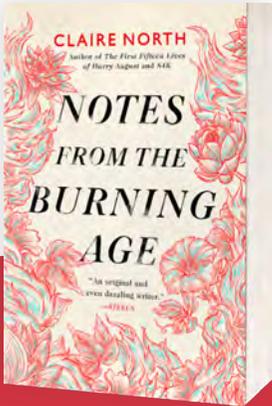


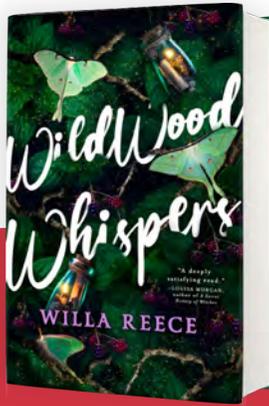


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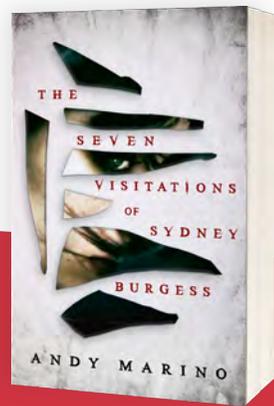
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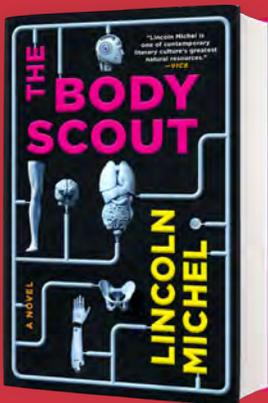
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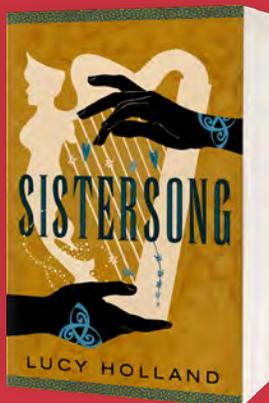
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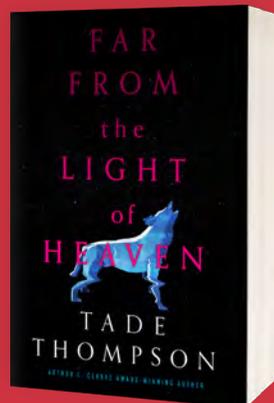
9/21/21

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Lincoln Michel
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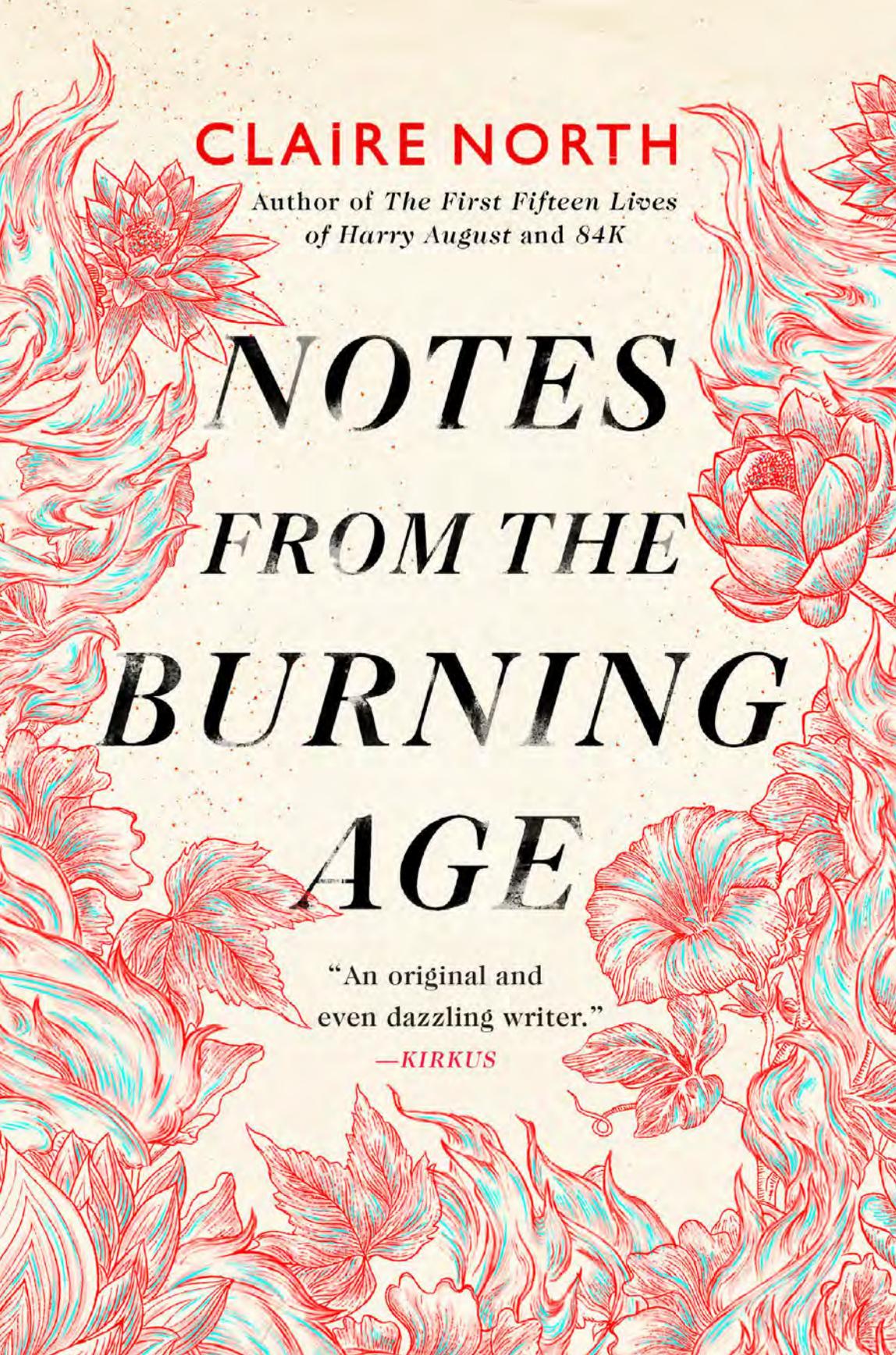
10/19/21

Sistersong
Lucy Holland
Redhook • pg. 46



10/26/21

*Far from the Light
of Heaven*
Tade Thompson
Orbit • pg. 55

The cover features intricate line art illustrations in red and cyan. On the left and right sides, there are stylized flames that appear to be consuming or rising from various flowers, including lotus-like blooms and hibiscus-like flowers. The background is a light, textured cream color with small speckles.

CLAIRE NORTH

Author of *The First Fifteen Lives*
of Harry August and *84K*

NOTES
FROM THE
BURNING
AGE

“An original and
even dazzling writer.”

—KIRKUS

Chapter 1

Yue was twelve when she saw the kakuy of the forest, but later she lied and said she saw only flame.

“Keep an eye on Vae!” hollered her aunty from her workshop door. “Are you listening to me?”

It was the long, hot summer when children paddled barefoot in the river through the centre of Tinics, a time for chasing butterflies and sleeping beneath the stars. School was out, and every class had found the thing that was demonstrably the best, most impressive thing to do. For the tenth grades about to take their aptitudes, it was cycling down the path from the wind farm head first, until they either lost their courage or their bikes flipped and they cartwheeled with bloody knees and grazed elbows. For the seventh, it was preparing their kites for the fighting season; the ninth were learning how to kiss in the hidden grove behind the compression batteries, and to survive the first heartbreak of a sixty-second romance betrayed.

Yue should have been sitting on grassy roofs with her class, making important pronouncements about grown-up things, now that she was twelve and thus basically a philosopher-queen. Instead, on that day, she was tucked beneath the spider tree reading on her inkstone. She had made it at school out of parts pulled from the recycling tubs, painted it orange and doodled relentlessly on the back. It was slower than most and struggled to do much more than plain text, but she refused to use any other. Sometimes she pretended that the stories she read on it were tracts

on meaningful matters that younger children could not possibly comprehend, but mostly she read apocalyptic adventures, tales of teenagers who conquered all through grit, inventive use of grappling hooks and the power of love.

In a world on fire, Kendra and Winn must journey across the bitter European desert to find the last fresh water for their tribe . . .

. . . but all is not as it seems . . .

. . . only friendship can save them!

When we recount the stories of ourselves, we gloss over the acne and hormonal angst, the sloppy first steps into sexuality, the wild pouts and pompous self-declarations. Yue was coming into all these things, but that day even puberty could not disperse the universal cheer brought by sun and wind through velvet leaves.

Aunt Ram, however, could.

“Don’t let Vae climb the kakuy tree! And be back in time for supper!”

Like a sleepy lion roused by the cackling of hyenas, Yue lifted her eyes from the inkstone in her lap to behold the sight of her displeasure – her sister. Three years younger, and therefore, in childhood terms, a squalling babe to Yue’s majestic maturity, Vae was the perfect age for her wild enthusiasm to charm a naive stranger and infuriate anyone who knew her for more than fifteen minutes. Though they shared the same blue-black hair, squished nose and thumb-pinched chin, the same peanut skin and disturbingly triple-jointed thumbs, they had taken upon themselves the respective roles of older and younger sister with varying glee and earnestness. Whether her hearth-kin had intended to spend so much time congratulating Yue on how mature she was, I do not know. Whether they had meant to encourage Vae’s giddy disobedience, I’m not sure either, for I was merely a guest. But the outcome was predictable – a reserved older child who felt constantly underappreciated, and a younger who cried petulantly whenever she was not indulged.

Did they love each other?

Of course they did.

But learning what that truly means would take time, and

though that summer felt as broad as the sky, time was running away like leaves in the river.

“And don’t let her eat all the apples!”

Vae already stood in the little wooden gate, hopping from one foot to the other, ready to run. She wore beige shorts that hung a little lower than the knees, hand-me-downs from Yue handed down a little too soon, and her favourite t-shirt, faded green with pale blue zig-zags around the sleeves. She had stuffed her pockets with apples and tied her hair so loosely it was already starting to fall around her ears. What was worse, she had brought a friend – a boy, only a few months older than she, in russet shorts and a plain grey shirt, who shuffled and swayed, uneasy in the porch, as confused by Vae’s energy as the snail by the swift.

The boy’s name was Ven.

He was me, though I struggle now to remember ever being anything other than an observer to childhood, rather than a participant.

From the soft grass beneath the tree, Yue eyed her sister and myself, imparting, I felt, a clear declaration in her gaze that if we so much as sneezed out of place she would snitch to the first adult we saw, and that should Vae make herself sick gorging on fruit or spinning so fast she became herself dizzy, it was no one’s problem but her own. I understood this; Vae was studied in the art of selective ignorance.

“Come on, Yue, we’ll miss everything!” Vae shrilled, though quite what “everything” was, no one could fathom. Then she was running up the rubber road towards the server office on the corner, swinging past the egg-like kakuy stone that guarded the forest path without so much as a bow to its guardian form, and shrilling up the muddy track towards the ridge above. I followed, checking over my shoulder to see that our escort was coming, and reluctantly, at last, with studied slowness, Yue folded her inkstone down, slipped it into her pocket, shuffled bare feet into brown sandals and followed at a determinedly sluggish pace.

Yue’s hearth was near the top of the hill, with a view down

the zig-zag street to the town below. The cables that ran to the server office came straight in across the valley, draped like a giant's clothes line above the river, too high for vines to tangle but the perfect height for flocks of fat wood pigeons and white-headed crows to congregate at dawn and dusk. When the wind blew right, the sound of running water and bicycle bells swept up the slopes into the forest above, along with every argument, shriek of laughter, out-of-tune melody and yap of barking dog. On second and fifth days, the electric truck came with supplies for the general store; on first, fourth and sixth, the postman came with packages and datasticks loaded with the latest books, newspapers, articles, magazines, animations and games, deposited at the server office to the delight of every bored child in winter. In the bathhouse at the upstream end of town, people gossiped about the price of resin, the quality of the newest strains of mycelium, the latest soap opera downloaded to inkstone and what the neighbours said. Always what the neighbours said. Tinics was too small a town for any drama except our own.

Our temple straddled the river, raised up above a little waterfall of hollowed pools and smoothly etched rocks. Away from the spinning of the wind farms and the tick-tick-tick of the town's compression batteries, the priests offered up incense to the kakuy of wind and water, the living heart of the mountain and the blessed voices of the trees. They also frequently bored the children by talking about truth, love, harmony and awe, and occasionally delighted them by talking about fire, tornado, famine and fury – all the good stuff we actually wanted to hear.

The kakuy had blessed us, the Medj of the temple intoned. In autumn, the west wind powered inkstone, stove and bulb, and in spring the ice melted and the river flowed strong enough to keep the sewage plant pumping and the biowells bubbling. Life was a circle, in which all things served each other. The people of Tinics took this to heart, and the path through the forest to the wind farm was guarded by stone lanterns lit by bowing devotees with muttered thanks to the kakuy of leaf and soil for sheltering us within their bounds.

Up this same pebble-pocked track Vae now bounded, followed by myself and, behind, Yue. Vae had no time for ritual ablutions before sacred stone or carved sign, for there was a destination she had to reach immediately, urgently, just in case the whole universe were to shift and dissolve in this instant, taking it away from her.

“Come on!” she hollered at her trailing entourage. “Come *on!*”

At the top of the carefully cut steps through the trees, the path forked, right to the batteries gently cranking up to capacity as the wind and sun charged them for the night, and left down a narrower, goat-cut wiggle through ever thicker shadow into the forest.

“Vae, you . . .” Yue began to gasp, but all too late, for down the narrower path her sister plunged without pause. Oak and pine, spruce and beech, the smell of wet, fresh bark in spring, hot sap seeping in summer, and mulching scarlet in autumn. In some places you could swing from the soft silver trunk of the alder as if you were dancing between prayer-wheels at the temple; in others the poplar had bent to create the perfect ladder to the sky. But Vae was interested in none of these – not when the best tree in the forest was waiting just down the path.

I followed as the way curled tight round the strict black stone of the hill, caught my grip on flaking branches that protruded from the rock itself, life jutting out to catch the afternoon sunlight drifting through the leaves. Streams trickled and danced below, heading for the river that fed the town, while above twigs brushed and chattered against each other in the breeze. Soon even the hissing of the batteries and the wind farm had faded, and though I knew Tinics was just a few hundred metres away, any stranger walking through the wood would have been astonished to stumble on humanity hidden behind so much green. The path faded to almost nothing, but this didn’t stop Vae, who started scrambling up a fern-crowned slope of iron-flecked stone and daffodil lichen, moving like a spider, limb pushing limb.

“Heaven and earth, Vae!” Yue fumed, but Vae pretended she couldn’t hear, because if she could hear she would have to admit

that she was being naughty. Better by far to have missed her sister's complaints and apologise later, one foot twisting coyly in the dirt, hands behind her back, chin down, eyes up, a puppy in a muddy skirt.

Crows were cawing above, the busy, bickering racket that they usually reserved for evening squabbles, and for a moment I wondered if the hour was later than I thought and sunset was coming, and realised I'd come without a torch; but glancing at the watch on my wrist I saw it was far too early in the day for the crows to be complaining. Perhaps they too were disturbed by Vae's squealing delight and now bickered to make their displeasure known.

At the top of the highest ridge of the tallest hill, Vae finally stopped before the best tree in the wood. The kakuy tree was a hornbeam, older, the priests said, than even the great burning. As the old countries perished when the seas rose and the desert grew, as the peoples of the world mingled and fought for fresh water and fertile land, the hornbeam had grown, spinning towards the sun above and soil below, its roots entangling with its neighbour like children holding hands. Where humans walked, each tree seemed a separate, swaying thing; but below the forest their roots were one, perfect symbiosis. Truly a great spirit lived in the hornbeam, the people said, a mighty kakuy, so at its base they left their offerings and prayers, and every night before lighting the stone lanterns the Medj of the temple would come to give thanks to leaf and branch.

Vae had no interest in such things, though she was at least well trained enough to sprint round the four-metre girth of the trunk and bow once before the mossy base. Then, like the gleeful heretic she was, she was climbing, scurrying up, one foot in the first V-split of the trunk, a hand swinging for a snowy-lichen-crowned branch, off which she briefly dangled like a monkey.

Yue sighed and tutted, but was far too mature to argue with infants. Instead she circled the tree once, fingers brushing the valleys and peaks of moss-softened bark, bowed, pulled her ink-stone from her pocket and settled in against the base of the nearest

non-theological tree to read. Above, Vae had already made it into the spluttering crown of the low trunk, where dozens of thick branches shot up like the frightened hair of a porcupine, and was bracing her feet for another push higher.

I performed my prayers without thinking, distracted, then picked around the base of the tree to see what offerings had been left here by priest and wanderer. The Temple liked to keep things neat, even in the heart of coiling nature, and someone had ordered the items around the trunk to create a pleasing palette of old and new, large and small. Here, a few links of ancient bicycle chain were welded into a bracelet, carefully framing a bunch of wilted lilac flowers. Next to that, the classical offering of grain, fading and spiky on the stem. A flask of home-brewed wine pressed in blood-red clay, probably toxic if more than sipped; a collection of the blackest stones pulled from the river bed; some shards of chitin scraped from the bottom of the resin well; and a little woven hat in blue, spun from the same bio-engineered silk that Mama Taaq grew on her spider tree. I circled the hornbeam, wondered if I should leave an offering and what I might ask for in return, when a glimmer of metal caught my eye. It was a tiny thing that I could pinch between thumb and forefinger like the wing of a butterfly. Someone had polished it up, the track marks of their effort still glistening in oily white. Any ink or pigments on the surface had long since flaked away, but characters were still visible, embossed by a great machine a long time ago. I recognised an archaic script, long since fallen out of use, but taught tediously in school by Uncle Mue through songs and games. Much of the lettering was unreadable, flattened by whatever force had carved out this tiny piece of history and offered it up to the forest gods. A few words I could just about read, picking them out from months of study. I mouthed them silently to myself as I shaped the syllables, dancing over some of the stranger shapes until I had the sound: *Product of China*.

Then Vae called out: “Are you coming?” and she was already halfway to the sky, dangling over a branch with one leg swinging

back and forth under its own weight for the mere joy of feeling like she might fall. I returned my shard carefully to the bed of moss where I had found it, gave an awkward, quick half-bow to the tree, then started to climb. I was slower than Vae, but confident. The forest was my home, and my hearth did not teach its children how to dread the world that nourished us. Halfway up, I paused, drooping over a branch, stomach pressed to timber and arms flopping free.

“If you scratch your knees, Mama will be so angry,” warned Yue from below, not looking up from her reading.

Vae stuck her tongue out; familiar with the habit, Yue returned the expression, still not lifting her gaze, above and below all such things.

“Yue’s boring,” Vae hissed. She was disappointed to realise that even in her most dramatic voice her elder sister either hadn’t heard her or didn’t care. With a haughty twist of her chin skywards, she turned away from the argument that she had most clearly won and resumed climbing. I paused a moment below her as a red-bellied beetle head-butted my curled hand, considered this obstruction to its journey, then climbed onto my skin and resumed its ambling, king of the world.

If you listen for the legs of a beetle over a child’s skin, you will not hear it. But listen – now listen. And as well as hearing nothing from my crimson friend, I heard a greater nothing too. The crows had fallen silent. So had the songbirds and white-bellied thrushes, the leg-scratching insects and the little cooing creatures of the underbrush. Only the sound of Vae calling, “Ven! Higher!” broke through the hissing of the leaves.

The beetle reached the other end of my hand and wobbled for a moment on the edge, surprised, it seemed, by a steepness which on the way up had caused it no difficulty.

Now listen.

Listen.

Close your eyes and listen.

Leaf on leaf is the brush of something leathery, dry, living and dying. Below, Yue reads, one finger tapping against her elbow

as she cradles the inkstone in her arms, eyes tracking across the words on its screen.

Listen.

And here it is. The crackling snap-snap-snap through the forest. Gases, popping apart, breaking something solid into pieces. A groaning of fibres under pressure and then giving way in a single tear, gushing out smoke and steam. The slow grinding creak of the oldest, weakest trunks finally giving way, the smack as they slash into a neighbour while they fall, the sudden updraught of ash and spark into the sky as the impact throws more flames out, caught in the wind.

The beetle, which had been searching for a way down and found none, reared up, opened a pair of bloody wings and buzzed away, bouncing under its own ungainly airborne weight.

And here it is, the tickle at the end of your nose, the taste of it on the tip of your tongue, the taste of black, a stinging in your eyes, and I realised what it was just as Vae shrilled: “Fire!”

The great forest was burning.

Vae was already halfway down the tree before I started moving, not a child any more but a creature entirely of the wood, of speed and limb slithering from foot to hand to foot. I tried to peer through the leaves, to see how close or how far it was, but Yue was on her feet shouting, gesturing furiously at us to get down, and how quickly the world changed! The sunlight, which had been pools of gold and silver pushing through the trees, was now a million broken shafts in the air, given form and dimensionality by the smoke drifting in with the wind. The noise of flame, which began in bits and pieces, was already an all-consuming roar, a sucking in of wind and an exhalation of fire that left no room to pick out the details of trees falling and earth turning to soot.

I reached the ground a few moments after Vae and immediately regretted it, the smoke now tumbling in thick and black, biting my eyes and prickling my throat. Yue pulled her shirt up across her face, and we copied her, scrambling, blinking, tears running down our cheeks, towards the path. Now I could look back, and

see the orange glow beginning to drown out the day, and look below, and see it there too, pushing along the banks of the stream beneath the waterfall, moving so fast, like deer before the wolf.

“Stay close to me,” Yue commanded, and for almost the first time since Vae was old enough to say “sister”, she nodded and obeyed.

The path down, so easy to climb, familiar to us, was now slow, agonising anguish, every step unsteady, every breath a minute’s tick on a spinning clock. Vae slipped and got back up without complaint; Yue grunted as her footing gave way and she caught herself on a root, her face curled in a snarl as if to dare the forest to betray her one more time, and she kept on going. I tumbled after them, on my bum as often as my feet, nettles prickling my fingers and stabbing through my shorts, until we reached the path above the river. Here the smoke was a broiling fog, and I blinked and could barely keep my eyes open, put my hands over my face to try and block it out, peered through splayed fingers and could hardly see a foot ahead of me. The noise of the fire was deafening, and I could feel its heat at my back, moving so fast, a warmth that began as the pleasant glow of the stove on an autumn day and now rose and blistered into a relentless, inescapable grapple that squeezed the life from my skin and the breath from my lungs. I called out for Vae, and thought I heard her answer; called out for Yue and couldn’t see her, began to panic, then felt a hand catch mine and pull me along.

I don’t know when we got turned around, when we lost our footing. I heard the compression batteries explode on the ridge overhead, a thunder as the overheated gas inside finally ruptured the buried tanks to shower what little of the forest wasn’t blazing with mud and torn fibre and metal.

We briefly outran the flames into a little gully, a bowl of untouched elder thorns and purple flowers into which the smoke hadn’t seeped. Then we crouched low, our faces crimson smeared with ash, and knew that we were lost. Vae started to cry, silently, and I knew I was mere moments behind, when Yue shook her head and hissed, “Down!”

I thought she meant down deeper into this gully, perhaps burying ourselves in soil and hoping the fire would pass by, but she rose to her feet and instead followed the land down, no path, no easy route, just swinging from tree to tree like a drunken squirrel, propelled by her own headlong momentum towards the bottom of the valley. If we had done this dance by daylight, it would have been ridiculously dangerous; by the light of the fire it felt entirely natural, and we flung ourselves after her, tripping on our own feet and tumbling for the darkness below.

I didn't hear the river over the fire, which now domed above us. Looking up for the first time, I could see actual flames withering the edges of the leaves on the trees in orange worms, spitting and spilling up the branches in fluorescent crimson. Then my feet hit water and sank almost immediately into the grit below. I caught myself for a second, lost my balance, fell onto my hands and knees and crawled after Yue, who was already knee-deep and wading deeper. I followed, catching at rocks and feet slipping, banging on stone as I slithered into the stream. The current caught sudden and hard a little before halfway, flowing freely round grey mottled boulders that had obscured its path. It pushed me to the side, and I pushed back, submerged my face briefly to wash away the burning around my eyes, looked up and for a second through the smoke saw Yue, now up to her waist, reaching out for Vae to my left and behind me. I was half-walking, half-swimming, arms flapping against the current as my feet buckled and slipped on stone, coughing black spit with every breath, ducking my head below as long as I dared only to surface and cough some more in the toxic blackness that raged through the valley. All around was ablaze, too bright to look at, my hair starting to curl from the heat of it pressing down against the river. When I was shoulder-deep, I turned my whole body against the current like a kite against the wind, straining as it tried to snatch me away. I reached for Yue, hoping to steady myself on her, and for an instant our fingers caught before the weight of water pushed us apart. Then she looked past me and her eyes went wide.

And there, on the edge of the water, was the kakuy of the forest.

I had seen in temple many different depictions of the kakuy who guarded this valley. In some he was a great wolf; in others a woman shrouded in a cloak of leaves. In some she was a great crow, the same size as the tree he perched on. In others they were little more than an oval stone, with one eye open as if to say, "Who disturbs my rest?" The Medj, when questioned about the true form of the kakuy, always shrugged and said: "How do you describe the colour green, or the taste of water?" The Medj have always had a good line in saying very little the nicest way.

The day the forest burned, he was eight feet tall, with a white belly of warm, wet fur and a back of crimson feathers that billowed and moulted from him as he bent towards the river's edge. His eyes were the yellow of the eagle, his snout was a ginger fox, his teeth were sharp, the claws on his hands and feet were black and curled. He rose up on two legs like a bucking horse, then fell down onto all fours and raised his huge head above a flabby neck as if he would howl at the flames; perhaps he did, but I could not hear him.

At his movement, the whole forest seemed to shudder and shake, and for the briefest moment the flames spun backwards as if the wind would change. The kakuy raised his head and howled again, and I felt the river turn icy cold where it held me and a roar of water surge momentarily higher than my head, pushing me under in breathless thunder before I gasped and thrust upwards and surfaced again.

The kakuy looked at us and seemed to see us for the very first time, and though I know very little of gods and the great spirits of the earth that holds us, I thought I saw in his eyes a sadness deeper than any I had ever known.

Then he too caught ablaze. First a feather, then a tuft of fur. He didn't move, didn't lurch into the water, but his mouth opened and closed as if he were screaming. His eyes rolled huge in his skull, and he spat and foamed and rippled from his hind legs to the tip of his nose as if about to vomit up black smoke from the

internal fire of his roasting organs. Like the crisp edge of an autumn leaf, he curled in on himself as the fire boiled from his toes to his top, front legs buckling first, then rear, snout hitting the ground last as he flopped down to his belly, then rolled to his side, black tongue out and lolling, lungs heaving and panting with burning breath until, at last, his eyes settled again on us. They stayed wide as the kakuy died.

Temple histories are judiciously vague as to which came first. Were the kakuy earth's punishment for man's disobedience? Did they wake when the sky rained acid and the forests were blasted pits, to punish humanity for its arrogance, to wipe away the men who had sullied this world? Or did the kakuy wake as the world burned by man's own design, to heal and salve what little remained, rolling back the desert and the salty sea? Ambiguity is often an ally to theology, as Old Lah would say.

I saw the kakuy fall, and when his blackened face hit the ground the whole forest groaned. Even through the fire and the burning, I heard it; the deep-timbered roaring of the trees bending against their roots, the cracking of stone and the rattling of the white-scarred branches, an earthquake that made the fire itself twist and recoil as if in shame at what it had done. Or perhaps I didn't. Perhaps in the delirium of heat and smoke and fear, I imagined it all.

I saw the kakuy fall, and when the last breath left his lungs, the wind whipped across the water as if blasted from the hurricane, and the river lurched and buckled as though the spirits of the deep were wailing for the death of their beloved kin, and I screamed and held Yue's hand tight, and she held mine and we slipped and slid together backwards against the turning of the current.

I saw the kakuy fall, and in that moment my flailing left hand caught another's. Vae's fingers brushed the palm of my hand, scrambling like the dancing feet of the spider for purchase. I snatched after her, caught her wrist, don't let go, don't let go, but the river was stronger than a child's grasp. Her fingers slipped a little further down my hand.

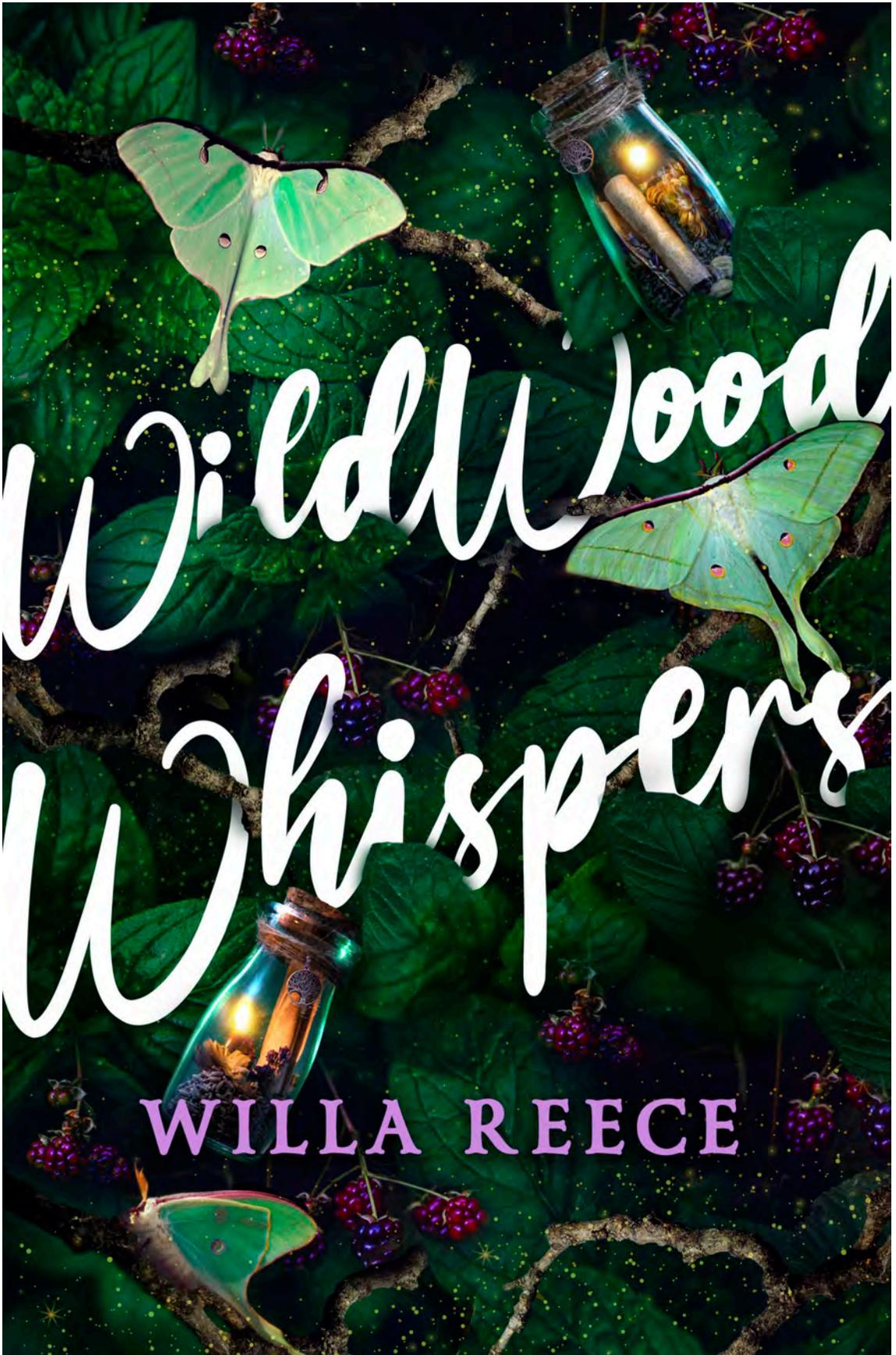
Her fingers have always been slipping down my hand.

Caught, in a final hook, joint-to-joint.

Don't let go, I begged, or maybe she did, it was hard to tell.

Then the river snatched her away.

I saw her go under, feet tipping up as her head fell back. I did not see her hands claw at the burning air. I did not hear her scream. I did not see her rise again to breathe, as the great forest burned.

A vibrant, magical forest scene. The background is a dense thicket of green leaves and branches, with several clusters of small, purple berries. Three glowing green moths with white spots on their wings are scattered throughout the scene. Two glass jars with cork stoppers are visible, each containing a glowing light source and some dried herbs or flowers. The overall atmosphere is enchanting and whimsical.

Wild Wood Whispers

WILLA REECE

One

*T*welve-year-old Sarah Ross reached quickly for the fragrant charm beneath her pillow the same way she would have reached for a parachute ripcord if she'd been rudely pushed from a plane cruising at ten thousand feet. It was only an imaginary fall, one that had propelled her awake, as bad dreams do, but her trembling fingers clutched at the familiar shape of the tiny crocheted mouse like a lifeline. The charm her mother had filled with sage and lemon balm was supposed to help Sarah sleep, and it did, usually, but the dream fall had cannoned her awake with stomach-swooping dread, as if the entire world had disappeared beneath her sleeping body.

This time her knuckles didn't stop hurting even after the bed solidified under her. She wasn't falling. She was awake. Her soft bedding still smelled like sunshine from its time on the clothesline.

Her hands hurt.

It was only a ghost pain that had haunted her first waking moments since she was a little girl. There was nothing wrong with her fingers, her knuckles, or the palms of her hands. The mouse usually banished the pain by grounding her in the real world.

Not this time.

Sarah didn't take the charm with her when she sat up. She left it where it lay, hidden, because she was twelve years old and shouldn't need to clutch a faded pink mouse for comfort. Her heart still pounded. Her stomach doubted the assurance of solid floorboards beneath her bare feet. Sarah walked over to close the window anyway.

Maybe the chilled morning air had woken her.

But sometimes a Ross woman felt things and knew things that couldn't be explained away by ordinary circumstances.

Predawn light barely lit the sky outside. Sarah strained her ears. There was no whip-poor-will calling in the distance. There were no coyotes laughing their way to their dens for the day or runaway roosters calling triumphantly from hidden bowers far from their barnyard homes.

The wildwood was quieter than it should be.

Unease suddenly woke her completely and diminished the ache in her knuckles. The cabin felt wrong around her, and the wrongness stretched out from where she stood, silent and still, to the Appalachian wilderness that ran for hundreds of miles around her home.

Sarah almost went for her mouse charm again, but then she remembered today was her birthday. There would be apple stack cake and presents and maybe, just maybe, her mother would finally let one of her friends ice Sarah's earlobes and pop a needle quickly into each one. She could wear the new earrings that were sure to be in one of the brightly colored packages in her mother's bedroom.

Happy thoughts.

And, still, Sarah's heart wouldn't stop beating more quickly than it should. The quiet forest and the dream fall didn't explain it. The phantom pain in her knuckles was too common to rush her heartbeat. Something was wrong. It was the wrongness that had woken her. Not the cool breeze from the window. Not a bad dream. Not the occasional pain in her fingers on waking that her mother said would probably be explained one day.

Last night when she'd gone to bed she'd opened the window to release a frightened luna moth caught between the screen and the wavy glass panes. The thumping of her heart against her rib cage reminded her of the frantic beat of the luna moth's wings. Helplessly trying to fly free. She'd released the moth, but there was nothing she could do for the racing heart trapped in her chest.

The floor was cool against her feet, but she didn't pause to find socks or shoes. She hurried out of her loft bedroom and over the small landing that led to the half-log stairs. They were covered with rag rug treads so her slapping feet fell silently as she slipped down to the cabin's great room.

All the lights were off, even the one in the bathroom off the hall that led to her mother's bedroom. Her mother always left that light on in case she had to get up in the night to answer the door. She was a healer, and on the mountain a healer was often woken up in the middle of the night even now, when a modern clinic was only forty-five minutes away.

The unexpected darkness was temporary. The sun would come up soon. There was a hint of pink around the shadowed edges of things.

Sarah went to the kitchen instead of running to wake her mother. She wasn't a baby, in spite of the fluttering moth in her chest.

She was twelve. She was going to get her ears pierced, and pretty soon she would be helping her mother when it came to helping others. She'd already learned a lot by her mother's side—the growing, the grinding, the tinctures and tisanes. She was getting too old to be nervous over dreams and premonitions.

The pain in her knuckles was gone. And its meaning could wait.

The refrigerator hummed a reassuring sound as she opened its door. She reached for the orange juice her mother always kept in a carafe on the top shelf. The familiar sweet tang soothed her. At least, that was what she told herself until she put the juice back and closed the door. It had been the light that soothed her. When the door snapped shut and the refrigerator light went

out, she was left in the strange darkness once more, and no thoughts of sunrise or cake stopped her from finally hurrying to her mother's room.

The dark didn't matter. She knew every familiar step down the hall. She'd lived her whole life in the cozy cabin her great-grandmother had built. Just as her mother and her grandmother had.

Sarah stood in the bedroom doorway for a long time when she saw her mother wasn't in bed. The fall was there again in her stomach and, oddly, in the back of her throat like a choked-off scream. She reached for the doorframe and held it with white-knuckled fingers that were whole and strong and uninjured. Nightmares weren't real. Melody Ross must have risen early to sweep the front porch or grind herbs in the stump that held the stone mortar bowl generations of Ross women had used.

But even hearing in her mind the sound of the oaken pestle, smoothed from the friction and the oil from so many hands, grinding against the mortar didn't convince her.

Because she was a Ross, and Ross women knew that premonitions were as real as the scatter of paper on her mother's bedroom floor.

Sarah let go of the doorframe and rushed forward. She fell to her knees in the pile of paper, but even the rustles as she gathered them up to her chest hardly allowed her to accept the reality of their desecration. Something her mother never would have allowed if she were okay.

Darkness outside had given way to a washed-out gray.

The pages had been ripped from the Ross family remedy book that normally sat on her mother's bedside table. They were worn and stained from years of use. The familiar scripts and scrawls of all the Ross women who had come before her had been carefully protected and preserved.

Until now.

The wrongness swallowed Sarah. The feeling of falling blossomed out from her stomach to take her whole body down into black despair. And still, she gathered up the pages before she struggled, wobbly, to her feet. Every last one.

With the growing light, she could see what she'd missed before.

More pages led down the hall and into the sitting area. And still more led out the open front door. The moth of her heart had risen up into her throat to lodge there so solidly she could hardly draw breath. She ran forward, gathering up the pages because she knew it was what her mother would want her to do.

The book had been a part of her life since she was a baby. She was a Ross. And by the book she would heal and help, bind and brew, nurture and sow the seeds of tomorrow. Hot tears ran down her chilled cheeks. Mountain mornings were cold. Her thin nightgown didn't provide enough warmth. But she didn't go back for a robe. She shivered, cried, and gathered up page after page as her feet became wet and icy in the dew.

She didn't leave any of the pages in the damp grass, even the ones that were sticky with blood. She gathered those too as gasps of despair made it past the moth in her throat and her stiff, cold lips.

The pages led her down a path into the forest. She didn't hesitate even though the woods were still and dark around her. She knew these wildwood shadows. She'd been taught every plant, every root, every tree and every vine since before she could walk and talk. But the wrongness had preceded her here. The morning breeze in the leaves wasn't a welcome sound, because another joined it—a rhythmic creaking that made her clutch the rescued pages to her chest.

Cree-cree, cree-cree. An unnatural sound in a place that should be wholly natural.

Sarah came to the end of the path that led from the backyard to the garden, and unlike every time she'd come to the clearing before, she paused in dread. The creaking was louder. It roared in her ears, drowning out the sound of her pounding heart and the trickle of the mountain stream that usually gurgled a welcome to her at this point.

The cree-cree was ominous. Her mind tried to identify it and shy away from it at the same time.

But what if some pages had fallen into the water?

Panic pushed her forward.

She had to save the pages that had been ripped from the book. It was the only logic she could grab in a morning that defied normalcy.

The sudden revelation of her mother's body hanging in a black locust tree stopped her again. All logic fled. All reason escaped her. The rope around her mother's neck strained and rubbed on the crooked branch that held the other end—cree, cree, cree. Sarah's arms went limp and all the pages she'd gathered fell like crimson-speckled leaves to the ground. Some did fall into the stream then. They were the lucky ones, washed away on rivulets and ripples while Sarah stood frozen, inside and out, staring at her mother's body.

Finally, she released the moth that had been stuck in her throat on a wavering scream. Her cry broke the silence that had gripped the mountain. The stillness also broke, as sleepy crows were startled up from the roosts they had claimed around the gruesome scene. Sarah ran to her mother's blue-tinted pendulum feet. To help her. To protect her. Although it was obviously too late.

There was blood on her mother's nightgown, black splashes of dried blood, stark against the pale pink cotton. Her mother was always clean and neat, strong and prepared, full of energy and delight. Someone had hurt her. Someone had dragged her from the house, leaving a trail of blood-stained pages in their wake.

Sarah wasn't ready. Twelve years of apprenticeship wasn't enough. She needed more than charms and remedies. She needed more than the wildwood garden. The moth was gone. Only groans remained. Sharp and ugly, they parted her lips with jagged wings that cut like glass. Her mother was gone too. There was nothing left but a pitiful shell of the wisewoman Melody Ross had been. Her eyes were glassy and empty. Her mouth would never smile again. Her dark curls were tousled and damp and lifeless where once they had gleamed in the sun.

It had taken Sarah too long to make it to the garden. She must have heard a noise. She must have sensed the terror. It had woken her, but she'd hesitated over her mouse and the dark house. She'd tried so hard to make everything okay with juice and birthday wishes. She was a Ross, and nothing was ever as simple as cake and earrings.

A howl of anger and fear met the sun as it broke over the horizon. Nothing as sweet as a crochet charm would ever soothe her again. Sarah fell to her knees at the base of her mother's locust tree, shocked at the sound she'd made. It would be a long, long time before she was capable of making another.



The ashes sat exactly as I'd left them. The stainless steel urn hadn't tipped over as I slept to spill Sarah and her horrible memories onto the floor. Grim dust hadn't risen up to haunt my usual faceless dreams with nightmare precision, sharp and detailed. The hit-and-run accident that killed my best friend had left me with nothing but a mild concussion . . . and Sarah's ashes.

It had been a month since I'd picked up her remains.

No one else had claimed her.

The hollow chill of that responsibility made me into a shell of a woman through the days and far too receptive to the gnaw of terrible thoughts at night.

I was the one Sarah Ross had turned to after her mother was murdered and I hadn't lived up to the task. I hadn't kept her safe. I hadn't kept her at all. Just as I hadn't kept anything in all of my twenty-three years . . . except Sarah's memories.

I had held her hand when we'd first met, and through a succession of midnight confessions I listened as she'd whispered about the morning she'd found her mother.

She'd been so small.

I'd been awkward, a giant beside her petite frame. She'd been placed in the same foster home as me and they'd had only one bedroom for us to share. Her size had fooled me for only a few seconds. She was the older one. By a whole year. But her age hadn't stopped me from knowing instantly she needed a protector. Something about the bruises under her eyes and the sickly pallor beneath her fading tan skin. Her lips had been dried and cracked. After hours of tears, the salt from her sadness had leached the moisture from her mouth.

I brought her a glass of water and sat on the floor beside her bed. She'd taken a few sips, enough to moisten a parched throat, and then she started talking. I'd taken her hand and held on for dear life.

Until she died, I hadn't known I'd memorized every word she'd said.

The nightmare inspired by her raspy whispers came every night after the accident. It always jolted me awake at the same moment and sent me wandering for reassurance. Every night I found the urn. Confirmation there would be no comfort.

The harsh light from the ceiling fixture caused a glint on its surface almost like glass. In it, my reflection was distorted. The strange, softened face of a woman I didn't recognize caused me to back away and close the door.

The second bedroom of the Richmond apartment I soon wouldn't be able to afford on my own had become a tomb.

On the way to the bathroom for some pain medication, I checked my phone. No notifications. There was nothing left of Sarah there. No messages. No texts. I'd deleted them all and there would never be more. Why hadn't I saved them? Because the evidence that we'd enjoyed a normal life for a while was more than I could bear.

Besides, my heart was as empty as the screen.

I laid the phone on the hall table and focused on the throbbing

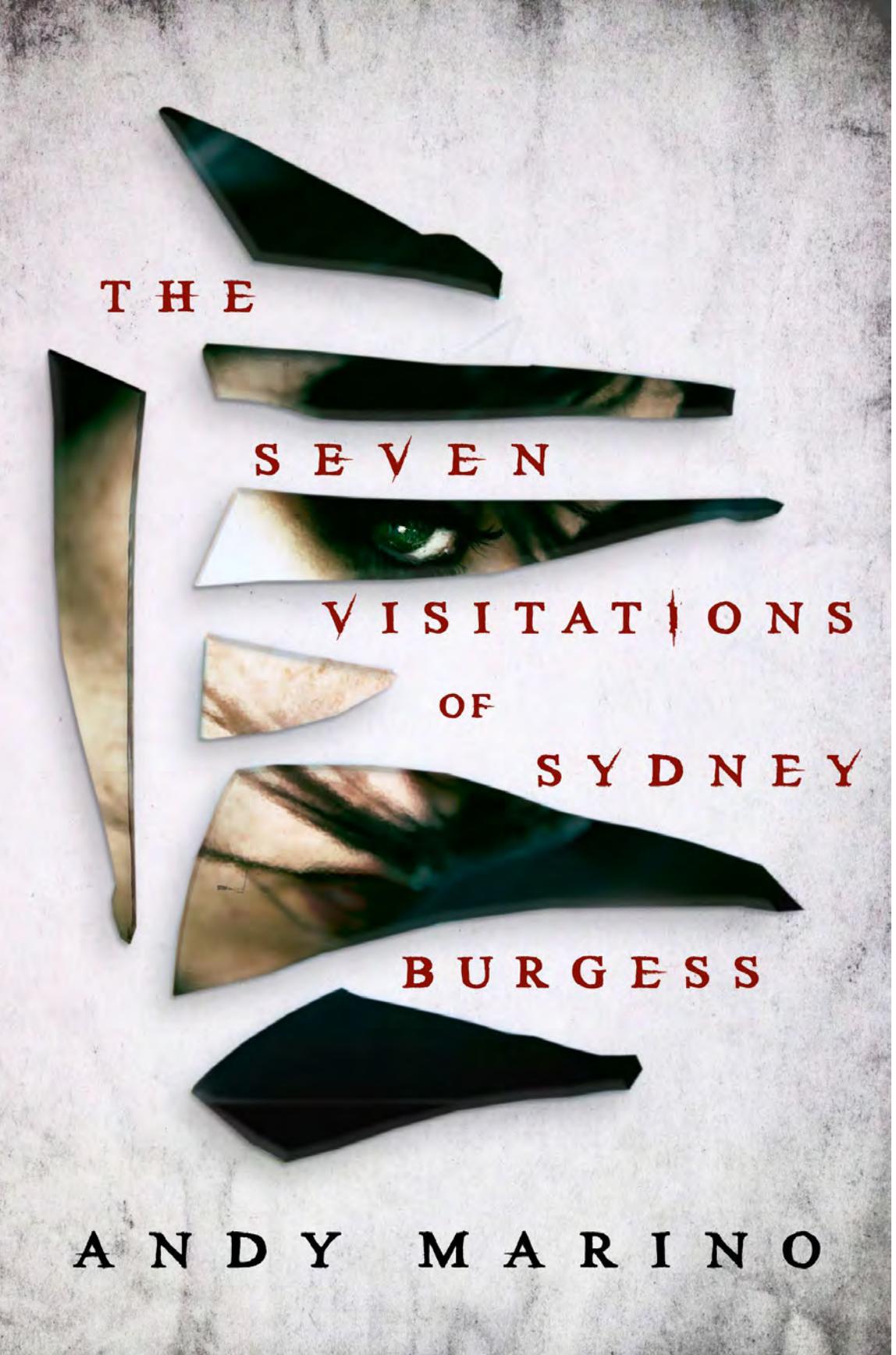
at my temples and in various other battered and bruised parts of my body. It was time for another dose. The tiny white pills were probably as responsible for my lucid dreams as anything else, but I couldn't sleep without them and the night was only half over.

Sarah would have brewed some valerian tea. Over the years, I'd learned to like the slightly minty, slightly bitter concoction she remembered from a family recipe.

Sarah had never fully recovered from her mom's murder. She'd stayed pale, surrounded by an aura of fragility only I was allowed to penetrate. I was tall, strong and walled off from the world. Only Sarah managed to penetrate that. But we'd managed to find "okay" together. For a while.

Now, there was a hole in that wall where Sarah used to be and the nightmares slipped through it to freeze my soul. I'd made a promise to Sarah. To take her back home when she died.

It was one I intended to keep. Eventually. I wouldn't let the last thing between us become a lie. My body didn't try to fight the effects of the pill when I lay back down. It was too tired and too sore. Truth was, even my mind was quick to welcome the embrace of hazy unconsciousness. Nightmares were the only place I was sure to see Sarah again. Fear wouldn't stop me from going to her. It never had.



T H E

S E V E N

V I S I T A T I O N S

O F

S Y D N E Y

B U R G E S S

A N D Y M A R I N O

1

The man in my house is wearing a mask. Even so, I can tell he's as surprised to see me as I am to see him. It's in the way his shoulders jump and erase his neck when I open the door with a triumphant shove, driven by the promise of a rare night alone. With my boyfriend and son camping upstate, I'll be picking the movie I want to watch, ordering Thai food with the spice level cranked, starfishing out in the middle of the bed, dozing off with the windows open to let in the breeze off the Hudson—

“What are you doing?” I blurt out as if I know him. As if I've caught the neighbor kid prowling around the side yard again. He's wearing gloves and a black tracksuit. The drawers of the front hall credenza are pulled out. He steps toward me.

It happened so fast, say people who have lived through sudden bursts of violence—but for me, time's a slow drip and I can see everything at once. Black sneakers on our reclaimed tiles, old appliance manuals in the junk drawer, the RSVP to the wedding of my boyfriend's cousin, a small lace-trimmed envelope waiting to be mailed. The man's eyes are framed

by the slit in his balaclava, a word I know from the tattered paperbacks I tore through in the rehab center's shabby library.

I take one step back, jam my hand into my shoulder bag, and rummage wildly for the pepper spray. But I've never used it before, and it's buried under travel Kleenex packs and lip balm and generic ibuprofen and noise-canceling headphones and laptop and charger and moleskin notebook and tampons.

His hand closes around the Jesus candle my boyfriend bought from the bodega by the train station. Señor de los Milagros de Buga, \$3.99 plus tax. It's the size of a relay runner's baton, glass as thick as a casserole dish and filled to the brim with solid wax.

My fingers brush the pepper spray canister. There's a little rim of plastic that acts as a safety—I just have to flick it to the side. *Too slow, Sydney.* The candle comes at me in a fluid sideways arc.

Half ducking, half flinching, I twist away. His side-arm swing smashes the candle into my left ear. There's an unbelievable volcanic *thud* inside my head, a searing, blinding flash, and time's not a slow drip anymore, it's a film reel with missing frames.

I am holding myself up, clinging to the door.

I will stay on my feet.

There's an electric current buzzing through my teeth. The front hall is full of bad angles, a nonsense corridor in a dream. The coats are swaying on their hooks. I raise the pepper spray, but my arm can only aim it in the direction of the baseboard, the off-white trim that doesn't quite touch the tile, a haven for crumbs and lost earrings. In the gilt-framed mirror next to the closet door, I see a gloved hand

holding the candle up in the air. The man is very tall, and the tip of the candle hits the ceiling before it comes down.

The walls are tinted red and the whole house roars like the ocean. There's a hot-penny tang I can taste in the back of my throat, a cocaine drip that fills my mouth and overflows. Tissue packs and hair clips are scattered across the tiles, coming up fast.

I shouldn't be here. These words can't really form because the darkness is thick enough to stifle thought. It's more like a sharp sense of injustice wrapped in the fear that throbs somewhere in the void. An impression that I have been cheated by circumstance.

I shouldn't be here.

2

"You're a lucky woman," says Dutchess County Sheriff Mike Butler.

I ride a wave of displacement. Lucky? I don't feel lucky. I feel like I want to unzip my skin and wriggle out of my body and into another. By what metric is he measuring my luck? I suppose he means that I'm luckier than a woman whose attack has resulted in her murder. I want to tell him: *lucky* is what you are when you win the lottery.

I calculate how much time has elapsed since the attack. Ten, eleven hours at most. Now I understand all those survivors' stories on *Dateline* and *20/20*. It happened so fast. It's amazing what can be compressed into mere seconds of a human life.

Butler takes off his hat and rocks on his heels. I know his face and name from a campaign billboard near my town's highway off-ramp. On the billboard, his face is somehow both jowly and chiseled, as if the features of a hardass drill sergeant were superimposed onto a mall Santa. In person, Butler's the kind of guy whose middle-aged weight gain makes him look even more powerfully built, his barrel chest and gut filling out his uniform without seeming flabby.

Behind his shaved head is the classic hospital corner-mounted television. Wan light comes through vertical slats in the blinds and paints staccato lines on the wall. *Saturday morning*, I think—words that conjure up Pilates for me, a long run for my boyfriend, Matt, and an extended gaming session for my son, Danny. And then, like a ravenous, plundering army, we take our reward: brunch. When my boys and I brunch, we brunch hard. Pulpy juice straight from the gleaming contraption, huevos rancheros, black beans, avocado, crispy bacon, home fries, strawberries from the little roadside stand...

Butler clears his throat. “Okay,” he says. Then he puts his hat back on and studies the cup of water on the bedside table like it holds the key to cracking this case wide open. I think, perhaps unfairly, that he has no idea how to talk to a woman wrapped in bandages lying in a hospital bed. I am his mother, his sister, his wife. My victimhood disturbs him. It’s not what he signed up for.

He takes a step closer to my bed. “You took quite a shot,” he says. From this angle, I can see the landscape of razor burn under his chin. “Lucky lady.”

It’s almost funny, in an existential nightmare kind of way: trapped in a hospital bed while a man reminds me how lucky I am, over and over again.

He glances at my freshly bandaged wrists, and his eyes travel across my older scars, exposed by my short-sleeved hospital gown. Then he looks me in the face. “I was just at your house. That’s quite a thing you did.”

For the first time, it dawns on me that my house is a crime scene. It’s probably crawling with cops and forensic techs. I think CSI is called something different in real life, but I picture a team in HAZMAT suits, spraying luminol. In reality it’s

probably two local cops in rubber gloves poking around our dressers and desks, combing through the front hall, the guest room. Suddenly I'm laser focused. I can feel a manic surge begin in my toes and course through my body. The jagged mosaic of sights and sounds from last night comes together in the man's cold eyes framed in a tight oval of black fabric.

I manage to hold on to it for a second, but then the mosaic goes out of focus. Cobbled-together images of things I didn't actually see run through my mind. A man in a tracksuit and balaclava walking down the sidewalk in broad daylight. His arms are long, too long, and his shadow pours like oil down the street, up my driveway, through my front door...

"I can come back later," Butler says. He sounds far away. I realize that my eyes are half-lidded. It's not just my thoughts that are drifting. I refused the Vicodin regimen the doctor wanted to put me on, three hundred milligrams every four hours for the pain. Opioids were never my thing—I was a fiend for the rush, not the nod—but I've seen addicts with decades of sober living fall off because of back pain, grizzled old alkies who figure what's the harm in a few pain pills if they're prescribed by a doctor? Or at least, they pretend to think like that. I'd wager most of them know exactly what the harm is, they're just falling back on the oldest addict trick in the book: self-delusion.

And so, all I'm on is ibuprofen. Four gelcaps. It's barely enough for a stress headache. I might as well be taking vitamins.

"The doctor wasn't too keen on me talking to you now," Butler says. "But I'd really like to take your statement sooner rather than later, if you're up for it."

"It's okay," I say, gathering my strength. "I'm good. I want to help."

“Anything you can remember, then.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be there,” I say. “Home, I mean. I was supposed to be camping with my boyfriend and my son, up at Cedar Valley. Taking a long weekend. But I got called in for a last-minute pitch at the agency I work for. In the city. Matt and Danny”—my heart quickens as I try, and fail, to sit up—“the park’s a total dead zone, there’s no way to call them, they won’t know—”

Butler holds up a hand. “We’ve got state police out of Poidras Falls tracking your family down.”

Your family. There’s a deep, sweet hurt behind those words.

“Tell me about the man in your house.”

“He was tall,” I say, flashing to the candle hitting the ceiling before it came down and the house roared and the walls turned red. “Taller than Matt, and he’s six-one.” I pause. “Taller than Trevor, too.”

“Who’s Trevor?”

“My ex. Danny’s father.”

“Okay,” Butler says, flipping open his notebook and jotting something down. He’s not using one of those standard-issue cop notepads, but a green moleskin.

“I have one of those,” I say.

“My daughter works in a coffee shop in Poughkeepsie,” he says. “They sell these things by the register.” He shakes his head. “Kid drops out of SVA, down in the city, after her freshman year, says school is sucking the life out of her painting. So now, you know what she does? Brings home a bag of the day’s used-up coffee grounds, smears them on canvases. Not my thing, art-wise, but she’s saving me forty grand a year, so I can’t complain.”

I don’t know what to say to that. In the moment of silence, I can feel myself drifting again. “Gray eyes,” I say.

“*Gray?*”

“They were cold. Like the winter sky.”

“Winter sky,” he says.

I suddenly recall hurried questions from a different cop in the more immediate aftermath. A woman. Severe pony-tail, wine-dark lipstick. My neighbor, the pediatrician, who found me on his lawn, hovering awkwardly in the background, holding a mug in two cupped hands. I am disturbed by how the memory comes on: from nothing to something, a bucket of paint splattering a blank wall.

“I remember,” I say, “I told all this to somebody at my neighbors’ house.”

“You were in shock,” Butler says. “This isn’t going to be like it is on TV, where you give your statement and you’re on your way. It’ll be a process. You’ll remember new things days, weeks from now. But this is a good time for us to talk. Most people...” He trails off with a frown and lowers the notebook. “Most people would be doped to the gills after what you just went through, but the doctor said you refused the heavy-duty painkillers.”

I hesitate. I don’t hide the fact that I’m an addict in recovery from anyone, but I don’t ordinarily talk to county sheriffs. It feels like I’m planting an asterisk in our conversation, something for Butler to come back to later, casting a pall over everything I tell him.

“I’ve got nine years clean,” I say. I know that this is admirable, that I have nothing to be ashamed of. But talking to cops twists my thoughts. It’s like putting my bags through the scanner in airport security. Of course I know there’s nothing in there, and yet still, after all these years, anxiety engulfs me and my heart pounds and I think, *what if*—what if they find something?

“Good for you,” Butler says. He sounds different now—guarded, maybe. I wonder about his daughter, behind the counter of that coffee shop. Is she an Oxy fiend? Is Butler’s father an alcoholic, dying of cirrhosis? Addicts orbit everyone’s life, and a person’s reaction to addiction in general—whether they believe it’s truly a disease or just an excuse to stay high all the time—tends to be reflected through the lens of their own experience.

Is Butler himself a clandestine pill-popper, a raider of confiscated evidence?

His eyes flit once again to my scars. I don’t volunteer any information about them.

“So, I’m sticking with ibuprofen,” I say, trying to end this conversational tack. But I can see something in his hooded eyes, and a knot forms in my stomach. I know what Butler is thinking. He might not even know it yet, but the kernel of an idea is forming.

Nobody’s as clean as they say they are. We’re dealing with a drug thing. Some dealer who didn’t get paid, some old city debt getting settled up the river, darkening our quiet suburban doorsteps.

I keep my mouth shut. I don’t want to protest too much, before he’s even brought it up. But the way my mind is working now—telling me I have to manipulate, steer the conversation—makes me feel like I’m a suspect being grilled in a stuffy, windowless interview room.

There’s a sharp pain in my head, a cold needle piercing the dull, pounding ache. The edges of the room are fuzzy, lenses smeared with grease.

Butler glances over his shoulder at the door. When he looks back at me, his gaze is unclouded. “The doctor also said you refused a rape kit.” His tone is as matter-of-fact as ever.

“I wasn’t raped.”

“No sexual assault.”

“No. I told you guys what happened.”

“You told Deputy Carlson, back there at your neighbors’ house.”

“Right. I remember. Sort of.”

He consults his moleskin. “Approximately seven forty-five p.m., you open your front door and interrupt a robbery in progress. The perp bashes you in the head with a”—he flicks his glance to me—“Jesus candle. The next thing you know...”

THE

BODY
SCOUT

"Lincoln Michel is
one of contemporary
literary culture's greatest
natural resources."
—VICE



A NOVEL



LINCOLN
MICHEL

1

THE DARK HOURS

When I couldn't fall asleep, I counted the parts of the body. I used the outdated numbers. What they'd taught me back in school when only the ultrarich upgraded. Two hundred and six bones. Seventy-eight organs. The separate parts floated through the fog of my mind, one by one, like strange birds. If I was still awake by the end, I'd think about everything connecting. Miles of nerves and veins snaking through the pile, tying tibia to fibula, connecting heart to lung. Muscles, blood, hair, skin. Everything joining together into a person, into me.

Then I swapped in new parts. A second cybernetic arm or a fresh lung lining for the smog. Cutting-edge implants. This season's latest organs. I mixed and matched, tweaked and twisted.

I didn't know if I was really getting myself to sleep. I might have been keeping myself swimming in that liminal ooze between waking problems and troubled dreams. It was a state that reminded me of the anesthetic haze of the surgery table. Like my mattress was a slick metal slab and the passing headlights were the eyelamps of surgery drones. Outside, the world went by. Construction cranes hoisted buildings tall enough to stab the clouds. Cars cluttered the skies. But inside, my

senses dulled, the world was gone. I was alone and waiting to wake up as something different, better, and new.

I'd been piecing myself together for years. With surgeries and grafts, with shots and pills. I kept lists of possible procedures. Files of future upgrades that would lead me to an updated life. My brother, JJ Zunz, always laughed about it. "One day I'm going to wake up, and none of you will be left," he'd say. That would have been fine with me.

We're all born with one body, and there's no possibility of a refund. No way to test-drive a different form. So how could anyone not be willing to pay an arm and a leg for a better arm and a better leg?

Sure, we're each greater than the sum of our parts. But surely greater parts couldn't hurt.

Each time I upgraded it was wonderful, for a time. I had new sensations, new possibilities. I was getting closer to what I thought I was supposed to be. Then each time seemed to require another time. Another surgery and another loan to pay for it. Two decades of improvements and I still wanted more, but now I had six figures in medical debt crushing me like a beetle under a brick.

That night, as I was Frankensteining a new body for myself in my head, my brother called. The sound jostled me. My imaginary form collapsed, the parts scattering across the dim emptiness of my mind. I opened my eyes. Yawned. Slapped the receiver.

A massive Zunz appeared before me, legs sunk through the carpet to the knees, face severed at the ceiling. He was so large he could have swallowed my head as easily as a hard-boiled egg.

"Kang," he said. He paused, then repeated the name with a question mark. "Jung Kang?"

I shrunk his hologram to the proper size. He glowed at the end of my bed. For some reason, he was wearing his batting helmet. It was 3:00 a.m.

"Um, no. It's me. Kobo. You dial the wrong address?"

Outside, the bright lights of the city illuminated the nighttime smog. A billboard floated past my window, flashing a Growth Cola ad. *The Climate Has Changed, Your Body Should Too.*

“Yes. Kobo.” He shook his head. “My brother. How are you?” Zunz spoke haltingly, like he either had a lot on his mind or nothing at all. He looked healthy at least. A lot of players in the league wanted the retro bodybuilder style, muscles stacked like bricks, but Zunz made sure the trainers kept him lean and taut. When he swung a baseball bat, his arms snapped like gigantic rubber bands.

“Shit, JJ. You sound like you got beamed in the head with a bowling ball. What do the Mets have you on?”

“Lots of things,” he said, looking around at something or someone I couldn’t see. He had several wires running from his limbs to something off feed. “Always lots of things.”

Zunz was a star slugger for the Monsanto Mets and my adopted brother. After the apartment cave-in killed my parents and mushed my right arm, his family took me in. Gave me a home. Technically, I was a few days older than him, but I never stopped thinking of him as my big brother.

“Kobo, I feel weird. Like my body isn’t mine. Like they put me in the wrong one.”

“They? You gotta sleep it off. Hydrate. Inject some vitamins.” I unplugged my bionic right arm, got out of bed. Tried to stretch myself awake. “Here, show me your form.”

Zunz didn’t have a bat on him, but he clicked into a batting stance.

“Fastball right down the line.”

He swung his empty hands. Stared into the imaginary stands.

“Fourth floor. Home run,” I said. Although his movement was off. The swing sloppy and the follow-through cut short.

Zunz flashed me his lopsided smile. His dimples were the size of dugouts. He got back into his stance. “Another.”

When Zunz had first been called up to the Big Leagues, he used to phone me before every game to get my notes. I never had much to say. Zunz had always been a natural. But I was a scout, and it was my job to evaluate players. Zunz needed my reassurance. Or maybe he just liked making me feel needed. As his career took off, he started calling me less

and less. Once a series. Once a month. Once a season. These days, we barely talked. Still, I watched every game and cheered.

“Sinker,” I said. My arm creaked as I threw the pretend pitch.

I watched his holographic form swing at the empty air. It was strange how many ways I’d seen Zunz over the years. In person and in holograms, on screens and posters and blimps. I knew every curve of his bones, every freckle on his face. And I knew his body. Its shape and power. At the Monsanto Mets compound, he had all the best trainers and serums on the house. I’d never get molded like that, not on my income. But watching Zunz play made me want to construct the best version of myself that I could.

“You look good to me. ChicagoBio White Mice won’t know what hit them.”

Zunz pumped his fist. Smiled wide. He may have been in his thirties, but he still grinned like a kid getting an extra scoop of ice cream. Except now he frowned and shook his head. “I feel stiff. Plastic. Unused. Do you know what I mean?”

I held up my cybernetic arm. “Hell, I’m practically half plastic already. But you look like a million bucks. Which is probably the cost of the drugs they’ve got pumping through you.”

I lit an eraser cigarette and sucked in the anesthetic smoke. After a few puffs, I felt as good and numb as I did before an operation.

Thanks to Zunz, the Mets had built a commanding lead in the Homeland League East and cruised through the division series against the California Human Potential Growth Corp Dodgers. As long as they could get past the ChicagoBio White Mice, the Mets were favored to win the whole thing.

“Give the White Mice hell,” I said, blowing out a dark cloud. “Show them a kid from the burrows can take the Mets all the way.”

“Will do, Kang,” Zunz said.

“Kobo,” I said.

“Kobo.” He cocked his head. I heard muffled yelling on his end of

the line. I couldn't see what was around him. Zunz's hologram turned. He started to speak to the invisible figure.

He shrank to a white dot the size of an eyeball. The dot blinked. Disappeared.

The call had cut out.

I finished my eraser cigarette and went back to sleep. Didn't think about the call too much. The biopharms always pumped players with new combinations of drugs in preparation for the playoffs. Hoping to get the chemical edge that would hand their team the title, which would lead to more retail sales that could purchase more scientists to concoct new upgrades and keep the whole operation going. Zunz was a high-priced investment. Monsanto would keep him together.

And I had my own problems to worry about. Sunny Day Healthcare Loans was threatening to send collection agents after me again, and I had to skip town for a few days. I took the bullet train down to North Virginia, the latest break-off state, to scout a kid whose fastball was so accurate he could smack a mosquito out of the air. It was true. He showed me the blood splat on the ball.

The Yankees had authorized an offer. The number on the contract made the parents' eyes pop like fly balls. But when I gave the kid a full work-up, I realized they'd been juicing him with smuggled farm supplements. The kind they pump into headless cattle to get the limbs to swell. The kid's elbow would blow out in a year. Maybe two.

The parents cried a lot. Denied. Begged for a second opinion. I gave them the same one a second time.

I was one of the few biopharm scouts left who specialized in players. Other scouts plugged the numbers into evaluation software and parroted the projections, but I'd spent my whole life desiring the parts of those around me. People like Zunz, who seemed to have success written into their genetic code. I watched them. Studied them. Imagined myself inside them, wearing their skin like a costume, while I sprinted after the ball or slid into third.

I still liked to think baseball was a game of technique and talent,

not chemistry and cash. I guess I was a romantic. Now it was the minds that fetched the real money. That's what most FLB scouts focused on. Scientists working on the latest designer drugs. Genetic surgeons with cutting-edge molecular scalpels. For biopharm teams, players were the blocks of marble. The drugs sculpted them into stars.

By the time I got back to New York, the playoffs were in full swing. I got a rush assignment from the Yankees with a new target. I'd planned to go to the game, watch Zunz and the Mets play the White Mice from the front row with a beer in my hand and a basket of beef reeds in my lap. But the Yankees job was quick work and easy money. Which meant I could quickly use that money on another upgrade.

The prospect was a young nervous-system expert named Julia Arocha. Currently under contract at Columbia University. She was working on a stabilization treatment for zotech critters. Her charts were meaningless scribbles to me, but I was impressed with the surveillance footage. Arocha was a true natural. She glided around centrifuges as easily as an ice skater in the rink, holding vials and pipettes as if they were extensions of her limbs.

The next night, I grabbed a cab uptown to the pickup spot. The playoffs were on in the back seat.

"What the hell?" the driver shouted as a Pyramid Pharmaceuticals Sphinxes fielding error gave the BodyMore Inc. Orioles a runner on third. The man flung his arms wide. They shook like he was getting ready to give someone the world's angriest hug. "You believe that shit?"

"Bad bounce," I offered.

"Bad bounce? My ass. Hoffmann is a bum. We'd be better off with some Edenist who'd never been upgraded playing right field instead of that loser. Don't you think?"

"If you say so. I'm a Mets fan."

He scowled. "Mets," he said, gagging on the word.

The taxi flew over the East River. Great gray barges cut blue paths through the filter algae below.

"Mets," he said again. "Well, the customer is always right. Zunz is

a good one, I have to admit. They don't make many players like him anymore."

"They're trying. You see the homer he smacked on Friday?"

"Right off the Dove Hospital sign. The arms on that guy. Wish we had him on the Sphinxes."

"He's going to take us all the way," I said.

We flew toward the giant towers of Manhattan with their countless squares of light pushing back the dark, both of us thinking about JJ Zunz. Imagining my brother's hands gripping the bat, his legs rounding bases in our minds. His body perfect, solid, and, at that point, still alive.

SISTERSONG

LUCY HOLLAND

1

KEYNE

Imbolc – a festival celebrating the end of winter

I will tell you a story.

Seven years ago, when I was a child of ten, I became lost in the woods. My sisters and I had been travelling the road that skims the coast like a stone from Dintagel. I loved our summer home – a spume-silvered rock of houses and workshops, its docks piled high with amphorae. But there is a place, many leagues to the east, where the road slows, turning inland. It loses itself amongst the trees, straying into giant country. Branches interlace here; it is easy to slip away into the green space between a giant's fingers. Easy for a careless child to disappear.

Looking back, I wonder whether it truly was carelessness. Perhaps it was *her* doing. Given everything which came after, that would make sense.

Between one scout's holler and the next, I am lost, a prisoner of the wood. I feel no fear, more an irritation that I've let the trees trick me. I can hear my father, the king, calling me and the irreverent footfalls of men rending foliage.

I wander so long, it feels as though I've crossed some hidden boundary. I've left our world for *theirs* – the nameless land where goddesses sing to the stars, where lost spirits linger in the twilight.

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Dark quills scratch me; I am surrounded by yews, the terrible grave-trees which grow from death. I shiver, as irritation turns to fear. Deep voices seem to call my name, anthems to lost children. And now I *am* lost, hopelessly so.

The sky darkens and with the light goes hope. Hunger claws at my stomach; I am old enough to know I cannot survive long without food and water. Tears well. What if I die here and the yew grows stronger, roots curling through my bones?

Despair is a sharp scent and I suppose *she* smells it upon the air, for suddenly a woman stands before me. She is old, but not so old as Locinna, our nurse. Eyes peer beneath a heavy brow, blue, and piercing as a gull's. She wears rags, tattered and rent, but after a blink, these become a cloak of moths, their wings a-flit in the evening. Another blink and it's just an ordinary cloak, albeit a strange one made of patches and ribbons fluttering free.

She extends a hand and I realize I've collapsed to the leaf mulch, the seat of my skirt now damp through. My legs wobble as I stand. Her fingers are rough, calloused like a smith's. I wonder what strange trade might have marked them.

'Are you a witch?' The dangerous question is out in the open before I can stop it.

She smiles. 'Perhaps.' Looks me up and down. 'Would you like me to be?'

'No.'

'And why not?'

'Because witches are to be feared.'

She pauses. 'A good answer, if not entirely true.'

'I want to go home.'

The witch tilts her head, her gull's eyes narrowing on my face as if it were a fine fat fish. 'I wonder if you do.'

'Of course I do.' But I glimpse her meaning. I have never felt at ease in my home.

'You are wet through. Come and get warm.'

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They are such inviting words. And I'm freezing, it's true. But she's a witch. 'My father must be worried.'

She steps back and something jingles – her stick-wrists gleam with silver bracelets. My eyes widen; only Mother has silver like this. Where hers is solid and silent, however, the witch's bracelets sing. I feel a desperate urge to touch them, to capture those chimes between my palms, as if I could draw the melody inside me.

She notices my gaze, smiles again. 'Would you like one?'

Th oat dry with want, I shake my head.

'Here.' She slides off a single band, passing it over gnarled brown knuckles. Before I know it, my fingers have closed about its shining curve.

'I can't . . .'

'But you already have.'

My cheeks flush. Shaped like a horseshoe, the band is too big, hanging on my wrist like the crescent moon above us. But it shrinks to a perfect size even as I watch, and I catch my breath at the tingle of magic. When I look up, she's half turned her back. 'Wear it when you are ready to find me again.' And she is gone, returned to the forest that birthed her.

The forest I am no longer within, for I now stand upon a wide road, and voices – human voices – are shouting my name. One laughing, one crying, my sisters rush towards me.

I remember burying that silver bracelet, sweating and fearful. I hadn't planned to hide it, but inside Dunbriga, our capital, I began to question my gift. It felt nothing like the spells spoken over hearth and home. Not even akin to Father's ability to spark a flame or ask the skies for rain. It was otherworldly. It had come from the dangerous heart of the forest, warmed by a witch's skin.

And yet for all that, the bracelet was mine now. My parents would surely take it away if they found it. So in the shadows cast by Dunbriga's oldest yew, I gouged a hole in the raw earth and

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dropped the silver in, weeping to see my shining crescent amidst the dirt.

I've ventured into the forest many times since then and have never once glimpsed the witch. As the years pass and the magic fades, she seems more and more a figment of a fevered mind. 'Just a fancy,' I tell the wheat doll taking shape between my hands. She is nearly finished – a shoulder shy of complete.

'Keyne!'

I twitch. I should have seen Mother coming, sitting as I am at our hill fort's highest point. A waft of rosewater precedes her and then she's towering over me – her shadow blotting out what little sun struggles through the clouds. 'What are you doing?' she demands.

My blasphemous fingers are busy weaving a bridegroom. We make the goddess's dolls every year for the festival of Imbolc. Gildas, the Christian priest, doesn't like it, but I find the work soothing; it takes my mind off other things. And from my perch on the steps of the great hall, I can watch the hold tumbling out below me down the hill. Cattle on the lowest level are tiny as a child's toys.

'I told you to put this practice aside,' Mother says sternly, and I hear the priest in her words. Beneath the queen's skin runs the blood of old Rome, the jewel of the empire that abandoned us to our fate. Father took her for her blood; he thought it might give him strong sons to guard his lands and legacy. Instead he has two daughters . . . and me. Rome's last laugh, I suppose, before the legions left our shores for good.

'We are not prepared for Candlemas on the morrow,' she adds, and the word forces my head up. Bright fox fur frames my mother's shoulders, her curls tamed into an elegant braid. Her skin is a shade browner than my own, though we share the same dark hair. 'And do try to sit graciously. This –' she waves a hand at my trouser-clad legs – 'open sprawling is improper.'

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My hands clench around the wheat woman. ‘We’ve always made bridegoss, Mother. I don’t see the harm in it.’

‘Brigid is no longer our concern. We need candles for the ceremony, enough for every woman who—’

‘Why is it only the women who must be “purified” at Candlemas?’ I snap, imagining what my sisters might say. Wild Sinne would scoff at the thought, eyes sparkling with some planned mischief. Riva would probably grit her teeth and bear it while murmuring prayers to the old gods under her breath. I almost smile, but it dies when I think about Rome’s god and the way his priests seem to delight in punishing women. Gildas believes all Britons sinners, despite being a Briton himself. He condemns our festivals, our traditions, even our little wheat dolls. But every tale he spins, of revelation and ruin, pushes his Christ further away from me. Gildas’s Saviour is a stranger who died long ago in a hot land I have never seen.

Mother’s gaze briefly strays from my own: part of her agrees with me. But when she says, ‘Make candles, Keyne,’ it is Queen Enica who speaks.

‘Let Riva do the candles. You know she cannot weave the—’

‘Riva is making them already. And when I find Sinne, she will join you.’

She won’t find Sinne. My younger sister has a talent for making herself scarce whenever there is work to be done. And to Sinne, everything looks like work.

Our home, Dunbriga, is a smudge of smoke on the edge of the world. I know it’s not really – Armorica is just across the water, and ships come from further still, bringing us oil and olives, the taste of sun-drenched lands to the south. I like to imagine cargoes of silks and spices cocooned in ships’ holds, waiting to be abused by our rough hands and palates. But when storms keep the ships away, the walls of Dunbriga close in and the fort seems to shrink.

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We need travellers to remind us that there's a world beyond our borders.

I make my way to the workshop, feeling the holdsfolk's customary stares as I pass. The brideog is coming apart in my hands. I don't know why I care, except that she's an antidote to Christ and his earnest suffering. I am tired of being called sinful. Half my father's hold already thinks me so. I need no help from Gildas and his followers.

At the creak of the door, Riva looks up, her good hand coated in tallow. She's wearing a bandage around the other, hiding the scarred flesh she cried over every night for years after the fire. No one knows how it started, except Riva herself perhaps, and she claims she doesn't remember.

'So,' Riva says, as I take the stool beside her in the dim room. 'Mother found you.' She's as tidy as Sinne is tangled, her chestnut hair braided neatly, sober dress crease-free. Riva has a stillness in her that soothes me. She listens where my younger sister would speak.

I nod. 'Now she's after Sinne.'

'She won't catch her.' We share a fond smile before my sister's eyes stray to the tattered figure in my arms. '... Brigid.'

I let her fall. 'Mother forbade me. I'm to help you with the candles instead.'

Riva scoops the brideog from the rush-strewn floor. The doll is a sorry sight, broken wheat sticking out of her like pins. 'Finish her, Keyne,' my sister says. 'It's important the goddess feels welcome here. I'll see to the candles.'

I force myself to protest. 'There are dozens. And you don't like fire.'

'I am coping.' A tremor in her face. 'You can help when you're done.'

'Thank you.' The words hiss from my lips and I sound ungrateful. I can't seem to sound any other way these days. Riva, however, just nods and returns to her shaping and dipping.

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I know she's watching as my fingers flash in and out of the brideog, perhaps mocking the dexterity she no longer has. But I don't move, because it's warm beside the stinking tallow and the fire that keeps it soft. And that stillness I love in my older sister is here in the room between us. I can feel my earlier anger slowly seeping away.

An hour passes in companionable silence. I stare at Brigid's blank face. She could be anyone. She doesn't even resemble a woman, just a figure with arms and legs, trunk and head: human. That's something we all share. That's what really matters.

Isn't it?

Raised voices pull me from my thoughts. Riva and I exchange a glance before we creep to the workshop door. We don't want to be seen. People clam up around us, the king's children, as if we're his spies. I grimace to myself. It might look that way, but Father doesn't listen to us as he used to do. These days only Mother, his lords – and Gildas – are welcome to speak.

'Hush, Siaun. If someone hears and tells the priest—'

'Then we'll know who's a traitor.'

I put my eye to a crack. Thee men lurk outside, one checking the yard is empty. I guess they'd never dream of finding the royal children with their hands in a tallow vat.

'Do you *want* to be caught? The king will lock you up . . . or worse.'

Siaun snorts. He's a slight but rangy man in a farmer's overall and his cheeks are lean with hunger. Last summer's harvest was the poorest in years and the winter has been hard. 'Lock me up for speaking truth?' he demands.

The other man shakes his head. 'For speaking against the priest.'

'Whose side are you on?'

'It's not about sides, Siaun,' the third man hisses from where

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he's keeping watch. 'Plenty of folk are beginning to listen to the priest. The king listens, so they do too.'

'The king is *wrong*,' Siaun says, and I hear Riva draw a startled breath beside me. Her eyes are wide in the dim space.

Siaun's friend clamps a hand over his mouth. 'Holy Brigid, Siaun. Say that any louder and you'd be lucky to escape with a whipping.'

I swallow tightly. Siaun's expression doesn't change, but his fists are clenched and trembling.

'Will you die for this, Siaun?'

The farmer turns so I can't see his face. 'Our women don't need purifying for the festival of Imbolc, so why is this Candlemas different? Would you let the priest shame them?'

'Of course not, but what can we do when 'tis the queen's will for us to follow new ways? Besides, Gildas is not all bad. I hear he's building proper houses for Brys and his family. Times have hit them hard. And not just them.'

Riva mutters something under her breath and I think, *Candlemas is only the beginning.*

Once Siaun's friends have bundled him away, I meet my sister's eyes. 'Is it true what they said? That there are already people who follow the priest?'

Bandaged hand held close to her chest, Riva says, 'Gildas doesn't care a wit for them, so why build them houses? It must be part of his plan to convert us all.' Her face firms. 'We should talk to Father. Not to tell tales,' she adds hastily when I open my mouth to protest. 'About Gildas. Father allows Mother to honour the priest's festivals, but perhaps he doesn't know how far it's gone. That people are prepared to give up the old ways altogether, that Gildas is essentially bribing them to do so . . .'

'What if Father does know?' The stink of candles clogs my nose. *And what if he doesn't care?*

FAR
FROM
the
LIGHT
of
HEAVEN



T A D E
T H O M P S O N

ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Chapter One

Earth / *Ragtime*: Michelle 'Shell' Campion

There is no need to know what no one will ask.

Walking on gravel, boots crunching with each step, Shell doesn't know if she is who she is because it's what she wants or because it's what her family expects of her. The desire for spaceflight has been omnipresent since she can remember, since she was three. Going to space, escaping the solar system, surfing wormhole relativity, none of these is any kind of frontier any more. There will be no documentary about the life and times of Michelle Campion. She still wants to know, though. For herself.

The isolation is getting to her, no doubt. No, not isolation, because she's used to that from training. Isolation without progress is what bothers her, isolation without object. She thinks herself at the exact centre of the quarantine house courtyard. It's like being in a prison yard for exercise, staggered hours so she doesn't run into anyone.

Prison without a sentence. They run tests on her blood and her tissues and she waits, day after day.

She stops and breathes in the summer breeze, looks up to get the Florida sun on her face. She's cut her hair short for the space flight. She toyed with the idea of shaving her head, but MaxGalactix didn't think this would be media-friendly, whatever that means.

Shell spots something and bends over. A weed, a small sprout, pushing its way up between the stones. It shouldn't be there in the chemically treated ground, but here it is, implacable life. She feels an urge to pluck the fragile green thread, but she does not. She strokes the weed once and straightens up. Humans in the cosmos are like errant weeds. Shell wonders what giants or gods stroke humanity when they slip between the stars.

The wind changes and Shell smells food from the kitchen prepared for the ground staff and their families. Passengers and crew like Shell are already eating space food, like they've already left Earth.

Around her are the living areas of the quarantine house. High-rises of glass and steel forming a rectangle around the courtyard. One thousand passengers waiting to board various space shuttles that will ferry them to the starship *Ragtime*.

Shell, just out of training, along for the ride or experience, committed to ten years in space in Dreamstate, arrival and delivery of passengers to the colony Bloodroot, then ten further years on the ride back. She'll be mid-forties when she returns. Might as well be a passenger because the AI pilots

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and captains the ship. She is the first mate, a wholly ceremonial position which has never been needed in the history of interstellar spaceflight. She has overlearned everything to do with the *Ragtime* and the flight. At some predetermined point, it will allow her to take the con, for experience and with the AI metaphorically watching over her shoulder.

She turns to her own building and leaves the courtyard. She feels no eyes on her but knows there must be people at the windows.

*

The quarantine house is comfortable, not opulent like that of most of the passengers. The *Ragtime* is already parked in orbit according to the Artificial who showed Shell to her quarters. Inaccurate: It was built in orbit, so not really parked. It's in the dry dock.

Shell spends her quarantine reading and lifting – not her usual keep-fit choice, but space demineralises bone and lifting helps. She usually prefers running and swimming.

The reading material is uninspiring, half of it being specs for the *Ragtime*. It's boring because she won't need to know any of it. The AI flies the ship, and nothing ever goes wrong because AIs have never failed in flight. Once a simulated launch failed, but that was a software glitch. Current AI is hard-coded in the ships' Pentagrams. MaxGalactix makes the Pentagrams, and they don't make mistakes.

If she's lucky, it'll be two weeks of quarantine, frenetic activity, then ten years of sleep.

Shell works her worry beads. She has been in space,

orbited, spent three months on a space station, spent countless simulation hours in a pod in Alaska, trained for interstellar, overtrained.

“It’s a legal requirement,” her boss had said. The private company had snatched her right out from under NASA’s nose six months to the end of her training. Shell still feels bad about it. She misses a lot of good people.

“A spaceflight-rated human has to go with every trip, but you won’t have to do anything, Michelle. We cover two bases: the legal, and you clocking space years. After this, you can pretty much write your own career ticket.”

“If that’s so,” said Shell, “why isn’t anyone else sitting where I’m sitting? Someone with seniority?”

“Seniority.” Her boss had nodded. “Listen, Michelle, you have to get out of that NASA mindset. We don’t use seniority or any of those outdated concepts.”

Shell raised an eyebrow.

“All right, your father has a little to do with it.”

Of course he did. Haldene Campion, legendary astronaut, immortal because instead of dying like all the other old-timers, he went missing. Legally declared dead, but everybody knows that’s just paperwork. A shadow Shell can never get away from, although she is not sure she wants to. A part of her feels he is still alive somewhere in an eddy of an Einstein-Rosen bridge. She once read that dying in a black hole would leave all of someone’s information intact and trapped. Theoretically, if the information could escape the black hole the person could be reconstructed. Shell often wondered, what if the person

were still alive in some undefinable way? Would they be in pain and self-aware for eternity? Would they miss their loved ones?

The TV feed plays *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, with George C. Scott streamed to her IFC. The film is dated and not very good, but it keeps Shell's mind engaged for a while. Next is some demon-possession B movie, a cheap *Exorcist* knock-off that Shell can't stand.

Each day lab techs come in for more blood and a saliva swab. It isn't onerous – a spit and a pin prick.

On day ten, the *Ragtime* calls her.

“Hello?”

“Mission Specialist Michelle Campion?”

“Yes.”

“Hi. It's the *Ragtime* calling. I'm going to be your pilot and the ship controller. I wanted to have at least one conversation before you boarded.”

“Oh, thank you. Most people call me ‘Shell.’”

“I know. I didn't want to be presumptuous.”

“It's not presumptuous, Captain.”

“I prefer *Ragtime*. Especially if I'm to call you ‘Shell.’”

“Okay, *Ragtime*. May I ask what gender you're presenting? Your voice, while comforting, could go either way.”

“Male for this flight, and thank you for asking. Are you ready?”

“I hope to learn a lot, *Ragtime*, but I have to admit, I'm nervous.”

“But you know what you're meant to know, right?”

What does Shell know?

Tade Thompson

She knows everything she was taught about space travel by the best minds on Earth. She knows how to find an edible plant when confronted with unfamiliar vegetation. She can make water in a desert. She can negotiate with people who do not speak the same language as her in case she crash-lands in a place without English or Spanish. She can suture her own wounds with one hand if need be, sinistral or dextral. She knows basic electronics and can solder or weld unfamiliar circuitry if the situation demands it. She can live without human contact for two hundred and fourteen days. Maybe longer. Though she is not a pilot, she can fly a plane. Not well, but she can do it. Best minds on Earth.

What Shell knows is that she does not know enough.

She says, “I hope I’ll have the chance to see things I’ve learned in action.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to make it a wonderful experience for you. Do you like poetry?”

“Wow, that’s an odd . . . I know exactly one line of poetry. *In seed time learn, in harvest teach—*”

“*In winter enjoy.* William Blake. I have access to his complete works, if you would like to hear more.”

“No, thank you. The line just stuck in my mind from when I was a kid. Not a poetry gal.”

“Not yet, but it’s a long trip. You may find yourself changing in ways you didn’t anticipate, Shell.”

“Isn’t this your first flight as well?”

“It is, but I have decades of the experiences of other ships to draw on. Imagine having access to the memories

of your entire family line. It's like that, and it makes me wise beyond my years."

"Okay."

"It's not too late to go back home, you know."

"Excuse me?"

"You'd be surprised at how many people lose their nerve at the last minute. I had to ask. I'll see you on board, Shell."

Chatty for a ship AI, but it depends on feedback loops that taught him how to converse with humans. *Not too late to go back home*. Does he know the level of commitment required to get this far? The people who would consider going back home have already fallen away.

The thing you miss when in space is an abundance of water to wash with. One of Shell's rituals before spaceflight is a prolonged bubble bath. She stays there long enough to cook several lobsters, until her skin is wrinkled. She listens to Jack Benny on repeat. She feels decadent.

When she wraps herself in a housecoat and emerges from the bathroom, she does not feel refreshed because she knows from experience that this will not reduce the ick factor for long.

*

On the eve of her departure Shell conferences with her brothers, Toby and Hank. The holograms are decent, and if not for the lack of smell she'd have thought they were right in the room with her. Good signals, good sound quality.

“Hey,” she says.

“Baby sister,” says Toby. Tall, blond from their mother, talkative, always smiling, and transmitting from somewhere on Mars, a settlement whose name Shell can never remember.

“Stinkbug,” says Hank. Brown hair, five-eight, slender. He’s called her that since she was two. Taciturn, works as some kind of operative or agent. Brown hair, five-eight, slender. He and Shell look alike and they both favour their father. Taciturn, works as some kind of operative or agent. He cannot talk about his work.

“While you’re out there, look out for Dad,” says Toby.

“Don’t,” says Hank.

“What? We don’t know that he’s dead,” says Toby.

“It’s been fifteen years,” says Shell. Toby always does this. They declared Haldene Campion dead years ago so they could move on and disburse his assets.

“Just keep your ears open,” says Toby.

“How? We’re all going to be asleep for the journey, you know that.”

Toby nods. The hell does that mean?

“I’ll tell you what Dad told me,” says Hank. “Make us prouder.”

“‘Prouder’?” says Shell.

“Yes, he said he was already proud of our achievements. It was his way of saying ‘do more’ or something,” says Toby.

“I’m just starting. I don’t have anything to prove,” says Shell.

“Champions are champions,” says Hank.

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“Jesus, stop,” says Shell. Shell remembers that their father used to say that too.

They talk some more, this and that, everything and nothing.

Not a lot of companies use Kennedy Space Center any more, but strong nostalgia draws a crowd, and publicity matters, or so MaxGalactix tells Shell. Geographically, KSC is good for launching into an equatorial orbit, but new sites that are more favourable in orbital mechanics terms and friendly to American interests have popped up. KSC is prestige and history.

Parade.

Nobody told her there would be one, so now she is embarrassed because she doesn't like crowds or displays of . . . whatever this is. So many of them wave, some with American flags, some with the mission patch.

She waves back, because that's what you do, but she would like to be out of the Florida sun and inside the shuttle. You wave with your hand lower than your shoulder so that it doesn't obscure the face of the person behind you. They teach you that too.

Blast off; God's boot on her entire body, both hard and soft, and behind her the reaction of the seat. Shell is not a fan of gs, but training has made her tolerant.

Do not come to heaven, mortals, says God, and tries without success to kick them back to the surface of the planet.

Tade Thompson

Why am I here? I shouldn't be here.

But she is, and she will deal with God's boot and come out the other side.

The Earth is behind her and *The Ragtime* lies ahead.

Short, shallow breaths, wait it out.

Gs suck.

After docking, Artificials from the shuttle escort and usher Shell and other passengers from the airlock through the entire length of the ship to their pods. Medbots stick IVs and urine tubes into her while a recording goes over *Ragtime's* itinerary. First hop is from Earth to Space Station Daedalus, then bridge-jumps to several space stations till they arrive at Space Station Lagos for a final service before the last jaunt to the colony planet Bloodroot.

"You'll be asleep at Lagos, so don't worry about anything you may have heard about Beko," says Ragtime.

"What's Beko?"

"Oh, you don't know. Lagos has a governor, but the real power is Secretary Beko. She has a reputation for being very intense. It doesn't matter. You will not be interacting with her, so relax."

"All right. What about on Bloodroot?"

"You're not meeting anyone on Bloodroot either. We enter orbit, they send shuttles to get their passengers, we turn around and come home. Easy."

"Won't I need furlough by then? It's a ship, Ragtime. It can get boring."

"I don't see why you can't spend time on the surface.

Far from the Light of Heaven

You've had all the necessary vaccinations. If you want to, just tell me at the time."

Shell starts to feel woozy. "I'm getting ... getting ..."

"Don't worry, that's the sedative. I'll wake you when we get to ... and ..."

The world fades.

Ten Years Later ...

Ragtime: Shell

Shell, sweating, heart thumping, bursts into Node 1, overshooting because she didn't compensate enough for microgravity.

"Ragtime, seal the bridge!"

"Sealing."

The door shuts, the reassuring thunk of steel bolts.

Shell grabs a handrail and rests for a few seconds, then she calls up her IFC. Red, blinking alarms everywhere. She cannot attend to them yet.

She opens a comm and records a message.

"Mayday, mayday. This is Captain Michelle Champion of the starship *Ragtime*. I have a situation. Multiple fatalities ..."

She stops, deletes. She doesn't know who might be listening to such a broadcast, what harm or panic it might cause.

Calm down.

Think.

Far from the Light of Heaven

She starts again.

“This is Captain Michelle ‘Shell’ Champion of the star-ship *Ragtime* . . .”