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### The Collective (A Novel): Part One

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The Collective (A Novel): Part One

A Thesis Presented

by

JEFFREY S. DAVIDSON

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies

Bridgewater State University

Bridgewater, Massachusetts

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in English

Approved by:

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## **Introduction: Forget everything you know about Santa Claus ...**

The novel in draft, “The Collective,” is the result of an eight-month effort, which began in one of Professor Bruce Machart’s writing workshops at Bridgewater State University, spring of 2016. It sat for a couple of years of minor edits and revisions while I waited for the opportunity to once again work with Professor Machart. What follows is the first of four sections of the novel, book one of four if you will. The first eighty pages of a significantly longer work, this thesis lays the footstones of a dramatic defamiliarization of the Santa Claus myth. I’ve turned everything about the myth around, made it more realistic in terms of working-class environs, attitudes. I’ve brought it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the years haven’t been kind. The Santa of “The Collective” has outgrown children’s stories.

The myth has Santa as jolly and fat, humble and kind. “The Collective” doesn’t see him that way. The first change is his appearance. He’s sloughed off the extra pounds, traded in his white locks for a crewcut, and given up on boots and red suits. Within “The Collective,” he is known as Nicklaus, and Nicklaus isn’t doing anything for charity or joy. The annual gift-giving extravaganza isn’t an act of kindness but rather an orchestrated attempt to lull us into security—who wouldn’t trust a man (is he a man?) whose sole purpose is the joy of others? Nicklaus seeks power and money, dominance. Getting in his way can be fatal. And the elves at the North Pole don’t sing while they work. Elves under his control aren’t working for love of humanity but simply to survive within a caste system. The majority of them are overworked, highly policed, underappreciated, and undercompensated.

Nicklaus has plans. Luckily for the human race (and others) he also has enemies. Some are natural, lifelong enemies. Others are come-lately enemies, created by Nicklaus’s own cruelty

and strict adherence to his doctrine of dominance and control. To achieve his goal, Nicklaus has amassed a criminal empire called the Collective.

Set in contemporary times, the events of the story unravel beside and beneath society as we know it over five days during Lent, from Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of March until St. Patrick's Day, the following Tuesday. Each of three key historical days during this period—Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, the Ides of March, and St. Patrick's Day—center on plot developments similar to the benchmarks that cemented them in world history, including a murder/kidnapping, a betrayal, and the chasing of evil from an island.

The story follows three major character arcs as viewed from the perspectives of five focal characters. We have a former government operative kidnapping a Canadian citizen at the behest of the Collective. We have elves running afoul of the Collective. And we have humans doing the same. However, the consequences for elves and for humans diametrically oppose one another. For the elves, repercussions could range from torture to death or to expulsion from the Collective and its relatively carefree life—it's not a life they are directly in control of, but their needs are met. For the humans, the consequences are the exact opposite: although Santa is well known and beloved around the world, the extent of his organization is still a secret to most who have no connection to it. Wayward humans present a risk of exposure, so they must not be allowed to leave. Instead, if captured, they will be adopted—absorbed into the Collective against their wills—and forced to leave their own worlds behind, including the recently widowed Sarah Bishop, who would be forced to abandon her two young children.

Plot lines are drawn and colored in this thesis, the players made flesh. We meet all of the major characters, save one. We learn their backgrounds, get to know and appreciate their foibles. We delve into their world deeply enough to form an attachment, only to see the first act end just

as tensions have reached their peak for the first half of the manuscript. In the remaining three sections, each of equal length to the thesis, the plot carries forward with each character arc and brings each to an unexpected climax.

In the beginning, the goal was not to besmirch the enduring and endearing legend of Saint Nicklaus. Rather, the goal was simply to experiment, to ask myself a question that has acted as catalyst for many a work of fiction: “What would happen if...?” What would happen if a place known to be devoid of people actually had people? Or what would happen if a place’s history was a lie? Presuming an unknown answer to these questions, I worked simply through deduction. If a place known to be devoid of people actually had people, those people would have to be living in secrecy. And if the history of the place where they lived was a lie circulated widely among those who did not live there, it could only be to preserve that same secrecy. Nomans Island, Massachusetts, hosts many of the events within the story. The question that came from all of this was: Who would create a false narrative about Nomans so they could hide a society on the island? The answer was obvious but slow in coming: Santa. Santa would hide a society on an island with a false history—a society, on an island with a false history, that produces the gifts he delivers each Christmas. Of course, the follow-up question was: What happens next? The answer? Only “The Collective” knows.

To properly contextualize, we must first retrace the steps to the story’s origin—in this case, “The Collective,” not the Santa mythos—primarily, how my discovery of Nomans Island and the accompanying mystique resulted in locating one of Santa’s workshops there, followed by discussion of methods of characterization, that is: where I found the archetypes for characterization—individual, inspiring sources—how I developed them, and their uses as secondary and tertiary characters within the narrative. Basically, we’ll cover the methods

required to bring this drama to life on the pages, allowing for proper illustration of the craft involved in the creation of individual moments, as well as the manuscript as a whole, comprising both that which is within and without of the thesis that follows.

### **Where No Elf Has Gone Before, or Location, Location, Location and Other Clichés**

Even origin stories have an origin. Ours begins with Nomans Land Island, whose own origin traces as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Wampanoag Sachem Tequenoman. Named first Martha's Vineyard by Bartholomew Gosnold in honor of his daughter, a name later transferred to a better-known location, the small, boot-shaped island has hosted rum runners, pirates, and one crazy guy named Crapo who stalked my Wood-family ancestors relentlessly over a four-day period—Bridgewater has a Crapo Street (Brannen "On the Ground"). The name, Nomans—pronounced nó-mins or nó-muns—has long been a source of conjecture and speculation but is generally accepted to be derivative of the name of the aforementioned sachem, Tequenoman. Ghost stories prompted by the howling Atlantic winds have haunted it since Europeans first claimed the island. It has been home to sheep herds, fishermen, and a man who envisioned it as the most exclusive sportsmen's resort on the east coast, if not in all of North America. Unfortunately for that man, the United States Navy needed to borrow it. Later, the Navy claimed eminent domain, and Nomans hosted explosions as a naval bombing range. This use stripped away nearly all evidence of human habitation. In 1996, the range was decommissioned and turned over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to become a wildlife refuge. Today, Nomans lives up to its name. Human presence is strictly forbidden except under the guidance of the FWS (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

This newfound starting point brought only questions with it. What if the wildlife refuge was a cover up? This led, in turn, to visual, historical, and cartographical explorations of the island. In *Bird by Bird*, Ann Lamott suggests calling upon friends as well as strangers to help familiarize oneself with locations that writers might otherwise know nothing about (75). In the case of the thesis, this was satisfied by a boat ride and research.

J.R.R. Tolkien needed a whole world in which to build his masterpieces—*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. So through some machination of imagination, he created Middle Earth and peopled it with elves elegant and intelligent, people short-sighted and selfish, dwarves reclusive and greedy, as well as ringwraiths, trolls and hobgoblins. Many of these races are adaptations of existing myths—trolls have “lived” under bridges in Europe for centuries, and there seems to be no specific definition of “elf”—my manuscript attempts to repair this oversight, but it’s likely that too much time has passed for my definition to gain any traction in literary circles.

Like Tolkien, the world was not big enough for J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter. While Rowling didn’t need an entire planet, she did need to make adjustments to the one she had, enough to make one check twice while passing platform 9 at King’s Cross. Rowling built a world parallel to our own and peopled it with many of the same myths as Tolkien, as well as werewolves, shapeshifters, and mudbloods.

For my own work, and without the wherewithal to build a complete world, I have worked along the same model as Rowling. The world of “The Collective” exists within and beside our own, one that, if not obviously fantasy, could just as easily exist without us knowing, as does Rowling’s wizarding world. Nomans Island, among others, houses one of Nicklaus’s thirty-plus workshops where preparations are ongoing for the Christmas holiday all year, year after year.



Nomans was the perfect location around which to center such a tale. With the last recorded visit being in 2011 (Brannen), enough time has passed to allow for something more secretive and sinister to grow. According to H. Porter Abbott in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, a setting should reflect or enhance the characters who people it or are associated with it (160). As the desolation and danger of Mordor reflect the wickedness of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the Shrieking Shack becomes the perfect hiding place for Rowling's escaped murderer, Sirius Black, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, so the isolation, deception, and hidden dangers of Nomans reflect the qualities and shortcomings not of its inhabitants but of its leader, Nicklaus.

Its history as a bombing range provides the ideal cover. None should be surprised at the presence of explosives in the water around Nomans. In fifty years of bombing, surely there would be some devices that, undetonated on deployment, would still be considered live ordinance, likely to explode at any given time with only the slightest disturbance. For this reason alone, Nomans Island is currently off limits to all, a law enforceable by any and all regulatory authorities that witness a trespass. It also provides a seamless excuse for the presence of a protective perimeter of underwater mines, which, in "The Collective," encircles the island like the moat around the keep at River Run in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series.

Likewise, if Nicklaus Kringle is going to build a global empire in the world of "The Collective," he will need more support than simply the few square miles provided by Nomans. In keeping with the classic myth, his primary workshop and Collective headquarters are at the North Pole—again, reflective of the reclusive persona he projects to the world—far from the eyes of those who might scrutinize. For the North Pole, I have chosen Cape Morris Jesup, Greenland, specifically because it is, longitudinally, the northern-most land on the planet, and

because its proximity to Alert, Nunavut, Canada, the northern-most permanent settlement in the world (“Canadian Forces”). This settlement, the town of Alert, comes into play after the events depicted in the thesis.

Additionally and also representative of both Nicklaus’s and the Collective’s secrecy, other locations have been designated as workshops for the Collective. The still-condemned site of the 1986 nuclear meltdown, Chernobyl, is one. The deepest reaches of both the Congo and the Amazon hide workshops, as do the inhospitable sub-Antarctic forests and grasslands of Cape Horn.

What’s more, the atmosphere of the Collective itself reflects Nicklaus’s attitude. Elves who cross the line face a variety of possible punishments, the worst of which is expulsion. They have long lived in a culture of disguised oppression. Horror stories abound of life outside of the Collective—when, in reality, it is not so bad—an effort on Nicklaus’s part to keep the workers in a state of fear and near enslavement.

Setting, suggests Burroway, “can serve as a mirror of emotion” (172). As the isolation of Nomans serves to reflect the attitudes of Nicklaus, so it reflects the attitude of what is, ostensibly, the story’s primary protagonist, Kashkaval (more on him later). Not having felt at home in the Collective since his transfer to Nomans, Kashkaval views the island’s isolation as imprisonment.

Further, Burroway notes that many artists “have observed that the function of literature is to make the ordinary fresh and strange” but that they will remain familiar if the writer has done the job properly (177). Ultimately, all aspects of location in “The Collective” do seem oddly familiar to the reader, even if they are populated with elves and murderers and psychopaths. As John Gardner writes in *The Art of Fiction*, the world of the tale must be relatable to the world of

the reader: “However odd, however wildly unfamiliar the fictional world—odd as hog farming to a fourth-generation Parisian designer, or Wall Street to an unemployed tuba player—[readers] must be drawn into the character’s world as if [they] were born into it” (43). In this way, one character’s feelings of isolation and another’s feelings of protection become familiar, universal truths that appeal to many readers.

### **Building the Perfect Person, or Playing God on a Minor Deity’s Budget**

“What has it got in its pocket?” (Tolkien 75), Gollum asks, contemplating Bilbo’s trickery. Bilbo is on to something, it seems. “Ask yourself,” Lamott suggests of for the initial stages of character development in *Bird by Bird*, “What do [characters] carry in their pockets or purses? ... How do they move? How do they smell?” (45). Initially, this wasn’t something I’d thought of when developing the players within the manuscript, but as time went on and the task required the development of their mannerisms and idiosyncrasies, an idea very similar to this came into my mind on its own, inspired by a suggestion from John Casey. When characterizing, he suggests in *Beyond the First Draft*, “It often helps for the writer to play the part. Imagine the character’s life offstage. What does she eat? How? What does she fear? How does she dress? ... Out of this imagining will come a hundred details, and usually one of them will provide a life-giving drop” (25). In Lamott and Casey, the concepts complement each other—they’re so similar that for years I’d been subconsciously following both bits of advice without any idea to whom to attribute it. But I had always tried to build my characters on this model. When I finally hunted down the sources, I was rewarded with my first mental image of Saint Nicklaus, Nicklaus Kristov Kringle—the name itself is an accounting, a short list of the names Santa has known for the duration of the myth—trim and fit, a close-cropped beard, reminiscent of Patrick McGoohan

as Edward the Longshanks in *Braveheart*. Next came a black suit and military style haircut. From there, the images seemed to flow.

Lamott also suggests allowing characters to develop themselves (46), which seems a rather slapdash method of development. If she is suggesting to choose a character's overall persona but not to be afraid to deviate, she woefully under develops the thought, but nonetheless she's giving good advice. That's what I've done with all of the characterizations in "The Collective"—defined them, then let the situation and their personalities as I've imagined them dictate how they respond to each dramatic situation. It's possible, however, Lamott is suggesting that a character is meant to develop itself based on its role or some other factor—she does overtly say that characters will tell the author what they'll do: "Whatever your characters do or say will be born out of who they are, so you need to set out and get to know each one as well as possible" (46). This seems tantamount to waiting for a blank canvas to paint itself. Instead, I created the outline and then chose the colors, as it were, based on how they adhered to or were absorbed by the canvas.

For my purposes, Lamott's most useful advice is about the pockets, the movements, the smells—comments echoed by Casey. What neither provides is any real consideration as to the sources of characters. As someone new to fiction, this is a real mystery. We, as writers, build a character in our minds, but the aforementioned experts make no suggestions as to where to look for characters. Common sense, on the other hand, offers the perfect solution: look for them everywhere. Characterization comes in hand motions, in overheard phone conversations, in sides of acquaintances and friends that one never thought to imagine, or in the look of an eye the exact second an insult is delivered ... or rebuked. The experts didn't tell me that we develop characters through real-life observation followed by imaginative, artful incorporation. I had to figure that

one out all on my own because, even in character-driven fiction, the characters don't just appear as Lamott seems to suggest, rather, they have to be built, cultivated, perhaps raised as it were, as one might a child born from some real-world prototype or progenitor.

There are generally three types of characters that I have discovered: composite characters, real-life characters, and wholly fictional characters.

For the composite characters—and where to find them—Janet Burroway and Ned and Elizabeth Stuckey-French suggest that characters can be completely invented but that the best bet is to create them from friends or acquaintances, usually combinations thereof—known as composite characters. I refer to them as “soft characters” because of their inherent malleability, they're easier to mold. By creating a character from multiple sources, there's less urgency to conform to a specific way in which a character acts. With characters like these, suggests Burroway, et al., one should make a significant change (physical or emotional) or highlight some key aspect of the source's personality. By doing this, the “alteration forces you to re-see [the character], and so to see more clearly” (134).

Burroway also writes that physical movements can account for further character description or development (118). At one point, the character called Kashkaval makes “jazz hands” (Davidson 69), indicating, in my own estimation, his sense of out-of-place humor during a time of extreme stress, a coping mechanism. Another character, seen through Kashkaval's eyes, makes “air quotes with chubby little elf fingers” (Davidson 10), another suggestion as to Kashkaval's perspective on the world—a bit of cynicism mixed with humor that I have attempted to attach to this character at most times. Other characters are marked similarly with noteworthy traits or physical tics or possessions they keep with them.

In the thesis and in the further manuscript, an elf named Chey Fidda Birchbow is one character who is marked by, and therefore associated with, something he carries. “Fid” is a combination of two real-life friends: a rich kid with whom I served in the Army, and a neighbor with a penchant for always thinking things through. As characterized, the Fid derived from the former knows, as does everyone else, that he is the golden boy who will never get in trouble, no matter what he does. The Fid derived from the latter almost never loses his cool no matter the heat of a given crisis. Were we to look in his pockets, we would find a silver money clip and an old skeleton key connected to an even older chain—an item borrowed from Sean Connery’s character, Jim Malone, in the 1987 film, *The Untouchables*. Incidentally, Malone also lends a bit to Fid’s personality. His movements are elegant and minimal, his smell clean.

The elf character Chetta Whitetree draws her persona and mannerisms from still other friends. As fiancé to Fid, it’s appropriate that one of her primary sources is married to one of Fid’s primary sources, my neighbor. This is whence Chetta derives her strong will, her protective instinct, and her physical beauty and strength (though the latter is not yet evident in the thesis portion of the manuscript). The other primary source for Chetta is a coworker who is a school teacher. From this source, Chetta receives compassion and kindness, eloquence, and slight naiveté. Both sources have seen to her intelligence working from both sides of the brain. Her mannerisms and speech patterns are carefully crafted combinations of the two sources—sometimes mimicking one, sometimes the other. Chetta carries lipstick and breath mints. Her movements are gentle (except once, post-thesis, when she smashes one of the focal characters in the face with a tea kettle), her smell that of fresh lavender.

In contrast to the soft characterizations, we have what I refer to as “hard characters”—those characters based directly on real people. In thesis and manuscript, there are five of them:

the elves Kashkaval Malentius and Rembley Trimfield; the humans Lehigh Jenkins and Sarah Bishop, and Nicklaus Kringle.

To put it bluntly, Kashkaval Malentius is pretty much his creator, me. Kashkaval reflects the more short-sighted and more short-tempered version of me from years past, a throwback to my twenties when selfish focus overwhelmed common sense and understanding. If there's ever a moment for overreaction, Kashkaval will be the first to do so. You'll be pleased to know that, in the end, Kashkaval gets what he deserves. Unfortunately, since the thesis is only one-quarter of the manuscript as a whole, that passage is unavailable at this time. His pockets contain a folding knife, lint, and a ring reminiscent of a lost love. His movements are animated and spontaneous, his smell that of sweat and yesterday's whiskey.

Both human characters were inspired by people from my job as a bartender. The woman, Sarah Bishop, is my best recreation of the strongest woman I've ever met, a woman whose husband died after years of battling brain cancer, leaving her at age 31 with two very young daughters. Her response was to channel her grief into a charity in his name, which raised over \$50,000 in its first six weeks of existence. I have tried in every passage involving her to recreate her strength, speech patterns, and mannerisms in my characterization of Sarah Bishop, and in every sense, the character is meant to honor to its source. I began writing "The Collective" only a few months after her husband's death. If there were ever a woman who could take on the task that I've set Sarah Bishop upon in this manuscript, it is the woman who inspired Bishop's creation. Bishop carries Chapstick and chewing gum. Her movements are dignified, her smell clean and simple (until she ends up in the Atlantic).

Similarly, I have modeled speech patterns and mannerisms of Lehigh Jenkins after a fisherman from Sandwich, Massachusetts. Jenkins is physically strong and mentally capable—

but he's more intuitive than he is smart, wiser than he is educated. Like his inspiration, Jenkins knows the world only as his experiences have taught him to. He questions things that don't seem to make sense, and he calls bullshit when he sees it. He considers his responses but not his reactions. He carries a cigarette lighter, a motorcycle key, and condoms. His movements are deliberate, his smell that of salt water.

The last of the hard characterizations are Nicklaus Kringle and the Lord Colormaster Rembley Trimfield. Nicklaus runs the Collective. Trimfield oversees elf and workshop operations. They are not equals. Trimfield answers to Nicklaus, but only in the case of workshop productivity. Trimfield is, for the most part, autonomous. As the manuscript was drafted primarily during the election year of 2016, these two characters developed in direct relationship to my interpretations of the two major-party candidates: Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. I leave it to the reader to decide which is which, but they have since turned out to be composites of the two. No other inspiration (of which I am aware) flavored their development.

Purely fictional, purely functional characterizations in "The Collective" exist solely to further both plot and narrative, yet they are not throw-away characters, and not all of them are flat. Some develop. Others die. Some do both. Some do neither. Like extras in a movie, their parts are as small as Barliman Butterbur, the keeper at the Inn of the Prancing Pony who gives the hobbits their first understanding of Strider in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien 153), or Mr. Borgin, the shopkeeper of Borgin and Burkes, an antiques shop specializing in dark wizardry, who facilitates a conversation for Harry Potter to overhear regarding an antagonist's dark past in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Rowling 51-2). These characters are the narrative equivalent of single-use plastics. Once they've served their purpose and are no longer



useful, they pass on so to speak, but during their short lives, they have had profound impacts both on the reader and within the narrative.

Other characters are as large as the singing savior, Tom Bombadil, in the same Tolkien novel, whose character arc seems an aside from the plot, but, nonetheless, he saves the hobbits from what would otherwise be certain doom. And over the course of the *Harry Potter* series, the wand maker, Garrick Ollivander, plays an important role in the defeat of Voldemort. Neither Tolkien nor Rowling developed the respective character any more than was necessary to make them understood, yet both play key roles.

Similarly, in “The Collective,” several background characters force changes in the plot. The superintendent of the Nomans Island workshop appears only briefly in both thesis and manuscript, but his choices create the primary conflicts in two of the three major character arcs. Without Submaster (superintendent) Harmonus Flimly, the Kashkaval arc never develops, and the elves likely never feel the need to turn against the Collective. And without him, Bishop and Jenkins can take their time leaving Nomans Land Island. In his pockets, a reader might find used tissues, dried and crinkly, and breath spray. His movements would be self-consciously calculated, his smell that of stale cigar smoke dusted (lightly) over with expensive cologne.

Another background character allows for the conversation that informs the reader of conflicts with one of the focal characters. Ostensibly violating a golden rule of narrative craft, I have used this character as the recipient of dialogue as exposition, describing the causes of Kashkaval’s ill treatment during the prologue. However, Burroway and the Stuckey-Frenches disagree. “If the telling of a memory *changes the relationship* between the teller and the listener, then you have a scene of high drama, and the dialogue can *advance the action*” (79).

From Tolkien to Rowling, both before and beyond, no character is complete without its creator. A part of the author bleeds into each character. At the beginning of the animated series *South Park*, a disclaimer warns that “All characters and events in this show—even those based on real people—are entirely fictional” (Parker). This needs to be said for today’s America, lest someone think that the personality being satirized actually said or did what the show depicts. But the disclaimer has meaning beyond the obvious. Regardless of how true the creator of a character tries to remain to its source, the actions and thoughts attributed to the character are the creator’s interpretations of how the person in question might act, guesses mostly. Even were I to write a fictional story with myself as the main protagonist, I could only guess how I would react in certain situations. The author’s need to interpret his character sources and guess how they might react in a situation renders all representations of character as composites unless they are completely fictional, which might not even be possible. Even wholly fictional characters will be imbued with traits borrowed from someone real, whether that person be a friend or acquaintance or, simply, a moment or a person viewed from afar. As Abbott says, “No character can match the complexity and changeableness of people as they really are” (136). Essentially, the author’s job is to imagine his or her way around these difficulties of characterization.

It’s not enough, though, to have interesting, exciting, even unique characters, nor is it enough to consider a list of things they might keep in their pockets, or what they smell like if one should pass them in the aisle at the market. None of that solves anything if no one likes them. This is true for the narrator as much as it is for the characters. Lamott writes that likeable characters and narrators are funny or they have a certain clarity of vision, but more importantly, the reader likes being engaged, as though the narrator or character is talking just to them. We achieve this by bringing a real person (or elf) to the page. Readers don’t want perfect characters

on their page any more than they want perfect people around them. Perfect is plain. “Perfect,” according to Lamott, “means shallow and unreal and fatally uninteresting.” The only fun thing about perfect people is the pointing out of flaws. Instead, “a person’s faults are largely what make him or her likeable” (50). When a reader senses a real person—someone likeable, with flaws and foibles they can relate to—they feel the character. They feel for the character. With that investment comes understanding that just because they like the character, they won’t always like what the character does. Generally, transgressions that the reader disfavors indicate a character’s tragic flaw. The more tragic the flaw, the more it will trigger in the reader other strong emotions. Flaws do not only attract a reader, they make characters relatable, sometimes instantly, whether the flaw is an entertaining one or a depressing or unpleasant one. Kashkaval, one of the manuscript’s primary protagonists, can’t let go of the past. He’s so focused on how things have gone against him and on his desires for revenge that he can’t even take responsibility for his part in all of it. Kashkaval’s story is one of growth, something that everyone can relate to in one sense or another. Hopefully Kashkaval is a character that sparks empathy within his reader. Hopefully, the reader will laugh with him and cry with him and cheer when he gets his comeuppance, cheer because they hope he learns from it. Gardner indicates “sane humanness . . . wisdom, generosity compassion, strength of will” (8-9) as admirable traits in the writer and in the written, but in the case of Kashkaval and several others in “The Collective,” it would serve no purpose for them to begin the story that way. Often, the narrator furnishes the reader with “more or fewer details . . . in a more or less direct way” (Genette 162), a cat-and-mouse effort to keep the reader involved by giving only as much knowledge as needed. It will not do to give away too much too soon. As the characters grow, so the reader does with them. And, seemingly, as the narrator gets to know his characters, so does the reader.

**Conclusion: ...But Remember This**

In the overall creation of people (and elves) and locations upon existing places (and more), the experts and their teaching have only made a difference in retrospect. During the composition process, all facets of the manuscript just rolled out. When it came time to develop these concepts, some came easily and others with much effort, but never during the initial phases—up to and including the completion of the first draft—did the advice of experts enter my head. It was during the revision process that their guidance proved meaningful, very meaningful in Machart’s case, who also provided me with the foundation knowledge to be able to write the manuscript in the first place. I think this indicative of the creative writing process as a whole, at least for me. No matter the knowledge, skill, or talent the writer possesses, the creative process demands its due, as if it is saying, “Put the words on the page—you can tidy them up later.” Only once a chapter was drafted could I go back into it and correct my mistakes. It was only then that the methods of craft could be rightfully observed and that the knowledge that they present could improve an already written (but not necessarily completed) work.

In *On Histories and Stories*, A.S. Byatt suggests that she would approve of my abomination of the Santa myth, at least in principle: “The novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has always incorporated forms of myths and fairy tales, working both with and against them” (130). She says, “The reasons for the truth of the tales is the human truths they reiterate plainly – the fate of beauty and ugliness, fear and hope, chance and disaster” (129). And that may well be the crux of it. “A writer,” says Lamott, who, despite my earlier disagreement, has much of import to share regarding the creative process, “paradoxically seeks the truth and tells lies every step of the way” (52). It’s my hope that readers will find some truths in the lies that follow.

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## The Collective

### *Prologue*

Behind the barbed-wire gates of the education center, down dark stairs and through a twisting tunnel of stones and arches, an elastic lab suit flashed white in the dim glow of a desk lamp. Blue gloves reached down to the naked body on the gurney, flashing a penlight across an eye pulled open. The pupil constricting, the hand switched on the floodlight above, a cone carving the darkness, illuminating steaming breath beneath goggled eyes.

The mattress long gone, the gurney's age hid beneath blood dried the color of rust, frost creeping along its corners and gathering in the creases where the floor meets the walls. Refrigeration units hummed a gentle vibrato, softly rocking the room like a crib. The body lay motionless, the cone constricting to shine only on the bearded face, barely perceptibly breathing.

There was light, but mostly darkness curled softly around him, a soothing embrace, snuggling itself into the folds of his skin like some otherworldly amniotic fluid. Kash floated in its warmth, blissfully disengaged from the world. His mind wandered Prague's city streets, the mournful tune of the bullfinch's whistle, the library, the subterranean pubs and parlors of the Mestempode—the "city under"—the musky flora of Miranda's perfume.

The sun disappeared in a burst of gold, illuminating the bellies of crimson clouds cascading into black. The river Vltava murmured approval, trickling along the rock wall beneath them like giggling children peeking at lovers from behind a tree.

The setting sun told Kash it should be getting darker, but somehow the light grew brighter.

The voice crashed in, baritone, accented, serrating the birdsong at sunset: *Tell me your name.*

Kash pulled Miranda closer, her neck muscles soft under the pressure of his lips parted gently, tasting her. Her platinum locks tickled his cheeks.

The voice imposed itself again: *Spirit of hartshorn*, it said. *Wake him.*

As the ammonia bit into Kash's sinuses, Miranda began to slip from his grasp. He held on, but she became lighter and thinner until her body wisped away altogether as smoke on a breeze. He clung to nothing. A blinding white swallowed the sunset. The birds and burbling riverbank gave way to the echo of breaths. Kash couldn't tell whether or not they were his own.

The light filled his eyes. Even when he shut them—and he scarcely knew when that was—the glow cut through his eyelids, a spotlight. The hair on his arms stood rigid in the chill of the room. He shook, knowing he was cold but also remembering something of fear—an emboldened voice in demand, pain, exposure—before his escape to the she-elf.

He tried to attune himself to the bright cold. Was it winter? He was on his back. The cold permeated from beneath him as well, metal, pressed against his naked back. He tried to cover himself, but his hands wouldn't do as they were told. His arms strapped tightly to the gurney, his hands responded only in ghostly motions he couldn't control.

Warmth crept onto his feet, a blanket, covering to his ankles.

*Tell me your name.*

“Miranda,” he tried to say. He wanted to ask where she was. She had just been here in the glow of sunset, her heart reaching out through her chest and into his own until they were one.

*Wrong.*

He tilted forward suddenly, almost to a standing position, but his feet weren't touching the floor. The warmth slid away.

*Your name.*

“Ma ... what?” he tried.

*Wrong.*

A mist spit onto his cheeks, tiny pin-pricks of ice dribbling through his beard to rest on raw flesh. Waves of water gushed out, seizing his chest. It repeated in pulses, a heartbeat, each wave gripping his chest like icy tendrils of the kraken. His body responded by sucking in what air it could, unable to exhale until it stopped. And then the next pulse would come. Each wave seemed to last minutes, the water threatening to wash away consciousness as well as sanity. He tried to count his breaths, but each time, he could only remember that it had happened before. He shook, his entire body a hiccup, tightening and jerking. For want of air, the lamp started to darken in his eyes.

The light never flickered.

A wave of heat walked down his body, blowing hot air. And then it stopped.

“Please,” he said.

*Your name.*

“Please,” he said again. “So cold.”

The light flicked off, with it the heat it radiated.

*Wrong.*

Brightness flashed through his head like an explosion. Something struck him, something more solid than a hand. The light sparked back on. One eye saw red, filling until he blinked, feeling it ooze, wet and stickily, into his ear. Blood. He thought it was his own.

The water came again next, tightening his chest and leaving him gasping. He tried to place himself in time and space. He knew his body, and the she-elf by the riverbank, he knew her too. He had been in Prague. Where was he now?



*Tell me your name.*

“Ma...” he started, stuttering. Every time he said anything, pain had followed. “My,” he thought he said, catching himself about to repeat Miranda’s name. “My name is Kash,” he said.

*And what else?*

He knew his body. He knew his past. He was a software engineer working for the Collective and stationed at the Prague workshop. “Kashkaval,” he said. His last name was a secret. Was he supposed to tell them? He had another last name, he thought, the one the Collective knew.

*There’s more.*

“Malentius,” he said, his voice cracking and weak, “Kashkaval Malentius, I am Kashkaval Malentius.” But he knew there was more. He was the secret child of the Crooked-Oak, but he mustn’t tell them that, the pride of the Thunderborn, first of his kind.

*Why are you here?*

“I don’t know,” he said, knowing it both a lie and the truth. He had been out in the city streets, in the public eye, risking exposure. Is that why he was here? His family name could get him tortured if they knew it, but surely they didn’t know, or they would still be asking for more information. Wouldn’t they?

*Wrong.*

This time, the light didn’t go out. He caught the brick out of the corner of his eye before he saw the flash and felt the sickly crunch of eggshells wet upon the pavement. Someone was screaming. Kash’s own throat burned like too many cigarettes, his mouth a cardboard fixture frozen in a grimace. A second hit, a third, a shard from his broken eye socket stabbed into his eyeball, threatening to force it from his face altogether.

His mind dug through the past for a reason before the voice asked again. It wasn't the girl. It wasn't his job. He'd never been one to let the rules tell him how to live. What had he done that they might know about?

*Why are you here?*

"Because, fuck you?" Kash asked, not having anything else to offer. He tensed, every muscle straining to the point of rupture, waiting for another sledgehammering from the brick.

The water came first. The brick struck the other side of his face as he concentrated on breathing. Between the scream and the cold clutching his chest, the light started to fade between the flashes from his face being pummeled. It slowly receded from view like he was looking at it while backing down a hallway. And then it went out.

He saw Miranda, beckoning him to the riverside. Sunset in the city still climbed down her back. He reached to her, but the river held him still, its current racing across his bare body. Light crept up behind her again.

He woke—spirit of hartshorn again. Nothing had changed: the blood, the cold, the searing pain in his face. Bones grinded each against the other. He imagined shards flung in all directions like chips of concrete flying from smashed cinder blocks. Each movement, even one so subtle as breathing, caused him to gasp, which started the cycle all over again.

*Why are you here?*

"I promise that I really don't know," he said, bracing himself for the pain to come.

It did not.

He lost feeling in his legs as though they were no longer attached. Only his torso was cold now, making the burning pain of the broken bones something of a comfort, or vice versa. He didn't know.

*You've been in the restricted section of the library. What did you learn there?*

“Dwarves,” he said.

*No.*

This time, the blue gloves gripped his face, pressing bone upon bone, contorting and rearranging them as a child might the pieces of a puzzle. Kash watched the determined face beneath the goggles, his own eyes reflecting back at him. He imagined peeling the flesh from those bones. He imagined cracking them one after another, pliers and a hammer in his hands. He couldn't tell if he still screamed. He couldn't tell if he still breathed. The light flashed and faded.

Soon, he passed out again. And soon, the hands woke him.

In the end, he told them everything he'd learned, words spilling out of his mouth two and three at a time: the library, the girl, the encyclopedia, the race he was not supposed to know existed.

When it came time to make promises, he made them all, willing to submit to anything to make the pain stop. Through slits of eyes, he watched the gloved hands guide his own to a sheet of paper—white he suspected but red through his eyes. He signed in a scribble the contract they said would save his life.

Through bloody eyes, he watched the oxygen mask descend over his mouth. He breathed deeply and slowly. The nurse leaned over him, her mouth moving, but no sound reached his ears. The chill flooded his veins. Propofol. *Sleep*, he thought.

Kash closed his eyes.

## *The Collective: Part One*

### *Kashkaval Malentius*

Kash woke shaking, a gasp trapping his breath somewhere inside. The memory played out in his dreams as it always did. He gulped whiskey from a flask on the bedside table, stepped into an ice-cold shower, the chill bringing him fully to life. As the water warmed, he warmed to the thought of the coming day.

Half a flask later, he stepped into the hallway. Night could not arrive soon enough. In the dark, he could hide, disappear, become numb to the onslaught of life. He could forget. Darkness offered first haze and then sleep. Sometimes, his dreams brought him somewhere akin to heaven. Other times, the torture dreams returned, but even torture dreams were better than life, a nightmare of hate begetting drunkenness, begetting more hate.

He limped his way through the day on unspiked coffee and too many carbohydrates, excuses to take naps, and a determination to get as drunk as possible once nighttime rolled around. It was Friday after all.

Tiny Town Tavern stood at the center of the underground marketplace. It was the only bar on Nomans Land designed for elves. Chairs, tables, bar top—all the proportions had been chosen based on the average elf height of about four feet.

Kash walked in after dark, fetching a seat at the near corner of the bar where he had a clear view of the door, a habit he'd taken to since he'd transferred from Prague. He'd been at Nomans for about fifteen years, as he remembered it. After his reconstructive surgery, he'd woken up on the island with no clue that a place named Massachusetts had ever existed, but he considered that fair because Massachusetts had no idea that he existed, nor did Massachusetts

have any idea that the island they thought was a bombing range—Nomans Land—was really one of Santa’s workshops.

Halfway through his second beer, most of his companions showed up, and the group retreated to an alcove table. The drab Belgian dark woods reminded him of so many places he’d liked in Europe, and the alcove itself, being a few steps up from the barroom floor, reminded him of his favorite bar in Prague, which was a good thing on good days.

Five friends had arrived, including a new guy that had been coming around for the last month or so—Flimly, an elf who wore his rank colors even when he wasn’t in uniform. He listened a little too closely, laughed a bit too loudly. For someone just a few months short of retirement, he seemed in a big hurry to make a bunch of close friends.

Retirement ... Kash had once been a gold-clad member of the elite on the track to retirement, a tried and tested company man for the Collective, same as Flimly was now. Kash called him “Flimsy” when he cared to address him at all, but he usually tried to just give him his space. When they did interact, Kash mostly wanted to rip his face off.

“Here’s to the Collective,” Fid said, lifting his glass to the cheers of his friends, the keyring and chain he always carried laced between the fingers of his beer hand, his other wrapped around his girlfriend, Chetta—who Kash had a crush on when they’d first met but had since outgrown. Fid had both wooed Chetta and somehow become the de facto leader of the group. Kash had never bothered to question it.

“Fuck them,” Kash replied in the silence of his friends’ drinking. And then he raised his own cup and drank.

“Another toast,” said Gelly. He lived up to his nickname, one massive—by elf standards—gelatinous blob. Kash laughed at his oversized kids’ pajamas, his version of formal

wear. Spiderman clung to the rolls of fat tumbling over the beltline of Gelly's jeans. For the longest time they'd all pronounced his name with a hard G, but one drunken night, Kash had compared him to a jelly roll, and the G was forever softened.

"Let's toast to the human race," Gelly said. "Without them, there's no Collective, and with no Collective, there's no easy money for all of us."

"Fuck them too," Kash followed. He'd started feeling the ale and the sips of whisky all day. In his peripheral vision, he kept catching Flimly staring at him, like he was studying. Too much more of it, and Kash knew he would probably say something. He looked over at the company man, thinking, *Even on a Friday night during holiday, the bastard is wearing his company colors.* Kash eyed the red badge pinned to Flimly's vest. He had once outranked Flimly. His gold ranking had been the second highest rank, beneath green. But with his arrival at Nomans, his rank had been downgraded to the lowest, indigo. He sipped his beer, shifted his gaze. Dwelling on that line of thought would end up with him mopping the bar with the company man.

As he'd expected, the thoughts acted as conspirators, pushing Kash to make his case with Flimly, but, exercising what little self-control he had, he turned to another section of the group. He started to barge into their conversation, but he made the mistake of looking to his side to see that Flimly still watched.

Atoms split in his head. "What the fuck are you looking at, company man?" he spat, satisfied with the way the other's eyes went white.

"Lighten up," someone said. "You're freaking him out. He's just new, and let's face it, Kash, you are one to garner attention."

“Yeah, fuck him too.” Kash looked across the table. “Yo, you, company man,” he said. “What’s your fucking name? Doesn’t matter. Don’t come around me with your company colors and your fucking ‘company first!’ and ‘Collective forever!’ attitude. I don’t want to hear how service to that rapist has treated you so well. I hope that when you retire to the Collective you get a seat right next to that fat, raping fuck, so you can hold hands while you burn in hell together.” Kash lunged over the table top to grab him.

The elf leaned out of the way just in time. Kash’s hand swiped the air where Flimly’s collar had been just a second before.

Gelly jumped between them, his hands hot on Kash’s shoulders. Kash spun one way and then the other, the beer slowing his motions as strongly as it had fueled his emotions.

Fid got in the way too, his back to Flimly, blocking Kash from coming closer. “Don’t worry, Flimly,” he said over his shoulder. “Kash just likes to act mean.”

“Doesn’t look like an act,” Flimly said, though he didn’t look scared enough for Kash’s liking.

Gelly pushed Kash back to the bar. “You really have to lighten up, Kash,” he said as he ushered him toward a pair of open seats at the far end. “If he tells someone about this, they’re going to send you to therapy.” As he said the word, he made air quotes with chubby little elf fingers. “They say therapy is the code word the Collective uses for torture. Elves who go to therapy never come back.” He paused then, looking and motioning to behind Kash.

Kash turned to see the head of the workshop police force, Rookmaster Villings, his stocky frame about the same size and build as Kash, big in the shoulders, strong in the arms.

“Good thing that ended when it did,” Gelly said. “If he’d come in when you were trying to fight Flimsy--”

“I would have had to kick his ass too,” Kash interrupted.

The rookmaster stepped up to the bar not far from them, leaning in to speak to the bartender, and then, with a pass of his eyes over Kash and Gelly, he turned and left with the same air of confidence he’d walked in with.

Kash was drunk to the point where he really didn’t care what happened with Flimly or the rookmaster. “Hmmp, elves,” said Kash, putting his beer down to light his pipe. “Did I ever tell you about my time in Prague?” He had to look down to look Gelly in the eyes.

“Only that you didn’t like it,” answered Gelly.

“Right, and I never told you why I left,” Kash continued. He’d gotten the pipe going. He stared into the smoke rings like they were taking him back in time. “Prague is a magical city. And by that, I don’t mean that it’s beautiful and ancient and rich in history, which it is, but lots of cities with workshops have that. What’s different about Prague is that the city really is charmed. After dark, spells cast on the city keep us elves from human eyes. No other city has this ancient mystery like Prague does. The museums and churches all have elf entrances. We could go there any time after dark and stay as long as we wanted, libraries too. I fell in love with that city. I fell in love *in* that city. She worked at the Mestska Knihovna, the city library. I started going there just to kill time on nights off. Prague’s social center was all underground, and after a while, you just want to go out into the air, even if it’s just for a little while. The workshop is under the city, so it was just a few flights of stairs and you were in the most beautiful place you can imagine.”

Kash looked down to the ring on his right hand, a simple, sturdy thing, its tarnished silver leaving a black streak around his finger. “I bought her this,” he said, holding it up for Gelly to see. “We met one night when she was working. We hit it off just fine, and I started going back



night after night. She spent as much time as she could with me, but it was work—the kind of work normally reserved for retirees with the Collective, the kind of shit Flimly will be doing in a few months. Anyway, since she was working, I had a lot of time to browse the collection. I read everything I could get my hands on. Well, one night, she shows me to the special section. I thought it was her way of saying we were going to have sex. Unfortunately, it really was a special section of books. It was a special section of books reserved for special people and high elves and other mystical beings. She let me in and told me she'd be working alone for a couple hours and wouldn't be able to see me. That was our first kiss too.”

He stopped for a minute to take a big sip of beer. He ordered another one. “I found this title called *An Illustrated History of All God's Creatures*. I swear the volumes were a foot thick each. Have you ever seen an aurochs or a dodo?” he asked, not waiting for an answer. “Neither have I because they've both been extinct since well before we were born. And then there's our people. I wanted to know what it said about us. So I started paging through it in that order: aurochs, dodo, elves. Aurochs are these big, beastly things, like angry buffaloes on steroids. Dodos are these dumb-looking, flightless birds with bodies too big for their legs or heads. And elves, elves are these tallish, pale-skinned, three-fingered and fair-haired folk who live in the forest. And I thought, you know, that couldn't be right. We're elves, and we're neither tall nor uniformly fair-haired, you know? We have four fingers, not three. So I start flipping pages, and I come back to this section on dwarves that I'd passed. According to this book, there's only one kind of elf, but there are hundreds of types—species, I guess—of dwarves, all of 'em short, and all of 'em with four fingers and a thumb, and all of 'em tireless workers.” He stopped here, the visions of the moment filling his head. He rolled the ring around in his fingers, puffing on the pipe and swallowing gulps of beer.

“Anyways, on the second entry about dwarves, I see this picture. It could’ve been me. If you wore a beard, it could just as easily have been you. Above the picture, it says ‘Buttafuori Dwarf,’ and in parentheses, ‘domesticated.’ Well, I read up on them, on us. I got through the whole history. We’ve been a slave race our entire existence and not a one of us knows it, except me. So just as I’m finishing up, Miranda comes back, tells me I got to go back to the public collection. Awhile later, she gets off of work and finally shows me the special section I’d been hoping for earlier. I get back to the workshop before daybreak. I get this blacksmith, Gonagol, to make the ring. I was a software wrangler back then. I spent that day tiptoeing across daisies because I was in love with Miranda for sure. I couldn’t wait to go back to the library and see her that night, but in the back of my mind, the dwarf thing kept gnawing at me. I go back at darkfall, and she’s not there. The jerk at the counter won’t tell me anything. I start feeling like a real yutz, you know, thinking who am I to think a girl that beautiful could love me, and that kind of crap.”

He had lowered his voice to the point that Gelly leaned in, their heads almost touching. “Feeling the fool, I found this bar on Jilska in Oldtown. It was a place where a lot of the higher color grades went for a few pops. I knocked the beers back like they owed me money and finally, I start talking to some old fella, an old fella like that shit Flimly reminds me of. So after I vented about the thing with Miranda, I got real comfortable and went ahead and told him about the dwarves. On the way home, I pass through the library and there’s Miranda, but it’s almost daybreak. She kisses me, says she’s sorry about the shift change and I don’t care. Miranda’s in my heart and I forgot all about the ring, didn’t remember until I was back at the workshop.”

“So wait,” said Gelly, “a software wrangler, you were gold?” like he’d never imagined Kash had any brains. “Software wranglers write code and steal code and they have to be geniuses or something like them. Shit, Kash, I never realized you had a career.”

Kash cut him off with a nod of affirmation. He said, “Gold that morning when I left Miranda, indigo the next time I went to bed. The old man in the bar went right to the behavior commission and reported me. They grabbed me on my way to the workshop floor. They asked all kinds of questions. I answered. Then they uttered the one word no elf, or dwarf, wants to hear: re-education.”

He stood to stretch, realized he was a little too wobbly, and sat back down. “Therapy, re-education or whatever you want to call it, is everything you imagine it is. Oxygen deprivation, water torture, bricks, and brass knuckles, they did a real number on me. Hell, half the bones in my face are metal now. The reason I don’t talk about Prague is that I don’t like to remember it. I was in a great place with a great girl. I had just about everything I could have wanted. They didn’t like my politics, so they beat me into submission and took it all away. They sent me here, Nomans Land. This is not a workshop. This is a prison.”

Kash looked back to where his friends still drank. A sceptic gaze lingered on Flimly for a moment before he scanned the rest of the group. There were an ex-girlfriend from years past and the data analyst on the verge of hooking up, or so it seemed. There were the two he only knew by association. There was Hervve, mop-haired, lisping Hervve, who Kash had met in childhood and even beat up a couple of times before adulthood found them both kinder and wiser. But his eyes came to rest on Chetta and Fid. Fid, the golden boy whose job kept him only two steps removed from the most powerful elf on the planet, he sat with an arm around Chetta, mindlessly playing with an ancient key on an even older chain, twirling it and dangling it and shifting it from hand to hand. Kash looked long, thinking how an elf with as much responsibility as Fid could carry on his daily life like he didn’t have a care in the world.

*Lehigh Jenkins*

Captain Jenkins—Jenks—dropped the scallop rake over the side of *Santiago*, rigging and wires rattling, dragging loops and chains and rubber across a rusted metal rail and chipped grey deck. The sea sucked it in. The winch whirred as seventy feet of steel cable fed the rake to the bottom. Feeling it catch, Jenks pitched the engines to six knots, looped the wheel in place, and stepped aft of the wheelhouse to watch his handiwork.

Behind him at the bow, his passenger stared through field glasses at the island ahead of them. They'd just rounded the northeastern corner of Naushon Island, traveling the Sound between it and Martha's Vineyard, the largest Massachusetts island. Their destination lay just a few miles south of the Vineyard, a small island known as Nomans Land.

Sarah Bishop had approached him in weeks past, scheduled him for her days off to look at islands near Cape Cod. They'd covered the Elizabeth Islands, jutting like a spur from the Cape, when she'd noticed Nomans on the chart. Jenks hadn't thought to suggest it because it was off limits, a wildlife preserve. Where that wildlife would come from was beyond him. It lived up to its name. No man lived there. No man even set foot there for fear of being blown up by unexploded bombs all over and around it. He had no desire to get too close.

He removed the scally cap from his horseshoe-hair crown and scratched. The drag had finished. He reversed the winch to pull the rake in, and as it rattled up, he swung it around to the side of the boat where, without slowing the boat, he dumped about four bushels of scallops into buckets. Nomans Land peeked around the edge of the Vineyard. Bishop stood still at the bow, leaned against the gunwales.

"What do you think?" he asked, approaching Bishop. "Could this be the place?"

Bishop had told him of dreams haunting her the last few months, of regularly waking swathed in sweat or trembling, sometimes both. Each of them, she said, had taken her to an island. On the previous trips, she had shared little of the significance of it with Jenks, mostly only telling him how she felt like she really needed to find that island.

“That’s the problem,” she replied. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to know which island is the one. The only vision I have is of a campfire beneath a tree, but there’s something about it that tells me I have to find it. It’s on or near a bluff. I almost think I’m going to recognize it by the way it feels, not the way it looks.”

“Well,” he said, “there’s only so close I can get you. I hope your feelings have long fingers.” He had told her earlier in the week about Nomans, made her understand that there was no way they could approach it or land on it. To be on the safe side, he reminded her of all this. He could see her hopefulness wither as he spoke. He read it in the corners of her mouth and in the furrow in her brow, but she continued on as though it hadn’t.

Jenks adjusted the steering wheel to give the trailing edge of the Vineyard decent clearance. He opened the front wheelhouse window to the cool sea air. Bishop leaned against it.

She stayed silent a moment, sullen, speculative. She scanned the horizon every few seconds, seeming to come to rest each time on the island.

Her husband had passed away the previous summer, leaving her with kids to raise alone. Jenks thought about his father’s death a few years back and knew that he didn’t know half of what Bishop was going through. Her “soul mate,” and “best friend” had been constant references both over the last few weeks spent together and in the years he’d known her while her husband had still been alive. He’d watched from a safe distance as she repeated his condition to her concerned bar customers about one tumor being removed after another. He’d always felt a

degree of empathy for her, but she always seemed to be a rock. Now, her vacant stares off the bow on weekend trips, the bedraggled look in her eyes, and the listlessness in her movements had combined to create for Jenks a new image of Bishop. She was still a rock, certainly, probably the strongest woman he'd ever met, but even the strongest suffered when the eyes of the world weren't watching.

“I see him in it every time,” she said. “He’s always by a fire beneath a tree. Sometimes, I can’t get to him. Sometimes, it takes all night to get to him. He just stands there beckoning me. It’s like he can’t move.”

She raised the field glasses again, looking toward the approaching island and then at the sea beyond it. “This island has one thing none of the others have had,” she said, pointing. “The sea beyond it is wide open. And in every dream, regardless of what happens, there’s always this profound sense of nothingness, emptiness. It sticks with me when I wake and I want to stay forever in bed, but I can’t. I have the kids and work. It ends up having the opposite effect. I put so much energy into quashing the emptiness that once it’s gone, I can’t wait to get through the day and back to bed so I can see him again in my dreams.”

She turned away from Jenks as she finished speaking, but not before he saw the tear streaking down her cheek.

Jenks again adjusted the angle of approach. The island was in clear view of every south-facing beach on the Vineyard. A holiday weekend with spring a week away, the Vineyard would be packed with visitors. There would be plenty of people around to call the Coast Guard if they thought a boat was getting dangerously close to Nomans—landing or approaching the island wasn’t just ill-advised, it was illegal. If the Coast Guard came along, the trip would end

immediately. As they rounded the southwestern tip, Jenks aimed for shallower water. Bishop wanted time to take pictures and get a really close look. She needed it, she had said.

He set *Santiago* on a gentle pace while they leaned into the arc they would take past the island. The sandy shore reminded him of his hometown on Cape Cod, where, like here, sand gave way to gravel and then to stones as he traveled east. Golden bluffs loomed over him from fifty feet above the beach, threatening at any minute to lose their composure and cascade into the Atlantic. Beyond the beach, crisp winter wind swept across marches and into piney hills, sea grass swaying under its influence.

Bluffs breezed past slowly, 50 feet away, maybe less. The depth finder had them in thirty feet of water. Ahead, Jenks spied a series of smaller, grass-haired bluffs, one that looked like something was moving beneath it, another with what looked like a footpath at its base. The woman saw it too.

“Slow down,” she said, and again. “Slow down.” She had her camera out, a nice one with a lens like a telescope. Jenks imagined the shutter snapping back and forth, logging Nomans one frame at a time. “Oh my god,” she shouted into the noise of the diesel engine. “Can you see this? I think there are footprints.”

Jenks checked the depth, still in the twenties, and then slowed to an almost stand still. He leaned from the wheelhouse to look where she pointed. He admitted, but not aloud, that she was right. They looked like footprints.

“Can we get closer?” She leaned far enough over the side to make Jenks nervous.

“Not closer,” he said, but to appease her, he slowed the throttle even more and angled the boat away from the incoming tide. “Could they be animal tracks?”

“I don’t think so. What kind of animal lives on a bombing range?”

“This place has been a wildlife preserve for 25 years,” he said. “I’m sure something lives here.”

The depth finder beeped, a built-in warning to let Jenks know they were getting toward the shallows. They had drifted within thirty feet of the shore. “We need to make some space between us and land,” he said as he eased forward on the throttle. But as he looked up again and back toward the way they had come, he noticed the sandy bluffs were gone. Instead, rocks lined the shore, jagged and jutting into the surf. He turned, “Bishop,” he said, pointing behind them “are you seeing this?”

She stared at it as well. “How?” she shouted. “What? I have pictures of the bluffs.” She snapped pictures of the rocky ledges, moving back to the bow as she did. Jenks spent a few very expensive seconds staring before he realized that he’d turned them back toward the west and the tide had put them in the shallows. He looked at the depth finder. They floated just a foot above *Santiago’s* six-foot draw. The tide pushed them toward landfall. He could see the bottom in places now. Or things on the bottom.

As he tried to turn them to face out, he felt the clank as much as he heard it. It was all the warning they got as the transom disintegrated behind him. What remained of the stern jackknifed out of the water. For about a second, Jenks lay half-conscious across the open wheelhouse window, watching Bishop fall into the water directly beneath him. He lay parallel to the water as the boat stood perpendicularly out of it, then coming down like the water was rock, hull crumpling on impact.

Jenks couldn’t move. His ears rang, a thousand tiny bells going off at random. A mixture of diesel and smoke burnt his nostrils. He opened his eyes, feeling his own body and limbs for damage or blood or broken bones. He found nothing. *Santiago* rolled to his right while water



slowly consumed her from the stern forward. Four feet had already gone under. The rear crane and pulley were gone. Life jackets and parts of the deck burned to his left. From the front, a ruptured tank spit fuel into the water. The diesel would dissipate before it could catch fire he hoped.

He put a foot on the gunwale to steady himself to look for Bishop. Relieved to see her both conscious and swimming toward the boat, he snapped loose the clips of the survival box on the roof of the wheelhouse and threw it toward her. It landed and stayed afloat by design.

“Use that to float. Head toward shore,” he yelled and dove in. He spit out any air his lungs had been holding as the frigid water wrapped around him like an ice bath. His boots slowed him down, but growing up on the water, he’d swum constantly in all temperatures. In seconds, he caught up to Bishop. She held the box by a rope handle. Her breath came in gasps.

“Are you okay?” he asked. Jenks felt for the bottom with his feet and was happy not to find it. Bishop panted too heavily to answer him. The pallor of her face told him she was likely in shock. He put his arm around her. “Listen,” he said, teeth chattering clicks between words, “I want you to just hold this handle with both hands and try to buoy yourself out behind it, like lying flat as possible. I’ll do the swimming. You just hold on and breathe. Try to breathe. I’ll get us to shore.”

He took the opposite handle and kicked. The tide had already moved them a little ways, and in a minute they were clear of the wreckage of *Santiago*, which had completely submerged.

Jenks swam them in until he had no choice but to put his feet down. He stood out of the water above the waist. He pulled the box and Bishop until she was lying on the sand. Then he helped her up and walked her to the leeward side of a stone bank not far from where they’d thought they saw footprints, though the bluff itself seemed to have disappeared. He went back

for the box and dragged it to her. Inside he found a blanket to wrap her in. He checked her limbs—he worried that she might have been hurt in the fall—and he poked and prodded her until he was confident that she didn't face anything worse than what he thought was shock, which would be bad enough. He would build a fire as soon as he made contact with the Coast Guard. He tried the satellite phone but couldn't get a signal. His own cell phone had gone down on the boat. If Bishop had one, it had probably fried when she hit the water.

He checked the box for whatever else might be useful: rain jackets, military-style rations, fire bricks, an electric match, toilet paper, ponchos, a flare gun with six flares and a hand-held Jericho flare, canteens of purified drinking water, water purification pills, a coil of rope, parachute cord, a hand axe, a small, inflatable raft not big enough for the two of them, and a shoulder bag that would carry most of it.

The sun warmed and dried them some, but their clothes clung to them like frigid papier-Mache. He leaned against Bishop—to share his body warmth with her—while he strapped the axe next to the shucking knife on his belt, and tied the canteen straps together in pairs. He put the rest of the items in the bag, save for the jackets, which they wore, and the raft, which he wasn't sure if they could use.

He fed Bishop water and some chocolate from one of the rations. Her color came back. After about an hour or so behind the bluff and after several more unsuccessful attempts at the satellite phone, she said they needed to move. Jenks agreed.

“I think we need to be on the north side of the island,” he said. “Wind is from the south. If nothing else, we'll be able to get out of the wind.”

“It'll probably help the phone signal too,” she added, looking up at him as she rose. “I don't feel too great.”

*Jamus Kringle*

Jamus Kringle let the window shade spin open, flooding the room with morning sunlight reflected off Nunavut's snow pack. He wiped steam off the window and looked out. It hadn't snowed in days, but the wind kicked little flurries off fir trees, and the mountains had provided a lazy sunrise.

He pressed his hand against the log wall, warmed by the woodstove only on the surface. Beneath that surface warmth, the subarctic chill held the heart of the log as it did the cabin. The cabin stood in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by woods and snow and mountains whose name Jamus didn't know. He'd planned it this way. Anyone hoping to get to him would first have to find him. And here, in a wildlife preserve not far from one of Santa's workshops, halfway between his Toronto workhouse and the Collective's North Pole headquarters, discovery seemed unlikely. He waited only for sunset and a courier sleigh.

In the corner nearest the fire, he'd curtained off the bed where his guest slept. He'd kept her sedated since the night before, about twelve hours. She'd wake on her own shortly, when Jamus would have to calm her and feed her. After that, he'd have to put her to sleep again.

Standing at the bedside, he swept aside the satin black of her hair, admiring the sharp, high cheekbones and triangular face. He turned her face to look at it. *If I had been choosing my own bride last night, it would have been you just the same*, he thought.

Jamus decided that the woman should wake and eat. He had the day to prepare her for travel, knowing that he would need her asleep again before then. She started coming around when the bacon had cooked and the eggs dropped into the grease. He heard rustling at first and then a gasp. He wore a lab coat over his suit shirt. The presence of the lab coat calmed most women in almost any circumstance. Once he broke the news, the coat wouldn't matter anymore,

but it made for easier introductions. He also had an IV solution on a slow drip into her arm for when he'd need to sedate her again.

Eggs ready, he carried the plate to the bedside. Sliding the curtain aside and then closed behind him, he smiled and sat down at the edge of the bed.

The woman, Vanessa Tam, had received an Ivy-League PhD before age 25. She graduated directly into a tenure-track position at the University of Toronto, and she spent her spare time volunteering with the children at Sister Magdalene of the Holy Cross, the orphanage where she'd been raised. Looking at her in shadows cast by the fireplace, he retraced his plan as it had unfolded so far: months of watching her, learning her patterns, setting the trap, and springing it. Her boyfriend had gotten in the way. Jamus regretted killing him. But had the man not been in the apartment, he'd still be alive. She had few friends, no pets, and no car. She wouldn't be missed until spring break ended in nine days.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, offering her the paper plate and a flimsy plastic fork.

She greeted him with wide eyes, an occasional flutter passing through them as though she was trying to blink away the blurriness of sleep. She considered the plate with a cocked eyebrow, her head scanning back and forth across the makeshift room created by the curtains.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Where am I? What's going on here?" She covered her eyes with her free hand, as if the light hurt them. "Why does my head hurt?"

After four Renderings, he knew how to expect her to react to the news that life as she knew it was over. This time, he'd made plans to leave the dirty work to someone else. "I'm Jamus Kringle," he said. "You fell down pretty bad last night, and I've been sent here to take care of you. Your head probably hurts both from the fall and from the sedative you were given.

We couldn't allow any risk of you suffering further damage before we knew the extent of the injuries.”

“What happened to me? Are you a doctor?” She still hesitated to reach for the plate. Jamus placed it on the bed table, careful to not come too close or make her feel threatened.

“I work for Interpol. I'm a police officer,” he said. “You've been through a lot. You should eat.”

In watching Vanessa, he'd used the gadgets and skills he'd learned in the C.I.A., specializing in high-value targets. He watched them as he had watched his guest, found weaknesses, exploited them. The Collective had sent him to the Agency, expecting him to come home when he retired. He had, dutiful son that he was, though he still freelanced both on his own and for the Agency.

“What happened?” Vanessa asked. “I remember getting home and then nothing.”

She picked up the plate slowly, looking unsure. Jamus needed her to eat. A full stomach would help minimize the sedative hangover. It would also make her lethargic and easier to deal with.

“Someone roofied your drink. You were lucky to make it home. You could have collapsed in the street,” Jamus said.

“Why would someone roofie me?” she asked.

Pulling out a picture of the man she had been dating, he asked, “Do you know this man?” The doctored photograph looked like a mugshot.

“Yes,” she said, hesitating. “That's Christian. We've been dating. He runs an insurance company.”

Jamus noticed a slight trill in her voice, suggesting that she was buying into the story.

“You saw him last night,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “We met out for drinks and he walked me home. What’s this all about?”

“I hate to be the one to break this to you,” Jamus said. Standing as he spoke, he pulled some paperwork from a briefcase. “The man you knew as Christian Barnes is a sex trafficker. He deals in the international slave trade. His real name is Edmund Woolery, and you were about to be his next victim.” He produced another picture, this one with Christian wearing facial hair.

Vanessa looked around, eyes wide, breath stuck somewhere inside. Her mouth moved as if to say something, but no sounds came out.

“The trail on him had gone cold. Then, about two months ago, he reappeared. I was brought in to find him. It’s lucky that we found you when we did.”

Tears welled in Vanessa’s almond-shaped eyes. “What happened last night?”

“We got word of his attempt on you,” Jamus said. “We captured him in your apartment after you’d passed out.”

“I thought Interpol didn’t make arrests,” she said.

The comment was a credit to her intelligence. Not many people knew that detail, and for her to pull it out of nowhere so soon after waking up was impressive. “Technically, we didn’t,” he said. “Technically, the Toronto Police Service arrested him. We only detained him.”

“Where’s this Woo—where’s Christian now?” Vanessa asked.

“The police have him in a cell, awaiting transfer for trial. He’s wanted in several countries. They’ll get him to make a deal where he’ll offer information on his network in exchange for a block on extradition,” Jamus said. “In some of the places he’s wanted, death isn’t the worst that can happen.”

In reality, Christian had been a perfect gentleman when she passed out. He had laid on the couch next to her, falling deep enough into half-drunken sleep that Jamus was able to administer an overdose without him waking up. In a few months, his body would probably wash up on the shore of Lake Ontario—hopefully, far from Toronto. The coroner’s report would show that he overdosed on heroin, and the case would be closed. He’d had drug arrests during his youth that would attest to the reality of an overdose. Jamus had also sent abusive text messages to Vanessa on Christian’s phone, including a threat to kill both her and himself.

“There’s another problem,” Jamus said, furrowing his brow.

“Oh, god,” said Vanessa, tears falling to her cheeks. “What is it?”

“Woolery was part of a huge network,” he said. “Since you can identify him, people will come looking for you once it gets out that you’ve gotten away from him. We removed all of the personal information and possessions from your apartment. No one would be able to tell anything about who lives there. And we’ve brought you to a safe house.” Jamus folded back the curtain surrounding the bed, allowing the windows and woods to come into view. “We’ll be moving later tonight to a short-term facility. Once we get Woolery talking, we can start making arrests. At that point, you will be free to go home again.”

“What about my friends, my job? I can’t just leave all that behind,” she said. She hadn’t touched the food on the plate, but she drank down a glass of juice.

Jamus reminded her that food would help, but she still showed no interest.

“Your friends will be thrilled and relieved to see you. And your job,” he said, “I can’t make any promises, but knowing that you’d been a key player in breaking up a sex-trafficking ring should encourage them to forgive you for missing a few weeks. Interpol will vouch for you if it comes to that.”

She was obviously waking faster than he wanted. He took her wrist in hand, not counting the pulse as much as feeling it thump beneath his fingers, a virile heart. Next, he waved a penlight across one pupil and then the other, watching the complex web of blacks and browns in her irises contract. His hand soft upon her cheek, her breath warming the air around his face, the basil and lime of her shampoo beckoning him closer. He'd always imagined a moment like this that ended with a kiss.

He stopped himself before he could do anything stupid. "Well," he said, forcing a smile, "physically, you seem healthier than me. How do you feel? Any nausea, are you light-headed or dizzy?"

"Like the worst hangover in the world is just getting started," she said. "My body feels like this blanket is made of lead. No nausea, but my head feels like the car that crushed it is still parked there. It's definitely not a light or dizzy feeling." She covered her eyes again. "My God, Christian..." she said. The tears really started to flow then.

Jamus watched in silence for a moment, and when they didn't stop, he took first her hand and, shortly, cradled her head against his chest until she cried herself to sleep with the help of the sedative. In the moment, he felt something unlike anything before. First, he felt sympathy for the woman. She'd passed out from the narcotics he, himself, had given her. She'd woken up to life in upheaval, and she didn't even yet have any idea of the extent of it. Second, affection introduced itself to him like a friend not seen since childhood. Growing up, his father, Nicklaus, had barely remembered his name, never came around to celebrate birthdays or achievements or, really, anything. Jamus had somehow transferred his anger with his father onto his mother when Nicklaus would show up drunk once or so a month and brutally force Jamus's mother into the bedroom. Jamus felt neglected and despised, and he had taken to blaming his mother for what he



saw as her support for the man responsible. His adolescent mind couldn't quite comprehend how she didn't have a choice. With disassociation like that, he'd never really understood a positive emotion greater than appreciation, but here he was now, cradling this woman's head and on the verge of crying for what he was doing to her. It didn't change anything. He still had a job to do, but, for the first time in his life, he almost felt bad about it.

Once she was sleeping soundly, he increased the drip, ensuring that she'd sleep all the way to Greenland.

He tried to imagine what led his father to choose his wives the way he did. At some point, the Rendering had become a scientific decision rather than an emotional one. Nicklaus had chosen wives for himself for many years, including the original Mrs. Claus. He wondered if the change was a result of bad choices or of his father's desire to focus on other things. With the growth of genetic sciences and with a hundred half-mortal children—Jamus's half brothers and sisters—studying them, Nicklaus's team would send out a picture and a name, as they'd done the previous year, sending Jamus the information to find his current guest.

Jamus knew nothing of genetic research. He only knew that, once every two years, he was given a woman's name and location, and she was to be delivered on the Ides of March the following year. The woman he stared at now was one of those names. He had met her for the first time the night before, but he had known her for eleven months previously through an array of cameras hidden in her apartment and from having shadowed her daily.

Splashed out on the pillow, Vanessa's hair framed her face. She looked serene in spite of the situation that had brought her there, a serenity that only medication or fatigue provides, one that Jamus had known well during childhood. His mother—brought into the Collective before genetic resources were available—had not been a viable vessel for motherhood. Jamus's older

brother had been miscarried. His first younger brother had never received a name, being pronounced dead in the birth canal. And the youngest of the four—he whispered the name aloud, “Jasper”—had lived only long enough for his name to be pronounced. He remembered her then, her black hair splashing out from the surgical cap as she dragged it from her head to cover her face, breathing deeply into it, like someone seeking to stop hyperventilation. She’d laid her head back to the pillow, eyes closed and looking—as Vanessa did—entirely too serene for the moment that had brought it on. Through it all, his mother had never cried except in those moments before the sedative had relieved her of her misery. On the verge of sleep, the tears would flow as they had with Vanessa.

Jamus’s eyes slipped back into focus, lingering on Vanessa. He had work to do. Closing the curtain, he took the cold eggs from the bedside, folded a spoonful into a piece of toast and ate it like a taco, wishing for hot sauce. He needed to remove any evidence that they’d been there, standard operational security, like always. They would need blankets and a heat source for the sleigh ride, same as always. He would need to prepare the intravenous solution for travel, same as always—it wouldn’t do to have to explain a ride in one of Santa’s sleighs to a woman who thinks she’s being protected by the police. And knowing that he’d already shown a weakness toward this one, the woman—laying there in the bliss of unconsciousness—reminded him now of what his mother had gone through, all of it. He wondered if, fifty years from now, a Rendering would be performed by Vanessa’s second son, a second son who’d sat idly by while his father repeatedly raped his mother and who would go on to deliver new brides so they could go through what his mother had gone through, a second son who would see his mother pass out from sedatives and emotional exhaustion the way Jamus had and not care that he was perpetuating the process, essentially, delivering his own mother like livestock. He knew he’d have to leave as

soon as possible after he delivered the woman, as soon as he'd let Nicklaus know of their arrival, and then he'd have to forget as much about her as he could for as long as he could. *Same as always*, he thought.

*Same as mom.*

*Jaravictus Villings*

Rookmaster Jaravictus Villings's internal clock had been badgering him about breakfast for hours. It spoke the growling tones of a neglected stomach. It served only to further confirm his opinion that nothing good comes of a missed meal.

Receiving messages of the arrival of the workshop's new executive—Submaster Harmonus Flimly—Villings had put an empty breakfast tray back on the stack at the workshop canteen and visited the new submaster in his office.

Formalities were observed.

The submaster's message had been about production quotas and the role of the rooks—the pejorative term for the security and police service—in achieving and maintaining those quotas. He'd given Villings a file folder with information on ten elves, Collective employees all, that Flimly had determined must be brought in for questioning.

Villings had disagreed with nine of the ten. “Chay Fidda Birchbow is the master of the shipping and receiving house,” he'd said, dropping his picture. “This one a lead mechanic, this one our finest reindeer trainer and the quartermaster's fiancée,” he said, following with pictures of Chetta Whitetree and another elf. “These are elves with families and strong ties to the Collective. They have no interest in sedition” he'd said. When he'd come to the folder marked “Kashkaval Malentius,” though, he stopped. “You won't need much to make a case with this one. He's caught my eye more than once, but the others shouldn't need even to be brought in, I think. Any questions for the rest could easily be taken care of at their residences or during working hours when they resume in the coming weeks.”

In the end, he'd lost the argument.

Returning to the rookery to carry out the orders, he learned that the submaster had already dispatched rooks to bring the group in for questioning. His stomach directed him toward the canteen for a second chance at breakfast—a plate runny with egg yolks waiting to be mopped up with dry toast, venison sausage cooked crispy on the outside, grits, cereal, juice.

Before he could fill his coffee cup, his tray went back to its place in the stack. The lights dimmed as though the generator was suddenly overworked. Speakers came to life, blaring out three short bursts of a recorded air horn. Warning lights over doors and in hallways flashed red circles, swinging from one end of the hallway to the other in repeating, dizzying ellipses.

Villings sprinted back to the rookery and confirmed that the alarm was for a security breach. He sent rooks to secure the exits on the surface of Nomans. The security feed showed a boat hitting a mine, and two human passengers swimming to shore. He left a rook to monitor their movements.

Looking for updates on the rooks who had not yet returned with prisoners for questioning, he left the rookery in favor of the housing areas. With the exception of Malentius, he figured, the elves could be questioned over lunch and then be back to their hangovers by early afternoon.

In the green hallway, where the highest ranking among the workshop lived, his rooks watched the hallways. They'd searched for the two renegades who lived there, but none were to be found.

He trekked the floors down to the indigo sector, where the unskilled laborers were housed. Malentius would be there, and if any of these elves were likely to put up a fight, it would be him. The rooks stood guard with nothing to report. Malentius hadn't come home the previous night.

Back at the gold sector, housing for the second highest ranking, he found his elves laughing over bloody captives. The fat one had been beaten unconscious. The other fared better but would also need the infirmary. Before he'd even fully digested the scene, he laid an open hand across the senior rook's cheek, his palm burning with life on impact, the slap echoing down the hall until it was eclipsed by the elf crumpling to the floor, now half-conscious himself. Villings laid a boot into his stomach for reinforcement.

He turned on the others. "What is the meaning of this barbarity?" he said to the next senior rook, his hand curling around the rook's neck as he drew him in where only whispers needed be spoken.

"We were told they were insurrectionists," came the reply. "We were told to apprehend them at all costs." As he spoke, his voice hollowed from the stress Villings willfully placed on his windpipe. He would have choked him unconscious if his sense of duty hadn't recognized the hypocrisy between his words and actions. He pushed the elf against the wall and commanded the four of them to take their captives to the infirmary. Back at the rookery, he learned that all but three had been taken in. Malentius was still missing along with the quartermaster and his fiancé.

Villings took the senior rook into his office. A transfer from the Chernobyl workshop, the elf had achieved his position as second in command because of his time with the Collective—as the rules would have it. Villings preferred to promote based on merit, but he hadn't had the choice with the transfer. Now, he opted to offer the elf a chance at redemption.

"What the hell was that all about?" Villings asked as soon as the office door closed. "Your job was to bring them to the rookery, not the infirmary."

"Submaster Villings had warned us to be on our guards with this lot," the rook responded. "They resisted, so we were forced to take action."

“I have my doubts as to the submaster’s instruction,” Villings said, “or at least your understanding of it.”

“I would not lie to save face, Rookmaster,” the rook said. “He said it in front of all of us. ‘These elves represent a dire threat,’ he said. We were to apprehend them at all costs and mete out doubly any resistance we met.”

“And what resistance merits an unconscious elf bleeding out of his ears?” Villings asked. He was confident that no answer would suffice. “Hm? Let’s hear it. What danger did the fat elf present that brought us to that point?”

“You must understand, rookmaster—and you can ask the rest of the team—Submaster Flimly indicated they were dangerous and prone to violence,” the rook said. “When we took him at the door, he had what we thought was a weapon. We all responded at once. The damage was not intentional.”

Villings dismissed him, knowing that excessive force isn’t always a conscious response. He collected his notes and proceeded to the submaster’s office to discuss the submaster’s methods.

In the rookery front office, he checked the progress of the humans and finally got his cup of coffee. Weekdays, there were always muffins or baked goods around, brought by a senior rook, but she had the late shift on the weekends, leaving his hunger to remain unsated. He gulped the coffee, enjoying the slight burn it left on his tongue. The office coffee maker had two settings: off and scalding. Spills spotted the table and tile beneath it.

At the camera array just to the right of the window into the foyer, he saw that the humans had made it ashore and were presently sitting tight in the wind shadow afforded by a series of bluffs, some fifty feet back from the water but only a few steps laterally from where they’d made

landfall. They didn't show up on the security feed, the rook told Villings, because the camera that should have been able to pinpoint them was malfunctioning. Instead, the rook had triangulated their location by using two adjacent cameras and the known location of the water's edge. The cameras had intersecting fields of vision, looking back at the inoperative camera. The only place the humans could go without being seen would be back into the water.



*Kash*

Kash had spent the night on a south-facing beach, waking confused and cold with high water lapping the shore just feet away. Details of the night had remained elusive since his rude awakening. He'd known Fid and Chetta would be in their favorite weekend destination, a cave in a cliff face overlooking the eastern shore of Nomans, where they could clearly see the sparkling Nantucket night.

They hadn't locked the wooden gate, which Kash had built for them expressly for that purpose. Panting, Kash tried to wake them.

"Get up, you moron," Kash growled hoarsely, kicking Fid's exposed foot with his work boots. "Chetta, nice tits. Now wake up and cover them." Kash tried to work his voice slowly into Fid's subconscious, finally dragging him, kicking and screaming, back to reality, where Fid covered Chetta's nakedness and looked at Kash with confused and bleary eyes.

"Jesus Christ, Kash, what the fuck do you want?" he asked, the drool of deep sleep still sticking wetly to his face.

"We have problems, Fid, real problems," Kash said, panting. He wiped hot sweat from his forehead. His hand came away streaked with dirt. "They took them, all of them. That fuck Flimly, he has to be behind this. If I find him, I'm going to do something, and it isn't going to be pretty. The fucking rooks, they dragged Hervve out, Gelly, bleeding from the fucking ears." Kash paused, still trying to catch his breath.

"Easy, Kash," said Fid, finding his pants and slipping into them. Kash looked away to save Fid the awkward duty of trying to avoid exposing himself. Chetta was awake now too, her face a mesh of frown and wrinkles. Fid walked toward the back of the cave. It looked like he

tried to distract Kash from half-naked Chetta, but he had also just woken. He probably needed to clear his head.

“Catch your breath, Kash. Start at the beginning,” he said.

“Okay,” said Kash. He focused his eyes on the foggy Nantucket morning visible in the distance. With the drying sweat, his own body odor caught his attention. His heart thumped like it looked for a way out. “The last thing I remember from last night was ripping Flimly’s shirt off when I tried to mop the bar with him. I woke up this morning beneath a bluff on the south shore. There was a fishing boat. It caught a mine and blew up. The people lived. They came ashore a little ways away from me. I bolted back to the workshop to spread the word. Alarms were already going off when I got there. I went to check on Hervve. But after running all that way, I had to puke. I used the public bathroom, just near his place. When I came out, the rooks were dragging him down the hall. He was half-dressed, looked like they might have roughed him up a bit. Three more came up, dragging Gelly. He’d had a good beating, his face all swollen, blood coming out of his fucking ears. With all the shit going on, I just snuck out of the workshop. I had just cleared the entrance and dove for the underbrush when they locked the door behind me. I didn’t know what else to do. I came here.” He jumped a little when Chetta walked past him. She had dressed and looked every bit as scared as Kash felt—her forehead lines took the shape of worry frowns, only with a sense of immediacy. He looked from Chetta to Fid. “What are we going to do?”

“I have no idea,” Fid said, running his fingers through his silver hair. “Why would the rooks take Hervve and Gelly?” He spoke to Kash, but his green eyes rested squarely on Chetta—everyone knew that she was his religion, the last thing he’d ever give up. “And why do you keep mentioning Flimly? What did he ever do to you?”

“I can’t really explain it, but I’ve met elves like him before. To your face, they’re always friendly. Behind your back, they’re turning you in to the behavior committee. He’s a company man: meat, muscle, and marrow.” Kash had to look down to make eye contact with the others. He was only a few inches taller than Fid, but both Fid and Chetta were petite little things. Kash was almost as wide in the shoulders as the two of them standing abreast.

“If the rooks are packing our friends off to therapy, it has to be about last night,” Fid said, the look on his face suggesting speculation. “I can’t imagine it has anything to do with people on the island.”

“We can’t go back to the workshop,” Kash said.

“We can’t really stay here, either,” Chetta said. “People on the island will put them on lockdown for a while, but once that problem is sorted out, they’ll come looking for us.”

Fid pulled his shirt on. “We didn’t really do anything. I say we take our chances with the rooks.”

“No fucking way,” Kash said, grabbing Fid by the arm, turning him so Kash could look in his eyes. “I’ve been to therapy before. It’s torture, the real thing. I’m not going back. They’ll beat the two of you to a bloody mess. They’ll strip your color ranking and then they’ll ship you off to opposite sides of the globe and you’ll never see each other again.”

“I don’t believe that. Why would they beat us? We didn’t do anything,” said Chetta.

“But we did do something,” said Kash. “We toasted and the words ‘fuck the Collective’ came out in front of that fuck Flimly. That’s enough. God forbid anyone heard me telling stories to Gelly. God forbid they break him and he tells them what I told him.”

“They won’t beat us all for that,” Chetta said. “Am I being naïve?”

“A little,” said Fid.

“A lot,” Kash countered. “Fid, Chetta, you both have to trust me on this one. I know we’ve been friends a long time, but some conversations have to wait for their moments. This is one of those moments, so here’s the abbreviated version: I said just the right things to just the wrong elf about twenty-some years ago, and it got me therapy. That’s how I ended up here, and it’s how I ended up indigo. I’ve never told you because it’s a hard memory to have. But, if we had a metal detector, you could hold it to my face and listen to it go off like an alarm clock. That’s what happens in therapy.”

Chetta reached out to touch Kash’s face. “Really?” she asked. Somewhere behind her look of disbelief, Kash could tell she believed him, “If we can’t stay here and we can’t go back, what do we do?” she asked.

They sat in silence a long few minutes before Fid finally sprang into action. He gathered a few things—clothing mostly—and put them in a pile on the bed. Then he sat down. “We have to get off the island.”

“How?” asked Chetta.

“Steal a sleigh?” offered Kash.

“Sleighs will be locked up,” said Fid. “The humans, we have to get the humans off the island, and, hopefully, us with them.”

“No, that would risk exposing the whole workshop,” said Chetta. “We do that and we’ll be single-handedly responsible for exposing the Collective.”

Kash smiled like it was Christmas morning. “I like it,” he said.

Chetta looked up, eyes flitting from Kash to Fid and then down to her hands. “Fid, we can’t.”

“If Kash is right, our only option is to escape,” Fid said.

“Trust me on this. If we go home, it’s torture. If we stay here, it’s torture. If we get the humans and us off this island, we stand a fighting chance. If we have to, we can alert the TV news,” Kash said. He felt something he couldn’t explain. He was scared—already he felt the thump of his heart against his chest, the clear focus of vision accompanying the wave of adrenaline through his veins. He was excited—he felt giddy at his own fear of death. In the moment he didn’t know if he should laugh or rage or curl up into a corner and bathe himself in his own tears. This was his chance to set the record straight, not the Collective’s record or history’s, but his own. He remembered the fear and the pain, but more than anything, he felt like it was his turn to torture his torturer, his turn with a hammer and a pair of plyers, and it scared him how much he looked forward to it.

He shivered, a quick one in his back. He felt the static-electric raising of hair on his arms as if he’d been rubbed with a balloon. He closed his eyes, imagining once more his own eyes in the goggles of his torturer, the futile reality of his powerlessness. It could cost him his life, or more—Miranda, if she even still cared that he existed—but he’d never been readier for anything in his life.

“I think we’re safer just trying to escape without anyone noticing, but if we’re rescued, which we kind of have to be, whoever does it is going to be more than just a little curious about us,” he said. “Might work in our favor, might work against us.”

“It’s settled, then,” said Fid. “We hole up here till dark, and then we go get the humans.”

*Lord Rembley Trimfield*

The Lord Colormaster Rembley Trimfield often lamented the lack of surprises in his life. But this night had brought one. A pilot widely known and respected throughout the Collective had been dispatched from the Nomans Island workshop. Having received word that the pilot had arrived, Lord Trimfield, feeling in the mood for a walk, proceeded to the hangar to meet him.

The primary reason for the pilot's notoriety was his engineering acumen. Every so often, the pilot, named Twooley, would unveil a new device that would spread, with his name, throughout the Collective. In years past, he'd produced a present-wrapping machine that, once streamlined, cut out much of the required December overtime. He'd invented self-sharpening scissors—another huge time saver—and, though its applications were limited, self-adhering Christmas paper. Unfortunately, the paper had failed to work with the wrapping machines.

This time, the pilot had arrived in what many were calling his ultimate creation. It was a revolutionary new sleigh design. The Lord Trimfield wasn't exactly excited to see it so much as he was curious. Like the rest of Twooley's inventions, production and distribution to Santa's thirty-plus workshops would be time consuming. In this case, the Lord Trimfield wasn't even sure if the benefits of the new sleigh could outweigh the costs of producing the staggering number that the Collective would need. And then there was the riddle of what to do with the sleighs they already had. The system wasn't broken. Lord Trimfield saw no reason to change it.

The familiar air of the hangar greeted him moodily—the smell of wet dog in streets of London slums, beneath which was the workshop where he had been raised. The memory pinched him with a touch of nostalgia, causing him to momentarily lose his focus and almost walk past the pilot and his sleigh, *Gulfstream*.

Taking a knee upon the Lord Trimfield's arrival, the pilot introduced himself as Ellamere Twooley. The elf wasn't anything special to look at—average height and weight, black and curly hair indicative of the Thunderborn—but he was exceedingly polite and exceptionally intelligent. Lord Trimfield stood almost a foot taller. After viewing the sleigh, he was forced to slacken his stride a little so that the pilot could keep up.

The sleigh looked like something from a science fiction movie. It sat low in the front, tapered, a wedge. A wind screen covered half of the cockpit and met with a retractable roof. It had a covered storage space, accessible from the front. However, the most noticeable difference that Lord Trimfield could see was the shape of the runners. On other sleighs, they served no purpose other than to make contact with the ground. On *Gulfstream*, they did as well, but they had been aerodynamically designed to assist in maneuvering and reduce wind resistance—wider than typical runners, they curved up and twisted at the rear of the sleigh, channeling the air straight out behind her, rather than allowing it to curl back up and become a drag on the forward progress.

Twooley explained all this in the corridor on the way back to the Lord Trimfield's office, breaking off his sentences occasionally to make comments on how Collective Headquarters' builders had managed to build the complex—a city, really—into first the living ice and, deeper in, into the living rock.

Inside his office, the Lord Trimfield poured out two snifters of Cognac, inviting him into one of the claw-footed chairs.

“I understand your sole purpose here tonight is not simply to woo me with your new sleigh,” Lord Trimfield said.

“My lord,” Twooley said, accepting the snifter graciously. “I have an important message from Submaster Flimly at the Nomans workshop.”

“Nomans? What news do you bring?” Lord Trimfield knew of grumblings within the community. He’d sent Flimly down to root out the problem.

“Apologies, my lord,” said Twooley nervously. “I’m afraid it is sealed. I cannot report to you on the contents.”

Eyeing the envelope as Twooley put it down, he asked, “Did the submaster suggest that it was important?”

“He did not, Lord, only that it was too sensitive for electronic transmission,” Twooley said after a taste. “It was put into my hand by his aide-de-camp as he led me to my waiting sleigh. They wasted no time.”

The pungent smoke from the Colormaster’s pipe mixed with the scent of leather from the chairs and desk and subtle hints of oak and vanilla in the Cognac. Lord Trimfield took them deeply in, the savory scent of opulence.

“I see the time stamp is a mere hour ago. You have revitalized my faith in your sleigh, *Gulfstream*,” said the Lord Trimfield. “That bit of recklessness proves itself useful.” He had heard of the sleigh throughout its production, but this was the first time he’d heard of its use as anything other than a toy for the pilots.

The Lord Trimfield had followed its development from the earliest stages, when the previous Nomans submaster had notified him of its approval. Twooley had been the one to convince him of its worth, the marriage of a racing sleigh with the aeronautics of both planes and automobiles. The original plan had been for fun. A sleigh designed for speed wouldn’t only be a great diversion for the pilots, but it would also have very necessary uses that the other sleighs



would be incapable of. Turning the trip from Nomans to Jesup into a one-hour ride was only one of them.

“Of course, my Lord,” said Twooley, smiling humbly with a bow. “Time was of the essence.”

They finished the Cognacs, discussing the possible downsides of switching over to the new sleigh style—Twooley was surprisingly comfortable with the possibility that it would not be adopted—and then the Colormaster sent the pilot on his way. He retracted the roof on his snow patio and stepped out. The blizzard still raged. He watched it through high windows as he dropped his robe and stepped naked into the steam pool. Seconds later his attendants, Sansy and Mandelina, appeared. They were destined to become wives at some point.

Mandelina’s dark hair brushed her shoulders as she looked up to him, the blackness of her irises making her pupils gigantic. She bit her lower lip whenever Lord Trimfield spoke. He imagined she heard some music in his voice of which he was unaware. He suggested she find more adequate clothing for the task at hand, the thin, silk layers covering her pale stomach and child-bearing hips seeming far less than adequate.

Sansy slid into the steam pool next to him. She scented the water with sprigs of mint. Standing waist deep, thin as a leaning poplar, her barely noticeable bosom were never more than a sheer slip of silk away from exposure. Milk-white hair cascaded across the deep of her clavicles, hanging down past hips that hardly stood out between her torso and legs. Turquoise eyes suggested a calm belied by her enthusiasm and appetite.

“Mandelina,” the Lord Trimfield said, “on my desk you will find a snifter of cognac and an unopened letter from an elf named Flimly. Open the letter and refill the snifter.” As he spoke,

he looked at Sansy, who already seemed to know her role. Her head disappeared beneath the water.

Mandelina handed him first the snifter. He held the unfolded letter and read as follows:

To: His Lordship and Colormaster, Lord High Rembley Trimfield

Claus Control 00-1138

Cape Jesup, Greenland

Fr: The lowly Submaster Harmonus Flimly

Lake Sirannon 14-1100

Nomans Island, North Atlantic

13<sup>th</sup> Thirdmonth

1700 hours

Your Lordship:

As per your instructions at the End of Christmas meeting and in support of Messrs. Claus and Kringle, I have taken upon myself the means by which to discover the source and nature of the alleged discontent upon Nomans Island. In so doing, I have dirtied my hands and worn the face of a transfer from Croatia.

A month now I have worked beside the men and gained their confidence and my reward has been discovery of the rumorous truth. While the elves took their leisure on Friday last, I inserted myself into a group and joined in their conversations.

While the majority of the workers are content with their lot, it seems a few have taken to ranting about it over drink. I had originally planned to bring them in individually, possibly to a therapy program if needed. However, a sour turn of events—explained below—has forced my hand, and I have seized several of them as conspirators. Therapy is my preferred solution to the problem, but now the population is aware of the seizure. Returning them to work here will be impossible. If therapy goes as it should, I shall send re-educated workers out, each to a different workshop. If it does not work, I shall resolve the situation with haste. Three of the ten conspirators remain at large among the population at time of this writing.

The events of today to which I previously referred are dire.

First, an explosive claimed a boat upon our south coast late this morning. On board were a human man and woman. Both survived. They stayed at the crash scene for hours, waiting for help. The man tried several methods of contacting help, but due to our electronic defenses, he was unsuccessful. In the afternoon, they traveled west in, I assume, hope of reaching the north shore but were turned back by the rocky coast and foul waters at Compass Point in the island's southwest. They then backtracked east, passing the crash site and mounting the bluff at mid-island. At sunset, they stopped in a wash outside the wood line at Spinnaker Hill. They have built a fire. They appear adequately provisioned for the night. We have undertaken emergency measures and all exits have been sealed and camouflaged.

I suspect I need not tell you that this will bring unwanted attention to our island. If they should successfully be rescued without discovering any sign of us, there will be an investigation into the crash, perhaps even an attempt to recover the vessel. In which case, an influx of human investigators and media might make preparations for the Christmas Season difficult, or worse,

lead to the discovery of our island defenses. Also, if this happens, tourism will slow—but not wholly impede—progress toward our October objectives toward Christmas preparation.

However, My Lord, if they should disappear, the boat could disappear with them. If they should gain any sight or notion of our presence here, we will be compromised. Had they stayed to the coast, this would not be as much a concern, but as they have now begun to venture overland, the chances of them running afoul of our situation causes great concern. Perhaps it is best that we apprehend them, destroy the boat, and send them to work for the Collective in one of the human harvest workshops. As the boat was a fishing boat and the man, therefore, a fishing man, perhaps we could consider relocating them to one of the nautical fleet workshops, where the man could be gainfully employed and married to the woman.

I humbly await your instruction in this matter. Until I hear otherwise, I shall simply let nature and the course of human events play out as they will.

Yours in Endless Resolve,

Submaster Harmonus Flimly

Lord Trimfield leaned back to sip his cognac and allow Sansy to finish him with her mouth. Draining his glass, he read the letter again. “Towel,” he said to Mandelina, who lay on her stomach massaging his shoulders. She took the glass and letter as Sansy dried him.

Back in his office, Mandelina prepared to take down a letter in response. His snifter again full, wrapped in his robe, he began his dictation.

Sansy fetched his secretary and then disappeared upstairs to the Colormaster’s bed.

When his secretary entered, he said, “Bring me that pilot, Twooley, and have his sleigh, *Gulfstream*, readied for departure.”

*Jenks*

Jenks had found enough wood to keep a fire burning all night. In the mid-March cold of the north Atlantic, he and Bishop stayed close to the fire while they ate. When it came time to finally lie down, Jenks placed the poncho on the ground next to the fire, where the two of them would sleep beneath the blanket.

“What happens next?” Bishop asked, crawling between him and the fire.

“I’ll keep the fire alive tonight. Tomorrow we’ll get to the north shore and fire off some flares,” he said, feeling far more unsure of the truth of it than the situation warranted. “It’ll be time consuming, step by step watching for things that might blow up, but we’ll get there. Someone will see the flares and the Coast Guard will come. It might take a while, but they’ll show. Hopefully the satellite phone will be in a better position to make a connection. If I can call, things will speed up.”

“And the *Santiago*, what will you do about her?”

Jenks hadn’t had time to think about it. “Well, I don’t know,” he said. “I’ve heard of insurance companies paying out for weirder things than hitting a sunken bomb. Maybe it’ll work that way for me.” He pulled the blankets up and wrapped his arms around her. “Best thing now is just to get some sleep. I can worry about all that when we’re out of here.”

The jackets made adequate pillows. Jenks soon heard a change in the rhythm of Bishop’s breathing. Content that she slept soundly, he let himself drift off.

In his dreams, he roamed the streets of an island resort. He smelled cooking meat. Smoke from pit fires burned his sinuses. The cacophony of crowded rooms disoriented him like in his

first days of kindergarten. He didn't know where to go. He looked for a person in charge to direct him.

Then he couldn't find his keys and wandered aimlessly to where he had parked but the roads had changed. He knew where he'd left his truck, but the road wasn't the one that had been there before.

Now he walked through a slew of restaurants, looking for a bathroom. The open air and burning sun worsened his urgency. When he found a bathroom, offal covered the walls and he left without pants, now walking half naked through the streets. People stared at him. Voices raised above the din:

"Look at them," one said.

"I've never seen those before," said another.

Jenks became self-conscious in his nakedness. Hands weren't enough to conceal him. His shirt wouldn't pull down far enough. He ran. The voices followed.

"Should I touch them?" said the first voice again, deep and gravelly, with an accent.

Jenks ran faster. Roads gave way to paths. Paths disappeared into woods where animal calls rent the night, filling his vision with specters of wolves and wild beasts.

"Gently, and just a little," said the second voice. It sounded gentler, soft and even, words gliding out, while the other sounded as if it was coming through clenched teeth.

"Wait, watch this," said the first voice again. "I saw this in a movie once. Man thing, wake up. Time for you to die."

"Cut the shit," said the other voice.

Now the world was shaking. Jenks couldn't control his feet.

The first voice came back, closer and louder. "Man thing, wake up," it said.

A rustling of brush and voices, the fire suddenly brighter, glowing through his closed lids, Jenks realized he was dreaming. He heard Bishop gasp. He bolted upright as he woke, trying to stand with sleep still foggy on his eyes. The fire blazed next to him. He couldn't see. He reached for the ax that had been near to hand when he lay down, but it was gone. He drew his knife, still trying to find his feet.

“Sit back down,” growled the first voice.

Jenks could tell that Bishop had attempted to move but had stopped. He rolled onto his knees, his eyes finally clearing, and got almost to his feet when a dull pain in the small of his back thrust him into the dirt, sprawling. His knife bounced out of sight. And then the voice was on him, a knee in his shoulder, another at the base of his spine, and the ax blade to his neck. Hot breath tickled his ear.

“Calm the fuck down, man thing,” it said, pushing the side of Jenks' face into the dirt, a single, solid hand pressing down on him. His one open eye could see nothing but the ax blade.

The other voice came from somewhere behind the fire: “Calm down, Kash. They aren't going anywhere.”

The voice straddling him leaned close. “Okay, man thing,” it said. Its breath smelled of frat house: stale beer and tobacco, old food. “He has the knife. I have the ax. If you promise to play nicey nice, and not make me hit you with it, I'll let you up. Do you understand me?”

Jenks had fallen with arms splayed out to his side. The owner of the voice had been on him before he could move. He was helpless. “Yeah,” Jenks said, surprising himself by sounding far more confident than he felt, “I get that.”

In an instant the weight projecting the voice was gone from his back. Jenks rolled over. The fire was too bright to see beyond it to the second voice, and his attacker had stepped into

darkness at the edge of the circle of firelight. Bishop sat silently about halfway around the fire. He could not see her face.

“Miss Bishop,” Jenks said. “Are you okay?”

“Um, I’m fine?” she said. “You may have noticed. We have company.”

Both of the voices chuckled, and a third, softer and gentler voice came in. “Believe it or not, we are here to help you,” the obviously female voice said. She had been standing behind Bishop on the other side of the fire beneath the gnarled oak that marked their camp. She’d been holding Bishop in place with firm hands on her shoulders. She released them now and stepped into view. “We live here. I’m Chetta Whitetree.”

Skin of milk, eyes a shade of raspberry cream, even in the firelight, Jenks could see their color. Silver hair rested on sleeved shoulders. Based on her height, Jenks would have guessed her a 9-year-old girl, except that she was, proportionately, a full-grown woman. He blinked a couple of times, his mouth moving but no words to fit his surprise would form on his lips.

“I know,” said Chetta, “that this isn’t exactly what you’d expect to find on a bombing range. You’ll have questions and we’ll give you answers, but we don’t have time for twenty questions right now.” She helped Bishop to her feet. “Suffice to say that—”

“What are you?” Jenks blurted. He thought he was dreaming again. A three-foot bikini model with pointed ears and a perfect figure had just roused him from sleep. What’s next? he thought.

The speaker of the second disembodied voice stepped into view, about half a foot taller than the girl—Jenks didn’t even know if he should call her a woman. His hair was darker, his eyes less vibrant, but he had the same delicate, striking features as the girl: sharp cheekbones and



almond-shaped eyes, thin hands that grasped Jenks' knife but unthreateningly. "They'll be coming for you. We have to get you to the north shore," he said.

"Who's coming?" asked Bishop.

"Nobody you want to meet," replied the curiosity that Jenks stared at. "No one wants you to get off this island except us. And we're going to make sure that happens." Jenks watched him lean down and throw some wood on the fire. "My name is Chey Fidda—call me Fid—Kash is the guy lurking in the dark over there," he said, pointing with the knife. "Put on your jackets. Bring only what food and water you can carry. Burn everything else. I assume you have a radio of some type, some rope, probably. Do you have any flares?"

Jenks looked to Bishop. She was whispering with the girl. He looked back to Fid. "What did you say your name was?"

It took a step toward him. "Call me Fid." Jenks involuntarily moved away. "Do you have flares?" it asked again, looking agitated.

"Flares? Yeah," Jenks said. The sleep drunkenness had cleared. He reached for the backpack. "I have one gun with six flares, and something that fires a bunch at once." He put both on the ground in front of them. "I'm sorry, but the girl is right. This is bizarre. What's going on here?" He had started to reach into the pack for something else and then just sort of gave up, let the pack fall and sat back on his heels, feeling helpless.

"What's your name?" it said.

Jenks had to remind himself that it had a name, Fid, and then he had to remind himself of his own. "Jenkins," he said, "Lehigh Jenkins. I go by Jenks."

"Okay, Jenks, clean out your pack of everything but food, water, radio, rope and flares," Fid said. "While you do that, I'll try to get you up to speed on what the world is really like."

Jenks dumped out the pack.

“You have to take my word for this. Believe me, I know it’s far-fetched,” Fid started.

“This is Nomans Island. It was never a bombing range for the Navy. The explosive you hit on the south shore yesterday wasn’t an unexploded bomb, it was a naval mine designed to deter people from landing, and, ideally, kill them if they try. This isn’t a wildlife preserve. It’s a workshop. One of Santa Claus’s workshops.” He stopped there and threw a handful of stuff into the fire.

“Are you with me so far?”

“Santa’s workshop,” Jenks said. He chuckled at his own stupidity—no way this was real, lucid dreaming, something that he couldn’t wake up from, or some kind of prank—and then dropped the backpack to the ground again. “So wait, let me guess. You guys are the elves and you’re here to build me a boat to sail home on.” He faced away from the fire to collect his thoughts. “You know, I don’t know what’s really going on here, but you might want to rethink your story and start over.” He turned back to face Fid.

“Or what?” The first voice stepped into the circle of light, looking every bit as bad-tempered as he sounded. Jenks took another step back. It stood about four-and-a-half-feet tall, shoulders as broad as his own. Jenks’ ax still gripped in its hand, it stepped toward him. Jenks couldn’t tell where the mop of black hair ended and the beard began. It looked like a werewolf, ears pointing back and jagged teeth, its breath in grunts and its words in a growl: “What the fuck are you going to do, man thing?”

“Wait!” Bishop and the girl yelled at the same time. “Jenks, they’re serious,” said Bishop. “They are elves—their appearance makes that pretty clear. This is a workshop. And other elves will be coming for us. The other ones won’t let us leave. We have to get out of here.”

Jenks looked back to the first voice.

“Your move, man thing,” it said.

Without the ax in its hand, Jenks might have been tempted to wrestle the werewolf to the ground, but the ax was a deal-breaker. The story seemed too outrageous, the situation untenable. But the tautness of his own neck and shoulders matched the anger in the eyes he stared at. The slight shake of his own chest, the heated and flushed feeling creeping on his face, the clouded tunnel vision of a high-school fistfight crept in on him. The werewolf stared back, the hint of what might be a smile creeping into the corners of his mouth. He wanted Jenks to fight.

Bishop told him to let it go. He heard the Fid elf filling the backpack with things they might need, an impatient stuffing of items two and three at a time.

Jenks reasoned it out quickly, calmness cooling his face: If someone was coming for them, both he and Bishop would be better off with the werewolf as an ally. “Sorry,” he said, reaching out to shake the werewolf’s hand.

It eyed him with something that might have been contempt. “Just get your shit ready to move,” it said.

Fid stepped up to Jenks and handed him his knife. “If he comes at you, you’ll need some way to defend yourself.”

“Do you think he will?” Jenks asked. Wrestling with an ax-wielding werewolf didn’t sound like a good time. It would help him to know how much of a threat there was.

“Probably not,” Fid said, “unless you provoke him. The problem is that none of us knows exactly what he will consider provocation.”

“Well, that makes me feel better,” Jenks said.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this,” Fid said, looking around the fire. He picked up a couple of oak branches that had been drying nearby. “These will do,” he said, handing one to the girl-elf

and one to Bishop. Then he addressed them all. “We have about four miles to go, but it won’t be easy. We’ll be in the brush most of the time. Sorry, humans, it’s the only path I know. Use the sticks to keep balance. The entire trip is unsteady, and the north shore is pretty steep.”

Jenks shouldered the pack and picked up a stick. He felt it would be much more useful if the werewolf came at him.

Fid spoke again: “I’ll go first. Jenks you follow me, and then Chetta and the woman—Bishop, is it? Odd for a woman to be named after a man of the cloth—Kash, you keep anyone from coming up behind us. They’ll wait to hear back from Trimfield, and then I don’t think they’ll do anything before dawn. By then, we should be there.”

Jenks watched him check that everyone was ready. Then Fid turned to the werewolf, “Kash,” he said, “why don’t you give Jenks back his ax?”

The werewolf looked from Fid to the ax and finally to Jenks. It pointed the ax at him. “You can have your ax back, man thing, when I’m convinced your skull won’t need it first.”

*Jamus*

Jamus Kringle had been at the bar at Collective headquarters, drinking with pilots. Something had gone amiss, presumably at one of the workshops. He couldn't get a lot of details, but a pilot had come and gone in a flashy new style of sleigh, and the word on the flight deck was "urgent." He had arrived with Vanessa more than an hour ago to a lot of commotion in the hangar.

Once the woman had reached the recovery room, a nurse brought him in to be with her. The doctors had come and gone with regularity and, only moments before, had informed Jamus that the woman would wake soon. So now, he waited at Vanessa's bedside.

When he saw movement, he closed his eyes and focused his attention on his next task. It was never easy telling a woman that she was a slave, and this time it would be less so. He did not want to see her cry. Even more, he didn't want to make her cry. He eyed her in the bed, her flesh sickly pale, fingers seeming too weak to even make a fist. Her hair in a disorganized bun springing wildly from her crown like blackbird feathers in mating season, made all the more noticeable by the white of the pillow beneath her head.

In the ten minutes it took between her first movement and finally opening her eyes, Jamus lived several hours, overthinking each of the coming moments before overthinking them again. His mother's face kept creeping into memory, as though this were her he was delivering and not an Asian scholar from Toronto. When Vanessa finally woke, he looked one last time at the woman he loved. Then he recognized her as the woman he'd taken for the Rendering and forced the emotion from his mind.

"I lied to you," he said without hesitation. She was not fully aware, but he knew that would change as he spoke. "When I spoke to you yesterday, I was lying."

“That was yesterday?” The words came sluggishly, sloppily, more falling from her lips than exiting with grace. “You’re James, the police officer.”

“Jamus,” he corrected her. “Everything I told you other than my name was lies. I work for a very wealthy and powerful man. That man sent me to bring you to him.”

“Who?” she asked. She didn’t believe him yet. He knew the phases. It was similar to Kubler-Ross’s stages of grieving. And since her life had just changed in a way equivalent to death, he thought it fitting. First there would be shock and disbelief. Then there would be denial.

“You’re not going to believe me when I tell you,” he said. “His name is Nicklaus Kringle. You might know him better by his middle name Chris Kringle.” In the past, the absolute confusion that came with realization that he was talking about Santa Claus had made him chuckle. Once, he had laughed.

“Kringle, that’s your name,” she said. “Who is he to you, and what does he want with me?”

“You’ve been brought here to be his bride,” he said. She looked sharply up as he said it. He held up a hand to, hopefully, keep her quiet a moment so he could blurt it all out. “You’ll be married to him tonight. You’ll be expected to give him five sons over the next fifteen years. Once those requirements are met, you’ll live the rest of your life never wanting for a thing.”

“This is a joke, right, an elaborate hoax dreamed up by some rich benefactor I never knew I had?” She had started to move in the bed now, realizing for the first time that she was strapped down.

Disbelief, thought Jamus. “If you prefer to think of it that way, it might be easier, but I’m afraid I’m completely serious.”

Vanessa reached for the buckles, in every place coming a few inches short. She strained to stretch or loosen the straps.

“I wouldn’t bother. They’re quite secure. The best you’ll do is hurt yourself, and we can’t have that. Your husband will not be pleased,” Jamus said. He reached for her arms to still them, but she saw him coming and clawed at him.

“Get away from me.” She spat. The sluggishness had fled, replaced by vitriol, a squint beneath angled brows. “I don’t think he needs to worry because it’s not going to happen.” She tugged repeatedly at the strap on her left arm, momentum moving the bed. “Get me a doctor. Is this a hospital? I need a doctor,” she said, having looked around and quickly coming to the conclusion that they were in a hospital.

Jamus asked if she was hurt and got nothing as a response other than repeated demands for a doctor. She would ask the doctor secretly to help her. Jamus called him in anyway.

“This is Dr. William,” he said as the door swung shut, “Dr. William Kringle.”

“Another one? Are you kidding me? What the hell is this? Doctor, you have to get me out of here. I don’t understand what’s going on, but this isn’t right.” She said in a single breath.

Seeing her struggle, the doctor stopped short of the bed. “What seems to be the problem?”

“This, all of this,” she said, indicating as best she could the room and Jamus. “None of this is right. I need you to call the police.”

The doctor made no move toward her. “It all seems perfectly in order,” he said.

She stopped struggling and glared at him. “What?” she shrieked. Her voice cracked midway through the word.

“You are Vanessa Kai Tam, correct?” he asked, not waiting for confirmation. “My half-sister Yolanda found you for us. Everything is exactly as it should be. You are the perfect specimen. You meet all the criteria. Old Nick will be quite pleased.”

“Old Nick? Your sister Yolanda? Who are these people?” She still struggled, but her strength, or perhaps her will, was waning.

“Doctor Grenewitz, your personal physician in Toronto. She’s my sister. She alerted us about you once Old Nick made the decision to bring in an Oriental. I guess he has plans for your kids.”

“I don’t have any kids,” said Vanessa, but even as she said it, she seemed to realize that this was a temporary state. “You don’t mean that—“

“Yes,” said Jamus, “that’s exactly what he means. Your doctor sold you to us and next you will become bride to the most beloved man on the planet. And you will give him sons because that’s what he wants. And Santa always gets what he wants.”

To Jamus, it looked like everything in Vanessa’s world had just powered down. She stopped moving and talking. Even her breath stopped. She looked at him through watery and wide eyes. “Santa?” she squeaked

The tears came immediately, followed in a few minutes by the screams for help. The threats came hot after that. After an hour of flopping between bargaining and continued threats, she lapsed into silence. Once she became docile, the doctor returned and gave her something to help her rest. Jamus stayed at her side until he was confident she would sleep for a while.

Once she slept, Jamus left her. At the newsroom, he searched for news from Toronto. He worried first on reports about Vanessa. Without family to be concerned with, her absence would likely go unnoticed until at least midday. She was a common sight at St. James Church, but not a



constant. In the year he'd watched her, she missed church about once a month. If she hadn't already missed a day this month, no flags would go up. If she had, it still wouldn't raise too many eyebrows. The March holiday would officially begin on Monday, so she wouldn't be expected at school. In all reality, it could be more than a week before anyone missed her.

Christian's absence wouldn't work out so conveniently. By Monday, he'd be expected back at his office, Tuesday at the latest. His disappearance might lead to the discovery of hers, but even so, a business owner and his girlfriend disappearing for an impromptu vacation wouldn't be unheard of, at least, not until enough unanswered calls and texts had gone out.

In spite of the fact that killing is at its best when it's avoided, Jamus felt he had covered this one with a thick wool blanket. In learning about Vanessa, he'd had no choice but to learn about Christian. He'd been a solid guy for most of his 20s, but his late teens had seen some misbehavior. Much of it could be attributed to teen angst—petty theft, fighting, lewd conduct—but a few items on his record would support the story of his overdose. He'd been busted a few times with heroin in his possession, at least once by consumption. It seems that there was short period in which Christian had been a big fan of the brown rock. He'd kicked it successfully, but the track marks on his arm would still lend credence to the possibility of a death by overdose.

Jamus was not above the occasional pang of guilt, and with the undoing of a life, Christian's, that had destabilized and then been righted, he felt a little of it now. With so many bad people out there who deserved death, it truly was a shame that a more-or-less-good person should have to be killed in the name of the Rendering. But work was work, and he couldn't let emotions foil the process now.

The train of thought surrounding Christian had turned back toward thoughts of Vanessa, so Jamus looked to other news. A small piece culled from a Central American news agency

caught his attention because he'd worked extensively in the area with the CIA. It spoke of growing fires in the jungles of the Amazon. He thought it strange that fires could spread in a rainforest. He looked around for other news, but nothing had the hook to pull his thoughts away from the woman. He took a summary booklet to catch up on what had happened, heading to get some food.

*Lord Trimfield*

Santa had long ago given up the red suit and festive hat. He was all business now. Lord Trimfield stepped through his office door immediately upon arrival. Unlike the Lord Trimfield, whose office was steeped in tradition and opulence, Nicklaus—called “Old Nick” anywhere except to his face—preferred his work environment to be nothing if not practical. White floors and walls supported black furnishings. His only obvious concession to his control over the Collective was the view. Each side of Santa’s office overlooked part of the Collective—hangar and reindeer stables, the main offices, the residential area, and, to the north, the Jefferson Sea, where showed nightly the aurora borealis.

The Lord Trimfield didn’t wait to sit. He chose the unflattering chair on the right and placed his materials on Old Nick’s desk. “Good morning, Nicklaus,” he said. “This meeting is rather sudden. I thought we had concluded with business until April Fools.”

“So had I,” returned Old Nick. His voice rattled from years of pipe smoking, but the baritone still commanded attention whenever he spoke. “I understand there is a problem in the Atlantic, Lord Colormaster.”

“If you refer to the extinction of the great Right Whale, you are quite correct, Nicklaus,” the Colormaster said, knowing where this was going and wondering how Old Nick had gotten his hands on it. “Other than that, I can’t think of a thing that you would need to concern yourself with.”

“It’s true, then,” said Old Nick. “You do know what I’m talking about.”

“I’m afraid I do not.”

“I speak of the uproar on Nomans Island,” he said, “the risk of exposure to the masses and the potential for media involvement. We have amassed an empire here, Lord Colormaster, and we cannot take the chance of being known to the world before the time has come.”

“I understand your concern for the Collective, Nicklaus, but is it true or is it not that the productivity of the workshops is my sole responsibility to you?”

“It is.”

“And therefore is it not also true that, so long as productivity is unhindered under my supervision, I may administer to them in, and by, whatever terms I deem fit?” he asked. Making an effort to maintain a blank expression and a monotone in his voice, the Colormaster continued. “And have not the last forty years seen almost constant improvement in productivity to the point where many of the workshops are bringing a profit, some of them significant?”

“True on both counts,” said Nicklaus.

“I don’t know what you have been told, Nicklaus, but there is no more uproar on Nomans Island than there is in Tierra del Fuego or in the Amazon or in Prague,” Lord Trimfield said. “Every year by the end of Thirdmonth, the workers become restless in their free time. They are a race of laborers and idle time breeds malcontent. Dare I brush across the cliché about idle hands and the devil’s tasking? If you could expand your business more deeply into Asia and the Middle East, we could have them producing more of the year and the grumblings would altogether cease.”

“So there is no threat of exposure or riots on Nomans?” asked Old Nick. “Do remember that your predecessor lost his job because he risked exposure through his recklessness.”

Lord Trimfield smiled and said, “I do remember. I remember that my predecessor lost a lot more than his job. And so did his family.”

“Then let this be fair warning to you, Lord Colormaster. Whatever is going on in Nomans, take care of it.”

“If, in fact, my elves were on the brink of revolution as you seem to think they are,” said Lord Trimfield, “do you think my descent from the position of Colormaster would increase stability or do you think a threat to me would be treated as a threat to all elves? The submasters all have solid control over their workshops, and I have their support. Were I and my family to disappear, productivity would plummet and unrest would ensue. I remain unsure how or if that would affect the possibility of exposure.”

“Careful, Colormaster,” said Old Nick. “I don’t know where you’re going with this, but I would take it gently.”

“How I handle my elves shall remain my own business, Nicklaus. At present, we have 34 workshops around the world,” said the Colormaster. “We have 314 sleigh-riding buffoons—all of them your sons—who go out once a year in boots and red suits to deliver the presents produced in my workshops. And the time will come soon that we will need more. I have 40,000 elves producing on a nine-month schedule twice the equivalent human manufacturers produce in twelve. Our surplus is packaged with ‘Made in China’ stickers and sold to retailers throughout the world, and what isn’t spent on operating costs is cycled back into the Collective, the most of which is profit for you, Nicklaus, to the tune last year of €117 million. All of this is my doing. I would say that leaves me some leeway in how I handle operations.”

“Now, now, Lord Colormaster,” said Old Nick. “I am not attempting to threaten you or to tell you how to handle your elves and workshops. I seek only your assurance that I needlessly worry myself.” He smiled as he finished saying this, as if to add that he was, in fact, doing both. “I am to be wed today, and I find myself worrying over every small detail.”

“Congratulations, Nicklaus, and you have my assurance. You worry needlessly,” said the Colormaster.

“And to your earlier point of expansion into Asia, my new bride is Chinese. Her children will carry the Kringle cause to all parts of Asia. Our empire stands on the brink of yet further expansion.” Looking pleased with himself, Old Nick lit and took a deep draw from his pipe. “We are in all the right places and in all the right ways. We have had our way in pitting the Middle East against the world. My sons and daughters there are preaching both sides of the conflict. We have brought them to violence, and soon it will be all out war. When the Christian countries band together and destroy the Muslims, we shall expand globally. And when we do, we will reveal ourselves, and without a thought of further violence, all the world will follow our wisdom, a perfect, bloodless coup d’état.”

Old Nick stood from his chair. From the cabinet behind the desk, he produced a decanter and two glasses. “Have you ever experienced American Bourbon?” He asked. “It’s similar in many ways to the cognac you love so much, but not so sweet.” He poured out two glasses, dropped a couple imperfect ice cubes in each, and handed one to the Colormaster. “Soon enough, we shall be savoring the finest in sake and soju from the source.” He held the glass up, peering through its hazel glaze as he swirled the cubes. “It’s the charcoal that gives it a unique character.”

“And that’s what it all comes down to, Nicklaus, yes?” asked the Colormaster. “In the end we’re all nothing more than charcoal, nothing but fodder and fuel and food for the earth.” He sipped of the bourbon, not caring for it any more this time than the last. “Except you, of course. Immortal you will be here long after I’ve become a feast for worms. And you’ll still be carrying on this endless enterprise. You’ll have more wives and more children and in 500 years, you

won't be able to find a suitable wife who isn't already tainted by your own blood." Lord Trimfield placed the glass back on the desk and took his things, rising. "What will you do then," he said as he turned to the door, "breed three-quarter mortals?"

*Kash*

Kash sat down on a rock, a familiar feeling rippling down his spine as sweat chilled against his skin. Sweat glistened on the others in the moonlight. Though the island was only three miles at its widest point, the trail they had taken through the brush made for slow going. They had nothing to cut it away with. The hatchet was useless in the tangled weeds. Sticks helped to push the brush aside, but even then, the humans had to either push it higher or crouch low beneath it. The man stood close to six feet, Kash guessed, and the woman a little under five and a half. Twigs filled her bobbed blonde hair. The man wore a hat, which must have helped.

Aside from the working vineyard at the island's eastern edge, the workshop didn't make use of the island's surface, and elves spent most of their time underground. Only animals lived above ground on Nomans, and they weren't known for trail blazing. In some places, rocks, hills, nettles and even downed trees conspired to block the way. At one point, they lost more than an hour circling around a rock formation.

They stopped at the far edge of a clearing after having made great time crossing its half mile. The brambles and brush stood almost waist high to Chetta, about two feet—knee level to the Bishop woman. She had scooped Chetta onto her shoulders, saying, "I have a daughter your size," and ran the distance. The man had offered the same courtesy to Fid, but he declined. Kash and the man had shared a laugh at the thought.

"I'm not carrying you, werewolf," the man said. "That puts you in the perfect place to split my skull with my own ax."

"Good humor, man thing, I might not have to kill and eat you after all," Kash replied.

Finally hazarding a short stop, the women drank from the same canteen. The man took a long pull from his and then tossed it to Kash. "You drink water, don't you?" he asked.



Fid answered while Kash chugged, “Of course we do, especially when we’re hungover.”

Kash handed Fid the canteen, finishing the thought: “And we tied on a doozy last night.”

“Wait a minute,” said the man, still wheezing and rattling from smoker’s lungs. “You can drink at Santa’s workshop? What do you drink?”

“Ale mostly,” responded Fid. “We have a brewery and a winery on the island, grow our own grapes.”

“There’s an arbor on the east end of the island. It only grows gewürztraminer,” Kash said, “white wine, sweet as hell.”

“We also make our own Meade,” added Fid. “And a few guys have set up a still to try moonshining.”

“Which,” said Kash, “just sounds like a really bad idea. Can you imagine me drinking spirits? Just ugly.” He turned to the man. “What about you, man thing, what do you drink when you’re not on your fishing man’s boat?”

The man laughed. “It’s called a scalloper—the boat,” he said. “I try to stick to beer. Too much of anything stronger and I get a little out of control.”

“Oh,” said Fid, looking from the man to Kash, “just like Kash.”

“We shouldn’t sit for too long,” said Fid. “Hypothermia can set in quickly.” He looked at the moon’s waning crescent and at the stars.

Kash knew he was calculating. “About 2:30?” he asked.

“A little later, I’d guess,” said Fid, pointing to one of the constellations.

“We go west now?” asked Kash.

“Yeah,” answered Fid. “We follow this tree line as long as it goes west or northwest. If it turns south, we break brush again.”

Since they were skirting a tree line, they didn't bother walking in a line. They walked in a disorganized mess with no discernable formation other than Fid being at the front. Kash could hear Chetta talking with the woman, something about sons and daughters and dreams.

Kash walked near, but slightly behind, the man. "A couple of times," he said, feeling a little worse for wear, but in a good mood. "I heard the woman say something about dreams. You got any idea what she's talking about, man thing?"

The man laughed, saying, "My name is Jenks or Lee. You don't have to call me 'man thing.'"

"I like man thing. It makes you sound vicious," Kash said, "like you're not really human, just a semblance of human. You know, a mixture of part human and part wickedness." He leaned down as they walked and took a berry bunch off a bush. He split the bunch in half and offered some to the man. "You see, man thing—eat these, they're safe. They'll expand in your stomach and you'll feel full—if someone comes creeping up behind us, intent on exercising some form of ill will, and I'm calling you 'Lee' or 'Jenks,'"—as he said this, he made little jazz hands and raised his voice like a schoolgirl—"they're going to come at us full on. But if I'm calling you 'man thing,' it's going to give them pause to consider what they are about to attack." He tossed the stalk from the berries to the side and smiled. "So, if it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon you got used to being 'man thing,' and maybe even let that absorb into your mindset. These elves that are going to come for us—if they aren't coming already—they might be pretty and delicate-looking like Fid and Chetta there, but they'll also be relentless. If we're going to get you and that woman and hopefully all of us off this island, we're going to have to be relentless too."

"What will they do?" the man asked.

“I’m not sure what their protocol will be,” said Kash. He had never been close enough to the security office to have any idea. “I do know two things, though. One, they will not kill you, and two, they will bring every rook in the rookery to make sure you don’t get off this island.”

While he explained the term and its assimilation into the workshop vernacular—rooks, slang for workshop security, and rookery, the logical extension for their offices and billets—Kash checked behind them. With the moon riding low in the sky, he still had a clear view. The trees zigged and zagged out behind them on the right, so they’d given them a bit of a girth—lots of holly and pine to prick the skin and tangle in his ratty hair. They’d left pretty obvious trails to be followed. He hoped that wouldn’t come back to haunt them.

“Now you can pass a history test,” Kash said. “If you want ideas on their tactics and methodology, ask Fid. He knows something about everything.”

The man lengthened his stride to catch Fid, and Kash kept pace with him.

“So you were going to tell me about the woman’s dreams,” Kash said.

“Oh, that,” the man said, shrugging his shoulders. “For a month or so now, she’s been hiring me to look at islands. She’s been having dreams of some kind, and they’ve kept her awake. That’s all I know.”

“What do you know about her?” Kash asked.

“Well, number one, I’m pretty sure she could kick both our asses,” the man said, making Kash snort. “I’m not kidding. Did you see how she scooped up Chetta—that’s her name, right?—without missing a stride and ran her across the clearing?” Kash nodded. “Well, that’s after swimming for her life and walking all night. If you want someone with a mindset to be relentless in fighting whatever comes for us, I think she’s our hero, and the rest of us are just her backup.”

Kash looked too as they passed the women, wide to their left. In the moonlight, her short, tangled mop of blonde hair clung to the sweat on her face and cheeks. He looked at her flawless skin and imagined shapes that the tightly tied jacket didn't expose. "She's pretty easy on the eyes too," he said.

"That's for sure," the man said. "Other than that, all I know is that she's got a son and a daughter and that she was recently widowed, like within the last year."

"Oh, that sucks," said Kash, thinking instantly of Miranda and of Prague and then doing everything he could to push them from his mind.

As the man reached Fid, Kash slackened his stride and fell back next to Chetta and the woman. "So, woman thing, how does a woman get a name like Bishop?" he asked.

"It's simple, elf thing," responded the woman. "A woman becomes a Bishop when she marries into the Bishop family. How does an elf get a name like Cash?"

"That's simple too, woman thing," Kash said. "An elf's friends get tired of his full name and shorten it. How long would you want to keep talking to me if you had to call me by four names? That, of course, assumes that you wanted to talk to me in the first place."

The woman laughed. "How," she asked, "did you get four names? With ears like yours, I figured you'd stop at Batman or something."

Chetta was curious too. "In our race, most elves have only one or two names. No one has three, unless they're like Fid whose first name is split in two. Mostly, only the elite have four names," she said. "Kash, I always thought your name was just Malentius. If you have four names, your family goes back pretty far."

"My family was original stock," Kash said. "My grandfather was the first Thunderborn, my grandmother a Crooked-Oak, one of the oldest elf families."

“The Crooked-Oaks were the first of our kind. You’re a direct descendant. That almost makes you royalty,” said Chetta.

“So what are your four names?” Bishop asked.

“I am Kashkaval Malentius Firebright Crooked-Oak, son of Kashkavan Vitosha Firebright Crooked-Oak, son of the Thunderborn Kaval Preslav Firebright Bluespruce.”

“Oh my god,” said Chetta.

“So what does all that mean?” asked Bishop. “What’s Thunderborn?”

“Kaval Preslav, Kash’s grandfather, was the first-ever Colormaster of the Collective,” Chetta said. “He basically ran the Collective for, like, 150 years until he and his family mysteriously disappeared the year I was born, fifty years ago. He was the first Thunderborn, natural choice for leadership.”

“That’s what Santa and the Collective will tell you,” said Kash. “The ugly truth is that he flirted with exposure too many times, and one day, Santa gave the order: My grandfather and all of his family lost their heads into a pit dug in the stable floor of an unused workshop and were buried where they fell, in an unmarked commoners’ grave. They replaced him with some power-hungry Cherrywood who’s still in charge.”

“How did you survive?” Chetta asked. “And also, how is it that you and your father have the same surname? If he’s a Crooked-Oak, shouldn’t your last name be your mother’s?”

“It should,” Kash said. “But it’s the name they gave me. And then they took it back. My grandfather removed my name from the records because he wanted me to make it on my own laurels,” Kash said, “unlike my father, who rode the family name into embarrassment. I still have my head because my grandfather didn’t want me to be a second-generation spoiled brat.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” said Bishop, who was echoed by Chetta almost immediately. Kash thought he saw something in Bishop’s eyes.

“It was fifty years ago, and I hardly even knew the elf. Besides, Bishop, I understand it’s us who should be sorry for your loss,” Kash said. “The man thing told me your husband passed away recently. I’m very sorry to hear it.” He didn’t know her at all but he had lost love once, so he understood how she must have felt more than he felt sorrow for her.

“Thank you,” Bishop said. “It’s still hard to believe he’s gone.”

“I’m really sorry,” Chetta said. Tears ran down her face.

“We should be turning north soon,” Kash said, feeling like a new subject would be better. In truth, he had absolutely no idea when they would turn north. “Fid said the climb down to the beach is going to suck.”

They slowed for a minute to allow Chetta to squat behind a tree, Kash whistling to get Fid to wait. “What’s a Cherrywood?” Bishop asked while they waited.

“What?” Kash responded.

“A few minutes ago, you said a Cherrywood replaced your grandfather. What’s a Cherrywood?”

“Oh,” said Kash, “Cherrywoods are the pretty ones.” He motioned toward Chetta and then Fid. “Slender, silver-haired, candy-colored eyes ... privileged, they’re what everyone pictures when they think of elves. Me, on the other hand, I’m one of the Thunderborn, dark and grungy laborers who do all the shit work. We outnumber them about five-to-one in most workshops. We’re the workers. They call us Thunderborn so they don’t have to explain that we’re really dwarves.”

“But your grandfather was the Colormaster?”

“He was,” Kash said. “They gave him power because they knew having a Thunderborn as a figurehead would help hide from us the fact that we’re slaves. We didn’t and still don’t really grasp the fact that we’re slaves. Except me, I’m done with this shit.”

*Villings*

The pilot Twooley stood in front of the submaster's desk as Rookmaster Villings entered. Submaster Flimly read silently a letter written in a markedly female hand. "My lord," said Villings to announce his presence. The room smelled of storage space, disuse, dust gathering in the short weeks since the previous submaster's departure. It seemed as though Flimly had simply moved in atop the existing accoutrements. Perhaps there was potential in him after all—promptness and practicality over pretense, traits Villings could admire.

"Right," said Flimly without looking up from the letter. "Good, Villings, you're just in time. Twooley here has just brought word from the Colormaster." He jerked a thumb in the pilot's direction. "We're to capture the humans without delay. Once we have them safely in hand, we can take our time deciding what's to become of them." He folded the sheet and slipped it into a desk draw. "Have you been keeping tabs on their progress?"

"As best we can, my lord," answered Villings. "Some of the motion cameras have become inoperative due to poor upkeep, bad weather, other unforeseen circumstances, but we have tracked them as far as the Whitewash."

A sand track that neither receded nor sprouted growth, the Whitewash Crescent separated the northern quarter of the island from the rest in a wholly visual way. Villings had crossed it a number of times, loose beach sand, nothing more, but it had attained a reputation in the workshop for being a danger zone of sorts.

"Our initial intelligence seems to have been wrong, my lord," he continued. "There are five of them, not two."

"Five," said Flimly, "And what of the ten elves from Friday?"

"We've detained all but three."



“I’d say, then,” said Flimly with a sort of satisfied grunt, “that we’ve accounted for the rest.” He rolled out a map of the island on his desk. “Tell me everything.”

“They’re heading north and west, toward the tip of the island,” said Villings, pointing on the map. He drew his finger back about half the way between the Whitewash and the tip. “We believe them to be in this area now.” He pointed just north of a large meadow. “The area is heavily wooded, leading up to a thirty foot cliff. The beach at its foot is slim, but a sandbar runs about a hundred feet into the surf. It’s exposed at low water and, therefore, not mined. Its perimeter is mined, but they are rather deep—a boat without a significant draw could go right over them—and with the shifting of the sandbar, it is entirely possible that some of the mines have been buried.”

Pacing, Flimly rubbed his fat, speckled cheeks. “In other words, if they can get a boat’s attention, they might be able to get off island.” Reorienting the map so the pilot could use it, he said, “Twooley, how many sleighs can you land in this clearing?” he asked, indicating an elevated spot west and a little south of the sandbar.

The pilot leaned over the map and did some silent calculations. “Based on the size, my lord, we could land two in succession, but only if they were in no hurry to leave.”

“And if they are in a hurry to leave, so more can land?” asked Villings.

“Then I should think only one,” answered Twooley. He pointed to the eastern edge of the clearing. “It’s here, you see, my lord. Landing isn’t a problem but this rocky edge to the clearing will require a circular takeoff pattern or we risk the reindeer. One slip on a rock or the slightest trip could result in a domino effect, bringing down the entire complement. Elves running around and a second sleigh just add to the hazards.”

“How many elves can we get onto each sleigh?” asked Flimly.

“Six,” said Twooley, “if we leave the copilot behind.”

“And if we don’t worry about comfort,” said Villings. “Could we not fit eight?”

“Yes,” said Flimly, a question not an affirmation.

“We could, sir,” said Twooley to the Rookmaster. “The limitations would be on space, not on weight. The animals can handle it. We only risk dropping rooks out of the sky. And,” he added after a few seconds of reflection. “We can remove the benches.”

“Will that give room for more elves?”

“Preferably not,” answered Twooley. “It will decrease the chance that someone falls overboard.”

Flimly paced behind his desk, a slow and thoughtful step.

Villings noted some of the rooks he would bring along. He diagramed the landing area and hollows in the woods where elves could be safely moved out of the way after landing. “I’ve got it,” he said. “We’ll take three sleighs,” he said. “The first will be myself, Twooley, and five of my rooks. The next two will be eight rooks and a pilot each. We’ll drop into the meadow one at a time and then take back off so the next can land immediately. At the same time, I’ll send twenty elves out of the shipping dock to traverse the north coast. It’s only a mile or so. They might get their feet wet, but they should make good time. We can still be there before sunrise.” As he spoke, he’d used his pen to point out locations for the benefit of the others. “We’ll have 41elves against five. Even if the humans resist, we will capture them.”

“And lethality?” asked the submaster. “What are you bringing for lethal arms?”

“My five rooks will be armed with bows and arrows in case the renegade elves become a problem,” said Villings. “The rest will carry night sticks and standard armament—knives, black

jacks and pepper spray. I think intimidation should settle this without incident. But just in case, we have some tranquilizer darts.”

“Very good, Rookmaster,” said Flimly. “See it done.”

In the hallway, Villings addressed the pilot. “I left room on our flight for a copilot. I know it’s no simple task landing in a dark clearing at night.” The pilot nodded. “If you have some control measures to aid the other pilots in landing, I suggest that you bring them. You will remain behind while your copilot leaves with our sleigh, so that you may safely guide the other sleighs in.” He looked in Twooley’s eyes for any sign of fear or uncertainty. “Is that acceptable to you?” he asked. He did not want to expose the pilot to danger if he wasn’t up for it. Twooley was not in command of the pilots, but he commanded respect among them.

“Certainly it is, Rookmaster,” Twooley replied. “Part of my job at all times is to ensure the safety of pilots, sleighs, and reindeer. It would reflect poorly if I were not there to assist.”

“Even more so, I should think, than if an attempt to assist went wrong,” responded Villings. “We’ll get this sorted out in no time. How long do you need to prepare the pilots?”

“I was given warning by the Colormaster that we were to apprehend the humans. I have four pilots on notice. They and their sleighs should be prepared and awaiting my arrival,” he said. “We can leave as soon as your men arrive.”

“Well done, pilot. I shall see to my elves and meet you in no more than fifteen minutes.” Villings gave the pilot a courtesy nod—the peer equivalent of a bow given to a superior—and turned on his heel, intent on getting to business, but he stopped to address something he’d had in mind for some time. “Twooley,” he said, “If this works out, I shall recommend the creation of the position of Airmaster specifically for you. This morning’s endeavor will be only one more

example of your efforts to serve this workshop and the Collective. I have been thinking of it for several months.”

“I would be honored,” Twooley said and then returned to business.

The rookery sat a floor down from the submaster’s office, at the workshop’s central point, ensuring equal response times to any part of the island. Villings smashed his way through the doors, his mind focusing on the best methods to get the rooks going. He’d given them a warning order before his meeting, and it pleased him that they were ready to go. The five elves that would take the first sleigh were from his personal detachment of eight rooks that he worked with regularly.

“Bring bindings and ropes—four coils of fifty feet,” he said. “Distribute the coils so that the ground party has one and the air party has three. Offwell and Gillis, you will command the second and third sleighs. Pick seven elves and meet with your pilots at the hangar.” He slid open his arms drawer, selecting a Greek-style sword—weighted toward the blade for stronger strikes in close quarters.

“Norling,” he said, addressing the rook he’d slapped in the hallway during the morning raids, “You will lead the ground force. Pick your elves and assign a second—I should think that transfer, Joxley. He distinguished himself clearing the Neale Junction Aborigines and seems like he has a good, level head for a fight, though, hopefully, there will be no fight. Pick another if you believe someone else more suited to the job.”

Addressing those who would accompany him and Twooley, he said, “Each man should be armed with a club and a sedative gun in case they don’t come quietly. And bring bow and arrow, one quiver each should suffice. We will not kill the humans, but I’ve reason to believe

that the three renegade elves are with them. They are not our focus. Capture them if you can. Kill them if you must. No elf leaves this island.”

When the six of them arrived at the hangar, Villings gathered the leaders. He explained the plan quickly but in detail. He told Norling: “I do not expect them to be at the beach when you arrive. Your job will be to make sure anyone coming down off the cliff doesn’t have anywhere else to go. Make good time and you can rest when you get there. You can fill them in on any details on your way to the target area. Now go.”

“Twooley,” the rookmaster said as they mounted the sleigh. “For all intents and purposes, you are my second on this trip. You know what must be done. If anything happens to me, see them captured.”

Within minutes, the sleighs *Carrier Pigeon*, *Dark Wing*, and *Night Owl* took off in succession into the predawn.