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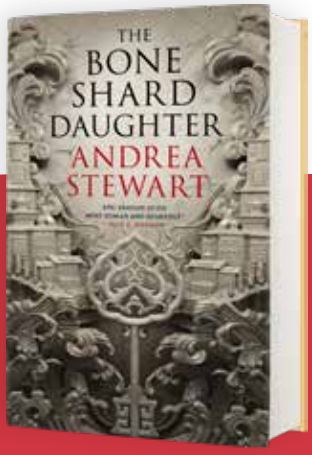
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"A fantastical journey of self-discovery that reveals the true power of our imagination."
—*WOMAN'S WORLD* on *THE TEN THOUSAND DOORS OF JANUARY*



ALIX E. HARROW

AUTHOR OF *THE TEN THOUSAND DOORS OF JANUARY*

An Introduction

There's no such thing as witches, but there used to be.

It used to be the air was so thick with magic you could taste it on your tongue like ash. Witches lurked in every tangled wood and waited at every midnight-crossroad with sharp-toothed smiles. They conversed with dragons on lonely mountaintops and rode rowan-wood brooms across full moons; they charmed the stars to dance beside them on the solstice and rode to battle with familiars at their heels. It used to be witches were wild as crows and fearless as foxes, because magic blazed bright and the night was theirs.

But then came the plague and the purges. The dragons were slain and the witches were burned and the night belonged to men with torches and crosses.

Witching isn't all gone, of course. My grandmother, Mama Mags, says they can't ever kill magic because it beats like a great red heartbeat on the other side of everything, that if you close your eyes you can feel it thrumming beneath the soles of your feet, *thumpthumpthump*. It's just a lot better-behaved than it used to be.

Most respectable folk can't even light a candle with witching, these days, but us poor folk still dabble here and there. *Witch-blood runs thick in the sewers*, the saying goes. Back home every mama teaches her daughters a few little charms to keep the soup-pot from boiling over or make the peonies bloom out of season. Every daddy teaches his sons how to spell ax-handles against breaking and rooftops against leaking.

Our daddy never taught us shit, except what a fox teaches chickens—how to run, how to tremble, how to outlive the bastard—and our mama died before she could teach us much of anything. But we had Mama

Mags, our mother's mother, and she didn't fool around with soup-pots and flowers.

The preacher back home says it was God's will that purged the witches from the world. He says women are sinful by nature and that magic in their hands turns naturally to rot and ruin, like the first witch Eve who poisoned the Garden and doomed mankind, like her daughters' daughters who poisoned the world with the plague. He says the purges purified the earth and shepherded us into the modern era of Gatling guns and steamboats, and the Indians and Africans ought to be thanking us on their knees for freeing them from their own savage magics.

Mama Mags said that was horseshit, and that wickedness was like beauty: in the eye of the beholder. She said proper witching is just a conversation with that red heartbeat, which only ever takes three things: the will to listen to it, the words to speak with it, and the way to let it into the world. The will, the words, and the way.

She taught us everything important comes in threes: little pigs, billy goats gruff, chances to guess unguessable names. Sisters.

There were three of us Eastwood sisters, me and Agnes and Bella, so maybe they'll tell our story like a witch-tale. *Once upon a time, there were three sisters.* Mags would like that, I think—she always said nobody paid enough attention to witch-tales and whatnot, the stories grannies tell their babies, the secret rhymes children chant among themselves, the songs women sing as they work.

Or maybe they won't tell our story at all, because it isn't finished yet. Maybe we're just the very beginning, and all the fuss and mess we made was nothing but the first strike of the flint, the first shower of sparks.

There's still no such thing as witches.

But there will be.

PART ONE

THE WAYWARD SISTERS



1

A tangled web she weaves
When she wishes to deceive.

A spell to distract and dismay, requiring cobweb gathered on the new moon & a pricked finger

Once upon a time, there were three sisters.

James Juniper Eastwood was the youngest, with hair as ragged and black as crow feathers. She was the wildest of the three. The canny one, the feral one, the one with torn skirts and scraped knees and a green glitter in her eyes, like summer-light through leaves. She knew where the whip-poor-wills nested and the foxes denned; she could find her way home at midnight on the new moon.

But on the spring equinox of 1893, James Juniper is lost.

She limps off the train with her legs still humming from the rattle and clack of the journey, leaning heavy on her red-cedar staff, and doesn't know which way to turn. Her plan only had two steps—step one, *run*, and step two, *keep running*—and now she's two hundred miles from home with nothing but loose change and witch-ways in her pockets and no place to go.

She sways on the platform, buffeted and jostled by folk who have plenty of someplaces to go. Steam hisses and swirls from the engine, curling catlike around her skirts. Posters and ads flutter on the wall. One of them is a list of New Salem city ordinances and the associated fines for things like littering, profanity, debauchery, indecency, and vagrancy. One of them shows an irritable-looking Lady Liberty with her fist raised into the air and invites ALL LADIES WHO TIRE OF TYRANNY to attend the New Salem Women's Association rally in St. George's Square at six o'clock on the equinox.

One of them shows Juniper's own face in blurred black and white above the words MISS JAMES JUNIPER EASTWOOD. SEVENTEEN YEARS OF AGE, WANTED FOR MURDER & SUSPECTED WITCHCRAFT.

Hell. They must have found him. She'd thought burning the house would muddy things a little more.

Juniper meets her own eyes on the poster and pulls her cloak's hood a little higher.

Boots ring dully on the platform: a man in a neat black uniform strolls toward her, baton slap-slapping in his palm, eyes narrowed.

Juniper gives him her best wide-eyed smile, hand sweating on her staff. "Morning, mister. I'm headed to…" She needs a purpose, a somewhere-to-be. Her eyes flick to the irritable Lady Liberty poster. "St. George's Square. Could you tell me how to get there?" She squeezes her accent for every country cent it's worth, pooling her vowels like spilled honey.

The officer looks her up and down: hacked-off hair scraping against her jaw, dirt-seamed knuckles, muddy boots. He grunts a mean laugh. "Saints save us, even the hicks want the vote."

Juniper's never thought much about voting or suffrage or women's rights, but his tone makes her chin jerk up. "That a crime?"

It's only after the words come whipping out of her mouth that Juniper reflects on how unwise it is to antagonize an officer of the law.

Particularly when there is a poster with your face on it directly behind the officer's head.

That temper will get you burnt at the damn stake, Mama Mags used to tell her. *A wise woman keeps her burning on the inside.* But Bella was the wise one, and she left home a long time ago.

Sweat stings Juniper's neck, nettle-sharp. She watches the veins purpling in the officer's neck, sees the silver-shined buttons straining on his chest, and slides her hands into her skirt pockets. Her fingers find a pair of candle-stubs and a pitch pine wand; a horseshoe nail and a silver tangle of cobweb; a pair of snake's teeth she swears she won't use again.

Heat gathers in her palms; words wait in her throat.

Maybe the officer won't recognize her, with her hair cut short and her cloak hood pulled high. Maybe he'll just yell and stomp like a ruffled rooster and let her go. Or maybe he'll haul her into the station and she'll end up swinging from a New Salem scaffold with the witch-mark drawn on her chest in clotted ash. Juniper declines to wait and find out.

The will. Heat is already boiling up her wrists, licking like whiskey through her veins.

The words. They singe her tongue as she whispers them into the clatter and noise of the station. "A tangled web she weaves—"

The way. Juniper pricks her thumb on the nail and holds the spider-web tight.

She feels the magic flick into the world, a cinder spit from some great unseen fire, and the officer claws at his own face. He swears and sputters as if he's stumbled face-first into a cobweb. Passersby are pointing, beginning to laugh.

Juniper slips away while he's still swiping at his eyes. A puff of steam, a passing crowd of railroad workers with their lunch pails swinging at their sides, and she's out the station doors. She runs in her hitching fashion, staff clacking on cobbles.

Growing up, Juniper had imagined New Salem as something like Heaven, if Heaven had trolleys and gas-lamps—bright and clean and rich, far removed from the sin of Old Salem—but now she finds it chilly and colorless, as if all that clean living has leached the shine out of everything. The buildings are all grayish and sober, without so much as a flower-box or colorful curtain peeking through the windows. The people are grayish and sober, too, their expressions suggesting each of them is on their way to an urgent but troublesome task, their collars starched and their skirts buttoned tight.

Maybe it's the absence of witching; Mags said magic invited a certain amount of mess, which was why the honeysuckle grew three times as fast around her house and songbirds roosted under her eaves no matter the season. In New Salem—the City Without Sin, where the trolleys run on time and every street wears a Saint's name—the only birds are pigeons and the only green is the faint shine of slime in the gutters.

A trolley jangles past several inches from Juniper's toes and its driver swears at her. Juniper swears back.

She keeps going because there's no place to stop. There are no mossy stumps or blue pine groves; every corner and stoop is filled up with people. Workers and maids, priests and officers, men with pocket-watches and ladies with big hats and children selling buns and newspapers and shriveled-up flowers. Juniper tries asking directions twice but the answers are baffling, riddle-like (follow St. Vincent's to Fourth-and-Winthrop, cross the Thorn and head straight). Within an hour she's been invited to a boxing match, accosted by a gentleman who wants to discuss the relationship between the equinox and the end-times, and given a map that has nothing marked on it but thirty-nine churches.

Juniper stares down at the map, knotted and foreign and unhelpful, and wants to go the hell home.

Home is twenty-three acres on the west side of the Big Sandy River.

Home is dogwoods blooming like pink-tipped pearls in the deep woods and the sharp smell of spring onions underfoot, the overgrown patch where the old barn burned and the mountainside so green and wet and alive it makes her eyes ache. Home is the place that beats like a second heart behind Juniper's ribs.

Home was her sisters, once. But they left and never came back—never even sent so much as a two-cent postcard—and now neither will Juniper.

Red rage swells in Juniper's chest. She crumples the map in her fist and keeps walking because it's either run or set something on fire, and she already did that.

She walks faster, faster, stumbling a little on her bad leg, shouldering past wide bustles and fashionable half-capes, following nothing but her own heartbeat and perhaps the faintest thread of something else.

She passes apothecaries and grocers and an entire shop just for shoes. Another one for hats, with a window full of faceless heads covered in lace and froth and frippery. A cemetery that sprawls like a separate city behind a high iron fence, its lawn clipped short and its headstones straight as stone soldiers. Juniper's eye is drawn to the blighted, barren witch-yard at its edges, where the ashes of the condemned are salted and spread; nothing grows in the yard but a single hawthorn, knobbled as a knuckle.

She crosses a bridge stretched over a river the color of day-old gravy. The city grows taller and grayer around her, the light swallowed by limestone buildings with domes and columns and men in suits guarding the entrances. Even the trolleys are on their best behavior, gliding past on smooth rails.

The street pours into a broad square. Linden trees line its edges, pruned into unnatural sameness, and people flock around the center.

"—why, we ask, should women wait in the shadows while their fathers and husbands determine our fates? Why should we—we doting

mothers, we beloved sisters, we treasured daughters—be barred from that most fundamental of rights: the right to vote?"

The voice is urgent and piercing, rising high above the city rumble. Juniper sees a woman standing in the middle of the square wearing a white-curled wig like some small, unfortunate animal pinned to her head. A bronze Saint George glares down at her and women press near her, waving signs and banners.

Juniper figures she's found St. George's Square and the New Salem Women's Association rally after all.

She's never seen a real live suffragist. In the Sunday cartoons they're drawn scraggle-haired and long-nosed, suspiciously witchy. But these women don't look much like witches. They look more like the models in Ivory soap ads, all puffed and white and fancy. Their dresses are ironed and pleated, their hats feathered, their shoes shined and smart.

They part around Juniper as she shoves forward, looking sideways at the seasick roll of her gait, the Crow County mud still clinging to her hem. She doesn't notice; her eyes are on the on the strident little woman at the foot of the statue. A badge on her chest reads *Miss Cady Stone, NSWA President*.

"It seems that our elected politicians disagree with the Constitution, which grants us certain inalienable rights. It seems that Mayor Worthington disagrees even with our benevolent God, who created us all equal."

The woman keeps talking, and Juniper keeps listening. She talks about the ballot box and the mayoral election in November and the importance of self-determination. She talks about the olden times when women were queens and scholars and knights. She talks about justice and equal rights and fair shares.

Juniper doesn't follow all the details—she stopped going to Miss Hurston's one-room schoolhouse at ten because after her sisters left there was no one to make her go—but she understands what

Miss Stone is asking. She's asking: *Aren't you tired yet?* Of being cast down and cast aside? Of making do with crumbs when once we wore crowns?

She's asking: *Aren't you angry yet?*

And oh, Juniper is. At her mama for dying too soon and her daddy for not dying sooner. At her dumbshit cousin for getting the land that should have been hers. At her sisters for leaving and herself for missing them. And at the whole Saints-damned world.

Juniper feels like a soldier with a loaded rifle, finally shown something she can shoot. Like a girl with a lit match, finally shown something she can burn.

There are women standing on either side of her, waving signs and filling in all the pauses with *hear-hears*, their faces full of bright hunger. For a second Juniper pretends she's standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her sisters again and she feels the hollowed-out place they left behind them, that emptiness so vast even fury can't quite fill it.

She wonders what they would say if they could see her now. Agnes would worry, always trying to be the mother they didn't have. Bella would ask six dozen questions.

Mags would say: *Girls who go looking for trouble usually find it.*

Her daddy would say: *Don't forget what you are, girl.* Then he would toss her down in the worm-eaten dark and hiss the answer: *Nothing.*

Juniper doesn't realize she's bitten her lip until she tastes blood. She spits and hears a faint hiss as it lands, like grease in a hot pan.

The wind rises.

It rushes through the square, midnight-cool and mischievous, fluttering the pages of Miss Cady Stone's notes. It smells wild and sweet, half-familiar, like Mama Mags's house on the solstice. Like earth and char and old magic. Like the small, feral roses that bloomed in the deep woods.

Miss Stone stops talking. The crowd clutches their hats and cloak-strings,

squinting upward. A mousy-looking girl near Juniper fusses with a lacy umbrella, as if she thinks this is a mundane storm that can be taken care of with mundane means. Juniper hears crows and jays calling in the distance, sharp and savage, and knows better.

She whirls, looking for the witch behind the working—

And the world comes unsewn.



2

Sugar and spice
And everything nice.

A spell to soothe a bad temper, requiring a pinch of sugar &
spring sunshine

Agnes Amaranth Eastwood was the middle sister, with hair as shining and black as a hawk's eye. She was the strongest of the three. The unflinching one, the steady one, the one that knew how to work and keep working, tireless as the tide.

But on the spring equinox of 1893, she is weak.

The shift bell rings and Agnes sags against her loom, listening to the tick and hiss of cooling metal and the rising babble of the mill-girls. Cotton-dust coats her tongue and gums her eyes; her limbs ache and rattle, worn out from too many extra shifts in a row.

One of those nasty fevers is spreading through New Salem's disorderly edges, festering in the boarding houses and barrooms of West Babel, and every third girl is hacking her lungs up in a bed at St. Charity's. Demand is high, too, because one of the other mills caught fire last week.

Agnes heard women had leapt from the windows, falling to the streets like comets trailing smoke and ash. All week her dreams have been crimson, full of the wet pop of burning flesh, except it's a memory and not a dream at all, and she wakes reaching for her sisters who aren't there.

The other girls are filing out, gossiping and jostling. *You headed to the rally?* A huff of laughter. *I got better ways to waste my time.* Agnes has worked at the Baldwin Brothers Bonded Mill for a handful of years now, but she doesn't know their names.

She used to learn their names. When she first came to New Salem, Agnes had a tendency to collect strays—the too-skinny girls who slept on the boarding-house floor because they couldn't afford beds, the too-quiet girls with bruises around their wrists. Agnes tucked them all under her scrawny wing as if each of them were the sisters she left behind. There was one girl whose hair she brushed every morning before work, thirty strokes, like she used to do for Juniper.

She found work as a night-nurse at the Home for Lost Angels. She spent long shifts soothing babies who couldn't be soothed, loving children she shouldn't love, dreaming about a big house with sunny windows and enough beds for each little lost angel. One night she showed up to work to find half her babies had been shipped out west to be adopted by settler families hungry for helping hands.

She stood among the empty beds, hands trembling, remembering what her mama Mags told her: *Every woman draws a circle around herself. Sometimes she has to be the only thing inside it.*

Agnes quit the orphanage. She told the boarding-house girl to brush her own damn hair and started work at the Baldwin Brothers. She figured you couldn't love a cotton mill.

The bell clangs again and Agnes unpeels her forehead from the loom. The floor boss leers idly as the girls file past, reaching for skirts and blouses with pinching fingers. He doesn't reach for Agnes. On her first shift Mr. Malton had cornered her behind the cotton bales—she

was always the pretty one, all shining hair and hips—but Mags taught her granddaughters ways to discourage that kind of horseshit. Since then Mr. Malton saves his leers for other girls.

Agnes watches the new girl flinch as she passes him, her shoulders sloped with shame. She looks away.

The alley air tastes clean and bright after the humid dark of the mill. Agnes turns west up St. Jude's, headed home—well, not home, just the moldy little room she rents in the South Sybil boarding house, which smells like boiled cabbage no matter what she cooks—until she sees the man waiting at the corner.

Hair slicked earnestly to one side, cap clutched in nervous hands. Wholesome good looks, clean fingernails, a weak chin you don't notice at first: Floyd Matthews.

Oh hell. His eyes are pleading at her, his mouth half-open to call her name, but Agnes fixes her eyes on the apron-strings of the woman in front of her and hopes he'll just give up and find some other mill-girl to pine after.

A scuffed boot appears in her path, followed by an outstretched hand. She wishes she didn't remember so precisely how that hand felt against her skin, smooth and soft, unscarred.

"Aggie, love, talk to me." What's so hard about calling a woman by her full name? Why do men always want to give you some smaller, sweeter name than the one your mama gave you?

"I already said my piece, Floyd."

She tries to edge past him but he puts his hands on her shoulders, imploring. "I don't understand! Why would you turn me down? I could take you out of this place"—he waves a soft hand at the dim alleys and sooty brick of the west side—"and make an honest woman out of you. I could give you anything you want!" He sounds bewildered, like his proposal was a mathematical equation and Agnes produced the incorrect response. Like a nice boy told *no* for the first time in his nice life.

She sighs at him, aware that the other girls are pausing on the street, turning to look at them. "You can't give me what I want, Floyd." Agnes doesn't know what she wants, exactly, but it's not Floyd Matthews or his little gold ring.

Floyd gives her a little shake. "But I *love* you!"

Oh, Agnes doubts the hell out of that. He loves pieces of her—the thunder-blue of her eyes, the full moon-glow of her breasts in the dark—but he never even met most of her. If he peeled back her pretty skin he'd find nothing soft or sweet at all, just busted glass and ashes and the desperate, animal will to stay alive.

Agnes removes Floyd's hands from her shoulders, gently. "I'm sorry."

She strides down St. Mary's with his voice rising behind her, pleading, desperate. His pleas curdle into cruelty soon enough. He curses her, calls her a witch and a whore and a hundred other names she learned from her daddy first. She doesn't turn back.

One of the other mill workers, a broad woman with a heavy accent, offers Agnes a nod as she passes and grunts "boys, eh" in the same tone she might say "fleas" or "piss-stains," and Agnes almost smiles at her before she catches herself.

She keeps walking. She dreams as she walks: a home of her own, so big she has extra beds just for guests. She'll write her little sister another letter: *You've got someplace to run, if you want it*. Maybe this time she would answer. Maybe the two of them could be family again.

It's a stupid dream.

Agnes learned young that you have a family right up until you don't. You take care of people right up until you can't, until you have to choose between staying and surviving.

By the time she turns on South Sybil the boarding house is lit up, noisy with the evening talk of working girls and unwed women.

Agnes finds her feet carrying her past it, even though her back aches and her stomach is sour and her breasts feel heavy, achey. She winds up Spinner's Row and down St. Lamentation Avenue, leaving the factories

and tenements and three dozen languages of West Babel behind her, lured forward by a strange, half-imagined tugging behind her ribs.

She buys a hot pie from a cart. A block later she throws it away, acid in her throat.

She heads uptown without quite admitting it to herself. She crosses the Thorn and the buildings get grander and farther apart, the faded advertisements and tattered playbills replaced by fresh campaign posters: *Clement Hughes for a Safer Salem! Gideon Hill: Our Light Against the Darkness!*

She falls in behind a flock of pinch-lipped women wearing white sashes with CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S UNION embroidered on one side and WOMEN WITHOUT SIN on the other.

Agnes has heard of them. They're always hassling street-witches and trying to save girls from the whorehouse whether or not they want to be saved (they mostly don't). Their leader is named something like Purity or Grace, one of those ladylike virtues. Agnes figures she's the one walking out front—slender, white-gloved, her hair piled up in a perfect Gibson Girl poof—wearing an expression suggesting she's Joan of Arc's tight-laced sister. Agnes would bet a silver dollar that her maid uses a little witching to keep her gown unwrinkled and her hair neat.

She wonders what Mama Mags would say if she could see them. Juniper would growl. Bella would have her nose in a book.

Agnes doesn't know why she's thinking of her sisters; she hasn't in years, not since the day she drew her circle and left them standing on the outside of it.

The street ends at St. George's Square, framed by City Hall and the College, and the white-sashed ladies begin stamping around the perimeter, chanting Bible verses and scowling at the gathering of suffragists in the center. Agnes should turn around and go back to South Sybil, but she lingers.

A woman in a white wig is speechifying about women's rights and

women's votes and women's history, about taking on the mantles of their fore-mothers and marching forward arm in arm.

And Saints save her, Agnes wishes it was real. That she could just wave a sign or shout a slogan and step into a better world, one where she could be more than a daughter or a mother or a wife. Where she could be something instead of nothing.

Don't forget what you are.

But Agnes hasn't believed in witch-tales since she was a little girl.

She is turning away, heading back to the boarding house, when the wind whips her skirts sideways and tugs her hair loose from its braid.

It smells foreign, green, un-city-like. It reminds Agnes of the dark interior of Mama Mags's house, hung with herbs and the bones of small creatures, of wild roses in the woods. The wind pulls at her, searching or asking, and her breasts ache in strange answer. Something wet and greasy dampens her dress-front and drips to the cobbles below. Something the color of bone or pearl.

Or—milk.

Agnes stares at the splattered drops like a woman watching a runaway carriage come hurtling toward her. Dates and numbers skitter behind her eyes as she counts up the days since Floyd lay beside her in the dark, his palm sliding smooth down her belly, laughing. *What's the harm, Aggie?*

No harm at all. For him.

Before Agnes can do more than curse Floyd Matthews and his soft hands six ways to Sunday, heat comes searing up her spine. It licks up her neck, rising like a fever.

Reality splits.

A ragged hole hangs in the air, that wild wind rushing through it. Another sky gleams dark on the other side, like skin glimpsed through torn cloth, and then the hole is growing, tearing wide and letting that other-sky pour through. The evening gray of New Salem is swallowed by star-spattered night.

In that night stands a tower.

Ancient, half-eaten by climbing roses and ivy, taller than the Courthouse or College on either side of the square. Dark, gnarled trees surround it, like the feral cousins of the lindens in their neat rows, and the sky above it fills with the dark tatter of wings.

For a moment the square stands in eerie, brittle silence, mesmerized by the strange stars and circling crows. Agnes pants, her blood still boiling, her heart inexplicably lifting.

Then someone screams. The stillness shatters. The crowd floods toward Agnes in a screeching horde, skirts and hats clutched tight. She braces her shoulders and wraps her arms around her belly, as if she can protect the fragile thing taking root inside her. As if she wants to.

She should turn and follow the crowd, should run from that strange tower and whatever power called it here, but she doesn't. She staggers toward the center of the square instead, following some invisible pull—

And the world mends itself.



3

The wayward sisters, hand in hand,
Burned and bound, our stolen crown,
But what is lost, that can't be found?

Purpose unknown

Beatrice Belladonna Eastwood was the oldest sister, with hair like owl feathers: soft and dark, streaked with early gray. She was the wisest of the three. The quiet one, the listening one, the one who knew the feel of a book's spine in her palm and the weight of words in the air.

But on the spring equinox of 1893, she is a fool.

She sits in the dust-specked light of her little office in the East Wing of the Salem College Library, flipping furtively through a newly donated first-edition copy of the Sisters Grimm's *Children and Household Witch-Tales* (1812). She already knows the stories, knows them so well she dreams in once-upon-a-times and sets of three, but she's never held a first edition in her own two hands. It has a weight to it, as if the Sisters Grimm tucked more than paper and ink inside it.

Beatrice flicks to the last page and pauses. Someone has added a verse at the end of the last tale, hand-lettered and faded.

The wayward sisters, hand in hand,
Burned and bound, our stolen crown,
But what is lost, that can't be found?

There are more lines below these, but they're lost to the blotches and stains of time.

It isn't especially strange to find words written in the back of an old book; Beatrice has been a librarian for five years, and has seen much worse, including a patron who used a raw strip of bacon as a bookmark. But it is a little strange that Beatrice recognizes these words, that she and her sisters sang them when they were little girls back in Crow County.

Beatrice always thought it was one of Mama Mags's nonsense-songs, a silly rhyme she made up to keep her granddaughters busy while she plucked rooster feathers or bottled jezebel-root. But here it is, scrawled in an old book of witch-tales.

Beatrice flips several onion-skin pages and finds the title of the last tale printed in scrolling script, surrounded by a dark tangle of ivy: *The Tale of Saint George and the Witches*. It's never been one of her favorites, but she reads it anyway.

It's the usual version: once upon a time there were three wicked witches who loosed a terrible plague on the world. But brave Saint George of Hyll rose against them. He purged witching from the world, leaving nothing but ashes behind him.

Finally only the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone remained, the last and wickedest of witches. They fled to Avalon and hid in a tall tower, but in the end Saint George burned the Three and their tower with them.

The last page of the story is an engraved illustration of grateful children dancing while the Last Three Witches of the West burned merrily in the background.

Mama Mags used to tell the story different. Beatrice remembers listening to her grandmother's stories as if they were doors to someplace else, someplace better. Later, after she was sent away, she would lie in her

narrow cot and re-tell them to herself again and again, rubbing them like lucky pennies between her fingers.

(Sometimes she can still see the walls of her room at St. Hale's: perfect ivory, closing like teeth around her. She keeps such things locked safe inside parentheses, like her mother taught her.)

A raised voice rings from the square through her office window, startling her. She isn't supposed to be dawdling over witch-tales and rhymes; as a junior associate librarian she's supposed to be cataloging and filing and recording, perhaps transcribing the work of true scholars.

Right now there are several hundred pages of illegible handwriting piled on her desk from a professor in the School of History. She's only typed the title page—*The Greater Good: An Ethical Evaluation of the Georgian Inquisition During the Purge*—but she can tell already it's one of those bloodthirsty books that relishes every gory detail of the purges: the beatings and brandings, the metal bridles and hot iron shoes, the women they burned with their babes still held in their arms. It will be popular with the Morality Party types, the saber-rattlers and church-goers who rather admire the French Empire's bloody campaign against the war-witches of Dahomey, who are eager to see similar measures taken up against the witches of the Navajo and Apache and the stubborn Choctaw still holed up in Mississippi.

Beatrice finds she doesn't have the stomach for it. She knows witching is sinful and dangerous, that it stands in the way of the forward march of progress and industry, et cetera, but she can't help but think of Mags in her little herb-hung house and wonder what the harm is.

She looks again at the words on the last page of the Sisters Grimm. They aren't important. They aren't anything at all, just a little girl's rhyme written in a children's book, a song sung by an old woman in the hills of nowhere in particular. An unfinished verse long forgotten.

But when she looks at them, Beatrice can almost feel her sisters' hands in hers again, can almost smell the mist rising from the valleys back home.

She pulls a notebook from her desk drawer. It's cheaply made—the black dye fading to murky mauve, the pages coming unglued—but it's her most beloved possession.

(It was her very first possession, the first thing she purchased with her own money after she left St. Hale's.)

The notebook is half-filled with witch-tales and nursery rhymes, stolen scraps and idle dreams and anything that catches Beatrice's eye. If she were a scholar she might refer to her notes as research, might imagine it typed and bound on a library shelf, discussed in university halls, but she isn't and it won't be.

Now she copies the verse about wayward sisters into the little black book, beside all the other stories she'll never tell and spells she'll never work.

She hasn't spoken so much as a single charm or cantrip since she left home. But something about the shape of the words on the page, written in her own hand, tempts her tongue. She has a wild impulse to read them aloud—and Beatrice isn't a woman much subject to wild impulses. She learned young what happened when a woman indulges herself, when she tastes fruits forbidden.

(*Don't forget what you are*, her daddy told her, and Beatrice hasn't).

And yet—Beatrice cracks her office door to check the College halls; she is entirely alone. She swallows. She feels a tugging somewhere in her chest, like a finger hooked around her ribcage.

She whispers the words aloud. *The wayward sisters, hand in hand.*

They roll in her mouth like summer sorghum, hot and sweet. *Burned and bound, our stolen crown.*

Heat slides down her throat, coils in her belly. *But what is lost, that can't be found?*

Beatrice waits, blood simmering.

Nothing happens. Naturally.

Tears—absurd, foolish tears—prick her eyes. Did she expect some grand magical feat? Flights of ravens, flocks of fairies? Magic is a dreary,

distasteful thing, more useful for whitening one's socks than for summoning dragons. And even if Beatrice stumbled on an ancient spell, she lacks the witch-blood to wield it. Books and tales are as close as she can come to a place where magic is still real, where women and their words have power.

Beatrice's office feels suddenly cluttered and stuffy. She stands so abruptly her chair screeches across the tile and fumbles a half-cloak around her shoulders. She strides from her office and clicks down the tidy halls of Salem College, thinking what a fool she was for trying. For hoping.

Mr. Blackwell, the director of Special Collections, blinks up from his desk as she passes. "Evening, Miss Eastwood. In a hurry?" Mr. Blackwell is the reason Beatrice is a junior associate librarian. He hired her with nothing but a diploma from St. Hale's, based purely on their shared weakness for sentimental novels and penny-papers.

Often Beatrice lingers to chat with him about the day's findings and frustrations, the new version of *East of the Sun, West of the Witch* she found in translation or the newest novel from Miss Hardy, but today she merely gives him a thin smile and hurries out into the graying evening with his worried eyes watching her.

She is halfway across the square, shoving through some sort of rally or protest, when the tears finally spill over, pooling against the wire rims of her spectacles before splashing to the stones below.

Heat hissing through her veins. An unnatural wind whipping toward the center of the square. It smells like drying herbs and wild roses. Like magic.

That foolish hope returns to her. Beatrice wets her wind-scoured lips and says the words again. *The wayward sisters, hand in hand—*

This time she doesn't stop—*can't* stop—but returns to the beginning in a circling chant. It's as if the words are a river or an unbridled horse, carrying her helplessly forward. There's a rhythm to them, a heartbeat that skips at the end of the verse, stuttering over missing words.

The spell shambles onward, careening, not quite right, and the heat builds. Her lungs are charred, her mouth seared, her skin fevered.

Dimly Beatrice is aware of things outside herself—the splitting open of the world, the black tower hanging against a star-flecked sky, hung with thorns and ivy, the crows reeling overhead—her own feet carrying her forward, forward, following the witch-wind to the middle of the square. But then the fever blurs her vision, swallows her whole.

None of Mama Mags's spells ever felt like this. Like a song she can't stop singing, like a bonfire beneath her skin. Beatrice thinks it might become a pyre if she keeps feeding it.

She stutters into silence.

The world shudders. The ripped-open edges of reality flutter like tattered cloth before drawing together again, as if some great unseen seamstress is stitching the world back together. The tower and the tangled wood and the foreign night vanish, replaced by the ordinary gray of a spring evening in the city.

Beatrice blinks and thinks, *That was witching.* True witching, old and dark and wild as midnight.

Everything tilts strangely in Beatrice's vision and she tips downward into darkness. She falls, half dreaming there are arms waiting to catch her, sturdy and warm. A woman's voice says her name, except it isn't her name anymore—it's the lost name her sisters used when they were still foolish and fearless—*Bella!*—

And it begins to rain.



Juniper is howling like a moon-drunk dog, reveling in the sweet heat of power coursing through her veins and the feather-soft beating of wings above her, when the tower disappears.

It leaves the square in teeming, shrieking chaos. Every hat is blown askew, every skirt is ruffled, every hair-pin failing in its duties. Even the

neat-trimmed linden trees look a little wilder, their leaves greener, their branches spreading like autumn antlers.

Juniper is chilled and dazed, emptied out except for a strange ache in the center of her. A *want* so vast it can't fit behind her ribs.

She looks up to see two other women standing near her, forming a silent circle in the middle of the screaming stampede of St. George's Square. In their faces Juniper sees her own want shining back at her, a hollow-cheeked hunger for whatever the hell it was they saw hanging in the sky, calling them closer.

One of the women sways and says "oh" in a hoarse voice, like she's been standing too long over a cook-fire. She blinks at Juniper through fever-slick eyes before she falls.

Juniper drops her staff and catches her before her head cracks against stone. She's light, feather-fragile in Juniper's arms. It's only as Juniper lays her down and resettles the crooked spectacles on the woman's nose, as she sees the freckles scattered across her cheeks like constellations she thought she'd forgotten, that she realizes who she is.

"*Bella*." Her oldest sister. And—

Juniper looks slowly up at the other woman, the first cold flecks of rain hissing on her cheeks, her heart thundering like iron-shod hooves against her breastbone.

She's just as pretty as Juniper remembers her: full lips and long lashes and slender neck. Juniper figures she takes after the mama she can't remember, because there's nothing of Daddy in her.

"*Agnes*." And just like that, Juniper is ten again.

She is opening her eyes in the earthen dark of Mags's hut, already speaking her sisters' names because that's how they were back then, always hand in hand, one-of-three. Mags is turning away from her, shoulders bowed, and Juniper is realizing all over again that her sisters are gone.

Oh, they'd talked about it. Of course they had. How they would run away into the woods together like Hansel and Gretel. How they would eat wild honey and pawpaws, leave honeysuckle crowns on

Mags's doorstep sometimes so she'd know they were still alive. How Daddy would weep and curse but they would never, ever go back home.

But Daddy's mood would lighten, sudden as springtime, and he would buy them sweets and ribbons and they would stay a while longer.

Not this time. This time her sisters cut and ran without looking back, without second-guessing. Without her.

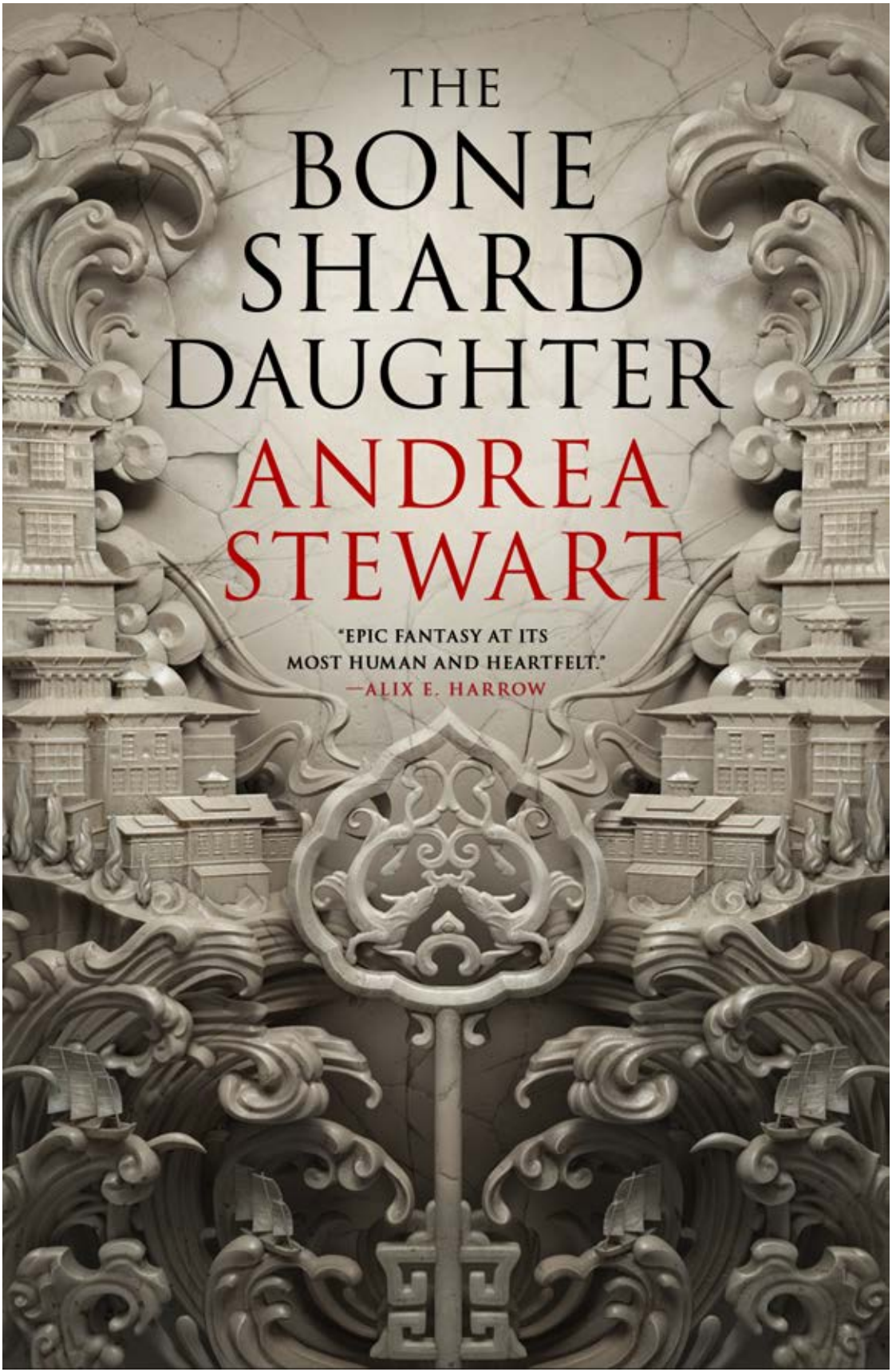
Juniper took off down the mountainside as soon as she understood, stumbling, limping—her left foot was still blistered and raw from the barn-fire.

She caught a single glimpse of Agnes's sleek black braid swaying on the back of a wagon as it jostled down the drive and shouted for her to come back, please come back, *don't leave me*, until her pleas turned to choked sobs and thrown stones, until she was too full-up with hate to hurt anymore.

She limped home. The house smelled wet and sweet, like meat gone bad, and her daddy was waiting for his supper. *Never mind, James*. He'd given her his own first name and liked to hear himself say it. *We'll get along without them.*

Seven years she survived without them. She grew up without them, buried Mama Mags without them, and waited without them for Daddy to die.

But now here they are, wet and hungry-eyed, smack dab in the middle of New Salem: her sisters.


THE
BONE
SHARD
DAUGHTER
ANDREA
STEWART
"EPIC FANTASY AT ITS
MOST HUMAN AND HEARTFELT."
—ALIX E. HARROW

1

Lin

Imperial Island

Father told me I'm broken.

He didn't speak this disappointment when I answered his question. But he said it with narrowed eyes, the way he sucked on his already hollow cheeks, the way the left side of his lips twitched a little bit down, the movement almost hidden by his beard.

He taught me how to read a person's thoughts on their face. And he knew that I knew how to read these signs. So between us, it was as though he had spoken out loud.

The question: "Who was your closest childhood friend?"

My answer: "I don't know."

I could run as quickly as the sparrow flies, I was as skilled with an abacus as the Empire's best accountants, and I could name all the known islands in the time it took for tea to finish steeping. But I could not remember my past before the sickness. Sometimes I thought I never would – that the girl from before was lost to me.

Father's chair creaked as he shifted, and he let out a long breath. In his fingers he held a brass key, which he tapped on the table's surface. "How can I trust you with my secrets? How can I trust you as my heir if you do not know who you are?"

I knew who I was. I was Lin. I was the Emperor's daughter. I shouted the words in my head, but I didn't say them. Unlike my father, I kept my face neutral, my thoughts hidden. Sometimes he liked it when I stood up for myself, but this was not one of those times. It never was, when it came to my past.

I did my best not to stare at the key.

"Ask me another question," I said. The wind lashed at the shutters, bringing with it the salt-seaweed smell of the ocean. The breeze licked at my neck, and I suppressed a shiver. I kept his gaze, hoping he saw the steel in my soul and not the fear. I could taste the scent of rebellion on the winds as clearly as I could the fish fermentation vats. It was that obvious, that thick. I could set things right, if only I had the means. If only he'd let me prove it.

Tap.

"Very well," Father said. The teak pillars behind him framed his withered countenance, making him look more like a foreboding portrait than a man. "You're afraid of sea serpents. Why?"

"I was bit by one when I was a child," I said.

He studied my face. I held my breath. I stopped holding my breath. I twined my fingers together and then forced them to relax. If I were a mountain, he would be following the taproots of cloud junipers, chipping away the stone, searching for the white, chalky core.

And finding it.

"Don't lie to me, girl," he snarled. "Don't make guesses. You may be my flesh and blood, but I can name my foster son to the crown. It doesn't have to be you."

I wished I did remember. Was there a time when this man stroked my hair and kissed my forehead? Had he loved me before I'd forgotten, when I'd been whole and unbroken? I wished there was someone I could ask. Or at least, someone who could give me answers. "Forgive me." I bowed my head. My black hair formed a curtain over my eyes, and I stole a glance at the key.

Most of the doors in the palace were locked. He hobbled from room to room, using his bone shard magic to create miracles. A magic I needed if I was to rule. I'd earned six keys. My father's foster, Bayan, had seven. Sometimes it felt as if my entire life was a test.

"Fine," Father said. He eased back into his chair. "You may go."

I rose to leave, but hesitated. "When will you teach me your bone shard magic?" I didn't wait for his response. "You say you can name Bayan as your heir, but you haven't. I am still your heir, and I need to know how to control the constructs. I'm twenty-three, and you—" I stopped, because I didn't know how old he was. There were liver spots on the backs of his hands, and his hair was steely gray. I didn't know how much longer he would live. All I could imagine was a future where he died and left me with no knowledge. No way to protect the Empire from the Alanga. No memories of a father who cared.

He coughed, muffling the sound with his sleeve. His gaze flicked to the key, and his voice went soft. "When you are a whole person," he said.

I didn't understand him. But I recognized the vulnerability. "Please," I said, "what if I am never a whole person?"

He looked at me, and the sadness in his gaze scraped at my heart like teeth. I had five years of memories; before that was a fog. I'd lost something precious; if only I knew what it was. "Father, I—"

A knock sounded at the door, and he was cold as stone once more.

Bayan slipped inside without waiting for a response, and I wanted to curse him. He hunched his shoulders as he walked, his footfalls silent. If he were anyone else, I'd think his step hesitant. But Bayan had the look of a cat about him – deliberate, predatory. He wore a leather apron over his tunic, and blood stained his hands.

"I've completed the modification," Bayan said. "You asked me to see you right away when I'd finished."

A construct hobbled behind him, tiny hooves clicking against the floor. It looked like a deer, except for the fangs protruding from its mouth and the curling monkey's tail. Two small wings sprouted from its shoulders, blood staining the fur around them.

Father turned in his chair and placed a hand on the creature's back. It looked up at him with wide, wet eyes. "Sloppy," he says. "How many shards did you use to embed the follow command?"

"Two," Bayan said. "One to get the construct to follow me, and another to get it to stop."

"It should be one," Father said. "It goes where you do unless you tell it not to. The language is in the first book I gave you." He seized one of the wings and pulled it. When he let it go, it settled slowly back at the construct's side. "Your construction, however, is excellent."

Bayan's eyes slid to the side, and I held his gaze. Neither of us looked away. Always a competition. Bayan's irises were blacker even than mine, and when his lip curled, it only accentuated the full curve of his mouth. I supposed he was prettier than I would ever be, but I was convinced I was smarter, and that's what really mattered. Bayan never cared to hide his feelings. He carried his contempt for me like a child's favorite seashell.

"Try again with a new construct," Father said, and Bayan broke his gaze from mine. Ah, I'd won this small contest.

Father reached his fingers into the beast. I held my breath. I'd only seen him do this twice. Twice I could remember, at least. The creature only blinked placidly as Father's hand disappeared to the wrist. And then he pulled away and the construct froze, still as a statue. In his hand were two small shards of bone.

No blood stained his fingers. He dropped the bones into Bayan's hand. "Now go. Both of you."

I was quicker to the door than Bayan, whom I suspected was hoping for more than just harsh words. But I was used to harsh words, and I'd things to do. I slipped out the door and held it for Bayan to pass so he needn't bloody the door with his hands. Father prized cleanliness.

Bayan glared at me as he passed, the breeze in his wake smelling of copper and incense. Bayan was just the son of a small isle's governor, lucky enough to have caught Father's eye and to be taken in as a foster. He'd brought the sickness with him, some exotic disease Imperial didn't know. I was told I got sick with it soon after he arrived, and recovered a little while after Bayan did. But he hadn't lost as much of his memory as I had, and he'd gotten some of it back.

As soon as he disappeared around the corner, I whirled and ran for the end of the hallway. The shutters threatened to blow against the walls when I unlatched them. The tile roofs looked like the slopes of mountains. I stepped outside and shut the window.

The world opened up before me. From atop the roof, I could see the city and the harbor. I could even see the boats in the ocean fishing for squid, their lanterns shining in the distance like earthbound stars. The wind tugged at my tunic, finding its way beneath the cloth, biting at my skin.

I had to be quick. By now, the construct servant would have removed the body of the deer. I half-ran, half-skidded down the slope of the roof toward the side of the palace where my father's bedroom was. He never brought his chain of keys into the questioning room. He didn't bring his construct guards with him. I'd read the small signs on his face. He might bark at me and scold me, but when we were alone – he feared me.

The tiles clicked below my feet. On the ramparts of the palace walls, shadows lurked – more constructs. Their instructions were simple. Watch for intruders. Sound an alarm. None of them paid me any mind, no matter that I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I wasn't an intruder.

The Construct of Bureaucracy would now be handing over the reports. I'd watched him sorting them earlier in the day, hairy lips fumbling over his teeth as he read them silently. There would be quite a lot. Shipments delayed due to skirmishes, the Ioph Carn stealing and smuggling witstone, citizens shirking their duty to the Empire.

I swung onto my father's balcony. The door to his' room was cracked open. The room was usually empty, but this time it was not. A growl emanated from within. I froze. A black nose nudged into the space between door and wall, widening the gap. Yellow eyes peered at me and tufted ears flicked back. Claws scraped against wood as the creature strode toward me. Bing Tai, one of my father's oldest constructs. Gray speckled his jowls, but he had all his teeth. Each incisor was as long as my thumb.

His lip curled, the hackles on his back standing on end. He was a creature of nightmares, an amalgamation of large predators, with black, shaggy fur that faded into the darkness. He took another step closer.

Maybe it wasn't Bayan that was stupid; maybe I was the stupid one. Maybe this was how Father would find me after his tea – torn

to bloody pieces on his balcony. It was too far to the ground, and I was too short to reach the roof gutters. The only way out from these rooms was into the hallway. "Bing Tai," I said, and my voice was steadier than I felt. "It is me, Lin."

I could almost feel my father's two commands battling in the construct's head. One: protect my rooms. Two: protect my family. Which command was stronger? I'd bet on the second one, but now I wasn't so sure.

I held my ground and tried not to let my fear show. I shoved my hand toward Bing Tai's nose. He could see me, he could hear me, perhaps he needed to smell me.

He *could* choose to taste me, though I did my best not to think about that.

His wet, cold nose touched my fingers, a growl still deep in his throat. I was not Bayan, who wrestled with the constructs like they were his brothers. I could not forget what they were. My throat constricted until I could barely breathe, my chest tight and painful.

And then Bing Tai settled on his haunches, his ears pricking, his lips covering his teeth. "Good Bing Tai," I said. My voice trembled. I had to hurry.

Grief lay heavy in the room, thick as the dust on what used to be my mother's wardrobe. Her jewelry on the dresser lay untouched; her slippers still awaited her next to the bed. What bothered me more than the questions my father asked me, than not knowing if he loved and cared for me as a child, was not remembering my mother.

I'd heard the remaining servants whispering. He burned all her portraits on the day she died. He forbade mention of her name. He put all her handmaidens to the sword. He guarded the memories of her jealously, as if he was the only one allowed to have them.

Focus.

I didn't know where he kept the copies he distributed to Bayan and me. He always pulled these from his sash pocket, and I didn't dare try to filch them from there. But the original chain of keys lay on the bed. So many doors. So many keys. I didn't know which was which, so I selected one at random – a golden key with a jade piece in the bow – and pocketed it.

I escaped into the hallway and wedged a thin piece of wood between door and frame so the door didn't latch. Now the tea would be steeping. Father would be reading through the reports, asking questions. I hoped they would keep him occupied.

My feet scuffed against the floorboards as I ran. The grand hallways of the palace were empty, lamplight glinting off the red-painted beams above. In the entryway, teak pillars rose from floor to ceiling, framing the faded mural on the second-floor wall. I took the steps down to the palace doors two at a time. Each step felt like a miniature betrayal.

I could have waited, one part of my mind told me. I could have been obedient; I could have done my best to answer my father's questions, to heal my memories. But the other part of my mind was cold and sharp. It cut through the guilt to find a hard truth. I could never be what he wanted if I did not take what I wanted. I hadn't been able to remember, no matter how hard I'd tried. He'd not left me with any other choice other than to show him I was worthy in a different way.

I slipped through the palace doors and into the silent yard. The front gates were closed, but I was small and strong, and if Father wouldn't teach me his magic, well, there were other things I'd taught myself in the times he was locked in a secret room with Bayan. Like climbing.

The walls were clean but in disrepair. The plaster had broken away in places, leaving the stone beneath exposed. It was easy

enough to climb. The monkey-shaped construct atop the wall just glanced at me before turning its limpid gaze back to the city. A thrill rushed through me when I touched down on the other side. I'd been into the city on foot before – *I must have* – but for me, it was like the first time. The streets stank of fish and hot oil, and the remnants of dinners cooked and eaten. The stones beneath my slippers were dark and slippery with washwater. Pots clanged and a breeze carried the sound of lilting, subdued voices. The first two storefronts I saw were closed, wooden shutters locked shut.

Too late? I'd seen the blacksmith's storefront from the palace walls, and this was what first gave me the idea. I held my breath as I dashed down a narrow alley.

He was there. He was pulling the door closed, a pack slung over one shoulder.

"Wait," I said. "Please, just one more order."

"We're closed," he huffed out. "Come back tomorrow."

I stifled the desperation clawing up my throat. "I'll pay you twice your regular price if you can start it tonight. Just one key copy."

He looked at me then, and his gaze trailed over my embroidered silk tunic. His lips pressed together. He was thinking about lying about how much he charged. But then he just sighed. "Two silver. One is my regular price." He was a good man, fair.

Relief flooded me as I dug the coins from my sash pocket and pressed them into his calloused palm. "Here. I need it quickly."

Wrong thing to say. Annoyance flashed across his face. But he still opened the door again and let me into his shop. The man was built like an iron – broad and squat. His shoulders seemed to take up half the space. Metal tools hung from the walls and ceiling. He picked up his tinderbox and re-lit the lamps. And then he turned back to face me. "It won't be ready until tomorrow morning at the earliest."

"But do you need to keep the key?"

He shook his head. "I can make a mold of it tonight. The key will be ready tomorrow."

I wished there weren't so many chances to turn back, so many chances for my courage to falter. I forced myself to drop my father's key into the blacksmith's hand. The man took it and turned, fishing a block of clay from a stone trough. He pressed the key into it. And then he froze, his breath stopping in his throat'.

I moved for the key before I could think. I saw what he did as soon as I took one step closer. At the base of the bow, just before the stem, was the tiny figure of a phoenix embossed into the metal.

When the blacksmith looked at me, his face was as round and pale as the moon. "Who are you? What are you doing with one of the Emperor's keys?"

I should have grabbed the key and ran. I was swifter than he was. I could snatch it away and be gone before he took his next breath. All he'd have left was a story – one that no one would believe.

But if I did, I wouldn't have my key copy. I wouldn't have any more answers. I'd be stuck where I was at the start of the day, my memory a haze, the answers I gave Father always inadequate. Always just out of reach. Always broken. And this man – he was a good man. Father taught me the kind of thing to say to good men.

I chose my words carefully. "Do you have any children?"

A measure of color came back into his face. "Two." He answered. His brows knit together as he wondered if he should have responded.

"I am Lin," I said, laying myself bare. "I am the Emperor's heir. He hasn't been the same since my mother's death. He isolates himself, he keeps few servants, he does not meet with the

island governors. Rebellion is brewing. Already the Shardless Few have taken Khalute. They'll seek to expand their hold. And there are the Alanga. Some may not believe they're coming back, but my family has kept them from returning.

"Do you want soldiers marching in the streets? Do you want war on your doorstep?" I touched his shoulder gently, and he did not flinch. "On your children's doorstep?"

He reached reflexively behind his right ear for the scar each citizen had. The place where a shard of bone was removed and taken for the Emperor's vault.

"Is my shard powering a construct?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. I don't know, I don't know – there was so *little* that I did know. "But if I get into my father's vault, I will look for yours and I will bring it back to you. I can't promise you anything. I wish I could. But I will try."

He licked his lips. "My children?"

"I can see what I can do." It was all I could say. No one was exempt from the islands' Tithing Festivals.

Sweat shone on his forehead. "I'll do it."

Father would be setting the reports aside now. He would take up his cup of tea and sip from it, looking out the window at the lights of the city below. Sweat prickled between my shoulder-blades. I needed to get the key back before he discovered me.

I watched through a haze as the blacksmith finished making the mold. When he handed the key back, I turned to run.

"Lin," he said.

I stopped.

"My name is Numeen. The year of my ritual was 1508. We need an Emperor who cares about us."

What could I say to that? So I just ran. Out the door, down the alleyway, back to climbing the wall. Now Father would be finishing up his tea, his fingers wrapped around the still-warm

cup. A stone came loose beneath my fingertips. I let it fall to the ground. The *crack* made me cringe.

He'd be putting his cup down, he'd be looking at the city. How long did he look at the city? The climb down was faster than the climb up. I couldn't smell the city anymore. All I could smell was my own breath. The walls of the outer buildings passed in a blur as I ran to the palace – the servants' quarters, the Hall of Everlasting Peace, the Hall of Earthly Wisdom, the wall surrounding the palace garden. Everything was cold and dark, empty.

I took the servants' entrance into the palace, bounding up the stairs two at a time. The narrow passageway opened into the main hallway. The main hallway wrapped around the palace's second floor, and my father's bedroom was nearly on the other side from the servants' entrance. I wished my legs were longer. I wished my mind were stronger.

Floorboards squeaked beneath my feet as I ran, the noise making me wince. At last, I made it back and slipped into my father's room. Bing Tai lay on the rug at the foot of the bed, stretched out like an old cat. I had to reach over him to get to the chain of keys. He smelled musty, like a mix between a bear construct and a closet full of moth-ridden clothes.

It took three tries for me to hook the key back onto the chain. My fingers felt like eels – flailing and slippery.

I knelt to retrieve the door wedge on my way out, my breath ragged in my throat. The brightness of the light in the hallway made me blink. I'd have to find my way into the city tomorrow to retrieve the new key. But it was done, the wedge for the door safely in my sash pocket. I let out the breath I hadn't known I'd been holding.

"Lin."

Bayan. My limbs felt made of stone. What had he seen?

I turned to face him – his brow was furrowed, his hands clasped behind his back. I willed my heart to calm, my face to blankness.

"What are you doing outside the Emperor's room?"

2

Jovis

Deerhead Island

I hoped this was one of my smaller mistakes. I tugged at the hem of the jacket. The sleeves were too short, the waist too roomy, the shoulders just a bit too broad. I sniffed the collar. The musky, star anise perfume went straight up my nose, making me cough. "If you're trying to attract a partner with that, best try a little less," I said. It was a good piece of advice, but the soldier at my feet didn't respond.

Is it still talking to oneself if the other person is unconscious?

Well, the uniform fit enough, and "enough" is what I could hope for most days. I had two full, standard boxes of witstone on my boat. Enough to pay my debts, enough to eat well for three months, enough to get my boat from one end of the Phoenix Empire to the other. But "enough" would never get me what I truly needed. I'd heard a rumor at the docks, a whisper of a disappearance similar to my Emahla's, and I'd be cursing myself the rest of my life if I didn't suss out the origins.

I slipped from the alleyway, resisting the urge to tug at

the jacket hem one more time. Nodded to another soldier when I passed her in the street. Let out my breath when she nodded back and turned away. I'd not checked the yearly Tithing Festival schedule before stopping. And because luck rarely worked out in my favor, this meant, of course, the Festival was here.

Deerhead Island was swarming with the Emperor's soldiers. And here I was – a trader without an Imperial contract, who'd had more than one run-in with the Empire's soldiers. I held the edge of my sleeve in my fingers as I navigated the streets. I'd gotten the rabbit tattoo when I'd passed the navigational exams. It was less pride and more practicality. How else would they identify my swollen and bloated body if I washed ashore? But now, as a smuggler, the tattoo was a liability. That and my face. They'd gotten the jawline wrong on the posters, the eyes were too close together and I'd cut my curling hair short since then, but aye, it was a likeness. I'd been paying gutter orphans to take them down, but then five days later I'd see some damned construct putting another one back up.

It was a shame that Imperial uniforms didn't come with hats.

I should have taken my witstone and fled, but Emahla was a string in my heart that fate couldn't seem to stop tugging. So I set my feet one in front of one another and did my best to appear as bland and blank as possible. The man at the docks had said the disappearance was recent, so the trail was still fresh. I didn't have much time. The soldier hadn't seen me before I'd clobbered him, but he'd patched a section of the left elbow and he'd recognize his uniform.

The street narrowed ahead, sunlight filtering down through gaps between the buildings and laundry hung to dry. Someone inside called out, "Don't' keep me waiting! How long does it take to put on a pair of shoes?" I wasn't far from the ocean, so the air

still smelled like seaweed, mingled with cooking meat and hot oil. They'd be preparing their children for the Festival, and preparing the Festival meal for when their children returned. Good food couldn't heal wounds of body and soul, but it could soothe them. My mother had prepared a feast for my trepanning day. Roasted duck with crisped skin, grilled vegetables, fragrant and spiced rice, fish with the sauce still bubbling. I'd had to dry my tears before eating it.

But that was a time long past for me – the scar behind my right ear long since healed. I ducked beneath a shirt hung too low and still damp, and found the drinking hall the man at the docks had described.

The door creaked as I opened it, scraping a well-worn path along the wooden floorboards. This early in the morning, it should have been empty. Instead, Imperial guards lurked in dusty corners, dried fish hanging from the ceiling. I made my way to the back, my shoulder against the wall, my wrist hidden by my thigh, my head down. If I'd been a better planner, I'd have wrapped the tattoo. Ah well. My face was the bigger problem, and I couldn't wrap that.

A woman stood behind the counter, her broad back to me, hair tied up in a handkerchief with a few loose strands stuck to her neck. She hunched over a wooden cutting board, her fingers nimbly pleating dumplings.

"Auntie," I said to her, deferential.

She didn't turn around. "Don't call me that," she said. "I'm not old enough to be anyone's auntie except to children." She wiped her floured hands on her apron, sighed. "What can I get for you?"

"I wanted to talk," I said.

She turned around then and gave my uniform a long look. I don't think she even glanced at my face. "I sent my nephew along

to the square already. The census takers would have marked him by now. Is that what you're here for?"

"You're Danila, right? I have questions about your foster daughter," I said.

Her face closed up. "I've reported everything I know."

I knew the reception she'd received upon her report, because Emahla's parents had gotten the same – the shrugged shoulders, the annoyed expressions. Young women ran away sometimes, didn't they? And besides, what did they expect the Emperor to do about it?

"Just leave me in peace," she said before turning back to her dumplings.

That soldier in the alleyway might be waking up right now with a splitting headache and a good many questions on his lips. But – Emahla. Her name chased itself around my head, spurring me to action. I slid around the end of the counter and joined Danila at the cutting board.

Without waiting for any sort of approval, I picked up the wrappings and the filling and began to pleat. After a startled moment, she began again. Behind us, two soldiers bet on their game of cards.

"You're good," she begrudged me. "Very neat, very quick."

"My mother. She was – *is* – a cook." I shook my head with a rueful smile. It had been so long since I'd been home. Another life, almost. "Makes the best dumplings in all the isles. I ran about a lot, sailing and studying for the navigational exams, but I always liked to help her. Even after I passed."

"If you passed the navigational exams, why are you a soldier?"

I weighed my options. I was a good liar – the best. It was the only reason I still had a head on my shoulders. But this woman reminded me of my mother, gruff but kindhearted, and I had a

missing wife to find. "I'm not." I slid my sleeve up enough to show the rabbit tattoo.

Danila looked at the tattoo, and then at my face. Her eyes narrowed, then widened. "Jovis," she said in a whisper. "You're that smuggler."

"I'd prefer 'most successful smuggler in the last one hundred years', but I'll settle for 'that smuggler'."

She snorted. "Depends on how you define success. Your mother wouldn't think so, I'd guess."

"You're probably right," I said lightly. It would deeply pain her to know how far I'd fallen. Danila relaxed, her shoulder now touching mine, her expression softer. She wouldn't give me away. Just wasn't the sort. "I need to ask about your foster daughter. How she disappeared."

"There isn't much to tell," she said. "She was here one day and then gone the next, nineteen silver coins left on her bedspread – as though a silver phoenix was all a year of her life was worth. It was two days ago. I keep thinking she'll walk back in the door."

She wouldn't. I knew, because I'd thought the same for a year. I could still see the nineteensilver coins scattered across Emahla's bed. Could still feel my heart pounding, my stomach twisting – caught in that moment of both knowing she was gone and not being able to believe it.

"Soshi was a bright young woman," Danila said, a quaver in her voice. She struck the tears from her eyes before they could reach her cheeks. "Her mother died in a mining accident and she didn't know her father. I never married, never had any children of my own. I took her in. I needed someone to help."

"Was . . . ?" The word thudded from my mouth; I couldn't form the question.

Danila picked up another wrap and studied my face. "I may

not be old enough to be your auntie, but to me you are still a boy. If the Empire had anything to do with her disappearance, she's already dead."

I have never been in love. We never met as children, we never became friends. I never took the chance, never kissed her. I never came back from Imperial Island. I told myself the lie, over and over. Even so, my mind layered on top her teasing smile, how she rolled her eyes when I made up a particularly silly story, the way she leaned her head onto my shoulder and sighed after a long day. But I needed to believe the lie. Because every time I thought about living the rest of my life without her, panic fluttered up my chest and wrapped itself around my throat. I swallowed. "Did you look for her? Did you find any trace?"

"Of course I looked," she said. "I asked around. One of the fishermen said they saw a boat leave early that morning. Not from the docks but from a nearby cove. It was small, dark and had blue sails. It went east. That's all I know."

It was the boat I'd seen the morning Emahla had disappeared, rounding the edge of the island, the mist so thick I wasn't sure I'd seen it at all. In four years, this was the best lead I had. If I was quick, I might be able to catch it.

One of the soldiers in the hall laughed, another groaned and cards hit the table. Chairs scraped against the floor as they rose. "It was a good game." A beam of sunlight warmed the back of my neck as they opened the door. "Hey you. You coming with us? The captain will bite your head off if you're late."

No one answered, and I remembered the soldier's jacket I wore. He was talking to me.

Danila seized my wrist. The one with the tattoo. Both her voice and her grip were intractable as tree roots. "I've done you a favor, Jovis. Now I need a favor of you."

Oh no. "Favors? We didn't speak of favors."

She talked over me, and I heard footsteps approaching from behind. "I have a nephew. He lives on a small isle just east of here. If I have it right, you'll be headed in that direction anyways. Take him before the ritual. Get him back to his parents. He's their only child."

"I'm not one of the Shardless Few. I don't smuggle children," I hissed. "It's not ethical. Or profitable." I tried her grip and found her strength greater than mine.

"Do it."

By the sound of the footsteps behind me, there was only one soldier. I could handle him. I could lie my way out of this. But after all these years, I still remembered the trickle of blood from my scalp, running down my neck. The cold touch of the chisel against my skin. The wound felt like fire. The Emperor says that the Tithing Festival is a small price to pay for the safety of us all. It didn't feel like so small a price when it was your head bowed and your knees digging into the ground.

I am hardened to the suffering of others. Another lie I told myself because I couldn't save everyone; I hadn't been able to even save my own brother. If I thought too much on all the suffering, all the people I couldn't help, I felt like I was drowning in the Endless Sea itself. I couldn't carry that weight.

Mostly this worked. But not today. Today I thought of my mother, her hands on each side of my face: "But what is the *truth*, Jovis?"

The truth was that someone had saved me. Sometimes one is enough. "I'll take him," I said.

I was a fool.

Danila let go of my wrist. "He owes me for a mug of wine. He'll be along shortly," she told the soldier.

The man's footsteps retreated.

"My nephew's name is Alon," Danila told me. "He's dressed

in a red shirt with white flowers embroidered on the hem. His mother is a cobbler on Phalar. She's the only one on the isle."

I brushed the flour from my hands. "Red shirt. Flowers. Cobbler. Got it."

"You should hurry."

I'd have snapped at her if her grief wasn't so obvious. She'd lost a daughter. I'd lost a wife. I could be kind. "If I find out what happened to your foster daughter, I'll figure out a way to let you know."

She wiped at her eyes again, nodded and turned back to pleating dumplings with the ferocity of a warrior on a battlefield. It seemed the lie she told herself was that these dumplings were the most important thing in the world right now.

I turned to go and the earth moved beneath me. Mugs rattled in their cupboards, Danila's rolling pin fell to the floor, and the dried fish swayed on their strings. I put my hands out, unsure of where to steady them. Everything moved. And then, just as quickly, it settled.

"Just a quake," Danila said, though I knew already. She said it more to soothe herself than me. "Some people think it's the witstone mine causing them – it runs deep. It's nothing to worry about. They've been going on for the past few months."

A lie she tells herself? Quakes happened sometimes, but it had been a long time since I'd felt one. I took an experimental step and found the ground steady. "I should go. May the winds be favorable."

"And the skies clear," she responded.

Spiriting a child away from the Tithing Festival wasn't going to be easy. The census takers made sure that all children who had turned eight years old attended, so I'd need to find a way to strike his name from the list. But I'd dealt with census takers before, and Imperial soldiers, and even the Emperor's constructs.

I smoothed the front of the uniform jacket and went to the door. I should have drawn aside the curtains, or cracked the door to look beforehand. But the quake had unsettled my nerves, and I was close to finding the boat that had taken Emahla. I was close to an answer. So instead, I stepped back into the narrow street, the sunlight hot on my face, wide-eyed and unsteady as a newborn lamb.

And found myself in the midst of a phalanx of Imperial soldiers.

3

Jovis

Deerhead Island

If only the street were busy, or loud, or anything but quiet and still. Ten uniformed men and women turned their attention to me. Sweat prickled in the small of my back.

"Soldier," one of them said. The pins at her collar marked her as a captain. "You're not one of mine. Who is your captain?"

Lies were well enough when you had substance to back them with. "Sir, I was with the first company to disembark."

She peered at my face, frowning, offering me nothing.

"Lindara's?" another soldier in the phalanx asked.

"Yes," I said in a tone that implied this was obvious, and the soldier foolish for verifying.

But the way the captain examined my features had me wanting to sink my chin into the collar of the uniform. Still studying me, she said, "You should be with your captain. This isn't a pleasure outing."

"I understand. It won't happen again."

"Did you happen to see another soldier around? Short, stocky, big nose and stinks of star anise."

I'd seen him, though we'd not become acquainted. His uniform and I had become intimately acquainted, however. I hoped fervently that the smell of fish and seaweed covered the scent lingering on my jacket. "No, I'm afraid not, sorry. And you're right, I should be with my captain." I turned to go.

A hand landed on my shoulder. "I didn't dismiss you," the captain said.

Oh, I would have made a terrible soldier. "Sir?" I pivoted back and did my best to wear "deferential" better than I wore this jacket.

Her fingers tightened around my shoulder and she squinted at my face. "I've seen you before."

"Probably digging latrine ditches. Lindara doesn't like me much." The other soldiers cracked grins, but the captain was uncrackable. I ran through all the tried and true tricks in my mind. Flirting with her would probably get my head chopped off. Self-deprecation didn't throw her off. Flattery maybe?

"No," she said. "There's something about your face."

Damn the Empire and their pettiness over a small bit of stolen witstone. Damn their power over both men and magic. But most of all, damn their stupid posters. "My face?" I said, to buy some time. "Well, it's—"

The ground beneath me shook again, and this time it shook harder. Everyone eyed the buildings above, hands out in vain attempts to stave off falling walls with fingers. A tile fell from the roof behind me, shattering on the stones by my feet. The shaking stopped.

"That's another one," one of the soldiers said. "Two in one day." He sounded anxious. Truth be told, I didn't like it much either. Sometimes there were small aftershocks, but this one had been stronger than the first.

The captain turned her attention back to me. Her eyes narrowed.

I cleared my throat and straightened my shoulders. "Should we be at the square, captain? It's nearly time for the Festival."

I'd finally hit the right note – respect and discipline. The captain's hand dropped from my shoulder. "We'll have to find our comrade later. We've a duty to fulfill." She strode up the street, beckoning for the others to follow.

I saw a couple of hands reach behind right ears to touch their trepanning scars. I wondered if they remembered that day as crisply as I did. I fell into step behind them – I had business at the Tithing Festival too after all. I might be a liar, but I kept my word. Always kept my word. So I put my legs into it and climbed the hill with the rest of them. The stones beneath my feet shifted as I trod upon them, loosened by the quake. The street opened up at the top of the hill, joining with two others.

The man in front of me turned around to check the view when we reached the top. His face paled, his eyes widening. "Captain!"

I whirled, wondering what it was he saw.

The narrow street wended behind us, buildings looming over it, pressed together like teeth. Dust glittered in the air, but this wasn't what had captured the soldier's attention. Down by the ocean, something had changed. The outline of the harbor had widened. The docks lay at strange angles to one another. There were dark shapes near the shore, jutting from the water.

The tops of bushes. The harbor had sunk.

The captain's regarded this revelation with a grim set to her mouth. "We go to the square," she said. "We tell the other two phalanxes. Keep calm, keep order. I don't know what this means, but we stick together."

It was a testament to her leadership that the soldiers fell into step behind her.

I eyed the docks behind us. Promises were well and good, but I'd also promised Emahla I'd find her – and I couldn't very well

do that if I were dead. I thought of Danila folding dumplings for her nephew's Festival feast. After mine, my normally reticent mother had held me close, kissed the top of my sweaty hair. "I wish I could have protected you," she'd said. She hadn't known then that I'd been spared. I'd barely known it myself. The square wasn't too far now, and I was a quick runner.

So despite my dread, I followed the soldiers. The air had gone still; no voices, no birds calling, only our footsteps scraping against stone. After another turn and a climb, the stillness gave way to murmuring. Ahead, the street widened into the city square.

Deerhead Island wasn't the largest of the known islands, but it was one of the wealthiest. I'd heard natives brag about their spicy fish soup, their vast markets, and had even heard one claim that Deerhead floated higher in the water than other islands. Their witstone mine produced a good deal of the Empire's supply, and the square was yet another reflection of this wealth. The stones beneath our feet became smooth, laid in patterns. A raised pond adorned the center of the square, bridges leading to a gazebo in the middle. The vine-like carvings on the gazebo marked it as one of the few Alanga-era structures still standing in one piece. It would have been a place I'd liked to have visited with Emahla. She would have given me a sly, sidelong look: "So why did the Alanga build that?" And I would have launched into a story about how this graceful building was merely one of their outhouses. She would have laughed and added in her own details. "Of course. Who doesn't dream of relieving themselves in a gazebo?"

But she wasn't actually here.

I stopped at the mouth of the street, waiting until the soldiers in front of me had made their way to the other end of the square. Dozens of children stood there, hemmed in by Imperial soldiers.

Like sheep being led to a slaughter. Some were calm but most looked nervous, and several of them openly wept. They'd have been dosed up with opium to make them docile and to dull the pain. I strode closer and searched their ranks. Red shirt, flowers on the hem. Too many children in red.

It shouldn't have been me doing this. It should have been one of the Shardless Few, with their romantic ideals about freedom and an Empire ruled by the people. I wasn't an idealist. Couldn't afford to be.

The earth moved. Dust shook loose from the tiled roofs and I struggled to keep my feet underneath me. Panic jolted to the tips of my fingers. An aftershock, fine, yes. Three quakes in one day, and the sinking of the harbor – this wasn't anywhere close to normal. At the other end of the square, the soldiers crouched around their charges, hands going to weapons as though that might help. The census taker presiding over the Festival hunched over his book. The children watched the buildings shake with wide eyes.

I steadied myself at the edge of the fountain, counting. One, two, three, four . . .

At five, my throat tightened. At ten, I knew this shaking might not stop. Something terrible was happening. I could feel it to the very marrow of my bones. As soon as I felt it, I could walk again. If the world was ending, then just waiting around for it to end would help no one, least of all myself.

A boy in the group of children seemed to sense the same thing I did. He rose from his crouch and ran. One of the Imperial soldiers caught him by the shirt.

Red shirt, flowers at the hem. Alon, Danila's nephew. Short for eight years old, with a mop of black hair that threatened to overwhelm him.

Duty held the soldiers together like a piece of fishing string. A hard push and they'd snap. I ran toward them, stumbling as

the ground shifted. "The island is sinking! I've seen this happen before," I lied. I didn't have to try at all to sound panicked. "Get to the ships, get out of here before it takes us all with it!" I couldn't be sure if I was exaggerating or not, but I wasn't about to stick around to find out.

The soldiers stared at me for a moment, stricken, the buildings behind them rumbling.

"You!" the captain called to me. "Get back in line."

With a sound like thunder, a building on the opposite side of the square collapsed. With that, the string tying the soldiers all together snapped. They ran. Children and soldiers buffeted me, threatening to knock me to the ground. I reached through the crowd and seized Alon's arm. So small I could fit my entire hand around it. "Your Auntie Danila sent me," I told him, shouting to be heard above the rumbling earth. I'm not sure if he heard me, but he didn't try to slip from my grasp. That was something. "We need to run. Can you do that?"

This time, he nodded at me.

I caught a glimpse of the faces of the other children – panicked but still placid, their steps unsteady. Their parents, their aunts and uncles would come. *A lie, a lie* – my mother's voice. I shook it off. I couldn't help them all. "Deep breaths," I said, and then ran, still holding on to Alon's arm. The boy might have been short, but he could keep a decent pace. We dashed around the pond and back toward the docks.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears. The narrow street now felt like a chasm, one into which we were falling without hope of escape. Another building to our left teetered, beams breaking. The soldiers behind us screamed as I yanked Alon forward, just out of the way of the collapsing facade. Dust swept across the paving stones, climbing into my nose. I tried not to think of the soldiers now buried in the rubble, the people that might have

been inside. I had to focus on keeping us alive. Alon began to cry, a high-pitched keening sound. "I want my mother!" he sobbed, pulling at my grip.

Oh, child. I did too. She'd sat through hurricane winds, ignoring the rattling shutters and the wailing wind as if they were merely overwrought children. I promised myself – I would find a way to visit home again if I lived through this. "Listen," I shouted, "you need to run. If you don't, you'll never see her again." The words shut him up more cleanly than a slap. There wasn't time to regret them. I wasn't big or strong enough to carry him.

I thought I recognized the doorway to the drinking hall, but Danila would have to make her own way out. The ground jolted, throwing me into the wall of a building, my shoulder catching the brunt of it. I pulled on Alon's arm to keep him upright. The air was hazy; it made my eyes water. But between the gaps in the buildings I could see blue ocean and blue skies. We skidded down the uneven stones. A falling tile hit Alon on the shoulder and he reached for the wound. I pulled him along before he could touch it, merciless.

And then the air cleared and we were at the docks, a cloud billowing behind us as though we'd brought this destruction with us. Despite the shaking and the destruction, people hadn't yet filled the harbor. They hesitated on the edge of that precipice: is it bad enough? Will I feel foolish when this is all done? What of the belongings I've left behind?

Fear nipped at my heels, and I knew by now to pay heed to my fear. The thought of remaining on this island filled me with a dread I couldn't name. Maybe this would all stop, the island having sunk only a few measures. But maybe it wouldn't, and it was the second maybe that roared in my mind.

A few people tried to get into the Imperial boats – searching for protection – but were warned off by the soldiers. Others made

for their fishing boats. A hulking construct with the face of a long-beaked bird did its best to stop each of them. "Please declare your goods before leaving," it croaked out. "The shipping and sale of unauthorized goods may result in fines and imprisonment. Sir, I need to perform a randomized search of your cargo hold." Bureaucrat constructs were my least favorite. I waited until it was occupied with someone else. "Alon," I said to the boy, "that's my boat out there, at the end of the dock." Wood creaked and groaned behind us; stones ground against one another. "The dock is unmoored. We need to swim. I'm going to let go of your wrist now, but you'll need to follow me. Kick off your shoes if they weigh you down."

I didn't wait to see if he nodded; I ran for the water while the construct's back was turned. It couldn't do much without Imperial soldiers backing it up, but this wasn't the time I wanted to be attracting undue attention. The ocean's surface jittered with the shaking earth, obscuring my reflection. I saw, with a shock, that the backs of my hands were gray with dust and dotted with blood. No time to check for injuries. I plunged into the water. Here, in the harbor and at the end of the dry season, it was as warm as the surrounding air. I took my own advice, kicking off my shoes as soon as the water came to my chest.

Anchors still weighed the docks to the ocean floor, so they'd only shifted instead of completely floating free. Each stroke felt surreal, brought me back to swimming in the ocean as a child, even as the island behind me fell to pieces. I seized the edge of the dock and climbed up, splinters digging beneath my fingernails.

Alon was only a short distance behind me. Good boy – he'd kicked off his shoes. I bent to help him onto the dock. My boat was moored at the other end, swaying gently in the water. It

was a small thing – big enough for some decent cargo and for weeks at sea, but smaller was quicker. Smaller meant less witstone used when I had the use of it at all. This far from the dust and falling buildings, my mind cleared. "There's my boat," I told the boy, and this time I didn't have to shout. "We're going to your parents."

He followed me like a little lost lamb.

As soon as I was aboard, years of training took over. Checking the lines, undoing the docking line, hoisting the sail. The cacophony from the island faded to a dim sound in the back of my mind. My father had started teaching me to sail as soon as I could walk. Here, on the boat, my feet were steadier beneath me than on the quaking island.

Alon found a seat at the bow, and he sat there, mute and shivering.

A *crack* filled the air, loud as thunder. I looked back and swallowed. The island *was* sinking, the harbor now nearly fully submerged, the buildings at the edge creeping into the water. This wasn't going to be enough. I had to do something, get away faster.

The witstone. I scrabbled at the cargo hatch, and then at the loose boards below. The boxes of witstone lay beneath. Anyone who knew my boat could see it was sitting lower in the water than it normally did, but there were few who knew my boat the way I did. I grabbed a handful of the white, chalky stuff, pushed myself up and dumped it into the brazier.

I could have been gone, long gone if I'd not stopped for the boy. If I'd not stopped to ask after the boat that had taken my Emahla. But ifs couldn't save me now. I fumbled with the flint and then struck it against the side of the brazier. Sparks showered onto the witstone; it caught fire as easily as if it had been chaff.

White smoke surged forcefully from the brazier, bringing with it a gust of wind that caught the sail and filled it. My ship lurched forward toward the harbor opening – which was now twice as wide as it had been when I'd arrived. Sweat traced tracks down the side of my face. The sun had risen higher in the sky and the heat of it licked at the back of my neck. It didn't seem fitting that the world should end on a cloudless day.

I blew on the flaming witstone and adjusted the mainsail. We weren't the only ones speeding out of the harbor, but we were among the first. On the ocean, my heartbeat calmed, though my fingers still trembled. I caught a look at Alon, still sitting and shivering at the bow, arms wrapped around himself. The swim hadn't washed all the dust from his face. His eyes widened as he stared at the island behind us. I risked a glance back.

The scale of destruction stole the breath from my lips. Half the buildings in the city had collapsed – nothing more than rubble. A gray plume of dust and smoke rose into the air, obscuring the trees. Flocks of birds had risen from the trees, dark specks among the plume.

"Auntie Danila . . ." Alon said.

Sometimes one was enough. One *had* to be enough. I swallowed. "She might have made it out, lad – don't despair yet." Around us in the water, I saw other shapes moving away from the island – goats, deer, cats, dogs, even rabbits and mice – all swimming, all abandoning the island. The deep stirred, the scales of some giant creature breaking the water briefly before it dove back down. I caught glimpses of fins and bright spots of luminescence. Even the beasts that lived on the underside of the floating island were leaving. Dread burrowed at the base of my neck, prickling down my spine.

The island trembled more violently, sending more of the city tumbling to the ground. The ground began to sink in earnest,

as lazily as a person slipping into a bath. My mind calculated out the problem before my heart could believe it. If the island sank completely, the water would rush to fill the space left behind, creating a whirlpool.

If we did not get far enough away, we'd be pulled in. "By all the Alanga," I murmured. We were moving quickly, but not quick enough. We'd barely cleared the harbor. I threw more witstone onto the fire, wiping the chalky dust off on the jacket. My little boat jumped in the water, but then slowed once more. I could see the eddies and currents, moving other boats about without regard for the wind. Someone on one of the boats screamed.

The witstone. I had to dump it. It was slowing us down.

Even with death staring me in the face, my mind scrambled for other options. I clamped down. No. I wouldn't be like those people still at the docks, still hoping the quake would end, that they'd be able to return to their homes. They were still there if they weren't drowned already.

"Alon, give me a hand with this, would you?"

The boy unfroze when I gestured to the hatch door. People always responded better in a crisis when given something to do. He held the door up as I dug for the boxes and heaved them onto the deck. A wealth of witstone, illicitly acquired, but mine. Enough to pay my debt to the Ioph Carn.

I reserved a handful for the brazier and then tossed the boxes overboard, one after another, before I could change my mind.

Enough – now not enough. Island sinking or no, the Ioph Carn would find me and demand their payment. But for now I was alive, my boat skimming across the water, my heartbeat quick and strong.

Alon crept back to the bow of the ship like a wounded animal. I'd pushed him hard, but I hadn't wanted to leave him behind.

He curled in on himself and began to keen. The opium was likely wearing off right about now too.

"Your auntie might still have gotten out," I said. I knew it wouldn't help as soon as I said it. He was eight; he wasn't stupid. Although he lived on a smaller island, he probably came to visit his auntie often; he probably knew this place like a second home. And it was gone, dissolving into the ocean, Danila with it too.

He glanced at me, red-faced, from beneath his elbow. "They're gone," he wept. "The people are dead, the island is dead, the animals –" He lifted his head to look at the animals swimming alongside our boat. ""They're going to die too."

The island behind us shook once more, and that last rumble broke down the walls I'd built around my horror. What had caused this? In all the old stories – even the ones of the Alanga – there was no mention of islands sinking. Quaking, yes, but not this. Not an entire island destroying itself, taking everything with it. I did my best to bolster my feelings. It wouldn't help me or the boy if I fell apart, no matter how badly I wanted to.

I leaned over the side of the ship and saw a brown kitten, struggling in the waves. It had nowhere to go, but still it swam on. It scrabbled at the side of my boat, hoping for some purchase. I knew the feeling. Its brown eyes met mine, and I could feel its desperation.

On an impulse, I took my net, reached over and scooped the creature from the sea. It didn't move when I deposited it on deck; it crouched, bedraggled and shivering. "Look here," I said to Alon. "This one won't die if you can take care of it. Open up that bench over there. There's some blankets on the left side and some dried fish buried beneath them. See if you can get this fellow cleaned up and eating."

Alon wiped his tears on the back of his sleeve and crept from

the bow to the kitten. He cupped the little creature in his arms, and though he still sniffled, he stopped keening.

One more life saved. It was a pittance, unutterably small against the scale of the lives lost. But it was there. And one life certainly made a difference to the one living it.

THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE

A NOVEL



"ROBINSON HAS ESTABLISHED HIMSELF AS THE GREAT HUMANIST OF SPECULATIVE FICTION." —*VILLAGE VOICE*

"ONE OF THE WORLD'S FINEST WORKING NOVELISTS, IN ANY GENRE." —*GUARDIAN*

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

1

It was getting hotter.

Frank May got off his mat and padded over to look out the window. Umber stucco walls and tiles, the color of the local clay. Square apartment blocks like the one he was in, rooftop patios occupied by residents who had moved up there in the night, it being too hot to sleep inside. Now quite a few of them were standing behind their chest-high walls looking east. Sky the color of the buildings, mixed with white where the sun would soon rise. Frank took a deep breath. It reminded him of the air in a sauna. This the coolest part of the day. In his entire life he had spent less than five minutes in saunas, he didn't like the sensation. Hot water, maybe; hot humid air, no. He didn't see why anyone would seek out such a stifling sweaty feeling.

Here there was no escaping it. He wouldn't have agreed to come here if he had thought it through. It was his home town's sister city, but there were other sister cities, other aid organizations. He could have worked in Alaska. Instead sweat was dripping into his eyes and stinging. He was wet, wearing only a pair of shorts, those too were wet; there were wet patches on his mat where he had tried to sleep. He was thirsty and the jug by his bedside was empty. All over town the stressed hum of windowbox air conditioner fans buzzed like giant mosquitoes.

And then the sun cracked the eastern horizon. It blazed like an atomic bomb, which of course it was. The fields and buildings underneath that brilliant chip of light went dark, then darker still as the chip flowed to the sides in a burning line that then bulged to a crescent he couldn't look at. The heat coming from it was palpable, a slap to the face. Solar radiation heating the skin of his face, making him blink. Stinging eyes flowing, he couldn't see much. Everything was tan and beige and a brilliant,

unbearable white. Ordinary town in Uttar Pradesh, 6 AM. He looked at his phone: 38 degrees. In Fahrenheit that was—he tapped—103 degrees. Humidity about 35 percent. The combination was the thing. A few years ago it would have been among the hottest wet-bulb temperatures ever recorded. Now just a Wednesday morning.

Wails of dismay cut the air, coming from the rooftop across the street. Cries of distress, a pair of young women leaning over the wall calling down to the street. Someone on that roof was not waking up. Frank picked up his phone from the box beside his mat, called the police. No answer. He couldn't tell if the call had gone through or not. Sirens now cut the air, sounding distant and as if somehow submerged. With the dawn, people were discovering sleepers in distress, finding those who would never wake up from the long hot night. Calling for help. The sirens seemed to indicate some of the calls had worked. Frank checked his phone again. Charged; showing a connection. But no reply at the police station he had had occasion to call several times in his four months here. Two months to go. Fifty-eight days, way too long. July 12, monsoon not yet arrived. Focus on getting through today. One day at a time. Then home to Jacksonville, comically cool after this. He would have stories to tell. But the poor people on the rooftop across the way.

Then the sound of the air conditioners cut off. More cries of distress. His phone no longer showed any bars. Electricity gone. Brownout, or blackout. Sirens like the wails of gods and goddesses, the whole Hindu pantheon in distress.

Generators were already firing up, loud two-stroke engines. Illegal gas, diesel, kerosene, saved for situations like these, when the law requiring use of liquid natural gas gave way to necessity. The air, already bad, would soon be a blanket of exhaust. Like breathing from the exhaust pipe of an old bus.

Frank coughed at the thought of it, tried again to drink from the jug by his bed. It was still empty. He took it downstairs with him, filled it from their filtered tank in the refrigerator in the closet there. Still cold even with power off, and now in his thermos jug, where it would stay cold for a good long while. He dropped an iodine pill in the jug for good measure, sealed it tight. The weight of it was reassuring.

The foundation had a couple of generators here in the closet, and some

cans of gasoline, enough to keep the generators going for two or three days. Something to keep in mind.

His colleagues came piling in the door. Hans, Azalee, Heather, all red-eyed and flustered. "Come on," they said, "we have to go."

"What do you mean?" Frank asked, confused.

"We need to go get help, the whole district has lost power, we have to tell them in Lucknow. We have to get doctors here."

"What doctors?" Frank asked.

"We have to try!"

"I'm not leaving," Frank said.

They stared at him, looked at each other.

"Leave the satellite phone," he said. "Go get help. I'll stay and tell people you're coming."

Uneasily they nodded, then rushed out.

Frank put on a white shirt that quickly soaked up his sweat. He walked out into the street. Sound of generators, rumbling exhaust into the superheated air, powering air conditioners he presumed. He suppressed a cough. It was too hot to cough; sucking back in air was like breathing in a furnace, so that one coughed again. Between the intake of steamy air and the effort of coughing, one ended up hotter than ever. People came up to him asking for help. He said it would be coming soon. Two in the afternoon, he told people. Come to the clinic then. For now, take the old ones and the little ones into rooms with air conditioning. The schools would have A/C, the government house. Go to those places. Follow the sound of generators.

Every building had a clutch of desperate mourners in its entryway, waiting for ambulance or hearse. As with coughing, it was too hot to wail very much. It felt dangerous even to talk, one would overheat. And what was there to say anyway? It was too hot to think. Still people approached him. Please sir, help sir.

Go to my clinic at two, Frank said. For now, get to the school. Get inside, find some A/C somewhere. Get the old ones and the little ones out of this.

But there's nowhere!

Then it came to him. "Go to the lake! Get in the water!"

This didn't seem to register. Like Kumbh Mela, during which people

went to Varanasi and bathed in the Ganges, he told them the best he could. "You can stay cool," he told them. "The water will keep you more cool."

A man shook his head. "That water is in the sun. It's as hot as a bath. It's worse than the air."

Curious, alarmed, feeling himself breathing hard, Frank walked down streets toward the lake. People were outside buildings, clustered in doorways. Some eyed him, most didn't, distracted by their own issues. Round-eyed with distress and fear, red-eyed from the heat and exhaust smoke, the dust. Metal surfaces in the sun burned to the touch, he could see heat waves bouncing over them like air over a barbeque. His muscles were jellied, a wire of dread running down his spinal cord was the only thing keeping him upright. It was impossible to hurry, but he wanted to. He walked in the shade as much as possible. This early in the morning one side of the street was usually shaded. Moving into sunlight was like getting pushed toward a bonfire. One lurched toward the next patch of shade, impelled by the blast.

He came to the lake and was unsurprised to see people in it already, neck deep. Brown faces flushed red with heat. A thick talcum of light hung over the water. He went to the curving concrete road that bordered the lake on this side, crouched and stuck his arm in up to the elbow. It was indeed as warm as a bath, or almost. He kept his arm in, trying to decide if the water was cooler or hotter than his body. In the cooking air it was hard to tell. After a time he concluded the water at the surface was approximately the same temperature as his blood. Which meant it was considerably cooler than the air. But if it was a little warmer than body temperature . . . well, it would still be cooler than the air. It was strangely hard to tell. He looked at the people in the lake. Only a narrow stretch of water was still in the morning shade of buildings and trees, and that stretch would be gone soon. After that the entire lake would be lying there in the sun, until the late afternoon brought shadows on the other side. That was bad. Umbrellas, though; everyone had an umbrella. It was an open question how many of the townspeople could fit in the lake. Not enough. It was said the town's population was two hundred thousand. Surrounded by fields and small hills, other towns a few or several kilometers away, in every direction. An ancient arrangement.

He went back to the compound, into the clinic on the ground floor.

Up to his room on the next floor, huffing and puffing. It would be easiest to lie there and wait it out. He tapped in the combination on his safe and pulled open its door, took out the satellite phone. He turned it on. Battery fully charged.

He called headquarters in Delhi. "We need help," he said to the woman who answered. "The power has gone out."

"Power is out here too," Preeti said. "It's out everywhere."

"Everywhere?"

"Most of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bengal. Parts of the west too, in Gujarat, Rajasthan . . ."

"What should we do?"

"Wait for help."

"From where?"

"I don't know."

"What's the forecast?"

"The heat wave is supposed to last a while longer. The rising air over the land might pull in cooler air off the ocean."

"When?"

"No one knows. The high pressure cell is huge. It's caught against the Himalaya."

"Is it better to be in water than in air?"

"Sure. If it's cooler than body temperature."

He turned off the phone, returned it to the safe. He checked the particulate meter on the wall: 1300 ppm. This for fine particulates, 25 nanometers and smaller. He went out onto the street again, staying in the shade of buildings. Everyone was doing that; no one stood in the sun now. Gray air lay on the town like smoke. It was too hot to have a smell, there was just a scorched sensation, a smell like heat itself, like flame.

He returned inside, went downstairs and opened the safe again, took out the keys to the closet, opened the closet and pulled out one of the generators and a jerrycan of gas. He tried to fill the generator's gas tank and found it was already full. He put the can of gas back in the closet, took the generator to the corner of the room where the window with the air conditioner was. The windowbox A/C had a short cord and was plugged into the wall socket under the window. But it wouldn't do to run a generator in a room, because of the exhaust. But it also wouldn't do to

run the generator out on the street below the window; it would surely be snatched. People were desperate. So . . . He went back to the closet, rooted around, found an extension cord. Up to the building's roof, which had a patio surrounded by a rampart and was four floors off the street. Extension cord only reached down to the floor below it. He went down and took the A/C unit out of the window on the second floor, hefted it up the stairs, gasping and sweating. For a moment he felt faint, then sweat stung his eyes and a surge of energy coursed through him. He opened the fourth floor office window, got the A/C unit balanced on the ledge and closed the window on it, pulled out the plastic sidepanels that closed off the parts of the window still open. Up to the rooftop terrace, start the generator, listen to it choke and rattle up to its two-stroke percussion. Initial puff of smoke, after that its exhaust wasn't visible. It was loud though, people would hear it. He could hear others around the town. Plug in the extension cord, down the stairs to the upper office, plug in the A/C unit, turn it on. Grating hum of the A/C. Inrush of air, ah God, the unit wasn't working. No, it was. Lowering the temperature of the outer air by 10 or 20 degrees—that left it at about 85 degrees as he thought of it, maybe more. In the shade that was fine, people could do that, even with the humidity. Just rest and be easy. And the cooler air would fall down the stairs and fill the whole place.

Downstairs he tried to close the window where the A/C unit had been, found it was stuck. He slammed it downward with his fists, almost breaking the glass. Finally it gave a jerk and came down. Out onto the street, closing the door. Off to the nearest school. A little shop nearby sold food and drinks to students and their parents. The school was closed, the shop too, but people were there, and he recognized some. "I've got air conditioning going at the clinic," he said to them. "Come on over."

Silently a group followed him. Seven or eight families, including the shop owners, locking their door after them. They tried to stay in the shade but now there was little shade to find. Men preceded wives who herded children and tried to induce their single file to stay in the shade. Conversations were in Awadhi, Frank thought, or Bhojpuri. He only spoke a little Hindi, as they knew; they would speak in that language to him if they wanted to talk to him, or confer with someone who would speak to him in English. He had never gotten used to trying to help people he

couldn't talk to. Embarrassed, ashamed, he blasted past his reluctance to reveal his bad Hindi and asked them how they felt, where their families were, whether they had any place they could go. If indeed he had said those things. They looked at him curiously.

At the clinic he opened up and people filed in. Without instruction they went upstairs to the room where the A/C was running, sat down on the floors. Quickly the room was full. He went back downstairs and stood outside the door and welcomed people in if they showed any interest. Soon the whole building was as full as it could be. After that he locked the door.

People sat sweltering in the relative cool of the rooms. Frank checked the desk computer; temperature on the ground floor 38 degrees. Perhaps cooler in the room with the A/C unit. Humidity now 60 percent. Bad to have both high heat and high humidity, unusual; in the dry season on the Gangetic plain, January through March, it was cooler and drier; then it grew hot, but was still dry; then with the soaking of the monsoon came cooler temperatures, and omnipresent clouds that gave relief from direct sunlight. This heat wave was different. Cloudless heat and yet high humidity. A terrible combination.

The clinic had two bathrooms. At some point the toilets stopped working. Presumably the sewers led to a wastewater treatment plant somewhere that ran on electricity, of course, and might not have the generator capacity to keep working, although that was hard to believe. Anyway it had happened. Now Frank let people out as needed so they could go in the alleys somewhere, as in hill villages in Nepal where there were no toilets at any time. He had been shocked the first time he saw that. Now he took nothing for granted.

Sometimes people began crying and little crowds surrounded them; elders in distress, little children in distress. Quite a few accidents of excretion. He put buckets in the bathrooms and when they were full he took them out into the streets and poured them into the gutters, took them back. An old man died; Frank helped some younger men carry the body up to the rooftop patio, where they wrapped the old one in a thin sheet, maybe a sari. Much worse came later that night, when they did the same thing for an infant. Everyone in every room cried as they carried the little body up to the roof. Frank saw the generator was running out of gas and went down to the closet and got the fuel can and refilled it.

His water jug was empty. The taps had stopped running. There were two big water cans in the refrigerator, but he didn't talk about those. He refilled his jug from one of them, in the dark; the water was still a bit cool. He went back to work.

Four more people died that night. In the morning the sun again rose like the blazing furnace of heat that it was, blasting the rooftop and its sad cargo of wrapped bodies. Every rooftop and, looking down at the town, every sidewalk too was now a morgue. The town was a morgue, and it was as hot as ever, maybe hotter. The thermometer now said 42 degrees, humidity 60 percent. Frank looked at the screens dully. He had slept about three hours, in snatches. The generator was still chuntering along in its irregular two-stroke, the A/C box was still vibrating like the bad fan it was. The sound of other generators and air conditioners still filled the air. But it wasn't going to make any difference.

He went downstairs and opened the safe and called Preeti again on the satellite phone. After twenty or forty tries, she picked up. "What is it?"

"Look, we need help here," he said. "We're dying here."

"What do you think?" she said furiously. "Do you think you're the only ones?"

"No, but we need help."

"We all need help!" she cried.

Frank paused to ponder this. It was hard to think. Preeti was in Delhi.

"Are you okay there?" he asked.

No answer. Preeti had hung up.

His eyes were stinging again. He wiped them clear, went back upstairs to get the buckets in the bathroom. They were filling more slowly now; people were emptied out. Without a water supply, they would have to move soon, one way or the other.

When he came back from the street and opened his door there was a rush and he was knocked inside. Three young men held him down on the floor, one with a squared-off black handgun as big as his head. He pointed the gun and Frank looked at the round circle of the barrel end pointed at him, the only round part of a squared-off thing of black metal. The whole world contracted to that little circle. His blood pounded through him and he felt his body go rigid. Sweat poured from his face and palms.

"Don't move," one of the other men said. "Move and you die."

Cries from upstairs tracked the intruders' progress. The muffled sounds of the generator and A/C cut off. The more general mumble of the town came wafting in the open doorway. People passing by stared curiously and moved on. There weren't very many of them. Frank tried to breathe as shallowly as possible. The stinging in his right eye was ferocious, but he only clamped the eye shut and with the other stared resolutely away. He felt he should resist, but he wanted to live. It was as if he was watching the whole scene from halfway up the stairs, well outside his body and any feelings it might be feeling. All except the stinging in his eye.

The gang of young men clomped downstairs with generator and A/C unit. Out they went into the street. The men holding Frank down let him go. "We need this more than you do," one of them explained.

The man with the gun scowled as he heard this. He pointed the gun at Frank one last time. "You did this," he said, and then they slammed the door on him and were gone.

Frank stood, rubbed his arms where the men had grasped him. His heart was still racing. He felt sick to his stomach. Some people from upstairs came down and asked how he was. They were worried about him, they were concerned he had been hurt. This solicitude pierced him, and suddenly he felt more than he could afford to feel. He sat on the lowest stair and hid his face in his hands, racked by a sudden paroxysm. His tears made his eyes sting less.

Finally he stood up. "We have to go to the lake," he said. "There's water there, and it will be cooler. Cooler in the water and on the sidewalk."

Several of the women were looking unhappy at this, and one of them said, "You may be right, but there will be too much sun. We should wait until dark."

Frank nodded. "That makes sense."

He went back to the little store with its owner, feeling jittery and lightheaded and weak. The sauna feeling hammered him and it was hard to carry a sack of food and canned and bottled drinks back to the clinic. Nevertheless he helped ferry over six loads of supplies. Bad as he felt, it seemed as if he was stronger than many of the others in their little group. Although at times he wondered if some of them could in fact just keep dragging along like this all day. But none of them spoke as they walked, nor even met eyes.

"We can get more later," the shop owner finally declared.

The day passed. Wails of grief were now muffled to groans. People were too hot and thirsty to make any fuss, even when their children died. Red eyes in brown faces, staring at Frank as he stumbled among them, trying to help get corpses of family members up onto the roof, where they scorched in the sun. Bodies would be rotting, but maybe they would anneal and dry out before that, it was so hot. No odors could survive in this heat, only the smell of scorched steamy air itself. Or maybe not: sudden smell of rotting meat. No one lingered up here now. Frank counted fourteen wrapped bodies, adult and child. Glancing across that rooftop level of the town he saw that other people were similarly engaged, silent, withdrawn, down-gazing, hurrying. No one he could see looked around as he was looking around.

Downstairs the food and drink were already gone. Frank made a count, which he found hard. Something like fifty-two people in the clinic. He sat on the stairs for a while, then went in the closet and stared at its contents. He refilled his water jug, drank deeply, refilled it again. No longer cool, but not hot. There was the can of gas; they could burn the bodies if they had to. There was another generator, but there was nothing to power with it that would do any good. The satellite phone was still charged, but there was no one to call. He wondered if he should call his mom. Hi Mom, I'm dying. No.

The day crawled second by second to its last hour, and then Frank conferred with the store owner and his friends. In murmurs they all agreed; time to go to the lake. They roused the people, explained the plan, helped those who needed it to stand, to get down the stairs. A few couldn't do it; that presented a quandary. A few old men said they would stay behind as long as they were needed, then come along to the lake. They said goodbye to the people leaving as if things were normal, but their eyes gave it all away. Many wept as they left the clinic.

They made their way in the afternoon shadows to the lake. Hotter than ever. No one on the streets and sidewalks. No wailing from the buildings. Still some generators grumbling, some fans grinding. Sound seemed stunted in the livid air.

At the lake they found a desperate scene. There were many, many people in the lake, heads dotted the surface everywhere around the shores, and out where it was presumably deeper there were still heads, people

semi-submerged as they lay on impromptu rafts of one sort or another. But not all of these people were alive. The surface of the lake seemed to have a low miasma rising out of it, and now the stink of death, of rotting meat, could be discerned in one's torched nostrils.

They agreed it might be best to start by sitting on the low lakeshore walkway or corniche and put their legs in the water. Down at the end of the walkway there was still room to do that, and they trudged down together and sat as a group, in a line. The concrete under them was still radiating the day's heat. They were all sweating, except for some who weren't, who were redder than the rest, incandescent in the shadows of the late afternoon. As twilight fell they propped these people up and helped them to die. The water of the lake was as hot as bath water, clearly hotter than body temperature, Frank thought; hotter than the last time he had tested it. It only made sense. He had read that if all the sun's energy that hit Earth were captured by it rather than some bouncing away, temperatures would rise until the seas boiled. He could well imagine what that would be like. The lake felt only a few degrees from boiling.

And yet sometime after sunset, as the quick twilight passed and darkness fell, they all got in the water. It just felt better. Their bodies told them to do it. They could sit on the shallowest part of the lake bottom, heads out of water, and try to endure.

Sitting next to Frank was a young man he had seen playing the part of Karna in one of the plays at the local mela, and Frank felt his blankness pierced again, as when the people had shown concern for him, by the memory of the young man at the moment Arjuna had rendered Karna helpless with a spoken curse and was about to kill him; at that point the young man had shouted triumphantly, "It's only fate!" and managed to take one last swing before going down under Arjuna's impervious sword. Now the young man was sipping the water of the lake, round-eyed with dread and sorrow. Frank had to look the other way.

The heat began to go to his head. His body crawled with the desire to get out of this too-hot bath, run like one would from a sauna into the icy lake that ought to accompany all such saunas, feel that blessed shock of cold smacking the breath out of his lungs as he had felt it once in Finland. People there spoke of trying to maximize the temperature differential, shift a hundred degrees in a second and see what that felt like.

But this train of thought was like scratching an itch and thereby making it worse. He tasted the hot lake water, tasted how foul it was, filled with organics and who knew what. Still he had a thirst that couldn't be slaked. Hot water in one's stomach meant there was no refuge anywhere, the world both inside and outside well higher than human body temperature ought to be. They were being poached. Surreptitiously he uncapped his water jug and drank. Its water was now tepid, but not hot, and it was clean. His body craved it and he couldn't stop himself, he drank it all down.

People were dying faster than ever. There was no coolness to be had. All the children were dead, all the old people were dead. People murmured what should have been screams of grief; those who could still move shoved bodies out of the lake, or out toward the middle where they floated like logs, or sank.

Frank shut his eyes and tried not to listen to the voices around him. He was fully immersed in the shallows, and could rest his head back against the concrete edge of the walkway and the mud just under it. Sink himself until he was stuck in mud and only half his head exposed to the burning air.

The night passed. Only the very brightest stars were visible, blurs swimming overhead. A moonless night. Satellites passing overhead, east to west, west to east, even once north to south. People were watching, they knew what was happening. They knew but they didn't act. Couldn't act. Didn't act. Nothing to do, nothing to say. Many years passed for Frank that night. When the sky lightened, at first to a gray that looked like clouds, but then was revealed to be only a clear and empty sky, he stirred. His fingertips were all pruney. He had been poached, slow-boiled, he was a cooked thing. It was hard to raise his head even an inch. Possibly he would drown here. The thought caused him to exert himself. He dug his elbows in, raised himself up. His limbs were like cooked spaghetti draping his bones, but his bones moved of their own accord. He sat up. The air was still hotter than the water. He watched sunlight strike the tops of the trees on the other side of the lake; it looked like they were bursting into flame. Balancing his head carefully on his spine, he surveyed the scene. Everyone was dead.

2

I am a god and I am not a god. Either way, you are my creatures. I keep you alive.

Inside I am hot beyond all telling, and yet my outside is even hotter. At my touch you burn, though I spin outside the sky. As I breathe my big slow breaths, you freeze and burn, freeze and burn.

Someday I will eat you. For now, I feed you. Beware my regard. Never look at me.

3

Article 14 of the Paris Agreement Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change called for a periodic taking stock of all the signatory nations' carbon emissions, which meant in effect the total global carbon burn for the year in question. The first "global stocktake" was scheduled for 2023, and then every five years after that.

That first global stocktake didn't go well. Reporting was inconsistent and incomplete, and yet still it was very clear that carbon emissions were far higher than the Parties to the Agreement had promised each other they would be, despite the 2020 dip. Very few nations had hit the targets they had set for themselves, even though they had set soft targets. Aware of the shortfall even before the 2023 stocktake, 108 countries had promised to strengthen their pledges; but these were smaller countries, amounting together to about 15 percent of global total emissions.

So at the annual Conference of the Parties the following year, some delegations pointed out that the Agreement's Article 16, clause 4, specified that the COP "shall make the decisions necessary to promote the Agreement's effective implementation by establishing such subsidiary bodies as were deemed necessary for the implementation of the Agreement." They also pointed to Article 18, clause 1, which allowed the COP to create new "Subsidiary Bodies for Implementation of the Agreement." These subsidiary bodies had previously been understood to mean committees that met only during the annual COP gatherings, but now some delegates argued that given the general failure of the Agreement so far, a new subsidiary body with permanent duties, and the resources to pursue them, was clearly needed to help push the process forward.

So at COP29, held in Bogotá, Colombia, the Parties to the Agreement created a new Subsidiary Body for Implementation of the Agreement, as

authorized by Articles 16 and 18, to be funded using the funding protocols outlined in Article 8, which bound all Parties to the methods outlined in the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage. The announcement said:

"Be it resolved that a Subsidiary Body authorized by this twenty-ninth Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the parties to the Paris Climate Agreement (CMA) is hereby established, to work with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and all the agencies of the United Nations, and all the governments signatory to the Paris Agreement, to advocate for the world's future generations of citizens, whose rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are as valid as our own. This new Subsidiary Body is furthermore charged with defending all living creatures present and future who cannot speak for themselves, by promoting their legal standing and physical protection."

Someone in the press named this new agency "the Ministry for the Future," and the name stuck and spread, and became what the new agency was usually called. It was established in Zurich, Switzerland, in January of 2025.

Not long after that, the big heat wave struck India.

4

Above the campus of the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, Zurich rises to a forest park on top of the Zuriberg, the hill that forms the eastern flank of the city. Most of the city covers the banks of the river Limmat, which begins as the outlet of the Zurichsee and drains northward between two hills, the Zuriberg on the east and the Uetliberg to the west. Between these two hills the land is pretty flat, for Switzerland anyway, and here almost a quarter of all the Swiss have congregated to make a compact handsome city. Those lucky enough to live on the rise of the Zuriberg often think they have the best location, with a view over the roofs of the downtown, and out to the big lake to the south, and sometimes a glimpse of the Alps. In the late afternoon sun a sense of luminous calm can radiate up from this mixed vista of human and natural features. A good place. Visitors often call it boring, but the locals don't complain.

At the Kirche Fluntern tram stop, about halfway up the Zuriberg, you can get off one of the blue trams and walk north along Hochstrasse, past an old church with a steeple that has a big clockface on it, with a bell that rings the hours. Next door to it is where one finds the offices of the Paris Agreement's Ministry for the Future. They're within easy walking distance of the ETH, with all its geotechnical expertise, and not far above offices of the big Swiss banks, with their immense amounts of capital, all out of proportion to Switzerland's small size. These proximities were not accidental; for centuries now the Swiss have pursued a national policy of creating maximum safety for Switzerland by helping to increase peace and prosperity worldwide. "No one is safe until all are secure" seems to be their principle here, and in that project, geotechnical expertise and lots of money are both very useful.

That being the case, and since Geneva already hosted the headquarters

of the World Health Organization and several other UN agencies, when the Paris Agreement established this new agency of theirs, Zurich forcefully made the case that Geneva was already too crowded with agencies, and expensive as a result, and after some vigorous inter-cantonal tussling, they won the bid to host the new agency. Offering rent-free the compound on Hochstrasse, and several nearby ETH buildings as well, was no doubt one of many reasons their bid succeeded.

Now the head of the ministry—Mary Murphy, an Irish woman of about forty-five years of age, ex–minister of foreign affairs in the government of the Irish Republic, and before that a union lawyer—walked into her office to find a crisis that didn't surprise her one bit. Everyone had been transfixed with horror at the news of the deadly heat wave in India; there were sure to be immediate ramifications. Now the first of these had come.

Her chief of staff, a short slight man named Badim Bahadur, followed Mary into her office saying, "You must have heard that the Indian government is beginning a solar radiation management action."

"Yes, I just saw it this morning," she said. "Have they given us the details of their plan?"

"They came half an hour ago. Our geoengineering people are saying that if they do it as planned, it will equate to about the same as the Pinatubo volcanic eruption of 1991. That lowered global temperature by about a degree Fahrenheit, for a year or two. That was from the sulfur dioxide in the ash cloud that the volcano shot into the stratosphere. It will take the Indians several months to replicate that boost of sulfur dioxide, our people say."

"Do they have the capacity to do it?"

"Their air force can probably do it, yes. They can certainly try, they've got the necessary aircraft and equipment. A lot of it will simply reconfigure aerial refueling technology. And planes dump fuel all the time, so that part won't be so hard. The main problem will be getting up as high as possible, and then it's just a matter of quantity, the number of missions needed. Thousands of flights, for sure."

Mary pulled her phone from her pocket, tapped the screen for Chandra. Head of India's delegation to the Paris Agreement, she was well known to Mary. It would be late in Delhi, but this was when they usually talked.

When she answered, Mary said, "Chandra, it's Mary, can you talk for a minute?"

"For a minute, yes," Chandra said. "It's very busy here."

"I'm sure. What's this about your air force doing a Pinatubo?"

"Or a double Pinatubo, yes. This is what our academy of sciences is recommending, and the prime minister has ordered it."

"But the Agreement," Mary said, sitting down on her chair and focusing on her colleague's voice. "You know what it says. No atmospheric interventions without consultation and agreement."

"We are breaking the Agreement," Chandra said flatly.

"But no one knows what the effects will be!"

"They will be like Pinatubo, or hopefully double that. Which is what we need."

"You can't be sure that there won't be other effects—"

"Mary!" Chandra exclaimed. "Stop it right now. I know what you are going to say even before you say it. Here's what we are sure of in India: millions of people have just died. We'll never even know how many died, there are too many to count. It could be twenty million people. Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes."

"No. You don't understand. I invite you to come see it in person. Really you should, just so you know."

Mary found herself short of breath. She swallowed. "I will if you want me to."

A long silence followed. Finally Chandra spoke, her voice tight and choked. "Thank you for that, but maybe there is too much trouble here now for us to handle such a visit. You can see in the reports. I will send you some we are making. What you need to know now is that we are scared here, and angry too. It was Europe and America and China who caused this heat wave, not us. I know we have burned a lot of coal in the last few decades, but it's nothing compared to the West. And yet we signed the Agreement to do our part. Which we have done. But no one else is fulfilling commitments, no one is paying the developing nations, and now we have this heat wave. And another one could happen next week! Conditions are much the same!"

"I know."

"Yes, you know. Everyone knows, but no one acts. So we are taking matters into our own hands. We'll lower global temperatures for a few years, everyone will benefit. And perhaps we'll dodge another massacre like this one."

"All right."

"We do not need your permission!" Chandra shouted.

"I didn't mean that," Mary said. But the line had gone dead.

5

We drove in with a fuel truck, water truck, all that. It was like going out into nothing. With the electricity out, pumps weren't working, nothing was working. We set to work on the power plants before we did anything about all the dead. In any case there was nothing we could do about them, the bodies were sleeping where they fell. This wasn't just the people, but all the cattle too. Seeing all the bodies, cows, people, dogs, someone said something about the way Tibetans bury their dead, called sky burial—let the vultures eat the bodies. And there were some vultures doing that, yes. Clouds of vultures and crows. They must have flown in afterward. Sometimes the stink was horrible, but then we would move on or the wind would shift, and it went away. It seemed like it was too hot for smells, the air was cooked. The main smell was of burning. And things were burning, yes. Once the power came back on, there were some downed lines east of Lucknow, and brush fires started from them. Next day a wind came and the fire spread and got into the towns and we had to fight the fire before anything else. We got particulate readings of 1500 ppm.

There was a lake we could pump from, next to one town near Lucknow. The lake was filled with dead bodies, it was awful, but we threw the pump intake out into the lake anyway, because we needed the water. We were downwind of a brush fire, it was coming at us fast. So when the pump started filling our water trucks we were relieved.

Then I heard a noise, at first I thought it was something in the pump line, a kind of squeak it was. But then it seemed to be coming from the lakeshore, where there was a sidewalk running around the edge of the water. So I went over to look. I don't know. I guess it sounded alive.

He was lying against a building across the sidewalk from the lake. He

had a shirt draped over his head. I saw him move and shouted to the others and went to him. He was a firangi, with brown hair and skin that was all peeling off. He looked like he had been burned, or boiled, I don't know—he looked dead but he was moving. His eyes were almost swollen shut, but I could see he was looking at me. Once we started helping him he never said a thing, never made another sound. His lips were cracked bloody. I thought maybe his voice was gone, that he was too cooked to talk. We gave him water by the spoonful. We were afraid to give him too much at once. Once we got the word to team command, the medicos were with us pretty quickly. They took over and gave him infusions. He watched them do it. He looked around at us, and back at the lake, but he never said a thing. His eyes were just slits, and so red. He looked completely mad. Like a different kind of being entirely.

6

Following the great Indian heat wave, the emergency meeting of the Paris Agreement signatories was fraught indeed. The Indian delegation arrived in force, and their leader Chandra Mukajee was excoriating in her denunciation of the international community and its almost complete failure to adhere to the terms of the agreement that every nation on Earth had signed. Reductions in emissions ignored, payment into investments funds that were to be spent on decarbonization not paid—in every way the Agreement had been ignored and abrogated. A performance without substance, a joke, a lie. And now India had paid the price. More people had died in this heat wave than in the entirety of the First World War, and all in a single fortnight and in a single region of the world. The stain of such a crime would never go away, it would remain forever.

No one had the heart to point out that India had also failed to meet its emission reduction targets. And of course if total emissions over historical time were totted up, India would come in far behind all of the developed nations of the Western world, as everyone knew. In dealing with the poverty that still plagued so much of the Indian populace, the Indian government had had to create electricity as fast as they could, and also, since they existed in a world run by the market, as cheaply as they could. Otherwise outside investors would not invest, because the rate of return would not be high enough. So they had burned coal, yes. Like everyone else had up until just a few years before. Now India was being told not to burn coal, when everyone else had finished burning enough of it to build up the capital to afford to shift to cleaner sources of power. India had been told to get better without any financial help to do so whatsoever. Told to tighten the belt and embrace austerity, and be the working class for the bourgeoisie of the developed world, and suffer in silence until better times came—but

the better times could never come, that plan was shot. The deck had been stacked, the game was over. And now twenty million people were dead.

The people in the big room in the center of Zurich's Kongresshall sat there in silence. This was not the same silence as the earlier memorial moment, a ritual period of silence to honor the memory of the dead which had stretched on for minute after minute. Now it was the silence of shame, confusion, dismay, guilt. The Indian delegation was done talking, they had nothing more they cared to say. Time for a response, an answer to them; but there was no answer. Nothing could be said. It was what it was: history, the nightmare from which they could not wake.

Finally that year's president of the Paris Agreement organization, a woman from Zimbabwe, stood up and went to the podium. Briefly she embraced Chandra, nodded to the other Indians on stage, and went to the microphone.

"Obviously we have to do better," she said. "The Paris Agreement was created to avoid tragedies like this one. We are all in a single global village now. We share the same air and water, and so this disaster has happened to all of us. Since we can't undo it, we have to turn it to the good somehow, or two things will happen; the crimes in it will go unatoned, and more such disasters will happen. So we have to act. At long last, we have to take the climate situation seriously, as the reality that overrides everything else. We have to act on what we know."

Everyone nodded. They could not applaud, not now, but they could nod. They could raise their hands, some of them with their fists clenched, and commit themselves to action.

That was all very well. It was a moment, maybe even a moment to remember. But very soon they were back to the usual horse-trading of national interests and commitments. The disaster had happened in India, in a part of India where few foreigners ever went, a place said to be very hot, very crowded, very poor. Probably more such events in the future would mostly happen in those nations located between the Tropics of Capricorn and Cancer, and the latitudes just to the north and south of these lines. Between thirty north and thirty south: meaning the poorest parts of the world. North and south of these latitudes, fatal heat waves might occur from time to time, but not so frequently, and not so fatally. So this was in some senses a regional problem. And every place had its

regional problems. So when the funerals and the gestures of deep sympathy were done with, many people around the world, and their governments, went back to business as usual. And all around the world, the CO_2 emissions continued.

For a while, therefore, it looked like the great heat wave would be like mass shootings in the United States—mourned by all, deplored by all, and then immediately forgotten or superseded by the next one, until they came in a daily drumbeat and became the new normal. It looked quite possible that the same thing would happen with this event, the worst week in human history. How long would that stay true, about being the worst week? And what could anyone do about it? Easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism: the old saying had grown teeth and was taking on a literal, vicious accuracy.

But not in India. Elections were held and the nationalist nativist BJP party was thrown out of office as insufficient to the task, and partly responsible for the disaster, having sold the country to outside interests and burned coal and trashed the landscape in the pursuit of ever-growing inequality. The RSS disgraced and discredited at last as an evil force in Indian life. A new party was voted in, a composite party composed of all kinds of Indians, every religion and caste, urban poor, rural poor, the educated, all banded together by the disaster and determined to make something change. The ruling elite lost legitimacy and hegemony, and the inchoate fractured resistance of victims coalesced in a party called Avasthana, Sanskrit for survival. The world's biggest democracy, taking a new way. India's electrical power companies were nationalized where they weren't already, and a vast force was put to work shutting down coal-fired power plants and building wind and solar plants, and free-river hydro, and non-battery electrical storage systems to supplement the growing power of battery storage. All kinds of things began to change. Efforts were renewed to dismantle the worst effects of the caste system—these efforts had been made before, but now it was made a national priority, the new reality, and enough Indians were now ready to work for it. All over India, governments at all levels began to implement these changes.

Lastly, though this was regretted by many, some more radical portion of this new Indian polity sent a message out to the world: change

with us, change now, or suffer the wrath of Kali. No more cheap Indian labor, no more sell-out deals; no deals of any kind, unless changes were made. If changes weren't made by the countries that had signed the Paris Agreement—and every nation had signed it—then this portion of India was now their enemy, and would break off diplomatic relations and do everything short of declaring military war. But economic war—yes, economic war. The world would see what this particular one-sixth of its population, formerly the working class for the world, could do. Time for the long post-colonial subalternity to end. Time for India to step onto the world stage, as it had at the start of history, and demand a better world. And then help to make it real.

Whether that kind of aggressive stance would be revealed as a true national position or the posturing of a radical faction remained to be seen. It depended, some thought, on how far India's new national government was willing to go to back up this Kali group's threats—to in effect unleash them. War in the age of the internet, the age of the global village, the age of drones, the age of synthetic biology and artificial pandemics—this was not the same as war in the past. If they were serious, it could get ugly. In fact, if even just the Kali faction of the Indian polity was serious, it could get very ugly.

But two could play at those games, indeed everyone could play those games—not just the 195 nations that had signed the Paris Agreement, but all the various kinds of non-state actors, right down to individuals.

And so came a time of troubles.