

The Edge of Doom

The massive iron door clanged shut behind her, and its echo reverberated down the flagstone hall. Lulu's ears hurt, but such a small price to pay for the chance to get inside the prison. She'd paid off prison guards, wardens, matrons, waylaying them on their way home from the prison. A couple of her friend Idra's sapphires had served her purpose, and she'd sold them for a fistful of bills. That was the easy part.

A beetle-browed guard—one she didn't know—demanded her papers. She handed them over, keeping a placid, amiable, but confident look on her face. She hoped she achieved that; over the years, she'd trained herself on maximizing the use of facial expressions, raising one's eyebrows when meeting someone (she'd done that just now, signifying openness and a willingness to greet the other), blinking a bit more often than usual, displaying likely acquiescence to what the other had to offer. Simple things. Hopefully effective. Especially here.

He held on to her papers when he'd finishing reading them, and she looked him in the eye. She waited for his pupils to dilate—meaning he was willing to hear what she had to say—and when they did, she said she hoped her papers were in order.

“They're correct,” he said. Begrudgingly. “As far as I can see. But I haven't been informed by the authorities why you're here.” Lulu said she was incredibly sorry, she had an appointment to take the prisoner Blaise Reiss home to her family. She'd been informed by the Government that Blaise was to be released today, and the bottom paper was the officially granted

release application. Though he stiffened his chin to keep in control, Lulu watched a look of befuddlement pass across his eyes like a scrap of cloud.

“The pages are jumbled—the release paper should have been on top,” he scowled. “You’ll have to talk to the Administrator. Take a seat on the chair down the hall.” It could have been worse; he could have thrown her out altogether. After all, most of the documents she’d given him had been forged and doctored. She hadn’t expected to be let in on the first try. She sat on the none too clean chair, trying not to put her hands on the armrests. She didn’t want to feel the dried sweat of anxious souls who knew their fate would be determined within these walls. This administrative part of the prison was square and squat, with low ceilings and dim lighting. Utilitarian, unadorned, no bronze busts of former wardens or statues of the goddess of justice. Leadened, deadened. Nothing like sending a message. She sat back, intending to look blameless. Just visiting a prison made you feel guilty. Of course she was guilty—under the eyes of the law. All kinds of fake identities, hers and the people she was charged to help, thefts, small and larger, anything that could be sold or bartered.

She sat there for a long time. From her experience the longer she waited the more imperious the Administrator would be. She’d been working underground for years, since she’d carried messages in her school backpack. She was recruited because of her face, not for especially good looks, unfortunately, since beauty would have served her well. Her face was mobile, they told her, with emotions flitting across it at will. You wanted angry, she’d give you angry. Shyness, with the slight duck of her head, fine by her.

Her mother had been an actress who’d bequeathed her the ability to call down all the emotions befitting a stage actress, with the addition of wide spaced green eyes, flaming auburn hair, a lissome figure. Her mother was an actress, playing mostly on community stages. She’d

lacked something, a sharp intelligence that would tell her who was coming up and who was going down, which director to play up to, which to glide away from. Thinking only of the part, an Ophelia, a Cordelia, all arts no smarts. From her father she'd gotten her shrewdness, his lackluster hazel eyes, his foolish hair like grizzled corncobs, his long, thin-lipped face.

She'd realized that street smarts could take the place of beauty. Her mother taught her to smooth, tone, highlight, dab on, cover, reveal so that she too could appear beautiful—or withered as the case might require.

“You’ll be a wonderful actress,” her mother had said. “You have physical beauty—no, it’s not only because I’m your mother—but you have a spirit flaming up, making your eyes glow with passion or despair. A life force, swirling up from the earth...”

“And popping out of my eyeballs like a cartoon character,” Lulu finished for her. “But all right, I’ll apply to acting school.” Her mother looked so radiant when she was pleased. And it was so easy to make her mother believe her.”

Her father was not so malleable. “Ridiculous,” he said. “You’re going to take direction? Please. You’d only be happy if you were the head of a battalion.” Lulu had no choice in the end, which infuriated her. It took her a while to realize that nobody but her parents cared for what she thought. The Government shut down the theaters, citing moral and political degradation. Plus a drain on the Government’s pockets at a time of possible war. They had funded the theaters, although the people were still aware enough to know the cash came from their taxers. Now that money was going to be used for other things, to protect the nation, for munitions and fortified prisons. Later the Government realized it didn’t have to give reasons for anything.

Without school Lulu rode aimlessly around on her bike with her dissatisfied girlfriends, commiserating with each other for not being able to see their crushes or other girls who lived too

far away. They went to the stores for their mothers, stealing the obligatory piece of gum or chocolate, until the stores ran out of candy, then fruits, fresh vegetables, meat, milk. Families with boys were lucky, because most of them had few qualms about stoning squirrels, who'd become as tame as puppies over the years, folding their paws on the tummies, expecting a handout. The girls broke into two factions, those who thought the boys who didn't hunt were darling and sweet and poetic, and those who thought the hunters were manly and sexy.

“Both those types of boys are crazy,” Lulu said. They'd left their bikes piled up on the uncut grass of the local park, while they sat in the shade of a hundred-year oak. “Merely romantic guys some of you are gaga about are just setting themselves up to starve. And the other he-men types you'd be sick of in a day—no soul left to consider the stars or the little universes inside us.” Lulu talked like that in those days—pragmatic yet thinking herself soulful.

Coraline, her at-the-moment best friend, said that Lulu should just let the girls chitchat. “My parents went on a camping trip once with their friends and they didn't bring enough food. So there they were miles from a store, and they had to make do with the scraps they had left. Their way of coping-- talking about food, they told me, the best meals they'd had, their favorite restaurants. They couldn't help it. And we can't stop talking about boys.” The other girls screamed their approval. Some jumped up, linked arms, and swirled around until they fell breathless on the ground.”

“I was just saying that making heroes of one group of guys or another...” Lulu stopped. Two women, perhaps mother and daughter, were walking on the path below. Arm in arm, each clutching a parasol, they wore long dresses, an older style, patterned with sprigs of flowers. The girls watched them, eager to observe new faces. “Genteel poverty,” Lulu said. “Old aristocratic family, no money.”

“How do you know,” Selma said. “You’ve met them before?”

“No, from books, silly. We used to have tons of them. I hid a few, but don’t ever repeat that. Cross your heart.”

“Hope to die,” Selma said. All the girls solemnly repeated the phrase.

“Just kidding,” Lulu said, smiling the way that brought out her dimples. But of course she wasn’t.

The women walked up the hill, closer to them, the young one graceful with strong strides, the older one huffing but not too much. Her daughter was watching out for her, and she settled down on bench nestled under an old beech. They talked about the beech, how it must be at least a hundred and fifty years old, but still so healthy. The girls could hear them, so probably the women could hear them as well, but they didn’t care. They were harmless, obviously.

Two old maids, Coraline said, with a shrug of a shoulder that meant *she* wouldn’t be one.

Lulu didn’t comment on the stupidity of the remark. She was the straggler when the girls picked up their bikes and walked them down to the road. She glanced back at the women, and the older one nodded her head. She wouldn’t mind talking to them.

That happened sooner than she’d thought—the next morning when her mother had commissioned her to find flour in one of the shops. There wasn’t any, the grocer said, sold out. They say a new shipment will come next week. Or the next. His chins were crumpled onto his neck like stale doughnuts. He turned to the next customer, continuing his round of regrets. She kept her head down as she walked outside. She knew her mother still had a store of foodstuffs in the cellar, crated up to keep out the rats who were getting hungry too. But you had to go out every day in case something came in. She knew the government was breaking down, her father speaking to her quietly when her mother was in another room. He didn’t want to upset her

mother, who he thought was fragile and nervous. Of course her mother knew whatever was common knowledge, but they'd felt the need to protect her. An actress, you know, her father would always sum up.

She wasn't watching where she was going, her thoughts sidetracking her, and bumped into someone outside the shop's door. The younger of the visiting ladies. Both of them waved off her apologies, and each looped an arm through hers. "So nice to see someone we recognize," she said, adding that she was Anna and her friend was Dagmar. They steered her to the café/bar next door and pushed open the door, its bell tinkling their arrival. Besides the manager, they were the only ones in the place. The women ordered three lemonades, and after the bartender mixed them, using a too bright yellow powder, he walked out and took a cigarette from his back pocket.

"We've been dying to meet you," Anna said. "Me and Dagmar."

"You were? Do you need a babysitter? But you don't live around here." Lulu was confused and flattered. She stared into two pairs of olive green eyes.

"We've met your father. At meetings. He agreed that we could talk to you."

"What about." Maybe they were recruiters from a college, but then they'd know that colleges in the entire Southeast had been put on extended intersession. Until finances in the region improved. And the Government found replacements for the teachers who'd been fired for holding unacceptable views. Judging by their dated dresses, these women were remnants of a distant past.

"As you know—being your father's daughter—the Government is crumbling and the Guard found just the opening they needed to gain control of not only the Southeast but the three other regions of the country. We're part of a third group that wants to bring down both these entities."

“I’m sorry, but you’re very misguided. What can two women, out of touch I’m afraid, do to overthrow these entities, as you say. I mean, look at you. Maybe you have shell shock from the things you’ve seen...” Lulu had heard enough about abductions, jailings, and beatings by thugs on both sides to feel that people would be justified in being thoroughly unbalanced. Things hadn’t been disastrous yet in their town, but why would they get better. At that moment she felt she left childhood, stepped across the line into an age she couldn’t name.

“We just want to look harmless,” Anna said. “So people look at us as odd and dotty. Not dangerous.” She ran her fingers through her frizzy curls. Her fingers were too thin and fragile to be a threat to anyone. But threats and danger came in plenty of different packages.

“Is my father in trouble?”

“Not with us,” Dagmar said. “He’s not one of us, but he supports us.”

“You’re talking in riddles,” Lulu said. “I have work to do. At home.” She picked up her purse from the back of the chair.

“We’d like you to work with us,” Dagmar said. She was sturdier than Anna, her voice deeper, forceful. Lulu couldn’t hold her stare.

“It’s just carrying messages,” Anna said. Arms crossed, she caressed her pointy elbows, as if soothing herself and Lulu. You’ll receive a sealed envelope. *Voila.*” She took one out of her pocket, square, addressed in discreet handwriting, and handed it to Lulu. “You never open it, just deliver it to the address. Any specifics, like slip under side door, are written in pencil under the address. Like the one you’re holding. That’s it. For now. Simple, right?”

“Is this dangerous? Could things go wrong?”

“These are dangerous times. You and your friends know it, but being young and not horrifically affected by the inconveniences, you take what you can out of your days. There’s a

fine balance now between your young spirits and the lack of things you're used to. There are no newspapers, but you didn't read them much anyway."

"I did," Lulu said.

"That's why we chose you. But I was speaking in more general terms," Dagmar continued. "Clinics aren't in the health business much anymore. They've been pressed by the powers that be into research. But that research isn't quite up and running yet, so it hasn't touched you. You're not in their clutches yet, so to speak. There are arrests and long sentences in the cities, but the long and powerful arms of injustice haven't reached here yet. Food shortages, you know about that. But the mothers here have a tradition stretching back centuries of putting food by. But this fine balance will change, with the hardships going up and your ability to live more or less like you're used to going down."

"And you and your people can prevent that? And me riding my bike around can do any good?" The earth had always turned, spinning Lulu with it, but now she realized how precarious it is on the planet. Holding on and not flying off like dust in the wind. She'd lost her complacency. Unsettling. She was breathing too fast.

"Dagmar and I are fighting to the end. There was a saying years and years ago. *War is not good for children and other living things*. But neither is the status quo. It's a race between the Government and the Guards to see who can grab more power, mowing down anyone in their way. We're only asking you to be a messenger." Lulu shocked herself by feeling a pang of disappointment. "Later you might become an agent or one of the masterminds." Anna lifted a shoulder. "But right now we'd like you to join us." Anna stood up, smoothing her bodice of her bizarre dress. Dagmar's dress hitched up when she got up—she was lean and boney, her collar

bones rising from her chest like cages. Lulu stared at her boots—tooled leather with sterling snakes climbing up the sides and steel-capped toes. Fighting boots.

Dagmar nodded. “Some more old words, *One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you.*”

“Over me?” Lulu said.

“No. You’re with us, a partisan.”

For years Lulu thought about getting identical boots when she pedaled furiously down back roads, certain she was followed; when she sweet-talked and big-eyed her way out of situations that had every indication of going south; when she pulled a partisan out of the waist deep mud, catching her foot on a sunken log and breaking myriad small bones. She was still limping when she traded a rosewood cane with a gold horsehead knob (found in a decayed manor house housing six Government deserters dead drunk on the floor) for a sister pair of tooled leather, steel-capped boots that just about fit. She’d been carrying that injury for years now, still having to soak her foot before her ankle pulsed with pain.

Her foot was acting up now from too much sitting on the splintery bench. It was ridiculous, waiting so long for the Administrator. She had perfected the art of raging inside while maintaining a pleasant half smile and placid eyes. She had to stand up and stretch out her ankle, so she might as well knock on the Administrator’s door. She never failed to feel a little sick when surmising what cruel, ego-driven men were doing behind closed doors. She was knocking, she might as well turn the handle. She poked her head inside. “Excuse me sir, but perhaps...”

Lunging up from his desk, his eyes bulging, his nose a map of veins, he screamed in the Guards’ language. She usually understood enough of his language to get by; she’d even decoded their encrypted messages. But now his words tumbled out of her head like children’s blocks. She

was utterly taken aback by the viciousness of his tone. She was a fool to be thrown off guard. She should have predicted his outrage. He was in charge and nobody would enter his space without his explicit permission. She'd probably have to pay him double now. She made profuse excuses, bowing her head, and closed the door silently behind her. Back to the bench, where she sat with her hands in prayer position beneath her chin. That's how he would see her when he came out. Remorseful, contrite. If he deigned to come out. She thoroughly, heartily hated him and all the world's cruel egoists.

Of course when he opened his door an hour later she was demure, bowing her head, playing total subordination. A bit of S and M foreplay, the goal here being the release of the girl. Just because she'd been notified that the prison would release her didn't mean success was guaranteed. What she wanted was in and out. An unfortunate expression. She grimaced as she followed his fat behind into his office.

"Sir, I'm here for the release of Blaise Semel," Lulu said, the mahogany desk looming between them. She pulled out the official-enough forms from her bag, now in the right order, and handed them across. The Administrator scowled at the forms, tossing them down when he was done. The office was tricked out in cushy leather chairs, freshly painted cream walls, copies of masterpieces on the wall. Or maybe they were the real thing, looted from the houses of the formerly well off. Lulu hadn't been asked to sit down, but she did now, unobtrusively sliding onto the buttery leather. "As you can see," she said, nodding at the papers, "today is set for her release. As you can see, she attested under oath that she would never participate in further protests against those in authority."

He scowled as if she'd questioned his ability to read through a document. Back to submission. "Thank you for your help, sir. Being the power behind the release."

“I only release those who have shown their cooperation and have been rehabilitated.” He interlaced his stubby fingers, nails neat and manicured. He grimaced—maybe he thought it was a smile—exposing white veneers and gold molars.

Lulu reached into her bag again, pulling out a velvet bag and giving it to him. “I believe in cooperation also.” He took out a sapphire cabochon, held it up to the grated window.

“And if I need more? More cooperation?”

“Naturally that would depend on how successfully we concluded this transaction. I have my contacts.” Her contacts were in a burlap bag, precious gems her agent Isolde had sweet-talked from a sympathetic general and his daughter-in-law.

“There are other ways of cooperating.” The old guy was soliciting her. Flirting. He was horrid, of course, but he could have flung her to the ground and straddled her by now if he’d had a mind to. Still might. “We’ll meet again.” He stared at her. His eyelashes were white over murky light eyes. “In some capacity.” He pressed a button on his desk and spoke into a handset. The language of the Guards, but again mostly unintelligible to her. She’d need to go back to studying it. It was likely to become the language of the realm, with the Guards already controlling cities in the Northeast and Northwest. Full out war between the Guards and the Government was just this side of inevitable. And she wanted both sides destroyed, each determined to grab whatever land and possessions the people still had, crush their souls and spirit and intelligence. She and the other Resistance fighters had put together their cadres for subverting the efforts of the other two sides, not equals, of course in strength or numbers, but underminers. Boring and destroying like boll weevils into the heart of their operations. Comparing the Resistance to bugs destroying cotton buds might not be the most apt of examples, Lulu conceded, but her goal was to create damage where they could.

Lulu felt fear rise in her throat—maybe the Administrator was having Blaise *cooperate*—when he came in, a reedy girl beside him. She wore blue cotton pants and a long-sleeved top, grungy and crumpled. Lulu cared most about Blaise’s expression—whatever she had gone through here, her eyes were still alive. Other wounds could be healed. Time to leave before the Administrator changed his mind or extracted demands. She took Blaise by the arm and led her to the door. Lulu felt the girl’s arm tremble. She had to keep Blaise upright.

Outside, Blaise’s eyes watered from the shreds of sunlight that poked through the bleary sky. “Where’s my baby,” she said, grabbing Lulu’s shoulder. “Where is she.”

“With Isolde, the girl you gave her to at the rally. She’s bringing her to your mother. Like you told her to do.”

“Has she been sick? Is she safe? You’re not lying to me, are you.” Blaise looked miserable, her tears streaking paths down her grimy cheeks. Inconsolable. Lulu did what she should have done as soon as they got outside. She hugged her tightly, pressed her cheek to Blaise’s and whispered that the baby was *safe and sound safe and sound safe and sound*. Like settling a horse who had reared up in fright, she said *easy easy*. Blaise pulled away, obviously not satisfied. Why should she believe Lulu, a stranger. She was not really a comforter. Not for the first time, Lulu doubted that she had the common touch, the ability to soothe and comfort. She was better at organizing, determining who’d be better at placing bombs on tracks or recruiting new activists, or rounding up food, shelter, medicine. But especially now, when hostilities between the Guards and the Government had ignited, and both groups were intent on eliminating anyone who defied them, people needed those who could console. Nurture. She wasn’t sure she had it in her.

I'm inadequate, she thought. She needed to shake off the malaise that she knew gripped all of them, dullness of spirit alternating with panic. Sometimes your own self is the enemy. She steered Blaise to a red brick apartment building and unlocked the front door. Inside, leaves and dirt had piled up in the drafty entry. "Second floor," Lulu said.

"Raul," Blaise said. "Is he released too? Where is he?"

"We don't know," Lulu said. "Our people went to the men's prison, but they had no record of him. Maybe he escaped. We'll keep trying. So many are lost. We'll have to get you home without him. I'm sorry we don't have a better result." Inside a shabby apartment right off the landing, Lulu pulled out a change of clothes, towel, soap, bread and cheese and told Blaise they'd leave as soon as Blaise washed up and ate something.

Sitting at the kitchen table a few minutes later, Lulu watched the girl eat, both crying and chewing. She was ravenous. Lulu watched her, gave her a chance to compose herself—if that was even possible. "Were you hurt at the prison? We can give you medicine—we commandeered a small supply this week."

"All the guards were women. So getting pregnant wasn't possible. They did other things. But I got off with just some bruises. Others fared worse."

"We'll have to walk to the station. Are you up to it?" Although staying in the apartment wasn't an option.

"I'll do anything. I have to get home."

"Of course. If anyone asks, you're my daughter, we've been visiting your aunt Isole. But volunteer nothing."

It was a long walk to the station on the edge of the city, instead of the central one only a few blocks away. Lulu couldn't risk seeing anyone who knew her from her large apartment complex. There her role was busybody, sitting on the steps outside, bantering, giving advice. Not holding the arm of an unfamiliar young woman. The buildings became more rundown as they walked closer to the outskirts. Bands of kids roamed the streets looking for a little money, excitement, drugs, whatever was available that day. Lulu and Blaise had a beat-up cloth bag, no jewelry, workaday clothes. The kids had more profitable marks in mind. Not that any were apparent on the street. A quiet day in the neighborhood.

Blaise looked pale, her red hair startling against her bloodless face. She needed a drink, a piece of fruit. Grit had settled on their shoes and clothes. They entered a small grocery, mostly a counter with boxes of potatoes, apples, beets on the floor. The stands that had once held newspapers—plaques indicating *The Times*, *The Globe*, *The Post* still screwed into the metal—now housed thin bundles of kindling wood. Garden tools, rakes, hoes, shovels, stood rusting quietly along the wall perpendicular to the counter. This would be a good time to have a garden, Lulu thought, food supplies so unpredictable. But the yards in this neighborhood were small, packed hard with pebbly dirt, airless, soulless. No earthworms making a home there, barely weeds. You'd need the wherewithal to dig it up, amend the dirt—you couldn't even call it soil—plant, nurture. And wherewithal was in short supply now.

They stood at the end of the line, just inside the door. The clerk moved slowly, even thought the orders were small. A burly man came in and shoved the door closed, hard so that the potato crate lurched and a couple spuds bounced off. A woman on the way out grabbed a couple rolling along the floor and stuffed them in her bag. A small shred of satisfaction for her. Nobody much noticed, since the door slammer took everyone's attention. It wasn't just his size—his keg

of a stomach, oaken neck—but his almost colorless blue eyes, his thick mustache waxed to two points, his shaved head with a topknot growing from center. On another man these traits could appear anodyne, just a look. But Lulu felt menace rising off him, a toxic miasma. He could prove unpredictable; she moved closer to Blaise.

He pushed his way to the front of the line, knocking an elderly woman down on his way. Blaise pulled away from Lulu and helped her up. Yes, it was admirable that Blaise had a good heart, but Lulu didn't want any attention shifted to her and Blaise. They had to remain anonymous, faceless. Though Blaise was formally released (with the help of a flawless sapphire) she could be pulled back in any time now that she had a record.

“Don't help her,” the topknot man said. “It's survival of the fittest. Who falls fails. Everyone stand on one foot. Do you think I'm joking?” He pulled a riding crop with a leather tassel out of his trouser pocket. “Across the face with this for anyone who stumbles.” People looked at the clerk, hoping he'd shush topknot up, make a joke out of it, get him to leave. Some starting lifting a wobbly foot, while those most elderly stared open-mouthed, motionless. The clerk was having none of it, hands flat on the counter, shoulder hunched, eyes on the cutting board between his fingers.

Topknot pulled a pistol from his jacket. “I guess we need stiffer penalties. A bunch of crappy misfits demanding handouts. No reason for you to live. A drain on the Government.”

Of course even the most uninformed knew that the Government hadn't distributed food or other provisions since the emergence of swamp fever. Its hands were tied temporarily, the Government had said at the time, fighting the fever. But even when the number of deaths mysteriously but amazingly dwindled—certainly no thanks to the Government which Lulu knew never lifted a finger—the Government made no pretense of resuming aid. Lulu would react had

been trained to do with a homegrown crazy—commiserating, speaking levelly, making minimal eye contact.

Before she could say anything, Blaise walked up to the man, slow, unthreatening. Of course she was unthreatening, an unarmed girl. But likely not to him. In his eyes she'd be another woman who wouldn't touch him unless he paid. When psychopaths wanted to kill there was always a reason. She put her hand on Blaise's shoulder to move her aside. She wouldn't budge.

"Leave them alone. They've done nothing." Blaise was standing inches from him now, her hands clasped in front of her chest.

"I'll do *them* a little something," he said. "And you I'll do later, nice and slow."

Blaise pushed him, hard, her fists tight knots. He'll kill Blaise now, Lulu thought. And then everybody else. She looked at the men and women, still standing in line, and shouted run, go out. No one moved; fear, panic, terror had rooted them in place as surely as if they'd been glued to the plank floor. She heard a thump behind her; amazingly Blaise had knocked the man down, flat on his back. The back of his head hit the blade of one of the hoes lined against the side wall. The man wheezed like a bellows, gasped. His heels kicked the floor a half dozen times, stopped. Lulu kneeled down to touch his neck. Nothing. She stared at Blaise. Everybody did.

Lulu grabbed her hand and pulled Blaise outside. The tremendous strength Blaise had displayed ebbed now, her lips pale as her skin. "What happened in there," Lulu said, though she didn't expect Blaise to answer. Half running besides Lulu was as much as she could do. They made it to the station without Blaise falling in a heap. Lulu had bought the tickets the day before. That was normal procedure so there'd be no last minute fiddling for bills or coins at the window—or being told that money had been devalued again and she'd need to fish twice as

much out of her purse. It was the night train they were waiting for, chosen in case things didn't go according to plan. Obviously they hadn't gone according to plan, and there was a good chance the police would burst into the station. If you were having trouble you couldn't count on the police—if you were the trouble they'd go all out. They'd let you go if you gave them a good enough bribe, and Lulu had prepared for that. Lulu, the mistress of all contingencies, except when a girl went wild on her watch.

They sat on the wooden bench farthest from the station door. Lulu pulled out a thin woolen shawl from her bag. A green and brown paisley, it was the kind the old *bubbes* had worn for eons. An item that was as familiar and unobtrusive as an old teapot. She draped it over both of them, and Lulu pulled Blaise's head down on her shoulder. A mother and her teenage daughter weary from travelling.

"I killed him," Blaise whispered. She wouldn't look at Lulu. "I didn't mean to."

"What would have happened if he hadn't smashed his head. He'd jump up and kill you and probably the rest of us. That didn't occur to you?"

"I reached a breaking point. If that's an excuse."

"It's an excuse. Justified? I don't know. You're no saint."

"Am I supposed to be?"

"No. there's an old tale that at any given time there are thirty-six just people in the world. One dies, another one emerges. Judging from my experience, you're not one of them. On the other hand, you may have saved the lives of the innocent people in the store."

"May have? So there's hope for me."

"You're not a cold-blooded killer. Well, you are, but these are extraordinary times, and the old rules don't apply."

“They apply,” Blaise said.

“Yes, I suppose they do. Even now, at the edge of doom.”

“I just want my baby to live. Be happy, laugh, be kind. That won’t happen, will it. At the edge of doom.” Tears streaked a path from her cheeks to her chin. She was exhausted, purple blotches like bruises under her eyes. “The edge of doom sounds like the saddest poem.”

“It’s from a poem, written ages ago. About love. *Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks but bears it out even to the edge of doom.*”

“What does it mean?”

“That love doesn’t change, even to the end of your life.”

“Did that happen to you.”

“Yes. I’ve loved people, still do even though they’re mostly gone.” They were quiet now, waiting for the train. It was eerily still in the station, no one frantically rushing in or out, trying to stay clear of danger. As if there was a truce in this city. Even hope.

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