

BONE DANCE

A FANTASY FOR
TECHNOPHILES

EMMA BULL



BONE DANCE

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Bone Dance

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BONE DANCE

A FANTASY FOR TECHNOPHILES

EMMA BULL



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BONE DANCE: A FANTASY FOR TECHNOPHILES

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Dedication . . .

Cyn Horton gave me the matches. Elise Matthesen held the candle while I lit it. The following umptump thousand words are dedicated to both of them. Thanks, guys.

. . . and acknowledgments

A book, like a building, needs a proper foundation; Tom Canty, Terri Windling, and Will Shetterly helped to lay the underpinnings for this one. But any doors out of true or stairs that lead nowhere are my fault.

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The section headings are paraphrased from Bill Butler's *Dictionary of the Tarot* (Schocken Books, 1978), a wonderful book for anyone interested in the comparative symbolism and interpretation of the tarot.

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Card 0

THE SIGNIFICATOR

Page of Swords

Crowley: The earthy part of air, the fixation of the volatile, the materialization of idea. Subtlety in material things, cleverness in managing practical affairs, especially if they are controversial.

Gray: A brown-haired, brown-eyed boy or girl. Possible understanding or knowledge of diplomacy, messages, or spying. Watch out for the unforeseen.

THE STOCK EXCHANGE

The room was dark. The room was always dark, because it had no windows; it ought not to have meant anything. But the way the shadows hung like drapery around the desk; the way the crook-necked lamp cast its measured oval of light on the polished rosewood; the way the silence lay on the room unbroken by the hiss of a gas mantle; the way the faint, faint smell of petroleum and electricity, like the odor of wealth itself, rose up from everywhere—these things gave the darkness meaning. Nothing in that room was incidental.

The customer sat behind his desk, in a chair so tall and wide it could have hidden two bodyguards. He leaned away from the light, and it from him. Maybe he'd read somewhere that hiding one's face was made for psychological advantage in business transactions. He was welcome to think so. He already had the only real advantage: money. All the rest was costume and props.

The merchandise was contained in a flat metal box half again as long as a hand, which had once been white. I put it on the edge of the desk, just outside the pool of light. Then I laid one finger on it and pushed, so that it skidded across the shining wood and stopped in front of him.

His hands came up from under the desk and settled on either side of the box. Then the left one rose again, touched the metal, spread flat on it.

"The one I asked for?" he said. They were the first words out of his mouth since his door had opened and let me in.

"Look at it."

He scrabbled a little at the catch, his self-control momentarily breached. One hinge stuck and complained; then the box opened with a *tic*, and a broken speck of metal skittered over the rosewood. Inside was another box, plastic. It was mostly deep blue, with a color photo reproduced on it, and the title. He was familiar with the design, I knew. I'd brought him others like it, but with different photos and different titles. He opened the second box to reveal the videocassette. He touched the label as if it might be fragile. "*Singin' in the Rain*," he said, and I could hear his satisfaction—self-satisfaction—really. He closed the inside box, and the outside. His hands returned to their guard positions, flat on the desk with the tape between them, like brackets in an equation.

"Do the contents match the label?" His voice was strong now, the voice that ordered that room and everything outside it.

"Yes."

"And is it really the original, or did you make a copy to sell me?"

At that, I reached out, laid the same single finger on the metal box, and slid it back across the desk to me. His hands curved like little cats rising and stretching. But they didn't reach after the box. I

knew the Deal.

“You can look for it somewhere else,” I said politely, “if you aren’t comfortable buying from me.”

His mouth, perhaps, had gone dry. I liked to think so.

We stayed like that for a moment. He might have been considering sending me away, but I doubted it. I had been searching for this one, at his request, for six months.

Finally he pulled a narrow leather bag into the light and spread it open. He shook the contents into his hand and lined them up, and made sure I saw that the bag was now empty. That was insulting, but not as insulting as his questions. Ten bright, round bits of gold he laid out between us, each with a nice portrait in the center, lovely examples of the coin-making art. Two hundred dollars hard, precisely what he had promised. Such a memory on that man.

I turned the line of coins into a stack with one hand and passed the box across the desk with the other. I looked at the top coin, then smiled across the barrier of light toward his face. “Remarkable likeness,” I said. I made the money disappear, and hoped he’d noticed; it was a response to his showing me there was nothing left in the leather bag to steal.

“Another commission,” he said, as if I had asked for one and he was weighing the prospect. He needed this little dance to keep from himself the knowledge that he needed me. “This’ll be a hard one.”

“The last one wasn’t exactly lying around like gravel.”

He picked up the box that held *Singin’ in the Rain*, and turned it over and over in his hands. At last he said, “I want the Horsemen movie.”

I laughed, which I hadn’t meant to do. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve never seen it, that’s why not. If anyone in the City would have seen it, I would, and I haven’t.”

“So you think it doesn’t exist.” There was chilly disbelief in his voice.

“I know the folklore. That some poor bastard made a sci-fi-B-movie in which psychic Special Forces soldiers took over the minds of evil brown dictators and won the war in South America. And that some folks who wore dark glasses in the nighttime arrived at his house, asked him *urgent* questions, and took him into custody. I’ve never heard if they let him out. I’ve never heard that the thing got video release. I’ve never even heard it proved that it was released, period. File the whole story next to Hitchhikers, Comma, Vanishing.”

There was a silence, in which I decided he was trying to figure out what that meant. If he asked, I was going to tell him to look it up.

“You sound as if you don’t believe in the Horsemen.”

Sometimes I feel a profound, crippling sense of loss for something I never had: the world, as it once was. I felt it then. “Of course I believe in the Horsemen. I just don’t believe that someone had the bad luck to make a movie about them.”

“You’re turning down the job?”

I shook my head. “I’ll look. I’ve been looking for years. But I’m not going to find it. Not now. If it had ever existed, do you really think there’d be a copy left unburnt?”

“Five hundred,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows. “A thousand, hard. Be glad I don’t ask for the hand of your firstborn and half your kingdom.”

“No one’d give you a thousand for a goddamn movie.”

“Then if I find it, no one will get it.”

Long, expensive-sounding silence. "If you find it," he said finally, rustily, "bring it to me."

I smiled, and stifled the impulse to bow. We had not agreed on a price; but we'd agreed that his figure and mine marked the borders of a country we were willing to skirmish in later, if the need arose.

He opened one of his desk drawers, dropped *Singin' in the Rain* into it, closed and locked it. A sometimes happens when a great deal of money changes owners in an atmosphere of bare tolerance, he suddenly turned hearty. He gestured toward a lower corner of the room and said, "Down there, some people call two hundred in gold a fortune, son. What do you plan to do with it all?"

I smiled; if he couldn't see it, he would still hear it in my voice. "Oh," I said, "I thought I'd treat myself to breakfast."

And that should have been the end of it; but it may be that I don't think clearly with a fortune in my inside pocket. "Have you seen it?" I asked him.

He was startled enough to get in the way of the light. It made him squint, his eyes lost in past white flesh. "Pardon?"

"*Singin' in the Rain*. Have you seen it?" Dancing over sofas, hanging from lampposts, piled furniture on the speech tutor. Did he have a secret passion for foolery?

"No."

"Then how do you know you want it?"

His answer was all in his face, scornful and baffled at once. Money makes me ask stupid questions. He wanted it, of course, because someone else didn't have it.

"Debbie Reynolds dies in the end," I told him.

Five minutes later I was in an elevator rumbling down from the top of the tallest building in the City, with more money than I'd ever carried in my life, literally surrounded by wealth and power. And I was mostly sick and frightened with it. When I got outside, onto the street, to anyplace that had even been touched by sunlight, I would be all right.

I went past the guard desk, nodded at the man who sat behind it, and tried, as I went out the door, not to look as if I was rushing. I turned right, into the cheerful morning pandemonium of the market, and the tight prickling between my shoulders went away.

I'd done a good job, I decided on reflection. That building, that office, that customer, always made me feel claustrophobic and small, but I'd kept my mind on the Deal, and it had gone as I'd meant it to. I might have sounded a little like Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*, but there were worse roles.

I bought eggs and peppers and a few ounces of crumbly cheese at three different stalls, and took them all to a grill cart and had the proprietor turn them into an omelette.

After breakfast I would hail a bicycle cab and pay for the long, long ride to the western outskirts of the City, where a culture-vulture knew of a sealed-up basement holding the remains of a video production business. It would be, by my standards, a perfect day.

But it had chaos hidden in it. Cancers start that way: a cell or two, mutated, dividing, a secret for weeks or months until suddenly the transformation announces itself, and the whole organism quails at the face of it. The cells mutated that day, though I knew nothing about it for weeks.

Card 1

COVERING **Death, Reversed**

Waite: Inertia, sleep, lethargy, petrification, somnambulism, hope destroyed.

Gray: Stagnation. Failure of revolution or other forms of violent change.

Crowley: Transformation and the logical development of existing conditions thwarted. His magical weapon is the pain of the obligation. His magical power is necromancy.

1.0

GONNA GO DOWNTOWN

I came up on my back in the dirt. The sun was hot on the front of me, but the ground under my back was cool. I'd been there a while, then. A white-blue glaring summer sky made my eyes water. My mouth felt like a tomb from some culture where they bury your servants with you.

I turned my head reluctantly, and found the river flats around me, deserted, smelling like dead fish and damp wood. Far away, across the baked mud and spilled cured concrete, a bridge crew worked. I could hear the cadence shout, faintly, and the crash as the weight came down to drive the piles.

I rolled half over and tried to decide how I was. This time, all I felt was a sore and swelling bruise on the side of my face. I remembered where I must have got it: in the street in back of Tet Offensive where I'd gone for spicy mock duck and gotten two *Charlies petites* instead. The last thing I recalled clearly was one of the boss girls doing a snap kick, watching her heel come at me out of the dark. Probably about then that I went down.

Since the only lasting damage I'd taken was something I could remember, I must not have been in any nasty things during downtime. How long had it been? And what had I missed?

When I stood up, I had to revise the damage report. My skull was the Holy Sepulcher of hangover. Oh, I must have been into some nasty things, indeed. I hoped I'd had fun. By the time I got to the street along the Bank, it was enough to make me sick.

I'd had thirty bucks in paper, but my pockets were empty now. If the boss girls hadn't gotten it, they'd have had it had paid for whatever had left its residue in my head. I wished I knew what it was. Not that I could resolve never to consume any more. Sooner or later I'd go down again, shut out of my own mind, and all the resolving I'd ever done would be as useful as a dome light in a casket.

The next plunge down would be number five. The first time, I'd thought it was something I'd eaten or drunk, or otherwise consumed. The second time, I'd wondered if it was someone else's malice, the *coup n'âme*. By the third, it had occurred to me that it might be all mine. The effect of my colorful origin, arrived at last to rectify a long-neglected error. But if that was so, why wasn't it coming close to killing me?

I sat on the wall by the road, shivering in the sun. Suddenly I could imagine all the things my boss might do when I wasn't there to stop it, and I felt so vile they might as well have happened. Maybe they had; they just hadn't left marks. I thought about a future full of blank spaces, and knew I couldn't bear it. If that was the future, I had to escape it.

The obvious method came to mind, despair's favorite offspring. It came so sharp to the front of my brain, so clear and desirable, that I made a quick little noise about it. I was down off the wall and headed for the Deeps before I could think about what I was running (figuratively) from. The human

animal, when hurting, prefers to go to ground in its own burrow.

In parts of town, I could have sat on the curb and held out my hand, and after a while, if I looked pitiful enough, I would have the money to pay for a bicycle cab. There were still people in the world who were superstitious about beggars, after all, and if bruised, dirty, and disoriented couldn't elicit pity, then what was superstition for? But the Bank was lousy panhandling territory. People there lived by the Deal, like everyone else. They lived *well* by it, however, and that affected their judgment. Even if they once knew the First Law of Conservation of Deals—that there are never enough to go around—they'd let it slip their minds. So they drove past in their co-op's car, or trotted by under the twisted trees, led by dogs that ate as much as I did, and assumed when they saw me that I didn't do as much to earn my food as the dog.

Once, even in a place like the Bank, you could hold your hand out in a certain way, and people would understand that you needed transportation. They'd stop their private cars and let you ride in them, without asking anything in return. Unnatural, but true. I'd seen it in movies. But that was a long time ago. I staggered on, the dogs barked, and their owners made what they thought were imperceptible movements toward one pocket or another. I wasn't worried; I didn't think even a shot of ammonia in my eyes could make me feel worse.

By the time I got to Seven Corners market, the whole world seemed to flash colors in rhythm with my heartbeat. The flapping shutter of my headache kept time, too. Seven Corners has never been a good place for my preferred sort of marketing: it's food, clothing, housewares, and the kind of services that go with those, mostly. So I didn't much mind having to make my way through it with my eyes squinted three-quarters shut. It occurred to me, dimly, that I might have more than a hangover.

The weight of the sun finally brought me to a ragged halt at the market's edge. I stood under a canvas awning, supporting myself by propping my hip against a table, and pretended to be thoughtful about a tray of tomatillos. The next stall over had crates of live poultry, and the noise and smell were unlovely. A black woman with a serpent scarred from cheek to cheek over the bridge of her nose traded the vendor a bottle of homebrew for a white rooster; the vendor popped a little sack over the bird's head, tied its feet together, and ran a loop of string through its bonds for a carrying handle. The woman walked away, swinging a rooster too dismayed to struggle. *It gets worse*, I wanted to tell him, thinking of his new owner's scar.

I was waiting, I realized, for my wits to disappear into darkness. As if it would happen when I was ready for it. There would be some consolation in knowing what it was. Brain tumor, bad food, the heat? The heat would kill cactus. Perspiration was trickling out of my hairline, warm as the air, too warm to be doing its job.

The poultry dealer had a pair of doves in a wicker cage, velvety gray and sullen. Doves in paintings were never sullen. They seemed, in fact, to have managed a permanent state of exaltation, like the mindless fluttering ones around a chalice in . . . Sherrea's . . . cards.

I stood clouted with revelation amid the produce. I wanted knowledge. Sherrea claimed to call it up out of a seventy-eight-card deck. I didn't believe in the cards, but I might, if pressed, admit to my uncertainty about Sher. A little mind reading, with tarot as its rationalization—however she explained it to herself, she might locate my missing memories. If she *was* a mind reader, if the memories were there, if there was any help in them. But I had to try.

The brown grandmotherly woman who sold the tomatillos was shooting ungrandmotherly narrow-eyed looks at me, so I turned to move on. But I missed my step and stumbled against one of the canvas awning poles, rocking the whole canvas roof, and she shouted something about *mi madre*. That made me laugh. The sun hit me over the head with its hammer when I came out of the shade, and I stopped

laughing.

The Ravine forms the western edge of the Bank, only a few hundred yards from Seven Corners market. It's full of the cracked pavement of an old interstate highway—still a perfectly good road, an age that requires less of its road surface and has no use for the concept of “between states.” From the lip of the Ravine I could see the Deeps on the other side, hard gray and brown brick and wood of the nearest structures, shading farther in to rose, bronze, black pearl, and verdigris in spires of stone, metals, and brilliant glass. The empress of it all, rising from its center, was Ego, the tallest building of the City, whose reflective flanks had no color of their own, but wore the sky instead—relentless, cloudless blue today. The towers of the Deeps, rising in angles or curves, were made more poignant by the occasional shattered forms of their ruined kin. If I'd reached them as quickly on foot as I have in the narrative, maybe I'd have no story to tell. Or maybe I would. Coincidence is the word we use when we can't see the levers and the pulleys.

The bridge over the Ravine was scattered with vendors who hadn't found a place in the market. Very few had awnings, or even stalls; they spread blankets on the scorching sidewalks, and kept their hats and shawls and parasols tilted against the sun. The heat rose with the force of an explosion from the road surface below, and the whole scene wiggled in a heat mirage. Near the center of the bridge, I stopped to press my hands over my eyes, trying to squeeze the aching out of my head, to replace it with a firm sense of up and down, forward and back. I shivered. Maybe the sweat was working, after all. Except that I didn't seem to be sweating anymore.

A warm wind brushed past me. No, it was the sudden breeze of people going by. So why didn't they go? I opened my eyes. A skinny arm reached out, bony fingers slapped my shoulder and spun me around. Faces splashed with black and gray, stubbly scalps, a flurry of ragged clothing—I was at the eye of a storm of Jammers.

I've heard them compared to rabbits in the spring. Maybe the people who do are afraid of rabbits. The Jammers were pale, thin as wire, and as they danced their arms and legs crisscrossed like a chainlink fence of skin and bone. They weren't dressed for the heat, but I understand Jammers don't feel it, or cold, or much of anything besides the passion of the drum in their veins.

The nightbabies, who every sunset brought their parents' money down from the tops of the towers or from the walled compounds of parkland at the City's edge, would follow a cloud of Jammers like gulls after a trash wagon. They'd try to copy the steps. But that dance has no pattern, no repeats, and the caller is the defect or disease that makes the Jammer bloodbeat and the shared mind that goes with them. The hoodoos claimed the Jammers as kin, but I never heard that the Jammers noticed. The nightbabies pestered them for prophecies, for any words at all that they could repeat down in the clubs to give them a varnish of artful doom for a few hours, until something else went bang.

But I didn't open fortune cookies, or feed hard money to the Weight-and-Fate in the Galería de Juegos, or seek out prophecies from the Jammers. No one could prove to me that the future was already on record. And if it was—well, the future is best friends with the past, and my past and I were not on speaking terms. Prophecy was a faith for the ignorant and a diversion for the rich, and I was neither. The Jammers couldn't know anything about me.

“Infant creature,” sang one of the Jammers, “ancient thing, *long* way from home.”

Lucky guesses didn't count. I could be, when I wanted, as close to invisible as flesh and blood came. Nobody Particular in a street full of the same. It didn't seem to be working now. “Blow off!” shrieked.

“Barely a step away from home,” piped another voice.

“On one side.” A third Jammer.

Fourth: "And on the other."

"Ain't got no home at all."

"Have you no homes? Have you no families?"

They all seemed to think that was hilarious. Given that they're supposed to share a mind, it was the equivalent of laughing at one's own joke.

By that time I couldn't tell if I'd heard any voice twice. "Get away from me," I said, "or I'm going to hurt one of you." The part of my mind that was doing my thinking, far away from the rest of me, was surprised by the screech in my voice. "Maybe two of you," I added, just to prove I could.

"You are the concept immaculate," caroled a Jammer, shoving her/his hollow face up close to mine. The skin, between streaks of gray paint, was opaque and flaky-looking; the breath the words came out on was eerily sweet. "You are the flesh made word. Whatchoo gonna do about it?"

"Which way you gonna step?"

"This is the step, this is it, right here."

I folded my arms around my head, as if to protect it from angry birds. "Go away!" I screamed, and now even my thinking mind, cowering in its corner, didn't care if every living soul on the bridge saw me, and knew I was afraid.

"Step!"

"Step!"

I was closed in by a fence of bones singing in the voices of crows, and if I didn't get out *now* would club me to my knees with my own secrets. I shut my eyes and punched.

They whooped, and it was a moment before I realized I hadn't connected with anything. I opened my eyes. There was a gap in the circle, so I bolted through it, through the forest of pedestrians and parasols, and if I hadn't stumbled over a blanket full of pots and pans and tripped on the curb, I wouldn't be writing this. Or perhaps I would. Those levers, those pulleys . . . Amid the ringing of aluminum and cast iron, I hit the pavement on my backside, inches from the path of the tri-wheeler that was scattering foot traffic to either side. The driver honked, swerved, and slewed to a halt.

The Jammers were yelling and—cheering? Who knows what Jammers cheer about? Had I just taken the going-home step, or the no-home-at-all step? Or did it mean anything?

The trike carried full touring kit and weather shell, and had a mud-and-dust finish from someplace where there used to be roads. When the hatch popped, clots of dirt cracked away from the seam and fell to the blacktop, and the driver unfolded out of the opening with startling speed and economy. It was hard to tell what pronoun properly applied under the tinted goggles, the helmet, the crumpled coveralls, and the dust. She or he was squatting next to me before I had a chance to think of standing up.

"Are you hit?" Quick, sharp-cut words, the middleweight voice cracking out of roughness in resonance. The skin on the angular jaw, under the dirt, had never needed shaving, and when the stained leather gauntlet came off the right hand, the battered fingers seemed relatively light-boned. I hazarded a "she." Those fingers grabbed my chin before I could dodge them.

Everything tilted forty-five degrees. My vision was clear, but for a moment I felt as if I were sitting on a slant with nothing to hold on to. Then the world snapped back to true. The driver's dark goggles showed me two views of myself, slightly bug-eyed. What *was* this hangover from?

"No," I said. "You didn't hit me."

She peeled off the goggles, snapped them closed, and dropped them into her breast pocket. Her eyes were black, and surrounded by clean tanned skin where the goggles had sealed out the dust that the tri-wheeler's shell hadn't. She was frowning, as if I'd confessed to something more offensive than n

having been hit by the trike. Then bland and lazy good nature replaced the frown—no, was held up front of it like a mask on a stick. “I could make another pass, I suppose,” she said thoughtfully. “No. But you seem so offended.”

“Not by your aim, honest. Excuse me,” I said, and stood up. A bit too fast. She grabbed me around the rib cage.

“Whoa, Paint, old girl. It’s *that* way that’s up. Put one foot there, and the other—that’s it.” She stepped back, and I swayed, but that was all. “Now, is there someone to carry you away, or are you doomed, like a public works project in cast cement, to grace this bridge forever?”

It was true that nothing I’d said or done up to then had indicated I ought to be allowed out alone. “No. I’ll be fine, I’m just going into the Deeps.” Now there was a mindless utterance. Still, if I could reach the Deeps, I would be all right. Or at least, the burrowing instinct told me so. I looked around and realized that the Jammers were gone. I must have stopped being interesting.

She raised her eyebrows: delicate inquiry. “The D—oh, downtown.” She swiped at a trickle of sweat on her forehead with the back of her wrist, then snatched impatiently at her helmet, yanked it off. The hair underneath was tangled, wet with perspiration, shoulder length, and very black. “I suppose your career as a caryatid will have to be cut short,” she said. “I’m going that way myself.” Glorious smile hiding nothing, signifying nothing.

I had a dirty shirt, a dirtier pair of jeans, and a pair of sneakers, none of which I intended to give up. I had a few useful things in my pockets, but none that would turn to gold in someone else’s fingers. Sitting would entail racking up an obligation to a formidable stranger. But the thought of sitting down, closing my eyes, and effortlessly reaching the Deeps—no, I had no credit here. “No thank you,” I croaked. “It’s a lovely day for a walk.”

Breath burst out between her lips. “Oh, Our Lady of Martyrs. I missed the odor of sanctity on you. Get in.”

She meant it as one kind of blasphemy. It fell on my ears as different, and worse. Where were the lovely, familiar cadences of the Deal, the careful weighing of goods and considerations, the call-and-response of buying and selling? Hers was an alien and heretical language, for all that I knew the words. She propelled me to the trike, and I tried not to go. But I really did want to sit down under the shell of the tri-wheeler where the sun couldn’t get me, even if I paid with the rest of my life—

She stuffed me onto the back seat as if I were her laundry, straddled the front seat, and slammed the hatch. In a moment I was surrounded by engine noise and the rattle of the weather shell.

Well, one more for the debit side of the ledger. “I’ll pay you back,” I said as loud as I could, doubting it was loud enough.

She turned in the saddle, passed a quick glance over me, and said mildly, “Good God, with what?”

We crossed the Ravine. My silence was fulminating; I don’t know what hers was. She drove quickly through the hollow-hearted warehouses, briskly past the copper-roofed riverbank palace and surrounding defensible wasteland of the Whitney-Celestin families. Pedestrians and bicyclists kept out of her way, except for once, when someone belatedly driving a pair of goats toward the market claimed right-of-way. Her Creole was idiomatic, at least on the obscenities. I felt the back end buck and slide on the gravel as she braked. Something flickered on the surface of a gauge in front of her. “Oh, shut up,” she said, and whacked a button with her index finger.

The trike was, by its nature, intensely valuable; but it wasn’t beautiful. There was a wealth of dust and dirt under the weather shell, and cracked rubber and scarred paint, but that was all. Everything in my field of vision had been repaired at least once, with varying degrees of success and duct tape. I let my head rest on the seat back and closed my eyes. The pain behind my eyebrows was dissolving now.

muscles.

~~“Do you plan to tell me where I’m going?” came the honed and honeyed voice from the front. “Do we drift like the Ancient Mariner? You don’t look like an albatross.”~~

“Well, you haven’t shot me,” I said, alarming myself. “Yet, anyway.” I opened my eyes and saw through the roof window the hard, hot sky and the ruined exterior of the Washington Hotel. “Go past the last gerbil tube and turn left.”

“I beg your pardon?” she said with delight.

“The pedestrian walkways over the streets. Gerbil tubes.”

She gave a shout of laughter. “Christ, they still call ’em that. I haven’t—” She shifted down, and the trike whined like an eager dog. “Here?”

“Yeah.” I had a moment of disorientation, watching the immense wet smile of the billboard boy on the front of the Power Authority Building sail by over my head. Conserve, by all that’s holy. You damn betcha.

“So, what do you think of the quality of life here? Are all the women strong and all the men good looking?”

Ignoring the unnerving mixture of good humor and ferocity in her voice, I said, “I take it you’re new in town.”

“You can damn well give it back, then. I grew up here. But I’ve been gone ten thousand miles or seven long years, whichever comes first. Give or take what you will.”

For the first time it occurred to me that my chauffeur might not have all her outlets grounded. “See. Stop when you get to the fence.”

“I’d be a fool not to,” she said, and I realized she’d downshifted as I spoke. “Unless I wanted to end up coarse-ground.” I leaned forward for a view out the windshield, and found the red-rust chainlink edge of the Night Fair before us. Quiet now, it waited for sunset. “What is that?” she asked, nodding at the fence.

I chose understatement. “A market. I can get out here.”

I expected her to pop the hatch. Instead, she cast a leisurely eye over the neighborhood. I was close enough to see the shallow lines at the corners of her eyes, the dense black sweep of her eyelashes, the precise shape of her lips. Her earlobes were pierced, but she wore no earrings. No rings, no cosmetics, no ornaments at all; no personal touches, no sentiment. She reminded me of my apartments.

As if she’d heard the thought, she asked, “You live here?”

“No,” I said blithely.

When it became clear that I wasn’t going to add to that, she killed the engine and looked over her shoulder again. I smiled at her. In defiance of logic, I felt worse now that the noise and vibration had quit. “My heavens,” she said at last, “a fount of information. Loose lips sink ships.” I heard the late afternoon sun over my head open; she lifted the roof off us, swung out of the driver’s seat, and offered me a hand. “At least, come tell to me your name.”

Likewise your occupation, and where and whence you came, I thought, my startled mind dropping the rest of the quote into place like a puzzle piece. Not mad—or at least, endowed with an interesting education, as well. I avoided her hand by pretending I needed both of mine to get out of the back seat. By the end of the process, it was true, and I leaned against the trike while my vision cleared. “Sparrow,” I said.

“Come again?”

“The name. And since you’ve had your will of me . . .”

“Hardly that,” she replied, laughing. But I thought I saw a flash of pleasure in her face, to find that

knew the beginning of her quote. “Besides, mine’s debased coin. One of sixty or so is hardly the same as one of a kind, an original, a work of art.”

“Do you think I was born with a name like Sparrow?” I said, pretending mild offense.

She swung her leg back over the front seat, her face good-humored and distant, and thumbed the starter. The tri-wheeler broke alcohol-scented wind, loudly, and came back to life. Then she looked up at me, her eyes half-lidded, her mouth half-smiling. “We’re all born nameless, aren’t we? And the name we end with has only peripherally to do with our family tree.”

I turned to go.

“Wait; I forgot,” she continued. “You were saying you’d pay me for this?”

Well, of course she’d remember. Things could only get worse, after all. “That’s the Deal.”

She took another up-and-down survey of me. “What’s that holding your hair back?”

It was a braided leather thong with a few jet beads in it. I’d forgotten it in my first inventory, but it wouldn’t have mattered—it wasn’t fair coin for a ride from the Bank. “It has a lot of sentimental value,” I lied, reflexes kicking in anyway. “I couldn’t part with it.”

“Yes, you could.” And she held out her hand, palm up.

Once again she’d chopped through the rituals of the Deal with brutal simplicity, razored the pelt of civilization off an already dubious exchange. I felt mauled. I yanked the thong out of my hair and dropped it into her hand. Her fingers closed over it with disturbing finality, and she nodded. “Just so I’ll treasure it always. Goodbye, Sparrow, and watch out for the cats.” With another vivid smile, she closed the hatch.

I watched until she was out of sight, and even until the gravel dust had settled. Then I went carefully around the corner to Del Corazón, to cadge five minutes on the phone from Beano.

1.1

A SURFEIT OF TRANSACTIONS

Del Corazón smelled of frangipani and leather and Fast Luck incense, and was suffocatingly warm. On any day but Friday, it would have been closed against the midday heat; but some business is best done when other people sleep. Del Corazón was open, if not precisely for me.

Beano was an animated wax statue in the dim light of the shop, gleaming from a fine, even coating of perspiration. Sweat darkened the front of his tight red tank top like blood. I asked my boon.

He laid both his clean white palms on the glass counter, between a tray of glow dermapaints and a rack of patent leather garters, and gave me a long pink look through ivory eyelashes. “Nothing’s free,” he said softly. Beano never raised his voice.

I felt a sudden, incautious relief. I had escaped out from under the fairy hill and returned to the real world, safe at last. Nothing was free. Even Beano was a danger I was used to. I gathered my strength and flung myself into the fray. “Well, and five minutes on the phone is nothing. I’m doing you a favor, in fact. Beano, *mi hermano*, if I’m on it, it can’t ring.”

“Ain’t but a hundred phones in the City. Don’t ring very often.”

“Yes, but I know how you hate to be disturbed on Fridays.” I twitched my nose like a cartoon rabbit. “Mmm. What an interesting new smell. Almost like . . .” I let my voice taper politely off. *Graceless*, I thought, *but functional*.

Beano accepted three currencies: hard money, flesh and blood, and knowledge. He preferred the first two. I mostly used the third, often pointed in the opposite direction from the one he had in mind. Usually with a lighter hand, but I felt like the saint with all the arrows, and it was undercutting my judgment. (I’d given him money, too, when I had it, when I could afford it. But never the second alternative, never skin. Never.)

“Almost like what?” he said.

I pursed my lips. “No, forgive me, it couldn’t possibly have been. And if it was, I’m sure it’s perfectly legal.”

Beano leaned down and opened the back of the display case. I watched his hard white hands, the backs veiled with sparse but surprisingly long white hairs, their nails long and thick and filed sharp, moving delicately over the merchandise. It was like watching a cave spider. The fingertips passed over knives with blades inscribed in Spanish, over a necklace made from the stuffed skin of a rattlesnake, fangs intact, over a pair of engraved silver clasp bracelets welded together, back to back, their inside curves studded with little spines. I looked away.

“Here,” Beano said, and set something on the counter. I turned back. It was a little box, covered in dark red velvet and lined in black satin. Ranked neatly on the satin were six bone needles, their bro-

ends still flanged and rough and recalling the joint they'd once been part of, their long points polished bright. "Do you know what these are for?" Beano asked.

"No."

"Do you want to know?"

I swallowed, because I couldn't help it, even though I knew he'd see me do it. "No."

He slammed the cash drawer and I jumped. He clenched his hands around the edge of the counter, the muscles in his forearm showed like rope. "Someday," he said, "maybe I'll show you."

"Does that mean I can use the phone today?"

Beano smiled slowly. "Sure. Sure you can."

It's possible to miss things you never had. Pay phones, desk phones, cellular phones, hotlines in Russia—they're taken for granted in the old movies. Whatever it took to get a phone installed in those golden days, it must not have been as complex as the City's system of influence, blackmail, and graft. And it must have resulted in something better than A. A. Albrecht's collection of scratchy party lines.

The phone was on the wall of a room behind the shop, where the extra stock was stored. The thing on the front of the rack was made of paper-thin black leather and lined with rose-colored silk. The material was so light that it hung shapeless, unidentifiable. A garment, probably. But thin leather cords hung from it at intervals, and a strand of wire coiled down from one side. I tried not to look at it as I listened to the ringing of the phone on the top floor of Sherrea's building. Eight rings. If no one answered—well, I could try again later. But that's not how I felt. My pass with Beano seemed to have used up all my insouciance; suddenly it was desperately important to hear Sherrea's voice, even if it was telling me to go to hell.

And at last, the life-giving click. "Eyeah?" Not one of her neighbors, but Sher herself. She sounded gritty beyond what the noisy connection would account for. Of course, I'd woken her; it was barely past noon.

"Sher? It's Sparrow," I half shouted into the tube.

"Mmh? Whaisit?"

"I need a reading."

"Ah, shit. Whattaya think, I took a Hippocratic oath?" There was a moment's pause before she said, "Call me when the moon's out."

"Sher—" My mouth opened to dicker, to offer her all the inducements, mythical and real, I could call to mind. In that moment, they seemed frail and faded. I shut my mouth and tried again, and found myself saying, "Sher . . . please?"

There was another crackling pause. "What's wrong?" Alarm and suspicion mixed in the words, with suspicion leading.

"I just woke up on the river flats. Between now and nine-ish last night, I have a big gap where my life used to be."

Silence on the other end. She bargained hard, but not as fast from straight out of bed. I could hear her trying to figure out how much my desperation was worth. "Uh-huh. And I can help."

"Maybe," I answered as the dickering impulse reasserted itself at last.

"*Chica*, this is gonna cost you."

"I'm good for it, Sher."

"What do you mean," she said ominously, "you're good for it?"

"One of the things that happened while I was down is that my money went away."

"Get some more."

"It's, ah, in my other pants. Which are locked up in the Night Fair."

“Where are you calling from?”

“Del Corazón.”

“What’d you give *Beano*?”

“Threats and promises,” I answered.

Sherrea said some things in a language I didn’t recognize. Then she said, “It’s a long walk, and you deserve it. Or are you planning to scam a lift out of some poor bastard?”

Twelve blocks and four flights. Well, after that nice restful ride . . . “I’m walking.”

“You’re gonna owe me, Sparrow. Got that?”

“Yes, I’ll owe you.” I felt suddenly, grovelingly, indecently grateful. Another debit for the ledger—but to Sherrea. I’d never known Sherrea to deal in flesh and blood.

“Get here in less than twenty minutes and I’ll cook your flat ass for breakfast.”

It took me thirty. I followed the route around the east flank of the Night Fair, where spindly locust trees cast a little shade. Sometimes I had to cling to the fence, when the curve of the world became too much to climb. Sometimes I just sat on the curb and panted and clutched my head. Two little black kids with the copper earrings of the Leopard Society threw fragments of paving at me. I scooped a handful of dust out of the boulevard plantings, spit into it, and closed my fingers over it, chanting random, bastard Spanish, Creole, Lao. Then I stared at the kids. They made a great show of nonchalance, but they left. Which was nice; what was I going to do when I blew my handful of dust at them, and they didn’t turn into lumps of clay, or get leprosy, or whatever they expected?

Away from the Fair, the traffic was heavier. I dodged bicycles and the occasional motorbike, as well as pedestrians more determined than I was, which was all of them. A silver sedan with smoked windows and the insignia of a northside greenkraal nearly put an end to my problems out in the middle of LaSalle. I jumped for the center island as the tires squealed. All’s well that isn’t over.

And all the while I watched for a filthy tri-wheeler, listening for its clotted growling. I had no idea what I’d do if I saw it.

Sherrea’s building was smooth dirty yellow tile and rows of too-small windows, with a door that used to be glass and was now rather more practical armor-gray steel. It was built in the last century when prosperity must have excused ugliness. The halls had once been blank and identical, the stairwells featureless tubes of concrete block and iron stair rail. Now living ivy worked its way toward the sky at the top of the stairs, where someone had turned a trapdoor into an open skylight; wisteria cascaded down to meet it from the roof. Things peered from the leaves: grotesque carved wooden faces, old photographs of people who all seemed to be smiling, faded postcards. A painted snake twined up the stair rail: red, black, and yellow on the first floor; blue, gray, and green on the second; purple, green, and orange on the third; blue, red, and yellow on the fourth. Fat candles stood in form of floor lamps on every landing.

The stairwell doors were numbered, as if the residents wouldn’t be able to keep track when they came home. The “4” was an elongated green man in a loincloth, one arm held out and bent. By the time I climbed that far, I was glad to see him. The hall behind him was painted with frescoes of vacant Roman courtyards. Sher’s door was the middle of a fountain; I knocked on a painted nymph’s tummy.

Sherrea had her face on, and layers and layers of black and purple clothing. The astral colors of sorcerers, she’d told me once. Her black hair was wet and had been combed flat to her head, but that wouldn’t last long. There was a cigarette between her white-painted lips, smoked nearly down to the filter.

Her big dark eyes got bigger when she saw me, and it made her look almost as young as she was. “Sparrow. Blessed goddamn Virgin,” she said around the cigarette. “Get in here and lie down.”

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