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Electric Snake

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Electric Snake

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

A Novel

by

David Liang

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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“Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.” -- Donna J. Haraway, A Cyborg Manifesto

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To all who read this, I hope it reads well. This is the start to this story not its end. Thank you for taking part in its creation.

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I think, then, that we are ready to begin.

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Electric Snake

Part One

Fieldlings

Chapter One - Good Boy

Halfway to heaven is still too close to hell for her liking. Nana learned the right way to be afraid a long, long, time ago, and takes good care of her grandson, named Ghamut, out in the Fields, out in the rain. She's a stoutly religious woman in a blurred, virtuous, elderly way, long enough alive to know that there's not a pleasant thing in the world, cynical and hopeful enough to be wary of the afterlife.

She was born old. She walked with a hunch from the age of twelve, looked back on her better years when she was just twenty. For a brief time, she was a mother, and then by the age of twenty-nine became a widow. By the age of thirty-six she exchanged motherhood for grandmotherhood; her daughter died giving birth to Ghamut. At night, Nana looks to the sky for her daughter's star and spits on the ground to curse the virile stag that lanced and then abandoned her daughter, left her with a nine-month curse that squalled and wailed in his mother's wake.

Ghamut, she prays, will be a good boy. He has his mother's brown eyes and her glare. When he cries, Nana can hear her daughter calling out. Try as she might, Nana can never pin where the cries are coming from -- the stars, or below the earth -- and so she prays for Ghamut, in case her daughter has been taken to hell by the stag, so that when Ghamut grows up and then dies, he will take some part of her daughter with him into heaven.

-

Nighttime on the field reveals shattered glass from a party gone on far too long. Bits of the sky have become lodged in puddles. In the darkness, the earth finally has a chance to match the cosmos, hurtling far above.

Nana's hovel is lit by ancient electric lamps and a small fire. Three small buildings -- her home, her daughter's would-be home, and a small outhouse -- are ringed by swaying lamps in a lopsided triangle. Ghamut was born in the house where his mother died; at night he lies on the straw that his mother clutched in her final agonies. After she is certain he is asleep, Nana sits in front of the open fire and cleans her hair. She inhales smoke and coughs. She brews a cup of tea and waits. The three small rooms lie facing an unkempt forest, the Fields, where low huts and other pinpricks of light speckle the night, and the road. The road lies a short ways away from this little triangle, accessible by climbing up a short embankment, and is a gravel-packed strip that runs all the way from the city, down to the Field, circumventing the forest. Most nights, the road is unoccupied.

In her vigil around the fire, Nana keeps an ear out for Ghamut, the shift of straw that signals an attempt to sneak out or away; if he does, Nana will give him a thrashing for staying up too late. In the meanwhile, she refuses to tear her gaze away from the forest.

A low growl sounds from the road behind her. A car arrives, its headlights catch the dust of the Fields, the steam, the midnight fog, replace silver with incandescence. It rocks on its perch and a door slams. Nana does not look at the sound of footsteps. The forest trees and their dark shadows peer back.

From the vertical lattice of firelight and shadow two brilliant eyes lock onto Nana's. She stirs tea and raises her neck, and the eyes flare. Nana stands up over the fire and drinks one cup of tea, then spits it out onto the flames. The crackling roar spews up smoke, and when it clears, the eyes are gone.

Behind her is now a man.

He wears a bowler hat, has a pinstriped suit and a cane that squeaks as he settles behind her. He speaks softly, gestures with a hand to the hovel. Nana has heard rumors of this man, his cane, his soft voice and the low purr of his words. His eyes dart left and right, taking in the fire, the lights strung up; it is only when he seems to settle on Ghamut's room that Nana finally snaps out of her reverie.

This man does not smell of the field, he smells of disinfectant and false flora. He doesn't smell like sweat, or like the mud, or the rushes. He smells like the man who lanced her daughter. He doesn't know he is evil, but he is sick with rot; Nana stands and listens to him. He comes from up the road, he represents light, and progress, and clean water and electricity and modernization and healthcare and if she would be so kind to make this easy on him, the others will sign their lots of the Field away, and they would be guaranteed a place to stay, an education, a pension. Nana turns back to the forest, and sees that those eyes have reappeared. Now she lets the forest see, how she turns him away, gently, kindly, in the way that old women who have heard so much can do effortlessly. He tips his hat, she has not made an enemy; but he will be back, in some way or another.

Again, the eyes vanish.

Nana opens Ghamut's straw door and watches his chest rise and fall.

He sleeps soundly, not like that other man, tearing back up the road.

Ghamut is, Nana knows, a good boy.

-

Ghamut races coins with the other children and steals them; he says they are lost. He is the fastest of them all, and when they let loose with the little polished faces, he is first after them. They fall into the tiny roadside rivers and gullies. Sometimes, they disappear into the brush and are never seen again. Once, he says, a small capuchin stole a quarter and cackled loudly as it hurtled back into the trees. Anything is possible. Ghamut has quite the imagination; he also has his friends' pocket change. He assures them that the two escaped coins were neck and neck, surely another race would reveal the winner.

He lathers the coins with mud in order to keep them from jangling too loudly in his pocket.

He waits on the road for the daily vendor to drive his car down, and uses his stolen goods to buy frozen candy and popsicles. He wolfs down the sticky sweet syrup and wanders down to the river in order to enjoy his prizes. When he has finished eating he throws the sweetened sticks and torments the fish with bits of wood that still contain the ghost of flavor. The vendor always makes the same joke about the deplorable state of the boy's coins but Ghamut does not laugh at all.

Ghamut does not ask where the vendor is going, or where he comes from. He doesn't care about the road, lining up with more and more cars. He is the envy of all the little boys and girls -- look, at how Ghamut eats his candy!

-

It is Maya, the poorest girl in the Fields, who sees Ghamut slip the coins into his pocket for the first time. She has put down a dense fiver coin, convinced that the heavier the coin is, the better and quicker it will make its way down the hill. Her opponent has put forth a half-cent, and together the fiver and the half-cent tumble forward. Ghamut is at the front of the pack chasing after them, and she is beside him. As they pull away from the group, Ghamut mid-stride steps over the fiver, capturing the cool little bit of metal under his foot. Maya tumbles to a halt beside him. Ghamut ignores her, and points off into the distance.

“There it goes!”

The other children look off in the direction that Ghamut is pointing towards. He bends down, plucks the coin off his heel and slips it into his pocket. He looks over next to him to see Maya, staring at his pocket. Her hands are clenched into fists and her lip is trembling.

“Did you see where it went?” he asks, pretending he doesn’t know exactly where the coin has disappeared. She nods.

Ghamut smiles. “Good!” He runs off in the direction that he’s pointed to, looking pointedly back at her as if she’ll explain where the lost coin has gone. The other children can’t find the coin hidden away in Ghamut’s pocket. When they leave, she is the only one who remains, blinking away tears.

It’s taken her two whole weeks to save up for the fiver. He has to give it back. She is easy to ignore on Ghamut’s way back to the road; to the vendor. Maya prances in his orbit and jumps up and down. Her small feet kick up dust. She balls her hand and hits his shoulder, but it is a child’s

hand and Ghamut weathers the blow easily. He wants to go down to the river. It's a hot, sunny day, and his dark black hair is plastered to his olive cheeks.

The vendor arrives and Ghamut gives him a fiver over Maya's protests. "Little sister?" the Vendor says, wiping off mud from the fiver.

Ghamut nods, and Maya can barely splutter out, "Give it back!" She points to Ghamut and says, "He stole it!"

"Be nice," Ghamut snaps. "I'm buying you candy."

The vendor shakes his head and laughs at them both. He gives Ghamut a frozen pop, with an extra bit of candy for his 'sister'.

When the vendor leaves, Ghamut walks to his spot by the river. Behind him, Maya's frustration has doubled down into rage. She kicks dirt onto the backs of his legs, throws rocks at the back of his head. Ghamut sucks on the popsicle, and after a final barrage at last turns as if to offer the bit of frozen sweet to Maya.

She opens her palm to take this consolation, but with a hack of the throat, Ghamut instead hurls a mouthful of syrup he has been preparing onto Maya. She screams; runs away. He watches her go, takes no joy in the little girl's weeping, but instead relaxes in his isolation.

Ghamut walks to his spot by the river and watches the sun set through the branches of the willow tree. The heat and humidity of the Fields melts the popsicle. Drowsy, he naps on the crook of a branch. The sun dips lower and lower. He is awakened by a singular beam upon his eyes, which he takes as his sign to leave.

He walks home, keeping close to the riverbank, lets the sweet candy-stick fall into the river and watches it float downstream. He takes riverwater and cleans his hair and scrubs the sand that Maya has kicked on him away. When he at last joins his grandmother by the fire, Nana smells the candy on his breath and makes him drink a foul, bitter soup. She tells him not to eat poison.

“Be a good boy, Ghamut,” she says, as she watches him choke down the bitter liquid. “Be a good boy, or you will be eaten.” She looks up past him into the forest.

She spits into the fire, and moves through the bloom of smoke. She quickly puts Ghamut to bed.

In his dead mother’s room, Ghamut hears a lone car drive up the road, the squeak of a brake then the soft scrapes of footsteps. A door opens and closes, and there against the dark of the night he hears Nana and another man, whose voice is refined, stilted, in an accent. Too far away to hear anything certain, more speculation than anything else. After a short conversation the two voices give way to a retreat. Outside, a car door slams, again the roar of an engine this time down the road. Nana sighs outside by the fire. She is tired and worn and for a little while she exists by the firelight before she too disappears and leaves Ghamut alone with nothing but the whisper-rattle of the forest, waiting right outside of the doorway.

Chapter Two - Justice

The other children of the Field go to school; Nana takes Ghamut into the forest. She leads him by the hand. Strung behind her, Ghamut admires the firmness of his grandmother's grip; she's young for a grandmother, with stringy dark black hair with the ends interlaced with beads. Wiry and bronze through years of work under the sun, her leathered skin and calluses prevent him from getting lost as she guides him over gnarled tree-trunks, helps him balance over rocks in the river; she crosses first, directs him, and at last he leaps over the rushing water and tumbles into her waiting arms.

Nana plants a kiss on Ghamut's forehead and calls him by his mother's name.

When she is tired, Nana brushes sweat and dirt from her brow and washes her face in the stream. Her beads click-clack as she moves about. In the layered light, she almost seems to fade into the forest: darkened skin, dark hair, a form and figure mottled by modest clothes the same color as the dirt. Ghamut lies down in the river and lets the water cool him off. Nana picks a few berries and shows them to Ghamut; they taste sweet and lukewarm. Nana plucks leaves off a tree and cocoons the berries, which adds the taste of ice to the little treat. Ghamut thanks Nana graciously. She says he is a good boy and takes him deeper and deeper.

In the middle of the forest, deep within the grace of the shadows, Nana stops her walking and Ghamut puts down his hiking stick. She reaches into the crevice of a tree and pulls out a heavy knife. Nana untwines herself from her dirt-flavored cloak and Ghamut follows behind as Nana

clears her way forward. In his hands, he carries an ever growing pile of kindling and the few spare roots she will carve up and transform into soup.

He watches the sun soar overhead. The children will leave school soon. Ghamut daydreams of the vendor who will drive his car along the road after them. But Nana pushes ever further, her knotted back arcing this way and that as she cuts her way deeper and deeper.

Sweat collects in the crevice of her back, between her shoulder blades. When she hikes up the Forest path, she sounds like the hogs raised for slaughter in the Fields. Ghamut stares up at the sun in despair. He knows where Nana is taking him. No quiet sojourn by the riverside. He will have to steal double tomorrow, to make up for today.

His mother's grave is covered by vines. Implanted in a small clearing, burned and cleared just two days after his birth, the little rock that serves as his mothers gravestone boulder lies over her final resting place at the far end of the grove. On a semi-frequent basis, whenever the moment seizes her, or if Nana becomes afraid that he is straying too close to the other children, she takes him here to meditate and ponder, occasionally pray.

As Nana bows below her daughter's headstone, pressing her forehead into the dust and dirt, Ghamut ties up the kindling and begins plucking vines and climbing greens off of his mother's tombstone. He does so out of boredom, ties the vines into knots; he waits for Nana to finish her weeping. The ground is too low, the sky and the burning sun too far away. Ghamut is alone next to his ancestors. His gaze is clear, harsh, and pointed, almost cruel as he watches his grandmother libate for all she has lost.

His indifference cuts quick. His misery would be Nana's opiate; his mother, he knows, had eyes like his own, Nana wants to see her sorrow reflected and realized. A vine has snaked its way over her name, which is already blurred from the weather. After he wrenches it to the side and discards the stem, he wipes off sweat from his brow and collapses to his knees. His mother is cold to the touch and he embraces her wholeheartedly. He presses his chin close to the rock and sighs, dreams of coins and candy and vendors on the road--

Nana is beside him in a flash, plucks a writhing vine which sinks its teeth into her arm. As it thrashes and flails, she strikes the serpent's head against her daughter, discards the twitching stem and cuts its head to the quick with her knife.

Ghamut's stares at the snake with wide eyes and Nana looks down at him. Something changes in her face and Ghamut thinks that she must see her daughter's expression instead of his, captured in terror, highlighted in sweat and the sun. Nana feels in the grass for the snake's severed head and Ghamut carries this, the towel full of kindling, behind his panting grandmother as they make their way back through the forest to the Fields.

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At the fire, Nana collapses, lies on her back to stare up at the sky. The snake-bitten arm has swollen and hangs limp against her side. At her instruction, Ghamut feeds her mashed leaves and pulpy sap: analgesics, as Nana says. When night falls, Nana cannot find the strength to move, but tells Ghamut to go to his room and stay there.

An hour after dark, kept awake by the thrashing and quiet hissing from his grandmother's cabin, Ghamut paces in his mother's room. He peers below the rags blocking the dying firelight and watches the light from embers fade away.

Darkness, complete and utter darkness, and a silence interrupted by Nana's panting, settles over the camp.

Again from the road comes the sound of a lone car, a door opening, then closing, the squeak of something tapping alongside footsteps on gravel. Ghamut clutches the rag of the door and peels it to the side. Nana's heavy breathing has quieted, and he wonders if she is still alive, or if the man -- another visitor from the city -- has taken something away from him yet again. Away with the door, onto the flat beaten earth of their home and onto the Field goes Ghamut.

The Fields lie dark and quiet. The moon is hidden away behind a cloud. Out of the forest pour shadows, dark shapes that seethe and lurk just beyond the dying light of the fire. One by one, they glower at Ghamut, panthers, serpents, monsters without names. Fog pours through the dark lattice, over the dead fire. He blinks and tries to find his Nana through the fog, but his chattering teeth mask his footsteps and he floats alone in a sea of gray. The electric lamps are off, and the world deals in shadows and silence now.

In the center of the mist, surrounded by the beasts of the forest -- can he not see them, coiling around him? -- stands a man with a hat and a cane, face all in shadow. Upon hearing Ghamut's footsteps, he looks up, and there for a moment he stands with the black of the night all around him before the moonlight filters through and catches two brilliant, shining eyes and a kind,

easygoing smile. A brush of dark hair clouds his brow, and as he wipes it away to reveal a broad, wide face, the forest seems to retreat, though watching, wakeful eyes still peer out towards the two of them.

“And who might you be?” This man’s voice is delicate and careful.

With a slight rustle of fabric, the man gets down on one knee. One gloved hand rests on his cane, the other stretches towards Ghamut, who can not, will not answer.

After a moment, the man stands up to look around the campsite.

“An older woman lives here,” he says. “Would you happen to know where she is tonight?”

The instinct to lie is quick and easy. “The lights are off,” says Ghamut. “She’s not here.” If the man speaks to Nana, then Ghamut will be put back inside, and then the forest and its strange, lurking, forms will return. For the first time that he can remember, the Field is clear at night, even the fog seems to have dissipated around this visitor. In its place is a strange, laden scent, unlike anything in the forest or the Field. The very air has become charged with scented rain.

In the fresh moonlight, Ghamut stares at the man’s black hat, wondering if beneath the mound of fabric lie antlers, if this man is a stag in disguise, of the same sort that took his mother away. The visitor regards Ghamut for a moment then nods. “Where’s she gone?”

“Are you from the city?”

The man smiles, and nods.

“Just up the road. Have you ever been?”

Ghamut shakes his head, and the man sucks in a breath. “Oh, it’s splendid! Civ is the world at its forefront. Marvelous things, marvelous people. Everything clean, sweet, and pure. If you’d like, I can show you, or you can wait, and see soon enough.”

Something about his accent, the careful precision surrounding each syllable, draws Ghamut in; he leans forward, and the man smiles.

After rummaging in his pocket, the man pulls out a photograph printed on a slip of plastic paper. It’s of a tower, a heap of glass and metal. Sunlight gleams eerily in the night’s dark. “In the city, the world is so beautiful,” he says. Ghamut takes it and examines it. “Don’t you agree?”

Ghamut glances at the forest and nods.

“She’s not here.”

“That’s okay,” the man says. “That’s not your fault.” One last look around at the little rooms, and he shakes his head, moves to go back to the car and the road, another black slab in the night. As Ghamut tries to hand back the picture, the man shakes his head. “It’s for you. A gift and a promise. Show it to the old woman when you get the chance, won’t you?”

Ghamut nods.

“Good boy,” the man purrs. “See you soon.”

And then he is in the car and away. As soon as he departs, the night oozes back with the fog, and the forest creatures come out to dance and hop around the campfire, first familiar shapes like dogs, cats, and lizards, and then slowly, slowly they become more alien, more abstracted, leeches with legs and wasps and bees and legs twitching and unfurling, refurling --

Ghamut clutches the little photo with its promise of sun close and stumbles around wildly, until he hears a moan and shoves through the glaring shadows. He is careful how he steps, afraid of falling sideways through dark seams into the forest's teeth. At last he sees the shadow of his grandmother's cabin. His route solidified, Ghamut pushes through a cloth door to see Nana, collapsed by her mudbrick stove, the snake's head in one hand, a tipped over jar on the ground, strange liquid reflecting a sole candle. She is curled over her arm and is panting, breathing, squeezing pus out of her swollen wound.

"Sylenia," Nana says, her eyes cloudy. "Haven't you learned not to talk to men from the city?"

"Nana, it's me."

The old woman's face does not change; she begs him to come closer, and when he comes up, she presses the dead serpent into Ghamut's hands. "That man is no good! You keep away from him, just like I say, now won't you go outside and fetch some firewood, here's a piece of kindling to start, I'm freezing, Nia. I'm so cold, and there you go, talking to your city-men and leaving me here to freeze."

She shakes the snake's limp head. In his grip the dead thing feels slimy, unclean and cold. Nana's hand feels too hot, he can feel something hammering away underneath her grip. "Nia, how about you go down to the village boy, fetch me some medicine for this cold. Or maybe a blanket. Tell them I'll work three months in the field for medicine, yes? Give them this--" she gives the snake another wriggle. "They'll know what to do."

“Nana, the man said to show this to you,” Ghamut says, and he gives her the photo of the city.

For a little while she stares at the picture, but then she crumples it up and wraps it around her nose, honks loudly and tosses it away. “So terribly cold!”

Away with the promise of sunshine, away with the man-with-hat’s gift.

When the sun rises, Ghamut sets out into the morning mist.

-

The village boy Nana wants medicine from has grown up and grown away; he works up the road where the man-in-hat disappeared to the night before. He only comes down the the Fields on rare occasions, he is a good boy, he worked his way up all the way to a doctor, he peddles medicine in Civ now, it was his dream to do that, ever since he saved his brother from drowning all those years ago, but his brother took water to the lung and almost died, lived four years as an invalid before the the boy and his mother laid him to rest in the Forest. Ghamut thanks the boy’s mother, who invites him in for tea.

“How is your grandmother doing?”

But Ghamut is already scampering up the embankment that leads to the road. The beaten earth stretches far, he’s already round the bend that the Vendor disappears. He can see the swimming pool he once snuck out to, the furthest he’s ever been from the Fields, the forest. This early, there’s no one there, and Ghamut crams his fingers into the chain wire fences, staring at the

cool blue water. His grandmother's skin, so hot to the touch... He imagines her arm, reflected underneath the crystal blue, not swollen, no longer purplish, steady and no longer twitching.

A rock hits him in the back of the head. Against the sudden dizziness he lurches into the wire, gasps, turns. Behind him stands Maya and a taller, bigger boy, backpacks slung over their shoulders, Maya is pointing at him.

"It's him," says Maya. "He's the one that stole my fiver and spat in my face."

"He's carrying a dead snake," says the big boy, picking up another rock. His features look like they have been smudged upwards into a perpetual sneer, Ghamut sees his own cold stare in the bigger boy's eyes. "He must be sick in the head."

Ghamut ducks and watches the rock explode through the chain link fence. Dust settles by the poolside.

"This is Diego." Maya's voice is sharp and soft. "He's my friend."

Diego takes a step forward as Maya asks, "Do you have a fiver?"

The sun crests over the road, it arcs over the pool. As the day shows the glee in Maya's eyes and the low curve of flashed teeth in Diego's grin, Ghamut sprints away from the poolside, the snake dragging on the ground.

When they are done with him, Nana's snake is flat against the packed-dirt road. Diego whistles from somewhere as Maya, now just a blurry outline through Ghamut's tears, her hair catching the light and ringing her in a morning halo, spits in Ghamut's face five times.

Chapter Three - Debt

Ghamut cries for a long time after Diego and Maya make their way to school. The snake feels heavier somehow; as if when Diego broke the vertebrae and ribs of the serpent he made them more than they once were. As he wipes the spit and the dust and the sweat away, Ghamut slings the broken body of the snake over his shoulder and sucks in a breath. Nana is in the house, alone; he bites his lip and trudges beyond the pool and up the road.

From the beaten gravel path emerges first asphalt, then concrete; wooden fences become steel girders. Field and forest give way to metal and glass, and soon it's easy to forget just where the Field lies. Aside from the road, everything is uniform and flat, utilitarian. There is no gnarled tree where the birds lie, no cracked rock from the time Nana saw a car crash over the road. Instead there marvels and miracles stack up so closely upon each other that they sap each other's splendor. Ghamut stares at a flashing red palm across the way and holds up his own to try and touch it. He steps into the road just as a car slams to a halt before him --

Something ugly like an oath sails out of the window.

Ghamut yelps and runs towards the sign as the car peels away. Staring at the sleek-black motor, so unlike the Vendor's box-cart, Ghamut glances up at the red palm, only to see it's transformed into a white stick figure, blinking with legs twitching underneath.

Left wandering, he admires firm, square houses, all with bright lettering and decor, blinking lights with different colors twisted into shapes and symbols. Slowly, the world is transformed into

the man-in-hat's photograph. People wearing clean clothes without dust stains on their shirts and trousers begin to walk up and down the street, all talking sharply. Ghamut clutches the flattened snake close to his chest, and stares.

This must be the land of stags and lances; Ghamut curls his hand into a fist and glares. Far above, the strange new world rumbles to life in tandem with the sunlight. He squints against it to find the boy who left the fields, who will heal Nana in exchange for three months of fieldwork.

-

A woman with orange hair tinted with the colors of sunset sees Ghamut, still carrying the snake, and rushes over. She wears a strange blue gown, entirely blue, save for a green and white cross on her lapel. It flaps and folds oddly around her, making her look like some sort of kite that might fly away at any moment, like the toys that the other children in the village sometimes set free. Outside the amorphous folds of her clothing, her face, nearly painted on with meticulous attention to hues, eyebrows and brushes, all sculpted over an alabaster canvas, surges into focus. She smells unlike anything Ghamut has ever encountered, and so he quickly scans her head for antlers.

She has none.

This strange, clean, perfect thing, kneels down in front of Ghamut and brushes his hair out of his eyes, feels his head with the back of her palm, and quickly speaks in a number of jagged sounds. Her eyes are wide, and she beckons another woman over in the same blue uniform, who stares incredulously at the little boy carrying his bloodied, broken snake.

Ghamut stares back, for as interested as she is with his snake, she seems to have not noticed that she is missing her arm. Her limb ends just after the elbow, transformed after with silver and glinting metal. Strange shapes locked together and put together with different pieces of wire, some catching the light, others dull and utilitarian all collapse in the vulgar imitation of an arm. It whispers as it moves and unfurls. It clicks as its fingers grasp for the snake, but he keeps her away with a shout.

The two women, one whole, the other incomplete, trill at each other. The woman with the liar of an arm tucks it out of sight, and bends over to squawk at him.

Ghamut weathers their onslaught of language bravely. Upright against their concerned faces, he explains that he is looking for a boy from the Fields who has grown up and away, who works on the road now. His brother died when he was young, because he fell in the river and breathed water in his lungs. After caring for him for a few years the boy, who is now a doctor, had to bury his brother in the forest. For a moment Ghamut considers asking for the man-in-hat, but the thought of Nana's insistence drives the thought away.

After a moment, Ghamut hesitantly adds, "He was a good boy, too. His mother said so."

The two women in their kite-suits stare blankly at him for a while and then explode into chirps, a moment later one of them disappears only to return a moment later with a third woman, who Ghamut stares at in exasperation.

This new woman squints at Ghamut and frowns. Her skin is darkened by the sun, not fair, like the other two. She appears to be whole, no strange creaking mechanical parts, and her hair is up

in a tight, reared-back bun. She smells like sweat, more real than her counterparts. A small twine necklace holds a small wooden carving of an owl, which peeks at Ghamut suspiciously from a small fold in her shirt. When she looks over Ghamut, he sees a knowing, tempered expression, not like the confusion and curiosity of the other two.

Again, Ghamut is forced to repeat his plea, and the woman frowns.

“Child, this is Civ. Too many people. I need a name.” She doesn’t seem at all concerned that one of the women next to her has had her arm removed, and Ghamut allows himself to relax, if just for a moment.

But he doesn’t know; perhaps he’s forgotten the boy’s name. The boy in the field -- his mother had called him ‘my sweet’, and ‘precious’, and ‘oh, that child of mine’, but these are the same things Nana calls Ghamut when she is in a good mood, and not writhing on the ground, calling out for her dead daughter. He pushes the broken snake at this woman, who speaks his language, and from the two watching kite-like observers comes a groan of disgust. Before him the woman with the owl pendant reddens slightly, dark eyes struggling to bear a new weight.

“Did this snake bite someone?” she asks softly.

“Yesterday,” Ghamut nods.

An oath, and then the woman stands abruptly, sings birdsong at the other two in that strange familiar language, and Ghamut lets the woman take the snake from him. The three of them stand far above, chirping and circling, like vultures plucking at the snake’s carcass. Ghamut wishes he could grow feathers and fly away.

He's led into another room full of chairs, with long electric lights, dizzying in their radiation. All around him lie colors in their worst forms, nothing vibrant, everything left drained and desaturated. Row upon row of chairs lie empty, a sitting room for catastrophe; he imagines the room full of groaning people, waiting for the women dressed like kites and wearing pendants. Hours after his beating by the poolside, Ghamut finally feels each aching bruise, every kick, the ringing in his ears has begun to compound upon itself in isolation. "Sylenia," Nana says, from far away. "My arm."

Diego has kicked his arm just above the elbow, there's a purplish bruise in the shape of a toe right there. He wonders if from the bruise, now that he's in this strange room, something electric and metal will grow like a vine and corrupt his arm until it chirps and clicks and whispers just like the woman in the front. Ghamut kicks his legs underneath his chair.

The woman with the owl pendant has returned. "There's medicine here," she says. There's a small pink bag in her hand. "But it's expensive. Do you have any money?"

Ghamut shakes his head, and the woman sighs.

"I can work in the Fields. I can lift a rake and can cut with a knife. I run fast, too."

"Child, this is Civ."

The precious medicine disappears back onto a counter. After so much walking, talking, seeing the unnatural and the woman up front with her severed arm, the medicine lying innocently upon the counter is more insult than object. Underneath the chair, his dust worn feet kick quicker. He feels his heel, where he steps on coins to buy candy; wipes clear his eyes and remembers Maya's

shadow. Hidden away in its nest of fabric, the owl on the pendant narrows its eyes and glares at him. Ghamut frowns, and says, "My name is Diego."

"Okay, Diego, well--" He waits for her to kneel next to him, then pushes her over, as hard as he can. The owl pendant woman lets out a coo as she falls flat on her face, but he's darted to the counter, grabbed the medicine, tucked it into his shirt, and now sprints towards the doorway.

One of the kites holds out a hand to catch him, a human, non-severed hand, and he bites down, hard, hard enough to taste the metal that will no doubt eventually transform them all into robots and machines. With a howl sounding behind him he bursts out onto the street, and, feet-slapping on the pavement Ghamut runs back away from the concrete and the asphalt towards the Fields, ignoring the cry of the pedestrian, the growl of cars, the shriek of horns, and the gaze from the sun reflected a thousand times on glass, over and over.

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Nana reads the instructions on the medicine before trailing a thin piece of the bag, coiled like a worm, near the spot where the snake bit her on the arm. There's a thin needle attached to the coil, and she wriggles it into her vein, holds the bag over her head, and waits. In the time that Ghamut has disappeared, her arm has kaleidoscoped into reds and greens and purples. Pustules and boils that smell like sweat have appeared in specks up and down her skin. Nana sinks slowly down onto the floor. Even with her arm in this state Ghamut feels relief. Nana's arm hasn't turned metal and foul.

Nana does not ask about the boy in the field, nor does she question how Ghamut came to get her medicine. She spends the rest of the day staring at the sun setting. Eventually she remembers that her daughter is dead and Ghamut is Ghamut, and she stares at him, swallows, sighs, clears her eyes and stands shakily upright. Ghamut takes the firewood that they picked up the day before to the campfire outside, and they spend the evening sipping on tea. Nana balances the bag of medicine on her shoulder as it drip feeds down into her arm.

As Nana eases into an uneasy sleep, Ghamut stares at the walls of his room, waiting for the creak of the emerging car, the squeak of the man's cane and the soft gravel lurch of his footsteps. But tonight no cars travel down the road. A peek outside the window reveals a hundred twitching beetles crawling outside, their glimmering black bodies glistening in the moonlight as they pivot to stare at Ghamut. The Forest animals lie atop the roof of the houses, terrified of their hard-shelled, many-legged counterparts.

Slowly but surely, the insectoids begin to chitter and chatter in the moonlight, and Ghamut watches from his place just beyond the door as the insects twirl their appendages like canes and wriggle their mandibles to take off and put back on tiny clumps of shadows in the shape of top-hats as they surge in a strange, semi-circular dance.

In the morning, without housework or chores to do, Nana puts aside her reservations and allows Ghamut to wander, though she forbids him to go back to the road. Nana demands this with such severity and refuses to let him out of her sight until Ghamut swears with his soul that he won't

approach the packed-gravel path. True to his word he wanders only to the riverside, where the gnarled willow tree over the bend of the river waits.

The crook of its branches prove a comfortable setting place. The wind whispers through its leaves and the birds occasionally jeer overhead. Beside the roots of the willow, water simmers in the day, and the Field grows hot and humid. In the shade of the drooping branches, Ghamut nods off.

He wakes when the sun has slipped sideways across the sky to rocks thrown at his legs; one catches him on the side of the head, and he looks down to see Maya pointing at him. "You," she says.

Ghamut sticks out his tongue to leer at Maya from his perch. She hasn't bought Diego this time, so he hurls moss and the old dust of the tree down upon her.

But no matter how much he hurls, she stays, simply waiting for him to come down. A piece of bark catches her in the cheek, near the eye, but she simply moves further away, and soon he can't hit her. She presents a cold determination in the way she paces around the ground, a certain smugness, as if she stands halfway out of the moment, already dreaming of when Ghamut will leave the tree.

She waits all the way until the sun goes down, and at last Ghamut drops down to the ground, armed with a branch and ready to bear against Maya, who scampers just out of his range. Threats and oaths have no effect, and she skips around Ghamut, orbits him, until out of frustration and annoyance, he screams, "*What?*" so loudly the thrushes shake and a flock of sparrows takes flight across the river.

Diego was taken by someone in Civ, Maya tells him. A big man with an electric gun took Diego away, for stealing from a Farm-A-Cey, and biting a Farm-A-Sist. Maya skips as she circles him. Diego's going to Civ-Jail.

Ghamut laughs, and Maya laughs at Ghamut.

"I'm gonna tell everyone," she says. "I knew it was you! Diego doesn't even look like you; he was so confused, but the police-man said they all look alike and then took him away."

"I hope they hit him," Ghamut says, thinking of the woman and her electric arm. "I saw--"

"Oh, I hope they hit him so hard when he comes back everyone feels sorry for him," says Maya. "I hope that they hit him until he can't remember who he is or what's happened to him, and his eyes never stop watering and he breathes with his mouth open while staring into the sun, until he goes blind and all the old people in the Field feel sorry for him."

She watches Ghamut out of the corner of her eye. He jabs at her with the branch, but she skips away.

"I hope your Nana takes one look at him and curses the city, and then, right as everyone is busy feeling sorry for Diego, I'm gonna tell them all that it was *you*, that *you* stole from us and when you got caught you went down to the city and bit some poor Farmer and then they sent people with guns to take Diego away. And then they'll run you out of the Field and everyone will hate you forever and ever." She grins at Ghamut.

"All that for a fiver!"

Chapter Four - Market

Nana takes to using a needle as her arm and hand recovers from the snake-bite. One hand has shriveled into a perpetually clenched fist, but with her needle, Nana peels oranges, holds down clothes, pins meat and greens on the cutting board, while her other hand works double. Ghamut walks around the house, idly doing his chores, he does not steal coins from the children up the road anymore; he waits for Maya during the day, and the man with the hat during the night.

Maya views the world as give and take. As the poorest of all of them in the Fields, stingy and determined to always get what she is due, she says she's traded her stolen fiver for Deigo's help in beating Ghamut, and now she'll trade Ghamut's guilt for many, many favors. Two weeks after Diego vanished alongside the policemen, he still hasn't returned. Ghamut isn't sure if he wants Diego back yesterday, or if he hopes that Diego stays away forever. Eventually, everyone will forget about him, and Ghamut will escape from his servitude and Maya's neverending tasks.

First, she had him do her homework, but quickly became infuriated with Ghamut's inability to read. Soon, Maya had Ghamut stealing coins to line her own pockets, and always vouches for Ghamut whenever the children get suspicious of him. He stands in silent fury as Maya skips up to the candy vendor and buys what should be *his* sweets at will.

She even takes to sitting in the crook of his tree by the river, while Ghamut fans leaves to cool her from the heat and the humidity.

He does her chores and cuts wood in the Fields for her fire. Lazily, the little girl thanks him. She tells him this is the best she's eaten in ages. Ghamut, sullen and wary of Maya's threats to expose his misdeeds to Nana and still unable to manufacture a satisfactory explanation as to how he received the city-medicine, must do nothing but wait until nightfall for the man-in-hat.

But the man does not arrive, not even when Nana resumes her quiet mutterings by the fire, keeping watch over the forest. Long after dark when she has gone into her hut, still nursing her arm, Ghamut stands by the embers of the campfire, waiting for a car, or the squeak of the cane, until terrified by the watching, pouring animals of the Forest, he retreats back inside.

One night, after an hour of waiting in the fog and mist, stepping over the dancing beetles and hearing their cellophane shells crackling underfoot, Ghamut spies what first he hopes are two car headlights, twilling through the road, gravel snaking underfoot.

Instead, two massive, glowing eyes made of circuitry and electric lights, affixed to a serpent's head, more than ten feet tall, wind down the road, its scales a million plates of smooth metal, a serpent's tongue flickering in and out. It catches the moonlight and parts the midnight fog. The grand beast glares at Ghamut, and with a carnivorous yawn, two brilliant fangs emerge from its artificial maw, gleaming silver spikes as it rears upwards and strikes down, burrowing into the Fields. Black mud erupts from the ground, oozing over the campfire, Ghamut is swept towards the forest as the snake thrashes, left and right.

The lattice of trees cuts his yell short. As the black ooze sweeps him away, the roots and branches and stone buffet him on either side. He cries out for help, for Nana, for Maya, Diego, the nameless vendor, the boy who moved up the road to work in Civ, the man-in-hat--

His skull slams into something cold and familiar, knotted with half-picked vines, smeared on one edge with snake's blood from Nana's knife.

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"There's a market coming," Maya says, picking petals off of a flower. "The yearly one." She places each pastel droplet in the river and watches them float away. Every so often, she crumples one up between her fingers and smells them.

Ghamut looks up from where he has been punching sticks and rocks in the riverside mud, building a makeshift wall. It never blocks any of the water, but maybe, one day, it will. He has ringed circles underneath his eyes from staying up too late. Every night now, he waits for the man-in-hat to arrive, or for the snake to coil its way down the road, sinking its teeth into the Field. He waits on his roof with the animals from the forest -- there are hundreds all piled high up on the thatched roofs above him now, silent cats and hounds and birds floating overhead. The fear of being swept away together has given them a sort of camaraderie, and though the creatures from the forest bare their teeth, snarl and gnash their fangs, together, they stare in awe at the electric snake bloodying the ground. Together, they watch as the black mud-as-blood seeps past them under the fog and surges into the forest. Atop their perches, they huddle together on the houses like makeshift rafts and artificial islands so as to keep from drowning under the dark current.

Even Nana seems somewhat aware of some grand happenings. Every night, she spends more and more time at the fire, staring into the thick of the trees. In order to avoid her strict curfew, Ghamut waits, later and later, for her to fall asleep before sneaking out of his room to watch the midnight happenings. Sometimes, he considers asking Nana what she waits for, what she sees in the dark, but some great hand of instinct clamps his mouth shut and keeps him well away. How could Nana, who sometimes confuses Ghamut for a collection of shards of her daughter, have anything useful to say?

“Smell my hands,” Maya says, back at the riverside. And he does. The river flows, mud knocks over his little shelter, his wall of sticks. Ghamut sighs.

“The left one is from a lotus at the school pond, the right is from a dandelion. Which is better?”

“The left one.” It smells like earth, not heavy. It’s light, simple, slightly bitter.

“Hmm,” Maya says, and she rinses her right hand in the river water. “Now go fetch some dandelions.”

After an hour of fetching the bright yellow puffs from the Fields and knotting them into a crown, Ghamut’s fury and boredom have reached their peak. Sitting here, instead of anywhere else, crooked up half a branch higher on his nest by the river, fanning Maya, who sucks on a piece of Civ candy that should be his. Her hair flutters in the breeze, and Ghamut daydreams of what would happen if he seized a fistful of strands and yanked her out of his tree, sent her tumbling into the

river. After she fell, he would take his place in his shady crook. But the threat of her tattling to Nana looms, so he schemes and tries desperately to come up with any way to escape.

As the breeze picks up, Ghamut rests his hands and watches the sky crawl overhead. He suddenly asks if she has ever visited the forest, to which she replies of course she has not. Just the field and the school. The forest is for superstitious folk.

“So you’re afraid,” Ghamut says, to which Maya puffs out her chest.

“Of course not!”

“You *are!*” Ghamut, now triumphant, hops off the branch dances on the river bank. Like the beetles, he waggles his arms and legs and mimes taking off a hat and twirling a cane. Maya’s face turns scarlet. At last, she demands he take her into the forest *immediately*, and off the two of them go, Ghamut grinning wide, convinced that his scheme has worked.

With her crown of dandelions, Maya forges steadfastly ahead, although she often glances backwards to make sure Ghamut is still walking alongside. They pass the knotted tree where Nana hides her knife, though by now the hideaway spot is abandoned. Then they cross over the creek, skipping over stones. At long last they stand in the clearing by Sylenia’s grave. Ghamut stares at his mother’s headstone and rubs the back of his head.

Maya shivers and loudly proclaims her disgust at the forest and its inhabitants. She is too hot, the trees arc too tall upwards, they half-block the sunlight. It’s too bright and too dark in all wrong, lopsided places. She kicks Sylenia’s gravestone, annoyed and impatient, and Ghamut at last takes the moment to disappear into the brush.

For several minutes Maya and her crown of dandelions do not notice Ghamut's absence. She walks idly up and down, complaining about this, and then that, but as an oppressive, heavy silence descends upon the shadowed trees, Maya clutches her arms close and shudders. From his perch up a tree, outlined by the sun into an indistinguishable blot of dark against the sky, Ghamut can see Maya twist and then turn in confusion.

She calls his name.

And again.

But Ghamut does not come down from his tree, instead, he turns his gaze back to the road, waits for night, waits for the snake.

By the time night falls, Maya has yelled until her voice has gone out. She's walked in a straight line in a strange, canted direction. If she had another half-day, she could make it to the road, but instead, from his place atop the trees, scrambling up and down branches, Ghamut can see that Maya has chosen a route that will only lead her deeper and deeper into the forest. The moon rises.

All throughout the forest, the eyes and teeth come back to life, climbing up the tree, staring at Ghamut. Their fangs rattle and hiss, hides click and claws shift against the wood, but they don't direct their nervousness and anger toward Ghamut; Not yet.

Nana must be worried back at camp, but Ghamut belays his scolding and watches, waits until the midnight moon shines brightly overhead. And at last with a low growl the snake begins its long journey into the field. Its glittering, electric eyes rear up, and it strikes down into the bed of soil in the Field, mud erupting as it thrashes, great dust plumes hiding it away from sight except for

the occasional glimpse of scales. The trees rattle and hum as the forest creatures climb into them.

Far below, Maya freezes.

A wave of mud crashes into the trees. Dark, like tar, Ghamut remembers how it flung him over the ground, almost swept him away were it not for his violent collision with his mother's gravestone. Maya shrieks and tries to outrun the seething soil but soon vanishes under the black waves. Ghamut loses sight of her amidst the shifting shadows and fog. As Maya fades away, the curiosity surrounding the forest and its creatures and his impatient eagerness to be rid of her gives way to a grating, buckling dread. The forest creatures glare at Ghamut and bare their teeth. One lunges at him, and Ghamut scrambles up the tree, higher and higher until the branches begin to bend and sag under his weight.

Another slash of a glaring fang, a bite of a claw, and Ghamut falls.

The ground hits hard. For a moment, he stares up at the sky, watching little white stars burn and twist far away through the trees. But then in the next, he sucks in air and feels his body for broken bones. Whatever he has landed on feels cool but firm, not mud from the fields, but still and soft, like a stone.

Familiar, familial, Ghamut looks into the moonlight, and sees a patch of light on a knotted branch of a tree, through the fog. The silver speck seems solid and now here comes the mud, but the mud parts at the cut of this piece of solid silver.

And again, he feels his mother's headstone beneath him, reassured, constant, smooth.

And again, he asks the night air, and this speck of moonlight: "Mom?"

And again Ghamut receives no answer.

When the snake has had its fill, and the mud streaming past the moonlit split has subsided, Ghamut walks a familiar path even in the dark back to Nana's huts. The moonlight guides him. He believes with all his heart now that the moonlight is Sylenia, and follows the constant speck of light further and further back the way he has come.

He has almost made his way back to the camp when a sharp *snap* of a stick to his left causes him to turn, and there out of the dark emerges Maya. She has dirt smudged on her face and her hair is wet, but she remains whole and alive. She even has her crown of dandelions atop her head. The flowers have fallen askew but there they are, still shining bright under the midnight sun. Ghamut stares at her.

"Did you see him?" Maya whispers. "Did you *see*?"

Ghamut turns to his mother, but the moonlight has vanished. Everything has vanished, except for the Forest's eyes, which have retreated back into their watching nooks.

"See what?" Ghamut asks.

Maya can hardly speak: "Diego!"

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Nana has kept herself awake and waits for Ghamut by a roaring fire when the two children return. When she speaks she waggles the needle at the two of them. If Maya's presence bothers her at all, the woman in firelight does not show it or even acknowledge the other girl's presence. Nana has not changed out of her day-clothes, an orange set of robes and a brown shawl, now almost black

in the night. Coming from the forest to the Field, and breaking out of the darkness, she almost seems a part of the fire, flickering and crackling with sparks.

Ghamut apologizes for staying out late, far, far too late.

“The Forest is dangerous at night,” Nana says quietly. The needle wavers in her grip, as if she is trying to stop it from flying out of her hand. It points at Ghamut’s heart.

“But --”

“But nothing! The forest is full of animals that will grind you up and eat you,” she wriggles her needle and now seems to acknowledge Maya. “Eat both of you. You shouldn’t be dragging each other into the forest.”

“I didn’t see any animals,” mumbles Maya.

“Good,” snaps Nana.

She turns to Ghamut. “And you should know better. I thought I taught you different. When the Forest is at peace, you shouldn’t disturb it so.” She glances up at the trees once more, and Ghamut wonders if she sees the eyes peering back.

Surely not, Ghamut realizes. Else she would realize that no matter how peaceably the forest may be, it surges onto the Field at night, hardly contained, disturbed or not. “Did you see it?”

Ghamut whispers. “Did you see it, Nana?”

He points to the road, where the snake makes its journey every night. Even through the moonlight, he thought he could see the glistening electric-laced scales. But now, by the fire, he isn’t sure. The orange glow seems to have warded away everything.

“See what?” Maya stares at him.

Nana doesn't so much as turn her head. “No. I didn't see anything.”

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Maya wants to sell dandelion crowns at the market, and Ghamut helps her when she comes down the road after school. Nana offers them a place to work, and always makes sure to split the two apart when dusk colors the horizon. No more night escapades into the forest.

While they knit crowns together, Maya pesters Ghamut about the forest. She is determined to understand how Diego managed to find himself there, of all places. “He must be a ghost,” she says. “Yes, that's it. They've killed him in Civ, after you blamed him for robbing the Farm-A-Cey, but he came back to help me from that mudslide.”

She's become so enamored with Diego as a ghost that she seems to have entirely forgotten that Ghamut left her alone in the forest. Maya's mind works in singular moments, darting up and down like a horsefly, Ghamut realizes. Focused entirely on one thing, the rest of the world seemed to fade away. Nana had likened the girl to a particularly conniving dog, saying that in a starving house, it was the only way to survive.

Aside from her general unease with their excursion into the forest, Nana seems to have taken a liking to Maya. “It's good you have a friend,” she says on more than one occasion. Maya in return seems to take a liking to Nana, if only with the intent to press Ghamut into further servitude. A day before the market itself, the old woman and the girl both sit in front of the fire. Nana expertly needles and binds the sunflowers into crowns, Maya stacks the little completed knots of stems into a

pile which she will take home. The packed earth and sky lie drained of color after midday in preparation for a burst of contrast in the evening.

Maya asks: "How much should I ask for a crown?"

The old woman stares at her, and then glances at the bundle of sticks and haphazard flowers.

"Maybe a double, triple?"

Maya pouts.

"Child, they're beautiful," Nana says. "But in the fields, flowers are everywhere, and in Civ..."

Maya sighs. She had hoped to buy a new pair of shoes with the money she will make from the market. She catches Ghamut watching them from his doorway, and glares.

As the sun begins to fall, Nana snaps her one good hand at Ghamut. "Be a good boy and help Maya take the flowers home," she says. "Don't be late on the way back, or I'll make a switch -- I've been weaving stems all day, a branch is far easier."

On the road, Maya torments Ghamut endlessly. All the money from the market she will keep and in exchange for Ghamut's help, she won't tell Nana about Diego's ghost, or his role in stealing from the Farm-A-Cey. "I'll sic his ghost on you, I talked to him when he was leading me out of the forest, and he says he can't wait to wonk you over the head again."

Maya has her nose in the air.

Ghamut rolls his eyes at her horsefly brain.

The road turns a light blue in the evening as the sky goes down, and at last they reach Maya's camp, just a few scrap cloths propped up with sticks. Ghamut sets his stack of dandelion

crowns on the ground and looks up. A shadow approaches. It's one of Maya's older brothers, a boy named Gregor. He wears hunger well, with indented cheeks and spindly arms wiry from constant work through his hunger. In his eyes Ghamut can see a houndish, desperate look, just like the strays that sometimes wander by the edge of the fields. Dog-like, just as Nana described.

Gregor sniffs the air, and scowls at Maya.

"Eating well?"

Nana has been feeding the two of them while they work. Nothing spectacular, just a few crackers and such, but still, the lack of hunger must be noticeable. Maya freezes. The very act of non-starvation must be a crime here. Gregor's frown deepens. For a while he circles the two of them; he's taller and lankier than them both, and he takes a look at the crowns and scowls.

"You-and-you." He points at Ghamut. "You make these?"

Maya avoids his eyes and moves to shuffle past Gregor, but he latches out a hand and plucks one of the flower crowns from her hand, sniffs it. "You didn't bring anything back home for us," he complains, fitting the crown on his head. "Selfish, spoilt girl." He jabs a finger at Ghamut and as he raises his arms a tear in his shirt widens and Ghamut captures a glimpse of ribs protruding through Gregor's dark skin.

"When she eats your food, she brings back nothing," Gregor snarls. "She's a coward. Eats all, brings back nothing, no food for Ma and Da, no food for her sister, her brothers, just eats it all and brings back nothing, nothing but stupid flowers and sticks not even a pig can eat."

He takes the crown off and pummels it underfoot; Maya sucks in a breath.

“I was going to sell them at the market for some extra food,” Maya mutters.

Ghamut glances over at her, then at her feet. Her shoes are falling apart. One toe juts out one side, covered in dust. She stares at the ground.

“Liar!” Gregor roars.

But before he can snatch another crown, Ghamut steps forward, head bowed, perfect image of a pup, eyes drooped. “She was planning on selling the crowns for bread,” Ghamut says softly. “If only half of them sell, then that’s still a loaf, maybe two.”

Gregor narrows his eyes and slowly steps towards Ghamut, towering over the younger boy.

“Two loaves?”

“Two,” Ghamut says coolly.

“And what will you do with your share of the money? Take a loaf?”

“I don’t have to tell you.”

Gregor grunts. “Two loaves, then.” He points a finger with a gnawed nail at Maya. “A single slice less and you won’t eat for a month here, I’ll make sure of it. You can pester your friend for food.”

“You broke one of my crowns,” Maya says. “You’re down a slice already.”

Gregor’s face turns ugly, but before he can say another word, a hazy, low voice sounds from one of the repositories of cloth hung up on rope. An arm reaches out, waving for something in the twilight air and with a last grimace Gregor turns tail and disappears.

Maya puts down the crowns in her tent.

“Thanks,” she mutters, “But don’t think you don’t owe me anything now.”

Ghamut simply smiles. Maya: he’s caught her in a lie, and feels scales are closer in alignment now. She scowls. “Don’t look at me like that. Because of you, I don’t get any new shoes. You owe me shoes too, now.”

“We’ll see,” Ghamut says.

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The day of the market, a familiar face walks among the swathe of cars and vans that have all parked along the road from Civ.

He’s seen the market but never been allowed to join. To Ghamut’s surprise, Nana allows him to go on the condition that Maya keep an eye on him. Perhaps she’s simply getting tired; perhaps she really does trust the girl. Either way, Ghamut looks forward to spending a day staring at the wonders of Civ.

Shining cars in all different colors have come to a halt alongside the dirt roads like a swarm of misplaced jewels or lost insects. Set up across from their Civ counterparts, the propped up stalls and booths of the Fields flutter and sag in embarrassment. Dyed fabrics snap in the wind and the shouts of Field vendors intermix with electric recordings and jingles from the Civ sellers. Through the hustle and bustle, Ghamut spies the man-in-hat; he seems smaller during the day, hunched over on his cane. In the daylight, Ghamut can see crow’s feet by his eyes and wrinkles from smiles lining his mouth.

“That’s Kilnyzk.” Maya has seen him staring. “He’s the person who gives all sorts of money to the school and is building all the roads and pools and things around here.”

Kilnyzk wears a cheery grin and works his way all around the market. Maya sells her flower crowns. A woman from civ with electronic, glowing glasses croons at them and tells Maya she is a beautiful girl, stumbling over her words. The man-in-hat walks up next.

“Maya,” he says, and he takes a crown, leaving a bill on the table; he doesn’t ask for change. His voice is candied syrup and he perks up in surprise. “And Nana’s boy!” Ghamut just stares.

“Is your grandmother at the market?” he asks.

But Ghamut doesn’t know. The man-in-hat sighs and replaces his hat with the flower crown. Even in the daylight his hair still shines silver. “Not a worry of mine, not a worry any longer.” He moves away, and Maya quickly snatches up the bill, marveling at it.

“There are your shoes,” Ghamut says, and crosses his arms.

Maya supposes this is true, and stares at the bill regretfully. Now that she can afford them, shoes don’t seem like such a faraway luxury. She sells a few more flower crowns, her brow knitted in thought, and Ghamut settles back into his seat next to her, feeling a sense of dread at what the horsefly-girl might be thinking. He handles the bills and trades small coins back and forth until they sell the last crown. If only he could hide away from Maya and her eyes, he would have slipped one or two coins into his own pockets, but in coming to know the girl he would not be surprised if she’s counted every cent thrice mentally. After a final sale, Maya packs up the little mat that they’ve used as a seat and they set about the market proper.

A baker from Civ has parked not far away from their makeshift stall. He sells Maya three loaves of bread from a small silver toaster, nods merrily from a shining steel countertop. Electric bulbs shine overhead, paired with thin strips of light embedded in his clothes which advertise his wares. Music plays from a speaker hidden out of sight, and as they wait outside his trailer everything becomes charged with the scent of warm bread. Ghamut's stomach grumbles and Maya giggles, tucking her loaves into a knapsack.

There are, in no particular order, stores that sell electric devices that can forecast the weather, tiny computers to help plant crops, fertilizers, water filters for wells, and fireworks. A particularly popular truck dispenses some kind of medicine that smells sweet, the recipients of which wander the road, eyes ahaze with drooping smiles. A cart peddling electric limbs catches Ghamut's attention and fascination, the purveyor a multi-armed, glowing-eyed spider of a man, who twirls knives, points and gesticulates at electric limbs, and holds up detached hands and eyes out of their sockets that flicker and twist as they stare at Maya and Ghamut, walking by. The overwhelming alien aspects of the electric parts supersedes any unease Ghamut might have felt about prosthetics and implants -- gazing at the vendor feels more like watching an entirely new species than observing anything human.

"It's all incredible," Ghamut says, momentarily forgetting he dislikes the girl walking next to him. Excitement overwhelms him, but it's tempered all too soon by Maya's disparaging grimace.

"What'd you mean? It's not like anyone can afford anything offered by them, anyway. They just come here to show it off."

It's true. Everyone in the Fields seems to have gathered around a group of vendors selling plants, seeds, equipment, and insecticides for the next season's harvest. The crowd of yearning hands and jeering voices all begging for a moment's attention from the three overwhelmed Vendors makes Ghamut's face redden.

A familiar voice calls out to the two children, and the two turn to see the candy vendor. Maya buys a handful of sweets for herself and even gives Ghamut a small sweet guava candy to suck on and then the two set off again. Maya's darting eyes betray her intentions. She walks past the little clothing market four times, and Ghamut dreads what she'll do when she comes to a stop.

And eventually she does come to the end of the road, to a shop surrounded by cheap radios, all playing music. Maya taps her feet to the beat, bobs her head up and down. Delighted, a woman wearing a gray suit, with her hands covered in dark blue gloves descends upon Maya, crooning in the same stilted style as the rest of the Vendors who have bothered to learn how to speak the Field's language.

Down the street, comes a familiar sound, out of place in the market, yet nevertheless unmistakable.

Nana -- grumbling, muttering, almost cursing.

Down the street she goes, her bitten arm grasped by the man-in-hat. His cane swings up and down as he drives her round a corner, out of sight. Ghamut moves to follow them, but before he can take a step away from the radio store Maya catches him and hands him her bag full of bread.

“Can you stay here and talk to her?” She asks sweetly, pulling the gloved lady over to Ghamut. “I have to pee.”

And then she disappears, off to do whatever it is Maya will do. The lady fusses and explains a number of things about sound to Ghamut, until Maya returns. There’s a lump under her shirt which the gloved-lady doesn’t notice, and when she takes the bag and mussels around with it, something heavy sags quickly to the bottom.

She thanks the gloved lady for everything and promises that next time she’ll have enough to buy a small radio. Together, she and Ghamut walk out of the store. Maya glances over her shoulder and laughs, playing with whatever she’s made away with and Ghamut runs round the corner after Nana and the man-in-hat, but in the midst of chaos of the market, he cannot find them. It’s in the middle of the day, and the heat beats down upon them all the way into the evening, when Kilnyzk’s voice rings out over speakers all over the field ushering them all to the crook in the road where he has gathered Civ and Field alike.

“I’m going home,” Maya says at last, admiring her stolen radio. “Good luck finding your Nana.”

And then she skips away. She doesn’t see one of her crowns -- lying discarded on the ground, trampled and covered in dust.

Ghamut wades through the market crowd, traces the sound of Kilnyzk’s voice, until he can just barely see the man-in-hat at the front of a growing crowd.

“News, news, wonderful news!”

He raises his hands in the air. "A project years in the making! A fantastic moment for all of Civ; for all of you!"

He points to the Fields, and screams, "Poverty! No more! Clean water! Night lights! All your dreams, come true! New homes, new land, all in Civ! Our gift to you!"

For a moment the crowd stands utterly still, and then slowly, then with a great burst, the market erupts into cheers.

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Nana sits by the fire with tear stains on her cheeks and does not greet Ghamut when he comes home.

"Did you hear? Did you hear?"

She nods, feeds a bit of wood into the fire.

"Of course I heard."

He pauses, wilts at her miserable expression.

"Then why--"

Nana hugs Ghamut close, and whispers. "Oh, child of mine, it's better that you remain a child, and that you know nothing." She presses Ghamut into her chest, and stares into the forest, trembling.

Nana quits the fire early that night, and the animals surge out far earlier than they should, pacing, tails lashing, jaws click-clicking nervously. Ghamut does not join them on the roof, but peers warily out from his bedroom door.

That night, when the electric snake tears down the road, the massive serpent encircles the forest, rears up, and swallows it whole.

Part Two

Naissance
Eighteen Years Later

Chapter Five - Riverside

Look at what's left of him. He's propped up against the wall, watching someone who owes far too much to exactly the wrong person saunter down the street. She wears a glinting green and silver dress with a slit down the back. Dark, tan skin lies taut beneath the glittering cut. She walks with a good sway, like a full sail upon the sea. Hair down over two bronzed shoulders ripples and a slight breeze teases the dress like it could fall off her entirely.

The dress looks expensive. *She* looks expensive, he thinks, and he wonders how she will pay off her debt which he has been sent to collect. Or if she will be able to pay it at all.

In his pocket sits a needle, about as long as his forearm, a point perfect for puncture and smooth from far too much handling. He's wiped it down for tonight; but still smells like copper and there's a red stain in his pocket from when he forgot to clean it. He can't get the stain out.

Though the light from the city fades and doesn't quite collect in this alleyway, she catches the light and the eye and remains in sharp focus as she makes her way over puddles and collected filth in the streets. Beside her, leaking pipes burst with steam in the chilled air. He has chosen his spot next to one of the hissing poles to keep out of sight; it seems to have worked quite well. She's ignored him entirely, and he leans forward and separates himself from the architecture.

He walks quick up next to her and he can smell her perfume. Goes and says to her back, to the twin shoulder blades like wings, "*Madama, do you a light? I've a spare when you do.*" He has two cigarettes in his hands and places one in his mouth, holds the other between index and midfinger

and points his hand square at her back like pointing a gun. Eighteen years in the city and he still stumbles over his words sometimes, but this woman doesn't seem to notice.

She turns, and caresses her thigh with a hand, produces a silver square and bends forward to light the cigarette in Ghamut's mouth. A burst of brackish air charged with substance hits the back of his throat and he looks greedily into her eyes; where her eyes should be are two crystal glass beads, the many faces of which are cut into a thousand flat planes. They catch the light from the cigarette and reflect it over and over again as she takes the second cigarette out from his hand and lights it.

"Thank you, sir," she says slowly, in between drags of the cigarette.

Ghamut had not known this woman would have electric eyes. His own organics flick up and down, taking stock of her pointed face, angular and possibly suspicious, though the false eyes give nothing away. *"Mind I join for a walk?"* he asks, and she does not.

Together, they set off through the city and as they walk Ghamut realizes that she has a habit of lifting her head and cocking it ever so slightly to the side so as to sneak glances over at him. Unafraid, increasingly curious, they each dissect the other. She looks up over at him and he glances back through tossed, curly black hair. He has a shadow under his chin, strange on a face that hasn't quite caught up to the fact that he's meant to be in his late twenties and climbing. The dress billows behind her and its front clings to her. As a collector, Ghamut has learned long ago that it is impolite and improper to wager on how debts are accrued. But in this case he cannot help but wonder: for a

debtor to have not only a dress such as this but to have been able to pay for two crystalline eyes, it's easy enough to assume what she's gotten in trouble for.

They don't speak much as they travel, and together they pace from the leaking alley under midnight pandemoniums of neon signs flickering off and on and a thin drizzle condensed out of the humid air. She walks along the technicolor backdrop of highrises and glass windows, content to wander aimlessly. Ghamut lets her walk for a while. He's within arm's reach of the woman if she ever tries to run, and he wonders if she knows who he is and what he is here to do. If she does, her eyes keep that secret well hidden. They find themselves at a river, set in the middle of the sprawling cityscape, a dark, natural slip away from the rigid structure of the city. Overhead, on a line as thin as fishing wire, a string of bright red lanterns arcs its way across the river, casting the dark waves in accents of color. There's still some traces of the old world here. A collapsed dock, a moored rowboat, and even some sand not yet swallowed up or paved over by the city all lie tinted red, revealed by the lanterns.

As she leans over the railings and flicks her cigarette out into the water, Ghamut spits out his own and readies the needle, puts one hand on the woman's shoulder, thumb gently on her neck.

But before he can say a word, the woman leans into his touch, and says, "*I almost thought nothing would come of you.*" And then she takes him by the hand, leads him closer to the water and where just before the river someone long ago has installed a small room rental service. She slips a card from her waist to check one of the rooms and then she leads Ghamut in by the hand, as if to show him how she would repay her debt, one night at a time.

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The only light in the riverside room comes from the lanterns leaking through the window. Ghamut stares at the ceiling and the woman breathes softly next to him. A small, black creature walks with inverted footsteps above on the ceiling, but Ghamut closes his eyes and reopens them until it disappears.

It has been eighteen years since the city Civ expanded and took over the Fields where Ghamut grew up as a boy.

In the night, under his touch, he could feel the muscle and sinew churning under the woman's skin. Although she had ripped out her eyes for electrics, he knew that she was a descendant of the Fields, just like himself. The needle still sits in his jacket pocket where it waits, discarded, and he wonders if he should pick it up.

Instead, he rises up out of sheets, pushing down on his spot on the bed and easing it so as not to wake her, and dresses. He slips on his clothes and spins the needle in his hands and walks out onto the little sagging docks, leaving payment behind on the room's bed stand, not enough to make a difference for the unaware debtor, but perhaps it would be taken into account anyways.

He walks outside and Civ rises to greet him. It feels like the early morning now, the act of laying down in bed has crossed some kind of threshold he couldn't describe. Though the sky hasn't changed and the wind still blows the same direction, he considers it morning: a new day. He reaches into his pocket and calls another woman from the night before.

Maya picks up on the first ring and waits for him to speak. She's grown into some kind of thin, wraithlike woman, still carries her hungry, ravenous look from her childhood. She waits for him to speak about the woman, wants her money, no matter how small the amount, and wants it now. Ghamut rubs his nose and twirls the needle in his hand. He watches the morning swell on the river and looks for signs or some kind of superstition. Some kind of cosmic coin-toss to tell him what to do.

The city gives him nothing. He speaks: No, he hasn't found the woman sleeping inside yet. Yes, he'll keep looking. To himself, he thinks there will be other women to collect who do not know the past as well as he.

In the twenty-two years he's known her, the eighteen working for and then with her, Maya has stopped all outward displays of anger or disappointment, and simply vanishes when she's displeased. Ever since the city grew over them and ripped up the Field and the forest and paved over everything with steel and asphalt and put lights where once campfires were, they've only really had each other to cling to. Now, in the stomach of the beast, Maya arranges agreements with lenders throughout the city and Ghamut collects.

"Is there anyone else?" Ghamut asks. "I'm by the old river, the old place. If there's anyone else--"

There is. There's an old man who's five months on the run and ten thousand short on payment. He's got two electric legs and owes the doctor who cut off and replaced them money for the surgery. It should be nothing too difficult for him; old men, even those with electric legs, can't

run fast or far. Ghamut says he will do the job, and Maya says, "Thank you," then ends the call.

Ghamut stares at his phone and sighs.

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Three days away from the river, Ghamut finds the man he has been searching for in a crowd. He smokes a pipe and picks at one of his legs, flicking bits of rust on the ground before rubbing the oxidized chips into red smears on the pavement. A bright orange umbrella hangs above the old man which doesn't quite block the light. Judging by the way he glances up and down the street, the old man knows that the umbrella doesn't offer protection from observation. He seems eager to leave. In the five or so minutes that Ghamut watches him, the old man glances at his watch six or seven times. Ghamut spins the needle in his hand and watches him through the throng of people.

Sometimes, fleeing debtors stumble into or become wrapped up in nefarious business, their flights sponsored by mafias. Sometimes debtors willingly trade their freedom for protection. Maya has made it a rule that Ghamut shall never cross such organizations. She calls such cases a waste of time and whenever Ghamut encounters them they spend the next week or so hungry until the next contract rolls in.

A sharply dressed young man with slicked back hair and with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his forearms sits next to the old man and kisses his cheek once on each side. The young man orders two bowls of soup and slides one across at the old man and together they eat in conversation. The older man occasionally clasps the younger man by the hand and gestures in the air. At last the young

man stands up and slips a bill onto the table and as he departs, the old man puts his hand on his chest, wipes a tear from his eye, shakes his head, and goes back to his soup.

Ghamut watches the old man's companion walk into an old but well kept car, and drive away. He kicks off the wall and crosses the bustling street and puts his phone to his ear.

He calls Maya to tell the doctor that he has found his missing ten thousand and to meet him quickly. The old man has time to look up at Ghamut once before the collector takes the old man's palm, slams it flat on the table, and drives the needle through it and the thin metal beneath. The old man's yelp is covered up by the street noises and Ghamut puts his hand over the man's fresh stigmata, feeling something warm and wet spill over onto the table.

Across the table the old man kicks his electric legs. With each pedal comes a grinding squeak and a gasp. The old man wriggles his hand and groans. "*Still.*" Ghamut warns, and the old man explodes in swears. His other hand slaps the table then his knee but he doesn't dare reach across to strike Ghamut.

"What the hell-who-are-you-what-do-you want I don't-have-any-money."

Ghamut nods. *"No money problems. You have a lot to owe."*

He takes a draught of the old man's soup and sighs as the warmth runs through him. Across the table the old man hisses, and a bit of spit trickles down Ghamut's face. *"You can't even speak the language right, can you?"*

Ghamut rubs his forefinger and thumb together. *"Only language is important."*

“Dog.”

Ghamut shrugs and wipes the spittle away. The old man snarls. *“Serf and swine: no difference in your Fields. You have no higher order, no complexity. You chase money like it’s the end of the world. A one and a zero. Do you even know what that means?”*

Ghamut shrugs, and the man curses him, his bad luck. The whole world has been unkind to him, this the latest in a long string of grievances. He asks for a single mercy, if Ghamut could take out the needle. It can’t be so bad, he says. His legs may be electric; his lungs aren’t. Ghamut blinks.

“The doctor is coming.”

The old man twists his head back and forth as if to rid himself of a bridle he cannot reach.

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Maya waves at the doctor as he drives away and hugs her coat tighter as the wind blows. Standing upright in her black jacket with hair flowing to the side out of the dark maw of a hood, Maya looks like a smoldering, misshapen match. Burnt out and starving. There’s a small hole in the table stained slightly red and she too takes a drink of the doomed man’s soup and shudders. Sixty-forty; she hands him four hundred. They walk side by side on the riverbank, watching the world come up into daylight over them. All around the pandemonium of the sun ricochets and crossfires. The two of them squint their eyes and Ghamut trails behind; Maya asks him what’s on his mind, and he looks up and down the embankment, trying to remember where he stood three nights ago. “Does the river sound familiar?” he asks no one in particular. “Right about here?”

Maya blinks. It doesn’t.

“Remember when we were kids..?”

Maya rolls her eyes and hurries on. She buys a pair of gloves from a river vendor and Ghamut buys a box of tissues and wipes his needle clean. They stop at a different vendor to eat. In the river a small family of ducks squawks and honks noisily and Ghamut throws crumbs out onto the waters for them to fight over. Maya scowls. Even now after she’s been all grown up she doesn’t like the thought of wasting food.

When the night gets dark, the both of them retire and they lie apart from each other in a broken down shopping center that lets in the wind. Ghamut tosses and turns. Out of the darkness come indistinct shadows that pace on all fours. One drags itself on the littered concrete; it doesn’t have legs. At a rapid closing and opening of his eyes and the distorted forms vanish.

He dreams of elsewhere. Of the Field, buried beneath steel and concrete and asphalt. Somewhere in the streets next to them, hidden away among the labyrinthine buildings and shining lights the old man will have his legs removed and reclaimed by the doctor. Still elsewhere in Civ the woman in the slit-dress will take men by the hand and lead them into hidden-away rooms to work off her debt. Next to him, Maya’s form lies still and soundless on the ground next to him. Like in his childhood upon his Field, sneaking out of mud-houses round his grandmother’s campfires, Ghamut creeps away from her and slips through the shattered shopping center wall to stand in the darkness. He does not want Maya to see where he goes and what he does at night. She sees too much already.

Fields, forest and moonlight, have become blinking advertisements, blazing fluorescents and shining cityscape. He had once been terrified of the dark, hadn’t he? He’d dreamed up monsters and

ghosts that he could visit and revisit every night upon the plain. The ghosts used to lurk inside the lattice of the forest, and now in the city, they're made real and tangible. Still, through the city's transformation of his childhood home he still has his penchant for insomnia. He wanders through once familiar landscapes still eerie and transformed after all this time. A familiar dip in the street should be a knoll, a main avenue lined with buildings, a country road. He turns west, pushes out through streetlights and abandoned crosswalks, each as identical to the last. Once, he could have known his precise location by how the air smelled, but each time he sets out alone he soon finds himself lost with nothing but street signs he can't read and an electronic map with patterns he can't decipher to tell him where he is. He walks in the middle of the road and allows himself to remember a place before paint on the ground told things where to go and when to stop. At last a massive electrical substation rises out of the ground, cordoned off with fencing. Ghamut stops and stares at once-familiar ground, all prickly with switches and breakers and with the lightning arrestors coiled up and down and laying about at strange angles. He remembers many long nights spent here, looking over from his bedroom into the forest, which now lies across the substation, in transformation just another street-fed power through underground cables and lines.

Ghamut looks at his old home and spits. He puts his hand on through the wiring, feels his weight carry through his fingers. As he hoists himself a foot off the ground he looks down at the dark shapes within the substation and then back at the city and steps down.

Every Fieldling knows two locations nearly by heart. They know where their homes were, and where the man-in-hat had promised to build them new ones. He can point to a blank space in

the sky where the promised skyscraper containing his and Maya's apartment should be. But no amount of gesturing will bring that space into reality. If only someone besides the Fieldings or the dozen or so well meaning but ineffectual advocacy groups cared about this grand swindle, then together they may make the entire world move and finally shout a building into being. With a final glare he turns away from his old home and the broken promise and looks out beyond the substation.

Miles from here lies the grave. Even now he has not told Maya its spot in the city. He has not visited in years, certainly never since Nana passed. Maya might remember when they ventured there as children, and perhaps if poked and prodded enough would realize that Ghamut had wanted to lose her in the forest forever for a reason even he can't remember.

Now they are lost together, although Ghamut is certain that one day he will find his way back into the forest, alone.

When he returns to the abandoned shopping center, a low black car idles on the curb outside. Headlights through the night silhouette a man in a bowler hat who straddles a cane, tipping his hat cordially at Ghamut. Here stands Kilnyzck, who bought out his grandmother's property so many years ago and turned it into an electrical hub, who bought out acre after acre, promising apartments and utilities until nothing remained except city streets and buildings. Nana had probably known she would die not long after she sold their plot of land, that life in the city would be unkind to her.

Ghamut does not miss her.

She had known the hell she had sold her little plot of land away for, but others in the Field who had believed the entrepreneur's lies had found their misfortunes a dreadful surprise. What few apartments had finished construction had never been leased or rented to their promised tenants.

"Ghamut," says Kilnyzk, his voice still impossibly warm and steady all these years later, in the night air. "Good lad. Just the person I wanted to see."

Again, Ghamut winces, but forces a smile. Kilnyzk wears his usual gray clothes under his black hat, still has on white gloves to grasp his cane. His clothes keep him almost entirely hidden away except for his face which shows his age. He wears a kind, benevolent expression, with two dancing eyes kept sharp in his sockets.

"Is Miss Maya... home tonight?"

Ghamut jerks a thumb inside. "Asleep."

"I'll speak to you then. You two are partners, not? Equal say in business, if not in pay."

Ghamut eases his head from side to side.

Kilnyzk has returned to them on this chilly spring night to inquire about a contract that Maya had taken not long ago. Not the doctor, but the aggrieved souteneuse Maya had spoken with perhaps a week or so ago. Ghamut nods. This concerns the woman from the riverside; the one with the shining dress. Kilnyzk smiles and takes off his hat, holds it to his side while he totters on his cane. It is with no small pleasure that he has assumed the wanted woman's debt, and now offers upon this midnight hour an accord. Kilnyzk over all these years has grown so accustomed to speaking Field to so many people that he speaks like a native, albeit one more sophisticated and

eloquent than the rest. His voice rings grand and warm at night. He proposes to Ghamut that he should receive the woman instead of her *souteneuse*, in exchange for such a massive sum of money that the mere description of it makes Ghamut's mouth water involuntarily.

A thought of his mother gives him pause. He thinks of that stag Nana had always warned him of, come down from the city to run his mother through with a lance and sire Ghamut and curse his mother with a violent delivery which would take Sylenia from the world. In Kilnyzk's request Ghamut senses a kind of fatal repetition, one in which assumes his mother's place or perhaps his father's. But that would be impossible, he soon realizes. He's already traded kindness before him. The whore at the river owes *him* a debt now, one which Kilnyzk would settle. Enough to feed himself for half a year if he were to do no work at all.

Still. He has to ask, even if to delude himself of his own decency, why Kilnyzck wants this woman in her slit-back dress. The man-in-hat smiles and says that, while it is of no business to Ghamut, the woman has a certain talent he has become aware of that he is most interested in. Ghamut nods. He thinks he knows exactly what Kilnyzck means, although he tries not to think too hard pairing the night at the riverside with Kilnyzck's wrinkled old face.

The man-in-hat's cool gray eyes watch without missing a moment under his lick of silver hair. No antlers interrupt his locks, and in his advanced age, he hunches over his cane. He pitches forward with a shuffle and holds out a hand. Hungry, Ghamut moves forward to take it.

Maya steps into the headlights of the car, and the two men freeze to look at her. She's scarcely clothed, having just rolled out of her sleeping mat. Goosebumps shine on her skin, which

almost seems pale, an impossibility for a Fieldling. Twin dark eyes glint match Kilnyzk's silver gaze and he bows in deference to her.

"Good of you, Miss Maya, to join us," he says.

Maya curtsies without a sliver of respect in her body and glares coldly back. She too has not forgotten his promise of a modest apartment for her and her family in exchange for their share of the Field. Instead, Kilnyzck took her family's land and put an arcade where her campfire used to be. Maya has shown Ghamut exactly where she used to sleep; pointed to a machine there that takes tiny coins and presses them into funny little trinkets for Civ children. As the years went by, her family went missing, one by one, each disappearing into Civ's depths until only Maya remained, holding mercilessly to what Kilnyzk had promised her. She has kept her childhood stubbornness, and still refuses to let go of debts. It's what has kept her alive through sickness and the cold, bleak Civ days. Ghamut used to joke that if Kilnyzk died without giving her the money or property owed she'd drown herself in the river and follow the old man down into hell. But Maya never laughed and eventually Ghamut stopped making jokes about her business and future.

Still, Kilnyzk greets her cordially, raises the hat from his cane to touch his brow in a polite salute as she asks if the apartment with her family's name on it has come anywhere close to completion.

"Maya..." Ghamut begins, but Kilnyzk indulges her. He's glad she asked. For a while, they dance and exchange their usual barbs, Kilnyzk's amusement reflecting off of Maya's tempered rage until she demands why the old man has come down from his cozy life to visit the two of them.

Again, Kilnyzk repeats his proposition and this time the answer comes quick: Maya refuses. Ghamut starts to protest but as he does Maya shoots him a look of such venom that he stands upright and bows once at the old man with his hat.

For a long while Kilnyzk looks between the two of them, squeaking and tottering on his cane. But at last he swings the hat back atop his head and bids them a good night, and reminds Maya that it would be wise and prudent to consider all possibilities in the future. He clammers into the passenger seat and scarcely has the door shut before the car peels off into the distance leaving the two of them alone.

Maya slinks back into the darkness and ignores Ghamut's explosion and outrage.

"Did you see the amount of money he was offering?!"

Yes, she had. She packs herself back into her sleeping bag. It is cold.

"Do you have any idea how long we could have been fed? You or I could have *lived* somewhere real for the first time in ages."

But Maya will not be convinced; will never be convinced of anything the black-hatted entrepreneur has to say until he makes good on his first promise. "He is not," Maya says, her voice soft in the dark. He can hear the chill in her words, her exhaustion. "He is not a good man."

Later in the morning, when Kilnyzk calls him, Ghamut agrees to collect the woman from the riverside.

Chapter Six - The Debtor's Son

In the afternoon, the doctor calls Maya on her phone. She hunches over and smokes a cigarette in the chill of the morning, takes the call and shudders as she listens to his words. Ghamut watches her stow her sleeping bag in a shadowy crevice. They don't speak of the night before. They walk a bit away from the shopping center and spend a bit more money on some food. Already, they're rationing what's left of the doctor's contract, although he has just offered another, satisfied as always with Ghamut's quick work.

They walk over streets bubbling with populace. Civ floods the streets with crowds in the day, and they push through clumps of people with electric limbs and lights sewn into their clothes and hair. Ghamut keeps his eye out for the woman in the dress and doesn't know what he will do if he sees her. Maya has her hands with gloves shoved deep down in her pockets as she steps quickly over asphalt. All around shops blare advertisements that flash winking, beckoning bodies which cavort and sway. Ghamut catches Maya staring at a screen full of women blowing kisses towards the camera. When it goes black between advertisements she takes a step backwards as her gaunt image reveals itself in a negative onto the glass. The next advertisement to play shows a man lathering himself up with oil, pink petals dribbling down on him as he licks his lips and rubs his abdominals, a perfect chiseled chin raised into the air.

Someone used to know the names of those petals, Ghamut thinks. Someone who lived before Civ. His grandmother would have called them by their real name. A shop owner with a cybernetic eye and an electric hand taps on the glass and shoos them away.

When they get to the doctor's clinic, he has just finished working. The clinic in its haphazard, cluttered floor, looks more like an open workshop. A battery of electric lamps glaring over a sole workstation obliterates what little natural light leaking in from the store windows. Ghamut spies the old man's legs which lie on a cluttered operating table, apparently discarded. Next to the detached limbs lie a few welding instruments and transistors. Without the accompanying body, the legs look cheap and dainty. They have been soaked in a chemical bath. Rust and a little bit of dirt float in a nearby submersion pool.

A young boy lies on a table, scratching his head and rubbing his new robotic arms. The new implants are skinless and metallic and beyond the reach of the quarrel between Civ and Field. As the boy gains his new bearings the doctor slips him some pills and the child wanders out with a full future ahead of him. Maya watches him leave with something like envy in her eyes and a quiet kind of sadness that Ghamut cannot understand.

Next to the operating station sits a small box, and it is this that the doctor puts up on the table and looks at them and crosses his arms. When it moves, ice and something else heavier moves about inside. Maya shakes her head, and demands payment, split in even halves before and after delivery. The doctor, a civ man with unkempt hair tied up under a net, rolls his eyes at her. He looks perpetually annoyed.

“Why the sudden change in course?”

Maya snaps that different deliveries have different rates. The doctor slings off his gloves, still wet and dripping. He shakes his head. He asks if either Ghamut or herself would like alternate payment. The last time they were in the shop -- he is a busy man and doesn't leave unless to collect wares and, occasionally, people -- he made the same offer. All around them, mounted on the walls, are cybernetics. Eyes, hands, limbs, even tails and metal skin, as if the doctor was instead some great butcher in an electric slaughterhouse. Maya does not so much as glance at the wares but instead clicks her foot and holds out one hand. The doctor sighs and gives in. He explains he will wait for more patients before asking them for more services if they are to be this way about things. Maya slips the bills into her pocket and leaves; she snaps her finger at the box on the table. It is surprisingly light. On the way out she asks Ghamut if he has his grandmother's needle and he shows it to her, the ice box rattling as he moves about.

“Be careful with that, and don't let it spoil,” says the doctor, already putting on new gloves.

Maya tells Ghamut to be ready.

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They book a cab with the doctor's new money and sit crammed into the backseat. Maya wonders aloud if they should just throw the box and its contents in the gutter and leave the doctor alone, but a growl from her stomach shuts her up and she stares out the window. They travel east, and gradually the city clammers up higher and higher above them. The road begins to split into single-lane roads, each ascending up hills and ramps, but a core of six lanes travel further and

further into a dark, growing maw. At last, they arrive in the oldest parts of the city, where architects and artificial intelligence once believed that the most efficient designs involved simply stacking things higher and higher on top of each other, before Civ spread outwards and took over the territories to its side. The sun has broken through an overcast sky to signal the end of the morning, but as the car drives into a final archway of darkness, the buildings begin to loom over them and soon streetlights that never stop shining overhead replace the day. They drive into an artificial cavern, with old Civ all around them. The buildings of the engulfed city section clamber up and over each other towards a pitch black ceiling that is in actuality the bottom of a street far above. What lucky buildings that have not fallen into ruin leak flickering light out into the perverted night. Through the dark air, Ghamut and Maya can hear the humming of the rest of the city far above, like faint peals of thunder. The two share a grim look as the car's interior slowly fills with shadow.

Civ has grown a second skin over this festering portion of the city. Rotting mortar and cast iron columns surrounded by scaffolding in a clutch all around wind up like giant oaks in a forest complete with black vines. They park at the base of one such column and emerge into a humid space lit the color of firelight but with none of the warmth or comforting scent. The air here feels old and smells foul, tinged with motor smoke. Occasionally the whole Low vibrates with the clanking of roaring motors and guttering engines.

"Damn him," mutters Ghamut, and in a rare moment of solidarity, Maya agrees. They step onto the winding scaffolding and haul themselves up higher and higher into this bastard of a tree. As they climb they step over soot-stained metal from campfires and duck by potted gardens glowing

purple. Someone coughs and spits and they hurry by. They crush glass syringes and wade through smoky hazes.

Dark shadows, the remnants of broken people cackle and croon at them as they walk by. A blanket unfurls and a madman with a gasket embedded in his head claps his hands, points and shouts at invisible butterflies. A crone with a sole electric eye emerges on all fours from her nest of blankets to stare with her mouth open at some majesty Maya and Ghamut are lucky enough not to see. Still others weep and moan and ward away swarms of invisible gnats, shuddering and crying in the twilight. Maya holds tight to Ghamut and they walk faster.

At last they reach the coordinates marked per the doctor's instructions. They have climbed about halfway up the encirclement of the column, up ramps and stairs made out of decaying wood. Surrounding them are cardboard boxes and rickety shelters propped up with sticks and rebar. Without a closer glance, the place seems abandoned, but every so often a bit of smoke will puff out from a careless mound of blankets. The smoke adds to the reek and air of depravity hanging heavy over this place. The makeshift platform has rusted sheet metal flashings as a floor and when Maya slams her heel onto it the decaying scaffolding creaks and reverberates as if it might fall at any moment. Ghamut becomes all too aware that the little platform, perhaps just a fully extended wingspan wide, has a sole pipe as a railing to keep them from falling off the sides, and that only a few ancient metal bars in a gridlike mesh below their feet keep the floor from collapsing.

From the darkness rise a score of shadows, pale Civ limbs lined with scars, eyes dull and sunken in their sockets. Mottled dermis transplants and replacement limbs that haven't taken or

settled weave in and out of the light. Flies buzz in the air and as the mounds of blankets move Ghamut smells the sweet scent of rot.

The occupants of this hellscape walk unevenly in their haphazard, patched existence. They wear a city's worth of discarded parts all appended. A Fieldling pushes through the waking horde. His arms end in stumps and from them protrude two crude surgical arms. Hooks lie in place of fingers. He waves at them and bows, speaks in Civ. He stares at the box Ghamut carries and only when Maya coughs does he seem to notice the two of them.

"Bless you for your deliverance this fine, fine day."

Maya's lip twitches when she asks him for the money for the delivery.

The Fieldling croons. *"Of course, of course. But may we see, for all to see?"* He shunts out a hook towards the box, but Ghamut keeps it out of reach, reaching into his pocket for the needle. He knows of a certain spot just under the eye that when married to the needle will end any argument in a flash. But Maya puts a hand on his shoulder and nods, so Ghamut slides back the lid and pushes the container forward so as to let the assembled crowd all have a look. The Fieldling licks his lips and again begins to reach forward, but Ghamut slams the lid shut. With a hiss the man retreats.

Maya holds out her hand, and with a growl, the man gives her a bit of money that she does not even bother counting. Ghamut slides the box towards the man and they leave him to his cutting and sewing.

Once they have retreated down the column, Maya allows herself to shudder in disgust.

"Lucky they were friendly," Ghamut says, feeling the needlepoint rub against his thigh.

Not friendly, explains Maya. The column-people are wearing the skin of the doctor's usual delivery men. Lucky for the pair, the wretched lot living in perpetual twilight have no need or want for any more Fieldling derms. Finally out of the cavern, and with the city of Civ exploding all around them in the wide open, Ghamut shudders with relief upon feeling sunlight. Even Maya, who usually complains of the constant cold, takes off her jacket for a moment and embraces the fresh air.

That night, they celebrate. Aside from the creeps on the column, the day has gone exceedingly well. Maya has made both the doctor and the Fieldling cutter pay for the same delivery, and Ghamut has pinned and collected a military deserter who he found begging for scraps by the main road. They buy a bottle of alcohol and pass it over a fire that was made courtesy of a trash deposit containing non-digital magazines and schoolbooks. It isn't much, but Maya smiles as she and Ghamut together remember the Fields and a life before a forest of glass and steel.

They fall asleep and it is cold again in the morning and they are both hungry.

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Trouble comes for them in the days afterward. The son of the debtor whose electric legs have been prematurely amputated has heard from the old man and now roams the streets, hunting them. The policeman who arrived at the shopping center to let them know of the forecasted threat speaks quickly and politely. She reminds Ghamut of the rule of law, that one can only act in self-defense. He simply grunts in response. These things happen. Threats are made and then never followed up. The officer reminds him that it is important that they respect Civ strictures. She has a young, pale kind face, and hair that is cropped short at the neck. She also has a gun Ghamut wishes

he had. It would be better than the needle. Her blue eyes flit over the dilapidated shopping center and then settle on Maya, who has perched on a windowsill, clad in a stringy bathrobe scrounged from a rubbish heap. The police officer frowns and makes as if to step inside. Maya sees the Civ woman looking at her. She picks her teeth and spits. The police officer leaves.

Maya sharpens a cheap store bought knife and picks her teeth with the tip. Ghamut cleans his needle. They wait. Each shadow in the shopping center becomes something to look out for. Ghamut wonders if the son will shoot them down in the dark. Maya doesn't think so. She points her knife at Ghamut's legs and says he probably wants a new pair for his father.

They have three collection contracts open, but the two do not dare to leave each other alone in the deserted shopping center. By the end of the week, they have completed only one of the collections contracts. With Maya in danger and principally unable to defend herself -- the knife does not fool Ghamut for even a moment -- he cannot go looking for Kilnzyk's woman. Nor can they easily make any money. Maya slows Ghamut down. Her feet hurt and she says she is tired all the time. By the time Ghamut finishes the first contract, the other two have been fulfilled by other collection agencies throughout the city. The doctor's money has almost run dry. They buy crackers, but even when they eat them the two go to bed hungry. Ghamut stares at the ceiling and Maya paces in the dark. Her soft footsteps scrape on the concrete floor tile. It is a mercy, the sound of something other than the wind and the dripping of water, enough to coax Ghamut towards sleep.

"Let out a scream if you're dying," Ghamut says.

Maya replies that she'll stick her knife in Ghamut's ass to wake him up and run away from the debtor's son into the sunset, rid of them both at last. Ghamut rolls over and dreams of the Fields.

He dreams of returning to the Field or the forest, of humidity and bright sunlight through trees and the river with its sandy little beaches instead of concrete piers and stairsteps. He remembers fondly stealing from Maya and laughing as she cried at the riverside. He thinks of the forest and its many trees and houses and huts with bare cloth instead of locked steel and metal for doors. For all of the city's crowding, none of Civ seems anchored or real, the buildings possess no more substance than the shadows observed deeper within the forest: aside from the outside facade the interiors seem entirely theoretical. All of the hustle and bustle seems muted, all of life's variations hidden away for fear that under close inspection it would seem imperfect but most horrifying: boring. Civ exists uniformly and in its uniformness, becomes panoptic.

Anyone can see everything all at once and be seen in a single glance, the city's citizens have become profiteers, experts in exchanging their most exciting moments in a constant escalation of exaggerations that slowly creep into the fictitious and then the absurd. And then in the absurdity Ghamut finds himself acting as a heavy weight, the unbearable disappointment within the mess someone has eked out rules that stifle dreams and ambitions. He collects debts, which are neither absurd or transitory, but always bound in an initial, sane accord.

In his dreams, he can run away into the forest, but instead he awakes to Maya's coughing. She has stayed up all night, kept awake by fear of the debtor's son. Someone out there is looking for

them, because they drew attention because of someone else's attention, and it's like this all the way down. With a future so bleak, it is easier to return to the past to explain the present.

A creature made of shadow licks its flank in the corner of the room. As Maya continues to make miserable, racking sounds, sounds that shake her whole frame, Ghamut stands up and says he'll take over the rest of the night's watch for her. The creature does not move or even register the bodies getting up and lying down. When Maya falls asleep Ghamut turns to the creature and mutters, "When I was a child, I used to see thousands of you."

The debtor's son does not arrive that night.

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Once the dreaded moment begins, it seems inevitable, inescapable. The debtor's son arrives and Ghamut feels something like relief. A familiar car sits parked two streets down from the shopping center -- too much of a coincidence for Ghamut. The sun struggles to peer through the clouds and when Ghamut and Maya stop to glare through the car's windows they see their reflections silhouetted by a gray matte. Ghamut takes out his needle and Maya unsheathes her knife, but can barely hold it up. She hasn't gotten a good night's sleep or eaten properly in days. They've long since run out of contract money. When they leave the car on the corner, Maya slashes holes in the tires. The chassis seems to sigh.

They walk towards the shopping center, already tired from a day of walking -- the debtor that would have netted them a meager eight hundred grew wise of their plots and jumped into the river to be swept downstream, probably into a Civ turbine or some other fatal mistake. Maya

watched him drift away and cursed. Ghamut looked down at the abandoned docks for a telltale shimmer of a slit-backed dress.

Now back at their makeshift shelter the two saunter in and make their camp as if nothing were wrong. Maya staggers back into a door frame, and they decide to sacrifice an old spare set of clothes to start a fire. Maya cuts them into ribbons with her knife, soaks them in the last of the alcohol, and starts the base for a fire. Ghamut quickly moves about in the rooms adjacent, finds them still deserted, but more fortunately, some heavy signboard and damp waste to burn. The room they lie in is fed only by a center door which has fallen off its hinges. It sits at the back of the complex and was once a landlord's office. It is there that Maya and Ghamut plot their ambush. They jam themselves each into a corner beside the doorway, Ghamut to the right, Maya to the left. Once the debtor's son enters, they'll jump him, beat some sense into him, and send him on his way. Maya looks forward to charging 'opportunity cost' for lost wages. They crouch half-collapsed in a pathetic ending of the day, just like the beggars on the street with their cardboard solicitations. Maya pretends to feign sleep, using her exhaustion to keep her breathing slow and steady, although her eyes dart quickly and nervously in her sockets.

Outside of the dying crackling of the fire comes a low scrape of a footstep. Together the two Fieldlings move to opposite sides of the doorway. They draw their instruments -- Ghamut stands with his needle, thumb placed atop the butt of the cold little shaft, Maya crouches with her knife extended, just in case. She scrunches up her nose and coughs to test the waters, and sure enough at the sound, somewhere not far from the empty doorway the intruder's footsteps vanish into silence.

That Maya can keep her breathing steady and deep, despite the knife shaking in her palm and the wild look in her eye demonstrates a singular force of will Ghamut cannot understand. Their eyes lock, and Ghamut watches Maya shift deeper into her corner. From the open doorway all except the two corners are visible. The debtor's son will have to choose which corner he decides to attack when he enters the room.

The embers of the little fire are serviceable enough to keep them warm, but by now the whole of the place seems to have a dark light about it. Finally, in between a flicker of flames, the debtor's son enters the room with a slight rustle of fabric. He looks wildly left and then right. When Maya and Ghamut stand in unison, the dark mass swings a dark outline of a pipe and with a hollow clang Maya's head snaps to the side and the knife spills from her hand and she follows thereafter.

Ghamut plunges the glint of the needle into the dark shadow's leg, working a stitch, and with an oath the shadow swings again. The pipe makes a musical croon as it carries overhead and Ghamut and the needle roll away as the shadow tumbles back outside the door and scuttles away. Maya hasn't moved but Ghamut can see that her hands have begun twitching and contorting. He runs after the debtor's son.

This time of night the streets are clear. The debtor's son reaches his car and starts it. The engine guns and vibrates. But here Maya's foresight works to Ghamut's advantage: the deflated tires flap hollowly and with a crash the car embeds itself half-cocked into another vehicle across the street, setting off an alarm. The car door pops open and out pops the debtor's son. Together he and Ghamut run up the street, twisting and turning until the echo of the alarm clicks off somewhere

behind them. The man calls for help -- *Murder! Murder!* But no one comes. The limping man still carries the pipe but he sways from side to side. As they continue across yet another intersection the man catches the curb with his heel and Ghamut hears a low moan and a cry and a clatter as he collapses on the ground. Ghamut slows to a walk. The only sign that the man is leaking are a few scarlet splatters on the pavement. A morning rain will wash them away.

In the better light of the street signs he can see a familiar face. The sharply dressed man from the cafe has spilled himself on the ground before him. He carries the same disdain in his eyes that Ghamut saw burning within the old man. The debtor's son yips like a panting, wounded animal when he speaks. *"All right. All right. It's over. It's done. God, my leg."*

"Why you did this?"

The debtor's son looks up from his punctured leg to swear. *"You goddamn collectors. You just take away what people deserve. All he wanted was to be able to walk properly. Those were his legs."*

"Then he pay for them," Ghamut says in staccotics. He crosses over to the pipe. At the end of the pipe, caught between the metal threads lies a speck of drying blood. He kicks it out of reach.

"You don't understand compassion, do you? You don't understand anything at all."

Ghamut shrugs. There is no use in understanding Civ.

"Take me to the hospital," the man demands. His clothes have pooled below him and he clutches his thigh. *"I will be missed. My friends will worry. We'll call it even, then. I've gotten my lick, you yours. Our business is over and finished."*

"It is?"

“You got your goddamned cut, I got my own. One-for-one. Be grateful the pipe didn’t hit you, you’re better for it. Now help me up.” He holds out his hand.

“I will call for police.”

“You’ll be worse for it. Two against one. I defended myself.”

“They told us you were coming. They know you wanting to hurt us.”

“I just wanted to talk.”

“You did not.”

“I do now.”

Ghamut glares at him. Then at the pipe with its little imprint of blood.

“You talk enough. You deserve bad happenings. Worse things for you if you don’t.” In his atrocious Civ, Ghamut manages to produce a halting indictment of the night’s events. As he speaks, he hears the dull clang of Maya’s head upon the pipe, over and over. Perhaps it would be better for everyone if he were to finish their little dialogue quickly. It would, after all, save the man on the ground jailtime. He stares at the soft spot beneath the other man’s eye.

The man shifts his punctured leg left and right on the ground. *“Don’t worry about me, it’s barely a crime. I’m doing you a favor here. I’ll forget about you. Don’t worry about it.”*

Ghamut stares back up the street, towards the old shopping center. It’s a long way back for all of that.

“I said don’t worry about it!” The man on the ground wrings his hands in pain. *“Come on. Think. Be a good person for once in your life and think beyond the moment, why don’t you? You’re smarter than you*

sound, I get it. But I'm not in trouble. You are. This is assault. If you push it, then it'll be worse for both of us. Come on. Think."

The late night smells like river humidity. Just like any other night. Rushes used to grow in the place of this street. The main road two blocks up used to be the only road in all directions, and once he used to race coins down the banks and knolls he called his own. He would chase after and step on the little currencies and steal them. Upon the banks, walking home, Maya had once called him a bastard, hadn't she? He remembers working in a neighbor's field and following Nana, who always told him he was a good boy and how they used to wander into the forest at night to visit his mother's grave. At twelve years old he found a dog kneeling in the grass and threw pebbles and sticks at it until a Fieldhand ran at him with a rake. Construction workers used to give Maya and the other children treats and now he's standing at the corner between two traffic lights above a bleeding man and the city is dead silent.

He's used the needle all over Civ, hurt a lot of people before. Sometimes people curse at him because he's a Fieldling. Sometimes they curse at him because he's a collector. But after they finish their business, everyone goes back to chattering among themselves and they don't say anything at all. Back in the shopping center, Ghamut imagines a different version of the evening, where the debtor's son swings his pipe left and then right. Ghamut imagines seeing the man spitting on the ground, and walking to his car. The debtor's son would then complain about his tires and curse in the direction of the darkened, empty shopping center. Then he would go home. The old man would

still be without legs, and his son would work hard to get the money to buy them back; maybe the doctor would install them again, but would demand the money up front this time.

And again: the debtor's son leaves the hospital, and Ghamut walks away, still hungry. Later, when the debtor's son has recovered, he goes back to the shopping center. He swings the pipe left and right some more. He drives home in a new car. On the street, Ghamut picks up the pipe and weighs it in his hands. The man on the ground scuttles like an upturned beetle, tries to stand up but falls over again. The look he gives Ghamut is indescribable. He threatens a world of similar looks. There will be cameras, policemen hunting for him. He will be missed by his friends. People will look for him and hunt Ghamut.

But Ghamut has never been seen, not even now.

So Ghamut slams the pipe as hard as he can into the man's hand. The debtor's son's yelp carries through the empty city without any answer from Civ this late at night. Ghamut throws the pipe as hard as he can into the city streets and when it clatters it produces a sweet ringing sound that reminds Ghamut of windchimes.

He hauls the cursing man up and without a word, takes him to an all-night clinic. A sleepy-eyed technician ushers them in through the waiting room, full of other patrons whose nights have gone poorly. No one looks at each other. White, bright lights wash all subtlety away and the two of them make an awkward, silent pair, blood and sweat dripping onto the tile. Soon Ghamut's eyes start to itch and hurt. Overhead, an air-freshener sneezes and the whole room begins to smell like a false approximation of lavender. Everything is so clean. Dressed in a surgical gown, the

technician takes stock of the punctures of the man's thigh and the broken bones in hand. "*And who might you be?*" she says, turning to Ghamut.

The debtor's son with the broken hand turns to glance over at him. True to his word, the debtor's son says nothing of the needle hidden away in Ghamut's jacket. Nor does he say a word about Maya. After checking him in, Ghamut walks back out to the sleeping streets. As he passes through the door, the debtor's son calls out, "*And have a good night,*" as if speaking to a longtime friend.

With all the evening's calamity, Ghamut finds himself back nearby the riverside, watching the red lights sway on strings. He can't remember the last time he's had a cigarette or anything to eat or drink. The railings feel cool and he rests his head against them. He finds himself watching the lights dance upon the water just as he did the last time he found himself here at this hour, as if in replication he could slip back into the memory of a more pleasant moment with the woman in the slit-backed dress. There's a faint smell of cigarette smoke and some ash on the ground that hasn't dispersed yet. He nudges it with his foot and smears it left and right.

From the road comes an arc of headlights from a car caught out late in the night, idly traversing the deserted roads. He turns to see the empty plaza, broken up in light and shadow, with a little boxed-in tree and a bench for lovers and a row of road posts curving by the road now silhouetted and playing with shadow. As the car approaches, it seems as if it means to barrel straight over the curb towards him. But then it trawls on, catching the curve of the road. It pumps music and mischief into the air. A gunshot cracks the sky and a puff of smoke signals from the tree.

Laughter emerges from its open windows as its collection of drunkards hoot and holler away from the riverside.

Somewhere back in the quiet lies Maya. Somewhere else in the dark lies the promise of a woman with a slit-backed dress and with *her* lies enough money to eat for a year.

Ghamut's hands shake. He walks down to rinse the needle in the water. He dries it on his pants and walks back to the rooms, looking up in the direction back the way he's come, towards Maya, then he looks at the row of familiar doors from mere nights ago. Either way, she will be waiting for him, one way or the other.

Then, he knocks on the doors, each of them, rousing no one he's looking for. Someone curses at him and says something in Civ that Ghamut barely hears. There are thumps happening in one room and probably a murder in the next, but no sign of the woman or her glittering dress or her two electric eyes. After each consecutive disappointment and then exhaustion, Ghamut walks back up the docks in the red lights of the lanterns and sits on the lover's bench and collapses sideways.

Chapter Seven - Arrest

It has been more than a decade since Ghamut has woken up to the sound of the river. Far in the distance, a storm rumbles and brews, black clouds in a dark, churning mass. But it's not the wind or the thunder rumbling off in the distance that wakes him up. Something empty spins in Ghamut's stomach and he feels like he hasn't eaten in a week. Most likely because that's the bonafide fact. He shudders as chills rack his frame. Upon the river, fractured over the water and split between glass buildings, the sunrise sends yellow and white shards ricocheting across the riverside before hiding away behind the oncoming storm. Ghamut shuffles off the bench and stumbles back up the road, tucking his hands in his pockets. Whining through the streets all around him, the wind spurs him on. It lets out a quiet howl in the deserted plaza; Ghamut walks alone.

He makes quick progress back to the shopping center. The garbage crew has already made its way down the street and picked up the crashed car. Aside from a dent in one of the sedans parked on the curb, no sign of last night's struggle remains. At the end of the street, the ruined shopping center waits patiently for his return. Ghamut stumbles back into the dilapidated ruins, calling Maya's name. Her knife remains where it fell. The blade glints in the tallow light. Next to it lies Maya. She stares upright at the ceiling and her eyes flick over at Ghamut when he walks into the doorway but she doesn't say a word.

When he picks her up, she feels lighter and colder than he remembers. In his arms, Maya uses what strength she can bear to bury her head in Ghamut's chest and he can feel her breathing. They emerge back out onto the street and make their way through the waking city.

"Maya?" Ghamut asks, ignoring the odd looks leveled at them. "Can you say something?"

"Thank you," Maya mutters, and then she falls quiet again.

They round a final bend and careen through the doctor's doors. He sits at his bench, working on a pair of electric arms. When he sees them, he waves his own up and down in the air in exasperation. Amongst the clutter of the workshop Ghamut doesn't know where to put Maya.

"What are you doing?" the doctor yells.

"Maya is injured."

"I can see that! What the hell'd you come in here for?"

"Please, you're the only one we know. Haven't we known you long enough?"

"Hell, man, speak proper!"

"The only doctor is you. We have worked." Ghamut wants to kick something expensive in frustration. In front of them, the doctor sighs. Muttering under his breath and looking put out about it all, he clears the workstation of instruments and discarded chunks of metal and then turns off and on a number of electrics in a panel. He wheels out a small operating table with a few instruments on it and pitches the whole thing sideways. Scalpels, knives, screwdrivers and a torch clatter to the ground. Together, they put Maya onto the table and she moans slightly. The doctor

eyes the bloody contusion at her temple and pokes a bit of the blood collected around the back of her ear.

“Do you have any money?”

“We can work.”

“You can work. This one isn’t going to be doing any work any time soon.”

“I will collect. Same as always.”

“How are you going to find out where the damn people are if you can’t even speak the language right?”

“She can do it. Not her broken mouth.”

The doctor purses his lips and glances at the doorway as if hoping for some other kind of surprise visitor.

“Motherfucker,” Ghamut swears. “If you can’t help us then don’t dare keep me waiting. I’ll put my goddamn needle through your eye, I will.”

The doctor puts his hands up in the air and shakes his head. *“Don’t lose your head. I’ve got two runners if you can find them.”* He peers at Maya and licks his lips, a glint suddenly appearing in his eye. *“I can replace the broken parts with synthetics, mend anything that’s bleeding--”*

But at this Maya finally snaps her eyes to the doctor and tries to raise a hand. She doesn’t want anything nonorganic in her brain, no synthetics from Civ. Just her old bone and medicinal paste. The doctor sighs.

“What’s the problem?”

"It will take longer."

"Is it more expensive?"

"Relatively speaking, perhaps. The longer it takes for her to recover, the longer you will work here."

"Maya.."

But she is inconsolable. She has one hand made up into a fist and she brings it down at her side over and over again, clattering on the operating table. The two men acquiesce, and the doctor takes a needle full of liquid and injects it into Maya's arm. She sighs, and falls asleep. Ghamut rubs his eyes. Down on the table, Maya actually looks peaceful. Under the bright lights of the operating area, above the littered, rusting, grime of the rest of the rooms, her starved look seems to fade.

The doctor pauses after slipping on a mask.

"If you'd like, I can go ahead and do synthetics. It's faster. I have someone coming in an hour and a half. If I have to rush, it will turn out worse. She won't know, anyway, will she?"

"You better not. If she knows, she will -- kill you -- be angry. Do you have any food? We haven't eaten in days."

The doctor slaps the table with his hand. He mutters something about metabolism and glances at the needle he has injected into Maya. He fumbles with an IV bag and snaps, *"The hell do you think this place is? A bistro? First, you want an operation, now you want me to feed you? Get the hell out of here."*

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With the promise of a phone call within the day, Ghamut wanders the streets, exhausted and hungry.

In the middle of the afternoon, the storm breaks. A heady scent rises up from the pavement and sets his mind swirling. Rain forces Civ to hunker down and cover up, it clatters all across the pavements and softens the city.

Two intersections down and one street across from the doctor's workshop, an open air market with local stores has set up shop for the day. A harried shopkeep with stringy, thin hair scrambles to unfold umbrellas and coverings to keep his wares dry. He is mostly unsuccessful. Ghamuts takes his distraction as a sign to approach. Lanterns flick on as the storm and the rain darken the day and the hanging lights illuminate dragonfruits, mean little guavas, lettuce heads, mushrooms, oranges, preserved pineapple and candied plums. With a quick hand, Ghamut snatches an overripe mango, stuffs the prize into his overcoat pocket and rounds the corner.

Crouched on an intersection curb, he eats the whole fruit, rain pressing his hair into streaks on his face, juice trickling down over his hands and down his chin. He eats the skin, leaves nothing but a pit clutched in his two hands. Across the road a kid watches him eat, a Civ kid, with a gossamer umbrella clutched in one hand frosting with the rain. He's got two big green eyes and is dressed in some horrid approximation of a business suit. When the crosswalk turns from red to white, he crosses over the street and gives Ghamut his umbrella.

"Fuck you," Ghamut says. He smiles. "*Thank you.*"

The kid reaches over with a chubby hand to gently pat Ghamut on the head and then skips back across the street under the safety of an awning. An elderly Civ woman waiting for the bus nods at the little child and smiles at him. In disgust, Ghamut takes the umbrella, unfolds it, and walks down the street.

Rain pours down throughout the day. He remembers watching the swelling river as a child, always careful in rainstorms like these. In those days, a sudden sweep of water could overwhelm the banks and rush into houses and backyards and campfires. Nana once told him of a particularly catastrophic summer in which three families disappeared into the river. Now, he just feels cold and annoyed, although with some food in him he slowly returns to his senses. While Maya marinates on the doctor's slab he plots a course for the soutenuse who opened the original contract on the woman in the slit-dress, hoping that somewhere, somehow, he might find more information regarding her possible whereabouts. He still has the kid's umbrella in his hand when he raps on a rusted door set into a gray slab without windows.

The door and its accompanying building are set squarely above the Low, still in use after the expansions that created and sealed away the artificial caverns. Mere dozens of feet below him, the day's rain plunges down into sewer grates and soaks deep through the cracks in mortar and cobblestone. It oozes down into the Low's cavern walls and dribbles from the vaulted ceiling in a tarry black perspiration, oil mixed with filth mixed with water.

When the rusted door opens, it reveals more remnants of Civ's past. This building -- once an administration building, or a telecommunications service -- now serves as a brothel, one of Maya's favorite and most consistent clients.

The woman who has opened the door looks plain, neither extraordinarily beautiful nor unsightly. Her only memorable features are her eyes, which appraise Ghamut quickly as she ushers him inside, out of the rain. He walks into a repurposed lobby. Though the current tenants here have long since stripped away the corporate furnishings, the architecture still holds a certain brutal energy, one that no amount of neon lights or artificial fog -- both of which are in overwhelming use now -- can erase. Ghamut steps onto a mosaic of two plump red lips and stares at his guide. She holds out an electric hand for the umbrella. When moves to give it to her, the door slams shut and a wave of overpoweringly sweet scent obliterates all traces of the rain. The woman before him wraps the cellophane umbrella in a small plastic bag and places it on a rack by the door.

"Welcome to Heathers," she says. "Who are you looking for?"

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The woman's name is Sammi. She stands upright in a gray vest on a white collared shirt that rises all the way up to her jaw. She looks more like a girl than a woman. When she hears Ghamut stutter out a cobbled Civ phrase she switches into Field, which she speaks comfortably. His language seems odd coming from someone unfamiliar. Sammi explains that sometimes clients like to hear words they can't comprehend but have meaning nonetheless. It's like speaking in secrets, she explains. And secrets are tantalizing. They sit on a row of couches in a smoky, hazy room that she

says once held rows of switchboards, long, long, long ago. Now it has a series of bookshelves and magazines on the wall, a fern in the corner, and two garish blue-green Neon lights that hang where windows should be. Music, chatter, and laughs keep on leaking through the door, and beyond all of that grumbles the rainstorm, churning in the background.

Sammi strokes her chin with her electric hand. "So who are you looking for?"

"You opened a contract on a woman who stole from you and ran ten days ago. I am trying to find her."

Sammi takes the words and her electric hand dances, swiveling back and forth at the wrist joint, fingers bending unnaturally. "The contract is closed." She says at last. "I cannot help you. I told everything to Maya already."

"I'm working on behalf of the new contractor."

Sammi narrows her eyes. "I didn't know Fieldlings still trusted Kilnyzk." She parses out his name and spits it out as if it were something foul. Kill-Nee-Zack.

They don't, not really, but when it comes to the money involved, Ghamut tells her he is willing to grasp at straws. Sammi shakes her head and leans back. Frowning, Ghamut asks her if she has any wager as to why the man-in-hat would pay such a high price for a common prostitute.

Sammi grimaces. Not that it's any of her business, but there's all the usual reasons for a man to pay someone to find a woman, none of which are particularly pleasant. Were the missing woman still under her employ, Sammi might have been tempted to intervene, but given that seven years of partnership ended in theft, she considers the problem squarely out of her hands now. And besides,

she reminds Ghamut, there was nothing common about Vera. She is a Fieldling, always ready to capture those clients with more exotic tastes. She cocks her head and peers at Ghamut.

“Stay hungry,” she says, “And the city will eat you alive. That’s what Vera told me.”

“Is that her name?”

“You didn’t know?”

Maya had only shown him the bare descriptors of the woman he was to collect: a smiling face, a location on a map, and a picture of the debtor with her hair tied up into a bun, captured on a security camera. When he’d finally caught up to her, they hadn’t been particularly interested in exchanging names at the riverside motel. “No,” Ghamut says in short.

Sammi thinks that that is funny, very funny. She laughs, and when she finishes laughing, rests her chin on her hand. “I thought all the Fieldlings were from the same village. Everyone swam in the same river, went to the same school.”

Ghamut lets his silence answer for him. At least Sammi has the decency to look down, her face coloring. “All right. My mistake. Still. You should stop looking for her.” She looks him up and down. “If it’s money you’re after, I could offer you or Maya a place here. There’s food provided, warmth, and of course, a bed.”

“I thought you wanted her found.”

“I wanted what was stolen returned. It’s now accounted for, and now Vera is off to the winds. Better for everyone if she stays gone, I think. Don’t you need a home? I can give you one.”

Now it’s Ghamut’s turn to laugh. Such offers are familiar to all Fieldlings.

Sammi protests: What Kilnyzck has done is different. Heathers is an institution, one that's been in service since Ghamut was a child playing in the Fields. It's stood here since Sammi was a little girl who thought she would be a physicist instead of a *souteneuse*, and will remain standing long after Ghamut and Vera and Maya and Sammi are long gone. It's never stolen anything from anybody, only taken what was given without a second thought, and that, Sammi says, is hardly stealing.

And again she repeats herself. Vera is best left alone. If Kilnyzck is after her, then she is already wrapped up in enough trouble that pursuit isn't worthwhile. But at Ghamut's insistence, Sammi seems to yield. She shrugs. "I can show you Vera's room, but I can't give anything more. Your guess as to where she's ended is as good as mine. It's what I was paying you for, after all."

She takes him down a hallway, and Ghamut, prepared for more sounds of the riverside, is surprised to see that most of the women and men inside sit casually in front of studio lights, still scantily clad, some entirely naked, almost all in front of computers or curled around their cell phones, but few are actually participating in sex. He even glimpses a classroom, rows of students staring at a screen as a man points to statistics and figures with a laser pointer.

Sammi doesn't say a word, but Ghamut can tell by the way she walks and sneaks sly glances at him that she is proud of what Heathers is, or has become. She stops beside a small door. It's the only doorway that's without light. Sammi shoves open the door to reveal a dark room adorned with vines hung on the walls. Small light fixtures glint among the green lattice, and at a flick of a switch besides the door they come to life in an approximation of fireflies. Water running over a sheet of

clear plastic trickles beside fake reeds. Vera has covered her bed with a rug made in the same style as one that once lay upon Ghamut's own floor and next to that sits a desk with a small collection of carved wooden figurines scattered upon it. In the middle of the room someone has installed a camera with a light fixture curved into a halo behind it.

The room's furnishings are disgusting in their imitation of Fieldling life, and yet Vera's design, attention to detail, and placement seem earnest and legitimate enough that Ghamut can almost imagine her as one of the children he might have run alongside with years ago.

"Did you put all this in?"

Sammi, propped up beside the door, smiles slightly. "Of course not. It wouldn't be authentic." She sits on the rug and presses down on it with her non-electric palm and winks at him. "See? A bed. Just for you. You already match the furniture, don't you?" She moves to the side as if to invite Ghamut in. Her legs are pressed together so that they may be pressed apart.

Some of Ghamut's fury must be leaking out of his expression, for Sammi sighs and apologizes, says it's the sort of thing Vera would have found funny. One leg crosses over the other. At the thought of moments between the two women, Vera speaking or whispering in the voice from the river, Sammi chuckling or laughing, Ghamut frowns. "Did she have anyone outside of here?" Ghamut asks. "A favorite man, woman, someone?"

Sammi blinks. "I wouldn't know," she says. "Vera took in-person visitors, clients, as well as anything that came her way online. She was old-school." She speaks carefully and softly, as if in-person trysts were some kind of rite-of passage worthy of respect.

“Do you remember who? Anyone?”

Sammi grins. “Everyone looks the same to me.”

Across the desk, a slow shadow detaches, and Ghamut watches as a creature that may have once been a cat slips out from behind one of the figurines, peering at Ghamut with a face that holds far too many eyes. It stretches and arcs its back, swishes a tail back and forth.

“Is it true that those are carvings of gods?” Sammi says, looking at the figurine. “I always wondered what they were for.” The little creature scuttles off into the fake reeds and begins to orbit her feet. He weighs the wood in his hand. It’s carved in the shape of a hawk and he can see the individual markings from a chisel, the little whittlings from a knife. They look like a child’s playthings, and certainly don’t seem seductive at all.

He turns to Sammi and forces a smile.

“These aren’t gods, and I don’t worship them.”

Sammi shrugs. “Vera said she did. Either way. The offer stands. Someone needs to fill the room. It’s a good living, and stable. You don’t need to ever see anyone in person, not anymore. You still can, of course, but it’s a privilege now and not a requisite. You won’t go hungry here.”

Underneath one of the figurines Ghamut finds a slip of paper with an address written in smeared ink. Ghamut eyes it for a moment before slipping it into his pocket. “If it was so perfect, then why isn’t she here?”

Sammi is silent but does not offer an explanation.

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He leaves Heathers without money, without food, still hungry. The rain has finished its pouring and he throws the kid's umbrella into the garbage, glad to be rid of it. The address leads him up north, but before he can get far, he's distracted by a butcher's shop. Hunks of meat hang on hooks, splayed out in red and white marbled glory. Juices run down crevices and folds of parchment paper, and there's a small red river of blood that's pooled against the glass.

He checks his phone but the doctor hasn't called.

The butcher slams his cleaver onto the board and shoos Ghamut away. He looks too hungry for his own good. Something must be done about this. He wanders into a grocery store with the aim of recreating his earlier heist and sprints out a few minutes later, shoveling whatever he can into his mouth. A man with electric legs comes running out after him. He leaps and bounds like a rabbit and catches Ghamut's ankle and Ghamut slams into the ground. When the shopkeeper presses down onto Ghamut and sneers at him, Ghamut can feel the cold steel through the fabric of his shirt.

He sighs. He has no strength left to fight. Vera and the rest will have to wait. He's wandered too far for his own good. This place is too clean and tidy for him. He's wandered into a realm of power-washed streets, security cameras, and far, far more augmented people than he could manage elsewhere. At least the food he's stolen will keep him going for a little while longer.

The police come and wrench his arm behind his back, bend him half-hunched over and push him into a car. They throw him into a cell after taking away his phone. No one finds the needle, hidden alongside his jacket zipper. The piece of paper he's found at Heathers has been pressed flat by an electric foot but is otherwise undamaged. Small mercy, that.

Inside the cell, which is little more than a box with a single bench held away from a barred door leading into the jail hallway, are three men and two women who stare at Ghamut when he stumbles inside.

One of the women sits with her knees up to her chest and only registers Ghamut's appearance with a single flick of her eyes before staring at one of the men, who stares back. The other picks at an electric arm with her biological one and taps her metal fingers on her cheek, resting her chin in a silicone palm. Of the three men, two are Civ dressed in street clothes. They look as if they're sobering up from a long night. The other man is a Fieldling like Ghamut, with sunblazed skin and clothes that are too big for him. He reeks, smells like sewage water and something burnt.

The Fieldling takes a look at Ghamut and shuffles over on the floor to crouch next to him. He sticks out his hand as if he expects Ghamut to shake it. When he does not, the man curls his hand into a fist and swings it at Ghamut's ear, only to mime an explosion and splay his hand out, flashing out his palm and wiggling his fingers.

"Sorry about that," he says. "It gets boring in here." He laughs and turns to the others in the cell, begins picking his teeth. "Real boring, see? But now you're here so it gets *exciting!*"

Ghamut nods, and tries to shuffle away, but the man hops like a frog towards Ghamut.

"*What are they saying?*" Asks the woman curled up behind her knees. She looks at the woman with the cybernetic hand, who shrugs.

"*I dunno.*"

The Fieldling lets out a sound like Ghamut has heard in the forest, and slaps the ground with his knuckles. Ghamut joins the others in staring at this madman. "*Someone do something,*" the pair of knees says, her voice plaintive. The madman seizes upon it, beckoning at Ghamut, who has pressed himself into a corner.

"Comrade, come on!" the man says. "Look at us! Look at us!"

One of the Civ men stands up with his fists raised, and the man screeches and spits, and mimes choking something out in front of them. The Civ man sits down. "Look at em!" the man says. He laughs and then in a moment stops laughing. He walks back to Ghamut and crouches down.

"When was the last time you screamed?" he says.

Ghamut just shakes his head.

"What you in here for, neighbor? Where were you from? What did you do to get here?" He rolls up his sleeves and Ghamut can see patches of pale skin -- Civ skin, entwined into delicate designs all up and down the man's arms. Ghamut shudders and tries to back away from yet another one of the Low's dermis junkies. The woman in the corner groans slightly at the sight of seeing skin like hers sewn into the madman's arms, and he grins and pulls back his teeth to reveal brown fangs. At Ghamut's insistence on silence, he scoffs slightly.

"They've got you bad."

All through the evening the madman torments all of them in equal measure. He snarls, makes noises and threatens things that only Ghamut can understand. When the guards give them

food on a silver platter, six pieces of bread, plain, but with some minced green onions, only Ghamut and the madman are the only ones brave enough to approach it. The madman keeps the others at bay with his hissing and growling and cackling. Ghamut's face burns in shame as he sups. No one in the cell can bear to look at them. He eats his own share, one piece of the bread he designates as one of the men's, then another piece, which he imagines might belong to the woman with the electric hand. The madman picks up the empty tray and bashes it on the floor until a guard comes and takes it back. After that, the lights click out.

The woman without the electric arm begs to be taken to another cell, but the guard leaves without a word.

All through the night the mad Fieldling describes things that only he can see. He points to the air and describes a world made only of mud. Ghamut, Civ, buildings, all mud. "Now why would you care about what the mud people have to say?" he asks Ghamut. "Let's have fun and turn the mud different colors. Make it twist into different shapes."

He howls and the jail cell rings with his cries.

Near dawn, the madman finally crosses a threshold, and leers at one of the men pressed up against the bar. He opens his mouth wide and twists his neck as if searching for a place to strike and bite down, and finally the woman with the electric arm stands, and with a swift blow, makes something *click* deep inside the man's chest, a resonance that reverbs in the new silence.

He sinks to the ground, twitching and laughing.

Ghamut reaches inside his jacket to clutch at the needle. As the woman with the arm walks up to him, over the giggling invalid, he gets ready to put the point through her eye. She points at Ghamut and says, "*No more of your shit, you hear me?*"

"*I did nothing*, I did nothing, I never did a damn thing against any of you," Ghamut says, but no one in the cell seems to hear him. He wants to scream.

Before the dawn comes, there in the shadows emerges a bouquet of eyes and a collection of teeth, peering at him in the darkness.

When the police let him go, sometime later in the morning, after assigning him a fine he cannot pay, Ghamut runs all the way back down the streets to Maya, who sits upon the doctor's operating room table. He spies her from the street and raps on the clinic windows. The doctor unlocks the door in a dreary haze and collapses back on the couch after letting Ghamut inside. She has a bandage around her head like a halo, and he buries his head in her chest. Her heart beats so slowly, she holds him close. Ghamut tells Maya that he has never been happier to see someone alive.

Maya strokes his hair and gives him a small kiss, right in the center of his forehead.

Chapter Eight - The Northern Estate

Maya has her old bite back in her voice before the turning of the week. She yearns for something to chew as she waits for her skull to heal, always hungry. Ghamut spears one of the doctor's contracts all on his own. He delivers spoils from hospitals to the Low, feeds an increasingly hungry population that craves pristine, fresh Civ skin. He doesn't ask what they do with the rest of the bits, although once he finds himself watching a barren, hooded shadow of a man stroke a dog's neck, who barks at Ghamut. The degenerate smiles eerily at Ghamut and puts a finger to his lips. The dog snaps its jaw open and shut.

He does not tell Maya about the offer from Vera's *soutenuse* nor does he tell her he has begun looking for Vera on Kilnyzk's behalf. During the day, when the doctor manages his clinic, Maya lies supine on the couch and tells Ghamut when he returns that she has become an expert at staring at lights until she can see entire worlds far away from here. The doctor has given them an operating screen to hide behind. Protected from him, the two drink alcohol until the world spins and Maya starts to see things in the light that are not there. She wonders if they are real, if they will come to take her away. Ghamut tells her of a story he once heard from his grandmother.

A man in Civ once went crazy. He was a rich man, like most of the men in Civ are, and had a winning job, a house with a good view, a loving family. He lived comfortably. One day, rushing either to or from his job -- the story always came out different -- he fell into an accident. Bandages covered his head and he spent months in the dark recovering. In order to alleviate the boredom

from the constant blackness, his doctors recommended he invest into dreams. They fed him bananas and tryptophan and vitamins and one day he dreamed a wonderful, amazing dream. And they kept him on this until he recovered and could go back to work, but instead of returning to his job he squandered his money, sold nearly everything and brought his house to the point of ruin, always asleep and never awake. The man's wife cut out his eyes and installed new electric ones, ones that broadcasted blackness whenever the man tried to dream his fantasies.

Round the haze of alcohol, Maya asks if he will cut out her eyes if she keeps staring at the lights. Ghamut shakes his head. "I'd tell stories about you," he says. "That's all. Nana used to point people on the street and say that they were the dreaming men. I used to be scared of them."

Maya thinks for a long time, then says, "Your grandmother was crazy."

"Believe me," Ghamut says, thinking of the old woman always huddling round her campfire, staring into the forest, every night. "I know."

What was she looking for in those dark stripes? Ghamut never got an answer to that question; his history is incomplete. Nana died too quickly after the city took over.

Some nights he sees dark creatures;; some nights he sees nothing.

Near the end of her recovery, when the world beyond the clinic creeps closer and closer, Ghamut asks Maya why she is so hellbent on never taking a contract or doing business with Kilnyzck. Perhaps she has had some sense knocked into her.

Maya frowns through her haze of medication. Again, she disavows the man who has cheated them and refused to pay his due. She says he Kilnyzck is not a good man and will never be.

Ghamut rolls his eyes and flicks her right above her cracked and healing skull. With a yowl Maya clutches her head and screams. She calls him a bastard and slaps him away with her hand. If she ever finds him working for the man-in-hat she will drive him out to sea and set him adrift.

“I ran down the man with that pipe for you,” Ghamut says.

Anyone can lumber about like a baboon, Maya posits. It’s why he swung at her first, because he knew if he left her alive then all his troubles would be multiplied! Ghamut rolls his eyes.

Then let her go out and run down people with the needle. Let Maya walk on the street and hunt, if all she wants to do is talk about things which can’t exist. Talk, talk, talk, Maya talks, and then talks some more, if he were as good as talking as her he could find a million Mayas to replace her and not one of them would have found a good man. Maya replies that if she could use his needle as well as he could the first thing she would do is jam it in his eye. If she didn’t have bones that would break from her time spent starving as a child she would dance on his grave.

Their argument ends in a draw as usual.

Maya smiles and leans back to rest against the gurney. Now if he could kindly shut up, she wants to sleep. Ghamut smiles too, smiles all the way through a dark, black dream in which nothing moves and nothing happens.

When Maya can walk without feeling dizzy the doctor claps his hands and declares their business concluded. “*Get,*” he says.

At a word from Maya, he promises he will call when he has more contracts, but for now he wants them out of his workshop. They emerge onto a sunny day and Maya claps her hands over her eyes.

“What, is the light too strong for you?” Ghamut says, grinning.

The sunlight shines quite differently than the artificial fluorescents, Maya has to admit. There isn't anything in the reflections to escape to.

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Before he left, Ghamut stowed away their sleeping sacks so as to keep them safe from people. It's not people who have found their supplies and chewed through their jackets, not thieves who have left scratch marks in their sleeping pads, little brown pellets smeared on their packs. Maya curses the rats. In the fields, the only thing that they had to contend with were bugs and mice. They are again immediately penniless. Worse: Ghamut owes money to pay for his jail time and in three weeks the police will start calling collections on him.

Maya takes calls on her cell phone and speaks in rapid Civ.

She's able to come up with three contracts before she complains that her head hurts and she has to put the phone down. Middling, inconsequential contracts that will do nothing but perhaps give them a bit of food for the night. Aside from the doctor's medicines and nutritional supplements, Maya hasn't tasted real food in ages. Ghamut unfolds Vera's slip of paper and eyes its distance from the other addresses. Still, he heads up north, all the while keeping an eye out for the telltale shimmer of her dress. It occurs to him then that in the daylight Vera might look completely

different than her nocturnal form, though he can't imagine her in anything but the glittering sheet of skin she wore that night.

The address leads him to a building with grand arches, columns that have petrified flowers as crowns and a massive rose window that glimmers in the early light. In front of him, two hands clasped in prayer sit atop a monolith made out of once-mountain stone. Opening the grand cathedral doors, Ghamut smells the incense and firewood burning in censers swinging from the ceiling. The light catches the smoke and makes it holy, or perhaps it's the other way around. On the floor, their heads pressed into marbled tile, kneels an electric congregation. Robotic limbs lie folded underneath torsos, all pointed towards a singular tree sprouting out of the marble. There are no pews, just the open room with its polished marbled floor and this tree centered in the middle of the room.

It's one of the gnarled trees from the riverside, a willow transplanted upriver and roosted in this strange, smoke-filled home far away. The assembled worshippers occasionally rise up to take breaths and mutter prayers, to the bark and tree leaves, and before he can stop himself Ghamut barks out a laugh.

It's a tree.

Not even a healthy tree. The smoke and the lack of direct access to sunlight light have forced the tree to grow cockeyed. Its limbs can barely support themselves, and what few leaves that the branches hold are undersaturated. The barren temple screams back a silence so powerful that Ghamut stops his snickering and comes to a silent standstill, held for a moment by the heavy quiet

before he shudders and presses forward, glancing once down at Vera's scrawl to ensure that yes, she wrote down this address and not somewhere else, anywhere else.

Perhaps she joined the electric congregation, Ghamut thinks. Weighed down with the gravitas of the ritual occurring in the empty room, pinned down by guilt or belief, she may too have once knelt down in her dress alongside the others here. It isn't the act of prayer itself that disturbs Ghamut so, moreso the obvious act of surrender. He considers the idea that such an arbitrary thing, like a tree which barely clings to life, could possibly hold any higher meaning insulting and tragic. Then what of the whole forest, cut up and paved over, or the riverside that once held hundreds of them? Vera could have cut this tree into a thousand child's toys and then a thousand trees into a thousand more, but by the murder of its kin this singular tree has become untouchable and holy. And here they are: worshipping artificial scarcity. Ghamut presses his thumb into the tip of his grandmother's needle and thinks about all the times he wanted to shove the old woman into the fire.

Still, Ghamut has to admit that although the tree is a bit of a bastard, like himself, the way the roots break through the marble is beautiful. By design or the passage of time, the eruption is the only graceful part of the brutal, empty room. He paces across the polished tile floor looking for Vera and her electric eyes among the congregation, but does not find her. His footsteps clatter and pollute the room's undisturbed quiet. Each report sounds harsh and out of place under the soothing haze of smoke.

A Civ monk clad in white robes that glide behind on the tile approaches Ghamut and asks him what brings him to the temple today. Metallic clicks accompany each movement the monk makes. Noticing Ghamut's attention, he reveals an amputated leg that sits atop a metal replacement and then bows deeply to the tree. He asks Ghamut again what brings him to the temple and Ghamut asks him if he has seen Vera.

"Ah," the monk says, flashing a knowing smile as if he has heard this all before. "*It is your electric heart.*"

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When Vera cut out her eyes all those weeks ago, one thing had been for certain. She could not stay at Heathers, and so with her eyes freshly installed, she had come here. The monk in his soft voice explains that this place takes in robotic refugees every day -- those who dream of regrowing their limbs in place of metal implants and replacements. Most of the attendees of the cathedral are victims of accidents or the city's violence. They wear insurance payouts and compensation that once seemed like mercy but now have become damnations. Every day, they pray for forgiveness and hope that the natural order may be restored.

Ghamut sighs and wishes that this place had furniture. He walks with the monk in a marble hallway, watching each other lit by candlelight. It looks like the hallway from Heathers, little cubbies for the refugees to spend their days cloistered.

The monk looks very much like a monk, but Ghamut can spy a dark turquoise tattoo creeping up beside his neck: a broken skull with a bullet hurtling out of the forehead. At a twist of the fabric, the ink disappears.

Vera stayed with them for half a week before disappearing, the monk says. He doesn't know what happened to her next. Then, she walked back to the river, Ghamut thinks.

Once a day, Vera would walk out of the church and return at sunset, the Monk says. She never ate with anyone else, but would disappear with her daily rations of food and vanish. Her room often sat empty and she was so quiet that no one at the church noticed when she disappeared.

"Anyone she spoke to? Anyone who would know?" Ghamut asks.

The monk nods. *"A young man, she often spoke with him. Sometimes, they would pray together. She is beautiful, no?"*

"Was it a Fieldling?" Ghamut asks impatiently.

"No. Civ. He has been missing too, but that is not so strange."

"Do you know his name?"

The monk shakes his head. He describes the man as a transient, a drifter who visits the temple irregularly. He collects stories, perhaps to sell. *"I will point him out for you if he comes,"* the monk says. He is convinced the man will visit the temple soon.

"Instead someone calls me?" Ghamut says.

The monk smiles. *"The only electrics we wield are the ones we wear."* At the look on Ghamut's face, the monk chuckles and shakes his head. *"We must seem foolish, but I promise we are no more foolish than the rest of you. Our confusion..."* He taps his electric foot on the ground. *"Is real. Rules help us remember a simpler time. They create a union between one evolution and the next."*

"You're a bunch of metal-wearing fucks that speak nice and hollow, aren't you?"

"I understand your disappointment," the monk says, his smile slightly condescending. *"But isn't persistence its own reward?"*

Again, Ghamut cuts a laugh. And again, the sound disappears far faster than it should down the hallway. The monk shakes his head, leads Ghamut into a modest mess hall and has him sit down at a table. He serves Ghamut a small bowl full of gruel and tacks on two pieces of bread. He watches Ghamut eat and says, *"It's easier to have patience with a full stomach."*

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Maya takes her hunger and turns it into silence. After another sleepless night she turns the silence into anger and beats Ghamut with fists that barely leave indents on Ghamut's clothes. She tells him he is a traitor, that if he wants her to starve he'd better stick his needle directly into her heart because she won't go quietly. She says that she would have been better off dead on the ground after the debtor's son, for now that Ghamut has saved her life he thinks that he can do what he pleases and leave her to starve. This is what Ghamut's clear conscience does, Maya complains. A

world in which he owes nobody nothing is a world in which Ghamut can transform into his fullest, cruelest self.

He would hit her, if he weren't so convinced that a physical escalation would not end up with one of them dead.

She begs him, piles contract after contract at his feet, but Ghamut can feel Vera slipping away, without constant vigilance --it's closing into a month since the riverside -- she will slip away entirely. Maya gnaws her fingers and chews on the keratin. She whispers to herself and once wakes Ghamut in the night, crawling over to him to shake him on the concrete floor. Trembling, she guides his hands to her temple, and demands to know the truth, if the doctor really healed her, or replaced some part of her.

"What's the matter with you?" Ghamut mutters, feeling her skull through her skin.

"I see things in the dark," Maya says. Around Ghamut's feet, a creature stretches and saunters towards the doorway. Maya blinks, and whispers. "And then I see things in the light."

"You're starving," Ghamut says.

"Aren't you?"

Ghamut goes to sleep.

After a third day of waiting at the cathedral for Vera's companion to appear, and sitting through a final night of Maya's insane mutterings, Maya does what Maya does best, and vanishes.

She vanishes for a night, leaving Ghamut to sit beside a slow-dying fire, full of the temple's gruel.

That night, a creature hangs star-splayed above Ghamut on the ceiling, smiling dully at him. Its face

is full of teeth and its eye -- a massive, white-and black pupil with marbled veins leading to the center dot -- winks at him. If it falls, its teeth will sink straight into Ghamut's skull.

In the morning, Maya returns. She's chipped her knife and limps, but she now has a pocketful of cash which she refuses to share with Ghamut. He watches her wrap her arm and leg in a bandage, and sup on a bag of dried mushrooms without a word. She does not look at him. He is glad for it.

Ghamut gets up and goes to the temple.

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The monk in the temple points to a man kneeling before the tree, dressed in a poncho that makes him look like a dissolving blot of ink on the marble floors. Ghamut squints his watering eyes at him through the haze of the burning censers. "*You have waited for her far longer than I thought you would,*" the monk says. Forever impassive, his face does not change. Nor does he congratulate Ghamut or encourage a next course of action. After reciting so many scriptures and telling Ghamut so much of his philosophy, at this final moment the monk falls silent. Soon, he moves away to step and click his way through the assembled worshippers.

Try as he might, Ghamut cannot envision any correlation between Vera and the man in the poncho. Though he could scarcely catch a glimpse of the man underneath his cloak, the face above the folds is grizzled and dusted with silver and white hair. Vera's companion keeps his arms and legs hidden and when Ghamut kneels beside him he does not move. He stares at the tree and mutters

prayers underneath his breath. He has a sweet, light voice, and when his eyes finally catch Ghamut's they present a cold silver-blue.

"I heard of you and Vera," Ghamut says.

Underneath the poncho, the man shifts slightly and his head swivels to look in Ghamut's direction. He smiles lightly. *"Vera,"* he says. *"Yes. The one with the eyes."*

"Electric."

The man in the poncho bows once to the tree and then stands. Out of the shadows of the poncho come two legs that unfold and straighten. They are wrapped in dark fabric, just like the rest of him. He looks over at Ghamut, sweeps his gaze up and down, and politely suggests that if they are to converse, it would be better to do so outside, so as not to disturb the good people of the Church. Together the two walk out of the cathedral. The monk watches them from across the room, half-hidden away through the veil of the willow tree.

A faint wind blows through Civ today, and the black poncho swirls and collects the air and presses flat against the man who introduces himself as Damien. He keeps his arms, which surely must be electric, hidden away underneath the cloak while he walks. When he talks, his voice, though light, carries through the wind easily. He only seems to speak in a whisper.

To Damien, nothing about Vera's journey comes as a surprise. He nods in agreement when Ghamut recounts her flight from Sammi, her stealing money to gouge out her eyes. *"Do you have a why?"* Ghamut asks. He can't imagine any good reason to take one's eyes out.

Damien shrugs and the cloak rustles in the wind. They have detached from the main avenue, and have begun to walk aimlessly through a small, crowded alleyway, so thick with electric wires overhead that they block out the midday sun. Tall buildings reach up far into the sky. The higher they reach, the closer they seem to teeter together. Cobblestone ridges click underneath their feet and Damien seems at home in the half-light. His blue eyes glimmer as he wagers Vera replaced her eyes with optics, *“For the usual reasons.”*

Ghamut frowns. Damien has stopped and has begun to smile, as if secretly inviting another question about what the usual reasons are or what they mean to Vera, but instead Ghamut says,

“Where she travels?”

Damien does not answer. Instead, he sits abruptly down at a curb, already lit up in the midday by a neon sign. He looks up at Ghamut, who holds the needle in his pocket.

“How far have you traveled yourself?” Damien asks, raising his chin to point at Ghamut.

“Nearby a month I have been looking for her.”

Damien shakes his head. *“I don’t mean how long you’ve been looking for her, or how far you’ve had to walk today or how long you’ve been waiting at the temple or anything of the sort. You have a look about you. It’s a sort of look peculiar to Fieldlings.”*

“Starving,” Ghamut corrects.

“Certainly a core principle. But nothing so simple. Perhaps: starved. Past tense.” He sniffs the air.

“You reek of it, whatever it is. Is it stifling, being that way all the time? I have spoken to so many people at the

temple, and even among the worst off, there is never the same smell as surrounds the Field and its people.

Indulge me, won't you? Can you explain yourself?"

Ghamut balances on his feet, left and right. *"Where is Vera?"*

Each time Damien has spoken he has done so deliberately and slowly, as if delivering a test, an evaluation that Ghamut wants no part of. But this is why Ghamut carries his needle: everyone wants to ask all the wrong questions. Kilnyzk and his money waits. So does the city.

Damien does not so much as blink. Instead, with his head on a swivel, he tracks Ghamut's paces up and down the street. *"Did you hear me? I'm willing to hear you. An explanation. A sequence of events, from the beginning to the end, to here, and then a little bit further."*

He smiles. Ghamut remembers the monk and his tattoo, speaking of this man and his propensity for selling stories.

"Do you need me to explain? And then you will tell me where Vera is?"

Damien shrugs. *"Need? Not quite. I simply express a polite interest. A habit from speaking to the fellow unfortunate. Everyone in that church has gone through some sort of hell and they pray that it does not return. I ask them to remember so it stays far away. I'm sure you have an interesting tale to tell. I promise I will remember it."*

"About Vera?" Ghamut snaps, tapping his foot and glancing up and down the street.

Damien stands up as well. It seems impossible, but he's grown an inch or two since sitting down, and looms slightly higher. *"Whether or not I will take you to Vera is not what is at stake. Focus."*

If it would lead to Vera, Ghamut would follow this man through the river, but simply standing on the corner, watching him, Damien makes no sign of moving either further up the street or back down the way they've come. With no small effort Ghamut manages to force a smile and shakes his head. Politely, he informs Damien that he wouldn't know where to begin. The sun burns overhead and Ghamut would like to have this business over as soon as possible. The other man laughs and the shoulders underneath the cloak shift up and down.

"Most times people begin by complaining about grievances. And then, in order to explain the merits of the complaint, they add depth and substance to it. A construction worker told to do something she's never done before. A woman who felt compelled to inject something into her arm by her friends. Once, a man told me he would have never lost his arm, but he had thought it better than cancer. See: it's very easy. You do it naturally. You explain you are in a rush. You have somewhere to be. Business. With who, for whom, I wonder? Go on. Work from there."

The needle sits warm in Ghamut's palm. He sees a brief silhouette of Kilnyzk appear briefly before him before vanishing, and rubs his head. Without question the man-in-hat would prefer his business kept secret. Ghamut shuts his mouth and then shakes his head. He has nothing to complain about. Damien absorbs the rebuff by craning his chin up and nodding.

"Lucky you, then." He smiles wide. *"Vera had so many mishaps and awful moments to describe the beginning of her adventure. Every Fieldling has."*

"Take me to her."

"Not the question."

"It cannot matter."

"It matters very much."

At each turn of the exchange, Damien's smile grows wider. Ghamut can't see where the teeth end, they don't seem to peter out on either side of the mouth. He shakes his head, and Damien crosses the street to press up close to Ghamut. He doesn't have the right sort of substance to stand at all. Throughout their entire conversation he has not shown a single glimpse of arms and Ghamut begins to wonder if Damien has any limbs at all. *"Won't you tell me what's happened?"*

Ghamut frowns. *"I can't."* Nana had once told him a story he can't remember. It had come with a warning. He remembers enough of it now to keep his silence.

"Why not?"

"I won't." And now Ghamut punches out with the needle. Its tip wavers at Damien's throat. *"Where is Vera?"*

"Where she is or if I will take you to her is not something you can change." Damien stares past the needle. He has grown very tall now. Even with his arm fully extended, the needle now only barely grazes the bottom of his throat. Ghamut wishes Damien would hurry up and produce whatever monstrous arm from within his cloak, but the poncho still hangs limp at his shoulder. *"You do not understand--"*

But Ghamut has not the time or capacity to understand. He has no time for stories or riddles or recollections. Just beyond Vera beckons the promise of comfort and stability; just beyond Damien and his veil of questions waits Vera. If he has to, Ghamut will puncture Damien a million times with the needle until which direction to move next emerges into pockmarked focus.

“Well then,” Damien says. “If it may not have a beginning, or a middle, then I can only assume that my place within it is to take you to its rightful conclusion.”

Again, he seems to grow in height, and now with a flourish, the poncho cloak flies out wide, and Ghamut lunges forward with the needle but finds no purchase. Beneath Damien’s poncho lies almost nothing at all. A solitary, metal spine supports Damien’s head instead of a body, each individual vertebrae held together by blocks of interlinked metal cut in crude geometric approximations of human bone.

The spine -- Damien himself -- has reared up like a snake about to strike and Ghamut has a brief moment to see that the backbone of this creature disappears into a black mass of wires and metal where hips should be, out of which emerges skeletal, metallic legs that disappear into a pair of shoes. The blue-eyed man grins down at Ghamut who looks back in horror.

Fixed onto each vertebrae lie metal antlers -- they have taken the place of ribs and it was these that Ghamut had mistaken for substance. He stumbles towards them. The silver antlers drip oil, are speckled with black spots and white, colugulated fat, they snap open to embrace Ghamut and snap shut to eat him.

Chapter Nine - Fortuneteller's Wager

Damien's electric spine presses firmly into Ghamut's head. Situated just below Damien's head Ghamut can hear the mutterings of his captor as they walk through the city. If Ghamut could speak, he would scream, but a foul smelling protrusion from one of Damien's vertebrae lies firmly upon Ghamut's tongue, extended to gently push all the way through to the back of his throat. The antler-like claws have coalesced in a vice grip round his back and those around his neck force him into an unwilling union with Damien's anthropomorphic frame. Ghamut's arms are bound to his sides, his legs lashed to Damien's own, who walks in a stilted, swiveling fashion, wading forward in half-circles. All around him the dark folds of the poncho swirl in the Civ wind and Ghamut can see from his pinned position flashes of light as the two walk through the city.

His muffled cries summon no help or assistance. His captor easily drowns out his groans, and Ghamut breathes shallowly in darkness as Damien explains in his unwavering voice the necessity of story. Everyone needs that which contextualizes the past and the present and the future, this knowledge prevents the present from becoming eternal but Fieldings need it most of all. Ghamut can only choke. It is a good thing, Damien goes on, that Ghamut does not have any electrics like other members of the church, else the electrodes embedded in Ghamut's bonds would be doing more work than restraint.

In this awful state, wrapped around Damien's lance and pinned with antlers to Damien's spine, Ghamut loses track of time. He can feel the gentle sway of his captor, taste the metal lying

latent on his tongue, stifling him, hear the mutterings of his captor. In the darkness, he can sense a changing of the air. Crisp, filtered breezes soon replace the city's slight humidity.

Damien comes to a halt not long after.

The binds holding him fall away. Ghamut tumbles out of the cloak, retching and spitting and gagging. Damien regards him for a moment before walking away.

They have arrived in a vast, expansive room devoid of texture and depth. All around Ghamut and Damien lie white walls, floors, and ceilings, all emitting a harsh, bright glow. The only landmark at all in the room is Damien, who stands stark black and without a shadow, a single blot of color on a canvas that could be impossibly wide or small.

This annihilation of the senses is utter and complete, every single sound Ghamut makes -- his breathing, his shuffling on the ground, his pulse -- is over-punctuated, too loud in contrast with this nothingness. The noises exist in isolation and the chain of continuity has become so disrupted that Ghamut thinks time itself has shattered and split, one moment in isolation existing next to but not because of another, and another, and another. He closes his eyes and tries to clear his mind but sees a fleshy pink instead of a comforting black.

The needle falls from his hand and clatters on the ground. All throughout the journey Ghamut held it so tightly that for a moment his hand cannot open and he stares at his locked fingers, trying to coax any cooperation from them. Damien watches him. His blue eyes have become pits of electricity and he sits on a small chair which Ghamut could not initially see because it too is painted white.

“Where am I?”

Damien says that they have arrived in a secondary church, a place for circumspection and remembrance. He points to the walls and then the ground, and explains: The church views their tree breaking through marble as an icon. When they watch the roots push against the marble and desecrate the building’s foundation, they imagine that their champion wages war against the city on their behalf. Their tree embodies their wish to return to nature, for their skin and bone to reclaim their cybernetics.

And yet in a rejection of technology they are starved of all its potential. A tree will do nothing except grow, and yet here in rooms like these, the congregation can venture back into bygone times. If only they weren’t such luddites, they could achieve the very thing they so desperately want. Ghamut crawls over to the needle and picks it up again, although it has done nothing of use and will continue to be useless. Damien does not argue or object.

He points the tip of the needle at Damien and snarls. So: Damien is some kind of philosopher who visits churches, plucking poor members of a desperate congregation to torture and then throw the twice damned in little bits into the river.

Damien shakes his head and laughs. He tells Ghamut he has never once cut up anyone into bits to throw in the river, although Ghamut is more than welcome to do whatever he wishes on his own time. He says that if Ghamut were thinking logically, then he would thank him. All of this technology around them -- Damien looks all around them -- opens up a great deal more possibility than a common Fieldling would ever have access to in a lifetime.

“Are you killing me? Are you going to kill me?”

Damien shakes his head. Just the opposite. Damien supposes that after this, Ghamut will begin a life already lived, all over again. Something whines at the nape of Ghamut’s neck, and he feels Damien’s vice grip reemerge: a small clamp presses harder and harder. As he bucks on the floor, trying to rid himself of the lock, the all encompassing white glow begins to flicker. Damien in his deadpan voice says not to be afraid or concerned, most people with cybernetics already have an installed chip for interfacing with their limbs; he will have to install one for Ghamut, free of charge.

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Nana fumbles with the needle. Her withered arm flinches, and with a small emission of sparks, the needle disappears into the depths of the fire. Grimacing, Nana reaches in after it, plucks it from the flames and wipes a bit of the soot on her orange sash. From the old hut behind her comes Ghamut, swearing and falling onto the ground, clawing at his neck and looking desperately from the mud slicked fields all the way back up to the sky, twilight and orange in the dying sun.

She holds out the needle to him.

“You dropped this when you were flailing about.”

“Damien?”

“Sweet boy, Damien does not speak our language.”

Ghamut lets fly with another oath and pitches the needle as hard as his chubby arms can hurl it. It clatters somewhere in the distance. He demands to be let go, for a strange parasite to be

removed from his neck, but when Nana searches him she only finds a slight, faint scar. She strokes his head, and Ghamut bites her. She presses her wound shut and goes back to tending the fire.

He walks around the campsite, kicking holes in his little mud cabin, his grandmother's room. He disappears into the out house and bursts through one of the walls, panting and covered in dust. "Sit down," she finally snaps, and through all of his swearing Ghamut flinches as if struck and ruefully waddles over to the campfire, sticking his hands out by the flames and sifting his fingers left and right to warm them. "Good boy," Nana says, and Ghamut shakes his head.

"Don't."

For a little while they sit together, just like in the old days, before. Nana waits, going through all her old motions until Ghamut finally says, "Are you really her?"

She turns her eyes to him. Smiles. He should be able to tell, she thinks. Nearly two decades of life with him should make the answer obvious.

"Or are you something from Damien?"

Perhaps not.

"Certainly not a part of Damien, child. More than that, at least."

Beside her, Ghamut rubs a bit of dirt between his finger and then raises it to his nose. "How is this possible? How could he know what to--"

"He provides a canvas, you the colors. But he cannot see what you do." Swiveling around, Nana marks out another spot beside the fire. "Only a few things he can directly manipulate. He'll want a description of what you come up with, I think."

“Why?”

Nana shrugs. No doubt in her mind that Damien will exchange something for insight into what Ghamut sees, but what that could possibly be, she can't say. “You know too much, even for a piece of my dreaming,” complains Ghamut. “Nana never knew anything.”

“Child,” Nana says, “I know much more than you think. And certainly more than a mere clump of pixels in a render. Allow me that much.” With mild amusement she waves her one healthy arm at the recapture of the forest and field, the neverending twilight sky. She runs her hand through his hair and feels familiar dust, dirt, sweat, and the remnants of a day long gone. Ghamut wears his usual petulant scowl, and Nana can't help herself; she laughs. All these years later and still he wears that expression of wanting, mischief, and restlessness well.

Ghamut frowns and crosses his tiny child's arms. “How can you be here then? If you aren't part of the room or of Damien?”

“I'm your grandmother. I go where I please. Just because you or the room don't want me here doesn't mean I won't be here.” She builds the fire a bit more. “Are you warm?”

“Then prove it. Prove it by saying something neither one of us could know.”

Nana purses her lips but says nothing. She takes off her sash and gently wraps it round Ghamut's shoulders. Then she looks up at the twilight sky, squinting at the air as if to peer through a haze into the past. “My daughter died giving birth to you,” she says. “When she came back that night covered in blood she looked me right in the eye and asked me to pummel her in the stomach because she couldn't bear the thought of carrying something so foul inside of her, and then when

she died I buried her in the forest and put you in her room where you grew up. She was a fighter, that one. She tore out the throat of the stag with her teeth when he slept beside her. She walked all the way home too, covered in his blood. She joked that when the mosquitos bit her that night they feasted double. She stopped saying such funny things when I refused to beat you out of her. When you were born she clenched her teeth so tight that they broke. Her incisors split and cracked in half. She never held you because she was too busy cursing me and dying. Every night, I stayed up after you to make sure you wouldn't clamp your teeth around my throat and bite down and pull. When you left me in the street for the Civ garbage collector to take away I sighed in relief because I finally got a good night's rest."

"Oh," says Ghamut. His voice barely carries over the fire. "I didn't know that."

Nana bends over to kiss him on the forehead.

"By my design," she says reassuringly. "But you don't have to know. Ever. You can say it was all the room or a figment of your little scrambled mind."

Ghamut rubs his child's hand between his brows. Nana can see the man Ghamut has grown into. The man who walks the streets of Civ alone.

"What about all those monsters?" Ghamut asks. "What about the electric snake?"

Nana strokes his hair. "Those silly things aren't real. They're mistakes. Glitches. Figments. They have to be. When that little insect that burrowed itself into your neck it knocked a few things loose, polluted your memory. Look back, and you'll see."

Ghamut frowns, but only folds himself further into Nana's sash. For a long time they sit together, both staring into a fire that isn't real, until the rest of the world begins to crash between them, just as it did all those years ago.

From the field comes a rustle, and Nana turns to see a small girl in an oversized green dress making her way from the road. Ghamut stirs within the folds of Nana's sash. This girl has brown eyes speckled green and privately Nana thinks she will grow up too pretty for her own good, just like Sylenia. "Is that the one?"

Ghamut nods.

"Be a good boy now, and don't let him know that I'm here. I don't think he'd take kindly to my presence."

A small clump of kindling waits next to Nana's feet. She begins to work away at twisting and tying the little bits of wood into a crown. She rustles into her pocket and adorns the little creation with a dandelion.

The visitor sits down at the fire beside Ghamut and waves cheerily. It speaks in a voice that is not that of a child, but soft and gentle, deep and masculine. It asks Ghamut if he is comfortable. If he's had time to adjust to the scenery. Ghamut glances once at Nana and nods. So this must be Damien. As if in affirmation, the girl claps her hands.

She begins to speak, and says that if all is well, then there is only the matter of a final exchange. If Ghamut would so please, then he shall describe the world that the room has rendered around him, so as to squarely create and report his beginnings. Damien cannot see what Ghamut

has conjured around him, and therefore relies solely on Ghamut's descriptions for information. In a matter of moments, Damien will recite Vera's own story in a show of good faith, and then to conclude his transaction with Ghamut, will give him his best prediction of the end of Ghamut's story.

Damien, in Vera's form, explains: He considers the matter one of a test and prediction, he delights in collecting as many tales and misadventures as he possibly can. After hearing so many, he thinks he can reasonably tell a person's fate just by the way they walk down the street, if they are destined for tragedy or greatness, or, like so many, many others, a life of comforting mediocrity. But for Fieldlings, he says, the natural order has been upended. He is curious to see if his guesses and stabs in the dark will come to fruition.

Without waiting for Ghamut to reply, Damien-as-Vera begins to speak in Civ. She tells them how she once lived in the Northern fields, upriver. It was there to a small but content family she was born and given her name. When she grew up and into herself as a teenager, she had always been told she was beautiful. When Civ came, that hadn't changed. Even today, she still knows she is beautiful. She rubs her eyes with a hand when she speaks and when they come away they have transformed into glass rubies, glittering in the light.

She can get anything in the world in just one night, Damien-as-Vera explains. She had to give up her eyes because she kept on seeing strange things, or things not strange enough. To stop seeing ghosts she gave up one eye and then another. She saved up the first time to pluck out her right eye, then stole for the left. She works by the riverside because it used to be her home. She lived

so close to the water that she could hear the peepers and toads fighting over each other in the night. In the summertime, she would dance over dead cicada shells and listen to them crackle underfoot. Now, she wants to see the rest of the world, and will one day steal enough or work hard enough to buy a ticket out of Civ, maybe buy a boat to sail up or down the river until the whole world ends and there she reaches a place that has nothing but open Fields again. The little girl smiles as if proud to have spouted off such a concise summary of her own existence, and then says, *“But of course she will not succeed. That is all I can say. But she will live the rest of her life here in Civ.”*

Ghamut glances at Nana, who winks at him. She has made two more dandelion crowns while Damien told his story.

“She’s more trouble than she is worth, if you ask me, but of course you didn’t.”

Damien, of course, cannot hear her. Ghamut frowns. With a slight shift of her dress the girl with the electric eyes reaches over the fire to clasp one of Ghamut’s hands. She strokes his palm. Nana puts down her crown, but Vera insists only on hearing what Ghamut can see. Softly, she demands a story, one that only he and he alone can tell. Ghamut trembles in her grasp. Nana puts a finger to her lips, and Ghamut closes his eyes and wraps his fingers tight around Vera’s. When he opens them, he stamps his foot on the ground and looks up at the sky. In the real, the sun would have sunk far below the horizon, but here in this strange limbo, the day will cling on as long as Damien wishes it to.

Glancing once more at Nana, Ghamut begins to speak. He describes his childhood, stealing from Maya, how once his grandmother was bitten by a snake and how he betrayed the missing boy,

Diego. He tells of making dandelion crowns, and then of the moment Nana sold her little house to the black-hatted entrepreneur, Kilnyzk. He tells of monsters and electric snakes, but does not mention Nana, who sits beside him knitting another dandelion crown. When he finishes, Damien lets go of Ghamut's hand. Ghamut has not betrayed Nana, who smiles privately. He is a good boy.

"Thank you," Damien-as-Vera says, and now she says it is time to go. She stands up and hands Ghamut the needle he threw far away into the forest.

Ghamut objects. Hadn't Damien promised so many things? What of Vera? What of his wager as to how Ghamut's tale would end?

The little girl's eyes glitter in the firelight and she says that all will come to pass, but only if Ghamut allow them to, which means leaving this place and whatever comforts he has imagined. She walks away into the dark trees.

Ghamut shudders. He looks over to Nana and she remembers all the times he's given her that same look, whenever she sent him off to bed.

"Do I have to go?"

"You can stay here however long you want. But I don't do too much these days, my dear. Be a good boy, and go finish things. I'll be all right here."

"Didn't you hear what I told Damien?" Ghamut asks. "What I've done? How can you call me that?"

"I'll call you whatever I damn well please," says Nana. "I'm your grandmother."

Ghamut squeezes his eyes shut.

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Light from a streetlight slams into Ghamut's eyes. He blinks. The back of his neck feels warm and when Ghamut grasps at it, his hands shine a dark red. He has been deposited on a bench by the riverside and slowly picks himself up, calling out for Damien. The strange wraith of a man does not reply. All over the water lie little paper boats filled with candles. A few catch fire and flare up like fireflies before sinking into the black waves. The night hasn't grown its thick, star-studded skin overhead yet and the shops and cafes of Civ still churn with the bustling of customers. On the river, barges carrying strings of lanterns beat out music into the night. Beside them, boats packed with contorting, dancing bodies trawl by, laughter splatters the night as the drunks try to stay on board.

A festival is underway, a parade of men and women hold up a long, serpentine puppet of a lion, each jumping post protruding against the puppet's skin like skewers. Fireworks shower the road in sparks and the lion looks as if it walks on grass made of fire.

With a curse Ghamut feels inside his pockets. One hand produces the needle, the other, the slip of paper with the address for the church. The tiny bit of blue ink has been crossed out and a small note beneath reads,

Your story will come to a disastrous end when you prove to yourself you are a good man.

Ghamut crumples the bit of paper and throws it into the river. It sinks quickly.

Muttering to himself and feeling the wound in the back of his head -- it feels more like he's been hit by a club than had something surgically insert itself -- he walks after the procession, catches

the tail end of it. Drawn for no other reason than the promise of light and spectacle, for a little while he walks along the street: hazy. Damien has left him with nothing but a headache and the contents of his pockets, and soon Ghamut wonders if perhaps the monk had simply slipped something into his meal and deposited him outside. Maya has left eight messages on his cell phone and he ignores all of them after listening to the first one.

His walks slowly. Ghamut's breath comes in halting bursts, the light becomes intolerable, until he exits the revelry and claws at the back of his neck. Now his hands come away covered in metallic-scented dust. He has lost the revelry, walks as if in a dream, until from around crossroads jammed in the midst of four buildings slips laughter and he follows the sound into an alley lit green by an ancient light. Shadows of men and women stand in front of an iron door left ajar, smoking cigarettes. Light can't quite penetrate the thickest portions of the smoke, and Ghamut half-walks, half-stumbles towards the crowd. The faceless dark shapes and shadows hearken back to the creatures hiding in the dark lattice of the forest outside his grandmother's campfire.

The men and women part before him. He suddenly feels parched. The back of his throat crinkles like parchment and he opens the door, stuttering and asking for a bit of water. Perhaps he can steal a drink. He walks into a nightclub that smells like of sweat. The lights turn on and off. What little he can see seems dirty. Bodies, all contorting and making all sorts of ghoulish noises, pack the room. As they move, they let out strange ritual chants. A man with an electric hand dances upside down in the middle of the floor, his electric fingers launching him bouncing him up in sync with the chanting around him. Music throbs in the air and Ghamut clutches his head and moans. A

counter to his left, near the door, bottles all catching blue, green, red, white flecks of light. A

barman asks him what his poison is, and Ghamut asks for ice and water.

He takes a frozen cube out of the glass and holds it to the back of his neck, downs the water in a single draught. He stumbles further inward and the reek of sweat intensifies. From the crowd comes a roar, an argument has started in the middle of the floor, sparks fly; someone throws a bottle. The man dancing on his fingers has fallen to the floor. A man in a crimson red suit shoves past Ghamut. His voice disappears in the din.

There's another door with an iron bar in front of it. Hopeful for a restroom, Ghamut heaves up the bar, wrenches open the door, and steps inside onto a concrete floor. The ground pushes back against his feet and he stands stiffly upright. Behind him, the dancing and the lights shut off with a *click*, and Ghamut can hear the sounds struggling to penetrate the veil.

The lights here shine a sickly teal, the shadows stretch and elongate. No sink, yet Ghamut can hear the dripping of water and walks toward it, through a storeroom door, down a long hallway, occasionally stopping to gasp for air. At last: A dripping sink with rusted corroded pipes presents itself, and after Ghamut hurls handfuls of water onto his face, he sees that he has wandered into a janitor's closet.

Making his way back to the club proves more difficult now that he has recovered his senses, and he finds himself lost in a maze of hallways and rooms too numerous to keep track of. At last: laughter, voices, the sounds of the music thumping the floor, every so often, a roar. He paces

forward eagerly, and watches as a shadow detaches itself from a wall, full of teeth and with no less than five eyes all flitting back and forth as it watches Ghamut walk down the hall.

Again, a probe at the back of the neck. The shadow combs itself by running its teeth through textureless fur.

Fucking Damien, Ghamut thinks.

He walks into the room crowded with people all clustered around a bowl-shaped hole in the ground. There's a railing ringed around the circle which the crowd presses up against. A few Fieldlings peer into the depths next to their Civ counterparts. The thumping music pounds louder and louder, but Ghamut can't make out the words. Something silver flares up from below, and Ghamut thinks he can see a tail. Making his way to the railing, he looks down.

A metallic tiger thrashes a wolf, tungsten fangs slamming the spine of the wolf into the floor over and over again. The wolf lies limp on its back after a throw and claws up against the tiger, Ghamut can hear a cry, a human shriek, but then the tiger, who has spittle dripping from its maw, slams its paw into the metallic gut of the wolf. Something sparks, rips, and the wolf's head careens on its side, wheezing and gasping for air. The crowd lets out a mix of groans and cheers.

The tiger sits down on its haunches and collapses on its side, spent.

Money changes hands, and as the crowd begins to disperse, Ghamut cannot help but stare. Across the pit stands Vera. Her electric eyes glitter as she takes the scene, her hands stuffed with winning slips from the bloody spectacle before her. She smokes a cigarette in the same lazy fashion from the riverside.

Chapter Ten - Vera

Her money changes hands. Vera trades all of the vouchers for fat clumps of bills held by rubber bands, and then gives all of them save one to a woman waiting by the door, who shoves it all into a suitcase. The woman taking the money appears fairly young, her youth accentuated by a smart white suit with black accents on the lapel. She has her hair, blonde, pulled up into a smart bun and she looks cutting, angular and sly. She has two dark, metallic black hands that flit quickly and deftly as she packages the money. One hand reaches up to cup Vera's neck. The two women exchange brief words. The woman in the suit laughs. Vera does not. With a quick peck, she kisses Vera on the cheek and snaps her fingers, leaves. Vera fans the money in its rubber band and stamps out the cigarette, grinding it into fine dust with her heel. She slips out the door behind the other woman.

Ghamut scrambles out behind her. He emerges into a back alley just in time to watch a sleek sports car careen away and curses after it, so close, and yet--

A purr of a voice agrees that the night is so full of disappointments, yet equally full of potential.

Vera stands next to a dumpster in the empty alleyway, full of smiles. A purse in her hand, clasped in front of her bulges slightly with the money she has won. Ghamut lets out a low breath.

"You. You've no idea how long--"

"You've been looking for me?"

Vera's smile carries through her words in their own language. In the few weeks since their last encounter, it has not lost any of its luster. Rather, Vera herself, carries a certain weariness about her, one that the light, shining dress can't quite hide. Even in the light of the alley there's a slump to her shoulders. She holds out a hand and Ghamut takes it, pulls her off the wall. Vera pirouettes in his grip as if spun in a dance and stands next to him.

Even with crystals for eyes she is beautiful, and one of her hands traces over Ghamut's shoulder, down his arm as if to re-remember him. "When Timund said a man was looking for me, I didn't picture you."

"Timund?"

"From the church. You visited there quite a bit."

Ghamut clicks his teeth, and Vera laughs. She had no idea Fieldlings could be so persistent, she tells him. Loss comes so naturally to the former inhabitants of the mud-fields that she thought it more natural to let things go, let things die. As she talks, she paces around Ghamut, curious about him, perhaps curious about that moment by the riverside that has returned. She does not ask him why he's been after her and he is glad for it; inventing excuses and lies this late in the night seems exhausting. As she circles him, inspecting, she steps in something foul and looks down at her foot, where a rotting, black mess now clings. Together, they begin their journey away from the alleyway.

Ghamut reaches into his pocket for the needle. He watches for anyone who might follow them or for the woman in the white suit in the club; she certainly seemed important. Perhaps important enough to assign someone to keep an eye on Vera.

As they walk somewhat mindlessly back towards more familiar streets, Vera appears to find great humor in Ghamut and his nervous glances. She laughs and laughs, until they emerge out of the corridors of dark alleyways and find themselves stepping behind the remnants of the parade. Litter and garbage somersault over the ground, spurred by the low breezes. Spent firecracker casings crumple underfoot and smoke hangs hazily in the air. The two of them look as if they belong in Civ, Ghamut in his long and tattered overcoat offset by Vera and her shining dress. They walk side by side until Vera pauses at a cafe that still has its incandescent lights on. The night has gone on in a rush, and only a few patrons line the outside seating. A few blink blearily at the two new visitors.

“I think this is where my family used to live,” Vera says softly. “Where was yours?”

Ghamut glances. Sure enough, here they are by the river. Damien’s words run through him and he shakes them. Water from a dog’s back. He smiles and waves his hand in the hazy direction of the substation.

“Would you like anything to drink?” Vera says.

“I don’t have any money yet.”

“My treat.” She taps her purse. “It’s the least I can do. You must be tired.”

She returns a moment later to hand him a steaming cup of coffee. She sips her own, and Ghamut gestures at her purse. “You bet on metal-fights?”

She nods, takes her drink. When she speaks, large plumes of steam drift away. Good money. More professional. She works for one of the syndicates after attracting attention -- she called three bouts in a row on narrow odds. Ghamut raises a toast to that.

“Lucky you.”

Vera shakes her head and insists that it is all the eyes. Ghamut remembers the sum of money she owed Sammi, and nods. They must be special eyes. Vera smiles mischievously. Maybe it's not *all* in the eyes. Fieldlings are special, she says. They have a particular way of seeing the world. Sometimes, it takes a particular amount of Civ to make sense of it all, and she taps her crystalline implants, which click in the night. Ghamut frowns.

She glances over his shoulder and something in her face changes. She stares at two men who sip from cups, seated behind them. “Those two are trouble,” she says. “But we'll be alright.”

“What?”

She smiles, shakes her head. “You don't have any implants,” she says quietly. “But I do. Let's go, quickly.” Ghamut shakes his head and picks up his coffee. It's been so long since he's drunk anything other than water or alcohol. The caffeine runs through him and makes him jittery. Vera holds out her hand and takes the cup from him or he gives it to her. After all, she's paying for the thing. She holds it close to her chest like clutching a secret, and walks off into an alleyway. He follows. As he rounds the corner, he sees that the two men drinking behind them push in their chairs and stalk after them.

Again, Ghamut has his hand around the needle.

Vera leads them down an alleyway. The shadows of the two other patrons stretch long behind them. “You shouldn’t have paid in front of everyone,” Ghamut complains.

“I said we’ll be alright,” Vera says. “Trust me. I’ve called the last five fights at the club, I call this one, now that you’re here.” She presses him up next to a wall and he can feel her bitter breath as she leans close. Her crystalline eyes search his. The shadows are almost upon them.

“You look nervous.”

Ghamut has his hand planted squarely in his pocket. Vera smells like coffee and reassurance. A low voice demands something, and with a jerk of sinew, Vera hurls the steaming cup of liquid into one of the men’s faces, who staggers back with a yowl, filling up the night. The other careens into Vera, who lets out a soft exhale, her weight against Ghamut’s chest vanishes.

Ghamut pulls the needle out. He punches it through the cheek of the man with coffee steaming from his eyes and knocks out canines and molars. Ghamut pushes forward with his arm, intending to throw the man caught by the needle onto the ground, but instead pulling the man down, the needle instead rips a gash into the man’s face, leaving him caught upright and gurgling.

With a scream muffled by liquid he runs away, dripping.

The other man has pounced on Vera, who glitters on the ground in struggle. He claws for her purse and raises something in his hand. Vera rolls and something *rips*, as something else clinks gently on the cobblestone. She lets out a little yelp and then Ghamut kicks the back of the man’s head. He falls to the ground and doesn’t move.

Vera holds her side and her hand comes away bloody. The man on the ground has torn her dress and she staggers shakily to her feet, sweeps back her hair which has fallen in a sheet before her face. She smiles a gritted, painful smile.

“Just as he said,” she says quietly, as if she can’t quite believe herself.

Ghamut narrows his eyes. “Who?”

Vera shakes her head. “A friend who happens to be right about most things.”

Ghamut demands to hear what this friend of hers has said, if he wears a poncho, snatches up people to kidnap them and drag them away to white rooms, but Vera shakes her head and grimaces, panting.

It is not such a grand thing, just that a good man would come to her aid in darker times.

Ghamut’s neck constricts and does not release as he swallows nervously. Vera holds the gash in her side and shakes her head. She did not imagine that the good man would be him, although she could have guessed that it would be. Good men are a rare breed. It’s not as if they fall from the sky. She picks up her purse as she staggers to her feet. “Let’s go home.”

“What the hell makes you say that?” Ghamut asks, still caught in the net of her words. He clenches his fists. Vera smiles and taps her crystalline eyes.

She exhales and says she can see the content of Ghamut’s character the same way she can see who will win the metal fights. It is a gift that she thought she had lost when she had grown out of childhood, after Civ had bulldozed her hovel and installed its electric lights. But after she had torn out her old eyes and installed new ones, gratefully free of seeing the physicality of nights spent

fucking in Sammi's little room, the dreadful gore of the fights she bets on and bears witness to. It's why she hasn't lost a bet yet. Her worlds come in staccotic bursts as she limps down the alleyway, breathing hard. Ghamut holds her hand half to support her and half to make sure she doesn't slip away.

Pieces of an explanation click into place. A chance at clairvoyance seems just the kind of thing the man-in-hat would pay an exorbitant perfect sum of money for. "It's like seeing different colors through water," Vera says. "Shimmering, shining, never in focus."

She sits down hard on the ground and asks for a moment. When she moves she gasps slightly, and when Ghamut asks after her she admits to him that the wound stings, but it isn't too deep. They both know that that's a lie, Ghamut because he's more familiar with such injuries, and Vera, because she's the one wearing the cut herself, her skin has drained of color and she grabs at her side with both hands now.

She glances up at him and says she can tell that he's worried, the colors on the riverside say so, but that she'll be all right. It's just another thing to wear, like her dress or her eyes. The needle drips on the alleyway floor. Ghamut can't decide whether or not he is disappointed that she sees only these colors, and not the greasy mop of hair, the tattered cloak, the needle in his hand, or the expression spreading across his face. He had hoped that something uniquely his had inspired ardor in this strange woman, but again, just like Nana, Vera seems to stare past him at something beyond his comprehension.

“Don’t you want to know?” she says from her position pressed up against the wall, her legs slowly unfurling as she sinks lower and lower to the ground.

“Know what?” He just wants to keep her awake, at this point.

When she points to him and her hands are covered red. “What I see? Everyone wants to know what color they are.”

No, Ghamut does not want to know what color she sees, but Vera tells him anyway. He is the color of sunset, of gold glittering across the water. Good colors, safe colors. Rare ones, if he cares about that at all. He does not. She insists: they are the colors of good men.

“That can’t be right,” Ghamut says, pulling out his phone. He looks down at the only two numbers that have labels.

Vera insists. Her eyes, they don’t lie, even if he can’t see it, she can. Her eyelids droop and she inhales as if inflating herself in preparation for some moment that will spill more blood out of her side. In the alley, everything is mercifully dark, but even so, Ghamut can see something shining slick like oil coating Vera’s dress.

Ghamut lets out a low breath. “Wait a moment,” he says, “I have a friend who will take care of you.”

Vera relaxes and settles back into the street. She asks Ghamut if he ever saw anything odd or strange as a child. A small black snake with a singular matte scale wraps itself around Vera’s eyes, and her arm falls to her side. She sucks in air but does not say another word. Ghamut shudders and calls Kilnyzk.

Chapter Eleven - Exchange

He had been worried that upon completion of the contract, Kilnyzck would repeat his vanishing act and leave Ghamut without compensation. But when the car eases into the alleyway beside them, the midnight business concludes with considerably less excitement than Ghamut had imagined. The car's back door eases open.

The man-in-hat limps his way towards them with his clicking cane and stares down at Vera, who lies slumped to one side. He holds a gloved hand up and twitches his fingers. The black car at the end of the alley rocks as the driver's door opens, and a massive man emerges into view, entirely bald and with a cascade of chins that disappears into a fat wad of a neck. When he walks, his breath hisses out of a mouth squished between two enormous jowls. Two beady eyes flit over to glare at Ghamut and Vera. The driver walks over to them all, Kilnyzck seeming somehow delicate and fragile when set next to the massive slab of meat that towers over them all.

The driver kneels down on one knee and picks up Vera, his enormous arms scrabbling for a hold until he carries her, pressed against his chest like a baby. He waddles back to the car. She seems tiny in his paws, but he carries her gently, lowering her into the open back door that Kilnyzck emerged from and slowly pushing her to the far side. The car's suspension groans as he does his work.

"You didn't cut her, did you?" Kilnyzck asks, looking around the alley. His gaze settles on Ghamut and he feels a sharp, knife-like anger hiding just behind the old man's warm, genial tone.

Ghamut shakes his head and points to the would-be mugger lying on the ground before them. "Ah," says Kilnyzck.

He motions with a hand and the lumbering bear of a driver walks forward, staring suspiciously at the needle still clutched in Ghamut's hand. With a slight exhale of air he puts his foot on the man's neck and rocks forward. He walks back to the car.

Kilnyzck and Ghamut stand in the alley together and the man-in-hat takes off his hat and bows slightly to Ghamut. Successful transactions are the sign of a stable order, and he delights in this reaffirmation. He cocks his head, looks at Ghamut and offers him a ride. The money lies in the car.

Ghamut isn't sure whether it is rude or not to take the offer, and hazards that Kilnyzk already has an outcome in mind; he accepts, and the man-in-hat holds the door open for him. Vera lies on the seat, slumped over. At the slight rocking of the car her eyes open and she smiles before closing them again. The interior smells like apple-scented perfume and is leather coated and soft. Ghamut and Vera lie across from an empty row of seats, now half-occupied by the man-in hat, who smiles at them.

The driver presses the accelerator and the lot of them rock in their seats. The man-in-hat smiles and places his gloved hand on Ghamut's shoulder, pressing harder and harder until finally he releases it. On the formerly pristine white glove are smears of dirt, grease, sweat, and blood. Kilnyzk nods, smells the soiled glove as if the grime upon the white surface contains all the wonder in the world, and then leans back against the window to look at Ghamut and Vera across from him.

“What--”

Kilnyzk leans forward in his seat to hear Ghamut.

“What are--”

The man waits for Ghamut to finish his question, but he can't, and so Kilnyzk strokes his chin and looks at Ghamut, sitting upright next to Vera, slumped over, and shakes his head. When he at last turns away to look at Civ, speeding by, Ghamut reaches over to hold Vera's hand, stroking her limp fingers. He hopes that she will wake up, and soon, either sigh in relief or scream, and let him know whether to be content or terrified.

The needle lies dormant in his pocket. He could slam it through Kilnyzk's wrinkled gullet and then through the back of the driver's neck and cradle Vera in his arms as the car spins out of control. They could run away forever. Ghamut knows how to hunt and Vera knows how to become lost, almost without effort. Somewhere in the car Kilnyzck has stashed all the money in the world, and surely that would make things easier.

But before Vera wakes up, the car oozes to a halt in front of the dilapidated shopping center and Ghamut stands out in the cold night air and waits while Kilnyzck opens and closes the trunk with such a sharp report Ghamut flinches. The suitcase as promised suddenly sits in his hand and there is a solid, monetary weight to it. It feels proper even if Ghamut does not.

Kilnyzck rests his hand on Ghamut's shoulder, looks into his eyes, then nods and opens the car door. After it clicks shut the car begins to roll forward, but then lurches shut again. The back

window rolls down and there Kilnyzck appears again, reaching out of the window to hold out a small slip of white. Vera's clutch purse.

"She won't be needing it," Kilnyzck says in his usual soft voice. "You have earned it."

Ghamut takes it and holds it in his hand. On its white, dimpled face, he can see a stain left over from the cafe, and now in his hands his very touch marring the white leather with blood and street water. He takes it and thinks how in all his time looking for debtors and hunting them down he has never held onto anything of theirs before. Nor has he ever looked so long or with such desperation for one such as Vera before.

Kilnyzck thanks him and calls him a good boy and says that he will remember Ghamut's name, not just for the exorbitant sum of money he has paid him, but also because of the excellent job he has done, all within the turn of the month. Excellent job for a Fieldling. The engine roars and the window rolls up. Ghamut flinches and blinks and then he moves away. Kilnyzck's car with Vera still slouched in the backseat pulls away. His hands shake and he doesn't know what to do with them, so he opens her purse and a handful of bills fall onto the ground. He recollects them and then opens the suitcase and gasps. Hundreds, maybe thousands more slips of paper money are piled on top of each other.

A disruption in the night, then.

Maya stands up in the doorway of the ruins and though Ghamut calls out to her -- look at his spoils, their spoils -- she turns away and vanishes into the darkness.

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She will not be stopped.

Starved for days, she says, starved for days and you -- did what, did what for him? Ghamut tries to explain, cannot comprehend Maya's sense of betrayal. Ghamut had thought that after Vera's delivery, Maya would relax and settle down. His business has concluded, and so too should Maya's anger come to a close as well. But now he realizes that he is sorely mistaken. Maya has transformed Vera into an abstraction of every possible thing she could hate and now views Ghamut as the deliverer of such things into Maya's life. She sits on a broken windowsill and slams her feet into the wall below her and looks so miserable. How could you, she says.

"How could you?"

To which he offers to buy her food, drink, wine, caviar. There are boats on the river they can take and tour the land they once walked as children. She calls him poison, a traitor, a bastard, and Ghamut wants to puff out his chest and say, 'No, I am golden sunlight on the water,' but knows better and keeps quiet.

Maya points at him and pulls up her shirt to show a sunken stomach and protruding ribs. She shows him a lateral scar embedded in her skin. It's grown a personality in colors, mottled purples, dark greens, the occasional jaundic yellow, garish against her skin. Ghamut stares. Maya tells him that she was so hungry she hadn't noticed the glass shard sticking out of her side, she had been too busy trying to cram herself into a window.

She pulls down her lip to reveal a gash from where she bit someone in a scrap over food found in a dumpster. The bread she'd won had tasted like copper. Ghamut has led her to ruin all

while he cavorts with Kilnyzck. He shakes his head. The money is for both of them. For him and for her; for Maya and Ghamut and not the two starving, squatting Fieldlings. They'll have reclaimed their names instead of being known by the price they charge for collections.

Maya laughs at him. She spits on the ground and reaches back with her long memory to hurl the cruelty he so easily and willingly waded into as a child back at him. How could he ever want to wear his own name, marker of the one who consorts with the very man who took everything from them and now sells them back what he owes in exchange for horrible, horrible things. Was that a woman in the backseat? Maya trembles.

Ghamut glares at her. All the world will ever be out of reach forever if they always stop to gawk at the past. Maya remembers--

"You don't remember the forest," Ghamut snarls. He points the needle at her. Its tip shakes. Maya looks at him with something like pity in her eyes.

Didn't Nana tell him, tell them, before she died, that this would be as good as they ever got and nothing more?

For all that Maya can remember, she can only remember his grandmother by what she said, not who she was. All the old woman ever wanted to do was sit by the fire and stare into a world she knew nothing about. She was blind as a bat and so lost in the past she hadn't seen the future rearing up to eat her. Civ came and ate her up and left nothing but a needle. Maya sneers.

Poor Ghamut. At least the world took everything away from Nana; Ghamut has given it all away. Would give everything he has in exchange for everything in the world, she should give it all

for Ghamut, who wants everything and has nothing except for her and isn't that nice, how funny, how savagely cruel she can be? No: He is a fool. A stupid boy grown into a stupid fool, too stupid without her.

See how Maya sees the walls of his cage and how he would in a moment snuff her out and rifle in her pockets for a key?

Maybe, he really will kill her. But of course he doesn't. He sits down with the money and cradles it to his chest and tells her that he will buy her medicine and salves for her cuts and then they will see who is right and who is alive. They fall asleep angry.

She will grow better and wiser, he thinks, but instead, she disappears. She can only bear to remain for a single night after his business with the man-in-hat concludes. She stared into the darkness, fingers rubbing her still healing temple while she muttered to herself quietly. Ghamut moved from his sleeping mat next to her and she looked at him and then around him and shuddered, and when he asked her what he saw, Maya gave him a gaze full of the same wonderment and fear he had once given to the forest and its creatures and shook her head.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I think I'm going crazy, just like your grandmother. I keep on seeing things and dreaming of the day I cut off your traitorous head and stick it on a pole until the ants feast on it and carry you in bits into the river."

Ghamut smiled. Her anger was familiar and comforting. Maya smiled back, and looking back in the days after Ghamut realizes too late that Maya had only smiled because she had already decided where to go before the morning came.

She sighed, then, and reached over to grab Ghamut's hand. She placed it on her temple. Her skin felt warm and in the dark she seemed solid and real, not like something about to disappear. "Tell me." Her voice rang with something hollow, and looking back, Ghamut should have known she was about to vanish in one of her spells, had already decided to abandon him, yet in the moment he thought, he thought he had a chance to keep her here. "Did that doctor put something electric in me?" Maya asked again. "Am I still all me?"

Ghamut traced her scar with a finger, feeling the tuft of her hair and the patchwork repair underneath. "Why do you ask?"

And again she told him that she sees things in the dark, and in the light. Things that have grown more pronounced than before. Perhaps she is really going crazy, perhaps she's infected with some cybernetic device.

"Do I glow in color?" Ghamut asked, thinking of Vera and her eyes.

"No," Maya said.

And for a long moment they stood silently together, looking at each other. Ghamut saw his old monsters coiled up around her, all teeth and eyes grinning, as if waiting for his answer, and Maya, perhaps, saw something too.

"I don't know," Ghamut said. "I can pay the doctor either way, tomorrow. For an answer."

For a long moment she said nothing and then shuddered against his touch. She reached up and took his hand and placed it on the floor, moved away in the darkness into the realm of eyes and teeth.

When Ghamut wakes up, Maya is gone.

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Maya leaves behind all of his belongings, her cell phone, and takes what little she has in the world. She has not touched the money he's bought them, not lifted a single cent or snatched a folded bill. Ghamut yells. The city swallows up the sound.

Business first. Ghamut clears his debt with the police, pays his fine. The officer who takes his money thinks he has stolen it. "Worse," Ghamut assures him.

This leads to a bit of a ruckus at the station, but after Ghamut's insistence and a call to Kilnyzck, the officers who have surrounded him with electric prods and pistols drawn all walk away and leave him with his suitcase and the half-empty purse. Their exchange is over.

Kilnyzck has left him so much money Ghamut doesn't know what to do with it all. For a long while he walks in terror, afraid that someone will beat him over the head with a pipe or slip a blade between his ribs, but he still looks destitute and no one pays him any mind. He wanders the city with some half-hearted intention of finding Maya but knows that he in all likelihood won't find her.

He has finally made it out of the slums, he tells himself, and left Maya behind. A scheme since childhood to be rid of her has finally come to fruition yet he can't bring himself to smile.

He buys an apartment. The concept of rent is a confusing, strange thing, one he can't quite understand after living as a squatter or as a Fieldling, so he forgoes the monthly payments for single time deposit and transfer. His new apartment looks over the riverside, and a special Civ man -- a realtor?-- takes a handful of money and counts it, keeps counting and has Ghamut sign a collection of papers until he suddenly declares that Ghamut has bought the house. The realtor leaves and the suitcase sits on a little table made out of something that looks like wood but feels like plastic. In the daylight, the lanterns hanging on strings look undersaturated, the water looks gray and moldy instead of a crisp, sharp black, and the air in the apartment smells like lemon scent and some artificial smell that has embedded itself into everything.

The apartment is small and entirely plain. The entry from the hallway is flanked by a closet on one side, a bathroom on the other, the tiny walkway gives way to a small kitchen with a counter that looks into a tiny living room that serves dual purpose as a bedroom -- a bed lies shoved up against the wall and at the foot of it sits a couch oriented towards a television screen. The windows overlooking the river let in gray light.

He strips out of his dirty clothes and stares out over the world like a newborn.

He takes a shower and interrogates the room. Every sensation imprints the strange scent of citrus. He feels sheets with his hand and gingerly rocks his wet feet upon the carpet. He smells like cleaning products. Ghamut lies down on the bed and falls asleep before he can understand what has happened to him.

Part Three

Fernwet

Chapter Twelve - The Burning Willow

She could not recognize him now! He has grown beyond her expectations, or perhaps into them, lives the life he has worked so hard for. Wears clean clothes, not how she knew him, all the grime washed away every night. He smells nice. He talks well. He stands upright and not hunched over. She wouldn't see hunger and mischief in his eyes, it's been bludgeoned out. He has a beard!

How handsome he's grown, how discerning, dashing, and demure: tantalizing, exotic.

She would not know what to say, and so she would not say anything at all.

He thinks it is for the best. After his nights of revelry, he comes home to her silence.

Her judgment.

She watches him in the crook of every shadow, a reflection, and he can't pinpoint who he curses in front of the mirror. He mixes up her name, she cycles before him. Naya, Mera, Vemana. He breaks one mirror and has it replaced, then another, nicks his neck with a razor trimming his beard and watches the cut well red before rinsing it away.

The creatures still plague him, but she didn't ever believe in the creatures to begin with, he never told her. And so they're his company. They sit around the apartment, building in number, until they clog the air. He wakes up one night to see one slip away from him, covered in eyes. It winks at him, then blinks, and he tries to push it out of the way but it scampers, bumps into another, and sends a whole tower of them onto the floor. They don't make a sound when they land.

When he falls off the bed, they scatter and in the moonlight he thrashes about at the blinking, grinning masses, tortured by their amusement. He calls the doctor.

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The doctor insists that there are no traces of any electronics in Ghamut's brain. He was happy to take Ghamut's money the first five tests, but now at the sixth he finally seems to balk at the prospect. "Well check again," Ghamut says, lying down on the operating table.

The doctor sighs and probes the little scar, and with a click peers inside with a scanner. Nothing has changed. No errant shard or piece of shrapnel has embedded or suddenly announced itself in his brain.

As usual, Ghamut feels silly. He sits up and rubs his eyes.

The doctor has his hands clasped in front of him. It is early in the morning, before the sun has come up. He's all shadows and sighs. "*What the hell is wrong with you?*" the doctor asks.

Until this point, Ghamut has managed to avoid telling the doctor about the strange creatures, but now upon the sixth same procedure he too can feel his resolve crumbling.

Ghamut has never known if the shadows can hear or understand him, much less decipher intent. No amount of swearing, cursing or shouts seem to have an effect on the blinking, grinning things. Even so the mere idea of describing them to the doctor in a different language seems intimately incorrect, as if afraid by revealing his own malfunctions he will make all of the Fieldlings seem damaged by proxy.

The doctor hasn't expected an answer, he's moved on to putting back the instruments and is in the midst of slipping back out of his gloves and hair net. Ghamut surprises them both when he stutters out in the wrong language a series of what the doctor then describes as hallucinations, figments, waking dreams and sleep paralysis. Further surprise when he assures Ghamut that if this were the case all along, he can have a fix for Ghamut readily and quickly. All for a sum, of course.

"We live in a constant barrage of miracles," the doctor says. "You can be anything you want or see anything you want to see. I can give you eyes with filters as easily as I can restore the beauty of a firefighter whose face has melted off."

He shows Ghamut a picture of a recent operation, as well as the prosthetic face he has outfitted for the burn victim. "See?"

At Ghamut's grimace the doctor shakes his head. His thinking is so terrestrial. The doctor tells Ghamut that if he likes, he can go 'full chrome', and have shining skin and eyes that shoot laser beams. If he so wants, he can put a vending machine in his rectum and shit out candy. The doctor spins a scalpel in his hands, warming up, becoming excited now. Ask for anything in the world, and you can become it. He tells Ghamut of clinics that create insects and animals out of humans. An entire metal forest, complete with its own new inhabitants. In his excitement, the doctor skips right over Ghamut's present and past and seizes upon his future.

"Guarantee you won't have nightmares if you've got your spine married to a chassis," he says.

Somewhere just beyond the reach of human sanity lies a promise of an escape. If only Ghamut could

reach out and take it, buy it, then it would become his, piece by piece. All it needs are the parts and interlocking fragments of liberation and experimentation.

“I just want no nightmares,” Ghamut says. He’s still getting his bearings. From the sleeping mats to a bed, to now supplementing and exceeding identity and humanity, Ghamut considers the exponential explosion of potential unsettling.

The doctor sighs and sells Ghamut a bottle of pills that he says will ease the psychological underpinnings of whatever might be troubling him. On his way out of the workshop Ghamut turns to the doctor, who is back to work on an electric spine.

“Don’t you have bad dreams too?”

The doctor gives him a look. He has lived in Civ all his life, went to school, and watched as the city paved over the fields. He says that he wasn’t raised in mud, and so he can’t have nightmares of returning to dust.

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The medicine has a soothing, hazy effect. Rather than banishing the creatures entirely, it makes Ghamut perpetually distracted. He accepts them without so much as blinking, and holds up his hands and arms and thinks about what the doctor says. He imagines installing cameras and eyes all up and down his hands and replacing his fingers with claws so he can latch onto ceilings and drink soup while hanging upside down and perform other such crimes against nature.

He drifts through the days, visits the club that he found Vera at, in the hopes of seeing the woman in the white suit, but there a guard stops him from opening the door with the iron bar.

He enters into a series of entanglements with Sammi, and thinks that the city has never felt smaller. She's giddy, delighted with his attention and folds herself into the rift that Maya or Vera has torn out of him. When he wakes up in his apartment he discovers she has claimed almost all the covers in the night and makes her coffee and thinks that he might love her. It makes sense. He likes the way she laughs, the way she spins when she hears her name. She's probably smarter than him and knows better than to ask about whose place she's occupying or how he's gotten the money for his apartment. She feels soft and strong and warm and like green lights. Once, staring up to the ceiling and watching the grinning shadows stare back, he tells her all of this. Sammi is smart enough to doubt him. She holds his hand in her electric one and traces the creases in his palm.

She looks mischievous when she tells him of his fortune, a trick she picked up at Heathers for seduction. She promises she'll tell the truth when she reads his and squints at the lines in his palm. When she speaks she winks at him and promises better things to come. She could say anything and Ghamut would prefer it to what Damien had to say and when she finishes she taps his palm and says that if they're lucky then maybe one day they'll wake up in the same bed fifty years from now and that'll be love, but now... She winks and says right now, it's luck.

"What does that mean?" Ghamut asks.

She takes a moment to reply. "It means that you don't know what you're talking about."

"Then tell me."

She sighs but still smiles. She tells him she doesn't know what it means either, but just because a person doesn't understand something doesn't make it untrue. Ghamut's insistence

demands further explanation and eventually she collapses into a thoughtful musing. She purrs and uses the same voice Ghamut hears when she acts as a *soutenuse*. “Luck. Luck is wandering into the eye of the storm. Maybe love is walking out of the storm itself.”

“Maybe you’re in both places.”

“Lucky you.”

“I’m thinking of buying a dog. What shall we name it?”

Sammi laughs and tells him to shut the fuck up then slings on clothes and her favorite puffy jacket and says she has to go to work. She pecks him on the cheek and then steps back out into the hallway to go to Heathers.

When she leaves, Ghamut goes for a walk. The apartment always feels emptier in her immediate absence.

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He ventures beyond the substation that marks his oldest home and into the parts of the city where the forest once stood. Instead of trees and dark lattice, the buildings and streetlights make a nest of light. Ghamut wanders up and down until he travels roundabout to where his mother’s grave was.

This plot of land became a shopping district, and the store directly on top of the grave sells cheap clothes. Its lack of evocation disappoints him. Ghamut had hoped for something so ironic, insulting, or banal that he could pretend that the placement of the store had some kind of significance, even if the slight was something only he could appreciate. He walks further and

further. Soon he finds himself at the very edge of Civ, where the gradient of development yields grassland, mud spots, and sand. The roads start to peter off and half-finished construction projects dot all the way up until the horizon, sporadically interspersed with tents and lights attached to generators that growl all during the night. Men with hard hats and robotic arms swing industrial tools to pulverize and level the dirt.

Ghamut feels the mud beneath his feet and sighs. Somewhere along the way, the creatures have all vanished. The bag of pills rattles in his pocket and he curses. He's forgotten the bloody needle back at the apartment.

When was the last time you screamed, the jailed madman with the broken back had asked.

He coughs, sucks in a breath.

"Hey."

Ghamut chokes on his surprise. A young worker clad in ragged neon clothes with a jackhammer protruding from his forearm has wandered out from the dark and squats atop a rock and bobs his chin at him. Sweat clears dust from his skin in streaks. With his organic hand the man scratches the stubble flecking his chin.

"You lost?"

"I think so," Ghamut says slowly.

"This place isn't safe. There's nails and chemicals lying around. Explosives and destabilizers in the ground."

"Oh."

"Yeah. I'll take you back to proper roads." The young man begins to walk back with his arm slung over his shoulder towards the lights of Civ. The jackhammer extension has been attached to integrated springs and pneumatics. He does not turn around to see if Ghamut follows. Every single step the worker takes, the mechanics of the jackhammer slot left and right with little clicks. Its tip is jagged and chipped and a small thin crack lies within the shaft of the hammer itself.

When they reach the city, Ghamut points to the tool on his arm and asks, *"Does that hurt?"*

The man looks at his arm as if noticing it for the first time.

"No." He points with the shaft back into the city. *"There you go. If you want a tour beyond the working zones there's services that are open in the day."*

He turns around and moves back down the road towards the Fields. Ghamut stares down at his shoes. He's stepped in something that has melted away a portion of the sole and will have to throw it away in the morning. It isn't safe out there. There's nothing to go back to. New, strange inhabitants lay claim to the borders now.

"If you became an animal, which one?" he asks.

The man speaks without turning around as if he expected the question. *"A goddamn peacock."*

"Why?"

And now the worker seems puzzled, and says as if stating the obvious:

"Because it's better than being a hammer."

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He buys a car and forgets how to walk. He marvels at the engineering, the gaskets and the different color fluids and batches of pipes underneath. Despite the overwhelming complexity of the machine, he comes to accept that they all mesh together in the name of a singular function. The world makes more sense in a vehicle, and the back alleys and side streets evaporate into temporary shadows and passing blurs. After nearly a fourth crash he manages to stay within lines and drives like a geriatric who remembers a different time and set of rules.

“Look at you,” the doctor says without a hint of irony. He’s staring at Ghamut’s car, a plain silver box with curves and a few sleek ridges lumped onto it. There’s a screen inside the dash that Ghamut likes to play with. Occasionally, if he pokes the right buttons, music plays. Ghamut has come to refill his prescription and notices a fresh box lying out on the operating room table. The doctor’s gloves still drip and noticing Ghamut’s stare, the doctor slings them away and smiles.

Another delivery, the doctor explains. With Maya and Ghamut retired, the doctor has taken on a series of new delivery boys, sending them one by one into the Low. Sometimes he doesn’t have to pay them because they don’t come back. There’s always a bonus from the rippers and tailors when that happens. He looks like he expects Ghamut to chuckle with him and seems disappointed when Ghamut only offers to shepherd the unwitting courier for a reduction in pay for the biweekly medicine.

“And how is the medicine helping?” the doctor asks. *“Any more hallucinations?”*

Ghamut shrugs. *“Less frightening.”*

Nodding in approval, the doctor agrees to a reduction of the cost of medicine, and the two men walk inside to wait for the courier. The doctor shows him new metallic parts mounted on the walls as well as a precise saw for working and asks if Ghamut has given any thought to growing an electric tail or installing other, more interesting nicknacks.

Ghamut weighs a sliver of tungsten and tries not to imagine the pain of such procedures. "Could a peacock?" he asks, to which the doctor answers immediately, "Yes."

Ghamut shakes his head and laughs, but the doctor reminds him of the metal forest. After all, they have burned and razed the old ones. "*The difference isn't man and peacock, but limit and potential.*"

He tells Ghamut a story.

"There was once a woman, walks into my clinic, with pain. Every day. Just pain, pain, pain, and more pain. So one day, when her father dies, she is... in more pain, and takes his money and comes to me. She knows: the body is the source of all of it. All this hurt and suffering and misery all wrapped up in her form. So I take the metal, break her out of it. She was not afraid, because she understood that as soon as prosthesis became functional, when the first electric limb was attached not out of necessity but for want, life grew naturally into metallics and design instead of luck and chance. She walks out of here, and ta-da! No more pain."

He points at the piece of metal in Ghamut's hand.

"Metal is clean and nonjudgmental, completely pain-less."

"What did she possess?" Ghamut asks. What sickness, what disease, he wonders, did this poor woman have?

The doctor grins. *“Not sick. Perfectly healthy. But still human. Still a woman. I think she is reimagined now, in the electric forest. Life as you want to be.”*

“It is real?”

The doctor nods. Of course it is real. But its inhabitants feel no need to consort with the people who cannot afford enlightenment. They don't walk on the streets anymore. No one sees them because electric beings don't need to be understood, they understand themselves. Oh, how the forest is a peaceful, strange place, filled by the luckiest of all creatures. The doctor says that some call the forest's creations monstrous, balk at the thought of beings with tens of arms and no legs, knives for skin, ambiguous, modular creations that can shift and become anyone or anything at will. But the fearful are as blind as they are wrong. With cybernetics comes the capacity to inhabit any human form: man, woman, all that lies in between, creature, monster, angels and gods, all depending on the installed module. Of course, at the moment it is costly and therefore prohibitive, but one day, one day the doctor believes they will all walk the electric forest in the shadows of metal trees. He sighs and stares somewhere off into a kinder future and Ghamut puts the metal piece down.

Then the door rings open and the courier walks in to take the box and *now* the doctor laughs because the contents of the box are for those wretches who know of a body's potential for modification and liberation, but are still firmly stuck within a dying, burning forest; they'll burn with it.

Together, Ghamut and the courier, who shakes Ghamut's hand and introduces himself as Vale, clamber into the car. "*Don't forget your medicine,*" the doctor says, and then they set off. Ghamut wears a thoughtful frown and does not speak the entire ride, perhaps for the benefit of both driver and passenger; there is nothing really to say.

When they park beneath the black dome, Ghamut stares up at the pillars and Vale makes his climb. For a little while Ghamut watches the pale figure and the box wind their way up the scaffolding, and when at last Vale disappears from sight, Ghamut stares out at the shadows and crevices set upon the street and frowns. The air still stinks down here.

Before he can open the car door, a woman stumbles out of one of the drooping buildings on the side of the road to sit down on a sidewalk curb. She's hidden away in a massive blob of a cloak and a bottle protrudes where a hand ought to be. When she sits down on the curb she belches slightly, then tips the bottle back in such a familiar, practiced motion that Ghamut cannot believe his eyes.

He shouts, "Maya?"

The woman does not respond. He crosses the street to get a better look at her and finds himself staring at a young woman from the fields wrapped up in the heap of clothing, but certainly not Maya. She reeks of something sweet from the bottle, and looks up at Ghamut inquisitively. Pointed nose, cut-glass lips and the same hunger in big, bulbous eyes.

He apologizes. "I thought you were someone else."

"That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

He laughs, and she offers him a drink which he prudently declines. She squints at his car.

“You a taxi driver?”

“No. Car’s mine.”

She rocks back and forth on the ground, looking from him to the car. “Awful nice for one of us.”

“Thank you.”

She snorts. “Still waiting on the apartment.”

“Aren’t we all?”

She chuckles. “You sure you don’t want a drink?”

He does not. She shrugs and takes another swill, then with an explosive curse spills the rest of the bottle on her shirt, making the air smell overpoweringly sweet and thick before the foul smell sets back in. Cursing, she fumbles out of her cloak and starts to dab at the spill. With her arms out in the dim light, Ghamut can see mottled, transplanted spots of Civ skin upon her arms. The pieces of skin have been cut and sewn into designs, swirls, and crude drawings of trees, animals, and flowers. Ghamut jerks back in surprise. She seems awfully sane for a dermis junkie.

She sees Ghamut staring and smiles, standing up out of the cloak to reveal more dermis transplants. “Ain’t it pretty?” she says, her voice high and fluttering.

Ghamut cannot lie. The thought of wearing another person’s skin still evokes a visceral disgust in him. The woman laughs at that and then glances down, shakes her head as if

disappointed, and covers up again in the cloak, smelling sweetly of drink. “You’d look well as Civ,” she says, peering up and down at him. “You’d wear them well.”

He shudders. The thought of wearing leather made out of stag, already in a stag’s world, seems a repulsive act of surrender, an imitative game of aesthetics that is doomed to failure. No matter how much pale skin you accrue, you will never become one of them. No matter how much you look like, talk like them, they’ll always see you as something different, if they even bother to see you at all.

Now the woman’s face crinkles in disgust. She points to her designs and explains: The strange cuts are not an imitation. She doesn’t collect discarded Civ skin to emulate; she isn’t weak-minded or mad like the addicts or the apologists who have renounced all their history up to their very bodies, speak only Civ, wear only Civ, who have cut out their shame and replaced it with the city standard. “Do I *look* Civ to you?” she says, half-smiling.

Ghamut has to admit she does not.

It’s a kind of triumph, she says, to reduce them the same way that they have worn down the Fieldlings themselves. To gawk and make bits of them as exotic and strange in the same way that the Fieldlings were already born as aliens to this place. She juts out her wrist and looks at a pale tendril whose stitch marks are still mending red against her skin. “So troublesome,” she says, rubbing the bit of dermis, as if to admonish its original owner. “But we’ll always win in the end.”

Ghamut thinks of the doctor and of bodies still trapped in a burning forest, wearing a war. He thinks of how clean metal is in comparison. Then, disgust: of his father's heritage buried somewhere beneath his own skin.

The woman on the ground smiles at him. She eyes the bottle on the ground, takes a final swig and then hurls it somewhere into the darkness with a casual entitlement. She tells him a secret. Of a rumor she heard from the deepest, darkest parts of the Low. Civ makes things make sense, she says, winking. Those electric implants, that marriage between electric and soul. Between that total obliteration, the total erasure and replacement of the human to the machine... she taps her head.

"I think some of the things I have seen as a child that I have forgotten... I would see them again."

Ghamut frowns at the woman. "What do you mean?"

"Even if they've burnt down our forests and our fields, even if we're losing bits of ourselves to them. We can use their own tools to build our own paradise. Or at least, preserve its vision, for a little while longer."

Before Ghamut can ask what she means, someone screams from the scaffolding wrapped around the massive pillars. The sound shatters like glass into fragments of gasps and wails before disappearing into the ambience. The woman licks her lips, eyes a blank spot on her hand, and says she will have a new design, perhaps in the shape of a lily. She stands up and moves to the pillar which the delivery boy has climbed and begins her ascent. Ghamut drives home alone.

When he opens his eyes at night, craving a drink of water, the shadows clinging to the walls shift and shudder. They move en-masse, rippling and clambering over each other like a boiling sea. A few unlucky stragglers fall from the ceiling, and Ghamut presses past them all to pour himself a drink from the sink.

As he lies back down onto the bed, Ghamut sees a smiling, grinning head mounted in the sea of black. Damien grins at him, unfurls his dark fabric, and falls upon him. He dreams of a campfire, and a whirling, boiling forest, the trees melting and disappearing into soup. Damien dances overhead, arms and legs pumping as he perpetually falls towards Ghamut, twirls around Ghamut, the folds of his cloak sifting and shifting all around. *“What’s in the stew? What’s in the soup?”*

He minces bits of Ghamut into the broth, dashes in Vera’s dress--bloodstained, empty--mixes the broth with a needle.

“What’s inside? What’s inside?”

He pours the mixture into the little cup Ghamut has placed by his bedside, and now in the dream or the nightmare or the thrashing, Ghamut catches a glimpse of the bedside lit in moonlight, seething with creatures.

“How does it taste? How does it taste?”

In the morning, Ghamut checks the apartment. His door is still locked, although the glass has fallen over from its place beside the bed. His breath tastes bitter and like salt, like skin.

At the sink Ghamut collects cold water in his hands and hurls it onto his face. He sees scars from collections gone wrong, calluses in his palm and in the tips of his fingers from holding the

needle. The mirror above the sink spits back an image of the small bruise on his cheek, fading, from the last time Maya hit him.

And then, below all of that lies his Fieldling skin, smooth, with the occasional sunspot earned as a child on his arms and cheeks. He hangs his head and water drips off his nose into the basin. In the garbage can beside the toilet lies a wrapper for the amenities package that came with the apartment. An advertisement promises clear skin and a reinvigorating formula for youthful exuberance. The models wink at him from their place in the garbage. He throws more water onto his face and then calls the doctor and asks what the price of metal is these days. The doctor laughs on the phone and says it depends on what Ghamut wants to be.

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The process of turning a human into an animal is surgically complicated but intuitively simple. Of all the organs, most can be emulated relatively easily with modern medicine, save for the brain and spinal cord, which must be preserved at all costs. The doctor warns of 'cybernetic shock' and 'acclimations' and how he will replace or move around Ghamut's internals to account for his patient's transformation, but Ghamut doesn't want the medical details, preferring to focus on his integration with the electric forest the doctor seems to speak so much about.

The doctor gives Ghamut medication to prepare for his operation. He scans Ghamut's brain and calibrates voltage and electrics, fat content and muscle mass and pain tolerance and looks into acquiring industrial materials. "Can peacocks fly?" Ghamut asks as the doctor weighs his arm on a scale.

“What?”

“Peacocks?” He mimes fluttering his wings. The doctor tells him to go look it up online or at a data center. *“If you want to fly, plug a rocket up your ass. They are quite beautiful, though.”*

When he has returned from his initial consultations with the doctor, Sammi cradles his head in the apartment bed. “After you turn into a peacock, you can preen your feathers at Heathers. You’ll be so beautiful.” She runs a hand over Ghamut’s skin and says she will miss this. She tells him to keep the dermis in a preservation tank in case he ever wants to wear it over his chassis again.

Privately, Ghamut thinks he will burn it.

When she leaves, he stares up at the ceiling swarming with the little creatures. He wonders if they particularly care that he’s chosen to change into a metallic peacock. “What about a wolf, or a dog, or a tiger?” Ghamut says, thinking of the animals thrashing about in the bloody pit.

The shadows don’t answer. They simply stare down at him and smile with their wide mouths. They don’t seem to mind the prospect of haunting a peacock-ified Ghamut. He is simply relieved that Damien is not among them. He doesn’t know what the blue-eyed man would have to say, but he’s changed the locks on his apartment door and added a deadbolt anyway.

“Why a peacock?” asks Sammi, after another doctor’s appointment.

“They can’t fly, not really. They stick out like a sore thumb and are in all reality quite useless unless you’re another peacock. Everyone stares at them when they walk by, too.”

“I like that,” says Sammi, laying back down. “I think it fits you.”

On the eve of the initial procedure, which involves the installation of a new electric frame that will work in tandem with his own, Ghamut walks down to the temple. The doctor has told him all about this particular operation. First, he will mold electric parts onto Ghamut's skeleton, then, months later, when Ghamut has acclimated to having the integrated framework, the doctor will begin the process of removing individual organs and substituting them with electric ones until only Ghamut's nervous system -- his brain and spine, that electric snake -- remains. Once he has exchanged his parts for metal ones and has become accustomed to wearing and working within metal, the doctor will reshape and add more and more metal bits until Ghamut is no more and only a peacock remains.

The doctor says that if Ghamut wishes, he may fly -- or flutter -- back and then he, the doctor, will unfurl Ghamut back into a human chassis, but few ever find the urge to return to anything remotely recognizable.

The process seems painful, risky, and the doctor admits that sometimes, people die. Ghamut goes to the temple to smile down upon the monk and see the last remnants of the forest that will soon burn down. If he sees Damien upon the marble he will ask if he saw this change of fate coming, if he has ever tried to predict with any certainty the fate of a peacock.

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It has already happened when he walks into the church. The smoke billows out from the gaps of the rose window and a police officer with a fire-suppressant gun strides into a church, barking orders over the rest to stand clear for deployment, stand clear please!

The congregation sits outside, blinking blearily in the early night, clumped awkwardly together. Without the marble they seem only half-present and could be mistaken for just another gawking crowd, save for the hands and cybernetics pressed together in prayer and the strange howling they let loose into the air.

Ghamut ignores them and presses through the doors into the cathedral. Smoke clots the air, and the police officer with the gun has his hands on his hips, watching the willow tree burn. Fire has claimed the trunk, flames lick up through the top branches like inverted rain. The tree crackles merrily, and detaches bits of the drooping leaves shed in floating embers throughout the church. One lights upon Ghamut's shoulder and he snuffs it out.

The police officer levels the gun at the tree and sights, fires. A small ball sails from the barrel and explodes over the top of the tree, showering the branches with foam and steam. With a hiss and a roar, the projectile douses fire with foam-like snow. The tree splinters and cracks, a few stray branches slam onto the marble floor where they shatter into sparks that bounce happily on the ground. The officer turns and sees Ghamut, staring.

"I said get the hell out of here, can't you hear?"

Before Ghamut can reply, the officer levels the fire suppressant at him and gestures back outside. *"Get, goddammit!"*

Obediently, Ghamut turns around, walks back outside, and hears the pops and shots of the rifle as it pours down more and more foam.

When the fire has been put out the monk appears from the ashes, bursts out with smears on his robes and char on his cheeks to angrily stride up and down the steps of the church.

“Ingrate and insolent. Undeserving foul little bastard!” He sees Ghamut and spits on the ground. Almost surprised by his own lapse into vulgarity, he smears the little bit of the saliva with his electric foot.

“You!”

Ghamut’s smile seems only to infuriate him more.

“Good evening, brother. Glad you’re safe.”

“You and that little shit,” the monk snarls. He fumbles in his pocket and produces a medley of spare bills and thrusts them at Ghamut, rapidly advancing. *“You make a mess, you clean it up.”*

“What? What?” He can’t quite move away quick enough.

“You collect people? Right? Right? Well then do this one. Her little bastard. You take her, you take them both! You take them both!”

“Who?”

Chapter Thirteen - Good Girl

She screams, "You said you would keep them away!"

The monk puts the video on display in the back room of the church -- the only room with a working computer and screen -- and shows the police officer the view from a camera embedded in the rafters. Dust coats the little hideaway room and, much like the rest of the temple, the office smells like smoke. Cabinets and paperwork here: the grand marble has given way to cheap linoleum tile. The desk with its clutter and worn earnest state is in accident more sacred than the burnt-out tree itself.

On the screen, a girl holding a censer points at the monk. Her young face -- oval with a little snub nose planted in the middle -- is knotted into a snarl. The congregation crowds back against the wall, cowering, and the girl glances nervously at the robotic arms that can puncture steel, the legs that could break her bones. But they are all too afraid to use their replacements. They are paralysed by what they have become, and in the face of her raw humanity, cannot stop her. She swings the censer like a flail, spewing smoke and keeping the monk at arm's distance. She has her mother's hair, the same jawline too, but not her eyes, which are still organic and non-electric. Without need for an explanation, Ghamut recognizes what surely must be Vera's child.

He accepts her existence as an inevitability. It seems fitting, he thinks, that the city should force him to reprise a role from his genesis. Here is its first gift, returned in bitter misalignment. Sylenia into Vera. Standing here in the office, he understands his transformation from his mother's

son into something more like his father. Well then! The last tree in his forest has burned down. He views his transformation complete and is thankful that tomorrow he will go to have his chassis outfitted for an escape into the electric forest.

He rubs his brow in front of the police officer and the monk, and sighs.

The two of them look at Ghamut expectantly.

“*What did she say?*” the officer asks.

“*She say, I’m will burn the tree.*”

“*Why?*”

From the sequence of events, Ghamut considers the situation obvious, but instead simply shrugs and points to the footage. The monk in particular should know better, he thinks. Vera found was Vera lost, and if the monk in his charity had become involved then it would only be right that he should pay for his failure.

If neither the monk nor the officer can be bothered to decipher cause and effect or are blind and deaf to it, Ghamut is content to keep her secret kept away. “*She not explain.*”

“*What?*” The monk says on the video. He reaches out to take the censer from her and she grabs his arm, wrenching it out to bite him.

In the back room of the church, the monk shows them the teeth marks on his arm. “*That’s battery,*” the officer says.

“*That’s -- fuckin’ funny -- a curse,*” Ghamut says.

“*How long was she in the church?*”

“Her mother came nearly two months ago, looking for safe haven and welfare. Men were after her.

Men like these.” The monk points to Ghamut.

The officer unfurls himself and frowns.

“Collector,” Ghamut explains.

The police officer looks as if he has smelt something foul but turns back to watch the video.

The monk waves his arm up and down and the girl pushes him away, takes careful aim, then throws the censer, which hits the top of the tree and explodes into sparks. The willow bursts into flames.

The girl hops over the fallen monk and sprints away, pausing once to look at the burning tree before vanishing from sight.

“Find her; there she is.” The monk slaps the table and glares at the pixels on the screen. He looks between the police officer and Ghamut.

“What is her name?” The officer has a tablet out and jots down everything the monk says with a stylus.

“Neita.”

“Age?”

“Eleven.”

Ghamut raises an eyebrow. The monk continues. Neita speaks only Field. Vera had begun teaching her how to speak Civ, and the girl as far as he knows cannot read or speak properly. She has a small mark in the shape of a V on her nose. She doesn't have any cybernetics and is completely

human. Ghamut blinks. Neita would have been born well after the construction of the new territories had begun and yet she has grown up speaking only Field. He shakes his head. This girl is off on an adventure, without him. He runs his hand through his hair and feels no antlers sprouting. Not that he should. This girl, how lucky to have lived so long with a mother, a chance he never had. He reaches for his pocket but remembers that he's left the needle in a cup by the apartment sink. Instead, Ghamut crosses his arms.

"Will you find her?" the monk says, staring. The police officer shrugs.

Clicking his teeth in frustration, the monk turns to Ghamut. In his floundering rage, his tattoo has begun peeking over his neck. Ghamut tells the monk that he is sorry, but he cannot find her. He has an appointment in the morning that will turn him into an electric peacock.

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A familiar black car waits outside of Ghamut's apartment building. The driver with his many chins leers and places a phone to his ear as Ghamut walks in. Ghamut considers running, but in the end, he takes the elevator up. Again another inevitability: Ghamut accepts the old specter's reappearance as a fitting punishment. When the elevator door creaks open he is almost relieved to see Kilnyzck waiting by his door, wagging his hat in greeting as if to confirm the existence of some sort of justice in the world. Ghamut walks forward to await judgment.

Kilnyzck has two new white gloves on but otherwise remains unchanged. He slips easily into one of the seats in the apartment and Ghamut sits across from him. Kilnyzck smiles when he talks and he compliments Ghamut's new lifestyle, his head slowly rotating left and right to drink in

every detail. He hopes he has found the apartment satisfactory. When Ghamut does not reply, Kilnyzck leans back in his chair and says that he hopes that as a result of Ghamut's recent successes, he has decided after some consideration to come to Ghamut with a new proposal.

Ghamut stares past him. Hundreds of tiny black creatures have unfolded from the shadows and circle the man-in-hat, nipping at each other's hinds, claws glinting in the dim light of the apartment.

Vera has been most uncooperative, and at this moment in time, it would make only the most sense if Ghamut and Maya work to bring him a replacement, skilled as they are at acquisition. He suggests that the offspring of Vera would do the trick. It should be an easy task, Kilnyzck says. They've already found Vera, and it shouldn't be too much of a stretch for them to find her child.

"Maya isn't here anymore," Ghamut says stiffly. A creature plants itself across from Ghamut and cocks its head at him to unfurl its mouth, revealing needlepoint teeth rippling all the way down its gullet. After a moment it saunters away, bored.

"Apologies," Kilnyzck says, shaking his head. His blue eyes don't move from Ghamut's. He takes off his bowler hat and presses it into his chest. His hair shines silver in the moonlight.

"I understand that may make things difficult for you, but I simply must insist on the acquisition of the girl."

"Vera didn't have any children," Ghamut says.

Kilnyzck warmly informs Ghamut that this statement is a lie. After a thorough examination, he says that he has seen enough signs and traces to warrant the existence of a child. He slides across

a picture of an androgynous approximation of Neita and explains that this is what the child will look like.

From the ceiling, a small black shadow drips down to land on Kilnyzck's hair. It traipes around on the thin strands like a nesting bird and tucks its head into the crook of its elbow, folding its paws underneath its stomach. Balefully, it looks over at Ghamut until its many eyes shut and only its teeth glint softly in its maw as it breathes in and out. Ghamut shudders and shakes his head. "I have a surgery tomorrow," he says.

"Oh?"

Ghamut nods.

Kilnyzck rattles off a number, or rather a description of a number. Of what it could mean to Ghamut, of the things that it could bring. Surely with a sum that large in play, Ghamut can belay his surgery. Kilnyzck leans on his cane and says he has no time to wait for Ghamut to recover from procedures, nor does he have the patience to work with some unknown contractor. Really, Ghamut is his only recourse in this dark hour. Ghamut swallows. Another creature has fallen off the ceiling and has clung to the side of the creature nestled in Kilnyzck's hair. It balances out, awkwardly reaching out for its brothers on the ceiling, who wriggle back and forth in response.

"Why? Why do you want this child too?" Ghamut whispers. The number is comical, and Kilnyzck's smile widens.

The number is irrelevant and the matter is private. Still. The man-in-hat taps his cane and chews his cheek.

“Vera was a woman of exceptional foresight,” Kilnyzck says, “She had a peculiar way of looking about the world that could have led her to great fortune. I’m hoping her child possesses that same gift.” He nods. That is all. As much as Ghamut tries he cannot pry anything else from Kilnyzck.

And now another creature has dropped off from its place on the ceiling and scuttles about on Kilnyzck’s head. Ghamut puts a hand over his eyes and moans. The doctor’s medicine lies away in a drawer, out of sight and reach. “What’s the matter?” the man-in-hat says, and when Ghamut looks up the old man has crossed the room and to peer down upon him with a concerned look upon his face. Kilnyzck has interlocked his two gloved hands and pushes down upon his cane to make himself stand fully upright. When he speaks he sounds like a father.

He sounds just like sunlight on the water, but his blue eyes are dead and hollow.

“I inhaled some smoke,” Ghamut says, coughing.

“Ah,” Kilnyzck moves to the kitchen counter to fill a glass up with water and offers it to him. As he sits down the assembled creatures upon his head extend and branch, clambering up and over each other in shifting, curdling prongs, extending with paws, teeth, and claws that glisten and blink and grin. Ghamut remembers Vera’s words and wonders: if everything she said was true, then perhaps it is not just the present at stake, but the future, too. The creatures have begun to whirl, faster and faster, orbiting around Kilnyzck. One tumbles and the other shadows leap upon it, ripping the shadow into shreds. The shadows around the cannibalized little creature seem to swell in size, and look about the room eagerly, as if realizing some new, disastrous potential.

He takes the glass from Kilnyzck's hand and drinks from it. The man-in-hat does not move or retreat until the glass is empty. When Ghamut puts the glass down, Kilnyzck nods and repeats his offer. Ghamut chokes on air and Kilnyzck frowns.

"Are you all right, Ghamut?"

"How old is she?" Ghamut says at last, and now the other man nods and says that the age is irrelevant, she's young enough that if she can run, she can't go far. Vera hadn't exactly been leaking details.

"You will not harm a hair on her head," Kilnyzck says. "I forbid it."

"Can't Vera find her?"

Kilnyzck tells Ghamut he has already asked of Vera too many things. Oh, Ghamut wishes for his medicine, for his needle, for a sign from the rest of the world to tell him what to do. Even a coin, falling from a table or a pocket would suffice. But his medicine lies out of reach, the needle still sits in the cup by the sink and he has only the creatures for company. They leer and smile their many-teethed smiles. He sees the burning forest approach, closer and closer. He just wants to fly away.

From the door comes a knock, and Kilnyzck slowly turns towards it. Ghamut looks up from one nightmare to another. In walks Sammi in a massive puffy jacket, frowning slightly as she sees Kilnyzck. The man-in-hat stands up. "*Madame,*" he says warmly, "*A surprise to see you.*"

"Likewise. How are you tonight?"

“Oh, well, well, very well. Just a bit of business, but now I believe I have all that I have to wring it out to its conclusion.”

Sammi pauses at the door, glancing between Kilnyzck and Ghamut, her face carefully blank. *“I’ll leave you to it,”* she says carefully. But the man-in-hat has already approached her.

“Nonsense,” he says. *“You’ve just as much a right to be here as anyone. I see he has been expecting you.”*

And now as he stands and leads her to Ghamut, sits her down. A crown of antlers sits upon Kilnyzck’s head, antlers with teeth and eyes and mouths that grin, full of dark, glistening teeth. He has his gloved hand over Sammi’s shoulder. The little creatures peer at Sammi and look hungrier than ever.

And now Ghamut realizes Maya was right, and he curses himself for saying it. If he means to flee to an electric forest because the old ones are burning down, then he has carried the torches for the man who has set the beginning fire, goddammit, goddammit. His breathing steadies. Then there is nothing else to do besides secure his own safety. The fire is already long out of control. He glances at Sammi, and tries to give her a smile, but she simply stares at him, her face unreadable.

Kilnyzck entreats Sammi to sit across from Ghamut and stands adjacent to them on his cane.

“As I was saying.”

“I’ll find her,” says Ghamut.

Kilnyzck blinks and his smile grows wider. He nods at Sammi. *"Did you hear that?"* he says. She doesn't seem to register the man-in-hat; she's still gazing at him. She flinches when Kilnyzck reaches to gently touch her knee.

"Your friend here and I are at the end of our business tonight. He says he'll do me a favor. Isn't that wonderful?"

Sammi flits her gaze between them.

"Mm."

"I'm glad you heard him agree, Madame Heathers," he says. *"It's of singular importance that he understands the importance of this contract. You should remind him. I know you have considerable talents at your disposal. Perhaps you could work an arrangement out with this fine gentleman."* He squeezes Sammi once on the shoulder and then clasps his cane again.

He approaches Ghamut and extends his hand. "I knew I could rely on you, Ghamut. So many of the other collectors have not the courage or the heart that you do. You were always a cut above the rest, and I'm so, so glad you've decided to reward yourself." Ghamut takes the man-in-hat's hand and feels him squeeze through the gloves. His blue eyes lock onto Ghamut's and for a moment Kilnyzck holds him in full regard, his crown of antlers peering down as witnesses. But then he moves away, nods and puts on his hat, the antlers break and scuttle in different directions. *"Have a good night,"* Kilnyzck says, and then he lurches out of the door, the cane clicking all the way down the hall.

When the doors close, Ghamut springs out of his chair and scrambles for his medicine. Sammi purses her lips, touching her shoulder with one hand. The creature squatting there yowls without noise and tumbles to the ground. She walks to the window as Ghamut swallows down a pill and a bit of water.

From her place before the glass she looks down at the apartment's front. After a moment she nods and returns to his side, sighing. Ghamut still stares at the walls and the ceiling. The creatures swarming the apartment have lost definition and seem more like moving shadows than anything definite, and he jolts from his haze when Sammi gives Ghamut a peck on the cheek. "I'll be going now," she says gently. "You have business to do."

"Sammi--" Ghamut says. But she is already leaving. She's too smart for his sake. He doesn't have the wit to argue and refuses to beg, so to the door she goes.

"This was nice, Ghamut, but things will be better for us this way. He won't find me either, and neither will you. You won't have to worry about what he'll do to me if you fuck up, and I won't have to worry about what he wants from you. Maybe next time, you'll say 'no'."

She squints at him as if trying to remember all of his features. As if she's looking at the dead.

"Maybe, in fifty years, I'll see you in that electric forest you were talking about. As a fox, maybe. But that's all luck and chance." She moves towards the door.

He runs over to the door and catches her arm. She smiles sadly and pries his fingers off, one by one, with her electric hand. He frowns and tries to think. "I can give you what he's giving me. I can--"

"I wouldn't want it. Ghamut. I don't steal things from people, I only take what's given."

"I *am* giving this to you. It would be my pleasure."

"I'm not talking about *you*," Sammi says. "I'm talking about the woman he's looking for."

"It's not --"

"Don't tell me," she says, before he can finish. "Don't tell me anything. You're so good at that."

"Then give *me* one thing. One thing only. Where do all the people hiding *go*? I don't know where to look Maya always knew." He still holds onto the hope that he can finish this assignment quickly. He's looking for an address, a place to go, a crossing of roads or even a set of coordinates.

Instead, Sammi smiles again. She's so beautiful when she smiles, she's perfected the expression down to a point so as to monetize it at *Heathers*, which will report her absence in the coming weeks. She says, as a sort of final farewell:

"We all go where you came from, Ghamut. We slip through the cracks."

And then she opens the door to leave him alone in a teeming apartment.

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When it comes time for his surgery, Ghamut drives down to the doctor's office. There's a black car parked outside and Ghamut drives on, swearing, the needle back in his pocket. He takes his pills of medicine and begins to search. He will find this girl and then fly away, very far away as fast as he can. Once all this business has concluded he will roost in the electric forest. There will be

no more men-in-hats, and the ground itself will shine so brightly it will blind all the shadows that wish to torment him.

He'll be a happy, stupid, peacock, and everyone will leave him alone. At worst, they'll point and stare at a majestic metal bird instead of Ghamut. He daydreams of obliterating the wretched thing called 'Ghamut'.

Without Maya and her constant updates, Civ seems so much larger. He has no idea where to look, no way of fenegling police feeds or radios to cobble together areas of interest. He knows nothing about Neita except her name, the vague memory of a shouting child on a security feed, and the half-accurate picture given to him by Kilnyzck. This is the second time that Kilnyzck has slipped him a square with his future printed on it, Ghamut realizes. He stares down at Neita's image and contemplates ripping it up before shoving it back into his pocket.

He searches schools for Fieldling children, schools that teach Civ. He says he is working on the behalf of a concerned relative but no one has seen Neita and so he leaves. He looks in dark alleys and behind dumpsters. He drives up to the church, but the monk turns him away and says the police are looking for the girl already. He asks the police but they say they haven't found anything. He stutters out questions but can barely speak the language and each polite point, each shake of the head drives him mad. At night, in the apartment, he stares up at the ceiling and imagines that he is his father. When he wakes up, the creatures gnaw at him and gradually, his medicine depletes.

Each night, he grinds one of the remaining pills that the doctor has given him into a powder and distributes this into a cup of water, which he drinks half at night and the other half in the

morning. The monsters grow as the dosage decreases and soon swell beyond their original sizes.

They now stalk up and down Ghamut's apartment, large as monkeys and jungle cats and with twice as many gangly limbs.

They seem more human in the corner of his eye, and they giggle and chitter amongst themselves when he walks in empty-handed, day after day.

After the fourth day of this torment, Ghamut decides to walk back to where it began, back to the riverside, and stares out over the water, weighing the possibility that by following Vera's footsteps, he may find Neita as well. He knocks on doors and presents the photograph. He gets into an argument that leaves him with a bloody nose and bleeds on a coffee shop counter while he nurses his wound. When he drinks his coffee, the waitress asks him to kindly leave; he is making a mess.

The whole world is unfair and cruel and he sits on the riverside bench watching the sun set and still finds no sign of the girl. In a fit of dejection, he drives his car up to the old shopping center and sees the glint of fire on the inside. He rushes in, hoping for Neita, will take Maya as a conciliatory prize, but finds only two Civ gutter rats warming their hands over a burning pile of garbage. One of the men is large, doughy, and slightly oafish, and the other is young with a pointed, hungry look on his face that Ghamut recognizes.

"Have you seen this one?"

The two men at the fire shake their heads, but the podgy one invites Ghamut to sit down for a spell. He cracks open a beer and offers it to him. They wear the same sort of outfits that Ghamut sees on garbagemen.

"What you are doing here?" Ghamut asks.

They're waiting for their apartment to be cleaned up. A neighbor had a grease fire, and one of the walls burnt down. Within a week they will return home. Until then, they've decided to squat here. The podgy man points to the photo in Ghamut's hand.

"She yours?"

Ghamut nods.

The fat man asks to see the picture and then squints down on it, shaking his head. He has mistaken Ghamut's hunger for freedom for parental guilt and by way of comfort says that Ghamut is lucky to have such a beautiful girl. He hopes that Ghamut finds her quickly and that she stays safe, that nothing bad ever happens to her.

"I don't like kids," the skinny one says. He yelps as the other man reaches out to cuff him on the ear.

"What's her favorite color?" the skinny one says, shifting his approach and rubbing his temple.

Ghamut blinks. *"Blue,"* he says. It's the color of the sky above the forest.

The two men nod in sage agreement. Blue is a very good color.

They want to know her favorite food, to which Ghamut says dumplings, the same as his own from the field. The two men seem to drink up the memory and their features soften as they remember their own childhoods and pasts, growing up in Civ. He creates a history, a happy history, without really knowing why -- it seems all the more tragic that she's missing if she went missing

from a happy home instead of the reality of her true circumstance. Perhaps he can exchange some of that pity for some kind of help, if not from the two jolly garbagemen then somewhere else.

“Ah, you’ll find her,” the man says. *“Keep heart.”*

Ghamut smiles and together they crouch over the burning fire. They reminisce of better times and Ghamut finds himself earnestly wishing that their little stint in the shopping center comes to a quick and satisfactory end. When he leaves them, the city closes back in. He wonders what Neita’s favorite color is. He seriously doubts it could be blue, but then again, he has no reason not to believe that it couldn’t be so.

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The doctor hasn’t seen the girl, and his hand lies in a cast. A delegation from the man-in-hat came to visit the doctor five days ago, and a young man broke his hand with a pipe. Ghamut frowns at that, and the doctor shakes his head. No surgeries. He is stuck selling surplus, exchanging more delivery teams to the Low, selling skin.

“Medicine?” Ghamut asks.

The doctor shakes his head. With his broken hand he can barely pay rent. The electric forest will have to wait, but he comfortably reminds Ghamut: *“Whatever you see, it’s not real.”*

Ghamut goes home and screams. The creatures have taken to eating each other, huge monstrous limbs lie shorn off all around the apartment, severed blocks of shadow blossom into tiny insect-like clumps of teeth and reform over and over again. He stumbles out of the door and ignores a pounding from across the hallway.

"Shut the fuck up!" someone screams.

He runs away. When he looks up at his apartment from the street, he can see packed up against the windows a turbid mess of eyes and teeth staring down at him. He hops in his car and drives mindlessly, staring out at the windows, grinding his teeth and looking for Neita. He twists up and down the streets idling under red lights and glancing at deserted crosswalks. Up over the cracked cobblestones that makes his car jolt up and down, he drives, on and on, deeper and later into the night, until he re-emerges onto a main road. Clouds veil the night sky in gentle gray streaks and he rests his head on the steering wheel and looks up at yet another row of street lamps blazing orange mixed with white and shadows elongating until his mirror shines. A car whizzes past and Ghamut blinks as the roar of the engine dies down. He runs a hand through his hair and stares at the picture of Neita. A creature grins at him from the seat next to him.

Headlights.

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He hits the side of his window and then out of the brilliant snap of sound and light comes darkness as all the airbags deploy and then go slack, his jaw is somewhere to his left and the night seems so dark, so dark he thinks he has somehow found his way back to the forest, but then with a groan the car lists upon its side and Ghamut hears a slight crunch of glass, and then a slight *click click* *click* as something in the ruined car groans.

Was that me, he thinks.

For a moment, Ghamut sits in the ruined car, staring at broken glass, breathing, just breathing. He closes his eyes and opens them and the glass doesn't disappear. He reaches for a seatbelt and gasps for air and tries the door, emerging onto an empty street, the car that collided with his has crumpled into a roadside barrier, its headlights still burning into the night.

The car that roared by moments ago comes around again and parks out beside the other crashed vehicle. The driver has his hair stuck up in spikes and wears a metal studded jacket. He explodes from his car, grips the door of the wreck and pulls it off of its hinges and onto the road. From within the crash comes a curse and someone tumbles onto the street.

Down the road, shadows appear, all sprinting to the car, flashlights and cameras and cursing.

One or two shine lights on Ghamut, who blinks and raises a hand to block out the light, stumbling on his feet; the massed shadows surround him.

"What the fuck?"

The driver of the crashed car has limped over and angrily points a finger at him, wiping blood from his nose. A cut above his eye makes him blink erratically. *"He was looking right at me. Right at me, through the window; he didn't move."*

Ghamut tries to speak but can't remember his Civ. Not that it would matter anyway, the little creature and its smirk have evaporated and have left him at the mercy of the crowd. He has his hand in his pocket, round the needle, although he is unsure of how to use it.

"Who's gonna pay for that, huh?" The assembled mass of midnight racers and gamblers begins to rumble. An accident was not part of the bet; they can't call the police on an illegal race. An angry face emerges and demands to know whose car Ghamut was driving, if he's stolen it. He shakes his head and rubs his temple.

Across the street, a group of racers have begun to push the car's crumpled frame towards the sidewalk. The broken metal makes a horrid groaning sound.

A gambler wearing a leather hood infused with blue and white lights spits on the ground. This will be the first bet in a week she has lost, and she's bet double on the outcome. The driver with the mohawk sniffs and says that with or without the crash, the other car was lagging behind going into the curve anyway. Together, he and the bleeding driver catapult themselves into an argument -- snapping about time and investment on curves and braking and nitrous, shifting into different gears -- above it all the woman yowls that she isn't on the line for an interrupted loss, to which someone else screams back that the race is finished and the lots lie where they are.

With money on the line, Ghamut can feel the choler of the crowd rising and begins to push his way out before someone assigns the blame onto him. The woman is the source of all the trouble; she demands that the bookies give back her money, and is convinced that the crashed driver would have won. When the crowd pushes back she says she has been cheated, and looks wildly around for Ghamut, sees him, and wades her way over. She looks him over and, seeing that he is not grievously injured, demands some kind of payment plan for him.

"Police," Ghamut says, shaking his head.

"You can pay for his car too." She points to the bloodied driver expectantly. The crowd shakes their heads. A chauffeur doesn't pull down enough of a salary to mend this. They'll lick their bruises and move on. No cops, no arrests; it's lucky that nobody died. They begin to depart. The wrecked car sits pushed off to the side of the street, and the racer alongside a few men with robotic arms stand around the warped frame, picking his ruined ride clean for parts. Money changes hands. Race over, someone won, someone lost. The driver of the wrecked car gets a few tips for his work and he and his crew, now with satchels -- where did they get those? -- packed with salvage slung over their shoulders, vanish into the night.

The woman sits on the hood of the car, arms crossed, hair askew, chewing on her lip and staring into the street with such a violent expression Ghamut is surprised she or the ground haven't caught fire. She sees him staring at her and kicks a piece of metal down the street and points at Ghamut. Half a week's worth of bets wiped out, she's going to have to start from scratch. Already she has to pay the imp to catch a bet; maybe the little prick has been lying to her the whole time, she can't be sure...

Ghamut fumbles in his pocket for a picture and pulls out Neita.

"Is this imp?"

The woman squints at the picture then backs away, shaking her head.

"I don't know her."

He grins and finds an easy lie. *"Most people think she is boy. Where she is?"*

The woman collapses easily enough. *"I seen her."* Another squint, this time at Ghamut. *"You police?"* She looks doubtfully at Ghamut.

"Father."

"Bullshit."

He glares and taps his chest. *"Where she is?"*

"How do I know you're her father? Why'd she run away?" Now she has her hands in fists, and Ghamut feels the needle in his pocket and the bruise on his head and hears the hissing of his car and the blinking of one of the lights behind him. He could--

But instead:

Her favorite color is blue. Her name is Neita. She likes meat dumplings. She ran away because she's terrified for the future. And so am I.

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He pays the woman very well, gives her a few thousand credits for her trouble, more than triple the money she lost from the race. He thinks himself stupid; like mother, like daughter. He wanders the city, walking, limping. He considers calling the police or an ambulance service but then will have to explain the crashed car and the race and the woman. Sometime in the early morning, the garbage crew comes out, and Ghamut watches the massive vehicles -- huge orange and black industrial trucks with enormous tungsten claws to pick up waste -- make their way down the street, emptying dumpsters, sanitizing the roads. The suspension groans as tons of garbage make their way

onto an increasingly full truck bed. When they come to his car, they'll cut it up into little pieces and squash them in the back compressor.

Ghamut watches two uniformed men glare out at him from a cockpit made up of scratched and dusted windows. When they finish emptying a dumpster parked in the front of an alley, he collapses behind it and falls asleep.

In the evening, when he wakes up, he is cold, and wet, and damp. Yet another parade has begun marching down a street next to him and firecrackers split the air over and over again until his head begins to pound. His leg and left arm have curdled into a sore, aching mess, and when he limps down the street, people stare. Someone yells at him to go back to the Low. A woman slips him a pamphlet for a construction job. He can trade his injured leg for a robotic one, as long as he's willing to work off his debt.

He clutches the paper and stares at the cover. A row of photogenic models all salute into a blazing sun brightly, wearing arms, legs, and eyes made of metal, steel, and glass. He walks on.

When the evening finally fades entirely, he keeps an eye out, looking up and down the street. He cannot spy any creatures, so he allows himself a moment's rest. He wishes for the doctor's medicine. Without the creatures to torment him, he sleeps surprisingly well and wakes up in the early morning, finishing his trek to Vera's old haunt just in time to catch the last vestiges of another night spent carousing.

Everyone looks sleepy and peaceful. Ghamut wonders if it is here, within the in-betweens and odd spaces of these different worlds, that Sammi and all others like her have hidden away.

In the day, or at least in the early morning, under bright cleaning fluorescent lights and the drroll vibrato of the air conditioning units, the interior of the club seems cheap and haphazard. A single janitor and a gassed-out bartender converse at the bar. The bartender has almost fallen over the bar and leans over the table with his head in between his arms, speaking to the floor; the janitor stands across from him on the dance floor, propped up on his mop and frowns when he sees Ghamut.

"We're closed."

"Water?"

The bartender has reappeared and nods. He grabs a dirty glass, wrinses it out twice and fills it all the way up with water, slides it across the counter, and it spills.

The janitor sighs.

Still, Ghamut drinks. The bartender tells him that this bar -- the club in general -- is closed for the next eighteen hours. The janitor stares down at the mess of fluids and scraps of paper dejectedly and wrings out his mop, dunks it again and begins to clean. The bartender looks up at Ghamut, who polishes off the drink of water and asks for another. He tries to converse with the bartender, but the rhythm is all wrong and the other man is tired and Ghamut can hardly speak Civ. To business, then: Ghamut points to the barred door in the back of the club, and asks when it opens. The bartender replies that the back rooms open three hours after nightfall, if you have a pass.

"What pass?"

The bartender rubs his index finger and thumb together.

Ghamut sighs. And what about the back door?

The barman shakes his head. The back door costs even more.

“*Alright,*” says Ghamut. He strikes a deal. He can give a quarter of that to the bartender and in return, he’ll get Ghamut in the regular door without a pass. The bartender agrees. Ghamut leaves them to their work and waits the day out in a cafe for nightfall.

In the night, shadows all clad in black mull around the entrance of the club. Every few feet, cigarettes and chatter light up the air. They’re all speaking Civ, even in their drunken haze. The club has only been open for half an hour, and already a strong chemical scent lingers in the air.

Someone screams out from the door, “*Any sons? Any daughters? Any offspring on the lawn?*” Her friends shush her and half-giggle, half-laugh and usher her into a corner, feed her a cigarette. She belts out, “*Just be yourself! You are beautiful, all my brothers and sisters!*”

Ghamut shakes his head and wishes he weren’t sober, tries not to breathe in anything wrong. In the night air someone stares at him, crouched in front of the doorway. “*That ain’t punk, is it?*”

“*Yeah, it is,*” someone else says. An electric arm flicks a cigarette; a thumb reignites the butt. The woman in the alley screams again.

“*Anyone? Anyone at all? Any sons or daughters?*”

The conversation flickers and then she’s right next to Ghamut. “*I usually date sons, not daughters,*” she says, purring at the shadow who has asked Ghamut if he is punk. “*But I’m open to it.*”

Ghamut goes inside, trying to get away, and immediately wishes he was elsewhere.

Everyone dances in unison, cheers lyrics he's never heard, they all move and converse in sync, speaking the same language. He props himself up against the wall and tries to decipher everything; he can barely understand the song but he can hear all right.

"Is that punk?" someone else next to him asks again.

"Fielding. Who cares what he's wearing? Shit's punk enough. Everyone here is punk enough."

"Wonder where he's from."

"I'm obsessed with the city. I bet I can tell you where he's from."

"What?"

"What?"

Someone taps his shoulder and asks where he is from. He looks over, and out of the crowd of shadows appear two men clad in jackets with sewn-in silver lights. They have hair gelled up into angular shapes and wear dark purple eyeliner that drips down onto their cheeks. They're young and someone would probably call them beautiful, in a soft, casual kind of way. *"Wait,"* The first one says. *"Don't tell me."* He rattles off a list of names: Midtown, Heights, The Lake, The Columns, Plaza, Bowl, Drag, Alley, Fountainview, Maze, and Hills. *"No, no,"* says Ghamut. He can understand this game.

"Damn," says the man. *"Where, then?"*

"Three houses before a forest," Ghamut says.

"Never heard of that."

The man's friend begins to pull him away, gesturing back to the crowd. "*Come on. Leave him alone.*" He smiles apologetically at Ghamut and tugs at the crook of the man's elbow. "*Have a good night,*" he says.

Ghamut nods and wishes them a good night. The man's friend chuckles and as a parting gift, turns to his companion and says, "*You know, you'd be super cute if you didn't talk so much.*"

Together, they disappear back into the crowd and Ghamut is forced back, further and further against the wall, boxed away, reluctant to make his way to the bar. Time drags by. Someone releases a flock of balloons that all crowd up against the ceiling, and Ghamut watches them for a while, realizing that soon they will become the litter that the janitor cleans up in the morning. He sees strange etches and realizes that someone has carved graffiti into the tiles above him.

He can't read. Maya could read, and he wishes that she was here. He imagines her, in this crowd, with matted clothes, maybe in something white and torn. He sublimates a woman with her arms in the air swaying back and forth, makes her Maya. Further in the crowd someone becomes Sammi, wearing her comical puff jacket and bobbing her head up and down to the beat of the music. Then Damien, the doctor, Kilnyzck, all moving in the same motion, facing away. He even catches a glimpse of Nana and Vera, but they exist in the thick of everything, he can just barely see them but knows they're on the dance floor too.

Ghamut tries to press forward but finds only the wall. Everyone in the club have become shadows, different shadows, with glowing eyes and shining skin; everyone knows how to move and Ghamut is stumbling, stumbling, making his way forward before they turn into eyes and teeth. In

the middle of the floor the crowd has formed an open circle and people run round it gleefully; within the empty space the dancers—if they can even be called that— run at each other and laugh wildly. Everyone is shoving and bumping, but there's a certain grace and method to the boiling sea. He wanders how far ashore he has drifted but remembers that there's nowhere to swim back to.

The bar feels solid and existent. Grounding, enough space that he can move within it and not feel trapped; people come up and leave, he takes his post and asks, again, for a water.

The bartender, already paid, smiles at him. The eighteen hours between his shifts seem to have done him well. *"You sure you don't want something stronger?"*

Ghamut shakes his head. Sobriety is a trap and his only mercy. Surrendering entirely seems almost impossible, even if it would be easier in the moment. The woman shouting for sons and daughters has entered the crowd and again repeats her pleas as loudly as possible. Her friends have given up trying to control her. She wanders, alone, and Ghamut wonders what would happen if she would come up to him, what he would say, but before that happens, the bartender slides him a glass of water and taps his arm.

"An hour and a half," the barman promises, gesturing at the door. *"Then the betting starts."*

Ghamut nods, and points to the ceiling. *"You know what that is?"* The barman nods.

On occasion, when a more electric crowd takes up the place, they reach up to the roof and cling up to the ceiling, mark it up for their pleasure, leave little notes. Faces, slogans, band names, it's all a history.

"What that one?"

"It says, 'drink water'"

"And that?"

"Don't take this for granted."

Ghamut nods, smiles, drinks his water. The music goes on and on, the shadows dance and crash into each other, and in due course the dread of being seen fades away; he allows himself to sway left and right to the music. In the rising humidity, lingering hints of sweat and heat from the day carry into the air and make the club feel swaddled and cut off from the rest of the world. Small creatures snake their way between the legs and thumping feet of the crowd; they jostle and circle Ghamut and waggle their tails to the beat of the music until he can spot two dance parties taking place at once, seen and unseen. Ghamut tries to leave the bar but the animals all bare their teeth at him; he can only watch as the dancing eyes and teeth go back to minding themselves. The woman searching for her daughters laughs and maybe finds one; he can't say for certain in the mess of shadows and dancers. He sips his water and waits for the third hour to come.

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They push through the crowd and make their way to the door; a few men in suits and a woman in a dress cut at the waist. She's quite the anachronism for Civ -- her shoulders and arms lie exposed to the whirling crowd, and her skin, even in the dark, is plainly bronzed, sunkissed, with long auburn hair such that the dress she's enveloped in looks like a bit of the sun has fallen off and has become cloaked by silver, wrapped up in moonlight. A second glance reveals she's wearing a fiber optic fabric, turned off, but there's enough ambient light on the dance floor to make her glow.

The bartender nods at Ghamut, and after the party makes its way through, he walks out of the bar to guide Ghamut towards the door.

The guard outside doesn't so much as blink; with the bartender's introduction Ghamut slips in after the crowd into the back rooms, walking with his head down and his hand in his pocket around the needle. He follows them into the back rooms.

And there she is: simple as that. Neita, hunched over with her skinny kid elbows propped up against the railing, next to the woman in the white suit. They're right out in front, not hidden away at all. Neita stares down at two electric jungle cats sitting on their haunches, their robotic eyes flitting about under metal slits, ready to do their bloody business.

Chapter Fourteen - Electric Forest I

She's chosen the left one to win. The woman in the white suit snaps her electric fingers and one of the bookies comes over. They converse briefly, and the woman in white points to the left jungle cat. The bookie taps down the bet into a small tablet and gives the woman in white a voucher. All around her, the other gamblers perk up and take note, they flag down the bookie and start pointing at the different cats. The woman in white doesn't seem to mind. Business concluded, she runs her hand by Neita's hair to pat her on the shoulder. The girl flinches and smiles and gives her two thumbs up.

An announcer has appeared on one of the corners of the ring, dressed in a black coat accented with red and gold. He speaks loudly, shouting over all. Two exquisite specimens have been captured from the Jagahli preserve! He flourishes a hand out from the interior of his cloak and gestures at the two cyborgs below them all. A low laugh sounds from the assembled crowd. He points to the left and the right. Kait and Morde. He looks down at the cats, and claps his hands. The two look up.

"Whoever wins gets a full repair and sent out again. Loser gets picked up by the garbage crew. Get it?"

The two cats nod.

All around the assembled audience places more bets, which now all seem to favor Kait as the victor. Ghamut can't help but wonder how many times Vera or the white suited woman have placed

bets just like this in the arena. Surely that must have spoiled the odds, if no one dares to bet against a surefire call. But the announcer and the bookies wandering the stage don't seem worried and the white suited lady seems to have forgotten about the bet entirely. Only Neita stares down at the pit with fascination upon her face. What a sight, for this little girl, although there is no telling how much she has seen before coming here.

She wears a dusty jacket and the same clothes -- jeans smeared with ash and a ratty-looking tee-shirt -- from the church. Her hair hangs oily by the side of her face and slick and deep circles set round her eyes make her seem older than she is.

Beside her, one of the men in gray suits that came in with the woman wearing the fiber optic dress glances at Neita, the woman in white, and the cat named Kait. He talks to the bookie and places a bet and then returns to the fiber optic woman and the other men in their company.

The everyday gamblers have given this woman and the group of men surrounding her a large berth, the same respect paid to the woman in white and Neita. The two women have made their camps on either side of the announcer and no one dares to cross into their territories. Ghamut glances uneasily at the men in suits surrounding the woman in fiber optics, all of which sport short, military haircuts. They all look the same, with flattened, crooked noses and ears that have been quashed into strange, wrinkled shapes.

He moves further away from the entrance to the room, eager to put some space between them, and inches towards the woman in white until he stands directly across from her and Neita.

The crowd becomes too thick to push through; he is stranded. He looks left and right and tries to find a way out but it's no use.

A man in a suit next to the woman in optics cocks his head as she says something and quickly removes himself, reemerging shortly with a bottle of alcohol. He gives it to her and she uncorks the cap, slings the bit of plastic onto the floor, then drinks straight from the neck as she stands up. She clenches her free hand into a fist as she takes a long draught and then puts the bottle down, crossing rapidly over behind the announcer to shake the woman in the white suit's hand.

The two smile hollowly at each other and the woman in white pretends to be delighted upon seeing her guest. Neita scurries away and hides behind the woman in white's leg, peering out from behind her to stare at the fiber optics woman, who waves with a forced cheeriness at her, wagging her fingers. After this peculiar interaction, they break away again and go back to ignoring each other. The woman in the fiber optics drinks from the bottle and glares out over the arena.

Within the pit itself, Kait and Morde circle each other. The betters cast their final bets. Kait flits a tail and Morde stretches as they walk, their electric chassis shimmering slightly in the warehouse light. Ghamut grabs the needle in the comfort of his pocket, the steel warm against the palm of his hand. He moves to the back of the wall, where a ring of space has formed, allowing him to move quickly around the pit. From across the room, he sees a tiny blot of motion and glances up to see Neita. She's torn her gaze away from the arena and stares up at him.

He slides his gaze off of her to focus on the woman in white but can still see Neita staring at him from the corner of his eye. The announcer screams out on the microphone that it is time.

Mercifully, one of the gamblers shoves in front of Neita to peer down at the ring and Ghamut is spared the child's gaze as with a final shout, the announcer slams his hands together and splits the air like a gunshot. The two electric cats snap into form, scales bristle into spikes, silver talons sprout from their paws and from Kait's tail barbs and thorns coalesce into points. Morde backs away, electric eyes surging red, and the fight begins.

A gnashing of claws, sparks clanging off the arena sides, the two beasts launch towards each other. They collide and drop to the ground, thrashing and cutting, pummeling. Unlike real cats, the only sound at all comes in the form of slight clicks of metal and brief, still human grunts. The woman in the white suit has pushed her way to the front of the crowd, and so has the woman in fiber optics. They stare at the tangle of metal, and as Kait rears up over the sparking, clicking chest of Morde, Ghamut can see the fury radiating from the woman in white and the glee from the woman dressed in fiber optics. Kait opens her mouth, and from the cat's maw, a grating, rusted voice begins to speak.

"What now?"

The woman in white has her lips flattened into a line, and Ghamut frowns; the crowd seems to ripple in confusion. Hadn't she placed a bet on Kait as well?

Morde squirms under Kait's grip. Her tail lashes back and forth and suddenly, without warning, the tip of the appendage transforms into a point and punctures through Kait's side. Spray -- blood, or oil -- splatters from the thrashing jungle cat, and seizing upon her opponent's distraction, Morde leaps upright, grabbing Kait's throat from below, and clamps down tight with

her teeth. The room suddenly smells like sweat, some kind of rotting ruin mixed in with salt and the fresh, heady scent of mud by the riverside.

The woman in white relaxes and lets go of the railing. Her cybernetics have left dents in the railing. Next to her, the sunkissed woman in fiber optics stares.

The announcer's voice rings out in the fresh silence. "*Up two-hundred! Bet: Kait will lose -- wins. Duchess?*" The woman in white's smile couldn't be wider. Ghamut stares down at Morde, panting, black fluid dripping from her jaw. "*To the victor go the spoils,*" the announcer says, peering down at her.

She looks up at him and at the Duchess, clad in white, collecting her winnings, and lowers her head. She speaks in a strange voice, as if relearning how to speak all over again.

"Take me back to the forest."

The announcer chuckles, snaps his fingers, and one of the bookies tosses him a wad of money which he throws down into the arena. Morde takes the little wad in her mouth and at another wave of the announcer's hand, a small port opens up in the anterior side of the arena, directly under the announcer. With one last baleful look around at the leering gamblers, Morde limps through. The door shuts after her and Ghamut feels a weight in his gut plummet through the floor. He looks for the back door, pushes through to the front of the crowd; Kait's body already lies pushed away into one side, the limp pieces of interlocking, dripping metal now hauled up in a net; discarded. New animals stalk nervously through yet another trapdoor—this time a pair of crocodiles. They smell like the river, and Ghamut clutches the needle.

He wades his way to the announcer, who has already begun to espouse the marvels of the two reptiles below him. The gamblers have forgotten their losses, and in their excitement, go back to exchanging money. Ghamut can barely stand to watch. He must know where the electric animals come from, where this electric forest is; perhaps he can catch Morde outside, but before he can reach either her or the announcer, a small figure steps before him. Neita peers upwards at him. Wide eyes take him in.

In the excitement of it all, he had forgotten all about her.

She points at him.

“You.”

Ghamut can only stare.

“You’re here for me.”

He blinks. And at a howl from the announcer, Neita turns and runs away, and Ghamut runs after her, not caring where she may lead him, to heaven or to hell; she’s a ticket to the electric forest, one way or the other.

She darts haphazardly through the crowd and ducks behind the Duchess; the woman in white.

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The Duchess is in the middle of an argument with the fiber-optics woman, who Ghamut learns is called Contessa.

Contessa blames the Duchess for her loss, she thought that in this neutral space there were to be no tricks. To which the Duchess coldly replies that if the Contessa's only thought was to follow her lead, then she deserves to win nothing. Contessa could split stone with her expression but the Duchess does not seem to care. Money or winnings are not of consequence, Contessa reminds the Duchess -- rather, this is a mark of dishonor. "Then place your own bets," the Duchess says. If Contessa wishes to speak of honor then she ought to have asked the Duchess directly for her thoughts on the fight instead of falling back to imitation. The Duchess glances at her counterpart's fiber optic dress and grimaces.

Contessa drops an ugly swear, and by now, Neita has brushed up against the Duchess's leg and Contessa glares down at the little girl.

"You are a filthy charm."

Neita looks up at Contessa blankly and the Duchess puts her dark, electric hand on Neita's shoulder, shoving her backwards. Contessa is never to talk like that to one of her subordinates, much less a child. For another moment, Contessa seems as if she will strike the Duchess across the face, but instead the optics in her dress swell red and she storms off, brushing past Ghamut without a glance behind her.

The Duchess has spotted him now, and Neita chitters at her side, miming all kinds of things with her hands. Slowly and with deliberation, the Duchess walks up towards Ghamut. Neita with her arms crossed scurries behind her.

She cocks her head at Ghamut. *"And who are you?"*

Ghamut blinks. He hadn't quite thought of what he would say to either of them, but now the moment is upon him and he says:

"I... her father. Vera's man."

The Duchess scoffs and glances down at Neita, who looks without comprehension up at her. Then she turns her attention back to Ghamut and tells him he doesn't look like a father of anyone; Vera hadn't mentioned a husband. To which Ghamut produces Kilnyzck's picture of Neita. The Duchess squints at it and shrugs. That could be anyone.

"Neita," Ghamut says. "I'm a friend of your mother's."

The girl's face curls in disgust. "I know all about my mother," she snaps. "I know who her 'friends' are."

"No, no. We--"

But the Duchess has stepped in front of him and has flicked her hand as if to ward away a pestering fly. Behind them, the announcer claps his hands, making a sound like a gunshot, and Ghamut flinches; the two crocodiles begin to thrash somewhere out of sight. The Duchess glances down at her winnings, then at the announcer and Contessa, and then back at the fight. She snaps her fingers. *"Neita, it's time to go."*

And again the girl stares at her. The Duchess sighs and motions to the backdoor, and the girl nods. They leave; Ghamut follows.

"Please!" he shouts. *"Vera already gone, you can't have both. Not both."*

And then:

“Neita, please. This woman isn’t safe, she got your mother killed, it’s dangerous here.”

The girl calls back -- fuck you, it’s dangerous everywhere.

The Duchess has made her way to a sports car parked outside in the alley, and Ghamut stands in front of it, slamming the hood with his fist. The driver leans out the window, calls him far too many names, revs the engine. The car jolts forward and Ghamut wonders if they really will run him over and if that will be the end of it. At last the woman in white steps out of the car to regard him coldly in the alley.

“I can pay for return,” Ghamut says. *“I made money.”* He rattles off the remainder of Kilnyzck’s payment. Upon delivery of Neita, money will be of no more concern. The Duchess shares a similar disregard. Neita and Vera share the same gift, and she would be a fool to give it up for some paltry sum. Besides -- she strokes the side of the car. She isn’t exactly starving.

“I can take care of her,” she says. *“She’ll be off the streets. Vera never--”*

“Vera never tell you about her! Just like she never tell you about me!” Ghamut wants very badly to kick the car. Damn the language, damn Kilnyzck, damn Neita and Vera and the whole city. He looks desperately around the alley for any sign of Morde or a strange, electric forest. He finds none. *“Vera has died and she will not had wanted her here! She want her with me!”*

He can see Neita in the back seat looking between them as they trade her mother’s name.

The Duchess purses her lips and looks down upon Ghamut with a kind of pity in her gaze.

“And you think you can do better? Keep her safe? The same people that took Vera away could come after you.”

She mistakes Ghamut's revulsion for fear. He shakes his head. "*You kept Vera safe?*"

The Duchess narrows her eyes. "*Vera insisted on her own independence. I respected it. Same for this little girl. If she ran away from you, how can you keep her safe? She came to me.*"

Ghamut flails for an explanation. "*I see things like Vera. Leads me to Neita. She will see safety. I can promise.*"

"*You can see what she sees?*"

"*Different,*" he doesn't know if that's exactly a lie. "*But I see things.*"

The Duchess glares and fully steps away from the car, walking up to get a better look at him, caught out in the blazing headlights. Ghamut watches her electric hands, and again feels for the needle. The driver barks something out and revs the engine threateningly, but the Duchess holds up her hand and he settles back down. "*What do you see?*"

"*I--*" He grimaces. "*It's a disease. Needing medicine. Vera and I..*" He twists his hand next to his head. "*Same thing with Neita. All in one family.*"

"*Vera..*" the Duchess shakes her head. She tells him that, while Vera was perhaps not quite a friend, she was certainly closer than an acquaintance. But Vera had never once told her she was sick or crazy. She had also never mentioned a partner or a child. As she peers at Ghamut, the Duchess admits to him that if there truly is something wrong with Neita, he likely knows more about Fieldlings and their strange ways than she.

But she tells him there is one thing she still cannot quite believe.

She's quite close now, and Ghamut can see two blue rings around her pupils where she looks down upon him. The Duchess coldly states that she can not believe that Ghamut is Vera's partner. He looks wrong for the part. She curls her electric hands into fists and rotates the knuckles. Something under her white suit *clicks*. If he can prove that he has a rightful claim to Neita, the Duchess says she may consider allowing the child to leave with him if the girl wishes.

But, if she finds him a liar... She'll let him leave but he would be wise to never return again.

Ghamut looks desperately from her to the driver, to Neita still in the car peering out, her face pressed up against the glass, staring at them. He tries to think of Vera to try to siphon off some kind of memory that will strengthen his lie, but can't remember much, just a slumped form in the backseat of Kilnyzck's car covered in a glittering dress. Then he runs to Sammi for inspiration, but can only conjure her puff jacket and her scent, and then instead of saying any of *that*, begins, "*I stole money from her when a race, back in the riverside.*"

And he ends with, "*And then she disappeared.*"

He does not account for Vera's electric eyes, does not mention a pregnancy or even the possibility of a child. He tells, he realizes, only half of what happened to him, and when he is finished he is breathless, having run through it all. Much to his surprise, Ghamut begins to cry. He hasn't -- he can't remember the last time he did this. He is glad that Maya isn't here to see. And then he stares up; he's taken a step back and tumbled, caught himself on one knee, but doesn't remember doing that either. Neita has appeared too somehow, left the safety of the car while he was speaking.

She and the Duchess stare down at him. The kid cocks her head and says slowly, "I feel like crying for mom too."

Ghamut groans. He can hear Maya's cutting voice, low, tired, hoarse from lack of sleep and starved. "See? This is what you become, if no one keeps an eye on you. A goddamn animal."

The Duchess glances down at Ghamut, then at Neita.

"You sound like you're telling the truth."

He can't even look her in the eye, and wishes it was so. He's taking in little bursts of air and feels lightheaded. The driver revs his engine but still the Duchess waves her hand dismissively.

"Alright. Alright." She takes Neita by the hand and kneels down in front of her. *"Your... father is here."* She points to Ghamut, and Neita peers suspiciously at him. She doesn't react to the word *'father'* at all.

But all the same, she doesn't shy away. In the light of the alley, Ghamut can only see a blurry shadow inching closer towards him, outlined black through the glare of the headlights.

"I would be lying if I didn't say I would be interested in her talents when she is older," the Duchess says. A hungry look shines in her eyes, but she shakes her head and turns away. The driver rolls down his window. They have stayed in one place far too long, but again the Duchess ignores him and stares at Ghamut, now Neita and Ghamut.

"Do you see colors too?" Ghamut whispers. Neita blinks, confused, takes a step away. The Duchess cocks her head.

"He's lying," Neita says, turning to her. "He thinks I can--"

But Mercifully, the Duchess cannot understand Field. Neita's frantic words and points don't mean anything to her. Still, she takes a step towards him. Behind her, the door leading out of the gambling den flies open and Ghamut hears what he thinks is the announcer, clapping his hands together like a gunshot again. The driver's head slams against the steering wheel. The window shatters in front of him, flecked red.

Contessa stands in the doorway leading into the alley, the men in suits flank her. One has a weapon drawn; the barrel smokes. She points at Neita and demands that one of them grab the kid, the fucking kid. They set off down the alley, sprinting towards the car. Beside it, caught between Ghamut, Neita, and the men running towards her, the Duchess screams out something and clenches her electric hands into fists.

Ghamut grabs Neita and sprints away as the alleyway erupts into thunderous applause.

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Neita doesn't cry; whatever she sees over Ghamut's shoulder has stunned her into silence. They run through the nighttime streets, each puddle of light a blotch of fear; have they been seen? Contessa's men rummage through the city streets behind them, a bullet clanks off of a manhole cover and she squeaks and buries her head into Ghamut's neck. His arm throbs from carrying her but he doesn't trust her not to run if he puts her down. He gags for breath and pushes on.

They turn down a greasy alleyway and sprint past closed cafes until they hit the riverside; and here Ghamut follows the old road until he can see the strings of lanterns and then runs further, not bothering to look behind him in case the men in suits are close behind; he runs into his

apartment, dashes through the lobby into an elevator and then moves upstairs, only releasing his grip on Neita as he slams the apartment door, bolts it, slumps against it. His arm lies limp at his side and shakes as blood forces its way back into the limb.

Neita slowly collapses onto the floor and stares blankly at the door. Ghamut crawls over to the window and looks down at the street. No suits in sight. A rattle rouses his attention. Neita has scrambled over to the door and is trying in vain to fumble with the locks. Ghamut scoops her up but now she's remembered she has teeth and bites him.

Swearing, he shoves her to the ground and she scampers away from him, only to begin hurling random items around the apartment at him. An empty glass, a bedside alarm clock, the doctor's empty bottle of medicine.

"Stop!" Ghamut wails, only to catch a fork to the jaw. He rubs the tender spot on his chin and then ducks as a spoon narrowly misses the top of his forehead.

"You don't know her at all!" Neita says. "She wouldn't tell you I can see colors!"

"Well your mother said *she* saw colors, what the hell do you see?"

She hesitates at that, at least puts down her next missile -- a plate -- but now crosses her arms and shouts. "I'm not saying anything! Not until you tell me who you are!"

"I knew your mother," Ghamut grumbles. "I'm taking you someplace." He fumbles in his pocket for the phone and stares at it in the dark. He puts it down by his side and rubs his forehead.

"Well I don't wanna go. Take me back."

"You don't have anywhere to go."

She rears back to throw the plate at him and he points the needle at her. She stares at the point.

“I swear I’ll tie you to a chair.”

They glare at each other in the dark. A lone shadow detaches itself from the wall and slinks across the floor. Ghamut can feel a headache coming on and moves away from the blot of darkness.

Neita extends a hand out and the little creature hops into her palm.

“You can see them?!”

Neita glares at him, cups the little creature to her chest. It glares at Ghamut and grins its many toothed smile.

“Put that thing down,” Ghamut snaps. Neita sticks her tongue out but puts the creature down onto the floor where it scampers away. Ghamut watches in relief. To his surprise, Neita sighs and looks after the scampering shadow longingly.

“So you can see them too,” Neita says coolly.

Ghamut shakes his head and crawls over to the empty medicine bottle, frantically uncorking the cap. Not much point in that. The bottle is empty, has been for days. Nothing comes out but a bit of dust. Ghamut licks a finger and dabs it on his palm in search of some curative remnant. From across the room he hears a strange chirping sound and he looks up -- Neita is laughing at him.

It’s a young, cruel, cutting sound, one that Ghamut recognizes as similar to his own from very long, long ago. He demands to know what the hell is so funny; why isn’t she terrified, why isn’t she scared, doesn’t she know that if she can see what he sees, then she’s sick, sick just like him.

And now her laugh is tinged with scorn. Vera has told her all about people like him. People who can't believe in the world, and so blame everything on themselves. She glances at the prescription bottle and her shoulders shake in amusement. She's seen such bottles before, when Vera used to bring them home for her, before Vera installed her electric eyes. Of course it's from Civ. Civ medicates, Civ makes everything medical and leaves no room for a strange, fantastic reality.

"You're just a child," Ghamut says, shaking his head. "You're just a kid who believes in ghosts and monsters." He reaches for his phone. The adrenaline from the chase has collapsed into pragmatics, and the reality of the situation has set in. Neita, as with Vera, will bring down upon his head more misery and pain than he can manage. He will rid himself of her, and in a few days he will walk down to the surgeon's shop and buy more medicine and have surgery, finally join the ranks of the mysterious creatures in the electric forest.

Neita frowns. She hasn't said anything about ghosts or monsters. Another creature in her palm; Ghamut groans.

"Flowers," she says. All she sees are flowers, drifting on the wind.

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Suspicion lapses into curiosity and from curiosity emerges a tentative compromise. The phone is on the floor, still within reach -- not that the girl has any idea of what he plans to do with it. Neita has agreed that she will stop throwing things and will explain her flowers and Ghamut's monsters, provided that Ghamut promises not to tie her to anything and explains what has

happened to her mother. She reaches out a tiny child's hand and Ghamut shakes it, feeling silly.

Neita has a conniving look upon her face that Ghamut has worn many times before, and he knows that although she won't test him, if given the opportunity, she'll bolt, just like he would as a child.

The moon rises high over the clear Civ sky, and with their positions drawn in the cheap carpet, the two relax. Neita shrinks into herself, pulls up her legs and cups them in front of her chest. Ghamut offers her a glass of water, and she takes it soundlessly and drinks. Ghamut still hasn't turned on the overhead lights and in the nighttime air, Neita has taken on a silver outline. A few of the creatures have begun appearing around her and she cups them in her hands, peering at them before setting them down again. Try as he might, he can't imagine them as petals or flowers. The creatures have too many teeth for that. She stares at him over the bend in her knees and waits for him to speak.

He sits propped up against the door. It pushes into his back, shoves him forward, and he tells her what he can bear, which is close to nothing. He doesn't mention his contract with the man-in-hat, but instead weaves Maya's original contract with Sammi into a semi-truth, places himself outside the collection business, a lover, a secret friend. He reimagines himself as a comrade, a fellow Fieldling. He remembers a bit of what Damien has said about her and sprinkles some of Vera's history in to make the lie more palatable. It's easy, it always has been. "Someone bought out the original contract, opened a collection on her, and you. Half of it filled. That's all I know," he says at last. He runs a hand through his hair. He wipes his eyes. The creatures have massed behind Neita, all clinging to the glass behind her, their teeth and eyes all locked onto him.

Neita doesn't look behind her, and takes his tale in stride.

"Sammi," she mutters.

"She just wanted what Vera owed." For a reason he can't understand, he wants Sammi removed from this, kept conceptually as far away as possible. In fifty years, he will see her sailing down the river in her puffy white jacket, unscathed, clean, unaged. She will pull him out of the river with her electric hand. He can dream of a lifeboat with an intact hull.

Neita nods briefly.

"So, you fucked her and fell in love with her, is that it? She probably didn't love you back. She has her..." she motions to her eyes. "Thing. She looks at people like that."

He can only stare at Neita. She smiles but there's no joy in her eyes.

"Piss. Fuck. Cock. Ass. She worked in a house for whores. Just words."

He runs a hand over his eyes. "Alright. I get it. The eye thing. You were talking about the eye thing."

"She *never* cared about you. She only cared about *me*."

"Alright."

"You say alright, but do you believe it?"

Ghamut can feel the flush rising in his cheeks. "Does it matter?"

Neita glances at the creatures around them both. "It matters to *me*."

Ghamut shudders, and Neita sucks in a breath and cradles a creature or flower to her chest.

Chapter Fifteen - Injustice

Neita was born when the forests had already been cut down and Civ already had bulldozers and steamrollers going over the mud, packing it down and preparing for pavement. Her first memory was of scaffolding, sneaking up on massive support pillars for a highway in the evening holding hands with Vera, looking out over the fleet of bulldozers making their way over the quashed earth, a gray sky overhead. Vera held her hand and told her of flower fields and grasslands which transformed into pavement. She was already on the path that would lead her to Heathers, and would never, for all that Neita could remember, ever tell her whether Neita was a product of love or circumstance.

They were lucky for a long time. Vera, torn away from family, was lonely. They grew up together, Vera learned from her mistakes and made sure that Neita was always insulated from them. She kept her hidden away from Civ, and as the city grew over them, the two darted from home to home, daycares to halfway-houses, relocation centers for Fieldlings, and eventually a motel by the riverside where Neita hid away during the day while Vera worked at Heathers.

And through it all, Vera couldn't stop talking about home. She dreamt of one day sailing down the river or flying away in a plane to somewhere else, when Neita was old enough. No matter how much Neita grew, she was never grown up enough.

She blamed herself when Neita started seeing things at night.

“All my fault,” Neita remembered her saying. She’d spent too much time talking about the past, and now her kid hallucinated flowers, flowers, floating in the moonlight, growing and sprouting around people’s necks. Neita didn’t share her mother’s concern. She delighted in this new world, and in the evenings would often camp out at one of the many riverside motels, gawking at strangers while slouched on decaying, moldy couches. She would watching as vines, petals, and flowers sprouted from limbs and wrapped themselves around waists and arms. For a little while Neita forgot that people had faces at all and only saw bouquets. As Civ obliterated the forests, month after month and then year after year, the complex bunches of the flowers faded, until only a few petals drifted through the air, following people as if caught in a tailwind.

But they never vanished entirely.

And so, Vera bought an eye. A medical eye, the best she could afford with her savings. Vera had never trusted doctors, and had often said she would be damned if she’d let anyone encroach upon her daughter. The cybernetic never picked up anything of course, but now Vera saw the world in strange, new colors. The petals didn’t seem so far-fetched.

Everyone had a hue.

After her initial disbelief, Vera had to admit that Neita wasn’t mad, crazy, or sick. She finally believed her daughter, and admitted that everything her little girl saw, somehow, was real. The two of them stared out at the world with a new fascination. Together, mother and daughter looked out over the city, once Field, and saw embedded within the living circuitry the traces of something that had exploded, that had shunted off into fragments and could maybe one

day be squeezed into a million words but was at the core unexplainable and beyond the grasp of either of them.

That didn't stop them from trying. Vera in her quest to understand this new language and her new visions took her electric eye out of its socket and found she could only see the strange colors with the cybernetic, and for a moment lapsed back into disbelief. She would forget about the truth of the world and transliterate sight into metaphor.

It's an easy trip to fall into, but at Neita's coaxing, she began to listen. A man who swirls with rotting, decaying petals -- in Vera's eye a whirling black and red shimmer -- almost stiffed Vera after a tryst. She locked him in and after threatening to tell his wife, she limped back to Neita, bruised but with her money.

Another client, this time supplanted with invisible daisies, -- a soft, clear-sky blue -- simply talks, thumbing his hands on the foot of Vera's bed. A woman covered in orange lilies becomes a frequent customer and Vera calls her a 'hothead,' on account of the fire she sees flickering all around her.

One night, after collapsing onto the motel bed beside Neita after a day's work at Heathers, Vera had looked up at the ceiling and burst into laughter. Neita, curled up around her mother's arm, had pressed into her side, and Vera had stroked her hair and kissed her goodnight. She had vanished from their little room and disappeared.

That very night, she had stolen from Sammi and they had run away the next morning.

A day later, she had no organic eyes and Neita looked at her mother and saw that her mother believed her and had staked their future, their escape from the city, on what they could see. Funny, looking back: Vera had bet it all on things that no one -- even almighty Civ -- seemed able to glimpse and yet they were just as blind as the rest of the city when it came to their own future.

She hid in the back of the church, under the careful watch of the monk, who wore white magnolias -- and looked like a beige, flat wash according to Vera. He was all smiles and promised to keep them safe while they took shelter within the walls, thought himself a protector or a guide. Vera was beautiful and kept him unaware that they had chosen the church because she had thought the whole situation bitterly funny.

There, in the middle of Civ, which had taken away everything from the Fieldlings, sown false promises, rolled over homes and history, obliterated heritage and stolen a future away from anyone who had ever lived where the mud flats chased the river, sat a half-apologetic monument to what -- electric guilt? An ode to humanity?

Neita had never known the field and was only familiar with the city. She couldn't quite understand, but knew well enough saw that she couldn't speak properly, couldn't comprehend anyone else's jabberwockic squawks. She did know well enough the absence and restlessness ingrained in Vera's migratory patterns up and down the city, and thought the two of them more like strays than anything else.

Well! Humanity had let everyone down, Vera said: and try as the temple's covenant might, they could not escape the fact that when Civ took and twisted bodies into metal the city was in fact performing exactly as intended except this time --

And here always Vera would tap her eyes and hold Neita's hand --

Except this time, Civ has accidentally given us gifts. Crystal eyes to peer through the veil. Robotic hands to reach back to the buried past and unearth it again. Civ in its carelessness had given a way for them all to peer beyond the circuitry and begin to pluck at the flow of electricity itself. They should be terrified, Vera was convinced, not of themselves and what they have become, but us.

And perhaps that was how she fell.

She had forgotten to be afraid.

Or never knew how. Vera waded into more and more dangerous water, without Heathers to return to, she used her eyes to carve her way through bets and gambling scores. She came home with money and as the sums grew, so too did Neita notice her own mother's petals -- roses -- adorn themselves with stems bristling with thorns.

One night, she vanished and didn't return in the morning. Neita waited in the church, unable to speak, and when it had become clear that Vera was gone and not coming back, she took what money they had saved, burned down the tree and ran. Neita took up shop betting on cars, and made her way to the Duchess.

Ghamut knows the rest.

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Afterwards, the silence in the apartment is thick and hard to break. They share in the grief and guilt of Vera lost. Ghamut carefully watches her and when she moves to stare out of the window, he wipes his eyes and shakes his head, thinking of all the mad Fieldlings rotting in the Low, calling out to things only they could see. Perhaps, they weren't so crazy after all.

Or rather, no crazier than the rest of them.

He puts the phone back in his pocket and joins her at the window.

"Sorry," he says, looking out over the city. Vera traces something with her finger and Ghamut asks her if she is staring at the flowers again. She nods.

He glances out, and thinks that maybe, just maybe, he can see a few dark creatures in the shadows.

"But how do we see them?" he says. He had been close to his own electric installments, would already be well on his way to becoming a peacock if it hadn't been for the man-in-hat, but for now, there is no metal within him, no trace of Civ.

To which Neita laughs her bitter laugh.

Half of her blood is Civ. And if Ghamut can see them, then half of his blood is Civ, too.

Chapter Sixteen - Electric Forest II

Over the moonlit city, the dark shapes move within shadows; creature or man, driven back by the lights lining over roads, pouring out of advertisements and storefronts. She used to see everything, Neita muses. Back when the city didn't have as many electric lights, when the land was still under construction without fluorescents or incandescents, it was easy to see strings of flowers and human bouquets.

"An electric forest," Ghamut mutters, rubbing his eyes. Imagine: a forest adorned with invisible flowers and inhabited with strange creatures and metallic animals. It's enough to make him queasy, and more tired than ever before. He moves away from the window to the kitchen, splashing cool water onto his face.

"Electric forest?" Neita glances at him, and he explains the doctor's thesis. An escape within the city, a way to fully transform into an animal. Seen, or unseen, the electric forest offers a break from the ambiguity, the casual, careless, malignance Civ often slips into.

"I'll drink to leaving it all behind," Ghamut mutters, pouring them each a glass of cheap liquor.

Neita sits with him at the table and sniffs the glass. She sticks her tongue into the little pool of liquid and makes a face. Ghamut drinks for both of them, and gives Neita a fresh glass of water which she takes down heartily.

“I never saw any electric animals outside of the ones they pulled into the betting ring,” Neita says. “Not like we could have enough money anyway.” She grins. Vera had always found satisfaction in describing the electric fights. Beyond the spectacle and colors, the thought of those who once bought their way out of skin returning to die in splatter on the floor was so fitting, in a grim kind of way. She licks her finger and makes the ring of the glass sing. Ghamut shrugs. Even Kait and Morde, tip-tapping across the arena; they had designed their own success or failure. At the very least, they looked beautiful.

Neita rests her cheek on the crook of her elbow and Ghamut takes the glass from her to refill it at the sink. For a little while they sit at the dining table. The phone has reappeared in one pocket, the needle in the other; Ghamut feels the weight of each.

“What would you think of a peacock?”

“Never seen one. You mean a robotic one?”

He shrugs.

“Peacocks don’t do anything but look pretty and die. Now a hawk, or a tiger, or something that scratches the eyes out of something else. That’s an animal!”

Ghamut chuckles. “Noted.”

He still hasn’t called Kilnyzck, and takes the phone out, puts it on the table. Neita yawns and stretches herself out like a sunbathing cat. Does he have any food?

Gratefully, he moves away from her and the phone over to the fridge, finds a stale plate full of vegetable leftovers. He heats it up and gives it to her. She picks through it, carefully avoiding

every clump of broccoli but eating most else, and lets out a generous belch. She crosses her arms and grudgingly admits that it's better than the mush at the church. She drinks another glass of water and stands. It is very late. She makes her way over to Ghamut's bed, fluffs up pillows, pulls up blankets and then at last she collapses.

He finds himself smiling. "You're not going to run away in the night, are you?" he calls out after her, but she's already asleep. He looks down at the phone and then sighs, moving back over to the door, locking every single lock. Nothing will get out, or in.

The creatures part as he walks towards her. They're littered on the bed, licking and grinning and staring and Ghamut squeezes his eyes shut and imagines that Neita lies in a grove of the forest, surrounded by lush flora, peacefully asleep. The creatures buzz and move in strange circles. Ghamut imagines a wind stirring up petals and flowers and casting them about.

He retreats to the couch and rubs his eyes. The phone still sits out on the table, and he drifts in and out of a restless sleep.

Once during the night Neita wakes him up with tiny, light sobs, and he sees her reach over to a blank space on the bed. The creatures stare down at him from their ceiling, slowly devouring each other. Vera is gone and he has made Neita more like him in his flailing for solid ground. The creatures see all, and slowly begin to form a wriggling, twitching chain. As they descend to blot out his eyes he wonders if, when he sleeps, he wears a crown of antlers.

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He dreams of Nana by the fire, can't remember a word but recognizes the sour taste in his mouth that lingers after every conversation with her. A clatter and crash in the sink brings him upright. Neita has broken a glass and has cleaned off the plate of leftovers, leaving nothing but smears from her tongue, rummaged through the fridge for cabinets and left the alarm on, scratched at the locks, thrown blankets onto the floor and managed, somehow, to flood the bathroom with shampoo. She's helped herself to one of Ghamut's shirts and wears another, a baby-blue button down, as a cape.

He sighs and cleans up the glass and swears at Neita; she hurls curses back and sits on the couch glaring at the television. "I'm bored," she says, as if their run from the nightclub was already in the distant past, not able to reach out from the night into the day. "What are you doing now? Are you going to take me away?"

Ghamut doesn't answer. The phone has begun to run.

The man-in-hat wishes Ghamut a very good morning, and hopes that he has had a pleasant night. The apartment shines brightly in the midmorning sun, and Ghamut blinks, presses the phone to his ear and stalks over to Neita, pretzeled up on the couch. When she sees him, she opens her mouth wide, probably to complain or curse at him, but then she freezes. She stares at him, takes in his eyes bugging almost out of their sockets, his white knuckles clenched around the phone. To Ghamut's relief she settles down on the couch and he puts his finger to his lips and steps into the flooded bathroom, feet sticky on the tile.

“*Good morning,*” he says to the man-in-hat, and for a little while after that Kilnyzck is silent on the other end and then replices, mirroring his Civ, “*There was a shooting at The Pit last night.*”

“*Pit?*”

“*A nightclub, Ghamut. Are you alright?*”

He says that he is, keeping his voice steady. Again, there is a long silence at the end of the line. Kilnyzck asks where he is. His voice, always and already warm in his greeting, seems to have picked up a new, burning intensity, blood red and white hot.

When Ghamut fails to answer, the man-in-hat says, “Don’t you have something for me?”

Ghamut stares at the locked bathroom door. He turns off the light as if Kilnyzck can see him, and a white outline of light presents itself in the darkness, the entire world outside, ready to flood in. The man-in-hat waits for an answer, and Ghamut closes his eyes and the white square vanishes. Somewhere in the invisible black, the shampoo coagulating under his feet and in the shower continues to pop and hiss slightly. In the dark, the wet and slick remind him of the mud hut and of walks by the riverside, barefoot, slipping over algae and balancing on slippery stones.

Through the darkness comes Kilnyzck. “Ghamut, are you afraid that she will hear us?”

“Yes,” Ghamut whispers.

“*You have her?*”

“Yes,” Ghamut says.

“*Well why didn't you say so?*” The heat carrying through the phone dulls down back to its usual warmth. Kilnyzck's grin carries through. There is no need to worry about such things. He will move to Ghamut's apartment shortly, with payment. The old man's cane carries through the speaker, clicking on stone. Kinyzck says there is no need for such theatrics, that for a moment he was concerned. “*Were you at The Pit?*”

Ghamut nods weakly to the phone and says, yes, he was. There was a woman, Contessa--

There is no need to worry about Contessa, the man-in-hat says reassuringly. He will take care of all of that for Ghamut upon completion of this transaction. “*You're so considerate, to not call an old man in the middle of the night,*” Kilnyzck chuckles. “*It's the least I can do.*”

The very least: All the money Ghamut could ever want will soon be his. Kilnyzck, no doubt spurred by his own excitement, says he will miss doing business with Ghamut, that he hopes that he finds himself a good nest in the Electric Forest. He laughs some more at that.

Ghamut glances at the door.

“*This is the end?*”

“*Yes,*” the man-in-hat says, to Ghamut's relief. There is no one else besides Vera and her daughter. He has other collectors for odd jobs, ones that would not require the... particular skillset of a Fieldling collector such as himself. Certainly if Vera had any more lineage to pursue, but the man-in-hat has found none. The grand experiment ends with Vera's girl.

He closes his eyes.

So Vera had not betrayed them. She had not given up her secret; the Field's secret. Ghamut glances out the door, and wonders if Neita would have the same resolve. He dares not imagine what sort of methods Kilnyzck has at his disposal to make people talk, let alone a child. He wonders what Kilnyzck will do once Neita tells him her story. He imagines that in a few years, the city will undergo a massive flensing. Collectors will hunt Fieldlings down and will sew electric implants into them, all for the ultimate purpose of catching a glimpse of what the Fieldlings might see. An entirely new Fieldling economy could flourish in Civ, where those whose new visions prove useful would be paid well for their services, whereas those like Ghamut and the junkies in the Low, who see nothing but terrors would be cast aside.

But in the electric forest Ghamut knows that he will be safe. With a new chassis, he will exist as a beautiful creature made of metal, escaped, not of Field or Civ, but something else entirely. As a peacock, he'll be unable to fight in any arena, unable to do anything really, but strut along the ground, glorious, and left alone. The forest will burn down behind him, utterly and completely, but will get away safely.

"I'll see you quickly," Ghamut says, and the call ends. He rests his head in his hands in the dark.

Neita is waiting for him outside of the bathroom.

"Who was that?" she says.

"An old friend."

Neita stares at him and huffs. Shaking her head, she sits back down on the couch. She holds his shirt as a cape and wraps it around herself. She's started up the television and watches the advertisements blankly, without comprehension or chagrin. She sits with her legs crossed and as she stares at the flashing colors she flips a bit of hair out of her eyes. He sits down next to her.

"What next?" she says, bored.

But Ghamut doesn't reply; instead he looks for a sign. He stares at the walls and ceilings of the little room in search of the little creatures that will grin at or gnash their teeth at him, but the midmorning sunlight has obliterated all shadow and the moon has disappeared into the bright of the day. In a strange way he misses the dark creatures' guidance and condemnation.

Hopeful, Ghamut turns his gaze towards the window. Perhaps, one of the lanterns has fallen into the river, or a cloud will soon blot out the sun, but the lanterns still sway in the wind and the sky is clear. He searches his pockets for a coin to flip, but only finds the needle and the crumpled picture of Neita. This decision is his to make, and his alone, and time is running rapidly away from him. Already, minutes have passed since the man-in-hat has hung up the phone. Soon Kilnyzck will arrive and Neita will be taken.

With all other distractions fruitless and ungiving, he looks at the girl herself. She's twitching one leg up and down and staring at the television as if annoyed. He recognizes a bit of the past in her bored pout, her shoulder-length hair. If she'd been born to the same portion of the riverside as he, Nana, and Maya, perhaps they could have been friends, or enemies. She would have been something significant, he decides. Something more than just a passing face. She seems scrappy

enough, and so Ghamut leans into the cushions. The best he can do for her, he decides, is to let her call the coin in the air. A simple wager. Heads or tails.

“Hey,” he says, and she peeps up over the couch. He tucks the photo away. That’s something for him to keep, no matter what.

“Blue. Is that your favorite color?”

Neita wrinkles her nose. Blue? Certainly not.

And so the coin has landed. It’s lot called. Ghamut feels something in his gut unravel and settles back against the couch, but then Neita says that her favorite color is orange, after the fruit that Vera used to steal and give to her as a child. Orange: like fire, or marigolds. She glances at Ghamut, and smiles. As she stares into him he can feel something inside him crumbling and giving way.

It’s a bit like making dams out of tiny sticks by the river side. No matter how many little pieces of wood and piles of sand he had at his disposal, the river kept on sweeping through, washing it all away. But now, Ghamut has a chance to truly stop the river. He may only hold it for a moment -- eventually, someone somewhere will find out the same thing Vera did, but perhaps he can stop this little girl from being drawn and quartered for the Field’s secrets.

Neita smirks at him and tells him there’s no need to be such a baby about it: orange is the color of the sun and blue is the color of the sky or the water, reflecting orange in the sunset or the morning. It’s a good pairing, she says, but orange is her favorite.

Ghamut is off the couch.

He throws on a shirt, fetches a clean pair of pants and puts on different overcoat. Neita looks up.

“Are you taking me somewhere?”

He takes his phone and drops it down the kitchen sink, stabs through the screen with the needle. He unlocks the door. Neita, excited, empties out a pillow case and dumps her dirty, ashen clothes into it.

“Where are we going?” Neita says.

“The forest,” says Ghamut.

Chapter Seventeen - Asset

Running becomes more like walking, and they walk from the apartment down to the riverside, hug the bends. Then begins a mindless, aimless wandering, up and down city streets throttled with pedestrians, far away from the broad streets, keeping to narrow alleyways clotted with parked cars, anything to slow down the man-in-hat; surely by now Kilnyzck has found the apartment abandoned, had the driver break down the door, and discovered the broken phone in the sink.

As the sun burns and heats up the street, he can feel the city constricting, coiling, pressing up closer and closer, curdling, calcifying and collapsing onto them. Somewhere out there is the man-in-hat, the doctor, Maya, Damien, Sammi.

His pockets are full of what little cash he has left, and he worries of unwanted attention from bums and panhandlers. They stop at a cafe -- Neita has to pee -- and he orders a plate of meat dumplings. The cashier doesn't so much as glance twice at him, and he is pleasantly surprised when Neita remarks how good the little fried delicacy is.

They walk deeper and deeper into the shining lattice, surrounded by massive concrete slabs used as benches, staircases, and strange planter boxes around gnarled, massive oaks. After yet another semi-rush through an empty plaza, surrounded by buildings with steel and glass bent in abstract shapes, full of architectural design choices that are, quite frankly, baffling, they come to a stop. Neita has crossed her arms and loudly complains, "You don't have any idea of where we're

going, do you?" A few civ businessmen walking by in professional attire glance at them, and Ghamut reaches for Neita's hand but she slaps it away. The sun sinks in the sky; they've walked all day in zigzags, doubled back up and down, with no real running strategy, reduced their odds of meeting either Kilnyzck or Contessa to mostly chance, which is the best Ghamut can manage at the moment.

"You see any flowers?" Ghamut says, kneeling in front of her. He can't see any creatures, and without them, assumes that he is lost.

Neita frowns. She *always* sees flowers. Ghamut's oversized shirt billows behind her and catches the light, translucent. She looks like the old women from villages upon the Field, a young little anachronism, sitting cross-legged in front of a captured tree in an overridden territory. Nodding, and hoping that Neita possesses some of the wisdom she seems to mimic, he explains that they will look for the most flowers possible.

Neita glares at him and stands up. "You're like that lady in all white? Trying to bet with me?"

No, no -- Ghamut glances around the industrial business park. If she runs away now, he'll never find her.

He explains: Back in the old days, before the city, the Field used to swarm with a thousand creatures, all around, scores hanging from branches. If they can find the repository of the little bastards, or if Neita can see vast fields of flowers, then surely they will have found the electric forest, and can live among the metal animals hiding away there.

She looks doubtfully at him. "That sounds incredibly stupid," she says. "Why can't we go back to the apartment?"

"Because the people looking for Vera are still looking for you," Ghamut says.

That shuts her up.

-

Deep into the evening, they still have found nothing. A few petals swirl in the wind, a few creatures crawl up and down the sides of the street, but the massive surge of little shadows or bouquets of flowers is entirely absent. They duck into a cafe and sup on cold, pureed mangos over sweet rice.

"This is the best I've ever eaten," Neita says, slurping down the bit of juice left over on her plate. "Thanks."

Ghamut shakes his head and slides over his plate, thinking of Maya, starving. They move quickly away from the cafe. The moon is out, the night has come.

"It's the damn lights," Neita says, staring at another neon-lit boulevard. "Back when there was just the light of the moon and not all these..." She points at a shop window full of television screens, dancing models with electric legs leaping in slow motion through fields of glitter and artificial fog. Ghamut glances up and down the street -- empty, no headlights, no cars, no running men in suits.

Neita takes his hand and leans up against him, yawning. He stares at her.

"If only we could turn them... off," she says.

And so he takes her into a liquor store, a sleepy cashier sitting upright at the electric bell.

Neita stares at the bottles wide-eyed, and the cashier does a double take when he sees the little girl.

"You can't--"

Ghamut stares at him long enough for him to remember such things aren't worth caring about. The cashier glances outside the store windows, crosses his arms. He scratches his arms and picks up a magazine but doesn't read it. *"Cute kid,"* he says, jerking his chin at Neita.

Ghamut smiles quickly and moves to an aisle full of glass bottles. He can't read any of the labels, but picks one with cut up oranges. The cashier stares at Neita. *"How long have you had her?"* he asks, and Ghamut stares at him.

"What the hell kind of qu-- pardon?"

"How old is she?"

"Eight."

The cashier takes the bottle and checks them out, staring after them as they leave.

Glancing behind back at the shop, Ghamut hurries down the street with Maya in tow. They work their way back down to familiar streets and Ghamut pours out the entire bottle after spearing the cap with the needle.

"Orange, your favorite color, right?"

Neita nods.

They've stopped by a row of cars and Ghamut crouches down. "You're small." He hands her the needle. "Look for a..." he explains a vague description of what a car's fuel tank should look like and hands Neita the bottle; she disappears underneath the ass end of the car. A few quick clinks later, and then a small splash of liquid hits the pavement and Neita swears. Her feet stick out from under the car and Ghamut glances up and down the street for passers by or police, but there is nothing and no one; the street is empty. The glass bottle clinks vibrantly over the ground and the needle rolls out; Ghamut collects it and smells the slightly sweet smell of gasoline. A puddle oozes out on the street and after a short while Neita emerges, spluttering with her thumb over the mouth of the bottle; it's half full and Ghamut eyes it suspiciously.

"Front end," he says, and Neita squirms her way to the front, muttering under her breath while he punches the needle into the hood, eventually catching the release; he wriggles it side to side until the hood lurches up and then he reaches into the tangle of pipes, gaskets, and wires to stab the transmission fluid tank with the metal lance. Neita swears again, and then after a few minutes of this, she reemerges, smelling and stained with grease, grime, and dirt. The bottle is almost full and tinted red, and Ghamut takes it from her, puts the cap back on, and shakes it until the gasoline and transmission fluid have come together in a weird sort of sludge.

Neita spits and glares at him. "What the hell are we doing?"

"Hush now. You get to do the fun part." He gestures at the shirt she's wearing as a cape.

"Gimmie that."

"No!"

She backs away and Ghamut sighs and groans. Working in tandem with the needle he tears a bit of his own shirt and stuffs it in the neck of the liquor bottle.

“What are you going to do with *that*?”

-

Nana kept the fire burning late into the night, and as they stop by the substation, lit only by the moon, he sees a creature stretch and uncoil round the silhouettes of the transformers and switches to stare at him, grinning, always grinning. Its tail lashes back and forth and he hands Neita the bottle. “This used to be my home,” he says. Neita peers in at the electrics and nods.

“It’s overgrown with weeds.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have a lighter, would you? Vera--”

“I don’t.”

They stare at the tangled mass. The creature lashes its tail expectantly, and Ghamut stares at it, wondering...

Neita sets down the bottle and sprints into the darkness. He calls after her, terrified, but she’s already disappearing down one of the side streets. For a moment he stands there, frozen, but then he’s sprinting after her, terrified, more afraid than he’s ever felt before. He finds her feet up in the air, half-in a dumpster, and she plops out, grinning, hand on a tiny lighter.

“How--?”

“I followed a sprout of pocketbooks -- Orange is my favorite color,” Neita says, and that is the only explanation he can coax out of her.

And then they stand before his old home, the bit of his shirt burning. The creature lashes its tail expectantly, fangs and eyes aglow. Neita breathes heavily. "For everyone," Ghamut says mutely. He closes his eyes. Neita steps up, her foot scrapes on concrete.

"For *mom!*" she screams, and then he hears a little swish of fabric and a small shattering of broken glass. He opens his eyes.

Nana sits beside the fire, knitting crowns, and Maya glares at Ghamut and says something he can't hear. He steps towards them, but the very ground seems to lurch away. He steps on mud-packed earth, hears a roar, the fire burns brighter and brighter, it will burn the dandelion crowns, and he pushes forward. The madman from the jail cell emerges from the flames, grinning, extending a hand out. "When was the--"

Neita catches his hand and he sees the substation on fire through the black wire, bright orange. He looks down at her and sees that she has started to cry, tears streaming down her face, wiping snot away with the back of a fist. All around them, the Civ lights shine on, and Ghamut wonders: just because an electrical substation has the word 'electrical' attached to it doesn't necessarily mean burning it down will have any effect on the rest of the city.

But then the sparks begin to fly, and Neita stares straight up at the night sky. There -- its eyes glowing, burning orange, black against the stars, moonlight on silver scales, tungsten teeth bared and lashing back and forth, is the electric snake.

"I'd forgotten about you," Ghamut says, to the night air.

The snake thrashes as bursts of silver light ripple up and down the ringed underside. The massive beast unravels from all across the city, growing more and more tangible as the substation burns, swathes of the lights flickering, color giving way to darkness. It rears back in agony, fixes its gaze on the burning fire, and lunges downwards.

The two Fieldlings, silhouetted against the burning fire, take a step back. The large one turns away from the blaze and cradles the other, turning away from the fire as the snake begins to dive. The serpent slams into the substation and a massive well of blackness spreads across the cityscape, flooding the lights and colors with emptiness, just the stars and the night and the moon. The snake latches on to the burning substation and punctures clean through, fangs leaving behind a dark wound. Soon the entirety of the snake's head is ablaze, and with a final thrash and a *crack*, the vertebrae in its spine split and shatter, jetting out into the night air, scales shimmering down like confetti, and Civ returns once more to the wild darkness.

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He holds her so close, feels his heart hammering away. Neita is silent, staring, waves of heat still cascade from the fire, but they have not been swept away. Civ's skyline has been reduced to black, blocky shapes in the night. Slowly, Ghamut relinquishes her.

"It was better than the tree," Neita says, wiping away tears, and they share a tentative laugh. He brushes a bit of her hair away from her face, tucks it behind her ear. The hiss of the fire and the burning rubber, metal and clicking electrics fills the night and they stare at Ghamut's campfire, burning in the night.

The creature cozies up by the fire, and glances back into the dark.

And from where the forest used to be, pour shadows. Thousands, more than that, perhaps hundreds of thousands, racing back into the city streets. Neita smiles. The flowers return with a vengeance, scores, adrift on the night wind, highlighted in the moonlight.

And the two set off for the electric forest, following flora and fauna home.

-

Sirens have begun to color the night, and police spill out on the streets, people mull around in the darkness and confusion, they push their way through, following the creatures prancing happily. A few cars trawl up and down with headlights cutting through and a voice lets residents know to stay indoors. People cradle phones and tablets with flashlights and light their way through dark streets with the blue glow of screens.

Next to them, the creatures chitter. Ghamut and Neita push on, until Ghamut recognizes the sloping ascent of the roads beside them, even in the darkness, their destination apparent. He falters and Neita skitters to a halt somewhere in the vicinity nearby. "Goddamit," he says.

The creatures pour into the maw of the Low, in the fresh dark a black blot lit up on occasion by fires. The tiny pinpricks of orange glow menacingly deep within, and dark shapes work within the darkness next to the grinning clumps of eyes and teeth. On the pillars clumps of light and voices ring down, hooting and hollering. So much noise out of something so dark, all of it a welcoming taunting warning, pushing and pulling and luring. Deep within the dark, hidden away from the rest of the world, must lie the electric forest. Perhaps that's where it grows, in the darkest parts, away

from prying eyes. The voices and sounds coalesce into the trumpeting of the birds, the growls of beasts, the whisper of wind through trees, and the silent hiss of voices, none speaking any language Ghamut can recognize, but speaking nonetheless.

“Don’t be scared,” Neita says, staring at her flowers. She holds out a hand and Ghamut looks at her, swears and takes it. “Are they good flowers?” Ghamut says, walking with her into the darkness. She guides him, vanishes entirely, and in a nightmare of eyes and watching teeth he walks, dragged behind her, entirely helpless.

“They are all the same,” she says, and they follow a drift of tulips and lace and anemones with little black centers into the dark, ripped up and chewed up petals. None of the flower names make any sense to Ghamut, but the sound of her voice, steadfast and sure, clear and ringing like a bell, carries him onward.

Once, Neita gasps, and he feels her jerk his wrist to the right and off they go down another incomprehensibly dark corridor. Orange light begins to flicker through the walls, and he cries out, afraid, like a child. They are children, all children of the Field, swept up and away down the dark waters of the river and mudslides and entombed in a concrete sarcophagus! He holds tight to the vision of the electric forest, a cornucopia of animals, he’ll see their cybernetics glowing in the dark, looks up and sees the blinking blue, red, green, lights of the insane and chrome-addicted mad men on pillars like a perverted sky and chokes on his own fear until Neita tells him to shut up.

Cowed, he falls silent, until Neita says she has found a drifting sea of lotuses, lily pads spinning slightly on downstreams of air and Ghamut stares and sees nothing but long tails and eyes

and teeth and down they go, running, running, until it becomes obvious that they are making their way to a fire and Ghamut smells garbage and something familiar. The dark shapes reform into creatures and things that can be understood and feared, and then Neita has led them into the ring of light and Ghamut stares in disbelief at the burned-up matchstick of a woman standing fully upright in the darkness, eyes accusing, mouth agape in astonishment, first surprise, then anger.

Chapter Eighteen - Horseflies, Fortunetellers, and Matchsticks

She should kill him now. The knife with the chipped blade wavers in the dark and Neita frowns between them and points at Maya. “Lotuses,” she says, her voice for once unsure. Maya stares down at the girl and explodes, Ghamut, what the *fuck*?

She backs away and stares at him and then at Neita, fumbles in her pocket for a phone and then glances at something on the screen, and yells at them to get away, far away. Hasn't he done enough? There's a contract out on him, on *them*, at such an astronomically high number that the whole city may as well be a sea of collectors, and now they've gone and shown up on her doorstep, why can't he leave her *alone*?

She sits down beside her little fire, scraps of wood and rotting scaffolding, bits of torn magazines, and puts her head in her hands.

“You know him?” Neita says, and then, excited. “My mom, did you know Vera?”

Maya looks at him in flat disgust. “Vera?” Oh, yes, Ghamut knew Vera, oh, yes -- and then he has crossed the fire and Maya swings the knife at him and he knocks it out of her hand, has the needle out in front of him, the point under Maya's chin. He turns so Neita can't see and Maya's eyes burn into him as she slowly lowers her chin onto the point, forcing him to lower the needle or else--

“Sit by the fire,” Ghamut says to Neita. “We'll be back soon.”

Maya glances over his shoulder and spits in Ghamut's face. Together, they disappear into the dark.

-

They walk to a darkened alleyway beyond the fire. Maya has made her camp in a long alley lined with dumpsters and littered with refuse and filth. They pass by garbage bags cut open and the contents filtered out, everything valuable pilfered. All around them, the shrieks, shouts, and cries of the darkened Low echo up and down and Ghamut wonders what calamity the lights will reveal if or when they turn back on.

He lowers the needle after walking past an open dumpster but catches her arm when she tries to push past him. "Maya, please," he says softly, and she hits him but doesn't hurt him. "*Maya*," he says, and then he rubs his eye, she's gone and jabbed at him with a fist. "I'm--" he grimaces -- she's caught him again -- "I'm sorry." She hits him across the face again and then steps back. He's still got one of her hands in his grasp and they stand there. She's breathing heavily and stares at him. Maybe something in his voice has caught her, maybe it's because he hasn't said a word and is staring at the ground, or maybe it's the tears pouring out of his eyes and the taste of salt trickling onto his lips. He lets go of her wrist and she hits him again but doesn't try to move.

She wants to know what he's sorry for. And he starts at the beginning.

He works his way through the time they spent as children, then adolescents, fight by fight, days spent eating while she starved, the night when he left her on the ground with a broken skull,

for working for Kilnyzck. He glances back at the fire, where Neita sits, warming her hands and peering curiously into the dark after them.

Maya stares at him, and then says no amount of words will ever, *ever* make them even. He owes her an entire life's worth of reparations, and then her eyes focus on something in the dark behind him and she shudders.

He turns and looks at the orange light flickering at the end of the alley.

And what does Neita owe Maya?

Maya glares at him. How *dare* he use that little girl, how dare he, how could he, just doing the same. Never learned from his mistakes. And now she tries to move past him and Ghamut says that she was right, right about everything, almost everything, she's the only one who was right about *him* but she's wrong about *this*. He could have been a peacock! One with electric feathers, strutting in an electric forest!

"You're insane," breathes Maya. "You are truly, fully insane."

And she's right about that too, Ghamut says, just not in the way she thinks. He begs her to see, one final time. She's seen through everyone else, including Nana. Only Maya has called him what he is, and now he has nothing to deny, hide, he's finally shed everything off, damn his pride or ambition, he's stripped, as naked as he can be, and she looks at him and he meets her gaze head on, holds it, and then gives her the needle. If she won't help them then he and Neita will leave, and she can have that—not much use it will be if everyone in the city is truly looking for them.

She takes it and feels its weight, tracing her fingers up and down the silver metal shaft and then gives it back to him. She wants to know if Neita knows what he's done to her mother, if Ghamut has told the little girl the truth. And then she smiles, because she's seen already in the flicker of his expression that he hasn't, and that's something she can seize and twist to clear Ghamut's debt to her. She laughs at him in the dark stain of the alley, and says that yes, she will help them, she will help them and then one day, at her choosing, she will tell Neita, that little girl, the total truth she knows, and then she and the rest of the world will see Ghamut for what he is and she will laugh as he burns. And then -- she will collect on Ghamut himself, he will owe her *everything* and she will *take* everything, as she is owed, until she deigns that they are square.

"Alright," Ghamut says. "Alright." He will draw whatever contract Maya wants; consider it done.

And then he walks back to the fire, breathless. He clears his expression and collects himself. After a pause and silence, he hears Maya follow him.

They take their places around the fire, Neita glances at them suspiciously but says not a word. She asks Maya how she knows Ghamut, but Maya just grunts and demands to know what the hell they've gotten into, and Neita, after a cursory glance at Ghamut, tells Vera's story. She talks about electric eyes and things that are invisible or unseen but still *there*, the marriage between Civ and Field.

Maya's face collects thunder and her hands make their way up to her temple, where the doctor had cut her open, and says she knew it; he's gone and put some kind of electric in her skull. She kicks the fire, sending up sparks.

Neita yelps and hugs herself a little tighter in her makeshift cape.

Maya strides up and down before them. She's seen things too -- little insects, always hungry, electric ants and flies and butterflies, bright neon against the dark, always moving in pursuit of food and eager to lead her to more and more. She'd thought herself mad, or crazy, and had followed them away from Ghamut, into dumpsters that had scraps for her, tiptoeing after trails of electric ants to scrounge for what she needed.

"I see flowers," Neita says. "Beautiful ones or prickly, poison, depending on the person."

Maya nods.

When Ghamut is silent, Neita chirps up, helpfully, that he's told her he can see monsters, and Maya glances up at him and says that is fitting. He sighs. In a way, it is. The two of them see just what they need, whereas his own peculiar sight only serves to torment him. Maya watches him from across the fire, carefully making note of his expression.

He tells her that they blew up the substation to follow Ghamut's creatures and Neita's flowers, and Maya puts her hands on her head and says they are both insane, so insane, it's all insane, but if they're here and alive and not dead then some way, somehow, it's not insane at all.

Neita half-smiles. The little girl gazes into the fire and holds Ghamut's oversized coat close. She looks so alone in their company and in the Low breeze she shudders. Without much of a

thought, Ghamut takes off his coat and puts it on her shoulders. Neita complains and tells him it smells terrible, just like him, but then mutters a sullen thanks when Ghamut moves away.

When he looks up Maya is staring at him with an ugly look on her face. She gets up and walks slowly away, and after a moment Ghamut pats Neita on the shoulder and tells her he'll return soon.

"You keep saying that," Neita says. He ignores her.

He follows Maya out onto a dark street. If it weren't for the thousands of eyes and teeth giving texture to the darkness, he would have been completely blind, but soon he finds her on a curb, staring out into the dark Low, and collapses beside her.

"It's not going to work," she says. "She's still going to hate you when I tell her."

"I know," Ghamut says.

She turns in the dark and he can see the tiniest glint of her eyes facing him.

"I might not even need to, you might fuck it up, like it's your nature. You'll hit her one day, or she'll say something wrong and you'll fall back to your old self."

"Maybe."

Something rustles in the dark and a moment later Maya's fist crashes into his cheek; she's hitting him again, breathing heavily, blows raining down, then kicks. Ghamut weathers the barrage silently -- Maya was never stronger than him. This time, she doesn't let up and only after running out of breath entirely do the strikes stop.

“Everything you do hurts me,” she whispers. “Every single thing you do. You could breathe and it’s like shards of glass in my throat. And no matter what I do to you, you just sit there and... I can’t --”

Those two pinprick eyes still stare at him in the darkness.

“I’m--”

“Don’t say it.”

She sits back down next to him and sighs. For a long time in the dark they sit beside each other, neither saying a word. It’s only half-true, what she’s said. Maya’s managed to twist every aspect of their life together in a net to drag him along. That hasn’t exactly been painless either, the constant battering, his fear and shame of her perception.

He puts a hand on her shoulder and feels her freeze up, but then he pulls her close and in the dark he can imagine anyone and tries to imagine Nana or Vera or Sammi but instead he can only think of Maya, and he wraps both of his arms around her.

“All this, for a fiver,” he says quietly, and is glad to hear a short, nervous laugh.

He lets her go.

“Bastard,” she says.

“Only you could say for sure.”

She seems to shift in acknowledgement.

From the alleyway comes a small crash, and Neita’s laugh. The firelight flares a little brighter; the girl has started to throw things into the fire. Ghamut sighs.

The world won't wait for them. This tentative truce is the best they'll get. He tells her of his fear: that if the man-in-hat gets ahold of that girl, then not only will terrible things happen to Neita, but perhaps to all of them. If the secret gets out, then one day, Cvi will force all Fieldlings to wear cybernetics and they will become slaves to what they see.

She says nothing for a little while.

"You still there?"

She is. Eventually she turns to him in the dark and asks, "Is that the only reason you're here now? Because you messed up her life so much and now she's and all of us one inch away from the brink, and if she goes over then we all go with her? Is that what it took, Ghamut? For you to find your one shred of decency? The end of the world?"

"I think she would have run with us on the riverside," Ghamut says. "She reminds me of the old days. Maybe things can be different this time around."

Before Maya can respond, the lights begin to flicker back on overhead. First one and then another. From the Low come screams, whoops, and laughter, all raining down from above.

Ghamut shudders. The city waits out there for them.

Maya, now able to be seen again, quickly picks herself off the ground and brushes herself off. She clears her throat and dabs at her eyes, which water in the change in ambiance.

Well then, she says. If that's the case, then he'd better have a place to go. They haven't come all this way just to find her, this she knows. Together, they make their way back to the fire, where Neita waits, looking up in disappointment at the returning ever present twilight. Ghamut explains

to Maya his quest to find the electric forest, and Maya shakes her head and calls him a suicidal fool. She says that there is no such thing, but Ghamut insists -- the creatures and the flowers led them here, and now he stops because he realizes how ridiculous it all sounds, but it's the truth and there they are, led all this way because of it.

He is sure, convinced, that they may find sanctuary in the electric forest, because they sure as all hell can't stay here, can't languish or wait if the full fury of the man-in-hat is after them. At the mere mention of Kilnyzck, Maya spits and looks around as if trying to piece together which road to go down that very instant.

But in the end, they have to stay for one night. It is late, Neita is tired, they are all exhausted, and the best that they can all do is wait until the morning. The little girl curls herself into a ball beside the embers, already at home in squalor. Maya lies flat out, her confusion and doubt eventually given way into unconsciousness, and Ghamut stays awake, cursing Kilnyzck for making them -- all of them -- this way.

-

Fluttering and footfalls. Ghamut opens his eyes to see Damien standing over them. The lights have gone back out again and the sky blinks back, full of creatures. He cannot know if it is morning or still the night, and he wonders if he is again captured in Damien's strange white room. The screaming and shrieking from the pillars has finally fallen quiet and the darkness mirrors the silence.

"Don't say a word," Damien says. He steps over Maya and his blue eyes scour her and Neita, still curled up next to the embers. What little light remains in the night casts them gray, more blurs than bodies. In a panic, Ghamut sits upright, hand flying to his pocket, and in response Damien unfurls his cloak, revealing the antlers affixed to his spine. Ghamut stops reaching for the needle and stands upright, slowly. Damien jerks his head down the alleyway and together they move away from the others.

"Glad you still have some sense and reason," Damien says. *"After your gift to the city, I was worried I would have to string one of your traveling companions up to get you to speak to me. Your recklessness is rather historic, my friend."* The folds of the cloak snap shut, and Ghamut shudders at the sound.

Damien smiles and kicks off the ground to squat on a dumpster, landing as delicately as a cat. *"Full of irregularities, twists and turns, you surprise me. I wonder if I've gotten everything right at all."*

He cocks his head and within his skull his two eyes shine brightly. He has heard from his many, many friends that Ghamut is looking for the electric forest, and with glee thinks that he can provide passage and transportation there. From his position atop the dumpster, hunched over with only his face appearing from his cloak, Damien looks like a catastrophe of a vulture, as if one of the scavenging birds has stuck its beak into Damien's gullet and in jerky, birdlike motions, puppeteers his head.

"Electric forest?" Ghamut says.

"Indeed." Damien grins and stands up. If Ghamut desires, he may hop into Damien's embrace and the blue-eyed man will install the requisite instruments so that the forest will reveal itself.

Hadn't Ghamut wanted to become a peacock? Yes, Damien knows how to make this happen, can make it all occur within a night. Oh yes, he knows how: Isn't it clear from Damien's form and appearance that he is an expert at such transformations?

"I knew we were alike," Damien says. *"We walk the same path, and I see your destination clear as day now."*

There is a certain bravery about it all that Damien wishes to reward, the castigation of humanity in favor of an embrace of the machine, the world trending upwards into metallic unity. Ghamut's rejection of Field and Civ is the overall trend Damien hopes to observe; where beyond his individual predictions all of mankind's fate lies. *"One day, we will all live in our own electric forests,"* he says.

Ghamut is elated and relieved. Of course, if he is offered an escape, he will take it. Damien as a savior is unexpected, but at this late in the dark, not unwelcome. Can he take Maya, and Neita -- provide passage for all three?

Damien smiles, and so too do all of the creatures above them.

Certainly. While he cannot give them electric chassis as he can for Ghamut, who so desperately needs one, he can certainly let them see the forest itself. Then they are welcome to wander for eternity.

Ghamut glances upwards at the leering monsters. *"But we go together?"* he says in his faltering Civ. Surely they can run into the forest together and find a hideaway there, and one day return.

Damien clucks his tongue. The electric forest is not the sort of thing one may return from. He cranes his neck and looks down around the Low. *“Don’t the pillars and skyscrapers look like trees? Do not the mottled streets feel like gravel and dirt? Doesn’t the air smell like the reeking forest, the muck and sewage on the ground fresh, clear rivers? Are not the people strange creatures, and the sky--”* he looks up at the dripping roof -- *“clear as the summer night?”* He shifts, and on the lid of the dumpster, Ghamut sees two crystalline pearls left behind: electric eyes, same as Vera.

Freedom, promises Damien. Freedom in the same way the projection room brought Ghamut back into the past. The very same freedom that the man who spent his days in a dream achieved, except *these* eyes are not bought by a jealous wife. These crystals don’t broadcast blackness, but rather are the gateways to an enlightened, electric world.

At the look on Ghamut’s face, Damien croons. It is not a lie. It is the kindest, easiest way to live. He will be safe there: his form as a peacock will match perfectly with the forest he sees. Ghamut can reshape the world into whatever he wants it to be through these eyes, he can live as he finally wants, be *free*, fucking *free!* With an electric form, the ghosts of disease, danger, and misery will fade away into just a long-forgotten dream. *“This is a nightmare,”* Damien says, throwing his gaze at the dark alleys of the Low. *“And it is most logical to want to wake up from it.”*

Ghamut stares at the two crystal pupils and then slowly weighs them in his hand, imagining an escape to the beginning of his history. Ghamut as Ghamut, finally destroyed. But mere eyes would not free Maya from herself, nor transform Neita into something unrecognizable. The world would still see them as they are, and still hunt them. The little glass balls are cold and click slightly as

they roll together in his palm. For a moment he wonders if Damien has lied to him but then discards the thought. The dark cloak of a man has no reason to deceive him. He grimaces and puts them back down on the garbage bin and Damien cocks his head, still smiling.

“Oh?”

Ghamut stares back at the darkened out campfire with the two sleeping forms curled around it. If only the electric forest was a real physical space they could hide away in, then perhaps he could accept. Perhaps if Neita and Maya were of the sort to exchange their flesh and bone for circuits and electrics, there could be a way for them to truly escape into this half-truth forest, but he cannot make that decision for them, and neither will he abandon them. Not this time, and perhaps never again, certainly not for a place more imaginary than tangible.

“But it will be real, one day,” Damien says. *“One day, all of it will be real.”* The eyes are just an intermediary, a stepping stone while the rest of the world catches up. So many others, just like the doctor said, so many others have already escaped, and lie in wait, have shed their skin for silicone, and reinforced bone with something stronger... Ghamut could skip ahead to the future to live in the past, this is his chance!

Ghamut shakes his head. Neita and Maya are trapped squarely in the present, and no amount of metal, money, or medicine will solve that problem. It doesn't matter if Neita sees a paradise if the city can still find her. Damien frowns and begins to barter. Well then, become something else, something besides a useless peacock. A wolf, a tiger, a lion, anything with large claws and sharp teeth!

The creatures seem to nod in agreement, but Ghamut shakes his head. All his life he has barely been seen. Nana only saw him as a part of his mother; Kilnyzck, as a collector; Civ, as a Fieldling. Maya was the only one who dared shove his ugliness into his face, and he's convinced that a true escape, a true transformation must mean something different. He'll not change forms just to be a walking stack of knives; after all, he already carries the needle. He will remain either as himself, or he will transform into an electric peacock, and if the latter is useless to the two women then damn it, he'll stay the former.

Damien sighs, and smiles sadly. If that is Ghamut's wish and choice, then he'll not impose his will any longer.

"I told you this would end badly for you," he says, hopping off from the dumpster to land silently on the ground. The eyes disappear under a sweep of the cloak. Damien stalks up to Ghamut until the wall digs into Ghamut's back and he can see only Damien's pale face and blue eyes. The older man drinks him in and Ghamut wonders if Damien will snap him up again but then the black poncho collapses into his usual smile and says, *"Then I will see you at the end."*

He lunges forward, and Ghamut throws up a hand. When he lowers it, Damien is gone. The lights have returned and so has the ambience of the Low, the rumble of traffic far overhead, the yells and shrieks of the pillars. All the little creatures have vanished as well, and the few lights that have recovered from the city blackout show an empty, dripping ceiling.

Ghamut shakes his head and walks back to the embers of the fire, and falls into an uneasy, fitful slumber.

Chapter Nineteen - The Electric Snake

“The river, then,” he says. He slings on his coat. Gray light streams in through the maw of the Low, making the underside of the city look like a dusty bowl. Even now, some of the lights installed on the street or nestled in their spots in the ceiling haven’t come back on, and Ghamut wonders what will happen in the next nightfall. Neita complains that this is twice now that he’s changed direction, and says that is too much changing.

“Can’t you figure out where you want to go?” she snaps.

“No. He’s hopeless.” -- Maya. Neita laughs: *Ha-ha*, and Maya cracks a small smile.

He glares at them both.

With the electric forest out of the question and the Low no place for children -- and here Maya has to agree with him -- there are few options within the city that would be safe. They may wander with luck for quite a while, but slowly, surely, Ghamut says, the electric snake will come for them all.

Across the burnt-out campfire, Maya shoots him a puzzled gaze but says nothing.

Even the police may be hunting him, what with the exploded substation. He sighs and groans and counts the amount of money left in his coat. There isn’t much, but perhaps they can find a way out of the city still. Maya glares. Leaving the city was not part of the deal, but at a retort from Ghamut -- “If there’s anything so lovely about it all that you can think of a reason to stay, then say it.” -- she pivots, and says that leaving is impossible.

He doesn't have enough money for a trip by plane, not that any of them would have any idea how to navigate any of *that*, nor does he have any money for a car. Walking out into the construction fields is a surefire way for them all to get cancer or die from poison; and Ghamut finally snaps and yells out, "Goddamnit Maya, I *know*," and Neita jumps.

They glare at each other until Ghamut breaks from Maya's gaze and he buries his forehead in his hand, rubbing the space between his eyes. She's always been smarter than him and goddamn, how he hates her for that. Neita's stomach growls loudly in the silence, and he purses his lips. Sooner or later, they'll have to move; the girl has to eat, after all. He sweeps his coat; they can go to a cafe and figure it out.

Maya laughs out loud. They can't go to a cafe, they can't go *anywhere*. If they leave the Low, they must cut straight to their escape; any detour isn't worth the risk.

"Well, she has to eat!" Ghamut says. "Surely you of *all* people can understand that!"

Maya snarls and says she can, and then stalks off down the alley in a huff. Ghamut watches her leave and curses. Together alone, Ghamut tries to smile for Neita but can't quite manage to make the expression convincing enough. For a few minutes, perhaps in awe of his and Maya's argument, the little girl sits on an upturned bucket, kicking bits of ash with her shoes and drawing flowers with her index finger in the muck.

Neita's voice is small: she can watch for thorns, or foul-smelling flowers, perhaps guide them through a forest of people, through to safety. But they'll have to wait for darkness when she can see clearly, sometime in the evening.

Ghamut glances up at the gray light filtering through the Low. Every second spent idle is another second that Kilnyzck can coil his grip tighter.

But there is nothing they can do.

“Fine,” he mutters. “Are you doing all right?”

“I liked the bed better.”

“At least you’re not kidnapped.”

Neita shrugs and grins. “Maybe. The lady in the white clothes had a nice car.”

He rolls his eyes. “All you’ve ever been is kidnapped.”

They wait for Maya to return, and when an hour passes, and then two -- by now Neita has drawn an entire arrangement of flowers on the ground -- Ghamut wonders if she’ll return at all, if they’ll have to make their way out the Low alone, with nothing but his neele and Neita’s flowers as defense.

But in the end, Maya returns near lunchtime with a garbage bag full of scraps over her shoulder. She doesn’t say where she got the scraps, but they’re all fresh, nothing rotten. She and Neita help themselves; when Ghamut tries to take a piece Maya slaps his hand away and only after Neita begins to protest does she hand him a few pieces of bread.

“You’re too kind for him,” Maya says, and Neita nods her head.

She knows. She knows *everything*.

Maya smiles.

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Despite the possibility of safe passage, there is still the question of where they might go. They spend the better part of the day dreaming up hijackings of cars, how they might commandeer buses, holding everyone hostage until they break out of the city limits to hide in the forest.

Neita has never met many Fieldlings who have a good memory of the forest. She listens to Maya describe the way they used to farm vegetables and how she and her starving brothers used to know all the right plants to eat off the earth. They'd go down by the river and root for little bugs to eat, the beetles that taste like fruit, the dried and salted stink-bugs...

Ghamut slaps the ground and points at her, triumphantly.

"The fucking river!"

Maya sneers. He doesn't have enough money to buy a boat either. To which Ghamut says it doesn't matter: he has enough to rent one for a day or a night, and they'll drive it upriver as far as possible and make an escape that way. They'll live like the old days, escape into a forest, a real forest. It'll be just like when they were growing up. Maya can follow her electric bugs to find and forage food, Ghamut will build many mud-houses and teach Neita how to fish -- hadn't Vera always said she'd wanted to get away?

Neita nods. But she can't see what that has to do with anything. Won't they starve, without the city? Won't they have no places to sleep, or air conditioning, or *anything*?

And now both Maya and Ghamut smile at her.

"Believe us, we got along just fine before the damn city," Ghamut says.

“We’re Fieldlings,” says Maya. And he looks at her. She shrugs, and says damn the city, damn Kilnyzck, damn the concrete and the metal and the fucking Low. She wants to see stars and wear dandelion crowns and swim in the river. She’s missed all of it, missed the old days spent in the Fields, running around with the other Fieldlings.

“But *I’m* not,” whines Neita. “I don’t know any of that! It’s not mine! It was Vera’s! Not mine!”

Oh, but it all belongs to you, it was simply stolen, and kept out of reach, and maybe now, we can get it all back.

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Maya finds a marina on her phone that closes a bit after sundown, and they carefully plot their way across Civ to it. Maya follows the little insects and Neita watches her invisible flower petals swirling the night air. Ghamut wishes he could see life through her eyes; exchange his creatures for her flowers. They pause at the corners of intersections, avoid slow trawling cars, give a certain building a wide berth.

“Poison ivy,” Neita says, shuddering.

The marina lies on top of a massive embankment that has stone stairs leading down to the water. At the top of the staircase sits a small rectangular box of a building that acts as a boat and equipment rental. A tall, metal fence sprayed with graffiti surrounds the entire premises. The top of the building is lit with a blue and white Neon sign that has incomprehensible Civ lettering and a blinking graphic of a winking seal in a sailor’s hat. Through the glass windows they can see a sleepy

receptionist with thin strands of hair combed over a shiny bald spot. Across from him lies a small waiting area. A few rotating shelves full of pamphlets sit in the middle of an arrangement of damp looking couches and a ratty carpet. A tablet embedded in a table before them plays advertisements on mute. The concierge holds in his hands a print magazine with a sailboat on the cover. He has electric ears and perks up when they emerge out of the darkness.

“What do you see?” Ghamut asks Neita.

“Black berries on a stem, with tiny white flowers underneath,” Neita says. “I don’t know what that is.”

The old receptionist has folded down the paper and grins at them. He waves.

“Good enough,” mutters Ghamut.

He opens the door and Maya bows slightly in a warm welcome. She says that they’d like to rent a boat, one with electric engines and maybe a sail, for a day trip on the river in the morning. The concierge grins a toothy smile at them and runs his hand through his oily strings.

“Lovely family outing?”

Maya nods. The rental, please. They had meant to come here yesterday, but were held up with the electric outage.

The man coughs out an old man’s laugh.

“You speak good for a Fieldling,” he says, pointing at Maya. He places his hands on his knees and looks down at Neita, smiling wide.

“And who might you be?”

Neita blinks and Maya hurriedly explains that she's shy. The man grunts and turns to Ghamut.

"Proud father, I assume? Whose name should I make the rental out to?"

"Diego," Ghamut says flatly. *"But my... wife handles business."*

Maya looks suddenly very strained and tired, but forces a smile anyways. Neita looks between the three of them, and Ghamut walks over to hold her hand. She squeezes his finger tightly and looks up at him with some mix of nervousness, apprehension, and hope in her brown eyes. The city -- all she's ever known -- and she's leaving it, they're all leaving it together.

He sees a bit of Vera in her expression too and wonders if somehow, this proves Damien wrong. That in spite of his prediction, part of her is leaving, escaping, even if it has happened a bit beyond her own lifetime and extended into her daughter's. He hopes that Neita will never look at him the way Maya or Nana does, and prays that maybe one day, somehow, Maya will forget her promise to make this little girl hate him, just as she does. He blinks. Maya has tapped him on the shoulder and is scrolling through the little tablet that the old man has given her. Given what money Ghamut has left, they settle on a one day rental for a catboat with a gasoline engine and a short mast with a blue sail that Maya says is called the *Arcadia*.

It takes up almost all the remaining money, and in fact, the concierge waives a final insurance fee in order for them to afford the rental at all, but Ghamut is willing to throw it all away. Where they're going, money doesn't matter. The sentiment is eerily echoed by the old concierge,

who points them down the stairs leading to the water. “*Third one on your left,*” he says. He hands Maya the key and they all rattle off stuttering *Thank you*s.

Grinning, the concierge stretches and puts his hands on his haunches. They must forgive him but he is old and it is almost closing time. He says they are welcome to look at the boat until the rental expires, but it’s been a long day and he ought to start closing up shop. They can see their own way out.

As they make their way onto the staircase, Ghamut hears the door shut behind them with an authoritative thud.

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Neita almost falls down the stairs three times on the way to the *Arcadia*, and Ghamut and Maya take turns catching her. The Marina has built the staircase with steps half the size of the usual. The water laps gently up against the docks and apart from Neita’s cursing and yelps, the night is tranquil and still. Somewhere downriver lie the lanterns on strings, and Ghamut looks over at the tiny pinprick of red light before Maya snaps at him.

The rental ships seem much larger up close, and *Arcadia* reveals herself as a chipped up old boat that has peeling paint and a few small holes in her blue sail. Ghamut fumbles with the ropes tying her to the dock before Maya pulls out her knife and says that fuck it, she’ll cut through, it’s not like they’re planning on returning to Civ anytime soon; they’ll ditch the boat somewhere, why not?

Neita jumps aboard, tumbles onto the deck and asks, “Do any of you actually know how to sail?”

Maya snaps back that it doesn't sound so hard, what with the engine in the back and the electric rudder the concierge advertised.

Ghamut tosses Neita the key to *Arcadia's* ignition and a moment later the little ship rumbles to life. A tiny incandescent bulb flickers on over the deck and the little girl howls excitedly. A soda can hisses open in the night -- there's a whole fridge full of goodies here for her taking.

From the top of the embarkment, the marina rental center is illuminated by a brief sweep of car lights. On the docks, Maya glances down at the rope and begins to saw through the knot a bit faster. More headlights, and now the sounds of engines begin to pile up, the entire front of the embarkment is silhouetted with light as countless cars pull into the marina parking lot. Only the black outline of the fence keeps the blaze away.

The electric snake coils around them, one last time.

"Son of a bitch," Ghamut says. He'll stick the needle in the old man's eye if it's the last thing he ever does, which it well might be.

A creak sounds from somewhere before them, and Ghamut looks up at the tiny boardwalk to see a figure crouching on one of the wooden poles jutting through the wood. There's Damien, his blue eyes grave, watching Maya saw at the rope.

"Come on," Ghamut says, and he stabs the chord with his needle, over and over, trying to unwind the string. More and more engines roar from the embarkment, and now Neita stands on the deck of the *Arcadia*, staring in horror at the lights carving up the sky.

Maya swears and curses Ghamut, wipes her brow and keeps sawing away at the rope.

They're dead. They're all dead, because of him. Neita's lip begins to wobble and liquid collects in her eyes and Ghamut's breath comes in short bursts. This can't be how it ends, not for her, not for--

A crack splits the night and Ghamut freezes. A familiar voice calls out for them to surrender. "Sorry to see our paths cross again," the debtor's son calls out into the night, "*But my friends are insistent that I extend our business.*"

Ghamut closes his eyes.

"*I've got an electric leg now too,*" the debtor's son calls out. "*And a gun. Don't make me come down there. You'll never get away from me.*"

Maya rubs her temple and taps his shoulder.

"Ghamut, what are we going to do?"

He locks eyes with Damien, who nods, still hidden away in shadow. A creature clambers around Damien's neck and throat, and begins to pad its way across the docks to Ghamut. From down the embankment, dripping down from the waiting lights like a dark waterfall, come more and more creatures. They latch onto the slick stone sides set next to the stone staircase and line the walls, all silent. They stack on top of each other and do not move. They all stare.

Final witnesses.

They do not smile.

Ghamut glances once at Maya, who stands on the dock beside him, working away with her knife at the rope, and then at Neita, who watches him from the deck of the *Arcadia*, shaking slightly in the cold night air.

The lone creature walking over the docks has made its way to Ghamut, and hops up lightly onto his shoulder. It speaks in a familiar voice, one that reminds him of smooth stone set in forest glades and Nana's murmured prayers. It reminds him of moonlight.

"Dear sweet boy, he will kill you all, with his gun," his mother says.

He takes in his breath and turns to stare at his shoulder but the creature has already hopped away and moves to join the ranks of the others. Have they all been a part of her, this whole time? All those shadows, her watchful eyes, her attempts at guidance? He shakes and shudders. She's the only thing that he has never had, never ever.

Ghamut turns to Maya and stabs the needle into the cord holding the *Arcadia* to the dock. The sea cable begins to unfurl. He clenches his hands and moves to turn away, to follow the call of his fate, but Maya catches his wrist.

"You're not leaving me with her; you -- you need --" she tries to pull out the needle and give it back to him, but he's shoved it deep and her fingers can't get a hold of the smooth metal.

"Ghamut, what are you doing?"

He reaches over to wrap her in a hug and when he lets her go he sees that Maya is staring at him, her fingers shaking in the night air. He turns to Neita but can't hold her gaze, and so he turns away to face Damien and the creatures and the rest of Civ, all gathered on the embankment.

"I'm coming up," he screams, and he hears laughter.

"Bring the girl," the debtor's son says.

"Yeah, right." He spits in the water.

"Wait!"

Neita stands at the side of the boat, her hands clenched at her side. She sucks down air and sways on her feet. She looks from Ghamut to the staircase, to the embankment and its fence atop it, silhouetted by light. He wonders if for her, the embankment has burst into bloom, or if this time, only he can see the creatures. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"You're gonna stay here," he calls out. "Maya's gonna take care of you."

"You son of a bitch," says Maya, wiping her eyes. She's gone back to sawing at the rope but she's blinking river spray out of her eyes and bits of river water stream down her cheeks.

Neita shakes her head and smiles. "Don't you want to know what flower you are?"

He blinks.

"It's dandelions!" Neita screams. "You've got dandelions in your hair and your clothes are all covered with sunflowers and dandelions!"

Maya stares at the girl and she wipes her eyes before cutting at the knot again. Ghamut smiles at Neita and tries to make sure he looks as brave as possible. Then he turns around, so she can't see.

He walks towards the stairs leading up to the embankment. Above him, he can hear someone struggling with the locked rental shop doors and someone hitting the glass with something heavy and metallic. The rotting docks creak under his footsteps.

He walks by Damien, who says nothing but hops off his post and walks strides beside him, his poncho billowing in the wind. Side by side, they move past row after row of creatures, all gathered in final respects. He knows they see him. Behind him the engine of the boat roars.

He only pauses once to catch his breath, halfway between heaven and hell, between the Field and Civ. He does not look back.

END.