

PROLOGUE – THE TOAD

I saw two unhurried shadows come up over the rocky lip of a salt dune and clumsily catch their way back down the other side, righting themselves at a heading straight for my hut. It was dry season; long orange days and cold-snap nights. As the red sun clotted into night, I hurried to clear the rust from my water pit. I had just only finished my own drachm with dinner and, not anticipating guests, was about to retire early.

When I arrived at my water purifier, I discovered that it had once again been strangled by buildup. I was able to clear the blockage on my own, but the distiller needed technical maintenance beyond my ken. I would have to journey soon to a nearby desert village and trade for the labor. I prepared an apology for my guests and wrapped my way back around to the front of the hut to watch them approach.

One figure was slightly taller than the other. Even from a long distance, the tall one's wide-brimmed cap could be seen tutting up and down over the shifting salt. The other figure was slight and moved with more of a stomp. The fabric of their clothing trailed off them like a wrap, flapping in the breeze. This one was moving a bit faster. They traveled together with familiarity—the faster, slither one wavered in and out of perimeter with the other, and yet they were unmistakably a duo. More, the figure in the hat moved surely, deliberately, and watchfully. This one was the vanguard, or the sentinel. The other was a charge, tethered to the other's movements by promise of safety and comfort.

I was wary, then, as the taller figure in the hat resolved into the mutant Dolus. Neither he, nor the woman he was with, offered introductions immediately. I was surprised and relieved to discover that not only were they were not struggling travelers desperate for drink, but that they would begin our interaction by offering me three drachms of water. It was cleaner than any I'd seen in years.

I knew of Dolus from tales of a powerful psychic traveler that had been known to cross the salt desert to the Jungle and back over the years. I had also seen Dolus once or twice whilst my mind wandered across the continent in many of my visions—though I had never actually laid eyes on his form. He was a tall, straight-legged man with sun-damaged, fair skin and a wary, sensitive posture. His eyes—pale and frighteningly sharp green—featured pupils split down the center, as though they were a dividing cell. His bulky face was framed by a mane of long, greasy black hair, and equally by a shaggy beard. The rest of him seemed a medium man of average height, especially for a mutant. The heavy blackened duster he wore somewhat helped conceal a misshapen mound on his back and, when he

began to gesticulate, I noticed that his arms were longer than average. He was a square of a person in many ways; heavy-jawed and carrying with him two bulging beltbags and a well-worn bolt-action rifle.

I feel compelled to call his company an equally average woman of dusty brown, blunted hair down past her shoulder blades. She had dark, clear skin save for swathes of salt-battered whitish blemishes. Her face was round in shape, but sharp in feature, with high cheeks cupping soil-brown eyes. She looked a bit like an owl and seemed inquisitive and precocious enough for the part. She was wrapped in a thin, dirt-stained white fabric shawl that I recognized from desert-side settlements far in the East. It appeared to hug her like a long, trailing scarf. The hot wind pushed against and around her, occasionally ballooning the garment like a whirlwind of off-white cloth. She wore one beltbag, a pair of well-insulated walking boots, and a small water distiller on the waist. She looked as though she may be True. Unmutated humans are a distinct rarity in this part of the world, and they are always anointed by assistive machinery. This woman used no sand crawler, no hydraulic braces, and no filtration systems that I could see.

Dolus and his company knew of me by reputation before they approached my hut, but I suspected that he also knew of me in a similar way I knew of him. Either way, we easily slipped past formalities of introduction and rituals of ingratiation. That—or he is simply as blunt and impatient as he might have seemed.

“Why have you come?” I asked.

“I think you know,” said Dolus.

“We would like an oracle,” the woman cut in, her voice a soft lilt with a hard edge. There was a valence to her that I would never see, either a softness or a hardness at her core that she kept closely guarded, or that Dolus closely guarded for her. Now, though, she was front-facing and polite. Something in the set of her mouth and the tone of her words seemed lightly apologetic. “Please.”

Dolus looked over at her—then me—and nodded. He kept his eyes on mine when he looked at me, while she let her gaze wander, as if she had never seen a toad before.

“You are the mutant Dolus, are you not?” I asked.

The woman beside Dolus craned her head, eyes briefly widening.

“I am,” said Dolus. “Precognition is not among my faculties, if you’re wondering.”

“I see,” I said. “Then, who will be the focus? For what length of time?”

“Both,” said Dolus, gesturing between himself and the woman. “Whatever comes to your mind, sage.” He stopped there, as though that had answered the second question.

The woman rolled her lower lip throughout a prolonged silence as we arranged ourselves around my small hut and I set about preparing a small fire. She and Dolus sat next to each other across from me as I lowered myself into my lounge with my long pipe.

“Very well. I trust you know that the less specific your request, the less specific I can be.”

Dolus tilted his head in assent.

I nodded, glancing between the two of them once again. Dolus relaxed onto his back elbows, watching me casually. The woman had sat on her knees, hands splayed across her legs, and her eyes wandered still, from the fire up the walls of my hut and across the sturdy wooden shelves of my belongings. She paused on my bed mat in the corner, then swung her gaze back to me as if caught doing so.

I closed my eyes, and let the energy of Dolus and his mysterious partner guide me across my imagination like a quill on a supple medium. These energies seemed at once somewhat arbitrary, and I can provide only limited guidance with a firm hand of causation and deliberation. Dolus had no semblance of whim, and the woman next to him mirrored his movements in her own unsure, curious way.

I let my mind break into the psionic tenor between folds of reality, and I saw thus:

“A man, a mutant, weaving through the Jungle on some journey. I do not understand the breadth of this journey, the edges of it shock and rankle me and bar me from comprehension. It seems older than time, but as emergent as a cataclysm. His success will save the Jungle from the entropy eating at the edges of the universe. This thing that licks through the seams of our world and slowly picks at the ashes of our fear could be curtailed by the Throne that awaits him should he succeed—and he must succeed.”

“I see three animal companions swayed to his cause. I see sacrifices; each grander than the last, until he is able to stand vigil in service to the thing that awaits him.”

I opened my eyes. I am briefly stunned by the aftermath of an intense vision, and so I was silent for a long moment as the significance of the images came to me piecemeal. The woman simmered in silence and Dolus sat distantly and implacably.

“What is the purpose of your journey?” I asked, after the narrative had settled on me.

Dolus picked his teeth and did not answer.

“Once, our people ruled the Jungle,” the woman broke in. “We are on a journey to reclaim it.”

“The Jungle cannot be claimed,” I said. “Or ruled.”

“It was,” Dolus said. “Once.”

The woman seemed challenged by this. “Is that why you live here, on the edge of the Jungle?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I would not survive in the Jungle. The water in the flatlands is dirty, but distillable.” When she seemed unconvinced by this, I added, “did Dolus not inform you that the Jungle is poison?”

The woman worked her mouth, but Dolus held up a flat hand. “We have water.”

I packed the long pipe. “I see. If you don’t mind me prying further, what was this Kingdom of yours like? You were once a Sultan, Dolus?”

“No Sultan,” said Dolus impenetrably.

“He’s modest,” interjected the woman. “My ancestors ruled with him as their chevalier. They cared for the Jungle, and it them. In our absence it’s grown malicious and aggressive. If we retake the Throne, we can set about the re-cultivation.”

“There is a long lineage of Jungle Sultans in my history books,” I said, twisting the bottom of my pipe to light it. “But I have never heard of one powerful enough to claim that they tamed it.”

“It was a long time ago,” said the woman. “Dolus has lived many lifetimes since, in service to my family.”

“I apologize, then,” I murmured. “I am Ud, the Toad. What is your name?”

The woman shook her head. “I won’t claim my name until I reclaim the Throne. I am his Wife, for now,” she answered. She said this as plainly as she would her favorite color, or her birthday.

“I have not heard of this custom.” I said. “Is this part of the old Kingdom’s culture?”

“Yes,” said The Wife. “Our rulers’ power lies in their name. Until I am to rule, I am nameless. The names of our leaders are held with great regard, and great care. We are not worthy of shouldering that burden without the Throne.”

I eyed Dolus, asking questions without words.

“I am no Sultan,” Dolus repeated mechanically.

“You could be called Nameless. Or the Woman,” I said to The Wife.

“You could call me those things, if you like,” she said.

Dolus drew his hat over his head and leaned backwards in place. I had set us a fire, and was sitting back in my chair to rest from the exertion of the oracle. The mutant shot me a glance—asking a silent permission.

I blinked back in concession. The firelight licked at The Wife’s grim face. She seemed so small, painted by flickering orange and black. Not like the creature I saw wrapped in a gossamer hand of shawl cresting the dunes with confidence.

“I should apologize again,” I mentioned to The Wife before snuffing the flames out completely. “I have only ever known the Jungle to be the way it is. It is difficult to process the idea that this is somehow a state of dereliction.”

“I can balance the systems of the Jungle,” said The Wife confidently. “From the Throne. It can be inhabited again.”

“And *‘the entropy eating at the edges of the universe?’*” I said. “There is an obvious corollary to this image, but what do you suppose that has to do with you?”

“I don’t know,” The Wife admitted dreamily, as though it were the very last thing on her mind. “I hadn’t thought about it, really. Where I was born, The Wall seems so far away as to not matter...”

I instinctively looked toward the West, where the edges of the Jungle brush up against The Wall. I remembered the photographs of trees half-swallowed by the gray expanse, of animals brushing limbs into it and retrieving nothing but a blank stump.

“In this part of the world, it greatly matters. You’ll likely see it before you reach your destination. At high elevation, deep in the Jungle, the True humans have taken pictures.” I glanced over to a bound envelope of stills on one of my saggier bookshelves. “Truly a terrifying thing to see, even in a photo still.”

The Wife looked over at Dolus. He seemed impenetrable, and stonewalled her with an aimless stare into the middle distance. “All I know is my duty.”

“It is a heavy thing to lose, a crown.” I said.

“Yes,” nodded The Wife. “I’m eager to pick it back up.”

“You are unconcerned with the specifics,” I observed.

The shadows played on her rounded cheeks before I dumped sand on the embers. She appeared to be laughing, the sudden darkness making it mystical and silly.

“I keep my load light,” she said.

The next morning, they set off at dawn while I barely stirred from my sleep. They replaced my firewood and left me another two drachms of fresh water. It is delicious, and I ration it for special occasions.

The Wife—it had to have been her precise hands over Dolus’ clumsy gauntlets—had repaired my distiller. I had not assumed she was from a fabricator or a processing plant, but it wasn’t unlikely. In a way, the sprawling factories of the East are their own complex Jungle. My distiller did not break again for three years.

I have thought about Dolus and his mysterious Wife often since then. That short night in their company remains untouched in my memory, like so many precipitating events of a life. I suppose they must not have achieved their goal. The Jungle remains the toxic maw it ever was. But I do sense Dolus somewhere out there in my oracle sometimes, and perhaps what they set in motion is simply too vast in time for me to understand it in my life.

The encounter stays in my mind because I am beset by a haunting curiosity. Untouchable in many ways, Dolus seems a pinnacle of psychic potential, and a self-assured master of the Jungle if there ever was one. But the question remains—in all these visions, all these oracles or sensory experiences, and indeed in the oracle for which he paid for in water, Dolus remains alone.

PART ONE: THE GOATMAN

The Jungle was a wide, wet, green wall that roared up into the air above The Wife, taller than she ever imagined in all their days crossing the Salt Desert. It cut the blue sky into chaotic patterns with vine-covered branches and the shapes they created. The green of it was too lush, too vibrant. Just teetering on the edge of something that looked fake, or toxic. And it was impossibly dense. A stagnant, oppressive cloud of humidity clung to the branches of the trees, bush and vine and slough and moss forming a kaleidoscope of difficult textures.

She regarded it as the sun cast into the angular open doorway of the Toad's hut, out of which Dolus was currently striding, beltbags on, hat projecting an oval of shadow onto the dry, gravelly ground next to him.

"We're going to be in that thing for weeks?" she said, almost squeaking the last part.

"We will be fine," Dolus answered. His voice was as crunchy as the ground he walked on. The loam became sandier, then they walked through a shallow basin flecked with tufts of green grass, and finally the impassable wall of the Jungle itself.

"I get less afraid the more you repeat that," The Wife said glumly. She fell in behind Dolus as he passed her with his eyes set dully forward.

They passed into the beast.

The horror stories The Wife had heard in increasing revolutions on their long journey here all seemed to gain a credibility and an immediacy all at once. The world instantly became dark, hot, and suffocating. The canopy above had plunged them into a night of shadow, flecked with the rare spotlight through gaps in the trees, across which rancid shapes would flit and cause The Wife to jump in her boots. Her shawl clung to her like a needy child. She clung to Dolus the same way sometimes as they moved, and it would be this way for multiple days as she adjusted to the dimness and the thickness of the air.

Gremlin dogs with foaming muzzles and wild yellow eyes would stalk them for hours. They would scatter as soon as Dolus shot one, but they harried The Wife nonetheless. Sometimes she felt them trailing at her heels, but turn and see nothing but a trembling ivy overhang. Flat sheets of stagnant, murky water would host throngs of too-large insects, which all seemed to writhe in sudden awareness of The Wife and Dolus as they passed.

Not long after they'd entered, The Wife asked Dolus, "what do you make of the oracle? Why did you want to hear it?"

“It was something to think about as I fall asleep. That was the last comfortable night we are going to have for a while.”

“You’re lying,” said The Wife.

Dolus said nothing.

The Wife let the resolution hang quietly in the air for a moment. Then she said, “Do you believe it?”

“Sure,” said Dolus, parting a tight expanse of foliage with his rifle. “They usually get one or two things right. Thicket is clear,” He led her through a tunnel of undergrowth and out the other side. The Wife held her breath in the darkness.

On the other side, she scoffed.

“You don’t, then,” Dolus observed in an uninterested tone.

“I just see the world to come a little more clearly than a poem,” she said. “With respect to your friend.”

Dolus grunted; acquiescence. After a moment, he didn’t seem to be able to resist adding, “You can’t find them. They find you.”

The Wife frowned, batting an insect away from her face. She hauled herself up over a gnarled root, narrowly avoiding a sheet of steaming moss. “So, I couldn’t make a living off it,” she said standoffishly. “I’m still better at it.”

“Drink water,” Dolus reminded her.

They camped on a shallow riverbank, the soft sand complimenting a back that hurt from hunching into Dolus’ elbow and shoulder all day, and the first few nights The Wife did not sleep at all. Tormented by every sound, plagued by catastrophizing thoughts, she would drum her fingers together to the beat of songs she liked to concentrate on the tapping over the incessant water droplets or deep insect buzz that tortured her.

“Something touched my foot,” she would say. Dolus would glance over his shoulder, shoot something with his rifle if he felt the need, but usually would turn back and ignore her pleas to stop and double check.

“You know we can’t stop,” he would sometimes reason. “This is not a good place to stop. You need to trust me, be silent, and keep moving.”

They passed, at least once every few days, strangely clean and perfectly circular holes in the ground. They looked incongruous with the bestial naturalism of the Jungle, almost certainly manmade. Perfect discs, sometimes with a dirtied chromelike sheen of a structure underneath, but often hauntingly

black and deep. One that they would pass close by might have distant echoes of some choking engine, or just the empty, cavernous howl of a massive chamber.

“We never go down,” Dolus said when he caught her preoccupied by them. “Ever.”

“What’s down there?” The Wife asked.

“The chrome. Tunnels. Old structures. Don’t always have oxygen. When they do, it means something lives there. Remember what I said. Say it back,” said Dolus. He stopped walking, then, to punctuate his seriousness.

“We don’t go down,” said The Wife.

“Ever,” said Dolus.

These patterns continued, partially broken up by periods of more confident navigation—or at least quieter confusion. For his part, Dolus was self-steady and worldweary as always. He issued one or two-word warnings that The Wife obeyed on instinct, and always made sure she could cross something safely before him. In the end, though, he could do little to quell the discomfort and the fear. Only time did that, and one can only be saturated by fear of one thing for so long before the fear bleeds into quiet discomfort over immobilizing force.

“Ud was right about one thing,” The Wife said. She and Dolus were standing over the still-twitching corpse of a spider-like automaton. “It is hard to imagine how we’d ever make this place livable in our lifetimes.” The automaton twitched, buzzed, and snapped out a low, blue spark before whining once and dying altogether. It was flaked with oxygenation. The Wife had been surprised it was able to move at all. She had never seen a model with quite the insistent behavior pattern, either. The machines had swarmed over the diameter of a tower magnet’s reach, which was a method of conveying power and behavioral programming The Wife was quite familiar with. The ones from her home factories were used for fleets of surveillance drones, though, not these sharp things that chased them around the magnet’s perimeter until Dolus got clear shots off.

“We used these at defensive encampments,” Dolus said, picking up one of them gingerly by the leg. Its central body was round, and The Wife could tell it had once been a polished chrome, chipped away by centuries of rust. It looked like a cross between a sea urchin and a long-legged arthropod with daggerlike legs.

“They’ve gone berserk with age,” The Wife proposed.

“Just following base programming,” said Dolus.

“If that were true, wouldn’t we be exempt?”

Dolus dropped the thing, letting it disappear into the tangle of leaves at his feet, then turned to keep walking. “We are strangers now.”

II

Two weeks into the journey they passed a huge clearing in the trees—or maybe more accurately a ‘thinning’—where full structures could be visible through underbrush and aged growth.

“Ruins?” asked The Wife, pointing over as they passed by the structures’ northern side.

The structures were likely once a bright red color. Shreds of the old shade seemed to cling to life underneath layers of rust and smudged foliage. Strangled surfaces of brick and concrete dotted the uneven ground as if they were carelessly tossed there. When they passed around it and the buildings resolved into a good angle, The Wife realized it might’ve once been a village. The dilapidated figures were the right sizes for housing, and there were large cylinders on the farther, flatter side that could’ve been grain siloes. The place seemed half-digested by the Jungle and then unceremoniously expelled from its innards, pulled halfway into the ground by sucking loam and tangled roots, smothered in nets of vine. Dolus had once described the rare Jungle settlement as suspicious, sparse, and less centralized than this, which crossed The Wife’s mind as a potential reason for its clear failure.

“Yes,” Dolus answered her. “Look there.” He pointed to a pattern of three humongous pits in the ground, unequally filled with a filmy sluice of stagnant water.

As they grew closer to the pits, The Wife noticed the greenish sludge at the bottom, and the slightly iridescent, metallic orange foam at the top. It smelled like oxidized metal and toxic runoff—the kind of place in the lower guts of the factory towns The Wife was used to where waste mixed with isolated groundwater and became noxious clouds of sulfur and iron. The ground around the pits was littered with thin flakes of choked, leaflike rust.

“Rust wells,” said Dolus. “When settlements do not care for their water properly in the Jungle.”

“It rusts?” The Wife asked.

“There are poisonous metals in the ground sediment. Standing water supplies accumulate them over time. The only way to safely remove it all is to run a harsh current through it. You insert magnets to catch the extra metals, then boil off the excess.” Dolus reached out, grabbing the damp, lichen-encrusted bark of a nearby tree, and ripped free a thin sheath of it. He tossed it aside and dug his gloved fingers into the soft wood underneath. When he pulled free, the tips of his glove fingers were covered in a fine, rust-orange debris. It looked like powder, but sloughed off his gloves like sap.

It began to rain. Rain, The Wife had learned recently, often reached boiling temperatures in the Jungle. A few drops sizzled into her bare shoulder, and she winced.

“People drank that? Insanity,” she said, jostled as Dolus pulled her under the twisted awning of what was once a veranda, now swallowed by a lumpy tree trunk. The Wife imagined choking back that ferrous, bilic waste, even if it had been purified.

“They were fools,” said Dolus. “Look what is left of them. Other settlements are True. They use machines in their bodies to recycle very sparse supplies of chemically assembled water. It’s the only way to make it last.”

“You’re so glib,” said The Wife under a furrowed brow. “Would it hurt you to—”

A sonic whine disturbed the leaves in the trees above them and agitated the pattern of rainfall. It rippled through the air as a charge through water. Dolus was suddenly grabbing The Wife around the waist and pulling her into him. With the hand that didn’t have her shawl knotted in his fist, he held his finger to his lips, then covered her mouth with his palm. The whine developed into a thrumming, distant screech. It was as if an earthquake was happening just ten feet in the air above them. Leaves and thinner branches began to rattle off of trees, adding to the cacophony of rainfall and debris hitting the metal awning above their heads.

The ripple seemed to pass through the trees and hover there, above Dolus and The Wife. It settled into a high-pitched, rhythmic swell unlike anything The Wife had ever heard before. It strummed so deeply in her ear canals she became unsure if hearing was the sense she was using at all.

A heavier piece of plant matter dented the awning, folding it in and hitting The Wife in the back of the head. It let in the rain, too.

Dolus clamped his hand tighter around The Wife’s mouth. She drew her eyes down from the awning above and saw that he had his eyes tightly shut, his mouth a quivering white line under the shaggy beard. He moved her as far underneath his own body as the current angle could permit. Her waist, and most of her legs were still in the path of the rain, and she could feel blisters start to form on her skin in the surge of heat.

The Wife deduced that it was some sort of psychic onslaught. Whether Dolus’ urgent withdrawal was a symptom of his defending them or concealing them, she didn’t know, but she found herself understanding the gravity of the situation much more slowly than she would have preferred. She flexed her fingers at her sides, gripping the fabric of her shawl. She tried to hide herself, to not feel anything, imagining herself less than a faint blip on a dusty radar screen. The less she panicked, the more subtly she could blink, and breath, and move blood through her trembling body, and she thought maybe if she could do it, maybe she would not die. Maybe her head wouldn’t cave in on itself from the pressure of comprehending a foreign mind.

The Jungle had stilled in an instant. The only sound was the hot, hollow pang of rain against what was left of the awning. Sweat and rain accumulated on the wide bridge of her nose, down septum, and onto her upper lip, struggling against her clamped jaw. The ripple plateaued, lingered, almost as if it was convinced the couple was present, but was unable to prove it.

And then it passed, dissipating back into the folds of the universe like so many bored predators into the night, leaving a wake of broken tree branches and dead birds behind.

Dolus checked The Wife's back and legs. They were lightly scalded, but would recover without too much peeling. The tree branch had not broken her skin—Dolus audibly breathed outward in relief upon appraising this—and Dolus had been completely untouched, except that he seemed incredibly fatigued.

"Was that an attack," The Wife asked, piercing the silence after nearly an hour. Dolus' peace was her favorite thing to kill and she was giddy from adrenaline and relief.

"No," said Dolus, "More like a leak."

"That's more anatomical than I was imagining," said The Wife.

"Psionics are multidimensional. Our minds—" he gestured here between The Wife and himself, "—cross the boundaries of spacetime. It is a form factor of our abilities." Dolus had his longhand machete out and was clearing a blood red thicket of brush that emitted a constant spray of yellow spores. He had given her a damp cloth to cover her mouth with. "Powerful psychics can hear each other across the folds. Sometimes they try to listen. Sometimes the listening comes through."

"We were being listened to?"

"We are in the Jungle. We are always being listened to."

III

The Wife had her first Jungleside oracle nineteen days into the trip. She had grown confident, and while she still strode close to Dolus, she no longer clung to him in a fugue of desperation. Her legs had been blistered badly by the rain, but they recovered quickly and were now splotchy, peeling, and itchy. The Jungle, for its part, was dynamic enough that the sounds, aches, and smells never became so standard, much less ever become the comfort of a hot wind across salt, or the motor oil grumbling of a factory town. All the same, she had begun to tune some of them out, and was getting noticeably more sleep.

The night before, she'd gone to bed hungry. They had a stock of dried food, but they were rationing it. Nothing they'd come across that day had been safe, so The Wife had volunteered to skip a meal rather than dip into rationed goods, arguing that Dolus was the one that needed the strength that came from better nutrition.

They had been following a river—a rough churn of greenish water tumbled through with sheets of rust ranging from leaf to tree-sized. Bigger oxidized deposits would bash against dropped rocks and scatter into a deadly orange haze, which Dolus was careful to lead The Wife around instead of through. Several times they had come across vertical dams that must have been made by an animal; Dolus had taken out some dehydrated fruit pellets and left them near the dams as tribute.

They did not start a fire that night. There was nothing to cook, and Dolus was wary of a pack of bipedal dogs that could be heard yapping in the distance a few times during the day.

The Wife, staring into the loud darkness as Dolus settled onto his roll, said quietly, “why did you leave those berries?”

“We used their dam,” said Dolus.

The Wife's stomach rumbled.

“Didn't ask you to skip dinner,” Dolus commented.

“I know,” said The Wife. She stretched her hand out, weaving it through Dolus' hair, brushing her fingers against the back of Dolus' chin. It was breezy, a deeply welcome reprieve. Between the cool rush along the sodden ground that reminded The Wife of a home beach and her hunger, The Wife found it alarmingly easy to drift off to sleep.

She is with Dolus. She is stamping her foot. She is pouting. He is growing irritated with her. He is gesturing angrily at a small burrow. To their left, ahead, directly in their path, is an utterly massive expanse of jagged bramble. Trees are growing out of it in sparser number than the dense columns that

had marred their journey so far. The sky could be visible in the clearing. It goes farther than her eyes can register, so far that the smaller bits on the horizon became an uncomfortable, skin-prickling pattern of distant texture. The spines are long, covered in morning dew. The bramble is a sickly green. There is a path over the bramble. It is a slippery path of fallen logs and stones. One could observe it involved a river crossing and a great deal of attention.

Dolus wants to go under. He is gesticulating with increasing frustration at a burrow. The burrow is about knee-height. He is insisting that it will come out the other side. Insisting that it might be slower, but it is also safer. Warning her to heed his word about the Jungle. Reminding her that she had agreed to.

She relents.

They are dirty. Hands and knees. The dirt smells like blood. The canopy of damp roots that make up the ceiling of the burrow creaks into her back as she crawls. It requires so much effort. She begins to lag behind. Dolus' distended back knocks repeatedly and annoyingly against the roots. They would already be done if they'd gone her way.

A clawed, furry hand, about the size of her forearm across, seizes him by the crook of the elbow. It attempts to yank him into the briar. He resists. He is shouting gutturally. She hears the chilling zap of a pyrokinetic flash. Dolus is lashing out on instinct. The bramble is too wet to catch flame. He can't reach his bolt-action. He is pulled into the briar. She hears him screaming and screaming and shouting. Finally a massive decompression of hot air and noise sweeps over the area. It is exploding outward and knocking her against the ceiling of the burrow. She falls back into the dirt. She is inhaling a mouthful of coppery silt. It smells like burnt flesh and steam.

It is over.

The morning after a prophecy was draining, pale, colorless world to The Wife. Even the Jungle's suspicious verdant saturation seemed dull, and the throb of her headache made it uglier and quieter.

"You've had an oracle," observed Dolus almost immediately.

The Wife was grasping her temple, sitting up out of her mat, as he was folding his up into the belt bag.

The Wife managed to nod, though the motion made her nauseous.

"Tell me when you are ready." He looked around, donning his wide-brimmed hat. It was at this point stained with green from plant matter, and bent around the back from the weight of extra moisture. "We should try to move soon. I didn't intend to sleep this late."

The Wife struggled to get her camp together, but eventually succeeded, and held onto Dolus' arm for support as the headache and motion sickness slowly began to fade away. They walked in frustrating, slow silence until midday when she finally spoke.

"You died," The Wife said shakily. "I think."

"Hm," said Dolus. "I doubt it."

"It wasn't good, Dolus."

"How?"

The Wife bit her lower lip, struggling to recollect the specifics. That was the problem, really. Unlike the Frog sage, who oracled in abstraction and prophesied in vaguery, she had clear visions of extremely likely near-future outcomes, but by the time she was able to articulate them, she had forgotten the specificities already, fleeting as they are in a dream. Plus, they came to her in uncontrollable, staccato bursts, along with the searing migraine. "We were crawling, and you were pulled into something sharp. I saw blood draw immediately. I think it was poisonous—no, I know it was."

"Hm," said Dolus.

He swung his bolt-action around to his front, and offered no interpretation or recourse.

They came to the crossroads in the early evening a day later. The details shocked back into The Wife's mind as Dolus monotoned about why the burrow was safer. She frowned, half-listening to him, and looked over at the river they'd been following. It had been dammed here, and the water looked a lot more appetizing during this stretch, though she knew a drop could still sicken her. It was calmer here, and she could see the strange shine of the riverbed underneath the water. Insect buzz filled the silence as Dolus waited, coughing pointedly, for her to answer a question she hadn't heard.

The Wife's experience, so far, was that there were two ways to win an argument with Dolus once he had made up his mind. Option one was to annoy him into conceding. This was not a surefire success, but with time, it could work. Option two was to simply change the rules of the situation such that his argument lacked fervor, or foundation.

The Wife opted for option two.

She wrested a downed branch from a nearby dead bush and began to furiously wrench at the sticks that made up the dam.

"What are you doing?" Dolus said, flatly at first, but then repeated the question with more alarm.

The Wife did not answer, finally jamming the stick in, breaking it, and using her foot to slam it down into the soft ground, prying several dam pieces free from their interlocking structure.

Water began to spill over at once, and The Wife leapt backwards from the runover as if skin contact alone might risk poison. Dolus simply let it wash over his boots—he was shin-deep in a sudden gash in the pale-green tinted rush in seconds. It flooded the burrow, instantly creating a caustic mud substance that sloshed eagerly as Dolus furiously wrenched his foot free.

“So now we can either go around, which will take days,” The Wife said once she’d gotten air back in her lungs, trudging forward toward Dolus out of the brush. “Or we can go over the brambles.”

“Witch,” Dolus said, fists clenched.

“You’ll live,” The Wife said placidly, and stepped onto the first of the slippery logs.

The journey was difficult, but even shorter than anticipated. There were several moments that looked frightening from afar, but up close only required a bit of courage and trust in Dolus to catch her should she fall.

Three quarters toward the end they saw some bloated, trembling shadow skewered in the bramble, shuddering with poison. It was some kind of furry mound which, as The Wife grew closer, came into focus as the creature that had grabbed Dolus in her vision. The flood had forced it from its ambushing spot into the brambles, where it had become trapped and impaled.

“A Goatman,” said Dolus, eyeing it curiously as they penguin-walked past on a flat, mossy rock.

It did have the features of a goat, The Wife realized, but it was huge, likely bipedal-- though it was splayed into the bramble. Standing, it would easily tower over both of them, its strange rectangular irises bearing down on them in the judgment of a hunter. But in this moment it was pathetic, edging death, its tongue lulled out of its swollen mouth. Its fur was gray, mottled with purple and crimson blood. It bleated, or attempted to, resulting in a wiry, desperate whistle. It had legs with cloven hooves, and arms with big, sharp claws on the end of its massive, four-digitated hands.

Dolus paused—the end of the bramble was in sight. The Goatman had actually almost made it. He knelt on the final stretch—a jagged path of similar mossy stones and a fallen log across the river, where bramble hadn’t grown—and cautiously leaned over the sharp tangle to peer at the Goatman.

Its rectangular eyes, bloodstained and wide with panic, met his, and stilled.

Dolus said, “Will you abide?”

A sudden lurch hit The Wife square in the back, a dizziness that spread from the base of her neck down into her legs. The whip-crack of Dolus’ psychic energy.

The Goatman uttered a miserable squeak, and stirred.

“Assist me,” Dolus then said, holding his two-hand machete out to The Wife.

She took it hesitantly.

The pressure she’d felt was Dolus carefully and surgically bending the flora backwards, away from the Goatman’s mangled body, with his mind. His hands were clasped together, hat down over his forehead, grunting with effort. She was meant to use the machete to pry the Goatman further free, clearing the thing a path out of its trap. It would certainly sustain further injury from the maneuver regardless of their carefulness, but it seemed that it was a hardy creature, and Dolus seemed to think it had a chance.

The procedure took nearly an hour for The Wife’s fear of being stuck by even one briar poker. By the end, The Wife’s already filthy shawl was dyed with a smuged swath of Goatman blood, sickly-green plant matter, and mud. It lay, then, on the bank on the other side of the river, wheezing and gasping wetly into the air.

Dolus went to work on its wounds. He instructed The Wife to set up their camp here, on the riverbank. The duo did their tasks in urgent silence, the Goatman wheezing or groaning loudly with pain every so often. Dolus would press his gloved hand over the thing’s mouth to quiet it, and it would shudder against his grasp, but never once fought him or raised a beastly claw on him.

The Wife unclipped Dolus’ middle beltbag and unfurled into their sleeping mats. She took the opposable rods out of the bottom and used them to stretch the beltbag out into a simple lean-to tent, affixing it to two nearby softwood trees that hung over the river. She had a relative comfort put together by the time the Goatman’s breathing stabilized. Looking over, The Wife discovered Dolus had gone through three of their five packs of steroids, the wax styptic, and the entire three-day battery on a flesh-solder, along with their entire store of painkillers and one-use microneedles.

“Why are you using so many supplies?” The Wife said highly, panic rising in her throat. “What if we need those, Dolus?”

“We did need them,” said Dolus without looking up at her, crouched over the still-trembling Goatman as he was.. “Goatmen are intelligent. See if you can find a small tree or branch for a cane.”

“No,” said The Wife indignantly, voice rising again. “This is absurd. Do you know how hard it is to obtain those supplies in the Salt Desert?”

Dolus said, “yes.”

The Wife suddenly went silent for a moment, pressing her lips together for a sharp inhale through the nostrils, then out through the mouth at a rush. “Did you do all this because you think it’s going to be one of Ud’s three animal companions?”

Dolus said, “yes.”

The Wife did not speak to Dolus for the next full day. She packed the camp up by herself in silence and attempted to use some of the undrinkable but distilled water she'd accumulate to wash her shawl. It would never be white again, but at least it didn't feel encrusted with detritus. While she was at it, she used a small jar of stolen soap powder from a broken vending machine at an old desert library to wash her armpits and crotch. The soap wasn't long for the world, but she cherished and rationed it as much as she could.

Meanwhile, the Goatman began to talk to Dolus. At first it simply asked what had happened while the poison was addling its mind.

Dolus said, "likely you planned to kill and eat us. Rather than inhale the river water in the burrow when my Wife flooded it, you leapt into the bramble."

The Goatman considered this. "An unlucky set of choices."

"I would have picked the water," said Dolus.

The Goatman uttered what The Wife would come to learn was a laugh; a short stuttered sound that irritated and unsettled the already upset Wife.

"I owe you my life," said the Goatman. It began to arduously move to its feet for the first time in nearly eighteen hours.

When it was finished, The Wife was humbled by its full height.

Dolus eventually addressed The Wife himself. "Goatmen are strong, powerful, and know the Jungle better than many other species. A loyal one will expedite our trip. It is not just about a frog's dream." He said it coldly. A thin mist dissipated off the ground as the night's collected moisture evaporated in pockets of intense sun.

"Toad," The Wife growled.

"I am not," Dolus replied flatly.

"I feel it only fair," said The Goatman. "That might be, because I am being influenced."

"It is," said Dolus.

"I can grant you, guest nomination," The Goatman said brightly, "at my village. Miss, you were angry, about supplies, yes?" The Goatman craned its head downward, and The Wife immediately broke eye contact and looked at her trudging feet. "We have supplies. Please, it is the least I can do. I have terribly inconvenienced you."

"You speak strangely," said The Wife.

It was true. The Goatman uttered small portions of sentences before taking large gulps of air and seeming to reset its jaw. Speaking human languages didn't seem to come very naturally or comfortably to it.

“It is difficult, to articulate, but my anatomy is a bit different.”

The Wife lost the fight with a burgeoning smile.

IV

The Wife took to calling the Goatman ‘Marlay,’ which she said was the name of a dog she had once. Dolus seemed wordlessly offended by this on Marlay’s behalf, but the Goatman took on the mantle with a generous chortle. It had not taken The Wife but three days to warm up to Marlay’s laughter, and its speech pattern. She also found that Marlay was a better conversationalist than her husband, and so the dynamic had shifted drastically in the prior days. Dolus would now trudge on ahead in silence while Marlay and The Wife held animated quorums about food preparation and machine maintenance.

Dolus hadn’t been lying about Marlay’s utility, either. They had passed into a region its village had purportedly hunted for generations, which made it by far the most cared-for slice of ecosystem they’d come across so far. The rare edible plant would shoot up out of isolated raised soil beds, and Marlay would pluck one, sniff it, and hand it to The Wife. They tasted like raw vegetation, but were somehow immensely filling.

Marlay knew to give warning signals, identify optimal paths, track and sniff stray wildlife for safety and avoidance, identify dangerous plants and animals, and even protect against the occasional hostile mutant ape or hideous river lizard. Even though it was still injured and moved delicately, seeing it stand to its full height and threaten other wildlife was possibly the most frightening thing The Wife had seen on the whole journey so far. She was glad it was loyal, even if she intended to ask Dolus about the long-term effects and ethics of his ‘influence’ later.

With Marlay, The Wife cultivated her blossoming confidence into a sense of total conquest. Dolus would allow her to take the lead with Marlay sometimes, for hours, and she could frolic with her new friend. She no longer hesitated and shied away from obstacles. It was time for her to be brave and flexible. She owned this place, after all.

The morning they were to arrive at the Goatmen village, they were forced to break away from the river. It bent South, and their route was straight West. At that point, Dolus would have mapped out a new route with his equipment, but having Marlay made it easy to just continue on with the seven feet of lumbering fur and horns leading the way.

“We are close,” Marlay said.

They had hit a flatland with sparse and thin strangler figs almost forming an equal pattern. They walked in between, aware that they were being followed at a distance by two or three thin, short figures darting in and out of brush cover.

“So are they,” muttered Dolus.

“I do not know, the word in Eastern, for them.” Marlay intoned lowly. Its voice crept closer to a bleat, something too deep and trembly to be a whisper. “They will not, do anything, so long as we keep moving. We will reach the village, before nightfall. They daren’t cross, the border.”

“Hm.” Dolus kept his hand on the rifle.

“What do they look like?” asked The Wife.

“Small, reddish brown. Hm, sharp-eared things. Blind, perhaps.”

“And they’re hunting us?” The Wife mostly sounded curious.

“They are, sure,” said Marlay. “We’ve seen, their victims.”

The Wife recalled the two human bodies slumped up against trees. They weren’t fresh, but not fully decomposed either, and the heat and moisture hadn’t helped. Their bodies were full of double puncture holes, skin thin and papery. It was perhaps the first time The Wife had truly seen one of the possible repercussions of being here, wasted into nothing but a portent.

The Wife looked over her shoulder and saw the still visage of a haunted Jungle looming behind her. There were times, though her brazenness had grown tenfold, that she felt as though the trees might be bending inward toward her. As if they were exerting their own kind of heat-pressure, some instantiation of foreign, subjugating energy. As if, rather than the Jungle being her birthright, she were somehow the Jungle’s.

Dolus told Marlay to scout briefly and pulled The Wife aside about an hour before they arrived at the village.

“You need to understand,” he said, “that this is not a safe place. It may look like civilization, but these are our natural predators. We are not guests, we are food tagged briefly inedible because of social custom.”

The Wife nodded.

“You are not to say anything of The Throne, or our journey. You’re True, and you’ve hired me to guide you through the Jungle. You’re a tourist.”

The Wife nodded again. Dolus’ split green eyes were shining with burning seriousness. “Okay. Let’s go,” she tried to shove him aside.

“Say it,” he said, catching her by the elbow. She saw Marlay swaying up to them through a tight copse ahead.

“I’m a tourist,” she murmured. “No Throne. I don’t even know the meaning of the word.”

He forced her gaze into his for a second longer, then let go of her elbow.

The border of the Goatmen village was lit by electric coils, which gave off an intense heat. Sparks occasionally spat between them, and Marlay advised against getting near any of the metal posts.

The Goatmen lived in hard mud and wideleaf yurts, supported by the strong lumber of the trees nearby. They were tall and long, with open-air thresholds and windows. Some of the buildings also had walls fortified by rusty sheet metal, some with stone, or both. Smoke spilled from chimneys and the general noise of social beings living in proximity with each other echoed gently and comfortably up to the hill at which the village gate sat. Some huts were part of, built in, or were the result of hollowed out trees. Otherwise, this was the place with the least overall foliage The Wife had seen in nearly a month.

Two Goatmen stood at the village gate, a wide space between border posts. One held a plain, unkempt iron tipped spear, and the other had a forked bison-prod hooked up to a battery backpack. A blue flash zapped between the prongs when the guard idly cantered it through the air, as if bored.

Marlay gave a high-pitched, granular bleat as they approached.

The guards' orange, rectangular eyes held something angrier and less precise about them than Marlay, and The Wife felt them scrutinizing herself and Dolus.

While the guard with the spear bleated back at Marlay, the one with the prod barked in a much less refined Eastern voice, "don't care, for mutants. Taste, indecent."

"It's good we are not food, then," replied Dolus.

"Good, indeed," said the guard. "Indeed."

Marlay was locking horns with the other guard, suddenly, which briefly alarmed The wife before she was able to read their body language as vaguely friendly. The guard slapped Marlay roughly on the back, resulting in an echoing, dry clapping sound.

In the end, they were nodded through.

"Stay with Marlay," Dolus warned as they descended into the village proper. A Goatman was wheeling a rotund pile of healthy-looking soil across the path far ahead of them. Two others were sitting at a nearby table, apparently gambling with a deck of cards bearing symbols The Wife didn't recognize.

"Mm," said The Wife noncommittally as she took in the sights and smells.

Dolus wheeled on her suddenly, stopping her in her tracks. "We're rats in a kitchen. Be smart."

"Fine," she squirmed away from him. "I get it."

They continued: Marlay's residence was a cylindrical yurt with a particularly thick tangle of tree branches for a roof. It was on the far edge of the village, and The Wife could see the electrified boundary posts opposite the territory from where they'd entered, glowing in a fading daylight. Also visible was what The Wife supposed was the Goatmen's aquifer. It was a flat slick of clear water that

looked like a big, smooth gold coin as the sun died. At the far edge of the aquifer and hanging over it with draping tendrils was a strange, bluish-yellow tree with bulbous foliage.

Despite all of Dolus' intensive warning, they were paid very little attention as they approached Marlay's yurt. All at once, The Wife was surprised, comforted, and confounded by the strange familiarity of the village. Of course, it wasn't a real nostalgia, she knew—she had suffused something of her own through the visions of Goatmen beating the dust out of tarpaulin together, tinkering with tangles of cord and electronic that occasionally whizzed and popped, or strolling leisurely through thickets of brush decorated with wind-spun tinsel. However different they truly were, and however frightened Dolus appeared to be, The Wife saw something she instinctively labeled 'human' upon walking through the Goatmen village.

Marlay was saying, "The Sheriff and the Head, are throwing a feast this evening, because tomorrow is the gather." Dolus and The Wife put the heavier of their things down. Dolus hesitantly let go of the water beltbags and the tent bag. He needed to be coaxed gently out of surrendering his weaponry so that The Wife could lean it against the wall.

"You should, join me," Marlay continued. "Make yourselves known."

"Is a gather a hunt?" asked The Wife. "Also, what is that tree outside?"

"A Suntime," said Marlay as if that would silence all further inquiry. "And, the gather is a hunt, primarily, yes. It's important, that we go on hunts, with no stores. Thus, we feast on surplus, before we depart."

The Wife looked at Dolus quizzically. He met her gaze for a short moment, his face placid and distant, but then he continued to browse Marlay's home. Sometimes his equivalent of saying he didn't know something was to simply ignore the question.

Marlay kept a clean kitchen despite not having floors, and slept on a suspended cot that didn't look like it could hold its weight until it did. The Goatman flopped onto it. "I am still injured, and the journey here, was difficult. I am going, to rest before the feast. Please, make yourselves at home."

It wasn't long before Marlay was snoring, and The Wife was leaning against the wall looking out at the Suntime while Dolus also snoozed.

"Dolus," she said as he tried to nod off. "Why do you suppose the goats don't keep surplus?"

"Goatmen," Dolus corrected. "Get some rest. I suspect we'll be up late."

"Do you think they inherited anything from my ancestors? Do you think there was any cultural exchange?" asked The Wife.

"Ask them tonight, if you're curious," said Dolus. He punctuated his statement by rolling over away from her and settling into his own nap.

But The Wife did not sleep. She continued to study the striations of wood grain on the Suntimee from a distance. Its strange, spherical bundles of yellowing leaves cast their reflections onto the water. The sky cut by canopy turned from orange to dull a dull violet gamut, brightening distantly in the halo of the boundary posts. She wondered if the Goatmen had any kept history, if they knew anything about the Throne, and how it was supposed to work.

Two Goatmen out by the aquifer got into a brawl over a small device that played percussive music. She shuddered, watching them bash into each other and cause the dust to agitate around each other, true powerhouses of the Jungle. Goatmen fought terribly. She'd seen it in brief on Marlay, though it was even more frightening with two uninjured Goatmen who weren't out to specifically protect, but out to get at each other's throats the way wild animals will savage each other at the zenith of survival. The Goatmen seemed organized and civil. They had hierarchy, agriculture, and used technology. So when the Goatman that had turned the device off finally wrapped its arm around the bottom end of its opponents head, braced its legs, and snapped its neck so violently the Wife could hear it from this far away, she let out a shocked whimper. The victim's body spasmed for several seconds, and The Wife drew away from the window.

She found herself thinking it might be best if they didn't know about the Throne.

The Goatmen organized along a long table that went from one end of the village's central quad to the other. It seemed most of the Goatmen in the village were in attendance. Some Goatmen were still cooking over fires or in a large, square building made mostly of metal that was chugging smoke into the air. Rabbit, venison, frog, iguana, snake, and coyote were served along with hearty cornucopias of fruits and vegetables. Goatmen were also bringing out loaves of fresh bread wrapped in netted cloth. The Goatmen made this strange slurry of berries and an acidic substance that The Wife found utterly delicious when spread on a slice of the bread. She was less than eager to partake of the meat, so she filled up on the jam and the bread.

The Wife and Dolus were sat up next to Marlay toward the head of the table. Marlay had claimed a seat next to the Sheriff and across from their leader, a position called the Head. The Wife and Dolus, then, were next to the Head, which felt awkward to The Wife as guests.

The Head wore a reddish tarpaulin about its shoulders, fastened with a big hook around its fur-dusted clavicle. It sported patchy, white fur and mottled eyes with reddish flakes. The horns on its head curled in on themselves, seeming to be dangerously close to protruding into its own skull. Its lips curled about when it attempted to speak heavy Eastern, and it seemed more hoarse and long-winded than its brethren, suggesting to The Wife that it was quite old.

The Sheriff was jet-black with burning gold eyes that flitted between Marlay and Dolus like fireflies from one trap to the other. It had a long tuft of fur protruding from the bottom of its chin, and when it spoke Goatmen it trembled in the night breeze. It seemed to speak often, haughtily, and shortly, punctuating with a hard, curled fist on the table or a glottal 'harrumph' noise.

Nighttime in the Jungle so far had been a pitch-black nightmare of sound and moisture, but tonight felt dry, cheery, and peaceable. The Wife hadn't felt like this since before they'd crossed the Salt Desert, so she found herself slipping into old socials and a form of elated hospitality she was sure Dolus hadn't yet seen in her.

"May I ask something?" Said The Wife at one point, gesticulating at the Head Goatman with a half-eaten slice of bread in her hand.

The Head nodded, its voice deep, throaty, and sure. "Quite."

"How does your aquifer work? The water is so clean."

The Head Goatman stroked its wisp of a beard. "We know, how to proliferate, The Suntimee. Its roots, and leaves, deposit static ferrous enzymes. It soaks up the rust, it takes, our burdens, onto itself.

It will, eventually, wither and die, from taking in, all the toxins.” The Head wheezed out a wet cough and tore a bite off the shank it had been eating. “We will, plant another, in its place, and thank it, for its service.”

The Wife considered this. “And all Goatmen villages have a Suntree?”

“Multiple, usually,” offered Marlay.

The Sheriff jabbed a flat hand in the air between the conversation as if swatting the energy away like a bothersome insect. “Enough, giving of free information, to outsiders,” it hissed in Eastern. Its voice was surprisingly reedy, given how much thicker it was than the other Goatmen, especially Marlay next to it, humbled by injury as it was.

“Charming, as ever, Sheriff,” said The Head. “Surely, you are not so easily, threatened by small ones.”

The Sheriff tossed The Head some kind of Goatman correspondence—a low, growling bleat followed by three sharp guttural noises. The Head also swung itself by the neck, this action looking as though it were pantomiming the act of goring the Sheriff. In response, the Sheriff tucked into its food grumpily and resumed its silence.

“Tell *me*,” said The Head, “why you have decided to come through this place.”

“I’m a tourist,” said The Wife nonchalantly. “This is my hired mutant. Say hello, Dolus.” She smiled cheekily at her husband, who managed to slip her a brief glower on the sly before nodding and murmuring some hollow greeting.

“A tourist,” said the Sheriff, apparently unable to contain himself. “You brought, a tourist through the village. What, on a whim?” it rumbled at Marlay.

The Wife felt there was something hedged between the two Goatmen in front of her. She could not identify what it was. She was suddenly bowed by the sense that, of course, things had been going on in this village long before she had arrived here.

Marlay shot back something in their language, shaking its head violently.

The Head banged two closed fists on the table twice, two deep drum beats that silence the tenor of the entire table.

“What would bring you to tour this place?” it asked after the silence had fallen and the commotion around them had slowly regained steam.

The Wife thought for a moment. “Well,” she said. “This.” She gestured around her.

The Head Goatman let out a piercing, howling chortle, much higher and sharper than Marlay’s laugh.

The Wife flinched.

“I doubt that, very much,” said the Head Goatman.

“No, really,” said The Wife, letting a touch of impertinence sink into her voice. “Sharing food, sharing company. Remembering the import of your relationship to nature. Intricate social customs, rituals, music. Balance. I want to see more of it.”

“You, consume it,” snapped the Sheriff. “We come, of the Jungle. You come here, and you colonize it, with your eyes, based on your little, *romantic swells*.”

The Head idly nibbled on a skewer of something that might have still been moving when it placed it in its mouth.

“All I want to do is witness,” said The Wife. “I don’t want to change or consume anything,” She felt her face getting hot, as if somehow she and the Sheriff had reached some kind of subtle understanding about her true reasons for being here.

“You change, with your presence. Your bodies, your ‘sharing.’” It gestured wildly at Marlay. “You change us.”

“You change *us*, too,” said Dolus calmly. “Living beings change each other. It is a fact of the world.”

“And you,” said the Sheriff, planting both meaty fists on the table and hauling itself up to a full, towering stand. “Could have, kept it to yourselves.”

“Enough!” said Marlay, pulling roughly on the Sheriff’s elbow.

The Sheriff tore itself away. It bleated something shrill and furious in Marlay’s face, spittle flinging itself in a rough swarm across both bodies.

The Wife withdrew in her body language. She turned eagerly to Marlay. “Marlay, you were telling me earlier,” she said quickly. She elbowed Dolus suggestively. “That you had something to show Dolus, right? Let’s have an example of the mutual exchange.”

Marlay paused, chewing, eyes moving slowly between the Sheriff, Dolus, and The Wife. The rest of the table’s din had died away, many eyes and many rectangular irises landing judgmentally on the couple and the conflict they appeared to have started. The Wife curled her lips up pleadingly at Marlay.

“Oh!” Marlay said finally. “Yes. Er, come, come, Dolus, friend.” It picked up its goblet. One of the drinks of the night that The Wife and Dolus had both politely declined was an alcoholic beverage that smelled of rotten berries and moldering soil. Perhaps it was some kind of brandy.

“Stand, stand with me,” said Marlay.

The Wife glanced at the Sheriff. She wasn't used to Goatman body language, but felt that it hadn't released any of its tension. The Head seemed bemused, however, its massive head perched on its two meaty hands, elbows at rest on the hard surface of the table.

Marlay cast a glance over at The Wife, who nodded, cleared her throat, and sat up straight. She began to clap her hands at a rhythm. She accompanied her beat with some low-throat humming, giving the Goatmen in her immediate vicinity a few encouraging glances. Hesitantly, at first, but with increasing gusto, they began to stamp their hooves into the ground on beat.

Marlay took Dolus' hands in his, and though Dolus' stiff body attempted to resist, he was led into a sort of slow dance with the Goatman. He glanced at The Wife helplessly as foot and hoof cut into Jungle earth, Marlay moving with clear improvisational twirls and Dolus doing a very poor job to keep up with choppy movements and unsure legs.

Dolus made eye contact with The Wife again, and she quirked the corner of her mouth and raised her water cup at him. He scowled.

The Goatmen began to laugh. It spread like a plague until almost the entire feast had their attention on Dolus' horrid dancing. They did not stop their rhythmic stampede, and in fact The Wife saw that The Head had joined in, its great horned mantle thrown back in the air, gutturally chuckling a steamy laugh into the night.

The only thing The Wife found more sonically unpleasant than the Head Goat's laugh was the sound of the entire feast laughing. She suppressed a shudder and kept humming.

Then, Dolus tripped. He was swinging his right leg backwards and it collided with his left. He pitched backwards, wide-brimmed hat flying up into the air, cloud of black hair in his face, and plummeted into the moist dirt.

The laughter exploded into a riot of clenched bellies and slamming fists.

The Sheriff swung itself away from the table and stomped away into the darkness, shoulders stiff and head reared back up toward the moon.

Dolus looked furiously at The Wife as he got to his feet and righted his hat.

"Just de-escalating," she murmured comfortingly, touching his arm as he slung himself back into his seat.

"Witch," he rumbled, tearing into a slice of bread.

Marlay pushed a dented tankard of the foul-smelling brandy over to Dolus, who curtly shook his head. "I find alcohol restrictive," he said vaguely, gently pushing it back toward Marlay, who looked at him for a long second before snapping the tankard to its own mouth and dumping the swill wholesale into its gullet.

“Please excuse, the Sheriff,” the Head said sometime later. Many Goatmen had turned in, and the Wife, Dolus, Marlay, the Head, and a few others were now sat around one of the dying bonfires. The Head and Marlay had traded a skin of the brandy substance for over an hour, and were both lolling their heavy heads back and occasionally drooling thickly onto the ground. It flashed on the firelight, and The Wife turned her lips up and tried not to notice.

“Nothing to excuse,” said Dolus.

Marlay sighed, a deep, rustling sound. “Sheriff believes, the Goatmen, are fragile.”

The Wife laughed. “We pulled you out of a poisoned briar and here you are waltzing around drinking yourself half to death.”

The Head shook its head, its thin lips doing some approximation of a wan smile. “Not physically. Our grasp, on ourselves, our culture, and our society. It is weak.”

“How?” asked The Wife.

Marlay snorted. “That is, the basis, of the debate.”

“Think of the Jungle, as having a contract,” The Head twirled a loose-wristed hand through the air, as if gesturing up a moving image out of bonfire sparks. “We live, in the last untamed place. The Wall, to the West, claims much, of the world now, and The East, is a land created by manufacture, industry, and war. There is no contract there, because it would be null. There is nothing mutual, about it. It is, necessarily, extractive. Resource, to consumption. It is not, an ecosystem, where you come from. It is, a machine.”

The Wife quirked her head to the side, mouth tugging up at the corner. She set her water cup on the ground and sat on her knees. “What do you know of the East?”

“We can, glean much, from the carcasses, of foolish travelers, overhead by their loud, camp side talks... It is an artifice of factory miles, and tar sands. It does not, take part in ecology, only economy.”

The Wife nodded. “You do seem to be able to make it sound dreadful.”

“It is, dreadful,” said The Head. “To me. And you, have certainly heard, many dreadful things about the Jungle. Difference is, easy to stigmatize.”

“What do you mean by ‘contract,’ though?” The Wife said. “You still haven’t gotten to that part.”

“Welcome,” said Marlay. “To speaking, with our Head.”

The Head swatted Marlay across the back of the head. “We seek no war, or provocation. We bother not the villages, of other species, and in fact, it is not exceptional to trade, with them. But in the raw, uninhibited wild of the Jungle, outside the markers, of residence and civilization, the food chain, is

respected. It must be, by us, for we are its stewards, at the top. We will, in this, kill and eat humans. And boarfolk, and dogs. Anything that, can be cleaned. Those humans may, be the same we traded with just the day before. It is an issue, of timing, and strategy.”

“You don’t know war, but you don’t know peace, either,” said The Wife, almost to herself than to the Head. “Interesting philosophy.”

“And this,” said the Head, “Brings us, back to the Sheriff. Do you see what, has just occurred?” The Wife blinked.

“You have taken what, I said, and put it in your own words. You have, used the apparatus of your own perspective, to warp, what I have told you. ‘Peace’ and ‘philosophy,’ are *your* words. ‘Philosophy,’ in the abstract, places things in a domain, which then can be mused upon, worried, until you feel it is tamed and understood, or at least, contained. A contract, however, mm, must simply be followed. It is innate, to the trees, and in the eye contact, which brings True humans and Goatmen in the Jungle either to trade or to blows.”

“But you don’t seem swayed by me translating, so to speak,” objected the Wife.

“No, I don’t,” said the Head. “Such things are not, tangible, in that way. This, is the Sheriff’s fear. Interpolation, and induction. It is, impossible to see the full, tapestry, of social causality. For instance, why did you ask, about the Suntime?”

“I was curious.”

“And, because of my generosity, you now hold valuable, strategic information, about our village. Would you, have told a passersby, that you had dried rabbit, in your bags?”

“Did you go through our things?” asked The Wife, looking briefly at Dolus, who was standing and dusting himself off, either not paying attention or not surprised.

Marlay wordlessly tapped the Head’s snout. “Smell,” it intoned. It slurred the word a little bit.

“I think,” said the Head, “that it is time to retire.”

The Wife nodded. “Thank you for the conversation,” she said. “I learned quite a bit.”

“And I,” said the Head. “Let’s not mention, our continued, privations, to the Sheriff, eh?”

“We’ll be out of your trouble in the morning,” said Dolus, already walking across the wide swath of quad toward Marlay’s yurt.

“Very well,” said The Head.

“And thank you very much for the food,” said The Wife.

The Head chuckled. “You ate, so little, we may actually still have a surplus.”

The Wife smiled bashfully. “Nevertheless, it was the most delicious and real food we’ve had in weeks.”

“Then I am, happy, to have accommodated guests of my Electrician,” said the Head.

Marlay swayed and stuttered its way back to its yurt. The Wife stayed nearby, not really for any material support as, if Marlay should’ve fallen over, it would likely simply crush her, but for moral support.

“The Sheriff,” said Marlay. “Doesn’t, like me very much.”

“Oh?” asked The Wife.

“Never, has,” said Marlay. “He’s the only one, who’s noticed, I’ve been influenced.”

“Why’s that?”

“When you hate, someone,” said Marlay, stumbling briefly before regaining its balance with a quick trot to burn off excess inertia. “I think you find, yourself paying attention, to them with an, adverse ratio.”

The Wife smiled. “Good point.”

“The Head is all, lofty sociologies,” said Marlay. “But I think, the Sheriff is just, afraid of Dolus.”

“Hm,” said Dolus.

They were at the entrance to the yurt now, Marlay brushing in and swaying over to his cot before collapsing into an indiscernible ball of fur and horns atop it. The Wife touched it briefly, and it rumbled and twitched, but seemed to be asleep as soon as it had become horizontal.

“I will keep watch,” said Dolus. “I don’t trust that Sheriff.”

The Wife frowned. “When did you last sleep? That little nap today doesn’t count.”

Dolus didn’t answer, jaw set in a serious grimace.

“Fine,” The Wife scowled. “Do whatever you want.” She sat on her bedroll, looking at him briefly. She let a certain tension hang in the air. He knew she was looking at him, but was staring out the threshold into the night. The dying embers of the bonfires were grim, shadowy flickers out in the nothingness. Electric whines from the boundary posts, occasional zaps from insects trespassing across them. Marlay began to snore.

“Do you think,” she said finally, breaking the weighted silence with a voice low and leaded with anxiety. She rethought her phrasing, exhaling harsh. “What will happen with the Goatmen when we take the Throne?”

“Nothing,” said Dolus. “Did you hear the Head? They are perfectly happy to let the world be outside their own concerns.”

“But won’t we be...” she lowered her voice even more. “Won’t we be changing it in just the way the Sheriff fears?”

Dolus flashed her a rare smirk. Just a small upturn of the lip, barely visible under his beard. “The Goatmen are a lot like the old Sultans. They take on all sorts of responsibility for the natural world, placing themselves at the top of the food chain. Heavy is the head. They’re so focused on it, they’ll change with the Jungle. They won’t even notice their knees bending.”

The Wife withdrew into a churning silence, brows knitted, and laid down. She looked at the ceiling for a long while, and before she knew it was time, she’d passed into a fitful realm of vague, restless anticipation in her dreams.

VI

They are restrained. Tight around her wrists. She can’t rub them together, much less wriggle any movement out of them. Her mouth is bound with cloth. The Head Goatman is pacing in front of her. Its enormous hooves pound the soil in front of her face. The soil is getting in her mouth.

Their things are spread around them. The sun dapples through the canopy. Amongst torn beltbags, the destroyed water distiller, emptied water drachms, and the last of their first aid, is a small, rusted cylinder—maybe an ancient food can—with a small sprig of green peeking up over its jagged lid. It sits in the center of their things as if cast by a spotlight. It seems to be a brighter green than anything else around them.

The Head Goatman shrieks a piercing bleat. The sound is bisected by two enraged chuffs as The Sheriff’s hooves join the Head’s in her view.

He is next to her, on the ground. Bound also. He is trying to use psionics. His face is red. His mouth beneath his beard is worked up into a tight knot of concentration. A corollary in his eye has blown. The double pupil gray green iris is flooding milky red.

Marlay is there. It’s sprawled a few feet away among their things, as if it were just another discarded item. Its head sits at an odd angle with its shoulders. A hot, shining trickle of red is spreading into the damp ground under it. Its left leg twitches once.

“Guilty.” Hoarse, chuffing, the Sheriff says the word. “Theft, manipulation. I smell empire on you.”

“This is how easy it is to fool all of you?” He is choking out, next to her, his psionic effort having caught. His restraints loosen. He is screaming fire into existence with his mind. His face flushes. He starts to get to his feet as the Suntree cracks into bright flame in the distance. “This paranoid fool frames us all for theft and it’s this easy to make the case?”

The Head makes another shrill, commanding sound. Two syllables. She can’t help but think it sounded like, ‘end it.’

Dolus’ effort catches even harder. It’s hotter, now. She looks over toward the slick disc of the aquifer. The Suntree is a column of blinding orange. A sizzling peal of psionic backlash floods her senses. She bites down hard, wet, hot, on blood, seeping between her teeth.

The Sheriff audibly knocks all of the breath out of Dolus with a quick knee to the side of the head. Hollow snapping. The Sheriff is stepping on his neck. Light as rotten fruit, with all the same give. Viscera across dirty leaves, her husband crunches into oblivion under the heel of the enemy.

She is staring into rectangular irises. The fire is spreading. There’s so much movement at the corner of her eyes, ants scrambling out of the hive, the motion nauseating and leery with too much momentum.

The Sheriff opens its mouth.

It is over.

The Wife awoke, starting, choking, and coughing as quietly as possible to herself. A quick look at the window confirmed it was still dark out. Her temples roiled with sharp stings. The space behind her eyeballs ached. She rolled, nauseous and full of phlegm, and heaved silently into the floor next to her roll. Dolus, his back to her, the fire in front of him, looked like an indiscernible black mound, rising and falling occasionally with low breaths. He was looking out into the night with his arms loose over his drawn knees.

“An oracle?” he asked quietly when she was free from her fit of strangled coughing.

The Wife pieced her dream together over a grueling moment poised on all fours over the ground next to the bedroll. Adrenaline surged through her, hauling her to her feet with a bleary stumble, and she dove for their belongings.

The Wife tore open the food beltbags with a manic fervor, grew impatient, and dumped them out onto the bare floor, sifting through the sealed packages of jerky and the cartons of dried fruit like a blind beggar.

“What are you doing?” Dolus said, with only a bare flicker of interest.

The Wife upended another bag, sloshing drachms of water in individual skins lolling out. With the last one came a hollow *clunk* and a fine spray of soil as an open tin can rolled out of the bottom. The Wife let out a brief, uncontrolled gasp, then clamped her fingers over her mouth.

“What is that?” Dolus said, pivoting on his palm so that he was sat facing her amongst the piles of their belongings.

The Wife opened and closed her mouth, turning the can right side up and packing what loose soil she could back around the small, verdant sapling sitting erect at the center inside.

“I-I-” she began, tucking her bottom lip under her teeth in panicked consternation. “I think it’s... a Suntime sapling.”

“Why do you have that,” Dolus said. There was a growing, cold edge to his voice.

“I-I don’t!” she gaped at him, brows furrowed. “I didn’t, I mean—”

“The Sheriff,” Dolus said levelly.

The Wife gestured aimlessly, blinked, and nodded.

“And your oracle was about this? It was immediate?”

The Wife shook her head. “No, I think it was daylight.”

Dolus frowned, eyes fixed dully on the tin can. He was silent for a long moment—arranging scenarios, reaching conclusions. The Wife did the same, and they both withdrew from each other’s company for just a moment to speculate in tight silence. She felt—through the tightness in her jaw and an experienced study of Dolus’ face—that they had arrived at precisely different resolutions about the events to follow.

The Wife thought that in Dolus’ mind, they had two options: leave immediately or try and convince the Head. They did not know where the sapling was meant to be kept, Marlay was incoherent, and it was likely that the Sheriff held sway with enough of the village that speaking to anyone else would warrant unacceptable risk.

In The Wife’s mind, her oracle told her that neither option would be sufficient without some external circumstance. There were two ways to win an argument with Dolus once he had made up his mind. Option one was to annoy him into conceding. Option two was to simply change the rules of the situation such that his argument lacked fervor, or foundation.

The Wife left Dolus in his stupor for just a moment, walking steadily over to the sagging lump of a half-empty skin near Marlay’s cot. She cast a spare glance in Dolus’ direction. He had taken up the sapling and hunched over it facing away from the yurt’s entrance. She reached down and plucked the brandy skin off the ground, then walked deliberately around the yurt’s interior until she was partially

obscured from Dolus. Kneeling near the panicked refuse of her tear through their belongings, she carefully selected a half-full drachm of water.

“I’m relieving myself,” The Wife intoned in Dolus’ direction. He turned his head away, his thumbnail between his teeth, the can now nestled in the crook of his arm.

Pouring the brandy into the water drachm was messy, sticky business, but The Wife managed. She finished up, walked over, knelt, and found her husband’s gaze again.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“I have to assume your oracle did not go ideally,” said Dolus, sizing her up. “You are as jumpy as vermin.”

“And you’re tired, and rude,” said The Wife coldly. “What are you thinking?”

“Leave. Now. Force our way out if we have to. Start packing,” he said.

“You could compel more of them.”

Dolus held his hand to his head. “Keeping Marlay under is exhausting enough.”

“You know he’s waiting to catch us.”

“That is what Marlay is for.”

The Wife was silent. “Drink,” she said eventually, proffering the water drachm.

Dolus lifted it to his lips; watched her for a moment. She quickly turned away to start packing.

He drank. The Wife spun and squeezed the bottom of the skin, forcing its contents into Dolus’ throat, mouth, and all over the front of his shirt and face.

“What are you doing!” he hissed, swatting the skin out of her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You have to trust me.”

He blinked, seeming to finally take in the taste. An expression crossed his face that The Wife had never seen cast at her. It made her shift her feet, and look at the ground, and become frightened.

“What have you done,” he said haltingly, pausing on each letter and punctuating the same with a clockwork tilt of the head and a widening of furious eyes. “You have no idea what you have done.”

The Wife stepped back.

Dolus blinked rapidly. He looked at his hands, waving his left in front of his face. He cursed.

“Pack. Now.”

The Wife did so. As she gathered their things, she saw in real time the brandy overtake him, tax his faculties, and eventually bring him into a sitting position with his head between his knees.

“Woman,” he said loudly, making Marlay chuff and wriggle in its cot. “What did you do...”

“You don’t listen,” The Wife said. “This is the only option.”

Marlay suddenly reared itself out of its cot. Its furred form spilled forward onto the dirt floor of the yurt, moaning and grunting loudly as the hard ground made contact with its injuries.

The Wife bit her lip, and rounded on Dolus. "You're so incapacitated, you have no idea what's going on. You've lost your ability to speak Eastern; you've forgotten, or something. Speak something else." She shook his shoulders urgently. "Do it. Say something. Say it back to me in Southern Farside."

Dolus rattled off something in a language she didn't know, and couldn't be sure was Southern Farside, but it would have to do. Even in a language she didn't know, she saw him lolling his head back as he spoke and slurring the words together with a clumsy, swollen tongue.

Marlay stirred again, having managed to move to one knee and brace itself against its upturned cot. It tilted its head toward the ceiling and uttered a short, chortling bark.

The Wife stood and smoothed out her wrap with clammy, trembling hands. The sapling tin felt like a ticking bomb in her hands as she strode outside. She held it aloft in both hands, grim orange dancing across its burgeoning features. One bonfire was still smoldering, but she could see a faint ochre cast over everything from the pre-dawn trickle of sun and the occasional electric zap of a boundary post.

"Head!" The Wife called, weakly and hoarsely at first. After clearing her throat, she tried again. "Head Goatman of this village! I wish to speak with you!"

For a moment, nothing happened. The slight breeze and the ambience of the Jungle encroaching on the village made it hard to tell if anyone was stirring in response to her call. She inhaled to do it again when, far off across the quad, a tracked sheet metal barn door shrieked open, and the Sheriff stepped out.

The Wife inhaled through her nose, and out through her mouth, locking her jaw and her forearms to keep the sapling held out in front of her.

"I wasn't calling you," The Wife said.

The Sheriff stormed up to her, its glowering rectangular irises immediately falling on the sapling. "Well," it said in its gravel-strewn voice, its tone low and warm as if it had been roasting over a fire for hours. "This is why, the Head elected me."

Dolus was stumbling into a leaning position on the threshold of Marlay's yurt. "Woman," he drawled bitterly.

"Silence, mutant," The Wife spat.

The Head rounded Marlay's yurt from the other side, sluggishly, using the heel of its enormous palm to dig sleepiness out of its equally enormous eyes.

"Explain yourselves!" The Wife said with immediacy and authority.

The Sheriff tilted its head, thrusting a hand in her direction and the sapling. “You first,” it said, its voice molten.

A familiar feeling returned to The Wife: the fraught string of something fermenting between the residents of this village long before she and Dolus had arrived. The careful and constant mixing of various chemicals, or a gamut of stipulation and causation. An equation, capped off by their intrusion, or a powder keg waiting for the fuse they provided.

She stood her ground. “I’m not stupid. I understand what’s going on. Am I correct that this is a Suntree sapling I found in my bags this morning? Maybe we could all agree on the obvious ploy of the Sheriff’s here?”

The Head gestured a hollow assent, though The Wife didn’t think it was convinced.

“I will ask, the questions here,” said The Sheriff, stepping forward and clamping a meaty hand on The Wife’s shoulder, bringing her to her knees immediately. With its other hand, it plucked the tin out of hers. The Wife’s neck hair stood on end, and she let out all the air in her lungs as she went down, but she stared up at the Sheriff through the pain in her thighs and knees.

“I was not speaking to you,” said The Wife in a clip, her temples throbbing.

The Head barked something angry and urgent, and The Sheriff stopped putting pressure on her shoulder and loosened its grip. It did not fully let go, its hot palm hovering tensely over her, ready to strike.

The Wife looked between the Sheriff’s knees at the red sash of the Head as it moved between her, Dolus, and Marlay. “Head,” she said, struggling and ultimately failing to keep her voice even. “How would we have even gotten it? When would I have had time to figure out where it even was? I was as surprised as you when I found it in our belongings.”

“Your foolish, chevalier,” said the Sheriff, “is a mutant of, unknown ability.”

The Wife wrenched herself furiously away from the Sheriff, struggling back to her feet. “Look at him!” she screamed, gesturing at Dolus’ slumped form.

Dolus slurred something unintelligible.

“He doesn’t even know where *he* is. Take your plant and let us go. You’ve made it exceptionally clear you don’t want us here with all your aggression and subterfuge, Sheriff.”

Dolus squeaked something incoherent. The Wife knitted her brows in his direction, a real concern crossing her features.

The Head took the tin from the Sheriff. The thing looked so small, and the Head seemed so incongruously tender with it. “I need no convincing,” it said, “of your innocence.”

The Wife opened her mouth, then closed it. The Sheriff snorted, rearing its head in a big, ugly circle, and lowering its posture as if to charge at her.

“What I am, puzzling over,” said the Head. “Is whether or not, to keep the peace with my Sheriff, by allowing him to devour you, as he so desires.” He turned around and held the sapling aloft, chewing on something and then spitting it formlessly out onto the dirt. “Or allowing you, to leave, and him, to build resentments.”

“You said we were guests,” said The Wife, the meekness and fear flooding her voice and her throat and aching in her teeth now. “You said—the contract—”

The Sheriff charged her. Color drained from the world. She felt its hard skull collide with her ribcage, took in the exact millisecond her bone fractured, and felt herself lifted off her feet.

She also saw Marlay charging the Sheriff in kind.

The Wife would’ve been gored easily. Impaled. Marlay collided with the Sheriff the instant the Sheriff collided with her, so instead she was thrown away like so much scattered rotten food, landing hard and airless on the cold ground. Iridescent agony flooded every blood vessel in her body. For a brief second, the universe was impenetrable and nothing made sense.

Dolus was stirring, on his hands and knees, reaching his finger into his mouth and undulating violently.

The Head, Marlay, the Sheriff, and one of the guards were in a thrashing conflict that had already spattered the yurt with blood.

She blinked, slapped herself, tried to stand, and failed. The entire left side of her body was a roaring circus of wretched sensation, and she dry heaved as she made a second attempt to stand. Adrenaline dumped into her system by the boatload and she still could not make herself move.

The other guard was advancing on them, its spear forward. Before it got close, she felt Dolus seize her by the elbow, she felt the whip crack and sonic *pop* of psionic effort, and she was suddenly being dragged between what felt like two blurring, concrete slabs, which caught and dragged on her skin. She wasn’t sure what she was seeing—the world seemed to have cleaved exactly in half and then sheared at such an intense angle that nothing could be resolved from the blur and the motion. It was as if reality itself were peeling apart before her eyes, and she was passing, not up or down, forward or backward. Not left or right, but *in*, *out*, and *beyond*.

And then everything fell into place like pieces on a board, and they were in the trees again, in the moss, the wet dirt, the bugs, and the hot grunts of nearby fauna. The Wife emptied what little was in her stomach instantly, in an agonizing splatter all over a nearby trunk. Everything was bright, every

color was wrong, every bone in her body had been turned three hundred and sixty degrees. She fell to her knees, gasping and retching.

In her periphery, Dolus wasn't doing much better. There was a low moan emanating from the man. He was on his side, coughing wet and rasping dry all at once. He appeared to be trying to roll onto his belly, but was too weak to get the proper inertia. He was retching, too, with a pathetic vocalization accompanying. A desperate squeak, a sound so weak and frightened she never thought him capable of making it.

She looked around, reality finally bleeding through her shock. They were in deep, thick vegetation. The sun was struggling to break the barrier of the Jungle in the clearing of the village, and so here, now, it may as well have still been night. The stirring of leaves and breaking of twigs bounced off of surfaces unseen, eyes catching in the low light before swinging out of existence.

She clumsily patted the ground nearby as her eyes adjusted, and when she saw that they had absolutely none of their belongings, she began to cry. One single heave of tears was all it took for the fire in her ribcage to spark again, and then she was on her unbroken side, emitting loud and gasping sobs into dirty soil and clawing at the ground in desperation. She lost herself in this fit for a long while, and only when she realized Dolus was staring at something did she finally manage to wrap weakly back around herself, to come into her being, and leave the panic for a safer moment.

Dolus' eyes had fallen on a pair opposite him, hovering in a the dark parabola of a half-fallen tree's shadow.

It was around the size of a small vehicle, what stepped out of the shadow and into what was gradually becoming a dew-kissed teal dawn, and it cast a hungry gaze across both of them. Visible exhalations from a piglike snout chuffed quietly between them, and it continued to advance.

Dolus was struggling to speak. The Wife had fallen silent, even the thrumming pain in her ribcage seeming distant and muffled. She had been defeated. Paralyzed, rooted to the spot, by the overwhelming series of threats. She felt disconnected from the fundamental idea of safety, as if suddenly the ground beneath her were a lie, and she had been and always would be in constant peril of slipping down into a drowned abyss.

"Will..." slurred Dolus, coughing.

The boar snuffed again, the painted black of the tree's shadow sliding over it like a vinyl sheaf as it came into the weak light. It was a mud brown with black streaks. The Wife thought she saw strange, porcupine-like quills dotting its back and sides.

“Will you... abide...” said Dolus, his voice a rock tumbler, his throat audibly constricting. The lower half of his body had gone limp, and he looked like a beached sea mammal, hoisting himself up on the hope of his trembling forearms alone.

“I will abide,” said the boar.

The vibration The Wife had failed to notice in her chasm of terror vanished. Her ears popped.

Dolus went entirely limp, one last wheeze of breath crawling from him as his head hit the soil.

PART TWO – THE BOAR

“Do not fear,” said the boar evenly in its strange drawl. “Help him onto me. I will carry him.”

The Wife took a long moment to reply, breathing quickly and forcing herself to swallow and right her posture. “I can’t,” she finally said, quietly and more weakly than she’d wanted. “I’m injured. I can’t lift anything.”

“Then you will need to figure out a way to move him.”

“What?”

“There are predators nearby,” said the boar. “We have very little time.”

The Wife looked around. She remembered to blink, felt the sore pang of how wide her eyes had been stuck. There was a crop in the hillside near a mucky stretch of standing water. Ripping off a portion of her already fraying shawl, she stuffed it in Dolus’ mouth so he wouldn’t inhale dirt or insects. She directed the boar to stand in the water, about halfway up to its stubby legs, while she torturously rolled Dolus over toward it. Now that it was in the water, all she had to do was keep rolling him onto the animal’s back. It only took a few minutes, but The Wife was a clotted mess of dirty sweat, panting, with a slick sheen of disgusting moisture over her knees and thighs. By the time the boar shuddered Dolus into a stable place on its back and trotted out of the water, The Wife had dropped down to her knees beside the pond again and was clutching her side.

Dolus seemed to stay unnaturally still on the quilled boar’s back as the boar began to trot Westward, where the canopy became visibly denser. A pale blue had suffused through the treeline as the dawn reared its head properly. The heat from the ground was belching up a froth of thick mist as The Wife followed painfully and slowly, gazing at Dolus’ crumpled form. Colors still seemed sharp and bright to The Wife, though the adrenaline had left her body a withered wreck. She caught up to the boar and clung to the matted fur on its side to try and keep pace with it. Dolus still hadn’t fallen off.

“How?” asked The Wife.

“I have deployed several quills. It will not be pleasant for him to wake up.” The Boar spoke in a toneless lilt, as if there were no emergency at all. Its voice was a low, unhurried grumble. “Are you able to walk any faster?”

“No. I need to keep going West. I don’t know where I am. I think Dolus expended a huge effort transporting us, and I don’t think you can aim that kind of thing. Do you know anything about the closest Goatman settlement?” She regarded her husband’s swaying body again, imagining what it must be doing to cope with the alcohol, and the strain, of all that it must do to keep them safe. She looked up

and around at the underside treetops, too—fearful and curious about another observing ‘leak’ like the one from the rusted village.

The boar said nothing for a moment, keeping itself straight and true. “Less than a day’s journey away. They only have one Head, so they are often picked on by other Goatmen.”

The Wife paled;. “That’s not very far. We have no supplies. I-I have a water distiller.” She fumbled with it nervously for a moment as her voice broke again.

“Do not fear,” said the boar. “We can make it the few days to a place humans will help, in exchange for work.”

“Really?” said The Wife, coming into her voice for the first time what felt like years. “There are humans nearby?”

“Yes,” said the boar. “If you are True, they will help. But we must make good time.”

“I’m not—” The Wife began, but then pressed her lips to a thin line, and nodded.

Once The Wife had calmed slightly, she was able to make better strides alongside the boar. If she kept her left side still and her breathing even, she found her body was much more willing to do something slightly reminiscent of a speed walk. The lack of water was gnawing at her, but she determined to remain focused on the few steps ahead of her. The Jungle had become a bit less dense as the day roared on, which only made room for its vague threats to sharpen. Spotlights of sun fell on pitfalls The Wife would rather have never seen: more holes in the ground that led to pitch black, sheer cliffsides that cropped out of nowhere because of the horizon’s uniformity. Shadows of feral standing dogs, hulking silhouettes of some giant humanoids peeking between layers of canopy: everything seemed to glower at the ragged trio as they hobbled by, paranoid and thirsty.

The Wife was sure that at least one rib was fractured. She coughed intentionally every few minutes, which hurt, but didn’t blur or tunnel her vision the way it had been when she had first obtained the injury. The rib didn’t seem to have pierced a lung, as she had no actual trouble breathing even through the pain. She purposefully took deep, long, gulping breaths of air every time she did a test cough. Their medkit was back in Marlay’s yurt, but she wasn’t even sure the steroidal and anti-inflammatories were in it. Maybe Dolus had used them all on Marlay. The Wife tensed with resentment, then guilt, then exhaustion.

“Can we take a break?” The Wife asked with more desperation than she’d meant to reveal. Her feet ached, and she felt a level of tiredness she wasn’t sure had been possible before today. She was dizzy, and feverish, and sure that she was slowly bleeding internally. When the boar slowed to a stop,

she checked quickly under her damaged shawl. The hellish purple bruising took up most of her left side, but hadn't gotten any larger. She figured that was at least a neutral sign.

"I will remain alert if you need to rest."

"Thank you," said The Wife, sitting down on an overturned log after checking that nothing on it would sting or eat her. "Are you... do you want to do this?"

"I do not know what you mean," said the boar.

"Did my husband... are you a slave?" said The Wife.

"I think I am a slave," said the boar.

The Wife frowned. She thought of Marlay, just now remembering that Dolus had said the same key words to it in the briar patch while it had been paralyzed by injury. "He enslaved someone else, too, I think," she said. "I mean, I know. I guess I just assumed maybe there was more of it in there than there was. I think it's dead." The Wife's voice broke, hoarse, and she felt her eyes grow warm again. She shook her head. "I'd free you if I could."

"You are in need of my services."

The Wife stewed in a paralyzed silence. "Would you die for us?" she finally asked.

"To tell the truth, I have not thought about it."

The Wife looked at her filthy feet, and the ground below them. "Would you.. have helped us if my husband hadn't enslaved you?"

"I do not think I would have known to," replied the boar.

The Wife curled up on the log. "I need to sleep. Just for a little bit."

"I will wake you when we must move."

"I..." The Wife trailed off, lower lip pouting.

"Yes?" asked the boar sluggishly.

"I'm sorry," said The Wife.

II

The Wife had blurry, stressful dreams. Her sleep was fitful and paralytic, not at all the rest she longed for. She dreamt of Dolus, his rituals, his instructions, his folly. She saw the resentment as cascading failures in a dam she was desperately trying to suppress. She saw him fade into a force of blunt nature and clear opine that she need not be informed of his decisions. He became a figure shrouded in black and red, and began to drift away from her.

Her factory town, the sprawling metropolis of chrome and engine, glowed in a distorted, photographic backdrop while Dolus began to flatten and sink beneath a churning wave of foreground salt dune. She half-gestured as if to reach for him, but stopped with her arm outstretched as he disappeared underneath the fuming, molten salt. The crook of her elbow caught a strange red moonlight, and she heard the distant shift whistle of her old workhouse kaleidoscope into the fevered, prowling sounds of the hostile Jungle and melt into indiscernible, shrill noise.

Jerking half-awake, The Wife was briefly certain that if she were a different person, she could walk into the fog of discordant chaos forever as her dream began to split apart and she felt a nudge at her side, the hot hair on her sweaty skin, and the urgent chuff of the boar. She longed for another second in a place without consequence, but then the boar was talking, and there was a rumble, and an instinct half-buried under exhaustion propped her bolt upright in the mid-afternoon.

Re-experiencing the rib injury again, The Wife strangled a nascent scream of pain into a yelp and a wince.

“You must wake,” said the boar. “I believe we are being pursued.”

“Goatmen?”

The boar snorted ravenously, and The Wife jumped. “I smell Goatman. I smell gunpowder.”

“Gunpowder?” The Wife frowned, knitting her eyebrows.

Dolus’ rifle.

The Wife scraped herself off the log, sore and stiff and still bleary. Keeping one hand on the boar to maintain her balance, she began to walk at a tight, painful pace.

“They’re faster than us,” she said.

“It is likely they will eventually overtake us,” agreed the boar.

The two managed to get a fair clip going. It was faster than The Wife had been able to manage before her fitful rest, but still nowhere near fast enough to outrun their hunters.

“Is there somewhere we can hide?” The Wife asked hesitantly.

The Jungle around them was flat, featureless humid dirt backed by uninterrupted voids of somber, draping trees. They were thinner, but more numerous here.

“Nowhere safe,” replied the boar.

“Answer better,” The Wife said, gritting her teeth.

“We could go down,” the boar offered, its unreadable deadpan both a rock and an annoyance to The Wife.

“Into the tunnels? Dolus said never to go in there. We could asphyxiate.”

“It is a gamble,” agreed the boar again.

The Wife considered this as they hobbled along. “Well, we certainly can’t fight,” she said shakily. “Maybe the tunnels are just as likely to act as a shortcut as they are a trap?”

The boar was silent, and The Wife was sheepish.

Her anxiety grew as their vague chase wore on. She found herself looking over her shoulder, always at an impenetrable wall of greens and yellows and brown. Sleep deprivation blurred her vision when she moved her pounding head too quickly, and everything still seemed just a tone too bright. It wasn’t sharper or prettier, it was almost cruelly bright, as if something was shining a light on every flaw in the universe and she was the only one who could see it.

“Okay,” said The Wife, steadying herself and her thoughts. “That feels like our only option, right?”

“We have many options,” replied the boar.

“The only option that I—”

A tree trunk exploded next to The Wife’s head. The concussion of it echoed in her vision before her ears even registered the crack of the gunshot.

The Wife bellowed a panicked curse. “Down, just go, wherever the closest one is.”

The boar was already hurtling forward with alarming speed. Fearing she’d be left behind, The Wife also picked up the pace, though it almost blinded her with pain.

No more gunshots. The bolt-action must be difficult to reload with their huge hands. The boar would be impossible to hide in the sparser coverage of the trees here, and they’d already drawn a bead on The Wife. Dolus swayed on the boar’s back with the panicked movement, and The Wife struggled to see if he was still breathing.

The pathetic trio scrambled between trees, though it was difficult to tell if they were taking cover or making themselves more vulnerable. Gas lights did bob on the edge of The Wife’s vision, but she no longer trusted that completely.

“Here,” said the boar.

The Wife, who had been frantically looking to gauge how surrounded they were, shot the boar a glance. It was huddled over a disc in the ground that, as The Wife approached, looked like the open mouth of a segmented chrome worm. The slick metal surface just underneath the ring of dirt and sharp grass was hauntingly incongruous as it had been the first time she'd seen one. The incline was steep.

"You should go first," said The Wife. "If you slipped, you'd crush me."

The boar obeyed, and as it was visibly fighting its natural instinct not to descend into the darkness, The Wife heard the first blood-freezing hunting bleat in the distance.

"Go," The Wife pleaded. Her voice raised the boar's hackles, and it seemed forced in by its own muscles, sliding instantly into pitch black on its back haunches.

The Wife followed closely behind, sucking in a painful breath as the mouth of the pit slipped over her head and became a departing glow.

As soon as she descended into the black, The Wife began to hear a constant murmuring noise. The tunnel leveled out slightly, though was still pitched perilously downwards, and The Wife and the boar eased themselves along it for what seemed like an eternity. She could see the shaft of sunlight illuminating a section of chrome behind them to a hot white, but even that faded and finally disappeared around a curving bend in the slope, leaving them in an uncomfortable, claustrophobic black ink.

The Wife realized the noise was distant, clunking machinery. It provoked a strange swell of nostalgic relief. It sounded like an Eastern processing plant churning and chuffing—though in her memory that was always accompanied by the distinct sounds of inhabitation—the shouting of commands, or the clatter and shriek of manual operation. This was emptier, somehow, and discordant. Well-kept systems of machinery produced their own kind of music, but this was sometimes uninterrupted staccatos of belts slipping across ancient gears, dying winnows of steam pipes, choruses of arrhythmic clangs. This ran through the walls, which began to vibrate to the touch. If The Wife put a palm flat on the curved wall of the chute, she could feel it like the underside of a great, diseased beast.

The last untamed place; that's what the Head Goatman had called the Jungle. In her frenzied, harrowed state of mind, The Wife couldn't resist a manic laugh at the thought.

"Are you well?" asked the boar. This was the first thing either of the two had said to the other in at least an hour.

"No," admitted The Wife, which elicited another hysteric bark. "No, everything is ironic and poisonous. I'm on a stupid, cheap serial print quest assigned to me by a hostile heap of garbage. I'm in 'the last untamed place,' which sits on the haunted bones of my people." She slapped a delirious palm against the hard metal of the tunnel, and instantly regretted it.

“You are also a slave?” asked the boar.

The Wife inched along in silence, then said, “No. I don’t need to be compelled. I know it’s my burden to be here.”

“Your burden is what compels you, then,” said the boar.

“But I chose the burden,” The Wife insisted. “I could have said no to Dolus’ proposal. I could have shut him out when he told me the truth about my history. I could’ve abandoned him in the salt desert.”

“I suppose I do not need to understand the difference.”

“The difference,” said The Wife, now immersed in the distraction, “Is that Dolus—my husband—compelled you to follow instructions and be our ally and servant. I made the decision to follow him, by comparison.” Her words echoed slightly higher than normal, which thrilled her with the hope that the chute might open out, or start to curve back upwards soon.

“I had the time to eat you both,” said the boar. “When you appeared in my thicket. I only waited because I couldn’t have fought your predators if they were close by. I made that decision myself. Is that what you mean?”

The Wife blinked. “Maybe... but in the end, you were still forcefully enthralled. Which, I still... regret.”

“There is no regret to accept,” said the boar. “And in the end, you were still brought to depend on me. Your free will means little now.”

“I wish Dolus were awake,” said The Wife, her voice breaking slightly. “He’d say something like, ‘when you change something else, you change yourself in kind. When enslave yourself, you enslave someone else in kind.’”

“You and your husband are technically at my mercy,” said the boar. “And even though I have no wish to betray my enslavement, I objectively possess the ability to kill or abandon you both right now.”

“I don’t like this conversation,” said The Wife quickly. “We should just wait here a while, and then go back up and see if they are still in the area.”

“I am not sure I could find purchase going back up that way,” said the boar.

“Maybe Dolus will wake up soon and he’ll have a better plan,” she said. “My plans have all gone to shit.”

“You are alive,” the boar pointed out.

“Barely,” said The Wife. “Though, I guess the alternatives I’ve seen are worse.”

“Alternatives?” asked the boar.

The Wife blanched in the darkness, and coughed. “I’ve just seen a lot of death lately,” she murmured, shivering at the recollection of her recent oracles.

Something lurched forward, then backward under The Wife’s feet. She planted her hands on the side of the boar to keep steady, accidentally sticking herself with a quill and cursing.

The floor was moving.

“No!” yelled The Wife, clawing her way back, falling to her knees and gasping as she clutched at her left side. “The exit!”

As though it were a massive organism attempting to digest them, the incline of the chute they’d come through seemed to wrench itself away from The Wife, becoming an impenetrable, flat wall instead of a slope. She cried out, slamming her right fist against its unrelenting surface as the floor—which she quickly realized now a rubberized conveyor belt—slowly dragged her away from it.

III

“No! No!” she heard herself screaming. She felt her own words growing distant, and she went still. She could feel the belt rumbling underneath her, feel that they were still moving forward. The board had gone silent—or maybe it hadn’t, and her cold-drench panic response had drowned it out over the rush of blood in her ears and the roar of pain in her side.. She curled up on the floor against her right side. Everything seemed to pull away from her, even abstract concepts like hunger, or time. She was drifting. If it were the fog from her dream on the fallen tree, it might well just swallow her now.

The darkness was a man-stamped hole in the universe, and it was eating The Wife, albeit slowly. No color. No features or interruptions in the sheer, cold metallic walls.

“Are you giving up?” asked the boar finally. She could still feel a directional heat and smell from it, but it sounded far away. The boar’s lack of tone didn’t seem derisive, but she curled up tighter and exhaled sharply in response anyway.

“We’re lost. We’re down. Dolus said, ‘never go down.’” She felt new heat from fresh tears. “We traded a quick death by bullet for whatever this hell is.”

“I cannot be sure, but I believe I would have to die before I simply let us be destroyed by this place.”

“Well,” said The Wife. “It probably won’t be long.” There was a sick edge of hope in her voice, and she heard it, too.

“Perhaps,” said the boar. “But until then, my only recourse is to notify you that something is alive up ahead, and to use your remorse over my enslavement against you.”

“What?” said The Wife. The tears had rolled down her face and pooled on the conveyor belt.

“It smells of chemical and salt,” said the boar. “I am required to do whatever I can to keep you and your husband alive. I must abide. Thus, I must appeal to the idea that you care for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I cannot do anything. I only know what I have seen, and I have never seen this place before. I speak, I obey orders, but I am not capable of cognition the way you are.” the boar had turned its head to look slightly back at her—she could hear the reverb from its proximity to the wall close in as it did so. “I have never been to a place like this. I have no instinct for how to behave down here. I do not know what to make of this strange floor. I only know that you have shown compassion before, and that thus you must have some wish to help me. I will fall victim to whatever is ahead before you. You will have to watch me die, otherwise.”

“You’re asking *me* to save *you*?” The Wife choked.

“Yes. In the interest of saving Dolus and yourself.”

“What could I even do?” The Wife sobbed and coughed blearily. Somehow, the idea that she was likely about to be eaten seemed both unreal and inconsequential. She would probably react stronger when some blind, wet, hot jaw was around her, but as she looked blindly at what would be her own hand if there were any light, she found the idea strangely obtuse and undefinable. Maybe she truly *had* given up.

“I do not know,” said the boar. “You and your husband, I think, claim to be some sovereign status of the Jungle, do you not?”

“Seems like a joke now,” said The Wife wistfully.

“Act like it,” said the boar impassively.

“What?”

“According to Dolus, you are the rightful heir of the Jungle. Behave as such,” said the boar.

The Wife laughed. It was a delirious, mean-spirited laugh, and she wiped her eyes with the crook of her arm and started to stagger into a crawling position. “You want me to just *demand* the floor stop moving? That whatever is ahead simply closes its mouth and help us along?”

“Demands are short-lived, and only beget demands in return,” said the boar. “A leader must act.”

The Wife, surprising herself, considered this very seriously for a moment.

“The smell grows strong. We have precious little time,” intoned the boar.

“Alright, alright,” The Wife said to herself. She spread her hands out in front of her, feeling for where the floor met the wall. She had to crawl laterally to the side of the belt for a surprising distance, implying that the conveyor belt was actually quite wide. She found purchase on a cold metal wall. She felt downwards until she found the seam where the belt met the wall, and then tottered forwards in astonishment as the wall gave way to a massive, chilly space.

At that moment, they had come out of whatever hole or chute they had been in, and the belt had moved them to a significantly larger chamber. Fear almost crushed The Wife again as she realized she had absolutely no way to know how far above the hypothetical floor of this chamber they were currently suspended, and how well-reinforced the belt was. The crunching noise of machinery was much louder now, compounded by the echoes off the boundaries of a large space. It was obviously big enough for atmospheric push and pull, as she felt the slight ice of a cold air current pressing against her skin.

The Wife collected herself and felt down and below again. Now that the walls had fallen away, she could easily feel her fingers brushing against the rotary mechanics of the conveyor belt underneath

her fingers. This may have been hundreds of years old, but it still worked like the ones in Eastern facilities—just a belt of reliable substrate along a series of mechanized rollers. She shrugged off her shawl, which had become so filthy and ragged she had basically been naked already anyway, and began to jam it into the rollers. She worked furiously, sweat gathering on her brow instantly as she accidentally tweaked her ribs more than once.

A minute into her effort, she heard a high-pitched whine somewhere further along the track, as well as a disturbing, wet-slop noise. The whine increased in fervor as The Wife sacrificed the bulk of her shawl to the machine, tearing a small length free to secure around her waist and legs. The conveyor belt then screeched unevenly to a halt, some backtrack of interrupted machinery noises bouncing off the walls behind them. It began to make a repetitive, seizing motion.

“Can you see anything?” asked The Wife.

“I can see the end of the flooring,” said the boar. “It is ruined. I believe the creature fell down.”

“Oh, good,” said The Wife.

“But it ends in a vent too small for either of us.” Dead end.

“Oh,” said The Wife.

“That is all I can see,” said the boar, audibly sniffing the air as its flat, drawling voice faded. “I can smell oil, and rust. And meat. The salt and chemical from before, but stronger.”

The Wife didn’t respond. She had kneeled on the skipping belt, which tossed her painfully from side to side as it continued to struggle against the jam.

“I could jump,” offered the boar. “I would be sure to land on my feet, even if I broke my legs. Dolus would have something to break his fall, and so would you.”

“No,” said The Wife. “Let me think.”

After a moment, she agonized to her feet and felt around the boar’s rump, then up in turn for the edges of Dolus’ coat. She got closer, feeling along the boar’s side.

“Is there a way for me to climb up? Can you kneel?”

It obeyed, cantilevering its weight onto its forelegs.

The Wife, through a series of tribulations that involved not disturbing her left ribs or her still unconscious husband—not to mention the danger of slipping off completely—managed to get herself into a straddling position in front of Dolus on the boar’s back. Her husband was still breathing evenly. She had never seen Dolus drink before, but had seen him refuse alcohol plenty of times. She never considered the reaction would’ve been this bad. She brushed her hand across his uneven back in sympathy, and guilt.

Then, she carefully wrested his coat from him, revealing the lumpy mound that made up two-thirds of Dolus' upper back underneath the thin, smeared cotton undershirt he wore, and the cold sweat on the back of his neck. Disembarking from the boar's back, The Wife checked the duster's pockets, feeling stupid that she hadn't up until now.

She sighed, almost moaning with relief. Among the pockets of Dolus' overcoat was a switch lighter, a water flask that held less than a quarter-drachm, a watch, a folded atlas of the Salt Desert the Wife recognized by touch, a tin of ointment The Wife didn't know anything about, and a wax styptic. The water, she held and regarded with her blind hands for a moment, then used all her willpower to take the smallest sip. It only brought to light how thirsty she really was, but medically it was better than nothing. She switched the lighter on. A flame flickered between the two electronic contacts, flaking with age. It didn't illuminate much, but it was a massive comfort in the belching darkness. Another involuntary sigh of relief escaped The Wife's lips.

The wax styptic was worthless for her ribcage, but in its casing it was heavy enough to fall and useless enough to sacrifice. She weighed it in her hands, and with the lighter still going, dropped it off the edge of the conveyor belt, watching carefully as the darkness gratefully swallowed it up. It took a disturbingly long time for it to slap hollowly on some indeterminate surface—not so long she was sure they were perched over an bottomless chasm, but enough to be sure she'd certainly sustain more injuries if she jumped or fell.

"I think," said The Wife, "I can climb down far enough to fall safely, using the rest of my clothes and the jacket. And if I use the switch lighter to see, I could maybe find a save spot for you to jump."

"Very well," said the boar.

The Wife sat quietly for a long moment.

"Can you... will you please tell me that it will be alright?" said The Wife with a broken voice.

"I do not know if it will be alright," said the boar. "I do not know if I know what that means."

The Wife clamped her eyes shut hard. "Can you please just say the words," she whispered.

There was another pregnant pause.

"Very well," said the boar. "It will be alright."

They put their plan into motion. The Wife went first, taking a few four-second breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth. She put the switch lighter in her mouth. She had already put the other objects in the pockets of Dolus' trousers. She braced herself against the boar and swung her legs over the side of the belt. Carefully, she edged forward, keeping her right side hunched against the floor until her midsection dangled out over open air. Then, she grabbed the length of shawl she'd tied to

the belt jam, and secured the duster sleeve-to-sleeve to its end for maximum length. She edged forward, then down, and then was just hanging on by her right arm at the end of the makeshift rope. She could only hold on for a few seconds as the conveyor belt continued to jerk and jostle her from side to side.

The Wife inhaled, swallowed, and let go.

IV

The fall was longer than she wanted, but shorter than she'd feared. It was long enough that she had to stop herself from screaming, but to her relief, she landed hard on her feet and did her best to roll to her right side. The surface she fell onto didn't break, but it had no give. It was strangely papery over a hard mesh under-frame. It was deeply unpleasant to the touch.

"Hold on a moment!" The Wife called back up to the boar once she'd removed the lighter from her mouth and done her best to dry it on her skin. She tensed immediately, fearful of some reaction from something nearby. She flicked the cap off the long cylinder of the switch lighter, revealing the wick and the electrical prongs underneath.

The lighter didn't illuminate much, but she whipped around to check for whatever had been waiting for them at the end of the conveyor belt. Nothing reached for her, grabbed her, or even moved in her periphery. She strained herself to hear more wet squishes or plops, but there was nothing but the constant chaos of the facility. After a few paces, she grew confident it had either moved on, or the fall from the belt had been its end. She shone the lighter on the ground, kneeling in front of her. The floor was some vague translucent membrane, white and marbled with a veinous pattern of streaks. It didn't react to light or touch, but it was slightly damp in a way that made her recoil when she brushed her fingertips across. She realized this was not the case for the whole of the strange material—the moisture was actually a thin trail of ooze that spread off into the unknown.

Investigating the rest of the chamber in the immediate area, surrounded by the distant roar of machineries and the soft, whiny jerk of the conveyor belt far above. She found that the surroundings were uniform and bare, and that she was at the bottom of a featureless passage room designed simply to house conveyor belts, as she heard the soft hiss of others that moved smoothly, and even one or two that were at head and waist level.

By tossing the wax styptic, which she eventually found cracked on the floor, up in several areas until it hit the bottom of other conveyor belts, The Wife was able to determine that if the boar was careful (and lucky), it could hop from one conveyor belt onto the next, as if they were stairs. The difficulty would be that it would need to guess where the first few were until it could see the light of the switch lighter, which guttered and sparked out. She decided to conserve it for guiding the boar, and called up to it again.

"Alright," she said weakly. She went over the general layout, trying to help the boar guess where to go by repeatedly clanging on the bottoms of the conveyor belts with the broken styptic. "Try it," she called eventually, when she was satisfied she'd done all she could.

Without a beat, The Wife heard the squeal of weight suddenly sloughing off metal as the boar hauled itself through the air toward the next step down. This first jump was rough; The Wife heard the boar whine in astonishment and scrape-scramble its way back up onto the surface after presumably nearly falling off. It proceeded down slowly, falling several times as it landed on already-moving belts, or in one case, missed one entirely and plummeted straight down two steps, landing rough on its side. It assured her that Dolus had been undisturbed, but she began to pace and worry as the descent took longer and longer to remap and time correctly with the movement of belts. Once, she almost lost the boar as it hit one that was going slightly faster and almost carried it into a different chamber.

Finally the beast came into view of the switch lighter, forcing itself into a gallop to circle back to her as it landed on her level. Its hooves seemed unsuited for the texture of the membrane-over-mesh material, and it stumbled, visibly uncomfortable. But Dolus was intact, breathing peacefully. To The Wife's gleeful astonishment, the boar had managed to bite off part of the shawl, and had brought Dolus' duster coat with it.

She wriggled happily into it. It smelled of Dolus, and it was insulating against the cold air of the facility, which had started to run her nose and make her eyes bleary.

"I dislike this floor," said the boar. "It is difficult to walk on." It was breathing hoarsely, heavy with effort and rattling with exhaustion.

"Let's see if we can find an exit, or a safe place to rest for a while," said The Wife, since air didn't seem to be a problem in this place—yet. The Wife sounded distant even to herself, as if perhaps she was actually intoning the universe to just place an easy stairwell right in their way.

"Very well. You have not seen whatever was on the belt?"

"No, I think it moved deeper into the chamber. I found a slime trail, I think. Since it was just stationary and waiting to be fed... presumably, it must not be terribly tough." The Wife wrung her hands. "All of that is speculation, obviously. Erm, do you have a sense of which way is West?"

"The belt chute curved very little and was uniform after emerging into this chamber, which I believe means we are facing West now," said the boar.

"That's what I thought, too. Let's go."

The duo, plus an unconscious Dolus, proceeded then through the chilly place. Thankfully after a few minutes of walking, they came to an interruption in the membrane floor by way of a cold, metallic surface just like the walls of the entrance and by the conveyor belt. It seemed colder down here, which surprised The Wife, because the machinery was noticeably louder, and should've given off more heat.

For a long while, they walked in silence, The Wife having time to grow exhausted once again and to lose herself in her thoughts.

“What do you suppose this place was for?” she asked idly, running her hand across some of the membraneous material that was on the wall near where they were walking. The floors and walls here seemed a patchwork of mottled chrome and this strange material in blocks and zones. The Wife wasn’t using the switch lighter when she didn’t absolutely have to, so she had very little understanding of any fine details regarding where exactly they were relative to their entrance, but they’d passed through what she thought was a few belt-housing chambers, a short corridor, and what felt like a pressure hatch with no door or handle.

“I could not begin to speculate,” said the boar. “I am not good at theorizations.”

The Wife smiled wryly. “You can’t theorize, but you can lecture me about leadership at the time of our doom?”

“I am only what I have seen over life in the Jungle. I have only suppositions about humans, having lived near some True. I have not, as you say, ‘thought,’ about any of that, until I was required to. I simply put my observations about your behavior to use in order to attempt resuscitating the situation. I have my limits.”

“That ought to make you a better leader than me,” said The Wife. “Certainly a better person.”

“‘Better’ is not useful to me,” said the boar. “Neither is ‘person.’ Until today, I lived on instinct, happily gorging when hungry, procreating when available, dreadfully hidden when hunted, and helpless when vulnerable. It did not occur to me until I was required to communicate with you that any of those things might have wider contexts.”

“I think Dolus cursed you,” said The Wife.

“I suspect what has been done to me is harm,” agreed the boar. “And yet, I do not feel capable of grasping the meaning and extent of the harm. And so it does little to trouble me.”

“‘Trouble’ isn’t useful,” said The Wife.

“Not until you look back on it,” said the boar. “You have no clues as to what this is, as its inheritor?”

“No,” said The Wife. “I could guess—that it might be a strange, spontaneous combination of different places over time. One time, it was functional, and it contributed to the thriving of a people. Otherwise, why would it be here? Even at their terrible cost, factory towns benefit someone, somewhere.” The Wife tried to imagine it—a confluence of random, useless systems, devoid of purpose and twisted into and onto themselves, creating this yawning labyrinth. A pointless husk extracting its heavy price long after the benefits have dried up. “Is this place a jewel in my crown, or

some other wrong to set right?" She repeatedly thought about Ud, the toad sage, observing that she had been unconcerned with the specifics.

"He was right," she said aloud. "I have no idea how I'm supposed to actually do this." She said it as though unearthing an ancient text, long buried and forgotten, yet when found by sunlight it seems impossible the world ever turned without it.

The boar said nothing, and for a while they were both lost in their shuffle. They entered a long corridor, which sloped to the right and intersected with a perpendicular corridor. The boar, ahead of The Wife, stopped at the intersection, and canted its head appraisingly in both directions.

"I came all this way," The Wife said. Her chest fluttered. "And all I know is I'm supposed to sit in a chair."

The boar said, "we must choose a direction."

"This is too much," said The Wife. "This is too big. It's so easy to say it when you're out there, on your way."

The boar sat back on its haunches and huffed impassively.

"Sorry, I—" The Wife waved her hand into the blackness, pressing the fingers of the other into her right temple, and closing her eyes. "I was just so sure it would... I don't know—*work*."

"There is still time for you to reach your answers," said the boar. "At the moment, you are fatigued."

"I need to compartmentalize," murmured The Wife. "I need one problem. One at a time."

She leaned on the wall, frowning, putting all her effort into organizing her thoughts, establishing priorities. "I can't even think. We need to rest. We can sit back-to-back and stay prepared if we back up into the corridor."

"Are you certain?" asked the boar.

"No," said The Wife. "But if we give it time, Dolus might wake up. You also need to rest, even if you're not being allowed to feel it."

"Very well."

They retreated into the hallway and assumed their positions, with the boar curled up facing the new junction and the wife sat up against its rear facing the direction they'd come.

Being still made reality sharper somehow. She was suddenly hyperaware of her situation, fully drinking in the significance of the total darkness, the lack of direction, and the constant threat of the unknown and unseen. It took a while to calm her own breathing, though she noticed neither Dolus nor the boar had stirred. On cue, the boar emitted a rough, chortling snore, which teased an ironic,

exhausted smile at the edges of The Wife's lips. Finding herself unable to sleep, she decided to take stock of their status and their belongings.

Dolus remained in a strange waking state of unconsciousness. If The Wife put her ear to his mouth, she could hear strange mutterings in languages she didn't speak, and nonsense phrases in the ones she did. She wondered if alcohol had only been the catalyst of this state, and that his explosions of uninhibited power during their escape had rendered him further invalid. In the end, it didn't matter. She couldn't control when—or, coldly, *if*—he awoke, and so she turned from the speculation before it could become torture.

The boar seemed relatively uninjured, though the conveyor belt situation must have been rough on its joints. It breathed evenly, and The Wife did her best not to jostle it for fear of its programming affecting a light sleep. For her own injuries, she decided to use the switch lighter to briefly check the bruising on her midsection. It had gotten darker, and significantly more tender to the touch, but not any bigger, which she decided to interpret as stability for now.

At one point in what must have been multiple hours sitting with the boar, The Wife heard a distant, screeching howl and the unmistakable squeal of tearing metal. It sounded very far away, so while it jostled and thrilled her, it didn't seem like the kind of thing to start moving for. Just a reminder that other things were down here, other stories, other empty pieces of desperation and gloom looking for their next meal or next entertainment.

She emptied Dolus' pockets again, quickly dismissing the map and the ointment after a quick sniff proved it to likely just be scented petroleum jelly. The seal on the styptic was cracked, which meant the sterility might have been compromised, but otherwise it was still theoretically usable. The Wife fiddled with the switch lighter, shaking it by her ear to try and gauge fuel, but it was either too empty or too full to matter. She was absently turning it over in her palm when the side canister popped open with surprising ease. The Wife felt idly inside with her forefinger, nonplussed when her finger ran over a smooth, glass surface housed in what felt like a delicate metal latch. It wasn't a fuel canister—that was a small compartment near the conductor plate at the top of the lighter, and it had been made significantly smaller to accommodate the space taken up by this mysterious secondary object.

When The Wife pressed on the glass gently, it clicked free of the holdings. She held back a gasp of surprise when she was stuck by its sharp upper end as she lifted it out of the lighter. It was a tiny syringe, safety locked for a single-time use by a wad of plastic wax attached to the plunger.

To nobody, The Wife said, “what?” and tucked her lips into a puzzled frown. She tried to click it back into its housing in the lighter, but without eyesight it seemed impossible. She worried at it for a second, but then had to restrain a hoarse curse when she felt the conductor plate break clean off the soldering. The lighter was useless now. She angrily clawed out a few more delicate internals and simply shoved the syringe into the empty casing, clicking the latch back over it and tossing it back into the duster’s pocket.

The Wife sat fuming for a couple of minutes, then had the difficult sensation that a significant amount of time had suddenly passed. She felt groggy, and realized she must have fallen asleep at some point. She choked back a shiver. It was so dark and she was so foggy she briefly couldn’t tell if her eyes were open or closed.

The boar was stirring awake, as well. It must have woken her with its stiff movements. It lumbered up, stretched, and exhaled big and guttural. The Wife checked Dolus’ breathing and pulse.

“How are you feeling?” she said to the boar.

“I am not sure how to answer that. I am able to continue.”

The Wife grimaced. “Okay.” For all the good it did, she looked down the corridor whence they came, and then craned around the boar to look ahead at the intersection. Into the unknown, again.

“Onward, then.”

“Your draw,” said The Wife.

They had come to another junction, and this one was more elaborate. It required the arduous process of discerning how many possible paths there were—five—and then deliberating on what order to tackle them in. They had come to many branches in the sprawl of corridors now, and it had been blessedly and miserably uneventful. Their system was to use the boar’s sense of smell and the scented ointment to attempt a haphazard and desperate network of navigation with The Wife doing her best to keep them heading West and, crucially, not in circles, a mistake they’d made once and found another viscous trail of slime. This had given The Wife the nauseating paranoia that they were being followed, and her imagination—which had grown fevered and maniacal in the darkness and hopelessness—had iterated with the idea that the thing following them was indeed the same creature from the conveyor belt, and that it had a grudge, and that it was playing with them.

“Leftmost first,” the boar said, which was always its answer.

“Why did they not leave any signage,” The Wife breathed irritably.

“Perhaps they did,” said the boar. “And it has wasted away.”

“My first decree,” said The Wife. “Is going to be the purging of this garbage heap.”

“A decree,” said the boar. It didn’t seem like a question, but it also didn’t seem like passive observation.

The Wife frowned as they turned down the leftmost intersection. She dabbed some of the ointment onto the dividing wall. “Demands only beget more demands,” she said faintly.

“I have seen many settlements fall to such,” said the boar.

“I guess I was just assuming how things were going to work, anyhow. Maybe the damn chair is magical,” said The Wife stagnantly. “Hold on—how old are you?”

“I am not sure,” said the boar. “It has never been relevant. Though, I think I am older than most other boars I’ve seen. I only reproduced once, and I would estimate that those boars are adults now.”

“You have children?” asked The Wife.

“Indeed,” it said. “I suspect most of them have survived.”

“Lovely to think about,” said The Wife.

“I would not know,” the boar replied.

The Wife went into a period of stressful introspection as they reached a large, caved-in room that was essentially a pillar of solidified stone and then doubled back to the five-way junction, picking

the next path down. The corridors had begun to introduce a complicating level of elevation difference in their directions, which was starting to dizzy the both of them.

“I should have Dolus free you the moment he wakes up,” said The Wife.

“I am not sure what would become of me,” said the boar.

“I would have thought you’d go back to how you were before. All those things you said about living on instinct? You wouldn’t be troubled by all this... context.”

“My suspicion,” said the boar, who had chosen to go up a steep ramp at the next junction, and so it was laboriously pulling itself along behind her, “is that I would lose those things, but I would also realize what has been done to me. I may attempt to gore the both of you.”

This corridor became too small for the boar to fit through, so they doubled back once again.

“Can’t blame you for that, I guess,” said The Wife, surprising herself. She sucked her teeth, and said, “well. I guess the first thing I’ll do myself is get rid of this place, instead of just saying it should be so.”

“Will you do it all on your own?”

“No,” The Wife admitted. “You may have noticed I’m quite incapable of doing anything on my own. I was just a diagnostic engineer when Dolus found me.” She furrowed her brow while the boar prepared a response, breath hitching again at the thought of sitting on the Throne of an empty queendom.

“You have survived many things I have easily seen end the life of many others. Humans, Goatmen, and boars alike.”

“That’s because I had you,” said The Wife. “And Dolus.” After a cold-plunge delay stirring up a guilt she’d buried under compartmentalization, she said, “and Marlay.” She shook her head. “Now, I know machines, and maybe my oracles are helpful even though I’m here because of them... do you hear that?”

A nauseating, wet gurgle echoed in the corridor behind them—which meant its source was blocking the route back to the five-way junction.

“Forward, then,” said The Wife tightly. “Down.”

The boar didn’t hesitate. It budged forward down the opposite ramp. Providentially, it went the direction The Wife had most closely associated with West, but whatever was making the awful noise kept pace, and every few seconds they would hear another stomach-churning slosh. The Wife slowly pieced together as they descended into a network of slimy, dripping catwalks, that they were fully in this thing’s domain, and that it was likely there was more than one.

They connected to another series of closed hallways, which immediately graced The Wife with a long-missed sight—light. A hazy, blue overhead flickered in a circular room at the terminus of two corridors, with the boar and The Wife coming down one. A roiling slap hit the floor behind them, and they were dashing toward the flickering light and the desperate hope for a locking door.

The overhead was clinical, fluorescent, and briefly blinding. The Wife flung her arm over her face as her retinas scalded over with the sudden difference. The light was disquieting and sterile, bathing everything in the room in an unpleasant flatness, but The Wife still felt like a moth to a flame, as if she'd found the only place in the world that was real.

There was no door, and the sounds were persistent, but distant. The Wife looked quickly around as her vision adjusted. The walls of the facility were paneled chrome, though it had given way to rust and decay in some places and raw earth had begun to spill inward. There was a broken readout panel on the far wall, which The Wife approached instinctually. She hadn't seen anything digital in weeks.

The Wife also recognized an empty worktable smeared with dust and disintegrated papyrus across its surface. Some claw-like apparatus was mounted to the far end with spidery, rusted appendages ending in various decomposing tools. She determined it might have been a mixing apparatus, or perhaps some type of autopsy machine, but couldn't be certain if the sharpness of the appendages was due to rot or if they were built this way.

"Can you see if you can shove this over?" said The Wife hurriedly.

The noises grew louder. The Wife looked down the corridor, but now that her eyes had adjusted to light, it was as if reality stopped right at this doorway, what little was illuminated beyond its border quickly losing its form to ink and mystery.

The boar tottered over to the worktable and shoved its full weight against the thing, which squealed rustily, but finally gave way and slammed to the floor, echoing a metal against metal shriek that bounced off the corridors and was instantly answered by a series of rolling gurgles. The edges of something amorphous resolved in the edges of the light, and The Wife took a stumbling step backwards before taking cover behind the toppled worktable. She saw that the underside of the claw device was operated with a bunch of wire-tension control buttons on the underside of the table. The boar joined her, though it was clearly too large to be hidden by the table.

"It will see me," it intoned.

"Yes, I just need a second."

When the shape approaching them finally crystallized in the pale light, The Wife sunk with the realization that it didn't matter if they hid.

What oozed into the sterile incandescence was a semi-transparent, green blob, about as wide and almost twice as high as the boar. It was sickly lime colored, the edges of its membrane brighter and more opaque than the rest. It had been forced into the shape of the corridor, and so when it came into the room it seemed to spill forward as though it had no containing structure at all. The Wife immediately smelled the ocean, felt the heat of a factory town sterilization pool. The blob had large, disturbingly textured organelles floating within its nonsensical structure. Pinkish, disgusting orbs and swaths of scintillating striations wobbled through it like bugs caught in sap.

The Wife ducked below the edge of the worktable, eyes stung with tears, and slapped her hand over her mouth.

“Push,” she choked out. “Push!” She was alight with panic, but she braced her right side against the worktable and shoved to very little effect and very great pain from her ribs. The table really started moving when the boar headbutted it. A low, increasingly loud squeal sounded from it as they dragged the table along the metal floor toward the blob.

The instant The Wife felt resistance, saw the ooze reaching out over the top edge of the table above her and around her, she screamed painfully as she reached out her left arm and began wantonly pressing the tension wire buttons.

A bloated crunching noise came from the other side of the table as the claw apparatus began slicing through the slime with rusty yowls of protest. The creature retracted, and then blossomed horrifically outward, pushing back against the table even as it dug its limbs into the membrane.

“Harder!” screamed The Wife, setting her jaw and continuing to push buttons. Two of the tension wires broke at the peak of their force, snapping out and whipping down across her forearm and drawing blood. She cried out, but didn’t stop pushing the other buttons. Viscera began to spray from over the top edge of the table as chunks of transparent-green jelly slapped and bounced to the floor around them. It had no way to make noise, but The Wife was sure the creature was in outrage and panic the same way she was, which escalated the adrenaline blasting through her, and she strained herself against the table even further, feeling it bend loudly inward around the shape of the opposing force.

Something suddenly gave, and the blob surged over the top of the table relentlessly.

Momentum carried The Wife and the boar forward, and she screamed, “Charge!” while she grabbed handfuls of boar fur and stuck herself to the side of the beast, quills breaking skin all over her body. She clung anyway as the boar lunged forward, knocking the blob and the table to the side and bounding into the hallway perpendicular from where they’d come. They got clear of the ooze just as it overcame The Wife’s legs below the knees, and she was pulled off the boar, landing hard on the metal floor with a bodily *thunk*.

Her legs were warm, and her skin felt acrid and sweaty. Then all at once it was like a thousand tiny needles had embedded themselves in her flesh, and she screamed. It was hoarse and strangled, fried through stressed vocal cords, but she bellowed nonetheless, as the noxious sting penetrated her muscle fiber, her bones, her soul.

“Boar!” she roared, flinging her self toward it as the ooze dragged her right back.

It was going to eat her.

“Bite and pull!” she screamed. “Do it! Do it now, *please!*” She would rather be eaten by the boar, or the Head Goatman, for that matter, than this thing.

It pulled at her again.

The boar’s unnatural wide mouth came over her right hand, closing on her forearm just below the wrist. It tried to yank her free in one fluid motion, which caused the needling sensation to become a horrific, barbed dragging sensation, and The Wife was certain her legs were being degloved at the cellular level. The ooze came over her right hand just as she pulled out the switch lighter. Without the conductor plate in its soldering, it couldn’t light, but the electrical tentpoles could still flare. She plunged down on the button, which send a hideous tremor through the thing, and it sloughed off her just enough.

The boar seized its moment and dug its teeth fully into her arm, breaking skin, yanking her shoulder out of joint, but also yanking her completely free from the slime, where she ended up in a fetal ball, choking and gasping incoherently.

“We must flee,” said the boar, with as much empathy and urgency in its painful monotone as it could manage.

The Wife’s legs were now freezing cold and numb. When she ran a hand over them, it came away with a viscous, sticky film that stung to touch with her fingertips. But she could move, albeit haltingly and without feeling. The boar had left a ruddy, bleeding bite mark on her arm, which crossed her wound from the tension wire into a grisly, lopsided X. She hauled herself to her feet using the boar as a counterweight, and continued leaning against it for support, as they hobbled away from the slime, which surged forward again, re-accumulating its own mass before balling up and pursuing them.

As disturbed and uncomfortable as The Wife was, it quickly became apparent that if they continued to move at a certain clip, the blob would not be able to catch up to them. Perhaps it had only caught up in the first place because they’d done so much doubling back. It wasn’t any less harrowing, however, knowing that if they slowed or stopped, it was potentially over, and they had lost the privilege

of weighting directional options and trying to ease their way through the facility on directional sense and smell alone.

No, this had become a slow, torturous race in a black void with nothing but corridors and empty places and echoes. The Wife gradually became sure this was the death knell of her experience in the Jungle. This was the banshee screech that would claim her. She dared not wish that any of the other near-misses she'd had with death thus far had come to fruition, even though they would've been faster than this. They'd gone from a plan to simply surviving one moment to the next. The Wife became less and less confident she'd ever see the sky again, and more and more gutturally terrified of any dead ends, which they did manage to find more than one of and had to furiously double back and then move painfully double-speed to put more distance between them and their stalker.

With the pursuer on them, the facility had become less of a frightening mystery and more of an infuriating, despondent adversary. An endless tangle of pulleys and motors and gas engines, circuitry, and pistons. A hostile circulatory system that had lost itself, feeding waste into a desecrated zone somewhere, a zone her remains would never find after she choked on its output and succumbed to the pressure bearing down on her from all directions.

She buried her face in the boar as they walked, and wept.

VI

The Wife nearly fell to her knees in thankful grace when the sprawl of corridors suddenly ended abruptly and opened into a space that was much taller, but not any wider. The boar was still almost shoulder-to-wall, with just enough room to turn around, but not any more. The ceiling disappeared into a featureless, black maw that whispered with distant clangs and chugs, echoing in certain places very loudly. The corridor, then, became something more akin to an alleyway, and it featured one other thing that made The Wife halt and look pointlessly upwards in the pitch.

She could feel the light, dying lift of agitated air on the back of her neck and the rampant fly-aways gathered around her face. It smelled still like petroleum and stale dust, but there was the faintest promise of a breeze. The smallest, most minute promise of fresh air.

“Do you feel that?” asked The Wife.

“I do,” said the boar.

“It could be caused by a fan or some other machine,” The Wife mused, trying to tamp out her hope before it could sting her. She had assumed a position by its rear right side, and had developed a habit of resting one hand on the boar and one hand on the wall as they walked.

When the boar didn’t say anything, The Wife continued, “I guess we should try and figure out a way up.”

“I smell salt water,” said the boar.

“Oh,” said The Wife. “Not sure if that’s good or bad.” The edge of the word ‘bad’ was lost in a sudden howl of air.

The walls on either side gave way to a vast emptiness.

The Wife noticed the change in the air and yelped in alarm when her hand slid off the side of the wall and out into openness. She clung in rough handfuls to the boar. She suspected they were now on a catwalk, which must have been supported underneath—or so The Wife desperately hoped—and stretched inscrutably into the void before them. It had no handrails; just a sharp drop of into unknowing. The infinite sigh of the place thrummed into a roar of cataclysmic largesse in this chamber, quickly drowning out whatever the boar was saying, and whatever The Wife anxiously mumbled back.

Pointlessly, The Wife looked behind her, which was nothingness, and thought of the blob squelching its way toward them. They had to be significantly further ahead now, but she felt the constant sensation it was rearing up behind her, pseudopods ready to pull her back into that freezing, pinprick hell.

Too afraid to try and turn around with the blind weight of the huge beast at her side, The Wife gritted her teeth, choked out a fearful gasp, and carefully sidled along next to the boar before she was able to get out ahead of it. She guided it in a straight path with her left hand, remaining sidelong with the catwalk, holding her right out in front of her as if someone would take it and save her at any moment.

“Above,” the boar said, though it had to intone so loudly that it came out more as a snorting bark.

The Wife looked up, gasping mutedly into the cacophony. Between a latticework of leaky pipes and a tight mess of valves and switches, there was a perfect, wide circle of sunlight and verdant foliage visible in the air above them. It was a hundred feet upwards or more, but it was there: a strange, painted disc of salvation, steeling The Wife, and taunting her. It was so far above them, its light diffused into uselessness long before it could assist them in crossing the catwalk.

She pressed forward further, and very quickly her outstretched hand hit a hard metal surface. She yelped again and withdrew it. The Wife felt around until she realized it was a large, pressurized hatch wheel. She let go of the boar and brushed her fingers along the mottled, rough metal, surmising the rounded edges of the hatch itself.

The Wife grabbed both ends of the hatch wheel and hurled her weight against it in both directions. On the second attempt, she felt it give. Taking small breaks to brace herself and prepare for the next protestation of her ribcage, she repeated the motion until she felt the entire hatch buck and start to creak open out at her. She gently pushed on the boar’s snout to back them both up, allowing the hatch to open completely into a room that was mercifully lit, but just as loud.

They entered another tall, deep structure, but they were at the bottom of this one, and could see the ceiling, which was about as distant as the hole they had seen in the chasm.

The Wife and the boar spilled out onto a suspension bridge held fast to the ceiling by a series of tight cables bolted to loops welded to the ceiling. The walls were an incongruously pristine bluish chrome made of uneven panelling. The overhead lighting, similar to the circular room from before, was flat, and made everything pallid and sterile. Some ceiling panels were missing, but were strangely patched by the familiar papery-membrane-over-mesh material that had been in the conveyor belt room.

The bridge was above a titanic pool of greenish, rushing water, which was jetting in and out in pale, sage-colored ebbs of froth at the edges of the room. The pool was lit underneath brightly, giving the water a distinct radioactive glow. It smelled like saline. The Wife thought she could see the bottom of the pool, and it didn’t seem terribly deep, but just enough to go over her head. On the other side of

the suspension bridge was another hatch door, so The Wife began to move toward it before she sensed the boar hesitate behind her.

“I am not sure this structure will support my weight,” it said.

The Wife peered over the edge of the bridge. It was wide enough for them to both cross side-by-side, and the substance of it was a tight chrome grating. Its supports whined and wobbled as she moved on it. As she looked over its side, she spotted something else in the pool, too. A curious tangle of looped, noodling metal limbs, all springing from a central orblike body. It was half-submerged, each limb curled into the water and terminating in the warped vision of the bottom. She realized it was a recon drone not unlike the one she and Dolus had seen toward the edges of the Jungle. Dolus had shot it. This one seemed inactive, and The Wife knew from experience that these drones needed magnet towards to position themselves and move accurately. This entire facility might theoretically serve as one, but from her vantage—which was admittedly poor—she saw that the drone seemed to be powered off.

The Wife spent a long few seconds peering and pondering, at one point stooping carefully down to her knees to see if anything more could be appraised about the downed drone. Seeing nothing, she simply said, “there’s no way that water is safe.” She looked at the bulkhead door from which they’d entered. Nothing had slammed against it demandingly, nor had she heard some indignant, predatory roar—or gurgle. “Then again,” she argued with herself, turning to regard the boar. “If the bridge broke on this side, it might just become a ramp to the far side.” She punctuated by pointing in either direction.

There was a strange sense of movement in the corner of her vision suddenly. A quick, panging *something* skittered across the roof of the chamber above them, causing several of the fluorescent light fixtures to dim and short. One went out completely in the far corner of the room. The Wife looked up to the wall to the left of where they had entered and saw that the huge square of membrane-mesh had begun to undulate softly, and worse, push outward. A soft squeal of metal began to eke from the paper folds of membrane, tamped by its thin cover but gradually rising in pitch and volume. This continued until The Wife, with a leap of horror, recognized it as a much more intimate version of the distant sound she’d heard during their rest period, including the squeal of the metal, which crescendoed as something within the membrane—something that had been on the other side of the wall until now—pushed with substance, as if it were a sick womb and its charge were escaping or a hideous, soft egg, beginning to hatch.

The Wife drew back, transfixed and distracted, as it continued to inflate. The boar impassively followed her gaze and stood stock still as the process resolved.

The membrane puffed out into an enormous sac containing a shadowy, jittering shape that was beginning to struggle through the grating inside it. The mesh seemed to both part and fuse with the thing that was pushing itself through into the bubble. Something that, beneath the distended skinbag, was indiscernible except that it was unmistakably organic and had a disturbingly arachnoid silhouette. The thing was large, easily taller than a Goatman, and it sagged against the bubble now, which itself began to hover precariously over the water. It finally broke apart, wet and amniotic, plunging the shape inside down into the pool.

The Wife made a shocked, disgusted noise, and backed further away, out over open air, and as she flinched, she tumbled over the edge of the bridge into the selfsame pool.

Immediately she felt prickly cold ripple across all the bruises and gashes in her body, shocking her into a choked screech and uncontrollable thrashing. Her manic legs did not touch the bottom of the pool. She inhaled a solid mouthful of the liquid, and it tasted like dirt and soap, and it had a horrible substance to it, as though it were almost unnoticeably more viscous than water.

The Wife finally righted herself, wiped her vision clean, and remember how to keep afloat. She was shocked cold; teeth chattering, breath shallow, which agitated her midsection. She looked upwards at the boar, which was peering down over the suspension bridge at her, clearly awaiting a command.

The thing that had dropped into the pool before her surged forward from where it had fallen as a black leviathan.

The Wife lost her scream in her throat, then frantically freed herself from the weight of Dolus' coat, which had blossomed out behind her. She gesticulated wildly at the boar, pointing at it and at the bridge, then clapping her hands down in between momentary thrashing to keep herself away from the creature. She could not speak—she knew that if she did, she would only find the scream.

The boar leapt straight up once—higher than The Wife had assumed possible—and landed with a metallic, whiny *crash* on the bridge, which broke most of the bearings on that side at once. The slab of metal careened into the water with the boar on it, who darted for the length that was now sloping easily out of the water toward the far door.

The Wife began to splash furiously toward the bridge-turned-ramp, then, choking and coughing. She ignored how her body, stabbed through by the cold, rose into a climaxing rush of anguish as she moved with speed. It wasn't enough to counteract the adrenaline and immobilize her, but the flight sensation was the only thing propelling her forward. It was a preternatural fear that fueled her now, and continued to fuel her as that very creature breached the surface of the water at the surface of the ramp before she could get to it.

It saw the boar first, and The Wife saw it first. It was soaked now, which made it worse. It was a continuous stretch of active membrane material over a sharp, intimidating grid of mechanical, spidery limbs. To The Wife it looked like a torturously modified maintenance drone, blown up twice its intended size and warped with these sopping, fleshy organic parts that pulsed like organs, throbbed like angry pustules. Where the limbs came together, a pallid semi-humanoid shape seemed to rise—just a torso and a rectangular ‘head.’ Parts of its metal frame were visible where, anatomically, muscle might have met tendon and bone. While she could not see if it had anything resembling a face, she saw that the back of its head was a confused mess of bare flesh, knotted like a tumor or a brain.

She may have vomited, but wouldn’t have noticed anyway.

The thing charged the boar. The boar, having no way to operate the bulkhead door, charged back. They clashed, stubby tusk against metal-girded flesh. The thing immediately gained ground on the boar, pushing upward. It plunged two vicious claws into the boar’s sides and heaved it overhead in a violent suplex that sent Dolus flying in the opposite direction. As it tossed the boar aside, too, all three of its victims landed in the pool before it.

The Wife had drifted closer to the downed drone and looked up at it numbly. Consequence seemed to have slipped away. There was a surreal quality to the situation. She had a few different capacities, but some of them seemed farther away from her fingers than others. She could tell, for one capacity, that she absolutely should not have swallowed this liquid. Dolus was going to drown—that was another. She failed to claw much more out of the logistic limbo suffocating her mind.

The last thing she managed to put together was that there was a panel missing in the drone’s underside, and that a connection was blown in its neural circuitry. This was easy to parse. Predictable. Simple flow of electricity; an easy fix, just needed conduction. She would have been registered to its repair, done it in five seconds flat, and enjoyed a nice break in her workday for the remaining time allotment. This was nostalgic. The flesh metal thing was only at the edges of her awareness; some distant throttling scream in the back of her mind begging her to run away, to do anything but just sit here, to fight.

She fished through Dolus’ sopping coat pockets and produced the broken switch lighter. It was wet, but it wasn’t fried into carbon crust like the current circuit. She emptied its broken conductor plate out onto her palm—a tiny metal square that could fit inside one of the larger drops of water accumulating in the folds of her skin. She slapped it into the open panel of the drone, feeling the hum and brief, painful shock of electrical resumption as the thing began to whirl to life. It sparked once—the connection was still wet—and then began to move. The Wife pushed off one of its submerged, tubular limbs with both her feet, surging back from it just as the attacker breached the water again where she’d

just been. She looked at that in astonishment as she backpedaled, far too slowly, but as fast as she could manage, toward Dolus.

This began a spectacle of the drone's many limbs looping around the woefully strong attacker—this twitching, alien thing entered a grudge match against the drone itself, two very different spiders struggling for dominance. The Wife blinked through her haze and looked over to Dolus, who was being dragged back up to the ramp by a heavily bleeding boar. The boar had its teeth around and through the back of Dolus' cotton shirt. She didn't dare look at the ongoing struggle. She knew the drone was absolutely no match for this thing.

"Drag him up," The Wife cohhed, astonished at how difficult it was to speak. Her words slurred together into a series of barely discernible syllables.

The boar throttled Dolus up to the high end of the ramp, and the bulkhead door that was their target. The bridge squealed in protest, but held firm as The Wife put everything she had left—which was very little—into turning the seal, and leaning the door open, collapsing her full weight against the soggy boar as it dragged Dolus through.

The Wife did not have the strength to push the door closed behind her. She only stumbled through after the boar and Dolus into another yawning chasm, this one identifiable immediately due to the blinking, hazy overheads high above. They revealed in their domains creaking conveyor belts moving at variable speeds. Aside from the working lights, there was a sickening twist in The Wife's stomach that this might be the same chamber they arrived in. Impossible, but possibility as a concept was far outside her current purview. She suddenly choked out a cry of desperation and spasmed, seeing that at this angle, the cone of bright sun from the hole she'd seen was visibly stabbing through the limitless black. It had bleached the machinery in its radius, producing the effect of having carved out what once might have gleamed in its light into a reddish-gray haze of stained tubing, glass, and rusted pipework.

"A staircase," said the boar, though she barely understood. It was facing away, toward what was indeed a shape rising up into the dim. The boar's voice was faint, and it was wobbly on its feet.

"Oh," said The Wife, her voice breaking. She realized she was crying. Her vision had continued to tunnel, and she continued to feel oddly disconnected from the happenings of her life.

"Dolus is drowning still," said the boar.

"Turn him over," The Wife said, still slurring and unbalanced.

The board did so, rolling her husband onto his back. He managed to cough most of the liquid out on his own. The Wife felt that she needed to realize something about that, as she saw him spit out the strange fluid and stir like an angry infant, but not rise to consciousness. Not only could she not put

her finger on what it was this meant, but she also suddenly felt uncontrollably dizzy, steadying herself with a braced hand on the floor.

Looking at Dolus' pale face, quaking with his shallow breath, she was wholly distracted. She drew her eyes down his soaked beard and mane of shaggy black hair. His hat was long gone, and he looked like a greasy sun that shot rays of wavy black out from its center in a shining halo. His thin lips were twitch up at a corner of his mouth, giving her the impression of his very rare half-smile. She thought it was rarer and certainly more valuable than gold; that it was the main thing that had made her agree to marry him, even before they'd set out from her factory town. That even though the blood in her veins that spelled destiny had brought them together, she had loved him anyway, and would have come here with him even if nothing ever came of it.

The Wife, stupidly and drunkenly, looked down at her hands, and saw that she had Dolus' head cradled in her lap. She had been doing something with his chest and mouth, she realized with a start, because he was breathing smoothly and evenly again. Moreover the contents of the switch lighter case were spread out on the floor around her, and she was holding the tiny syringe. In the light she could see that it had been full of vibrant, purple liquid. She struggled to remember where it had come from, then saw that the wax seal had been stripped off and the plunger pushed down. She saw that Dolus' top buttons had been undone and there was a pockmark in his hairy chest. She heard the boar utter a warning.

"I think I'm going to pass out," The Wife slurred.

"You must not," said the boar. "We must flee."

"Carry me," said The Wife. She slumped miserably against the boar.

The boar seemed to be regarding Dolus, who was spluttering and coughing and potentially stirring awake, though it seemed like he was in pain and discomfort.

"Mouth," said The Wife, uttering a groan of pain as she hauled herself up onto the boar's back. "Just be gentle..."

The door squealed open all the way, the mesh-metal spider emerging as it tossed aside the broken husk of the maintenance drone's central body. It clattered loudly to the metal floor, and then the spider jumped.

"Go!" said The Wife. She scooped Dolus up and bounded toward the steps just as the spider landed where it had just been, thrashing furiously against the ground with such force that its metal legs shot sparks across it. Dolus bobbed like a ragdoll in its mouth, and a low, pained groan started to lift from his diaphragm.

Jostled and barely able to hold on, The Wife simply squeezed her eyes shut. She felt the staircase groan and snap in places under the boar's weight, and even more under the weight of their pursuer, who was chittering and screeching and making steampipe noises. The boar made several sharp turns while ascending, and she could feel the peal of its breath underneath the quills and the rough floor onto which she clung. She could feel the drying, hot wet of its leaking blood. She was flung violently to the left and right, and then up off the boar almost entirely once it leapt from the top of the staircase onto a conveyor belt and almost off the other side. It managed to right itself, but the belt buckled the second their attacker joined them upon it. This forced the boar to leap to another.

This continued for what felt like hours. The boar slammed into metal walls, slamming The Wife into them in turn. It dropped Dolus more than once, and had to stop and pick him roughly back up, eliciting another shout of half-conscious protestation each time. She heard Dolus actually start screaming—an earthshattering sound that quickened her heart even more and flushed her with fear and guilt. The chase had the predator and its quarry leaping from belt to catwalk to strange, lopsided machine, to shambling, rusty staircase, across the tops of groaning metallic chambers and entire sections of board flooring that had become the creature's bizarre membrane. The boar once, and she could tell it had sprained something, for it never picked its speed back up and began to sway roughly from side to side as it limped. The boar had also not stopped bleeding.

After a series of desperate, bony staccato hops, it lost its balance, a clear whine of agony escaping it, and suddenly she was diagonal, and the boar was struggling to climb up a slick chute of chrome. It was up. They were going up, and she could see the daylight reflecting off its curved surface. She could feel the hot breath of the Jungle, she could see green, she could see moss and soil. The tube rushed with the whisper of humid, fresh air and sunlight.

The Wife cried out in astonishment.

The spider creature was right behind them, comportsing itself into the tube with one sharp, metallic limb outstretched, swiping at the back of the boar. She heard the sound of fruit being sliced as it flayed the boar in the backside repeatedly.

“Goodbye,” said the boar.

The Wife was suddenly blinded, hot, and screaming.

Dolus was awake—she saw him pry himself out of the boar's mouth and tumble onto the ground—the real ground, now, and she was on it too, having landed on her backside. Dolus was roaring in bestial fury. The boar had flung her multiple feet clear of the situation. Dolus was between her and the boar, and the boar was between Dolus and the spider. She had no air in her lungs, pain ricocheting through a body that had been saturated it and then emptied, rinse and repeat, and she too began to howl,

unable to cope and stay sane through the torrent of sensations flooding her endocrine and blinding her mind to reality.

Dolus was still screaming, louder, thrumming and blending smoothly into a peal of psionic effort that whip-cracked through the air around him. It was deafening. The air grew thick with hostility, immense with indignation, and all the veins in Dolus' neck and forehead were visible and thrumming as his skin turned a mottled red.

He let it all out at once.

The Wife watched numbly, her scream having been eaten by Dolus'.

It was so slow at first—or perhaps she would simply remember it this way later. Every detail seemed so clear, despite her fugue, despite her exhaustion. It was crystal. The ground surrounding Dolus began to peel upwards in a small ring, a perfect circle. Granules of moist soil and fallen leaves churned in the air with the force of an invisible and immaterial whirlwind. It was too vivid—The Wife made out each individual twig and shred of foliage in the half-second it swirled around her husband.

The creature was upon him, and the boar, which had stayed on its feet and was attempting to rip into it with its tusks. One limb came to hover dangerously close to Dolus' face, smeared with the dye of boar blood. The limb then peeled backwards as if it were the skin of a banana. Like it was nothing. The spider creature's leg curled in on itself, then seemed to lose all substance, and then melted away in a carbon flash of ozone and ghostly vapor. The rest of the creature followed. Every vagrant leaf, every insect, every atom around the mutant blitzed into nothing. The ground was also stirring and melting away as though it were simply boiling into the atmosphere.

The boar, too, flaked and crumpled away like pond scum cleared by a net.

Dolus resoundingly annihilated ten square feet of universe in every direction. Pure deletion rumbled out from around him in a perfect sphere.

The Wife let her head lull backwards, taking in the full embrace of the hot sun and the muggy Jungle air. Her back followed suit, and then she continued to fall, down through the damp dirt, past the yawn of the facility below them, into the core of the world, into the heart of the universe. Trees reached for each other above her, lashing the cloudless blue of the sky into an earthen kaleidoscope, dancing before her eyes.

And she was gone.

PART THREE – THE WIFE

“...grateful, anyway,” someone was saying with a high grit of agitation. The Wife couldn’t see anything, and even what she was hearing felt muffled. She felt as though she were swaddled in a big, hot, wet cloth. Her limbs were immutable stone, and she was breathing perhaps through her skin or her ears, certainly not through her sealed mouth or her raw nose. There was a low hum—not like in the factory, but homelier and more pleasant. It sounded as though it were deliberately made to be comforting. It was punctuated rhythmically by a computational *beep*.

“Man, you’re a *doctor*,” another voice said in a tone that indicated its possessor was stonewalling the original speaker. It was deep, throaty, and twinged at all its edges by a thick accent The Wife couldn’t place. “This is below us, Just put her right and set her out. That’s the deal. Easy.”

“I would have helped her,” said the first voice, edged with the calm warning that precedes furious uproar, “regardless of the ‘deal,’ and she has been walking around her whole life *incomplete*.” This first voice was hollow, scratchy with an accept The Wife did recognize. It was the sharp staccato of a Salt Desert dweller, an abrupt lilt that was front-heavy and all in the teeth.

“They don’t make ‘em like this in the East,” cautioned a third voice, this one airy, and blunted with the same accent as the second. “They’re more mechanical-orthodox than We. She’s something else. Scan her again. Mutants travel together.” This third person sounded clinical, analytic, and cold.

The first person The Wife heard speak made a sudden noise of alarm, and uttered something that might have been a curse. “She’s waking up.”

“Put her back under,” said the third person. “I don’t trust this.”

Something rustled. Discordant noises of plastic against metal and something like a squeaking wheel seemed to move busily on her left side, where the first person had started to speak, and then moved over to her right. Distantly, she realized she could not move her limbs.

The Wife felt a sudden pressure against the right side of her neck, followed by the finessed pinprick of a cold plunge through her veins, and descended slow-motion again into dark oblivion.

They are in the town center. They are in front of a dry fountain. The sky is caked red with sun filtered through fresh smoke. It’s sunset. It smells acrid, something between a barbecue and a demolition, and the stench burns in her nostrils. She is in a sitting position on the ground; the rough stones hot under her thin stockings. She is breathing heavily, and the white cotton tunic is glued frozen to her body with sweat. Her chest is heaving. Her throat is acidic with vomit.

Dolus is standing in front of her. He is holding a strange handgun. He is bleeding from his gun arm. The blood is trickling onto the stone road, slow. He is cutting into the middle ground between her—alone, panicked, animalistic—and the fifteen-odd people across the road—bristling, roiling, mercurial.

Nobody is saying anything. The silence is infuriating, struck through with the mad crackle of wildfire. There rises a distant moan, wind whipping through flame and seared tree branch. She is simply aware of destruction. The loudest thing of all, she realizes, is her breath.

Dolus raises the handgun and fires. The handgun clicks once, horribly, hollow. Akin to the shrill of an old air raid siren and as damning as the ring of a cathedral bell.

His head snaps back as another shot rings out. Stiff as a board, he falls over onto his back like a felled tree.

She hears the first half of a flat pop, a blinding white in her vision, and it is over.

But it is not over.

Her vision grays at the moment she detaches from reality, and the scene fades back into being. A pressure she had not had the time to feel passes through the back of her head, and she feels for a terrible moment the sensation of the rear of her skull closing up.

Dolus heaves weightlessly back into a standing position, falling upward in reverse.

The bullet exits the front of his skull and zips backwards in the air like a small insect. It deblooms into the barrel of a revolver held by a man with a black moustache and a crop of messy hair. At his side is a freckled older woman with a shaved head. The gunman's hand jerks backward and forward in a strange parody of recoil. He has nothing in his eyes but the fire that burns in their reflection.

Then it is over.

When The Wife woke again, she felt stiff and sore, but more like a human with skin than some kind of chrysalis. She could see—a small room dimly lit with a hazy yellow oil lamp hanging from the ceiling. She was in a firm, but warm bed with a comfortable blanket tucked over her.

The Wife sat up, instinctively checking her side. There was a large setting band swaddled across her midsection, held in place by a tight corral of bandages. Another of these setups was on her left leg, and her arm was simply bandaged with a long wax styptic.

Her room was quiet and tepid. The floor was a thick layer of straw hardened by years of padding feet. The walls were a dusty, sand-stained white color—or so she surmised as they were bleached with the hazy yellow of the oil lamp. There was a window, shuttered with wood painted green only once a long time ago. It cut the insistent sunlight outside into horizontal slits on the blonde floor.

For a long, palpitating moment, The Wife thought she was in a Salt Desert hut, with the familiar walls and the outside heat seeming less suffocatingly humid. The sound outside was that of a thick and lazy wind penetrating the top canopy of the Jungle's treeline, though it was buried under the unmistakable bustle of a throng of people outside, distantly going about their business.

Looking down at her body, The Wife saw she'd been wrapped in a pallid tunic made of thick cotton. She felt along the short, rough-cut sleeves, and figured it was some thin leathery material. It breathed well, despite the mild heat of the room. The bandages were the same linen as her sheets—stiff starchy, bleached white. She was restrained, she realized then, by the largest of her bandages, which traveled under the straw mattress and up the other side. Instinctively, she tested its tension, which brought a plume of fresh soreness to run up and down her entire frame. She collapsed backwards, staring at the ceiling.

An unrestrained groan escaped, bubbling out from deep in her gut, and The Wife leaned up again, as far as the restraint would let her, to clutch herself and squeeze her eyes shut. Her body had suddenly remembered the extent of her injuries. The soreness had been abruptly joined by the burning from the lashes in her arm, the ungodly itchiness of her leg, and whatever she had imbibed that made her head swim and her thoughts disconnect like broken train cars. Radiating from her ribcage and bouncing vibrationally off the bones in her legs was a fastidious bullet of agony, which instantly broke her into a sweat. Her skin became placid and sticky, and she fell backwards again with her head hitting an unforgiving cushion.

The only door in the room creaked open, and The Wife watched through her hyperventilation as a short, rotund, and balding person strode into the room dragging a lopsided metal cart. The person's skin was sun-beaten and washed out by the bleachy clothing they wore, and ropey with age.

"Awake's good. I've got something for the pain." They spoke crisply, with the unmistakable Salt Desert accent she had heard before shew as put back to sleep.

This also reminded her of the effects of her intense oracle. She seized her jaw and begun blowing long, unbearable releases of air through her stinging nostrils. Her brain felt like it was struggling against her skull, desperate to somersault in a strait jacket.

The Wife felt this person seize her wrist in a gentle, but firm hand. She looked over to see them using a long implement to breach the skin of her wrist and to which they deftly stuck an ampule of bronze liquid into a notch at the top. The ampule spasmed and drained quickly. The Wife must have been displaying a mask of distrust for her caretaker, but she couldn't feel her face. The caretaker's eyes looked tiny behind uneven coke-bottle glasses, the left of which was cracked along the top edge.

"You're all right," they said dispassionately. "Can you speak? You understand me?"

“Why am I restrained,” The Wife said meekly with her eyes closed.

“Because we don’t trust you,” said the caretaker matter-of-factly. “Your ‘husband’”—they said the word ‘husband’ in a way that made it sound like the word was a snake they were trying to keep in their mouth—”made quite a show of ensure your care.”

The Wife only looked at them with helpless confusion.

“Oh, you don’t know a thing, do you?” they said with a condescending, but sympathetic, lilt. They busied themselves with the tray they’d brought in, turning once and then back to The Wife to reveal a shallow saucer of what looked like water in their hands. “This is safe, but it won’t taste good. We doesn’t use it for drinking, but you’re dehydrated.”

They tipped the saucer, which contained a little more than a sip, to The Wife’s lips. The Wife took it hungrily. It had the clean taste of pure water, but almost too far. It tasted empty, like somehow less than nothing, and it was strangely bitter and chemical in her mouth after she swallowed.

“Well, it was a show he doesn’t need to be making. I’m a doctor, and I would’ve helped a fellow True free of charge. But he was very ‘don’t ask questions, don’t make a fuss, just treat her and drop her, and your daughter walks free.’” The doctor growled out an unflattering, but unfortunately very convincing, impression of Dolus.

“Your daughter?” The Wife said, strangled by horror.

“Yes,” said the doctor. “A daughter of We. A girl of seventeen. Your ‘husband’ is holding her hostage to ensure your care. So that’s why you are restrained. That and, while the scans show conclusively that you are True, I do not understand how you pass around unanointed. Especially here.” While they spoke, the doctor had been refilling the saucer from a stained plastic jug and offering it to her, as well as prodding around her wound dressings and testing the reflexes in her legs, nodding and frowning appraisingly as they did so.

The Wife bit her lip, considering. “I’m True,” she corroborated after a long moment. “But where I come from, the factory towns in the East, only those who need the assistance of machines are anointed.”

“You were born,” said the doctor slowly, not bothering to mask the incredulousness with which they spoke, “with no mutations and no disabilities? And you have taken that body of yours into the Jungle with a hostile mutant?”

“He is my husband.” The Wife insisted.

The doctor wrinkled their stubby nose, and shook their head. “I liked this better when you were asleep.” They sighed, patting her a few times on the abdomen. “Your rib is fractured and your system has required more than one toxin flush. Miracle you’re alive. And, I suppose, if your story is to be

believed,” they scoffed, “you’re even luckier I was talked out of installing a filt system in you. Maybe where you come from your body is a miracle, but here you are no better than a mutant. If anyone in We asks you, I *did* install that filt system. Let no one see you drinking.

“Won’t be difficult,” said The Wife noncommittally, craning her head down at the restraint.

The doctor barked a quiet laugh. “When your rib is further along, I’ll take the restraints off and we’ll walk you to the rendezvous point to your husband. The timeline on this is one week. Remember what I said, Eastern girl.” The doctor then wheeled the tray back out of the room, letting the thin wooden door clack shut behind them.

The Wife could hear an old tumbler stirring as the doctor turned a heavy deadbolt.

II

With very little else to do, The Wife went over each detail she could remember of her especially heinous oracle, tried to listen to the people outside, and tried to think very hard at Dolus. He had never shown an aptitude for reading her thoughts, but she couldn’t think of anything else to do, and her gut was roiling with resentment.

A mundanity settled around her. The doctor came in another two times throughout the next day to offer her more bitter water, the second time also coming in with a tray of roasted field rat, which she devoured down to the bone and then sucked on those, too, more out of boredom than anything else. She had lost weight. When they had entered the Salt Desert, she’d been curvy and soft at the thighs and upper arms, which had pleased her, and apparently Dolus. On their journey of subsistence, her arms had gained a firmness and her thighs a boniness that she found unpleasant. And with nothing to look at but the plain, hot room and her restrained, bandaged, and battered body, she found herself almost wishing she were in darkness again. Not the factory, just the darkness within it, because at least that had an uncertainty and an unpredictability, and she could ambulate within it.

Tears welled in her eyes at the thought of the boar. She knew that she was being haunted by the chilling ghost of a very unpleasant conversation between her and Dolus on the horizon. She knew he must be furious with her, and also must know she was furious with him. His acerbic lack of compassion

and willingness to share intelligence was just as much to blame for their cascade of failures as she was for her impulsiveness, for the fact that she'd let the oracles scare her into rash action.

Night pulsed into being, and a stranger came into the room. They rapped on the door with their knuckles, more a warning than a question, as the door cracked open and an old woman gingerly swung her head into view. She was an older woman with a similar cracked, brown complexion as the doctor. Her graying hair fell in discolored ringlets around her soft face. Her hooded eyes were a startling amber, and she wore a half-sleepy expression on her face, a fathomless contentment playing across her lips. When The Wife made eye contact with her, her neutral face broke into a wide, generous, and mostly toothless smile.

"Hello!" chimed this woman.

"Hello," said The Wife sullenly back.

"What is your name?" This woman had the second, unfamiliar accent The Wife had heard while she was half-conscious. The woman drew herself fully into the room. She was angular and thin, though her head and face were round like a full moon. She shifted uneasily beneath the thin, ankle-length cottony garment she wore. The garment had a high collar, and under it The Wife could see traces of quietly hissing machinery sneaking down from the base of the woman's throat to past her midsection. Every few seconds a quiet *huff* of air could be heard, as if from a ventilator, and the bottom of the woman's robe would stir.

"You can call me The Wife. Or The Woman. Or Nameless," she said.

The woman frowned. "If you insist. I am Ros."

"Nice to meet you," said The Wife. She had intended to sound neutral and pleasant, but the inanity of her day slid into her voice, and she could hear the hollowness and resentment that came from her instead.

Ros produced a pair of sharp barber's scissors from under her robe.

The Wife flinched, heart jumping to her throat.

"Relax," said Ros, elongating the word in a song-song fashion. She slipped the scissors smoothly underneath the small of The Wife's back, prompting a thrill of her skin against cold metal, and snipped her dressings free from the restraint. "Now, stay still. I need to redress this."

"Are you supposed to be doing this?" The Wife said, failing also to tamp the hopefulness in her voice.

“No,” said Ros. She took all the bandages off The Wife’s midsection and produced a second item from under her garment; a fresh roll of gauze. Ros used the same medical tape that had been on the old dressing and stuck it to a new roll. The Wife winced as Ros began rewinding.

“Um,” The Wife said, strained. “Then... why are you?”

“You’ve been complacent. You didn’t know anything.” Ros said airily, the smile never leaving her cracked lips as she used her two index fingers to spool the whole roll of gauze against The Wife’s torso. “You’ve been a perfectly good girl. I don’t believe in tying good girls up.”

The Wife thinned her lips.

Ros finished her task and patted The Wife on the back. “Will you walk me home? I’m not supposed to be out and about with no one to help me if I fall.”

“Sure,” said The Wife. “But then what?”

“Lean on the wall,” Ros instructed as The Wife swung her legs over the bed and uneasily rumbled to her feet, bracing the wall with her shoulder. Tiny protestations burped up from her diaphragm and out of her lips, and her knees bowed briefly, but she managed to stand.

“Well done,” said Ros. “Kon-abadon—that’s the doctor that treated you—said it was very bad.”

“I’ll be fine,” said The Wife woozily. “I just need to get to my husband. We have somewhere to be.” She finished her sentence through clenched teeth.

Ros beckoned The Wife from the doorway. “We don’t have all night, dear.”

The Wife hobbled meagerly toward her, knees shaking slightly. Her midsection pulsed angrily as she used her left leg incorrectly, so she was forced to keep herself in an uneven and awkward hunch as she shuffled along.

In the hallway outside her room—a dark, barren stretch of lumpy stucco and more trampled vegetation flooring—a linen-wrapped walking stick was propped up against one wall. Ros motioned at it, and The Wife took it gratefully. She thought she must look like a shambling remnant, weak and bruise-eyed, dragging herself along by the hollow thump of the staff every time she drove it effortfully into the ground.

She’d been kept, she surmised, in a small hut off the doctor Kon-abadon’s personal property. Once they were outside in the muggy night air, The Wife grasped that she was in a surprisingly large settlement nestled up against a sheer wall of stained rock choked by a lattice of vines and roots dead and alive. The kerosene lamps dotting the huts and larger structures up against the cliff wall created jagged pockets of impenetrable blackness out of the shadows of the roots and branches of nearby trees.

There was no shortage of diversity in masonry. The hut The Wife had been kept in was one of many dotting the immediate area, who all seemed to be swept up in the arms of a large stoned barrier

erected from a larger bric-a-brac estate house. But other buildings The Wife could see, huddled in masses of like and like, were made of things like enormous, puffy fungi, gray-white and orange, hollowed out like a Goatman village tree. Some could be mistaken for jumbles of raw wooden materials from one angle until, as Ros and The Wife passed by, they resolved into a complete structure, lit from within.

As The Wife marveled, particularly at the mushroom houses, The Wife also noticed the air in the village was hot, and somehow stale, but still quite dry compared to other Jungle conditions. She could see the barrier of thick foliage at all the edges of the True settlement, the grasping mandibles of that great, impenetrable beast, and she even thought she could see the frightening, wet cloud of moisture it sometimes exuded. In the area immediately around her, though, it was strangely temperate and breathable, even if it was tinged by the familiar scent of heated oil and welded electronics.

“This is incredible,” The Wife breathed solemnly as she barely kept pace beside Ros, who herself wasn’t exactly a sprinter. “I had no idea settlements this large existed in the Jungle.”

“They don’t,” said Ros. “For the most part, as far as We knows. This is the largest settlement in the whole of the Jungle, probably.”

The Wife sensed pride in Ros’ voice, but also a form of apprehension. “It’s difficult to manage and protect, and it gets harder as it gets bigger. We’re wholly self-reliant, and I’m not sure how much longer we can keep that up. Sometimes I’m not sure we’re doing ourselves any favors here. Anyway,” Ros genuinely brightened, and the pride came rushing back with an earnest smile. “Welcome to We.” The old woman cut her hand through the air like she was gesturing to a prize on a pedestal.

A blessedly cool breeze scampered up the street, stirring Ros’ robes around her ventilator and gently lifting The Wife’s hair. She watched it shimmy back into the Jungle, dispersing in the thick humidity.

“What are they going to do when they find my room empty?” asked The Wife. Her oracle flashed in her memory, and her fists tightened.

“I’ll take care of it,” said Ros, performing a lazy gesture that managed to convey dismissal and beckoning at the same time.

“Can you tell me more about what happened?” asked The Wife.

They were coming up on a big square, and with a chilling, sinking feeling, The Wife realized quickly it was the plaza from the oracle. On a stump in the middle of the field here sat a girl. From far away, she sort of just looked like she could’ve been an axe leaning against the log, but as they got closer to her, The Wife realized she was simply wearing a gray-white night dress and had a smooth head of blunt, black hair.

The girl was holding a silver revolver, glittering in the moonlight, against her own temple.

She faced away from them, facing instead the six people that were standing nearby, arms folded. Some sat on crates, others stood. They looked at her with mixtures of concern, rage, sadness, and fear.

“Stop,” said Ros as The Wife approached. Ros held up a firm hand. They were about thirty feet away. Her tone took a firmness to it, as well, an authority The Wife hadn’t heard before, and made her halt in her tracks, bracing against the walking stick. “The answer to your question is no. I can’t. But this just so happens to be on our way.”

“Hello, Kamei.” said Ros, calling out to the girl. She shifted in her seat on the stump. The Wife could now make out the filaments going up and down her spine, poking against the night dress, and the other bits of gadgetry that jostled the dress around her hip, with a hydraulic piston emerging from below her right buttock and down into a metallic cavity on her ankle. “I’m here with our guest.”

The people on the other side of the girl stirred, craned around her to lay eyes on The Wife. One of them said something in alarm, and the others began to circle around toward them. They stayed approximately forty feet away from the girl as they did so, traveling in a wide loop around her and toward The Wife and Ros.

The one in the lead, who was bald-headed and burned down one side of his face and wore stained coveralls, pointed viciously at The Wife and said something in a language The Wife didn’t know, but it was aggressive and inquisitive.

Ros replied impenetrably, in the same language making cautious but maintained eye contact with this man.

The Wife shrank, licked her lips, and decided to look at the girl as the two gesticulated and carried on in front of her. She was still facing away from them. The leg with the hydraulic apparatus was bouncing nervously. Her free arm was up in front of her face, suggesting she was might be chewing her nails.

It hit her as she stared, and she fell back in startled shock. “H-hey,” she mumbled, looking at Ros. “Is... is *this the hostage?*”

The bald man snapped his head toward her, glowering furiously, and said in heavily accented Eastern, “you will regret.” The anger in his face was so scalding, so sudden, violent, and barely restrained, that The Wife stumbled back even further, lost her balance, and dropped painfully to one knee. It had been like the sun turned away from the cosmos to look at her, and did not like what it saw.

Ros reached up and slapped him hard across the face, continuing to speak in their language. She didn’t change her tone at all, and lowered her hand calmly as the man recoiled, straightened, and stared

daggers back at the old woman. He turned on his heel, walked a few paces back toward his group, said something inaudible, and then turned back around to stare at them furiously with his arms folded.

“He insists on watching,” said Ros with exasperation.

The Wife struggled back to her feet. “S-so it is? It is? Th-this?”

“Yes,” said Ros placidly. “This is Kamei, the seventeen year old girl your husband has taken hostage with his... I don’t know, prowesses.”

“I-I. I’m,” The Wife realized this was beyond apologies immediately. She choked on the words, swallowed them like horse pills, and turned away from the scene with her hand on her cheek. Her body convulsed with fear and guilt.

“Look at her,” Ros insisted calmly, entreating her with the patience of a parent.

The Wife looked up from her shielding hand, tears rolling down her cheek. “Wh-what can I do?”

“Well,” said Ros, matter-of-factly. “You can hurry up and get better and leave. But since you’re stuck here, you might as well learn a thing or two. Maybe you can take what you learn back to your husband, and he can learn what exactly he has done to this village in this act.”

III

Kamei was a soft-faced, chubby girl with blunt bangs that covered a high forehead. She looked a little younger than her age, except around the eyes, which had an obvious haunt to them that stunned The Wife into another bout of clueless silence as she and Ros rounded the stump, staying the minimum distance away. A nearby kerosene lamp doused the left side of her face in a radiant orange, with the other half slipping into night silhouette. She had black eyes, and a paunchy mouth set in a grimace that, more than anything else, seemed bored. The Wife had been mistaken, earlier—she wasn't bouncing on one knee, she was kicking her feet as if she were sitting on a bridge over water.

"Are you The Wife?" Kamei asked in a surprisingly throaty voice when they made eye contact. She had to yell to be heard.

"Yes," said The Wife loudly, for a clumsy and guilt-stricken lack of anything else. "Hello."

"Hello," Kamei shouted in only the way a child could.

The Wife resisted the urge to clamp her hand over her mouth. Quietly to Ros, she said, "He wouldn't do this. I don't understand."

"Desperate people," said Ros, "do desperate things. I can't imagine what depths mutants are capable of sinking to."

The Wife bit her lip, strangled her protests, and felt her eyes sting with heat once again at the futility and inequity of the situation on every imaginable level.

"How are you feeling?" called Kamei. "You don't seem very good."

"I'm okay," said The Wife. She breached the surface of her self-loathing and set her shoulders to the best affect they were able. "Is there a better way we can speak?"

"No," said Kamei. "Sorry. We're lucky Kon-abadon taught me Eastern early."

"Please don't apologize. I'm so sorry, Kamei," yelled The Wife. "I'll leave tonight, nobody ever has to see me again. This can end right now."

"You're unwell," said Ros. "That won't do. Kon-abadon isn't finished with you."

"I can't just let this happen for my benefit," The Wife said, voice breaking.

"Oh, you poor girl," said Ros. "You're just as much in this situation as Kamei. The risk at the throat of this village right now means that we have no choice but to provide the best possible care. We absolutely cannot risk your husband finding your recovery unacceptable." Ros held up a flat hand when The Wife opened her mouth. "I don't care what you think of him. I have to operate based on what *I* know. Mutants are violent and dangerous. I would rather have him pass on and give him no reason to return. Do you understand?"

The Wife nodded silently, lips in a thin line.

“What are you two arguing about?” called Kamei.

“Don’t worry, dear,” said Ros, lifting a placating hand into the air and turning back toward Kamei. “I’m just making sure The Wife here knows her situation, that’s all.”

“I have a bolt in my elbow,” said Kamei. “Don’t worry about me. I just had a cycle, too. I don’t need anything for another ten days. I’m just bored, is all.”

The Wife looked at the girl with knitted brows, mouth set in a restraining frown. “Nobody can bring you any books?”

“No,” said Kamei. “If anyone attempts to cross within thirty feet of me, put anything within thirty feet of me, throw anything at me, or attempt any sort of physical interaction with me, I have to pull the trigger.” She said it like she were being forced to write lines on a chalkboard.

The Wife uttered a long, low groan of a curse, pressing her hands to her face.

“Honestly,” called Kamei. “The worst part is everyone staring at me all the time. We all understand, I’m in mortal peril. Can you please just haul your potatoes.”

The Wife bit her lip. “There’s nothing I can do to help? He didn’t give you any rules about me?”

“Nope,” said Kamei. “But I don’t get to talk to strangers, much.”

“Maybe I can keep you company, sometimes? When I’m not being treated?”

Ros brightened visibly at this.

“That could be nice,” said Kamei. “I don’t get to talk to strangers, much.”

“I have to show The Wife a few more things now, Kamei,” said Ros. “Etuth is still watching over you. Let him know if anything changes.”

“Yes,” said Kamei, drawn out and a little exasperated.

Ros took the crook of The Wife’s arm and led her away from Kamei, toward a crop of smaller residences that preceded a large dark spot in the coverage of the kerosene lamps that seemed like some kind of tilled field. They hobbled up to a large, reddish brown fungus which was shaped vaguely like a tent, massive membrane gathered around a presumed stalk hidden underneath its folds. A door had been set into one of the shallower ruffles, and other masonry could be seen supporting additional structures on the other side.

“I am very tired,” said Ros. “I think I’ll sleep here tonight.”

“Should I go back to Kon-abadon’s?” asked The Wife. The village was larger than she’d anticipated, but across the central quad where Kamei was sitting she could still see the small bundle of huts that represented Kon-abadon’s hospital.

“Eventually,” said Ros. “There are a few others I would like for you to meet first. Ketarl can walk you back later.”

The Wife didn’t like this answer, but kept quiet as Ros strode up to the door, unlatched its strange locking mechanism, and stepped inside, gesturing for her to follow. The Wife stepped forward, but then Ros hesitated. “There might be smoking. Do you smoke?”

“Sometimes,” said The Wife. “Not in a long time.”

Ros shouldered the green-painted door, the hinges quiet and obedient. Warm, sputtering light from within washed across The Wife’s vision, and she stepped inside she saw a crackling central fire pit surrounded by three silhouettes.

One of the silhouettes stood up, revealing a young moon of a face carved into a crescent by the firelight. He had deep brown eyes curly red hair, and he came up to Ros to brace her elbow as he hurried her inside. He and Ros were conversing pleasantly in their native language. “You must be the new guest, ah?” His accent was so much stronger than Ros’, The Wife blinked through a few seconds of interpolation before flinching and nodding apologetically.

“That’s... a nice way to put it,” said The Wife, self-consciously leaning her arm into her middle, grabbing the wrist holding the cane to close off her body.

“Walou, stay sat.” The command came from Ros, and she saw the central silhouette react to their name. The command was in a tone The Wife hadn’t heard from Ros, and it stilled her. It was much more intense than the way she’d spoken to the man outside that had been guarding Kamei. And, The Wife noticed, Ros had wanted The Wife to understand it, otherwise she would have spoken their True tongue.

The ‘answering’ silhouette stilled. They were taking a long drag from a thin, hollow bone pipe. They stayed seated in obeisance to Ros, but swiveled, resolving into a large man in a cotton yellow shirt with a long, thin mustache.

The Wife sucked a breath through her teeth, though she forced herself to smile. The mustache gave it away immediately: this was the man who would shoot Dolus in the oracle. She even saw the revolver tucked into an aged holster at his side.

“H-Hello,” she said to Walou, the would-be murderer.

Walou took in an eyeful of her, his baleful expression and gleaming, eager eyes making no indication he intended to acknowledge her. Then he slid back to look at the fire, showing her his huge

back. He handed the pipe over to the final silhouette, asked something of Ros in their language The Wife confidently surmised was something like, “why is she here.”

The third silhouette was a little girl, kicking her feet off a chair that was too big for her and writing something in a small book in her lap with a graphite stick that was also too big for her. The end of it waddled about in the air next to her head as she scribbled. She took the pipe when it was passed to her, took a clumsy gulp of smoke off the end, then waved it in the air. The curly-haired boy that was helping Ros out of her shoes was Ketarl, and when Ros had seated, he took the pipe from the little girl and handed it to Ros. The boy looked to be about fifteen, versus the girl about eleven.

The Wife looked at the pipe for a long time, then back at the girl, brows knitted, but stayed silent and awkward at the entrance to the single room. A collection of what appeared to be hospital chairs sat hooked up to basins with digital readouts and assortments of tools stood against one corner, but otherwise most of the room was taken up by the fire pit and its seating. A collapsable stair-ladder led to a loft, and The Wife made out a darkened archway to a rear corridor in the far corner.

“Sit, child,” beckoned Ros, patting the empty bench seat next to her as Ketarl heaved himself into a metallic folding chair and picked up a digital slate of some kind. The Wife hesitated, as she’d be placing herself between Ros and Walou, but obeyed anyway and lowered herself gingerly into the seat, bracing against the walking stick, which she then continued to clutch for comfort as the warmth of the fire and the clover smell of the smoke washed over her. It was a glorious comfort, a homeliness she hadn’t realized she’d so dearly missed in her time subsisting amongst the hostile flora and fauna.

“Thank you for welcoming me into your home,” said The Wife unconfidently.

“What’s your name?” said the little girl, not looking up from her notebook. “I’m Cherile.”

“Hello, Cherile,” said The Wife. “I come from a place where names work a little bit differently. You can call me whatever you want.”

“That’s weird,” said the little girl.

The Wife laughed, then winced and clutched her side.

“Don’t mind her,” said Ketarl. “Do you smoke?”

“Yes,” said The Wife.

Ros passed her the pipe, which she tried to take very nonchalantly, but in the middle of the exchange she realized she very badly wanted the lightheaded uplift of tobacco, for her neck felt heavy, and her brain felt too full. She took a long drag very quickly, and only during did she notice Ros had immediately regretted her decision to pass The Wife the pipe, and had been attempting to subtly take it back, opening her mouth for an explanation.

The Wife took in a thick pull of clove and dry tobacco, spicy and bitter with a textured chocolate undertone. It was beautiful, and she exhaled a steady stream of yellow-white smoke, drifting pleasantly into the fog that developed around her brain.

Everyone around the fire recoiled, except Ros, who looked resigned and annoyed. It was only now that The Wife realized nobody else had needed to exhale their smoke.

“Christ, woman!” said Walou angrily. “Do you not even have a filt?” He looked at her with an even mix of disgust and pity.

“My fault, Walou,” Ros said quickly. “Kon-abadon had to fuss with it. They expressly said no smoking, and I forgot.”

“Oh-oh,” said The Wife, putting on what she thought was a mildly convincing show of coughing a little in surprise. “Yes, I did too. I apologize, I’m so sorry.”

“That was cool,” said Cherile. “Can I try?”

Walou said something reproachful and pointed at the front door. Cherile closed her book and stuck her tongue out at Walou, retorting snidely. Walou responded in kind, though there was something jovial underneath his rough bluntness, and a tenderness in his face that was wholly and pointedly absent when he looked at The Wife.

Cherile gathered her things and placed them in a fabric satchel that had been collapsed under her seat, then hefted it onto her back. She said something cheerful to the group, who replied with something else in kind—this was easily readable to The Wife as a ‘goodbye,’ or a ‘see you later,’ and she smiled curiously, eyes gleaming with a nostalgia and a loneliness she hadn’t noticed gathering in her heart.

Ros looked impatiently at Ketarl, who sprung to his feet, uttered something deferential, and bounded over to escort Cherile wherever she was going.

Walou looked at The Wife, then at Ketarl, and said a command. Ketarl, in turn, glanced hesitantly between The Wife and Ros.

Ros shook her head. “Enough—speak Eastern. Ketarl can take Cherile home and then come back and take our guest back to Kon-abadon separately. I need to write them a letter of excuse before retiring, anyhow.”

Walou frowned darkly, folded his arms, and stood.

“I told you to say seated, Walou,” said Ros.

Walou tilted his head at The Wife. His face in full view, now, he might be somewhat handsome if it weren’t for the folds of a permanent, dissatisfied sneer had etched into his face. Now, standing over her, he seemed inescapably tall. He kept his arms folded, lips curling out from under the mustache.

His eyes were warmed only by the reflection of the fire, and he said, “It does not seem you understand situation, so I make it very clear to you-eh.” He leaned down.

Ros cut in warningly in their native language. He ignored her.

“If I ever get the opportunity,” he said gravely. “I kill your husband.”

Ros threw the pipe at Walou. He ducked gingerly, and the pipe clattered against the hut wall, spraying embers and ash all over the threshold of the hut.

As if nothing had happened, Walou leaned back down over The Wife, who had shrunken back despite the ache and broken into a cold sweat. She dared not break eye contact, bone-white fingers digging into the bench seat next to Ros, who was wrapping an arm around her shoulder and trying to pull her away from Walou.

“I in charge of keeping this village safe-eh,” Walou continued. “You two commit a crime too heinous to forgive.”

He stood when Ros offered a cold, deadpan string of words with a hard edge to them. She was looking up at him with a mask of stone. She continued for a little while, and he stood transfixed by her words, hands balled into fists and now straight at his side.

With Walou’s attention elsewhere, The Wife’s eyes were free to drop down to Walou’s sidearm, the orange gleam of it in the firelight sparking alarms of panic in her head. With her heart in her throat, she realized that memories of the future were the worst thing of all.

Walou turned and stomped out of the hut summarily, his loud and insistent footsteps disappearing into the subtle nighttime din of We.

The Wife let out a shaky breath, grimacing. “I’m sorry,” she said pathetically while Ros appeared to collect herself.

“No, I’m sorry,” Ros corrected. The old woman, too, had taken a long, calming breath after the confrontation. “I thought I could affect that situation a little more smoothly, and I suppose I shouldn’t have forced it.”

“I wish it weren’t like this,” said The Wife. “We do go places where we *don’t* ruin everything, I promise.”

Ros smirked coyly. “What else have you ruined?”

The Wife dodged eye contact, throat thickening with the thought of Marlay. “You know—just Jungle things.”

“Very good answer,” Ros replied, standing effortfully and gathering a small twig broom from a low cupboard.

“Please, let me,” said The Wife, gripping the walking stick and heaving upward.

“Sit back down, stupid girl,” said Ros, gesturing dismissively. “I’m old, but I’m not all chewed up like you.”

The Wife looked on, frowning, before hesitantly dropping back down to her seat.

As Ros bent over and flung the embers and ashes from the pipe outside with the broom, she said with a grunt, “Kamei is Walou’s wife.”

The Wife’s jaw dropped.

Ros put the broom back, then bent and picked the pipe up with another grunt. “Yes, I should have probably warned you, but I had hoped to have a more fruitful discussion of it *with* the man,” she continued with a resigned lilt at the end of her words. “So I apologize.”

The Wife swallowed, and remained silent. She just shook her head and frowned miserably.

“And before you start any judgment,” Ros started as she sat back down next to The Wife. For the old woman’s part, she’d returned to her natural, effortless cadence, which was at least soothing. “We don’t even normally do marriage. People couple off in We sometimes, but generally coupling and parentage are communal processes for us.”

The Wife nodded, and relaxed her shoulders a bit. “So, Cherile...”

“I know who her biological parents are, sure, and I think she does, too. But that does not really figure in to her daily life. She sleeps in the same hut as Kamei and an older girl named Halse.”

“I would love to hear more about that,” said The Wife eagerly.

Ros produced a writing stick and a piece of natural papyrus. “I’m sure you would. Maybe you’ll get to know more during your short stay.” She began scribbling on the papyrus. “What I wanted you to learn from meeting Walou tonight is that Kamei is the last able-bodied female for reproduction in the village. Walou married her because, while the rest of our governing body is well-meant, they would have had her... serve the village a different way.”

The Wife clamped her hand over her mouth.

Ros waved her hand in the air. She shook her head with the weight of someone who had known many difficult battles. Dolus did it like that, too. “I know,” she said. “We isn’t like that. Or it won’t be, while Walou is around.”

“However, the problem remains that there is an unimaginable pressure on Walou and Kamei, as you can imagine.”

“We’ve done the worst thing in the world,” The Wife uttered, cutting herself off with a rough, aching sob. She began to convulse, body wracked with tense cries of anguish, and she doubled over. “I don’t think we deserve to make it through this,” she moaned.

Ros said nothing, but reached over with her free hand while she continued to write on the papyrus, and stroked The Wife's tender back in small circles.

"I promise, *promise* you he had no idea. He isn't like that, either. Not—not while I'm around," she said, interrupted midway by a rough hiccup.

"I'll take your word for it," said Ros patiently. "But I know you're clever. You know that doesn't matter."

The Wife nodded, and kept her head down, buried in her hands.

IV

Ketarl eventually returned to the hut and received the papyrus from Ros, who bade The Wife goodnight and then retired to the rear room. The walk back to the hospital with Ketarl was silent and awkward, with Ketarl asking stunted questions and giving one-word answers, not because he wanted to talk, but because he felt like he was supposed to. The Wife smiled anyway, and thanked him earnestly when they came up to the front door of the hut she'd stayed in.

When she settled into bed, she realized she was utterly exhausted. Passing fitfully into a shotgun spread of sleeping and waking abruptly, she tossed and turned until the sun filtered through the closed wooden blinds of the stale room and the idle air began to heat. Just when she found herself stable and moderately comfortable, she grew hot, and tossed the covers off herself angrily.

After a final death knell of a short nap, Kon-abadon bustled in with their steel tray and halted when they saw The Wife was not restrained.

"Read the papyrus, please," said The Wife. "It's from Ros."

Behind their goggles, Kon-abadon rolled their eyes and looked askance at the papyrus, which was folded up on the table by the door.

"I'll get to it," they said resignedly. "I take it she took you for a walk?"

“Yes,” The Wife croaked.

“Kept you up, huh,” said Kon-abadon. “Ridiculous old bat.”

The Wife crossed her arm over her face.

Kon-abadon went to work on her, checking her wounds, performing a much longer series of injections this time that ended with The Wife retching into a shallow basin for half an hour.

“Maybe I didn’t stress enough to you. You had micro-organisms in your bloodstream and a blood toxicity so high I didn’t think you were going to be conscious for another day or so,” said Kon-abadon. “You are just barely on the good side of dying. I suggest you take that seriously.” They eyed the walking stick in the corner of the room. “Two hours walking about a day—*maximum*. I want you in here all night and all morning. Don’t make me waste my time. I used a lot of medicine on you.”

“I understand,” said The Wife hoarsely, throat sore from dry-heaving.

“This water is better,” continued Kon-abadon, heaving a jug off the bottom of the steel tray cart and putting it on the floor next to the bed. “It’s recycled, and we usually use it for crops, but I got Krot to surrender me some of the cleaner stuff. I’d use this on it, however it works,” said Kon-abadon, proffering The Wife’s water distiller.

“Oh, thank you.” The Wife took a look at it, easily prying open the plastic latch and looking at the composite pill filter inside. The mechanics were undamaged, which she determined after removing and replacing a few internals, and then snapped it shut, shook it hard, and tossed it into the jug. It emitted a striated puff of white vapor at the bottom of the water.

“Guess I could’ve figured that out,” mused Kon-abadon.

“Don’t worry. I make mine a little strangely,” said The Wife.

“You made that?” asked Kon-abadon, frowning contemplatively.

The Wife nodded.

“You’re good with electronics?” asked Kon-abadon.

“That thing isn’t exactly electronic,” said The Wife. “Oh, but, yes. I was a diagnostics engineer in a factory town.”

Kon-abadon clicked their tongue. “Would you... be able to look at a few things? Medical things?”

The Wife shrugged, suppressing a light thrill. “I could try. I’m probably not familiar with them, but it shouldn’t hurt to fiddle.”

Using the steel tray cart, Kon-abadon brought The Wife a broken centrifuge, a strange injection mold device she didn't quite understand the application of, and a defibrillator, placing them all on the table. The doctor then brought a comfortable rolling chair into the room, providing a minimal workshop. Kon-abadon had a soldering iron and a few other useful things, but mostly The Wife diagnosed with her fingers. She worked over the next day, not leaving the hospital save once to visit Kamei.

The girl cast a long shadow in the midday sunlight. It was clear, and the way the Jungle canopy parted over We had eerily placed Kamei in a very wide spotlight that tickled the edges of the quad before breaking into the dappled streaks that covered the rest of the village. On her stump, arm locked, Kamei looked mostly bored. She'd smile politely at people bustling by carrying things, then frown when the exhausted bald man stepped in their way, judging that they were passing too close to the psychic cordon. He stepped in front of The Wife, too, as she approached. She couldn't imagine looking very threatening, hobbling around with all her weight braced hopefully against Ros' walking stick, but he had the look of a fearful predator in his eyes. A fear born of power without understanding, rendered entirely justifiable by the circumstance. She sighed.

"Etuth," called Kamei. The Wife wasn't sure if that was the man's name, or some other commentary, but he turned toward her. She said another string of syllables, but The Wife simply didn't have any grasp of form or context with their language, and couldn't tell based on her disaffected tone what she could be saying.

The man looked sad, strained, and ready to swallow his lower lip. He rounded on The Wife. "You stay right here-eh. You sit on ground. Ten minute. I watch and listen, right here." He prodded the dirt with his foot, then moved to stand next to The Wife, close enough to reach over if necessary. He folded his arms and stared straight ahead into the middle distance.

The Wife replied with silent obeisance, curling up cross-legged on the hard-packed road soil, pebbles digging into her waning thighs. She may not even last ten minutes in this position.

"H-hello, Kamei," said The Wife, unsure of her volume, or anything else at the moment.

"Hello," replied Kamei. "Sorry it's so awkward to speak."

The Wife's lip curled, and she turned away. "Please don't apologize."

But it was awkward—with Etuth standing over her, and everyone else who happened to pass by unable to stop themselves from at least briefly rubbernecking, the conversation was on a foundation of strain and unalterable pretense. Yelling over an invisible, thirty-foot impenetrable cube was a chore for both parties.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" The Wife said after a tense moment.

“Tell me a story?” asked Kamei.

The Wife thought for a moment, then nodded. “I’m not a very good orator, just so you know. But, ah, I’ve come a long way, and a thing or two has happened...”

The Wife told Kamei the story of the abandoned Salt Desert settlement. It had simply been raided to the point of being inhospitable, so the residents had up and hurriedly sought refuge in a larger settlement elsewhere. It was deeply unnerving—much moreso than the rusted over ruins they’d passed in the Jungle, because it was so obviously recently inhabited. It hadn’t been swallowed by the salt, or battered by exposure and lack of maintenance. It looked like they could see anyone around any corner at any time, but they simply didn’t. Empty buildings seemed to cast longer shadows in the Salt Desert, where the very ground parched you of moisture and the sun baked it off the top of your head. Even the wind had been dry. Of course, the oases were utterly lush, and frequent, so it had nothing of the hardship of the Jungle in the end. The Wife had found a great joy in several untouched cases of books, but they were too heavy to all take, so The Wife had done a hurried inventory and taken a single one—a treatise on ancient Jungle Sultans—before they’d moved on.

It was only another three days before they found the very settlement that had been evacuated to, as made obviously by the abrupt burst of color outside the village walls which resolved into a tent city as they drew closer. The refugees were on a wait list for purchasing a residence, and seemed otherwise as well-taken care of as possible. The village walls were manned with powerful turrets, and so despite being outside them, the refugees were fed, watered, and protected from further threats for the time being. They seemed, if not happy (many, in fact, had resented to leave their homes and had turned such onto their would-be protectors, which was a problem The Wife could see escalating) then at least content. Dolus and The Wife stayed amongst them for two days, during which The Wife’s guilt over having taken a book grew and grew until she resolved to find its proper owner.

The Wife wandered the entire second day with the book outstretched like a dowsing rod asking anyone who would listen if they’d seen it or not. She’d even gone into the village—which, in further defense of the encampment situation, was terribly overcrowded—since a few refugees had cleared the wait list and been able to afford residences. No luck. She’d already consumed most of it, and Dolus had passed it over, claiming most of it was probably conjecture—Kamei laughed when The Wife did her Dolus impression—so at that point, it was dead, guilty weight in her waist satchels.

As Dolus and The Wife prepared to leave, the book was next to her bedroll when a young boy walked by pushing a small sibling in a rickety pram. He stopped to look at the book, and The Wife caught his gaze. She offered it to him, explaining where it had come from. The boy had gleefully accepted it and then told her, “it was always yours, and it was always mine, too.”

“Sorry if that was boring,” The Wife said with a start after emerging from a quick reverie. Etuth looked like he was ready to shoo her away, so she began to get to her feet. “I just always think about that boy.”

“No,” said Kamei. She was too far away for The Wife to really see what was playing on her face, but in her limited capacity to gesticulate, Kamei seemed enthusiastic. “I mean. The book part is whatever, but the idea that those refugees were able to find safety is nice to hear about.” She sounded earnestly thoughtful, and a touch distant.

The Wife nodded, finding the right balance to move on her feet. “I’ll come again, if that’s okay. Maybe you can tell me a story next time.”

“Yes, please. I’ll think of a good one,” said Kamei. “Etuth can judge who told a better one.”

“I think I would probably bet on you for that,” said The Wife weakly, nodding as Etuth rushed her backwards. “I’ll see you later, Kamei!” she yelled with finality, and the distant girl nodded stiffly, kicking her legs in the short breeze.

The Wife found herself physically unable to look back at her as she bustled off to work on more of the village’s broken devices.

The Wife was haunted still by the oracle, which had resolved into something that fit in a context now, and The Wife worried at it at the same time she worried at what was amounting to be a new part-time job. The defibrillator had been beyond her resuscitation without replacement parts and further tools. The injector and centrifuge she had been able to fix, but she had also warned that the centrifuge would no longer have any speed throttle, and so now had a very limited use case. Kon-abadon seemed very relieved and grateful, regardless, and apparently had told others of The Wife's limited utility. They began to bring other devices of non-medical origin—radios, mechanical limbs, single-use drones, and monitor displays began to crowd The Wife's room, and on the fourth day of her fraught and stressful residency, a stranger wheeled a large corkboard affixed with a massive papyrus diagram into her room with Kon-abadon assisting.

He was a mocha-skinned, tall wisp of a man with a paunch belly, a spine brace, and a false eye. He wore thin, square glasses. The lens over the false eye was tinted a pale yellow color. He wore a long, faded khaki coat over a loose and stringy sweater and faded trousers. He wore his braided hair in a large knot tied with drooping bands affixed to the back of his head, and a few braids spilled out.

"U-um," he said faintly. "Hi. I'm Yosteer. I hear you are helping with things. Stuff, I mean. Er, devices." He offered a hand to shake, changed his mind, and then seemed to change it again but restrained himself from actually offering it once more.

The Wife looked on in a worried bemusement. "Uh, yes. I'm trying to do what I can while I'm here, I guess. What is this?" She gestured at the chart, but upon actually looking away from the chaotic person presenting it, she immediately recognized it as a large scale-model blueprint. It appeared to be the workings of a very powerful digital telescope, or some other surveillance device, given the lenses and extremely fragile-looking housings involved.

"S-so, this, ah—" the man looked helplessly at Kon-abadon, who looked at the blueprint and offered, "scope," unsurely.

"Yes," said Yosteer, "scope—this, scope, was sold to me by a mammoth trader six years ago, and it's my favorite-eh," he gestured in the air, looking for the words. He had a soft-spoken voice, and was audibly very unpracticed at speaking Eastern. "Thing. De-vice. Device."

The Wife smiled despite herself—a big, wide smile that penetrated the haze in her eyes and head, and she broke free from something for just a moment. "Okay, Yosteer. How can I help?"

“Well... it’s hard to tell. I asked if you could come look it, but Kon-abadon says—” he broke off into an impression of Kon-abadon, but slipped into their language, so he sort of uttered a string of unidentifiable syllables in a mocking tone of voice. The Wife laughed again, which seemed to delight Yosteer to no end.

“I don’t want you on the observation deck,” said Kon-abadon. “It’s a hard climb, and nobody trusts you enough to let you go up there.”

The Wife nodded implacably. “I understand.”

“No-no!” said Yosteer, throwing his hands up. “Stupid! She is helping us!” He gestured with so much emotion, but was clearly also putting on a show of it. The chaos of it charmed her a little bit, and if nothing else it was an entertainment in a very difficult string of days.

“Try to describe it here,” said Kon-abadon flatly.

Yosteer waved her off, saying something sarcastic and shaking his head. “Okay, see here?” He pointed emphatically at a joint in the angling apparatus of the thing—or what The Wife suspected was one. “I can’t take new measures, it won’t adjust... all the way. It’s not eh... how do you say,” he looked at Kon-abadon and said something, pantomiming in an exaggerated way. The Wife caught him gauging her reaction out of the corner of his eye, and smiled again despite herself.

“Delicate?” Kon-abadon offered in a disinterested tone.

“Delicate!” Yosteer exclaimed, latching onto the word even though The Wife suspected it was only close, and not completely accurate.

The Wife tapped her chin as she studied the plans. She was able to piece together that this was a long-range observation device mounted on a track for angular adjustment, but without the context of its housing, she might as well be trying to cook without a stove. Loosely, it seemed to her that Yosteer needed help with a fine-tuned angular adjustment the device didn’t have enough range of motion to accommodate.

“Kon-abadon,” said The Wife, frowning. “This looks like a very big project, and I really can’t do anything with just this plan. Are you sure I can’t go up there to take a look? I’ll be sure to rest plenty.”

Kon-abadon gave her a long look, then scoffed. “Clear it with Walou, then do whatever you want. All I can do is recommend. I’ve got other things to do.” The doctor said something urgent and warning to Yosteer, then peeled himself from between The Wife’s bed and the chart, bustling from the room as if struggling to exhale.

The Wife blanched at the prospect of seeing Walou, but Yosteer nodded excitedly. “Yes, Walou! Up for travel, Madame?” he asked, blinking rapidly at The Wife.

“Sure,” said The Wife. “But just be warned I’m very slow.”

Yosteer hovered nervously over her as she raised herself from the bed using the walking stick. She’d managed to set her posture better while walking without as much pain over the last couple days, which Kon-abadon seemed to have taken as a very good sign. She was more upright now, and walking was less uncomfortable, but it had become even slower as she shuffled with her stuff, gauze-heavy legs. She walked out into the mid-afternoon with him, a high buzz of insects and a humid wash of dappled sunlight greeting them as Yosteer swung Kon-abadon’s door open.

We in the daytime was less sprawling and mysterious. In the light, The Wife could see it for what it was—a jumble of makeshifts huddled fearfully up against a sheer cliffside. An infant in the protective embrace of its earthy mother, turned away from the world and in toward the comfort. It was still much bigger than the Goatmen village, but by less of an integer than she’d suspected on her first night here.

In the daylight, too, one could see the staggered bursts of catwalk and masonry that carved its way serpentine up the red-brown of the cliffside, terminating in a stilted, concrete building jutting from a sturdy ledge high up enough to blot its shadow down across a significant swath of the town. When The Wife actually looked up at it and took in its details properly, she almost immediately saw the lens device. It was on a large, mechanical slit of a track built into the West-facing wall of the concrete facility at the top of the cliff, inset with the washy glimmer of a clean lens seen from far away.

Walou’s hut, or the place he was at the time of Yosteer’s and The Wife’s arrival, was one of the larger facilities pushed directly up against the bottom of the cliff, which included an empty corral and an covered outdoor gunsmithing workshop. A miserable-looking surveillance drone clung to the awning of the building’s entrance, its bracing claws droopy against the metal of the awning and its monocular lens sweeping erratically from left to right. When it swung to the right, it made a rusty, clipped squeaking noise, and The Wife frowned up with it as Yosteer bounded up the yard and posed to yank on the dilapidated handle.

“Ah, maybe,” said The Wife suddenly, gesturing to pause him. “I should wait out here. We, er, I should say Walou, doesn’t very much like me. Which—” she gestured again quickly. “Is very understandable.”

Yosteer frowned thoughtfully, as if he could not for his own life figure out why that would be, and then shrugged, shouldering into the shadowy building. She heard a raucous round of greeting as he entered, which tapered into a muffled din when the metal door swung shut behind him. The Wife spent a few moments enjoying an ephemeral, but very refreshing breeze before she heard the sound of yelling in We’s native language inside the building. She squeamishly moved even further away from the door,

and she had been fairly conservative about it already. She thought she heard a staccato trade of verbal jabbing between Yosteer and Walou, before it fell eerily silent, then got louder again.

Just as The Wife began to contemplate when exactly the discomfort would be enough to justify her returning to Kon-abadon, the metal door swung open roughly with a squeal, and Yosteer padded out amiably with a look of victory strewn across his round, protruding cheeks. Behind him was a sullen Walou, dressed in a sleeveless mesh vest and cargo trousers, hair under a flat-brim cap that looked a little like Dolus’.

“Walou wants to, ah...” Yosteer snapped his fingers, bounding up to The Wife.

The Wife quirked an eyebrow and said, “keep an eye on me?”

Yosteer snapped louder and pointed at her, grinning. “Got it! Could use eh translator, too.”

Walou said something that rang with a fervent refusal, and The Wife grimaced.

“By the way,” said Yosteer. “If you haven’t seen before. It is difficult—you prepare.”

Before she could really adjust to the situation or contemplate what that could mean, she was following the two men up a series of crisscrossing, creaky wooden stairways. The breeze got a little rougher as they ascended. The stairways were shaded by the proceeding landings, and there was a firm guardrail in place, but she still felt woozy and untethered, and it got stranger the higher she got. She apologized frequently as she stopped to breathe, even sitting on the bottom stair of what looked to be a rather heinous stretch twice.

Walou remained silent the entire time, but Yosteer was perfectly happy to engage her in a strained conversation that ran the total gamut of their language barrier’s obstacles. The Wife discerned through these stunted trades that this observation deck must be a rather large project and a significant security measure, which likely meant it was about more than just spotting threats to the village. A curiosity then gripped The Wife and intensified as she got closer, finally heaving a painful short few gasps of breath as they reached the landing with the observation deck, and The Wife took in the actual view for the first time. She gasped hard enough to set her ribcage into a spasm, and doubled over with her teeth gritted.

She expected to see the Jungle splayed out like a big, green, undulating creature underneath her, rolling masses of vegetation that blew in a rough wind like waves on the ocean. She did see this, and did get a brief second to enjoy the roiling majesty of it for a moment—and in that moment, she truly felt like a survivor for the first time since before the Goatmen village. The ordeals since had done significant damage to her ego and her confidence in her mission, but being above the Jungle and *feeling* above it pulsed through her, washing away her miserable stagnation like a salty tide.

Then she saw The Wall.

There were stories in her youth that echoed through her higher education of the way the world ends. About the journeying machinists and tradesmen who had come up on the end of the world more suddenly than they'd expected, and left in tears, retiring before their careers took off. Rumors that seeing it would take all the hope out of your lungs, instantly deflate the meaning of your life into one, soundless finger snap in the wide berth of the universe.

Those things were all true, The Wife realized with a bitter flip of her stomach, but they were not nearly enough to describe the insatiable, ascendant horror of gazing on the thing itself.

The problem was, it was mundane. Where the world should have continued, it ended in a featureless, gray flat block that extended up into the atmosphere, blending in a murky gradient with the untouched blue of the sky, giving it a nauseating sense of infinity. It was so staggering as to be in some way imperceptible, and The Wife would see ghostly glimpses of how the world should be beyond the boundary of that flat gray expanse. If any edge could be seen, it could be easily interpreted as some kind of unquantifiable superstructure, but since it went as far as the world did in all directions, all possibilities, at all angles, it instead elicited a primal response in her brain to scream, to run, to never see something so unnatural ever again or it might make her mind second guess itself, its reality, and in the face of an untouchable query her sanity would simply crumble, and nothing would ever matter to her again.

She felt a biological compulsion to look away, and twisted furiously, gasping in agony as she realized she'd twisted left. Yosteer was on her in an instant as she collapsed into a guttural, existential sob, cradling, supporting the back of her head, and lowering her onto the solid wood panel landing floor as she took shallow, hot breaths.

She focused on his face, which still managed to have some inner immutable glow of energy as he gave her a sympathetic smile with gleaming eyes. "Warned you-eh."

The Wife recuperated on a comfortable cushioned sofa inside the observation deck, which it turned out was a single large room with a second door to an open-air latrine. The bulk of the room was taken up by the apparatus The Wife had seen some of the plans for. On the inside of the deck it was basically a large control display with an undercarriage for accessing the finer mechanicals of the lens, which all itself was offset on either side by measuring equipment, digital readouts, and a blessedly noisy dot matrix printer. The Wife immediately felt a nostalgia toward when she collapsed onto the sofa.

“I’m sorry,” she groaned, trying to push what she’d seen out of her head for now. There’d be myriad time to worry away at it when she got back to her bed.

“No, no,” Yosteer shook his head and clicked his teeth. “I try to warn, it’s not... good. To look at it for the first time. Or again. Or,” he made an exaggerated show of counting on his fingers. “Five thousand.”

The Wife made a hollow, barking laugh of a noise, unable to tamp down her smile. “Still, I didn’t want to make this more difficult than it was already going to be,” she said, physically restraining herself from looking over at Walou, who had busied himself with the dot matrix feed.

Walou said something demanding to Yosteer, who got to his feet. They conversed in a brief clip, which ended with Yosteer making something that sounded like a joke and then laughing to himself and shaking Walou’s shoulder roughly. Walou shrugged out of the gesture, rolling his eyes and gesturing toward The Wife with his chin.

The Wife, then, cut in: “I understand you’re trying to angle this thing and having an issue?”

“Ah, yes—” said Yosteer, looking hesitantly between himself and The Wife. He seemed to beg Walou for something, who crossed his arms and scoffed.

Without looking at The Wife, Walou said in his bitter, accented Eastern, “we measure the advance of The Wall. We can’t take accurate measurement with the current.” He gestured with frustration at the undercarriage of the adjustment mechanism. “Notches.”

“You need the notch between one millimeter and two millimeters on the ruler,” The Wife offered as an analogy.

“Yes!” exclaimed Yosteer, pumping his fists. “Yes! But—ah, you need more rest...”

“No,” said The Wife. “That sounds important. Maybe you’ll explain to me what you’re measuring exactly?” She got herself back to her feet, finding she was still pretty out of breath, but equally desperate to not be around Walou anymore.

“Every three hundred twelve days,” Walou recited in a deadpan, “The Wall eat between 3.31 and 7.3 micrometers existing reality. Average.”

The Wife’s breath became hollow again.

“Or, it had the last six years,” Walou continued. “Last year number was 14 micrometers. That’s what We is measuring. It’s speed up.”

The Wife said nothing as she hobbled over to the adjustment mechanism and, with slow and awkward jolts of movement, got to her hands and knees. “Do you have a torch?” she asked. She gestured blankly at the shadowy mechanism before Yosteer put it together. With trademark animation, the man proffered a small diode on a chain, which The Wife took and wrapped between her index and middle fingers. She pointed a feeble cone of white light into the mechanism and began poking around. Her fingers became lousy with the viscous gunk produced when oil meets too much dust and sediment. She had desperately missed this sensation, and was unknowingly smiling to herself as she probed.

Walou and Yosteer engaged in idle, stunted conversation that limped along in the background of The Wife’s thoughts. She could tell that Yosteer was obviously speaking as though nothing were wrong at all while Walou simmered under the pretense of the situation like an unbalanced pressure cooker. Occasionally, The Wife would ask for a tool—at a certain point it became easier to just awkwardly wheel the tool chest over to her and stagger its various drawers open so she could just access things herself. It looked to her that she was grabbing for things Yosteer had never even used before.

After about forty minutes of vague muttering and the periodic yelp of a severely injured person that has moved incorrectly, The Wife clumsily got back up into a sitting position. Her forearms had been smudged nearly black, though she was pretty certain the ooze hadn’t gotten into her bandaging. “This is going to take me a few days—and that’s if we can find all the parts I need. What I’m going to do is basically just take off the entire increment system. It’ll be harder to select a whole number for measuring, but you won’t have any trouble getting small numbers. The problem is, the increment system is also part of the support, so we’ll need to replace it with something form-fitting that I’ll need to make from scrap.”

Yosteer was staring at her with undiminished reverence as she spoke, while Walou stood with his arms folded and frowned. He haltingly clarified things for Yosteer as she spoke. He hadn’t grown less agitated, or certainly less resentful, but there was a strange animus in him now, as if he’d rediscovered a lost passion.

“You’ll finish it before you’re done here?” Walou asked, and there was something lighter in his voice The Wife couldn’t identify initially.

“I hope so,” said The Wife.

Yosteer handed her a damp rag, and she nodded thanks before working at the grease on her arms with it.

“You’re not going to break it?” Walou said, frowning.

“I hope not,” said The Wife.

“I don’t like this,” said Walou. He shook his head. “Why don’t you just teach Yosteer how to do it?”

“Fine,” said The Wife. “But I have to do it to to teach it.” She stood upright with the rag wadded up in her fist. It had shown, then, in his face. The fear. The uplift on his syllables even under the accent was not just resentment—it was desperation.

The Wife’s face fell a little, then. “This is very important to you,” she said softly. “I understand. I’m not good at much, but I’m good at this.” She motioned, then, between herself and Yosteer. “We can do it.”

Walou’s face screwed up and he jerked his head away. “We are done here. Down you go-eh.”

The Wife nodded, and accepted Yosteer’s help in navigating the way down, which was much easier. The afternoon had advanced significantly, with the breeze taking on a fortuitous cooling effect when the sun began its death rattle across the horizon. Down over the other side of The Wall. The image of that deathly curtain eating the star every single day perforated her concentration as she reached the bottom with the two men.

Yosteer said, “I walk you to Kon-abadon,” and made to take The Wife’s elbow, but Walou put his hand on the energetic man’s shoulder and leveled at authoritative gaze at him, saying something even and short. Yosteer replied, shrugging, and loped his way down toward the other side of the quad. He took a shy look back and The Wife and waved weakly before charging on, not seeing that she had timidly waved back with one hand.

Walou silently began walking in the general direction of Kon-abadon’s, checking once briefly to see if The Wife was following him. She picked up the cue, but blinked curiously at the back of his head as she walked. Walou stayed facing forward, reaching up under his hat to scratch at his head. A long silence played between them over the sounds of bustle and village life and, beyond that, the stirring of the Jungle.

“We were on a scout,” said Walou. “Kamei insisted coming along. She always wanted to explore, but We don’t let her. I said I would keep safe-eh. I gave my word, understand?”

“Yes,” said The Wife faintly.

“The mutant was carrying you, on his arms.” From behind, The Wife could tell Walou was pantomiming a bridal carry. “He walk into clearing with Kamei—I keep her in front so I could see.” He took in a breath. “You were bad. I think... *thought*, you were dead. The mutant knew our language, so I was on back foot. This is no excuse—just what happens. He say, ‘help her please. I do anything.’”

The Wife’s stomach did a horrible flip.

“Kamei wants to help you very bad. She asks me, she gets all—” Walou pantomimed something else, now, but The Wife couldn’t make it out. It seemed like a vaguely annoyed, but also slightly endeared dismissive gesture. “I don’t know he’s mutant yet, so I put Kamei behind me and I approach. Then I wake up, Kamei has revolver, you are on ground in front. Mutant gone. Kamei explains to me, then we walk back here. The rest happens.”

The Wife narrowed her eyes, staring intently into the middle distance and lost in her thoughts. New questions bubbled up in her recollections, new contexts to her oracle, and a cold plunge of suspicion and realization.

“Why are you telling me this?” The Wife asked.

“Yosteer likes you,” said Walou. “We don’t do... talk-around. We don’t do flirt.”

“Okay,” said The Wife slowly. “I think I knew that about Yosteer. What’s that got to do with anything?”

Walou sighed, and turned around, frowning angrily at her. “You are blind. That mutant—I marry Kamei. I care about Kamei.” His face fell into an agonized mask of despair. “I failed her, she is like this because of me!” his voice raised, skin turning a shade of violet under his dark tan. He got very close to The Wife—who stood her ground, but her breath quickened. His eyes were glassy and puffy—it became instantly clear to The Wife that he’d been crying regularly. “Do you see this?” he almost yelled in her face, gesturing at his own with saturated remorse. “*This* is face of man about to lose wife!”

The Wife finally took a step back. “Walou, I’m so sorry, I—”

“Shut!” he stomped his foot. “I’m telling you. That mutant in the clearing. He did not have this face.” He gestured at himself again, totally losing his composure now. The Wife thought he might collapse, so she took another hesitant step forward. “He had face like... favorite toy is broken. He had face like he was at job he didn’t like. You are not bad. You contribute to We. You are True-eh.”

“Walou...” The Wife started, and he held up a hand.

“You think about what I say,” he said, trembling. He had nothing playing across his face this way when he shot Dolus in the head during her oracle. He was bereft, in that vision. That had not been a face with no emotion, it had been the face of a man who’d lost everything. He wasn’t just empty, he had been emptied. The Wife looked at the ground, her tunic stirring in the light breeze. Two villagers

had circled a corner and were looking intently at them. They had arrived near Kon-abadon's, but Walou had stopped them outside so he could continue speaking.

"You think on it," Walou said again. "You could belong. That mutant feels no love. He only sees things."

"You don't know him," said The Wife quietly, before she could stop herself.

Walou laughed cruelly. "I take safe bet: neither do *you*."

VI

The next two days had The Wife completely lost in thought. Kon-abadon gave their blessing for The Wife to spend the night up in the observation deck, which greatly exacerbated the tension with Walou, who demanded that he *also* stay the night there, which ended in the horrifically silent and tense night with The Wife not sleeping on the sofa and Walou not sleeping on a bedroll near the console. Both of them had stared up at the ceiling, full of things to say to each other but no energy to be so vulnerable.

Yosteer was a light in the darkness. His energy completely perforated the thick air of resentment between Walou and The Wife, and he dragged her attention with both hands over to their work, which went by astonishingly smoothly. Despite the language barrier—and Walou did have to clumsily assist with this—Yosteer was an incredibly fast learner with very dextrous hands, which allowed The Wife to guide him in some of the finer operations in the undercarriage where her injuries would not allow her to do it herself. She was also able to learn from him—she became comfortable with a few very simple exchanges in We’s language, which they called Orsken. It was a mealy language that used a lot of the back of the mouth, and The Wife had a great deal of trouble with its tones—combined with what she surmised from Walou were Yosteer’s own idiosyncrasies, she didn’t feel confident she’d have an easy time getting past the basics.

When not enthralled by the scope lens, The Wife sat subsumed in contemplation, her thoughts daggering from one scenario to the next. She had to have a plan for her last day in We, as she assumed since Dolus was there in her oracle that this would be the precipitating moment of the killing. She became obsessed with causality, but in a removed way that had her feeling strangely like an outsider in her own life. She was cautious of allowing her fear to make her panic the way it had with the brambles and the Goatmen village. The things around her felt more like pieces of a story than the material conditions that would kill or save her; kill or save the Jungle.

And she became more preoccupied with this, too. How close she was to her goal, the increasing anxiety around what shape the goal would actually take, and the anticipation of seeing Dolus again. She longed for his company, and longed to defend him to everyone she interacted with, for all the futility and selfishness that would betray. She wanted to say, ‘but you haven’t seen him play a game, cook a meal, say a joke, or react to being teased, or how he goes to such lengths to wait on me hand and foot when we’re not struggling to survive in a poison monster,’ or whatever other effortless things she could pull from the category of their journey before it had gone so wrong.

With two days until her fate would beset her, The Wife had essentially nothing but a working part for the lens made out of scrap with Yosteer and some vague hope in a conversation with Kamei, who had her first breakdown the morning they were to fit the part into the larger machine. It was clear that she was tired, and a child, and was throwing a very justifiable tantrum. The Wife could not look at the situation as she passed that morning, Etuth groveling on the dirt thirty feet away, promising to save her, begging her to calm down in case she accidentally fired the gun. The Wife's jaw set for so long after that it began to ache when she lay on the sofa that night, devoid of energy and tense for her final full day in the village. She was going to have to talk to Kamei again tomorrow, and she had decided that that was going to have to be the pivot on which her salvation moved, if there was any to be had at all. She looked miserably at her hands, reflecting on her last few days using them, and her last conversation with Kamei, and her reaction to the story about the book.

The fix had worked. Yosteer wouldn't be able to take a measurement of The Wall until a certain time of day, but they were able to test the new increment system on some well-lit trees below and had confirmed that he would be able to do it fully the following morning.

Walou was sitting on a cushion, looking out a dingy paned window out into the featureless night. The Wife looked over at him, swallowing as she emerged from a reverie about the oracle.

"May I ask you something?" The Wife said in a small voice.

Walou simply looked over at her, withered, face in a deep shadow from the white of the lamp near his face.

"Is We the only True village in the Jungle?"

Walou snorted, twining his fingers through the ends of his mustache. "Complicated question. You ask me, yes."

The Wife considered this for a long while, then said, "so there are other—for lack of a better word, forgive me—*human* villages?"

"The Jungle is vast," said Walou, gesturing big with his hands. "You've been here less than a month. You have only seen tiny pinprick. Yes—they are not True. Some... mutants only, far to the North. Some say they True—the way that you say you are True-eh." He waved dismissively. "The others might not, but I know Ros lying. You don't have a filt."

The Wife looked at the floor.

"I say you are True, though," said Walou wistfully. "Before. Stupid."

"Caught in the moment, maybe?" asked The Wife.

The ticking of a nearby analogue clock seemed to become louder as Walou looked back out the window.

“No,” said Walou. “You wouldn’t get-eh. Things are complicated, right now.”

“You’re worried about the village’s future,” said The Wife. “That’s a lot of pressure.”

Walou shook his head, offering no answer.

“Can I tell you what I think?” asked The Wife, a surge of confidence building as she mulled over what she knew. “While I’m protected by all this context?”

“Whatever,” said Walou. “You stop asking for things you are already going to do-eh.”

The Wife smiled, almost hearing the last bit in Dolus’ voice. “I think you know We can’t put its future on yours and Kamei’s shoulders alone. I think you know it’s time to play with that definition of ‘True’ a little bit. That’s why you said that the other day. Why you talked Yosteer up like that.”

Walou flinched. “I should have say ‘no-eh.’”

That night, The Wife decided on her course of action. She built her case, she established her scenario tests, and she willed the universe to arrange itself in front of her. Not to toss her from one danger to the next like a limp doll, but to receive her effort and pay it heed. She begged reality to reward her in this moment, to give her one thing she could hold onto in the home stretch of her journey—she had come *so far*, and the threat of the oracle had made her nerves fire all the more as she tried to sleep, knees creaking with restlessness and heart pounding in her chest. She remembered Walou’s face, how different it looked, how surprised she really was she’d even recognized this man as the same one. She thought of the fire. She thought of Kamei. If it was all going to end, it had better end brighter than that.

Yosteer came slapstick into the observation deck the next morning. The Wife startled, twinged her ribcage, and let her head fall back in a wordless moan of pain. Walou responded with a jerky wake, getting quickly to his feet and nodding a good morning at Yosteer.

“Sorry, Miss,” said Yosteer, both hands up in a preemptive surrender.

“No,” said The Wife, holding up a hand through her wince. “A fly could kill me, it’s not your fault.”

“I am excited to do the measuring,” said Yosteer. “You will observe, Miss?”

Walou said, “Not sure we all like what we see-eh.”

“I’ve got to speak to Kamei,” said The Wife. “But I’ll admit I’m a bit, er, morbidly curious.”

Yosteer beamed a smile at her. “Yes, Miss. We all nobodies at the end of the world, fighting over nothing all time. Might as well mark it, no-eh?”

The Wife looked at Yosteer for a long time, chest heaving with something foreign and lightweight.

“Get on,” Walou said, posture stiff and face drawn. He and The Wife shared a knowing, strained look, laden with futility.

Yosteer nodded, rolling his eyes playfully, and began worrying over the mechanisms, typing constants and variables and pivots into a dirty database interface, which then spat out other figures on a dot matrix printer as he peered intently into the viewport of the lens.

The Wife watched Yosteer for several anticipatory minutes as he engaged in what was becoming obvious was his life’s work. At the controls of the machine, Yosteer engaged in a sort of observational alchemy, a science for science’s sake that was alien to The Wife, and she realized just how much she had enjoyed doing that same work in this context, where before she could not wait to get away from the factory town and go on a grandiose journey of destiny.

Just as she began to lose herself, Yosteer let out a shaky breath and passed a printout to Walou, who sucked his teeth and balled it up into a wad before tossing it over his shoulder onto the floor.

“Twenty-six,” murmured Yosteer in a beleaguered, puzzled way. “Twenty-six micrometer.”

“That’s almost double the maximum,” The Wife said shakily, recalling the figures Walou had given her. “It’s really speeding up that much?”

“After next measurement,” said Yosteer, who had bent over the crumpled up paper and was smoothing it out on a worktable. “I can calculate growth rate. Not good, though-eh.”

Walou wordlessly left the room.

“How long before...” The Wife trailed off.

Yosteer looked at her with his mouth screwed up in a pained grimace. “Please, Miss, let me work it out tomorrow-eh. Just... today, We enjoy our last day of working electronics.” He smiled wryly at her.

The Wife swallowed. She let her thoughts drift undisciplined toward the selfish question which actually ate her. She attempted to gain control of the sense of rising panic, working out that no matter what, it was extremely unlikely she’d see a visible shift in its approach in her lifetime. But, in the end, since she did not know exactly where the Throne was, it was a haunting variable lost in a series of mindless, apocalyptic questions. Yosteer was right; this could not be shouldered right now. She had told the boar to prioritize, down there in the darkness. She would have to do the same. The Wall didn’t matter if she died at dusk.

Kon-abadon looked The Wife over one last time as she drank some more of the gross, but technically clean, water from the jug by her bedside.

“You’re still pretty far in the red,” said the doctor, poking the fresh bandages over her ribcage. The Wife swatted their hand away on instinct, wincing.

“But your reflexes are better,” Kon-abadon continued with no reaction, looking at a clipboard. “And you seem more alert. You’ve got more energy. If that mutant can really protect you, I guess you’ll be fine. You need to take it slow, though. If we find your body out there, I will curse your soul.”

“You don’t believe in the soul,” said The Wife with a teasing smile.

“Already you’ve got attitude like we know each other,” said Kon-abadon flatly. “My point is, this village has been put on the brink because of you. Don’t make it for nothing.”

“I know,” said The Wife haltingly. She balled her hands up into fists and took a deep breath. “I’d like to talk to Kamei one last time.”

“You spent most of your walking about allowance coming down from the deck,” said Kon-abadon.

“Etuth will only give me ten minutes, anyway,” said The Wife. “It’s important.”

“You know, you tend to ask for things knowing the answer doesn’t really matter.”

The Wife nodded, her teasing simper growing. “I’m told it’s very annoying.”

The Wife stopped at Ros’ residence, passing Kamei on the way and making a gesture she’d learned from Yosteer meant ‘wait,’ which she could tell made the girl very happy. Ros shuffled out into what had become a midday gloom. Light cloudcover had put a muffler on bright Jungle colors, brighter We colors, and apparently Ros’ mood. Her face was drawn and pale, though she smiled plaintively through it at The Wife.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” said The Wife. “It’s been a little while.”

“Not at all,” said Ros, shaking her head. “Come in? I’m alone, you could smoke all you want.”

The Wife smiled. “That’s very tempting, but, ah...” she gripped her forearm with the hand not clinging to the walking stick. “I was actually hoping you would come with me to talk to Kamei. If you’re available.”

Ros frowned, looking at her. “You’re up to something, aren’t you?”

The Wife flinched, taking a full step back with the walking stick dragging loudly and awkwardly in the dirt. “I-I...”

“If you put that girl in any more danger...”

“Ros,” said The Wife, gulping in a hot breath of air in an attempt to douse her fiery nerves. “I know you don’t know me very well. I can’t really... I need to see...” she attempted to start the sentence another two times.

Ros drew a little further back, into her hut. “Do I need to get Walou involved?”

“No!” said The Wife hurriedly, a little bit too loud, then clamped her mouth shut. “No. I’m sorry. I know this is strange, and dangerous, and confusing. I swear to you I will not do anything to endanger Kamei. It’s just that you’ve been kind to me, and I could really use your support. I’m gone forever after today.”

The old woman sighed, then stepped out into the daylight. “Fine,” she said. “Let’s go, then. I’ll be keeping a close eye on you, though. Don’t think I don’t have a way to stop an injured woman from doing something stupid.”

“Of course not,” said The Wife.

Kamei’s face was a little bit red still from the previous day’s events, and The Wife did her best to portray confidence and impassivity while her clammy palms clung sweatily to the walking stick. The Wife sat on her knees this time, which was less comfortable, but easier to stand from. Kamei regarded her with a contemplative frown, and scratched her chin with her free hand. The Wife took breath in very steadily and very exactly. There was a longing, a past and future that would never be, that shared the same bedfellows as the worrying Walou had been doing over herself and Yosteer. She was nostalgic for We, and Kamei, and it wasn’t even over, though it was very, very close.

“Hello, Kamei,” called The Wife. “How are you?”

“The same,” said Kamei, though it wasn’t true. She was tired, and her voice was stuffy and hoarse from shouting. “Sorry you had to see that yesterday.”

“I’d have done worse, and not recovered, in your situation!” said The Wife.

“Yeah, right,” the teen replied. “Anyway, I’ve thought of my story.”

“I’d love to hear it,” said The Wife.

“Does Ros have to be here?” asked Kamei. “It’s... well it’s sort of private.”

Ros chimed in, “if it’s so private, tell it when you don’t have to shout it to the whole village.”

Kamei moved her head in a way that told The Wife she was rolling her eyes. “Fine, okay. Uh, so, Walou and I have only been on one date. Well, two, but you kind of ruined the second one. He won’t call it a date because I’m a little bit young or whatever, and we’re only married because of some other stuff, but it’s a date to me. He took me to a big, gross river a few miles South of here. It’s not potable, obviously, and when the rust washes out of the big basin at the edge of The Wall every so

often, it turns this weird orange color. He'd been tracking the sediment levels and wanted to show it to me when it was at its brightest. Orange is my favorite color, you know. So it's a day out there and a day back, and Etuth didn't want me to go—he's my father, and he's weird about it. I wish he'd be normal." Kamei paused for effect and shifted her gaze over to Etuth, who didn't show any sign of having heard her at all, still with his arms folded like a stone statue.

"I went anyway," said Kamei. "I feel sort of bad. I intentionally screwed up some textile stuff so that Etuth would be busy fixing it and couldn't stop me." Kamei looked wistful, and paused, staring off into space.

The Wife tilted her head, forcing a grin. "Sometimes, with men, you just have to force their hand."

Kamei laughed, with her belly this time.

A pure levity rocked throughout the quad, breaking the tension like an oil droplet on water.

The girl continued: "It was really fun, and really scary sometimes. We saw a big bear with a wax coat, it dripped it everywhere, which was really gross, but I couldn't stop looking at it. Just imagine Jungle, like over there, but if you ran through it carrying a bunch of melting candles. Walou says it's not really wax, it's a kind of fungus, and it's a skin irritant so he wouldn't let me touch it. But I think about it a lot. I wonder if you could make a candle out of it. Anyway, we got to the river at sunset and camped by it. When the river became the same color as the sunset, it was almost like the sunset had split the whole world in half. And then it was like the Jungle had quieted down for me—just for me, in that moment, so I could have a second to look without feeling watched. That sounds weird, I know, but it *really* felt like it was for me. I started really appreciating how beautiful our home is, even though it's difficult and scary and... and it might all end soon, one way or the other. It was worth it. You know? To see that. Worth the journey, and worth living."

The Wife nodded, cheeks hot with tears.

"Um, so, Walou said to me at the river, 'I can't love you the way a husband does, but I can protect you like a husband does. That's what I want. I'm sorry that you feel differently.'" Kamei's voice shook, and she let out a strangled bubble of a sob. "He-he said, 'you can take me for granted.' Isn't that romantic? He's such a dumb sap, even though he doesn't really love me."

"Sounds like love to me," called The Wife. "Why do it at all, if not to be taken for granted?"

Kamei was quiet for a while, though at the distance it seemed like she was restraining a hiccup or a sob every now and again. "Yeah," she finally called hoarsely. "You take your husband for granted, right?"

The Wife smiled. "Of course I do. But, I think, like yours, our marriage is a little bit different."

“How so?” called Kamei.

“I’m sorry, Kamei,” said The Wife genuinely. “I don’t really have the time to get into that. I guess I’ll just say there are many ways to love, and be a partner, and sometimes it’s weird, and sometimes it’s even ugly and messy and complicated and you can’t shout it over thirty feet in ten minutes.”

Kamei laughed.

The Wife looked at Ros, who was also tear-streaked, smiling with nothing but nigh-religious adoration at Kamei. She had forgotten The Wife’s existence, and, The Wife hoped, the revolver, too. The Wife squared her shoulders and rolled her neck, took in a metered breath, ignoring the pounding in her chest and the hollowness in her ribs.

“Kamei, can I ask you something?” she said.

“Of course,” said Kamei.

“You were alone with Dolus for a while. Did he say anything... else to you? That you haven’t told me? Or Walou? Things that weren’t just the rules?”

There was an utterly suffocating silence.

“No,” said Kamei, more steadily than she’d said anything else in their short time conversing.

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

The Wife pushed. “Did you abide?”

“What?” said Kamei. “I don’t know what you mean. I did what he asked, if that’s what you’re asking...” she trailed off, an absence trailing her words, an unsureness. Not the lockstep of Marlay. Not heel-turn of the boar.

A rock of ice formed in The Wife’s chest. She almost wished she was not correct. She almost wished this wasn’t what it took.

“Kamei,” said The Wife evenly. “I would really... I would really like to ask you to put the gun down.”

Ros looked at her with a stone look of confused rage. Etuth mirrored her, though his reaction was of barely restrained physical force.

The Wife looked back at Ros. She tried to put everything in her expression. The desperation of a lost partner, someone who had not stopped fighting for her life for a month straight, as well as all the weight of a lost woman, a woman in a contract, bound by fate, with the weight of a whole world bearing down on the back of her neck. The look of someone crushed by responsibility, given to a course of life, someone with power but not freedom, and survival instead of life. She mouthed the

word, ‘please,’ begging, pleading with her eyes, her skin alive with sweat and panic before she took a solitary step toward Kamei.

“Stay back!” shouted Kamei.

“Kamei,” said The Wife as Etuth started forward and clamped his arm on her elbow.

“Walou!” Etuth screamed.

The Wife managed to pivot away from the man that had driven himself too far—his exhausted fingers pried painfully at her elbow, and he tried to take a limp swing at her that missed as he fumbled for his gun. Ros had been effectively stunned by the brazenness, the oddity, the absurdity. We, the village, realized then that the boundary around Kamei may as well have been physical. For all they wanted to taze The Wife, to shoot her in the head, nobody could muster the will to cross or fire into the circle. Nobody could stop The Wife as she drove the walking stick into the dirt and surged forward. A clump of dirt exploded in front of her and to the left just as a clanging rifle shot rang out. She had to keep going. These bullets were not scary. She knew which bullets were scary, because she knew what alternative was to be had.

“Kamei,” she called. “You are such a smart girl. You are so clever, and so many people adore you. Not your womb—you.” She took another step—by this point, she was well within the thirty-foot boundary, and she could see Walou bursting from his security building in the distance, his own revolver raised.

“Everyone knows it, but they’ve failed to tell you. It happens. It’s hard. People get scared and they close ranks, Kamei. It’s not their fault. But there are a million better ways, a million less wasteful ways, a million ways to keep Walou and keep We, and they’re all out there! Where you want to be. Where rivers cut the world in half at dusk! *Put down the gun.*”

Ros was saying something to Etuth in a panicked rage, but everyone had stopped moving, for Kamei had not pulled the trigger and The Wife had come well within thirty feet. The girl looked so much worse up close. Pocks of scabbed skin where she had idly scratched herself, pale ashiness on her legs and arms from sun exposure, and blemishes from dry tears sprung up all over her body as The Wife got her first good look.

As soon as she was in arm’s reach, The Wife dropped the walking stick and raised both her hands. “I’m in as much danger as you, right now. I know you didn’t want to get anyone else mixed up in this. You just saw an opportunity. How far are you going to take it, Kamei?”

Kamei’s lip wobbled, her eyes glassy, a hot, salty droplet running down her blemished cheek. She reached, with her free hand, over to her elbow, and fiddled with a metal protrusion at the joint.

The gun arm dropped instantly down into the dirt, limp, like a broken swing.

Gasps echoed throughout the quad. Walou was now bounding forward like a charging lion.

“That’s right,” said The Wife. “You can fix this.”

Kamei shook her head. “You’re nice,” she said over a full, wracking sob as she suddenly collapsed into despaired slump. “But you don’t know anything.”

Walou had reached them, and looked caught between full-body tackling The Wife and full-body tackling Kamei. He was frozen for a moment, eyes darting wildly between the two of them, legs spread wide and ready to pounce.

“Sometimes,” said The Wife, catching Kamei’s eye contact with an intense look. “With men, you have to force their hand.” The Wife realized distantly that Yosteer was also here, behind Walou, wringing his hands nervously. He now also had a gun on his hip, a small automatic. He was anxiously stepping forward, around Walou, trying to get his attention.

Kamei looked up at her, confused, distressed, lost. At once a child caught in a terrible lie and a woman at the crossroads of a breakthrough or a breakdown.

“Fine!” Kamei shouted suddenly, her face now breaking from a placid resignation into a hot fury. Snot streaked her upper lip. Tracks left by tears carved her cheeks into angry lines. “I made it up! I thought... I thought someone would fuck this up. I thought nobody actually cared about me. I thought... I thought this was a good way to kill myself.” The last part came all out in a rush, and stunned Walou and Yosteer even further. “I don’t want to have babies! I don’t want to have babies!” She screamed, twice, then more, then a fifth time.

The Wife frowned down at her, her leg aching without the walking stick, sympathy coursing through her mind. It made her head heavy. “I swear, Kamei, Walou will help. There are others out there. You can build a support network. Form other relationships.” She looked at Walou, and despaired. His face had blossomed into an unknowable apoplexy. She’d crossed a line. She’d stepped on his toes. She hadn’t let him reach this conclusion on his own—but there simply hadn’t been enough time.

Kamei saw this, too.

Yosteer was now bellowing something at someone behind The Wife. He’d raised his automatic pistol and was gesturing at someone with the barrel, shooing them.

Walou said something very loud in a hauntingly still, unbroken voice. The Wife thought she could maybe make out ‘put’ and ‘down.’

Kamei lifted the revolver to her lower abdomen. “Get Kon-abadon,” she said in a low voice only Walou, Yosteer, and The Wife could hear.

Then she pulled the trigger.

VII

The quad erupted into a chaotic throng. The Wife, pushed down suddenly by Yosteer as a bullet zipped through the air above her, saw only bits and pieces of it as she was hauled around, trampled, shot at again. When she was able to come to her senses and think through the agony, she realized Yosteer was dragging her out of the people who had clambered forward to help Kamei, who had fallen backwards into the dirt, clutching her wound in silent agony.

Every one of The Wife's injuries was forcibly moved in the wrong way, causing a staccato thrum to cascade throughout her body. She could not resist the pained, sharp yelp as Yosteer hauled her out of the crowd to meet Kon-abadon and Etuth. Kon-abadon had a smock draped over their front and was hurriedly putting on gloves as Etuth breathlessly coughed out desperate information and held their surgical bag tight with both hands. Neither of them even looked at The Wife. Nobody did—not even Yosteer, who was now pulling her harshly by the wrist toward the hospital.

The Wife, who was too overwhelmed to speak, just continued to make involuntary sounds of protestation as her joints erupted, stiff and swollen. They reached her room, which was still cluttered with half-finished volunteer repair projects. She looked at them with intense remorse dancing over her trembling upper lip.

“Walou has supply... thing, mark by two burnt trees. River bank. Direct South from village. Red concrete marker. Past supply thing, further South, there is ruins—this was meeting place. You go alone. Everyone too busy right now—but quick.” Yosteer was recollecting things, counting on his trembling fingers. He had hunched slightly, his wiry frame buckling under the rush of his thoughts. “I think they don't spare you. You must go quickly-eh.”

“I'll try,” said The Wife, realizing she didn't have her stick.

Yosteer proffered the jug of farm water with her distiller in it. It was half-empty now, and still heavier than The Wife could really lift on her own. She'd have to drag it all the way to wherever Dolus was, or else abandon it and hope he had found something on his own to share with her.

“I...” he turned away. “I wish you aren't with mutant. We all do-eh.”

The Wife looked at him sadly. “I wish I agreed.” She had only thought of derailing the oracle during her interment in We. A tense moment passed between them, the silent observation of a falling star. The cough after a near-miss.

“Good luck, Yosteer,” said The Wife.

“And you-eh,” said Yosteer stiffly.

“I... I’ll never forget. Thank you,” she said heavily and clumsily in Orskan. She looked at him again, in the dim light of her room as she painfully shouldered the handle of the water jug, which threatened to topple her over until she gained some stability. Yosteer was as gangly and awkward-looking as ever in the dimness, machine parts glittering in the minimal sunlight through the window slats, flaking with paint. A mute paralysis took hold of The Wife, and she felt as though she were watching a train chortle away with everything she knew in its cars. She worried her lips into a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, and then she turned and left.

She saw Kon-abadon, Walou, Etuth, and a burly woman carrying Kamei into the hospital as she hobbled away. The girl was conscious. None of them dared to spare her a glance. The air was cut through, unspoken. *If We look at you, We shoot you.*

Sun high in the sky, she slowly made her way South. Villagers not present for the drama, or who had had jobs to do, gave her a quick second of their attention as she passed by before returning to their duties, unaware for now of what exactly had occurred down at the quad. The Wife cried quietly to herself as she crossed the boundary past the cherry red concrete trail marker. She barely noticed the Jungle rearing up on her now. It helped that We had woven itself seamlessly into the ranks of the beast, like the Goatmen had, but there was no pausing. She kept her wits up, listening, looking. She remained alert, and tried to stay calm, but none of this changed the wobbliness of her vision as tears stung her eyes.

The foliage here was incredibly dense, but the individual trees were strangled, thin things that knotted around each other in strange, bulbous growths unlike any flora she’d seen to date. She often had to painfully maneuver herself through clumps of soil-caked root knots and tubules of strange, twitching vines. She had gone far South to reach Walou’s supply cache, which she found surprisingly easily, as he’d torched two more standard-looking trees into what amounted to a big black signpost over disturbed earth. She dug at with her hands until it released a locked cache box, which was no match for her ability to use the screwdriver she’d stolen from Kon-abadon to pry off the hinges.

Inside was an old, scratched up revolver, six bullets, a heavy-duty waterproof switch lighter, a decently-stocked first aid kit, some kind of synthetic lubricant presumably for internal machinery, and a single use water distillation cartridge, which could be fit into her distiller to refresh it for another few uses. There was also a sachet of nutrient powder like the kind Kon-abadon had stirred into the water they’d given her instead of full meals. The cache box itself was about the size of a small dog, and The Wife couldn’t carry it and the water jug at the same time without such a significant slowdown as to lean dangerously close to spending the night alone. Her tunic had two pockets, so she stuffed the nutrient

pack and distillation cartridge in one and the bullets and switch lighter in the other. Then, she used the majority of the first-aid kit and water jug to clean and redress her own wounds. After only a week, they weren't much better, and in fact new bruises had blossomed an irritated purple from all the injections and treatments from Kon-abadon. But she could move, and before all the excitement had blown her around and exacerbated her now-chronic pain, she was starting to feel energy return to her again. Finally, she took the revolver and stuffed it into the waistband of her breeches, checking the safety. She'd get a lecture from Dolus, but it was better than being alone and empty-handed.

The Wife continued South, only fully understanding that she was completely alone in the Jungle now, and just as much at its whim. It was slow traveling, the boredom colliding with the paranoia in an incredibly drawn-out and unpleasant charade of morbid fantasies and false planning for situations that didn't happen, and still she preferred that over reliving the events of the day over and over again, trapped in a labyrinth of imagining different outcomes. Eventually, the ruins came into view. It was really a singular ruin, a dilapidated shell of one building reduced to rebar supports, cinderblocks, and one standing corner curled around the remains of a moldering seating arrangement like a mother bear frozen in a moment of protection.

She saw a toppled tree and sat on the hollowed-out trunk, sweeping away a nest of termites. She thought of Kamei, unable to discipline her thoughts. Kon-abadon had saved The Wife from what sounded like much worse—a thought that eased her, and let her keep her thoughts forward-facing. Still, her chest ached, and she caught herself one too many times looking miserably at her feet instead of keeping her eyes on the darkening spaces between trees as dusk began to come.

She saw him first, which surprised her. He was walking in the direction of the village in front of her, crossing from right to left in her field vision. Without his coat, the stained white cotton shirt clung to the muscles in his arms and chest, draped over his gut, and exacerbated the strange shape of his humpback. To a stranger, Dolus might be terrifying now, greasy hair hung in a curtain over his somber, wary face, which was stuck in a glower even when neutral. His chest and stomach were riddled with crimson-brown stains from where he'd been impaled on the boar.

He turned sharply when he noticed someone was looking at him, and the tension that had seized his entire body evaporated like a steam geyser when they made eye contact. His shoulders slumped, and he let out a breath so loud she could hear it even from how far away she was. He almost bounded at her like a worn polar bear, arms outstretched.

The Wife stood, bearing in the sight of her partner after what felt like eons, and allowed him to embrace her. He coughed in a lame attempt to cover the sob that retched from his haggard throat. He

was gentle, squeezing her tighter in uninjured places, and she stayed stiff-armed in his embrace for a few quiet moments. Under the body odor, the blood, the oil stains, the stench of raw exposure and exhaustion, she caught his scent—his moody, oaken musk, like a freshly stained antique table baking in the sun.

He finally let go, stepped back, surveying, appraising, and diagnosing.

Against the pain of it, The Wife wound up the entire left side of her body and leaned her pathetic mass of weight into a single punch to Dolus' face.

VIII

“You had better have a list of justifications. So help me, Dolus, convince me there was a good reason for all that,” The Wife shouted, spittle streaking her husband’s cheek as he sat there caressing his completely uninjured chin. “Do you have any idea what those people went through? Do you have *any* idea!” She deteriorated into a whirl of anger, striking him in the shoulder again and again until he pushed her arms to her sides and held her again, at which point she broke like an old dam and melted into the embrace, completely unintelligible.

“I am so sorry,” Dolus said, voice trembling uncharacteristically. Even The Wife had trouble extricating his real feelings from his speech sometimes, but the relief in his voice was unmistakable. “Things went wronger than they have ever gone.”

“You let that girl try to kill herself.”

“I used a situation that already existed to ensure your safety. No other doctor could have done this for you.”

The Wife pulled away, clarity returning. “That’s all you have.”

“What?”

“That’s the only thing you could think to do? Have a girl sit there with a gun to her head for almost seven straight days under false pretenses?” She threw her hands up, taking multiple steps away from him. “Do you even understand how monstrous I felt. Do you even understand what those people think of us?”

“Frankly,” said Dolus. “That is immaterial.”

“You *are* a monster,” said The Wife. “Who are you? Did the man I marry die in the teleportation? What happened to you?”

“Truly,” said Dolus. “I am. I told you that the day we met.”

“You’re not even going to try,” said The Wife, stunned. Her mouth hung open. “You aren’t even going to try and fake empathy. They really were just a stepping stone to you. An entire people. They have their own language, Dolus. You almost made me party to a genocide.”

“Kamei did that,” said Dolus flatly. “She already had an entire plan. We just happened to be the missing piece she needed.”

“She is a *child!*” screamed The Wife.

“You’re belittling her,” said Dolus. “You weren’t there—not really. You do not understand what she saw in me. You did not see me begging for your life.” He choked up.

“And you weren’t there in the underground,” said The Wife. “You don’t know what happened to me.”

“And who put you there?” Dolus said, his features sharpening. The hollow of his throat had tightened as his mouth twisted into a snarl. “Who put you down in the chrome after being explicitly told you could asphyxiate at any moment? Who escalated the incident with the Goatmen?” He stepped toward her; she backed up. “Do you have any idea how impossible it is to control a full material teleportation? I could have put us straight into The Wall and that would have been that.”

“Actually, I don’t have any idea,” screamed The Wife. “Because you don’t tell me any damn thing!”

“Keep your voice down,” said Dolus. “It isn’t safe here.”

“It isn’t safe anywhere,” said The Wife coldly. “Not even with you.”

Dolus flinched. He looked like a punched dog.

The Wife stepped forward. “You know, since you’ve been off sulking quietly to yourself while I fight for my life, I actually learned a few things, and I realized a few others. You haven’t told me anything *at all*. You haven’t justified your actions in We, you haven’t justified our entire journey, you never told me about The Wall advancing—” she noticed, here, Dolus’ violent physical reaction to this information, as if his entire body was being assaulted by a thousand daggering hands “—you never told me what exactly I’m supposed to do besides sit on an old chair and smile stupidly, and you know what? I’m starting to think you’re just full of nothing. I’m starting to consider the possibility that you’re a liar. If I didn’t know for a fact you’ve never asked me to abide, I’d suspect I’m just one of your stupid pigs or goats that you throw at problems every time you—”

“Enough,” Dolus said. There was something under his voice that shut The Wife up instantaneously. It wasn’t a threat of violence; inconceivable, really, even now. It wasn’t even a threat at all. It felt like looking at The Wall. It was an impenetrability, a finality. It was a reminder that Dolus was eons older than her, and while he practiced much restraint in their relationship, this conferred to him a level of authority she could not hope to comprehend. “I understand you’re upset. You may hate me and rant at me all you wish. But we are too close now to have doubts, and I am deadly serious. It is not safe to go around screaming your head off this deep in the Jungle. For both our sakes, don’t make all of this worth nothing. The rules still apply. I need you to listen to me now.”

“All of the good that’s done us,” said The Wife petulantly. “Fine. You’re right. It’s too late to go back. But just know this, Dolus. Every day I was alone, even with the boar, I trusted you a little less. For a second there, I—” tears welled up in her eyes, which frustrated her. She didn’t think she had any left. “For a minute, I...”

“You wanted to learn Orsken,” said Dolus, taking her arm gently. “You wanted to stay.”

The Wife burst into another full fit, and as she blubbered quietly in her despair, Dolus refit all her things into his own pockets and made a better holster for her rifle out of vines and a piece of deteriorated leather found in the ruin. He gave her some real food-it was desaturated and dried jerky of unknown origin, tough and miserable and flavorless, but it felt incredible to masticate and dig into something like a creature reborn, pre-social and instinctual. It was something simple in a mire of dreadful complication.

And they departed. It was stiff between them, now. Too much had happened and they were unable to slow down and process it all together. They walked farther apart than they had before. The Wife kept up her own sentry instead of clinging to Dolus. She kept her revolver in her thoughts. At night, Dolus would curl up against her, whispering apologies, and she would allow him to provide her warmth, but she never forgave out loud, nor even responded to him when he spoke to her. She followed directions but offered no earnestness. It wasn't the petulance of a silent treatment, but more the calm before a storm. The Wife found herself stockpiling aggression and frustration to use on predators or to release on Dolus all at once when they got to their destination.

Their biggest challenge was reliable sources of food. The water distiller worked for two more uses, and they'd kept the jug from We, so theoretically between the two of them they had a month's supply of water if they could reliably locate streams that weren't too dirty. They were tormented by poisonous berries, tempting meat that was just as dangerous dead as it had been alive, and the crushing disappointment of a sealed ration found in a ruin to be so old the contents were just unaffected dust. They only had, by Dolus' estimation, another two weeks of constant journeying until they got to their destination, but the first week alone felt like an unbearable dredge longer than any leg of their journey so far. The silence between them didn't help. It felt like a sinister arbiter for the flow of time, a nameless and incorporeal frustration that could only be addressed by the earnestness both partners were too petulant to share.

Even emergencies were muted and annoying rather than truly scary. The Wife felt numb when bipedal dogs snarled at them from the brush, or when carnivorous plants tried to ensnare them. The Wife used three bullets in the first week, only one of which was an actual kill. Dolus didn't take the gun from her. At this point, the idea of conserving his psychic energy was a bad joke, and he had begun simply demolishing things that proved too threatening for a firearm. The Wife could see that it damaged and exhausted him, as tense nights before bed began to include shows of Dolus mopping up severe nosebleeds and becoming immobilized by tension headaches. They both felt it; the withering last steps of a marathon, where one stops caring about the big picture and starts throwing everything at

every little stepping stone just to get oneself closer to the end, doing anything just to make it all seem a little bit faster.

“I’m sorry,” said The Wife one night over the half-glow of their buried camp embers. She was looking at him laying flat on his back, rubbing his temples with his eyes closed. She spoke softly, touching his forehead with a rag torn off her tunic and dipped in their water. “I don’t know how to forgive you. But I said things I didn’t mean the other day. Of course you’ve kept me safe.”

They were in a small thicket surrounded by barbed plants, most of which had been alive and ready to prey on them until a few hours earlier. They had made a grotesque nest out of the dead plant matter for a light degree of protection as they slept. The canopy here was as dense as ever, and the day had been exceptionally hot. The steam released from the root systems and dense soil as the temperature dropped had made the area feel like a muggy cave, and reminded The Wife of the underground facility. Slip-sheet sounds of fur over flesh sounded in the distance—some predator sloughing off with the last of their meal—and a low whine of an insect swarm nearby was the soundtrack for the evening.

“I wish it had not turned out that way,” said Dolus. “But it would be inappropriate for me to apologize in return. I don’t regret my actions. They will allow the residents of We to live longer, in the end.”

“How?” said The Wife cautiously, as if offering her scent to a feral cat. “I know how, vaguely. But truly, Dolus. What am I to do on the Throne? Why have you kept everything so obfuscated?”

Dolus sighed. “The Throne is a unique device with a genetic lock. It works on the same principles as The Wall in some ways. It is difficult to describe, but I should have tried, anyway. That is an apology I feel comfortable offering. I’m sorry, Wife.”

“Can you try now?” she asked.

Dolus worried at this for a second, dropping his hands from his temples. He sniffled, and opened his eyes, looking up at her through those split pupils.

“It sounds ludicrous, but you’re going to see it soon anyway,” he said. “It works with your imagination.”

The Wife blinked, a nonplussed expression tugging at her lips.

“It is a machine capable of generating spontaneous matter based on the principles of its user. The Wall was generated much the same way, but it was used by desperate, ignorant people. It created a force of unnature that will end us all one day.”

“Are you saying the Throne is responsible for The Wall?” The Wife said haltingly.

“No,” said Dolus. “But the technology is similar. I can give you an example. The last Queen of the Jungle to whom I was chevalier used the Throne to create the chrome. Those underground facilities

used to produce antibodies and soil nutrients as well as autonomous ecology drones that rebalanced the ecosystems of the Jungle. Back then, it wasn't that the Jungle was wild and uncontrollable, strangling everything within it like a cancer. It was just dying. The Salt Desert was eating it. The chrome fixed the issues. But history is long, and difficult, and complex. I can't even remember everything. The bloodline was scattered, the facilities grew ancient and haunted without someone to use the Throne. And here we are."

The Wife took this in, sitting with him and absently daubing him with the rag before he gently prized it from her fingers and set it aside.

"So, in the end, she just created the new problem it has," said The Wife. "She manipulated the ecology directly, and it spiraled out of control."

"That is one way of looking at it," said Dolus. "Another way of looking at it is: in an innumerable long history of suffering, conflict, and crisis, she carved out an entire era of stability and peace. Many people lived their lives in wholesome passion, fulfilled in service to each other and to themselves in their communities."

"And villages like We pay for it now," said The Wife. "The Goatmen."

"Every new birth is a loan against the sins of the past," said Dolus.

"If you had told me all this earlier," said The Wife. "I would have had time to think of what I would do."

"You've already been thinking about it," said Dolus. "Every probing question you asked the Head Goatman, or me, or Ud. I would bet real money you did the same thing in We. I do not talk about it in advance because I believe the Throne works only if you come to it without preconceptions. It works best on your unconscious—the things so constitutive of who you are that you cannot see them on your own. Your genetics are one thing, Wife, but *you* are the Queen the Jungle needs, and this has all been part of your coronation."

The Wife batted at his shoulder bashfully. "You flatter me," she said.

"You won't do it yourself. You keep saying you can't do anything without me. I haven't even been with you for over a week, and here you are."

"Crippled," said The Wife nonchalantly, raising her bandaged arm and stiffly kicking her sore legs.

"You want to make something that lasts forever," said Dolus. He propped himself up on his elbows. "A noble impulse, but impossible. Nothing lasts forever."

"What about The Wall?" asked The Wife.

Dolus, in a rare show, smiled big with his teeth. “Ironically, I truly do not know. But in some ways, that reinforces my point. The proof that nothing lasts is looming above us as we speak.”

“Makes you wonder what the point is,” said The Wife, looking out past their corpse nest and into the inky blackness, and the noises within its folds.

“Does it?” said Dolus.

“Of course,” said The Wife. “They measure The Wall at We, did you know that? It’s advancing at an exponential rate every three hundred-odd days.”

There was a brief moment where, even in the darkness, even when the only light illuminating him was from a dead fire, Dolus seemed overcome by an immense shadow. A sudden weight pressed against his features, and in an almost imperceptible instant, he looked as hollow as Walou had looked in the oracle. “Staring at death is paralyzing, and paralysis wastes time. Would you not rather die with purpose, working toward an end? Would you not rather seek comfort in the time you have left? Anything else is a tragic waste.”

“Sure,” said The Wife. “But the hopelessness is crushing sometimes.”

Dolus nodded, and tossed some fresh dirt over the embers, dousing them both in a sheet of night. “That is why we have each other. I will hold it up when you cannot.”

The Wife let out an involuntary squeak, eyes hot again. “I cry too much,” she murmured.

“No such thing,” said Dolus.

IX

The ziggurat was visible from a high hillside that was slippery with mud and loose rocks. There was a high fog in the air that had nestled among the lower-hanging tree branches, and for a full day the ground had been invisible under a thick layer of undulating kudzu. It was host to a mire of wretched creatures, and The Wife had used the last of her bullets and also lost the revolver in an attempt to use it as a bludgeon. The injuries on The Wife's legs seemed to be clearing up rapidly, as she no longer experienced harrowing spells of stiffness or painful itching. Her arm had scabbed up, and she'd been able to let it breathe. The biggest problem was still her rib, which hurt less from moment to moment, but could still rear up in painful fury if she moved incorrectly or had to sprint anywhere.

It had been unmistakably pristine white, once. Pockets of uninterrupted masonry could still be seen underneath a strangling layer of vines. Two massive strangler figs had erupted from over the top, and as Dolus and The Wife closed in on it, its overall shape and structure became indistinguishable from the flora and fauna of it all. The sharp edges of the facade became lost in a latticework of tough roots and oppressive greenery. After the hill dipped down into waist-high grass, they lost the ziggurat completely in the Jungle, but The Wife had known the instant she'd seen it that it was their destination.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked idly as Dolus parted reeds with his hands ahead of her, checking all directions to make sure there weren't predators hiding in the tangle.

"You," said Dolus.

"Me, too," said The Wife. "How long do you think?"

"A few hours," said Dolus. "How do you feel? Stay behind me—closer. That is good. I cannot tell if there is anything circling around."

"Anxious," said The Wife. "Nervous."

Dolus was silent. His body language had locked up, and he was rigidly looking to the left around a knot of young cacao trees. "Clear," he said finally.

"I hope I do well," said The Wife.

"You will," said Dolus. "I have never doubted this."

"Not once? I don't believe you," The Wife retorted.

"Not once."

"When you were unconscious," said The Wife. "Do you remember anything?"

"No," said Dolus. "That state is almost purely vegetative. I probably seemed simply asleep, but my psyche had temporarily left my body."

"That's terrifying," said The Wife.

“Yes,” said Dolus. “It is why I don’t drink alcohol.” He paused, seeming to consider if he should say his next words or not. “And especially why I don’t drink alcohol and then do an extremely complex full matter teleportation.”

“I’m sorry,” said The Wife. “The oracles—”

“They frighten you.”

“Yes,” said The Wife. “They’re dreadful. But I... well, I regret that things were painful and very tenuous for a long while there, but I can’t say I preferred the alternative. Do all Queens have oracles?”

“No,” said Dolus. “In fact, none of them have.”

“Oh,” said The Wife.

“If you can learn how to have them voluntarily, they may just be your greatest boon.”

“Maybe I should have learned from Ud,” said The Wife, wrinkling her nose.

“No,” said Dolus. “Psychic prowess cannot be taught. It is personal to each individual mind. It works on vastly different levels from one person to the next. Realistically, though we tend to categorize them to make sense of them, no two similar psychics are even doing remotely the same things.”

The Jungle opened to them suddenly, and they were in a barren clearing littered with razor-edge flat tree stumps and decayed robotic structures. Some were whole drones, so choked by plant matter and rust that they had become something more like a monument, or a warning post. Some still chattered, immobilized, cursed by solar power to rot in the dirt until their receptors finally died out. The Wife frowned sadly at them as she walked by. “Was this an important place?”

“Yes,” said Dolus. “We’ve been within the boundaries of what was once a capitol city since the broken boundary stone the other day. This was an open-air assemblage.”

“How is that even possible?” asked The Wife. “Open air and precision mechanics? What’s the point of the chrome, then?”

Dolus turned to her, his face etched deep into his classical somber expression. A wry smile teased the corner of his mouth, and his eyes seemed sad and lonely. “Would you believe me if I told you I honestly do not remember?”

“Yes,” said The Wife. “But that’s not very satisfying.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you, my Queen.”

“Stop with all that,” said The Wife. “We’re not there, yet.”

“But we will be,” said Dolus. He’d lost against the sad smile. Usually, however rare, Dolus’ smiles were a flash in a pan. A lightning bolt. The dwarf in the flask—a smiling, mischievous shadow that betrayed a lust for adventure. She lived for those moments, when he could no longer hide the deep joy a journey could bring him. It made her feel a part of it—part of the joy, part of the wonder. Part of

the stress and fear and sadness, too. But to her, that was the marriage. All of it. “You had better get used to it.”

“No,” said The Wife. “Not from you. I want to hear you call me Wife until I’m a skeleton.”

“Skeletons can’t hear,” said Dolus flatly.

“I will, when I’m one,” said The Wife. “But only if you call me Wife.”

“You are stubborn and petulant,” said Dolus.

“You are stubborn and petulant...” said The Wife expectantly, punching Dolus in the rear end.

“You are stubborn and petulant, *Wife*,” said Dolus. His voice had shaken abruptly, so The Wife stopped him and spun him by the shoulder. He resisted, at first, but then allowed himself to pivot, and The Wife could see that a smattering of tears had developed on his cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Dolus. “I am... I am grateful for you, that is all.”

“You’re a sap,” said The Wife, laughing. “You’re such a fraud.”

“The genetic lock could have awakened to anyone,” said Dolus. They’d stopped walking for a moment, and he’d seized her by the shoulders. “It could have been anyone, and that person could have just been a burden and a responsibility. We could have had no chemistry. We could have hated each other, but been forced together.” The look on his face, and the sad smile from before, all told The Wife he was speaking from a haunted experience, deep in the forgotten annals of his too-long past. His mouth turned into a perfect U-frown, and more tears edged out from his split-iris eyes. “But I got you.”

“Shut up,” said The Wife. “You’re all salty now—stop that!” she wriggled against his sudden, tough embrace, but he was like a stone wall. He would not be swayed—the intimacy crushed her, and she folded into him like a wet winter leaf against a chain link fence.

“Thank you,” he said. He said it again, his face buried in her hair. He said it again and again, sobs billowing up from his tangled mane of greasy hair. She tangled her fingers in it and held him back.

“You’re welcome,” said The Wife. “Now keep walking, husband. We’re in the home stretch, and I’m eager to sit down.”

It was so much bigger in person.

It yawned over her head, an impossible monument to an impossible task. The end of the road. The Zahir of her journey, and the final jewel in her crown. It was a stunning work of impermanence, mottled by time and the stain of ever-changing life. Jagged edges folded into intricate roots and formed the looming visage of a titan caught in a snare. It gestured at her, invisible hands outstretched, proverbial maw open in a cry for help. A desperate bid for purpose, one that only she could grant. She

laid her worn boot on the first step and gasped out a strangled cry of relief and catharsis. Stained green in streaks and totally obscured by flora in some places, the steps up to the shadowy gate of the entrance were a journey on their own. Her body seemed to scream against this final obstacle, and while her legs had seen a marked improvement, she felt a tenuous backslide into discomfort as she strained the muscles in them with each careful lunge.

A large square of black shadow passed up over her as she neared the top. It was only the threshold of a large vault door that was, of course, sealed. A rusted terminal was situated within the enclosure, submerged in the midday shadow of the opening itself. The interface still worked. A small receptor tray was jutting out underneath the terminal interface. The Wife touched it, and found it was oiled with some indeterminate substance to keep from rusting.

The terminal beeped shrilly, causing her to withdraw in surprise. The screen flashed a message in what seemed to be an alphabet, but she couldn't make out any recognizable symbols.

"Well," said Dolus. "I suppose you don't need any instructions."

A deafening hiss of pneumatics was followed by an explosive *clunk* of metal slotting into place, and then the vault door began to squeal back into its housing.

"Why didn't you teach me how to read the language?" she asked, offended.

"You'll learn by doing," said Dolus simply. "Trying to learn a language outside its context is useless."

The Wife frowned at him.

The opening of the massive bulkhead was a five-minute ordeal, during which The Wife was once again struck dumb and paralyzed the weight of this place. She suddenly felt as though the entire structure were perched singularly on her shoulders.

"What if I'm not ready?" she said finding her voice very small and weak.

"You never will be," said Dolus. "That is why you're frightened. There is no way to be ready, except to come here, and to take your place."

"What if I don't deserve it?" she said, even though she had taken multiple steps forward.

"False concept," said Dolus. "Nobody deserves anything. It is just bodies hitting bodies in this universe. You cannot torture yourself by trying to imagine more."

The Wife sighed.

The door opened. A klaxon sounded three times, and the couple was briefly bathed in an ominous, red rotating light as it swung across their forms and briefly bathed the massive interior chamber in flat red paint. The auxiliary lights slapped on, bare white fluorescents bathing everything in

a clinical, impartial glow that revealed the flaws of time and the beauty of the architecture in one dispassionate swoon.

It was just as dirty inside as it had been on the outside, just in a different way.

Dust coated rows of terminals and computational machinery. Girders lined with thick ropes of cable crossed high over their heads as they entered. It was a bit like a massive server farm at the heart of a factory town, but decrepit, unorganized, and elaborate. The walls all around the huge, square facility were lined with instruments of various uses and types, all under a thick blanket of grime and dust. Broken pieces of machinery littered the floor. Rust reached its great, timeless claws and batted at all visible surfaces in dismaying streaks of hazy color.

At the center was the Throne. It was a simple, white marble chair in a huge, unbroken glass tube. An electric coil stood at the top. The floor beneath it was a row of drain latches, and two large metal spouts reared up on either side.

“How do I get in?” asked The Wife. Her voice bounced uncertainly off the walls, tamped by the accumulation of filth, but repeating her question back to her nevertheless in some eternal, final taunt.

“Give me a moment,” said Dolus. He had gone straight over to a terminal close by the Throne and was tapping gingerly at its interface. Clicks and whines rose from the machine. It had a similar receptor plate, which Dolus touched to a confirming beep this time. Several seconds passed during which unseen machinery moved within the walls and under their feet, squealing with stiffness and disuse, before the glass tube around the Throne lifted high into the air.

The Wife took shallow, sharp breaths. Her heart fired off in her chest.

“We could spend the night here. You could claim it tomorrow morning, if you wanted,” said Dolus. He looked more tired, more old, more burdened than she had ever seen him as he turned to face her. Etched in his lines was the haunting crush of nostalgia. His eyes were glassy with the same feeling she had experienced turning away from Yosteer. Running from We. A crossroads. A rare moment where one could feel the trajectory and weight of their decision, and could either direct the sensation or be crushed by regret. It was the exact opposite of looking at The Wall; everything mattered. Every thrill of blood in the veins, every intake of musty Throne air, it all mattered more than the Sun in this moment.

The Wife smiled, and shook her head, and Dolus nodded. No more words passed between them, and he turned back to the console.

“Queen of the Jungle,” he said in an authoritative voice, as if they had an audience. “Please claim your seat of power.”

The Wife held her head high. The silence fell like a curtain, punctuated by the muted stomp of her boots on the stone floor. She approached.

“The tube will lower, and the Throne will be submerged. It is breathable,” said Dolus. “Do not panic. Stay in your conviction. It is likely nothing will happen the first time. But we’ll do this every day until structures begin to take shape.”

“What will they be?” asked The Wife. She lowered herself into the seat, feeling the unforgiving stone against her. She sank into her future, and it was cold and narrow and strange and hard where the Jungle had been hot and wide and angry, with just enough give to make everything a trap.

“We have no way of knowing,” said Dolus. “And yet it is entirely up to you.”

He turned to look at her as the glass lowered between them. It warped him slightly, widened him, and crushed his height into a cartoonish crumple. She smiled.

A pungent fluid began to rush from the faucets at either side. She maintained her shallow, reedy breaths, but her heart would not relent. It thrummed in her throat, and she noticed her knuckles white and strained against the armrests of the Throne.

This was for her; it had been waiting for her. This was where she belonged, out of everywhere.

Dolus’ face, warped by the glass, was impenetrable. His age had truly begun to show as they’d approached the Throne. For a moment she no longer saw her husband, but a withered mummy, pockmarked by the endless sandstorm of time and cycle, beaten by its sands into a shape no longer human. There was relief, too, though, his shoulders free of something unknowable, and she knew that he stood straighter now than he had in a long, long time.

The fluid was warm and surprisingly pleasant. It instantly mollified the discomfort of the unyielding Throne. It reached her chin, and she lowered her head and took in a huge gulp of the stuff. It reminded her of the fluid in the chrome facility that had destroyed her sense of reason and, according to Kon-abadon, should have poisoned her to death.

This was different. She could feel it instantly—the conducive nature of it. This was not dulling, it was sharpening. She felt it taking something from her, and she felt a sudden urge to give that thing a shape, but knew that she had no substrate on which to paint, or no foundation on which to stand. She became briefly very confused, at a loss for what to do, as the liquid swirled over her head and warped her husband even further. She no longer saw a man behind that glass, but a stretched, vibrating shape. He was still looking at her. She looked back. She smiled.

He turned away, and she sank.

She is standing amongst the throngs of them. The bottom of the ziggurat had opened up beneath them, revealing a mile-deep trench of assemblage chrome facility. The facility had already been full of the things she had designed. It had come into the universe that way, through a slipstream of unstable

matter given form by her convictions. Thousands of tiny lights spread underneath her effervescent reach. She knows them all, commands them all. They are the extra shoulders onto which she situated the future of the Jungle.

They are messenger drones.

The deep gray recesses of their gill-like surface thrum with pulsing information. They are metaphysically attached to reality, written into existence as having always existed, and thus they cannot be destroyed. They cannot even be harmed. They cannot be crushed, set aflame. Bullets do nothing to them. Somehow, even in the infinity of her ignorance, she knows that they would even survive walking into The Wall, though they could no longer serve their purpose in their.

Their purpose is to speak. They carry no weapons. They carry no tools. They carry no words. They carry only ideas. They carried thoughts and dreams, distilled into their purest forms. They cannot be lied to, or manipulated. They are immune to pretense, and ideology sloughs off their ranks like the poisonous sluice of a Jungle river, because they could not take preconceptions with them.

They cannot be systems, they can only be desires.

They cannot be shields, they can only be messages.

And they march.

She is standing amongst the throngs of them. They look the same as the last, but only now. When they go below, they will join together and harden into impenetrable concrete. They will suffocate the chrome. When they go into the rivers they will form the baleen that streaks out rust, planting rows of Suntrees in their wake. They will deposit antibodies and sediment mixtures that refresh the riverbeds. They, too, are metaphysically indestructible, but once they fulfill their purpose, they will break down into constituent parts. Nitrogen, potassium, and oxygenized protozoa will flourish in the biomes they create.

They cannot be weapons, they can only be ecology.

They cannot be diluted, they can only be dispersed.

She is standing outside the ziggurat. The moon is crystal, surrounded by loving stars. She is old, now. She imagines that people are judging her when she stands next to him now, where they used to judge him. He is no different. He is a lightning bolt smile away from a frown, as always. He has a new hat.

The Jungle is a reflecting pool of gilled lights. The messenger drones carry their burdens from one person to the next. The food chain among speaking beings has become meaningless. Their multicolored conveyance of pure candor makes the Jungle a kaleidoscope.

Of course there is misery. Of course there is suffering. There are still poisons, and there is still evil, and there is still cruelty. It is a tapestry, not a textile. It is a painting, not a canvas.

She calls the messenger drones Kamei. She calls the ecology drones Marlay.

It is lonely. Some despise her for the radical change over decades. Some worship her. But nobody is able to fit her into their vision. Nobody can look upon her with the frame of their mind. She is no longer human to the denizens of the Jungle, and perhaps she never was. This ghosting is victory, and it is bittersweet. It is lonely, but she is not alone. He braces her by the elbow. She asks him what he will do when she passes. He says he will travel. He will fade again. She asks if he will find another Queen. He says maybe, some day. He chastises her. He reminds her to enjoy what she's made. He reminds her to bask in the long future of it all instead of shrinking at the distant end. The world turns. The Wall approaches. One day there will be a final Queen.

But not her. She was gifted with both the before and the after, which makes her so, so grateful for the now.

EPILOGUE – THE ELDER

I was waiting for Dolus as he exited the Great Machine. I knew that he would be upset with me for looking in on him at the onset of this latest Jungle foray. Sometimes I truly cannot help my own curiosity. He had been so furiously protective of her—which should not have surprised me, but it did. It was beyond the details of the duty. I suspected, as he walked out of the shadowy entrance and the dying sunlight struck his face, that he truly cared for her. Not that he discards the rest. The ritual deployed as such—the anguish completely overtakes him, and he sits on the steps of the ziggurat drowning in it for multiple days. But this one gave up her name—this one truly fell in love with him. In that desolation of his heart, did he....

I hovered near this spot, his collapsing spot, where he gets his only break every few centuries to wallow before he must take up the road again and set things up to foster another one.

“It’s rare you come to taunt me,” said Dolus stiffly as he took the spot, head in his hands, a single hoarse breath trembling through his hunched body.

“I’ve been curious,” I said. “This one seemed very different.”

“Was that the impression you got when you nearly endangered the entire operation and undid millennia of work, Exyges?”

“I did not mean to provoke you so,” I said. “And I resent being accused of taunting.”

“When you look in on me,” Dolus said, “it threatens the tenuous bond. I struggled to feed her an oracle after that, and the rain burned her leg, *and* you probably killed several birds, and it set us on a completely disastrous chain of cause. That is your fault.”

“And yet you said that *you* struggled to feed her the oracle,” I said, shrugging under my robes, which in the Sun were purple. I didn’t anticipate that, and was briefly caught up in the look.

“You constitute yourself terribly,” Dolus shot back, pettiness surging up in his voice.

“I like it,” I said, pawing at the robe with one of my free hands.

“I would shoot you if I had a gun,” said Dolus.

“You say that to me all the time,” I said, dismissing the sentimental man with a wave. “You are the one that insists on staying this way.”

“If I don’t, it’s all gone,” said Dolus, looking Wallward.

“It’s all gone, anyway, Dolus,” I said. “This world is a ghost. You could come join us.”

“I would rather burn with it,” he said disaffectedly.

“One day your resentment will fade away,” I said calmly, attempting to pacify him. He is a terrible child and it is difficult to turn him from a tantrum.

“If it does,” said Dolus. “I hope it takes you with it.”

I turned when there was a rustling in the brush, raising a hand.

A young, dark skinned True human emerged from the treeline, and Dolus shot to his feet.

“Don’t,” said Dolus to me when I considered incinerating this man. “Just go.”

I made myself imperceivable to the man, but I did not leave.

Sometimes I truly cannot help my own curiosity.

The man was dressed in a tight-fitting yellow smock with combat fatigues and thick boots. He was a skinny hobbler, the kind that in my experience generally stays inside reading papyruses or whatever they do now.

“Are you from We?” asked Dolus. He was speaking a different language now.

“I am,” said the man. “My name is Yosteer.” He raised a handgun at Dolus.

“I take it the girl didn’t make it,” said Dolus. “For what it’s worth, I wish none of that had happened.”

“She made it,” said Yosteer. “She’ll need new legs, but she is fine. Thanks for your concern.”

“What’s this about, then? Just angry about our disruption?”

“The woman,” said Yosteer. “Where is she?”

Dolus looked upward. “She’s dead,” he said. “You can see her, if you’d like.”

The man shot Dolus in the shoulder. He looked right at me as I hovered there, daring me to respond, but I didn’t. I can take chastising when it’s appropriate, unlike him.

Dolus grasped his shoulder with a short, pained sigh. “Would you like to see her?”

The man shot Dolus in the stomach. He fell to his backside.

“I knew you had done something to her,” said the man Yosteer. “It wasn’t right.”

“It wasn’t good,” said Dolus. “It was foul. It was a vile crime. But, to be pedantic, it was right.”

“Where is she?”

“In there,” said Dolus. He jabbed his thumb up to the entrance.

“I’ve never seen it open,” said Yosteer, briefly giving in to astonishment.

“You can go in. Make sure you come out before twelve hours have passed, or you’ll be sealed in there, though.” Dolus was speaking between gritted teeth.

Do you need assistance? I asked him.

No, he said.

I gave it anyway. The bullets wriggled out and he exploded in a writhing sob of pain as I cauterized the wounds closed.

Yosteer had been advancing up the steps, but paused. He seemed more genuine suddenly. A manic smile broke the dourness on his face. "Should have known you were immune to bullets! A monster, you are. I should have liked to study you, if things were different."

"Bullets can kill me just fine," said Dolus. "You're the problem, not them."

Yosteer laughed cruelly. "Seems like they hurt, at least." He approached Dolus and dug the barrel of the handgun into his inner thigh before pulling the trigger.

"Justice to you is torture, huh?" Dolus strained out as he gripped his leg.

"Walou is the one that deals in justice," said Yosteer. "I'm young and in love and angry, you freakish monster."

"You're a strange person," said Dolus. "I can see why she loved you."

Yosteer swung the gun in a broad sweep, whipping it harshly across Dolus' face.

"You're missing your chance to see her," said Dolus. "Are you gonna shoot and hit me for twelve hours?"

"No, I'm going to do it forever," said Yosteer sarcastically.

Dolus sighed a caustic edge of a laugh, sucking in a sharp breath as I pulled the bullet out of his thigh and sealed the fracture in his cheekbone.

"When you are finished here," said Dolus. "However long that takes. When you go home, and you need something to do with your hands because you've let out all this accumulated energy and now you're nothing but grief. Measure The Wall again."

"Screw you," said Yosteer.

"I mean it. You don't have to believe me, but I know you'll do it. And you'll see. And you'll know. And even at the bottom of that pit of despair, when you're so angry with futility you almost want to hurl yourself off the top of the largest tree you can find, you can come find me. And you can end the world if you want. You can ruin it all."

Yosteer let out a pitiful cry of rage and tossed the gun against the steps, chipping the stone and breaking the firing mechanism.

He went into the ziggurat after a painful silence.

Why so merciful? I asked.

Dolus glared up at where I was not, and I did my best to approximate a smile at him. He didn't answer, though.

You like it, don't you? I asked. This is why we'll never understand each other. You enjoy being punished. It makes it easier to justify yourself.

"Yes," said Dolus, his voice a sodden piece of wood against a serrated dirk.

The noise of crashing metal sounded from inside the ziggurat. Exclamations of some tongue or another. Pained howls.

Do you think it will ever get any easier? I asked. I know you don't want it to. But if you let go for a second, if you ever really leaned in to what you are, I bet it would.

"Then I would be like you," Dolus said flatly. "Not worth it."

The man Yosteer exited the Great Machine and sat slumped a few steps above Dolus. They looked funny like that. Both in the same posture. Both cowed by the cruelty of the corporeal. Both content in their prison.

"Explain," said Yosteer weakly after a while. "What is it. Why did you put her in there."

"It's the Throne," said Dolus. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing," he moaned, head in his hands, sobs wrenching his body back and forth. "I didn't ask."

"Well, I know it's of no comfort, but there were only a few lies under which she was operating. She really did save the world, Yosteer."

"What are you talking about!" Yosteer exploded. "Who are you!"

"I am Dolus," said Dolus. "The mutant."

"You haven't explained anything," said Yosteer, and he got up and drew a knife from his waistbag.

"You should have shot me if you wanted to kill me," said Dolus. "With that, I would have to fight back."

"Explain," Yosteer said again.

Dolus sighed. "You should sit. This is a long story."

Yosteer remained standing, but as Dolus went on speaking, he eventually gave in and sat down. I stayed, though I was about to leave, because I actually hadn't heard it in a long time. I wondered what he remembered, what he papered over. What he told himself to make it through the next day.

"Suppose you were born in a ragged and chaotic place, not like here. Here there are rules, there are systems. You can be reasonably sure that We is still standing right now. Back then, radioactive lightning fell from the sky. Bombs. Guns. The Jungle didn't exist. It was just a wasteland.

“Suppose you were born with a terrible gift. You come up knowing Sultans near and far, and they’re all the same. They hoist their weapons up into the air as continents decimate behind them. They are atop skyscutting towers of steel devastation. You could kill them all by thinking it, and they have learned that about you. Once a curative, the mutant disease creates a new type of fear even amongst the desolation. Disease. Acts are perpetrated—acts so foul with consequences so long-lasting you would eventually forget, for to try and keep it all in your mind at once is its own apocalypse.

“Suppose you came of age during a time where the people around you had become so hollow and ashen from their choices that they lost all context for the value of existence. Suppose you entered adulthood gazing at the end, the nothingness, the crackling gray summoned by the barrages of weapons made by minds who no longer even knew how to want anything from their use. You would swear up and down on the grave of your civilization—the one you killed—that you would never allow it to swallow the world.

“Suppose you were afforded a chance to honor that binding vow. A chance to guarantee that this wasn’t the end, that what had been lost may be so without claiming anything more. A chance that came with an unimaginable price. A chance that came with a burden that would drive you to your knees, starving yourself for decades rather than move and risk being called to it again. You had seen it firsthand, what it was like to have no other choice but to do the wrong thing. You had learned in a life so long-lived that contrivances mortals thought to be million-to-one were actually a morbid, multitudinous procession of ravaging history.

“How many times would you do it?

“The Great Machine is a desperate stopgap. The Wall works by eating possibility, by gorging on potential. When you imagine something, when you tell yourself a story and commit it to the constituent parts of yourself, you tear possibility from the sky. To create in your mind is to constrain infinity. There is no machine that can spawn a solution. There is no magic chair that can fix the world. There are only stories. No machine can do that, no apparatus of any kind. Only the ephemeral intricacies of a thinking mind, a mind that can tell those stories, can stop The Wall. That is what The Great Machine is. That is what my Wife was. An ordinary, True human existing in a normal context that could tell herself a story. She did it well. That’s your explanation, Yosteer. I’m sorry.” Dolus began to cry, too. “I am truly sorry.”

Yosteer said nothing, staring off into the distance, eyes clouded with remote thought.

You romantic, I said. How many times have you had to tell the truth? You have it all memorized? Some blows were pretty soft in there. I think that’s training.

Dolus ignored me.

The Jungle sounded its chorus as twilight began. I rose, looking out over swaths of green rolling hills. The tree canopy blended together into a uniform surface, a wave frozen mid-crash against the unyielding buckle of The Wall. This high up, with my acuity, I actually saw it shrinking under the fantasy of that woman. She was a great choice. This one will last longer than many others.

I decided to return home, but before I did so, I looked back down at Dolus and Yosteer.

Yosteer had stood. “So that’s it, then,” he said. “If I believe you.”

“Do you?” asked Dolus.

“There is only one way to find out,” said Yosteer, the strange, fae smile taking his face again. It was crusted by sadness now. He would never shake it off. “So, what, you steal women from their homes, take their names, throw them into the pit? To buy a few more years?”

“Could you bear their names?” Dolus asked, looking directly at him with the piercing level of a sniper. “Could you carry their names in your body? If you think so, you are stronger than me, and maybe you should take my place. And—no. It is not always women, it is not always wives. She wanted partnership, and the problems that come with it.”

“She enjoyed problems,” Yosteer said distantly.

“It is how she preferred to love the world,” agreed Dolus.

Another moment passed between them. I began to deconstitute myself.

“Did you love her?” asked Yosteer.

Dolus looked past him, out over the growing intricacies of golden hour Jungle shadow, and all the things that looked back at him from within it.

I returned.

THE END