



Issue #36 • Feb. 11, 2010

[“To Slay with a Thousand Kisses,”](#)
[by Rodello Santos](#)

[“The Motor, the Mirror, the Mind,”](#)
[by T.F. Davenport](#)

For more stories and Audio Fiction Podcasts, visit
<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

TO SLAY WITH A THOUSAND KISSES

by Rodello Santos

The darkness was a loom upon which the cold rain wove. Only the thin bow of a moon haunted the sky as I traveled to the village of the Blue Sparrow clan. Every fifty years I made this journey—as I had done these last two centuries. Each of my steps trembled with restrained desire. It was my master, this hunger.

One day still remained before *Seyol*, when the passage of night begins to outlast the day. By now, the villagers will have already chosen a maiden, my poor sacrificial bride, waiting by the cornfields. She will wait in white wedding robes, bound tight lest she think to run away, golden string in her hair to plait our braids together as husband and wife. I will slay her, with a thousand kisses.

I wondered if she would be short or tall, if her body would mimic the plains or the curving hills. In the end, though, what mattered was her spirit. Strong and fiery, as it would need to be to sustain me for the next fifty years.

One would think my soul so black that I felt no stirring in my conscience. Untrue. Part of me...remembers.

Somewhere along my journey, the rain had turned to snow, fat flakes that whitened the trees and rocks. The beads of my wedding necklaces clacked, sending crisp echoes through the ice-brittle air. The prints my moccasins left were smoothened by the trail of my hawk-feather cloak. Were it as easy to erase my past.

When I reached the cornfields of the Blue Sparrow clan, I stopped, unsure if what I saw before me was some trick. The wind played with the feathers of my headband as I stood, mountain-still.

No bride waited for me.

Instead, three young braves—if that word could be used—were blindfolded and tied to stakes, left out to the merciless weather. I walked closer and saw that their robes, breechcloths, and leggings were woven from bristleweed, whose spiny needles cause the flesh to blister.

Captives from a warring tribe? Oathbreakers? I wondered what they had done to merit this treatment.

The first brave sobbed like an old woman. His body shook from more than just the cold.

“Who are you?” I demanded, the power in my voice causing the very wind to pause.

His head snapped up, and he looked in my direction. Confusion warred with fear upon his face. He opened his

mouth, began to stammer. His voice shook so much I could not comprehend him.

The second youth was murmuring prayers to the Buffalo Dancer for protection, deliverance.

“Who are you?” I asked of him, but it was not he who responded.

“Perhaps I can answer your questions, grandfather Tocho.”

I was startled by the calm in the third youth’s voice, and even more so that he recognized me despite his blindfold. His face was sharp and angled, a strong face of the kind that made other men take heed. In age he appeared the same as I, though the heartless caress of years has not touched me since I was cursed in my youth.

“If you know who I am, you would not bother with titles of respect.”

“I give only what is deserved...or will be.”

I did not find his riddles endearing. “If you have answers, speak quickly. Where is the maiden your clan was bidden to leave me? Where is my wife?”

“Forgotten, grandfather.”

My temper rose. “Do they seek to test me? Blood shall water their crops.”

“No. Only that the memory of man is short. Especially when darker terrors show their face.”

I unwrapped his blindfold. It, too, was made of bristleweed and left an angry red swath over his eyes. Through obvious discomfort, he smiled. “Thank you,” he said.

I saw mysteries dancing when he opened his eyes. There was magic in them, of that I was certain. “What darker terrors do you babble of?”

“I leave the babbling to the other two who were offered with me as sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice to whom?”

“They call her Tuwa Nukpana, daughter of Masauwu.”

My jaw clenched. Masauwu was the Skeleton Man, the great god of Earth who dances with his One Horned Priests. But never had I heard of a daughter.

The brave continued. “Three youths does Tuwa Nukpana require, to be offered at each season’s end. Three youths to feed her dark lust with their blood, their seed, and their lives. Hers is a fresher darkness, and under her shadow, I fear your own demands have been forgotten.”

“But *you* have not forgotten...you, who speak of fear but show none.”

“I am Ahote. My sight grants me glimpses of things to come. I knew you would rescue me, just as you will rescue this village. The same way *I* shall rescue you.”

Laughter escaped me. “You will rescue me from my fate?”

“I must,” he said, and I sensed a touch of inexplicable sorrow.

“You wish to play savior, then save yourself. Perhaps you are simply mad?”

“My father believed that true and spilled much of my blood to cure me. Or so he claimed was his intent. No matter, I am not wrong. You were once an honorable warrior.”

“How—”

“I know the lore from no source but my dreams. You will save this village.”

His words disturbed me more deeply than I let show; redemption was a wish I knew better than to make. “You are a fool,” I hissed, “a mudhead unable to grasp the truth standing before him. I am as far from a hero as tree roots are to clouds.”

“You have called me mad and a fool, but my faith is not shaken. For clouds weep, their tears quenching the thirst of roots. Untie me, and I shall instruct you. Trust me, and no longer will you be condemned to take a maiden every fifty years.”

“If you are lying—”

“I am not.”

My hand did not shake when I drew my knife and struck his bindings. No hint did I give of expectation, nor trust in his

words. But inside...inside, I sensed my hopes, like winter-starved wolves, stalking me.

* * *

When I freed the two other youths, they spewed their gratitude with praises and honorifics. I, too, was grateful, for the silence that followed the fools' departures. I wondered what stories they would spread to their clan.

Ahote stayed with me, acting as if all were preordained. Each time I looked at him, saw his calm and certitude, I wondered if I'd misjudged his age. Perhaps he was as I, clad in the seeming of youth though long years had roared past, foaming, bubbling in the cataract of time.

Even the bristleweed appeared to bother him little. Still, when I offered him my cloak, he accepted. I asked why they had been wearing the bristleweed clothes.

"It was by order of Tuwa Nukpana, to insure her victims suffered while they waited."

Cruel. "How long has she plagued your village?"

"No more than three years, but you are wrong to assume this is my village."

I stared at him. "You are not of the Blue Sparrow clan?"

Ahote laughed. "The elders were no more surprised than you when I volunteered. But I knew it was the easiest way to meet you."

“There is much you keep hidden. Too much.”

“Yet what I offer is surely worth your patience.”

I clenched my teeth. “Why help the village? Or me?”

“I do as my sight commands.”

Snowflakes spun around us, swirled by the restless wind. My hawk-feather cloak fluttered upon Ahote’s shoulders like a broken wing.

In the end, he was right. If he could aid me, then what cared I for all the secrets he hid? And if I aided others, what harm was that to myself? In my first life, I had been trusted. Whenever my village had been threatened, hadn’t I shed blood to save it?

“You suggested my curse could be broken. Tell me how.”

“How did the curse come upon you?”

I snorted. “Does your sight not tell you?”

He said nothing, only stared into the dark wilderness and waited. My patience frayed. All I had wanted was to bring a new bride home and consummate our union. To draw her spirit through her lips, shiny with her blood. Even now, I was distracted by the ache of my need.

At last, Ahote spoke. “Stay still as I do one last thing.” He bent down before the bristleweed clothing that lay upon the earth. With no hesitation, he licked the spindly fabric.

I scowled. *Ahote the mad, Ahote the mudhead.*

He stood, leaned close to me as if to whisper, and I felt the tip of his tongue touch my ear. I flinched away. My finger wiped at my ear, and I saw he had left his blood.

When he spoke again, his voice flew soundless like arrows through my mind. *Stand against the evil that visits, and I shall lift your curse. Now behold, beware. She is here.*

I saw a hill, veiled in snow and bearded in moss, undulating as it approached. With it came the stench of decay, like dead bodies too long in the sun. Only when it neared did it unwrap itself, rotten vegetation sloughing away like overripe flesh.

Tuwa Nukpana.

Her age was impossible to say, for her face was crusted with muck and roots. Her teeth were like kernels of mottled corn. She was naked, her skin textured like stone, gray and gravelly. Wet, bulbous mushrooms grew in the moss around her womanly crevice. Her reek nearly brought me to my knees.

When she spoke, her words slithered, foul and colder than the night air. "Where is my food? Where are my husbands? Who are you who waits, whose lust keens feebly next to mine?"

I noticed I was alone. Ahote had fled.

"These people are under...my protection." The words were thorns on my tongue, and yet I could imagine myself having

spoken them many ages ago. “And if my hunger pales next to yours, then you are even more wretched than I.”

She hissed, like those venomous red lizards that live under desert rocks. It was all the warning I received.

Her attack came swift, her thick legs launching her wide frame into mine. My knife flashed out, but its strong blade shattered against her stony skin. She wrestled me down into the snow, our bodies sliding about with our struggles.

Kiss her. Ahote’s voice rang through my mind, even as my ear tingled where his blood had touched it.

“No,” I whispered, disgusted at the thought. I dug my fingers into her throat, hurled her off sideways.

In amazement, I watched the ground *catch* her, then throw her back at me. I had barely gotten to my feet, and her new assault sent us tumbling, this time into the cornfield, crushing the dead stalks.

Kiss her, Ahote said again.

“Never!” I shouted, but his distraction gave her an opportunity. Roots burst out of the hard ground, wrapping themselves hungrily around my limbs.

Then, Ahote’s counsel became moot...for it was she who brought her lips to mine.

My mind recoiled. Her tongue was a grave-worm tunneling into me, befouling me. I bit down, but her tongue

was resilient as petrified wood.

She tried to drink my life into her, and for the first time in centuries, I knew dread. Was this how it had felt for my brides, as I slowly swallowed their lives? It must have been. But whereas I consumed a single bride through fifty years, Tuwa Nukpana gorged upon three men each season.

I fought back, tried to absorb her own life into me. Like starved wolves tugging a scrap of flesh with their teeth, our souls battled through that macabre kiss.

Ahote's presence was a shining dove in my mind. *To win, you must surrender.*

More riddles. I berated myself; it was I who was the mudhead, for releasing him.

Footsteps crunched in the snow, and from the corner of my eye I saw Ahote appear. I sensed Tuwa Nukpana's reaction, a mix of curiosity and caution. Perhaps she wanted to break off the kiss, but if she tried she knew I would devour her soul.

Ahote knelt beside us, put a hand on each of our foreheads. I felt connection, my mind to Ahote's touch, and through him, the mind of Tuwa Nukpana.

"Remember," he said...

...and my spirit obeyed.

The world around me vanishes. In my memory I am kissing Sulali, my mistress—the last woman I have truly loved,

as beautiful as Tuwa Nukpana is hideous, as gentle and warm as my enemy is wicked and cold. The scent of Sulali stirs my soul, my body—the remembrance of her doe-like grace, her sunlit smiles. She does not deserve the fate that my wife, Powaq, decrees.

Powaq knows what I think is hidden, knows the depths of desire I feel for Sulali...and makes that hunger real. What dark magic my first wife uses, I cannot say—it is clear she has secrets of her own. When I kiss Sulali again, I feel her spirit consumed into me. My lover withers in my arms, her strong, youthful body desiccating into a black husk, and no matter how hard I try I cannot stop myself. Her death takes only a moment.

And still I hunger. Powaq decrees I take a new wife from the Blue Sparrow clan—Sulali's clan—to sate my treacherous lusts. My wife vanishes into the night, but her curse lingers. Forever will my infidelity haunt me, she says. Forever, for my lusts will drive me to find new wives.

The agony of guilt and wasted years are barbs that pierce my throat, my eyes, my heart.

With no warning, the world around me changes: a verdant glade spills into existence. I have no recollection of this place.

A lone woman giggles as she tiptoes barefoot across a brook. Three shadows wait on the other side. By the time she notices them, it is too late. Three braves, their headbands

adorned with blue feathers, surround her and give in to their depravations. Her tears do not move them, nor her anguished screams.

Their savagery revolts me. I charge at them before I even realize what I am doing. My fist goes harmlessly through the first brave, as does my next strike and my third. I am powerless.

I close my eyes but visions seep through. Blood from her struck mouth. Angry red welts around bound wrists. The body, presumed dead, abandoned in a ditch where the earth reclaims it. The infection of wickedness—first to her flesh, then to her spirit—corrupting her, *disfiguring* her.

Enough, I shout in my mind. *Enough*, *Ahote!*

And then I was back in the waking world. Tuwa Nukpana's lips trembled against mine. Her face, pressed to my own, shivered; and screams, faint with age, echoed in my skull. A dark bonfire swelled in her gaze, only to gutter from the tears in her eyes.

"Surrender," Ahote said again. "Or your pain shall never fade."

After all I had just seen, my soul was a tempest of emotion. *Death, then*. Is that what he meant with his offer to end my curse, to die that I might break free?

Surrender, I told myself. Life is not worth killing innocents. *I want to live.*

Surrender. Let Tocho the Cursed Groom die, a widower to the last. *I want to live.*

Surrender. That I might search for Sulali in the World of Clouds and beg her forgiveness.

I want...

I ceased my struggle.

And to my astonishment, Tuwa Nukpana did the same. I felt the power of my every yearning—release, absolution, fulfillment, *love*—flow into her even as her desires flowed into me.

I gasped, fell back, and saw Tuwa Nukpana now transformed—she blinked at me, a beautiful young woman with fawn-shaped eyes who had once tiptoed barefoot across a brook.

“What did you do?” I demanded of Ahote.

He smiled, and I saw contempt. “It is better to ask what *you* just ceded. The life force you both required existed in the other. No longer will you need victims to feast upon.”

Tuwa Nukpana stood, touched her smooth face with fingers that could not stop shaking. “My curse has undone his?”

I looked to Ahote. “You said she was the daughter of Masauwu, the Skeleton Man. Not that she was cursed.”

“No,” he answered. “I said she was *called* the daughter of Masauwu. Do not blame me if your assumptions prove you a mudhead.”

Again, I was taken aback by his tone. Gone was the humble helper, replaced by one who seemed only to hold derision. “You helped us break our curses. If you seek payment—”

“You are not the first I have aided this way, not the first whose curses I have broken. Save your empty gratitude.”

“Then why do you give your help?”

Ahote’s eyes sparked as he looked at me, the mysteries within them awhirl in frenzied dance.

“To atone for my own sins. To aid those accursed fools whom I once deemed beneath me. That,” he said as he turned away, “is *my* curse.”

Tuwa Nukpana reached out, touched Ahote’s shoulder, but he shrugged her hand away as a horsetail slaps a fly. My hawk-feather cloak slipped off him. I retrieved it, draped it upon Tuwa’s shoulders.

What could I offer her when she leaned closer but to hold her near? What answer could I give but a dazed shake of my head. My mind still reeled, rejoicing, trembling at my reborn humanity.

We watched as Ahote strode off into the wintry shadows, to stalk others as accursed as we once were. Part of me was

desperate to call to him, to demand answers, and yet...if he could aid others, if he could take away their hunger as he did mine, then what cared I for all the secrets he hid.

Copyright © 2010 Rodello Santos

[Comment on this Story](#) in the BCS Forums

Rod Santos dwells in a vast suburbia (Westchester, NY) bordered by a shadowy, lawless land (the Bronx). At work, he hoards fodder for blackmail ("Human Resources"). His tales can be found in such places as The Town Drunk, Cinema Spec, Philippine Speculative Fiction 3, and Paper Blossoms, Sharpened Steel (forthcoming). He is hard at work on a fantasy novel (any day now) that he predicts will be humorous. When in need of serenity, he will watch proof of God's love (squirrels).

**Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies**

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

THE MOTOR, THE MIRROR, THE MIND

by T.F. Davenport

We have always known that our world is the brain of a being far vaster and grander than ourselves. Cleave a man's skull in battle, and the corrugations of flesh—pink, tender, swiftly dying—mirror the cliffs and gullies of the infinite clanking city around you. And to the millions of tiny beings who occupy the dying man's skull? To them, it's as if a sword has cut through the sky. The world has ended. *What have I done?* they cry. *What, to deserve this?*

* * *

Before it was taken by the Motor King's soldiers, my suite of rooms looked out from the encrusted cliff face that made up the Mirror Kingdom. Who knew how far the facing cliffs stretched: upwards and downwards, they bristled off into a distance of pumps and throbbing gears, of curling vines and grimy windows like mine—into countries and lands unimaginable. I lived in the complex of workshops, apartments, foundries and larders that Queen Nadia's grandmother had sectioned off arbitrarily and declared the seat of her power.

But the dynasty would end that morning. Drying my face after my morning shave, I looked out my window onto the tract

—an elevated road wide enough to admit an army—and saw just that: an army.

The chasm echoed with their progression. In the oil-brown uniforms of the Motor country, the soldiers tramped like automata, stepping precisely before their great wheeled guns and flamethrowers. In the hazy light I saw pallid faces under black caps, hands wiping away grease and sweat as the army formed up before the palace bridge. The battalions gathered like clouds in a storm, the banks of uniformed men imparting a faint electricity into the morning, an urge for murder and repossession. I saw the artillery roll into place like animals of war, the men crawling over them like ticks: loading, oiling, sealing, tightening. There was no one else on the tract. I saw the young faces turned in fear toward the windows of Mirror country, the soldiers holding their ranks as gunshots popped out of windows around me, as bullets pinged off the brass and an artilleryman tumbled from behind his gun. I turned away when the trumpets called, sounding the order to return fire.

The palace walls, including those of my room, were festooned with mirrors. Some of them were as large as doors, others like sequins or chips of glass. In the mirrors we saw our own faces and sometimes other sights: foreigners doing inscrutable business, armies on the march, riots, festivals, plagues of boils and pox.... Few people know if these visions are

real or false—and as one who does know, I can tell you it doesn't matter. The visions are real, but they're no help in avoiding fate.

I hurried past mirrors in which black strands curled behind my jeweled ear, past a grave procession, dimly glimpsed, which on a normal day I would have stopped to interpret, and finally through a series of workshops where the peasants plated silver and tin onto panes of glass. I entered the throne room, or what sufficed for one. It was the only room not given over to living space or the production of mirrors: a small, ornate parlor dominated by a massive clavier. At a desk in the corner, Queen Nadia addressed her lieutenants downstairs through a metal tube.

“...and above all, hold the bridge,” she said. She, and a hundred reflections, glanced over her shoulder as I entered. “You’ll die in great numbers there, and aye, you’ll probably lose it. But don’t fall back until you’re fighting with daggers and slipping on blood—and when you do, open the oil ducts and set the bridge alight. It’s been through worse....”

The queen was eighteen, though she looked like a child, or ageless. So pale and slender, her freckled face so distressed with fatigue, that it was hard to believe she wasn’t stricken with haemophilia. It was said that her grandmother Sophia was a dispossessed noble of the Motor Kingdom, and that Nadia

herself was the Motor King's cousin. The rumor was credible: every infirmity that Queen Nadia implied, that tyrant in his walking chair actually possessed. She nodded me to the stool at the clavier. Then she tucked a few limp hairs behind her ear and placed her lips to the speaking tube again.

"And should our kingdom be saved, the man responsible for its salvation will take his rightful place beside me as our king, and as my husband."

Although I'd foreseen the end of her reign, it was hard not to hope for victory as a distant cheer echoed up from the lower halls. Reaching forward, she flicked off the electric power. For a few moments there was no sound in the room but her quiet sniffing and next door's gurgling acid bath, cleaning the glass for plating.

She held out her hand and I took it, the long fingers bunching limply. I bent close to her and murmured, "No queen has ever kept that promise."

"Aye, Daniel." She nodded sadly. "The men know it, too."

"Now is the time, Nadia. If ever." The words sounded hollow as I said them. My divinations hadn't shown me if we would live or die. They hadn't shown me because it didn't matter if we lived or died; it didn't matter if we fled. To the Great Being it only mattered that the Motor King would take this palace. The soldiers would loot the treasury, throw the

corpses over the side of the tract, and settle. Demand for mirrors would flow in without pause from all corners of the world, and someone would have to make them, wouldn't they? And so this Motor conquest would, bit by bit, become the Mirror Kingdom again. That was what had happened in the first place when old Queen Sophia moved in. The duke then in residence was the Motor King's vassal. She poisoned his wine on a mission of trade. Her first instruction to his people, now hers, was to go on with their work as if nothing had changed.

Far away, clanging and screams could be heard. Booming gunshots, stout walls resounding like bells. And beneath that, the ceaseless tapping on copper frames, the acid wash slurping, the grinding of glass. The peasants in their workshops knew nothing would change. Even the women felt no fear. They had more value at their benches than as spoils of war.

They stayed bent over their mirrors, in on the game, as Nadia and I changed into rough, faded cotton. I took the garnets out of my earlobes; Nadia tugged off her emerald ring. We balled up the jewelry in royal velvet and guardsman's corduroy. I sprinted to my suite, the sounds of battle growing louder, the roar of the artillery almost constant—and threw this finery out the window, to rain wealth on a distant country.

When the enemy forced their way upstairs, uniforms filthy with blood and smoke, Nadia and I sat as factory-workers.

With her red hair tied under a cap, she pushed pane after pane of glass through a grinding lathe. Several benches away, I loaded these panes into a tub of acid and sealed the lid.

The first man in was an officer. He was short, bald, and built like a boiler. Sweat glistened on his forehead and two parallel streaks of blood banded his thigh. He stood in the doorway, blocking the enlisted boys peering over his shoulder. He uncapped a metal tube and tapped a roll of paper into his hand. He cleared his throat and read.

“Attention! You are now the property of His Highness Stefan III, Lord of this gyros and all dwelling therein, be they aware or as yet unaware of His dominion.”

The peasants knew their value. They expected something like this. For the oldest of them—those with gnarled, stained fingers, nearing the start of their pension years—it was something they’d heard before from Queen Sophia. And so despite the stench of battle and the faint sound of boots being dragged across the floor, the workers felt light enough to chuckle. *Be they aware or as yet unaware.* I smiled, too, though Nadia didn’t.

In a smooth motion the captain drew his dagger and swiped it cleanly over the nearest throat. A portly man with pebbly skin fell forward, burbling, spilling his life on a looking glass. As the room erupted in shouts the captain unblocked the

door, admitting the soldiers with their rifles leveled. Quiet returned as he wiped the blade on his thigh, painting a third stripe alongside the other two.

He unrolled the paper again. “Insofar—” he wiped some crust from his eye— “insofar as you respect your new master and work faithfully, you will be permitted to live in peace and to carry out the functions for which you’ve been trained. Food and payment....” He scanned down the page. “Well, the rest is all details.”

He rolled the paper and slipped it back in the tube. His blue eyes glittered—not from killing, I thought, but from the chase to come. “Now, who knows where the queen went?”

He leaned against the wall to watch our reactions. Peasants looked from one to another. Many things passed among them, but not loyalty. Nadia was crying. I raised my hand.

The officer spied me. “You, man.”

I stood up. “I can show you where the queen went, sir.”

I crossed the workshop to a door-sized mirror—door-sized because it was, in fact, a door. A damp draught billowed in. Behind the mirror: a dripping floor made of perforated iron grilles, a staircase twisting upward with repurposed piping for handrails. A few mirrors mounted randomly.

“Mm-hm.” Hands on his hips, the captain looked up into the winding dark, wiping rust-red drips off his forehead. He asked a few questions about where the stairway led. “Up,” was the best answer anyone could give. He shrugged, lit a cigarette, and went out, leaving a pair of his teenage soldiers at the hidden door.

* * *

In the dark hours, Nadia and I crept in our stockings from the dead man’s room, cut the two throats of those teenage soldiers, and quietly climbed the stairway.

* * *

In advance of this day I’d packed a bag. We had wineskins, dry fruit, and salted meat; daggers in our belts and a revolver snug in my vest. Sturdy shoes, jewels to barter, pouches of coins. Our ghostly faces stalked us pane by pane, until after hours of climbing we emerged into a high-ceilinged space both brightly lit and searingly hot.

The Motor Kingdom surrounded and interpenetrated the Mirror lands so thoroughly that regardless of which direction we went, it would be hard to predict whether we’d enter it. But this room, evidently, was friendly ground. It was a foundry, with giant cups pouring liquid glass onto troughs of molten metal. Grunting sweat-slick women and men, with firelight pouring off their muscles, directed the automation. They

spared us a short glance as we emerged from the stairway. Choking on heat, we stumbled past and out onto a balcony encrusted with vines.

We'd not come far. The tract before the Mirror Palace was still the nearest below us, though from this vantage the soldiers appeared as fleas. They were camped all over the tract. The breeze gusting down the sulcus ruffled the canvas tarps on the war machines. A pinpoint fire flickered in the sparse drizzle. In a chalk circle a pair of the fleas tussled; a faint cheer reached us when one of them went sprawling.

I watched Nadia as she looked down. In a child-like face one expects to see childish feelings, the primary colors of sadness and hope. Nadia's face contained neither of these. Tears dribbled down her cheeks, but the set of her lips and the embers in her eyes pointed to something other than sadness.

The mirrors in my own mind reflected nothing. Not knowing what else to do, I put an arm around her shoulder and muttered the obvious comforts. We'd find work soon, some way to live. We'd make our way through the Motor Kingdom and live anonymously. I might find a position doing cerebromancy, or we might find a home in the glass trade.

"Why bother, Daniel?"

"My queen?"

She looked at me, wet and red around her eyes' blue rings. "Don't call me a queen," she said. "Or a lady. I'm nothing now, and so are you."

"Nothing! My— You're free. *We're* free. The mirrors predicted nothing beyond today. We can be anything, anyone. Anything we want."

"I want death."

"Nadia."

"His, or mine."

"But to what end? The Kingdom will survive *this*. So will the workers, men of yours still living." I touched her shoulder. "They love you, my lady. They want you to live. As do I. And the only way we can ensure that is by leaving this country. Your time as a queen is done. Let the mirrors flow on without you."

"Let the mirrors flow on!" She flopped down on the vines, elbows on her knees. "Everything taken, but 'never mind, my lady! Let the mirrors flow on!'" She looked up at me, weeping, and I recognized the other element in her face: rage. "Is this what it's done to you, being a cerebromancer?"

"This is being a cerebromancer." I sat beside her. "When you sat down so suddenly, the movement caused an infinitesimal trauma to the flesh in your head. In that chaos, a few of the creatures that compose your brain were killed. Are you sad for them? Or do you only care about them so long as

they provide you with movement, emotions, the mirrors that reflect my mind in yours? And so, Nadia—”

“‘And so are we to the Great Being.’ I know, Daniel. I don’t care.” She planted a hand on my knee, leveraging. “*I will* have a throne again. May it cost the Great Being I-don’t-care-what, I will.”

Firelight enveloped her as she crossed the foundry floor. “I’d prefer not to do this alone, Daniel,” she called without looking back.

I gathered both packs and followed her.

* * *

Several miles above, we spent the night on a stairwell landing. A flickering light-coil erased and redrew our faces in the giant mirror comprising one wall. After a plug of tough, salty meat and a few figs, we spread our cloaks on the floor and bedded down for a sleepless night.

For a long time I lay on my back listening to her even breaths, letting the cold light dig into my eyes. I wondered what the creatures forming my own mind dreamed—if they had nightmares or good dreams, and indeed what there was in their world to dream of. I wondered too if the fall of the Mirror Palace was but a small contribution to the dream of our own Great Being—and what that being had to dream of.

“Daniel.”

Somehow, I'd fallen asleep after all. I blinked away images of a palsied white face under the Urchin Crown, of steel legs ticking like teeth on the floor. I listened for those legs and heard my own pumping heart and the light-coil's faint popping noise.

"Daniel," she said again.

She sat on the steps in her blouse and short pants, white arms folded across her knees. Her dagger lay on the steps next to her. I followed her gaze.

The light-coil sputtered. In the dark points of its cycle, the mirror showed nothing. But in the light, it reflected a vista far larger than our little room. The scene was a wedding, or perhaps a coronation, or both. We saw it from a balcony overlooking the procession. The spectators wore lavish costumes. They went mad with excitement, raining blue flowers on the parade of soldiers.

The royal couple, if that's what they were, had already passed. The bride's form and hair were hidden by an elaborate veil dragging behind her. The groom—it was easy to see who he was. He walked on four mechanical legs, ticking forward as coldly and precisely as those of a crab. An armature of clamps and cushions held his withered torso upright, bobbing limply as the jointed legs advanced. The Motor King's crown was a cap of needles, each one sprouting a white filament too thick to be a

hair. These were gathered into a braid down the length of his back.

The light-coil died, sealing us in darkness. When it fizzed back to life, the mirror showed only our little landing. Nadia stared at the glass, blinking as if she'd just woken and didn't know yet where she was.

"It was me," she whispered.

"I don't think so, my queen."

"I'm sure of it. The bride's hand was my hand. You didn't see?" She held up her left hand to show the little finger ending at the first knuckle. She'd lost it at the age of five in the clavier's lid.

"The view was too distant to see that." I shook my head. "Go to sleep, my lady. The bride in the mirror was not you. Or if it was, then how can we know what will change or hasten it? Maybe that girl will strangle him in the wedding bed; more likely she'll be his chattel for a while, then fling herself off a balcony. Rejoice that it's not you." I lay down and shut my eyes.

"I'd rather die tomorrow, if marriage to that creature is the alternative."

What could I say? She would probably get her wish. All day we'd batted plans back and forth. She wanted to return for survivors among her men. To seize a factory and call it a kingdom. I wanted to spend our jewels on a stake in a business,

a comfortable life, a measure of freedom. We could call it a kingdom if she desired, so long as we got far away quickly. *But close enough to strike back*, she wanted to know, *when we're strong enough?* And so we'd gone all day, spiraling upward on the narrow stairs.

Now I squeezed my eyes shut against the light trying to batter its way in. I tried to squeeze out the sound of her sniffing. I knew I should take her in my arms and comfort her. I had words prepared for these occasions, to whisper into her ears and soothe her mind to sleep.

She'd been six years old when I predicted the year of her overthrow. This was the myth she grew up with: because she touched so many lives as princess and then as queen, she mattered enough to appear in the signs read by cerebromancers, who see only the grand events.

In truth, I did what cerebromancers always do. Whether we see visions in mirrors or hear voices in warbling electrical static, we must always interpret, extrapolate, confabulate. Nadia's downfall was only a guess. The vision that actually appeared showed only a merchant's ledger, indicating that in this year the kingdom's output of mirrors would decrease. It would stay depressed for some months, then return to normal.

What could cause this besides an invasion? Now I knew. In the vast sweep of human endeavor, in the absorption of a small

kingdom into a greater one, the nexus of true significance was the death of the old glass polisher, made an example by the Motor King's officer.

* * *

Every vision seen in a mirror has two meanings; neglect either one at your peril. The first is the image actually seen, and the second—perhaps more important—is how it affects the viewer. I should have divined the second meaning and offered Nadia the comfort she wanted. In the morning, I was alone. Her pack was gone. So were her cloak, her knife, my pistol, and half of our money.

Panic seized me. I shouted her name and banged open doors, surprising workers asleep in hard bunks and startling merchants blinking through spectacles at contracts. I bounded upstairs, stopping only when my thighs burned and my lungs wheezed. I stood on the landing, panting, until I heard voices growing louder above me. I hid in a privy—a zinc-lined booth that smelled like its function—as footsteps echoed over the platform.

As they crossed the landing to file out through a narrow door, I considered my appearance: nothing identified me as a man of the Mirror lands. Except for my cloak I was dressed like a peasant. Assuming I wasn't arrested for vagrancy, I could range throughout the Motor Kingdom at will. If I was lucky

enough to find them, I could even seek help from the Inhibition: the secretive network of saboteurs and subversives active throughout the world. It was said they concentrated their work in the Motor Kingdom.

I stepped out of the privy to nod at the passing soldiers. They ignored me.

Two options were clear. Either Nadia had gone up, into the Motor heartland to spend her life on revenge—or down, to round up survivors and begin afresh. In neither case would she get her money's worth. The Motor King was the best-guarded man in the world, and she was hardly a skilled assassin. She'd never killed except in the usual way of royalty, by ordering faithful men to their deaths. Just the same, any survivors she found below would be deserters. They'd never put a crown on her head, but they might at least keep her safe.

So I went upstairs, hoping she hadn't gone this way and knowing angrily that she probably had. I was tired of her ambitions. But duty, years of promises made and kept, compelled me to find her and persuade her against revenge. As I climbed the stairs from landing to landing, I examined every mirror for a glimpse of red hair, a sallow cheekbone, a blue eye. But I saw only myself.

In a foul, low-ceilinged room where pungent chemicals ate the silver off old mirror shards—the metal flakes were caught in

sieves and sold by the gram—I paid the old man in residence a brass penny to let me harvest food from his balcony. Between the cliffs fell sheets of warm rain, hazing the yellow light. The water drooled off a distant overhang, splashing onto the fragrant leaves.

Squatting to watch the rain fall, I peeled and ate a fist-sized melon. The rind sailed down, to be scraped off a tract, brushed off a shoulder, washed through a gutter down to the basal lands. There, the books said, copper-skinned farmers grew food of all kinds under sunlamps powered by falling water. It was there, one day, that my own body would fall after being heaved over the tract. I shook the water out of my hair As I stood in the doorway searching my pouch for another coin that might loosen the old man's tongue if he knew of the Inhibition, an officer of the Motor King stepped into the room.

He was young with blushing cheeks and a thatch of black hair squirming to be free of his lieutenant's cap. The old man sat in a rusting chair, a cloth breathing mask over his mouth, and the officer knelt to speak with him. I clipped the pouch shut and strode quickly by him, heart pounding against the dagger nestled under my arm. I nodded good day. He raised his cap, grinning a stupid, good-natured smile, and moved out of my way. My mouth was too dry to thank him.

In the mirrors outside, my face was white. Haggard pouches huddled under my eyes. Looking like a war refugee was likely to get me arrested, so I composed my face until I resembled a happy, footloose vagrant—the kind of man who was just passing through because *passing through* was how he preferred to live.

As I climbed, I noticed the mirrors giving way to the telltales of the Motor Kingdom. Bundles of cable hugged the walls. Dark lenses watched from the ceiling; metal ears listened. I was so absorbed in these sights that I didn't notice the footsteps behind me.

“Good day,” the young officer said, falling into step with me as I rounded a spiral staircase. He introduced himself as Terrence, a lieutenant in the Motor King's occupational force. I called myself Walter, origin unspecified, occupation flexible. I told him I was just passing through his fine country; I hoped I had not trespassed.

“Oh no,” he assured me, “you're quite welcome here.”

“Well that's a happy surprise.”

In his plump youthful face, his brown eyes were thoughtful. He looked about to say something grave, but it seemed at the last moment he changed his mind. He looked around us at the spiralling staircase, remarking that it swept up in a counter-clockwise fashion, giving the advantage to the

attacking force rather than the defenders. “A strange design, don’t you think?”

“Only if you live upstairs.”

He chuckled as we mounted the last step. There a doorway opened onto a small barren room. An automaton, receiving motive power from the cables bracketed to the ceiling, polished ball bearings. The pudgy young woman overseeing it was so desperately bored that her face crumpled with disappointment when we declined to stay and talk. Terrence examined the cases of polished bearings, writing the figures into a chart he carried. Then we continued upstairs.

I accompanied Terrence along his entire work route. I made up stories about my travels and my origins in a fictional province of the Optic lands, while he recounted the dry details of his life as a lieutenant-inspector in the low-level components industry. Cogs, gears, ball bearings and springs: he seemed to know everything about them. He spoke warmly about his ambition to move into the high-level sector, where whole machines were assembled for shipping and sale. I asked him about the war, hoping to find out whether Nadia had been captured. Unfortunately he knew little except as it pertained to manufacturing.

And so together we hiked up through the gyrys, visiting workshops and factories. Some were little rooms housing only

a single machine. Others were larger workshops like those in the Mirror Palace, with dozens of workers moving in unison. In all of them, Terrence wrote down production totals. A few times, with a mischievous smirk, he falsified lower figures.

In every workshop, great or small, the bundles of wire sprouted from holes in the ceiling, feeding power to the automata and collecting information via mesh ears and bead-like glass eyes.

“Is this a primary region?” I whispered to Terrence. We were climbing a cramped stairwell with neither human nor metal ears in sight.

“It is now.” He fingered an insulated cable bracketed to the wall. “The king had the lower parts of the country wired to prepare for the war. Now that the Mirror Kingdom has fallen, he’ll have that wired into the primary region, too.”

“You seem to know a lot about it,” I said hopefully.

“I make it my business.” Smiling, he put a finger to his lips.

We stood aside as a team of technicians in brown uniforms approached. They passed us on the narrow landing, saluting Terrence as they squeezed by. A pair of young soldiers followed, lugging a giant spool of white cable. When their footsteps echoed below us, I returned Terrence’s smile. I’d found a friend in the Inhibition.

But as we continued upward, my thoughts turned to Nadia and her madness for vengeance. It was hopeless now. For decades, since the reign of King Stefan's grandfather if not before, the very anatomy of the Motor lands had been a tool of the state hierarchy. Engineers strung miles of cable, connecting the centers of manufacturing to the great dynamos at the Motor Palace on top of the gyros. Not only did this put the machinery under state control, but the wires carried extra channels for optic and audio data. They allowed the Motor King and his corps of cerebromancers to monitor any of the so-called primary regions. If the Motor Kingdom was already incorporating the Mirror lands into its network, Nadia had no hope of retaking them. A surprise attack on the Mirror Palace, a slim hope already, simply could not succeed.

And so, as I followed Terrence through echoing factories and tiny workshops, I inwardly gave up on helping Nadia with her ambitions. It was a burden I was glad to be rid of. Not since the attack, I realized with some surprise, had I cared whether she ever wore a crown again. If she'd been captured, then Terrence and his co-conspirators might help me free her. If not, I would leave the gyros and leave Nadia to pursue her own happiness.

She would probably never find it, but I think happiness was never her intention, anyway.

* * *

At the end of the day, Terrence led me onto a tract miles above the Mirror Palace, in what appeared to be a farm of sorts just outside the Motor heartland. The sky was darkening: through the narrow slots around the uncountable layers of tract, faint indigo light fell to glimmer darkly on the valvework cliffs. Instead of serving as a highway, like the one fronting the Mirror Palace, this road was the site of a sleepy, free-standing village. Structures clapped together from metal scrap stood ramshackle on the wide road. Rickety bridges rattled as factory workers returned home from their shifts. All around the dark houses and up to the edges grew lush grass, vegetable plots, white mushrooms and melons. The place was speckled with grazing goats, serenely unaware of their future.

Soon we sat in a taproom where electric lights traced the rims of our mugs. My thighs ached like they hadn't for years, and even this warm beer—too yeasty by far—felt wonderful as it flowed down my throat. From the patrons' covert looks at me, and from the way those looks melted when they landed on Terrence, I understood this place was friendly to the Inhibition. Men hunched over their drinks at the other tables, gossiping in low voices.

“I’ve never seen a place like this,” I said. Like everyone, I thought, I’d always lived in the rooms hollowed out of the gyri, the chambers inhabited since time immemorial.

Terrence smiled at me. “It helps control what kind of people come in.” I looked around. Apart from the fact that they were all men, the clientele seemed undistinguished. However, I saw none of the Motor King’s lenses here, nor the steel mesh balls that picked up audio signals.

Food arrived—a platter heaped with goat meat and pickled melon, cheese, mushrooms, leafy vegetables. I ate with gusto. Once my hunger subsided, I tried again to draw Terrence out on the battle—how it had gone, and whether anyone of note had been captured.

“Of course, you would have come through there,” he said.

I shrugged. “I’m not the type that armies concern themselves with.”

He looked at me kindly. An exile, or homeless. An object of pity. “You must have concerned somebody once.”

“Let’s say that somebody concerned me.”

“Hmmm.” He drank with his eyes closed, as if kissing the glass. The scanty remains of the foam bobbed lower. I imagined he was thinking of the women who’d concerned him—or of the men. With that intuition, a mirror came to life in my head. Our day together must have looked very different from his side of it.

I was an unattached man, lonely, and obviously in search of a bed for the night. I wondered if he knew of the Inhibition at all.

Terrence smiled at me. “We did win, of course.” On the copper table veined with verdigris, his fingers unconsciously traced a network. “The King was planning on victory, which means the factories were, too. So if we lost, the factories would be the first to know about it— we’d have to change up production schedules, free up workers to restock the army...” He shook his head. “Complications I don’t need.”

“There are always complications,” I said. “Believe me.”

“Now more than ever,” he replied.

I questioned him with a look.

“It’s all anyone’s talking about. The war’s been won, and how is the King celebrating? He’s getting married tomorrow! It’s a nightmare. Everyone’s going to want a day off—

“Terrence, listen to me. Is it the Mirror Queen?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve been through this way before,” I explained. “There was a queen or a duchess in that little country who fed me once. She was young. I’d like to know what’s happened to her, if she survived.”

“I’m sure I could find out for you.”

I rewarded him with a smile.

Beaming, he ordered more drinks, and more, until the night ended on the narrow mattress of his little officer's cabin. I didn't resist as he undressed me, nor did I comfort him when he then fell back, aghast. I lit the lamp calmly, found my trousers, and put them on again. "It was in the Mirror Queen's service," I said, "that I was rendered a eunuch."

He turned his face from the lamplight. "I'm so sorry."

I shook my head. *Sorry*. That day was the proudest of my life. I knelt before Nadia—she was a princess then—and swore that I would always serve her, always protect her. And even though she herself had betrayed that trust by abandoning me on the stairwell landing, I had enough honor to protect her still, if not to serve.

But what did Terrence know of honor? Instead of telling him of that day, I found myself cradling his head as he sobbed and sobbed on my chest. "While we were together in the taproom," he said, sniffing, "all I could think of was how lucky you were. Not to be a cog in the Motor. Clicking through the same motions day after day."

"I think you've done pretty well, actually."

He sneered. "I thought Lafferty was doing well, until he jumped."

"Was Lafferty... close to you?"

"Ha! No. He was my boss. He had this job before me."

“Goodness.”

In the gentle course of our lives we think of war as an aberration. A battle is talked about for generations after: the dents in the walls are shown to children. How short, then, must be the lives of the men and nations who comprise our minds. Every decision we make is the outcome of a civil war. And just as in a rebellion there's no way to know which side will win, nor even what values they truly stand for, until the fighting ends and the new monarch is crowned. A war must have raged at a level below my attention, because the winning idea sprang up as if from nothing.

I tilted Terrence's head by the chin. “Listen to me. I'm the Mirror Queen's cerebromancer. I'm the only servant she has left in the world. If she's been captured, I must know. You said you could find out the bride's identity. Can you do that for me?”

I wanted to tell him I didn't care about his comfortable boredom, not when I'd lost my home and my queen only two days before. But of course to him his own crisis was greater. I'd lost the world I loved, but he'd never had one.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“If the Motor King has her, then I'll kill him.”

He wiped sweat from his suddenly much paler brow.

“It won’t be safe, of course. But if you want to, you could come with me.”

“I—” he said, “I don’t know about this.”

I reached into my pack and brought out my dagger, which caused him to jump backwards. Then I took out an apple and peeled it. “I can save you from the life you hate,” I said. “That does not make us lovers; it makes us friends. Would you like a snack?”

I let him kiss me. Just once. We stayed up planning for hours; then we slept side-by-side, foot to head and head to foot, like travelers at a crowded inn. The whispery grinding of factory work kept me awake for hours. But Terrence slept soundly, and in the morning we set out.

* * *

When we rose, Terrence could not stop smiling at me. We stepped out onto his comically small balcony—there was barely room for the two of us—and he pointed high above at some crenellations poking out of the cliff face. “Those balconies overlook the tract closest to the Motor Palace. They’re open to officers and lower nobility.” In our late-night planning session I’d described my vision in as much as detail as I remembered: the wide tract cleared for the parade, the richly-dressed raining blue flowers on the royal couple, the clear view of the Motor King.

Terrence explained to me that being an officer in the occupational zone—even an industrial officer—entitled him to military privileges. We planned to meet at the balcony I'd seen in my vision. Terrence would spend the day making inquiries, and if the bride was indeed Nadia then he would use his rank to obtain a precision rifle, ostensibly for a day of marksmanship practice. He would give the rifle to me, and I would assassinate the Motor King once he'd taken his vows. By the laws of this country, Nadia would inherit the monarchy. If she wasn't strangled by an ambitious courtier then she would have her throne. She would no longer be my problem, and I could depart with a clean conscience.

If Terrence showed up without the rifle, it would mean Nadia was not the bride. We would strike out for other lands. We'd settle far away, ideally in another gyros, and do our best to live peacefully. Terrence loaned me a spare uniform. He watched me with disconcerting quiet as I changed into it, and pecked my cheek before leaving.

I hiked alone up narrow stairs, chewing a hard crust of bread and a few prunes as I went. In the factories, pistons throbbed like hearts, and gears ground their teeth slick with oil. The scent of motor grease was ubiquitous, the gnashing of machinery a muted roar. Where the doorways down below had opened into little nooks of odd size—humble workshops

holding a single automaton—here every room was a vast hall stretching farther than I could see. Rank upon rank of men and women worked in synchronous motion, welding components, lowering presses, riveting, oiling, cutting, drilling. Everywhere I saw the palsied hand of King Stefan at work. In the walls I could all but hear his whispered words, multiplying out to the ends of his dominion.

Such thoughts reminded me of my vision, the effects of which were fast reshaping my life and Nadia's. If I survived this day, and King Stefan didn't, then my vision would affect the whole world. And the Great Being only knew what it meant for Nadia, and what she in turn would do to the world. I found myself wishing I'd never entered her service. Would this kingdom be any happier with her on its throne than King Stefan?

When I arrived at the top of the gyros, soldiers had already blocked off the tract. Here I stared up and marveled at a sight I'd only read of in books: the cliffs went up—and ended. Far above them the stripes of light I'd learned to call *sky* swelled into a blue infinity. The sun was a jewel of painful brilliance. Pillows of white gas boiled in slowed motion; birds wheeled in flocks of thousands.

Above them, most magnificent of all, turned another world. The roofs of its gyri, glass and metal, flared in the

sunlight. The sulci, narrow dark canyons, wrinkled the globe like an ancient face. An alien god tumbled through the sky, about as large as my fist at arm's length.

And under these marvels what did the Motor subjects do? They went about their business, diverting wagons laden with goods into smaller tunnels through the gyros, allowing in war machines for the coming parade, smoking cigarettes and cracking wise.

I wandered among the traffic until I found Terrence, looking morose. He handed me a slim, heavy briefcase, and together we looked through the balconies until we found one with blue-blossomed vines climbing the walls. Just as in my vision, the seating was divided into private boxes. Sheet-metal walls sectioned off seats in groups of half a dozen. Most of their gates bore fluttering tags indicating a reservation, but Terrence found an unreserved box, ducked into a nearby office, and claimed it.

Inside, he leaned against the door while I assembled the rifle, checked the magazine, and tested the telescopic sight. In my vision, the bride and the Motor King passed at a stately pace—she on foot and he in his arachnoid truss. This box should afford me a fine angle of fire.

There was nothing left to do but wait. Terrence leaned forward to point at a tall, slender spire sprouting from a distant

bluff. “The Motor Palace,” he said, “under that tower.” I squinted. Tiny windows glimmered. I couldn’t tell where the palace began or ended: like the Mirror Palace, it was just a cluster of rooms partitioned off from the rest of the gyrus for easy defense.

But somewhere behind one of those little windows, Nadia was either being crowned Motor Queen or executed.

* * *

Wheels rumbled. Bootsteps snapped in unison, quaking the ground. Laughter and footfalls had filled the other boxes, and now in front of us we saw the tops of officers’ caps and their ladies’ towering coiffures.

Cheers swelled—and what could I do but join?—when a gleaming war machine rolled by. The spirit of the crowd, or maybe the interminable wait, helped to calm my anxiety. In an hour, possibly less, I might be dead. Spent, like so many others, by Nadia’s lust for glory. I’d always recognized the monarchy for what it was, yet I’d still given it my loyalty. Only now, imagining the crack of the rifle, did I wonder, *Is it worth dying for?*

The crowd’s cheering rose to a distant roar. I felt it grow, like a distant wave traveling towards me. “The Motor King,” Terrence whispered in my ear.

“Then go,” I said. His eyes were wet, and the roar of the crowd swelled closer, slowly, as if it were tracking the King’s progress. “Go,” I said, and Terrence went. Then I worked the rifle’s bolt: the first cartridge, like a golden tooth, slid into the breech. I raised the rifle, setting the scope to my right eye.

In the telescopic sight there were fine crosshairs, which presently alighted on the head of an obese, gray-haired general. He passed, followed at length by a train of soldiers. Then, like figures in a mirror, the royal couple crawled into the scope’s view. *How odd*, I thought, as I pulled the trigger and King Stefan toppled. *He must have gotten a new truss; he is taller than her.*

I manipulated the bolt to eject the shell. My hands seemed to work of their own volition, while my mind was far away. I relived in an instant Nadia’s abandonment of me. I recalled her self-pitying tears and the good men who had died—as I would die, most likely. My hands did their work efficiently, and only when the scope was again at my eye did I understand how completely I hated her.

I squeezed the trigger, sending her down in a cloud of blood.

* * *

I remember little of what followed. Everything collapsed into pandemonium. The balcony of blue flowers erupted in

screams. I threw down the rifle and ran into the promenade, where yelling throngs poured in from every doorway. Soldiers ran about, shouting. Somehow, they recognized me despite my uniform. They must have beaten me, because my vision went black.

I awoke in some kind of medical ward: ugly and functional with clean tiles gleaming. In a mirror opposite my bed I saw my own face: bruised, gaunt, pale, and hairless. In place of my scalp there was gleaming steel; in place of my hair, needles ending in wires. I was wearing an urchin crown, just like the Motor King's.

My hands were strapped to the sides of the bed, presumably to keep me from killing myself by pushing the needles in. The wires were bound into a cable that disappeared into a hole in the far wall. So they were monitoring me, which meant they knew I was conscious. And yes, as soon as I'd taken stock of myself the steel door squeaked open.

I heard quiet voices: one asking questions, another answering. I don't think I was truly afraid until I heard the metal legs ticking on tiles. The door screeched wider and King Stefan entered.

As in his portraits, he wore a gauzy white shirt like a hospital garment. On his head—or rather, replacing the top of it—was the urchin crown. Otherwise he was naked, although

his trunk disappeared so completely into the metal truss that it was hard to say how much of a lower body he had. His skin was chalk-pale and utterly hairless. When he spoke, only the right half of his face moved.

“Are you comfortable?”

“What?”

“I said, are you comfortable?”

He spoke in a whispering sort of croak, a deathbed voice. Palsied and stammering, half-paralyzed, he seemed more fit for a sickbed than I. With his good hand he reached forward, spider legs stretching, and pulled the sheet down over my body. Bruises lumped my flesh; my left leg was an unrecognizable pulp encased in blood-soaked bandages. From the crook of my elbow sprouted a thin, clear tube, pumping in food syrup or medicine.

“I never meant this to happen,” he said, as if excusing himself. “She asked me to spare you, as much as possible. I told my guards to try.”

“She?” I said. “Queen Nadia?”

The Motor King nodded. “The couple you killed were stand-ins. They trained years for this day and gave their lives willingly.”

I shook my head. “Nadia will be a good wife to you.”

He smiled—a one-sided sneer. “I could’ve taken the bullet myself. Do you think I’m afraid of that? But the whole kingdom would have collapsed. Anarchy, famines. My cerebromancers have heard it.”

I dismissed this with a wave of the hand.

“You doubt me?”

How couldn’t I, when he was clearly at death’s door already? The Motor King was a different man from the one I’d heard stories of: a weaker man. The king of legend would never have tolerated that dismissive gesture. Yet a kernel of arrogance remained: if he truly cared about his subjects, he would have stepped down in favor of a healthier king.

Which made perfect sense. I leaned forward. “Was your invasion a pretext to install Nadia as your successor?”

His face sparkled with amusement. “No.”

“Then what?”

He paused, as if dredging something complex from memory. Then, as if catching it, he leaned out the door and spoke. Minutes later, a pair of porters came in holding a small table and, on top of it, a recording device of some kind. A long scroll of paper stretched over its top, and many armatures tipped with graphite rested on the clean white surface.

One of the porters picked up the cable from my urchin crown and plugged it into the machine. At once the machine

sprang to life. The paper rolled smoothly while the pencils jittered, tracing jagged lines.

“What do you think cerebromancy is?” the Motor King asked.

I looked at the machine. “To be frank with you, I don’t care anymore.”

He didn’t seem to be listening. He turned off drawing machine and examined the roll of paper.

“I used to think of it in terms of telling the future,” I said. “But look where that’s brought me. As far as I’m concerned, cerebromancy is useless.”

“That is gravely wrong,” he murmured, scanning the paper, “though I can see why you’d think it.” He unclipped the scroll and showed it to me. About thirty rows of gray lines zig-zagged across the paper. “Every fluctuation in a line,” he said, “records a transaction between two citizens of your brain. Which two—” he ran a hand over the needles piercing his own crown— “depends on where the needle strikes. Now look here.” He showed me a part of the scroll where several of the lines narrowed into sharp, precisely aligned peaks. After that, they dissolved into chaotic jaggedness.

“This surge in communication,” he said, indicating the jaggedness, “occurs when you speak. And this—” he pointed to

the precisely aligned peaks— “occurs just before you decide to speak. In fact it *is* your decision to speak.”

“What does it matter, though?” I said. “Of real consequence is *what* is said, how it affects people. Can lines on a scroll feed anyone? What do they mean to the creatures occupying my skull, who died when the needles were put in?”

He replied with his sneering smile. “The men in your skull, like those in the world, are of little consequence. The system is what matters. But this is the point: the invasion wasn’t about wealth or territory. It wasn’t about Nadia. It was *this*.”

And he pointed again at the scroll, at the point in my brain activity where I’d decided to speak. “Really, it was about mirrors. In the human brain, mirrors are a metaphor: there are beings in your brain who allow us to understand other people’s intentions and feelings. In order to speak, those ‘mirrors’ must be yoked to the muscle control centers—the so-called motor system—for the mouth and voicebox. We call them that because in reality they aren’t metaphors: the Great Being is indeed about to speak, and for this to happen mirrors are needed. That, Daniel, and no other reason, is why the Motor lands had to conquer the Mirror.”

I shook my head. It was insane. War for defense, war for glory and conquest—these things I could understand. But going to war for the Great Being, who neither knew nor cared of our

existence? It was too much for my fatigued mind to grasp. “I don’t understand,” I said, yawning. My limbs felt heavy. Numbness spread from the tube in my arm. I heard the Motor King speak to a doctor on his way out.

When I awoke, my ruined leg had been cut away. A steel limb was bolted into my hip.

* * *

The doctor who taught me to walk again was a quiet man with the tea-colored skin of a surface-dweller. He exuded the tang of alcohol. It was nothing like gin or melonwine, but like the solvents used to clean glass. He wore a paper mask over his mouth and a cloth cap over his silver hair. He never told me his name.

I found the false leg strangely easy to accept. I knew I was marking time until my execution, which would surely come when the Motor King offered me a place in his service and I refused. For the same reason, I no longer worried about my role in the Great Being’s cognition. I had myself, my own experiences, and that was enough.

When the doctor came in I sat up and greeted him warmly. Here was another being, as complex as a whole world. With little time left, what gave me comfort was to savor each speck of experience: the gray mortar between the wall tiles, the sheets crisp against my skin. I confess too that it gave me a grim

satisfaction to be alone in my understanding. Nadia bent all her efforts to greater acquisition; the Motor King saw people as signals, pencil traces of information. Only I perceived the core truth of existence.

So, as much as possible, I tried to enjoy my final days. I submitted humbly to the doctor's care. He plugged the cable from my urchin crown into a socket on the back of the new leg's thigh. Then he asked me to try moving.

"But there's nothing to move," I said. My left leg was gone. The nerves were cut.

The doctor answered patiently. "I didn't say to move it. I said to *try* moving it."

I tried.

"Try flexing the knee."

I tried again, and this time the metal leg twitched, kicked slightly.

"Again."

He drove me through hours of exhausting practice. By the end, I was using that metal leg almost as though it were my own: bending the knee, turning the lower part—even clenching the clawed foot, which had more in common with a hand.

I had no concept of day or night anymore, but I guessed it was about a week before I could walk with confidence. The

rhythm of walking with one metal leg and one flesh unnerved me at first, but I soon grew used to it.

When I heard the boot soles thumping the floor outside, I rose to open the door. King Stefan, fist poised to knock, looked me up and down with approval. “Walk with me,” he said. I tugged on a linen hospital shirt and stepped out into the echoing, white-walled corridor. A pair of guards followed close behind.

I quickly noticed that I wasn’t in a hospital at all. Nor was I in prison, precisely. The scent of alcohol was strong and every surface spotless, as one would expect in a medical ward. But the doors were heavy with external bolts. Armed guards were posted everywhere. Through the occasional window I saw shackled men wearing urchin crowns. In each room, a cerebromancer dressed as a doctor commanded the prisoner: some of them were writing with chalk; others were reading or speaking or solving some puzzle with their hands. One silver-capped face turned to me in anguish. We walked past.

“Have you thought about what I said?” the Motor King asked. “About the greater meaning of cerebromancy?”

I shook my head. “I’m finished with cerebromancy. I spent a decade reading visions for Nadia, and for what? To keep her on a throne she didn’t deserve? To advise her on getting the

best return for the lives of her men? No, I'm done. Kill me if your laws demand it, but I'm done."

I expected to die shortly—to arrive at an execution site where King Stefan would lecture me again about cerebromancy, a veiled offer to join his service. Instead, he said softly, "As a matter of fact you're going to be exiled." He saw my expression. "It surprises me, too, frankly."

It had to be Nadia. Only a queen's command could justify such expensive treatment for an exile. For King Stefan, it would have been less trouble to send me off one-legged, or to keep me prisoner in this hellish research clinic of his.

We reached the end of the hall, a door of thick steel flanked by a further pair of guards. We waited there while they recited a complicated series of salutes, credentials and pass-codes, convincing those at the exit that this was indeed the king and not one of his doubles.

King Stefan said, "I imagine you've often wondered about the citizens of your own brain. How do they live? What sensations, dreams, desires do they have?"

I nodded.

"My cerebromancers tell me that the Great Being wonders the same thing. They tell me that this... *conversion* of yours—this notion that individuals have some value—is the first embodiment of this fancy. The Great Being will speak of this

idea, and—" he coughed— "after some coaxing from my queen, it seems that you are to be the message."

At last, the two sentries were satisfied. One of them pushed a button. The heavy door slid away.

"Darling!" the king cried.

"My *love!*" squealed Queen Nadia, standing in the small room that was revealed. She wore a gemmed, brocaded cloak. A pair of guards flanked her. The Motor King scuttled forward, sweeping her into a one-armed embrace. She bent slightly to kiss his cheek, then cast a stage grimace and wink at me.

"Daniel," she smiled warmly, inviting me into the little parlor as if it had been years, not days, since we'd seen each other. As if instead of leaving me to seek her own glory she'd simply fallen out of touch, as old friends occasionally do. As if she didn't know I'd shot her double in the head.

I stepped inside. The door slid shut behind me. Some distant mechanism creaked into motion, cables groaned, and I felt my legs press into the floor as the room ascended. "I suppose I should thank you," I said.

"I never forget my friends, Daniel."

"Your *friends*." I shook my head. "I thank you again, Nadia, but I'm not your friend." I pointed to my leg. "You did this, and worse, to countless men. You abandoned me for your

own ambition when it suited you! How can you look me in the eyes and smile?”

We must have been deep within the gyrus—as deep as the old Mirror Palace—for the room continued to rise. For the first time since the invasion, my body felt buoyant, even light. I whirled on King Stefan. “And you! You spend people like coins, and what does it gain you? You’re dying, you know, and your own wife—” A cold dagger touched my throat. The guard had moved with such furtive purpose that I hadn’t noticed him until he was on me.

Nadia waved him back. “Have you understood nothing, Daniel? If you want to condemn injustice, look into your own skull. Do you think, if you lost a finger or stopped using a foreign language, the patch of your brain devoted to it would go on living in peace? Of course not. Its neighbors would invade, enslave the inhabitants. Would you cut the evil out of your own cortex, then? You disappoint me.”

I said nothing. I was leaving this world, if I could believe the Motor King; and if I couldn’t believe him then I was about to die. Nothing I said to them would matter. My body felt lighter still as the room ascended, unnaturally so. My shirt *floated* around me; the cable along my back bobbed in the air like a rope in water.

“I forgot to ask you,” Nadia said to her husband, “did he ever ask about his friend Terrence?”

“He never did,” the Motor King answered, with mock sadness. “We looked in on Terrence in the research clinic, and Daniel didn’t even recognize him.”

In a single moment, my pretense of enlightenment fell to pieces. I’d renounced all I had: my position, my loyalties, even my faith. If I’d still held onto anything in this world, it was my certainty that at least I had saved Terrence from a fate like mine. That had been my secret, the one thing Stefan could never take from me.

“What a shame,” Nadia said.

“That’s plain to see on his face,” Stefan remarked. As if imparting a valuable lesson, he said to me, “Hold onto that shame, Daniel. Treasure it. Think of the *worth* that Terrence has for you: quite apart from its place in the Great Being’s mind, his life means something in itself. I confess I don’t understand it. But if the Great Being finds it so interesting, I urge you to speak of it as you make your way in the new world.”

That was goodbye. The moving parlor ground to a halt, the door opened, and I saw that instead of moving up through the gyros we’d been ascending the tall spire atop the Motor Palace.

The guards took me out onto the balcony at the spire’s tip. My body felt weightless and I was given a rope to clip myself to

the handrails.

Far below, the wrinkled land was a patchwork of glimmers and shadows. Albatrosses and gulls spiraled. Clouds shrank back from the sun. A giant mirror in the shape of a bowl, ten times the span of my body, occupied a platform at the end of the balcony. I was left sitting under it with a bag of dried fruit and a skin of water.

At this weightless altitude, I felt the sunlight as a faint pressure against my face, like wind.

Hours passed before the sun caught my mirror.

Then the whole platform shuddered—startled birds took flight—and broke away into the sky. Up I sailed, away from my dwindling world, into exile.

Copyright © 2010 T.F. Davenport

[Comment on this Story](#) in the *BCS* Forums

T.F. Davenport lives in southern California where he is working on a doctorate in cognitive science. In his spare time he would be writing science fiction, were it not for the minor impediment of having no spare time at all. By some miracle,

he has stories forthcoming in GUD and the fiction column of Nature.

**Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies**

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

COVER ART

“Chinese Steampunk Village,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste has been an Art Director on Videogames and Cinematics for over seven years; he worked at Ubisoft on such licenses as Assassin's Creed. He won a VES Award in 2006 for his work on Prince of Persia and the Two Thrones. He currently works as Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts Montreal. View his gallery at www.rafael-lacoste.com.



This file is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 U.S. license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/). You may copy and share the file so long as you retain the attribution to the authors, but you may not sell it and you may not alter it or partition it or transcribe it.