

Aé'elles

Kay

"Do you need anything else?" she asked, her head ringing sharply, more so on the left side of her head than the right. She was leaning over, her ear toward a student who was sitting at a desk, who had a near-empty paper, a calculator, and a neatly filled-in notebook in front of them. Symbols cluttered the calculator's small display, and there were small typed writings on the paper, although Alex could not read them then. The room she was in was full of people, however none of them spoke, and the blinds of the tall windows that kept outside the sun, cut into the coconut wall in three columns, were drawn shut.

"No, I'm okay," the woman sitting at the desk said.

Alex nodded and stood straight and looked about. There were seventy-nine people in this lecture hall amongst seats still empty. There were raised hands, and some shoulders were hunched. Alex made for one who had been holding his hand up the longest. "Please give me one sec'," Alex whispered to a person she passed along the way, raising one finger gently as she did so, and she leapt up the steps of the room.

Later, a few remained as other students waited outside the closed door to the hall. Students offered their papers to Alex, and Alex thanked them. Alex then drank from a thermos she had on her desk. She pursed her lips as someone approached her, and they explained to her how they do not do well on tests, and that come examination day, everything they studied vanishes from their mind. Alex listened to them, nodding, until they were done.

"That's okay," Alex said. "We can talk about the material whenever you have time - and there are plenty of opportunities to bring any grades up. Do not worry," she said. "It will be okay."

And Alex left the lecture room, and remaining in the now empty hallway, sitting on a bench, head in his hands, was a student whose longboard leaned upon the wall next to him.

"Adam?" Alex said. He looked up at her. "Are you okay?"

Adam shook his head. "I studied everyday," he said, his voice hoarse. Alex turned, pushing a massive metallic suitcase to the side, and sat beside him. "Did all the practice problems, went through the review, read through everything. Studied, really hard. And I bombed it."

"You don't know you bombed it," Alex said. "However you imagine you did, you probably did better."

"No," he said. "I could not do anything. I don't know anything."

Alex touched his shoulder. Adam looked at her. "You know more than you believe you do," Alex said. "And this is one exam. And I know people say that type of thing, but it is true. The world will not end tomorrow. And you prepared for it. You put effort in. You tried to learn the material. That's what is important. And... I am not looking to destroy anybody. You've pushed yourself - now, go out and have some fun."

Relax. Forget about all this junk,” she said. Alex stood up. “You’re not going to need it, and you are never going to use it, anyway. So, if you are passionate about it, or you are wanting to learn more or you would like to help,” she said, turning back toward him now, smiling as best as she could, “we can talk about the stuff. Office hours, or at whatever time is good for you. But don’t beat yourself up, Adam. Go and live life a bit. All this, it’s inconsequential.”

Adam looked at her.

“Seriously,” she said. “It’ll all be fine. You will get through this class, and things will be better. And believe me - you did better than you are giving yourself credit for.”

Adam nodded and lowered his head again. But when he looked up he was smiling too, and he stood, taking hold of his longboard with one hand.

“Thank you, Alex.”

Alex shook her head, waving her hand out in front of her. “You are welcome.” She took the metallic suitcase and wheeled it in front of her, its contents, an organized mass, clacking against each other in rows. She looked over her shoulder and grinned at him. “I’ll ride mine next week,” she said.

Adam smiled and nodded. “Awesome,” he said. “Have a good day Professor.”

She nodded. “Thank you. You as well.”

Alex walked and heard him lift his bag and his footsteps go to the side. She turned and pushed open glass doors with her back, pulling the case with her. Outside, the air was cool and the sky was glumly overcast. The doors rang behind her as she sipped from her thermos. Then, she started toward another concrete building just down the way.

Later, she was leaning upon a pale, darkened door, the handle heavy against her whole palm, her phone a stiffened, cold brick in her back pocket. From her dress pants she drew a cluttered key chain and plunged one into a lock. She then stood straight, slowly exhaling once, and pushed the door open and entered. Yellow light reached around her and into the living room of an apartment, falling upon the thin edges of kitchen, marked by a somber counter and a door to a room darker, just barely ajar. To the immediate right of her was a large window which filled a wall, screened-over by thin black mesh. Upon the floor was a black, wooly blanket, and against one wall a desk was pushed, papers stacked and scattered across it. There was a thin bulbed lamp which was dormant above a large leather couch, which spread opposite the window. Across the couch was a silhouette of a man on his back, his body covered in blankets and the top of his face obscured by a scuba-looking sleeping mask. Above him, nailed into the wall, was the flag of a country that did not exist anymore.

Alex locked the door behind her and slid off her shoes. Forward to the kitchen, she walked slowly, and she set her hollow thermos on the kitchen counter, which itself was bare. In the sink was a single plate and fork. She opened the fridge and white light strained her eyes, shooting past her and onto the walls, ceiling, and floor.

The fridge was empty except for a large porcelain bowl filled with rice and beans. She pressed her hand into her stomach, her fingers on her ribs, and then she

opened the freezer. Inside were frost-burnt bottles of rum and gin, their plastic shells speckled with ice crystals. She pressed again into her stomach and she closed her eyes and her body flowed forward, the space around her head bending; she pushed the freezer shut.

“... Kay?”

Alex turned. “It’s me,” she answered.

Alex stared as, into the still shadow of the apartment between her and the front door, the man emerged. He was bent over, shoulders and body rolled, and then he stood fully, leaning first against the pasty archway dividing the living room and the kitchen. He was wearing a brimmed hat now, and a T-shirt whose bottom hung halfway down his underwear.

“Kay,” he said, in a whisper from his chest. He came to her and he held her, pulling on her biceps and shoulders as he kissed her. She closed her eyes and let him tilt her head, his weight reaching over hers; she felt the gentle prick of his face, and as she opened her eyes slow, he parted slowly too, holding her as his head rose and his eyes settled somewhere inside hers.

He smiled.

“How did it go?” he asked.

Alex smiled, stood with her toes, and kissed his lips. She then walked from him, deeper into the corner of the kitchen. “I failed,” she said, as she rested her palms upon the counter.

“Well,” he said, his voice becoming a little higher pitched, his words slower; “what happened? - and that’s okay. You’ll take it again?”

“I can.”

He looked at her. She held her eyes on his, and she could see him, and she could see the room behind him.

“You okay, Kay?”

“I’m okay Theron,” she said. “I promise. Truthfully, I feel... really good. I talked with Dr. Conway.”

“And what did he say?”

“They’re going to support my project,” she said, pushing off the counter. “The ferry, my room, a board stipend. Connections with Trinity there - Conway mentioned specifically a, Dr. Stevan. Conway, he said it was *quite* the project.”

“Amanaan?”

Alex leaned back against the fridge. “Yes,” she said.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Kay, that’s wonderful!” he exclaimed, his pitch lifting again. “Even without the test, they’re going to help you?”

Alex nodded. “I cannot believe it.”

Theron leapt forward and held her. Her fingers wrapped around the muscles in his back. “This is so wonderful, Kay.” He pulled his head back and put his lips on hers. His tongue entered her mouth.

She opened her eyes, moving her hands gently to his chest, her fingers only just bent, and he separated from her, holding her lower with both his hands. His pelvis lifted, pressing the interior of her hips.

"When do you leave?" he asked, breathing low.

"Next week," Alex said. "Monday, next week." She felt him stiffen.

"So soon?"

"I know," she said, her own voice hushed now. "It's absurd. What's wrong?"

He was still, but then Theron shook his head, smiling. His hands squeezed her and he stepped to the side. He pulled the darkened crack in the wall open and stepped inside.

"I'm just going to miss you Kay," he called, his voice lively. "I'll just miss you." He emerged from the still dark. She turned her head, the back of her skull against the steel refrigerator. He was holding a bottle across both his hands. He leaned and kissed her. "I'll just miss you, Kay, is all."

"I know love, but I'll be back."

He looked at her now and grinned, his body hunched over the bottle. He bent and suddenly jerked. "I got this for you, for after your exam." He handed her the bottle, and then he reached above the sink for a cupboard. "But perhaps we may celebrate still - and for an outcome that might turn out better than what we'd planned."

Alex smiled and looked down and read the bottle. "Scotch?" she said. "You really should not have, Theron." She lifted the neck and flame filled her nostrils. Her body shuddered once, her mouth open, and then her head shook. "Wow," she said. "Really, love, this is too much - "

And he kissed her, and he received and grabbed her, squeezing her, while his other hand took the bottle. She heard liquid splashing into empty glasses.

"How about we learn about it together?"

Later, Alex was lying on her back, her head in a pillow. There was a rumbling beneath her - a quiet, purring engine. Fair green, and wind cool about her, were delicate and swaying the tops of the strands all one way, and then the other. There was cold under her head. Shallow, soft light was weaving into the darkened bedroom. She glanced. Theron's foot was pressed into the inside of her bare thigh. Its sweat was dripping down her leg, little hairs like eels slimy along her skin.

Alex turned her head, for the door. She watched each ray of light come screaming in.

Tungsten Falls

Alex, the next day, was sitting at the end of a pier, a faded thumping hurting her head, as she pressed to her lips the steel of her thermos, and the muddy amber streamed down her throat, warmly stinging the flesh there. She reclined back, stiffening her legs straight, crossing ankles upon her right heel planted against a stone

so that, when the quiet waves reached in, the water wet the heel of that shoe, but the water did not reach high enough to seep through the sole. She held her head up, looking forward so that her chin was pressed upon her neck. The boulder beneath her dug numbly into her muscles and spine. Above her and around her, she listened to the gulls calling across the settled wind and the bells hanging off the bows and masts of boats rocking up and down along the coastline dock. She squinted, as the burning perforated through her stomach, at the silhouette blinding of someone standing in a long, slender punt, a large rod in their hands, their back straight, perpendicular with the flat Blanquesh sea, and as they pulled the rod upward and planted it back into the water, it reached into the sun as if a scepter; and as they pushed the rod backward, the punt propelled forward, never breaking the water, sliding, passing, as if it too was but a seam of the sea.

She watched the man push the punt, and she drank more, and she saw sitting in the stern someone else, another man, and as she watched him he turned his head left and looked at her. She screwed the thermos shut and laid it on her lap. The man then turned toward the horizon, toward Amanaan. He pointed upward, but he did not need to, as she felt something detach from beyond the horizon, a thin, spiraling weight released, pulled by gravity, blazing as it entered orbit. She stood and the thermos crashed in between the boulders beneath her. She could feel the rod puncturing clouds, clouds so high she could not see; then, as one narrow tear through the sky, she saw the sliver plummet, its descent but a traceless shard of light. Its trail vanished as it appeared, its destination obscured by the ocean's curve. Then, the horizon turned to flame, and a great hemisphere of energy emerged, spreading without sound, until then a great thunderclap shattered across the waves, sweeping their crests flat. The barrier struck Alex and she fell to her back. The hemisphere rose into the sky, its core engulfed. Alex rose. She gazed toward Amanaan. The punt and its passengers were gone, and the blast faded from the sky.

Farewell to Theron

"I just don't fucking understand why you have to leave" Theron snapped. Alex stepped backward. "Before, I was like, fine, whatever. That was acceptable. But now - the place just exploded."

"I know," Alex said.

"So why are you going, if you know?"

"Don't talk to me like that."

"What did you say?"

Alex stepped to the middle of their room, her shoes on a dirty black blanket, not looking at Theron.

"You don't have to go off saving the fucking world."

Alex turned to him. He was still sitting, white socks on his feet. "Do you have any idea how important this is to me?"

"How important what is? - what exactly are you working on, again? You don't even know what you're trying to do. You're running, again. Everything you need is right here. Why throw that away? - and there's no fucking way they'll let anyone on the island, now."

"I can find a way."

"Do you really think that's true?"

Alex shuddered.

"You're not some kind of hero," he said. "Be realistic, Kay. There's nothing there for you. I don't get why you can't just stay here and be fucking normal."

Alex turned her head. "Maybe I want more, Theron. Maybe I want to do more. Or at least, maybe I can try."

"Am I not enough?"

"That's not what I'm saying - "

"There is *nothing* there, anymore," he said. "Not that there was anything to begin with. You study, you research, - but you don't want to work in a school. You work, you learn, you network - but you don't want a career. Layman old me works, stupid old me keeps the light on. Trying to make a better future. For *us*. And you want to run off and pretend to be an explorer."

"I want more," Alex cracked.

"But why Amanaan? "

"I don't want to do this," she exclaimed, her voice cracking. "Whatever, this, is. Not forever. I want to do something, help people. And I know I can't explain it. But I feel it. I know there's something there. And I know I need to go."

"What about me?"

"Fuck Theron, you could come with me."

"I'm not going, absolutely not."

Alex threw her hands in the air. "I'm leaving in the morning," she said.

"No you're not."

She turned. Theron was standing. "Excuse me?" she said.

"I'm not going to let you."

"Sit down," she said.

"You've nobody but me, Alex."

"Sit down."

And Theron sat, far more quickly than he stood. Alex felt wind gush through their hollow home and she was suddenly before the door, her legs moving upon her own command. But it had not processed, and it had not stalled; she turned and saw Theron looking at her, and she took the door handle and pulled. The air smelled richly of salt, and the shadows were cool and dark, and the pavement beneath her was hazed-over in old yellow light.

"I don't know why I stayed here this long," Alex said. She looked at Theron. "You are never going to see me again."

Alex stepped outside. She pushed the door shut behind her, and into the night she vanished.

To Amanaan

On a wooden stool beside a counter of a bar named *Benth*, Alex gazed out across the Blanquesh. The sky was dark, and the seats with her were empty. She could hear the man who had given her the glass of amber liquid she held between her fingers talking hurriedly and hushed to someone.

Ahead of her, the bank of the coast sloped into a cascade of rocks, which stacked and piled made a barrier against the charred-black sand which spilled into the sea. A rotting odor rose from the sand, reaching her opaquely but without weight. The waves though were quiet, settling peacefully upon the bank. She looked. A wooden boat, its oars hanging out its side, rolling up and softly down with the waves, was moored to a metal hook hammered into a boulder.

Her back was to the bar. She glanced over her shoulder, lifting the glass a little higher. The man's speech had faded further, back within the building, its interior blocked by an island-painted mural. She drank, setting the glass silently upon the bar, and before the warmth had fully flowed through her throat, she started down the slope. She leapt upon the boulder and unfettered the small vessel's moor from the hook. She wound it about her forearm and placed the hoops within the craft and sat inside. Lifting the oars, she turned, pressing a paddle against the boulder that had held it there, and pushed off and away from the decay. Turned that way, so her back was to the horizon, she leaned back, pushed the oars forward, and heaved, forcing the wood through the water as her body rolled with the fulcrum in her middle. The raft lurched through the water, its bow breaking, above and below, the Blanquesh warmly, like crystals sprinkling over a light blanket covering her head. She leaned back again, lifting the oars from the water, slid them into the sea, and heaved.

They, her and the raft, slingshot forward like a heavy slug. She glanced upward and saw that the man had come around the mural, but by then he had become small, and all about her was obscured by the waters and the sky. She saw him look at where she had been sitting, his phone to his ear, and glance about each way, and then turn back again, disappearing behind the wall.

Alex jerked, and she surged across the sea.

She woke up once, the water quiet beneath her, her body hunched over into her lap. She lifted her head and blinked. In the distance, a blip on the horizon, was land. Beyond it and all around her the sky was aflame with a creamy orange, which seemed to lighten into a shell-white only as it began to pass under the sea. She could hear nothing but then she heard feathers, and she looked and around her were several albatross, some wandering and others smaller, some with light yellow coloring up their necks and others with dark browns and blacks along their beaks and the shoulders of their wings. They made no calls as they floated on the water.

Alex glanced down. Gazing into her was a yellow cyclopean eye. Its pupil was orange like the sky, an ellipse that was longer than her silhouette was tall upon the surface. She pushed on the handles, bringing upward the oars, but then she realized

there was more distance between her and the leviathan than had seemed, although she was not sure exactly the depth. Its skin glowed in patterns like how the sun refracts through water observed from someone suspended within the light-layer of a lake. However, the glow was not intense, and as her raft floated toward the island, and it underneath seemed to move too, its body blended with the sea, parts of its immensity seamlessly disappearing and reappearing. Alex looked up and saw the island had come closer. The albatross then left the water, their calls quiet as they lifted into the class, salt-spray moistening Alex's skin. She looked for the leviathan and it was there, still gazing toward her. She turned.

A man was sitting in her boat.

"It's you," she said.

The man looked away from the Blanquesh horizon and dipped his head. Then, he put on a little grin, and he looked at her, one eye aimed into hers and the other just slightly off.

"Me," he said. "The punt?"

"Yes," she said.

He nodded. "Ah." He grinned again, but then he lowered his head. Then, he looked away.

He was gone, and Alex leaned over the edge. The leviathan blinked. Then, it began to drift away, not submerging directly. She raised her head slowly to follow it. Its pupil then moved, aiming downward into the Blanquesh deep, while beneath her remained its mass. Then its eye, glowing just-brighter than the rest of its body, assimilated into the sea, and by then the rest of it had blended back in. Alex took hold of her oars and, turning her back to Amanaan, pulled. Her and the boat moved through the water, and the orange like a faraway flame faded from the sky, replaced with a turquoise green and the smell and taste of sulfur and ash.

Razed

She lifted herself from the plank spanning the width of the boat and then leapt upon the flotsam, which squelched underneath her shoes, the boat making no sound as she stood straight. Again she looked ahead of her, and she could not see past the sloping beach. She then grabbed the front lip of the boat and dragged it from the water, pulling it several yards. There were trees to the left of her, still further away, and she turned forward and pulled the boat until she was amongst the trees, and then she pinned the raft against the base of a tree whose trunk curved outward with the decaying Earth which held it. She then followed the tree line. She began to reach the peak of the beach, and as she did, she gazed at the anvil-shaped cliffs that emerged, jutting from the land and the flat Blanquesh horizon into the sky still and stout, their bodies a millennia of bedrock and weathered dirt. Over their tops, greenery fell in tufts and swirls, unfettered and messy, and she could hear birds now that were closer to her, although she was watching the small specks of light colors soaring about and above the cliffs. Between them and her the ground was almost flat but gradually

sloping, like the beach had behind her, further inland.

Alex walked and she realized she was climbing a mound of the beach. She stood on the top and, to her right, was a harbor. People there had rifles, and they were beginning to turn toward her. She leapt backward, sliding down the mound, landing into a run toward the trees. She slipped inside, running far from where she had pinched the boat, and then watched where she had come. She heard herself breathe and she slowed it, quieted it, placing her fingers on her forearm so her entire body went still. Alex stared. Eventually, it was dark, and Alex turned her head. The trees continued some distance further, and she turned and started through them, travelling parallel to the beach head. There were small animals about her, but she heard no human sounds, and when the trees began to thin, the night was well-dark. She emerged from them and looked out onto the beach. There were large boulders that continued along the water's edge until she could not see anymore, great behemoths moved by ancient glacier walls. She turned and followed the trees, staying within their shadows, darkening herself against the pale ambience cast down by an obscured, nearly invisible moon. She followed them until the land levelled-out, the rotting black filth replaced with gravel and sand, and then that too filled in with dirt and blast-shocked grass. Once more though, the land started to slope. To her left she glanced, and she saw, like a mirror to those before, great cliffs, reaching and seeming to slam themselves flat as they pushed against the sky. These cliffs though were far further away, and their features were hidden by the night, their massive forms discernible as dramatic, colorless breaks from the land and sea. She walked up the second slope and after some time the land dropped from her, sloping into a valley, bordered on the left and right immediately by the cliffs and bordered in the distance by something more formless and flowing. Within the valley, into which burrowed a highway, was a city. She saw over those two miles towers marking the tips of its small skyline, their midsections twisted and the edges toward their tops jagged and punctured through, material like metal splintered-off and crinkled. She listened and she heard engines running to the right of her, and as she gazed at the city she saw headlights from the highway. The light reached her though as twin sets of little lanterns, their gaze forward and not up at her hill; she started down into the valley, each step toward the city and further from the road.

She arrived at the edge of the capital and the burning smell was stronger, but it was less sharp, sitting heavy and flat in the air. Light shattered between the ruined remnants of concrete structure and fell upon her faded and weak and dull, and she watched it opaque at the corner of her eyes as she walked on a greyed-over sidewalk, everything dark. In the expanse between vehicles passing she could faintly hear water flowing on the other side of the building which towered to her right. Chunks of its since expelled insides through since-eviscerated walls and glass floated in the air nearly invisible, like a fair, transparent sheet. The moonlight blocked by the buildings still reached through in a calm, withstanding aethered sheen. Alex walked without looking behind her until she came to a crossroads that continued forward into the cool night, rightward into the city and over a bridge, and leftward and curled upward and

to the right between hills. She started left and she climbed the hill and no more did human light follow her. The moon crept over the scrapers as the ground's gradient decreased and she came upon a cobblestone street wedged between two rows of buildings whose brick was pale, almost yellowing, and she continued and she turned right once and then left and saw ahead of her a steeple rising into the sky, punctuated by a black cross alone against darkened clouds. She looked about her and she made for the double front-doors of the church which were thick hard wood and she pulled on the iron handles which flexed against their restraints but the wood, bolted through in the hinges and in their inner edges by rods, barely moved. She then walked right and around the building, and above her head were windows partitioned in squares stained over with imagery of the virgin and the son of God. She measured the distance in her head and she saw the inside of the church was far lower into the ground than where she stood; she then lowered her head and her vision darkened and she walked from the church, stopping on the outer edge of the circle within which it was centered, and looked into a shop with a large glass window in its wall and a door now hanging open, its interior dark but without shape. She entered. And she turned and she looked out the shattered window at the moonlit square and she did not move but then she did and she exited through the door holding an ax. She came to the doors of the church and began to swing with rhythm and power, each bright arc striking the weight and shattering off splinters which covered her and sprinkled upon the ground, each deeper into the wood and cleaved free without friction wound back and then slammed back in, over and over, until the wood broke cleanly inward and she swung the ax ripping the hole wider until she stepped forward, lowering the ax in one hand to settle on her shin and reached in, and when she felt no bolt or clamp she stepped back again raised the ax and swung it downward and the entirety of the gate exploded, metal and wood clanging against the stone floor ahead and below. Alex leaned the ax against a stone column just outside the opening and stepped into this place, darker than that outside and darker than the shop, and she made for the back between rows of seats dully shadowed-over with pale moonlit wisps and walked to the right through an archway and then opened an unlocked door and there was a lectern underneath a glass stained mural and in that quiet light falling down upon the lectern there was nothing.

Alex left the church and she glanced downward and the ax was gone. She looked at the sky, and then she stared blankly back down the path. Then, she walked.

Reason

I never wanted to be here.

Alex was sitting on a rebarbed concrete cube which laid alone on the side of a road whose paved edges were held by thin and whistling thistles and grasses. They reached fluffy and fair upward, dainty but not letting go of the ground, and she felt them tickle her legs as she read the words written along the top of the page of a notebook she held on her bent knee. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes and then looked to her right, back down the road. It gently wound with grass that was

not hilly but almost was, and in the distance she saw the towers of the city. Ahead of her and far were shaved-off tops of hills and a land scorched black. However, the closer the land came to where she was, the greener the grass became, the infection fading rapidly, the mellow brightness replacing it. And as she looked to the left of her, northward into Amanann, the grass greened further. All she could hear was the wind upon that the thistles slowly swayed, which through the space between her ear and her came comfortably, cooling her brain. She glanced down and in the middle of the page sketched was a scythe.

She closed the book, knocking the pen with about a third of the pages, slid the book into her back pocket, and she stood.

She walked within the thigh-high grasses along the edge of the road. The breeze coated her in a soft, soothing grace. The sky was white and blue.

The road passed beneath her and she above it and it curved ahead left and then back right in a crescent and along the sharpness of the blade she saw somebody laying on their back, their shoulders against a bike which itself leaned leisurely toward the right, its wheels sleepy on the pavement. Alex approached this person and he was asleep.

Even then, the only outside sensation was the wind. It came over and filled and swirled, all gently, all quietly, all with the most care, carrying her and bringing with it the person's hair softly over his eyes, it flowing back and forth: leftward with the wind, and rightward with its infant weight.

His eyelids fluttered, eyelashes shaking as he then slowly opened them fully and looked at her. She had leaned toward him, some feet away; now, she took a step back, straightening.

"I am sorry," she said.

Now he looked about himself, lifting his head not very far from the bike, glancing to his right and then his left. His caramel brown hair flowed like it actually had no weight at all, and he lifted the few fair strands in front of his eyes with his hand. He wore a tan jacket, lighter in color than his hair but darker brown along its edges, seams, and accents, and jeans which ended over the ankles of his shoes. The jacket was open and he wore a shirt underneath.

"That's - alright," he said. "I am surprised to see anyone here." He glanced behind him, although he could not turn his head for he still leaned against the bike. He then looked back at her, meeting her eyes, and smiled. "I would've found a more hidden place to rest."

She smiled and looked to her right, at the faroff city. "Ah well," she said. "No one's going to be coming out here anyway."

His eyes were deep, dark brown.

He pushed slowly from the ground, turning to lift his knee, and then stood beside the bike. He was about an inch taller than she was.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Alexandra," she said. "And yours?"

“Garity,” he said. He extended his hand. She looked at it, and she met it, and he shook her hand. “Very happy to meet you Alexandra.”

She nodded, dipping her head, taking another step not directly backward but also not to the side.

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

She looked ahead. She did too. “Northways - I suppose,” she said. “Are you headed that way, too?”

He grinned. “I suppose I am northland-bound too.” He motioned with his head. “Certainly cannot go back that way. So it’s this way,” he said. Then he motioned to the ocean behind her, and then behind him, over the top of his bike and into the hilly meadows. “Or that way, or that way. But I don’t have any way of leaving here, and riding the roads is fun with no one else around. And - well, could give it a shot, but being bikeless with no landmarks may not be great. But then again,” he said, looking at her. “Would we be any less stranded?”

“Not terribly,” she said. “Would you like to be northland-bound together?”

Garity smiled. “That sounds lovely.”

He turned and took hold of the handlebars of the bike. He looked over his shoulder, and she walked forward so he could look left instead.

“Let’s go,” he said.

And she watched him as she walked too, just a step behind, as he pushed the bike along. She saw then that bits of his jacket were ripped down his back, thick, ragged tears parallel with but not on his spine. There was a lightness in her throat and it seemed to swell into her ears. She raised her foot and hesitated and then she stepped and took another one so she was in-stride with him again.

“Your bike have gas?” she asked.

He looked at her, still pushing. He then faced forward and shook his head. “Nah, we’re going to have to find some first.”

She nodded then, a few times deeply, and then looked forward again. For a few steps they went like this, but then he stopped, and she stepped and turned and watched. He then swung his leg over the bike, made a kicking motion with that leg, and she heard metal slap back as an engine bubbled and rolled and then came to life, its power rumbling quietly, its volume just above the wind blowing all around them. She then smiled and shook her head.

Garity grinned and chuckled, his lips closed. “Sorry,” he said.

“No that’s okay,” she said. “That was funny.”

He smiled and looked ahead, and then he looked at her. She could feel blood in her face and she dipped her head like she had before. His voice then reached her warmly, with a weight like a blanket in the morning.

“Did I... misunderstand, your question, Alexandra?”

She shook her head. “No, not at all,” she said. Alex then stepped toward the bike, Garity pulled himself further forward, she swung her leg over, and then she sat in the seat behind him. She tightened her legs around his and his hips, and she held onto his ribs with her hands.

He glanced back at her, and she leaned left to look at him. She looked into his eyes.

“You ready?”

And she nodded. He turned forward and she saw his knuckles turn on the handles and the motorcycle roared underneath her and she leaned into him and her arms reached around his belly and she pressed her cheek upon his back and the bike jerked left once and Garity pulled on the bars and then the bike was straight and together they rode through Amanaan.

They laid together in cool twilight. Her hand was relaxed, fingers uncurled, and around him and just-reaching the grass at their soft tips. Quiet and calm was her head and she listened to the breathing inside his chest, which rose and fell sweetly, her left ear resting upon it, her hand down and waving along his warm skin. His hand was holding her shoulder, which with her body curled just barely inward, her right leg around both of his in her holding of him. Alex inhaled with her nose and she smelled him and she smiled and she closed her eyes.

“you okay, alex?” he whispered.

And all at once tears filled her eyes, soft and warm ones, and they trickled cooling down her cheek. He lifted his head then to look at her, she knew, and she nodded and moved so that he laid his head back down.

“Yes,” she said. “yes. and right now... i feel so happy.”

And she turned her head and he was smiling and his eyes moved to hers and she smiled with the wetness of her eyes and she kissed his chest and turned her head again, pulling and nuzzling herself closer, and she felt then how he swaddled her closer too.

“I am happy too,” he said.

Alex closed her eyes and around her Amanaan, with the open air and the little star-glimmer and the gentlest of ocean breeze, lulled her to sleep. In those last seconds, as her consciousness slipped to rest, she felt Garity slip along with her. And when the pair woke in the morning, sprinkling upon them was rain, and within that shower they stayed.

“I came here looking for a book that was never even there,” Alex said. Garity was sitting behind her, arms wrapped around her lightly. Around his right bicep her fingers were curled, and she leaned her head into the nook of that shoulder. His other was slowly running through and back and through her hair. “And I don’t think, something like that ever existed, anywhere.”

“Which book?”

“Aé’elles.”

“I know it,” he said.

She looked at him. “You do?”

He was gazing out a square window ahead of them. Warm, handwoven hard wood ran in level planks of unequal width and length with the window and along the

floor and ceiling too, which was not very high above them from their bed. A fur blanket of dark black filled some of the floor, and from where they sat they could see the top of a building across the distance of what could have been a street. The air inside the room was clean and there was a pleasant filling coming from an unseen, unheard energy from the other side of the blued glass.

“Well, I have heard of the Aé’elles,” he said. “Its ornate pages, colored and decorated in ruby and gold. Zealots who had transcribed for centuries, they had made it, same as their book, but more beautifully done. Something, in how they laid light on the pages. Hm. I thought it was at Trinity.”

“I thought so too. But I looked,” she said. “It’s not there.”

“Maybe it was moved.” Garity with two fingers brushed some flares of her hair from her forehead, and she saw the strands, thin as light, move from her eyes. Alex smiled, and she turned her head and looked at him. He looked at her then. “Or maybe, it was not at Trinity. But,” he said, “I am sure, it exists somewhere.”

Alex looked out the window, at the sky above the building across the way.

“In some way,” he said, “your book is out there.”

“How did you get to be here, Garity?”

“I was born here. East, not quite in the center but not on the coast either. When they dropped the rod I was on the Monehrn and I turned and the horizon exploded. I started back south. But then, I guess I stopped. Did not want to go there anymore. Not to the city, anyway. And then you found me.”

“Where do you want to go now?”

“I’m pretty happy where I am at this moment,” he said.

She raised her head and he lowered his. “You don’t want to, head back East?”

“No,” he said. “Not terribly.”

“Why not?”

Garity lifted her head, his hand under her chin. He kissed her lips. Her stomach fluttered and he held her shoulders and she moved forward so he could swing his leg over. She lowered herself to her elbows, and then she laid on her belly, and she watched him walk around the end of the bed. His bare body moved and he stood by the window, his chest and face illuminated in the early afternoon, the rest of him blanketed over with a comfortable, pretty dark.

“There’s nothing worth anything for me there anymore,” he said. But then he turned toward her fully and she looked at him and he grinned and then he laughed. “I am being so dramatic. Haha. Alex, want to hit the town?”

She pushed herself up and walked to him and she kissed him and she ran her finger down his chest and belly. His body shuddered and she giggled and she kissed him again. She put her right arm around his back and came close to his side, and down into the street she looked, and there people on a path paved with mud and brick were walking and talking together, and waving along were passersby.

“Let me get dressed,” she said, as she walked from him. She felt his eyes on him and she smiled. She turned and he dipped his head, and away from the window he stepped.

They walked together down a narrow set of stairs, whose walls were tall and slanted roof speckled with little spider webs; Alex pushed open the door and her cheeks were cooled, blood rising to her warm skin. Garity stepped to their side and they took a step forward as a family passed behind them. Alex smiled at them and Garity to their greeting greeted them back. The couple had a young boy with them, and on his hat was a flat cap made of tweed. A yellow feather was sticking out from behind his ear, and he laughed as he started to run ahead, and further down the cobbled walk Alex and Garity looked there was a larger group of boys jumbled together into a bouncing, jumping murder, and they cheered on the boy who joined them and they started running down the path. Garity looked at Alex smiling and Alex nudged him forward with her shoulder. The sky was well overcast, and although it was light and barely there, something in the air smelled like mustard.

Alex saw a perforation of an aether, an entity reaching and seeping through the small set of streets which surrounded her, and it entered the mouths and noses of the people laughing about her, and deep in the Earth, in the heart of the island, she saw something brighter and cleaner than any gold, and mineral or machine, and it inhaled and breathed and the smog dulled, dissipating from the land and transforming, becoming with that above and within the Blanquesh sea.

Garity was ahead of her now, his arm outstretched toward an oak wooden door, a warm light unlike any Alex had ever seen glowing from within the building's sleepy windows and the slowly widening opening before her. She blinked and she watched the door move and she felt it breathe again, but then she drew breath and as she did it did too and she sucked air tight and her own heart stopped as she felt everything, around her and not, and her insides sunk into the ground as one narrow needle.

Alex shook her head. She looked at Garity and he was talking to someone inside. A man with some of his features walked past him and he smiled at Alex and he tipped his black felt hat at her. She nodded to him, unable to speak, but when she looked at Garity he was waiting for her, and she unfolded within his eyes, relaxing and spreading from that sharpened, absolute point, and she smiled and dipped her head and he stepped to the side even more, parting for her as she entered the tavern.

Warm light like the dusking sun grew gently from the corners of the room, and candlelight flickered from atop a shined bar, which sat sequestered in the center of the building, as one tender who with a cloth rubbed clean the upper edge of a tall glass mug.

"Friends," the tender said.

"Henthèrn," Garity said.

The tender smiled.

"This is Alexandra," Garity said. "Alex Kaylen."

Alex reached with her hand. The tender put the glass under the bar, laid the cloth folded on the inner edge of the bar, and shook her hand. The tender nodded.

"Pleasure to know your hand," Henthèrn said.

"And it is mine to meet yours."

Henthèrn smiled. "How may I do it for you?"

Garity turned to Alex. Her cheeks reddened. She shrugged. "What would you like?" she asked.

Garity grinned and turned back toward the tender. He leaned forward on his hands a bit and looked over the organ pipes of bottles arranged along the three shelves behind Henthèrn. They were shorter at the far ends and taller in the middle, the flame from the four candles together on a small plate at the left side of the bar dancing on the curved glass and swirling within the liquid it held.

"Seven comets," Garity said. He looked at Alex again. "On ice?"

She nodded.

"Superb," Henthèrn said. Henthèrn reached underneath the bar and brought out two glasses. Then from the back of the organ, a bottle corked-shut was retrieved, and something in Henthèrn's hand popped it open. Garity began reaching into his coat.

The tender shook his head. "No need. Get the next one, if you wish."

"Thank you, Henthèrn."

The tender nodded. The twin glasses were set on the darkened oak, and perfect cubes of ice, on each, were dropped inside. Alex watched the flames flare in the clear liquid poured four-fifths up the glasses. The tender offered them.

"I am happy to see you again."

Garity accepted the drink, and Alex accepted hers. "And I all the more," Garity said.

The tender smiled, and then turned. Garity motioned with his head, and Alex followed him, and deeper into the bar, but still beside a small window, in a booth made of unbroken leather, Garity sat, his back toward the doors they had entered through. Alex went to sit across from him, but then she set the glass on the table and he moved closer to the window. She sat beside him, and she laid her shoulder on his. His hand found hers underneath the table. Alex sipped from her glass, and the cool ichor entered her mouth with heat and from her middle spread through her body; and then the fire settled and laid, dimming but not vanishing, and that within her seemed to match the wooded shadows and candlelit corners which enveloped her, the warmth from the man next to her, and with her fingertip she traced the creases in Garity's hardened, holding knuckles.

"Maybe there is something for me here," Garity said.

"I'd be inclined to agree," Alex said.

Alex saw the crystals within the ice cube slowly separating, their edges and serrations melting, as the oranges and reds danced across the gaps in their branches and bridges. Her body felt heat again, and then warmth, and then remained warmed. She turned her head and gazed out the old window, Garity's form just-entering the view.

"How long did you fight?" Alex asked.

"Since I was fourteen."

"When did you stop?"

"I think when, I thought I realized, anyway, that there was never going to be a way to win. To break this mold of steel and space."

"But your book's out there, too," Alex said.

He smiled. She watched him now, that out the window faded and gone, although out it his eyes fell, unmoving, images flashing through them, those which she watched and saw and lived now too, and they ran across that surface every way and every direction, and she held his hand tighter and let the glass alone on the table and rubbed his knee with her other palm.

He grinned, chuckling quietly, even as those memories played. "Precisely," he said, "and I am not a hypocrite."

"I am sorry," Alex said.

"What for?"

"For what happened. Happened to you."

"I am happy now," he said, as he turned his head, letting rest his lips in the hair on Alex's head. She closed her eyes. "And I've friends," he said. "Myself. And you," he said. "That is, if you would like that."

"You may have me," she said.

She felt him and she smiled, grinning like she had before. "Where were you headed, Garity, when we happened upon each other?"

"Into the highlands," he said.

Alex nodded.

"I wanted to come to Amanaan all my life," she said. "And I think, maybe as an excuse, or a justification, or maybe as a practical means - all of those things, probably, I focused on A'éelles or a project or research or something, so to some way get there. Give me a reason, to be here right now, beyond... myself. But then again how does anyone do anything?"

"Wanting to is reason enough."

"I appreciate that, but I do not think that is true. And a want is not easy to ascertain. A true want. Desire. Did you choose to fight?"

"I suppose."

"Did you want to stop?"

"Ah..." Garity sipped from the comet. She watched his face and the muscles there just so subtly recoiled and he nuzzled the side of her head into his shoulder. She then turned her body, reclining now her spine into him, and he turned to and held her with both his arms, and she gazed into the darkened floor of the tavern as he looked out the window.

"Probably not," Garity said. "But I felt like I wanted to. Disguising how defeated I felt."

Alex listened to him.

"The family I did have, were either killed, or they've left Amanaan. I've never sailed further than the harbor. And, I've wanted to lay in the highlands all my life. But instead, I learned to hide a knife in my sleeve and wire a bomb to a railroad track. And they dropped light from the sky. Not before these words leaving my mouth, I never

thought of visiting my childhood home. But now, that's likely a black scar on the Earth. And perhaps there's a compulsion, here, to visit that place. Yet, in the wake of the latest desecration of my people, of this place, I cannot say I want to stay. I said wanting to is enough, but I have no idea what wanting means."

He looked at her.

"And not like, wanting to be here with you right now."

"I know," she said.

"But beyond that. If such a notion actually exists, beyond compulsion and, responsibility, maybe."

"But you'd want to be responsible, and the compulsion of your compass comes from some kind of wanting."

"Maybe," Garity said, "or they stem from the belief, the carefully calculated, convinced, and depended-upon reason, that this set of things that I've done and may do are indeed those worth wanting."

"The land I left," Alex said, "is stained, rotted, drenched-over and soaked-through with dark, black, stinking tar. And here, it tries to trickle back into the land, but the corruption does not reach beyond the shoreline; even after the rods fell, that scar is self-contained and every hour its constitution diminishes, relaxed and succumbed to by that surrounding it. This island, from which the world seems to drip. That, if nothing else, beyond myself, beyond you, beyond this," Alex said, "is worthwhile. Seems to me, anyway. And independent of and in accordance with my own person, that is something I want to preserve. To understand. To be a part of."

"That is wonderful," Garity said.

Alex stood then. He was staring out the window, but he turned to her now. She knelt down and kissed his lips for a long time. Then Alex drank the rest of her comet.

"Same thing?" she asked.

And Garity drank the rest of his, and he went to stand, and with her fingertips Alex pushed his chest back into the booth, and she kissed him again, and his eyes were closed, and so were hers.

"Nonsense," she said. "You, sit down."

And Alex started for the bar, and Garity watched her go, and she brought with her the two glasses, their cubes half-melted. She reached into her coat.

"How was that?" Henthèrn asked.

"Delightful," she answered. "We would like another, and the ice we have is plenty," she said.

Henthèrn looked at her, and then nodded. Liquid flame poured into the glasses, filling the space left free by the melted crystals.

Alex returned to the booth. Garity smiled, and then he rose. She stepped from his path.

"I will be right back," he said.

Alex nodded. She watched him walk past the bar and then turn around the corner. She then slid into the booth, placing his drink where he would sit. She then, now, watched out the window. And as she did, she heard the doors open. A wooden

staff met the hard floor, the crisp echo sounding three times. Then, after a moment's pass, the sound returned, now nearing her. Alex turned as the sound stopped, and in a long felt coat, leaning rightward on a cane around which one lone hand was wrapped, in a tweed cap like the boy with the feather with the family, a man was looking at her. He smiled at her, and now, he reached with his hand. It hung open, and Alex studied him, but she could see nothing. She shook his hand.

"A pleasure, finally, to meet your hand," the man said.

"Who are you?"

He grinned, and he leaned his weight against the cane, his other arm braced against the outside of his thigh underneath his coat. "I am Jessen. Trysten Jessen. You seem to be happy," he said.

"I am."

Jessen looked to the side, tracing something passing with his eyes, although at his height, the window was beneath him. He laughed to himself, silently and in his throat. "I took this opportunity given Garity's temporary departure to delineate to you that imperative to your circumstance."

Alex stared at him.

"They are coming. Far faster than you will allow yourself to fathom. And at your most true, they will rip your heart in half. If you admit anything that I have since shown you, admit this truth. They come for that well-beyond this, Kaylen, although this reality they even do not comprehend - they come for you."

"I understand," she said.

He shook his head. Jessen started to turn for the bar. He looked at her then, as his body waned with the cane. His eyes were made of yellowed crystals, as if they'd been poisoned.

"You will, Kaylen."

Alex turned her body as he left. He stood in front of the bar and Henthèrn saw him and greeted him. The man then leaned forward and laughed, the cane a stiff, slanted sceptre under his lean, arching form. Then Garity entered from around the wall; the man turned to Garity, took hold of his cane with his other hand, and shook Garity's hand enthusiastically; Garity smiled, nodding to the man. Jessen then nodded to Garity and Henthèrn both and turned for the door. Midstride though his eyes met Alex's. He then smiled and waved, and his form seemed to pass from the room, gliding although he did indeed walk out the door. The cane moved and struck the ground and Alex did not hear it.

She then looked out the window. The man did not emerge that way. Alex then stood, leaning over the table, and looked down the street. He was not there either. People walked, talking to each other.

Garity was to the left of her. She looked at him and he lowered herself to sit. She pushed the glass to him. He smiled.

"Thank you," he said.

"Sure thing," she said.

"Did he bother you?"

She shook her head. "You know him?"

"I do," he said. "Most everyone does. Jessen. People call him the Warlock."

She looked at him.

"He might actually be magical."

"Yeah?"

"If you're watching him, you'll see him walk, limping. And while you're somewhere, he will come greet you. He knows everyone, and everyone knows him. Everywhere I've been. But if you look away, or he leaves a room, and always within not impossible reason, you check where he's went, and he's vanished. But he'll come back around after a time, weeks, months, longer, shorter, and talk to you like he never left."

"I could see that," she said.

"However, he also likes having that reputation. He definitely feeds into it. And everybody else likes it too. He always has these little oracles and wisdoms to share. That said, if there was anyone that would be an actual sorcerer, it would be him."

Garity sipped from his glass. His lips rippled and Alex smiled. She looked out the window and saw the green hills further outside the town, and through them the ocean.

"He makes a point of introducing himself," Garity said. "Which is... good."

Alex turned toward him. He was looking at her.

Confession

The window was open in their room, and a waving, curling breeze, nearly invisible, gentle and cool upon her shoulder, was weaving in. Alex saw its little lines like out of a drawing, blown otherwise from a cloud, although here there was no cloud, at least, not in front of her; if there was one, it was far away, and the breeze, Alex felt, was independent of any cloud, and maybe independent too, she thought, from Amanaan; she saw the breeze, but her eyes were looking through it, at the warm, candle-darkened corner beside a half-opened, shingled closet door, within which she could see their clothing on hangars, one such jacket of hers, a grey one made of felt with pockets closed with black buttons, hanging off its hangar at the shoulder. She watched then, after a few minutes, the jacket fall. Her eyes focused on that closest to her for a moment, and then she closed them, exhaling as her body settled further into the calm, rising warmth beside her. The breeze was comfortable upon her shoulder. Her two fingers danced in swirls over his chest, and, upon her bicep, which cooled too between them, fingers his own, held her.

"I would say," she whispered. "That I was nothing, without my friends. They were everything to me. And then I went to school, and I met people there the same. But everything I felt from before - sadness? Loneliness? Came with me. Followed me. And became louder, more suffocating. Maybe things got harder. Or maybe, I got worse at ignoring it."

Garity's hand left her arm, and it fell to her, and she felt his fingers running along the top of her head, and suddenly she started to cry, but her body became still. She heard him then, more quiet than anything she had ever heard.

"Shh," he whispered. "you're okay, Alex."

"But Garity I'm not. I numb-up so bad and then I cry and I sob and then I, I don't know, push it all away or bury it or just make myself, force myself to pretend that I feel nothing. But I feel so much but I keep going anyway and maybe I am strong and maybe I am not that bad? - but I am so, so sad. It feels never-ending and I feel hopeless. There's like, this thing I have to do. I ascribe some task to it. And the task I accomplish. And every day, every time, I hollow more. I smile and I laugh and I listen to people and joke, but when I am alone and I cannot distract myself with the next attribution, I cry. I cry alone. And then from in my throat, this deep, twisted spot above my heart, it's like this sedative spreads. It reaches my head," Alex said, "and my feeling's gone."

"I am sorry," he said.

"No, I am sorry," she said. She started to sit up, and Garity's hand fell from her, and she turned away from him leaning on her arm. She felt him sit up too, but he did not touch her. She looked at him then, and tears came from her eyes. He met them and he reached and he held her hands. "I don't know what's wrong with me," she said.

"There's nothing wrong with you," he said.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know what I am saying."

He leaned forward and held her and she curled up within him. He rubbed her head with his hand again and she felt within the ringing a calming in her brain and a quieting in her chest.

"And you don't have to," he said.

"Why are you so nice to me?" she asked.

"Because I'd like to be," Garity said. "And I like being with ya."

She started to shake her head again, groaning, muttering, and Garity enveloped her.

Later, Alex was standing by that window. The breeze was gone, and that remaining was warm, odorless, but stifling. A blanket had fallen from her, and it laid curled and piled around her feet. Pale, wispy light bathed her front, while that behind her was covered in shadow. Through the opened panes was a field of rolling hills, their emeralds in a slumber and the moon above them, though felt, was hidden. Far off, as soundless as their room was still, coals seemed to smolder behind the hills. Dark red flame and industrial-black smoke was rising from embers obscured - but without moving Alex peered, and she could see silhouettes writhing in the flames, and images darker than the smoke in which they danced while their outlines remained, almost lingering, just-defined against the night around that burning kiln, their shapes like the luminescence of torchlit drawings leaving.

Alex turned from the window and she felt suddenly the kiln, as if firing a shot across the island, singe the middle of her spine. Back around she whipped and her

vision lunged across the land, galloping and leaping over the hills, and then she was above the inferno, and then she was within it.

A man was strewn across and piled under the rubble of a building, its wooden beams and boards aflame and their iron implements and nails shining, cracking and bending with the heat, while a long, thick, black wooden bar seemed to almost hover, suspended between two great beams, while through its center and there bent jagged it was cracked; the man's head was gone, its pieces blown across and boiling off the rubble beneath him. Alex heard a child scream, her own heart then shrieking, and she saw at the boy's feet a tweed cap and a yellow feather in the cobbles tramped. The couple that had been with him were gone, and Alex saw a woman holding the boy above her head by the scruff of his neck. A curved dagger the woman stabbed into the bone of the boy's breast and the child howled and his body went limp, his limbs falling as blood from his heart spilled over the woman's face, her mouth opening and her tongue lapping up the red liquid on her cheeks and lips. Alex barely moved and in that instant she saw the woman's eyes meet her own and the woman exploded. Dark, bloody bile splattered across Alex and she smelled burning sulfur but she lunged forward and she caught the boy as he fell, and when she lifted him he was already dead. People screamed and howled around her and she heard and saw them die, but after only a few seconds, as she crumbled to her knees holding his corpse, she knew they had all been killed. Then, she was somewhere colder, and the boy's body was in her arms, and his blood was on her and on her hands, and against the Amanaan air the sulfur was gone, and her skin, tight and cold, no longer burned, and then there was a hole in the land, and she was laying the boy within it. Alex covered the grave, and she felt the boy's hat then squeezed within her bone-clenched fists; she took a branch, marked the boy's grave with it, and upon it she hung his hat. She then turned, looking over her shoulder.

She was amongst snow, and around her were white-topped pine, the smell of sap she could feel but it was then distant and separated, and ahead of her the boreal was broken, scarred-over with a petrified forest. And there in a small clearing, centered amongst the pale, twisted skeletons of wood and amongst those sentinels fallen who defeated laid shattered brittle upon the icy ground, she saw the man on his knees. He was away from her, but she could see the one he knelt before; the other was sitting upon a long-dead log, his whole weight upon the man's shoulder, and his midsection was gutted, his intestines and organs, bright with blood, spilling into the man's hands. The man lifted and pushed the essence back into the other's center, but it all rolled free again. The man then turned from the other and toward Alex, and Alex felt the blood covering her own face; the expression the man had from before was broken, and Alex felt the cold about her whisk, and she was standing back in the room.

Garity had been lacing his boots. He turned toward her and he stepped back, and Alex's eyes were wide, and she was holding her breath. She then felt liquid drip from her hair, and she ran past him, toward the bathroom, which was in the opposite corner of the room as the closet. She felt for the light switch and she saw in the mirror

herself, with dark crimson blood flowing down her cheeks and staining into her skin, her hair streaked with it, her arms nearly black with it up to her elbows. She grabbed a towel from a rack and wet it and frantically started to wipe her face, her arms and body then shaking, the blood off her body splashing against the sink and floor. She heard then Garity come to the bathroom door and she saw him in the mirror and she turned toward him, covering herself with the bloodied towel. His own eyes were wide, and he was very still, and he studied her, and she felt him do that, and he took another step forward, entering then with one leg the bathroom, and she stepped back, balancing herself against the sink. He then retreated, but he continued to look at her.

"You are back," he then said.

She stared at him, and then she furrowed her brow, and then she blinked.

"Who did you kill?" he asked.

Alex blinked again, and she lowered her head, staring hard into the ceramic tile. "A woman," she said. "She had slaughtered the boy with the feathered cap."

Garity then stared hard, gazing at some spot in the wall. Alex had lifted her head after she had spoken, watching him, analyzing the light flickering within his iris. Garity then stepped out of the bathroom, hurriedly, but not toward the door to the room, and Alex followed him, stopping at the foot of the bed, as he leaned out the window. She was silent, watching him, and she saw flames reflecting off his face.

"You were gone but a minute or two," Garity said. He turned toward her, and he then gestured with his hands. "Time enough for me to get dressed, anyway."

She looked at her own hands. Blood still ran from her, not from her face but from her arms and chest, reddening the carpet beneath her and staining the towel within which she was wrapped. "Garity," Alex said. "What I have done, if it is what I did, is impossible."

Garity waited. "I was mostly asleep," he said. "Eyes barely opened - but," he grinned, "I *was* watching you, by the window. And then you were gone. I cannot even say, there was motion, there. It was soundless. I ran for the window and you had vanished, and there was nothing, except for the horizon burning. Did not really know what to do, so I figured I could try to go find you - in my limited mind, I figured you can't have gotten too far. And then you appeared before me," he smiled, "an angel of retribution. A bloodied seraphim."

Alex stared at him. Just as she had gone, there was no sound in the room, and in her eyes there was only him.

"Are you serious?"

Garity grinned again. "Was there something unclear in my position?"

Emotion and energy bled from her heart. She looked at the ground, then she looked at him, and then she, with one eye half-open, nodded. Within her towel then she waddled around the bed to him, and she kissed his lips. When she parted his eyes were closed, and then he opened them, and she looked at him as he smiled upon her.

"Let me fucking, get dressed," she said. She made for the bathroom. As she entered and closed the door, she turned back to look at him through the gap still left;

he was looking back out the window, his eyelids drawn close and tight. He then turned his head and found her eyes and smiled, and she felt warm once more.

"I'll get our things," Garity said; "and when you are ready, we'll get out of here."

Alex nodded and closed the door. She turned the single knob for the shower, and hot water steamed off her face; she closed her eyes, lifted her head, and from her blood ran down.

The Warlock

"Your friend, Henthèrn," Alex said. Garity was pulling the bike about, aiming it straight toward the North. Alex was in front of him, just to the side, and beneath where the apartment had been, the heat from the horizon was a mere distortion against the sky - but her eyes studied this distortion now, even as she spoke to him, and all at once her body could feel the flames growing, as if she herself was approaching them. However, she had not moved. "He is dead," she said, without a break in her speech. "When I was there, I saw him."

Garity stopped pushing the bike and he gazed off ahead, past Alex's shoulder. Alex felt stiff, her body waiting. He then looked at her, not moving, and Alex stepped forward and met his hands with hers. He smiled and dipped his head.

"I am sorry," she said.

"It's alright," Garity answered. He squeezed her hand gently. He then moved his head away, but then after a moment, he turned back and opened his arms, and Alex held him.

"Where should we go?" she softly said.

Garity hugged her tightly, parted, and then shot his leg down and the engine started, exhaust rumbling out from the bike. He looked at her, and she felt the heat burning from inside her face.

"North," he said. "Hide away. Build a home. Live out the rest of our days, that we have been given."

She held him, her arms around her waist, her eyes closed and her ear upon his back, and she listened to his heart. She felt faraway the inferno but as they rode through the night, the air around them cooling, drying, and the land bending upward just lightly, what she saw drifted away and his heart grew louder, a steady, deep bass; the flames far behind her faded, and as the days passed, and then the months, she felt them no more.

She woke one morning and Garity was gone from their bed. The blankets under which they laid were pulled over her, tucked around her shoulders, so that the end of her nose was underneath the covers. She looked at the ceiling, her eyes sleepy, half-open, and she turned her head to look where he had been. The blankets smelled like him, and she rolled her body toward the window, the only window in the room, which was closer to her than it would have been to him. Through it she felt cold air reaching, and the light through it that shone did so in a bright white light. There were great pine trees, their needles a deep and dark green, their branches strong with the

weight of snow piled fluffy atop them. Alex inhaled and she closed her eyes, the light through the window gentle on her covers, and she drifted off again. The next time she woke, it was to the smell of coffee roasting, and she rose, holding the blankets wrapped around her, and made for the door to their closet, at the opposite side of the bed, and she slipped on a nightgown and over it a jacket. The door through which the coffee was coming from was ajar, and she pulled it open and walked through, and in that room too, Garity was not there. There was a black, cast iron curved pot on a stout wooden table that spanned parallel a sink and rows of cabinets. She made for the table and smelled once more the dark coffee and heard behind her the crackling of firewood in a great stone fireplace that reached through the ceiling of their cabin. Upon the stone floor stretched several rugs and carpets, and tapestries with knots and curls hung from the walls, some covering windows and others not. Aside from the table, there were two chairs that faced at meeting angles the fireplace, and beside the fireplace, filling wooden shelves and standing in stacks on the floor, were books. Before sitting at the table, she reached above the sink, opened a cabinet, and from it pulled a red mug whose interior was warmly dark; she sat at the table and scrunched her shoulders, holding the cast coffee pot with a cloth by its curved handles and pouring slowly the rich liquid from which steam rose, which met her face and warmed her pores. She felt the sides of her mug with her fingers as they rapidly grew hot. She blew on the coffee, holding her face close to it. There were windows above the sink, through which the bright light shone through, illuminating her and the table and leaving the corners of the cabin in comfortable shadow. Upon her back the outside was also settling, and as she lifted the mug to sip, she heard boots through the snow. The coffee warm in her throat, she turned, and the door opened and she smiled.

Garity's face was rosy with the nip of cold, his cheeks red and flared, his wool hat with flaps in one hand while he pulled the glove off his other with his teeth. She watched him turn and close the door, not before he kicked the snow off his boots just outside. He turned then back to her, and he smiled, and he shook off the heavy coat he wore and hung it on a hook beside the door. She rose, and after he removed his boots, he walked to her, and she took his hands, which were cold, and within her hands, they were warmed. She looked up at him then and placed her palms upon her cheeks, and then they were warm too, and she pulled his face down and she kissed him. Then, she turned, and she heard him sit at the table, and she reached for a mug in the same cabinet as before, one which, only briefly, was alone on the shelf; she brought it with her and poured into it the coffee, set it upon the wood for him, and then sat beside him. They each hunched over their mugs, and as he blew on his, she sipped from hers. She gazed out the window above the sink, and she leaned on him, and she smiled.

Later that day, her body was leaned into the handle of a long axe, whose blade was in the crisp snow, the handle pushing into her hip. The land before her sloped down, starting as a snow-covered clearing before quickly being covered and shadowed by a pine woods. There were shapes there, and little sounds, which she saw and heard, and she watched them go. Next to her was a large stump, and leaning on the

stump, like she was with the axe, were logs of wood. She gazed off toward the woods for a long time. Then, she placed a log on the stump with her fingers, raised the axe above her head, and swung.

The log split into two sheaves that fell from the stump and landed in the snow with a soundless thump. Alex took another log, placed it on the stump, and split that one clean too. She looked then and, from the woods, standing alone, as all other movement silenced and all other sound, with the settling of the wood, stopped, was a black fox.

It watched her. She watched it. To the side she saw Garity's tracks in the snow, which went down the hill and around a breaking in the tree line.

It had not moved.

Alex set down the axe. She started toward it, her body warm, boots now on her own feet. The fox waited there until she had descended most of the slope. Then she saw its blackened eyes blink and it began to turn, and she stopped as it did, but before it had fully returned to the forest, it turned back around for her, watching again. She approached it and it waited until she was beside it. Then, the fox started forward, and a few paces behind it, Alex followed.

The forest was still, and Alex's eyes, gliding and never darting, analyzed every inch, and nowhere did she see any other living thing; then though, there was a release in the air, like a thin film pulled and then let free. Then, she was surrounded by the same small sounds as before, and all around her she could hear mammals and birds scurrying along the bark, rustling amongst the pines, and digging and trudging through the snow. The snow itself was unbroken, and even those chunks of passed trees reaching through like moored ships, they did so without violence, their breaching of the snow-cover without abrasion or tear - their casting-away upon the shore was against one whose sand was pure, soft, and golden. Everything seemed to blend, the smoothness of the snow and softness of the hills decorated by the points of the pines.

Gradually, the trees clustered less tightly, until eventually the black fox stepped out of the boreal into what Alex could feel was a clearing, and she followed it, and there was a shallow hill upward which lunged, at the top, more steeply, and into the side of this hill, housed within a wall made of stone laid like brick, was an orange-red wooden door. Alex looked at this, and then she looked at the fox, who had been travelling up the hill, but had stopped. It was staring into the trees, in the direction behind the house inside the hill, toward where the entirety of the land sloped back into the rest of Amanaan. Then, Alex looked at the door. It was open. She looked back. The fox was gone.

Alex made for the door. Reaching that place where the hill crested, she peered inward. In there too, white light from outside shone, and she could see the flickering warmth of flames, and she could hear inside the crackling of dry wood.

"Come in."

Alex stepped back. The voice reached her, but it had not come from inside, nor had it reached from around her. The door then, before her, opened, its hinges creaking and the heavy wood sighing.

"Trysten," she said.

The man nodded. He smiled then, a grin which was crooked, as he leaned into the view, his body against his cane. "It is I," he said. "And, Alex."

"Our acquaintance is remembered."

Tristen's head bounced as he smiled. "It would seem so. Would you have time to share, so to spare a moment's company?"

"I would," Alex answered.

"Lovely," Tristen said. "Please, come in. And share with me this home of mine."

The old man turned and held the heavy door open for her, spreading his cracked and pale palm wide against the wood, and placing his back against it, leaning his weight toward it and off his cane. She stepped inside, and the air within was quiet but empty, although in a fire pit built in the far wall, smoldering were embers and chunks of charcoal. There were two wooden chairs facing the fire, handmade, and some pans and weapons hanging along the kitchen and from the walls: martial blades straight and curved with spears and glaives and knives and, above the fireplace, a gladius. Alex heard the cane meet the floor and she stepped aside, and he walked ahead of her, and she grabbed one of the chairs and swung it around toward her, lifting it with only the muscles in his shoulder and forearm. Despite the energy in the sudden movement, he set the chair on the floor without a sound, and he offered it to her, and she nodded. He made for the chair's partner as she sat, and he turned his around, and he sat to face her, half of his face reception to the cold, white light coming through the lone window above an empty sink.

"So," Jessen said, "are you liking the island?"

"I like being here," Alex said. "And I frankly like the cold. If you knew where we were," she said then, "why did you come looking for us now?"

The man's grin faded. His eyes went blank, and for a second, he seemed to be looking through her head. But then he focused back, a grin returning, but a different one, where the edges did not curl up as much and the color in his lips was all but gone. His long black coat hung off his waist, which was not skeletal but still thin, a thick shirt of deep maroon on his chest. He placed his cane across his lap.

"What gave that away?"

Alex looked at him, and as he looked at her, the color did not return.

"You know," he said. "Ah... never mind. I'll ask instead maybe what I am unable to help myself not ask, and probably a question you'd be more inclined to answer. How much, then, do you know about me?"

"You know a lot more than you let on," she said. "I think you may mean well, but I am, not sure. Garity said you may be a wizard."

The man smiled.

"And he also said you've gone by another name."

"And that is?"

"The Warlock."

The man leaned back in his chair. He rolled the cane forward on his lap, spreading his fingers wide over his palms. His hands were bare, although there was a

tattoo, the end of some snaking tendril or flame, that emerged from the exposed edge of his wrist. He then leaned forward again.

"Garity is a good man," he said.

"He is," Alex said. She glanced out the window. Outside was white.

"Your judgement is good," the man said. "But not, maybe, of me. Although, I have gone by other names besides, and I, sometimes successfully, am not the easiest to read. I am sorry for taking you from him."

"You haven't."

Jessen looked at her. He turned his head, lifting up his chin. "Do you remember me?"

"From before the town?"

"Yes."

"I do. Why did they destroy it?"

"For much the same reason why you swam across the Blanquesh."

Again, she looked at him.

"You came looking for a book that was never even there," he said.

Alex braced herself in her chair. "How do you know I said that?"

"I would not have to," he said. "Although too," he grinned, now, "we don't *really* know for sure if the book, or a book, was around, or is around. Not in the negative nor in the positive, anyway."

"But you know."

"How's that? You know me, and you remember me. What amount do you reckon I am laying off?"

"I am not sure," she said. "Looking to be about everything."

"Everything's a lot."

"And yet," Alex said, staring at him.

"I know stuff," the man said, "but really I don't know anything at all."

"Why'd you let that town burn?"

Jessen raised his eyebrows. "Call me a Warlock, but that is beyond my power."

"Then you're right."

"Yeah?"

"You don't know anything."

The man looked at her then. His body stiffened, and again it seemed like he was looking through her. For an instance he had scowled, but an empty, saddened expression flooded back over him, covering him.

"Then you know why you are here," he said.

Alex tilted her head.

The man scowled. He rose, taking with him his cane, and he leaned his weight hard into it as he went to the window. He turned to her, leaning against the sink, his legs crossed at his ankles, and when he did his expression had not changed.

"I taught Garity how to tie that fuse about a rail line. I dragged dying people out of fire and blown-out buildings, homes collapsed onto crying children. I have taught and I have teached, and I have shown and I have led. I have seen over continents and I

have known futures; I have killed with bullets, I have killed with bombs, I have killed with blades, and I have killed with my bare hands. And I have loved, with these hands. But now," Jessen said, his voice quieting, "I realize my most terrible decision."

Alex rose. The man did not move. His cane was gone. Alex ran for the door. She pulled it open and the sky was on fire. She glanced back at him, and he there was unmoving, a sentinel, his eyes gazing into the floor, and the fireplace behind him was dormant, and the house was dark and cold, covered in shadowed dust and cobwebs. Alex ran into the snow.

The forest was ablaze and the heat enveloped her and her body glid across the ground, her person passing between the crackling and screaming trees ethereal. Animals bled and broke around her and she burst out from the tree line and up their hill and saw their house was caved in, a towering inferno crowned in a black spiral ripping up through the heart and devouring the laid-down wood and stone. She was up the hill and then above the house and she tore columns and beams away, the debris crashing in the snow and forest, and when she reached the stone foundation she lashed around and scanned every inch of scorched snow and burnt ground and found no one. Beyond the trees she saw black smoke and the shadows of silhouettes against flames, and she remembered Henthèrn headless, crushed beneath the beams. She was then there among the brimstone, and people screamed and bled around her and her tears as they streamed vaporized from her face. There was cackling and bullets ricocheted and splattered and she blinked through the town, and each one she saw was then dead, and the people underneath and the people running turned and saw her, and she did see them, but she did not stay; and with but shrill cries at seeing their associates annihilated, the invaders were gone, reduced to black stains of blood blasted into the spots that they had stood and sought and savaged.

Alex then scoured through the rubble, diffusing the flames and piling wood and splinters in the center of that little town, letting loose within its center a light flame which quickly lapped up the kindling into a comfortable bonfire, around which the people remaining gathered; and they watched Alex as she lifted and looked through everything, and when she could not find him she collapsed in the snow, her face falling against the melted ice, the water freezing to her skin as she cried, and the people came around her slowly and reached for her, and when she pushed them away they waited, but again they came, and Alex fell into them and sobbed, and they carried her before the funeral pyre.

Fyre

When she woke the next morning, she was in a bed wrapped in blankets of thick wool. The wool itched her skin and she lifted her head. The room around her was empty, decorated in light browns with pictures and paintings. She rose, pulled the blankets back so the bed was set, opened the door to the room and, leaving, closed it.

Pancakes, toast, and eggs were left on a small table before a single counter. The door to the main room of the home though, which curved into the kitchen that had

but a table, a small sofa, and a large blanket, was ajar, and Alex pushed it open. People were clamoring, and a few were running toward where she was. They had seen her appear though and they stopped. She looked at them, and then she saw them turning their heads and she looked down the main road, past the right side of the still-warm remnants of the pyre. People were running, and Alex rose into the air. Everyone in the village that could see her then stopped and watched, staring, standing in the open snow. She then flew in the direction they had run from, toward which the village ended and the land sloped downward into dormant fields and play-mounds and forts of snow and toward the rest of Amanaan. Coming up a great, ancient highway which further south ran alongside cliffs and caught the clear spray of the sea, was a caravan a mile long. Alex's face contorted and, instantly across that distance between her and them, great pillars of energy burst upward through the road, cleaving longward through the center of the forces. Vehicles shot upward, mangled and blown to pieces, and spinning they crashed into the island, and bodies were sent spiraling into the sky and those not pulverized slammed and slid across the icy sheets. Alex closed her fists and her eyes twitched, her body then still and her vision absolute, and the pillars became a singular step of power that sprung from the ground through the entirety of the caravan, engulfing those dark shapes and dissolving in a second their very atoms. And after that second, the energy was gone, and besides the burns and mangled bodies, the caravan had been erased.

Alex lowered herself to the ground and stood alone in the snow, now just next to the pyre. Before long though she turned and let a flame within it gather, and swiftly and softly there was crackling inside. She then sat and crossed her legs and looked into the center of the piled timber and watched the glow brighten. She heard the people around her, and she knew many of them looked at her, but she did not listen to them talk, at least not of her, for they talked at a volume that she'd ought to have no idea that they were whispering. That made her, after a long time, smile, but then she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and when she rose she made back for that small home she had woken up in. She reached the door, which was ajar, and pushed on it with her fingertips, but then she looked up and saw there was a family inside and they were carrying rope-bound bags and on their backs and hips were wearing rifles, shotguns, knives, and swords; there were two young children with them, whose faces and necks were covered with scarves, one red and one blue.

She stopped in the doorway and said nothing, and they, eight of them in all, looked at her, but then the mother turned for the counter, lit the burner on the stove, and lowered the pancakes, eggs, and toasts into a pan. Alex shook her head.

"Nonsense," the woman said. "Come and eat, before we go."

Alex went to speak, but the woman with only her eyes insisted, and Alex nodded.

"Please, sit," the woman said, gesturing to the sofa.

And Alex did. She then watched quietly as the family started to sit on the carpet except for the mother, who was flipping the contents of the pan over. Alex then smiled and she slid herself from the couch onto the floor, and when the woman brought the

food on a plate to Alex, the woman sat beside her, and Alex and the family were sitting in one circle. The woman then motioned to the oldest of the two young children and the boy rose, his red scarf pulled from his mouth, went to a drawer, and coming back brought Alex a fork. His hair was dark, and as he handed it to her, he smiled.

"Thank you, very much," Alex said.

The family watched her, and then they nodded. Alex meekly smiled and lowered her head, lifting chunks of egg into her mouth. She chewed and she swallowed.

"Where will you go?" Alex asked.

"Further into the highlands," one of the men said. "Into the Tuatd'nen."

"Do you need help getting there?"

He shook his head. "Thank you, but we will travel as we always have. And we could not ask you to."

Alex looked at them. The children were quiet. Alex finished eating and nodded once more. Together, the family rose, and Alex with them, and then the mother took her plate. They then exited the home. As they stepped out, the elder of the family stopped her. The family then turned around to look at them, but only for a moment, and then they started toward the pyre. Alex turned toward the elder, who had reached for her shoulder.

"Thank you," he said. Alex nodded, a tightness deep in her throat. "People have sought the power here for millennia. The very blood of the world, flows from this island. That which cannot be taken inspires among the spiteful cruelty and obsession. And now that they've beheld that awe that they believe they've been wrongfully barred from - they will try to reach you, and if they cannot, they will try to destroy you."

"I do not know what I am," Alex said. "And I see what I have done, and I recognize it has always, in some capacity, been this way. But... what of me?"

"I am sorry," the old man said. "For your fate. Many are covetous of your gifts."

"I am cursed," she said.

He shook his head. "But the jealousy of many speaks nothing of the person. I speak now not for myself, or for my people, but for your sake. Our time is nearly exhausted, if it's not already wired. You possess the strength to do something truly great and mighty. And your heart is one of gold."

"My heart is broken."

"And it bleeds gold nonetheless."

Alex's face contorted, and she shook her head. "What if they find you again?"

"We will fight, and we will flee."

"Can you leave Amanaan?"

"We could not if we tried. They would not let us. And, it is our determination to stay. We will never leave the island. It is our home."

Alex watched him join his family. She thought to ask for his name, but her mouth did not open. She stood there just outside the shadow of their home, watching as more of those survivors of the village gathered around the now burning tower of broken wood. Later they began to leave, walking migratory as nomads, past where she was, the burning tower at their backs casting warmth upon them. Their shadows from

the flames, even amongst the bright northern day, she could see. Alex had been sitting in the snow cross-legged, staring off into the treaded white, and in her view blurry were splotches of red; as the village started their journey, though, Alex stood. They looked at her as they passed. Many thanked her, and to them, she nodded and pursed her lips. Soon though, the people were gone, and Alex was alone.

After a long time when she could hear nothing, Alex rose. She travelled silently across Amanaan, back into the mainland. Every village and town she saw, she walked through, and seeing the people there safe and happy, she walked on down the winding road until she was out of sight, and then to the next one she travelled. Nowhere did she happen upon violence. She then went to the city that she landed in from the Blanquësh, and the soldiers there turned and saw her; their weapons in their hands she disintegrated, and each of their persons she brought to the beach and forced onto a large ferry, one with a great green flag flying from the uppermost deck of its stern. Painted on its side was *Wayfarer*, and when all the people in that city, who had by then had become silent and were watching her, had been brought aboard this vessel, she launched it from the dock, sending it in one lunge over the Blanquësh back toward the continent. Waters roared underneath its bow and showered icy upon her dry face. She smelt then the rot of the shore and saw the black infection of the land up the rocks and boulders of the beachhead; she saw then motion clamoring aboard the *Wayfarer*, and as she turned as saw the towering cliffs, upon the very foot of which the stinking death was halted. She then turned and lowered herself to the ground, and into her feet and her soul the sickness from the beach bled and spread. Then, Alex froze.

Her head whipped toward the sea. She peered over the horizon, but with the Earth her vision ended. She then snapped toward the sky, directly overhead. The sky, blue behind the clouds, was greyed over. She squinted and then her eyes flung open, and again her fist clenched. Energy suddenly bubbled from within the cloud cover, above their heavy wisps, and then bright yellow and orange light erupted from within, sending shards and rays slicing and scattering through the clouds. Chunks of steel and tungsten aflame with the rainbow hurled then in a star-shaped cascade toward the island and into the sea; everywhere Alex's eyes fell, those blazing pieces of that starfall crumbled and evaporated, and before any of them could reach the surface, they had been reduced to smoke and debris of dust.

She then toward the Blanquësh, her eyes on the horizon, and she brought her hand in front of her, waving it from left to right; energy she felt then spread and spread from her palms, emanating off the tips of her fingers and spreading like clay spun on a spindle, and it felt like she was pressing her flesh upon glass. She waved her arm so only once, but there she stood, feeling as if someone was tugging on her arm, and then it changed, as if her palm was placed on the open port of a space ship, the infinitude of space sucking on her flesh; but the siphoning was from within, and to it she gave but from herself she felt nothing sapped, and as she stood there, energy flooding from her, she felt no more weak but instead more alive. That which colors the sky and that which brings life up from the dirt was within her, flowing through her

own veins, beating within and from her own heart; she closed her eyes and she gave more of it, and then more, and she inhaled deep and even more of it pushed through and aligned and then she stopped. Alex opened her eyes and looked to the sky; again, she peered through the cloudcover, and as that imitation of light hurdled down through the ozone and toward the island, something in the sky broke it, shattering it brittle, and its energy burst and then dissipated down the celestial of Amanaan's planetarium.

Alexandra

Alex was perched within the upper canopy of an evergreen pine, her body wrapped in dense furs, with snow atop the toque she wore on her head and weighing down heavy upon the branches of the tree that enveloped her. Her cheeks were red and her breathing was impossibly slow. She was watching the scene below, hidden from all but perhaps a quizzical eye from those participants below; and even then, she would have appeared as a reminiscent shade, a whisking personage of a spirit, inspired by a not-so distant legend. Below her and some distance away was a village, and tucked within a small ravine, the stout branches of trees obscuring them from the sky, were people gathered in the middle of several homesteads. One building was larger than the rest, with a warmly wooden roof that flared upward at its exposed front end, and hanging from it and carved into it were signs of sigils and knotted swirls. The people were in a circle, surrounding a small tower of kindling and wood. Then, the doors to the large building slowly opened, and from it emerged four men carrying a carved casket, with one of the men at the front, holding the end by his hip with one fist furthest from Alex, was older than the other three. As the four walked, descending the steps of that grand townhouse, others appeared from inside and, hand upon hand settled upon their waists, followed behind them. Alex saw each of their faces, and to each other and with those who at the front carried, they were all related or descendent; Alex straightened her back, holding the bark of the pine with one hand. They brought the casket to the tower and laid it inside, carefully pushing it so within that kindling it did not protrude out either end. The oldest one then spoke, his head down, and then his head lifted up toward the tip of the tower, and Alex watched but left their words to be between them. Then, a young boy came from the townhouse carrying a torch. He walked to the front of those assembled before the pyre, in the center of the circle who watched, and laid the torch within the heart. The older man turned to the boy; the man had dark hair, and when he lifted the boy into his arms, wrapping around the boy's neck a blue scarf, he smiled.

Alex remained in reverence for the funeral. When all left except for the older man, Alex lowered herself from the tree. There waiting for her was a white fox, and it was sitting, its tail curled, gazing out into the woods opposite the village. Alex came alongside it and it turned to her and she ruffled the top of its head and its ears.

"Let's go, Achthenen."

Alex started off, the snow smudged and pushed by her boots, and the fox travelled alongside her.

Later, Alex was lying with her eyes closed in a rocky field. Pollen flowed into her nose and she sneezed. She sat up, and around her, tall grasses flowed with a gentle seaside wind. To the right of her was the rest of the island, sprawling into gentle hills and fading with the horizon into the highlands. Left of her though was the sea, and far below her it rolled and smashed against the cliffside. She stood and looked down over that jutting anvil of a cliff. Then, she looked behind her, still at the Blanquesh, and gathering above the sea were flocks of gulls and envoys of albatross. She did not look that way for very long before looking down. Achthenen, its fur now a brownish grey, was curled at her feet and its mouth was open in a long yawn.

"I'll be back," she said to the fox. Achthenen looked at her and Alex smiled, and for a few more seconds she gazed across the sea and she could hear the quiet calls of the birds; then, after a few moments, she was across the sea and before the continent.

From the shoreline, the rot had reached further than Alex could see. The land was stained black, a deathly stench even as she remained offshore reaching her, and upward she rose, hiding herself among the clouds, clouds she realized were not of water but of smog, billowing up from spires stuck into the land and encased and surrounded by steel. Alex held her breath and flew further inland, and as she did the rot for a long time did not cease, but Alex went faster, and eventually the infection broke up in spots shaped like dead stars and then as a whole gradually weakened, until once more Alex could see grey concrete and grass. She continued further until she found a town whose distance from the disease was at least a horizon's worth. In an alley then between two shops, Alex quickly touched ground, and she walked and emerged into the street. She looked at herself and saw the furs she wore; she felt the warmth of the temperature, and at herself she smiled. She looked both ways down a street, which was dotted with people springly dressed walking in pairs and warmly colored cars quietly parked. People in a fenced-off field threw a frisbee, and as she surveyed a small line of cyclers rode by her. Alex took off her toque and shook her head, letting her golden hair flow about her shoulders. She then looked both ways down the street again, herself standing on a sidewalk, and she saw a woman walking towards her.

"Excuse me," Alex said. "Would you be able to point me toward a library?"

"Why yes," the woman said. She turned back toward the way she had come. "That way, just next to the cemetery."

Alex dipped her head and smiled. "Thank you very much."

"A beautiful day to be that bundled up," the woman joked.

Alex smiled. "I know!" she exclaimed. "Guess I haven't had time to change." Alex started in the direction the woman had pointed. "Thank you again."

"Take care, sweetheart."

Alex smiled. "You too."

Alex walked down the street and turned left. The street there broke into a crossroads, and to the right of her as she walked then spanned a graveyard encased

within a small town square. Fence partitioned by posts built out of bricks ran along its perimeter - thin bars about hip-height made of metal. The sun shone then upon Alex's face, breaking over the tops of the buildings and brightening as she walked. She reached the library and she pulled open doors by tall cylindrical handles the color of gold. In she walked, and the sounds of her footsteps were snuggled up by the library carpet. The sounds she did hear, like the sliding of books and the light falling of pages, were quiet, distant, and intimate. She walked between twin machines built into the wall of the hallway that themselves made no sound. Folks in flat caps and button caps smiled at her as she walked by and she smiled at them. She made for a long table against a wall and sat at a desktop computer. Turning it on, she pulled the keyboard closer to herself. She dipped her head for a moment.

Garity A'nthren.

Alex scrolled slowly. Many links appeared and she clicked on only the first few. Pictures appeared of people that shared his name. Alex looked at their faces. Then, she closed that window.

Alex closed her eyes, and she lifted her chin. For a few seconds she breathed. Then, her fingers began to move, and she typed into the computer.

Alexandra Kaylen.

Alex leaned forward. Nothing appeared.

Kaylen.

Nothing.

Theron Vanque.

Nothing.

She inhaled.

Amanaan.

Nothing.

Alex closed the window and turned off the computer. She pulled the toque from her pocket and pulled it over her ears. Rising, she pushed her chair back into the desk. Then, to the people in the library that looked her way, she smiled and they smiled back, and she left.

Outside, Alex slowly looked left and then right. She looked to the sky. Then, she shot upward.

As she neared the island, she felt a slight, invisible resistance, and then she passed through. She found Achthenen, curled up and asleep atop the Monehrn; she gathered him into her arms and flew with him, bringing him north. She found amongst those cold hills the slicked-over remains of a long burnt-down cabin, and from its fallen beams and crinkled boards sprouted pink and red flowers, and between those stems mosses had settled. She lowered herself to the ground, letting the fox down, and it stood straight and graceful as Alex walked to the middle of the ruins. She remained there for a few seconds, and then she walked out, lifting her legs over that passed, and as she left the perimeter of their old home, she looked into the woods down the hill. She glanced at Achthenen and motioned with her head and alongside her the fox came, and the two walked down the hill, which was no longer covered in

snow but instead of grass shining with moisture. The pair entered the woods, and as they did Alex leaned forward, peering toward its depths, but that inside she could not see. Achthenen looked at her; she looked ahead, and together they continued deeper.

She thought and remembered, but the hill and the house that she had been in years ago did not appear, nor did she feel a pull or break in that around her. As they went, the fox gradually advanced ahead of her, delicately reaching over and hopping across the foliage, trunks, and divots that filled their path. Alex looked down then, and as she watched the brown and green pass beneath her, her mind drifted off elsewhere.

She remembered and felt Garity. And then she felt heat, and she felt liquid on her hands. She opened them. They were dripping with blood.

Alex stopped. The blood from her hands was gone. Her heart was beating. She looked up. The crowding of the trees had been broken. Achthenen was looking at her; just past the fox, cascading concentrically downward into a circle, was a boreal forest, the skin of the trees chalk-white, crossed and striped over with etches and streaks of black. As they cascaded, the boreal grew fewer, ending with a bare, circular clearing. And in that clearing was a man, appearing in age like she was with her own. His back was turned, and as Alex crept forward, holding her breath, he did not move.

Alex went slowly, walking and not making a sound, while Achthenen snuck alongside her, its slender, lengthy body low to the ground. The air around her was cold, still, and silent. Eventually, she reached the edge of the circle. The man was sitting on a dead log on the opposite side. Alex stepped forward.

"Jessen," she said.

The man turned to her. His face appeared young, his hair full, although his eyes were surrounded by dark circles, and over himself his back was hunched. Seeing her, his eyes went wide, and he placed a hand on the log and turned himself toward her. He straightened his back, and after a moment he stood.

"Alexandra," he said.

She said nothing, and he watched her.

"How much do you know?" she said.

The man did not answer. He was looking through her. Then though, his eyes met hers. His lips thinned, and his eyes lost their color. He looked at the fox, and he did not grin.

"Achthenen," Jessen said.

He then made a sign with his fingers; the fox left Alex's side and went to Jessen. Alex watched and the man knelt down and, cupping his hand around his mouth, whispered in the fox's ear, and although Alex listened, his speech she could not hear; Achthenen then leapt on the log behind Jessen and scampered into the woods.

Alex took a step, but Jessen extended his hand, shaking his head.

"He's only going ahead, not too far," the man said. "Let's follow him."

Alex crossed the center of the cascade. Jessen waited for her, but before she reached him fully, he turned, placed his foot on the log, and leapt over. Behind him some feet, Alex hopped the log and followed.

They went over a small hill, after which the land dipped down again, deeper than the clearing, and the boreal returned and surrounded them. The trees like dried bones became dense, corralling together like bamboo, and after some time Alex turned sideways to slip between them. Ahead, Jessen was doing the same. They continued and Alex could see Achthenen's form, the brown of his fur rich. His head was turned now toward Jessen and Alex, and beside him was a low tunnel built from bent brambles and thorns.

"Not too much further now," Jessen said, as he crouched. "I apologize for how, unwelcoming it is."

Jessen with his fingertips moved from his face the dead-white thorns. Alex, close behind him, followed, while Achthenen led. This tunnel path went on only about ten yards. At the end, Alex watched Achthenen leap out and Jessen slowly stand; she stood, and around, the boreal woods too dense to see or go through, opened up into a final valley. At the middle of the valley, carved and built into a sudden wall of stone one with the ground, was a small wooden door and a singular dark window.

Without speaking, Jessen followed the fox, and at the door the man smiled at Achthenen, and then the fox looked at Alex and returned to her. Alex stopped and ruffled the fox's ears as it sat beside her. She watched. Jessen pulled open the door and, sliding a small stone with his foot, propped it open, and then he walked inside. He did not reappear and Alex, staring at that darkened doorway, started. Stepping through, she left it open.

He was sitting, again his back turned, at a wooden table. Warm, orange light then reached around him, and turning, he set a candle on the wood. Behind him, Alex could see, was a cold fireplace and two empty chairs facing it, the floor there utterly bare; Jessen's thin silhouette was cast dark over the fireplace by the flame flickering faint.

He motioned with his hand, gesturing for Alex to sit, and across from him, she did. He lightly slid the candle to his right.

"There does not exist that in the present I do not know," Jessen said. "But you, Alex, are far quicker than me. More witty. More caring, more deductive, and far more kind."

Jessen stared off. He did not look through her anymore, but at some corner of the room.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Are people happy in the world?"

"Hah," the man grinned. He shook his head, and the grin was gone. "Sorry. Ah. Some are. Some are not."

"Will things get better?"

"I do not know the future. Just like how I could not stop the razing of that town. Or the razing of every town since. I do not know."

"Then what do you think?"

"I *think* that it could, with intervention."

"And what stops you from being that?"

The man grinned, but then he scowled. "I did. And I tried. But I was not strong enough. None of us were. And that which I beloved I lost, and still I tried. But my passion, my belief, became cynicism, doubt, and contempt - and this too I recognize. But in all that I pretend to know, I never claimed to be rational."

Alex closed her lips.

"I am sorry," she said.

He scowled again, shaking his head. "You owe me no such grace, and there is no such nicety of which I am deserving. Meanwhile, I owe you the world." He looked off again. "You have come here, because you want to intervene."

Alex looked at the man, into his eyes, which pierced forever with a cold and cracked. She nodded.

"When I had led you away," he said, "I wanted you to do something rash. To kill them, or to kill me. And you only sought to protect. Even those... people, who would have been next in line to the slaughter, you ferried away. Now, you truly empathize with me. Ah, ah." He said. He looked to the ceiling and closed his eyes. "Give me one more moment of your grace," he said.

Alex nodded, and Jessen rose. He walked past her, and after a second, Alex turned. Achthenen was waiting in the doorway, and he too watched as Jessen crossed to the opposite side of the room and disappeared within a darkened door that had been left barely open. Alex watched, and after a minute, the man reappeared, and Alex turned back around. He sat across from her.

"I will give you my omniscience," he said. "Is this what you want?"

"Want, as you know, is a funny thing," she said. "But I will be able to help this way. And, perhaps I will feel better."

"I am sorry for your fate, Alex," he said. "I wish you had never come here. You are far greater than I, and far beyond anything that they will deserve."

"I don't feel that's true."

The Warlock then smiled. "With this, I am no more. Farewell, Alexandra Kaylen."

"Goodbye, Trysten."

The man offered her his hands, turned upright. Alex extended hers, placing them in his; he flipped his over and wrapped his middle finger and thumb around the bones of her wrists and Alex closed her eyes and there was a cold searing which coursed through her blood and into her brain; she shook and she opened her eyes, and Trysten was gone. She looked behind her and saw Achthenen looking at her, and it was then the fox entered the hollow and walked alongside her. She breathed deeply, letting her hand fall upon the fox's head. She looked at the fireplace, the man's silhouette from it departed, and the candle upon the wood there before the chairs, dried and fossilized, slowly waltzed along. She then turned her head.

Alex rose, bringing with her the candle, and she made for the door darkened just-open. She pushed it slowly open with her fingers and held the candle close to her chest. The light fell upon a bed with one pillow, tucked into that small room and beside a small nightstand. On the nightstand, closed and bound shut with a leather

lock, was a book whose cover was embroidered with rubies, sapphires, and emeralds, carved into which were knots and the braided courses of rivers and streams. Alex smiled and lifted the light. Behind the book, turned toward the bed, was a framed photo, free from the dust covering the cover of jewels and tapestries; in the photo were two silhouettes. Alex lowered the candle, and from the room she withdrew. She left the door open and, making then for the fireplace, she let the candle sit amongst the wood. Behind her, the little flames began to crackle, and as her and Achthenen then stood in the door, she turned at the fireplace, looked at it, and within it bright red flames grew and bloomed. Warmth filled the room, and Alex left.

Outside, she closed her eyes. In that instant she could see everything. She opened them, and along with that around her, everything else she could still perceive and track. She saw and heard and felt people laughing, people loving, people dying, and people screaming. Her heart soared and fell and broke and bled.

Gold fell and flowed from her head. "May I never lose this," Alex said. She looked down, and she smiled. "C'mon, Achthenen."