

A Novel by the Award-Winning Author of
Brown Girl in the Ring and The New Moon's Arms

NALO HOPKINSON

SISTER MANTA



NALO HOPKINSON
SISTER MINE
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For David, who brings me joy



*“Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either.”*

SCORE!” I SAID to the scruffy grey cat sitting on the building’s loading dock. “She’d never even think to look for me here!”

The cat replied with a near-silent mew, and set about cleaning its face. One ear was ragged from a long-healed injury.

I double-checked the scrap of paper I’d torn out of the Classifieds section of the *Toronto Star*. Yup, this was the place that was looking for tenants. It didn’t look like much, sitting there on a downtown corner. It was a blocky, crumbling cube of a warehouse. Looked like it had a basement below, two storeys above. It was wedged between upscale high-rise condos and low-rise co-op town houses.

There were buildings in this city that went to hundreds of floors. Your ears’d pop from the altitude change just going up in the elevator. But those sparkly new structures, they needed the reflected gleam of sunlight off their chromed and mirrored surfaces in order to shine. This building, it sucked in light and the glow it gave back couldn’t be seen in daylight or in Toronto’s overlit night; not by pure claypicken eyes, that is. I could see it, though. One of the few perks of being a crippled deity half-breed; although I had no mojo of my own, I could sometimes get a glimpse of the glow-on that some things and people had. Not as strongly as Abby could. Still, if I squinted exactly the right way, for just a split second, I’d see a flash bounce off Shiny people and things. Like the green flash on the horizon just as the sun sinks into Lake Ontario. That warehouse had some Shine to it. Inanimate objects can get that way when they’ve rubbed up against the ineffable for a long time. The building’s faint burr of Shininess was my first clue that I might like living there.

The exterior paint job was something else, in a wacky way that I liked. Probably years before someone had slopped teal green paint onto the raw brick. They’d used a dark, muddy purple for the exterior window rims and sills and the edging around the roof. Then, for good measure, they’d lined the inner surfaces of the windows’ rims with dark yellow, kind of a mango colour. Made the windows look like the insides of baby birds’ beaks when they gaped them wide and demanded food from the exhausted parents.

When he’d realized he was slipping, our dad had signed our childhood home over to me and my sister. Since Abby and I had to live in the world, it was best if we had claypicken legal documents to prove that the place was ours. But I’d had it with living under Abby’s wing. She could have my share in the house. I was going to go it alone from now on. My pulse leapt at the thought.

“I think a tree talked to me today,” I told Abby, hating myself for doing this again, for coveting mojo so badly that I kept trying to talk myself into believing I had it. I’d never been able to read trees before, so why would I suddenly now have developed a knack for it? I waited, toying with the food on my plate, sitting at Abby’s expensive mahogany table, eating off her handmade plates from some

artists' studio over in the Distillery District, staring at the graceful young oak tree in Abby's front yard through the leaded panes of Abby's antique stained glass living room window. In my own house, cotched like a boarder.

Teal with purple edging and yellow accents; Abby would hate the place. She would especially hate that it was crass enough to have a name. Hand-painted in toppling white letters over the entrance were the words "CHEERFUL REST." Abby's lips would curl at the inept lettering, the building that looked like a squat for homeless people. Me, I thought it was neat. Plus it would intimidate her. Even low and funny-looking as it was, even in broad daylight, Cheerful Rest managed to loom. Abby would be able to see that, probably more clearly than I could.

The old cat had finished its ablutions. It sphinx-sat on the loading dock in the springtime sun, watching me through half-closed eyes. I could hear it purring though I was a good few feet away. My body swayed a little to the rhythm of the vibrations.

Abby didn't reply right away. I looked across the table at her. She was staring out the window, slow and carefully chewing. I'd made us an excellent dinner: stewed guinea hen and manioc with bata dumplings, and an arugula salad with crumbled blue cheese. No wonder Burger Delite wouldn't let me do anything but bus tables and wash dishes; I was too good for them.

The building's Shine wasn't a flash, but kind of an aura. But it felt like mojo, or tasted like it, something. How had it come by that Shine? Would it somehow spell trouble for me if I moved there? I had a bad track record of not getting along well with the Shiny, the Family on my dad's side, my haint. Abby.

"Abby, I'd swear it really did talk. A crab apple tree in that park at Queen and Sherbourne. I think it asked me where Dad was. Said it hadn't seen him in a long time."

Abby whipped her head around from the window to glare at me. "Stop it. Just stop it. Why are you always saying things like this? You're embarrassing yourself. And me."

"But—" Why did I say things like that? Because I couldn't help myself. Because I craved more than anything else to have a little mojo of my own.

"Makeda, I don't care whether it's desperate wishful thinking or a stupid little trick you play to impress, but it's really cruel of you to play it with Dad lying helpless in palliative care."

Oh, gods, why couldn't I ever stop doing this? Abby was right. I was only shaming myself.

A lean black guy came round the corner. He was wearing faded black jeans rubbed thin at the knees and a black Revolting Cocks T-shirt so worn that it was almost grey. The left shoulder seam had split open. He had a big, wild 'fro. His left foot was shod in an orange high-topped canvas sneaker, his right foot in a purple one. He smiled at me before unlocking and yanking open the heavy back door that led inside the building, letting out a grungy roar of miked rock drumming. Sounded live, too, like a practice. The guy made an apologetic shrug. He spied the piece of torn classifieds in my hand. He smiled. Over the racket, he shouted, "It's only this noisy on the weekend!"

If I moved in here, there would be music, and musicians. Plus there was a brother, apparently living here, who liked punk. So it wouldn't be like I was trying to single-handedly desegregate the place, either. Nice. I smiled back at him and relaxed a bit. Music was the most fun part of living with

Abby.

He said, "Hey, Yoplait!"

Yoplait?

The cat twitched one ear in his direction.

The guy jerked his chin towards the open door. "Come on!"

The cat looked over its shoulder at him. Stood. Went over to him. The door was hydraulic, and took a few seconds to shut behind the guy and his cat; long enough for me to hear the drumming clang to halt, someone saying something muffled into the mike, a laugh, the drumming starting up again. Looked like the guy had gone up a short flight of stairs. I'd gotten a brief whiff of stale beer from the open door. There were empty two-fours stacked outside. Some kind of club space in the building?

The door closed completely, and I was left with only the endless Toronto traffic sounds.

Longing tapped me on the shoulder and enclosed me in its arms. I wanted to live here, be fully independent of Abby and Uncle, start learning how to exist as the mortal I was. I bet Cheerful Rest was some kind of claypicken artists' space, where people used scavenged milk crates and bricks and wooden flats to customize their units. There'd be flyers stapled to the walls, advertising bands and readings and gallery openings and dance performances. Would they even let me into a place like that? I wasn't really an artist. I was just an artist's hanger-on who liked to tinker. I'd always wanted to live in a warehouse. A real warehouse, with high ceilings and exposed brick and pipes. And best of all, Abby wouldn't know where I was if I didn't tell her. We'd quarrelled last night, and again this morning. I'd told her I was moving when I stormed out a few hours ago, but I always said that when we fought. Today, though, I meant it. Standing outside Cheerful Rest that warm spring afternoon, sensing its warm-blooded Shine and waiting for the guy who ran it to show up, I meant it. I was finally going to break free of the hold my sister Abby had on me. She could get kinda clingy. We'd always lived together. She lost her shit if I didn't attend a performance of hers. And to tell the truth, I missed her if I didn't see her for a few days. But she really got on my freaking nerves all the time! Today, I was cutting the tie that bound us, locked together like the conjoined twins we used to be. I'd get my own place, tell Abby in a few months where I was living, and by then, she and I would have gotten used to being a little less intertwined in each other's affairs. I could begin to figure out how to live my own life.

It was partly my own fault. Abby'd been so dependent on me in the first years of our life, and I'd gotten used to it. They'd separated us physically, but emotionally, Abs and I couldn't seem to let each other go.

"Abs, can't you even give me the benefit of the doubt? Why in hell can't you accept that maybe you're not the only special one?"

Abby slid her cane off the back of her chair and pulled herself to her feet. "Because you don't hear trees talk. You never did. You started pretending you could after you overheard Cousin Flash calling you that silly name."

"The donkey. Yeah. But that's not when I started doing it."

"When you started to make believe you could do it."

"I started it after you called me the same name to my face." Too late, I realized I'd just practically admitted I was talking shit about speaking to trees. My cheeks flaring with embarrassment, I pressed on, "The sister I shared all my secrets with. The sister I looked after until she could do it herself."

She swallowed. Took a breath. "Children can be cruel. They say mean things to each other, play nasty tricks. How about that time you shortened one of my crutches?"

“That’s not fair!”

“Just a half inch. And me so used to being uncomfortable in my skin that I didn’t notice it for while. My shoulder ached that whole day and the next, and I couldn’t figure out why.”

“It was just a prank. A stupid kid prank.”

“And me calling you ‘donkey’ was just a stupid kid thing. Get over it, Makeda.”

I folded my arms, looked out the window. “That tree could have been talking to me,” I muttered. It sounded about five years old. I detested myself for it. I hated my compulsion to go on about this stuff. The wind in that tree, it had sounded almost like words in a different language. I just figured maybe that’s what Dad heard when plants talked to him. Maybe it was just like a different language, and I could learn it. Or maybe I was just being an ass. I knew how to do that.

A grey-beige hatchback, new, pulled into the building’s three-car gravel parking lot. I moved out of the way. The door whispered open. The man who rolled out of the car was a big guy, white-looking with straight, light brown hair that stopped just short of his jawline. He was wearing a two-piece suit the same colour as his hair, white shirt underneath. Brown dress shoes, their leather creased across the toe box. He was sweating even though it was a cool spring day. He gave me a distracted glance. “Yo Mak... Makky...?”

“Makeda,” I said, moving forward and extending my hand to shake his. “And you must be Milo.” He was about as Shiny as day-old bread. So he wasn’t the source of the building’s glow.

“Yeah.” His hand was cool and meaty. “Come inside,” he said.

As I turned to follow him into the building, I fretted. Didn’t have any references to give him except Abby, and I didn’t want to bring her into this. I’d been fired from or left the last four jobs I’d had. They hadn’t felt real to me at the time. Even Burger Delite was just something I did to prove to myself that I could, until today. Abby made money from music-related gigs here and there, I knew that. I’d never been too clear on the specific details of everything she did. Me, Dad, and Abby, we’d never been wealthy, but if things were getting too lean, Uncle would glean some valuables from the dead for us. Never anything that next of kin might be needing. Lots of people died in ways that made the cash in their pockets or purses inaccessible to claypickens. Today, though, my ignorance could bite me in the ass. When Milo did his credit check on me, it’d reveal a tendency towards bouncing cheques—not all the time, just a lot of the time—low earnings, and a spotty work history. It’d never been a problem before. I did some quick math in my head. Paying my own way was going to be tight. The rent on a run-down place like this would be low, wouldn’t it? Fact was, I hadn’t really thought my grand storm would come out through.

Milo walked me around to the front of the building and unlocked that door. From here, the drumming was muffled. He frowned. “You won’t have that noise all the time,” he said. “If they have a weeknight show, they stop by eleven p.m.”

Weeknights, too, huh? That could get a little rigorous. “That’s fine,” I lied. “I’m sure it’ll be okay.” Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

“They practise during the days a lot, but most people are out at work then.”

“I usually work the evening shift. But I’m used to sleeping through the sounds of music practice.”

“Yeah? You know some folks in the biz, then?”

“A few.”

Milo led me into a tiny, stuffy office on the main floor. One scuffed desk, dark brown Formica with a fake wood grain. No chairs; Milo perched on the edge of the desk while I bent over it to fill out the application form with the chewed ballpoint pen he lent me. “It’s a good place,” he said absently.

gotta get another super, but that won't take long."

"A super what?" I was only half listening. *Three* references?

He laughed. "Superintendent. I'm not here every day, so if you need anything, just ask Brian or one of the other tenants. They'll help you. Only not the chick in 213. She's a little crazy. Nothing to worry about! She gets nervous around strangers, is all. If she stays on her medication, she's just fine. I'm giving her a break on her rent till she's back on her feet. In any case, Welfare sends her rent cheques right to me, so no worries there. Anybody else can give you a hand if you need anything, and you have my number."

Yeah, sure he was doing it out of the goodness of his heart. Sweet deal for him, guaranteed rent.

Whatever. He was talking as though I already had the place. That was a good sign. Nervously, I handed him the completed application form. He glanced at the badly photocopied sheet of paper. "No references?"

I guessed I could use Aunt Suze as a reference. I took the form back from him and scribbled down her name and contact information. Thought about it some more, then added the name and phone number of my boss at Burger Delite, even though I'd already written that in the employment section. I couldn't put my uncle's name down; Death didn't exactly have a physical home address or phone number. Or a reliably corporeal body, for that matter.

Maybe Milo would be satisfied with two references. I slid the form back across the table to him. He started reading it again. He said, "You have any pets? No pets allowed in here."

So did he not know about the grey cat I'd just seen? "No pets."

"You don't throw loud parties, do you? Or have loud hobbies, like woodworking? Had a guy in here once with a table saw. Disturbed the other tenants."

I laughed. "No, nothing like that." He was worried about one person having a party, but he had a rock band practising on the main floor? "I make little windup toys. You know, from discarded nuts and bolts. Just something I do to pass the time. Give them to people as gifts. It's not noisy. Mostly use glue and a screwdriver."

"No soldering? Can't do anything in here that's a fire hazard. You won't even have a stove in your unit."

"What? How do people cook, then?"

He frowned irritably, as though I'd asked him something bothersome and insignificant. "I think there's a microwave in that vacant unit. And there's a kitchen down the hall, with a shared fridge and a stove. It can get a little skanky in there, but it's okay."

I bit my lower lip. Store my meds in a communal fridge, where anyone could walk in and help themselves to them? I didn't think so.

"And by the way," said Milo, "the unit doesn't have bathroom facilities, either. You'd have to use the shared shower and toilet down the hall." He saw my face. "Most of the units don't have bathrooms. Only the supers' units do. This is warehouse living, remember? It's pretty bare-bones. But you can fix your unit up any way you like. Paint it, whatever. Brian, he built an honest-to-God loft in his. It's like he has a two-storey apartment. Has these heavy stage curtains running along rods he put in the ceiling. Uses them as movable room dividers. It's the darnedest thing. Girl downstairs is a dancer. She built a sprung wood floor in hers, so she can practise."

"Okay," I said doubtfully. This was the experience I'd wanted, but now it wasn't sounding so hot.

In my pocket, my cell phone buzzed. Probably Abby, calling for the umpteenth time today. I ignored it. Let her fret. "And how much is the rent?" I asked Milo.

He named a figure. I swallowed. It was decidedly more than I'd been contributing to the joint

household fund that Abs and I split between us. "That's fine," I said, lying through my teeth. I'd have to see about picking up another shift at the restaurant. And about trying to subsist on the free food I got there when I was working. In a pinch, there was always Uncle.

Milo was still peering at the sheet. "What do you do at Burger Delite?"

"Dishwasher." I looked down at my feet. I'd been so proud about holding down a claypicken job, but today, in the face of how inadequate my salary was going to be for just the basics, it felt as though I were confessing to some sort of character failing. I made myself meet Milo's eyes. "But they say they're going to move me up to waiting tables soon. I'll get tips then." Gods, that was even worse. Like I was begging him for shelter.

He pursed his lips, studied the sheet once more. "You've been living at your last place of residence since you were... what? Sixteen?"

"Yes, but—" All my twenty-four years on this Earth, actually, but I'd fudged that part of the form.

"And the owner has the same surname as you? Who is that, your mother? You still living home?"

"No! Not exactly. Abby's my sister. We're co-owners."

He raised an eloquent eyebrow. "So why are you leaving your own home? If you don't mind me asking."

"She and I, well, we aren't getting along. I'd rather she didn't know where I was living." Damn. I hadn't wanted to get into this. I'd hoped he'd think that I'd been renting my previous place and just happened to have the same surname as the owner. Guess that was dumb of me.

"But it's your house, too? I don't get that. You walking away from your own property?"

"She can have it." His prying was starting to make me a little cranky. Was this how it would be living whole-hog in the claypicken world?

"You don't owe her money or anything, do you? I don't want to take on an unreliable tenant."

I laughed, trying hard to sound like someone who would never, ever "forget" for two months in a row to pay into a household fund. "God, no. That's not why I'm leaving. She's just always up in my business. Nosy."

He frowned. "Can't have any drugs in here, you know."

Oh, no, he did not just say that. I growled, "I'm black, so I must be a dealer? That it?"

He laughed an easy, non-defensive laugh. It threw me. "Hell, no. I was one at your age, though. And when my first wife started to get too curious, I told her to stop being so nosy. She didn't like that one bit, I can tell you. We were divorced within a year. So the word 'nosy' kinda sets me off sometimes."

Nonplussed, I said, "Don't worry. Dope's not my thing. Bottle of Guinness with dinner is more my speed. And early to bed when I can. Those shifts at the restaurant are brutal."

He perked up even more. "You drink Guinness? That's the good stuff. Not like the dishwasher and the rest of the guys in here swill. You drink it cold?"

I shook my head. "No. You hide the flavour that way."

"Good girl."

The word "girl" made me feel bristly all over again, but I wanted this place. If he wanted to make patronizing small talk, I could play along a little. Milo looked me over, considering. "Mak... Makeda. Listen. Ordinarily, I wouldn't rent a place to someone..." He put the paper down on the table, pushing it away from himself. "I mean, no references, minimum-wage job. I notice you didn't put down any previous employment, either."

"I've had other jobs! I just—"

“Here’s the deal.” He sighed, set his shoulders as though he’d just come to a decision. “You see like a nice girl. I’d like to make you an offer.”

Now it was my turn to raise an eyebrow. “You would, would you?”

He smiled. “Oh no, my dear. Nothing like that. Nothing at all like that. I need a new assistant superintendent to help Brian out, fill in when he’s not around. Sounds like you’re pretty handy? Know one end of a hammer from the other? It’s easy work, doesn’t need more than an hour or two a week, sometimes not even that.”

“So, how would this arrangement go?” This could work out after all. If Milo let me have the unit to return for replacing the occasional washer, I could maybe drop down to one shift at Burger Deli instead of two, still be making enough to get by. Not take handouts from Abby and Uncle for ever little thing. Make a real go at having a claypicken life, since I was never going to have the other kind.

“I’d reduce your rent by a couple hundred,” Milo said.

My happy bubble fantasy popped, leaving a sting like liquid soap. “Two hundred? That’s it?” That wasn’t even a quarter of the rent he was asking for the unit. Which, it suddenly occurred to me, Milo hadn’t shown me yet.

Milo nodded. “One-fifty, two hundred, something like that. You’d have your own bathroom.”

Did the fool think I hadn’t noticed how the “couple hundred” reduction in the rent was turning into one-fifty? “Can I see the unit?” I asked coldly. Might as well, since I was there. But no way was I falling for this guy’s penny-pinching con job. There had to be plenty of apartments in this city, if you weren’t too fussy.

He led me up the flight of stairs to the second floor. Iron railings, painted in peeling black enamel. The stairs were steel-reinforced slabs of concrete, worn down by years of foot traffic, each step canted at a slightly different angle from its neighbours. I liked that. I liked things that had been solidly made and that wore the evidence of hard use, of survival.

The second-floor hallway was cool and dark. The walls were the same colour as the outside of the building. There was a musty, old-building smell. Only to be expected. Not like I was going to be living in the hall, anyway, right? There were doors lining the hallway on one side, an open doorway halfway down on the other side, leading to what looked like some kind of common room. There was a battered couch in there, an old Formica table, a couple of rickety chairs. And sure enough, posters tacked to the walls: some band playing at the Vault last week, old cartoon film fest at the library this weekend. The room was painted a deep pinkish red. The paint on one wall wasn’t just flaking, it was bubbling. Moisture beneath it. Milo noticed me looking at it. “Had a bit of a leak in there last week. Spring rains, you know? I’m having it fixed.”

I’d heard about his kind. He was just your average slum landlord. I kissed my teeth in disdain. Milo blinked at the sound, but clearly didn’t know what it meant. Any one of my relatives would have, on either side of the Family. Hell, any black person pretty much the world over would have known it.

Milo unlocked one of the units on the other side of the hallway. “Just had it painted,” he said proudly. “This is where the previous assistant superintendent lived.”

He pushed the door open and went in ahead of me. “Oh,” he said, “I guess Brian hasn’t gotten around to painting it yet. Looks kinda cool though, right? Artsy.”

A faint scent wafted out of the room. Spices? Was that nutmeg? And some kind of fruit? My mouth watered. I stepped inside. I asked, “Did the previous tenant like to burn incense? I can smell—”

“No incense burning allowed in the units. No burning of anything.” He clearly wasn’t the least bit interested in what the previous tenant used to do in here.

The space was big. The walls were a creamy white, reaching up and up to the high ceiling.

previous tenant had painted curling vines climbing up the corners. Probably the same someone who had painted the Styrofoam ceiling tiles in a sky-scape of blue and massing white clouds. “The colour,” I said to Milo, delighted. I pointed at the ceiling. “It’s haint blue.”

He squinted up at the ceiling. “Is it? I scored a lot of tins of it in a closeout sale a while ago. Don’t think Brian’s used it all up yet.”

I smiled. “No, it’s okay. I kinda like it.” More than that; I felt oddly at home. The blue of the ceiling was the same colour as the porch ceiling of our—of Abby’s house. Dad had done that for many years ago. Ghosts can’t cross water without help. Plus they’re stupid. Get the right shade of blue, paint your floor or ceiling with it—doesn’t matter which, ’cause ghosts don’t have a right way up—and they’ll mistake it for the glint of light on water and be unable to pass. Paint your porch ceiling the same colour, and your door and your window frames, and you have a haint-proof house.

There was more. The nubbly concrete floor had been coated with a semi-gloss St. Julian mango yellow, layered on so thick it was like enamel. The building had looked a bit creepy from the outside but looks could be deceiving. Now that I’d seen this part of its insides, I loved the place. “It’s cute,” I said, trying for nonchalance. The window in the opposite wall was open a crack, letting in birdsong and a ribbon of cool, sweet air that leavened the unit’s damp, musty smell. The street noises were a distant background rumble. With the vines, it was like a picnic in the park in here. My bed would fit nice and right over by the window, give me a bit of a view of the outside. Abby’d just bought a new microwave. I could take the old one off her hands when I went to pick up my chest of drawers. Hooks on the wall for any clothes that needed hanging, my workbench and chair. Maybe a card table and a couple more chairs once I could afford them. For when guests came over. I could have guests! That was the kind of thing that claypickens did, wasn’t it? But the rent, ouch. Boldly, I asked, “You said three hundred on the rent?”

He frowned. “Two hundred.”

Gotcha. I’d tricked him back up to the full discount he’d promised at first and then tried to waltz on. It was still more than I could afford, but I was enjoying playing with the bastard now. Lead him on, make him think I was going to take the place, then shake my head and walk out of there. “Two hundred. Could I get that in writing?”

“Sure. And there’s a bar fridge around here somewhere you could have. I’d get Brian to put it here for you.”

That’d solve the problem of where to keep my meds, at least. If I were going to take the place. Which I wasn’t.

“So. You like it? The bar fridge could go over there.” He pointed to a wall with an electrical socket.

“I don’t know about this...”

The hint of fruits stewed in honey and nutmeg intensified. Cinnamon, too? And maybe a bit of orange zest? It was like the scent was seeping from the walls. The Shiny building was flirting with me! Sometimes Shiny objects developed self-awareness, and something a bit like personalities. I smiled regretfully, shook my head. Milo looked at his watch. “Miss, I have to go. No rest for the wicked, and all that. Would you like the place or not? You’re not going to find a deal this good anywhere else.”

Couldn’t I? I opened my mouth to tell him no.

“Like hell you’re moving out. You know you’re going to stay right here, where the living is easy.”

Abby thought she knew me so well. I said, “I’ll take it.”



*“Nay, take a seat with us,
Honor and eat with us,”
They answered grinning;
“Our feast is but beginning.”*

It felt weird to hand over a cheque for first and last months' rent. That was a lot of money for me. I hoped Milo wouldn't try to cash it today; my bank account was a few hundred short of the full amount. I'd have to figure something out about the balance.

It felt weirder to be heading back into the bright sunshine after the redolent darkness of Cheerful Rest. I hesitated in the doorway, midway between darkness and light, blinking like Orpheus exiting the land of the dead. My skin prickled. I looked back. No one behind me.

Then the second-floor fire door banged open and the black guy I'd seen before came clattering down the stairs with Yoplait the cat beside him. I waved. “Hey.”

He had the most wonderful grin. The guy, not the cat. “Hey. Milo says you're my new assistant. Rockin'.”

Yoplait slid past me, out into the world. I stepped back inside. The door sighed shut. “Looks like a neat place. You're Brian?”

He stuck his hand out. “Call me Brie. It's my stage name.”

I giggled as I shook his hand. “You're Brie, and your cat's called Yoplait?”

He did a half-smile, shrugged one shoulder. “Yeah. It's a thing.”

“A dairy thing,” I deadpanned.

“Uh-huh.”

“Funny. My sis—I mean, I know someone with a cat named Butter.” I didn't have to mention Abby just yet, did I? Keep her out of my life a little bit longer.

Brie asked, “Want a beer? Me and the band are taking a break for a few minutes.”

I hesitated. I didn't know Brie well enough to take alcohol from him. How would a claypickin' woman handle this? But shit, I could handle myself. He tried anything, I'd just sic my uncle on him. He nodded. “Sure.”

I followed him back up the stairs to the second floor. Over his shoulder, he said, “Milo give you the gears about no pets, no cooking in your unit, blah, blah, blah?”

“Yeah. And no table saws.”

Brie snickered. “He says that stuff so that if anything goes down, he can tell the cops he told you but you broke the rules. I got an extra hot plate if you want one.”

“Cool. Thanks. Your cat gonna be okay out on the street like that?”

“Yup. Where I found him. Swear I've seen that mangy old brute hitchhiking. So, whaddyou do?”

“Nothing. I'm not like my... oh, right. You mean for money, don't you?”

He nodded, looking a little confused.

“I work in a greasy spoon.”

He glanced back at me. “And for kicks?”

He opened the fire door on the second-floor landing. I followed him through it. “Today? Moving out of my sister's place for the first time ever.” My heart jumped. I was letting Abby have the place all to herself. I was really moving out. So what if I'd just outed myself as having a sister?

He chuckled a little. “Rockin'. Gotta break those chains sometime, right?”

“Oh, *hell* yeah.”

His voice had the rich timbre of a singer's. I figured him for a tenor.

Now that the band wasn't drowning out the other sounds in the building, I could hear evidence the other people who lived here: TV show theme music from behind one closed door, a rhythm creaking of bedsprings from another. Brie grinned. "Hallam's got himself a new boyfriend. They've been going at it since Thursday evening, I swear."

All those lives, separated from each other by nothing but the walls between the units. And was that hot dogs someone was boiling? I wrinkled my nose up. Didn't living in each other's laps like that make them crazy sometimes? Last thing I wanted was to move from one claustrophobic situation to another.

A doorway a little farther down the dark hallway opened a crack. I squinted. I could just make out a pair of eyes, peeping over the jamb.

"Oh, hey, Fleet," said Brie. "Come meet the new super."

Four fingers crept over the doorjamb, but the person still didn't leave their unit. A soft, sexless voice said to Brie, "But you're the super."

"I know that, babe. Makeda's going to be my backup."

"Like Gus is?"

Brie gave a little sigh. "Gus quit the band, Fleet. Remember he moved to Berlin? And Makeda's not in the band." At his words, my heart thumped, dejectedly, once. "She's going to be my assistant superintendent, though. Like Gus was. Got it?"

After a couple of seconds, Fleet replied, "Gus... moved."

"Exactly. So now we have Makeda. She's going to be your neighbour! Come out and meet her, okay?" He strode over to Fleet's doorway and reached a hand out. "Come on, hon. She's really nice. And she's pretty." He glanced at me, ducked his head away shyly. Sweet. I checked out the number on the partially open door. Two-thirteen. Where the crazy girl lived.

Fleet opened the door a little more and shuffled out into the hallway.

Wow. Why in the world had Milo called her a girl? She had to be in her fifties. She was pale and shrunken. Her head looked too big for her body. Her hair was a little thin on her head, some of it brown, some of it white. It had probably been curly when she looked after it. Right now, though, it frizzed out around her head like thistle fuzz. Her face was broad, her nose narrow. Her cheekbones stood out like razor blades. Her eyes were rimmed with pink. She was wearing low-slung jeans so big for her that she kept having to hitch them back up. Her shirt was a long-sleeved flannel pyjama top with mushrooms and brightly coloured toadstools on it. It was half-tucked into the waistband of her jeans. She peered at me, her eyes narrowed.

I stuck my hand out. "Hey there, Miz... Fleet, is it? Pleased to meet you."

She looked at my hand. There was no expression on her face; none. She put her hands behind her back, leaving mine hanging. Flushing, I lowered my own hand to my side. My smile, unresponded to, had frozen in place.

"I'm just Fleet," she told me. Her voice was so quiet I had to strain to hear it.

A head stuck out of another door farther along the corridor, right across from my new place. She had pink white-girl braids going every which way. A little impatiently, she beckoned Brie. "Dude, you're coming, or what?" she called. She was signing as she spoke. Difficult to see with her hands moving that quickly, but it looked as though every fingernail was painted a different colour, all of them bright. "There's almost no beer left," she said. "Bring your friend."

"Be right there," Brie replied, also signing as he spoke aloud. Hot damn. I was already impressed and I hadn't even heard the band yet, except for some of the racket from their practice session. Brie turned back to Fleet. "We gotta go. Catch you later, okay?"

Fleet stared at Brie. Swallowed. "Are you playing tonight?" she whispered.

"Yeah, hon. Every Saturday night, you know that."

She nodded. "Can I play with you guys this time?"

"Not tonight. But come and see us, okay?" He grabbed my hand and drew me over in the direction of the girl with the braids. He said, sotto voce, "She calls herself Fleet 'cause she used to be a flute player, back in the day. BC, you know?"

"British Columbia?"

He looked sad. "No, Before Crack." His hand was warm, almost hot, and dry. It covered my whole hand so entirely that one of his fingers was curling almost the whole way around my wrist. I looked over my shoulder, but Fleet had already closed her door.

The girl who'd called us over nodded at me. It made her braids bob. "Maturity," she said, with fingerspelling it. She giggled. For a split second I thought she was teasing me for being immature. Or Fleet for being old. Then I understood that it was her name. What was it with the single-barrelled names in here?

I nodded back. "Makeda."

She stepped out to hold the door open for us. "There's some pizza left," she told us, and I remembered that I hadn't eaten breakfast this morning. Maturity was plump and pink and beaming. She wore a crisp white gauze tutu over a pink-and-white crinoline, over striped pink-and-black tights tucked into black Victorian-style heeled boots. She was popping out of the tops of the two old nylon slippers she was wearing, one black and one burgundy. She'd slit them both up the sides, presumably so she could get the froth of tutu and crinoline on under them. She looked like the topper on an angel food cake.

Brie held the door open so that Maturity and I could go in first. Gentlemanly and well-spoken; nice combo. I had to brush close to him in order to get through. He smelled of lemons and coffee.

As I walked in, the first impression I got was of a black yawning mouth of space. It dwarfed the four people sitting on the floor in front of the stage, eating pizza out of the box and sharing a two-for-one of Blue. A stage took up about half of the black-painted room. The rest was bare, black floor. There was room enough for an audience to stand, maybe do a little dancing. There was a stack of iron folding chairs leaning against the stage. Brie opened his arms to indicate the whole space. "This is where we practise," he said. "And these guys are"—he silently counted them off—"most of the band." The three guys and the chick stopped scarfing down pizza long enough to nod in my direction. Maturity curtseyed.

The next few minutes were a flurry of cold pizza, warm beer, and meeting the members of So Chain that were present. Maturity, go figure, did sign language interpreting. The other woman, Rain, was dark brown with long, straight black hair. She wore faded jeans, a plain black T-shirt, a rainbow-coloured metal bracelet on each wrist. She played drums. Jeff, a pudgy, light-skinned brother with freckles and cornrowed red hair, guitar. Solaris looked to be about fifteen, but was probably older. White. Thin to the point of transparency, but with a strong handshake. Bristle of blond hair. Piercing everywhere, seemed to be wearing a brace on one leg, under the jeans. Mid-range, androgynous voice. I first thought that Solaris was a guy. Then a girl. Maybe. Then I gave up trying to figure out which. It would become obvious at some point, or not. Andy, an older guy with black earplugs and a sleeve of tats on both arms, played button box. Brie, of all things, tambourine. Brie sang lead, the rest of the band did backup vocals (Maturity signed as she sang), though they all teasingly accused Andy of only mouthing the words. Hallam (he of the thumping bed) and Cleveland would show up later. They were dancers. As people introduced themselves, I wolfed down a slice of cold pepperoni pizza and knocked back

beer that Brie brought me. Turned out that most of them lived in this building. Like family. Yikes. Warily, I asked, “You guys eat together like this for every meal?”

There was an astonished silence, then they all fell out laughing. “As if!” said Jeff.

Solaris gave Maturity a gentle slap on the shoulder. “If I had to listen to this one complain about work every time I sat down to eat, I’d probably go postal.”

Raini said, “Got lives. Know how to use them.”

Was she making fun of me? I studied her face. Oh, of course not. She didn’t know me at all. I grinned like a fool, contemplating beginning a life in which my pariah status didn’t figure in the least.

“And you... live in here?” I asked Brie, looking around the bare, open space for where he might have a bed, someplace to stash his clothes, stuff like that.

He laughed. “No, but sometimes it feels like it.”

Jeff shook his head. “Yeah. Slave driver there only makes us practise most weekends. But I swear he’s in here 24/7, trying out new songs—”

“—testing the lights—” Brie explained.

Jeff continued, “—wanking, God knows what else.”

Raini and Solaris grinned. Maturity and Andy had their heads together over the button box. I heard Maturity say, “So, you come in on the third note?”

Brie gave a big, theatrical sigh. “These guys, nothing but abuse I get from them. But yeah, I have two units side by side, made them into one. My room’s over there.” He gestured vaguely at the light-swallowing corner of the space. “I’m afraid you’re going to find it loud in here on Saturday night, especially with you living across from me and all. And you get to help me clean up the mess on Sunday mornings. Plus side is, I give you free beer!” He beamed at me. Nice smile he had. It hadn’t slowly dawned on me that it was his band. He wasn’t just a member of it. I suspected I was going to like living here.

“Hey, wanna see the rest of my kingly domain?”

I hesitated. Maturity looked up from her confab with Andy. “It’s all right,” she said. “Brie’s cool.”

“Jesus, of course I’m cool! Why would you even talk like that?”

“Oh, get the knot out of your panties.” She smiled to take the sting out of it. “Girls gotta watch out for each other, jeez. Try thanking me for letting Makeda know that you’re not a skeez.” She turned to me. “So he’s okay, but watch out for that bloody ankle-biter of a cat. It’ll try to slash you if you get too close to it, or to Brie.”

Brie smiled ruefully. “Yeah, she would know. I’m still apologizing to her for that.”

She waved the concern away. “Not a big deal.”

I said, “I would like the grand tour.”

“Sweet.” Brie took me over to a door hidden in the shadows. He pulled a key fob out of his jeans pocket and used one of the many keys on it to unlock the door.

“Am I going to get a set of keys like that?”

“Sure, I’ll cut you a set.”

Me, in charge of a building. I could just imagine the astonishment on Abby’s face when I told her.

The door opened. Brie went in ahead of me. From just inside the doorway, he said, “Come on in. And leave the door open, okay?” Smart of him. No matter what Maturity had said, I still didn’t know this guy.

I stepped through the threshold into the unit. I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the dimness of the room. Naked lightbulb, high up in the ceiling. Tiny LED bulbs in the sconce lights lining the walls and the entranceway. The sconces themselves were black mesh in the shape of small pouched triangles.

"Those seem kinda Martha Stewart for you," I said, pointing at one of them.

"So I have a gentle side. I made those things out of screen door mesh, though, all manly-like." He made fake bodybuilder muscles.

His room was a big, open space, like mine. Old couch against one wall, with some kind of fancy embroidered cloth thrown over it. Slab of a wooden table in the middle of the room. It was oval, long enough for two people to lie on it head to head. Mismatched chairs all around it; everything from pilfered park bench to woven plastic lawn chairs. Through the legs of the chairs I could see that the table legs were scrolled iron. The loft that Milo had described to me was built into the far side of the unit, complete with wooden stairs slanting up towards it. Underneath the loft was a computer, sitting on a warped piece of particleboard balanced on two sawhorses. The upper floor of the loft held a honest-to-God four-poster bed, complete with a translucent white canopy. "You have got to be kidding me," I said, pointing to it.

He smiled. "I like to be comfortable."

"Decadent, more like it. How come you can have two adjoining units? You make enough as a musician?"

"Hell, no. We have a lot of regulars that come to our shows and buy a lot of cheap beer, so Milo can come a deal."

"You, too, huh? What is he, some kind of philanthropist?"

Brie smirked. "Hardly. He gets the bar tab. Unofficially, that is. This place doesn't have a liquor license."

The cat stuck its head over the side of the loft and gave me a questioning yowl. Brie said, "He's Yoplait."

"How'd he get back inside?" I headed up the steps towards the cat, remembered my manners, stopped halfway up. "May I?"

"Sure, I'll wait down here." He pulled out one of the chairs and plopped himself down onto it. "Careful, though. Maturity wasn't kidding. He bites."

Yoplait didn't let me get too close. He scowled at me, leapt off the bed, and disappeared below it.

"He's pretty wild," said Brie. "I'm guessing he has lots of reasons not to trust human beings."

"That's sad." I came back down the steps, sat on the lowest one.

Brie replied, "Funny thing about that old cat."

"What?"

"He's a dead ringer for a cat I found as a boy. Maybe that's why I'm so taken with him. Look, I know it's not his winning ways. The one I found when I was a kid, I think a car must have hit it, or something. It was half-dead, lying on the side of the road. Back legs and jaw broken."

I winced.

"Which didn't stop it from trying to sink its teeth into me when I went to pick it up. It was really scared."

"What happened to it?"

"It was bleeding, and its legs were hanging all floppy." The memory was making him sound like the kid he used to be. "After the first try, I couldn't bear to touch it. Made my stomach squirmy. But I couldn't stand to leave him there, either. Street was full of people, too. When I got older, I wondered whether the poor thing might have gotten helped quicker if there hadn't been a fourteen-year-old black boy with his hair in cornrows on his knees crying beside him."

"Me, I would have called my dad. He has a way with living things."

His face set into a hard look. "I didn't have a dad to call. I had a foster home that, let's just say

wasn't working out too well."

"So what happened?"

"White lady came by who wasn't afraid of me or of an injured cat. She sat right down at the curb beside me. Called Animal Rescue and then waited with us both until they came." He smiled a little. "She was a little confused at first when she found out it wasn't my cat, but she dealt."

"Did you ever see the cat again?"

Yoplait had stuck his head over the edge of the top step and was staring at me wide-eyed with what looked like combined curiosity and alarm.

He shook his head. "The lady who'd helped us called me the next day to say that his injuries had been too extensive. He died."

"That's awful."

"That afternoon, I was walking by the place where I'd found him, and there was a torn-up cat collar lying there. No ID on it, but it showed somebody must have loved him at some point, right?"

"I guess."

"I kept that collar for a while. Wore it on my wrist, doubled. But I lost track of it in the many moves from foster home to foster home. Then Yoplait here just wandered in off the street one day. Got into the kitchen, was helping himself to our bacon when I caught him. He was nothing but fur and bones. I let him finish the bacon, and he just stayed. Finally let me get close enough to him to touch him. Nowadays I have to watch where I put my feet when I roll out of bed in the mornings. Yoplait has a way of leaving four or five still-bleeding mouse torsos right where I'll step."

I grimaced. "Gross."

"I know. Scared me shitless the first time it happened. Maybe it's his way of paying rent, I dunno. He arranges them neatly in a row for me. Just their front halves. Their heads and their little front legs. I guess the back halves are meatier. I think he eats those. At least, I've never found any hairy mouse butts hanging around."

"My dad used to bring live mice into the house. I mean, they would come looking for him." I realized my slip-up when I saw Brie's startled face. I tried to think up a reasonable explanation.

"Brie!" yelled a voice from outside. "We're starting up again!"

Brie called out, "Okay, just a second!" He stood up.

Whew. Saved by the bellow. I was going to have to keep a close watch on what I said.

Brie said, "Right; here's what you need to know about this building." He ticked off on his fingers. "If it's raining on the outside, it'll be raining on the inside, so get yourself a bunch of tarps and use them."

"Oh, shit. Now I find out."

"Don't leave your soap and shampoo in the bathroom, unless you really want to share. Ditto with your food in the kitchen."

"Got my own bathroom in my unit."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. Anyway, garbage and recyclables go out onto the curb every other Thursday morning before seven a.m. Organic waste goes out every Wednesday morning. The big bins for all the stuff are downstairs. Wheeling them out to the curb every week is my job and yours. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Now, you wanna watch us practise?"

Why not? I wasn't working that night. "Okay."

"Great. If you're gonna stay for the show, you can leave your jacket and purse in here. Safer that way."

“Thanks.”

~~As we were walking out into the performance space, I checked my phone: six messages, all from Abby. I turned the phone off and stuck it back into my pocket.~~

Soul Chain started practising again, and that’s where it stopped being romantic. They were struggling. Jeff didn’t seem to know half the set tunes. Brie kept forgetting the words to the songs and jumping in either too early or too late. And when he did, his voice wasn’t great. Guess I had been spoiled by Abby’s perfect pitch. Man, this was going to be one clunker of a show. I got glimpses of raw talent from them, but with no finesse behind it.

But let’s be honest; they all sounded better than I did. Abby and I were twelve the first time I saw her perform live. After that, I didn’t want to even sing in the shower ever again. Maybe Soul Chain would get it together in the adrenaline high of playing live. So I stayed right through the practice, piqued by the twinkle in Brie’s beautiful brown eyes, and the brief seconds where they all came together and sparkled before crashing again in a tangle of notes. The walls of the building exuded the ghosts of all the smells it had absorbed over the centuries. Ashes, stale beer, pot, a brief hint of perfume; tantalizing hints of the stories that had played out inside it, and promises of the ones that were yet to come.



*Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other’s wings,
They lay down, in their curtained bed:
Like two blossoms on one stem.*

We’d had to be cut free of our mother’s womb. She’d never have been able to push the two-headed sport that was me and Abby out the usual way. Mom was still human at the time. My dad’s family hadn’t yet exiled her to the waters. After the C-section, just for a few days, she was kind of sidelined while she recovered. That gave Dad’s family the opening they needed to move in and take over. ’Cause from their perspective, things were a mess. Abby and I were fused, you see. Conjoined twins. Abby’s head, torso and left arm protruded from my chest. We shared a liver and three and three-quarters legs between us. We had two stomachs, two hearts and four lungs, and enough colon for us each to have a viable section, come to that. Abby and I could have lived as we were, conjoined. Between us, we had what we needed. But here’s the real kicker; Abby had the magic, I didn’t. Far as the Family was concerned, Abby was one of them, though cursed, as I was, with the tragic flaw of mortality. Abby and me, my mom brought us that gift.

You might say that my dad married outside the family. To hear some of them tell it, outside the species. Most of his family would barely give Mom the time of day while she was still around, despite the fact that she and her kin had done steward service to them for centuries. Or rather, because of it. Dad’s family could have stood it if she were just some dalliance of Dad’s, a bit of booty call. Even love might have been okay, if they’d kept it to a dull roar. Wouldn’t have been the first time that a celestial had knocked boots with the help. But no, Dad and the help had to go and breed.

With Mom unable to interfere for the time being, Dad’s family decided that obviously, the human doctors of the hospital where we were born had to surgically separate Abby and me. They put pressure on my dad till he agreed to it. They’re not really venal, that lot, just too big for their britches. They’ve been emissaries of the Big Boss for so long that they forget they aren’t gods themselves, just glorified overseers. But overseers with serious power. Mom’s kin didn’t say boo. They knew damned well that

they didn't have the cash to buy that much trouble.

~~The second we were separated, Abby began to die. There was something vital she needed that nobody'd been supplying. No one could tell exactly what, but we were losing her.~~

There's a guardian that attends births and deaths. He keeps his eye on the young and on the old, the former having so recently left the other world for this one, and the latter soon to depart that world again. That guardian, you might say that he's a border guard. It's his job to send the living on their way, and the dead on theirs. If it's not your time, you're not going anywhere. He was there, ready to do his job, when Abby and I were born, the semi-celestial child and her human donkey of a sister. Now it was time for him to escort her back across the barrier between the quick and the dead. He lingered over our cribs in Intensive Care for an instant. He smiled at us both, chuckled us under our tiny chin. He thought we were kinda cute. Then he kissed us each on the forehead and gently picked Abby up, cradled her in his arms. My dad, grieving, watched him. The guardian gave him a rueful look. Have you mentioned that the guardian is our uncle? Dad's brother? He took Abby, leaving my dad to weep at my bedside.

The guardian should have carried Abby to the crossroads right away. Instead, he took her to my mom's room. He'd taken a shine to Mom, Uncle had. A real shine. The kind that sets brother against brother, starts family feuds.

Mom was still doozy from the anaesthetic, but Uncle took care of that. Plain ol' unconsciousness was no challenge for the being who shuttled humans from life to death like beads on an abacus. Even in her half-sleep she'd been begging to see her babies, and now she was fully awake. This was her first time seeing Abby, but when she clapped eyes on my uncle carrying a gasping bundle whose little mouth pursed like my dad's, she figured out pretty quickly that the baby was one of hers.

The guardian's impartial. He has to be. Normally he wouldn't be put in the position of herding a family across the borders between life and death, since the rest of that lot don't die. Not permanently anyway.

Mom begged him for Abby's life.

He replied, "There isn't enough of her to survive on this side of the gate."

Mom was having none of it. She began to make promises. But what does a human have to offer a demigod? She tried to swear her lifelong obedience. Uncle shook his head. In a way, he already had that, from every mortal on this plane and the next. But he didn't leave with Abby. Mom's arms ached to hold her baby. She promised sex, the best he'd had, and he's had some good stuff. He's not just Lord of the Grave, my uncle. All that boring and dying business has given him a taste for some of the sweetest gifts of the flesh. My mom was fine, they tell me. All blackberry sweet juice. And she knew what to do with what she'd got. How d'you think she managed to catch the eye of not just one celestial but two?

Thing is, Uncle, for all his lechery, is pretty professional about his job. He shook his head, turned towards the door. But Mom spied the tear twinkling in his eye, and she knew she'd underestimated him. Sure, he liked doing the nasty plenty well, but—"Save her," Mom said wildly. "And I'll love you."

Uncle stopped, one hand on the door's crash bar, the other supporting Abby's one-and-three-quarters-legged little rump. He knows lies, Uncle does. There's a propaganda machine that makes him out to be the prince of them, but that's some bullshit. Those are the same people that won't let the kids borrow fiction from the libraries. Stories aren't lies, people. Some of them are truer than an autobiography. But Uncle does know how lies taste; refined sugar-sweet, not molasses-sweet lies, truth, with its sulphurous backbite. Mom was telling the truth; the room was treacherous with it. If he saved

her daughter, she would love him. She would love Death itself, fiercely and hotly. What parents wouldn't, under the circumstances?

Uncle looked down at the child he was holding, at her piecemeal body and oddly canted face. Her jaundiced skin going blue. She had my mom's eyes. We both do. Uncle turned. Mom reached her hand out, took his in it, her eyes brimming with hope, with love enough to fight for her child, and more.

Uncle whispered, "I can't do it. She needs organs, tissues that I can't give her. I'm a ferryman. I can't make her live."

"All you need me for that," said my dad. He walked into Mom's room. Uncle tried to snatch her hand away from Mom's, but she held on and looked Dad full in the face. A mother's love is fierce with pride, and Mom was never one for regrets.

Dad read the signs of what had gone on between them, like spoor in the room. "You want this?" he asked Mom.

"Yes."

"Brother mine," said Dad, "give me my child." His two eyes made four with Uncle's. In that moment, Dad's eyes in his bark-brown face were green, the bright green of new spring leaves. Gently, Uncle handed Abby over. Gently, Dad took her. His first time holding his baby. That was the moment that Uncle violated the border between this side and the next, for once he had taken a soul to himself he wasn't ever supposed to hand it over until he had delivered it to its destination.

If Uncle is a ferryman between the worlds, Dad is a gardener. His talents are growing, grafting and pruning. "Lewwe go then, nuh?" said Dad to his brother.

"What?" said Mom. "Where're you taking her?"

Dad replied, his voice full of loss, "Can't fix her up here. We have to go to the next side. You stay and see to Makeda." He tried on a smile. "We going to bring her sister back to you before you could say Jack Mandora."

Uncle embraced Dad. Their circled arms protected Abby. Mom had to look away from the brothers then. Their aspects were already changing, preparing to cross over to the other side. Mortals cannot look upon that celestial shift for long. It's like looking directly into the sun. Between the glory that was the brothers, dying Abby was a fleeting scrap of dull flesh. Then the three were gone. Mom clambered back into her bed, closed her eyes, and prayed for both her children. No point imploring the Big Boss. He has more important things to look after. As so many claypickens do, Mom prayed to the celestials more directly involved in the affairs of this plane; in this case, to her lover and to her brother.



I was right; when fuelled by audience energy, Soul Chain was the fucking bomb. They had a full hour that night. They'd been playing for maybe a couple hours. Brie stepped up to the mike, grabbed it and screamed into it, fast and angry:

"Suck all the juice this life will give!"

The crowd roared a refrain back at Brie. I couldn't make the words out. Maturity's signifier animated her whole body, a silent explosion of tough. She punched and clutched at the air, snarled life, kneed and kneaded it, sucking its juices. Jeff's axe kicked in again with a rubber-burning roar of riffing. The dance floor exploded for the umpteenth time into people bouncing and bodies slamming to the music. Cleveland and Hallam were doing some crazy mix of go-go dancing, tutting and turf. They were all over the stage and it was all, as far as I could tell, improvised. Brie played call-and-response with us. I finally heard the words of the response when a brush-cut white guy not much

taller than me spat it out right into my ear:

“The pretty ones are too good to live!”

It was all incredible. The mass of people, pulsing simultaneously with one heart and with many. The competing whiffs of sweat, cologne, weed, beer. The body heat, the sheer aural assault of the music. I'd pushed my way to the centre of the room, where I wasn't so much dancing as being shoved back and forth by the tide of bodies as the crowd contracted rhythmically around me. My feet ached, I needed to pee, and there was sweat running down the crack of my ass. I didn't give a fuck. Brie was pushing his voice to the limit, screaming and roaring at us, playing chicken with that knife edge that could do permanent damage to his vocal cords. Abby would have been wincing if she had been there. Which she wasn't. I pumped my fist in the air and shouted triumphantly along with everyone else. *“The pretty ones are too good to live!”* The stage lights picked up verdant highlights on Brie's face and hands.

I worked my way over to the side to give my empty beer bottle back. I caught a glimpse of frizzy brown hair flecked with white; Fleet, swaying drunkenly through the crowd, clapping sloppily in time to the music and slurring the words in a spitty howl. Her face had that damp, bleached-out look that pale people can get when they've been running too hard and too long. It could have felt weird, seeing someone her age body-slammng in a mosh pit full of twentysomethings, but she wasn't the only middle-aged person here. Asian guy over there, wizened as a walnut, belt pulling in a good eight inches of slack on the waistband of his jeans. Stylin' jeans, too, for an old man. And cool haircuts. Bobbing along like everyone else. As I watched, he slowed down, panting. He wobbled his way over to the side, where he crouched with his hands on his knees, sucking in air. Man, what if he flatlined right here? I chuckled to myself. At least it'd mean I'd get to say hi to Uncle. Bet he'd be surprised to see me in this place. Even Milo my new landlord was here, rocking a screaming Hawaiian shirt, jammer and rubber flip-flops, staggering around the periphery of the crowd and occasionally bopping along for a few seconds. Man was an embarrassment to himself, fashion-wise. I bounded back into the fray, fought my way front and centre to give Brie and the rest of the band a thumbs-up. Brie looked down and saw me. He came forward, leaned down, and grabbed me by the wrist. He was strong. I shook my head, laughing, but I didn't fight too hard as he pulled me up onto the stage. But then he put the mic in front of my mouth. I batted it away. He laughed, put the mike back in its stand. “Okay, then,” he shouted, his mouth close to my ear. His lips buzzed pleasantly against my skin. He was still holding my hand. He took me to the front of the stage again. “Jump with me!” he said.

I threw myself into the air right away. “Hey!” he yelled, surprised. I caught a glimpse of his arms leaping to join me. Then I landed in the arms of a bellowing, happy crowd. I'd always wanted to do a stage dive. I thought it'd be like flopping onto a bed of springy green boughs. Not so much. More grabby, ouchy, and confusing. Hands squeezed my arms and ankles too hard, pulled me in too many directions at once. Someone's searching fingers slid between my be-jeaned thighs. “Hey!” I yelled inaudible under the music. The hand withdrew, grabbed my thigh instead and helped to body-surf me along the top of the crowd. Hands took my shoulders and supported my head. A voice murmured friendly, “Here you go, love” as I was passed on. Hands patted my bottom. I tried to swat them away but my arms weren't my own. They had become handles for people to use to propel me along. Fingers tweaked a nipple. I probably shouldn't have liked that as much as I did. Briefly, my knee twisted painfully. I pulled my leg out of the hold. It hung for a second at an uncomfortable angle until more hands lifted it level with my body. I took a light punch to the kidneys. Felt like I'd connected with someone's bobbing head. I thought I heard the person yell, “Sorry!” but I was already many body-lengths away. A stranger's sweat flew into my eyes. I blinked the salt sting away, laughed, and gave

myself up to it all.

~~Brie was being wafted along nearby. Fizzy bubbles of excitement danced in my veins. I giggled.~~
Brie grinned back at me. I yelled, "What a freaking high!"

He yelled back, "Fucking right! See why I love this stuff?"

The rest of the band kept kicking, driving the energy higher, faster, more frenzied. A guy the size of a bear hollered happily at me, grabbed me by the waist, and lifted me over his head, even higher than the reaching arms of the crowd. I hallooed with glee at the roller-coaster feeling of being swooped aloft. I bellowed, "We're flying!"

Brie gave a triumphant howl as he was spun through the green aura of the stage lights. "You're amazing!" he yelled at me. "You just jumped right in!"

I felt amazing. I threw my head back and let the caterpillar hands of the people below me prop me where they would. The blood in my veins carbonated with a wild, diving joy. I yelled, "Higher! Take me higher!"

And then there was nothing.



THE BABY WOULDN'T STOP CRYING. Nothing Suzy tried was working. Winston's diaper was dry, he was fed, he didn't have gas, there was nothing poking into him, he wasn't teething, he didn't seem to be sick, and he certainly had all Suzy's attention at the moment. But still he kept up a disconsolate sob as his little hands curled into angry, helpless fists.

Naima stuck her head around the corner. She'd been happily playing some kind of six-year-old game in the living room. "Mommy, the crows are cawing," she said.

"That's wonderful, darling." Suzy rocked the baby. The baby cried. "Mommy's kind of busy right now."

"But what's wrong, Mommy? The crows are cawing, and Wheedle's crying."

"Call him Winston, sweetie. It's his real name. You wouldn't like it if we made fun of your name, would you?"

And Wheedle cried.

"The crows are unhappy like Wheed—like Winston's unhappy," Naima responded. She stood and twiddled one of her plaits for a bit. When Suzy didn't reply, she wandered back to the living room. Not a minute later, there was a huge crack, then a slushy crashing sound from outside. Suzy rushed out. On her way, she checked to make sure that Naima was still safely in the living room. She was.

The crows had gone silent now. Suzy realized she should have listened to Naima. Cawing crows around here, that meant something bad was coming. When the crows *stopped* cawing, now; that meant something worse. It meant the bad thing had just happened and the crows had hightailed it out there.

Suzy couldn't quite get out the door. The way was blocked by branches. The big old tree in the yard had cracked near its base and fallen over onto the house.

Which meant that something had gotten loose from the cage of the tree's roots. And Suzy couldn't guess what or who it was. When you were a steward to the celestials, you saw a lot of family secrets.

"Oh, dear," Suzy said to the baby, "this isn't good."

Winston abruptly stopped whimpering. Instead, he stared, mesmerized, as a tendril of kudzu whipped around one of the branches closest to both of them, lengthening as it went. Suzy's scalp crawled, fright winning out over flight. With the speed of a striking serpent, the kudzu reached for Suzy's wrist. Suzy shouted. She took a step backwards and slammed the sliding door shut. Her head leapt in her throat like a live frog, desperate to escape.

The kudzu vine pressed itself against the glass, its frustrated leaves spread flat and handlike against it. Suzy managed to croak out, "Papa B.? That you?"

A rope of kudzu, nearly as big around as Suzy's wrist, thumped against the glass. The door rattled in its track.

Suzy fought herself back from the brink of panic. She was a mama. She had these little ones to keep safe. She knew who could do for that kudzu for her. "Naima," she shouted, "get over here!"

Naima whined something back about wanting to stay and have tea with her dolls. Tiny curls of smoke began rising up from the outer glass of the door where the kudzu was touching it.

"Girl, don't give me your lip right now; get over here, I said!"

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