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## Mr. Universe Wants To Live Forever

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## Prologue

“You call that half?” The elderly customer grabbed the flapping tire wall and pressed it back in place. “There’s still life in this here rubber. If I weren’t retired I’d patch it up myself.” He chuckled. “Got it? Tire – retired?”

The young tech who had earlier introduced himself as Xavier didn’t laugh. “Sir. It’s illegal for us to fix it. Half of it is missing.”

“Now, don’t be stupid, boy. Lemme talk to your superior and we’ll get this straightened out.”

Inside the showroom chrome wheels hung on the walls like prized heads in a hunting lodge. The place, though void of costumers or maybe because of it, sparkled. As the old man shuffled to the counter, his trench coat left behind a trail of fermented stench. Not at all what the prestigious TireGods Co. would call acceptable costumer material.

The manager came out of the back office. He’d switched on his best smile, but it cracked when the old man, in all of his unsavory glory, reach his destination and leaned onto the counter.

“May I help you?” the manager said.

“You may.” The customer squinted at the name tag. “Mister Spencer Principle. Little grasshopper over there tells me I’ve got half my tire gone missing. When I dropped ‘Eve’ off this mornin’ it was nothing but a hole yey big.” He made a show of moving his thumb and forefinger closer together in slow motion.

With a somber expression the manager watched until the customer finished his demonstration. Then, he said, “I understand how frustrating it can be to have to spend money you don’t have, especially in this tough economy—”

“Who said anything about spending?” Old, watery eyes bulged. The spiked white hair seemed to perk up like porcupine quills. The man folded his crusty sleeves on the laminated surface separating him from the thirty-something with a hangover tinge to his breath.

The manager crossed his arms. “There isn’t much I can do for that tire and it’d be illegal for me to let you drive off the lot with it.”

“So, you’re gonna keep me hostage until I buy a new one? Give an old gizzard a break, will ya?”

“We have plenty of old ones.” The manager’s cheeks tightened with bravado.

A slight tic pulled at the older man’s left eye. “I bet you do.”

Just then one of the overhead lights gave a pop, sending a shower of white glass down to the tiles at the two men’s feet. The manager covered his head and shrieked like a macaque. Ever since the unfortunate incident involving a bong and a three way light bulb he had lost faith in modern lighting.

The elderly customer regarded his surroundings like someone about to regret nothing. His face had lost the amiable squint. A soft breeze fanned his trench coat and hair. “You listen to me, young Skywalker. All I’ve done, my entire life, is spend. My energy, my good will, cheer, and all that crap. Now that I’m finally retired, you’re telling me you can’t make an old man happy? Do you know who I am?” His voice held the undertones of a church bell.

When the manager recouped from the light accident he came around the counter, a move one made only in those cases when a customer didn’t respond as they should to a perfectly molded sales pitch.

Suddenly, the mysterious wind blew in his direction. It was stronger now and for a split second he regretted not joining the Hair Club for Men two years ago. He would’ve looked

impressive with long, sexy locks flowing around his face as he took on the S.O.B who dared to question company policy. But he could do it this way too; bald like a Viking warrior. He squared his jaw.

“You can be God for all I care.”

The man roared. “God was the worst student in my class.”

The showroom began to shake. Lights flickered. But Spencer fancied himself a fighter, so if it was a battle the bastard wanted he would sure as hell get one. “Bring it on, grandpa,” he yelled through the deafening noise of crashing wheels.

The old man’s feet lifted off the ground. He spread his arms and levitated. “I am. Mister. Universe—”

“Like from one of the casino shows on the Strip?”

“No, you imbecile. *The* Mister Universe. I am the creator of everything you know, of all the worlds, of life’s every particle.” His face transformed into a chiseled version reminiscent of Robert Plant. “Kneel before me, you fucking fuck-scum beneath my toenail. You shall fix my flat at no charge, or I will crush you.”

Spencer held his arms out to cover his face from the punishing cyclone lashing at him. His body leaned forward with the effort not to get blown away, but he stood his ground. “Never! Company policy states... your - tire - does - not - meet – our - safety - regulations.”

“You dare defy my orders, after I have threatened your very existence!” More turbulence blasted the showroom that rocked back and forth like a ship on deadly seas. Mr. Universe jabbed a forefinger in Spencer’s direction, lifting him off the ground. When their faces nearly touched he chewed out his next words. “Very well. Fix my damn tire ... or I will call your corporate office.”

Spencer's heart thundered. Petrified, he could barely move his lips. "You're a monster."  
"Well?"

It was difficult to concentrate while dangling in the air, but Spencer's mind galloped a hundred miles an hour. He had been promoted to manager only two weeks ago. It had taken lots of ass kissing, and bootlicking, literally. One customer complaint could send him into the dungeons of demotion for ages. S & M was fine as the means to an end, but he knew he couldn't go through that bullshit all over again. One glance at the whips hanging in his boss's office would send him running back to flipping burgers at Dave's Tender Chik.

"I'm sure we can work something out," he squeaked.

"I am listening."

"A brand new tire?"

Mr. Universe gave him a good shake.

"Free of charge, of course."

The wind started to die down. "What kind? I don't want no Sumotomos. Got a reputation to uphold."

"I understand. How about a set of brand new Coopers—" Another shake. "I mean Michelins," Spencer hurried to correct himself.

Silence descended. The old man scratched his chin with a toothy smile. "My 'Eve' would like that."

Spencer didn't notice floating down until his feet touched the cracked tile, at which point he nearly pissed his pants. Standing never felt so wholesome. He hurried back to the counter as if it were an anchor to keep him steady and grounded and totally not freaking out about what had just happened. From the shelf below, he picked up a thin booklet—*The TireGods' Rulebook*—

which every employee had been trained to turn to in the same fashion a believer turns to a holy book.

Mr. Universe was back to his breezy self, leaning on the counter like a regular Joe. “So, I’ll pick her up at seven then?”

“Ah... We close at six,” Spencer answered without thinking.

There had never been a tornado in the middle of Las Vegas before. Especially not one targeted so precisely at a local business. The store employees managed to flee before the building gave. All except for one, who now stood in the middle of the rubble that used to be the showroom, gripping the toasted remains of *The TireGods’ Rulebook*. The paramedics led the man who seemed to be suffering from acute shock to the ambulance and laid him onto the gurney, but hard as they tried, they couldn’t pry the book from his fingers. It would take Spencer Principle only a few days to recover, but when asked, he had no recollection of the events that had demolished his store. Nor could he ever explain why he flinched every time he heard the Rolling Stones.

## **PART ONE**

### **Sophronia**

Very likely her father had fathered more children than there were meth labs in Clark County, but Sophronia was the only offspring to ever attempt—successfully (her mother disapproved) — to find him. Not an easy exploit in spite of the fact that one could still buy his vinyls on eBay.

The first time she saw him she swore that she'd been transported into a Dickensian novel, Mr. Scrooge grimacing down his nose through a pair of contemptuous dentures. He was nothing like the man she'd pictured. A bum, sandals tracking dirt over the shop's linoleum, grimy trench coat masked by ambiguity of color, leather pants two sizes too small with a button down shirt half tucked in, short white hair spiked ever which way. Deep grooves ran the length of his cheeks and smaller lines netted between his eyebrows, as if he'd been dejected for so long that his face was now permanently stuck in the expression of ridicule. Then again, maybe he was just not so glad to see her.

When her mother finally surrendered his name, Sophronia Googled him, shocked when the search returned hundreds of result pages and just as many pictures; gritty photos of smoky stages and long-maned sweaty rockers. In these images Talbot Rider—the front man of Little Devil Rose, a notorious 70's band—appeared eternally caught up in a trance somewhere between rapture and pain. His long face was contorted over the microphone, vest flaps flying open to reveal a hairless chest, bellbottoms ringing. Turned out Talbot Rider was a British legend plastered on many a teenage girl's bedroom walls, and when the girls became women they commemorated their fantasies of him with tattoos, a large number of which now fading and sagging and generally living out life in regret.

Despite years of stardom the infamous front man proved difficult to trace, as if he'd gone into a witness protection program that actually worked, but Sophronia set her sleuth skills to work (leftover from a short stint at the local paper called The Vista), locating his number through an online service that gave up the personal information motherload for a nominal fee.

Their first phone conversation was barbwire sharp, but after she told him she'd be calling daily, would likely make a habit of it, he agreed to meet at Roberto's, his favorite neighborhood taco shop. Later Sophronia found out that he'd lied about that, choosing the farthest taco shop from his house as a precautionary measure. 'Loonies still hound me,' he'd said. "Gotta keep safe." But that was after he looked down at her, face like an occupied taxi, and said, "You're Black."

At first the spark of defensiveness lit inside her, but that sly look gave him away. "No way Grisly Adams," she'd said. "Gonna take much more than that to get rid of me."

During the three years since she'd found him, he'd been trying to prove her wrong.



**Uranchimeg (whose name means “artistic decoration”)**

She hurried through the thick blanket of friendly faces of shop assistants and baristas at the Las Vegas McCarran International. Already she didn't trust anyone. She met her driver by the carousel 4 and watched him from under her eyebrows heave her suitcases unto the cart. She didn't trust him either. He was a young man, too young, younger than her surely, with jet black hair that fell over his forehead, and his eyes were expressive and not shy of contact.

“I'm Xavier,” he said and reached out to shake hands.

Uranchimeg pretended not to notice and eventually his hand fell and he pushed the loaded cart down the floor toward the exit. She'd been enough polite in her greetings to establish their respective ranking, but though polite and solemn, he didn't come across as someone who took rules to heart. She'd have to mention this as well as the unsuitability of his age to Aran.

Two men greeted her by the limo Aran had reserved for her use during the month long stay; her bodyguards. Aran had assured that she needed those in Vegas, that every celebrity had one or two, and what would people back home think if they found out he'd allowed his wife to go without? The tall one introduced himself as Bataar, a countryman who'd lived in America for the past ten years. He had wide shoulders, giant hands with blunt fingertips and a combination of a mustache and beard that nearly covered the bottom half of his face. He had a thick unibrow and pinching eyes. The other man was an American born Mongolian named Robbie. In contrast with Bataar, Robbie looked like a dwarf. He had a flat face, flat nose and walked with a slight limp.

While waiting for the men to load her luggage, Uranchimeg couldn't help but note the weather. It was April, but unreasonable. The air stuck to her skin like scotch tape, messing with the makeup it had taken an hour to apply and considerable minutes in transit to retouch. Soon as

the driver opened the door she slid into the back seat, glaring. There were different kinds of deserts, and Vegas desert had immediately begun to annoy her with its overcooked friendliness. No mystique here, only plain heat and all kinds of merriment spewing down from its billboards.

## **Eric**

Eric hated Sundays. Or was it Fridays? The booze, which constantly infused his system has been blowing massive holes in his memory. He did remember the back rent he still owed for a room he rented from an old hermit, a room where disorder ruled like a nagging wife.

A wife. He nearly had one of those.

Eric reached out, unwilling to completely wake up yet, but forced to by an incessant noise of feet tramping up and down the staircase. His fingers wrapped around a bottle and his heart skipped a lazy beat in gratitude.

Lily had no place in his memory. She gave up that right when she bailed without a word, not even a fuck you Eric I'm leaving.

He turned on his back and took a long gulp without checking to see which poison slid down his throat today. The drink curled inside him like a content snake. He gripped the long, glass neck and sighed. Life will seem much better just as soon as he finished it.

When a gentle knock came on his door Eric covered his face with a pillow, but the noise persisted.

"The hell." He flung the sheets and stood, empty bottled and pissed. The room careened and he grabbed for the nearest chair. The knocking continued. "Wait!"

He ran both hands down his face, the stubble rough against his palms, and yawned. What day *was* it?

“Eric. How long do I have to stand out here?” Another knock. “I need to use the facilities.”

After unlocking the door, Eric padded toward the bed without a backward glance. “This is Vegas Michael. Our facilities have facilities.”

Michael was a recovering Mormon who had discovered both, his passion for astrophysics and Italian fashion at the same time. The first was brought upon by a visit to a university lecture. The second, by a clandestine affair with a millionaire’s husband. Eric had known Michael from their high school days and the transformation from a teenager riding a bike with a backpack crammed with pamphlets to a well recognized scientist and a fashionista was uncanny.

Michael glared at him like an Italian matriarch on a mission. He set a large cardboard box down on the kitchenette counter, sending a pile of unopened envelopes flying to the floor below. “Give me that,” he said, yanking the Whiskey Eric had just picked up from the dresser.

A pack of cigarettes peeked from under the bed, and Eric scooped it as he plopped down on the edge. Under Michael’s scrutiny he lit and blew cheap cigarette smoke in his face. “I thought you needed to piss?”

“It’s only ten and you’re already wasted. What? You’re trying to be Nicolas Cage. What was that movie. Sleepless in Las Vegas?”

Eric choked on laughter. “I’m not gonna drink myself to death.”

“Oh, good. I was getting worried.”

“There’s not enough booze here for that. I’ll have to go out and get more just as soon as you get your ass outta here.”

“Idiot.” Michael muttered something else while he gathered the five remaining liquor bottles off the dresser, most of them nearly empty.

“Hey, I’m not done with those.”

Michael flung the glass containers in the trash with a pronounced clatter.

Eric didn’t have enough energy to protest more. But Michael didn’t know about the secret stash, so he decided to allow him these false moments of triumph. “What the fuck do you want?”

“It’s been nearly six months. She’s not coming back.” Michael pulled up a chair and sat close enough for Eric to smell the Armani leather of his jacket. “I have something to show you.”

Eric picked up his jeans off the pile of clothes on the floor. He gave it an impatient shake in search of his wallet, but only a few coins landed at his feet.

“You probably don’t even deserve to see this.”

“So don’t show it to me.”

Michael cleared his throat. “Why aren’t you writing anymore?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because you’re a novelist. That’s how you make your living, remember?” He hitched a thumb at the computer desk set in a corner by the only window. Trapped between a dead tomato plant and a gargantuan Webster’s Dictionary was Eric’s laptop. It peeked out in misery from under a pile of unfinished manuscripts. “Your agent called again.”

Ignoring that last, Eric pulled on his pants, cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. “She knows I’m chasing my muse.”

“That why you’re avoiding her?”

“You sound like my mother. Have you guys been talking?”

“As a matter of fact, we have. She has your birth chart, and I needed to borrow it.”

“Ok, Miss Cleo.” He refused to ask why.

Michael walked to the box he’d brought and pulled out a thirteen inch TV set. He placed it carefully on the only uncluttered part of the desk. “We’ll get better reception by the window.” He opened the blinds, allowing sunlight to drench the stuffy apartment.

Eric squinted. “Are those rabbit ears?”

The wiry antennas vibrated slightly while Michael set them on top of the antique set.

“Where did you get that?”

“Pawn shop.”

“God damn. It must be at least sixty years old.” Curiosity slipped into Eric’s voice before he could catch himself. He came closer and crouched before the gray, lifeless screen. “I’m not that broke, yet, you know.”

The screen lit into a static dance. The kind Eric hadn’t seen in a very long time. Not since broadcasting went completely **digital** eleven years ago.

“Ok. Tell me when you see anything.” Michael readjusted the antenna.

“Exactly what am I supposed to see?”

“You’ll know when you see it.” He moved the wires more to the right. “Now?”

Eric’s expression was suspended between amusement and confusion. “An astrophysicist attempting to watch TV on an outdated set, while pretending not to find his actions a bit odd. A bit odd, don’t you think?” His friend ignored him, but as a writer, he couldn’t help but see the irony. He signed. “You can’t get a signal on analog, man.”

Michael continued to tinker with the rabbit ears. “Satellites scramble the reception to any digital equipment. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

The screen wobbled with distorted, black and white images. At first, Eric couldn't discern them. But he didn't move away, and he completely forgot about his wallet or the closest 7-11.

"Almost got it." Michael leaned over to see the screen, but kept a hand on the antenna until the picture cleared. "There you go." He let go, careful not to make any sudden movements.

Space. Black and white. Absolutely still if one didn't look close enough. A giant disc of a planet shimmered with a distant light on one side, the other obliterated by shadows of black matter. Millions of stars flickered realistically.

"Yeah," Eric finally said. "You know. Last time I was watching the Expanding Universe on Discovery Channel, I thought to myself, 'Wouldn't it be great if I could see this program in black and white on an honest to God archaic piece of shit.'" He straightened and slapped Michael on a shoulder. "How can I thank you for bringing that dream to life?"

Where the hell was his wallet? He looked around, willing himself to think far enough back to remember where he left the fucking thing. He reached for the dresser drawer which fell off the hinges as soon as he pried it open. He upturned its' contents onto the bed.

Michael shook his head and took a deep breath worthy of a saint. "Come back here. This is not programming. It's real."

Eric rummaged through socks and underwear. Some things you just never gave up on, like premium *Stoli* to start off the day. "Okay."

"This is what I wanted you to see. It's why you have to stop killing yourself."

A lame, soap opera statement. But something in the way he said it, like he wasn't going to ever come back again unless Eric believed him. *That* made Eric look.

## **Mr. Universe**

He didn't normally get up this early, but the new tenant was arriving soon and he wanted to change out of his 'crotch-torn' pajamas into the 'bleached along the waistband and down the side' ones before the doorbell rang. His new tenant's name evaded him, but he'd fibbed his way through driving tests for the past three years, so no biggie. Tidying up the house, the common areas downstairs, wasn't on the agenda. Dusty bookshelves and unkempt coffee tables overflowing with magazines and porcelain sheep and ashtrays from various decades and in various states of decline added a sense of intellectually enigmatic space, he'd read somewhere, because they helped produce a museum-like atmosphere where one must not interfere lest they wish to dissuade history from thriving.

Through the living room bay window, notebook in hand, he took in the rest of the neighborhood. The builders responsible for the atrocity that was his housing development, deluded themselves into believing that one could enjoy Victorian England while living in the middle of Las Vegas and proceeded to construct what, if it were in England, would be a row of trellised buildings, but because it wasn't in England, resulted in a cluster of standalone three story mansions with gargoyles and banisters and other unvictorian Victorian features. Ugly half-beasts, he called them, all but his own house, which was a transplant from Pennsylvania. He had bought the eighteen century mansion on eBay for a dollar and had it taken apart and put back together in Vegas. Or rather Paradise, an unincorporated town in the middle of Vegas. As cliché as the name sounded there was nowhere else he'd rather set up home. Fifteen minutes to everything, from the biggest churches to the plushest of strip joints.

The limo pulled up into the driveway and the curtains in the house across the cul-de-sac fluttered. Intuitively he growled and penciled in the time in his notebook. Mrs. Pole's favorite activity, fluttering behind draperies.

The front passenger door opened and a large man in a black suit stepped out, wearing enormous wraparound sunglasses. In turn, he opened the back door to let out a woman. Her dense curly black hair hung to her waist. It looked impossibly heavy, and he wondered how such a thin neck and a small round face with small delicate features could possibly hold it all. She was petite and subtle in her movements as she stepped aside and waited.

Another man exited the limo from the other side, also in a suit but no glasses. The two made their way up the steps, and the woman trailed behind them.

He waited for them to ring the bell, but they knocked. Three powerfully convincing bangs.

When he shuffled to the door, he shuffled below the speed limit he would normally shuffle at, and when he turned the locks, he took the same amount of time he used when parallel parking.

"Mr. Euniwers? 391 Frank Sinatra seercle?" The accent in the big man's mouth bucked and only 'Frank Sinatra' got a gentle landing.

He nodded. "Bodyguards?" He used sarcasm to pad the insulting quality of his voice, but the men missed it.

"I am Bataar. This Robbie. Vee check house." The leader signaled with a dramatic rise of his eyebrows, and Mr. Universe followed the eyebrow arch and after that the clasping of the hands that he assumed indicated the man's equally distributed readiness-to-eagerness inspection ratio.



He stepped aside not because he felt intimidated but out of curiosity. Never before had there been an inspection of his rooms on this scale, and he wanted to see how they'd go about it, what their expectations were and whether or not they'd leave if they weren't met. The reason he'd turned his place into a sort of a boarding house was this same curiosity, the compensatory itch to observe strangers out of their environment, to learn as many functions and the subtleties in these function and to determine once and for all if purpose controlled behavior or if behavior shaped purpose. Call it his pet project. But also, having people around seemed to slow down his ageing process and sealed, albeit temporarily, the cracks in his memory.

Already the two men went up the narrow creaking staircase to the second floor. At first, he waited for his new tenant to go up, but she hesitated at the bottom, gave him two short bows and said, you go you go, until he went. Only then did she follow. The inspectors looked around, perhaps in search of clues to his background or upbringing. But the walls were bare of family photos, well, because he had only one family member. Pictures of her were on the upper floor of the house, in his private rooms.

"Which rrroom she stay?" Bataar asked and pointed to a door at the end of the hallway. He glanced at the other doors as they passed them. "You have many tenants?"

"Enough for me," he said.

"You let peoples in your home all times?"

The question sounded suspiciously like a criticism. He didn't like that at all and he gave Bataar a meaningful squint. Something about the stillness in the air between them suggested that if Bataar wasn't careful bad things would happen to him and his friend.

Smart man Bataar cleared his throat and quietly asked for the permission to open the door. All of them crowded inside and the bodyguards began to talk amongst themselves and gesture at the twin bed, the writing desk, the hardwood floors.

“TeeWee work?”

Before he could answer, Bataar picked up the remote control and began to turn channels, his voice pulsating with disapproving sounds whenever he encountered static. “No shotime?”

“Basic cable,” he said.

Bataar then turned on the microwave sitting on the kitchenette counter and waited for it to zing to a stop, and nodded in approval at finding the cabinets full of coffee and sugar. Not so impressed by the bathroom, “Smalishhh” but appeased by the presence of hot water on demand.

The inspection lasted about ten minutes and during this time he patiently answered questions about privacy of blinds, wifi, privacy of telephone conversations, other tenants and their privacy practices.

Satisfied, the two men retrieved the girl’s luggage, shaking the old house into wakefulness with their heavy booted footsteps. All the while she stood, patiently waiting, and once everything was in place, walked inside her room and closed the door.

## Eric

Michael continued to adjust the image on the TV by moving the antennae while talking. “I’ve been working on a program. I hacked into the system at work, and used some of its components to create something which could potentially upend the Axis of Logic Theory, the entire scientific community, for that matter.”

Eric didn’t exactly know what kind of a reaction was expected from him, but considering the wild-eyed look on the scientist’s face, he did the best he could under the circumstances. He remained silent, nodded his head, and made sure to frown in a contemplative manner.

Michael continued. “That’s one of the reasons I had to find an analog processor, like this television. Otherwise, the signal can be traced. If my boss ever found out, he’d probably kill me.”

Eric spit out the cigarette butt into an overstuffed ashtray. “What are you talking about?” Michael worked for the tech branch out of Area-51, but even though the most of the research conducted was top secret, Eric never believed it dangerous. “Did you steal something?”

“Never mind that. I might’ve exaggerated a little.” Michael dismissed Eric’s troubled expression with a wave of a hand. “You’ve heard of Newton’s Laws of Motion, right?”

“Maybe in college.”

“The third law. For every action there’s a reaction.”

“So.”

“This program reveals a direct link between the action and the reaction. On a universal scale.” He flipped his arms out to demonstrate the gravity of that last statement.

“So it’s something to do with space.”

*This* time, Michael missed the sarcasm as well. “Based upon the information I produced from your chart, plus the calculated Physical Libration and the approximate Hour Angle, I’ve established a connection between you and another body. A celestial body, Eric. Do you have any idea what this means?”

“English please.”

“Come sit.” Michael placed a chair right in front of the television and Eric, intrigued by his friend’s behavior, took a seat.

Michael pointed at the screen and spoke as if to a five year old. “This planet, I call it Eric-2, is a White Giant.”

“Thank you,” Eric said slowly. “For naming it after me?”

“Eric -2 is about twenty billion light years away.”

“Fascinating.”

“It’s on the brink of disintegration, which *you* will bring about unless, the drinking, and the... the snorting, and the smoking, and the moping stops.”

Snorting with laughter, Eric tried to get up. “Now, I really have a good reason to get hammered.”

“Sit.” Michael pushed him back down. “You are the action. That planet is the reaction. Every time you harm yourself. Any time you self destruct in any way, Eric -2 gets bombarded with a meteor shower, or, or wobbles off its’ axis a little.”

When Eric moved off the chair this time, he made it all the way to the kitchenette before Michael followed with more nonsense. “Don’t you see the importance of this?” He took off his jacket and tossed it aside as if it didn’t cost a fortune. “That stupid grin on your face tells me that you do not.”

“You expect me to believe that every time I take a leak, the tides on Eric-2 rise. Do you realize how fucking idiotic that sounds?”

The kitchen, an eight by three piece of linoleum with a sink, a mini fridge and a breakfast counter top, smelled like a dog. Two people couldn’t fit in it simultaneously. Perhaps, Eric had an ulterior motive for positioning himself there. Further away from the insane bald man on the other side of the counter.

“Please, be serious,” Michael prompted. “And stop with the garbage already. I poured all the liquor down the drain.”

“I don’t need to be saved. I’m a grown person, body hair and all.” This last attempt at a joke was met with a stern, unmovable scowl. Eric found a water bottle in the fridge and squeezed the cap off with a deadly twist. “What do you want me to say?”

“Test it. Give me a chance to convince you.”

He should’ve just left, Eric thought later that night, before the whole thing went to shit. But the opportunity to prove Michael wrong, to show him that everything was just fine, seemed too great to pass. “You’ve got ten minutes.” With a measure of distaste, he poured plain water down his throat, then followed Michael back into the ‘living room’.

The scene on the set remained unchanged, its natural serenity almost infectious. Eric avoided the chair. He chose a spot some distance from Eric-2 and immediately reprimanded himself for using that ludicrous name. “Well?”

“Well.” Michael blew a decisive breath. “You have to do something. For *it* to show any effects.”

“Something bad.”

“Terribly.”

Eric found the pack of Carlton 100's and lit another cigarette.

“No. Something more drastic. To see an immediate change.”

“This is going to be drastic,” Eric said, and holding the butt between two fingers, lowered the smoldering end to his forearm. He paled at the searing pain as it scorched his skin at a single point. “Hellfuck.” Somehow this trick didn’t look as painful when someone did it on TV.

“That should work.” Michael returned his attention to the screen, not at all concerned.

Eric ground the cigarette into the ashtray. “Glad I could help.” The burn had sent an agonizing shockwave throughout his body, and it took all of his self-control not to cringe. He began to pace, instead.

“There.” The awe in Michael’s voice was hard to ignore.

A gigantic, milk-white cloud made a slow, spiral walk across the planet’s surface. It looked like a miniature galaxy with a black hole in the middle, around which it rotated.

“Is that a hurricane?” Eric refused to come closer but didn’t take his eyes off the scene.

“A giant one. A cyclone of this proportion is relatively the size of Earth. It’s deadly. By the time it travels around the planet’s circumference it will destroy any living organism in its path.”

“Are there any?”

For the first time since the experiment, Michael turned away from the screen. His glasses had slid down the bridge of his nose. He studied Eric over the black rims with interest.

“Is there anything alive on that fucking rock?” Eric demanded. In that moment, he despised Michael. For days now, no weeks. Months. For months now, he had managed not to feel emotionally yoked to anything or anyone. He wrapped himself in misery, rage, and an insignificant amount of self pity, refusing everyday reality, willing his body and mind to descend

into hell. It was like digging at a hangnail. He liked the pain. “Not that I give a damn. Just want to know how far you’d go playing this game.” The rhythmic pulse of the burn throbbed up and down his arm like a jabbing needle. “Answer me.”

“I don’t know if there’s life, but given more time to research—”

“Leave. Get your stuff and go.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You have to believe me.”

“Fine.” He found his Sketchers, gray and scuffed, a counterpart to his mood, and forced his feet into one, then another. His toes hit something bulky and he pulled out the wallet, stuffing it into his back pocket. “Then I’ll go.”

“Eric, wait.”

Eric ran down the stairs past his landlord and a woman standing next to him with arms tightly folded across her chest, past two men lugging suitcases up the front steps of the house, past the limo with a man sitting on the hood smoking. Eric took off in the direction of the nearest strip club.

## Uranchimeg

What she did first once alone in her room was to dig up her blanket from the bottom of one of her suitcases and cover the bed. It should've been to call her husband and report on the lodgings and her general state of being (was she ready for the first performance?), but not this time. Something about the house flustered her and she wanted to collect herself before talking to him. Aran never missed a hesitation.

Why would he choose this particular house for her was beyond her understanding. This American monstrosity that defied spatial frugality with its sheer mass, and its sham desert landscaping that sprawled like a disease. On the inside the house lacked style, of any kind. Ambiguous in its presentation like the slot machine attendant back at the airport who with her sheered hair and severely wrinkled features could be a man for all she knew. And the landlord. Uranchimeg wrinkled her nose. That smell.

The presence of Bataar and Robbie also confused her. What exactly was so dangerous as to warrant the need of bodyguards, and would she have to have them around every time she stepped out of the house? A private person by nature Uranchimeg found the thought unnerving.

She looked around to collect her thoughts.

The room was white, bare of wall coverings or pictures. The only decoration was a blue medicine cabinet hanging on the wall across from the bed above the TV. It was empty but the color soothed and perhaps that was the desired effect. She never carried personal trinkets to remind her of home, so she didn't have to worry about finding a place to display them. Ever since the time her parents arranged her marriage to Aran she became convinced that home could only exist inside a person, so unreliable was its physical representation. It wasn't a bad marriage. It was practical and beneficial to many, including herself. But her idea of home has changed



drastically since she was a child. Now her work sustained her, gave her walls and a roof. And the rest? All frills. That's why marrying Aran had been a fortunate arrangement they both had been enjoying for ten years now. She didn't love him, but he made a reliable husband. He possessed one of the most famous women in Mongolia, and Uranchimeg, in turn, was devoted to her art.

The blanket didn't count as a personal trinket. It was the only blanket that kept her warm.

Because routine calmed her mind, she took a bath and afterward spent half hour combing the knots from her tight curls. Order of habit was the way Uranchimeg prepared herself for performances as well, and with Aran a part of her was always on stage.

It was well past midnight when she dialed home. Aran answered on the first ring. "My lovely I always said some day you shall see Vegas lights at night, but I am disappointed that you must be there alone."

"Can't see any lights from here, darling." She had not even taken a peek outside the tightly drawn window curtain.

"Always the pragmatic," he said. "This is better than staying in those flashy hotels. Trust me."

"I do." But she didn't this time, her customary tolerance for the ways in which he managed her life blotched with anticipation of what lay beyond his plans. Something told her that he was wrong about his expectations for this trip. It was the first time Uranchimeg's intuition surfaced and forced her to pay attention to it. Unaccustomed to ambiguity, she didn't like the feeling.

"It saddens me that I can not join you this time my love," he said. "The deal is on the table. All I need now is the signature and the entire block of Bouncy Condos IV will be ours." At the start of the first phase of construction Aran wanted a project name to imply happiness and

fullness of life. An intern with a year of English at the local university proposed bouncy and Aran liked the way it sounded. Bouncy condos, all three phases made the Sendoos one of the richest couples in Mongolia.

It doesn't matter," she wanted to say, not because she didn't want him around, but because she didn't think his presence would change things that were coming her way.

## **Michael**

A guilty conscience is a parasite that crawls into the farthest corners of one's healthy flesh and systematically destroys it, and Michael, feeling its deadly feelers couldn't enjoy things he normally took great pleasure doing. His bike ride he cut short after nearly knocking into a ditch a kid on his way to school. Later he stood in the middle of his kitchen unable to decide on whether to make a tofu stir-fry for lunch or baked salmon with couscous. Not even working in his garden brought him any kind of joy. He was annoyed by the tomatoes and eyeballed the cilantro with general suspicion. A few hours later he drove, digested, to the McCarran airport's private terminal where a jet would pick up him and fifty others and fly them to the remote landing strip near Area 51.

Eric's habits were killing him and because Michael considered Eric his best friend—a soul brother— and because he was also by nature allergic to failure, once he'd noticed Eric's decline he went crazy-mad trying to find a way to reverse the effects of Lily's betrayal. But perhaps he'd gone too far, the parasite whispered. He'd never taken a step without charting a precise course of the subsequent steps. Never in his life had he acted upon whim, always driven by his analytical mind to allow only the smallest of margins for error. If left to his own devices, Eric would die, and that's how Eric-2 came to be. It was the product of quick thinking in a situation that required extreme measures and a conspiracy theorist's mindset.

## Mr. Universe

Trivial things only matter after they've gone, and for the last three years he watched their departure with the kind of detachment a parent exhumes from the depths of their very soul as they stand on the doorstep of the house while Bobby Jr. hops behind the wheel of his Handai and fishtails off to college. To him these things? They used to all be trivial: Memory, the fickle bitch. Empathy the manipulative fucking asshole if there ever was one. **Responsibility** a synonym of 'pest.' And the ultimate codependent junky of them lot—Omnipresence. And yet, he found dents in himself that were getting more and more difficult to patch up and that bothered him no matter how much he acted like nothing did. To keep track of things, he'd started to make notes in his notebook, but he wasn't very consistent. It was a poor substitute for common sense at any rate. The only trivial thing still flickering like a light in a distance was love, and only because he was continuously reminded of it by a willful girl sitting across the table. Of course he'd never confess that he liked her nor how much.

"Why this place, U?"

She never called him dad, but he knew a secret of hers. When she liked you she used your last name, and the more she liked you the shorter it grew.

The sound of wine splashing into a glass announced that their waiter was afoot, and Mr. Universe turned his face in that general direction, flaring his nostrils from below his blindfold as if he could sniff out the man. He couldn't. Even his physical body was betraying him.

"Damn," he said.

"I'm sorry?" The waiter said from nearby.

"Nothing."

“Well, my name is Derrick and I will be your trusty guide this evening. Are you two ready to begin, then?” The waiter’s voice was young.

“Bring it on,” Mr. Universe said.

“I shall be back with your opening course.” Derrick’s footsteps receded and Mr. Universe found himself at a loss. Normally he stared or glared, depending on the crowd, at the other diners. He didn’t trust dinner conversations in restaurants. People were hardly ever genuine, agendas galore. You had to read their faces to put the ticks together like a puzzle, but with the blindfold there was nothing but soft voices to go by.

“You didn’t answer,” Sophronia said. “I had no idea you were into experimental dining.”

He spoke into the air between them. “Dark dining. Is what it’s called. And I can be experimental. Come on, you know better.”

“But on your birthday? I mean I’m not complaining. More power to ya”

He repressed a laugh. “Then stop complaining.”

“This is where you tell me you’re marrying a showgirl named Candi and moving to Bahamas.”

“Naw,” he said. “Candi’s not a showgirl, and why buy the golf course when you can hole—”

“Dad!” The ultimate label of disapproval.

“I’m a man, Soph, not an anatomically correct statue.”

She sighed. “Just keep your leaf on, deal?”

“And how’s your romantic life going? Still seeing that Ralph guy? I say he’s too Jewish accountant to ever understand you—”

She raised her hands. He couldn't see the gesture, but he had a kind of a mental map of Sophronia in his head, and that's what she would do.

"We're not actually going there are we?" she said. "Why do you have to act like such a racist ass?"

He shrugged, listening to the drone of conversations around them. "Who says I'm acting?" It pleased him to rile his daughter like this. Her decency made places in his heart he didn't know existed play sweet baselines.

"How's Eric?" her tone was guarded.

"I don't want to talk about Eric either," he said.

"Is he drinking?"

"Yeah."

"More than before or less?"

Dishes arrived and the waiter led them through the basics of dark dining. It's all about the senses. Never take off the blindfold. Even if you do, you won't see much as the lights are dim to create the ambiance. It's a four course meal, but he will not tell you what you're eating. Rather, you'll have to guess. Utensils are optional, slurping encouraged. With that he left.

He felt the shape of the plate with his fingers and discovered another, smaller dish in the middle, its smooth rim warm to the touch. A finger into the middle of it all.

"Soup," he said with triumph.

"You need a sticker for that? A gold star?"

"The sarcasm must be from your mother."

"What's going on, U?"

“Can’t a father have a memorable birthday with his child?” Under normal dining circumstances he’d see her cock an eyebrow. “Don’t you like it?”

“Actually I’m kinda loving this.”

“I kinda figured you’d be into something this bizarre.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve brought us here for my benefit.”

“I won’t ‘cause I didn’t. Your enjoyment of present activity is a byproduct of a quirky old man’s wishes to try something new.”

“Thank the stars for that.”

During the main course, the first taste nearly scorched the roof of his mouth, he blew on the second, finally closing his eyes behind the blindfold and relaxing the muscles around his shoulder blades that up to that point had been at a standoff with each other. Somehow having the other senses work overtime, observing the mechanisms of a human body in synergy, like a well choreographed dance, gave him hope. Soph’s company and the noises of her blowing on the spoon or commenting on the use of saffron and lemon—the most genuine of sounds to his ear—bumped up the experience to exceptional. She had no idea that he was losing the hold on his identity each day, fractals of himself floating into the cosmos like the lanterns at a Chinese new year’s festival, that his recollection of events on some days was so vague he swore he’d dreamed them. And he wasn’t going to tell her, because unfortunately that would end the world. But he had a plan to get his old self back.

## Eric

The incessant flutter of strobe lights pulsed across his eyelids. A techno version of “White Lines” drowned the club as the song pounded against the walls. His senses, muddled and unsteady, have become saturated with fatigue. He lost all sense of time and even place. The world was a dream bearing the very best traits of a nightmare. For the past (how many days?), he avoided his place, his own life, and most of all the TV: the poltergeist in his mind. With its presence in his room he couldn’t go about floating in oblivion, and that really pissed the hell out of his plans.

“I know heaven,” a woman’s voice said.

Eric lifted his head from the blonde’s shoulder and opened his eyes, disoriented.

“Wanna come see it with me?” Her long fingers unwrapped a plastic pouch filled with tiny crystals. “It’s out of this world.” With an alluring smile she offered Eric the contents of the bag, but she’d already made neat tiny crosses on the glass table in front of them.

That last sentence jolted him. Out of this world. That’s how he felt. Actually, out of his mind was more like it.

“You won’t regret it,” she promised.

I already am, he almost said. What was he doing? Why did he go through this personal exile, all because of Michael’s idiotic plot to control his life? No. He’d been drowning himself well before that. That’s all he wanted. Peace, in whatever form.

“I have to go,” he sat up and tried to focus on the woman’s face. “What time is it?”

She pouted and wrapped her arm around his neck. “Oh, baby, but we’re having a great time. You can’t leave me now.”



Eric was pretty sure he'd just met her. No matter how hard he concentrated, her name evaded him. He blamed it all on Michael. Ironic that his friend's attempts to help produced completely the opposite result. If only he could see how far Eric had gone down the road to self-destruction, he'd kick himself.

He went to stand up, but his legs buckled and he fell back into the girl's lap. Lips caressing his ear she purred that she wanted to fuck again, but her voice traveled from miles away and the room streaked sounds like they were lights all around him so fast that he felt like a giant windstorm held him in its grip. Next thing he knew he was vomiting all over her lap. The blond shoved him off and jumped to her feet, cussing like a long-haul truck driver. And the next next thing he knew he passed out.

### **Mrs. Bernice Pole**

This was not the first time she'd stolen someone's Bingo winnings from under their sniffers. Normally she got away with it, too, because no one ever suspected a middle aged respectable looking woman of crime. On any other day she would've glided across the bingo hall past rows of rectangle tables strewn with bingo cards, and her hand would shoot a straight one (having before spotted the fool who left their stash out in the open), and swoosh! She'd be gone before they could say Jackpot.

In her twenties she had often been mistaken for Sofia Loren. They could've been sisters, except that Bernice preferred her hair platinum blond and big and with a wavy bounce to it. Now nearing sixty she still retained some of her charm, the mojo that made others unable to refuse her and to erroneously assume her an angel still sparking now and then. No denying she now had to fight for her place in society, as a woman and a human being, but she relished battle and polished her boxing gloves regularly. Why, now and then even her own daughter forgot which womb she'd sprung from and would show disrespect in the form of a silent treatment for days. She didn't approve of Bernice's work as a spiritual guide, and often she'd also lecture her on the long term dangers of addictive behaviors. But a good fight Bernice never back down from and a relative made the toothiest of adversaries.

Not that she had a problem.

All this went through her mind as she zigzagged between the cars of the 777 Gambling Hall parking lot, three security guards on her heels.

"Ma'am please stop!" One of them took a sharp left as a short cut and tripped on his own shoelace, diving to the asphalt.

The second of the three paused, head whirling between his friend and the criminal. “You okay, man?”

The man down got to one knee. “Leave me. She’s getting away.”

She hopped lively until the powder-blue of her Cadillac Seville surfaced like a whale out of water. She made that last sprint, but then everything slowed down. One guard came from the left, the other from the right, and together they intercepted her before she could stick her key in the car door. Damn those manuals, a thought flashed through her head, should’ve gotten a newer model years ago.

“Ma’am.” The man on the left whizzed, his cheeks shaking.

Seeing his friend in pain the second guard finished. “We must ask you to come with us.”

“Oh, my. Why didn’t you say so?”

The third guard joined them. “Cause you run faster than my kid through Toys R Us, I swear I pulled a lung chasing after you.”

“Oh, officer.” She pressed her hands to her chest and fluttered her fake lashes. “I must’ve not heard you calling after me.” But these particular guards proved impervious to her charms, and as she followed them back inside she was thinking that Jack would give her hell for the rest of her gambling career for this.

## **Mr. Universe**

For the past three years, he's been losing his identity and his powers. The tornado slash electric fire had been a fluke. His temper got the best of him and he lost control, but the accident (he used that word with insincerity) made him feel more alive than he had in eternity. It also demanded he act. For some people it took a tire shop sized tornado to finally admit that Western meds couldn't fix every problem and that there was a problem in the first place.

Peeking outside his living room bay window, at the house across the street, he was already trying to talk himself out of what he was thinking. But he was running out of options. Desperate measures and all.

He didn't feel good about what he'd done, but not gushing with remorse, either. The manager had been a despicable human being: Three robberies with the record wiped clean after he snitched on his partner with whom he made crank and sold it to middle-school neighborhood kids. There was also a history of marital abuse, two girls whose memories of their father choking out their mom had peeled back some of that sweet buffering youth provides before adulthood jumps out of the closet screaming, "Gotcha sucker!"

It's not that he was a walking search engine, more like this information surfaced on the skin of whomever he came in contact with like a tattoo.

But all that said he wasn't in the habit of judging. The cosmos was a mechanism of pure anarchy with equilibrium at its core and not even he could temper with it too much. The chaos of it all—and life was chaos (ask any parent behind the wheel of a minivan)—consisted of all things falling into place without intervention from anyone. He'd tried. Others had too. But in the end things sprung to the state they were designated for the time being, because this said mechanism was designed to withstand corruption, and it interlocked with infinite other mechanisms, every

one a fractal of a grander mechanism.

Who designed it? Well, that was the thing. He did. Only the details have been getting blurry and he could no longer recall how he'd come up with the idea in the first place or why.

He was becoming fond of writing in his journal. Nothing serious. It helped him remember that there was a past and not just a blank space behind him. If he were to write an autobiography it would go something like this:

In the beginning there was a being filled with the compulsion of a baby with its own toes on the horizon. And unto nothingness this being imagined conscience of time and space. The being then infused this conscience with cycles of renewal, and because minding life proved a shitty sort of work, the being eventually retired, leaving in its place the mechanisms to help govern things. The mechanisms it called deities, and living creatures were their instruments. The irony being that he was the original god, the boss, and no one knew about him.

He had no one to share this with. Not a single being he could confide in and hear reassure that everything was fine. This was so because along with the grand mechanism, he'd created a trigger to its distraction: Not a soul knew his true identity, for if they did the universe would tangle and collapse in on itself and vanish as if it had never existed. That much he still remembered. Therein laid another irony.

He'd been retired for over ten thousand years, but he'd never suspected time would catch him in its snare. Time, turns out, was an equal opportunity bastard.

**Sophronia**

“So you marinate the ramen cake in whatever sauce you’re using and when ready you grill it on medium flame.”

Sophronia stared into space past her computer screen. Her producer, Phil, waved on the other side of the glass and pointed at his earphones and she sat up remembering her caller.

“Wild,” she said. “And how do you know it’s done? You’ve got a special ramen thermometer for that?”

The voice spiked with excitement. “Oh you’ll know. It’ll get nice and crispy.”

“Thanks man. You’ve made many a starving college student a little happier today.” She clicked off the caller and spoke into the mike. “You heard it, peeps,” she said. “Grilled top ramen. Next up, hemp dresses and why you shouldn’t smoke them. Be back right after this.”

Once off air, Phil came on the line. “What’s up, Soph?”

“Sorry about that. Just need more coffee.” The first time the cell blinked to life she had ignored it. It was Eric. She ignored it because though she worried about him, the last time they spoke she hurtled a plate at his head for being such a dumbass after Lily left. He wouldn’t listen to her pleas to stop the drinking, stone-walled her when she brought up the subject and though she had patience by barrelfuls his stupidity made her act like a mixed martial arts fighter.

After the break, the cell went off again. It blinked in silence while Sophronia interviewed a local fashion designer who moaned about people breaking into her shop to blast a joint made of her newest collection. The number came on for the third time and a message sign came on soon after. Funny that she had just been thinking about him. Something about the way U avoided talking about Eric at dinner worried Sophronia. Knowing their history, or because he didn’t care about it, U was usually more forthcoming with information. But actively staying away from any discussion of Eric indicated that something wasn’t right.

Sophronia finished the show, eyes darting to the phone screen where the message sign waited for her. She called her voicemail soon as she stepped out of the building:

‘Hello? Hello? This was the first number on the speed-dial. I don’t want this guy to get into trouble so I hope you’re not his wife... or husband or whatever. Erm, so he’s passed out and, he’s not doing so well so can you like come pick him up? The owner said he’ll call the cops if he’s not out of here soon. We’re at the Disco Bar on Paradise and Harmon.’

“Fuck.” Sophronia got into her car and dialed Eric’s number. No one answered, so she left a message letting whoever hears it know she was on her way. She knew the place, the strip bar near the Hard Rock hotel. When she met Eric three years ago, she worked there as a cocktail waitress. They had started a conversation when he ordered a g&t and she remembered how impressed he was when she told him she was an ‘urban nomad’, someone who worked their way through various occupations as a way of traveling around the world. It was an ongoing project of hers, and he was impressed about that too. In turn she was interested in his writing. He’d called it ‘literary junk that only gets published with snooty university presses’. With his five o’clock stubble and longish dirty-blond hair falling over blue eyes framed by the longest lashes she’d ever seen on a man, he had a magnetic kind of energy of someone who never simply looked at people or things but into their core and always commandeered some part of them to destroy on paper later.

She didn’t go home with him that day, but she’d been hooked.

Later he broke her heart.

This was before Lily. Before the engagement and the disappearance.

**Michael**

Michael scanned the monitor in front of him, running a hand over his super-short hair as was his habit when worried or interested in something. He glanced aside, at the other screen, drawn by a noise of an opening door inside Eric's place. He had a sweet multi monitor setup with four screens mounted side by side, and this monitor was linked directly to the television set. He had to have some way of tracking Eric's movements in order to rig the set to show the appropriate material. Devious, yes, but for the sake of saving Eric's life Michael didn't care what it felt or looked like. He didn't care that if Eric ever found out it would sever their friendship forever. Hopefully their friendship would prove stronger than a couple of lies meant to shock Eric's mind out of depression. This was his only objective, and in this case means justified the end. As a scientist Michael could see no other way.

After two days of silence Eric's front door opened and Sophronia stumbled in, Eric draped over her. Michael was relieved to see his friend who had ignored his calls ever since the TV conversation, but he was shocked to see Sophronia who had sworn off Eric months ago. She walked him to the bed, something that should've taken thirty seconds but didn't, because he kept stumbling over nothing and laughing quietly, finger raised as if he was trying to make a point. Then Michael heard him clearer:

'Is this the real life?' Eric's attempt to wrap his arms around Sophronia's waist resulted in a half-crumple to the floor. She caught him, assuring she's got him and muttering other less pleasant things that Michael could definitely hear.

'Is this just fantasy?'

He didn't so much get back to his feet, though not for the lack of trying, as he hobble-crawled the rest of the way to the bed with her guiding him to prevent him from tumbling over.



Finally they made it, and she helped him get on the bed. Another undertaking. Eric watched her, his eyelids fluttering as if they couldn't decide if he were asleep or awake.

"Look at yourself," Sophronia said, tugging his sneakers off his feet. "You're fucking up your life, and for what?"

Eric began to hum. "Tum-tum-tum. Tum. Tum." Raised both arms in the air and conducted, signaling Sophronia to join him.

She cocked her head at him.

He waited. "No escape." And pouted.

"From reality," she finished with a sad smile.

Unable to watch any longer he turned off the monitor and hid his face in his hands. Never did he think Eric would get this bad. All the more reason why he had to continue with his plan.

The only problem now was Sophronia.

## **Detective Jacqueline ‘Jack’ Mullins**

Jack sat across the desk from her witness, an eighteen year old gas station attendant who’d witnessed a fight that resulted in a stabbing. She was only thirty two, but more and more people were lately beginning to look like kids to her, including her witness.

He leaned over his folded arms on the desk and fidgeted with his fingernails. “The guy gets in the other guy’s mug, calling him names. He just gets all up in his grill.”

“You’re saying he was hostile from the very beginning?” She had a pencil, but didn’t jot down anything he was saying. She’d remember this, because lately every case sounded like the one before. On the weeknight she sometimes hung out with some of the guys from work at the local pub down the street, and she remembered once reading a scribble on one of its restroom stall doors that said, ‘Save animals. Experiment on humans.’ On days like these she wanted to tattoo those words across her forehead. “Any idea why they were fighting?”

“The one dude wanted the other dude’s slot machine, but the dude wouldn’t give it up and told the other dude to shut the fuck up and wait his turn.”

“You remember what the assailant looked like?”

“Yeah. Sorry for the busted security camera. The owner never fixed it from the last time when we got robbed. So... Oldish, and he had a long beard and shpanz,” he said with a sheepish look.

“Shpanz?”

“You know, too long to be shorts and too short for pants.” A nervous chuckle. “Shpanz.”

“You came up with that?”

“Yep. Gonna trademark it,” he said.

She studied him closely for any signs of drug use. His eyes were a bit dilated but that could just be excitement or nervousness.

She reached for her phone. "You wanna burger?"

"Ahm, sure."

Once done with her order Jack noticed her witness had relaxed a bit. "You mind trying again to describe the man to our sketch artist?"

"Sure. Some crazy ass shit, isn't it? Gambling I mean."

"Yeah," Jack said. "Crazy ass shit for sure."

The phone on her desk rang and Jack picked it up wiping ketchup from the front of her white shirt (she'd sworn she'd never wear white for this very reason).

The voice on the other side was hesitant, like it wished it had the wrong number.

"Again?" she said. "Are you sure?" Heartburn worked its way up her esophagus.

The voice confirmed the name.

"Where is she held?"

It confirmed the location.

"Fuck."

The voice cleared its throat and apologized.

Jack threw the half eaten burger on the desk in disgust and cussed some more. "Don't worry. You did the right thing by calling me, but fuck." She shook her head. "No, no. I'm on my way."

She put down the phone and opened one of the bottom drawers, muttering under her breath and yanking to free her purse. "I've got to go, kid."

"You okay?" he stood.

“Yeah,” she said. “Just some crazy ass shit of my own.”

## **Uranchimeg**

She was glad Aran had obliged her by instructing Bataar and Robbie to ride in their own car. Having so many people in the limo stifled her to the point of despair. If it were up to her, she'd replace the driver or better yet, drive herself if she knew how. He had a habit of listening to music as he drove her to the Smith Center concert hall for rehearsals. Sometimes he even hummed and his untrained voice grated on her ears, because she had perfect pitch and couldn't suffer bad singing even at low frequencies. But she did not tell him to stop. Instead she trained her mind inward. There were many imperfections in the world and he was just another, and she had learned long ago that she could not fight all of them. At times she felt she had over-trained herself, like a Buddhist monk whose only purpose was to eradicate chaos that stemmed from emotion, but at moments like these Uranchimeg was glad. Otherwise she might've thrown herself at the driver and tried to strangle him for droning like a low grade vacuum cleaner.

When they reached the back door of the hall Uranchimeg waited until one of her bodyguards opened the door for her, and got out without acknowledging the driver's well wishes for a good day. After all, he had been told numerous times she didn't speak English.

She made her way down a dark hallway to her dressing room outside of which her assistant, whose name escaped her, a redhead with freckles and a basic knowledge of conversational Mongolian, waited for orders. Club soda, raw egg. Before her call she sat in front of her mirror with one hand tucked under her chin. Everything about her was delicate. Aran liked

to say she was his doll—porcelain and pristine—and strictly forbade her to stay out in the sun too long so that her skin would remain white.

The assistant entered after knocking and carried a tray to the table. She smiled as she lowered it down.

“You are so beautiful,” she said. “I can just imagine you in costume right now. Wow!”

Uranchimeg still felt irritated, most likely about the driver’s humming, and so it wasn’t really the assistant’s fault for what she said next, but it didn’t matter.

“I need you to stop talking.”

The assistant blanched. “Sorry.” She let go of the tray as if burned and hurried to the door.

Uranchimeg followed her and shut the door quietly but with enough force to make her point clear. She preferred to be left alone.

## **Jack**

The guys inside the county jail had known Jack for years and so they didn’t ask questions when she arrived, didn’t make jokes, pretended this was everyday business. That’s because they also knew her mother.

Before turning the last corner she clenched and unclenched her fists to help her let off some of the tension building in her body. She walked up to the cell door with an expression of what she hoped was indifference. With the exception of a Goth nurse sulking in a corner and a

girl in a ‘good girls go to heaven, bad girls go to Las Vegas’ shirt asleep on a bench, the cell’s residents were gathered around Jack’s mother.

“And that’s when Jimmy and Janis and I rolled eleven spliffs in a row,” she was saying to her audience of first-grader wannabees. “You know Ram Dass?” No one reacted, but she gave her audience a loaded smile and put a finger to her lips.

“You smoked them all in one go?” A starry-eyed meth head asked through her blackened teeth.

The older woman rolled her eyes, caught up in the moment. “Honey. That was just an appetizer. We then—”

“Mother.”

Bernice turned to Jack and grinned. “My baby!” As she got up she patted one of the women on the head. “We’re done, dears. My daughter’s here to get me.”

With varying sounds of disappointment the women dispersed.

Bernice approached the cell door, heels clicking on the floor. “I know you’re mad, but you have to believe me. It was an accident.”

“Your hands took someone else’s money without your knowledge?”

“Well, no. Not that part.” She managed to look flustered but Jack knew it was a ruse.

“Mother. I’m a cop,” Ah, there went some of her cool. She waved it good bye. “You can’t run around committing crimes. Everyone in this town knows us.”

Bernice raised a manicured finger. Jack noticed that this time her nails had tiny watch gears glued to their purple surfaces. “First of all, because they know me they should show more respect. I’ve been a member of this community for longer than most of them could wipe their

own behinds. Second, I've probably spent millions in their casinos by now and don't you think they owe me something in return?"

"As always, your logic is brilliantly deviant."

Bernice wrapped her hands around the cell bars. "Honey. Why can't you just be happy? Look. I'm in jail, and do I let it get to me?"

"This has nothing to do with me." Jack almost stomped her foot, but she wasn't a kid anymore and her mother didn't have that kind of a hold on her. "Why can't you see this isn't normal. You. Us. It can't continue this way."

"Whoever told you they've got a normal relationship is a lying delusional son of a bi—" Jack's expression diverted her mother from finishing that statement and her face softened once again. "My evening is fully booked today, honey. Can't we just get going and talk this over later?"

"That's another thing," Jack said. "Your business," she finger quoted 'business.'

"What's wrong with helping people?"

"You're scamming them."

"I'm a psychologist! It's a respected profession!"

Jack was losing her cool completely. "A holistic guide isn't the same as a psychologist. It's not even a real occupation."

Her mother shook her head sadly. "Let me out and I'll clean your aura. Tell me then if it's real or not."

Suddenly Jack knew what she was going to do.

"I can't let you out," she lied. "It's not up to me and there's nothing I can do this time."

Her mother's eyes grew big. "But you've always done it before."

“Not this time.” Jack liked seeing the astonishment on her mother’s face, her mother who was always non-fazed by life, who broke the rules and expected Jack to clean up after.

Her mother was yelling for Jack to come back, that she’d never speak to her again, but Jack turned the corner back the way she came and said nothing, except to the guys upfront who owed her a couple of favors of their own (everyone in Vegas metro had a delinquent relative or two), and whom she instructed to keep Mrs. Bernice Pole in a private cell for two days before letting her go.

Surely her mother would finally learn her lesson.



## **Sophronia**

He was a likable guy and Eric's best friends and Sophronia had to keep that in mind as she sat across from Michael listening to his crazy story. The waitress at the Blueberry Hill on Flamingo was patiently hovering nearby because she had already laid down the bill and there was a line of customers out the door. But neither Sophronia nor Michael noticed.

"This crazy ass space television is supposed to save his life?" Sophronia asked.

Michael had already explained that bit, hand-gestures and animation on the back of the bill included, but he did it again with the kind of genuine patience that made it difficult to be mad at him for a long time. "You really don't have to say again how insane this is," he said.

"What else could I say?"

He leaned on his elbows, people eating pancakes at the table behind Sophronia reflected in his glasses. "He's a creative type, right? Everyday solutions or interventions won't work with him. We must jar him out of it. Shock his system back into working order by something as wacky as what he does for a living."

"And telling him he's responsible for a distant planet's annihilation will do the trick?" Sophronia shook her head and looked around as if for support from other customers, but people at the Blueberry Hill, well, they were a happy bunch with their giant plates of bacon and eggs and toast. For the moment all was right in their lives. One writer's well-being and one scientist's madness made no difference. She glared at Michael. "You can't do shit like this to people. You have to tell him."

"But he's already changing!"

"He nearly overdosed at that strip club, Michael," she said. "That's the kind of change you waiting for?"

“But the TV was affecting him, don’t you see? That’s why he ran away to the strip club in the first place.”

“Unbelievable.” The only thing that stopped her from accusing Michael of manipulation and plain cruelty was the fact that she couldn’t question his friendship or his motives. Eric had always been there for him. She wasn’t around when Michael’s house caught fire and he suffered second degree burns over 70 percent of his body, but she knew that Eric stayed with his friend for months, took courses to learn how to care for a burn victim, and *did* that, unconditionally and with complete devotion. And so she didn’t doubt Michael’s loyalty. His sanity? That was another issue all together.

“I watched him before he disappeared for those two days. He couldn’t stop looking at it. And listen to this,” he whispered in excitement. “No, don’t shake your head. Just listen.”

“What?”

He jumped in his seat and used his hands for emphasis, punctuating every word in the air. “When I was there I poured out all the booze I could find, but apparently he had a secret stash in the closet which he started drinking soon as I left. But he never finished.”

“How did you know that?” she interrupted. “All of what you’re telling me right now. How?”

“I have an app on my phone that allows me to see him through a camera inside the tv set.” He fidgeted with the corner of the bill.

“So the other night when I was there—”

“I turned it off at ‘Will you do the Fandango?’” He lifted a hand to stop her and continued. “I created a meteor shower, rather violent, that began to pelt Eric-2 and the longer Eric boozed the more violent it grew and guess what? He started to pay attention. Cussing and

throwing bottles around the room and. Watching. The screen. He didn't finish his stash. He left. That's progress!"

Sophonra felt like slapping him on the face, but knowing Eric, sad new unrecognizable Eric, she couldn't deny the hope that peeked through the clouds. "You sure he cared? Maybe he just wanted to get the fuck out?"

Michael cocked an eyebrow.

"Can you tell it was the TV that upset him? Maybe it was just you butting in."

He cocked his head.

"I can't stop you from doing this, can I?"

"No."

"And if I tell him?"

"He might die soon."

"Asshole," she said, but he didn't react. At least not verbally. The sadness in his eyes reached out and brushed against her own. "But he'll kill us both when he finds out it's all a lie and that you're spying on him."

"I don't give a frack," Michael said with a half smile. He never cursed, even now that he was no longer Mormon. "Do you? I'd rather lose a friend to a grudge than to a bottle of Stoli."

How could she disagree what that logic?

## **Mr. Universe**

No one answered the door. Odd considering the woman had an ongoing chain of visitors most days. She was some sort of a New Agey shrink and that was partially why he'd disliked her all these years. Making a living under the pretenses of having what some would call god-like abilities spoke worlds of the kind of a person who would make a living that way. Sure there were genuines. Sensitives to energies. As it happened, deep down, deeper than the naked eye could see, Mrs. Pole was one of these folk, he didn't deny it. Otherwise he wouldn't make the effort to walk across the road to ask for her help. What irked him was the fact she took money for her services. And also the way she dressed, in tight flowery garments, bright colored and cheerful to the eye. Just the sight of her riled his tempter. The irony of him knocking on her door now did not escape him. He thwarted it and stuffed it in the deepest pocket of his psyche where even he would not later (if there was any justice in this word) be able find it.

A Mercedes SUV the color of a pearl cruised to a stop and a woman came out leaving the engine running. She had a mountain of blond feathered hair and a mask of makeup and walked in heels so high they rendered her awkward.

"Hello there." She waved a bangled hand and approached him. "I'm Lucy. You're the neighbor, right?"

He growled in affirmative. He didn't like the way she drew out the end of 'right'.

"I came to check on her. She still not home?"

Now she did the same with 'home'. He shook his head no.

The woman pressed her hands together just below her chin. "Oh no. How long are they going to keep her?"

"Keep her where?" he said.

Drawing back she blinked her mascara-gooped eyes. “You don’t know? Her own daughter put her in jail and left her there. Can you believe it? I had an appointment to stabilize my fifth chakra today, and I just don’t know how I’m going to survive this day without her. That sweet angel woman!”

Naturally he was immune to female tears, and so he looked away and clasped his hands behind his back. Lucy’s fifth chakra was the least of her problems. Her husband, presently in Phoenix with his mistress, was the foremost. “Too bad,” he finally said, his plan falling like a domino stack. Then after a truly wacky thought he asked, “Which jail was it?”

## **Mrs. Pole**

The day her daughter betrayed her, one of the officers came in and asked her to follow him to a private cell where she would stay for the rest of her sentence. As if. In spirit of comradery for her new friends she had refused, and being older and a cop's mother she eventually won her place in the communal cell. Everyone was really chatty, because she put people at ease. Presently she was listening to a girl from Texas recall how she fell asleep with a hot bong on her stomach and woke up with a scar above her belly button. But in the middle of her story she suddenly grew quiet.

Bernice followed the direction of the girl's stare and herself froze to the bench when she saw him waiting for an officer to unlock the cell door.

When they saw him the girls parted like the sea and not out of anything but apprehension. And this bunch had seen more pimps with sticks than Bernice had seen Mexican telenovelas. The old man exuded menace they surely couldn't decipher and so their minds made the decision to stay out of his way for them, these girls that had hovered over Bernice, hounding her for outrageous gossip about famous folk. Suddenly these girls went mute and meek.

She looked around with a wild expression expecting one of her cell mates to step up, because surely he couldn't have come for her.

But he had.

They walked out of the building together, keeping the customary distance and side-glancing like they had reasons not to trust one another. They did not.

The only explanation Mrs. Pole had still made little sense, but she tried anyway. "Jack sent you, didn't she?" She said. "If this is her way of apologizing I think she could do better than you."

She held a hand above her eyes to shield them from the sun so bright it was bleaching all color out of the world, but he didn't seem to be bothered. The squint was his normal expression. One of her regulars once noted that he might've looked like Clint Eastwood in his younger days, but she disagreed. Eastwood had a soul, a hot smoldering one, behind those pale green eyes. This man was a sheet of sandpaper.

"I got you out," Mr. U said, and he sounded pissed off about it.

At this moment at least part of the situation became clear. She was in his debt. And now she was pissed off, too. "Oh darn it all to Hades' speedos," she said.

Mr. U unlocked his car door, got in and reached across the seats to unlock the passenger side. He drummed his fingers on the wheel. She stopped in the middle of the parking lot with defiance gaining momentum behind her pursed lips.

"I'll call a cab," she said.

"You've got no money," he said through the still open driver side door. "And your daughter doesn't know I bailed you out. Maybe she'll wanna put you right back. I can call her right now and—"

"What do you want?!" She stomped her foot.

She tried to hold on to her dignity, but this was the last man she wanted to owe anything to and it physically hurt to think that she might. Nothing really happened between them to warrant their feud. For years they lived near each other like warring city states guarding their territories. He looked down on her for what she did for a living and she couldn't stand his hobo attitude and attire and the way he sometimes sunbathed in his front yard in his boxers. The sight scared off clients. Other neighbors on their road have come and gone over the years, most of them renters now, and so the two of them and their mutual animosity remained and grew.

Mr. U made a point of turning on the air conditioning so high that it blew his white hair back.

Sweat pooled between her breasts and she cursed under her breath. “Just take me home,” she said and got in. She turned the air vents her way, leaning forward and closing her eyes. But only for a second. “For goodness sake do you have to wear that horribly smelling trench everywhere you go?”

“If you don’t like it, don’t smell.”

“So? What is it? I know you want something.”

He drove off the parking lot and said in a very low mumble. “I’ve got an issue, and, thing is. The kinda issue you might know something about. That’s what I’ve got. Must remain confidential, by the way.”

She turned to him, mouth open. “Am I hearing you right? I might need a hearing aid for this.”

He grumbled. “I need your help with something. There. No big deal. Don’t get ideas. I still don’t like you.”

“Then why come to me?” She was caught between amusement and irritation.

She could actually see him struggle with what he wanted to say.

“It’s a sensitive issue, you see?”

“I see,” she said.



## **Eric**

Eric had always wondered what it would be like to not exist under the very nose of society. This could be why he found himself now in the tunnels under the Vegas strip, where a large community of the city's homeless population had created its own underground world. Years back Eric wanted to write about them, but another writer beat him to it and did a much better job than Eric would ever have. He didn't feel sorry for himself, wasn't why he came here. He felt sorry for those who tried to help him, and unable to deal with his conscience he snuck out of his place, bought a six-pack of Bud and came here. All this after Sophronia brought him home from the club, cleaned the puke off his face, helped him change into clean clothes, made sure he was otherwise comfortable and waited until he fell asleep before leaving quietly. He was a fucking bastard.

He sat propped against a concrete wall, the circle of light at the end of the tunnel to the right glaring like an eye. He could hear traffic above him. All these people, he thought, above and around him, did they too have the cosmos at their mercy? Because if so the universe was screwed to hell. He hadn't expected to think about Michael's claim. But if he were completely honest the television set was the biggest reason he was here. The animated piece of rock on its screen held Eric captive in his own place and he didn't know how to deal with its presence, whether to chuck the TV out the window or sit down and ponder life's meaning. He had no idea why he'd believe Michael's story in the first place, but Eric-2 filled him with doubt and he didn't know what to do with it either.

Eric propped his elbows on his knees and rubbed his face up and down as if that would erase these thoughts from his mind. A man shuffled by. He was tall like a reed and carried a suitcase with rags sticking out of its ripped corners. He gave Eric a nod of acknowledgement. Then he turned around and pissed in his pants, saying through a toothless smile, "Life is what happens to you while you rub your dirty hands all over your face, my good friend."

## **Uranchimeg**

It was the day of the first performance and as always she was not nervous at all. This was due to a well designed routine: Wake up and drink a raw egg, read inspirational quotes from Confucius, go for a walk and watch nature, preferably ducks, eat a small meal, read some more, have a nap, take a warm salt and baking powder bath, get to the theater several hours early, do hair and makeup and test the costumes carefully, all the while use voice only when absolutely necessary.

## **Xavier**

“You kidding me, right?” Xavier said.

Bataar and Robbie had been informed of the routine and were now instructing him to take Mrs. Sendoo to see ducks.

There was something very strange about the woman and about the bodyguards who didn't seem to have anything to guard her against. The gig paid well, though, so he didn't complain. He needed this job. The last one didn't work out. Just thinking about it gave him nervous shakes, so he tried to block the memories from his mind. Now he was in the family business, only marginally better, but his uncle's limo service was an upgrade from the gig before. In order to save money for what he really wanted to do he gave in, telling himself it was temporary. Also she intrigued him. When she didn't move she looked like a porcelain doll. The way she turned her face away when he tried to strike a conversation, nose up in the air, reminded him of the movie he'd recently watched. It was a 1980 Italian remake of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Nothing about her was ordinary. He liked people he couldn't figure out. They were like clock mechanisms and he'd never come across one as complicated as Mrs. Sendoo.

“Ducks?” he repeated.

Bataar nodded, wiping his nose absentmindedly as was his habit. “It part of routine. She need watch them.”

At first he shrugged. Maybe we could google it.” But then he remembered Sunset Park with a giant manmade lake that was home to all kinds of birds.

They went to see ducks together at the Sunset Park. As she strolled down the path that circled the lake she tossed bread crumbs to the birds who gathered around her feet. The body guards followed at a slight distance. Watching them from his seat on top of the limo's hood

Xavier thought two things at once: Bataar and Robbie had better be careful about the coke the carried in their giant gold nugget rings. Vegas cops were unforgiving. And second, he wanted to know if she performed the way she walked—like she wasn't of this world, ethereal, unattainable.

He immediately berated himself, almost disgusted with the amount of attention he paid a woman who hadn't looked straight in his eyes once since he picked her up at the airport. But he couldn't help it.

He jumped off the hood and walked around the limo to fetch some window polish from the trunk. Wax on, wax off, he said to himself in his best Mr. Yoshi voice, but soon his eyes drifted back to the lake.

## Mr. Universe

“Be honest,” Mrs. Pole urged in a gentle tone. “What is it that you really lack in your life?”

“My memory, woman,” he said. “I’ve already explained it to you. I’m losing memories.”

She ignored his brashness. “Of what?”

“Why do I have a feeling you’re treating me like I’m five?”

Mrs. Pole leaned back and spread her hands and studied him from over the rims of a pair of glasses she’d put on moments ago. “We need to be as clear about this as we can. If you don’t know what you actually want how am I supposed to deliver?”

They sat in her ‘office’ surrounded by shelves upon shelves of dragons. Ceramic, glass, yarn, stick, candle wax. The creatures scrutinized him as if they knew his secrets. The room was not too large, some would call it cozy, but the rich hewed fabric on the walls made it look even smaller, making him a little claustrophobic. Their designs varied from Celtic love knots to the eye of David. He had a feeling he was being watched and analyzed from every corner.

While Mrs. Pole waited for him to answer her last question with the patience he would’ve never attributed to someone like her, he sat on an armchair across and wondered for the millionths time if he’d made the right decision. His dilemma was proving more difficult to explain than he’d thought.

“I want you to make me remember who I am,” he said. “And to stop me from forgetting everyday things. Like why I went to the store or how my favorite jeans ended up in the basement.” He couldn’t tell her the truth in its entirety. Not that he also wanted to regain his divinity. How would that sound? ‘Help me remember how to be omnipotent.’ But he believed

that in a sense, recalling everyday human things wasn't too far from relearning how to be a higher being again and logic followed that the remedy would be similar for both maladies.

She blew out her breath. "That's a toughie, mister. Are we being literal here or figurative?"

Frustration was building in his chest. He stood up. "Listen. Maybe I better go."

"Wait," she got up to meet him and reached out, but didn't touch him. Her eyes were filled with worry. "First sessions are always hard. You just barrel through them, I say. Now sit down."

He listened.

"It sounds like you're going through a spiritual crisis, something called The Dark Night. You don't know who you are anymore and you doubt the bits that you know. Nothing makes sense. You can't sleep, you've lost your appetite and you can't relate well to others." She coughed as if that last one held personal meaning. "Am I right?"

"Go on," he said.

She scrunched up her nose and closed her eyes for a sec, moving her fingers across the bridge of her nose. Then she was back. "Here's what I think we should start with. A meditation to open up your chakras, first. It will take several sessions, but the first one is of most significance. It will set in motion the process of renewal."

That wasn't what he expected. "Isn't there a spell or something, a potion?"

"Seriously? Who do you think I am? Madam Blavatsky?" she said, pulling her glasses down the bridge of her nose. He appeared embarrassed and that satisfied her. "It's called a Vivi-Med. A mediation that renews your energies and revives your old self, the pieces you need, mind you."

“Let me get it straight. It’s not a guarantee?”

“Nothing is in this life,” she said. “At your age I would’ve assumed you know that. If you’re meant to be exactly the way you were before you’d never age.”

What’s with this philosophical crap, he wanted to stay, but decided to go with the flow. But really, he despised philosophy. It deterred people from learning the real meaning of life... which he had forgotten about a year ago and now wished he had written down in his notebook. “So what do I have to do?”

She smiled. “I’ll walk you through it several times until you’re comfortable, and then we meditate and hope for the best.”

“When do we start?”

“Hold on there, Speedy Gonzales.” She grabbed a notebook from the coffee table and leaved through it. “I have a full schedule the next two days, and to make up for the time lost due to my daughter’s heartless betrayal—”

A vision of a dark haired woman, a younger version of Mrs. Pole came to him. “She’s not heartless,” he said. “She’s lost... You’ve broken too many promises.”

Mrs. Pole froze mid sentence and started at him as if he’d grown another head. A whole bunch of different emotions flew one after another behind her eyes, and she seemed to be putting a lot of effort into regaining her cool. When she did she swallowed and went back to her schedule. “Lets see... this Friday?”

He stood again. He wanted to leave because he sensed she was on a brink of letting lose some major waterworks, so he hurried to the door. “Good.” That was as close to thanks as he could get.



“One more thing.” She followed him to the front door, flustered and breathing through every word. “You must have other people around you during the final meditation. Their energies will aid you and stabilize the currents.”

“This is supposed to be confidential, damn it.”

“I know you don’t have friends, but what about your tenants? Have a gathering of some sort. They don’t have to know. The meditation will be between you and me but their presence is required for it to have a chance.”

He left, but couldn’t decide if he felt still frustrated or relieved or excited. He shuffled across the road and up the step of his house.

Somewhere inside the phone rang. Perfect timing, he thought.

## Michael

He entered the mouth of the tunnel thinking he should've worn something less likely to get him killed. Not that Michael discriminated against homeless people, but after having been mugged three times in various locations around the valley he should've learned something: Dress well in Vegas at your own risk. This came to him as he parked on the side of the road and walked down to the underpass where Eric's cell phone last gave off a signal. He hadn't thought about exchanging his Gucci loafer for a pair of Nikes before because all of his focus streamed to two things these days: going to work and cranking through ten hour days like a robot, and hoping Eric hadn't hung himself from a tree branch in one of the hundreds of clearings around town. The last concern especially, took precedence over almost everything in Michael's daily life and he, like the mule his mother often compared him to, pressed on with his plan.

Michael found Eric lying on his side, a puddle of piss a foot away from his body. He didn't care to contemplate if it belonged to Eric so he ignored its existence and knelt by his friend.

"Hey man." He nudged Eric on the shoulder.

It took a few more tries to get Eric to response. He grumbled something indistinguishable and sat up with Michael's help. The side of his face he had lay on was covered with dirt, bits of gravel stuck in his beard.

Michael dusted his friend off gently. "Dude, you'd put Grizzly Adams to shame."

"Don't you have other people to pester?"

"Sophronia asked me to find you." This was a partial lie. She did call him in the morning to ask how Eric was doing (following Michael's advice to not bother Eric too much so as not to stir any old emotions he might still harbor for their time together). After Michael said Eric was

fine and sleeping Sophronia invited them both to dinner that night at her father's house. Thinking this might be a good way to distract Eric from his moap-fest Michael followed the GPS signal that led him here. Not that he wouldn't have looked for Eric regardless of Sophronia's invite. It just sped up the process.

"I'm busy today," Eric said, trying to go back to his nap on the cement.

Michael kept his friend upright before slowly pulling him to his feet against the other man's weak protests.

"You haven't paid rent in three months and your landlord hasn't evicted you," Michael said. "And he's still invited you to his dinner party."

Technically, the invite hadn't come from Mr. U, at least not as far as Michael knew, but that didn't matter.

Eric allowed Michael to sling his arm around his shoulder and to lead him out of the tunnel. His protests didn't match his body's compliance to walk and even get into Michael's car, and Michael saw it as a good sign. Solitude was the worst thing for someone in Eric's state, he'd read in a medical journal somewhere. Perhaps a crowd of happy well behaved people was the miracle Eric needed.

## Jack

Jack stormed to her mother's front door and knocked with her fist, the newspaper rolled up in it. Her stomach was pressing up to her lungs making it difficult to breath.

The door opened. Her mother stood behind it and dared to appear startled.

After a flash of relief Jack unfolded the newspaper and thrust it in her face. "What is this?!"

The obituary read:

*The city of Las Vegas lost a gem today. Bernice Emilia Pole was too young to go, but a broken heart carried her gently to her final hour and alone, completely and utterly alone, she crossed into the great divine where surely her grand sense of humor, her sweet charm and caring vivacious nature will be truly appreciated.*

Her mother squinted at the obituary. "I'm taking a writing class honey."

"For fuck's sake mother!"

Mrs. Pole opened the door wider and waited for Jack to come inside. But when Jack didn't move she came out on the porch, managing a pout. "I missed you and you weren't answering my calls."

"Everyone in my precinct thinks you're dead," Jack said. "I had to find out from my boss."

"But aren't you happy I'm not dead? Doesn't it put things in perspective?"

Sometimes Jack wondered how her mother managed to live this long. It was so easy to want to stick her head in the oven and hold it there. The more time passed the more Jack understood why she had been married four times and why all four husbands let her go with sighs of relief.

“Who bailed you out?” Jack would have to have a word with her mother’s secret liberator, preferably inside an interrogation room for long-term effect.

“Why my neighbor.” Her mother gestured at the house across. “Whom I was on my way to see right before you came.” Her eyes lit up and she flapped her fake eyelashes in excitement. “Come with me. We’re having dinner. I know. I’m shocked, too.”

“The same guy who ran over your flower bed last year because you had his palm tree trimmed?”

“He came to see me the other day. All hush-hush. The poor man is plugged.”

“Explains why he’s such an asshole.”

Amazing how with a simple cock of the head her mother could make her feel like a child. Even in her **thirties** Jack wasn’t immune to it.

“You need to have more fun, Jack. Life is a twinkle.”

“Just don’t. I’m so mad at you right now I can’t even listen to your voice without wanting to smash something.”

“I just wanted to get your attention.”

Jack began to walk back to her car. “Don’t call me!”

“For how long?” her mother ran after her.

Screaming in the street wasn’t Jack’s idea of an adult conversation. It went against all of her negotiator training. But she had lost control the moment her boss had sat her down in his office, pushed a box of tissues across the table and announced in a somber tone that he was sorry for her mother’s passing.

The door of the house across opened and a young woman stepped out. She had a huge halo of curly hair; her skin glowed in the darkening daylight. She slowly came down to the driveway. Other people stood in the doorway.

“Everything ok?” she asked Jack.

Mrs. Pole said, “Honey, I’m sorry. Let’s talk about it.”

Jack’s hands were shaking as she pushed the car alarm button on her keychain. When it didn’t work she banged on the side of her car, yanked on the door handle and banged some more. The other woman came closer.

“I have a hanger inside the house,” she said. “You wanna try it or you have a spare key?”

Jack rolled her eyes at her own stupidity. The key. She searched through her keychain. It proved the hardest task in the world.

“Honey,” her mother said from far afar. “You’re overreacting.”

Jack ignored her. She found the key and stuck in into the keyhole with all her strength. It snapped off, and she let out a moan.

The woman said, “The hanger?”

Jack nodded. That’s all she could manage at the time.

“It’s inside the house,” the woman said. She was about to leave but turned half way.

“Maybe sit on the steps if you want. It’s in the closet upstairs so I’ll be a minute or two.” She walked alongside Jack until Jack reached the steps and lowered herself down. Mrs. Pole followed and was about to say something, but the woman gestured for her not to and led her into the house.

Jack was grateful.

The people in the doorway hovered, but no one said anything, and eventually they all retreated back inside the house, all except for the old man who stood half hidden by the doorway.

When the woman returned with a metal hanger and a glass of water Jack's pulse didn't gallop like a wild horse anymore and her hands were more or less steady. She took the water and gulped it down.

"I'm Sophronia," the woman said.

"Jack," she said, putting the empty glass on the step in front of her. "Thank you."

"That loon is my father." She stuck a thumb at the man in the doorway.

"This loon was on the cover of Rolling Stones in 1974," the man called out.

The woman turned around and said, "Dad, check the roast, will you." He left with a hrump.

Jack took a deep breath and looked at the sky.

Sophronia laughed softly and sat next to her, holding her knees like someone much younger. "He only likes me for my food."

"It seems impossible that he knows the meaning of the word 'like,' no offense."

"I'm teaching him," she said. "But it'll take time. Hey. You hungry?"

"I'll probably kill her if we're in the same room right now," Jack said.

"Oh, I know the feeling, trust me."

Jack looked at the woman whose face was tense with uncertainty.

"Please join us," Sophronia said. "I'm really nervous."

## **Dinner and a Toast**

Tension always makes people's voices different from how they normally sound and it makes their eyes shine. Mr. U, Jack, Sophronia, Mrs. Pole, Eric, Michael and Uranchimeg sat around the table eating dinner together. Several tensions swirled around them like a murder of crows.

"This roast is wonderful." Mrs. Pole slowly chewed her food with eyes half closed. "Full of magic."

Sophronia smiled. "You should try my mother's."

"It's full of magic!" Mrs. Pole looked pointedly across the table at Mr. U. "Isn't it?"

"What's that?" he said. Unlike Mrs. Pole he swallowed large mouthfuls and used his hands instead of utensils like a Viking royal. "Oh, yeah. Yes." He delivered unto Sophronia an honest to god nod of approval and her heart almost stopped. "I've eaten half of it myself," he said. "Beyond doubt superior to any piece of meat I've ever had."

The others, except for Uranchimeg who nibbled on a green bean, seconded Mrs. Pole observation and compliments flew across the table.

Feeling left out Uranchimeg chimed in, keeping her voice soft so as not to irritate her vocal chords. "Veg-e-ta-bles wery wery good!"

"Oh come on." Suddenly animated Mr. U gestured at the small bunch of green beans and an even smaller cluster of roasted potatoes nestled on her plate and exclaimed, "Put your back into it girl and eat. If you can't enjoy food your life will feel only half lived." He moved closer and looked deep into her big eyes. "Control is an illusion, you know?"

For a moment everyone went quiet, even Mr. U, as if his outburst was as much a surprise to him as it was to others.



“Now, now,” Mrs. Pole said in a delicate tone. “There are seven of us here tonight. A perfect number to enjoy a memorable dinner.”

Mr. U cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I meant well,” he said to Uranchimeg whose fork had frozen half way to her mouth.

“Sophronia never does anything halfway,” Eric said, volunteering to defuse the uncomfortable moment. “This really is amazing, Soph.” Inside he was still simmering over what happened earlier, not the tunnel rescue bit (though that irked him, too), but the part where Michael shaved him and picked out the jeans and the clean blue t-shirt he now wore. He didn’t want to come down, did only as a thanks to Sophronia for getting him from the club before the cops showed. But once he saw the food on the table hunger enveloped him and he began to salivate like a dog at the sight of a bone. He made his first direct eye contact with Sophronia. “I guess your culinary adventure paid off,” he said.

The others looked puzzled and Michael said, “Soph is an urban nomad. She travels through vocations to learn what kinds of people do certain kinds of jobs and how the work affects them.”

“Is this for you or for research?” Jack asked Sophronia. She liked her. There was a measured tranquility about the woman, the kind she herself could never manage to attain. Sophronia seemed like someone who, no matter the crisis, kept enough distance to not be devoured by it. Although Jack’s police training had taught her how to appear composed and never react aggressively at the core Jack had always perceived this calm to be a temporary deception rather than a healthy state of mind. That’s why so many of her colleagues and maybe herself suffered from PTSD.

Sophronia picked up the bowl of roasted potatoes and sloshed a huge spoonful onto her father's plate. "A little of both. It started off as a fun way to see the world without ever leaving the country, but then I met someone who suggested I put my experiences in a book form." She glanced at Eric.

"This research to be good culture study, yes?" Uranchimeg startled everyone with her observation, even Mr. U who took a break from his plate to note that it's absurd how people assume that foreigners aren't as smart just because they don't speak the language.

"Father, really?" Sophronia swayed back in her chair, hands splayed on the table.

Mrs. Pole interrupted Mr. U's protests of innocents and said with more conviction than before. "Seven guests, my dear neighbor. Let us keep this beautiful pure number intact."

Mrs. Pole's frustration with her newest client climbed the ladder of her tolerance and she used the heel of her shoe to kick it off. They had gone over their respective roles for the evening. They had mediated together several times for practice. He had assured her he was ready. And she waited for him to emit the positive vibes but the old devil couldn't seem to last a couple of hours without making someone miserable. Mrs. Pole regarded these judgmental thoughts from a distance she had taught herself to maintain from her emotional state through hours of spiritual work and breathed in the love in the room, something Mr. U should have been doing as well. Some of this love trickled in from the bolding but cute guy wearing glasses. A love of a brother at arms whose loyalty shone like the North Star on a clear day. Some came off Sophronia who kept adding food to Mr. U's plate. The green-eyed brooding guy on Sophronia's left? Well his energy was all scrambled up and mired by regret, but even he wasn't beyond hope. He was just searching for it out of arms reach instead of closer by. The Asian gal? Mrs. Pole couldn't tell. She was locked up from all sides like a hundred step Japanese puzzle box. And Jack, who hadn't

looked once in her mother's direction, was hurting because she loved too much and didn't know how to handle it.

Slim pickins, Mrs. Pole thought. All the more reason why the old goat needs to get his ass in gear and remember the training.

Mrs. Pole channeled the vigor of the mother earth to enter her from the roots of her feet, and felt it rise very slowly to the beautiful soundtrack of the voices around her. After that last warning Mr. U got the message and started to behave himself. He didn't talk much. Always a good sign.

Once in a while they exchanged glances and he would take a deep breath with a half smile which was an equivalent of a mad grin to the cantankerous. In the back of their minds they periodically chanted,

*The secret to life is to die young but to do it as late as possible.*

By dessert the atmosphere around the dinner table settled into something that resembled comfortable. Even Uranchimeg, after much convincing, agreed to try a sliver of the New York Cheesecake Michael had brought. The universal Mmm! noise she made did not need translation. She hadn't had anything so rich and sweet since she was a child, and the memory of that taste came rushing in, making her giddy as if she had a shot of strong whiskey (this comparison she based on an assumption because she'd never tried whiskey).

Jack, worn down by the geniality of those around her, told a joke about an Irishman drinking for his brothers at a pub. Eric, being an Irishman, defended his people with a five minute toast that included a list of such accomplishments as the invention of radiotherapy, ejection seats, stethoscope, whiskey (Uranchimeg giggled into her hand), as well as the bragging rights to Bono.

All the while Mrs. Pole and Mr. U concentrated on their mutual meditation. This proved more complicated for Mr. U. He had a hard time entertaining guests while visualizing warmth and beautiful lights wrap around him like wings of angels. Every time he lost concentration he looked to Mrs. Pole for support and with a barely detectable nod of encouragement she would provide what he needed. During their training she had warned him that he would not see the results straight away but that for no reason was he to stop the meditation, and so Mr. U turned his mind's eye (whatever it was) to becoming one with the loving energies of those around him and hoped that the strange thing that flashed inside him now and then wasn't joy but cure for his humanness.

## PART TWO

In the basement of the house the energy virga shaped and unshaped itself into various forms until it lifted, arriving at something manageable if modest—a miniature aurora borealis. It slipped between the cracks in the parquet floor and floated through the dark quite, searching. Though its first attraction drew it to the upstairs bedroom where an old entity slumbered in a pair of most ridiculously gaudy yellow pajamas, the aurora hovered and paused, having learned long ago not to trust first impressions. After some deliberation, in a remarkable show of colors (it had glimpsed itself in the dresser mirror) the energy eddied out of the master bedroom and down to the lower levels, still searching.

This Is Going to Be Interesting, was its thought.

## **Eric**

The clock glared 2:11am in bright red. Eric glared back. The last time, it had said 1:11 and the time before that 12:11. He'd felt good during dinner and after but he couldn't sleep, and now it was getting ridiculous. He got out of bed and felt his way to the bathroom, stabbing his toe twice and swearing like a meat market vendor. From the corner of the desk the TV followed his unsteady progress across the room and back in silent blank screen accusation and he resisted the urge to put a hammer to it. How could this be when he'd turned it off long ago? Frustrated with being intimidated by an inanimate object he flopped down on the mattress and turned to face the wall. Even then he felt the thing's despondent glower.

"Unbelievable," he muttered confounded at exactly 3:11. By 5:11 he found himself perched on the edge of the bed, elbows on knees, hands massaging his scalp. Now and then he'd catch himself sneak a quick glance in the direction of the desk.

Somewhere so deep inside that Eric had to really concentrate on it his heart ached with oozing stab wounds of disappointment with himself and with how he was handling his current situation. What stilled his hands was the realization that for once he wasn't thinking about Lily.

On hands and knees he closed the distance between the bed and the TV, sleepwalking, or sleep-crawling. Either way he swallowed back the unreasonable fear of what he might see and reached for the ON nub.

He sat back on his heels. The planet crumbled in slow-motion dismantlement. Its jagged pieces broke off like delicate puffs of smoke and floated into the abyss of cosmos. "No." He pressed his fingers to the screen.

## Uranchimeg

“What is the matter, darling?” Aran said.

“I want to come home.”

Uranchimeg had called him on impulse. That in itself was strange. Normally she treated impulse like a dirty dust rag only her housekeeper touched.

“Has anyone mistreated you? Are the guards respecting your privacy? I’ve ordered that they ride a separate vehicle.”

“They are adequate. It is not that.”

“Are you eating properly?”

“Yes.” Her stomach growled and her eyes flew to it as if a creature from outer space had crawled inside her and was now begging for a snack. “Darling—”

“We can’t break the contract, my love.” There were voices on the other end of the line. “I must go now. In the middle of a meeting with the developers.”

Uranchimeg dropped her phone on the bed and pulled up her knees to her face, wrapping her arms around them. Before long another impulse came over her. She put on her slippers, retrieved her phone, went out the back door of the house into the back yard where a pile of bricks stood leftover from a half finished fire grill. She set the phone on the ground and smashed it with a brick.

Then Uranchimeg went back to her room and slept.

## **Jack**

Jack heard voices. She ignored them. She lived in an apartment building where the grills of the central air-conditioning were a set of brass instruments blaring distorted melodies whenever someone raised their voice above conversational level.

The voices kept her awake for a while. The murmuring in her ears escalated to an indistinguishable hum the more she strained to listen. After some tossing and turning she opened her eyes and flipped onto her side to see the clock: 4:11. “Fuck me,” she said, because it was Sunday, her one day off this week. She lifted herself off the pillow and scanned the shadows of her bedroom. She never left lights on at night and drew shades tight so that even in the morning the room remained impenetrable to sunlight. Not expecting to see anything she fell back to the pillows, but the outlines of the room swam behind her closed eyelids and as she drifted back to sleep Jack wondered what in hell all those people in the corner were doing.



## Michael

"I've killed it," said Eric's voice on the other end of the phone.

Michael started at his cell. Speechless wasn't a state he'd often found himself in.

"Did you hear me?"

"Please tell me you're talking about a roach," Michael said.

"The fucking planet," Eric exclaimed. "I'm a murdering son of a bitch!"

Michael rolled his chair to his computer desk and looked at the screen where Eric- 2  
rotated like the Death Star.

Before last night's gathering, literally right before, Michael was pretty much ready to give up. He was going to back off and let Eric carouse himself to death. The decision came at the moment Eric went off on him for mentioning that he spoke to Eric's agent again who's been unable to reach him. When Eric barked that Michael needed to get laid and leave him be the haze of obsession over Eric's situation lifted and everything fell in its place. After leaving Mr. U's house Michael wanted to do something spectacular, just for the heck of it, to see if anything at all bothered Eric anymore.

Maybe he overdid it a little.

One elbow on the desk Michael rubbed his temple. "I'm sure you're overreacting," he said.

"Just come down here. Now."

"Jesus. It's six in the morning."

"Now Michael."

The phone went dead.

Eric had been right. He had nothing of his own and he needed to change that. Right after he explained to Eric that the whole Eric-2 thing was a hoax.

## **Bernice**

Was it unusual to have the very first appointment of the day be at 7:30 in the morning? Yes. But Bernice was a professional ready to assist those of her clients who needed the extra attention.

She answered the door with a smile on her face unwavering even when her neighbor barged in wearing yellow pajamas and an all too familiar scowl of disdain.

“It didn’t work,” he said.

It was still early enough for the weather to be tolerable and breezy and she had been sitting out in her back yard by her pool drinking her morning coffee. She had mentally prepared herself for this.

“Come outside with me.” She waved him beyond the curtains covering the French doors waving in the breeze.

“No,” he said. His chin jutted out.

In the kitchen she made an iced Coffee Frappe just the way one of her Greek friends taught her the last time she visited Athens. She put a straw in it. “Yes,” she said and tipped her head to the doors as she went.

He followed. Outside he scrutinized the lawn chair she indicated for him to sit in as if it was a spy to be interrogated but in the end gave in. Even took a sip of the drink.

“What happened?” she asked once they were both sitting down.

“Nothing,” he said. The statement came in a form of an accusation, accompanied by a formidable squint.

She noted for the first time since they’d known each other that the number of expressions her neighbor had in his arsenal could rival a pantomime.

He went on. "I slept too long. Now my morning routine is all out of whack. Went downstairs to get my jell-o and everyone's awake. The Gucci fella's knocking on the door, the Asian girls running around in her sleepwear, Sophronia's cleaning the kitchen. I tell her to go away and she ignores me. No privacy in my own damn house! And you know what else?"

"I never promised miracles."

"I can't remember where I put my coat."

"Maybe you need to give it time," she said. "You do remember about being patient, don't you?"

Mr. U downed his coffee, slammed it on the table and left with a huff only someone his age could manage without appearing too melodramatic.

## Michael

They'd been at it for hours. Michael had several chances to tell Eric the truth, but the way Eric went on about his insignificance as a man who just might (might with a dozen question marks mind you) be responsible for the very equilibrium of the universe itself, well, Michael couldn't bring himself to do it. His plan was finally working.

"I'm speaking hypothetically here," Eric was saying.

"Of course," Michael said, trying not to sound too giddy. It really was working!

"But I feel a connection." Eric paused. "And I don't know if it's me finally going nuts or if this is a dream I can't fucking shake off."

"Wait, what?"

Eric had been making wide circles around the perimeter of the room, something he did when thinking or talking on the phone. He stopped and bit the fingernail of his right thumb, eyes darting between Michael and the TV. "Take it with you," he said.

All of Michael's hopes and dreams sank like the titanic and he bobbed up and down on the waves of utter confusion.

He was sitting on one of the two bar stools by the kitchenette counter, but he hopped off suddenly feeling the urge to pace like Eric had done earlier. "I thought you were connecting. That you could feel a sense of responsibility for all living things."

"That's why I want you to take it."

"I don't understand."

Eric grabbed Michael by the shoulders and shook him. "I'm a fuckup, but I'm not an ignorant fuckup. I know what you're up to—"

Michael swallowed. "Yeah?"

“—but watching this thing only proves that I can do nothing but destroy things.”

“That’s a real cynical way of looking at things.”

Eric shrugged and let go. “Mr. Obvious at his best,” he said. “I know you were expecting redemption, but I’m not one of your projects, Michael. You can’t make me do things at the sound of your bell.”

One would think this would be the perfect time to come out with it, but something held him back. Maybe it was the way Eric glanced at the television, the way a criminal does at the one man in the back of the courtroom with all the secrets. Maybe he was too confused to know what to do at this moment. After all it’s not every day that one has to choose between the possibility of a badly severed friendship and an opportunity to delay the thing that would sever it. But the reason Michael didn’t crack was probably this.

“If you want it out why is it still here?” he asked.

“What?”

Eric immediately crossed his arms high over his chest.

“You’ve had plenty of opportunities to toss it,” Michael said. “It’s not even that heavy. Look.” He went over to the desk and demonstrated, lowering the TV down after he made sure Eric saw him lift it with ease.

“Does it really matter?” Eric said. “It’s yours. I figured you’d need it for something.” But his voice wavered and he wouldn’t meet Michael’s eyes for longer than a split second.

Michael went over to the door and said, “If you don’t want it, you know where the dumpster is.”

“Get back here Michael!”

He slammed the door and hurried down the staircase and out of the house before Eric could drag him back in.

## Uranchimeg

Impossible but there it was. For the first time in ten years she was going to be late to her own concert. In a mad dash about the room she collected the stage jewelry too valuable to leave at the theater into an embroidered cosmetics bag and jammed it into her purse, dropping it twice as she scrambled down the stairs to where her driver waited. The guards gave her curious looks but said nothing while she got inside the limo. They walked to their car idling a few feet away. Aran would know about this by the end of the day, she was certain.

“Everything okay?” the driver asked. It didn’t seem to bother him that she didn’t acknowledge the question. Whistling a tune he pulled out of the driveway.

Shame crept upon Uranchimeg. How could she have slept for ten hours straight and not heard the three alarms she’d always set as a precaution? Her throat burned and she willed it to relax, breathing deep and visualizing a meadow with beautiful flowers swaying in the breeze and white horses galloping. It was a familiar place she went to as part of her pre-performance routine, usually during her bath, but there was something different about it this time. In the middle of the meadow now stood an unfamiliar sight, a log cabin. She walked to it and the front door opened, a delicious aroma beckoning her inside. This aroma belonged to a large roast crisscrossed and studded with cloves that sat upon a table with a pristine white tablecloth. All around it were dishes she recognized: grilled eggplants and tomatoes, marinated beets covered with onion and chopped parsley, bowls of caviar red and black and her favorite—deep fried zucchini flowers! But Uranchimeg only had eyes for the roast. In its magnificence it glistened like a meaty piece of paradise. With a war cry Uranchimeg jumped up on the table and sunk her teeth into the roast’s crispy surface. Juices ran down her chin. She closed her eyes and moaned with pleasure.

“Wake up Mrs. Sendoo.”



Someone shook her by the shoulder and she started to complete wakefulness, looking around, disoriented and lightheaded.

The driver was leaning over his seat. “We’re here,” he said, then narrowing his eyes added, “You want me to take you back home?”

Uranchimeg couldn’t speak.

He reached up to her face but stopped just short of touching her. “You’ve got some...” He tapped at the side of his own mouth. “Right there.”

Flustered Uranchimeg ransacked her purse for a mirror, but he came back with a tissue.

“Here,” he said. “It’s not a big deal, really. I drool all the time.” When he realized how that sounded he straightened and put both hands on the wheel, but not before Uranchimeg saw his ears turn red. He cleared his throat. “Sorry.”

Mortified she dabbed at where he had indicated.

“Your sentries are coming,” she heard him say from the front seat.

Before the guards could reach the limo the door flew open and the assistant director’s face appeared. Charles’ features were tight with worry. “I can’t believe this,” he said. “Mrs. Sendoo. This is Vegas. A late show means a no show. We have twenty minutes before the curtain call. Why are you still sitting there? Archie is gonna have my head for this! I can hear him saying, Why Charles. Where has our royal highness, our diva gone off to? Why Archie, I have no idea. She could’ve called and warned me but she can’t seem to find her cell phone under all that snootiness. This is America, missus. Even Oprah has to work for her meal.”

Uranchimeg scrambled across her seat, unable to get out because Charles was blocking her with his fury. Though, the only person she could think of disappointing was Aran, and the thought dosed her like a bucket of icy water.

The driver had come around and was holding the door open. He pulled gently on the man's shoulder and in response the assistant barked at him to better watch it.

Meanwhile the guards remained where they were, watching the exchange like a pair of overfed bears.

"It was my fault. The Charleston ramp was closed again," the driver said. "I had to take the detour—"

"Look amigo." The assistant stuck a hand in the driver's face as if preparing to say, talk to the hand. "Do your job from now on and get her here on time."

Uranchimeg got out of the car, feeling like she'd landed on an alien planet where even the air tasted different. She saw Charles withdraw his hand from the driver whose expression went stone cold.

"Hey," the driver said in an eerily calm voice that made him look older. "It won't happen again, but show the lady some respect."

Charles hurried to put some distance between them and ushered Uranchimeg to the back door, speaking in hushed tones about the importance of punctuality in their business. She was only half-listening, still in a bit of a daze. She gave the driver a backward glance. He tipped his hat.

## Sophronia

Sophronia tapped her foot. Her father's face was inches away.

"And I said I don't want to," he said.

She clenched her teeth. "It's good for you."

It was shocking to see him walk into the radio station lobby. Not once in the past three years had he ever set foot in any place Sophronia worked. And to keep with the tradition of never doing anything half-heartedly he walked in hollering at the front desk receptionist to get his daughter to the lobby now. Sophronia had fifteen minutes before she had to go on air. Great timing. Not so great content.

At the concerned looks of her coworkers who hovered and hid behind their glass office doors Sophronia tried to get her father to follow her to hers, but inspired to make a scene he dug in his heels. Maybe she shouldn't have allowed her good mood lead her earlier that morning to go shopping for him? Only that the dinner the night before had gone so well that she wanted to retain that feeling of closeness—of family—with the one family member who resisted closeness at all possible cost.

He planted his feet in the middle of the lobby, hands on hips, trench flapping like a cape. "I like my ice cream. I like my jell-o. I like my bacon. I like my Gin. I—"

She held up a hand. "I get it."

"Then why have all those items gone missing from my fridge?"

"Your diet is terrible and you will get diabetes if you don't change it and if someone doesn't change it for you you never will. What's the matter with you anyway? It's not that big of a deal."

"I'm in a rotten mood already." There was a pout.

Sophronia went for a gentler approach, but he cut her off before she could finish a sentence.

“I don’t want to,” he shouted and looked around in triumph. King of the jungle.

“Too late. They’re gone and ain’t ever coming back,” she said, and was about to storm off when her boss, eyes full of wonderment, crossed the lobby in a sort of a daze.

“Excuse me, Sophronia.” Phil gawked at her father. “But isn’t it...”

“Dad meet boss. Boss-dad.”

Mr. U gave a small nod.

Phil looked up into his face in awe. He was very short compared even to Sophronia who was only 5.4. “Talbot Rider is your father?” That last part escaped in a whimper, as if he was about to hyperventilate.

“Move along, Phil.” Sophronia said.

Phil had the countenance of someone half his age. “I can’t believe this, man. You were... you are my idol. I have all of your vinyls and 8-tracks. “Walking and Throbbing. Who’s Got the Blow? Pussy Knees.”

Her father’s ice cap of madness began to melt. He didn’t appear to mind the little man fawning over him like a prepubescent fan boy. He grunted in approval, answering with a pronounced British accent that surfaced whenever he reminisced about the old rocker days. “Oh, aye that one. Limited edition.”

“Aha, yeah I know.” Phil nodded in rapid succession. “I sold my entire Thundercats action figure collection for it.”

Mr. U stuck out his lower lip. “Impressive.” He tapped Phil’s chest with the back of his hand and fixed a stare at Sophronia. “You see? That’s what I call real devotion. Respect!”

She nodded in rapid succession. “Aha, yeah, I don’t think so. Phil will you give us a minute?”

Phil dropped his hands to his sides, forlorn, but before he left he fired out exactly what Sophronia had hoped he wouldn’t. “Mr. Rider. Would you consider an on air exclusive interview? Your fans would be ecstatic. So much love for you out there.”

Sophronia watched thoughts work their way across her father’s face. She could literally see his recluse self doing some heavy mental lifting.

“It’s probably not a good idea,” she said. She’d found his pills in his medicine cabinet a while back, but didn’t say anything because she respected his choice of not sharing the fact that he was seriously ill. Instead she looked up the meds. Coumadin for blood clots. ARBs for blood pressure. Prozac for depression. Memantine, an anti-dementia drug. That last was a real shocker. The list went on. Sophronia cried all night after discovering his stash, and the next morning she tried talking to him, but he avoided the conversation and in the end she was just as frustrated as before, if not more. Since then every attempt to talk was met with snorts and whispers under breath about lawns in need of raking. All she could do was her own research, which clearly advised against excursion and overexcitement of any kind.

But soon as she said it wasn’t a good idea her father, who’s obviously been sensing her attempts to help him, turned to Phil and said, “Book it my boy!”

## **Jack**

Somehow Jack had fallen asleep on her dinner host's living room couch and didn't wake up until the early sunlight poked her in the eye through the bay window. She never understood the appeal of uncovered windows. It was like standing naked in front of the world, shouting, Look what I've got, everyone!

She was too grumpy to be mad at her mother for leaving without her, so instead she drove to the nearest Starbucks and ordered their grande Honey Nut Cheerios Frappuccino with extra whipped cream. This way she could soothe the irritation and have breakfast on her way to work all at the same time. The muscles on the back of her neck pulled tight and she rotated her head in a circular motion, ignoring the guy in the next car over who smiled lasciviously at her attempt to massage herself and did 'feeler fingers' in the air. On a different day she would've cuffed him. Would've busted his light first and then cuffed him. But this morning Jack found it easier than usual to let things fly. She turned away and took a long satisfying sip of her frappe.

When she walked into the police station she was glad that at least she had on dark wrinkle-free pant suit. Thank goodness for acrylic/polyester blends! It was only seven or so in the morning but the place hummed with activity. It was too early for it to buzz, but most chairs were already occupied. Vegas criminals, just like the rest of the professionals in the city, operated in three shifts. It was a twenty-four hour place in all respects.

Jack wound her way to the restroom. She bent over a sink, splashed her face with cold water, tried to brush her teeth with her index finger. One of the stall doors opened and a woman came out. Tammy Kissinger, a homicide detective freshly transferred out of Huston, smiled at her. Jack smiled a hello back.

“My allergies are kicking my ass?” Tammy said. She leaned over the sink in front of the large mirror and dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a tissue. “How can you stand all the dust?”

“You get used to it,” Jack said. Grabbing a handful of paper from the wall dispenser she dried her face.

“So it goes away after a while?”

“Oh, no. You just get used to the sandpaper feeling in your eyes and the sinus infections.” She was about to answer Tammy’s question about the best sushi in town when she heard someone call out her name. Her eyes jumped from the door to her coworker. “Who the fuck is that?”

“Who?” Tammy looked around.

A man’s voice shouted, “Jack Mullins. Detective Jacqueline Mullins!”

“You hear that?”

Tammy strained an ear in the direction of the door. “No.”

There it was again. Jack didn’t recognize the voice. She stepped out of the restroom with caution. One never knew if someone you put away came for revenge. It happened before. There were people everywhere, but most of them Jack knew on sight: The cops and the ‘robbers’ who were more often than not regulars. Jack searched the faces. Then she found him. He stood in the middle of the floor, hands cupped around his mouth.

“Jack Mullins where are you?” His massive belly rose with the force of his bellow. Not a single person paused or lifted their head.

“Hey,” she approached him with a hand on the back of her waist. “What can I do for you?”

The man beamed down at her as if she was the only person who'd ever made him happy. He spread his arms in a gesture of delight.

"There you are."

"Do we know each other?"

"Could we talk somewhere more private?"

She led him to her desk, watchful of any sudden movements.

With a sign of relief he lowered himself into the chair across from hers. He barely fit. He was plump, red-haired and he wore a knit hat with ear muffs. His face was sunburned and wind burned at the same time, red and dry. He extended one gloved hand across the desk.

"I've been searching for you. Ms. Mullins. I'm Mr. Bean." He had a wheezy voice of an asthmatic.

"Mr. Bean?" she repeated with an even voice. He didn't look the part.

He winked. "I had the name first."

"I'm sorry," she said, realizing how foolish her reaction was. Totally unprofessional. She laced her fingers together on the desk to help herself feel better. "How can I help you. Mr. Bean."

"Don. Call me Don. Might be easier for you." He winked again and made her blush. "I'm here about an old Jane Doe case."

Jack leaned back, relaxing into her job now. "I don't usually handle those, but I can find someone who can take your statement."

"No, I was waiting for you and I kinda got to be quick," he said with a quick glance back at the lobby. "To be honest."



If she talked too much she knew he might bolt. Jane Doe witnesses didn't turn up much, but when they did they were jackrabbits. One minute you see them the next you're lucky if you ever find them again.

"Of course."

Don reached into the front pocket of his pants and pried out a pink faux snakeskin wallet. He laid it on the table and pushed it toward Jack.

"I swiped this off a girl some time ago. Then a coupla' days after, I saw her on the news. Someone stabbed her to death and dumped her body in the wash, and the newsman said she had no id on her, so they couldn't find who she was."

He looked down at his lap, and Jack? She sat up straighter, thinking what if he's not a witness but a killer? She tried to catch the attention of her partner, Mike, who sat at the desk nearby talking on the phone, but he wouldn't look up from the pad he was scribbling on.

Don's shoulders began to shake. "You know I wanted to come in, to give it back so you could find her family."

"You're here now. That counts."

Tears streaked the man's big cheeks. "I only wanted the money. I took it from her purse down on the strip and ran." He broke into another sob. "That makes me the last person to see her alive."

Jack offered him the tissue box sitting on the corner of her desk. "So you weren't involved in her murder?" Maybe she shouldn't have asked him that, but it was that kind of a morning. She watched closely for his reaction.

He gave her an appalled gawk and said with conviction that made his ear warmers quaked. "I'm a Vietnam vet. The last time I killed was to save a soldier."

“I’m sorry. But why didn’t you come forward earlier?”

“A homeless bum like me would’ve stood no chance. They would’ve never believed I didn’t do it.”

Jack took the wallet. It felt new, like it hadn’t been opened a lot. When she looked up Don was on his feet, wiping his cheeks with the back of his hand.

“I gotta go now, but I hope you can find her family. I hope it’s not too late.”

He stared to lumber away.

“Wait,” Jack said. “I have more questions.” But he kept walking. She went around the desk and ran after him as he hurried across the room and through the hallway leading to the front desk.

Jack lost him in the parking lot.

Digested she came back and retrieved the victim’s driver’s license from the wallet. The woman in the picture was a pretty blond, all smiles that creased the corners of her eyes like she meant it. Jack typed in her info on the screen and the file came up right away. The murder happened several years back. No suspects. Next she typed the name Donald Bean, and sure enough he had a criminal record longer than Paris Hilton’s grocery list. She read through the narcotics and burglary charges, parole violations and a dispute that lent him in a mental institution for a while, until she reached the most recent entry made only two months ago:

Donald Preston Bean. Age seventy-two. Deceased.

## **Xavier**

Before he killed himself with a .20 gauge shotgun in their parents' bedroom, Xavier's father used to say that his only son wasn't like everyone else. This ain't a good thing, he said. In this world, he said, you've got to keep your feet grounded even when you're asleep. If not you're fucked. Maybe he was. Fucked, that is. It would explain why after Charles the assistant director dragged Mrs. Sendoo away from the limo and to the back door, he waited for the bodyguards to drive away to get lunch before sneaking into the theater. Now he hid up in the part of the balcony sectioned off for the lighting crew. Only because he wanted to make sure she was alright. Which was probably stalker behavior. He's father would've whapped him over the head for being fucked for sure.

Once he saw her walk up on stage he let go of the death grip he had on the balcony railing. The audience applauded, someone shouted her name and a few whistled as she came center stage and took a slow graceful bow, the beaded tassels on either side of her elaborate headdress falling forward like tiny red waterfalls. She was dressed in a traditional Mongolian costume (Xavier had Googled Mongolian culture several days ago and watched some Netflix documentaries, every one consisting of slightly various version of Genghis Khan's life.)

Her cool composure suggested she was just fine and he had worried for nothing. Most women he knew would've gone into a fit after being treated the way Phil had treated her. Okay. A slight over-exaggeration based solely on personal (female relatives and one ex girlfriend who liked to pitch ashtrays across rooms) therefore biased experiences. But hell, even he was still fired up over the whole thing. Repeatedly he imagined ripping the assistant director's head off his scrawny neck and shoving it up his ass in slow mo' so that no one but himself could hear the bitching.

The lights dimmed and the music began to flow. In addition to an orchestra at the foot of the stage, there was a small group of musicians he hadn't noticed before, sitting on a raised platform stage left. They played string instruments Xavier had never seen before, but the sound was somehow familiar, primal and steadfast like a childhood lullaby. Then she began to sing. At first he wasn't sure. Her lips hardly moved and the sound of her voice glided in a subtle rising motion never seeming to break for breath. It passed through him like a wave, and then it seemed to break into surf, a full throaty sound that gave him goose bumps. He sat down and closed his eyes.

## Uranchimeg

What were the chances that two days after the dinner party there was still some cheesecake left? Most likely none, Uranchimeg mused, tip-toeing down the stairs in the middle of the night.

Once again she couldn't sleep. Aran had called the day before and asked if there was a reason she had been late the other day. That's exactly how he said it:

"Was there a reason why you arrived late to the concert, dear?" The 'dear' did nothing to soften the disapproval in his clipped words.

Uranchimeg admitted she was tired.

"Should I come join you?"

"No," she quickly answered. "I'm fine."

He paused. "Perhaps you are simply homesick, as you said before. Or moody, depressed"

She sensed he was testing her. He was always testing her.

"Of course I am homesick, but I have done this many times before. I know how to handle it."

"Tell me what happened," he said. "Maybe I can help you isolated the trigger."

She gave him a slightly altered version of the day's events and completely omitted the part with the driver having words with Charles.

"I'm surprised at your landlord. I had particularly instructed him to not bother you."

It had been a mistake to tell Aran about the dinner. "He's not too bad. He doesn't bother me at all?" Even despite the man's strange comments about her eating habits and race

Uranchimeg held no animosity for him. He was old and old folk tended to forget how to censor their words.

“From what I understood the man is a recluse.”

“Most of the time he is.”

“You either are a recluse or you’re not,” Aran said with impatience, than added.

“Concentrate on your work, darling. You only have a couple of weeks left on our contract. They money has already been transferred. Don’t spend your energy on people of no consequence.”

“Of course,” she said, but her thoughts wondered away from the rest of what Aran was saying like a boat no longer fettered to the harbor.

Later that night she lay in her bed thinking that the most unsettling thing about the day of sleeping in was the driver’s confrontation with Charles. Unsettling in an exciting way.

Uranchimeg tossed and turned the way she had never done before. She was quite unused to insomnia, and her insomnia had her driver’s face. She tossed the covers off and sat up. In one swoop she got up and cracked open the door of her room, listening to the night noises of the house.

And that’s how she found herself sneaking to her landlord’s downstairs kitchen refrigerator and back up the stairs with the cling wrapped leftover cheesecake tight in her grip. Being a vegetarian didn’t factor into this act. Hopping on the bed Uranchimeg unwrapped the cake and gobbled it up so quickly she still yearned for more before the last bite. There were crumbs left in the plastic and she used her tongue to lick them off.

Only after she was done did she stare down at her hands with a combination of horror and contentment. Before she could think it through she went back down the stairs in search of meat.

## **Sophronia**

Sophronia tried to talk her father out of the radio interview. It went something like this.

Hey U. Can we talk about the interview thing?

You have no idea what it's like to be everything and watch yourself turn into nothing.

Is that what all washed up rock stars say? Rather shallow, don't you think?

Ahh...I know what this is. This is payback because you think I'm a racist, but it won't work because first of all, I am not a racist and second, I need this air time.

Why? You planning a comeback?

Make fun all you want but my fans have been shorted far too long.

I though you hated people.

I've changed my mind.

## **Jack**

In spite of what most of her coworkers thought Jack had a fun streak. In college she lived with three roommates. Alice was a music education major, Brianna a sports education major, and Mimi undecided. The combo made for memories some of which Jack still claimed to have blocked out but was in the process of eradicating from her mind for eternity. Every college student carries two reputations: one of personal nature, developed from a combination of habits and character traits, and another dependent solely on their discipline of choice. That Alice only dated Jazz musicians was no coincidence. They said things like, ‘My heart rings like a bell for you, baby’, and made it sound like a love confession. Alice’s groupie personality thrived on the boom of those bells. Brianna’s meat of choice was always something sturdy, but only the elite-jock kind, meaning that not only could they cap a six-and-a-half-minute drive with the game-winning touchdown pass with 15 seconds remaining but they could also write a mean research paper on the effects of Creatine on a professional athlete’s workout routines. Mimi jumped from members of one major to another with a pounce instinct of a Siberian mink. Jack, a sociology major, always went for the biologists who were wilder than they let on because they carried a streak of the God’s gene in them (or so they believed). This gene allowed them to see the world for what it was— a clusterfuck of sequences triggered by a mechanism of protons and neutrons. These guys were the most tainted of the lot, freely surrendering to their impulses because let’s face it, one can’t argue with nature, only obey its will.

The four kept in touch, but Alice was the only one who still lived in Vegas and it was to her house that Jack drove one evening claiming her condo building was being fumigated and she needed a couple of night to crash somewhere.



Alice lived in a house with glass walls on top of a fancy upper East Vegas hill overlooking the Strip. The post-modern streamlined architecture of the house made Jack feel like she was a shell crab in an aquarium, only she didn't have a shell to hide in.

Alice was the creative director for Las Vegas Entertainment Group, the company that managed most of the evening shows around town. She married a juggler whom she also managed. He had his own show on the Strip, but at the present he was doing a stint in Qatar for a prince's cousin who was paying him a year's worth of salary for a month. Practically a jazz musician, she'd whispered with a conspiratory wink on her wedding day when Jack, per her maid of honor duties offered to hold the bouquet during the ceremony.

Popping a home-made pizza into the oven Alice straightened and said, "I'm doing it, Jack. Day after tomorrow. We'll be live on News 5 at 3 pm sharp and don't you dare not watch or I'll never speak to you again."

Jack groaned. "You're not serious. Okay. I can see you are, but it's just so dumb."

"If you mean it's so bum than I agree." Alice stuck out her hip and touched her index finger to her butt. "This here, my dear, is a genuine work of art and must be celebrated."

Alice's work of art was going to be celebrated in a city organized event called The Grand Butt-oodles Chain—the world's longest butt lineup.

"I give up on you," Jack said. "How have we ever lasted this long? We have nothing in common."

"So how's work?" Alice changed the subject without blinking and poured them both a glass of red. They were sitting at the kitchen bar that could've been a mirror. In its surface Jack looked haggard. Yes, her mother would use that exact word and it would fit.

"I'm good," she said, taking a gulp of the wine.

“Now see? Right there,” said Alice, “is the kind of bullshit people say when they want you to pry and I’m not the prying kind so give up the fucking deets or I swear the fuck I’m gonna come to your place of employment and tell everyone you dated a convicted bank robber.”

“I didn’t know that when we dated!”

Bobby happened early on in Jack’s career. The sex was mind-blowing, but then turned out he had a penchant for explosives. That’s how he got into the bank vaults around the valley. The guy was still on the FBI’s most wanted list, but Jack didn’t follow the manhunt.

“Spill,” said Alice.

“It’s mom,” Jack said. She wasn’t quite lying. The jail break and the consequent obituary still irked her. She couldn’t really come out and say that she’s been seeing dead people. Not even Alice could handle that. Shit, she couldn’t either.

Alice softened and patted Jack’s hand. “Oh, hon. What has she done this time?”

Jack gave her the short version of the recent events. At the story of the bingo parking lot chase (as retold by the security guards) Alice sputtered wine all over the counter and coughed non-stop for at least three minutes. When Jack was done her friend looked straight in her eye and said, “Your mother is the wackiest most eccentric off the wall contradictory human being I’ve ever known, and frankly I’m surprised you guys are still talking after all the crap she’s put you through over the years.”

The way she said it, Jack suspect there was a punch line.

“But.” And there it was. “I’d give anything for a fight with my mother. Hell. I’d make me deliriously happy to not speak with her for years.”

Four years ago Alice’s mother died of leukemia.

“I’m really sorry,” Jack said and propping herself up in her stool hugged Alice across the counter. “I can be so fucking insensitive sometimes I even offend myself.”

Alice pinched her cheek with a sad smile. “No, I’m sorry. This wasn’t about me. SO when are you gonna tell me what all this really all about? Are you hiding from a lover? Is it that NARC with a hipster beard? Don’t shake your head at me. Fumigating your condo, you say? I call bluff!”

Jack didn’t tell Alice about the dead. Not even when they had gone through two wine bottles. They ate homemade pizza and watched 34 Inch Chest—a film Alice swore would make Jack want to move to England and date a gangster. It was close to 2 am when they hugged good night. The world outside had long since disappeared with only the reflection of Jack and Alice sitting in the living room straight out of an IKEA catalog under accent lights that looked like drops of cougar suspended from thick black cords. Jack walked down the hallway lit with a single night light low to the ground. In the doorway of the guest bedroom a figure stood waiting for her. Jack wasn’t afraid. Something peculiar about that, because according to Hollywood and personal anecdotes everyone was always terrified of ghosts.

“Hey there, Jacky,” said Alice’s mom.

After a brief hesitation Jack entered the bedroom and closed the door. If Alice heard her talking to herself she’d come to investigate. No doubt about that.

“Long time no see, Mrs. Boulton.”

## Sophronia

Driving home from her shift at the radio station Sophronia listened to a new demo a local artist sent her. The digital clock said 2:11am and although the streets at this time of the night were almost deserted Sophronia preferred a little mood music to keep her alert. In the car is where she ‘auditioned’ local artists to appear on her show and strut their stuff. Nowadays everything came in digital form, but this girl went old school and mailed a CD with Poppy Morgan scribbled in black sharpie. This track was a remake of Ane Brun’s “Undertow”: an acoustic version played completely on a cimbalom. Intrigued by the choice of instrument and by the singer’s rich, vibrato-dappled voice Sophronia listened to the song twice before reaching her condo in the Green Valley— one of the nicer Las Vegas neighborhoods with signs of playing children that announced it was one of the funnest cities in the US. She carried her bags of groceries up the stairs and set them on the kitchen table. Caterwaul jumped up on its surface and sloped his body under Sophronia’s hand for a mandatory petting.

“Hey baby Cat.” She obliged, stroking him under the chin when he stretched with his front and hind legs miles long. He was a giant black cat who understood everything that’s ever been said to him.

Sophronia listened to the CD while she put the groceries away. She’d heard the song before but this girl carried the lyrics up to Sophronia’s ear like a tiny wristwatch. I’m caught in your undertow, she started to sing along. *Let me rise.*

Caterwaul walked circles around her legs, hungry for attention and a bowl of milk.

In the middle of pouring the milk Sophronia’s vision blurred. She steadied herself, hands on the kitchen counter, looking straight ahead trying to breathe the spell away, but it stayed put along with Caterwaul who hopped up on the counter and pushed his head into Sophronia’s arm.

A single thought took over her like an unfurling sail. Something was wrong with Eric. Not that anything wasn't wrong with him, but this time she knew for a fact.

She shook her head to get rid of this thought, and picked up her phone to check for messages, just to distract herself. That's how she came across instagrams of Eric, surrounded by unfamiliar faces smoking crack. "Oh, you dumshit." Sophronia said, reading the location under the images. She clicked off the cell and tossed it back in her purse, looking around for something that would require exhausting physical labor. But already she was trying to map out the fastest driving route in her head.

"I don't want to do this anymore," she told herself. She whispered versions of this and jumped up and down stomping her feet in place in an attempt to shake away the ominous feeling. It was Eric's life and he made it clear he wanted no involvement from her. Caterwaul let out a long powerful meow. She looked around surprised she hadn't noticed when he'd gone from her side to the front door. Tail wrapped around his paws, his emerald eyes shone up at her in expectation.

"Traitor," she told him and got her purse, dialing Michael's number on her way out.

## **Jack**

This time was different. This time Jack wasn't half asleep or tired and there was nothing to explain away her friend's dead mother.

"I'm not a figment of your imagination," said Mrs. Boulton. "In case you're wondering."

She wore a light blue two piece suit threaded with gold thread, the dress she was buried in. A string of family pearls, old as the old west, flashed a muted white in the moonlight soaking up the bedroom's gloom. The giant full moon was so bright that every corner of the bedroom was visible.

"Doesn't make this any less bizarre," Jack said.

Mrs. Boulton laughed softly. The sound reminded Jack of grilled garlic butter corn she used to make for Thanksgiving dinner. Jack's mother didn't celebrate historical dates. Her idea of Thanksgiving was something she called Anti-Thanksgiving when she served things like frybread, succotash and green chili stew to celebrate the indigenous peoples of the Americas. All the same November was Jack's favorite month, even when she grew up, because she celebrated Thanksgiving and Anti-Thanksgiving all in one day.

Mrs. Boulton kept her distance, hands clasped in her lap.

Noticing this Jack took an instinctive step closer. "Is this your first time, too? I mean coming back. Talking to someone who's still..." she couldn't say it.

"It is. I am a bit nervous it's true," Mrs. Boulton said, visibly relaxing her shoulders. "But seeing you so composed puts me at ease, which is nice. Honestly, I didn't know what to expect."

Millions of question reeled through Jack's mind. If only she could explain all this in some rational, college-geek kind of way she'd be good to go. Logic and chance battled it out while she

made herself breath through spikes of panic whenever Mrs. Boulton spoke or moved even an inch.

The woman glanced at an empty corner behind her, then back at Jack. “This thing, it’s not a permanent state and it takes lots of energy, dear. Could you do me a huge favor?”

“Sure.” Jack shrugged like it was nothing.

“Tell Alice not to go to that butt-a-thon?”

At first Jack was too stumped to speak. “That’s why you’re here?”

“I know, I know. You were probably expecting something more profound, but please tell her.”

“She won’t listen to me,” Jack said, “You know she’s like a mule when she decides to do something—”

“Then tell her I forbid her to go.”

“Right. Alice, your mom appeared in my bedroom last night and she forbids you to go to the butt thing.” She sat on the bed and covered her face with her hands.

“She must not, Jacky. No matter what.”

Jack glanced up. “Maybe if you give me proof that we talked? She might listen then.”

“Like what?”

“A secret or, or something she’s been thinking about lately that she hasn’t told me.”

The older woman shook her head with an expression of melancholy, like a mom who know the time has come to tell her kid that Santa’s fake. “This isn’t magic, Jacky. Just trust her. She’s always respected your opinions, and if she doesn’t listen, slash her tires.”

With that she disappeared.

Before logic caught up with her, euphoric and scared shitless at the same time, Jack marched to Alice's room. She threw aside her covers and said, "Your mom doesn't want you to go to the butt-oodles thing."

Alice jumped up in her bed, shielding her eyes from the light Jack turned on with no mercy. "What the fu—?" she slurred. She never held her liquor well and she wasn't very graceful when woken up before the end of her 9 hour sleep cycle. "Go away. I'm doing it." She fell back onto the pillows and tugged her sheet up over her head.

Jack tried to pry the sheet down. "Listen. I can't explain it so I won't. I'll just tell you. Your mom was just in my room and she told me to slash your goddamn tires if you decide to go."

"She'd never suggest something like that," Alice mumbled from under her fort.

"Humor me, okay?"

"No way."

Blowing her bangs out of her eyes Jack stared at the ceiling. What else could she do?

"If you go I'll sick the NARC on you."

"Yea, right," Alice said. But she sounded fully awake now.

Jack shook her by the shoulder until Alice turned over and yanked down the covers.

"I left my own mother in jail," Jack said. "So you better believe I'll sick him on you and Brent."

The whole time Alice shook her head in denial, crying that she didn't believe Jack would stoop so low.

"You bitch," Alice said, finally convinced. She stuck out her tongue and turned away with a theatrical huff.



## Uranchimeg

Every day since her transgression of cheesecake and roast Uranchimeg paced the floor and beelined to the front door when she heard the limo pull up in the driveway. She clenched her back and face muscles until she escaped into its tinted interior unseen by her landlord. Shame drove her insane.

What had possessed her to steal?

True to form the driver tried to make small talk in spite of her resistance and today was no different.

He snuck a peek at her in the mirror. She caught him and it reminded her that three days ago he took the blame for her and would've been fired if she hadn't convinced Charles not to call and complain to the limo service company. Even now she wasn't sure what to think and hypothesized that perhaps in her fatigued state she had embellished the whole incident romanticizing his role.

Uranchimeg wasn't particularly observant; small details of everyday life held no particular interest in her mind. His reflection in the mirror had nice eyebrows and dark eyes with a twinkle and when it smiled, which it did often, its cheeks dimpled. It also wore an immaculate black suit with a white button down shirt and a blue tie, and a hat decorated with a golden emblem of an eagle. The hat never stayed on for too long and eventually ended up on the front passenger seat. The reflection had lots of thick straight hair that was black-blue and too shiny for any man to possess. Its lips were sensuous in curve.

She gave him a curt nod and looked out the window pretending she wasn't eager to leave before her landlord tracked her down. He hadn't so far but the guillotine of chance hung over her.

“Are you getting enough sleep?” the driver said as he made a u-turn in the road. “You’re very pale.”

As always so inappropriate. But he was right. Something was off. It wasn’t just the scene with Charles and the cake heist. The other day she lost concentration during rehearsal. Just before the key change an image of a plate of bacon covered with a paper towel sitting on her landlord’s kitchen counter flashed before her and she lost track and repeated the same section she’d started, a blunder that caused the orchestra conductor to stomp his foot and beat the music stand with his butane. Unlike Uranchimeg he was expressive as a kettle whistling on a high flame.

“Are you a doctor as well?”

After a second of surprised silence he said, “You’ve got people here? Friends? Someone you can hang out with and talk?”

Uranchimeg thought about her private room at the theater (Aran had arranged that right away), and her two bodyguards. “My people are behind us, no?” She wanted to hear what he’d say to that, not at all considering the two as even potential friends.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think you’ve got people. What about back home?”

She shook her head watching a group of bikers pass them by on flying Harleys.

“Where are you from?” she didn’t mean to ask.

“Mexico. You’ve ever been?”

Aran hadn’t had the financial interest in doing concerts anywhere but North America and Western Europe. “No.”

“You should go before you leave. It’s not far from here.”

“Did it take you a long time to get used to US after Mexico?” she asked.

“When you’re attached to a place it always feels like you’re splitting yourself in two when you go somewhere else, don’t you think?”

“I do not know.”

“Maybe for someone like you it’s different because you have to get used to not being attached to places.”

She shot him a look. “Someone like me?”

“A star, you know?”

Not until after Xavier dropped her off at the theater’s back entrance did Uranchimeg become conscious of two things: first, she remembered his name this time, and second, that she had spoken English the entire time.

## **Mr. Universe**

He had asked Michael to bring him another one of those cheesecakes and he was presently waiting for it to arrive. Meanwhile up in his rooms, he dusted the shelves lined with Grammy’s and other music awards, and used glass cleaner to wipe down the gold and platinum records that covered the walls. He had an impressive collection of Stellas and Gibsons on their respective guitar stands, but those he kept sparkling and tuned up even if he hardly played them.

They were family, not trophies. Photos of his band members and others he came in contact with over the fifty plus year career as a rocker, hung from the walls. He gave those a wipe, too, wondering how a life could so quickly change without you ever noticing. When did he become so domesticated that a request for a cheesecake has become the highlight of his day?

The boy, Michael, seemed surprised by the phone call but even more so by the request. Although he was Eric's good friend and his daughter's, they didn't hang out much due to the difference in age and temperament, and also because even old Mr. U prided himself on his coolness. Underneath all those fine leather and silk Michael was just a geek. With some caution Michael said he was kind of in the middle of something and if this could wait. It'd just take a bit. Unsympathetic Mr. U countered with, No. Now. It must be now. He had a feeling that it absolutely had to and he couldn't deny his intuition because it didn't visit much these days. Plus he wasn't good at negotiating. Confusion hung between them until Mr. U said he'd be home all day, mumbled his appreciation and clicked the phone dead.

He heard a car in the driveway but before he could check outside the door flew open.

"It's raining and I need to borrow your truck." Sophronia walked past him and fetched the keys from a hook in the kitchen.

"It might not start up," he said after her. It's been at least a year since he last drove it and even that was just for a tune up. He didn't drive it unless hiking or camping in the desert.

He didn't ask why she wanted it and she didn't volunteer the info. When she went back out the door, boots clomping and leaving rain water on the wooden floor, and still didn't say anything except expletives peppered over pledges of 'this is the last time', he called after her. "Make sure you wear a seatbelt."

She jumped in the truck and drove away with dust devils at her back.

## **Michael**

In retrospect Michael would probably regret agreeing to Sophronia's plan, but at the moment he had little choice. She guilt tripped him, reminding him that she could've ratted him out to Eric. The fake TV idea, she said, was much crazier than what she had in mind. By far.

He wasn't the type of a person who thrived on stressful situations. Unpredictability, for him as a scientist, was a state of things in need of sorting out, not a philosophical right to brood and compose quotes about the meaninglessness of life. And so, while picking up the cheesecake

for Mr. U and the ‘supplies’ at the local drug store for Sophronia, Michael worked overtime to assure himself that reason had to be somewhere at the core of all this chaos even if right now he couldn’t locate it.

## **Eric**

The girl named Lucy leaned on the mike stand by the karaoke machine and took an elegant bow as the crowd applauded at her rendition of a song from *La Miserable*. She was the second year MFA student Eric hitched a ride with to come to Pioneer Saloon on this Thursday night. There wasn’t an official stage so a small area up front was sectioned off to serve as one. Making her way across the dance floor where another two dozen MFA students danced to

Talking Heads Lucy waved at Eric as she skipped to the bar. The bartender who was the owner's wife flipped the bottles in the air. With a nod she gave Lucy her drink order, still flipping.

Eric was sitting at the wooden table that looked like something out of the old West saloon, taking in the atmosphere. He was calling the experience research. The place was small on charm but big on reputation with an entire room dedicated to all the Hollywood celebrities who'd ever visited. It was busy and the noise made Eric feel like his ears were filled with ocean water. He wasn't quite sure how he ended up agreeing to hang with a group of creative writing students whose favorite spot, it turned out, wasn't a sleek casino night club with pumping lights and music, but a country western/old rock bar one had to drive through the desert to find. From Dusk Till Dawn came to mind, minus the strippers and the vampires. Lucy swung her legs around the bench and placed a shot glass in front of his face.

"You're very talented," he said.

"I get better the more of these I have," she said. Her accent placed her somewhere in the Midwest but he was too wasted and high to pin point the exact location. She had a pixie cut, dark hair streaked with blue, and wore a black top with matching shorts and hose with flowery designs that made her legs go on for miles.

"Don't we all."

She gave him a sideways glance. "Beauty *and* brains. Nice."

Eric picked up the drink in a toast and swallowed its contents. So did she with a giggle.

"I know you," she said. "I taught one of your Washington Post essays in my English class a few semesters back."

"You sure?" He hoped she wasn't. Nothing could ruin an evening of carefree karaoke fun like a conversation about writing.

“Yeah. *The Trouble With Humility*. I remember warning the class that the reading might leave them so depressed they’d want to jump off their dorm roof.”

“Sorry about that.”

“They loved it.” She studied him with interest. “So when’s the next book coming out?”

Sensing that he had to take care with his words in the presence of a writer who still believed there was a magic formula for literary immortality Eric said, “Sometimes you can’t rush a project, you know? Sometimes you must allow it to ferment.”

“I totally agree,” she exclaimed. “I’ve got this novel I’ve been working on for years now, but I’ve recently come to the conclusion I’m just too young for it. It’s wiser than me.”

“Exactly.”

They looked at one another and a moment of understanding passed between them.

She said, “That’s the biggest load of bull crap I’ve heard in a while if I do say so myself.”

They broke down into laughter so hard that tears ran down her face and Eric’s side started to hurt.

Just then the music stopped and the karaoke operator/owner announced their next performer. As soon as the name was heard the crowd went wild with applause and cat calls. A man wearing a cap, white t, tight Levi’s and cowboy boots sauntered to the mike. He was short and had a hunchback. His weathered skin placed him somewhere in his sixties (though he was probably much younger) and when he grinned half his teeth were missing and the other half was the neon tobacco yellow you could see from across the bar. The students and a handful of locals (where did they live?) cheered when Lance raised his fists to the guitar intro of Big Balls by Ac/Dc.



The voice that came out of the man didn't match the way he looked. It was powerful and if you closed your eyes might've belonged to a young rocker playing sold out stadiums.

Eric couldn't help but pay attention to the crowd's response to the man. His voice and facial expressions inspired enthusiastic sing alongs. All he had to do was point at someone in the crowd and they'd belt out the lyrics. Everyone bounced and clapped and when he reached his first chorus the crowd joined in.

Eric couldn't help but think about the TV in his room. Surely Lance was at this very moment responsible for beautiful tropical weather on some faraway planet with temperatures in the 80's and a pleasant breeze shuffling through coconut trees.

Before he knew what was happening Lucy was pulling him up and toward the mike.

"Let's see what you're made of," she said.

But before he could start a woman stepped out. With her sharp featured and thin side braids she resembled a crow. She took the mike in one hand and Eric's hand in the other.

"It's not every day that we get such handsome piece of ass visiting us out here at the Pioneer country."

Did he mind the objectification? Not so much. But the woman gave him the creeps as she rubbed suggestively against him.

"We must celebrate with an auction," she said. "Who'd like to spend some time with this hunk of a ...?"

Hands shot up into the air. Eric searched the crowd for Lucy and when he found her he motioned in a pleading fashion of someone who had no idea what was going on but figured whatever it was it wasn't good. Lucy gave him the thumbs up.

"Fiver!" someone shouted.

“Is that it?” The woman pouted. “A ride in the desert on this fine night surely is worth more than that.”

The price went up to thirty and Eric, too oblivious to care, stood watching a sea of faces float before his eyes, left and right to and fro.

The woman shot a look to the bar where two men sat drinking whiskey. They exchanged nods and she said, “How about I break him in for you all? Fifty bucks.”

“One hundred,” came a voice he knew from the back of the crowd, and Sophronia pushed her way through, Michael in tow.

### **Sophronia**

Looking at him up there her heart squeezed tight in her chest. He waved. She saw a void in his eyes as big as a black hole and she almost fell in. But in that instance Sophronia’s compassion iced over. She remembered the promise she made herself. This was the last time. With a jaw so tight her cheekbones hurt she wiggled a finger for him to come to her.

Eric made a slow way through the crowd, accompanied by disappointed cries, smiling and hi fiving his new friends. The woman upfront spoke into the mike, hitting her teeth on the mesh. “Oh no fair. Where you taking that boy? Give others a chance will ya?”

Sophronia was the only black woman in the bar and usually she cared nothing for numbers, but right now she preferred the uneven odds. She mentally called out to the spirit of her dear grandma Susan who was sweet by nature to those she loved but intimidated the rest of the world with her Afrikaans/Brooklyn accent.

“You better go on back to your cattle ranch, Pollyanna,” Sophronia said. “This ain’t your trouble.”

The woman stuck a hand on her wobbly hip. “What if I wanna make it my trouble?”

“Go on.” Sophronia ignored Michael’s imploring requests to leave the place now, and cocked her hip. “I’m waiting.”

Pollyanna seemed undecided. She gave a last croak into the mike. “What about the money?”

Just a glare. That’s all it took and she backed off. Sophronia turned her attention back to Eric who’d come to stand before her, looking guilty for all intent and purpose. Only she knew better.

“You guys,” Eric said. He reached out and hugged both of them. “I’m glad you’re here. This place is fucking awesome.”

Sophronia said, “I see we’re branching out. No strippers this time to clean you off the floor.”

Around them the majority of the patrons jovially followed their attention spans straight to the bar, a separate cluster pouring over the karaoke songbook. Another group sat around a table

to the right. Dressed all in black they had a deck of cards splayed on the table. It looked like they were playing poker. There was a bottle of whiskey on the table next to a pair of black boxes with blinking red lights and a pistol.

Michael, who up to this point stayed behind Sophronia's back in case someone tried to intercept them on their way out, craned his neck over to one of the men standing near the table. "What kind of poker is this?"

"Not a real game, dude. We're ghost hunters," the man said. "And this is a reenactment of a game that happened here at this establishment exactly one hundred and fifty years ago. A game whose outcome was decided by a single shot to the head."

With a vacant expression Michael said, "I don't get it."

The man turned and said, "One dude shot another dude in a card game and we're trying to conjure the dead dude's spirit so we could talk to it. Got it?"

Michael, Sophronia and Eric looked at the man then at the table than back. Finally Eric broke into the fakest laugh Sophronia had ever heard and slapped Michael on the shoulder. "See guys? What did I say. A gem in the middle of the desert!"

Unimpressed Sophronia drew her eyes to Eric's face. "We're leaving."

The crowd parted as she went. She didn't look back, irate and fed up enough to not care if Eric followed. But he did. There were a few lushed voices calling out to him to come back on ladies choice Tuesdays.

## **Uranchimeg**

It was unusually late by the time Uranchimeg got into the limo at the back of the theater. The bodyguards didn't exit their car. They simply waited, unfocused and red in the eyes, until the limo moved, and only then followed.

"I wish they would disappear," she said. Xavier's laughter drifted back and she covered her face, wondering when she'd lost all control of what came out of her mouth. "That was rude."

“Unrude,” he said, fixing his mirror to see her better. “They’re using a lot, which isn’t safe. They’re not bodyguarding. They haven’t bodyguarded since the day they came to meet you at the airport.”

“That is a good thing, do you not think? It must mean I am in little danger.”

“From what?”

She hesitated.

“You don’t have to answer that.”

He mistook her silence for reserve, but just as well. How could she explain what she didn’t know? If there was any potential danger in her trip surely Aran wouldn’t allow it to take place in the first place. Why had he sent them?

“But,” Xavier went on, “You’ve been here for how long and you haven’t seen anything. It’s always home, work, home, work.”

“Do not forget the ducks,” she said with a small giggle that took her by surprise.

“Oka-ay. When you go home and your family asks, Tell us Mrs. Sendoo—”

“Uranchimeg.”

“—Uranchimeg about Wegas. Vhat did you do vhat did you see? It must’ve been amwazing! You’ll say, For suuure. I have seen ze inside of a veird looking khouze, a stage vith seats,” he made a wide circle with his right arm, “arranged like so in rows in front of it, and yes, ze most spectacoolar sight of all—ze Sunset Park ducks!”

By the time he was done Uranchimeg was laughing so hard tears fell from her eyes.

“I do not talk in that accent,” she managed.

“True but I can only do the Count from Sesame Street.” He half turned and added, “What happens if you go somewhere else for a bit?”

She crossed her hands over her knees, leaned away from the back of the seat and shook her head with a wistful look. He handed her a tissue and she wiped at the corners of her eyes. It's not that she didn't want to see the city, only that she couldn't decide if this would be wise.

"I promise you'll love it," he said.

"You are very self-confident for someone your age."

"Think of your family. Say yes." He flashed her a grin that made her think, What would be the harm? A famous line spoken by all those following tornadoes or cuddling bear cubs. But the orderliness of Uranchimeg's reality was cracking and she could no longer rely on it to keep her safe. She considered the alternative, the moment she'd sit up in her bed and pine for the contents of Mr. U's refrigerator.

"What about the bodyguards?" she said.

They were almost at the house and Xavier took the turn off to the smaller road to the gated community. "Do they stay outside the house all night?"

If this was what teenagers felt like snooping around behind their parents back Uranchimeg didn't blame them. Excitement made her lightheaded. "They never stay for longer than half hour."

"I'll come back for you in one."

## **Sophronia**

It was World War III from The Pioneer Saloon all the way home. Unlike ever before Sophronia let her temper blast Eric into the corner of the front passenger seat. And it felt great. All the while Michael suggested he drive, but she refused to give up the wheel for two reasons: they were after all in her father's vehicle—a Lambo prototype of the first true luxury off road vehicle. (Not an SUV mutt, but an honest to god mud loving, cliff hugging mountain goat of a

ride with three solid axles and three locking differentials, that could ascend 48 degree inclines and balance on 24 degree off camber tilts.) But the most important reason was the fact that if she didn't have to navigate around the sharp turns of the isolated country road and had all of her focus on Eric instead, she'd probably hurl him out the window.

"Soph, slow down," said Michael from the back seat. He was balancing himself on the edge of the seat, his hands tight around Eric's headrest. "Not that I don't have the urge to hit him right now, but can we wait at least until we're in the city?"

"Look," Eric said. "You don't have to come charging like Sancho Panza every time I down a shot." In the car he quickly sobered up (to a degree) probably due to the shock of being whisked away from all the fun.

Sophronia gripped the wheel. "How nice. At least he still remembers his classics. All hope is not lost."

With a loud exhale Eric turned to Michael. "Where's all the mockery coming from? Has she always been this bitchy?"

"You don't know bitchy," Sophronia said, noticing the highway sign and cutting a sharp left. "You haven't seen bitchy yet."

"So this is just an overture?"

Michael cringed and closed his eyes.

"Les amuse-bouche," she said. "Take that fucktard."

Something akin to a chuckle barely escaped Eric's lips before he covered his mouth, giving Sophronia his full attention.

They were on the highway now although she couldn't remember how they got there. Vegas was only thirty miles away.



Eric looked at them both. “Why do I feel like we’re having the same damn conversation over and over again? You care, I get it. But you’ve gone too far.”

“Too far will be when you’re living on the street,” Sophronia said.

“Or in those tunnels,” Michael added helpfully, “which is practically on the street just a bit darker and dryer during monsoon season. Or maybe I got that last part wrong. Will have to do some research...” he trailed off.

“Did you ever think,” Eric said, “That I don’t want to move on? I don’t want to get over the fact that she left without a word, not even a finger in the air.” His voice didn’t match the words. It was flat and empty. “Our thing, whatever it was, wasn’t even worth an ‘adios asshole’”

Sophronia didn’t speak. Stared ahead and simply refused.

“And now she’s not talking to me,” said Eric. “Fucking kindergarten.”

“But it’s insane to think that would make you feel better, don’t you see that?” Michael said.

Eric shook his hands, fingers pointing at his face. “Then I am insane, god damn it, and you can’t do anything about it and your dumbass aliens can’t either.”

“What are we, in kindergarten?” Michael frowned and met her eyes in the mirror. “I really thought you understood— the interconnectedness of the universe is—”

“Fuck your aliens,” Eric shouted.

“There’s no need,” said Michael.

“Fuck ‘em. Your aliens. That’s right. Fuck. Them.” Each word a whip.

“Neanderthalian by the minute,” Michael said.

“I swear,” Sophronia finally spoke. “You’re like a rabid dog. You can’t wait to sink your chompers into flesh and you don’t give a shit who gets hurt.”

She could see the house. It was all lit up. Atypical considering the hour and her father's habits. Now he'd see why she'd left with the truck, but one good thing about him was that he lacked the curiosity to butt into Sophronia's business. Normally his apathy offended her, but tonight was a different story.

The three of them remained silent while she maneuvered the truck into the giant underground garage. Michael reached in the truck and took out a large cooler box that he brought out with him, but Sophronia was too preoccupied to ask about it. Already, Eric marched ahead of them, probably planning on locking himself in his room. But he didn't know about the conversation she and Michael had on their drive to the desert and he didn't notice the silent exchange between them behind his back just now as they reached the top of the front stairs and waited for him to unlock the front door, which coincidentally stood unlocked.

In the front room they bumped into her father's other tenant, the girl from Mongolia, Uranchimeg. It looked like she had just come back as well and was on her way up the staircase when Sophronia's father came out of the kitchen.

"What's going on here?" He noticed Michael and the cooler, and gave him a pointed stare. In the same sweep he stopped Uranchimeg on the bottom stair, mid air, crooked his head to indicate where Sophronia should put his keys. Eric he greeted with a lip upturned in disgust. Then he made a general announcement. "Someone. Explain."

Michael hurriedly carried the cooler to the old man and placed it in his hands. "So sorry about the wait, Mr. U."

Her father grumbled but it wasn't in an understanding or a forgiving manner. A genuine sound of warning.

Returning to Sophronia's side, just a little behind Eric, Michael reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle. The two exchanged signs, but she saw that her father noticed.

"It's really late U," she said with a breezy attitude she didn't feel at all. "Why you still up?" he wasn't wearing his customary pajama set, but was actually dressed up than down, in a pair of black slacks washed too many times, white shirt and loafers.

"I have stuff to take care of," he said. Then to Uranchimeg. "A word, Meg before you fly up to your gilded cage, dear." Per Sophronia's suggestion he had taken up calling her Meg after several botched up attempts to conquer the tongue twister that was her real name.

Uranchimeg paled.

"What's with you three?" he asked Sophronia and Michael, skipping over Eric. "You look like you're hiding pot in your pants in an airport."

"Everything's fine," Sophronia said.

That's when Eric moved toward the staircase. Sophronia and Michael followed, staying as close as possible.

"Going to bed already?" Mr. U asked Eric who stopped because Uranchimeg was unintentionally blocking his way.

"Long night," Eric said.

"Of lots of damn good writing I hope. You still owe me rent."

Eric gripped the banister, knuckles white. "Of course. My royalties are due any day now. I do apologies for being late and for your patience. I'll pay back with interest."

"Naturally," said Mr. U. He went back to Sophronia who'd moved closer to Eric. "So?

Eric made another attempt and she gave Michael a signal. They charged him. Sophronia leaped on his back, wrapping her arms around him and Michael wriggled between Uranchimeg

and Eric and slammed a rag over Eric's nose and mouth. Uranchimeg jumped back with a cry. Eric's shouts were muffled by the cloth. He flung his arms trying to dislodge Sophronia from his back, or he tried to do that but failed because she had slid midway and had her arms clamped about his middle, trapping him so that he couldn't knock Michael's hands from his face. The fact that loads of alcohol were still cruising through his system made the assault easier. It was the only time Sophronia was glad he'd been drinking.

After several minutes of struggle Eric's resistance finally began to soften. He slipped to his knees and passed out.

"Is the basement unlocked?" Sophronia said, panting. She had her hair in a high bun, but some had slipped and now lay plastered to the sides of her face. She could feel sweat rolling down between her shoulder blades.

Her father, who was now holding the cooler Michael had brought with him, extended an arm at the door behind her to the right of the entrance. "Help yourself."

"Thanks," she said. "I'll get the feet," she said to Michael and they carried Eric's prone six foot five body down the narrow basement steps.

Several trips later up and down the stairs, Sophronia made a bed on a cot that served as an extra bed for guests Mr. U never had. Michael brought down the TV set and Eric's coffee table to put it on. He even carried down all of Eric's manuscripts and his laptop. They worked in sync while her father and Uranchimeg watched in various stages of horror and irritation until Sophronia said, "It's cozy again." She'd used it for a while when she first came to Vegas and didn't have a place to live. It had a single window with iron bars and lacy curtains. Perfect. She said, "He'll get good light in the daytime, but won't be able to escape."

Mr. U walked to his armchair and slowly lowered himself down. He took off his loafers and massaged his feet on the carpet. “Well that’s a blessing. Now we can all get back to our lives without a speck of worry.”

Sophronia locked the basement from the outside and looked up at Uranchimeg who had since melted unto the stairs looking equal part calm and alarmed if that were possible.

Sophronia gave her an apologetic bow. “I know this looks bad, but we’re old friends. You know sometimes friends have to be real shits to each other to get prove they’re still friends.”

Uranchimeg gave her a slow nod.

“I have to go to work for now,” Sophronia said, “but Michael will take this shift. K?”

Mr. U spread his arms. “Do I really have any say in this?”

“No,” she said. “Can he use the spare room?”

Michael added, “I’ll be in the basement with Eric most of the time, so I won’t be in the way.” That was as far as he got before Mr. U waved him off.

“I’ve got my own crap to deal with, so you’ll have to wrap things up rather quicklike. Got it?”

For a moment Sophronia froze, watching him until he became blurry. She was probably just now becoming overwhelmed with all the pent up tension of the evening’s events hit her full force. On impulse she crossed the room and gave her father a tight full hearted hug. He didn’t reciprocate, just touched his fingers to her back, but that only made her vision blurry. “Thanks, dad.”

### **Mr. Universe**

After everyone left and the house grew quiet the girl still sat at the top of the stairs. Mr. U put his slippers back on and motioned her to follow him into the kitchen. He had to control himself, he thought, and not intimidate her. She was shaken as it is.

“Allright, Meg,” he said, adding water to the kettle and setting it on top of the gas burner. Every night he had tea before bedtime. Why should tonight be any different just because there was a grown man held hostage in his basement? “I’m gonna call you Meg, because I’m old enough to earn the right to use names as references only. How are you tonight?” Asking almost hurt his face. His lips were unaccustomed to polite banter.

She stood in the doorway and fumbled for words, hands behind her back as she plastered her back to the wall.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Have you been crying?”

Her hand shot up to her face and then it seemed she remembered something and her fingers softened. “Laughing.”

For the life of him he couldn’t imagine the sight. “In a way we’re kindred spirits, you and I,” he said, “I thought so from the very first time you glowered at me, but now I’ve noticed a difference in you. And it’s probably the good kind. Either that or it’ll kill you. A typical two choice scenario when it comes to transformations in a human’s life.”

“A difference?” She slid into a nearby chair.

Determined to be nice he thought before he spoke, at least he gave it a shot. To her question and to her reaction which was that of horror-stricken anticipation, he simply said, “You’re welcome.”

“I don’t understand.”

He didn’t either. The phrase flew out undetected by the new filter between his brain and his mouth. But improv came easy to him so he went with the flow curious where it’d take them. He’d invented the Freudian slip long before he’d come up with the word *conscience*.

“Whatever you’re doing? Does it feel like muscles stretching after a century of lazing around?”

“I,” she said desperately.

“Or like muscles you’ve never thought you had before?”

The more he pried and acted helpful the less articulate Uranchimeg grew until she could only manage a random ‘oh’ and an occasional ‘erm’, but as he continued to ask her to explain the logistics of this current change in her state of being—like a doctor performing an initial diagnostics test on a new patient—the reason for his earlier unintentional slip and for his actions now dawned on him. Apathy. He sensed that his prying was causing her to ask questions of herself she’d never considered before; exactly what she needed.

He dumped three spoonfuls of sugar in his cup, steam swirling into the air, and sat down at the kitchen table, mentally budgeting his time for this conversation, because helpful as he was Sophronia had downloaded the new Tonto film a couple of days back for him and already he was anticipating the Old West and politically incorrect character development.

“You know about caterpillars, Meg? They slither along half their lives oblivious to speed and sky and during this time they’re not much into their image. In other words they’re ugly little bastards. So they eat. Probably use food as an emotional buffer. Then one day they get a crapload of courage and decide to do something about the rut they’ve been in all their incredibly short sad lives.”

Her tension seemed so severe that she looked as if she’d had a rough day at work lugging flour sacks around. But even in this exhausted state she jumped to her feet. “Why you torturing me? Yes, I did steal your food. Yes I am. A thief! I think my crime every night. The guilt drowns me until I can not take a breath—”



“I know about being over-dramatic,” he said, which made Uranchimeg balk.

“What do you want from me?”

He wasn't as metaphorically coordinated anymore. That's when he understood that he'd terrified the girl for no reason. He used to be able to talk an agnostic into missionary work and a staunch preacher into dancing on tables in strip clubs just for laughs. In short, he used to be sophisticated. He noted this at the exactly same time he noted that his tea had gotten cold and that Tonto was probably getting restless. Maybe he wasn't going about it right? Make it simple. Maybe he should just tell her that it's okay to eat his food whenever she wished. It was just part of the metamorphosis of her life and that's how her body was dealing with it.

Pushing himself off the chair Mr. U retrieved the cake from the cooler and extended it to Uranchimeg.

She took a step back.

“I don't blame you for liking it. It's the best damn cake I've ever had.”

“I can not.”

“You must.”

“I will forever be shameful for stealing from you Mr. Universe.”

“Anytime you're hungry the kitchen is yours.”

“You are making fun of me.”

“I've lost my sense of humor long ago.”

## **Xavier**

As far as he knew the only reason a man got nervous around a woman was because he feared her. He stood in front of the door, thinking that maybe he should turn around, get back in the limo and drive away before it was too late.

What he feared was that he was falling for her.

Scoffing at the silly notion he rang the bell. Soon the door lock clicked. Immediately his throat went dry.

She still wore the dress with frilly sleeves that she had on earlier and she held in her hands a cake box.

“You change your mind?” he asked. Some part of him hoped she’d say yes and save him from acting like a moron.

For an instant she seemed distracted but then she took his hand and pulled him inside. Her fingers burned him. Why did he ever think this would be a good idea?

“I will be ready in five minutes,” she said, indicating he take a seat. She put down the cake box in his lap, “We take this with us,” and hurried to the staircase. “Oh, skirt or pants?”

“Something comfortable,” he said.

In absolute contradiction to his inner conflict a huge weight dropped from his lungs, and now, his step springy, Xavier sat on the couch she indicated and with his eyes followed her up until she was gone, exhaling through a stupid grin he was glad she couldn’t see. He took a peek inside the box. The cake was pale yellow with whipped cream petals dusting the top and sides. The smell of orange and vanilla drifted to his nostrils and he realized he hadn’t eaten since morning, because he kept thinking about her. Closing the box he looked around distracted,

reminding himself as he'd been doing since she'd agreed to go with him that this wasn't a date. Mrs. Sendoo was a Mrs. for a reason. He was her limo driver. Period.

As promised she was back in the living room in no time. She'd changed into a dark blue blouse with three pearl buttons near the left shoulder and loose black pants and a pair of flat shoes. "I am afraid I do not have jeans or sweats."

"What you have on is perfect," he said. Flustered he felt his ears burn and stood up to get some blood circulating.

They went out and while he waited for her to lock the door Xavier's gaze drifted over the house. He couldn't shake the feeling that he stood on a stone porch of something centuries old, but of course that was crazy. In this desert nothing but cacti lay claim to that kind of longevity.

"Could I ask? Why are you staying in this house instead of a hotel?"

She hesitated. "Aran thought this would be more comfortable than busy hotels. I get tired of crowds easily."

"Was he right?"

"I always trust his judgment."

Xavier didn't comment on the fact that she didn't answer his question. He caught a silhouette behind the curtain on the top floor. The next moment the curtain moved aside and a face peered down at them.

He jerked back and almost fell off the steps.

Uranchimeg caught him by the elbow. "What is the matter?"

He focused his gaze on her face, fighting the urge to return to the window.

"Nothing at all," he lied.

She looked doubtful but allowed him to lead her to the limo. When he opened the front passenger door for her his eyes, like traitors, lifted.

The old man who'd destroyed the tire shop was now gone, the window empty, a dim light filling the space behind it like a sun with a dark cloth thrown over it.

Xavier had seen him fly.

And now the man had seen Xavier.

## **Xavier and Uranchimeg's first Day out**

## **Jack**

Alice fought it all the way, but Jack wouldn't retract her threats and if she was acting like a bully so be it. She watched Alice remove her name from the Butt-oodles site and slapped on the shoulder on her way out the door. "See? That wasn't so hard."

If Alice had been a fire-breathing dragon nothing but cinder would be left of Jack.

Leaving Alice's home she drove straight to the event set up area across from Riviera Hotel and Casino. Margaret only came to Jack on that first night, but her warning hovered like a storm cloud, and because Jack wanted to establish that something (coffee drinks with cereal names?) was making her hallucinate she was willing to sacrifice three hours of her life to prove it. Jack's most important task had become to prove to herself that she didn't possess the ability to communicate with the dead. Nothing would happen. Women would line up for miles. People would take pictures, newscasters tell stories, and tomorrow only family trivia board game creators would remember that the longest butt lineup happened on this day in Las Vegas.

All streets were blocked off to traffic within the 5 mile radius of the event, open only to pedestrians. Tourists descended on the area like a swarm of locusts. There were plenty of locals in their midst, too, but it was easy enough to tell them apart. Locals paid attention to the action at eye level, tourists craned their necks at the billboards, mouths open like chicks waiting for the worm to drop.

Jack made her way through the throng, to one of the many stages being set up for later entertainment. Already the sun assumed its 'death ray to Vegas' position and Jack began to sweat through her dark polyester wondering how people in the seventies ever got things done.

The lineup had already begun. Starting from The Rivera's main entrance it assembled itself like some futuristic human-sized belt aiming to wrap around the Earth. The women

huddled, arms around each other's waists, hands on butts. High above the casino buildings a giant floating zeppelin trudged, painted with bright blue lighting rods and Tire Gods. Co logo over its sides. It had a screen that flashed ads for the event's sponsors as it circumvented the area, switching to live feed of the mob below at evenly spaced out periods.

Jack took in the amount of security, which was substantial given to the fact that Vegas was no stranger to the best of intentions going out the window. The cop cars kept their siren lights flashing and stayed on the outskirts of the perimeter, but the bike cops spread out watching the action from within.

After the city governor did his customary 'blessing' ceremony that included a show girl on each arm, the casino owner and several event sponsors did their thing too, though without feathered beauties to keep them interesting. All the while Jack scanned the sea of faces. The back of her neck prickled. The lineup quickly lengthened. Eventually it started to wrap around, disappearing down one of the side streets. People were becoming restless once the action seemed out of sight, but then the crowd began to cheer and Jack looked up. Two more zeppelins joined the first, live feed of the growing line-up displayed on their giant screens.

After an hour of this Jack was ready to go. Pulling her top away from her skin and blowing inside to cool down she realized how stupid she was acting. She made a note to get an appointment with the shrink at work. No shame in that. Lots of her coworkers saw Lydia. She never judged.

An ear deafening noise split the air and someone screamed. Jack jerked to attention searching for the source. Already the cops nearest the spot were pushing through the mob that became an unruly undulating wave. Jack jumped down and cut through the people screaming for those close by to get down. Another shot went off. It was definitely a gun shot. This time the

zeppelin with the Tire Gods. Co logo lurched down to one side and began to fall gently until it crashed into the crowd. Jack yanked her gun out of the holster and tried to run. “Get down!” Only some listened. The rest scampered in all directions, screaming.

By the time Jack reached the area from where the shots originated she could clearly see the shooter. A man with a bandana over the bottom half of his face held out his arm. He was shaking as three other cops ordered him to lay down his weapon, their own drawn and aimed.

Jack re-holstered hers and approached slowly. Suddenly it seemed the circled around them had cleared. Most of the spectators who found themselves close lay on the ground. Jack hoped none of them were injured or dead but it wasn’t something she could check at the moment.

Her eyes met the shooter’s.



## **Mr. Universe**

There was a peculiarity in the air he couldn't place. It wasn't the customary sterile smell of a doctor's office. It was more unique and specific to the man pointing to the scans on a lit up screen. He decided to call this peculiarity bullshit. "Let me get this right," he said. "Three years ago you tell me I had a stroke. Dementia six months ago. Now it's Alzheimer's?"

Dr. Silverman pinched the bridge of his substantial nose and evaded looking at the man on his exam table. "Technically Alzheimer's is just one of many symptoms of Dem..." He trailed off when his patient dismissed him by running the palm of his hand across his throat. After regaining some of his medical composure the doctor returned to the images. "Perhaps we should take more scans. A DTI and an MRS this time, to be safe. You now sometimes the equipment acts up around patients with strong electromagnetic fields. It's happened before."

"Now you see, doc? When someone who's gone through moneytanks of schooling says things like 'perhaps' or 'equipment acts up,' to me it means 'I don't fucking know what the fuck is going on so I'm gonna charge you extra and hope the next time the pictures turn out not so blurry.'"

"Mr. Universe," the doc said with an overfed puppy look. "These kinds of diagnosis are often inconclusive in their initial stages. Isn't it better to rule out all other possibilities so that we know exactly the type of treatment you need? I'm sure you'd want that."

He ground his teeth. "I don't do condescending, boy."

Someone knocked on the door and a nurse stuck her head inside the office. "Doctor Silverman. You forgot the rest of the results on the desk."

He yanked the file from the nurse with a harassed exasperation of someone who just found out he was going to prison for tax fraud.

“What’s in there?” Mr. U demanded.

“Ahm.”

The doctor evaded the question by opening the file and reading it closely.

“We both know you’ve done that already,” said Mr. U.

The doc’s shoulders had climbed up to his ears but finally it all became too much and he fell onto the stool and hunched over the papers.

“I don’t know how to say this.”

“Then I won’t know how to pay you.”

“You have a brain tumor.” The doctor raised his face to him. “It’s malignant.”

“Terminal?”

Dr. Silverman nodded.

“Can I stop taking the pills now?”

“If you wish.” He seemed taken aback by his patient’s calm.

IN his line of work he must’ve dished out many a grim finding. Why there was probably a class he had to take in medical school that taught him the tricks of bad news giving. Something called Dismal Verdict Communications 101, perhaps, or Introduction to Life and Death (with lab on Tuesdays and Thursdays). Nevertheless the poor man might as well have been dying himself so shaken he was, with a slight tremble to his hands and lower lip. “I don’t understand,” he said, and to a medical professional of his prestige and earning power those words were lava flow that leveled Pompeii.

For a long time Mr. Universe mentally charted out his own demise. Him dying in Las Vegas. How ironic. He remembered that to do so effectively he needed one more piece of vital information. “How long do I have?” he said.

“A month? Maybe two?”

## **Eric**

When he woke up his sheets were soaked. Sometime during the night someone changed him out of his jeans and tee and left him in his boxers. Sweat lay plastered to his skin and crawled through his hair. Disorientation wobbled his vision, so he raised himself on his elbows and focused on a single brightish spot across the room in stubborn desperation. It worked but very gradually. And it was unfortunate that when clarity returned, it was the blasted TV that popped at him. Then he remembered where he was and who put him there.

With a roar he leaped up the steep wooden steps and blasted the door with his fists until his knuckles stung and bled. The door shook but didn't give. Did they stoop so low as to reinforce the fucking thing from the outside?

“Open the door, assholes!”

The top stair was barely wider than the others and he didn't have much room to maneuver. When he rammed his shoulder into the door he almost fell back down the stairs. He did that until the side of his body began to throb. Down in the basement below the window Eric found a plank, a leftover from a wooden fence that circled the property, and he carried it back up and slammed it full force into the door. It splintered after a couple of seconds and Eric chucked it down.

Once his rage ebbed away he crawled back to his cot and sat on the floor. His body throbbed inside and out, and a cavelike thirst filled him. There were water bottles on a small side table, along with bananas and pudding. But the sight of food turned his stomach and his thirst wasn't for water. With a vacant expression he scanned his surroundings, then squeezed his head between his hands. Swaying back and forth he began to keen and soon cry and an indeterminable amount of time after he felt a little air could finally get into his lungs. When he looked up the

image on TV caught him. Eric-2 hung in deep space, stars twinkling around its disfigured shape. He squinted at the image. For the first time since Michael brought the curse into Eric's life, the planet didn't seem in the state of further collapse. For the first time it turned on its extraterrestrial axis in peace.

## **Jack**

The shooter aimed at Jack's chest. His arm shook which only made him more dangerous. Tricky business, negotiating with someone who can't think past the sound of their own pulse.

"Hey, it's okay." Jack held out her hands to show him she wasn't armed. Earlier she had pulled out the badge hanging on a chain around her neck to make sure the other cops knew she was one of them.

"Whatever you say, it won't make a difference." The shooter's voice was muffled by his bandana. Sweat on his forehead darkened the edges of the cloth as it seeped in. "I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were."

"What do you want?" he asked.

Jack stalled and hoped the guys behind him weren't going to get spooked and pull the trigger. She'd shortened the distance between her and the man by a couple of feet. Subtlety was the key here. "Just to talk," she said.

"Ha! I'm not gonna let you lure me in so you can cuff me and toss me to the volchers."

"We can go wherever you want."

He reached to wipe his brow but remembered the gun and jerked back.

Oh you idiot, Jack thought as the cops tensed. You're going to get yourself killed.

"What's up?" she made her voice friendly and casual. "What's your name?"

"I'm not answering your stupid questions."

"Look," she cocked her head. "I'm off duty. It's not like I'm getting a bonus check out of this. I was just in the area. I'm kinda your only friend right now. Let me help."

"You can't," he said. The aim dropped a bit without his notice.

“Worth a shot... No pun intended.” She actually cracked up. An honest to god I don’t give a shit laugh. Later, if she wasn’t carried away on a gurney she’d give this some thought.

He glanced to the fallen zeppelin. “I didn’t wanna hurt anyone. The motherfuckers fired me. After ten years of nonstop 13 to 16 hour shifts and cat shit’s worth in overtime pay they cut me like I don’t mean nothing.”

“You were making a point,” she said. “Understandable.”

The cops were giving her funny looks but she didn’t give a damn. After one starts talking to ghosts it puts the concerns of the living in a whole new perspective.

The shooter squinted at Jack, his shoulders up to his ears with renewed agitation. “They said I didn’t handle the complaint according to the company policy, but they weren’t there! The motherfucker bulldozed my shop. *He* did it and I told them but instead of arresting his ass they forced me into a nut house. Now how’s that fair?”

“I can see you were a good employee...”

“Spencer.”

“Spencer. But bosses aren’t there to make our lives easier.”

“They’re heartless,” he said with a pained whine.

“Nature of corporate business,” Jack said. “Sometimes someone needs to remind them they’re messing with human lives not machines.”

“Mos def.” Spencer nodded in agreement. By then she was close enough she could reach over and put her arm around his shoulder. He wasn’t reacting, preoccupied with feeling sorry for himself and it sounded like he was crying.

When Jack gently pried the gun from his fingers a collective sigh of relief could be felt in the air. The cops ran over and cuffed Spencer. He didn't resist. Broken down by his actions and the sheer stress of the standoff he went down willingly.

Jack walked off to the cheers rising all around her, but her relief was bittersweet. For although she'd prevented a potential tragedy she couldn't get past the fact that she could indeed talk to dead people. Now how does one move on from that?



## Sophronia

“Also hanging out with us tonight is none other than Poppy Morgan herself.”

Sophronia smiled at the girl over the mike, encouraging her to say hello to the listeners. When Poppy first came into the studio Sophronia, along with the receptionist and Phil, stared at her in amazement before they remembered their manners. Poppy’s version of “Undertow” was sophisticated and her voice didn’t sound like it belonged to the girl before them. The song became so popular that callers demanded that the ‘sultry siren’ be the next undiscovered talent guest on Sophronia’s late night segment, The Whos, that brought together an undiscovered artist and someone well known to talk and jam. Usually the newbies came on star-struck not only by their companions but by vision of their own impending fame. A local radio gig was better than nothing, right? But not this one, this timid skinny sixteen year old with a half shaved head, a nose ring in the shape of a running bull, and the composure of a pro minus the attitude. Sophronia didn’t expect her. She also didn’t expect the wheelchair.

“Poppy?” Sophronia’s father who happened to be the other guest on the show leaned an elbow on the table and almost bumped his shoulder into the mike. “That a stage name?”

“If I tell you I’ll have to take away all your Grammys,” she said.

Ha bulked. The girl didn’t appear impressed by his rank and Sophronia got a kick out of it. More so because of the sour look he landed on both of them out of the corner of one slitted eye. She fumed when Phil announced the guests a few hours ago claiming that Mr. Universe only just made the commitment and had asked (the word was spoken thinly and with a considerable amount of fakery) to come on tonight, before his schedule got busy. But after the scene with Eric Sophronia simply wasn’t ready to face her father. He’d give her sniffs like a bloodhound testing the air. Other than Michael he was the only one who knew how much Sophronia struggled over

the years to let Eric go and how many times she'd failed. And although he didn't demand she spill her reasons for holding Eric hostage, somewhere in that all knowing wrinkled mug of his lurked a very precise knowledge of Sophronia's inner landscape. Unnerving, really, but she could never hide the truth from him.

"A feisty one," he said. "You know, in this business you don't ogle other man's trophies."

If he expected to shock the girl he failed. She smiled at him with an illusory cuteness of a mongoose and tapped her fingertips together.

"I'm not so much after trophies," she said.

Sophronia watched the exchange as if was a blockbuster flick. If only she had a bucket of popcorn. Her father liked Poppy. In and of itself quite atypical. Although his everyday approach to people was to deject, reject and otherwise offense the hell out of until depression and self-loathing hit the last nail into their coffin, this casual mutually insulting banter indicated that he was enjoying himself this time and wasn't intent on harming the girl.

"How long has it been since your last gig?" Poppy asked. No bite, but a twinkle in black pencil rimmed eyes.

He sighed and studying the ceiling in deliberation. "Ah, twenty years? An extended vacation, you might say. Enjoying every minute of it."

"Tough," she said.

"Yeah? Let's wait and see how you do, pumpkin. If you're ever famous that is. If you ever sell out the biggest stadiums in the world and have to scrape your fans off your bus with a squidgy. I've had my fill of glory, so you know. Why I can live off of those memories for a few more decades, for eternity."

“I don’t want to be famous,” she said, which made his face contort into a pre-chuckle grimace, all squeezed like a lemon.

“You don’t say!”

“Why not? You’re so talented.” Sophronia jumped in, though she had a distinct impression that her presence had been forgotten.

“Must be stage fright.” Mr. U cackled to her, then said to Poppy. “Sometimes it goes away with practice. But other times you’re screwed for life.”

“That’s not it,” Poppy said. She pressed the palm of her hand to her chest. “I’m made of music. It’s my first love. It’ll never not be enough, but being famous, I think, taints that love. And from what I gather watching the careers of starts like you,” she extended a respectful hand at Mr. U. “Fame leaves people with unrealistic expectations.”

“Pray continue, little one.”

“That they’ll always be adored, like Mozart or Elvis. But the thing is those guys, they’re gone, too. It’s just their sound that’s immortal.”

That wasn’t coming out of a sixteen year old’s mouth, thought Sophronia. At sixteen her wisest observation was that a push up bra might not be a good way to surprise your new boyfriend on your first night together, not when you’re smaller than average in the boob department.

“You’re a wise ass you know that?” Mr. U said.

Appalled at first at his language Sophronia tried to show him with hand gestures across her neck to stop pestering the poor girl, but he gestured back with a complicated skit that loosely translated into, Chill she can handle it.

## **Mr. Universe**

He paced his bedroom, glancing out the window as was his habit, spying on the house across where the one who he'd foolishly assumed could help him, was gleefully accepting clients as if life went to. Why couldn't he be one of those people periodically skipping (probably humming to themselves) out of Mrs. Pole's house? Was he deluding himself because after all, once a God always a God and wasn't that the chief canon that operated the universe and without which the whole thing could careen and crumble into the abyss of nothingness? Did he not deserve assistance one in a while or was he entertaining grandiose ideas of himself beyond all possible help?

Dr. Silverman's diagnosis couldn't be right and this left only one option: Clearly Mr. Universe was suffering from an identity crisis.

From its overuse in movies and during shrink sessions the term obviously carried serious implications. It hardly had before. Genghis Khan didn't give a shit's dribble about identity crisis when he reshuffled the Eurasian continent. Henry had enough identities to go around eight wives and then some, a healthy man indeed. This was a new concept, but one had to adapt to the times if one was to survive.

Mr. Universe blamed the pup better known as Poppy the contemptuous girl-child. For the rest of the hour the other day he'd grilled her, without mercy, but she withstood every ambush with style of an ancient druid priest. In the end he began to admire her. And now her words rang bells in the tower of his awareness that he'd forgotten they occupied. Was he in fact still the highest of beings or have the human afflictions become so strong over the centuries that not even immortality could withstand them? Was he as an artist and a deity destined to fade leaving behind only sounds and images and an occasional claim to an immaculate conception?

## Eric

He threw up on the floor again. It's been maybe a day and already he wanted to seek out Dr. Kevorkian. His body had gone into the violent shakes of an addict he never admitted he was. But what irritated him most was that the more ill he grew the more things with Eric-2 improved. By some fucking miracle the planet had begun to rebuild itself, and with every new hurl, with every sprint to the toilet, with every frantic round of wall punching, the bastard grew rounder and greener. A contradiction of everything Michael claimed, wasn't it? In theory, the pain Eric endured should've incinerated it.

Not that Eric cared, but if he didn't have something to take his mind off the waves of raw pain drilling through him, he'd go nuts.

Because his body kept jerking, arms and legs flailing as it squeezed all the toxins out, Eric couldn't lie down for too long. The involuntary jerking and the shakes in general scared the shit out of him. Instead he paced the basement floor. The biting cold of the cement kept him grounded into the moment for flashes of time, but mostly his mind was in too much shock to 'learn from this experience'. He just wanted to fucking choke somebody until the withdrawals stopped.

He heard the door open and shut and he froze. He'd been hallucinating and was slowly beginning to doubt his senses. But the footsteps were real and so was the soft descent of sandaled feet.

Uranchimeg appeared at the bottom stair. She held a small earthenware bowl under one hand, a ladle with a spoon in another. "Hello," she said with a small bow and a smaller courtesy that was so out of place considering Eric was still in his boxers.

"Hello," he said, confused.

She gave the basement a once over.

Eric was suddenly conscious of his state and grabbed his sweats, yanking them on. His legs shook so much that he tripped over the pants and almost fell. Uranchimeg rushed to him, but he waved her away. “It’s all good. I’m good.”

“My father was also... a drinker,” she said. “For many years when I was a child.”

He had his sweats on, and felt sturdier on his feet though his vision shimmered at the very edges. “And did your family enslave him in your basement?” She blanched and he cursed himself. “That was out of line. I’m such an ass. Sorry! I didn’t mean to use bad language.”

She was smiling. “I curse, too, you know?”

“That’s hard to believe.”

She tapped her temple. “Up here. You would be shocked. Our language is very rich.” She caught him looking up at the door. “I can not let you out.”

“I’m not really an alcoholic. Look around. No booze and I’m fine.”

She walked over to the table and sat down the bowl and the utensils, noting the manuscripts stacked against the wall. “But you are a writer?”

“In these conditions?”

“If every artist waits for right conditions no art will ever be finished, I suspect.”

He pressed the palms of his hands together in front of his chest and rested his chin on the tips of his fingers, looking up at her in what he hoped was earnest plea.

“A friend is guarding the door,” she said. “I am sorry.”

Disappointed Eric joined her as she lifted the lid off the bowl and a dark liquid within let off tendrils of steam.

“What’s that?”

“Reishi mushroom soup,” she said and ladled some into the lid that converted into a tiny bowl. “It will aid you in your recovery.”

He protested against the accusation of there needing to be a recovery, but it was difficult to have a one-sided argument.

“Next time I will bring tea.”

“By then I should be better,” he said, and glanced up at the door without meaning to.

“My friend is stronger than he looks.”

## **Xavier**

The house his family lived was located in the old neighborhood off of Desert Inn and Pecos. It had a flat roof, whitewashed exterior and a decidedly seventies feel to it, because it was built in the seventies. When his parents first bought it twenty some years ago, they had repainted the interior and his father, before he fell into depression that would eventually kill him, had covered the exterior with brightly hued mosaics of country scenes. But that was a very long time ago and now Xavier had the house all to himself. A few years after his father's death, his mother and sisters moved back to Mexico City to take care of his grandparents. He hadn't been ready to go yet, and had been working multiple jobs saving money for his future.

He lay on the bed, hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. Usually his mind was so preoccupied with the present that he didn't have time for daydreaming. But tonight was different. After standing guard at the basement door while Uranchimeg travelled below like some adventurer descending into a cave, she came back up and offered him tea. The fact that she didn't ask him to leave, didn't mention the bodyguards milling outside made him feel taller than the house they were standing in.

Once in the kitchen he sat at the table and watched the motions of her hands as she poured loose tea leaves into a small tea pot and covered it with boiling water. When she began sing softly it brought back the memory of her on stage. He put his face in his hands and listened, wondering if she always did this when preoccupied. Had she even noticed?

Now he lay on top of his bed and daydreamed about drinking tea with her? She told him about her family, too. Uranchimeg's almost ceremonial attention to detail hypnotized him. Xavier wanted to do something in return. He sat up. He wanted to cook for her.



**Mrs. Pole**

“Mom I need to talk to you,” came Jack’s voice over the phone.

Although Bernice sensed something wasn’t right she booyah-ed! in pantomime to celebrate the moment. Her daughter had actually called her and she used the word Mom. She looked around. The red and green couch cushions studded with sequin design in the shape of amoebas were strewn over the floor, incense sticks poking their half-burned heads out of their dragon holders on the coffee table and the kitchen counter was covered with empty glasses and dishes—once a month during the full moon she led a small group of clients in transcendental meditation. More than once Jack commented that her mother’s house resembled a psychic shop and smelled like a hippy pad straight out of the seventies. For some reason she made it sound like a bad thing.

“Sure honey. Why don’t you come by after work or, or right now if you want.”

A pause followed by a shifting of the phone from one ear to the other. “No. I want to make an appointment.”

“Why?”

“So we’re not meeting like family. I want this to be business. I think it’ll help.”

Considering this was the first real conversation—with suggestions and things—she and Jack had in months Mrs. Pole didn’t dare to question further. She reached over to her appointment book and made a note. Tomorrow at 11 am. She’d have to call Lucy and reschedule their meeting. Lucy was convinced that her late mother hid love letter from a secret affair with her pastor that destroyed her parents’ marriage even though her father never found proof. Lucy’s emotional landscape had been shaped by this event, mostly because instead of her father leaving

his inheritance to Lucy he donated it to an organization called Peaceful Against Religion.

Needless to say Lucy carried a lot of resentment for both her parents.

“Hope everything’s okay,” Mrs. Pole said before Jack got off the phone. That wasn’t really prying was it? Besides, as the person who’d changed Jacqueline Mullins’ diapers for the first three years of her life Mrs. Pole believed she reserved the right to worry even when there wasn’t a reason but especially when she suspected there was.

The next day she waited for 11 am by making herself a morning Bloody Mary with a side of an English muffin toast and watching her Price Is Right and True Blood reruns on TiVo. After that she meandered about the house, poking her face between the lace curtains of the living room window a couple of times to check on her neighbor who hadn’t come back since the day he barged in to complain about their failed experiment. Despicable man, she thought instinctively, but the insult no longer carried the oomph it had in the past. Sad man. She wished she could help, but suspected he hadn’t been completely honest about his problem. If only she could find a way to crack that shell of his.

When the doorbell rang she ran to the door and opened it with a bright smile, but one look at Jack and her good mood fizzled. “Oh honey.” She stood aside and let Jack pass. “You look horrible.”

Jack’s clothes were crumpled, shirt only half tucked into her pants and her long brown hair was a mess, bangs scruffy. The bags under her eyes could use a cucumber compress or ten.

Jack fell onto the couch. “Thanks mom.”

Bernice closed the door and joined her daughter. “You know I’m always honest with you.” After a skeptical look from Jack she added, “Where it counts.”

Jack's head fell back on the cushion and with a long sigh she rubbed her temples. "Just give me a minute."

"What's going on, Jack?"

Jack stared at the floor. "I think I'm going nuts."

Thanks to the training Mrs. Pole knew she shouldn't act alarmed. Non-reaction was the best reaction in these types of situations. She once had a client who had claimed he possessed the gift of intangibility and proceeded to continuously bump his body into her living room wall to prove he could walk through it. She worked with him until he realized that his brand of intangibility was of the symbolic variety and with a lesser dose of his anti-psychotic meds he was eventually able take up out of body travel instead. A great success.

"Is it something at work?" she asked. She had never particularly liked Jack's career choice. In college Jack wanted to be a cultural anthropologist and study embedded cultures of the world, but then one day a police academy recruit got a hold of her and the rest is history.

"It's kind of work related," Jack said with uncertainty.

The door bell rang again and Mrs. Pole excused herself. She opened it to Lucy's tear streaked face.

"I need you," Lucy wailed inviting herself in, arms wrapped tight around her middle. "How do you not understand that I need to know. Now. As soon as possible. I can't do anything else until I know. I can barely function as it is."

Bernice mouthed for Jack to wait a second and brought a glass of water over to her client who accepted it with shaking hands. "There isn't a guarantee this session will work, Lucy. I'm speaking plain here."

"But I trust you and we must try."

“Grrh. I take that back. It’s not just work related,” Jack said.

“What?” Bernice asked, searching her daughters face for signs of a fever.

Jack addressed Lucy. “Your mother says, don’t blame your meds dependency on my love letters.”

With a huff of feigned indignity Lucy said, “I don’t have a meds problem—” Turned to Bernice and hissed, “It’s not a meds problem.”

Bernice went white. “Jack? What did you say, honey?”

With a tortured glance to the corner behind Bernice and Lucy Jack repeated, slower this time. “She says... don’t blame your meds dependency on my love letters.”

Seeing the desperation in her daughter’s eyes Bernice felt like she’d been dunked in ice water. “Lucy. I’ll call you.” She pushed the baffled woman to the front door and out, locking it as Lucy tried to side-step back inside.

“Bernice!” Lucy banged on the door. Her voice sounded muffled, as if she’d pressed her face to it. “You can’t treat me like this. I’ve got questions.”

“Pray and maybe you’ll get answers.”

She hurried back to the couch, sat down, jumped up. Flew into the kitchen where she retrieved an expensive brandy from the back of the fridge with two ice glasses and came back, pouring them both a drink. They heard Lucy’s car rev out the driveway.

“Mom,” Jack said. She was looking at her like someone fighting not to look anywhere else. Her eyes were shiny.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Several days,” Jack said. “Don Bean was the first... No wait.” She was thoughtful for a moment. “I had a kind of a vision or a hallucination the night after the dinner at your neighbor’s house.”

Bernice tightened the grip on her glass and took a careful sip. “Oh, yeah?”

“People in the corner of my room, like a bunch of them just standing there watching me.”

“Maybe it was a dream.” She was hopeful.

“No, they were there. After that I saw Don Bean and today, a woman showed up to tell me she’d just been strangled by her father-in-law.”

Bernice rubbed her daughter’s back. She didn’t need to ask if Jack had checked out the woman’s claim. Her daughter was a damn good detective, even if lately she seemed burned out and more distant than usual. Bernice had read in many texts that a person going through a psychological crisis was most prone to incidents of spiritual nature, and Jack had been in this crisis for longer than she would ever admit herself. Bernice knew only one person who connected with the dead in this direct kind of a manner, and it took him ten years to learn how to manage that ability, to control it so that he wasn’t constantly accosted.

Jack took Bernice’s hands in hers, in a gesture of closeness that hadn’t occurred between them in ages. “Can you shut it off?”

“We’ll figure it out, honey. We will I promise.”

Jack’s exhaustion eventually knocked her out right there on the couch. After Bernice covered her with a blanket and planted a gentle kiss on her forehead she marched across the road.

## **Mr. Universe**

He was in the middle of his own march on Mrs. Pole's house and so they met halfway and faced one another in the middle of the road full of repressed feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, desperation, and on Mr. U's part a bit of pekishness. Ever since Sophronia had stopped shopping for him and Urnachimeg started stealing food he hadn't been eating on schedule.

He jerked a thumb in the direction of his house. "It's a mad house over her. You've got Ritz crackers and some of that drinky we had last time?" This crafty 'intro' helped him ease his nerve in preparation for what no doubt would be another battle—he could tell by the pinched pencil thin eyebrows and the way her bracelets clanged like a trapper's bells.

Mrs. Pole stuck her hands on her generous hips and seemed to contemplate something. Finally she spun around and marched back to her house calling behind her. "I want a word with you, and be quiet until I say otherwise."

He never enjoyed bossy women, but he followed, seeing as how he himself was on the way to pick a bone with her. Inside she man-handled him across the living room, past a sleeping form on the couch, and straight to the back yard. Gently (the woman was a contradiction onto herself) she closed the French doors behind them and erupted in a whisper. "What's going on here, mister?"

"I was gonna ask you the same," he said, a little confused. What could she possibly blame him for? He was the one with a legitimate complaint here. "What's happening is that you didn't deliver. While I'm waiting for your voodoo to restore me everyone else has gone mad, and I can't handle this pandemonium. I've got problems of my own."

"Always thinking about yourself," she said.

He smacked his chest. "I'm all that I've got."

“Liar,” she said, a bit deflated. Her cheeks were pale, which made the rouge stand out more than usual. He also noticed that her normally teased and hair sprayed hair was limp and there were mascara dustings under her eyes. “How is it going?” she said, genuine concern softening her frown.

“Could I have those crackers?” he asked.

“No you can’t have the damn crackers until you answer. Do you feel any different?”

Now that she asked he did. “No.”

“So no boost in memory capacity? How are you sleeping? How are your energy levels?”

“Same old me,” he lied. “Which is a problem I’ve wanted to see you about.” He couldn’t as well say that he felt himself becoming amicable and that the idea made him nauseous.

“You lying to me again.”

“Like I said. It isn’t me. It’s everyone else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sophronia stuffed Eric, my wayward novelist, into the basement—”

“Why?”

“He’s trying to booze himself to death, and then there’s the girl—”

“Girl?”

“Mongolian B-b-q—”

“Why are you calling her that? It’s not nice. She’s a vegetarian, ain’t she?”

“That’s what I thought. Her bodyguards told me that she’s on a ‘weary speshaal dieta’—

”

“And?” She prompted him to get moving with the story.

“She’s been stealing food. I am vexed.”

There was a long undefined pause. Then she burst out, “Are you kidding me?” and clawed at him in the air with fake blood red curvy nails.

“Why would I be making it up?” He wrinkled his forehead in frank perplexity and took a step back.

“My daughter is in serious, perhaps irreversible trouble and you’re over here vexed. Vexed?! About a young girl from a third world country picking at your provisions?!”

“And the novelist in my basement.”

She peered inside the house, and lowered her voice. “Look. No denying something’s up here. Let’s calm down and think. Who else was at the dinner that night? The other young man?”

“Michael? He’s fine. He stays in the basement with the novelist sometimes.”

“And Sophronia?”

He gave a shrug. “She’s not taking Eric’s shit. That’s what got him in the basement in the first place. Come to think of it, Michael helped her put him there. It was a devious way they got him, too, I tell ‘ya. Something I would’ve done, but never those two.”

“And yours?” said Mrs. Pole. “Is Sophronia taking your shit?”

“I guess not.” He puffed up, hoping to look hurt. “Hasn’t asked me once if I needed groceries done.”

Mrs. Pole examined the air in front of her in a way people do when they’re putting a mental puzzle together. She tapped her chin with a finger. “Something happened that night and we need to figure out what?”

“What’s wrong with your daughter?”

“She talks to dead folks now.”



“That’s a pickle. Maybe I should see her,” he said out of the blue. Why was he trying to help people lately and would he ever get used to this ridiculous urge to butt into other people’s business?

She reached out and fixed the collar of his shirt, and he froze, feeling an even more ridiculous sense of pleasure at her touch.

“I’m glad you said that,” she said. “Because the three of us are going to see a friend of mine together. Tomorrow. I’ll pick you up at midnight.” She escorted him back across the house and opened the door for him. “And be ready. I hate waiting for people.”

“We could put her in the basement with the novelist,” he said to lighten the mood.

“You’re such an asshole,” said Mrs. Pole and shut the door in his face.

## Michael

To say that the basement was a mess would be an understatement. Mess implied a disorder amidst which one could see the remnants of the initial order like the flash of the big bang in the night sky. But in the case of the basement it was in a state of chaos. If the basement were a person it would tremble in the corner, appalled and wringing its hands at the sight of the atrocity committed against it.

Michael had come in earlier to bring Eric supplies consisting of drinking water, pudding, chicken soup, change of clothes and a ream of paper for Eric's printer. Now they sat some ways apart as if in the middle of a job interview.

"You've been writing then?" Michael's eyes clambered across the rampage of paper on the floor.

"I will never forgive you for this."

"Anything good?"

Eric scratched his beard. He wasn't given a razor, not even an electric one. "A Shakespearesque dramedy about betrayal and..."

"And?"

He smiled evilly. "And that's it. Just betrayal."

"But you are feeling better, admit it."

Lighting up a cig Eric said through the smoke. "Is Sophronia coming by soon?"

"We only have your best interest at heart, you know?" Michael said.

"Is that a yes?"

"Why? So you can try and manipulate her into feeling sorry for your ass again? She won't let you out. We're on a buddy system. So I won't either."

Eric's face registered surprise, and Michael tightened his lips and gave him an 'I dare you to say something' stare. Michael didn't curse. His usage of 'ass' would send his mother running for the pew in cold sweat. But he was on edge and the word just kind of slipped out, because he'd been preparing himself for the unpleasantness of this and possibly all future exchanges. He read up on interventions and it didn't sound good. "Do you want to lose her? Because you are getting close, real close to that possibility."

Eric released a cloud of smoke in Michael's direction. "Don't be such a fucking drama queen."

"But it is that bad. You will if you're not careful. She loves you—"

"I love her too, damn it but I'm not gonna butt into her life whenever I don't agree with her choices."

"For a writer your depth perception of human emotion is inexplicably asinine. What I meant to say is that she. Loves. You."

"For fuck's sake." Eric blinked, cigarette midway to his mouth, but he said nothing else and ground the cig into the tuna can he was using for an ashtray.

"I know. Her choice is shocking to me, too." To calm himself down, Michael investigated the iron bars on the window. He looked over to the TV. It blinked and Eric-2's Western most side appeared on the screen, serene, so vivid it could be a Pre-Raphaelite painting. That was odd. He tapped the screen. "Have you been messing with the TV?"

"That fucking thing? I've forgotten it was there."

"I'm serious."

Eric pushed himself to his feet with some effort, though Michael wasn't sure if the unwillingness was due to weakness or laziness. He peered over Michael's shoulder. "Why?"

Michael also detected that the nonchalant question carried an underlying tone of anxiety that's never been there before.

This was the moment Michael had been also preparing himself for. If there was ever a good time to come clean this was it. He straightened and said, "Before I can answer your question I have to tell you something about Eric-2."

## **Xavier**

The only way Uranchimeg could think of hiding her whereabouts from Bataar and Robbie was to tell them her rehearsal would run a few hours late. So she did. Surprisingly the lie slid off her tongue with ease. She had known for some time now that they reported her moves to Aran, because he knew things about her she never told him. This gave her a discomfort in her stomach she eventually recognized as fury. There were always bodyguards wherever she traveled, which meant Aran had always had informers.

But from the moment Xavier picked her up she stopped thinking about Aran, but not before she jumped at the realization that she'd forgotten to call him. After she broke her old cell, the guards brought her a new one the very next day. But she no longer wanted to call home.

"What?" Xavier said.

They were in the limo and he still wore the uniform for later when the two men would come to pick Uranchimeg up from the theater. Uranchimeg's cell lay heavy inside her purse on her lap. "I need to make a phone call."

He looked down at her purse, probably expecting her to reach in and do what she said she had to do, but she didn't move.

"You can use my phone."

"That is okay," she said, feeling rebellious. "I will call later."

Although he seemed on the verge of continuing with the phone conversation he seemed to have thought better and instead concentrated on the road, turning onto Silverado Ranch Rd., while paying upmost attention to signs flashing alongside the busy road. Grateful that he didn't press Uranchimeg eased into the seat. She hadn't become conscious of how tense she was until that moment.

“How’s your friend?” he said as they got onto the freeway.

Uranchimeg hardly knew Eric, but that mattered little. His pain was familiar and she wanted to help. “I will bring him more Reishi soup tomorrow.”

“I’ll stand guard.”

They drove for a while before Uranchimeg asked where they were going.

“I’m surprised you waited this long to ask,” he said.

“So am I.”

“Two things, *if* we can manage them in one night.” He held up two fingers and folded one. “First, I make Briam.”

“What is Briam?”

“And second, I show you our desert.”

“I live in a desert, too,” she reminded, bemused. Really she loved the desert landscape and her initial dislike of the city had been purely reflexive, but he couldn’t have known that.

“Don’t tell me you think any two deserts are alike.”

She thought for a second and burst into laughter when Xavier’s jaw dropped dramatically.

“Tell me you’re messing with me,” he said.

“I am not familiar with that expression, but I think you ask if I am joking and I am. I want to try this, this...”

“Briam.”

“Yes and go to see your desert.”

## Michael

The only thing Eric had to hit with was a broken flat iron he found on a small dusty dresser tucked under the basement staircase. The dresser itself, being an antique, was built like a boulder and wouldn't budge. He smashed the iron on top of the television several times in a row, but it broke into bits and he hurtled it, missing Michael's leg by an inch.

"You fucking asshole motherfucker," Eric said over and over as he paced back and forth, feral and wobbly like a male gorilla on drugs. "It's fake? The whole 'interconnectedness' bullshit was bullshit and you let me believe I was doing something wrong?"

Probably it wasn't the wisest thing to do, but Michael tried to explain that his intentions were good. As a response Eric punched a hole in the wall.

Michael jumped out of the way and stayed light on his feet thereafter. He didn't even ask if Eric's hand was okay and just watched him suck in his breath and cringe. "But that's just it. I'm not controlling it anymore. My program's been off since we've got you into the basement."

Eric bared his teeth. "What an ass fucking relief that is." He searched the area for more things to destroy the set, and Michael couldn't say he wasn't relieved that he and Sophronia had Eric-proofed the basement prior to his incarceration.

"You don't get it," he said. "I'm not loading the images. The thing is working independently, but it shouldn't. I hadn't programmed it to."

Folding over and taking shallow uneven breaths, Eric said, "Your voice is clogging my arteries."

"I need to check it and see if—"

"You need to leave."

Michael ran a hand over his face. "Can you for once listen? I'm only trying to help."

“Funny way you have.”

“We’re friends. I’d never intentionally—”

“Michael. Now.”

Michael’s arms fell at his side and he suddenly felt dispirited.

“Get the fuck out,” Eric said. “We’re done, you and I.”

“I’m so sorry, man,” Michael said. “You’re my best friend and I love you.” He looked back at the television, at Eric and his manuscripts strewn all over the floor. He lumbered up to the basement door. There was nothing worse than losing a friend to a lie about a distant planet in need of supervision.



## Uranchimeg

Sitting on the other side of the kitchen island Uranchimeg rested her chin in her hand and wondered how someone arranging cut vegetables in a baking dish could evoke such spellbound fascination.

Xavier layered the aubergines in rows next to potatoes and zucchinis and sprinkled them with olive oil, cheeks hollow in concentration. Whenever she cooked Uranchimeg flew about the kitchen space, cutting, stirring and sautéing all at the same time to reduce the prep and cook time. It was the only time she rushed. And because she only made vegetarian dishes in the end her kitchen often looked like a ratatouille had blown up in the middle of it. In comparison Xavier moved in a leisurely manner caught up in the process itself, as if painting a delicate flower onto the last fresh canvas left.

“You fidget with your fingers whenever you’re thinking.”

“Sorry?” She looked up, unaware that he’d been watching.

Xavier nodded in the direction of her other hand, which she had laid on the edge of the table.

“Oh yes,” she said. “A habit that has been quite difficult to break.”

“Who says you should break it?”

“My husband.”

Carefully he scooped up a handful of cubed feta cheese from the cutting board. His face was suspiciously neutral; Uranchimeg could’ve sworn she’d seen questions, dozens of them, flitting behind his eyes.

“How did you learn to cook?” she asked to deflect the strange moment that might’ve been nothing more than imagined.

He bent over slightly and sprinkled the feta over the colorful vegetables. “I’ve always had the knack I guess. Mostly my mom. Half of our garage is filled with cook books.”

“A family trait?”

“You can say that,” he said. “Only for her it’s more of a hobby. She likes to try new things because they’re new.”

“And you? Why do you love this?”

His hand hovered in the air as he seemed to work out in his mind what he wanted to say. “You know how some people can create a multidimensional drawing of an object, let’s say a bridge or a building, purely by instinct?”

She nodded.

“Well I can’t do that. But I see a dish in its entirety before I even begin to make it and I can taste the flavors, the best combination for a particular dish, before they’re blended.”

For a while Uranchimeg didn’t speak. He went to one of the cupboards and came back with a pepper mill, laughing softly and trying hard not to look embarrassed.

“It sounds bizarre, I know,” he said. “But I can’t think of any better way to explain.”

“It is fascinating. I have never heard anyone talk about food in such terms.” She smiled. “How serious is this calling?”

“You think it’s a calling?” He seemed pleased when she nodded in a solemn manner, as if they were discussing philosophy. “I’m saving money to go to culinary school. I haven’t told anyone.”

“Not even family?”

“Men in my family are either in the army or construction. Except for my father. He was a craftsman.”

Seeing the sadness when he mentioned his father Uranchimeg decided not to pry. She was enjoying his passion too much, and wanted to hear him talk more about it. “I have a feeling you have a school in mind already.”

“Le Cordon Bleu Anahuac University in Mexico City.”

At Uranchimeg’s appeal Xavier continued to explain the recipe while he assembled it. Now that she knew how significant the process was for him, the steps took on a feel of a ritual. She worked on her songs in this way, meticulous with every detail and aware of its fragility. Before they knew it the dish was ready. They were starving that happily agreed to eat at the island, straight from the dish.

“This is the most delicious thing I have ever tasted,” she said after the first bite. She had to close her eyes and savor the flavors, and when she opened them Xavier was watching her again, fork poised in mid air.

“I know this is going to sound cheesy,” he said. “but you really should smile more often.”

“Why?” She held her breath.

“It’s good for you.”

Too many moments of prolonged eye contact were making Uranchimeg light headed and she couldn’t for the life of her understand why this was. Being in Xavier’s company seemed to disentangle a knot deep inside her.

After half the dish was gone they headed back out. Uranchimeg’s stomach fluttered. “I feel like we are acting like children,” she said as they got into the limo.

“Let’s hope our parents don’t find out,” he said. “I hate being grounded.” He started up and turned on the headlights. It was late enough for that.

They drove for a while until the lights of the city spread out like a blanket behind them and the stars grew brighter.

“There’s a place out on the other side of Lake Mead that should be perfect for tonight,” he said in a barely contained excitement.

“What is tonight?”

“My desert, remember?” he winked. “Trust me you don’t want me to tell you. Much better you see for yourself.”

Eventually he parked at the top of a hill overlooking the gray canvas of the lake. There was only a swath of city lights peaking between two other hills. The rest of the place was wilderness touching face with the sky. Xavier took a large blanket out of the trunk and laid it over the hood of the limo. “Hop on.”

Uranchimeg gave him a doubtful look. “I do not as a rule hop onto things.”

So he extended his arms and said, “I can pick you up.”

“No I will manage.”

Which she did even if a bit ungraceful. It was difficult with the cake box so she put it down first, ignoring his raised eyebrows. She found plastic forks inside and handed one to Xavier as he joined her on the other side. They ate in silence, taking big bites and making noises of satisfaction that sounded out of place in the vast space of the desert around them. Then there was the night sky. The night grew deeper when they both reclined on the hood, and the sky opened wide before them.

Uranchimeg sat up in astonishment. “It’s moving.”

Streaks of light shot across, one after another as the meteor shower displayed itself like an elusive animal coming to life at night.

Urchimeg overflowed with that light. Soon she could barely feel her body so light it grew.

Every streak sent a shock through her, like a rollercoaster ride cresting and falling. For a moment she closed her eyes because the sensation overwhelmed her and she wanted to cry.

“I’m glad you like it,” Xavier said.

## **Eric**

There was a deep ache inside him and again he was sweating, though the involuntary jerks that thrashed through his body before were not as bad now.

Now, he thought, now that the whole thing turned out to be a sham he could finally smash the fucking thing to bits. Only he couldn't bring himself to do it. Thing is, the entire time Sophronia and Michael thought he was destroying himself Eric was actively trying to find his way back. It's not important that even he didn't figure out that's what he was doing until now. What mattered was that the reason he never chucked the television out his window or put a hammer to it, was precisely because Eric did believe he was in some implausible sci-fi kind of a way effecting Eric-2. How it was possible that the first time this became evident was after Michael's big reveal? Simple. Self denial. Over the months Eric had mastered the trait so well that he denied he suffered from it. Even now he had to keep reminding himself of having been an ass. Literally. Yes, Lily left him without an explanation. Yes, he loved her despite it. And he missed her. And he wanted to run the clothes she left behind through the garbage disposal. But he couldn't allow Lily's choice, no matter how fucked up and ice-bitch cold, to rule all parts of his life.

He lay on his cot with eyes closed but his awareness lay wide open, and he forced a cohesive train of critical thinking to pass through his mind like a steam engine long left at the station. The joints were rusty and the cars bumped stretching their muscles after a long spell of idleness. Every time the train lurched and stumbled off the tracks Eric nudged it back in place, like a child with his first toy set.

## **Jack**

The woman cornered Jack outside the station. She wore a splattered green dress and sandals covered in blood. She was missing a portion of her scalp, her brain glistening in the early morning sunlight.

“I know you’re busy, but I have no one else to turn to,” she said as Jack tried to walk past her.

Several guys were gathered next to three cop cars parked by the sidewalk. Their voices carried as they chatted and barked with laughter. When Jack walked by on her way to the building a couple of the guys waved at her. Tom and Jerry, partners despite the unfortunate coincidence of their names, asked if Jack was good for a night of darts at the nearby Winchelle’s pub after her shift. She was still the reigning champion and their aspiration for the past two months has been to drive her off her throne. But she declined good-naturedly, of course. She’d known the guys from when she patrolled, and they were good friends. She declined because she had already noticed the woman standing by the bushes and didn’t want to draw attention to herself.

“This isn’t how it’s supposed to work,” Jack said under her breath, trying not to appear to be talking to herself.

The woman followed her into the building, taking three steps to Jack’s one.

“But don’t you catch bad guys?” she said. “Isn’t that your thing?”

“I solve crimes based on evidence not ghost testimonials.”

The woman hurried after Jack with a doe-eyed expression. Disturbing considering the brain exposure and all the dripping blood which disappeared soon as it hit the floor. She came around and barred Jack’s way to the coffee machine.

“She’ll get away with it. By all accounts we don’t even know each other.”

Their faces were so close that Jack could’ve sworn she felt the woman’s breath on her skin, but that of course wasn’t possible. At the same time, ‘possible’ was a relative term nowadays. Jack said a quick hey to a passing coworker with lips in a line so thin it hurt.

“Fine.”

The woman jumped and clapped her hands.

“But not here. Meet me on the outside patio.”

The patio was the designated smoking area, but in this weather most people didn’t brave the heat and those desperate enough smoked in their cars with the air on full blast. When Jack got there the woman was already waiting. She fidgeted with her hair seeming ignorant of its disarray, and her face lit up when she saw Jack.

“I only have a few minutes,” Jack said.

The woman nodded and cleared her throat. “Her name is Rachel Moore and we met on Etsy. I make wheel covers and she has a collection of books made from plastic bottles. I liked her designs and my sales weren’t going so well so I started to steal them.”

“So you made your own plastic bottles books?”

“It sounds silly but you should see them. They’re gorgeous!”

The constant nagging thought that there was a dead person on her station’s patio crept up on Jack and to keep ignoring it took great effort. The only thing that maintained her calm right now was the fact that she’d go back to her mother’s at night. She promised to help. Oh the irony, Jack thought. All her life she’d made fun of her mother’s obsession with meditation and spiritual awareness and look at her now.

“So how did you go from plastic bottles to this?”



The woman looked down like a child caught stealing. “She found out and got really mad.”

“Did she send you emails?”

“She’s too smart. I got two letters in the mail, untraceable, warning me to back off. But I didn’t take them seriously. Then last night someone knocks on my door and there she is with a shot gun. I tried to run but maybe turning around wasn’t such a good idea.” She stomped her foot. “But who does that? Who shoots a person over an Etsy project?” her voice wavered and tears welled up in her eyes.

Jack considered the horror she must’ve felt, and forgot all about her discomfort. “What’s your name?”

“Amy Bucket.”

“I’m sorry Amy.”

Amy’s face lightened and she coughed through her tears. “You’re a blessing, you know that?”

With that she poof and disappeared, leaving Jack with a queasy feeling that if nothing was done about her predicament, she’d soon have a line of people only she can see out the door. She looked at her watch. An eternity spread between Jack and midnight. She peered through the glass door searching for others like Amy, then squared her shoulders and walked inside.

## **Sophronia**

She came down the steps thankful that she was the bearer of good news this time. Maybe he'd forgive her for making him a prisoner. Michael had told her about the television and their falling out, so she prepared for the worst. The late morning light crept into the basement window with the same amount of guilt Sophronia felt. She found Eric sitting cross legged on the floor staring out into space.

He watched her walk around him and sit down facing him.

"What?"

He shrugged. "Did you know about Michael's ingenious plan?"

"I told him it was a bad idea from the beginning."

"So you were in on this conspiracy."

"He didn't want me to come down here. That's why I haven't visited."

"Give me a little credit, Soph. I'd never hurt you."

It occurred to Sophronia that Eric didn't seem as upset as Michael had described, but who knew what that meant: Good weather or the eye of the storm? Fifty fifty chance of either. Maybe he was getting better. He had begun to shake less and wasn't talking to himself... as much. The fevers weren't as severe or as frequent, either. The violence at first was so bad that Michael pretty much ordered her to stay out of the basement, swearing that if she disobeyed he'd let Eric out. Better that than risk her getting hurt.

Sophronia held out the envelope. "This came for you. It's from Jenny, who by the way is still waiting for you to call her about the book you're supposed to be working on."

Tearing open the envelope Eric waved over his shoulder at the piles of papers. "Jenny is a pro. She knows self destructive behavior is part of the package."

“She won’t wait forever.”

He met her eyes. “I know.”

Sophronia detected the barest of smiles as he opened the letter and looked at the check inside. Then he just stared at it. “Good news?”

Without saying a word he handed her the envelope.

“Ten thousand?” she said. “Oh Eric. Congratulations.” Without really thinking it through she crossed the space between them and threw her arms around him. “This is great great, incredible news!”

At first he seemed unsure if he should return the gesture, but then he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her. Some time passed and Sophronia was beginning to panic. She was supposed to act aloof. But his body was a wall of heat.

“I better go.” She tried to dislodge herself, but that only resulted in her arms around his neck, drawing him closer.

There was a time when they’d lose all self control by now, caught up in the sexual tension sparking lightning bolts between them, but this time Eric seemed resolved to be the better man. He loosened his arms and eventually let go, helping her up. Sophronia couldn’t say she wasn’t disappointed.

He held out a hand. “Thank you for bringing the letter.”

“Of course,” she said, shaking it. “I knew it’d make you happy.”

The space between them began to shrink and Sophronia’s resolve to leave floated like an ice cube in water. At first he tried to stick his hands in the back pockets of his pants, but after discovering his sweats didn’t have pockets, crossed his arms instead. It would’ve looked comical if it wasn’t for the longing in his eyes.

“You need to stop trying to make me happy,” he said.

“You need to eat better. Next time I’ll bring you comfort food. I think your stomach can handle it.” She took a step back and he a step forward until their toes touched.

“Like what?” he asked, fingers inching down her hips.

Sophronia began to unbutton his shirt. “Mac and cheese.”

“I love it.” To the hem of her skirt.

Under her skirt.

Her breath caught as he pulled at the rim of her panties. “I remember,” she said.

“Tell me more.”

“Okay.”

“I miss you.”

“Stop talking, Eric.”

## **Uranchimeg**

Uranchimeg.” She felt a gentle nudge and turned around swinging her arm, expecting to hit the soft surface of the mattress. Instead it landed painfully on something hard. Her eyes flew open and she sat up, disoriented, on the hood of the limo.

The desert sunlight hurt her eyes.

Xavier was standing by her side. His hair stuck out in spikes of various lengths as he ran both hands up and down his face as if to wake himself up.

“What happened?” she said. “What time is it?” she felt the back of her neck grow cold with dread.

“We better get going. It’s close to nine.”

She rolled off the hood and he immediately gathered the blankets and stuffed them into the trunk. By the time he came back Uranchimeg was already in the front seat, trying hard not to hyperventilate, something she’d never done but feared was imminent.

“We’ll be back in the city in forty minutes, tops. I promise.” He made a sharp turn and she grabbed the handle above the door to keep from bumping around. Her other hand lay on her knee. His gaze jumped down then up to her face. “I’ll tell them I’d asked you to come. It’s the truth.”

“But they will fire you. Aran will make sure of it.”

He hit the wheel muttering something in a language Uranchimeg didn’t understand.

She had an impulse to reach out and hold his hand, but resisted. “We did not do anything unseemly.”

“No,” he said with conviction. “We didn’t. But that’s beside the point.”

“The fault is mine,” she continued. “Something is wrong with me and my actions are prove of that.”

He gave her an incredulous look. “Nothing is wrong with you. You’ve just been brainwashed to think there is. That’s why instead of not freaking out right now, you’re terrified.”

“Not true.”

He cocked an eyebrow in her direction and she squirmed. They sped along the highway, the scenery swishing by, and Uranchimeg could think of nothing but the price she’d pay for this mistake. Aran had never been intentionally cruel, but then again, she’d never disobeyed him.

“I’ll tell them that I asked you out last night,” Xavier said. “Truth is the best way to go.” He reached into the cup holder and fished out a pack of cigarettes, trying and failing to dislodge one.

“I will not allow it.” This time she grabbed the top of his arm. “Please. I will speak with Aran today and explain that it was all an accident.”

“You can’t.” He watched her free a cigarette and light it for him.

She put it between his lips and gave him a sidelong glance. “Why not?”

“You slept in the desert with a guy.”

“He would never assume. You are six years younger. Surely he would not think something could happen between us?”

“I’ve got two questions for you. Do you know anything about men? And,” he reached over to Uranchimeg’s side and pulled down the overhead mirror, pointing at it. “Have you seen yourself? Of course he would think that.”

“Then why did we go out there?”

“Because I was being selfish.”

It took her some effort to speak the truth, because this particular truth felt like a dish she'd never tried before. "We have both been selfish it seems."

As they drove up to the house the two guards waited with their hands clasped in front of them, legs in wide stance, the glare of their sunglasses unforgiving.

## **Mr. Universe**

It was going to be an eventful day, he could tell already, from the moment the fan in his room pitter pattered to a stop to the moment the two ghouls standing outside the window watched the limo drive up with glints in their bloodshot eyes. And he didn't even want to try and guess what was going on in the basement. Oh, he sensed Sophronia in the house but blocked her once she and Eric said hello. Funny, but in the past Mr. U tolerated Sophronia's interest in the guy as something annoying but not worth the aggravation, her being a grown woman and all. But now? Well, he had half a mind to flatten the basement to the ground with Eric in it.

The only thing stopping him was Sophronia. And yes, he wasn't certain he could repeat the tire shop performance. His powers were still leaving him. Determined to relax until his appointment with Mrs. Pole later that night he went downstairs and shoved aside all the healthy crap in the cupboard until his fingertips touched a can of cranberry sauce. He pulled it out and got a can opener, smiling at his own initiative to stay healthy the way Sophronia nagged him to be. "This'll take care of the fruit requirement for today," he said sticking a spoonful of cranberry sauce in his mouth.

He heard the voices outside and immediately thought of the two men that had been on a steak out for half the night. They were Uranchimeg's trusty guards, so where was the girl? As the voices escalated he set the can down, spoon inside, and placed both hands on the counter. From the first moment they met he didn't like Bataar and Robbie, but it wasn't his business.

"But they're on my property damn it," he said out loud, trying to convince himself that it was if truth be told admirable to butt in at times like these, even necessary.

He stalked across the house and swung the front door wide open. His robe swayed from the breeze the motion created.



“You’re on my property.” He stomped down the front steps toward the others who were presently frozen where they were. Bataar had the limo driver by the throat (why did the kid look so familiar?), while Robbie tousled Uranchimeg. She jerked away but he yanked her closer every time.

“Hey boyo,” he said to Bataar, having long ago ascertained him to be the leader. “You’re disturbing my breakfast. Why don’t you take this somewhere else?”

“Go back inside the house, sir,” Bataar said, nodding at the front door.

He was just settling into the situation, getting his bearings. He studied the kid trying to recall where he knew him from. The kid blanched when their eyes met.

“You’re messing up my lawn,” he said. Taking a turn around the group he noticed that the guards carried.

Everyone’s eyes fell to the desert landscaping of rock and cacti with an occasional fallen leaf. Robbie tightened his grip on Uranchimeg’s arms and she winced.

Mr. U’s attention honed in on him. “When you’re gone do you want your kids to remember you as the prick who roughs up helpless women?”

“Please don’t do anything weird.”

Everyone looked at the kid who strained to see Mr. U past the grip around his neck. Bataar gave him a shake. “Is me you should be afraid of, not old man in a stripy green robe with coffee stain.”

It was then that Mr. U remembered.

“I see you’re still in the automotive business,” he said with a slowly spreading smile.

“Don’t hurt them, ok?”

“What is this?” Robbie said. His eyes darted between the two and he didn’t look happy.

Mr. U ignored him, all attention on the kid. “Oh, come now. I didn’t hurt anyone, per say. I taught your boss a valuable lesson about talking bullshit at the wrong time.” Then to the guards. “Now listen. I’m in a relatively good mood today. Got a promising meeting later on, you see? But I have to admit I’ve got a lot of pent up energy. You know how these things go. You meet someone new. You’ve got your hopes up. In other words, all the anticipation is making me a bit edgy.”

Bataar scowled. “This isn’t your business.”

“He’s right,” the kid said.

“What is wrong with you?” said Uranchimeg. She tried to wriggle free from her captor but unsuccessfully. This time she yelped in pain and the kid jumped in the guards grip. “Leave her alone fuckface.”

Wind whipped at Mr. U’s robes. It was a breezy morning. But the kid’s face grew flypaper white. He looked deeply into the bodyguard’s eyes. “You don’t want to piss him off. I’ve seen him pissed off and you don’t want that to happen. I told you it was my fault. I didn’t tell her where I was taking her. So deal with me. But somewhere else,” he added quickly. “Ok?” He held his hands up in a gesture of compliance. “I’ll go with you. Now.”

“Too late for that, I’m afraid,” said Mr. U. “Though your courage is commendable, you can’t save everybody.”

The kid ignored Bataar’s menacing growl and addressed Mr. U who was coming around the guard’s back. “They’re just ghouls. They’re not in charge. Leave them alone. I’ll deal with it.”

“Why are you defending them?” Uranchimeg asked in a voice high-pitched voice.

Dust devils began to form around Mr. U and he grinned. “Remember grasshopper. No matter the bull they teach you in school you’re always in charge of your lunch money.”

“Look.” The kid spoke to the guards again, words tumbling now. “If you don’t get out of here right now he’ll hurt you so bad you won’t remember what a dumbbell looks like for the rest of your life. You get it?”

Just as Bataar pulled back his fist, ready to smash it into the kid’s face a car came into view driving up the street. The guard let go so abruptly that the kid skidded and fell backwards onto the ground. “Cops,” he said, motioning for his partner to get in the car.

He watched them drive off with disappointment. The wind around him subsided into drifts of dust. “Interrupted by the long neighborly arm of the law,” he said.

## **Jack and Mother**

Jack saw the BMW take off and the old neighbor with two others standing in his front yard. Something weird was always going on across the road, but she didn't care, really. She was nosy by nature of her job, but today she drove past them and into her mother's driveway and went inside without saying hello.

Her mother was in the house making meringue cookies. Some kind of salsa music drifted through the speakers and she hummed under her breath. She ran up to Jack and gave her a semi hug, holding her hands in the air.

"Honey, honey, honey. My fingers are sticky with whipped cream but I'm so glad to see you." She gave Jack a once over. "How are you doing darling? How was work?"

"I got an early out," Jack pulled up one of the kitchen chairs. "It was impossible to get anything done."

"Talk to me."

"Three more today."

"All dead?"

Jack gave her a sidelong glance and her mother nodded, platinum curls bobbing up and down.

"At least you know exactly what they want," she said. "It's not like getting an enigmatic message that you have to decipher, a mystery to solve."

"That's not the point mother."

"Just trying to see the brighter side of things."

Jack glanced at the tray containing white blobs of meringue topped with whipped cream and mariner cherries. "What's the occasion?"

Her mother turned around, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. “Something to take with us tonight. People like it when you bring them an offering.”

“They do?” Jack said. She got up and fished a meringue from the tray before her mother stuck the confections into the fridge to harden. She took a bite. “Oh my god this is so good. Why haven’t I known about this?”

Mrs. Pole grinned. “It’s a new recipe. Got it from a Russian cookbook.”

“And this will help us tonight how?”

“Well, don’t you feel better?”

“You know what?” Jack said. “I actually do. It melts in your mouth and it’s kind of... refreshing.”

“That’s because of the secret ingredient. It does wonders for the mood and we all need to be in a relaxed mood tonight, especially that old goat across the street.”

“What’s the secret ingredient?”

“Vodka.”

Suddenly Jack thought about what they were going to do tonight and panicked. Coming to her mother for help was something like this seemed the logical step, but Jack struggled with the fact that she was about to do the very thing that created rifts in their relationship over the years. This was so not her.

“I’ll be right back,” Jack said and went down the hallway where she shut herself in the bathroom and leaned on the sink and hung her head and made honest to god eye contact with the drain stopper for ten minutes straight, thinking that just like in movies she was going to wake up any moment and tell everyone she knew about the crazy dream she had.

## **Sophronia**

They heard the door bang against the wall and jerked awake.

“Sophronia!” came her father’s booming voice. “You in here?” He stomped down, making as much noise as possible, and Sophronia sat up holding the sheet to her chest and rubbing her eyes.

Next to her Eric raised himself on his elbows. At the sight of her father he groped the sheets for his shirt and yanked it on. Buttoning the thing didn’t quite work out due to the missing buttons from when Sophronia ripped the shirt open the night before. He held it together and attempted to look dignified.

Sophronia held in a giggle at the shame on Eric’s face as he avoided looking at her father who at the present stood at the foot of the cot with a giant coffee cup shaped like a rattle snake in one hand.

“If you’re done here,” He gave Eric a disgusted nod and came back to Sophronia, “We need you upstairs.”

“Who’s we?” she gestured him to turn away so that she could get dressed, and this time did laugh when Eric turned aside as well. She could only imagine how uncomfortable this felt to him, but she didn’t feel sorry. He deserved it.

Her father, busy intimidating Eric with the pure power of his presence didn’t answer right away. He stuck a hand on a hip and waited, finally speaking over his shoulder. “We the Mongolian girl and her cub.”

“Father behave yourself,” Sophronia cried out, mouthing ‘can you believe him?’ at Eric.

“Well I say what I know. Give ‘em a basement and you’ll see I’m right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” This time Sophronia could feel her cheeks infuse with heat. She pulled her shorts up, zipped and searched around for her sandals which she found under the cot.

“You were a nurse in one of your lives, weren’t you?”

“No dad. Mom is a nurse.”

“Good enough for me.”

“What happened?”

“Attacked by her own guards.”

“Why?” Eric said. Shirt forgotten he was now pulling on his own sweats. “Is she alright?”

“When are you gonna pay me?” Her father said.

Eric jumped to attention as Mr. U turned around. “I have the money. Just need to get out to cash the check.” He gave Sophronia a sheepish look.

“Oh I don’t think so.” She wiggled a finger at him. “You’re staying put.” She started up the stairs with her father in tow.

“You’re not serious,” Eric said.

You think because we did it—”

He father hurried up past her. “That’s not fitting talk in front of your father.”

“— that everything’s back to normal again?”

Eric held his hands together. “What is it you want from me, Soph?”

“You can start by writing again. This is a perfect opportunity.”

“And if I do?”

“Then we’ll see.”

She shut and locked the door just in time to hear him punch the wall.



## **Uranchimeg**

Her landlord and Sophronia exited the basement and bolted the door back up. One look at Xavier sent Sophronia into the kitchen cupboard for painkiller, and Mr. Universe followed after her as they started to bicker about his lack of propriety and her lack of self-respect.

Meanwhile, Uranchimeg sat on the edge of her chair in a daze, studying the dust on the coffee table as if she was only an observer and not truly present. How could the men attack her? It didn't make sense and yet, something told her that calling Aran would prove useless. The guards would've never gone this far without Aran's knowledge. That scared her, made her numb. Loud thuds reverberated against the floor from somewhere below. It was followed by a row of muffled shouts. she started, gripping the edge of the cushion. The noise returned her back to reality. Once again she took in Xavier's state and stifled a moan. He stood by the fireplace from where he cast longing glances at the furniture.

"How long are they gonna keep him there?" he said in a hoarse voice. A bloody line cut across his lower lip and when he spoke he barely opened his mouth, wincing. One side of his face was puffy and bruised and there were hand prints on his neck from where the guard choked him. His jacket hung asymmetrically, half the sleeve torn off, and he was missing a shoe.

"Xavier. Sit down," she said.

"I'm good." He seemed aware of the state of his torn dirty clothes and remained on his feet even after Mr. Universe pointed to the couch when they first came inside the house.

Uranchimeg's chest constricted. Without a word she got up and wrapped her arms around him, felt him tense, loosened her embrace and tried to take in air without breaking down like a soap opera actress. She felt his hand on her back.

"That must've really scared you."

“I want to kill them,” she heard herself whisper into his chest.

“Kind of harsh, don’t you think?”

The humor in his tone made her feel like maybe things hadn’t gone as horribly wrong as she’d thought, until she looked up. The proof was right there, about two feet above her.

The other two returned from the kitchen and Sophronia ordered Xavier to sit. She took his chin in her hand and turned it from side to side slowly. “I don’t think we can do much for the bruises except to ice your face until you can’t feel it.” With that she laid an ice pack on the bruised side.

“That’s what I figured,” he said, holding the pack in place. “There wasn’t any need for panic.”

Mr. Universe clasped his hands behind his back. “You’re sturdier than you look.”

“Dad, don’t you have something you were doing?” Sophronia said.

He grumbled but stopped abruptly when Uranchimeg came to him and gave him a hug as well. This form of affection wasn’t common for her and it still felt awkward, but she was overwhelmed with gratitude. “Thank you for helping us.”

Her landlord didn’t quite reciprocate. He didn’t pull back either. Just waited until she released him and said, “I wanted them off my property and what is a girl like you doing getting yourself in trouble anyway?”

The white stubble on his cheeks made him look even crankier than he already appeared. Only Uranchimeg wasn’t wounded by his reprimand. On the contrary she completely understood his nature.

“Takes much to rile you up, doesn’t it,” he said, as if reading her mind. Then back to Xavier. “You kid need to learn how to read a situation. When to speak and when to let nature take its course.”

Xavier tightened his grip on the icepack. “And we all know how that turned out last time.”

“Not all of us.” The old man’s words were short and loaded.

Uranchimeg and Sophronia looked between the two. She recalled their strange interaction earlier, as if they knew one another.

“Same thing about your neck,” Sophronia said, after her questioning look was ignored by both men. “You’ll just have to wait until the swelling goes down. I have some drugs to help you with the pain, though.” She opened a large plastic box filled with pill bottles and looked up at her father. “Why aren’t you taking them?”

He shrugged a little too nonchalant. “Don’t need them anymore.”

“Really?”

“Why don’t you tend to our patient,” he said. “We can have a fight later.”

Sophronia narrowed her eyes at him, but returned to Xavier. “You’re going to press charges, right? I mean you know these guys. What company are they working for?”

“My husband hired them,” Uranchimeg said.

Sophronia stopped rummaging in her father’s medicine box. “Oh... Shit.”

## **Jack**

It didn't truly register that they were going to see a psychic until her mother's Caddie came to a stop in front of the storefront in a rundown two storey strip mall off of Flamingo (research). The parking lot was deserted, all the shops closed at this time of the night.

"Are you sure they know we're coming?" Jack said from the back seat. The old neighbor had commandeered the front seat riding like a king in a procession.

Mrs. Pole turned off the ignition and climbed out. "They know. She only sees people on special occasions at this time."

They came to the glass door with a closed sign hanging on the inside. A very dim light drifted from somewhere within but the shop front was completely dark, lacy white curtains drawn. Mrs. Pole felt for something on the side of the door and pressed a small barely visible button. She gave Jack and Mr. U an encouraging bob of the head and smiled down at the vodka-laced plate of meringue cookies in her hand.

Several minutes later a shape appeared to be moving behind the curtains and a young woman in her late twenties stuck her face to the glass. As soon as she saw Mrs. Pole she smiled and unlocked the door.

"Rebecca." Jack's mother wrapped an arm around the other woman's shoulder as they kissed on the cheek. She gave Rebecca the plate. "It's been ages. Darling you've lost so much weight."

Rebecca ran her hands down her large curves. "Thank you. I've been doing yoga."

"This could only mean one thing. You're in love."

The girl actually twirled her skirt side to side, and then waved them to the back of the store where a steep staircase led up to the second level.

The upper level consisted of a living area with a kitchen and living room and bedrooms. Even so late sounds of activity drifted from other parts of the apartment and voices mingled in conversation. They came into the living room with matching furniture in pale beige and red wood. The carpet was almost the same color. There was a large vase with an Asian motive in each corner of the room with long green and red reeds. Rebecca disappeared and Mrs. Pole made herself comfortable on one of the chairs. The entire time her cranky neighbor scrutinized his surroundings the way a cat does when in an unfamiliar environment, upraising them of their value and appeal. He walked around, hands behind his back, peering at the art that hung on the walls. Jacks still didn't know why he came along, but didn't have the chance to ask.

"Will you relax?" her mother said to him, and he turned around and fixed the collar of his button down shirt. He seemed to have dressed up, if wearing black leather pants with snake skin boots could be called that. His normally spiky white hair was jelled up, making it intentionally spiky, therefore acceptable.

"I am."

"What exactly are we going to do here?" Jack asked. She was also standing, unsure whether she was violating some kind of an unspoken law enforcement detective code of conduct by being here.

Just then Rebecca reappeared in the doorway, carrying the plate of cookies which she put down on the coffee table, disappearing quickly into the kitchen and coming back with a carafe of lemonade and some glasses. She then sat down across from Mrs. Pole, smiling shyly at Jack and not so much smiling at Mr. U as squinting, as if she couldn't quite figure out why he was there, either.

"Please sit down." She indicated the other chairs.

“Thanks for seeing us on such a short notice, honey,” said Mrs. Pole.

“You’ve done the same plenty of times for me,” Rebecca said.

Once they sat in a circle she swiveled her head as if working the kinks out and stopped on Jack. Mrs. Pole crossed her legs. She seemed expectant but not anxious, and Jack wished she could imitate the attitude though with the beaming fidgety young woman tossing longing glances at the cookie plate it wasn’t easy.

“Your mother told me about your... predicament,” Rebecca said.

“And what is my predicament, exactly?”

“The gift of discernment, silly.”

That was it. No further explanation. Rebecca placed two cookies on a desert plate and reverently pushed her nose to them, sighing with appreciation.

Meanwhile Mr. U sat on his chair more obedient than Jack could have ever imagined him to be.

“What about our other friend?” asked Mrs. Pole waving at Mr. U who had grabbed a cookie off the plate and bit into it, gooey bits sticking to the whiskers above his upper lip.

Rebecca leaned back in surprise. “Is he the one the meditation was meant for?” At the nod of confirmation from Mrs. Pole she said with a distinct air of cheerfulness. “But I don’t sense his dilemma at all. To be honest I don’t sense him at all.” She shrugged.

“How can you not sense me?” Mr. U said, looking hurt. She spread her arms and he muttered under his breath. “What kind of a world are we living in where a magic practitioner grows ignorant of my presence?”

Jack’s initial impression of her mother’s neighbor being a conceited egotistical ass was just reaffirmed and she gave him an ‘I can’t believe you’ headshake which he returned with a

rebellious capture of another cookie. Mrs. Pole bit her pinky nail and smiled apologetically at Rebecca.

“I suspected it wouldn’t work,” Mr. U said, a bit subdued. “From the get go.”

“It did work, but not the way you anticipated I suspect,” Rebecca said, trying to match his tone. But there was a guardedness about her Jack hadn’t noticed before.

“You suspect right,” said Mr. U and wiped his fingers on his pants. “And I suspect there’s nothing you can do to fix it?”

“Is there ever a time when you simply listen and not act like a five year old?” Mrs. Pole said to Mr. U.

He jutted out his chin, but said nothing more to Rebecca. Jack was shocked to see this interplay. Not that she wasn’t used to her mother putting people in their place, just not someone like him.

“You suspect right,” Rebecca said. “Here’s the deal. Often during meditation we ask for things we think we need but it’s our ego that makes the request and not our purest soul, and so the universe,” she pointed up with a helpful twinkle in her eyes, “aware of this craziness rights the wrong and presents to you those things that truly belong to you.” Rebecca finished off her cookies and leaned over the table to get more. “These are delicious.”

“I knew you’d like them?” Mrs. Pole said.

“We’ll come back to the gentleman in a moment, but for now let’s focus on the young lady.”

Jack strangled a laugh. She must’ve been at least ten years older than the girl.

“No one can tell you why you’ve been chosen to communicate with the other side in this manner,” Rebecca said, growing pensive. “Maybe your profession lands to it? Or maybe there

are doors somewhere deep in your mind that are bolted shut and plastered over and this event somehow blasted open one you least suspected.”

“I don’t have doors,” Jack said, trying to sound tactful, the way a teacher tries with a seven year old who claims to know the meaning of life. “I’m a detective.”

“Is that how you define yourself?”

“I’m a normal person.”

“No such thing. Inside we are all tangled.”

“Fine,” Jack said in response to her mother’s silent pleading (hands to heart) to cooperate. “So what should I do to make it go away?”

“First, you have to understand that it might never go away.” That was exactly what her mother said. “We all carry the gift of trans-universal interconnectedness within us, but only a few ever tap into it. For most it remains as potential only. What if you’re meant to develop it instead? How would you feel about that?”

“It’s like saying that everyone is a potential alcoholic,” Jack said.

“Or a great pianist.”

She contemplated that for a moment.

“Touché,” came from Mr. U who had apparently given up on asserting his prominence, at least temporarily, as well as forgotten he wasn’t supposed to speak. “Here’s how I see it. Either the girl’s right or you’re stuck hearing voices for the rest of your life. Grinds a person down after a while, always hearing people moaning about this and about that, though. A passive-aggressive relationship for eternity.” He noticed everyone staring at him and managed to look uncomfortable and became keenly interested in a wall painting of two horses eating grass on the other side of the room. “Or maybe she has a point. What do I know?”



## **Xavier**

After taking the painkillers Xavier had fallen asleep on the couch and didn't wake up until the sky grew tinged with blue, well past midnight. Groggy he sat up. Someone had taken off his jacket—he moved aside the blanket—and his pants. The lights on the lower level had been turned off, all except one drifting from the kitchen and the one on the front porch. When he stood up the floor careened under his feet and he fell back on the couch looking down to steady the circles dancing in his vision. Once the dizziness eased he found his clothes on a nearby chair. When he went to put them on he saw they'd been mended, and he smiled.

The last thing Xavier wanted to do was to leave Uranchimeg alone. The guards' actions clearly demonstrated that they weren't all bark, that if given free reign they'd take up the roles of mercenaries with ease. If they were smoking crack as regularly as he'd noticed they were unpredictable and unreliable. His mother would've said that a guiding spirit was warning Xavier of danger, but having always considered himself an agnostic he attributed the bad feeling clawing at his spine to over-protectiveness. Taking care not to fall from the sheer weakness he reached out and grabbed the banister, and lowered himself on the floor at the bottom of the stairs waiting for the drugs to leave his system so that he could warn Uranchimeg.

## **Sophronia**

She'd jumped at the opportunity to stand in for a fellow dj, grateful for the graveyard shift. The show was half over but since it was the only thing that prevented her from thinking non-stop about what she'd done with Eric she wished the hour could stretch until morning. No one could ever call Sophronia a coward, but this was different. Eric's desperation to feel wanted led him into her arms and in turn, her feelings for him made her act like a fool. It didn't sit well with her that they used each other. After she left her father's house Sophronia felt like she was half walking half floating between reality and some kind of otherness she wished she could fling off like a bug. She didn't want to love Eric. Plain and simple. Didn't want the emotion to occupy any part of her.

In her office she sat down in front of her computer and opened her inbox, clicked on a week old email she'd received from an old friend who'd relocated to Seattle a year before. At the time she barely noticed it, skimming it and forgetting about it. Not only was it against her philosophy to do the same job twice, but also against the very core of her book project, but now she re-read the message.

'My boss loved the concept of the Urban Nomad. You'll have your own show. You share your own experiences and interview guests from all over the world who do similar things. This will be incredible. Did you know the term has taken off and people are reading your blogs and following in your example? There might be a book deal in this, too. Come on, Soph. What do you have to lose?'

She turned away from the monitor. After some time she swiveled the chair back around and began to type.

**Jack**

The message, supposedly channeled through Jack as she wrote, was this:

*Now is the time to change what you believe is supposed to happen in tunnels of best cities. Coarse hairs are to be plucked and doors opened when you lay awake and sleeping. We are one and only in attention to vibrant nature. We call you in our hearts to make the minutes before retention. Could you supply life and energy to this, without fear, and cope with truth of reason?*

She sat at an old fashioned roll top desk in the corner of a small room Rebecca had led them after their initial conversation, and scribbled on a white sheet of paper until her hand cramped up and she had to stop. This wasn't because there was a lot of writing going on, but because she wasn't used writing by hand. She was, by and large, against the idea of free writing, the practice seeming too 'what mother did with her baby boomer friends during their special parties' to appear serious, but Jack decided to oblige. After all, she did ask for help. This was more about detecting what was wrong, her mother's way, and if she didn't like what she found she could easily move on to something more promising, like the occupational psychologist's office at her station.

Rebecca studied the writing and re-read it out loud several times tapping her chin.

"Sounds like a bunch of—" Jack thought of a better word choice than crap. "gibberish, doesn't it?"

"Goodness. Not at all," said Rebecca.

"It's clear as can be, honey," said Mrs. Pole hovering over Rebecca's shoulder. "I'm surprised at just how simple the answer is and I can't believe I hadn't thought of it myself. She wrapped her hands around Rebecca's arm. "No offense, dear."

“Makes complete sense.” Rebecca smiled at Jack like a doctor delivering great news.  
“Basically the choice is yours.”

“How?” Jack said. “I have absolutely no control over when they come. That’s why I’m here in the first place.”

“It seems out of your control because you’re still in shock and fighting it. What’s written here is a request to connect and also a message of understanding if you choose not to. You may shut the door and never see another spirit again. You may open it later on in life when you feel ready.”

“How do I do that?”

“Write back.”

“That’s it?” said Mr. U from his spot on a stool by the wall. “It sounds more like you’re trying to subconsciously tell yourself that you need to either shaved or travel. I’d say travel. You have the look of a workaholic about you.”

Rebecca turned around, hands on hips. “I just can’t believe you,” she said to Mr. U. “You have so much power. What kind of power? I can’t say, but I know you’re special somehow. And yet you’re acting like you know nothing and can do nothing, unless you’re angry or condescending or petty. It’s like you’ve been a child forever and now you’ve finally hit puberty and don’t know what the hell to do about it. Are you really so clueless?”

“Am not!” he said. “What you getting mad for? I thought you were supposed to help me not insult me.”

For the first time since they came in Rebecca’s temperament reared up, and the sweet bubbly meringue loving young woman had been replaced by an Amazon warrior who happened to center her wrath on the unfortunate man perched on the stool.

She shook a finger at him as if he was much younger than her. “The kind of help you want isn’t going to come from a séance and you know it, so stop pretending. I can see it in those wily eyes of yours. The kind of help you’re looking for isn’t store bought. You don’t pop it into the microwave and hit baked potato.”

“No clue what you’re talking about.”

“Do you want your memories back, old man, or your youth?” she said, and he froze in his seat.

“Memories of course.” But he sounded uncertain. “isn’t that what all old folk want?”

Rebecca crossed the room and stopped before Mr. U, leaning in until their faces almost touched. “None of us want to let go of the earthly attachments. You’ve had a good life,” she said in a quiet meditative voice. “But your energy is ready to flow and rejoin the cosmic force we are all made of. You’re in this wheel with the rest of us. How else will your memories survive if not by sustaining life for the creation of the future?”

She blinked and moved away holding a hand to her forehead. When she swayed Mrs. Pole and Jack ran up to steady her, taking her by the elbows and leading her to the chair.

“I think you’ve overexerted yourself,” Mrs. Pole said, looking down in deep concern.

“Just a little dizzy. My blood sugar level must’ve fallen.”

Jack went into the living room and came back with a plate of cookies and a glass of lemonade which Rebecca gulped down.

All the while Mr. U stayed on his stool looking like a concord balanced on top of a tree branch, but then quite suddenly he walked up to Rebecca and laid a hand on her head. Jack watched as color returned to her face and she seemed to breathe easier. Seeing this Mr. U patted Rebecca’s shoulder in a gesture of reassurance and walked out of the room.

## **Jack**

Jack went to work the next day thinking that already life was righting itself back to normal. By the time she came home it was almost four in the morning and time to get up. But she wrote the letter sitting on her bed, eyes gritty from lack of sleep. For some reason she wanted to make it just right, but after dozens of drafts and an admonition of, you're not composing a play, she settled on a simple note, short and to the point: I'm closing this door for now, but will leave it unlocked. Maybe one day I'll be ready.

She slept three hours straight and slammed the alarm down when it buzzed, sleepwalking through her routine. And yet her every nerve sparked with energy, even her lungs felt twice as big as their normal size. By the time she entered the station some of the coffee had worked through her system and her eyes were finally seeing one hundred percent. She breezed through the station saying hello to people she didn't know and those she usually ignored completely. At her desk Jack turned on the computer and read the emails from the last few days, but she kept glancing outside. It was a gorgeous day.

"What?" Mike from the desk across was staring at her, a sausage mcmuffin halfway to his mouth. He looked behind him, at the front of his shirt, and came back with a puzzled openmouthed expression.

"What?" Jack said.

"Do I have something on my mouth?" He stuck a napkin to his lips.

"No."

"Then why are you grinning at me?"

Because not a single dead person has come by to announce their death or to ask for help, she almost said.

Mike did something with his eyes that resembled what was probably meant to be a sexy wink but came out as a spastic flutter of the eyelashes, and Jack held in a laugh. “Stand down, cowboy,” she said. “The answer is still no I’m not going out with you.”

Mike gave his mcmuffin a forlorn sigh and bit into it.

There was a pile of files and papers on Jack’s desk. This never bothered her. She thrived on a bit of chaos, but only because she knew her messes by heart. Every scrap, every list or letter or file. So she reached for a case she’d been working on, of domestic abuse, pulled out the file and cracked it open in front of her, ready to put some bad guys away.

She stopped in her tracks, forgetting the mood and the birds singing outside the window. The photo attached to the forensics report was that of Jane Doe, the one whose stolen wallet Mr. Bean had brought her over a week ago. Jack held up the file and called out to Mike. “Hey do you know when this got here?”

“Idwonnough,” he mumbled, crumbs falling from his mouth into his lap.

“Who brought it?”

He shrugged his shoulders up to his ears.

Jack distinctly remembered taking the wallet to Rosemary Walters who had been the head investigator on the case back when the body was found. She picked up the phone and dialed Rosemary’s extension. It went to voicemail and Jack left a brief message asking why Rosemary had brought back the file. The next thing she did was shuffle through the stuff on her desk in search of the wallet, relieved when it wasn’t there. She opened the drawers and there it was, in the very top drawer open to the woman’s driver’s license photo.

A sinking feeling came over Jack. She twisted around, swiveled her chair searching for any signs of Bean, but the station was abuzz with activity that she recognized as one hundred percent living.

“Youkay?” Mike was a quick eater but a slow chewer and his cheeks bulged like a chipmunk’s, making him appear concerned but incapable of helping even if someone needed him.

Jack dug her elbows on the desk and grabbed fistfuls of hair with both hands, nesting between them until the skin of her face stretched. She read the file and raked her brain for any memory of asking for it, getting it or at least of forgetting it. Nothing. “You haven’t seen Rosemary come by? Anyone else? You positive? No problem. Everything’s fine. I’m fine. Go back to your snack, Mike.”

True to his chipmunk form Mike blinked at her out of one eye, eating and probably wondering exactly when he should run, if at all. Once done he crushed the paper into a ball and tossed it into the nearby garbage bin. It landed a couple of feet away. “Oh, fuck,” he said with a whine that grated on Jack’s nerves. Rolling his eyes he got up and walked it over to the bin. On his way back he looked over Jack’s shoulder. “Why does it matter who brought it?” It was an innocent question, but it hit Jack like a lightning bolt. Why did it matter? So her informant was a dead man. So what? The woman was still a victim, her family probably still grieving.

“You’ve got her license, right?” Mike said.

Jack looked up at him, genuinely humbled.



## Michael

No one called in to work, not when work was one of Area 51's leading research facilities, but Michael's boss was a man with seven daughters and the patience of a martyr. "You get one day," he told Michael in a strict tone. "Tomorrow you do overtime."

Right away Michael decided to head to the Gold Strike downtown, where the town's geeks and entrepreneurs came to work and downed gallons of espresso while doing it. It used to be a casino but was recently refurbished into an adult work/play kind of a venue with billiard tables and board games and plenty of seating areas to work away into the night. He went there to tune out the world, and this was the perfect time for it. Things with Eric had gone terribly wrong, so wrong that it was difficult for Michael to imagine they'd ever speak again. The look on Eric's face when he figured out the TV was a hoax nearly punched the air out of Michael's lungs. He didn't know how to explain his motives. In his mind they were so clear, but once put on the spot he got tongue-tied, as if over twenty years of top university education had produced nothing but a bumbling fool with a penchance for practical jokes, but he wanted to remember that he was a man who'd do anything to save his friend.

The only way Michael knew to deal with the stress of losing his best friend was to work on his own stuff. In this case the work was the TV. Initially to write the program for Eric-2 he'd hacked into a NASA link to the telescopes and hijacked some of the live feed, but he'd terminated it since then. So how was it still operational?

Talking to himself Michael stuffed his laptop into a backpack and headed out the door where he bumped straight into a woman with a raised fist.

"Oh, I was about to knock," she said, arm still in the air as she gawked at him.

He couldn't recall her name, but she looked familiar. "We know each other from somewhere—"

"Yeah, the dinner party a couple of weeks ago." Her voice rose on the last word as if she were also unsure.

"Of course. I knew I remembered you from somewhere. Jack, right?"

They exchanged a nervous laugh.

They stood in the doorway until Michael realized he lived in the apartment the doorway led to and that there was probably a reason why she was here. "Please come in," he said.

She kind of craned her neck as if to see inside before entering, and said, "I can come back if this isn't a good time."

"It's fine. Would you like a drink? Water?"

"No thank you," she said, taking a seat on the edge of the ottoman chair piled high with laundry. Every chair and the sofa, Michael saw in terror, were also covered with unfolded laundry. He pushed some aside and sat down as well.

"I'm sorry for the mess."

She rubbed her forehead. "Do you know a woman by the name of Lily Saunders?"

"I used to. Why?"

"What is your relation to her," Jack said, then softer. "Can you tell me?"

"She was a friend and a roommate for a few years." He looked around the room bare of almost all furniture. When Lily and Eric moved out they took most of it. He didn't mind. He spent most of his days off over at theirs anyway. "Eric. Do you remember him from the party?"

"The novelist?"

"That one. The three of us lived here and then they got together and got their own place."

“And where is she now?” Jack said.

“Why? Is she in some kind of trouble?”

“Sounds like you’re not very fond of her.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “One day they’re engaged, picking a chapel and things the next she’s gone.”

“Just like that?”

He looked around guiltily. “Not exactly, but don’t tell Eric. Before she left she mentioned meeting a guy.”

“Did she tell you his name?”

“No. Just said, I met a guy. Like she was thinking about leaving Eric, but wasn’t sure yet. I never told him. Wouldn’t change anything anyway.”

Jack blew out a slow breath and sat up.

“What is it?” Michael was starting to feel anxious.

“Six months ago Lily’s body was found in the Pittman Wash. At the time she didn’t have any identification. That’s why no one was notified.”

It felt like someone punched him in the stomach. He clasped his hands in his lap and lowered his face as a wave of nausea climbed all the way to the tip of his throat.

“I’m so sorry,” said Jack. He heard her rise and pour a glass of water from the sink before coming back. He took the offered glass. It shook in his hands.

“When did you find out?”

“Just last week, but I didn’t make the connection until right now.”

“She must’ve never changed her address on the driver’s license.”

“Does she have next of kin?” Jack sat back down. “I couldn’t find living parents.”

Michael shook his head. “Eric,” he choked out. “Just him. All this time he thought she left him. That’s why he’s been drinking so much and using God knows what. This’ll kill him.”

“She was his fiancé, which makes him next of kin. I have to tell him.” She walked over to him again and squeezed his shoulder softly. “But you don’t have to.”

There would be nothing worse than staying behind and leaving Eric to receive the news alone. Heavy on his feet Michael stood up and walked to the door like a zombie. “I’m going with you.”

## **Xavier**

On the day he woke up at Mr. U's house Uranchimeg held his face between her hands and instructed him to stay away. She kissed him, then pushed him and walked back to her room and shut the door quietly. He'd never been as baffled by a woman's actions as at that moment, but he respected her wishes. For the next two days he'd barely slept and ran four red lights and put on his shirt backward twice, operating solely on autopilot and even that not very well. He didn't have her cell number, but what he wanted to say wasn't fitting for a phone conversation and would she even listen? Not knowing whether she was alright or mad at him for getting her in trouble or indifferent was driving him mad. He'd acted without thinking, only thinking about spending time with her. If anything else he wanted to apologize for making her have to explain things to her husband. He wanted to at least say sorry before she left.

On the morning of Uranchimeg's last performance Xavier came to pick her up as usual, having made up a somewhat cohesive plan to tell her all these things. This would be the first time they saw each other after the standoff with the bodyguards. In an attempt to avoid thinking about her departure tomorrow he straightened his tie and his cap over and over again, but nothing helped. He was unable to sit still for more than a couple of seconds before his eyes darted to the front door. But she didn't come out, and after half an hour he knew something was wrong. It was just an odd tingling at the base of his neck, but after what happened before he didn't want to leave anything to chance.

When he rang the doorbell for the seventh time and no one answered he rushed down the steps back to the limo and took off toward the theater.

Bataar and Robbie were hanging out by the back door, talking and kicking dirt with the tips of their black shoes. They watched him and began to walk toward the limo as he pulled up.

“Your services are no longer required,” said Bataar.

Xavier got out and tried to go around them. “I’m free, then, do go about my business.”

The blocked his way.

“Mr. Sendoo gave us permission to shoot you on sight.” Bataar reached to the back of his waist.

At the sight of the gun aimed at him Xavier raised his hands and froze. He knew better than to run. Even if he wanted to his legs were like two steel cables rooted into the ground. He heard the gun go off and suddenly he was in his parents’ house, running into their bedroom where his father lay on the floor half his head blown off. Xavier’s chest hurt as he wrestled his way back from that memory.

“You have a death wish or something?” Robbie called out.

“I just want to make sure she’s alright.” Sweat pooled at the base of his spine.

Bataar used his other hand to reinforce his grip. His gaze wavered past the barrel, as if he had a hard time keeping focused. “Do you know what being indispensable means, kid? It means I can blow off your toes, right here in the broad daylight and nobody would give a fuck.” He ground his teeth.

“You can’t scare me away,” Xavier said.

The guard angled the gun and fired. The bullet ricocheted off the gravel inches from Xavier’s feet, but he held his ground. His blood pumped so hard it shook him.

“Stubborn idiot,” Bataar said, and fired again.

A lightning of pain cracked through Xavier’s right toe. He cried out and almost fell.

“I can keep going,” said the guard. “Gotta wait for Mrs. Sendoo anyway. Hours to kill.”

Robbie snickered.

“I’m not leaving,” Xavier said.

The back door cracked open and a man stuck out his head then disappeared back inside. It was Uranchimeg’s manager. “What’s this noise?” he called out. “You do realize tonight’s our biggest performance? We’ve been sold out for weeks. You do understand how serious this is!”

Bataar rolled his eyes and lowered the gun. “I’m getting tired of always being interrupted.” He moved his arm, aiming at the door.

“I’m calling the police!” came a quick reply and the door bolted shut.

Before he could think Xavier rushed the bodyguard. They collided and fell to the ground as he wrestled him for the gun. The man threw a punch but Xavier ducked and rolled aside, wringing the gun away from Bataar. He couldn’t see or hear what the other man was doing, and maybe that was a good thing because his mind was on fire and his body strung out on pain. He scrambled to his feet and aimed. His eyes watered and felt gritty and his vision swam as he tried to stop swaying.

“Bataar. The pup probably did call the police,” said Robbie, looking nervously at Xavier who kept switching his aim from one man to the other.

“You keep breathing like that you’ll shoot yourself, little girl.” With an ugly grimace the tall one rose to his feet and dusted off his suit, hardly paying attention to the fact he had a weapon aimed at him.

“I’ll take my chances,” said Xavier. “Now get into your BMW and go.”

“Oh, look,” Robbie said. “He’s threatening.” But Bataar hit him over the head and shoved him around.

“I think we been beat,” he said, walking backwards to the car. “But so you know. You should’ve listened to my advices and walked away. Now it be too late.”

## Uranchimeg

Her own reflection appeared unimpressed and rather judgmental, so Uranchimeg turned aside. The conflict raging inside her reminded her why she had worked so hard to observe the world through the lens of rationality. But it had gone now. The only thing she saw when she looked in the mirror was a woman trapped by her own choices and Aran's manipulations. Their marriage had been arranged by their families, common enough in that part of the world. Uranchimeg was eighteen, Aran twenty seven and a catch. As she recalled their wedding night she felt herself sink. The reflection in the mirror was pale like death. She quickly rummaged for wet wipes and cleansing cream and began to slather off the heavy stage makeup, which was proving difficult because her hands shook. Beneath it her skin still had little color.

The memory that had always slithered away whenever she tried to recapture it, now resurfaced like a log in the water. Aran hovered above her pinning her hands above her head as she tried to wriggle away. 'Wait,' she cried out. 'Give me a moment.' In the candlelight of the darkened room his skin reflected the shadows and bright pinholes danced in his dark eyes. 'I won't wait any longer,' he said to her. 'You'll get used to it.' He forced her knees apart and rammed inside her. When she screamed he pushed a hand over her mouth, covering her nose as well until her lungs caught fire and she began to drift into oblivion from pain and lack of air. An eternity passed until he heaved above her and then slid off. The elderly women who stood in the corner of the room like two gargoyles finally came to life. They wore expressions of teary-eyed joy as Aran confirmed Uranchimeg's purity. Other memories of Aran's rapes absconded her like vultures. Uranchimeg had no recollection of any of them, and helpless she felt them begin to peck.



The door handle to her dressing room shook slightly. She shot up to her feet, holding her hands to her chest. A succession of soft knocks came. She dreaded facing the bodyguards who had informed her that they were to stay with her until she boarded the plane in the morning, so she pretended not to hear anything and continued to take off the makeup, removing her robes until she was in a shift. All this she did with erratic inconsistency, moving around the room like a mental patient in solitary. Another knock, but this time it came accompanied by a whisper. “Uranchimeg, it’s Xavier.”

She unlocked the door and Xavier stumbled in, locking the door behind him.

“They did not see you?” she said. She was nervous and happy. The combination made her jittery. “I told you to stay away. Those men are evil. They will hurt you.” She looked down at his bandaged foot and cried out. “What happened? Sit down this instance.”

She guided him to a chair and knelt, touching his foot carefully.

“An accident. It’s nothing. Listen. Look at me.” He leaned down and took her hands in his so that they faced each other. “I’m leaving for Mexico tomorrow.”

“That is wonderful news!”

“Come with me. I have enough to live on and my grandparents have an apartment in the city we could use. I’ll work and study and you can open a music school or perform or whatever you want to do, it doesn’t matter. Just don’t go back, okay?”

“Xavier.”

“Don’t say no.”

“My life is in Mongolia. Now tell me what happened to your foot.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.”

“I must go back.”

“Aran is up to something,” Xavier said. “I can feel it. I don’t know how to explain this, but it’s been nagging at me for days now.”

She gave him a sad smile. “He is upset as he has the right to be.”

“It’s more than that.”

She caressed the side of his face with an open palm and Xavier nestled his face in her hand.

She said. “Perhaps we want it to be something to each other to cover up other issues in our lives that require attention—”

He lowered his face to hers and she met him halfway, forgetting her train of thought. A sensation of being weightless came over her and Uranchimeg gripped the hair at the nape of his neck to keep steady.

“You have to go.” She drew him closer.

“Together.”

“We would never be free.”

## **Mr. Universe**

Mrs. Pole called him to ask if he'd pick her at Sam's Town gambling hall. Her voice was aquiver, but that didn't faze him. He'd not talked to anyone since Rebecca's scolding, and seeing the woman who had, albeit with his permission, involved him in a plan that would eventually bring him face to face with a young woman and in turn his own conciseness, Mr. U wasn't keen on conversing with her, which is what he said when she called. "I'm not in a mood for conversing," were his exact words.

"Please," she said after a miserable pause. "I'm in a bit of a bind."

"Your daughter's here," he said, assuming this might be a way to get out of whatever favor she wanted him to do.

"She is?" Fear made her voice even quiverier.

"Locked herself up with the writer and the scientist. Maybe you should come and get her. I'm hearing shit being thrown around the room. Somebody's gotta pay for the damages."

"Then why don't you go in and check if everything's all right, you foolish man?"

He puffed. "It's not my business."

"Please come," she repeated then. "She'll never talk to me again if she finds out. She can't know."

"Know what? That you stole fifty bucks from her purse?" He chuckled with pleasure when he heard her gasp.

"This was the last time. I swear. I got the number to the counseling center and soon as I get home I'm gonna call and make an appointment."

"I'm surprised she hasn't noticed, yet. Not detective behavior at all if you ask me."

"Don't you dare talk about my daughter that way. She's been dealing with a lot of..."

“Say it.”

“ ... ”

“If you say it I’ll get you.” It amused him that a woman with such a colorful history as Mrs. Pole was embarrassed to curse in front of him. He knew her spirit—a mountain cat on a prowl— so why the disguise?

“I hate your guts you freaking jackass!”

“That’s my girl.”

## **Sophronia**

She had already packed. The sooner she left the less chance of her changing her mind. Living in a short term furnished rental meant she didn't have to turn off her utilities or bother with moving vans. She loaded all of her belongings into her car. Most of it would go to her father's house. He could need some redecorating anyway.

"Where would you like us to forward your mail," asked the clerk at the front desk, fingers poised over the computer keyboard.

Too distracted to concentrate Sophronia said, "Can I call you with that info later?" The girl gave her an indifferent shrug and took a large gulp of her iced coffee, turning away.

Several hours later Sophronia parked in front of her father's house. In the back seat Caterwaul mewed sheepishly from his Sherpa carrier. He abhorred not being able to feel the ground beneath his feet.

"Maybe I should leave you with grandpa," Sophronia winked at him. Caterwaul answered with a short mewl that sounded suspiciously like 'you mad, girl.' When she opened the car door, he began to scratch at the mesh of the carrier, wailing a long one this time. "Don't be such a drama queen. I'll be right back."

The first thing she noticed was the basement door standing ajar. Sophronia rushed down the steps. It was empty. She ran back up. "Eric? Dad?" No one answered at first, but then she heard a noise of feet shuffling on the hardwood floor and the next thing she knew a man came out of the kitchen. He wore a black suit and a tie, but she could tell right away he wasn't a businessman. The jowls of his face hung like that of a bulldog and he had bushy eyebrows that almost met in the middle. Below them his eyes were brimmed in red and hooded.

“Who are you?” Sophronia asked, but tried not to sound confrontational. Her father had his share of strange friends. “Where’s Eric?”

The man kept one hand behind his back. With the other he put a finger to his lips in a warning. The fine hairs on the nape of Sophronia’s neck stood. He took small measured steps in her direction, and sidling along the wall she tried to figure out which way to bolt.

She heard the back door creak open and close and another man joined them. This one was shorter with a receding hairline and a flat face. Seeing her, he stopped in his tracks and scanned his surroundings, as if expecting others. He gave his partner an inquiring look. Sophronia now stood at the base of the staircase, but something told her that shouting a warning to whomever was upstairs might not be a good idea.

Somewhere a door opened and the three of them froze. For a split second, before addressing the men, Sophronia’s attention darted to the upstairs landing and she met Jack’s eyes.

“We don’t keep money in the house,” she said in a normal conversational tone of voice, raising her arms and splaying her hands. “I’ve got a savings account. The purse is in my car.”

“Quiet, bitch,” said the tall man. He shifted his other hand in front of him and waved a gun at Sophronia to move out of the way.

## **Uranchimeg**

Like mad Uranchimeg shoved her belongings into the suitcases she had brought with her. Unconcerned with damaging anything she upended drawers of cosmetics and underthings, picking up several pairs of shoes off the floor and throwing them in as well. Every time thoughts of Xavier materialized she packed with more vengeance. The bodyguards would be coming for her any minute now, and she wanted to be out of Vegas, the sooner the better. She absolutely needed to be on that plane before she changed her mind. Aran still hadn't called and she couldn't get a hold of him, but she wasn't worried. Once home, she'd smooth things over. Somehow she'd conjure up the old Uranchimeg, the one who could ignore Aran's true nature. As before she would lose herself in her music and nothing would touch her.

## **Eric**

Eric couldn't feel his body. He noticed vaguely that his room had been cleaned in his absence. "Do you know who did it?"

Jack shook her head. She stood across from him and Michael who looked like he was about to vomit.

"I'm so sorry, man," he said.

Eric could only manage a half nod. It felt like he'd been grieving for so long that now he was almost impervious to the pain that should've come with the truth.

"Listen," Michael said. "I'm not even going to ask if you're okay, but if you need anything, any help or to talk or anything, I'm here, buddy."

"No, I'm good." Eric expelled that reply. "I mean not good good but... I can't explain it."

Jack clasped her hands in front of her. Her face was compassionate but not pitying, for which Eric was grateful. "Relieved. Because you know what happened."

He rubbed the back of his neck. The pressure was almost unbearable there. She had it close. Although he was like a piece of led, that wailing excruciating pain of unknowing that had been flogging him for months had gone. Exhaustion overwhelmed him.

"Do you guys mind if I sleep for a bit? I know we need to talk more, but just give me a little time."

"Of course," Jack motioned for Michael to take the hint and follow her out. "You need to rest."

Michael didn't seem very willing to leave and kept giving Eric backward glances. "I'll check in on you later." With that he trailed after Jack who was halfway out when she pushed back in and closed the door quietly.



She pressed her finger to her lips and whispered. "Someone's downstairs with Sophronia. I think they're armed."

Eric jerked to awareness, all thoughts of sleep forgotten. In fact he hadn't felt this awake in months. "She down there alone with them?"

Jack held him back. "We can't just race down the stairs. We don't know how many or what kinds of weapons."

"I have my cell," Michael wrestled with his pocket.

"I got it." Sophronia quickly texted an sos to her department.

They heard a car in the distance.

Eric rushed to the window but he only had a partial view of the front of the house. He didn't risk opening the window. "Whoever it is they could spook the assholes."

Jack unholstered her gun, one hand on the door handle. "I'm going downstairs. You two stay here."

"You don't actually think I'm gonna listen," Eric said. "I owe her my life."

"Then don't endanger hers."

Jack cracked open the door.

## **Xavier**

He knocked on the door and rang the doorbell. When no one answered, he covered his head with his hands turning up his face out of pure frustration. Had she gone already? Couldn't be. After yesterday's standoff with Bataar and Robbie he had followed them, waiting outside the dive bar where they spent all night. This morning he tailed them here, watched them park some ways off, which made no sense. If they were here to pick up Uranchimeg, why would then not park in front of the house.

The bad feeling that has been pestering him for days now intensified to the point that his skin started to break out in hives.

He didn't care that he'd seem like an obsessed stalker, and promised himself to ignore it after checking just one last time that she was okay. This time he knocked on the door with more force. A shadow appeared behind him and then a hand landed on his shoulder. Something hard pressed into the middle of his back.

"So you're the pup chasing my wife," said a hard voice into his ear. "Well, come in. Let's have a chat."

**Mrs. Pole**

“I swear I will never step foot in another casino in my life.” She laid a hand across her chest as if in preparation for the pledge of allegiance.

They had come to a stop in Mr. U’s driveway and, though he hadn’t said much to shame her for trying to rip off the butterfly necktie from the poker dealer’s neck for refusing to give back the money she lost Mrs. Pole was determined to use him as her practice dummy.

He scratched his beard as if deep in thought. Then switched off the ignition and rattled the keys out. “I’m not convinced.”

She had never felt as frustrated as she did in the presence of this man, so it was beyond her understanding why she didn’t just storm off to her house and forget he existed. She joined him as he went up to his front door, her high clear plastic heels tapping on the ground.

“How mad do you think she’ll be?”

He gave her a sidelong glance full of mottled tolerance. “I’d never talk to you again.”

She could feel her heart plummet to the front door mat that read ‘Go Away’ in black fuzzy letters. But maybe with other people serving as a buffer Jack would go easy on her, just long enough to explain things.

They walked in and she felt Mr. U go rigid in front of her, heard a click, craned her neck to see past him and opened her mouth with a barely audible ‘Oh.’

At the far end of the living room a short man aimed a gun at Mr. U’s chest. Another, almost parallel to him aimed at Sophronia standing by the basement door. In the middle of the living room, another man, also armed, had in his grip a younger man. Mrs. Pole recognized the

two wearing black suits as the security for the Mongolian singer, but that didn't make the scene any less confusing.

"Last time I checked this was my house," said Mr. U.

The man with the jet black hair held back in a ponytail said, "Forgive us for intruding." Then as an aside meant for his employees. "I was under the impression the house would be empty. Bataar."

"How should I have known they'd all show up at the same time?"

"Perhaps you could do me a favor and leave," the leader pointed the barrel behind Sophronia, "into that nice basement, for example."

"We're not going to make it easier for you to shoot us," quacked Mrs. Pole, for which she immediately got flicked by Mr. U whose hands were behind his back.

"I've come to retrieve my wife," said the man. "Is she here?"

"I know who you are, Aran," Mr. U asked. "What about the kid? What's he got to do with this?"

Surprise flashed across the man's face. He spread his free arm and said in an amicable manner. "I only have business with my wife. And this cunning yelp."

"Why don't we just take care of them all right now, boss?" said the short one.

"That's not how we do things," the man said through clenched teeth. "And don't call me that. This isn't one of your idiotic American action movies."

The younger guy then spoke directly to Mr. U. "Don't let her go with him. He's dangerous."

The man shoved the barrel further against the young man's temple, thin lips strung tight.

"Wait!" came from upstairs and Uranchimeg came racing down the staircase.

## Uranchimeg

Unable to wait any longer Uranchimeg left her room to check outside. Maybe her cell wasn't working properly and she hadn't heard them call? It was dark on the landing, but she immediately saw the shape at the other end of the hallway by Eric's door. She took a few steps closer and the shape moved and came into focus. The neighbor's daughter, Jack, stood still at the foot, weapon cocked. She signaled Uranchimeg to go back inside the room. Uranchimeg didn't make a noise, but she didn't listen either. From her spot she saw Sophronia and shadows of others who weren't in her line of vision. She heard her husband's voice and her hands flew to her face.

"That's not how we do things," he was saying. Then she heard Xavier's. Before she knew what she was doing, she catapulted toward the stairs. "Wait!"

Jack grabbed her arm, but she wrestled out of her grip.

Uranchimeg skidded to a stop, which put her in line with Aran and Xavier. His jaw was clenched, but she wasn't sure it had to do with the gun pressed to his head or with her running out in the open. She tried to unglue her fingernails from the palms of hands and hike down her shoulders.

"You're running late, darling," Aran said with malice.

"I'm sorry, dear. What are you doing? All these people."

"A slight problem, I agree." He spoke over his shoulder. "My instructions were clear, and yet I find myself wondering why I had to fly halfway across the world to finish what others have started."

Robbie's face fell. "Boss. I mean, ahh... We were on schedule until yesterday when this jerkoff showed up. He snarled at Xavier. "We tried to scare him off."

"The theater call the cops," said Bataar.

Uranchimeg mouthed a question but she couldn't seem to find her vocal chords. She was terrified now.

Xavier moved as if to go to her.

"Steady, lover boy," Aran said.

Uranchimeg said, "Instructions?"

"You aren't coming back home with me, my dear famous and, so fortuitously stalker-prone wife."

"Of course I am," Uranchimeg said. "Please let us go to the airport. We will never see these people again."

Mr. Universe spoke then, directing a condescending sneer at Aran. "Oh, I get it now. Your assassination attempt on your own wife has become a bit of a Mongolian clusterfuck, hasn't it, my friend?"

## **Michael**

Michael had never heard his heart pound the way it did as he climbed out Eric's bedroom down the drain pipe. It hammered at his chest cavity making him shake like a house under a demolition ball. The coolness of the folding metal chair in his grip reminded him this was real, and the fact it didn't shoot bullets told him he had one chance to do this right. He tip toed through the back porch door leading to the kitchen. Lucky for him it wasn't in a direct line of sight of the living room. He heard bits and pieces of conversation and advanced, praying to the god he'd always found rather hackneyed that no creak would alarm the bad guys of his presence.

## Mongolian Clusterfuck

Several things happened at once, like bursts of fireworks exploding in unison. Everything sped up around and later everyone involved would have difficulty recalling the order of events. With time inaccurate details would fill in the gaps in memory, morphing the story into fairy-tale like accounts, one more fantastical than the next.

Right after Mr. U's poorly timed observation, Uranchimeg's husband shoved Xavier aside with an enraged growl and charged at the old man. Using the commotion to his advantage Michael flew out of the kitchen with the metal chair high above his head. He slammed it down on the short guy who crumpled to his knees with a loud string of curses. In response, the tall one twisted around, aimed and fired. **Eric hopped over the staircase and** check where he was before) blocked Sophronia with his body. Meanwhile Sophronia resisted his barricade by thrusting him from behind so that she could get to her father who egged on Aran by calling his mother a choice number of things none of which made the man any less eager to want to strangle him with on the spot. Jack, who'd until then tried to stay concealed until the best possible moment conceded the moment fired in response to the tall one's assault on Michael who fell to the floor and covered his head with his hands. Xavier tackled Aran. Punched him straight in the nose. Mr. U was throwing fists in the air, only held back by Mrs. Pole who had wrapped her arms from behind him, physically detaining him. He struggled to get free, and ended up falling forward with her on his back. "Leave me be, woman," he barked, crawling his way to where Xavier, straddling Aran, delivered one blow after another, eyes unfocused. Uranchimeg scrambled to Xavier's side and pulled him back from Aran, but he shoved her away. At first Aran fought back, landing hard blows to Xavier's jaw and temple, but soon his hands went limp and he stopped responding. Only then did Xavier stop, heaving above Aran's prone form. As he



turned to get up Sophronia screamed and Eric dove at Aran just as he fired at Xavier. A split second later another gun went off and Aran jerked and fell back, a red stain bloomed across the front of his chest.

It was Sophronia's father who finally dragged Xavier from Aran's body. Coming to all fours Xavier took long ragged breaths, spitting blood out his mouth onto the hardwood floor.

That's when Sophronia felt the pain in her side reach unbearable heights, and fainted.

## **PART THREE**

### **Mr. Universe and Mrs. Pole**

Mr. U went to see an old friend about a bottle of gin still owed him, and he found him at the Don't Tell Mama lounge on Fremont Street. This time of night and this far from the trendy part of the upper South Strip, there were only a few stragglers nursing their drinks or cuddling in dark corners to the sounds of Jimmy T's Stella. The old rocker held her in his lap like he'd grown an extra limb a while ago and had gotten used to its presents so that he hardly noticed it was there at all.

When Jimmy finished his set he labored off his stool, setting the guitar on the stand, and walked bowlegged to join Mr. U at the bar. He raised a hand in the air and the bartender, a man with a Mohawk shaved to resemble a resting lizard came over.

"Fetch me that bottle of arpcock-water, will you, Nate?"

With a short yep the bartender disappeared through the revolving doors that led into the back.

"Took you long enough," said Jimmy, landing a hard slap on Mr. U's back. "And here I thought we were reduced to phone calls once every blue moon." He scanned the fading bruises on his friend's face and the arm stuck in a sling. "What the hell happened to you? Don't tell me you're still bar-fighting."

Nate came back with a bottle and glasses and went over to a woman who leaned over the bar with a sizable cleavage and an empty margarita glass. Mr. U poured the liquid for them. They clinked glasses, and he downed his feeling it burn all the way.

"A minor misunderstanding with some out-of-towners," he said. "All sorted out."

“How you gonna play now?”

“I haven’t touched a guitar in ages, Jimmy. You know that so stop trying to fish for info.”

“Ahh, I see how it is. Can’t have it all so you rather stay pig-headed about having some, right?”

Mr. U gave him a sheepish look.

“We all miss it,” Jimmy said. “The spotlight.” He rolled his drink between his hands and gave his friend a sidelong glance. “Fame’s a temperamental bitch, but once you know there’s more fish in the sea life becomes much easier.”

He looked into the face of one of his oldest friends who would never know that he had seen Jimmy at his very conception and witnessed him grow into a child and age to the ripe old age of seventy two. He said, “You know. Old age and happiness are an oxymoron. Your mind is fresh as a young watermelon in season, but your body’s a deceiver.” At the memory of the gun fight a month ago, a mixture of resentment, bitterness and shame crept into him. That was the last time he had attempted to act like a deity, only instead wreaking havoc upon the unworthy pricks who dared to enter his home uninvited, he fell on his face and broke his arm. In the past the only time he could wield his brawn was when he got mad, but now even that trigger no longer worked. Officially he was powerless now. An average man.

“No shit.” With a chortle Jimmy wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close. “Have some faith you old gizzard. And play a set with me.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

An armed snaked around Mr. U’s shoulder and a voice said, “I’ll hold the guitar for you, baby.”

Jimmy drew back and peered at the woman behind him. “And who is this blossoming bird of paradise?”

With a coquettish smile Beatrice extended a hand and Jimmy kissed it like a knight.

“This is Bernice,” said Mr. U retracting her hand from Jimmy’s grip.

Jimmy signaled Nate for another glass and pulled up another stool, trying but failing not to ogle over Bernice’s legs as she climbed up and crossed them.

Mr. U snapped his fingers and Jimmy grinned. “I thought your doctors ordered no stress or... over-excitement.”

“He didn’t tell you?” she said.

“He tells me nothing.”

“It was all a mistake. He has a clean bill of health now.”

Now Jimmy really looked taken aback. “What’s this?”

Mr. U gave him a blasé snort. “Something with their equipment.”

“Let me get this right. No dementia? Stroke? Alzheimer’s? What the damn?”

Bernice laid a hand on Mr. U’s knee. “He’s healthy as a mule. Stubborn as one, too, but I’m sure you knew that.”

“Come on,” said Mr. U. “I’m a healthy average bloke now.” His intuition was still there. For example, he knew Jimmy’s liver needed checking. Also, Nate the bartender was taking half the till money on the nights when no one was looking. That probably needed to be discussed as well. But not tonight. “We’ve seen stranger things, haven’t we old friend?”

With a befuddled stare Jimmy poured another round. They talked till young sunshine peeked into the darkened bar and not even the bartenders could stay up any longer.

“Maybe,” Jimmy finally said in lieu of a toast, raising his glass. “All you needed was the love of a woman with a shady past and bucketloads of patience to handle your enormous ego.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Mr. Universe.

## **Jack**

A full workload was a blessing when one didn't want to think too much about shooting a man dead. It was Jack's first time, and the aftertaste almost made her quit the force. Granted Aran had been a bad guy: a background check revealed a money laundering operation, the biggest in Mongolia, concealed behind the seemingly legitimate real estate business. Also, Jack had discovered that Aran had taken out an insurance policy on his famous wife and was about to cash it in when Xavier came into the picture and botched up his plans.

As always, Mike was sitting at his desk across from Jack. As always he was eating. "You're going to burn out if you don't take breaks," he said.

"How would you know?" She immediately felt bad about the jibe. "I didn't mean it that way."

Mike accepted the apology with easy. "Remember when we patrolled the strip and arrested that guy who was walking round with a fake badge?"

Jack looked up from her computer. First she shoulders started to shake. Then she burst into laughter so hard it startled the detective taking a witness account at the desk nearby.

Mike's face blossomed, cheeks red with pleasure. "Yeah, yeah? He confiscated socks from a street vendor."

"And stuffed them all in his shirt." Jack was busting at the seams at the memory of the street vendor demanding his socks back and the suspect shouting that it was illegal to sell them on the strip and that he'd done the city service by serving justice.

"Citizen Arrest with a ToysRUs badge!" Mike said. After the laughter died down, he stood and grabbed his wallet from the top drawer. "The guys are going to Whiskey Pete's. You coming?"

Jack clicked the power off on her computer. “You sure you’re ready for a smack down of historic proportions?”

## **Uranchimeg and Xavier**

They were at the border when Uranchimeg, while searching for her passport in her purse, found the envelope. It was blank on the outside, not even a name. She took it out and tore it open.

“What is it?” asked Xavier when he noticed she was staring down at it.

She pulled out a wad of money to show him and it was his turn to be speechless.

“How did that get there?” he finally said.

She counted it. “It’s five thousand dollars.”

“As soon as we get to Mexico City we’ll call and find out,” he said. “We can’t keep it. I’m sure it’s a mistake.”

But Uranchimeg suspected it wasn’t.

After Aran’s business resolved itself, she was so shaken she stayed in her room for days, replaying in her head the events that led to his death. Over and over she tried to rearrange them in such a way that he would come out alive, but no matter what kept arriving at the conclusion that Jack’s action was justified. Later, Uranchimeg asked to see Jack and wrapped her arms around her and thanked her for saving Xavier’s life. She had never expressed gratitude with as much sincerity as at that moment. And it felt right. Xavier’s life had to have been spared. He had a fascinating future ahead of him. If only she could help him, but she was officially bankrupt.

The insurance money went to cover the debt Aran had racked up on a side. Even the house back home, seized by the authorities, was to be auctioned off. Uranchimeg didn’t mind it. She wanted nothing to do with her past where she was nothing but a means to an end.



Since she was practically homeless now, taking Xavier up on his offer seemed like the logical thing to do. It didn't really matter where her new start would be. Well, that wasn't quite so. It didn't matter where as long as they were together in it.

Urchimeg placed the envelope back in her purse, making a mental note to call everyone and thank them individually even if no one admits to helping. Xavier and her would make sure to pay back every penny. Looking out at the road that now belonged to another country Urchimeg breathed in the air of it. Xavier reached across the seats and took her hand in his. "This is home," he said.

## **Michael**

He's been tinkering with the hard drive for hours now. The television set was back in his possession, although Eric resisted giving it back claiming that the serenity of the images helped him write. Michael wasn't sure if Eric was being sarcastic or if he had truly begun to believe the program was showing a real connection between celestial bodies and human action.

But Michael couldn't rest at such a simplified explanation. He used his intellect to deal with the mystery at hand, specifically by calibrating the original formula to reflect a planet, one of Jupiter's moons, which according to the program's calculations had a direct link to Michael.

He looked down at his watch. In two hours he and Eric were heading out to Seattle to see Sophronia. Plenty of time to test this thing, Michael thought.

## **Sophronia**

No one said long distance relationships were easy, but they were taking things slow, which was a good thing.

Sophronia dusted some powdered sugar on top of the New York cheesecake and placed it in the refrigerator, resisting tasting it. She had also made spinach lasagna, knowing how much Michael liked it. As she straightened she winced and touched her side. Aran's bullet had barely nicked her, requiring only several stitches, but it hurt like hell and was slow in healing.

Her father shuffled into the kitchen wearing a robe that flapped as he walked revealing nothing else under it. Sophronia guarded her eyes. "Dad. I know you brought clothes with you."

"Bernice and I are going to an intensive three day camp at the local nudist colony. I'm practicing." He opened the fridge and fished out a bottle of orange juice.

She refused to remind him yet again about the Washington guidebook she'd bought for them before their visit. Nudist colony wasn't one of the activities. But they were grown-ups and she wasn't going to act like their mother.

Her father gave her an affectionate peck on the cheek. "It's still early so I'm going back to bed."

She rolled her eyes.

## Eric

With only an hour left before he had to pick up Michael, he sat at his typewriter and a nervous kind of excitement coursed through him. It reminded him of the time he was a kid waiting for Christmas morning, and Easter, and Halloween and Thanksgiving. He was going to see her soon. Soon they would sit at her kitchen table and eat and she'd tell him about her show and later cuddle with him on the couch, her book open in their laps as she pointed out the passages she'd been working on and talk about the images she wanted or didn't want to use, all while he'd claim it was always better not to share too much of your work before its finished. She'd stick her tongue out at him and call him superstitious. Her voice alone would make him want to carry her to the bedroom. But he'd wait, because she'd be so excited about the project that it'd take her some time to notice that the wine's gone and that it's dark outside. He'd wait, because her passion would stir him even more.

For the longest time he couldn't get the moment Sophronia was shot out of his head. It replayed itself in slow motion the way one's life does right before they die, or so he heard. The only way he could get rid of the ghost of it was to write about it, which wasn't a surprise at all. Life mimicks life, on paper or otherwise.

He began to type the first sentence of his newest novel:

*"You call that half?" The elderly customer grabbed the flapping tire wall and tried to push it back in place.*