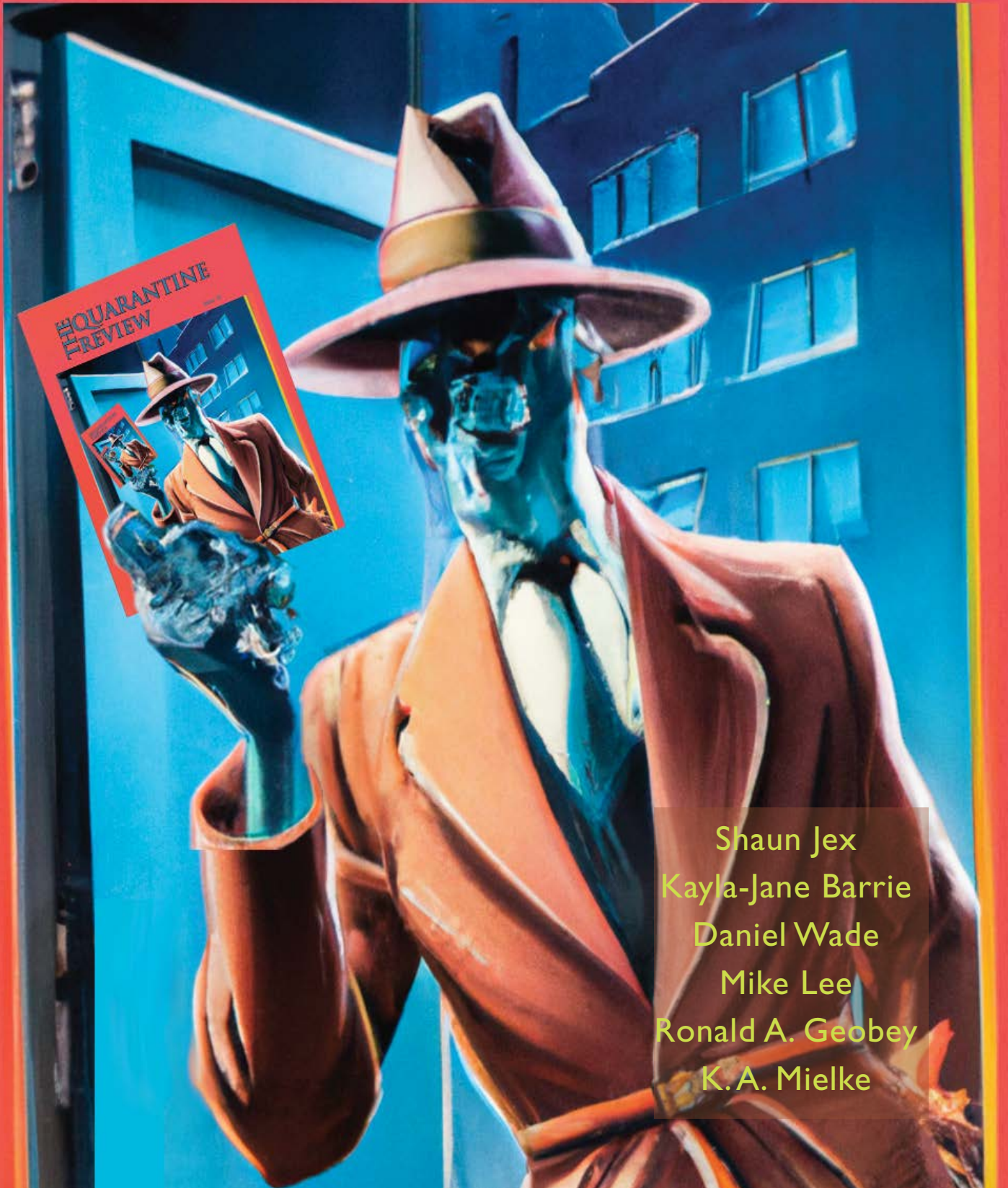


# THE QUARANTINE PREVIEW

Issue 13



Shaun Jex  
Kayla-Jane Barrie  
Daniel Wade  
Mike Lee  
Ronald A. Geobey  
K.A. Mielke

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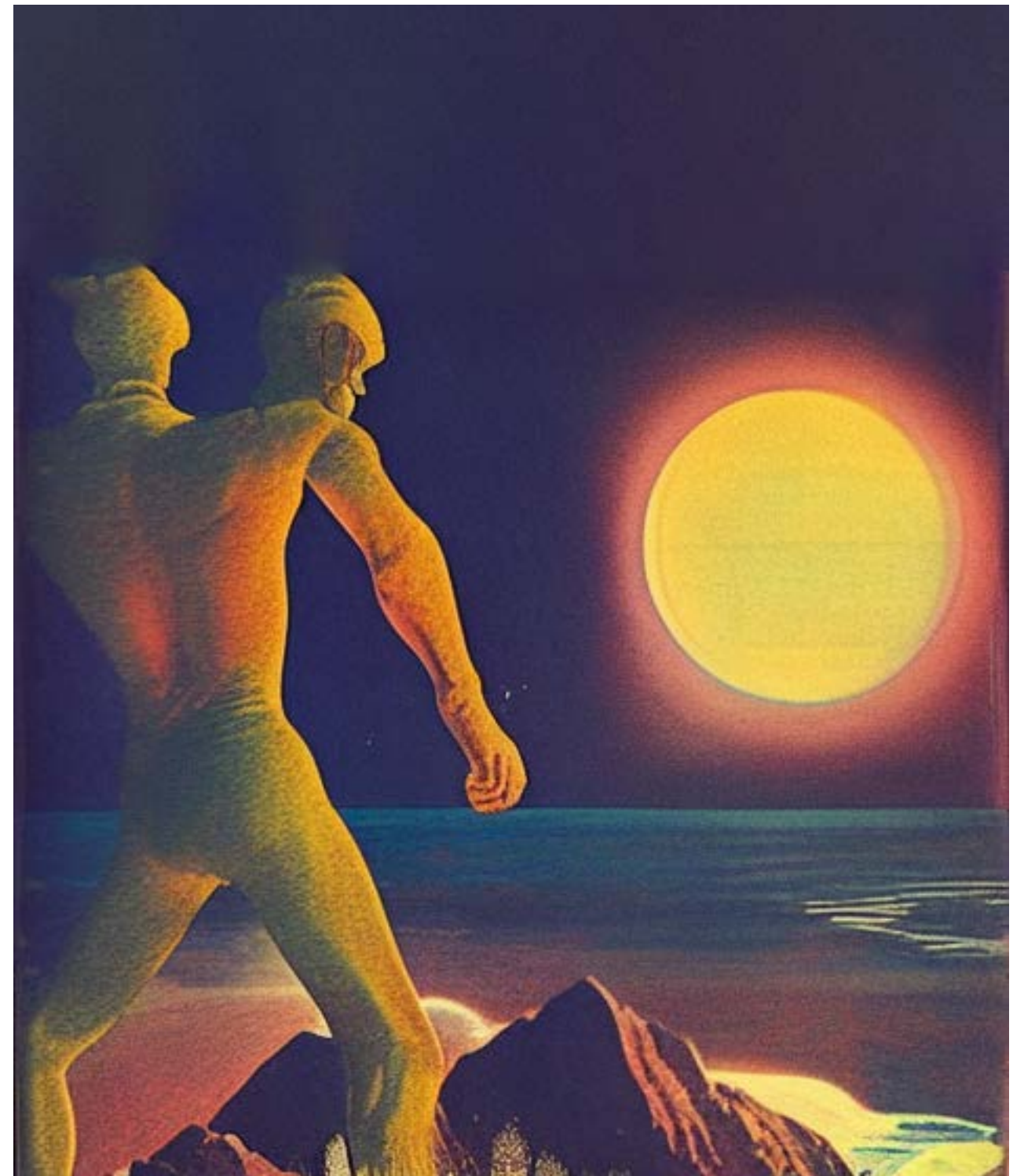
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# Communion

Shaun Jex

When I was a boy, I lived in a house that backed up on woodlands. Go deep enough in and you'd find a swamp. I spent my days exploring it. Playing. Doing the normal things a child does when left to the wild.

There were always animals to find. I saw raccoons and possums. Squirrels and waterfowl. Once, I climbed a tree and found a nest full of hatchlings. Their bodies naked of feathers and eyes still blind to the world. They must have thought I was their mother because as soon as I appeared they began to open their mouths and scream for food.

Then there were the snakes. Garter snakes. Pine snakes. King snakes and cottonmouths. Once, I came across one in the process of eating a bullfrog, its jaw distended into a gaping maw to swallow it whole.

But it's a white-tail deer that I remember the best.

One night, while I was sleeping my daddy came into my room and woke me. He told me to get dressed and follow him outside. I didn't know where we were going, but I wasn't fool enough to ask. I simply followed. I didn't even have time to put on shoes or change into proper clothes.

It was a cloudy night. If not for the flashlight in my daddy's hand it would have been pitch black. It must have been near two or three in the morning, but the summer heat kept the air warm and moist. It made the whole earth pungent with the sweet smell of decay.

We walked through the backyard and into the woods, moving through brambles and skeletal branches that reached out of the darkness like hungry hands. I could feel thorns snagging at my pants and a stray branch caught the side of my cheek, drawing blood. I cried out as I felt the sticky fluid begin to trickle down to my chin, but daddy shushed me with a sharp look.

He led us deeper and deeper, taking turns here and there until I felt well and truly lost. I knew we must be getting closer to the marsh because the ground was getting soft. A few times I felt my feet sink into the ground. They made a sickening squelch when I pulled them out of the mud. To be honest, it was a relief, saving me from the pain of the rocks and twigs that dug into the tender soles of my feet along the path.

I heard movement coming from deep within the swamp. An owl hooted. The wind rustled the branches. I caught the howl of coyotes drifting through the woods like a weird ritual chant. Something sounded as though it were trudging slowly through the marsh grasses in the distance, but no matter how hard I looked, I couldn't see it.

Daddy stopped walking suddenly and stepped to the side of the path. And that's when I saw the deer. It lay dead, partially sunk into the soft earth. Chunks of its flesh had been torn away, exposing bone and muscle. Flies gathered around its eyes, which stared glassy into the distance. A swarm of

ants crawled atop a pile of viscera that spilled from the deer's open gut. A sharp odor rose up from the body, filling the air until I thought I would choke on it. I closed my eyes and covered my mouth, but Daddy pulled my hands down.

"Look at it," he said.

"I don't wanna," I whimpered.

"Open your eyes and look," he commanded.

With every bit of will I could muster, I opened my eyes and stared at the body on the ground.

"The woods are like a temple boy," he said. "And a temple is a place of sacrifice. Where blood purifies and exalts. Where old gods wander and command. Do you understand?"

I nodded, and my father laughed.

"No," he said. "You don't understand. Not yet. You see, the gods have set an order to things, and all things must find their way into it, or else be cast out."

His strong hand reached out and gripped the back of my neck, forcing me down onto my knees. He pushed my face toward that of the deer until we were eye to eye. I felt a fly land on my cheek where I'd been cut by the branch.

"We all have a role to play," he said. "There is predator and prey. And there is nothing in-between."

With that, he turned off the flashlight, and I was swallowed by the dark of night. I reached out for him, but it was like he vanished. I swung my arms in every direction, stumbling back and forth, hoping that I would find my way into his sturdy arms. But he was gone.

The scent of death filled my nostrils and moved like a cloud into my mouth so that I could taste the rot. My stomach lurched, and for a moment I thought I would vomit, but my gut was empty.

The lumbering sounds I'd heard in the distance grew louder, crashing through the brush. It drew closer and closer until I could hear the deep, ragged sounds of its breath.

In fright, I fell to the ground, landing on the body of the deer which seemed to envelop me in a warm embrace.

The creature was upon me, looming over me, though it was still too dark to give shape to its enormous form. I was blind. Like a desperate little baby bird. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

It bent close to my face, and I felt the heat of its breath and smelled the musk of its fur. It caressed my face with what felt like a hoof, which it then used to push my face onto the carcass of the deer.

"Eat," it whispered.

And I ate.

# Oklahoma

Mike Lee

*I received this card. Irene texted. It's from Oklahoma.*

*Do you know anyone there?*

*No.*

*She texted again. Take a look.*

*Irene sends a photo.*

*The card is a flower pattern. The next photo revealed the note.*

*Whoa. That's really strange.*

*Yeah. Looks like the writing is traced.*

*I can see. The writing is straight, and the writer uses paragraph indents perfectly aligned.*

*My attention is drawn to the third paragraph, second and third lines.*

*Do you see she has two similar words lined up nearly vertically aligned?*

*Yes! It's like a room full of indefatigable ants copied from the same letter.*

*Irene added, Is that a Bible verse?*

*I don't think so. BTW, who is Xatha?*

*Never heard of a Xatha.*

*Let me Google.*

*When I read what Xatha referred to, I thought Oklahoma was flatlands while driving to Kansas and a cryptic scene in an unfinished Kafka novel. But, after I clicked on the entry and read the story of Xatha, I realized this card Irene received referred to something extraordinary—and distressing.*

*My fingers lingered over the keypad with anxiety rising until I tapped Irene a message.*

*I looked it up.*

*Babe, can you send me another screenshot of the quotation?*

*“Ray of Light. Gust of Wind. All bow before you, O Goddess, Triumphant. By the night wind, we chant of You Complete. Come to Us, O Goddess.”*

*“Pretty fucking weird, I’ll say,” Irene had a smile that really more of a grimace. I could tell she was thinking more than the weird letter she received copied from Brenda Owen from Tulsa, Oklahoma.*

*I wondered whether Brenda Owen was her real name. Or if she was in a room full of other Brenda Owens, all at desks copying from the same template and mailing them out to hundreds of individuals.*

*“It’s possible this is a real Goddess, but not one I had heard of,” she said.*

*“I’m not certain whether it’s real or you’re being spoofed,” I said. “The only references to Xatha I found are by a horror writer who published in the small press, and several anthologies in the 1990s. No publications after 2002.”*

*“What was his name, again?”*

*“Geoff Justin. I checked social media. Nothing,” I said. “It may have been a pseudonym, but who knows?”*

*On her leopard print daybed, Irene sat across from me, hand slightly pressed against her chin, her light green eyes peering through her glasses.*

*“I have this feeling of being pulled underwater,” Irene said. “I don’t know why that is. Just a thought that entered my mind.”*

*“I wouldn’t worry about this,” I said. “It’s*

*just a strange little card from some goofy weirdo from Tulsa.”*

\*\*\*\*

*We stayed up to watch *Emily in Paris* but shut it off quickly when the plot turned. Suddenly one character discovered the skillet belonging to her boyfriend on Emily’s stove. Irene and I share the quirk of not watching trouble when it occurs in a story. We have seen more than our share in our respective lives.*

*We went to bed, looking forward to a weekend in the Hill Country. We found a rental near Enchanted Rock. Before driving out, we had to get up early and have some breakfast tacos at our favorite coffee house in South Austin.*

*Early in the morning, I woke up in a sweat. I couldn’t remember if I had dreamed but felt disturbed. I turned to see Irene sleeping, her hand balled into a fist. I relaxed and returned to sleep.*

\*\*\*\*

*I stood on the summit of Enchanted Rock with Irene. The Moon was full, dominating the sweep of constellations in the cloudless night sky. It stared at us with knowledge, unshared.*

*Irene stood wearing gold sandals and a flowing white dress that lifted up from her ankles with the wind. Her red hair flew as flames under the moonlight as she raised her arms high and clasped them together.*

*I could hear the chanting from below: “Ray of Light. Gust of Wind. All bow before you, O Goddess, Triumphant. By the night wind, we chant of You Complete. Come to Us, O Goddess.”*

*The chant sounded closer.*

*Suddenly, Irene spread out her arms. Then, in a resonating voice, she spoke.*

*“In Night, Through Fire, I Xatha, Goddess of Destruction, bring myself to Lead You.”*

*Her fingers spread while she lowered them.*

*The skies exploded. The wind howled. I awoke face down on the ground. I looked up. I was not dreaming.*

# Poison for the Goblin King

K.A. Mielke

Alexandra had never poisoned someone before.

“It’s simple,” Prince Edgar was saying, the warmth of his breath hot as the hearth on her ear. “Even simpler given your choice of dish.”

She swirled the wooden ladle clockwise, an ocean god sinking sailors of carrot and goat. It was an onion broth she prepared, hearty and warm on such a night where the howling winds warned travelers of the wolves and fiends whose calls it carried. The Goblin King requested it specially to take the chill from his bones, promising the visiting Prince of Kalamat a more lavish feast on the morrow.

“You know nothing of simple, Your Royal Highness,” Alexandra said, straightening her back in defiance. “To poison my food is to poison my reputation. Who would ever trust a murderous chef?”

His hand snaked across her waist, resting on the small of her back where the heat of the kitchens pasted tunic to flesh. Gripping her curves, the prince twirled Alexandra around to face him, his jewel blue eyes half-lidded, his thick blond hair framing chiselled features, his strong jaw housing a winning smile.

With his mouth inches from hers, he breathed, “I would.”

He pressed his thin lips hard to her, sought refuge in her full mouth. Emerging stubble scratched her face. He smelled of sweat and man and the long road to the mountain castle of Gobwall, and not even the aroma rising from the soup pot could mask his wild scent.

The gentle clang of distant armour resounded from the staircase. “The goblin guard!” Prince Edgar ejaculated. He tugged down the front of his ornate purple and gold dress robes. “I must be gone, my love. If they catch me here with you, I shall be executed for conspiracy.”

“As you say.”

He leaned in for one last peck. Alexandra allowed him his goodbye.

The Prince of Kalamat fled. Alexandra returned her attention to dinner.

They supped in the great hall, sitting at an excessively long table and speaking little. Alexandra sat on one end of the table with the Goblin King Flabborn IX, his warty arm draped over her shoulder as if she were in danger of being blown away. Prince Edgar sat what seemed like leagues away at the other end of the table, his face red with barely contained rage.

The Goblin King devoured his meal with gusto. He slurped loudly and proclaimed his satisfaction after nearly every swallow. Broth ran down his hanging green jowls, staining his golden robes. At times, the guzzling and chewing and swallowing led Alexandra to think the king was drowning in her soup. But then he would come up for air gasping and let out a colossal belch that flickered the torches, and she would wipe the splattered soup from her freckled cheek and wonder no longer.

Prince Edgar of Kalamat picked the chunks of carrot out with his fingers and set them to the side of his bowl. It was unclear if he intended on consuming any of the broth. “Have we eaten enough to talk business, Your Royal Highness?”

“You are every bit as impatient as your reputation suggests,” the king boomed, laughing with a quiver of his rotund belly. “I am only on my fifth bowl!”

To his servant, the king demanded another serving. Prince Edgar grinded his teeth. He poked his soup with a spoon as if the meal were an animal he couldn’t be certain was dead.

The unopened vial of poison hidden in Alexandra’s bosom seemed to emanate warmth. Negotiation waited another night.

“If you don’t poison the Goblin King, how will we ever be together?” Prince Edgar demanded as Alexandra rolled a raw, pink chicken through a mixture of spices and breadcrumbs. He fingered her long ginger braid while she worked. “How will you ever see the fields back home, green and fragrant and alive? How will you ever feel the salty ocean breeze in this life of ice and rock? Kill your captor so you may be free and away with me.”

“You know I cannot,” Alexandra said. “I’m no killer.”

“Foolish girl,” the prince growled, taking her shoulders and giving her a shake that cut her tongue between her teeth. A metallic tang coated her mouth. “Do you not remember how you came to this place?”

Alexandra hugged herself, her shoulders sagging. “Of course I do,” she said over the screams and the flames and the bloodshed of her memories.

Man and goblin had clashed in her village during the war. The Battle of Pebblecast. Her father, the King of Undoor, had died there, run through with a goblin blade. The goblins won the battle. By the time the flames were doused and the bodies buried, Princess Alexandra of Undoor was across kingdom lines. Captive,

they said.

She’d lived in service to the Goblin King for ten of her twenty-five years.

“We are running out of time,” Prince Edgar said, softening like a sunbeam piercing a stormy sky. He took Alexandra in his arms. “If you hesitate too long, I won’t be able to help you.”

“I appreciate your concern, Your Royal Highness,” Alexandra said curtly, refusing to melt at his touch the way countless women back home undoubtedly acted, as butter to his warm loaf. “But I am a chef, not an assassin.”

She shoved him away and stuck the chicken on a spit.

The prince and the king argued. Or rather, the prince argued while the king happily gorged on Alexandra’s roast chicken, tearing seasoned skin from steaming white meat and slurping it into his maw.

“My father knows it’s your men!” Edgar roared, rising to his feet and knocking his leg of roast chicken to the floor where dust mites would join the breadcrumb crust. “You dare lie to me when I represent the whole of two powerful kingdoms!”

Shredding meat and skin with sharp teeth, the Goblin King said, “Truly, I feel you might be less irate if only you had something to eat, my friend.”

“Fuck your food, and fuck your diversions, you rotten gold-mongering bastard!”

The king leaned to one side and released a noisy, wet gust of wind. He patted his belly. “My, Alexandra, you do cook the most delectable meals. Your presence in my castle is invaluable.”

Alexandra’s cheeks flushed. “Many thanks, Your Grace.”

Prince Edgar burst into the kitchen on the third day looking fit to drag Alexandra from Gobwall by the hair, if need be. Yet he stopped, gave the warm kitchen air a sniff,

and turned his attention to Alexandra's flour-caked hands.

"Lemon tarts," he said, smiling. "You remembered. Does this mean...?"

"Wait until after dinner," Alexandra said. "Eat your food as if there is nothing amiss. By the time dessert is cleared, our troubles shall be resolved."

"Oh, Alexandra!" the prince cried, and he swept the woman up in his strong arms, and he kissed her one thousand fold on the face, and his clumsy hands groped her breasts like an overeager boy, and he cleared himself from her workspace.

When the tarts rose and their crust blossomed golden in the oven, Alexandra removed them and decorated them with a liberal sprinkle of white powder.

"My good prince," the King of the Goblins announced as a hunchbacked goblin servant led the prince into the great hall, "you do seem to be in a much better mood today. Perhaps we might finally glimpse those fabled Kalamatian manners."

"Perhaps," Prince Edgar agreed, his cheeks sharp from his aggressive grin. The servant seated him as Alexandra lay out a meal of roast ham, baked potatoes, bacon-wrapped asparagus, and a tray of lemon tarts.

Throughout supper, Prince Edgar was a gentleman and a diplomat. He spoke of peace treaties and trade routes, of tariffs and history. He even laughed at the king's jokes. And all the while, he held Alexandra's gaze a beat too long, smiling his knowing smile.

"To peace," he announced, raising his lemon tart.

The king smiled wide and raised his own. "To peace."

Both men bit into their lemon tarts. Crust snapped in the quiet hall. Yellow filling smeared their lips. Stuffed cheeks flapped like wing beats. Throat-apples bobbed.

"Is dessert to your liking, Your Majesty?" Prince Edgar asked.

"Quite," replied the king. "And yours?"

Prince Edgar took another bite. "Lemon tarts have always been my favourite, Your Majesty. My mother used to ask the castle chef to prepare them for my birthday. Alexandra remembers. Has she ever told you about our childhood, I wonder?"

"Of course—"

"I thought not! And why would she? You are her captor. And I?" He took a third bite and rose to his feet. "I am her thaviour."

He dropped to the floor, knocking over his chair.

Alexandra stood. She walked the length of the dining table, running her fingertips atop the varnished wood. Prince Edgar's feet danced in spite of his lying flat. Despite their lack of anything to celebrate.

She stood over the dying prince. Red foam dribbled from his gaping mouth like the Undoorish seaside during the war. His limbs twitched and grasped for her.

But his eyes trained on hers, perfectly lucid.

"I saw you, my prince," she said, each word dripping with poison sitting stagnant for ten years, growing in potency as a fine wine ages. "I saw you take up a goblin sword and cut down my father. Doing your father's bidding. Causing the joining of our kingdoms. I saw you! And yet you come to Gobwall promising to court me, to marry me, to protect your legitimacy in ruling Undoor!"

Prince Edgar of Kalamat gurgled.

"Fuck you," Alexandra said, and Prince Edgar was stiff. And dead.

A chair scraped against the floor. The Goblin King's flat feet padded toward her. Alexandra struggled to catch her breath, to still the tremors wracking her muscles.

"You realize this will mean war," the king said, holding her in his gentle green arms.

She melted into him, butter-like.

"I do," Alexandra said. "Let them come. I am certain they will be hungry."



# Thwarted By A Malign Star

Kayla-Jane Barrie

The 9–5, cooking, cleaning, bills; the structure. I would rather be swept away in my contemplations.

Some do not see the value in an atomic cascade of visions each night. The mundane happily choose to check the hours of snooze off their to-do list so they can wake up exhausted, ready to move in their daily cycle, for infinity.

Others, like me, the non-mundane, have created a system to teleport among the stars. We swim in seas with waves as high as the atmosphere on distant planets. We walk through castles, pick variegated coral petals off roses and watch the sunset on the horizon.

I buy a one-way ticket into the unknown. No destination. The only hope I will find somewhere far beyond that will welcome the group's invitation. We trade waking life to visit these locations.

It's a small price to pay to get a glimpse of eternity.

Sometimes we find creatures in blackened armour hiding in the shadows between the ivory pillars. They hold polished automatic machines that have been long banned on Earth. They have a hazy black aura around them and reflective empty eyes.

When they are not watching, the lands are free to roam. I take notes in my travel documents of this unknown place—they are never like the last. That being said ... we can never find our way back to places of our past. The star maps are engulfed in black holes when we return.

I become friends with new faces and I take in the outlandish architecture. When I am travelling, it feels more at home than on the planet that grounds my bones.

I have deeply considered if I could live permanently in the clouds. Some days I can't take the burden of a paycheque and watching the planet unfurl around me. We spend our waking life earning our keep on a planet that used to be filled with kaleidoscope landscapes, abundant vegetation, and clear flowing streams.

The Earth has become grey. The waters no longer flow. Soil doesn't grow flora anymore. There are no birds, only the echoing clicking of industrialization and the hum of hard drives. Earth is fatigued because our illusions of success sell back leisure in the form of a digital cube. Many choose to stay inside and live vicariously through automation.

*Like. Like. Like. Tap. Scroll.*

Opting in to drown daydreams into a funnel of data.

Everyone around me is appalled by my bare minimum to pay my dues. To be respected, you should work beyond your means and sell your soul's entirety to the CEOs and continue to support the system, that doesn't support you.

I'm tired.

Finally, the occasion to live is here again.

I close my eyes and plot the location with my best friend. We find each other on a desert, a train rolling by. We hop in and go for a ride.

We are greeted by flowing champagne

and decadent cakes—the types that are pre-packaged on Earth and taste entirely fake.

He laughs, but I only wonder, *what is he so angry about?* I don't need to ask, I already know.

It's the false reality back at home.

We arrive at our destination.

We change into ballroom attire before exploring the uncharted land. I'm adorned in a navy silk gown with delicate sparkles. He's wearing a tailored suit, and a tie to match the material draping against my skin.

We dance through emerald diamonds studded along dark walls. He holds me close, as if to remind me we are physical bodies floating in space. Two glamourized anarchists, assembling love based on delusions.

At the end of the ballroom, we walk through the pillars to lay down on the beach.

Above us, stars are glimmering in full force as far as the eye can see. We count the galaxies and wonder who will invite us over next. We see a rocky planet, stuck at the centre of the galactic map.

We look into each other's eyes. I think I found my destiny away from the pale blue dot.

A life without societal expectations that exploit the nature of the universe and the wishes of humanity.

These corporations stole our wishes and sold them back as a distraction. Promoting that productivity and purpose are the only meanings to live by. Keeping the eyes and minds busy is a safe option because they do not trust us to find beauty, love, or freedom of thinking.

*Stop daydreaming* echoes with anger.

The black armoured mercenaries have found us again. Their silken metallic bodies glisten in the starlight. Their eyes cut through the joy we have been seeking for a lifetime.

This time we decide to run. We grasp each other's hands and run as fast as our pathetic human feet can carry us.

I look at my friend, my star-crossed lover, luminaries reflecting in his tears. A lifelong journey falling into despair.

Fluorescent floodlights fill my vision.

*Get back to work*, a muffled organism in black exclaims.

The grey walls around me propose no meaning.

A moment ago, I was somewhere else with someone, and it all had significance. An expression of pure, authentic, delight.

All I can remember is: bodies made of stars, demanding to find their way home.



# From Montreal to Paris, and back again

Anna Dowdall on her latest novel, mystery writing, and transcontinental intrigue

Jeffrey Dupuis

What books or authors inspired you to try your hand at detective fiction?

I love mid-century female crime writers, from Margaret Millar to the largely forgotten Ursula Curtiss. I find in their books a certain kind of sophistication and intelligence, as well as atmosphere and a rich female characterization. And these writers still tell an old-fashioned good story. Agatha Christie once named Margaret Millar as her favourite crime fiction writer. Sadly, a lot of Canadians haven't heard of her.

I also love Ethel Lena White and, jumping to end of the century, the Sister Pelagia mysteries of Boris Akunin. I elected to write crime fiction because I'm a big reader of the genre, I suppose. And who knows why crime fiction took over my reading habits? My addiction has been decades in the making and follows the oft-noted market trend. We mystery readers probably all wonder how this has come about.

When I was a kid, magic and improbable adventure were the things I looked for in a book, to avoid the pitfall of moral harangues, maybe. As an adult I feel a good crime story offers the same probable respite from moral harangue, not to mention showing off. Of course, we crime fiction writers show off too, but the opportunities to be pretentious are fewer.

The private investigator has such a long and rich pedigree in fiction. How did that influence the creation of your detective?

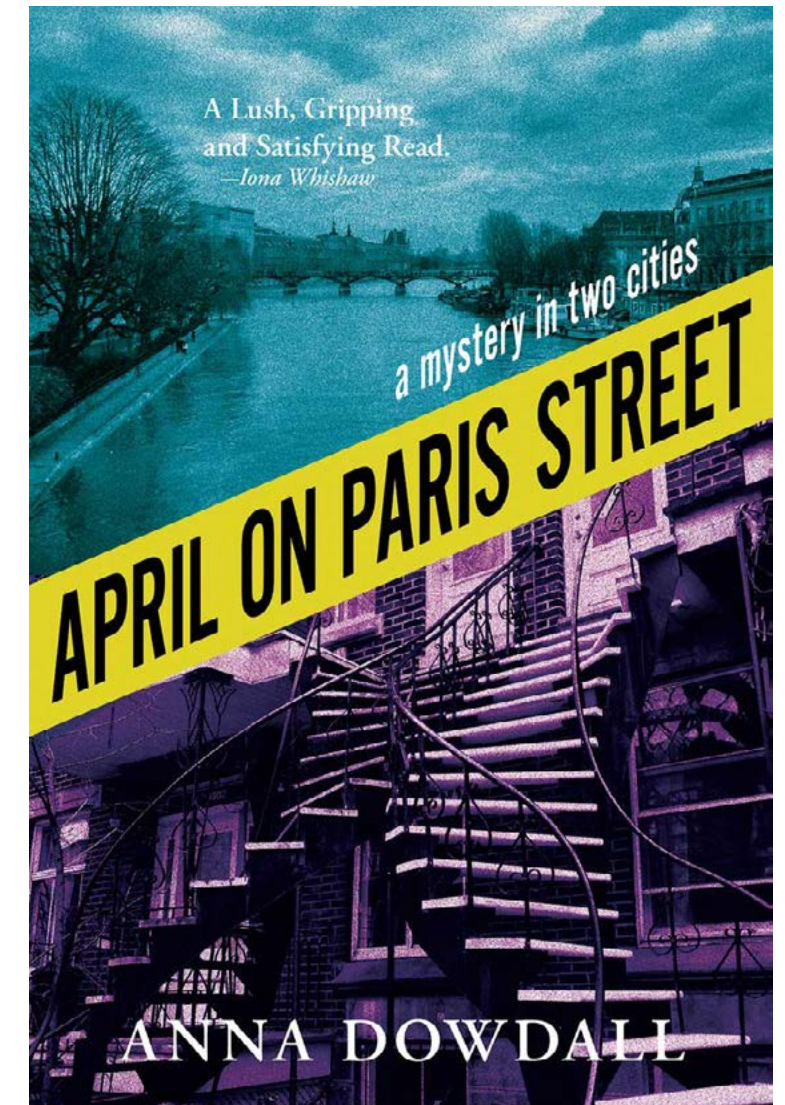
True, no doubt, regarding the long and rich pedigree, but I probably prefer the amateur sleuth. In my first book, *After the Winter*, PI Ashley Smeeton starts out as a nosy nine year old and a secondary character.

For, ahem, pragmatic reasons, I claimed to a submissions editor that I was writing a series, and even named it on the fly: The Ashley Smeeton Files. Thus *The Au Pair* and *April on Paris Street* came into being.

I don't know what to make of modern gumshoes. They either owe too much to those hard-boiled and sexist stereotypes, or they fall into the feisty female, sometimes sisterhood of feisty females, camp, which I know is meant to be an antidote to the former, but I almost like them less. My favourite PI is Reginald Hill's Joe Sixsmith, unemployed lathe operator who stumbles into a PI role, as he sometimes literally stumbles into crime solutions.

In *April on Paris Street*, Ashley continually makes mistakes, it's almost her MO, but still she finds out things, often via empathy. I sometimes think the only theme I ever really plumb is human error.

However, although know-it-all *raisonneur* sleuths in my books are not treated kindly



“ In standard hard-boiled crime fiction, her very attractiveness and power are a problem for the moral scheme of the novel. ”

if they exist at all, I do adore Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. I've always had a complicated relationship with institutions.

**How did genre conventions shape your conceptualization of *April on Paris Street*? Were there any genre conventions that you actively tried to subvert?**

Thank you for the leading question! I think *April on Paris Street* might appeal to two different readers: the reader who wants an atmospheric Canadian mystery with some depth of character, and the reader who want something edgier, a discernible literariness as they're being carried away on the story.

I think commercial fiction lends itself nicely to conscious literary adaptation. Sometimes, it's as simple as bending and twisting the conventions themselves. Your stereotypical crime story has a relatively predictable story line, whose outcome can be a trite reckoning of the good, the bad and the ugly.

*April on Paris Street* twists traditional plots, detaching major felonious activities from a typical reckoning. You can bend and transform stock popular characters too.

Take crime fiction's femme fatale. In standard hard-boiled crime fiction, her very attractiveness and power are a problem for the moral scheme of the novel.

My books abound in femmes fatales, but turn the stereotype upside down and inside out. My femme fatale characters reveal moral depths. And their counter-type, ingenues, can be deliciously calculating, so you might have trouble distinguishing them all eventually.

My books show women faced with threats, operating from complicated motives in a world where there is scant justice for women, and who take on the patriarchy without guilt or repercussion. If you have to play the role of femme fatale to do that, so be it.

**Location often acts as a character all its own in detective fiction. What made you set your story in both Montreal and Paris?**

Somehow, I decided *April on Paris Street* would be "about" doubles, and what other city would you match with Montreal except Paris, for that tale of two cities vibe? Both cities are represented as rife with divisions, labyrinthine, uncanny, bounded by endlessly changing and secretive rivers. The characters and the reader find themselves in parts of the city where they've never set foot, where their preconceptions fall by the wayside in an atmosphere of fear. Montreal is especially important in the story and the most decisive events occur there. It's a Montreal that will seem both familiar and strange to readers. I wanted to capture its ambiguity-ridden identity. There's a playful nod in my book to Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*. The setting of east end Montreal, unknown to so many English-speaking Montrealers and where I happen to live, functions as a kind of ironic terra incognita in the second half of the story. You could think of *April on Paris Street* as a *Two Solitudes* for the escapist fiction side of the tracks. But modernized, in the sense that many would say that Canada in 2022 is a place not merely of dual but multiple solitudes and truths. My protagonist herself illustrates this, she's culturally mixed. All this dividedness adds up to an uncertain human world. However, threaded through my depiction of unknowable and occasionally sinister cities is a theme of small domestic worlds which, if they aren't proof against the uncertainty, are at least islands of muddled kindness and unexpected kinship.

**Your next project features an agnostic nun? What can you tell us about that kind of characters and her motivations?**

Sister Harriet is probably an atheist, but she always tries to do the right thing even while

leading her double life. She's just another muddled human in turmoil, trying in an unreliable 1962 to deal with the hand she's been dealt. I wanted to portray a flawed modern everywoman, a mix of many irreconcilable things: in a way she's my counterargument to simplified characters and simplified moral schemes. *The Suspension Bridge* (publisher inquiries welcome) explores human error to the darkly comic max, picking up themes of despair, contagion and extinction along the way—but in a fun, light way. The book is nominally a mystery, in which the vagaries of the characters and overarching Fate, represented by a gigantic bridge with ideas of its own on stairways to heaven and highways to hell, take liberties with mystery form. But it's also meant to be read as a boarding school whodunit, with *Derry Girls*-style fun nuns, a humane if crackpot bishop, and something sufficiently resembling a reveal at the end so as not to estrange mystery readers, who are after all my peeps. You can take or leave the philosophy, and at least there are no moral harangues. The novel might turn out to be too light for some readers and too dark for others, while the religious and irreligious could well join in disliking it for its playful flippancy and philosophical irreverence, for largely the same puritanical reasons. But it was the book I felt like writing, so here we are.

# Carnivals of Heaven, Wonderlands of Hell

Daniel Wade

*February 2020*

I halted dead in my tracks when her message came through. Usually, it's me who breaks the ice. Whenever I do, it's generally as a text from an unknown number, when and where they've to be, exact site and security details, what gear we'll be using, and, most crucially, how much they get paid after. That's the clincher, the tiny detail that keeps them interested. If I decide they're legit, and not some undercover grunt Pearse Street cop shop hoping to set us up, I make the necessary arrangements.

Not Erika, though; she's the one who got on to me first, and she asked all the right questions.

Now, on a biting cold February night, I'm standing at the main roundabout of Kilcreggan estate with Tigger Coburn, under the streetlight's flickering orange glare. Waiting for her. Fighting the urge to give her a bell.

To look at us, you'd know right away we're up to no good—subtlety is neither of our strong points. Our hoods are drawn up, our movements are brisk and cagey as fuck, and we're scowling like a pair of welterweights waiting for the bell to sound. Our black holdalls, both visibly bulging with crowbars, gloves, torches and various other bits of gear vital for tonight's job, aren't helping.

It's fucking freezing too, so moving about is necessary. For all intents and purposes but, we also just look like two lads waiting on a

lift, and technically, we are. Tonight looks to be a major haul, and it's in neither of our interests to fuck it up even slightly.

Tigger wonders aloud, and not for the first time, why we even agreed for her to pick us up here. We don't know the place; its bottleneck laneways and graffitied cul-de-sacs offer no obvious escape route. There seem to be double-yellows everywhere, snaking past and around us. It seems to stand still, and Tigger hates anything that doesn't move. Unless he's nicking it, of course. I know he's not really serious, though; my instinct for getting drivers inside is bang-on.

Right now, he glances up from his phone. "Any joy?" he asks.

I shake my head. He curses and goes back to his DMs.

It's a clear night, the sky heavy and star-filled. It was a grand enough day for it, this big cloudless sun spilling sharply down like it's nearly spring, but by night it's cool as glass, even for February. Not even a hint of rain. A Siberian high slices through the estate, grazing our jaws and making us hike up our collars. Just beyond, on a nearby building site left inactive for the night, I can see the ruby lights rigging the crane towers and jib, like neon comets hovering in mid-air. Their small dazzle makes the cranes resemble glittering, high-rise skeletons.

Erika told me to keep an eye out for a car with tinted windows. She gave me all the info I needed: driver's license, car type and number, what speed she'll be at when we see

her, so I scan the distance, hyperalert for her headlights to come raking through the dark at any second. While hoping to Jaysus it's not a Garda car.

Despite the wind, it's quiet tonight—we hear no nearing crunch of tyres or engines, no whoops and hollers of kids knacker-drinking up in the nearby field. The Centra up the way is shuttered up, as is the chipper next to it, lone security light shining over the graffiti-smearred shutters. Midnight was over an hour ago, in fairness. But the silence feels deadly, braced with the airless sort of calm a leopard has right before it pounces. Then again, that's just to be expected in our line of work.

"Here," Tigger says, out of nowhere. "When you and her were talkin', d'ye get a good look at her?" I must be gawking at him, because he grimaces. "She fit, is what I'm askin'?"

"Dunno, mate. I've only messaged and phoned her 'til tonight."

"Ah, man, I hope she's fuckin' lovely."

I wince at him saying that. Lovely isn't generally a word Tigger uses to describe women. He has a much more colourful lexicon to mine from whenever that subject gets brought up. Coming from him, lovely somehow sounds more obscene than any expletive you can name.

"Ah, man." He shakes his head, grinning incredulously, and takes a fresh drag. The grin quickly vanishes, along with the silvery jet of smoke he spews on the air.

I lean against the lamppost, one leg coiled around the other. Tigger doesn't hide his agitation nearly as well as me—teeth always clenched a little too tight, dragging hard on his rollie and constantly fishing his phone out of his pocket to squint bemusedly at the screen before putting it away again, only to fish it out again a mere fifteen seconds later.

Maybe it's just the cold, but he keeps pacing about, until there isn't a square inch of the roundabout's bumpy asphalt that his steel-capped Docs haven't covered. His head flicks in all directions, every time he hears an approaching engine or clocks a flare of headlights raking through the darkness and

unsalted tarmac. Every so often he'll emit a snarl of frustration and growl to himself: "Where the fuck is she?"

I never reply when he's like this. I know him well enough by now to know that he doesn't want an answer, or even to be reassured or reasoned with, in this mood. Far easier just to let him wander around fuming to himself, I've long since decided. He needs those heavy nicotine drags, and the near-frantic pacing of his steps, to stay focused. Once that amorphous scarlet fog rolls into his brain, Tigger Coburn listens to no-one.

Not that I blame him, though. This type of job is always a risk, even when it's just the two of us. The nerves I do be getting; do my fucking head in, so they do.

Doesn't matter how well you plan it, how meticulously you map out the terrain and infrastructure, how many names you memorize, how many numbers you added and subtract, a kinetic fizz of anxiety still gurgles in your core. Your eyes can't help but flick and dart after every car passes you by, hoping the one to pick you up has finally arrived and the night's excursions can rumble into action.

I pride myself on noticing the instability of things; in this game, there's nothing I can leave to chance. Clocks cease ticking, engines break down, phones lose their battery or data. Tigger knows what can go wrong, too—a driver gets cold feet, the security system gets overlooked in some small but fundamental way, a rogue alarm goes off unexpectedly just when we think they're all cleared. Tigger trusts me on these things, he's no engineer, but even he knows I'm fallible. That said, there have been no fuckups yet.

Then I remind myself, we've a good few minutes to go before Erika arrives. Nothing to get too anxious about. I'll give her five minutes tops, to be late; it can happen. After that, I start dialing. She better not make me do that; I can't risk the call being traced.

Neither of us ever drive to a job. The risk is too high. We need to leave as thin a trail behind us as we can. The car absolutely has to

be cheap, and inconspicuous, with a decent engine ensuring that it moves fast. Always. Only fuckin' eejits go on a job in an Audi—you're just asking to be caught with a motor like that.

Tigger's twenty-four, same as me. This is when we're at our best, both of us—doc'd, masked, flak-jacketed and armoured, our guns tucked safely into our jeans waistbands and hidden beneath our coats, yet swift and noiseless as tumbleweed, the throb of adrenaline pulsing through our veins. Raring for combat, says you. Between us, we rely on my hawk-like vision, the fact that I don't smoke or drink, and he benches 198 lbs at a local gym every week, should any unforeseen trouble necessitating brute force impose itself on us. I'm also blessed with a face that is deadeningly unmemorable. No-one recognises Tigger and only the most sharp-eyed can link me to the robberies. There are iron grids to get past, alarm systems to avoid or dismantle, tracks to cover. The only wild card for tonight so far is Erika herself.

Neither of us know her; until now, she's just a voice on a series of encrypted Whatsapp messages, all of which I've deleted once I've the necessary info memorised. Not even a profile picture to give me an idea. She's using a burner phone, I know that much. After tonight, its number'll be deleted, the yoke itself discarded, and all evidence of our brief correspondence will go up in digital smoke. Neither of us will ever reach each other by those numbers again.

I should add, she also doesn't know where we're going. Me and Tigger will point her in the right direction; in every conversation I've had with her, I took care not to mention the place's name. We also have to make sure she can't find the route again. I know it by heart anyway (no point giving ourselves away with something as simple as a google search), so getting there won't be a hassle. There's also no shortage of exits for her to take.

Now, you might be wondering why we agree to work with people we don't know. The fact is, me and Tigger like the risk; we seek it out, sniffing the night air for even a hint of earth to leave nicely scorched. Feel free to insert your own hackneyed junkie/addict metaphor/snide remark about how we'd be better off getting into Bitcoin here. Tell me the fucking alternative. Lost and lonely abroad and jobless at home? Fuck that.

But we'd be the first to admit it. We return to these jobs again and again. Our blast-proof orbits circle, lit by sodium-

sallow glow and the flare of a rollie, staving off the inevitable. Anticipatory nerves are all part of the thrill. Whatever unknown elements come into play, that's for us to deal with. Of course, chances of our plans being dashed are never far from our thoughts. Even if you're certain you're not being watched, it's best to keep acting as if you are. No job is ever too much for the likes of us; not if it guarantees that delicious rush of peril to come roaring through our bones.

Who knows, perhaps Erika wants a taste of that rush, too.

And speaking of peril, Tigger himself

“Doesn't matter how well you plan it, how meticulously you map out the terrain and infrastructure, how many names you memorize, a kinetic fizz of anxiety still gurgles in your core.”

knows what the inside of a prison cell looks like. With the deformed home life he comes from, he was unlikely to ever end up anywhere else. First time he was locked up, so he told me, he was up in the children's court for an assault he took part in that left two other fellas with skull fractures. He got four years in St. Pat's for that one. Only his granny was there to support him in court. So he said. I doubt he wants to see it again, though he still lives the life with all the dedication of a new convert. Risk-taker to the bone, is our Tigger. He's the two vital qualities risk-takers the world over need and want: a nose for opportunity and a neck like a jockey's bollocks.

I remember him and me once got away by just the skin of our teeth when we did a job on an ESB substation out Inchicore way. It was only us, and, because Tigger can be a right gobshite when he wants to be and doesn't look where he's going, we ended up causing one of the biggest fires of the year; flames thrashing at the sky like pillars. We caused a major power cut all across West Dublin that night, and, just to show what top blokes we are, got away with a good rook each for the night's trouble, less than half of what we'd headed in for. Daring, and, if I do say so myself, ambitious.

Tigger's all personal. I know more about his private life simply because he never shuts up about it. I don't know if on some warped level he trusts me more than most, I'm a really safe person to vent to, or he's just too careless with his secrets. I know it all, because of him: the deformed home life he comes from, his absent da who he hasn't seen since he was ten, his junkie ma, his sister in care, his younger brother who overdosed when Tigger was twelve, and his older brother already doing a five-to-nine stretch in the Joy for burglary and possession.

Me, I don't do personal—no need to give anyone more ammo to use against you. Especially if you work with them. And I don't think Tigger could give much of a fuck anyway, which suits me fine.

He may have gotten me into this racket,

and schooled me in his own free-floating brand of paranoia, but, as it turns out, I'm well built for it. The planning, the breaking-in, the leaving; I'm a natural. Of course, I do be getting nerves each time, but that's just part of the job. It's probably no different for a fireman or a guard.

I'll say this, though: Tigger's been at it long enough to know the hows, wheres and whys, but he's too volatile to keep at it forever. Eventually, he'll get himself or both of us locked up; some night soon, he'll be too slow, too shambolic, too blind-sighted and then it's off to the Joy we go. But not for now; this is the best he'll ever be at this game. He's not the sort who eventually wises up after one fuck-up too many; he'll be at this to the end. Maybe I'll move on before then and do my thing with someone else. I'm a man who makes plans, don't you know. Amn't I Tigger Coburn's loyal factotum, after all?

Sure enough, bang on time, we hear yet another approaching motor. From the rim of my left eye, I see a jet-black VW Golf GTD come cruising from the estate's north end, bobbing and weaving into the cul-de-sac, its headlights radiant. It makes a beeline for the roundabout, already decelerating. I suspect whoever's driving has seen us long before we've seen them.

I reach for the fleece lip of my balaclava, and pull it down over my face just as the headlights expand like twin supernovae readying to explode across an unmapped sky. Tigger's doing the same.

Fair play to Erika; the car is cheap, and looks it. In fact, it's in even better nick than I expected. A nifty little flying machine, with non-reflective paintwork. And it moves at a decent speed, good mileage to go with. We watch it come closer, gripping our holdall straps. Tigger already has his slung over his shoulder like an archer's quiver. Our balaclavas are already drawn tightly down, our faces well out of sight.

The car pulls up to us just as he's got the strap taut and secure; it comes to a steady halt at the roundabout's lip, motor still running.

The girl at the wheel leans out the passenger seat; sodium glare shows her to me for the first time. She's all of five-foot-nothing and resembles a Victorian graphite sketch of a ballerina brought to life, but going from our back and forths over Messenger, I've her sussed as dogwide as the best of them. She's probably one of the few me and Tigger can trust when it comes to matters vehicular. I know she's done jobs like this before, as a nixer to whatever she's at in college. Working on the QT with the likes of us might just probably be a welcome change to her day-to-day. That, or she needs the moola bad. Either way, I'm glad she's on board tonight. My understanding, after all, is she's one of the best in the game.

She's younger than I thought; through the shadows and her own dimmed windshield, I can't quite place it. But we'll know soon enough.

Leaning forward against the wheel, the young woman raises one eyebrow and says, casual as you like: "Alright, lads?"

A Dublin girl, nice one; one of our own. Dressed all in black, like us, no makeup and fully assured at the wheel of a car. She peers at me a fraction longer than at Tigger.

Next to me, Tigger replies, through his bally: "Howiya. Erika, is it?"

"The very same, the one and only. I believe yis need a lift off me?"

"We do, yeh. If you'll have us."

"I'll be the judge of that. Have y'what we agreed?"

"Right, here." Tigger's hand goes to his jacket pocket and he produces a bundle of notes that I handed to him earlier on, crisp fifties and twenties, all clasped together by a strip of elastic. Her pay, in full. Just as I promised her. She eyes it before reaching out to take it. We leave her to it, counting away, until at last she says, "Sound."

She's spirit, this one. I hope my surprise doesn't show. All night, I've been expecting a junkie girl, or at least Tigger's female equivalent, a lank-haired harridan in her

pyjamas, with a voice like a faulty alarm system, eyes scrunched in prickly defensiveness at everything we say. The young one with her hand on the steering wheel, wrapped in a waterproof puffer coat, has a level gaze, sharp and clear. Her hair is drawn back into a ponytail, a stark streak of peroxide sweeping in from her widow's peak. Were it loose, I imagine it falling thick and unbraided past her shoulders. To be honest, I find her a bit hard to read.

And this is where Tigger does the talking. He has more of a gift of the gab than I do, and it's times like this when we need it most.

"The car yours?" he asks.

"No, I rented it," your one replies. "Can't be leavin' a trail, sure I can't?"

Tigger smirks under his balaclava, like he approves. "Dead right. So, c'mere, it's a lovely, quiet motor, this—"

"Your ears work, I see."

"As do me eyes. And tell us, how old are yeh?"

"Twenty-two."

"Righ', show us your boot, so. Take down the details."

A soft thud from within the car tells me she's opened the boot. I raise it and we drop our holdalls inside before slamming it back down with a click. Apparently satisfied, Tigger says, "Nice one. We get a fuckin' move on, so?"

She undoes the locks, nods coolly at the handle. "Whenever suits."

Tigger barrels 'round the side of the car and hops in the passenger seat. I get in the back, shooting a quick glance in the rear view mirror.

The job ahead isn't heavy-duty by a lot of standards, but you still need to stay sharp. No doubt it was equipped with serious acceleration, a very quiet motor and a full tank of unleaded. All our worries at the start of the night just might be allayed, even as we get to the site.

"So tell us, y'know where you're goin', yeh?" Tiger asks, overdoing the casual.

"Ah, yeh," Erika replies tonelessly, coming

to a stop at a red traffic light. “Any wrong turns, you’ll be the first to know.”

Tigger’s smirk is gnarled with approval as the lights turn green. “Bang-on. Let there be no fuck-ups, wha?”

“Let there be no fuck-ups,” is Tigger’s self-chosen catchphrase. He says it every time we go on a job, to the extent it has lost all meaning. “And let there be no worries,” is my usual reply, whenever he says it. I wait for him to say his line, and only then do I say mine. He’d yet to say it tonight, of course, up until now. I decide against responding, this time.

And since Erika pulled up, I haven’t spoken a single word to her. I watch the back of her head in the driver’s seat, and decide I won’t have to threaten her. Not yet, anyway. Something tells me that, while telling her to forget both our faces after tonight (our ballies, remember) is redundant, it’ll be a good while before I forget hers.

The car’s reasonably-sized, enough for us to make off with a decent haul. I reckon it’s a birthday present from her aul’ lad, or, better still, it was robbed for her by someone she knew. Thick carpeting under our feet, the upholstery welcomes our shape.

Her GPS is switched off, her radio is down, only a few litres of fuel to keep us going all night if we have to.

It may well be a rental as well, but I doubt this somehow. It also smells good and clean, a pleasing mix of what I imagine is Erika’s perfume, laced by a faint factory-fresh tang that still pervades the seats. And it’s clean, no personal belongings strewn over the backseat nor rogue dust peppering the upholstery. She has the heater on too, so the sudden protective

warmth of the interior is a welcome reprieve from the night air’s stinging chill. Soon, I’ll be fighting the urge to tear my bally off.

In a hot minute we’re flying down the N11, right on the speed limit. Erika keeps the radio switched off, just as I told her to. I’ve given myself updates before heading out earlier, as I often do whenever my own thoughts and schemes start boring me. I go to my newsfeed, imagine I’m gazing into a magic mirror instead of a tiny cellular device, trying

“Erika’s different. Not once did she ask a stupid or suspicious question. Irony is, her very incuriosity has gotten me curious about her.”

to divine even a sliver of forbidden knowledge. But there’s nothing forbidden about what the endless, rapidly-changing updates show me, however—Trump acting the prick as usual, Rogan’s latest guest, the upcoming Jones and Reyes fight, complete with slaggings-off on Twitter to keep the fans good and riled-up, that coronavirus yoke spreading across and further outside China, Kirk Douglas trending, the fella who played

Spartacus in that old ’60s film now dead at 101, and me finding all this out as I’m stuffing all my gear into a holdall and heading out to a job with Tigger and Erika.

I never ask the drivers why they’re involved, or anything about their lives. I need just whatever crucial info I can get from them. With most of them, the feeling is definitely mutual, and that’s the way I like it. They don’t need to know anything about how we get inside a building or why we chose that specific location. All they need to know is where to be, and what I’m paying them.

Erika’s different. Not once did she ask a stupid or suspicious question, nor even betray a hint of wanting to know anything more than what’s required of her. Most drivers we get, even if they’re discreet, reek of their own urge

to know more. As a result, the entire drive is a pressure-cooker of them willing themselves not to blurt out any questions. Irony is, her very incuriosity has gotten me curious about her. I’m fairly positive she’s unarmed. No reason she wouldn’t be.

She manoeuvres us expertly under the shuttling streak of streetlights and ever-decreasing road signs. The motorway will eventually devolve into the crooks and twists of lanes and sideroads sprawled this way and that, confounding even the most seasoned motorist. Soon there will be no more brightness, save Erika’s headlights and the sterile glow of a petrol station, a lone bastion of light looming ahead, holding out against the road’s increasingly heavy gloom.

If there are any Garda checkpoints, her satnav will tell us. We’ll know where to go to avoid them.

Where we’re going is rarely indicated on any map; it’s tucked deep away in the countryside’s nether recesses, and can only be found if you’re really looking. Even Erika’s satnav might draw a blank on it; who’s to say? The windows mist over from our body heat. Traffic is mercifully light at this hour. We pass only the occasional car, or an oil truck lumbering through a night run, headlights shimmering like plankton. All are heading in the opposite direction, back toward the city.

Things are quiet at first. I’m well used to keeping schtum; protracted silences don’t bother me. Tigger, one hand casually gripping the grab handle above his window, leans back in the passenger seat, pretending not to glance at Erika every so often, as casually as if he’s readying to chat her up. I fold my arms, let the seconds pass. This shouldn’t take long. Tigger’ll go through the questions.

“You’re serious now? No messin’?”

He’s eyeing her too closely, beaming his best 100-watt shark grin, even with the bally. That grin only ever comes out on special occasions. Tigger flashes it whenever he wants to get his hole, or talk himself out of trouble.

“Messin’ about’ wha’?”

“Who told you about us? Gave you our numbers, like?”

“Tony Joyce.”

“I fuckin’ knew it. He’d be better off mute, that chap.”

“No disagreements there.”

“Alrigh’, who else’ve yeh worked with?”

She reels off a few more names, much to both of our surprise. Tigger doesn’t bother hiding his bemusement or how impressed he is, depending on who she mentions.

“Hang on. Y’were Git FitzPatrick’s getaway driver? Fuck me, how’d you survive that?”

“It was grand, sure. He’s a sweetheart.”

“Not to us he isn’t.”

“Yeh? He’d some good things to say about yis.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

Erika had a smirk to best his. “Only good things.”

“And here, what about’ Tommy Toner? Y’drive for him?”

Now it’s her turn to grimace, sourly. “I don’t like Tommy. The bleedin’ head on him. He’s a fuckin’ horrible yoke.”

“Unlike yourself.” Tigger smirks. He snaps it away, abrupt. “And how do we know y’won’t fuck us over?”

“I never fuck any of my clients over.” There’s that level gaze again, eyes off the road for three solid seconds; a guarantee, eyes clear with defiance. And the immediate, factual way she replies, meeting Tigger’s pointedly baleful stare without flinching or even flubbing her words, charms me more than I’d like to admit.

I take a sec to weigh up the info she’s after given us. All the lads she’s mentioned so far are legit operators, some more psychotic than others. If she can survive their company and still want in on this game, that’s no mean feat. I’ve no reason to believe or disbelieve her. All indicators say she showed up prepared.

After a moment, Tigger decides he’s better off letting it go, and settles back into his seat. That stare of his doesn’t really work the way

he thinks it does; he tends to overdo the squint.

On the plus side, his red mist has evaporated. You'd think he's Oscar-worthy, it's that seamless. In a matter of minutes, Tigger Coburn goes from spitting venom under his breath to the sweetest-talking man in Dublin, cheekily urbane as he needs to be. If you don't know him as well as I do, you'd fall for it, too. Whenever he's chatting up a mot, she'll never be quite able to bring herself to tell him to sling his hook—even if she's getting bad vibes off him. Which is often, I can tell you. Of course, she'll regret it in the morning. Right now, though, I just hope his good humour lasts.

Not that I blame him. He's like this before a job anyway, so I'm not too worried. His bad mood melts away the second things start going according to plan. Once he's stuck into it, he's grand. Prompt, efficient, focused on the work, able to cut through any building's mainframe.

If I had anything to worry about that night, it was how his mood would affect the job—he'd leave too many stray fingerprints, make too much noise, he'd decide to slam a padlock off its hasp rather than pick it free, or an alarm system would erupt because he'd put the wrong foot forward. So far, no reason to worry about any of that.

Another thing you need to know about him: he never speaks to people—always either at or down to them. In his head, people are either enemies to do away with or tools to make use of for some illicit purpose. Given the life he leads, I'm not too surprised it's his default way of thinking. Nor do I take it personally. I'm one of his tools, an audience of one to his various neuroses and whatever obsession and fixation is compressing his mind that month. He doesn't care very much about what I do outside the jobs we do together. As long as I do my bit and he does his, we're grand in each other's books. Like I said, I prefer to remain on his good side. I know he has no favourites.

And I'm really starting to fucking hate the way he's stares at Erika.

For my part, I shift awkwardly in my seat and keep an eye on the road. This is the part of a job, any job, in fact, that I love. After the first few miles, a preternatural calm alights and condenses like dew at the base of the skull, and the finely-tuned crackle of nerves is briefly stilled. I like to think the car isn't so much moving as being dragged westward, away from Dublin and its associated bollixology.

It could be any hour of the night (though AM's always best), the motor's steady grind soothing in our ears, tyres seething off the frosty road as Dublin's lights lag behind, the relaxing sweep of shadows that take over from the sodium glare, the motorway pitch-black and void of traffic and signposts, as if it's uncharted. Smooth EU-funded strip of macadam, stretching off into rural oblivion, flyovers sweeping above us like the wings of downed warplanes. Erika surges on, willing the car forward; the road cuts through the undulating grasslands of Wicklow. Soon enough a crepuscular nightscape of fields and hills and skeletal, leafless trees, rendered treacherous by the moon's spectral gleam, hurtles past us; in the distance, the Sugar Loaf hunches as if in wait, for once unencumbered by mist or raincloud.

And all of it just for us, the journey ours and ours alone. We'll arrive at the site calm and refreshed as if we'd emerged from a good shower. By the time we get to it, disabling security systems and paralysing networks, the job will be halfway done and we can exchange moola with grins on our faces as we speed back to where we were, taking a different route of course.

Tigger and Erika chat away, dredging for info about each other. The long silences aren't good for Tigger. He'll go back to being paro if there's too much of a lull. Better he keeps the conversation up, stilted as it may be.

"Here, see that coronavirus yoke's after

spreadin'?" Tigger ventures after a half a minutes silence.

"It's certainly lookin' worse," Erika responds. "There's cases of it in India now, apparently. Italy, too."

"As of ... ?"

"Today. So the chap on said this mornin'. Spreadin' faster than they thought."

"Fuckin' scaremongerin's all that is. Be over in a few weeks, sure."

"You reckon?"

"Course. At which point they'll be trying to scare us with the next huge disaster. Could set my fuckin' watch by it."

"They're sayin' the most vulnerable are people over sixty."

"I know. Then again, Corona, wha'?' Whoever thought of naming a virus after a light beer seriously needs to have a fuckin' word with themselves."

That seems to put a brief stopper in their confab. Or Erika just couldn't be arsed replying. Both, I suspect, are being rightfully cagey in their responses. They have to be. Of the two, though, Tigger's happy enough to waffle on about whatever, his laddish exaggerations pitifully obvious; even laughing a little too loudly at Erika's punctuating responses, which drip uniformly with headshake-and-eyeroll-combo sarcasm. He's said nothing incriminating so far, but the more he talks, the more restive I get. Soon, some semblance of embryonic gallantry kicks in, and Tigger reverts the conversation back to her. As I am hoping he will.

"So, c'mere, what got yeh into this game?" Tigger asks.

"What, drivin' the likes of youse around?"

"Yeh, that."

"Why? Nice girl like me shouldn't be involved? Is that what you're thinking?"

Tigger seems to appraise her. "Yeh. That's exactly what I'm thinkin'."

She swerves onto the hard shoulder, shaking her head slightly. "That's not for strangers."

"Ah, c'mon," Tigger coaxes, "are we not all mates here, sure?"

"Are we?" Erika asks.

Tigger frowns, but lets it go. "I'd say we are. Sure if we weren't mates, why in the fuck would y'bring us all the way out here?"

"You tell me. Scintillatin' convo might just be it."

"All part of our Celtic charm, love. So, tell us, is Erika really your name?"

She peers at him, the road momentarily forgotten. "Does it matter?"

Tigger shrugs, though for some reason my heart jolts mildly. Those eyes cut like Stanleys. "Not if you don't want it to."

Erika doesn't respond. Tigger's about to go on, but at that moment, his eyes flick up and he sees me staring at him in the rear-view. I'm doing my best narrow-eyed, slow shake of the head: Leave it be. Which he does.

Nonetheless, I'm getting curious about her myself. Women are rare in this game; people who aren't afraid of us, even more so. Though, in fairness, Tigger and I are hardened criminals only on paper. I know we could never hack being locked up. The papers gave us nicknames, making us sound like sidekicks in a Disney cartoon, hardmen caricatures. I presume Erika's read enough overblown articles on our alleged exploits in the Herald and DublinLive.ie to know what we're about. And, hopefully, what we're not.

"Here, can he speak?" Erika asks, out of nowhere.

Tigger glances at me, eyebrows slanting upward in amusement. "When he wants to, yeh."

I'm not surprised she's asked. I'm not a talker by habit. Most people know to leave it at that. Not Erika, though.

"He reminds me of someone," she says.

"Is that right? Through his bally, like?"

"It's just, it's ... his eyes. They're familiar."

I don't mind them talking about me like I'm not there. If Erika has something she needs to get off her chest, I won't stop her. It'll pass the time and take all attention off me.

"Have yis met, ever?"

Erika seems to avoid my eye through the rear view. I wonder if she's deciding whether

to pursue whatever it is she's brought up. In fairness to her, she still keeps her eye on the road.

"No, he just looks like someone I knew once. This friend of my da's."

"Oh?" says Tigger.

"Yeh, this fella my da used to work with. He wasn't my uncle, but he was close as one. I'd see him at Christmas and family do's. That kind of thing."

"Right."

"So, anyway, years back, they were both workin' out in South Africa, like. He was shot inside a church."

That grabs my attention alright. I watch the back of her head.

"When was this?" Tigger wants to know.

"Ah, ages ago. 'Round '94, I think. I was only a year old. Anyway, they were working out in Capetown, in this place called Kenilworth, and his mate, who used to be in the army, wanted to see one of the churches. Religious, y'know the way?"

I find myself nodding, though she can't see me. As she goes on, though, I notice, she's glancing at me more and more in the rear view, like I'm an animal that needs to be watched.

"So it was just my da, his mate, and all the locals. Just sittin' at prayer, listenin' to hymns, y'know? Near the back rows, they were. It was rainin' that night, he said, and I mean, peltin' from the heavens. He said after, he was amazed so many had shown up at all." Her voice is even. She's taking her time. Whatever she has to tell us needs to be gotten out slowly.

"Why?"

"Fear of Communism, y'know? Whipped-up hysteria, people afraid to walk the streets after dark, y'know yourself." She whips past a low-hanging branch. "But everybody, and I mean, everybody in Cape Town, knew someone who was in that church that day."

"Fuck," Tigger exhales.

"So, anyways, my da's mate, he'd been through years of treatment, from all the horrible shite he saw back in his army days,

for all the good it did. I'd a brother who'd been through the same thing, and the second he saw him, he said he knew what it was."

"And what happened?"

A pensive knot furrows Erika's brow, and she exhales. "Out of the blue, all these MK cadres fire shot after shot down the pews. It was the middle of the night, and they were usin' R4s, improvised bombs, all that shite. Y'know, them type of conflicts, it always depends on which side you're on. There's just no way of ever reachin' the heart of it. The mad thing was, you'd think this lad, my da's mate, with his background, would've been trained to dodge, hit the floor, get out of the way somehow at the sound of gunfire, like. But he was so far gone, he just snapped. He kept on saying, afterward like, 'I could see the whites in the fuckers' eyes, man, I was that damn close.' Kept saying it, over and over. 'I could see the whites in their eyes, man.' It never even occurred to him to hit the floor."

"And the lads with the guns? Who were they?"

"Umkhonto we Sizwe. Armed wing of the Communist party. Spear of the Nation, they call themselves. There were four of them, my da said. Churches are normally out of bounds for the likesa them, but this attack was unprecedented. Predominantly white congregation, y'know? All at prayer, all perfect targets."

"Jaysus."

"So the door swings open, righ', and all they see are these combat boots just before they start firin'. Suddenly this blizzard of wood fills the air, 'cause all the pews are bein' blasted to fuck. Sounded like thunder, y'know? Wasn't just wood splinters, either. Shrapnel too, from the grenades they were after flingin' at them. Cape Town people know what thunder is. They live between two oceans, they know the signs. But my da's mate, he stood up."

Tigger grimaces, eyebrows springing up. "Hang on. He stood up? In the middle of that?"

"He did, yeh. My da, meanwhile, hit the floor and started crawling. And that's when ...

fuck, that's when he smelt the gunpowder, and blood was already spilling down the nave, like it was coming for him, and still they kept on firing. By the time they were done, ten people were already dead. I dunno many died in the end."

"Y'serious?"

"Dead serious. But my da always says, he remembers his friend lookin' up and just starin' at the holes they were after punchin' in the roof. He only dared turn his head and the first thing he saw was this book of hymns. Red leather cover, y'know? But it was soaked red like, from all the blood, and he saw a single bullet had penetrated it. Right next to it was a lad, youngfella, about my age, both his legs blown off. One of their grenades landed on his lap. A very clean shot. Then my da sees his mate, firin' back. He somehow leapt up and was firin' from a revolver he had on him, little snub-nosed yoke. This is Cape Town, y'know? Everyone's armed, even people visiting. Anyway, he drove 'em off. The four lads with guns turned and legged it out."

"Then what?"

"From my what my da said, he lay there for a good hour, not darin' to move, even as the puddle of blood around him started to cool. Finally the medics showed up. But all he says he remembers is his mate friend standing up, and not moving. Didn't run at them or away from them. He just stood there. He'd seen worse shit than this, so he wasn't fazed. Maybe a switch in his brain was flicked, and he was back where he'd been before. Who's to say? For yers after, whenever he was over at our place, he's get this faraway look in his eyes. Like he was watchin' for somethin'."

The silence that follows this seems unbreakable. We sit in our seats and stare ahead, serenaded by the engine. Even Tigger can't summon a good jibe to lighten the mood. He gawks out the window, whether deep in thought or hoping the mood will pass, I can't say. Erika keeps staring ahead, fingers steady on the steering wheel. She's

the one to break the silence.

"Anyway," she murmurs, briefly meeting my gaze again through the rear view mirror. "Your mate just reminds me of him, is all. My da's friend, I mean. Same look in his eyes. Sorry if I'm after bringin' the mood down."

Introspection doesn't suit Tigger. He seems on edge, eyes flicking at the dark blurs passing us. He's looking anywhere except at me or Erika. I don't blame him; what we just heard isn't easy to forget or dismiss. Nor is this usually how jobs go; drivers rarely open up that much or with Erika's level of poise. Still, he clearly has something he'd like to get off his chest.

"Ah, you're grand, Erika. Mad fuckin' story, all the same," is what he eventually comes out with.

"Oh, I know. Desperate," Erika smiles, winking at him as she bypasses off the main road, her attention now fully returned to driving.

Tigger manages to smile ruefully back, but he's clearly nulling stuff over. I still say nothing, which seems grand with everyone. People often say I'm Tigger's quiet mate, and this is no different.

I wouldn't even necessarily say that me and him are mates. People think we are, because we're always seen together, but I could think of a fuckload of other terms that would describe our relationship more accurately. Drinking buddies is one. Partners-in-crime is another. I've been his wingman the odd time when we're on the piss and he starts chatting up some young one at the bar. I'm usually good enough leverage to saunter over and get a chat going. Tigger needs a foil, a fall guy he can make look ridiculous with a few overly-loud slaggings, so he can then swoop in and nab his prize with enough practised, smirky charm. That said, I doubt he'd ever pull strokes like that on his own; the only reason he's so confident around women is because I'm usually nearby, backing him up and making him look better by comparison. It's an unspoken understanding we have, one that neither of us would ever rip asunder by putting it into words.

And he better not fucking dare try it now.



We're on the clock after all.

But Erika is sending my brain more and more into overdrive. She's a smooth driver. And she knows how to tell a story while she's at it. Not once, since we left the estate, has she asked for directions, nor have I had to point her where to go. We're probably the only three people left in the world with any awareness of the location she's taking us to. That's knowledge you can't put a price on; no amount of cash or free gargle will ever get it out of me.

I watch Erika, eyes glued to the back of her head, close enough to touch. She's giggling away at one of Tigger's jokes and focused on the road; fair play to the fucker, he got her to crack a smile. Her hair is crimped, I notice, dark at the roots, blonde streaks. Even laughing, she remains almost stone-like at the wheel. I know the heater is on, but I'm certain the heat of her body is adding to it.

I wonder what her alibi for tonight is? Did she pull a sickie, send apologetic texts to her mates and family, saying she couldn't meet them tonight? Did she say she wanted to make it an early one, and keep her phone switched off? Did she take a few days off work, or did she plan to walk in first thing tomorrow, business as usual? She made it very clear no-one else knew; I keep one eye on the rear view for any cars that are staying on the same route as us for a suspiciously long time. Does she know to do this instinctively, or have past mistakes forced her wise up, and wise up fast?

My proximity to her makes it difficult to push all thoughts of closeness from my mind. I hope to lock eyes with her in the rear-view, but not once does she glance up.

This is for the best, I've to stay focused.

I remind myself that no-one ever drives up to the Wicklow mountains with good intentions. There are no signs of where we're going. It isn't that many miles out of Dublin, or even that far from the nearest village, but you'd have to be looking, and I mean really looking, to find it.

We never know if a job is doomed from the start. I mean, how can we? We're professionals.

Like insects to a carcass, we hurry to the site of plunder. We're planners; nothing is ever done on impulse, and everything is to the letter: the necessary blueprints drawn up, the right measurements taken, the exact time set between going in empty-handed and coming out with our hands full of all manner of enticing swag. For tonight, we've agreed on the site, on the twelfth of April, early hours. The plan is the same as the rest: go in without getting caught or killed, and without killing anyone else.

I insist on that last part.

We, or rather, I, have the place well-cased. We won't be taking more than we need. There's enough copper in the storage space to fill up the car and motor back without being caught.

And the plans are drawn up. Summer's coming in, and before we know it, the evenings will stretch out longer than they should, amber radiance spilling over motorways like petroleum. Cash runs swiftly out and a new job must be decided on. It doesn't have to be a massive heist, or the systematic B&E-ing of an entire street of suburban homes. Just something to keep our heads above water for when the summer arrives, the yearly hollier

“ I could think of a fuckload of other terms that would describe our relationship more accurately. Drinking buddies is one. Partners-in-crime is another. ”

to Amsterdam booked, and the guards off our scent. I've my computer set up so we get email notifications of local obituaries; I scan the social media sites for funeral announcements, closures of certain businesses due to some emergency or other, building sites and railyards left unattended, find the right one and the plans are drawn up.

There is no more light now, just the motorway uncoiling ahead of us, and then elbowed sharply into a narrow backroad, hedged and bogged and mud-strewn. I'm thankful for the lack of rain. Erika slows, steering steadily under overhanging leaves. The darkness would be absolute were it not for the torch Tigger has now flicked on. Its cyclopean glare strobes out ahead, joining the headlights, and we see what we are here for.

“There she is,” he purrs. “What a fuckin' beaut.”

A building site, seemingly stalled for the night, but in reality has been out of action for over a decade, looms ahead of us: all around are stainless steel rails, liviried with graffiti-and rust-heavy warning signs. The moon still rides at anchor in its bruise-blue sky. A cement mixer, stacks of rebar and jackhammers, and JCBs cluster together in the dark like petrified beasts, on a bed of drying cement, stark in its glimmer. It's as silent as the known universe.

Erika inches past the steel fencing that runs along the length of the site. What used to be the foreman's prefab stands like a used bomb shelter. The iron gate that once guarded the place has only one lock, non-electronic. Were it abandoned, the blinding glare of floodlights would spill over everything. Anything could give us away, the flicker of our torches or the car engine humming sonorously at the entrance. And yet, no skeleton crew working overtime. Nor even a single nightwatchman, electrical wire or CCTV in sight. Beautiful.

Erika parks at the far end, so we are secluded fully in darkness again. From here, we have the best vantage point of the site. She kills the lights and keeps the engine thrumming idly. Tigger glances over his

shoulder and nods at me, making a stab at being all business. He gets out and moves 'round to the boot. I give myself a second to recce.

It's only now I notice the wind hasn't just died down, but seems to have died completely out. Even with my bally covering my face, I know it.

Has Erika noticed it too?

The place is isolated enough that I bet not even squatters or local delinquent schoolkids venture in, not even for a dare. But really, it's no worse than visiting a cemetery. One look at it, though, would tell you exactly what era in our recent history it's sprung out of. Zoning and rezoning make no difference. The place's name could burn holes into a roadmap, is spoken as if it's a slur, a tumour or a felony best forgotten, half-built salvage staining the landscape, the fruit of a developer's planned greed, laid bare once the economy's inflamed bowels burst open.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Far as I'm concerned, I'm staring at this mortar garden, unguarded as a landfill, a corral of what might have been ten houses, slated, and drably new, began life as a ruin miles out from Dublin's roughest outskirts, a ruin you could never call noble, its silence too daunting, too frozen, to break, and all I can think is: I have found Eden.

I wonder if Erika sees it, too.

Despite the bulb-gleam, a thick layer of shadow permeates the site, and where the roof had been is now a pile of rubble imploded by a demolition blow. From the corner where the long-abandoned foreman's prefab stood, piles of concrete-caked scaffolding, joists and girders, lie abandoned, cradled only by the cold.

I can't tell how long it's been abandoned for; it reminds me of an apex predator recently shot down and chewed over by buzzards. The fuse box and storage spaces containing the coils of wire aren't too far off.

Fuck me. There is nowhere else I would rather be.

It occurs to me that going 'round the far

side might be the best route; hidden cameras could still actually be here, functioning and vigilant, that I somehow missed last time. Tigger hasn't recce'd the place in the way I have; I've got the photos of every nook and cranny in the palace stored in my phone, though I'll doubt I need them. Knowing exactly where the nerve centre was located threatened to suddenly throw my normal calm into a state of feverish imbalance - the nerves of before now replaced by a crackling, finely-tuned intent. Most jobs we go on are high-risk; closed-up businesses that are set to carry on as normal the next morning. By comparison, this place had been standing empty for well over a decade now. But something about this place's dereliction has me mesmerised.

"Ten minutes. Then yis're on your own."

Erika's voice punctures my reverie.

"No bother. We'll see you then."

The only words I'll speak to her all night.

She looks at us, all business now. "Righ' lads, I'm bein' serious now. Yis're to be in there ten minutes tops, yeh? Any longer, I fuck off and yis are on yer own. Fair enough?"

"Yeh, no worries." Tigger's wink is conspiratory.

"Oh, and the keys stay with me." She jingles them in her hand. Fuck, but she has some smirk.

"Yeh, deadly."

"Yis go in, unload as much as y'can, then we head down to Cutler's, and we sell it for 8 K."

"Whatever y' say, love."

Tigger does a mock army salute, slings his holdall over his waist and fucks off toward the site. I follow and fall in step with him, both of us keeping it brisk. The car stays where it is, Erika still behind the wheel in the dark, her eyes trained on our swiftly receding backs. I know she's set her timer to ten solid minutes. I resist the urge to look back over my shoulder at her.

There is no other sound, save our boots crunching off the dirt track. I know this, because my ears are pricked all the way up.

The air is redolent with damp from the fields.

Sheer, alien silence reigns out here, hanging heavy as a verdict between the nooks and crannies of abandoned gear, replacing hammer-blows and the grind of a drill; not a church bell's distant chime, nor the faint roar of the sea. No birdsong, no whisper of wind to sizzle stiffly through a window's smashed lacuna like poisonous laughter, reminding us we're still on earth. Were it not for the biting chill, I'd think my flesh has somehow numbed to all sensory vibration.

I'm confident no-one else is after beating us to this job; if they have, they've covered their tracks well. Tigger exhales, a lazy whistle.

"She's fuckin' somethin', isn't she, man?"

I can barely see him in the dark; he's an odd, loping patch of blackness superimposed over the night's abyssal gloom, in the torch lights' dazzling rim. I know he's grinning, but his presence is somehow intermittent now. I imagine both of our shadows, could we see them, would look crooked and hunched from the weight we carry.

"She is, yeh."

Even to my own ears, my voice sounds slightly unnatural, disoriented.

We won't be using the torches just yet. The iron contours of scaffolding, made delicate by the moon and backed by a swarm of stars, act as odd beacons for us.

"She single, d'ye think?"

"I wouldn't know, man. She never said."

"Y'serious? Never asked if she'd anyone who might worry about her? A fella, maybe?"

"If there is, she didn't say."

He's trying to be his usual jack-the-lad self, but I'm not fooled. "Here, d'yeh reckon that story she told was true? 'Bout the chap in the church, like?"

"What the fuck's it matter?"

"Here, I'm only wonderin', man!" He snaps, shaking his head defensively. I ignore him, trying to get a suss on the silhouettes ahead of me. I'm painfully aware of the minutes slipping by, second by injurious second. I try lightening my voice; can't have him getting too edgy.

"Sure, y'know me, man. That stuff doesn't come up 'less I think it's important. Which, in this case, it wasn't. Clearly, yer one thinks the same. And anyway, wouldn't be a smart move to try anythin' with her. It'll just more complicated later on. You'll end losin' focus on a job 'cuz she's all y'can think about. I seen lads go that way enough times."

"You're some fuckin' dry shite, you are."

"All a part of me Celtic charm, Tigger-me-boy. It's also why I've never been locked up. Can you say the same?"

He doesn't like that, but he says nothing. Just as I need him to.

As we edge closer, our torch beams reveal the site in stark, luminous pools of LED. Already I'm picturing coils of electric cable, some an inch thick, the pipes, many of which kept their sheen even after years of non-use, and joints clustered together like rust-coloured bones in the storage room at the end. We can't make off with all of it, of course, not in the time Erika's given us; but enough of it'll get us some decent moola down at Cutler's Scrapyard.

Tigger's eyes are like jackhammers poised to hit as he takes it in. His breathing has sharpened, too, great plumes of condensed, eager breath spewing from his mouth. For a fella like him, there was no eye or understanding for the sublime places in the world. Yet the silence of the place seems infectious even to him; he finally knows to the shut the fuck up.

Not that I blame him, of course. It's like walking into some forgotten cave of wonders; all around us, floodlights loom tall and vacant as relics or prehistoric idols, their bulbs long since disconnected, all coated in ochre blotches of aged rust. Bituminous pools of wastewater, on the verge of freezing, crouch below us; cement-crusting gear lie in half-sunk abeyance among the potholes.

Wind seethes icily around it all, as if hinting at some dire eventuality. Even by torchlight, it looks unfamiliar. All this forsaken machinery, without even the sad dignity of forgotten statues, yet altered into

looming, eldritch shapes by night-time's inky immensity.

Everything I've snapped in the photo is here: half-built avenues sour as demolished dreams, their edges and corners worn by slow wind blasts and growing clots of moss as they drift in and out of our torchlight, ghost-pallid in their wires of frost. Overhead wires sputter with choked assibilation, snowflakes that fall in a soft flurry now glaciare to frost, trussing the supine tarmac of properties neither resident nor developer will claim: the boom years' concrete dung.

My torch's cyclopean glare plays, dances and works its battery-powered alchemy, revealing the exposed stone and brick work, now crumbling slowly away. There is no life within sight or earshot. The place began life as a ruin, I just now realise. I hope it's erased off the maps one day, levelled into oblivion without even the minor solace of being a distant memory.

Yet another part of me thinks it holy; whatever ghosts haunt it must be benign. Perhaps they expect us, have stilled whatever spectral agitations they are condemned to engage in, so that we may pass undisturbed. They are near, sheathed in every acrid doorway, raising their terrestrial heads, in what might have been living rooms or kitchens, the air shivering with their prayer's glacial tempo.

The thought does not disturb me; in fact, I welcome it. It's as if the site has become its own singular domain of steel and rust and potholes, utterly removed from humanity - and which knew when intruders were near and across its border.

For that reason, we don't just amble across and into the site. It's still overrun with abandoned builder's gear, after all. Along the way, we'll have to pass weatherworn breeze blocks stacked high like a gambler's surety, a ladder lying sidelong in torrential mud, tangles of abandoned tools, torsos of unfinished homes hugged by rust-crusting scaffolding, a cement mixer's open maw, speckled with frost and birdshite. All still

well able for use. The remnants of labour, all once ready and in place to help erect yet another luxury husk of remembrance to some property developer's bloated ego, now all so stained and abandoned and verging on extinction. One fella's death trap is truly another fella's treasure trove.

We move with our customary cautious stealth, deeper into the site, where the storage space is. The wind's wraith-like murmurings and gravel snarling under our feet are the sole sounds we hear. I imagine the silence without them to be as vast and dispiriting as that of the ocean floor at its deepest fathom.

We've done jobs similar to this before; but the site definitely has us mesmerized.

Like pilgrims in a temple, we make sure not to knock anything over. I've dreamed of this place, and the exhilaration of finally standing in it is overwhelming. I can't quite shake the sense that it's beckoning me, somehow, urging me closer.

God, but life was better in the boom years. In fairness, we were still scumbags, still known to the guards, but we at least did things our way. We'd necks on us like a pair of jockey's bollocks, and we made fucking sure it'd be that way forever.

Of course, them days are long over. Recession arrived, austerity washed over us like a rogue wave, forcing us to look our weakness dead in the face. The country was sold down the river at the order of a few bureaucratic fuckheads in Brussels, and all without a fight, too. The country's halcyon years smouldered to a heap of debt-ridden cinders, banknotes shrivelled to silver dust.

Our torchlight crawls; the lane it shows us is narrow. Tigger's shadow is reflected in the overlapping pools of light. His head is darting in all directions, like a hyper-curious bird. The need to get down this passage is urgent as life itself now.

Even when this site was active, security had been lax: storage was covered by a single wooden board propped up against the main entrance. Not so much as a lock. Under my

gloves, my palms are itching, and a restive ache radiates my spine.

Within half a minute of navigating the site, we arrive at the main storage space, which looks as abandoned as anything we've seen so far. Anyone else might describe it as being like the underside of a grave. I, personally, call it a haven.

Only now do I notice that Tigger's pace has slowed somewhat; in fact, he's a good six feet behind me.

Whenever we're on a job, he's generally the senior partner, at least when it comes to entry and execution. He leads, I follow. He mulishly declares what we do and where we do it, even though tonight is all my idea. It's a deep, tacit understanding we have, a natural dance of command-and-obey we have of working together.

Tigger also knows I'm smart enough to keep my gob shut when I have to. It's why I don't go drinking with him anymore, because every time I have, the night is instantly turned into a griever, due to his stupidity or belligerence. He's no mutton-head, but. He's somehow managed to avoid, ironically, an overnight stay in a drunk tank. He's cunning enough, I suppose. But now he's lagging behind me, his footfalls less determined. Reluctant, nearly.

The storage room isn't much more than a makeshift industrial shed; were people brave enough to venture out here it'd be slathered in graffiti. We inch towards it as if toward the unknown.

We whisper now, even though we're definitely alone. "So, what's the plan?"

I angle my torch and squint. "We only fill up as much as we're able. Should only be two minutes, tops. Just take whatever you can put your hands on and make for the door. I'll be behind you. There should be enough in there not to worry about coming back for seconds. We're only to take what we need." I upend my torch, hold the cone of light under my chin, flash him my best rictal smirk. "Fuckit, sure. We can always come back another night."

Tigger flinches foolishly, before grinning back with exaggerated elan. "Y'aways were a

smart fucker. I knew that about yeh from day one."

I barely hear him. There it is again. My voice sounds less and less like me, even in my own ears. I wonder if Tigger has noticed too; or even knows my plan.

But then, Tigger knows very little about me, whereas I know a great deal about him. Funnily, I don't actually know his real name, which is a bit weird at this stage. He's always just been Tigger to me. His funeral will be interesting, mind. Be funny to see what name they carve on the headstone when they lower him in. That's assuming I'll even be around to see it, of course. After tonight, I hope I am.

He'll happily lash me out of it if we're having a few cans with the lads, but he needs my silence. He'd rather work with me than anyone else. He has me sussed, but he's also smart enough to realise that he can't spend all this time in my company without me eventually knowing his game too. We're better off together. Because we're not amateurs. We don't break into people's gaffs, wreck the furniture and then take a complimentary shite on the dinner table. We're professionals; we pride ourselves on it. It doesn't matter what I'm doing, if I get a text from Tigger telling me the time and place of a job

And one thing is definite: me and Tigger are a hell of a team.

But if he pussies out of this job, I'll happily break his face.

I put my meagre weight behind the door and grit my teeth as it breaks inward. The crunch of it is an echoing, abrupt violation of the silence that, up until now, has been attending us like a bodyguard. We step through past the door, now just barely clinging lopsidedly to its hinges, and into a corridor.

Tigger follows my lead, past towering steel racks laden with pallets and containers, down a smooth concrete aisle that narrowly leads to the rear of the place. The racks, abandoned for yonks by now, drift through our torchlight, contours revolving dimly in and out of the lunar sweep. Our boots echo; no doubt the

place is more cavernous than either of our torches can show. A faded fire exit tells us we are near; it is affixed to a wooden door. A useless barricade if ever I saw one; whatever locks were used had succumbed to the rust.

When we reach it, I kick the wooden panel in, my boot springing like a cobra through the plywood. The sudden, hard crack of the thing shattering feels like an act of vandalism against the quiet. Thankfully it's only for a few seconds. I take a breath before stepping inside.

There is no escaping this momentum, or this chill. Every step counts now.

Dim coils of copper glitter in the dark with smooth radiance, just as I expect it to. It glows and sparkles in its pile, like coal on a hearth. It is piled into a mound, as if whoever was here before us wished it to be found this way: a bar there, coiled wiring here and over there, a hex joist. Tubes of corroded piping and stout barrels of sheeting covered the floor. For anyone else, it's scrap metal. For me, it's a sublime discovery. It almost hurts to look at, yet I've come all this way and can't bring myself to flinch. I fight to urge to fall to my knees.

The leftover smell of petrol makes my mouth water; my fingertips itch to run along every square surface, all of it ours for the taking. The wires are neatly coiled like beaten torcs; joists and girders reach out to us with the openness of so many welcoming arms. It has a light of its own, I notice, nebulous and pure, like the sun's aurora grimacing through fog. No, they are many lights, catching each other and stirring together in astral harmony.

The air in the place is oddly clear and scentless. Why, then, is Tigger falling back, coughing like a mad thing?

I ignore him and carry on into the room, my breath quickening. I've taken my time, waited with enough patience as I have for tonight. No longer do I know where I am. The ache in my spine surges through my bones and I am now made ready. This light cannot be bought for any earthly price.

I am dimly aware of Tigger calling my name, but his voice is too far off to truly register.

Were I to reach out and touch the copper, will it scorch my palm or flood my body with some arcane, divine knowledge? To own such knowledge would then be to guard it, hoard it away with miserly zeal.

“Show me the carnivals of heaven, the wonderlands of hell,” I hear my voice echo in the dark.

I inch closer, my hand shaking, my torch’s halogenic glare falling spasmodically on the copper like sacrilege, I am unable to think of anything now, save that something is coming for us all, something more than any of us, a brink as yet undiscovered, a burning point of strange ecstasy that will grip everyone caught in its path. Could it be a plague, or a mode of transcendence?

“Did the needle of history sting us into our current crime, deepen like a shovel into the earth, making concrete slabs made of our feet?”

From somewhere behind me, I think I hear Tigger suddenly drop his holdall and run back the way he came, through the estate. The retreating gleam of his torch tells me he is going at a frantic pace. Can’t for the life of me suss out why.

“Do we wait for a tomorrow that will never arrive?”

I want nothing now. Not love, not glory, nor even the riches I thought I’d take from here. Just the copper before me and the siren song it seems to sing, that I suspect only I can hear.

“And did we know we’d learn to eat fire, swallow down the heat as punishment for our delinquency? Let the flavour linger on our tongues, char our nerve endings? Don’t fight or flee from it. Allow ourselves to be broken, the mildew of defeat drenching our bones, the heat and chill rubbing our throats?”

Tigger is now yelling at the top of his lungs, like the gobdaw he is. Does he not know we’ll be caught if he keeps it up?

“Brook the punishment if we can, we who gave in too easily, defending the most brittle rumours as fact, looking no challenger in the eye, our parade of anger halted by the mildest

contradiction, the politest disagreement. Too many forfeit their gusto for a bondman’s sake, their eyes rubbed in the acid of another’s guilt. Why must we pile our shame with theirs? Is their poisoned laughter all we can expect to hear now? Why do they wait for a tomorrow we cannot bring, for the moon to avert its eye from their affliction, for the rain to drown in its own deluge?”

I say all this while eyeing the copper. The possibilities are endless now. I know it is mine and mine alone. There is nothing before or after it. Nothing can break its magic—not even the hysterical shireks Tigger’s giving off, nor the pounding footfalls I take to be his frantic as he runs away from me.

The copper flares and twinkles, their vague gleam dancing, flaring, shimmering as if in anticipation of my approach. It ghosts and scratches my skin, needles my eyes and claims every pore and nerve and sinew for its own, bursts whatever internal dam that’s stoppered my blood all night.

Somewhere behind me Tigger’s voice is getting evermore muffled.

My vision blurs, as if I’ve opened my eyes underwater. Neither the moon nor the sun could boast a gleam so bright; it was more than mere lustre, all things are outshone by it, it could catapult me right out of existence, burn my eyes clean of all they had never wished to see. Whatever secrets I may know any second now will come on in waves, knowledge vaster than anything I’ve yet yet known.

“Whether I glimpse hell or heaven, I shall know soon,” I say aloud. Tigger is too far away to have heard me. I know because I hear his frantic screams echoing across the site. He does not truly know what brought us out here.

As I speak those words, I step forward, the cold of the site now forgotten. Everything is claimed by what I am now seeing, the shadows, the smell of damp, the abandoned machinery just outside, Tigger, Erika, everyone and everything subsumed, the relentless spread of this eclipse sweeping us into finality, a strange, inglorious conclusion.

Somewhere behind me Tigger has long since given up shouting my name.

Should you ever ask me what happened, I’d say don’t waste your time. There is nothing of it left. There is nothing of me either. You may search and search, but such a pursuit is futile. Forget me when you speak of this.



# Pawns of the Prophet

An excerpt from book two in the Kiranis series by  
Ronald A. Geobey

## PART I EARTH

*The Sentience could be known, it could be felt in the heart and in the mind, yet still our people turned from its guidance. And so, the Sentience brought the Cage, and with it a plague to make us slaves to mediocrity so that the unworthy might be judged. But Mannix Relland had prepared the way, and those of pure heart were Chosen for Renewal. Now the Sentinels oversee those who have yet to Ascend, guiding our children and keeping our ways. As the Sentience is righteous, so shall Ascension set us free.*

Extract from the so-called “Monologues of Ascension” (author unknown), restored from corrupted Psy-cells discovered in 709 NE in the ruins of the Great “Si” Library in Berlin. The “Monologues” are copies of earlier texts thought to be composed by a Presbyter of the Church of the New Elect c. 320-370 NE. They are now housed in the Millennium Temple on Kiranis. It is unclear as to whether “Ascension” in this extract indicates a retrospective on the events of the year 330, or it was an ambiguous theological concept pre-dating those events; a concept to be later legitimated by them.

## THE MEC SYSTEM

MEC Station Gamma-48, Sector 176

The Argo ploughed the darkness in which stars would grow. It was a thing of beauty, this black-shredding ship. Sleek and fast, its rows of proximity beacons were like strings of pearls embedded in the shimmering skin of an obsidian predator searing through the waterless depths. And a predator indeed, because like many things of beauty, the Argo was lethal, a trickster of seductive destruction. Small windows along its hide emitted pinpoints of light belittled by the proximity beacons. But through these pinpoints one could see life. As the Argo was nearing a gigantic station living in the shadows of a nearby star, Captain Abigale Saranne was enjoying the silence as she traversed one of the outer corridors. There was no activity in this area of the ship, and she trusted that there was none anywhere else. Well ... almost anywhere else. As she reached an elevator door, she tapped the control panel and said, ‘Medical.’ After a few seconds, the face of a man in his early forties appeared on a small screen. Green-eyed and handsome, his light brown hair was retreating from an encroaching forehead and losing the battle on two fronts, as invading grey also assaulted on the left and right flanks. *We’re ready, Captain*, he reported. *Just you and me to go.*

“Good,” Abigale replied. “I want the bridge crew as soon as we’re through.”

The man furrowed his eyebrows. *I’m not a big fan of flouting protocol.*

“You’ll have to trust me on this one, Doc,” Abigale assured him. “I just can’t tell you why.”

On matters such as this, the conflict of authority between Command and Medical usually ended in stalemate, serving nobody’s interests. The doctor conceded, aware that there was little time to argue. *I’ll skip straight to Engineering after the bridge then ... to get back on track.*

Abigale gave a little laugh. “I can’t imagine you skipping anywhere.”

The doctor smiled. *You’d be surprised what I get up to when you’re all out!*

“I really don’t wanna know.”

*Call me from the bridge*, the doctor said, as a warning sounded from his console. *We’re within scanning range.*

“Will do.” Abigale tapped the panel and, as the screen went blank, the elevator door opened. She stepped in.

The dark station came to life as the Argo continued towards it. It was seen to be cylindrical as thousands of points of light burned the shadows, but it opened with an internal spiralling section separating its two operating units in anticipation of its latest client. The station was a portal to the MEC network.

Abigale looked at her reflection in the mirrored wall at the rear of the elevator. She was tired, and it showed. Loath to wear much make-up, the darkness around her eyes was rescued from over-exposure by her sallow skin. Yet still she could see it; she knew it was there. Her blue eyes saw an older woman than the one to whom it had become accustomed. And her long brown hair framed a face which had seen too much. She was looking forward to getting home. As she began to tie up her hair to transform herself into Practical Mode, she said, ‘Bridge,’ and two things happened: the elevator began its ascent, and the mirrored wall became almost fully transparent. Abigale could still see her reflection, enough to aid in fixing her hair, but she could also see something wonderful.

The self-perpetuating engine of the Argo represented a considerable evolution of even the most trusted and economical quantum intake conversion drives which had become the norm in the past century, but its mechanics were a secret fiercely protected by the Vawter Corporation. Whereas a standard QUIC engine collected its fuel on a quantum level as the vessel moved through space—its hordes of bots processing a theoretically endless supply of energy—the pulsing and swirling sphere

of multi-coloured lights in the centre of the Argo was the effect of the undulating waves of mirror-cased bots obscuring the true heart of the operation. It was suicide to investigate closer, a determination not unfounded. As captain, however, Abigale was necessarily privy to its secrets. She knew that the engine of the Argo was one of a kind, but it was not the only thing on view as the elevator rose higher, allowing Abigale to look down upon it.

The internal walls of the inner corridor-run of every deck could be seen, as well as the scores of elevator cars and lines. Hundreds of robotic automatons with various duties moved around the weightless interior, their mag-drive propulsion systems humming amidst the glow and pulse of the engine. Abigale loved this sight, the inner workings of the ship. It reminded her of the doll she once took apart as a child, much to the frustration of her father. As she sat in her room amidst the pieces, she had looked up at him sweetly and explained, "I wanted to see how she cried."

Flickers of blue light could be seen in the space between the two ends of the cylinder as the great MEC station prepared for the arrival of the Argo. Like an enormous glowing mouth waiting to swallow the vessel, the spiralling centre had been opened according to the dimensions of the ship, allowing for its passage through this giant metal portal. The interior of the portal activated then, crackling blue energy igniting to create a sheet of bright blue light.

The elevator stopped and, rather than having to turn around and exit the way she had entered, as on most other decks, Abigale watched the glass descend to open the elevator onto the short corridor leading to the bridge. It was also transparent, and Abigale walked a curving path until she reached the bridge, feeling a familiar shiver run through her as she stepped into the deathly, but occupied,

silence. It welcomed her with a whispering, "Remember me?" Seventeen of her crew were here, unconscious at their stations, laying comfortably in reclining chairs designed for this specific, haunting purpose. Abigale went swiftly to her own chair and settled in, pressing the button to recline with her left hand. Tapping the panel with her right, she said again, "Medical."

A holo-image of the doctor projected from the ceiling. *Comfy?* he asked.

"And if I say no?" Abigale quipped.

*Not my problem. Close your eyes and relax.*

"Ooh, I bet you say that to all the girls!" Abigale closed her eyes and tried to relax as she heard the soft hum of the hypo-spray moving into position at her neck. On the end of a short arm attached to the chair, the hypo-spray was ready to administer the sedative which would render her unconscious. It reached her neck, and with a short, sharp hiss, its pressurised delivery system shot the sedative through her pores and directly into her bloodstream. She was quickly out. Down in Medical, the doctor followed suit, until the Argo was like a ghost ship, its unique engine shutting down until it set as a solid reflective sphere. Power was systematically cut off in a pre-determined hierarchy of systems, until only the string-of-pearls proximity beacons were active. Then they, too, were shut down, until – all lights out, all life out – the Argo was drawn like a black moth into the sheet of blue energy inside the automated station. The prow of the ship pushed into the energy wall, but it was not destroyed. Instead, once the entire ship was devoured, the spiral reversed and closed the station, before an aperture opened on its dark surface and a ball of bright blue light shot out across the galaxy. Travelling at immense speed, it vanished into the darkness.

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Many light years away, a very different ship was approaching Earth. A majestic vessel, it was beautiful like the Argo but larger and

more powerful, the killer whale to the Argo's great white shark. It appeared to cause ripples in the fabric of space as it came closer to the planet around which similar technology was being brought to fruition. For here, finally, were the Illeri, a species whose reputation preceded them only insofar as their mysterious nature had become synonymous with the Shield. Only slightly larger than the C-1 Battle Cruisers of Earth's military, the Illeri ship boasted no lighting of any kind, no indication of windows or the flashing, coloured strips of a proximity detection system. There was no visual evidence of life on board; but appearances could indeed deceive.

Star Marshal Rami Marush had heard little about these people, these strange new friends whom he observed from the command centre of the lunar station. A life form known only to humans as a Type-4 Sentient, this classification identified the Illeri as a primarily aquatic life form, and as such it was likely that they were loath to spend too much time away from their natural habitat. Marush tried to imagine them interacting with the Senate representatives, grinning as he pictured someone throwing the bureaucrats into a gigantic tank to swim with the Illeri ambassador.

"Could do with a joke, sir," a familiar voice cut in. Marush did not particularly like the man, but he chuckled softly as he turned to see Commander Collenson, his direct subordinate for this operation, walking up the ramp towards him and saying, "Been a long day."

"Just thinking about this meeting," Marush explained. "How they're gonna do it without drowning."

Collenson nodded, stony-faced as always. "Should be interesting," he agreed, missing the joke, "although we won't see any of it till we get home. There's something interfering with civilian broadcasting." He handed a light-key to the star marshal, who put it on his right palm and activated it. The projection jumped up from his hand, displaying approach vectors for the visiting ship as Collenson explained,

"They're clear for entry. Far as we can tell, the Shield itself is guiding them in."

"Probably what's blocking the broadcast," Marush noted.

"As long as it's nothing more than that. I don't like knowing nothing about these guys."

Marush nodded in agreement. "Well, that's what this is all about. Fifteen planets and seven different species under their watch, all of them out farther than we're willing to go without a MEC station in tow. It'd be nice to find out how they managed to get all that power without antagonising the Kwaiois. Either they've nothing the Council wants, or something they just can't take."

"Dunno which is better."

"I know what you mean," agreed Marush. As the sleek monster passed the moon and reduced to minimal speed, an escort of seven battle cruisers attached themselves. On the lunar station, an alarm suddenly sounded and shouts were heard across the command centre: "We got incoming! Multiple targets!"

They had clearly been monitoring the approach of the Illeri, these predators. With terrible speed and ferocity, scores of ships arrived from different directions, assorted in size and strength. With some risking being torn apart by the sudden drop in velocity, this was apparently a concerted attack. Marush ordered fighters launched from the lunar station to engage them, but it quickly became clear that these were diversionary tactics on the part of the attackers. Larger vessels materialised in the space between the Shield and the escorted Illeri ship, Garran battleships opening fire on Earth's cruisers without delay. Marush could see only the flashing bursts of explosions in the distance and Earth itself was just a dark sphere looming in the background, but his screen magnified the scene just in time for him to witness something magnificent. In the shadow of the Shield, the Illeri vessel came alive, thousands of lights illuminating its surface, countless weapons pummelling the Garran ships and tearing them to pieces. Another alarm sounded and Marush shouted, "Report!"

“A vortex, sir! Above the North Pole!”

The darkness beyond the zenith of the Shield rippled as if a stone had disturbed a pool of black, and three ships birthed from the darkness. The outer hulls of the warships of the Jaevisk Society were now composed of a shimmering network of black and reflective metal, and they were deadlier than ever, from Marush’s viewpoint appearing to descend upon their Illeri target like ravenous birds. The battle cruisers from Earth were severely damaged and would not last much longer, but even the Garran found themselves in the line of fire as the three Jaevisk ships opened fire on everything in their path. This was not a concerted attack at all. It was a moment of opportunistic chaos brought on by the Illeri arrival. Although the final guest at the party was fashionably late, it swiftly made its presence felt. The Argo roared into the fray like an angry beast.

Countless weapons, some never before seen by the attackers, disabled and destroyed everything that came up against it, and the Jaevisk found its lead ship with a gaping hole in its belly as strange missiles burst from this unique vessel to blow it wide open. The Jaevisk realised too late that the tide had turned as this new horror maintained a collision course with the weakened section of the lead warship, ripping it in two as the Argo burst through the explosion and the wreckage. Stunned by these tactics, the Jaevisk fled, waiting until they had reached a safe distance before opening a vortex and returning to the sanctuary of their space, leaving behind the burning debris of a warship. It was not long before the Garran and the other unidentified attackers followed suit, with Earth’s military vessels snapping at their heels. In the aftermath, it appeared that the Illeri had suffered little damage, and they made no attempt to contact anyone to express any form of gratitude. Their lights went out again. And they resumed their course to Earth.

The Shield constructed around the blue planet deactivated its defence systems. Electromagnetic fields of protection went

down, surface-to-orbit guns switched off and thousands of apertures opened to reveal the patchwork of metal encompassing the Earth. The metal world opened, allowing the Illeri vessel to enter its domain. Marush watched it passing through the Shield and he felt a shiver run through him as he observed, “It’s like it recognises them.”