



# Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – THE CITY OF ICE by David Fox. Mr. Fox writes, “I studied Labor Relations at Cornell University and currently reside in New York City.”

Page 11 – OLD FOLKS by Leonard Henry Scott. Mr. Scott was born and raised in the Bronx and is a graduate of American University, with an MLS degree from the University of Maryland. He was on the staff of the Library of Congress for many years and presently lives in National Harbor, Maryland. Scott’s essays and fiction have appeared in *Sci Phi Journal*, *Mystery Tribune*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, *Good Works Review* and elsewhere.

Page 19 – SAMARAN by Ivan Petrov. Mr. Petrov writes, “I am a novice writer with one short story published last year. I am a non-native English speaker and a chemist by trade. My fiction is influenced by my interest in fundamental sciences and philosophy.”



# “THE CITY OF ICE”

by DAVID FOX

The Boring Machine broke fresh ice on the surface just after sunrise. The two-ton steel drill on the hood of the vehicle pierced through the outermost layer of permafrost after hours of Edmund’s persistence behind the wheel. It mystified him that the topmost layer of snow and ice were the toughest to cut through despite their exposure to long hours under the sun. Somehow the surface was colder and harder than the ice and bedrock buried below ground.

As the snowy dust and debris began to clear, Edmund saw the outline of a great icy wall take shape around his vehicle. Beneath its treads lay a flattened portcullis of ivory. Entire panels of the gate stretched over 20 feet long, and each piece was adorned with moonstones and other bright white gems.

Edmund had been driving the subterranean vehicle for weeks in search of ore that could fuel their furnace, and moonstone burned cleanest of all. He was in charge of piloting the enormous Boring Machine, while his companion, Roger, managed their inventory and heat. Navigation had long since become an art rather than a science. The binders full of maps and logbooks in his cockpit were outdated, and the pale golden compass pinned

to the top of the dashboard would spin wildly week to week. But today, it led them to a bounty.

“That was a nasty crash,” Roger said as he climbed into the cockpit. “I just finished loading fuel for the engine. We should have enough heat to dock on the surface for a day, maybe two, while I work on repairs.”

“And how is the greenhouse?” Edmund asked. “Do we have any more food ready to cultivate?”

Roger scratched his head. “Well, we have pemmican dried up and saved in storage. And I have a few plants this close to bearing fruit,” Roger said as he squinted and pinched his pointer a millimeter away from his thumb.

“Good. Then I should start to scout out the surface to see what I can recover,” Edmund said. “We don’t find our way above-ground often.”

Edmund grabbed the compass and began fitting himself into his survival suit. It was a rubber cloak lined with fabrics and fur to provide maximum insulation. It had a clear plastic mask and goggles with an attached respirator to ensure steady breathing during extreme weather. Despite the discomfort, he always volunteered to sojourn on such missions. With the Boring

Machine stationary, there was little work for him, while Roger always had a plant to prune or a loose bolt to hammer into place on the furnace. He enjoyed the feeling of sunshine on his face, even if it was marred by a brutal windchill. Temperatures on the surface could reach as low as -40 degrees.

Edmund opened the hatch at the top of the vehicle and climbed into the tundra. Once outside the machine, he could survey the damage more clearly. Splinters of the gate and various gems littered the snow. He wondered what kind of creature had tusks large enough to produce such long shards of ivory. "Only in the days of the woolly mammoth," Edmund thought.

As he crossed the threshold into the city, Edmund saw that it differed from the usual abandoned cityscape. Edmund spotted igloos and snowy spires floating in all directions. Each structure was shining white and made almost entirely of ice. He was enchanted by the handiwork which continued for hundreds of yards. There were dozens of manses of crystal and ice surrounded by gardens of snow. Lifelike snowy sculptures of rabbits and wolves and penguins mingled among the architecture; they seemed to move as snowflakes stirred in the breeze. At the center of the city was a great crystal palace built upon the crest of a hill. Its silver buttresses crossed one another as they held up enormous glass frames. Through the tinted windows Edmund could see incredible marvels, marble staircases and a great diamond chandelier.

And in front of the palace stood a girl.

She did not see Edmund as he approached; her back was turned and her statuesque body was covered by a slender silk dress and a mane of platinum white hair.

Edmund watched, mesmerized, as she lowered herself into the snow beneath her feet. She spread her arms and legs into wide arcs by her head and beneath her shoes, carving a figure into the powder. Out of the snow a seraph rose, as tall and fair as the girl, but more albescent. After a moment it glided forward, up the porcelain stairs carved into the side of the hill. The doors of the palace opened as the mysterious figure approached, but once it entered the doors slammed shut, protecting the palace's secrets once more.

Edmund continued to observe the girl as he crept forward. He saw her tenderly rise to her feet, but as Edmund drew within several meters of her, she suddenly collapsed into the snow. Edmund ran towards the girl, plunging his knees into the powder and lifting her into his arms.

"Miss! Are you well? Do you know how cold it is?" As he looked into her face and saw her frigid white skin and tourmaline eyes, it dawned on him that his questions might be obtuse. He pointed at the castle overhead. "Do you live there? Is that your home?"

The girl closed her eyes and lowered her head more deeply into his lap. She contorted her body against his, not trying to remove herself from his grasp, but trying to cling to some sort of comfort.

"I'm tired, that's all," the girl said.  
"Yes, the castle is my home."

"It's marvelous," Edmund said. "This whole city... it's the most beautiful place I have ever seen. And that palace most of all." He looked down at his thermometer, which was pushing towards -40. "It's a shame it's so cold."

The girl's breathing grew deeper and more labored. She tried to stand on her own weight, but found herself again falling into Edmund's arms. "Yes, you're right, it's the temperature," the girl said. She pointed at the staircase which led the way up the mountain. "You're such a kind gentleman, I can see it in your eyes. Could you help a princess find her way home? I'm afraid I can't make it on my own with these slippers."

With a blush, Edmund looked down at the girl's legs. She had plain silken skin down to her ankles, and at their base rest a pair of high-heeled crystalline slippers. He cupped one in his hand, examining its exquisite craftsmanship and shape. As he held it in his hands, droplets of water formed at the edge of the sole, slowly trickling into his hands and the snow beneath them.

Edmund stood and carried the girl in his arms. She was lighter than he expected, a waif, not quite as tall as he thought when he first examined her. Their walk up the mountainside was scenic. All around him, Edmund saw crystallized peaks of the lesser structures surrounding the capitol. He could see many were made of moonstone and other valuable minerals. He also saw the outlines of several snowy figures in the distance that he was certain were not look-

ing at the castle when he spotted them before. But as he observed his surroundings, he could scarcely take his eyes off of the girl's beauty.

When he approached the front doors of the palace, the girl motioned him to stop, and delicately got to her feet. "I am afraid this is where I leave you," the girl said. The palace doors swung open, but before Edmund could turn his head to look at what awaited inside, the girl grabbed his cheekbones and turned his face towards hers. "This place is not for you," the girl said.

"You can't mean that! Are you sure?" asked Edmund. "You can't just leave me out here in the cold. And now that I've seen all of this... I don't think I'll ever be able to forget. You can't be so cruel."

The princess studied Edmund's eyes. "No, I don't think I can ever let you in my palace," the girl said. "But perhaps you can show me yours? Just for tonight."

Edmund's heart began to throb in his chest and his face grew flush with color. A tear began to fall down his cheek. "My lady! Are you sure? I don't have a palace quite like this. But it would be an honor to make you a guest in my home!"

The girl stepped onto her tiptoes and whispered in Edmund's ear. "Yes, I would love to see. I need to see where you live, and the magic that brought you here." She stepped away from Edmund and towards the castle doors. "But first, I must collect a few things. I will see you at midnight." The door slammed shut behind her, and Edmund knew better than to try to steal a

glance inside the entrance. Perhaps one day he would be invited inside. But not today.

#

When the girl emerged from her forlorn fortress under the moon, she was wearing an outfit that almost matched Edmund's own. She was wrapped in a floor-length gown of bright white wool, and her shoulders were shrouded in exotic furs. Her mittens and earmuffs were so thick that Edmund could mistake them each for a rabbit. Where the animals she sheared to obtain these materials were, Edmund could not say.

And upon her head was a splendid crown of ice. It was as sturdy as titanium, but she carried it elegantly as she strode forward, as if she did not notice the tremendous weight. Inset in the crown were gemstones of all varieties. Pearls of milk and diamonds shaped like swords, opals so pale they appeared albino, and above them all, a moonstone adorning the crown of her head.

When the princess reached Edmund, she placed her hand into his, and he could only feel the mittens. Her gaze was level as her eyes peered into his own; Edmund wondered if underneath her coat and dress she traded her melting slippers for taller heels.

"I love your new coat," Edmund said. "It should be more sensible to wear in this blizzard than your last dress."

"I should not have been so foolish this morning," the princess said. "I'm always at my most fatigued under the sun. But with my new outfit I feel brave enough to face

the elements!"

Edmund walked through the frozen city with his lady, her hand intertwined with his, his heart throbbing in his chest, his face a fiery red from nerves and near frostbite. As they crossed through the town, Edmund again saw snowy sculptures dotting the landscape, seemingly transfixed by the woman at his side.

"Are those your companions?" asked Edmund. "I imagine it gets lonely here without another soul in sight."

The lady frowned. "They are my creations. I build them out of snow and ice. Just like you might have when you were a child. But yes, it gets lonely here, without a living soul by my side."

With that comment, Edmund felt his knees begin to weaken. "Well you won't be alone any longer!" declared Edmund. "I would never leave you!" She did not say another word as they continued their journey towards Edmund's home.

The first piece of Edmund's palace that came into view as they approached was the steel drill that had crushed the gate of the city's outer wall. Edmund's hand clammed up, and he began to feel guilty about the damage they did to her city when they arrived.

"I'm sorry about the mess we made of your wall," Edmund said. "Roger and I were excited to find such a promising collection of minerals. I didn't realize that they belonged to anyone. Most cities have been abandoned."

The girl still did not respond as she examined the artifact. She pointed at the



spot in the ground where the drill pierced the ice and permafrost as it climbed out of the caves. "Is this how you got here?" asked the princess. "Do you live underground?"

"Most of the time," Edmund said. "It's warmer down there, especially when our furnace is at full blast. Let me show you inside."

Edmund grabbed the lady's hand as he opened the hatch on the roof and climbed into the Boring Machine. The first room Edmund showed her was the greenhouse. It was a marvel of technology. Hundreds of lamps and ultraviolet lights lined layers and layers of wrought iron columns. Their heat was channeled towards a terrarium full of natural life. There were rows for staple foods such as pumpkins and potatoes, as well as entire sections dedicated to medications and salves. Tangled vines of aloe and the occasional poppy filled a corner of the structure.

But most of all, Edmund wanted to show the princess his garden. He took her hand and led her to a bed of roses at the heart of the greenhouse. He plucked a dark vermilion blossom and handed it to her. "Roger and I focus on survival most of the time. But when we have the energy, we like to work on this garden. It reminds us that there still is some beauty in the world." Edmund looked down and blushed. "But now that I have you, I'm not sure I'll need any more reminders."

The princess took the rose in her hand and inhaled its fragrance deeply. The moisture on her breath was visible as she exhaled. As the tiny droplets of chilled

water and wind buffeted the rose, the stem grew thin and white and pale, but its petals bloomed blue. Edmund wondered how her breath would taste on his own lips.

"If you ever find yourself needing a reminder," the girl said with a smile, as she bent down and replanted the rose in the arboretum. "Is there anything else you would like to show me? I would love to meet this Roger," the princess said.

Edmund was worried about how Roger would react to the girl. She was beautiful, but he didn't think Roger would approve his spending time with her instead of gathering materials or working on the machine. "Well, I suppose I must introduce you two if you'll be staying the night. He should be in the furnace room at this hour."

Edmund grabbed the princess by her mittened hand and guided her beneath the greenhouse into the mechanical room of the Boring Machine below. It was a tremendous structure of clockwork and steam. Steel pistons and metal motors pummeled spinning wheels and cogs, while cables distributed the energy throughout the device. At its base sat an enormous furnace chiseled into the face of a block of obsidian. Roger hovered over the apparatus, shoveling blocks of coal and iron into the mouth of the device. The furnace's jaws opened and closed, masticating each block as Roger fed it material. As it devoured each stone, a ripple of thermal energy would erupt forward, through the attached pipes and cables, and into the rest of the machine.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting,"

Edmund said. "But I have something really exciting to show you. I found someone living out in the wilderness! And she doesn't need a machine like ours to live out here. It's incredible."

Roger abandoned his work and approached the couple. "That's quite a story, Edmund, but I still can't believe you left me alone down here for hours! I was worried you were lost out there in the snow. Then what would I do? I would be stranded without your help!"

"I understand how you feel, Roger. But can't you see this girl is a greater discovery than all of the moonstone in the world? A real, living girl, hidden here in the tundra. Surviving in the cold. Living in nature, without the help of machines."

The princess remained silent but glared at Roger as he spoke. Roger glared back at her and noticed the moonstone gem in her crown. "At least your trip wasn't a total waste. It does look like she has something to offer us."

Roger reached forth to grab the crown from the princess's head. But as his fingers made contact, they let out a sizzling hiss. Roger and the girl stumbled away from one another and each lost their balance and collapsed upon the floor. Roger held up his hands in front of his eyes and saw the hives and welts of cold urticaria beginning to form on his fingertips.

"Edmund!" Roger shouted. "What kind of magic is this? How can her skin be so cold?" Roger looked at the thermometer attached to the top of the furnace. Its reading was dropping by the second. Roger

began to climb the stairs towards his quarters behind the engine room.

"Let me know once the girl is gone and it's safe to come back out," Roger yelled. "Send her on her way and take some moonstone for your trouble. I'm sure there's plenty scattered about where your drill hit the wall. Once we have a fresh stock, we should be on our way back home." Roger slammed the door to his room, leaving Edmund alone with the princess once more.

Edmund turned towards the girl to apologize. "You have to forgive Roger. We don't get visitors, often," Edmund said. "He's just focused on our mission. Weeks in isolation by the furnace can do that to you."

The girl shook her head and gazed into Edmund's eyes. "Not every man can be a gentleman like you," the girl said. "And I'm afraid I have no moonstone or any other minerals for you to take. I'll have to use the debris to fix that wall you destroyed. Until I gather more." Edmund wondered how a lonely girl without even a shovel could mine heavy ore, let alone craft an entire city in the wilderness.

Edmund led the princess towards his quarters by the cockpit. His room was small, barely the size of a supply closet. A twin sized cot was circumscribed within its walls, and above it, etched into the ceiling, were star charts and maps of the galaxies beyond their own.

"I have no windows or a view, so I had to draw my own," Edmund said. "And studying the stars aids me as a navigator."

Edmund took a seat on the bed. “We don’t get many visitors, so this is all I have to offer you. If you would like, I can leave you here while I find a place to sleep in the cockpit. Lord knows I’ve dozed off in that chair before.”

The princess took a seat at Edmund’s side. “I can stay with you tonight. And I will make sure you have sweet dreams.” The princess kissed Edmund on the forehead, and he felt weightless as he fell backwards into the cushions.

That night he dreamed of ice and stone and marble, diamond chandeliers and royalty in moon draped crowns. He danced in the ballroom of a crystal palace, taking steps that he had never rehearsed or performed before. And at his side was a beautiful girl. As he gazed into her eyes, he saw them staring back. And as he looked closer and more deeply, and as he moved his brow to touch her own, he saw a reflection in the iris of her tourmaline eyes. He saw himself staring back, in a suit of snow white, with a crown larger and more majestic than that of any king.

Hours later, Edmund awoke to the feeling of frigid water. As he roused himself, he worried that his bedroom had sprung another leak allowing the winter outside to come pouring in. But all around him the walls of his room remained locked and sealed. When he looked upon the girl at his side, he saw that she had waned in size like the moon after it shaved itself into a crescent. Her frame narrowed and her crown melted until it had become a simple circlet surrounding a single moonlit peb-

ble.

“I told you I could spend only one night,” the girl said, apologizing. “It’s not safe for me here. You and Roger need to leave as soon as possible, before you cause any more damage.” But Edmund could see tears streaming from her face and down the side of her crown as she crept out of his room and departed his mechanical city.

Edmund could not bring himself to mutter a single word as she abandoned him. He lay in his bed for hours, staring at the stars above his eyes, imagining what might lie beyond his ceiling, in the crystal palace in the city of ice. As it approached twilight, Edmund resolved to pay her court one final visit, to beg or bargain for her favor.

When Edmund departed the machine at dusk, he did so without his survival suit. Tonight he would surrender himself completely to her wintry world. He shivered as he pulled himself through the tundra; the only respite from cold and dark was the faint glimmer of stars and the moon above his head.

When Edmund entered the city walls, he saw that its frozen animal sculptures and icy spires had also begun to melt. Undeterred, he pressed on in the direction of the princess’s palace in the sky. When he reached the porcelain staircase at the base of her mountain, he bent his knees into the snow and bowed his head in her direction. And there he sat and prayed as moments passed and the midnight hour approached. As he waited for her with his head facing down, he could feel the gentle



patter of shards of hail and freezing rain land in the city, rebuilding its former glory and slowly burying him to his chest.

At last the princess deigned to meet him. She descended the staircase at the base of her palace just as the snow piled up to his face, threatening to snuff out his breath forevermore. The girl looked down at Edmund, and gently grasped his face in her hands. "You should leave me now, dear Edmund," the girl said softly. Crystal tears began to well up in his eyes at her words. He could not bring himself to look at her as she issued her judgment. "You can leave me now, and never return. Or swear yourself to me now, and be mine forever."

Edmund rose to his feet and embraced the princess. "I swear myself to you, now and always!" The boy began to sob. "My destiny, my stars, they are now yours. Whatever you wish, I will do it."

The princess nodded. "And what of your companion, Roger?" the princess asked. "How will you handle him?"

Edmund began to shake his head. "I don't think he would join you," Edmund said. "And I want to be yours alone."

"Then you must destroy him. And that godforsaken machine. My city cannot stand while his furnace brings heat."

The princess stepped away from Edmund and gathered a handful of snow. He watched as she blew her breath into the frost. Her pursed lips drained from dark indigo to palest pink. She fashioned a snowball out of the material and held it in front of Edmund. "You will need this, as well as the rose in your garden," the girl

said. "With this power we can silence them forever."

With her other hand, she grabbed Edmund and pulled him to the grand entrance at the front of her palace. "I need one last favor from you," the girl said. "It will be quick." She took Edmund into herself and consecrated their bond. When Edmund gave her his seed, he gave his soul as well.

"I feel so cold," Edmund said. "Will I ever feel warm again?"

"No," the princess said. "But you will live here forever."

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Edmund followed the moon back to his old mechanical home. He climbed into the structure and crept through its narrow passages until he reached Roger's room. He found him sleeping there, incognizant of the wonders just beyond his perception. Edmund took the snowball and blew into it with all of his might. Specks of snowflakes and frosted powder floated upon his face and on his body. As Roger yawned and snored, flakes began to travel into his nose and through his lungs. Before long the entire snowball was depleted and Roger's snoring had subsided. His face shone blue, his eyelids sagged and his respiration eased. Edmund could only wonder what visions Roger witnessed in his slumber.

Edmund made his way to the greenhouse next. He passed through rows and rows of flora and plant-life that he and Roger spent years cultivating, but paid no mind until he reached the floral garden at

the arboretum's heart. He saw that the princess's rose had already begun to germinate within it. Dozens of flowers in the garden had darkened to various shades of blue. Edmund carefully picked each and every one of the blue roses, careful not to even touch a single red blossom. Once he reached the last one, he stopped himself and left it alone in the plot with the remaining ordinary flowers. Edmund knew it would not be alone for long.

Edmund ordered the flowers he collected into a stunning winter's bouquet. He carefully carried the arrangement with him into the furnace room. He felt dizzy

upon entering the chamber and he stumbled as he struggled to approach the furnace's face. Sweat dripped from his brow, and flowers began to melt between his fingers and slip from his grasp. As he neared the obsidian beast before him he collapsed on the ground and had to drag his body forward. Nausea and migraines clouded his senses and all he could smell was the heat of burning dust and smoke and smolder. He summoned all of his remaining strength to lift himself back to his feet. As he stared down the jaws of the inferno, he realized he had only one rose left, and prayed it would be enough. He fed the



flower to the machine and waited.

After several moments passed, he saw the numbers on the thermometer at the top of the structure start to trickle downwards. The humming of the room's pistons and motors began to quiet, and the spinning wheels and cogs all around him slowed until they reached a final halt. No one would be able to operate the machine again.

Edmund climbed out of the sepulcher and reemerged on the surface. He saw that he had been joined by several of the creatures of the princess's court. Enchanted rabbits and wolves and polar bears stood at attention beside the dormant drill. And towering above them all was a great white mammoth, the snow on the ground shaking beneath his feet. As Edmund lowered himself from the structure, the larger animals put themselves to work, pushing Edmund's machine deeper and deeper into the ravine from which it came. The smaller creatures gathered snow and ice from around the vehicle and worked to bury every visible drop of metal. Once their work was complete, they nodded at Edmund, and began the final walk back home.

Edmund bowed before the princess when he met her that night. "My work is done," Edmund said. "Will I be able to join you in your palace at last?"

The princess motioned Edmund to his feet, and when he stepped forward, she embraced him. He felt the fatigue inflicted by the furnace fade away. She held him for a moment in her arms, until at last she

said "I wish you could, Edmund. But even now I feel an ember deep in your heart. You are so unlike my snow creatures. But that is what makes you human." She motioned to a seraph standing by her side. It adorned him with shining white armor made of ice and an enormous halberd.

With those artifacts Edmund stood guard at the top of the mountain. Seraphs and snow creatures, even yetis and wendigo all bowed before Edmund until he granted them audience with their Pale Queen. On some nights the girl would pass him by, whispering words of gratitude in his ear or planting a kiss on his cheek. Sometimes the girl would place his hand on her belly, and Edmund would think wistfully about the future.

One day the girl brought forth a young boy to meet Edmund. His eyes were tourmaline and his skin smooth as milk, but his hair was spun of ashen bronze. And when the boy touched the visor on Edmund's helm, he felt himself begin to weep. He knew he would never be able to hold the boy. And when the boy was old and grown, and the ember in his heart grew too large, he would be cast out of Eden, forced to venture forth into the unknown, alone. ❖



# “OLD FOLKS”

by LEONARD HENRY SCOTT

The trucks came at noon, a solemn procession of enormous closed moving vans with great empty stomachs and deep tinted windows to shield the desert sun. There were three, identical and shiny black, with no lettering. But now, against the long empty gray-white distance, they seemed no more than flickers, a little parade of glittery bugs.

At the old farmhouse (which was the main building), Albert Bremer and seven other men of a certain age sat on the front porch, their straight-backed wooden chairs propped against the cedar wall, deep into the cool shadows, safe from the high desert sun. At the sight of them, the old men jumped to their feet, knocking over chairs and one small table along with two cups of coffee that had been cooling in the shade. They squinted out across the flat, barren landscape at the three specks that glided noiselessly along the horizon, flashing sunlight and kicking up rooster-tails of dust.

Although they must have been traveling at considerable speed, from this distance they seemed to be moving in slow motion. After a time, the convoy turned in a long looping way, as it continued to follow the faint scuff of road which led toward the farmhouse. The farmhouse and the small collection of companion build-

ings, which formed this remote complex, was the only realistic destination within 50 miles in any direction.

For a time, with an almost predatory stillness, the old men continued to watch as the slow-moving distant flickers grew larger as they moved along. Finally, someone groaned or stamped a nervous foot on the gray-painted floorboards and the old men stopped staring at the distance and started talking to one another.

They discussed it and ruminated over it. At first two of the men fervently and feverishly denied what their lying eyes betrayed. They argued with the others. But the argument petered out quickly. It was no more than wishful thinking because there could truly be no honest debate on the matter. The most recent arrivals had never seen the trucks before. But all of the older residents knew in their hearts that these were the trucks they had been waiting for.

Other trucks had come before, sometimes with great regularity, bringing food and various other supplies needed to run the complex. They came just one at a time. But when a caravan of trucks arrived, always three, the purpose of the visit was quite different.

The men all shruggingly agreed. Some

were tearful. Some were reticent. But, none-the-less, grudgingly or not, they agreed. What more could they do? Almost in unison, they sighed and sadly shook their heads. Then, reluctantly, slow-footed and fearful, the old men went off in several directions to tell the other residents, all of whom were men.

Now others came outside in a flurry of door slamming, slipper shuffling and quick-padding deck shoes on the wooden floors. They came wiping their mouths from a half-finished lunch. They came with fluffs of shaving foam on their necks, with pool cues or newspapers in hand, or fresh from the john with their pants hiked up too high and reading matter tucked securely under their arms. They came from the other buildings as well, several of the fat, green-roofed two-stories that abutted the farmhouse.

Everyone went out to the front yard to see the trucks...

*(How many times have the trucks come as a shiny surprise half way to the horizon, churning through the dead sand like a triple-jointed black metal bug?)*

As they approached, Albert Bremer thought about this. Sometimes he didn't remember things as well as he should, at least as well as he did in the past. The trucks grew larger as they moved along, ripping out great swatches of desert with their bear claw tires. He thought about it some more as they came, glistening deep black and shiny in the sun, with feather-soft motors and dazzling chrome grills that looked like teeth.

(Six)

That's how many times they'd come before, six times, in Bremer's recollection. He was certain. It was something very important to remember because when the trucks came the seventh time, when they left, they took you with them. So, Albert Bremer and a number of other "six timers" had been waiting with particular interest for the arrival of the next caravan (this caravan).

When the trucks finally curved up to a stop in the flat, grassless front yard, all four hundred and eleven residents were waiting in the yard to greet them. They stood silently stiff and still as if at reveille. None of this formality was required, of course. Life was quite casual here. They could be inside or outside. Nobody cared. In the past, some of the men would stay in their rooms when the trucks arrived. It didn't matter. But, if it was their time to go (their seventh visit of the trucks), someone (or a group of some ones) would simply retrieve them from wherever they were. However, though it was not required (most of the men believed), it was somehow better to come outside and wait with their friends. It was more dignified and honorable. Plus, the idea of waiting outside together filled them with a kind of brave serenity, a peacefulness that somehow made this dreaded moment easier.

The man in charge rode in the first truck, next to the driver. He was white covered and fat, with a face of fresh pink sausage and a cluster of copper rivets for hair. He pushed open the passenger's door



and then came like a lord, ponderously down the scant two metal steps of the cab. He wore no badge of rank. He needed none.

Perfunctorily, the man rifled the sheaf of yellow papers on his clipboard as he leaned casually against one sun burnished fender. He was in no hurry. By now his white coveralled assistants had already put up the metal staircase to the door in the side of the truck, which was open, but covered with a heavy dark rubbery curtain. They stood now chewing gum and talking to one another in very soft, respectful tones as if they were spectators at a golf tournament. The old folks did not talk at all. They stood in careful, motionless clumps which dribbled now from the porch to the yard and fanned out almost to both ends of the farmhouse.

All eyes were on the man as he continued to study his clipboard. Then finally, with Neronian self importance he cleared the phlegm from his throat. He was regal, almost Olympian. and there could be no doubt whatsoever that this man was in charge. He was not just in charge of the trucks or the three drivers, or the weathered farmhouse with its dull green shutters, or even the old people themselves. No, at this particular point in time the man was in charge of the desert itself as far as the horizon, and perhaps the entire world.

"This..."

He said softly, patting the fender of his truck and sniffing quickly one time.

"...is the first truck."

The man glanced up and surveyed the

gathered residents, all the way to the left, then all the way to the right.

"When I call your name..." he said evenly.

"... I want you to come up to me, take the letter that I will hand you and proceed into the first truck."

With this, he looked down once more to his clipboard and began to read the names out loud in stentorian Standardese.

"Bremer, Albert G."

"Yo!"

Albert Bremer, age 92, smiled through the intricate porcelain of an ancient face. His once-upon-a-time glorious waterfall of dark curly hair was now reduced to a few pitiful dry white scraps that danced spastically in the warm stagnant breeze. His brown-spotted hands (chicken hands) trembled just a bit as he raised them high above his head and ran unhesitatingly to the man. Everything would be left behind, his photo album, his clothes, all of it. These things would remain in his room for the next one to keep or discard, as he had done with the few possessions of the man who had previously occupied his room. To Albert, his predecessor was still unknown, a mysterious life reduced to a lone snapshot of a slight gaunt-faced teen-aged boy smiling earnestly out at the world in a snug-fitting blue U.S. Air Force uniform.

There were other things aside from the neatly folded clothes he discovered in the dresser drawer and the nice leather jacket he found in the closet. The other things, the treasures, too few to represent an entire life, a Benrus watch, some old coins, a Bill

Clinton for President button and other seemingly inconsequential things were all heaped together in a shoe box. Albert left the box under his bed for someone else to discard or kept as he pleased. As for the clothes, they were too small and he gave them away to several grateful residents.

Only those few most precious things would be kept. But this time it would not be his decision. He hoped, however, that his little wooden box of treasures, which included his Vietnam medals, some yellowing photographs and several sets of cufflinks that had belonged to his father, would not be discarded. He had left a note explaining what the things were. He could only explain what they meant to him. Truthfully, they might not mean a damn thing to anyone else. But that was all he could do.

If the past was truly an indication of things to come (and it seemed to be), tomorrow morning one or two buses would arrive at the farmhouse with new residents that had been gathered up from various places. No-one would be younger than 90. Although, a new law had been passed lowering the age to 85, that law would not become effective until the next year. But it was widely rumored that work would soon begin to renovate and enlarge the farmhouse complex to accommodate the anticipated increase of new residents.

The man thumbed off one yellow sheet of paper from his clipboard. Nodding ever so slightly (out of respect?) he handed it to Bremer.

DEAR MR. BREMER,  
YOU HAVE LIVED A FULL AND  
RICH LIFE. NOW, IT IS TIME TO  
REST. PLEASE WELCOME YOUR  
REST AS AN OLD FRIEND.  
ALLOW YOUR CHILDREN AND  
GRANDCHILDREN TO LIVE FULL  
AND RICH LIVES AS YOU HAVE.  
ONLY YOU CAN GIVE THEM THIS  
MOST PRECIOUS AND WONDER  
FUL GIFT.  
THINK OF THEM AT THIS TIME.  
THINK OF THEM AND MAY YOUR  
HEART BE FILLED WITH JOY AND  
LOVE AND MAY YOUR SOUL BE AT  
PEACE.

ACCEPT YOUR REST WITH  
DIGNITY AND WITH PRIDE. DO  
THIS LAST, MOST HONORABLE  
DEED FOR YOUR COUNTRY AND  
FOR ALL MANKIND, AND YOU  
SHALL ALWAYS BE REMEMBERED  
AS A HERO.

YOUR NAME WILL BE ENGRAVED  
IN THE GREAT MARBLE WALL BE  
BEHIND THE STATUE OF PAUL  
SHACKLEFORD, WHO WAS THE  
FIRST.

GOD BLESS YOU.

SINCERELY,  
THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE UNITED STATES

After pausing briefly to read the flier,

Bremer turned and walked to the metal staircase. He climbed the several steps with greater ease than he thought he would. His legs did not waver at all, let alone buckle and collapse under him like the legs of some wimpy, fainthearted old man. But then Albert Bremer had never been a coward. All of his life he took as good as he gave.

He paused momentarily at the top of the staircase, glanced quickly back to his friends. Then, with just the slightest trace of a lopsided smile, he threw one quick, bony, blue-veined fist high above his head, turned and walked calmly through the curtained doorway into the dark mysterious bowels of truck.

“Carmichael, Edward Q.”

The meager light from several corner-mounted flame-bulb lamps simmered in the brown paneled walls. There were two long storage benches topped with dark green corduroy seat cushions. Carpeting in a similar dark green covered the floor.

“Foley, Samuel E.”

In the far corner, flush against the wall behind the back of the cab was a beautifully polished mahogany bar with a gleaming brass foot railing. Above the bar was a row of half a dozen dark-stained wooden shelves. Each was lined ten deep from end to end with miniature bottles of whiskey, wine and liqueur. Every kind that Bremer could recall and many, many more were there, stuck securely in place like pegs in a pegboard. Bottles upon bottles with exotically delicious labels flickered sparkles of light in a hundred different colors.

“Goldblatt, Frederick.”

A variety of crystal goblets waited in a rack on top of the bar, along with a brass ice bucket. Beer and sodas were in a large silvery box, its delicate raised lettering blurred with frost.

“Grady, Willie L.”

Others came, Eddie, Slim, Goldblatt, who each in turn selected a glass and a miniature bottle of his favorite beverage.

“Graham, Mark ... Granville, Stephen ...Humphrey, Arthur J...”

Bremer reviewed the shelves several times before he settled on one particular bottle of scotch. It wasn't the best. But it wasn't cheap either. He was quite familiar with the brand as he had been faithfully drinking it for the past 55 years, “Dewar's White Label”. Changing brands even for something that was supposedly better didn't make much sense to him at this stage.

“King, Ronald S... Korwin, Samuel T...”

The long benches were almost full now and the men, some standing, some sitting, talked to one another in a low mumbling rumble of words.

“... Kotinger, Eric ...”

In a few minutes the driver of the van appeared at the doorway. His expression was carefully blank as his eyes roamed about seeming to find everything but the eyes of the old men. Without a word, he closed the door. The outside latch snapped efficiently in place. There was a certain finality about this sound, like the sharp, irrevocable click of an icebox door or the

closing of a great heavy book.

Oddly, at this point there was no onset of syrupy gloom as Bremer had imagined during those times when he thought about this situation. Instead, the men in the truck began to loosen up. Somebody told a joke. Although it wasn't a particularly funny joke, Albert laughed so hard that he almost fell off the bench. Then, someone made a paper airplane out of his yellow flier and sailed it across the van. Someone sailed it back.

With the absence of intrusive sunlight there was a certain safeness about the truck. It took on a cozy, friendly ambience. The candle bulbs seemed almost to be actual candles, flickering soft, golden color in the faces of the men. They talked more easily now. Instead of a dozen separate conversations, there was only one. Topics were wide-ranging. But for the most part, everything they touched upon related in some way to their common situation. Those who wanted to say their piece could do so without interruption. There was no bullying for the floor. Some were more talkative than usual. Some were taciturn and sad. Some wept softly, but only a few.

They talked about the farmhouse, the place that had been their home for some months now. They already missed it, even though the truck had not yet left the front yard. Before night, the residents who had lived in the outbuildings would take the empty rooms that these men had left behind. The farmhouse was the most coveted of all places in this empty, neglected land. By morning, new residents would

arrive, confused and tired from their uncertain journey. Then, in a month or two or three, the trucks would come again.

Some of the men were on their third drink, but most still nursed their second when the motor started, whisper soft, but definite.

Then, from somewhere, suddenly, there was music. The palpable pounding bass reverberated through the benches, tingling their skin and their bones, down to the marrow of their very souls. It was Chuck Berry himself, The Father of Rock and Roll resurrected from the long-gone wonderful days of yesteryear, playing his electric guitar and singing, and "Johnny B. Goode" blared through the truck and filled up every pour of their being.

In their distant youth, this music was new. But it was not simply new. It was a raucous, toe-tapping celebration to challenge the well-ordered, almost robotic conformity of its time. Because when this sweet fresh breeze of wonderfully joyful, non-conforming music swept across the land, it irrevocably upset the balance of things. This music was not merely new, it was a revelation.

The voice was the most appealing thing of all. It had a pureness about it, the unselfconscious joy and sparkling clean simplicity of a long-ago (much more pleasant, much more innocent) time. And as these insistent lyrics rode the air currents and bounced happily off the walls of the truck, Chuck Berry was right there in the front of Albert Bremer's mind in a light-colored tuxedo from a black and white

movie, playing his guitar and duck-walking across the stage.

Some of the men began to dance around, drinks in hand. Others sang along with the music mouthing the lyrics perfectly from a thousand years ago and Johnny B. Goode never sounded so wonderful. All at once, it was 1958 and not a single one of them was older than 16.

At this moment, Albert suddenly remembered everything about that time. The memories came galloping up, bumping into one another, pushing and shoving as they vied for attention (*Me! Me, Remember Me?*) They all came back, rushing back, flooding back through the long corridor of years. So many things: day trips to City Island; Stevie Spacarelli's new turquoise Impala (*GOD how we hated him*); the day Bernie and Buddy beat up that kid that everyone always beat up, and put dog shit in his cap; the late-night pop and clatter of the El heading up to some mysterious place called "Dyre Ave" (*nobody we knew had ever been there*); long walks to Carvel's in Parkchester (*one time Neville got a nose bleed in his custard and mixed it up like strawberry, and we laughed and laughed*); sounding wars near the Van Nest Bocce Club (*"your mother carries a couch on her back for curb service"*); So many things, sights, smells, sounds all colliding together: Alan Freed's Rock and Roll Party; The Moonglows; Dion and the Belmonts; An icy Nedick's orange drink on a blistering hot day; The Dell Vikings on the stage of the Brooklyn Paramount; and Carol...Carol Martin, Carol Martin....

Albert's wistful smile melted briefly away in that moment as he recalled things lost but never truly forgotten despite his life-long efforts to keep them out of his consciousness.

"...and those long, slow summer evenings on her front porch, hidden in the sweet shadows behind the rose trellis. A feel, a gentle kiss, the anxious liquid scent of her. And Chuck Berry was there on Albert's brand new two-tone blue Motorola Roto-Tenna radio along with all the others, The Penguins, The Chantels, The Cleftones. And the music stroked and caressed them and carried them off with its magic.

At the end of summer, Carol and her family moved away to California, never to be seen again. The day she left was the worst day of his life. Alone in his room, Albert grieved over the unbearably painful loss of her. He cried long and hard into the night, his face buried in his pillow, his mind brimming with thoughts and pictures of her. He struggled to remember her scent, and the special way her soft, warm face felt against his. Sadly, this interminable night of mourning was only the first of many, throughout the fall, deep into the winter. Albert expected to die, wanted to die, but he didn't. Curiously, life just simply went on, one foot after the other through the long march of years. Now, despite the gaping 76-year chasm that separated him from that wonderful summer, despite two marriages, three children, seven grandchildren and eleven great grandchildren, the memory of that long



ago time was as fresh now as a brand-new unopened pack of cigarettes. Albert remembered everything, the curve of her face, her wide blue eyes, the gentle touch of her hand, the incredibly painful sweetness of those long-ago moments that he had spent with her. He remembered it all now and suddenly, tears ran down his face as he grieved for the loss of Carol all over again as if she had just died in his arms.

Albert Bremer poured himself another drink. This time he hesitated when he reached for his usual brand. Instead, he selected a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue (*the really, really good stuff*) and had a tall, neat drink of Blue in a perfect crystal glass.

The old men, tired from their dancing, now just bounced their heads and sang along with Chuck, adult beverages of choice sloshing over the rims of their goblets as they moved their hands demonstratively to the music. Their eyes filled with tears of the painful pleasure and the innocent fire of youth.

The more they drank, the louder they sang and as the whiskey and the music and the painful sweet honey of remembered youth poured over them, the truck picked up speed.

Outside, in the front yard, those who remained (*the first through the six new timers*) stood in quiet groups, watching as the trucks drove away. They could hear singing coming from inside of each passing truck, one then another and finally the last. There were different songs, but all of the men in the trucks were singing. It was a loud, discordant concert of drunken old

men riding off to their final rest. But to the gathering of those who waited outside, the singing was nothing less than heroic. The sound of it was sweet to the ear as the breath of angels.

The black trucks moved steadily along, kicking up great clouds of dust as they headed out toward the horizon. Shining bright silver in the desert sun, they sped off into the distance like a fast train.

And the singing could be heard for miles. ❖

# “SAMARAN”

by IVAN PETROV

*...and every adept of Samaran, when the calling is strong and courage abounds, will run to the edge of the world. And along the way speak about the miracle of the The Factor, to depose ignorance, such that all become one in infinite bliss.*

*(The Codex of Samaran, Book 6, Section 10  
‘On Propagation of The Faith’)*

## Part 1

Metso got down on all fours by the heap of coals. The morning sun touched his bare ass, but he kept shivering, the night’s damp trapped in his insides. Up went flakes of ash under his breath. Yesterday’s embers snapped and glowed and made no flame. Staring into the forest, where windfall lay scattered in the brambles and nettles, he considered going in for firewood. But instead, fingers shaking, he untied the strip of willow bark at the top of the cooking tripod and broke the sticks over his knee.

The fire woke up. Metso pulled his robe, drying on a branch, into a patch of sunlight and hurried to the campfire. While it warmed his back, the sun took care of his front. Afraid to yield even a moment to silence, birds strained to pack

the still air with song.

‘I am grateful! For you, and you, and you,’ he announced, pointing one by one to the sun, a weed growing by his feet, and a shred of spider silk hanging off the weed. He ran in place, did push-ups, the grass tickled his stomach and he let out a laugh. Blood returned to his fingers and toes.

A while back, Crow’s Way had trickled down to a path, narrow, deserted. Now it twisted up the side of the valley, dipped over its edge, and climbed the slope of another ripple. Then another and another, out of sight. Plump and green, the ridges huddled all the way to the fjords and islands of the Atlantic coast. According to... Metso fished his map of Norway out of his pannier. According to the map and his imagination. This land had been carved by ice, dragging itself back and forth for countless millennia. He didn’t need or want to know more than that.

Something stirred behind him.

‘Morning.’ He looked over his shoulder only to see Boy, still asleep, balled up.

More rustling in the trees and a faint whistle. Metso’s robe started to crawl along the branch, hopped off and disappeared, held by a hand that grabbed its corner from behind the trunk.

‘Hey!’ Metso dropped the map, leapt

forward, and landed with his foot across a twig. He hobbled uphill, chasing a pair of pale legs, feet flashing dirty soles, a giggling shape. Between the brambles and roots, it danced on, waving his clothes like a flag. Metso stumbled and winced at the thorns snagging his skin. The shape stopped and turned to him. A woman. Small, with thick legs and a nothing-special face, lines starting to settle nose to mouth. A hat with a brim too wide for one person. Brown hair falling in waves on a green military shirt, with the sleeves gone, belted to look like a dress. Standing just out of reach, with the robe tucked under one arm, the woman took off her hat and fanned herself with it, looking Metso up and down, smirking. She smelled of berries and lavender singed by midday heat, of summer condensed.

‘Do you sleep in bogs often? Your clothes are soaked.’ She had a soft voice, a touch hoarse.

Metso evened out his breath and struggled to swallow his anger. Mosquitos zinged around his head, his foot throbbed. He wanted to snatch his robe from this... whoever, and maybe her stupid hat, too. And let Boy take one of his sloppy morning shirts into it. But! That wouldn’t be very Samaran of him. Peace and harmony, he reminded himself. She meant no offense, he assured himself. Also, her eyes, dark, with a bead of sunshine, gave off confidence and openness, disarming. He bent at the waist and crossed his arms over his crotch. The woman craned to get a peek.

‘All are one,’ spluttered Metso. His hand shot up to his heart in greeting and

dropped back. ‘Peace to you and your home.’

The woman’s eyes snapped from his hidden goods back to his face. ‘You’re from away. No wonder you slept in a bog.’

‘I didn’t see a bog.’

‘What’s that?’ She pointed downhill, to a tree near his tent.

He took a second, expecting a trick question. ‘A very confused tree. It has pinecones and leaves, all at once. What about it?’

‘It’s an alder. They like to stand with their feet in water.’

‘Well, then.’ He sighed slowly and looked away from the know-it-all-clothes-hostage-taker.

‘You’re big enough to strangle a moose, but you’re not a hunter. A hunter would know these things.’ The woman went on, chewing her fingernail.

‘I suppose a hunter would,’ he grumbled, tired of standing all scrunched. He cleared his throat. ‘I am a scholar of Samaran. I bring a message of hope and peace.’ That came out flat. ‘Can I have my robe back now?’

‘Hope and peace. We have that here already, but do what you must, scholar.’ The woman looked down and slapped a mosquito on her leg. It left a blood smear, triangular like the sign of The Factor stitched to Metso’s robe.

‘I won’t bore you with my words then and leave you to your strange ways.’ He pointed to his clothes. ‘That, please.’

‘Strange?!’ The whites of the woman’s eyes flared under her hat. ‘Says the naked

man with a woodlouse the size of a bear for a friend!

He hadn't noticed Boy, who must've padded over like a walking boulder to investigate the fuss. Satisfied, he now grazed on moss and waved his feelers. Without asking if she could, the woman stroked Boy's shell, testing the hardness of it with her nails. Staying clear of his scissoring jaws, she hugged his small head and looked into his honeycomb eyes. She offered Boy a strip of moss.

'Yes, well, he also carries my belongings. Anyway! It's irrelevant! What do you want?!' Metso's face got hot.

The woman's smile fluttered and vanished, and her shoulders sank. 'You're no fun, giant from away.'

No fun. Familiar words. He opened his mouth, still working on a comeback when his robe landed on his head. Wrapped in the scent of lavender, he fumbled with the wet fabric, and once free, he saw no trace of the woman. He listened. Nothing but birds, insects, the fire collapsing as it gobbled up the last of the tripod sticks, and Boy crunching on his breakfast. Nothing but another day.

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Again the bell chimed. Mesto had been waking to the sound for the past three days. Over time, it had grown from a twitch at the edge of his hearing to part of his normal. Sparse, lamenting notes that rolled into late morning and quit until dawn. He could never tell the direction they came from. But today, as he and Boy slogged it over a new hill, and a new valley

opened up, split by a glistening stream, the bell rang in the woods below. If it meant an audience for a dose of Samaran wisdom, Metso would need to put his show face on. He rubbed his temples and yawned, eyes shut against the sun. Tough morning. He'd had a dream and forgotten it, but the sourness stayed. To wake up bawling wasn't usual for him anymore.

'You won't tell, eh, Boy?' He slowed down to pat Boy's shell, smooth and warm. Of course, he won't. Metso's sandals and Boy's many legs raised puffs of dust on the path, and pebbles rolled ahead of them as they descended to the stream.

Their presence, heavy step, the clanking of the billie can, none of it fit here. They'd set off tremors, noticeable only to the unnoticed. Movements and whispers came. Curiosity. Remarks tossed in small voices over the chirring of grasshoppers. Eyes in the grass. A humpbacked fellow with a long nose snuck back into his burrow under Metso's gaze. From the shrubs drowned in vanilla-scented flowers, wee things with stripes, wispy human limbs, and wings that broke sunlight into rainbows watched the newcomers pass by. He wondered who, after all, needed his gift of hope and peace. We have that here already, he recalled. Certainly, looked it. He clicked his tongue, thinking, and inhaled the salt off the ocean, too far to be seen but near enough to be felt, the great water biting into the Norwegian shores. He decided that today he'd stay away from big thoughts.

By the stream, he let Boy roam. Then

undid his braids, scratched his scalp, sweaty and dusty, and looked for a spot to dunk his head. Here, the brook ran shallow and calm, overhung by willows, between fat blades of bullrushes. He pushed aside a lily pad and from under it, a nymph kicked with its crayfish tail. It waited, segmented arms holding the bottom, looked up at him through the water mouth open, shook its little head, and swam off. How does one preach to something with no ears? He knelt and took in air. The stream hugged his skull and snuffed out the sounds of the land. A cloud of silt swept across his face.

He waded in and plopped down on his back. With a rock for a pillow, soft from weeds, his face stayed above water. To the left, Boy digging under a tree. To the right, woods tangled in the last shreds of fog. The path crossed the stream over flat stones and carried on towards the forest. His hair moved in dark waves around him, the chill crawled into his pores. And he wanted more, as if to wash away soot from under his skin. When he closed his eyes, shadows of branches and rushes flickered on the red background. He brought up fistfuls of muck from the bottom of the stream and let it run along his arms. Rotten and fresh-smelling at the same time. True, like a past acknowledged. When he opened his eyes, he studied the tree sprawled over Boy, its limbs—veins against the sky, and the vine dangling from one of them, like a... noose.

Metso sat up, panting. No big thoughts, no bad thoughts. All are one.

Peace. He put his hand to his heart, clenched his jaw, and thought his teeth might explode from the pressure. In his chest, behind his eyes, in his throat, his heartbeat raced, tapping away in code. The rhythm that pieced together the mind and the reality within it. He needed to calm it, to tilt back into summer, into the wind that used to billow his clothes on mountain tops, into his sandals smoothed by endless miles. He needed to get back to work, to teach, help, hear, walk. No bad thoughts.

The bell rang. He splashed out of the stream. They'd listen. Whoever lived there would listen to the words of Samaran, he'd make sure of it. He had to pack, no time to lounge in puddles. Wet hair braided so tight he could hardly blink, he ran up to Boy, who'd dug himself half-way into the ground.

Metso knocked on his shell. 'Hello! Anyone? I think we've got a winner here, a whole village.' Before closing the panniers, Metso felt for his copy of the Codex, dense as a brick, tucked under his gear. 'You know how it is, business first, pleasure second.'

They walked. An aisle in a green cathedral, cool air above, warm ground underfoot. The trail plunged them into the woods, Boy pattering behind, with Metso leading the way. He kicked up a bunch of last year's leaves.

'This is your scene. Don't you love it?' He pointed to fallen trunks melting into the earth and mushrooms carpeting the dead wood. He stuck his fingers into the



soil. Hot velvet. 'A buffet of mouldy treats for you, sir. After our first conversion, I'll bring you here to celebrate. Promise.' Boy seemed to agree, his feelers wiggling faster.

An hour on, Metso stopped, looking up. A breath fizzed out of his chest. 'Shiiiiit. No village then.' Curtained off by the trees, a tower stood in front of him. Slim, collapsed on one side, threaded by climbing plants through the cracks and windows. It once had been part of a bigger building, now turned to overgrown rubble. 'Stay there.' Metso went to the tower and Boy started plucking mushrooms off a log, taking time to savour every bite.

Lichened and coarse, fitted without cement, the stones felt older than... stones. And the bell. Open to the sky, catching light with its engraved belly, like a ring on a mummified hand. Metso rubbed his face. A sifting of dust fell on his head. Looking up again, he caught a glimpse of a green dress and a wide-brimmed hat. Impossible. He circled to the wonky side to see inside the tower. She sat at the top, next to the bell, swinging her legs. He stepped into the round boundary through what used to be a doorway.

'Is it you who's been torturing the bell all morning?' Inside the stone carcass, his voice carried well.

'Greetings, scholar, didn't recognise you without *your* bell hanging out! But yes, it's me.'

Crude. Was that meant to be charming? Local custom? In any case, even if he had no village to convert, the bog woman was better than nothing. He managed a

smile.

'How did you beat me here? I've been glued to the trail the whole three days since we, umm... met.'

'Maybe walking isn't the only way to get places.'

'Fine.' He shrugged.

One hand gripping the ivy, the woman climbed down the staircase built into the inner wall. She hopped over the missing steps and Metso almost shouted to her to be careful, but didn't want to startle her and have broken bones on his conscience. So, he waited until she made it down and sat cross-legged in the shadow by the wall. That grin, those eyes like tempered chocolate, bathing him in sweetness.

'Can we try this again?' He straightened his back and moved centre-stage, where the sun squeezed in between the trees and the tower's peak. 'My name is Metso. And I have something for you,' he announced, hand on heart.

'My name is Roum.' The woman copied his gesture. She bit her lip and winked. 'Let's see it!'

'One moment, Roum.' He dashed, tripping over his robe and the stones, and came back with the Codex clutched to his chest. 'Can't forget *this*.' His fingers traced the knotwork pressed into the leather binding, and in his head he went over a couple of ways to start.

'Is it going to be good?' The honesty of Roum's question drove a crowbar into his thoughts.

'Very good. Life-changing, hopefully!'

'Oh good. I like those.' Roum scooted

closer to him, but stayed in the shade.  
'Sorry, the sun isn't a friend of mine.'

'But I am. And so is Samaran!' He tried to laugh and Roum tried to join in. Why was this so hard? He picked at the dirt with his sandal as the trees creaked in the breeze. 'Samaran saves us.' He held a dramatic pause. 'From lying awake at night, wondering why we even exist. From the panic that crushes your stomach when you think of death. From regret and bad thoughts.' He paced, waving his hands, stroking the Codex.

'Are you talking about your god? You said it would be good.' Roum slouched, arms crossed. 'The show you gave in the bog was better. Even a card trick would've been better.'

'No, I don't do card tricks,' muttered Metso. 'Samaran isn't a god.' He waited. 'It's a way of looking at the world, a philosophy of sorts.'

'Uh-huh. Aren't you a slippery one, Metso from away?' Roum got up and scrambled up the stairs. 'I'll listen, don't worry, only because I'm nice like that.' She stuck out her tongue at him. 'But I'm on duty, in case you couldn't tell.' She pulled the bell rope.

'That's enough noise for today! What do you think?' came a shout after three rings. He nodded, still feeling the sound somewhere in his liver.

'Samaran is the oldest of faiths.' He continued when Roum returned, and they sat together. 'And we, the messengers, stay poor. Because all you need is right here.' He touched his forehead. 'The whole

world. Everything that you see or touch or hear. It lives inside you, strung together by the flickers of the mind. And I'm part of yours and you're part of mine.' His fingers interlaced. 'One consciousness. No birth, no death, only the eternity of now.' In his own ears he nattered, a background hum, his lips shaping the teachings he'd spent years obsessing over. He watched Roum's hands and face, his thoughts skimming their gentle lines. In each line, grace and strength he no longer dismissed. With each postulate he spat out, her eyes got rounder. She'd cast a glance at him and go back to playing with a lock of her hair, head leaning on the stones.

Metso's voice began to struggle against a new sound. It came from all sides, busy as a cloth the size of the sky flapping in the wind. Next, the light dimmed, and he jumped to his feet.

'The babies heard the bedtime bell. We'd better step away from the wall,' said Roum and pulled him by the hand, her small palm rough and cool.

'What babies?' He flinched when a moth flew by his face. Another one landed on his sleeve, its antennae two silvery ferns. Moths swooped down to settle on the walls, wings blending with the grey stones. A swarm. At its thickest, above the tower, it was blocking the sun, swelling. The bugs swished around him and he thought they'd start crawling into his mouth and ears any second. Like drowning. In the sound of their wings, in the silver dust from their backs, in their tarry smell. He broke free of Roum and started windmilling his arms.

Shifting like a blanket over a restless body, the layer of moths grew and grew.

'They're back, they're back! Fuzz babies!' danced Roun, spinning in the middle of the moth cloud. He wanted to run. Now. 'This way. We'll wait it out here.' Roun got hold of him again and pulled him down a set of worn steps into a nook he hadn't noticed before.

#

'What about Boy?' Metso covered his mouth, as if the moths would follow his voice and storm the crypt.

'Oh, stop it!' Roun slapped his arm. 'He's fine, he won't even notice you've been gone. It's only until they quiet down.'

Metso's head scraped the ceiling. On one side of the nook, a broken antique chair, and by the opposite wall, a grandfather clock. Old and cobwebbed, with bizarre dials, ages ago it must've told something, but not time. He tapped the cracked glass.

'It has a secret,' announced Roun with a little squeal. He only snorted. Nothing would've surprised him at that point. She turned the knob on the case door below the clockface and pulled. The scent of earth and mouldy stone hit his nostrils. Instead of a pendulum and weights, a tunnel. 'Come, it's nice and cool down here, and quiet. Good for talking about your... Samaran.' She slunk through the opening and waved Metso over. He heard moth wings and recoiled as they touched the back of his neck. Exhaling until his ribs stuck to his spine, he squeezed inside the clock and shut the door behind him.

'What's with the moths?' He had to crawl, while Roun was small enough to walk doubled over.

'They connect the earth and the sky. Hatch and feed here as young ones, then grow wings, but never forget their home. They bring news of the world. For Agarik. Isn't it wonderful?'

'Not the word I had in mind. And who's Agarik? Though why do I even care?' His hands and knees shuffled through a layer of crunchy bits. In the light streaming through the sieve of the ruined tunnel, he saw that he'd been crawling in shells of insect pupae.

'But you should care,' replied Roun in her bright voice, as if touring a hole in the ground was a normal way to, say, kill time until dinner. 'You've got your Samaran god...'

'It's not a god.'

'...and we have Agarik. He returns dead stuff to the earth, so she can eat and life can go on. Can your Samaran do that?'

'Very impressive. Does he live in a palace or a cave?' Metso pressed on with the questions. He could see up Roun's dress and fought to keep his eyes down and his brain distracted.

'He lives all around.' She patted the wall. They reached a chamber, plenty big to stand and walk in. He studied the spot she touched, where yellowish strings tangled with the soil like never-ending snot.

'You mean in the ground?'

'Yes, scholar!' She threw her arms up. 'Agarik the Great Fungus has spread far and wide!' The age-old walls swallowed her

words. The place had long windows, dressed in mouldings. But since the building had sunk into the dirt, only their tips, beaming from the rush of daylight, stood above the surface. In one of the windows, a bird's nest. Metso sat down. Next to him sat Roum, so close he could smell her hair. He didn't move away. From his pocket he dug out a pack of salt liquorice, a trust-building gift for others and a reminder of home for himself. After passing Roum a piece, he popped a handful of pastilles in his mouth.

'You really want to hear more about my faith?' The tang and salt tightened his jaw.

'Why not? I rarely get visitors, especially from away. Or tall ones.' She giggled and tugged on his braids, like reins. She bit into the liquorice and squished up her face. Her nails gripped his arm, but she kept rolling the pastille around with her tongue, slowly.

'You know, you don't have to eat it. It's kind of traditional sweet where I come from.' He laughed. 'It's not for everyone.'

The black wad hit the floor and she wiped her lips with the back of her hand. 'Glad I didn't grow up where you did. I'd hate to see what else you snack on. Broken glass?'

He cracked up again. 'Well, since you asked...'

Roum didn't let him finish. She pressed her mouth to his. A clumsy landing, salty and sweet. Hot breath gushing from her nose. Her hands scrabbled up his chest, as if she were climbing a cliff and let-

ting go meant something awful. He stopped himself from holding her.

'Come on, scholar, play.' Urgency in her voice, storm coiled in her body.

This happened too many times before. The lust-drunk look, hungry fingers, I love you —whispered between damp sheets, which he never whispered back. Too many. Alina, with a rear end as well-fed as her trust fund. He'd helped himself to both. Liisa, who enjoyed music on vinyl and deep conversation. To him, she'd opened her house and her legs so willingly. They gave, and he took, scraped out, emptied. And if they melted into their boots at the mere sight of him, then he deserved what he took. Right? They loved being his toys, his means. Because he was special and admired by all. A gorgeous face decorating a gorgeous body, a masterpiece destined for greatness. No matter the cost. Right? Until Pepper came along.

Metso's stomach knotted up, his breath caught. And he didn't want to go back in time, to see Pepper's face bobbing in his memories. All are one. No bad thoughts. And he would've pushed Roum's arms off his shoulders. But he could already feel her heat on his lap. And he would've told her that he only wanted to spread the word of Samaran as a new man. But she'd already lifted her dress. And he would've clawed his way out of the damned catacombs. But she was a lovely bundle, her mouth already draining the loneliness out of him.

He let his hands stroke her hair.

#

Two heartbeats, two Factors meshed,

pushing out a new script. Metso listened to them carefully, teasing their sound away from all the others: Roum's whimpers, the squish-squash of him in her, birds chirping outside.

The air had notes of a bedroom well-enjoyed. That's one way to make a pile of rock feel lived in. He picked up other smells, too. An odd sprinkling: cordwood rotting behind a sauna, autumn frost, sour-dough. Faint at first, they suddenly rushed him.

'I. Am.' Punched into his palate. The words echoed and faded. He almost spat. 'I am sensing a guest in your home, little Roum-Roum.' The voice bloomed in his head.

He rolled onto his back.

'No, no, you stay up.' Roum attempted to revive his cock. Then pulled on his shoulders.

'Am I going nuts? Who was that?' He wouldn't shift.

'Agarik being nosy. Don't worry, he can only hear me, not you. It's fine. Please.' She whispered in his ear and yanked on his hips as if loosening a rusty hinge.

'Is this what you meant by *play*?' With a grunt, he turned over and kissed her neck.

'It's all right. You're a gentle beast, just relax. There,' she gasped.

'Are you enjoying yourself, Roum?' The cold words lagged in the folds of Metso's brain.

'Leave me alone!' She shouted and pressed herself into Metso, swinging her

hips faster.

'Are you?'

'Yes!' Roum's fingers kneaded Metso's back.

He ground his dead knob against her a little longer before giving up. 'It's all a bit much. I'm afraid playtime is over.'

They lay on top of his robe, staring at the vaulted ceiling, with her tucked into his side.

'So, where's this Agarik hiding?' He finally turned to her.

Near her nose, she had a mole. And all the tension he sensed in her seemed to pool in that small skin-tone pearl. He wanted to be disgusted by it. Makes it easier to walk away.

'He doesn't hide! And there's no hiding from him, either!' Roum got to her feet and snatched up her dress. 'He's everywhere.' Her lips shook and her breasts swayed in time to her pacing. Metso thought that as a bringer of hope and peace, he should comfort her. But she wiggled out of his embrace. They got dressed quietly.

'I am greatly disappointed,' the voice came back.

'Sounds like someone's jealous.' Metso snickered, dusting off his clothes. 'And how am I hearing him if he's got no mouth?'

'He doesn't need one, the old sack of shit. He talks through smell. You inhale his words.' Roum took a noisy breath and pretended to retch. Wondering how to get Agarik out of his mouth and nose, Metso ran his tongue over his teeth. 'What he



does need is to learn how to mind his own business!’ Fists clenched, Roum yelled at the yellow strings showing through the cracks in the foundation.

Metso picked up the Codex and asked for its weight to steady him. To stop him from slipping up again. He had a job to do, roads to travel. In the stodgy chamber, he now felt squeezed. Roum hesitated, fumbling with her dress, pulling her hair behind her ear over and over. He thought she might cry. Or he might. Preparing himself for a farewell, he looked past her, to the tunnel under its carved lintel. The only way in or out.

‘Shall I take him, Roum?’ Agarik wouldn’t let up.

‘No!’ Her body snapped to a straight line. ‘He is *not* dead!’

‘And you are *not* respectful.’

Roum signed madly to Metso to head for the exit.

‘You’re not married to the mushroom, are you? And come to think of it, are you a smell-talker too?’ He took a while to walk over. ‘Or maybe you’re both a mouth- and a smell-talker. Ouch!’ With a smack on the ass, she moved him along. This time, he climbed into the tunnel first.

‘I apologise and regret my choices,’ said Roum softly, while prodding Metso to crawl faster.

‘What? All of them?’ He glanced back at her. She gave him sad eyes and a silent ‘no’ with her lips.

‘Good. Still, a lesson must be learned. I shall take him.’ Sharp as ice, Agarik’s words hung inside Mesto’s head.

‘No!’ screamed Roum. ‘I’ve learned my lesson, I assure you!’

‘Please, stop. Preserve at least some of your dignity. The Sprouts have been dispatched. Do not interfere.’

‘Sounds well-pissed. You think he’d like to hear about Samaran? Unwind a little? You could do the talking,’ said Metso over his shoulder. Roum pushed him harder. He braced himself and his wrist grazed a thin white mushroom with two black dots on its head. The touch felt like a splash of boiling oil wiped off with a hot iron.

‘This wasn’t here before!’ he howled and clutched his wrist. It resembled a blanched fruit, the skin ready to slip off.

‘So, he really did it,’ hissed Roum. ‘Don’t rub the burn. Be careful. We’re almost there.’

Further ahead, more slimy caps rose through the roots, dirt, and moth shells. Metso twisted himself into a knot, trying to avoid another touch. He spilled out of the clock door. Roum hurried around him and up the steps, checking around the corners.

‘Keep moving, we need to leave. Doesn’t matter where to, but it’s got to be far.’ Fear in her face. He swallowed and felt a kick of nerves in his gut. They blew past the legion of sleeping fuzz babies and out of the tower, to the path. He sneezed from the light. Beyond the cover of the trees, the northern day would burn until morning. He lowered himself onto a stump and the cushion of moss gave under his weight. At the root, he spotted a hole which passed for a door, and a piece of fabric, small as a

coaster. Someone's doormat perhaps. He moved his feet to leave it untouched.

'What are you doing!?! Let's go, let's go!'

Roum clapped her hands by his ear.

'All are one, of course, but I'm not a mind-reader. Not yet, anyway. You'll have to explain why you're acting like this.' He did his best not to raise his voice at her. 'I mean, we got out. Sure, that damned mushroom hurt like a motherfucker. But I'm not moving until you tell me what's going on.' Waiting for an answer, he checked his blister, then shouted for Boy, who'd wandered off while he was busy... preaching.

'Sprouts.' Roum pointed behind him, barely mouthing the word, and drifted back. 'I'm sorry.'

Metso jumped and spun around at the same time.

About twenty yards away, a white figure, roughly human, leant out from behind a tree, as if playing hide and seek.

Unblinking eyes—specks of coal, fixed on Metso from a height of two men. He jerked sideways, and the thing moved with him, letting go of the trunk, reeling out two long arms and hands with knobbly fingers. Slowly, it started to approach. A round head and a keg of a torso on spindly legs, gliding over litter and shrubs. He inched backwards, keeping his eyes on the creature. At its mouth-hole, a call erupted, a rattle that brought up a gush of slime. With one hand, it brushed away the mucous and let it dribble on a log. The wood dissolved like a sugar cube in hot tea.

'Peace to you and your home,' whis-

pered Metso. He looked for Roum. She stood with her palms against her cheeks, watching the Sprout.

More of them appeared. All identical. A parade of ugly. The same translucent flesh and folds like lace collars around stumpy necks – the silhouettes lumbered through the woods on their stilt legs, huffing, bubbling. Roum grabbed Metso's hand and led him off the path, away from the tower. Into the brush, thick as a soup made of nightmares. The ordeal emptied him, made his legs soft. If the world was his to create, from the beat of consciousness, why didn't his Factor do better? Samaran saves. But somehow, Samaran gave more questions than answers. A test? A puzzle? How much of his reality came about by chance? Dice cast from the lousiest corners of his mind. No, the one mind! He squeezed the Codex in his sweaty hand. He had to believe. That everything he'd faced since stepping onto Crow's Way as Metso meant something. He tried to believe it so hard, his head hurt.

In all directions, the whiteness of the long things now flooded the browns and the greens of the forest. Closer, louder, tightening the circle. Nothing to be done. Metso placed himself between Roum and the closest of the freaks. He would've bet his balls that Agarik had a worse punishment planned for her than him. With one stride, his trembling body entered the sliver of space reserved for his first truly selfless act. His head felt stuffed with cotton. A slimy hand raked forward. He slapped it away with the Codex and immediately

checked the book – the cover got scarred by the juice. The Sprout looked at its empty fingers, at Metso, then gurgled and. Fell over. Behind it, the bushes shook and an armoured shell stormed out, a set of feelers whipping around.

‘Boy!’ Metso half-screamed, half-laughed. In his jaws, Boy carried a long skinny leg, and as he tore into it, lapping up the slime with great appetite, the smell of mushrooms spread in the air.

The Sprouts froze, looking at the maimed one. In the slowest chase Metso had ever seen, Boy charged. His little legs rippled beneath him as the white flock dragged their limbs over obstacles, scattering, suddenly panicked and clumsy.

‘Woo-hoo! Yes! Eat ‘em up, you big lump!’ Roum jumped, red-faced, waving her hat. Metso, drunk with relief, couldn’t stop giggling like an idiot.

## Part 2

The left side of the window never opened. Between the layers of dirty glass, a miniature wooden boat sat trapped with a crew of dead flies. Metso opened the right side to let in the sea air and the squawking of bickering seagulls. Roum’s new favourite sound. She’d never been this close to salt water and enjoyed listening to Skjerstadfjorden’s wildlife.

‘Sk-yerr-stad. Sheer-stad.’ He rolled the name on his tongue like a marble. His map showed the fjord, but not the fishing village they’d come to. Then again, many places he and Boy had walked through

since starting on Crow’s Way weren’t on his map. The best map, with every cairn, farm, and monument accounted for. Now he could bet those places weren’t on *any* map drawn by human hand.

‘You were brave back there, with the Sprouts.’ Roum sounded half-asleep.

As he took in the soaring, pine-covered cliffs on either side of the fjord’s mouth, he felt her eyes on his back. Never underestimate a guilty conscience, he wanted to say, or better yet, I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to you, or even a simple thank you.

‘Samaran saves,’ he said instead.

‘Uh-huh.’

He heard her roll over in bed. The massive scab on his wrist itched, healing. Since they stumbled upon the village a week ago, he hadn’t brought up the events in Agarik’s forest. Neither did they discuss any plans, afraid, perhaps, of each other’s answers. She’d fucked herself out of her home. His route continued westward, to the edge of land. His route or theirs? He turned. The blanket covered the top half of her. With her feet crossed, cuddling one another, she lay curled up. The sun gilded the hairs on her calves. Ducking under the beams strung with old nets and fishing line, he crossed the floor, the planks already warmed by the light streaming through the four windows. Roum spent a lot of time in bed. She ventured out on overcast days or when the midnight sun took a break behind the mountains and the shadows grew longer. Her appetite doubled, yet her cheekbones sharpened and

her ribs started to show. Whatever it was, she hadn't complained once. Lifting the door gently on its hinges so it wouldn't squeak, he slipped out and headed down the scuffed stairs.

In the garden, he placed a log on the chopping block. First morning chore. On day one, he nearly lost an eye and another time, a finger, but now wielded the axe with confidence. Swing, crack, next. Resin, bitter in the air and sticky on his hands. He pictured himself on one of those islands strewn between Bodø and Lofoten. Cutting timber, digging postholes, raising a small temple. A sailboat to take him and Boy back to the mainland to preach and get supplies. If only he knew how to sail.

'There you are, Master Scholar! It's so early. Shouldn't you be resting?' Lule, the innkeeper, came around the corner of the shed. Her porcelain pipe ornamented with blue flowers twitched in her wide mouth. Occasionally, Metso thought of peeking behind her ears to check for gills because he felt something of the ocean in her. Skin, smooth and taught as a mackerel's, same eyes too, with a silver sheen. She dried her hands on her apron. Under it, a long skirt and blouse, above it, a friendly face and blond hair in a bun.

'All are one. Simply doing what I can for our generous host.' He wiped the sweat off his brow with his forearm. Instead of his robe, he wore a shirt and trousers gifted by Lule. Easier to work in, but both too short, so he'd rolled the sleeves and the trouser legs. Quite the fisherman look. The shirt pulled across his shoulders and he left

a few buttons undone. Her eyes lingered.

She took a mighty drag on her pipe. 'A holy man cannot waste his time on common work. I do appreciate it, mind you! Of course!' she added quickly and touched his hand. 'It's an honour to have a person of your calibre stay with us.' She smiled with her entire unwrinkleable face and bowed a little.

'Calibre? You're very kind, Lule.' He bowed back, his ears on fire, wishing for something, anything at all, to end the conversation. Oh, look! The axe slipped and Master Scholar is bleeding out! That would do. The whole week she'd been prancing around him. Polite with Roum, but mostly ignoring her. Esteemed guest, holy man, master. Not that he or Roum had any money, but she didn't even want payment in labour. And he kept trying and Lule kept telling him not to. Awkward for a changed man brimming with integrity. The arrangement prickled his skin and slowed his flow of gratitude down to a drip. How many days until the bloody ferry?

'Speaking of special guests! I must check on Lady Gamla.' Lule raised her head to the big round window on the top floor. 'She is due next month and still working. Bless. That's dedication. Her business is very important, you see,' whispered Lule, leaning into him. 'She works with humans, such as yourself, Master Scholar. It's all hush-hush.' She turned an invisible key at her lips, but he knew she was bursting to say more. He nodded and asked nothing. 'She will want a snack. I baked skolebrød this morning, and the coffee is

fresh. Help yourself! And take some for your... friend!' Lule trotted off.

Gamla appeared in the gap between the lace curtains. Against the sky-blue cladding and the white trim of the inn, the blackness of her outfit was infinite. Metso pretended to look at the chipped paint and the weather-beaten peaked roof. He'd never seen her up close, but his windpipe narrowed every time he caught sight of her shuffling along the paths near the inn, arm-in-arm with Lule, on her daily walk. Ancient, bent, skinny as a cane, and pregnant. One hand resting on her bump. As he got busy stacking the firewood, he hoped Gamla was looking at the bay and not him.

The street leading to the pier wound between rows of houses and workshops. Red and white, with grassy roofs and flowers in window boxes. On the beach, spraying water everywhere, kids skipped rope with seaweed. They'd adopted Boy as one of their own, riding him and letting him chase them. He loved the attention. Metso whistled and took a carrot out of his pocket, all snap and sugar. Boy left his playmates and took the treat gently with his chompers.

'How are these little barnacles treating our hero, the Sprout-eater?' Metso asked and waved to the kids. They kept a distance and didn't wave back, all covered in dirt, mouths hanging open from running, exchanging shy smiles. Boy nuzzled Metso's pocket. 'Can't fool *you*.' He pulled out a second carrot.

Boy took off to join the games and

Metso walked along the water's edge. The licks of the waves numbed his toes. Sails down, oars out, a couple of boats crawled towards the shore with their catch. The bigger crew members rowing and the pint-sized ones hustling to prepare the ropes for landing. The mid-morning light turned the fjord into shimmering fish scales. In the glimmer, seal-people dived for sea urchins. They did all the diving jobs for the fleet. He called them seal-people, but surely, these stocky creatures with human faces and legs that ended in flippers, useless on land, went by a different name. He looped back to the pier. Slumped among the rocks, tarred boats were waiting for the incoming tide to right them. By accident, he bumped a can sitting on the boardwalk and hot tar leaked into the water like tentacles. Climbing up to the inn, under a clear sky, he thought of having a sauna and a dip in the sea. Later.

In the big and bright kitchen, Lule's radio crackled about a low-pressure system approaching the coast. He loaded a tray with a pot of coffee and two cups. Took a skolebrød from the still warm oven and another one, for Roum. Glanced behind him and took a third one, for Roum. In the salon, the guests went about their day. The smallest customers lived in drawers and cupboards and any place they could find. One of the lodgers crawled out of a cabinet, rubbed his muzzle, and disappeared behind a curtain. Metso went up the stairs.

At the smell of coffee and pastry, Roum's nose surfaced from the blanket.





He sat by the window, at their wobbly table.

'My name is Metso. And I have something for you,' she said in a girl baritone.

He chuckled. 'This time, it's something even better than Samaran.'

'I can't imagine it's possible.' She gave an eyeroll that could've reversed the tide in the fjord.

'Lule is being weird again.' He poured coffee. 'Takes me for some kind of miracle man. It's not like anyone made her think that I am one?' Slit-eyed, he turned to Roum. She pulled the covers higher. 'Did you say something to her?'

No answer. He stared at the spiderweb of cracked enamel on his saucer. A gust of wind blew a seed fluff onto one of the pastries. Upstairs, Lule's voice flared up periodically, washed out by the sounds of the bay. Her quick feet walked circles in Gamla's suite.

'It's all right. Give her the pleasure of spoiling another very important guest at this very unimportant place.' Roum's face re-appeared.

'I'm not here to freeload.'

'No one said that.'

'But she doesn't want me to do *anything* for her.'

'She doesn't need it.'

'I need it!' His palm landed, and the skolebrød jumped. So did Roum's shoulders. He put his elbows, stone-heavy, on the table, and with one hand squeezed his temples. 'Very important guest? We shouldn't lie.'

'We shouldn't do a lot of things.' She

peeled back the blanket. 'Come.'

#

The west-bound ferry had been delayed again, this time due to weather. Clouds with full bellies settled over the fjord. The mountain peaks softened in the fog and the deep green of the pines shifted to near black. The gulls fell quiet, but the slopes and the still water carried through a strange rumble. It grew into a low trill, stopped, and started over.

'A grouse drumming its wings on a log. Far, where the woods are deep. That's what you do if you're a grouse,' explained Roum earlier that morning when Metso walked with her to the harbour. She shook her head as if to chase the sound away.

The cool air got under Metso's collar, sending wake-up shivers down his back. He'd patched up his robe, but Roum's dress had been decimated by the run through the underbrush in Agarik's forest. She'd solemnly cremated it in their wood burner. Now she sat on the crowded pier, busy over a broken net, wearing one of Lule's getups. Her slim body lost in the blouse, the shade from her hat darker somehow, stealing her face. Harold, the most respected of the older blokes, had been teaching her the basics of life on the sea. He darted here and there on his six crab legs, folding a tarp. Occasionally, he checked her work, nodding and grinning into his beard.

With the boats stuck waiting for the storm to pass, Metso had his opportunity. He licked his lips, sucked dry by the jitters.

'Dear friends. I am Metso, a messenger



of Samaran!' Arms open and chest forward, he walked into the bustle. He wanted everyone to see the red inverted triangle stitched to his robe. The sign of The Factor. A woman put down her knife and lifted her head from the hook-nosed salmon she'd been filleting. One of the seal-people pulled himself out of the water and reclined on the dock, his mottled skin shiny.

'We all have a heart.' Metso offered a handshake to a rat-looking thing with scruffy, wet fur. It... or he... sat on a mooring post, wearing the smallest sou'wester, and his paw just about closed around Metso's index finger. 'Different as we are, I assume we all do. And its beat is the only constant in our lives. Is it not? People and places come and go, we grow older, joy and pain mix, fall to the back of our memory. Yet the rhythm stays.' Metso knocked his fist against his red triangle. 'Thump, thump. Take a moment, feel it for yourselves.'

They all put their hands, paws, flippers to their hearts. About thirty-strong, the crowd decided to go with it, out of boredom or curiosity. Who knows? But the woman with the fish, for one, took it seriously enough, gazing at him, her mouth a tight button.

'That, my friends, is your Factor!' His voice rang stronger now. 'The origin of everything. Of your mind and of the universe. Like the letters in a word or the beeps in a telegram, it creates the world you live in. It is the code of reality!'

'How beautiful,' sighed the woman.

'Hey, Metso! My friend Ulla says she likes you!' A girl waved to him. Laughter rolled through the crowd. He cast down his eyes, tapping his fingers on the Codex.

'Bitch!' chirped presumably Ulla and stormed off. As her friends hurried in tow and the elders dished them a few smacks, Metso gave the group time to reshuffle. The colours around him had wilted. Even the bright walls of the buildings had been sapped by the grey slabs overhead. Only the red of his triangle remained unchanged. The wind threw its first jab at his face.

'How can this be? My mamma made my heart when she made me. And my heart doesn't make anything,' peeped the rat-sailor.

'You see...' Metso stumbled. 'It is not an easy truth to accept.' He thrust the Codex above his head. 'But Samaran tells us that we live in a world of symbols whose meaning is obscure until we pore over them. A painting is but a pattern of lines and dots, a code of symbols. A jumper is a ball of yarn until you apply a pattern to it. Pure information! You cannot touch it or see it, but it's there! The thread of creation starts with your Factor – the first pattern, arising by chance from an infinite potential! The potential of you! You are infinite! Everything you perceive as real lives within you! Including your wonderful mamma.' Out of breath and flushed, he bent down to the rat creature.

Silence.

'I miss my mamma,' said the furry guy quietly.

Time dragged, and the crowd stood

hushed. Some squirming, others dead still, and all avoiding eye contact with Metso and one another. All but Roum. From her place at the back, she gave him a nod and silent applause. With that, he at least didn't feel like jumping off the wharf anymore.

'If you live within me, I'd like to get you out!' Harold's wisecrack sparked nervous giggles.

'You live within me too, and we all share one unbreakable consciousness. Though we cannot see with each other's eyes. Our Factors are connected! All are one! That is what Samaran teaches us!' Metso hugged the Codex and hoped to wring more life out of his butchered sermon. Except now, once again, his voice sounded thin.

'Give over. I've seen less shit inside a beached whale,' groaned Harold and started pushing through the people towards his boathouse.

'Oh, you rude bastard! For shame!' The fish woman's hands splashed up to Harold's face with the sort of casual anger that keeps marriages together.

'There's work to be done.' Harold shooed her away. His legs clicked on the boardwalk, crustacean lower body sagging, dirty-white, sporting clumps of hair or seaweed. How do they fuck? Flashed across Metso's mind as he watched the crab-man totter away. 'And you be careful round these parts, mate! We've got Lady Gamla and the Wrights to look after us! Don't go upsetting them, yammering about your silly god!' Harold's parting words came on the

wind. From the path skirting the bay, he pointed to the inn.

'It's not a god,' spat Metso through his teeth.

Gamla's knotted figure, hanging off Lule's elbow, slowly approached the pier. As the pair got closer, the crowd thinned out. Even the fish woman disappeared inside her shop without a word. Soon, only Metso and Roum stood on the rickety boardwalk, he – choking down defeat and she – chewing her lip and packing up her net.

'A fine morning, isn't it?' croaked Gamla, lifting her eyes, milky with cataracts. Metso's stomach fluttered. From behind, Roum pressed herself close to him.

'Fine indeed. Lule. Lady Gamla.' He dipped his head to both. Messengers of Samaran shouldn't sulk. But a delicious sulk was all he wanted after the preaching flop.

'My lady, you always have your humour! Fine morning! We're in for it with these thunderclouds!' cackled Lule and almost lost her pipe. She squeezed Gamla's claws in her hard-working hand. The wind lashed Gamla's hair, her scalp showing through the silver strands.

'Humour comes with age, love.' The hag rubbed her huge belly. Sluggish as a tortoise, she stretched for the honey-flavoured smoke that seeped from Lule's pipe and mouth. 'I'm not meant to smoke in my condition, obviously, but I sneak a whiff any chance I get.' She sniffed again. The high collar of her dress bunched her neck into a squeezebox of withered skin.

Fitted at the top, beaded in intricate whorls, luxurious, the dress spilled over her belly and reached the ground. All black. Bodice, long sleeves, beads. Black on black. And the beads moved. Whole designs crept to new positions, re-arranged themselves, pivoted, never at rest. Like hundreds of crows' eyes, watching constantly. Even Gamla's earrings had black stones, round, alive, and watchful.

All those eyes—fixed on Metso, but still moving. Dizzy, he leaned on the stack of lobster traps next to him.

'Something wrong?' Roum poked his side. Lule and Gamla looked concerned. Now, the whole world sped up. The fjord rippled, tarps snapped in the wind, the trees waved their crowns, and the storm clouds churned.

'I need to go. Pardon me, ladies.'

Once at the inn, he climbed into bed with his sandals on. Zero conversions, one threat from a local, two pests spooking his audience, and a boatload of embarrassment. He threw the Codex into the far corner. Got up, shoved the book in his pannier, and got back into bed. The blanket, coarse and worn, rubbed his chin like sandpaper. Back home in Oulu, he had a soft blanket. In Oulu, he could stroll into town on a Saturday, order muikku and roasted taters at the market, chat up the girls, people-watch. Normal human people. Not god-damned crabs or mushrooms or pregnant old bags.

The windows buzzed from the storm picking up and the rain started, heavy as bullets. Heavy as his eyelids. Shadow filled

the place. He felt adrift on the bed, in a space that wound back on itself, endlessly small and big. Space that packed his every cell and bloated his cheeks with fear and loss – an icy lungful of comet dust.

He lifted one eyelid. The hands of the small amber clock on the bedside table edged to noon. Back to sleep.

#

The door screamed on its hinges, and Metso leapt out of bed. Ten, said the clock. The banging went on. He didn't make it to the door before the handle turned and Roum stuck in her messy head.

'What!?' He swung the door open.

She didn't enter. 'Sorry. But. We kind of need you. I think.' Her voice cracked, and she rubbed her jutting collar bones. Behind her, Lule's moon face swam in the gloom of the corridor.

'It's Lady Gamla, she's in labour! It came early, and she needs special care, and the ferry, nowhere to be seen. Her births are never easy. Heavens help us! We don't know what to do, Master Scholar, please.'

He raked his cheeks with his fingers. 'You both are off your rocker. I have no medical skills.'

Roum and Lule stood there, blinking up at him, like two baby owls waiting for a mouse to be puked up. Sweat flushed his pits and washed away his leftover sleep. Was this a gift? A chance to be Metso without the limp-dick preaching? He had no idea how to help, but it didn't matter because they didn't come for help. They came for...

'Hope. Hope. Hope and peace,' he



breathed, thundering up the stairs.

Gamla's bedroom gobbled him up. Big but stuffed with knick-knacks and furniture. The rain-soaked evening sucked the light through the round window. Like an animal's jaw, a poster bed with no canopy cradled the naked guest of honour. Old book smell – vanilla and wood, and on top of that, something metallic mixed with shit. He stepped onto the cushy rug by the bed and wrinkled his nose.

'Right'. He wanted to cover Gamla better, but the sheet lumped between her legs was warm and wet and stained red, so he left it alone. Opposite to him, Lule stroked Gamla's head, muttering comforting nonsense. 'Right. We'll need hot water and towels.' Isn't that what they always say? 'And more light.'

'On it!' Roun sprinted for the door, as did Lule.

Metso cleared a dainty pedestal table decorated with twining serpents and put it at the bedside. A wash basin went on top. Gamla moaned steadily, her sunken mouth quivering, eyelids down, blue-tinted as a pair of plums buried in her skull. Roun showed up with an armful of candles and lit them. The trembling flames glazed the old woman yellow.

'Here you go.' Teary-eyed, Lule handed him a stack of impossibly white and soft hand towels. She poured hot water into the basin and stood back, fidgeting with her apron. With one towel, he wiped Gamla's forehead, then rolled up his sleeves and dipped another towel in the water. His knowledge of midwifery ended there.

Roun appeared too busy, consoling Lule, who'd started sobbing on her shoulder. He hovered over Gamla a minute, not sure which end of her the towel was meant for, and settled for middle ground. Plunked the cloth on her belly, turned to Roun, and forced a smile.

Gamla looked dissolved into her bed. Never again did he want to see old flesh displayed like that. Thank goodness for clothes! Only wrinkles left of her, the rest given away. Blue rivers of veins covering every inch. Bruises in full bloom, as if she'd lost a war under that flimsy skin. Yet not quite lost. Her stomach, a perfect dome crowned with a nub of a navel, and her engorged breasts dammed by thick brown nipples – all brewing, all monuments to life among the collapse. Gross. Fascinating. She kicked off the stained sheet.

'Mercy,' whispered Metso. Her bits looked like a raspberry pie gone wrong.

No! A sliver of shame stabbed him. Who thinks this way?! Where did his gratitude go? Forget the creepy eye-beads and her aura that plucked his nerves. Could this crumpled being on the mattress trust him with her helplessness? He patted Gamla's hand and whispered an apology.

'Do you think she's doing better?' Roun, perched with Lule on a settee of bentwood and silk, kept trying to look around him. Gamla honked and arched her back. Metso pressed on her hot, sticky chest but stopped, afraid of snapping her ribs.

'She'll be fine!' The lie scraped his

throat. He offered the baby owls another stiff smile and Lule wailed louder.

Wheezing, Gamla clutched the sheets. With a sickening pop, the old woman's neck plunged into her torso. Sucked in, missing, as if pulled by a string from the inside. Metso held his own neck and stepped back, shaking. Another crack and Gamla's head buckled, sinking into her body. The moaning died down as her matted locks disappeared in the crater between her shoulders.

'It's starting! I can't bear to look!' cried Lule from a hundred miles away, behind the cracking sounds and Metso's Factor hammering in his chest. As Gamla's bones crumbled, he danced around the bed with his arms out, a mad shaman, not knowing what to touch or how. Between her legs a bulb emerged, stretching her like rubber. One push, two, and a head came out. Not a child's head, but a woman's. He wanted to weave his toes into the rug to anchor himself against certain insanity. Dropping to his haunches and dry-heaving, he tied a towel around his face to stop the stink. Maybe that's what the towels were meant for. Minute by minute, hour by hour, Gamla continued to turn herself inside out like the world's most complicated sock. Her belly deflated, torso and limbs folded as neatly as out of season clothes, and followed her head down the same sinkhole. And on the other side emerged a new Gamla, exquisite, young, smeared with her own blood.

By the time the rain had stopped and morning ribboned the clouds, she lay with

her feet on the pillow. Fresh-skinned, red-haired, with solid bones. Metso found refuge in the depths of a black velvet armchair. Despite spending all of yesterday in bed, he felt like he hadn't slept in months. With a syrupy delay, his thoughts tripped over one another and moving his arms took ages. Someone opened the window, and the breeze cooled his burning face. He pushed himself up to leave.

'Please, stay a little longer. It is my birthday, after all,' asked Gamla. Her voice a gentle chime.

Lule's apron zipped by. A cup of coffee appeared in his hand, and in his lap a bowl of strawberries with cream. After turning Gamla the right way around, Lule propped her up with cushions and started to clean her up.

'All better, my lady, all better. You did give us a fright but, thankfully, we had Master Metso.'

'These acrobatics don't get easier, dear! It's all a dark blur. I was lucky to have all of you near, especially our intrepid Master Scholar,' laughed Gamla. Her hazel eyes scanned the bedroom and settled on Metso.

'Any time, Lady Gamla.' He had no energy to be modest.

'Are you really one of the Wrights?' Roum took a break from shovelling in cream and berries.

'Until I get a better offer.' Gamla clasped her hands behind her head.

'Somebody pinch me,' mumbled Roum and licked her spoon, gawking at the beauty on the bed.

‘Blanket, my lady?’ Lule, with her eyes red from crying, wouldn’t leave Gamla’s side.

‘No, thank you. We’ve steamed up this little birdhouse quite well, haven’t we? Plus, what can be better than the birthday suit on one’s birthday?’ Her long legs splayed, Gamla ran her hands up and down her body and tousled her stuck-together curls.

‘As you wish.’ Lule smiled and touched her head to Gamla’s. The magnificent red-head pecked her on the cheek.

Metso crossed his legs, trying to ignore the only part of him that suddenly decided to wake up. He surveyed the décor. A wardrobe with beetles and centipedes carved on the doors, theatre binoculars inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a porcelain lucky cat saluting a pair of curvy-toed Turkish slippers. On the wall, a paper fan covered in herons, rice fields, and peasants having a better day than Metso. On the stack of books next to him, a small bronze hedgehog with turquoise eyes. It was heavy for its size and had a hole in its arse.

‘Adorable, isn’t it? One of a kind. You can have it, as a thank-you gift.’ Gamla offered. Slowly, he looked up at her. ‘It’s for pepper.’

‘Pepper?’

‘Pepper.’

His breath hitched, and he dropped the hedgehog back in its place. Why did Gamla’s eyes flash black? Why did she smirk? He filled his lungs and studied the blue-and-beige swirls on the Persian rug. No bad thoughts. She didn’t smirk. He was

just tired. The last of his appetite went, and he passed his bowl to Roum, who almost ripped his hands off taking it.

‘I appreciate your generosity, but scholars of Samaran steer away from possessions where possible,’ he declared, staring at the rug.

#

The following night, Pepper came to him and called him by his real name. She twisted around him like purple water, laughing, teasing. He tried to grasp her hand or stroke her hair. Small as a cat, she climbed onto his back and dived off his shoulder. Then stretched, rose above him, and fell down in coils, too quick to catch.

‘Pepper! You’re all right, you’re flying!’ he called to her through tears.

‘I don’t know about flying, but my feet are off the ground.’ Dressed in a purple gown, she lingered close by, to show him her feet tinted purple, same as her hands and lips. She brushed her hair away from her neck to reveal a purple groove pressed by a rope. ‘I colour-coordinated, just for you. Do you like it?’ she giggled.

‘Why did you do it?’ Suffocating in his sobs, he reached for the rope mark but stopped and instead pulled on his braids. They came off, wriggling like eels in his hands. He scratched the scab on his wrist and it flaked off, brittle as an eggshell. He dug into his flesh. No pain, only the softness of a spoiled apple.

‘I did it, so you would love me. And remember me. Why else?’ Pepper’s breathless face dangled upside down in front of his. ‘Do you love me now? Will you ever

love me? Will you ever love anyone?  
Yourself even?

‘I’m so sorry. So sorry for hurting you and the others. I have a heart too. Do you believe me?’ He peeled great slabs of meat off his chest, all the way to his Factor hiding in its muggy cage. ‘See? Is it ticking?’

He woke up panting, on a wet pillow, his fingernails buried in his skin. The day glowed through the closed curtains. Up in the rafters, a cobweb flickered on a draft. The table and chairs, old dresser, little boat in the window, all there, all real. Something for his skidding mind to grab on to. Roum didn’t wake. She looked paler than ever. He panicked and put his ear to her face. She breathed in even swells, with the odd nose whistle, nothing unusual. As he wrapped his arm around her, she stirred. His fingers ran along the bony rosary of her spine. She’d lost her summer smell.

‘When the ferry gets here, come with me. We’ll find you a doctor in Bodø.’

‘I’m fine, don’t worry yourself too much,’ she replied lazily. ‘And we have Wrights who specialise in healing. Not saying I need one.’

‘No offense, but you should see a real doctor.’

‘Mmmm.’

‘Will you come with me?’

She took his other hand and put it under her cheek.

### Part 3

‘Do we have everything?’ Metso turned

to Roum. She nodded. Slowly, she walked behind him, cloaked in a brown plaid blanket, one hand on Boy’s back. ‘It has to work.’

‘Of course it will.’ Under her hat, her lips thinned into a weak smile.

From up high on the path, under the evening pinks and blues, the ferry looked like a shrunken medieval town docked in the harbour. Skewed lines, wrong angles. Timber cabins, darkened by age and weather, piled high on a barge. Turrets poking out, yellow lights above cabin doors. Ladders and rickety passes tying the hive together. No wonder this wooden broccoli couldn’t sail in choppy waters.

They descended to the pier and joined a sparse procession of passengers. The hum of the group reassured Metso. No fingers pointing at him, no ogling. No one cared, preoccupied with their own little lives. He helped Roum bundle up in her blanket. Under the breath of glaciers, summer had finally faltered.

The passengers dropped their fare into a rusty pail, and some kind of troll in a grubby peacoat issued tickets. When Metso’s turn came, but no coins clanked in the bucket, the deck boss lifted his face from his pad.

‘Peace to you and your home,’ started Metso in his softest tone.

‘Blast my nuts! Look at the size of you! One wrong step and you’ll sink this floating pigsty!’ The old guy’s scratchy laugh turned into a cough. About four feet tall and sinewy, he studied Metso with his small red eyes. In his drooping nose, a gold

ring glittered against his grey skin.

‘Or, instead of sinking it, I could work. My friend is unwell and needs help, but we can’t afford the passage.’ Metso slapped his pockets. ‘Please, I’m sure you can find use for these.’ He presented his hands, each bigger than the geezer’s head. For the longest minute the deck boss sucked his gums, looking from Metso to Boy to shrivelled up Roum in her giant hat. The wind teased a lonely tuft of hair on his dome.

Fine! I’ll have you help with the luggage and then put you on the chains.’ He scribbled on a ticket and handed it to Metso.

‘Thank you! And all the blessings of Samaran be with you!’ Metso could’ve hugged the boss troll until his head popped off.

‘Yeah, yeah. Cabin twenty-four. Report back as soon as. Animals below deck,’ he pointed at Boy, already looking past Metso and Roum.

‘He’s never been on water.’ Metso latched on to the edge of Boy’s shell with both hands.

‘Don’t hold up the queue, big fella. We’ll take care of him.’ The deck boss waved over the next passenger.

After taking Boy to the stinking cargo hold and Roum up to the cabin, Metso got busy. A creature that could’ve passed for a cross between a bear and a snail slowly handed him a small suitcase. It easily weighed forty kilos. A family of slimy newt things dropped their rucksacks, smelling of a campfire, into his palm. From a sad, ghostly passenger in flowing rags, he col-

lected a broken gramophone. Towering over the trolls, he criss-crossed the slippery deck until all travellers, except one, had been taken care of.

Gamla arrived late, with a dozen suitcases and trunks. It took the entire crew to haul them aboard.

‘You sure carry a lot, Lady Gamla,’ huffed Metso, waddling with two cases under his arms and two in his hands. He made himself look right at her.

‘Don’t we all, Master Scholar?’ Her colossal up-do flamed against her low-cut black dress and the black fox pelt on her shoulders. ‘And thank you ever so much for being such a darling!’ Hiking up her skirt, she walked past him and up the plank. The pelt lifted its head and looked at Metso with its black eyes. He cursed and decided to focus on keeping his balance.

At the bow, two chains attached to winches hung overboard and disappeared into the water.

‘Hands on chains!’ screamed the deck boss, leaning out of the window of the tallest tower. He signalled to Metso to take a spot by one of the stations and moved his arms as if turning a crank. The cold metal handle burned Metso’s hands. ‘Go!!’ Came from the tower. He dug in with his heels and pushed the crank. One by one, the links, covered in strings of seaweed, rumbled out of the water and onto the drum. The smell of grease and iron infused the salty air. At the other station, two ferry trolls worked hard to keep their wheel moving.

‘Gamla must’ve had a birthday,’ snick-



ered one.

‘Fresh as a petal, ain’t she? The other one smacked his lips. ‘I ought to request an audience. Under her fuckin’ skirt!’ He folded over, laughing.

‘You would’ve been all over that even before her birthday, you sick bugger!’

Metso stopped listening. A refreshing ache flooded his muscles, his nostrils flared, and his body moved to the rhythm of the chain. Where the cold air clashed with water, mist, light as boiled-over milk, crept up the rocky shore and seeped into the pines. From here, the inn looked like the centrepiece of a toy village, a blue dollhouse, with Lule waiting patiently on the porch to see everyone off.

‘Halt!!’ The boss troll hollered and stuck a long, twisted horn out of his window. With a heave of his scrawny chest, he gave a blast that shook the fjord, ricocheting off the cliffs. The crew let go of the cranks. The chains tensed up, the deck lurched forward, and Metso grabbed the parapet. The ferry creaked out of the harbour, guided by something pulling on the chains hundreds of yards ahead. There, in the fog, a dark fan-shaped tail softly broke the surface. As it went under, half as wide as the fjord and longer than any ship imaginable, Metso tried to grasp the scale of the creature, dragging a matchbox full of ants through the crooked inlets. His knuckles glared white and he felt stuck in a dream cooked up by the one mind. Or his own mind. Or whatever. The bow cut through the water and the village started to shrink

in the ferry’s wake.

#

Up the ladder to the second level, over the spaghetti-thin bridge, and right. Or was it left? After a few attempts, Metso found the door with the number twenty-four nailed to it and squeezed in.

‘Roum?’ He pushed her hair back from her clammy forehead and sat on his narrow berth across from her. The warm light of the ceiling lantern moved with the boat. Roum’s sleeping eyes jittered, chasing images that made her face wilt into a frown. He knew nothing about her, he caught himself thinking. ‘All right then, rest up.’ The porthole showed only fog and charcoal grey sea. Couldn’t that bloat with the chains pull them any faster? He put the basket packed by Lule on the foldaway table. Sweet soul, she sent them off with smoked meat sandwiches, biscuits, cloud-berry jam, and a mystery pouch. As it turned out, the bag contained Lule’s homemade oregano tea. For a moment, he sat with his nose in it, imagining himself sprawled in a meadow and hidden by whispering grass. ‘I’ll see if I can hunt down a kettle,’ he said, and Roum murmured in her sleep. He unfolded out of the cabin and went down to where he thought the kitchen was.

‘Looking for something, Master Scholar?’ Gamla walked up to him, swaying her hips with the rise and fall of the deck.

‘Aren’t we all?’

‘Well played indeed!’

‘Trying to make tea for Roum and me.’ He scratched the back of his neck.

Her brows knotted. 'How is she, that little bundle? She didn't seem too chipper.'

He coughed to clear the worry from his voice. 'Something's not right. She needs to see a doctor in Bodø.'

Gamla narrowed her eyes at the horizon. 'That horsey is a good one.' Her chin pointed to the sea monster as it came up again like a living island. The water roared off its back. 'She knows the North Atlantic like the back of her flipper. But she won't take you straight to Bodø. That's human territory. The drop-off point is some miles away from the city.' Her mouth tightened, and she took Metso's elbow. 'Don't take Roum there. She belongs *here*.'

'She wants to go.' His words sliced the air as he pulled away from Gamla.

'Does she? Are you taking her because she needs it or because you can't let her go?' she asked with nothing but hardness in her voice and her stupid fox pelt bared its teeth. He licked the droplets of mist off his stubble. Not such a sweet lady, after all. She'd had a hook in him since the first day he saw her, right under the diaphragm, in his softest part, and now she was jiggling the line. He braced his legs and folded his arms. They felt thick and strong.

'Who are you?! Why do you meddle?! Why do I feel like I can't take a shit without you knowing?!' He was letting out a rage that made him feel giant. Bigger than the ferry and the 'horsey' put together. He thought it might swallow Gamla whole. But she neither moved nor flinched. Worst of all, her lips pulled back in a smile. His thunder broke against her. 'What do you

know about me?' came out before he could stop himself. And now he felt like he'd levelled his own barricades and flung himself belly-up at her feet. Again. He clenched his jaw.

Gamla raised an eyebrow. 'I know precisely what you've decided to reveal yourself. Not a smidge more.' Her hands crept back towards him and her grin widened. Those damned teeth shone like pirate treasure. 'Sorry, I am freezing.' As her eyes melted, her fingers snuck into the sleeves of his robe. 'When you are sad, the world changes, doesn't it?'

'What are you getting at?' Maybe it was her purring tone but, somehow, he didn't mind her cold fingers on his skin.

'You did not want your old life. I don't know why, but isn't it true?'

'True enough.'

'You wanted a way out. Not just to turn a corner, but to make the corner vanish.' Gamla swept her arm across the ferry and the fjord. 'How is this for different?' Waterfalls chattered, rushing off the clifftops. A grumpy seagull sat on the parapet.

'I only wanted to spread the word of Samaran.' He snapped his fingers at the seagull, half-expecting it to open its beak and give him a life lesson, too. But the bird just squawked and took off on heavy wings. 'Things got weird when I followed the sign for Crow's Way.'

'Because you were ready.'

'For what?'

'To accept the weird. To make the imaginary real.' Gamla looked at him play-

fully and scratched her fox pelt under the chin. The dead animal's head searched out the crook of her neck, returning the cuddle. 'So, I let you in. On Crow's Way. I let you into our world, the place you wanted to be real. It is my job as a Wright. Some Wrights create new life, others explore the stars and the ocean's depths, still others heal. I take in desperate humans. The refugees, sufferers, sadlings. I keep an eye... or many eyes on who comes in and out. And collect souvenirs from all my travels. That's the best part!' She laughed but quickly got serious. 'You were not the first and you won't be the last.'

'I don't like it anymore. Didn't expect it to get *this* real.' He rested his elbows on the parapet, thinking of the Wrights, whoever the hell they were, taming monstrosities in the deep. The old boards creaked as the ferry veered to follow the turn in the fjord.

'That is a shame.' Gamla brushed her shoulder against his, leaning on the parapet. 'You used to like it. Meeting a giant woodlouse and other strange creatures. The sort of thing you humans imprison in myth.'

'I did enjoy it at first. And Boy is... something else,' he snorted. 'Anyway. And I don't know why I'm asking you this. But. Have I gone insane?'

She gave a good, open-throated laugh. 'Master Scholar! Rumour has it, you go around preaching about our reality being encoded by our heartbeat and all living things being part of one consciousness.' Her finger pinned his sign of The Factor to

his chest. 'And I think I can save tragic humans from their past and future. Which one of us is insane?'

'The one who admits it first, I suppose.'

'I would agree. Now go and make your tea.' She stood on tiptoe and kissed his ear. 'I hope you find peace.' Weaving between the tired cabins and towers, she headed to the back of the ferry. The air blew her kiss dry.

'Will you let me go back?!' he shouted after her.

'No one is holding you here!'

#

Wet from the dew, the pines lowered their branches and twigs lost their snap under Metso's sandals. Now and then, he glanced through the trees to check that the shore stayed to his left. The path connected the drop-off cove to the outskirts of Bodø. An hour ago, the ferry left for its next destination with a few long-distance travellers, including Gamla, on board. Without the horn, or as much as a splash, it glided out of sight. The journey to the city on foot would take another couple of hours.

By now, Metso, Roum, and Boy had the path to themselves. The other former passengers, busy and weighed down by luggage, dispersed along the many trails that shot off the main route. Metso walked with a broken pace—step and wait. He wanted to take the longest strides possible to close the distance between them and the first place that resembled a hospital. Only Boy couldn't walk that fast and Roum, too tired to

walk, rode on his back. Giant woodlice weren't meant to be ridden side-saddle, and Metso had to muster all his patience. At least Roum had enough strength to sit up and hold on.

'You know, pine and sea has got to be one of my favourite smells. Right up there with salt liquorice and coffee.' He wiggled his wet toes. 'The humidity is really bringing it out.' He tried to sound cheerful.

'Autumn is almost here and then it will be winter. The earth is drinking before her long sleep.' Roum's cracked lips hardly moved, and the circles under her eyes looked like silent film makeup.

'If you're worried about going to a human city, don't be. I think you'll love it.' Of course, two bums plus a giant bug had a fat zero chance of loving anything about city life. But had she decided to refuse help and turn back now, he would've lost it. He had to keep her calm. Though she looked so out of it, he wondered if she even knew where she was going. In his head, he begged her to keep her lights on a little longer.

'I'm ready. I feel it coming.' She sounded hollow and appeared to be far away. Her head wobbled as Boy navigated the uneven path.

'Feel what coming? The city?' The road ahead forked. No one had told him that. On the left, muddy and narrow, the path skirted the cliffside. On the right, it sank into the forest in some unknown direction. 'Sorry, Roum, what were you saying?'

He heard a thump. 'Oh, please, no,' flew out of his mouth as he whirled

around. She was down and flailing under her plaid blanket. He leapt to pick her up, but she crouched like an animal and bolted into the woods on all fours. Her curiously stiff limbs skimming the ground, she ran faster than a startled silverfish. When the shock wore off, Metso ran after her. Boy hovered in the corner of his vision, doing his best to keep up, but soon fell behind. Trying to look in all directions at once, Metso slipped on a root and went face-first into the soft carpet of needles. They lost her. As he turned over, Boy's antennae waved over him. Hundreds of pine trunks, straight as masts, pierced the sky. He sat up and patted Boy's head, and could think of nothing else to do. They lost her. His chin shook and his breath wouldn't settle, annoying and noisy. 'Is that you, Boy?' He thought he heard a rustle. No, Boy hadn't moved at all. Metso crept from one tree to another, following the sound. 'Roum,' he exhaled.

She was squatting and digging, her hands a blur. Chunks of soil and pine needles flew about and landed in her hair. With tortured eyes, she looked at him.

'I must lie down. It's the end.' She sobbed.

'No, no. Come with me, we're almost there. Trust me. I'll carry you.' Sweat pooled in his eyebrows. He approached slowly, on bent knees.

'You don't get it! I'm full of his spores. I must lie down, it's time.'

He froze. 'What spores?'

'Are you the dumbest scholar or what? Agarik's spores! They want to come out.'

She twitched in her pit, a restless nugget robbing the forest of its stillness. 'Why won't you stop?! It's deep enough!' Howling with tears, she screamed at her hands.

'Easy, Roum, easy.' He knelt and rubbed her back and felt the strange dance of muscles under her clothes. 'You should've told me earlier.' Fear hollowed out his stomach. Panic, and she's done for, she needs you, he reminded himself and forced his breath to quiet. Her hands slowed down too.

'No use! It was meant to be and I can't fight it.' Her spit bubbled and mixed with her tears.

'Don't say that. We'll find help.' He bit his lip until he couldn't stand the pain. Who? Where? Was she having a breakdown or speaking the truth? Did anyone in the city know how to deal with psycho mushroom spores? No way back to the village, either.

'Keep soothing yourself! I have no choice. They want to come out and feed on me, so I must lie down.' She crawled around, mopping the ground with her hair, smoothing the bottom of the shallow grave with her stiff hands.

'You always have a choice, Roum. Come on now, you're far from home, you're unwell but you'll get better.' He pulled her sleeve, then gripped her trembling wrist, and she stopped digging.

'Wrong!' She scowled. 'It was inevitable. I will always be part of him, no matter how much I hate it. He planned it. Do you get it? What I think of as my

choice is him steering me. From seeing you in the bog to running away, he organised it for me. He just wants his spores to spread further. Can't blame a fungus for being a fungus.' A sad smile flickered on her face and she shook her hair. 'But I'm happy we met, scholar. Metso. It was a good time.' She wiped away fresh tears. Stooped under the trees in her grimy white blouse, she could've passed for a mushroom peeking through the soil after a rainy night.

'Don't believe that, please. It's not true. You're in charge of your future.'

'It's not about believing. It just is. And you're naïve.' Sitting on the edge of the pit, she fixed him with her eyes. 'You think you know everything, with your Samaran.' She scoffed. 'You think your clever book has all the answers.'

He marched over to Boy and took the Codex out of the pannier. 'I don't think that at all!' He offered her the book. She held it with both hands, inspected the vines pressed into the binding, the intricate knots smudged by the Sprout's juice, and thumbed through the pages.

'What is this? A trick? Invisible ink?' She held up one blank page after another and squinted at them from either side.

'No tricks. It's empty.' Grunting, he picked up the blanket and sat with her, staring into the pit. 'I made it all up.' He started tying knots in pine needles. She ruffled the sheets, flipped the book every way possible, sniffed it.

'And what does *this* say?' Her fingernail, rimmed with dirt, underlined the only three words to be found inside.



‘Made in China.’ He muttered and got back to his pine needles. Then his shoulders shook as he tried to swallow a laugh. It came out of his nose.

‘What’s China?’ Eyes wide, cheeks streaked with drying tears, she turned to him.

‘A beautiful country far, far away.’

‘So you made the whole thing up? About the mind and the heart and stuff?’

‘The whole damned thing!’ Smiling, he threw the Codex overhand, and it hit a tree. Boy pricked his feelers and pattered towards it. ‘Don’t eat that! It will upset your tummy!’

‘You sneaky scholar!’ Roum slapped his knee. ‘It wasn’t that bad, honestly. You should keep going. With practice, you

might convert someone.’

‘Thanks. At times, I almost converted myself.’ He wrapped the blanket around both of them and picked the chunks of dirt out of her hair. Somewhere above, a bird was cooing. The pines answered it with the odd groan. Light slanted through the breaks in the green ceiling and spun a pattern, or maybe even a code, on the ground.

‘Tell me about China,’ asked Roum.



**END TRANSMISSION**