

Cold Iron

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1.

The changeling's decision to steal a dragon and escape was born, though she did not know it then, the night the children met to plot the death of their supervisor.

She had lived in the steam dragon plant for as long as she could remember. Each dawn she was marched with the other indentured minors from their dormitory in Building 5 to the cafeteria for a breakfast she barely had time to choke down before work. Usually she was then sent to the cylinder machine shop for polishing labor, but other times she was assigned to Building 12, where the black iron bodies were inspected and oiled before being sent to the erection shop for final assembly. The abdominal tunnels were too small for an adult. It was her duty to crawl within them to swab out and then grease those dark passages. She worked until sunset and sometimes later if there was a particularly important dragon under contract.

Her name was Jane.

The worst assignments were in the foundries, which were hellish in summer even before the molds were poured and waves of heat slammed from the cupolas like a fist, and miserable in winter, when snow blew through the broken windows and a grey slush covered the workflow. The knockers and hogmen who labored there were swart, hairy creatures who never spoke, blackened and muscular things with evil red eyes and intelligences charred down to their irreducible cinders by decades-long exposure to magickal fires and cold iron. Jane feared them even more than she feared the molten metals they poured and the brute machines they operated.

She'd returned from the orange foundry one twilit evening too sick to eat, wrapped her thin blanket tight about her and fallen immediately asleep. Her dreams were all in a jumble. In them she was polishing, polishing, while walls slammed down and floors shot up like the pistons of a gigantic engine. She fled from them under her dormitory bed, crawling into the secret place behind the wallboards where she had, when younger, hidden from Rooster's petty cruelties. But at the thought of him, Rooster was there, laughing meanly and waving a three-legged toad in her face. He chased her through underground caverns, among the stars, through boiler rooms and machine shops.

The images stabilized. She was running and skipping through a world of green lawns and enormous spaces, a strangely familiar place she knew must be Home. This was a dream she had often. In it, there were people who cared for her and gave her all the food she wanted. Her clothes were clean and new, and nobody expected her to put in twelve hours daily at the workbench. She owned toys.

But then, as it always did, the dream darkened. She was skipping rope at the center of a vast expanse of grass when some inner sense alerted her to an intrusive presence. Bland white houses surrounded her, and yet the conviction that some malevolent intelligence was studying her increased. There were evil forces hiding beneath the sod, clustered behind every tree, crouching under the rocks. She let the rope fall to her feet, looked about wonderingly, and cried a name she could not remember.

The sky ripped apart.

"Wake up, you slattern!" Rooster hissed urgently. "We coven tonight. We've got to decide what to do

about Stilt."

Jane jolted awake, heart racing. In the confusion of first waking, she felt glad to have escaped her dream, and sorry to have lost it. Rooster's eyes were two cold gleams of moonlight afloat in the night. He knelt on her bed, bony knees pressing against her. His breath smelled of elm bark and leaf mold intermingled. "Would you mind moving? You're poking into my ribs."

Rooster grinned and pinched her arm.

She shoved him away. Still, she was glad to see him. They'd established a prickly sort of friendship, and Jane had come to understand that beneath the swagger and thoughtlessness, Rooster was actually quite nice. "What do we have to decide about Stilt?"

"That's what we're going to talk about, stupid!"

"I'm tired," Jane grumbled. "I put in a long day, and I'm in no mood for your hijinks. If you won't tell me, I'm going back to sleep."

His face whitened and he balled his fist. "What is this—mutiny? I'm the leader here. You'll do what I say, when I say, because I say it. Got that?"

Jane and Rooster matched stares for an instant. He was a mongrel fey, the sort of creature who a century ago would have lived wild in the woods, emerging occasionally to tip over a milkmaid's stool or loosen the stitching on bags of milled flour so they'd burst when flung over a shoulder. His kind were shallow, perhaps, but quick to malice and tough as rats. He worked as a scrap iron boy, and nobody doubted he would survive his indenture.

At last Jane ducked her head. It wasn't worth it to defy him.

When she looked up, he was gone to rouse the others. Clutching the blanket about her like a cloak, Jane followed. There was a quiet scuffling of feet and paws, and quick exhalations of breath as the children gathered in the center of the room.

Dimity produced a stolen candle stub and wedged it in the widest part of a crack between two warped floorboards. They all knelt about it in a circle. Rooster muttered a word beneath his breath and a spark leaped from his fingertip to the wick.

A flame danced atop the candle. It drew all eyes inward and cast leaping phantasms on the walls, like some two-dimensional Walpurgisnacht. Twenty-three lesser flames danced in their irises. That was all dozen of them, assuming that the shadow-boy lurked somewhere nearby, sliding away from most of the light and absorbing the rest so thoroughly that not a single photon escaped to betray his location.

In a solemn, self-important voice, Rooster said: "Blugg must die." He drew a gooly-doll from his jerkin. It was a misshapen little thing, clumsily sewn, with two large buttons for eyes and a straight gash of charcoal for a mouth. But there was the stench of power to it, and at its sight several of the younger children closed their eyes in sympathetic hatred. "Skizzlecraw has the crone's-blood. She made this." Beside him, Skizzlecraw nodded unhappily. The gooly-doll had been her closely guarded treasure, and the Lady only knew how Rooster had talked her out of it. He brandished it over the candle. "We've said the prayers and spilt the blood. All we need do now is sew some touch of Blugg inside the stomach and throw it onto a furnace."

"That's murder!" Jane said, shocked.

Thistle snickered.

"I mean it! And not only is it wrong, but it's a stupid idea as well." Thistle was a shifter, as was Stilt himself, and like all shifters she was something of a lack-wit. Jane had learned long ago that the only way to silence Thistle was to challenge her directly. "What good would it do? Even if it worked—which I doubt—there'd be an investigation afterwards. And if by some miracle we weren't discovered, they'd still only replace Blugg with somebody every bit as bad. So what's the point of killing him?"

That should have silenced them. But to Jane's surprise, a chorus of angry whispers rose up like cricket song.

"He works us too hard!"

"He *beats* me!"

"I hate that rotten Old Stinky!"

"Kill him," the shadow-boy said in a trembling voice from directly behind her left shoulder. "Kill the big dumb fuck!" She whirled about and he wasn't there.

"Be still!" Casting a scornful look at Jane, Rooster said, "We have to kill Blugg. There is no alternative. Come forward, Stilt."

Stilt scootched a little closer. His legs were so long that when he sat down his knees were higher than his head. He slipped a foot out of his buskin and unself-consciously scratched himself behind an ear.

"Bend your neck."

The scrawny young shifter obeyed. Rooster shoved the head further down with one hand, and with the other pushed aside the lank, ditchwater hair. "Look—pinfeathers!" He yanked up Stilt's head again, and waggled the sharp, foot-long nose to show how it had calcified. "And his toes are turning to talons—see for yourselves."

The children pushed and shoved at one another in their anxiety to see. Stilt blinked, but suffered their pokes and prods with dim stoicism. Finally, Dimity sniffed and said, "So what?"

"He's coming of age, that's so what. Look at his nose! His eyes! Before the next Maiden's Moon, the change will be upon him. And then, and then. . ." Rooster paused dramatically.

"Then?" the shadow-boy prompted in a papery, night-breeze of a voice. He was somewhere behind Thistle now.

"Then he'll be able to fly!" Rooster said triumphantly. "He'll be able to fly over the walls to freedom, and never come back."

Freedom! Jane thought. She rocked back on her heels, and imagined Stilt flapping off clumsily into a bronze-green autumn sky. Her thoughts soared with him, over the walls and razor-wire and into the air, the factory buildings and marshalling yards dwindling below, as he flew higher than the billowing exhaust from the smokestacks, into the deepening sky, higher than Dame Moon herself. And never, oh never, to return!

It was impossible, of course. Only the dragons and their half-human engineers ever left the plant by air. All others, workers and management alike, were held in by the walls and, at the gates, by security guards and the hulking cast iron Time Clock. And yet at that instant she felt something take hold within her, a kind of impossible hunger. She knew now that the idea, if nothing more, of freedom was possible, and, that established, the desire to be free herself was impossible to deny.

Down at the base of her hindbrain, something stirred and looked about with dark interest. She experienced a moment's dizzy nausea, a removal into some lightless claustrophobic realm, and then she was once again deep in the maw of the steam dragon plant, in the little dormitory room on the second floor of Building 5, wedged between a pattern store room and the sand shed, with dusty wooden beams and a tarpaper roof between her and the sky.

"So he'll get to fly away," Dimity said sourly. Her tail lashed back and forth discontentedly. "So what? Are we supposed to kill Blugg as a going-away present?"

Rooster punched her on the shoulder for insubordination. "Dolt! Pimple! Douchebag! You think Blugg hasn't noticed? You think he isn't . planning to make an offering to the Goddess, so she'll keep the change away?"

Nobody else said anything, so reluctantly Jane asked, "What kind of offering?"

He grabbed his crotch with one hand, formed a sickle with the other, and then made a slicing gesture with the sickle. His hand fell away. He raised an eyebrow. "Get it?"

She didn't really, but Jane knew better than to admit that. Blushing, she said, "Oh."

"Okay, now, I've been studying Blugg. On black foundry days, he goes to his office at noon, where he can watch us through the window in his door, and cuts his big, ugly nails. He uses this humongous great knife, and cuts them down into an ashtray. When he's done, he balls them up in a paper napkin and tosses it into the foundry fires, so they can't be used against him.

"Next time, though, I'm going to create a disturbance. Then Jane will slip into his office and steal one or two parings. No more," he said, looking sternly at her, "or he'll notice."

"Me?" Jane squeaked. "Why me?"

"Don't be thick. He's got his door protected from the likes of the rest of us. But you—you're of the other blood. His wards and hexes won't stop you."

"Well, thanks heaps," Jane said. "But I won't do it. It's wrong, and I've already told you why." Some of the smaller children moved toward her threateningly. She folded her arms. "I don't care what you guys say or do, you can't make me. Find somebody else to do your dirty work!"

"Aw, c'mon. Think of how grateful we'd all be." Rooster got up on one knee, laid a hand across his heart and reached out yearningly. He waggled his eyebrows comically. "I'll be your swain forever."

"No!"

Stilt was having trouble following what they were saying. In his kind this was an early sign of impending maturity. Brow furrowed, he turned to Rooster and haltingly said, "I . . . can't fly?"

Rooster turned his head to the side and spat on the floor in disgust. "Not unless Jane changes her mind."

Stilt began to cry.

His sobs began almost silently, but quickly grew louder. He threw back his head, and howled in misery. Horrified, the children tumbled over one another to reach him and stifle his cries with their hands and bodies. His tears muffled, then ceased.

For a long, breathless moment they waited to hear if Blugg had been roused. They listened for his heavy

tread coming up the stairs, the angry creaking of old wood, felt for the stale aura of violence and barely suppressed anger that he pushed before him. Even Rooster look frightened.

But there came no sound other than the snort of cyborg hounds on patrol, the clang and rustle of dragons in the yards stirring restlessly in their chains, and the distant subaudible chime of midnight bells celebrating some faraway sylvan revelry. Blugg still slept.

They relaxed.

What a shivering, starveling batch they were! Jane felt a pity for them all that did not exclude herself. A kind of strength hardly distinguishable from desperation entered her then and filled her with resolve, as though she were nothing more than an empty mold whose limbs and torso had been suddenly poured through with molten iron. She burned with purpose. In that instant she realized that if she were ever to be free, she must be tough and ruthless. Her childish weaknesses would have to be left behind. Inwardly she swore, on her very soul, that she would do whatever it took, anything, however frightening, however vile, however wrong.

"All right," she said. "I'll do it."

"Good." Without so much as a nod of thanks, Rooster began elaborating his plot, assigning every child a part to play. When he was done, he muttered a word and made a short, chopping pass with his hand over the candle. The flame guttered out.

Any one of them could've extinguished it with the slightest puff of breath. But that wouldn't have been as satisfying.

* * *

The black foundry was the second largest workspace in all the plant. Here the iron was poured to make the invulnerable bodies and lesser magick-proofed parts of the great dragons. Concrete pits held the green sand, silt mixes and loam molds. Cranes moved slowly on overhead beams, and the October sunlight slanted down through airborne dust laboriously churned by gigantic ventilating fans.

At noon an old lake hag came by with the lunch cart, and Jane received a plastic-wrapped sandwich and a cup of lukewarm grapefruit juice for her portion. She left her chamois gloves at the workbench, and carried her food to a warm, dusty niche beside a wood frame bin filled with iron scrap, a jumble of claws, scales and cogwheels.

Jane set the paper cup by her side, and smoothed her coarse brown skirt comfortably over her knees. Closing her eyes, she pretended she was in a high-elven cloud palace. The lords and ladies sat about a long table, all marble and white lace, presided over by slim tapers in silver sticks. The ladies had names like Fata Elspeth and Fata Morgaine, and spoke in mellifluous polysyllables. Their laughter was like little bells and they called her Fata Jayne. An elven prince urged a bowl of sorbet dainties on her. There was romance in his eyes. Dwarven slaves heaped the floor with cut flowers in place of rushes.

She took a bite of sandwich, and chewed it slowly to make it last. Crouched in the arch of the window was her very own aquilohippus, jeweled saddle on its back, and anxious to fly. Its glance was fierce and its beak as sharp as razors. Nobody but she dared ride it, but to her it was very gentle and sweet. Its name was

Somebody stomped on her foot.

"Oh!" Jane scrambled to her feet, knocking over her juice, and saw that Rooster had just passed her, a

bag of scrap slung over his shoulder—he was on the second lunch shift, and still working. "Heads up, dipshit! It's almost time!" he growled from the corner of his mouth. Then, to take the sting off his words, he smiled and winked. But it was a wan and unconvincing smile. If she hadn't known better, she'd've thought him afraid.

Then he was gone.

Her peaceful mood was shattered. Briefly, she had forgotten Rooster's wild plan. Now it came back to her, and with it the certainty that it would never work. She would be caught and punished, and there was nothing she could do about it. She had given her word.

The wall of the foundry furthest from the cupolas held a run of narrow offices for shop-level supervisors. Jane shoved her sandwich into the pocket of her work apron, and peered around the edge of the bin. She could see Blugg's office and within it Blugg seated at his desk, cigar in mouth, slowly leafing through a glossy magazine.

Blugg was fat and burly, with heavy jowls and a low brow. He had wispy flyaway hair, which was thinning and which he never tended, and a curling pair of ram's horns of which he was inordinately vain. For special occasions he had them lacquered and varnished, and once a year on Samhain, he would gild the tips. Traces of gold remained in the whorls and ridges for weeks after.

"Hsst!"

Jane turned. The shadow-boy was standing in the niche she had just vacated, a ragged figure dim and difficult to see even at high noon. "Rooster sent me," he said. "I'm supposed to keep lookout for you." She could not make out the expression on his face, but his voice trembled.

She felt awful now, and afraid. "I can't," she said. She didn't have the nerve to go ahead with it. "I just—"

A roar shattered the midday calm. Suddenly everyone was running, throwing down tools, scuttling out onto the workfloor and climbing up on the molds to see what was going on. They were all rushing toward the cupolas. Something was happening there. Jane stared into the swirl of figures, unable to make sense of all the noise and motion. Then suddenly everything snapped into place.

Rooster, laughing insanely, was pissing on a hammer giant's foot. The hammer giant screamed in fury. It was the Sand Slinger himself, the biggest creature in all the plant, that Rooster had decided to pick on. This was typical Rooster shrewdness, since the Sand Slinger was not only the largest but had the slowest reaction time of all the giants. But it was still a madly dangerous thing to do.

Now at last the Sand Slinger thought to raise its foot up from the stream of urine and bring it down upon its miniscule antagonist. The floor shook with the impact.

Rooster darted aside, jeering.

The giant moved its head from side to side in baffled rage. Brow knitted, it stared down at the three-ton maul lying atop its anvil. A cunning expression blossomed on its coarse face, and it reached an enormous hand for the hammer.

"Now!" The shadow-boy anxiously pointed to Blugg's office. It was empty. The door had been left slammed wide, open and unguarded.

Crash. The hammer slammed down where Rooster had been. Running, stooping, Jane scuttled across those enormous empty spaces separating her from Blugg's office. She was aghast at her own daring, and terrified she would be caught. Behind her, the hammer slammed down again. The soles of her feet tingled

with the vibrations. Then she was in the office. She stepped immediately to the side, where the wall would hide her, and straightened up to get her bearings.

Crash. The hammer fell a third time. People were yelling, running, screaming.

The office was close and cluttered. Technical manuals lay on the floor in heaps. The trash basket overflowed with litter. Water-stained plans for wyverns obsolete decades ago hung on the walls, along with thumbtacked production schedules gone brown at the edges, and a SAFETY FIRST poster showing a cartoon hand holding index finger upward, a ribbon tied in a bow just beneath the second knuckle.

The sole bit of color came from a supplier's calendar with a picture of naked mermaids, fat as sea cows, lolling on the rocks. Jane stared at those pink acres of marshmallow-soft flesh for a frozen instant, as if the image were a window into an alien and threatening universe. Then she shook her head clear and darted to the desk.

The pressed metal ashtray was exactly where it ought to be. A cigar smoldered on its lip, still damp on one end. Gingerly, she took the smelly thing between thumb and forefinger and held it aside. Hurry! she thought. In among the ashes were what looked to be seven crescent moons carved from yellowed ivory. She picked out two, put down the cigar, and whirled to go.

But then a speck of green caught her eye, and she glanced down in the waste basket. One corner of a book peeked out from the trash. For no reason that she could think of, she brushed the papers aside to see what it was. Then she saw and caught her breath.

A grimoire!

It was a thick volume in a pebbled green vinyl cover, with the company logo on the front and beneath that a title she could not read in raised gold-edged lettering. Three chrome bolts held in the pages so they could be easily removed and updated. Jane gaped, then came to her senses. Grimoires were valuable beyond imagining, so rare that each was numbered and registered in the front offices. It was impossible that one should end up here, in Blugg's office, much less that it would then be thrown away as worthless.

Still .. it wouldn't hurt just to touch it.

She touched it, and a numinous sense of essence flowed up her arm. In a way unlike anything she had ever felt before the volume spoke to her. It was real! Beyond any doubt or possibility of delusion, the book was a true grimoire. Here, within her grasp, was real magick; recipes for hellfire and vengeance, secrets capable of leveling cities, the technologies of invisibility and ecstatic cruelty, power enough to raise the dead and harrow Hell itself.

For a long, timeless instant she communed with the grimoire, letting it suffuse and possess her. At last its whispered promises faded and were still.

She dug it out of the papers.

It was too big to carry in one hand. Jane stuck the stolen nail parings in her mouth, where she could hold them between lip and gum, and seized the book with both hands.

At that instant there was a long, shrill whistle. She turned, and there in the doorway stood the shadow-boy, held back by the fetish-bundles nailed to the jamb, urging her out with anxious sweeps of his arm. Beyond, she saw that the Sand Slinger had been brought under control. Rooster was held captive by one of the hogmen. The spectators were breaking up, some into small knots to discuss what

they'd seen, others turning away, returning to their jobs.

Cradling the book in her arms, she ran from the room. It weighed a ton, and she staggered under its weight. But she wasn't going to give it up. It was hers now.

The shadow-boy stood in open daylight, as close to visible as he ever came. "What took you so long?" he whispered fearfully. "He'll be coming soon."

"Here." She thrust the book at him. "Take this back to the dormitory, quick, and hide it under my blanket." When he didn't move, she snapped, "There's no time for questions. Just do it!"

In a voice close to tears, the shadow-boy said, "But what about my lunch?" His head turned yearningly to where the lake hag leaned over her cart, staring slack jawed at the aftermath of Rooster's fight. She had yet to begin her second swing through the factory.

"You can have mine," Jane dredged her somewhat flattened sandwich from her apron pocket, and slapped it down atop the grimoire. "Now go!" An indistinct motion that might have been a shrug, and the shadow-boy was gone. Jane did not see him leave. It was as if he had simply dissolved into the gloom and ceased to be.

She raised a hand to her mouth to spit out the stolen nail parings, and simultaneously saw Blugg all the way across the foundry, squinting straight at her. Jane stood in an exquisite paralysis of exposure.

Then Rooster darted free of the hogman and shouted something up at the giant. With a roar of outrage, the Sand Slinger seized the first weapon that came to hand, and *hurled* it.

Lightning flashed.

The afterimage of the molten iron that splayed from the flung ladle burned across Jane's eyes. Voices rose in a babble of fear, laced through with urgently shouted orders. High above them all, Rooster screamed an agonized scream.

In the confusion, Jane made good her escape. She was back at her bench in a minute, hastily pulling on her gloves. Maybe Blugg hadn't really seen her. Maybe he'd forgotten her in all the excitement.

"Did you get them?" Smidgeon whispered. For a second Jane couldn't imagine what she was talking about. Then she remembered, nodded, and spat out the stolen nail parings into her hand. Smidgeon took them and passed them down the line to Lumpbuckle who palmed them off to Little Dick, and from there Jane lost track. She scooped some emery powder into the palm of her glove. Back to work. That was the safest course.

To the far side of the factory, Rooster's still body was being carted away. Leather-helmeted spriggans ran about, dousing small fires the molten metal had started. Water sizzled and gushed into steam. A scorched smell filled the air.

Over it all rumbled the Sand Slinger's laughter, like thunder.

* * *

Blugg descended upon the workbench, face black with rage. He slammed his hand on the table so hard the emery trays jumped. "Stand up, damn you!" he shouted. "Stand when I'm talking to you!"

They scrambled to their feet.

"You vile little pieces of shit. You worthless, miserable . . ." He didn't seem able to compose his thoughts. "Who put Rooster up to this? That's what I want to know. Who? Eh?" He seized Smidgeon in one enormous hand and hauled the wretched creature struggling off her feet. "Tell me!" He twisted her ear until she whimpered.

"I-I think he did it himself, sir. He's always been a wild one."

"Bah!" Blugg contemptuously flung Smidgeon down, and turned on Jane. His face swelled up before her, as large and awful as the moon. Jane could smell his sweat, not the fine, clean astringency of a Rooster or a shadow-boy, but the strong, sour smell of an adult male. She smelled his breath, too, sweet with corruption. He had yellow little stumps of teeth, black where the gums drew away from them. A bit of rotten meat caught between two of his teeth mesmerized Jane. She could not look away.

"You—" he began. Then, shaking his head bullishly, he drew back and addressed them all: "You think you can ruin my career, don't you?" They were too fearful to speak.

"Well, I have news for you! I'm not some dickless wonder you can fuck over anytime you feel like. You make things hard on me, and I'll make things hard on you. I'll make things harder on you than you could ever imagine!"

He bent over, turning sideways, and pointed to his own rump. "When you make trouble, Management is going to land on me right *here*, get that? And if they land on me *here*, I'm going to land on you *here* too." Every time he said here, he wagged his backside and jabbed his forefinger at it; it would have been funny, if it weren't so frightening. "Do you read me?"

They stood trembling and silent before him.

"I said: Do you read me!"

"Yes, sir!"

For a long time Blugg glared at them, motionless, silent, unblinking. A muscle in the back of Jane's left leg began to tremble with the effort of standing still. She was sure he was going to ask what she was doing in his office. Despair welled up within her, a force so overwhelming that once it started to leak from her eyes she knew it would fill the room and drown them all.

"You . . . little . . . vermin," he said at last. "There's nothing I'd like better than to strangle each and every one of you with my bare hands. I could do it, too—don't think you'd be missed! You eat like pigs and then spend half the day sitting on your thumbs." He walked down the line looking them each in the eye. When he came to Jane she again thought he would ask why she had invaded his office, but he did not.

"All right," he said at last, "line up by height, and out the east door doubleti—where's the shadow-boy?"

"Here, sir," the shadow-boy said meekly. Jane started. She hadn't realized he was standing beside her.

Blugg rocked slowly on his heels, sweeping his gaze up and down the workbench, savoring their fear. Then he snapped, "All right, doubletime out—I've got some special work duty for you little shits. Now!" They were quick-marched, Blugg cursing them every step of the way, out the east door, past the loading docks and around the steam hammer works. A brace of loaders were parked in front of the orange smithy, so they took a detour through the old file works building, which had begun long ago as a covered yardway connecting the planing shed to the machine shop and then been expanded and still later, after the new file works building was dedicated, renovated into a clutch of utility rooms.

Blugg had still not said anything of Jane's being in his office. She was beginning to dare hope that all that

had happened had driven it from his mind.

"You!" He grabbed Jane by her collar, half-choking her, and kicked open a door. "Wait in here. If you're not here when I return, you know what'll happen to you."

He flung her inside and slammed the door.

The hurrying footsteps of the children faded away, and all was still.

2.

The room was empty. One wall was all windows from waist-high to the ceiling, panes painted over in a motley, unplanned pattern of grey and dull blue to reduce environmental distraction and promote worker efficiency. Pale light shone through them, wintry weak and shadowless. Thin cracks where the paint had contracted by the edges of the sash bars shone painfully bright.

Beneath the windows a long lab bench was cluttered with testing equipment. Three oscilloscopes shivered liquidly, square-cornered sine waves slowly creeping across their screens. White smocks had been hastily hung over wall pegs or left draped atop high wooden stools, as if the low-level technomancers who ordinarily worked here had been suddenly driven away by some industrial disaster. To the far side of the room, a new-model dragon's eyeball, as tall as she was, peered from a testing box. *Click*. It swiveled to look at her.

Jane shivered miserably. She tried to picture what punishment Blugg would inflict on her for her crime, and could not. Whatever it was, it would be bad. She walked slowly across the room and back again, the sound of her footsteps bouncing from the high ceiling. The dragon's eye tracked her progress.

Was Rooster dead? His plan had turned out even worse than she had anticipated. She had expected that he would escape unscathed while she herself would be caught and subjected to a punishment both swift and dreadful. This was worse, far worse, on both counts.

Time passed, and Blugg did not return. Nor did the techs who surely worked here. At first she awaited them with fear, knowing they would not accept her explanation of what she was doing in their workspace.

Then, from sheer boredom, she began to look forward to the confrontation. Later, she despaired of it. Finally, she arrived at indifference. Let them come or not; she did not care. She was a creature of pure perception, a passive observer of the coarse feel of the metallic grit dusting the workbench, of the oxidized rubber smell of the voltmeters, and the fine sheen of the smoothly worn grain on the seats of the stools. Without her, these things would cease to exist, fading silently and gratefully into nothingness.

By excruciatingly slow degrees the window dimmed and the room cooled. Just before darkness, someone walked by in the hallway, flicking switches. Row upon row of fluorescent tubes winked on overhead.

Jane's stomach ached. She felt miserable in a way that was beyond tears. Her insides cramped. For the umpteenth time she walked into the center of the room, the dragon's eye following her every step. She had no idea what time it was, but she was certain she had missed supper.

The door slammed open.

Blugg entered, looking weary and distracted. His grey workshirt was damp under the armpits, and the sleeves were rolled halfway up his wooly forearms. The dragon's eye flicked toward him.

"What were you doing in my office?" Oddly, Blugg did not look at Jane. Instead, he frowned down at a small filigree-capped crystal that hung from his hand on a loop of thread.

"I was only. . . ."

All of its own volition, Jane's hand rose to her mouth. Her lips pursed involuntarily. It was the exact same gesture she had been making when Blugg saw her in front of his office. Horrified, she whipped her hand down and hid it behind her back.

Blugg stared at her in a bug-eyed, unblinking way for a moment. A slow smile grew on his face. "You little minx. You were going through my trash."

"No!" she cried. "I didn't take anything, really I didn't."

Blugg slid the crystal back in its plastic case and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He reached forward and seized her chin.

His smile grew dreamier, and more frighteningly distant. He turned her head from side to side, studying her face. "Mmmmm." He ran his gaze down the front of her work apron, as though appraising her strength. His nostrils flared. "Rummaging through my trash basket, were you? Looking for orange peels and bits of sandwich crust. Well, why not? A healthy appetite is a good thing in a youngster."

This was more terrifying than threats would have been, for it made no sense at all. Jane stared up at Blugg uncomprehendingly.

He laid his hands on her shoulders, turned her around slowly. "You've been working for me how long? Why, it's been years, hasn't it? How time has flown. You're getting to be a big little girl, aren't you? Perhaps it's time you were promoted. I'm going to put in for a Clerk-Messenger Three. How would you like that?"

"Sir?"

"Don't sir me! It's a simple enough question." He looked at her oddly, then sniffed the air again. "Pfaugh! You're bleeding. Why haven't you kept yourself clean?"

"Bleeding?" she said blankly.

Blugg pointed down at her leg with a fat, blunt finger. "There." Jane looked down. There was *blood* trickling down her calf. She could feel it now, itching all the way down from her thigh.

This final indignity broke her delicately maintained control. The sudden, sorcerous appearance of blood from some previously unsuspected wound ruptured the membrane holding back all her fear and apprehension. She began to cry.

"Oh, shit." Blugg made a face. "Why does all this crap always happen to me?" Disgusted, he waved her to the door. "Go on! Go straight to the nurse's station and do whatever she tells you."

* * *

"Congratulations," the nurse said. "You're a woman now."

The nurse was a sour old creature with piggy eyes, a pointed nose, and two donkey's ears. She showed Jane how to fold a sanitary napkin, and what to do with it. Then she delivered a memorized lecture on personal hygiene, gave her two aspirins and sent her back to the dormitory.

Rooster was there already. He lay delirious upon his bed, head swathed in bandages. "He's going to lose his left eye," Dimity said. "That's if he lives. They said if he doesn't die tonight, he'll probably be okay."

Jane timidly touched Rooster's shoulder, though she could scarcely bear doing so. His skin was pale as wax, and cold. "Fly the friendly skies," he mumbled, lost in some faraway delirium. "Join the Pepsi generation." Jane snatched her hand away from him, as if scorched.

"I'm taking care of him. So don't you interfere." Dimity smoothed the blanket down fussily. There was a defiant edge to her voice. When she was done, she leaned back, hands on hips, waiting for Jane to challenge her. Then, when Jane did not, she smiled meanly. "Time for you to go to bed. Isn't it?"

Jane nodded and went to her corner.

The grimoire was waiting for her. The shadow-boy had left it under her folded blanket as instructed. She undressed slowly, managing to spread out the blanket and slip beneath without exposing the book. When she put her arms around it, she experienced a tingling sensation, like a low-voltage electrical current running through her. It made her feel strange.

That night, it seemed to take forever for the children to fall asleep. Rooster groaned and cried and babbled in his sleep, and his pain terrified them. Some of the smaller creatures crept from their own cots to huddle with their friends. Even the oldest among them occasionally sighed or turned over on their sides to face away from his suffering.

At long last, though, only Jane remained awake.

Silently, she slipped from her covers and under the bed. She pried up the broken board and squeezed into the narrow space between the dormitory room and the sand shed wall. It was dark there and dusty, but not close, for neither wall reached quite to the ceiling. A tiny draft found her and, naked, she shivered. It was not quite cold enough, though, to force her back for her dress. She groped blindly behind her for the grimoire, and pulled it in after her.

Rooster groaned. In a high, lucid voice he said, "Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese . . ." Jane found herself unable to breathe. ". . . and a sesame seed bun." It was too awful, his lonely voice speaking to no one in the emptiness of the night. "Teflon." She grasped the broken board with her hand and swung it to. With it closed, she could no longer hear him.

Settling herself down on her heels, she placed the grimoire on her lap and opened it. The pages were black and lightless, but the letters shone coolly, silvery to the eye and slick to the touch. She found that when she concentrated hard on them, a whispery sense of meaning filled her, though she could not quite capture the significance of each word. This was a table of compression ratios, and here was a section on machining tolerances for the cylinders. She lingered briefly over the calibration settings for the crystals, then flipped ahead, trusting to her fingertips to convey to her the essence of what they skimmed, skipping and leaping ahead until she came to what she wanted.

It was the chapter that told how to actually operate a dragon.

Until that instant, she had not known what she intended. Now, though, running her hands over and over the schematics with their cryptic symbols for capacitors and potentiometers and resistors and grounds, dipping her head so she could caress the printed dials and circuits with her cheek, breathing deep the ink and coated-paper smell that emanated from each page, it seemed to her that she had been born intending to someday steal a dragon.

The space between walls was so tight it pinched her shoulders. She did not notice. Her head was full of

fast black dragons. What had been invisible to her, because ubiquitous, now stood revealed. She heard them scream supersonic across the sky, fueled by wrath and gasoline. She felt the gravitational pull of them, the superheated backwash of their passing. And she saw herself riding one away, away, away.

First, though, she would have to master the grimoire. She would have to learn how the dragons were operated.

For hours Jane pored over the book, gently touching and internalizing the chapter sigil by sigil. She finished her first reading of it in time for breakfast. She crawled out of the wall just as the wake-up whistle blew, and was marched off to eat, yawning, bone-weary and happy.

The next night, for the first time, she heard the dragon speak to her.

* * *

Three days later Jane, Dimity, and Thistle were taken to the machine shop. The regular workspaces were all claimed, and after some argument with the shop supervisor Blugg took a box of machine wheels under his arm and led them upstairs. A balcony-level string of rooms ran completely around the building there. It was junk space, but Blugg found a place for them between a wooden stairway and the brick chimney-top of an industrial alembic. They were given a rickety wood bench at a window ledge, and told to wipe the wheels clean of grease.

Then Blugg left.

The window had long ago been painted over, glass and all, with white or green or grey paint—it was hard to guess which now—and there was a gap of at least a foot between the upper sash and the top of the frame, glued permanently open. Chill air poured down on them. A brown enameled kerosene heater wedged under the stairway strained to offset the cold.

"Trade places with me," Dimity said, as soon as Blugg was gone. "Thistle and I want to be closer to the heater."

Jane almost refused. But Dimity was always complaining about the cold; it was possible she felt it more. And Thistle was smiling in rather a mean way. It was probably best to give in to them on this one.

She stood, walked to the far side of the bench, and sat down again without saying a word.

The cogwheels were the size of silver pennies but much thinner, with fine teeth that prickled when touched edge-on. The grease on them was an almost translucent brown, and had hardened so that it did not come off easily. They worked industriously, knowing that Blugg would pop up to look in on them regularly.

But the inspections never came. Hours passed. Blugg seemed to have forgotten them completely.

Jane stared sightlessly ahead as she worked, her thoughts on the grimoire and on the dragon's voice she was still not entirely sure that she heard speaking to her at night. She dreamed of gleaming ebon flanks and smooth, streamlined surfaces, of strength and endurance wedded to ruthless speed. She imagined her hand on the throttle, with all that fearsome power under her control.

Beside her, Dimity sighed.

The silvery-dull sunlight streaming in over the top of the window was suddenly divided by the fluttering shadow of wings. Dimity looked up and eagerly cried, "Toad eggs!"

"Toad eggs?" Thistle said dimly. "Eww. Whatever are you talking about?"

"Up there, under the roof. That's where they've built their nests." Dimity climbed up on the ledge and stood on tiptoe. She stretched an arm out the window as far as it would go, her tail twitching impatiently. There were several muddy blobs on the undersides of the eaves. "Damn! I can't quite. . . ."

"There won't be any eggs," Jane pointed out. "Nothing lays eggs in the autumn."

"Toads do. It's not like the spring clutch, it doesn't hatch. They store them away for the winter, so they'll have something to eat during the Axe Moon." She looked down, a strange smile twisting her wide mouth. "Jaaane! Climb out there, and fetch me in some eggs."

"I'm no climber! Why don't you get Smidgeon or Little Dick or. . . ." "They're not here." She exchanged glances with Thistle, and before Jane could react, the shifter had seized her and thrust her up alongside Dimity. The young feys were both preternaturally strong. Laughing, they stuck her out the window and shoved. The box of cogwheels was kicked over, and little metal wheels went spinning and rolling away. "Out you go, my lovely!" Dimity sang.

Jane clutched wildly at the frame. Cold wind blew in her face, forcing tears to her eyes. Across a cinder-paved courtyard, Building 6 reeled up at her, dark clouds scudding above. Below and to one side, she saw the tarpaper roof of a utility shack, dotted with bits of brick and old soda bottles. It was at least a thirty foot drop.

"Oh, holy Mother!" Jane gasped. Desperately, she struggled to pull herself back in.

But tough, merciless hands pried her fingers free. With a jar, she was pushed out into the void. Flailing, afraid she would throw up, she squeezed her eyes shut tight and grabbed for the window frame. Her weight rested atop the upper sash now. Only her legs were inside.

"Don't wriggle, you'll make us drop you."

She had hold of the frame again. Brittle flakes of paint crunched under her fingertips. She pulled herself flat against the building, brick scratching her cheek. The sweet, pungent smell of toad droppings filled her nostrils. The outside top of the frame was white with them. It was cold out here, too. She shivered convulsively. "Oh, please let me in," she babbled, "sweet Dimity, I'll do anything you ask me, I'll be your best friend, only—"

"Here." A hand shot out with a plastic bag in it. "Fill this up, and you can come back in again." One of Jane's shoes had fallen off and now she felt Thistle peel her sock back. A sharp fingertip drew itself up the center of her foot, paused, then waggled at the softest part of her flesh. "Stop that tickling! If she falls, I won't get any eggs." The hand moved impatiently up and down. "Take the bag."

Jane obeyed. She took a long, deep breath, and opened her eyes. Her head and stomach were so dizzy-sick that it took her a moment to realize that she was staring up at the underside of the eaves. There must be twenty nests up there, warty and bulging things with a hole to one side, like ill-made jars.

The toads had scattered when she first emerged from the window. They fluttered in agitation not far off, their black-feathered wings beating hysterically. They were loathsome things, the miscegenated get of jackdaws upon their lustful batrachian dams, and like their sires they were notorious thieves. Their nests were ordinarily kept cleared away from the roofs because they had a fondness for shiny objects and, unlike most wild things, had little or no fear of fire. They had been known to torch buildings by filching lit cigarettes and carrying them back to their nests. They were a terrible hazard.

Trembling, she stretched out a hand. The nest was just out of reach. Unhappily, she knew that Dimity would never accept that as an excuse. Taking a long, steadying breath, she forced herself to lean back over empty air. With the arm clutching the window fully extended she could easily reach the nearest nest. She squeezed her hand into the opening.

The inside of the nest was lined with fine black down, silkily soft to her touch. She probed to the back of the nest, and found a clutch of sticky warm eggs. She scooped them out and straightened at the waist, returning to the window. Awkwardly she opened the bag and dropped the eggs within. They slid to the bottom in a mass.

She hadn't gotten all the eggs. She leaned back again to scoop up those she had missed. This time, she only got a half-handful, along with two bits of aluminum foil, a shard of broken glass, and a chromed hex nut. These last she let drop to the distant ground.

Second nest. She dredged out the eggs quickly. Just as she was withdrawing her hand, the wind whipped up, sending a blast of icy air right through her clothing. She knew better than to look down, but the sudden swirl of air made her feel especially vertiginous. She wanted to cry, from fear and frustration, but dared not.

If she started crying now, she might never stop.

This nest had, in addition to the eggs, several more bits of foil and a jagged strip of copper sheeting gone green that made her think for a horrified instant that something had stung her, when she jabbed her hand against the point. "The bag is almost half-full!" she cried. "Can I come back in again?"

"Not enough."

"But I can't reach any more. Really I can't."

Dimity's face appeared in the window opening. Her grip on Jane's legs slipped a bit, and Jane cried out in fear. Dimity squinted judiciously. "That one there." She pointed. "You can reach it."

Jane's fingers ached. She was not sure her strength would hold out. The underside of the eaves crawled in her vision from her staring so hard, but when she closed her eyes all the world seemed to flip over, and she had to open them quickly or lose her balance.

She forced herself to stretch out as far as she could.

Her hand would not quite reach. "Dimity—" she began tremblingly. "Eggs!"

There was only one way. Jane squirmed a little higher up on the window, so that her weight now rested halfway down her thighs. She stretched so far she could hear her bones creak.

Again her hand slipped into a nest. She felt the downy warmth and then the slippery stickiness within. She curved her hand and scooped out the eggs.

But the toads were beginning to regain their courage. They croaked and cawed at her, and made short, threatening swoops. One flew almost in her face, and when she threw up an elbow to protect herself, it bounced off her forearm with a solid, slimy thump. Jane's stomach lurched in revulsion.

"Hold my legs tight," she whispered, not at all sure she could be heard, but unable to speak any louder. She straightened at the waist.

Then she was back at the window. Gasping, she hugged it to her.

For a long time she was unable to move. When she had somewhat recovered herself, she tremblingly opened the bag and dropped in her final handful of eggs. Something red gleamed within. She stuck in two fingers to fish it out.

It was a ruby.

The ruby was half as long as her thumb, hexagonal in cross-section, and flat on both silvered ends, an industrial crystal used in occult information systems for the storage and processing of data. Smaller than a pencil stub, it was probably worth more than Jane herself was.

The problem was that she dared not bring it in with the eggs, or Dimity, her avarice excited, would send her out again to look for more. She'd return it to the nest if she dared, but her strength and nerve both were shot. If she dropped it and it were found later, Dimity would hear and figure out what had happened.

The top of the window ledge was white with droppings. She stuck the crystal in among them, and said, "Let me in. I've got your eggs."

* * *

Dimity snatched the bag from Jane's hand, even before she could climb wobblingly down from the ledge and collapse on the bench. "Good little Janie, nice little Janie-poo," she gloated, sliding her hand deep into the bag, and dumping a great gelatinous mass in Thistle's eagerly cupped palms. She placed an egg into her mouth and closed her eyes in ecstasy as it popped. She shoveled in more.

The cogwheels were all over the floor. Wearily, Jane righted the box and began picking them up. "Dimity," she said at last. "Why do you hate me?"

Dimity smiled an eggy smile. Thistle opened her mouth wide to show its inside yellow with yolk. Bits of shell clung to her lips. "Want some? After all, you fetched them."

Tears welled up in Jane's eyes. "I never did anything to you. Why are you like this to me?"

Thistle's cheeks were bulging with eggs. Dimity swallowed hers down, then turned the plastic bag inside out and began licking it. "I hear you're going to be Blugg's messenger," she said.

"Blugg's little pet is more like it," Thistle spat. "That's what you are, aren't you, Missy?"

"No, I'm not!"

"You know what he really wants, don't you?" Dimity thrust an arm up Thistle's skirt, and Thistle rolled her eyes in mock ecstasy. "He wants you to be his familiar."

Jane shook her head. "I don't know what that means."

"He wants to poke his wig-wag into your cunny."

"But that doesn't make any sense!" she wailed. "Why would he want—?"

Dimity's eyes turned the hard flat red of two garnets. "Don't act so innocent with *me*! I hear you creeping out of bed at night, crawling into the wall so you can stick your fingers up your rabbit-hole." "No. Really."

"Oh! No, of course. You wouldn't do anything like thaa-at. Hotsy-totsy little Miss Changeling. Think we're so special, do we? Just you wait until Blugg sticks his thing in your heinie-hole, let's see you put on your airs then!"

Thistle began to skip and dance about Jane, lifting her skirts up above her waist and wagging her skinny little behind. "Heinie-hole, heiniehole," she sang. "Heinie-heinie-heinie-hole."

"Just keep this in mind, girlie-girl." The fey grabbed her by the collar, bunched it together and lifted her painfully off the ground. "I give the orders here. What I say goes, messenger or not, familiar or not. You obey me. Got that?"

"Yes, Dimity," she said helplessly.

"He'll want to put it in your mouth too," Thistle smirked.

* * *

Rooster lay abed for a week before he lapsed long enough into consciousness to get caught up. When his resources were at ebb, he lay motionless, struggling to breathe, each gasp of air rough and anguished. Sometimes he cried. Other times, snatches of glossolalic nonsense floated out of him. "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains," he said. "Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco."

Every night Jane waited until the others were asleep and crept into the wall to commune with the grimoire. When she had read herself into a trance, half exhaustion and half rapture, the dragon's voice would speak from the back of her skull. It told her they were both prisoners. It said their destinies were linked, and spoke of the freedom that would be theirs when they two flew off together, describing endless mountain chains with cold, high lakes, southern archipelagoes twisting like lizards, and high aeries niched among the autumn stars. She stayed, listening, inside the wall for as long as possible, emerging only when she was in danger of nodding off and being discovered missing at roll call the next morning. She didn't know if her dragon's voice were real or fantasy, and she didn't care.

She was under a compulsion.

It was always startling, when she emerged, to find Rooster still in his bed, she'd have forgotten him so thoroughly. He seemed an alien thing, slick with sweat, shining like an insect caught midway through metamorphosis. The pus that stained the edges of his bandages was faintly luminescent, like corpsefire, and he emitted an odd odor.

Jane's guilt was overwhelming. She ought to tend to him, she knew, wipe away his sweat, change his bandages, do what she could to ease his pain. But he repulsed her, even more than the foreign demons who worked in Section A as woodcarvers and joiners did, who were rumored to be cannibals and coprophages. She could not bring herself to go near him.

* * *

One evening the children came tromping back to the dormitory to find Rooster awake and waiting for them. He had propped himself up weakly against the headboard. At the sight of them he twisted his mouth into what he must have thought looked like a grin. "Back so early? Now in my day, we had to put in a full day's work, we did. These young people today, I don't know."

The children clustered timidly by the door.

"Well, come on. There's no reason to stand back like that. It's me!" They edged uncomfortably closer.

"Well. So how'd it go? Is Blugg dead?"

Nobody answered.

Now Rooster looked concerned. "Didn't the gooly-doll work?" Dimity cleared her throat. "We haven't tried it yet," she admitted. "You pussies." Rooster's face had the gently luminous quality of the flesh of some fey mushrooms from the deep woods. The bandages were all crusty, for they hadn't been changed in days. His eyelid sank almost closed, then opened again. "Why not?"

"Dimity said—" Stilt began.

"—that we should wait on you," Jane said hastily. Dimity favored her with a quick glance that said as clear as words: Don't think that will get you any favors. Her tail switched twice. "So we'd be certain to do it properly."

"That's all right, then." Rooster was not a subtle creature and had caught none of the undercurrents of the exchange. "That's not half so bad as I'd expected." He nodded to Stilt. "You hear that? We look after your interests, old buddy."

Stilt nodded and bobbed his head, eagerly, grotesquely happy, perfectly secure in his friend's ability to protect him. In the face of such faith, Jane had no choice but to admit to herself that she no longer believed in Rooster's plan. They were only children. Their simple magicks wouldn't touch a grown-up like Blugg. Management must provide wards against such attacks as part of their benefits package; otherwise, overseers would be dropping dead every day. Most likely he wouldn't even notice he had been attacked. She felt cold and stiff.

"Get the candle, we'll do the thing now," Rooster said. Then, when Dimity did not immediately respond, "Come on, you cow! Get a fucking move on!"

Grudgingly, the young hulder complied. She paused just long enough after wedging the candle between floorboards to make it seem she expected Rooster to charm it alight, thus emphasizing his weakness, then struck a lucifer match.

Sulfur spat and flared.

"Where's the gooly-doll?" Rooster asked.

Shame-faced, Skizzlecraw produced it. Rooster ran a thumb over the stomach to feel the sharp tips of the horn slivers poking through, then handed it to Stilt. "You do it," he said.

Automatically, Stilt glanced toward Dimity for her okay.

Dimity tightened her lips, nodded.

"Hush," Rooster commanded.

They were still. Outside could be heard overlay upon overlay of distant machine noises, friendly rumblings, groanings, and poundings. Directly beneath them, they could hear the regular creak-creak-creak, almost inaudible, of a rocker. Blugg was whistling the Elf King's Tune, varying the speed and lilt of it as the rocker sped up and slowed down.

"Now!" Rooster whispered.

Stilt shoved the doll into the flame.

It had been stitched from old nylons, and the cloth bubbled and blackened as the fire touched it. A horrid stench filled the air. Then the cotton stuffing went up with a small roar, and Stilt dropped the thing with a

startled cry. He cringed back, sucking on his hand.

The instant the flames touched the doll's belly, Jane's mouth went numb. She gasped. Her tongue felt swollen and prickly, as if it had been brushed by stinging nettles. Of course! There were still trace amounts of her saliva on the nail parings. A blind fraction of the curse was working on her.

Maybe they could kill Blugg after all.

Skizzlecraw began to cry. But Rooster ignored her. Hellfire malice dancing in his eyes, he sat bolt upright in his bed, fists clenched and head thrown back. "Yes!" he cried. "Yes! Die, damn you, die!" And while Smidgeon and Little Dick frantically beat out the flames to keep them from spreading, he laughed in triumph.

At that instant, there came a pounding on the ceiling of the room below, and Blugg bellowed, "What's that you brats are up to? By the Mother, I'm coming up there, and I'm bringing the strap!"

They fell silent.

A minute later, they heard his heavy tread coming up the stairs, and the lighter, more sprightly sound of leather tapping thigh.

Rooster looked stricken. The children scurried for their beds, hoping against hope to be spared the general punishment, Jane among them. But she noticed that Thistle was smirking with satisfaction.

Dimity was their leader now.

3.

Everybody blamed Jane.

Immediately after the doll's sacrifice, Jane came down with a light fever. Stilt stopped speaking altogether for three days. Skizzlecraw's hands and face blotched up with a rash. She turned sullen as well, but that was so in keeping with her prior character that it was little remarked by the other children. It was obvious to all that the curse was puissant, and an explanation was needed for why Blugg had not been hurt by it.

Dimity told them all, and Thistle backed her up, that Jane had lost her nerve in Blugg's office and come out without the nail parings. In her weakened state, Jane did a poor job of defending herself. And the shadow-boy was so bewildered and confused by the argument that he was of no help whatsoever.

Rooster knew the truth, of course; he had felt the parings with his own fingers. But he said nothing. After his moment of triumph, he had suffered a physical relapse and fallen back into silence and dead-eyed suspicion. So Jane was left totally friendless.

Her isolation was heightened by the new position Blugg had secured for her. Jane had to wear a day-glo orange vest to mark her as a messenger. It had two panels, front and back, that fit over her head, and was cinched at the waist by four ties of black plasticized cloth. She felt awkward wearing it, and exposed.

The work was easy, but unfamiliar. For her training period she trailed after Blugg as he made his rounds, and kept her mouth shut. "This is the meter house," he'd grunt, or "Here's where you get the emery powder, small bags only, and be sure to keep the yellow copy of the order slip." Jane was astonished to discover how much less Blugg had to do than his charges; his work seemed to her an aimless wandering process that consisted largely of long, incomprehensible conversations half-business and half-gossip.

Sometimes he played dominoes with a squattie man in Purchasing, the two of them hunched motionless over a plank, peering suspiciously at each other and cheating when they could.

"Wash your face," he told her one lunchbreak. "Your hands too, and scrub under the nails. You have to make a good impression." "Why?" she asked.

"Never you mind why! What business is it of yours why? You just do as you're told." Blugg followed her into the lavatory, and stood over her as she washed, making sure she lathered up with the brown soap, and at one point rubbing out a stain on the side of her ear with his own spittle.

They walked through a cold drizzle to a small office near the main gate. Blugg knocked, and they entered.

Inside, an elegantly lean elf-wife dressed in black sat smoking a cigarette and staring out the window. She turned her head when they entered, all powder and high cheekbones. Without any particular emphasis she said, "Is this she?"

"It's her," Blugg agreed.

The elf-wife stood. She was a good head and a half taller than Blugg. Heels clicking briskly, she strode to Jane and pinched her chin between thumb and forefinger. She turned Jane's head one way, then the other, frowning critically.

"She's an obedient thing," Blugg said wheedlingly. "Does exactly what she's told, snap of your fingers, doesn't have to be spoken to twice." Jane stared up into the elf-wife's eyes. They were cold things, like grey chips of ice, and the flesh around them broke into complex structures of wrinkles, hinting at years and decades that had not been visible from across the room. Jane had a sudden vision of the flesh as nothing more than a thin mask stretched over the woman's skull.

Recognition of a kind sparked in those lustreless eyes. "Are you afraid of me?"

Jane shook her head fearfully.

"You should be." The elf-wife's breath smelled of candied sweets and nicotine. Two long pearls dangled from her ears, half as long as her forefinger, and carved into blunt-headed serpentine shapes. Her fingertips tightened on Jane's chin, until tears involuntarily filled her eyes.

At last those fingers freed Jane. "I'll give it some thought," she said. She waved a hand toward the door. "You may leave."

Outside, Blugg was in an inexplicably gleeful mood. "Do you know who that was?" he all but chortled. Not waiting for an answer, he said, "That was a Greenleaf. A Greenleaf!"

Jane forgot about the encounter almost immediately. It was but one odd incident out of many.

* * *

It was not long before Rooster was back at work. The demons in the joinery shop made a little cart for him to use until he was strong enough to walk, and Jane and Stilt would lead the daily procession to and from work, each pulling at one handle of the cart.

One evening as they were marched back to the dormitory, they were stopped by the main gate while the shifts changed. They waited in the shadow of the monstrous black Time Clock while a flood of workers shambled, limped and hopped by. The swing shift was letting out, and all the nonresident laborers were

lined up before the Time Clock. They punched their cards, kissed the Goddess stone, and trudged off.

Stilt stared yearningly through the gate. Visible beyond were only the parking lot and the dusty curve of an asphalt road, but he stared as if they were a vision of the Western Isles. Blugg came up behind him, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Stilt looked up.

Blugg's wide mouth twisted into what might almost have been a smile. He plucked a tiny feather from the base of Stilt's neck and held it up to his squinting vision. "Haughhmm." He put the feather in his mouth and slowly, savoringly, let it melt on his tongue. "About time you were sent to the infirmary, innit?" he rumbled. "Jane! Remind me come morning to send this one to the Doc for—"

It was not at all certain that Stilt understood what was being said. But something within him broke. With a high, despairing cry, Stilt dropped the cart handle and ran.

Blugg swore and started to lumber after the boy. But fat as he was, he was no match for the small, lithe figure. Slack-jawed workers turned as Stilt darted by. Their motions were slow in contrast, like those of flies caught in sap already hardening toward amber. Jane clutched the sides of her skirt with both hands in an agony of dread.

"Don't do it, Stilt!" Rooster screamed. He sat bolt upright in his cart, face waxy and white. "Come back!"

But Stilt was beyond listening. Arms out to either side, he ran down the road. The creatures of the swing shift stood frozen, gaping dully after him. He ran past the Time Clock, and through the gate.

He was outside.

As he ran, his arms appeared to thicken and lift. His whole body was changing, in fact, his neck elongating, spine curving forward, legs atrophying as thin as pencils.

"He's growing older," one of the little ones whispered in flat astonishment.

"Stupid!" Dimity snapped. "What do you think a Time Clock is for?"

It was true. With every step away from the Time Clock, Stilt put on days, weeks, months. He was a child no more. He ran through his adolescent phase and coloration in no time at all. He was an adult now.

Then he was in the air and flying. For one wondrous instant, it was just as Jane had imagined it would be. He flapped his new wings wildly, straining upward, and surprised laughter fell from his mouth.

He was glorious.

The wall around the factory grounds hid him briefly as he rose. He reappeared overtop of the gate, headed east and dwindling. Then Stilt faltered, and lurched in the sky. His wild flappings grew weaker and less effective. His brown-and-russet coloring greyed. A feather drifted down from his wings. Then another. One after another, until they were as thick as flakes in a snowstorm.

Stilt fell.

On the way back to the dormitory, everyone was silent. Even Blugg, though white with rage, could find no words to express himself; he kept punching the air with impotent little jabs of his fist. Rooster's face was like stone.

Crawling back into her bed that night, Jane was surprised to find Rooster waiting for her, back against the wall, legs folded beneath him. A flash of alarm as harsh as an electric shock seized her. But before she could say anything, he shivered spasmodically and in a dry, toneless whisper said, "Something bad is happening to you." He swayed. "Something. . . . bad."

"Come on," she said, forcing solicitude into her voice. "You've got to get back to bed." She took his arm, shocked by how light he was, how little resistance he gave her, and led him to his own cot. Eased him down, and pulled up the blanket. Touching him was not so repulsive as she had thought it would be.

"No. You've got to. . . ." For the first time he opened his eye. It had no white. The pupil had swollen larger than his lid, opening a black, lightless hole completely out of the universe. She released his arm in fear. "Stilt . . . wasn't . . . the only one growing up. I have the sight. Not much, but a touch of it."

He shuddered again. The awen was upon him, moving about under his skin, threatening to splinter his bones from within. His slender frame writhed with the force of it, like an engine under too much strain.

Mastering her fear, Jane climbed in under the blanket, letting it engulf them both in its tentlike folds. She hugged Rooster to her. His flesh was cold as a corpse.

"You were in my dreams," he croaked. "I saw you."

"Hush."

"I lost my best friend," he said. "Not you too." His voice was fading now. His head thrashed to one side, then the other, as if trying to capture a fugitive thought. "We have seen the light at the end of the tunnel. Whip inflation now. Good fences make good neighbors."

"Hush, hush." She held him close, sharing her warmth and refusing to listen until eventually the awen left him. He lay panting and exhausted, grey-faced, cold, and sweating. Quietly, then, Jane stole back to her own bed.

* * *

One day Jane was let off work early. Blugg took her back to his room, a typical troll's den of black oak furniture and awkward ceramics of sentimental scenes. Puck stealing apples. The abduction of Europa. He stood her in the center of the room and inhaled deeply, noisily. His piggish little eyes looked pleased.

"At least you're not bleeding." He gestured toward a half-open door. "There's a tub in the next room. And soap. Take your time cleaning yourself."

It was small and dark next door and smelled warmly of ammonia and body gas. There was a bar of creamy white soap that smelled of lilacs resting on the lip of a zinc trough. Jane undressed and, seizing the soap in both hands like a sword, stepped into the steamy water.

She bathed slowly, thinking of napalm cannons, cannisters of elf-blight, and laser-guided ATS missiles. Contemplating the dragon's weapons systems made the voice stronger, strong enough that she could sense it, weak as a tickle, even when she wasn't physically touching the book.

She fell into a dreamlike trance, the water warm against her naked skin, the dragon's voice almost real, stroking the bar of floral soap slowly up and down her body. The wiring diagrams floated before her like a mandala.

The dragon seemed to be insisting that she not let Blugg touch her. Jane didn't respond. She knew that the voice's admonitions, whether real or a projection of her own fears, were useless. Blugg would touch

her as he wished. He was bigger than she, and would do whatever he wanted with her. It was the way things were.

Her silence brought up a burst of outrage, and she seemed to feel the dragon dwindling in the western sky and she herself left behind, a prisoner, alone and unchanging, stuck here forever. In that adrenal burst of anger were undercurrents of what could only have been fear.

Jane had been gently lathering the brush of downy hair that had recently sprouted between her legs. Now she released the soap, and it bobbed to the surface. She turned her head sideways to look at it, one eye underwater and one eye not. She pretended it was a boat, a galleon that would take her far, far away. The water rocked up and down in time with her breath. All the world seemed to float in her vision.

The floor creaked under approaching footsteps. She heard it as a chord of sound, the solid grumble and squeak coming from the ear out of the water and its watery twin from the one under. She felt Blugg's bulk at the back of her neck, and closed her eyes. The light dimmed as his shadow touched her.

"That's enough." She stared up into a crazily-skewed smile. "Rinse yourself, dry yourself off, and get dressed. We've got a date at the Castle."

* * *

The Castle was an anomalous brick mansion located just off the center of the plant grounds. Older than the factory buildings that had arisen to surround and intimidate it, it had all the stylishness of a biscuit box turned on its side. Its trim and brickwork were hidden under industrial grime and black stains reached down the walls like tear tracks from its eaves.

The thin elf-wife answered the door with a disapproving frown, and waved Jane inside. "You may return in two hours," she said, and shut the door in Blugg's face.

Wordlessly, she turned and walked away.

Jane had no choice but to follow.

The mansion was much larger inside than out. She was led down a narrow gallery in whose high dimness chandeliers hung like giant luminescent jellyfish, then up a set of stairs, and through a series of rooms. The house appointments were everywhere valuable but nowhere absolutely clean. The damask silk settees were frayed, and the lace curtains were brittle as old spiderwebs. The taint of cigarettes and furniture polish clung to the textured walls, echoing a thousand yesterdays that differed from each other not at all.

Through one doorway Jane saw a sitting room where all the furniture rested comfortably on the ceiling. Shelves of knicknacks and oil portraits hung upside down on the walls, and through the windows a grey drizzle fell up. The elf-wife frowned. "Not for us," she said, and shut the door firmly.

At last they came to rest in an unused bedroom, the four-poster's ancient hangings beginning to rip at the rings, a nightstand candle gone grey with dust and canting genteelly to one side. From a closet shelf, the elf-wife removed a large cardboard box. Tissue paper crackled.

"Put this on." She held out a pink dress.

Jane obeyed, folding her work things carefully as she removed them.

The elf-wife *tsked* when she saw Jane's underthings and from a dresser drawer removed better, made of silk. "These also."

The dress was shell pink, linen, with cup sleeves. It was smocked across the bodice with tiny pink flowers and green leaves embroidered onto the cloth. The smocking went down to the waist, and then the cloth fell straight to her knees. There was another circle of embroidered roses at the hem.

The elf-wife watched, frowning and smoking, as she dressed. "Youth is wasted on the young," she remarked at one point. But added no more.

The dress buttoned up the back with pearl buttons. By reaching around awkwardly, Jane was able to fasten almost all, but the final closure, a single pearl button at the back of her neck, defeated her. "Oh, for Cernunos' sake," the elf-wife said. She briskly stepped forward, and buttoned the collar.

"You may look at yourself in the mirror."

Standing before the oval claw-footed mirror, Jane expected to see anything other than what she did see: Herself. The dress was tight in the bodice, and it made her hips look big. It was for a child far younger than she. But it made her look not younger, or even different really, but more emphatically, awkwardly herself. She raised a hand and her reflection reached up yearningly to touch her. Her hand stopped just short of the glass.

"Please, ma'am. What am I supposed to do?"

"That should be obvious enough soon." She opened the door. "This way."

Five minutes later, they entered a den. Logs blazed in a high-arched fireplace. Pillars to either side supported tiled vaulting for a triple ceiling. The walls held paintings and photographs in ormolu and cloisonné frames, trophy antlers, religious fetishes in such profusion that the eye could not grasp them, and shelves of books in autumnal leather colors. The floor, by contrast, was empty save for a chaise lounge, a rocking chair and a scattering of rugs.

An elf-laird sat in the cushioned rocking chair, not rocking. He was old beyond belief, browned and gnarled as a tree stump. He stared straight ahead of himself.

"Father, this is young Jane. She's come to play here this evening." The old laird's eyes swiveled around, but other than that he did not move.

"You'll enjoy that, won't you? You've always been fond of children." Jane would have curtsied had she known how. But apparently that was not required of her. She stood in the center of the room while the elf-wife retrieved a large wooden box from behind the chaise. Still the laird did not react. Only his eyes were alive, and they betrayed nothing of what he thought.

"Excuse me, please, ma'am," Jane said. "But what's wrong with him?"

Stiffly, the elf-wife said, "There is nothing wrong with him. He is Baldwynn of Baldwynn. Of the Greenleaf-Baldwynns. You will respect him accordingly. You have been brought here to brighten his evenings. If you behave properly, you will be allowed to return here on a regular basis. Otherwise, you will not. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You may call me Mrs. Greenleaf."

"Yes, Mrs. Greenleaf."

The box of toys rested on the hearth rug. "Well," Mrs. Greenleaf said. "Play with them, child."

Uncertainly, Jane knelt by the box. She rummaged within. It contained a marvelous mix of things: A set of nymble-sticks with ivory and mother-of-pearl inlays. A small ferris wheel that really worked, with seats that swung down and all the signs of the Zodiac painted on its sides. A set of toy soldiers, with archers and mine sweepers, two full armies' worth, each with its own commanding wizard. A faerie bell that when shaken filled the mind with a soft chime, breathtaking when sounded and impossible to clearly remember an instant later. Jacks and a ball.

Mrs. Greenleaf had settled herself on the lounge. She unfolded a newspaper and began to read. Sometimes she would read an article aloud for the edification of her father.

For two hours, Jane played with the toys. It was nowhere near so much fun as might have been expected. She was constantly aware of the laird's presence, of his eyes boring through her back. Everything went into those eyes, and nothing came out. His was the unhealthiest aura she had ever felt, a powerful presence that felt dangerous, capricious, random. Now and then she would glance at his trousered legs, never higher, and his shiny polished wingtips. It was like being in the same room as an overloaded boiler, waiting to see if it was going to explode.

"Here's an interesting article. They're phasing out those old Neptune-class dreadnaughts, and converting the shipyards for missile ships. You own some of that stock, don't you?"

The Baldwynn sat in his chair, looking at nobody.

* * *

It was night when she got back to the door, in her own clothes again and oddly relieved to be free of that stuffy room, its uncanny laird, and the drear comments of Mrs. Greenleaf. Blugg stood on the stoop, shivering from the cold. His glance was dark when Jane met it.

"You may bring her back again at the same time in two days," the elf-wife said. Then, formally, "You have our gratitude."

Jane had expected Blugg would beat her. At the very least he would cuff her ear, and then complain and berate her all the way back to the dormitory. But once again, he seemed strangely elated by Mrs. Greenleaf's words.

"Gratitude!" he said. "You have our gratitude! That's worth something, indeed it is."

They did not go straight back to the dormitory, but cut through the storage yard to the smith shop, so Blugg could stop to have a drink with a boiler imp who lived in an outmoded annealing oven there. The imp was a slight, whiskered creature who obviously admired Blugg's bulk and self-assurance. He brought out a jug, and two tumblers.

"Did it work out well?" he asked anxiously. "How did it go?"

"It was a fucking triumph," Blugg asserted. "I have her gratitude. Her personal gratitude, mind you, the gratitude of a Greenleaf."

They clicked glasses, and the imp begged for details.

The shop was empty and, save for the red glows of the banked furnaces and a single bare bulb dangling over the imp's oven, dark. Left to her own devices, Jane eased back into the shadows. She found a warm niche around the curve of the oven and settled in among the cinders. It had a pleasant coke-smoky smell.

Feeling weary and unambitious, Jane leaned back and thought about her dragon. She had spent the last week studying diagrams of its electrical systems, and now she visualized them entire, a network of bright silver lines hung in space against a velvet sky. It was possible to rotate the image in her mind, and watch the wires close, converge and pass one another as they orbited first one axis and then another.

After a time, the sense of the dragon's presence grew strong within her. With it came a kind of nervous energy, a jumpy sort of strength that drove sleep away without necessarily making her feel any less weary.

There was a warmth to the dragon's presence, an almost smug satisfaction that she hadn't been touched. At the same time, there were unclean depths to it. The better she was coming to know it, the more Jane realized that, morally at least, the dragon was no better than Blugg or anyone else in the plant.

Still, they had common cause.

"He didn't want to," Jane whispered, uncertain she could be heard. Around to the other side of the oven, Blugg and the imp were laughing drunkenly. It was easy to distinguish between the mousy squeak and the deep, trollish rumble. "It wasn't anything I had any say over."

But the dragon's presence was affectionate and approving. A compulsion seized her then. Her feet became intolerably restless. She could not stay behind the stove one more second.

Silently, stealthily, she slipped away.

It was time she finally met the dragon.

4.

Jane slipped out into the storage yard. The dragon's presence filled her head like a hand inside a puppet. It was cold outside, and the earth was black. A few bitter flakes of snow, the first of the winter, drifted down from a low sky.

Feeling horribly exposed, she made her way down the narrow corridor between the smith shop and the erecting shop and past the mountainous stacks of iron boilerplate stock to the marshalling yards.

On the far side of a hurricane fence, the dragons rustled and clanked in their chains. Jane crept by, making herself small and insignificant, afraid of the carnivorous machines and painfully aware of their bloody and disdainful thoughts. In the shadow of a propane tank storage shed, she climbed the fence and dropped down into the yard.

A dragon snorted, sending her scurrying away in terror, like a leaf before the wind.

The dragons did not deign to notice the little figure darting through their shadows; their appetites for destruction were larger than anything a morsel such as she could satisfy. Cinders crunching underfoot, she hurried past the great lordly engines to a disused and overgrown corner of the yard.

There, between a pile of creosoted timbers and a hillock of moldering ammunition crates, was the ruined hulk of a dragon. It was half-buried in brambles and dried grasses, hollyhock and Queen Mab's lace. Rust had eaten holes in its boiler plates. On its side, in chipped, flaking numerals, was painted No. 7332.

Jane froze, trembling with dismay.

This couldn't be her dragon! "It's not even alive," she whispered. "It's not." But, sick with disillusion, she knew she was wrong. It lived, crippled and demented, nursing one last spark of life within its broken

carcass and harboring hallucinations. And she had been caught by its madness, by its fantasies of escape.

She wanted to turn, flee and never return. But a compulsion seized her then, and she could not control her body. Her legs walked her to the dragon's remains. Her arms reached for the ladder up its side. The rungs sounded underfoot as she climbed.

She stepped into the fire-gutted cabin, all rust and decay, and the door slammed behind her. Alone in the darkness, she smelled the mingled scents of burnt carbon and high-octane fuel. From the depths of the machine a hum arose. A faint vibration trembled the floor, and rode up her legs. The air was warm.

Slowly, as if some unseen hand were turning a rheostat, the instrument panels came on. A soft greenish light suffused the interior of the dragon.

The cabin was transformed.

What had been rust and carbonized plastic was now chromed steel, optical glass and ebony-smooth surfaces. The charred pillar in the center of the cabin revealed itself as the pilot's couch, dark crimson leather with cushioned armrests.

Jane slid into the chair. It adjusted to her weight, hugging her hips, rising to support her back. Everything was positioned exactly as the grimoire had said it would be. She ran her hands over the engine instrumentation. At the flick of a switch the cybernetics curled themselves about her. She seized the rubber grips at the ends of the armrests and gave them a quarter turn. Twin needles slid painlessly into her wrists. Camera wraparounds closed about Jane's eyes. She peered through the dragon's virtual imaging systems into a spectrum wider than human vision, trebling high into the infrared and booming deep into the ultraviolet. The yards were tangled orange and silver lines of power, the brick walls of the shop buildings purple quartz cliffs. Overhead, the stars were pinpricks of red and orange and green.

Then she fell, without a shock, into the dragon's memories, and was flying low over Lyonesse on a napalm run. Pink clouds blossomed in her wake, billowing over saturated green rainforests. She felt the shudder of hypersonic acceleration, the laminar flow of air over wing surfaces as she made a tight roll to avoid the guns of an anti-dragon emplacement. The airwaves were alive with radio messages, screams of rage and triumph from her cousins and the passionless exchange of positionals by the pilots. Black specks appeared at the horizon, an enemy squadron scrambled to meet them. Gleefully, she turned to meet the challenge.

Jane was trembling with adrenaline and surrogate emotion. In what was almost a sob, she cried, "Who are you?"

I am the spear that screams for blood.

Armies clashed in a continent of permanent night. The dragon's mind encompassed them all, cold as a northern ocean and as vast. Jane was half-drowning in its dreams of violence. A snapshot flash of elven warriors on the ground, spears held high as they posed behind a mound of trophy heads. Their grins were electric, wide, ecstatic. A line of trolls burning like torches. A city by the sea swelling in her gunsights, its slim towers shattering into crystal shards and dust. Tears streamed down her cheeks, big and wet and warm.

She was soaring now, alone, above clouds that shone brighter than hundred-watt bulbs, the air as cold as ice and thinner than a dream. The dragon's lust for blood was hers, and she felt the appeal of it, the beauty of its cruel simplicity. "No! No, I mean—what is your name?"

Abruptly, she was dumped clear of the memories, and found herself sitting damp and exhausted in the

control couch, wrists stinging as the needles withdrew. Through the wraparounds she saw a dragon crouched on the far side of the lot, one clawed forearm raised. It stared unblinking at the moon. A voice as harsh and cool as static from distant stars spoke over the headphone speakers in the wraparounds. "You may call me 7332."

Jane felt unclean. Relieved as she was to be free of the dragon's mind, she yearned to enter it again, to once again feel that keen freedom from doubt and hesitation. Staring at the dragon across the lot, she felt the urge to climb in it and fly away, fly away forever, never to return.

"And so you shall," 7332 promised.

"Can I really?" Suddenly Jane found that hard to imagine. "Outside you look so . . . rusted, broken."

"Stealth technology, little savior. If our masters knew I was yet functional, they'd finish the job they began when I was first brought here. I'm too dangerous for them to ignore."

Jane's fingers ran lightly over the panels, caressing the potentiometer knobs and stroking the rowed switches she had night after night memorized from the grimoire. To have them before her in actuality made her giddy with possibility.

"Can we leave now?" she asked.

A deep engine noise thrummed up from the engine and through Jane's entire body. 7332 was chuckling. "You have the grimoire, that's a start. With that and three keys, we can leave anytime."

"Three keys?"

"The first is a ruby with a chromium taint at its heart."

"I've seen that!" Jane said, startled. "I've—" She stopped. "Was that your doing?"

"You must pay heed. Our time is short. The ruby will enable my laser guidance system. That is the first key. The second is a small thing. It looks like a walnut, but is made of brass and is cool to the touch."

"I've seen that . . ." Jane said uncertainly.

"It is in the box of toys in the Baldwynn's study." Jane started. "You must bring it to me; it contains part of my memory. The third key we already have: You."

"Me?"

"You, O changeling. Why do you think the Tylwyth Teg stole you in the first place? To sweat and swelter in the factories? Not cost-effective! No, you are merely being held here until you are old enough to be used. Dragons, as you must know, are built of cold iron around a heart of black steel. We generate a magnetic force which is carcinogenic to the elf-lords and their underlings. They cannot pilot us themselves. A pilot needs mortal blood."

"Then . . . I'm to be a pilot?" It was a dazzling future, and for a second Jane was blinded by ambition and forgot about escape entirely.

7332 laughed, not kindly. "A human pilot? Impossible! Pilots must be trustworthy, loyal to the system, bound to it by blood and training. It is only the half-blooded who are ever licensed to fly dragons.

"No, you were brought here as a breeder."

It took her a moment to absorb his meaning. When she did, it was with the shock of a physical blow.

They wanted her to be a brood mare! To grow children for them—half-elven children who would be taken away at birth to be raised as warriors. She burned with cold wrath. "Tell me your name," she said.

"I have given it already."

"That's just your serial number. I need your name to get your operational specifications." There were hundreds of models this creature might be; the grimoire's index went on forever. Without the master key, a serial number told her nothing. "I can't operate you without your op specs."

"No names."

"I must!"

A touch of anger entered that cold, staticky whisper. "Changeling, what do you take me for? I am great beyond your kind. Your place is to free me; in return, I will take you away. Do not aspire beyond yourself."

"I can't release your bonds without knowing your true name," Jane lied. "It says so in the grimoire!"

The lights went off.

Jane sat in the dark, amid the dying whines of servomechanisms withdrawing the cybernetics. The door slammed open.

The glamour was either renewed or lost, for in the cold moonlight the interior of 7332 was again blasted and lifeless. Jane stood, swiping at the flakes of burnt vinyl that clung to the back of her dress. "I'm not changing my mind!" she said defiantly. "You need my help. So if you want to be free again, you have to give me your name." She waited, but there was no response.

She left.

* * *

Blugg had a plan. Jane had no notion what it might be, but the machinations of it kept her busy throughout the days that followed, scurrying from the spring shop to the scale house, from motion work to the bolt shop and then back again by way of the metaphysics lab. She was sent to the cylinder machine shop to reserve three days' time on the boring mills, then across to the tender shop to collect a sealed envelope from an old demoted engineer who had lost one eye and both his ears to some long ago corporate discipline. When she went to the chemical supplies room to see how much jellied bryony compound was on hand and not already spoken for, the supply clerk- put down his wirerims and glared at her through pink-edged eyes. "Why does Blugg want to know?" he asked.

Jane shrugged uneasily. "He didn't tell me."

"You must know *something*." The clerk was brown as bark and so grotesquely thin his eyes stuck out to either side; he looked to be an assemblage of twigs, like the stick men that were hung from poles and set ablaze on Hogmanay night. Rattling his fingers at her, he said, "Underlings always know." What he must have thought an ingratiating grin split his face. "Creeping and sneaking about like mice, little whiskery noses into everything."

"No, really."

"Bullshit!" He slammed the counter. "It's something to do with Grimpke, isn't it? The earless old bastard in Section A?" He turned his head sideways, so one eye could peer down at her. "I thought so!"

Something to do with his famous leg-assembly, no doubt." He eased back, cackling. "Well if *that's* what Blugg thinks is going to make him Management's darling, you can tell him—You can tell him—" A crafty look came over his thin face. "No, don't say that. Tell him," he twisted about to peer over a shoulder at the ranks of barrels arrayed on steel-mesh shelving behind him, "tell him that we've only got half a barrel of the bryony and if he wants more he'll need documentation from the boys in the labs."

As Jane left, she heard the supply clerk laughing behind her. "Grimpke! What a joke!"

* * *

When next she crawled into the wall, Jane did not settle into the little nest she had made there. Leaving the grimoire below, she climbed up between the walls, searching out the braces and supports for places to set her bare feet. It was surprisingly easy. Carefully she climbed all the way up to the very top. There she followed the cool currents of air until she found their source, a trapdoor that had long ago provided access to the roof.

When she tried it, she found that it had been tarpapered over, and would not open. But it would not take any great effort for her to steal a knife.

* * *

The next day, toward shift's end, Rooster approached her with a new plan of escape. They were in the midst of a seasonal production slowdown, and rather than take them back to the dormitory early, Blugg had given the children brooms and barrels of sweeping compound and set them to work cleaning the floors of the pattern shop.

It was all make-work. The floors were built of enormous oaken beams almost a century ago, so warped and ground away by generations of feet that the wood between the lines of grain was worn into deep ruts and cracks, forming inexhaustible wells of dirt and dust. No amount of sweeping would clean them.

But so long as the children made a pretense of working, Blugg stayed in the pattern-master's office and left them alone. Jane could see the cubby through the window-wall that ran the length of the building, just below the ceiling: a modest warren of desk spaces, all carpeted and clean, a calm and different world from the one in which she labored. Grimpke was up in the borrowed office with him. The two old ogres bent low and solemn over their production schedules.

"Look." Rooster shook a dustpan full of dirt and waxy crumbs of compound in Jane's face. "Where do you think this stuff goes?" Jane pushed it away. "Back to the floor, soon enough."

"Very funny. No, listen. We dump it in those dustbins, right? Then later, there's a couple of pillywiggins haul them out and dump the trash in a dumpster, okay? Along with scraps and sawdust, packaging, cannisters of chemical waste and the like. Then a truck comes along and empties the dumpsters. Where do you think that truck goes?"

"The cafeteria."

"Chucklehead! It goes out through a service gateway in the east wall. Nowhere near the Time Clock—get it? Nowhere near the Time Clock." "Get real. You want to climb into a trash truck's belly? Have you ever seen the teeth on those things? They're sharp as razors and bigger than you are. That thing gets you into its maw, and you're as good as dead." "Are you sure of that?"

"No, of course I'm not sure. But it's not worth taking a chance on." Rooster looked cunning. "Let's say the only way out is past the Clock, then. How do people get by it? With their punchcards, right? But

suppose we could get hold of a couple of cards. If we could find some way to delay whoever normally used 'em, we could. . . ."

"Include me out." Jane began sweeping vigorously away.

"Jane!" Rooster hurried after her. With a quick glance upward, he seized her arm and swung her into the shadow of a pillar. "Jane, why are you against me? All the others are on Dimity's side, except for you. And Dimity hates your guts. So whose side are you on? You have to choose."

"I'm not going to be on anybody's side anymore," she said. "Sides are stupid."

"What will it take?" he asked desperately. "What will it take to get you back on my side again?"

He wasn't going to stop pestering her until she agreed to be a part of his idiot schemes. Well, she had resolved to do whatever it took to get out of here. She might as well turn this to her advantage. "Okay, I'll tell you what. You go places I don't. Steal me a hex-nut. A virgin nut, mind you. One that's never been used."

Mercurial as ever, Rooster leered and grabbed his crotch.

"I'm sick of putting up with your crude jokes too. Help me or don't, I don't much care which. But if you're not willing to do a little thing like this for me, I don't see why I should be expected to put myself out for you."

In a hurt tone, Rooster said, "Hey, what'd I ever do to you? Ain't I always been your friend?" He closed his good eye and put a finger alongside his nose. "If I help you, will you help me? With my plan?" "Yeah, sure," Jane said. "Sure I will."

When he was gone, Jane wearily swept her way to the far dark end of the shop. It had been such a long day, and she still had to go to Mrs. Greenleaf's to play. She fervently hoped Blugg wouldn't get so caught up in his project that he'd leave her waiting in the Castle's foyer as he had the past three days running.

Dimity was waiting in the shadows for her, and seized her just below the shoulder.

"Ow!" Her poor arm was getting all bruised.

But Dimity only squeezed all the tighter. "What were you and Rooster talking about?"

"Nothing!" she cried.

Dimity stared at her long and hard, with eyes like two coiled snakes. Finally she released Jane and turned away. "Better be nothing."

* * *

As the winter weeks progressed, Blugg's plans ripened toward fruition. Creatures in suits began dropping by to confer with him. He grew more expansive and dressed with greater care, adding a string tie to his work shirt and bathing three times a week. Over in the erecting shop in an unused assembly bay—closed for structural repairs that wouldn't be scheduled until the economic climate picked up—a prototype of Grimpke's leg assembly was taking shape.

During one of her trips to Section A, Jane pocketed a scrap of green leather from the floor of the trim shop. She stole some heavy thread and a curved needle, and sacrificed some of her time with the grimoire to make Rooster an eyepatch. It was more work than she'd intended, and she was feeling

peevish by the time it was done. But when she woke Rooster to give it to him, he was so touched and delighted by the present, she felt put to shame.

"This is great!" He sat up in bed and unwrapped the rag from his head, revealing for a hideous instant the ruin of his eye. Then he ducked his head, tugged on the band to adjust it, and when he straightened he was the old Rooster again. His smile went up further on one side of his face than the other, as if trying to compensate for the lack of balance higher up. His forelocks fell over the strap in a swaggering, piratical sort of way.

He hopped off the bed. "Where's a mirror?"

Jane shook her head, laughing silently, his joy was so infectious. Because of course there were no mirrors in the dormitory or anywhere near it. Industrial safety regulations forbade them.

Rooster tucked thumbs into armpits, making wingtips of his elbows, and stood on one leg. "Dimity better watch out for me now!" Alarmed, Jane said, "Oh, don't pick a fight with her. Please don't." "I didn't pick this fight."

"She's stronger than you are. Now."

"It's only the other kids that make her so strong. Without their faith in her, she's nothing. All that power will come flowing back to me as soon as I kill Blugg."

"You can't kill Blugg."

"Just watch me."

"Well, I'm not going to listen to any of this," Jane said. "I'm going to bed." And she did.

But she had an awful feeling her innocent gift had started something spinning out of control.

* * *

Jane was standing on call outside Blugg's office when Rooster sidled up with the hex-nut he'd promised to steal. He favored her with a one-eyed wink and pressed it into her hand.

"Is it cherry?" she asked.

"Sure it is," Rooster said. "What do you take me for? Some kind of a hardware-fucker?"

"Don't be crude." Jane slipped the nut under her vest and into a pocket. She was getting to be a pretty good thief; the motions were all but automatic by now. To her surprise she found that she actively enjoyed stealing things. There was a dark, shivery thrill to putting herself in danger and yet eluding punishment.

By the time Jane got back from the Castle that night, the other children were asleep. With practiced swiftness, she stripped off her smock, slipped under her bed, and lifted the loose board. Agile as a night-ape, she scaled the inside of the wall.

The wind was a lash across Jane's flesh. She crouched low on the roof, blue-skinned with cold. But Dame Moon gave her strength to endure it. With all her will, she stared at the hex-nut in her hand, focusing on the memorized specs: its dimensions, weight and sheering strength, the exact composition of its alloy.

Nothing happened.

She juggled it into the exact center of her palm, concentrating on the heft and feel of it, the pale gleam of moonlight on its faceted surface, the tight coil of the thread down its core. With an almost audible click, she felt her knowledge of it snap together into a perfect whole.

I know you, she thought. Fly.

It rose spinning in the air.

Jane felt content. Knowing the hex-nut's nature gave her power over it. It had to do what she wanted. Similarly, she knew that for all the dragon's silence, 7332 needed her. Someday it would have to call her. She would be ready then. She would have all its specs down by heart. And when they left, she'd leave knowing the dragon's name.

In control.

"What are you doing up here?"

Jane spun around in horror. Rooster was climbing up through the trapdoor. He had a big shit-eating grin on his face and Jane, remembering her nudity, vainly tried to cover herself with her hands. "Don't look!"

"Too late. I've already seen everything." Rooster laughed. "You look like Glam herself, riding the roofs." He reached into the shadows behind him and brought out a blanket. Carelessly he draped it over her shoulders. "There. That ought to prove I'm on your side, after all."

"Oh. Sides again." Blushing, Jane tugged the blanket tight about her. Rooster stood on tiptoe, straining an arm toward the moon, as if he thought he could pluck it down from the sky. He pulled himself so high and thin it seemed as if he were trying to make himself one with the wind. "Hey, nice view you got here." He squinted down at her. "Would it make you feel any better if I took my clothes off too?" He began unbuttoning his trousers.

"No!"

"Oh well." Rooster shrugged and rebuttoned himself. Then, abruptly, he dropped to his knees before her. "Jane, I've been thinking and thinking how to get you to like me again."

"I do like you, Rooster. You know that." Jane edged away from him and he followed her on his knees so that the distance between them remained unchanged.

"Yeah, but you won't help me. You say you will, but you don't really mean it. I mean, you know what I mean?"

She lowered her eyes. "Yeah."

Rooster's voice grew small, as if he were admitting to something shameful. Jane had to strain to make out his words. "So what I thought was maybe we should tell each other our true names."

"What?"

"You know. You tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine. That means you really trust somebody, because when they know your true name, they can kill you like *that*!" He snapped his fingers.

"Rooster, I'm human."

"So? I don't hold that against you." His expression was bruised, wounded. He was perfectly vulnerable to her now, even without knowing his secret name. Jane's heart ached for him.

Gently, she said, "I don't have a true name."

"Shit." Rooster went to the very edge of the roof and for the longest time stared straight down at the faraway ground. Jane was seized with dread for him, but simultaneously feared to call out lest he should fall. Finally he put his arms out full length to either side and spun around. He stalked toward her. "I'm going to tell you anyway."

"Rooster, no!"

"It's Tetigistus. That means Needle." He folded his arms. His face had taken on an eerily peaceful cast, as if all his cares and worries had suddenly fallen away. Jane found herself almost envying him. "There. Now you can do anything you want with me."

"Rooster, I don't know what to say."

"Hey, you still haven't told me what you're doing up here." The hex-nut had fallen from the air when Rooster first spoke. All this time she had been holding it clutched in one fist. Now Rooster unfolded her fingers and took the nut from her. "Ahhhh." He peered at her through the bore. "So that's what you wanted it for. You're learning how to use things' names against them."

Numbly Jane nodded. "Yes, I I . . . I found this grimoire, see—" "Yeah, right, I stepped on it down at the bottom of the wall." Rooster's voice burned fierce with joy. "Oh, that's perfect. That means anything can be turned against Blugg! We can crush him under boiler stock, call down molten brass on him, fill his arteries with particulate lead." "Rooster, why this fixation on Blugg? Give it up. Revenge isn't going to help you escape."

"Oh, I don't care about escape."

"But you said—"

"Only because that's what you wanted. Since my sickness, since I lost my eye, the sight has been getting stronger within me every day. What do I care what side of the factory gates I'm on? Right here and now I can see worlds like nothing you've ever imagined. Things you don't have the words for. And sometimes I get premonitions." He frowned with unRoosterlike solemnity and said, "That's why I keep trying to warn you. You're caught in something, and the more you try to get loose, the more tangled you become." Then he laughed, Rooster again. "But now we're working together! First you'll help me kill Blugg, and then we'll lift his punchcard and we can walk out free. It's so simple it's beautiful."

Jane felt awful. Rooster's plans were not hers. There was no way 7332 was going to let her take Rooster along when she left. She could feel the dragon's presence even now, a saturating medium pervasive everywhere in the plant. Even here, weakened by the moonlight, its influence was yet tangible. She could feel the iron certainty of its revulsion in the back of her skull. "It won't work. It's just another of your childish fantasies."

"Don't be like that. You're just letting yourself get all caught up in the illusion of existence." He held out a hand. "Here, let me show you."

She took his hand. "Show me? How?"

"You know my name, don't you? Well, use it."

"Teti. . . Tetigistus," she said hesitantly. "Show me what you see."

* * *

They were walking down a dark winter sidewalk. Patches of unshoveled snow had been trodden down to black lumps, hard as rock and slippery as ice. Stone-and-glass buildings soared up out of sight. Lights were everywhere, lining the endless shop windows, twinkling in scrawny leafless trees, spelling out words in enormous letters in an alphabet strangely familiar but undecipherable to her. The streets were choked with machines that moved as if they were alive, but had no voices of their own, only the roar of their engines and the blare of horns.

"Where are we?" Jane asked wonderingly.

Rooster shook his head. They walked on, among throngs of silent, shadowy people. Nobody spoke to them or jostled them. It was as if they were ghosts.

In a window they saw evergreen trees spangled with popcorn and foil and strings of gingerbread soldiers. Beneath the firs were heaped an ogre's hoard of toys, bears in harness beating small drums, machines that were glossy miniatures of those in the street, dolls in lace-trimmed taffeta, a stuffed giraffe half as large as life.

Jane had never seen anything or anyplace like this repository of alien wealth, but some resonant echo of the spirit told her that this place was in some way identical to or congruent with the world of her earliest memories, that time and place when she had been small and protected and happy. She began to cry. "Rooster, take me home, please."

He turned to her in surprise and unthinkingly released her hand.

They were back on the factory roof again.

"There." Rooster kissed her on the cheek. "Now we trust each other completely," he said.

* * *

Time was getting short. Jane could feel the grinding vibration of events coming together as the machineries of fate moved them about. The next night, as she was making a pretense of playing with the toys, Jane closed her hand around the nugget of brass 7332 wanted. As a distraction she lifted a glory-hand free of the box, waving it back and forth as if she were playing sorceress. This made Mrs. Greenleaf happy, she knew, acting childish; the more childish she acted the happier the old elf was.

Craftily, she turned her body to hide the theft, drawing the nugget close with a languid gesture of her hand, and secreting it among her clothes. Mrs. Greenleaf, busy with pencil and magazine, noticed nothing. Casually, though the Baldwynn never looked directly at anything, Jane glanced up at him to make sure he also was not watching.

She gasped.

The elf-laird was not in his chair. Where he had been now floated an egg of light. It pulsed gently. Pale colors played over its cold, featureless surface. She cringed away from the thing, irrationally afraid that it would leave the chair and come after her.

Mrs. Greenleaf looked up from her acrostics. "Jane," she said warningly. "Is there a problem?"

"No, Mrs. Greenleaf," Jane said hastily.

But Mrs. Greenleaf had already turned toward her father. Her mouth opened in a round little O and her eyes bulged as if she had been suddenly ensorcelled into a fish. Her distress was so comically extreme that Jane had to fight down the urge to giggle.

Magazines sliding from her lap, the old elf-wife stood. She seized Jane's hand in a grip that was thoughtlessly painful, and hauled her straightaway from the room.

Once the door was firmly shut, Mrs. Greenleaf turned to Jane, the skin on her face taut and white, her mouth a lipless slit. "You saw nothing tonight, do you understand?" She shook Jane's arm for emphasis. "Nothing!"

"No, ma'am."

"We are an old family, a respectable family, there has been no trace of scandal since—what are you looking at?"

"Nothing." Jane was afraid that the elf-wife would strike her. But instead, she was led directly to the dressing room, even though her time here was only half done. Her work clothes were returned to her, and her play dress and lacy underthings packed away once more in white paper. It was early still, at least an hour before Blugg was scheduled to pick her up, when she was deposited out on the front steps.

"I don't think it will be necessary for you to return tomorrow," Mrs. Greenleaf said firmly.

She closed the door.

Blugg was half an hour late picking her up. Jane awaited him in an agony of expectation. When he finally arrived, startled to find her standing outside instead of in the foyer as in times previously, he demanded to know why. Then, when she told him what Mrs. Greenleaf's last words had been, he threw back his head and howled. It was a terrible sound, compounded of pain and the misery of broken dreams.

When they got back to the dormitory, he beat her.

5.

It was agony getting out of bed the next morning. Jane's side burned with pain. One leg buckled slightly when she put weight on it, giving her an odd, twisting limp. She had to spoon her gruel through the left side of her mouth; the right was swollen shut by a lump the size of an egg.

Blugg took one look at Jane and yanked the messenger's vest from her back. He tossed it to Dimity, who slipped it over her head and followed him off to his office with a triumphant little flip of her skirts.

To her humiliation and amazement, Jane discovered that losing the position actually hurt.

But Blugg's project did not collapse with the loss of the Baldwynn's supposed sponsorship. It had taken on its own momentum; too great a mass of ambitious middle-management types had invested their time and prestige in the enterprise to allow it to die.

Paradoxically, the project picked up speed with Mrs. Greenleaf's dismissal of Jane. The prototype, which had for weeks stood in unhasty incompleteness in its assembly bay, was rapidly finished, tested, and packed with grease. Smidgeon, Creep, and Three-eyes spent an entire day polishing its surface until it shone like mirrors.

Nights, Rooster would crawl into the wall to pore over the grimoire. He insisted that Jane show him the chapter dealing with cam assemblies and went over all the diagrams again and again until he was sure he had identified the one the wizened old engineer Grimpke had used in the prototype.

"We don't have much time," he told Jane. "I was talking with Hob—that's Hob the whitesmith's gaffer, not one-legged Hob—and he said there's some lord high muckety-muck from the head office coming

down to look over the leg in five days. The inspector general from the office for applications assessment. He all but sang the words: Rooster was inordinately fond of high-flown titles. "Word on the floor is that they had to pull a lot of strings to get the I.G. down here, and now they're all running around like Lady Corus, trying to get everything firmed up in time."

"I don't see how you can expect to have all those figures memorized in five days," Jane whispered back. It was close within the wall and even though she was fully clothed, she felt embarrassed being squished up against Rooster this way. "There must be seven pages!"

"I'll manage it," he said grimly.

He frowned over the numbers, face dim and almost unseeable in the silvery runelight. Jane knew how hard what he was trying to do could be. She had cranked down her own ambitions, from total mastery of her dragon to control of several key functions in its optical and processing systems. "I don't even believe you can read the numbers."

"Sure I can."

"What's this say, then?" She jabbed a finger at the runes signifying 3.2 ohms.

"Look, I don't need to *understand* the squiggles to memorize them. I can see how they look every bit as well as you can. I'll just memorize them as pictures."

It was an impossible task that Rooster had set for himself. Jane left him there and went back to bed, grateful for the chance to get some sleep and sure that Rooster would give it up after a day's effort, two at most. She could return to her studies when he did.

But he did not. That night and the next and the three after that, Rooster crept into the wall and stayed till dawn communing with the grimoire. Jane found herself resenting the time he spent there. It was, after all, *her* book, and she had serious need of it. Rooster, though, shrugged off all her hints, suggestions, and finally demands that they alternate nights studying the grimoire.

There was no talking to him. Rooster was obsessed.

* * *

The night before the scheduled inspection, the children were all lined up at the tub room and given baths, even though it was the middle of the week. One at a time they were called in. Dimity oversaw the girls, wielding a stiff brush to catch any places they might have themselves missed, while Blugg watched with frank amusement.

The brush was wielded with particular vigor when it was Jane's turn in the zinc trough. Dimity seemed to be demonstrating something to Blugg, something Jane could not decipher. "Get those clothes off, you slut!" she shouted. "Show some motion."

Jane stared fixedly away from Blugg as she undressed, and climbed awkwardly into the tub. She was largely recovered from her beating, but the bruises still lingered, yellow and black around purple clouds, like bad weather just beneath the skin. The water was still warm, and thin oily streaks of soap floated on its grey surface.

"You've beshit yourself, you pig!"

"I have not!" Jane cried involuntarily.

"What's that, then?" Dimity thrust the scrub brush between Jane's legs, and scrubbed with hard, fast strokes, forcing tears to her eyes. "It's all up and down the crack of your ass." Jane splashed and floundered away, and Dimity followed her to the far end of the tub, scouring her bottom with the sharp nylon bristles.

"Here!" She threw a dirty washrag into Jane's face. "Wipe your face. It's filthy."

When Jane was getting dressed, she timidly glanced up and saw an odd look pass between Dimity and Blugg, enigmatic and yet conspiratorial, freighted with terrible meaning.

* * *

An unhealthy smile came and went on Rooster's face at breakfast. His fingers trembled slightly, and his gaze was darting and distracted. Since he had started crawling into the wall at night, his face had grown even more sallow and drawn; a constant weariness hung about him now. But an unnatural energy underlay his exhaustion this morning, like an electrical current pushing his muscles toward spasm.

"Rooster?" Jane said quietly. Nobody else noticed the state he was in.

They were all preoccupied by the nearing inspector general's visit. "You mustn't feel bad if things don't. . . ." She couldn't bring herself to say it.

"This is the day." He flashed her a weird, scary grin. "You know something? Lately I've been hearing Stilt's voice again. Like he wasn't really dead, but hiding somewhere in the shadows, or maybe in the back of my skull, you know? Well, I think Stilt is going to like today. This one is going to be for him."

"Yes, but if—"

"Shhh!" He winked and laid a finger alongside of his nose, just as Dimity came slinking up to order them into marching formation for work. "How's it hanging, *Dimity*?"

"You just better watch yourself." She grabbed his ear between thumb and forefinger and pinched. "If you fuck up today, your ass is grass, buster." Then she let go.

Rooster ducked his head and looked away and when she was just one too many steps distant to turn back without losing dignity, remarked to Jane, "Sounds just like Blugg, dunshe?"

Dimity stiffened, but kept on walking.

* * *

Dimity suffered a mishap on the way to work that morning, just as they were marching by the pitch yards. She was striding past Rooster, making sure the line was straight, when there was a sudden flurry of motion and Thistle lurched and fell against her. Caught unprepared, she was sent spilling to one side, head-first into a bucket of hot tar. When she stood, sputtering, she looked like a golliwog, face black and hair glistening.

The children laughed.

"Shut up!" Dimity gasped. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Her mouth gaped comically. She furiously swiped at her eyes, trying to clean the tar away.

Blugg exploded. "Get out of here! You fucking stupid brat. Go straight to the tub room and get scrubbing! I want that shit off your face by noon if you have to take the skin with it."

"But it wasn't my fault," Dimity wailed. "It was—"

"Go!" Blugg swung around and jabbed a thick finger at Rooster. "You! Go to stores and get a messenger's vest. A brand new one, mind, the best they have! Cernunos knows, you're not much, but you'll have to do."

"Yes, sir, absolutely, sir." Rooster grabbed his forelock and tugged, bowing himself down low to hide the leer of triumph on his face.

* * *

That day felt longer than any Jane could remember. Though they got no work done at all—appearances mattered, so they couldn't handle grease or polish—the children were constantly being shuttled from work-site to worksite, broken into groups and urgently gathered together again, so that a jumpy sense of unease extended through the morning deep into the afternoon.

At last, late in the day, the inspector general arrived.

A wave of dread preceded the elf-lord through the plant. Not a kobold or korrigan, not a spunky, pillywiggin, nor lowliest dunter but knew the inspector general was coming. The air shivered in anticipation of his arrival. A glimmering light went just before him, causing all heads to turn, all work to stop, the instant before he turned a corner or entered a shop.

He appeared in the doorway.

Tall and majestic he was in an Italian suit and tufted silk tie. He wore a white hardhat. His face was square-jawed and handsome in a more than human way, and his hair and teeth were perfect. Two high-ranking Tylwyth Teg accompanied him, clipboards in hand, and a vulture-headed cost analyst from Accounting trailed in his wake.

Blugg stood straight and proud in a mixed welcoming line of upper and middle management. His face and horns were scrubbed so clean their surfaces were faintly translucent. Rooster stood by his side and a little behind, an accessory to his dignity. Old Grimpke was present as well, hunched over slightly and rubbing his hands with grinning nervousness. The prototype leg-and-claw mechanism was upended in the center of the room.

The workers had been lined up against the walls, arrayed by size and function, like so many tools on display. The children stood straight and scared against the wall behind their overseer. Dimity was to the far end of the line from Jane, her face red with suppressed anger. She'd had to cut off most of her hair to get rid of the tar, which gave her a plucked and lopsided look totally disqualifying her from standing in the welcoming line with Blugg.

Rooster twisted around in line to peer intently at first Dimity, then Jane. He flashed his shirt open and shut again, revealing a near-subliminal glimpse of a white cardboard rectangle pressed against his flesh.

It was Blugg's punchcard.

He raised an eyebrow, and his one eye filled with cold inhuman light. Then he faced forward again, posture stiff and correct.

"What was that?" Little Dick whispered. "That white thing in Rooster's shirt?" And Smidgeon echoed. "Yeah, what?"

"Shut the fuck up!" Jane growled out of the corner of her mouth. An ogre in a white shirt looked back

over his shoulder at them, and they all did their best to look innocent.

But she had seen. The steely glitter in Rooster's eye had nothing to do with him. It was dragon's light that shone there, the alien intelligence of 7332 acting within him. He had been taken over, and made into a tool, one that 7332 could use for its own inscrutable purposes.

Don't don't don't, she prayed in her head. Don't do it Rooster, don't let yourself be used like this, and to the dragon she prayed, don't make him do this, don't, and to the Goddess: don't. Stop time, stop motion, unmake the world, halt the sun in its circuit, don't let this go on.

Now that she was alerted to it, she could feel the dragon's influence everywhere about them, a pervasive fluid medium within which they all moved, like fish in a hostile ocean. She could tell from the rigid set of Rooster's back that he was staring at the prototype. Now, too late, she realized that the evenings spent with the grimoire had not been wasted time on Rooster's part; they had created an opening through which 7332 might move and influence him.

The plant manager shook hands with the inspector general, and introduced the comptroller. The elf-lord worked his way gracefully down the line, making firm eye contact and occasionally reinforcing his handshakes with a small laugh or a pat on the shoulder.

The ceremony proceeded with the deliberate pace of a ritual drama. At one point, Rooster surrendered a bound set of production figures to Blugg, who handed them to the elf-lord, who handed them to the senior of the two Tylwyth Teg, and thus to the junior and finally to the cost accountant who tucked it under his arm without glancing at it. Creep yawned and was savagely elbowed by Dimity.

Finally the officials all turned to the prototype, as if noticing it for the first time. Grimpke unscrewed an access cap, opening up the leg to demonstrate the array of eccentric gears stacked down the core. "Verra important," he said. " 'Swod magesutt work, yasee?'" One of the upper management types winced, but the expression on the inspector general's face was encouraging, bland, smiling. Grimpke reached into the grease to show how tightly packed the gears were, and light glinted between his fingers.

He screamed.

Bright, actinic power flared from the center of the assembly. It swallowed up and engulfed those closest to it. Suits and faces dissolved in the light. A hardhat bounced on the floor and rolled away. Everything moved. Flames arose. All this in an instant of perfect silence.

Then the world shattered.

Warm air slammed into Jane's face and she staggered backward; it was like being knocked over with a pillow. Her ears were deafened, ringing. She felt split and divided, her vision fractured into too many images to accept at once: The Tylwyth Teg ablaze, running, falling. A lesser giant doubling over with hysterical, disbelieving laughter. Something tumbling through the air. Cinder blocks bursting, spraying gravel and chips of paint.

Hazy grey smoke filled the room, and the black stench of burning PCBs. Alarms wailed.

In the center of the geysering sparks, Blugg stood as a man stricken. A pillar in a chaotic sea, he stood motionless, while the light passed beyond and through him. One arm slowly rose, as if there were a point he wanted to raise. Then he fell apart, crumbling into grey ash.

Dimity shrieked as a spray of slivers dotted a curve across her face, a graceful line that neatly avoided her lips, nose, and both eyes by coming within a hair of marring them all. Other children were leaping,

dancing in quickstep pain, slapping at arms or sides.

But Jane was looking at none of them. She stared, as it seemed she must always have been staring from the beginning of time, at Rooster. His body, reduced and thin, like a piece of paper that, purpose served, has been wadded up and thrown down, lay upon the floor. Only she in all the room had seen him lifted up and then dropped by the release of the power within as it left him. It had happened in that instant just before the explosion.

She stared at Rooster, and he was dead.

* * *

The children had instinctively clustered together. Amid all the smoke and flames, the screams and shouted orders, Dimity said with gentle wonder, "Blugg's dead."

"And Rooster." The shadow-boy spoke from somewhere behind her. "They've gone to Spiral Castle together."

The strangeness of this, the improbability of two such fates being mingled, held them all silent for an instant. Finally Thistle asked, "What do we do now?"

She was looking straight at Dimity, pleadingly. But Dimity did not reply. The accident had frightened her as much as the others. She trembled, stunned and shaken, her face pale as snow and dotted with blood where the splinters had hit her. Some leader, Jane thought sourly.

A donkey-eared supervisor in torn white shirt staggered by, touching them each on the shoulder in passing, as though he would fall down without the handhold. "Stay here," he said. "There'll be a safety officer along any minute now. He'll want to interview you." He disappeared into the smoke.

Then the dragon was within Jane again, filling her with purpose and strength. "Form up!" she snapped. "Line up by size. Square off. Lead out!" Meekly, they obeyed.

Jane marched them out of the shop and across the grounds. Rescue forces were still converging on the erecting shop. Ambulances screamed. Flashing lights filled the night, and the stench from the explosion. The loaders and trucks were all stirring restlessly in their stables, crying out with alarmed mechanical voices. The children walked through the chaos as if enchanted, protected by their purposeful air. Nobody stopped them.

Jane marched them, some—the littlest ones—still hacking and coughing, back to Building 5. There were quiet sobs and sniffs, and those were all right, but when Skizzlecraw threw back her head and began to wail, Jane whacked her a good one right on the ear. That shut her up.

At the dormitory stairs, Jane stepped inside and hustled them before her with snarls and shoves. As the last—it was Creep, of course—went by, she snagged the first-aid kit from its hook just outside Blugg's door.

The first order of business was bandaging up wounds. Fortunately, few of the children had been injured by the explosion; the trauma was mostly from shock. When she came to clean up Dimity's face, the shifter broke out of her frozen apathy and cried, "My face! What am I going to look like?"

"A freak," Jane said, "if I don't tweeze these things out. Shut up and let me work."

She did as good a job as she could manage with the tools at hand. There were still a few black specks under Dimity's skin when she was done, but most likely they were nothing serious. She dosed the more

hysterical of the children with morphine, and then she sent them all to bed.

Jane was their leader now.

But not, if she could help it, for long.

* * *

When the children were all at last asleep, Jane climbed up to the roof to watch over the unfolding events. Smoke and sparks belched from the smokestacks, and rescue machines prowled restlessly about the grounds. The death of so important a figure as the inspector general had roused all the plant to action, whether productive or not.

Slowly, order reasserted itself. Thaumaturges emerged from the labs and walked through the grounds in orange environmental suits, scattering particulate radioisotopes from thuribles and censers and muttering incantations that stiffened the air with dread. In their wake, the ground was crisscrossed with ley lines glowing blue and red and yellow, like a wiring diagram gone mad, all overlapping circles and straight lines meeting at unlikely angles, then separating again. It was impossible to see how they could expect to untangle the readings of magickal influence, and apparently they could not, for none of the lines was tracked back to Number 7332.

Jane watched for half the night from the rooftop, fearful the dragon would be unmasked. She was a small and pale pip on the black expanse of tar, and if anyone saw her, they must've taken her for a warehouse tutelary about her legitimate business.

When the moon had sunk low in the sky, 7332 finally called for her.

* * *

Calmly, Jane climbed down from the roof, gathered up grimoire, crystal and nugget, and dressed. She let herself out of the dormitory with Blugg's key, stepping outside without a glance to either side, and headed for her dragon. She walked straight across the grounds, making no attempt to avoid detection. She was no longer afraid of the plant's security forces. That was 7332's job, not hers.

When she came to the marshalling yard, the great dragons crawled aside to let her pass. They were too proud to look directly, but more than one glanced sidelong at her, their expressions haughty and unreadable. Their navigation lights were bright strings of red, green and white tracing the contours of their flanks.

Jane reached Number 7332 and climbed its side. She felt invisible. Soft lights came on as she stepped into the cab. There would be no protective camouflage tonight. The door clanged shut behind her. "You killed him," she said.

From the lightless depths of the machinery came a voice, superficially calm but with undertones of anticipation. "I had to distract the security forces from their normal business long enough to complete my preparations. You needn't mourn the spilling of a little elf blood."

For a second the response made no sense. Then Jane realized that 7332 thought she was talking about the inspector general. "I meant Rooster! You used him. You burned him out and threw him away."

"The little one?" 7332 sounded puzzled. "There's nothing special about him. I can get you as many of his kind as you like." Gently, it urged her, "Sit. It's time we left this prison for freedom and the sky."

Numbly, Jane sat down in the chair, and let the servomechanisms wrap themselves around her. She

clutched the black handgrips and gave the left-hand one a quarter-turn. Twin needles slid into her wrist. Vision swam and transformed, and she was looking through the dragon's eyes, feeling the cool winter breeze on its iron hide through its nervous system. She was no longer entirely Jane, but part of something much bigger than she alone could ever be. It felt good.

"Power up engine systems," she said.

"That's the spirit!" Fuel gurgled as electrical motors pumped it to the turbines. A high-pitched whine grew and grew until it filled the universe. If it hadn't been for the padded headphones, Jane would have been deafened.

"We're ready. Now insert the keys," 7332 said.

Jane flicked a line of switches off and on, checking that the navigational systems were operative. "That's not necessary," the dragon said testily. "All you need do is insert the keys."

Suddenly an inhuman voice howled. A second voice joined the first, and then a third as alarms went off all across the plant. Lesser, but more piercing voices bayed and yelped. The cyborg hounds. That could only mean that they had been discovered. With the turbines powered up, the tangled lines of force and influence leading back to source must be lit up like so many neon tubes. "Quickly!" 7332 said. "We've been discovered."

The ruby crystal and the walnut were both in Jane's hip pocket; she was uncomfortably half-sitting on them. But she didn't move to take them out. "Tell me your name."

A troll from plant security appeared at the far end of the yard, flames in his eyes. He was followed by several more of his kind, black forms against a cold sky. They each held five or six cyborg hounds straining against titanium leashes.

"They're coming. We must leave now, or not at all."

"Your name," she insisted.

The cyborg hounds were released. They sped, baying, at the dragon. The first of them bounced against its side with a loud clang and sank diamond teeth into its side. Submerged as she was in 7332's sensorium, Jane felt the fangs in her own flesh. She cried out loud with pain.

Desperation finally entered 7332's voice. "If we don't leave now, they'll have us!" It kicked at the hound, sending it flying. But more were arriving, hot on its heels.

"That they will."

The hounds were leaping into the air to seize the dragon. 7332 twisted around to face them, almost throwing Jane out of her chair. Its turbines were screaming, and still it could not configure for flight. Shouts of anger and fierce commands came from the trollish warriors. 7332 damped down the circuits carrying sensation from its skin; Jane felt herself go numb all over in sympathetic identification. Still, the hounds were starting to do real damage. "*The keys!*"

Jane waited. Half submerged into the dragon as she was, and uncertain of her identity around the edges, of where she ended and it began, she was sure it must know that she was not bluffing. That without a name, without the control it would give her, they were going nowhere.

"Melanchthon, of the line of Melchesiach, of the line of Moloch!" the dragon cried. Its anguish rose about Jane like phantom flame. She felt her eyelashes singeing in his wrath, and knew down to her very core

that it spoke the truth.

She flipped open the grimoire, riffled through the pages to the command codes and began to read: "Recurvor. Recusadora. Recusamor." The engines roared and shuddered. "Recussus. Redaccendo. Redactamos." Jane slapped the crystal into place. "Redadim. Redambules. Redamnavit." The dragon trembled with repressed power. She fitted the brass nugget into its receptor niche, and rotated the right-hand grip a quarter-turn forward. Now the needles were deep within both her wrists. "Now fly!"

"You'll burn in Hell for this humiliation!" 7332 promised. Remembered war atrocities flashed at the back of Jane's skull. "I'll feed you to the Teind with my own claws."

"Shut up and fly!"

They were moving. The tarmac grumbled under their weight as they picked up speed. The dragon's wings raised, deployed, caught at the air. Hounds fell away. Jane was laughing hysterically and so, to her surprise, was 7332.

He lifted.

Shuddering, they took flight. The factory walls moved toward them slowly, then quickly, and then flashed by underneath, alarmingly close. They were free of the plant altogether. Slowly, they gained height.

The last of the hellhounds lost its grip, and fell yapping to its death. A calm, unaccented elven voice spoke over the radio, from some faraway control tower: *You are violating industrial airspace. Surrender all autonomous functions immediately.*

Now Melanchthon screamed his battle-cry over all frequencies, scrambling communications, jamming radar, scratching an ionized line high up into the stratosphere. Far below them, civil defense forces scrambled, flights of war-hardened creatures eager for another taste of combat clawing at the air, but too late.

Jane was laughing so hard now she was crying. She couldn't stop thinking of Rooster, couldn't drive the sight of his small, still body from her mind. Her emotions were so extreme, so chaotic, she could not tell which were hers and which the dragon's. It did not matter. What 7332 felt could be no more intense than what was happening inside her now. She was burning with joy.

They *soared*. •