

Regions of Passion
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Smashwords Edition

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by
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For Rose

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Part One: Departure

I. Man

"In a realm of chaos there is no striving but towards order. We are born, we destroy ourselves, and then we are born again."

This is a quote from one of the region's most beloved philosophers, a man by the name of Gielgood Goldenbough, dead these many centuries through the misfortune of being struck by a falling tree during a lightning storm. According to accounts that were sketchy at best, he had been dashing home through the rainy streets from one of his own lectures, this one concerning the spiritual benefits of growing and tending fruit orchards. But whatever the circumstances of his demise, all who respected his doctrines and dogmas agreed that a great man had been taken from them. His teachings, his writings, would be forever considered cornerstones of the region's political architecture.

Woodward Cambridge was no student of Goldenbough's. The philosopher's works, in his opinion, had always seemed too tame, too trite, to wield any real influence. But there was one belief he shared with the dead thinker: Where there was order, there was prosperity. No region, large or small, could hope to achieve balance and functionality amongst its people without a proper guidance system in place. No kingdom, mighty or meek, could hope to stand the test of time without the existence of a healthy political machine in its castle.

Cambridge's ruling over his own castle was testament. The servants who worked in it, though small in number, followed a tight regime as they went about their tasks. They were forbidden to take actions outside of their jurisdictions. The laundry ladies were not allowed to polish the furniture. The furniture polisher was not allowed to do any cooking. The cook was not allowed to sweep the steps. And so on and so forth. And while it was true that such tasks would indeed be fixed to the appropriate individuals, in any castle, Cambridge felt that by tethering them to their specific duties he eliminated any chance that one of them might lay blame for an interruption in the order of things upon another. Indeed, each servant was required to place his or her name onto a service parchment before performing any duty. If a stain should ever show up on one of his tunics in the morning, Cambridge would be able to discover exactly who had washed that tunic the night before. Should a mound of dust ever be found beneath any of the castle's many curving, stone steps, Cambridge would have no trouble finding out who had swept those steps so sloppily. And should any of his meals ever be inadequate--the potatoes undercooked, the coffee too strong, the sweet-cake too dry--it would be a simple matter of looking at the service parchment to find out who had done what, and at which time.

Order--yes, order. The castle almost rang with it. Servants came and went, obsequious, fastidious. They knew what was expected of them--indeed, what was demanded of them. They worked with faces devoid of expression, and when they spoke

to their master, they did so in low, even tones, displaying fear and respect in equal measure. Only two had been removed over the past year: one for dropping an antique teacup in the kitchen, another for coughing outside the door to get his attention. The latter had been concerned about bats nesting in one of the castle towers, but he had interrupted Cambridge from a particularly pleasant memory about the taste of a young girl's blood. The cough had been annoying--almost impatient. That servant's bones were today drying in a dungeon beneath the castle.

Outside, beyond the moat, things were different. From his bedchamber high in the east wing, Cambridge had a fine view of one of the region's more lush forests. To the right of that forest was a body of water known as Coldfrock Lake. To the left, a road led into a landscape of rolling hills. A full midnight moon shined upon this scene. A light wind whispered. Bracts from a nearby dogwood tumbled through the air. Peace and tranquility seemed to hold court in every shadow, in every splash of moonlight. Yet Cambridge was not fooled. He sipped his tea, gazing at the region with a face that wore no expression, but with eyes reflecting a calm cynicism for the secrets so poorly hidden behind the pretty dalliance of the night. Two hundred years of living in this place had stripped away the masquetry.

A sudden knock at the door broke his chain of thought. "Come in," he called moodily.

The door opened. In it stood a tall, lean man in a pressed gray suit. He did not cross the threshold, instead choosing to speak his purpose for the intrusion from the candlelit hallway.

"My apologies, sir," he began, "but there's a disturbance at the southern area of the castle. A large wolf is running loose in the pasture. The animals there are in a panic. There's danger of a stampede."

Cambridge's eyes grew wide. "A *wolf*?" he asked. The chair gave a squeak as he rose. "How certain are you of this?"

"Near to positive, sir."

"Come in, O'Connor. It's all right; you needn't speak from outside the door."

The man entered, his gait and expression maintaining a balanced dignity that Cambridge had come to appreciate over the many years he had spent under the castle's employ. He had started out as a prophet, reading tarot cards for the amusement of Cambridge's court. But it soon became apparent he possessed skills in other areas, particularly when it came to leadership. The lord of Coldfrock Castle had eventually promoted him to chief advisor, and from there to the position he held today.

"One of the parapet strollers spotted the beast skulking in the orchard. Its eyes, he said, seemed to be following our stock, as if on the hunt."

"I see. And how long ago was this?"

"Approximately thirty minutes ago, sir. I didn't wish to disturb you with any news that would later prove to be false. I ordered the stroller, along with four of his colleagues, to form a perimeter around the pasture"

Cambridge nodded. "And they are armed with kickshellacs I hope."

"Indeed, sir. With a bit of luck the beast will be trapped and disposed of with very little unpleasantness."

"We'll go down and join the strollers."

"Sir?"

O'Connor's eyes were gleaming in the moonlight, as were the features of his wrinkled, ruddy face. Cambridge did not expect to see fear there, nor did he. The pale beams picked out only two things: concern and, dare Cambridge even consider it, surprise. The latter was unusual, as O'Connor was not a man who wore his emotions publicly. But then again...

"Suppose you were attacked, sir?" he went on. "Injured or even..."

His words trailed off, but Cambridge caught the gist well enough. He smiled at his servant as he threw a light coat over his shoulders. "Attacked and injured. Or even something worse, eh?" He shook his head while walking towards the door. "No, no, O'Connor, I think not. In fact I rather feel the region is trying to prove a point to me tonight, and it needs me alive for that."

"What point, sir?"

Cambridge was still smiling as they stepped into the hall and headed for the stairs. "That there is, in fact, no striving towards order--that there will always be chaos."

"I think it's time, O'Connor," he said, once they were at the pasture gate. "We have armies in hiding outside two of the region's major cities, correct? Thorncut and Dalandaniss?"

"That is correct, sir. And according to their reports, neither city is at all fitted for self-defense. In fact their inhabitants seem barely attentive to such things."

"That will change once we're in charge."

His eyes scanned the pasture and rested on a copse of trees some two hundred yards distant. According to one of the strollers, the wolf was cowering inside this copse. No doubt it knew full well it was surrounded--its nose had told it as much.

Thorncut and Dalandaniss were in a similar situation. The first was a port city, medium-sized, on the coast of the Yeetahtan Sea. The second was used as a stop for traders. They were neither safe nor especially clean, these cities. What they lacked in order, however, they more than made up for in arrogance and self-satisfaction. They offended Cambridge's love of arrangement, his passion for foundation. Did they now, like the wolf in the copse, sense, at least in some vague way, the coming demise of their wantonness?

Cambridge doubted it. It had been too long since they had known change; they were too far mired in their own improvisational lifestyle. But oh, how things were going to rumble, and soon. Years of planning had gone into the siege that was about to take place. It was time now to set a match to its fuse and watch the old, cavalier ways of the region be sent to oblivion. It would be ugly business. For awhile, at least, there would be even more chaos for the land. But when the dust settled--when all the fires and the flooding and the corpses of the dissidents had been swept away--there would be plenty of room to rebuild. There would be a church--*his* church. There would be an altar--*his* altar. And at last, there would be a bible. A bible of the new order.

"How about the ogres, O'Connor?" he asked, still studying the copse.

"I don't know, sir."

Cambridge looked at the man, unwilling to believe what he'd just heard. "I'm sorry? Could you repeat that, please?"

"I don't know, sir," O'Connor obliged, allowing a trace of penitence to cross his typically featureless expression.

It was this penitence that enabled Cambridge to maintain his temper. "Explain yourself," he demanded.

Just then a shout came from the other side of the pasture. The wolf was making a break for it. At the sight of it, dashing towards the fence on the far side, Cambridge had to gasp in a breath. The beast was heavy and black—a misshapen shadow cast on a wall. A low, angry growl emitted from its throat, as cries of *shoot! shoot!* came from the strollers on Cambridge's side of the pasture.

The wolf stopped and crouched, as if in hope the high grass would shelter it from danger. It then turned, abandoning this hope, and started running full speed directly at Cambridge.

"Sir!" O'Connor exclaimed.

Cambridge was backing away from the fence, with O'Connor following. The shadow closed in. Two red eyes, furious, desperate, gleamed in the moonlight. A mouth full of white fangs gaped. O'Connor stepped in front of his master, prepared to shield him to the death. One of the strollers fired a shot from his kickshellac and missed. Another cried out that his weapon was jammed. A second shot was fired--again, a miss. The wolf let out a long, triumphant roar, and Cambridge wondered for a moment whether or not the beast might be a giant gorilla running on all fours. But no--he got time to see that it *was* a dog of some sort, as it leaped into the air to tear him and O'Connor apart. There was a muzzle, dripping with saliva. There was fur, twisted and tangled. There were paws and toenails.

There was also a bullet, fired from one of the kickshellacs, that found its way into the flank of the creature, shattering its ribs, tearing through its lungs. Its roar of triumph turned to agony as it writhed and then crashed into the fence where Cambridge stood.

The sound of hissing, labored breathing followed. Cambridge stepped from behind O'Connor, peering at the dark shape lying in the grass. Distantly, he could hear the strollers approaching. Orders were being shouted, questions asked. Was everyone all right? Was the wolf dead?

"We're fine!" Cambridge yelled, not taking his eyes off the creature. He moved closer, wanting to get a better look.

"Sir you'll be bitten," O'Connor warned.

Cambridge stopped. He was close enough to see as much of the wolf as he wanted to. It was panting hard beneath a crooked fence-post, staring at the moon with draining red eyes.

"You see, O'Connor?" he said with a small, forced smile. "This is chaos." His hand gestured the beast. "This is disorganization. This is destruction. Mindless, whirlwind destruction. And it will not be stopped without an agent. A champion."

"No, sir."

"Tomorrow evening the armies attack. Thorncut and Dalandaniss will burn."

"Yes, sir."

Cambridge's voice lowered; he was still staring at wolf as it released its final breath and lay still. "We'll wait til they've had dinner. Their bellies will be full. They'll be slow. Sluggish."

"Yes, sir."

"Then we'll put out the fires. Clean things up. A new leader will emerge from the rubble." He turned to look at O'Connor. "They'll be better people for it in the end."

"Yes, sir."

By now the strollers who'd fired upon the beast had arrived, along with several others from the castle parapet. This latter party had no business whatsoever with tonight's events; Cambridge would get their names and see that they were punished. For now, however, there was still the wolf--or rather, the wolf's corpse. Cambridge was tempted to have it moved to the dungeon, gutted, and then stuffed as a trophy. But that would never work. The stroller who had shot it would no doubt pause to look at it every day. Pride would swell in his chest over time. He would tell stories to his friends and colleagues--yes, he would do this anyway, but it still irked Cambridge to know he'd have something physical to point at as well.

He asked who it was that shot the wolf. When the man stepped forward, Cambridge congratulated him soberly. He then sent them all back to their duties on the parapet.

"Have it burned in a pyre," he said to O'Connor, when they were alone. "I never want to see it again."

"Very good, sir."

He paused for a moment. "And then you will come inside, to my study, and tell me about the ogres." His eyebrow went up. "Understood?"

"Yes, sir," O'Connor replied, his voice not wavering so much as a jot.

Cambridge looked at the wolf one last time. Tomorrow night the end would begin. With Goldenbough's edict--in a realm of chaos there is no striving but towards order--serving as foundation for the entire movement, Cambridge would take control of the region, city by city, and show it a way of existence it had hitherto never known.

It would be ungrateful at first. There would be uprisings, rebellions. But Cambridge was a patient man. He'd been living in this world for a long time. The rebellions would be squelched, as much by his ability to interpret how the insurgents would feel and do things as by force. In a way, he even looked forward to this part of the game. Because afterward, of course, these very same insurgents (along with the rest of the region) would heap adoration and praise upon his head--or at least the ones left alive would.

Would, would, would. That word flashed in Cambridge's mind, over and over, as he walked back to the castle. The future was coming. A new region. The idea made his thoughts leap from one vision of glory to the next, and his belly churn with anticipation. The future was coming. It would be here soon.

It would, it would, it would.

II. Girl

Ingrid Semeska sat quietly inside the office of her high school guidance counselor, looking every bit like one of that counselor's prim and perfect students. Her small hands were folded in her lap. Her legs were crossed beneath the hem of a short but clean and pressed denim skirt. A light blue blouse, also clean and pressed, decorated her narrow chest. Her long brown hair shined in the sunlight coming through the window, lending its delicate curls an almost gilded appearance. To look at her, one would most certainly think: Now there is a girl with a future.

"Ingrid?" the guidance counselor, whose name was Martin Prewski, said. "Will you look at me, please?"

Ingrid turned from the window, where her eyes had been studying a cloud that looked like a castle. It looked pretty, yet Ingrid wasn't fooled. A storm was coming.

"Ingrid," the counselor said again, his voice more stern.

It irritated her. She was looking right at Prewski now--why was he still trying to get her attention? "Yes?" she replied, shrugging her shoulders.

He was a little bald man with glasses who liked to wear a beret in the halls when he could get away with it. It always made him look like an Italian jazz player from the nineteen-sixties. Except Prewski was more (oh so very much more) a man of today--of this day in late May of 1990. Unlike the guidance counselors Ingrid often saw on television, he never tried to talk to the students at their level, using their language. The beret no doubt was fakery enough for him. He was instead chilly and officious with any pupil who set foot inside his office. For him, you were either in or out. Only he never said it that way. Those that were *in* received warm smiles and friendly words of encouragement about what lay in wait beyond the doors of Norwalk High School in lovely little Norwalk, Ohio. Those that were *out* saw a man with a straight face, a tight lip, and an even tighter spiel about finding work in what he called "the general labor bracket".

Ingrid didn't even reach this high on his credibility scale.

"You're going to fail school this year," he said, his eyes bulbous and even a bit ichthyic behind the lenses of his glasses. "You're going to have to repeat the junior level next year. Unless of course you attend a summer school. But even that..." He trailed off with an exasperated sigh, shaking his head.

"You don't have to tell me this," Ingrid informed with dry weariness.

The fishy-eyes widened for a moment. "But I do, Ingrid. It's my job."

"And that's what's important?"

"Yes," he nodded. "My job is important to me. Responsibility is important, Ingrid. I've never been able to make you realize as much. That's my failure. *Your* failure"--he raised a copy of her transcript--"is here. In these grades. Your attendance record reveals quite a bit as well. To be frank I'm surprised the school hasn't sent a truancy officer to your doorstep yet."

"The school isn't taking me seriously anymore."

"I'm taking you seriously."

"No you're not."

He looked hurt. "But I am. It breaks my heart to see kids spiral down the drain like this." The transcript was raised again as he spoke. "Your freshman year was fine--Bs and Cs. A few As. Mrs. Hammersmith down in Arts and Theater was particularly enamored with you. Last year came a noticeable drop-off--Cs and Ds. An F. And this year--"

"You don't have to tell me this!" Ingrid said again, her voice raised. She was scowling at her hands.

"I *am* telling you. And watch your tone when you speak to me, young lady."

Her head came up. "Or else what?"

Prewski's cheeks went red; his lip tightened. "I should have you expelled," he almost hissed. "You haven't even been trying this year. But I'm not going to."

"Very noble, Mr. Prewski. Only you're not going to because you can't, not because you care. Girls like me and Trudy Bench and Danielle Brewner, we make being a guidance counselor difficult, except you don't like trying very much, either."

"What on Earth are you talking about?"

Ingrid uncrossed her legs. She was getting ready to leave, whether this man wanted her to or not. "General labor--isn't that what you tell anyone you can't figure out, or are too lazy to figure out?"

"Shut up!" Prewski snarled.

"That's okay," Ingrid said, picking up her bag. "I'll get a job at the grocery store, or typing letters. And your straight A students will go to Caltech or one of the Ivy League schools or wherever. That's the easy way, Mr. Prewski. It makes you look compassionate and helpful. All of that stuff." She stood up. "Anyway--"

"Sit down, Ingrid. You're not going anywhere."

"Oh I'm going all right."

"*I said sit down!*"

Ingrid looked at him. While she'd been talking, her eyes had begun to hurt. There was no enigma in what that signified: Tears. She was going to cry, and she wanted to be away from this man before it happened. But now he was standing up, too, and while he was not a tall man by any means, he was still taller than she. Also, he looked very angry indeed.

Don't cry, she told herself, not in front of this slimy mud cat, girl, please.

Prewski bared his teeth. "What did you just call me?" he whispered, eyes narrowing in disbelief.

Ingrid realized that she had actually said "slimy mud cat" out loud, though she hadn't meant to. She shook her head as the counselor took a step forward. "Just leave me alone!" she sobbed.

"Ingrid, you are going to sit down, or I am going to sit you down."

This was not the truth, and Ingrid knew it. If Prewski were to so much as brush her elbow with his pinky, he would lose his job; she was not worth that kind of trouble, to him or to herself. And yet she had begun to cry with helpless abandon anyway. Tears

fell to the floor; her hair hung in her face. When Prewski told her for a fourth time to sit down, she did.

"I'm going to call your parents," he said. "And then all four of us are going to come here and talk--for a long time, no doubt. You are one..." he trailed off as his mind groped for the appropriate adjectives "...disrespectful little juvenile."

Ingrid still couldn't raise her eyes. "May I go now, please?"

"Go. Get out of here. Get back to class."

She rose from the chair on shaking legs. Her bag dropped. She picked it up. As she opened the door, Prewski had one last thing to say.

"Don't think we're finished here, Ingrid. We're not, I can assure you."

The girls' bathroom was quiet. Ingrid splashed her face with cold water. Little by little, her composure returned. The water washed away what was left of her makeup. The skin underneath looked red and raw, clean to the point of being brutal. That was good. It would make forgetting what happened in Prewski's office easier.

She was applying a sheen of fresh makeup when the toilet behind her flushed. There was the sound of rising water, and then--

"Oh shit!" a girl started shouting. "Oh shit! Oh *shit!*" Splashing sounds now--water on the tiles. A puddle of it ran under the stall door. "Goddammit!"

Ingrid finished with her makeup. The girl in the mirror who'd been crying just minutes before had actually begun to smile. She thought out a thank you to the other girl, who was still swearing and stamping around in the stall.

Seconds later the end-of-period bell rang. Students gushed into the hall, a deluge of chatter and foot-traffic. Ingrid weaved her way through them, getting herself downstairs to her locker. Here, she picked up her jacket. Other lockers opened and slammed shut. There were a couple of faces she knew standing next to them, but none of them said hello or even smiled. After making her way to the end of the hall, Ingrid went down a short flight of steps, and then outside.

Go back to class, Prewski had told her.

But where was the point in that? Ingrid was failing all of her classes save one--Arts and Theater. There was no time left in the school year to turn things around, not that it would matter either way. Ingrid had spent the entire first semester of this year trying to care about her grades, but by the end of the second semester a full out academic brushfire was burning on her report card.

Her teachers had been baffled. She was not a stupid girl and they all knew it. Prewski had also been baffled. In their earlier meetings he'd kept asking her: *Why? Why, why, why?*

She'd been asking herself that very same question. The answer resisted words. She had always been a sullen girl. Part of this had to do with her past, or seeming lack thereof. She lived with a foster family on West Main Street, having been adopted by them from an orphanage in 1975. Her real parents were nothing more than names taken from her birth certificate. On it, over the space marked Mother, was the name Luanna Quinn. Over the space marked Father there was but the surname, typed in

faded ink: Quinn. That name had not seemed to be connected to any of the families living in Norwalk at the time. Attempts to track them down over the years proved futile. Questions at the orphanage resulted in a lot of heads shaking, and even more shoulders shrugging. As for the foster family itself, the Semeskas...

Ingrid didn't want to think about them right now. There would be plenty thinking about them--indeed, plenty interaction with them--later on. God knew what horror stories Prewski was putting together at the moment. Still, what he finally did tell them would not be fresh news. That was a satisfaction Ingrid was not at all willing to grant. The news that she was quitting school would come from her lips first. There was little possibility they would commiserate. Randy in particular, the foster brother, would be furious, even if he didn't in truth care; there was the chance of a beating from him, should her timing be bad enough. He'd attacked her before for lesser deeds. She might even be thrown out of the house at the end of it all. This was a threat the Semeskas had made time and again in the past, for crimes such as coming home too late, or burning the morning eggs, or failing to scrub the bathroom tiles properly. Could it be they would make good on it at last?

She didn't want to risk the chance. She took the long way into the downtown district, crossing over Linwood Bridge to Summit Street, and then walking down Benedict Avenue into the flats. There was a pay phone here, outside a bar that had a dangerous reputation on weekend nights. The number of her ex-employer at Cedar Point came fast enough to her fingertips after she dropped a coin into the slot. After three rings it was picked up on the other end.

"Frontier Town," a gruff voice spoke, "Tom Rolling here."

"Mister Rolling? This is Ingrid Semeska."

Rolling did not reply immediately. Ingrid's first stint at Cedar Point amusement park last summer had not gone well. She'd treated her job as a caricature artist in much the same fashion as she'd treated her schoolwork this year--which was to say, carelessly and without inspiration. In August she'd left the park, without giving notice of any kind. It was no wonder hearing her voice again gave him pause.

"And what do you want?" he asked flatly.

Ingrid saw no reason to beat about the bush. "I want to come back to Frontier Town and work for you, Mister Rolling," she said. "I realize that must sound a little strange after what I did last year, but--"

"A *little* strange?" He paused again, then huffed into the receiver. "Girly, you must think you're part of a pretty rare breed, to be calling me like this. I've got artists knocking on my door every day of the week looking for a job. Artists who will show up on days that they're scheduled to work. Artists who will stay with my team for a full season."

"I understand that, Mister Rolling, truly I do. I was...having some difficulties last summer. I'm past them now."

"Bullshit. You sound just the same as you did during our first interview, Ingrid. A little out of focus, a little left of center, whatever you want to call it. I didn't mind it then, because that's pretty much the way all artists are. On top of that you were damned good."

"I'm still good."

But Ingrid's brow was furled with confusion. Were her apathy and lack of spirit so obvious that Rolling could with pinpoint accuracy detect the sweep of their numb erosion just by hearing her voice on the phone? It seemed so. And if that was the case, she was much farther gone than she'd feared.

"If you'll accept my apology, Mister Rolling, I would be happy to come back and prove it to you," she pressed on. "I know you can always use an extra girl to work in front of the upside-down house. People come off of that ride with the funniest pictures in their heads, am I right?"

"You're right. You're also right about my needing an extra girl. But goddammit, Ingrid, you are not the one I have in mind. We've got thirty-thousand people trolling through this park every day, forking thirty bucks a ticket for some thrills and chills--and yes, the occasional talented caricaturist. I don't want to have to go to my boss's office on fucking July the 4th or Labor Day or whatever and tell him at least some of those people are walking away from Frontier Town with their hands free of souvenirs because one of my artists is too busy pouting over how shitty the universe has been treating her."

You're laying it on awful thick, fella, Ingrid thought. *I draw pictures for crying out loud. I'm a side-show.*

"You will *not* be telling him that," she said out loud.

Rolling said nothing for a few moments. His breath puffed into the receiver. "All right," he at last conceded. "One more chance, Ingrid."

"Thank you very much, Mister Rolling. Sincerely."

"But don't fuck with me. When I call you, you're on. Where I put you, you're at. If I tell you to paint pictures of Donald Duck on top of the Gemini at twelve midnight, then that's what you'll do. If I tell you to jump into the pool at the bottom of the Log Jam and sketch the Loch Ness Monster, then that's what I mean. I speak, you do. Understand?"

"I understand. When can I start?"

The operator cut in after this question, asking Ingrid to please deposit another twenty-five cents. She dropped a quarter into the slot.

"Mister Rolling?"

"I'm here."

"When can I start?"

There was more breathing into the phone as he chewed this over. "Be here tomorrow at 1PM," he decided. "You'll start at your old spot by the funhouse."

"Will do. One more thing, Mister Rolling."

"You're not negotiating already?"

"No, no. I was just wondering if you know whether or not a woman named Lisa Felton is still working there?"

"Lisa Felton?" His voice trailed off in thought, then came back with sudden punctuation. "Oh yes! I believe she still runs the Ship-to-Shore diner near Soak City. End of the Oceana Midway."

Ingrid allowed herself to smile for the first time since leaving the school. "Thank you again, Mister Rolling. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I hope you mean that."

"I do."

The walk home from the flats was slow and pleasant. Part of this had to do with the approaching storm--as Ingrid passed by a cafe-restaurant a cool breeze swept the awnings, ruffling their scallops. Flower petals from a park swirled around benches; a little boy laughed, chasing his cap.

Another reason was the memory of Lisa. Ingrid hadn't been thinking about her at all when she'd first dialed up Rolling. The woman's name popped into her head right as the call was coming to a close, perhaps because spending time at the Ship-to-Shore diner had been her favorite thing about Cedar Point. Ingrid had gotten to know Lisa Felton after eating there a few times. She made for easy company, which was a rare commodity among Ingrid's circle. It was Lisa, in fact, who had invited Ingrid to her diner for the first time, after getting a portrait done. Her opinion of this portrait had been very high, to the point where Ingrid's cheeks had turned red (praise was another thing she wasn't used to). From here, their friendship had blossomed. Ingrid went back to the Ship-to-Shore almost every night during the months of June and July. She went there in certain parts of August as well, even as it was becoming clear her job with Tom Rolling's team was not going to provide the fulfillment she was so desperately searching for. And of course, in the midst of these final few visits, Lisa had sensed something wrong. She'd tried to get Ingrid to talk, to tell her something, anything, that would help her bring the issue into focus. Ingrid had failed to do this, evening after evening, until finally the sadness and frustration got the better of her. On a sunny day near the end of the month, she had walked out of the park gate with tears on her cheeks.

God yes, there had been tears! She had cried all the way home that day, thinking of Lisa. Now, she felt like crying again, only this time not for loss, but for a coming happy reunion.

The driveway was empty when she arrived home--another thing to feel good about. Randy worked as a taxi driver in Sandusky and was still on shift. Ingrid opened the side door. Her foster mother was in the living room watching television; she looked up instantly.

"You're home early." There was no music to these words, or empathy--her tone instead was that of a woman wondering what was wrong this time.

Ingrid came right out and told her. "I quit school."

"You *what*?"

"I quit school."

The television was snapped off. "You can't quit school. You're sixteen years old."

Ingrid shrugged and walked into the kitchen. It was two o'clock. That left four hours until the family sat down for dinner--time for a nice head start. She peeked into the refrigerator to see what was there to cook up.

"Is Dad still at work?" she asked, sensing her mother, whose name was Nancy, had followed.

"Yes. Ingrid--"

"Anything special you guys want for dinner?"

"Ingrid there is no way you can just quit school. They'll come to the door and drag you back to class. Your dad and I will be in trouble with the police."

"The school year's almost over," Ingrid said, closing the door. "I have the whole summer yet to figure out what to do."

"What you're going to do is go back to school."

Nancy had not in fact entered the kitchen. She was in the doorway, her glare baleful. At fifty, she looked every bit the mother of a teenager, foster or no. Her short black hair was going gray, and the corners of her mouth were beginning to curve down, giving her features a haggard, sleepless appearance. These characteristics in no way affected her authority over the house, however. She ruled it with a cold and calculating efficiency, maintaining order among the ranks through a series of assigned chores that even Randy--virulent, volatile, vociferous Randy--did not dare challenge.

Ingrid drew a deep breath; it was all downhill from here. "I'm not," she said, with as much firmness as she could muster. "My grades are shot. I'm going to flunk the year. It's a lost cause, Mom."

The other woman had no immediate reply. Her lip twisted for a moment; her eyes widened; that was all. Ingrid closed the refrigerator door and crossed to the pantry. The silence thickened.

"You're lying," was what Nancy finally came out with.

"It might seem like that for awhile. But my guidance counselor is going to be calling you soon. He wants a meeting."

"Don't you dare get smug with me. Leaving school is not your decision to make, no matter how bad your grades are."

"I'm not going back," Ingrid repeated, daring to make eye contact.

Nancy's face flushed red, until it looked like she was going to grab her foster daughter by the throat. Ingrid braced herself. If she ducked fast enough, she could run past her and get upstairs. The attack did not come, however.

"Go upstairs."

Ingrid looked at her.

"You heard me. To your room. Now. Forget about dinner."

Shrugging, Ingrid stepped forward. But Nancy was still standing in the kitchen doorway, blocking her exit. "Can I get past?" she asked.

Her tone must have been too sharp, because in the next moment she was lying on the linoleum floor with the side of her face red and stinging. The pain made her eyes water. She rubbed them, getting them clear enough to see. The kitchen doorway was now empty. Ingrid stood, cupping her flaming cheek in her hand, and made her way upstairs to her room.

Once inside, with the door closed and locked, she began to feel safe again. It was not a sensation that would sustain itself for long. In spite of her small victory, Ingrid knew the battle was far from over. It was a battle, in fact, she could not hope to win. Nor did she even wish to try. Nancy was not a woman to match stamina with. She was bigger, she was angrier. She had hatred on her side. She also had Randy.

It was best to leave the house for awhile--disappear until things calmed down. Ingrid packed some clothes into a gym bag. Then she went to the bathroom for a quick shower. While she washed, her mind mulled over a short list of places to go.

To Lisa?

Perhaps. On the surface it seemed logical enough. She'd been a great friend who'd clearly cared about Ingrid's well-being. As an added bonus, she could also provide her with a ride to work every day. But would it really be proper to make such an aggressive re-entry to the life of one whom she had not made contact with in almost a year?

She decided to file the idea away as a possibility for now--something to act upon should nothing more reasonable present itself. As she padded back to her room, a towel around her body, a few more names popped up.

Trixie Keefer. She was a friend from school who carried a very distinct honor: She was the only person Ingrid knew who could make her laugh out loud on a regular basis. But like Ingrid, she was only sixteen. There was no chance she would be allowed to take in a house-guest (especially a house-guest who might very well be on the run), even in the short term. Trixie was out.

Danielle Brewner wouldn't do either, and for much the same reason--she was underage. Her parents, not she, governed her household, and while said parents were not by any means terrible, they would not take in a young girl who had just run away from home.

Tom Rolling. This idea made her laugh. Good ole Tom Rolling. Hugs and kisses for everybody.

Ingrid laughed again--and then froze. Another name had floated to the surface of her thoughts, coaxed, perhaps, by her laughter, or maybe because, like Tom Rolling, the name was a male one. Only this male was nothing at all like the first. He was neither imperious nor overbearing. He never shouted. He'd done favors for Ingrid in the past, without once expecting anything in return. He'd even told her once, while they were still in school (he was out now, two years graduated), that he loved her.

The words sounded ridiculous at the time. She'd been a freshman then, but still a girl of the earth. A girl who trusted in few things but the hard, solid ground her feet were planted on. She hadn't believed the boy when he'd said it, though she had caught him several times prior to that moment staring at her from afar.

Ingrid finished getting dressed. That was how the whole thing had started--with those long, wanting stares. They were the stares of a boy in pain for something sublime that was just out of reach. And him a senior! She hadn't had the heart to turn him away. They started having lunch together in the cafeteria. As always when it came to the friends she had, he did most of the talking, but what had been different that time around was her own sense of amused bafflement at that sudden, strange twist in the otherwise banal goings-on of her life. She'd felt like a girl swept off by a tide.

Trixie Keefer had also been curious. *So is he your boyfriend or what?* she'd kept asking, clearly delighted by the prospect. *I mean holy shit, Ingrid, he's a senior!*

Ingrid had no idea how to answer the question. The boy had been watching her for a long time before he'd approached her locker with professions of love—that much she'd been able to figure out on her own. What she hadn't understood at the time (and

frankly still didn't) was why she had accepted his extremely awkward--downright clumsy even--method of introducing himself.

I love you.

That had basically been it. Yet for some reason, it had been enough. Ingrid hadn't laughed, the way a lot of other girls would have laughed. She hadn't been afraid either, or put off. She'd instead looked at the strange boy, taking in the forlorn expression on his face up close for the first time. His dusty-colored hair had been disheveled, his clothes the same.

What? she'd asked.

And yes, he had repeated himself: *I love you.*

There'd been hiccups from that point, of course. The inelegance of his approach all but guaranteed a slow start to their relationship. The boy had been as persistent as he'd been courageous, however, and over a handful of casual dates, Ingrid decided that her answer to Trixie's rather enthusiastic question would be *yes. Yes he is.*

The sound of Randy's van came through the window. Ingrid's excitement turned cold and broke away like brittle ice. She'd been hoping to slip out of the house without further confrontation. That was likely impossible now.

The living room door that let on the driveway opened, slammed shut. Heavy footsteps pounded, making the whole house tremor. Ingrid grabbed her gym bag and went into the hallway. If she was lucky, she could slip out while Randy was in the kitchen. Her feet were silent. Slight girl that she was, not a single board underneath the hardwood creaked as she passed. She reached the top of the stairs and peered down. The space below was empty. Seconds later the dry, husky sound of Randy's voice drifted from the kitchen.

It was now or never. Stealthy as a fox, Ingrid started down. She would reach the bottom and dash right past the television--Nancy and Randy would hear the door slam, but by then it would be too late for them restrain her. One third of the way down now. Halfway down.

Randy stepped in front of the newel post. He stopped...and looked straight at Ingrid.

"What are you doing?" he barked.

Ingrid began to creep backwards. It wasn't like she had a choice. The man standing at the bottom of the stairs was immense: six feet plus, two hundred and seventy pounds. His round, heavy body blocked the entire passage.

"Mom says you've been disrespectful."

"What?" Ingrid asked, hoping it would keep him passive for a few extra seconds.

"You heard me. She also told me you think you're going to quit school."

"Well..."

She was close to the top again. Randy moved forward. His expression, though set with a tiny smile, seethed belligerence from every pore. He'd worn this same expression, with its flabby red lips and bulbous, oily cheeks, on numerous occasions, before throwing her against a wall, or knocking her down with his prodigious belly.

"I think you owe Mom an apology," he opined. Unlike the girl above him, he made the risers creak in agony. "Now come down here."

Ingrid's knees quivered. She wanted to turn and run--except that such an action, she knew, would be tantamount to self-mutilation. Randy would give chase, and when he caught her...

"I'll come down," she said.

"Good."

The trembling in her knees had spread to her arms and hands. Randy's smile widened. He knew how to scare her, all right; always had. He came up another step. Ingrid moved back another step.

"Hey," her tormentor said, incredulous. "I said *down*."

In that moment, Ingrid made her decision--she turned tail and ran. An instant later the sound of thunder pounding on the steps announced Randy's pursuit. Ingrid was across the hallway in a flash. She streaked into her room, slammed the door and locked it. Randy's feet pounded close behind. He tried the knob and, getting nothing but a stiff rattle, bellowed his fury at being defied.

"Get out here!"

Before she could answer, his heavy boot kicked at the lock full force. Ingrid screamed as the door shook and one of her dolls fell off the dresser. God, this had been a mistake! She should have just gone down, taken a light beating, given her apology. Randy kicked the door again, and this time a splinter of wood shot across the room.

Chest heaving for breath, Ingrid scanned around for something to defend herself with. There was nothing significant, not that it would have mattered. Her arms weren't much when it came to bludgeoning; against the likes of Randy they would be useless.

Another kick--**CRACK!** Shards of wood sprinkled onto the floor.

Ingrid screamed again. She rushed to the window and threw the sash. There was a screen inside of it. Beyond this screen was the slated roof of the anteroom where Nancy demanded everyone in the family hang their coats. If Ingrid could get the screen off quickly enough she could jump to the roof and from there to the ground.

Randy kicked the door a fourth time as her hands groped for the latch that would release the screen. Nancy was also in the hallway now, yelling something. Whether her shouts were for Randy to stop or for Ingrid to come out were incomprehensible. A fifth blow, this one breaking the lock and sending the doorknob flying, shook the room.

She got the latch pulled back. The screen fell loose but wouldn't release itself fully from the frame. Ingrid shook it, rattled it, yanked it. Her panicked breathing became more and more high-pitched. Behind her, Randy was trying to push his way through the remains of the door. When he saw her at the window he realized her intention and bellowed again.

"GET OVER HERE!"

"Oh please come on, come ON!" Ingrid shrieked.

But the screen just wouldn't give. Her long nails may as well have been kitten claws, harmlessly as they scratched the scuffed metal.

Behind her, Randy hit the door with his shoulder. It was for the most part open--a normal-sized man would have been able to slip through it. But Randy's bulk, which had done him great service with destroying the lock and breaking the wood, had become a

hindrance; he couldn't get his belly in quite far enough to gain passage. He stepped back for a moment, and then gave one final kick.

The remains of the door flew away just as Ingrid got the screen free, and she thought that two barriers in this room had surrendered at the same time--one by violence and the other by tact--did not go unnoticed by her. She looked at Randy as he stormed across the room, but only for a moment. A moment was all there was. In the next, she was diving head-first out the window.

"INGRID!"

Her arms buckled as she hit the roof. There was no time to shake the pain off, however. Randy had already turned from the window, and was without doubt on his way down the stairs to meet her in front of the house. She rolled onto her back, scooted to the edge of the roof, and slid off.

The drop was short. She hit the ground and bounced back up just as the first flash of lightning from the storm lit the sky. Thunder exploded overhead. She ran to the opposite side of the house. Here, a small hill ran into the neighbor's back lawn. A dog--curse it--barked as she ran by. But then no beacon was going to help Randy now. He was big but Ingrid thought she could outrun him for at least long enough to disappear across a vacant lot and onto Seminary Street.

She ran fast as her legs would carry her. On the other side of the lot and a little further down street was an elm tree. Gasping for air, Ingrid hid behind its trunk to get her wind back. Did Randy plan to chase her in the van? Or had he taken himself off in the wrong direction, down West Main Street? She gave the lot a peek. It was empty.

Deciding to press her luck a little further, she stepped from behind the tree and began a brisk walk down Seminary. A car rolled past. Wind-chimes jangled. There was another flash of lightning, another crack of thunder...and then came the rain.

It was a downpour. All at once Seminary became draped under a silver curtain of water. Ingrid was instantly soaked to the skin. She didn't mind. The rain would provide even further cover. She kept walking, glancing in all directions for any sign of her pursuer, but there was no one. The only person foolhardy enough to be outside during this kind of weather, it seemed, was herself.

She reached Benedict Avenue and turned right, back into the flats. Here the traffic was heavier. Ingrid walked with her head down, hoping none of the drivers were taking too much notice of the flagging girl on the sidewalk who, with no umbrella, was getting the shower of her life.

Before long she found herself in front of the very same phone booth she had used to call Tom Rolling. It was coincidence, nothing more, yet it shifted her thoughts back to the dilemma she'd been pondering before Randy had so rudely interrupted: to contact the boy who had not so long ago loved her--and perhaps still did--or no.

She stepped into the booth and closed it. Rain pelted the glass, but at least she had some form of shelter over her head. To call the boy (could she even remember his number, and would he still be living at the same address?) would be every bit as presumptuous an act as calling any of her other friends. More so even. She had abandoned him in much the same fashion as she'd abandoned Lisa. Knowing that,

would he even deign to speak to her? And what, exactly, could she begin the call by saying?

Hi there, remember me?

A gust of wind blew by. Ingrid shivered. Her wet clothes were making her cold, and she hadn't packed a jacket. She thought about Lisa again; perhaps it would be better to just call her instead. Presumptuous or no, it was her best bet. Her number was still fresh in Ingrid's mind. She could pop in a quarter, dial it, and have herself a warm bed to sleep in tonight.

Ingrid put a coin into the slot. Her fingers began to dial. They hesitated a moment as one of the numbers eluded memory, but then continued as, yes, it came back. Of course it came back. Love was like that, Lisa had told her once, during one of their many nighttime talks at the Ship-to-Shore. Love, she said, always comes back.

Outside, the rain came down with sudden, renewed vigor. After several rings the number she dialed was picked up on the other end by an individual who, it turned out, remembered her well, and was happy to hear her voice again. The individual insisted the drive to Norwalk would not be a problem. Could she wait where she was, for just a little while? *Yes*, Ingrid replied. *I can wait, it's okay.*

And as she hung up the phone, she kept thinking of that word. *Yes, yes.* It reminded her, for whatever strange reason, of Trixie Keefer, and of the question she'd once asked with an almost ecstatic look in her eyes. The question that was now two years old.

Yes, Ingrid would have told her, though she'd never gotten the chance. *Yes he is.*

III. Boy

There are certain pleasures in life that occupy the flow of one's thoughts like flower petals along a rocky stream. They are cast on the twisting currents of the mind's endless passage for sensation and emotion, presenting themselves at random moments as bright slivers of color on an otherwise dreary afternoon, or as keepsakes, set adrift in another time, returned to the reaching peninsulas of memory to be picked up, examined, loved, and then, ultimately, set adrift again.

Scott Wesley Bremman loved to drive in the rain. He loved the sound of tires on wet pavement. He took comfort in the purr of an engine, well-tuned, inducting moisturized air. He was soothed and somehow reassured by the steady, mechanical sweep of windshield wipers as they cleared away the water to reveal the colorless landscape beyond.

Without color, but not without value. While the terrain beyond--the open fields between Norwalk and Sandusky--looked nothing at all the way it did in late Autumn, Scott was nevertheless reminded of the poem *My November Guest* by Robert Frost. *My Sorrow, when she's here with me*, its author had lamented at one point.

As it so happened, she was.

When the brown-haired, dark-complexioned girl sitting in the passenger seat had called him from out of nowhere, he'd been unable to speak. This was a far cry from how things used to be. Once, he had told this girl he loved her. His delivery had been far from eloquent, yet when Ingrid Semeska's voice came through the receiver, telling him hello, he wanted nothing more than to run to wherever she was at and hold on for all life was worth.

He'd stammered at first. Fumbled greetings were exchanged. Ingrid then gave him a sketchy outline of her predicament, and he drove to Norwalk to fetch her. She was waiting at Dairy Mart, across the street from the phone booth from which she'd called, soaking wet and shivering.

Those shivers, at least, had passed, what with the car's heater going. But in glancing at her from time to time, Scott could see Ingrid felt very alone and very frightened. Her eyes told the tale--they remained fixed on the lights of Sandusky, as if exhausted from too much input. There were clues in her hands as well. Her fingers kept opening and closing, opening and closing. What, Scott wondered, was she wishing she could grasp? Finally, it was in the little sighs she fetched from time to time. Of the three, these were the most heart-wrenching. They were the sighs of a girl who wanted to go to sleep and never wake up.

"I don't want to get you into trouble," she insisted for the fifth time. "I'm so sorry about this, Scott."

"I want to help," Scott managed. "Have you eaten? We could stop at any one of these places coming up on the strip."

"I haven't. But I'd like to put on some dry clothes before anything else."

"I'll order something in. Chinese. How are your chopstick skills?"

"I make my living holding long, slender objects, Scott." She paused. "Oh God, I set myself up with that line."

Scott smiled.

"Shut up," Ingrid said. "Drive."

They had reached Sandusky. Its proximity to Lake Erie made it something of a summer tourist town. They rode past a great many hotels and restaurants. There was the mall, a water park, a putt-putt golf course. There were pizza parlors and used car lots, ice cream stands and beer gardens.

Scott's apartment was off Columbus Avenue, at a house that had once been a bed and breakfast but now served as a triplex. They went inside. He showed Ingrid where the bathroom was; she thanked him and closed the door to get changed. Scott then went to the telephone. By a little after six, they were both in the kitchen eating fried rice with baby corn. Some further desultory conversation was made over the meal. Ingrid asked what the neighborhood was like--dangerous, or just vaguely unsettling? Scott allowed it was the latter, albeit most of the time it was perfectly safe.

"You're too close to Broadway," the other remarked.

"It only gets ugly at night. And even then you have to be way down by the Ford plant before you need a gun."

She chuckled. "Good to know. Are you working near here?"

He nodded, chewing. "At the Blue Jay Valu. Meat department. Patty grinder and clean-up boy. Lackey in other words."

Ingrid's gaze went to the living room. "I like the apartment."

"I got lucky with it. The landlord is the friend of a friend of a friend."

They went on eating, until Scott with tactful care shifted the conversation to the offensive. He asked how the last two years had been for her. This earned a shrug from the other side of the table. The ruse did not fool him; back during the final, dying days of their romance, Ingrid had often used this same shrug. Any question of weight would trigger it. *Nothing's wrong, no problem.* When she gave it this time, he decided to press a little further.

"Just in and out of school?" he asked.

"Pretty much. Tests and term papers, you know. You've been there and done it."

"Got a summer job lined up?"

"As a matter of fact I do."

She told him about her call to Tom Rolling. Outside, the rain had tapered to a drizzle, but a stormy breeze had begun to pick up again, lifting the kitchen curtain.

"You start back tomorrow?" Scott asked, a little surprised by her return to the amusement park.

"One PM."

"My shift starts at two. I can give you a ride in."

"Just to the causeway if it's all right. There should be a shuttle there."

"Did you enroll in that work program at school? D.E.C.A. I think it's called."

Ingrid put down her fork. "I should call my mom. Tell her where I've gone. Try to smooth things over."

Now Scott was the one who shrugged. "Sure. But," he added, raising his hand to halt the girl as she was standing up.

Ingrid looked at him, hair lifting in the breeze. "Yes?"

"Well," Scott went on. He licked his lips, unsure of how to continue. This condition was so common with him that he'd long been aware of its antidote: Force. "Don't...you know...tell her you've shacked up with some twenty-year-old guy. I mean—"

She slid her chair in. "Nah, don't worry. I'll tell her I'm bunking with Brad Daugherty up in Cleveland."

"Atta girl."

She smiled. In that moment Scott supposed he was still in love. It had come on with painful abruptness back at Norwalk High. A shock of brown hair, curling to a point in the center of a slender back, was all it had taken. Love.

He had later proclaimed it to her rather stupidly on a rainy morning by her locker, without so much as an introduction, or even an hello. It was utter surrender, after weeks of yearning, to the emotion which had overcome him--an emotion which, even to this day, he did not fully understand. Ingrid was pretty, to be sure. Beautiful even. But there had been a lot of beautiful girls going to Norwalk at the time; none of them had captured his attention for very long. What it was about Ingrid remained a mystery--a flower pressed between the pages of a used book. He could not even lay blame on that old stand-by about it being something in her eyes, because he had fallen in love with her before ever seeing her face.

He cleaned the table and left to give her some privacy with the telephone. A suspicion lingered that she had not been altogether truthful about what happened at her house today. If this was the case, then "smoothing things over" was probably not the proper way to define the goal of the call. All the same, Scott left her to it. He lay back on his bed with an auto magazine and waited. Ingrid's voice soon came from the next room, low at first, then a bit louder. Towards the end of the call her tone took on a pleading quality that twisted his heart. The whole ordeal took about ten minutes. After that, she was standing in the bedroom with him, the smile on her face long gone, the light in her eyes extinguished.

"She's giving me two days," she said. "Two days to come home. After that, she calls the police."

"Damn."

"Oh it could have been worse. Nancy doesn't yield to anything, but I think the way Randy was acting might have creeped her out a little."

"How was Randy acting?"

The shrug came again. "Pissed. But I guess it all turned out for the better. I've got two days to let the dust settle."

Scott nodded in a mixture of confusion and empathy. That ghostly suspicion was stronger now. There was no sense entertaining it though. Ingrid did not look like she'd be willing to answer more of his questions at the moment. She looked exhausted and worried.

They watched television in the living room for awhile, a bag of popcorn between them, like lovers on a movie date. Afterward, Scott set up a bed for himself on the

couch, giving Ingrid the bedroom. She assured him she had not revealed her whereabouts to Nancy, nor even given her a number to call. There would be no surprise midnight rings from angry foster mothers. This was a good thing, because Scott found himself lying awake until well after this time, staring at the ceiling.

It was only now he felt stunned at having Ingrid back in his life, two years after she'd walked away from their relationship. Strange, for though he had allowed her to drift away from him (silently, like a sailboat broken away from its mooring), he had never fully put her out of his mind. Now she was back. And still in pain.

There was something more to that pain today. Ingrid was no longer just a down-spirited girl with a chemical imbalance. Something recent had happened to her, and she had for whatever reason reached out for help.

But how could he help? The question vexed him. What did she need? Shelter, certainly. That much at least he'd been able to accommodate. As for the rest of it, he just didn't know.

His subconscious had nothing to say on the matter. When at last he fell asleep, there were no enlightening dreams. Hours later, he awoke to find Ingrid already up and about. They breakfasted without talking while The Price Is Right game show burred from the television. Very little talk went on in the car as well, as he drove her to the causeway. He asked what time she would be getting off work; she told him probably ten. And then, she was opening the door, to get out next to the depot where the shuttle would take her to the park.

"Goodbye, Scott," she said. "Thank you...a lot, for helping me yesterday."

"I'll see you tonight," he replied, as if to remind her of the fact.

She gave a small smile at this, before closing the door and walking away.

Scott did not immediately drive off; he watched her instead, until she disappeared inside the depot. Her hair was still the same--still coming down to that curled point at the center of her back. His love for her remained constant as well. This time around, however, it would need to be even stronger. Otherwise, she would drift away once more. Drift away without the strength to call for help again.

That day at the grocery store was more frenzied than most. Memorial Day was less than a week off, which meant customers were pouring in by the thousands for cookout essentials. A great many of these had to do with the meat department, where Scott worked. Faces jammed the front of the counter. The service bell rang and rang. And while Scott was not a butcher, he did more or less everything else, from slicing hams to grinding patties to cubing steaks. All of these were done in a near mad rush to keep up with demand. At 5PM the butchers went home, leaving Scott to clean the equipment and floors. All the while, customers kept coming. He got the cuber taken apart and cleaned, only to have to reassemble it and use it again. Ground chuck was on sale at eighty-nine cents a pound; it flew off the shelf fast as he could put it there. One customer wanted a bone-in ham sliced. Scott, though not so good with the band saw, managed the trick, but found the task had put him well behind on cleaning the fish case. He twisted his ankle in a puddle of blood left by one of the butchers. He dropped a lug full of ground round on cooler floor.

Somehow, though, he was able to get done by 8PM. Traffic on the way to the causeway was moderate. It took almost thirty minutes to reach High Street, and then another fifteen to drive across the bridge to the park's prodigious entrance. Whether or not Ingrid was still in the park was of no concern: She'd called the store earlier to inform him that yes, she would indeed be working in front of The Upside-Down House until ten. Scott told her he would be at the depot to pick her up, but had a change of heart as he drove, and now wanted to meet her inside the gates.

The ticket girls were not about to let this happen for free. Admission fees were high, though they did come down a notch after 5PM. By the time Scott set foot on the main midway, his wallet was a good deal lighter. All the same, it was an almost ethereal pleasure that came over him as his eyes took in the park. His last visit to Cedar Point had been as a young boy; thus, the whole place seemed new again, and full of wonders already.

Children ran everywhere, screaming their delight. Some of them carried cotton candy, others licked gigantic lollipops. Others still waved glo-sticks, painting the balmy air. Screams of a different order came from above, where a thrill ride dropped harnessed passengers from a steel tower. To Scott's right, a group of teenagers clapped and laughed over a man juggling beer steins. To his left was a picnic area, where lanterns swayed in a maple tree copse.

There were two methods for reaching Frontiertown: practical and chaotic. The practical method involved using the fold-out map all park guests were given upon traversal of the gates. Looking at this map, Scott could see it wouldn't take very long. All he needed to do was veer left at the end of the main midway (a giant Ferris wheel stood at this spot, serving as a perfect landmark), and then cross a set of narrow-gauge railroad tracks. This would put him right where he wanted to be. All the same, he couldn't help but allow his footsteps to be influenced by a certain element of the chaotic. The park was simply too vast, its wonders too rich, to pass through in the manner that a crow would fly.

He walked to the Ferris wheel and over the tracks. Then, rather than continue straight down the midway--which had changed from concrete to dirt--he turned right, where a smaller path led into another copse of trees, this one more dense and florid. Violet petals rained from their boughs on a whispering breeze. Pinwheels, their shafts planted like the stems of flowers, spun above tall blades of grass. A man on a bench strummed a guitar.

At the other end of the copse he once again set foot on the midway. Harsher music from a mock saloon assaulted his ears. More lanterns swung and swayed, these from wooden posts that also served as street signs. The names of these streets, Scott guessed, were influenced by whatever attraction happened to be addressed upon them. Log Jam Place was a popular one--a long queue of chattering people waited here, eager to brave the water ride looming above. Mine Ride Avenue, where a wooden roller coaster that dated back to the 1960s was still in operation, was also well-loved. But the one that caught Scott's eye had nothing at all to do with heights and plummet. It was called the Upside-Down House Way, and this was where he turned, with his heart growing more and more light with every step, and his thoughts spinning, so by the time

he laid eyes on Ingrid again, his elation was of a kind that no thrill ride, be it of wood, water, or wire rope, could ever replicate.

"Draw him with the biggest mouth and the most rounded eyes that you can," a woman with sunburned skin was saying. "I mean he was gob smacked by that ghost in the mirror."

Ingrid smiled and nodded, her slender arm winging away over a portable draft-board. The woman's husband was also smiling, though he looked humiliated.

"Gob smacked, I tell you!"

"All right, honey, all right."

"Did you shit yourself?"

"That's enough."

Scott watched as Ingrid worked. She was dressed in the blue blouse and pink cotton skirt she'd put on earlier in the day. Her lips were pressed in concentration. A pair of pink spectacles rested on her nose. This last came as somewhat of a shock; Scott had never seen her in glasses before. They lent her face, which was already studious, an air of professionalism that bordered on the mechanical—except they were pink. Ingrid, he remembered, though a dour girl, had never been one to shy from color, and he found himself wondering for the first time if perhaps this was in defense against the many black and white pictures she created. Working with pencils and charcoal on a constant basis perhaps stirred a craving in her for things more prismatic when not in the studio.

After ten minutes the couple left with their picture. Like an assassin on the hunt, Scott broke cover. Though The Upside-Down House was well lit, there were plenty of screams coming from inside to cover his footsteps. Ingrid was looking the other way, at a large dog that had broken out of the pet-check station. Next to her was a sign that read:

SKETCH ARTIST!

Portraits, Caricatures, Dreams and Wishes!

\$5.00

Much to his amusement, Scott was able to walk to her workstation without her noticing at all. He could now smell her perfume and shampoo. Her gaze was still resting on the dog.

"Hey Artemisia," he said, "can I get a portrait done? Only no torture scenes, please."

Ingrid whirled around, her eyes wide. "Scott!" she almost gusted. Then: "My gosh, you came all the way into the park to get me?"

"I had to see the genius at work. I hope you're not mad."

"No, I'm not mad. But..." She laughed. "Scott, admission isn't free. Honest, I would have met you on the other side of the causeway."

"I know. But there's also the fact I haven't seen this place in so many years. I guess I got tempted."

Ingrid glanced at her watch. "Well I'm outta here in fifteen minutes, if you don't mind waiting."

"Not at all."

No one else asked to have a picture done. At ten o'clock, Ingrid took the sign down. She then went into the house--which to judge by the shrieks still emanating from its windows maintained a strong pull--and signed off on what Scott guessed was a kind of schedule sheet. When she emerged, they were all set to go.

"Seeing as you're here, would you mind if I dragged you over to the Oceana Midway?" she asked. "I'm hoping to find an old friend there."

"Drag away."

She led him east, past the Mine Ride. They crossed the Gemini Midway, where the Octopus was located, along with the tremendous roller-coaster for which this section of the park had been named. There was also the Schwabinchen, and the Witch's Wheel. Ingrid showed no interest in any of these, but Scott felt as if he were reliving the past. He could remember his dad, years ago, trying to cajole him into boarding rides like the Witch's Wheel, and even the Gemini. Terrified, Scott had refused, until his dad had given up and smiled and called him a big sissy. Looking at the Witch's Wheel now, Scott supposed his feelings for these rides hadn't changed much. Not for money or beer would he allow himself to be locked inside one of those orange cylinders and spun upside-down like an ice cube in a drink tumbler.

They veered south towards a golden-lit building called the Hotel Breakers. They passed a beach entrance, and next to that was what looked to be a small cafe called the Ship-to-Shore. It featured an outdoor dining area. Candles flickered between quiet eaters. Once inside, Ingrid chose a corner table and sat, gesturing for Scott to do the same.

"She's with somebody right now," she told him. There was a very strange smile on her face. "Let's wait a few minutes. Hungry?"

Scott's eyes skimmed the diners. To whom was Ingrid referring? At one table a black lady talked to a tall, slender man in a gray suit. At another a pair of teenaged girls giggled over two Shirley Temples.

"Scott?"

He turned to her. "Yes?"

"You hungry?"

He hadn't eaten since lunch. He asked Ingrid what was on the menu.

"Hamburgers, fries, and other quickie stuff, as I recall. Oh and seafood of course."

A girl brought them menus. After their order was complete, Ingrid told him the black lady's name was Lisa Felton. She was a friend from her first year working at the park--the only friend, really, Ingrid had made here.

"And this is the first time you've seen her since you left?" Scott asked.

Ingrid nodded, sipping a Diet Coke. "I used to come here all the time. We'd talk about all sorts of things. I think Lisa got to know me better than I knew myself."

Scott looked at the lady. Whatever she was discussing with the man in the suit, it appeared to be very serious. Her eyes looked almost tragic, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

The wait didn't seem to bother Ingrid. Perhaps she was soaking up a few memories of her own, or, more likely, she was so excited at the prospect of talking to her friend again it didn't matter how long the man took.

Whichever the reason, the man's reaction to Ingrid as he was leaving was one that Scott would never forget. His eyes were downcast as he walked, his hands laced behind his back. But then as if by chance he glanced up. His eyes widened; his gait froze. His mouth dropped for an instant and then snapped shut as he turned to look back at Lisa.

Ingrid, too, was looking at Lisa. Looking, and waving. She hadn't noticed the man's behavior. Scott, on the other hand, had a clear view. The man looked to be in his middle fifties. His skin hung on his face, as if draped there by a hurried *fabricant de masque*. On his head was a scribbled shock of dirty blond hair that looked sandy and swept about as a desert dune. His gaze returned to Ingrid, who now realized she was the object of some rather bizarre scrutiny. She blinked at him doubtfully.

"I'm sorry, Miss," the man came out with. "I mistook you for someone I knew. Please forgive the intrusion. Good evening."

With that, he walked out of the restaurant and disappeared.

"What the hell?" Scott wondered.

But Ingrid was already getting up. So was Lisa. They met halfway between the tables and embraced with such fondness Scott had little choice but to stay back and let the reunion play out. When at last they let go of each other, both women were in tears.

Introductions were made. Scott shook Lisa's hand. She wore her hair long, the way Ingrid did. Her eyes were bright, the way Ingrid's sometimes were. Her voice was clear and friendly.

"You still like your cherry brandy?" she asked Ingrid with a wry smile.

"Yes, please."

She looked at Scott. "And how about your lover-boy here?"

"Lisa!"

"It's on the house," she winked. "What'll it be?"

Scott, blushing, asked for a scotch over ice.

"Just don't go shouting it to the whole world a black lady at the Ship-to-Shore likes to pass out alcoholic beverages to minors. They'd hammer me to a cross."

Ingrid shook her head. "I told you last year, Lisa: I'm forty years old. The Avon lady who comes to my house is supernatural."

"You're only forty on the *inside*, girl."

They got to talking more intimately once the drinks were served. Ingrid described what happened to her the day before, once more sounding to Scott like she was censoring her story a little. She next told Lisa she was sleeping at Scott's apartment. This caused the older woman to set her glass down and raise her hand in a *stop this right now* gesture.

"Whoa!" she exclaimed, swallowing hard on her brandy. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ingrid, that's a bad idea! You're sixteen! He's--" she looked at Scott "--how old are you?"

"Twenty."

"If anyone finds out you're living alone with Ingrid they'll call the police and you'll be arrested out of hand," she said flatly.

"There are things about me the police don't know, Lisa, and that's the way I intend for it to stay."

This last came from Ingrid. Her tone was not defensive, but rather fostering, as if she had more to tell and was just beginning to clear the air. A breeze came off the lake, stirring the candles.

Ingrid took a sip of brandy before continuing. "Look, I ran away from home yesterday. That much you know. But what you don't know is that..." She trailed off here and shook her head.

"It's okay, honey," Lisa said. "Just tell us."

"I quit school. My grades are terrible. I'm going to flunk the year anyway, so...I quit. When I told Nancy and Randy I quit, Randy got super mad and tried to attack me. I had to lock my bedroom door and jump out the window while he was breaking it down."

Another breeze blew in. No one said anything for a number of seconds. On the midway, the rides continued to spin and roll, but there was a steady flow of traffic heading towards the exit now. The park would be closing soon.

It was Lisa who broke the silence. "The police *should* know," she declared. "I don't know much about the foster care system here in Ohio, Ingrid, but surely there's something that can be done. How long has Randy been doing things like that?"

"Breaking down doors? That was a first. But he's always been violent. As far as disrupting the foster care situation goes, I'd rather not bother. It's only two more years before I can legally leave the house on my own, and it might take that long anyway for the system to place me somewhere else."

"And in the meantime, Nancy and Randy would make your life even more of a living hell than it already is."

Ingrid took another drink. "Got it in one."

Scott listened to all this with his mind scrambling to concoct its own solution to the problem. It was doing a very poor job. He'd never met Randy, but the way Ingrid had talked about him... The thought of sending her back to the Semeska household, in just twenty-four hours, made Scott want to quaff his scotch like a desperate drunkard.

"Maybe Nancy would let you stay with me for awhile," Lisa suggested, though not with much confidence. "If you put the idea to her, you know, self-deprecatingly enough."

This made Ingrid laugh. "Yeah, hey, Nancy, I know I'm nothing but a big pain in the ass around here, so I got an idea--"

"Something along those lines, yes. There are...other things in the mix as well. Other places you could go."

"Other places?" Scott asked, cocking his head a little.

"Yes."

"Where?" Scott and Ingrid both wanted to know at the same time.

But Lisa only shook her head. "Not yet. Ingrid, I think for now your only option is to go back home--"

"No way," Scott cut in.

"Lay low. Keep your head down and your mouth closed."

Scott looked with intentness at Lisa. "I don't want her going back to that house."

"I'll be all right, Scott," Ingrid said. "I don't think Randy will attack me on sight, anyway. When I talked to Nancy on the phone she sounded like...well, like she had things back under control."

"Right. At least until you have to jump out the window again."

"You talked to Nancy on the phone?" Lisa grimaced. "You didn't tell her you were staying with Scott I hope."

"No. And she gave me until tomorrow night to go back."

"Then go back tomorrow night. Scott, you drive her. Walk her right up to the door."

"That would defeat the purpose of my not telling her where I'd been staying," Ingrid pointed out.

"Okay. But I still want Scott to drive you. Are you working tomorrow?"

"Same shift, yes."

"I need to make contact with a friend tomorrow, but come and see me on Saturday. I'm still living in town." She reminded Ingrid of her address and telephone number. "Once you're back in Norwalk, be quiet and compliant. At least until Saturday. Don't stir up any trouble."

"Wait a minute," Scott said. "What's happening on Saturday?"

Lisa gave him a very familiar shrug. "I don't know yet."

"Does it have anything to do with the man you were talking to earlier? Because something about Ingrid really seemed to get his attention. He told her it was a mistake, but--"

"I can stay out of trouble for twelve hours at that house," Ingrid put in. "I come home on Friday night, and get out by Saturday noon, no worries."

She sounded confident, but Scott was not content to let the situation lie. "I would really like to know what it is you have in mind for Ingrid, Miss Felton," he said.

"Scott--"

"I know you do, Scott," Lisa said. "Truly. And it makes me happy to see Ingrid has at least two people in this world who care about her. I would like both of you to come to my house on Saturday. There we can talk more about getting Ingrid out of that house, hopefully sooner than two years. But right now, the park is closing."

"It's almost midnight, Scott," Ingrid put in.

Scott looked from one woman to the other. He had no choice but to admit defeat. They finished their drinks; they said their goodbyes. But before they parted, Lisa had one last request to make.

"Take care of her," she said to Scott, low enough so the other didn't hear.

Twenty minutes later, as he was driving Ingrid back his apartment, it occurred to him that Lisa had managed to get them out of her restaurant without answering his question as to whether or not the tall man in the gray suit was somehow connected to what, if anything, was going on.

The next day at work went much the same as the previous. Though customers at the Blue Jay were in a frenzy to get their shopping done for the holiday, Scott was once again able to get out by eight and over to Cedar Point by nine. He waited for Ingrid at the causeway this time, sipping coffee and leafing through that day's edition of the Lorain Journal. At ten-thirty the shuttle arrived. Scott greeted her and asked if she was ready to go back to Norwalk--a decidedly stupid question.

She didn't tax him on it. The drive took thirty minutes. Ingrid noted as they cruised by her house that Randy's van was not in the driveway. He was probably out drinking, she said; it was Friday, after all. Scott parked the car in a church lot just down the street.

"I'm going to wait here for a few minutes, just in case," he told her.

"All right. But it really looks like the coast is clear for now."

Before getting out, she leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Scott watched her walk away from the car feeling far more dizzy than the scotch had made him on the night previous. Though they had dated steadily during his senior year at high school, his romance with Ingrid had never really gotten past the hand-holding stage. Oh, there'd been times when she'd looked at him with a welcoming message in her eyes, but Scott had never quite been able to dare the leap. Today he felt foolish for those times. Perhaps a kiss had been the only thing she'd needed then.

As Ingrid stepped under a streetlamp Scott saw that her head was down. In that moment she looked like what she was: A girl walking into a den of lions. And once again, Scott found himself wondering what indeed he could do about that.

Take care of her, Lisa had said.

She clearly thought him capable of the task, or she wouldn't have bothered. Ingrid was harboring hopes for him as well. Why else had she called him from that phone booth in the rain?

But there was a cold truth to be realized: Scott had never been a champion in his life. He was a boy who worked in a supermarket, no more.

He watched Ingrid reach her house and disappear down the driveway. How could he do it? If she needed him, how could he do it?

No, he had never once been a champion, and it frightened him now to realize that, should he be cast in that role regardless, there would likely be very little time to learn how to be one.

IV. Woman

Ingrid had twice in her life visited the Toledo Zoo, located about seventy miles west of Norwalk. Two distinct things about it clung in her memory. The first was its rather odd parking scheme: Visitors were obliged to leave their cars in a lot on the far side of a multi-lane freeway, then walk through a tunnel to reach the main gate. *Ingrid* had done this at eight and then again at eleven years old. Both occasions provided the sensation of being buried alive. The walls shook as cars and trucks passed by overhead. The lights sometimes flickered.

The second thing she remembered was the smell from the gorilla pit. This smell was, in fact, impossible not to notice. Even before the exhibit came into view, the odor--a stench of sweat, dirty hair, and excrement--would be hovering in the air. Some visitors complained, others wrinkled their noses. *Ingrid* always made it a point never to be eating anything whilst passing through this section of the park, but that was all the further her intolerance went. She had known even then the animals themselves, though large and intimidating, were for the most part peaceful. Creatures like *Randy*, *Ingrid* had known (even then), were uglier by far than the gorillas would ever be.

Still, it was to a gorilla her mind leaped upon setting foot in the house. The living room smelled hideous. It looked to have been ransacked, as if an anthropoid had been at play with the furniture. The couch was overturned and torn apart, its cushions scattered. The television lay facedown on the floor. Also on the floor was a large and lethal-looking shard of wood *Ingrid* realized had been broken off from the banister. Next to the banister was a gigantic, wet blotch, the smell of which was unmistakable: urine. Someone (or something?) had peed on the floor.

"Dad?" *Ingrid* called.

The light in the kitchen was on; it spilled forth in a sardonic invitation to see more. *Ingrid* didn't want to see more, but jumped the puddle anyway and leaned to peek into the kitchen area. It looked much the same as the room behind her. Pots were scattered. Dishes were broken. The faucet was running.

Ingrid's feet dragged on the tiles. She called for *Mister Semeska* again and again received no answer. To her right was the dining table; it had been flipped over, so its legs now poked at the ceiling like the petrified limbs of a dead animal.

She turned the faucet off. It was a mistake. In the sudden silence, *Ingrid's* mind froze. She could not think of what to do next, or where to go. What in blazes had happened here? Had *Randy* gone insane? Had he gotten into a shouting match with *Nancy* and then wound up breaking furniture and peeing on the floor?

Oh God, girl, just leave. Leave the house right now.

A noise made her turn her head. The door that let on the basement steps was wide open, but the threshold was dark. *Ingrid* took a step towards it. The noise did not repeat itself. Had she imagined it? It had sounded dry and raspy--a spider scuttling over a sheet of sandpaper. She took another step, and then another--

The noise came again: *SSSSST!*

There was something in the basement. Ingrid's bare knees wobbled as she moved to the door. Closer, closer. Her tongue wet her lips. Or rather, tried; she had no spit at the moment.

Why are you doing this? Leave!

No, not yet. She couldn't leave...*quite* yet. She peered into the dark. It was silent. Blank. Ingrid squinted, trying to force her eyes to adjust faster. A car passed on the street. There was something wrong with the basement steps. It took Ingrid a moment to realize what it was: They were gone. The first two steps were right there at the bottom of the door, just like always, but beyond them there was nothing. In the weak light, Ingrid could just make out a pile of broken wood on the floor below.

SSSSSSST! SSSSSST! SSSSSST!

Ingrid leaped back. Standing this close to the door, she could now identify the dry sound as it came again, and again, and again. It was the sound of feet, heavy feet, moving over cement. It was the sound of someone (something) walking to and fro.

Ingrid's curiosity had been holding out strong since she'd entered the house. Finally, it collapsed. She turned to run--

And with a terrified scream crashed into Scott Bremman's chest.

He put his arms around her, doubtless attempting to calm her, but Ingrid was beyond sedation. Her finger shook at the door.

"*There's something in the basement!*" she wheezed, not daring to scream the words. "*There's something in the basement!*"

Scott peered over her shoulder. His face looked puzzled but not disbelieving. What skepticism he might have maintained died when the thing in the basement let out a howl.

It was the howl of a very large beast--Ingrid would later be able to remember that much. Yet it was not to gorillas that her mind leaped this time. The howl was low and hollow--the howl of a grizzly bear from deep inside a cave. Ingrid looked through the door and saw two round, yellow eyes looking back. The eyes widened in interest from the size of baseballs to the size of softballs, and then the howl came again.

Screaming, Ingrid buried her face into Scott's chest. Her nails clawed the back of his neck. She was too frightened to run.

Somehow, she made herself look back through the doorway. The eyes were gone. A moment later, the sound of crashing and blundering came from the far end of the basement. Ingrid screamed again as a large pane of glass out back of the house was suddenly smashed to pieces.

"The sliding glass door," she whimpered into Scott's chest. "It broke through it. It's going outside."

They went across the kitchen to a picture window overlooking a patio in back of the house. From here the howler was still not visible--not all of it, at least. Nevertheless, Ingrid knew something was standing next to the low wooden fence where Nancy sometimes planted flowers in the summer. A black humanoid shape, maybe nine feet in height, idled.

"I see it," Ingrid whispered, clinging to Scott's torso.

"Me too," he whispered back. "But what the hell is it?"

The shape stomped across the patio and into Nancy's vegetable garden. Here, the moon caught its yellow eyes, making them gleam. Its head snapped around. Something beyond the fence had caught its attention. It crouched a little, showing a mouthful of long white teeth. The howl came a third time, deep and ululating.

Ingrid had no idea what the beast could be looking at. None of the neighborhood dogs were barking--likely they were cowering in terror instead. The answer came seconds later when a horn blew from the north side train yards. Once more, the creature in the garden gave a howl, only this time, instead of standing pat, it leaped the fence and bounded off through the trees.

As it disappeared Ingrid felt Scott's hold on her loosen a little. She tightened hers by way of response, sending a message (she hoped) that they weren't out of danger just yet. Her eyes could just pick out the gleam of tracks in the moonlight. She watched them, not knowing what it was she was waiting for. The train horn blew again, closer now. The bell from its diesel engine rang through the night. Headlamps spilled over the rails.

Look away, Ingrid told herself.

She couldn't. The tracks had her mesmerized, and just as it seemed there would be nothing further to see--that the creature with the yellow eyes and the black cave howl was gone for good--something huge, covered from head to foot in black hair, threw itself in front of the train and down the other side.

"My god," she heard Scott say.

"Out of here," she murmured, her eyes welling with fresh tears.

"What?"

"Let's get out of here. Please."

They left the kitchen. In the hallway was a china cabinet that had been empty for years. Nancy was not a collector, nor was Randy one for painting model airplanes. Ingrid's father, as far as she knew, had never looked twice at it. Now he was inside of it. Two eyes, bulbous, gaped through broken glass, set into a scream-torn face. In back of the cabinet, blood was splattered everywhere. An arm rested on one of the shelves. A leg rested on another. Passing the cabinet earlier, Ingrid hadn't noticed any of it--she'd been too caught up in the putrescence and the piss and the overall pandemonium that greeted her at the door. Seeing her foster father's dead body now, in her already weakened state, was the last straw. She shrieked out in absolute terror, and would have collapsed had Scott not been there to bear her up. He lifted her and carried her through the living room. This was the only way Ingrid could think, minutes later, of how she had gotten into the passenger seat of his car. Her memory was hazy. She was trembling. Tears flowed from her eyes in rivers.

"That was my dad," she managed at some point. "My dad."

Except Scott wasn't there to hear her. He was standing outside, puking his guts.

It gave her time to gather some composure. She leaned to put her head between her knees. The tears kept flowing. She let them come. Bitter experience had taught her that the best way to get through a cry was to just keep crying. After a few minutes Scott was sitting beside her. His sour breath permeated the inside of the car.

"That was my dad," she said again.

"What's going on?" he croaked.

"No idea."

"Nancy and Randy?"

"What about them?"

"Are they inside too?"

"I didn't see them. But then I didn't go upstairs."

Here was a new thought, and one she didn't like. Nancy and Randy, also dead, also dismembered, lying somewhere in the house.

"We should call the police," Scott said.

"Yeah," she nodded, running her hands through her hair. "But what are we going to tell them?"

He did not reply. Ingrid could sense his frustration, though she was still looking down at her lap. She suggested they drive to Lisa's house and call the police from there. He thought about it for a moment before nodding. The idea made sense--as much sense as could be made on a night like this anyway. Too bad it was not so cut and dry. Ingrid had nothing to wear except the clothes she had on--the clothes she had been wearing all day. Her duffle bag was still at Scott's apartment, but the clothes in it were dirty as well.

"Let's just go," she said to herself.

But Scott sensed something in her tone. "What's wrong?" he wanted to know. "Besides the obvious, I mean."

She shrugged. "Well I...don't have any clothes to wear. And I'm not going back into the house."

"Your room is upstairs?"

"Yep."

He craned over her to peer at the windows. "Let me run in real quick. It won't take long."

His tone was reluctant, and Ingrid didn't blame him in the slightest. She looked at him. Her hands clawed at the hem of her skirt. "No."

"I can throw some stuff in a bag for you, Ingrid. We're talking minutes at the...at the most."

"And what if that thing comes back?"

He looked back at the house before answering. "I don't think it will. It ran off so fast."

"You don't *think*."

But she was already giving in. She hated herself for it a little--but then, Ingrid Semeska knew she had never been a big fan of Ingrid Semeska in the first place.

"There's a shopping bag under my bed," she went on vacantly. "You could just...go through my dresser and dump whatever you can into it."

"All right. Is there anything special you want me to grab?"

Refusing to look at him, she shook her head. "There's a bathroom at the top of the stairs. Walk past it. My room is right next to it."

"I'm going to leave the keys here with you. If anything *does* happen, drive off. Fast."

He said these things as he opened the door, trying to sound brave, trying to sound in control. Ingrid didn't think he was either at the moment. He stopped in front of the house to once again look at her window.

Five minutes, that's all he's going to need.

Scott went inside the house. Ingrid waited. She wondered again what it was they had seen jump the railroad tracks. She wondered what was going to happen to her now--house torn apart, father dead, mother and brother missing. And yes, what was she going to tell the police about those things?

As if on cue, the sound of sirens began from downtown. Two patrol cars, their lights flashing, came flying around the corner at Benedict Avenue. Ingrid ducked as they approached, more out of instinct than out of any thought that they might stop in front of her house.

They stopped in front of her house. Cursing, Ingrid sank lower. Lights of red and blue fluttered in the mirror, on the house, everywhere. Car doors slammed. Two police officers walked to the driveway. Their radios chattered incomprehensible codes: *Seventy-four, five-by; eighteen-twenty in progress; One-forty-six at Norwood and Fair Road.*

Ingrid peered overtop of the door. The two officers were talking, gesturing, pointing at the house. Cautiously, keeping her body low as she could, she slithered to the driver's seat. The officers kept talking. Ingrid did not know what the right thing to do was. Scott was going to be arrested. Should she get out with her hands up, and be arrested with him?

She hoped not, because she wasn't going to do that. Scott might begin to hate her for it (at last, he might begin to hate her), but the night had already been horrific enough. Ingrid did not want to end it with being handcuffed at the police station, under accusation of murder.

"Are we going in?" she heard one of the officers ask.

The other said something that sounded like *yes*. Both officers walked towards the side entrance.

Ingrid's hands shook some more. Her heart raced. She was going to do it, she was really going to do it: She was going to drive away and leave Scott to explain things to the Norwalk Police Department all by himself.

The officers went inside the house. Ingrid waited for a minute. It was nearing midnight. Utter silence enveloped the street. Crying, she started the car and pulled away, leaving the headlamps off. Maybe it wouldn't matter, she told herself. The engine was well-tuned, but maybe the police would hear it anyway and come charging out, yelling all the things they yelled in the movies: *Hold it right there! Halt! Pull over!*

But the driveway was empty when she looked back. The car rolled farther and farther down the street. She looked back again. Empty still. No one was going to come out and tell her to pull over.

She made a left onto State Street and turned on the headlamps. She listened for sirens--there were none. She looked for spectators on the sidewalk, crowds that would gather at any scene exciting enough to bring two police cruisers screeching through the

night with their sirens on. There was no one. The rear-view mirror showed her nothing but a few parked cars and some trees sleeping beneath an arc-sodium lamp.

"Oh God," she said to herself. "Oh God, oh God!"

She could not bring herself to drive faster than fifteen miles per hour. Her chest hitched with sobs. Her eyes stung. It took five minutes to get over to Milan Avenue, where a turn north would take her back to Sandusky. On League Street was a man out walking his dog. At the corner of Marshall Street another man was unlocking his car. Neither of them so much as glanced in Ingrid's direction.

Half an hour later she was parked on Erie Street, in front of Lisa Felton's house, needing to get herself under control before she got out and knocked on the door. But the task wanted too much time. Giving it up as a bad job, she stepped onto the curb. She had to seize her right wrist with her left hand in order to get Scott's key steady enough to lock the driver's door.

Lisa's door was set back on a long porch where tree shadows swept long, black fingers to and fro. Ingrid rang the bell and waited. Not a single light came on inside the house, which was not surprising given the hour. From somewhere nearby came the sounds of a midnight basketball game. Ingrid rang again, then stepped back to get a view of the upper windows. They were both dark. She considered tossing a stone up, and was about to act upon the notion when one of the windows glowed into life. Moments later the downstairs lights came on.

"Who's there?" a sleepy voice asked.

Recognizing the speaker easily enough, Ingrid replied: "It's me, Lisa. Ingrid."

And that was how at one o'clock in the morning she found herself sitting at a table in a small but tidy kitchen, drinking coffee, sharing secrets, and discussing plans.

Just seeing Lisa again helped Ingrid to calm down. Over coffee and cake, Ingrid told her everything that happened after she'd gotten off work at Cedar Point. It didn't take long once she was able to stop crying. The most difficult part of the story came in describing the creature in the basement. Ingrid did not for one minute think Lisa would believe it, so she decided to blur her description of the beast somewhat, leaving out the parts about the yellow eyes and the black hair. But Lisa, in a tone far from derogatory, began to ask questions about it right away, until Ingrid was forced to supply a detailed account of what she'd seen. The other woman became very pale. Fear rose in her eyes like floodwater behind a dam, threatening to spill over. It did not spill over, but it *did* get Ingrid's hands shaking again; she had never seen Lisa, who was always so placid, afraid before. Her questions stopped. She told Ingrid to finish her story. This Ingrid managed to do, mostly by treating her coffee mug like a stress ball, squeezing it as her lips expelled the narrative. She began to cry again as she described the scene of her foster father, dead in the hallway, then kept right on crying when she came to the part about Scott going back into the house and getting trapped by the police.

"I drove off," she said, wiping her eyes with tissue paper. There was a small pile of it on the table by now. "I don't think the police noticed a thing. I just drove off and...and left Scott inside."

Lisa waited a very long time before saying anything. "All right," she came out with at last.

"All right?" Ingrid replied, sniffing.

The other shook her head. "Just talking to myself. You came straight here after you left the house?"

"Yes."

"Was Scott arrested?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"Well I'm glad it wasn't both of you. You did the right thing, Ingrid. I know it wasn't easy—"

"No. I felt like I was going to throw up."

"But it was the right thing." Lisa reached across the table and took Ingrid's hand. "The correct choices are seldom the easiest choices, Ingrid. I know you know that already, but I'm telling you anyway." Her eyes were stern, and they would not let Ingrid's go until she was finished. "Because we all need to be reminded of the strongest parts inside of us, from time to time. Because there are more hard choices ahead for you."

Ingrid gave her a puzzled look.

"Yes," she went on. Her gaze came to rest on the kitchen window. "That thing you saw in the basement," she let out, eyes never leaving the glass, "I know what it was. What it *is*. In the region they're known as dambuhala, or halimaw. Those less educated about the species refer to them as ogres. Why not? That's exactly what they look like." Her face held no expression, nor her tone inflection. Hearing her was like hearing a recording from the distant past of a woman long dead.

It gave Ingrid a chill. "Lisa?" she asked.

The other didn't move. "Dambuhala," she said again, lowly. "Dambuhala, dambuhala, stay away from me tonight. Dambuhala, dambuhala, you're such a frightful sight." And then, at last, she *did* look at Ingrid. A smile appeared on her face. "That's part of a rhyme kids used to sing. Maybe they still do, I don't know."

Ingrid shook her head. "I've never heard of it."

"That's because you didn't stay at home, Ingrid. Maybe if you had your mother would have taught it to you. Or used it to scare you into being a good little girl."

"What are you talking about? Up until two days ago I was always at home."

Lisa's eyebrow went up. "Think so?"

"Of course. How could I have run away from home and not known about it? Unless I crawled out of my crib as a baby and up the chimney."

"Ah. That *would* be hard to remember doing, wouldn't it?" The corner of her lip twitched a little. "Or what if you were carried away from home as a baby? That would be difficult to look back upon as well, I imagine."

"Huh?" Ingrid bleeted.

The twitch became something more like a twist. "Well how can I put this? Ingrid, when you told me there was a monster running loose around Norwalk, I told you what it was, and that in the region they're known as halimaw." Lisa leaned towards her a little. "In the *region*. Do you know where that is?"

"I wasn't sure what you meant by that actually."

"I meant another place, dear. Another world."

She hesitated, letting her eyes drop. To Ingrid it looked like she was arriving at a decision. "The world where *you* were born, Ingrid," she went on. "In 1974. Near a village called Myrobalan. A funny name, considering the climate there isn't tropical. There's this place called Horseshoe Bay, and on top of the cliffs--"

"Stop."

Ingrid had raised her hand and was shaking her head. She had no idea what Lisa was talking about, but it sounded like she was still lost in that old J.M. Barrie book, where babies that used to be birds tried to crawl away from their nurseries so they could be birds again. In fact, had she not already escaped from something that looked like a sasquatch tonight, and seen her foster father dead inside of a china cabinet, Ingrid would have thought that Lisa had suddenly gone insane.

"I was born in Norwalk," she said with slow patience. "At Fisher-Titus Memorial. That's on my birth certificate. I--"

"The information on your birth certificate was easily enough provided and accepted. There are certain...feats that can be used to influence others, when such a thing is needed. In your case it was most definitely needed."

"Feats?"

Lisa used Ingrid's own shrug against her. "Magic. Sorcery. Spells. All brought about by incantation--no wands or witch's cauldrons. And none of it what I would call powerful. No one who uses magic knows what powerful is."

Ingrid let out a pained noise. "Poor Scott," she murmured.

"What?"

"Scott. He's locked up in Huron County Jail, probably being accused of murder. And the only people who have a chance of helping him are two ladies who have lost their marbles. He doesn't deserve--"

"*Ingrid!*"

Her head came up. Lisa had run quite a gambit of emotions tonight--from concerned to frightened to detached to lunatic. And now this: fury.

"I know you've been through a lot tonight," she plumed through gritted teeth, "but if anything that should make you more receptive to what I'm telling you."

"I don't believe in magic, Lisa."

It was the wrong thing to say. "You don't believe in *anything*, Ingrid," Lisa came back with, raising her voice. "But then that's always been your problem. For you, nothing is worth the time or the trouble. You're a flower growing from a grave. You walk around with your head down and your hair hanging in your eyes, content to stay lost. And you *are* lost, Ingrid. You'll *stay* lost, until you stand up and start looking for the roads that can lead you back."

"Lead me back to where?"

Ingrid felt flabbergasted by her friend's outburst. She'd driven to Sandusky with tears in her eyes, needing a lap to lay her head on and think things through. Now she was being attacked. It was the last thing she expected to have happen.

Lisa's answer to her question came out a bit more subdued, but no less difficult to understand for the fact. "Home, Ingrid. It's time for you to go back home."

The narrative got even crazier from there. Ingrid refilled her coffee cup twice while Lisa spoke, though what she really wanted was more cherry brandy from the Ship-To-Shore. She found herself relying on, over and over, what had already happened to her tonight, just as Lisa had suggested she do. It did indeed make the whole story easier to digest. Just not easy enough.

Listen:

You were born in another world, a place referred to by those who visit it frequently as the region. This was in 1974, as I already said. It's about the size of the United States, though nowhere near as developed. Open, grassy country dominates most of the landscape. There are cities and villages--though again, none of them are like what we have here. The people who live in these places are known as dwellers. They are kind and empathic. They are raised to consider the feelings of others before considering their own. It's a lifestyle that works wonderfully, because even though the individual is always putting himself second to someone else, that someone else is putting himself second to the other. I care more about you than I do about me, but that's okay, because you care more about me than you do yourself. I'm talking about love here, Ingrid--the kind of love that you will need to feel in order to even set foot in this place. There is gratitude in abundance. Everyone helps each other. They are happy for each other's joy; they are sad for each other's pain. There are no arguments, no raised voices. No one scoffs at another's opinion, or condescends to their ideas. There is no hypocrisy; there is no sanctimony. To express your thoughts and feelings in the region is to have them considered and respected. There is no true rejection of anything. There is no hatred, or even anger. Everyone cares, and most of all, everyone loves. Everyone loves.

"How do you feel about this so far?"

Ingrid stared at Lisa. Her mind remained doubtful. Also, she was tired. It was after two o'clock in the morning. The basketball game on the other block had long since ended. Not a sound came from the streets.

"Don't answer me yet," Lisa went on. "Take a shower first. I have a nightgown you can borrow."

"Sylvester?" Ingrid asked wryly, looking down at Lisa's Tweety-Bird PJs.

Lisa smiled back. "Maybe. But I think you're a lot more like that wolf who talks with the southern accent."

"Don't know him."

"Never mind. Have a shower."

Ingrid accepted the invitation with gratitude. The shower was long, hot, and felt fantastic. When she at last stepped back into the kitchen, it was three o'clock. Lisa insisted they finish their talk, though by now her own desire for sleep was becoming evident. She asked again for Ingrid's thoughts about her story, and this time Ingrid felt more able to consider the question. She sat down and folded her hands together on the table.

"I don't know how to respond to it," she said. "But I'm not rejecting it outright. It's like you said: I've seen too much tonight already. What was the name of the town I was born in again?"

"Myrobalan. Near there at least. At the ruins of an estate overlooking Coldfrock Lake."

"And who are my parents? Do you know them?"

"I do."

"How?"

"I'm from the region too, Ingrid. I was a friend of your father. He asked me to take you to a safe place after you were born. You couldn't stay in the region, because..."

Her words died. Ingrid studied her face, wondering whether she would find traces of deceit there, anything that might expose her tale as apocryphal. But Lisa's expression was like the back of a playing card--stoic, unreadable.

"Because of a man named Woodward Cambridge," Lisa continued. The words clearly caused her some discomfort. She was almost grimacing as she spoke.

"Woodward Cambridge," Ingrid repeated, not knowing at all what the name meant.

"He's the richest and most powerful man in the region by far. Being the only dweller in the land who cares about having an empire will do that for a person eventually. He owns a castle near the same lake where you were born. One day he will govern the entire region from that castle. If things don't change, that is."

"Who governs the region right now?"

"Nobody. There is no law in the region. There are no presidents or kings or queens or what-have-yous. I've already told you why. The one real police force there was owned by Cambridge, and from what I've been told it's been wiped out by the dambuhala." Lisa paused a moment, shaking her head. "Strange. I think he could have taken the land with just the police force, had he left it at that. Thorncut and Dalandaniss. All the other cities. But he wanted an ace card." She let out a laugh. "Well, he got it. Turned out it was the ace of spades."

"He thought these monsters would help him gain control of the region?" Ingrid ventured, hoping her tone was level enough.

"Yes. His idea was to tear the whole country apart and put it back together again in his image. He has this...*concept* in his mind, of order. Of classification. Categorization. Chains of command. The region-dwellers want or need none of those things. Cambridge feels that without a government in place they are weak. But his motivations are less pure than they seem."

"Less pure?"

Lisa stood up and placed the remains of the cake into the refrigerator, then asked Ingrid if she wanted any more coffee. Ingrid told her no. The cups and dishes were cleared away for washing at the sink.

"From the outside, Cambridge is a very stable and capable man," Lisa continued while lathering dish soap onto a sponge. "He commands armies--or used to anyway. He employs a modest staff of guards and servants. He owns an enormous castle. Most of that was done with family money. His father was an architect and a ship builder; his

mother was a writer and a painter. But there are other things that might--*might*--be going on with him as well."

She turned to Ingrid, drying her hands. Her butt leaned against the sink.

"Cambridge sleeps in a coffin by day. In a coffin, in the basement, near the dungeons. No, he isn't a vampire," she went on, as if Ingrid were about to ask. "He just thinks he is. It's another one of his concepts. A monster with fangs and long fingernails that drinks blood is more intimidating than a normal man, so I'll pretend to be the monster. The dwellers will be more frightened of me, and therefore more compliant."

"He's nuts," Ingrid whispered. It was hard to think of anything else to add.

"Well, yes," Lisa agreed. The fact of Cambridge's lunacy didn't seem to interest her much. "At night he spends a good deal of his time away from the castle, as you may already be imagining. He rides off on his horse to...hunt. Victims."

"Oh my god."

"*Maybe*," Lisa finished. "I've gotten this information second-hand from one of his servants. A man named O'Connor. He was the person I was talking to at Cedar Point the other night when you and Scott came in. He told me a lot of girls were--are--disappearing around Coldfrock Lake. Virgins. Most of them well-to-do. If Cambridge is responsible then I think it's a given he's stealing whatever money they had with them as well."

"But it's not certain that he is responsible?"

"Not at all. But Ingrid...he's not a man of compunction. Believe me, there is no debating that. The military sieges, the ogres. His own servants punished with death for petty mistakes."

"Why is he doing it?" Ingrid asked incredulously. "Why does he want to control this...this *region*? He wants to sit on a throne like some kind of god?"

"That's part of it to be sure." Lisa sat back down. "But to be honest, Ingrid, I don't have a complete answer to that question. It's something you're going to have to find out for yourself."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Or maybe you don't need to find out. Right now it's the *dambuhala* that concern me. A way must be found to put them back where they came from."

"Do you know where that is?"

"I know that it's another region. Not this one, and not the one where you were born. Cambridge found a way to summon them without the emotion that is typically required to do so. The borders of every region, Ingrid, are governed by emotion. Fear, hate. Happiness, love. It's different for every one, and the land itself as a rule reflects the governing emotion. The emotion that circumscribes your region, for instance, is love. Specifically, romantic love."

"So a person needs to be in love before he can cross?"

"He or she," Lisa put in with a small, knowing smile.

It was a lot to digest. Ingrid felt her limbs beginning to tire again. The shower had made for a nice breath of fresh air, but Lisa's story was deep (unfathomable really), and the waters murky. There was no logic to it whatsoever. Monsters from another world had been summoned by a lunatic to destroy a land of love and peace, so said lunatic

could rebuild that land to a state more suitable to his tastes. Oh yes, that was deep all right. Ingrid was ready to come up for more air; she'd been holding her breath a long time.

If only Lisa would let go her ankle.

"The person in love would also need to be at the right place," the older woman continued. "At a crossing point. I know of two. One of them is at Cedar Point. That will be the one you will use--"

Ingrid stood up. Like it or not, she needed to breathe.

"Whoa," she called, raising her hands. "Lisa, I'm sorry but I just...can't accept this. I can't. I know it isn't nice. I know I'm not showing enough gratitude. But please. You're asking me to believe in something that...can't possibly be real."

Lisa looked at her for what seemed like a long time. Her shoulders were slumped. Her eyes were dark, in need of sleep. All at once Ingrid was certain she was going to get angry and raise her voice again.

If she does that, she told herself, I'll just leave. I'll get dressed and leave. She doesn't need me here anyway. Nobody needs me anywhere.

But Lisa did not get angry. Instead, she gave a little nod, along with a look that, while brief, seemed to show that she understood.

"We could both use some sleep," she admitted. "You'll stay here today. I don't want you going to work."

"I have to go to work."

"Don't go to work," Lisa told her, more sharply. "Chances are the police are looking for you. In fact I'd say it's a guarantee.

"If that's true then they'll go to Cedar Point and talk to my boss. They may even trace me back here to you."

"Who is your boss? Still Tom Rolling?"

"Yes."

"I'll talk to him. Let me worry about it," she cut in, as Ingrid was about to protest.

Ingrid shrugged and sat back down. There was still one more concern that needed to be addressed before they went to bed. It was an elephant that had been in the room the whole time--Scott. What were they going to do, she wondered aloud, about Scott.

"If he's been arrested they'll be keeping him at the Norwalk police station while the whole mess gets sorted out," Lisa stated. "Later today I'll pay them a visit and find out for sure."

Ingrid stiffened a little at this pronouncement. "You're going to walk into the police station and ask about Scott?" she marveled. "Lisa I don't know. That could get us all burned."

Lisa shook her head. "Oh girl of little confidence," she smiled. "I am not only going to visit Scott in jail later on, I'm going to bring him back here to you. That should give you at least a *little* more faith in my story."

At this Ingrid was almost gaping. "How in the hell are you going to do that?"

"Nope. Don't worry about it right now."

"But--"

"Let's go to bed. I'll show you upstairs."

She would not be budged any further on the subject. Ingrid was lead upstairs to a small bedroom. She lay down under the sheets, leaving a low-watt lamp burning on the side table. Her eyes wandered the ceiling. Tired as she was, her mind could not seem to find a place to rest. It leaped from thought to thought like a fish against a strong current. It was a wonder that she wasn't in shock from all that had happened. And Lisa's story about the region...

"Crazy," Ingrid whispered at the stucco.

Yet why would Lisa, who had been nothing but a true friend since they'd met, stoop to mocking her with a fairy tale on a night when a beast of some sort had come close to attacking her, and her foster father had been murdered? That idea was crazy too.

Everyone cares, and most of all, everyone loves.

At last Ingrid's eyes grew heavy. She closed them for a moment, hoping her mind's eye would not look back upon the angry, yellow glare of the creature in the basement, nor the disembodied corpse of her dad. When it didn't, she let out a small sigh of relief. It was the region her eye turned to instead, and what it saw there assisted her into sleep with gentle arms. Smiling faces in lamp-lit streets at dusk. Summer breezes in flowering trees. Extended hands, shared greetings. It was a good place, this region, whether real or imagined. So why, if Ingrid had indeed been born there as Lisa had said, was she not walking there today? The full answer to that question had never come, though Lisa no doubt intended for her to know. *You couldn't stay in the region, because...*

As Ingrid wondered over this, sleep took her. She dreamed of Lisa, sitting atop a horse on some grassy plain.

"Are you leaving?" Ingrid, looking up at her, asked.

I'll be back, Lisa replied. Then, cryptically: *And so will you.*

V. Child

“You did it. We know you did it. If you want to make things easier for yourself, you'll tell us everything that happened.”

That was how things began for Scott Bremman at the Norwalk Police Department—with accusations. *You're guilty and we know it.*

Except it wasn't a matter of *we*. Just one officer came into the small white room where Scott had been told to wait—a tall, lean, fifty-ish man with dark hair and an unkempt mustache. His uniform hung on his bones. Eyes that looked bored and bitter stared through plumes of coffee breath. He looked at Scott, a cold-blooded murderer, without the slightest trace of shock or disgust. Though Norwalk was a small town that rarely dealt with homicides, it was clear this man was a veteran of the force. Surprises, for him, were things of the past.

"I'm officer Battles," he said, with weary contempt. "You're going to talk to me tonight. You're going to tell me everything that happened. Understand?"

Thinking back on this meeting from his holding cell, Scott guessed he looked to officer Battles exactly like what he was: a terrified animal caught in an unforgiving trap. He'd been shaking. His eyes had been wide. He'd blurted out some gibberish in a squeaky voice about doing a favor for a friend while somehow maintaining just enough composure not to mention Ingrid by name.

Officer Battles never believed a word of it. His head shook back and forth while hitching one deep, exasperated sigh after the next.

"Don't make this difficult, Mr. Bremman, there's no need. You're a killer. A murderer."

"No! I went inside to get some things for a friend!"

"You broke inside," Battles corrected. "You attacked a man named Timothy Semeska. You cut off his head and then his arms and legs."

"I didn't!"

"You cut off his arms and legs first?"

"No!"

"How did you go about it then? The parlor window was smashed. You broke that after you found the doors locked. Was Mr. Semeska in the parlor at the time?"

"I don't know."

"So you did get in through the parlor window."

This last was declared the way a bored man might declare the discovery of a missing puzzle piece.

Scott, in a frustrated panic, had tried to backtrack, with disastrous results. "He wasn't in the parlor!"

"Where was he then?"

"He was already dead when we found him!"

Battles' eyes widened a little. He finally looked surprised—a little. "We? Who's we, Mr. Bremman? Who was with you?"

"No one."

"You said we. Was it the friend you were talking about?"

"I was alone," Scott had replied, knowing how ridiculous it sounded.

But Battles had taken the bait--if only to lay a new trap of his own. "So you were alone when you killed Mr. Semeska," he stated, in that same bored tone.

"Yes. I mean I was *alone*, but--"

And that was when Battles stood up. "Okay then," he said.

"Wait a second!"

But Battles wasn't waiting--he'd gotten what he wanted. "*You* wait. Right here. You'll be escorted to a holding cell."

That holding cell was where he now sat, with one other inmate, a young African-American male who idled on the opposite bunk. The cell itself looked like all the ones Scott had seen in the movies: a stained concrete floor with a drain in the center, concrete walls scribbled with casual, sometimes strange, graffiti. Scott found himself reading over this graffiti in the hope it would take his mind off his predicament, at least for awhile. Most of it had to do with sex. But amidst the crudely drawn penises and vaginas, betwixt the misspelled pronouncements of love in the name of coitus, there were more interesting dashings. Some seemed to serve as messages to other prisoners. *The well in Peru*, one line read, *12am. Dino I will be at the playground on Foxx Street*, read another. Other lines were more cryptic still. *I saw Mary's bones*, an inmate had written, a long time ago, as the words were faded to near invisibility. *You can't run forever, Mikey*, someone else had promised. *Here comes the tide. I drank poison under a red moon*.

"So what did they throw you in here for?" the African-American suddenly asked.

Scott looked at him. He appeared to be in his middle thirties, a little over six feet tall. A patch of short, black hair covered his scalp. His eyes, despite the hour, did not look tired, nor fearful of the surroundings. They studied Scott with gentle, sober amusement. A tiny smile curled the corners of his lips. He lay on the bunk with the posture of a man having a cigarette on the beach, though nothing of the sort smoldered in his hand. Scott had to wonder if the man was sizing him up and finding the results ridiculous.

"If I told you, you'd think I was crazy," he replied.

The man laughed. "Oh come on. This is Norwalk."

"They think I killed somebody."

"They *think*, or they *know*?"

"They *think*."

"Well, shit, that'll be good enough for them, I'm afraid. The name's Darren by the way."

"I'm Scott. What are you in for?"

"I'm in for a breezy Saturday night up to Battery Park," Darren confessed, and barked out a laugh. When Scott looked puzzled he went on with the truth. "Naw, man. Actually it was what they call breakin' and enterin'. I had to clean up a mess for a friend and got caught holdin' the mop. So to speak."

Scott's head tilted to the side. The similarity to the circumstances of his own arrest was startling. "That's...sort of how it was for me," he told Darren. "Except in my case the mop was a dead body."

Darren looked commiserative. "Not too cool, Scott. I bet it gave you a hell of a scare."

"Everything that's happened tonight gave me a hell of a scare. I'm *still* scared."

"Well you'd best find a way to make yourself at least a little bit comfortable. We won't see any more pigs until at least tomorrow morning. Is this dead person of yours right here in town or in the outskirts?"

"In town. West Main Street."

"Whoa shit!" Darren grinned. "The newspapers will be all *over* that! I bet the Reflector and the Register already have reporters crawling around out there. Shit, there might even be some TV people from Cleveland on their way down."

"I guess."

"You guess." Darren barked out another laugh.

Scott decided then to give the man a more detailed account of what happened. He wasn't certain why. Perhaps he was envious of Darren's good humor in the face of his folly and sought to temper it, or maybe in the telling he felt he could abate his fear somewhat. Whichever, Scott told his tale from an abridged standpoint, leaving out the part about the monster in the basement, as well as Ingrid's name. Darren proved to be a thoughtful listener who was not given to interruptions, so by the time the story was finished, it was barely one-o'clock in the morning.

"It's gonna keep 'em busy," Darren said with a nod. "The press and the pigs." He paused, thinking this through with obvious satisfaction. "You got a lawyer, Scott?"

"No," he admitted. "I've never spoken to a lawyer in my whole life."

"You'll get stuck with someone from the court then. If it goes that far."

"I sure hope it does. It's not like they can send me straight to the electric chair."

"Naw, man, not in Ohio."

"There's no death penalty in Ohio?" Scott asked.

"No electric chair. It's lethal injection."

With that, Darren began to laugh loud and hard, until someone down the hall told him to shut up. He then lay back on the bunk and let out a long sigh, folding his arms on his chest. Scott lay back as well, letting his eyes wander. Strange that just a few hours ago he'd been a simple man working a simple job in the back of a grocery store. Now, this: a Huron County jail cell, given to him for the night under the accusation of, unreal as it seemed, murder. Scott told himself that there had to be claw marks on the body made by whatever the creature was that had done the actual slaying. Teeth marks. Hair. The police would find these things. He would be cleared of blame--apologized to, even. Officer Battles would clap him on the back, looking shame-faced and somehow defiant at the same time

It was a bear, he would say. It doesn't happen very often, Mr. Bremman, and thank God for that, but a bear strayed off from its natural habitat. Got itself lost. It probably came all the way over from the Rockies. Anyway, we're very sorry about everything you had to endure.

His thoughts began to spin as he slid closer to unconsciousness, to become more plausible and sane. There had to be a logical explanation for everything that happened; there just had to be. A little detective work would reveal the truth.

He didn't know what time it was when he awoke; there was no window in the cell, and the police had confiscated his wristwatch. But Darren's bunk on the opposite wall was empty. Scott sat up and stretched. His neck was sore. His spine ached. His belly growled for food.

A clock across the hall pronounced the time to be seven-thirty. At eight o'clock he was given a meager breakfast: an egg, a cold slice of ham, dry toast, a fruit drink. Scott wondered as he ate what was going to happen to him next. He supposed that, whatever it was, it would need to happen before nightfall. If the police intended to keep holding him they were going to need to charge him with something.

At eight-thirty an officer came by to retrieve the breakfast tray. He did not so much as glance at Scott. At twelve noon another tray was brought: Lunch. By now Scott had ample time to plan out how he would conduct himself when officer Battles--or whoever--called upon him for further questioning. He would use the simple truth as his primary weapon. Or rather, he would use the animal he and Ingrid had seen. Evidence of its existence at the crime scene must be common knowledge with the department by now. His own testimony would corroborate its findings, point its investigation in a new direction.

At three p.m. a fire alarm in the hall went off.

Scott watched as two officers trotted by the cell. One of them asked if there was something burning. The other growled that if it was popcorn in the microwave again, heads were going to roll. The alarm brayed on. Scott sat down and covered his ears. Another officer trotted past. Voices were beginning to swell at the end of the hall. Scott tried to smell smoke and came up empty.

He walked back to the bars and peered out. There were no visual signs of smoke either--no haze around the light-bulbs, no dark plumes eddying out the vents. In fact the air in the hallway looked and smelled cleaner than it had prior to the alarm. There was a definite breeze about the premises. Papers fluttered. A pencil rolled off a desk.

The alarm stopped.

It should have been a good thing--Scott's eardrums had started to pulse with the sound, and his head had begun to hurt. Only now, he could hear screams coming from the other end of the station. Some of them sounded angry--orders were being shouted. Others sounded outright terrified.

Scott's blood turned cold. He craned his head in effort to see further down the hall. What could be happening down there that caused professional police officers to lose their composure? He could see a T intersection that looked deserted. He could hear what sounded like furniture being thrown around a room--and, faintly amidst the screams and shouts, a soft and steady moan.

Wooooooooooooooooo...

A loud crash made him jump. Footsteps scrambled. A female voice on the other side of the wall begged for someone to *get it away! Get it away!*

Scott's blood ran colder. The entire station seemed to be under some kind of attack. Had the beast he and Ingrid saw last night returned? Was it even now roaming the halls, seeking out the prey that had escaped it earlier?

He backed away from the bars. His hair began to lift in the strange breeze that was blowing. It was getting stronger. Smells of spring rain and budding trees permeated the cell. Also getting stronger was the moan. It was bass, but Scott thought it sounded almost female--the moan of a mother singing a dirge for her dead child.

...WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO...

A shelf tipped over in the adjacent room--books spilled over the floor, glass shattered. A door flew open and crashed against the wall.

An instant later, the power went out. Everything went black.

The screams kept coming. Scott cowered as far back as the cell would allow, pressing his palms against the cold masonry. From somewhere an emergency generator kicked on. A pallid glow illuminated the hallway--

This was only just sufficient enough. The area now rife with shadows, Scott thought he could see things passing by his cell. Some of them were real--forms and documents swirled everywhere like giant moths. Others were impossible to believe, such as the woman in black who glided past, fully two heads taller than Scott, her mouth pursed with the bulbous, bloody lips of a witch. Or the blue dog that trotted up to the cell and stuck its snout between the bars, its red-stained eyes shimmering in the gloom. Something that looked like a human head floated by, though its face was hidden by a heavy, blowing curtain of black hair.

At some point during this lunatic parade the screams came to a stop. In itself this was bad enough; it gave Scott the idea that someone or something had silenced them. Worse, the moaning kept on. Its music no longer challenged from an opposing orchestra, it began to echo throughout the entire station, until it seemed like its shrouded, soughing song of death was coming out the very walls themselves.

Scott looked at the other bunk and saw Darren sitting on it, smiling through the shadows. He opened his mouth to call out his name, and Darren disappeared.

Something at the bars spoke his name. Its voice was the same as that of the moaner--female and dark, but with a tinge of demand to it now.

"Scott! Scott! Scoooooooooooooot!"

The woman in black was standing before him. Her hands, boney and greenish, were clutching the bars, as if preparing to pull them apart. A hood covered her face, but Scott could still see her lips, gleaming arterial red in the sallow light.

Floating next to this improbable creature were two of the disembodied heads. Each carried a mane of long black hair that danced over dark, cavernous eye-sockets. Beneath these sockets were mouths, hanging agape, that whispered so quickly it was near impossible to comprehend their words.

The cell door rattled five times: *BANGBANGBANGBANGBANG!*

And then slid open.

Scott gasped as the black specteress glid into the cage. Both the speaking heads followed, yet maintained what looked like a respectful degree of counsel for their mistress. They came to a complete stop as said mistress raised her arms towards Scott,

as if to seize him by the neck. Sensing this was indeed to be some sort of attack, Scott slid into a crouching position against the wall.

The specteress did not reach for him. It was not malice her boney hands intended, but exposition. She grasped hold of her hood and pulled it back.

The scene inside was not at all comforting. Quite the reverse. Scott shrank down even lower, looking up in near supplication at the specteress' baleful red eyes--red eyes that were looming closer and closer. Strands of her dry black hair slithered over his face like snakes.

"Scott!" the bulbous lips moaned again. *"Stand up! Right now!"*

Her hands seized him beneath the arms; they were the hands of a skeleton. They lifted. Scott had no choice but to rise.

"Come with me!" the specteress demanded, hissing the words into his ear.

On wobbling legs, Scott walked with her out of the cell. He was led left down the hall, away from the T intersection. The breeze grew stronger. In the visitor's foyer Scott began to shiver with cold as well as fear. Notes tacked onto a bulletin board flapped on their pins. A coffee mug of used pencils was tipped over on the traffic violations counter. Another head of long hair passed by, this one rolling on the floor as if chopped with an ax. It disappeared around the corner of a door marked with red letters.

The source of the wind itself was no longer difficult to ascertain: The doors to the station were wide open, and it was storming a gale force beyond. Scott could see trees bending and stoplights swaying. Nevertheless, his ghostly companion seemed intent on crossing this maelstrom. She led him to it without speaking, the cold, claw-like fingers entwined through his own bearing down for a moment, warning him not to resist.

A tree had fallen across the parking lot. Two patrol cars were smashed underneath it. Leaves danced in the sky. Horns blared on Whittlesey Avenue.

"Oh I hope we didn't cause an accident," the specteress worried.

Bemused, Scott looked at her.

He didn't need to look far as he had in the station. They were crossing the lot, working their way around the fallen tree, and with each step he noticed that the specteress appeared to be shrinking. A gray mist had begun to churn around her robes. Also, the wind was weakening. Foliage came down in a green rain.

A third thing Scott noticed, as they came to the other side of the tree, was that the disembodied heads had gone. The woman walking next to him was now shorter than he, and her robes had been replaced with common clothing. Her hair was still long and black, but no longer blowing in a dreadful, dead curtain. Indeed, it rested quite naturally on her shoulders. Part of this was due to the wind dying off; another part was due to the beads that decorated its locks.

"See my car?" Lisa Felton said to him, pointing across the street.

"Well, yes, but--"

"Get in. Now."

Knowing this was not a good time to be asking questions, he ran over to a red Chevette parked under an elm. He got into the passenger side just as Lisa sat down in front of the wheel. She started the engine and let the clutch go with professional ease.

"And that's that," she nodded as they reached the end of the block. A triumphant grin spread over her face. "And Ingrid didn't think I could do it."

"What the hell did you do?" Scott had to ask, now that they were away.

"Tut tut, Prince Charming. This is no night for profanity."

She was still smiling, but it was clear she meant what she said. For Scott her reply was yet another mystery to pile on top of the ones already there.

"Those balls of hair looked pretty profane to me," he came out with, for want of anything else.

"Nah," Lisa refuted. "They're called pouting jennies by most of the summoners who use them. Because they tend to whine a lot." The Chevette went over a pot-hole in the road that made both of them bounce. "Damn! Oops, sorry. Now you've got me doing it."

"Pouting jennies?"

"Yep. Just common entities really. They loathe being disturbed, especially when it's for a function. So they complain and make threats. But believe me, they're harmless as pussy-cats."

The Chevette turned onto Milan Avenue. Fast-food restaurants blew by the windows. Men and women cavorted in front of bars. Scott hardly noticed. He was too busy trying to wrap his mind around what Lisa was saying. His thoughts dodged over one picture after the next. Nothing he could remember made any sense--of course not. Monsters in the basement, a murdered corpse in a china cabinet, disembodied heads that floated in the air, a banshee that transformed into a friend of a friend.

Were it not for the newspaper lying on the floor between his feet he might have dismissed the memories altogether and demanded to be taken to a hospital. As it was, Scott bent and picked up the paper, his shocked eyes scanning the headline.

WEST MAIN STREET HOME BROKEN INTO, ONE DEAD, it proclaimed.

"That was me," he said aloud.

But he wasn't mentioned anywhere in the article. Ingrid's name of course came up. The reporter had her listed as an occupant of the house. No mention was made as to whether or not the police were searching for her, but Scott could just bet her friends and associates had been questioned.

"No it wasn't," Lisa said. "You didn't break into any houses, Scott. And you sure as sh--" she stopped herself. "You sure didn't murder anybody."

"Did Ingrid tell you what happened to us?"

"Yes. And Scott, I want to thank you for being there for her. She mentioned something about your carrying her outside to your car."

He shook his head a little. Recollections were going to be hazy and crazy for a long while. "I think I did. I don't remember."

"She says you did." Lisa patted his hand. "She's a very strong girl, and she likes to pretend she doesn't need anybody. But Scott..."

The Chevette curved over a valley outside of town. Windows twinkled in blue-collar houses, where no doubt families were eating dinners in safe, warm kitchens.

"You love her," Lisa went on. "She told me that, too, but I knew it when I saw the way you looked at her the other night. Give her that love, Scott. Don't be ashamed of

it. Because she's..." Her voice died again, and when she next spoke, it sounded to Scott like she was fighting back tears. "Hurting. Bad. I'm...I'm her *friend*, and that's never going to change. I love her, but my love's different from yours." She glanced at him for a moment--and yes, Scott saw that her eyes were glistening. "You understand what I'm saying, I'm sure."

"I'm not ashamed of loving her," Scott said.

"You're not," Lisa replied. She sounded very sure of herself. "You came right out and told her once, didn't you?"

"Yes. I tried to think of other ways to introduce myself, believe me--"

Lisa laughed out loud, but without rancor.

Scott smiled back. He was tired and scared and confused, but he smiled back. Thinking of Ingrid had a way of making that expression come easy. "There were no other ways," he said finally. It was the simple truth.

The Chevette cruised along Route 250, headed towards Sandusky. Perkins glowed in the distance, where they would pass the first in what always seemed to Scott like an endless stream of hotels, motels, and restaurants. The dashboard clock read 8:56.

"Of course love is more than just saying so," the woman sitting next to him pointed out.

"Yes," Scott agreed. "Are we going back to your house?"

"No. I don't think any of us would be safe there now. We're going to Cedar Point."

"Cedar Point?"

"You're going to stay there with Ingrid tonight. There's a room above one of the attractions. It's cozy, and there's a lock on the door. No one will know you're there."

Scott fell silent. This was serious information indeed. But Lisa had more.

"Sometimes you need to show a girl how you feel, Scott. That goes double for a girl like Ingrid. Words are nice, but words aren't always enough."

"Well--"

"And I'm not lecturing you. God, don't think that. I get the idea lecturing a guy like you about love would be like lecturing a fish about swimming."

Scott's face went crimson red and he found himself happy the inside of the car was so dark.

"What I'm trying to say is that I trust you with Ingrid, Scott. That probably doesn't sound too logical, given I haven't known you for long. But she's told me a lot, and I've seen a lot. You can make her happy."

She intoned this last as if it were a revelation to them both.

"You can," she repeated, when Scott didn't answer. "And I would...I would *love* to see Ingrid happy, Scott. She's never felt that way in her whole life."

"I would love that, too."

He could think of nothing else to say. The words were honest.

"So let's go see her," Lisa said, with what had to be the most deviant smile he had ever seen.

They arrived at Cedar Point by ten o'clock. Lisa used an employee entrance that let on the pet check area; no questions were asked about Scott. From here she led him

towards the Ferris wheel--which was so gigantic it could be seen from anywhere in the park--and into Frontiertown. She avoided the central midway, choosing instead a smaller path that circled under the trees to the park's extreme northern end. At this point they were presented with a long, grassy slope, on the foot of which was doubtless the attraction Lisa had mentioned in the car.

It was a small theater--The Dakota Theater, according its glowing marquee. As they got closer, Scott noticed it did not seem to be a popular part of the park. In fact, parts of the building looked to be in need of repair. The paint was flaking in places. Some of the marquee lights were out.

A bored-looking girl in the ticket booth said hello to Lisa and waved them inside. More evidence of the building's neglect awaited them here. Worn red carpeting lay in a lost memory of something better over the foyer. Faded six-sheet posters of old westerns hung on the walls. Lisa noticed Scott looking at one and explained that this theater showed only westerns to keep with the spirit of Frontiertown. This week it was *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Scott was about to ask Lisa why anyone would want to spend two hours watching an old western after spending thirty dollars to get into the park itself, but just then she turned down a dimly lit hall and led him up a flight of creaking wooden steps. At the top of these steps another hall, just as dim, led to a small window overlooking the lake. Next to this window was a door. Lisa gave it a light knock.

"Ingrid?"

Seconds later the locked turned, and the door swung open. Ingrid looked up at them, wearing a pair of pink pajamas.

"You have a visitor," said Lisa.

Once all three of them were inside with the door locked, Scott was given a brief description of the quarters. It consisted of a mere two rooms. The main room smelled of coffee--a pot of it steamed on a wooden desk. There was also a window, a lamp, and a bed. Off from this room was a bathroom with a shower.

Scott wasn't sure what to think. His mind went back to the movie playing downstairs. It was appropriate to the situation. The police were looking for him; they thought he was a murderer. Bulletins were doubtless being sent out all over Ohio at this very moment. What would happen to him next? What would happen to Ingrid?

Lisa appeared to be reading these worries from his expression. "Both of you sleep tonight. As much as you can." This last was directed at Ingrid with a knowing simper. "Scott?"

"Yes?"

The simper faded. "Try not to think too much right now. Tomorrow you're going to know a lot more."

"What will we do then?"

She shot him a chiding look, until Scott, defeated, looked away.

"Great," she said. "I'll be back. Ingrid, are you going to be okay for now?"

She was sitting on the bed with her legs crossed. "I will be, Lisa. Thank you for everything."

She stood and embraced her friend. Lisa hugged her back. Her lips moved as she whispered something into her ear. Scott thanked her as well, though he wasn't sure just

what for. Yes, she had broken him out of jail, but that only meant he was hotter than ever now.

Ingrid offered him coffee after the two of them were alone. There was also a box of plain donuts next to the mirror. Scott accepted both. He found he was ravenously hungry, and had to force himself to eat with some modicum of manners while in the presence of a lady. He filled the spaces in between bites with the story of how Lisa had gotten him out of the police station. Ingrid was fazed by none of it. She was back on the bed, legs crossed, fingers spread on the mattress.

When Scott was done with all three of his courses--coffee, donuts, and story--she asked if he wanted a shower. A soft smile had come over her face, and her eyes were shining as if the mind behind them had discovered a pleasurable dream.

There was a new toothbrush in the holder, as well as a small shaving kit. After showering, Scott cleaned his teeth, and had his hand on the razor when Ingrid appeared in the doorway.

"I forbid you to do that," she purred.

"What, shave?"

"Save the stubble, Mr. Johnson. It's for a good cause."

Scott looked in the mirror. "It's getting to be a bit more than stubble I think."

"No. Let me see."

She came to him. Her hand, small and soft, rose to touch his face. A scent of lavender wafted from her hair. Her fingers traced down his cheek to his chin.

"It's okay, Scott. Just right."

"In that case I'm glad you caught me in time."

"I caught you two years ago, didn't I?" Her finger touched his lower lip. "Say it again," she whispered. "Please."

Scott raised his hand to touch her face, brushing away a lock of brown hair. Her skin felt smooth, delicate. "What do you want me to say," he whispered back.

"I love you."

These words had never been a problem for him. Ingrid would always be worth the bravery it took. He moved closer, putting his other hand on her cheek, so her face was fully cradled when he said: "I love you, Ingrid."

It made her beam with joy. A tiny breath of air slipped from her lungs. Scott had never seen her smile with such abandon. It suited her, like a ray of nourishing sunlight over a garden long rained upon. Her cheeks turned red. She let out another breath, this one more of a laugh.

"You're blushing," he teased.

"Can I hear it one more time?"

"You can hear it as many times as you like. I love you, Ingrid."

A second, delighted little laugh came. She stood on tip-toe...

And Scott pressed his lips to hers, kissing her for the very first time. His hands moved through her hair, making their way down to her waist. Ingrid responded by opening her fingers over his shoulder-blades, while her soft lips continued to drink the kiss in. A sudden burst of sweet breath plumed from her nose, followed by a long gasp. Scott, still holding his own breath, cautiously reached beneath the hem of her pajama

top to caress the small of her back. Ingrid went with it, arching her spine. Her fingernails found the front of his bare chest and began to rake. As they ventured towards his naval they must have noticed the sizable bulge now pulsing beneath his belt buckle, for they retreated with some abruptness, as if in fear of his appetite. Except that they weren't afraid at all. Rather than moderate her advances, Ingrid arched an eyebrow at him, and began to unbutton her top...

It must have been after midnight when he awoke. The chatter from the sidewalks as they'd made love, the music from the arcades, the elated cries from Ohio's thrill-seekers beyond the trees, had all ceased. The room was silent but for the sound of Ingrid's breathing.

Her lips came close to his ears as she placed kiss after delicate kiss on his face. Scott put his hands on her back and traced her spine down to the cleavage of her buttocks. Ingrid bent into a sitting position by way of response, so her small, slender chest hovered over his own wider, coarser frame. His penis, already hard, grew harder still, and he could see Ingrid's smile gleaming in the light of two candles that flickered on the desk. She shifted her weight. The hairs around the opening between her thighs brushed his shaft, and then he was deep inside of her once again. A light, musical breath of air plumed from her chest, and the sound and the scent of it brought Scott dangerously close to letting go too soon. But it seemed Ingrid had already picked up the trick of feeding and caring for his sex from their first session. She froze on top of him as things teetered on the brink for a few precious seconds. Her nails scratched at his chest, perhaps as a means of distraction. It worked just well enough. Scott then took her breasts in his hands, squeezing them until the nipples were sharp as pebbles on his palms. Ingrid leaned back and drew in a deep, pretty breath, raising her chest up high in his embrace. There was no expelled breath, leading Scott to believe she was holding it as she ran her hands through his hair and kissed him deeply on the lips. Her hips flexed, encouraging him to go deeper down there, to press harder. The invitation left her backside fully exposed, and Scott could not resist reaching between them to touch the other, smaller hole. It caused Ingrid to come up for air (gasping), but her hips maintained their rhythm, and the expression on her face reflected amusement, and--dare he think it?--provocation. He felt her bear down a little on his finger. He pushed back, which caused her to open her legs wider and kiss him again. Scott was now back in the red zone, yet this time, Ingrid was giving him the go-ahead to follow through. His hands returned to the smooth softness of her back, and his hips rose higher, and his breath caught, and his eyes were holding the eyes of the woman he loved. And just before he let go inside of her, he took her face in his hands, and kept watching her eyes, her brown, beautiful eyes as they gleamed in the candlelight.

"I love you, sweetheart," he whispered. "I love you, I love you."

A reciprocation came, just as heartfelt, just as sincere. Scott felt it was only right that those were the first words he had ever spoken to her. They had begun their journey together with the truth, and now, hiding in this secret room at the top of the stairs, they were living the truth.

Ingrid lay her head on his chest after giving him one last goodnight kiss. Minutes later, Scott could tell by the rhythm of her breathing that she was asleep. The candles continued to flicker. By their light he could see what looked like a mask hanging on the wall. Above was a skylight which he had also failed to notice earlier. Stars shimmered in the quiet sky beyond.

He closed his eyes, content with the feeling of Ingrid's delicate weight against his body. A night-bird sang from some nearby tree. Its lullaby carried him to a peaceful, placid sleep, which sheltered him quite adequately from the further truth of things.

Hours later, the sun came up.

Scott awoke knowing things between him and Ingrid would be changed by their love. What he did not know--what he could never in his wildest dreams have imagined--was that their love had changed everything else as well.

Part Two: Journey

VI. Witch

Woodward Cambridge was unwell.

Things were not going according to plan. They had started off well enough, in spite of some resistance from cities like Thorncut and Dalandaniss, as well as an obvious reluctance by O'Connor towards using the ogres as a means to deter those foolhardy enough to oppress his ideals. The man had protested the concept of their employment from the start, using his typical gentle and patient demeanor. There would be no need, he'd argued on many nights after Cambridge's strategic meetings with his military officers, of their services; his armies were already strong, and the region was already weak. Also--and this O'Connor had pointed out with a shrewd lack of confidence in his voice--opening a portal into the ogres' region, so they could cross into this one, would not be easy. Cambridge was aware, of course, of the specification required for entry into this particular realm? It was love. Pure, perfect love. What ogre knew anything about love? What ogre, for that matter, knew anything beyond their own appetite for raw flesh?

"Love comes to us in many guises, O'Connor," had been Woodward's reply.

It was the truth, as his success at opening the portal had gone on to prove. Indeed, the passion of the dambuhala had scarcely played a role in the breach at all. What O'Connor had failed to observe--or had declined to observe--was that it had been he, Cambridge, encroaching upon the region of the ogres, not the other way about. The specification required for that was just the opposite: hate. And once the portal was open, the ogres poured through it in droves, howling with delight at the smell and the taste and the vista of a new world. Oh, the incantations for it had worked; they had worked so well. Cambridge had been in awe at the sight of hundreds of brown and black beasts, ten feet in height, stampeding the grassy hill he had chosen for their crossing. Their eyes, shining by light of a full moon, had been yellow and demented. Their howls, booming across the sky, had been savage.

The region's first victim by the claws of these beasts might have been Cambridge, had it not been for the precautions he'd taken. A hiding spot, a glamour, an evil-tasting potion that preached mutiny in his bowels...these had been the terms of those precautions, and Cambridge still wasn't certain whether they had actually worked or if fear alone--the fear of failure that, like contraband, he carried but kept hidden away--had played the master role in his survival.

The ogres had gone on to take the region by storm. Straight in the path of the stampede on that first night was a small village by the name of Rudgard. The ogres had pounded through its breezy outskirts of orchards and milk farms as its occupants dreamed in their beds. Survivors spoke of a rumble in the ground, as if the nearby volcano Mount Chariness, which had been dormant for a thousand years, were erupting again. By that time the ogres had already laid siege in the streets. Screams of terror from those few who'd been out at that late hour rose above the village's pointed rooftops, awakening everyone else. Those others had come to their doorsteps with

lanterns in their hands, bleary-eyed and curious, to be slaughtered themselves on the cobblestones.

Cambridge had been pleased--at first. This was the message he'd wanted to send. From Rudgard, the ogres had made their way over the hills, following their noses to a larger city where ships were built for travel across the Yeetahtan, named Havencourt. There, they had eaten their fill. In the space of an hour, Havencourt went from a pleasant, somewhat conceited city, to a full-out abattoir. By dawn the hands--as well as the brains--of its skilled craftsmen lay turned inside-out on the wide avenues, the chic boulevards, as survivors wailed for lost loves among the carnage.

Daytime was when the ogres slept. This gave news of what was happening in the region time to spread, and spread it did. On the following evening, Cambridge arrived in Thorncut to find his army in full command of the city. Its people had listened to his patient, logical speech in front of a large fountain at the end of Petal Avenue. They had fidgeted. They had gawked. They had gaped at the soldiers in the streets carrying kickshellacs.

"What would you have of us?" one of the bystanders all but gibbered.

Cambridge answered from his podium with sternness and compassion in equal measure, never realizing that in a mere two hours his army in Dalandaniss would be attacked and slaughtered by the ogres.

"The shape of this region," he'd begun, "is evanescing before our very eyes. Its substance is being diluted by our own unwillingness to maintain its structure, its foundation, through a cognizance of the nutrients that allow a civilization to evolve. Those nutrients, my ladies and my gentlemen, consist of two things: discipline and deference."

"Deference to whom?" another, bolder individual wanted to know. The expression on his face had suggested an urge to spit into Cambridge's eye.

But Cambridge did not allow himself to be discountenanced; he'd spent a week preparing this speech, and his answer to the defiant man's question was readily at hand.

"Deference to anyone who cares enough for this world to make sacrifices for its well-being."

"We're happy with how we are."

Cambridge glanced at one of his soldiers before continuing. "You are lawless," he said to the man. "A body without breakers to contain it."

"We're happy with how we are," the man had repeated, as if rebuking a small child.

The soldier by that point was standing directly behind him.

"I find your reaction impulsive," Cambridge went on. "I wish to enrich the region by providing a system that is conducive to order. Imagine a medical facility in every city, where trained doctors provide expert care to those in need. Imagine--"

"Thorncut has very fine doctor already."

"Imagine a team of individuals dedicated to the stoppage of crime."

"Hegemony is a crime!"

Cambridge then looked over the crowd with his hands on the podium, paying the man no mind. Some carried lanterns that flickered in the gloaming. Children held their

parents' hands, lips quivering. Wives cowered behind husbands who wore sheepish, worried faces. The night had been hot and still, without a single whisper in the trees.

"Imagine a region-wide monetary system--a system in which currency from one city could be spent in another. Imagine wider, more practical roads being built between these cities. Facilitated travel. Imagine a skill for every individual. A duty. A team of men could build the roads after another team had mapped out the territory in advance. Other teams like these could be used to treat the sick, care for the animals, nurse the children. One team could build a bridge; another could cross that bridge to dam a river on the other side. A team of loggers could chop down a forest; a team of carpenters could craft with the wood obtained. One man builds a fire, another man stokes it. One man lays a brick, another man spreads the mortar. One woman sweeps, another woman disposes. All of these things and so much more. I'm talking about a system, my ladies and my gentlemen, larger and more organized than the one you employ now, that will bring about cultivation for the entire region. You will work by the clock, performing whatever task you excel at the most. One task for every individual. My goal is simply this: organization. My objective? To have the new monetary system in place and fully functional within one year. Also within that time, I will expect ninety percent compliance from the region-dwellers."

After this, Cambridge's eyes had hardened, his brow had darkened. He looked out proprietarily at the residents of Thorncut. One of those residents did not look back: The man who had protested his occupation from the outset lay dead in front of the fountain, his skull broken open by the butt of a kickshellac.

"That compliance, my ladies and my gentlemen, shall begin tonight. With you."

No further resistance was put forth after the initial naysayer, but the transformation was still slow. Most Thorncut men worked as shipping merchants; a team of recruiting officers was already sending back reports that very few other skills were evident. There was the doctor, of course. One barber. One rather brilliant seamstress who went by the name of Echo Gardener. Zero carpenters. Zero chefs. One butcher.

Cambridge sighed. A cool, pleasant rain fell in the darkness beyond the plinths of his chamber balcony. The problem wasn't in Thorncut.

"Tell me," he said to the shadows.

"Dead, sir," O'Connor replied. "All of them."

Cambridge, agitated, cocked his head at the shape across from him. "Are you speaking of Dalandaniss? Of my platoon there?"

"Yes, sir. They were--"

"I *know* what happened in Dalandaniss!" he growled. It wasn't like O'Connor to be presumptuous, and it was irritating to see it on display now. "I was referring to your little journey across the interstice. Tell me what you found."

"Of course, sir. I spoke with Luanna Felton, known as Lisa in the progressive. Her daughter is alive and well."

"Well? I was given to understand she suffers from a rather severe form of depression. That she has communication issues. That she goes through long spells of apathy towards everything around her, followed by brief periods of instability."

"Indeed, sir," O'Connor agreed. "But she is physically healthy. I feel--"

"You would do better for both of us, O'Connor, to be more precise with your feedback, as you have been until recent times. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. And before you continue I may as well correct you on another point as well: Luanna Felton's daughter is dead. We were able to get one of the dambuhala into her house in the progressive region."

O'Connor made no reply to this.

"Yes, yes, I know," Cambridge went on, "you would have objected strongly to the idea. For you the ogres will always be something of a sow's ear for a silk purse, and now that our army in Dalandaniss is slaughtered you feel vindicated. No doubt the entire mess pleases you. You can now look me in the eye with more confidence than you know what to do with."

He wasn't being fair with these words, and he knew it, but *god*, did he feel ugly tonight.

"She's dead, O'Connor," he reiterated, regaining some composure. "The area where she lives is in a state of decay--The Rust Belt, I believe it's called. It was only a matter of finding an individual in this region who was also dying to get a sedated ogre across."

"I see," O'Connor murmured.

"Do you?" Cambridge snapped.

He seized a goblet of blood from the table and quaffed it; its owner had been small, slender, full of life--in a word, delicious. It made him feel a little better.

"You'd best tell me what you learned about Luanna. Is she a threat to our plans?"

"She does not have access to the region, sir. Her heart has the love, but not the focus. Or if it does have the focus it is not reciprocated."

"But if she were here, O'Connor, could she stop us?"

The servant was silent before answering. "Yes, sir. I would consider her a threat. Except for perhaps the dambuhala."

Cambridge started in his seat. "The dambuhala?"

"Yes, sir. Were she here, I feel her priority would be to return the beasts to the region from which they came. Yet she has not the hate nor the hunger to do this."

Cambridge's eyes widened...and then he began to smile. "My dearest O'Connor," he purred, "did you *really* object to my calling them over? Did you really?"

"Sir, it's not as if the matter of Miss Felton's intervention provides a fulcrum for a turn of events. She is unable to breach the region."

"She'll come over," Cambridge, still smiling, assured. "An ogre killed her daughter. And when she sees more ogres, and what they're doing to the region, she'll try to stop them. They'll eviscerate her like they did to the Dalandaniss platoon. By then it *will* be time to put them back. The region will be...in utter remission."

He spoke this last more to himself than O'Connor, staring in the direction of Coldfrock Lake. The rain-clouds were thinning, and now the moon hung over the water like an incredulous eye, ready to weep for the region's lost innocence. Yet Cambridge suddenly knew his decision to summon the ogres had been wise.

Luanna Quinn Felton could not hate--she could only love. She could not consume--she could only give. That left just one other person with the knowledge and the capability to cast the ogres back to their own region, when the time came.

"Me," Cambridge whispered, nodding. Things were going to work out after all.

"Sir?"

He started again, shaken from his reverie.

"Don't despair, O'Connor." These were his soft words. "Thorncut is under full control. Willowbee is occupied; tomorrow night I'll speak there. We're well on our way."

The two men said nothing more to each other for the remainder of their time on the balcony, but Cambridge could still feel the vibes of doubt emanating from his servant. It did not perturb him. He watched the night clouds drift from the castle. The skies, like his thoughts, were clearing. The one person powerful enough to put an end to his ambitions would soon be dead, a victim of her own ambitions...

Love and compassion.

The castle dungeons were nothing at all like his tower chamber, but Cambridge enjoyed their surroundings nonetheless. Their strengths were different, to be certain. Gone were the cool breezes through geminate windows, the smells of sweet tea steaming by candle-light. In their place: cold drafts and torches that burned in charred sconces. Cambridge was convinced the former was due mainly to the restless spirits of those who'd suffered here centuries ago, during more tumultuous times for the region. The thought of them suffering still, beyond death, pleased him no end. Yet not for their crimes--goodness, no! What did he care for the political views of men and women dead these five-hundred years? What business had he with the petty exuberance of a few teenagers from broken homes? No, it was the suffering alone--the thought of entities in the catacombs straining beneath near unbearable amounts of pressure, wanting to scream but lacking the voices to do so--that captivated him, that made him almost eager to walk among the rows of rusted iron bars, boots clicking on the cracked fieldstone floors. It made a fine paradox as well--he, Cambridge, lord of the castle, held in check by his own fascination with the spirits of its dead prisoners.

Tonight, however, he did not allow himself to be deterred. He walked straight through the dungeon's main corridor. He turned left, his purple cape whirling in a near flourish, and proceeded down a slight incline fitfully lit--thanks to O'Connor--by two more torches. Near the end of this incline, on the right, was a large, arched door. It was already ajar. Cambridge opened it.

One of the larger cells had been located here, back when the dungeon was still in use, but now it functioned as a simple storage room. Old furniture was stacked in corners: bookshelves, tables, broken chairs. A large crate rested next to one wall, its

lock broken. An old painting was propped against another, the canvas smeared, the colors that once depicted an organized scene now screaming in torment.

In the center of the room was a bed. Next to the bed stood two people. One of them was O'Connor, who had come down after their meeting on the balcony. The other was his sister, Nancy Semeska. They were looking at a third individual, lying on the dusty counterpane with a bump on his head. The individual's body was large, fat. Who else could it be, Cambridge thought, but his nephew Randy?

"What happened?" he asked, his buoyant mood lessening.

Nancy and O'Connor looked at him. "Just a bump on the head," the woman told him. "A shelf tipped over as we arrived. Air displacement."

"I see. O'Connor, please have everything in this room rearranged in a more tidy fashion, so as to prevent future accidents from occurring."

"Yes, sir."

Cambridge looked down at Randy. "Welcome back," he said, not without sarcasm. "Can you walk?"

"Yes," Randy's bulbous lips blubbered back. "I'm very hungry though."

"Of course you are. I'll have something prepared. We can talk as we eat. Also, if the two of you are in any way displeased with the clothing left for you down here, do not by any means hesitate to say so. Tastes change, styles change. I am always happy to assist my guests with their acclimation to a new environment."

Nancy smiled; the torchlight caught the gray, grandmotherly streaks in her hair, making her look almost sweet, almost kind. "Same old Woodward," she said. "That veneer of politeness is as counterfeit as your fear of the sunlight. But I'm happy to be back all the same."

Cambridge affected to look puzzled. "Counterfeit?"

"Hush."

She gave him a hug. He returned it happily enough, though he refused to touch Randy, even for a hand-shake. He ordered O'Connor to assist the boy to his feet and they departed the storage room.

They did not talk as they ate. Randy, never one for rhetoric, laid waste to every course placed in front of him, his appetite rivaling those of the ogres. It was no matter; there was neither insight nor information to be gained from him on any day.

O'Connor was also quiet. Again, this came as no great hardship for Cambridge. The servant had already given his report in the tower. Having nothing further to add, he sat tasting at his soup, a glass of white burgundy at his side.

The one who frustrated him was Nancy.

She spoke not a word, even when pressed for information regarding how things had turned out with the ogre in the progressive region. She merely raised her eyebrows, smiled, and promised to relate everything once the meal was finished.

Cambridge had no choice but to wait. He picked absently at a slice of fruit for another twenty minutes, making desultory conversation with his sister. She drank two more glasses of red wine. A servant came to stoke the fireplace. The flames danced. Another servant cleared away the empty plates and bowls.

"So then," Cambridge said to Nancy, trying again to instigate some meaningful exchange.

"So then," she replied.

Cambridge smiled, though inside he was beginning to feel apprehensive again. Why he could not quite determine, except through Nancy's obvious reluctance to speak with more discourse.

"The dambuhala?" he ventured. "Was our... 'terminal subject' able to bring it into the progressive?"

"He certainly was."

"Ah!" Cambridge sat back, relieved. "And did the beast locate its target?"

"It found her."

It was Randy who replied. They all looked at him. He shrugged and started to say something more, but Nancy shushed him with a hiss.

"Oh who cares anyway?" he whined. "It's not like that little cooze is gonna--"

"I said shut your mouth!" Nancy slammed her fist down, rattling the glasses.

A long silence followed, during which Cambridge sipped his wine. His eyes were still cast into its depths when he asked: "Am I to presume the girl is still alive?"

"We had a bit of bad luck," the woman admitted. Her cheeks were still fuming. "It seems the dambuhala was already gone by the time Ingrid arrived at the house. The police found everything inside smashed to pieces." She paused. "It killed Tim."

"I see. And what became of the girl?"

"There's been no report. I took Randy to Toledo so as not to look connected in any way to the occurrence. But I very much suspect she somehow made her way to her mother and received help there."

"What kind of help?"

Nancy's look became a glare. "The usual kind, Woodward. Food. Shelter. And... maybe something else."

"Something else?"

"A boy named Scott Bremman was arrested at the house. Incarcerated."

"Ingrid's *boyfriend*," Randy added.

Cambridge raised a hand to quell another outburst from Nancy, but this time his sister did not react.

"On the very next day, someone went to the police station and broke him out of jail," she went on. "This someone used magic--very weak magic. Pouting jennies, to judge by the accounts given at the scene."

"Pouting jennies? What are those?"

"Silly, trifling creatures that look like little balls of hair. They are easily summoned, easily returned."

"And you feel the summoner was Ingrid's mother? Luanna Felton?"

Nancy didn't answer right away. A wondering smile played upon her lips. Cambridge had seen it before. She used it whenever she found something to be ridiculous. The clearest memory he had was from when Randy was still a boy. He'd been swimming in Coldfrock Lake with one of the village girls--Lilac, her name had been--and she'd challenged him to a breath-holding contest. They'd both inhaled hard and

gone under. As the seconds went by, Nancy had stared at the water wearing that same, wondering smile--a smile that reflected a crooked and somehow perverse amusement. Cambridge had also watched the water, the early-evening cigar in his hand forgotten. After thirty seconds a flurry of bubbles had exploded at the surface, and Lilac had come up, gasping. A triumphant Randy had come up right behind her, and shoved her back down. Even as a boy he'd been big, with very strong arms. The water had gone still again, and Nancy had kept right on watching, wearing that strange smile.

"I know of no one else who would resort to pouting jennies," she finally replied.

"Is there something special about the boy that would encourage Luanna to do such a thing?" Cambridge wondered.

The smile faded. Nancy looked from her glass and blinked. "I'm sorry?"

But Cambridge was in his own reverie now. He steepled his fingers. If what his sister told him was true, then Luanna had taken a huge risk, magic or no magic; infiltrating a police station--a police station in the progressive region, of all places--was tantamount to an act of madness. Or desperation.

"What did you say his name is again?" he asked.

"Scott Bremman," Nancy replied. "He dated Ingrid briefly, when they were both still in high school." Her shoulders shrugged. "She broke it off. Or so I was led to believe."

"But now they're back together?"

"It seems so."

Cambridge frowned. It didn't make sense. The ogre had made it over to the progressive but failed to kill Ingrid. It had, however, murdered Nancy's husband. The police had arrived at the house later on and arrested Ingrid's boyfriend, who just happened to be lingering on the premises. Ingrid's mother had then gone to the police station and broke him out of jail. Why? What role could he have in all this?

"Are they in love?" O'Connor came out with. He was looking at Nancy; his eyes were calculating and officious.

Nancy appeared to be surprised. "I would have no way of knowing that. Mr. O'Connor."

"Why do you ask?" Cambridge wanted to know.

The servant was silent at first, which was characteristic of his nature. He then made a sudden reach for his drink, which was not. "Sir," he began, "I was curious as to why Miss Felton would dare such a coup. It seems unwise--"

"That's not why," Randy cut in, smirking. "If they're in *love*"--his lip writhed with the word as if a dead bug were caught on it--"then they could cross over to this region. The two of them. Right?"

Cambridge looked at the boy. He was crude, fat, rude. If the old saying about the eyes being windows to the soul was true, then Randy's soul no doubt resembled something cold and slimy and coiled. Nevertheless, his words made sense.

"If you're right," he told him, "then Ingrid might already be here in the region." He turned to Nancy. "Would Luanna do that? Put her own daughter in harm's way? The ogres would tear her to pieces were she to attempt to intervene. And then of course I have my own men waiting."

"The daughter knows nothing of magic," Nancy insisted. "I'm certain of that. *But*-- she cast a quick, hard glance at Randy--"I was able to trace the remnants of Luanna's magic from the police station to Lake Erie. We were halfway across a bridge to a recreational facility known as Cedar Point when the remnants tapered off. It was of little matter. Within Cedar Point I located a potential crossing point, in an upstairs room of a small theatre."

"And the lovers could have used that room?"

"Yes. They could have."

"Where in this region would it have deposited them?"

Nancy swallowed the last of her third glass of wine. A noticeable redness burned in her eyes. "Somewhere in the West. It would take me a week to calculate a precise location." Her teeth clenched. "I'm not going to do that."

Cambridge shook his head. "No. A week is too long. I want you to set after her as soon as possible. Tomorrow, even."

At this, O'Connor stiffened in his chair. Randy gave a contemptuous snort. Nancy's jaw hung near her throat.

"*What?*"

"Tomorrow, Nancy," Cambridge repeated patiently. "You and the boy will be given provisions. You will travel west. You will find Ingrid, and complete the task left undone in the progressive region."

Nancy's cheeks flushed with blood as he spoke. It was not surprising. Cambridge knew she hated to be given orders of any kind, to be placed beneath another in a chain of command. It was a family trait. His tone, therefore, was guarded as he spoke--cultured and even. But not enough so, for in the next instant Nancy was leaping from her chair, tipping it over backward in the process.

"I most certainly will *not!*" she thundered. "I adopted her as a baby! I took her out of that orphanage, where she was supposed to be *safe*, and raised her as my own! I kept watch over her, just as you asked!"

She stopped, fuming at him. Her hair hung in her eyes; her arms were trembling. It was clear she had an urge to seize Cambridge about the neck and squeeze. Cambridge remained seated, saying nothing. Nancy's next words were disbelieving as well as furious.

"How can you dare ask me to chase after her again? In a region overrun with dambuhala, no less?"

"Hardly overrun," Cambridge objected. "We've had some unpleasant surprises, to be certain--"

"One of your armies was wiped out, Woodward!" She studied his reaction to the words, and began to smile. "Oh yes," she continued. "I know about it. Ogres running amok in the wrong region is *news*, brother dearest. And I don't think *unpleasant* is an appropriate way to describe what happened in Dalandniss."

Cambridge stared at her. The initial shock he'd felt at her knowledge of just how bad things were right now was already fading. Discipline, he knew, was every bit as important with one's self as it was with one's minions.

"Nancy, please," he soothed, "let me explain the methods of my wishes. O'Connor?" He gestured the fallen chair; the servant dutifully rose to place it back on its legs.

Nancy sat down, brushing long strands of hair out of her eyes. When Cambridge proceeded it was with even greater caution. One wrong slip would trigger another outburst, one that could result in something more serious than a piece of toppled furniture. She knew of a spell, for instance, that caused its subjects to suffer night terrors for a week. Cambridge had no desire to wake up screaming every evening for seven days.

"Luanna Felton knows there's trouble in this region," he said. "Trouble the way she sees things, at least. O'Connor has already informed me she may have some difficulty with getting over here, but I believe she will find a method regardless. When that happens, her very first priority will likely be to drive the dambuhala back into their own region." At this point, Cambridge risked leaning forward a little, to add weight to his words. "She has very, *very* little chance of success with that. But some chance, all the same. Do you understand?"

Nancy shook her head. "Not at all."

Cambridge found himself wishing there were someone in the room to refill her glass. "Luanna understands the workings of the regions," he went on. "She's familiar with the interstice—the space between regions. She knows how passages can be opened and closed. And if she has the capability to open a passage to this region, then there is at least a possibility that she can open passages to others. Specifically, the region of the dambuhala. *Unless...*" he trailed off for a moment, letting the silence grow pregnant. "Unless some terrible calamity were to befall her," he smiled. "The death of her daughter, perhaps. Such an occurrence would wound her beyond healing."

"Then why didn't I just kill her years ago, Woodward?"

At that moment one of the kitchen servants, bless her, came in with more wine. Nancy raised her glass to have it topped off. When the servant was gone, Cambridge told his sister he had felt no pressing interest in either mother or daughter until recent years, when he'd begun to reorganize his coup from its initial stutter at the hands of Michael Quinn

It was the truth. In the years that followed Luanna's escape into the progressive region, Cambridge had been content with the mere surveillance of his subjects, Luanna more so than the daughter. Quinn, her husband (and an ex-member of Cambridge's army), had been killed, and she'd been on the run, with a baby daughter in her arms and a tail between her legs.

Nancy knew this part of the story already. She had been the one to pursue Luanna across the region after her rebellion's defeat. Had she been able to catch up, Cambridge would have had no qualms with her disposal. But at a crucial moment during the chase, Luanna had elected to take her daughter into a lesser known, lesser traveled area of the region: the Frondplume. It was a large, dark jungle, which to this day remained unexplored. Within, under cover of the understory, Luanna had managed to cross into the progressive. How she had done it was still a mystery, as was that part of the progressive where she had wound up. Furious, Nancy had ordered her men back to

Cambridge's castle, and upon hearing the news of Luanna's escape, Cambridge had called the chase off. Months later, Luanna had turned up in Ohio, living a quiet life as the manager of a seafood restaurant.

"No pressing matter, of course," Nancy said presently, her words slurring. "Is there a statute of limitations on your crimes here, Woodward, or do you take some perverse satisfaction in having her know of your...nocturnal habits?"

Randy snorted again.

"My 'crimes' here are no longer the issue, Nancy. The issue is the coup. The seizure." His lip curled into a regretting grimace. "Now I admit it would perhaps have been wiser to have Luanna dispatched earlier--"

"Ha!" Nancy cackled drunkenly.

"But as you well know, the progressive region is far less primitive and far more paranoid than this one. I felt that any attempt to have Luanna or her daughter killed would have resulted in an investigation that could have...uncovered clues best left covered."

"So sixteen years later you sent a wild animal across to do the work instead?" Randy put in. The remark was followed with a long belch.

"Bullshit!" Nancy bellowed, making O'Connor jump. "Come on, Woodward, you just wanted me out of your precious castle for awhile so you could indulge in your stupid vampire fantasy even further! *Servant!*"

The kitchen girl came again with more wine.

"You've perhaps had enough," Cambridge suggested, remembering that only minutes ago he'd been begging in silence for the kitchen girl to appear.

Nancy slurped at her glass. "Oh I've had enough all right. You've made a right royal mess of things, Woodward. First vampires, then soldiers, and now ogres. *Fine!*" she yelled, after the table went silent again. "If you want the girl dead, I'll make her dead! What do I care about the Feltons, or the Quinns, or whatever the hell that family's been calling itself lately! But I'll warn you now, Woodward..." She raised one finger in the air. "Once this region does come under military power, don't think you can maintain it all by yourself. You will need at least one other mind that thinks like yours."

Cambridge gave her a consenting smile. "Of course. It would be wonderful to have the assistance of a fellow strategist."

"Give me the western cities. Neria. Pendleton. Vance."

"Consider them yours. Is there anything else?"

"The boy. Scott. He dies after Ingrid."

"Accepted."

Nancy stared at him with bloodshot eyes, clearly in disbelief of how her demands had been granted. But Cambridge's mindset was absolute sincerity, at least for tonight. Despite her drunkenness, there was logic behind what his sister said. He *was* going to need help with orchestrating things once the dust settled. And while it was true he had plenty of top minds under his command already, none of them, he knew, understood his appreciation of *structure* and *order*. Nancy had it all in her blood.

"So it's yours," someone suddenly said.

Cambridge looked to see Randy wearing that smirk again. "I beg your pardon?"

"The region. It's yours."
Cambridge smiled back. "Almost."

Yet when dawn came he could not sleep. He lay in his casket, entombed beneath one of the curved staircases of the Eastern keep. The dry, musty smell of its inner fabric was comforting as always. The pillow was soft. He was safe and alone. Yet a visual noise behind his eyelids denied quiescence.

Willowbee was gone.

News of the catastrophe had arrived not long after dinner. It was as bad as Dalandaniss--perhaps even worse. A large murder of dambulhala had fallen upon the city with the scent of prey in its nostrils, and it'd been indiscriminate as ever. An army Cambridge had posted for his arrival on the following evening had fought back, only not well enough. According to the report, it was a total loss.

Cambridge opened his eyes. The space in front of him, with the casket closed, was black. However the noise kept on. Raging dots of red irritated him at first, then became unsettling. It seemed the chaos of the region, rather than being beaten back for his actions, had instead burrowed its way inside his skull. Worse, it was red, like the blood the ogres were spilling everywhere. Once again, he began to consider his tactics. Perhaps the idea of using the ogres as fear-mongerers had been a poor one after all. Perhaps it was time to send them back, and start the whole crusade afresh.

"No," he said aloud.

His heart skipped a beat.

Start over? Impossible. For one thing, it would reflect poorly on his skills as a leader. His underlings--soldiers and servants alike--might begin to question a figurehead who had led them along one current only to stop and choose another. For another, he might begin to question himself. Indeed, he'd been doing that very thing already of late, yet never in a way that made him feel uncertain of his methods. Starting over--calling the ogres off--seemed like a rash and impulsive act. It would be like giving in to the very things he hated.

Lastly, there was Luanna. More than anything else it was her that made him want to stick to his plan. Years ago, her husband had almost brought ruin to his empire just when it had begun to show signs of stability. She had escaped the region after his death and he'd allowed her to go on living in the progressive. Today, with the most significant part of his takeover now in motion, she felt like unfinished business.

The ogres would finish it. They were the bait--the carrot on the string that would bring Luanna back to this world. She would hunt them down, confident in her trifling abilities as a magician, and be devoured for her indignation. Her daughter would already be dead by that time, rendering her an even weaker requiter.

The visual noise lessened at these thoughts. Cambridge gave a deep sigh, letting his eyes close. There would be no starting over. He made up his mind at that very moment that should the tide of the dambulhala killings continue to rise, he would let it do so. The entire region could drown under a sea of red if that's what fate decreed. Then, and only then, would he entertain thoughts of creating afresh, of building an empire upon a wasteland left behind by a scourge.

To build upon blood, Cambridge thought. What a fine idea. And what better foundation for a vampire to have beneath his boots?

The visual noise was gone, replaced by an image of himself at midnight, looking on a field of cicadas from the bough of a mighty tree. He sang, and everything sang with him. He spread his wings to fly, and a terrific but ordered buzzing followed from below.

VII. Friend

Scott awoke to the scent of pine.

Was it pine? he wondered, keeping his head buried beneath the blankets. The smell coming through the tunnel of cloth before him was like a forest breeze. Accompanying this, the singing of birds. Scott pulled back the blanket, and there above was the skylight he'd noticed earlier, latticed with what appeared to be bamboo mesh.

"Hey you."

Ingrid sat on the edge of the bed. Part of the blanket lay over her lap; other than that, she was still naked. She leaned forward and gave Scott a kiss. Her arms hooked around his neck.

"Welcome back to the world, slugger."

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Morning. I hope."

Scott looked at the skylight again. Another vision struck, this one a memory: Saturday in the police station, chaos, Lisa leading him through a storm of conjurations, driving him here.

"Conjurations," he said aloud, blinking.

"Hmm?"

His head shook. "Lisa. Do you know that she's...a magician of some kind? Or at least a damned good illusionist. She made everyone at the police station think they were being attacked by"--he shook his head again--"something."

"Pouting jennies. You told me about it last night."

"Yeah, but..."

Ingrid had resumed kissing him, about the face and neck. "But what, sweetheart?" she whispered.

His arms took her. The kisses were not helping his concentration much. "I guess I'm still a bit muddled from sleep."

"No. You're wide awake."

"Hey...where are we?"

Scott began to take full notice of the room. It looked decidedly different. For one thing, the desk and the lamp were gone--in their place stood a crude wooden table with burned-out candles. The bathroom was also gone--not closed behind a door but *gone*; the wall where the doorway had been was now solid, plain wood, decorated with a generic landscape painting. The wall next to the bed, where a window had once let on Lake Erie, had changed as well.

"Masks!" Scott exclaimed. "Look at all the masks!"

"I see them," Ingrid said.

"Where did they come from?"

They hung on the wall in five neat rows of five. A variety of materials had been used to craft them. Some were made of glass, others of wood, others still of sackcloth. Scott spied one that looked woven from the same kind of bamboo used for the skylight.

He saw another that looked like a beehive with eyes. The expressions on each were varied as well. There were smiles, frowns, screams, and wails; there were tears, laughs, upturned noses, and terrified stares. Some were clearly labors of love, and looked ready to start speaking at any moment. Others seemed hacked into shape by crude tools, their faces barely recognizable as such.

"What happened last night?" Scott said. "Did somebody drug us? Take us to a different place?"

It wasn't a crazy idea. Enough lunacy had gone down already--why not heap drugging and kidnapping onto the pile?

"In a manner of speaking," Ingrid told him. "Something drugged us alright. And we are...not at Cedar Point anymore."

Scott looked at her.

"I'm going to tell you everything I know, Scott. Don't worry."

"Don't worry? Ingrid...what *is* all this? What's going on? I--"

Her hand closed over his mouth. "Shh. Lie back. Let's talk."

She coaxed him into the pillows; her slender arms were gentle but insistent. She next told him everything that had happened to her on the night she left Scott at the West Main Street house. She told him about the long chat she and Lisa had shared, starting with what she now knew about the dambuhala, moving on to their summoner (Woodward Cambridge), and finishing with the region itself, along with the passion it required for entry, romantic love. Scott did not feel receptive to the story at first, but as Ingrid spoke she kept reminding him that she'd had her own difficulties with believing it at the outset.

"I kept telling myself it had to be true," she said, "mostly because of what had already happened. And also because the story was coming from Lisa."

Scott looked at the skylight again, and then at the masks.

"We woke up later on Saturday morning," Ingrid went on. "Lisa told me more about...well, how to get into the region. By then my doubts were pretty much gone. It scared me. I told her I didn't want to go. That thing you and I saw in the basement on Friday? There are about one thousand more running around in the region. Right now."

Her hands pushed his chest, as if waiting for the lungs inside to draw breath for speech. But Scott was still searching for a handle on the moment.

"One *thousand*?" he croaked. "God, Ingrid, why did she ask you to come here?"

Her bare breasts rose as she took a breath. They fell again with words that appalled Scott to his very core.

"I'm here to drive the ogres--the dambuhala--back. To seal them inside their own region again. I'm also here to stop Cambridge from seizing control of this region."

It was clear to Scott she wanted to get all of that out on one chestful of air, because Ingrid's next breath was almost a gasp. How could he blame her? His own breathing was now difficult, and it had nothing to do with how Ingrid was straddling his midsection.

"Ingrid, come on," he said.

She shrugged her trademark Ingrid shrug.

This time it made Scott mad. "No, that's not *it*. If what you just told me is true, then it sounds like your best friend is putting your neck under a guillotine. Well fuck that!"

"Scott--"

He sat up. Ingrid didn't move, and her eyes remained fixed on his. This gallantry, along with her chattiness and her newfound ability to smile, was yet another part of her that had come to life since Friday night. The changes pleased him, but Scott was still furious with Lisa for placing such a task on her shoulders, and with Ingrid for accepting it. Unless--

"Do you know magic too?" he asked, furling his brow. "Can you do things like Lisa did at the police station?"

After a moment, her eyes dropped. She shook her head. "No."

"Then what the *hell* do you think you're going to do--"

"Will you stop yelling please?"

Her own voice was raised now--Friday night again. Scott also noticed her bangs were pushed back from her forehead, though that might have happened as they'd made love. He put his arms around her. She came willingly. A breeze played through the skylight.

"How?" his lips whispered. "Just tell me that, Ingrid. How?"

She kissed his ear, then whispered one word.

There was a wooden chest with a broken latch in the corner of the room. A pile of old, dusty clothing lay inside. Ingrid poked through them first. Her eye was fastidious, but even as she rejected one garment after the next, Scott knew the result of her expedition, like it or no, was apt to be something outlandish. None of the pieces matched. Their colors were flamboyant to the point where it ached to behold them. Blouses with huge collars were wrapped around pantaloons with crooked, kaleidoscopic buttons. There were yellow hats with green bills, and green hats with yellow bills. There were high-heeled boots with tremendous golden buckles that jingled like wind-chimes.

Scott couldn't take it anymore. He started to laugh as Ingrid, with a noise of disgust, pitched one of the boots over her shoulder.

"We're in a theater," she explained. "So this is what we have for now. But the owner is a friend of Lisa's, so don't worry. We'll...*cut it out!*"

But Scott couldn't stop laughing. Ingrid was holding a yellow blouse with the most bodacious ruffles he had ever seen. The ruffles were funny--that Ingrid appeared to be considering the piece seriously was funnier still.

"Listen, you," she warned, grinning, "I'm not going to tolerate any insubordination." And then another one of the blouses soared at his face. "Oh I can't *wait* to see what *you* pull out of this box!"

She settled on the yellow blouse, along with a red pair of pants that ended just above her shins. Scott's delving faired no better. After fifteen minutes of pawing with increasing despair, the grotesquerie forced him to choose a plain pink shirt with no

sleeves, and a pair of light blue pants with a red string around the waist that served as a belt.

Now it was Ingrid's turn to laugh. From the sound, vengeance tasted sweet. "Bravo!" she clapped. "Love it, Scott! You look ready to dance with a tambourine on Bourbon Street."

"Oh you're funny, Ingrid." He looked at himself, saw the shame, and grimaced. "You ought to be on television, so I could turn you off."

She beckoned him to what looked like a trap door next to the bed. There was a bronze-colored handle on one side and mismatched silver hinges on the other.

"According to Lisa, there's a ladder here that leads to the stage," she told him. "I'm going to let you open it because I know you're a sweet guy."

Scott knelt and pulled on the handle, feeling dumber than ever as the pants-cuffs pulled away from the dusty brown shoes on his feet. But there *was* a ladder underneath, plunging into murky blue light.

"Ladies first?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not this time, Bojangles."

The rungs felt crude. They hadn't been sanded well, and were nailed crookedly onto the rails. Those inconveniences aside, the structure was sturdy; both he and Ingrid were able to climb easily to the stage.

The blue light surrounded them as they descended. There was good reason for this: A tremendous matte painting depicting an underwater scene towered over the stage. It extended from left to right, and was the height of a movie theater screen. The ladder dropped in front of it, and the sudden exposure to this fantastic set-piece froze Scott on the rungs. Seconds later, Ingrid's foot touched the top of his head. She jerked it back with a yelp of surprise.

"Sorry!" she called down. Then: "What are you doing?"

He couldn't answer right away. Though the stage was not well lit (a huge curtain, also blue, was drawn behind Scott's back; the only light visible appeared to be falling through a row of small windows high along the left wall), the painting commanded respect. Fish of all shapes, sizes, and colors gaped from the canvas, their bodies seeming to leap at the viewer in a way that reminded Scott of the 3D features he had seen as a kid at Sandusky Mall. A reef sparkled on the left, depicted in just the proper shades of green, yellow, and white to create the illusion. Sun-dapples danced on a sandy floor dotted with coral and crustaceans.

"Scott?"

But it was the image painted in the center that impressed him most. A gigantic killer whale loomed at the ladder with its mouth stretched back in a knowing grin. The 3D effect was almost perfect; Scott felt like he could reach out and touch the tip of its nose. It was not a pleasant sensation, especially in the dark.

"I'm here," he managed, closing his eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. There's a painting down here. Huge. You might not want to see it."

She wanted to see it; of course she did. Scott put his feet on the stage and let her gawk. The curtain was a little better, but not much. It was dark blue and, like the matte

painting, almost vertiginous in its vastness. It undulated from time to time as rogue drafts whispered through its folds. The battens creaked. Also, Scott noticed for the first time, there was music coming from somewhere--high, lilting notes from what sounded like a small pipe.

Ingrid did not care about the curtain or the music. Her eyes were fixed on the painting, in awe of its magnificence. When Scott told her--whilst averting his own eyes--that it was a bit *too* magnificent for his tastes, she smiled and explained it was an anamorphic piece. The artist or artists, she went on, had deliberately painted the fish in a distorted fashion up close so they would appear to leap from the canvas when viewed from a distance.

"Only this one is better than any I've ever seen," she said. "With an anamorphic piece the viewer as a rule needs to stand in a very specific place." She gestured at the whale, fearless of the effect achieved by its creator. "Imagine what this looks like from the seats, Scott."

"No thanks."

"We'd probably get wet."

"I think from now on I'm going to stick with 2D when it comes to entertainment."

The curtain went on undulating. It had no opening in the center that either could see. Ingrid suggested they try down right and then wondered aloud who was playing the pipe. Scott had no idea what down right meant, but managed to hide his ignorance well enough as he fell in step behind her. She led him to the right front area of the stage. Here they were both able to slip around the curtain, where a mercifully prosaic seating area presented itself. Gas footlights flickered along the front of the stage. Candles glowed from sconces along wooden walls. There were perhaps five-hundred seats in all, and all were empty save one: The pipe player, a woman, sat in the front row of the theater's balcony. Her legs were crossed under a plain green dress. Her fingers scuttled like spiders over the holes.

Scott was about to call to her when he noticed a second individual running beneath the balcony, this one a child. Like the whale in the painting, he was grinning from ear to ear. In one small hand he held what looked like a toy airplane. He was making it loop and dive among the seats as he capered with what Scott saw as pure joy for the moment.

"*Taas pa!*" he cried, the words echoing. "*Taas pa!*"

The woman's pipe playing stopped. "*Ingat!*" she called.

That was when she noticed the visitors. Scott could tell as much from the way her head froze. For a moment none of the three adults could move. Then the woman stood. Her voice carried over the seats when she shouted: "*Sino ka?*"

Scott and Ingrid looked at each other, then back at the woman. The child also noticed them now, his toy forgotten at his side.

"*Sino ka?*" the woman shouted again, and Scott could hear menace beginning to bleed into her tone.

"Hello!" Ingrid called back. "We're sorry to intrude! Are you the owner of this theater?"

Scott raised his hand in a feeble wave. "I don't think she speaks English," he said through the corner of his mouth.

"Lisa told me there are a lot of dialects used here. Keep your fingers crossed."

The woman disappeared through a door at the back of the balcony. Moments later she was walking towards them down the center aisle. She was similar to Ingrid in size and build, but with a shade darker skin. Her face, framed behind curls of long black hair, looked neither welcoming nor disagreeable. When she reached the front row she stopped. The boy stopped behind her and peered around her waist.

"Hello," Ingrid tried again.

The woman's eyes, which held a distinct Asian quality, narrowed. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Scott Bremman," Scott said. "This is my friend, Ingrid Semeska."

"Ingrid Felton," the girl standing at his side corrected. "Are you Rowena?"

Scott looked at her in surprise. Ingrid Felton?

But neither of the two women acknowledged him now. "I am Rowena," the older one allowed. "I own this theater. How did you get backstage?"

"Through a loft above the curtains," Ingrid said.

This caused the corner of Rowena's mouth to twitch a little. "Lovers," she observed, glancing at Scott.

"Yes," Ingrid admitted, sounding not at all apologetic. "I'm Luanna Felton's daughter. She told me the two of you were friends a long time ago--"

Here, at last, came a smile from Rowena. It was wide and friendly. Scott should have felt comforted--except he wasn't, at least not in full. Ingrid had not mentioned anyone named Luanna Felton as she'd recounted her story in the loft; all the same, he had an idea who it was. The tone Ingrid used when she spoke her name was similar to how she sounded when she talked about Lisa. It jarred him. He was barely able to smile back when Rowena beckoned them off the stage and demanded they join her for an early lunch.

She led them with happy chatter to a foyer at the back of the theater.

"You were a baby!" she kept saying. "My *god!* A *baby!* And look at you now!"

The boy trailed behind them. Rowena explained between gushes that his name was Benjamin--Benji for short. His father, she added, was Caucasian, and had red hair. This accounted for the pale, freckled complexion of his skin.

"But look at you!" she exclaimed at Ingrid again. "You're dark of course, but not like Luanna!"

"No. My father--"

"Quinn, yes! Michael Quinn! A soldier! Oh *god*, was he *gwapo!* Handsome I mean! Sorry."

The foyer was larger and better cared for than the one Scott remembered from Cedar Point. Sunlight gleamed off polished wooden floors. Half a dozen giant roses--the biggest Scott had ever seen--drooped from a ceramic vase set in front of clean windows, and a breeze coming through the door carried their sweet scent. It also carried sounds from the street beyond--footsteps, talk, laughter. To Scott's right was a large canvas set on an easel. A man and a woman kissed beneath a title that was not in English.

To his left was the entrance to a small cafe--The Harlequin's Cup, according to its sign. The dining area consisted of about ten rustic wooden tables and a short row of bar-stools. Rowena sat Ingrid and Scott down at one of the more shadowy booths. She then placed a lit candle between them before dashing to the kitchen, promising that the wait would not be long.

Within fifteen minutes there was food, simple but functional: rice and gravy, chicken, mashed potatoes. As they ate Ingrid recounted their story a second time, only with bits and pieces added in. Most significantly for Scott: the fact that Lisa Felton and Luanna Lynn Felton were indeed the same person and, as she had already claimed from the stage, Ingrid's biological mother.

"When did she tell you that?" he interrupted.

"Saturday morning, before she left to help you."

"Wasn't that quite a bit to digest?"

She looked at him. "This has all been quite a bit to digest, Scott. But...yeah, sure, at first. Only the shock didn't last for very long."

"And you believed her?"

Now the look became cool. "Yeah. I did. She's my friend."

"This is Luanna's daughter, Scott," Rowena promised. "If you don't believe her, then believe me. I helped Luanna during her pregnancy and I got a chance to see Ingrid not long after she was born."

"I believe her." He laughed a little and rolled his eyes, which made Benjamin laugh back. "I don't know why I keep letting myself get surprised, after so much has happened. It's--"

Benjamin cut him off at that moment by throwing his chicken leg across the table. It struck a cat with red fur and foot-long whiskers that had been dozing on the floor. The cat yowled at the boy, hissed...and then snatched up the leg in its teeth.

Everyone laughed, but when Benjamin attempted to follow up his performance--this time with a cup of water--Rowena told him to stop. From here, Ingrid finished her story. Scott fleshed it out by telling the woman of his own adventures at the police station. She became more and more incredulous as he spoke, not at his illustration of the pouting jennies, or of the escape itself, but at the fact that he had actually been locked up in a cage.

"They don't do things like that here," she said. "There isn't the need. Or at least there wasn't, until Woodward Cambridge came along."

"Woodward and Nancy," Ingrid put in. "Nancy being the woman who adopted me in the progressive region. According to Lisa, they're brother and sister."

"Woodward's sister adopted you?" Rowena exclaimed. "*Ay diyos ko!* How did that happen?"

"Hard to say," Ingrid replied. "I do know that Nancy is far more powerful than Lisa as a magician. Lisa put me in the agency after arriving in Ohio as a means to get me out of harm's way. It backfired. It could be Lisa used a small feat to get me into the agency and Nancy was able to detect it."

"And then hold you as a kind of hostage to fortune," Scott added.

"It's a reasonable assumption. Living with her for sixteen years was hell."

"You told me that Cambridge is" Scott began, but had to stop himself when he glanced at Benjamin "a very bad man," he finished. "He hurts people because he thinks he's some sort of vampire."

"That's right."

"But your father found out about it and was getting ready to blow the whistle?"

"He was getting ready to do more than that. According to Lisa--Mom--he had his own little coup planned with a group of friends. But Cambridge somehow found out about it. My dad was killed and Lisa was forced to run."

"Which part of the progressive region did she wind up in when she crossed?" Rowena wanted to know.

Ingrid looked flustered. "You know, she didn't tell me, and I never thought to ask. I guess there was already too much on my plate to digest."

From here she revealed that the next step in their task was to visit her original birthplace: a lakeside point called Horseshoe Bay.

"Coldfrock Lake," Rowena intoned.

Ingrid nodded. "That's right."

"Cambridge's castle is on the other side of that lake. Not that I'm recommending you sail across for a visit. Why Horseshoe Bay?"

"Mom left a journal there. There's information inside about Cambridge, and about putting the dambuhala back where they belong. Opening portals to other regions."

"Dambuhala!" Benjamin moaned with a mischievous grin. He clawed the air with his fingers.

"That's them!" Ingrid laughed. She made her own monster noise in return and began tickling his belly, which caused the boy to shriek with glee.

"Nap time," Rowena grinned.

"Ayaw!"

"Yes. You're being a pest."

"I'm not a pest, Mommy!"

"Are."

"Not!"

Rowena, still grinning, snarled at him. "Are are are are!"

"Not not not not!"

Laughter erupted around the table. After getting himself under control Scott asked if Ingrid thought her mother's journal would still be where she'd left it sixteen years ago. Ingrid replied by saying they were going to find out.

"But not today," Rowena added. "Horseshoe Bay is a three day ride from Hampton. Also, I'll want some time to put your provisions together."

Ingrid had gone back to tickling Benjamin; she stopped at hearing these words from Rowena. The smile on her face slipped a little. "How long?" she asked.

"You can leave tomorrow morning," she said. Then, quickly: "If you want. By the way, Ingrid, how *is* Luanna doing? In all this excitement I never asked. And it's been so long."

"She operates a seafood restaurant on the shore of a lake in the progressive. I used to have lunch there a lot. We got to know each other without my ever

actually...knowing." One of her fingernails tapped the table, as if she were looking back on a memory she did not quite believe.

"Does she have plans to return to this region?" the other lady asked.

"As a matter of fact she does. She intends to follow me across so we can rendezvous at Horsehoe. She spent the other day tracking down a...*friend* to help her."

"A friend," Rowena repeated, smiling like an elf.

"But she's having trouble all the same," Ingrid went on.

"Not surprising," Rowena said. "It's love. Will she use the same location as you and Scott did?"

"I think so."

"That would make me very happy. It makes me happy seeing the two of you here. Hampton hasn't seen any effect of what Cambridge has done. Yet. But we get news from everywhere. Right now the criers are saying Cambridge has lost control of the dambuhala. That his army is all but destroyed. If that's true then it's only a matter of time before they come here--the dambuhala, that is."

The three of them considered this in silence. Even Benjamin was quiet; he sat on the floor with his legs crossed, rolling a wooden toy back and forth. Ingrid looked at him. Scott could tell it hurt her heart to do so.

"Whatever he's done, I'm going to undo," she said.

Could she? Scott wondered. He didn't know. One monster in the basement had been enough to scare them both to near paralysis. Could they really hope to stand against one thousand? He remembered--all too clearly--the way those yellow eyes had stared at them from the darkness. The long, glistening teeth. The deep howl.

One thousand, plus Cambridge, plus Nancy.

I do know that Nancy is far more powerful than Lisa as a magician, Ingrid had said.

Rowena picked at her food. Benjamin sat on the floor, rolling his toy back and forth, back and forth, like a schoolboy trying to erase an answer from a test that was either pass, and succeed, or fail, and be doomed.

There was love again that night.

He searched her eyes between kisses while a high wind rushed through the streets. The curtains lifted; the candles flickered. Ingrid's body, delicate and soft beneath him, shifted with his weight, taking him in deep with accommodating gasps of air before releasing him again with sweet sighs. She told him she loved him, that she would always love him, that she was so happy to have him. He told her the same, all of that and more, as his fingers touched her hair and the wind whispered through the room.

"Will you help me?" she purred, after it was over.

"Yes," he answered. "Of course I will."

Her head moved on his chest. "Rowena has a book about the dambuhala. She wants me to borrow it."

"Good idea. I wouldn't mind reading it either." A sudden thought came to him. "Hey Ingrid?"

"Yes?"

"If we fall asleep here, now, won't we wake up back home again? In the other region?"

"This is my home, Scott. But no, we won't. Every region requires a different emotion in order to enter it. Some have more than one. And almost all of them have more than one crossing point."

"You learned a lot about this in just one day."

"Not nearly enough. I just hope Mom's journal is where she left it."

He winced. "I guess I shouldn't have asked about that earlier. Now you're going to fret."

"I don't mind. I've been sleeping for so long. It's nice to be awake and alive."

They talked for a few more minutes, then Ingrid was asleep in his arms. The scent of rain came through the window. A bell rang from a tower down the street.

Scott found himself unable to sleep. He rose and pulled a chair next to the window. The cool wind chilled his naked body. Below, an empty, earthen street glowed yellow by gaslight. The architecture of the lamp posts looked very similar to the ones he knew back home. The same went for the building blocks. To judge by the ornate eaves, they were late nineteenth century. He wondered if their designers had been travelers like him.

The bell tolled again--once, hollowly. Scott lay back down. For a long time, his eyes studied the ceiling beams. His mind wheeled over the old questions about how he could help Ingrid, how he could make her happy, except now the gravity was tenfold. Now he was lost with her in another world that was being murdered by monsters and lunatics.

He closed his eyes. And when at last sleep came, he dreamed of Ingrid. She was writing a letter at a humongous black desk. Her hand was a brushfire.

Lisa and the vampire, she'd written. Halloween night.

The sound of a baby crying made him look away from this missive. When he looked back, Ingrid's chair was empty. Hoping to find the baby, Scott knelt and opened one of the desk's larger cabinets. It too was empty. The crying became louder, more desperate. He opened another cabinet, then another, and another still. All were empty. The baby began to shriek. Frantic now, Scott began to pull out drawers; none of them were occupied. And the desk, he saw, was getting bigger. Soon it loomed over him, a wooden monolith.

Seconds later all the cabinet doors creaked open on their own--all save one, way up at the very top. He became certain this was where the baby lay. He jumped, grabbed one of the cabinet handles, and tried to pull himself up. The handle broke. He jumped again. This time the entire door came off under his weight, spilling him in a shower of splinters.

The crying stopped. Scott stood. Above him, the locked cabinet burst open. Muddy water gushed from inside, splattering his feet. Dead algae swirled under the desk. Broken twigs bobbed fitfully. From behind, a more solid, heavier splash. Horrified, Scott turned to see a large bouquet of lily flowers, their stems broken, sinking from sight. His hand plunged into the water, seizing hold of the fractured stems. He pulled them to the surface. And gasped.

All of the lilies in the bouquet were brown. Dead.

VIII. Priest

Rowena proved to be good as her word.

When Scott and Ingrid came downstairs the following morning, they found two leather back-packs in the Harlequin's Cup. Both were filled with food and clothing. As they breakfasted, Rowena informed Ingrid that her pack also carried the book she had mentioned.

Ingrid thanked her for everything best she knew how, directly and indirectly. The latter method consisted of multiple compliments regarding their breakfast: muffins and coffee. Both, she wanted the theater-owner to know, were the best she had ever smelled, the best she had ever tasted.

Scott agreed. "These are blueberry?" he asked, his mouth full. A huge crumb rested on the end of his nose.

"They're called Gamey or Gameyfruit here," was Rowena's reply, "but yes, they're essentially the same."

When they finished, Rowena led her guests--with Benjamin tottering behind--out a side door. Flowers and sunshine greeted them. On the other side of a wooden fence a small, round woman stood pruning her garden.

"*Magandang umaga, Kay!*" Rowena called. "*Kamusta ang babies?*"

Kay looked up and waved. "Hello, Weng! They're happy after last night's little shower, I should think."

"I've got peat moss if you need some."

Kay's cheerful expression changed to one of terror. "Peat moss! Ack! Cannibalism! Really, Weng, I--"

"I'm just teasing! I love doing that to her," she said to Ingrid and Scott. "Those flowers are her pride and joy, but she has very particular nursing methods."

The smell changed in back of the theater. A sharp, bitter tang of manure replaced the flowers' sweetness. Its source was obvious enough: They had come upon a small stable yard. In it grazed four animals about the size of Shetland ponies. Their fur was short, brown, and wiry, and there were antlers growing from atop their squat-nosed heads. Their eyes widened when they saw Rowena. All four clopped to the fence, tongues smacking in anticipation of a meal.

"These are called niddi," Rowena explained. "Or niddy with a 'y' if it's singular. They're slow but sure-footed. Easy to ride." She pointed to a street where groups of people were going about their morning business. "You see that forest out past the edge of town?"

A light shiver touched Ingrid's spine. Though she was the shortest of the three, the dark line of trees--so dark it was almost black--was still quite visible over the rooftops. It stretched across the horizon like a violent brush-stroke. It looked dark, cold, and uncompromising.

"Is that where we're going?" she had to ask.

"Yes," the other woman replied. "Part-way into it at least. The niddi will carry you around the trees without much trouble. But please don't miss the entrance to the Istasica Tunnel, which leads under the rest of the forest. There are signs, don't worry. Take Cloudshadow Road straight out of town."

"What happens if we miss the tunnel?" Scott wanted to know.

Rowena looked at him. "You'll get lost. Probably forever. Ingrid?"

"Yes?"

"I put a map in your pack. It will guide you to Horseshoe Bay."

She spent the next few minutes teaching them both how to ride the niddi. As promised, it was a simple activity. The animals seemed willing to carry both humans and supplies without complaint. Rowena then advised they be fed and watered twice daily.

Not long after, a street bell tower rang out ten times. The group fell silent. For better or worse, it was time to part ways. Scott said goodbye to Benjamin and told him not to throw any more food at the cat. Ingrid gave Rowena a long hug.

"I hope your mother comes back," she said, misty-eyed. "It would be wonderful to see her again."

"She will."

"And you come back too. The plays we have at this theater are nice, but they're not real, the way your love is real."

"Don't say that. Art is always created from love."

Rowena smiled. "You're right. But I still want to see the both of you again. Take in a show sometime, okay?"

Scott, who had been playing with the boy, appeared next to them. He thanked Rowena for all she had done. She told him with deep warmth in her tone to watch after Ingrid.

Minutes later they were clopping away on their niddi. Ingrid turned and waved. Scott followed suit. Rowena held Benjamin in her arms. The boy had his thumb in his mouth and looked ready to cry. At the end of the street they turned left onto a road that would lead them out of town.

Everyone loves.

That was the way Luanna had described the region to Ingrid only three nights ago. As Ingrid looked at that region now, she could understand why. Couples held hands along the tree-lined streets, the men looking at their ladies in much the same way Scott always looked at her. Cheerful voices rang everywhere. On a balcony above, a woman in a blue dress sang as she hung laundry. On a flight of steps across the street, a man wearing brown was lighting another man's pipe; they were laughing together like brothers. A boy chased a ball down an alley, where it was scooped up and returned by a woman who tousled his hair. On not one face of the hundreds that walked among them did Ingrid see even a hint of dismay or contempt.

At the edge of town a series of wide, rolling hills led to the forest. Here the animal life became more prominent. Dogs ran alongside Cloudshadow road, barking at the

niddi. Other pack animals traveled with them, some carrying passengers, others pulling wooden wagons.

Ingrid thought that the region--so far, at least--looked a lot like the pictures of old Huron County she had once looked at in the Norwalk Public Library. It was a place without cars, without concrete. It was a place where almost everyone wore a hat of some kind (everyone including herself and Scott; she wore a blue wide-brim with a flower in the band, he something that resembled a bowler), with the men carrying canes while the women held umbrellas. It was a place of handlebar mustaches and curled braids. Ingrid began to wonder what Scott would look like with such a mustache. It got her laughing. Other people on the road noticed and smiled at her.

Serving as a counterpoint to the happiness was Istasica Forest. It was no further than a mile off now, and looked even more black and forbidding than it had from Hampton. As they drew near the tunnel, the talk and the laughter began to abate. Ingrid could hear the sound of dry bark creaking as the forests' gigantic trees swayed back and forth under a sky rushing with high breezes. Clouds passed to and fro over the sun, giving the landscape a flickering quality. Strangely shaped leaves scuttled underfoot, their petioles clawing the dirt like gnarled fingers in search of a lost grave.

And graves, like it or no, were what came to Ingrid's mind minutes later when she got her first look at the tunnel. It also made her think of the Toledo Zoo again--or rather, of the passage that ran under the interstate. The Istasica passage was much wider, and the stones arching its entrance were old and mossy. On the highest stone was a copper-colored sign that spelled out *Istasica Tunnel* in curled letters.

The road plunged down, getting darker and darker. Lanterns hung along the walls. Ingrid peeked at Scott. He had been quiet for a long time. He was gazing down the tunnel with wide, wondering eyes.

"Doing all right?" she asked, not liking the slight tremor in her voice.

He nodded without much conviction. "I guess. It smells so *wet*, doesn't it?"

"It does. We're going deep underground. The walls are probably oozing. Hey stop a minute."

They were at mouth of the tunnel. Ingrid giggled her niddy to a golden plaque and began reading aloud.

"Construction on this tunnel was begun in 1800 and ended in 1822. Grew Istasica, architect. This plaque is to commemorate the sixty-six brave workers who lost their lives during the endeavor. Through their noble contribution we are granted safe passage. Through their undaunted will, we are delivered. We champion their labor; we cherish their souls.

"--Grew Istasica."

Scott's eyes had gone back to the tunnel. "We're about to ride through a black cavern where sixty-six people died," he groaned. "How cheerful."

"We won't be alone," Ingrid reminded, nodding at the other travelers.

But she had to admit there weren't many, and none of them wore the smiles they'd had on above. She looked into the cave. Shadows writhed everywhere in dubious light. Dark shapes ambled like zombies, exchanging whispers. She now wished with all her heart that she had never noticed the plaque.

"Trixie used to tell me I read too much," she said aloud.

"What?" Scott asked.

"Nothing. Let's go."

They rode with their heads down and their mouths closed. The opening receded to a tiny gray square behind them. Ingrid stole a glance at Scott. She wished he would try to talk to her. A conversation, even one held in whispers, would be just the ticket to get her mind off the surroundings. Yet his shape remained silent. Giving up, she looked at her niddy. The animal didn't seem to mind the tunnel at all. Its hooves were steady. Little puffs of air came out of its nose from time to time, which Ingrid put down to the light smell emanating from the lanterns.

The tunnel bent to the right. Ingrid found her thoughts doubling back to Trixie Keefer, a lanky girl with short red hair and a wide mouth that was always ready to laugh. She'd been in a few of Ingrid's classes at school. Sometimes they would go to the mall together and window shop. Trixie liked to browse the stores, filling her cart with all the things she wished she had the money to buy; when she was finished, she would abandon the loaded cart in the middle of the aisle. "Closest I'm going to get for now," she would then say, as the sales-ladies eyed her beadily. What was she doing right at this moment? Ingrid wondered. What items was she selecting for her basket of dreams?

The niddy stopped. Ingrid looked up. The tunnel was gone. So was Scott.

"Oh God, fella, did you take a wrong turn?" she asked the animal.

It had. They were now in a large, rectangular room stacked with crates and tables and boxes of all sizes. More lanterns glowed on the walls. Nor were they the sole source of light. A small campfire burned in the center of the room; sticks were formed in a pyramid over a yellow flame. Ingrid dismounted. She peered around one of the wooden crates. The fire's tender sat on the other side. A dark, wrinkled robe hung on his frame; the hood was pulled back to expose a bald head with chiseled features and a rather serious overbite which highlighted his front teeth in an unflattering way. Next to him lay a longer, heavier stick, scorched at the end.

Ingrid hung back, not certain whether she should introduce herself. The niddy decided for her when it gave a long, tired honk through its nose. The man's head shot up.

"Hello," he said after a moment, sounding pleasant. "Are you lost?"

Ingrid's lip tightened. "I...think so, yes."

"Well, good for you," the other replied. "To lose your way is to learn. I preach that during my sermons. On Sundays," he added, as if Ingrid were about to request a sample then and there.

"You're a priest?" she asked instead.

"To the best of my ability," the man nodded, "though there's not a great need for guidance in this region." He gestured the space across from him. "Won't you come and sit? It's quite safe in here, I assure you. But feed your animal first; it sounds hungry."

Ingrid did as she was told without knowing why. Perhaps the priest's pleasant way of speaking solicited his harmlessness, or maybe it was in the easy way he sat by the fire, as if there were all the time in the world to do nothing at all. Whichever, she came

back and sat across from him, smoothing the plain gray skirt she had on. The priest introduced himself as Thomas Pastel. He told her that in between sermons he took odd jobs for food and drink, and sometimes for a place to sleep. He had no permanent home, he explained further, which was okay, since he enjoyed traveling.

"Especially in this region. So much love, you know. Empathy. And emotions like pride or bitterness are almost anathema to the dwellers. Of course, again, that also means I need to choose my sermons with care. Lately they've been motivational in nature, what with the dambuhala leaving so much death in their wake." He picked up his stick and prodded the fire. "Tragic, that. Senseless as well. To have something be destroyed and then rebuilt is one thing--to destroy it intentionally so you can craft it in your own image is something altogether different."

"My name is Ingrid Felton," Ingrid told him, more fascinated by the second with this man. "You seem to know a lot about what's been going on. Do you know of the man responsible for the dambuhala rampage? His name is Cambridge."

"I know of him. Most of the dwellers do by now. He's been traveling with his army, giving sermons that are nothing at all like mine." His eyes didn't leave the fire as he spoke. "He's a madman. He thinks gardens can be cultivated with blood and tears. Imagine."

"I don't want to. I've actually been sent to stop Cambridge. The ogres too."

The stick stopped prodding; Pastel looked bemused. "How?" he asked.

"I don't know yet. My mother...I think she may know. She told me the portal to the ogres' region can be re-opened, that they can be forced back."

"With emotions, yes. She's right about that. It's about being in the right place and feeling the right things." He looked at her for a moment, his head tilted. "Are you aware of the emotion required for the dambuhala?"

"Hatred."

"Ah. Yes, Cambridge has plenty of that. Hunger, too." The priest's brow rose. "And what about you, Miss Felton? What's in your heart? Love, certainly, or you wouldn't be here. What else?"

"I haven't given it much thought."

"You'd best, if you intend to succeed. I know of something that may help."

He rose with surprising gracefulness. His shoes--a beaten pair of open-toed sandals--glided across the dirt to a brown cloth about six feet long hanging on the wall.

"The village of Hampton was kind enough to provide me with employment until my next sermon," he continued, standing on tip-toe to reach the top corner of the cloth. "I am to alphabetically catalogue and arrange the items in this storeroom." A grunt came from his throat as the cloth caught the corner of whatever it was covering. "Come on now," he goaded.

He gave the cloth another twitch, and the entire piece fell from a clean, smooth looking glass that reflected the room so perfectly Ingrid thought for a moment it was a door to a second room. The glass was rectangular, about six feet high and three feet across; it was housed in a wooden frame that was chipped and nicked in places.

"This is the Carlson Glass," Pastel said, hovering to one side. "Crafted and enchanted by one Carney Carlson some three hundred years ago, if you believe the

stories. He was a hermit who lived beneath Mount Chariness. He was also a rather skilled magician. I gleaned all of this from a book I found at Hampton's library, after I saw the name of the mirror listed on the room's inventory and became curious."

"Is it the actual glass?" Ingrid asked. Her eyes were roving along the top of the frame, where a series of crude faces, each wearing a different expression, had been carved.

"I am inclined to believe so," the priest allowed. "Only because I myself have experienced its power."

"Which is what?"

"Ah."

A cool draft laced, ghost-like, through the room, making the lanterns quiver. Ingrid reached to touch the glass. It was so immaculate she half-expected her fingers to go right through it. This did not happen. The glass, however, was *very* cold. A chill bolted up her arm. She shivered and flinched.

"What is it?" Pastel said, sounding concerned.

"It's cold. There should be frost on that glass."

"Cold? Interesting. Every time I've touched it it's been warm. Not hot, mind you, but warm. I attributed it to the proximity of the lanterns."

"Well it's cold now." She stepped from the glass, clasping her arms under her breasts.

Pastel was quiet for a time. Clearly he'd no idea that the mirror, whatever else it was capable of, harbored protean qualities. His lip twisted in thought. "Look into the glass, Miss Felton," he ventured. "Tell me what you see."

Ingrid peered at her reflection. The girl in the mirror--short, slender, dressed in plain gray clothes and brown boots--peered back. Behind her, the lanterns flickered on, steady once more.

"Step closer," Pastel almost whispered. "Find the eyes of your reflection and hold them."

She heard her feet moving, saw her face getting closer. Closer. The girl in the glass grew quizzical. Her eyes narrowed. She was studying herself, penetrating her own penetrating stare. Lantern flames danced in her irises.

"Look, Miss Felton," Pastel whispered again. "Look...look."

The reflection scowled like a witch. "Where are your glasses?" it spat.

Ingrid gasped. Her legs trembled. She wanted to run but felt frozen to the spot.

Meanwhile the reflection continued to scowl. "I said where are your glasses? I know you're stupid and all. Did you lose them like you lose everything else? *Answer me, you idiot!*"

"They're...in the progressive region," Ingrid managed timidly, her mouth agape. "I couldn't bring them across."

The reflection put its hands on its hips. Its head tilted. "I can't believe you found someone to love you," it grimaced. "*You*. An ugly, stupid girl who's a waste of the space she stands in." Its eyes dropped to Ingrid's belly for a moment. "And you loved him back. Now you're here. Great. What colossal luck."

"It wasn't luck," Ingrid retorted. Her heart was beginning to thump hard at this mouthy likeness despite how fantastic it was. "I *do* love him!"

"I wasn't referring to you, stupid, I was referring to the region. It's going to die. You can't save it. I'm amazed you can tie your own shoes in the morning."

Ingrid shook her head. "You don't know anything. You're just a silly magic trick."

The reflection moved closer. Its face became larger and larger and larger, until it filled the entire glass. Its eyes gleamed like shimmering bullets. "I am *not* a magic trick!" its huge mouth writhed. Fog plumed on the opposite surface.

"Then who are you?" Ingrid asked, fighting an urge to flee.

The mirror had begun to shake with the reflection's rage. Ingrid saw her own cheeks flaming with blood, her own teeth gnashing. The inside of the glass was very foggy now. The reflection let out a scream, never taking its eyes off its host. Terrified, Ingrid screamed back, stumbling from the mirror that was now shaking with such vehemence it looked ready to tip.

And then it *did* tip. Ingrid fell to the ground, her legs splayed, and saw herself coming forward, a looming face with an evil grin. The reflection had raised its finger and was writing a word on the inside of the glass, in reverse so its recipient could interpret it. The finger finished writing just as the mirror crashed over Ingrid's body, smothering her screams. She took the word with her down into blackness: JOSEPHINE.

Ingrid opened her eyes to the sound of crackling campfire. Father Pastel was on one side, sitting cross-legged. On the other, a surprise: Scott. He leaned forward when he noticed her awake and began to bombard her with compassionate questions. Was she all right? Did she need anything? Had the man who kept claiming he was a priest harmed her in any way?

Ingrid did her best to smile and assure him she felt okay. Sitting up, she turned to look at the mirror. It was leaning against the wall, just as before, looking serene as an island lagoon.

"What happened?" she blinked.

It was the priest who answered. "You were speaking to the glass. I quite expected that. But the vehemence of the exchange came as a shock. You shouted, and then you screamed." He put his hand on her shoulder. "And then you fainted dead away. I carried you to the fire. Mister Bremman came looking for you not long after."

Ingrid looked at Scott. The expression on his face was one of contempt and disbelief for whatever explanation Father Pastel had given him. Still in a fog, she explained how her niddy had lost its way in the dark. She described her subsequent conversation with Father Pastel, and how he'd wanted her to use the Carlson Glass as a means to discover the necessary emotions for opening portals to other regions.

"And what did the glass show you, Miss Felton?" the priest inquired at this point.

Ingrid paused to take a bite of sweet cake Scott had fetched during her story. "I saw myself, of course," she began. "Only it wasn't myself. I started swearing and shouting. Calling myself names."

Pastel looked thoughtful. "The reflection was angry with you?"

"Was it ever. It even tried to attack me. The mirror started shaking. It tipped on top of me. That's when I blacked out."

"It never tipped, Miss Felton. It never even moved. You were the one who shook. Then you let out a scream and collapsed."

Pastel said all of this with the even, soothing tone of a man comforting a child just awakened from a nightmare. Except it wasn't a nightmare that Ingrid had experienced--it was very important, the priest explained after Ingrid raised the possibility, that she understood this point. He asked her to be more specific about what the reflection had said and done. Ingrid told him everything she remembered.

"I see," Pastel muttered, gazing into the fire.

"Who is Josephine?" Scott wondered aloud, looking much subdued.

Pastel looked at Ingrid. "Does the name mean anything to you?"

It did. "She was...just this girl I used to yell at when I was younger. An imaginary girl. The family I was living with didn't like me. So when I was alone I sometimes used her as a beating pillow. Someone to take my frustration out on."

"Do you know what she looked like?"

"Me," Ingrid replied flatly. "She was me."

"So it was a case of self-loathing," Pastel concluded. He gave Ingrid a few moments to respond to this. When she didn't, he went on to say that while he didn't know enough about her to understand how a girl like Josephine could come to be, her presence in the mirror at the very least confirmed that the hatred needed to drive the dambuhala back to their own region was alive and well inside of her. "But you must know how to refocus that hatred when the time comes, Miss Felton. You must channel it into the ritual necessary for opening the portal."

"I'm not certain I can do that."

"Your mother's journal may help," Scott pointed out. The other two stared at him. "I mean that's a big part of this trip right?" he went on with a shrug, looking at Ingrid. "Your mother wrote in her journal about...opening these portals?"

"Yes," Ingrid agreed. "It's something to hope for at least."

Father Pastel had raised his brow. "Was your mother a traveler?"

"She was. Is. Born in this region but living in the progressive."

He nodded and went back to stirring the fire with his stick. "I don't know of the progressive. But if she left information here about breaching other regions you really should find it. That sort of knowledge only belongs in...proper-minded people, as this man Woodward Cambridge has already shown us." He paused for a few moments, letting embers from the fire float between them. "I know of another, possible source of assistance as well."

Ingrid and Scott both raised their heads.

"There is a man named Rupert Doody who's been studying and writing about the existence of multiple regions for years. He lives in a town called Bowershim, about a day's ride on your niddi from here. I know of this because I am frequently in Bowershim myself." A small smile touched the corners of his lips. "We've shared philosophies, opinions, harsh words. Bottles of wine. He once told me that to open a portal to another region, you not only had to be standing in the right spot and feeling the right

things, you also had to be..." the smile faltered "...now how did he put it? 'In an ecstasy of inner ascension.' Whatever *that* means."

Bewildered, the priest shook his head, while Ingrid and Scott smiled at each other.

"So you think he can help us?" Ingrid then asked.

"Oh if there's anyone who's done more research on traveling between regions I'd like to meet him," Pastel said. "Doody took an interest in the whole idea from a young age.

"Why?" Scott wanted to know.

"Well, for one thing, he's not from this region. He awoke here as a baby--or so he claims--not long after he was born. For another thing, he truly feels that the cure for the disease ailing him lies in the home he slipped from all those years ago. It's—"

Scott's niddy suddenly brayed out a loud, terrified honk. Everyone jumped. When they turned to look, the beast was disappearing at a rapid gait through the corridor to get back to the main tunnel. As they got to their feet to give chase, the other niddy became spooked as well. It let out several high-pitched honks, its hooves stamping the dirt.

"What the hell's gotten into--" Scott began.

And then Ingrid screamed too. She jumped to her feet and straight over the campfire, never minding the hem of her skirt.

"Ingrid!" Scott yelled, trying to get his arms around her shaking body.

"Rat!" she got out, all but leaping into his arms. "Biggest rat I've ever seen!"

She scurried behind him and peered over his shoulders. All three were now looking at the rat. Oblivious to the chaos it had wrought, it trundled along the far wall. It was the size of Scott's forearm, not including the tail, and fat as a milked kitten. Its black whiskers streaked lines in the dirt.

Only Father Pastel seemed in control of himself. "I'll take care of it," he said with a small smile. "But first we should catch the niddi. We don't want a stampede in the tunnel."

It took twenty minutes for them to catch and calm the animals down. Ingrid's hands were shaking for almost that long. When the priest informed her that such rodents were quite common around the Istasica Forest, she insisted they walk straightaway to the other end of the tunnel and up to level ground.

Scott stayed close to her. This helped to sedate her nerves, as did the terrain that greeted them when, some thirty minutes later, they ascended from the tunnel on the other side of the forest. It reminded Ingrid of an Ohio countryside. Fluffy white clouds hovered over a curvaceous horizon dotted with small, neat houses. Huge, ancient trees cast shadows over narrow lanes lined with wild strawberries, blooming sunflowers, and knobby wooden fences.

Father Pastel took them aside to bid his farewells. He could not travel to Bowershim with them. There was still work to be done in the storage room. And from the storage room he would make his way to a small church in Rudgard, a village in the South that had already been attacked by the dambuhala.

"The two of you will continue north," he instructed, pointing out their destination on Ingrid's map. "It shouldn't be too hard to find Rupert once you're in Bowershim; he's quite the celebrity there."

Ingrid looked at the map. The stop was going to be convenient, if nothing else. Bowershim appeared to be two-thirds of the way from Istasica Forest to Coldfrock Lake, and not at all far from their original route.

She folded the map and thanked Father Pastel for everything.

They camped that night in a small, grassy field near the road. Ingrid lay in front of the fire looking at the stars long after Scott had fallen asleep. She was wide awake. Part of that had to do with the fact she was alone in her bag this evening--she had grown accustomed to sleeping in Scott's arms. Another had to do with the region. Scanning the sky, she looked for familiar constellations; there were none. Only the moon looked the same. Its white rays slanted over the grass. It lit the foliage in a nearby copse of whispering trees.

It's another dimension, she remembered her mother saying on Saturday afternoon--a time that seemed an age ago already. *Some of it's different, some of it's the same. The biggest change you're going to notice is the utter lack of negativity from everyone.*

So far, everything Luanna had told her about the place was spot on. But then, she hadn't gone into a lot of details, perhaps because she didn't remember them well enough herself. Or perhaps because she simply hadn't known.

Ingrid *did* find details in the book that Rowena had loaned her. It was actually the fifth book in a series of tomes about wildlife in the regions. *Creatures Beyond The Interstice*, the title read, *Volume Five: Dambuhala*. But while its author, a woman named Crindy Suwdowns, seemed to know a good deal about the physical attributes of the beasts--their size, temperament, and diet--she had recorded almost nothing in regards to defending oneself against them. Indeed, it was her opinion that to encounter a dambuhala meant certain death, unless the subject in question was very lucky.

The best way to survive a dambuhala is to run and jump from the nearest cliff and hope for a soft landing, the author had written with tart precision.

The illustrations were even less comforting. She read for awhile longer about ogre mating habits, became disgusted, then closed the book to find something more pleasant to set her mind to.

Her eyes wandered the copse. Lanterns swayed from some of the boughs; by their light, she could make out shapes of other couples who had chosen to rest here for the night. Some sat in the branches, their legs swinging; others shared whispers from the tall grass.

Minutes later, Scott appeared before her mind's eye, and she knew she must be dozing off. He was fretting over the fire while she laughed.

"It's okay, I was in the Boy Scouts club," he kept insisting as his hands rubbed two sticks together. When nothing at all happened he snarled and began cursing out his old scout leader.

This made Ingrid laugh even harder. "What was the scout leader's name?" she spluttered.

"Rupert Doody," Scott growled back. "That son of a bitch. Rub two sticks together to make a fire, my ass!"

Ingrid's laughter stopped. Her eyes darted across the breezy field. A dark shape was approaching from the far end. It was not walking. It appeared to be sitting in a wheelchair. Its arms moved with the jerking, spastic motions of a film reel set on high speed.

"He was sick," Scott said, still sounding disgusted. "He had this disease that ailed him."

The wheelchair continued to get closer, bouncing over the uneven terrain. Its occupant looked terrifically large.

And it had the glowing, orange eyes of a wolf.

IX. Dullard

Randy liked Cambridge's castle. It treated him like royalty whenever he visited. His bedchamber, which included a private bath, was the same size as the entire upstairs of the Norwalk house. Servants provided food and drink around the clock. There was a bowling and billiards room in the south wing. There was a theater where acting troupes sometimes put on shows (slapstick comedies were Randy's favorite).

This was not to say the setup was perfect. For starters, the region had no electricity. That meant no television, no video games, and no compact disc players. If you wanted a cold beer you had to go outside and dunk your bottle in the river for an hour. If you wanted a hot bath you had to first order a servant to fill your tub, and then order another to set and light the coals. Plumbing was also quite crude. Toilets--or what the region-dwellers referred to as "lookies"--did not flush. At Cambridge's castle, your waste simply dropped down a chute that led to the dungeon, where it would then be disposed of by one of the servants.

Randy missed these creature comforts. They were attributes of the progressive region which one day, perhaps, would find their way here. But he was not fool enough to think that day would be soon. Therefore, he had devised a number of activities to compensate his frustration. Besides having round the clock access to bowling and billiards, he owned his own kickshellac, which was fun to shoot birds with after breakfast. Coldfrock Lake was a convenient venue for fishing and swimming. At night it could be quite gleeful, provided his timing was just right, to leap from behind corners and scare the laundry women.

But his very favorite thing to do was to hire a servant girl.

He had taken up the habit seven years ago, at the age of eighteen, over a more or less innocent encounter. In those days a pretty girl with long red hair who went by the name of Deedee had been pouring wine for Cambridge's dinner parties. She noticed him one night, staring over his plate of roasted niddy...and smiled. Not a wide smile--nothing that could be noticed by anyone else at the table. But the message was delivered. And received.

Randy had kept an eye on her for the rest of the meal. Later that evening, while Cambridge's guests were dancing in the ballroom, Randy cornered the girl in an empty corridor and introduced himself. A proposal was made; a deal was struck. Deedee stayed in his chamber that night until three in the morning.

He never told any of the girls what he expected right out front. Doubtless they had their own ideas in mind. But never once--and about this he was certain--had any of them anticipated the specifics of his yearning.

Tonight's girl was no different. Her name was Hallie. She was the kitchen girl who had poured the wine during that very first dinner upon his return to the castle. Randy had been asking the other servants discreet questions about her over the past two days. She was eighteen. She was taciturn. She liked to read. Randy also discovered that her mother had recently died in the castle dungeon.

"'Ee locked her down tha for not pressin' the wrinkles outta ees shirt colla'," a chef told him rather matter-of-factly in the kitchen, his bald head shining in the cooklight. "I don' know whether or not 'ee expected 'er to doy, but doy she did. Took a fayvor one night and boined up in the cole."

"And now she's alone?" Randy had asked.

The chef had looked nonplussed. "'Oo?"

"Hallie."

"Oh! Oh aye, yes, I reckon she is now. Poor lass."

Randy had continued to watch the girl, and wait. Over the next day, he plotted out how he was going to make his request--the words he would use, the tone of his voice. The plan was to shower her with affectionate palliations for his intrusion upon her time, then move on to how sorry he felt for her recent loss.

At last he managed to catch up with her in an empty corridor. Her eyes gleamed at him as he went through his spill, which was dotted, on the spur of the moment, with a few lies about loss within his own family. Like the other girls, Hallie was shy at first but willing to listen. Unlike the other girls, she outright rejected his invitation to a midnight meeting, even after he suggested she talk about her pain, not to relive old memories, but to expel them.

It was the worst thing he could have said. Hallie's eyes narrowed; the gleam of torchlight in them seemed to go from delicate to defiant. She yelped that the memories of her mother were all she had left, and that she would go on spending time with them like the happy friends they were.

With that, she strode off, giving Randy no time to recant his words. He stared after her with fat cheeks flushed in embarrassment. A sudden urge to chase her down and slam her head against the wall seized him. He fought it off. Blood was for Cambridge's victims. There was another liquid he preferred when it came to his.

But he couldn't wait--it had to be tonight. He and his mother were to depart from the castle in the morning by boat; Nancy was certain that their quarry, with a three day head start, would be at Horseshoe Bay before long.

It took only a moment for him to decide. He followed her down to the servants' chambers as quietly as he could, past weapon displays and empty suits of armor, while the waves of Coldfrock Lake crashed beyond arched windows.

The servants' quarters were located on a floor of the castle just above the dungeons. Randy watched from behind a corner as Hallie strode past and down to the bathing area. Moments later, the sound of running water. Randy felt his heart begin to speed up. This was going to be far easier than he'd anticipated. And much more fun.

Just then Hallie appeared in the corridor again. Randy jumped back with a surprised gasp. The girl's footsteps froze.

"Hello?" she called. "Alice, is that you?"

Randy kept his council. He could hear the girl approaching. Her footsteps grew louder, louder...and then stopped again.

She was no more than five feet away when she said, in an amused voice: "Now you can't scare me that easily!"

On that statement, the footsteps resumed, moving back towards the bathing area. Randy peered down the corridor. It dead-ended at a blank wall, from the left of which water could still be heard running into a basin. In front of that, also on the left, was Hallie's chamber. Dull lamplight flickered through the archways of both doors.

Randy lumbered over the ancient stone floor. Closer, closer. Hallie stepped out of her chamber, freezing him in his tracks, and turned left without noticing him. A blue robe was now wrapped around her slender frame. She went into the bathing room and shut off the water. Silence fell, floating like a black feather on the surface of his compulsion. At any moment the girl would be placing her feet in the tub. Randy took another step forward--

Only to see her appear in the corridor yet again, still wearing the robe, and walk straight back to the bedchamber.

Now what? he wondered.

He decided to wait until she reemerged. But several minutes went by without this happening. And now, curiously enough, came the sound of light sobs. Hallie was crying.

Randy crept to the door and peered in. The girl was sitting at a crude, uneven desk. In front of her was a sheet of parchment. Here was the instigation of her tears. Her shoulders shook with them; her chest hitched. A tattered quill was clutched in her hand.

The bathing room was just a few steps further on. Randy went to it without making a sound and slipped inside. A full tub rested in the middle of the floor, about five feet long and three feet deep. Torchlight gleamed on its surface. A dusty mirror nearby also reflected the light, but Randy still felt the room held a sufficient amount of shadows. He chose one and continued to wait.

It was not a long wait. Hallie appeared within minutes. Her small, bare feet padded over the stones. She went to the mirror and unlaced the belt of her robe. It fell to the floor, exposing delicate curves, soft skin.

Randy was sporting a full erection as the girl walked, fawn-like, to the tub and lowered herself inside. Her back was to him, yet he knew the water had risen up over her breasts, almost to her clavicle. Randy's eyes dropped to the tub for a moment before returning to Hallie's shoulders. It was not as big as the one he had upstairs, but it would still do for holding her entire body when she submerged. She was a small girl.

His chest and arms were wet when, thirty minutes later, he stepped out of the chamber. Hallie was not in accompaniment. Had he known all along how it would be? Randy could no more answer that question than he could strike a match with his sopping, shaking fingers.

He shut the door with a look on his face like that of a boy who has just seen a shooting star for the first time. A quiet, purring elation was nestled within the depths of his mind. It had been terrifying to watch the girl die. But it had also been spectacular.

Her scream at the initial confrontation had gotten the scene off to an enticing start. It was high-pitched, piercing...and strong. It gave Randy hope that she would do well. He grabbed her naked body and twisted it around to get a hand over her mouth.

"Stop," he told her, as she splashed and writhed. When this didn't work he threatened to hurt her. She froze on the spot, eyes bulging. "Now I only want to watch you," he went on. "Is that so bad? I even offered to pay you."

His large, flabby arms held her in place. He took his hand away from her mouth, ready to clamp it right back on if she screamed again. She didn't. She covered her breasts with her arm instead

"Wh-what do you want me to do?" she asked in a trembling voice.

Randy smiled. He understood why she was scared. He understood also that being scared would not do for what he had in mind. He released his hold and stood up.

"I want you to take a nice, deep breath and lie down at the bottom of the tub," he said.

"Why?"

"I want to time you."

Again: "Why?"

Randy became puzzled for a moment. The question was not new to him--he asked it of himself all the time. But its answer was hard to pin down. It had to be connected with sex in some way; seeing a girl holding her breath underwater was always cause for an erection. Beyond that he didn't know. And for the most part didn't care.

"Do it," he demanded.

Her first attempt was a poor one. Too much fear. Also, she kept trying to keep her breasts and groin covered with her hands. The second attempt was a little better. The third lasted almost an entire minute.

Hallie was gasping by that point. The nipples on her breasts, as they rose and fell, were small and sharp as stones. Her blonde hair clung to her back.

Looking at the small, slender bones of her body, Randy had all at once found himself unable to adhere to the script. He began to want more from tonight than just a few dives and a payoff. He wanted to feel the way he had felt years ago--at the age of eleven, as a matter of fact--when he pulled a girl underwater and held her down for the first time. She had been a villager from right here in the region; she had challenged him to a breath-hold contest; she had lost.

He grabbed Hallie and jammed her head underwater face-first. She thrashed as he held her down. A line of drool ran from the corner of his mouth. He lifted her head out of the water, giving her a ragged breath--*HAAUUUUH!*--then jammed it down again. Bubbles plumed in white panic from her lips and nose. Bare buttocks clenched and opened. He gave her another quick breath, dunked her back under. His fat face was smiling. It was pure ecstasy.

A stream of urine sprang from her bladder. Randy felt it, because his other hand had been holding her in between the legs at the time. He pulled her out of the water; her eyes were blank. They remained blank as he laid her on the floor. And as he unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants, her neck was already turning blue.

The thing to do now, his fevered, elated mind warranted, was get out of the servants' corridors and back upstairs without being seen. He did not wish to be tied to the crime, despite the fact there was very little chance of anyone besides Hallie's

friends--if she even had any--caring much about the event. Servants came, servants left. Some lived and some died. They had no idea what they were getting themselves into when they came to work for Cambridge, but that was how it was. Before Hallie's death in the water tub, her own mother had died in the dungeon.

Perhaps these thoughts were responsible for what Randy did next. Instead of leaving the corridor straight away, he paused in front of the dead girl's bedchamber and peered inside. There on the table was the letter she had been working on. Beside it, gleaming in the torchlight, was the quill.

He stepped into the chamber and closed the door. He picked up the letter. The ink on the bottom of the page looked to have dried mere minutes ago, while near the top, it was beginning to fade. So the material had taken a long time to compose. Whether this was due to the girl's lack of education--there were spelling mistakes everywhere--or to a certain fastidiousness with the message itself, Randy had no way of knowing. All of that aside, her handwriting was clear and perfectly legible.

Mam,

I walked to the vilage todey. Felicia at the market saw me and sayd hallo. You used to by me apples from her when I was a gurl. She asked after you. I tried not to cry as I told her what hapened. I failed. I am failing as I rite this.

The gards wuld not let me down to see you. I tried many times, begging from my knees. They wuld not let me in. I was beaten and dragged from the portcullis. They wuld not let me in. But one of the men told me you were sick. He told me you had terible head-pane, and a fever. You were vimiting and shivering, sleeping on the flore of your cage. You were not strong enuf to eat.

I miss you mam. I miss your singing. Remember wen you boght me a doll from that funy lady in Dalandaniss, and we tuk it home? You were laffing becuse you thawt the tunge sticking out of its mowth was so funy. We played with that doll together. We dressed it up. You even made up stories from it to tel me at bedtime. What ever hapened to that doll?

I wish you culd come bak to me. The man sayd that you cried a lot becuse your head hurt so bad, but that Cambridge wuld not give you medacin. Then one night you were crying and when you fell asleep you did not wake up.

Thank you for being my mam. Thank you for bringing me into this wurd. Thank you for feeding me, and teaching me, and bying me clothes and toys. Thank you for teling me wen I was rong. Thank you for teling me wen I was rite. Thank you for your bedtime stories. Thank you for hugging me. Thank you for kissing me wen I was hurt. Thank you mam so very very much. This alone is love. Thank you.

I cannot stop crying. I love you, mam. I love you.

Randy folded the parchment in his hands. He picked up the quill and left the room. In the bathing chamber, Hallie's body was still on the floor. Her eyes gaped.

Setting the parchment and quill aside for a moment, he picked up the body. His nose wrinkled. Hallie now felt like a rolled carpet left out in the rain. Her limbs were stiff and blue. Randy dropped her back into the tub.

The scene was set. Hallie's death, when she was found, would be ruled a drowning. This would be just fine; it was the truth. The letter was lying nearby, where her most unfortunate discoverer would certainly see. Randy felt it read enough like a suicide note to be ascertained as such. Very few questions seemed liable.

Minutes later he was back upstairs. He lay awake long into the night, thinking about how it had felt to hold the girl underwater, while her lungs--her strong but small lungs--seethed under the delicate bones of her ribs. Seethed...and then broke. Timing her, the way he had timed so many other girls, had not been enough. Randy did not think it would ever be enough again.

It was over an hour before he fell asleep. By then, he was thinking of whom to drown next. The answer came just as he drifted off. Like Hallie, she was small and pretty. This time, though, the water would be deep. Her bubbled screams would take a long time to reach the surface. And when at long last they did, it would be too late to lock the door, too late to open the window. Too late to do anything but inhale and let death flood in.

X. Scholar

Father Pastel's judgment about how long it would take to reach Bowershim from Hampton had been optimistic. It took closer to two days to reach the outskirts of the village, by which time Ingrid and Scott were irritated not only with the slow progress of their journey, but with each other. Ingrid snapped at Scott several times for asking questions about the region that she, being new to it herself, could not hope to answer. And Scott, in his turn, had long since stopped showing empathy towards her complaints about feeling dirty from wearing clothes washed in a river, or having a sore back from riding the niddy.

Thus their entry into Bowershim was done in relative speechlessness, as evening bore down on the arched backs of copious vegetable crops on either side of the road. Scott was not at all enamored with the smell of these crops, a faint but sour assault that pricked the nostrils until he could think of nothing but flies and dead rodents.

"What the hell *are* those things?" he asked, looking at a row of gnarled vines wrapped around a fence. Hanging from these vines were a number of ugly, orange and black spheres the size of baseballs.

Ingrid fetched a deep sigh. This, he'd learned well enough already, was her way of warning him she was in no mood for conversation.

Scott decided to heed the warning for now. He scratched his beard, which was growing thick again. He hadn't shaved since before leaving Hampton. Ingrid's legs were no doubt starting to get prickly as well. Scott glanced at them, feeling stupid about it but glad to have some kind of distraction, however insignificant, from that vague yet somehow sickening field odor. She gave no signal of notice to his observation; her hair hung over her eyes as she stared at the road.

And then...music.

Scott peered between the antlers of his niddy. The road bent to the right. From around this bend came the bright, happy notes of a fast tempo song. He looked at Ingrid. She too was listening. Her brow was raised, and for the first time since leaving the tunnel she looked ready to smile.

The melody grew louder with every step, seeming to swirl between the boughs of the trees and give them new life. To Scott it sounded Cajun in style. There were horns, an accordion, a zealous, staccato-laden beating of snare drums. He shared this speculation with Ingrid, who for the most part agreed, but felt that something along the lines of Zydeco was a closer bet. Scott had never heard the word Zydeco before in his life and could not for love or money think of how to reply.

"But where is it coming from?" he asked instead.

By then they were already rounding the bend. A wooden signpost with the word BOWERSHIM hammered onto it came into view. And in front of that, not more than a hundred yards off, was a jubilee of people in full swing on the town square.

The niddy's hooves took on a hollow sound as they stepped onto a gas-lit, cobbled street. Children ran everywhere, their laughter peeling through the evening air. Scott

judged by their formal attire that they'd come with their parents to the party, and the party was attributed to a wedding. Many of the girls were carrying flowers.

"Scott? We need to tie up the animals. There."

Ingrid pointed to a man in brown who was beckoning them. He stood in front of a wooden rail where several other animals were tied.

"Good evening!" he bellowed, teeth gleaming beneath a curled mustache. "Bride or groom?"

Scott blinked and gave Ingrid a helpless look. He all at once felt like he was being asked for a password that he did not possess. Should he try to pass himself off as one of the wedding guests? Maybe he could dance around with Ingrid and float discreet questions to the other couples about Rupert Doody. He would be suave, charming...and completely idiotic. His detective skills--what few he had--were weak. None of the old *T.J. Hooker* reruns he used to watch covered tactical maneuvers at wedding parties in parallel dimensions.

But Ingrid came to the rescue. "We're just passing through town," she said. "Do you happen to know a man by the name of Rupert Doody? We were told he lives here."

"I know of him," the man allowed. "But he doesn't like to come outside very much, and I'm afraid I don't know his address." His face flushed a little. "Ah...it's five scrips if you wish to tie up your niddi."

"Let's walk around," Ingrid said to Scott.

She was jumping down from her beast before he could make any kind of reply. Soon after, they were doing exactly what Scott had contemplated minutes earlier: mingling with the party guests. Most of this went on in the town square, and while they lacked proper clothing for the occasion, the throng seemed happy enough to incorporate new arrivals. One man handed Scott a drink as Ingrid tugged him towards a dais--where the Zydeco band was set up--adorned with blue and pink streamers. Another clapped him hard enough on the back to make him spill it into the grass.

"*Inuman na, pare!*" he whooped, eyes rolling in different directions.

Everywhere was chatter and laughter. Couples danced like bats diving after insects. Somebody popped a champagne bottle. Somebody else belched. The smell of liquor and tobacco hovered. It all felt festive and pleasant enough. The one thing Scott did not care for was the heat, which had gone up a great deal on the square. It was a case of too many people occupying too small an area.

"Where are we going?" he called to Ingrid.

"I'm just looking for the right face!" she shouted back.

"What?"

At that moment a man with a large handlebar mustache stumbled over and dumped a full glass of beer over Scott's head. "*Cheers, mate!*"

Several other men laughed at this. Biting back a retort, Scott let Ingrid lead him away. The crowd did not dissipate as they reached the dais; indeed, it grew thicker. Ingrid drew him down the length of it, not pausing to talk to anyone. It took some tricky maneuvering. Small as she was, Ingrid looked rather like a child, twisting her way through a forest of adults to reach whatever candy rack she saw in her mind's eye. As a consequence, Scott wound up bumping into a lot of people. More beer and whiskey

splashed onto his clothes. Ingrid received a number of high-pitched whistles from the men.

The crowd thinned somewhat in back of the dais. This, coupled with the fact that the area was not as well lit as the one he had just left, served to improve Scott's mood. No one was dancing and the talk was quieter. For the first time since entering Bowershim, Scott could hear insects singing in the grass.

Ingrid continued to look flustered. She released him and put her hands on her hips. Her eyes looked across the square to a shadowy street on the far end.

"Shit," she muttered. The word carried, for at that same moment the band finished their number. Several people cast odd glances in her direction. "This isn't going to work, Scott. Let's get away from the party and try over there." Her finger pointed towards the street. "I mean everyone here's either too drunk, or--"

"Hello!" a high-pitched voice called.

A tall, heavy-set man who'd been leaning against the dais stepped towards them. His complexion was of a very light brown that was similar to Ingrid's, though the skin was more chaffed, as if from overexposure to sunlight. If the condition was causing him pain, he gave no sign; his smile beamed, and his eyes were the most sober Scott had seen thus far on the square.

"You're not from around here, right?" he asked, halting his advance. "I mean I can usually tell. You two look the way I used to feel all the time."

"We're not," Ingrid allowed.

"Not even from this region I'll bet."

"Um...well..."

"I knew it. Dixon!"

This last was less spoken than sung over the man's shoulder, and in mere moments another, leaner man joined the group. He regarded Scott and Ingrid with the same, easy smile as the one worn by his partner, and his voice, when he spoke, contained the same roller-coaster-like intonation.

"Are you bothering these people, Varion?"

"Well I hope not," the larger man laughed. "I noticed them looking around like they were lost. It reminded me of us."

"We're not lost."

"Not anymore."

"So what region are you from?" Dixon suddenly asked. "Oh don't look so surprised. Varion never misses a trick."

"We're from the progressive," Ingrid replied.

"What's that?"

"Well, it's..."

Her words died off. Scott knew what she was thinking, or was trying to think. In their hastily attained knowledge about the many regions rumored to exist, never once had any of their educators--Lisa, Father Pastel--attempted to describe a singular region in detail. And now here was this man Dixon, blithely requesting the deed as if it were nothing more than a light for his cigarette. Scott wasn't even sure where to begin.

"It's very advanced compared to this one, from a technical standpoint," he ventured.

"Stand!" a drunken man nearby yelled. "Point!" And he pointed across the square.

It eviscerated Scott's train of thought. "I mean we have cars and trains and...and airplanes..."

"Bars and babes and hair-brains!" the drunk roared.

Dixon and Varion remained silent. Scott looked at Ingrid, whose face was registering a high amount of amusement, not at the antics of the drunkard, but at his own foolishness for swimming into waters far too deep for his verbal skills to tread. All the same, he was about start his attempt afresh when Varion said:

"The progressive. Is that what they've been calling it of late? In California I'm sure something like *the totally bitchin' region* would go over a lot better."

"Or *the way too cool for fools frontier*," Dixon added.

There was a span of seconds in which nothing was said. The drunkard was gone. He and his friends had tottered off.

"You're from California?" Ingrid asked, with a hopeful voice.

"Marina del Rey," Varion sang out, "born and raised."

"Ohio," Ingrid said, beaming with sudden joy. "Both of us."

"Well welcome back to the sixteenth century. I'm Varion Punzal. This crazy fag next to me is Dixon Anderson."

"Hey it takes one to know one!" Dixon reacted.

"I'm Ingrid Felton and this is my boyfriend, Scott Bremman."

Hands were shaken all around. Scott found Ingrid's broad smile contagious. Although Varion and Dixon were still little more than strangers to him, he could not help but be thrilled to meet natives of his own region after days of traveling through foreign territory.

"Did you get here the same way we got here?" Varion put forward with innocent shrewdness.

"They're lovers, of course they did," Dixon told him.

"Have you been here very long?" the other then asked, putting his arm around Dixon.

"Just a few days," Ingrid confessed.

"Did it frighten you? Crossing over I mean. Dixon and I went to bed together last Christmas night. The next morning we were here. It scared me so bad I was crying. I thought I'd gotten sick somehow and was hallucinating."

Dixon had pulled Varion closer to him while he spoke. "We had to convince each other it was real. Imagine that. Two men go to sleep in one bed and wake up in another, without any idea of how they'd gotten there. Then they have to reassure each other of their sanity."

"It didn't frighten me," Ingrid said, with slight emphasis on the final word. "I knew it was coming."

When Varion and Dixon looked blank, Ingrid launched into her full story. Scott suggested they walk further away from the dais as she spoke, but soon began to think lesser of the idea. For while the noise level of the party dropped with every step they

took, the smell Scott had noticed outside of town earlier--the sour smell of rotting fruit piled on top of dead animals--had intensified. Varion and Dixon, when asked, were at a loss to explain it. They claimed the odor had come over the town this very evening.

Ingrid finished by the time they reached a quiet street. The two taller men looked sobered by her words. Their pace had slowed to a thoughtful, almost dreamy stroll. And while children from the party could still be seen playing on the sidewalks, their antics in ropes and rhymes did not penetrate the look that had come over Ingrid's audience.

Dixon stopped under a lamp-post. "I don't understand how you intend to accomplish what you're telling me," he said. "Even if your mother knew magic, casting the dambuhala back to their own region just doesn't seem possible." He blinked in thought for a moment. "How many of them are there?"

"About one thousand," Ingrid said.

"Oh my God," Varion marveled.

"We may have a few pieces of the puzzle with us already," Scott added.

"And what are those?" Dixon wanted to know.

"We know that the emotion connected with the ogres' region is hatred. We know from the Carlson Glass that Ingrid has...has a very pure form of this hatred inside of her, and that it can be retrieved."

But neither of the men looked reassured. It was time, Scott knew, to play his and Ingrid's one remaining power card: It was time to tell them why they were in Bowershim.

It did not have the effect he was hoping for. Varion's expression did not waver at all; Dixon offered a sad nod. "Everyone in Bowershim knows of Rupert Doody," he said. "Varion and I have even met him. I understand why you want to do the same. He's a foreigner in this region, and he's done extensive research into what makes travel between them possible."

"But you don't think it's a good idea," Ingrid surmised.

"Oh it's a good idea. But Ingrid...as much as Rupert knows, he's never been able to replicate what happened to him when he was a baby. Varion and I got the idea that this was a great source of frustration for him. Also..."

A pained expression came over Dixon's face. Two giggling girls skipped past them, hair bouncing, dresses billowing.

"What is it?" Scott asked.

Dixon lifted his gaze. His following words came with great carefulness. "Did this...this Father Pastel mention that Rupert is...ah, handicapped?"

"Yes," Ingrid nodded, "but we were interrupted before he could describe the nature of it."

"All right."

Dixon and Varion looked at each other under the weak yellow glare of the lamp-posts. On the square across the way, the party was still going full steam; the Zydeco band was playing faster than ever, and Scott thought the dancers must soon spill into the streets. Finally Varion shrugged and leaned to whisper something into Dixon's ear. The other man gave a grim nod.

"Do the two of you know of a condition called Proteus Syndrome?" Varion wondered.

Ingrid answered him first. "A little. The person who comes to mind when I think of Proteus Syndrome is Joseph Merrick."

"Joseph Merrick, that's right," the other nodded. "Born in 1862. Died in a London hospital in 1890 at the age of twenty-seven. Cared for by one Doctor Frederick Treves. Proteus Syndrome is a genetic disorder that causes unusual bone development, rapid skin growth, tumors. Parts of the body tend to become gigantic and deformed."

"Wait a second," Scott broke in, raising his hand. "Are we talking about The Elephant Man?"

"Yes," Dixon rejoined, "we are."

"So Rupert Doody has Proteus Syndrome?" Ingrid asked.

"As far as medical science in this region can understand. Doctors here are calling it Gnaritis. He looks very much the way Merrick used to look, but then nobody knew for certain what his affliction was either. Again, Proteus Syndrome was as close as doctors could get."

"It doesn't matter," Ingrid said. "If he has knowledge of how to travel between regions then we need to talk to him. The sooner the better." Scott watched her eyes shine with confidence. It was a look she achieved with relative ease, over and over again, now that her life had taken on a sudden, drastic change. "Can we see him tonight? Will he still be awake?"

"I think so," Dixon said, as Varion nodded. "He told us he prefers to be awake at night. Fewer people see him that way."

"Take us to him please."

They started walking again. No one spoke. Scott looked across the street and saw one of the flower girls twirling a pink ribbon over her head. Another, younger girl stood next to her, gazing up at the ribbon in wonder.

And then Dixon and Varion turned down an empty alley, leaving it all behind. They walked for perhaps thirty yards between two, two-story wooden buildings. The shadows around them grew darker. Scott drew a deep breath--and immediately regretted it. That evil smell which everyone else in Bowershim seemed to be ignoring rushed through his nostrils, making him cough. Was it getting worse? He thought yes.

At the end of the alley was a poorly-lit street of rocky dirt and neglected buildings. Ingrid fell in step with Scott; he put his arm around her. Black windows of closed shops leered from beneath awnings that were like the ragged sails of wrecked ships. In one a candle had been left flickering. By its glow, Scott could see something in the shape of a coffin on display, propped from behind. MONDUSHMOW'S, a sign on the shop's closed door read, ODDITIES.

They stopped before a T intersection at the end of the street, where stood a larger house that was more handsome than its neighbors. It was three stories high and looked to be made of ashlar. All of its windows were dark. A short flight of steps led to a pair of red doors decorated with gold trim. A second flight went down to a more plain door that Scott presumed would let on the home's cellar.

"This," Dixon told them, standing with his hands on his hips, "is the office of Doctor Grant Bowershim. His ancestors founded the village. It is also the home of Rupert Doody. Doctor Bowershim allows him to stay here under the condition that he be studied for medical science."

Scott looked at the windows again--all black, all uninviting. Were he to walk up the steps and twist the bell handle that shined on the door, he was certain no one would answer.

"Not there," Varion said, comprehending his gaze. "Mr. Doody's quarters are under the house." And he gestured at the stairs that led down. "Keep in mind the severity of his ailment is...rather high. It's affected his skull, his chest. Part of one arm and all of one leg. His appearance can be difficult to digest. It's why he prefers to keep night hours."

Ingrid did not hesitate. Her boots scraped with high-heat, summer dryness on the steps as she descended into the shadowy nook of the cellar door. Scott followed. Seconds later all four were crowded into the nook.

Ingrid balled her hand and knocked.

It felt to Scott like several minutes before someone at last answered. By then Ingrid's knuckles had gone red, and the two men behind him were shuffling their feet.

"He's not home," one of them plumed.

Scott turned around, ready to agree, but the platitude died in his throat when he caught sight of the tall, misshapen figure, cloaked in a heavy brown coat, staring quizzically down at them from the top of the stairs.

It didn't take long for Dixon and Varion to follow his gaze. Once they did, Dixon stepped forward and said:

"Hello, Mr. Doody. I hope you remember me. I'm Dixon Anderson and this is Varion Punzal. We have friends with us who are in need of some help."

A crafter's vision never completely survives the journey from mind to reality. Ingrid had once told Scott that, while they were both still in high school. The memory of it returned to him afresh as he got his first close look at Rupert Doody.

Which conceits had survived during the creation of this remarkable man who now sat before him in the glow of an oil lamp, and which had perished?

As I slept in the womb, I dreamed of love. And in the dream, I lay on a hill, and regarded a series of clouds that passed above, ever drifting, ever changing. There was nothing literal about the dream's ideals of love, but they did bring me to this region, and their message holds merit: The effects of love are always protean. I, too, am protean, as you so plainly can see. But then all of you were changed by love as well, and may one day be changed again.

Rupert Doody told them these things best as he was able through a mouth that hung lopsided on his face, as if he had suffered a stroke. One gigantic hand lay useless by his side. The other clutched an old wooden cane that was knobby and crooked as the massive chest that drew air behind it. His eyes stared, one bulging and blue, the other brown and shriveled. Shining by candlelight in both, however, was a kindness, a gentle and steady intelligence, that Scott thought only the most sour of prejudices could miss.

Doody was by no means a monster. All the same, what he told them after Ingrid had filled him in on their story did not sound promising.

"So you wish to drive these creatures back from whence they came," he uttered, "because to have them here, in this region, is a horror. They kill. They eat what they kill. They kill some more. I am also told they smell quite foul." His good hand laid the cane between his legs so he could take the cup of tea Dixon brought from the kitchen. "My perception in that area is weak," he confessed, after drawing in a long, awkward slurp, "though I would not presume to disagree."

"The ogres are just part of it," Ingrid said to him. "The one behind all the killing and eating is named Woodward Cambridge. He summoned the ogres into this region. He wants them to destroy it so he can rebuild it in his own way. Make it a place he can rule."

Doody slurped his tea again. He did not appear to be put out by the information--but then, Scott didn't think a man with his deformities would be easy to read in any case.

"And how do you feel about this?" he asked her. "Tell me. How do you feel?"

"Disgusted. Repulsed."

"Why?"

Ingrid blinked. "Well...because he's poison, Mr. Doody. It's like he's...desecrating the love that allows a person to live in this region. He's spilling blood on something sacred. Taking lives."

Doody looked at her for a long time without replying. His living quarters were sparse, but there were many shelves of books along the walls. In one corner was a canvas resting upon an easel. In another Scott noticed a black gramophone. They were the possessions of one who held a certain appreciation for the arts, he knew. On the heels of that realization came the thought that Doody and Ingrid, under different circumstances, would doubtless have become friends.

At present he sounded anything but impressed. "You are sharing your thoughts with me," he said to her, "but not your feelings."

Ingrid looked at him over her teacup. "They are the same."

"They are not. Or if they are, young lady, then I will venture your heart is uncertain and hesitant. Did the girl in the Carlson glass weep as she expressed her rage? Or did she merely stare from a distance?"

Scott could sense Ingrid growing more and more rigid. Her fingers clawed the teacup. Varion and Dixon, who had not made a sound since they'd entered the house, remained quiet, as if they too could understand that, so far, the meeting was not going according to plan.

"She *screamed* at me," Ingrid said in defiance. "The glass was shaking."

"Very good," Doody replied. "For what your mother told you is true. The regions are separated by the pain that we feel. What she may not have added is there are many different facets to all manner of pain. The pain of love, for instance, can be romantic, or sentimental, or parental, or many other things. Each of those facets can and will influence the destination of their host."

"For this particular region the governor is romantic love," Dixon came out with, barely questioning the fact at all.

"Correct," Doody told him.

"What about the progressive region?" Scott asked.

"Ah."

A hand touched Scott's back. It was Ingrid's. "The progressive," she said, to both him and Doody, "can wait for now. The priority for the time being is the dambuhala. Can hatred--the emotion of hatred--really provide access to their native region, Mr. Doody?"

"Indeed it can. But Miss Felton," he continued, overriding what Ingrid was about to say next, "I would also like to point out that certain regions--the progressive included--can be breached by different forms of pain."

"Why do you keep referring to it as pain?" It was Varion who wanted to know. Everyone looked at him. "I mean...the love that Dixon and I feel for each other," he pressed on awkwardly, "it isn't *painful* at all. I was in pain *before* we met. But now..." And he trailed off with a smile towards his companion.

Doody let out a soft sigh before replying. "Gielgood Goldenbough once wrote that happiness is the soil we throw on the bones of our grievances. I feel the description is accurate. There is pain underneath everything we keep in our hearts. Pain, loss, the fear of loss. The soul begins its journey as an empty chamber. As time goes by, we fill it with the things we hold dear. But those things are seldom constant. Waiting behind the wares of love, of courage, of thoughtfulness, of righteous, vindictive anger, there will always be that empty chamber. Empty, except for the pain caused by the absence of what made us."

"I'm not sure I can accept that," Varion said; his smile had vanished. "I'm sorry, Mr. Doody, but I have hope for what lies at the end of whatever journey it is our souls are taking. I think it's about nourishment and enlightening, not emptiness and pain."

"The metaphor is bitter," Doody conceded. "My affliction perhaps plays a role in the outlook I maintain." His eyes closed, and his massive head gave a little nod. Down the street outside, someone let out a short, clipped scream. It sounded to Scott like the reception was getting rowdier by the minute. "But that," Doody went on, "is what my heart tells me is true. And I believe it so much that it causes me pain. I must. For the idea that one day this"--his head trembled as he looked down at himself--"abominable shell will fall from my soul and leave it empty once more gives me great comfort."

"Your heart, young lady," he said to Ingrid, "is repulsed as well, to judge by what you saw in the Carlson glass. Only you do not hear its voice now. You shy away from the pain it brings, content with a false facade of compassion for the region. This will not deliver it from the dambuhala."

"That repulsion is from when I was a little girl, Mr. Doody."

"But it exists in you still. The Carlson glass proves as much. And assuming you can find it again..."

He leaned on his cane and rose, wobbling, to his feet. Dixon was across the floor in a flash to take his teacup and provide extra support.

"Thank you, dear boy," Doody said.

Ingrid picked up the oil lamp, and everyone went to the next room, wherein rested a large wooden desk with a leather chair. Doody lurched to the desk, opened one of its drawers, and with his one good arm laid out a leather-bound notebook. By this time Varion had managed to light a number of candles. By their glow, Ingrid could see the words *Inducing Lucid Dreams* written across the notebook's title page.

"By Rupert Carey Doody," its author remarked with a tone of amusement in his voice. "We have talked about the tools you need, Miss Felton. Now it is time to talk about how to use them. Are you familiar with the term 'lucid dream'?"

Before Ingrid could answer another scream ripped through the night outside. Everyone jumped. It was louder than the first. Sharper too.

"That's getting to be quite a shindig," Scott remarked.

But he remained unsettled. The screams didn't tally with what he knew so far about the region. If love and empathy and friendship did indeed define the matrix of its existence, could a party of drunken, rowdy people celebrating a wedding find it in their hearts to let their cups overflow with such abandon?

"Awareness," Ingrid said in a soft voice. "The sleeper becomes aware he is asleep, and dreaming. This knowledge gives him control over the dream. He can orchestrate its events in any way he sees fit."

"Precisely," Doody replied. "Four nights ago, you fell asleep in one region and awoke in another. Before that, Mister Punzal and Mister Anderson did the same thing. Many other couples I have spoken with in my research over the years also found their way here while they slept. There is a pattern in this. And while it is not the only way to traverse the interstice, performing the act during a lucid dream seems to be the easiest."

"But I didn't have a lucid dream on the night I crossed," Ingrid said. She looked at Scott. "Did you?"

He shook his head, with one ear still cocked towards the street. "No."

"It is not the only way," Doody repeated with patience. "Pure, true love, shared at a proper crossing point, will always bring a couple into this region," he went on. Then, looking at them all with his disproportionate eyes: "But only while they are asleep."

Everyone considered this in silence, until Varion said, "So in a lucid dream, it can be possible for the sleeper to...what? To call forth the emotion needed for crossing into whatever region he wishes to see?"

"That is correct. In a lucid dream, one may summon the emotion required for crossing. It will appear before the dreamer as a living, breathing entity. This entity can then be commanded to open a gateway to the interstice."

"What's the interstice?" one of the other three asked. During the horrors which, at that very moment, were sweeping down upon them all, Scott would forget who.

"It is merely a fancy word that describes the space between all regions. Very little is known about it. One scholar described it as the white blur of a vague memory. Another spoke of it as a place of apathy--a place where feeling does not exist. It is believed that to sojourn there is to shirk watchfulness. To look away from the window that lets on the postal road of your life. To sleep."

Doody beckoned Ingrid to him. She went without the slightest trace of reluctance, and the two of them bent over his notebook for a number of minutes. He told her the best way to achieve a lucid state whilst dreaming was to focus on the desire to do so as sleep overcame the mind. It would of course take practice, he went on to say. Practice and patience. He advised her to begin the very next time she put down her head. Ingrid promised him she would. And once the lucid state was achieved, he continued, it would be time to summon the girl from the Carlson Glass--the girl of self-loathing.

"Jo-Jo," Ingrid said grimly. "But how can I do that without using the glass?"

Doody looked at her. "Young lady, you will indeed be using the glass. Once you conjure it in your imagination, it will come. Seek out the girl within. Bring her forth. She will hate you for it, but you must. Bring her forth, Miss Felton...and then hate her back. Hate her back with all of the poison that your heart can conceive. Only then will the gateway to the interstice open, and a bridge for those indigenous of the region Cambridge once breached be traversable."

"What--" Ingrid began.

A series of long, terrified shrieks from outside cut her off. Dixon let out a squeal of surprise. All of them stared in wonderment at the ceiling. More shrieks came. Someone--a man, it sounded like--began to howl in pain right outside the wall. The howls were long and agonized...and then abruptly cut off. Following that--

A low, thunderous growl. A growl Scott knew all too terribly well.

A moment passed in which he was glad Doody's apartments were underground and had no windows. Then, something huge and heavy slammed full force against the house. Glass from upstairs shattered. Everything shook.

"Oh no," Ingrid moaned.

"*What is that?*" Varion screamed. He and Dixon were clutching each other.

The house was slammed into again. Some of Doody's books toppled from their shelves. Dust fell in a mist as something tremendous pounded onto the floor above.

"It's an ogre," Scott said. The sound of furniture being smashed made his heart begin to race.

"*There's an ogre in the HOUSE?*" Varion screamed.

No one answered. The footsteps that pounded on the floor overhead were more than answer enough.

The dambuhala had come to Bowershim.

Part Three: Crest

XI. Scourge

"This way," Doody said, shuffling back into the sitting room, "this way."

He was the only one who did not walk with his eyes fixed on the ceiling. This Scott was able to tell when he spared a glance at the man. A glance was all he *could* spare, for at that same moment he heard Ingrid begin to cry. Her arms were clutched around his waist.

"What are we going to do?" she muttered--and then screamed as the ogre let out another long, ululating howl.

Doody swept his cane unmistakable command for silence. Too late. The whole house began to shake anew as the ogre's enormous feet pounded towards the entrance to the cellar. A flight of steps on the far end of Doody's sitting room led straight to it. Scott looked at them, and remembered how the ogre at Ingrid's house in Norwalk had gotten itself trapped in the basement. The stairs had broken under its weight.

"We need to leave," he said to Doody. "Like right now."

"My dear boy, I could not agree with you more."

But he wasn't making his way towards the street exit. He lurched to the gramophone instead, next to which was a crude wooden crate. He instructed Scott to open it.

An ancient rifle lay inside. Its stock was wrapped in filthy cloth. The bolt handle was rusted.

"A kickshellac," Doody said. "You must take it--"

The cellar door exploded off of its hinges. Splinters of wood skittered like insects over the stairs.

"*My God!*" Ingrid shrieked.

Scott seized the gun. He knew next to nothing about firearms but there was no time to consider the issue. The ogre was breathing behind him as it made its way down the steps. One of the stringboards gave away with a hard *crack!* that brought a howl of surprise from the beast.

Ingrid and Dixon ran to the other side of the room. Scott helped Varion as best he could with a limping Doody. They reached the door but Dixon, in a panic, was having trouble with the chain. His fingers clawed and shook at the knob.

"*It's stuck!*" he gibbered. "*I can't get it I can't get it oh fuck oh Jesus!*"

Scott held his weapon up to Doody. "How do I use this!"

The man did not look disposed to answer at first. He was clutching his chest, his breathing coming in hoarse, dry gasps. "Pull the bolt back and drop it into the notch," he got out.

Scott grabbed the bolt-handle--and froze.

The ogre, too tall for the environment it now occupied, was hunched over him. Its yellow eyes hovered in the gloom not more than ten feet away. Coated with thick, black hair, its body cast a lumpish shadow on the wall that seemed to dance in the candlelight with a life of its own.

"Shoot it!" Varion cried

But fear of the monstrosity held Scott in place. When it reached for him he screamed and dropped the kickshellac. When it lifted him off the floor he screamed again. Its mouth opened. Through his panic, Scott could smell its breath, its sweat--it was the same abhorrent smell that had been hanging over the town all afternoon.

Higher and higher up he went. Scott's panic was like being under dirty water--cold blackness pressed through his every pore, making his heart race, his body shiver. A muffled, distant voice from the surface shouted a warning that he was about to have his head bitten off. Nothing could be done about it. The ogre's hairy hands were squeezing his ribs, making it near impossible to draw breath. Hot, foul air from its gullet baked his eyeballs. Something sharp and wet touched his neck--

And the cellar shook with a heavy explosion.

Scott heaved a deep breath of air as he was dropped to the floor. The sound of splattering liquid came from nearby, accompanied by a series of raspy, choking coughs. He saw the beast topple into the gramophone, smashing it to pieces. Its arms were clutched to its throat. It fell to its knees, and then flat onto the floor.

Scott blinked. He sat up. His hands felt round his neck. It was still attached to his body, a fact for which he was most grateful. But what had happened to the ogre?

Ingrid got to his side within seconds. Was he hurt? Was there blood anywhere? Had the monster bitten him? Nothing she said was coherent, but Scott assured her as best he could that no permanent damage had been done.

Not to him at least. Rupert Doody was another matter. He had collapsed to his knees, the kickshellac he had fired moments earlier gone from his hand. His other hand--the one affected by the disease--was pressed to his chest. He tottered for a moment, and pitched forward before anybody could react. The sound of his heavy head hitting the floor caused Dixon and Varion to fly to his aid.

He was choking for air as they turned him over. Nobody could understand why at first. His neck began to turn blue; his eyes flickered upward, showing their whites.

"*What's wrong, Mister Doody!*" Dixon shouted hysterically. "*Talk to us please! PLEASE!*"

But Doody was beyond talking. Scott, still grappling with the shock he had received, wondered if shrapnel from the kickshellac had somehow pierced his throat, cutting off his breathing. His eyes scanned the floor for blood. There was none.

Meanwhile Doody continued to die. The last of his consciousness was trickling away. He gasped in a quick, dry breath before going completely still.

"*What do we do!*" Dixon screamed through flowing tears.

And then Ingrid, through tears of her own, told them. "*He's prone!*" she screamed. "*Lift him up! Get him into a sitting position! NOW!*" she shrieked, when nobody moved.

Varion grabbed one arm--Dixon, the other. Together they hoisted his torso forward. Ingrid grabbed a pillow from the couch and was able to get it behind his head before he was set against the wall. Now Doody resembled a drunkard passed out in an alley. His legs were splayed; his arms were limp at his sides. But he was drawing breath again--clean, deep gasps of it.

Everyone waited. Scott had forgotten about the ogre, though its smell permeated the cellar, and the sounds of ruckus from outside were still present. At last Doody blinked and looked around. His lip quivered.

"So that," he rasped, "is what it's like to be able-bodied. I feel so...so *alive*." His chest began to hitch again, but when Ingrid jumped a little he waved her off. "Quite all right, my dear. I haven't laughed in so long." His head turned towards the ogre. "Is the beast dead? I believe the bullet struck its throat."

Scott rose and walked to the ogre. Its huge black body was motionless. A puddle of dark blood did indeed spread from its neck. He gave its upper arm a tentative kick, ready to leap away should it reach for him. When it didn't, he placed his boot against the side of its head and pushed, so its face came away from the floor. Two sightless yellow eyes came into view. Its mouth, rife with jagged fangs, hung in a silent scream. Pieces of flesh lay everywhere in a muck of tacky blood.

"It's dead," Scott heard himself say.

Minutes later Varion and Dixon were helping Doody up the basement steps. The steps were splintered in places, and one of the stringboards was almost broken in two, but everyone made it to the top. The lower floor of Doctor Bowershim's house reeked of the dead ogre's scent. Scott stepped in something that squished as he tried to feel his way through the darkness; on the instant he knew what it was.

"That fucker shit on the floor."

"Scott," Ingrid scolded from somewhere, "not now."

She was right. They needed to find a place for Rupert Doody to rest. His heart, he explained to them not long after Scott's inspection of the dead beast, was healthier than his body, but only just. He then asked to be taken upstairs, away from the corpse. This level wasn't high enough, however. Even without proper lighting Scott felt certain of that. A hole gaped in the wall where the ogre had broken through. Beyond was the street, which had gone eerily quiet over the last ten minutes. Scott didn't know what that meant. All he knew was they were still vulnerable here.

They got Doody up another flight (after a stop in the kitchen for the deterging of Scott's shoes) to a half-landing when something that should have been obvious from the start occurred to him. "Is Doctor Bowershim in the house?" he asked.

"On vacation," Doody replied. "A golfing trip in the gulf."

"They have *golf* in this region?"

Doody gave him a look. "They have it in the progressive?"

"That reminds me of a joke," Varion said. "What's the most dangerous thing in the skies?"

Scott smiled. "What?"

"A doctor flying a Beechcraft Bonanza."

Everyone laughed except Doody, who only looked puzzled. He directed them to the house's master bedroom. It was at the very end of a long hallway. Inside were three ornate candelabras, which Varion set about lighting once Doody was propped in a large, canopied bed. Ingrid closed the door and locked it.

"Does anybody know what time it is?" Dixon wondered aloud.

"Barely nine-thirty," Ingrid told him. "I saw a clock downstairs."

"Wow is that all? This is going to be a long night."

Scott went to the nearest window and peered out. The scene beyond was not encouraging. A girl's body lay in the middle of the intersection, her form little more than a bundle of rags. The scream she had died with was still fixed upon her face. Her party dress, once white, was splattered with red. It looked like one of the ogres had taken a very large bite out of her torso. Beside her, undamaged, a pink ribbon--one that he recognized--fluttered in a breeze.

"Scott?" Ingrid said from behind him.

He turned to shoo her back--he didn't want her to see. Her eyes were too quick for him though. They found the dead girl, and the dark circles beneath them seemed to grow even darker. Ingrid's lip quivered. She laid her head against Scott's chest, saying nothing.

"Look away," he pleaded.

"No," she said, "I don't think I can do that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm here to stop all of this from happening. I have to look. I have to see..."

A flood of tears washed her words away. Scott brought her in closer, bearing her body up. A mere hour ago, the girl in the street had been alive and happy, playing with her friends at a party in the celebration of love. In one fell swoop, that party had come to a very bloody end. It brought all the doubts back in a suffocating rush. What chance did they have fighting a thousand monsters like the one that lay dead in the apartment below? He was a man who worked a terrible job in a grocery store meat department; she was a high school dropout. What they were attempting was nothing short of ridiculous. They couldn't win. But for Doody's teachings, which were intangible at the kindest, they had no weapons to fight with.

And of course the monsters were just part of the challenge. Woodward Cambridge, the conductor of all the madness, was still waving his baton from some hellish pedestal in his castle on Coldfrock Lake. This at least was how Scott had come to imagine him. The lunatic vampire who sipped on the blood of young virgins. And speaking of lunatics, there was also Nancy Semeska, sister of Cambridge and wicked stepmother of Ingrid. Was she now a conspirator in her brother's crusade for a policed society? It seemed so. In fact it was a safe bet she was in the region at this very moment, assisting with the reorganization of his forces. Fortifying him with a strange power that was even more potent than Lisa's.

As Ingrid continued to weep, Scott's mind went back to his time in the Huron County jail. Less than a week had passed since then, but it already felt like years ago. Lisa had broken him out with something she called pouting jennies--grotesque, disembodied female heads that floated from place to place like Kongming lanterns from a fever dream. They were harmless, Lisa had kept insisting. Harmless--yet they had reduced the police on duty that night to jabbering circus clowns.

Weak magic...that?

Nancy's, he'd been told, was stronger. More deadly.

"Scott?"

He lifted his head to see Dixon standing next to him, his face flickering in the gloom.

"There are three more bedrooms off the hall if you and Ingrid want to use one. Varion and I will take turns sitting with Mr. Doody tonight." His mouth came open to say something more, but then he noticed the girl in the street. "Oh my *god*," he whispered.

Scott thanked him best as he was able. Ingrid's head was now buried in his chest. He knelt and lifted her off the floor, curving his arm behind her knees. Her head came to rest on his shoulder as if she no longer possessed the strength to raise it.

It was still dark when he awoke.

Blinking, he sat up to survey the small guest room he and Ingrid were in. A candle flickered on the nightstand. Next to it, a golden pocket-watch ticked. Everything seemed tranquil. Yet he had not meant to fall asleep, and cursed himself as his hand reached for the watch. It was one-ten in the morning.

Slow, so as not to disturb Ingrid, Scott slithered from under the counterpane. His PJs consisted of a light shirt and cotton pants, and the room felt chilly despite the season. This minor annoyance meant nothing next to what waited in the hall. The smell of the dead ogre had wafted up the stairs, and was more pungent than ever. Cupping a hand over his mouth, Scott turned to the door of the master bedroom. He opened it a crack, saw Varion look up at him suddenly, then slipped inside while pulling it closed again.

Doody was sleeping on the bed. Dixon, also asleep, was sprawled over a nearby chair.

"How is he?" Scott asked, looking at the odd lumps beneath Doody's quilt.

"He fell asleep about two hours ago," Varion replied. "Everything seems okay at the moment. We just have to make sure his head stays propped up." He gave Scott a small smile. "Your girlfriend was pretty keen to see that. I think we got his airway open with about ten seconds to spare."

"She reads a lot."

"Dixon too. We first met Mr. Doody on a bridge outside of town. He was throwing food to the fish in the river. After that encounter Dixon wanted to remember everything he'd ever read about Joseph Merrick."

Scott's eyes returned to the man snoring on the bed. His knowledge of Joseph Merrick--England's famous Elephant Man--came mostly from old photographs. There was no denying the resemblance between the two men.

"Maybe they're related," he said.

"I doubt it. Merrick's relatives have been traced all over England. But I'm willing to believe it's the same illness that's ravaged them both. You know what's funny?"

Scott placed himself on the edge of the bed. "Tell me. I could use a laugh."

"Not that kind of funny. But Dixon and I"--he stopped here for a moment, smiling at Doody--"we've been in the region for what? Five months now. And never once did we consider the turmoil it's in. We knew about Woodward Cambridge of course. And the dambuhala. But Bowershim had never been touched by any of it until tonight."

"Weren't the locals worried?"

Varion shook his head. "I don't think so. Even with its proximity to Coldfrock, Bowershim is small. No one could imagine Cambridge being interested in it. It just has the one doctor. And a hatchery."

"The dambuhala don't care about what's serviceable. They go where the food is."

"Is it true Cambridge doesn't have control of them anymore?"

"Yes," Scott answered, though he had no real proof of this. The idea of anybody controlling the ogres seemed too ridiculous to consider. He couldn't figure out how in God's name the madman had worked out the idea to summon them in the first place. On the one hand, there was the infantry--soldiers armed with kickshellacs marching from town to town, enforcing the ideals of a new order. On the other, there were the ogres--savage, bloodthirsty creatures which could in no way be related to anything administrative. The two factions could not be less alike. How did Cambridge feel they could be used together in an equation?

"...I don't think so, at least," Varion opined.

Scott looked at him. "I'm sorry, I got lost in my thoughts for a bit. What don't you think?"

"A revolution," the other repeated. "It will never work. I don't mean you and Ingrid," he added, raising his hand, "I'm speaking in strict reference to the indigenous. How could they rise up in battle against Cambridge when all they know is love and compassion and harmony?" A harsh laugh leaped from his throat. "Jesus it's like the nineteen-sixties here. Maybe we should just sail over to Cambridge's castle and tell him to peace the fuck out."

"Nuclear disarmament," Scott agreed, smirking. "You bring the incense, Varion, and I'll bring the prayer beads."

"Did you clean your shoes, by the way?"

"Yep. In the kitchen, remember?"

"Good man. Can't be spreading stink around. How did you meet Ingrid?"

Scott lifted his head, startled.

The look on his face made Varion grin. "You're a very cute couple. I'm curious."

"I was a senior in high school. She was still a freshman at the time. It was love at first sight."

"For you or for her?"

"Me."

Varion was silent for a moment. "Well she loves you back now," he informed. "It's in the way she stands next to you. She's proud of you. I don't especially like pride but when it comes to love I don't think a girl can help it."

"You're not--"

"I *know* I'm not a girl, Scott. But I sure know how girls think and how they feel."

"I wasn't going to say that. I was going to ask if you're proud of Dixon."

It was a long time before Varion's answer came. His eyes settled over the still snoring Doody, as if the sleeping man's mouth might fall open and impart some of his own wisdom on the subject.

"No," he said at last, never once looking at Scott as he spoke. "No. I'm very pleased with Dixon. *Very* pleased. But pride is being pleased and acting superior for the fact. I've been in this region too long to feel superior. The natives have no concept of it--or didn't, until Cambridge came along."

"The region didn't change you," Scott said. "Your contempt of pride is part of what got you over here in the first place."

There was silence between them as the other man considered this. He was still looking at Doody, but Scott wasn't sure he was seeing him at the moment. "Maybe you're right. I know when Dixon and I are together it's like all of our strengths and weaknesses are being shared. As if we're one person instead of two."

"I think that's the way it's supposed to be."

Varion's head turned. "Is that the way you feel with Ingrid?"

"Yes. But there is also this urge to shield her. To shelter her. She would laugh if I told her that, but I can't help it."

"She wouldn't laugh," Varion replied, with gentle sureness in his voice. "She knows that about you and she appreciates it. That, Scott, is part of what got *you* here."

"I only wish I were doing a better job of it so far." He was thinking of his failure with the ogre as he spoke--the way he'd frozen in panic with the kickshellac in his hand, and almost died for it.

It was doubtless Varion could read these thoughts, but bless him, he wouldn't reinforce the guilt. "I think your heart is going to overcome whatever shortcomings you think you have, Scott. You're here because you love Ingrid. You'd suffer and die for her. I know that because you can't be in love with someone any other way. It's impossible. If you can't die for your love then it's not love at all."

Scott felt his self-reproach for what had happened in the basement lift a little. After all, Varion was probably right. Didn't he feel those very things every time he looked into Ingrid's brown eyes, or saw her sitting on the edge of the bed with her legs crossed, or listened to the light, musical sound of her voice? It was a plea of no contest.

"Thanks, Varion," he said.

"I speak only to remind the wanderer of what he already knows."

"Would you like to get some sleep? I'll watch after Mister Doody and Ingrid."

He stayed awake until five, every so often looking into the next room to check on Ingrid. The hallway smell of the ogre's rotting corpse remained persistent, killing whatever urge he might have had to sneak downstairs to the kitchen for something to eat. He supposed Doctor Bowershim would need to fumigate when he returned from his golfing trip. Hell, he needed to fumigate right now, provided the cause wasn't lost already.

Also lingering about the house, though in a way far less indelicate, was a rather mystifying silence. Scott found himself walking to the window again and again as the hours ticked by, half expecting to hear another bloody scream from the next block, or another ravenous howl from the sidewalk below. Yet for the stirrings of the occasional light breeze, no sounds came. What he kept finding instead, each time he went to the glass, was the third constant of the night: the ragged remains of the dead girl.

He couldn't help but wonder about her. Had she run to this street during the attack with the hope of finding the four people she'd seen pass by earlier? Had she been crying desperate, panicked tears while searching for a light, for a promise of sanctuary, in one of the windows? They were pointless, painful questions that did him no good. Scott also came to believe, during those quiet hours, that the ogre in the basement had been the one that killed the girl. How he hoped that Doody's bullet hurt. Hurt like hell.

At five-o'clock Dixon relieved him. Scott went back to Ingrid's bed and lay down until eight, at which time he awoke from a light doze to find himself alone under the covers. He pulled the covers back--

And the smell attacked.

"Oh *fuck*," he breathed out, cupping a hand over his mouth.

He got dressed in a flash. In the hall, the stench had escalated to the point where breathing was nigh impossible. Scott dashed into the master bedroom, prepared to apologize for opening the door, only to discover it had been abandoned. Crumpled sheets hung over the side of the bed. A snuffed candle sat frozen in dried wax.

Holding a deep breath, he went back to the hallway. As he did so Ingrid came to the top of the stairs. Her mouth and nose were wrapped under a piece of white cloth.

"I was just coming up to see if you'd asphyxiated on me," she said.

"Not quite," he coughed back.

They ran outside to the street, where a sunny, humid morning awaited. Scott was sure the air would be cleaner here, and it was--to a degree. Nevertheless a faint scent of sewage and rotting meat hung over all the land. Ingrid led him to the alley they had used the night before.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"At the park. Helping with clean-up."

"Clean-up?"

She wouldn't elaborate. There turned out to be good reason. The smell at the mouth of the alley struck with the same fervor as it had back at the house. Sprawled over a curb lay the body of a young man. One of his arms had been torn off, along with the lower halves of both legs. His face was bloated and purple, cooking in the hot sun. Two eyes were popping out of his head like eggs left to boil for too long in a pot of rancid water.

Scott felt Ingrid's arm curl around his waist. "Sorry," she said, "I should have braced you for that. But it gets worse."

A mere cast of his gaze clarified her warning. The park, which less than twelve hours ago had been a scene of festivity and love, now looked like the aftermath of a plane crash. Bodies were strewn in twisted, tortured poses. None were whole. Streaks of tacky blood matted the grass. Scott stepped sideways to avoid a thick clotting of it, felt something hard under his boot, and looked down to see a lady's hand--a ring still on one of the fingers--clawing at him for redemption. Nearby was something that reminded him of Lisa's pouting jennies: a mop of long, gnarled brown hair with no body to go with it. Except this was no supernatural entity conjured from another world. This was someone's head, torn off at the shoulders.

"Let's go to the bandstand?" Ingrid suggested. "You look like you need to sit down. And even if you don't, I do."

"I believe we've all done enough mulling about at the bandstand for one morning," a dry, twangy voice chimed from the left.

Feeling greener by the moment, Scott turned his head to find a tall, lean man walking over the grass. He looked like every stereotype of every middle-aged southern gentleman from every book and movie ever made. His suit was white, his boots were black, and his face was red. A white mustache, complemented by a neat goatee, decorated the skin around his mouth. Resting on his head was a clean and tidy Boss of the Plains hat. A bolo tie with silver finding hung from the collar of his shirt. Behind his shoulder, slung western-style, rested a kickshellac.

"The boys are over at Farraday's," he said to Ingrid, "trying to manage a little breakfast. If they do it then they're tougher'n I am." His eyes peered at the dead. "God damned sons of bitches tore through here like a bunch of wild dogs."

Ingrid took a moment to make introductions. "Scott, this is Lon Kolk. We met him at the bandstand about an hour ago. Mr. Kolk this is Scott Bremman."

"How you doin' son?" he asked as they shook hands. "Stupid question, I know. I own a tanning business here in town. I wasn't invited to the wedding. God damned good thing, wouldn't you say?"

Farraday's turned out to be a cafe-restaurant on the opposite side of Bowershim. Walking there was not pleasant (there were more casualties along the way, with mourners weeping uncontrolled tears), but seeing Varion, Dixon, and Doody again was. The former two greeted Scott with hugs and smiles, while Rupert Doody invited him to sit down and put some coffee and bread into his belly. Scott accepted the offer with extreme caution, not knowing how the body that had nearly been eaten alive the night before would react to food. What few other diners that were in the restaurant with them seemed to harbor similar shadows of distress. Nary a whisper was spoken between them as they picked at their breakfasts. The women all had red eyes; the men looked drugged.

"Well," Doody said from his seat across the table, "the sun has come up again. I would say that's the one decent thing this morning has given us."

"How are you feeling?" Scott asked.

"My heart is performing its proper duties at the moment. It just feels a great deal heavier."

"Rupert, I'm going to go have a talk with Trina for a few minutes," Kolk said. "Please excuse me." With that, he tipped his hat at the rest of them and was gone.

"Trina Farraday is the owner of this restaurant," Doody explained. "She and Mr. Kolk are well acquainted."

"Oh," said Scott, chewing. "He probably wants to make sure she's okay."

"Perhaps. But next to Doctor Bowershim they are the two most influential people in this town. It is more likely they are discussing the wherewithal of your departure."

Ingrid, Varion, and Dixon had also sat down. Scott glanced at them for a moment. He felt nonplussed by what Doody had said.

"Our departure? Why should they care about that?"

"Scott there have been some people talking about us already," Ingrid cut in before the other could answer. "It seems the residents of Bowershim are blaming us for...well, for what happened last night."

Scott had been about to sip his coffee--now he dropped his arm in disbelief. The mug struck the table. "Oh come on."

"Nobody's angry," Dixon insisted, "at least not with us. But they're connecting your arrival with that of the dambuhala."

"And while I can't prove anything, I think the man who tied up our niddi had a little bit to do with that," Ingrid added. "He got a good look at us when we rode in."

"He was also one of the few who was still sober," Scott mused. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I don't get it--doesn't everyone in the region know by now that Woodward Cambridge is attempting a takeover?"

"Ssst!" Varion broke in. "Don't say his name so loud, Scott. They know all right, and there's a lot of ill will. If someone overhears you talking about him you could be mistaken for one of his agents."

Scott made a face at him. "Don't be stupid!"

"I'm not being stupid," Varion said, bristling at the remark. "But in case you hadn't noticed, there are children dead outside. I talked to a woman earlier whose six-year old daughter got mauled. The daughter is still alive, but her face is never going to look right again."

Doody thumped his cane on the floor. "That's enough," he told them. "Gentlemen--and lady, especially lady--our time this morning would be better spent in review of what is known so far and what actions must be taken in return." His eyes rested on Ingrid. "You have my notebook?"

"I do."

"Very good. Mister Bremman?"

Scott looked at him. "Yes?"

"What do we know so far? Tell us."

"What do we *know*?" He was finally beginning to lose his temper. Since arriving in Bowershim, Scott had so far been: drenched in beer by a group of drunken party-goers; almost eaten alive by a giant monster from another world; camped for long hours at a window over a dead child in the street; and now accused—or so it seemed—of instigating the very atrocities on the region he was hoping to put a stop to. "What do we *know*?" he said again. "Mister Doody, forgive me, but we know...Christ, *nothing*."

"If that is your belief, then you haven't been paying very close attention to the events in motion around you. Considering your responsibility in the matter, I find that prospect rather terrifying."

Scott gritted his teeth.

"Mister Bremman," Doody continued, his voice softening, "please, don't be angry just now."

"That's my job anyway," Ingrid put in.

"It serves you no purpose. Bring your thoughts together and tell me what you find."

Scott closed his eyes, opened them, and unknotted his hands. A deep breath filled his lungs. "Okay. We know that a man named Woodward Cambridge"--his eyes shifted

briefly to Varion--"wants very much to...take control of the region. Establish a militia. Govern it. He has employed armies to march from town to town and conduct seizures."

Doody's lip quivered in that way he had of trying to smile. "Interesting choice of vocabulary."

"He has also summoned monsters. The dambuhala. I don't know why, and believe me, I've wondered. Maybe they're supposed to be a scare tactic. Or maybe Cambridge felt that his armies weren't large enough."

"Or maybe their purpose was to eviscerate the countryside," Dixon brought out, "while the soldiers focused on the villages." He paused and then shook his head. "If that's the case then man Cambridge sure fucked it up."

"Or maybe Mister Cambridge is simply insane," Doody said. "You are wise to question this facet of his plan, Scott, but indeed, we cannot know for certain what was going through his mind at the time of that...most unfortunate decision. That mystery is best left to rest for now. So then!" Everyone jumped as Doody's cane hit the floor again. "Those are the facts. And now, Miss Felton, if you would please review for us what needs to be done."

"First and foremost?" she asked, reaching over the table to take Scott's hand. "The dambuhala need to be put back. A gateway to their native region can be opened with..." she shrugged her shoulders "...heartfelt hatred. I hope. I seem to have that kind of hatred inside of me. I never actually feel it," she insisted, "but I guess it's there."

"And how will you call forth this hatred?" Doody wanted to know.

"I am going to remember the way I used to feel about myself. They way I sometimes still do." She laughed. "There, I lied. I feel the hatred. But not the way Jo-Jo used to."

"The imaginary friend from your childhood."

"That's her. The best way to breach another region is during sleep, in a lucid dream. When I reach this state, I can bring Jo-Jo through the Carlson Glass. She will be the one to open the gateway."

"She is you and you are she," Doody intoned. "Is there anything else?"

"Oh yes," Scott intruded. His patience was still on edge, and he felt willing to risk the reputation of his manners against the cavalier approach the group was taking towards its case this morning. "We still don't know where Cambridge was when he brought the ogres across in the first place. Remember that locations are just as important as emotions here. And please," he added, "leave us not forget the other two villains in this Kafkaesque drama: Nancy and Randy."

Everyone regarded him in silence, which was even more frustrating.

"We're not playing a game of checkers here, people," he pressed on, mystified by their behavior. "We can't just jump over pieces on a board and take them away. And you can thump your cane all you want!" he snapped at Doody.

"Scott!" Ingrid cried.

"But there are a thousand monsters running around loose in this region that like to slaughter people and eat them raw! There's the fat-cat lunatic who set them free! And then there's the fat-cat lunatic's even more lunatic sister and her moron of a son who might just be helping him in any way they see fit!"

Customers at the other tables were looking at them now. Some had started to whisper. Scott didn't care. The saccharine-flavored politics of the region-dwellers were doing a whole lot of nothing against Cambridge's siege. Smiles, empathy, and love had not saved Bowershim, nor any of the other towns the ogres had eviscerated. It was maybe time for them to start fomenting their culture with headier spices.

"I think that 'the lunatic sister' as you call her is indeed in the region at this moment," said Doody. He had stared, unblinking, at Scott through his entire outburst. "But not her son. I can think of no way for a man as loathsome as Miss Felton described yesterday to cross the interstice."

Scott shrugged. "All right, so it's Nancy we need to worry about, on top of what's already on our plate. That's still plenty. And I don't think discussing it like a bunch of old ladies at a tea party is respectful enough."

"We're keeping our heads," Varion said coolly.

"Most of us are, anyway," Dixon added.

Ingrid squeezed Scott's hand. "I'm hoping my mom can help with Nancy somehow," she said. "She told me we would rendezvous at Horseshoe Bay--if she makes it."

"And you have her journal waiting even if she doesn't?" Doody asked.

"Maybe. And maybe there'll be something in it to use against Nancy. And maybe there won't."

As she finished speaking Lon Kolk came back to the table. It saved them all another outburst from Scott, who had heard the word *maybe* enough times on this journey to last into middle-age. Standing with Kolk was a short, round woman dressed in cook's whites. Her face wore no expression, but Scott could sense a kind of measured contempt about the heavy lids of her eyes. Kolk introduced her as Trina Farraday before dropping the request Doody had already suspected was coming.

"Everyone knows it's not your fault," Kolk kept insisting, though to judge by the flat tone of his voice it was hard for Scott to know if he indeed believed this was true. "But Bowershim is going to want to forget about what happened last night. The sooner the better. And Miss Felton, I say this to you and your gentleman only: The longer the two of you stay here, the more difficult forgetting's going to be."

"When would you like us gone?" Scott gritted out.

"Trina has agreed to restock your provisions. She can have you ready to push on by noon."

"Lovely."

Kolk looked at him for a moment before seating himself at the neighboring table. "Son, try to understand our position."

"I think I understand it just fine. You want to lie low and ignore what's going on in the region rather than do something about it."

"That's not true, son. We intend to do everything necessary to get Bowershim past what happened. What concerns me the most is how it's going to begin."

"How is *what* going to begin, Mister Kolk?"

"The healing, son."

"The healing won't begin until the cause of the hurt is destroyed. You're bailing out water without first sealing the leak."

The remark struck a target somewhere. Kolk jerked a little in his seat before answering. "Well you're goddamned right we're bailing out water. Otherwise we're going to sink."

"A temporary fix is a temporary reprieve, Mister Kolk. I would rather stop things at the source."

"Then you go right on ahead," Kolk said curtly. "I suppose you're blessed with the time. I'm going to stay here and help Trina distribute free meals to anybody in Bowershim who needs one. A doctor from another village is on her way to assist with our wounded. Bodies need to be buried, blood needs to be mopped, repairs need to be made. There are at least five children on the square right now who no longer have parents or a place to live. One little girl six years old was bawling her eyes out for her daddy. I didn't know how the hell to tell her that he'd been killed by one of her monsters from under the bed."

The old man looked tired; he rose from his chair on unsteady legs. "But go on, son," he said down at Scott. "Patch your leak. We'll try and keep the ship afloat while you do so. Healings do begin with crusades, sometimes. But more often they begin with an intense desire to stop the pain that people are in--to stop it right *now*. That's what I feel for Bowershim and that's what I'm going to give it."

"We'll go," Ingrid jumped in. "Noon is fine."

Kolk made no reply for a number of seconds. He and Farraday continued to stare at Scott, in that moment looking nothing at all like the kind strangers the region was known for. "All right then," he conceded. "Leave your bags here so Trina can stock them. Trina?"

The large woman made a faint nod, then both of them turned on their heels like a couple of cadets in a military review, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Once they were gone, Varion began to clap his hands slowly and heavily. "Bravo, Bremman," he said. "Take a bow."

XII. Squid

Two adventurers had ridden into Bowershim, four were leaving.

This thought repeated itself in Ingrid Felton's mind as they rode out of town. Her heart was not in it. Despite the cool, matter-of-fact way she had been able to recite her plan to Doody at the breakfast table, it was hard to feel confident about their chances.

It was a case of too many question marks. How, and where, was she supposed to fall asleep so the lucid dream Doody had placed so much emphasis upon could be induced? What would happen if she *couldn't* induce such a dream? Ingrid had read enough about lucid dreams to know they required skill and patience and practice. Was there enough time for her to learn? And even if there was, what if she were to go into the demesne of her own head, conjure up the Carlson Glass, summon Jo-Jo...and then find the entity unwilling to cooperate? Very few details about Jo-Jo remained in Ingrid's memory; she was a ghost from another time, a ghost who had never been real to begin with. The memories that *did* remain were all negative. Could she really be counted on as an ally?

Her friends were also aware of these issues. She had pointed them out not long after leaving Bowershim. Scott, who was still grumpy over his encounter with Lon Kolk, could provide little comfort off the top of his head, but did agree her doubts were deserving of deep consideration. Varion and Dixon seemed to be distracted by the fact they were striking out into the region for the first time in five months. They rode their niddi in relative silence, sometimes pointing to things on the roadside that interested them: a wooden house built in the treetops of a chestnut lane; a woman strumming a gittern by a covered bridge.

Distracted or no, Ingrid felt grateful to have two extra men riding with her on this journey. She was going to need all the help she could get. In Bowershim, Varion and Dixon had been adamant about obtaining another pair of niddi so as to accompany her and Scott to Horseshoe Bay. Ingrid hadn't pressed them as to why, though she had her suspicions. They wanted to help defend the place they had come to think of as home.

The breeze remained steady as afternoon slipped closer to evening. Dandelion seeds played over the road, some landing in the trees, others catching stronger currents to more distant places. None of the men seemed inclined to talk. Ingrid looked at her map again and guessed they would reach Horseshoe Bay sometime next morning.

The prospect of seeing her true birthplace after so many years of lies and rejections had been an interesting one from the start. And as her mind toyed with it, Ingrid felt her interest blossoming into something brighter and more colorful. Eager to forget her doubts for awhile, she let it come. What would the bay look like? At her kitchen table, Lisa had described two large homes gone to ruin atop a cliff-face. A trail, she went on to say, led up that cliff-face from the water. In her mind's eye Ingrid could already see it. Artist that she was, the vision made her want to paint, or at the very least find some charcoal to sketch with.

It made her want to do something else as well. Her eye went to Scott. He was riding with his head down. The brim of his hat cast a shadow on his eyes. His face was coarse with stubble--just the way she liked it. The sun had given his arms, which were strong from his time working with meat butchers, a light tan. The niddy's reign was clutched in his gloved hands. Ingrid also wore gloves--white, lacey ones that matched the dress she had on. She took off her pink flowered hat and ran her fingers through her hair, lifting it so the sun's rays could find their way to her scalp. She arched her back and took a deep breath.

"Everything all right?" Scott asked, his voice sounding deeper than usual.

A smile that must have been very odd to see rose to Ingrid's lips. Scott smiled back, though his face was quizzical. Ingrid kept staring without knowing why this hunger had come upon her. Horseshoe Bay couldn't be the sole reason. But whatever the case, it was undeniable that Scott Wesley Bremman was beginning to look like a meal spread on a table for her--a meal she wanted to devour like a tigress.

"You're in trouble when the sun goes down, Mister," she told him.

The quizzical expression turned to worry. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. You did something very right."

They camped that night in a cemetery set back on a grassy slope. An iron fence surrounded it, but the gate was not locked. A single, ancient-looking mausoleum, its windows dark, overlooked the headstones. Most of these stones were mossy and illegible. Broken angel wings lay half-buried in the grass. Wreaths of dead flowers rattled in the wind.

They shared a light meal, then Varion and Dixon, no doubt wanting to be alone for reasons similar to Ingrid's, wandered off after securing the niddi. Shadows cast by the trees soon enveloped them, leaving the rest of the slope to its two remaining, living occupants.

"Let's go?" Ingrid said.

"Where to?"

She cast her eyes about the stones with an appetite in full caper now that the banquet was so near. Near one was what looked to be a small dogwood tree. Pleased by the flower petals alighting like birds from its boughs, she led him over by the hand.

They unpacked their bags. Scott was able to anchor one of the blankets using a few rocks he found in a nearby pile of rubble. As he went about this task, Ingrid took off her hat. She unlaced her gloves, and then her boots.

Scott rose, dusting off his hands. Barefooted, Ingrid approached him. A sudden, stronger gust of wind infiltrated her hair, so its locks were dancing in a fiery waltz as she put her hands on his shoulders, stood on tip-toe, and kissed him deeply. Two strong arms took her waist, bearing her up.

"My dress," she plumed, swaying a little on her feet.

He unbuttoned the back of it. It fell all the way to the naval, allowing the night breeze access to her delicate skin. Nice, but not enough. Ingrid paused to unfasten her brassiere, then let that fall too, freeing her breasts. But before Scott could reach for them, she opened his shirt, so upon turning around her back came in contact with his

bare skin. Scott was now able to reach around her body with his hands, which he did eagerly, lifting the breasts from her ribs as her lungs seized another deep breath.

Ingrid opened the belt of her dress. She then made her way upward to seek one of Scott's hands and lead it back under the light fabric of her underwear. Feeling his touch over the wetness of her sex caused her knees to buckle, but he caught her up with his other arm while two of his fingers plunged deep and curled backward. A cry of pleasure escaped Ingrid, and the dress fell to her ankles in a heap.

She wanted to lie down with him now. Scott eased her naked body to the blanket, where she could watch from its softness the conclusion of his undressing. Her intention was to let him love her the traditional way, but at the sight of his excited penis (it looked ready to burst at any moment) the notion of her ravishing appetite shifted to a different ideal. She motioned for him to stay on his feet whilst rising from the blanket, moving forward on her knees until the object of her hunger became all there was to see.

Ingrid reached out. As her hand came in contact with the tight, hot skin of his shaft, Scott jerked and let out a cry of his own.

"Everything all right up there?" she whispered.

His breath gushed. "Yes but I'm right on the edge, honey."

"Is that a fact? So I'm in a dangerous situation here?"

"Very, very dangerous."

"I see."

She opened her mouth and took him inside. For a moment it seemed like he was about to pull away, but the pleasure of her temerity was perhaps too absolute to decline, for in the next his hands were exploring her hair, coaxing her deeper. Ingrid took a breath and held it as the wide bulb of his cock neared the back of her throat. The taste of his skin—salt and sweat—made her want to swallow him whole, but she wasn't sure she could accomplish this feat without choking. She gave his buttocks a hefty squeeze instead, maintaining the flow of her saliva by keeping her tongue busy.

"Ingrid?" Scott gasped.

The word was both question and warning. Ingrid continued to gorge, keeping her breath held, hoping this would be answer enough.

It was. Scott's entire body stiffened. Knowing full well what it signified, Ingrid fought to hold her breath for just a little longer. She knew he desperately wanted what was coming. Yet in that moment, as the night wind gusted through the dogwood tree and the flower petals danced, Ingrid was certain she wanted it more.

Nevertheless his deluge, when it came, was violent. A viscid, salty fluid gushed over Ingrid's tongue. Her fingernails clawed. Scott's penis gave off a second jet, then a third and a fourth. Mouth now dripping, Ingrid was forced to back away, gasping air through her nose. Or rather, trying. His thick, heavy seed had found its way into her throat, blocking the passage, and it was stubborn. Swallowing hard, Ingrid tilted her head, giving Scott a reassuring smile. It helped, but not very much. She had to swallow twice more before further speech became possible.

"Oh wow," she told him, once there was sufficient breath. "That was...good, scary fun."

He laughed and knelt down. "Scary?"

"I wasn't sure how it was going to feel--which only made me want to do it all the more." She gave him a smirk.

"I'm sorry. I was pretty--"

"Oh don't you dare be sorry for that. I knew I had you under my spell and it felt good. Plus I've been wanting to tear you to pieces all day."

His head tilted. "Perhaps I can return the favor?"

"I hope so. I want to be relaxed before I fall asleep so I can practice Rupert's lucid dream technique."

"Okay," he whispered, already lifting her hair to place a number of soft kisses on the back of her neck.

They needed to wait a few minutes, but once he was ready again she turned to seize hold of his shoulder-blades. As before, the blanket beckoned. This time Ingrid accepted its embrace without a second thought. She bent her knees and opened her legs wide. Everything down there continued to function as intended; there was a tingling, throbbing sensation from every hole, as if they were in bloom for their arriving guest.

The guest came in. Ingrid's back arched. She opened her mouth. Opened, opened...she wanted everything opened for him. All of her most secret, sensitive places. It was lust--lust for the coarseness of his skin, the rugged, raspiness of his blue-collar hands. Lust for the hotness of his breath, the wideness of his chest, the firmness of his buttocks. And yes, lust for the tanned, blood-filled shaft of his cock, with the balls underneath carrying a full load of heavy ammunition.

But it was also trust. Trust that Scott, seeing and touching and tasting every part of her naked body, would not betray the hand that led him through these secret places. He would plunge them, certainly. He would leave no part of her unexplored, driven by a desire that grew stronger with each of her soft, pretty sighs. Yet it was giving, not taking, that interested him. It was pleasure, not pain, he wished to inflict. It was water and sunlight and pollen. It was the heat of a summer wind, the cool plume of an ocean mist. It was the goose bumps under a quilt on a cold and snowy day. It was a camp-fire. It was a desert rain. It was an old and favorite poem rediscovered in surprise. It was comfort. It was safety.

And finally, above all else, it was love...

Love beneath the wooden trunks of majestic things.

Expecting to see trees, Ingrid looked up. But there were no flora and fauna to greet her eye. And the trunks were not actually trunks at all. They were the beams of a giant Ferris-wheel, with gondolas of red and gold--each the size of a garden gazebo-- gliding by a platform wet from a recent rain. Faces peered at her through the windows, some smiling, others tinged with fear. One car squeaked as it passed, which seemed to set off all the rest. They began to rock gently on their hinges in a stiffening breeze.

"They're all right," someone said from behind her.

Ingrid turned to see a handsome man dressed in a white. In one gloved hand he held a cane. In the other was a top hat.

"Rupert," he proclaimed, taking a bow.

"You don't look like Rupert."

"I was teaching a girl how to see her drafting board. Showing her the colors."

As if this explained everything the man waved his cane in the air. The platform disappeared, to be replaced by long stalks of whispering green grass.

A mighty, hollow crack from high above made Ingrid forget her befuddlement at once. She looked up again. Now from about fifty yards away, the Ferris-wheel was looking back at her. It had somehow broken off its frame and taken a terrible forward list. The center badge logo at the top of the main support--CP for Cedar Point--loomed.

"Hey!" Ingrid screamed.

It was almost drowned by the screaming from the gondolas. In spite of all logic Ingrid could hear the people in them. Fists pounding on glass. Sobbing. Panicked pleas for help.

"OPEN! OPEN THE DOOR OH GOD!"

"IT'S GONNA FALL IT'S GONNA FALL!"

"WE'RE TOO HIGH! SOMEBODY GET THE LATCH!"

"Stop it," said the man with the hat. His eyes were calm, his face wearing a pleasant smile. "You're doing this, Jo-Jo."

Another crack, like thunder, from the wheel. Ingrid stumbled as the ground began to shake. A jet engine sound filled the sky. The wheel tipped, slowly at first but gaining more speed as its center of gravity shifted.

Meanwhile the pleasant man continued to reason with her. "Just understand that things like this don't happen," he insisted.

Maybe not before, but now? Oh yes. And given the angle of the wheel's trajectory, Ingrid judged--with a terrified rush of backbone tingles--that the giant CP logo was going to land smack on top of her.

She turned to run. No one stopped her--the man in white had disappeared. Screaming, Ingrid leaped fast as she could through the tall grass. The Ferris-wheel now sounded like an avalanche of steel. Its din owned the world. Unable to help herself, Ingrid looked over her shoulder. The CP logo grinned back. It was all she could see. She gasped--

And awoke.

Bright sunlight stabbed her eyes. Shielding them, she sat up. The punishing rays were coming through the trees at an angle. Early morning then. A small campfire burned nearby, giving off tufts of wood smoke. Over it hung a tin pot. *Please let that be coffee*, Ingrid thought, before casting her gaze around for Scott. He was nowhere to be seen. But for a few twittering birds in search of their breakfast, the gravestone lanes were empty.

She was about to call out when he crested a hill by the mausoleum. A towel covered the waist of his otherwise naked body, and his hair was damp. Regardless of this (and regardless of the cold corpses that lay buried everywhere), the smile on his face could not have been warmer.

"Hey there, beautiful," he chimed, stopping near the fire to reach for a cup. "Coffee?"

Ingrid returned the smile. "Magic words. Do we have any sweetener?"

"I think that Farraday woman had you pegged as a double-double kind of girl right out of the gate, yes."

"Oh god," she laughed, "don't go Canadian on me now, Scott, I've got enough regions to keep track of as it is."

The coffee steamed as the cup was placed in her hand. "That's what growing up on Lake Erie does for a fella. Culture mish-mash." His brow went up with a new thought. "Did you dream last night?"

"I did as a matter of fact. But I couldn't control it."

He put on some clothes, and she told him everything she could remember as they breakfasted on coffee and bread with hard-boiled eggs. Varion and Dixon appeared two minutes into the recounting, which obliged her to start over. Not that it mattered. The gist of the dream was easily enough painted: She'd botched it. At least on that particular try.

At the end of the story Dixon gave her a piercing look. "You know if I dreamed of a giant Ferris-wheel falling down on me I would go out of my fucking mind."

"I do a lot of drawing and painting in my spare time," Ingrid said, making sure the blanket wrapped around her was covering everything sufficiently. "That's got to be connected with how crazy the basement of my head is."

There was a brook running behind the mausoleum deep enough to bathe in. Ingrid partook in this exercise without indulgence, not liking the feel of the cold water on her skin, or the slimy mud of the bed on her feet.

They rode from the cemetery at a little before nine a.m. (Scott had thoughtfully stolen the pocket-watch from Doctor Bowershim's bedroom). By ten the road was sloping into a valley of sorts. The trees thinned out, giving way to spacious fields dotted by neat, cozy cabins. In front of one doorway two boys and a dog were playing catch with a wooden ball. The backyard of another home had laundry out, sheets billowing in a breeze that now carried the distinct scent of the lake.

That lake--Coldfrock--could be seen as a chalky blue line along the horizon. It looked bigger than Ingrid imagined, more like Lake Erie than any of Norwalk's minor bodies of water. And indeed it was. Rather than remain at rest in the distance, it began to loom as the morning wore on. The chalkiness of its color became richer and darker. The sky also grew darker. Over the past hour clouds had begun to dodge across it on a strengthening wind. Ingrid's hair lifted; the hem of her skirt flapped.

They stopped on the side of the road to pick wild strawberries. A traveler passing in the other direction told them that to reach Horseshoe Bay they would need to veer right towards Myrobalan at the next fork, then turn left at the second intersection. These instructions proved to be accurate while at the same time lacking in perspective. It took another hour to reach the fork--the niddi ambling along without a care in the world--and forty-five more minutes to arrive at the prescribed intersection. It could be guessed that straight ahead was the town of Myrobalan. To the left, a brown path led down through a sparse copse of swaying, hissing spruce trees. They chose this path, which soon dumped them onto an empty beach Ingrid guessed would attract a lot of

swimmers during better weather. But the cool wind was keeping the area's water babies indoors for today.

At the foot of the beach lay Coldfrock Lake.

How big is it exactly? Ingrid wondered. Peering over its crests, she could find no hint of an opposite shoreline. Far to the left, a faded rainbow hung from the clouds. Gulls screamed and dived around a rock-lined inlet to their right. High, frothy waves splashed the sands, where the remains of a child's castle surrendered their creator's ambition.

"Now what?" Dixon asked, shaking from his hat a light rain that had begun to fall.

Ingrid bit her lip. "My mom said there are two old houses on top of a cliff."

"I don't see any cliffs. Just water and sand."

"It looks more like an ocean than a lake," Scott said, as if from a dream. His eyes were lost among the waves.

Ingrid barely heard; it was Dixon's observation holding her attention at the moment. Where, indeed, were the cliffs Lisa had mentioned?

"Fuck," someone barked.

It broke her concentration. She frowned at Scott, but he was still looking at the water without the slightest trace of impatience for their quandary. Next to him was Varion.

"What?" he asked, all in innocence, when Ingrid's stare shifted to him.

"Did you say something?" she inquired with feigned sweetness.

"No."

"What about you?" she asked Dixon, who looked back at her in bemusement. "Well damn, maybe it was my niddy. I sensed she was starting to get an attitude. Ooh, look who's finally awake."

Scott had turned his head in her direction. The expression of bafflement on his face was not at all helpful. Stupidity and mutiny did not mix well.

"Look people!" she shouted. "This is where we were told to go! Hell, it's even on Rowena's map!" Furious now, she shrugged off her pack and began to rummage through it like a desperate girl in search of a lost homework assignment. Her hands seized the map, pulled it out—and lost it in a gale of wind that ripped it down the shoreline. "*Goddammit!*" she shrieked, watching the paper tumble towards the rocky inlet.

Her niddy took a lazy step in the opposite direction, which made her want to smack it on the ass. Instead, she jumped from the animal's saddle and gave chase on foot, her boots kicking puffs of sand.

The wind carried the map over one of the higher, more jagged rocks before forcing it down again and out of sight. Ingrid shrieked another curse. Her boots skidded to a stop. The rocks were huge. But never minding the others—and never minding her burning lungs—she climbed to them and slipped through a crevice. On the other side was a short trail.

And at the bottom of that trail, frothing like a stew in the gales, was Horseshoe Bay.

Ingrid recognized it on the instant. She also knew when she turned her head to the right, she would see the houses. There they were. The cliff they sat upon was not as

high as she'd suspected, which allowed for the rocks to conceal them from the beach. But Lisa's description had still been accurate. There was a bay, there was a trail that led from the bay (a trail Ingrid noticed even as she thought of it), and there were two large houses gone to ruin. All here, all waiting for her.

She looked back through the crevice. The others were on their way up the beach; they had dismounted and were pulling their niddi by the reins. Ingrid shouted her location.

"It's here! I've found the bay!"

They blinked at her. But she had no patience for repeating herself. Smiling now, the purloined map forgotten, Ingrid plunged down the slope on the other side of the rocks to visit Horseshoe Bay for only the second time in her life.

That night the wind died.

It made for a warm, uncomfortable sleep on a dusty wooden floor alongside a once grand staircase. Lying naked in Scott's arms, Ingrid experienced many fitful, feverish dreams, none of which she was able to control. In one, an old woman sat in a rocking chair. In another, she was back in her Norwalk bedroom, wiping tears from the faces of her dolls. Yet another had her at Nancy's dining room table at midnight, studying an archway where, she was certain, an ogre hid.

This last woke her up with a start, and now she couldn't get back to sleep. Her heart thudded for several minutes as she lay listening to Horseshoe Bay's night music: insects singing in the grass, bats squealing, the occasional hoot of an owl. She reached for Scott's watch and was surprised to discover that it nearing dawn. Her heart relaxed. Dawn; light; another day of possibilities. The dream of the ogre began to fade. If she intended to send those creatures back to their own region, she would need to exercise control over the fear they caused. But how?

The most logical and straightforward way to conquer fear, she knew, was through exposure. *Most* of the time. Yet the ogres--the dambuhala--were different.

Just a tiny bit different, yes, she thought, suppressing a laugh.

The book Rowena had loaned advised readers not to go near the beasts at all. Good advice, but not advice she could take. Yet perhaps she wouldn't need to *see* them, to *encounter* them, to drive them back. After all, she would be asleep when she opened the portal to the interstice...*if* she could manage the trick of conducting a lucid dream, and *if* she could bring Jo-Jo into that dream.

Carefully (so as not to wake Scott) she sat up. The living room was huge. On the far wall was a gaping fireplace, its black furnace cold. Crooked paintings of unsmiling landlords and landladies long dead hung over broken furniture, their features wrinkled, their eyes brooding. Ingrid wasn't worried about ghosts though. She thought it a safe bet the ruins were deserted--had been since before she'd been born.

Born...yes. She'd been born here.

She rummaged through Scott's bag for a shirt, found one and put it on. It was strange to think that this forgotten place had been the beginning of her memory. *You're like a flower growing from a grave,* Lisa had told her. Could this be what she'd meant by those words? Life sprouting from death?

To judge by the architecture, Ingrid guessed the houses owed their own beginnings to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century--that was, if the trends in this region followed a similar path to those in the progressive. The craze for Greek revival during that era could almost be compared to a sickness, or so it seemed from what Ingrid knew of the subject. One English architect she recalled reading about--Charles Cockerell--had been bewildered by its effects. But then wasn't that the way of all trends? Through tenuous, unverified arteries they came to be...and through arteries just as tenuous, just as unverified, they went. Any girl like Ingrid, who had lived as a preteen during the eighties, knew all too well the fickle nature of style.

The stuffy air which had played hob with her sleep did not diminish at the door. Ingrid looked across the water. It was still as glass this morning. Nothing moved. The sky was gray with heavy, maundering clouds. Her eye dropped to the bay. It looked clear, deep, and cool. Cool enough to provide temptation. Her period was late this month, but she was still experiencing some light cramping and spotting. A fresh bath on this warm morning, in water deep enough to swim in, seemed like a perfect way to alleviate the discomfort.

She went back to the stairs to retrieve a towel. Seconds later she was walking barefoot down the trail. It became more inviting the closer she got. Cooler, more moist air coaxed her forward. Stopping to spare one final, cautionary glance at the houses, Ingrid pulled Scott's shirt off, then splashed into Horseshoe Bay until the water was over her breasts.

It shocked her into full alertness. It felt great--better than great. More like sublime. Ingrid tossed her head back, smiling at the clouds. She went out deeper, relishing the feel of water around her nakedness. Deeper, deeper. The bottom dropped from her feet. Ingrid disregarded it. She wasn't a good swimmer, but she knew how, and felt confident about indulging herself, if only for a short while.

How deep could the water be anyway? Curious, Ingrid filled her lungs with air--*haaaaaah!*--and dove.

She kicked once, twice, three times. More giant rocks lay strewn across the bottom, about fifty feet down. Ingrid knew she wasn't anywhere near strong enough to reach them, which seemed a pity, because staring back from these behemoths, like the magnified face of a dead god, was the toppled facade of another house. Four gigantic black windows gaped from beneath exposed truss beams the size of trees. Fractured columns, divorced from their bases, sprawled over the sand.

Wishing she could stay longer but needing to breathe, Ingrid swam to the surface. As her chest rose with a heavy gasp, her mind went to Lisa. Or more specifically, to Lisa's lost diary. The whole group had spent the previous afternoon poring through the cliff-top houses to no avail. Could the actual abode where she'd hidden it sixteen years ago be the one that now reposed at the bottom of the bay?

The mystery required further investigation. Once finished with her bath, Ingrid decided she would search the cliffs for the foundation of the drowned house. It had to be there somewhere; perhaps the diary would be there as well.

If only Lisa were here to provide more information--here, at the planned rendezvous point. But it seemed she was still having difficulties with crossing the

interstice, either from an emotional or a physical standpoint. Whichever the case, Ingrid was forced to content herself with the hope--and nothing else--that she would see her mother again soon.

She drew a deep breath, readying herself for a second dive, when a tremendous splash from the opposite bank made her twist in that direction. An empty shoreline stared back, but a series of high, clumsy ripples from whatever had impacted the surface eddied towards her.

"Scott?" she called.

Ingrid scanned the depths, searching for his face...

And Randy Semeska was there, grinning like a madman!

He burst from the water before she could so much as flinch and grabbed her from behind. Terrified, Ingrid screamed the very first name that came to her lips:

"SCOTT!"

Randy's hand shut it off. "Shh," he hushed. "Quiet now. Come on."

"NNNF!"

Ingrid kicked with her legs while at the same time twisting her torso in an effort to slip free. But Randy Semeska was huge and held on fast. His arm gave her ribs a long, hard squeeze. She could feel his nakedness against her own--coarse, curled body hairs, raspy skin. His belly rubbed against her buttocks; his penis stabbed and poked at the insides of her thighs. It would have been disgusting, were she not almost crying with fear.

"Stop kicking," he ordered. "Be still or I'm going to break your little ribs."

Ingrid believed him. She stopped, and looked at the cliffs, eyes clawing for anyone who could help. But there were only the houses--the silent, solemn houses.

"Good girl," Randy cooed. Then, as if this were nothing more than an interview for a lifeguard position, he asked: "So how long can you hold your breath underwater, Ingrid?"

She furled her brow, gave her head a tiny shake.

"Oh come on. You mean you've never timed yourself?"

Again, Ingrid shook her head. *Please, Scott, she pleaded, get down here, oh please!*

"Let me feel you breathe in," Randy said, giving her another squeeze. "*Breathe in,*" he repeated, when she didn't comply.

Closing her eyes, Ingrid inhaled through her nose. Her bare, slender chest rose under his massive arm.

A plume of smelly breath broke over her cheek. "*There you go. Nice and deep, Ingrid. Take one more.*"

Ingrid inhaled.

Randy shoved her under the water--and held her.

"Hold your breath!" he encouraged, as if she had a choice. He was still holding her around the ribs with one arm, but the other was now locked at her collarbone. "Doing good, Ingrid! Doing *real* good!"

Except she wasn't doing good at all. Her chest was already burning. Ingrid grimaced. A plume of bubbles exploded from her lips.

"There it is!" the maniac exclaimed. "You're in trouble now, aren't you? *Aren't you?*"

He kept her under for another five seconds, brought her up, dunked her, then brought her up again.

"How are you feeling, little girl? Hmm?"

"*Randy!*" Ingrid heaved, too out of breath to manage much else. "*Randy please!*"

"It's all right," came his reply. "I like the delicate ones. The ones who give out early." His mouth opened in another grin. "They're *duh-licious.*"

"*Wait! Wait!*"

"Inhale."

"*Oh God!*"

"Inhale."

She got in a ragged, desperate breath just before they went back down, together this time. Down and down. The face of the sunken house grew larger. Its windows seemed ready to swallow them whole.

Ingrid's arms flailed. By way of response, Randy reached between her legs to bury his fingers in the hairs of her genitalia, bringing a scream of bubbles from her lips--the very last of her air. This time her tormentor granted no mercy. They continued to sink deeper into the bay as Ingrid's slender body gave a lurch, and her eyes rolled back. A thin trail of blood trickled from her nose.

Ingrid's legs gave one, final, futile kick...

And then she was gone.

XIII. Witch

"Randy please!"

Scott awoke with a scream in his head--shouted, according to the dream he'd been having, over turbulent waters from the stern of a distressed ship. He sat bolt upright. He reached for Ingrid and found an empty pillow. The ship--it had been sinking. On it there'd been a girl.

"Ingrid?" he called.

There were no concrete reasons for disquiet. The windows, the open room, professed their innocence with tranquility. Ingrid was probably right outside the door, brewing coffee with Varion and Dixon.

Yet the dream lingered. And Scott's heart, as he looked from one corner of the room to the other, could not get free of the hot fist closed around it. He reached for his pants.

"Wait! Wait!" a girl's voice, this one very real, shrieked from far off.

Tranquility broken. Running towards the door, Scott grabbed the first shirt he could find and threw it over his shoulders. Another scream came from Ingrid:

"Oh God!"

He plowed straight into Varion on the front walk. "Where's Ingrid!" he shouted.

Varion's eyes were frantic. "I don't know Scott! I heard her scream--"

At that moment Dixon rushed onto the scene. "Down the trail!" he yelled. "Hurry! Hurry!"

They followed his lead--but not for long. Legs pumping, Scott was soon ahead of the other two, ignoring the sharp stones under his feet, ignoring the sudden bolt of lightning that forked over the lake, ignoring everything except the girl on the ship. He broke from a cleft to confront the bay. Water lapped at its shore. Trees, their boughs hushed, towered over glittering water.

"Ingrid!"

The surface rippled. And from over the center came a flurry of bubbles. Scott plunged into the water, diving forward just as Varion and Dixon appeared, shouting words--orders, curses, who knew?—he barely heard.

It was a good distance to the center of the bay. Scott swam harder, but no matter how fast his body moved, he knew it wasn't fast enough. The time had come to dive under. Two minutes, maybe more, were gone now since Ingrid's last scream. If she'd actually been underwater for that long...

At that instant, a goliath emerged from the depths of the bay, throwing water from the ragged black hair of its massive head. Over one meaty shoulder was the naked body of its victim. That body belonged to Ingrid; Scott knew it instantly. He hadn't needed to see her face--her glazed, unseeing eyes, her lolling mouth, her blue neck--to understand. He hadn't needed to see her face. But it was there anyway.

The first thing he felt was desire--a desire to take the beast by the head and twist until its neck broke. Scott's hands trembled; his eyes swelled with tears of rage. What is

it? he wondered. What is it and how can I make it feel the most agonizing pain there is before I kill it?

"YOU!" he shrieked.

The beast had been swimming towards shore. Now it stopped. It twisted around, wearing an impish smile. *Look, the smile said, I caught this butterfly and tore off its wings. It was fun.*

Roaring, Scott dove forward. This was by no means a tactful reaction: The beast, even with half its body underwater, held the advantage in regard to size and strength. But Scott's hatred blinded him from rational thought. All he wanted was to get Ingrid out of its arms--and then kill it. Kill it dead.

The beast seemed to realize his intentions, for rather than swim to meet him in the middle of the bay, it carried Ingrid back to the bank, where it laid her down with a reverential grace that outraged Scott even further. Then it turned to face him.

And for the first time, Scott faltered.

The beast was huge. Standing over six feet tall and appearing to weigh hundreds of pounds, it was far beyond anything Scott's imagination could have conjured. Its round face, pale white from its recent bath, stared at Scott without the slightest trace of fear.

Also, the beast was completely naked.

More than anything, this last almost made Scott stop. The beast's body, flabby and covered with short, wiry hairs, looked positively obscene: a grotesquerie from a pulp horror comic book. Its pink-nippled breasts drooped like melted orbs of spoiled cheese. Its penis pointed from a straggled, greasy nest of pubic hair. Its toenails, jagged and filthy, desecrated the water.

"Give her to me!" Scott thundered.

As he walked forward, a third individual appeared on the scene and kneeled next to Ingrid. Scott stepped to the left. The beast's eyes followed him--good. Now the newcomer—it was either Varion or Dixon--had an even less chance of being seen. He had already tilted Ingrid's torso backward to drain water from her lungs and at present appeared to be administering CPR.

Scott left the water. He crouched into a fighting stance, looking the beast up and down. There was only one visible weak spot. Balling his fist, Scott charged. The beast stood its ground, smiling all the while. Scott planted his left leg. His arm reared back--

And then, with his right leg, he kicked at the beast's groin as hard as he could.

Under better circumstances, the maneuver might have worked. Were Scott's clothes not so wet from a cold bath; were the beast not so confident of its place on the shore. As it was, when the kick came, the beast side-stepped with alarming speed, then bent to hoist its attacker off the ground. Scott punched it in the head, but not enough leverage existed to do damage with the blow. The beast raised him higher. Now he looked like a belt captured at a title bout. Another bolt of lightning flashed over Coldfrock Lake, followed by a rumble of thunder.

"There's a rock behind you," the beast said.

Scott quit squirming. "So you can talk," he managed through the tight grip around his throat. "Funny. You don't look smart enough to wipe your own ass."

"That must make you even more stupid. Since I'm about to kill you." Then, again: "There's a rock behind you."

Scott turned his head. There was indeed a rather large rock about fifty feet back from the water. And why not? Horseshoe Bay was nothing but rocks--rocks and water. By the latter, Ingrid had been killed. By the former--

"I'm going to splat your head as hard as I can all over it," the beast disclosed. "Maybe it'll hurt. Maybe it won't." Its shoulders gave a minute shrug. "Maybe you'll notice when one of your eyeballs pops out. Maybe you'll see your own teeth in the sand. I don't know."

"Fuck you!" Scott hissed.

But he was scared. The beast meant every word that came from its blubbering mouth. Unlike the dambuhala, this ogre possessed an awareness of its actions: The look on its face--an almost serene dedication to purpose--said all that needed to be said.

"Ready?" it asked.

Scott began squirming afresh. It granted him no ground. The beast took a step forward, and then another, and then another. As the rock came closer, the steps gained speed. The beast's hand tightened more. The steps became a jog. The jog, a run. Bloody death was moments away. Wanting to see Ingrid one last time, Scott cast his eyes across the sand. Varion and Dixon were there. And Ingrid, thank whatever maker who sat on his throne in the heavens, was sitting upright between them, blinking at the sky.

"I love you," Scott breathed through his tortured windpipe.

The beast didn't hear. Or if it did, it found the words amusing, for as the rock bore down it began to laugh a merry, lunatic laugh. It was an ogre after all.

"*Here it comes!*" it shrieked. "*Pumpkin pie for everyone!*"

"**TAHIMIK!**"

The beast stopped, grabbed the top of Scott's head, yanked it forward.

"**TAHIMIK!**"

Eyes closed, Scott waited to die. Yet it wasn't happening. The hand holding his head was poised, but remained immobile. His eyes came open a crack. The shouter of the strange word--*tahimik*--stood off to the right: a tall, middle-aged woman with close-cut dark hair and a truculent glower.

"Mom!" the beast yowled, disappointed by this interruption from its sport.

"Let him go *now*," the woman came back with. "You've had your fun."

Her eye went to Scott. In that moment Scott knew that, despite her intervention upon his slaughter, this woman was no savior. Rescue did not interest the proprietor of that brief, black glance; there were other plans in the mix.

"And I've no wish to observe your brutalities," she added.

"Look the other way then."

"Randy!"

"*Fine!*" The beast dropped Scott to the ground. "*Happy now? **Mother?***"

The woman stepped forward. Her boots trudged, like the footsteps of a drunkard. Indeed, she *was* drunk. Scott arrived at this conclusion through the drawling, drifting manner of her next words.

"I'll be *happy*...when you at last decide to have a stroke or a heart attack and let me forget you were ever born."

"Touching. I'll be extra careful with the signatures for this year's Christmas card."

"Get dressed you pig."

"Oink oink, mother dear."

On that sentiment, the beast turned and disappeared behind the rock.

"Are you hurt?" the woman asked with mock tenderness.

It was hard to hear. Scott's attention had focused on Ingrid. Varion and Dixon were still tending to her. Neck throbbing, legs shaking, Scott rose to his feet. Fifty steps--that was all it would take to get her back into his arms. So easy. If only the ache around his windpipe would recede just a little; if only his spine, which felt twisted by vice grips, could support his weight for just a few more seconds.

He staggered forward while trying to call Ingrid's name. No joy. His voice didn't want to bother. It came out in a whisper that stung like broken glass. To make matters worse, a hand fell on his shoulder, impeding his already delicate progress. Scott turned—and there was the dark woman who had postponed his demise. She stood as tall as he. Her eyes were black marbles; her breath stank of cheap whiskey.

"Hi," she chirped. "I'm Nancy. You must be Scott."

"No..."

She put on a crooked smile and cocked her eye. "Yes you are. Who else would dive into that water for Ingrid?"

"No," Scott whispered again, "I mean...leave me alone."

"Ha! You're welcome!" Suddenly she had hold of his other shoulder. "You," she said, pulling him closer, "need to sleep. Okay?"

Scott, for the third time: "No..."

The black marbles gleamed. "Yes, Scott. Look at me. That's it. Now listen."

"I can't."

"*Makatulog*," she breathed. "*Makatulog*."

Scott tried to look away. But his eyes refused the order. The dark woman kept bringing her face closer and closer, holding his gaze in a grip that seemed--crazy as it was--even more powerful than the beast's.

"*Makatulog*," she kept whispering. "Sleep. Sleep, Scott. *Makatulog*."

He tried to fight it. But his legs buckled. Looking into her eyes had a vertiginous effect. Like outer space, they were abysmal, and it seemed that to fall into them was to fall forever.

"*Makatulog*..."

A quote from somewhere rose to the surface of Scott's thoughts: *When you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.* Eyes fluttering, he collapsed on his knees, yet he still could not break free of the dark woman's stare.

"Sleep."

When you gaze long into an abyss...

"Sleep, Scott."

the abyss also gazes (unconscious, Scott fell to the sand)--

"Sleep."

into you.

Nancy smiled. "Good boy. Rest for awhile."

"Good girl. Wake up now."

Nancy's voice. That was the first thing Ingrid heard--the first thing she heard and comprehended--after her sojourn in the blue ice. Blue ice was all she could remember seeing after Randy's attack. It had risen around her in paralyzing thickness, just as her lungs gave way to the tide. What happened afterward was hard to pin down. Time, at that point, had come to a stop: the scream on her lips, the terror in her eyes, the flood in her chest. She hadn't been able to move. There'd been too much cold, blue weight. The pedestrian belief of death being a tunnel that led to fields of gold was a myth. Death, instead, seemed more like a glacier.

"Innngriiiiid," the voice sang. "Hell-oooo!"

She was still groggy. It was hard to respond to the voice, or even lift her head. Yet somehow she managed both. "Nancy?" was the croak that came from her throat.

"Oh do you look awful."

Ingrid felt awful. Her hair hung over her face in dry, dead strings. The clothing she'd been dressed in appeared to be little more than rags. And her wrists, she now became aware of as her cognizance returned, were shackled over her head by thick, rusty chains.

"Where am I?" she wanted to know.

"You're in the hull of my brother's ship. The *Barony*. Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?" Ingrid whispered.

"Oh come on. There's a storm outside. The ship's pitching merry hell."

"Is that why your legs are wobbling? I thought you were drunk again."

Nancy's eyes narrowed, but her voice remained cheerful. "Clever. Almost as clever as going skinny-dipping alone in Horseshoe Bay."

"Where's Scott?"

"On board. Somewhere. With the other two...what are their names? Dixon and Varion, right? We're all on our way across the lake to Woodward's castle."

The hull gave a creak as it rose on the swell of a wave and then fell hard. Lanterns swayed on their beams.

"Are you going to kill them?" Ingrid asked, when her stomach relaxed.

Nancy seemed to find the question ridiculous. "Of course," she said. "I just haven't decided how yet." Her features twisted in disgust. "Randy wanted to...make a *mess*. He doesn't enjoy men."

"And you do?"

"More than women at least. I'm going to make the Bremman boy suffer."

This last was spoken in a tone a woman might use to describe how she's going to cook the eggs for breakfast. Ingrid gave her head a shake in effort to clear it. Instead,

the pain came on worse. Her biceps were throbbing as well; she wished she could lower her arms.

"Don't hurt Scott," she pleaded. "Please. It's my fault he's here in the first place."

The other woman recoiled. "I beg your pardon. It is *not* your fault. He loves you, Ingrid. Whoa!"

The *Barony* was pitching again. Nancy's boots stamped the floor for balance. Ingrid felt like throwing up.

"If anything it's *his* fault that *you're* here. But what does it matter? The daughter of the man who tried to kill my brother belongs to me again." Grinning, Nancy fetched a deep sigh. "This time through," she went on, leaning closer, "I'm not interested in captivity. At least not for long."

"You're interested in death."

"I am," Nancy agreed. "So was your father. So is Lisa." The grin dropped. "And so are you, Ingrid."

Ingrid looked at her. What was she saying?

"You're here to kill my brother," Nancy told her, as if she had asked the question aloud. "Right?"

With care that was almost like love, the older woman placed her hands on either side of Ingrid's face, splaying her fingers wide. Then, she began to pull the lids of Ingrid's eyes open.

"Am I right?"

The fingers were strong--far too strong. Even at her most powerful--and this was not one of those moments--Ingrid knew she would be no match for Nancy.

"I came to stop him from killing others," she explained, twisting in the other's grasp. "What are you doing?"

Instead of answering, Nancy repeated her. "You came to stop him from killing others. How noble. Oh Ingrid." Her long fingers continued to widen, stretching the skin around Ingrid's eyeballs to the limit while her neck was forced backward.

She couldn't blink. Hot, dry air from the lanterns began to feed on the moisture around her corneas. "Stop it!" she screamed.

"You really are a very stupid girl," Nancy said. "You wandered to a strange world full of strange people, thinking you could overpower the wealthiest man living there, a man with a castle and two armies. What were you planning to do? Read him poetry? Paint him a picture?"

"Nancy my eyes!"

"Do you know what a night terror is, Ingrid?"

"No!"

"Ooh. Let me educate you. When a person goes to sleep, he or she almost always dreams. Some of these dreams are good, some are bad. The bad dreams are called nightmares, as I'm certain you're well aware. But even nightmares are harmless and don't mean anything at all. Night terrors are different."

Her fingers remained splayed across Ingrid's face. Hot breath, reeking of alcohol, poisoned the air.

"You wake from a night terror *screaming*. Whatever it is you fear the most, that's what you'll see when you fall asleep. And they are so much more real than a typical dream. It's almost like being lucid. It astounds you. It embraces you and squeezes until you feel like you're being crushed by your own musings. It howls in your face. And then it bites off your head."

"Why are you telling me this?" Ingrid asked. Her eyes were almost all dry now; Nancy's face had disappeared behind a foggy whiteness. Yet her ears were still working just fine, and when the wicked stepmother next spoke, it was in the contemplative tones of a woman in deep thought.

"For the next seven days you will enjoy no peaceful rest," she whispered, fingernails scratching Ingrid's skin. "Every time you close your eyes there will be torments that are...specifically crafted from the things you dread. You will not sleep without them. You will not so much as doze. You'll *try*," she added, letting the grin creep back just a little. "But even the sunniest, friendliest bedrooms will fail to head off your screams. A nap at the kitchen table will have you writhing on the floor, begging for help. Come this time next week you are going to be a very different girl, I promise that. If you're still alive at all. This spell drives many of its victims to suicide before it can run its course."

"Nancy..."

The other woman tilted her head. Her fingers began to make slow circles, first clockwise, then counter-clockwise.

Ingrid felt something cold spread from their touch. With the last of her strength, she tried to pull free. A pointless effort. The shackles were tight. And Nancy, to judge by her commanding, baritone recitation, meant to have what she wanted.

"*Ikaw natatakot*," the dark woman hissed. "*Hindi makatulog*."

"My head," Ingrid moaned.

"*Hindi makatulog. Dahil--*"

At that precise moment the *Barony* gave its hardest lurch yet. The hull shook as if struck by a cannonball, throwing Nancy off of her feet. She bounced back up and cast her eyes deck-ward. By the sound of things--thunder clapping, waves crashing--the storm was still raging full force. But the ship, for better or for worse, had stopped moving. It took Ingrid a few moments to register this; her mind had gotten used to the pitching and yawing. She looked around, every bit as confused as her stepmother.

Are we sinking? she had to wonder.

It seemed not. Her eyes had regained their focus, and she could see no water coming in.

"What's happening?" Nancy snapped out loud.

"How should I know?" Ingrid replied--

Except she was not the one to whom the other had spoken. A member of the crew had appeared on the stairs, dripping with sea-water.

"We've fetched up on the rocks outside the castle, Madame," he reported after a glance at Ingrid. His feet lingered on the bottom step, unwilling by some reverence or other to proceed further.

"Wrecked?" Nancy inquired.

"Yes Madame. But intact. We should be able to alight as soon as the weather clears."

"We will alight *now*." She looked at Ingrid, then turned back to the crewman as a new thought struck her. "Where is Captain Tullis?"

The crewman blanched. "Dead, Madame. Knocked overboard by a swinging--"

"*WHAT?*"

"The storm, Madame," came the other's gibbering explanation, "it's the worst...the worst on Coldfrock for...for years."

"Do you mean to tell me I sailed the lake with a crew that had no idea how to conduct itself in bad weather? Is that it? *IS IT?*"

"No, Madame. Of course not. It's just that--"

She cut him off again. "Back on deck. *Now*. Arrange for our passengers to be taken to the dungeon."

"Yes, Madame." But he lingered for a moment, perhaps to assure himself that no immediate punishment was forthcoming.

"*GET GOING!*" Nancy exploded.

The way the crewman tore up the steps demons may have been at his heels. Ingrid watched the empty place where he'd stood, wishing she could be there, her arms free. They ached mightily, those arms, and her head throbbed, but oh, how she would run, if given the chance. Run to safety, if indeed there was such a place so near to Cambridge's castle, get her head together, re-strategize. Scott needed her. So did Varion and Dixon. But she needed time--and oh god, there wasn't any left.

"Now then," Nancy was saying, raising her hands once more. The grin had returned in full abundance. "Where were we?"

It took an hour to get everyone off the ship. During this time, Scott Bremman saw none of his friends. After being separated from incarceration with Varion and Dixon below deck, he was led into the dungeon of Coldfrock Castle by two stocky, brutish soldiers who looked eager to do harm to anyone who gave them a reason. Their wide faces were blank and hard as the stones around Horseshoe Bay, and their kickshellacs, slick with grease, had been outfitted with bayonets.

One flight of steps, two flights, three flights. Down and down. The smell grew rank. Pictures of wet, moldy, dead things began to flit about Scott's thoughts. Flames danced in crooked sconces on the walls. The final flight delivered them to an arched doorway. On the other side was a large, empty room full of twitchy shadows. After leading him inside, one of the men told Scott to jump.

Confused, he looked at the man. "Jump where?"

"Down, ye idiot! In the hole!"

More confused than ever, Scott followed the guard's gaze. At his feet was a dark spot which he had first taken to be a shadow. It was not.

"How deep is it?" he asked, timorous.

The bayonet rose to his throat. "*Jump!* I won't be tellin' ye again!"

Steeling himself, Scott bent his knees. The hole looked just big enough to slip through. He made to seat himself on the edge--

And that was when one of the guards shoved him in the back, sending him twenty feet down into a black pit. He landed on his shoulder. It came dislocated with a wet, popping sound, along with a kind of pain he had never felt before in his life. He screamed like a man shot with a buck. A moment later his entire arm was numb.

"My arm!" he screeched. Dirt from the floor got onto his tongue. "I broke my arm!"

The guards above laughed. "Good fer you!" one of them called. He fired his kickshellac through the hole; the shot broke a crater near Scott's head. "Whoops! You wanna look out for giant spiders in there! One of 'em might just crawl inta yer skull and tear it open from tha inside!"

More laughter followed. Scott began to crawl away from the light. It was clumsy work. His injured arm ignored every command. He looked back to measure his progress, lost his balance, and fell hard onto the displaced bone. A bolt of blinding pain forced a second, blood-curdling screech from his throat. The guards cried back sarcastically between hoarse guffaws.

Not long after, Scott blacked out.

The duration of his unconsciousness was hard to guess, but when he awoke, the guards had gone. Lifting his head, he tried to get a lay of the surroundings. Silence and blackness hovered. Shivering, Scott rubbed his nose and his hand came away wet with either blood or snot. Nearby was a row of rusty bars. This came as no surprise. Neither did the muffled squeak of a rat from somewhere behind him.

The surprise came from outside the bars, in the form of a gruff and familiar voice. "Are you awake over there, son?"

It was as weak as Scott felt, and its words stammered about the trail of its speaker's thoughts. All the same, Scott was pretty sure he knew who was talking.

"Mr. Kolk?" he groaned into the darkness.

"It's me, son," the voice came back. "How are you feeling?"

Scott wanted to laugh. "Like shit. I broke my arm. I'm freezing cold. Have you seen Ingrid?"

"No, son. I'm sorry. But I hope she's okay. You I recognized by your voice when you fell."

"The way I talked to you in Bowershim you'll probably remember my voice for a long time. I shouldn't have lost my temper like that."

"Son," the voice floated back, "you were speaking from your heart. Just like a true region-dweller. We were at odds but we both believed--and still believe--in the same things. I left Bowershim not long after you with the hope of joining your crusade."

"You mean you changed your mind?"

"In a manner of speaking. Like I said, we were both right. But I remembered what you said about being a pretender. It stuck with me. And the more I thought about it, the more I understood the point you were trying to make." The voice paused for a moment. Then: "I am not a pretender."

"I believe you. How did you get captured?"

"How does anyone get captured? Carelessness. Be it by love or hate or simple bad weather, it's always carelessness that gets one captured. Were you careless with Ingrid, son?"

Scott thought about it. "Oh yes. She went swimming by herself. I never should have--"

"No, no, son. I mean when you fell in love. I bet you were being careless when it happened. Just walking along, minding your own business. Am I right?"

"You're right."

"Aye." Kolk laughed then--a wet, slithering laugh that became a heavy cough.

"Are you hurt?" Scott asked.

"Hurt? Yeah...I'm beat up pretty bad, I'd say. Some pretty big men off that boat ambushed me. Locked me in the hull and took me across the lake. That fat boy. What's his name?"

"Randy."

"Him. What a poisonous bastard. He broke both of my thumbs. Then he knocked me cold with my own kickshellac."

"Did anyone else from Bowershim come with you?"

"No, thank goodness. Trina tried to talk me out of going. Told me I was a damned fool. And Rupert..." He trailed off to fight his way through another fit of coughing. "Rupert of course isn't fit for traveling," he finished.

Just then a door from somewhere was kicked open. Light splashed between the two cells. By it, Scott could make out a beaten face—Kolk's—staring out from the bars opposite. He was seated against the back wall, chest heaving, legs splayed. Not a shred of his former aplomb remained.

A large, lumpy shadow cut over the light. Scott knew at once to whom it belonged. Yet the voice accompanying it was not Randy's: It was Varion's. He was sobbing as he appeared, with Randy pointing a kickshellac at his head.

"Hello," Kolk's fat boy greeted. "Having fun? I've got another sausage here for the wiener-fest."

"Fuck you," Scott told him. He dragged himself into a sitting position and watched as Varion was shoved into the cell with him.

Randy grinned while relocking the door. "No thanks. But you two go ahead. Find *love*. It has so many wonderful things to give." The grin became a leer. "Right, Varion?"

At this, Varion's sobs turned into full out wailing. "Give him back to me! Please! *Please!*"

"I can't do that," Randy replied, twirling the cell key on his finger. "Not that I would. But yeah," he went on, "you *did* watch me blow his head off--"

Varion covered the wretched tears on his face.

"So Dixon won't be coming back. Ever."

The weight of Randy's words settled like an illness into Scott's bones. He looked at the killer, limp arm throbbing, nose trickling blood, and scowled.

"You...*fucker*."

"Tut tut, Romeo."

"You motherfucking fat piece of shit!"

Even with his hatred burning full force, there was still a part of him that held hope for it not to be true. Dixon dead? He looked at Varion. His knuckles were pressed over his eyes; his entire body was shaking. In a puff of despair, the hope flickered and blew out.

"I had to kill one of them," Randy explained. "After my mom got done yelling at me for what I did to Ingrid, I told her that. 'Let me kill one of them' I said. And when she asked me why, well..." His head gave a tiny, guilty shake. "I said 'because I'm tired of shooting at broken goblets'. Ha!"

"So you shot a man instead," Scott snarled.

"I shot a man instead. And I'd shoot you right now if I were allowed. But my mom isn't partial to instant death. She insists that pain and suffering come first."

"What a sweet lady she must be."

Varion had crawled to the back of the cell during this exchange, where he continued to cry. Occasionally, he would wipe his nose with the back of his hand. Scott wished he could say something, anything, that would provide comfort. But the words would not come. His mouth was dry. His brow was beginning to burn with fever. And his arm, which he would have placed around Varion's shoulders were he able, could hardly move at all.

"What does she plan on doing with us?" he asked.

Randy looked perplexed. "I don't know. She'll think of something. I *do* know she's pissed at you for bringing Ingrid into the region. She's also pissed at Ingrid for not getting killed by the ogre back in Norwalk."

"So that was her doing?"

"She was in on it," Randy told him. "But Ingrid's mother was the one we *should* have killed. Years ago. She has...certain abilities. Like my mom, but not like my mom. Nancy is far more astute."

"Far more disgusting is more like it." Yet Scott was intrigued nonetheless by what he was hearing. Lisa's story—told to him just a week ago—had not been complete. Over the following days, Ingrid had been able to fill in a few of the gaps, but not all. Now thanks to Randy, one burning question stood at the forefront. "Why didn't you go after Lisa right away?" he brought out.

The fat man sneered. "Me? I was still a child when all this shit with Ingrid's dad and my uncle went down. You know about that I'm guessing? A guy named Quinn once tried to do the same thing you're trying to do now. What makes you think you'll pull it off this time?"

Scott didn't reply. He had so few cards to work with in this game, he wanted to hold them close. Fingers crossed, Randy would not choose to do the same.

"Anyway," the other continued, "my uncle didn't see Lisa as a threat at the time. She's wasn't--isn't--very powerful. Her husband was dead. When she ran off with Ingrid to the progressive he instead saw an opportunity. So he took it."

"And what exactly was that?"

"*Death*," came someone's croak from the cell opposite. Kolk's cell.

Randy spun around. "Hey, I forgot about you," he almost gushed. "Mister Lonny Kolk!" The kickshellac waved thoughtfully. "Did I mention your face sells a lot of fried chicken in my region?"

"Death," Kolk said again, ignoring him. "That's what it was all about for Cambridge, just before and after he had Quinn murdered."

"No," Randy came back with. "My uncle has never been interested in death. It's blood that fascinates him."

"Blood that he kills to take and drink. The blood of virgins. Young girls. And with Nancy occupied in the progressive region he was free to do just that for sixteen more years."

Randy studied him. "You know more than I gave you credit for, old man," he admitted. "Been keeping your ear to the ground, eh?" When Kolk didn't answer, he pointed his kickshellac between the bars. "I asked you a question."

"Oh indeed I have," Kolk confessed. "Me and...a great many other region-dwellers. Cambridge has a love of organization, but he still commits mistakes from time to time. When he killed Quinn, he cut the head off the rebellion. Cut it off clean. But the body was left intact."

"A body without a brain."

"We had brains, boy. We just weren't as aggressive as Quinn. We thought we could protect the daughters by keeping their parents informed. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it did not. We even wanted to inform Quinn's daughter, but none of us could get the trick of crossing into her region. We didn't know her exact location in that region either. Or her name. Or even what she looked like."

"You know who she is now," Scott said incredulously. "She was with me in Bowershim. It's Ingrid."

"Yes, son. She told me a lot before you came out of Doc Bowershim's house. I am still a bit too upset with myself over Quinn's death to talk of my friendship with him, so I shared very little with Ingrid in return." A noise somewhere between a cough and a snort came from inside the cell--a noise that reflected the pain of regret.

It reminded Scott of his own regrets. Specifically, his failure to fulfill the role which had been designated to him all along: bodyguard. Where, at this very moment, was the woman he was supposed to be protecting? Locked up somewhere else in the dungeon? Or had Nancy killed her already?

He looked at Varion. Tears were still flowing down his cheeks. They would go on flowing for a long time. Maybe forever. Varion had lost the love of his life.

"Ingrid was very fun to drown," Randy came out with, apropos of nothing. "Squirmed and wriggled *a lot*. And her bubbles?" A sigh of pure pleasure escaped his lips. "The prettiest I have ever seen. It's just too bad she isn't a virgin. My uncle would have a field day."

Scott's left arm--his good arm--found a small rock on the ground and winged it at the fattest thing he could see. It lanced off one of the bars just before it could find its target. Randy jumped with a startled yelp.

"It's okay, Scott," Varion managed to speak. "Dixon knew CPR. He...he brought her back."

"Nobody's going to be bringing Dixon back," Randy giggled.

"G-Go to hell."

"Not just yet." He slung the kickshellac over his shoulder. "I have other places to be. More fags to shoot. More girls to drown."

Scott watched as the shape of his body turned and began to walk towards the entrance of the dungeon. Halfway there, a thought seemed to occur to him. He stopped, turned again. He walked back to Lon Kolk's cell. The kickshellac came off his shoulder.

"I almost forgot," he said, and fired into the shadows where Kolk sat.

A deafening explosion shook dust from the walls. Varion screamed, but Scott was too weak to do anything besides slump further in the dirt. Throwing the rock had taken more strength than he'd had to give. It was not until after Randy had gone that he called out to Kolk. No answer returned.

Exhausted, Scott closed his eyes. His head lolled. He needed Ingrid. So very, very much, he needed Ingrid.

XIV. Mother

Woodward Cambridge had ordered what few men he had left in his castle militia to assist with the wreck of the *Barony*. It lay broken on the rocks, a child's forgotten toy, while the lake crashed and churned.

The recovery of its passengers had been difficult to watch. Not because of the weather--Cambridge did not set foot beyond Coldfrock Castle's barbican throughout the entire operation. And not because of the wreck itself--the *Barony* was an old ship and did not surrender easily to mishaps small or large. No, the difficulty had come with the sight of his men, trudging under the rainy skies, looking for all the world like beaten animals forsaking a feast they had once vowed to die for.

It seemed to serve as the final rail-switch for the rerouting of his plans. And now, thinking back on the scene from his usual east tower brooding place, he at last had to admit--in utter finality--that unleashing the dambuhala was stupid. A costly, terrible mistake.

"Sir?"

Rain from the dying storm trespassed the window, slapping his face. He turned and, of course, there stood O'Connor, looking impeccable as always. His posture was straight. His hands were behind his back. He was a soldier. A soldier of gleaning--be it of information or artifacts or simple clean clothes--but still a soldier. Maybe even the last, best one in all the region.

"The prisoners are secure in the dungeon," he went on when Cambridge nodded. "Mrs. Semeska wishes to begin questioning the girl straight away."

This last declaration was funny. "Questioning?" the castle lord almost smiled. "Goodness, no, O'Connor. My sister knows everything about Ingrid already. Don't forget they lived with each other for sixteen years."

"Yes, sir. But the whereabouts of her mother are still in doubt."

"And would Ingrid be able to help with that?" Cambridge's brow wrinkled; he was still amused, and wanted to thank the composed servant for the fact. "Really, O'Connor, your optimism can be naive at times. Much like my own."

"Much like your own indeed," came a third, more formidable voice from the corridor.

An instant later Nancy Semeska was standing in the arched doorway. She side-stepped O'Connor, giving her brother a look that could teach the rain outside a few things about coldness.

"Nancy!" Cambridge beamed, feigning pleasure at her appearance. He reached to take her hand; the gesture was not returned. "Are you and Randy all right?"

"No thanks to the crew you put on board. Imbeciles, the lot of them."

"Did Captain Tullis really...erm..."

"Die?" Nancy gave a lunatic nod through the bangs of her hair. "Oh most assuredly, Woodward! Yes indeed! Pitched over the side like the piece of refuse he was!"

Cambridge took a moment to dismiss O'Connor just in case the fireworks got out of hand. "Coldfrock Lake hasn't seen a storm like this in...maybe forever," he then explained. "No one was prepared for it." His mind scrambled for something else to say that would placate her. "That is something I'd like to do with the region once I'm in control: organize a team of weather watchers."

His cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Even off the top of his head the idea was ridiculous.

Nancy smirked. "Ingenious, Woodward, I love it. Maybe we can bring Dick Goddard over from the progressive to give bulletins."

"Who?"

"Never mind." Her face became serious again. "I thought I'd drop in to inform you that Ingrid is secure in the dungeon, along with the Bremman boy."

"Thank you. But O'Connor has already told me as much."

"Good for him. Did he also tell you she is pregnant?"

Cambridge took a moment to let this new piece of information sink in. "No," he muttered. Then: "Are you sure?"

"Oh yes. I noticed it while placing the *natatakot* spell on her."

"*Natatakot*?"

"Night terrors. Every night for seven nights. That should make Lisa cry a few tears later on."

He winced before she'd even finished speaking. "Goodness, Nancy."

"Oh listen to my brother's sweet sympathy. Spare it for the parents of your dead virgins."

"They died quick. And what about the baby?"

"What *about* the baby?"

"Is it healthy?"

The question seemed to irritate her. "I don't know. Does it matter?"

"No," he had to confess. "I suppose it caught me off guard. Ingrid's only sixteen after all."

"So what happens from here, Woodward?" Nancy demanded.

Her straightforwardness disarmed him even further. What indeed? There were no easy answers. "We proceed with the plan as intended," he carried off.

It didn't convince his sibling in the slightest. "That can't be. Most of your army have been slaughtered along with the townsfolk they were assigned to corral."

"Ah. But the *dambuhala* are still on the loose."

"They are, yes. And if you don't put them back there won't be anyone in the region left to govern when the storm settles. Or haven't you considered that?"

"I have," Cambridge replied, returning to his favorite chair by the window. "I have also considered that Lisa Felton remains an active component in our...little dilemma. Once she is out of the way--"

"Lisa Felton is *weak*! She conjures Halloween ornaments! I'll kill her myself," she thundered.

"Do you know where she is?" Cambridge said.

"She'll turn up. And when she does"--the woman snapped her fingers--"it'll be for the last time."

"I should have sent that ogre to her house, not yours."

"You always over-think everything."

Cambridge didn't need to consider this; she was right. "Okay," he allowed. "No more thinking. Let's just kill them all: Lisa, Ingrid..." He hesitated. "And who is the boyfriend again?"

"Scott."

"Yes, him too. And the dambuhala will be expelled back to their own region."

"I want to let Ingrid suffer with the *natatakot*--her and her baby. Aside from that, playtime is over."

Cambridge had gone back to looking at the lake. "Very well."

"Right. I'm off, then."

"Where to?" he tossed over his shoulder.

The voice that answered was serious as the grave. "To the dungeon, of course. To kill Scott Bremman."

Ingrid awoke on her back.

A faint orange glow flickered on the stones. *Stones?* she wondered. Her hand reached to brush the rough-hewn confines of whatever bed she lay in. It was stone, all right: cold, dry stone. On the left was a wall, also made of stone. On the right, candles glowed in a narrow corridor. By their light Ingrid could make out an entire column of other stone beds, three tiers high. She seemed to be on the middle tier of her own column, which provided a good view of what lay across the way. Too good of a view. Nobody else in the room was alive. They were all skeletons--skeletons asleep in their beds.

I'm in a niche, she thought with dawning misery.

Just then something moaned. Ingrid sat up a little and looked toward its source. From one of the middle tier beds, a blackened corpse was also sitting up, with its crooked white eyes glaring in her direction.

"*You died*," it moaned. "*You died with a hole in your head.*"

The corpse swung its legs over the ledge to drop from the niche. Ingrid also wanted to drop--drop and run. But she couldn't quite find enough nerve.

"*You died*," the corpse repeated, rising to its full height. Its face, now level with the Ingrid's, began to float forward. A beaten jack-o-lantern could not have been less symmetrical. Its eyes bulged in one direction; its smile twisted in another.

The niche was not narrow enough to keep the corpse out. It leaned forward to grab Ingrid. Icy cold hands invaded her body. She screamed and cowered against the wall. Nothing doing. The dead thing, whatever it was, meant to have her. It even told her as much while it clawed at her face.

"*Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine!*"

"Ingrid!"

"*Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine!*"

"Ingrid wake up!"

Her eyes flew open to a labyrinth of dancing shadows. Shackles were locked around her wrists, and someone with long black hair was shaking her violently.

"No!" Ingrid shrieked. "*No please! Please stop oh god help meeeee!*"

"Ingrid baby wake up! It's all right! It's me! *It's your mother!*"

The thrashing stopped. Though her back was still tingling, Ingrid forced herself to look at the speaker.

No, the darkness tried to say. *No, it's still me.*

But that voice was weaker by the moment. Not so the other. It told her again to wake up, that she was going to be all right. Ingrid listened. Her head throbbed, her legs were stiff, and her wrists felt like they were bleeding...but she listened. Not only to the voice of the speaker, which was female, but to that speaker's eyes as well. Her eyes, which shined not with a vicious hunger, but with a warm, protecting love Ingrid had all but given up on.

"Mom?" Ingrid moaned.

Lisa Felton burst into tears as she embraced her. "It's me, baby. I'm here. I've found you."

Scott Bremman felt like nobody would ever find him.

The pain in his arm had given way to a pounding, pulsing agony, which in turn had brought about a fever, headache and chills. One of the wall torches had gone out, and the neighboring rats were growing more courageous by the minute. Every so often the need arose to scare one off with his leg. Consciousness ebbed. The metal bars seemed to move of their own accord, squirming like snakes in a basket. He tried calling to Varion, but got only vague groans by way of response. So he let his head loll, trying not to look at anything in particular. It worked for short periods of time--until another rat passed too close for comfort, or a distant scream rang from one of the other cells.

And then--at long last!--respite.

A woman appeared on the other side of the bars, tall and lean, her hair flowing. There came the sound of a key in a lock. The bars opened.

"Scott?" the woman called.

His heart sank a little. Something in the way she spoke sounded off. A warble on a record that bent the music. But he was too sick and too desperate to consider what it might mean.

"Here," he grunted.

And death turned its head to look at him. "There you are," Nancy Semeska cooed from the shadows. "I was afraid I'd gotten lost."

Scott squinted at her. It was as if Medusa had come into the cell--her hair, like the bars, writhed to and fro; her eyes were a shiny green.

"I'm here to kill you," she told him, just in case the fact wasn't obvious enough already. A rope with a noose hung from her shoulder.

"Uh," Scott got out.

His cognizance could not seem to get a foothold. Nancy knelt and slipped the noose around his neck. It was wet; it gave off a smell as it scratched his skin. She then stood

on tiptoe and found something on the ceiling (did it matter what?) to drape the opposite end around.

"Does everybody in your family have a breathing fetish?" Scott said, or thought, or dreamed. It was impossible to tell which. His whole body felt frozen and on fire at the same time.

Nancy pulled the rope.

The noose went tight, cutting off the quavering breath he'd been in the middle of taking. The dislocated shoulder screamed as his entire body was lifted off the ground. He began to beat the noose with his one good arm, legs kicking for purchase. This brought a laugh from the executioner. She pulled harder on the rope's gristly fabric, rocking on her heels. The effect of her actions was not without paradox. In the process of dying, Scott had become more alert than he'd been since his deposit into the dungeon. A myriad of things hitherto unnoticed came into focus. The torches looked brighter and warmer. In the cell across the way, a pair of boots could be seen, toes pointed upward. Those boots, Scott somehow understood, belonged to Lon Kolk. Nor was he the sole corpse in the vicinity. Indeed, the dead were everywhere underfoot. Skeleton bones, gone brown after years of exposure to sooty torchlight, lay amidst fresher, more stubborn atrocities. Skulls with skin still clinging to their features, and dark hair flowing from their scalps, lay in defiance of time atop the dustier remains of their brethren.

Somehow, Scott managed to smile. Who could have guessed that expiration carried with it such sentience? Now even that was slipping away. Receding beneath a garden of blooming black roses.

"Too bad, Prince Charming," an echoing voice from Nancy lamented. "Too bad."

At that moment one of the skulls turned to look at her. It gave a screech and launched itself from the floor, striking Nancy hard enough to make her drop the rope. Stunned, she staggered backward. A second skull struck her legs while she was still off balance. Screaming with rage, Nancy fell to the dirt on her butt.

"*WHO?*" Scott heard her demand. "*WHO?*"

Clarity came back by degrees. Coughing and gasping, Scott lifted his head. More of the skulls had bore down on Nancy; she was flat on her back, kicking like a baby in a tantrum. Behind her, standing at the bars, was another woman--an hallucination. She had to be an hallucination. Why? Because Scott thought he recognized this newcomer, just a tiny bit. And there was no way it could be true. But then, who had come for him the last time he'd been locked behind a row of bars? Who had liberated him in the company of flying, shrieking skulls trailing hair gnarled and dead as autumn foliage?

The woman stepped into the cell, knelt next to Nancy, and whispered. The tantrum abruptly stopped; Nancy went still. Everything else--the skulls, the rats--did the same. The cell became motionless as a photograph.

Now what?

Scott waited. His savior stood up. The beads in her hair clicked as she turned her head and made a gesture towards the corridor. A second, shorter figure appeared. Its features were impossible to discern, but that didn't matter. Not with the identity of its summoner already so obvious.

"Lisa," Scott called, with as much breath as he could.

She heard him. Waving the pouting jennies away, Lisa Felton rushed to where he was and put her hands on his face.

"Can you sit up?" she asked.

"If I go slow. I think my arm's broken."

She nodded, and was reaching to lift him when two small, bare feet appeared from the darkness.

"Mom?" a soft voice, like raindrops a breezy summer night, spoke. "Let me."

Lisa moved. A haggard, dirty face appeared in her stead, framed by tufts of tangled brown hair sticking every which way. Never in his life had Scott been so happy to see such a mess. Ignoring the pain, he reached and fell into Ingrid's arms.

"Hey," she whispered, rocking him gently, "hey now. It's okay. I've got you. It's okay, sweetheart."

Strangely, that was just how things felt. The dungeon, Lon Kolk, Dixon Anderson...all of it had gone away. Ingrid, the love of his life, was all that mattered. He would not let her go again.

"What happened, honey?" he asked. "We went to sleep in that house, and when I woke up..."

"I know, I know. It was my fault. I shouldn't have wandered off."

"It wasn't your fault." The patently ridiculous self-accusation made him want to laugh. "Just...stay with me from now on. Forever, please. I don't even know who I am without you."

"I'll stay with you for as long as you can tolerate me, Scott."

"Then the rest of my life should be perfect."

Lisa interrupted them at this point. "I'm sure whatever you two are whispering to each other is very nice," she said, "and I'm glad you're together again. But we don't have time on our side. The sleeping hex I put on Nancy will be brief. And her son could show at any second."

Scott felt Ingrid shiver.

"Keep Randy away from me," she said. "I don't care how, just...keep him away."

Lisa was able to reset his shoulder using the same healing incantation that, as was explained to him during the process, she had used to take away Ingrid's headache and clear her lungs. Ingrid then told him of the night terror spell Nancy had cursed her with, about which nothing could be done.

"She needs to ride it out," Lisa said. "It lasts about seven days. During that time she is not, for any reason, to sleep alone. Not even for five minutes." Her voice rose. "Are you hearing me?" she demanded.

Scott nodded. "Yes. Absolutely."

"It's a serious spell. Ingrid could lose her sanity."

"What little I have left," the girl put in.

"Can you stand up?" Lisa then asked.

Scott could and he did. The thrill of it after being so sick for so many hours, however, did not last long. Varion was dead. With his wits restored, Scott remembered he had been brought to the cell by Randy. Now, only his body remained. A sharp,

bloody stone lay in one limp hand. It seemed Varion had used it to slice open his own neck. Blood gleamed everywhere.

Seeing it made Ingrid cry. Scott held her and told her what he knew of the tragedy: that Randy had murdered Dixon and Lon Kolk (this piece of news did nothing to abate Ingrid's tears), but had morbidly left Varion alive to grieve.

"Lon Kolk is dead too?" Lisa sighed.

"I think so," Scott answered.

One look into his cell verified it: The shell from Randy's kickshellac had blasted out half the old man's head. Crying harder, Ingrid buried her face in Scott's chest.

"Let's get out of here," he said to Lisa. "Do you have a plan?"

Her eyes went from Kolk to Varion, and then back to Kolk, before finding their way to Scott. "We meet with my friend on watch outside the dungeon," she told him. "Then we leave the castle."

"I like it," he said gruffly.

But as they quit the dungeon, using a flight of broken steps that curved along a mossy wall, Scott's mind lingered over its one last, living occupant: Nancy. Why had they left without killing her? The job would have been simple. They could have used the noose, or Varion's stone, or anything handy. Unable to think of a suitable answer, he asked Lisa for input.

"Are we killers, Scott?" she asked while they climbed.

"Not now but I think we're going to need to learn."

"I see. And how does all the death you've seen so far make you feel?"

He was still contemplating the question when they reached the top of the stairs, where a tall, dark figure waited. Lacking light, Scott thought it could have been anyone--anyone at all. Yet there was something revealing about the tilt of its head, and the casualness with which it leaned on the wall.

"Scott," Lisa said, a little out of breath, "I want you to meet--"

"Darren," he finished for her, smiling.

The figure grinned back. "You remember," it said, before putting an arm around Lisa. "Everything okay?" it asked.

She looked at him as if he'd gone crazy. "Are you kidding?"

"Well I didn't mean 'okay', like, let's everyone take a nap. I meant...are we cool?"

"Not remotely. We need to get as far away from this castle as possible."

"I'm all for that," Scott added.

"I'm not."

The three of them looked at Ingrid. She had found a torch and was holding it over her head. "Part of the reason I came here was to stop Cambridge," she told them. "This is his castle. It's safe to assume he's here somewhere. Why are we running away?"

"Ingrid--" Lisa began.

"And even if I can't stop him," she plowed on, "I need to at least find out where he was when he summoned the ogres. Right?"

Her eyes moved over them. Tired eyes. Eyes that Scott now knew were afraid to sleep. Her hands shook; her face was dirty. The hair around her head was disheveled

and frizzy as a witch's. Behind it all, however, glowed a determination that could not be refuted.

Lisa decided to reason with it instead. "I understand what you're telling us, Ingrid," she said, "but this isn't an opportune time. We're surrounded by our enemies. Nancy, Randy, soldiers with kickshellacs. You're under a curse."

"But how much longer can we wait?"

"I don't know, baby. I only know we're too vulnerable to go after Cambridge now. I want us to fall back so we can heal and draw a better plan." She put a hand on Ingrid's shoulder. "Okay?"

Very reluctantly, Ingrid nodded. She would not look at any of them. "Okay. But if it takes too long, if we're too late..."

"We won't be."

"Then let's get out of here."

Darren had a route already planned. Or it least it seemed that way to Scott, as they followed him up and down corridors, around corners, along stairways, past rows of crumbling windows and torn tapestries. Random voices floated from other chambers, but none were raised to give alarm. Wind of their escape had yet to sweep the castle.

"Where are we going once we're out of this place?" Scott asked Lisa as they passed a library of dusty books.

"Into the forest," she told him. "Darren and I set up camp there."

Scott gave her a vacant nod. He was not reassured. A camp in the forest? It didn't seem far enough away. How difficult would it be for those soldiers Lisa had just mentioned--the ones with the kickshellacs--to find them? Or was the forest in question similar to the one outside of Hampton, too dark and thick for anyone but the very desperate to dare traversing?

"Almost there," Darren whispered.

At these words Scott's confidence slipped yet another notch. They were moving up a flight of outdoor, gorge tower steps. The rain had stopped, but the wind was still strong off the lake, whipping their hair this way and that. At the top of the stairs, a single oil lamp swayed on a hook. Blackness engulfed everything beyond.

"Almost *where*?" Scott had to ask.

"We're over the stables," Lisa told him. "Darren was able to get a ladder set up."

"And it's still there?"

"It better be."

It was. Darren located it by slinging his foot over the ledge. He went down first to assure the way was clear, while Lisa explained that this tactic had worked thanks to the dambuhala. With the decimation of Cambridge's army, she said, the castle towers and parapets were not as secure as they'd once been.

"Which isn't to say we should dally," she cautioned, just in case the idea had sprung into their heads. "Ingrid? How about you go next?"

Ingrid moved forward--

And that was all the further she got. A shout rose from the parapet. It reached their ears in pieces on the wind, but the pieces were enough. One word, in fact, was all it took.

"*Dambuhala!*" a guard was screaming as he jumped, "*dambuhala!*"

His finger pointed into the blackness, seemingly at nothing. Scott couldn't make out a single thing past the stables. There was the sound of water being thrown against a rocky shore. Nothing else.

"Darren?" Lisa called.

"I'm here," came his reply. "Let me listen...oh God. Lisa?"

"Darren?"

"*All of you get back into the castle now! Find a place to hide!*"

"*Darren!*"

Another powerful gust of wind made it impossible to hear whatever else he might have said. Scott saw three soldiers dash across the courtyard to another tower. A fourth stood on top of the keep with a horn, blowing one shrill warning note after another.

Scott took Ingrid's hand. "Back down the steps," he said. "Lisa? Lisa!"

She was studying the dark. "I don't see anything!" she shouted. "And what's more, I don't *smell* anything! Darren? Come back up here!"

"Mom!" Ingrid called.

"*Darren come back!*"

The ladder was brutally yanked away, and a deep howl tore through the gales. An ogre's face, black with twisted tufts of matted fur, popped up on the wall. Lisa leaped from the reach of its clawed hands, which raked in frantic effort for purchase, and screamed Darren's name again.

Ingrid moved next. With her right hand still inside of Scott's, she reached with the other to seize Lisa's wrist, so all three were able to stumble in a panicky chain down the steps.

"*Where are we going?*" Lisa demanded.

Scott didn't answer. A wide open courtyard--one he hadn't paid any mind to as they'd crept alongside the wall earlier--had frozen him in place. Crossing it, he knew, would be tantamount to suicide. There was too much space: they would either be shot dead or eaten.

His head snapped left, towards the keep. No joy. It was high and dark, with nowhere to run except up. And while fortune might favor them long enough to make it to the roof...it was there they would be trapped, by anyone or anything that came in pursuit.

Like the monster behind them. It had gained the top of the tower, but the stairway was too narrow for its body. It was getting ready to jump instead. Scott looked to see its massive shape hanging halfway over the wall.

"Shit!" he yelled

"Run, everybody, just *run!*"

The command came from Lisa, who much to Scott's misgivings had chosen to use the courtyard. Letting out another curse, Scott followed. Did he have a choice? Lisa and Ingrid cut left after running past a well. At that same moment a heavy thud--real or imagined--hit the base of the tower. Lungs heaving, Scott also went left, trying to keep sight of the girls. They arrived at a two-story building decorated with ornate windows.

"Find the door!" Ingrid hissed.

Lisa did. It was arched, made of heavy oak, and mercifully unlocked. She pulled it open so all three could get inside. Scott slammed it shut and shot a bolt through a latch.

"There!" he gasped. "But it'll never hold against those ogres!"

"Maybe there's just the one!" Ingrid got out between breaths.

Lisa shook her head. "No, listen!"

Ugly noises came from everywhere outside: screams, shouts, howls, roars. The occasional blast from a kickshellac. Heavy footsteps. Jangling armor. The entire castle was a pandemonium.

"One ogre doesn't cause all that," the older woman pressed, "and besides, they never travel alone."

"We're in some kind of a church," Scott said. He had turned around to face a number of wooden pews that led to a podium.

"The chapel, yes," Lisa said. "It was the best place I could think to run."

"I doubt praying is going to do us much good right now," Ingrid put in.

They hurried towards the podium. Candelabras glowed from distant corners, as did an enormous chandelier on the ceiling. Ingrid jumped as something large ran across the roof.

"It's following us," she gibbered, looking at a bundle of capering shadows.

"It can't get in from the roof," Scott told her. Then, at Lisa: "Can it?"

Ignoring the question, she led them past the podium to a door and a narrow staircase. The stairs, Scott saw with abiding dread, went down.

"Not another dungeon," was all he could think to say.

"Not another dungeon," Lisa assured. "If I remember right, these stairs lead to the lake. Years ago there used to be a jetty. I'm hoping it's still there. I'll go down first."

"Let me go first," Scott said, moving under a large black shield hanging over the door. "We'll go single file. Ingrid, walk between us."

He took her hand. They began their descent. Scott shivered as a draft--perhaps from the lake--swept past. And then the door slammed closed.

Ingrid's reaction was immediate. "*Mom! MOM!*"

Her screams were powerful, but Scott still heard the dry click of a lock from inside the chapel. Lisa had been closed off. They were separated.

"Mom!" Ingrid yelled, beating on the door with her small fists. "*Are you all right? What's going on?*"

"Never mind your mother."

Scott spun at the sound of this new voice, almost losing his balance and falling in the process. It may have been better if he had. For the man walking towards them from below, holding a torch in one hand and a kickshellac in the other, did not look accustomed to accidents. He looked, quite matter-of-factly, like the lord of all creation, taking each step in slow motion, as if time were his to control with a style as conservative as he pleased it to be.

"My mother," Randy Semeska said, grinning his unctuous grin, "is of far greater concern."

And on that note, he pointed the kickshellac at Scott, and squeezed the trigger.

Lisa realized everything just a moment too late. As Ingrid disappeared under the archway, her eyes flicked to the shield. Two crossed swords had been mounted on it. It all looked right—and it all looked wrong. The ornament seemed to cling to the wall like an insect. A thought passed Lisa's mind of it flying off on giant, chitin wings. Suddenly gun-shy, she reached to grab Ingrid. At that same moment, an arm slithered from the shield, slamming the door closed before she could react.

This set the stage for Nancy Semeska to spread her cloak and drop from the wall. She locked the door in a moment (a moment from which Lisa might have profited were she not frozen in shock), then revealed her features in full by pulling a cowl from her hair. The sight of her triumphant, lunatic grin did nothing to remedy Lisa's state of inertness. How had Nancy gotten here so fast? And where, Lisa wondered, am I going to run now?

"*Mom!*" came a muffled scream from somewhere far away. "*Are you all right?*"

Nancy gave her some time to answer. Her green eyes never blinked, nor did the subtly amused tilt of her head so much as quiver. Faith in the trap she had sprung gleamed from every pore.

"Well?" she wanted to know, at last tiring of the game. "Are you or aren't you, Lisa? Don't keep your daughter in suspense."

"I--" Lisa began. An explosion from behind the door halted her. "What was that?"

"It sounded like a kickshellac," Nancy said matter-of-factly. "Someone's been shot. I wonder who."

Another scream from Ingrid, more piercing than the first, followed by the sound of someone laughing.

It was like a splash of cold water on Lisa's face. She raised her fists. "Out of my way."

"Rushing to the rescue again?" Nancy asked without budging. "Yes, of course. After all, you're a healer. You heal, I hurt. That's what we've practiced. It's all we can do."

"I said *move!*"

The witch's head shifted the tiniest bit. "Move me, Lisa," she challenged. The sharp nails of her fingers were not curled, but splayed as if charged with lightning. "You'll have to touch me first, though," she went on. "That's all right, isn't it? It's the way we share our gifts, after all."

Lisa understood the message: Nancy wanted a duel. Touch to touch, magic to magic, comfort versus anguish. But it was just another trap. Lisa knew her gift lacked the mechanic to do harm, no matter how much she might need it. Years of research and meditation stood in the way--years that Nancy had already chosen. She wielded the power like a set of knives stained with the blood of her victims. The bandages and chamomile that Lisa commanded would be useless, ridiculous even, when paired against such power. Common sense cried for an alternative solution.

Only one seemed fitting. Clenching her teeth, Lisa threw the hardest punch she could muster. The blow connected. But even as the witch staggered backward, her

poison flowed. Lisa felt her arm go limp. It fell to her side. She drew breath to try and lift it—but found her lungs would not expand to full capacity.

Something was drearily, dreadfully wrong. Lisa could not close the distance between herself and the locked door. Everything listed to the left. Dazed, Lisa fell backward, hitting her head on one of the pews.

The last of her power faded. She looked to see a blurred outline of Nancy, the black mother, looming forward. Her lip was bleeding from where the punch had landed, but only a little. Perhaps to prove how minor the damage was, Nancy took Lisa's hand and raised it to her mouth.

"Haaaah!" Lisa gasped.

"Shh," the black mother whispered, smearing blood on Lisa's fingers. "It's almost over."

Yes, it was. Nancy had never been on close terms with the truth, but tonight, she and it were raising their glasses in celebration of victory over life. Lisa closed her eyes. Over...it was all over. What will happen to Ingrid? she wondered, with the last speck of light in her mind's eye. Would she ever be happy? And what about the region? Would it be saved, or would it perish?

Ah, let it not be the latter, she pleaded. Let nothing be the latter. Let it all get better, please. Let it all find purpose.

Let it all *heal*.

And on that final thought the wound on Nancy's lip, unbeknownst to Lisa as she lay dying, closed.

Part Four: Crash

XV. Beast

There was time for Scott to hope, just as the weapon in Randy's hand went off, that the projectile would not pass through his chest and strike Ingrid. Then a flash of light blinded him, an explosion deafened him. It was time to die. The process turned out to be surprisingly painless. His spirit had already left its body, perhaps during that moment of hope, and was still standing at the top of the steps.

Scott looked down. In the light of a dropped torch, two figures struggled. Ingrid let out a scream as one of them reached for the kickshellac, which had also been dropped. Then Randy began to laugh.

So I'm not dead, Scott told himself. I should be, but I'm not.

There was evidence abound to support the idea. The feel of Ingrid's nails at his shoulder; the puff of her panicked breath. The smell of the stairwell, mossy and wet; the fatigue in his bones.

His bones...

Scott glanced at Ingrid's hand, gripping him. *Touching* him. He looked at her...and their eyes met. She could *see* him as well!

"Alive," he muttered, turning his gaze back to the laughing lunatic.

Ingrid heard him. "Scott?"

Touch, sight, hearing: Three senses was enough. Scott bolted, crouching to hit Randy low before he could fire the kickshellac. It all happened in a blur. Scott noticed Randy give the gun a frustrated look just before connecting with the side of his knee, then they were both tumbling downstairs like drunkards thrown from a bar.

A short struggle ensued, during which Scott, like his savior before him, could not maintain the upper hand. His adversary was too big and too strong. A heavy roundhouse blow struck the side of his head, rendering him senseless. His body slumped.

Not again, some disconnected thought managed to whisper.

Randy's round, ugly face broke into yet another triumphant grin...then the butt of the kickshellac hit the side of his head--*CRACK!*--knocking him out cold on the stairs.

Scott blinked at the body. The savior stood nearby, nodding.

"*Fuck* that guy," Darren said.

"What is this?" Nancy let out.

The hand which had moments earlier been at work draining the life from Lisa was now about more speculative business, stroking the place where a punch had landed hard enough to bring blood. But the flow had stopped; the wound was closed.

"What have you done?" she demanded to know. "*Healed* me? Whatever for?"

Lisa lay at her feet, waiting--hoping--for strength to return. So far no good; her limbs were still heavy, her breath reluctant. And to make matters worse, Nancy wouldn't stop asking questions.

"Shut up," she muttered. "God in heaven."

"Oh I love it, don't get me wrong," came the other woman's reply. "The pain and the swelling are both gone. You're *good*, Lisa. You're just not...you know, very smart."

"Maybe smarter than you think," Lisa moaned.

The rooftop footsteps Ingrid had noticed minutes ago started again, heavy and slow. Lisa looked up. Nancy's face was there, hideous as always, and behind her--just for a split second--something else. A flitting shadow across one of the chapel's ornate windows. A distant, choked-off cry.

"Maybe," Nancy was saying, though it was clear by her tone she didn't care either way. "Time to die now, Lisa."

"Okay."

The killing hand, reaching to resume its duty, hesitated. Nancy smiled and opened her fingers.

"So you concede? That *is* smart."

"Maybe smarter than you think," Lisa repeated.

Her fist came up, punching Nancy square in the eye. She went flailing against the door with a long, gobbling croak. Not wanting to give her time to regain the upper hand, Lisa forced herself to her feet. The world spun into a series of gray smears but stayed close. Under the latch, crumpled like a whipped animal, lay Nancy.

It was now or never. Lisa aimed a kick at the witch's abdomen. It connected in a most satisfying manner, bringing a deep, painful moan to the lips of its target. Thirst for a kill did not drive the assault--Lisa meant every word she'd said to Scott earlier--which meant Nancy would be up and about again soon. (It had been a gamble, healing the wound she'd inflicted, but Lisa felt some part of her must have realized it could be used as a conduit through Nancy's defenses). By that time Lisa intended to have all of her friends--Darren included, love be with him--tucked away in a safe haven.

But as she was reaching for the latch, one of the ornate windows overlooking the podium exploded inward, spewing shards of glass in a Damoclean rain across the chapel. Not having any interest whatsoever in witnessing the cause of this mayhem, Lisa shielded her eyes and reached for the latch a second time. That was when she was lifted and dangled over the black maw of the biggest ogre she had ever seen. Its hair, filthy with the rotting, tacky entrails of previous meals, was crawling with cockroaches. An eye glared at her; another oozed in a gelatinous tide down its cheek, put out by the lucky shot of some unknown soldier. The maw, filled with bloody teeth, opened wider to take Lisa in. She gasped. Cockroaches swarmed her body, some reaching her ears, their busy little legs clicking hysterically.

Then, out of nowhere, an arrow buried itself in the base of the ogre's skull.

Lisa's body was thrown over the pews. She landed on her back. The sound of agonized roaring came next. Furniture being smashed. A storm of splintered wood. Brushing cockroaches from her hair, Lisa kept low. She crawled to the aisle--which was strewn with debris--and risked a peek towards the door. The ogre's attention had been drawn to a broken window, where a soldier knelt with his bow drawn for a second shot. It never came. Still roaring, the ogre seized hold the podium and winged it at the soldier. It flew like a torpedo. Blood sprang from the soldier's mouth as it struck him in the chest, eviscerating his ribs before he flew backward out of sight.

Slowly, the ogre's head turned towards the pews. Sounds of gunshots, cries of terror, floated through the window.

Lisa's heart froze. God, now what? The towering goliath's one good eye would spot her before long. And it was way too big and way too powerful to overrun. She wouldn't make it to the door (where Nancy's inert body still lay), let alone have time to lift the latch.

Her eye went back to the aisle. A candlestick, its occupant lost, lay on its side. Without thinking, she grabbed it and pitched it hard as she could at the wall farthest from the door. It landed with a clang that instantly set the ogre storming in that direction.

It was now or never again. Crouched over, Lisa entered the aisle and began a brisk duck-walk down the slope. Glass crunched underfoot, but the monster was making too much noise to hear. Or perhaps its ears were clogged with cockroaches. Whichever, she made it all the way down unseen, and her shaking fingers were fumbling with the latch when she was arrested yet again, this time by her original antagonist: Nancy Semeska.

"Wait," the antagonist said, grinning from the floor with her hand clutched around Lisa's ankle. "I wasn't done with my desecration."

"Nancy, there's dambuhala in here, and believe me, it's done desecration enough."

She laughed and rose to her feet with far too much vigor. True, one of her eyes had turned purple, but the other carried lucidity for both. Given, her dress was powdered from hem to shoulders with dust, but that only lent weight to the hideousness of its dark weave. Nancy now resembled a black spider studying a meal from the opposite end of the web.

It was a meal she meant to have. With one jerk, Lisa's hand was wrenched from the latch, the wrist bending back far enough to bring a cry to her lips. From behind came a near instantaneous response from the ogre: a roar, the sound of giant, charging feet. Nancy gave a mad laugh and shoved Lisa in the chest as hard as she could. It sent her reeling straight into the monster's arms, which locked around her ribs like a couple of junkyard jaw crushers.

"**NO!**" she screamed, wriggling against wiry hairs and scuttling cockroaches. She could feel the creature's breath on top of her head. "**NANCY! NANCY!**"

"Lisa!" Nancy shrieked back in a parody almost green with poison. Over her shoulder, the latch began to shake desperately. But it showed no sign of surrender. "Go on, handsome. Give the lady a squeeze."

Under no circumstances could the ogre have understood these instructions. And yet its grip came down on Lisa's ribs, forcing an irreplaceable gasp through her throat.

"**HIIIIEEEE!**" Lisa hissed, hands beating on biceps bigger than her waist.

When she tried to get the air back, it wouldn't come. The ogre wasn't allowing her chest to expand. In fact, it squeezed harder. Harder and harder, bending the bones.

The last thought Lisa had was of Ingrid. Ingrid screaming--crying--from behind the door. Through some kindness from a different region she did not understand, that door had become transparent. She could see Ingrid as well, pounding the wood, ragged dress in tatters, begging to be let through. Behind her was Scott, the love of her life. And

behind Scott, Darren, the love of *her* life. The man who had made it possible for her to come and see this region one final time.

"Love you all," she tried to say, before everything in her chest broke. A geyser of blood burst from her mouth. And then the next place of sojourn, the next region of passion, took her away.

Nancy reached back. Her thumb found the latch-plate, pressed it. Ingrid burst through just in time to see Lisa's crushed body drop to the floor. She saw the ogre too, but in that moment its black, towering shape was little more than a premonitory shadow cast over a dream terrible enough without one. A manteau of dark storm clouds over an already obliterated city-scape. An emblem of death on the loggia of a funeral home. A spatter of blood on a red battle flag.

It couldn't be. It just couldn't be.

"Oh it's true," Nancy smiled, reading this thought on Ingrid's face. "Your mother's bones are ready for gnawing."

"**MOM!**"

"Usually these creatures prefer thighs or drumsticks. But this one started with the ribs. That's fine."

"**MOM!**"

"A good turkey tastes delicious no matter where one chooses to spear first."

By now Scott had made it through the door, with Darren close behind. Ingrid barely noticed. Even Nancy seemed incorporeal. All she could see, all she could feel, was Lisa. Lisa, lying dead beyond any speculation at their feet, her bones crushed out the sides of her chest, her jaw hanging open for the scream she'd not had breath to vent. Lisa Felton, her mother. Gone.

Ingrid fell to her knees. It was suicide, but then...so what? Hadn't she been suicidal since the beginning? A girl in an apathetic daze wandering from one pretend cup of coffee to the next, knowing a jolt would never come but drinking anyway, just for something to do. Well, the time for doing was done. The final mug was empty; the last nickel had been spent.

Her reaction did not go unchallenged. Scott in particular objected to it a good deal. He gave a yell from somewhere; she paid it never mind. Then his hands were grabbing her, hauling her backward.

No!

She wrenched her arms away, wailing some incomprehensible curse. It was time to quit, dammit! Why couldn't he see that? And as if his ignorance were not cause enough for outrage, the ogre at that moment--after a surprising space of inertness--contributed to the grotesquerie by plucking an arm off Lisa's corpse and beginning to nibble.

Too much. Not wanting to see or feel anything ever again, Ingrid went limp in Scott's arms. Her bare feet were scooped off the floor. She didn't care. She felt herself being spun around, Scott now carrying her like a bride, to face the door, the exit to life. No big deal, either.

"Where are you going?" a familiar voice sang.

Oh yes, it's Nancy, Ingrid thought. Still with us. Good try, Scott, but we're not going to make it. Oh well.

And maybe they wouldn't have made it. Maybe, Ingrid considered later, the ogre would have eaten them all, or Nancy would have tortured them to death, the way she liked it. Maybe this and maybe that. One forgotten number in the equation changed the whole tide--forgotten, that was, by Nancy, who had begun to shake her head as she walked to block the door.

"Don't send it home without dessert," she told Ingrid. "Smooth and soft and sweet. What would a meal be otherwise--"

Darren grabbed her from behind and lifted her high, his loss lending strength to his sinew. Nancy was too surprised to react. It was her undoing. With one Herculean thrust of his arms, Darren threw her at the ogre. She collided with the beast about mid-thigh. None too happy about being interrupted from its meal, it reached for her. Nancy began to scramble on all fours like one of the cockroaches in its hair. She screamed as the beast's claws caught her by the back of her dress, tearing it open. Her foot slipped on a puddle of entrails. The ogre picked her up and bit off her head.

"Jesus!" Darren shrieked, his voice splintering with the bones of Nancy's neck. "Jesus fucking Christ oh God!"

"Time to leave," Scott said.

I don't care, Ingrid thought.

Scott carried her to the bottom of the stairs, past Randy's still unconscious body, and out another door that let on a cobblestone path. The path twisted to a rocky, windy beach. Waves crashed under shimmering constellations that Ingrid had yet to recognize. Sprinkles of cold water showered her face and arms.

"Which way!" Scott yelled over the din. "Darren? *Darren!*"

"I'm thinking, goddammit," he snapped back. "Just...shut up a minute!"

His eyes, which were wet, searched the stars. It seemed he and they were on better terms. Ingrid waited with her head on Scott's shoulder, saying nothing. The hem of her ragged dress flapped in the wind.

"All right, follow me," Darren said, and without waiting, plodded off to the left.

Ingrid saw Scott look worriedly up the cobblestone path. She was sure the ogre would not be capable of pursuit--it was too big to fit down the stairs--but didn't bother to voice the consolation. Then he struck off after Darren. He did not ask Ingrid to walk, nor did she ask--or even consider the idea of asking--to be put down. Why were the men bothering with flight anyway?

Their intransigence seemed borderline insane. How many more friends and loved ones had to die before they realized the ridiculousness of this entire enterprise?

Her eye went to the door at the top of the path, which grew more distant by the second. It had been left unlatched. Violent gusts of wind slammed it open and closed.

How many more? she wondered again.

Open--*Wham!* Closed--*Bang!*

Scott carried her further and further down the beach. Soon the door disappeared behind a rock. Ingrid kept listening until it was too far away to hear as well, and the water and the wind were all existence had to offer, agents of erosion, wiping the world clean.

"Hold still," Scott said.

Ingrid lay on the table, blinking at a light fixture with a dead wasp in it. They were in a kitchen of some kind. She could see a stove, a row of cupboards. From behind, the sound of scissors.

"You're going to feel so much better," Scott told her as he snipped. "The region's wet. It's getting into your hair. But if you wear it short it won't be as cold."

"Okay," she accepted.

Someone else came in. While Scott spoke, a woman danced to the table, arms waving, black hair flying. She jumped and twirled around Scott, oblivious to his newfound (and more than a little strange) interest in becoming a beautician. Equally oblivious was the beautician himself. He snipped away at Ingrid's hair, chattering like a bird about where he'd been earlier that day.

"I found a lucky rabbit's foot in Norwalk. White. Put it in my pocket. A girl threw a jump-rope at me and told me to put it back. Oh man, how embarrassing."

The dancer spun to the other side of the table. Now that she was closer, Ingrid recognized her as Lisa. Lisa looked at her, winked, and stuck her tongue out toward Scott, never missing a step in her routine.

"What I wouldn't give," Scott was going on, wiping the scissors on his sleeve, "for like...twenty five cents to buy an ice cream. Then I'd have a place for that cherry in the basement."

Hearing this, Lisa stuck her finger in her mouth and made gagging gestures. At the same time, the middle finger of her other hand stabbed the air.

"Mom," Ingrid chided. "What are you doing?"

Lisa rushed at her. Her eyes were a wide, furious yellow; her teeth were snarling. Ingrid recoiled, but without very far to lean back, Lisa was able to bring her face in close enough to eclipse the entire kitchen.

"*Why did you kill me?*" she barked. "*WHY DID YOU KILL ME?*"

Cold locks of hair spilled over Ingrid's mouth and neck. Fingernails sharp as razors clawed her arms.

"*WHY DID YOU KILL ME?*" With every word Lisa's eyes got wider. Wider and wider, until they were all Ingrid could see. "*WHY DID YOU KILL ME? WHY DID YOU KILL MEEEE?*"

She woke up screaming next to the dying glow of a neglected campfire. Lisa still had hold of her. Two arms were wrapped round her back in an accusing embrace.

"*Ingrid?*"

She went on screaming as the arms squeezed even harder.

"*Ingrid it's me, Scott! You're awake now!*"

"*Where am I?*"

"*At the campsite! Coldfrock Forest! Remember?*"

Her eyes fluttered open. It was slow going, but eventually the rate of her tears--as well as the thrumming of her pulse--slowed to a more manageable degree. She looked at the remains of the fire. On the other side was Darren, his face concerned yet

somehow empty and lost at the same time. Around them, trees, tall and silent under an early morning sky rife with stars.

"We're out," Darren croaked. "Castle's behind us."

"The dambuhala?" Ingrid asked.

"Traveling the other direction. I think they must've passed real close to this camp on their way down."

She nodded and cuddled closer to Scott. Darren stoked the fire. And for a long time, nobody said a word. With that, at least, Ingrid felt content. The fire had a soothing effect on her nerves. She watched it crackling from the confines of Scott's arms, her mind growing more comfortable with memories of Lisa. The trick of this latter achievement came with advice given by the woman herself as they'd made their way through the castle to rescue Scott.

"The best way to get over a night terror is to mock it," she'd said. "Make it nonsense. Remember, Ingrid, as scary as they are, they're still just bad dreams. And they end the moment you wake up."

Nevertheless, it took eight days in all, not seven, for Nancy's spell to wear off. At Scott's insistence, Ingrid stayed at the camp until she made a full recovery. Only it wasn't just her that he meant, she knew. All three required mending time. They also had stories to share, and what better place than a campfire for that?

Darren told his first, in a dreary, hollow voice. As Ingrid suspected, he and Lisa had encountered difficulties with leaving the progressive right from the start.

"If there even *was* a start," he said over the fire during their third night in the forest. "I mean, Lisa knew she loved me. That was okay. But it took me a little longer. And once I knew I loved her too..." he trailed off, smiling for the first time since leaving the castle. "It was like I couldn't even remember the beginning. Like it was there all the time."

Scott gave him a nod. "You helped her break me out of jail that night. At the time I thought you were just another one of Norwalk's infamous car thieves, Darren."

"Nancy eventually found her way out to Cedar Point, where you guys crossed. She did it by tracing the magic Lisa used with you, Scott. She closed the passage to the interstice, forcing Lisa and me to find a new one."

"And that also took time," Ingrid put in.

"It took a *lot* of time," Darren agreed. "But," he shrugged, the smile becoming shy, "lovers found a way. They always do."

"Where was it?" Ingrid wanted to know.

"The passage? Marblehead Peninsula, near the lighthouse." His eyes roved around the clearing. "And this is where we woke up," he told them. "Two nights later the storm chased us towards the castle. That's where we saw Cambridge's ship wrecked on the rocks."

"Did you know who was inside?" Scott asked.

"No. But I was able to ask a few discreet questions around the stables. The weather had everyone too preoccupied for suspicion. Lisa put two and two together and figured out the rest. Except for...well, how you were captured in the first place."

At this Ingrid looked at Scott, who was sitting with his arms folded around her belly.

"Shall I?" he invited.

"The floor is yours."

In a matter of minutes Darren learned everything that had happened to them since their arrival in the region. Or rather, almost everything. Ingrid carried one final piece to the story not even Scott knew about. She looked at him a second time as he described Rowena's little boy, Benjamin, in a tone with more spirit and music in it than a ragtime band on a Saturday night. He clearly harbored a wish to meet the child again.

"I didn't know Weng had a baby," Darren, wistful, said.

"Five years old," Scott said. "Or thereabouts, anyway. Cute as a button."

Ingrid decided to keep quiet until he was finished. He maintained a short and neat narrative, tactfully avoiding too much detail while describing the dambulhala attack on Bowershim, and was finished before Ingrid could come to full grips with how she intended to proceed.

Keep waiting then, a less courageous part of her suggested. They've got a lot on their plates already, you know?

She knew. Her own plate carried many of the same things and more. It still made her feel like giving up, the way she'd wanted to give up two nights ago on the beach. The old Ingrid--the quitter--had talked to her a great deal on that night. Pleaded her case for futility. It had almost worked. Just one thing stood in the way.

"Speaking of babies," Ingrid said presently, shifting a little in Scott's arms.

Darren looked quizzical. Scott said nothing, though it was doubtless he wore the same expression. Ingrid opened her mouth to speak again, not knowing what was going to come out.

"I'm pregnant."

A hush seemed to fall over the entire forest. Ingrid held her breath, waiting for Scott to react. She prayed for him not ask something stupid like *are you sure? or oh gosh, really?* Questions like that would drive her right out of his arms to sleep on the other side of the fire, night terrors be damned.

But what happened was this: His hand touched her chin and with great care pulled. Ingrid let it guide her in the direction it wanted to go, turning her head to meet a surprised smile. Curious, she kept waiting. The next line belonged to him whether he liked it or not. And to his credit, he seemed to realize as much after but a few seconds, for his head gave a tiny nod, and he asked:

"How long have you known?"

"Mom told me at the castle. She felt it while she was healing me. There were...some other things going on as well that made me suspect."

"Can you handle it?"

Ingrid turned her head. The question had come from Darren, whose face regarded her without expression through the flames.

"Yes," she told him. "I mean my body hasn't...you know, started doing too many strange things yet. And I don't think it's going to take nine months to resolve what's going on in the region."

"Don't be too sure about that. It took Cambridge almost twenty years to tear it apart."

"It won't take nine months," Ingrid said again. "It *can't*. In nine months there won't be anything left of the region to save."

"I wonder how much is left right now," Scott offered. "We've been hearing so much about the dambuhala. *Seeing* so much. Much, much, much, I know. But I can't help it. And I'll tell you what else I can't help." He paused here for a moment. "Ingrid, I can't help thinking of how alone you're going to be when the time comes."

"When what time comes, Scott?"

"You know what time. Opening the interstice. Coaxing the dambuhala back to their own region."

"Technically, she won't be opening the interstice," Darren said. "She'll be opening a portal to the interstice. From there--"

"Okay," Scott broke in, "if you want to be semantic. But she's still going to be alone. That bothers me."

"You mentioned coaxing," Ingrid said. "That's where you'll be of help. Because something tells me it's going to take both hands to hold the door open for those things."

"The dambuhala won't need coaxing," Darren told them. "Once they get a whiff of their own region they're going to rush for it like insects to a crack in the wall. And it will be over with fast."

"See?" Scott shrugged. "Where does that leave me?"

Ingrid grimaced. What was he going on about anyway? "For crying out loud, Scott--"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just...don't care much for the idea of stretching out under an apple tree while you run a marathon. I've already failed you once."

"And I've already told you that it wasn't your fault," Ingrid replied. She could feel her chest tightening with irritation. "I went off alone. I wanted to *think*."

"I let you down."

"Goddammit, Scott."

"*Please*," Darren cut in. "Let's talk about something else for now. I don't need you two at each other's throats. There's been"--his face dropped--"too much rending and tearing already."

The sadness in his eyes was enough to soften Ingrid. Nodding, she suggested everyone sleep instead, with a reminder to Scott that a major purpose he would be serving over the next few days involved protecting her from the blackness of her own mind. In this regard he was able to prove his mettle. Ingrid woke screaming at least three times every night, but not once were Scott's arms ever late to provide comfort. Ingrid would lie in his lap next to the fire, tears streaming down her cheeks, her whole body shaking, and gibber about how the dreams made her afraid to die, how she thought her heart was going to explode.

"No," Scott promised over and over, night after night, while he stroked her hair, "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"When will it stop?"

"Soon, sweetheart. Very, very soon."

She had little choice but to be content with that answer, as well as accept the love he had to give with a glutton's zeal. During the next few days she made certain to keep

him on a short leash. The thought of being alone, even for the most private of functions, frightened her almost as much as the dreams themselves, and on more than one occasion Ingrid found herself cursing Nancy from a squatting position in the bushes while Scott idled nearby, telling her not to be too hard on herself, that this newfound weakness would be short-lived.

Darren, for his part, proved to be effective at gathering news--as well as supplies--from the surrounding area, though little of the information he gleaned was pleasant to hear. A nearby village had been gossiping all week about the massacre at Coldfrock Castle. There were even a small number of individuals--teenaged males, mostly, whose starry-eyed girlfriends trembled at the thought of being loved by a brave adventurer--claiming to have journeyed through the forest to explore what remained of Cambridge's folly for themselves. The stories they returned with told of abandoned parapets and blood-spattered galleries, crumbling staircases and defiled tapestries. Nothing of the castle's former authority, these talkative trespassers surmised, had withstood the dambuhala onslaught. Not even Woodward Cambridge himself. So far no trace of the ambuscader had been found; no one, in fact, had heard so much as a whisper that might lead to his whereabouts. He had either fled the castle during the attack, or been killed and eaten. Whichever, one fact became more and more clear to the region dwellers as news of the massacre at Coldfrock Castle spread: The coup on their land was at an end. Woodward Cambridge had failed, and fantastically at that. His army of monsters had destroyed his army of humans. All that remained now was for the region to decide how it wanted to heal.

For the men, the answer still seemed to rest with kickshellacs. Small armies had been dispatched on hunting expeditions from the towns and villages as yet unscathed by Cambridge's siege. Their reasoning, from what Darren was able to learn, was that the ogres should be hunted down and killed like the menace they were.

"Violence against violence," Darren told Scott one day near the end of Ingrid's convalescence. They were fishing from the bank of a cold, fast stream, waiting for a bite. "Or should I say, savagery against savagery."

"Do you think it will work?" Scott asked.

"I don't know. I'm not entirely against the idea. And yes, when I think about killing a dambuhala I become very anxious."

"How many are left?"

"At a guess, I would put it at around nine hundred."

"Still a lot."

"Still a lot," Darren agreed, tugging his line. "But it's not impractical, what those men are doing. The dambuhala can die just like any other flesh and bone beast. Although I personally couldn't even hold a loaded kickshellac," he added with a laugh. "I would hide the cartridges in the pocket of one of Lisa's dresses and fake it for the best."

Scott turned to ask for Ingrid's opinion on the matter, but she was out of earshot, filling a basket with berries under a delicate snow of dandelion seeds. Or so he'd thought at the time. Later that afternoon, as they bathed in a spring dappled with flower petals from a nearby knoll, she let on that she had indeed been listening to their talk. With her hands moving up and down his back, she told him in low tones that she

disagreed with the idea of hunting the dambuhala out of the region. They were too big, she said, too strong. And furthermore the kickshellacs, for all of their power, were slow, clumsy weapons.

"According to Rupert Doody, sometimes the bolts get jammed. He told me that morning in Bowershim he thought we were all going to die in his apartment. He couldn't believe the gun actually fired."

"It didn't look well cared for," Scott said, hoping this would imply not all gun owners neglected their weapons.

"No," Ingrid agreed, "but even the best ones are cumbersome. They take time to load. They're not accurate. And the dambuhala aren't just going to stand under the trees and pose for a shot. They're hungry, furious creatures. Look what happened to Cambridge's army."

"I know. It doesn't bode well."

"Just one of them by itself killed my mom and Nancy. Powerful women." She paused to splash water onto his shoulder. "A turkey shoot isn't going to eradicate these things, Scott."

"So what do we do?"

"We stay with the original plan. Breach the interstice. Let the ogres go back where they came from."

"That might be difficult with Cambridge dead. We don't even know where the crossing point is."

"There's no reason to think Cambridge is dead."

Scott looked at her, waiting for an explanation.

"Remember his idiosyncrasy?" she went on, splashing more water onto his chest.

"You mean about being a vampire?"

"That's the one. Now tell me: What do vampires like to do when they feel weak?"

"Um...drink blood?"

"Guess again."

"Hide."

"Hide where?"

"In the dark."

"Right. Or more specifically, in a coffin." Suddenly she shivered. "Let's get dressed. It's getting a bit late to be wet."

Scott followed her out of the water. That thick shock of brown hair which had been the start of his falling in love two years ago now extended all the way to her waist, which despite his discreet appraisal showed no indications of pregnancy. Nor should it have. But Scott nevertheless found himself considering her nakedness in a new way while she got dressed: the smooth curves of her breasts and buttocks; the bones of her ribcage as she raised her arms. And not for the first time, he had the thought that Ingrid was a newly arrived woman. Even her eyes had changed. They were sadder, dimmer, wearier. Her childhood, for better or for worse, was gone.

"Wait," he said, before she could cover her chest with the camisole she'd earlier hung on a twig. His hands closed around her.

Right away she sensed the source of his curiosity. "I don't think you're going to feel anything yet."

He whispered that he knew, while at the same time taking hold of her left breast, identifying its softness, its fragility, not only as sexual stimulants on this venture, but as givers of nourishment as well.

"If it's a girl we have to name her Lisa," Ingrid said.

"All right. And if it's a boy?"

She considered this for a few moments. "Wesley?"

A long while passed before he could think of anything to say. Her turned her around and held her close until she signaled a desire to be kissed by standing on tiptoe. Rocking her in his arms, he tasted her lips, content to let this breathless interlude do all the talking for itself.

"Conceived between regions," she murmured.

"The baby?" he breathed back. "You think so?"

"Yes."

"I love that. I really do." His fingers, halfway down the cascade of her hair, stopped. "Think what kind of a person it's going to become."

"It's going to have some strange dreams I'll bet. Stranger than mine even."

"Did Lisa ever tell you what the interstice looks like?"

"No. I don't think she knew. Maybe--" She stopped, turning her eyes away.

"Maybe what?"

Her head shook, and she shrugged the classic Ingrid shrug he had almost forgotten existed. "Maybe Varion and Dixon knew. Maybe they saw."

"They liked it here. They loved it here."

"They loved it here," Ingrid said at that exact same moment.

And Scott regarded her in the dying light, remembering the way Varion and Dixon had appeared behind the dais in Bowershim, smiling ear to ear, in perfect contentment with each other and the world around them. It was Christmas night--less than a year ago--when they crossed from the progressive. Did that fact, he wondered, make what had happened to them even more magical? Could it have somehow given them a glimpse of the space they'd jumped to reach this region? Alas, the time for asking had gone.

"Let's go to bed," Ingrid suggested.

Later that night, with Ingrid asleep in his arms, he tried to recall the interstice for himself. He thought of the theater at Cedar Point, of the little room upstairs where he and Ingrid had first made love. After that, of course, there'd been sleep, and then a different room inside of a different theater. But...what had happened in between?

Scott lay awake wondering, willing his mind to overturn every stone it could find along the banks of that particular body of memories. It was no use. Trying to recall the interstice was like trying to recall being born. His journey between regions had been made during a state of unconsciousness, and there'd been no dreams, no visions, no exemplifications whatsoever to capture the voyage for future reference.

The following morning he voiced his frustration to Ingrid and Darren over a breakfast of bread, fish, coffee, and a rather tart fruit juice (to Scott it tasted something

like apple cider mixed with cherry pulp) that the villagers referred to as bengbong. Both thought he was being unreasonable with himself. How could he have expected to know, they told him--almost together--what that night a month ago held in store?

"And consider," Darren pointed out further, "the realities we experience during sleep can be mistaken for dreams, and vice-versa. So even if you were to see the interstice your memories would come with a good deal more ambiguity than certainty."

"But *someone* must know," Scott insisted, grimacing as he swallowed another mouthful of bengbong.

"I agree. But why is it important?"

"Because--" He stopped. Ingrid was looking at him with her brow raised. "Well, because it's at least possible that--that the baby was conceived there."

"Interesting," Darren said after a few moments of thought. "There's a chance the baby will know, Scott. You must ask it once it's old enough."

Scott nodded. Here was an idea that hadn't passed through his head the night before. "I'll do that."

"Good. But in the meantime we must plot our course of action for repelling the dambuhala."

At this, Ingrid spoke up, telling him what she'd already told Scott.

"Are you sure?" Darren asked, his face a cloudy mixture of negative emotions. "Killing them by force would be less of a risk, Ingrid. Think of what replacing them is going to entail. All of the dambuhala, together in one location, while you strain to hold the door open."

"I know," she said. "I mean I don't *know*, but I understand. It's just that we've already seen an army of men spilling blood fail. The masculine way doesn't work. If the region's going to be saved it has to be through its own strengths."

"Love?" Darren asked. And although Scott could see he wanted the question to sound innocent, the edge of mockery in his tone was impossible to miss.

Love, however, was a word Ingrid knew how to defend these days. "That's right," she said, indignant. "Compassion."

"Compassion for the dambuhala?"

"No. Compassion for the way of life in the region. For the people and the land itself." She tilted her head. "Or did you want to just go on slaughtering things like a butcher, the way Cambridge would?"

Defeated, Darren shook his head. "Not at all. But if Cambridge is indeed still alive then we must find him. Where do we look?"

"Coldfrock Castle for starters. Maybe we can pick up the trail where it went cold."

"All right." He grabbed a pouch with a cork stuck in the top. "Scott? More bengbong?"

"Oh Christ no. My face is already imploding."

"Ingrid?"

"No thanks."

"Then let's go get our vampire, shall we?"

It was thirty minutes' walk to the beach path. Ingrid had no intention, however, of using the door they'd already escaped through once to get back inside.

"Stables," she ordered.

Neither of the men argued. The day had brightened since their departure. A hazy blue sky shimmered as they trekked away from the lake. Soon the sand beneath Ingrid's boots gave way to tall blades of grass that caressed the hem of her skirt.

"Slow down," Scott said. "We don't know what might still be around."

Seeing the wisdom of this, Ingrid adjusted her plunging through the grass to something more like a perusing swim, letting Darren scout ahead while Scott watched things from behind. At the far end of a large plateau on their right stood the forest, which under light of day emanated a welcoming aura that might have been pleasant were it not for the enormous, austere gray wall of the castle directly on their left. It loomed over the field, a swath that all but spoke aloud the dread it bridled.

Nor did the stables make for a comforting sight. A herd of disemboweled niddi lay dead (Ingrid counted six before realizing she was being morbid) among various scattered piles of bloodstained straw. Flies fat as bumblebees buzzed the carcasses, their wings providing an obscene symphony to the sour smell of rotting meat.

"This is where you climbed down?" Ingrid asked Darren as she looked at the gorge tower.

"Yes," he answered. "Now all we need to do is find--"

"The ladder," Scott finished. He was with some difficulty lifting a long piece of wood from the dirt, his teeth clenched. "Damned thing's heavier than it looks."

He and Darren together had better luck with maneuvering it into place, and within minutes all three were standing in a light breeze atop the tower. Not a thing stirred in the courtyard. Ingrid peered over the parapet (part of it broken from where the ogre had made its pursuing leap a week ago), expecting to see some sign of life, however minor, present itself. But Coldfrock Castle stared at her without a thing to say. The baileys, the keep, and the chapel were all silent.

"Weird," Scott said.

Was he feeling the same things as she? *Someone*, Ingrid thought, *must be standing on my grave right about now.*

"No," Darren uttered, and at first Ingrid thought he must've plucked the notion straight from her head. But it was Scott he'd addressed. "Not weird. Not any *weirder*, at least. Castle Coldfrock has always been haunted. Now that it's empty the ghosts are easier to see. The masquerade is over."

"At least until the next tyrant moves in," Scott added.

"Yeah."

"So where do we start looking? Assuming Cambridge is still here somewhere."

Ingrid looked at Scott for a moment, then back over the courtyard. Where indeed? Where in a castle would a vanquished monster go to lick its wounds? Somewhere dark--perhaps underground. She shook her head. Christ, not the dungeons again. Give a girl a break. Wait...

"Darren?" she called, her eyes panning the towers.

"Yes?"

"What's the most secure part of any castle? Besides the dungeons," she tacked on, before he could suggest them.

"That would be the keep," he replied. "It's the last refuge of any Lord, should his castle..." His voice trailed off. A tone of discovery accompanied its return. "Should his castle come under siege. Of course."

"Well it might not be that easy," Ingrid said, turning on the heel of her boot. "But we should damn well check it out."

"Agreed."

It was not that easy. The keep turned out to be rather large for a castle of Coldfrock's size, its cavernous chambers decorated with a handful of small windows (which obliged the three of them to hunt for candles and torches), its ancient spiral staircases--five in all--a rusty, rotting framework of daredevil dancing lessons, each more treacherous than the last. There were two facts, however, they found a way to take advantage of. The first was that Coldfrock Castle's keep, like the rest of it, had been constructed with a distinct Romanesque flair. This meant that while its rooms were large and its layout grandiose, the purpose it served tended to favor politics over protection. Hence, from a security aspect at least, the difficulties with searching the keep were few. The second had to do with the staircases again. As much as their dilapidated condition made for dangerous climbing, the passageway to Cambridge's coffin might never have been found otherwise.

Over an hour after first setting foot in the keep, Ingrid was standing next to the largest of five spirals. Thus far, her eyes had failed her. For all her searching, not a trace of the castle lord's whereabouts had turned up, and she was about to suggest they move to a different tower when a large black spider scurried down the rounded column of the spiral. Not being a girl who cared for creeping things of any kind, she leaped back, biting off a scream, and knocked the heel of her boot against a wall with a loose stone. It meant nothing to her, that stone--at first. The entire keep was strewn with them. But when she kicked it again, it slid further to reveal a hollow space behind the wall.

"Boys?" she called. Seconds later Scott and Darren arrived. "Look at that," she said, pointing down at what she'd undone.

"A hole at the bottom of a wall," Darren said.

"Well so far this is the best I've got, sorry--"

"No no, don't misunderstand. I'm intrigued."

With that, he knelt and pulled another of the stones away.

"Damn," Scott said, nudging it with his foot. "What did the guy do, seal himself up like a check in the mail?"

Darren reached a tentative hand into the hollow space. "Cold," he whispered.

"Do the two of you think you can pull out a few more?" Ingrid asked. Hope was beginning to bloom in of her chest. "I want to know how big the space behind this wall is and whether there's anything in it."

The men dutifully set to work tearing the wall apart. The hole grew larger and larger. Concerned about the integrity of the wall, Ingrid opened her mouth to put a stop

to their labor. At that same instant, everything collapsed, spewing rubble and dust across the floor. Ingrid and Scott screamed; Darren cursed; but no one got hurt. When the dust settled, a rent appeared that was large enough for Ingrid to walk through without ducking. She asked Darren for his torch (which he had placed in a scone before going to work on the stones), shined it inside for a moment, then stepped back out.

"Well?" Scott asked, face powdered with debris.

"Well," Ingrid replied, "Cambridge is nuts."

Darren frowned. "I think we established that bit of information long ago, Ingrid. Did you see something inside of the wall?"

"I sure did. It's a casket. Large. Ornate. Pine crafted for the protection of its occupant."

"And why is that crazy?" Scott chanced.

Ingrid peered into the hole as she answered. "Because like it or not, the body always returns to nature. Cambridge is only fooling himself."

"If indeed he's in the box," Darren said, bending to get a look.

"Oh he's there all right."

"How do you know?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't. Feelings were all she had to go by today. They would be enough. In this region feelings--wisdom from the heart--were always enough, even when the sermon they preached was less than pleasant to hear.

Ingrid made her way through the broken stones to get where the casket lay. Thinking of Lisa, she said: "I just know, Darren. I just know."

XVI. Vampire

It took a long time to get the coffin open. That it had been locked from the inside came as no shock to Ingrid. For all his ambition regarding rule and organization of the region, Cambridge had no wish, for the time being at least, to be discovered. It made sense, considering that his once great plan could now be compared to the wall fortifying his retreat. Both were in ruins.

She waited while the men chipped and banged at the casket with makeshift tools. Their labor--and the swearing that went along with it--raised a significant din, and after several minutes of zero progress Scott finally voiced aloud a question that had already surfaced in Ingrid's mind.

"Why doesn't the fucker just wake up and let us in?" she heard him snap. "I mean Jesus Christ, he's gotta know by now that someone's knocking."

"I very much doubt the idea of entertaining visitors pleases him," Darren came back with.

"Scott, do you want to take a breather?" Ingrid asked, shining her torch into the hole.

"No, no. I'm all right."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

They went back to work. Ingrid went back to thinking about what she was going to say to Cambridge. Or more precisely, *how* she was going to say them. The thing of it was...they had never met. Not once. For all the changes wrought upon her life by Cambridge's maniacal ideals, in spite of all the loss and heartbreak that had grown from the spoiled crops of his failed enterprise, Ingrid had no idea what the body reposing inside the casket looked like. Until today, Cambridge had been an adversary without a face. How would their belated confrontation play out?

A deep, hollow sound of something heavy being broken came from inside the hole. "Got it!" Scott yelled.

"Wait!" Darren called. "Move slow. Nice and easy. We don't know what's inside yet. Ingrid?"

"Here," she called.

"Almost ready for you."

Inhaling a deep breath, she stepped under the wall. "Once the lid's off I want the two of you to wait outside."

"I'm not sure that's wise," Darren said, his eyes doubtful in the torchlight. "Cambridge may be old, but he's plenty dangerous. He's also a vampire."

"No he's not. There's no such thing."

"He murders people and drinks their blood. That's a vampire as far as I'm concerned."

"Ingrid," Scott broke in. He was filthy. Dust powdered his beard. Sweat gleamed on his neck and biceps.

"I'll be okay. I'll be careful."

"But--"

"And if something does go wrong I'll give a shout. Come on, boys," she went on, cutting off all further objection. "Show me some muscle. We need to get this lid off."

"Young lady I assure you," came a sudden, muffled voice that made her blood freeze, "they will have no further need at this time for physical endeavor."

And with that, the casket's heavy pine lid began to move.

His skin was the color of Carrara marble--bloodless, but for a gossamer web-work of blue veins. And indeed, Ingrid thought as she beheld his countenance, this man looked ready to be cut, to be willed by hammer and point into the godlike figure he'd once been. He gazed balefully from the casket, saying nothing, his hands at rest on the white counterpane. Uncertain of how to proceed, Ingrid stared back. She opened her mouth to speak--

"Just like I was told," Cambridge uttered.

Her eyes narrowed. "How do you mean?"

"You. Standing there, looking at me the way an insomniac looks at a clock in the middle of the night."

"I'm not sleepy just now."

"No. You're hopeless and lost, but not tired, at least for the moment."

"Did Nancy tell you that?"

"Of course. And she knew. She was your guardian, after all."

So far, only Cambridge's lips and eyes had moved. As for the rest of his body, Ingrid couldn't help but compare it to the stuff of quarries again, rigid and ghost-like, even through the black sleeping gown he wore. Yet if her earlier musing were to prove correct--if the flare in his eyes burned from an aspiration to be recast--this man was about to be disappointed. Ingrid had no goals in that direction. She'd come here for information. And perhaps to tear down any part of him that remained.

"Ingrid Semeska," the vampire proclaimed.

"Ingrid Felton."

"She's dead."

Her lip twisted. "My mother, yes."

"Her too. But I was speaking of Nancy."

"Oh. Yes, I was there when it happened."

"Were you? All I saw was the aftermath, when the dambuhala had left. This was just before dawn."

"What drew you to the cathedral?" Her curiosity was piqued. "I mean you're a vampire, aren't you?"

For the first time, the expression on Cambridge's face changed. Subtle amusement rippled its features.

"Yes," he claimed, eyebrows lifted, "and like any vampire, I'm in love with desecration."

"Stop it. That's just the opposite of what you've been trying to do with the region."

The brows dropped. "Young lady, this region is a lot of things. Desecrated is not one of them. Ungoverned. Disorganized. Reckless. But never desecrated." Cambridge stopped, drew a deep breath, and sighed. "At any rate, what I once strived for matters little at the present time. I have...nothing left to offer this land."

"That's a relief, isn't it?"

"Such wit. I care about the region every bit as much as you or anyone else who traipses about its wonders spewing poetry and vaginal fluid like they were both the same thing. Even more so, I dare say. I tried to make it a better place. A stronger place. Love is never bound by a physical deed, Miss Semeska. Tears and pain and loss imprison it as well. Lock it away to burn while its keeper feigns helplessness in the corner of some room flown by the man of her dreams. I wished to take those things away. Filter them out. Give us purity."

"I've heard that kind of talk before, mainly from televangelists on Sunday morning looking for fast money. And it's Felton, not Semeska."

His hands turned to fists. "Damn it, girl, you're not *listening!* Leave your cynicism in the progressive where it belongs. Open your heart to something other than what that young man outside gives you in bed every night."

Ingrid felt her own anger begin to swell. She gritted her teeth. "That young man brought me here, and I him, with the one kind of love this region needs. Take your own shortcomings back to the progressive where they belong--"

"You don't know anything," the vampire spat.

"Ingrid?" Scott's voice, concerned. Ingrid looked over her shoulder to find him peering through the hole.

"It's all right," she told him. "We just need a few more minutes."

"Oh yes, everything here's just lovey-dovey," came Cambridge's voice from the casket.

"Why don't you climb out of that thing so we can talk in more suitable surroundings," Ingrid asked, once Scott had retreated.

"More suitable for whom? Don't be an imbecile, girl. It's daylight out there."

She couldn't help but laugh. "Which means what? You'll burst into flames once sunlight touches your head?"

"I have forgotten what happens. But do you know what will happen to the region, now my attempt to arrange its scattered pieces has come to an end?"

"It heals."

"Parts of it will heal," he allowed. "But the parts of it that were sick to begin with--the deadly accidents that could have been prevented; the poorly planned roads that lead nowhere; the plagues; the infestations--they're going to get worse. And worse, and worse. Because nobody cares."

"They care a good deal, Cambridge. It's what this region is all--"

His head shook. "We go around and around, Miss...*Felton*," he corrected, in the nick of time. "Just do what you've come here to do. Get it over with. I'm weak."

"What do you mean?" Ingrid replied, frowning.

It irritated him. "What do you mean, *what do I mean?* Finish me. Complete your task here and go...*save* the region."

Ingrid gazed upon his weathered features, barely able to believe her ears. Her earlier intuition regarding quarries and chisels had been sharp--razor sharp. Except it wasn't resculpture Cambridge was interested in. Oh, no. Here before her lay a man who'd been beaten, and who wished to remain so. Only one final hammer-strike remained.

"Sorry," she told him, giving her head a shake. "We're not in some gothic novel from the nineteenth century. And even if we were I'd leave the stakes and hammers to men who know how to use them."

Cambridge eyed her beadily. "A delicate little flower, Ingrid? Is that what you are?"

"Delicate and wise. Strength in weakness, Cambridge. Remember that passage from the Bible?"

"I do, but I hardly think Paul and Timothy had slaying vampires in mind during the penning of 2 Corinthians."

"It's about wisdom, Cambridge. Or so I've always believed. Knowing that what makes us weak on the outside can always be subdued by the strength we carry within."

"You weren't very strong when you broke your young man's heart two years ago. Or when you dropped out of school." His lip curled into a wry smile. "Or while Randy was holding you underwater like an octopus, waiting for your breath to expire."

Ingrid, unperturbed, stared straight back at him. "I was though. I'm still here."

"Your friends saved you."

"My friends love me. And I them. That's what you're missing, Cambridge. You can't take pain and suffering away from love. They're crucial ingredients. Without them you don't have love at all."

"Is that a fact? Then tell me, Ingrid, what *do* you have?"

Her eyes narrowed. "A consumer."

"Bah!" The casket shook as his fist struck the inner lining.

"Help me put the dambuhala back, Cambridge. Tell me where you were when you brought them through. I need just that much."

He snorted. "You're going to lead them back, eh? Play a tune on your pipe and make them dance?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that."

"Tell me."

"Do I need to?"

"I'd like to hear."

He was serious. Smiling, but serious. Ingrid nodded, and after a brief update to Scott and Darren, went back to the chamber and told him everything Rupert Doody had told her in Bowershim. When she was finished Cambridge, like any good listener, repeated the story's key points in order to clear any possible misconceptions on his part.

"So you're going to breach the interstice whilst in the misty realm of a lucid dream," he said, blinking into the shadows. "Lucky you, to be able to control what your subconscious shows you at night. I never remember my dreams."

Ingrid's eyes dropped. "I don't control my subconscious."

"What do you mean?" the other frowned. "Isn't that what lucid dreaming is?"

"Yes."

"And you don't know how?"

"Well..." she faltered, biting her lip. "No."

Cambridge's chest sank as he let out a heavy sigh. "This Rupert Doody gave you a book with instructions on how to achieve the state necessary for access to the interstice. You read it, I presume."

"Of course I read it."

"But it didn't sink in."

"I guess not," Ingrid replied bitterly. "But then I didn't get much time for field practice. Your nephew drowned me. Your sister chained me in a dungeon and put me under a curse."

"Ah yes, the night terror curse. It was always her favorite." His fingers drummed the counterpane. "Though in your case, girl, it would have helped more than hindered. *Should* have helped."

"I guess I was too busy trying not to die of fright."

Cambridge looked away with a shrug. "*Che sera, sera*, Ingrid. Oh and by the way, your teacher has at least part of his instructions wrong. You may wish to fact-check the rest, just to be certain."

"What are you talking about this time?"

"What is it that everyone talks about in this region? Emotions, girl. But it isn't hatred that's going to reopen the interstice for the dambuhala. Hatred is for higher states of consciousness. The ogres don't feel it."

"Then how did you get them here in the first place?"

"Ah. Tell me, Miss Felton, in your opinion, what is the most primitive, the most rudimentary emotion there is?"

"Well..."

"Come on. You're a smart girl."

She thought of the ogres, mindlessly rending and tearing their way through the region. And whether she liked to admit it or not, Cambridge had a point. The dambuhala didn't seem intelligent enough to feel hatred, or any other emotion produced from advanced thought. So what did that leave? Something primitive, as she'd already been told. Something basic that lived in every corner of every thought of every living brain.

"The first emotion," Ingrid said, half to herself.

"Right you are. And that would be...?"

Her head shook. "Oh no. Fear?"

"Give the girl a stuffed bear, carny, she's done well."

"It can't be right," she said, though in her heart a different truth became more clear by the second.

"Why not?" Cambridge asked. "For all the destruction they do, Miss Felton, the dambuhala are animals. Animals lured into a strange new world and trapped there. Trapped to scramble like mad for a way out. They're not angry—that was another of my mistakes. They're terrified."

His choice of words reminded Ingrid of something Darren had said at camp the previous week: *The dambuhala won't need coaxing...they'll rush to their own region like insects to a crack in the wall...*

Somehow, she began to feel even less adequate than before. Doody had instructed her how to use anger, not fear, to open the interstice. Would the chemistry for both emotions be the same? Surely not. But hate was all the girl she'd seen in the Carlson Glass had to give. *Hate her back*, Doody had said. But where would that lead the ogres?

"Hatred does have a region somewhere, right?" she asked.

"Oh, undoubtedly. And yes," Cambridge cut in, reading her thoughts, "I suppose it would be possible to adhere to your tutor's instructions. The interstice would open--probably--and the dambuhala would rush right in. Then they would become the problem of whomever or whatever lived on the other side."

"If we're talking about a region of hatred I'm not sure I care."

A look of surprise took hold of his face. "No? Goodness."

"What?" she asked.

"You continue to astound me with your naiveté. Even if I do agree to help you, Miss Felton, it may not matter. You lack the education needed to comprehend these emotions."

The remark stung. Ingrid's hands closed into fists. "I know more than you. What about empathy, Mister Cambridge? Did you care at all about those girls you killed? "

"I chose not to care in order to serve a higher purpose."

"Your vampirism?" Ingrid was suddenly furious. All the hurt Cambridge had done the region flooded her thoughts. "I ought to have Scott and Darren drag you outside right now. We'll find out just how meaningful your purpose is."

"You, on the other hand," Cambridge continued, "have no choices to make in the matter. You know of only one, simple way. Hatred may not be a pleasant thing to feel, Miss Felton, but it's still an emotion. It gets things done."

"I can't think of anything good coming out of hating somebody."

"Hatred requires not a living target. Plenty of good derives from negative beginnings, Miss Felton. A man may build a tree house for his son because he hates the thought of disappointing him. A woman may paint a mural on a wall because she hates how plain it looks. I daresay the region of hatred is not at all barbaric, but a glorious, prosperous place, filled with the achievements of its dwellers."

She shrugged. "It still doesn't sound like a tourist spot to me. But your point is taken, Mister Cambridge. So I'll ask again," she went on, braving the vampire's proximity by leaning over the coffin, "tell me where you brought the dambuhala through, so I can put them back. If fear is the primary emotion of their region then fear is what I'll use."

He waited a long time before answering. Scott and Darren checked on her again; she told them she was fine. Then she took a deep breath and circled to the other side of the chamber. Something--a rodent, it sounded like--skittered across the floor. She didn't let it scare her the way such creatures normally would. Cambridge appeared to be deep in thought. Soon, she was convinced, his secret would be hers. It made these seconds alone with him critical; any distraction held the potential to change the

vampire's mind and end their conversation with the veil undrawn. And so she waited, still holding her breath, until at last Cambridge turned his head in her direction.

"It would do better to show you than to tell you," he said.

"Why?" Ingrid plumed, before gasping deep with some much needed air.

"Because I want to be there when it happens," he answered. "It's a fascinating thing to behold, the opening of the interstice. Also..." He trailed off, closing his eyes.

"Yes?"

"You'll need someone with you--a person who has at least some vague, conscious experience with these things--to reduce the risk of failure."

"All right. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. You need to discover what it is that scares you more than anything, so it may be conjured at the proper time and projected onto your childhood compeer. Otherwise the entire endeavor is for naught." His head turned away. "Now get out of here. Come back to the castle tonight. I'll be waiting."

Ingrid's heart sank--she'd been afraid of that request. "I was rather hoping you could come with us now," she said.

"Not a chance. Now be off." His hand made a shooing gesture. "But tell your brutes to replace the lid before they leave."

She had no choice but to comply with the vampire's wishes. Promising him that she would indeed return, she stumbled back to the broken wall.

"Ingrid?" Cambridge called, just as she reached the archway of ancient stones. "What are you afraid of, girl? What are you *truly* afraid of? The answer means the difference between success and failure."

She looked at him. "If I knew you would be the last person I'd tell."

"Very wise. Perhaps the compeer can help."

"She doesn't exist."

"She exists in your dreams. There is where you will need to look. Goodbye."

With that piece of instruction given, the vampire closed his eyes. Ingrid climbed through the hole, nervous already about how the castle--and Cambridge as well--would look at night.

I wish I could go home, she thought, for the first time ever since setting foot in this region. *Oh how I wish I could just go home.*

But as she had already told Scott, this was her home. They returned to the castle that night (Darren, anticipating a long journey, had procured four niddi from the village in exchange for what little money they had left, along with a portrait, drawn by Ingrid, of the family that owned the niddy farm) under a starry sky. Finding the castle again did not turn out to be the tricky business she had feared. The moon was bright; its silvery gleam shimmered on the waters of Coldfrock Lake.

To make matters even simpler, Cambridge was waiting for them at the well in the courtyard. The hair on his head gleamed almost as bright as the waters. He looked at them with a face somewhat surprised at seeing their approach from the gorge tower as opposed to the main gate.

"A girl of many guiles," he grinned.

Ingrid gestured for the two boys to stop. Alert and awake, Cambridge of course made for a far more imposing figure. He stood as tall as Darren, cloaked in robes of purple and black. Seeing Ingrid stop short caused him to tilt his head, allowing the grin to linger like a dying candle whose observance had passed. Trying not to make the fact of her uneasiness too obvious, Ingrid stood on tip-toe and asked where it was they would be going from here. Cambridge gave the name of a village by way of response: Rudgard.

"That's at least twelve hours away," Darren moaned.

"We'll be there by dawn," Cambridge replied, the grin still lingering. "Then I sleep. Then we get back to work." The grin flickered out. "Questions?"

"None from me," Ingrid told him. But the impertinent sound in his voice bothered her all the same. Cambridge, whether she liked it or not, had taken sudden and immediate control over the group. His knowledge of where the ogres' homing ritual would take place granted that. No wonder he'd refused to speak of it outright. Now they were all at the mercy of his remorse--or lack thereof.

It was nearing ten o'clock when they left the stables. For Ingrid, the night that followed passed with the slow dreaminess of a galleon crossing a fjord. Just shy of midnight she was shaken from her torpor by, of all things, a meteor shower. The niddi were making their way across one of the region's many grassy hillsclapes--Cambridge's was in front, then Darren's, then Ingrid's, then Scott's. Ingrid looked at the moon just in time to see a streak of light beyond a row of distant trees. This was followed by another, and another. Before long, the entire sky looked strewn with melting icicles.

"What's going on?" Scott asked, gazing at the torrent with his mouth unhinged.

Both boys looked at Cambridge to answer, which made Ingrid grimace. This was an especially odd reaction for Darren, who had every reason to hate the vampire the same way that she did but so far had given no outward indications.

"The meteor showers in this region have always been strong," he said at present, when Cambridge didn't answer. "There's a comet that's in close orbit to the sun."

"So we're on another planet?" Ingrid asked, intrigued.

The meteors were now shooting to and fro like fireworks over their heads. Darren studied them for several seconds before answering.

"I believe we're on a different version or idea of the same planet, but hard facts on the subject are difficult to pin down, even for scholars."

In the next hour they entered a wooded area steeped in the music of a shallow stream. Around this same time a breeze got up, rustling the moonlit foliage with whispered scents of berries and wildflowers. Ingrid's attention stayed with Cambridge, who had yet to speak a word since leaving the castle. Perhaps being in such close proximity to Darren made him feel too awkward for chat, but she doubted it. He was plotting something, developing some final plan to usurp the region.

How, Ingrid asked herself, would I go about that, if I were him?

A number of ideas seemed plausible. Would he slaughter them all in their sleep? Not likely. He was still in need of her services. Would he wait then, until after the ritual, to perhaps blow her head off with a kickshellac? Slit her throat with a dagger? Strangle her with his bare hands?

Plausible but not probable. For one thing, Scott and Darren were both strong and capable bodyguards. For another, the region dwellers already despised Cambridge far beyond any willingness to bend to his ambition. No reparatory deed or deeds, however sweet, would change that. He was an outcast, a pariah. A done duck. Killing their freedom fighters would make things worse.

Still, the vampire just had to know something. Just *had* to. But what?

They reached Rudgard while she was still wondering. The village possessed features, both cosmetic and social, very similar to Bowershim's. There was a business district built around a public square (though at this hour of the morning, the one OPEN sign Ingrid could see hung in the window of a bakery shop). Large, ancient trees lined the streets, with houses Queen Anne and Stick in style dozing beneath them. Pretty enough, Ingrid thought.

Pretty enough at one time, at least. In a way that was also very much like Bowershim, Rudgard had been left in a state close to ruin. Ingrid now saw that many of the businesses around the square were closed not because of the hour, but because they'd been heavily damaged. Windows and doors were missing, replaced with crude slats of wood bearing notices scrawled in red. Alley-ways were piled with torn clothing and broken furniture. Ingrid recognized it all. Breathing odors of earth and asphalt in equal measure, she asked Cambridge--though she already knew the answer--if the dambuhala had been to Rudgard.

"Oh yes," he said over his shoulder.

It silenced her. He sounded impressed by what he was seeing, and she couldn't stomach that.

"Bastard," Scott voiced.

At the other side of the square Cambridge motioned for them to stop. The skies were still dark, but wouldn't be for much longer. What that meant for the vampire could scarcely be in dispute. Looking through the trees, he pronounced their journey at an end.

"I must feed," he uttered, with an air of theatricality Ingrid found ridiculous, "and then I must sleep."

"Feed?" she asked, giggling her niddy up to Darren's.

He nodded. "That's right. The blood of--"

"Forget it."

"A lamb," he finished, with a tilt of his head.

"Where are we supposed to find a lamb?"

"Allow concern for such matters to lie with me."

"This oughtta be rich," Scott put in. "You're going to do what? Sneak out behind some farmer's stable and grab one of his animals around the neck?"

Cambridge cleared his throat. "Allow concern for such matters to lie with me."

"I think not," Darren said. "On this trip, you dine in the company of your companions or not at all."

They managed to locate a butcher doing an early trade in front of his once proud establishment, and an hour after that found an abandoned house on a dead-end street. By then, the skies were purple, and Cambridge, once finished with his raw, bloody meal,

had become ill at ease. Still, he had some advice to give Ingrid before retiring to the basement.

"Study," he said. "Learn the trick of lucid dreaming. It's your only chance for access to the interstice."

"You already told me you're not a lucid dreamer, Mister Cambridge" she said, leaning her head on Scott's shoulder.

"No. Sometimes, but...no."

"Then tell me how you brought the dambuhala through?"

The vampire studied the remains of the house's dusty hearth. "Chemicals and magic. Prayers. Hiding places." He looked at her. "And did they work? Oh indeed. But the emotion was fear, not hate. Fear of the interstice, of the beasts themselves, both of which have since abandoned me."

"What did it look like?"

"The interstice?" A sigh dropped from his chest. "Vast. Abysmal. But empty. A canvas bereft of color for the myriad passions it feeds. Bled of feeling by hearts like yours and mine."

"Is that what you saw or is that you're theorizing?"

"One is just the same as the other for a nihilist like me."

She blinked at these words but decided not to pursue them. "Can you open it again?"

Cambridge's answer came as no surprise. "Not with hate. But now," he pronounced, rising from his chair, "the time has come for sleep. I advise the three of you to follow suit. Tonight we ride to the locus, where Miss Felton will make her first attempt at undoing the wrong I have done."

Ingrid felt a worm of anxiety twist in her belly. This was it, then. She and her friends had come a long way over the past month, but this was finally it. The dambuhala had been to Rudgard once; tonight, they would return.

Scott and Darren followed Cambridge into the basement, leaving her to contemplate this fact in solitude. Fact, not possibility, she told herself over and over, forcing her confidence to be strong. Despite Cambridge's allusion that the breach would take more than one attempt, she wanted to get it on the first try. One and done. It was by no means a realistic aspiration (she still didn't have an answer to Cambridge's question--*what are you truly afraid of?*--or even a certainty that the question was important in the first place), but she wondered whether she had a choice. Under these circumstances, what did trial and error mean? What if she were able to open the interstice long enough to get the ogres in front of it, but not long enough to get them through? That would leave nine-hundred of the beasts together in one place. Or what if she herself were to fall into the region of fear with them? Or what if Scott were killed? Or Darren? Or both?

What if this, what if that. With each failed attempt the probabilities for catastrophe would rise, until sooner or later, one of them came true.

"Jesus," she uttered, staring into the hearth. "Stop it, already."

And so she cast her mind to more pleasant things until the boys' return. Most of them involved memories of Lisa. Evenings spent at the Ship-To-Shore, laughing in the

lake breeze. But she also remembered Trixie Keefer and Danielle Brewner--high school friends like Scott who had drifted away, but who, unlike Scott, had yet to find their way back. Where were they at this exact second? Both were passionate about malls and beaches. Ingrid estimated it would be late June by now in the progressive region. Summer had just begun. For her that meant days spent alone in her room and nights spent working at Cedar Point. Trixie and Danielle, on the other hand, would be making the very most of their freedom.

"Hi," Scott said, pulling her from the reverie.

"There you are," she blinked. "Is Cambridge all tucked in?"

He laughed and sat down. "Snug as a bug in a rug. Darren and I are going to work in shifts watching his little niche on a carpentry shelf."

"Aww."

"Ready for tonight?"

She moved to sit on his lap, letting his arms envelop her. "I'm not sure it's possible to be ready for a thing like this."

"You're right." His voice sounded chastened. "I guess that was a stupid question."

"There are no stupid questions, Scott."

"Is that a challenge?"

She laughed into the crook of his neck. "Yeah, hit me with your best shot."

"Okay. So tell me, Ingrid...what the hell is a locus?"

This puzzled her for a few moments. But then she remembered it, and got to laughing so hard she had to cling to Scott to keep from falling off the couch.

"I mean are there going to be *bugs* at this thing?" Scott asked. "Monsters and maniacs are one thing, Ingrid, but *bugs*..."

"Stop it, that's not what it means. You're thinking of *locust* not *locus*."

"Well that's a relief," he sighed.

"I believe locus means a point or a place on a map. Something like that."

"What a weird guy. Why didn't he just say that?"

"Who knows? Maybe he just got tired of using the same old words."

She stopped laughing and looked at him. His beard was still there--a little thicker than the way she liked it but still nice. He looked back, and she had time to wonder what he saw. Then, they collapsed into each others' arms, laughing too hard to think of anything else.

"Now I know the first thing I'm going to do once we get back to the progressive," Ingrid said, after they'd settled down.

"What's that, sweetheart?"

"Buy you a thesaurus."

He lay motionless for the next thirty minutes, letting Ingrid drift off in his arms. Then, after easing her onto the sofa, Scott stood and went to the window. The journey was not a simple one, as he and Darren had earlier blocked all light sources in the room with furniture to provide the illusion of night. Nor was what lay at the end any great value. Scott peered around a desk to see that the dead-end street looked as desolate now as it had upon their arrival. More, perhaps, now that dawn had broken. Houses

with sagging porches and broken windows wept in the morning light, their tears the sharp glass that shined in the gutters. Standing before one was a young girl in a filthy dress. She held a crippled doll, and her eyes were roving in apparent search for its missing limb. Scott watched her check both ends of the street several times, until at last she decided to forfeit the game. Dropping the doll in the dirt, the girl ran behind one of the other empty houses and was gone.

Scott focused his ears on the sound of Ingrid's breathing until he managed to rediscover the spartan circle of furniture where she slept and sat down. From here, he must have dozed for awhile, for he remembered nothing between this time and the time of his arrest by Cambridge's thugs. There was a blur, and then someone was shaking him. Darren? Yes, it was Darren, come to administer a change of watch.

No, it wasn't Darren. Darren was sitting across from him, arms behind his back, blood dripping from a wound on his temple. And he wasn't being shaken. He was being thrashed. His hands were pinned to the small of his back while a rope wound around his wrists.

"Hey!" he cried, kicking at the large, dark shape over the chair.

Someone punched him. Behind, the rope was pulled, twisted, and pulled again. Now he couldn't move his arms at all. His eyes were watery from the punch. He blinked the tears away to discover three men, one of them with a kickshellac, standing by the couch.

"Get his legs," an unarmed one said.

The voice, unctuous with pleasure over what was happening, did not take long to recognize. Nor did the wide, round shape of its proprietor.

"Shit, Randy," Scott said, "it figures you wouldn't break your neck like anyone else after falling down a flight of steps."

"You want another punch in the head, loverboy?"

Scott's ankles were drawn together and tied tightly as his wrists. Powerless, he scowled at Ingrid's foster brother, wishing harder than ever that he'd taken the trouble to kill him earlier. Now that their roles were reversed, there was little chance Randy would commit such an error.

"Where's Ingrid?" Scott demanded.

"STAND UP!" Randy yelled by way of reply.

She was still on the couch, of course, just now coming awake to the brewing catastrophe. Her arm was yanked hard enough to make her cry out, and a number of crude, foul, four-letter interjections for Randy surfaced in Scott's mind, begging to be vomited, but he kept his tongue, knowing that to use them would fast-track an already imminent execution.

Darren was also quiet. He gazed at the men (the other two looked to be guards from the castle, though Scott couldn't be certain) with a searching, thoughtful expression. Could he be scheming something?

Meanwhile, Ingrid looked despairingly at Scott. Even less pleased with the goings on was Cambridge, who presently appeared in the room. He looked, in fact, furious. "You," he said at Randy, "are the stupidest boy I have ever known."

"*What?*" Randy thundered. "I did everything right! We followed you all the way here without being seen! We took all three of these fuckers quietly as mice--"

"You were not to make any moves upon them until *after* the breach! *AFTER!*"

"Oh for Christ's sake, who cares! They're *yours!*"

"Idiot! The girl will never be able to accomplish the task on her own now! Chemicals will have to be used! Unstable, unpredictable chemicals! *Idiot!*"

Flabbergasted, Scott looked from one crazy person to the other. How had it all happened so fast? One moment he was dozing, his mind on broken toys and wandering little girls, the next he was a prisoner at the mercy of rabid wolves.

Failed you again, he thought, turning his eyes to Ingrid, Rudgard's newest wandering girl. *How many times is that now?*

Cambridge and Randy continued to bicker. Darren was looking at a pair of candles on a nearby table. Ingrid's head was down, her shoulders slumped; no amount of willfulness from Scott could lift them. She seemed to have given up hope. She'd been beaten, drowned, cursed. Now she was about to be drugged. All because the man she had chosen as her partner in life lacked the strength to do his job.

Sorry, Scott wanted to say, *I'm so sorry*.

Except there was an old family saying when it came to apologies, handed down by his dad, which Scott still used on himself from time to time: *Sorry ain't got it!*

Never had those words been more true than at this moment. To apologize now was tantamount to admitting defeat. No good. It couldn't be over yet. He wasn't willing to let his life with Ingrid and the baby go for fire, ice, or anything in between.

Darren nudged him. "Any ideas?" he whispered.

"Not yet. But--" His eye stopped on the candles. "Wait," Scott said. "Yes...I may have something after all."

XVII. Captors

It was laundry day.

Ingrid always waited until after dark to wash her own clothes--a task that gave her the creeps, for the machines were located in the basement next to an empty apartment Nancy and her husband had been neglecting for years. Ignoring the tingles in her spine, she dropped her basket on the floor and began loading the washer. The furnace ticked. The light flickered. Ingrid told herself not to pay attention to the apartment's doorway, which at night was black as coal.

Breathing the musty scent of hundred year-old masonry, she turned the washer's knob to COLD, pulled , waited. The tank began to fill.

And something in the apartment moved.

Ingrid whirled. There was the doorway, ten feet from where she stood. Yet she could see nothing but the dark of the hour.

"Quit being stupid," she told herself, bending to pick up the basket.

"*Stupid*," a voice echoed.

Ingrid screamed. The voice laughed. "Gotcha!" it said.

Jo-Jo appeared, with a grin so tight-lipped it might have been cut with a razor.

"Bitch," she spat, the grin twitching, "what are you doing down here?"

Ingrid watched herself—her angry, incompetent self, the part of her she hated but knew how to live with, the part of her Randy had taken to bullying long after the novelty had gone.

"Washing my clothes," she told the doppelganger.

"Got it all under control, do you?"

"What?"

"Let the region die, Ingrid. You can't save it. You don't know what to feel."

Suddenly the stairway door burst open. "INGRID!" Randy's voice boomed, and everything shook as he started to come down.

"Watch out!" Jo-Jo cackled.

A huge body covered in black hair--an ogre--appeared on the steps. Ingrid turned to run but tripped over something and fell. In seconds the ogre was picking her up, shaking her, howling at her. A clawed hand reached to take hold of her neck. And Ingrid had just enough time, before her head was twisted off, to see that Jo-Jo was laughing so hard she could barely stand up.

"STAND UP!" Randy yelled.

Someone yanked her into a sitting position. The remains of the dream were still spattered everywhere, sticky globs of grease, but Ingrid knew she was awake now--and in trouble. Her arm was pulled so taut behind her back it wanted to snap at the shoulder. Darren was trussed on his knees in front of the hearth. Scott too. What the hell had happened?

"How ya feelin?" Randy's fat face asked.

She blinked. Cambridge appeared from down the hall and told him to shut up. Randy did, but when the vampire began to berate him (something about moving in too soon, jumping the gun), he started shouting again. Before long both men were bickering like schoolyard bullies, which made them easy, at least for the time being, to ignore. Ingrid looked at Scott, who was looking at a candle. Surely nothing helpful would come of that.

Or would it? She saw Darren whisper something to him; Scott whispered back. *Well*, she thought, *if you boys are planning something, you'd better make it good.*

"I told you!" Cambridge barked, "there's no more time for poetry! The procedure now needs to be chemical in nature!"

"Fine!" Randy said. "Shoot her up! I don't care!"

"I don't think you care about anything! You realize your mother's *dead*, correct?"

Randy's voice lowered. "Yes. And I also realize your promise to her is not. Something about governing the West?"

"Not a chance. I'm not handing over half the region to a fat fool."

"Then I withdraw my help."

"Fuck off," Cambridge replied, which stunned Ingrid more than anything he'd said so far. "I don't need you." He nodded, and the barrel of a kickshellac rose.

Knowing he was beaten, Randy showed his empty palms to the soldiers. The expression of disbelief on his face gave Ingrid a picture of how she herself felt. She was certain they were going to kill Randy--that she was about to see his brains get splattered all over the hearth.

Instead, Cambridge told him to leave. "Out of respect for your mother I'm letting you go," he explained. "But don't let me see you again. Ever."

Randy hesitated. Then, his heavy feet were pounding across the room. He reached the door, opened it, and disappeared into a ray of sunlight.

"A joyous occasion," Cambridge smiled, turning to his captive audience, "to have that...brainless bovid off of our playing field forever, yes?"

"If you think he won't be back you're a fool."

Darren said it. Cambridge didn't rise to the remark, but Ingrid saw his smile falter as he told one of the guards to go outside and send for, of all things, a handmaiden. Bewildered, she watched the guard leave. Once more the ray of sunlight appeared on the step, and this time Cambridge cringed.

"Handmaiden?" Ingrid asked him. "Why?"

"Because," the vampire said, relaxing a little as the door closed, "you must be cleaned and properly dressed for the ritual."

"As I understand it, I'm going to be drugged. So what's the point?"

"The basic conventions must still be observed. You will open the interstice so the ogres may return to their own region. Then you will close the interstice. The error I made will be erased, and I can build afresh."

"And if I refuse you're going to kill Darren and Scott."

"Oh I'm going to kill them anyway," Cambridge said matter-of-factly.

The words were an icicle through Ingrid's heart, but she did her best not to let it show. "So...why should I help you at all?"

Looking more relaxed than ever, the vampire smiled. "Because if you don't, dear girl, I'm going to tell this soldier to kill both of them right here, right now, right in front of you."

Her mouth fell open. This was an irony, for she could think of nothing at all to say. Cambridge had everyone right where he wanted them. The game was his.

"Of course," he smiled on, "you can postpone their deaths by doing my bidding. Grant them a little more time. But even if you're feeling too merciful for that, you wouldn't want to *watch* them die, would you? Your lover especially. No, not him, not now."

At the mention of Scott, Ingrid glanced to check on his well-being. This was the part where he was supposed to tell her not to be intimidated by Cambridge's threats, to go ahead and deny him anyway and let everyone die with honor. He did not seem ready for martyrdom yet, however; he gave Ingrid a tiny shake of his head, then turned his eyes to Darren. The two of them did indeed have some plan or other in mind, then. Or so she hoped.

Minutes later there came a knock at the door, and in stepped the other soldier with a withered old woman on one arm and a large, rectangular box on the other.

"Is that the dress?" Cambridge asked, eyeing the box.

"Yes, sir," the soldier replied, "along with the serum."

"Marvelous. Please conduct Miss Felton and Ms..." he smiled at the handmaiden, who then told him in a rather raspy voice that her name was Echo Gardener. "And Ms. Gardener upstairs. Find a suitable room for them to work in. We leave at dusk for the field."

"Yes, sir."

"Never you worry, Ingrid," Cambridge said, seeing the desperate look on her face as she was led away, "no one dies until your usefulness has expired. And you needn't be present for the executions. When this is over you may return to your habit of hiding away from the things that pain you. That is, after all, your greatest skill."

They had to wait until all but one of the captors were gone before moving. This, for Scott, was a far worse kind of torture than being bound and held at gunpoint. The temptation to act sooner, to prevent Cambridge from leaving with Ingrid, was powerful. He wanted to move *now*. But the risk of failure loomed. Besides Cambridge, there were soldiers in the house. One of those soldiers, he hoped though he had no actual way of knowing, planned to accompany the vampire tonight. That would leave one man on guard for him and Darren to subdue. It was tactics. It made sense. Thus, in an agony of self-mastery, they waited.

"What if the fucking guard decides to blow the candle out?" Darren whispered at one point. "Do we ask him nicely to please light it again?"

"Fuck the variables," Scott whispered back, keeping his eye on the soldier, who'd been eating what looked like a cinnamon roll at the time.

"We can't do that. If something fucks up we need to be prepared."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"Because there are so many things that can and probably will fuck up once we make our move it'd take us a week to list them all."

"You don't sound very confident about our chances."

"I can't think of any other way out."

"Me either. You're right, then. Let's just do this thing and give them all the hell we can."

Late that afternoon Ingrid was brought downstairs. By then Scott's ankles and wrists had gone numb, and his spine was throbbing. Lack of a proper meal for the whole day (the guard offered nothing but bread, water, and hoarse curses for both prisoners to digest, two of which were served on a plate as if to a pair of dogs) had his belly in an acidic ruckus. But when Ingrid glided into the room, wearing a purple Victorian dress with black gloves and flowered hat, all creature discomforts fell by the wayside. Indeed, he almost didn't recognize her. Her hair had been lifted into a bun, framing a face pale with make-up, the cheeks rouged, the lips tintured. The dress, flounced with ruffles, had been pulled to accentuate its lady's every curve, whilst beneath the hem a pair of black boots lent a full inch to her height. The sight of her clicking into the room with her hands clasped at her middle silenced even the loquacious, cinnamon-eating guard; and when Cambridge returned from the basement minutes later, he froze for several moments before gushing his approval.

"Delectable and delightful," he uttered, eyes twinkling. "Ms. Cardener, I am so very pleased."

"*Gardener*," the old woman rasped back. "You destroyed my town with the zoo you let escape and now you can't even remember my name." She stood in front of hearth, wrinkled and frail. "Very touching."

"Rudgard's glory days are still in its future, Ms--"

"I'm not from Rudgard, I'm from Thorncut!"

"Well *wherever!*" Cambridge barked, growing tired of the rigmarole. "Everything about this entire region will be as gold! Perfection! Or choose whatever word pertaining to greatness that suits you!"

The other guard had gone outside after Ingrid's reappearance; now he came back, nipping off whatever retort the seamstress would have cast. "Sir? The wagon's arrived. Preparations are complete."

"Very well. Miss Felton?" Her head turned. "We leave in one hour. Until then you wait in the kitchen."

It turned out to be closer to ninety minutes--this because Cambridge wanted absolute surety the setting sun's rays would not touch his skin whilst on the hill of the breach. The hill in question apparently had no name, or if it did, Scott failed to overhear it mentioned. Nor did he pick up any clues to its location. His hope, however, that Cambridge would take one of the guards with him proved sensible. This time the quieter, more obedient guard remained behind after Ingrid was taken off, with the sounds of hooves and wagon wheels as her single farewell. Thus, he and Darren were stuck to cope with the smarter of the two, if not necessarily the stronger. And once they were alone the very first thing he did was put out the candle.

"Asshole," Darren said, watching the man as he wetted his fingers. Then, to Scott: "Fuck the variables huh? You would have made a shitty mathematician, you know that?"

The guard took a seat on the couch. "Don't be angry. You would have set yourselves on fire, trying to burn through the ropes."

"Where is the breach going to take place?" Scott asked, feeling curdled.

"Even if I knew I wouldn't tell you."

"Why not? We're going to die anyway."

"Because your friend's right. Never say fuck the variables."

On those words an explosion rang out, sending the guard flailing with blood spurting from his thigh. Darren wasted no time with the rest. Leaning back, he kicked with his tied feet and knocked the wounded man cold.

"Well, *shit!*" Echo Gardener snarled. A smoking kickshellac rested in her bony arms. "I'm sorry about that! I was aiming for his head!"

"Then I'm glad you missed," Darren told her. "There's been enough death in my life." He flashed her a smile. "Now as a seamstress you may not be much for shooting a gun, but I bet you're a wizard at loosening rope."

The streets of Rudgard were hot and humid. Summer took part of the blame, but Ingrid also knew that the dress, which weighed near one hundred pounds, could not be entirely absolved. Its designer at least possessed enough humanity to include a fan, which she used now, as the wagon trundled through a town learning how to live again. Gas lamps flickered over sidewalks where more makeshift kiosks like the butcher's were set. Between these walked dozens of women dressed much like Ingrid herself, some with men, others with children, others still—though these by far were the scarcest—alone. Ingrid looked from one to the next, wondering what was in the bags they carried, what they were shopping for. To judge by their dour expressions (and by the simple, no-nonsense wares hanging in the kiosks) it was nothing pertaining to pleasure or leisure. Survival was the order of the times, and it was grim business for all.

A thought struck her then. "Cambridge?" Ingrid asked, peering overtop her fan at a little girl selling flowers. "If I open the interstice, and the dambuhala come charging back, won't that put Rudgard in harm's way again?"

"Yes, I should think so."

"And you don't care?"

His hand gave a tiny wave. "The region as it is today interests me very little. All that matters is what I intend to do with it. The kingdom it will become."

"Is that what you have in mind? Royalty?"

"Yes," Cambridge purred, relishing the idea. "A new passion for this region, one stronger than all the rest. For that to happen, of course, will require conversion. Soon romantic love will no longer be the required currency for passage. Soon...it will be *loyalty*."

Ingrid fell silent. Here was a new twist in the vampire's impossible scheme. Could a region's passion be changed? Her eye wandered again to the women walking to and

fro. None, she had to admit, looked like they were in love. They looked more ready to cry, or lash out at the nearest possible catalyst for their misery.

Take your eyes off your shoes for one second, she thought, and you'll see that catalyst riding by, the only person in town with a smile on his face.

"They all hate you," she told the vampire.

"They won't once they see I'm the last hope for setting things straight again. And they *will* see it."

The wagon had reached the outskirts of town. A large hole in the road jostled everyone in their seats, causing Ingrid to drop her fan. Like a perfect gentleman, Cambridge bent and retrieved it for her.

"When will they see?" she asked.

"When they're so desperate they can't see anything else."

"Let's move," Scott said. He had already stretched and wriggled the feeling back into his limbs, but the pain from being tied up--as well as the humiliation that went with it--was far from his main concern. "I need to get back to Ingrid. I don't know what Cambridge has planned for her, but--"

"You know exactly what he has planned for her," Darren said. He stood with Echo's kickshellac in one hand and a satchel in the other. "He's going to use her to breach the interstice."

"Yes but I don't know what that *means*."

"It means total chaos," a rusty gate—the voice of Echo Gardener—put in, "at least for a little while. The exact opposite of what Cambridge is striving for."

Darren nodded. "The dambuhala will be everywhere, running from all different directions to get home."

The picture these words conjured for Scott was far from happy. "So Rudgard's going to get hit again?" he asked.

"Very likely."

"Chaos," Echo repeated. "Cambridge must be clinging to that old Goldenbough axiom. 'In a realm of chaos, there is no striving--'"

"but towards order," Darren finished. "Maybe he is. But even if he isn't, we have to let it all happen. Ingrid needs to open the interstice."

"Yes," Scott said, though it pained him to agree. "We also need to make sure we don't lose her. What's in the bag?"

Darren looked at the satchel almost as if he'd forgotten it. "Oh...provisions. Ingrid's old clothes. Some food. Ammunition for the gun."

"I'll carry it. How long do you think this..." he floundered for the right word "...homing for the dambuhala is going to take?"

"That depends on how far away the monsters are. And how well Ingrid can hold things together."

Scott took the satchel. "Let's go. We'll follow the wagon on foot. Less chance of being spotted that way."

"Right you are. Echo? Will you be all right here?"

"Oh I can tie rope as well as loosen it," the old woman answered, eyeing the unconscious guard. "In fact I don't need all of it. Take some for yourself."

"Thank you," Scott told her, "for everything. I don't know how else to say it. Thank you."

Echo smiled at him, and when she next spoke the harsh rasp had gone. "Young man," she said, "in this region, everyone knows how to say just the right thing."

"What's the name of that mountain?" Ingrid wanted to know.

They had left the wagon behind. This because no road climbed hill of tall grass on which they now strode. Out here in the open air, with Rudgard over a mile off, Ingrid anticipated some respite from the heat. But no. If anything, it was worse. Her breath was coming up short and her legs were beginning to wobble. Her heart skipped in her chest. Thus, as a way to distract herself, she asked about the mountain that loomed on their right.

"Mount Chariness," Cambridge said, "the region's only volcano."

"Active?" she plumed.

"Dormant."

A short time later the three of them--Ingrid, Cambridge, and the beefy soldier--reached the top of the hill. There was not a breath of wind to be found, and the night bugs were singing merry hell. Ingrid looked in every direction for Scott, but her eyes found only trees and fields. Maybe his plan--whatever it was--hadn't come to fruition after all. Maybe he was dead already. It did her no good to despair over such things but the thought persisted. *Dead already*, a voice--Jo-Jo's, perhaps--kept whispering, *he's gone, you've lost him again. This time forever.*

"Here," Cambridge told the soldier.

A large, pink quilt was spread over the grass and anchored with stones. Cambridge then told Ingrid to stand next to it.

"Now then," he said, once she was in place, "please remove your dress and anything you have on underneath. You may forgo your boots."

Ingrid gawked. "Uh...what?"

Giving her a helpless expression that seemed to suggest none of this was his idea, Cambridge repeated himself. "It is required for the subject to be...refined during the ritual," he went on to explain. "Otherwise there may be complications, none of which we have time for."

"But I don't want to be undressed," Ingrid said, eyeing both of the men now, in particular the soldier, whose grin was broadening by the second.

"This isn't a question of what you want, girl. None of it ever has been. This is a matter of what must be."

"Oh come on!" Her heart began to race. Crazy as his instructions were, Cambridge looked deadly serious. Ingrid looked to her left, to her right. Still no Scott. "I can't!" she pleaded.

"Must I ask this brute to assist you then?" the vampire responded, without the slightest trace of resignation.

"Cambridge, *please.*"

"Remove the dress, Miss Felton, or I shall have it removed for you."

The soldier took a step forward.

"Okay!" Ingrid screamed, jumping back. "Okay, okay! Just...wait!"

And the vampire, looking pleased, nodded. "Good girl."

Hunkered in the tall grass, Scott watched the soldier move towards Ingrid, heard Ingrid's scream tear over the hill like a fine, silver blade. He could afford to wait no longer. He and Darren had caught up with the wagon and followed it by shadow out of town; they'd stayed hidden after its three riders had alighted at the bottom of the hill, tailing them all the way up without once being seen. Now, at long last, it was time to act.

He pulled the kickshellac from Darren's hands. Darren said something about the gun not being as dangerous as it looked, which he ignored, then began to close the distance to Ingrid.

Her fingers could not find the first button of the bodice. They floundered under the lacing, pushing on anything that felt remotely like an eye. After a minute she got one to let go, causing the collar of the dress to loosen its hold the tiniest bit. Ingrid removed her gloves, reached under the lacing, and opened the next button. The collar dropped even more, exposing a swatch of smooth skin. Then a bearded man rose from the grass. He brought the butt of a kickshellac down on the back of the soldier's skull hard enough for her to hear the bone shatter. She screamed again as blood splashed her boots.

"Do one more stupid thing," Scott said, aiming his rifle at Cambridge. "Please, I want you to, so I can see how many pieces this gun will take off your fucking head."

Ingrid lowered her shaking hands from the bodice. "S-Scott?" she breathed. "Is that really you?"

"It's me. Are you all right?"

"I think so."

By this time Darren had appeared on the scene, seemingly out of nowhere. "Hand me the gun, Scott. It's all right, I'll hold him. Go look after your lady."

"Shoot him if you want to," Scott told him, relinquishing his weapon, "nobody here's going to mind."

"No tempting. Now go."

He crossed the grass to her. Not knowing how much longer she could stand on her own, Ingrid fell into his arms, which took her weight with blessed ease. Her boots were lifted off the ground, and a sigh of relief--the sigh of a man who has found solace after a very long period of suffering--plumed into her ear.

"I am...*really* glad you're here," she whispered. "How did you get out of the ropes?"

"We found an unexpected ally in the form of an old seamstress," he replied.

"Echo Gardener?"

"That's her. Turns out she knows how to shoot a gun."

"I managed to keep my head on the ride out here," Ingrid said, raising her voice to bring both men into the story. "But then Cambridge told me I needed to be undressed."

Scott craned his neck to look at her. "*What?*"

"Yeah," she nodded, "I felt the same way. It was kind of the last straw. I got scared, started shaking. You and Darren showed up just in the nick of time."

"But it doesn't change anything," Cambridge told them. His voice was that of a teacher reciting lessons to a class of very dim students. "Miss Felton still needs to facilitate the ritual, and she still needs to disrobe as part of the preparation."

"Not in front of you I don't," she let him know.

"And who will administer the lucid dream serum?"

She looked at Scott. "Well?"

"I'm not shooting you up with anything," he said. "We don't know what the hell that shit actually is. What it does, where it comes from. Side-effects--"

"Echo Gardener told me a little about it while we were putting the dress on. It's organic. She insisted the effects would be temporary in nature. I'll fall asleep and have a very vivid, very colorful dream. One I can control."

"Why would she tell you all that?"

"Scott," Darren said, "if I may. The serum is likely safe, at least as a single dose. I've read about pharmacologists in this region who've mixed the drug for other dwellers as a kind of psychological aid. Lucid dreams can and often do soothe a troubled mind. Imagine being able to control the world you live in, right down to the dew-drops on the flower petals."

"Nothing given to us by that man," Scott nodded towards Cambridge, "can possibly amount to any good."

The vampire's retort was instantaneous. "Stay in this region long enough and I will change your mind."

"You were going to kill us. We're done here."

But they weren't, and Ingrid all at once felt like enough bickering for an entire lifetime had poisoned her ears. "Scott," she said, "the serum doesn't come from Cambridge, it comes from one of Rudgard's...what did you call them?" she asked, looking at Darren.

"Pharmacologists."

"Right, them. I got that from Echo herself. So let's just get on with this, okay?"

"Ingrid we're talking about a strange chemical from a strange place that--"

"*What did I just say?*" she snapped.

With a reluctance almost tangible, Scott nodded.

"Good," she said softly, touching his beard. "I don't want to wait anymore, Scott."

"Why? The region's torn apart already. Why can't we just go home and forget we were ever here?"

"Because that's not why we came. Why I brought you here." She looked away. "Sorry."

"Hey," he said, tracing his fingers through her hair. "Look at me."

She did so.

"We brought each other. Not that I ever needed to prove to myself what you mean to me, but we brought each other. You know I used to think love was something a person fell into? Not anymore. It's an occurrence. A stupendous, spectacular incident. Something we never realize how much we need until it's there."

"I needed *you*, Scott. And so I took you. I didn't even give you a warning. Now I think about it that was pretty bad, right?"

"I never warned you either. I came to your locker and told you I love you. I couldn't help it then and I can't help it now." He smiled. "Strange how being so helpless makes me the happiest I've ever been."

The confession flabbergasted her; she had the feeling it always would. "I don't know what you see in me, Scott."

"Everything I want for the rest of my life."

Cambridge had the serum. Scott took it, while Darren kept the kickshellac trained on his--Cambridge's--head. Ingrid then instructed Darren to lead the vampire down the slope and find a safe place to wait until the last of the dambuhala had passed.

"I guess we're ready," Scott said, once they were gone.

"Almost."

He watched her walk to the blanket and resume with the bodice. "You seem so confident about this. Like you already know it's going to work."

"I'm a girl who appreciates the arts, Scott. Painting, music. Theater," she added with a grin. "Chances are I'm just pretending to be confident."

The bodice fell, exposing a tightly drawn corset.

"Need help?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

She wanted to be in his arms after everything was off. The softness of her naked body as it pressed against his clothes felt like nothing he had ever known before, an elixir of humility and desire, strength and dedication. Ingrid's arms tightened their grip. Her eyes, gazing up at him, showed not a trace of awkwardness or embarrassment. She looked perfectly confident, perfectly at ease. Scott thought he knew why. The reason was simple: She trusted him. That was a precious thing--a thing of always and forever. He felt ready to die tonight, or on any night, if that's what it took to see her through.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Sure?"

Before he could answer, she stood on tip-toe to kiss him.

"What about you?" he wanted to know.

"All set. Let's do this and live happily ever after."

She lay on the blanket, blinking at the stars. The syringe was also something to blink at. Never once in this region had Scott laid eyes on any kind of plastic...until tonight. Wondering if perhaps it had come from the progressive, he hesitated for a closer look at its markings. Nothing aside from a milligram bar, however, existed.

"This *has* to be from the progressive," he said out loud, as if to defy all doubt.

"Probably," Ingrid responded. "Do you know how to use it?"

"I think so. Lay your arm out and give me a fist. Like that. Good."

Her bare breasts rose as she drew in a long, deep breath. "Scott?"

The needle, on its way to her vein, stopped. "Yes?"

"I still don't know what I'm afraid of. I mean *truly* afraid of."

"That doesn't surprise me. You're a tough cookie."

"You're not helping, dear."

The needle came closer...then stopped again. "Last chance to say no, Ingrid. And believe me, I would be so very much okay with it if you did."

"We'll come through this, Scott. Just stay low when the dambuhala come. No gawking, no picture taking. Stay low. Got it?"

"Got it."

"I love you, Scott."

"I love you too, Ingrid. I'm going to be right here when you wake up."

"You'd better be." Her gaze returned to the stars. "Okay. Do it."

"Take another breath. Deep."

"*Haaaauuuuuh!*" she gasped--

And the needle, mere seconds after breaking her skin, put her straight to sleep.

XVIII. Reflection

She awoke in her own bed. Stuffed animals arced a rainbow across the counterpane, their plastic eyes shining in humid sunlight from the window. In fact the heat was everywhere; the entire room looked to be basting in sick yellow that Ingrid found hard to breathe. Blinking, she put her feet on the floor.

"Scott?"

No answer. But she noticed the door was open--or rather, broken off its hinges. Of course it had not been repaired since Randy's assault. Why, though, did splinters still scatter the carpet? Ingrid hated to leave messes be.

And just like that the splinters were gone. The carpet became freshly shampooed, giving off a lilac scent. Ingrid frowned. The door was now back on its frame, a perfect fit. Cool wind lifted the curtains.

"Hi!" Scott said cheerfully, stepping into the room.

"Uh...hello?"

He kissed her on the cheek. "So how are you?"

"Um..."

"Um! Um! Um!" His eyes looked wider than usual, crazier than usual. His mouth leered. "Come on, baby, talk to me. Like lovers do." A lunatic laugh burst from his lips, and he began to dance about the room like an ox, singing a song Ingrid hadn't thought of in years. "*Oh baby talk to meeeee! Like lovers dooooo!*"

"Am I making you do that?" she asked, standing up.

"*Walk with meeeee!* Yeah, you are. May I stop now?"

"Please. I need to speak with Jo-Jo."

Scott's capering froze. He looked at her for a moment, his chest heaving. "She's in the basement."

"Okay. Well she's coming here now. It's my dream," she added, before he could form a rebuttal.

"It's our dream," came a familiar voice from the hallway stairs--the very stairs, Ingrid remembered, Randy had used in pursuit of her obedience not long ago. The feet treading them now were much lighter and daintier, but no less intimidating.

"Jo," Ingrid said, looking at the doppelganger as it peeked from the top step.

"Our dream," it said again.

Unlike Scott (who had already disappeared from the scene), Jo-Jo's face wore no message of greeting or concern. As always, it was bitterness that carried the day. Everything else—dress, shoes, hairstyle—made Ingrid feel like a carbon copy.

"Because we're the same, right?" Ingrid told her.

"We're the same."

The doppelganger entered the room slow and silent.

"But you don't think I belong here."

"No."

"I do. Doesn't that make us different?"

"You've always been a good liar, Ingrid. The confidence you're feeling is false."

The room darkened. Ingrid looked to find a sky of gray over the church steeple across the street. A scent of rain followed, rippling the curtains.

"I'm the real you," Jo-Jo went on. "Always angry, always frustrated. Always knowing she isn't good enough for anything." Her lips stretched in a lopsided smile. "Ingrid Semeska refined."

"It's Felton."

"No. There is no Ingrid Felton."

A flash from outside made her look through the window again. It was followed instantly by a prodigious clap of thunder that shook the entire house. Ingrid jumped; Jo-Jo only laughed.

"Storm's almost here, little lady. Time to take cover again."

"I'm not afraid of storms."

The doppelganger's head tilted. "What then? Commitment comes to mind. You ran away from Scott, then Lisa, then school."

"I went back to Scott and Lisa."

"You *fled* back," Jo-Jo corrected, face twisting in disgust. "Like the desperate girl you were. Excuse me, *are*."

Ingrid thought about this before being forced to concede that Jo-Jo was right. She had fled back. From what though? Nancy and Randy without question. But a feeling from somewhere else said they were not alone. There was another something--something dark and dreadful. It terrified her, and rather than face it, she ran. All the time, she ran.

"But you can't run anymore," Jo-Jo said. "Not if you want the dambuhala out of the region."

As she spoke the skies opened up. Everything outside became a veil of singing silver through which she could barely see.

"I want to know what it is," Ingrid said over the din. "Tell me."

"First tell me why you shouted at the mirror so much when you were little. Why you called me all those terrible names."

"I hated you."

"Exactly. And how do you feel about me now?"

Her body vanished without waiting for an answer, leaving Ingrid alone in the room. Or not. There was someone standing near the bed; she could sense it. She turned...and there was Jo-Jo again, framed in a gigantic mirror that leaned against the wall. The Carlson Glass.

Ingrid stepped closer. Jo-Jo did the same. Ingrid tilted her head. So did Jo-Jo.

We're the same, she thought.

And so they were. The girl in the mirror stood five feet, two inches tall. She had long brown hair. Her thoughts were hard to organize, and even harder to express. She was forgetful. She made a lot of silly, frustrating mistakes.

"When you forget," the reflection gritted through its teeth, "it's the same as saying you didn't care. When you make a *mistake*"—the word was spewed like vomit—"it's

the same as saying you weren't smart enough to do it right. To err is *stupid*, Ingrid, to forgive is a waste of time."

"Everyone makes mistakes," Ingrid reminded it.

"Yes, but the same ones, over and over? You flunk a test at school, study for the right answers, then flunk the damned thing again. You burn meals. You lose keys. You forget to wash your paintbrushes. You splash milk on the table when you pour cereal. You cut your legs when you shave. You read music at the piano the way a stream corrodes a rock. You--"

"Enough."

The reflection hesitated. Yet it had more, even uglier things to point out. "And really, Ingrid," it said, "you're never going to be good at anything anyway. Everyone's better than you."

"Who's everyone?"

A very well-used shrug came from the glass. "Everyone. Your whole life is an exercise in futility. Give up already. Let it go. If not for your sake then for the sake of people around you."

Ingrid could hear the rain falling harder than ever.

"Consider," the reflection went on in a perfectly conversational tone. "You don't deserve nice things. Scott and the baby. Let them go too. It's not hatred anymore, Ingrid. It's logic. It just makes sense."

"How?" Ingrid almost sobbed. The criticism, like it or no, was beginning to get to her, as it always did.

"They're just two more people you're going to hurt with your shortcomings. Your stunted abilities. You can't be a wife and a mother. You're not good enough. I *know*," it cut her off, just as her mouth came open to argue the case, "I know how that makes you feel. But I'm not yelling at you, Ingrid. I'm not being spiteful anymore. I'm just trying to make you see the better way."

The reflection turned its head. There was a dresser next to the glass. On top of it was a stereo. And on top of that...

As if in a dream (and wasn't that all this was?) Ingrid picked up the gun. She knew nothing about firearms, except they were heavy and lethal. A very simple representation of one now lay in her trembling hand. The gun was black. It had a barrel, a butt, and a trigger. And yes, it felt very heavy indeed. Ingrid pointed it at the reflection. The reflection pointed it straight back. That wouldn't do--it wasn't enough. She put the barrel against her own temple instead. The reflection, of course, followed suit.

Outside, the rain came to a dead stop.

"Now you're doing it right," Ingrid told herself in the hush that fell over everything. "For once in your life, you're doing something right."

Randy Semeska walked up the hill with his fists clenched and his teeth gnashing. During this most recent stay in the region, two people had gotten the better of him: Ingrid, whom he had drowned once but who had somehow survived the ordeal anyway; and of course his uncle, Woodward Cambridge.

The latter stung much more than the former. Ingrid had at least been fun. Cambridge, on the other hand, had not only renounced his involvement in the coming new order (casually, like a table scrap being pushed into a dog dish), he had shamed him as well. Made him feel small.

So he decided to save his greatest redemption until last. After locating Cambridge near the bottom of the hill (held at gunpoint by the black man who had knocked him out on the stairs, that made three helpings of vengeance due), he went to the far side and there began his ascent. The slope was long but not steep. Already he could see the boyfriend--frightened, nervous thing that he was--watching over Ingrid at the crest. No problem with that. Randy had never considered Scott to be anything more than a nuisance.

After Scott, of course, would come Ingrid. How he wished he could drown her again. But there was no water nearby and he didn't feel like dragging her any great distance to find some. Ah well. Strangulation then. His step-sister (or whatever the fuck she was) didn't have very good lungs anyway.

He stayed behind Scott during the climb, though he had no intention of ambushing the man. It would be enough to see him jump when his name was called. Randy closed the distance with a patient, casual gait. A mere twenty yards separated him from the top of the hill. Now there were fifteen. Now ten. Now five.

Randy stopped.

"Hey!" he called cheerfully.

The man watching Ingrid did not jump. He didn't even flinch. Instead, he turned around to address his caller. And all at once, Randy's cheerfulness began to curdle. This was not Scott. Or at least, this was not the Scott he remembered. The man standing before him now wore a thick, dark beard beneath long tufts of wild hair that framed a face no longer familiar with fear. Indeed, nothing save contempt for what pressed at the gate flared from his eyes. There was no predisposition to flee about his open stance, no trembling of the clenched fists at his sides. In short, this was a man who looked ready to fight.

That suited Randy just fine. His merriment rekindled at the thought of digging deep for Scott's lost cowardice and finding it between tortured screams as he punched that falsely impudent face into mush. Because whether he wanted to admit it or not, Scott was no champion. Crying and begging fitted him much better. Tonight, Randy would make him do both. Then he would make him die.

There was a dagger in his belt. Randy touched it but did not unsheathe it. No need. Bare hands would suffice. Bellowing, he charged the rest of the way up the hill, meaning to tackle Scott before beating him to death. Scott crouched and stepped to the side, punching Randy's neck with his fist hard enough to send him flailing.

Okay then, so he was quick. But if he meant to hang around for Ingrid's sake that wouldn't be enough. Randy charged again, this time slowing his approach just as Scott made for a second dodge. The wide-eyed face in front of him looked as fragile a target as Ingrid's. Randy swung his fist at it--

And somehow, Scott punched him instead, right under chin. Once more Randy found himself off balance and tumbling, this time with stars before his eyes. A heavy

boot kicked him as he hit the ground, knocking the wind from his lungs. Randy grabbed it and pulled. Arms flailing, Scott fell into the grass with him.

"Now let's see how much hurt you can fucking take!" Randy wheezed.

Hard as he could, he punched Scott's nose. A very satisfying crunch followed. Blood fountained everywhere. Randy located Scott's front teeth and punched them to pieces as well. Loverboy's face got lost in a mess of blood and broken bone. Yet still, he wasn't showing fear. If anything he looked ready for more pain.

"Great," Randy said, happy to oblige.

That was when Scott grabbed his neck and squeezed.

Instantly his air was cut off. "*Guh!*" he let out. "*Uh!*"

"Thassh right," he heard Scott spit. "Keep shryin to breef."

Randy took hold the arm choking him but for whatever reason couldn't seem to dislodge it. Either he was weaker than he used to be, or Scott was stronger. Whichever, the tide of the fight had returned to the hero.

"Goddammit!" Randy tried to say. Except all he could manage was *Gah!* "*Gah!* *Gah!* *Gah!*"

Scott bent forward, paying no mind to all the blood. His grip tightened. Over the last few seconds a wind had gotten up, making the grass dance, but Randy could get none of it into his lungs. There was something shining off to the left as well, a white light growing bigger and brighter by the second. Wondering if heaven were opening, Randy strained to turn his head to see it. A gigantic gleaming rectangle, big as a drive-in movie screen, hovered over the hill.

"What the hell?" he whispered.

He could talk! He was breathing again!

Realizing this, he spared a glance at Scott. He, too, had become mesmerized by the light. Not wishing to waste the opportunity, Randy shoved him backwards. Next, he pulled the dagger from his belt. The time for mucking about was over. He wanted closure with this man, who had probably gone crazy during his time in the region. How else could this sudden bravado be explained?

"Nighty-night," Randy told him.

The dagger came down once, twice, three times. On the fourth blow, he aimed for Scott's heart. Except movement from the bottom of the hill made him hesitate. Randy turned his head. A dozen ogres were charging the slope. Behind them, a hundred more stampeded the fields.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," Randy said.

In that same instant Scott knocked the dagger from his hand, and the tide turned yet again.

The steel pressing Ingrid's temple felt nothing like she imagined, off and on through the years, when she contemplated suicide. There was no sharpness, no coldness. The hammer didn't give off clicking noises as her fingers trembled. No smell of grease tinged the air. Simply put, all her ideas about the experience had been wrong.

It was puzzling. This was her dream, after all. Why shouldn't her imagination dictate from memory how this whole thing was supposed to play out?

"Because a large part of what makes us afraid is not knowing," Jo-Jo told her through the glass. "When you get what you expect you just shrug your shoulders, the way you do with Scott." She hesitated. "The way you did with Lisa."

"Shut up," Ingrid snapped.

"Are you going to fire this thing or are you going to stand there forever? That's it," Jo-Jo went on, after Ingrid closed her eyes. "Now just squeeze. Do it, Ingrid. Do it for the people you love. They'll understand. Martyrdom involves passion, too. It may even be passion at its purest. Think what it takes to die for what you believe."

Gritting her teeth, Ingrid squeezed the trigger.

There was an echoing explosion—the sound of dynamite through a canyon. A blinding white light flashed for an instant and then went right back out. Everything began to turn, to tip, to spin. Something heavy thumped the floor. Ingrid opened her eyes. One of them could no longer see. Black flowers blossomed over the carpet, which was now level with her other, working eye. She was on the floor.

"Okay let's see what we can do for her!" someone suddenly said. "Bullet wound through the temporal lobe?"

"That's right," another voice tremored.

"And it's still in her brain? I mean the bullet is still in her brain?"

"I think so."

The second voice began to weep. "Somebody help! Help, HELP, *PLEASE OH GOD HELP HER!*"

Scott closed his eyes just as the first ogre jumped over his head on its way to the interstice. He knew that very little time remained to take care of Randy. For one thing, all the hill was trembled. Hundreds of dambuhala were thundering from the Rudgard side, which meant that hundreds more were likely doing the same from the other side. For another, he was pretty sure he was dying.

Randy had stabbed him three times. Pain screamed in his abdomen and shoulder. The third stab had found his right eye, obliterating it. Half the world had gone black. And his head hurt so bad it was hard to concentrate.

The knife sailed to the right after he'd knocked it away. Blind in that direction, Scott--still on his back beneath a distracted Randy--began to claw the grass, hoping to get lucky. Seconds later his fingers did indeed close around something hard and cold. Not the knife though. This was a rock.

Training his left eye on Randy's temple as best he could, Scott swung hard. The results were more pleasing than he ever dared hope. Gagging, choking noises came from Randy's throat as he toppled over in a spew of blood.

Another ogre charged past. A third leaped Scott's head. It was time to get back to Ingrid. She was still on the blanket, still holding the interstice open, but there were ogres running everywhere in groups of ten, twenty, thirty. Surely she would be trampled before long.

"Damn the Zucker brothers," Scott laughed.

He could he be laughing now? Had he gone crazy from his wounds? Or was the interstice, which now spanned the entire hill, to blame? Even the ogres made for a

funny sight. They were stampeding into the light, howling happily, almost sexually. The whole fiasco looked less like pariahs going home and more like drunkards chasing a beer truck. One of them tripped, rolled, and got up without breaking its stride. Another jumped over Randy with the prissy gracefulness of a ballerina.

Randy himself would never be graceful again. He was having a seizure in the grass. Scott thought someone might have jammed a high voltage wire straight up his bottom. Every muscle in his body thrummed with chaotic, confused signals from a brain that had lost authority over its vehicle.

"Help me!" he puffed through clenched teeth. "Help me!"

"Oh no," Scott said. "You're the one who's drowning now. But kick out the jams while you can, motherfucker, because this is your last swim."

The rock was still in his hand. Feeling like one of the ogres, Scott knelt and with just three blows broke Randy's skull into pieces. The seizure stopped. And so, in that very same instant, did Nancy Semeska's only son. Forever.

"Great," Scott said, letting the tacky rock fall. "Far out."

His feet began to stumble towards Ingrid. He fell, got back up, fell again, and made the rest of the journey on hands and knees.

That he no longer possessed the strength to stand wasn't distressing. He would need to lie down anyway in order to shield Ingrid from the ogres still running pell mell into the light. And that was just what he did upon reaching the blanket where she lay, looking for all the world like a girl lost in the placid depths of some peaceful, dreamless sleep. Of course, Scott knew, this was not the case. From wherever she was, from whatever she had done, she was holding the interstice open. As for how long she could maintain the feat...well, that did not make for safe guessing.

Gently, Scott moved his body over top of hers. Now all he could do was lie still and wait.

"Hold on, honey," he whispered. "Hold on."

Happy now?

I thought so. I'm dead, Ingrid. You can stop calling me useless, you can stop hating me. And for what it's worth...I'm sorry I couldn't please you more often. I wanted to. You won't believe that but it's true. Every time you asked me to make something wonderful, I picked up my brush, placed it on the canvas, and tried to paint the very best things I knew of into your life. Why? Because I knew--I knew--that there were beautiful things inside of you, beautiful things that could make you and all of your friends beautiful too. Look what they did for Scott. If you could see him now, Ingrid, I swear you would love him even more. He has found the strength to slay dragons, just from knowing in his heart he belongs to you.

By the way, please don't start thinking I've forgotten the difference between effort and results. We both hate people who do that. I tried, you kept hating me, I tried harder... But things just didn't work out, did they? So you went to your room to sleep until judgment day. Guess what that means? It means it wasn't just me. We both failed.

Love you anyway though, girl.

I do. Not because I'm proud or egotistical, but because you always knew what you wanted, and you were damned if anything less would suffice. That's why you couldn't stop treating me with such poison. I kept smearing the paint, making mistakes. I couldn't help it. I was afraid.

What's that? You're saying you've never once in your life known what you wanted? Oh come on! You've always known. It was just scary, that's all. Really scary. Don't feel bad. A lot of people hide from their desires for the same reason.

Say it, Ingrid, just once. You can do it.

Suicide.

There, it wasn't so hard after all. In fact, you actually committed the deed. You put the gun to your head and squeezed the trigger. Impressive. It opened the interstice, so...yeah, I'd call it impressive.

Now let me go back to my first question. Are you happy? Did I please you at last? Using that gun required strength and courage. You came to me and got both. We're square, right? I can leave?

Thank you.

Ingrid got up from the floor just as the sound of Jo-Jo's feet faded off. She ran to the stairs and peered over the railing. Sure enough, the steps were empty. Not content to let the doppelganger go without imparting a farewell of her own, Ingrid raced down. There, she was able to pick up the trail again. Jo-Jo could now be heard on the basement stairs. Yet she seemed intent on remaining elusive, for here there proved nothing to see but a single footprint on the laundry floor, left from a trail of rogue water. Ingrid followed on. Already the footprint was drying, but the direction it pointed left little to the imagination. Calling the doppelganger's name, Ingrid entered the empty apartment.

But it was just that: empty. The floors and the walls were bare. The shelves were dusty. Cobwebs hung from a drooping, water-stained ceiling. The single bit of cheerfulness came in the form of sunlight through the apartment's sliding glass door. Feeling like she should take what she could get, Ingrid went to it. It was bright, considering how filthy the glass was, and very warm to the touch.

"Jo-Jo?" she called again.

Utter silence. No one occupied the apartment--no one except her. The doppelganger had gone.

Either that, or she'd been burnt to a crisp. The ray of sun had turned white over the past few seconds, and its heat was beginning to sting. Ingrid looked through the glass. Perhaps Jo-Jo would be on the other side, up to one of her nasty tricks. But the light was bright to the point of being dangerous. Ingrid covered her eyes. It was not enough. The light kept coming. Coming, coming, coming. Her neck and chest burned. Skin began to peel from her arms. Screaming, Ingrid fell to her knees.

And just like that, the light went out.

Now what? she wondered, trembling in the dark.

Her eyes came open. There was not a thing to see. Blackness ruled the world. What happened? Had the light robbed her vision? No. It seemed instead she was floating in a place where nothing existed. Nothing, that was, except her.

Her...and now, the stars.

They had begun to appear across her line of sight, one at a time, like the lights of a village on a misty dawn. The reason became plain after a few discombobulated moments. She was lying on her back, blinking at a night sky. Grass swayed in a light breeze. Insects sang. She was back on the hill.

"Scott?"

Yes, he was here, too. The dear man. Lying on top of her as a means of protection from what she was beginning to realize had been one hell of a stampede. A pungent fetor of dung hovered everywhere. The grass beyond the blanket had been trampled flat.

"Scott, I'm awake. Did it work? Scott? Scott!"

Getting from underneath him required effort, but the heat of her concern proved more than equal to the challenge. Ingrid twisted free and with shaking hands got Scott's head into her naked lap. Even before laying eyes on his face there could be no doubt that something was drastically, dreadfully wrong. Scott's body had become a heavy sack that lolled far too much with the shifting of its weight. Now she did see his face, and it was not reassuring. Something--some heavy blow--had turned his nose flat to one side. Something else had broken his mouth in. Dried blood, like war-paint, covered what was left of his features. Also, his right eye appeared to have been destroyed. A bloody black socket was all that remained.

"Scott, what happened, baby? *What happened?*"

She began to cry, as if crying would do any good. Soon, a murder of crippled birds was circling her head, with twisted wings barely capable of doing their duty, and talons scratchy with bitter salt. Yet they had been with her through so much pain, for so many years, that their presence was commonplace. She allowed them to come and go as they pleased, never ashamed, never remorseful. They were healers all. Cleansers of the past. On this morning, however--this early, hazy morning--the ashfall was far too thick for ablutions. On this morning it seemed that hurt would choke the whole world.

"*Scott,*" she sobbed, cradling his head.

There was nothing else to say. Lisa was no longer here to heal him; there were no charms, no rites, no magical incantations for bringing him back. There was only his name, and no matter how many times she spoke it, it would not be enough. Scott Bremman, her friend, her lover, the father of her child, her companion across the interstice, was dead. The partnership segment of Ingrid's journey had come to an end. To wherever it led from here, she would be alone.

After a time that seemed like forever, Ingrid laid Scott's head on the blanket and located the bag he'd left behind. Inside was a plain, simple dress and some boots. With the carrion birds still circling, she put them on, noticing the second body lying nearby as she hooked the dress' final button. She made her way to it and knelt. Its face, like Scott's, had been broken apart. Still, she was able to identify it: Randy.

"Oh, God," her lips plumed, as understanding of what happened flooded in. There'd been a fight of some kind--a fight that Scott had won for just long enough to make it matter. "Oh Scott. Oh sweetheart."

Moments later a man down the hill called her name. Not caring to acknowledge it (could any man's voice besides Scott's matter to her ever again?), Ingrid remained silent. But the man, whoever he was, did not seem to understand her wish for solitude. He went on calling, until finally Ingrid--now standing next to Scott's body again--deigned to look up.

A man in purple robes was approaching the scene. Darren still had him at gunpoint, and it was his voice that upset the morning stillness. It was high and pleasant. Almost cheerful. He knew nothing of what their actions had cost.

"It's over," he was saying, as if any of this wretchedness could possibly come to an end. "You did it, Ingrid. I really think you--"

The tears on her face, the defeated slump of her shoulders, made him stop. He looked at Scott's body. The kickshellac's barrel dipped. Now, finally, Darren began to understand.

"No," he said, "no. Ingrid...please tell me that isn't who it looks like."

"It's Scott."

"Dead?"

She gave a weak nod.

"How? The ogres?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it was Randy," she gestured towards the other body. "I think they had a fight."

By this time Cambridge was also reacting to the aftermath. His breathing had become heavy, and his limbs shook. Clutching his chest, he fell to his knees.

"My word," he puffed, "my word, this has all been so...so taxing. I had no idea the magnitude of..."

His right hand dove and came back with something that gleamed. A knife.

"Darren!" Ingrid screamed.

But her warning was not quick enough. There came the sound of a blade punching through meat. Darren let out a cry, dropping the kickshellac.

That was all it took for the vampire to regain the upper hand.

He grabbed the weapon, pointed it at Ingrid. She held her ground, causing his face to register surprise for a moment, but then his eyes relaxed into that old, twinkling confidence which had no doubt been with him since his very earliest dreams of domination.

"You've proven a very useful tool, my dear," he purred. "A mop of cleansing water over a very ugly spill. The dambuhala are gone. I can start my campaign afresh."

"You're welcome."

The vampire's head tilted; the twinkle flickered. "But then you're a very strange girl, aren't you? Going about life unattached to anything you ever looked at. Then making your way here after finding more passion than you knew what to do with, confronting your love, confronting your fear, both with the mask of pride that you wear even now."

"It isn't pride, Cambridge. Pride of any form is for different, lesser regions. This is comfort. Acceptance."

"And you would go to your death for it? Turn your back on the fire, lie down in apathy like the girl you once were?"

"I feel as strong now as I've ever felt for this region."

It was true. Ingrid stood with her fists clenched, her legs slightly apart, her back straight. The hem of her dress flapped in the breeze. The fear Cambridge wanted her to feel was of a kind she had already faced, and overcome. Nothing could tell her she wasn't ready to die for this region.

"What are you feeling now, girl?" Cambridge, fool that he was, asked. "Tell me before you die. What is your current passion?"

She barely needed time to think. "Virtue."

The barrel of the kickshellac hovered for a few more moments...then, like the cup of a scale with a feather on it, slipped down.

"Miss Felton, it would seem you have been lost for so long there isn't a lie in your head not musical enough for convincing. Never worry though"--the barrel rose again--"for this opera is at an end. Goodnight, little princess!"

Cambridge squeezed the trigger. The kickshellac bucked.

Afterward, there was only the breeze, the whispering of the grass, and a single night flower next to the blanket which, through whatever form of luck, had persevered the stampede.

Ingrid stood in front of the vampire, who was now regarding his weapon with a look of pure confusion. It had not fired; the chamber was empty.

Ingrid's hand plunged the pocket of her dress. "Looking for these?"

Two cartridges rested on her palm.

"Very clever," the vampire told her, "but are those lies you listen to really so absurd you would not still realize your disadvantage? All I need do now is kill you with my bare hands."

On that pronouncement, he tossed the kickshellac aside and started to approach her. One step was all the further he got. Darren had risen behind him, dagger in hand. With a single swoop he buried the blade in back of the vampire's neck, killing him instantly. It all happened in a matter of seconds. Ingrid never even flinched. Behind her, the night flower continued to bloom.

Woodward Cambridge, silenced forever, lay face-down in the grass. His dream of dictatorship, of absolute power, had at last come to an end.

"That was some bravado," Darren, covering a bloody hole in his thigh, said. "You had me convinced you were a martyr. For a few moments at least."

"We're all martyrs, Darren," Ingrid replied. "But I wouldn't give up Scott's baby for this"--her boot kicked Cambridge's body--"or anything else. Also," she continued, a twitch going through her brow, "I once overheard you say something about never being able to hold a loaded kickshellac. Are the dambuhala really gone?"

"I think so," Darren nodded. "There was a stampede." His hand gestured the trampled dirt and ogre dung. "Then just before the interstice closed it all stopped. Everything got quiet."

Ingrid noticed movement on the road leading out of Rudgard. There were villagers, a good deal of them by the looks of it, approaching the hill. She supposed they were curious as to what the hell had happened. Well, let them wonder. She meant to answer their questions over the coming days as best she could, yet the events which had unfolded on this night--and indeed, on all the nights Cambridge had marauded through--would need to sink into the minds of every dweller on their own. The process would take time. Healing always did.

"What now?" Darren asked.

Ingrid continued to look at the villagers as dawn began its slow creep over the hill. "Home," she said.

They made their way down the far side, staying out of sight, before doubling back to Rudgard and the old dead-end street house. There they found Echo Gardener, the old woman, still holding things down. She'd made a fire in the hearth, and a breakfast in the kitchen. Over rice and fried eggs Ingrid told her everything that happened. Darren (now wearing a wound dressing provided by Gardener) also listened to the story. He pulled a sour grimace when she came to the part about confronting her greatest fear.

"Suicide," he said.

"Killing yourself is never the answer," Cambridge's last soldier, his arms tied, put in.

"Oh it was this time," Ingrid said. "Even my mom knew it, or at least I think she did. That was why she needed me to come here."

What to do with the soldier was another question in need of an answer. In the end, Ingrid decided to set him free. The alternative solution--killing him in cold blood--was as absurd to her as it was to Darren. This even after Echo Gardener voiced her opinion on the matter.

"Blow his head off!" she wailed while cleaning dishes at the sink.

"Now, now," Darren cooed, "aren't you a woman of this region?"

"I had a lover once, sure! I was a flower, like this brave girl. But flowers are fragile," she pointed out, looking at Ingrid, "they get stepped on. Trampled. It isn't safe being beautiful and sweet."

"Not all of them get stepped on," Ingrid said, thinking of the flower on the hill.

"No, not all of them--"

"And Echo," she continued, putting a hand on the old woman's shoulder, "if we as women don't stand up for femininity, if we don't realize its power and act through its own, brighter strength, then who does? Tell me that. Who does?"

Part Five: Shore

XIX. Allies

They returned to the hill the following morning. Ingrid wasn't sure what she wanted to do with Scott's body, but she didn't want it left in the open to be eaten by rats and worms and who knew what else. Burying him at the place where they'd last made love--Horseshoe Bay--crossed her mind, as did the dogwood cemetery. Except both of those places were so very far away.

"We could also use the cemetery just outside Rudgard," Darren observed from the front of Cambridge's wagon.

"Yes," Ingrid said. "I'll have to think about it some more."

She steeled herself as best she could for the sight atop the hill. Crying was a foregone conclusion--never again would there come a thought related to Scott that didn't bring tears. But she also wanted to maintain her courage, if not for the sake of Scott's memory, then for that of Darren, who would be the one to carry the corpse to the wagon once she'd wrapped a blanket over it. Doubtless he too was feeling things at the moment. They needed to be strong together.

Only there was a problem... Scott's body was no longer on the hill.

She walked past Randy's corpse, past Cambridge's corpse, to the place where the blood-stained blanket remained anchored, and there was nothing else to see. She turned this way and that, looking every direction. The answer from all points, however, was the same. Scott had disappeared.

"Someone took him," Darren mused.

"Yes but who? And why?"

"Perhaps someone from the village can tell us. Remember, there were a lot of people on their here when we left."

But following his suggestion only deepened the mystery. No one in Rudgard knew a thing about a body on the hill, though several people admitted visiting the place where "the whitest light ever blinded me from every star in heaven" as one gent in a basement barber shop described it.

In fact, talk of what had happened on that night was the main topic of discussion about every tavern, stable, and general store during Ingrid's three week stay in the village. A kind of cautious optimism seemed to have taken everyone as news of Woodward Cambridge's heroism spread. That this was the news they put together for themselves surprised Ingrid at first. Yet could she blame them for their self-assuredness? They were doing the best they could with what little evidence they'd found. Perhaps time would teach them other things, but not today.

Still, it did get irritating to hear his name lauded over and over again (as well as her earlier certainty that the dwellers would hate Cambridge forever proven false), to the point where she stayed indoors as often as possible, listening to Darren's ideas about where Scott's body might have gone, or chatting with Echo Gardener over tea. As it turned out, the old woman had her own thoughts to share with regards to the father of her unborn child.

"I've read that places where the interstice can be opened are never stable, even under the least favorable conditions for crossing," she claimed one morning near the end of Ingrid's stay. "Perhaps what you did in your sleep happened again all on its own. Maybe just for long enough to embrace the body."

Ingrid's teacup shook. Here was a strange, unsettling idea. Picturing Scott's body afloat in that empty, infinite plain of nothingness between all the conceivable passions ever felt by living things made her green. He'd be ripped apart in a tug of war of emotions.

"I would rather he got stolen by pirates," she said.

"You don't mean that."

She looked out the window; on the walk, a boy no older than five stood crying with a half-eaten apple while his mother counted change from a tin cup.

"I'm not sure what I mean anymore. Except this: I'm going home. Back to the progressive."

"Why?"

"Darren says my mother left some things for me there. Things I won't need to look for this time," she added, thinking of the diary at Horseshoe Bay which had never turned up.

The remark puzzled Echo. "I'm sorry?" she said.

"A house," Ingrid smiled. "Her house. And a restaurant at a park."

"But isn't this region special to you?"

"Again, I just don't know anymore. I'm disappointed the dwellers are putting Cambridge on a pedestal. I understand it but I'm disappointed. Also..." She let out a breath, knowing well before the first tear fell that she was going to cry. "Without Scott...no. This place...I guess doesn't mean so much to me anymore. We came here together, and...and..."

Echo touched her hand. "It's all right, dear. You don't have to go on."

"Don't worry," Ingrid replied, wiping her cheeks. "It doesn't shame me. It just...*hurts*. I mean you spend years shutting yourself away from this crazy life you have. Building walls to close out a family that hates you. Trying to make this quiet little place where you can just...just live life doing your own pretty, private things. And pretty soon you stop caring about everything else. Nothing matters anymore. Then...then..."

"And then something wonderful happens," Echo said softly. "Right?"

"Something more wonderful than I'll ever have words for." No longer able to hold the teacup steady, Ingrid put it on the table. "Along comes this man who loves me. And he won't stop, even after I've pushed him away. I swear, Echo...he climbed right over that wall and put his arms around me. It gave me strength. It made me want to make friends with the world again. I saw him one morning after we first got back together, sitting at the kitchen table the way we are now. He looked sad and empty and lost. But when he looked up and saw me," she sobbed, tears coming in a flood at the memory, "everything *changed*. He smiled. He got so happy. And I was like...I'm doing this to him. I'm making a difference in his life. And I loved him right back for that. I loved him back so much."

"That's what brought you here, darling," Echo reminded her. "Remember it always. That's what brought you here."

Ingrid sat with her head in her hands until the crying stopped. It took a long time, but when at last she was able to lift her eyes, she said to the seamstress: "Yes. But I can't stay here without him. It would never feel right. I have to go home."

Ingrid had been to the part of the region known as Frondplume once before. It was no longer a part of her conscious memory, but she'd been there. It took up a large part of the region's tropical southwest, where dense jungles thrived so well under the near constant sun there were few explorers brave enough--or foolish enough--to enter them. Sixteen years ago, Lisa Felton hadn't been given a choice. She'd plunged into its lush green thickets, where huge spiders spun webs strong enough to catch lizards living under the rocks, and snakes wide as tree trunks sometimes dropped from sloping palms to wrap themselves about the necks of unsuspecting prey, with a baby in her arms, a plan flaring in her mind, and a witch in hot pursuit. That witch--Nancy Semeska--wanted Lisa dead not only for the crime of insurrection, but because Lisa was a witch herself. Thus, knowing the region would never be safe for her and her baby, she had fled to the door of another region.

Ingrid learned all of this from Darren while preparing to leave Rudgard, as well as on the road to Frondplume, which took five days to cross by niddy. Their first stop on the trip was Coldfrock Castle, there to retrieve what useful clothing and food left over from the ogre siege that they could. During this short stay Ingrid also learned that the passage out of Frondplume did not lead directly back to Ohio, or indeed anywhere close. She had just fitted herself into a plain green dress she'd found in the servant's quarters when Darren appeared, holding a sheet of parchment and looking rather apologetic.

"It's all right," she'd assured him, "I was done here. Aristocracy doesn't suit me, so I ignored the dresses upstairs."

Darren's face didn't change. So he was upset about something else. She asked him what, and instead of answering, he gave her the parchment. On it was a name--what looked like a Spanish name--and an address: a place in Manila, the Philippines, called Mckinley Hill.

"What's this?" she wanted to know.

"It's where you're going to wake up," Darren replied, "after you leave Frondplume. Put it in your pocket so you don't forget."

"I don't know the first thing about Manila, Darren. Please tell me this is a joke."

"I'm afraid not. But it's okay," he went on, "the man who lives at the address is a friend of your mom's. A fellow...traveler. Years ago he owned a hostel in Dalandaniss. But when Cambridge showed up he returned to Manila and became a lawyer. He can help you with fixing a passport and whatever other bureaucratic necessities there are with flying to the U.S. None of it will be legal, of course, but in that regard there won't be much choice."

"Does he know I'm coming?"

"Yes. Your mom took a great number of precautions before leaving the progressive. Hid some cards under the table just in case what came off the deck didn't provide a

winning hand. He knows you're coming and he knows what you look like. Just make your way to the address once you're in Manila. I'll teach you a few basic Tagalog phrases as we ride."

"And from there I'm on a plane to Cleveland?"

"That's right. Lisa's house is already yours. You'll need to sign some papers, but it's yours. And the Ship-to-Shore awaits its new management while some other friends take care of it in the meantime."

These last bits of information were ones Ingrid already had. But hearing them again, this time packaged with further, even more meticulous plans, made them seem like they'd been made with the air of a woman writing her last will and testament. Lisa had left things for her daughter in the progressive--things that would help her build a stable, functional life there should she be fortunate enough to get back. About her own life it was clear there had been grave doubts indeed.

Despite a certain grimness that came with this, the ride away from Coldrock maintained an almost whimsical pleasantness over the next two days. The air stayed moist and breezy, hissing between sentinels of tremendous, ancient trees that nodded from surrounding slopes. And where there weren't trees, there were crops. Fields of corn lined the road, husks sparkling in the sunlight, as did giant fruit patches with strawberries big as Ingrid's fist.

By the third day things were changing. The rich, healthy blue of the sky began to fade like plants left too long in the sun. The air went from warm to hot. Ingrid's dress felt stickier by the minute. Shaking its bodice helped a little, but by mid-afternoon, she was frustrated with all the sweating. She looked across the now lifeless field they rode through, and said:

"Fuck."

Darren looked at her. "Excuse me?"

"Sorry," she muttered. "I'm just hot. Are we getting close to Frondplume?"

"Closer by the minute. Try pouring some water down your back."

"I need a lagoon. Like Brooke Shields."

The other laughed. "It'll be dark soon. Cooler."

And so it was. But though Woodward Cambridge was dead, the region still had its vampires. They swooped and buzzed Ingrid's hair as the sun went down. They bit at her arms. Swatting them did no good. For every three she killed, five more landed on her.

"Is Manila like this?" she asked on the afternoon of the fourth day.

They'd slept in an abandoned barn the night before. Tonight, chances were they would not be so lucky. The road had become a narrow dirt track that cut through an expanse of what looked to be open wetlands, with mosquitoes buzzing everywhere.

Darren slapped his forehead, splatting one of the bugs into a disgusting henna tattoo. "What, tropical? Oh yes. But it's a bit more civilized than this. A bit," he added after a short pause.

"Why Manila?"

"It's a place where mothers bond heavily with their children, and vice-versa. Remember that a passage through the interstice must have a common theme residing at both ends."

"But don't all mothers love their children?"

"Not the way they do in Manila. Tell a Filipina that babies in the U.S. get forgotten inside cars and die of heat stroke while their parents do the grocery shopping. She'll look at you like you've gone mad. Tell her that American parents swear in front of their children. She won't believe you."

"I can't imagine doing any of those things either."

"Wait until the child is two years old and tearing about the house like a miniature dambuhala."

She winced. "Ooh, I'd rather not think about that."

"See?"

"Yeah but I'm not going to kill the poor little guy, no matter how bad it gets."

"I know," he laughed. "I'm not being a hundred percent serious, of course. What I am serious about are these damned mosquitoes." He slapped two more off his arm.

"Are they going to be with us the whole rest of the way?"

"Indubitably."

"Terrific," she moaned.

As she had feared, no place of refuge appeared that night, forcing them to sleep as best they could under cover of thin blankets they'd brought from the castle. She woke up next morning irritated, itchy, and in need of a bath. The latter, at least, could be provided, as there were many small, shallow pools of water dotting the landscape. All it took was courage enough to leave the road, walk a short distance, and push aside what stalks of high reeds grew around the oases. Ingrid found herself more than willing to brave these challenges for even a little respite.

The place where she crossed back home was better still. On the morning of the fifth day the road plunged into what looked like a rainforest, and the understory was at least ten degrees cooler. Wet, mossy tree trunks, some wide as the gates of Castle Coldfrock, rose by the hundreds into a canopy occupied with myriad cawing jungle parrots. Chatty and cheerful, these birds soon took to swooping the niddy. Some of them, Ingrid noticed while ducking a rain of feathers, even seemed to be smiling. It looked silly--it *was* silly. And it made her laugh.

"Are all the animals in here so cheerful?" she asked Darren.

His reply dampened her. "No. In fact a lot of the frogs and geckos are poisonous. Lisa probably used a glamour to keep them away. We won't have such conveniences at our disposal."

"So we need to be careful."

"Very, very careful."

"How far is it to the crossing point?"

Her answer came about two hours later when Darren pulled his niddy to a stop next to--wonder of wonders--a deep, blue lagoon dappled by the shadows of its concealing trees. A waterfall from a stocky cliff-face kept it full, and kept the lily-pads that bobbed on its surface in constant motion. Nevertheless, it was so clear that Ingrid could see straight to the bottom.

"This is where you depart," Darren said, gazing into the depths.

For a moment her stomach tightened. "Where? Underwater?"

He laughed. "Oh goodness no. You can stretch out under any one of the nearest trees."

"Oh. Well don't say things like that. My drowning days are done."

"Sorry. Although this lagoon is safe to swim in should you wish to partake."

The water was too tempting to refuse. Darren offered her some privacy under the justification of gathering firewood for a camp, and once he was out of sight, she took everything off and swam to the middle, letting her body indulge in the coolness. A few dives beneath the surface revealed a cave which prevented the lagoon from overflowing, and she had time to think that nature, like love, was maybe not as complicated as most people made it out to be. All it needed for life was the proper set of ingredients: coarseness and strength, softness and frailty. Then Darren asked from somewhere in the trees if she was finished, and she called for another ten minutes to dry off and get dressed.

After dark they ate dinner in front of the fire. It was the same one they'd had not long ago in a different forest—bread, fish, coffee. This time, however, the space between them was empty, and Ingrid had to force herself not to look at it. She didn't want to leave this region in tears. After dinner they brushed their teeth, using a compound made from wood ash that Darren claimed the region-dwellers mixed all the time. Then it was time to leave.

"Ready?" Darren asked.

Ingrid was looking at the moon. The twig she'd used to brush her teeth lay in one hand. In the other was the address in Manila.

"When it comes to crossing regions I'm not sure I know what ready is," she replied.

"It'll be just like before. You'll go to sleep, and when you wake up, you'll be in another world."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Where will you go after I'm gone?"

Darren looked into the heavens, yet she had the queer idea that he wasn't, like her, seeing the moon. He was seeing the stars.

"Back to Rudgard for awhile," he guessed. "Then maybe on to some other towns. Bowershim still needs help, and I've always been something of a journeyman. That's part of what took Lisa so long to catch me."

"Please allow your journeys to take you back to the progressive some day. I'll be at the house in Sandusky."

His eyes returned from their spacewalk. "And one day, Ingrid, there will be a knock at your door."

The address went back to her pocket. Minutes later she had a makeshift bed of blankets spread in front of the fire. As she lay back, her thoughts went to the baby. *Lisa if it's a girl*, she told herself, *Wesley if it's a boy*.

"That's it," Darren said, reading her thoughts, "think of the baby as you go to sleep. Think of what it means to you and Scott. You're a mother now, Ingrid. You know that."

Ingrid reached again into the pocket of her dress. It was the servant girl's dress she'd found days ago at the castle. Inside was a fragment of a letter she'd been reading

over and over during the trip. A daughter's letter, written in English, that summed up everything Ingrid wanted Lisa--or Wesley--to feel about her mother one day.

Thank you for being my mam. Thank you for bringing me into this wurld. Thank you for feeding me, and teaching me, and bying me clothes and toys. Thank you for teling me wen I was rong. Thank you for teling me wen I was rite. Thank you for your bedtime stories. Thank you for hugging me. Thank you for kissing me wen I was hurt. Thank you mam so very very much. This alone is love. Thank you.

Ingrid folded the letter and pushed it into her bodice, where it could rest over her heart.

"Goodnight, Darren," she whispered.

"Goodnight," came his soft reply.

Thinking of the baby then, loving the baby, Ingrid fell asleep.

Two very distinct things greeted her upon return to consciousness. The first was the sun. It stabbed her eyes, and for a moment, she panicked, fearing she'd somehow gotten lost in the interstice. But then came the next thing, this one a man, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, his hair black, his skin brown.

"Hello," Ingrid moaned, trying to get her bearings.

The man looked as if he'd just seen a ghost--or as if he'd just seen a girl appear out of thin air on this grassy hill.

"Kumusta ka na?" he shrieked. "Kumusta? *Kumusta?*"

"It's okay," Ingrid said.

But now the man was pointing at her dress, and his eyes were bulging. "*Dugo! Dugo!*"

"What?"

Her gaze followed his finger. There was a patch of red in the grass. Seeing it cleared every trace of fog from the crossing. Ingrid opened her thighs...and her heart froze. Everything down below felt soaked with blood.

"Oh no," she began to sob. "No! *No!*"

"Sandali lang," the man was meanwhile telling her, from what seemed like a hundred miles away. He turned and sprinted off...

That was all Ingrid could remember later, after waking up in a hospital. White walls and plastic tubing surrounded her bed. An IV dripped. A heart monitor beeped. So she was alive...if nothing else. But what about the baby? Hoping the blood had been nothing more than a bad dream, she sat upright, drawing a heavy gasp of air.

"Heyyy," someone sang out.

A middle-aged man wearing a white dress shirt sat by the bed. Ingrid blinked at him. His spectacles were huge--almost the size of his entire face. The eyes behind them, however, looked warm and kind enough to penetrate any impediment. Smiling, he gave her knee small pat.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Ingrid didn't know for sure. "Where am I?"

"Saint Luke's Hospital. My name is Mark Abunda." The smile widened. "But please just call me Mac. Everyone does."

"You're my mom's friend," Ingrid plumed, her thoughts still busy trying to find purchase in the whirlwind. "I'm back in the progressive?"

"You are. Welcome to Manila."

"My God."

"Now now," he laughed, "it's not too terrible of a place yet. Give it maybe ten more years."

"No, it's just that...I'm overwhelmed. All of this happened so fast."

"You're all right," he assured her. "You and the--"

"Baby!" Ingrid exploded. "The baby, how is it? I was bleeding on the hill! It--"

"It's fine," Mac said, patting her knee again. "Truly, Ingrid. It's okay. A gynecologist has examined you. Also a pediatrician." His brows, which were shaggy, rose at the mention of this last. "In fact she's the one who's going to yell at you."

"Yell at me for what?"

"For exposing yourself to inappropriate levels of stress during your pregnancy. According to her that's what caused the bleeding."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter."

"I know. But she doesn't. Believe me, she doesn't."

"And is she asking questions?"

"A few. Everyone is. But I've given them the basics and they seem satisfied. Your name is Ingrid Felton, you're here visiting friends on vacation, with the father back home in Ohio. Churva, churva, churva. They found my name and address in the pocket of your dress and now here I am."

Ingrid lay back. Her hand caressed her belly.

"I thought I was going to lose it. I really did. That would have been just too much."

"Well, the baby is very healthy according to what I've been told. You're nine weeks in. They're...a little puzzled by your age, but then this is the Philippines, and here girls don't usually get married til they're out of their twenties."

A nurse came through the door with a tray of food. His face was blank until he noticed that Ingrid was awake, at which time it lit up with excitement, and he began to coo and fawn over his patient like a boy just given a new puppy.

"Oooh you're up!" he twittered, straightening the blanket. "So nice!" His hand touched her face. "How do you feel? Any pain at all?"

"None so far," Ingrid smiled, "thank you."

This seemed to please the nurse even further. "I'm Arvin," he beamed, the hand over his own chest now. "I'm the day nurse. Whenever you need something just press the call button and I'll be here."

"Thank you, Arvin. I'm Ingrid."

Arvin shook his head. "Riddy. You're Riddy. Everyone here gets a nickname, dear, so I've taken the liberty to christen you."

"Very cute," Mac put in, nodding.

"I *know*," the nurse agreed with a playful clap, "I like it! It's so fun!"

The pediatrician paid a visit later that day. She didn't yell at Ingrid, but did advise, sternly, against any further activities bearing even the remotest resemblance to the ones she'd been practicing of late.

"Whatever they may be," the doctor added with a note of suspicion. "You got lucky this time. But no more gambling. Understood?"

"Yes," Ingrid said.

Two days later she was discharged. Mac drove her to his condominium in McKinley Hill, all the while keeping a pleasant, easy chatter about his city. He seemed eager to play the part of tour guide, which suited Ingrid just fine, as she felt it necessary to soak up all the information she could about these new surroundings.

"Notice we're moving along pretty good right now," he pointed out, gesturing at the light traffic along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, "but come back in ten years, maybe even five. It's all going to change. When the U.S. starts outsourcing call center jobs here it's going to change like hell."

"Do you think that will happen?"

"It will," Mac nodded, sounding very sure of himself. "It will, Riddy. Now there's good and bad with that. It's going to create a hell of a lot of jobs for Filipinos. That's good. But Manila is going to expand *fast*. That's bad. People will flock to this city in droves. I'm not sure I like that idea. I know that's crazy coming from a lawyer, but I've never been much for the social circuit. And by the year two thousand the whole goddamned town is going to be one gigantic social circuit."

"It might not turn out as bad as you think--"

"Do you know we had an earthquake here last month?" Mac plowed on, as if he hadn't heard. "In Luzon. 7.8 magnitude."

"I didn't," Ingrid said. "I've been away from the progressive for awhile."

"It was horrible. Awful. But you know...in a city of twenty million people, it would have been apocalyptic. And Manila gets earthquakes all the time. I've already told your mother about my fears for this city. Her reaction was the same as yours. She doesn't believe me."

He sped up to overtake a car. The car honked and Ingrid saw the driver raise his middle finger.

"Well I wouldn't go so far as not to believe you," she said hesitantly. "By the way...about my mom..."

She had already recounted to Mac everything that had happened to her in the region--everything, that was, except Lisa's death by dambuhala. Her own pain prevented her from talking about it. But Mac had a right to know. While still at the hospital he had told Ingrid a few stories of his own regarding Lisa. They'd gone through battles together, discussed tactics at midnight meetings with Michael Quinn and some other insurgents. It was more than enough for a few painful truths.

He stopped talking when she told him, and said almost nothing more all the way into McKinley. By the time they arrived at the condo's parking garage Ingrid started to wonder whether she had done the right thing. An attendant opened her door. She stepped out. A cautious glance over the hood at Mac revealed that he was still coming to terms with the loss of his friend; his face had transformed through a mixture of thoughtfulness and an abrupt, sad fatigue.

"It's going to take awhile," Ingrid warned.

One of the bushy brows furled. "What will?"

"Adaptation. To losing a close friend."

"Oh there is no adaptation, Riddy. I've lost so many friends, most of them in wars. One was stabbed to death at midnight while waiting for a cab right here in Manila. There is no adaptation."

"I wish you hadn't told me that," she replied, thinking of Scott. "I have so much I need to cope with."

"Coping you will learn. Adaptation..." he trailed off, shaking his head. "Never."

She did not need to adapt to Manila, as her stay turned out to be a short one. Darren had been correct about Mac's acquaintances with powerful, if somewhat shady, organizers of colored paper-work and hackers of red tape, so by the end of August Ingrid was sitting at the condo's kitchen table with a passport, an immigration card, and a plane ticket tucked into a small suitcase that Mac had also provided.

Ingrid didn't know how to express her gratitude. Simply thanking this man seemed ridiculous; he had been looking after her every need for a month, while she had done little more than paint him a picture--with oils and brushes that came from Mac--of Rupert Doody, her ailing friend from Bowershim. She was also able to answer a number of questions he had about the region, going into as much detail as was possible to satisfy his thirst for information. Still, as the sun began to set on her last day in the Philippines, she felt beholden. She told Mac that night, over a dinner of nilaga with corn and pork (which she cooked after learning the recipe) to let her know if there was anything she could do to repay his kindness. He looked surprised at first, but then put down his fork and told her that what she had done for the region was more than payment enough for everyone involved.

"It's strange how just a year ago I was back in Norwalk, getting ready for school," Ingrid observed. "Not caring about school but getting ready for it. It was just another year as far as I was concerned."

"Big changes don't always need time. Sometimes they just strike, like a snake from under a rock."

"So they're always bad?"

"I don't know. But there's an American author who once wrote: Change is always change for the worse. And since reading it I've never forgotten it. Take that how you will."

"Well maybe I can set things to rights again once I'm home."

"Oh you're healing already. I can see it." He had picked his fork up to spear another potato, but now his hand froze. "I know what I want for a favor," he said with a nod.

"Yes?"

"Yes. Stay in touch, Riddy. Always. And send me pictures of the baby."

Ingrid's own fork stopped. "I will be more than happy to do that. No more drifting away--there's a change for the better I'm going to make. No more drifting away."

Mac smiled. "That's an odd thing to hear from someone about to make a twenty-four hour flight into Cleveland."

"God is that how long it takes?"

"Twenty-four hours in the air. I'm not including stopovers."

She looked at her fork, her appetite flown. "I'm going to be miserable."

"Probably," Mac had to admit.

Her plane left the next morning. The flight turned out to be a fantastic, incredible bore, a fact to which she knew she owed gratitude considering the alternatives, but still complained about inwardly during the stopovers in Tokyo and Minneapolis, where huge crowds of people stumbled about the turnstiles in search of luggage, children, spouses, and the nearest bar. By the time her plane left Minnesota Ingrid was ready for a stiff drink as well, and half wished Mac had faked the age on her bogus passport. She supposed she had to be content that the passport served its function at all. Indeed, no one so much as gave her little blue booklet a second glance.

On the last day of August--Friday--Ingrid's plane touched down at Cleveland Hopkins Airport in Cleveland, Ohio. She ate lunch at the airport, then spent two hours in finding a cab driver willing to make the drive down route 2 to Sandusky. With her wallet lighter, she set foot on the doorstep of Lisa's house almost three months to the day after leaving it. It was just before six o'clock in the evening.

"Journey's end," she said to no one in particular while opening the newel post for a spare set of keys.

Much to her shock, somebody heard. Also, the keys were gone--taken, no doubt, by the individual standing on the other side of the door, rattling the lock, and calling her name. The trip from Manila had been dull, but very tiring. So much so that when Ingrid laid eyes on the tall, dark figure that yanked the door open, still with her name on its lips, the containment of her exhaustion became impossible.

She fainted dead away.

XX. Champions

Friday, September 21, 1990.

Summer had left the progressive region, but forgot to close the door on its way out, allowing a stubborn, stifling heat to linger, too curious for its own good about the goings on of its celebrants after all the holiday parades had ended, and all the backyard swimming pools were drained, folded up, and put away. Cedar Point, the giant amusement park which many enthusiasts considered to be the jewel of Lake Erie, had been open for business on weekends only since Labor Day, but because of the weather its trade remained steady; the celebrants, it seemed, were not quite ready to give up on the season yet either.

Until tonight.

The Ship-to-Shore was almost empty. Ingrid Felton stood behind the cash register thinking about nothing at all. She was content to watch the world pass on the midway, in particular the children. Many of them were even now with their parents in the twilight, clutching balloons, lollipops, and overpriced souvenirs of all shapes and sizes. Sounds of their laughter rang like music. Occasionally her eye would wander to the scenery above, from which a broken rain of peeling screams fell, born of some thrill ride over the trees. Dominating it all, of course, majestic, was the Ferris wheel, its lights twinkling as if with ambition to join the very stars themselves.

A man dressed as a pirate to fit the theme of the restaurant was waiting tables tonight. He was new, and lacked experience, but for a month now there'd been no complaints about his conduct. This came as no surprise to Ingrid. The man possessed a certain knack for getting the hang of things over time. At present he was standing at the entrance, relishing the reactions from passers by. He waved at the children and handed them balloons. He said pirate things like *Argh!* and *Avast ye scurvy scallowags!* This last earned him a lot of strange glances, but Ingrid allowed it, until finally, at just after eight o'clock, his wish to commit social suicide had achieved for her its maximum number of cringes, and she left the counter to put a stop to the show.

"Pardon me, Captain Hook," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder. The pirate turned. And yes, the costume was a wonder to behold, with its red jacket, its plastic gold buttons, and its tricorne stapled with long black hair. But what made it all work so well were the scars on his face, and the eye-patch, which were as genuine as the smile he now offered. "You're scaring away potential customers."

Scott Bremman glanced at the midway for a moment. "No. Come on, am I that good?"

"Oh you've got this buccaneer thing down to an art." She stood on tip-toe to give him a kiss. "Why don't you go swab the deck or something while I close the grill?"

"Aye-aye, Madame."

In fact there were very few things left to do, and by nine o'clock they were ready to go home. They waited for closing time at one of the tables, holding hands and talking about the summer gone by. At nine-fifteen Scott got up to hang a CLOSED sign on the

Ship-to-Shore's little gate. He wasn't quite quick enough, as one final customer slipped in, a female Ingrid's age, and one she knew.

"Ingrid?" the girl asked, grinning ear to ear.

The lake breeze lifted Ingrid's hair--which she had left long--as she stood. "Trixie Keefer!" She gave her friend a hug and they both laughed for a minute over how long it had been. A few lighthearted jokes were made about the heat, about school (Martin Prewski in particular). "Sit down, sit down," Ingrid insisted, "can I have Scott get you something? Coke? Sprite? A hot dog?"

"Gosh no, but thanks. I heard you were managing the restaurant now and was hoping to catch you before going home."

"Well...I'm sort of the unofficial manager. I'm not old enough yet to govern the helm, so to speak, so Scott's playing decoy for now."

Trixie looked at Scott, who was hanging his jacket on a hook near the bar. "The pirate?" she asked with a knowing grin. "Yes, I've heard you've been eating a few hot dogs yourself."

Ingrid laughed. It had been almost a year since she'd talked to Trixie, but the edge in her humor was still as tart and precise as the pixie haircut she wore. "You know an awful lot, Trixie. Who's been whispering in your ear?"

"My own boyfriend is a bellhop at Hotel Breakers. He's seen you working here now that Lisa's gone and put two and two together."

Ingrid found not long after her arrival back home that Lisa had shut her affairs in Sandusky with word she was relocating to another state, and no one thus far had come forward with questions. No doubt her story had been just simple enough to believe, like the ones she'd left behind to fill the gaps for her daughter.

"When are you coming back to school?" Trixie wondered. "Danielle's been asking about you. Some of the other girls too."

"Never," Ingrid decreed. "I'm figuring on correspondence courses for my GED instead. Scott and I are going to hunker down for the winter over on Erie Street--"

"I bet," Trixie said with a raised brow.

"--we've got a baby on the way."

"You *what*?"

"A baby on the way," Ingrid repeated, enjoying the petrified expression on her friend's face. "I'm twelve weeks in. Everything is in working order so far, according to the doctor I've been seeing. And this guy," she went on, patting Scott's leg as he approached the table, "is the happy father-to-be. He'd better be happy anyway."

"He's ecstatic," Scott said.

"Trixie you met Scott once a couple years ago. Here he is again, a changed man. Scott this is Trixie Keefer."

"I remember. It's nice to see you again."

The girl nodded, but her mouth was still hanging open. "I am so totally out of touch with the world," she said, sounding like she was confessing the fact more to herself than the others.

"I'll leave you ladies to talk while I finish putting the chairs up," Scott said.

Ingrid warned Trixie to close her mouth before she wound up swallowing a midge. But her friend was still dazed. She watched Scott busy himself in the lounge, lost under whatever spell the idea of Ingrid having a baby had put her under.

"Trixie this is Houston," Ingrid smiled, "please come in."

It did something. The girl blinked and gave Ingrid a long look-over. "I'm assessing you," she said, all traces of humor flown from her voice. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Ingrid said. "Finding anything interesting?"

"Anything interesting?" the other repeated. "Look at you, Ingrid! Look how happy you are! You know the last time we talked I was worried you were going to wander off somewhere and...oh, I don't know. Do something crazy. Now we're together again and I get this girl who looks like she's just been to a wishing well."

"It wasn't quite like that, Trixie, but you're close. I certainly discovered some things."

"Like what?"

"You've had enough surprises for now."

"Fair enough. But Ingrid?" She'd been leaning in her chair with her legs crossed during their chat; now she came forward. "You really are happy. I can see it."

"I am. I'm happy, and I'm excited about Scott and the baby, the life we're going to have together--" Trixie giggled. "What?" Ingrid laughed back. "What'd I say?"

"Everything, girl." She leaned in close for another hug. "I love this," Ingrid heard her say, the words dripping with tears of sincerity. "Truly. It's the new you."

They talked about other, lighter things until the park closed. Two weeks later, on a stormy night, the park closed for the year.

Ingrid spent October with Scott at the Erie Street house. During that month summer finally acquiesced to a full departure, allowing cooler air to sweep from the north. The leaves turned dry and fell, spicing the air with their crisp scent. Every Sunday afternoon Scott would rake them off the back lawn while Ingrid swept the porch. News from the world came and went. On October fourth Ingrid stopped what she was doing to watch a bulletin on television about a rebel uprising in the Philippines. It inspired her to write a letter to Mark Abunda, which she sent on the very next day. During that same week she met Scott's family for the first time. They'd been asking a ton of questions (the mother in particular) about the high school sweetheart who'd popped back into his life after a two-year vanishing act, and since they'd missed making her acquaintance the first time, would it not be a chore to bring her around the house on some weekend in the near future? Scott brought the request to Ingrid, which she accepted, knowing full well that to play hide-and-seek from his relatives would only arouse further suspicion. Indeed, she had some questions of her own in regard to what, if anything, Scott was telling them these days about June and July.

"I told them we eloped," Scott said on the night before the meet and greet.

Ingrid dropped her toothbrush, trying not to get gel up her nose as she laughed. "For two months? And did we get married during this fabulous getaway? Because my ring finger is still bare, Romeo."

"It was not the best story in the world, but I thought it was the only one my mom would entertain."

"And how did she take it?"

"She thinks we're both ridiculous. Especially since while we were away I got robbed and wound up losing an eye."

"Defending the damsel in distress no doubt."

"I did tell them that as a matter of fact. It made...the shock of what happened to me a little easier for everyone to take."

Ingrid touched his eye-patch. "I'm glad you told them that," she said, "because that's exactly what you were doing."

"In Detroit, no less," he smiled.

"Yes, you romantic fool. Eloping with the girl of your dreams to Detroit."

The weather turned warm again for Halloween. On the twenty-eighth (Sunday) an almost balmy breeze visited the rust belt, lifting its leaves to the skies for days to come. Wednesday afternoon found Ingrid walking home with Scott from an early supper. Wind chimes sang from porches. Jack-o-lanterns grinned on stone steps. Ingrid had decided to dress as a clown for giving away candy later on, and was about to pitch her idea for a make-up scheme to Scott when they arrived at Lisa's house to find a man sitting on the porch swing.

Her feet stopped on the front walk. "Who's that?" she asked. But something had already clicked on its own. The man was tall and slender, with straight, dry husks of blond hair growing from the rim of the dress hat he wore.

"I recognize him," Scott said pensively.

The man recognized them too. Noticing their scrutiny, he stood up, came to the edge of the porch, and with a bow said: "Lady and gentleman. Please forgive me for intruding. It is a pleasure to see the both of you again."

"Hello, O'Connor," Ingrid said, tightening her hold around Scott's waist. "What can we do for you?"

In twenty minutes they were having tea and cake at the kitchen table. Ever dignified, O'Connor complimented Ingrid on her baking while making pleasant observations regarding the decor of the house. But his politeness was a screen, Ingrid knew; of course it was, and she waited with mounting tension for him to arrive at the true purpose of his visit, and not five minutes later, he did just that.

The region they'd left was no longer a place of romantic love, he proclaimed. Had this news reached their ears? When Ingrid told him that it hadn't, O'Connor went on to say that Cambridge was now being worshipped as a kind of god for seeing the error of his ways and giving his life to correct them, while on the other side of the coin, lynch mobs were in search of Ingrid, ready to put her head on a stake for the hardships she'd visited upon their saint. At this point Ingrid became worried about Darren's well-being, but when she asked after it, O'Connor could provide no news.

Scott spoke up not long after. "What is it that you'd like us to do, Mister O'Connor?" he asked.

"Come back to the region with me," he replied, "give it the blood that it needs. Martyr yourselves."

"What?"

"The region will never be the place of love it once was unless the two of you die, Mister Bremman. You and Miss Felton represent the closure that it needs. The finality of its tumult."

"Forget it," Scott said flatly. "You can leave now."

"Mister Bremman," O'Connor went on, "Woodward Cambridge may have been misguided, but out of love for the region, I believed in his ideals. He made me feel it could one day be an even better, more powerful place. Today I only want what once was. And I am prepared to go to...great lengths in order to achieve it."

Ingrid began to realize that inviting O'Connor into the house had been a terrible mistake. She looked at Scott, who was standing his ground like a sentinel. He too understood the danger.

"Heal the region," O'Connor entreated, "please. Both of you."

"Get out," Scott warned.

"Before you refuse I want you to consider the police are still looking for you in this region," O'Connor pointed out.

"I imagine the police are still very confused about what happened the night I left Norwalk," Scott came back with, "confused and more than a little embarrassed. Also, I woke up three months ago in a Detroit hospital with one eye and about a hundred scars. I don't look like the man they're hunting anymore."

O'Connor tilted his head.

"I was hurt and dying," Scott explained, "at a crossing place in the region, with the interstice wide open. So I went through and into a part of the progressive that was--is--also dying."

"I see," the other man replied. "How fortunate for you both."

"We did our work in the region. The dambuhala are gone. We're shut of that place."

At these words O'Connor laid another one of his cards on the table--one that first surprised Ingrid but then made her angry.

"Ah, but are they gone, Mister Bremman? Were you able to kill the one that was sent to...ignite a certain grief in Lisa Felton? Or were the confused and embarrassed members of your police force too quick to give you a chance?"

"That one's dead by now," Ingrid broke in, "and even if it's not, my husband's right: We are *shut*."

"Very well," O'Connor sighed, rising from the table to his full height, which was a good three inches more than Scott's. "Madame," he continued to Ingrid, "you are decidedly precise in your ever so curt deduction. You are indeed *shut*."

And his eyes turned red, and his teeth grew into fangs that scratched the flesh of his chin. Frozen in terror, Ingrid saw a talon rise from under the table where his hand had been. The talon swiped at her face. She screamed a word--a word that might have been *Lisa!* or *Wesley!* Scott dove forward. Blood flew, splattering the mantle pictures Lisa had put up months before. One of them, taken at the Ship-to-Shore, showed Ingrid

sitting at a table with Lake Erie in the background, and though she was smiling for the camera, a shadow lay across her expression, as if she didn't really believe the lie the photo would later tell, of her being happy, and never would.

Outside, dozens of trick-or-treaters had begun their pilgrimage for candy. The blood-curdling screams coming from the house got them even further into the spirit of things. One of them, a young boy dressed as a vampire, looked into the sky and hollered *Happy Halloween!* while walking single file with his brother and sister, mindful of the traffic, of the other children, of the broken, uneven sidewalk. Mindful, ever so mindful.

For in a realm of chaos there is no striving but towards order. Seeds carried on the wind must settle; wounds opened in battle must heal. There is no eternity but for that. Regions are different, passions are different, but their cycles repeat, and they are always the same.

We are born, we destroy ourselves, and then we are born again.



About the author: Tag Cavello was born in Norwalk, Ohio, in 1971. Today he lives in Manila, the Philippines, with his wife and two young daughters.

AFTERWORD

Hello everyone, and thank you for riding along.

I hope you had a good time with this book. Its primary aim was to show you the healing effects of love, but I'm also hoping it managed to take you away from your own life for a little while and show you some interesting things. I like to take what pleases me in the real world and place it into my fiction (what writer doesn't?). Windy days and rainy nights. Candlelit corners, old library books. The laughter of children. A kiss between lovers.

Regions of Passion is a fantasy novel. It's also my first ever novel, though fingers crossed not the last. The idea for it came during the early nineties. At the time, I was taking piano lessons on Columbus Avenue in Sandusky, Ohio. There are (or were, at least) a lot of shops down by the wharf, a lot of night clubs, a lot of old boats docked in still older boathouses. After my lessons I would often walk to the wharf and daydream in front of Sandusky Bay. Amidst one of these daydreams I imagined a boy and a girl sitting on a bench, holding hands, looking at the water. That boy and girl eventually became Scott and Ingrid.

I should also point out that my two favorite novels in the whole world are Weaveworld and Imajica. Both of them are written by Clive Barker. Both of them are fantasy novels. And after reading them, I simply *had* to make one for myself. You understand.

Unfortunately, I was not a very good author during this time period. Most of my stories lacked voice and structure and tried *way* too hard to be cute with their prose. To give you a better understanding of what I mean, think of a baseball pitcher who decides he wants to throw nothing but ungodly breaking balls that fly all over the place—they fly everywhere, in fact, except into the strike zone. That was me. My stuff tumbled like a bumble-bee in a storm, never once coming close to its target.

I wrote the first one hundred pages of Regions, which was then called My Summer With Ingrid, if you can dig that, and then quit. Cold turkey.

How come? I could give you lots of reasons. I could tell you my short stories were being rejected by every small magazine I sent them to (some with rather harsh words from the editors warning me never to darken their doorstep again). I could tell you I got tired of licking and pasting countless self-addressed, stamped envelopes. I could tell you that Tag Cavello was just too damned good for the literary world (yeah, yeah). But the truth is I liked playing video games way, way more than I liked writing. I had this kick-ass title for my PSX called Final Fantasy VII that really had me hooked. Screw writing. Who needed it?

Also...the novel sucked. Big time. Come on, man, I was in my twenties then. And before you say it, yes, I know that lots of authors hit it big in their twenties. There was Stephen Crane and Stephen King and everyone in between I guess. This author, however, needed a few more years to bake. And Christ, I'm pretty sure I'm not done yet.

The original novel had Scott and Ingrid fighting all the time. They swore at each other like truck drivers in heavy traffic. In fact, by the time they actually reached the region, Ingrid was pretty close to hating Scott. This, of course, is patently ridiculous, considering the prerequisites for accessing the land in question. Also, as I mentioned earlier, the book lacked structure. Oh I had an ending for it in mind before ever sitting down to type, but as for what happened before then...I was pretty much making things up as I went along. That is a bad, *bad* way to write any story.

So I quit writing and played video games for a few years. Let's make that fifteen years. I also moved to the Philippines to work as an English teacher. And it was with this job, at last, that I learned the importance of structure, of outlining your projects start to finish before ever beginning them. I have my old boss, J.C. Besona, to thank for that. My first ever project pitch to him went something like this:

Me: Hey J.C. I have this cool idea for a new class, let me explain it.

J.C.: Sure.

He listens to the pitch and I stand there looking like a new father. J.C., however, only gives a vague nod.

J.C.: That's great. Where's your outline?

Me: My what?

J.C.: I need an outline and a synopsis for the project, okay?

Me: Uh...sure.

J.C.: In fact I'll want an outline for every single project you dream up, all the time. Okay?

Me: Wow.

J.C.: Now go on, shoo, get out of here.

I went and wrote the outline mainly to please him. But when it was finished I knew I could never create any project again without one. What J.C. basically did was point out that while a journey and a destination are great, you also need a map if you plan not to get lost in the middle.

Know what else? Ingrid is the most classic, old-style romantic girl I have ever known. She waited fifteen years for me. She sat in the back of my mind and brooded, and waited, and brooded some more. It's true goddammit. I just couldn't stop thinking about her. I guess she really wanted me to write her book.

So I did. This time with a map to show me the way.

And now our journey is complete. I think the ending disappointed her a little. It was supposed to close with her, Scott, and O'Connor setting off to kill that last ogre—the one that ran off at the beginning of the novel. Instead we got O'Connor going after a steak dinner at our protagonists' expense. If it's any consolation I think both Ingrid and the baby survived that attack. Scott I'm not so sure about.

You survived, too. You read a book by an indie author and lived. Congrats. And again, thank you. I do hope you enjoyed the ride.

Take care, and we'll see each other again soon (that isn't a threat).

--Tag Cavello, September, 2014

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