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[“Fleurs du Mal,” by J. Kathleen Cheney](#)

[“As Below, So Above,” by Ferrett Steinmetz](#)

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FLEURS DU MAL

by J. Kathleen Cheney

“Where did you meet her?” I spoke loudly to be heard over the crush in the place, and then had to repeat my query as Jeremy hadn’t heard me the first time.

Understanding lit my brother’s weary features, and he gave me what he must have considered a wolfish grin. “Why, here, Bertrand. At *Le Boeuf*. At one of Nicolas’ parties.”

I shook my head and surveyed the smoky room. In the four years since it opened in ‘22, *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* had become a gathering spot for a ‘fast and loose’ crowd. Jeremy would have been an easy target, laughably innocent compared to the type who frequented this sort of place.

The nightclub’s denizens reminded me of nothing so much as a horde of desperate butterflies, all flitting about a handful of glowing flowers. A few would be satisfied, but most would starve and die. And the seductive blooms? They would be fulfilled, serviced by the abundant insects’ cravings.

I couldn’t help seeing my younger brother as one of those starving creatures. He looked ill, his dinner jacket hanging loosely across his broad shoulders. He’d lost a great deal of

weight. Father paid Jeremy's bills, so he wasn't in dun territory, and I doubted that my brother—once an athlete at university—would turn to the false comfort of the cocaine or morphine that flowed so freely here. I had no simple explanation for his decline.

Mother had actually dispatched me forth, worried by the tenor of Jeremy's letters. Promising my superiors at the Royal Botanical Gardens a side trip to Berlin to visit with Dr. Baur regarding his recent work with pelargoniums, I'd been given leave to visit Paris to check on my brother.

Recalling that charge, I frowned at him and yelled. "Do you come to this place regularly?"

Jeremy didn't answer but gazed past my shoulder as if he saw his salvation there. I turned, and spotted his Anne returning.

The notes of a tango slid through the voices of the crowd, and Anne Dubourg moved with it, gliding through the close-set tables. Under a dark cloche hat, one blonde curl showed on her forehead. Her shapeless dress revealed little of her figure, but her breasts—larger than fashionable, I noted—swayed as she walked. Her hips writhed under the silk.

Jeremy rose stiffly, like an old man, and pulled out a chair for her. He leaned down to kiss her as she sat. She looked away demurely, whispering, "*Pas sur la bouche.*"

Not on the mouth. How I'd been able to hear that over the crowd, I didn't know. It was more as if her voice had come into my head through some avenue other than my ears.

Jeremy complied, pressing a fevered kiss to her ivory cheek rather than her lips. Her blue eyes flicked upward and met mine, a pained look in them as if she were embarrassed to receive such a salute in public. A demure flower, I decided, which had the same goal as any other flower. The violet wanted the same thing as the tiger lily.

Jeremy sat again, and Anne smiled at him and patted his hand. The tango grew louder and the smoke whirled about us as we worked through the second course, our voices almost impossible to hear above the din. The truffled eggs were too rich for me, so I watched my brother eat, noting with some satisfaction that he devoured the entire selection before him. He wolfed down his lamb chop as well, although he bypassed the peas, having always had a dislike for his greens.

The deserts were pedestrian and, afterwards, I was more than happy to leave the stifling atmosphere of the club to make our way along the *rue Boissy-d'Anglas*. The night was still young. Chattering people passed us on the street, likely heading off to scandalous pursuits. Automobiles trundled by, and I turned away from their headlamps to spare my eyes.

I looked at Anne instead. She clung to Jeremy's arm with one hand as we walked, her hips swaying as if she still heard a tango in the night air. I couldn't decide what to make of her attachment to him. *He is far out of his league*, I thought, *my trusting little brother*.

Anne's eyes fixed on me then, the look in them not innocent at all. Her strawberry lips pursed as if blowing me a kiss. "You must come visit my home."

"Yes, Bertrand, come," Jeremy inserted, apparently oblivious to his paramour's defection. "It's a lovely house."

I agreed, thinking I might find some leverage there to ease Jeremy out of her grip.

We walked through the traffic past *Boulevard Haussman* and then turned onto a side street whose name I didn't catch. Houses crowded onto each other, most three or fours stories tall. Along our path I saw window boxes full of faded flowers—colors leached by the night, but I recognized their shapes even in the darkness: pelargonium, lobelia, petunia, and verbenas. Under a streetlight, I caught a flash of red in the petals of a hybrid musk rose which, no doubt, Pemberton would find fascinating. I made a mental note to come back later in the daylight and ask a cutting of the homeowner.

Anne produced a jingling bunch of keys from her purse and led us up the steps of one of the houses. Once inside, she

showed us to an elegant sitting room on the first floor. Like her, it was outfitted in the most current style, all straight lines and geometric shapes. Two spare-looking chaises waited on either side of a low black table, a Japanese tea service on a small stand to one side. An open book lay next to the delicately painted cups and pot.

“Please sit down,” Anne said.

I did so, and watched her settle next to Jeremy on the other chaise. One leg slid along the other, and for the first time I noticed a tattoo on the inside of her shapely calf, visible through her fine beige stocking. A design of angel’s trumpet snaked its way up her leg and disappeared under the edge of her skirt. Pendulous blossoms in a pale color hung down, their edges curling upward. I knew though, as many do not, that angel’s trumpet is deadly poisonous.

“Jeremy tells me that you’re a botanist,” Anne said brightly.

My brother yawned, as he often did when the conversation turned away from himself.

I wondered what else he’d told her. “Yes.”

“And how does one make a living at that?” she asked. “Or do you?”

“I make an excellent living,” I said, and then added what I expected she wanted to know. “Although, as I’ll inherit all the

Everslee estates on our father's death, money isn't truly an issue."

She shifted closer to Jeremy. Her legs moved along each other again, setting off other thoughts in my mind, of skin against skin. "So what do you do, exactly?"

"I'm at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew," I said, "currently working on breeding new geranium cultivars."

Her eyes did not—as most women's would at that point—glaze over into a mask of polite attention. "How successful have you been?"

"Quite," I said. "I've created two new cultivars, and I have another line I hope to breed successfully this season."

"Breeding successfully is always important." The tip of her tongue appeared between her red lips.

My brother yawned again. "Bertrand, do stop going on about plants. You're boring us." He turned to her and added in an aside, "He likes plants better than his own family."

"No," Anne assured him, "I don't find it boring at all. I love plants."

She ran a hand along his cheek, and his head lolled against the high back of the chaise; he'd fallen asleep. That sent a frisson of warning down my spine. I didn't know how, but I felt certain she'd caused his sudden somnolence.

She turned back to me as if nothing unusual had happened. “Have you named one of your new cultivars for yourself?”

“Not yet. I haven’t yet produced one distinct enough that I want it to bear my name.”

I intended to choose carefully from among my botanical children. I wouldn’t have any human ones. None of my many affaires had produced a child, and although my wife Millicent had died in childbirth back in ‘18, it was clear that the stillborn child wasn’t mine. (I’d been long out on the front at the time, fighting for Home and Family for over a year. My younger brother, who’d been too young to interest the War Office but old enough for my young bride, had fallen under her spell. Unwilling to think her darling Jeremy capable of such moral weakness, Mother chose to believe a footman at fault instead, but Jeremy and I knew better.) Either way, my brother would have to carry on the family line, or the family’s fortunes would pass to a distant cousin on my own death.

Anne rose and held out a delicate hand to me. “Would you like to see my workroom? It’s up on the third floor, but I think you’ll find it worth the climb.”

I didn’t know if this was a euphemism, but either way I had nothing against accompanying her, whether to her

workroom or her bed. Either would serve my ends in prying my hapless brother free of her.

I followed her swaying hips up the narrow stairwell to the third floor. She took out her jangling keys and unlocked the first whitewashed door. Bright light streamed from the open doorway, produced by what looked like a dozen large lamps. I shielded my eyes until they adjusted. “They prefer darkness,” she told me. “They’ll still grow in the light, but slowly enough that I can judge the results.”

Inside the room, shelves lined the walls. Dozens of glass globes larger than a man’s head rested on them, each encasing what seemed to be a withered plant. I stepped over the threshold into the workroom, eyeing a single globe that rested on the wide worktable—a forcing glass of sorts, in which a bulbous plant grew without soil. The morphology of the plant, though, was one I didn’t recognize.

The ivory-fleshed bulb had the smooth, elongated shape of the Resurrection Lily (or Naked Lady, as they are sometimes called), but the leaf habit was wrong, more like the delicate fronds of the asparagus fern. The color of the leaf was peculiar as well, almost the tone of human flesh. At first I wondered if it might be a sculpture, intended to mock life, but then I saw the fronds move as if a wind reached them inside that glass. “What

are these?" I asked, turning my attention to the others lining the wall.

"I don't actually know what they're called," she said. In the small room, she stood close enough that I could smell her skin, the sweetness of lilies under the scent of smoke that lingered from the club. She lifted the globe from the table and set it on a bare spot on one of the shelves. While she held it, the fronds bent and writhed against the glass as if they sought the warmth of her touch.

I inspected the other globes, seeing inside each a similar growth. A few of the plants looked much like the one she'd had out on the table, although none were as large or as vigorous. "Where did they originate?"

"The original was a...gift," she said, "so I don't know."

Or she had no intention of telling me. I kept my hands behind me and peered at one of the more robust specimens. "And what does my brother think of these?"

She laughed dismissively. "Young Jeremy has never been past the first floor."

I was fairly certain that *was* a euphemism, but one can never tell with French girls. I'd learned that during the War. I turned and gazed down into her innocent face. "Are you lovers?"

“Ah, *les Anglais*,” she said in a despairing tone, shaking her head. “So blunt. No, we have not been. He is too young for my tastes.”

“Then why lead him on?”

She fingered my sleeve. “He is charming company. It is no more than that.”

Or more likely, she’d discovered Jeremy had an older brother who would inherit the family’s money. French is, sometimes, *not* difficult to understand. For a moment we regarded each other in heated silence. “Why do you grow these?” I finally asked.

“They are like my children,” she said.

“And you keep them caged like this, rather than in the soil where they belong?” When forced so, most bulbs would not survive coming into bloom, their strength depleted by that effort.

She stroked the globe of one of the sickly plants. The fronds inside followed the motion of her fingers, but feebly. “You work with hybrids, Bertrand,” she said, pronouncing my name in the French way so that it sounded soft and seductive. “You know many do not survive, and of those that do, many do not ever reach fruition.”

“It’s difficult to predict one’s results,” I said, “but given a sufficient number of trials, it isn’t impossible.”

She nodded. "I'm very selective which of these children of mine I allow to grow to maturity, so I start them here. Those that are successful, I move to proper...soil. The others should not be allowed to live."

"The weak ones?" I asked, thinking inadvertently of my brother. I felt disloyal then and pushed that thought aside.

"I fear they end in the incinerator," she said with an unapologetic shrug. "The strong survive."

I believed I understood her better then. "I am not easy prey," I told her.

She smiled wisely, those strawberry lips drawing up into a tight bow. "I never thought so."

"I want you to leave my brother alone."

She stroked one hand down my lapel. Her fingers slid to rest on my hip. "What would you give me in return?"

I set my hands about her waist and lifted her onto the worktable. The many lamps kept the room overwarm, and the table was hard, but I didn't intend to go looking for her bedroom when this was so much more convenient.

"Not on the lips," she whispered, as she had to my brother. She turned her head away when I tried to kiss her, but everything else was clearly acceptable to her.

* * *

In the morning my brother still lay on the sofa on the first floor, sleeping like the dead. It took some effort to wake him, but then I dragged him forth to his own flat.

I told him, of course, which not only made him angry with me but also caused him to swear off women altogether. “After Milly, I guess I deserved that,” he said in a resentful tone.

“Women are eternally fickle, little brother,” I said, and clapped him on the shoulder. I couldn’t help wondering how many of them would use him before he figured that out. “Your family is forever.”

I didn’t feel too sorry for him. Even so, I decided to stay in Paris to keep an eye on him, relegating my many projects at the Gardens to my assistant (a capable young man, but lacking in vision). Jeremy didn’t go back to Anne, which was the important part.

After a few bitter days, his spirits lifted and he seemed to have forgiven me. He actually got out his oils and sat on his rooftop, recreating the sunset on canvas. He’d not painted in weeks and expressed relief at getting back to his art.

For my part, I wrote letters to our mother and father and detailed instructions to my assistant. I tried not to think about those fascinating plants in Anne’s forcing globes or wonder about their origin. I tried not to recall how they had moved like

infants reaching to touch their mother's hands—or carnivorous plants seeking prey.

* * *

Visions of strawberry lips haunted my days, along with the smell of lilies. I spent the nights in my hotel room, sweating in my narrow bed, feeling the phantom slide of Anne's skin against mine, a siren's call just as potent as my curiosity about the bulbs in that workroom.

I expected Jeremy to improve but, despite rising spirits, he grew even gaunter under my watchful guardianship. He became listless, sitting unmoving before his canvas as if something sapped away his strength. His breathing grew increasingly shallow.

The doctor had no explanation for Jeremy's continued wasting—not tuberculosis, nor any other sickness he recognized. I suspected that if anyone knew what ailed Jeremy, it would be Anne Dubourg. After the doctor's visit I knew I would be going back to that apartment near *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*.

Following a trail I recognized only by the contents of the window boxes, I arrived at her house before the dinner hour. I expected to find Anne at home, preparing for an evening on the town. I stood on the steps for a moment, a shiver chasing itself

along my skin, feeling a sense of anticipation like catching the first scent of brandy after too long without.

She came to the door wearing her dressing gown, a silken affair with flowers painted on it, twining branches like the tattoo that snaked its way up the entire length of her leg. “Bertrand,” she said, affecting surprise. “Please come in, I’ve been hoping you would come to see me.”

“You knew I would.” I followed her inside and up the stairs to her dressing room. I leaned against her black-lacquered vanity table as she applied her lipstick, painting strawberry red over the plump flesh of her lips.

“What’s wrong with my brother?” I asked.

She sighed heavily and her eyes met mine in the mirror. “Ah, Bertrand, I am so sorry.”

“So you do know what’s wrong. What can I do?”

She turned and faced me. “There is nothing. The seed was sown weeks ago.”

I grabbed her arm and hauled her up from the boudoir chair. “What do you mean?”

A teardrop glistened in the corner of one eye. “What I said, Bertrand. The seed was sown. I have no way to take it back.”

I held her close to me, trying to see past her façade of innocence. This close I could smell her skin, the heady scent of lilies this time not masked by smoke. My body recalled that

fragrance, tightening in anticipation, but I forced my thoughts away from that. “What seed?”

“You only choose the best specimens for breeding, *n’est ce pas*? Jeremy was vigorous and young, which gave promise of a healthy fruit. The seed was planted. It must have nourishment to form a bulb, so it takes from the body in which it grows. It is the way of life.”

I thrust her away, horrified. She fell against the vanity table but didn’t cringe as if afraid of me. Instead, she turned knowing eyes on me.

“The way of life?” I asked. “It sounds more like the way of death.”

“I can make him comfortable here, for what time is left. Do you want him to suffer?” She reached a hand toward me.

I batted it away. She clearly believed Jeremy was as good as dead. Having witnessed his continued decline, I didn’t have much doubt myself. “What can I do to help him?” I demanded anyway.

She shook her head sadly. “There is nothing. I swear.”

I considered wringing her neck, but that wouldn’t help. “I’m not leaving until you tell me exactly what you did to him.”

“But I did tell you,” she said. “The seed was planted, Bertrand. When it comes to fruition, I’ll retrieve the bulb. Once in my workshop, I can determine if the growth is healthy.”

And I wondered if her selection of Jeremy as her victim might not have had some deeper significance, if she might not have known about *me* all along. “Why?”

“If anyone would understand the process, it should be you.” She stroked my chest, which I knew for an invitation. “I can only allow the most successful of my children to be planted again. So after I harvest the bulb, I have to watch them carefully.”

“Planted again?” I repeated, feeling dazed. I could not seem to focus with her scented skin so close.

“Just as I am, in this body,” she said. “I pass my seed on to others, but the process is unpredictable. In some part, the child comes from the host.”

My mind spun that over as I looked down at her. She came closer, pressing against me. She was poison, any way I looked at it. I felt my hands curl about her shoulders, almost of their own volition.

“There’s nothing you can do,” she whispered, and once again, I felt almost as if I heard her words in my head rather than my ears. “Jeremy is gone, whether you admit it or not. You can only choose how you act afterward. Truly, Bertrand, if I could give you your brother back, I would.”

She was a monster, perhaps not one of Baudeliare’s vampires, but something just as inhuman. I reconsidered my

decision not to strangle her, but my traitorous hands moved to push the robe from her shoulders instead, craving the feel of her skin under them. “Are there others like you?”

“A few,” she said, coyly holding her dressing gown closed even as she came closer. “But I will not tell you who they are, if that’s your question.”

Her silk-clad breasts brushed my chest then, and my mind suggested other ways to convince her to help me to save my brother. I laid one hand on her hip and drew her savagely against me. When I leaned toward her, she set one surprisingly strong hand against my chest and pushed me back. “Not on the lips, Bertrand. Never on the lips, or I will lose you.”

Which made me suspect how her ‘seeds’ passed to her victims. That I would *not* forget, no matter how much I wished to defy her.

* * *

I walked along *Boulevard Haussman* in the pale morning light, my ruined shirt hidden under a tightly buttoned suit jacket. Some things about French girls I liked excessively, particularly in this new Paris.

I still did not know what to make of her appetite for me, when I’d made it so plain that I did not like her. I wondered if it might only be my knowledge of botany that drew her—or if it was the other way about, my interest in *her* stemming from her

bizarre glass-enclosed garden. Either way, she hadn't told me anything that would help me halt my brother's decline.

And when I reached his studio, I discovered Jeremy sitting in his favorite chair, the coverlet from his bed draped across him as if he'd sat up waiting for me. But his eyes were open, unblinking, fixed on some place I couldn't see. He was already dead. For a moment, I simply gazed at his unmoving form, trying to decide what I would tell the police.

I wondered then if there *was* inside him a seed of sorts, a slender elongated bulb like those I'd seen in Anne's workroom. Thinking the police would never know, I drew the coverlet away, revealing the bloody mess of his shirt. A large hole gaped several inches beneath his chin, just to the left of the breastbone. I dropped the blanket back over him and stepped back, shaking in fury.

It hadn't been Anne. I knew that. I knew where she'd been every moment of the previous night. My chest still stung from the scratches her nails had left behind.

A few, she'd said. A few like her existed—only a handful, all close by in Paris. Any of them would have motive, a reason to cut into his body and remove that thing which had killed him. One of *them* must have done this to Jeremy, and I swore to myself then that I would do whatever I must to find them, every one.

A frisson of premonition warned me, and I turned. A policeman stood in the open doorway, nightstick in his hand. Behind him, other voices sounded in the stairway.

I had been set up, I realized, to take the fall for my brother's death.

* * *

For a long time I sat in a cell at the police station on *rue des Prouvaires*, waiting for someone who would listen to my protestations of innocence. I had ample time to think, to consider the tangle that had ensnared both my brother and myself, but I couldn't decide what to say.

Whether to tell them that my brother and I were distant at the best of times; whether to tell them I had recently stolen his paramour just as he had, several years ago, taken my wife; whether to admit I wouldn't deeply mourn my brother's absence, as I had never known him half as well as I should have? Nevertheless, whatever his flaws, Jeremy had been a scion of the Everslee family, and I intended to avenge his death. My family would expect no less.

As the hours passed, I became anxious, my hands shaking and my thoughts scattering. Their design, no doubt. It was late afternoon by the time a Lieutenant Golairde came to hear my explanation of events. When asked where I spent the night (for the hotelier had given out that I'd not returned to my rented

room), I told them I'd been at the house of Anne Dubourg. None recognized her name. As I couldn't recall the name of her street, I offered to lead them to her house instead. I would expose the room full of globes, I decided, and reveal that each represented a life stolen.

After much confusion, Goliarde located a couple of officers to escort me to locate the house of my mystery woman. They put handcuffs on me and as we neared the front door of the station, she walked over the threshold.

"Bertrand!" she cried. "I went to your brother's flat, and the landlady told me they'd brought you here." She turned her innocent eyes on the officers who held my arms. "What is this? Why does he wear these?"

She had come to deny my claim, I guessed, the final seal on my condemnation. I scowled as she grasped my cuffed hands, her red lips pouting up at me. I caught the scent of her skin then, and my anxiety eased.

The officer on my left gazed down at her legs. She wore the shortest skirt I'd seen yet, one that actually bared her knees. "Who are you, mademoiselle?" the man asked.

She primly held out one hand. "Anne Dubourg, officer. Monsieur Everslee was at my flat all night last night. A party, you understand. I'm sure the other guests can attest to his presence as well."

I hadn't told Goliarde *what* I was doing at her flat, merely that I'd been there all night. He shrugged and bid the officers to uncuff me.

I gazed down at my unexpected rescuer and wondered what she planned for me. I was not, it seemed, the sacrificial lamb after all.

* * *

In the workroom on the third floor, she gazed raptly at the new globe that sat upon her worktable. She stroked the glass, but the bulb had no fronds yet to reach for the warmth of her fingers.

That was all that was left of foolish Jeremy. Although I knew she hadn't been the one to take my brother's life, I could not deny that she'd been a part of it. Nor could my involvement be an accident.

I would have to handle her carefully. In her presence I could not seem to keep focus on my ultimate goal. Sooner or later she would trust me enough to introduce me to the others, her children. When I knew their names, I would reveal them all. If the police would not act, I would bring an end to them myself. I raised my eyes to hers, hoping my face did not show my intentions.

She watched me with a shrewd expression. "A healthy start," she said, still stroking the glass. "If this one does well,

then a part of your brother will live on forever. Together we will find a strong host for him, and he will never grow old, never die. He will have children as numerous as the stars.”

I’d heard that sort of promise before, somewhere. “What do you need *me* for?”

She smiled up at me, those strawberry lips drawn up into a smile as lethal as the angel’s trumpet. “Who would be better than you to help us select potential bearers of our seed, Bertrand? You understand breeding like few others—how to look at a plant and see what traits would breed true. How could I let you molder in prison when you might learn so much here?”

I couldn’t argue that. I did have much to learn. “Still, it is a shame about my brother,” I said, searching her eyes for a hint of remorse.

“I have said I was sorry, Bertrand. He pressed me for my kisses, and he paid the price.”

Not what she had told me the night before. All her words might have been lies, from the very beginning.

She stroked a lily-scented hand up my sleeve, and that suspicion faded from my mind. I felt it slip away, like an unpleasantness forgiven after a bottle of fine wine.

“Not on the lips,” she said, her breath on my cheek. “I am pleased you understand the importance of overcoming that desire.”

Even dazed as I was, I kept that warning well fixed in my mind.

* * *

To my mother’s sorrow and my father’s ire, I didn’t escort my brother’s body back to England, leaving them to see him buried. I worried that if I left France I would return to find Anne and her kind gone, beyond my grasp. I might lose my chance for to expose them I put off my assistant’s queries so I might stay, and then the furious demands of my superiors at the Gardens.

I studied the glass-encased bulbs fervently, wanting to understand what sort of creature would destroy its host and move on to another. The bulb stolen from my brother’s body grew leaves that resembled the fronds of the asparagus fern, a warm flesh tone much like the one I’d seen that first night. My attention kept returning to it, as if it were actually a part of my brother as Anne claimed. I might save this one, I thought, and then just as quickly reminded myself that I must, when the time came, destroy them all. I must.

If there were aught of my brother there, I saw no sign of recognition. When Anne touched the glass, the fronds reached

for the warmth of her fingers. They did not respond to me as they did to her, perhaps recognizing their own kind.

Just as I am, inside this body. That passing comment of hers came back to me time and again.

I had no doubt that one of these things lived inside Anne's warm body, set inside her chest near the heart. What I did not know was whether she told me the truth—that the 'plant' inside maintained the hosts' health, no more—or if it took a firmer hold of the body it inhabited. More than once I wondered if it was truly Anne Dubourg whose body I clutched at night or merely the remnant of her, a husk animated by something else altogether. The lily scent of her skin, the sweet taste of her perspiration—those hinted that she was not human any longer.

I began to have nightmares, imagining delicate fronds unfurling throughout my own body, infiltrating or even supplanting my own flesh. I would wake entangled in Anne's poisonous limbs, but my suspicions would fade with her touch.

* * *

After some days, I received an ultimatum from the Royal Botanical Gardens: return or be quit of my position. I ignored that, too, as my plan had not reached fruition. In fact, it hadn't proceeded nearly as far as I'd hoped. I had only identified one of Anne's compatriots by that time, the glassmaker who made

the globes for her, a man who'd once worked for Lalique. But I didn't even know his name. I couldn't leave.

And the bulb I'd first seen had reached maturity. Spores appeared along the undersides of those feathery fronds, and Anne declared it time to find the creature—for I knew it to have some sentience by then—a new host.

For the first time, I wondered if that host might be me. I didn't know whether I feared that opportunity, or craved it. Anne assured me it would only cost a fraction of my own mind. In return I would have health and long life, and eventually offspring of my own.

And if I let them place it inside me, surely they would trust me, my mind reasoned. They would allow me into their inner circle. It would mean sacrificing myself in the end, but that would be worth it if I could achieve their destruction. Or would I be so lost to my own self that my sense of purpose would fade away?

It would make me more of a match for Anne in every way. I had to believe that I would be strong enough to enforce my will over it, that I could defeat the designs of such a pale and fragile creature, even if it were set inside my chest next to my heart.

* * *

When the time came, the glassmaker came to the house. In the third floor workroom, he used a ball hammer to tap a small hole near the bottom of the globe. Seeming to recognize the danger of the shattering glass, the feathery fronds of the bulb folded inward. The stems curled up like a fern's nascent fronds. I watched as the glassmaker removed the bulb from the broken globe and slipped it into a silken bag, hiding it away before I could even touch it.

"Were you able to secure him?" Anne asked.

"With no difficulties," the man assured her. He nodded to Anne and left the workroom.

I was clearly not the chosen one, not this time. I felt the sting of betrayal, even though she'd promised me nothing.

"There are priorities," she said vaguely when I regarded her with raised brows. "You will have your own soon, my love. There are others."

I glanced about the workroom and gestured at the shelves. Most of these specimens lacked the vigor she favored. "Where?"

Smiling secretively, she took my hand and led me out into the hallway. She unlocked the second door and let me peer within. "You see, there *are* others."

If there were dozens in the first room, there must have been more than a hundred in this one. I ran back in my mind

and counted the number of rooms that led off the hallway. Six in all, a frightening number when added together.

“And when they are all ready?” I asked.

“Then we will scour Paris for the best and wisest to make them of us. Like you,” she said, her hand stroking my cheek. My anger with her fled, and I breathed in her wonderful scent. And that led to other things.

* * *

In the morning, I stood on the steps of the house watching the early sun. I was surprised to see Lieutenant Goliarde coming up the street, finally searching me out, I assumed, to deliver news of my brother's killer. I feared he would ruin my chances by acting too early, so I moved to intercept him before he entered the house. But he strode up the steps almost as if he didn't see me there.

“Lieutenant, are you here to see me?”

He blinked at me. “Excuse me?”

“About my brother's death. Is that why you're here?”

“Your brother, *monsieur*?” His attention wandered to the stone of the house's facade.

I resisted my desire to slap him. “You were investigating my brother's death, man,” I said. “Jeremy Everslee?”

Goliarde regarded me as if there were nothing in his brain. “I suppose,” he said, and brushed past me into the house. He did not come out again.

* * *

“He was asking difficult questions,” Anne explained later that evening in the cacophony of the nightclub. “We could not afford to let him pursue his inquiries further.”

The choice of Goliarde had been expedient, I understood then, not a slight against myself. “He seems much changed.”

She stroked my hand in time to the music. “He will regain some personality once the two parts have had a chance to merge together. And it will be useful for us to have a man among the *gendarmes*.”

A man among the police. Just as it was useful to have a glassmaker in her retinue—and a botanist.

Goliarde did improve over the next day, but I saw little resemblance to that officer I’d briefly met. He seemed healthy. His eyes took on a new innocence, and yet he eyed girls as they walked along the street as if he wished to devour them. He now seemed that which I was destined, in Anne’s greater plan, to become.

And then I began to question if that was her intent at all, or another of her lies. Were I to become like Goliarde—a mere

caricature of his former self—my skills as a botanist would be blunted.

And then Goliarde brought back a bulb. It was small and covered with blood—but his own, he claimed proudly. I watched with narrowed eyes as Anne carefully placed it inside a new globe. At that size, my studies suggested it would not fare well.

“Curb your eagerness next time,” Anne told Goliarde sternly. “This child of yours should have been given time to gather strength before removing it.”

He stroked the globe and smiled down at his child regardless.

“And when is it my turn?” I asked Anne after he’d left the house.

“Soon,” she whispered, her strawberry lips pursing.

Which meant *never*, I suspected. I was more valuable to Anne as I was—human, and vulnerable.

She held me in her thrall. I had discovered that too late, much as I had discovered my regrettable dependence on morphine after being wounded in the war. I was addicted. I could not bear to be too long out of her presence now. My determination to avenge my brother’s murder would return when she left the flat, then turn to anxiety and sometimes even pain, only calmed by her touch and the scent of her skin.

Given what I'd seen of Goliarde's change, I should have been relieved. But in some part, I still craved it, and her.

* * *

I always rose earlier than she did. The next morning, I stood on the steps and scowled at the sunrise. A policeman walked by, swinging his nightstick.

"Do you have a cigarette?" I asked.

Anne never selected men who smoked, as she claimed it fouled the lungs. I took the cigarette and cradled it over the match he offered. "Could I have the matches?" I asked. "I'll give you a franc for them."

His eyebrows rose, but he made the exchange anyway and then went on his way.

I took a puff of the cigarette, and then dropped it and ground it under my shoe. I recalled why I'd quit smoking after the war; it dried me out. I had escaped the morphine as well, although that had been far more difficult. Surely I could overcome my need for Anne.

I would keep to my original plan, and wait until she trusted me and made me known to them. Or perhaps....

I lit one of the matches and watched its comforting glow fade in the waxing light. I thought of the lace curtains in the sitting room and the fragile fabric of the throws. They would burn quickly. Then the wallpaper would catch, sending flames

up into the walls and the upper floors. The third floor with its rooms of globes would become an incinerator, stamping out all the small fragile lives therein. Nothing of Jeremy could be saved.

Goliarde I could find easily. Then I would have to hunt down the others, although I don't know all their names.

Anne slept on the second floor, entangled in her silken sheets, looking deceptively angelic but smelling of lilies and musk. She would go as well. I thought of her swaying hips and those strawberry lips that spread her seed so judiciously.

My hands shook as I blew out the match. Tomorrow, perhaps.

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AS BELOW, SO ABOVE

by Ferrett Steinmetz

Up at the shimmering edge of the sky, where the water met the air, Son spread his tentacles out beneath the terrible shadow of his father. They were waiting for the ships. Son felt the approaching heart-thrum bouncing off the coral-cruled hulls below as the ships crested the painwall.

Are you sure you should do this, Father? Son thought. He twisted his mantle around to gaze at the scarred stumps of his father's tentacles. *You've trained me well. There'd be no shame in letting me take this harvest.*

My name, thought Two-Father, his beak clacking shut with the finality of a ship's hull crunching into stone, *is Two, formerly One. It is a name I earned, one murder at a time. And I will carry out the harvest until Dysmas decides I am no longer worthy.* He flexed his tentacles experimentally, then added: *Perhaps He already has.*

Don't say that, Father, thought Son. *Dysmas could not ask for a worthier beast. He must heal you.*

Two-Father's great blue eye was clouded, his suckers cracked and shrunken. His remaining tentacles, once as nimble

as a school of fish, were stiff and slow. It was the same disease that had struck One-Mother just before her end.

Son rippled uneasily in the water, trying to imagine what Two-Father had done to warrant such an affliction. He tried to envision life without Two-Father—no more chasing-games around the cavern-filled Ring that surrounded Dysmas's great Spire, no more competitions of hunt-the-shark—and shuddered water, uneasily, from his gills.

Ah, Son, thought Two-Father, reaching down to stroke the sensitive tips of his feeling-tentacles across the Son's head-fin. Dysmas has given me so many gifts. This pain is a small price to pay.

That was Two-Father's way. Every day, he sang the hymns of praise to Dysmas, thanking the sky-father for his former wife, for the great feasts, for the beauty of the playgrounds of the Ring, for the strength and power of his wondrous Son.

Son sang, too, but secretly he prayed for Dysmas to forgive Two-Father—or at least tell them what Two-Father had done. Two-Father never missed a harvest, even though they came at all times these days, arriving without warning in greater and greater numbers. Why would Dysmas make him weak when he needed to be strong?

Worse, Son suspected he knew why. But how could he tell Two-Father?

My only regret, thought Two-Father, is that you have never met Him. If you did, you would understand everything. Now still yourself; the ships arrive.

Two-Father twitched with eagerness. Son knew he would have launched himself at the ships immediately were it not for the billowing mesh of the painwall. Not even Two-Father could bear to approach that agony—not that he would, for Dysmas had marked the edge of the world with a net and Dysmas was never to be questioned.

Son froze at the approach of the ships, trying to untangle the jumble of heart-hums that drummed against his skin. There were five of them. Once that would have been a large pack, but these days the ships came in such droves that five was nearly a respite. As the pack crested the netting of the painwall, they split off and away from Two-Father, circling around towards the Spire above the sky. The crops, scuttling across the flattened tops of the ships like pink parasites, must have seen Two-Father's shadow in the water.

Son looked up and realized with horror that Two-Father's skin was still a mottled pink, still marked with the black fist that Dysmas had tattooed into his flesh. Two-Father's ability to shift colors had left him.

I'll take the three, thought Two-Father, jetting off towards the first pack. That left the remaining two ships for Son to crack.

Stay low to avoid their fire-jelly, Father! Son rocketed towards the hull of the two ships, heard the hiss of harpoons plunging into the waters. *'Ware their nets, their axes!*

I taught you to harvest, Son, Two-Father assured him. *I know my lessons.*

But Son wasn't sure. The ships now not only came in greater numbers, but they were unpredictable, evolving new defenses. Son squeezed billows of black ink around the ship to mask his approach, remembering what Two-Father had told him: *Always curl your tentacles around the front, never in the back where the whirling tail-blades lie. Never rest your tips on the deck, lest they chop off the ends of your sensing-limbs. And should you brush against a long, thin tube of metal, draw away quickly before it squirts fire.*

Every day, though, there were new lessons to be learned. New ships brought new weapons, and Two-Father did not learn quickly.

Son positioned himself under the ship, spreading his tentacles out to caress the hull's curve. Barbed harpoons showered down from above, hooked deep into his flesh, tugged

cruelly. He ignored the pain to stroke the curved hull with his long sensor-limbs, seeking the ship's heart-hum.

Two-Father believed in brute strength. He could afford to. He dwarfed the ships, could pull them apart four at a time. But Son was smaller, barely wide enough to stretch around a hull. He'd had to learn cunning.

He swept the thin tips of his feeler-limbs across the ship's barnacle-crusting skin, triangulating the vibrating—

His tentacles blazed with pain.

Son keened and came uncoiled, fell away in a slack-limbed tangle. He retreated; the anguish lessened but did not abate. Agony radiated out from the ship in jagged pulses.

That's the painwall, Son thought, cringing in terror. These ships are like touching the painwall.

He attempted to master his quivering tentacles, but they shrank away of their own volition. He'd never seen a painwall ship before. It was the worst thing he'd felt.

It's another test, Son! called Two-Father, grasping two ships between his vast tentacles—but Son saw Two-Father's suckers blackening. *Dysmas wants to see if we are worthy!*

Son cared not a whit about Dysmas. But if there was any chance that Dysmas might find his father worthy, and possibly heal him....

Son pressed his tentacles to the painship.

His suckers burned. Before, the water had been safe; the ships could only create fire up above the sky, and though the blisters were horrid when they sprayed their fire-jelly on your tentacles, you could avoid it if you were quick.

Son forced himself against the fire.

He squeezed one of his smashing-limbs into a ball and punched down through the top deck. He clamped his beak against the pain as he rummaged around in the interior. He forced his tentacles through the stairways, out through the caverns filled with the small-boned crops inside, each clutching fire-tubes. He was hunting for the ship's heart.

And there it was, a thumping thing with a white-hot canister of steam at the center. He wrapped his seeking-limb around the heart. The creak of torn metal filled the water as he hauled it up by the roots.

The pain ebbed. The water tasted of ink and oil.

There were tiny cries and yells from the crops still within the ship. They buried axes into his tentacles. He smashed them against the walls, then slithered his limb out. The ship was dead, floating dumbly above the sky. He could shuck the tiny specks of meat out at his leisure.

Will that convince you, Dysmas? he wondered, gulping down a few wriggling crops to regain his strength. Then he sucked in fouled water and exhaled it, jetting over to the sister

ship. It crackled to life, flooding him with burning torture, but he wrestled it to one side and toppled it over it into the water.

He heard another keen. Two-Father was screaming.

Two-Father never screamed.

Through bloodied water Son saw him, still struggling to crush the two ships in his limbs. Between the agony of the painships and Two-Father's dreadful affliction, he hadn't the strength to crumple their hulls—and now he was caught between both ships. The third ship was backing into him, ramming its whirling tail-blades into his flesh.

One-Mother had died the same way: a weakness that led to slaughter.

Son crested his mantle above the sky and roared. The crops on the ships turned to look at him, their light flesh turning even paler. Then he rushed at the blade-ship that was carving his father to pieces, flung himself above the sky and into the void, landed on the deck with a strength he'd never believed possible. He lashed out with his limbs in all directions. The painships stung him deep, but he felt nothing but rage.

We beat your challenges! he screamed. *We suffer for Dysmas! We deserve peace!*

His fury would have done One-Mother proud.

When he was done, the three ships were jagged chunks. The sky-border was dotted with struggling crops, churning the

water beneath them, hoping to swim their way to Dysmas's lair. The ship-wreckage bubbled its way down into the black water to clank against the coral below. The bottom of the Ring was lined with layers of old ships, proof of the fierce years of devotion that Two-Father (and, once, One-Mother) had given to Dysmas.

Why would Dysmas blight a beast so faithful and constant?

Son's gills sucked in the sour scent of his father's blood. *Are you all right?* he asked, knowing that Two-Father wasn't; three more of his tentacles were stumps now.

And there was a ragged, cavernous gash that corkscrewed through the center of Dysmas's mark. Bits of his father pulsed within it.

We must—we must—we must harvest, said Two-Father, woozily scooping up a few remaining crops and swirling them around. *Find the still-living crops. Devour them. Let not a one set foot upon Dysmas's shore.*

Son wanted to argue, but there was no use. He ate the waves clean.

* * *

Did I ever tell you how you were hatched, Son? said Two-Father, curling against the protective walls of the coral caves. *I can't remember....*

Son groomed his father's exposed skin, using the delicate tips of his seeking-limbs to pluck the harpoons from his father's wrinkled flesh. The cave was his gift to him, carefully assembled from the bulwarks of harvested ships, crushed into a canopy to make a fine and dark resting place.

Son had heard the tale of his own birth a thousand times before—but he never tired of it.

No, Father, he said, tugging an axe from his father's skin. Tell me.

Two-Father's cloudy blue eye grew cloudier. Son felt him sinking back against the coral, as if to sleep, and anticipated he would slumber—but instead, Two-Father thought at him in a low, happy tone.

Your mother, thought Two-Father, ruled me with tentacles of iron. I was One, the first, before she arrived and made me Two. She was monolithic, a beast fit to end the world, and it was only because of Dysmas's mark that she did not devour me.

I remember, Father, thought Son. Son had never liked One-Mother. She was so large she could have gulped him down without chewing—and she'd tried to. Son had no mark of Dysmas to protect him from her endless hunger, and it was only thanks to Two-Father's constant interventions that he had not wound up in mother's gullet.

What? thought Two-Father. *Oh, yes, of course you do. But she came to me one day and said, 'I have eggs. You will fertilize them.' And so I did, spraying my life-essence around her, and she drank of it, and squatted her first clutch of eggs on the black sand.*

Soon, a miracle arrived—a ship that sailed under the edge of the sky! We knew a miracle of Dysmas because it bore Dysmas's mark upon it: the black fist. So One-Mother could not eat it—though she certainly longed to! Two-Father clacked his beak in weak amusement. And Dysmas's ship searched out that clutch of eggs, and squirted His own life-essence upon it—a jelly so potent it stung our eyes and swelled shut our squirting-valves.

The next day, all the eggs were dead. Not a one of them was strong enough.

The next year, your mother once again commanded me to mate. And once again, Dysmas's ship emerged to fertilize the eggs. And once again, they all hardened and cracked and the tides carried them out beyond the painwall.

But the year after that? Dysmas's ship came—and out of thousands of eggs, you alone were the full heir to His power. One-Mother longed to swallow you, but I told her that if she ate you, she must then devour me, and did she have the strength to swallow so much of Dysmas's power?

She did not. And so you were hatched, and beloved, and the scion of three beasts, each greater than the last. Isn't that a fine thing?

Son ran his tongue nervously around the rasp of his beak. *It is, Father. It surely is.*

But every time his father told him that story, Son wondered: was Dysmas trying to meld His potency with the eggs, or had Dysmas tried to kill him? Dysmas had given him no mark. Dysmas had never spoken to him.

He tried to tell himself that Dysmas didn't exist, was just a figment of Two-Father's imagination. Yet *something* had tattooed that fist upon his father's skin. And so the thought stuck in his mind like a sliver of hull lodged in his beak:

Two-Father was dying for the sin of Son's existence.

* * *

At Two-Father's insistence, Son still patrolled the Ring in an endless hunt for ships, squeezing himself tight into crevices for amusement, but it wasn't much fun without Two-Father. The Ring encircled Dysmas's Spire, bordered by the painwalls. No matter where Son swum within the Ring, when he looked up through the rippling edge of the sky, he could see Dysmas's Spire reaching towards the clouds—a twisted spike of steel and rock.

The outline of a great black fist had been carved into its surface.

The Spire was never silent; it rumbled, and clanked, and bubbled so loudly Son could hear the tremors in the water. Occasionally great beasts shot out from the caves to soar high above the shimmering border, spreading out sail-shaped, fluttering limbs to dart between the clouds. Their beaks shrieked loud caws.

Two-Father said that the soaring-things were guardian beasts that lived above the edge of the sky, created by Dysmas to protect His land above the sky just as He had created them to live below it. And that made sense, because occasionally slow-moving oval-canopied things approached from far beyond the painwalls, firing loud concussive blasts, and the soaring-beasts ripped them to shreds.

Sometimes, Son waved his tentacles at the soaring-beasts and thought at them. But all they did was make those useless cawing sounds. It was like when he'd held the crops in his seeking-limbs, beaming thought-waves of greeting at them, and all they too had done was make shrill cries.

Two-Father said that each beast communicated in secret patterns—except for Dysmas, who could speak to all. Son supposed that Two-Father would know; after all, he had been in Dysmas's Spire, once. Son had never been at all.

The Ring stretched out and down from the sandy beaches that emanated out from Dysmas's Spire, all the way out to the fluttering fence of painwalls that marked the edge of the world.

Son had tugged at the painwall once, to test its strength. That was the only time Two-Father had hurt him.

You do not broach His borders! Two-Father had screamed, squeezing Son so tight he almost burst. Should anyone lay one bit of flesh upon the beaches of Dysmas's Spire, the world will end! Should we break the painwall, the world will end! He told me true! Do you want to leave this sacred duty? Shall I tell One-Mother to treat you like any other fish?

No, Father! Son had cried. *Don't let One-Mother devour me!*

But One-Mother was dead. And Two-Father rested within a cave made from the metal skin of their conquests, regaining his strength.

What if Son were to touch the beach?

Dysmas had forbidden it. Yet Son's tentacles stretched out of their own volition. He kept pulling them back, one by one, but his limbs had minds of their own. They wanted to brush the shore. To test it.

What would just one touch do? Would Dysmas appear, raining death upon him? Would the world shimmer and fade?

Or worse, would nothing at all happen, and Son would have proof that Two-Father was mad?

Dysmas, he thought, *if you exist, I dare You to stop me*. He bunched himself up in preparation for judgment, and slithered the tip of his smallest tentacle out to brush against the beach.

Nothing happened.

Son clacked his beak in surprised amusement. There was his tentacle, buried in warm sand. *Dysmas*, he thought with satisfaction, was just an illusion.

And as he pondered this, he became aware of a hum against his skin. Ships. Two, three, seven, nine—
—too many to count.

Son raised his eye up above the edge of the sky, and saw an armada of approaching ships, as numerous as fish in a shoal. The air above them roiled with smoke and steam, filled with great gray canopied things that floated towards *Dysmas's* Spire.

A huge whoop filled the seas, an endless cry that never stopped for breath, and Son realized that it was coming from the Spire. Lights flashed across the Spire's face. Soaring-beasts shot from the caves, shrieking defiance, and zoomed up towards the canopy ships.

Son could barely think for all the conflicting heart-hums thumping against his skin now, coming at him from all sides, at

least a hundred ships from every direction. Two-Father tugged at his tentacles.

This is it, said Two-Father eagerly. Our greatest test. We shall prevail!

They didn't.

* * *

Two-Father lay, torn as a shredded sail, across piles of freshly-broken ships.

Why? he asked. *Why did I not die?*

Son cowered below the edge of the sky, unable to look away. The edge was on fire now, ablaze in wavering hues of orange and black. They had cracked so many ships that the water was coated with slick ship-blood, and the collapse at the end of the battle had ignited the world.

Everything was lost.

Son floated in circles around the Ring, unsure what to do. He should have been in agony, thanks to four severed limbs and a host of bleeding wounds, but he was cushioned by a numb shock of disbelief. Two-Father and Son had crushed painships until their tentacles ached, hurled fireships at mineships, dragged netships below water—

—and still the ships had come, their tubes shooting hot death.

Son had ducked below water to avoid the pain of those tubes. Two-Father had roared defiance at the ships, daring them to spray him with fire, mustering his strength to smash all who opposed him into twists of metal.

Yet they were only two. Son had looked back and seen piles of ships aground on the beach. Tiny crops ran up toward Dysmas's Spire, clutching small fire-tubes in their hands. Two-Father rushed to the border of the beach and slapped the ships into the mud, bellowing for Dysmas's forgiveness as he tried to destroy the intruders on the shore.

They fought until Son saw the fullest horror of the day: Dysmas's Spire, tumbling down in an avalanche of glass and steel.

Two-Father went as limp as seaweed. Son had dragged him down under the water for safety, just as the sky burst into a consuming flame.

I did this, thought Son. I lost my faith, and now it's destroyed us.

Two-Father bubbled blood from a thousand holes, waiting for death.

* * *

After the apocalypse came the hunt.

The ships dropped metal globes from the sky, globes that burned and burst. They scoured the face of the Ring, criss-

crossing in such numbers that it was impossible to surface. Son rammed himself against the anguish of the painwalls, frantic for escape—but there was none.

Let me die! Two-Father thought, struggling to flutter up to the ships. *Let Dysmas's wrath destroy me and end it!* But he was weak, so weak. Son could tug him back into the protective canopy of their caves.

After the hunt came the famine.

Once the ships had passed, there were no more harvests. Son hunted through the remains of the Ring, crunching shoals of silver fish to bring them back to his father, but it wasn't enough to satiate his hunger.

Two-Father refused to eat. Instead, he was eaten. Tiny fish nibbled at the rotting flesh that trailed from his fresh stumps, eroded his body. His limbs withered and withdrew.

Two-Father forgot where he was.

Dysmas made me. His thoughts sounded faint, like echoes. *He brought me to life into a tank with a thousand brothers and sisters. He was so huge, He could lift me up on the metal palm of His black fist, and He said you have all your brothers and sisters and there is only one way to find who will serve Me. I want the strongest. The rest will be food. Go. And so I ate and ate and ate, and felt a thousand brethren shrieking in my mind and I hid when I was too tired to fight*

and I was oh so scared, and when I was done and devoured them all He said I was beautiful and He made me the sea and the painwalls and a potent wife to remind me of my place and that is when Dysmas made me He brought me to life into a tank with a thousand brothers and sisters....

Occasionally he'd stare straight up at the sky and murmur, *My Son. My beautiful, powerful Son.* But he did not respond when Son spoke.

Son ran in circles around the Ring, anywhere to be away from Two-Father. He looked up at the empty hole where Dysmas's tower used to be. He scoured the Spire's ruins, sifting through the mud and metal beams for signs of divinity. There was nothing. Only more machinery, just like the ships he pulled apart; only more rooms filled with the bloated husks of tiny crops and the tattered bodies of the soaring-beasts.

He slapped his limbs upon the beach, half-expecting a painwall to drop from above and strike him down. Nothing did. All he saw were bizarre beasts lying on the ground, massive things with only four limbs and ripping tusks and scaled skin. They were clearly dead, surrounded by smashed crops in sprays of blood.

Had Dysmas created these beasts, too? What did it all mean?

And then Son felt a fury boiling within him like the heart of a ship.

There is no Dysmas! he screamed. *There is no being in the sky watching us, there is no guilt, there is no reason to be kept here!*

The painwall flexed—but held. It mocked him. The ships had come from somewhere. Hadn't they? Or did the black waters beyond fade into oblivion, and this was all that there was in all the world, a tiny abandoned speck floating in a sea of nothing, with two dying beasts trapped within?

If there was a Dysmas, He was surely mad. If Son could wrap his limbs around Him, he would squeeze an explanation from Him. Why had this lunatic power used them so poorly?

After the famine came more famine. And despair. And emptiness.

But not death. Not yet.

* * *

Two-Father's skin had shrunk, tugging his tentacles inwards. Two-Father wanted to die, but his great heart refused to stop beating. His body was so huge that when it had to start devouring itself, it had vast stores to draw upon.

I tried I tried I tried I tried I tried—

Son could not shut his father's voice out. It chased him around the Ring, around to the other end of the stunted rock

that had once been a Spire. Son flattened himself against the painwall over and over, suckering himself to the strands with a fierce gratitude: Dysmas was wonderful, Dysmas was horrible, Dysmas had given him this great pain to blot out greater pains.

With a crackling hum, the painwall stopped emanating anguish.

Son looked at his limbs in disbelief, wondering what was happening. He plucked at the netting. Nothing. No pain.

Another hum danced, faint but unmistakable, across the surface of his skin.

A ship. Coming from the shore.

It took Son a moment to home in on the noise, because ships never went out. They went in, and he harvested them. This reverse direction baffled him—but he dashed off after it regardless, hungry to see something new.

It was a very small, battered ship—not sleek, like the other ships, but a hull raw with fractures, as though this new, small ship had been cobbled together from scraps.

Painted crudely on its side, lacking the elegant grace of Two-Father's bold, clean mark, was a black fist.

Son froze. What was this? Should he crack the ship? Let it sail away? Commit the unforgivable sin of destroying one of Dysmas's Chosen?

He poked his head above the edge of the sky. Atop the boat was a tiny crop, clad in a black skin over pink wrinkled skin, wild white hair waving in the wind. The crop seemed oddly confident, his back straight as he sailed towards the painwall, exposing his teeth to the edge of the sky as though he owned it.

The crop's right hand, however, was not made of flesh. It was made of metal, grafted onto the end of the arm.

A black hand.

It could be him.

It must be him.

Son reached out and brought the ship to a halt. The world did not end. Instead, the crop stumbled and fell. It pressed the ship's console and made mouth-noises into a small gray wand, and Son shivered as a new voice boomed in his head:

GOOD MERCY! YOU POOR THING. HOW IN THE WORLD DID YOU SURVIVE?

The voice was loud, so much louder than the tiny creature upon the ship. It sounded so surprisingly kind that Son couldn't think of anything to say.

It reached out to stroke the tips of his tentacles. YOU BEAR MANY SCARS, HERE, YES—LIKE ME. THEY TRIED TO KILL US BOTH, YOU SEE. THEY THINK WE'RE ABOMINATIONS. BUT WE CAN SHOW THEM BETTER, CAN'T WE?

Are—are you Dysmas? Son asked.

The crop bared its teeth at him. OF COURSE I AM, it said, tenderly. YOU MUST HAVE BEEN SO LONELY DOWN THERE, TO FORGET ABOUT ME. ALL THINGS SHOULD KNOW THEIR GOD WHEN IT SPEAKS TO THEM.

Son felt suddenly afraid. *Who's trying to kill us?*

EVERYONE, Dysmas said, his voice lowered to a whisper. EVERYONE IN THE ENTIRE WORLD. THE IDEA THAT A MAN CAN CREATE LIFE ON HIS OWN, WITH NO HELP FROM NATURE? THAT ALL THEIR ESSENCE CAN BE RECREATED IN A VAT? OH, IT DRIVES THEM MAD. I'VE BEEN HOUNDED FROM ONE END OF THE EARTH TO ANOTHER.

WHEN THEY LOOK AT YOU, LITTLE ONE, THEY DO NOT SEE THE GLEAMING LUSTER OF YOUR SKIN OR A SHIMMERING GOLDEN EYE—THEY SEE A MURDEROUS BEAST. AND THEY SEE ME AS THE MADMAN WHO BROUGHT YOU INTO EXISTENCE. BUT WE KNOW BETTER, DON'T WE?

Dysmas kept stroking Son's tentacles, seeming to draw strength from them. It was a gentle touch—almost the way Son had plucked hull-splinters from Two-Father's flesh.

IT'S KISMET THAT WE MEET, LITTLE ONE. I NEED A GUARDIAN, AT LEAST UNTIL I CAN REBUILD, AND YOU NEED A GOD. COME ALONG.

The boat started off. Part of Son wanted to chase after it, exhilarated to have a purpose—but he could not leave without knowing.

What about Two-Father?

TWO-FATH—? OH, THAT'S RIGHT, THERE WERE TWO OF YOU. HE'S SERVED HIS PURPOSE. LEAVE HIM BEHIND. The boat chugged forward merrily.

Son wrapped his tentacles around the ship to stop it. How could Two-Father be so easily forgotten? *He was strong. He was **faithful**. Why did You—you—make his eyes bad? Why did you weaken his limbs?*

Dysmas reached out to stroke Son's tentacles again, but Son realized it wasn't like his own touch on Two-Father at all. Son plucked cutlasses from Two-Father's skin to soothe him. Dysmas's touch felt like he was stroking something he owned.

YOU POOR, IGNORANT THING. I FORGOT YOU AREN'T CAPABLE OF UNDERSTANDING. I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING; YOUR FRIEND JUST GOT OLD, BEAST. THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS IN TIME TO ALL OF US: YOU GET WEAK, YOU FAIL, YOU DIE.

So heal him.

I CAN'T. AND THERE'S NO SENSE IN WASTING TIME TRYING. IF HE'S AS WEAK AS YOU SAY, HE CAN'T PROTECT ME—AND I NEED PROTECTION. EVERYTHING DIES; AT LEAST HIS DEATH HAD A PURPOSE.

What purpose?

HE KEPT ME ALIVE.

Son felt an incandescent rage. His tentacles slapped the water.

What about the beauty of the encoralled caves we created? What of all the songs we sung—the chasing-games we played, the stories we shared? Is all of that just so much wreckage, if we can't keep you alive?

I—I'M PROUD THAT MY CREATIONS CAN ALSO CREATE. BUT YOUR ULTIMATE DUTY IS TO ME....

And what makes you better than Two-Father?

WHY, I CREATED HIM.

Dysmas said it with confusion, as though he'd never thought another answer would be needed. But Son thought of Two-Father, who had stood up against One-Mother's terrible anger only once in his life—to protect Son.

Everything Two-Father had ever done, right or not, was meant to protect Son.

Creating us doesn't mean we owe you. It means you owe us.

Dysmas looked warily at the tentacles rising around him, then pressed one thin finger against a hidden stud in his metal hand.

I BEG TO DIFFER. WITHOUT ME, YOU WOULD BE NOTHING—AND YOU CAN BE NOTHING AGAIN SOON ENOUGH. NOW, I'D HATE TO SLAY SUCH A BEAUTIFUL BEAST AS YOURSELF—BUT WITH A TOUCH, I CAN GRANT DEATH TO ANYTHING I'VE CREATED.

SO LEAVE YOUR FRIEND BEHIND AND FOLLOW ME—I PROMISE YOUR SERVICE WILL BRING YOU EVEN GREATER JOYS THAN ALL YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED HERE. UNLESS, OF COURSE, YOU'D LIKE TO SEE WHAT LIES BEYOND THE VEIL.

Yes, thought Son, clacking his beak. *I would.*

Frowning, Dysmas mashed the button on his palm. Puzzled, he pushed it again.

WHY DOESN'T IT—

For the first time, Dysmas looked—really *looked*—at Son. Had he finally noticed that Son had no mark upon him? Dysmas's face went wide, and his mouth opened up like all the other crops Son had devoured, and Son took a deep pleasure in speaking to his God for the last time.

You didn't create Me, said Son, plucking him high off the deck. *So what do I owe you?*

Dysmas screamed. It was satisfyingly small.

* * *

The tides shoved Two-Father around now. The water that spilled in and out of his gills was barely enough to stir mud. Son floated directly above his cataracted eye.

...Son?

I brought you a gift, Father, Son thought.

I need no gifts.

You need this one, thought Son. Feel.

Using the finest of his sensor-limbs, he tapped Dysmas's metal fist against his father's skin.

What is that?

Son held the fist before his father's eye. It was so tiny. *This is Dysmas's fist. I met Him. He gave it to me.*

Two-Father clacked his beak. *What did he....*

He told me.... Son forced fresh water through his gills. He told me that you had done well. That your time here is complete. And if you—if you let go, you will go to a land full of easy crops and gigantic mothers and, and an even greater Spire to protect.

But.... That hand is so small, Son. Dysmas is huge....

Was huge, thought Son to himself. When you were a baby.

Son brushed his tentacles across his father's tattered fin. *That is how large you will be, he thought. In the new world,*

you will dwarf Dysmas, dwarf One-Mother, dwarf everything. You will be—be the world, Father. You will be everything.

Ah, said Two-Father. It was a small sound packed with a lifetime of hope.

And he died.

* * *

Son stayed until Two-Father was gone. He held his vigil as the fish attacked Two-Father's corpse, and the corpse became scraps, and the scraps became a haze. It was silly, for he was starving and there was a world of fresh crops out there—but he couldn't leave while his father was still there.

You were the world, Father, he thought, stirring the waters where the last of his father floated. Father broke apart, indistinguishable from the sea.

Son crushed the fist. Then he squirmed over the edge of the painwall and disappeared, going beyond the edge of the world to a place where no one knew.

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After twenty years of wandering desolate as a writer, Ferrett Steinmetz attended Clarion in 2008 and was rejuvenated. In the two years since then, he's sold stories to Asimov's (twice!), GUD, Shimmer, and Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, among others, and otherwise has a marvelous collection of extremely kind rejection letters. He lives in Cleveland with his wife, a well-worn copy of Rock Band, and a friendly ghost. Visit him online at theferrett.livejournal.com.

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“Fantasy Gate,” by Wolfgang Wachelhofer



Wolfgang Wachelhofer is an Austrian graphic artist and web designer who has a deep passion for surreal art. Most of his inspiration comes from the rich and colorful cultures of Brazil, where he lived for four years. He has done a lot of work for various clients for which he has earned a high reputation for his uniqueness. View more of his art in his [online galleries](#).

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