

Fable of the Swan

A Novel



From the
Chuubo's Marvelous
Wish-Granting Engine
Project

Jenna Katerin Moran

FABLE OF THE SWAN

by

Jenna Katerin Moran

Copyright © 2010 - 2012 by Jenna K. Moran
All rights reserved.

Cover art by Tony Damiani
Layout by Rand Brittain

All characters in this story are fictitious or heavily fictionalized. Readers are advised against drawing conclusions about or regarding persons living or dead based on this material.

Part of the
Chuubo's Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine
transmedia project

In celebration of the birth of
Killian James Sebastian Maginn

And with special thanks to
Cync Brantley
Chrysoula Tzavelas
Hsin Chen
R'ykandar Korra'ti
Gretchen Shanrock-Solberg
Rand Brittain
Anthony Damiani
Amy Sutedja
and
Kathryn Tewson

Introduction

I remember what it was like, being bathed in the radiance of the swan.
I remember being good.

I remember being — a good person. I actually was. I mean. There were like forty, fifty minutes there where I was *redeemed*, made whole, made perfect, and nobody could have doubted it. Even turned into a serpent, even biting poison into my own saviour —

I was made good.

I am not sure if a good person could tell you this story. I figure, a good person — they might not be able to do this kind of thing. They might not be able to drag somebody's heart out. They might not be able to rip out a soul, take it in their good right hand, and use the left-behind flesh in magic.

Or maybe it's like: a good person would *double* tell you this story.

It hurts, you see. Literally.

There are brass hooks of story sticking out of me right now. There are three that have made it out of my skin. There are more that sit just inside me like little prickly presents of the heart.

That's a good reason to think that a good person — that they'd *definitely* tell it, and more.

Don't good people go around doing stupid self-sacrificing things like this all the time?

I am not certain.

That is just an impression that I have acquired.

As for myself, even if I am now bad to the *bone*, I am actually a pro at this stupid self-sacrificing stuff. I bet that I even qualify as tangentially *good-like* in this limited and specific domain. I can self-sacrifice stupidly like nobody's business.

But still I keep thinking:

There has got to be an easier way.

Couldn't I just sing this out of me in one trill of beauteous song and be done? Can't I have a magic pen and write this into me, into my heart and stomach, backwards and upside-down, in letters of golden fire? Can't I find a typewriter and type this out click-click-click like a *normal* person? Or even an abnormal, disturbingly organic-looking typewriter that clicks with a grotesque peculiarity — wouldn't that be fine?

Every time my heart beats all the hooks wriggle and they catch at bits of innards and my skin.

The pain is actually phantom pain — I think.

I think that the hooks are not physical. For one thing, I am not currently choking on blood and dying. I am not totally human any longer so that argument may not be definitive — but here's an even better proof: I have seen other people telling stories that hurt, and lately I have seen those stories manifest as hooks. None of *those people* have choked on their own blood or had their guts explode because they told their painful stories *either*.

(I am not counting Mr. Morozov.

He had a stomach monster.)

So I do not think that these hooks are physically real. I think that most of this pain is a self-inflicted deception. My body twinges with each twitch and each wriggle of these thorns because I can see them — because I know that they are there. My eyes and heart tell me that I am pierced all through by these awful brass hooks in me and therefore my body, my sense of feeling: it is deceived.

Still.

Phantom pain or real pain, pushing giant brass hooks out from your heart is not easy. I would have rather had a magic finger-snapping story delivery method or even the terrible machine.

When I finish telling you this story, when I have gone over everything that I need to go over, when I speak the last words of it, then I will find the likeliest looking hook of these. I will set my hands upon it. I will gather up my courage. Then I will pull me inside out with it.

I will *invert* me.

I will *unfold* me with that hook into a leviathan of burnished brass and gleaming chrome.

I will make these groping brass hooks of mine into tentacles. I will open my eyes in both directions into emptiness. I will learn to swim in air and land and void.

Then I will swim out and fight with Death. I will squeeze him in my tentacles. I will rip him open with the teeth that are on them and I will bite his brain. I will feast on he Death — the lord of Death's dominion, the first of the Riders, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy is he named. I will break him, and I will grow great with his death-meats, and I will laugh, evilly, then, *bwa ha ha*, at the world and void.

That is my current intention.

It is, I will stress, the appropriate thing to do under these circumstances.

It is logical, sensible, and sane.

It is probably just as well that the whole "good" thing did not take, however. I believe that this initiative would have given me some trouble — at minimum, at the evil laughter part — if I had remained infected by the radiance of the swan.

I met my friend Kseniya when I was eleven years old and I came to School for the first time. I met her and she awed me. She was a foot taller than me and the exact same age. She was stronger than the boys, than all of the boys, even the ones one or two years older. She was tall and stern and awesome and I loved her.

She awed me.

It was incomprehensible to me that she could like me back. I hadn't even *liked* things that weren't human before I met her. I'd looked down on them. Then I met her, and all of a sudden *I* was the thing that I looked down on. And she? I wanted to *be* like her.

I wanted to be one of what *she* was. I didn't mind the sharp lines of her or the cold colours of her face. I wanted that old blood she had, that blood of magicians and giants, all mixed up with the human as it was in her.

That wasn't even the heart of her, though. It wasn't the true thing. It wasn't being part-Jotun that made her Kseniya. I think there was more than that. I think it was *her*. Just, who she was. She just was this person who . . . was . . . real. Real and more real, real in ways that I was never real, real where I was a feeble copy. Truth where we were falsehood. Original where everyone around us, including myself, was a bric-a-brac of created things. She was vibrant. She was self-creating. She was like a single living thing in a field of dead, sepia grass. She was truth and I loved that truth of her.

She didn't think she was better than I was. Don't get me wrong. She liked being her better than she'd have liked being me. She didn't want to trade or anything — but she didn't agree with me that there was an essential difference. She said that she liked being her because and only because a person should be who they are.

So she didn't think I should be like her.

She thought I should be like myself.

That I should be. That Mikhael should be; Giselle; Vanessa; that Elya should; Natalia; Sienna; Brice; Lee; Desmond; whomever, whatever, I don't know. People. Everyone. The Headmaster himself. She thought that people should be like themselves.

It turns out —

Let me pause the story here to bud a few more hooks and build a furnace chamber —

It turns out that being like myself is not my greatest strength.

Here is a secret that I never wanted to tell.

I fought against the void-born swan. I fought against that blind and awful power that Lee Scathing unleashed.

I fought against it when it tried to perfect us.

I am proud of that much. In my own awful way I am proud of that and I would do it again.

I fought it while it lived but when it died —

I wriggled in me. I clutched after that dying radiance.

I *wanted* it.

It was absolution and salvation and it would have *fixed* me. I couldn't bear that it was withdrawing from me, that attention, that emanation, that redemption of the swan. I grasped at it gruesomely. I clung to it like a squalling child.

I fought to save us from it but as soon as it died I tried to seize it back.

I battened onto that dying glow. I was desperate, I was greedy. I tried to hold on to it. I had tasted of being innocent and good and true and righteous and I wanted it. I did not want to become wicked and to let it go.

I am ashamed of that.

I did not want to tell you that. I did not even want to tell that to myself.

Fable of the Swan

3 years ago

"The world was dark," Kseniya told me, "when the humans came, and there was as yet no sun."

"How did people see?" I asked her.

"Hush," she said.

It was a Tuesday afternoon in late autumn. On Tuesdays, when classes ended and the other students went streaming out, the two of us stayed behind. We tidied up Mrs. Rosewood's classroom. We talked about this and that. That day, Kseniya sat on the edge of her student's chair-and-desk. She put one foot down hard upon the floor. She told me this.

"The world was dark, and we worshipped the gods of dream and nightmare —"

She thought for a bit. She corrected herself.

"Prayed to," she said. "The world was dark, and we *prayed to* the gods of dream and nightmare, and there was as yet no sun. The humans came across the lake on their ships and oh, it was a very great wonder to us. We had walked all around the lake, you see, and we knew there was no place such as the ships could have come from. Then — there they were, looming, lurching, rising and hovering across the horizon, their nets and their rigging and the fires that were the lights on them and the strange small people on them, clinging to the upper ropes, their round faces glowing in the lamplight and the shouting of them, the terrible racket and ruckus as they came over the edge of the lake, perching, lurching, stumbling up onto our shores.

"And such strange and marvellous wonders you were, too! There on the pebbled beaches, sand in your tiny toes, wailing, dressed in a riot of coloured fabric, staggering up onto our shores, you with your sewing and your lanterns, you with your iron and your fires, your farming, your Churches, and your Christ."

Here I interrupted her. I felt . . . defensive. "He's not *my* —" I said.

I would have said 'he's not my Christ.'

"He's not *my*," is all I said.

She glared at me. "Whisht!" she said, and I looked away. The light ran long across the floor.

"Your crosses, then," she said, after a bit. "The marvel of your crosses. For you have to understand how very strange that must have been. Don't you? How strange, to we who lacked any cultural reference for it, we who had never even heard of Rome much less the Christ, we who had only lived in the darkness and only known the darkness and prayed to the gods of dream and nightmare, to suddenly have —"

She seemed at a loss for words for a while.

"It was as if," she said, "I were to pick up this eraser —"

And here she seized up a pencil eraser from her desk and brandished it at me.

"By the power of this unknown cultural reference! With this reference," she said, "to events which you do not know, to dreams and nightmares which you do not have, I erase thee, I banish thee, o get thee gone!"

Such was the fury of it that I staggered back, threw up my hand before my face, *erased* —

Or, well, not. Of course. I suppose. I mean, it had none such a power. I knew that it had none.

"Like that," she said.

I raised an eyebrow. "That sentence did not hold together," I told her.

"Pfuh," she handwaved. She tossed the eraser away.

I snickered. She sighed. She stared out the window at the sky.

"These ruddy, swarming creatures," she said, "who could hold up two sticks of wood and drive us back. We feared you, in the end. We loved you, at first. We were amazed by you. And the foxes always loved you. They always thought you were like them, I suppose, in ways the Jotun were never. But in the end you were a threat, and we should have killed you: thought of killing you; planned to kill you. Wiped you out entirely, bundled you back onto your boats and burned them,

given you all a gala funeral upon the lake. We could have done that, should have done that, maybe, but we were slow."

My cheeks reddened. Some of that was anger, I mean, the "should have done that" made me angry. Some of that was maybe humour, too. I don't know what I felt, exactly. Some things. I felt some things, some strong things, a mix of some various strong things, when she said all of that.

"We were *so very* slow," she said.

To *that* I grinned. Pulled up half my mouth, at least. Looked down at my desk.

She stuck out her tongue at me. "Oh, you agree, do you?"

I nodded.

"Well," she said, "my little butterball, you have no idea. You've seen me now and then at my more . . . ponderous . . . moments. You've met my cousin. You've met my Ma. So you think, 'hm, yes, they do have something of a tendency in that direction, don't they. Some . . . inclination towards . . . slowness.' But back then, oh. Back then we were granite. Back then you could cut off one of our heads and we'd be too slow to die of it. No, we'd recover from the shock, and years would have passed. We'd put our heads back on, and years would have passed. We'd swivel them around, lock them on our necks, get them facing the right way. We'd stomp down into the village of humans to get our revenge, but oh, we couldn't, because the person who'd cut off our head in the first place was dead, dead and buried, and their children were dead, and their grandchildren, dead, and yeah, we could probably smoosh their great-grandchildren, sometimes we did that, but — it wasn't the same. You know? Trees grew too fast for us to run you out of wood. We couldn't burn your crops before you'd brought them in. We'd sweep through town and claim your iron, break what things had formed into the shape of a cross, storm your churches, shatter them, then we'd go home and we'd throw a party. We'd eat, we'd drink, we'd dance and sleep, we'd feel very good about how thorough a job we'd done and sleep and wake and there you'd be, you'd mined your iron back again, you'd built your churches up again, you'd bred three more for every one we'd crushed. You seethed, like army ants you seethed, a siege of numbers, years, and time.

"Such little creatures and yet so very much alive.

"And in the end we would have killed you, you understand. We would have made a permanent end and you would not have stood against us, save for Elizaveta."

That was a story that I knew.

"I've heard of her," I said.

She nodded.

"She stitched your shadows into the ground," I said. "And made you small. She knit together the tails of the foxes. When she was done with that, why, she sewed the sun right up into the sky."

Kseniya looked at me and her eyes were wide and her mouth was gaping and after a bit she began to laugh, Kseniya's soft slow laughter that sounded like a human sounds in sobs.

And she said, "Is that how you tell it?"

And I flushed. I said, "Yeah."

"Oh, dear," she said.

She grinned off and away at the sky.

"She had no magic like that," Kseniya said. "Only, her husband Ivan, he was a hero, he fought against us, went out most nights, went killing, sometimes won. Heroes do. He went through a lot of clothes, like that, too. Ripped them, tore them, shredded them, you know. And she would mend them and make new clothes. And one day she looked up from her sewing to find one of the swan people perched on her drafting table, looking at her with admiration, saying, 'you who can sew a pair of pants like that, you're worthy.'"

Here her attention drifted. I think it was longing. I don't know. Her attention drifted and then it came back to me.

"So we didn't kill you, of course," she said. And I looked at her, confused. "We couldn't," she said. "Not when there was one of — not when there was even one of you, even something, not when even one of you had made something that one of the swan people had liked.

"I don't think you can understand it. I'm not even really sure I can understand it, I don't have much of that blood in me any more, we're not what we were then, and the swan people are not what they were then, but to us, to my people, living then, in the darkness that was our world, they were beauty. They were truth and they were beauty and they were what it meant to be worth something. What it meant for something to be worth something was to have one of them look at it and approve, and in all of our works and in all of our days that was not a thing we ever had . . . and then you, you swarming creatures, you come to our shores and you with your iron that makes us sick and your lanterns against the dark and your farming and your sewing and your cross that *drives us back*, your right angle between two lengths of wood with the horizontal one higher than the midway point that drives us back — and this one woman, these only pants, were worthy. So we didn't kill you. Let you live, let you breed, let you have your iron, let you have your churches, bred with you sometimes — more often than with ourselves. Not so much by preference as by rate of opportunity. We would mate as ponderous giants now and then across the centuries, you know, we who loved our own, and they who fell for humans, they who could fall for humans, well, their matings were faster and more frequent, so I hear. And we were jealous but we did not regret. How could we? You'd been graced by a swan."

". . . that's not enough," I said.

"*It was enough*," she said. She sounded sad and angry and defensive about it. "It was enough. You have to know that. It was like — it was like if you humans were huddled in your dark houses, your caves, your fortresses, huddled there, fearing and hating our kind, thinking we were lumbering, unkillable monsters, which we sort of were, forgotten of your God, and then one day you looked out into the mists beyond your houses and your caves to the forests where the giants walked and saw not the horror that you expected but something different, something terrible, something — like — like your . . . Santa Claus, your Santa Claus taking the hands of one of us and kissing each cheek in friendship, praising us: 'You are Nice.' Uh. Or your Jesus. Your Buddha. Your Queen Elizabeth."

She looked at me, watching my face, rolling her hand in the air as she tried to figure out if she'd hit the right note yet. "Your Gandhi. . . . Your Benjamin Franklin. Nader. Marie Curie. Dracula. Feynman? Shaft. Your human Stalin. Your Romeo. Your Juliet. Lee Iacocca. Ah!"

She snapped her fingers. The chalkboard rang resonant with it. "*Your Gamera*."

I hesitated.

"You would understand," she said, "wouldn't you? If you'd crept out from your homes among the monsters, and found your movie *Gamera* embracing one of them there? You would take it to heart. You would *understand*, wouldn't you? that here was something worthy of your admiration, worthy of setting aside your fears and your struggles and your hate?"

Gamera is a fictional giant turtle from Japanese monster movies. I remember being kind of bemused. Santa Claus or Queen Elizabeth would have been better. But I sort of understood what she meant, in regards to *Gamera*, and I loved her, so I said:

"He *is* 'friend to all the children of the world.'"

"Exactly," she said, satisfied. "It was just like that, for us."

School was silent then, except for us. Most everybody else had left for home.

"I want you to remember that," she told me. "You in particular. You who are always wondering what it is that you are worth."

"What?" I said.

"A swan person liked Elizaveta's craft," she said, "and therefore you are made good."

Time passed.

"That's the worst inspirational anecdote ever," I told her.

But it wasn't. Not really. I said, "I mean, that applies to every human in Town. That probably even applies to *you* by now."

She shrugged. She looked away. I blushed.

"That's — that's *terrible*," I said. But the truth was, it wasn't that terrible, because, after all, it did mean something that she'd chosen to say it all to me. That the whole story had been about her

saying that to me. *That* meant something. So it actually made me pretty happy for a few days, at least, that she'd said that, before I got upset about something or other else.

That was the year that my friend Kseniya made me a crochet hook.

It was pretty.

It was probably the exact opposite of these brass hooks of story. These hooks come out through my flesh. That hook . . . didn't. There were also more substantive differences like:

It was made of wood.

Kseniya dragged me around a forested area for most of an hour looking for the right bit of wood. She finally found a rowan branch that she liked for it. She stripped off its outer bark. She had me dry it for a couple of days against my bedroom wall. Then she split it in two. She gave me one piece and took one herself. She showed me how to scrape it smooth, how to cut it, how to round it, and how to rough the end down to a point.

I tried to imitate her. I kept screwing up and losing control of the knife.

"This is way too much work," I said. "There is a *store*."

She grinned at me.

She used an iron blade — to my distress, and hissing as she did so — to mark the neck. She cut a smile into it. The rest of the work she did with a stone knife, and much more comfortably. She made a hook.

"Thus," she said, and she handed it to me.

See?

Not even the least bit alike.

... The world was born as a crime against the void.

Here's how it happened, I think.

Probably — the void was just sitting there, this great dark expanse of nothing on top of nothing, and if you looked left, there'd be nothing, and if you looked right, there'd be nothing, and it was just the same exactly if you happened to look up or down. All around. Whatever. Just this sheet of solitary darkness, not even having stars.

The stars came later, you know, later on.

The void was just sitting there and then somebody dropped a name onto it. A name, a word, but — I shouldn't think it was just this verbal thing. It was a name made from the language of metal, it was a name incarnate as a thing, a key, a silver key, maybe, or maybe a key made out of iron.

That's why names are so important, you know, they're not *just* sounds, they're also metal things, metal keys. They're physical, they're tangible, they're the kinds of things you can use to open locks. If names were just sounds then nobody would listen to them, they wouldn't be important, they wouldn't have the power to change the way people think about things. They wouldn't, but they do. So the names, the first names, anyway, the names that can make worlds pop into existence, they're not sounds, or at least not just sounds. They're metal too.

The metal of the key fell through the void and where it fell the void became the sky — it became 'up,' the upper part. Then it landed. It hit the ground. That became the 'ground,' the lower part. The key fell through the upper part and landed on the lower part and that made the two parts into different things.

So imagine that you're in a dark room, a huge dark room, a gymnasium maybe, and there's no windows and all the lights are out, there's just this perfect darkness and then there's this glowing, shining key, it appears, it falls, it reflects, probably, against the floor, and you know by the light of its falling that there is an airy part of the place you're in, it touches its reflection: *bang*. You know by the sound and the actuality of its landing that there's a floor. You've seen and heard the ground now, you know the up and down now, an up and a down and a sky and a ground and all the space between.

That's where this thing gets awful.

That's where you start to hate the world, because the key, it doesn't just land. It's metal. Metal cuts, scrapes, gouges.

Change perspective. You're not watching the key any more. You're a perfectly happy, content void. *You're* the gymnasium now. You're not a person with eyes, not any more, but a vast and perfect empty space. Then suddenly you're cut. Something lands on you, on the floor of you, something cuts into you, opens into you, digs down, cuts, writhes, digs beneath you, takes the roots of it and spreads them into you, turns the tumblers of you and the lock of you, I don't know; tendrils of silver spread beneath the floor of you as would the roots of trees. It flourishes of you, in the air of you and above you, the key turning from solid form into organic, bursting forth into a vast and silver tree, its head becoming a trunk that rises, its branches sprouting, turning, and unfolding this way, the other way, and that, and glittering and spreading all in the darkness of you with reflections of its own light. It rips up the floor of you, does this tree. It uses you to bring itself to fruit. It fills you painfully with its shadows and its light, and there where you'd been perfectly peaceably content as a bit of nothingness, you've got this rough raw *being* in you instead.

The world must have so hated itself. Back then.

Certainly the void, it loathed the world. Certainly the void wept at the existence of the world. Certainly the nothing hated that the *something* was, and the nothing was right to do so, it was *reasonable* to do so, because when there was nothing at all then all things were in harmony, but now that there was a world — now that there was a key, and that that key had fallen, and that key had spread its metal through the basin of the void, and spread its branches and its fruit, now that there was a burning light in the nothingness and not simply the peace and quiet of it — things

could be in disharmony with themselves, things could be confused, things could be false and not just automatically and of necessity true.

Nobody knows where the key came from. I assume. I assume that nobody knows.

If somebody knew then wouldn't they have found some sort of proper authority and filed an appropriate complaint? . . .

*On the benches, by the pond, in
Bluebell Park*

When I was thirteen, I went and I sat on a bench in Bluebell Park. I threw bits of old bread on the pond. I got out my knitting and worked on a yellow hat for my little brother and I basked in the Park because it loved me.

The whole place was vibrant with it.

You could *feel* it.

It was like God had wandered in, and fallen asleep there, down under the soil and the grass, it had grown on Him, and His love slipped up to permeate everything, and me.

Not everyone takes to the Park that way, or at least, not the other way around.

Some people get sick from it. Some think it's just kind of OK. It's a vibrant place and it has its own little preferences and tastes regarding guests.

I kicked my feet and I knit and purled and I didn't see the swans come in.

They were just — there.

They were just there, born from the water, like as twins — like one had been born of the other's reflection. They surfaced, first one and then the other, and then they started honking at one another, and it was the most ridiculous set of noises ever. There's nothing *wrong* with swan honking, if you get me, it's not unnatural like a fox's screams, but *this* was like listening to two bad divas in a fight. I broke down giggling at them. Then I threw bread at them, right at them, until they first got louder and faster and then stopped honking completely and then I stuck out my tongue at them as they looked away.

I went back to my knitting.

One of them got out of the water.

It walked a little ways towards me, its tail wiggling, its wings all fluffed. I brandished the hat at it. I said, "Look! I made this! If you're a person, then make me good!"

It turns out that that only works when the swan is a metaphor.

If it happens to be a *real* swan, it isn't a very good idea.

Wings and Faces

not so very long ago

"Give me wings and faces, give me rivers, peaks, and fire: only make me strong enough and durable enough," said my friend Kseniya, "and I will bring her home."

How Harald Dreamt of a Stone

3 years ago

I don't know what actually *happened* to me the day that Giselle met me. I probably never will. It was like a string knotted around my finger, and then the knot pulled out. It was like a row of knitting ripped out of me and then re-done to a different plan. It was in me, that awful sickness, and then it was unravelled; no trace of the origins or ends of it remained.

It scared me.

My face swelled up, red and bloated. I felt a proper chipmunk. I laughed with it until I started panicking — on the day that Giselle met me. I coughed and blood came out; it was dripping down the back of my throat, I thought, where the mucous usually goes.

I rubbed my hand clean and I hid that blood from me.

That's when I started getting scared.

Breathing was kind of difficult. It got worse when I got scared but it was a little bad even before that. I felt like I had carbon paper in my lungs. You know? Like, there was this mesh of fine and pretty black paper in my lungs that was crinkling and wrinkling with every breath that I took. I had to breathe through it, like a filter, and it made every breath kind of rattling and weird inside me. It was like I was breathing past something and through something as I breathed.

My heart beat fast and it wriggled.

Kseniya wanted me to go to the nurse at the Recuperatorium. I didn't want to go. She was sort of like dragging me. You know? She wasn't actually dragging me. Because she could've, and she didn't, so she wasn't. She was just *pulling* on me. I was holding on to the table with both hands but she was stronger than me so she could've dragged me if she'd wanted to but she didn't because I was shaking my head. You know? Like this. Shaking my head!

I didn't want to go.

"I'm fine," I said. I — I said. I giggled nervously with my breaths. I rubbed at my red nose. "Seriously. Shut up. I — it's OK. I'm fine."

Did you ever notice that people say that when things are actually not fine?

Cause people do.

I mean, I bet if you could talk to dead people that most of them would be saying stuff like, "Seriously, people, I'm OK. Don't *worry*. You're making way too big a deal out of this. I'm just a little tired and, you know, wormy. Leave me alone!"

That's what most of them would say.

I mean, I guess every cemetery probably has a *few* complainers. You know the type. "I'm *deaaad*, I can't *moooove*, my life is *so o-over*." Yeah. They are probably just engaging in medication-seeking behaviour. Dead women — I mean, guys too, dead people? They can be *so* melodramatic, you have no idea.

... I may have been digressing from the substance of my tale.

So, um ... right.

I — I was telling Kseniya that I was fine. She was having none of it. My stomach was hurting. I was a little worried that I was going to have diarrhoea. That made clinging to a table in the middle of a public room less appealing, but it's hard to rearrange your reactions and consider them properly in the middle of a physical confrontation.

Everything around me was kind of bright. It was all extra shiny, like somebody had gone through the memory while I was off rambling about corpses and medication and polished everything up: Kseniya's face, the table, the floor ... the peas, the sensations in my stomach and my hands, whatever. All of that shone with the reflections of the room-top lights.

I don't know what was actually wrong with me. Knotted thread, like I said, it got pulled out and it was gone. If the blood didn't mean anything, if it was just my throat dry and raw or something, then it could all have just been anxiety. If I was dizzy because I was scared, if I was sick because I was scared, then maybe it was a case of asthma. Or anaphylaxis, at the worst. I don't have any

reason to think it was hemorrhagic fever or Hearst's or a vitality rejection syndrome or anything. I can't imagine it was some parasite worming itself out of my brain and down my sinuses, heralded by blood, into my throat. I thought at the time maybe I'd got my first period wrong and blood came out in the wrong place of me but that almost certainly wasn't it.

I don't get to know, I never will, so I hope it's not really relevant.

Giselle took whatever was wrong with me away.

She was suddenly there, next to me, then, this awkward girl with sunglasses and gel in her short black hair. I knew her. Well . . . I sort of knew her. I'd seen her around. I hadn't paid attention to her, though, not particularly. I'm surprised she'd paid any attention at all to me.

Actually she probably hadn't.

I mean, maybe? For some reason? I don't know? But probably not. Probably she didn't care about me or anything, back then, not even about Kseniya.

I think she probably just couldn't watch what was happening any longer. I mean, she's *Giselle*. She was Death's *sister*. She *ought* to have been able to watch worse than that, pop some popcorn in her mouth, chew, and laugh; but on that particular occasion, she couldn't.

I guess maybe it was a bad day for her, or maybe I hit some kind of personal note for her, or maybe she was really stressed about some kind of homework assignment, and I was distracting to her? Something. I don't know.

She slammed her book down like she was exasperated with me. She got up, I sort of saw it, but I hadn't been paying attention. Then all suddenly — like I said earlier — she was *there*.

She had on this white shirt and this bomber jacket and she kissed me, out of nowhere. It was all but literally the last thing I would have expected to happen right then, the most improbable possible contribution to the symptoms I had going on right then; like, her shooting laser beams out of her eyes at me suddenly would have seemed more probable to me before the fact.

She didn't shoot lasers. Instead, she kissed me, and I was surprised, and then she reached her hand into my chest, right through the flesh and bone and lungs, her hand arrow-straight like a diver into a pool, and she closed her hand on something metal in amongst all the crinkly carbon paper that I was imagining and pink lungs, and that surprised me more.

She pulled something out of my chest.

She held my soul, my name, my heart, my being, my self, my — my *me*, I guess, the truth of me, the core of me, the thing that *makes* me me of me, all brass shine and writhing bits in her good right hand.

Suddenly I wasn't sick.

It was the weirdest thing. It was a legend come to life! There was someone right there at School with us who could reach into your chest and pull your heart out and use the rest of you in magics.

I could still feel the purely physical, mechanical difficulty in my breathing. I was still swollen, flushed, and hot. I could still feel the awful clenching of my stomach and my insides. It didn't matter, though. It had stopped affecting me. My thoughts no longer seemed contingent on my flesh or on the condition of my brain — they were stunned and cold and faltering, but I couldn't feel the adrenaline and the fear and the general *condition* of me interacting with the *thinking* of me any more.

Suddenly I wasn't feeling sick.

I was feeling something more like: *oh, that girl is sick. That girl who happens to be me.*

I saw with a weird and secondary vision. I saw things the way I felt things. I saw things the way I feel my own body — the movement of muscles under the skin, the pressure of a hiccup about to happen, the startled lunging impulse and movement when a cup falls off a local table. I didn't need *light* to see things with, not any longer. I wasn't seeing *with* the light, not any longer. I saw things in the same way that I feel where my arms and legs are; discover whether or not I have a headache; and experience looking at or listening for things. It was a kinaesthetic experience but it wasn't coming up the spine of me — it was converted into sight, it came in as sight directly, a kind of otherworldly seeing that set everything around me shining with the light of it *being* and *experiencing* itself.

I saw movement inside things. It was as if people were pillow-sacks full of wants and needs and gestures. I saw the *looking* of them when they went to look. I saw the *turning* of them when they went to turn. Even the ordinary things like the tables were full of the memories of recent motion and all the little tremblings that were their lives.

This was all still covered over by the surfaces of things. I still *saw* the surfaces of things. It was just, they were translucent now. They did not hide the *entirety* of their light within them. The raw physicality of feelings and bits of people's motor intentions kept floating to the surfaces of things: like the elbows of somebody wriggling under a shared blanket; like answers rolling up from the murk of a magic 8-ball; like bits of dream remembered through the passage of a day, all sudden, clear, and sharp.

The thing that struck me most — right through a sudden general dispassion — was how *bright* all the things around me shone.

The way that Kseniya was afire with *being Kseniya*. The way the table actually caught light with *tabling*. The way that that boy over there — he's not actually a part of this story, I just happened to look over at him while I was noticing all this stuff, I think his name was Armand or something, he might have died in Mr. Rosewood's class, you know, gotten eaten? I don't know, not for sure, anyway, I don't remember — the way that *being Armand* illumined he.

It was a world without reflections, where things stood apart from one another, a world gone all voidwards and otherworldly, but everything seemed to burn in it with an inner light.

Giselle drew back.

Kseniya was shouting — I don't know what. Words. She drew back, I mean Giselle drew back, and she curled around my heart, bent herself around it, hunched over it, like a hungry dog in a field of other hungry dogs who'd found a bone. She *hurt*. You could see that she hurt.

You could see it, if you were me, I mean, without even looking at her with your eyes. It was a searing barrenness, a deep hot chafing, a painful alienness. I could have seen it from half a mile away, I bet, at least, and through a wall, with my heart's cold metal in her hands.

I could see her pain. I could feel her pain. It was much more real in that moment than my own.

She grit her teeth.

She wanted something. I didn't know what. I could see her hunger for it like a hundred hands clutching and grasping inwards around an emptiness. I could feel the fingers flexing around the stiff knuckles of them. She wanted it more than I had ever wanted anything.

Then she twitched, this all over angry twitch, and she used my flesh in magic.

The struggling in my chest abandoned me. The flush and the swelling of my face it left me. The clenching of my stomach, the trickle in my throat — she ripped them from me. It didn't — I mean, it wasn't like some sort of healing or repairing or anything. There wasn't a *medical* thing that happened. I just stopped being sick.

She re-envisioned me from first principles, I think; shoved the whole of me sideways from where I was as the sickened me into a healthy form.

I don't think she even got it exactly right, like, my hair I think it changed colour just a little; I dropped all the stress that I'd been storing in my muscles; the next time I peed it was actually pure water, like, clear as Evian; and I lost this little scar on my upper arm from where Desmond had accidentally burned me once, a little scar that I'd forgotten until I noticed it was gone.

I wasn't swollen. I wasn't breathing funny any more. I didn't hurt.

. . . I guess I did hurt. Kind of. It was different. I hurt in a different way, an abstract way, like there was a wind blowing through me, like I'd been emptied out and then filled up again and all my nerves were crying out, "Whoa, what was that?"

I didn't hurt *normal* pain.

There weren't any knots in my stomach. Not any longer. There wasn't any dizziness. I gave a final cough and rose and fell and suddenly my lungs were fine.

I straightened up like a puppet. I let go of the table. I looked at her. My eyes were wide.

"Please," she was saying. She wasn't looking at me. She *wanted*. She wasn't looking at Kseniya. She wasn't looking at anything really; except for a moment when she tried to and then she couldn't meet my eyes. The guilt in her was like a knife. "Please. No. No. God. I'm so sorry."

Then she shoved my soul back into my chest and she sank down onto the bench and she put her face on the table, not even onto her hands, just right down onto the table, like, it might have even been wet, so gross, and then she cried.

The bell was ringing for class. Lunch time was over and the bell was ringing for class and I tried to find my mental balance and I couldn't. I tried to see things but for a moment I couldn't because they weren't glowing of themselves. I only slowly noticed that there was actually plenty of normal cafeteria-light in which to see.

I didn't know at the time that she was Death's sister. I didn't know she was an enemy, or at least, that she should have been an enemy. I just felt . . . clean.

"What happened?" I said. I wanted to grab her and shake her. I wanted to hug her. I wanted to sit next to her and give her a tissue, only I'd used all mine up and I didn't have any left. "What was that? What did you just *do*?"

She just shook her head.

"What did you *do*?" I asked her again.

After a while, though, I couldn't really think of anything better to do than to pat her on the shoulders, and smile pretty uncomfortably, and thank her, almost under my breath, and go away, and so I did.

The older a story is the more it becomes a story about men. The story of Harald and the *cintamani* is no exception. He isn't human, of course, but he's usually described in human terms. He's "a giant of the old blood," because you're not supposed to expect that an important historical figure would be a giant. He's "thirty feet tall if he's an inch," because everyone knows that giants measure themselves by the feet of English Kings. (I guess there *could* be a giant who collected the feet of English Kings and used them as a kind of measuring tape. Not *everything* is about ideology. — But importing them from Europe would be quite the terrible pain and what would the giants do if one of the feet they were using broke? They would probably need to have a farm for breeding large numbers of appropriate Kings, and that would cast divine right into all kinds of problematic perspectives.)

Harald isn't human, so we have to talk about that, right there at the beginning of the story. We have to boggle at it, just like we do at the occasional female hero. Then, having gotten it out there, we have to either treat him for the rest of the story like he's exactly like a human would be, or we have to make a big deal out of how tall and slow and ancient he is, always bumping into doors and talking about "back in the old days, by which I mean yesterday," and the like.

We can't just show him *being* one of the old people, one of the people of the old blood, one of the people with the stuff of mountains and forests and fields and wind and trees in him, having in him the old truths, the old ways, the old majesties, giant and magician and hero as well in him. It has to be *about* how he's not human or about how exactly like humans Harald is. The story of Harald and the *cintamani* has to be a story about, well, men.

Standard usage to the contrary, though, when I say "men" I don't just mean "humans." His story went through generations of the Jotun before it got to us, after all; before they bred to us, and they became us, and we took over with our movable type and our flurry of bookmaking the processing of legend. When I say "men" I don't just mean "humans." I mean "male humans."

The story of Harald and the *cintamani* is a story that drops the female perspective entirely. His wife and his three daughters — "each more beautiful than the last," presumably so that the math geeks can freak out and argue about intransitive qualities of femininity — don't get a voice in it. They're just there to be used by him, to assist him, to follow him on his journey and then become the vehicles for his execution of it.

If it were a new story then I'd say, oh, that's just how it was written; or oh, that's just how it happened. The story of Harald and the *cintamani* isn't a new story. It's a very old one. I'm telling it the way I've learned it *because* it's an old story, and it deserves better than my screwing around with it, but the price of that is that it's a story told and retold by generations.

Generations of patriarchs.

So I think that when you see where the fable ends up you have to expect that it's not exactly the same as where the fable started.

It could have been.

This could have even been the way it actually *happened*, way back when. I just don't think it was.

I think that back in the old days — back when this kind of stuff was *real*, back when there was magic under every tree and bush, back when the giants were giants and they fought the people of the void, back when Harald went out beyond the world to seize the *cintamani* stone — that his family must have had voices of their own.

I think that Gerd must have been a girl with her own thoughts and interests, like, maybe she really liked bugs and didn't like people. Or maybe she was brave.

I think Hild, I think maybe Hild was there voluntarily, heroically, you know, trying to do the same thing that her father was. Or if not, then I think that she was a victim, that Harald didn't have the right to do what he did to her, even to get the *cintamani* it would have been *wrong*, you know?

If she wasn't there on her own.

Tola — I like to think that Tola was, I mean, she could have been, the one to have the original dream. I like to think that *she* saw the *cintamani* first, from afar, and that she was the one who took them out into the void.

The problem is: if that's true, if any of those things are true, nobody bothered to tell us them. Nobody bothers to talk about how some girl who was used as part of her father's quest for the *cintamani*, all those years ago, how she hated people but was rather fond of bugs.

That isn't interesting to the kind of men who tell stories and pass them down. Maybe it survived one generation, two, three, whatever, and then someone said, you know, let's just skip that boring part.

Maybe Tola had the original dream, not Harald, but then somebody said, along the way: you know, it makes more sense if that was Harald. Didn't he find the stone, at the end? Wasn't it his hand that closed over it, and got burned "red and black and orange?" Wasn't he the one who fought against the lord of Death's dominion he? Wasn't he the one who took Tola's heart out, in the end; used her flesh in magics?

There's no way we'd remember *her*, not really, not *Tola as she was*, not by the time the story's got here.

The heartless do not tell stories, nor the dead; and suddenly here I am telling you stories of people who are both.

So I feel like I have to explain this to you. Like I have to remind you of it. All this story, this whole *Fable of the Swan* — not just the bit with Harald and the *cintamani* — I'm having to put words in the mouths of others, the best words that I can remember, and I'm having to tell you their lives as stories, and as their stories, but I can't really do that, I can't really tell you that, because they're dead.

So anyway.

Here's Harald's story, as it came down to me: how Harald dreamt of a stone.

Once upon a time, so the story goes, a man named Harald lived in the walking fields at the edge of Town with his wife and his three daughters; and each of his three daughters was more beautiful than the last. He was a giant of the old blood, Harald was, thirty feet tall if he was an inch and strong as hills, and his greatest strength was dreams. He dreamt true things. He knew great magic of them.

He dreamt a stone, a stone that burnt red and black and orange in the darkness, a stone he knew for the jewel of all desiring. He knew in the moment that he saw that stone that it held the answers to all of the sorrows of the world.

Back then the world was a worthless place, you know. It had no truth to it, no virtue, it was only cruelty, awfulness, and sorrow: to which the stone, the smooth warm stone, the *cintamani* could make cure.

He closed his hand around it, in that dream. It burnt his hand red and black and orange, as to the colours of the stone. He dreamt that it burned him and he woke, it had burned him, his hand singed and smoking, and he clutched his hand hollow and empty and yearning for that stone against his chest, yearning for the fire of the stone, pounding it against his ribs and listening to the answer of his heart, and knowing from the moment that he woke where exactly in the void the stone of all desiring might be found.

Such was the power of Harald's dreaming.

He had closed his hand around that stone, that perfect jewel, in dreams, and so there was nothing for it save that he should seek it out in life. He called his family to him. He gathered them around him they. He showed them his wounded hand as if it were a precious thing in its emptiness and he told them what they must do.

"We're going out, my dear and darlings," Harald said, "to face the void beyond the world."

They went to the bottom of the world, to Lethe then, to the gates of life and darkness, and they opened them up then, and when they opened them up they saw through the back of their eyes as through the front of them, and they reaped up that curtain of the self and they went through it and far beyond this life into the territory of nothingness and death. They had I would assume there a superfluity of adventures, had difficulties and tragedies and exultations beyond numbering, but to find those stories you must look to other books; this is not the story of his journey but the story of what happened after.

They found it, you see. At the end. We know that of them: they found it in the end. They found it, all of them greatly tested and greatly strong, and Harald he reached out his hand and he closed it around the *cintamani*, in waking as he had in dreams, and the whole of the great dark nothingness took light.

This was after the beginning, so this was not the first light; the nothingness had known the world —

But never had it known a light like this.

The sky there was then and in that moment it burned it, like a crystal dome above him it, and cast it back the fire of his jewel.

The stars they shone brilliant in the jointing of that dome they, gleamed with light incalculable they, and then one by one, they the stars they one by one began to fall.

And all around him gaping in that emptiness the Riders rose, rose the people of the then void they, as if a fog had risen, fallen from Harald's vision then, and stood they then them there. Like fields of grain they then were they, unending miles of them, teeming seamless seas of them, cold-hearted people they the kingdom of Death they were, the people born of it there they, arising there they or previously preceding, if such they'd ever done: arising, originating, flowing forth from some an unknown origin they who were them their kingdom in the dark. Drew they then their swords and axes then, their crossbows and their guns they then, and turned their bleak and hollowed faces then, turned them Harald's way.

There was nothing else for it. Not then.

Harald reached his good left hand into the chest of his eldest daughter, Gerd. He pulled out her heart. He used the rest of her in magic and she became a bridge.

The bridge sprang up like a rainbow.

It was sharp-edged like razor-wire. It glittered like metal in the fire of the *cintamani* stone. It stood there and gleaming was it in the light of the furtive moon.

They ran, then, Harald, his wife and his two daughters they, ran out and up and over and far along that bridge, and the Riders they followed after.

... In good time.

I mean, they feared it, at first. They hesitated them. They stared up with their bleak dead faces and they did not wish to dare that bridge. It was sharp, after all, and treacherous, and made it from the flesh of the giantess Gerd and they were right to fear it they; but in the end the first of them took his horse out on that bridge, and then the second, and then they were on it in a great thunderous massed charge, it rang with their brass-shod hooves, and Harald he looked back, and he cried out to hurry, and hurried too, and the Riders followed after.

They had horses, pale horses, they the Riders then; horses formed by magic from dreams and light of stars. These they were whose hoofbeats made the bridge a drumming, drumming then. These the beasts that made them Riders they. They were slow to follow Harald to that bridge, slow to climb they up, but when they drummed out on it they the Riders closed in fast. They were slow to follow Harald but they were swift to hunt him they.

Harald had gotten back scarcely a third of the way to life's dominion when the first of the Rider arrows, the first of their dead black arrows, glanced itself off his granite back.

There was nothing else for it. Not then.

Harald he reached his left hand into the chest of his middle daughter, Edda. He pulled out her heart and used the rest of her in magics. Her flesh became a chariot and horses, fire-maned horses faster than the wind. He flung his wife and his youngest daughter into the back of that chariot and he himself and shouted out a name in a crack of thunder and the horses reared and screamed and they feared that name and they lunged and burned with fire they and roared and off the chariot ran.

Faster and faster Harald stormed, and they who followed him too; but the first of the Riders, the lord of Death's dominion, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy was he named, cast forth he his spear and tangled it in the wheels of the chariot of Edda. Then did it cast aside both Harald and his wife, the chariot of Edda did, and lurched. Caught the leg of Harald's youngest daughter, last-surviving Hild they did, the ropes and reins and tangles of the chariot caught her did, drag'd her bouncing and bloody and screaming along the knife-edged surfaces of Gerd, and soon to fumble out her dagger and cut the straps and fall her free she did, and only by that measure save her life from this thereby. Now Harald himself, plunged he him down into the darkness from the bridge did he, caught and arrested and held him there only by the seizing, clutching hand of his wife Tola, who lay prostrate and cut and bleeding along the bridge named Gerd, the bridge and its knife-edges; and blood on her forehead and blood on her chest and strong the muscles of her hand and arm were they as she hauled him up to life and Gerd and to all endings.

There was nothing else for it, you know.

Not then.

He kissed his wife Tola, Harald did. He said goodbye. He reached his good left hand into her chest and he pulled out her heart and he used the rest of her in magics.

He made a sword of her, hone her into an edge sharper than a prayer and made a grip smooth and comfortable of her in his left hand, and with this he fought the Riders as they came, cutting them, severing them, casting them from the edges of the bridge did he to dissolve into the nothingness below. The limbs and bodies of them and their pale horses were as snow and quiet and all drifting peace like the solemnness of winters and with a circle small of light within his hand, until the lord of Death's dominion reached him and tasted him with his spear. There they met and there they fought and beautiful was their fight; their weapons gave forth not sparks as they met but bits of drifting dream and world, bubbles of somethingness and nothingness that spun, grew truth in

them, grew life in them, grew lies in them, whatever, I don't know, and drifted away to anchor on the walls of the endless void and melt into them or to pop and fade into nothingness in some irrelevant and unmapped space.

In the end the bleak Rider drove Harald back.

Harald retreated step by step towards life and world and this is not anywhere recorded as his plan or cunning, but only weakness; well, if it can be named weakness, anyhow, to duel the lord of Death's dominion and fall just a little shy. The chief of the Riders pressed him back, and Harald stumbled over his youngest daughter Hild, and fell, and there was nothing for it then, there, then, there was nothing for it but for one last theft of soul.

So he reached into Hild's chest, his daughter Hild's he did, and with his burnt right hand. He shoved out her heart, to fall singing from her back and to tumble off the bridge into the void. He left inside her then instead the *cintamani* stone. He twisted the rest of her, used her in magics, and made her into a white raven, to fly whimpering through the bleakness, harried hard and hunted, desperate, bloody, and stumbling through the sky, Harald's arrow and his legacy to land within the boundaries of life.

At this the Riders only laughed.

They mocked Harald then. They jeered at him. They told him that he'd wasted his family's lives, their lives and hearts and souls, and his own, too, and done nothing more than make a new cage for the *cintamani*: redeemed one crime, the crime of the existence of the world, but at the cost of another greater; accomplished nothing, saved nothing, earned nothing, seized nothing, but only hurt everything that he'd ever known and loved.

Then they ripped him open, they there then did, and hung the two halves of him side by side, one to each gate given of the Bleak Academy's doors, and his heart and his wife's heart and the hearts of his two daughters they put on pedestals in the great hall of their museum, in their void beyond the world; or made them over, for all I know, as swans.

These things we know because Hild told us them; or Harald, rather, did, who held her voice, owned her voice, then, and what he'd made of her was his, his dream, his wings, his arrow and his legacy, to carry in to us and on her wings the answer to the sorrows and the suffering of the world, the *cintamani* stone; though what it means or what it does or where it is, that stone, I cannot say.

I do not know.

Then the lord of Death's dominion, said he then:

"This must never again happen; this must never again be *allowed* to happen."

The prince of the void, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy was he named, and brother to my friend Giselle, he made her then. He rived her from him, split her off from him, burst her into being from he the lord of void him, and loveless flesh she was born to be: wreathed in fire, carved of iron, and named — lest ever again an iron-fearing Jotun come to steal the fire of the void — bleak iron's god. Birthed in lightning, grown demon and grown goddess, born to hear the prayers of humanity and laugh.

I don't know when that happened. I have two theories. The first is that she was born right then, back all those years ago, and then something happened — I don't know what; her own will, her need to be free of him, perhaps — some five to twenty years before we met. She stumbled into the world and she became a girl, and tried to live.

The second theory is that he didn't actually make her until much, much later — not until he started planning that thing with the sun, or until Lee Scathing started up his operations, or whatever, I don't know. Something recent. She was born, then, at roughly the same time I was, give or take X years, and for whatever reason needed as part of her cultivation and creation to grow up in Town a girl.

He supported her. He helped her, the lord of Death's dominion he. He let her grow up in world, let her do her own thing there and even help folks now and then, so I guess I should be grateful, but I'm not. He created her and he supported her and I guess that she owes him everything, but somehow —

I always hated him, you know. She always depended on him, sort of, and I always thought he owed her more.

I don't know why, exactly.

I only know I did.

She liked to keep her hair short. Giselle did. She liked eating, an awful lot, but she didn't do it very much. She didn't talk much either. She was snarky and kind of mean, I mean, when she *did* talk. She didn't really answer questions, not hardly ever. What little we ever knew of her we picked up in dribs and drabs.

She looked human. The iron wasn't in her yet, or at least it wasn't in her then. You could maybe see it in her sometimes, if you knew to look for it — I comb my memories and I imagine that I see it — but maybe I'm only seeing it because I've looked.

She didn't *carry* herself like a thing of iron, fear, and majesty. Most of the time she only barely looked *alive*.

In a lot of ways I didn't like her, *don't* like her; she was kind of an abomination; but I loved her. I maybe even love her still.

You can forgive someone a lot, you know, when they're in that much trouble; and born to be that awful; and yet the first time you ever meet them they're stepping forward to save your life.

"We didn't do it on purpose. Not at first," Kseniya said.

It was later on that day — the day Giselle had met me. We'd wandered off through the emptier parts of School and I was in a daze. We'd found a room with books, chairs, and games — a good room. The Apocynum Room. The wind blew through it and there was something comforting to it and after we'd poked around for a while we set up a game of chess and I'd wondered to Kseniya what had happened back at the cafeteria. She'd sort of acted at the time like she had known.

So she thought for a while. We made some bad moves in our chess game. Then she said that. That thing that I just told you.

We didn't do it on purpose.

"We'd just discover it. Them. As time went by we'd find them," she said. "Our old ones, our deeply-born and risen ones, we'd visit them and their heart would have gotten lost along the way. We found them — that they'd stopped *being* them; no longer *people* . . . they; they'd turned into something else, something raw and physical else, like a mountain, or a meadow, or a stream."

She had the blood of those things in her, you know. Mountains, meadows, streams. She was Jotun-born, my friend Kseniya was, and I was jealous of that like anything; but at least she liked me too.

"And their heart," she said, "their, their *thing*, the thing that made them their themness — aw, man, I don't know how to say it, sparky. Their inner key. It had wandered off, somewhere. It took us a while — usually — to even figure out that the thing that had stayed behind was *them*. It terrified me, you know, when that girl took out your heart."

I looked at her.

"I . . . I didn't recognize you," she said. "When it happened, you stopped being you to me. There were just two kissing strangers and I knew that the one on the right had to be you, because I'd seen it, I knew what was happening and it fit with the old stories, but I had to use my mind for that, I had to *think* it. I couldn't see it with my eyes or with my heart. I hadn't seen real magic, not like that, before, so it was terrifying."

Somehow that reached me, even though it had happened *to* me; I mean, I'd been thinking about it all day, the soullessness, the sickness, the wellness, and the light of things, but somehow it still caught me out of my own thoughts, the way she'd seen it. I was taken aback by imagining how strange it must have been for her and I breathed out, "Wow," to her. She hesitated for a moment at that, like that wasn't what she'd expected to hear from me, but when she saw I was still watching and listening to her she continued.

"I think it must have been like that for the families, back then. You'd go to your mother's house, your grandmother's house, whatever, you'd see, oh, they're not there, they're not in, they aren't living there any more, there's nobody home, there's just this random forest or glade or stream. There's a new wind coming in off the lake that never blew there before, or a flower made of crystal, tears, and flame."

"Yeah."

"Eventually we figured out . . . eventually we started doing it on purpose."

She fiddled with her collar. She pulled out that necklace that she always wore. She held the pendant in her hand for a while and then took the whole chain off. She spilled it from her left hand to her right. She held it out to me. I stared at it, then looked up at her for permission, then took it when she nodded and I held it in my hand.

It was silver. It was strange and sharp and twisted. It had a blunt bit and some sharp bits and I thought it might have been a key.

"'Angrbode,'" Kseniya named it. "My seventh-great grandmother."

It was a soul.

I didn't really believe her, so I teased her. "She is small and metallic," I said. "Silver. You have such tiny, shiny ancestors!"

Kseniya grinned.

"I *do*," she said, with smug self-satisfaction, like hardly anybody else in the world had ancestors so small and shiny as her own.

I actually startled. I looked up at her to see if she were teasing me back. She did not seem to be.

"She was larger than houses," Kseniya said. "Back then. She was larger than hills. She was a proper giantess, my ancestress. She was full nine generations back. But we used up all the rest of her in magics. So now all that's left of her is this. The Angrbode. Her heart. Her soul. Her name."

I admired it.

"Is yours like this?" I blinked. I remembered mine. "No, wait, is *everyone's* heart like this?"

She shrugged. "No idea," she said. "I had assumed yours would be one of those red meaty things. Like they show in dramas. Now that I've seen it — I guess maybe they are all like this. Keys to unspoken locks."

"Wow."

She took it back from me. She hung it around her neck.

"I cannot afford to get a chest X-ray," she said, "So I cannot see it for myself. They are very expensive."

"Yeah."

I'd never really cared before, but it was making me sad now. I couldn't see my heart whenever I wanted. I couldn't see *inside* things any time I wanted. Not even with an X-ray machine, much less my eyes.

"I can't either," I admitted.

"We're the same."

"Can you do any magic with her?" I asked.

"Not with just the heart," she said.

"Aww."

"The Riders," she started, then she interrupted herself with: "Ah — do you know what I mean? The Riders?"

"Like, Clotild?" I asked.

Clotild was a Rider girl — well, a Rider girl like Kseniya was a Jotun girl. Modern, mostly human, but she still had the Rider eyes. There were a handful of kids like that at School. Clotild, Euric, Randal, probably a few that I've forgotten and many more that I'd never met.

Kseniya shook her head.

"They're not really the same," she said. Then she shrugged. "— but, yeah. Them. The Riders, they used to be able to do magic with just the heart. At least a little. Their words were poison and dark water. They could make you dream, make you hallucinate, they could cast their voices and turn their blood to venom, they could take your heart in their hand and change it, or change it through a touch upon your flesh. We — we, us — our thing was always to use the heart to shape the flesh, instead, and when the flesh had been used up in magic, you wouldn't do magic with the heart, you'd just hang on to it. You'd love it, you'd keep it, you'd treasure it, and now and then you'd say, 'Angrbode, you're such a tiny, shiny ancestor!'"

"Hey!"

"Well," she said, happily, "that's what I will say *now*. I had lesser compliments to use before."

We made some moves on the board. They were slick moves. They were so slick they might not even have been legal chess. Seriously we were not very good. We started playing Connect-4, eventually — now *that* gave rise to some legendary tactical matches between Kseniya and myself — but as for chess, I think, well, it's like this.

We were not any good.

If Anatoly Karpov and Mr. Spock had been there, their mouths would have fallen open in sheer horror at our game. If tiny bee-people had been there, too, and watching, they could have flown right in. I mean, into their mouths. I mean, not that Mr. Spock would have been having with any of

that kind of shenanigans, or that tiny bee-people were *there*, they weren't, but if they had been, and Spock and Karpov, and if Spock had been having with it, then they might've flown right in.

We weren't dumb. I mean, we weren't smart, but I'm not saying that we were dumb. I'm saying that we were thirteen-year-old girls who almost never actually played chess. It's important that we were playing, because I needed to give this story some time to deepen, but it wasn't very interesting as a *game*.

"We'd never really done . . . surgery with the magic," Kseniya said. "I mean, I never *heard* of anybody doing surgery with the magic. Maybe nobody ever told me. Maybe we just never needed it. You know, maybe *some* species don't fall over and start bleeding and choking at the top of their lungs at the drop of a hat, you know, while telling their panicking friends that they're fine, not like *you* squirmy little freaks tend to do."

I stuck my tongue out at her. I jumped my knight. I told her, "Mate in six."

She glared at me. She looked at the board. She moderated the glare into a squint.

"In eight?" I suggested. "Twelve? Seventeen?"

"You have shocked my game-playing professionalism," she said, "with this cavalier attitude, missy."

I waved dismissively. She snorted.

"We did greater things with hearts and flesh," she said, "I mean, yeah, you could have done that, could have done cosmetic surgery, even, you know, out with the heart, spang go the teeth, all straight and with no braces and no name; then bam, pop the heart back in and all is sickly-sweet. But nobody's ever *said* to me that you could do that, nobody's ever told me stories about us doing that, I don't think that we ever did do that. You took the heart from somebody and they were *dead*; they were named dead; their life was given over, they were living dead, but you could make a mountain from their heartless flesh. You could make a gate, a forest, a fire, or a wind. *Mansions in the sky*, we made them, butterball, from our heartless ancestors we made them. Palace-yachts to float upon the clouds, dreadnaughts and the Tank Majal, submarines that went through land and sea, we made them, libraries small enough to fit in talking pearls and spears to fly from one end to the other of the void. We did not heal our heartless ancestors, sparky, but razed the folk of Death's dominion with them rather, gave the enemy over to withering, to shattering, to burning, and going out against the storming of our ancestors and the jagged edges of their flesh."

I frowned at her. "Wait, with *people*?" I said.

She shrugged. She touched her necklace through her blouse.

"With your *ancestors*?"

"Sure," she said. "From our ancestors. From our children. Friends. Wives. Husbands. Volunteers. They were us, they were our people, but only the flesh, sparky, only the *bodies* of them. The hearts had already been taken out to be their pilot's keys."

I couldn't help imagining that done to me: the world all bright with the inner light of things, then my flesh stretched and twisted into some fiery and godlike form. The room shook and swayed a little (metaphorically); I couldn't help thinking that I wouldn't have minded, except *oh* how I minded, *oh* how my heart whimpered in me at the thought of me being twisted into a cloud-palace, a spear, a weapon, even a library at somebody else's hands. "That's wicked," I said, though I couldn't make it sound confident.

"It's not like it hurts anybody," she said. "I mean —"

She waved her hand at me. "Look at you! All, you know, breathing and stuff."

I twitched my mouth. The shapes I was imagining slipped away into darkness. "I was fine."

"You were red as an apple," she said. "I wanted to eat you. You were as puffy and as colourful as a dessert pastry and you were wiggling like a young pig."

"Aa!" I said. I pointed at her. I took sharp breaths. I shook my finger at her. I shook it more. "So mean."

"Anyway," she said. "It does not hurt anybody. You can still love them when they become a heart. You can still talk to them. I mean, with your heart." She thumped her chest with one hand. "In

your heart. I don't know how good it is as actual communication but you can *do* it. And apparently, though nobody'd ever told me, you can just . . . put the heart back in."

"You are a strange girl," I said, and I lowered my finger.

"Yes. *That* I have been told."

I sat there. The wind blew.

Finally, she said, "It stopped being so useful when the Riders learned to turn them against us. They learned to do — pretty much the same things with the heartless that *we* could do. They didn't even, sometimes they didn't even need to have the heart. They learned to manipulate the flesh. After that it wasn't really all that great as far as weapons went. We could use it against them, then they could use it against us, only we had to have somebody on our side give up their heart to make a weapon from them. The Riders just had to get a good opportunity to hijack one mid-fight."

"That sucks," I agreed.

"So we started to chain our heartless ancestors down, to bind their flesh, to make them into permanent and harmless things, and the magic to do anything else with them has been lost. I thought. I *thought* it had been lost. Maybe nobody ever bothered to *tell* me that we still do that kind of thing. Do you think she's one of us? That girl? She's awfully small for a giant and I didn't see any of the ears that you'd get with a fox. Rider? Do you think she's a Rider?"

"I think," I said, "that they should have horses, if they're going to be called Riders."

"That's not their fault, sparky."

"Why do we even care that they're descended from evil magic horse riders," I said, because this had been bugging me, "if they don't even have evil magic horses? I mean, dang."

"You cannot inherit a horse genetically."

"Can so!" I said.

She waited. I withered. I couldn't think of an argument for this in time.

"They're on the horse chromosome," I tried, which I admit entirely was lame.

She laughed then, soft and slow.

"You should invite her here," she said. "This is a good room. Nobody uses it. We can meet here and talk about magic, tell stories, and play chess. I will get to know she a Rider and then I will know more than others if we fight with them or make friends properly with them during my life."

That's how we started meeting at the Apocynum Room, more or less; though I wouldn't say we talked about magic that much, or told that many stories, or ever even actually played chess. Mostly we talked about random stuff, you know, like you do; and Giselle, even when she'd gotten used to us?

She barely ever talked at all.

My Mom was kind of weirded out by the incident in the cafeteria. She kept taking my temperature, bringing me bits of cheese and apple, and fussing in unnecessary ways. When I finally broke down and admitted that it was fine because somebody had taken my heart out and piloted it to repair me she sat down (and I flopped onto the bed) and we had a serious and actual talk.

"I don't want you relying on magical esoterica for health maintenance, honey," she told me.

". . . Mom?"

She spun her wheeled chair around. She looked up at the ceiling. She started half-upright, said, "Would you like tea?" and then sank back down again when I shook my head. Finally she said, "You know what's really important for health, right? I mean, exercise, healthy eating, listening to your body . . . you know that it's not about . . . random vitamins or fads or magic heart-stealing or whatever?"

"I do know that, Mom."

She chewed on her lip. "I know," she said, "that even in this modern age, stuff still — happens. Stuff that is not totally — scientific, or . . ." She said, with a tone of distant disgust, "Sane. But you mustn't rely on it. It's a crutch."

"I—I wasn't planning on *relying*," I said.

"Back before I had you," she said, "I was having so much trouble with it. With my body. I'd had two pregnancies, I'd thought, and they were so hard to get, only both, well, I had two miscarriages. And I didn't know why that was happening. I didn't know if the next pregnancy was going to go well or just be a heartbreak again. I didn't know if it was bad luck or fate or karma or just my body being broken, and so naturally I thought about magic. I thought, hm. I can't solve this with engineering know-how and my usual tricks. I can't just rebuild my uterus with spare parts. A steam-powered impregnator or miscarriage-prevention device? No. No, no. That just seemed, you know, a little mad."

"On the verge, Mom," I agreed.

She crinkled her eyes, leaned over with her hand on mine, and gave me a quick peck on my cheek.

"You can't even make a good electronic control panel for the womb," she said. "You know. That stuff's not beyond *science*, of course, not as a whole, but it's beyond the scope of — of the good *clean* science, you know, the metal and electronic science. It's all that fuzzy-headed fuzzy-problem'd medicine kind of stuff. I thought about hacking a Ruxpin or R.O.B. into some kind of robot daughter, building it up as it grew older, I even kind of drew up the plans, but seriously?"

She sat back. She thought.

"OK, I have to admit: it would have ruled," she said. "She would have had a dead lift of four long tons by the time she was your age, four tons! Ben, though, he just said, 'you know that wouldn't be the same as a real daughter, honey. You can't cuddle a giant octo-robot in your arms.' And I knew that he was right."

She sighed.

"So I thought about magic," she said. "I thought, OK, maybe I can buy a kid from some fairies, or something. I really thought about that. I would have tried anything, I think, if I'd had to, to have you, and I could have. You can always find something. You never get stuck, not forever, you can always find a way forward if you try hard enough. That's my motto! So I could have done that, turned to magic, and it would have helped, but —" She stared at her hands. "What happens to someone who starts dabbling in that kind of stuff?"

I shrugged.

"How could I be a scientist," she said, "I mean, ever again? How could I ever build anything and trust that it would hold up, after buying a kid from fairies? After — using dreams to fix me, stealing vampire blood to get healthier, I don't know, whatever? Eating a unicorn?"

"Mom!"

"I didn't do it," she said. "I don't even think there are unicorns, honey. Wouldn't they be redundant with rhinoceri?"

I squinted at her.

"The point is, I would have lost my sense of who I was," she said, "And then, even if it had all worked out perfectly, even if I'd had someone by magic, I don't think it would have been you. I'd have lost you, my normal, healthy, awesome, organic daughter, and also my natural, normal, dorky biological son, I wouldn't have had you two, or my sense of self and being, even if I'd had some kind of magical unicorn-child instead."

"Mom?" I said.

She'd been searching for the next chunk of words. She stopped at that. She tilted her head to one side.

"Seriously," I said. "I'm not going to try to get magically pregnant."

She blinked. "Well, of course not, honey," she said. "I mean, you're thirteen! You shouldn't even be thinking about boys — well, hm, not boys, I guess I mean babies? Whatever it is you shouldn't even be thinking about yet — yet. I just don't want you to start thinking that getting involved in magical stuff is ever going to make your life easy. It won't. It doesn't! It's the last resort of weak-minded fools who can't read a circuit diagram properly. Plus a few awesome tricks for parties."

". . . I know, Mom."

She hugged me.

"Good," she said. "And the next time you're having trouble breathing, no clinging to the tables and squealing, OK? Let your . . . primordial friend . . . drag you."

"She wasn't dragging me," I said, because she *could* have, like I said —

But Mom just rolled her eyes and then looked at me in all Socratic diffidence until I had to nod.

I was glad to have my heart back.

It took me a while to realize that. It took me a while to realize that when I sat at home singing to myself that I was singing to myself because I had my heart back. That when I woke up and felt good about the day, I felt good because I had my heart back. I hadn't really realized at first that it had been gone long enough to miss it, but —

It was something precious.

It was something precious and it was *mine*.

The only problem was, I kept expecting to see things, you know, the *light* of things. I missed it, I kept bonking myself on the head like I could adjust it, like I could clonk open my secret voidwards vision and see the thingnesses of the world. I kept walking into stuff in the dark because it was so hard to accept that I couldn't see things glowing with themselves. In fact, I spent a fair bit of time walking into stuff in the *light*. I got a reputation for goofy clumsiness from it, not that I'd been any paragon of grace and dignity beforehand, but *now* — I could be looking right at something or somebody and *still* walk right into it, them, the whatever, because it wouldn't actually *process* for me that whatever I was looking at was really *there*.

I could watch the trees swaying in the wind and not feel the motion, not feel the stress in their branches or their bending. That was how isolated from the world I'd become. That was how trapped in a single flesh I was back then.

I had my heart, though, at least. My heart was awesome. Having it, having a heart and soul of my very own in me — that was in fact the *best*.

It took me quite a while to get used to things and get back to thinking of myself as kind of a waste of space again, because I knew I had a soul. It took me quite a while to get used to thinking of the world as a kind of mean and barren and set against me place, again, because I'd seen beyond its surfaces.

Puberty came along, though — it comes a little later in Town than you'd guess from the TV — and *that*, well, if you can call it helping, helped.

The Appearance of a Soul
last year

Below the School there were laboratories. My friend . . . Vanessa hung out down there. She filled them up with her fantasies; imbued her dreams on them; looked the place into a canvas for her imagination. She wandered those basements like a spirit in a wan white dress, circling the great vitreous chambers and playing with the bulky mechanical terminals that controlled them.

I think that maybe if nobody was around she might have known how all that worked.

Maybe if I wasn't looking, I mean, maybe *when* everybody wasn't looking, my friend Vanessa would take real measurements and do real calculations. Like, maybe she understood, when a Vanessa alone, what the facility in the basement *did*. I don't think so, but I like to imagine it, her putting on a pair of feathered glasses when nobody was looking, covering over those eyes with wisdom, picking up a clipboard, turning from a waif or spirit into brain.

When I was around, though, she was more innocent than any ordinary girl.

She'd name the machines and set histories to the creeks — speak of wars that had been fought over what were in actuality effluent channels and imagine freakish experiments performed in what I think were actually chemically neutral tanks.

"It's all just waste treatment," I told her once, "You know." I told her that once just to *make sure* that she knew.

She just gave me a secret kind of smile.

"Of course it is," she said, and then ignored me. She went back to staring at her reflection in the glass of one of the chambers. She watched the bubbles flutter up through the vent inside. "They make hall monitors in these," she said, "I think."

What can you say to that?

It'd be like kicking a puppy to just say *no, they don't. They do not so*. You can't just walk up to a kid and say, there's no such thing as Santa. You can't just explain to Kseniya that Gamera was never real. You can't do that. If you want to taunt a kid, you tell them, *but how can Santa fly that far, that fast?*

You question people. You push at their ideas.

You shouldn't just say *no*.

So I ran with it instead. "Well, of course," I said. "Hall monitors are waste."

"Oh dear," she said.

"The Principal makes them," I said, "from the truants and delinquents Lee cannot otherwise make good." I blinked at her. "I thought that everybody knew."

She reflected. "That is a rumour," she concluded, "and not a datum. There are always many rumours around the great mysteries, you know. They all have seeds of truth in them, of course, so that is not to say that you are wrong."

Sighing, me: "We live in a world of incomplete information."

She drifted off from me. She poked at one of the terminals. She pressed the keys. They plunged down with heavy clunks and clicked back up when she let go. It didn't seem to do anything. She wasn't wearing glasses and carrying a clipboard. I know that that wouldn't actually have mattered. I know the terminals were not clipboard-sensitive. I just mean, she didn't seem to be doing science. The terminal might not even have been powered.

She'd know that by then, after all, I mean, which terminals were safe to touch.

"Lee advises me," she said, "that a woman need not burden herself with truth when she can collect rumours and stories and hypotheses; he praises it; but sometimes I think he simply prefers to keep me innocent. Perhaps they do such things with waste management down here as would make me quite uncomfortable with them if I knew. Or perhaps I would be excited, and exclaim, 'Ah, it is such brilliant mad science, Lee!' but it would be to the detriment of his modesty."

Ptui! I made a spitting noise to my left. "*That* for your Lee Scathing, and his modesties."

I didn't *actually* spit, for clarity. I just made the noise. I was in a *lab*. I mean, it was a wastewater treatment facility, my germs probably couldn't have disrupted anything, but it still *felt* like a lab, and good girls don't spit near where somebody might be doing an experiment. In fact, *good* girls don't even spit *most* places, and if I'd been, I don't know, at a fancy London party or something, I probably wouldn't have even made the *noise*, the spitting noise, unless it was to josh some toff right off their dilly.

But I digress.

As for Vanessa, she affected a look of sorrow at these the manners of her friend.

"It is understandable," she said. "You are too wise for such deceptions, too much insightful. The furrowed reaches of your brain have bulked themselves up with facts and knowledge, you have grown great like a detective and vast like the mind of God. You are too far beyond me, darling, like Christ at Gethsemane, and you have lost the power to be innocent."

Her expression shifted into a sly grin.

"You are *jealous* of my Lee-cultured ignorance," she said.

I made a face. I made two faces, in fact. I made *so many faces* at her. However I only had one head, so they all came out as a single face.

She drifted around the chamber. She walked around a corner. I followed her.

"In honesty," she admitted, "I am uncomfortable in the presence of secrets that keep me from truths that I would find uncomfortable. But there is hardly any point in arguing . . ."

Mikhael — one of the students who worked down there — came into view. He had brown hair and a white coat and he was already turning his chair around to look at us as I saw him. She pointed at his chest.

". . . When everyone will only say how incredibly dull, boring, and lifeless the truth would turn out to be."

"That's so," Mikhael agreed.

I looked at him. He looked at me.

"It is incredibly dull, boring, and lifeless," he said. "It is traumatic in its tedium. I attempt to explain the darkest and most hallowed secrets of this place. She drifts away. I come back to myself ten minutes later and I am wringing my hands, gesturing upwards dramatically at the heavens, crying to those heavens my wish that I had been born a jackalope or a starving child in Far Africa rather than a student with an aptitude for chemistry, and she — long gone."

"I do that," Vanessa agreed. "He does that. It is exactly as he says."

"Hey, Mikhael," I said.

"I could lecture *you* on it," Mikhael said hopefully to me. "I could share some measure of my deep and abiding frustration with *you*. It's not natural, you know, me still being down here. This is my detention. Fourteen months. Fourteen months! down here, and just for running in the halls!"

I made a face at him. *They did not so!*

Vanessa confided in me, "He exaggerates. Long ago his sentence would have elapsed save that they pay him to continue. In this fashion they have accommodated him to his own damnation and accomplished his collaboration thereupon."

I looked sidelong at her. "I thought you drifted away when he explained."

She dimpled. "He rants loudly," she said. "I pick up the noise of it through these great and echoing chambers. In such manner I would put together many trade secrets and see through to the heart of things and the truth of the world, had I a head for biology or chemistry. But then no doubt Lee Scathing would cut it off and display it prominently on the gates to School, so it is for the best."

I ran with it. I struck an aggrieved pose.

"Cutting off heads," I said, "is outside the purview of the Disciplinary Committee!"

"The matter is untested," Vanessa protested. "Even were he reprimanded for his excesses I'm still suspecting I would find it very difficult to screw my head for biology or chemistry back on."

"He would be arrested," I said, "and —"

Here I became confused. I don't actually know what happens to someone who goes around murdering people in Town. It's not like we have a big police force or a justice system. I guess he'd

probably be . . . exported? Somewhere? I made a mental note to ask Mom about that kind of thing but then I never did.

"— made to know a doleful fate," I concluded.

"I see," she said. "You will see to it?"

"Gladly," I said.

"He wears a mask, you know," she said. "A swan-feather mask."

"Which is crazy," I pointed out.

"Well," she said, "yes; but the point is, if he were to take it off, how would you know that he is Lee Scathing, or rather *who* is Lee Scathing?"

"You read too many comics," I said.

"Graphic novels," she corrected, "And I am simply saying that your grand quest for revenge upon my murderer —"

"*To aid the police*," I said, "and then, only if necessary —"

"— would run aground on practical obstacles if you are not careful. You hunt for him, but lo!: he has removed his mask. He has become an anyone — a faceless member of the thronging populace of School. Is he that boy over there? That one? A teacher, even, perhaps, or some other adult? You look around, this way, that way, that way. . . . A chill takes you! He is behind you! You turn —"

Mikhael waved a hand to interrupt and offer a point of clarification.

"He doesn't wear the mask *all the time*," he said. "It's a student council thing, not some sort of sartorial insanity or fetish. He has to take it off in, like, P.E. and such."

"Oh," said Vanessa. She blinked. "Really?"

"Really." Mikhael crossed his heart.

"Well, then," Vanessa said. She poked me. "So you shall have it easy!"

"That's so," I said. "I'll have his head up next to yours on the gate by sundown!"

God did he like to make an entrance, did that man.

A shadow seemed to fall over me. A chill ran through me. I felt somebody watching me, suddenly, from behind me, and I heard the click of his steel-toed shoes.

"I should like that," said Lee Scathing.

I blushed. I fluttered my hand vigorously. I spun around. I almost stumbled and I almost fell. I said, "Sorry. Sorry. I mean, nothing. Sorry."

He looked so amazing. He really shouldn't have. He should have been goofy-looking, he should have been ridiculous, he really should have, with that white practically glowing uniform of his and the feathered mask. He didn't, though. He looked like a prince out of the lands of fable. He looked like an angel of some forgotten God.

You could feel his eyes upon you right through the obscuration of his mask.

"To be without a head," he said. "How freeing that would be. I should not have to hear the whining of my subordinates, for I would have no ears. I should no longer see the pathetic defiance of the delinquents, for I would have no eyes. The work would go on more steadily, I think. I would be refined by it. My hands would not shake, if I had no head to steer them wrong."

There really wasn't anything I could *say* to him.

It was a pose, of course, it *had* to be, it was humour or hyperbole at least; but there was a real and disdainful strand of bitterness to him under that affected mask.

(Metaphorically.)

"I'll go," I said.

He reached out an arm to bar my path. It was astonishing. I considered turning around and making for another exit, but that seemed a little desperate and even a little bit insulting.

"Though," he said, "I would still know about *you*, my dear. You with your wild revenge slaughtering. That would show a great weakness in your character, my dear. You should experience detention, if you did that, that and something more."

"Oh."

"You are here to be purified, you know. That is the only point of mucking around down here in the dark. It is to find the pearl that is in the oyster of your soul. You come here often. Your teachers

do not send you, but you come here often. That is your guilty conscience. You've already done something terrible, have you not — something of which you are ashamed? You must have. You are only human, after all. Tell me about it. Unburden yourself. Do not lurk down here, giving yourself the tantalizing experience of second-hand suffering and refinement but refusing yourself the actual release of punishment. Open yourself up to rehabilitation. I will help you."

I shook my head. I backed a little bit away.

"To repent is to shed a burden," he said. He paused. "To be *made good*. You understand me? . . . No?"

"I didn't do it," I said. "I mean —"

I hesitated a long moment. I really couldn't think of anything I'd done, or, well, I mean, hadn't done. I mean, OK, I hadn't robbed any banks. I hadn't flown away cackling from any banks on some sort of steam-powered jet-sled, money littering the streets behind me. I hadn't done that. Not even once!

I shook my head again.

He sighed. He lowered his arm. Oh, good, now I could leave! . . . So of course I stayed.

"I mean," I said carefully and sternly, "that I can't go home yet. Because it is a Tuesday. So I thought I would visit Vanessa, who is my friend, and who thinks that you are keeping terrible secrets from her."

"I do not think," Vanessa said.

There she paused. I frowned at her.

"I mean, I *think*," she clarified. "I am capable of thinking."

"Well, good," I said.

"What terrible secrets?" said Lee Scathing. "I can't think of any terrible secrets. Though, I wouldn't tell them to her if I had them. She is not the kind of soul that would carry well such weight."

His eyes fluttered.

"But I have none," he concluded.

"You do wear a mask," I pointed out.

"It is to shield me from the Principal's sins," he said. "It means nothing."

"But in this case," Vanessa said, as if nobody else had said anything, "I am not *thinking* it, but, rather, considering a fabric of possibilities, which I know to include many rumours and outright falsehoods, from which I hope to attend indirectly to the truth."

"I am also not the kind of person," said Lee Scathing, "who would, if somebody were to encounter my terrible secrets, which I do not, for clarity, have, cut off their head. I want that to be understood. There are doubtless crimes for which that is the suitable punishment but that is not a matter for the student council. If there were a truant or a delinquent for whom execution were the appropriate disciplinary strategy then a second consideration would show the matter outside the aegis of the student council entirely."

"That would never be the relevant disciplinary strategy," I said.

"Yes, yes," he said, and he flapped a hand, and he glared at me. "That it would never be. So we have established that this is entirely irrelevant to the questions at hand, much as with the mask, and that everything about me is entirely open and aboveboard."

"You told her not to burden herself with the truth!"

He frowned. He looked down at his hand. I caught a shifting sight of something strange on the back of his hand. Then I blinked and it wasn't there. Lee Scathing composed himself.

"I see," he said. "You are taking the matter out of context. That is all."

"Oh?"

"She is a Vanessa," he said. "The Vanessa, even. A unique entity. One says many things to a Vanessa that may be easily misunderstood."

"Mm," Vanessa said, nodding, and with the vaguest air of pride.

"I told her I was a dreadful pirate," Mikhael volunteered.

"One ought not to be a pirate," Lee Scathing said. "That is against School regulat—"

He stopped himself.

"Like that," he said. "Yes. As you can see."

"You aren't a pirate?" Vanessa said.

"It is against School regulations to be a pirate," Lee Scathing, arguably, repeated. "As with all such acts of naval carelessness and brigandry. I would not allow it."

"There is no such regulation," I said.

Mikhael giggled.

"It is implicit," Lee Scathing said. "If there were piracy, the student would receive detention. Ergo."

The conversation reached a lull.

Lee Scathing made a face. He looked down. He looked up again. His pose slipped from him; his role dissolved from him; his mask, figuratively speaking, slipped. It hardly changed the way he spoke at all.

"Many people come here," he said, "because they wish their sins purged from them. They wish the waste of them made clean. They want to be good; or to be bad, and to be corrected. You are an irritating anomaly, you with your 'visiting' and your apparent motive for being here being to make my life more confusing and complicated. I do not *like* complications and confusion. They lead to forgetting to clean filters and thus to sewage explosions, tainting of the vitreous fluid, and long hours' work into the night."

"I did try to leave," I pointed out.

"Most people try to leave when they have a guilty conscience," he said. "Leaving is just as bad as staying —"

He earned a weird kind of respect from me for stopping at that point and actually chewing over the implications of that thought.

"Perhaps," he said, staring at my mouth and not my eyes, "I have over-tuned my senses for stained consciences. Forgive me?"

"You are a liar who makes up School regulations," I said, thinking it was teasing him; but it did not so. Instead it seemed to hurt and anger him. His teeth clicked like the steel toes of his shoes.

"I assure you —" he said, voice pained.

"What kind of student says 'I assure you?'"

His face went completely blank. "Go, then."

I walked past him. I turned. I tried to find a good parting line. He beat me to the punch. He flicked on this horrid, acid smile.

"I look forward to your returning," he said, "as someone more ready to be improved."

"Oh, hush," Vanessa told him.

And then, because one can in fact hear quite far down there, through the pipes and the air ducts and the like, I could hear her say: "She is already something good."

That was Vanessa.

I mean, you'd think that that was a secret truth about me, some contradiction to what I told you earlier; or something that changed since that conversation happened; or some key, important way that she was wrong about me — but it wasn't anything like that. She didn't say it because of anything like that. She couldn't. She was Vanessa. She wasn't even talking about *me*.

She was talking about the me that she'd imagined.

She looked at me, she projected some kind of dream on me, and she decided that that dream was good. That was Vanessa. That was what she did.

She loved me and I loved her for it, but she knew me not at all.

She knew only what she'd dreamt up about me, I think, to represent me on the inside of her head.

The worst field trip anyone's ever taken is the field trip down to the labs under our School. Everybody has to go on it sometime, usually in their freshman year. It is awkward and gross and really short for a field trip. You really only have to take the elevator down.

The labs are basically one big wastewater treatment facility. There's a lot of sewage in Horizon and some in the rest of Town. There's not much industrial waste, not really, but there's a bunch of . . . stuff . . . left over from the old days. The stuff that the Principal calls Horizon's "burden."

One of the big ways that School funds itself, not that it really needs it, is by taking all of that and turning it into graywater, fertilizer, chemicals, insecticides, and effluent. There are also some miscellaneous chemical and biological workplaces attached, I *think* for efficiencies of scale — you can get the advanced chemistry students down there, and the occasional medical labwork done, and spot checks on . . . quality of waste, I don't know? . . . and not have to have a bunch of separate facilities that Town doesn't have the population to support.

The place doesn't smell badly, you understand. If it did, you wouldn't get the likes of Vanessa down there. It's got a rich old ruins scent going on, instead: all ivy and old stone. You can *find* places where it smells just awful, where there's a stink like you wouldn't believe or a furious storm of ventilation just to keep that out. You can find some still rooms, too, like from Egyptian tombs. Mostly, though, it smells kind of neat down there. Like I said. All ivy, and old stone.

That doesn't mean working down there for detention isn't a typical student's nightmare. It is. I never had to. Hardly anyone ever has to. Most of us just get thrown into some boring room somewhere while a teacher glares at us. The lower detention is mostly just a threat, or, in some cases, a promise. You can get course credit, perks, training, even an income down there, like Mikhael did, if you've got the right kind of brain. But the idea that you might get *sent* down there — that's still a sobering influence on a mind inclined to prank.

There's supposed to be a few jobs down there dirty enough to traumatize even the worst kind of delinquent. That's the threat that makes the place the Disciplinary Committee's sanctum, I suppose. Then there's the *real* underground detention, the actual one, the kind of thing that Mikhael got and, later on, Kseniya — reasonable, non-awful work down there, but with an occasional spin through the parts that'll scare you straight, and a chance to get some money and some training if you decide to stick around.

It makes sense. It's the kind of place that could exist. I'm not surprised that I believed it did.

It doesn't. It's all a cover. It isn't real.

That's the funny part. Vanessa knew it all along and I didn't believe her. I spent years thinking all of this was perfectly normal, even though I of all people should have known better, because, well — because it *had* an explanation. Because I was *used* to it being there, because I knew about it, because I'd *grown up* knowing about it, so I just assumed that whatever was going on down there had to be something sensible, logical, and sane; and all the while it wasn't, it wasn't, it really wasn't, it was well past the verge of science and into madness. It was all a freakish cover for something else, for something broken; for mad Lee Scathing's ambition and the construction of his swan.

. . . Hugh Rosewood had me run laps around the gym today. I got lost. Pretty soon I found myself in Finland. I had to fight *three whole witches* to get back, and then he only counted it as *one lap*.

That was totally unfair. . . .

. . . in the mornings when nobody else is around the Principal rides a great evil island down from the sky and lands it in the half-mile-wide parking lot. He walks down a jut-forth peninsula to his office and then he waves the island back into the sky. It dwindles to a dot. If you look up at the sun, right now! You can see it. That dot! Right there? That's his evil island, going around the sun.

Why do we even have a parking lot that big? If it were smaller then we wouldn't have to worry about evil islands. Or wicked principals! We don't need the lot for anybody else, you know. There's only like 12 students and a couple faculty with cars. . . .

. . . If Desmond doesn't stop growing he'll be taller than me one day. What a giant little brother! Thirty feet? Forty feet? Seventy? I won't be able to call him lunchbox any longer. He couldn't even go to School!

. . . Hm.

Wait.

I bet that a giant *could* go to School, actually. I bet that's what's going on with the size of School. I bet it's *for* them, left over *from* them: a School from the time of giants.

They used to have their kids wiggle into the classrooms and take classes. They'd stick their heads into the rooms and the fox-people would give them lectures. Then they'd assign homework. The giants would try to bite them. Ha ha! They'd fail. There are windows. There are always windows. The foxes would scurry out the windows, a flick of their tails! And then they're gone.

If I went to puppy school I would have it very easy, because I am smarter than any puppy, but I would have to wriggle around to fit in the Puppy School building like those giants had must to have done. It might even be more difficult for me to do puppy athletics than human athletics because I am way too big and not as wriggly. Plus, I am always embarrassed when I lick people's noses, whereas dogs are not.

I bet I'd actually get a report card and it would be all like "Math A++++, Literature A++++, P.E. D, Nose-Licking B-, Civics A+," and my dog would look at me with that look that said: *seriously? A+? You're that bad at Puppy Civics?* She would be so disappointed! I would have to crawl into the space between the washing machine and the ironing board and eat the awful lint-bulked dust bunnies of shame. . . .

Back then — back when I was normal — I climbed the Apocynum Tower most days at lunch. Six floors up was the unused club room that I'd mentioned, that my friends and I had taken over as our own. There wasn't an elevator, so there was pretty much no chance that anybody with an official club would swoop in and claim it. They'd have had to be mean, deliberately targeting us, and they'd have had to really care about cardiovascular fitness, too. Cause, dang, that was a lot of stairs.

Six stories is a lot to climb the first time you climb them. Then for a while it's not so much. Then suddenly it's a lot again, I mean, if you're doing it every day. Somehow I never got quite so strong in climbing them that they were easy. I just got strong enough, exactly strong enough, that they were barely acceptably hard.

Here was the group.

Kseniya was at the core. Then me and Giselle. Vanessa was a rare visitor. Mikhael had drifted into my circle at some point and started showing up pretty often. Elya too. She doesn't show up in this story but I think she might have been *there* once or twice when stuff was happening. I don't know! I don't remember her doing anything that mattered, though, so I'm not writing her into this tale. That was it for the regular visitors. People came by sometimes to flirt with or bother Kseniya or Giselle but they didn't really count.

On the day the sun got slaughtered I'd gone up the tower for my lunch. The climb wore me out. I fell over on the old sofa when I'd made it into the room. I let myself rest for five minutes before I even *thought* of eating lunch.

That was a mistake.

I guess that technically it wasn't a mistake, couldn't have been a mistake, because I couldn't help it. Otherwise you would say things like "oh, man, I was born with a finite lifespan and potential. What an error!"

I don't say things like that. Do you?

But it was a mistake anyhow. I should have somehow done something different. I'd sat there for like five minutes, and, you see, Giselle was already there. She was sitting by the table. By the time I could get up and move around and eat my sandwich she'd had *five whole minutes* to make the eyes of sorrow at my lunch.

I had no alternative. I had to give her half.

"Ha," she said, with smug acceptance. "I'll use these calories for evil!"

"You use too many calories for evil," I protested. "Consider the plight of neutrality."

"I need consider nothing," she said, that bleak spike-haired iron's god.

She chewed. She swallowed.

"But thank you."

"I will thin away to nothing," I sadded. Can you sad a phrase? I tried.

"I'll remember you," she said.

We played checkers.

I'm suspicious of checkers, actually. Ever since I saw *War Games* and realized that tic-tac-toe is broken I've wondered if checkers is actually any better. What if it's a game that's not strategically *winnable*? Giselle was really good at checkers, I mean, she was an absolute fiend for it, she might even have been a little smarter than I was overall, and even *still* she only beat me roughly half the time.

On that particular occasion, for example, she won! But on a different occasion, or if she'd had a few fewer checkers to work with, she could quite easily have lost.

Mikhael had wandered up at some point during the game; he tapped me on the shoulder, said, "Play the winner?" and swapped he in.

Then:

"Iron," Kseniya said, dramatically, from the doorway.

She stomped in. She flung herself onto the beanbag with a thump. She scowled at the ceiling. "There is *iron* in my locker, people."

Me: "You're kidding."

"The world is full of Christian bastards," she said.

Mikhael's nostrils flared.

"Christians *and* bastards," he said.

"Ha!" Kseniya snorted. "You curry well for favour, Mikhael, but in the end — you will go in the kettle too if you do not set your Christ aside. I have no compassion left in me today."

He stuck out his tongue at her and made the cross sign with his fingers.

She waved irritably at him. She's a bit too modern a Jotun to be repulsed by a finger-joint cross, though I've heard that it can tingle.

"My point," she said, "illustrated. Remind me why I do not go on a murderous rampage through this School, people, leaving only ash and blood?"

Giselle looked up, but she didn't speak.

Kseniya looked at her. "'zeb?"

"Mnmn-nnh," Giselle denied, muttering, and shook her head.

"It *would* put a dent in your athletic scholarship," I pointed out.

She turned to me. "Always with the practicality," she said.

"It wouldn't be poetic, either!"

"It wouldn't not be so," she denied. "I could arrange the bodies into the lines of an epic verse. Full of blood and thunder. Blood, anyway. Then it could rain. There's the thunder."

"The Disciplinary Committee would cut off your head and hang it from the gate," I pointed out.

"Such is beyond their purview!"

"Stoke their arrogance with the fires of mass murder," I said, "and you would likely reap the consequences."

Kseniya considered that.

"I don't think you stoke and then reap," Mikhael observed.

This was probably true.

"You are a sheltered adolescent," I informed him anyway, "who has never had to burn the grain-fire of a cruel man's arrogance."

"That's just *wrong*," he said. "If you continue to mix your metaphors, I will tell Vanessa that you have changed your position on the likelihood of beheadings."

I gaped at him. He stuck his tongue out at me.

Kseniya sighed mightily.

"Can one of you help?" she asked, looking smaller. "I mean, in a bit? I thought about being all stoic and unflappable. Picking it up and taking it to a trash can. Throwing it pointedly away — but it really makes me sick."

Giselle started to stand up. Mikhael put his hand on her arm.

"You stay," he said. He looked over at Kseniya. "I can get it after this game?"

"Please," she said.

But I'd eaten, already, all my half a meal of it; and I wasn't playing; and Kseniya hardly *ever* asks for anything, so I'd already gotten up, myself.

"I need the exercise," I said. I went back down the stairs. I got that exercise. I got . . . what turned out to be my first *real* kiss, too. Also there was an apocalypse.

It just goes to show you, I guess. Iron is a trouble!

I missed most of the apocalypse, to be honest. I didn't get rained on by the boiling blood. I didn't get to see the sun's chariot crash down burning into the lake. I didn't even know at the time, not really, that the apocalypse *was*.

I thought it was an eclipse.

I knew it was weird. I knew something weird was going on. So I thought it was a *weird* eclipse. Then things got better, so I thought that it was a weird eclipse that had ended. I figured when things got better that they had never gone wrong at all.

Apparently they had.

Apparently if I'd been down in Fortitude, or over on Little Island, I'd have *known* that the world was ending. If I'd been anywhere but safe in a corridor at Principal Entropy's School in Horizon, really, I could have watched the old sun die, I could have seen the sun get *killed* and I would have known it and the knowing of it would have hurt me.

As it was, it scared me but it didn't break me. I missed it. I missed the heart of the whole apocalypse, and of the miracle that followed.

The sun didn't come back. So I'm told. The old sun was just gone. What we had afterwards — what lets us breathe, what lets us see, what lets us live — it's something new. Magic. A miracle. A gift.

The light in the world is a *new* light, so I am told, because of what happened that day in Town.

I was in the hallway. I was down by the lockers. I was standing in front of Kseniya's locker. I didn't know its combination so I was hitting it. It wasn't helping. A ginger boy was leaning against the wall. He was watching the sky and the sun and the windows.

Bang! went the locker. Around us golden light streamed in.

I didn't really think that banging on the locker would help with anything. I was just frustrated. I did not *want* to walk all the way back down the hall, climb up six floors, ask Kseniya for the combination, climb back down, walk back up the hall, and open the locker up. Hitting the locker was impractical but it was something I could do right there.

Bang! went the locker again.

The red-headed boy glanced at me. He'd caught me in the act of thumping. I blushed. The sunlight reddened. Everything was very red. He looked away. The red light darkened. Then that last thing crossed some hidden boundary in my brain and commanded all my attention.

That isn't right.

I turned. I followed the boy's gaze outwards. I saw the red that was blooming on the sun. I saw that redness grow and darken and the sun unravel and the red devour it. I stood there frozen as the world descended into night.

We were like silhouettes then and I do not know what made it light enough for even that. It was like we'd stepped a little voidwards, a little out of synch with the usual way of seeing, and our people-ness was making us to glow. It was the same kind of thing as when Giselle had taken out my heart — but that didn't really help me *understand* it. She *still* hadn't *explained* that, not really, not ever, you know — not even to that day.

He shone, anyway.

He shone because he was Randal — I mean, the red-haired boy, his name turns out to have been Randal, he shone because he was Randal. I shone, in turn, as me.

Even with that, though, we were merely silhouettes. It was night, deep midnight, in the middle of the day, and it frightened me. It made me cold, and colder as the wind blew by. The entire world had turned the colours of the shadows in the woods.

"That's not supposed to happen," I said, meaning the sun.

The boy moved closer. I moved closer to him. I took his hand. He put his arm around my shoulder. It was all oddly natural to me, considering that I didn't know him; and as for him, he stood remarkably confident and straight.

"It's an eclipse, right?" I asked him.

"It's the end of the lie," he said. "The end of the world. The end of everything."

He spoke gently and there was a joy in him. I didn't realize that he meant it. My friends might have said exactly that, though they'd have had a hard time faking the joy in him, meaning: *of course it's an eclipse, you dork*. I thought that he was joking, so I nestled in.

"The sun dies," he said. "— the world can't see itself any longer, it falls apart from itself, it ceases to know itself, it ceases to name itself and cry itself out into the night, and then . . . it's gone, like a breath of wind."

"Hey," I told him. I jostled him.

"It's all right," he said. "It's supposed to be this way. It's *good*."

He didn't seem to be joking any longer. I pulled away from him. I guess I was worried that he was a deranged sun-murdering serial killer who also killed high school girls.

"That's not funny," I said.

"Oh."

He gave me a sad half-grin. At least, I think he did.

"It'll be better without the world to exist here, jasmine," he said. "You'll see."

I think I'd had jasmine scent in my shampoo.

Maybe he thought I looked like the girl from *Aladdin*, but I didn't; or maybe he thought my top was purple, though it wasn't; maybe there was even a girl named Jasmine he'd confused me with, though that would be a little weird. So I'm going to go with that, with my first guess, that I'd had jasmine in my shampoo.

"It's an eclipse," I said.

I didn't know that I was repeating myself.

"It's just an eclipse."

"OK," he said.

He moved closer. I let him. He put his arm around me again. I let him. It was cold.

Then — well.

I guess you'd know this part, right? It's only in every history, every tourist brochure, every, well, every *thing* that's ever been printed about Town since that day; and, plus, I already told you this part, up above.

The world didn't end. The sun came back; or, rather, it *didn't* come back, but a new sun rose.

I guess that it couldn't have been the previous sun, even without all the stuff that other people saw, because it didn't appear in the same place in the sky; but the truth is, I assumed that I'd been looking in the wrong direction, remembering in the wrong direction; I was the kind of girl who was used to thinking of the world around her as logical, sensible, and sane; and the sun's return thus occasioned in me not a sense of miracle but of relief and sanity returning.

I thought to myself: *eclipse*.

And that was all.

"See?" I said. Eclipse! I'd said it three times and it was so.

All around us there was light.

When I was younger I asked Giselle once, "What's it like out there? Out there in the nothingness?"

She shook her head. She looked down.

"Dark," she said, softly; but not like you'd say "this sewer is dark" or "this gothic romance is dark," but like you'd say "beautiful" or "incredible" or "beloved." She lingered a bit on the tail of the word.

There was this pleasure in it, this savour in it, and just a hint of loss.

"Sounds great," I said, after a bit. I grinned. "Must suck having to be here and take classes and hang out with us the normal folk instead."

She shrugged. Then she looked at me. She grinned a little, like you'd grin at a kitten, or a friend. Like I was cute. Like I was worth it.

That kind of smile.

"Aw," I said. I was kind of touched.

She snorted around the smile, tried to hide it, that smile, but it just snuck back out onto her again. She giggled. "Not *you*, sparky. Not in *particular*. Just . . . all ya."

"Oh."

I grinned suddenly. "Hey. I should visit sometime!"

Her smile flatlined.

"No," she said, like I was shoving her into a locker or something. *No, no, no, no quit it stop it.*

"What?"

She looked down. She rocked. She looked up. She glared at me with this mix of grief and rage.

"No no no it isn't *yours*."

A television turned off somewhere, it must have done: its world closed down, tumbled in, and its light went dark, save for a single fading spark.

After a bit I pushed the boy away.

"Hey," I said. It was a criticism, not an attention request. He'd been the one to start with the physical closeness this time, and *after* I'd been mad, you know. Even if I'd let him.

I glanced up at his face, though, and I saw it: he wasn't paying attention to me. He was staring; he was sickened; he was raw, and wounded, and vulnerable. He wasn't holding me or not holding me, he wasn't letting go or clinging, he was just standing there frozen, stilled, and hurt.

I'd looked up too late to stop myself from jostling him but at least in time to know I hadn't caused that pain.

Me: "You want the world to end that badly?"

He shook it off.

"Of course not," he said. He looked down at his shoes. His left hand twitched. "That was a joke. I thought it would . . . add to the moment."

I chewed on the inside of my mouth. Then I shrugged. OK. Whatever. I went back to staring at Kseniya's locker. The chewing kind of hurt.

I tried hitting the locker lower than I'd hit it before. I winced and flinched as I did that in case it turned out that *every* time I hit Kseniya's locker, the sun would go red and die and the boy would suffer. I didn't *expect* that, you understand, but it was hard not to spin out the scenarios in my head:

... "See," said the ginger boy, "inside her locker are seven candles, one for each day of the week; and when you hit the locker, you puff out the flame, and that particular day goes dark.

"It was lucky that you got today, just now, and not yesterday.

"If you'd made yesterday dark retroactively all kinds of trouble might have taken place." ...

Bang.

... "No!" he said, grabbing my wrist to stop me from hitting it, "you've gone and hit it wrong and unbalanced the marvellous sun-stabilizing device in the basement of this School. Don't do that! The sun'll go marvellously unstable!" ...

Bang.

... "Stop!" he said, grabbing my wrist. "You will wake the sun to double life! Then I will never manage to extinguish it! I must extinguish it! I must make it a hole in the sky, through which the air can boil out!"

"But sir!" I said. "Can't you live here, and love me, and accept the existence of the sun?"

"No!" he said. "I am adamant! Now let us go and revel in the dark!" ...

Bang.

... "Ha ha ha!" he laughed.

I struck at the locker. My strength was fading, failing, falling. I was growing weak, too weak, too weak to sustain the heartbeat of the sun. I slumped. I faltered. I sank down against the locker, limp and feeble, clawing at the metal and the gaps. My fingernails they played they the vent holes like a slide.

"Please," I said.

The light was dying. The air was floating away. Everything was going black and crinkly and dying in my lungs.

"Please."

I raised my hand to strike one final time upon the locker, but he caught my wrist, he caught my wrist and he laughed.

"I'm a deranged sun-murdering serial killer," he said, "but I don't mind killing high school girls —" ...

I hit the locker. I flinched. I hit it again, and flinched. I hit it a third time, and I kept my reaction under control, but all I could think about for a moment was the red that had blotted out the sun. I shook it off. I raised my hand to hit the locker a fourth time. He grabbed my wrist to stop me.

It was too much like the scenarios I'd been imagining. I lost it.

I shrieked. I struggled. I said, "Noo we need the sun to live and breathe!"

We don't, of course.

We need it to live, presumably, but not really for breathing. Do we? I was being way too melodramatic about the dying of the sun.

"That key," he said, when I'd recovered my equilibrium.

I should have thought that lockers don't have keys. I should have. But I didn't. I actually lost my train of thought entirely because —

Well, he was looking at me funny.

He was looking at me funny so I completely forgot to evaluate what *he* was doing and instead I started worrying about myself. I started worrying that maybe I had extra arms and legs that nobody had ever told me about, all cunningly folded up inside my ordinary ones, and that maybe he'd caught me at it — that that look meant: *hey, does that girl there have the right number of limbs?* Maybe he'd heard that rumour that I've got tentacles or claws hidden away somewhere, or he'd just plain seen my face and started wondering that, and I really wanted to explain to him that first, I do have all the usual number of arms and legs, but only the usual number, and no other limbs that are not immediately obvious and normal *even if you count my head* and that second, anyway, even if I *had* had extras, like, even if you'd wanted to count extra wiggly bits attached to a person's secret heart, which you wouldn't, because *aorta*; or even if I'd *secretly had* a tail or double arms or something, it *still* wouldn't have been anyways a call to look at me like that, that would have been *ableism* or possibly even *anti-superhumanism* if extra limbs would be an advantage — is it an advantage? And then I kind of wondered, what with the way he was looking at me, if it was possible that he'd be open to talking with me about whether such things would be an advantage or a disadvantage, I mean, *speculating* with me, talking about things like that that are *silly*, I mean, for fun, because he had after all been quite good about having an arm around my shoulders when the light had gone out of the world even if he'd been a bit of a dork about it after the light had gone and then come back.

Maybe, I thought, having a cute boy with his arm around me in the Apocynum Room would not be such a bad thing when I was arguing with Kseniya *or even with that boy himself* about things like limbs and sunlight and the like, and I was thinking a *lot* of things like this, and I had a lot of things to say but I am pretty sure that all I'd actually managed to get *out* of me was "First of all," and then he kissed me.

I missed the part where Kseniya's locker opened. Actually I missed —

It's like, I think there were some parts of what happened that didn't actually ever make it from my short-term memory to my long-term memory, because I think that the entirety of my mental stack just got kind of dumped into nothingness with that kiss.

From the outside I'd guess it was fast-starting and medium in duration, and then he'd pulled back, and then he'd looked at me again, and then before I could say anything, anything at all, he'd laughed at me, snickered, really, and left.

From the inside it had a longer story.

From the inside it was very startling and I'd had time to be confused in five or six different directions before it had even properly begun.

For one thing, there was the suddenness of it. You are supposed to have time to stand there paralysed as the boy's lips approach. In part this is because it is easier to blame yourself afterwards then, or to come up with all kinds of theories about whether you liked it or not, when there is that

initial frozen moment. In part you need this time so that if you are one of those strong girls who won't put up with anything from anyone, like Kseniya or . . . or . . . well, like Kseniya, then you have time to slap them; or if you are one of those shy and wriggly ferret-girls like on the American television shows you have time to wriggle out and away from them; or, of course, if you love the boy, or just really want to be kissed right then, that looming pause gives you time to melt.

He did not give me that time.

It was really quite narratively incorrect of him. I was offended as a connoisseur of stories. I thought, wait, that sliced time too thinly. That cut out the middle of some sentence. One moment he was standing next to me, his back to the window, his hair like a fire and his eyes dark as night and then there wasn't really a next moment, there was just his lips already on mine and my body already telling me that he was all around me, his hands on my arms, his body close to mine. Where was the observation of the moment *between* him standing next to me and him kissing me? Where was the inexorable build-up? You can start a cosmos with a Big Bang but you shouldn't do a kiss.

Then there was the fact that by the time I did not know whether I wanted to kiss him or not I had *already been* kissing him for like a second.

Actually it was closer to two seconds, because before I could actually start wondering whether I wanted to kiss him or not (being myself, as I was and usually am, or, at least, as I'd usually started to be), I had to, I mean, I, having found myself suddenly being in that Big Bang of a kiss, had to worry first about whether or not I was kissing him properly. It was not my first kiss in some technical senses, but I think that perhaps practicing with mirrors or with Vanessa — I mean, well, *being practiced upon* by Vanessa, really — or with the brass-mask steam-clock parody of a human face that my mother had given me, for my birthday, I mean, it spoke the time, it wasn't for kissing with, it was a *time*-speaking face but objects are adaptable to human purposes, did not really help me to know what I was doing as much as I had hoped. And as for the kiss from Giselle, that, that was, I mean, that had been *medicine*, it turns out, that was just for medical purposes. I'd thought that maybe it *would* help, that it *would* count as a kiss, or at least kissing *practice*, in retrospect, but apparently it did not, and using lip balm —

OK. Look.

I don't even know where you get these ideas, people, I mean, seriously. Lip balm? Chapstick stealing an impressionable young girl's lip virginity? What is that even doing in my purse I've never even seen that lip balm before or, um — I mean, this is totally ridiculous.

I was all freaked out and so there was this second or whatever after I'd actually figured out that I *was* kissing somebody that I was like: wait, is this right? Am I standing right? Where are my arms? What do I do with my arms? I mean, my mouth? Am I kissing properly? Where is my nose what am I supposed to do with my nose what are you doing that why what that is how?

And then after all that even though I had only two of each — I am a perfectly normal and sensible person in this regard *as I have mentioned* — I had to wait for my arms and legs, *all* of my arms and legs, to actually *report back* to me on where they were and what they were doing before I could even begin to evaluate what was actually going on. And *then* I had to make sure with my head and my mouth and with my lips that I gave him a reasonably *good* kiss, assuming that I hadn't decided to slap him or to ferret-wriggle away instead which I concluded that I hadn't, so that he did not go around telling everybody in the School how terrible and awful of a kisser I had been. (This is why it is important to practice, even if all you have is a mirror and a clock and the occasional unpredictable practice snog from somebody like Vanessa, because you don't want to live in a place where the boys say *that*.) So you can see how very long we must have been kissing *already* by the time I actually got *around* to the matter of whether or not I wanted to be kissing him at all.

Now with the magisterial grandeur of my finally catching up to the moment I concluded that I did *not* want to kiss him. I didn't even know him. I had to think really hard to figure out his name, which I *thought* was something starting with A, or at least, had an A in it, which as you have already seen was entirely accurate, it *did* have an A in it, it had two of them in it, for a fact, so I am pretty confident that at least we *had* met before that point, I didn't just figure out his name and its internal vowels *from* kissing him, that would have been pretty weird, we must have previously met.

But vowels aside, he was basically a stranger, the consonants of him were inaccessible to me mid-kiss, and that put me at risk of being unexpectedly and without any planning on my part a girl who was kissing strangers.

So, no kissing! That was my firm decision. I mean, it *would* be my firm decision. I mean, after the important second thoughts. Second thoughts are important. It's *important* to stop and consider any decision that you've made a second time, if you can, before it becomes inevitable. You don't want to goof up in the middle of your first kiss, I mean, of a decision, by breaking it off and *not* thinking about whether you're breaking it off or not a second time. Also he was only a single stranger.

Hmmm.

OK, imagine me putting on the glasses and taking up the clipboard to consider it now, even though this thing I did not do.

He was definitely somewhere between a 7.4 and a 9 on a hotness scale, while my own rating was a 4.2 at best. Even Vanessa who would spontaneously call me good limited her *physicality* compliments to "you're a perfectly serviceable girl, you know, and don't let anybody ever tell you different!" Which is to say that *she* thinks I'm a 7, and Kseniya at one point argued that I should probably consider myself at least a 6 — she is competitive, and that is the number she has chosen for herself, which is just ridiculous — but there was definitely no way that I could rate an athletic, clean-looking red-head slightly taller than myself with at least a modicum of imagination.

Hmmm.

That meant that even after I'd concluded that I did not want to be kissing him and started to try to figure out in one channel of my thoughts how one goes about stopping kissing (having, as mentioned, entirely missed the moments when I *could* have ducked out gracefully, as if by a skip in time) I had to take a moment of second thoughts with another channel of my mind to audit that decision.

Now, I'm absolutely sure, because I am not that kind of girl — I mean, rather, because I *am* the kind of girl that I am about to describe myself as being, and not some *other* kind of girl — that I *would* have elected not to kiss him, and proceeded to disentangle myself, and stop kissing him, and even if the consequence was that the sun went out again and School all fallen down into the bowels of the Earth and Kseniya was to go killing through the halls leaving only ash and blood and I all sprouting forth extra limbs and tentacles and claws, I *would* have stopped kissing him —

Except. Before I could —

The world went flat and barren and cold. The light in the hall went harsh and wrong. The world shifted behind its surfaces. I lost track of where I was, of what I was; where I began, where I ended, and of whom. I think that maybe his arm, which I hadn't kept track of — his hand, his fingertips — had brushed my heart, or at least my lungs, all searching for the metal of me inside.

That moment shivered, hung, hurt, froze, and

— warmth flooded back into the world. Light fell back into the world. Things tumbled back into place, only, the kiss had ended, it was *over*, and he had pulled already quite entirely away.

I made that look you make where the left side of your mouth pulls over and maybe up and is totally ready to become a smile or a frown depending on what the people around you think about things. I looked at his eyes and I tried to catch what was going on in his head so I would know which thing to do. I failed. His eyes were completely unreadable to me.

I opened my mouth. I tried to figure out what to say to him. He took in my expression.

That's when, like I said, he snickered at me.

His shoulders came forward and his head came down a little with it, and he straightened up, and he took a step back, and he snickered again. I tried to say his name but my voice didn't work on the first try. Then he turned and he walked away, all shaking his head like this, and he was gone.

"Really, I only have two arms," I said, but it was too late, and, after a while, I realized that he could probably have figured that out.

Did a boy's arm count, when it's around your shoulder?

Did that make it a third?

I took a handful of iron nails out of Kseniya's locker, because it was open now. It had opened, somehow. I shook my fist, which was full of nails. I managed to prick myself somehow, with them — that was just geometric madness — but I didn't get tetanus or any lasting stigmata, so whatever. I was stoic and unflappable. I marched to the trash can and I pointedly threw them away, the nails, I mean, afterwards, and that was Randal's kiss.

It was time for class. Whatever. The sun had gone out! I went back up the Apocynum Tower.

Kseniya and Mikhael were gone before I got there.

Giselle was staring at the wall.

I dropped my backpack by the chair. I grabbed a coat. I was cold. I sat down and I got out my book of might-have-beens and I wrote down all the things that hadn't happened.

I didn't know what to write about the things that had.

It took Giselle a while to refocus. It was like the way I get when watching a spider or like I *expected* to get when watching a boy move in to kiss me. The wall held her fixated. It commandeered her attention. She had to fight to pull her eyes away from it. I finished writing. I put my book away again. I met the eyes of her. She flinched and she looked right back at the wall.

"I don't think it's very funny to kiss somebody," I told her.

". . . The sun went out," she said.

"Yes."

"But it . . . came back?"

"Yes."

"OK," she said. Her attention ebbed. Then it flowed in again. "What if it was kissing Kseniya?"

That *was* funny, sometimes, but — I shook one hand in the air as if trying to get a flashlight to work or as waving away some sort of rabble. "In this case it was myself."

She thought about that.

"Also, it's only really funny when it's a friend of hers," I said. "Some random boy kissing Kseniya out of nowhere would not be funny."

"It would be bloody," Giselle said.

"Yes."

I walked out on the balcony. There are a lot of balconies in School. There are a lot of balconies in Horizon in general, really. If you want to grab a gargoyle-laden tower to hang out with your friends on and stare broodingly out from a balcony of, you will not find them in short supply.

I'd think the gargoyles were breeding, actually, frankly, if they'd had the sexual organs to do it with, but they did not. I'd checked, on one of those days when I'd been in a very particular mood — the kind of mood, in *particular*, where you check whether gargoyles have reproductive organs or not. Then you casually mention the outcome, either way, in conversation with other people. Then, when they react to this datum with some confusion, you reassure them that you're not just saying this. It's reliable information! You've checked!

That mood.

I stood there amongst the sexless gargoyles on the balcony, broodingly staring out over the School. I braced my hands on the railing and I let my hair flow in the wind and I made shift to be quite gothic; though I may have overshot it, the mood that I was gearing to, and ended up at "baroque" or "melodramatic" instead.

It's possible!

"I was just trying to open Kseniya's locker," I said.

I was quiet. If I weren't myself I'd think I'd missed a word or two of what came next.

"— suddenly he folded me all up into the space of him, and he was warm, and then it was cold, and then warm again, and I think that I might have liked it, but I think *he* thought it was just a big joke, and I am pretty sure that Andrew was his name. Andrew. Armand. Abaddon. A. A something."

I looked over my shoulder at her.

She wasn't blinking. She looked at me like she was really far away.

A cold wind blew.

She licked her lips.

"That's awful," she said. She paused. With some, inexplicable difficulty, she added, "I expect you can't hold yourself accountable for what a boy wants to do, or what he finds funny, though."

"It wasn't funny," I said.

"A girl thinks she's worth something," said Giselle. "That's some guys' favourite kind of joke."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "I am worth millions of — some kind of — kissing currency. I am *perfectly serviceable*, you know, Vanessa says so, and nobody is allowed to tell me different. I think he was just nervous. Most likely he just hadn't kissed anybody before. Most likely he was so completely totally surprised by the event and by suddenly being kissing me that by the time he realized that he *was* kissing me and figured out whether he wanted to be kissing me or not or how to kiss somebody because it's actually kind of tricky, you know, and all, it was all already over. He had red hair."

Giselle stared at my shoulder. I think it was because my shoulder wasn't brooding or being melodramatic. Red hair is statistically pretty uncommon. She could have been startled, you know. That could have startled her. She fell down on the job of her reactions here.

"It is all very confusing," I said. "And I think I will never go back to Kseniya's locker under any circumstances whatsoever and I will also wear a clever black veil when I go to class so that nobody can ever tell it's me."

She looked down. She looked up. "Do I have to say anything?" she asked.

My eyebrows twitched. Then I took a good look at her.

God damn it, Giselle.

"No," I said, because she looked frailer than a ghost. I dug out *the Game of Life* and we set it up and we played something even less demanding than was checkers until it was time, quite suddenly, to go home.

Souls — aka hearts, aka names, aka selves — they're actually really interesting things to look at.

The coolest one to look at, I think, is your *own* soul. (Unless mine just happens randomly to be the best.) If you can get past the horribleness of not having your own soul in you, which I guess you can't, but you know, if you could, and the awesomeness of not having it in you, same thing, but, well, you know —

If you can get past all of that, then looking at your own soul is just plain *neat*, and souls in general, anyway, they're all pretty cool, and nothing like you would expect.

For myself, I was my mother's daughter and my heart was an echo of the daughter that I might have been. It was a thing on the verge of science, sleek, mechanical; it was all brass and chrome and steam-work, vents and dials. It was paperback-sized, my heart, though not as wide. It had an engine's shape, a dynamic shape, a shape like an artificial jellyfish or squid. Its extended tines or jellyfish-tendrils were a mix of straight antenna-spikes and flexible tubes; the latter things were moving parts, they'd writhed and dangled from it twisting when Giselle had held it in her hand. I was a key of many shapes, shifting, living; though I hadn't reached my full intricacy then, not yet.

More generally the way souls look is this.

There's a blunt bit on one end of a soul and a pointy bit on the other. There's actually usually *multiple* pointy bits, in fact — tines or spines or knife-ends, I don't know.

There's a certain rough sense of directionality to a soul. The tines tend to point in the same direction, or to spiral around one another, or to point in radially symmetric directions, so that you have a top and a bottom, in any case, an inside and an outside, but rarely a right or a left.

There's a deep complexity to them. They're ornate, they're *decorative*, they're like an illuminated script or Victorian engine. Sometimes the complexity is organic in appearance: connective tissues, fibres, a soul like an anatomy diagram or a tree branch. Other times it's more mechanical or mathematical: a structure of knotwork, gears, or fractal flanges.

You'll usually have to reach past the tines and their sharpness to the blunt bit, if you want to pull out a soul. If you grab the sharp bits, you'll hurt your hand. That said —

A soul is a living thing, you see. It isn't always the same shape. It isn't even always only the same dimensions. It's living and when it gets agitated, all alive with its needs or its stories, a soul grows hooks. It bulges with them. It grows handles, great hooks or spikes of handles, handles that reach out at you from the flesh. *Those* are easy to grab. You don't need to risk getting cut. They might even wriggle, those handles, as if to say, "Take hold of me! And pull me out!"

All of the souls that *I've* ever seen are shiny and metal. They can be golden, brassy, silver, even iron. They're always metal, though. They're always polished. They always gleam. It's like they've been oiled, subtly, blued, mirrored, maybe, if you are looking at them in the light.

In the dark, of course, be it the mortal dark or voidwards vision, any person's soul will glow.

Back before Randal took and broke the key that held the pieces of my life together, I'd had a brother named Desmond. He was small and brown-haired and annoying, although I'd guess he grew.

I'd be making a lemon tea bread, say, and I'd be frowning at the batter, and there would be two reasons for this. The first reason would be that I would have my hands covered in batter, and yet, I would want to scratch my nose. Taking care of this properly would mean washing my hands off twice, but taking care of it improperly would mark me as no lady. (The mark in question being a smear of batter beneath my nose.) Also it is possible that I would be wondering the entire time anybody but me tasted the bread, "Can they taste the impurity of my nose which may have been in indirect contact with this food?" That would be the first reason I was frowning. The second reason would be that the batter would be curdling, just a little, and I wouldn't be sure if that was necessarily OK.

And in he'd come, while I stared at the batter in a puzzled fashion, Desmond would, and he'd say: "It goes in the oven."

"What?"

"The oven provides heat," he'd explain seriously and calmly. "This causes the insides of the bread to mature and the outsides to go crispy, expanding it into a sort of . . . bread-like substance. The French call it 'pan,' after the pan you bake it on."

OK, I can't take this habitual tense stuff any longer, even though it's eerily accurate, so I'm just going to shift to the past tense straight and simple. You will have to *live* with the world suddenly lurching into specificity as I told him, as I'd always tell him, "You're a dork."

He pulled himself up onto a barstool — for the kitchen counter, you understand, I don't do any kind of baking in any sort of bar — and said, "That is probably the French. You hear their quaint word for bread and think, 'how dorky!' But in fact it is efficient, and as for myself, I am doing you a service to pass the information on."

I rubbed the underside of my nose with the back of my hand and began, irritably, to mix the batter, dry and wet. "What do you want?"

"I want to discuss firebirds," he said.

"You do not so!"

"I do," he said. "It bothers me that these birds, presented as glorious and amazing and good, go around stealing apples from the gardens of a Tsar."

"That's just a myth," I said.

"Granted," he said. "But a myth from *Russia*, which is the next best thing to being fact."

I didn't respond to this. I figured he could figure out my *how do you figure?* on his own, as in fact he did.

"Because some inaccuracies creep into our understanding of any distant place," he explained, laboriously, "so if you take the myths, already inaccurate and figurative approximations to the truth, and then inaccurate *them* — well, seems likely to me that there's more truth to the firebird than to the stories of the KGB and beer made out of potatoes."

"Not beer," I said, then snarled, because I'd responded.

"Whatever," he dismissed airily. "It's all beer-*like* until at least one of us is 18, and probably me, since *you'll* probably just sneak the alcohol home and use it in your baking."

"I'm perfectly capable of being a lush," I said.

"I'm sure that's what all the boys say."

"Aww," I said. "It thinks it's important enough to insult me."

He sighed. He stole a banana from the basket on the counter. He ate it. He waited. He knew that I'd have to put the bread in the oven eventually, and when that happened, I'd have to say something or he'd be able to nod wisely and say: *yes, exactly, like that! Soon it will 'bake' on the 'pan!'*

"I imagine," I said, finally, "that the golden apples were never meant to be sealed away in a Tsar's garden."

"Oh?"

"So imagine that you're a grand Tsar," I said, "ruler of all Russia."

"OK."

"And you find that you've come into the possession of — I don't know. The apples of truth, or eternal life, or pure good, or hope, or something. Right? This tree, and the apples from it, and they're magic."

"Gold," he said.

"What?"

I put the batter in the pan. I put the pan into the oven. He didn't say anything. This would have been a point for me if it had been a point worth scoring.

"Gold," he said. "They were golden, so they were money."

"They were not so."

"Yuh huh!"

"Now, look," I said. I wanted to put my hands on my hips but I couldn't so I washed them off and dried them on a dish towel instead. "You couldn't eat a golden apple. That would be the most ridiculous foodstuff ever."

"Pickled snails," he said.

"The second-most ridiculous foodstuff ever."

"Your mother," he said.

"That doesn't work." I let him figure out why it didn't work on his own. "The point is, I don't think birds steal money."

"It's shiny."

"They don't steal large apple-shaped chunks of golden money," I said. "To weave cunningly into their nests."

He frowned. "That's fair," he said.

"So they were magic."

"All right," he said.

"So what does the Tsar do?"

"What?"

"The premise of this discussion," I said. "The Tsar has found these magic apples."

"Oh." He thought about this. "He walls them up so that the ordinary people don't eat them, gain their magic, and take over from him. The woodcutters and virtuous peasant girls in particular, probably, since they're always getting their nose up in people's magic."

"Right," I said. "And then next thing you know, the world reacts against it, sending a firebird in to take the magic, which was supposed to belong to everybody, and flare it out over the world. So the Tsar discovers the firebird eating apples from the golden apple tree in his garden, and sends his sons to capture it, and the story thus continues."

He frowned. "That's wicked."

"The world beyond the garden was probably scary to him," I said. "Full of all kinds of awful people who couldn't be trusted to put the golden apples to good use."

"Was it Eden?"

I leaned against the sink and thought about this. "No," I said. "That wouldn't make sense. Eden is supposed to be in Africa, I mean, that's what the science says, and Africa is like on the other side of the world from Russia."

"That's America."

"Whatever."

It occurred to me that I'd been sucked into a conversation on firebirds. This always happens. The problem is that he *knows* I am a sucker for conversations.

"Why are you even *here*?" I asked him.

"Mom said to bother you," he said.

"What?"

"Standing instructions! I am not to let you brood."

"I was *baking*."

"You'd lost track of that," he said. "You were staring woefully at the batter. You were thinking, 'if only I knew what came next!' But what would have come next would have been gothic brooding, and then, no doubt, you'd have eaten the batter raw, rubbed it under your nose as a beauty treatment, and gone off to become a loveless hermit."

"This is the way a person gets their bed filled with spiders," I pointed out to him.

"I have a lock," he said.

"You're not diligent," I said. "Besides, I can bypass your locks."

"You can not so."

"Want to bet?"

"Ha."

"I bring Vanessa over," I said. "Vanessa says, 'would you be a sweet and unlock that door?' You unlock the door. Vanessa says, 'would you be a sweet and go wander aimlessly through the streets of Horizon for the next few hours?' Later, you find the inevitable reward of malice."

He was bright red. I set the oven timer.

"Like that," I said.

"That is *not* fair," he said.

"I can also fetch Kseniya."

"Waugh!" He hid his face against the counter.

"Also your lock gives if you rattle it," I pointed out, "because it is a safety lock."

"That doesn't make me feel safe," he said, in a muffled fashion.

"If a firebird burst into your room while you were asleep and then set it on fire," I said, "and you burnt your hands off and couldn't work the button from your side, then I'd think it would make you feel extremely safe to know that I could unlock it without fetching Vanessa over to encourage you."

"That is not a proper hypothetical," he said.

"Well," I said. "I don't know. You could be smoking something awful in there. It seemed kind to assume it was a firebird that set the imaginary fire."

"I don't — *geez*."

I was going to bonk him on the back of the head, smugly, and I was going to walk away, but that wasn't what happened. Instead, what happened was something like this.

My hand struck the counter, straight through his head.

I stared. I was confused. The first thought that came to me was: *I missed?*

Maybe he'd been sitting at the other barstool. I tried to put that picture together in my head. It didn't work, because I'd seen him at *that* one. Maybe he'd dodged. That didn't really make sense either.

I had double vision for a moment. It was like I'd unfocused my eyes, so that I could see my fist on the empty counter and I could see his head, and they weren't so much on top of one another as independent visuals. The surfaces of things had nothing behind them. There was this feel to him like afterimages, like I saw him by the light of a *previously*, and all his present-time *thereness* already gone.

He sat up and back. His eyes were full of confusion. He said something. I had double hearing for a moment. It was like I'd unfocused my ears, so that I could hear the silence of the kitchen and his saying: "What — where — what's . . . ?"

It occurred to me that the way that I'd reached the conclusion that I'd had a brother was weird. I hadn't seen him glowing in the light of him being Desmond and recognized him in that light my brother. I hadn't had direct and given insight into his brotherness as truth. No quill had written him into my world in letters of golden fire, neither backwards and upside-down on the insides of my heart and stomach or rightwise up in the air in front of me; there'd been no cosmic power booming: *you have a brother now, and Desmond is he born*.

I hadn't *felt him being and becoming*, like, from the inside of his skin. I'd just accumulated evidence for him, slowly; over time.

Mom had come home from hospital with a baby. I'd seen the baby, I'd heard the baby, I'd smelled and held and licked the nose of the baby — I don't even remember why. Sometimes people lick the noses of babies, OK? — and so I'd concluded that the baby had been there. I'd had bits and pieces of the baby growing up: not continuously, of course, there were plenty of occasions for substitutions and shenanigans, there was even this one time when it seemed like the Desmond of immediately after a two-week class trip to Soma was suspiciously taller than the Desmond of beforehand, but I'd *seen* it, more or less, and heard it, and occasionally felt or smelled it, that continuity of him; yet, all of that was just an *approximation* to the truth. It wasn't *being*. It wasn't my *having* a brother. It was just — things that would go to *giving an impression* that I did.

I understood why I'd mourned the light of soullessness, even as much as I needed and depended on my soul. How can you know anything if you can't see things as their true selves? How can you trust anything to be itself if the only thing you can see it with is your eyes?

My life with him was all unravelling in my head.

Like, if you've ever had somebody do that trick where they carry a big mug as if it's full of heavy liquid, and then they hand it to you, and you go to catch the weight of it, but it isn't there and so your hand flies up; or if you grow your whole life up thinking that Santa Claus is real, that the port side of a ship is the side where you go to do the drinking, that puppies are born housetrained and nobody is ever going to kiss you, that the meat at the butcher's just kind of appears there and there's nobody out there slaughtering it, if you've ever had that kind of growing-up experience, where you think that and then suddenly you realize that it's not that way at all, that all the evidence you've had and your own assumptions have *led you to the wrong conclusion* —

That just because you've gotten presents from Santa Claus, now and again; that just because sailors are legendary for drinking and ships for having ports; that just because meat comes in paper and the like — that just because you've *seen* and *heard* and *smelled* and *touched* things, that doesn't make them real. The sensory data is real, or at least it's *reality-like*, but that doesn't make the conclusions your heart has drawn from it correct.

It was Desmond who unravelled.

He unwound from my life, all my brother he, and maybe from all existence. I'd never really had a brother, I guess, only *indications* that I'd had a brother. I'd only had the same kind of evidence that I'd had for Santa Claus, though rather a lot more of it; and in the very moment that my hand hit the counter and not my brother's head, all of that came undone. All that evidence was counterexemplified and invalidated and the thread of destiny and family that had bound us together snapped, unravelled, and was gone.

It was horrifying at first. Then even the horror faded. Even the *connection* that I'd had that made me care about losing him frayed. It was traumatizing at first and I screamed and screamed for him, and then the screams were gone, unravelled and unmade. The hurt, the trauma, and Desmond, too: into the book of might-have-beens.

I dreamt that night that I was a walled garden and firebirds were stripping the fruit from every tree inside. I dreamt that night that I was on an operating table, and a ginger boy — his name was Randal. I'd remembered it. His name was Randal — was rooting around inside my chest. I didn't dream of Desmond. I didn't ever wind up dreaming about Desmond, not even when I tried to, any more than I can dream of Dad or Mom.

I did dream one good thing, though.

I wrote this down.

I was walking with Randal in the forest beyond his home, where the trees get thicker and thicker until the branches intertwine. We walked until we had to stop, until we couldn't go any further, because there wasn't any passage any longer, only a single wall of thorny woods.

"Beyond that," he said, "the world turns dark; and the darkness thickens, too, twines itself with itself, until you can hardly breathe or move from the thickness of it."

It seemed impossible enough with just the trees.

"But if you could travel for hundreds of miles further on that way," he said, "past vales of dark and miles of seamless light — there's a point where it goes all dazzling brightness, you know, after things can't get darker any more — then eventually you'll get to a garden where there is no suffering and no sorrow; where people do not doubt themselves; and where humans are not cruel."

The Headmaster of the Bleak Academy
last year

So in the middle of the night I kind of lost my bookmark on my life and suddenly nothing really fit together any longer.

For instance, I'd had my first kiss from a boy. The day before!

I'd even remembered his name!

I woke up feeling unhappy, though, and weird, and out of sorts, and grumpy, and then kind of proud of myself for how completely I'd gotten over everything in the world being about the kiss, and then kind of weirded by it, and finally I came up with that metaphor:

Somehow I'd lost the bookmark on my life.

Somehow I wasn't really on the page that I thought I was on, and that's why everything was weird. If I just ignored everything and went back to the ordinary flow of things and the everydayness of my life, I figured, then things would straighten themselves out and I would understand the world again.

I stomped into the Apocynum Room.

Nobody really seemed to care about my presence or the distress that I was sure had to be radiating off of me in great psychic waves (which I was of course totally ignoring and planning to pretend did not exist until it went away.)

"Salute!" I said. "Apocynum!"

Kseniya snorted. She gave me a casual forehead wave. Mikhael and Giselle didn't even bother to do that. I fell into a chair.

"There is awfulness," I said.

"Oh?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said.

Giselle snorted. Mikhael looked at her.

"A boy kissed her," Giselle said. "And the sun went out."

Traitor.

"Granted," I said. "Also, he laughed at me. Also he didn't even *ask* me if I wanted to be kissed, or formally pay suit to my parents for my hand. But that is beside the point, because I only have two hands and my parents don't have any spares and anyway, I have a plan, which is this: I will definitely *not* talk to him. Or look at him. Or hang out near where it happened for more than the minimum necessary time. I will just hang out with my friends and talk about completely unrelated things."

"Thank you for getting the iron out of my locker," Kseniya said.

"Yes!" I said. "Like that!"

"If you want," Kseniya said, "in exchange, I can end him."

". . . that is not a completely unrelated thing," I said.

Sometimes you have to clarify stuff like this for Kseniya. She has the old blood, the blood of stones and fields and mountains in her — people will sleep with anything, I guess? — so she can be a little Jurassic in her thinking.

"It is in fact a related thing," she conceded. She hesitated. "But if I were to limit my conversation to mathematics and literature, I would find that less entertaining than talking about pulling this boy's head off and using it as an amusing hand puppet."

"That isn't," I protested. "I don't think —"

I didn't actually know what I didn't think, or what wasn't. For that matter I wasn't clear on what I thought or what actually was. Possibly nothing.

Finally, I settled on, "That's disproportionate."

"True," Mikhael said.

Kseniya favoured him with a glance.

"Look," Mikhael said. He was checkering with Giselle again and I saw her mild frustration as his attention wandered. "If you end every guy who kisses somebody, then pretty soon, you don't have any more guys. Then you can't make more."

"Kisses *and* laughs *and* without asking."

Mikhael made a face. Then he stopped. Then he made the face again. He shrugged. "I'm just agreeing with her," he said.

"You see," I said, "this is *still* not everybody talking about completely unrelated things."

"He is either kissing you for a joke," Kseniya said, "or he is a terrible lover."

"*That is not —*"

"If I end him," she interrupted persuasively, "fate will provide you with someone better to kiss you. The void on the stage of the play, another character will fill it! Nature abhors a vacuum, sparky. Thus is all that is wrong and emptiness made gold."

I looked away.

"Thanks," I said. "But you don't have to."

Kseniya sighed.

"I was not serious," she said, after a moment.

"I know."

"I would not actually rip off somebody's head. I would only make them aware of the possibility."

"I know."

"Possibly then I would kiss this boy," she said, "and I would laugh."

"Noo!"

"Ah," said Kseniya. She sighed. "We will pause discussion about this until the next time, then."

My cheeks burned with a red and human blush.

Giselle picked up a checker.

"I think his name was Randal," I finally said.

Giselle hesitated in her movement. It was long enough for me to notice.

"You know him?" I asked.

She nodded. She opened her mouth. She hesitated. I rolled my hand in the air.

"Out with it, girl."

She laughed a little, a short burst. "Sorry. It's — it doesn't matter. My brother thinks he's a ninny."

Relief flashed through me. "Oh," I said. "Oh!"

She looked away. She blushed.

"Then he's all right, then," I said, and Giselle grit her teeth hard so she wouldn't laugh.

And that was pretty much the reason that I gave Randal another shot at me. It wasn't because I liked him. It wasn't because I wanted him to kiss me again, or trusted — cause I didn't! — that he would not. It was because I knew in some vague way that I didn't really understand that Giselle's brother was responsible for the way she was.

So I hated him.

His negative opinion of Randal, come to that, was better than all the ringing praise of Heaven would have been.

Only . . .

It led me wrong.

There'd been a cold moment when Randal had kissed me. There'd been a moment like ice drowning out the sun. There'd been a cold moment when he'd kissed me, and there would be colder things to come.

"The Headmaster of the Bleak Academy"

Once upon a time, so the story goes, God and the Devil opened one School each. One was in the middle of a terrible nightmare and the other was set amidst a beautiful and magical dream.

They took new names, then, God and the Devil did.

One of them, he called himself Principal Entropy. The other, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy.

Then Principal Entropy died. Or, if you like, his son killed him. The matter's a bit ambiguous. Everybody's got a theory and nobody's got any kind of proof. He's dead now, anyhow, and his son rules in his place.

He's the one who's God or the Devil now, and I'm afraid that I don't know which.

I mean, it's not just me.

There's nobody who knows that. Nobody who can hardly know that. How could you know?

Sometimes you look at the Headmaster and you think: *he's gotta be the Devil.*

Sometimes you get this hint of an angry God.

As for the other side — his hands run with blood all the time, do the Principal's son's. That's the evidence people tend to bandy. It's a little weird, right? I mean, it *is* weird, it's not normal, hardly anybody's hands *should* be running with blood all the time like the Principal's, but it doesn't tell you: God II or the Son of Devil?

God's got a red right hand, he does, and there's no reason he can't have two; and as for the Devil, if his hands are clean, that's a tribute to his gloves. And either way, he'd killed his Da, or, at least, well, he might have done.

... It's just a story.

It's not the truth. I mean, everybody knows it's not the truth. There's folks like me, who don't know if there rightly is such a thing as God, and folks like Mikhael, who're sure there is one but wouldn't expect to see him running School or whatever. It's not *Godly*.

You ask Mikhael, or somebody like him, and God's not some Principal. He's *God*, he's out there in some kind of super-God-space Heaven beyond any kind of space or time, *King Heaven* and the King of Heaven he, and George Burns can go hang if he'd try to tell you otherwise; though, I guess, I hear he wouldn't've, not actually, not in life.

Now the world's sealed against the void, sealed to the Bleak Academy, but that doesn't mean that the Headmaster can't get in. You hear stories about him. He's always around Town, you know, doing this and doing that. He seduces spirits in Bluebell Park. I hear he's even gotten hot and heavy with the sun. He's got people gliding through the halls and setting up stalls when there's a Career Day at the Principal's School. The Headmaster, I don't know how, but somehow, he gets he in.

Maybe he just walks in, through a hidden gate.

Maybe he needs summoning. Maybe you've got to say his name, you know, like, three times thrice, with a mirror before your face. Maybe he's just everywhere already, maybe he's here *right now*, and it all comes down to whether or not he's choosing to be seen.

He's the one who opens doorways in the forest before the Riders' hunt comes in.

He's the bogeyman, the Headmaster, the bogeyman to most of us. To the Riders' children, he's a little more like a patron god. He's the prince of void, the lord of Death's dominion, the first of the Riders, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy is he named.

Once upon a time, so the story goes, God and the Devil opened one School each; but even now

—
I couldn't tell you which one is which.

"I want you to understand," I told Randal, "that that kiss was your one mistake."

Randal looked at me.

"I am willing to extend you a single error," I said, "owing to the fact that it was a traumatic and peculiar occasion for both of us and you no doubt discovered yourself peculiarly vulnerable to my charisma."

"Oh," he said. "Is that what happened?"

There was a lump in my chest. It was a little hard to breathe. I think that this was not actually a romantic lump or for that matter a malignant lump but rather a sudden fear that in fact he was all too aware that I was not possessed of any such charisma as the which I had just said. The possibility that I had just forgiven him for a kiss that he had already been regretting in all the moments since — that he had been sitting at his home pounding his head into the mirror going, "Why, why, why, and with *her*?" — made me dizzy and weak. I was blushing. I had trouble breathing. I was super-aware of my heart. It was nothing like romance.

Please tell me that that is nothing like romance?

"You *were* the one who started it," I stammered out. "I was too surprised to figure out what to do about it before it was even already over."

He leaned against the wall. He was staring at the sky again.

"You laughed at me," I said.

"That's true," he said. "That's — not true. That wasn't it. It was just suddenly really funny. It was like, 'oh my God that just happened.'"

"That's not OK!"

"It is so. You *said*. I'd get one error."

"Laughing makes error two," I said.

"Geez," he said. "Harsh. If I'm already in trouble I could probably go ahead and kiss you again —"

I moved back about five paces and bumped into the lockers with a clang. He noticed. He laughed again. "*Kidding*."

"Oh."

"I was not myself," he said. "I was doing something that I really shouldn't have been doing. I'm sorry."

"Oh," I said again. It was hard to protest. The fear had congealed into something like self-hatred. Somehow his being rude became my being unworthy of him, just as soon as he'd apologized. Maybe it would have done that anyway, even if he hadn't apologized. That's sometimes how fear works.

"If it helps," he said, "it wasn't really about you at all."

It turned out that that did not help. That did not help at all.

I honestly felt like Giselle right then, like talking was just too *hard*, even though I was pretty sure that I ought to have things to say.

"So," he said, "are we done?"

I was really strong here, I think, and it got me into trouble. That's the problem with being strong when you're usually quite weak — it's more important to be a little bit strong all the time than to be suddenly strong in the middle of all your weaknesses and then go right back to being weak again.

"You didn't have to apologize for not wanting me," I said. "You could just want me."

He laughed again. He probably did that after each time he beat his forehead against the mirror at home. Why, why, why, and with *her*? Snicker. Why, why, why, and with *her*? Snicker —

I turned away. I went to go. He said, "That's not the way to say it, that was all — I mean, a guy could hear that weird, you know?"

I walked away stiffly. I heard a clang. He was probably hitting his head on the lockers and muttering. That was the most reasonable thing to suspect.

Three days later, Vanessa hugged me and pulled away and breathed, "*Go you*," and as I blinked at her, she said, "Did you know that you have a boyfriend? Apparently he will beat someone up if another boy refers to the notion as the eighth wonder of the world, and then loudly observe that it is important to date many kinds of people, good ones *and* freaky ones, as practice for a later success in life."

What the hell, Randal.

"Nobody tells me these things," I said.

"That's true," Vanessa said. "Our long and torrid affair must now be put aside without your ever once having noticed it. Oh me, oh my. And what will the third member of our polygamous trio say?"

I made a horrible face at her. At least I think it was horrible. There is never a mirror around when you need one. Then I hesitated. "Wait, Mikhael?"

"Ha!" she snorted. "No, Lee. The man is practically mooning over you, you know, always walking around pushing buttons and adjusting levers and not saying a word about you while looking in a lonely fashion off into the distance. He will be heartbroken."

My brain shattered and fell out my ears (metaphorically) but fortunately my mouth does not actually need it to carry on a conversation. The brain is a vestigial, useless organ, like the tonsils, used mostly for regulating hormones and serving as a convenient reservoir of bone marrow. "Well, then," I said, "bring in Mikhael to replace me."

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh, poor Lee. Mikhael is a pirate, you know; they could never get along in bed."

"I think —" I glared at her. "No, wait, my thoughts are a confusion."

"You consider a fabric of possibilities?" she said, brightly.

"Yes."

"Well, then," she said. "You have come far. But you mustn't hope to surpass me at my field of specialty when you have so many of your own. A boyfriend! And at your age!"

"It is the first I'd heard of it!" I said.

"Oh dear," she said. "I rather thought that might be the case. The girl is always the last to know, you know, unless the boy is. Or possibly there is an old man living in Albuquerque or Oz or somewhere far and fabulous like that who is always informed at the latest. You must straighten the matter out with him at once, you know. Say, 'here now, boy, if we are to be mates, I had better be kept informed!'"

"That is not a thing I can imagine myself saying."

"Nonsense," she said. "You have a vivid and sterling imagination. You are merely being self-deprecating. Have you kissed, then? I am piecing together a fabric of rumour. Kseniya mentioned that I should ask Lee whether a girl may receive leeway, flexibility, or dispensation for taking violent action if someone is unexpectedly kissed. Lee was not cooperative on the matter. You are right to leave me and him behind. But oh, was this the matter at hand or was Kseniya merely griping because someone had importuned her?"

"It was barely even a kiss," I said. I held my hands close together in front of me, as if measuring out something small. "It was over before I'd decided what to do about it! Also, then, I lost my place on life and decided that it doesn't matter any longer."

"Yes, yes," she said. "You lose your place on life any time anything strange happens. It is an endearing habit. But I'm afraid that 'before I'd decided what to do about it' could have been *ages*, you know. My dear, dear girl, if you're going to describe it *that* way I'm half surprised you're not in the middle of the kiss right now."

"I'm not!" I squeaked.

This was actually a momentary concern. Like, what if all of this was *still* my thoughts racing ahead in confusion, and I'd gotten up to speculating on what I'd be talking to Vanessa about four days later? But in fact I was not speculating, I was actually in the hall with her, as far as — reality goes.

So, I squeaked: "I'm not!" and she talked on.

"Now," she said, "I recommend that you *do* decide, because if you do not want to kiss him, then I can make him softly and silently vanish away, but only if I am informed of this sometime before we have graduated and moved on with our various lives; if I am on my deathbed, surrounded by my grandchildren, and you skulk up to me and say, 'Vanessa, I have concluded that Randal and I are not to be, can you take care of the matter?' I will be perplexed."

"Perplexed?"

"Well, I will have gone a bit silly in my old age," she said, "you know. I shall hardly even remember who he is. 'That ginger?' I'll ask, but in fact his hair will have turned gray and fallen out long before."

"This conversation is atrocious," I told her.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I am violating your human rights. My apologies."

She giggled.

Then she looked at me, quite seriously. "I do mean that," she said. "Though. You should start thinking about the matter now. Because a boy who believes that you are dating is likely to attempt to date you if he is not discouraged. Also to become peevish and vexed and dangerous, to be honest, should you actually do decide to discourage him, and I should like to have him vanished before that goes on."

"Am I the only person in this School who does not casually employ violence to suit my ends?"

"It is not violence," she said. "It is delayed justice; I have assembled a file on his various transgressions from the materiel available to me below and filed it where Lee Scathing will, or will not, see it depending on the outcome of events; did you know, we are practically a panopticon of records at this School? The hidden cameras are quite remarkable."

I assumed she was joking. I still think this, actually. School *could* have hidden cameras, I know that now, I know that it's possible now, it could make sense with what I know about it now, but that doesn't mean that it *does*. But it's not like I cared about that back then; it was more like:

"The hidden cameras are quite remarkable," she said, and I turned red at the notion that they should have captured him kissing me, and then I twitched away the whole idea of there being such hidden cameras at School at all, and finally — without even *worrying* about whether or not she was serious — I stomped my foot!

"He is too good for me," I said. "So he will only become too bad for me. This is obvious and inevitable."

"Oh, dear," she said. She sighed. She put her hands onto my shoulders. She looked into my normal human eyes. I looked away. "You know that you are not so bad as that. You are kind and entertaining and it is my firm belief that it is possible for somebody to be attracted to you. Although I had thought it would be someone a bit less human and a bit more — you know, craggled beast of the fields type — at first to give you confidence before suddenly all the humans around you began to notice that you have a figure, a salvageable face, and a strong vital principle. Later, of course, the craggled beast of the fields would fight your human love for you, and it would be very tragic for everybody, but by then you'd have gone away to sea to become a pirate, as Mikhael had had to give his high position up in order to be with me."

"That is not reassuring," I said, although in fact by the middle of it, when it became clear that she was narrating her internal theory of the world and not simply offering lame and marginal compliments up because they were the best she could come up with, it had in fact become a little reassuring.

"If he becomes bad for you," she said, "then you have friends; so I think you ought to taste him and figure out whether he can be good. That is my sage counsel."

The horrible face tried to return at the same time as a wide grin, and the grin, I think, won out. "You think?"

"I do," she said sternly. "But do not go any farther than kissing and possibly some nuzzling. I will demand reports at every stage from you and you will get them totally blurred up if you move too quickly with him. Also, your reputation is essentially unformed at this point, and can be turned

golden if you handle this well. I know you consider it to be fixed in stone and immutably awful but in fact that is simply a proto-reputation, a childhood reputation, like baby teeth; handle this one boy well and you will become a shining star on the stage that is this School and don't let anybody ever tell you different."

Nobody was going to try to tell me that if I handled this one boy well that I would not become a shining star on the stage that was Principal Entropy's School. I could not even imagine how that conversation would come about. It was like all the years that had gone by without anybody ever brazenly telling me that I was not in fact a perfectly serviceable girl. Possibly I interpreted Vanessa's commandments in too specific of a fashion.

I gave her an overly elaborate courtesy.

"As my teacher demands it," I said. "I shall it thus."

"Ha ha!" she said, somewhere between saying the words and actual laughter — it was a ladylike skill of hers, empowering her to measure and dole her laughter out at need. "So brave. So be it. Go! I believe he is in Ms. Rosewood's third period class; you can catch him coincidentally outside it and arrange for a further occasion."

"A further occasion of what?"

She blinked at me, then gave it serious consideration. "You mustn't ask me such things," she said. "I am entirely too innocent. Perhaps a romantic walk in Bluebell Park, or a meet with him for lunch?"

"He laughed at me," I said, "you know. After we kissed."

"You make a funny expression," she said.

"That was not it," I said. I hesitated. I worked my mouth. "Was it?"

"Wasn't it?"

"I don't know," I said. "I couldn't see!"

"Bring a mirror," she said. "I cannot solve everything for you," she added, and then slid glidingly away.

His dream rose, then struck against the limits of the flesh, then fell.

His dream rose, then struck against the limits of the flesh, and fell.

His dream rose —

“Please,” he said. “Please. If you know how to do it. If you can.”

Randal’s need was as the first step in a dance, and this the next. I set a kiss upon his lips. My hand went through him, into his chest. Caught the fervid hook of him. Pulled out his key.

I used his flesh in magic.

The life in him followed out from that key. Arched out. It spun around my hand. It wheeled.

His dream rose, struck against the limits of his flesh, and burst.

He bent up to me, he lifted, rose, I *felt* it. I felt him rising to the edge of all possible things and the limits of what was given to him, as Randal in this world, to be and do; felt him struggle against the iron of that truth, that there are only certain things we are, that there are failures we cannot fight, weaknesses we cannot cure, limits that we cannot overcome; felt him skittering against that, beating the wings of his being against that, and start to fall —

I pulled him past, like sucking a mosquito through a screen; skinned his life and drew him up and through and out of he; reshaped him; brought him I to this — an apotheosis.

He howled, Randal he.

His life sluiced out from him, and to my hand. His life, his soul, his name. The night remaining in him it bled all through him, flooded through him from his eyes, filled his skin and then the flesh of him. His body it came alive with it: that dark, that remaining night.

He lost cohesion. He surged. He rose, he flowed, he turned viscous.

He ascended as one thing, as *a* one thing, a velvet tide; he was exalted, he was lifted up, and he was made, I made him, from ordinary flesh into a vehicle for the ending of the world.

That was about a month ago. He was still alive then. I could still help him, then, it was still possible, then, and so I did, I did, I tried, I tried, the which was logical, and sensible, and kind.

Unroll time to last year again, to me meeting and dating Randal again, and then hurry forward several weeks.

"I will show you an astonishing secret," Vanessa told me.

She took me by the hand. She led me downwards. I tried to speak at one point, but she made a frantic noise, a frantic gesture, she waved our conjoined hands and emitted strangled noises, and so I did not speak.

We snuck — yes, it was actual *sneaking* — down past the rooms of the Disciplinary Committee. We passed into the maintenance tunnels and then lower yet: to where the concrete became rock and then the rock became porous, brown, natural, and wet. The silence and the darkness deepened and Vanessa borrowed a battery lantern from a wall hook to light our way.

She pulled me to a stop in a damp and cavernous chamber. "Lo!" she said.

She gestured to the end of it —

— to the Basalt Gates.

They were solid clear through and heavy like Stonehenge or Coral Castle. You could believe that somehow people had carried them down here, if somebody *told* you that, but you wanted to imagine ancient astronauts, magic, or chthonic things instead.

"Um," I said.

This did not seem like the sort of place that we were supposed to be. It didn't seem like it should be there at all, but whether or not *it* belonged here *we* did not. I hissed it to her:

"*We should not be here.*"

"Pish-tosh," she dismissed.

She walked up. She put her hand against the gates. "Though," she added, "we are definitely not supposed to *know* that these are here, or what they are."

"Fortunately," I said, "I don't."

"What?"

"Well," I said, "I'm lost, so that's neither."

"It's not possible to be lost," she said. "This is a labyrinth and not a maze."

"Oh."

"I've looked at the other turnings," she said. "They lead nowhere. They are for souls to wander about lost in, trudgingly, I imagine."

"You can't be trudgingly," I argued, making an even greater hash of the underlying verb than had she. "Also, what the hell?"

"Exactly!" she said. "Or, rather, Lethe, I think."

"Lethe?"

"That is what Lee Scathing called it," she said. "He said, and I was not supposed to hear, that it was Lethe. So I believe that it is the gate that souls must pass through to forget their lives before they are reborn, the which is said to be in Hell. And where better to keep Hell than directly underneath the waste reclamation facility? That just makes sense."

"He may have actually said 'Lee.'"

"What, he thinks he's a door?"

"You think it's a river!"

"That is enough nonsense out of you," she said, and sighed. "Look at it! Marvel! Be amazed! Let it shake up the ordinariness of your unnecessarily constrained perspective."

It was like she broke a spell instead of casting one; reality reasserted itself with a snap.

"It is amazing," I said, "but it is also just a freaky giant gate in a freaky set of tunnels. Things like that can happen."

"Oh, honey," she said.

"It is not necessary to be able to explain everything," I said, "to know that everything has an explanation. Probably this was the work of some pagan cult with an excess of time on their hands, and the maintenance tunnels connected to it by accident or were built on top of part of an existing structure."

"That makes sense," she said, "if you also have a better explanation for what happens to people after they die; but if you don't then isn't it more like a feeble candle of justification held up against the darkness of all things? Anyways, come and touch the door. Maybe you'll die or forget stuff."

"That's not encouraging."

"Well," she said reasonably, "if this were constructed by a pagan cult that worshipped Lee Scathing, then touching it is probably safe."

"There was nonesuch," I said, but I was cold, and scared, and I crept forward because I was cold and scared and did not want to creep forward and put my hand upon the door.

"This is why you keep getting kissed, you know," she said.

"What?"

"It's like boys and their chicken," she said, unhelpfully, and I actually felt very small and far away because the Basalt Gates are more real than practically anything and in touching them I felt myself bleed into the greater somethingness of the world. But I didn't forget anything, I think, and I didn't die, and they only trembled a little and leaned a little inwards and didn't actually *open* with my touch, so eventually, I pulled away.

Vanessa was staring at the gates in a clinical fashion.

"Though," she said, "they don't tremble like that when I touch them. You must be stronger than you look."

"I am not so," I said.

"Arm wrestle me!" she said, with sudden excitement.

She pulled me down onto the ground with her on her belly and her elbow on the ground in front of her and me on my hands and knees beside. She arm wrestled me, and she should have won, of course, but her etiquette kicked in with my hand halfway to the ground, both times she almost got it there, and she relented, affected struggling, let me push her arm back, and finally, unsatisfyingly, to the leftwards ground.

"Well," she sighed, pushing away my hand. "That was disappointing, and now my clothing is dirty."

"I refuse the blame," I said.

She struggled to her feet and patted herself down. "That is all right," she said. "I will make vague references to mythological characters and entities and others will develop explanations for it on their own. They will probably think you are secretly an ogre or troll or just possibly a witch, you know."

"Not so!"

She helped me up: "Some wicked orc."

"I am nonesuch thing," I said. "I am human as the day is long, except in the winter, when I may actually be humanner."

"You cannot say humanner," she argued. "You would say 'add hominem.'"

I leaned against the wall. "On this matter I remain silent."

"That's ever so unfortunate," she concluded. "But, oh well. I have shown you a marvellous thing, so we must now comb over your life for a recompense in kind."

"Oh, God."

"Ha!" she said. "I knew it! You're dating him."

I looked away.

"I *was* going to tell you," I said. "I was just going to figure out first whether I wanted to keep going."

"Yes," she said. "That was what you would have decided after the first date. And then after the second?"

"I still wasn't sure!" I said.

"That's beside the point, though," she said. "I find your romantic life entirely predictable at this point. You must give me something better."

"I've had two dates ever!"

"Not *everything* is about you and Randal," she said. "I want the book."

"Oh, God," I repeated.

She looked at the gate. She tapped her foot. She looked back at me.

"Fine," I said. "The book. For an *hour*."

She waited for a minute, to see if she could get more out of me, then she beamed. "An hour," she said, and she laughed.

Randal's eyes weren't there.

I'd started dating him. Sort of. I mean, you have to understand, I wasn't fully *me* yet. I was a bit of a child still. You know? It was nine or ten months ago, I was still fifteen, and looking back at myself, I feel like I was shapeless metal, maybe even unfiltered rock, compared to the structure that I've become. My mind had great wild empty spaces in it that I would later fill with facts and reasoning. So when I say 'dating' I really mean that we each *thought* that we were dating, but in fact neither of us really knew how to do it right. He was actually, when I look back, almost as bad at it as I was — his confusion just made him more aggressive and less paralysed than mine made me.

Now, I'll note that he was wicked. He wasn't evil, but he was bad. He wasn't a monster, I can forgive him, I can miss him, even, but what he was doing wasn't nice. I wish that I could go back in time and hit myself on the top of the head and say, "Quit it! This won't end well."

Or hit *him*.

Any of us, really. I could have been a great big sister to *any of us*, back then.

Tragically, I never got the chance. I didn't pop out of some kind of freakish time vortex and bonk myself on the head, so now I know I never will.

I dated him instead.

I dated Randal, and his eyes weren't there, and I didn't really pay attention to that at the time. I mean, I knew that it was going on. I was *aware* of it. It just didn't bother me. I thought big grown-up things like:

I'm cosmopolitan. I grew up in Horizon. I know about the Riders' eyes.

Or

I'm not going to be like one of those babies who freaks out when they see that somebody doesn't have regular eyes but just these awful, beautiful windows onto the endless night.

I actually thought that. Even the "endless night" part.

It probably bothered me more than I let myself believe. People are pretty weird about the eyes. I knew, though, I knew that a proper romantic heroine would see past them. (Metaphorically.) So I tried. I decided I was the kind of girl who could just *put up* with a guy and his eyelessness. I could *recognize* that of course Rider eyes were not traditional and that some people, some old bigoted people, would call him unsuitable for dating because of that distinction. But not me! I was young and free with my affections, I mean, monogamously and shyly so, and I could rise above that kind of thing. Besides, realistically, if he'd had proper eyes, he would have been a 9, and that meant that he was at least a 7.4 even *with* them. That was quite good, you know, numerically, even then with me and my proper eyes myself.

They also looked *good*.

That's just kind of weird. I know. I've just been explaining that they bothered me, that they were on some squirmy atavistic level kind of frightening, but even when part of me couldn't look past it, part of me — aesthetically? The aesthetic part? it — did. They disturbed me but they looked *good*. Tasty, kind of. Interesting. Exotic. They matched the black and red of his clothing. They made him look mysterious and distant. They turned the little freckles on his cheeks into the dust of fallen stars.

He kissed me and he pulled away and he said, "My Jasmine."

It wasn't my name.

I tried to point this out to him.

"Um," I said. "Actually, it's mmp—"

He put his finger to my lips. He shook his head.

I worked my mouth. It was actually me trying to figure out what to say but I was kind of embarrassed because I think it looked like I wanted to eat his finger. I didn't. I spoke up anyway. "No," I protested. "That's like me calling you 'my Abelthorpe.'"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Try it," he invited.

I wasn't sure if I actually could. It turns out it is a hard name to pronounce romantically. I hope that poetic justice never dates me off with a guy named Abelthorpe who also despises nicknames.

That would be a trouble!

"You didn't ask me," I said, "if I wanted to kiss you."

He never had! It was an unappealing quality. Or an appealing one. I came down mostly on the side of unappealing, though, because the thrill of it was about one time in three and the vague uncomfortable feeling like he was kissing me for reasons of his own that weren't about me at all, like I was his — his practice clock or his mirror — that was two in three.

I mean, I *liked* them, sudden unasked-for kisses, but sometimes you can like things and still not want them, still feel weird about them, you know? I didn't want him to think he could just decide when to kiss me without consulting me on the matter, even though evidently and obviously he could, because he did.

And then there were times when —

— When it was like before. When it was suddenly cold, in the middle of the warmth, and the world was suddenly very far away, and everything was limned strangely, and I could feel my heart shift and my will it left me, fled from me, left me weak and hollow in his hands; I never even looked to see if his good left hand was really there, in my chest, through my chest, past the flesh and bone of it, groping for the elusiveness of my heart, so passive I'd become.

And at those times I started noticing that things around me had come unlocked.

That was very strange.

That was a source of a great many entries for my book of might-have-beens.

But while I have been explaining all of this he would probably have already said three or four different things, if we were watching this in a real-time time window or something, so let's unreel things back to where I'd just pointed out that he didn't ask, and he'd said:

"That's true."

"Why?" I said.

For just a moment he looked afraid. Or, well, *off*, anyhow. It was so hard to read his face without his eyes. It made him mysterious but also kind of — impossible, you know, like all the signals I was sending out, not just the good signals but the bad ones, they were all vanishing into that starry void instead of coming back to me with a burden of new signals attached to them like when I talked to an actual human being.

Or even to Kseniya, I mean! To anyone with eyes.

It was also hard to read his face when my own heart was beating — I mean, it's always beating, more or less, except in the interval between the beats, but it was hard to read his face when I could *feel* it beating, my heart, not his face, I mean, in my chest, in my ears, in my arms. It was this thing, this meaning, this dark and bright and powerful and awful magic, and back then it was larger than the whole of me, maybe even larger than the world.

. . . You can see why real-time windows on my past would be a fruitless endeavour if I ever attempted to narrate things in their presence.

Anyway, he looked afraid. Then I thought that maybe it wasn't actually fear but some kind of genuine confusion. Like when I'd asked him why he didn't check with me, why he just, well, *snogged* me, it was like — he didn't know. That it was as weird for him as for me, somehow, that maybe sometimes he missed that moment, too, that it was as cut out from his life as it was from mine, the moment he stepped in to kiss.

But then he said something wicked.

He wriggled his mouth up into a grin and he said, "Because it's funny."

"What?"

"I mean," he said. "You. And me. It's *funny*. So I have to do it quickly or I can't."

It didn't even make sense. I don't think he was even *trying* to make sense. I am pretty much always surrounded by people desperately working hard to make sense while given much less raw material to make sense with than he was, so I know what that looks like, and he wasn't trying for it.

It didn't make sense. It just hurt. It was just mean.

And he walked away and I hit the locker next to me and it didn't do me any good.

It reminded me of a baby's fist, a baby's punch, all pudgy and ineffectual (though the locker did open from it, having come unlocked.)

And almost, *almost*, I caught on, then. But I didn't.

It was like my life had been an image on water, and he'd fallen into it like a stone into a pool. Everything was broken.

Vanessa! She wanted an hour with the book of might-have-beens. That was frightening.

It was her fault, you know. The book. It was for her.

She'd listen to me hypothesizing. She'd appreciate it. In fact, she'd appreciate it too much. She'd remember the things I said. She was better at that than I was. That started to trip me up more and more as time went by. If I went back later on to think about something I'd only imagined — the King of Grout, say, living on his desolate grout-moon; frogs that kidnap people, such as Desmond; the matter of the Russians — she'd often disrupt the flow of my thinking by remembering some detail that I'd mentioned previously and had since, with time, forgotten.

I'd started writing things down. In part it was defence. In part it was for her.

I'd tried to get her to do the same. She had her fantasies. I had mine. We could exchange the books and it would be awesome. She had not complied. She'd tried, but her words were limp and peculiar, all bolstered up by facts when written, and she hadn't really liked that. So we came to the state of things as it was then.

See, once I had started, I'd continued, but I didn't *plan* any more on having her read them later. Not once she'd stopped participating. Writing it for her, after a while — that had just felt *weird*.

So I kept my book by then for *me*.

I liked keeping my book for me. It was nicer than keeping a book of actual things. It was like a diary, a sideways diary, that nobody but me could really understand.

I'd stopped paying careful attention to what I put into it. I'd stopped *planning* on Vanessa reading it. So now, when I had to loan it to her — and fair was fair; Vanessa *had* shown me Lethe — I was in panic. What if I'd written something awful? Something embarrassing? Something she wouldn't like to see?

I kept a spare. I was that smart, at least. I kept a spare, safe, *tame* and untawdry book of might-have-beens, for emergencies, but that would only work so well. Once or twice, it might fool her. Make a habit of it, I knew, and she would figure the deception out!

It is never wise to turn something that somebody else will read into a diary.

It messes your head right up.

I drew stupid pictures in my book of might-have-beens. I made strange speculations. Lord only knew what was in there that I might not want Vanessa my friend to see, and soon I'd know that too.

The review process had begun!

. . . Vanessa is secretly one of the swan people. She turns into a swan when nobody is looking and swans about in the post-sanitization streams. When Lee Scathing runs down and criticizes her, telling her, "Turning into a swan is against School regulations!" she gives a gurgling scream, charges him, batters him with her wings, and bites him.

That is actually quite rude!

The whole wastewater treatment facility is actually only there so that when her arm gets stuck as the wing of a swan he can fix it. That's the power of chemistry and biology. . . .

. . . Lee Scathing created Vanessa. He made her in a vat!

Here is how I know.

On Tuesday, Vanessa told me that he was her sugar daddy. I was very surprised. I told her I did not realize that their relationship was of that character. On Friday, she *ran* up to me, bright red as she is never red, and clarified that she was not, that he was not, that it was not so.

"I have misunderstood the phrase's origins," she said. "It is an understandable calamity."

Of course she had! He had no doubt informed her when she brought this up that he did not use regular sugar at all to be her daddy but in fact had used artificial sweeteners, chemical additives, and love. . . .

. . . Most of the students who get detention at this School are never seen again. They vanish into the basements where they become the foundation for the "blank toxin" that we export to Soma and the Keep of Lady Mugain. . . .

. . . the outflow for sanitized effluent is not in Horizon or Old Molder, as commonly believed, but rather Australia. I have not seen Vanessa in some time. I suspect that she has taken her old kayak out, gotten lost, and travelled inadvertently to Australia. The worst part of this is that they probably believe her just another British convict, a throwback to the days of criminal exportation, a Vanessa-come-lately and in detention to their shores. . . .

. . . I am afraid for Vanessa. Our new robot overlords do not recognize me as a perfectly serviceable girl and we are on the road to inevitable hostilities. . . .

. . . Now that I have touched Lethe, I can remember nothing. I listen to my voice as it speaks words, as if it understands them, but they are empty to me. I watch my hand writing and I do not remember the words it writes.

I am trapped in here. I am trapped in this *impression of existence* I am giving.

I am imprisoned.

I am lonely.

I am lost. . . .

Here was something weird.

I called my book of might-have-beens a sideways diary. Remember?

I wasn't speaking loosely. That's what it is.

All of it was a work of crazy legendry, of course, and some unenlightened folks might hold it up, might try turning it sideways, back upright, and even sideways to the other direction, finally saying of it and in its every possible orientation: that's not a diary, sparky. That's not a diary at all!

Only . . .

Look at them. Each hypothesis, each idea, each crazy fancy — it presumed a certain set of prevailing conditions. The truth was like the weather to my fantasies — you could look out from the windows and the gates of them and see the truth all roiling.

Does that make sense?

Like —

Desmond. I wrote once about how my brother Desmond could have just kept growing. I wrote that because I had a brother Desmond. I wrote once about how he might have been taken away by frogs. I had a brother Desmond, and I'd heard of frogs!

I wrote once about how I'd run laps in the School gymnasium. Maybe I didn't wind up in Finland. Maybe I didn't fight against witches. But I'd probably run laps.

I wrote about sharks in the neighbourhood pool. Maybe I'd made that up. Maybe I'd made up having a pool, and then I made up the sharks. That could have happened. But most probably, there'd been a pool.

So the longer I read the book, the more I re-read old might-have-beens, the more puzzled I became. The world really was broken. That wasn't just me being weird about Randal. There was something wrong.

I was reading a book that was written by somebody else.

I wasn't reading *my* book of might-have-beens.

I was reading the sideways diary of somebody who'd had a *brother. Desmond.* Somebody who had had a *dog.* Somebody who'd had a friend named Elya. Someone who had met her Dad.

I could flip back to the very earliest entries and read stuff by a girl whose life I could hardly understand. It wasn't my life. It wasn't even my younger life. It was like my heart had come unseated, my soul, my name, my life, all cast askew inside my chest, and the pieces and parts of me and it didn't connect to one another any more.

I was afraid.

I sat there and I got chills, I shivered, and I imagined some future me —

I scribbled this down in the book itself and it made me feel no better —

Some future me reading the book of might-have-beens and going, "That girl was so weird! She writes as if it's just *obvious* who Kseniya and Vanessa and Mikhael and Randal are!"

Then I'd write: "Everybody knows I don't actually have anybody like that."

That might-be was pretty bleak.

I tried to think of Desmond. I tried to figure out who he'd been or why I'd written him. If I tried really hard, I could sort of catch a glimpse of him, here and there, right around the edges of my thoughts. I could sort of remember — oh, *right*, like, I'd licked his baby nose, right?

And the dog. I remembered the dog.

It was a beagle . . . or, maybe some sort of retriever. Probably not a shih-tzu. Those are wrinkly, right? I didn't write anything about my dog being all wrinkly. I didn't write about losing coinage in the wrinkles and wringing out my dog when I needed change.

I would have, wouldn't I?

I stopped myself from writing that idea down because it would muddy the historical record.

I didn't even know what name I'd given the dog. I always called it "the dog" or "my dog," apparently. Maybe I'd *named* it Dog, like that Soun boy had done back when.

I could sort of remember how I'd started stacking the fantasy novels and the pulps behind the Regency romances so that Desmond wouldn't steal my books —

It was gone. It was mostly gone. It was all gone.

I sat up.

I thought: maybe this is just how a book of might-have-beens . . . works?

That idea was stupid. It was just absurd. I hit myself on the side of my head for thinking it. It wasn't productive.

Maybe somebody had cleverly substituted a different book.

That was unlikely.

Maybe — maybe I'd made a brother up. Then I'd *stopped* making a brother up. Then I'd entirely forgotten I'd ever done that, as recently as the month before.

I held the book at arm's length from me like it was a snake. I stared at it like it was a snake, maybe even a big spider.

I put it down. Carefully.

I scratched my nose.

Two theories emerged. They fought for a while. Then they stopped. They were both the best I had.

The first theory was that I was irreparably broken. A cold and distant shock, that one. My mother would disinherit me and send me off to asylum to be hurt. All ice.

That . . . that felt all ice.

The other possibility was that this shifting of reality was a perfectly natural and normal part of growing up. That everybody knew about it. That probably even *I* knew about it, only, I hadn't put the pieces together yet, hadn't connected yet the words and the ideas. Like, when you first figure out that going to School is something that can happen to *you*. Like when you catch yourself saying, "Wow, I've been exercising every day, thank goodness I'm getting stronger so I can take it."

Yes, I'd said that once.

Like he'd teased me, fairly often: *You 'bake' it on the 'pan.'*

"In fact," I said to myself, with sudden great reassurance and relief, "this could *be* 'growing up.' It is probably what growing up *means*. You go your whole life with people telling you that at some point you'll have to grow up, and you never really formally acknowledge that that involves sudden tectonic shifts in the structure of your life where you have, or cease to have, a sudden brother or acquaintances or memories and history or dog or not, even though people are always *saying* that your life changes . . . completely."

I thought about that.

"This is probably why people keep regular diaries," I said, "and not books of hypotheses. A regular diary would update automatically to track your life, rather than leaving all these untidy epiphenomenal legacies of a previous story and a previous life."

I said that, but I did not believe it. I think I said it. Something like that, anyhow.

I wrote —

Everybody loses their soul when they turn sixteen. The adults don't tell you. They think that it's a kindness that you don't know.

I put down the book. I felt a cold sweat come on. I picked up the book again. I flipped rapidly forwards to the most recent stuff I'd written and re-read it in case it had been written by somebody else.

I sagged in relief that it had not been.

A thought flickered across my mind, that that would happen *later*. Or that of *course* I wasn't writing the wrong things in the book of might-have-beens, not while I was *watching* for it . . .

I gulped.

I wrote —

You meet a boy, and he edits the pieces of your reality. Anyone can do it, really, with a kiss.

I shook it off.

I mastered myself. A little. I couldn't spend time worrying about this. About *me*. I had to check into the reality of my brother. I had to figure out if there was a brother, whether there *was* a brother, this Desmond-brother of mine.

I know I'm supposed to be more broken up about him. I know. I've known.
I've known it even for the dog.

Even for the dog I'm supposed to be willing to crack the world, and then there was my *brother*

I really must sound like the most callous and awful person who's ever lived.

I know I'm supposed to at least be like the girl in *Labyrinth* and — I don't know — have sex with David Bowie or something? to save my brother. I didn't, I didn't know how to, I didn't even try.

I *know*, OK?

I tried to picture him in my head. I tried to think about what it must have been like to have a little brother, who was annoying, before Randal had kissed me.

I did try that.

I even went out into the hall. I made a face at the wall where I guessed his room might have been. A picture of a sailboat hung jauntily back at me. Possibly I was looking at the wrong place. Possibly he'd lived in the library, or the guest room, or the kitchen, or under a tile on the roof. Counterfactuals are a bother when they get out of the book.

"If I *had* a little brother," I said, "then it would make sense for him to steal my book and write himself implicitly into existence; but contrariwise —"

That was as far as that line of reasoning went. See? Counterfactuals!

I went that far. I did. I went a little farther, as you'll see below. I tried, but I couldn't care about him. I wanted to but I couldn't do.

I hunted for him in my memories but I never found more than scraps and pieces.

I looked for him in my heart but I couldn't find him there.

Sometimes I think that there's something wrong with the way that I care about people.

He wasn't real to me. Not after he wasn't.

He was like somebody from a book.

I went down to the laundry room, to where Mom was engaged in her lifelong struggle against the arcade game *Sinistar*; or rather, engaged in an instant death against the same, as the creak of the staircase distracted her and she lost her game.

She turned to me.

Her eyes were vivid and they were bright.

"Mom," I tried. "I think we've lost a Desmond."

She hesitated a beat or two. She looked like she'd expected me to say more. Then she leaned against the machine and said, "Totally. We are Desmond-less. This is a Desmond-free household. Should we get one? We could install him in the ceiling fan and he would spin until he became dizzy."

That was my mother.

I glanced up at the ceiling fan. It wasn't actually spinning. I think she'd used the motor for something else.

"No," I said. I didn't want to say that Desmond had been my brother. That would mean citing my book as evidence. That would mean *entering* my book into evidence, on *top* of everything else that concerned me, and then fielding the obvious objection that it was not even a book of ares but a book of might-have-beens. "I mean, you know. You remember. Desmond?"

"I'm sorry, hon," she said. "What are we talking about?"

"Small?" I said. I held my hand up at an estimated Desmond-height, then adjusted it up and down and finally up again when I remembered that he'd been growing tall. "Brown-haired? Irritating?"

"Mm," she said. Her eyes focused somewhere else for a moment; mild regret, maybe, wistfulness, a strand of memory brushing by, perhaps, and then gone. Her expression cleared. "I don't keep track of small, brown-haired, irritating things, honey," she said. Her eyes crinkled. "That just leads to trouble."

"Mom."

". . . except you?" she proposed.

"I'm not —"

I didn't say *brown-haired*. That was not a winning gambit. I abandoned the field instead. I grabbed a jacket. I went to Mikhael's. I pounded on the door until he opened up.

Mikhael is pretty much just human, although I think that his Grandmum might have been a witch. He's a distant relative to the Sosunovs in Fortitude so he could probably have been magical if he'd wanted to. He didn't. He wanted to be a normal, scientific boy.

He was cute in a kind of ugly fashion. I mean, he was crooked, and he had really big eyebrows, and his whole face in fact was too big for his head, but his hair was an awesome mix of colours — brown and black, I don't think he even dyed it — and he had these astonishing pale green eyes, and there was nothing wrong with him that a good growth spurt, a few years in the sunlight, some exercise, and a bit of confidence wouldn't cure. He was a fixer-upper, you know? One of those boys who didn't have it all together, I mean, seriously, at all, but who looked like he had the *potential* to clean up cool. I'd even tried to date him, once, back before Randal, I was really extremely courageous about it, because I knew that he was lonely and I was lonely and, well —

But that had not worked out well.

He was pretty into the Christianity thing. I didn't really get it. It kind of sucked because it meant that Mikhael and Kseniya were always a little — you know, tense. I mean, they'd got past it, they both basically ignored it, but it was always kind of *there*. He'd stopped wearing a crucifix once he'd met her — "It isn't for hurting people with," he'd said — but it's not like he threw it out, or anything. It just sat on his desk at home, and in his heart.

. . . Not literally! That would have been crazy, sacrilegious, and a little creepy.

I didn't mean *literally*.

I just mean, you know, that he'd kept the faith.

I banged on his door. He opened it.

"Hey."

He stood at the door in the door frame awkwardly, like he didn't want me to go in. I stood there, outside it, with an equal and opposite awkwardness. "My mother's never heard of my younger brother," I said.

"Okay?" he said. He waited for me to say more.

"Desmond."

Vanessa wandered out into the entry hall. She looked at me with the kind of eyes you see on dogs when they've just heard the rustle of a squirrel. Alert! Intent! Considering whether to pounce!

Ohhhh.

"Seriously?" I said. "You're both dressed, so just let me in already."

I pushed past Mikhael.

"We weren't going to be undressed," Mikhael said, with great dignity. "That would be totally wrong."

"Each of you in your own hamster ball?" I said.

He was blushing brightly.

"That would also be wrong," he said. He brushed his hair away from his face. "OK. Fine. You win. Sit anywhere, I guess. I'll be right out."

He doesn't live alone, exactly. It's just that his family's got practically a whole rookery to themselves, so there's really no bother with the rest of them unless they *want* to be friendly or a nuisance. Finding affordable housing in Horizon — it's not hard!

Mikhael disappeared into the back. A bathroom fan turned on. He ran the sink.

"You have a younger brother?" Vanessa ventured.

"Apparently."

"That's terribly exciting! Was he kidnapped by pirates?"

"That seems unlikely."

She tilted her head. "Zombies?"

"He was small," I said. "He had brown hair. I didn't like him."

"That is not a brother," she disapproved. "That is a gerbil."

"I don't remember him," I said.

Back in the bathrooms the sink slowed, then turned off. The fan turned off, then back on for a moment, then off again.

Mikhael came back. He was watching the ground as he walked.

"I have been thinking," he said. "And what I think is that if you are hallucinating the existence of a sibling that I have never met or heard of, and whom your mother hadn't noticed, you should stay here tonight. But not, you understand, in this part of the building, but rather in a lower part of the building where Grandmum can look in on you occasionally and I will not be unhappy at the intrusion."

"I am not *hallucinating*," I said.

"Listen," he said. He looked up for a moment. His body posture was stiff. "It's not safe."

That took the wind from my sails. "I— I don't —"

"Fine," he said.

"I was going to finish that sentence with more words!"

He snorted. He waved me at a chair.

"I really was."

He sat down. I sat. "Fine," he said. "Just tell me."

Vanessa perched.

"I was reading the book," I said, "to make sure that it was safe to give Vanessa in unexpurgated form."

She made a sound of protest.

"And I seem to have been under the impression that I didn't have to actually explain the presence of my brother Desmond in a random hypothesis."

Vanessa said, hesitantly, "You are not always very good at remembering the details of the things you apprehend, you know. Isn't that why you keep the book in the first place?"

"That's true," I said, "but there's a difference!"

"There is?"

"Well," I said, "it's the difference between writing 'Santa probably spends hours in indecision outside the houses of children who love nothing more than coal' and writing 'In the North Pole there lives a magical man who delivers presents every Christmas; presents, or coal, that is, to good and bad children respectively, and if a child should love coal more than presents, he is forced to indecide.'"

Vanessa frowned and was silent.

"Also, I thought I had a dog," I said, "but I'm not totally sure. Maybe it was just a dog-like entity of uncertain provenance."

"I had one of those!" Vanessa said. "It turned out to be Mikhael."

"Shut up," Mikhael said.

"What?"

"I'm not — just don't," he said. "Not you too. Take it back."

"Fine," she said. "You're not a dog-like entity of uncertain provenance. Perhaps I was thinking of this Desmond. Or of a dog!"

He twitched a little. Then sighed. "Why did you write it?"

"What?"

"I mean," he said. "When you were writing about Desmond."

"I don't know," I said. "I mean, I'd have to remember when I was writing it and what was going on that day and why I was writing about, which is exactly the things that I'd keep a diary to help me remember, only because a diary is too boring, I keep a book of might-have-beens."

"So you don't remember writing it?"

I pondered that. I squinted at a blue and gold wall hanging, trying to focus my gaze down to an individual patch of fuzzy colour so the pattern wouldn't distract me.

"What were you doing," he pressed, "*instead* of being annoyed at Desmond, or interacting with your dog, or whatever?"

"I don't know!" I snapped at him. "Nothing. Something. It doesn't matter. This is normal, right? It's just . . ."

"It's perfectly normal," Vanessa comforted. She put a hand on mine.

Mikhael looked at her, then back at me.

He sighed.

"Great," he said. "This happens to both of you? It's a girl thing?"

"Oh," Vanessa said. "No. No, I just think it's normal."

"Because?"

She looked serene. "Because she isn't the kind of person that is abnormal about things. She'd never let herself live it down. Besides, normal is comforting, and she looks like she needs comfort. Plus, she did just start dating, which is always weird; remember how *you* —"

"No! No memories!" Mikhael glared at her.

"Well then," she said.

"It's not normal," he said. "It's abysmal. It's terrible and wrong and I refuse to get in the middle of it but it is not OK."

"You're taking it seriously," I said, blankly.

He squinted at me.

"I'd figured," I said, "that either you'd laugh in my face; *or* you'd say, 'that's terrible, you have historical fever, my Grandmum had that once, it's quite all right.'"

"Ah," he said. "No. That's not — you're thinking of senility, and that's not what you have."

"Oh."

"Or her!" he said, defensively.

"Oh."

"It's nothing I've ever heard of," he said. "But it's probably *something*."

"Oh," I said for what turns out to have been time three, and I felt a little warm. "Thank you."

"So I'm not going to kick you out," he said. "I think that whatever-it-is is probably at your house. But I don't want you staying here long. Get a cot downstairs. Have some food. Sleep there. In the morning you should go to Kseniya's. Then I'll get someone to warn your mother to get out of there. And your — I dunno, your brother, if he exists and you've just forgotten him, and your Dad if you have one. Why don't you have a Dad, sparky, anyways? And whatever."

Vanessa looked at him.

"I don't have a Mom," she said. "Or a real Dad, for that matter."

"That's a mystery," he said.

She squinted at him, then beamed. "Even so."

"Do you," I said, after processing what he said, "I mean, you're saying, I mean, you've — what, seriously?"

"That," Mikhael said, "is the third-worst question you have ever asked me."

"I want to hear number one and two!" Vanessa said, but Mikhael shook his head.

"You said 'it's' probably at my house," I said. "What it?"

"I don't *know*," he said. "When I was a kid, a thing got me, right? And Mum killed it, and I've never met any other body who'd got got by the same thing. So I figure, some thing has got you, and I don't know what it is, but it's probably under your bed or in your walls because that seems like where a thing that gets somebody like you would be."

The words all came in a rush, and I opened my mouth, and he said:

"Shut *up* I don't want to talk about it. That's all. It's a thing that gets. Maybe it comes in through your window. Maybe you've got a vampire. Do they make you forget little brothers? I don't know. Shut up."

"Not a pirate at all," Vanessa sighed. He laughed. I didn't say anything.

Some thing has got you.

I went down and I got a cot and some food and I slept.

Kseniya came from a good Jotun family. She had generations of human in her, on both sides of her, but that's just normal. By the mœurs of the modern times she is as Jotun as you get.

They're an older people. A less finished people, like rough-made carvings.

There was something in the look of her —

Like she wasn't born, but rather broken off, sheared whole from some mountain's stone.

She was brilliant. She wasn't much of a student, but that was a matter of respect. Most teachers just didn't get it from her. She sneered at your human chemistry. She doodled during your boring class. She was on the verge of breaking down in helpless laughter all through Mr. Skiven's physics and she *still* thinks, even to this day — I think — that human storytelling is absurd.

If you were a Jotun, you could get her to mind, I'm sure. A fox, maybe. A twig or swan, even a Rider. Most of our teachers at School were human, though, that is to say, Town newbies, and had no *business* teaching a good Jotun girl like her.

She loved track.

She came alive in it. For it. Track; and telling stories — she loved telling stories, she was the alpha storyteller in the pack of us. Track; and telling stories; and exploring; and . . . just talking about lives. All our lives. She came alive then, for all that stuff.

She was tall, and strong, and vibrant. She was stubborn, thoughtful, and severe.

Iron made her sick. It could —

It could even burn her. Iron. It could burn her. It could set her skin and bones on fire. It would take, it took, I mean, it needs, needs, *needed* a lot of that, to burn her, it had to be *on* her to be burning her, but it could do that. It made her sick, like, it nauseated her, when it was even near.

It . . . that's all about iron. That's all, it just, it could burn her.

Crosses didn't bother her much. On the other hand. I think she had trouble with crucifixes, I mean, the full-on kind with the wiggly man, but not so much with crosses. She could even squirm her way into a Church. She did that once, on a bet I think, and all it gave her was a bloody nose.

She believed in things.

No, that's not right.

She believed in people — in every people, and most of all in herself.

I attended class. I looked at Kseniya and thought about asking to crash with her. A plan congealed. I ate lunch. My stomach clenched. I walked around. I saw Mikhael in the hallways. I hurried up to him.

"Hey," I said.

He looked at me.

"It's OK," I said. "I've decided that it's OK. I don't need to go to Kseniya's."

How awesome, he was going to say. I'm glad you have this well in hand. You're so mature and diligent!

Yes, I was — modestly — going to agree.

"That's great," he said.

His tone was flat. His look was flat. Unexpectedly furious.

He didn't understand.

"So you don't have to tell anyone to warn my Mom," I said. "Because I'll try to work up to telling her. But if not, it's all right, all right? It's just normal. I don't have to go to an asylum or anything and get hurt."

He just ignored the straight line. Apparently you can do that. I don't really understand it. His eye muscles twitched. Then he grit his teeth, turned away, and flipped me off.

"What?"

He emphasized the gesture. Then he walked away. I think — I think —

I almost apologized. I really almost did. I almost wait-wait-sorried him! But if I'd apologized, then that would have *made* trouble. I'd have had to go make trouble for Kseniya just because I'd apologized to Mikhael. Then there would be a big fuss about nothing and everything and I would be a dork. I was being good and strong by not apologizing. Plus, I wasn't even getting angry at him. I was so awesome! Even though he'd flipped me up the bird!

I was so cool and so strong and totally above it all! Best of all, I didn't even have to *do* anything to be that cool.

That day went by, and then the next.

I hung on Randal's arm.

I talked to him about things — not about the kind of things that would get me, or get Mikhael, or vampires or werewolves, but just about ordinary strange and silly stuff. It was in the middle of a hypothesis I was having on the nature of life in a frozen world after the climate shifted colder that he kissed me and I sputtered and I pushed him away and told him, taking a stand on this at last: "I was only talking to you because you were *there*."

And afterwards I really wanted to have unsaid it, but I couldn't really take it back, because basically it was true.

"Oh," he said.

And this was the part where I couldn't actually unsay it.

Oh, he'd said.

He looked at me. Then he shrugged. Then he walked away.

The next time I waved to him he didn't wave back. The next time I spoke to him — I'd gotten all worked up to it, I was going to accuse him of doing *something*, of being the reason I felt suddenly so very much alone, of being the thing that had got me, if there was such a thing, and it wasn't just growing up or imminent insanity or whatever, and he smiled at me and it was as if he saw right through me and he said, "*There* it is."

And he kissed me and the way that everything went funny was not the way that things are supposed to go funny with a kiss. It wasn't even the way they *do* go funny on a kiss. It was rather a completely different kind of funny, where everything was cold and dark even when it was perfectly

warm and perfectly well-lit; and everything was glowing from the inside of it; and it was like he'd been looking, hunting, searching for my heart with every kiss, but had only brushed against its edges theretofore; and now his seeking eyes and his seeking hand had found it at the last, and he reached into my chest with his good left hand and pulled a part of me away with him, gathered it up in his hand, ripped it loose from me, and smiled.

It was a soul. It was a key.

I'd seen it before. Giselle had pulled it out, before, in a cafeteria, long ago.

It was a key. It was my heart. It was my prototype. It was the spark of *me*.

That Rider boy had pulled my heart out and now he held it all slick wet shine and wriggling in his hand.

I didn't say anything. I didn't criticize. I could not. It was no longer possible. There was no way to criticize it. I'd gone all frail, slow, and meek. He'd taken the fire from me, the brass, the spark, the chrome; he'd taken the loudness of me from me, the shivering and clanking engine, and he'd left only the quietness, the dullness, and the fleshy parts behind.

"Thank you," he said.

Breast pocket: he pocketed it.

I tilted my head forward as if his hand held reins. I wanted it back. I swallowed.

"Mnuh?" I asked.

"There is a True Thing, Jasmine," he said, "beyond all the faces of the world. There is a thing that is *real*, when all of this, all this world around us is . . . not real. I'd thought that maybe, when the sun — I mean — I'd thought —"

He shrugged a little.

"There is a True Thing," he tried again, "and it has been kept *hidden* from us, sealed away from us, taken from us, and we are left to dwell in the murk of this reality, cursed and afflicted and blinded by the world. Reality is a cage, my Jasmine. I want it done, and I want out."

It was not what I'd expected him to say. I mean, like, ever. I'd have sooner imagined him shooting lasers.

I watched him shiver there, felt the tentative movements in him as if they were my own, *saw* them, rather, as he stood there glowing while I was emptied of myself.

"I will pop the airlock of this world," he said. His eyes were livid with the light of falling stars. "I will break the seals, and let it all unravel of itself and fall apart. There is a set of Basalt Gates beneath this School, my dear, that border on the nothingness, and to which you are a key."

I frowned at him.

"I am not," I objected.

He made a face. "Well," he said. He patted his pocket and I watched my heart writhe in it. "To which *this* shall be a key."

"Randal . . ."

"It's OK," he said. "It's all right. I know it might not be you. I mean, I really hope. I really hope, I mean, you're *strong*, you know, this key is *strong*, I think that you could really be the one. But I've failed before. It's OK. That's not your fault."

He straightened my head, one hand beneath my chin. I really don't know why he bothered.

Then he smiled to me.

"You'll do, though. I mean, it *will* work. I will open the gates with this your key and the world will end and it'll be OK and you will love me, everyone will love me, for this glorious thing I will have done."

I stood there in the dark and the light and I watched the bits and pieces of my life fray away and there was nothing I could do. I fell away from myself like the leaves in fall. I came apart at the edges. I could have been a hill, or a wind, or a fire, only, he didn't ask me to, so I just stayed, became, remained a girl, a map of girl.

"I wasn't going to do it," he said. "I never want to do it. But you have to understand. You wanted it. You looked, that day — the sun, it went out, it came back, the world was still here, and

you looked so *right*, it burned in you, it was so obvious. I need to break the world and you're the *key*."

Only I wasn't; or rather, only, it was, *it* was, in his pocket, rather, right there, in his breast pocket as he left, so he didn't bother saying anything more to *me*.

There is something that dreams in Bluebell Park.

There is a thing that hungers.

There are bluebells that bloom there even out of season. There are statues of strange gods. There are symbols there, symbols that are not aseptic, symbols that are difficult to quarantine within the mind; and at night the spirits of dreams and wantings and wishes, like swamp-wisps or voiceless fairies — they float through Bluebell Park.

Sometimes in the winter those spirits sicken. They fall then and litter the ground, they spread dead like ashes they, soot, a bitter and empty detritus of ambition.

There is a power in Bluebell Park that is older than I am. It's not older than *people* are, I think, but it's older at least than me. It might be older than the world is. It's certainly older than Horizon is, or School.

That night the statues moved in the park. That night they howled and reached for something that they could not touch. Lights burned among the trees. Shadows hunted. There was a terrible awakening.

I woke with bits of bluebells in my teeth.

Town has a saying:

"Shall we meet in Bluebell Park?"

It's something you say when you have a passion of some sort that you long to carry forward. It's something you say when you want to fight somebody, or to have a romantic walk with them. It's a favourite of playwrights, because you can have comedic cases where one person shows up expecting one of those things and their counterpart expects the other.

Bluebell Park is magic and it's wickedness. It's a place you can go to when the pieces of your brain are at cross-purposes with one another. It can help you, then, or break you. It can align you, orient you or take you, fit the pieces of you together or sunder them against the magnet of who you are.

It loves me.

It's weird, of all the things and people — but it loves me. I knew that from the first time I ever set foot in the park. It was the first provenance to grace me. I am made me by mélange of will and strange coincidence, and before that by Randal's hands, and by Giselle's, and — honestly! — by birth and raising, woman born of woman, entirely the normal way I think, but as much as that, as much as anything, I was sown into this world and void by the love of Bluebell Park.

It loves me, Bluebell Park does, but it couldn't help me; not against that soullessness, not then.

There was nothing at all for it.

Not then.

I went there — I had to, even passive as I found myself I had to — but there wasn't anybody there at that time to walk with and there wasn't anybody there at that time to fight.

It couldn't help me.

To be nameless is to lose your stories. You ask yourself who you are and maybe you even tell yourself who you are, but you can't hear the things you're saying. They're swallowed up by the silence. They don't reach you.

You can sometimes hear the things that other people say.

I walked and where I walked in that silence of me I killed the flowers. I don't mean that I plucked them. I didn't touch them. I just mean, where I went, they died.

I stared at the pond but I couldn't see my reflection.

My seeing was shifted all voidwards, all otherworldly. It was bright as I walked to the Park, everything was bright with being itself (save me); only, in Bluebell Park itself, it wasn't. The light of things was missing there, or greatly dimmed, at least; it was absent as I was absent, all shrouded in a terrible darkness, and I found myself looking at things with my mortal, ordinary eyes.

In the pond, even that ordinary vision didn't help me; I couldn't see my reflection; I saw only dark water and endless depths.

I wanted something. I wanted it more than I had ever wanted anything.

I guess, looking back at it, that I wanted to have my heart.

I sat on a bench and I made sure my eyes were open so that I could read the brass plaque on it — it said "I, I, I to me, and I, myself" — but I felt no kinship with the *words* of it, only with the dim and shadowed image of the brass and wood of it. I could barely differentiate myself from the things around me: the bench, the ground, the grass.

I sat on a bench. I looked at the statues. They were statues.

I cried among the bluebells, by the pond.

Mad Science
last year

One day passed. Two days passed.

I did not see Randal. I looked for him. I did not see him. I did not write. I attended class but I do not really remember any of what the teachers said. I looked at my room in the dark and I saw things much more clearly than I should have.

I remembered the colours and the structures of my key.

On the third night Horizon *shook*. The whole town, the whole place — it just shook. I felt something twist and shatter in my chest like heartbreak.

I got up.

I went to the window. I peered out. I saw roofs and houses, porches, dead trees, wide streets, and the burning light of things. There was a slick in the cobbles by the Sidorov house. A bird's life burned in an under-roof nest. I saw a gargoyle leer down from a third floor spire, but no explanations for the earthquake in the night.

The next day I went down below to talk to Vanessa. I thought that maybe now that I'd been betrayed by a man — how very adult-sounding that makes it — I would understand what it was like to slip, pale and wan, between the vitreous chambers. In fact, I felt clumsier, thicker, and more lumbering than ever.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

I tried to make sense of it. I couldn't. I finally said, "I forgot the book."

"Oh, honey," she said. "Don't be ridiculous. You can bring it another time."

She looked at me.

"There was an intrusion last night," she said. "Lee is very Scathing."

"Seriously?"

She looked away. "Well," she said, "I do not get many opportunities to use that, and as you know my own name is hard to use in jokes."

"Also, seriously?" This time I was referring to the intrusion, and not the pun.

"Yeah. Someone went down to Lethe."

". . . He took it," I said.

"Did he?"

I nodded.

Vanessa frowned. "That's unfortunate. I think. That people take things. Would you like him to give it back?"

I laughed.

"It may seem as if I know what you're talking about," Vanessa said. "But I haven't the faintest. Would you like me to talk to this 'him?'"

I shook my head.

"Then," said Vanessa, "you will come in, and I will make one of the penitents, who do not sadly include the intruder or intruders, make you a cup of tea. The water may be vitreous jelly, however; I cannot be sure."

That seemed unlikely.

"Well," she granted, after taking in my expression, "I simply mean, I cannot *vouch* for anything down here. If you emerge a hall monitor or otherwise horribly transformed into some sort of laboratory mutant then I cannot be held responsible. Tell me that it was not Lee Scathing or Mikhael that took this 'it?'"

I shook my head. Then I thought about it. I nodded.

"No?" she prompted.

"No."

"Good. Then sit."

She vanished for a bit. She emerged with two cups of coffee.

"I have failed you," she said, and handed me one. "This is not tea. It will stunt our growth, you know, and make us shrivelled little people of unaccountable derivation."

"What?"

"It's the caffeine," she said.

I gave up. I had sometimes wondered if she would be easier to follow if I were in a dazed state of half-consciousness and half-existence but now I knew that the opposite was true. She did not even flag her movements loudly to my voidwards sight.

"Thank you," I said.

I drank.

"Who took what?" she asked, but I couldn't figure out what to say to that. I gestured vaguely.

"Did you know," I said, "that I can see in the dark?"

"That's the caffeine talking," she said.

"That is not," I said. "Also, I have had coffee before."

"Oh, dear," she said.

"That's . . ." I stopped, frustrated. "I mean, I turn out the lights, and everything is still visible. Because it is glowing from the inside. I can feel the coffee trickling through you. I can see the *thingness* of the *things*."

She frowned at me. She chewed on her lip.

"I mean, now," I said.

"Yes," she said. "If it were a pre-existing symptom you would have mentioned it before."

"Oh."

"I've never experienced that particular phenomenon," she said, "but it seems possible that you are just coming into your night vision after a brain tumour spontaneously liquefied and ran out your ears, leaving you remarkably trouble-free?"

"I — what?"

"I mean," she said, "with the way you normally stumble around when it is dark, it is possible that you were merely naturally *bad* at seeing things at night, and now it is better; or you got a new night light and forgot about it; or your mother or Lee Scathing has been performing genetics experiments on you in secret. Do you believe I shall be infected, too? There is this coffee that we are sharing. It could be an semicausal vector."

"I'm *serious*," I told her, blankly.

"Of course you are," she said. She looked at me. "That's not it, then?"

"It's not."

"It's good to have brain and eye issues resolve themselves, you know. This one time I hadn't even noticed I'd stopped hearing out of my right ear for like six months before it suddenly came back. And then I was all, 'whoa.'"

"How do you not notice that?"

"Exactly! Though, I guess, I'd noticed, but it had been gradual, so my noticing of it had been a little bit gradual as well, and faded into the background of my life. I'm worried about you," she said, without any real transition. "I think Mikhael is worried too and he never worries about anybody except maybe himself."

"He worries," I said.

"Well," she said, in a dismissive tone. Her attention drifted inwards for a moment and then returned. "He spends his time worrying that he will turn out to be a bad person," she said, "just because he *is* kind of a prick, or possibly he is a prick because he worries that he will turn out to be a bad person, but that is not the same thing as thinking that somebody genuinely needs help and being unable to give it; that is to say, real worry. Are you all right?"

"No," I said.

"There, then," she said. "I think I will make sure that Kseniya takes you in, and give you no choice in the matter. Ah! I see you writhing inside trying to come up with an excuse, but I won't have it."

"I . . ." I started.

She waited.

"Fine," I said.

"Excellent," she said. "That will get you out of Horizon, at the least. You're really not going to tell me what took what, are you? That's really quite unlike — well, it's not like you on your better days."

I shook my head.

"Dear, dear," she said. She sighed. "It is a good thing that I am a creature of insight and grace who is capable of providing more than half of a conversation when necessary; otherwise this situation might prove troublesome. Sit down. Did you and Randal have sex?"

I was half-standing up before the 'sit down' processed. I glowered at her. She squinted at me.

"I *think* that's a no."

I shook my head.

"OK. You understand that I had to ask."

I made faces at her.

"It could have been unintentional!" she said. She rolled a hand. "Like, you were just standing there and then before you could even decide whether you wanted to have sex or not, bam, the two of you were married."

"That is so unfair," I said.

"It is totally fair," she said, gleefully. "Men are like unexpected sexfalls sometimes. You walk around a corner, bam, they sex right through you — like the wind — and you spin around blinking and going, 'hey!'"

"Do you even know what sex *is*?"

"It is like that gesture," she said, illustrating. "I assume. With the finger going into the circled finger and thumb. Or like Robin Hood and his archery."

"What?"

She shrugged. "I have no time to work out *all* the details. Some of this vast frontier must be left for others to discover."

I stared blankly at her. "You have utterly destroyed my image of you."

"Oh," she said sadly. She gave me a wistful smile. "It is that time, is it? You have become more sophisticated than your old teacher Vanessa, you are ready to go on to heights of cosmopolitanism and adulthood that I cannot scale? Next shall you be telling me that fashion involves wearing lipstick on the fingers and not on the lips as I have believed all along?"

"That would be fashionable," I said, "in general terms. You really don't know?"

She pursed her lips. "Well," she said, and a twitch of amusement ran through her, "perhaps I exaggerate slightly. The point is that you would probably be the kind of person to let him go too far, or, if he's the person who took whatever it is, perhaps *he* is the kind of person to *go* too far . . . let or otherwise. But I suppose it was actually some sort of vampire or bugaboo, then, or a peculiar eccentricity of Horizon?"

I looked away and then into my cup. White bits of cup showed through the night-black dregs.

"I'll bring the book next time," I started, but I did not get further.

A shadow seemed to fall over me. I heard a click of steel-toed shoes behind me. A chill took me, and I could practically *see* him through me, right through the back of my head, and burning with an inner light.

"Oh," he whispered, Lee Scathing did, "Oh, dear."

"What?" I said.

He turned my chair. I scrambled to my feet. I tried to back away. I couldn't. There was a chair behind me. He looked at me. Then he glanced at Vanessa. "What is this, my child? What is this abomination?"

I licked my lips.

"Who has made this?" He looked pained. "What have they done?"

"She's not a 'this,'" Vanessa said, sharply. I saw a flash of red and white anger from her, like an arm bone grinding in its shoulder socket; then it sank below the surface of her being. She continued with more vagueness: "She's a friend. She's a my friend. *What's-her-name*. You know."

His eyebrows twitched under the mask. "I do not know," he said.

He looked at me.

"Can you speak?"

"We've *talked*," I told him.

"That's just sickening," he said. "Sickening and delightful. May I borrow your friend, Vanessa?"

Shadow covered him for a moment. The light of *he himself* by which I saw him fell into darkness, and in that darkness, an eye, an eye, no, a *looking* opened where his right cheek had been. There was no longer *Lee Scathing* there but *an eye, its eyelid peels back, it shifts in its socket, it is looking at you* there instead. To my normal vision, nothing changed, I think — I think he was still physically, visually himself — but I don't remember, not really. I am not sure.

The eye blinked at me.

Then it faded and Lee Scathing had returned.

"Um," I said.

"It's your basement," Vanessa shrugged.

"It is," Lee Scathing agreed casually. "Come, then. We will talk, since you can talk. It is to weep."

"That's not what talking is," Vanessa nitpicked, as we two walked away.

"What I make with these tainted hands," Lee Scathing said, and gestured; "it is not pure."

We were walking in the darkness. It didn't matter to either of us, I thought, though he seemed less certain in the darker places than was I.

"I am trying," he said.

We stopped for a moment. He leaned his head against the basement wall. It looked cold. A few seconds passed. Then he lifted his head and he looked at me; shrugged; made a thoughtful face; and we were walking once again.

"It is so very difficult," he said, "to see the world, and know the world is wrong. That is my place. That is what is given to me, to be the one who looks upon the world and knows that it is wrong. That it is filthy, that it is worthless, that it is ungraced by any God."

He's weird. I never know what to say to him.

"Say something," he insisted, even so.

I tried. "The world is worthless?" I asked him.

". . . Yes," he said.

"There is a *cintamani*," I said. "People told me."

"I've never seen it."

I thought that possibly it had never been given detention, nor flushed into the wastewater treatment facility. I thought about saying that. It was really too difficult. It burns a lot of energy, using words.

"I've heard of it," he said. "Of course. And I know that it existed. Once. It's why Lethe's so well-defended now. So sealed, so guarded. Not even John Wicked himself could get it open, in these the modern days."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "The secret, I think, is that the world is worthless now, but it was worse than worthless before. Like there's trash and sewage. Waste and effluent. Then there's things like you, some kind of . . ." He shrugged again. "Graywater girl."

I bit my lip, on the inside, lightly. I let it pass.

"How did they make you?" he asked.

There was enough self left in me to blush. I did blush. I looked down. I wriggled a foot. "Pardon?"

"Make you," he said. His interest sharpened. "Refine you. You're no human, you."

My blush was deeper. "I don't know my Da," I said. "But Mom said he was human. He had a thingie. You know."

"What?" he said.

"A *thingie that made my Mom pregnant*," I emphasized, too loudly, then looked away and waited for the dark to drown out my embarrassment and my thoughts.

"What," he said.

I don't think he understood. I don't think he got it, not all the way, not quite.

Slowly, he said: "Pregnancy? You were nurtured in some woman's womb? That's abhorrent."

"That's not the usual description of it," I said.

"Oh," he said. He looked embarrassed now too. He looked away. I could tell that even though I wasn't looking at him. The little movements of it shone. "I don't mean to say it's your fault. It's not. That's obvious. Nothing's your fault. You're not the kind of thing that can have things be your fault. I'm not blaming you. You're perfect. Horrible, really, but perfect. It's just that that's beyond the pale. You shouldn't nurture a *thing* in a woman's womb."

My face made twisting motions. "OK," I said.

"I used a chamber," he said. He waved vaguely leftwards. "It filled with blood and products. It was disgusting. Then I tried a reclamation bog. That did no better. You may have met my swamp-boy. These days, I am experimenting with a customized nurturing environment."

"What?"

"To make a soulless thing like you," he said. "To make a flesh that has no sin in it, no grace, no nothing in it, only truth; only existence; only being: to gather up the void inside of it, you see, and thereby make us good."

I waited for him to say more, or to start walking again, which eventually he did.

"You're flawed, of course. Misshapen. I'm sorry. But very promising. You shame me. I'm so sorry."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

He stared at me for a while. His eyes moved under the mask; and his other eyes, too, they would fade in again, he would fade out and they would fade in again and for a moment there would only be *an eye, looking* again from somewhere that should have been his leg, his hip, his face, his arms, his chest. Finally he said, "I am very foolish, am I not? Of course you don't."

I nodded.

We turned. We walked into his inner sanctum. He put on a light, kicked a rolling rack with bottles of wine and brandy in my direction, and fell into a chair. "Feel free," he said.

I looked at the bottles for a while, then shrugged, found a glass, and poured myself a shot.

"They would not tell you. How could they tell you? Innocence frays. It falls apart. To see the wicked truths is to become the wicked things. To know the world is to become the slave of the world. It infects you. It infects you, so of course you, who are free of the infection, you are innocent of the truth. If they had told you then you would have seen what you were and you could no longer have been pure and as you are. That is how reflections are. That is how they work. The greatest crime that was ever done was the gift of the world to the nothingness, but the second greatest crime was the invention of mirrors. Mirrors make the wicked cruel, you know, and the innocent the wicked."

I looked at my reflection in the liquor. Well, I tried. It wasn't glowing of itself. It wasn't as bad as the pond had been, though; at least the brandy had its own light. I thought maybe I could see *something* of a reflection.

I wasn't sure.

"You're telling me I was created," I said.

"Yes."

"I wasn't," I said.

"That's unlikely," he disagreed.

"I was normal," I said. "I was normal. Then he *took* it."

"Hm," he said.

I glared at him.

"It seems more likely that your parent constructed you in some sort of cyst-crèche nutrarium," he said. A twitch of his mouth: he thought he knew better than me. "Or tore up spirits of smokeless flame and bound their pieces into the shape of you. Or otherwise you were constructed."

It was practically slander. "She'd rather *steam*."

He raised an eyebrow at me.

"Biological and magical esoterica are for weak-minded blowhards who don't have the stones to do real science," I said. The words were practically automatic. I almost *felt* them. Reluctantly, I added, "... she says. If she'd made an artificial daughter it would have been all beep and boop and robot eyes and steam and have extra limbs and tentacles and my dead lift at age fifteen would have been five and a half long tons. I've *seen the blueprints*."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "You are no steam-powered device," he said. "Do I truly need to argue this?"

"... no."

I blew out my cheeks.

"Because," I said defensively, "my Mom is an ordinary human woman who had me ordinary and does normal, sensible, *clean* science and wouldn't *do* that kind of thing."

"You are meant to be a girl," he said. "Obviously. Not a steam construct. A girl, or, at least, model of and an approximation to."

I muttered something. I don't know what. I think the words 'perfectly serviceable' were in there somewhere. I didn't even really bother saying it out loud because he wasn't hardly *listening*.

"Remarkable," he said.

Then he shivered, once.

"I shouldn't talk to you, though," he said. "I will corrupt you. I mean, I fear I will corrupt you, I should fear that. Though — you do not seem to be *accessible* to corruption. It's amazing. I am made small by this. You are glorious."

He was almost crying. You could hear it in his voice.

"Are you conscious? I can't imagine that you're conscious. I am talking to you, listen to me, I am talking to you, but you cannot possibly be conscious. But people are. Girls are. You must at least be able to pass the Turing test as a girl, else you would not now be here."

They were a grittiness in my head and chest, these assertions of his. They crinkled up my mind. It was like there was a mesh of fine black paper inside me, like I was breathing through it, thinking through it, it was crinkling and wrinkling with each breath and every thought. It disquieted and it nauseated me. My stomach clenched.

"Are you?" he asked again.

I didn't answer him. I hunched my shoulders and I hated him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There is a story that someone once asked that of the void, you know, 'are you there?' and it got so angry that it made the world; I should have guessed that you'd take that question hard."

I didn't bother looking at him.

I didn't like talking to him.

"I'll keep telling myself that I am conscious," I said, triumphantly, "because that way, I'll be in a conversation with somebody worth talking to."

Humour rose in him: "Oh dear."

He grinned at me. Then it receded and he sighed.

"I should kill you," he said. "That would be the proper answer. I should break your neck, and drink in the sight of you with my eyes, and leave only a dusting of soot and ash behind. But Vanessa would chide me, saying, 'That is not proper detention,' and there would be no explanation that I could give."

"I'm not *yours to kill*," I said. "I was a *person*. Am. Am a *person*."

He squinted at me.

"If they made you from an already-living girl," he said, "made sinless a living thing, then this is monstrous —"

I was on my feet. I don't know why. I had to defend Randal. I didn't know why. It writhed in me. It burned in me. It was a silver flame. "This is wrong, you're wrong, you're being evil. I'm leaving."

"What?"

"You're wrong," I said, like a puppet on my strings: "It's not monstrous. I am *good*."

Masks are stupid and you are stupid!

I twitched and wiggled my fingers and I stomped away.

At the end of class that day I couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't even go down and bother Vanessa. I went up to the Apocynum Room instead. I sat by the balcony. I stared up blankly at the sun.

After a while Mikhael poked his head in.

"Yo," he said.

I didn't look at him. I didn't bother looking at him. Everything was broken.

"Giselle is in the hospital," he said. "She had some sort of breakdown in fifth period. She's supposed to be mostly fine but I figured that I'd tell people."

I was standing up. That surprised me.

"Who?" I asked.

"Vanessa," he said. A vague shame flit across him. "You. Um, me, I guess. That's all I've found so far. Do you know who she hangs out with besides us?"

I shook my head.

"I'd *guess* either nobody," he said, "or she has a vast social network hidden beneath the surface of the School. But it's hard to say. Anyway, I'm going to try to find Kseniya; you should go on ahead."

I wavered for a moment. "I can find her . . ."

"I don't want you to," he said. "I want you to go to the hospital and make sure Giselle is OK, while I find Kseniya."

Oh.

I remembered that I was angry at Mikhael. Or he was angry at me. Or something like that. But I nodded. "Okay."

I went.

Giselle lay there and her blood was happy; it flowed through her with a feeling of rivers, ponds, and streams. It was all lush moss and croaking frogs. It was hard to get past that — hard to see the yellow walls of the hospital, and not some forested glen; to feel the dryness of the air against my skin and not refreshing damp; to see the physical world and not the world she *felt*. Then when I *had* seen past it, I got caught up in the little drama that was pouring off of her left foot, the way she winced and it was uncomfortable and it kind of fought her, a war of nerve endings, whenever her foot wanted to twitch or she wanted to move her legs.

It took me a while with all of that to notice *her* — to see past those kinaesthetic impressions to her *conscious* intentions, to the face she was making at me, the muscles clenching in her jaw: her attempt at a scary, disapproving snarl. She wanted that expression to strike me like a blow; she *tried* to grit such a face at me as to make me turn around and leave — she was like a barksy little dog, or a kitten attacking, throwing itself whole body around the arm of the enemy, growling *gr! Gr! Gr!* as it nibbled, inside its thoughts.

"What?" I asked her, trying not to giggle at her.

She sighed. She gave it up. Her shoulders and her back fell limp and she lay back.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "Vanessa came. I told her to go. Now I will tell you to go."

"Why?"

"This is embarrassing," she said.

I sat down by the bed.

"You're pretty energetic," I said. "I mean, usually you'd look and sound *worse* in a hospital."

"Bah," she said. She waved an arm. It had an IV attached to it. "Stupid sugar water brain clarity. It's like blue and greenness flowing into my head. It's unpleasantly rejuvenating. But that is not the point. The point is that I don't want you here."

That made me hesitate for a moment.

"Vanessa actually left?"

"She told me that she would go to the cafeteria and get me a sandwich," Giselle said. "I told her I was not allowed to eat sandwiches. Then I gave her the wrong location for the cafeteria and a set of highly detailed sandwich specifications. Hopefully she is lost or arguing with a doctor or arguing with a person behind a counter and will eventually give up and go away."

It was like somebody had turned up the volume on her. I felt this bizarre surge of affection. "So this is what you sound like when you talk," I said.

"I know," she said. She grinned at me. "Nasty, huh? So leave me alone and in good conscience."

"Seriously," I said, "what's up?"

She gestured dismissively. "They're just being nosy."

"Oh?"

"There is this thing," she said, rolling her eyes, "where apparently if you slip up and tell doctors what's going on, they have to hold you for a day or two and cluck at you and conduct tests that say nothing before they tell you, 'oh, well, your choices are your choices and your symptoms are improbable so we're just going to smarm at you and then let you go.' Sometimes I forget this. However, the important thing is that my brother is going to come and pick me up, and at that time, I do not want you to be here."

I frowned at her.

"He will chide me," she said. Her hands gave dramatic emphasis to her words. "Then you will get angry. Then he will see you as the hollow thing you are and he will destroy or make some use out of you. I consider this unfortunate."

"Pardon?"

"I just want to not deal with it," she said. "Is that OK? I am tired of dealing with things."

I made a face at her.

"If you really want to help," she said, sighing and then pursing her lips in thought, "you could get Vanessa to go away. That is a genuinely important and quite necessary task. She is in practically as much danger as you are, and not as quick to run."

A nurse with hurting feet came by. I stepped back from Giselle. I stood there as the nurse took notes and a temperature. She gave Giselle a little paper cup of pills that scraped the back of Giselle's throat as she swallowed them. Then she retreated from the room.

Me: "What actually happened?"

"I got upset," Giselle said. She swallowed a few more times to try to soothe her throat. "Then my teacher got upset and sent me to the nurse. Then the nurse got upset because I had not been eating and yet refused to confess to being anorexic, vampiric, fey, robotic, or abused. Lesson: claim to be a robot. Then the doctor said I had an infection from cleaning under my nails and I was lucky that I was not going to lose my foot. Now they will not let me leave so my brother is going to come. He is not going to be upset but he is going to be oh so very aggravating."

I squinted at her.

"Hey," I said, a distant memory stirring. "How did you actually determine that you had a brother?"

She looked blankly at me. "It's not that difficult," she said.

"I mean," I said, "you like make observations, right? You think, oh, hm, this person appears to be my brother, maybe I'll gather a bit more evidence —"

"JFC on a POGO stick, butterball," she said.

"Oh," I said.

"It was true in a flare of lightning," she said. "It was *immanent* and *instant*. Golden fire writing letters into the world. Truth bursts to life and being, sparky, it tumbles from the sheds of your ignorance and it splashes all about you, it comes from nowhere and it becomes undeniable in an instant, the world splits apart and it *burns* with it, sparky, with iron and with fire and then you have a brother, and then, all suddenly, all suddenly, plus, also, you are born."

". . . Oh."

Honestly there is a lot that I don't know about normal sibling relationships.

"Though, I *was* the younger one," she said.

"I guess that could make a difference," I said.

"Yeah."

She scratched at the back of her neck. She smiled. She sighed. Then:

"He said I'd be OK here. He said. . . . It doesn't matter." She spread her hands. "It's fine. It's my fault. It really is. I could have told him how bad things were, I just . . . he would have hated you. I mean, not *you*, I mean — all ya and all. He wouldn't have wanted me hanging out with you guys. He wouldn't have wanted me treating myself like all the other kids at School. He would have wanted me setting myself apart, setting myself *above*, he's a right bastard when it comes to being proper about things like that, my brother is, and frankly, he would have been right."

I chewed on my lip. I didn't really have any spark in me, you know, so I couldn't really think about any of the things that she'd just said. I just thought about her foot, her poor infected foot, and said, "It is good to have two feet, you know."

"I *know*," Giselle said. "You *do* go on about having the right number of limbs, butterball, you do, if I ever do lose my foot someday it will enrage me, I shall be furious, I shall be frenzied, your two-footed supremacism will enrage me and I will throw it at you, sparky, I'll just throw it, I'll yell 'in your face!' at you and throw it, and that, sparky, that is where it will wind up: in your face; and you will try to say something clever but no matter what you say you will wind up with your foot in your mouth, or *my* foot in your mouth, anyway, you will eat crow in your terrible misery, only, it won't be crow. It will be FOOT."

I laughed. Her energy was contagious. "I just worry that I'll get it wrong," I explained.

She laughed too. "What, your limb count?"

I shrugged defensively.

"Wake up with too many or too few?"

"It could happen!"

She rolled her eyes. An imperative arose; I watched it drive her to point her finger at the door.

"Look," she said. "Go get rid of Vanessa. Make sure nobody else comes. That would be really effective and helpful. I don't *want* my brother to meet you."

"Why?"

"Fuck," she said. She rolled her eyes and sighed. She held up her arm and she glared at it, at the IV taped onto it and stuck into her vein. "This is what comes of having energy to talk, sparky. This is why I try not to have calories."

"This —"

"No," she said, with a rising agitation. "I am joking. You have seen me eat. See? Willingly! I am fine. Seriously. I don't want to say too much. Please go."

"What does he do to you?" I asked.

"No." She paused, unreadable. Then her face twitched. "You don't *get* it. The nurse didn't get it. The doctor didn't get it. It's not like that. He doesn't *do* anything to me. It isn't like that. He is doing a perfectly good job at taking care of me."

"You're afraid of him."

"For *you*," she said. "I'm afraid. *For you*. He treats *me* fine."

I stared at her for a while. Then I said, "OK."

"For you and for Vanessa," she said, after a bit, and with bitter acceptance, "although it's not like anyone else is safe with oh him hi."

That was to him, of course, pushing open the door, walking in, Giselle's brother, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy.

He was beautiful and he shone incandescent with his wickedness. He was at least ten years older than Giselle, maybe more; if I'd had to guess, and using my ordinary sight, I would have pegged him as a thirty-something. I suppose in actuality he's older than the night.

He smiled at me in passing, and there was a *wanting* in it, and it almost melted me despite my hating him. He gave a keener and sharper smile to Giselle.

"You do not take care of yourself," he said.

She looked away.

I'd had nightmares of him. I'd seen him in storybooks. It couldn't be *him*, though. *That* man wasn't *real*. He couldn't be —

"Be reasonable," he said.

"I am doing fine," said Giselle.

"You must tell me if you need things," he said. "You must tell me if you are doing poorly. If you do not tell me then there is nothing I can do."

She looked at me. She flicked her eyes between me and the door. *Go*.

I mouthed: *seriously?*

She grit her teeth.

"I'll try harder," she said.

"The doctors tell me," he said, "that your foot was practically half again its proper size, infected, and that you told them you were hoping it would bud off."

She was scowling at me. Her brother followed her eyes. She tried to stop and look away but he kept looking at me anyway. His gaze was vivid in the otherworldly medium: I could feel him *looking* like my own eyes looking, could feel his amusement like my own lungs were trembling with it, and I could feel his decision to use me to his own ends like it was my own hand reaching out to pull my strings. He laughed and I may have even mouthed it with him as he said: "But I am embarrassing you in front of your friend."

He paused for consideration. For mock-consideration.

"Well, that's good," he/we said, and his eyes slipped off me like the breaking of a spell. He continued: "Let that be the lesson. Do things that would embarrass you if I discussed them in front of others, and you shall wind up becoming embarrassed. Let that encourage you to talk to me when your foot is only giving, ah, one hundred and ten percent."

"I'll go," I said.

"Oh, do stay," he said. He glanced at me. Humour. Power. Dim and aching in the bones and stomach of us was an old irritation, too: there was something here that defied us, that was steadfastly refusing to be as we had decided it to be — to our detriment and to its own. "I'd love to meet one of my sister's friends. She tells me so very little. Do the two of you talk often?"

I hated him. I feared him. Talking was so very difficult.

I made a flapping gesture in the air and he blinked, he lost me, he *lost* me with that blink, and I scurried frantically out.

I stood outside the door.

I panted. I looked around. A nurse was looking at me. I hurried off. I walked into the maternity ward. That was not helpful. I bumped into a doctor. He said, "Are you OK?"

"Where can I find sandwiches?" I asked him.

He pointed. I got lost. I sat down. I stood up. I looked towards where I could see the Headmaster, practically see him, a conflagration of *luring, mocking, teasing, pushing*, and just the rarest hint of an actual underlying concern — right through the walls I saw him, to my soulless vision he was that bright. I shook my head. I tried to spot Vanessa through the hospital, but real people don't shine through walls like that; only a few of the neediest babies shone anything close to Headmaster-bright.

I went to the entrance. I met Kseniya and Mikhael by accident by the entrance desk. I looked at Mikhael. He looked at me.

Kseniya shifted into a solid stance and waited for one of us to speak.

I said, "She's afraid that if we hang out with her we'll get into a fight with her brother."

"That is unlikely," Kseniya said. "This is a hospital."

"What?"

"It is important to respect a hospital," Kseniya said. "I did not even bring an axe."

I brushed hair out of my eyes.

"Also Mikhael would scream girlishly and then be furious."

I tried not to look amused. Mikhael tried not to look . . . well, I don't know. He succeeded.

"Is he actually here?" Kseniya said.

I nodded.

Kseniya's tone sharpened, a little. "Is it his fault?"

". . . She says it's not," I said.

"Damn," she said.

"Damn?"

"I had hoped it was his fault."

"Heh."

I waved. I started to move on. Mikhael turned as I went past and his jaw tightened with decision and he said, "Wait."

"What?"

"You," he said. "You stay with Kseniya."

Kseniya looked mildly at him.

He lifted his chin.

"She needs to stay with you for a few days," he said. "Something's feeding on her. I don't know what or how."

"Who is she?" Kseniya asked.

I froze.

It was actually Mikhael that asked her: "What?"

Kseniya frowned at me. She licked her lips. Her head twitched a bit as she tried to keep looking at me, and something — fear? — tried to make her look away. "I don't know that. Do I?"

"She's your *friend*," he said.

"She —"

Kseniya's neck stiffened. The muscles of her left arm twitched. Her stomach twisted.

Then she said, like sinking into arctic waters: "Oh."

"Oh?" Mikhael said.

She sighed. She looked away. Some stiff and heavy emotion rolled to the surface of her. She swallowed it. She gulped it down. "Which one of them did it?" she asked.

I looked at her with blank panic rising. I couldn't answer that.

"Who did it, sparky? *Who killed you?*"

There were no words. There wasn't even looking any more. I couldn't look. Looking at her was like sticking pitchforks in my eyes. Looking at her was like rolling naked in the snow.

"This is a puppet, Mikhael," she said. *Oh God*. "This is soulless. Nameless. Heartless. This is a *thing*. Did Giselle? Did her brother? Did it — you didn't just — you didn't just *die*, just have it go away, and I wasn't even there? Please tell me it is Giselle's brother. Please tell me it is someone I can punch in the head. Please. I want to punch somebody in the head until everything is better."

"That's fighting in the hospital," I managed.

". . . see?" she said, after ten or fifteen seconds. She laughed, Kseniya's soft slow laughter that sounds like a human sounds in tears. Or maybe she was crying. I don't know. I couldn't tell. "Heartless."

She patted me awkwardly on the head, it left my head tingling with it, and she walked away; not, I thought, in any particular direction, nor did she listen when Mikhael called out.

"I'm going to go," I said.

"Wait," Mikhael said.

I waited.

In the distance, I saw a tinge of satisfaction enter the Headmaster's glow.

"You're dead?" Mikhael asked. "You're a — a *puppet*?"

I risked a glance at him. He was blushing hotly, which is good, because a person *should* blush, after asking that question. He was locked up, too, they were knotting up the joints of him, all they his tension, uncertainties, and disgust.

I told him: "I don't even know what that means."

I walked home with my eyes closed, just to see if I could. I didn't fall down once. It wasn't until I'd actually made it home and was fumbling out our house key from beneath the stone, it kept slipping through my fingers, that I realized that that didn't even *tell* me anything. How the heck would I know how puppets see?

Was Lee Scathing right?

Had I been made for this?

Maybe I'd just sprung up from the flowers, from drops of blood and petals that had fallen by the pond. Maybe I'd grown up from the forest, Bluebell Park's little forest, or been bud from some stony god. Maybe Mom *was* a biologist, maybe the steam thing was a diversion, or maybe I was actually a steam-powered robot, just, a well-disguised one, I'd always kind of worried, I'd always had this kind of *steamy* feeling, you know, like, ever since she'd mentioned those early plans; like, this one time I'd stepped into the bathtub and it was kind of like I'd maybe gone *clunk* instead of *thump*, stuff like that, you know? Maybe the *Sinistar* machine in the laundry room was secretly my control panel, only —

It didn't matter. It couldn't matter. Could it?

What I'd been made for was made irrelevant. I understood finally what I was *then*. The world had given me the answer that I could not give myself.

I was made heartless. I was made soulless. I was made nameless. I was a puppet.

He'd taken it.

He'd taken out my heart, Randal had, like Harald had taken Hild's; only, he hadn't bothered using me in magics. He hadn't made a cloud palace of me, or anything. Maybe he hadn't even tried. He'd just done what Giselle had, left me alone, left my empty flesh behind in shape of *me*, and I realized that I wondered why.

Why, why, why, and how could they?

How it had come to pass that perfectly serviceable girls were so rare and special that everybody kept just leaving me the way I'd been?

I didn't leave home for a while after that. I stayed in my room. I told my mother that I was sick. Kseniya came by.

I frowned at her. I invited her in, because I thought she wanted me to invite her in. It hurt.

She sat down on my bed. She looked around her. She looked at everything but me. She was heavy, there was a heaviness in her, it bent her, it bowed her — she who was Jotun-born and never bowed — it bowed her down.

"You are not there, butterball," she said.

It filled her up like water.

"Yeah," I said. I spun my desk chair round and round and then I sat.

"I can't even see you," she said. "I can't even recognize you. You don't make sense to me. I did not even see that it was you."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No," she said. She sighed. "I think that you are probably not even in there. That you are just . . . a machine. You understand? A memory. But I promised myself that I would talk to you like you were a person and give you a choice like I would give it to a person because I miss you."

She was crying. She couldn't stop it. It distressed me then. It distresses me now. It cuts through me when I remember it, that awful grief.

"Did you volunteer for this?" she asked me after a while. "Did it just happen? Is your heart still out there somewhere, sparky?"

She held Angrbode in her hand.

"This is abominable," she said, "to have to look at you, and you're dead. To have to listen to you, and you're dead. If you'd talk. If you'd talk, so that I could hate how you were talking as I sank my teeth into the joy of hearing words."

My head just shook.

She nodded after a while. Red rage flashed through her. It rose. It struggled in her. It fell.

"He took," she said, "Giselle."

Seeing without seeing — it was like the world was washed over in moonlight. It was like she was sitting there surrounded by the darkness and in the light of a windowed moon.

I could feel her helplessness.

She didn't know then that Giselle was a goddess forged of iron. She didn't know that Giselle's iron touch — that the hands of that many-handed goddess could/would burn her, could/would sear her skin, set her aflame. She didn't know that they were never meant to have a friendship, that it was wrong, alien, murderous, impossible and wrong, that they'd ever had one; nor that the Headmaster had thereafter taken steps.

She didn't know.

Not that, even if she had, she would have cared.

"He took Giselle," she said, her fist opening and closing, "and she's gone, he took her *out of the world*, sparky, right in front of us, he ripped the world open and he took her out of it, she's *gone*."

"Oh," I said.

I didn't bother feeling anything. Not with Kseniya right there lit by her awful hurt. There wasn't anything a nameless girl could add to them, to the feelings in that room.

"And here you are," Kseniya said slowly. "My best friend, skin of my best friend, flesh, and your soul is gone, and you are lost; and then there is my other friend, and she is gone, taken, out beyond the world to void, to Death's dominion it and she, whence first the Riders came; and it struck me that one crisis might be the answer to the other."

Her words were sombre, like from some story. Something rose in her. Something struggled. It did not fall.

There is a *thing that moves* in people — a will, a determination, a vital principle. It ebbs and flows in us gently but now and then it will give to a great rising. Now and then it roars up, struggles

against the limitations of the flesh, *fights* — loses the balance of it, and crashes down. Its outflow feeds a rising. Its falling feeds a rising. Down becomes up; it cycles; it turns; it crashes and it howls up again. It claws it up to the peak of it, it rips at the sky from the wave-cap hooks of it, it seethes and struggles against the limits of the flesh — and crashes down.

It rises but it cannot hold; it slips, like a grinding gear.

It rises, it struggles, it hurts, it falls. Over and over again the waves roll in of it, crashing and rising are they all, until the tide goes still.

This rose, this struggled — but it did not fall.

“I will use your flesh in magics,” my friend Kseniya said. She clung to the pitch of her intention and she did not let it fall. “If you will let me. I have been trying to learn how. I do not know if I can do it, but I think that it must be something I can do, because I am close to your heart. If that does not help me then maybe I can change you somehow using Angrbode’s heart. If that does not work —”

She stared past me.

“Something will work. Something must work. I will tear open the world and Mikhael and I and maybe Vanessa will go through and we will take Giselle back and then it will not be such a tragedy and a loss that this happened to you. And if it is he that has taken you, I will punch he the lord of Death’s dominion in the *face* and break his teeth. It will be your *memorial*, sparky. OK?”

I remembered the Headmaster’s satisfaction.

Had that been the moment Giselle started to bend? When she’d started to agree with him, when she’d started to give in? When the *thing that moved* in her exhausted itself, hit the limits of her strength, and started to bow back downwards towards its fall?

I couldn’t leave Kseniya like this.

“OK,” I said.

She squeezed my hands, like fire and ice the grip of her, and finally it faded out, that long sustained note of will, intention, courage, the *that which moves* in her; it fell and left her helpless then; she looked at me, her face all twisted then, and then she left.

After she left I tried to write something in the book of might-have-beens. I tried to come up with something, you know, some hypothesis. *Maybe she can change me somehow using Angrbode’s heart, and then that changes me.*

Or: *maybe because she is close to my heart she can use my flesh in magics.*

I wrote these things, these hypotheses, and then I tried to take them somewhere, but I could not. To be heartless is to lose your stories.

I went to a mirror and I stared at it, but I could not see you, because you were not there.

I put the book away after a while, and I lay down on my bed, and I stayed there; I stared up at the ceiling for a number of days and nights.

On the tenth day Randal came.

He stood there in the darkness of the room and I watched the stars fall, one by one, in the night sky that was his eyes, and finally he said, "Here," and he tossed a twisted bit of metal and broken light onto my bed.

Heart!

I seized it up. The lights of the world went out in an instant; or dimmed, deeply, rather. I was blind for a moment, with the otherworldly vistas of a soulless person's vision at less than a tenth of their normal intensity and my mortal eyes having practically forgotten how to see.

It didn't matter. I was blind but I didn't *care*.

In the darkness I clutched my heart to me. I held it tight to me. I hugged it and I rocked with it and I made inane, soft, and helpless sounds.

"You look disgusting," Randal said, somewhere.

I shrugged at him distractedly. I hadn't showered in a while; he was probably right.

I didn't want to shift my attention to him. I could. It was *possible*. I guess he was sort of glowing, still. I guess I could sort of still see it. Him. He was still a thing in the world, I guess. He was fading into visibility, like the rest of things. I gave him that.

I just didn't want to care.

"It didn't work," he said. "I tried it and it didn't work. I'm sorry."

He wasn't my heart. I looked up at him anyway. I guess. "My friend said," I explained to him, "that I was dead. A puppet. Not an actual anybody."

I was occupied for a moment by a remembered grief.

He sighed. He came in. He sat down on the bed. He pulled me under his arm. I didn't fight him, even though I think I should have. Or maybe I shouldn't have. Should I?

"That wasn't you," he said.

He nodded vaguely in the direction of my twisted, broken heart.

"That," he said. "That's you. So it's OK. I mean, stuff people say to your body? That's not important. It's not surprising that it's what you remember, particularly since you haven't put that heart back in yet, but — you know. Whatever. It's not *you*."

"Oh," I said.

I turned the soul over and over in my hands. It looked like somebody had been beating it against a pair of giant Basalt Gates, beating it or grinding it or stretching and twisting it — I don't know which. The tines that had been straight were broken or twisted. The flexible tubes were all over ripped and torn. There was blood on it, too, dried blood, all over it. I guessed it was his and a glance confirmed it; his fingers were crisscrossed with faded purple marks.

"It's not your fault," he said.

"What?"

"You were pretty *close* to being the key to that gate," he said. "To being *within reach* of being a key to that gate. But you weren't. And I guess that ultimately you can't really change what you're the key to. Maybe if I'd hunted around forever I'd have found some other gate, some *similar* gate, to which you are the key. Maybe I could have opened that. But I didn't. I didn't do that. I brought it back to you."

"Yeah," I said. "OK. Thanks."

It felt horrible that he was trying to console me but I didn't really understand why I minded. I hugged my heart. It struck me that it should have ought felt nice that he was being kind to me; I thought there was probably something wrong with me that I felt distracted and kind of resentful instead. That's why I let him keep trying, however awfully, to be kind.

"Here," he said gently. "Let me put it in."

I shook my head. He reached for my hand, like he was going to do it anyway, but I closed my hands around my key until they bled and I didn't let him.

So he shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he said. "You can probably — I mean, if you can't, just swallow it, or stick it your ear or something, the heart can find its own way back to its proper place."

I beamed at it.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," he said.

"Wow."

He laughed a little. "Yeah," he said. "They're something."

I tried to sarcastically imagine under which circumstances I would jam twisted metal into my ear intentionally but I couldn't be sarcastic successfully. This circumstance, these circumstances, they were pretty much them. That's a lesson of this story. I mean, I don't want to turn this into a public service announcement for victims of magical esoterica or anything, but it's still a lesson. If you find yourself thinking about jamming a broken key in your ear, if that ever seems like the right thing to do, you have gotten misled somewhere, you have become mistaken. To jam it thusly in is not correct.

"I didn't think I'd ever take someone's heart again," he said. "I really didn't, not after Ai. Not after Elechka. . . ."

He trailed off for a moment, then finished with: "But I brought it back."

"Yeah."

He tilted my head up. He looked at me. "Do you forgive me?"

I licked my lips.

"I could kiss you," he said. "And put it back in. I mean, for old times' sake. Though you are kind of smelly right now."

I laughed. I couldn't help it.

"You — I," I said. "Um. No."

"OK," he said.

My hand bled. My heart squeaked — squealed, I don't know. It made a noise in my pulse and a feeling in my head. I had a *plan*.

"Anyway," he said. He patted my head. "That's all. I — I mean, I didn't think you were that bad, or anything. We could have dated anyway. I mean, we wouldn't have, but we *could* have. You know?"

I didn't say anything.

I should have said something. If it had been Kseniya, or Vanessa, or Mikhael, or Giselle, I would have told them off. If it had even been Lee Scathing. But for Randal I just shrugged a little and said, "Thank you."

"Aw, hell," he said, and added, "Here."

And he did kiss me, and he pushed my hand up to my chest, like he was trying to stick my heart back in me with my own good left and his good right hands, but I didn't let him, I held it in my chubby useless fists and I did not let it go, and eventually he left.

I had my heart in my hands. It was broken, it was damaged, it was ruined, but I *had* it.

I had a *plan*.

"Become perfect," I told myself. I whispered to it. My eyes must have gleamed. "Become like her, better, stronger, like the mountains, like the forests, like the sky."

My heart squeaked. It screamed like twisted metal and its tendrils tried to move. For a moment I was not in the world, not properly real, not properly myself; for a moment I lost track of the lie that is the world and everything was currents and motions and the stuff of dreams, but I did not see the truth behind the lie, only a dizzy gray unbeing. My heart pounded in my hands and my pulse beat in my ears and my skin twitched, it shook, my body struggled, and for a moment — for a moment —

But I did not change.

"Oh, come on," I pled.

I had a heart. I could become fire-maned horses, couldn't I? A sword? A white raven, at the least? I could be something awesome, like Harald had made Hild. I could be a snake. I could be a steam construct. *I could have wings*. Probably not all at once, but I *could*.

Only, I couldn't.

Maybe it was just too difficult. Maybe I wasn't strong enough. Most likely it was because my heart was broken. More than broken.

It was totalled.

"Be fire, then," I whispered. "A raven. A swan. A bridge. A flute of glass."

It writhed, it *hurt*, it was crying in my hands, my heart, and still the things I prayed for were not so.

"Be —"

I hesitated.

"Be the thing I need to be," I said, "to rescue my friend Giselle."

I almost felt it, then. It almost happened.

For a moment the heart stretched forth a hook from it, for a moment it wriggled in my hands, struggled, tried to become unbroken, to unbend. It hurt terribly but it almost happened; and there were scales, I thought, on my arm, and darkness, and a shifting in my senses; a glimpse of something that at that time I thought was Heaven but I later realized was the True Thing behind all forms; and then I was still, and lost, and only me.

So that's how I came up with my stupid, stupid plan.

That's how I came around to the most terrible idea I've ever had, which was this:

"I'm broken anyway," I told myself. "I'm not me any longer anyway."

That much was true.

"So I don't *have* to put it back in," I said, conclusively. "I don't have to go back to being . . . that. Or staying this. I can let Kseniya do this. I can let her make things right, and I can just . . . be *magic*."

It was compelling. I made it make sense to me. There's always room in a well-made purse for another heart, so I stuck mine in there, right in there, and I waited for Kseniya to figure out what she had to do.

When she called, because she'd solved that, I took the bus to the walking fields.

There's a bus from School to the fields west of Town for all the people — like Kseniya — who must go back and forth. Most of the kids on the bus were human, of course, since even the fields are mostly human now — but not all of them. There was a fox-eared boy, all elaborately dressed; a pair of ambiguously mixed-blood siblings; three or four Rider kids with their night-filled Outsider eyes; and all of them, or at least it *felt* like all of them, nudging one another, pointing at me now and then, whispering, and giggling.

I hated it.

I didn't like being so conspicuous. I knew that it was mostly just because I was new on the bus route. They had to know everyone else who took the trip by then, had to hate or like or feel indifferent but acquainted to practically the all of one another, and here I was, some weird Horizon girl, suddenly joining them on their bus.

I told myself that was all it was. I told myself that surely they couldn't just *look* at me and see that I'd had the heart taken out of me and smashed to ruin against some low chthonic door.

For the humans on the bus that might even have been true; but for the rest, I was mistaken.

The fox-eared boy eventually came over and sat down opposite me. He stared at me for a while, and then he rubbed beneath his nose.

"You're being taken advantage of," he said, "you know."

I looked at him.

"I don't know what they told you," he said, "And I don't know who you are; but they're not going to give you your name back. They're going to use you for magic, they're going to do something to you, and when it's done your name's just going to be a bit of jewellery, a little heirloom, for the taker to wear or pawn."

"Oh, leave her alone, Leelo!" someone called, and he glared at them.

"It's *Neil*," he confided. "It's the worst nickname ever. But I'll let you have it anyway, if you like, since you probably need *some* sort of name."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"I have a name," I told him.

"Oh really."

I chewed on my lip. Then I showed him. I took it out. I cradled it in my hands. I held it up to him, where he could see, and none of the others could.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, dear."

Then I put it back away.

His left ear — the fox one, I mean — wiggled, and he scratched at it a bit, and he said, "That's even worse, then. What *are* you doing, dear?"

One of the Rider girls had come forward too. The night in her eyes was full of purple clouds and silver rain. She looked me over, then stared at Neil.

"This guy bothering you?" she said.

I shook my head.

"We eat foxes," she said, "where I come from."

Neil smirked. "Promise?"

"Well," the Rider girl clarified, "our dogs do."

"Bitch," he said, without heat — I think he was going for the pun — but she slapped him. He skidded sideways by a seat, fell half-over, straightened, and shook his head like a wet dog might; she was stronger than she looked or he was lighter.

"Hey," I objected.

She growled. She sat down next to me.

"I don't hold with this stuff," she said. "I mean, the old wars. But I'm not going to let him take you off this bus and use your flesh for awful magic."

"And yet it's you she's scared of," Neil helpfully tossed in.

I shot him a look, but I didn't comment. For one thing, he was right.

"Well," she said, "I'm terrifying."

She gave him a toothy grin. Then she looked back to me. She put one hand on her hip. "I am named Leubovera," she said.

"I'm so sorry," I said automatically.

She laughed.

"It is all right," she said. "It is better than 'Leelo.' Or my cousin Ultrogotha."

I stared at her.

"She came to Horizon once," Leubovera said. "She was very prideful. I told her, use a nickname. Call me Vera. Name yourself . . . Ullie, I think, I ultimately suggested. She told me that she had a fine Outsider name and that I should not give in to cultural pressures. Then she swanned about the town introducing herself to many fine men. 'I am Ultrogotha,' she would say. 'Are you.' they would reply. It was beautiful. My father's name is Aregisel and my grandmother's name is Beretrude; we are sacrifices on the altar of making their names seem normal by comparison."

"Oh."

The world outside us was changing, bit by bit. I could see it. I could feel it. The colours shifted. They became richer and less luminescent as we passed out of the city and into the fields. The wet silver and black look of Horizon gave way to purple shadows and golden lands.

"I don't think," said Neil, "that I was planning to take her off this bus and use her flesh for awful magic."

"That is good," she said. "That averts our imminent conflict."

"But," said Neil, "I don't think that you should do that either."

"I should not," she agreed. "It would be morally incorrect and teacher would chide me. He would say, 'Leubovera! You have learned nothing!' Then he would send me to the Principal or to Lee Scathing and I should know regret."

"I am right here," I said.

"That is the problem," said Leubovera.

"I don't intend to go with either of you," I said, "to be rescued or to be used."

"She should stay on the bus," Leubovera said. "And return with it."

"That's not really safe either," Neil said.

"No," she sighed. "But I do not *want* to ride all the way back to Horizon, and then out home again. You. Girl. You should be innately obedient to a superior will. If I tell you to stay on this bus all the way back to Horizon, and then go home and not come back out to the fields until this name thing of yours resolves, can I trust you not to give in to Neil or other blandishments?"

"That is extremely high-handed," I told her.

"Well?"

"No," I said, after a moment. "That isn't what I'm going to do."

Neil laughed. Leubovera glared at him.

"Superior will," he said, and cackled.

She flushed.

"Very well," she said. "I will take you home with me, and this fox will come along to stand for your safety, and I will ask one of the elders what shall be done."

I stood up.

She stared at me. Everyone did, really, except for Neil, who was still laughing for a moment or two longer.

"I am going to do," I said, "what I have chosen."

Then I stomped to the very back of the bus, and I sat down, and I looked away from all of them, and I ignored the murmurs and the laughs.

"But she *can't*," said Leubovera; almost wailed it, really, and Neil said something to her, but what it was I do not know.

I got off the bus, stiffly, at the bus stop; and I stood waiting under a rain shelter for Kseniya to pick me up; and a spider lowered itself down on a strand of web and whispered to me, "They can't help you find your name, you know. They're only trying to use you."

"Who?" I asked it.

"Whoever," it said. "Whoever. Anyone but me."

And I laughed, and I held it on my finger, and then I blew it off, and it flew away in the wind; and Kseniya picked me up and took me to the sacrificial grounds.

Mikhael was already there. He was radiating anger, ferocity, and pain. He looked up at Kseniya. He looked over at me. He clenched his teeth.

"You said that she wasn't in there any longer," he told her.

"Yes."

He looked confused.

"It's all right," Kseniya said. "It's useful. A body that somebody has emptied, we can use that for the magic to bring the Gazebra back."

His eyes sharpened.

"Wait," he said.

"Wait?"

"Use, how?"

"We tear her — it . . ." She hesitated. She floundered for a moment. Then she jut her chin and continued. "We tear it open, use it as a gate. Flesh is a gate, you know, a gate between the world and void. We break open the gate and there it is, the Bleak Academy. They do not expect us. They don't dare attack us. It is the modern day, a bright new age of Town, and we are students at Principal Entropy's School. We stride in, ignoring protests and resistance. We take Giselle by the ear, thus."

She demonstrated on me.

"We say, 'do not make trouble, Gazebra.' She is compliant, being Giselle. She mumbles irritably but does not have the energy to object. Vigorously we then abscond."

Mikhael stared at me. Then he sagged. "No," he said, and shook his head.

"No?"

"I don't understand what's wrong with her," he said, "but human sacrifice is never the answer." She frowned at him.

"It's a really simple moral rule," Mikhael said.

"I don't understand," Kseniya said.

He pointed at a boulder. There were knives laid out upon it. He pointed at me. "If you find yourself cutting a person open for magical rituals," he said, "you stop."

"But I've explained this," Kseniya said.

"Yes," Mikhael answered equably. "And that's why I'm *not* saying that you are a crazy murder-bitch and I never want to see you again. But it is a very simple rule. If you find yourself cutting somebody open as part of a magical ritual, you stop."

She frowned at him.

"But you're a Christian," she said blankly.

He stared at her.

"Your religion only *works* because somebody hung your Christ up on a cross with iron nails in his hands —"

"Shut the hell up," he said.

She frowned at him. She looked like she was going to cry. She said, slowly, "But we need to get Giselle back. I cannot lose another. I have already lost one and we cannot lose another."

He grit his teeth. "We don't do this," he said.

"I want to," I said.

"Thank you, that's great, you shut up too," he said.

"No," I said. "I mean, it's important. I mean —"

"If you're in there," he said, "shut the hell up, because if you're in there this is fucking bloody sick, luh— buh— *sparky*. And if you're *not* in there, shut up because you're not in there and listening to a puppet talk like it's someone I cared about is *not helping*."

I swallowed words.

"I won't let you stop me," Kseniya said softly.

He watched her. He pointed his thumb at me and twitched his head. "You," he said. "Get out of here. I'll hate you if you don't. I will never forgive you. I will spend the rest of my life cursing not just Kseniya but you, too, every night before I go to bed. I will mutter 'that horrid, stupid, fat girl' every time I wash my hands, between the soapings, if you do not right now *go*."

I stepped back.

"No," said Kseniya.

"I will loathe you," he said. His teeth were clenched. "I will make sure Giselle and Vanessa loathe you. I will make Kseniya so miserable that she wishes that the two of you had never met."

I stepped back again. I couldn't not. I couldn't *breathe*.

"See?" he said, to Kseniya. "We can't do this. That stupid bitch is *in there somewhere* —"

Kseniya hit him then and Mikhael flew physically back. He landed hard. He wheezed. He did not move. Seconds passed. I stared. Then he twitched, and I ran forward, and Kseniya caught me by the collar and said softly, "He will live."

I glared at her.

"*He will live*," she told me. "We will do this."

"Will we," I said, my tone gone all flat.

"Yes," she said.

I thought that I had a say in this, that the way I had my heart in my purse would give me a say in this, but I was wrong. It is dangerous to have your heart outside your flesh. It is a vulnerable position. She had her hands on me and she did not even need the knives, but rather only words and will; she pulled me apart, strung me in every direction, seizing great gobbets of me and pulling or throwing them to either side, and I fell into the walking fields. She used me to rip the world open, to drag with me the *that which is* to either side and open the hollow place within me to *that which is not*, or possibly *what might have been*.

I thought that it would work, too.

I should have realized how stupid that was; how Randal wouldn't have *bothered*, if you could open up the world just by making some random heartless person into a gate.

Have you ever had one of those days — one of those headaches, one of those sleepless nights, one of those really bad stomach flus — when all you want is to *not be real*? When you feel dizzy enough and bad enough that it seems like you *could* pass out, that you *could* let go and just drift off into nothingness, only you don't? Your heart races and the world throbs and you keep waiting for your body and mind to just give out and fall down, only — you can't, they don't, the pain in your head holds you there, the churning in your stomach holds you there, even the desperate *wanting* to fall asleep keeps you awake, and everything is gray instead of true?

I waited for a change. I waited for that click, that shift, that change in reality. I waited to fall into a different mode of being and become a gate into the void. I waited for reality to fall open and into the Bleak Academy beyond.

It did not so.

I felt worse and worse, sicker and sicker, and I didn't even want to think about what I *looked* like as she pulled me apart, twisted me, and reshaped me, but the world held still and real. There was even this moment, this trembling moment, when *something* happened, when I was so sure it was going to be magic, it was going to be a gate, she was going to open me and open a path through me to Giselle, but all that happened was a gout of fire burst from me, caught on her hand, *clung*, and roiled across her skin until she beat it out.

She was crying. I was crying. Mikhael was whimpering, he'd curled up, his eyes were closed and he made soft noises. Night came out and the stars came out and shadows dusked the hills and blacked the trees.

Then he was there, all sleek and smug and hateful behind her, and she turned and twitched and screamed at him, her hands up to the elbows of them blood, and he said, "I can't watch this any more."

The first of the Riders, the lord of Death's dominion, Giselle's brother and her maker, I supposed, too, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy was he named.

He brushed his hair out of his eyes. He looked at us.

He said, lightly, "I can't help feeling like somehow this is my fault."

"Give her back," Kseniya said;

"She's *not yours*," he said, laughing, but Kseniya was already mid-leap, she leapt at him; and there were sticky bloody strands of . . . me, I suppose . . . trailing from her hands, and she was stretching them, drawing me up through them, forming them into a curved sword as she moved, forming *me* into a weapon against him, well, some of me, the bits that weren't just piled on the ground where she had left them there of me, and my edge was poisoned, dripped cold poison, green and black.

That was the moment that I stopped being human.

You don't recover from that. You don't start thinking of yourself as a human again after that, not after your best friend turns part of you into a sword while the rest of you is so much meat.

She swung me at him. She failed.

His hand was on her wrist. His foot was behind her ankle. His laughter had stopped. He dragged her around in a half-circle and he threw her to the ground and she hit hard. His grin was fading. She twitched once, convulsed, used me as leverage — flattened the sword of me into something like a bellows that shoved her back up from the ground and then she sharpened me again as she spun and struck.

His expression had had just enough time to finish going hard and cold.

He was an image he of light on water then. The blade divided he but it did not break.

His form was no longer precise.

He was *loud*, like a roar of thunder. He was *blinding*, like a magnesium fire. He stood between the world and void, and even to ordinary sight and ordinary senses then there were intimations in him of he the lord of Death's dominion he, of he his nature he, the fire and the darkness him; he became a wavering surface and behind that surface there it wreathed it a terrible movement and a terrible thing.

His passage stunned her. It took her from her senses. He became that which shattered her consciousness, answered the *I, I, I* of her thoughts with *No*, and it would have stripped me from being and awareness too were I not already locked in distant, dreamless sloth; as it was, it did the opposite thing to me.

Horror it clawed me out of my daze. I clutched at awake before it.

He held her by the neck.

He terrified me.

I'd woken up enough to be conscious of things, and able to have opinions about them, just in time for those opinions to be *fear*; to be sick with fear, to be overcome by fear, to be caught up in strumming fear of he the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy like a fly in a spider's web.

Kseniya struggled. It was mostly autonomic. Her eyes were not focused on him or any other thing.

The Headmaster said, softly and lucidly, "Make her dump out her purse."

It buzzed and lingered in my ears.

I think Kseniya did that then. I think it was she, and not the Headmaster, who made me do that; who flexed the muscle of my hands; she who picked up my purse for me, with my hands, me a puppet on her strings, and turned it out; she who dumped my heart and change and Kleenex and pads and pens and trash and gum and books and all the scattered things of me all out amongst the gobbets in the dark.

Kseniya saw it there; she saw the heart. She paled.

He put her down.

"I'd never really intended," he said, "to leave Giselle here so long. It was just, she didn't want to return to the endless void. You all were so bad for her. Really, quite terrible. Savages," he sighed.

She was down on her knees.

"Friends don't rip friends to pieces," he said. "Or let their foot swell up like that without even saying *anything*. It's just not done. But I suppose that it's reasonable, what with your growing up — in this environment."

The world is sealed away from the void. There are paths between them, but you can't just step from one to the other. If you could, then I figure, one of them, or both of them, would end.

Beyond the trees, maybe. Down the long road that goes through the walking fields. Past the Basalt Gates under Horizon. I don't know. There *are* ways — and then there's he.

He didn't walk any path. He was the Headmaster. He was God or the Devil, so the story goes, though nobody ever told me which.

He met my eyes.

The world that had had the image of him shuddered, once. He vibrated and bent. Then he was a black tree and a bit of shadow; then he was bent grass, self-deception, and our fear; then he was a *not he there*, then he was a *never having been he there*, but only the things that we'd mistaken for him rather. His "eyes," what we had taken for his eyes, were nothing but the night and stars through trees.

I pulled myself together, bit by bit.

The wind blew.

I clustered me around my heart. I heaved me up. I poured me risen into myself until I fit some map of girl.

"How could you?" Kseniya said, finally. "How could you not *tell* me?"

I made a terrible mistake. I shouldn't have. It was my own fault. I shouldn't have. I didn't, I oughtn't, I couldn't — I said something wicked. I said, "You were the one who *did* it."

And that was how I lost my friend.

She was throwing up. I was walking away. Mikhael was . . . I don't know. I guess he must have eventually been fine.

I shoved my heart in through my ear, because, you know, why not, and I took the bus to town.

... if frogs kidnapped my Mom, they would interrogate her for all kinds of useful information about my life. She would say, "I am a good scientist, and I do not do crazy things that are past the verge, but I like steam rather too well. I have black hair and I am taller than my daughter. I liked repairing and refurbishing things, playing *Sinistar*, and eating pot pies, which are my favourite food."

"That's amazing!" the frogs would say. "With that information we can construct a Mom-like robot to replace you."

"One time when the city took me to the asylum, and they hurt me, my daughter and her friend Kseniya came and found me. They could not rescue me but my daughter brought me a pen so I could write. I told her that I loved her."

"We need to know that kind of thing," the frogs would doubtlessly agree. ...

... "Let's write a random detailed record of what things would have been like if your heart had been ripped out by a boy named Randal," said the God of Remembering Things Even When the World Changes Under You.

"OK!" cheered the little hedgehog. Write, write, write! ...

... I have a secret shadow friend. Her name is Kseniya. She hates me now, but she liked me once.

I met my shadow friend when I was eleven years old and came to School for the first time. ...

... "What!" exclaimed the mad professor. "You live on Ishiki Prospekt *too*?"

"That's right! My house number is 317!" ...

... the lord of Death's dominion, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy was he named, he left his eyes behind when he left *us*. They're not with him. They're just part of the night now. Above the walking fields. How can he even see with them anyway? I mean, how could he ever could? They're not actual eyes. They're just things that other people *mistake* for eyes!

He might look down. He might think that my Mom had this blue sweater that she wore a lot that was kind of fuzzy. He might think that she had this way of just rolling with whatever happened, most of the time. He might think that she taught me to be a little crazy, but not *too* crazy, and that that was kind of cool of her. He might think, like I sometimes think: "Did she like me more before that Randal guy messed with that butterball's heart?"

What would it matter? Who actually cares?

He can't really even see. He probably can't even think or be. He just makes fun of people and he looks he down with his eyes that are bits of night. ...

... "If you forget everything," said the Prince to the Princess, "then remember this. You had people who cared about you, and therefore you are made good."

"How does that relate to the Elizaveta's pants thing?" the Princess asked.

"... they were probably pants of friendship," the Prince concluded. "For the love of others is such a power as can claim even *the greatest pair of pants in all the world*." ...

... I'm scared.

I didn't get Desmond back or anything. My world didn't fall back into place.

Kseniya helped me get my, you know, my parts, all back together, eventually, so that there wasn't a puddle of sword somewhere in the walking fields that was also me — but my world was still askew. My heart and my name and my soul were still askew, in me. Lee Scathing let me down below but he snarled every time he looked my way.

What I mean is, I didn't come out of it back to normal. I didn't get a *then I woke up*, any more than a happily ever after. I wasn't ever the same. Not then. I'm still not even even the same.

The person I'd been —

It was written in the book of my heart, that human person, and the words of it sent through a shredder — not just added to, but twisted; rescripted; bent and knotted and rewoven; mangled; ruined; recreating itself from ruins; no way to sort out the truth or the origins of them remaining.

I'd been twisted up and broken; I'd been made into a puppet, then a sword; and now I was just a lost and damaged soul.

It made me angry. The way that somehow this was my fault made me angry.

"What was I supposed to do?" I asked Vanessa. She still talked to me. I still talked to her, until I stopped. "What are you *supposed* to do about that, when somebody trashes your heart like that? Wasn't using the rest of me up to save Giselle a *good* plan? He took my name and he broke it and I don't know what else I could have been meant to *do*."

She pondered that. "What makes you think you were supposed to do something about it?"

"What?"

She looked at me sideways. Then she said, "Can I see it?"

I pulled my heart out.

That was how much I'd changed, by then. I didn't worry about it. I didn't even think about it. I just pulled it out and tossed it to her, and she held the ruins of the key of me in her long hands. Then she cupped those hands under it, and she held it up, and it began to burn with light, until I had to look away, it was blinding; until the flaws, where Randal had bent and broken it, where he'd damaged it, were fault-lines and horror-lines in the substance of the world. It burned until I couldn't see, until it was like the sun, and I thought she was going to do something with it, then, I thought that that was the answer, then, that the problem wasn't me or the Headmaster or Kseniya but just that I'd given it to the *wrong person* to try to use, but the light just faded away again, after a while, and she gave it back.

"A heart isn't for *doing things* about," she said. "It's just a thing to look at, you know, and a light in which to see."

If I'd listened to her —

If I'd listened to her —

She was the last person I could talk to, and after that, I couldn't even talk to her.

I hid from her, instead. I hid from me. I curled up into myself, I was alone, I hated myself, everyone hated me (I said), I was a freak, I was the only one, I was alone, I was broken, I was wrong, I wasn't even human any more. I could feel my broken heart rattling around inside me as I moved, I'd spit it out sometimes and laugh at it, play basketball with it with the faux hoop inside my door, scrape at my arms or face with its sharp edges, I *didn't want it*, I think that every moment waking and sleeping I held it away from me, let it heal but kept it separate in me, kept it from finding its proper seat.

I hated it like it hated me, and I was sure, absolutely certain, that I was the only one whose life was awful like that, the only one whose heart was broken like that, and honestly, in my own defence, in my *only* own defence, I'll tell you that I wasn't exactly thinking clearly at the time.

Eight months passed, and a little of another. I snubbed the Riders. I met the new girl. I took my classes and I was a little ball of rage. I went out on Hugh Rosewood's court one day, a day like any

other — a little pack of grade schoolers chatting on the bleachers; light leaking in from the high windows and glaring down at us from the halide bays; a dozen dozens of us, girls and boys my age in our sweat and uniforms and out there playing dodgeball on the court — and I did not feel appreciative of the shining of the sun. I felt it coming, I felt something coming, I turned around, I tried to turn, I think I felt it, but I didn't turn around fast enough, I was slow and clumsy and I was awkward; a dodgeball grew from nothing, came over the horizon of unanticipated things, loomed there, lurched there, seemed to rise, came hoving in, red and stippled and weighty it, and it struck me hard upon the head.

I flew!

But Who Shall Bell the Lord of Death's Dominion?

not so very long ago

For a moment I was free of it. For a moment I lost *all* of it, all the lies I'd told myself, the lies that existence told the void.

I rose, I floated, and I did not fall.

For a moment it just all . . . let go.

The world spun around me and it let me fly. All the ways that I held myself apart from myself surrendered; my heart rattled and sank finally and firmly into place; and I was born again, I was myself again, and I *saw*.

Not just the light of the gymnasium's high fixtures; not just the sun; not just the light of things that shone because they were themselves; but the light of *the* thing, the True Thing that shone *through* things, that was the light and origin of things — I *saw* it, and it was *good*.

You don't understand. Probably. I can't imagine that you understand it. How amazing it. Not just from words. How amazing *the* it, the it, the truth, *so* good; the *you*, *so* good; and beautiful. . . .

Bang.

The world fell back down around me like an iron cage.

Shoes squeaked around me on the wooden floor. Somebody pulled me to the side. One of the grade schoolers from the bleachers had come down to help me. That was a little weird. Also, she was an elf. That was even weirder. *It is weird and unusual and I should have really noticed before this that we even have an elf.*

I was totally disoriented and out of it.

Half the people out there on the court playing dodgeball didn't even have faces. They just had blank expanses of white with scribbly black lines on them. For some reason that surprised me.

The new girl took out five of the faceless kids with a single throw, it just went bouncing back and forth between their heads. She skidded backwards on the floor with the recoil, herself, knocked on the wood with one lowered hand as she caught the ball again, and straightened up, looking obscurely disappointed.

I felt this rising sense of confusion.

Was this really how high school dodgeball goes?

"Are you OK?" the elf asked.

I licked my lips. I tried to speak. The words came out wrong. They didn't sound like me at all.

"M not."

She frowned. She twisted her cap. She pulled down one of my lower eyelids and she stared at it through a magnifying glass. I shook her off.

"You're an elf," I informed her, in vague distress.

"Yes," she said.

I levered myself up. I stared at the game. "*They* don't have faces."

"It's *weird*, right?" she said, like she'd been *waiting* for someone else to notice that most of the people around the school don't have faces. "I thought it was weird. But every time I try to do a detailed study on one of them, they just turn human. Everything turns human here when you study it too much."

I frowned at her. I guess I was staring because she twitched, followed the natural line of thinking of her sentence, and threw her arm between her face and me.

"Not me," she squeaked. It was half of a correction and half of a protest. "Though. I mean, people have studied me. There was the medical examiner and everything."

Eventually she lowered her arm and peeked out at me.

"It doesn't work on me."

I looked away. I stared at our P.E. teacher for a while. *I could stare at things.* That had returned to me. I could . . . I could *wonder*.

"Or on him."

I could notice things again. I mean, I could tell when things were strange. I could tell *that* things were strange.

This couldn't be how the world was supposed to be! This couldn't be what was *normal* for a School!

"There is a truth beyond the lie that is this world," I said. I felt feverish with it. "There is a truth behind the lies of wood and bone, under the weave of light we see, a lump of true flesh under the bedding of sight and sounds that fakes reality. All that we see, all mortal *things*, they are a fabric cast over the truth so that when we move, we move incorrectly. When we speak, we speak incorrectly. When we make reference to things, we make reference to the wrong things, in the wrong order, in the wrong fashion. We are misled, we are blanketed in errors, we cannot see the truth, because the world was born as a lie against the void."

That did it. That solved it. That *explained* it. That let the pressure of the *wrongness* out and it all suddenly made *sense*.

It was sensible, logical, and sane.

Not just the True Thing, with that, but everything — explained! My life and all its confusions. Sanity burst in on me like a mad scientist's dreams, like one of those dizzying, fearful visions and temptations that Mom had described to me that could push even a good, sound-minded person past the verge, driving them beyond the limits of ordinary, sensible, and proper science — but this!

This wasn't mad and it wasn't science. It was *philosophy*. It was *experience*. It was *life*. It was *my* life, and it made *sense* now; it was sensible, where it *hadn't* been, logical, where it *hadn't* been, it was become sensible, and logical, and sane:

The world was born as a crime against the void.

Everything was so broken, my life had been so weird and broken — I *saw* it, I *understood* it, it all *made sense* now — because: *reality was the problem*.

"You were hit pretty hard by a dodgeball," the elf noted.

"I *saw* it," I said.

I gestured and my hand moved around but it wasn't a real gesture. I'd figured it out. It was a *lie* gesture, a gesture put together by interpolation, a clumsy movement that was *made* clumsy by the lie that said that I lived in world. It wasn't the perfect and beautiful gesture that there *should* have been; it was instead a distorted, made-up echo of the glorious True Thing that gave it to us to move.

I looked down at my knees.

Knees.

Geez!

Knees are an illusion. Knees are a falsehood. Knees are a crime against the motive forces of the leg. You grow up with knees. You grow up with knees and a School run by God or oh maybe the Devil that has foxes and Jotun and Riders in attendance and you think, oh, this is all totally normal. This School where half the kids are faceless ghosts, you don't even think to *mention* that part when you're telling people about it, not for half the story of it, it's all normal. Like the knees.

Knees, and ogres teaching classes, and elves hanging out at the edge of the dodgeball court, and the graininess of a person's pores —

Pores.

It's all an illusion. It's all just a terrible error. It's all just *fake*.

"Oh, God," I said. I touched my face in sudden horrible shock.

I had a *nose*.

Look, maybe this happens to everyone when their name and soul gets broken and then finally there's a click and it all falls into place, maybe *everyone* gets a nose, or notices a nose anyway, noses up, you know, when that happens, maybe it is just a natural part of the healing process, but the thing is, I had a nose, I had this knobbly thing on my face with like cartilage and holes in it and it

made no sense except that someone had been playing fast and loose with the rules of things and made the world as a crime against the void.

I had a school uniform. Why are there school uniforms?

I was breathing. *Thanks, Giselle.* (That was sarcastic.) I was *breathing*, every breath was puffing out the gross invisible grayish flesh of my human lungs with air, then letting it out again, while blood ran every which way and that within my veins.

"It's all a *lie*," I said.

The new girl was watching us. I could feel it. She absent-mindedly caught the dodgeball as it came her way again, spun it on a finger, waited. She flinched when I met her eyes and threw the ball off to her left and gave her attention back to the game.

"It's not like that," the elf assured me.

"I have to get hit by the dodgeball again," I said.

I pulled myself to my feet.

"I have to — *everyone* has to get hit by the dodgeball again," I said.

It made sense. It really did make sense. It was practical, sensible, and kind.

Everyone gets hit by the dodgeball. Everyone sees the truth. They can't keep the world going if *everyone* sees the truth. It's like in *Alice's Restaurant* —

One person sees the truth: they're a freak. Two: they're bodhisattvas! But fifty? One hundred? You get one hundred students at a School seeing past the lie of flesh and bone and, dang. That's a movement!

But it was more than that.

See, the thing is, the idea that there was someone out there who *didn't* see it, who couldn't see it, who'd never seen it —

It hurt.

It was like watching your best friend writhing on a cross. It was like seeing puppies starving. It was like strolling through the intensive care ward and licking up the pus.

It was bad enough that the world was still closing in around me, that I was having trouble really feeling it, now, seeing it, still, finding it in me, with my eyes, the truth I'd seen; bad enough that I was *losing* the sight of the True Thing, the taste, the tang, the memory of it; but that there were people all around me who'd *never* seen it, who'd never felt it, who could live their whole life inside the lie that is reality and never know how *awful* was the world —

No.

Oh, no. *God* no.

Nobody should have to live that way. Nobody should have to endure without the truth.

It should —

... should run in the bones of us. Do you understand? It's that important. It should live in us. It should dwell in us. It should live *through* us. It should make us gold, the truth, the underlying thing, the void, it should purify us, it should refine us, it should make us who are noise into the signal. It was so *close*, so very close, so marvellous, I could touch it, I could taste it, I could feel it, it was fading from me, it was already fading (aw!) but it was *there*, ready to perfect us, ready to *free* us, only we were sheltered from it by our mistakes, our lies, our *lives*...

I moved my lip over my teeth. I bit it, my flesh-lip, and I felt the little message-less pattern of indentations and bumps shifting beneath the skin.

I *saw*. I *understood*.

The new girl was burning with truth. The elf as well. And me.

It was perfect. It was clean. It was kind. I knew what I had to do.

Dodgeballs weren't gonna be enough. That was ridiculous. People don't always see the True Thing when they're hit by dodgeballs. That was a good plan, but it wasn't *reliable*.

"*I've got to kill everyone*," I said, with rising joy, and I tottered forward to bring an end to the lie which is the world, and it was almost in reach, I think, something rose in me, struggled, and it would have flown; I don't know how but I would have *done*; but the dodgeball struck me for a second time, instead, and I caromed into the perfect night.

I dreamed. I dreamed. I —

"I *am* sorry about that," said the new girl.

I woke.

"You were — how shall I put it? Going gun-mad. So I gave you a little rest."

I licked my lips. I opened my eyes. I looked at her.

"Interesting," she said.

"Eh?"

"Your eyes are gone," she said. I tried to freak out but I wasn't awake enough. I tried to flail my arms but they weren't really responding. My self-awareness sickened but I couldn't even get my heart to race. I managed a bit of a blink. "There's just night and stars," she said. "May I?"

She was reaching out a finger. She was going to *poke me in the eye*. I wiggled my head vigorously in negation. She sighed.

"It's just an interesting perceptual effect," she said. "I'd like to know if it's an optical illusion or some sort of portal, and whether they're a flat plane or a rounded object."

"Some things," I said hopefully, "should be a mystery."

"Ah," she said.

She sighed. She stood up. She turned away from me and went to the window. "Not many people," she said, "notice that things are not as they should be. When I tell my parents that a Principal's hands should not be always dripping with blood, they say, 'You are so imaginative, Natashenka!' Or 'it is natural to be confused when you are in a strange place.' When I tell them that we could not possibly have taken a boat from Russia to an entirely inland lake, they laugh, and remind me that my father is a seaman and I am a teenaged girl. When I point out the *rats* or the *ogres* —"

She sighed.

I swallowed. I said, "You have been lied to."

"Yes," she agreed.

"You think that you're a Russian," I told her.

". . . Yes?"

It was the wrong place to start. She'd probably react badly if I explained that nobody *really* comes from Russia, not any more than you'd come from Atlantis, Greece, or Shangri-La. It'd be like walking up to Mrs. Claus and explaining that her husband is just mythology.

You shouldn't just flatly deny a person's truths.

"When I was struck," I said. I tried starting there instead. *When I was struck*. "I saw that there is a True Thing, and that it loves us. I realized that I'd been ignoring it. All my life. I'd been constructing a world on top of it, a world of names and words out of the evidence of my senses. My senses were always lying! But I built a world out of them anyway. And more than that:

"I realized that I was always making assumptions about the world, so much faster than I could ever test them. I kept coming up with ideas to explain the world, bubbles, like . . . noses, and eyes, and knees; language, and loudness, and the silence. I came up with these things and I just *accepted* them, *saw* them, *sank into believing in them*, and so I allowed myself to be deceived.

"*We* are the liars, Russia. The world is all us in the endless darkness of the truth scalding our pudgy little eyes with the lie of light."

"Hnk," the new girl said.

It wasn't the sound I was hoping for. It was a kind of dismissive snort. It was like neither "bubbles" or "Russia" satisfied her as nicknames. Light slipped through the curtains and made her gradient and silhouette.

"Profound skepticism about reality," she said, ". . . is a dead-end thought. It is not an insight but an antinsight. Can you say that? A countrinsight? I do not know the word. It is not a thing but an un-thing. I disapprove."

"Geez," I said.

She glanced back at me. She didn't stop the glance, and eventually it turned into a look. She was waiting for an answer, or a counterpoint.

After a while, I said, "Best I've got is 'your face.'"

She laughed and looked away.

It was dizzying. I was strong again. I was sane again. I could have *friends* again. I had said something mildly amusing to someone, and they had laughed!

I suppressed a sudden, wild surge of joy.

"I do think," she said, a bit later, "that we are being lied to."

"Yes," I said, but she cut me off.

"*Not* in the existence of things," she said. "*Not* about noses, knees, and eyes, language, loudness, and the silence. I think that either: the world has always been crazier, more magical, and less reliable than I could have imagined. Or, we are in an artificial environment — a Potemkin village. *That* kind of lied to."

I sighed.

"It's not worth arguing about," I said. "I have a headache."

I didn't actually have a headache. I was just really out of it and she tired me and my head hurt and there was a grinding weight all around my temples. She seemed unaware of my deceit.

"Please," she said quietly.

"Hm?"

"There is hardly anybody," she said, "who sees it. Who sees any of it. Who will even believe me that there *is* a lie. There is de Montreal. He is an ass. There is an underaged elf. And there is you."

She gave me a pained smile.

"Please," she said; and what I heard was: *I am alone*.

". . . I'm Jasmine," I said.

She startled. She frowned. Then she concealed any further expression.

"Jasmine Apocynum," I finished.

"Natalia."

We clasped hands.

I looked at the ceiling. I tried to look beyond it, but the lie of "Recuperatoria have ceilings" was a strong one, as was "ceilings are opaque." Somewhere, I think, a star fell from the sky.

"I really am tired," I said. "I really do have a headache. I wasn't just saying that to get rid of you."

"I know," she said.

The ventilation in the room was very loud, and the sun was very bright, and the cot beneath me rough and tangible and blue.

Randal caught up with us on the road to my mother's house. He was red-haired and wide-faced and his eyes were —

Ah.

"You," I said. I snapped my fingers. I pointed at him.

He had Rider eyes, you see, the eyes of the Outside, round viewports into night and falling stars. His whole family did.

(Not counting Skaed.)

"Me," that ginger conceded.

Natalia looked between us. "This is a dramatic moment," she said.

I think it was observational humour. I do not believe she actually recognized any drama in it. She may also have been attempting to go with the flow.

"You took my eyes," I said.

"Yes," he said. *This*, on the other hand, was definitely making fun of me. "I kissed you and stole your heart and half a year later your eyes fell out. Naturally I used my optical magnet to recover them. However, I will keep them somewhere special, so you need not fear for their safety."

I glared at him. I think.

I had actually mostly been ignoring Natalia's claim that my eyes had gone all nightish until Randal had shown up. Could I still glare at people? What if when I gave people a sly look, or a sardonic look, or a grim hard stare, all they saw was blank night and falling stars?

"Seriously," he said, "that's not what actually happened. Are you OK?"

"I am fine," I said. I hesitated. "You're talking to me again."

"I didn't want to make trouble," he said.

I frowned at him.

It suddenly occurred to me that he didn't *matter*; that I had better things to do, like seeing to the end of all lies and all deceptions, like bringing down the curtain on earth and sky and sun and moon and stars, than worrying about a boy who dated me and smashed my soul against the Basalt Gates and tossed it back to me and then never really talked to me again.

So I shrugged. I turned away. I started walking back towards my home.

He moved to grab my arm, I think. Natalia was faster. She was fast enough to startle me, to make me stumble to the side just from *seeing* her move, and she caught his hand with a slightly bent index finger in his palm and stopped him.

It occurred to me that she was absurdly strong. It occurred to me that she must *know* that she is absurdly strong; I wouldn't have wanted to fight a *three-year-old* with the point of my finger, like that, lest they accidentally bend it back and snap it bone from bone.

It occurred to Randal too, I think, possibly — and I am not being sympathetic to him here — because I think he tried to push.

"Is there a problem?" Natalia asked.

"Russia isn't a real place," I said.

She blinked at me.

In retrospect I'm ashamed of this. In retrospect I think that there is a demon in all of us that says, *do not defend me. Do not try to save me. You will make it worse.* I think that I hurt Natalia because she was trying to help me, and not because I was frightened of her strength.

"There is no KGB," I said. "They do not make alcohol out of potatoes. There are no chicken-legged huts and giant bears and drowning-spirits in the lakes. Behind the iron curtain there are only dreams and make-believe."

She bent her arm and held her right hand against her chest. She took a few steps back.

"I see," she said.

"You have to have known it wasn't real," I said, helplessly.

She was quiet.

"I just wanted to know what happened, actually," Randal said. He looked down me and up me. "There aren't many of us. I didn't know you were one of us. I mean, you could have *said*. . . . You're hurt, though, aren't you? Why don't I walk you home?"

I frowned at him. I frowned at his eyes. I tried to think.

"Do you —" I asked him. I looked for words. "Did you see it too?"

"See what?"

"Your eyes," I said vaguely. I gestured.

". . . in the mirror?" he guessed.

I wanted to ask if he'd seen the True Thing too, if it had taken his eyes, if that was the *reason* for Rider eyes, but I couldn't phrase the question. I couldn't describe it, the True Thing, I couldn't point to it, I couldn't put words or thoughts to it, I had even forgotten that he had once mentioned it. It was just this *thing* that I had seen, underneath the world, this truth, that had made everything else I knew a lie.

Maybe I'd had love at first sight, only it missed, because I wasn't looking at anybody, so it hit the True Thing beyond all Things instead —

He didn't have the faintest idea what I was talking about. He hadn't seen it. It wasn't the explanation behind his eyes at all!

"It's a coincidence," I said.

"You're confused," *he* said. Wait, *had* he seen it? ". . . It's probably the way people kept hitting you on the head with dodgeballs."

"I did not hurt her," Natalia protested.

"You don't get the eyes by seeing something," Randal said, "and you don't get black hair by being trapped in a dark place for seven days, and you don't grow a nose by being in the presence of too many toadstools in your childhood. It's a genetic trait. Usually, I mean. Seriously, let me walk you home. I want to talk to your family. If you're a changeling Rider it's not safe and if *they're* changelings they really should come home to a collective."

It had been eight months. Nine. A year. Practically a year. Practically two years. That's basically a decade. Half my life. We'd been kids. I could forgive him. I should forgive him. I was strong again. I was sane again. I could have friends again. He probably didn't even know how much damage he had done to me. He'd just kissed me and broken me and hadn't realized that it mattered. I could forgive him. I should forgive him. *Sensible, logical, and sane.*

He'd even apologized!

He was real, too, I mean, a little bit, and I didn't have to believe in Russians or in elves to hang out with him, just in the Riders and the Bleak Academy, so I told him, "Sure. Come on."

We were a long way on before Natalia rejoined us. She fell in about ten feet behind us. Her walk was stiff and her face was set and lonely.

I will tell you the story of a poison.

Now Death he walked in the darkness and Death he knew many things, and the price of that knowing was discontentment, wounding, suffering in his heart. Then did he speak the poison, that cursed god, the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy was he named, said he: "I, I, I to me, and I, myself."

These words fell from his lips like dark water, like beads of green-black poison, lifeless jewels, forbidden to host their fire by the lightlessness wherein he dwelt.

They fell onto the base of the void. They curdled there. They richened night's soil and made it bloom. Then there was a flower growing in the darkness, blue and violet in the darkness, shining with the light of its own existence like a thing in a dream of darkness, known and known in colour but imperceptible to the eyes.

There grew a flower, leaning, burdened with the dew that clung to it, and dripped from it, and ran through the grasses of the darkness to the trickling water of a pond.

There Death returned and in that pond he saw reflections; saw the face of Death, knew it, wept; loathed nothing so much as the flower, recoiled from it, hated it, felt his stomach roil to see it, and yet he tasted it, bellied himself up to it and licked it, he, suckled he on the dew of it, and chewed its leaves.

He walked in the darkness, did he Death, and heard the ringing of its bells, like metal shaking and not a plant, clamouring in the darkness, singing around him always, always in his ears.

He cried.

His stomach heaved. He fell over on the darkness. He vomited it out, a riot of colour where no colour was, a riot of *something* where no something was, to spill a glorious medley of shape and substance onto the hungry nothing of the void.

Yet it clung to him. It caked his throat. It lived in his stomach, it indwelt him, it was of him, that poison, the poison of those words.

There was nothing else for it. Not then.

He reached inside him he. He reached deep inside him, scratched at it, tried to rip it out, the thing that grew inside him, he pulled him outside from inwards, ripped he open trying, turned him inside out, and bloodied, rough, and fallen innards on the ground there were, all wastefully upon the ground there were, the inner part of him and what was left of what had been the out of him all at the center of the mass.

There in that rich and fertile pile did the flowers grow, there in that darkness where had been only darkness. There in that absence where had been only absence went the sweet scent of the flowers all about, and the scent of the that which had been inside.

Then did they devour him, consumed him they, ate him up, those words, "I, I, I to me, and I, myself."

His bones remained to be the key that is the world; some say.

Or they were only the lattice on which the flowers grew; their trellis; there on those bones the flowers grew up, twined up, faded, fell down, devoured them his bones, and rotted they away; and after they were gone, Death he picked him up and he walked off, and only the lingering smell of flowers there remembered; and as for the world, it came later, and in other ways.

... The Headmaster — if you've seen him, he doesn't seem much like a man who was turned all inside out, and died, and left as fodder for the flowers then; but then again, you can't ever really know with Death. These things are always happening, you know, they're always having happened happening, will have been happening happening, not yet having happened happening, sideways and backwards and all around the edges of a soul's life happening, illumination to his pages happening, and the flowers they still grow of him even now in Bluebell Park —

In Bluebell Park, which has claimed me; which wanders through the streets of Town, now here, now there, hunting, devouring, a thing not of man or God but other; Bluebell Park, where the music

played; where it surrounded us as we approached it, I know not whence it came, from some house, I guess, some forsaken sewer band, some car, though cars were rare in Town —

It filled the air as we came to it, the sound of Bluebell Park. It made the earth and welkin loud with it. The sky seemed to be shouting. The beat was both terrible and deep and made me small.

I am made Jasmine Apocynum, I say, and I shall rule you. I am Jasmine Apocynum and I shall be Queen of our mortal world before I shatter it, before I break it, before I devour it, I shall ascend and all power and all beauty shall be in my hands before I fray and tear and break the lies that are the world, before I save you from the ruin that is your lives, before I am as God, a name, devourer I, apocalypse; but I am small to Bluebell Park, even as was Death.

The world rang loud and everywhere was music as we went.

I touched the gates of Bluebell Park.

They opened wide.

Wind blew through grass and flowers then. It kissed me, brushed against my lips, the moving air; the light; the sound; the whole of Bluebell Park, and took me from myself.

It struck me.

It rang me. It wrung me out. I rose, I widened, I spread out, I opened into something more than just the flesh and soul of me that walked along. I fell into the whole of the Park, it was me, it entangled with me, flesh of its flesh, heart of its heart, and left me not only any longer anything myself.

Listen.

It welcomed me. It waited for me. It pled with me, and I curdled inside my soul.

It writhed around me, reconfigured about me, cast forth light and sound around me as we walked we in.

There were no boundaries to me then; I lost them. They slipped away as we walked. I drown't in the Park, I felt apart in it. Swallowed, I, and welcoming it, and in all of helplessness, in me, as the world around me went awry.

And

The forest in the Park was full of statuary gods, great and tall and awful shapes they were, frozen, in abeyance, held in stone. Lit by candle light of candles, they were vast gods rumbling, small gods ringing, the music's sound became their speaking, preaching to one another of all ungodly things.

Listen and Randal touched my arm and a bloom of bluebells burst there through it, cast themselves and flung their hair awry all out of season in the woods, spread they there a lavender-blue carpet of themselves and open to the sky and hanging down. They were the shiver of his touch.

I stepped there, there, there, and there, along the path.

There was Natalia. You can see her. You can see her there. She was frightened. She watched her shadow, it was loose from her, it had slipped from her, it hid from her back behind the Park's black gates. She turned her head this way and that, her hair flung flinging with each motion, her breath faster now, her eyes wide/her pupils small with fear. Then she screamed — no, not screamed, there was no sound, her mouth opened in a scream, only a trill of the music, she croaked, perhaps, ducked, and as she ducked, after she ducked, belatedly it was, a thing flew at her, a thing, I do not know, it had no being, it had no specificity, it was only the thing that flew and struck at her, moved at her like a striking snake, and she grasped at it, she tried to seize it, but it was gone.

I stumbled.

Randal caught me. I stumbled and Randal caught me. The wind blew loudly in Bluebell Park —

Every statue turned to stare.

I mumbled something. I don't know what I said. I don't think that it made sense. I think I spilled out words of silver and violet and blue and they went about all ringing in the coldness of the sky.

He whispered something in my hearing. It tickled me, licked across me, rubbed in its furry softness against the surface of my ears. I did not trust him. I feared him, but then I did not fear him, because I saw that it was not he but Bluebell Park that spoke.

He kissed me, it was not he, but Bluebell Park.

He moved the levers of my flesh, I could not find them, and then I drew it out, I pulled it out, I caught hold of the hooks of it and brought it forth —

No metal key.

No small and metal key, not here; I understood it, the Park was no boy, nor no Giselle, to reach in and take, but it demanded.

I saw voidwards. The world went crisp and clear and lit by the light of *things themselves*. The hooks of the True Thing they, they were, its echoes, its extensions, the flanges of it, the claws and tendrils, they were of a piece, they were a piece of the True Thing thrust out as many things into the being world.

Between them the things — a vast and warm and hollow space — some dusty echoing chambers; and before me, as if Bluebell Park were a mirror to that the other sight, in that the other space, I saw myself.

Through that reflection I caught out my heart.

The kiss was still tingling on my lips, and I was still around and through it, and in every direction I was reflected I. Looked and I saw myself. Saw my chest, saw my heart moving in it: some brass cephalopod all writhing; into that reflection and for that heart my hand went, two fingers hooked and two fingers straight, caught it as it writhed and struggled, and I drew it forth.

It sank its spines into my thumb and made me bleed.

I pulled it forth and it roared. It thrashed. It came out of me as something larger than the me myself, it was leviathan and behemoth there, it dug up furrows in the earth as it lashed its limbs, it was a great and furious and many-limbed beast of metal, crab-faced, tentacled, and clawed; it had drunk up the lore of steam and pistons as I had sat at my mother's knee, it had borrowed it from my dreams and nightmares, and its headlights burned like great eyes gleaming and it vented steam and fire through the hatches of it, it roared and dwarfed me and it was vast above me, this great creature, and yet it was also smaller than a hedge-pig in my hands.

Light washed across it. Light chased itself along its lines. It shone.

It sunk its forward tendrils it into the earth; it snapped they off; and where they'd sunk there grew up metal trees. It arched its back, it shook and lifted up its head and roared, and where it raised its head grew attics. It scraped barbed hooks along the ground to etch out walkways. Its fluttering spine settled into roofing tiles. It puffed out its metal lips to make a porch.

There was a long and hideous venting, spraying, shuddering, and settling. I heard pipes bursting somewhere, blood and water exploding out and going dry. My heart shuddered in my hand. Then everywhere was chrome and brass and wooden flinders and I hid my face behind the heart of me, and from the heart of me, in Bluebell Park.

A scale of the heart, it shed it, it fell tumbling through the air. I caught the reflection of Randal in it, saw him he, and saw in him the little hook that rose from him to make his heart convenient to my flesh. I almost grabbed it then, it was so close to me, and pulled it out; but I did not.

The heart of me, me mine —

I kissed it.

I made the smaller heart that was in my hand into a crown. I set it on my head. Then I squint-frowned up at it. *Too easily lost*, I thought, and made it a stud-piercing for my tongue instead; and all the while the greater house was settling, shaping, changing, and becoming more itself.

Too easily lost, again.

Reluctantly, I swallowed it. I curled my heart-stud to my throat and I loosed it and I gulped it down. It was cold and metal in its descending; and I let it in me, let it swim slippery in me as a metal fish, but did not absorb it; and I stood there with my heart inside me in the shadow of the mansion that was its twin.

I held it in me and I ruled it.

I whispered to my heart and to my flesh: *change, change, be changing*.

My heart unfolded in me, grew flowers, flames.

Change, change, I said to my flesh, *be changing*.

For the first time of my own will and whispering it did so; it was slovenly, sluggish, unwilling to move, but it did so. A hair on the back of my hand became a fire and puffed it out. A fingertip split into a flower's bud. The world sang with the *thing that moves* in me and I would have done so much more with it; I saw it and knew it and I would have made myself so much more with it: a wind, a spout, a sun, a sky, a song, a dragon, snake, or swan, *cintamani*, but I felt something; I fell under a shadow; I was distracted by a thing of mine unravelling.

I looked up and over, and the statues did the same.

A racing tentacle-hook of soul slipped through the ground, cut through it like a writhing worm, eddied out of Bluebell Park and towards my mother's house, tried to catch it — that house, tried to catch it, it and she. It failed.

I was too late.

My mother's house was already dissolving; I felt it deep in the belly of me as it gave. I caught at it, my heart barbed and bristled, the *animus* that held my heart it caught at it my mother's home, but failed; I caught only scraps and shadows of the thing. My home, my real home, my first history, it was already falling apart, dissolving, shattering, broken, cut: and into the book of might-have-beens.

And yet I was, I remained, endured, and there we were —

There we stood before the vast shadow of it, the vast and grieving reflection of me, the mirror and the afterimage of my heart; or the heart of my self-created reflection, maybe, or the Park's heart itself, cast up in the image of my own, with its blunt bits and its pointy bits and its tendrils all a-settling, all folding down to wings and patios and suchlike things, and with its flourishes of brass and shiny chrome and its gardens, and its walls become as wood and the metal flowers of it and their flourishing; and Mom —

And Mom —

Mom, Dad, Desmond, all the rest —

They were neither there, nor'd ever been.

The world crashed down to sane.

"Oh, God," said Natalia.

The sprawling keep still stood there, though I could feel my heart inside me: a house in my image; my heart's reflection. It seemed somehow less impressive now: as I recognized myself as myself and not as Bluebell Park, my house became more ordinary, lower-class, and less imposing.

The wood of its front hall was flinders and broken. Pictures had fallen or hung crooked on their hangers. White dust covered everything and random bits of furniture and broken wall were covered over in plastic. Brass and copper pipes were exposed, with their knobs like cheery pinwheels. They looked like they *should* be spraying water out from cracks and even shearing but they did not. They were desert-dry.

The metal facing looked somewhat less impressive than it had. I stood in front of it all and I licked my lips.

"They're gone," I said. I shook my head. "My family's gone. It's empty."

At least I was not alone. Not for this. I had Natalia and Randal as my witnesses and my company. Except:

"I have erred," Natalia said.

"What?"

She looked away from me. She was trembling. "This is not a house. You are not a person. This is a lair, Jasmine Apocynum, and you are a danger to me and mine."

I wondered when in that whole process I'd stopped paying attention to her reactions. I felt a dim buzz of inhospitableness and embarrassment, like a little bug of emotions whining about my face.

I bit my lip and waved it off.

(Metaphorically.)

"I am going to go to where I believe your actual house to be," Natalia said. "The house of the girl who was self-obsessed, self-loathing, irritatingly unaware of how strange everything around us is, but was *not* a monster living in a lair. Because I am fair and because there is a chance that I am mistaken in some particular and there is some real person still labouring inside you, I will give you a short time to decide to accompany me. No. I will give you a short time to decide *not* to accompany me. You will go into that house without me, or, in ten seconds, I will drag you away from it and pray it does not follow us and eat whatever soul you have remaining."

"That's ridiculous," I said. *Seriously? You have to do this right this second?* "I'm totally a person. I just got *back* to being a person. After an uh sabbatical."

"Ten," she said. "Nine. Oh, hell, I'm not counting. Scurry back to your web, spider Apocynum, or take my hand and we will run."

She held out her hand.

"It's just a house," I said. I looked between her and Randal in a panic. "It's not even a very good house. It's basically just my heart, right? Those two things are *not* related. *Mom!*" I yelled in through the door.

She was going to take me away from it.

It was dizzying. She had the power. She was strong. I was strong again, I was sane again, I could have friends again, but there's no one I'd ever *seen*, not even *Kseniya*, who was stronger than this Natalia Koutolika from her fabled and wintry land.

And the house was something magical —

Something weird and magical, and *mine*; and she was going to rip me away from it, like Randal had ripped out my *heart*.

I wavered.

Randal reached for my arm. I shook him off. Then with a horrified noise, like I couldn't believe what I was doing myself, like I was watching myself get into a car wreck or other atrocity, I stepped backwards through the door into the mansion of my heart. As quickly as that Natalia was gone, a

flurry of steps, kicking off across the statuary and the gravestones, like nobody human should have ever been able to do.

And I was home, and I stared out dully, and Randal followed me inside, and she was right; it was a lair.

I looked at the wall and I rested my fingers on it and I could feel the distant touch of that hand echoing in me, mirroring through the heart that was in me, and I twitched part of the house and it shifted, just a little, *moved*, and I looked at Randal and I wondered if he could even escape from there if I didn't want him to, wondered if I'd become suddenly the sort of thing that ate people, if I was such now as to lure boys to my web, my parlour, my lair in Bluebell Park, o spider Apocynum, and *eat them* —

. . . I didn't want to eat Randal. He probably had all sorts of weird boy diseases.

Instead I just poked at one of the dry pipes, rustled the plastic, fixed a picture — cf. the cover of this book, for reference — and I looked at him with hollow eyes.

(Metaphorically.)

And sighed.

He reached out his arm around my shoulder. By the time I'd decided that I did not actually want him to do that it had already been there for five or six seconds and he was squeezing me and then pulling away.

"So we're back on again?" I said, resignedly.

"What?"

"Is it the eyes?" I said. "The tragedy? Did a spell suddenly break? Because I was pretty sure you'd decided that the only reason to date me was so you could smash my heart over and over again into a pair of creepy gates underneath the School."

"It was romantic," he said suavely.

"Oh. My. *God*," I said.

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "Fine," he said. "It's — I don't know. It sucked. I'm sorry. I *told* you I was sorry. I said that."

Then, because he was the dorkiest, most self-centered person I have ever met, at least, you know, right that second he was, he added, "I thought you'd be *happy* that I was hanging out with you again."

This is what comes of catching your ex-boyfriend's freaky eye condition. They get all clingy.

I walked to where a set of stairs down to the basement weren't. I frowned at them. There wasn't a Mom down below me, playing *Sinistar* or doing laundry. There weren't a couple shelves down there of my favourite books.

"Yes," I said, to Randal. "Thrilled."

It wasn't a home. My home was gone.

It was a lair.

I scratched at the wall. I peeled a bit of tape. I promised myself that I wouldn't cry in front of Randal and I stared into the patterns on the wall until they possessed me, wove out and in through me, shifted in front of my eyes, and suddenly I understood them.

I understood *me*.

The truth under the surface of me flowed through and filled me and it lifted me up and there was a roaring thunder in my head. It was like anger, I guess, or love, or a kiss, only this was something different.

This was something to *see*, and I understood.

That was what the miracle of Bluebell Park that day bought for me. That was what the magic got for me: not a war machine, though someday I hope to use it for that; not a trap nor a lair, neither, not exactly; certainly not, though it is, a convenient way to grow a garden of metal flowers. It was as Vanessa had said eight months before.

Hearts are for looking at.

I looked at my house, I dwelt in the walls and plumbing of it, and I understood a secret.

"You made a terrible mistake," I said to Randal.

He looked suddenly nervous. That was right and proper, I suppose.

"It's not the heart that opens locks," I said. "You can't *change* what a heart is."

Yes.

I stood in my heart that had become a mansion, with my heart that had been a crown and a piercing now a swallowed and chromed brass fish swimming inside me, and I looked at he who had twisted and broken my heart previously, changing it forever, and I said that. That you can't *change* what a heart is. Leave me alone. I was having an epiphany.

"It's the flesh."

He was confused, I think. His eyes widened, but they were still so hard to read!

"There is a set of Basalt Gates beneath Horizon's School," I said, "my dear, to which *anyone* can be the key."

He was frozen. He was still. He did not understand.

"Would you like me to open them?" I said.

His mouth was open, just a bit. I touched his face.

"You don't know how," he said.

I grinned at him.

"Please," he said. "Please, if you know. If you can."

The longing in him was like the first step in a dance, and this the next: my hand went into him, caught the hook of him, pulled out the key, and I used the flesh of him in magic. The life in him, the being in him, the truth in him arched upwards. It lifted, rose, struggled towards fruition, and I pulled it out of him, drew it from him, reshaped him, brought him to this: apotheosis.

His back bent. He howled. He stretched out. Darkness flooded through him and he was living night, a viscous ooze of dark and need and yearning for the ending of the world; I exalted him, I lifted him up, I made him such as could fulfil his dreams, the which was naturally logical, sane, and kind.

Then I fell over asleep in the puddle of him, which was probably less so, and kind of gross to boot, but what can I say? That had taken almost as much out of me as it had from him.

Randal was a Rider kid.

His Mom had been a human. Some Rider had turned her as a child. He'd caught her and he'd forced his own madness onto her and her eyes had gone all night and falling stars. She'd learned to control it, eventually, to swallow it, to make it normal, to fake humanity until her eyes grew whites. She wasn't fast enough. It took her years of practice to learn the trick of it, by which time her family and her community had already forced her out.

Humans —

I keep forgetting, because I'm a Horizon girl. I grew up where the prejudices are pretty light. In the walking fields, where human existence is *tentative*, the fears are clandestine but they run more deep.

Humans had been pretty bad to her once she'd turned. They'd been petty and they'd been cruel. She ran away, when she could, and she went wicked. She made her own life in the wildlands by theft. One day she met the punishment of the wild, that the forest gives to thieves: a Rider caught her among the trees, *hunted* her, went to kill her, and fear struck the white scales from her eyes. She fell back into being Rider, she showed him the night of her and in her, and he crowed with joy at the sight of her and within her; they fell in love.

They fell in love. They married. They lived in a collective over in the walking fields. They had three children, one born alive and one born dead, and Randal, born a Rider, caught in between.

Morning spun up into the sky and advanced towards noon. I woke blearily and spit out a bit of Randal that had wandered into my mouth during the night. It was fuzzy. I stretched and I looked out the windows at the metal birds. I showered. I dressed from new closets. We went to School.

I snuck when I thought I had to — when I was in heavily populated places, or near the haunts of a teacher who might ask about me and my night companion.

The rest of the time, I strode.

Randal kept up with me pretty well but he fell way behind on the stairs to the Apocynum Room. It's pretty hard to climb stairs, I guess, when you're a seething void of night.

It was just as well.

I had a breakdown, pretty much as soon as I was out of his sight. I hugged myself. I shook. I leaned my head against the wall. What if my old friends hated me? What if they'd always hated me? What if they started hating me now?

It's a mercy that no one saw that. It was so very much unworthy of me.

I shook it off. I stood up straight. I strode!

"Salute!" I said, as I marched in. "Apocynum!"

Kseniya was there. Mikhael was there. Mikhael made an angry snorting noise. He didn't even look up. Kseniya saluted. Then her brow furrowed. She did look up. Then she was on her feet.

"My God," she said. "You're *awake*."

"What?" I said.

Mikhael's head snapped up.

She hugged me, hard. "You weren't even there," she said. "Even with your heart in you, you weren't *there*. I have missed you."

I tried to say *what?* again, but in fact I had no air. Kseniya is really quite fierce, and when she did let go all my ribs ached.

"Oh," I said.

"Huh," Mikhael said. He made a face at me. I don't know what expression it was supposed to be. Possibly he was trying to signal to me that there was an alien insect living inside the skin of his face, or that he'd taken up neo-cubist mime. Seriously. It was an expression the way Cheech and Chong are comedians.

Then Kseniya pushed me away. She turned to look at the shelves of the room. She said, and her voice was kind of choked, "I couldn't remember your name, you know. Even after. You were very rude."

There was dust all over the checkerboard pieces. "I was," I said, trying not to be distracted. "I am sorry about that. I was angry because I had been unforgivable."

"Huh," Mikhael said again.

"Listen," I said. "I did not want to make things harder. I just missed you. I am going to make things better."

"You do not have to make things better," Kseniya said. Her posture was very stiff.

"I do!" I said. I looked up at her. "I totally do. The world is a lie and a crime against the void. You are labouring under the weight of terrible and painful misapprehensions." I spared a glance at Mikhael. "You too!" Then back to Kseniya. "I would be a terrible and unforgiveable person if I just let things continue in this way."

"Your eyes are very strange," she said, "you know."

"Yes." I looked away. "They went this way. Randal suggests I am a changeling. I guess the Riders do that? I don't know. What does he know anyway?"

Mikhael giggled.

I grinned at him.

"I've accepted that I shall be friends with Riders," Kseniya said. "I mean, all things considered."

"Good."

I melted a little, I think. My body felt so light. I fell into a chair and said, "I've missed you guys too."

"You didn't have to be such a jackass," Mikhael said.

"I did," I said. My eyes widened. "That was my burden as being a person born into this world."

"Hm," he said.

Then he stood up. He walked over. He patted me —

He *patted me on the arm*.

"OK," he said.

He *patted me on the arm*. He was *in high school*. Good God.

"That's fair," he said. Then he sat down nearby. "Vanessa will be glad."

"Yes," I said. "I am going to tell her. I mean, I don't know what I am going to tell her. But I have to go down there anyway."

"You do?"

He snapped his fingers. He pointed at me. He beamed. "You've gotten in *trouble*. You're going to have to work with Lee Scathing."

In the background, Kseniya snorted.

"Soon you will know," gloated he Mikhael, "what it is *like*."

"I haven't gotten in the least bit of trouble," I denied.

"Naturally all such matters are confidential," he said. He winked. "I'll keep your secret!"

I growled at him. He shifted moods.

"Seriously," he said, "are you OK?"

"I am better," I said. "I am so much better."

"That is actually a little disturbing," Kseniya said, after a moment.

"I am going to be Jasmine Apocynum," I said, "maybe even *Princess* Jasmine Apocynum, and I am going to open this world up like an oyster, and I'm going to take the pearl of it, and I'm going to crush it in my hand, and blow the white powder of it out into the void —"

Mikhael *actually* did that thing where he looked amused when I said the word 'blow' oh my God you leave a guy alone for eight months and he turns into a *pervert* although I don't know if he was making fun of me for a sex thing or a drug thing —

"And then bam, nothing but the perfect truth and joy forever after."

"You are so totally a Rider girl," Kseniya said.

Mikhael looked at her.

"It is *always* about destroying the world with them," she confided, to him. She sounded so happy. It made me want to cry. "It is probably best just to allow her her delusions."

"It's not, I mean, it's not about *destroying*," I said. "I mean, not really. I mean, I can understand why you'd get the impression that it's destructive, but it's more like, you know, if a bird in a cage thinks that the cage is the world, they start to love it, they start to admire it, and then somebody comes along and says, 'I'm going to open that cage for you, little birdie, I'm going to let you see the sky,' only —"

"You don't have to protest so much," she said, and I fell quiet. "You could, though, you could at least *ask*, you know, how we're doing."

"Oh my God," I said.

I got on my feet. My eyes widened.

"Oh, God, I'm so awful."

"*Finally*," said Mikhael.

"Oh, come on," Kseniya told him.

"Leave me my pleasures," he sulked. "*She* wants to destroy the world."

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"And lunch time is basically over," Mikhael said. "So now I'm going to be late to class over your crap."

"No," I said. He was actually standing up. "No. You have to tell me how you've been. Are you OK? Did anyone eat your brain? Do you still have the right number of limbs? I mean, it's — um, do you like disco? I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

He kissed my forehead. That was not quite as lame as patting me on the arm.

"You ever do that again," he said. "I'm dropping you like a hot potato. Also, life is *sweet*."

"What?"

"Birds sing," he said. "Flowers bloom. I am on top of the world, butterball."

"Because of *me*?"

He laughed. I wanted to hit him. Then I wanted to hug him. Even though I wanted to be paying all my attention to Kseniya.

"Dork," he said. In the way that I was *pretty* sure meant *no, you idiot*, although it could actually have meant *of course*. But I think it was the first one, the no you idiot one. I think.

He walked out.

I looked at Kseniya. I wanted her to still like me. "And you?"

"I got a perfect score on the karaoke machine," she said.

"Oh?"

"Born in the U.S.A.," she said. "Mikhael complains, but Vanessa tells him to shut up."

"Ha ha!" I said. Then I beamed at myself. I had learned to do that! Vanessa's trick of saying laughter! I. Am. So. Amazing. On the stairs Mikhael screamed. I got to my feet. Kseniya was already in motion.

Right. I'd forgotten that there was a nightscape blob following me. I'd been planning to introduce them.

"It's OK!" I yelled after them.

I wasn't that slow any longer. I wasn't *that* useless any longer. I got there only five, ten seconds behind Kseniya. Mikhael was embedded in the substance of Randal, sinking into it like a Mikhael into a tarpit. Kseniya was trying to rip Randal apart. I waved my hands frantically.

"Stop! Stop!"

Kseniya, reluctantly, stopped. Randal pulled back.

"Right," I said. I panted. I leaned on my knees. *I really should alter my flesh*, I thought, *to someone more fit. Maybe I could make myself into Natalia. Or a leopard!*

Mikhael pulled free. He withdrew shuddering. It was actually pretty amazing. He was curling up against the wall and shaking, *way* overreacting, I thought, since it's not like Randal actually *ate* him or anything.

"This is Randal," I said.

"Oh dear," Kseniya said.

"I took out his heart," I explained, "and I'm going to use him to open up the gates under the School later this period. I just — I *missed* you guys."

Mikhael did this amazing thing where he managed to scurry up three steps and sideways away from me without using his arms — it was all this one writhing, wriggling move. He made this whining noise with his throat and nose as he hyperventilated. I am trying to be sympathetic here because honestly he *did* kind of bump into a supernatural horror body-first but seriously, Mikhael.

Kseniya's expression had gone distant.

"Jasmine," she said, softly. Then she was very still for a moment. I waited. Randal eddied. "Oh, honey. No."

"It's perfectly sensible," I said.

Somewhere in there Mikhael stopped shivering. He went still. Well, most of him. He was mumbling, muttering, whispering, I don't know, I couldn't really hear, just this intermittent sibillance when his voice hit an s sound in whatever he was saying to himself.

"He wanted to do it," I said. "I mean, he probably didn't want this *exactly*, but it *is* what he wanted, I *did* ask, I wouldn't just do it without asking. It's about *fulfilling* him."

Mikhael twitched. It made me uncomfortable. There was this reaction to it building up in me, rising, rising, which I think was — like — I wanted to *do* something about it, but I hadn't decided yet

whether that *something* was getting angry and yelling at him or trying to help him or both. You know? Like, why was he making such a *big deal* over it or maybe it was a big deal? Should I be nice or tell him to get over himself? He'd have told *me* to get over it.

He really would have, you know. I mean, if *I* got got by something. You know he would have because I am a very reliable narrator.

His fingers twitched in repetitive patterns. I licked my lips.

"I made him viscous and amorphous to give him a better chance of conforming to the shape of the lock of the Basalt Gates, though I probably will have to do some fine-tuning when we get there —"

Kseniya spat to one side. I shut up.

"Fix him," she said.

"What?"

"Fix. Him."

"*He* did it to *me*," I said, by which I meant of course that the world was a lie and a crime against the void and so this was absolutely and totally necessary as part of saving everybody from suffering. It wasn't like I *wanted* Randal to be a gelatinous, bubbling horror, I mean, particularly, I don't even think he minded.

I think I said it wrong. I mean, I think that highlighting the balance and justice of this situation was probably the wrong way to accurately convey my meaning to Kseniya, which was mostly that turning Randal into an ooze had been the appropriate thing to do under the circumstances, that it was about *fulfilling* him, that it was logical, sensible, and kind.

"I am beginning to think," she said, slowly, "that you were never actually a very nice person —"

I shoved Randal's heart back in him. I let him close around it. I let him bubble and squirm around it and flow back into the shape of a boy, a red-haired boy, night and emptiness of his eyes, school uniform as his clothing, laying there on the stairs. "There!" I said. "Fine! Now everybody has to endure a world full of suffering and misapprehension! Are you happy?" I flapped my hands.

". . . Yeah," said Kseniya.

"Yeah?" I said.

She gave me a weird kind of smile. "Maybe?"

"Oh, God," whispered Mikhael.

She picked him up. Kseniya picked him up. Mikhael. Not Randal. It was — I mean, geez. She sighed at me.

"Don't do that again," she said.

She walked off. I stared after her.

"Are we OK?" I said.

She shrugged.

I brushed my hair out of my eyes. I followed her down the stairs. I guess I did kind of just leave Randal there. I said, "We have to be OK. I don't have anyone. Mom is gone. I can't destroy the world without him. The new girl called me a monster. Please."

She gave me a look. "We will be more likely to be OK," she told me, "if . . . if you leave me alone for a few minutes."

"What?"

"I am trying very hard to pretend," she said, "that you are you again, and that I have not waited out some broken stranger shuffling through your life just to have a horror stepping in. But if you push me right now you will make that difficult, sparky."

"But I need things to be OK *now*."

She turned a little bit, I think so Mikhael couldn't see me, so her back was between us.

"Don't. Push."

I think I threw up after she was gone, but I don't know for sure, and I guess it didn't matter, because seriously, throwing up? That is just a crazy lie we tell ourselves. Nobody would really make stomachs that work like that.

That would just be gross.

Here's the last thing that happened on the stairs, after she left.

Randal came down. He stopped. He looked at me. He was pale as a ghost. He was weak. He'd stepped in vomit, I don't know, probably came from some, you know, drunk student, or maybe some sort of ghost or something. Spontaneous stair vomit? Whatever. That can happen. It really can.

"I can't," he said. "I can't do that. Not now. Not again. Don't. Don't do it again."

Then he twitched his face, once, twice, three times.

"Later," he said, and he hugged himself. "Later, because the gate, the gate, you have to, I have to, because the gate. You have to do it again later."

He walked off, hurting, and I think that's when I actually forgave him for so long ago, because, you know, he was pretty nice, not even mentioning the vomit, a lot of people would have said something about it or complained about their shoes to me.

Natalia was there when I went by my old home. That surprised me.

She was there. She was *waiting*.

There wasn't a house there. There wasn't a *my* house there, anyway. That didn't surprise me. There were other houses. I staggered up. I sat down on the steps to somebody else's porch.

"I have three things to say," she told me. She looked tense as a wild fox.

". . . how did you even find it?" I said.

She pointed with her toe. I followed the gesture. The street was ripped and torn, roughly in a line: the spoor of the tendril of my mansion-heart.

"How long have you *been* here?"

"First," she said. She ignored my question. "I have been reviewing Russian history. It is messy. It is tangled. It is the history of many ordinary people."

"Have you talked to the neighbours? Do they remember me?"

"I — that is the second thing," she said. "That is all right. This can happen out of order. I am sorry."

"What?"

"Your Park," she said. "I did not feel well. It sickened me. I reacted poorly. I did my upbringing no credit. I am sorry."

"They don't remember me," I said blankly.

"They are very kind," she said. "I am to bring you a blanket or cup of soup if you need one. They would be here now comforting you but I am not sure if you are safe."

"That's not your call!"

"I know it is a hard thing," she said, "to lose your family —"

I was on my feet. I was staring at the door of the building on whose porch I sat and I couldn't remember the owner's *name*.

"It is a hard thing," she said. "Please. I understand. It is the hardest. I am so sorry."

"How *dare* you."

"What happened to that boy?"

"God!" I said. "What the hell. Shut up."

"Is he alive?"

"Yes."

". . . thank God," she said.

"I am not like that," I said.

"You don't want to kill everybody."

"It's not like that."

"I understand that the eyes signify the Riders," she said. "That you rode in from outside the world back near the beginning, come to bring an end to life and being. You don't want to end the world?"

"You're totally putting my wanting to end the world in the wrong context," I said.

"And to kill everybody."

"Yes."

I leaned against a wooden pole. I couldn't help it. I began to laugh. After a while I relaxed.

"Fine," I said. "Thank you for caring."

"You — if you need a place —"

"Pardon?"

"That is the third thing," she said.

"What about the first one?"

"I don't know," she said. "I was going to pontificate about erasing the lives of ordinary Russian people. They don't know that you're living here trying to make sense of a great big world."

"The Hell with them!"

"What?"

". . . nevermind," I said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I am empathetic for the plight of the ordinary Russian people and their ordinary lives."

She hesitated. She looked like she'd tasted something bitter.

Then she shrugged it off.

"Third," she said. "I would like — if —"

She shook her head. She started over.

"If you need a place," she said. "If you can . . . if you can just *not* kill anyone for a bit, if you can *not* end the world or eat any souls or make any more spooky mansions or anything, if you can give me a few weeks to figure things out —"

She made strained faces at me.

"If you need a place to sleep," she said.

I shook my head some more. "I don't sleep any longer," I told her.

"Can you wait?" she said. "Can you not kill, not do anything awful, not end the world, just . . . wait?"

I shook my head.

"Can you *try*?"

It's hard to say no to that. It's hard, when someone is asking you that, to just say no. And I couldn't open up Randal again for a bit anyway. I was being slow and lame in getting the world ended proper anyway, it wouldn't hurt to —

"God! Fine. I'll do what I can."

She watched me for a while. I think she was letting that sink into my head, what I'd just said. She waited for the first tears to come to the edge of my eyes; and when I brushed them away, I noticed that they glittered, that they had their own light in them, as my tears had never had before.

Then she offered me a handkerchief. I didn't even know those were still a *thing*, but it's what she did; and she went away.

I don't sleep any longer, I'd told her.

I'd said that. I'd even thought at the time that it was true. I thought that that whole wasting a third of your life sleeping thing was for people who *haven't* seen the True Thing; who *haven't* made a mansion of their heart; who *aren't* going to rip away the screen of lies that shields us from the void. I believed it; I was being honest, I really was; I'd aimed for truth; but it turned out to be a dirty lie, after I'd said it, such as you find in worlds.

I slept, and I dreamed, and I dreamed of fire.

"Darling," Vanessa said, in tones of profoundest satisfaction.

I couldn't help it. I grinned goofily. I brushed a twig from my clothes where I'd wound up sleeping in them the previous night and I hugged her.

"That is much better," she said, "albeit somewhat dirtier. You have been mooning about far too much, you know, and been far too antisocial, even if you did have eyes."

I shrugged. "You know how it is," I said. "Got eyes, you gotta be depressed. But *without* them..."

"Always the pessimist in the kingdom of the blind," she said. She pushed me away to arms' length and admired me. "It is a nice look. You rather freaked out my boyfriend, you know."

"You!" I said.

"Me!" she giggled. "I have a boyfriend! I think I may even be pregnant."

Bubbles floated by in the vitreous chambers. My expression froze. I thought furiously.

"I am terribly worried that it will interfere with my academic pursuits," she said. "But on the other hand, if I have a baby, I can dangle it upside down *or* carry it right side up on any occasion that I choose, and it can sit with me for free on many conveyances, and my boy will never leave me then, unless he does."

"That is exactly what it would be like," I agreed. I thought: *Is it possible that she cannot see my panic because my eyes are missing? Please do not see my panic.* "You are totally ready to be a mother," I blurted out.

"Exactly," she said smugly. Then she sighed. "Though it is frightening. But come, I must show you the new decor of the Discipline Dungeon."

"That is its name?"

"I *believe* that it is officially named 'restricted sub-level A,' but I call it what I like and Lee Scathing cannot stop me."

"That is good," I said. "I would not let you show me the decor of an officially recognized Discipline Dungeon."

"Bah," she said.

She led me inwards and downwards. "You've inspired Lee astoundingly," she said, as we walked into new places. "It's simply *tops*."

The walls were freshly painted here. The tanks held not vitreous fluid but some grayish, greenish effluent. Something floated against the wall of one of them: a half-formed animal body, muscle and bones. I flinched, then stood I strong. Another tank held a creature that was complete save for the skin, the skull, and the brain.

"He's been churning out new designs and prototypes like there's no tomorrow," she said. "And so many monkeys!"

The shadows were darker here. She stopped to stroke a golden fur spread on the wall, sleek and silky and four-limbed-and-tailed. I felt like Mikhael had looked, suddenly, after Randal had glorped him. I didn't quite understand what that feeling meant.

"I'm not a monkey," I pointed out.

"That's hardly my fault, dear," she said.

"I mean, I wouldn't inspire monkeys."

"And yet!"

She poked her head through a door. "There's this guy, too," she threw in. I was still trying to figure out what to say to her. I peeked in after her at a dining-room-type chamber with this corpse spraw—

Where a—

Where this *body*, whatever, you know, it lay there, all, all empty and mouth open and gaping. I'm not actually certain that it was dead. It just looked all corpse. It just sprawled —

I licked my lips. *All existence is basically just an illusion*, I reminded myself. *A constructed thing. We see weird tanks with unfinished animals in them and weird corpses in basement rooms and we think that something creepy is going on. But really, all we know is that there are sight-impressions that register on our eyes, sound-impressions that register on our ears, freaking-out-impressions that register on our hearts. It is all just an illusion. We are just being waylaid by imaginary, constructed experience.*

I told myself this.

Dang it, imaginary constructed experience! Why you gotta be like that?

I told myself this very fervently. Then I turned away and I changed the subject, all chipper with my voice.

"So you went all the way with him," I said.

"All the way?"

"I mean, with the pregnancy," I said.

There were ivory spears crossed on the walls. The terminals had been covered over in shrouds. I didn't think anyone had done anything with them in a while. I saw a student in penitentiary whites slip by, out of the corner of my eye. "Yeah," Vanessa told me. She grinned at me, then made a pretty surprisingly un-Vanessa tongue-roll kind of face.

I turned to look at her and I was going to double-check whether I was actually understanding the sequence of events, like, she and Mikhael, right? Not Lee, or a stranger? She and Mikhael and . . . sex? What does tongue-rolling have to do with pregnancy? Wait, was it *me* who didn't know how sex worked?

— I didn't manage to ask her, though, I was, I was *going* to, but then it looked like the corpse had moved, I turned and looked and it was like the corpse had moved, I don't think it *had* moved, I still think it hadn't, I think it was still just laying there, as still as anything, the body. I think it wasn't grinning at me. I think its expression hadn't changed. I think I just thought it, I think I just remember it because I *thought* it . . .

My stomach heaved and twisted. I hunched. I tried to say something. I couldn't. The world flashed, flickered: it was all otherworldly light for a moment, save for the corpse, which had no inner light to shine with; then back to sight, and I actually thought for a moment that the corpse was like a light bulb, that *the corpse had gone out*.

It was too much.

I lost my shape, I gave it up, it fell away from me, I changed like I had when Kseniya had made a sword of me, or I made ooze of Randal's flesh.

It was all just — *corpses why what tongue Vanessa agh it's leering at me* —

I fell apart.

I whole-body shuddered, bowed, bent back and flew me away from the corpse and from myself as the world flashed again and my skin crawled and I was up, I was sideways, I was twisted, I was shuddering. I was dangling from the ceiling pipe. I'd been coiled. I wasn't. I'd had wings. I didn't. The pipe creaked and I was me. The pipe cracked and I was me, clinging to it. The pipe lurched and I was me, falling off of it. Vanessa caught me. She tried. I tried to stop her. I was falling. *What about the baby*. Terror flushed through me. I didn't fly. I didn't shift. I couldn't change. I fell. She fell. Cracked. She fell. Cracked. Sprawled. The sound, the crack, all fear it filled through me though I think it was the long bone of her arm and not *she her*, not *she her broken*.

Like a snap of celery —

No, I mean, no, not — not, not like that, I mean, sorry, sorry, um, sorry, um, I mean — that, I mean, I mean that isn't, that isn't, I mean, nevermind, just, just her arm, you know, just her arm, that. That was *fine*.

I screamed and Lee Scathing, he was there.

He must have been practically there already. He was pulling me off of her. He was strong — I'd put him at 80% of a Kseniya, which meant he had to use both hands to shove me back against the wall, but that's still quite strong — and he hissed in my face, "Hsst, *mine*," before squinting sideways at Vanessa, asking, "Are you OK?" and then glaring back at me and doing a whole body

twitch and quiver of his own like he'd expected me to start an *attack* on them in the moment of his distraction.

"Your corpse made faces at me!" I said.

"Shut it."

Vanessa whimpered. She rubbed at her face with her right arm. She made another whimpering noise. Then she said, well, whined, really, "'m fine. It's OK."

Slowly, Lee relaxed.

Vanessa started to get up. Her left arm was hurt. It looked like it anyway.

"I'm going to lay here," she said, after a moment.

"You," he said to me, "are going to be buried in sewage detention so deep they will never even *find* your head. Why couldn't you just stay *useful*? What *are* you? Freak. So strange. Stay there."

He let go. He backed away from me. He knelt by her.

"Seriously?" I asked him. "You wanted me to *stay* heartless?"

"Sinless," he said. "It is not a bad thing. I admired it. It is more than I myself have been able to achieve."

I sank into a sitting position against the wall.

"So that guy," I said.

"Sinless as the dead," Lee said. "But I can't get him to move. That was your best trick. Vanessa's mobile and this guy's sinless but —"

He shrugged.

"Feel free to advise me," he said. "I suppose I could use it. You're not supposed to be here, you know. Vanessa, why did you bring it, it, *her* here? It is strictly forbidden for students to enter this detention area."

Me: "That's a self-solving problem if I've ever heard one."

I was still on the verge of panic, I think. It just slipped out.

Vanessa murmured, "I was excited to see her again. Honestly, you both make too big a deal of things. Have you ever considered soothing massages?"

"What, on each other?" Lee Scathing asked. Then he shook his head. "I mean, no. I mean, what? Why? That is not important right now. Why is she in here, falling on you, Vanessa? She should not be in here falling on you. That is cruel and dangerous."

"*Cruel*?" I said.

"Pfuh," Vanessa said. "I fell under her."

I slumped against the bumpy wall. "I should go."

"You make me embarrassed to have the two of you in my entourage," Vanessa said, irritably, using Lee to lever herself up. "Now take me to the Recuperatorium. No fighting! Also no sexing. That would just make me feel awkward."

Somehow even though I wanted to turn into some sort of flying thing that tangles around steam pipes again I found that I had not.

"Seriously," I told her, alone with her, or at least, if not alone with her, then with no Lee, "he's dangerous."

The nurse finished immobilizing Vanessa's shoulder. She spoke stock medical dialogue. I don't know. She stepped away.

Vanessa looked at me.

Her eyes shadowed. Then she smiled. "Of course," she said. "It did not occur to me. You have been away. You have missed my fabulous adventures and discoveries. You are my childhood friend and you cannot make sense of this my flowering of maturity. Do not be afraid, darling. All is well and all manner of things shall be well. This is nothing new nor should it frighten you. He is simply Lee Scathing, and he has always been making marvels and creatures from the wastes below."

"There was a *body*, Vanessa —"

"It was *hollow*," she said. "Just flesh. No heart. It is not as if it was a *student*. I don't think it's even dead. I hope it's not dead. I am *supposed* to feed it regularly. It is practice for the baby, Lee says, though he also says I cannot possibly be pregnant. But what does he know? He is not a girl. *He* did not explore these matters. *He* is, quite frankly, completely repressed."

"Vanessa," I said.

"Hush," she said. She reached out her hand. She put her finger on my lips. "You are in no position to judge me."

I looked away. "I don't understand," I said. "Please. Don't just act like it's normal."

She sighed.

"I love the monkeys," she said. "He can *make* them. Out of *effluent*. They were inspired by my friend."

"How can you be so *calm*?"

There was a long pause. She thought about this. She stared at her hand as she stretched her wrist and then she said, "You are no fun after all. I waited so long for you to come back to me and now you are all up in my grill. I should have known better. It is like Lee says, the fun ones all have sin in them and the sinless ones are dry."

I hugged her.

I don't know if that was the right thing to do. I don't know if anything was the right thing to do. I may have hurt her arm again and she pushed me away, but she smiled afterwards, so there was that. "Oh dear," she said.

She looked at me.

"Very well," she said. "You may be sinful and funless and somehow sweet. Still, you have not properly apologized to me for all my worrying. You were gone for so very long. I thought you had tired of me and of my world."

"I had a broken heart," I told her. "But then it got better and I turned it into a magical house."

"That's my dear sparky," she said. "Always so very dramatic about things."

Then she lay back on the cot, right there in the Recuperatorium, and she went to sleep.

Here's where I want to stop and talk about Vanessa, to say something more about Vanessa, who she was, where she came from, and what she was about, but all I can remember is the swan.

Vanessa was part of the bedrock of my world. She was shaped to be that, I think —

Not to be that to *me*, you understand, but to be a bedrock kind of person. I think of her heart as a mirrored ball, all hookless, shimmering, and I can't imagine how Lee Scathing ever got it out.

She was really a good person. She didn't *want* anything, she just liked people.

She was Vanessa; she was *Vanessa*; until Lee Scathing took Vanessa away.

Have you ever broken a wishbone from a turkey? Have you ever — it *snaps*, it breaks —

You make a wish —

It *breaks* —

I found Mikhael. He kind of froze. His eyes widened and his face took on this trapped expression. Then he gave me this twitch of a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

He didn't say anything.

"Oh, come on," I said.

"What do you want?" he said.

I looked away. "Well, *now* I want you to be OK and to not feel guilty."

His nostrils flared. He licked his lips. "I think that I should probably just not talk to you," he said.

"That's not fair."

"Maybe not." He hesitated. Then, as if with great effort, he relaxed. His shoulders slumped a little bit. "What do you want, Jasmine?"

"I'm freaked out," I said. "There's a corpse down there."

His right eye twitched.

"Where?"

"There," I said. I waved down towards the basement. "Vanessa said it was alive and that I shouldn't worry about it."

"That is — that —"

He made a face at me. He hesitated. He met my eyes. He flinched from them, then stared at them in a kind of fascination.

"OK," he said. "We can talk about that. We can find somewhere to talk about that. You're not going to fling yourself randomly into a fire or cut your arm off or something if it's actually down there, are you?"

". . . I wasn't planning to . . ."

"I mean, I'm sure there's *something* mystical you can do to make it worse, if there's somebody dead down there. Or alive. Like, you could summon up a dog demon from — the janitorial closet or something, I don't know, maybe the American football teams have an altar, and try to feed yourself to it or something. Or you could turn the Principal into a world-devouring iguana."

"You are impugning my superlative competence," I said.

". . . Yes," he agreed.

I snorted. "You have no idea who you are dealing with, Mickey-me-boy. You're thinking of the *old* me."

"Fine," he said. "Be that way. Let's find a room with bad acoustics."

He sat in a chair. I stood by the door. He said, "I seem to have stepped in your former boyfriend, you know."

"What?"

"I still don't feel clean. After yesterday. I never do. Do you know that if you wash your hands three times you are probably 99.9% clean? Because even a pretty lame cleaning job can get 90% of what's there. As long as they're independent cleanings, so that you don't miss the same problem three times in a row."

"I am capable of performing mathematics," I said.

"It was gross, sparky. Also I think he was trying to eat me. Or turn me into whatever he was. Or — aren't those the same thing? Unless it's the other way around, where you turn into what you eat."

"There's a *body*!"

"Whatever," he said.

"You *work* there," I said. "Vanessa works there. She's pr—" *egnant*.

I realized mid-sentence that she might not have told him.

"Prr-obably a fan of spark plugs."

He just stared at me.

"She has a boyfriend!" I said. "They're doing things. Is that you?"

"Is *that* what this is about?" he said. "You're *jealous*? We were *not* an item, ever, you know. That did not happen."

"*Things*," I said, desperately, and he blushed, shook his head, ducked his head once, and admitted:

"Yes, that is me."

"Good."

". . . OK."

"How can you *work* there?"

He was quiet for a surprisingly long time. Then he said, "You're serious?"

"Yeah."

"There's stuff," he said. "I know."

He shrugged.

"There's stuff. I'm not blind. Vanessa tells me I would probably not deal with it very well if I knew the details. I sheltered her, and then she went beyond me, and now she shelters me. So I have a hard time, you know, digging into it.

"You have to understand. I'd be all macho and look at it anyway except (1) no, (2) not my business, and (3) if she *was* right and I couldn't deal with it that would be the most humiliating thing ever.

"It's not like I'm hip deep in that whole Lee Scathing *pile*," he said. "It's not like I get down there in the afternoon and he swashbuckles up, slaps on the mask, points at some sort of freak time vortex, and cries, 'Mikhael! We're off to the Jurassic for the kidneys of a vampire dinosaur!'"

A flash of disappointment.

"I just do *lab work*," he said. "That's all. It's an exciting day when I get to squint at something under a microscope instead of just counting and calculating standard deviations. It's an exciting day when I realize I can *doodle* vampire fangs onto all the previous doodles that I've made out of dinosaurs. And then it's like, what if he comes along and distracts me halfway through? Or what if I miss one? What if I just leave one of the dinosaur pictures the wrong old way and somebody takes its kidneys?"

"What the hell?"

"No, you!"

A second or two slipped by. "Fair point," I conceded.

"He isn't going to hurt her," Mikhael said. "He isn't going to hurt anyone, he's not that *kind* of freak, but he's *especially* not going to hurt *her*. She's — he's like a television Dad with her, you know, and she his princess daughter. There comes a point where you have to say: 'OK, fine, am I *man* enough to cope with a boss who's . . . ah, pushing the frontiers of waste management, or am I going to cower under my bed?'"

"It's not —"

I sighed.

"Fine," I said.

"Besides," he said, "you *know* that if he *is* on the verge he'll need stability and getting all worked up about it will only push him harder."

"Fine," I said.

"OK."

"OK."

After a while, he said, "Tell me something?"

"Sure."

"How'd you make it back?"

"What?"

"A person loses themselves," he said. "It's not that easy to come back."

"Oh. — I didn't, really."

He frowned.

"I mean, I'm hardly *me*, am I?" I said. "No friends, no family, new ideas, new name, new plans? It's not the *same*."

He scratched at his ear. "You seem pretty much you," he said.

". . . I saw the truth," I said. "I mean, that's what brought me back. I saw the way things really were."

"How are they?"

"They're beautiful," I said.

". . . Really?"

"Yeah," I said. I warmed to it. "Things are beautiful, Mikhael. *We* are beautiful. We cover ourselves over all the time with filth and horror, suffering, lies, it's all completely unnecessary — I can't even *stop* myself from doing it, I'm sporting knees and nose like the worst of the lot of you, it's unnecessary — but underneath that, things are glowing of themselves, with the light of themselves; and deeper yet: the True Thing, the *worth* and the *beauty* and the *goodness* and it all, and it permeates the smaller things with love.

"We are clean bones and truth underneath the stinking pile of our trash and misconceptions, Mikhael. We are promontories off an endless immensity of something good."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"What's so clean about the bones of us? What's there in us and in the lies of us that makes us promontories off of anything worth having? What is there in us that is loved?"

"I—I don't know," I said. I frowned at him. "Nothing? I mean, the, you know, the *thusness*? The *ofness*. The *because*?"

He stood up. He glared at me. "'The *because*?'"

"The *because*!" I said. I flapped my hands at him. "Why do you *think*? We suck, it all sucks, but that's just an error, that's just an error that we're imposing on ourselves, it's not *real*, it's just a story that we're telling *to* ourselves to make sense of things because the actual thing *won't* make sense to us, that's why we have to make up stories to understand it, *because* part of the actual thing is that we're loved and deep down we can tell that we're pretty cool. I guess. . . . Maybe?"

"Maybe?" he said.

"Maybe I need another dodgeball! It was *yesterday*, Mikhael, I can't remember *everything* about why the True Thing loves us. It was yesterday."

"You are the worst guru ever," he said.

"I wasn't trying to goo you!"

"Whatever! Seriously. *You're wonderful even though everything you do is suck?* You wander School like some kind of dreary, faceless ghost for practically a *year* and you come back to us because you realized *that?*"

"Chill," I said. Whined, I guess, since I made two syllables of it.

He squinched up his face. He looked away.

"Oh my God," I said. "You're trying not to cry."

"Screw you," he said.

"You want to *not* be making horrible mistakes," I said. "You want it to be smart and clever and awesome to be going around breathing all the time, and having a nose, and *knees*. You want things in *this* world to be OK. Oh my God," I realized. "You've been having a crisis of *faith*. You were hoping I could *help you* with a crisis of *faith*."

"Mn-n," he denied, and shook his head.

I think I was wrong here and he was right. I don't think this actually had anything to do with faith, or Godly things; I think this was between Mikhael and the mortal world, or maybe between him and some other kind of wound. I don't know. I'll never *know*. I am not he. I just don't want you to think it was a religion thing now just because I said so at the time.

That's between him, his soul, and his God, as opposed to what actually happened, which had very little to do with God or religion, but rather, me.

"You are standing between me and the door," he noted.

"Oh, huh," I said. "So I am."

He sighed. He relaxed. He asserted self-control. He looked up at me. "Yeah," he admitted. "I would like it to be smart and awesome to go around in these bodies of ours, in these stupid lives and habits of ours, even though I know it's not. I'd like something to be OK. Just once. I'd like something to be OK. Please move out of the way. OK? I don't hit girls."

I boggled at him. "Was that a *threat?*"

"Explicitly it was not," he said. "If I were threatening you, I would imply that I *would* hit you. Instead I am pointing out that you have put me in a position where I can either shove you out of the way or be stuck here listening to you, and I really don't want either of those choices."

I grit my teeth. I sighed. I stepped out of his way.

He walked past me. I didn't grab his arm. It was unfair because he was taller *and* fitter than I was.

I said, "I thought it was a good thing. I thought it was a good message."

He stopped at the door.

"I thought it was *good*," I said. "Everything around us: trash, lies. Underneath it, though: something good."

"I already knew," he said, but he didn't sound like he was listening. He smiled at me instead, this stiff pained smile. "It's all sick, isn't it? All this stuff we do when we're living? I didn't need you to tell me that. I knew."

I saw it, then, the hook at the end of his soul. I pulled on it, just a little tug, you know, for testing, and the words came spilling out.

"It's all filthy," Mikhael said.

I couldn't stop myself. It was fascinating. I couldn't help it. I —

His heart was wiggling out of his chest now. It was practically coming out on its own; it was like fishing without even needing a fishing pole, like they were jumping into the boat; but I can't put it all on him, I did pull, a little, I pulled, that pulling was me, that key and necessary step was mine, and the words poured out of him like an uncorked river.

"There is a flow of awful waste through it," he said. "Piled, clogged rivers of it, sin and sewage, under the surfaces of things. We are living amongst it. We are vermin, feasting upon it. We are beasts and wastrel creatures/we are tarnished ruined copies of the pure and bright things that we

were meant to be; close your eyes and you can see it, where the flesh is not, where the air is not, where the land is not, lit by an awful light, our sea of waste —”

You poor creature.

My hand went in all the way. I found his heart. I pulled it out and back and around and from the hole that left in him the sewage poured out; green and silver and clotted was it all, and woven in and out through it there were words, whispering, repeating, too soft to hear by then save for the occasional sibilant that slipped out. A prayer, maybe, or a demand of me, or to himself; stuck slipping through his lips, stripped of its meaning, on permanent repeat.

The waste-wash touched my foot. I didn't draw back in time, and I almost gagged on it, on the sheer awfulness of that witnessed world.

His skin went rough and scarred, as from tight ropes, then it sloughed off and left him raw. He gave me a horrified, panicked look. "I'm human," he was protesting, momentarily louder. "Human. Human. Me."

He tried to hold himself together, but he could not.

Not without his heart.

It slipped from him, all of it, made him sick from the freedom and the joy of it, poured the waste and weakness of him away, and leaving only bones.

I could have stopped myself. I didn't. I —

I strengthened the bones of him, then, instead, I lit them up, shod them they in silver and in runes, and coated what was remaining of his flesh in glass and slickness. I let him grow, then, stretched him out, articulated him onto a new frame, until his lonesome lambent eyes stared from a new and elongated face and his arms were stronger and his body a clean and pure and geometric tracery, the last dregs of some nameless sickness dripping and dribbling out from his hollowed chest.

He fell down onto all fours.

The sewage and the shed slid away from the glass of him like magnets with an opposite charge. Fur bristled from him, fine strands of glass, fierce and clean and spiky brown and silver it was all, and I brushed it back from the ears of him and felt the tingle of it, and he licked my face, and then the magic faded and I fell crashing back into myself, and he to him, and I knew what I had done.

"Oh dear," I said.

His heart hung jangling from my hand. It was silver and blue steel. It dangled on a clasped silver chain — some hearts have those — and the design on the clasp was that of a serpent, a cross, and a rose. I strung the chain around my neck slowly. It was beautiful. His heart settled with a sound like a bell.

I thought, *I'd better not tell Vanessa*, which made me practically fall over laughing with a mixture of worry and glee.

Bleak Iron's God
not so very long ago

He was difficult to control.

Mikhael was *slick*, as Randal had not been slick. He was slippery in my hand. Freed from the bonds that had been in him, he'd gone all wild. I could point him, steer him, direct it, but I could not *control* him.

He went out into the halls like barrels rolling and he was wild magic and he was free.

There was only really one thing that I could point him at; only one thing I could *do* with an enchanted Mikhael, which was to point him downwards, aim him at the gates below us, pop the world and end reality.

I'd *planned* to wait for Randal to be ready again; for Kseniya to forgive me and accept me again; maybe even for Natalia. I'd planned that; but here I was with Mikhael in hand, and I couldn't even keep him in the room, so down we slipped.

I had power in my hands, real power.

What else could I have done?

I nudged him. He went loping off ahead of me. He ran on slideways, floors, and walls. I chased him as he ran, I followed he, towards the lift and Lee Scathing's realm.

As I've said, School is pretty big.

I don't know who spotted us or how; some startled teacher pressing a button or Lee Scathing watching up through his panopticon (alleged). Maybe I'd just taken too long, missed some sort of cosmic moment, and the stars were no longer right.

We hadn't actually gotten anywhere near the lift when things started to go awry.

Alarms came on in the hallways, amber, spinning. They gave forth high-pitched, awful, distant wailing, piercing through the entirety of the halls. As the doors to the classrooms closed, ahead of me, I felt the sudden, strange, and overpowering desire to be *behind* them — on the other side of them. To be safe behind the drone of a teacher and the inattentive good humour of the students. To be thinking of note-taking and note-passing and the hardness of the seat beneath me and not of the wild magic that Mikhael had become. I was like a zoo animal suddenly at large in the wilderness, remembering back to dreams of freedom, and thinking: *how much safer felt the longing than the fact!*

I felt stripped and raw and wrong, out there in the halls at class-time, staggering along behind the furor of the glass-and-silver beast I'd made.

It *hurt* me, not being in class then. It grated on me.

I felt like I could close my eyes and all of it would go away. It would drain away and I would open them and I would be sitting there, amidst Geometry. The thing I'd turned Mikhael into would just be a postulate sketched out —

I think I *did*, to be honest, I did close my eyes for a moment, I did slip from my full awareness of the world and swayed. I barely dragged my eyes open again to see the hall monitors out among us in the halls. They were nameless, identical creatures, dressed in regulation green and with the regulation red badge dangling on a plastic chain around each neck. They made me fear them with their presence but Mikhael he feared them not. They gathered around him. They swarmed him, they clung to him like stains, but he slipped from them, he was sinless, they tried to hold him but they could not stay.

He howled amongst them. He struggled against them. He slicked he through them and slipped he free.

How had I never noticed before how terrible they were, and how alike?

How had I thought all my life that they were just students who'd chosen to monitor the halls, in exchange for a teacher's praise?

There was one of them who unlocked his arms and legs, twisted them, unfurled them, became something like a regulation green human spider to cling to Mikhael; several of them did, too many, it was horrible and awful — but these horrors could not cling.

I feared them and I tried to make this faster.

I tried to hurry him on. This thing I could not do. He'd gotten too free of me, as he was free of them and of the shames inside himself. I clutched at his heart but it kept slipping in my hands, and he snapped his jaws at a hall monitor and bit it through.

Are they human? I wondered. *Do they feel? Did I just make somebody I care about kill a boy?*

A hand set itself on my shoulder. A chill ran through me, along my spine it all. I did not move, but knew it: the hand of another hall monitor, behind me in the halls.

"Miss?" he said.

I turned to look at him. Not all spidery-unfolded, praise the Lord.

"You should be in class," he said.

I punched him in the stomach. It was the right thing to do. It was sensible, logical, and sane. "You're *monsters*," I said. I kicked his knee. I spat venom on him. Possibly it was saliva. I shoved the side of his head with both my hands. He toppled against the wall, looking unaccountably betrayed. I ran forward. Then I halted.

There were stairs at the end of the hall, not that far off from the lift, and the new girl came down them —

Slid the banister on her two feet. It was ridiculous. I refuse to accept it. I had the sudden disorienting sense of what it must be like to be wicked and to watch heroes do these stupidly flawless and heroic things while you must live misshapen, cowardly, and ashamed. She slid down the banister two-footed and flew into the melee and I could not help it, I moved on reflex, I shrunk myself down to a long-legged flying bug lest she look in my direction and I flicked aside to the wall to dodge her gaze. I clung there sideways while my vision of the scene skewed wildly. It exploded for a moment into facets; night swept across them and swallowed them; as the blackness cleared, everything was sideways for a moment, twisted three hours counterclockwise; then a sharp rotation restored everything to normal, or maybe a little bit shrunken and distorted, and I could see Natalia and Mikhael again.

He threw her off with one writhing motion as I saw them. She was perfect but she could not hold. She scrabbled for a grip on the long leg of him and failed. She tried to block him and he ran by above. She leapt for him; seized him; slipped from him and fell; lay a moment there. Then she kipped up to her feet and grinned.

"All right, then," said Natalia. "I will teach you a certain game."

She caught herself short, then, in chasing him; and he pulled short as well. He looked back at her like a dog will look at you when you're chasing them — as if to say: *don't fall so far behind!*

She turned to the side and he slunk closer.

Natalia moved, and each movement ended with a little twitch, a little withdrawal, and her eyes locked always just short of him, and she slid where his eyes were not looking, and the chase became a dance.

He flinched back less with each of her steps forward. He advanced farther with each step backwards or to the side. She drew him in, pulled him with little gestures, hooked the pattern of her movement all about him, until she could draw him forward with a little tugging of her fingers, as on a string.

There was a tension rising in his heart and I could not handle it, for I was made small and long-legged and clinging to the wall.

She moved like poison and dark water.

Natalia she drew him in.

She stared into his eyes and they two circled, and she said softly, "Ah."

There is something in that shape that was unfinished. There was something that I had not done. There was a wrongness somewhere remaining, a thing *unfinished* in him, made by her or perhaps

simply found, and she teased it out, drew it forward, and then she stuck her hand into his mouth and pulled it forth:

A last bead of jade and silver, calcified and hardened filth, embedded somewhere in the flesh or brain of him, the which I had not seen.

She pulled it from him, in the hallway there, and out it came.

He rested.

He fell over like a child into bed.

He closed him down, she slept him, he heaped he down all tumbled glass and boneless bones. Then the magic slipped from him, it drained from him, it shuddered from him, fell away from him, and he lay there, young and vulnerable again, a human boy.

I did not take up his heart and change him again.

I wasn't even sure I could.

I just met up with him, in the Recuperatorium, where I found him with Vanessa. I snuck up to him in squirrel shape as she wept over his unmoving form. I dropped his heart on the chain of it back into his chest, and it went back in.

Vanessa she drew back.

She squinted.

"Are you . . . a magical animal?" she asked me.

I twitched my head. I think she saw my eyes, but I don't know if she could have understood them. I scurried out and then away and gone.

I let time pass.

I met Natalia in the halls. That frightened me. She frowned at me. Then she smiled. That was so terrifying. It made me think things like, "what if she's *on to me*," even though I wasn't entirely sure that I was actually on to myself.

She was a hero.

She wasn't human. She wasn't normal. She was obviously some sort of inhuman Siberian *hero*.

What if I was the kind of thing that heroes killed?

She seemed a little disappointed that I kind of froze up under her smile, that I didn't wave or smile back but just kind of stopped and half-fell-over, off-balance in the halls. As for me, I wound up tailing her for a while as a cat or fox, watching her, trying to figure out if she was watching me as I was watching her, until one day as she sat on a swing in the playground behind the School, she said casually, "Your eyes don't change, you know," and I vanished in a panic into the bushes and wound up scratched all over and nearly having an unpleasant encounter with a raccoon the size of a Volvo, or, at least, so it seemed to cat-me at the time.

I didn't dare talk to Mikhael or Vanessa. I didn't even really dare to talk to Kseniya; not until she caught my eye outside her lockers, where I was admiring the windows and their view of the sky, and she rolled her eyes, and we smiled, and then I hugged her and everything was made as light.

"Mikhael tells me that he has never felt better," she said.

If you ever want proof that the flesh and the heart are not the same you have only to watch the way that the smile *escapes* from you, *defies* you at such times as that, takes over your face, colonizes it on its own account, makes no pretence of caring whether you want to show your happiness to the world, doesn't even do that if you'd *want* to smile publicly, it just happens, like some demonic clown is standing in front of you with long prickly fingers hooking into the muscles of your face, grabbing your lips, dragging them up at the corners, while a third hand tickles the inside of your chest cavity and makes your insides float.

"He has?"

"I did not trust you," she said. "I am sorry. You had turned your ex-boyfriend into amorphous, viscous goop. I was taken by surprise."

"You *should* be sorry," I protested, pointing at her, but she held up a palm and I stopped.

I looked away. "Okay," I admitted, "valid reason for concern."

"Let's walk," she said.

We walked for a while. I didn't say anything. She didn't say much.

Just, "Come stay with me for a while."

"I can't possibly."

"Why not?"

"Your family," I said. I gestured at her. I pointed at my eyes. I waved dramatically at the air.

She stared at me, baffled.

"What?" I asked. It was so obvious. She couldn't bring someone with Rider eyes to her *home*.

Except:

"I already asked my Mom," my friend Kseniya replied.

Here's Kseniya's mom. She's kind of weird. She's one of the most *deliberate* people that I've ever met. She walks like she's reading the steps out of a book. She hardly said anything at all the whole time I was there; she gave me silence to be in. On the second day I was there, though, she woke me up with a cup of coffee and took me out into the fields to watch the sunrise from an old stone bridge; and as the sky turned to red and purple streaks, the fields burst open a pustule of birds all squabbling, and the wind blew my hair out to the side — and it was beautiful. On the third day, when I went to get onto the bus to School, she stopped me and she had me sit in the kitchen as she baked, instead. I came down the stairs into the living room one night half-shrouded in dreams and thought she was a mountain peak; it took me a long time to realize that there aren't mountain peaks in living rooms, that she must be some sort of mountainous coat rack instead, and then *oh*, not even that, that's her mom, that's *Sienna*. The only long things I ever heard her say were stories; and when I told her I was born from nothing and I had no family, she wept for ten or fifteen minutes before I saw her first tear fall.

Kseniya's father was even worse.

I actually thought for a while that Kseniya's father was gone — that he'd gone off and turned into the fields or a mountain or something. There was this way that he was always referenced with a kind of casual wave off into the wilderness; like pointing to a landmark, when they indicated him. It wasn't until I'd spent a week there that I actually *met* him, when he stomped in for dinner one Friday night, all gnarled muscle and oak-bark skin, with his misshapen face and his extra eye, and he wheeled Kseniya about like a dancer when she "Da!"d him.

"This is what's-her-name," Kseniya introduced us proudly. "And Da!"

"Jasmine," I explained.

"Brice," he said. He took my hand lightly with the vast thick plate of his. He didn't let go for a while. That's usually really uncomfortable when guys do it, but I think it was just taking him a while to figure out what to say. "I'd heard things."

"Yeah," I said, embarrassed.

"Hm," he said. He let go.

"I'm going to break the world," I told him.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! I yelled at myself in my head, but he just gave me this marvellous smile. "We all make mistakes," he said.

I couldn't be angry at him. Not the way he said it, like he'd broken the world once or twice himself, when young.

And we ate.

I was finishing off a plate of — to this day I do not know. I think it may have been some sort of *wood* — when I found myself saying, "I'm a little scared of ripping people's souls out."

Kseniya was the only one to reply, and it was after a while. "It does seem scary."

"I can just *do* it," I said. "I mean, I grew up thinking, even if I wanted to hurt people. Even if I wanted to do magic. It wouldn't matter, because like I could do that. I was just some random girl."

"I always knew that someday I'd be able to do like Harald could," Kseniya said.

I looked at her.

"Well, since Gazebra, anyway. I mean, once I knew it was *real* and not just history stuff like knights and zeps."

It was weird because her parents were right there, but they were *silent*, and I wanted to *know*, so I asked her, "What was it like for you?"

"I didn't want to ever do it again," she said.

"Oh."

"I look at people, and I think, you know, I've done this kind of magic now, I bet I could figure out the rest. There's a kiss, right? And then you stick your hand in their chest and hope you don't

accidentally make a giant hole in their lungs or intestines. And then the rest — then you sort of *imagine* . . .”

“It’s not imagining,” Sienna said.

Kseniya: “Hm?”

Sienna did a rolling shrug. “You tell the flesh a story. That is all. The first magic was learning to take the heart out and tell a story to it. The second magic was learning to tell a story directly to the flesh. The third magic was learning to seal the flesh so that it listens to stories no longer.”

“How isn’t that imagining?” I asked.

“You can imagine without stories,” she said. “You can imagine the sun into the sky. You can imagine the earth and the life on it. You can imagine the world giving forth its grain. That is not a story. It is not a story until the wind blows in the fields and they begin to move, to stir, to shift, to flow like the currents of the sea. The mountains can be imaginers but the wind is a storyteller.”

“Oh.”

After a while I said, “Should I tell stories?”

There was a passing cloud of anger across her face. She took her plate into the kitchen. I did not hear her answer at the dinner table; nor that night; nor the next; but her answer was still the next thing she said to me, not long before I left them:

“If you are a storyteller.”

And she hugged me and I honestly think it would have killed me if I hadn’t taught my flesh to shift when I needed it. I think she would have broken my chest, that my ribs would have splintered inwards, spiked my lungs, and my stomach burst around all recent meals, and my back, finally, snapped; but instead, at some point during my flailing, I slithered away ophidian, instead, and felt, well, cheered.

Again, this is not a PSA. This story is not about lessons like “claim to be a robot,” “have as many feet as possible,” “don’t stick broken keys in your ears,” or “it’s OK to rip people’s souls out if you’re a storyteller.” This story is for turning into a leviathan of burnished brass and gleaming chrome; for taking up he the lord of Death’s dominion he in a dozen or so brass tentacles, ripping him into pieces, and scattering them across the unforgiving earth.

Or, you know, whatever.

I don’t want to get my ideological agenda all up in my autopoietic transformation. I don’t want to sneak in some kind of under-the-radar assertion that Sienna was super-wise and that ripping out Mikhael’s soul was totally OK because I’m a *storyteller* only to have it turn into a structural defect in the hydraulics.

It’s just . . .

It was really nice, you know?

It was nice that there was at least one person that I looked up to who’d never think I was bad, not intrinsically or inherently bad anyway, just because I might conceivably spend a little too much time kissing random people of my acquaintance, reaching my good left or right hand into their chests, pulling their hearts out, and using the rest of them in magic. She got that. She was OK with that.

She understood.

I came back to School.

The colour left Randal's face when he saw me. I think I terrified him.

He walked over to me anyway.

"We shouldn't do it in the halls," I said.

He looked wry.

I felt defensive. "Because I don't know how they figured out the thing with Mikhael!"

"That's true," he said.

"It is possible that they are always watching us with hidden cameras," I said, which made me feel suddenly, terrifyingly lunatic. "I mean, the Principal. I mean, . . . I don't know what I mean."

"Hell if I know," he said, and shrugged.

"But not listening," I said. "I mean, obviously."

"You are making this harder," he said.

"Oh."

He looked away. "I don't know which of us thinks I'm an ooze," he said.

I took this as a request for a detailed exposition of my technical thoughts on the subject. "I suspect that the form is premised on your nature and your underlying being but organized in a fashion that fits my imagination — like, the homogeneity and affectation towards the void is a reference to your underlying structure, while the viscosity, appearance, and malleability come from what I'm trying to use you for —"

He was still kind of pale, even after all that highly useful data.

"The thing is," I said, "I figure that if I can mold you to the gates, I can use you as a kind of plaster cast — oh, we should be walking towards them; I figure that I can probably get us past Lee Scathing and then it's straight on to Lethe."

". . . right," he said. He began walking.

"— and basically *fit* you to what's needed to open up the world to the endless void."

"It's nice that you're picking up my hobbies," he said, with a nervous laugh.

"We're still broken up," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Broken up. Heroes, though. Me especially."

"Freak," I said. I hit him on the arm. I don't think he felt it. I didn't like use magic or anything.

"I mean, we're going to be remembered forever," he said. "If time endures. I don't know if time is going to endure."

I shook my head.

"That sucks," he said.

I shrugged.

"Still," he said. He grimaced. "I mean, — it'll be you and me. So that's kind of cool, even if . . . even if we . . . you know."

That almost won my heart back. I suddenly almost loved him, did love him, maybe, had this surge of warm affection. I actually went to kiss him and had him blush and look away and say:

"Wait till *later*. Dork."

"Heh."

That can happen when you conspire with your ex-boyfriend to end the world.

We went down the lift. No alarms rang. I knew how it worked down there. I knew where the technicians would be. I knew Lee Scathing probably wasn't around, not at fourth period. I didn't know where Vanessa was, but I knew which way she'd go if *she* wanted to sneak through and not be seen.

When we were in far enough, when there was just a couple halls and a possibly-manned desk between me, Randal, and the pathway down to Lethe, I kissed him.

It was gentle. It was nice. It was probably the nicest kiss we ever had, maybe the only kiss we ever had that both of us were really ready for.

Then I bent him back, pulled the name of him from his chest, and let the rest of him rain down to the floor as a bubbling soup of night.

"Go, go," I said, and he launched his tendrils forward, anchored them thousandfold in the room beyond, glorped himself over a startled kid at a startled desk —

. . . I suppose that technically the desk wasn't startled, although I like to imagine, you know, that maybe it was. Maybe desks just sit around, you know, living their desky life, and that was the craziest thing that particular desk had ever seen. It probably was all: *chair! Chair! Did you SEE?* And the chair was all: *YES, DESK, HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY IMAGINE I WAS GOING TO MISS THAT?*

— and eddied past and on into the steam tunnels and uncarved caves below, to die against the gates of Lethe.

I would like to tell you Randal's story. I would like to tell you how this happened, and through his eyes.

I can't do that.

Something rises, something struggles, something falls . . .

It's not like my eyes look all that different, not now, not any longer. They're the same, in that sense, they're Rider eyes like his were, portals to night and falling stars. I'm not even completely sure that there *is* an actual visual difference —

But my eyes are mine. They're in *my* head. I see through them. He that saw through his eyes was he his own.

He had his own life, his own name, his own voice; only, not right *then*.

Something slips, like a grinding gear.

He didn't have a voice any longer when I killed him. He didn't have a heart. He didn't have a name. Or rather, I had all those things, for him. I was the she who held them in my hand.

I think he was not that good a person. I think he broke me and I think he died trying to make himself important. I think he wanted to do good for the world, for everyone in the world. I think he chose to let himself become something that horrified him, let himself give up having arms and legs and a head and looking like a person instead of some kind of hideous oozetosity, because he wanted to save you. And me. And him.

Because he wanted the True Thing.

I think all of that. I think I would like to tell you all his flaws and all his truths and have you think at the end of it that he was a hero, and feel good about yourself for seeing that, and good about me for being willing to show it to you, and good, in the end, about him.

I can't do that.

In the end he wasn't there when he died. In the end there wasn't a *him* to do all of that. In the end there was just me.

I took the flesh that had been Randal. I wove him into an instrument of my will. I pit it against the Basalt Gates and burst his flesh in exactly the same way he'd once smashed my heart. I thought I was so clever, I thought I'd solved it, I thought that he'd made the mistake, that he'd used the heart that was a key and not the flesh that could be anything against those gates, and that I could do better; but in the end, I made an even worse hash of it than had he.

I understood the magic oh so very well but I did not understand the Basalt Gates.

They shuddered as I pushed Randal against them. They sang. The world shook and there were cracks in the walls and the entirety of the lie screamed and was made naked before the True Thing as I strove: but the gates burned him, made a red cut through him, and then he broke.

The night of him died against the world and void.

I struggled. I pushed.

I managed. For just a moment, I managed. I gaped the world open. I cracked it. I saw what waited beyond Lethe.

And all was made as night.

I have lied to you.

I've lied to you over and over again. I have to apologize.

Through that crack in the world I saw the god of iron. Giselle, I mean, but also — I saw the principle she was made as, created as he created her, message from he the Headmaster to the world.

To see the god of iron is to realize that at least one of the things that I've been saying all this time —

It wasn't true.

I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you all of you and *you*, my dear and darlings, you in particular, and I wanted you to think that you were worthy. I wanted you to think you were made good. I wanted you to think that the truth, it loved you, that the True Thing loved you, that you were already and pricelessly made good.

Here is the iron.

Giselle stood there at the gates, clad all in armour, iron was she through and ringed with fire; and her sword and her shield and her body all spoke the name that is iron's name, she was clad in it, armoured in it, armed with it, and made expression for it, the part of the truth that is iron. The thing that makes iron cut, and sickens Jotun like Kseniya, and burns.

She stood many-handed the guardian of the void against the world, and to look at her was to be drawn past the surface of the metal: to lose the grip of your eyes on the shapes of things, on the *having shapes* of things, and fall into the patterns of light and shadow and sideways onto revelations, until you snap up your head and pull away from it and find your whole body remembering, speaking, articulating these words:

Not for you is made the world, nor is the void.

Not yours.

There *is* something beautiful. There *is* something transcendent, and to know it is to love it, and to know it is to love *all things*, including you, beloved. You ought to see it. You do deserve to see it. I hurt that you exist and do not know this, but —

It's not made *for* you. It was never *for* you.

The void was created for itself.

Not yours.

Not for us was this creation created. Not to us was the True Thing given. Not for us is the truth manifested. The greatness and the majesty and the glory of it are not made for us; Death and void and truth and all eternity were made and they were given to themselves. There is beyond us a vast and hungering greatness and we owe it our lives and our service as a matter of simple duty. *It owes us nothing in return.*

We who would steal the *cintamani* —

We who would demand from the void that we be made good — well, that was always an awful crime. We who would *insist* that we be worthy —

We don't have a right to that, no matter how we demand it.

It has no obligation to make us good.

It owes us nothing. It didn't ask for us. It does not *belong* to us, the void.

That is the iron.

That is the message Giselle was created to give to us. That is what she was born for, lest we of the world go out once again into the darkness and condense its worth into a stone. That is the lesson she was made to give to us, from her brother, who is Death; the iron, the guardian of the gates, the sealing of the void against the world:

There may be a Heaven. There may be a worth, and the True Thing, and a power to make you good.

Not yours.

So I saw her there, I who would be your saviour, and it broke me too.

Maybe I could have saved Randal, if it hadn't. Maybe I could have kept him alive. Maybe I couldn't've. Maybe there just wasn't enough power in his flesh.

I tried to keep him together, I tried to hold him coherent, but I was distracted and I was broken and Randal shattered, Randal dissolved, and Randal he went out.

I stared into that iron and into that fire that swirled about it. My eyes sank again and again into the curves and reflections of that shield, that sword, that face. I was shaken, I was lost, I was sickened at my heart, and then suddenly I saw something else, suddenly I understood something else, suddenly I found enough points of reference to see it, to put it together, to understand what the Headmaster had taken from us to defend he him:

"Giselle?"

She made a bitter, choked noise, maybe a laugh, and she looked away; and the Basalt Gates slammed closed.

Something rises, something struggles, . . . something falls.

After a while Lee Scathing found me there.

"Well," he said.

He knelt beside me. He shook my shoulder. Eyes faded into being, swivelled, looked at me, and faded away; they grew where his shoulder should have been, where his arm should have been, his hand, his stomach, his legs, once even in place of one of his physical eyes; they appeared and glutted themselves with sight — the sight of me, of the cavern around us, of whatever was where they looked — they drank that vision in, consumed it, *digested* it in some fashion, then sank into their sockets and pulled their reality in after them and vanished; they were not flesh, but some principle of looking, and when one of them was looking at me the space around it had no *him* in it, it was made void, it had only the same darkness in it that I see, that any person sees, just outside the field of vision of their eyes.

I did not respond. He sighed.

"I sensed you blundering about down here," he said. "You disturb me, you know. How did you get so *close*? It makes no sense to me. And so foolish. Why would you imagine that you could just — open the gates? Why would you think that, Ms. . . ." He squinted. "Apocynum? Can you not understand that Death would have defences?"

He pulled my head up. He looked at me.

"Well," he said. "It is not your fault. You are clearly addled."

I made a face at him.

"It's the eyes," he said. "You're not seeing. We need eyes to appreciate our own mistakes. But then we grow to love them. We marry them, we and our sins. It's a problem. Let's go upstairs a bit. Meddling child," he said, his voice oddly warm with it, "I want you to explain just what you've done."

I actually held on to his arm. I can't believe I did that. I held on to his arm, except once when we were walking I remembered the eye that had opened in it and imagined that I was crushing it with my fingers and I let go and I screamed, or squealed, maybe, and I fell over. He picked me up again.

"I really can't understand how you could get to this point before I did," he said. "The Principal, maybe. John Wicked, got he in the game. Vanessa, maybe, if she slipped my hand and learned my tricks. But you? You're simply impossible. You don't even know chemistry. I know. I asked."

He grinned a bit as we walked.

"Pulled your records, rather. Stared off into the distance quite a bit while thinking about them, Vanessa claims."

"He died."

"Vanessa's not a he, Ms. Apocynum."

"No," I agreed.

I tried to pull away from him. For a moment he fought me. I tried to turn into a lizard. I didn't get it right. I was still tall and had the normal number of hands and arms and legs and I guess lizards do, but one of my legs was a tail. I tried to be a porcupine and he let go but I hadn't stabbed him properly. I tried to turn into a wolf and got confused about whether I was turning into a werewolf or a wolf, because, you know, I'd been human, so if I turned into a wolf, wouldn't that *be* turning into a werewolf?

Mostly by the time he helped me get up again I hadn't really changed anything, except that maybe my hair was really looking kind of goofy and it had feathers in.

He helped me into a wheeled chair. It was in one of the detention chambers. I suppose that technically I might have qualified for detention.

"Talk," he said.

I blearilied at him. I acted in a bleary fashion. I don't know what acts I took. I was just bleary about them. I think my hair was trying to pollinate and my liver was trying to grow spines at him. Stars fell sideways in my eyes.

I threw up, finally, and felt a little better after that.

He poked the side of his cheek out with his tongue. I think it was his tongue. It was inside his cheek so it could have been an eye. I threw up some more. Then I decided it was a tongue and felt kind of ridiculous.

"OK, then," he said. "Listen."

I giggled.

"Did you think that he would just let us take another run at him after the *cintamani*?" Lee Scathing asked.

"Um," I said.

"The world is hollow," he said. "It's missing something. It *needs* something, which can be taken from the void. But the void has defences. It's not just a matter of opening the gates, not that I've managed even that, so — go you, I suppose — but that's not enough. You can't just go out there and hope for the best. It's not going to happen that easily again. The operation needs to be a masterstroke. Targeted. Conscious. Overwhelming. It has to hit the void before it even sees it coming, from a direction that it cannot even imagine, and overwhelm he the lord of Death's dominion he before he can gather his will or his armies to respond. *That* is the endgame, Ms. Apocynum. . . . Can I call you Jasmine?"

"Sparky."

He squinted at me. "What's-her-name?"

"Jasmine," I conceded.

"Jasmine."

"OK."

"I've spent years, you know," he said. "Years, and you walk in and you practically open up the gates, you don't even know what you're doing, as far as I can tell, you probably just had, like, Vanessa, she took you down there and said, 'look, pretty gates!' and you said, 'I know! I'll turn my hair into some daisies and the gates of death will open up!'"

"That is not exactly what happened," I said.

"This is just great," he said. "Tell me that it was at least not a madcap accident. Tell me the world is not an utter and complete farrago of idiocy and misapprehension. Tell me you at least know *how*."

"How?"

"Right," he said. "I made empty bodies. But they couldn't get through the gates. I made Vanessa. She couldn't get through the gates. I made half-finished monkeys, but I actually didn't even bother to try, because I thought, you know, if that's the key, if the goal here is to make half-finished monkeys —"

"You're not serious."

"No," he conceded. "I'm mimicking your usual jaunty glibness. In truth, I gave up on the simian project and then I had to leave the monkeys active because Vanessa liked them."

"You made *her*?" I said, catching up.

"I needed an innocent," he said. "It is very difficult to make an innocent. One must start from the beginning. Children — have you ever seen kindergarteners? They are not suitable candidates to raise to innocence. Even Vanessa is . . . slipping."

"You can't *make* people," I said.

He shrugged.

"She's a *person*."

"And I am not," he said, softly. He looked away. "I'm the blood of a dead Principal, spiralled down the drains into the dark. I'm the eyes of a forgotten God. I'm Lee Scathing, and I'll thank you not to tell me what I can and cannot do; but also —"

"What?"

"It's so totally not the point," he said, "that I don't think you could *see* the point from there."

"Oh."

I frowned. I actually felt a little humble, then, though I think — I think it was not before Lee Scathing, but before the memory of Giselle.

"I used Randal," I said.

"Some sort of prokaryote?" he guessed.

I didn't say that he was my boyfriend. That is never a winning line after someone asks you whether something is a prokaryote. I don't know much about biology but I do know that one. It's not a winning line there to call somebody your ex-boyfriend either. In fact any reference at all to romantic or friendly relationships in that context is likely to get you accused of having an extremely poor understanding of taxonomy. "It's complicated."

He sighed. "He's going to come for you," he said. "Death's going to come for you. You're going to die. I'll try to protect you. I don't like you, so get that out of your head, I just . . . I mean, you're a student. You're under my authority here. If you live I can make you work detention until you turn *gray*, you'll not even remember what the colours of the world above are like. But he's going to take you. If you want me to be able to pull you back from death, afterwards, you're going to have to talk."

Somewhere along the line I'd dropped Randal's heart. I felt kind of bad about that. You shouldn't kill someone and abandon their soul in a maintenance tunnel.

"I —" I fell silent.

"We have the same goal, don't we?" he said. "Don't we both want the same thing here, to seize some sort of value from the void? To set the deeps on fire like the sun lights up the sky? To *make us pure*?"

"No."

"No?"

"I wanted to open it," I said, "and kill the world."

Silence took him for a bit. It caught his tongue. Then he said, "Oh."

"I thought if we opened it," I said, "then the world would go out, like a candle, and there would only be the True Thing, and everybody would know it, and everyone would see it, and everyone would be at peace, and loved. But instead — instead —"

"It is only natural," he said.

"Pardon?"

"We are wicked creatures," he said. "So we seek annihilation. To be wicked is to not want to live, not really, because to be wicked is to be wrong. It would be better to purify ourselves, though, I'd think. It is possible to purify ourselves. There is a seed of goodness buried in the sin."

"There's *not*."

"That is the Headmaster talking," he said softly.

"What?"

"Always he tells me this," said Lee. "Always he is whispering to me, there is no goodness to be found, if I scrape down the wickedness forever I shall only make it bleed and fray away and nothing left remaining, no pearl inside the oyster, only grit inside the pearl. Always he is telling me, cut away the sin as you like, Lee Scathing, but there is only deeper wickedness within. But I do not believe in this. You do not believe in this. You must not believe in this. Cut away the awfulness of things and things are good."

"They are not so."

He dabbed at my forehead with a little towel. I don't really know why. He asked me, "Oh?"

"You're scrubbing down the wrong thing," I said.

He waited.

"There is only the *is*," I said, "the isness. That is good. And then there is the lie, and under the lie there is a lie, and under that is more deception — we cannot make ourselves good with words or actions."

"Then how?"

I closed my eyes. The face of iron loomed behind that dark. I found myself chewing on my thumbnail, and then, because that looked too much like sucking on my thumb in front of Lee, my

index fingernail, instead. "I think," I said, "that if we are good, then we are good, and if we are not, then we are not."

For a moment I saw something better than that.

For a moment I held the pattern of it in my mind, the rose and leaves of it, that *goodness* is a *word* — but it fell from me, and all I can remember is that useless statement now.

So he sighed. He said, "Tell me how you opened up the gates."

"I took out Randal's heart," I said.

He'd seen the residue. "That was a *kid*?" he said.

"He'd opened up his heart to me," I said. "He let me see the hook at the end of it. So I took that and I dragged it out of him. Then I used his flesh in magics."

"I'd heard of that," he said. He thought on it for a bit. "I thought it was literal. Then I tried it. Then I decided it didn't work. It's . . . not literal, then. It's a sin-word, a metaphor, a spirit-thing?"

"Pardon?"

"You —"

He thought about this for a bit.

"The hook," he said. "Describe it?"

"I don't know how," I said. "People have hooks in them. Their heart swims up and there are things that stick out of them like a spear sticking through them of them. Their struggling gives them *handles*. If they're stuck, if they're slipping, if they're repeating, if there's something pushing the hooks out of them, there are hooks and handles to them. You've never seen?"

"I try not to," he said.

"You look at them with the kind of look that sees things as themselves," I said, "and then there's the heart moving under the surface of the thing, and it sticks out its hooks. They want you to pull on them."

I shrugged. "They need it, even, sometimes."

"I see," he said.

He thought about this for a bit. We were in silence.

"I don't suppose you know," he said, "where the actual original *cintamani* went?"

I shook my head.

He made a soft, unhappy noise. He gave me a half-smile, like, *I'm going to leave you here and go away to think about stuff. Don't leave the room or I'll have to kill you.* That kind of expression. He turned. He walked away. At the door of the room — he didn't lock it, he didn't even close it all the way, he just stopped at the door and said, "I'm going to leave you here and go away to think about stuff. Don't leave the room or I'll have to kill you."

That's how I understood his expression, by the way. He explained it.

Then he left.

So I sat there.

After a while I began to cry again, because there's only so long you can sit in detention and worry about Lee Scathing before you remember that you've just killed a boy you knew.

It Burned It
not so very long ago

This is where it all goes spare.

I can look back and I can tell you that this is the exact moment where everything fell apart. This is where it turned awful and beautiful: Kseniya knocking at the door. Kseniya, who never comes down there. Kseniya, tall and strong and ill-at-ease in the subterranean world of Lee Scathing and the Basalt Gates. Kseniya, who ought properly be standing in a field somewhere, or on a mountain, with the wind blowing in her hair, not in cramped small spaces, not in darkness, not in iron.

"I have discovered," she said, "that you have been arrested for attempting to violate reality. Naturally, I thought: *what took them so long?* But also I decided to visit you in your cell."

"Hey," I said.

The tears had stopped. That was a while ago. I was just sitting there, by then. Not arrested, for clarity. I mean, I want to be clear about this with you. I don't think I had been arrested. Arguably, since Lee Scathing is at least technically just a student, I hadn't even formally been detained. It's just the thing that Kseniya happened right then to say.

"You OK?" she said.

She came in. I tried to track the path information had followed. Lee had . . . spoken to Vanessa? Vanessa had told Kseniya? Natalia had a tap into the hidden cameras? One of the daisy petals from my hair had slipped into the ventilation to deliver a warning?

She reached out to touch my face. "You've been crying," she said.

I shook her off. I wheeled my chair backwards away from her.

"Well, you have," she said.

She sat against the wall.

"I got into a fight a few weeks ago," she said. "The rugby team offended me."

"Really?"

"I had tension to burn off," she said, after a while. "I figured they would not mind. It transpired that they did."

"Did you win?"

"Nah," she said. "They've got vampires."

"Kseniya," I said.

"I didn't fight them at night!" she said. "It was just, you know, indoors."

"I see."

"I miss it," she said.

"What?"

"When I was a kid, I wasn't afraid of being me. I wasn't trying to fit in with you people all the time. I could just be Kseniya."

"I'm not 'you people,'" I said. Then I laughed. "I mean, in multiple senses."

"It's just really hard," she said. "And I really thought, they're a rugby team, they won't mind."

"I see."

"So now I push carts and walk hallways for Lee Scathing," she said. "And he talks to me about souls, and flesh, and hearts, and then he takes Vanessa into his office, and he does the same with her."

I frowned.

"And I am afraid," she said. She stretched out her hands. She looked at them. "I don't know why. I only know that I am afraid. She is not to me what you were. She is not to me what Giselle was. But she is my friend. And you are my friend. And suddenly I am afraid."

The fear was a hook, and I found myself reaching —

I held me back.

"I saw her," I said.

"Who?"

"Giselle," I said.

"I don't know what you mean, sparky," Kseniya said.

"I opened the gates," I said, "and beyond them there was Giselle, it was *Giselle*, iron and fire in the dark of it, and I looked at her, and she broke me, and the truth has no love for little souls like we."

Kseniya sat down. She dropped cross-legged onto the floor. Her face worked.

"You wouldn't be able to touch her," I said. "She wore iron."

Kseniya held her hand in front of her chest. She closed it slowly, as if to squeeze the air. She closed her eyes. It was a while before she said, "Tell me all of it."

"I took out Randal's heart," I said. "I made him of that substance, and brought he down, and melded him against the gates, and there he broke, and there he died, and I killed him, and the gates they opened and Giselle looked in, all iron and fire was she all, it was in the *skin* and *bones* and *hair* of her, and I asked her, I said her name, I asked her, but the gates they only slammed."

"Why?"

I couldn't say. I didn't know. I don't know, even now, not really, I just assume —

Only, it didn't matter. That didn't matter. I could feel it building in her. I could feel it *rising* in her like a series of drum crescendos, this helplessness, this fear, this rage that had no outlet in her, this need and drive, this *thing that moves*. It was a storm in her. It rose, it struggled, then it tumbled down. It tiled the world around me with the flares and spans of it. It rose out of her like a spring uncoiling, it unfurled wings, it filled the world with the beating of those wings, it flung itself — again and again — against the limitations of the flesh. I saw it in her. I felt it with her. It was a movement in me as it was moving in her:

Something rising. Something struggling. Something falling.

Something rising. Something struggling. Something fell.

Something rising. Something struggling. Something falling.

Something rising. Something struggling. Something —

Found.

It found its expression in her; it peaked itself through her; rose and rode through her did they the hungers of her heart. She took my hands, I felt that from both sides of it, we took Jasmine's hands with our Kseniya's, as if to give our heart into them; and she said and my heart spoke with her:

"Give me wings and faces, give me rivers, peaks, and fire: only make me strong and durable enough," she said, "and I will bring her home."

There was nothing else for it, of course.

There was nothing else for it. Not then.

I pulled it out of her, ripped it from her with a kiss, took her heart and bent her sideways from the world, occulted the space around her, twisted her, made her grow; gave it to her to stand tall, as her ancestors stood tall, made wings for her, and tendrils for her, and faces opening and closing were they all, made her as a coral mandala blooming in the nothingness, ignored the Gates, declared victory against them before I challenged them, spread her on both sides of them, simply *put her outside and beyond them*, to be my weapon, her weapon, of our will; filled the basements of the School and through them and the void beyond, unfolded her like a flower or a fire blooming, set her to unfurl and be apocalypse, and half of her apart from me and half of her beside me, scissoring around and across the gates between them to snap them from the other side, shaking and cracking Lee Scathing's halls and tunnels and chambers, distorting the substance of the void; only, between the world and void, or at the edges of the void, at least, was iron.

Kseniya she stepped she forward in the darkness.

"Hey," she thundered, and shook the void. "Hey! Gazebra! Don't make trouble! You're coming home."

And she was her again, the shape of she again, she could be no other; she dropped back into being *Kseniya*, now with the gates torn wide; she caught up iron in her arms and the heart of Kseniya caught fire in my hands; the flame it burned me, struck me *seared me* from my

consciousness, fell me to the floor, and I passed out, lost the sight of her, and time ticked by, and when I woke it was still burning.

I couldn't put it out.

I knew it was Lee when he shook my shoulder. Only, it wasn't.

He picked me up.

He squinted at me, looked into my eyes, he the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy he. I looked me back.

"I'm an armadillo," I told him.

It was true. More or less. It's a good shape to be miserable in. There's something wired right into the armadillo brainstem for just plain wishing you were dead, and you don't have to be as furry as an opossum.

"Really," he said.

"Yuh-huh."

"You're talking," he pointed out. "Armadillos don't talk."

"The world is a shell of lies," I said. "That's probably just a misconception."

"That would explain it," he said.

He put me on his shoulder. He stared down thoughtfully at the burning heart. He shrugged. He turned away. I rolled up and fell off. He caught me. He put me back. I tried to let go again and he hurt me, flares of fire and madness in the night, and I held on instead.

He walked out with me, he the Headmaster of the Bleak Academy.

"We keep meeting," he said. "It occurs to me that I should pay attention to you."

He walked down towards the steam tunnels and through the tumbled halls. He had only the faintest limning of his true self about him; he could almost have qualified as a man. If I hadn't seen him voidwards, through the eyes of the soulless; if I hadn't watched him fight Kseniya; if I hadn't seen what he *was*, I could have mistaken him for human then, or something *like* human, like, a vampire or something, instead of he the lord of Death's dominion he.

"It's probably just a coincidence," I said.

"Mm," he said. He gave me a sideways look. "I like the eyes. They give you that certain *je ne sais quoi* of an armadillo whose eyes are gateways onto endless night."

"I can't fix them," I said.

"Yeah," he said. He grinned casually. "It's a thing. Listen. We're always looking for new students at the Bleak Academy. People who've transcended this little world. People who're ready to experience . . . new vistas, as it were."

"I actually kind of hate you," I said.

He blinked.

"You were all Giselle had," I said.

"Ah," he said.

He stopped in the hallway. He stood there for a while. For a moment his hand touched his chest; then he walked forward and put that hand against one of the vitreous chambers instead. He stared at it for a while.

"We used to want the world back," he said.

"What?"

"We did!"

Sick fear coiled around my voice. "You don't?"

"The world changed," he said. "Now it's probably for the best if it lives it out."

"That's not true," I said. I pulled myself away from his shoulder. I had my tail and two legs still hooked on his neck, I couldn't even make them let go, but the rest of me was struggling, pulling away, stretching from his shoulder like a winged snake. "It's not. It's still deserved. It's still *right* to end it."

"You don't understand," he said.

"I don't!"

"You learned to *see*," he said. "I mean, some of you. You learned to *see* things. We can't just have you all out in the emptiness seeing things. You'd ruin it. You'd ruin death."

"That is ridiculous," I told him. "You can't just leave everybody alive forever, for one thing."

"They'll live until they're done," he said. "Until they've burnt out their eyes with living or stood out enough to get an admissions package. It's not perfect, not for either side of us, but it'll do. Besides, you people want it. I can see you, you know. On the other side of the Gates, all *wanting* it. Whatever it is you think life really is, you *want* it, you glug it down like milk and nectar, you belly up to it and lick it, you suckle on it, you whine and whimper for it, you cry like little babies when somebody comes up to steal your lives away. You cannot tell me that you do not want it, even you who would end it; and *they* most definitely love their lives."

"That is the outcome of an illusion!"

"No," he said.

He pulled my head around to face him. I flicked my tongue and struggled in his hand.

"It's not *just* illusion," he said. "It's — I spoke too harshly. There's something . . . unfinished . . . too."

I managed to look away.

"No?" He sighed. "Well, that's something that we can talk about. I mean, later. This world is a poison, you know. It's dangerous. We're going to go out there, and close the gates behind us, and breathe no more for a while of this sick and poisoned air."

He straightened up. He smiled at his reflection. For just a moment the world flickered. He walked away.

"Poisoned?" I said.

"You all *want* things," he said, "so very *hard* —"

He actually didn't finish that whole word. He got cut off in the middle of its end. He didn't get a *chance* to finish it, because there was rubble falling from the ceiling, and a steam pipe creaking, and Natalia descended from the sky.

It has to have been on purpose.

I'd damaged the place. I mean, with Kseniya. I'd shaken the tunnels and cracked them. In theory the ceiling could have just crumbled from that, she could have just been standing on top of it and then *whoa!* and fallen through, but it *has* to have been on purpose. She's Natalia Koutolika. I figure she must just get a kick out of it, I mean, out of heroically descending from the heights.

She landed in the rubble. It was smooth: two bent knees, two fingers of her right hand forward and two fingers back, then straightening and tossing back her dustless hair. It was visceral, how impossible she was. She was some foreign flawless god.

"Pardon," she said. Her eyes met our eyes. "But I don't think unauthorized personnel should be kidnapping children from Principal Entropy's School."

"It's not a child," he said.

I really wanted him to say "it's an armadillo." Seriously. I was all ready to take advantage of that slip of the tongue, to flap my wings and struggle with my attachment to his shoulder and make a casual ruin of his claims. I would probably even say something to the effect that I was in fact a rare and precious zoological specimen —

"And I'll thank *you*," he said, instead, "to step aside."

She focused on me. She frowned. "Are you all right?" she asked me, rather bluntly.

I looked away.

She said: "That settles that."

She traced one foot through a half-circle on the ground, ending up behind her. She bent her forward knee. She turned one hand up and one hand down and she did not back away.

His eyelids twitched. He may have smiled. It's really hard to tell, I think, with Rider eyes.

Then he said: "One moment."

He pulled me from his shoulder. He set me aside. I immediately demanded of my flesh that it scramble away, that it shift into something lethal or something elusive and *escape*, but that did not

happen. Instead I writhed, twitched, struggled but I could not really move. I was all over pins and needles and clumsiness, for he'd set his will on mine.

I'd seen him move like this before. I'd made *Kseniya* move like this, sort of, though nowhere near as well. He transcended the hall, as if he were an actor on a stage and the hall his prop. He made her as if a real thing, and she a story — became he not so much a physical participant in the events around him as an absolute limitation against which they would splash. He stretched her between the world and void. He moved like a sphere in flatland, not just left, right, forward, back, and up/down, but *lifewards* and *voidwards* too.

He burned with the light of her even to my ordinary eyes.

It shouldn't have been possible. Looking at him with ordinary vision, I should just have taken in a pattern of light falling on my eyes — it shouldn't have been possible to see the *feeling* of his motion or the light of her himself. I shouldn't have been able to *feel* the muscles stretching smoothly as he started moving, nor see straight through the shadow of his head to the smile on its other side.

He was death, though. I've said that. Death, or the lord of Death's dominion, he. He was God or the Devil, maybe, like I've said, and I've never known which one is he. He wasn't something you could fight just because you could lay your hand on the arm of him, like Natalia did as he struck her. He wasn't someone you could move with mortal torque.

What good is mortal force? What good is Mr. Skiven's physics?

What good is martial arts against death itself? The Devil? God?

She might as well have tried to push the planets from their courses while still standing on them. You might as well breathe, center yourself, blow on your hands, take up your stance, and shove reality out of the way — push against the air, knock it aside like a feeble prop, tear through the screen of world like a movie character forcing themselves out onto the audience and stand before the True Thing in mortal flesh. As well set your will against the bleak and skull-made darkness of the bodied brain, force a vision on it, and use that to displace the actual things seen by your eyes.

As well fly.

Wake up one morning and choose to live forever; or topple Heaven; or save the world.

I heard her startled, choking squeak as she totally failed and he broke her collarbone. I saw her twist in the air, set a second hand on his arm, and try to move it. It was like watching somebody attempting Judo on a bear. It did *nothing*. It moved him not a fraction, he broke with physics, and he slammed her into the wall and she used it for leverage but it was her hip and the wall itself that gave, not he.

Wind howled down the halls, down to the gates, and outwards.

I could not bear to look at him. He had become madness made flesh. He made her an alien music and evoked strobe lights and living fear. To look at him, to hear him, to be near him, was to feel the rolling movement — like tumbling boulders, like death by dehydration — that was his will to break Natalia and move that girl aside.

Her own body must have sung along with it — must have been following his will and his motion whenever her attention slipped, echoing them and he, her tissues and joints and the bones of her betraying her and following her the Headmaster's design.

She fell to the floor and she rolled away from his next strike, was caught by the next one after — a kick that lifted her physically into the air, she drifted upwards, floated, and his elbow came down towards her as she rose.

I will tell you of Natalia Koutolika.

In midair, as his elbow struck, she found the space between world and void. She tracked it, somehow; understood it, somehow, what he was doing, and he shoved her not down into the floor but towards somewhere *sideways* to all three dimensions; or rather, he didn't shove her, she . . . rolled with his motion, rather? She took that component of his motion — the deathwards motion? The voidwards motion? Possibly just some sort of tangential soulwards motion from reality? She

followed it, flowed with it, resonated with it as his motions sang to her body he, and she pulled him off balance with it in a direction that was not there.

The strobe-light of his motion flared and then burned out and she threw him straight from existence into nothingness, he flickered out like an empty corpse; she rolled him with his own momentum and before he could even *react* to it into *nowhere*, flung he into the void and maybe even past the void and stood there at impossible angles herself, halfway unreal herself, giving off a welter of confusing visual signals of her own. Then she slumped with a thunderclap into world and sound and her eyes sagged closed; the Basalt Gates slammed shut.

I stared at her.

She swayed on her feet. "*Chidaoba*," she said. Then clarified, "A wrestler's art. It is from Georgia."

I think that I passed out.

I think that I fell into the vast and endless comfort that is the world without myself, or myself without the world. I'm not sure. I startled back up fairly quickly.

"The heart," I said. I had hands. I was grabbing at Natalia's shoulder and her arm. "Kseniya's heart. It's *burning*."

She looked puzzled.

"Above," I said. "Above, in the detention room. It's burning."

Her face softened. She sat down beside me, cross-legged. She took my hands. "You're not sane," she said.

"We have to go," I said.

"I can't move you," she said. "I'm bleeding. You're hurt. And I do not trust you."

"What?"

She looked at me. Finally, she sighed. "You are so gullible, Natashenka," she murmured. "So desperate, Natashenka — fine."

She sighed again, then straightened, managed a weak smile.

"I'll believe you. I'll trust you, I guess. God. *You*. I'll trust *you*. I can't even read your eyes. . . . I'll need you portable, though. I can't carry you. Can you turn yourself back into an . . . um . . . a shoulder-dwelling snake-bat-thing?"

I fell into rabbit form. It's soft and comforting when you're at the end of your rope.

"That'll do," she admitted. She picked me up. She sniffed the air. She looked around. "This way?"

She didn't wait for a reply. She just began to run.

I'd kind of forgotten the damage she'd taken, particularly with the way she was carrying herself, but I couldn't really ignore the blood that began to soak my fur.

"Um," I said.

"Biofeedback," she said. "I'll be fine."

"Um."

It was wet. It was warm. It smelled awful. I don't ever want to be a vampire. If I ever turn into a vampire it is OK if you stake me. I mean, not really, I have things to do, I'd still have things to do even if I were a vampire, besides, I probably didn't actually turn into a vampire, I would probably have just *shapeshifted* into a vampire, I am probably just a transiently were-vampire, get with the program here, don't just *stake* me, but *abstractly*, in a hypothetical sense, do it and do it fast.

I could still smell it burning.

I could still smell the *smoke* of it, oh God, only Natalia was staggering, and I was fading in and out myself.

"I'm fine," she repeated.

This is where she departs our story, Natalia does; here we lose our unstoppable hero. Here we become vulnerable again to the lord of Death's dominion and must arm and armour ourselves with the knowledge of that weakness rather than the comfort of her unassailable strength.

She lives, I am told; she is healing well; but at this moment she departs our tale.

I don't know how many times she told me she was fine. A few at least, and I may have missed a few others. I owed her and more than owed her; I honoured her, but Kseniya was burning.

She fell. She got up. She staggered onwards.

She fell. She got up.

She fell. She got up. She staggered onwards.

She fell, and the fourth time was the game. I crawled a little further; that was all that I could manage.

Natalia did not move thereafter.

As for Kseniya, she just kept on burning.

I fell back into the dark.

Lee Scathing was sitting on a folding chair beside me as I woke.

That startled me — quite a bit, really. I was sharp-toned as I said, "What?"

"What?" he answered, defensively.

"Why are you here?"

"You were poisoned," he said. "And burned. And turned into a rabbit. I thought I would keep an eye on you."

I squeezed my eyes closed.

"You don't have to stay in detention when you're badly injured," he clarified. "I am not *guarding* you. I am simply here. And you are simply here. It is very simple."

"What happened," I said, slowly, "with *Kseniya*?"

"Oh," he said. His mouth worked. "I rather thought you'd know more of that than I do."

My muscles all locked up inside my body. They ground against my bones. I closed my eyes and stared at an infinite lightless space and all its static. I said, "*No*."

"It's going to be all right," he said from very far away.

That reminded me. Of course. Everything was going to be all right. I was going to make everything all right. I was going to strip away the lies, and —

There was — there was iron —

He left me alone there, after a while, so I could weep.

Days passed. The weekend came and left. I went to the Apocynum Room for lunch one day and nobody else was there. It didn't have to be that way. Mikhael *existed*. But that day I happened to be alone.

I beat my head against Kseniya's locker remembering the flame.

She was good, you know. She was made good. It wasn't just that she told me stories and tried to save Giselle. There was —

There was this one time, you know, when I was thirteen, I guess, and I was at the Park, and I brandished this hat that I was knitting, this hat that I was knitting for *Desmond*, before a swan.

It turned out that that wasn't a very good idea.

It didn't go like I expected.

It just laughed at me, you know? It just laughed, it didn't grace me, not at all; it didn't make me good; it was like the hat I was making for my brother didn't even *matter* to it, like my brother could fall out of the world for all *it* cared, and me, and all my workings too; but its eye fell on my knitting kit and it made a reluctant noise that I always thought was kind of like, "Nice hook, though," before it gave a gurgling scream and it charged.

I told that to her locker. I told it that, there, then, Kseniya: "A swan liked your crochet hook."

Ate it, even —

I'd woken up after and I was all over bruises, because it's not like some magical kind of fairy tale, it's not like that swan was just waiting for some ugly duckling to come along and to raise it up, it was a *swan*, they're like the apex predators of little ponds in magic Parks. I'd gotten that hat in the mud and my yarn in the mud and I promised myself I'd really carefully clean it and make a new hook and then I'd finish it, only I never did. And I never found the crochet hook, just an angry swan out there hacking and choking on the lake, so that's why I think that it ate it, that that's where that hook had gone —

But that's not material. The *point* is, it liked it.

"This Jotun," I told her, "this only hook, it was *worthy*; and therefore you are made good."

I'd told her about it a long time ago, and she'd said "Sparky, that was a *swan*." She didn't get it. She didn't even believe me that it could have been a swan person. She didn't believe me that she could have been made good. But her locker listened. Her locker *got* it.

I turned the tumblers of her locker with the key that is my heart and it opened before me.

There was only ash and emptiness inside.

After a while, Vanessa found me.

She was alive with a secret energy.

"I am to grow vast," Vanessa said.

She took my hands. She drew me down into the basement. I walked with her, and she beside.

"I am to bring forth a great harvest. I am planted, I am nurtured, I am cultivated, and the fruit of me shall make rectification to the earth."

I smiled at her a little.

"That is overwrought," I said.

"Mm."

I took it as a confirmation that she was pregnant. That is why I was kind. That is why I could still smile with her. Kseniya was still dead, burned, it was still my fault, I even still had to kill the world, but there were still some things — body things, deep body things like sickness, pregnancy, and loss — that mattered. That could still matter. Even then.

So I gave her this gentle smile — not *too* kind, not *too* pleased, just in case she planned to end it, or her body ended it of itself, but kind — and I asked her, "How many months?"

Her face spasmed. She looked away.

"Oh," she said.

She grimaced at the wall.

"Oh, that. *That*. I am made," she said, "Lee Scathing tells me, for *this* thing, this other thing, and not for that."

I should have taken warning from that. I should have seen it coming, somehow, could have, should have, I could have —

I didn't.

She squared her shoulders. "So."

I didn't know what she meant, so I hugged her, and I walked with her, and I let her choose her own moments to explain.

I wasn't even paying attention to where we were going; where we were walking; I came to the awareness of it slowly, and then I struggled with myself and didn't question her about it.

We reached the Basalt Gates and we stood before them and they were broken.

— not shattered. Not tumbled. Not yet.

I still, I —

They were still *there*, and principally whole. Just . . . broken.

There were cracks in them. There were pockmarks. There were little holes and crannies that showed the seething void, and the fire, beyond.

There was Lee Scathing, standing by the gates.

And

And and

And

There was a heart on a pedestal. It was still burning.

I opened my mouth. I stared at the heart. *Days*, I said, except it didn't come out of my mouth. There was just a horrid croak. *Why didn't you tell me. Did you even know? Did you even understand?*

"I've figured it out," Lee said. "I've got it. I wanted you to be here."

I'll kill you, I said, except that didn't make it out either. It was just a croak.

I looked between them with wild eyes.

"I've figured it all out," he said, "and I owe it to you."

His eyes were bright, like a child's, opening closing, shining, gleeful, alien, awful, and brilliant with cheer. He was so *happy* and such a *creep*.

He beckoned to Vanessa. We slipped apart; she went to him, and I to Kseniya's heart.

I tried to touch it. I couldn't. It burned too harsh.

"I found that," he said. "I think it may be the Headmaster's. I've been —"

If I'd been Natalia I would have done something. Something amazing. Right then. I would have put that fire out so hard it would have been out already five days ago and Kseniya never hurt —

It bristled from me like a hedge-pig's spines; my heart spread a garden of claws and need. If he'd wanted to do so he could have pulled it out right then. Or she. Anyone, though that grip might have drawn their blood. Anyone could have ripped my heart out of me right then, crested that wave of wild need, and flowered me into a *fix this*.

Instead he just finished his sentence. "— studying it. It's been *insightful*."

He shrugged.

He was smiling. There was all triumph in him; all rising joy; all burdens falling from him, and to be released. He smiled epiphany, eucatastrophe, and redemption. He smiled like a man who had dreamt something magical — who'd closed his hand about it in that dream, burned his hand upon it, held it dear — and now closed his hand about that thing in life.

He drew Vanessa to him. He feasted her with that smile.

I saw an understanding strike her. I heard her say: "I am made small."

I thought it was meant somehow romantically; some surrendering; some gift she gave to he. I ignored it, it had no meaning to me; not when —

Kseniya.

He kissed her. He reached his good right hand into her chest, arrow-straight like a diver into a pool, and he pulled out her heart.

I understood something in that moment that I had not understood properly before — not about Lee or Vanessa or even about Kseniya but about the *cintamani*. It struck me through the tumble of my thoughts; it was a deep-body understanding and the knowing of it cracked into my frozen mind: the *cintamani* was not something Harald *found* in the void, it was not something that was just *laying around* in the void, that just *happened* to be there instead of here.

The *cintamani* was the void itself, crushed down to stone.

Lee Scathing kissed Vanessa gently, and pulled her heart out, and through her he closed his hand around the void itself. She unfurled. She unfolded gently in his hands. *I am made small*, she'd said; but he made her vast. He brushed aside the gates of the world with her. He burgeoned her into the space beyond. Through her he took hold of it, gentled it with his hand, lay his fingers all around and through and on it the void itself, and there were feathers and wind all around us then at this, the formation of the void-born swan.

*I shall look through innocent eyes upon you, said Lee Scathing to the world;
Baptize you through their perspective,
And I shall make you good.*

For a moment I saw Kseniya burning behind them. Her skin was slick; bits of it had gone all metal, all iron like Giselle's had, all gleaming with reflections. Fires raged on her. They were not consistent. They flared up, dissipated, skated across her skin, cast bursts of light and shadows. She writhed like fever. Giselle sat beside her, rocking, helpless, gripping Kseniya's hand — her charcoal of a hand; all blackened ruin from the wrist — up near her chest.

For a moment I saw the crazy flickering of them.

Lee Scathing's words roared out to fill the void.

He ruled what had been Vanessa; charmed it through her severed heart; held it up against the void and gathered the void he into her substance. She flowed into it, battened herself upon it, made herself and the void as one. Void thickened with her, grew gravid with her, she merged into it and it with her, until between them there were no distinctions/but the airless medium was folded into her and the substance of Death's dominion became her flesh.

There was the world, and there was Vanessa. There was the world, and there was the void.

Outside the world was whiteness, feathers; all her smile was it all.

He shaped her into a swan, the flesh of her.

He held her heart in her hand, and he turned her, bent her towards the world, and bade her to give it worth. She spread her wings around the world, the void embraced it, and I thought for a moment of Zeus and Leda, though that was wrong, or backwards at the least; I remembered the quality of Vanessa's innocence; and I realized that he could do it.

My disagreement with Death no longer mattered. My worries. My fears. My hopes. Flame and iron didn't matter, they were all-important but they didn't matter, he hid them, did he Lee Scathing, behind the peaceful whiteness of the swan.

It didn't matter! Not any longer.

The swan would make us good.

He thrust himself through to the eyes of her. He looked back down at the world through her, looked back at him reflected he; took her vision, looked down on us through the swan, and met he his own eyes.

He grimaced.

He looked on himself through the eyes of the swan and he Lee Scathing was displeased.

It interrupted him.

It scattered him, his thoughts, it disturbed him. He saw himself through her, through what he wielded of her, and in that self was wickedness where he desired only innocence. He'd taken her heart, bound her down to sinlessness, but there was sin remaining in his hands, his hands which ruled her; so, without releasing the slightest fragment of his control, without stepping the least bit outside of her, he sought to grind the him in her away.

He was one person!

Her will had become irrelevant. There was only he; and yet they fought. He stood there triumphant over Death's dominion he, stood there dominant over world and over void, alone, unchallenged, I was thinking about challenging him but I couldn't make my mind or body move yet, and there —

Lord of all the world and void —

He fought himself.

She looked at us, Lee Scathing; and he looked at her, Lee Scathing back; they regarded they them he; and his soul and his body they grit them, one against the other, and the eyes of him went out. Burst. One by one they were discarded, popping, falling from him, catching fire, scraped, lathed, ground from him all they were, spawning and opening and closing and opening all across his flesh they were, only to wither, burn, blacken, split, and die.

He scoured himself cratered and blind and bloody, there, there in that white suit that he wore; he stained his mask to crimson then; he grated them off of him, he Lee Scathing the eyes of him, until the eyesockets that opened in him were empty, blind, and aching, appeared and hurt and faded without drinking, and they the swan stared eyeless back.

Eyeless the void regarded us; eyeless did the swan; and all this silent, soundless, heatless, though there was still a fire that raged beyond.

In the end he broke.

In the end he fell, gurgling, choking, dying, and there was no heart in play then, no will in play then, only the thing that looked but was not seeing; the perfection of his ideal of innocence; that which had swallowed void and gates in its fruition; absolute and absolution, then, in the completion of the swan.

The void sang like a beaten drum. It *resounded* with it, with the being of the swan. It filled it, and encompassed it, and before it the world was small.

It looked at me and it looked blindly.

It transfixed me.

It offered me being good.

Nevermind Kseniya. Giselle. Nevermind Vanessa.

Nevermind nothing everything and all.

It looked at me and it transfixed me it and it offered me being good.

Each beat of its fearsome wings hammered that into me. It regard struck at me like hammers. It stormed through me, left my nerves singing, exalted me, and crushed the bits of me that resisted deeper and deeper back.

The sinful part. The bad part. Those.

The mewling part, too, the part that cries every infant's protest to someone giving them a happy ending: *No! Me do!*

That too it hammered it down.

It beat such errant portions from me. It drove them from the flesh of me, split them like wood under an errant hammer from me, me the core of me, the me bent down and thrown over with the adoration of the swan.

And I was by it made good.

Everything the world had invested in me: to birth me, to grow me up, to live me there — made good. It was made good, because Lee Scathing had sent out Vanessa, and now there was a swan.

By this, this simple expedient, I was reformed.

The beat of the wings came through me again, blew through me, stormed through me, left me shaking, and the sin wrecked and crushed and small in me.

I strove there before that greatness to be worthy of the swan.

In this it dismissed me.

It gave a disgusted squeal at the thought. *You are already good.*

Because I listened to Kseniya's stories, I thought. Because I was fighting to save everybody. Because I'd actually waited, like Natalia had asked me to. Because the dodgeball had struck me. Because I was *Jasmine Apocynum*, and I'd seen the True Thing, and I was *alive* and *burning* with the truth of it—

Except no.

Because there was a swan.

I tried again, in the space between wingbeats.

Because I played checkers with Giselle. Because I tried to let Kseniya *rip me open*, for Giselle. Because I had exactly the right number of arms and legs and a head, I mean, most of the time, you know, when I wasn't turning into snakes with wings or half-lizards or whatever. Because I'd gotten an A on my civics homework, and if there's any grade that makes you good, it's gotta be an A on civic—

Because there was a swan.

Because I was *me*—

It burned in me then, rallied in me, gathered up like a snake at the base of my spine, where the wind had pushed all my sins, then it rose its head and struck: good because I was *me*—

And still the swan hung there, disregarding it, contemplating its own magnificence and casting out the light of that magnificence to burn in all of us like flames: because there is a swan.

I was a snake in truth, then, a snake in the darkness, and I bit her, and my fangs filled and emptied up with poison black and green; and the swan bit me back, caught me by the neck, and shook me, worried me in the darkness, and with a distant, cold dissatisfaction:

"Do not let's make this difficult," said the swan.

I pulled up coils to wrap around its neck, but I lost them, for still each drumbeat of the wings pushed all the wickedness from me, shattered the will of me, and pushed the poison backwards from its heart up towards my fangs.

I was begging. Somewhere in me I was begging.

Stop it no, I said. I will be good. I will . . . I will not be difficult.

The matter was disregarded by the swan.

I felt my body give out.

I lay there limply. It dropped me to the ground. It bellied itself low over me, curled over me, spread its wings across me, and I had the disassociated memory, nothing arising from nothing, of white Lee Scathing's mask.

I hung on.

The minutes gruelled by and I hung on.

Of course I am good. That much is obvious. I am, in fact, totally awesome. . . .

I asserted: *Because I am Jasmine Apoc—*

Because there is a swan.

Because I —

Because there is a swan.

Because —

Perhaps I could have held on like that forever. I doubt it. It drooled the poison back from its mouth to me. It fell on me like a rain, that poison, *my* poison, it was cool, refreshing, and toxic in the dark. It spilled through the cavern and the caverns of me, became flowers, dew, and streams:

I, I, I to me, and I, myself.

It flowed around the vitreous chambers. It swept up a handful of delinquents and chemists; they burned in it, drank it in and writhed with it; wept, loathed nothing so much as the poison but could not stop the drinking of it, until their stomachs swelled with it and they choked against it and they sank they still suckling at the poison of it underneath the rising tides. I screamed at their deaths and they were a burden of guilt on me but what is guilt before a swan?

I the monstrous I then *bang* came down the wings and I the pure; stainless, sinless, immaculate I, Princess Jasmine Apocynum, to drown these innocents in poison and therefore be made good

because I am Jasmine Apocynum—

Because there was a swan.

Because I am —

Perhaps I could have held on like that forever.

I was well-suited to it. My heart slipped and slicked like a fish inside me, it was elusive, it was protected from the swan. My flesh was malleable, tricky, I had learned the *becoming* of it, and if I shook off the stupor the swan had laid upon me I could have become a wind, a spout, a sun, the sky, a song —

In the end I didn't have to hold on forever. Thank God.

The poison fell from the mouth of the swan, that old poison: *"I, I, I to me, and I, myself."*

It was dark water. It was beads of green-black poison. It was lifeless jewels. It curdled and richened the soil of us. It fell across the ruined skin and body of Lee Scathing and the broken snake of me. It washed it up around me and it slipped in through the seal that was my lips. It flooded the wastewater treatment facility of Lee Scathing and it doused the fire of Kseniya's heart.

In the end I didn't have to hold on forever.

I didn't have to!

Somewhere out there, beyond the world, in struggles, my best friend Kseniya won.

The fire hidden behind the swan went out. Kseniya rose staggering to her feet; and she took the iron in her, wrung it out from her, made a gift/a jewel from it that burned black and orange and red; held it in her burnt right hand, lifted it, and lit the darkness.

The sky there was then, behind the swan, and in that moment it burned it, like a crystal dome above her it, and cast it back the fire of her jewel.

The ground there was then, gray-veined soil, gritted, waking into being like the world at dawn; the darkness broke, turned gray and black, striated, like the hills and mountains of a horizon differentiating in the dawn. A *place* fought to rise, where place there had been none, illumined for the first time by the fire of her jewel.

Kseniya howled, wild and brilliant with it, and then she turned towards us.

Still it beat at the world the weight and urgency of the swan. It had not noticed Kseniya. It did not turn towards her. It cared nothing for her victory. It had no eyes to see the light of stones.

There was nothing else for it.

Not then.

Kseniya she stepped towards us. Kseniya she bent the dimensions of the world and with her good left hand she reached she out and she, her, she, her— her— she her fingers, she—she wrapped they, around— they around, the, the neck, the swan, they, she, she took the fingers of her good left hand and she wrapped them around— there was nothing else for it— she wrapped them around the neck of the swan.

Like wishbones, like —

Like this one time I asked Mikhael on this date and he said he couldn't, he was sorry, he just couldn't.

The sun going red.

Like Desmond unravelling. A tree branch breaking.

Snap.

Like a celery stalk. Like it snaps. Have you ever done that? Snapped a bit of celery? Like an X-ray film with a shadow in it.

Like everything born to flesh, I mean, *to* everything born to flesh, you know, it *snaps*, it breaks

—

You make a wish —

It *snaps* —

The Basalt Gates slammed closed.

*Basements (after disasters),
Principal Entropy's School,
Horizon*

Bang.

The world crashed down around me like an iron cage.

I found myself human, or nearly so, floating in poison and dark water.

A heart brushed up against me, then another. I took them in my hands. I found the gates were sealed tight against me; I couldn't feel Kseniya or Vanessa through their souls.

I braced myself on an irregular wall and time went by.

I stared at Lee Scathing's rolling, floating, bobbing, ruined flesh for a while. I thought at the time that he'd died, but the more that I think about it, the more I doubt that he'd managed it. It *should* have killed him, all that, that was *enough* to kill a man, but I don't think he'd actually died of it. Not because he was Lee Scathing or anything; certainly not because of the power and perquisites of a member of the student council — but because I think the gates that closed there then were held fast against him too.

I don't think the Headmaster would make *room* in the emptiness for the eyeless eyes of some dead God.

After a while the water began to drain. It began lowering but also pulling upwards — it wasn't draining straight down, but draining *out*, flowing out into the corridors and, ultimately, up. It took the corpse of Lee Scathing with it.

After another while I reached the floor.

I knelt there for a bit on my hands and knees. Then I stood on shaky legs amidst the flowers and the stone. Then I tottered to the gates and I lay my head upon them and I asked them to open. They trembled as if they wanted to open, but they did not, they would not.

Kseniya, Giselle, and anything left there was of Vanessa Death he held he all of them and on the other side.

The Void Beyond the World
not so very long ago

The next morning, about a quarter after ten o'clock, Kseniya's heart twitched.

I picked it up.

I stared at it. I tried to reach her. I couldn't. I ran to the mirror with it. I kissed myself — don't judge me — and I tried to shove it in. It didn't work well. My own heart fell out the back and that made me panic and my body screamed for my *me* and I was almost too busy scrambling around to pick up my heart which was making a run for it with its scrabbling tendrils across the hardwood floor to hear anything that Kseniya's own heart might say.

I finally got my hands on mine and I held it next to me but I didn't put it in and I tried to stop and just be Kseniya for a moment, which isn't actually as easy as it sounds. My attention to the world sharpened almost unbearably; it became a fearsome burden upon me. The weight of *noticing* the things around me —

It was like standing on Jupiter. It was like sandblasting my senses.

It was like radiating this fierce, powerful *looking* outwards and then catching it back into my naked eyes.

I couldn't imagine what it must be like to live at that pitch of being *always*, never mind the burden of that much courage. I didn't like it, I didn't enjoy it, but I couldn't make myself let go of it. The experience of paying attention had an obsessive pull on me. It consumed me. Eventually I gave in to it, let it fill me up past the lip of what I had assumed was my metaphorical cup, and for a long time I was simply *there* —

But I couldn't stay like her forever.

I had better things to do than just sprawl there, watching the dust drift by in the light of the windows, seeing the grain of the wood and the gaps between the floorboards, watching the stars float in those awful eyes in the mirror, and being aware through every nerve and muscle that I was not myself. I had things to do that needed me to be Jasmine Apocynum, heart-thief, shapeshifter, and destroyer. The world already had a Kseniya.

... Hopefully.

I sighed and I swapped the hearts back with one another and I started bending my thoughts down to the task of breaking the Basalt Gates *properly*, and thus to bring this story to its end.

Obviously I could just find a random person, rip their soul out, and use them. This was almost worth it to me to save Kseniya, but it felt wrong to me on some level.

Even after the swan —

Even after deliberately rejecting the idea that something could make me good —

I wanted to be a little OK with myself and my choices.

Finding a better answer than that — finding something that I thought I could try without just throwing yet another person's flesh or soul against those Gates —

It took me four days.

I sat cross-legged on the floor of the mansion of my heart. I found a box that was marked "sandwiches." When I was hungry I took a sandwich out from it and I ate. I found pots that were marked "tea" and "water." When I needed of those things, I drank. I studied myself in the mirrors and in the structures of my mansion and I held Kseniya and Vanessa's hearts near me and I looked for answers.

Now and then I'd remember that *snap* and I'd curl gasping around their hearts like I'd been squeezed.

I couldn't even tell for sure if Kseniya was still alive.

Four days after they'd last slammed on me I went and I stood before the Basalt Gates.

The Headmaster had made them as he'd made Giselle, I supposed, and for a similar reason: that we who would steal the *cintamani*, we who would demand of the void that we be good, would be bound instead in world.

I lay my hand on them and they trembled.

The Headmaster had; or the Principal had; or we had ourselves. God, the Devil, Death, or we ourselves who live in world —

We'd built walls, including *this* one, between life and death; and each to each; and to keep the haggard servants of the far dominions out.

I remembered being good.

I remembered — being a good person. When I actually was, I mean. Those interminable and longed-for minutes under the attention of the swan when I was *redeemed*, made whole, made perfect; when the worst was washed out of me, and all that was not pure and beautiful besides; when nobody could have doubted that I, Jasmine Apocynum, was worth having in the world, that I was *worthy*, even if it *was* because there had been a swan.

I remembered when I'd been made good.

I wanted that back again. I wanted to steal it from the void. I wanted to drag up the corpse of the swan and drape myself in its skin and its feathers if that's what it took to be a good person. I wanted to shove crochet hooks down the gullet of every form of waterfowl and sew everyone in the world into a pair of pants. I wanted to ride out far beyond world and sound and close my hand around the fire of that stone, if that's what it took to be a good person —

I remembered Kseniya burning.

I remembered her face as she'd looked up at me, that most horrible face I've ever seen, after she'd snapped the neck of Vanessa, who was our friend.

I remembered not being able to do anything, not anything at all, not even look like I still loved her, when that happened —

"Fine," I said. I told them.

I stared at them. Them the Gates. I stared at them the Gates and I ached with the absence of the swan.

I told them: *Fine*.

"I won't *be* good, then."

They thundered. They burst they stone from stone and shattered in the air. I saw through the back of my eyes as through the front of them and the Basalt Gates disintegrated with a sound so loud and terrible that I could feel it, I could taste it, I could see it like arcs of violet lightning unfolding against the night that was my eyes.

Fable of the Swan

*interpreted as a series of blueprints for transforming into a brass cephalopod,
on such occasions as that may be the appropriate response to the circumstances at hand,
qualifying accordingly for the descriptors "logical, sensible, and kind."*

It was gray beyond the Gates — all over gray, heaped gray, piles of it, shades of it.

The mist was gray. The moon was gray. There ran a pale river below it. The ground was striated dust, all monochrome, between the shadows of the mesas they. This was a place that did not know itself.

It was therefore without colour —

But sometimes when she would move — Kseniya she; my best friend she; she who held the iron in her hand — the light would move and the shadows would move and some thing within the void would flare with a sudden brilliant lustre.

A crack in some dead gray tree would burn with a sudden honeyed sparkle — like pyrite worked into the sap. A river-bottom rock would catch the light suddenly like quartz. On one occasion an entire bleak mesa lit up with a sudden silver fire.

She fought Death.

They were so blackly, bleakly tired, both of them. It smote me like a blow.

She had been fighting Death, and she fought him still.

She held iron in her hand like a white star burning and it did not burn her. The iron light from it hurt him instead. It seared and scarred him. It ate into he the lord of Death's dominion and he staggered stiff and broken.

He held in his left hand a spear that was all pale fire and black nothingness.

In his right hand he held a heart.

I assume it was Giselle's. I assume that it was she with whom he assailed her — she the thunderbolt that he battered against Kseniya, she the great-toothed iron dog, the vaporous poisons, the ever-shifting sinkholes and the fires and the storms with which the Headmaster assailed her.

It was a pitted and polished meteoric stone he held, bound by a rusted chain. I hated him, you know.

I always had.

I don't think that Kseniya really wanted to keep going. I think it was just that she couldn't fall down. She couldn't lose. She may even have been trying to. She may have twitched her neck towards his spear on an occasion, rolled her eyes up and tried to fall over on another, tried to take any and every opportunity to *lose* and have it be *over* without actually formally consciously giving up on herself or on Giselle.

Like she'd used up her triumph already.

Like: *I've done it, I've beaten* iron.

Don't I get to stop?

Like death had become for her a terrible allure.

The story in her, that will that had sent her out there in the first place —

That *make me strong enough and durable enough* of her ascension —

It pinned her to the fight instead.

She tried, but she couldn't fall.

It was awful and it was kind of beautiful, because it meant that she was still *in there*, and perhaps that she could have held on like that forever.

She won't have to.

The Headmaster he made a mistake.

He saw me burst the Gates. He saw me coming. He saw that I was still useless; still meek and weak and flushed with my mortality; and no longer even trying to be good. He saw this story burning in me, building in me, lashing out its hooks from me, this story rising, and he knew that in its fullness I would give forth leviathan. Disdainful of me now and yet fearful of that yet to be, as I came through the broken gates into darkness he backhanded me with Giselle.

She plunged at me.

She was living thunder and lightning. I took — I don't even know which one. A heart. Some heart. Maybe even mine — in my hand as she came.

I put it in her with my good right hand and she tumbled through past me into the basements of the School, and I took this story all through me and all in me and the fire of Kseniya's victory and I glut me on it; I made me an engine of my heart from my own damnation, and now —

Presumably —

I get to beat up Death.

I would like to take a moment to thank my former mother. I can no longer really remember her directly but her plans for a gigantic brass cephalopodan daughter with a dead lift (at age 16) of seven and a half long tons —

They're making a difference.

I honestly think that without them, without these disassociated memories of blueprints and the detritus of my formative experiences, I would be screwing this up really badly right now. I would probably have turned into some sort of unicorn-horned "land seahorse" or something, Mom, and other than making the Headmaster fall over in helpless laughter? I'm not sure what good that particular notion would have done.

I love you, Mom. I sort of . . . kind of remember you.

I don't really miss you but that's only because it's not allowed.

This Page Deliberately Left Blank

I am actually still —

You have to understand. It actually takes, you know, a little — it's not . . .

I mean, it's not really *easy* to, you know, turn yourself into a steam-powered leviathan and go fight the scariest guy you've ever seen. You want to argue with that *you* can go do it, OK?

I am having a little —

Courage-related hitch.

So I'm going to take a moment to explain one last secret, while Kseniya and the Headmaster stagger around out there so awfully, and *then* I'm going to go make with the glorious apothecotic victory.

I hope maybe —

I hope that after all this is done, I can share this with you. I mean, all you, all the you out there, not just the me in the mirror. I want you to know Kseniya, and Vanessa, and all the rest of us, even the kind of lame ones with their cooties like Mikhael and Lee.

If I manage that; if I live to distribute this via a print house, or write it burning into the substance of Death's dominion, or whatever, then I want you to understand —

This is an awful secret to have to tell you. It's almost worse to spit out of me than the one I started with. It's almost worse than just taking this hook and *pulling*, being *brave*.

I mean — it's not a bad secret.

It's not awful. You won't feel bad about it. Saying it just kind of hurts *me*.

I can't use it myself, you see. I mean — I can't. I mean, if I were good, I mean, if I were going to be good, if I were going to find something and make me *be made good*, then the Basalt Gates would have held fast against me, and even Giselle would have overwhelmed me; they would have heard my heart crying out for that goodness and said, *Not yours*.

But if you want to be good, I mean, *you*, I mean, you yourself, I mean, you, *to* yourself — you don't need a crochet hook. You don't need pants. You don't even need to grab your metal heart with the hooks of it, rip it right out of you, turn yourself inside-out into a brass leviathan, and go fight Death.

In Bluebell Park there is a poison.

If you want something to make you good — come. Drink.

AGH TOO MANY FEET