

Tough Break

Lulu faced the group of young women, their swords unsheathed and brandished, lips pursed in concentration. The fluorescent lights gleamed on the polished edges. The blades had been sharpened to fine points. She wondered if any of them knew enough anatomy to strike a fatal blow. They wore sky blue micro-mini skirts and hibiscus patterned halter tops.

“Double hop step, sword up, sword down,” Lulu said. “Shuffle right, shuffle left, don’t let the lines get scraggly. Precision. Let’s do it again. The festival is in four days. Move like your life’s on the line.”

The girls had been handpicked for the Arts and Letters Brigade where Lulu taught. The Brigade was a last-ditch attempt by the Government to lift the populace’s spirits, which had been immolated by years of food shortages, job loss, and the ever escalating war with the Guards. What had been shocking a few years ago had become routine—convoys of tanks and trucks entering towns and taking over, with the Guard’s yellow and blue flags planted everywhere. Lulu knew, though, that the people, like the proverbial hibernating bear (most of them extinct through hunting and disappearance of their food sources), were awakening; Lulu shook her head, imperceptibly, marveling at the human spirit. Maybe it really was indomitable. Lulu assumed that the Government’s surveillance initiatives had taken careful note of the unrest and initiated group activities to focus this brooding energy. A flimsy response (the Government being reliably cheap)—handing out food and suppling jobs would have been an infinitely better technique for rallying support. Before the masses—or the Guards—wrenched control and the Government fell. Which would be wonderful, ending its despotic, power hungry rule, but the Guards were worse, with their medical experiments on people in the areas they controled and incarceration in their private prisons.

Judging from her scrawny recruits, the Government didn't have to worry about the masses overthrowing them, Yet. The young women, in their late teens or twenties, needed food, sunlight, exercise. Exercise she was providing. Food and sunlight were trickier. Tap dance with a mishmash of swordsmanship thrown in. Some factotum had grabbed the Government's ear, promising that dance would captivate the masses, making them forget their troubles and channel their spirits in a wholesome way. Instead of trying to subvert the Government. And here's the kicker, the snake oil salesman had added—if the dancer breaks their sword, it's a death sentence. Like a combination of gladiators and the Cake Walk. The Government wasn't necessarily stupid. Naturally, they asked who would take up this sport. Well then, death only to the professionals, oil man explained. Not the townies taking it at community ed.

It was a go. Free, open to all, classes at the community centers and schools that had been all but abandoned since the Shadow War began. Teachers weren't paid—it was an honor to be chosen—and classes were almost free. A collection box was passed around at the end and people put in what they could, plastic barrettes or water bottles with scraps of labels still stuck on them, or tiny toy cars, left over from another era and found in crumbling garages and attics.

“Careful with those swords! A gentle plink plink on the floor.” A dark-haired girl dropped hers and pressed her hands across her mouth. The other girls stopped, scared. “No just go on. She'll catch up. If you make a goof, even a big one, pretend it's part of the show. Turn around and wiggle your behind, then pick it up and kiss it like it's an old friend. Be sassy. The crowd'll eat it up. The swords are vintage and heavy—mistakes are bound to happen.”

“We'll go to jail,” the girl wailed.

“You'll be put to death,” Lulu said. “But only if you're a pro.”

“Like you?”

“Well, yes.” As if she hadn’t thought about that a million times since she’d become a teacher three months ago. “But that shouldn’t stop you from proceeding to the next level of training. These swords were used in battle ages ago. Solid brass, meant for action. None have broken so far—in their day, they struck stone and bone.”

“Some must have broken. And some of these may be on the verge of breaking after all those years,” a girl in the back row said. Sullen. She chewed on the ends of her honey streaked hair. Years ago, Lulu’s mother had her hair dyed to achieve that streaked look. She and her actress friends would mix up left over colors from the shuttered salons, adding ammonia to make the dyes go farther. The women gossiped and talked, their moods brightening as they fussed over each other. In the summer they’d sit in the sun to set the dyes, Lulu’s mother setting out bowls of wild raspberries and chamomile tea made from leaves plucked from the ruined garden. When the dyes ran out, they made lipstick from beet juice and canning wax. “*We’re like the First Peoples,*” her aunt Masha said, “*creating what we need from the land.* Her mother’s best friend, Gertrude, had added, *More likely the Last People...* All these years later, the words still ricocheted down her spine.

“Have you tested them,” the girl said. “So they’ll take out the defective ones.”

“Positions, students. I assume that quality control has gone through them. They’ve been carefully stored for hundreds of years. Or dozens, anyway. The swords have been buffed, polished. We’ll spend our time polishing our steps.” Lulu knew that she was spouting nonsense. The swords were heavy, looked like solid brass. But she had no idea of their provenance. They could have been made in one of the factories that previously turned out belt buckles and metal costume jewelry. Maybe some were purposely flawed to ensure breakage and ensuing excitement from the masses when a pro was put to death. She remembered a line from

somewhere—give the masses bread and circus. Entertained and uninformed, oblivious to the Government’s arrogance and misdeeds behind their backs. Those were her thoughts during her dark hours, when she catastrophized, assuming that the Government would knead people down to their basest elements. But she been a part of the resistance long enough to know that people were too complicated and unpredictable to be battered down to mere cogs. Not most of them, anyway. So far. (Unless they were imprisoned in solitary, where their breakdown could happen within days.) Her cell, for example, worked in factories the Government still ran, munitions, uniforms, warehouses, engines for tanks, subs, trucks. And methodically sabotaging whatever landed on their work benches. Other cells did the same to the facilities the Guards commanded. Run both sides down, like a virus that attacks every organ. Her life’s work, if that didn’t sound too grand.

Her current assignment from her cell was to recruit young people from the sword dance groups. Obviously the Government could have no idea. She sighed as she looked at the girls going through their steps. For her purposes, she didn’t care if their talent was minimal, but one or two showed the potential she looked for—quick-wittedness, of course, but composure, self-containment, an innate ability to lie reliably and not stand out in a crowd. Not that she herself fit that model— her actress mother had bestowed a sense of drama that in Lulu’s case worked fine. She could be a convincing old age pensioner, a washerwoman, a teacher. She knew nothing about tap dancing, except for a class she’d taken when she was eight, but her current handler—who was also a teacher at the dance school—gave her a crash course. Lulu carried a cane—she’d allegedly tripped on a broken curb—so she could get away with demonstrating only the barest basics. She’d dyed her hair auburn with magenta streaks, extended her eyeliner to create cat’s

eyes, applied a thick slash of red to her lips, penciled-in thick, arching brows. Artistic, a bit eccentric. Black tights and high-heeled rhinestone studded tap shoes.

“Nina, come up here and show the class that last move. That’s it, dear, come right up by me.” Nina obliged without cringing or hunching her shoulders or looking bashful or grimacing. Did what she had to do, did it again. Went back to her spot, ready to learn the next steps. Lulu smiled, and the girl nodded, her only reaction to the attention and the stares of thirty eyes. She was a distinct possibility. Getting even one recruit from this group would be well worth her time. She still believed that their nation was like an ancient painting, grimy, layered over with inferior attempts by untalented artists, its frame splintered, its canvas cracked. But the original work could be restored—was being restored—by dedicated people, some specialists, others untrained. People who were kind, believed in freedom. They existed. She knew that. It’s what kept her going. Even if many were too emotionally brutalized by the abysmal combination of Government and Guards to be fully sound again, their children could be saved. She had to believe that.

The next day Lulu woke up late, the gray light seeping ineffectually through the slats of the blinds. She walked barefoot to the window, the worn but beautiful rug with its pattern of stylized flowers and geometric shapes smooth under her feet. She swept constantly, dumping grit into the trash can in the corridor, promoting her image of tidiness and domesticity to her neighbors. She presented herself as a homebody, willing to listen to her friends in the building, commiserating while mining information. Even her blinds were dust free and the cord with the little pull at the bottom still white. Overnight rain had puddled in the street, and though it was just misting now, the grim sun showed little promise. The dismal day boded well for her purposes.

She pulled up her collar and tightened her scarf as she walked to her class, but drops shaken from the leaves still dribbled down her neck, the wind gusty and cold. The classroom was chilly and damp, dabs of mold spotting the walls. The buildings in the city hadn't electric or gas heat since Lulu had been the same age as the dancers. Those with fireplaces got by, breaking off branches and leaves in the parks until the Government levied fines that no one could pay. She knew better to lament what had been—that way lay madness, she told herself. When the girls came in, Lulu told them that they'd all stay an extra hour to practice, since really who would want to go out in this weather. Some of the girls grizzled about it, saying they'd have to go out eventually, and then it would be dark on top of dreary. Those girls Lulu eliminated as possibilities. The girl Nina said nothing, trying out a couple of trickier steps until Lulu called the class to order. She'd talk to Nina after their performance at the Festival, eventually give her a small assignment, delivering a message by bicycle, like Lulu herself had started out.

For the added-on hour, Lulu divided up the class, telling the students that Nina would take half the group and she'd take the other. They'd practice the last section of the dance, working to bring out the strength of their tapping. "The sound of tapping makes our dancing unique," she said. "It gets people going. We'll fill the house to the rafters. Then bring the house down. People will go nuts."

"Course the free food will help." A girl in a tight blonde braid nodded at the others. "Hope they'll save some for us. We'll be famished."

"I'll make sure there'll be doughnuts and cookies left over for us. Now let's give the next hour our best," Lulu said, She gave two sharp claps and counted out the steps. Lulu wished she had a better rapport with the class. She should have realized earlier that they'd be hungry—they always were—and worked something out with the Festival organizers. She should have brought

them cookies and treats, fostered a sense of camaraderie. But both cookies and camaraderie were in short supply. She was glib, so damn glib. The thing was, she could have done more. Scrounge around for some treats, raisins from the back of a friend's cupboard, crackers with jelly salvaged from someone's cellar. The girls were being paid with one day's food ration, but all this shuffle hopping used up whatever spare energy they had. Because Lulu wasn't just an agent looking for a potential agent. She was a person supposedly creating a society based on what's right. Including feeding her girls. They were her girls, even if she'd never see them again after the classes. She remembered her mother spooning out thick vitamin syrup, making sure she swallowed all of it. Vidaylin, it was called. She'd loved the taste and her mother's intent expression while she put the spoon to Lulu's mouth.

They were her girls but she didn't trust them. Some may have been recruited by the Government to watch her and the other teachers; some most likely had tiny recorders implanted in their tap shoes to track everything she said. There was a fine line between paranoia and being realistic. She was working against the powers that be, after all, and she had to be hyper vigilant while also accurately playing the parts she was assigned without fear overtaking her. Every day she was thankful that her mother had been an actor and had passed on that talent.

The day before their performance, Lulu passed out slips of paper with an address written on it. "Kata is a dance instructor who is looking for students wanting to go to the next level. After the Festival, think about it and call on her if you'd like." The addresses were made up, and there was no Kata. Only Nina's slip had the address of Common Grounds, a café that served as a safe house—the bartender there was also an agent who could determine if Nina was a safe bet, if she had the potential to be a resource. If the other girls complained to the Program Coordinator that Lulu had sent them on a wild goose chase—well, she'd be out of the picture, having hung up

her dancing shoes after the Festival. She'd disappear back into group that would give her a new role, a new persona.

The next night, Lulu and the girls waited backstage for their turn. She'd powdered and rouged them, and their eyes glittered with excitement and anticipation. Excitement was good unless it moved up to panic. "You'll do fine," she told them. "All that practice—you've got great muscle memory now. And I've stowed away plenty of treats for you. Let's go out and break a leg or two." They strutted onstage to hoots and catcalls from the audience. The house was full, and excitement electrified the girls, who smiled wildly, even the shy ones. While they got into position, Lulu moved to stage right next to the curtains. She'd do the routine with them, her back to the audience. The pianist played the intro on the old but tuned piano, the troupe thrust their swords, touched the tips to the floorboards, (gently, gently, Lulu urged silently) tapped out the rollicking rhythm. When they finished, Lulu faced the encore-yelling audience, flung out her arms as if embracing them and the girls. Dropped her sword in her excitement. Stupid, stupid of her. The sword broke at the hilt, right up at the handle. The crowd went silent, as if they'd all been vaporized. Lulu swore she could hear the metal reverberating at her feet, sound waves fainter and fainter but still audible. The sound rang in her ears—she would always hear it—as two officers in brown mufti jumped onstage and grabbed her elbows. The girls ran into the wings on the other side of the stage, but one of them, unafraid, ran back to her and pressed a cloth bag in her hands. "For you. From my grandma's vines. Her holiday grapes. Take them," she (Maria? Lulu couldn't think straight) said at bullet speed before the guards shoved her aside and half dragged, half marched Lulu off the stage.

And into a white Transit van, unmarked, the men in the front were obviously detectives. Good wool suits, silk ties, expensively barbered hair. They drove down mostly empty streets,

since people had flocked to the Festival. She was breathing fast and tried taking the long slow breaths that were supposed to be calming. Hopeless. She was going to be put to death. That was the law. At the police station, the detective with the red and blue striped tie opened her door and led her into an interview room. A bulb hung from the ceiling, directly over the wooden table, bolted to the floor. She'd never been in a police interview room before, but her friend Ehud had, who was an agent in her cell and also a Detective Superintendent in a precinct at the other end of the City. From his description the room felt both familiar and utterly terrifying. Though the officers hadn't handcuffed her on the ride over, she expected them to cuff her now. Maybe she'd be cuffed in front and not in the back. And maybe they'd be plastic and not metal and maybe they'd give her a lecture about maintaining her equipment and maybe just a night in jail and they'd let her go. Shock seeped down her glands, muscles, cranial cavities, numbing her, almost putting her to sleep.

"We're not handcuffing you," red and blue tie said. "You've committed a capital crime, but you're not dangerous. Just to yourself, for being careless with government property."

"You do know why you're here," yellow tie said. "But you should know the conditions applying to your case." He leaned against the wall in front of her, rolling his shoulders and turning his neck from side to side. "That van wasn't as comfortable as it should be." Blue and red nodded, sitting back in his chair and flexing and extending his feet.

"Were you trying to send a message, breaking your sword like that," yellow said.

Lulu shook herself out of her somnolence, spurts of adrenaline starting to course through her system. Little rivulets first, then a wide stream forceful enough to break through the shock dam. "A message? I broke my sword on purpose to send a message? To who? Knowing that I'd be executed?"

“We’ve heard some things about you,” red and blue said. “Meetings, that sort of thing.”

Lulu crumpled in her seat. She pursed her lips to bring out some lip and chin wrinkles. She tucked her chin to simulate jowls and squinted to form crow’s feet, aging herself fifteen years. Making tight fists, she put her hands on the table, creating a big knuckle look. Elderly now. What would an older matron have to do with meetings not related to handiwork or scripture (officially banned but not yet enforced, since prisons would be even more overloaded) or Cooking with Three Ingredients or Less. Still she had been a dance teacher. She’d have to explain that. “I was so thrilled to teach the Festival class. Yes, I couldn’t move around much and had to describe the steps, but the girls loved it and no one ever missed a class. The girls needed exercise, and I got a bit too. One of the girls gave me Holiday Grapes from her grandma’s patch, as recognition for being a good teacher.” She patted the canvas bag in her lap and held it up as an offering. The men waved it aside. But they looked at her differently. She could tell. She’d morphed into an older woman, almost invisible.

“All right, let’s get you onto the bus. To your final destination,” yellow said. The detectives smirked. A joke. What was this old woman to them? “Let’s just make sure we’ve got the facts right.” He shuffled through a small pile of papers under a coffee mug. “You’re at 8424 Monticello in Northwest. Profession: teacher and one-time actor. Affiliation: Government Party. Date of birth: Obedience 23, 0037. Any corrections?”

Well, no. Except the address was the house she grew up in. Empty. Profession was half wrong. She still considered herself an actor. She paid her dues, but she hated the Government Party. Her goal was to destroy the Government and put a democracy in its place. One person, one vote, equal under the law. Like that.

“Yes. That is correct.”

The green and white bus was waiting outside. The words Metro Transit were painted on the side, but most of the letters had faded—only Me Sit were readable. The Metro system had gone out of business years ago—she'd taken the bus with her mother for pediatrician visits or trips to the main library or shopping at Macy's or Nordstrom's, stores that remained wispy figments in older inhabitants' minds. The detectives put her in a seat two rows behind the driver, red and blue mumbling *enjoy your grapes*, next to a woman with a knit scarf wrapped several times around her neck and an enormous purse in her lap. Lizard skin, the scales peeling and ripped, some green, others a moldy gray. Lulu wondered how the woman got to keep her purse, but then she had her bag of grapes, some soft and leaking into the canvas. Maybe it would be a good idea to pass the bag around, make some friends. Maybe someone could help her out. Very likely, Lulu scolded herself, that this rag tag crew could possibly prevent her from execution. As if assessing the situation would make any difference. Still, she looked down the aisle, passing the bag of grapes to the lizard lady and then to the people behind her. A man in a tattered suit who kept his eyes on his gnarled hands, two ladies in torn cocktail dresses who passed a flask back and forth, trying to hide it but instead making the scratched metal more obvious. A few teenage boys who stared straight ahead, their eyes frozen wide in fear. No young girls, and she thanked the powers that be for their omission. What a forlorn lot they were. She remembered a magazine her mother used to buy when Lulu was a girl, *Lady's Home Journal*, which had a feature every month, *Can This Marriage Be Saved?* Every month another unhappy couple, interviewed separately by the reporter, talked about their problems and unhappiness. Then they spoke to a therapist. Amazingly, every time the marriages got straightened out, the couples happy and satisfied.

Lulu wondered if the people on the bus could rise above their despair, their hopelessness. Their helplessness. Not to mention the country itself. Maybe she'd wasted her time, her life fighting the government. Had she and the other agents, scattered across the country and the world, made a difference in peoples' lives? It was inevitable that the hard questions would press down on you when you faced death. She'd read stories about a government somewhere eons ago would determine guilt—they'd actually press stones on the chests of the presumed guilty. If the person died, that was the sign of innocence. If the person lived, that meant guilt and death. Ridiculous, as was today's decree proclaiming that a broken sword meant death.

Should she have lived her life differently? Just taking care of her own business, steering clear of anything that would disturb her universe. Impossible. She shook her head. She couldn't have done things differently.

The lady next to her patted Lulu's hand. "Name's Nadia. What're you in for?"

"Breaking my sword."

"How much is the fine? I've got to give them a gold piece. They say I stole a roll from the bakery on Chestnut Street. You know how there're aren't any chestnut trees on Chestnut Street? A couple maybe when I was a kid but long gone." She raked her fingers through her battleship gray hair. "So there aren't any rolls in the bakery for love or money. Bakery's closed. I ask you how I could steal a roll. But they had to fill their quota, the police, so bingo, I was the lucky one. Everyone on the bus, they've done barely anything wrong. Right Gustave?" The bus driver rocked his head, right and left. Noncommittal.

"They said I took a newspaper from the stand." The man behind them raised his head and put his hands in his jacket pocket. "When was the last time there were papers in the newsstand?"

He looked at them, his eyes a soft green, the color of hills Lulu had seen in painting. Turner, the artist's name was, or Constable.

"The ladies back there," Nadia said. "Police said they were trying to solicit. From who? Nobody's out on the street at night."

"Maybe not nobody," the man said. "But still, I wouldn't know. I stay home night and day."

Gustave pulled the bus over to the curb in front of the bus station. "People, a rest stop. My instructions are you go in, you do your business, you come out. No ones hides in the stalls, because I'll come looking for you. And then you'll have an additional fine put on your bill. The back exit is locked, so don't waste your time pulling and pushing at the door."

The passengers stood up, picking up their meager belongings, groaning, stretching their legs. The fumes from the exhaust almost overwhelmed them, people hacking and wheezing. "You go first, dear," Nadia said. Lulu could barely hear her above the noise. "I have to make sure everything's in my purse." She fumbled in her bag, pulling out a scrap of paper, which she put in Lulu's hand. Lulu was the first down the steps. She glanced at the slip in her palm. *The back exit is open.* She walked into the building, taking a quick look at the passengers trying to get out. Nadia stood there blocking them with her open purse, big as a postal workers's sack, shouting that her glasses had fallen out.

Lulu picked up speed, but it didn't help that her legs were full of pins and needles from the ride. She went straight to the back of the station, pretending to glance at the packages of dried-out pastries and sad stuffed animals. A few people poked through the offerings, perhaps hoping to find something marked down. When she got to the exit door, she leaned against the bar and picked up her right leg, looking at the bottom of her shoe. Maybe a piece of gum. She

scraped her foot on the mat. The door gave a little as she leaned against the bar. She pushed gently, opening it just wide enough to slip through.

Then she ran. For maybe a half mile until the combination of adrenaline and exhaustion ground her down. I'm a nub, she told herself, worn out, overcome. Her breaths came fast but shallow. Not enough air. Right at the skyline, a group of people waved down at her. Were they clouds that she'd misidentified as human shapes? They called out to her, children as young as four, teens, young married couples holding hands, old men and women. *You can come to us*, they said. *We'll dote on you, clasp you to our hearts. Let go if you need to.* Lulu knew who they were, though their lives and hers had never overlapped. Aunts and uncles, her father's brothers and sisters killed in the war. Friends of cousins she'd never known. A cousin in a tiny suit, one of the four-year olds, said *my aunt got married today. Come see!*

Lulu could very easily have dropped on the muddy curb, given up. She'd be carted away, a heap of refuse. She didn't need any funeral extolling her. Still, her legs ran, weakly, feebly, but moving. Lulu gasped, her breath ragged. Still breathing, though pitifully. Soon enough, my loves, I'll be with you. Don't stop waiting for me. But not yet. Maybe I can still live. I will see you all, darlings. Just not yet. Escape happened, not though any of my graces of course. Things left for me to do. Nadia, the unlocked door. I was set free.

Lulu pulled herself together enough to notice she was coming up to an intersection. She turned right and found herself on a pleasant residential street, brick houses set back on landscaped grounds. Mature hanoki cypress, mugo pine, mulched beds. A small park on the corner had freshly painted benches, a handful of swings. She didn't belong in a neighborhood like this, where interlopers would be vulnerable to stares and questions. She had to sit down. She had no choice. Anxious that she couldn't pull in enough air. Her legs trembled, her mouth a

desert. In her mind's eye, she saw a fading version of the relatives and family friends who'd called to her from the cloudbank. Called to her—shouldn't that be patently ridiculous? But the feeling settled over her again, the love she felt, from them and for them. She knew none of them—they'd gone before, other lifetimes. Was she crazy? Then she'd be crazy. She couldn't deny them.

No curtains twitched in the nearby buildings. No gimlet eyes. She should use the time to plan, but her mind wouldn't stretch that far. A man came out of the house across the street and walked into the park with his Yorkie. Who still had pets? She wondered for a terrifying moment if she was on the executioner's block and hallucinating in her fear and dread.

He looked at her. She'd have to speak. "Hello sir," she said, amazed that her mouth and tongue still coordinated, though she could barely speak above a whisper. She could just about put on the Lulu voice she used when she wanted to be your normal housewife out for a walk before starting dinner. "I was on the trolley and then got off to explore this lovely section for a bit. Now I'm turned around and quite exhausted. Would you know how far it is back to the City?"

"You are turned around, my dear. It's about twenty miles. But just go back to the corner and take the 59 West."

She was thrilled that he apparently didn't know that she was an escaped prisoner. A tiny burst of thrilling, then another round of despair. Of course, radios had become scarce—only those entrenched in the system still had electricity that came on and off randomly. It wouldn't be until the next few days, if that, that the papers would carry the news. *The Sun Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times* put out only sporadic issues when they had the resources—reporters who hadn't disappeared, presses that hadn't been dismantled. "I see," she said. Not that she had any way to board the 59 West, not a token, not a bit of cash on her. Maybe it would be some

rough justice to get arrested for sneaking onto the trolley and then being recognized and executed for her sword after all.

“Listen, I’ve been carrying around a couple of tokens in my pocket since I retired,” the man said. “To remind me of the lawyer I used to be, going to work, sifting through my files, taking the trolley home way after dark. Busy me. On the other hand, missed out on a lot of things.” Lulu could tell he was thinking of missed ballgames with his kids, missed dinners with the family. He pulled a couple tokens out of his pocket. “They’re yours. Get back home before it’s dark.”

“That’s extremely kind of you, sir,” Lulu said. Her eyes filled. She had forgotten what tears were like.

“Marc,” he said. “Just Marc. Very glad to be of help.” He put his hand up to his tweed cap and walked on with his Yorkie. Twice in one day strangers had saved her life. On the trolley, after a nervous wait, she dropped a token into the box and found a seat next to a woman with a toddler on her lap. She was thrilled to see the girl babbling to her mother. The birthrate had dropped precipitously in the last few years. You had to have enough food to get pregnant. You had to have a warm enough apartment and the immunity to fight off whatever viruses were lying in wait for you.

She got off a few stops before her own. She didn’t want to see anyone who recognized her. Yes, people had been good to her today, but you had to use sense. She couldn’t go to her apartment building—the police would obviously wait for her there. Idra’s apartment was in the same building, so that was out too. Lulu was horrified that Idra would inevitably be dragged into her troubles. Idra would have to leave too—Lulu needed to warn her. Her only option was to go to the café, Common Grounds, and beg Mattias to take a message to Idra. Of course he would.

Though she was cold, hungry, and worn out—she couldn't imagine ever feeling different—she walked over to the café, circling around the block two times to determine who was inside. No police vehicles waiting outside, unless they were unmarked. Mattias was inside, bending down behind the bar to take a bottle out of the cabinet. He stood up, stretching his back and glancing out the window. He saw her, their eyes meeting, though he made no sign except the slightest nod. Maybe that was her exhausted eyes playing tricks on her. A few people—a middle aged woman with a bag of kindling at her feet, a rangy man reading a paperback pulled up right to his glasses. At the back, next to the supply closet, Nina was wiping down a tabletop, its glass gleaming furiously at the western sun in the almost twilit sky. So Nina, her gifted tap dancer, would play a part in their group. Mattias said something to her and Nina came outside, making a show of shaking out a broom.

Lulu followed her into the café, picking a table that the sun had already abandoned. “They let you go?” Nina whispered. Mattias sat down facing Lulu so that she was partly blocked from view. He took Lulu's hands, his rough and callused, hers cracked, dried dots of blood across the knuckles. Nina turned the Open sign on the door to Closed. The few customers piled up their belongings and shuffled out.

“I heard you'd escaped,” Mattias said. “Tell me the details.”

Lulu told them, but Mattias didn't know “Nadia” or anyone who matched her description. He hadn't been involved in her escape. “We have to get Idra to leave her apartment,” Lulu said. “They'll come for her as soon as they figure out that we live in the same building. And that I don't live in the house in the country. Fortunately, my papers say otherwise. So Idra has a little time. But not much.”

“I put a mattress in the office. Not particularly safe but it'll do for a day or two.”

“I lost the keys to the safe house on Maxwell Street,” Lulu said. She looked down on herself, her dress and leggings stained and greasy. “I have nothing,” she said. She tried a smile but she couldn’t crank it up. “And it feels lousy to feel sorry for myself.”

“You’re entitled,” Mattias said.

“I should have been asking if you’ve run into any trouble.”

He didn’t answer, knowing she was too tired to focus. Nina left to get Idra, the brass bell tinkling as if nothing had happened ever. He helped Lulu to the office and pulled out a sweatshirt and pants for her from a rickety chest. “Need help?” he offered.

“Next time,” she said. He closed the door behind him, the lock clicking. She curled up on the thin mattress, almost calling him back. Her eyes closed before she could get the words out. An hour later she surfaced, exhaustion not letting her sleep properly. Plus the mattress was apparently stuffed with acorns and broken crockery. She saw Idra peering at her through the window glass window in the office door and Lulu frantically waved her in. Idra dropped the shopping bags she was schlepping and threw her arms around Lulu’s neck. Could your heart break from a friend’s love? Of course it could.

“I brought your clothes and my clothes and your boots and scarves and hats a purse and *The Oxford Book of Poetry*, which needs a rubber band to keep it together,” Idra said.

“Idra.” Lulu hugged her harder. She didn’t think she could ever let go.

“I think the only thing you care about is that book,” Idra said, voice muffled by Lulu’s shoulder. She pulled away and opened the book. “*Terence this is stupid stuff: You eat your victuals fast enough; There can’t be much amiss, ‘tis clear, To see the rate you drink your beer.* How is this in any way poetry,” Idra said. “Shall I go on? *The cow, the old cow, She is dead. It rests well its horned head.*”

“Are you flirting,” Lulu said. She hoped so. At this moment she loved Mattias and Idra and little Nina. Maybe she was sappy and loopy, but it was better than venom pouring out of her. And fear, which tapped her on the shoulder like a devil’s claw.

“Where will we live,” Lulu said. Already anxiety sloshed around her ankles, working its way up to her knees.

“In the safe house, silly. Both of us. You know,” Idra said, grasping Lulu’s shoulders, “you saved my life. They’d have come after me too, storming in after they trashed your place.”

“They’ll ransack mine eventually and yours only if they figure out our connection. They won’t know at first where I live. My papers say I’m a country girl. I think we’re safe enough for the while.” A total fabrication of course, but she didn’t want Idra to blame her for immediately bringing the police and army down on both of them. It would happen because *the wheels of (in)justice grind slow but exceedingly fine.*

Mattias had finished stacking up the chairs onto the tables. When he came into the office, Idra told him that they’d leave for the safe house now.

“That won’t work. We need that house for emergencies. People who need it as a last resort.”

“Of course,” Lulu said automatically. She was used to standing aside for fugitives or refugees in emergencies who didn’t have experience seeking safety. People who wouldn’t have a piece of paper slipped into their hand supplying a way out of danger. People who didn’t have her skills and contacts. Who didn’t have Lulu’s life. When Lulu was a child, her great-grandmother told her about a television show she used to watch as a kid called *This is Your Life* where an unsuspecting guest became reacquainted with people from childhood—teachers, old neighbors and school friends. Watching the show when she was home sick with the flu or chickenpox, her

great-grandmother happy for these people who hadn't seen each other for years. Lulu hadn't seen most of the people from her past for years either—mostly dead or in jail or having fled to a marginally safer spot. The people she knew now—assumed names, pasts they didn't talk about or made up. Still, she'd trust them with her life. Mattias, Idra.

“What should we do then?” Lulu said. Yes, she was experienced in sabotaging the Government and the Guards and rescuing people whose covers were exposed. But she was one of the hunted, and she was desperate that she and Idra survived.

Mattias ran his hands through his unruly hair. “Stay here, both of you, one more night. Tomorrow you'll be taken to the Southwest. There's plenty to do there.”

“We'll lie low,” Lulu said. Actually giggling, so tired that she vibrated inside. An expression her great-grandmother had picked up from her other television loves—cowboy movies and detective shows.

Tomorrow would be simple, she told herself—at least the beginning of the day. Bundling their bags into a car, wearing hats low on their foreheads, sunglasses. Sounding like a long ago spy novel. Except this disappearing or escaping or fleeing was an accepted part of Lulu's daily life. She had to accept it because it was part of the package—working against a decayed, corrupt life that had settled on people like a toxic funk—her life meant very little stability and routine. She'd lived in her apartment in the City for four years now, longer than anyplace else except her childhood home. Then why was she so afraid this time.

“We'll be back won't we,” Lulu said. She didn't want to beg. But she couldn't help it.

“What can we really promise in this life?” Mattias said. “I can't pretend to know how events will unravel. What I can do is promise to do everything I can to bring you two back.”

“I know that,” Lulu said. “When it’s safe. But it doesn’t have to be too safe. I can take a little danger.”

“You’ve had your share lately. More than your share.”

“I’m alive, Mattias. A bit of difficulty grasping that my head will stay on my shoulders for the duration but I’m back in business. With a little help from my friends, as that—folk song was it? —put it. A lot of help. I’m very grateful.” Three commonplace words. Overwhelming her.

Mattias pulled down the shades at the front of the café. Lulu went over to help but merely held a cord in her hand, looking out at the brave new moon pushing through a miasma of fog. “Look, I’m unsure of myself right now. Devasted. On the bus, knowing there was no way out. Maybe I’m too old for this work. Maybe I should sit at a desk coordinating assignments. Paperwork. Starting a newsletter.” She realized instantly this was a fatal approach. Later she could work on reassuring herself that she was still fit for infiltration, for sabotage, for taking down the Government and the Guard. Maybe it was good to know what fear and doubt felt like. She’d been rash and headstrong until now, talking her way out of bad situations, fleeing when she had to. Incredulously unafraid. Her near extinction had exposed reality’s grim side, which should have been evident all along. She’d get back to some semblance of herself—what choice did she have—but she had to reassure Mattias that she was as indispensable as ever.

“Newsletter? Talking nonsense. You’re ageless, Lulu,” Mattias said. She knew he was exasperated with her.

Lulu scowled at him, attempting sour and crochety and flippant and dishabile. “Beyond counting, you mean?” Bright banter.

“So a desk assignment?” He slouched his long frame. She wondered when the last time he’d slept.

“Of course not,” she lied, shaking her head like he was a hopeless though loveable idiot. “I mean after all this time you can’t tell when I’m taking the piss? But no more dance teacher gigs. Or swords.” She winked—winked!—like an ingenue, a croquette, a jaunty young thing. When she felt old and defeated. She had to retain her spot, high up in his list of contacts, because even if she had to drag herself around—until she felt her brazen self again—she’d do her job. She’d been brave Lulu, doing her part to save the world. It was her identity, her passion. What else did she have?

“I don’t do promises,” he said stiffly. “But yeah, scratch dance teacher. You’re relieved, I’m relieved.” He grinned then, one of those people whose smile utterly transformed them. Maybe she was ridiculous, but when his eyes shone, his irises mixed blue and green with amber sparkles—even in the poor light, his lined face beatific. She had to turn her head.

“I know,” she said. “No promises.” Her escape from imminent death had knocked the stuffing out of her, and she hadn’t been able to hide that raw, primal part of her. Never trust anyone but your family, her father had warned her. She’d bristled at that, a young, idealistic girl who believed in the potent pull of friendship. She still believed in it—almost all the time. Just tonight—there was a place for strategy and connivance in even the closest relationships. She needed Mattias more than he needed her. She pulled down the shade, then opened the window a finger’s width. She needed air that hadn’t been tainted by breath or heat rising from bodies. She felt better, she thought, fortified. More herself.

“Don’t worry,” Lulu said. “I can still be anyone.

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