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Aima Arkhaïos

The last one

She was the last ... The realization kept running through her head without going anywhere. Somewhere at the back of Hemerythe's head a rogue thought train raised its eyebrows at the realization on how much of life is spent in repetition. For the thirteenth time she read the message and for the thirteenth time she could not wrap her head around it.

The last transmission from the Svenner was at 7 February, 04:13 AM, another distress call. Because of the ferocity of the hurricane, which was a category 5, rescue hydroplanes went forth no earlier than 9 February, 08:30 AM. At 16:34 PM one of them spotted a piece of ferrofoam off the northern coast of Puerto Rico that belonged to an Amerdhow, very likely from the Svenner. Further search has not yielded any other trace of the ship. The search for the Svenner and three other missing ships was abandoned on the morning of 12 February. The crews of the lost ships must be presumed dead.

She rested her heavy head in her hands. Joshua, Norene and Asvathama, all gone. They had been warned of the dangers, waved the objections and had sailed anyway. "We need a break from all this work!" They had been experienced sailors, yes, but apparently not good enough.

She pulled back from the screen. The three were just the latest in a series of endings. Apart from her, the entire team perished, drifted away, gone mad, or whatever. She was the only one left. The downfall, it was just surreal. Yet their work ... It was much too important to just crumble like a half-baked cookie.

She looked up again and glanced around the laboratory. Everything looked and sounded normal, like they were all still there. Scattered clipboards, computer fans humming to discard heat, a half empty coffee mug, the desk light faltering for the thousandth time, the cultivations growing at indiscernible rates.

Part of her just wanted to get back to work. She thought that, however ridiculous, it might even be possible. She could handle most tasks that others had done, though not as well. Computers and robots could handle the rest. And the money? She did not know how much was left. Probably more than enough. Payvand had been lost for quite a while, but the exact number could be found ... Joshua would have known.

But even if she had wanted to, her mind was in no shape to do anything productive. She logged off, emptied the coffee mug in the planter and donned her coat. On exit, she looked around once more, then defiantly refused to switch the light off.

Most team members had lived in the suburbs or even outside the city, but Hemerythe's apartment was within walking distance. Though she had walked the way hundreds of times, this time the air seemed to feel colder, the night more dark, lonely and menacing. She hurried home and locked herself in the comfort and safety of her kip.

The house robot welcomed her. "Good evening, miss! Shall I take your coat? I heard you approaching and have started to warm the wine already."

Wine, yes! Hemerythe helped herself to the still lukewarm glass, gulped the liquid down and refilled immediately.

"My, my, miss! You seem to be thirsty. I must warn you for the effects of alcohol over-consumption, which, especially in your profession, -"

"Advisory functions off."

With the robot silenced, she could drink in peace, though it did not soothe her mind. After half an hour of boozing and rummaging through the apartment, she became quite tired. Not bothering to undress, she climbed into bed and quickly fell asleep.

The bedtime, as could have been expected, refreshed her less than usual. Again she dreamed about the man with the perfect teeth. This time he was some kind of aristocrat from the 18th century, dressed in a fancy coat, with white stockings and a dusty wig. They had dinner by candlelight, which enhanced the lines in his oblong face. The talk was light and witty; even had she been awake she might not have recalled much of it. The wine warmed her but the air in the old drafty room grew chillier while the evening progressed. They retreated to the hearth, where his body was a better heater than the flames. His kisses and caresses made her forget about the cold. They were tender yet fierce, even biting her like carnivores do in mock fights among each other, or maybe a bit more intense. Somewhere along the line she abruptly fell into deep sleep.

The next morning she awoke with a hangover. This time she let the house robot patch her up with up with

tea and food.

"What kind of breakfast would you like, miss? Italian, Scandinavian, fruit, English, American with extra pancakes, -"

"Steak and eggs." The last two weeks or so she had developed a taste for red meat, even early in the day. This morning especially so.

After she had eaten her meal and consumed three large cups of tea she took a shower, donned fresh clothes and felt better. She still did not know what to do, but at least her mind was clear again. She decided to go back to the laboratory, either to work or to clean up.

The morning was chilly but not nearly as hostile as the night before. Commuters buzzed around her and the sun occasionally peeked through the clouds. When she arrived at the place she halted abruptly. Dozens of people in blue uniforms were moving boxes around, as if busy with a relocation. Indeed several parked vans blocked the entrance, their backdoors open like hungry mouths, gobbling up furniture. Some construction workers were widening the entrance to the shed where the generators were housed, a crane gently breaking the wall apart, its arm a lightly scratching giant fingernail.

She rushed to the scene. "Stop! You cannot do this! This is an operational laboratory. You are wrecking years of research!"

A supervisor alerted and strolled over. He tapped his safety helmet as if in salute. "Don't worry, miss, we are from a certified company, the decommission is in capable hands. But who might you be?"

"I am Hemerythe Onerri. I work here!"

He raised his eyebrows. "Work? You must be mistaken. The work here has been terminated. The building is to be remade into a shopping mall. Who do you work for?"

"In, er, I ..." Of course she could not claim to be working for CTP, it had been a secret department. And without Payvand at the wheel or any team members to back her claim ... She realized she had no proper cover story. They had never needed one. What the heck was happening here? "Who has ordered this?"

"I dunno. Some white collar kids over at Wall Street. The company is named Blah Blah Money Company or something. Wait, I have a business card." He produced a small card that said:

Osta Gold Investment Group

Human empowered strategic return on investment
65 Dustman Street, Boston MA 02167-1004

"Probably a bunch of smooth talking good-for-nothings. But their money is hard! Maybe your boss has fired you but simply failed to tell you? I tell you, these businessmen, they are ruthless sharks."

It was possible that the board of executives had finally discovered Payvand's pet project and decided to liquidate it. But the timing was too suspicious, the move way too fast. "I told you, I work here. I must retrieve our research material! You have no idea how valuable it is."

"I'm afraid I cannot allow passersby entry to the site," the man said, bracing his legs. "But I can assure you that all material will be properly archived before the builders move in."

Hemerythe wanted to plea more but realized that armed with only secret credentials she did not stand a chance against the mighty shoulders of bureaucracy. "What company did you say?"

The supervisor showed her the card again.

She mumbled a thank you, turned on her heels and headed for the subway station. It surprised her how rapidly she had become a woman of action again. Maybe it was because she now had a single, concrete goal. Or maybe it was because the team had been her family. Not her real family, dead for several years, but her at least her acting soulmates. And now they had fallen too. Kaylee succumbed to that weird infection; Robert hanged himself; Anthony gone, well, mad ... And now Payvand dead and the three sailors drowned. She had to find out what had happened. She owed that much to them.

Half an hour later, 65 Dustman Street did not look like business building. It was a half-derelict ramshackle wooden house that looked like a tired granny with bent back, solidified into wood. The rest of the neighborhood was rather poor and shabby too. A crow in a nearby basswood tree eyed her sullenly. There was no door plate. She rang the bell, which sounded like a large gong, reverberating deep into the house. There was a long silence.

Just when Hemerythe started to fret and think about abandoning her impulsive visit, footsteps approached. An eye peered out from the peephole. "Yes?"

"Is this Osta Gold Investment Group?"

"Who is asking?"

The tone was not as friendly as one would expect from reception staff, but it was a fair question. "My name is Hemerythe Onerri. I would like to speak to a ... the manager responsible for the ... recent purchase of the building at the corner of Oak Street and Markrowe Avenue."

"Please wait."

Again too much time passed. The crow flapped its wings and started making slow circles, as if it expected food from her. Finally it flew off over the house. Seconds later the door opened. The appearance of the man in the opening shocked Hemerythe. He was more than six feet tall and looked equally broad. His jaw was like a brick, with an underbite that almost let his lower canines poke out. He was dressed in an old-fashioned yet impeccable business suit, which seemed about to burst by his muscles at any moment. "Miss Onerri, please follow me."

Puzzled, she followed the giant into the house, which was as decrepit on the inside as on the outside. Soon they descended a stairs that appeared to lead to a basement, yet went far deeper than an ordinary cellar would warrant. The walls to the side were dark stone, notably smoothed, breathing an aura of age, strength and menace. There were no lights except a jar with something shiny moving inside, which the man picked up and carried with him. Hemerythe told herself that she was making a big mistake, yet continued to trail him, darkness closing the way behind them. They passed several junctions, turning at some, so that she quickly lost her sense of direction. Because the light was ahead of her, she caught only glimpses of the interior. There were mosaics, murals and statues, depicting what looked like processions, battles and mythological half-human, half-animal creatures.

Finally they arrived in a large room that had plenty of light from multiple lamps. Again she halted, amazed by the sight. It was not a rectangular room but an irregular den, with sloping floors, slanting walls, strange curves and nooks. Nothing was symmetrical, yet the whole was strangely harmonious like a Zen garden. Furniture was scattered all over the place in equally semi-random places, consisting of solid tables that seemed to weigh a ton, easy armchairs, bookcases overloaded with books, pots of greenery and flowers that denied the absence of sunlight, carpets worn with age. Murals here too, using the patterns and angles of the rock they were painted on as an integral part of the their art.

While she was gaping at the scene the giant moved aside and another man rose from a seat. He had a sharp chin, aquiline nose and dark brown, almost black eyes. His skin was pale, though his face did not look Caucasian. He looked somewhat like the man from her dreams, but there were differences too. He wore a baggy dark green dress with a large belt, with a headscarf on top and his feet in leather boots. Turkish?

The man made a slight bow. "Welcome, miss Onerri. My name is Araz Bivir. Please, take a seat. Would you like some tea?"

This did not look like an investment company at all. Hemerythe wondered if she was dreaming - an occupational hazard - but it did not feel that way. She sat down on one of the chairs.

The man seated himself too. He did not speak, just eyed her with an unfathomable gaze. His eyes were really dark. It was like he peered past her appearance, into her inner self. There was a subtle hint of desire, though she might have imagined that.

Hemerythe felt uncomfortable. "I came here ... You, your company purchased the building at the corner -"

"Irrelevant. It is in the past, and a well known part of the past too, no? That is not what interests you. You are enticed by the *unknown* parts."

She was lost for words.

"You are a seeker. You are interested in your future, which is ours, while we are keen on the past, which *you* are an expert on. That sound like we could make a deal, no? A business deal, if you wish."

The past? How much did this man know? "I am afraid I don't know what you are talking about. I came here -"

His tone was suddenly sharp. "You know very well what I am talking about. Do not try to deceive me; I am a master at the game where you are still an apprentice. Now, before we fully accept you as one of our own you must perform a little test. Call it a job application assessment, if you will."

"I came ... I did ... I want ..." She had too many questions and failed to formulate even one into a coherent response.

He pulled his chair closer to hers. "What people fail to realize is that the towns were not grand affairs after all. Pressburg, or rather Poszony, was about to become the capital of Hungary, yet it had no more than 30,000 inhabitants or so. Just enough for some anonymity, even with all the different ethnicities: Slavs, Germans, Hungarians. The moviegoers see narrow streets bustling with people, but the outskirts were much more quiet, almost rural. What the viewers do not notice are the smells: roasted meat, urine, smoke, sweat, fresh pastries, rotting leaves, dung, sewage, drying cloth, old wood. All depending on the part of town, the

season and the time of day. On some days I played blind man and navigated the streets by my nose alone. But for you I will not raise the bar so high. I will describe the layout mostly by sight. You can still see some of it the modern city. Start at the Szent Márton-dóm on the left bank of the Donau, on the eastern side, near the old linden tree, which is now dead. From there glance east and down over the old town and notice the ubiquitous brick and weathered plastering on its north side. If you walk down the hillock you have to take care at the second right turn, because the ground was often slippery there ..." It was still morning, but with the endless narrative the lack of sleep of the previous night started to make itself felt. Hemerythe became drowsy, which alarmed her, yet neither made her speak up nor fall asleep.

After her host had described dozens of streets, houses and landmarks in exhausting detail, he zoomed in on the life of the town. "Saturday was market day. The first farmers would come in around four in the morning, their shaggy horses pulling carts loaded with food. Latecomers would have often have to fight to gain a place in the free section, near the house of Mosicz the butcher, who would open up early too. The man had an opinion about everything but sold excellent pork chops. Always exactly at half past six Kroglica Prod Bignose, a creature of habit, would start making his round, settling disputes and collecting bribes. Around that time Frau Husal, who was getting more wrinkles every year but fiercely plastered them every night, would kick out the last drunkards, who would drift back home like ghosts among the busy morning folk. Some of them were foreigners. I used to scare them by dragging them into dark alleys, kissing them and sending them onward again with a dose of the purple broth that clung to their tongues for hours, thus reinforcing Hella's reputation as a witch, though she never produced anything more magical than that."

Again he rambled on, describing rituals, people and habits in the hundreds, until she her head was spinning from an overload of information. Still she was forced to keep listening and absorbing, as if he had hypnotized her with his droning voice.

"When you are there, you must seek out an acquaintance of mine. He is a master of disguise, but if you know what to look for he is not hard to spot. His stature is small, little more than five feet. His instinct is to walk very carefully at all times, taking small steps, often shuffling and shifting, testing the ground before he sets foot on it. His voice is somewhat nasal, hyponasal to be exact, high-pitched. Last but not least, before he eats he will always take a little piece of food and toss it over his left shoulder.

My acquaintance is quite furtive, but on some days he is likely to make an appearance. I think you should tackle All Saint's Day. Though the town will be crowded, your chances of success will be the best. Now All Saint's Day is quite a large feast, including several masses, a procession, and a fair. The bishop supervises all. He is easily recognizable by his miter and tabard. The word is that he is somewhat too fond of handsome little boys, but as you can bribe him easily nobody minds much."

He went on describing the costumes, the rituals, the best inns to get loaded, not be scared of the people dressed as dead men but not to let them grope under your dress either, be sure not to miss the lighting of the candles at the graveyard and ... and ... Hemerythe actually enjoyed this part.

At last he straightened his back. "So. Roam the town, scry like an eagle. Find my man, if possible get his name, then return. A simple mission, suitable to start with."

There was no more. Araz Bivir stood up and walked away. Hemerythe's head felt like all the talk had filled it with physical weight. She looked at her watch and saw that it was eight in the evening. He had talked for an entire day?! She should be hungry and sore from lounging in the chair but was neither. The teapot was empty. How many times had it been refilled? She could not recall. Had she been drugged? The natural thing would be to stand up and do whatever she had come here to do, which was ... what? But she was just bone tired. So tired and comfortable in the chair ...

It was a dreary gray morning, the clouds menacing rain but not yet yielding it. She had never been to any European city and certainly not an old one, but this one she knew like the back of her hand. Along the Street of the Provosts, turn right, evade the eager hands of the beggar children, through the Green and on to shouts of the vendors on the large square, which buzzed with hundreds of voices.

There were two large crowds hemming in a path that was kept clear by watchmen. All kinds of people were there: rich and poor, old and young, ugly and pretty, smart and dull. The mood was one of excitement. Hemerythe realized that she was late and had missed the vespers of the previous evening and the morning mass. All the best places had already been taken. However she was taller than most people, so would be able to peer overhead and see at least the banners and statues.

She was a woman, nay a girl, of some standing, she knew. She wore a rather opulent green dress, far too wide at the hips for her taste, yet that was the fashion. The silver lined embroidery was great, though. Her hair hung loose and was crowned by a gay circlet, marking her as unmarried.

She augmented her appearance with sunny smiles and shy glances, melted some hearts and within minutes managed to maneuver to the front. Right on cue the procession arrived, the bishop in front, followed by priests, monks, nuns, bearers holding dozens of statues of saints aloft, the standards of the nobility, a band of musicians, the mob of corpses, a select group of VIPs and finally the long stretch of commoners. She marveled at the colors, the physical malformities that were untouched by modern cosmetic surgery, the queer mix of reverence and gaiety. It absorbed her so much that she almost missed the awkward step of one of the dead men, who walked with a shuffling gait.

That was her mark! She wanted to follow him, but there was no way to escape the throng. Biting her tongue, she had to wait for a quarter of an hour until the rear of the train had passed and she could join up. The long stretch of people snaked north and then circled back south, through the city gates, over the bridge to the Goat Island in the Danube, where all gathered. They were singing hymns, offering prayers and letting the statues of the saints one by one bless the crowd by sprinkling water, puffing smoke and blowing trumpets.

She estimated several thousand people present. No more sign of the 'acquaintance' of course. She walked around slowly, scanning faces, hundreds of them, until they blurred in her mind. By noon the main event was over. Pious Christians went on to more religious duties, but the bulk of the people squirmed themselves over the bridge and through the gate back into the city proper, where there were strings of market stalls, clots of performers and bustling taverns.

Hemerythe just wandered around, failing to come up with a strategy to find her target again. She noticed that she was being followed - by another man. Anxiously she tried to lose him in the crowd, but he hung on. When she tried to feign interest in a blouse at a stall he caught up with her.

"Excuse me, miss, but I could not fail to notice the light of Heaven breaking through the murk. It landed lief on your golden tresses, as a bee attracted by the flower! May I ask what brings you to Pressburg, so all alone?"

She shot him a sideways glance and that one look told her enough. They were separated by centuries, but some things never change. He was blond, nervous and smitten. "I am not alone, young man. My brother is selling his, er, horse on the market."

He seemed genuinely puzzled. "Today?"

"Yes, and he does not take kindly to strangers who approach his sister."

"Where is this horse market? On All Saint's Day?"

Hemerythe noticed the flaw in her improvisation. Fortunately at that moment a party of dead men came down the street. They wore black and white tunics and large, skull-like helmets with masks. One of them played the pipes and the others danced the joy of the dead roaming once more among the living.

Hemerythe jumped in and engaged them in dancing, causing considerable cheer. They quickly adopted her as a kind of female mascot, performing grotesque mime scenes with her. It was all fun until hands found ways under her dress. Remembering that the town was a proper Christian place where ladies were not available for free groping, she wanted to smack the culprit. Then she noticed his small stature and high-pitched nasal giggle.

So instead she brushed his hand aside and flashed a smile at him. "Ho there, mister corpsy, that flesh is for the living only!"

Likewise he took the rebuff in good cheer. "Oh milady, I can assure you that at this moment I am quite alive. And not just this day!"

She engaged him in a little private dance, trying to gauge his footwork, while keeping his hands from resuming their exploration. His steps did seem somewhat small and indecisive, though the dancing and costume could contribute to that too. "You dance well. Might I know your name, my lord?"

"You may call me Bierlala, for he I am now."

She guessed that that was not his real name. But before she could inquire further, the rest of the group dragged Bierlala with them. "To the graveyard for the final carole!"

Again the throng pushed forward through the narrow streets. Hemerythe let herself be swept along but lost contact with the dead men. The townsfolk moved west to the cemetery near the castle, just outside the town proper. The rowdiness subsided, people became solemn. They brought little gifts for their ancestors and lighted candles to fight the dark, which was slowly gaining air in the east. She wandered around a bit, feeling kinship despite being a stranger.

The rituals lasted through most of the twilight. Then the crowd broke up. Carriages arrived to transport the rich; the poor had to walk on foot. Apparently many people were farmers, who dispersed into the countryside, with only candles to guide them through the dark. Others went back to the town, followed by

Hemerythe. There market traders had broken up their stalls. Unsold goods were re-wrapped, or if spoiled, thrown in the gutter. Clearly the party was over and business too.

She realized that soon the streets would be plunged into darkness. Even carrying a light, which she did not have, she would very quickly attract the attention of the night watch, who would be very suspicious of a woman alone at night, even if apparently well-to-do. She wondered where her home was. To her astonishment she did not know. No home, no family, no past? What was she doing here? Panicking, she hurried through the streets without aim, while the shadows lengthened and grew steadily more menacing.

An arm darted out from behind a tree and fished her from the cobblestones. "Good evening, miss, we meet again!" She recognized the voice. It was the man who called himself Bierlala. He was wearing a normal costume now, a black doublet over a shirt with stiff ruffs. His black mustache and beard were carefully trimmed, covering the lower part of his pale face, which without the mask revealed itself to be jolly, playing host to a very wide natural grin. "As you can see I am quite alive. Perhaps we could get somewhat more acquainted, miss ... ?"

"Onerri. Hemerythe Onerri," she responded without thinking. "I really should be going home."

"Where do you hail from? You speak German like a noblewoman, but with a touch of Slovene. Are you from a noble family? No. If you were, I would know, but I do not."

German? As far as Hemerythe could tell she had been talking English with everyone. English? In Pressburg, in this era?

While she was sorting out her confusion the man started to renew their acquaintance in force, locking her into his arms and exploring her shape with nimble questing fingers.

"Stop that, or I will scream!"

"You will not." It was stated with a flat voice, as a fact. He showed her a Swiss dagger, a short sturdy military blade. It was quickly hidden again, but its point forced her onward, steering her through the narrow streets, certain of its way. They walked out of the town, into the fields to the north.

"Now we will dance the Dance Macabre!" he announced. "The foolish foreign fay Hemerythe Onerri will court Lord Frouri as best as she can, using her supple limbs and feminine wiles. If she fails or falters, her doom will be swift!"

He attacked her with the knife, though not very quick, allowing her to evade. Again and again he lunged and slashed, faster now, forcing her to jump and duck for life. Occasionally she was too slow and then the knife nicked her skin, drawing small gashes of blood. Bierlala enjoyed himself tremendously, uttering short ululations, licking the blood from the blade, then attacking once more.

Suddenly somebody shouted "Foul devil!" A shape bolted from the dark and almost knocked the man over, who evaded just in time. "Fear not, my lady! I will save your honor!" It was her admirer from the afternoon. Clearly he had followed them. Like cavalry, in the nick of time!

"Fool!" Bierlala exclaimed. "Now I will drink both of you!" He sprang forward fiercely, wielding the knife almost as if it was a saber. Compared to him the newcomer was a clumsy amateur. The knife drove him back, again and again, until he stumbled against a fence. Bierlala lunged, stabbed him in the belly and ripped half his intestines out. The young man slumped forward, suddenly as dead as the knife wielder had pretended to be.

But Hemerythe did not witness that. She had not waited to see if her hero would vanquish the villain or the other way around. She turned and ran off through the darkness of the field, which without streetlights was very dark indeed. Her feet slipped and half sank into mud, but she fled like a rabbit in the chase. Or maybe not. Suddenly there was something in the blackness before her. She crashed into a tree. The impact was brutal. It knocked her out cold.

Araz Bivir was bending over her. His dark eyes studied her with attention; his mouth revealed no emotion. "How did you get out?"

She was back in the underground den. No more darkness, no more smell of cow dung, just the ambient light from her hours of instruction. She felt no physical pain, but her head was still a mess. "I ... I ran into something. A tree."

"That sounds like a crude yet effective method. I will find you a better one. But. Did you manage to catch his name?"

"Whose name?"

"Of my acquaintance. The short man with the hesitant gait and the food throwing."

"Bierlala?"

The edges of the mouth drooped a little. "That is a figure from folklore. A pseudonym."

"He ... I ..." Part of her mind asked why she was answering questions. "He called himself Frouri before he started attacking me with the knife."

"Frouri you say? Drawing blood? You must tell me everything once you have regained your wits. But for now you have done splendidly."

The Wind Isle

Hemerythe rubbed the sleeping dust out of her eyes. She wondered about the time, but that did not seem to matter much in the underground room.

Araz Bivir offered her another cup of tea. "You pulled that off quite well. I must admit I was skeptical about this dream divination, but you have proven me wrong."

She rejected the beverage. Now she knew what was mixed into it: vathystagma, the chroneiro-inducing drug. His people must have taken it from the laboratory. No more of that now! "It is not divination. We call it chronorology."

"Chronology?"

"No, *chronorology*. Chronology and chronometry had already been taken, so we had to come up with a new word. It is more accurate anyway."

"Ah yes, a fancy term for a useful craft. You should share your knowledge. You will find more attentive ears here than anywhere else!"

"That knowledge is ..." Suddenly military jargon proved useful. "classified."

"You mean this?" He produced a thick folder stuffed with old-fashioned sheets of paper and showed her some of them. She spotted several of the team's research papers and reports.

"How did you ..."

"Young lady, do not be so naive. You have been working on a secret project, hidden from the world, but nothing is ever entirely secret. We came, we saw and we *bought* your project. The equipment, the research, the files. All of it." He produced his wide smile once more. "But do not worry, the circle has widened but little, it is still a secret enterprise. Perhaps even more so, as we are experts in secrecy. But as I said, we are more actively interested in the results than your previous sponsors. We desire to learn about your proficiency and travel the rivers of time, to dip our oars in the waters and stir up new eddies."

In spite of herself Hemerythe barked a laugh. "Poet. It is not a matter of waving a magic wand. You don't seem to realize what is involved! First, we do not 'travel' through time, we ... listen to it, in a matter of speaking. Second, it is a team effort. To do it properly, you need resonance alignment, brainwave monitoring, medical assistance and more. With the lab dismantled, the team dead and most knowledge lost, we have been set back *years*. A zillion things must be rediscovered, relearned. Third, to engage in the act, you need not just training, but also genetic changes and cerebral rearrangement. You would need to lose some of your humanity and become like me, a bit of a *cyborg*."

She spoke the last word with ice in her voice, but Araz Bivir looked utterly unfazed. "Nothing unexpected, nothing insurmountable. We have time, resources and willpower. More than you can imagine."

She blinked. "I think it is time that you tell me who you are and how you gained knowledge of our work."

"Questions, questions ... You truly are but a child. Yet you belong to our family now. It is a great honor, greater than you realize. You have done quite a lot of work. Are you hungry or thirsty?"

She sensed she was. The tea had been rejected, but then again she did not thirst after that flat liquid.

"I see, you want something juicy. How about a fresh steak?" He lifted the lid from a plate and revealed a large piece of beef that looked almost raw.

The sight and smell of the meat brushed her thoughts aside. Saliva flowed; she almost drooled over it. Despite her determination to question the man she attacked the dish with her bare hands, tearing off chunks, munching fiercely and sucking out the juices.

Araz Bivir looked amused. "You have craved this kind of meat for some time, no? That is because we have been preparing you. When you mature and grow wiser, you will care less and less about the fibers and more about the nectar. Our elders hardly eat anymore, they just drink. Now that is evolution, is it not? Maybe modern medicine could explain it, if they would let it poke into their innards, which they will not."

Hemerythe just devoured the steak, tearing the structure apart and sucking it dry.

"You may prove worthy. But Pressburg was just a test. The real work lies ahead. You too must learn, the skills of the past to connect with it, and survival to navigate hostile worlds that are devoid of modern safeties. Sleep now, the sleep without dreams, to rest your body."

She awoke in a proper bed, not wood or iron but stone, yet cushioned with a thick enough mattress. It was located in a side room. There was no door to close it off, just a doorway, slanted and trapezoid like the rest of the space. There was a sink but no tap; water was present in a jug. She located the toilet, a simple hole in the floor that by the sound of the echoes was very deep. New clothes were draped over a chair: simple linen underwear, a low necked crayola satin dress, a golden(!) waist girdle and soft slippers. Feeling espied she peered outside into the main room but saw nobody. She washed, did her hair, dressed and looked in the mirror. The dress was rather formal but it did match her blonde hair well.

As soon as she walked into the large room, Araz Bivir appeared. Had he been lying in wait?

"Ah, young lady, you are up. You look gorgeous. Ready for work? But first, a light meal."

Once more there was meat on the table. This time she fought back the urge to devour it like an animal. Her constraint seemed to be appreciated by her host, who also brought something to drink. Not tea, but red wine.

"Red wine for breakfast?" she asked.

"Breakfast, lunch, dinner, supper. What does it matter?"

She tasted the drink. It had a strange taste, both sour and slightly coppery. Strange, but tasty.

"You need to get used to it. In time it will prove more nutritious to you than anything else."

When the breakfast was done, there was no time for idle conversation. Araz Bivir set out a study program for her and it was breathtaking: weaving, pottery, carpentry, fencing, stalking, playing the flute, ancient law, haggling, theology, genealogy. "The wilderness skills will come later, once we can let you go outside again. So hiking, camp craft, foraging, fishing, tracking, hunting, agriculture and animal husbandry will have to wait for now."

"What do I need all this for?" she asked, though she already guessed the answer.

"How can you attune yourself to past times if you do not know what it was like to live in them? Also, you need to be able to always fend for yourself, in any situation."

And so her teaching began. Almost of all it was done by Araz Bivir, who proved himself a master of a thousand crafts. He could mold clay on the potter's wheel and then bake it without breaking it; knew countless tunes and melodies and could perform them on any instrument; always criticized the dogmas of the theologians yet knew them all; fenced with relish, panache and blinding speed. He pushed her hard but never beyond her capabilities. She absorbed it all, filling her head to the brim, aching her muscles and driving herself as relentlessly as was requested. Sometimes she wondered why she put up with her new life but she knew the answer already: mental viscosity. Being a chronoist had its price. A spirit malleable enough to adjust to the rhythms of the past was also susceptible to manipulation of the will.

They did not talk much about the project. When Hemerythe brought up the subject, Araz Bivir evaded it every time with a remark about her studies, an irrelevant anecdote, or changed the talk in another way. Secretly she feared that he had something to do with the mysterious deaths and disappearances of the team members, but for some strange reason she cared less and less. She was focused on the simple things now: eating, drinking, learning, sleeping. After that first night she dreamt again, much, about all the impressions gathered during the day. At least as far as days could be discerned, as there was no day or night in the cave. Some of the instruction was done by Bivir's servant, the giant man. His name was Thoan. He was the instructor for fighting with heavy weapons, including armor and shield, which taught her as much about muscle ache as it did about fighting. He was even more close-tongued about the underground club, of whom Hemerythe had only seen but him and his master.

His style of instruction was very practical and very rough. Every time she came back from practice bouts with bruises, sometimes with sprains, one time with a broken toe. To her surprise they healed quite fast and even serious damage repaired itself smoothly. It was as if she was a salamander, capable of regrowing a full tail. "You see," Araz Bivir commented, "that our condition has advantages too. You will find that you are also more resistant to disease and poison. We are a tough breed!"

It was Thoan who took her up, back to the world above ground. After so much time in the half dark, the sunlight was almost hostile to Hemerythe. They did not linger in the city but left immediately by car. Thoan drove them to the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge. They entered in late afternoon and stayed for three full days and nights. Roaming in the park at night was forbidden, but she saw money changing hands when they checked in and that seemed to do the trick. It was archery hunting season and she got a taste of tracking, stalking, shooting, setting traps, camping and a host of other outdoor activities. They had only minimal camping gear; no rifles, no tent. Instead they slept in impromptu shelters, cold and wet. Thoan insisted that they only eat what they managed to catch. This meant that they often went hungry because Hemerythe was not very skilled yet. When they caught something they ate it raw, which she did not mind

anymore. When they finally returned to the underground den she was a little leaner, very dirty and, as Araz Bivir observed, had acquired something of a wolfish instinct.

From that time on she switched between indoor and outdoor training. She was always busy and had no time, nor desire, for reflection. Her previous employment, few friends, remnants of distant family: all faded away into an indistinct background. Her company was limited to Araz Bivir and Thoan. The former always spoke of 'we', but clearly that did not include his assistant. However any other members of the 'family' or the Osta Gold Investment Group failed to materialize. She wondered what interested him in her, besides her qualities as a chronoroist. His gaze lingered often on her comeliness, yet he never touched her more than was necessary during her lessons; something held him back.

After what must have been weeks Araz Bivir summoned her to a kind of briefing room. There he had prepared a glorious large three-dimensional map of an island, using little pieces of wood and carboard, painted with loving detail. She recognized it quickly as Iceland. "I want to you to familiarize yourself with this map. You must know the lay of the land. Also, I have a selection of documentaries and modern travel guides. There are also the Icelandic sagas, though those are secondary. This time the land is much more important than the people. Here is an overview of the flora and fauna, as best as we could make it. Learn that too."

She briefly browsed through it. "Birch forests? In Iceland?"

"Before the Norse cut them down forest and woodland covered at least a third of the island."

So it was time for chronorology again. "I will be going back to ... which year?"

"821 in the European count. Before the arrival of the Norse. This time you must seek out Allaghu, a rather lone religious hermit - I consider him a nut - who seeks enlightenment. He tries to free himself from earthly urges like appetite and lust, though has trouble succeeding. He -"

"Oh, is he one of those Irish monks who inhabited the island before the vikings arrived? I read about that."

"That story is poppycock! Concocted by 12th century christian writers who wanted to give Iceland a holy foundation. His religion is closer to buddhism than christianity, though his exact beliefs match no established cult. Now, to recognize him. Allaghu appears to be about 40 years old, lean and wiry, with a black-gray beard down to his knees. Usually he wears a broad rimmed felt hat, otherwise dressing in rags. He is a shy figure who must be approached with caution. You must gain his trust somehow. He lives in a typical Icelandic dwelling, a longhouse with thick earth walls that is half underground. If you spook him, he will retreat there and not come out for days. You can try to use feminine charm, but I doubt that will work. You must be creative and find some way. Maybe appeal to his love of thunderstorms, quote Asian wisdom to him, or simply use physical force. He is not a strong man."

"It sounds like you know him quite well."

"I made a study of him, for your benefit. The man is not the goal, the Liccini Tablets are. Your must wrest the location of them from him. They are buried somewhere. We must know the spot."

"Liccini Tablets? What are those?"

"Stone tablets containing important information. You will learn when we dig them up. Now, study the map and the literature."

When the time for chroneiroing came, Araz Bivir presented her with a miniature laboratory, including a chrono-chair. But most of the equipment was missing and the brain monitor was an ordinary hospital electroencephalograph. It wasn't even wired properly. Though electronics had been Asvathama's field, Hemerythe knew enough to get it up and running again.

Araz Bivir looked on with approval. "Good! Now we will see what goes on in your head."

"No. You will see my brainwaves dancing pretty patterns, the general picture. But you will not see the concept fields, the sensation-creativity balance, the hormone feedback." She glanced at the primitive setup and sighed. "I was wrong. We have not been set back years, but decades."

"It is just a start! We will get better in time, I promise. Eventually we will surpass your previous work."

But she was agitated. "You don't even know how to wire the EEG! And Thoan is standing there like a dumbhead ogre, good for sacks of potatoes."

"Patience!" snapped Araz Bivir, smashing the circuit board that he had been holding to pieces. "All in good time. It is good enough for a normal session. In the past, there lies the knowledge we must acquire first! Prepare yourself."

She was struck by the sudden anger. The great all-knowing Araz Bivir, shamed by his own ignorance? The thought was enough to calm her mind. She drank the vathystagma-saturated tea that he gave her, then settled on the bed, comfortable on the mattress and let her mind wander a bit until she gently drifted off.

The wind was cold. Wet too, rain hung in the air. She looked around. Indeed there were trees. Birch, as foretold, but also a few rowan and aspen plus numerous shrubs and smaller vegetation. They were in leaf, so at least it was not winter season. Towering over all was a single redwood tree. Had that been part of the description, was it truly native to the age or was it a figment of her imagination? She did not know. That was the trouble with *chroneiroi*. It all went on inside your head, so inevitably some of your own thoughts crept into them.

On a whim she decided to climb one of the trees. This time her dress was ordinary: a linen undertunic under a longer woolen overtunic and a cloak as a third layer, with small but sturdy leather shoes. Functional, not fashionable. They hindered her but little while she laboriously climbed the tree to a point close to the top. She took care not to rip anything. The sea was in the south; a glacier shone white in the east; the area itself was lowland. It had to be the southwestern marshes.

Where would Allaghu be? Hopefully close by; Iceland without towns, roads and population was vast and hostile. Now she was grateful for Thoan's lessons. She spent some time finding a suitable place, away from gullies and widow-makers, near a stream but neither too low nor too high. She found a rock that formed a kind of overhang and within a few hours had extended it to a makeshift shelter that could keep the wind and rain out.

Making a fire was harder. She struggled with grass, leaves and sticks for hours, chafing the skin of her hands until they bled, screaming in frustration! And then trying once more. Fortunately the sun was high and the day was long, signaling that the season was summer. But summer in Iceland is cool at best. So when she finally managed to kindle a flame that did not die within seconds she cheered like a treasure hunter who had found gold. She was happy to notice that birch wood and bark burn well, even half wet. The fire was hemmed in by stones, she covered herself with some light branches and set herself to dream within the dream.

The night lasted only 6 hours, of which she dozed about half. The fire needed maintenance and despite it she was cold all the time. Hungry too. She got up early and started to work on fortifying her too thin leaf mattress, setting traps and gathering more firewood. In the meantime the fire died and again she had to spend several hours to kindle the flames. When the sun started to sink she was knackered and ravenously hungry. Before she fell asleep she realized she had not even begun to search for Allaghu.

After a week she had lost 5 kilograms but no more, because her traps had ensnared a skua that even half charred tasted like a banquet. She found a half rotten but still edible egg and had made birch bark and lichen tea, boiled in a rickety birch bark cup, many times. She was dirty and smelly and her clothes were torn and damaged, only partially repaired. She had become familiar with her surroundings, was beginning to make wilderness trails and had named the local arctic fox that circled her camp "Lady Snow White", though the animal wore brown in summer, not white. The meager fauna was frustrating. There simply were no animals of note at all except foxes and birds.

Despite the empty stomach, the rain and her utter loneliness she knew that this was the high time. In a few months winter would be coming, marching in with impossible strength, like a grim frost giant of Norse myth, cold and bleak and dark almost all the time. Food would be even scarcer, nighttime temperatures below freezing, accidents and disease lurking in the background. They formed *real* risks. The experiments on monkeys had proven that chronology was no harmless stroll through dreamland. The experiences of the psycheathou, the dream self, mixed with those of the real self, mentally as well as physically. There was no professional team to watch over her in the real world, nobody to raise her up to wakefulness when things got too dire. She had to find that Allaghu, and soon too.

But he was not the target of her next expedition. It was hunger that drove her to the coast. It took a full day to get there. At its end she had to start all over again to set up kip. But in the morning the beach presented a surprise: dozens of seals, all lazily basking in the sun. The large puppy eyes did not charm her. She fashioned a coarse club out of a branch and walked to the sands. The seals did not back off right away. They eyed her curiously. She rushed in, whacked a pup senseless, chased its mother away with a few more buffets, then clubbed the youngster dead. Hours later she had more or less skinned and gutted the animal and roasted it over the fire. She guzzled the meat, fat and all, until she got sick and vomited half out again. Still, she felt better than ever since her arrival on the island.

She stuck to the coast for quite a while, though the seals became weary and hunting more difficult. There was fishing to be done too, with simple line made of plant fibers, or with her crooked forked spear. She spent much time locating brine pools and boiling the water to gain salt, as even a single seal pup was way too much meat for a day. Salting and smoking helped to preserve the meat a little longer.

It was the fire and the smoke that put her back to her mission. One day she spotted another faint column of

smoke, several kilometers to the east. Smoke! People! She gathered some food and the next day she set out towards the spot. After a few hours walking she found footprints in the sand and her heart jumped once more. She found the fireplace, which was still and cold. Not far away, in the woods, was a simple shelter, better made than her own. But it was empty too. Being just an apprentice tracker, she did not manage to figure out where the other had gone to. So she just appropriated the shelter, which was large enough for just one person, and hoped for his or her return.

That did not happen. She was forced back into the routine of food gathering and a little exploration. The forest was much the same as in the area where she had 'landed'. It looked like just another swampy woodland filled with trees and tangled bushes. It was woody, wet, gnarled and utterly unkempt, sheer wilderness, suitable for small animals, not humans. Until she found the path. It was a narrow trail, hardly discernible, yet with clear signs of minimal maintenance: broken twigs and flattened patches. It followed the nearby river, sometimes swerving away to pick the easiest ground, but never far, always coming back to the stream. Anxiously she walked it, going several kilometers north.

Then she found the house. It was simple yet far beyond anything she had managed to construct herself. Stones, stacked up to form walls, cemented with earth and sods. It was half buried into the ground, had no windows but two chimneys topped with wooden caps. Dangling from a line strung between two poles was a row of salmon, mullet and sticklebacks, gutted and drying in the wind.

Cautiously she approached the door, which was made of crude planks. Before she could knock it was flung open. In the opening, half dark, she spied a skinny man with a very long beard, clad in a mantle of white and brown fox pelts. Seeing her, his eyes went large and he croaked something unintelligible. Quickly he drew some kind of symbol in the air, then slammed the door shut.

Yet in that one brief look, despite his gaunt medieval appearance, she had recognized him. The hawkish nose, the brown eyes, the small mouth ... It was Payvand. That was impossible. It had to be an intrusion of her own memories. Back at the CTP they had called it a 'par-par', short for 'parelthon-paron', 'past-present', a mix of personal recollections with the chronokyma, the time waves. Par-par could make a terrible mess of a proper chroneiro. If she had slid thus far, how could she trust anything in this dream?

There was no exit but forward. She had to speak to him. She knocked, pleaded and pulled at the door, to no avail. There was no reaction from inside. Excited, afraid and angry at the same time, she settled down in the yard. He had to come out sometime.

After an hour she was cold. She realized that if this was to be a waiting game, the man inside the house would win, out of the wind and probably with some kind of larder. So she hoisted herself upright and explored the environment. The man had constructed fish traps in the river and she saw stumps of trees that had been cut down. Apparently he had been here for some time. He looked like Payvand, but also had to be Allaghu. The description matched.

She explored further and eventually made a crude shelter some half kilometer to the southwest, downstream. In the morning, after a very sober meal of herbs and lichen, she checked the house again. The fish line was empty and the door was still shut. It had been painted with some substance she did not know. The pattern was a large circle with a smaller filled one in the center. She stared at it for a while, then it dawned on her. It was a viking shield with a boss in the middle. The message was clear: Stop here!

She shrugged and walked back to her latest shelter. She started to fortify this 'Base Camp Three' to withstand the wind and rain, set traps and gathered food; in short, her settlement routine again. Every day she checked the house and every day the door was shut. But there were signs that the man ventured outside. There were fresh tracks in the grass and some of the sods were renewed. He had visited her camp too. The rickety southern wall had been reinforced with a sturdy pole, rammed deep into the earth. Another time her primitive birch tea cup was missing, replaced by a smooth thick wooden one.

Hemerythe's spirits rose. She attacked her disheveled appearance by washing and mending her clothes as best as she could. Her hair, which had grown quite long, was cut with a piece of flint and disentangled with the coarse wooden comb that she had made. When she was bathing in the cold river she had a feeling of being watched, though the dark forest hid the onlooker. Of course there was a risk. Would his lust make him mad? Her intuition said no. This man was too careful and more important, too caring.

Then one day, with the sun already low over the horizon, she ran into him while gathering firewood. They both stood still, some twenty meters apart, staring at each other. He really looked like Payvand.

The silence became unbearable. "My name is Hemerythe."

He hesitated, then coughed. "You are not Greek."

"I am ... American."

"What are you doing here?"

What to say that was not too confrontational? "I am seeking knowledge."

"In the empty wilderness of Thule?"

She was starting to be angry and amused at the same time. "They say that in Thule there lives a sage who knows almost everything, except how to properly greet strangers."

"Strangers should know that dragons, despite liking flattery, are too smart to be swayed by it."

"If there were dragons in Thule they would welcome one of their kind, because I did not come here by boat. And you are no dragon."

He did not respond immediately. From his restless eyes she deduced that there was some kind of struggle going on inside him.

"Would you like some tea? We can use your own bowl."

He nodded and followed her to her camp. She stoked the fire and made the tea. Meanwhile they sized each other up. He had the white skin that Payvand had, but his beard was long and ragged instead of a short imperial. There was no broad rimmed hat, just hair as wild as the beard. The hair made comparison difficult, but she estimated them to be about the same age.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

His eyes really gave him away, even when his voice did not. They were wary now. "Long enough."

"It must be hard to not being able to use your conversation skills."

"I talk to myself a lot. You will be surprised how good a debating partner your mind can be, if you are smart and honest enough."

"So what do you two talk about?"

"At this moment, why we are supposed to answer so many questions. How about receiving some answers instead? For example: Who are you? Where did you come from? How did you get here? And last but not least: Why did you come here?"

"I am a natural philosopher." She had wanted to say 'scientist', but the word did not fit. What language was she speaking to the man? "My field of study is the overlap between dreams and the flow of time."

He laughed, the throaty Payvand chuckle that she knew. "Haha! I think you are a ghost, haunting my dreams with visions of pretty women. I can handle that. Begone, vixen! Leave me to my meditations."

"No, you are not dreaming me. I am dreaming you!"

"Is there a difference?"

Despite her intention to play her cards carefully, she launched into an explanation. "All matter and spirit" - the wrong word again, she meant to say 'energy' - "oscillate and change. This leaves patterns in the chronokyma, er, time waves, like the layers of sediment in the earth, stacked on top of each other. All the past is there! All the way up to the beginning, at the very bottom. You cannot dig those layers up and turn them over, but they can be perused, like the pages of a book, if you know which pages to browse to. Through dreams. Though only with extraordinary -" She could not find how to say 'genetic'.

He seemed amused. "So I am a piece of sediment in your dream? If so, why do we sit and talk here, turning the layers over?"

"No, it is not like that! If I read a good book I form images and thoughts in my head and interpret them. That's where, er, what you are, thoughts in my head."

He pondered that for a moment. Then he suddenly pounded forward, grabbed her wrist and twisted it around, until she yelped from pain. He released her again. "There. That seems pretty physical to me. Not dreamy at all."

She nursed her aching wrist. "Do you never feel pain in your dreams?"

Again he did not answer, just stared with a faint grin.

Now the anger was taking over. If her mind had made Payvand out of this Allaghu, she could turn the tables. She recalled some things she knew about her former boss. "You cannot digest milk. You despise bright sunlight. You are afraid of snakes."

The grin faded. "There are no snakes on this island."

Spontaneously she decided to pursue the idea further. "I truly know who you are. I know this because I know your future self. You were, er, will be my boss one day. For a while at least."

He leaned forward, his eyes dark. "Which year?"

"Two thousand -" she realized that the Gregorian calendar had not been invented yet. "Some 13 centuries from now."

He stood up. "My name is Allaghu. We have to talk. Not here, but in my house, where there is warmth, proper food and drink. Come."

They went back to the house. He opened the door, which proved to have a thick wooden latch inside, by lifting it with a piece of wood, inserted through the crack at the edge of the door. Inside it was rather dark, but he stirred the fire and lit candles made of whale oil. It was (finally!) comfortably warm. The place was stacked with supplies and tools. She spotted wooden barrels, vessels, various kinds of rope and thread, stone axes, fishing spears and nets. Fox pelts were stretched out on racks; the ceiling was a mini-forest of dangling herbs; a bed was situated near the central fireplace. A shelf was filled with statues made from wood, stone and strands of fiber: a bear; a singing bird; a faerie-like woman; a model of a Roman or Greek temple; a jumping deer; a dragon with sharp fangs and subtle whiskers; several others.

Allaghu retrieved strips of dried meat, herbs, nuts, seeds, two bird eggs and started to cook a supper. He did not seem inclined to talk just yet. Instead his entire being was focused on preparing the meal. Hemerythe waited silently too, absorbing the environment. Likewise they ate without speaking, savoring the food, which was surprisingly good. The fare was accompanied by fruit mead, which was slightly alcoholic and somewhat metallic. It tasted heavenly after weeks of water and weak tea.

"About that business of yours. I get to live for at least 1300 years? And become a master of natural philosophers?"

"Yes, a whole team." She wanted to warn him about the demise of the project, but knew that would not change the reality one bit. And Payvand's death ... better not cloud his mind with that. "You live under a different name though, a Persian one. I always doubted that you were of Persian origin."

"Is there much philosophy being done in the future?"

"We have formal education reaching almost everyone, and people working as professional knowledge seekers."

His eyes brightened. "So there is hope! I must redouble my efforts."

"Doing more or less will not matter. You are only a shred of a dream, remember? Not part of reality, though your real self may play a role there. Why are you so much interested in natural philosophy?"

"I retreated to this island to meditate on the great questions. The Roman empire is gone, though the Byzantines still linger, but I doubt they can resurrect it. If they could have done that, they would have done it centuries ago. We are at a low point. Vikings and Saracens are hammering the continental kingdoms; the steppes are in turmoil. The Arabs may achieve great things, but their curiosity is poisoned by religion, like in India. The T'ang .. the Chinese currently reach higher than anybody else. Maybe the seed is there."

"You are extraordinarily well informed about the world! You must have traveled far and wide. So why become a hermit here?"

Again there was hesitation. "I am ... an Adept of Chaos."

Hemerythe stared without speaking.

"The christian monks teach that the world is divided in high and low, in good and evil; basically a Manichaeistic view. However their notion of moral values is quite subjective. If there are fundamental forces driving the world it is not the petty struggles of humans trying to master their base instincts. Even Siddhartha Gautama Buddha got that wrong. No, the flow of things is measured on a different axis: chaos versus order."

"I guess that most people are on the side of order?" Hemerythe interrupted. "They do not want see things crumble down in chaos."

"Indeed. But order is destructive also. Order makes things wither and perish, to make room for rebirth and new growth. It is cyclic, on multiple levels. Day and night, the turn of the seasons, life and death. Some say even empires are recurring, falling apart and rising anew."

"And that is not a good thing?"

"No! Repetition implies stasis. With order, things seem to change all the time, but they always cycle back to the same states. So on a broader scale they do not change at all, they are static. A static world is a dead world. It does not rise, develop, grow wise. It needs chaos to shake things up, to tear the order apart."

"By destroying it?"

"Chaos destroys the status quo. But that is a means, not the end. From the ashes of destruction something new must be built, something better. Simply rebuilding what has been lost would be pointless, that would be just another form of order. Ruining old things is easy; creating new is hard."

Hemerythe was digesting the philosophy. "I still don't get what an 'agent of chaos' is doing here all alone on an uninhabited island. Shouldn't you be among the people, destroying and, er, rebuilding?"

"There is only so much that a single man can do, even wise and well traveled. I am pondering my strategy. There are times when you have to take a step back and see things from a new angle. In time, I will travel and act again."

She wanted to belittle Allaghu's grand schemes, but then recalled the multitude of great men and women who had imprinted their ideas on mankind, and her own work under Payvand, whom she had overlayed with his future self. It mellowed her mood. "I am glad you are willing to talk to me. And, without spoiling the surprises of your life, I can tell you that you *will* be one of the people who help the world forward."

"Aww, is that not sweet?" The passion of his explanation was gone, though his eyes shone with mirth. "But you did not come here to listen to my ambitions."

He had opened up so much that she dared to state her goal bluntly. "I am looking for the location of the Liccini Tablets. My, er studies have hinted that you may know where they are buried."

His eyebrows rose. "The Liccini Tablets? What need do you have of those?"

Araz Bivir should have provided more information. She improvised quickly. "We think they contain a hidden message. With modern text analyzing, er," - the word 'software' eluded her - "baked brains we can probably decipher it."

He looked at her intensely but did not speak. Was he thinking again? It lasted a full minute or maybe more. She returned his gaze for quite a while, stubbornly refusing to give in. It was hard. Her vision seemed to narrow, her consciousness too, more and more until she saw only his bearded face.

When he broke the silence his voice sounded deeper. "You are a junior in the family, no? Did your master send you?"

"Yes," she responded automatically.

"Who is he?"

"Araz Bivir."

"How old is he?"

"I don't know."

"Describe him for me."

She did, including details about appearance, mannerisms and speech.

His voice was resolute. "Tell me about how you two met, his abode, what his instructions were. Relate everything, word by word. You will remember."

She started to tell, a long stream of words and impressions. But somewhere in the back of her head was something that asked why the dream was reading the dreamer instead of the other way around. With an almost physical effort she tore herself loose from his gaze.

"What are you doing to me?! Are you" - this time the word 'hypnotism' failed to materialize - "bewitching me?"

"You are strong," he remarked. "You have potential. Your master was wise to choose you. All right, I tried to spellbind you. Forgive me for trying. How about a trade instead? Your dream theory against my philosophy, the location of the tablets against information about that master of yours. Though if I am a dream thread as you say, there is no harm in just telling me everything."

"You first, because you tried to cheat me."

He did not blink an eye. "The Liccini Tablets are located in Sethre's tomb, some three Roman miles west of Pistoria, a little north of the road to Luca, in the Melli forest. Look for the Four Hundred Steps Path up the hill."

That was quick. Hemerythe wanted to ask more about what the tablets were, but did not want to betray her ignorance.

"Your turn. Tell me about this master of yours."

So she did, describing his underground residence, his giant servant, his interest in chronorology; almost everything. Many times she stumbled on inventions and theories from her own time and was both unable and unwilling to explain them fully, even though she knew that she was talking to a chronoskia, a time shade. By the time she was done it was morning, though the inside of the house was still gloomy. Allaghu showed no signs of weariness. "That master of yours has many hidden agendas. He is quite mature, I think. Beware of veterans like him. All of them are manipulative. They have to be in order to survive so long. And I know what I am talking about." He smiled. "But what need do you have for this advice? After all we are only part of your dream."

"No, this is useful! When I wake up you will be gone. But I will remember all of this. That is what I have been training for these last few years." She reflected for a moment. "Speaking of waking, I think I should be leaving. I would love to speak more to you, but I am tired of this wilderness. Maybe I will return later. It will be a different dream, so you will not remember me. But our meeting will be easier, because now I already know you."

"Leaving? So soon? That is an insult to my hospitality."

"You showed the limits of your hospitality when you tried to cast a spell on me. That was deceitful." He stood up and took a stone axe from the wall. "You have no idea about the depths of my deceit. Did you really think I would believe your silly dream story and just let you run back to that Bivir with all that knowledge?"

She spotted old blood on the axe edge, dark and almost grey. Suddenly her body felt cold. Its instincts were sound. Dying in a dream was possible and physically lethal. No psychethou meant no chronorist! Dread gripped her. She scooped up some ashes and flung them in his face, jumped up and raced out of the house.

Her diversion was not very effective. Only seconds later she heard him coming in pursuit. "Run, little sapling, run! Only there is nowhere to run to. You are on an island!" His laughter echoed booming against the rocks, as if he was supported by rows of malicious trolls.

But instinct made her flee. She ran like a deer, crashing through the shrubs, tearing her clothes and skin, racing in blind panic. There was an opening, a glade? It was a cliff. She was going so fast she could not stop in time! She was swimming through the air. Then the ground came up and she screamed in horror.

Land of the Sun I

She awoke drenched in sweat, as if from a nightmare. Once more Araz Bivir was bending over her. "An intense experience? How did you fare?"

"Am I dead?" she asked. "I was falling. Death in a dream is flat brainwaves, death in real life."

"Falling? Ah! Fear of death is a powerful stimulant. Apparently powerful enough to jolt you from your deep chrono-slumber. Did you obtain the location of the tablets?"

"I'm *not* fine, thanks for asking. He tried to kill me!"

Araz Bivir smiled his trademark wide smile, but did not speak.

"And yes, I know where your precious tablets are."

The smile neither faded nor widened.

"In Italy, somewhere near Posteria."

"Posteria? Posterior? Did you mean Pistoria? You do remember the right location, do you?"

"Yes, Pistoria. But I don't know here that is."

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "It is an ancient town in Tuscany, Italy. It lost an r in the centuries but your source seems to remember the proper Latin name."

Images of sunny hills with lush vineyards filled her mind. "Oh, I have always wanted to go to Europe!"

"I am glad you look at things from the positive side. Eat, drink and rest now. Tomorrow we must resume our studies."

"Don't you want to hear how I got the information? And what misery and danger I had to get through to get it?"

"I had hoped that the island would teach you some patience. Brief me tomorrow."

Hemerythe responded by devouring a copious meal, gulping down several cups of the metallic wine, washing herself and sleeping as long as she liked in a warm bed.

The next day Araz Bivir was already up, fussing with an old-fashioned speaker set. "Un principe adunque dovrebbe sempre accettare consigli, ma solo quando lo vuole, non quando gli altri vogliono darlo; dovrebbe scoraggiare tutti dall'offrire consigli senza invito," the thing said.

"A prince always does? should do? advice, but only if he desires it, not when others er, something, give it, he should ban? everyone from giving it without invitement," Araz Bivir translated.

"I think you mean 'invitation', not 'invitement'," Hemerythe interrupted.

He switched off the machine with an aggressive flick of his finger and snapped "Le ragazze sciocche dovrebbero sapere quando parlare e quando tacere."

"What are you doing with that relic?"

"To brush up my Italian. Speaking the language opens many doors."

"But why are you not using a modern language coach? That way you can learn twice as fast."

He stared at her for a moment. "You have changed. Let us have breakfast. You may tell me all about your nordic adventure."

That she did, taking care not to miss any detail of the first weeks of her ordeal. However she did not mention the par-par. She referred to the man only as Allaghu, not Payvand, and omitted the parts of their conversation that had referred to the future. He might have tried to kill her, but the advice he had given her

earlier felt genuine.

Araz Bivir listened politely, with what on first sight looked like disinterest. But occasionally he fired a question that showed that he was really paying attention, requesting clarification of a detail or reflecting on her observations. When she was done, his smile was faint. "You must learn unattachment. You know that all you are experiencing is just in your mind. Your hunger is not real, your pain is an illusion, your fears are unfounded."

"If I would detach I would remain in the dream forever," she retorted.

"The mind is not a single voice. One ideation may state that nothing matters while another thinks that you are about to perish. Appreciate both; be master of both, simultaneously." As if to demonstrate he abruptly changed the subject. "We will be leaving for Tuscany soon. You need not pack much. I have a fair collection of female dresses. Make sure to pick a varied selection, as we must be prepared for every situation."

He went on about Italy and what differences to expect there: the food, manners, music and more. Now the roles in the conversation were reversed, Hemerythe listening and perceiving. Araz Bivir seemed changed also. He was filled with nervousness and energy, fussing over every little thing that could go wrong. She let him vent his thoughts and waited. When he was done she pounced on the wardrobe. It was indeed varied: casual clothes, formal dresses, jungle wear, various uniforms. She judged most of it rather old-fashioned. Look at that 1960's dress! Suppose they would visit Milan? She made a mental note to pressure her mentor to do some shopping before they left.

They departed a few days later. Thoan stayed behind to guard the fort. To Hemerythe's surprise they did not go to the airport but the harbor. Araz Bivir had booked a large cabin on the lowest deck of a cruise liner. It was loaded with baggage, much of which remained packed into trunks during the journey. The man too stayed in the hut as much as possible. Meals were brought in, fellow passengers were kept out.

Despite his urgings to keep a low profile, Hemerythe refused to remain locked in. "I'm not some kind of weever fish!" She went up to enjoy everything the cruise had to offer: swimming pools, shows, people having a good time. There was music and laughter and everything else that had been absent from her life for so long. Yet not all was hunky dory. She had hoped to regain something of a sun tan, but the bright light on cloudless days caused her discomfort. It made her skin itch as if she had spent hours baking in the sun rather than minutes. Gray days were better, though she really felt at ease only indoors or at night. She confronted her boss with the problem. "What is it with the aversion to light? Do those bloody steaks have something to do with it? It is like we are vampires!"

He laughed. "You do not have two small bite marks in your neck and neither have I. We have confronted the sunlight yet not burst into flames; we season our bloody meat with spices, including garlic; we walk past crucifixes without blinking an eye; you have not seen me changing into a bat or other animal. Please, leave stories of vampires where they belong, in the realms of fantasy."

"But the burning light is real. You stay below for a good reason."

"It is comparable to, though not the same as, Xeroderma pigmentosum. We cannot stand bright light. It is another aspect of our condition. Not everything is necessarily a boon! Though I find a paler complexion complements your blonde hair better."

It was the first time he had voiced his appreciation for her looks. But she refused to be distracted by flattery. "This 'condition', did you bestow it on me?"

"Or was it already part of you, the reason for coming to me? What matters is that it is with us. Do not try to fight it. You cannot, as much as you cannot fight the sun going up and down every day."

She made a mental note of finding out more about her mentor. If only she knew where and when he came from ... Then perhaps she could visit him in a chroneiro and quiz his chronoskia thoroughly, multiple times if need be, and learn everything she needed to know.

For the rest of the trip, which lasted a week, she stuck mostly to the nightlife on board, which was nearly as vibrant as the day bustle. After the crossing of the Atlantic the speed of the journey slowed down and there were several stops: Barcelona, Marseille, Nice. The weather was bright and sunny. Hemerythe fought back with oils and an umbrella, so she could get a glimpse of the old continent. Araz Bivir, who of course stayed behind, derided her tourist behavior. "Americans! There is no 'Europe'. It is not a federal state like the USA. They speak about 40 different languages; saunas are not Spanish and meze are not a dish but a collection of dishes. At least read a travel guide!"

They disembarked at Livorno. This time Araz Bivir had to come out too. He quickly rented a camper, making sure it was equipped with blinds to keep the interior as dark as possible. All the trunks from the ship were loaded into the car. "You must do the driving. You are still young; the sunlight hurts you less. Pistoia is only 50 miles from here."

Pistoia was a pretty Italian town with traces of its medieval roots and plenty of tourist sites, and tourists too. Hemerythe would have liked to land in a cozy family hostel and explore the place, but again Araz Bivir had other plans. They booked a room in a large anonymous hotel and had food brought to their room like on the ship instead of dining in the restaurant. In the evening they went out, not a stroll to the Piazza del Duomo but a ride in the camper to the countryside west of the town. It was much quieter, fields interspersed with picturesque villages and an occasional villa.

After a few miles they veered off the main road, parked the camper in Stazione Masotti and continued on foot. The area to the north of the village was heavily forested. A single road, the Via Leonardo Da Vinci, cut through it.

Araz Bivir had studied tourist guides, Italian land surveys and even manuscripts from the Renaissance. None mentioned a Four Hundred Steps Path. "In all likelihood the name has been forgotten. But the path is probably still there. If we encounter it, my eyes will recognize it." Yet finding proved to be a daunting task. The forest area covered at least half a square mile, if the target was indeed a 'little north of the road'. There were several hills in the area, all wooded and difficult to traverse, especially in the dark.

Hemerythe wanted to explore in daylight, but this was denied. "We must not attract attention from villagers, or worse the police. Secrecy is always the best mantle. Let your eyes adjust to the dark and use your other senses."

So they stalked through the trees, swinging weak flashlights that were not up to the task, looking for signs of a path or a tomb. Hemerythe mostly used her tactile sense, when she tripped over yet another branch or stumbled into some unseen thorns. She wondered if Araz Bivir had developed night vision, but from the sound of his muttered curses that was not so.

In the early morning, back in the hotel, both were chafed and scratched all over. Hemerythe grumbled about it, but Araz Bivir waved her complaints aside. "Those will fade before the day is over. You know how good our regenerative powers are." He served two large glasses of the heavy red wine to ease their comforts.

"Is this some kind of healing potion?" she asked.

"Modern medicine has learned that our condition distorts the lymphatic system. It leads to a chronic deficiency in erythrocytes and iron. The wine helps to alleviate that. So in a way it is indeed a healing potion."

Hemerythe still wanted to trade the thorns for sunlight. "Can't we set up some kind of cover? Let's pretend we are archaeologists or something like that."

"A creative thought. However even that would attract attention. I have told you before: Our enterprise is secret and must remain so. You must learn patience. It is only some 300 acres! We will bring heavier clothing next time."

They ventured out night after night. The hotel staff thought they were party animals; the villagers failed to notice the camper that was parked in their neighborhood every night; the police were busy chasing after speeders and criminals. All failed to notice the strangeness of two foreigners going trekking in the dark. Only the wildlife was disturbed. It kept a wide berth from the two stumbling humans.

Araz Bivir had planned to walk through the area in a regular zigzag pattern, but Hemerythe managed to convince him to start at the hilltops and descend in spirals. She did get better at evading hostile flora, though still gained minor wounds faster than they healed.

Then, on the ninth night, Araz Bivir suddenly hissed like an angry goose. "There! Do you see it?"

She saw nothing but gnarled roots, mud-covered trunks and tangled branches and leaves, like she had seen thousands of times.

He brushed some dirt off what looked like another root. "Stone! And here, another." It looked like the teeth of a stone giant, though one in need of a dentist. It was a stairs, clumsy and irregular, worn and half gone, but a stairs.

Fired up too now, she started to uncover the steps also.

"Do not clear it all up! We do not want anybody to find this in the daytime. Secrecy, remember? We can follow this track just as it is."

The stairs led them back up the westernmost hill, southeast of the olive farm, through an area they had scanned before. Near the top the stairs vanished.

"The tomb is probably buried here," Araz Bivir mused. "It must be really old. Good! But excavating it will leave a very clear trace. It must be done in a single night. Let me mark this spot. Now come, we must prepare."

The next night they arrived early, shortly after dark. Some of the trunks were emptied now. Trying to remain

silent and not hit every branch on the way they hauled spades, saws, picks and other tools up the hill. "Put on your gloves," Araz Bivir said. "We may have to do a lot of digging and cannot afford to be hindered by blisters. I do not now how much soil we will have to clear. I have read, and tested, that a healthy male like me can dig a man-sized grave in four hours. You should be able to do it in six. Of course we will not be digging a grave, but that should give you an idea of what we can accomplish in a night."

However the soil was not graveyard sand. It was earth here, rocky there and infested with roots of all kinds and sizes. After half a night of digging there was yet no sign of a tomb. Hemerythe had blisters in spite of the workman gloves. "I don't think we're going to strike gold tonight."

"If we are lucky we might!" He sobered. "But you are right, we must plan for the worst case scenario. We must cover the place up and return overnight. The sand must be dispersed in a wide area so that nobody will notice. You go down and fetch the bags. I will start cutting camouflage branches."

She thought the secrecy way overdone, but complied anyway. When she returned with the sandbags she had to admit that Araz Bivir had done a nice job. The camouflage was worthy of a military operation. But after carrying several heavy sandbag loads downhill her muscles were not so merry anymore.

When they were almost done and back at the van they encountered a new problem. Araz Bivir's exertions had attracted the attention of some dog, which kept barking at him. "Sherz nakdagh!" he exclaimed, but the animal kept trotting around him and making noise. Exasperated and anxious at the same time, the man suddenly dropped his bag, whipped a knife out and pounced on the animal. The attack was as fast as the strike of a snake. "Yipe!" the dog said, then slumped. Its throat was cut and its last breath whisked off into the cold night air.

Hemerythe thought she should be appalled but she was not. She did not care about the animal and the smell of the blood made her thirsty. Thirsty ... the thought that welled up with it tasted ugly.

Araz Bivir kept on muttering, while he stuffed the carcass in a sand bag, drained most of the blood into the gutter and covered the rest with sand. He seemed very agitated; his eyes darted from left to right and his muscles were taut.

Neither of them said anything during the drive back to the hotel.

The next day Araz Bivir was uncertain. "Who knows if someone has seen or heard anything? In such situations it is usually best to let matters rest, to return when everything is forgotten. But what if they discover our excavation? Every day is an extra risk." He restlessly walked up and down for an hour. In the end he decided they should go back at first dark.

When they drove into the village they noticed a group of people standing in the northern bend of the Via Musicanti. They had axes and hedge trimmers with them. One of them, an old man, was crying, while others tried to console him. A shred of his wailing told them enough: "Massimo! Cosa devo fare senza Massimo? Aah!"

Araz Bivir had the shakes. "Our operation has been compromised!" He wanted to drive right back to Pistoia.

Suddenly Hemerythe was the bold one. "They are not starting a search, they have just returned from one! And it was fruitless. They're giving up because night has fallen. This is *our* time!"

He was persuaded. They parked the camper at some distance, grabbed their equipment and went back up the hill. There was no sign that the locals had been there, so they resumed digging. It was fascinating to see Araz Bivir laboring now. He was like a bird picking up seeds, looking up every few seconds to see if there was no intruder on approach.

This time they struck stone quite soon. Not some loose piece of rock, but masonry. Araz Bivir started clearing the stone furiously, working as if possessed. Hemerythe went down to the van and came back with industrial mortar dissolver, which made short work of the seams. At midnight they managed to pry the first brick loose. Others followed, while the hours crept towards daybreak. There was an unspoken agreement that they would not return for a second time. The tomb had to be opened right there and then.

Finally they had enlarged the hole enough for Hemerythe to wriggle through. Araz Bivir held her feet, but it felt like he was more eager to push her in than to pull her out in case of trouble. She managed to grab something to stabilize herself, pull her legs up and rotate back to a standing position.

She turned around with the flashlight. It revealed colorful mosaics on the walls with dinner benches below them, shelves with bucchero pottery and several items crumbled into untraceable dust. The age of the place was tangible, it almost felt like a chroneiro.

"The tablets! Do you see the tablets?" Araz Bivir demanded.

"Not yet. You should try to crawl through also. This place is amazing, I think we're the first to see it after all those centuries!"

"Do not dawdle. Dawn is approaching! Locate the tablets."

She looked around more. There was nothing that looked like tablets. She tried to open the closet that was under the couch with the couple, until she realized it was not real, it only looked like one. Good craftsmanship! Araz Bivir was showering her with questions and unusable advice. She ignored him and examined every hook and cranny. When she blew the dust off a silver dinner plate, it revealed a spiral pattern with strange characters along the line, curling either inwards or outwards. She took it to the hole and handed it to Araz Bivir.

"That is not Etruscan writing!"

Hemerythe's shoulders slumped.

"This must be it! Quick, come out. We must be gone before anybody comes snooping." He dragged her out again, rather too fast, so she was chafed in several places.

"Ouch! You are rough like Thoan. And the tomb, are we just going to leave it like this?"

With the tablet/plate in his eager hands, he had regained his calm. "Somebody will find it sooner or later. Let him or her claim a finder's fee. They will call in the scientists, who will categorize and analyze its contents properly. One plate will be a small loss to them, especially if unknown. Now, let us go!"

Back in the hotel they showered, put on day clothes and checked out. Because Araz Bivir had tipped heavily, the clerk did not ask why they were leaving before the week that he had paid for was over. They did not take the plate with them, as they had to go through customs, who would raise hell if they should discover it. Instead he put the thing in the mail, handled by a company that Hemerythe had never heard of: Cutzhe Cochlea Cursorium. The return trip was unconventional too. Not a cruise liner, but a cargo ship carrying an enormous load of containers. Hemerythe suspected that again substantial bribery was done. They got a container for themselves, furnished with beds, refrigerator and other furniture. Araz Bivir forbade her to go out and mingle with the crew, so she spent much time reading. After a week she was bored to hell. Back in Boston on the plate had arrived before them, without any fuss. They both pounced on it. Araz Bivir was right: The characters were not Etruscan, not even Greek. There were too many of them for a proper alphabet and the text was too short to make sense of the spiraling message. "The Etruscans built their alphabet from the Greek one, somewhere in the 8th century Before Common Era. This is something very different. The true archaic Etruscan script? A religious writing system? We must decipher it, but how?"

"Use computers," Hemerythe said. "Language models, freestyle text parsers. I'm no expert, that was Norene. But we can call on scientists who are experts in language analysis."

"No! No scientists, no computation machines, no outsiders. We cannot afford any information leaks, not a single one, however slight."

"Then what?"

"I have to think about it."

Land of the Sun II

Araz Bivir showed himself more of a historian than he already had proven to be. He pored over countless ancient tomes, scribbled notes, drew comparison diagrams that looked like failed spiderwebs. He was like archaeologist, historian, linguist and mysticist all in one.

Despite all the hours he devoted to his research, he still found time to attend to Hemerythe's training too. She was back to studying ancient crafts, music and several old scripts for herself. However this time he wanted to be student as well as teacher. "We are a good team. But we must be better. You must teach me how to do chronology. I must be able to do some exploration of my own."

"I already told you need genetic adaptations. The normal human brain is not able to keep dreams focused. You cannot just gulp down more vathystagma, you must -"

"You underestimate the powers of training. The human mind is a flexible thing. I can dream lucidly, recall and manipulate my dreams, just as you do. I think I can overcome the problems."

"You lack sensitivity to the chronokyma. It's like dreaming about visions while being blind. You need to perceive not your personal memories, but those of the world! The reminiscences of other people are quite different from one's own. Let alone animals, plants, dead matter, swirling elements. You don't need to fully understand them, but you must be able to at least sense them. All of them."

He shrugged. "You cannot blame a man for trying. We will both engage in the next chroneiro. You with your cyborginess, me with the skill of old age. Let us see what results that will yield."

"The next chroneiro? When to? Have you deciphered the writing on the plate?"

"I have not, but I know where to find somebody who can. We must go to Toscana, 662 Before Common Era. There we must find someone who can unravel the mystery. Maybe the writer of the plate itself!"

As could be expected, a lengthy briefing followed. Like with Iceland, Araz Bivir had to rely on external sources. There were books to plow through, museum collections to be viewed again and again, documentaries to be watched as well as interviews with contemporary Italians living in Tuscany. There were maps, art collections far grander than what she had glanced at in the tomb, a translation of a witty ancient play that preceded the Romans, obscure brittle manuscripts from his private library that looked like scientists would be willing to kill for. He made them wear reconstructed Etruscan clothing so that they could get a feel for it. Finally, after exhausting all resources, they were as ready as they could be. They exercised a bit to wear themselves out, cooled down, drank their vathystagma and settled down to sleep.

It was summer. She felt it right from the first moment. The flora heavy with growth, even in the dry air, insects buzzing and the sun high in the sky as the king of them all. Just like in Iceland, the light did not bother her. The landscape was full of gentle rolling hills, covered in a gorgeous lush mix of woods and fields. Tuscany, but without the asphalt, the noise and people everywhere. She was wearing some kind of tunic, almost as long as a dress, with cute sandals underneath that had upward curling toes. She walked to a nearby stream that lazily flowed through a shallow valley. There she beheld herself in the reflection of the water. She looked like her normal self, but with long hair, half stuck up. The tunic was a piece of art, soft green with happy flowers at the hemlines, topped with an exquisite necklace of gold leaves studded with small emeralds. So she was to be a member of the upper class!

She was carrying a dream copy of the inscribed plate in a linen bag. What do with it? She looked around more. There was a town in the distance. Maybe go there? She was also carrying a basket, half filled with wild radishes. What was the significance of that? Once more it was hard to discern what the past had brought and what was the product of her own research and imagination.

She wandered around a bit, then spotted a man standing next to a bronze chariot, drawn by a horse. "Are you ready, miss?" he called.

"Yes," she answered, for lack of any better idea. She walked over to him. She estimated him about 30 years old, possibly a slave because of his simple dress.

"Do you want to go back to the house or get some figs too?"

This was new. Not a Hemerythe who walked into the chroneiro as a stranger, but one who was somehow already part of it. "Just drive around a bit, then go back. I want to enjoy the sun."

Which was true. She had missed the feeling of warmth on her skin. They climbed into the chariot. The slave took the reins and toured her around at a gentle pace, driving over gravel roads that curved around and over the hills, touching farms left and right. She saw people at work in the fields, passed wagons loaded with hay, was chased by playful dogs. The whole breathed the calm life of the countryside.

After a while they drove to the town. By that time Hemerythe had acquired an overview of the landscape. She had studied Araz Bivir's maps well and now knew the name of the place: Velahtri, one of the major towns in the north of the Etruscan heartland, a center of metal production. Indeed, when entering the town proper, she spotted several smithies where copper, tin and iron were being worked. A cacophony of smells assaulted her nose: the stench of a tannery, drying fish, horse dung and many kinds of smoke. The streets were busy, many craftsmen practicing their trade in front of their shops / houses. She noticed that the people were rather small, averaging little more than 5.5 feet, and that she was no taller than the rest.

The chariot drove upwards to the highest part of the town, where a rich and more tranquil residential neighborhood perched on the hilltop. They stopped at a large house, somewhat like a Roman villa, but with heavy wooden doors before the courtyard, which were wide open. No rickety wood and clay here. The base was solid alabaster, above that wattle and daub around sturdy wooden poles with a thatched roof on top. Fortunately it had an opening in the center just as with a Roman atrium, so the sun was able to enter the house from above. She dismounted and walked into the house, taking the scene in.

Almost immediately she was approached by a man who appeared in his thirties and was dressed equally rich. "Thana! Welcome home. Did you enjoy yourself?" Before she could answer he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. His beard felt strange; she had never dated a bearded man before.

"Er, yes, I brought, er, radishes!"

"Splendid. Velia, take care of those." He guided her further into the courtyard. One arm stayed in place around her waist and buttocks, playfully pinching them. "I am composing a letter to the magistrate. It must be both forceful and polite. I want you to proofread it." He led her to a wax tablet where the letter had been carved into.

From Rasce Lethanei to Teithu Zalthu: Greetings. Your handling of the the branching of the Zaishe river has been exemplary and has been of great benefit to the community. May the gods grant you equal wisdom with the settlement of the immigrants from Lenthenna. I want to draw your attention to the persistent rumor of blood-sucking striges haunting the town. Some elders have repeatedly dismissed these as unfounded hysteria of wrinkled grapes, yet only fools ignore the warnings of old women. These monsters are a dire threat to our newborn, the pride of our loins. I would like to plea for a reinforcement of the night watch and equipping them with stink horns, so that they may ward off these flying horrors. The community is wealthy enough to fund these measures.

"You make a good, er, sharp point. Perhaps flatter the magistrate some more?"

"Yes, you are right, as always. He is a vain person. I will add a reference to more of his past accomplishments." He started to sort his mind in search of something suitable, speaking half out loud.

Hemerythe was a bit confused and upset about the content of the message, but then another thought occurred to her. As usual the talk and writings appeared as English to her despite being Etruscan. Would the same happen with the plate? "I need to freshen up," she said. She walked around, trying to determine which room was what, without appearing lost. After some probing she found what looked like the afternoon bedchamber in the rear half of the house. Eagerly she unwrapped the plate. It was still as unintelligible as before.

Clearly she needed some kind of scribe or scholar. Finding one would have been hard enough in an unknown town, but chained to what appeared to be a marriage it might prove even harder. She wondered if they had children. Children ... her real relationships had never come close to marriage. She rummaged through the furniture, looking for letters or anything else that could tell her more about the household. It felt like snooping, but she forced herself to reorient her thinking. She was both Hemerythe and Thana.

She was startled when Rasce walked in. "Are you ready for dinner? You have not changed. Have you fallen asleep again?"

"Yes. No. A bit."

He took her hand and guided her to the dinner room. On the table was a light meal consisting of a salad of mixed vegetables, grapes, grilled tuna, bread and wine. Now she was thankful for Araz Bivir's practice sessions. She was familiar with dining reclining on dinner couches, eating bread without salt and sipping wine that was as thick as soup, diluted back to something drinkable with water.

Rasce talked about the price of repairing the mural on the west wall, the whims of his latest horse, even the weather. She did not say much and gave short, evasive answers to questions. How could she have prepared for this? Global knowledge of an era was no substitute for the notions of daily life.

Rasce noticed. "You are absent. Nervous for the evening? There is no need to."

There was something planned? "Actually, I am nervous. I don't know what to expect!"

"Of course you do. Just recite the hymns and dance as beautifully as only you can and you will be fine. I was hoping you would wear the blue dress I gave you last year."

"Of course! Is there still time?"

"It is still at least an hour to the ceremony."

In summertime, that would be one and a half modern hours. Or was that for the Romans? "I will go change." She rushed back to the bedroom and managed to find the blue dress, which was another tunic, not as long as what she was wearing. It was dyed a soft turquoise, adorned with gold thread in swirling patterns. They must be really rich. She donned the dress, applied the unknown makeup to her best judgment and bound her hair with a silver hairpin in the form of a running deer.

When she reappeared Rasce had changed too, into a male tebenna and mantle, as refined as her own clothes. No chariot this time, just walking, because the ceremony was only half a mile from their house. The top of the hill was undeveloped, covered in forest, with a grove in the center. A lot of people where gathered there, all dressed in what their descendants would call their Sunday best. Lampoons lighted the place, musicians made the air vibrate with anticipation. There were greetings everywhere. Everybody seemed to know them. Hemerythe smiled a lot and gave obvious and ambiguous answers to questions.

Fortunately the chatter subsided, as the priests and priestesses approached. There were four of them, two men and two women. They were dressed in elaborate tunics and wore pointed hats. Each positioned him- or herself in one of the four compass directions and started chanting. "Winds, come down! Clouds, depart! Trushes, alight!" Hemerythe sensed some kind of rhythm and guessed that in Etruscan, those lines would rhyme.

The crowd around them sang along and started to dance in a wide circle around the priests and priestesses. The steps were small and cautious at first, but both music and dance gradually stepped up. Occasionally

somebody broke off to sip wine from bowls that were held by slaves outside the ring. They did not drink it all, but poured the remainder on the ground as a libation.

Sometimes a person wheeled inside instead. They were handed a live bird from one of the augurs in the center, which they killed, dismembered and cast up into the sky. All of them pleaded with Turms, the messenger of the gods, like: "Oh Turms, wise herald, accept this offer. Hear my plea, feel my pain! Tell me, will my son return unharmed from the northern campaign?" The prayers were not spoken, but sung, and the worshipers tried their best to keep in harmony with the general hymn. Meanwhile the priests and priestesses gathered the bird remains, interpreted their pattern and gave answer with the voice of Turms.

Hemerythe got her share of wine, which was stronger than the watery dinner juice. The music, dancing and alcohol made her a little dizzy. She thought she saw Araz Bivir among the people outside the dancing ring, sitting on a branch of a tree. How could that be, in her own chroneiro? But by the next revolution she saw only a large owl.

Rasce tugged at her sleeve. "Come on, why do you not take a turn? You sing so well!" Before she could answer he more or less pushed her to the inside.

She half stumbled, but managed to turn the dip into a pirouette and some other smooth moves. A warbler was handed to her. Quickly she broke its neck, then with more difficulty tore it apart in bloody pieces, casting them around. Then she sang, hesitating at first, looking for words. "Oh Turms, light of foot, great strider, hear me!" To her sudden surprise her psycheathou had a magnificent voice! She could sing like a nightingale, something that the real Hemerythe had never been able to do. Drunk with wine and exultation her voice rose up. "Aid me in my quest! Tell me where I can find the words of Liccini!" If there were puzzled looks among the crowd she did not notice. She jumped, bounced and swirled and landed before the clergy, who were debating intensely among themselves. "Well?" she asked.

Apparently they were in disagreement about the signs. Finally one of the priests turned to her. "Do not seek the answer. It will come to you."

And then she had to retake her place in the circle of dancers, making room for the next client. All who wanted got to ask a question. When all was done the ground was littered with gory dead bird parts. Everybody joined in a final hymn, saying thanks to the god. Again Hemerythe/Thana sang with gusto. The words seemed to flow from the melody, and the repetition of the choruses made them easier still.

When the last song was done the chatter from the beginning resumed and the crowd slowly started to break up. Hemerythe, remembering something, looked around for the owl, but it was gone. She got several compliments on her singing and dancing and just smiled in answer. Rasce led her home, walking with a proud step.

The house was already partially at sleep, the doors now closed. A slave was on watch and let them in. The couple visited the toilet, he first and she after. She was horrified to find just a primitive seat over a cesspit, close to the kitchen. Fortunately she only had to pee, which she did as fast as she could manage. She did not dare to wash herself with the grimy water in the bucket that stood next to the seat, dream or not.

In the bedroom Rasce had laid down his mantle as a blanket to lie on; hers was another one. She wasn't exactly looking forward to spend the night in bed with this bearded stranger either. He might just expect too much. Indeed when he laid down to sleep he started to fondle her right away. "You were magnificent as always."

"Please, let me sleep. I think I have danced a bit too enthusiastically. I'm exhausted."

Rasce was a decent husband. He rolled away and soon after snored softly.

His wife could not sleep. Too many thoughts, questions, anxieties haunted her mind. After a while she sneaked out of the bed and retrieved the plate from the room next door. The characters were completely unreadable in the darkness. This was why she had come to this time. What message did it contain?

Her musings were interrupted by a whisper. "Thana! Are you awake?"

The voice came from outside. She climbed on a table and peered through the open window. The moonlight revealed an anthropomorphic shape. "Thank the gods! I know it is too risky to come to your house, but I just had to see you! Your performance tonight was exhilarating. Is he asleep? Then come outside, if only for a moment!"

She hesitated, then sought the back door by touch, opened it slightly and peered out again. A man stepped up, pulled her outside, closed the door, glanced around, embraced her and then kissed her full on the mouth. Only then did she realize that she was still naked. "What is the matter?" he asked. "You are numb. Are you all meager?"

"I ... me ... the ceremony ..."

"You were radiant as Turan herself! If we had been alone I would have pounced on you right there and then, sacred grove or not." He kissed her again, quite well actually.

But she disentangled herself. "Rasce will hear."

"He has drunk too much wine, I can hear him snoring from here. What are you holding in your hand?"

"I, er, foun-, bought this from a foreign merchant. It contains a secret message. I just *must* know what it says." She added: "But only you and I may know!"

He gave her a puzzled look. Then he held the plate up in the faint moonlight and looked at the writing. Meanwhile she observed him in the same light. He really was a handsome man, more her age than Rasce. Without a beard too. And apparently he was her lover.

"This is ancient zingu! I know only one person who can decipher this: Larth the Seer." He turned back to her. "Once again you have come up with an exciting adventure! Meet me tomorrow after dusk at the old linden. Don't worry about a gift for Larth; I will bring one." He embraced her once more, gave her a third kiss, then ran off, silent on his bare feet.

Bewildered, Hemerythe stole back into the house and the bedroom and laid herself down to sleep next to Rasce, who was still snoring.

The next morning the house came alive. A slave woman was making breakfast; another took the laundry to the river. Hemerythe visited the toilet again and now was forced to clean herself. There were some cloths, apparently used several times since their last washing. Almost gagging, she picked the least dirty one and used it. Later, at breakfast, she was still rubbing her hands against her tunic.

Rasce left to present his letter to the magistrate, leaving her in charge of the house. She did not know what to do, but fortunately the chores were daily routine for the slaves and she had only to approve their suggestions. There were three of them: an old woman who did most of the cooking and cleaning; a younger one who carried water and did the laundry; the male slave who tended the garden, did heavy labor, was the handyman and night guard. Hemerythe knew much about their lives, yet when confronted with the 'reality' of those, was surprised at their constant toiling that went on from dawn to dusk, their meager meals and cramped sleeping quarters.

But she had work of her own to do. "It is another splendid day," she said to the male slave. "We're going out again to gather more food. Drive me to the old linden tree." It was a gamble, but worked out well: He knew the place. This time she gathered berries and wild chard.

In the afternoon, back in the house, she helped the slaves with some of their work and again evaded conversation as much as possible to hide her ignorance. Rasce announced that he was going to attend a drinking party. "Do not expect me back anytime soon, we are going to do some serious drinking. And by the way: women are not invited. This is a party in Greek style," he added with a grin.

"As long as you do any vomiting outside," she quipped.

That evening all she had to do was wait until the house was dark and quiet. Then she stalked out, using her new hunting skills to walk as silently as she could. The linden tree was two miles away and difficult to find in the darkness, though the moon was nearly full. Her lover, whose name she still didn't know, came out of the shadows and walked towards her. "Thana! Come, the seer is already here."

Larth the seer was an old man, so thin that both his torso and limbs looked like straws. He compensated that with a beard that reached to his knees. He also had heterochromia, one eye having a different color than the other. "Where is the scroll?" he demanded.

Hemerythe handed him the plate.

He looked it over, keeping it very close to his face and frowned. "This is a lunar message. You did not tell me that! Fortunately, the moon is out. We must make an offering to Losna before we can proceed. Some silver drachms will do."

"I think he is just trying to rip us off," the young man whispered in her ear.

But she knew spending dream money would not make her real self even a single obol poorer. "Give him his coins. I will pay you later."

The man handed over three drachms, which Larth accepted eagerly. He began a little dance, hopping in circles like a silly movie dwarf, lifting up the plate again and again, singing something unintelligible. Then he spotted an owl, sitting in a nearby tree. Hemerythe saw the bird too. It looked like the one from the night before. Larth became agitated. "A spy! A dæmon from the Night Realms!" He started throwing stones at it. Hemerythe, acting on gut feeling, stopped him. "It is just an owl! He will do us no harm. Proceed with your work."

Larth grumbled, but complied. When his singing and dancing was done he peered at the characters, again very close to his face, but not so close that the moonlight could not reach them. Suddenly he started to

speak in a voice that was hollow as the ringing of heavy bells. "The Lion claws at the Ram. The Bull and the Defender shield him. Fate will decide." He lowered the plate and spoke in his normal voice again. "That is what it says."

Hemerythe was offended. "What malarkey is that?"

Now Larth's face flushed with anger. "I told you what is written! I translate, I do not interpret. Consult an augur or a sage for that."

The young man intervened. "Thana! Do not question the voice of the gods!" He gave Larth another drachm. "Off with you!" The seer pocketed the coin swiftly and walked away.

Hemerythe considered that puzzling as it was, it might just be the proper translation. And as for interpreters, she knew a sage back in the 21st century ... So: possibly mission accomplished, in just two days. That meant she had to wake. But how? She did not relish the prospect of knocking herself out again or skirting some kind of heart-stopping dream death.

Her companion had other things on his mind. "Intriguing! A puzzle within a puzzle! But solving that will have to wait until tomorrow. We are two and as usual it will not last long; we must make the best of it." He kissed her again.

She answered it and soon his hands were under her tunic. Sex in a chroneiro? Why not, he was a handsome young stud and she hadn't felt like this in the real world for quite some time. They went down on the soft grass and made passionate love. He knew where to touch her, heated her up more and more until she climaxed heavily.

And was back in her chair in the underground den. She had had a wet dream; her pussy was damp against her panties.

Araz Bivir was still asleep, but awoke seconds later. He recognized her condition immediately. "I see you have found a new way to wake from a time dream. Congratulations, I did not know that one yet." In answer to her blushing his eyes spoke lust, but again it did not translate into advances.

The Return

"We have the message!" Araz Bivir exulted. "Splendid! Marvelous! Fabulous! Wonderful! The text is interesting. What does it mean?"

"I haven't told you the message yet," Hemerythe objected.

"I have already heard it with my own ears, which were quite sharp." He turned his head like a bird to cast his broad smile at her from the side.

"The owl ... That was really you! An animal? How?!"

"In every dream your psycheathou looks different than the real you. If you can vary among human shapes, why not animal ones?"

A human mind in an animal brain? But being in a chroneiro, how real was that brain? Before she could dive into the question, her thoughts already jumped to the next ones. How had he managed to engage in chronorology without proper adjustment and training? And how had he ended up in *her* chroneiro? She noted that she had underestimated him.

Both lost themselves in their thoughts. After a while they settled down for a light meal. Araz Bivir was fired up, expostulating theories, digging up books, striding back and forth between bites. Hemerythe was silent, reflecting on her ancient lover and the matter of privacy in chroneiroi. She withdrew into her bedroom to get some real sleep.

In the morning, at least what time happend to be that, she was woken by the sound of hammering. When she entered the main room she saw Araz Bivir and Thoan busy chiseling away at a stone bar, about a foot in length. "What are you doing?"

"Preparing for the next dream. We are getting real close now!" He laid hammer and chisel aside and pointed out a blackboard. The message from the plate was written on it, with numbers under some of the words. "While you were sleeping I unraveled the text. It is a really simple cipher. I would have expected better from him. You see? The words refer to the signs of the Sumerian zodiac. 'The lion' is Urgula, number 4; 'claws' refers to Girtab, the scorpion, number 7; 'Ram' is Kumal, the dweller in the fields, number 12; 'The Bull' is of course Guanna, the heavenly bull, number 1; 'Defender' is even more clearly Pabil, number 8; and 'Fate' is Zibaabba, the fate of heaven, number 6. So: 4-7-12-1-8-6."

"So a spiral of unreadable characters has been translated to a cryptic text which is now an even more unintelligible sequence of numbers?"

"Numbers is what we want." He pointed to the stone. "They represent the extent of the ledges of the key. Small numbers for short ones, high for long. Thoan and myself have started to carve them. It will take a lot of time, but we have time enough, no?"

She spotted the first cuts, along with some chalk marks. "That *whole* rock is to be a key?"

"It is for a big lock."

Over the course of many days the two men laboriously chipped away at the stone. She thought that industrial machines could have done the job in just a few hours, but by now knew her mentor well enough to not voice that idea. She had to do some stone carving of her own, as it was part of her curriculum, though they did not let her touch the mysterious key. Between all the masonry, the regular training was also taken up again. Crafts, books, surviving, combat; there was so much yet to learn and refine.

Meanwhile she indulged in a little private research. The idea was to practice chronology without vathystagma. She was well trained and could keep her thoughts from drifting off on every whim, but without the drug probing the chronokyma beyond her personal memories was very difficult. Her test case was the 2031 bombing of the Boston city hall, which had been extensively covered in the media. She tried ... and was able to visit the terrible event. With her own eyes she saw the shattered facade, the torn bodies and weeping people, heard the wailing sirens. But it kept feeling unfinished, incomplete, like a movie rather than the real thing.

Only when the key, a massive sandstone block weighing 3 kilograms, was ready, did Araz Bivir reveal the destination of her next chroneiro: Pressburg, in the year 1530.

"Haven't I been there already?" she asked.

"Yes, but this time you will enter armed with knowledge and more importantly, this key. Of course you will not bring the physical thing itself, but it will help you get a proper feel for it. The devil is in the details no?" He dumped the piece of rock into her hands, almost making her drop it. "And now you will have a genuine mission. I will supplement my previous description of the town with extra information. You will remember Moscicz the butcher, no? If you go around his house to the back, there is hatch that gives entrance to his cellar, where he stocks salted and fresh meat. The cellar is several feet underground; you have to descend by a narrow stairs with worn out stone steps. The temperature there is fairly constant, the humidity low." Clearly this was one of those places where Araz Bivir appeared to know personally, because he went on describing the cellar in detail, then added something extra. "In the northeastern corner there is a blackened wooden slab that looks like a place to hang meat on, but actually is a lid for the keyhole. You have to move it, open the lock and proceed to the inner haunt. I do not know exactly what you will find there. Your goal is to get knowledge of 'šęǵal'. It might be written down, though I doubt it -"

"More ancient tablets? Or something else?"

"Most likely a someone. I am sure you will handle the situation well."

"You will not come along?"

"No, circumstances prevent me from doing that. A warning: Above ground you must now evade Frouri. You will certainly remember him. He may be occupied, but he might roam around the house too. If he finds you there he will ... obstruct you."

"Last time he tried to kill me." She had an idea. "We know Pressburg well. Why don't we go back or forth a couple of years, to evade that man?"

"The time window is narrower than you think. Too early and we might miss, er, your target and too late, it may ... have become unsuitable. Go back to the same year, the same day even. Your chances of dodging Frouri are better on All Saint's Day."

"But the first time you sent me to that day explicitly to find him!"

"That was the other one. Now listen closely, I must describe the Moscicz environment in more detail."

The other one? Hemerythe planted her feet firmly on the ground, folded her arms and clenched her teeth.

"You are not telling me everything. I won't do it."

Now Araz Bivir burst into wrath. "Ungrateful wench! After all I have given you, you refuse to obey me?!" He gave a brief signal to Thoan, who grabbed her, locking her in an iron grip. Araz Bivir wrenched open her mouth and poured a beverage, which she knew contained vathystagma and other drugs, down her throat. Soon she felt fuzzy and mellow. Her boss hammered her with his instructions. "You will not go as a flimsy damsel. You will assume the shape of Thoan here: male, big and strong. It may help you in your endeavors. Smell his sweat, feel his muscles, so that you may know him better. Do not forget the key. Now sleep."

It was a dreary gray morning, the clouds menacing rain but not yet yielding it. She had arrived in the same spot as before, in the western quarter. She could hear the noise of the crowd to the east.

It felt strange to be a man, especially such a big one. The bulk, the strength. His muscles were hers, but her

senses were still feminine. She caressed herself, enjoying the feeling, then abruptly stopped, ashamed of herself. And she had a dick too. She did not notice it right away, until she touched it. Yikes! That was an odd feeling.

But she had a mission to accomplish. She hefted the key, which was wrapped in a nondescript sack, as Araz Bivir had instructed. Then she set off to the north, towards the butcher's house. With Araz Bivir's knowledge at her disposal, it was easy to find. There were only a handful of people in the street, most had gone off to celebrate. The house was part of a block that was wrapped around a common garden. She found a narrow passage between two houses that led to it. Cautiously she scanned the courtyard from the shadows. An old woman laid a blanket on the railing of a balcony, then went inside again. All seemed quiet. She glanced up at the sun. Even the time was the same. If she would go to the town square, she would encounter the procession. Frouri was part of it. If he was there, he could not be here. She strolled up to the cellar door and examined it. No lock. She opened it and climbed down the smooth and slightly slippery steps.

There was a thud behind her. She whirled around and saw ... Frouri. He was neither wearing a dead men costume nor a black doublet, but a brigandine. In his left hand he held a hand axe; on his face there was the wide grin again. "What have we here? Hungry for meat?"

"I was ... sent to pick up chops for the feast," Hemerythe improvised.

Frouri laughed, the same maniacal laugh that he had used when he had played knife and blood with her the first time. "Oh, there will be chops, do you not fear about that." He raised the axe and approached.

The hatchet came down with terrible swiftness. In a desperate move she blocked it with the key, which gave a loud clang. Frouri's face showed surprise, but he recovered quickly, hacking and whirling his weapon with great skill. Hemerythe had had combat training from Thoan and now possessed his strength too, but was no match for the axeman, who moved as fast as Araz Bivir. He drove her back against the wall, again obviously enjoying himself. Another stroke came down, but it was a feint that was converted into a vicious low cut. She felt her left knee being shattered.

Gasping from the pain she fell down. She knew she was about to be butchered. How cruel, to die in a chroneiro by the hands of an enemy she did not even know!

"You Hungarians, you are all clumsy fools," Frouri said. I will have a talk with you when my brother comes back. He whacked her temple with the flat of his axe blade and plunged her mind in darkness.

Araz Bivir was bending over her. His dark eyes studied her with attention; his expression was blank. "Did you succeed?"

In her mind she was still feeling the pain of the knock against her head. She shook it from her. "No. Again I was almost killed by that Frouri monster." She told him her adventure.

"He is a problem, as I feared. But now that you know when, where and how you will encounter him, you can handle him quite easily. Here, familiarize yourself with this, so that you can conjure one in the dream." He presented her with a snaplock pistol that looked like it came from a museum.

"I am to kill him?"

"You are to complete your mission. Shooting him is the simplest way to remove the obstacle. Remember, he is just a chronoskia. Thoan will teach you how to handle the gun."

"I would rather have a modern weapon."

"That will not be possible."

So two days later she drank the vathystagma again. Araz Bivir had left her form to her own decision. She had chosen to appear like a woman again. A maid, obviously poor and very common. For the third time she 'landed' in Pressburg and for the second time she navigated to the butcher's house. She kept an eye out for a sign of Frouri, but did not see him anywhere. After the old woman had deposited the blanket she descended down into the cellar once more. This time she did not wait until her eyes had surveyed the room, but immediately stepped aside and lifted the pistol.

Right on queue Frouri jumped down. She aimed and pulled the trigger. Sparks flew, smoke gusted and the man sank back against the stairs with a large hole in his chest. His eyes were large with surprise, then froze in an empty gaze.

She looked him over. He had a scar on his neck! That was something that she was sure was missing on her attacker from her first chroneiro. "My brother," he had said. Twins? Araz Bivir could have, should have warned her, if he knew about them, which she suspected he did. Had the aim of that first trip really been to see if she could find one of the Frouis? It appeared that they knew how to find her quite easily.

The thought of another brother still at large gave her the creeps. She located the wooden lid and the keyhole

behind it. It was as large as the massive key. Now her reduced strength was a disadvantage. With difficulty she inserted it into the keyhole and pushed with her entire body. By the sound of it it was an old-fashioned pin tumbler lock, though with pins made of stone rather than metal, held down by sheer gravity. Slowly, one by one, they unlocked, banging instead of clicking. With all her might she turned the key around. Next she had to pull, to wheel the door open. Behind it was a dark corridor, which slanted slightly down.

She carried no lamp. Using the light from the cellar door she entered, feeling the walls and testing the ground with every step. The background light did not reach far, so she had to rely more and more on touch. However her senses were sharpening. After what seemed ages she arrived at a room. She could not see, but felt the space of it. There was furniture: a table, jars in different sizes, a kind of wall tapestry.

Then she touched skin. Warm, moving, alive. Frightened, she withdrew her hand.

A feeble voice came out of the dark, hesitating and rasping, as if unfamiliar with itself. "Waghghh, zhh, ghk! Gh, Gho comez to vist old Gisiš in hiss humble 'ome?"

Hemerythe, cautious now from previous encounters, did not want to reveal her name. Recalling a title she had read in one of Araz Bivir's many old books, she answered vaguely: "I am the Dreamer of Echoes."

"Ahh, are you an egh-, envoy of Enki? How courteous, how benign, to visit an old man in his dusty abode."

"May I ask who you are and what you are doing here?"

The voice grew stronger. "I am Gisiš, High Priest of Ninazu, Keeper of the Secrets, Guardian of Years. Here I hide, far from the reeds, waiting for the sign, waiting for the return."

She wondered if she could play on giving a 'sign', and whether she should. "I wish to know about ... 'šēgal'. Do you keep writings, descriptions of that here?"

He laughed, a dry chuckle that sounded like a goose being strangled. "Šēgal? In writing? Yes, masters of scripture we be. Recording, calculating, praising. It is our gift to the world."

Meanwhile she was still groping around. Her fingers found what felt like an oil lamp. Was there still oil in it? "Would you mind if I made some light?"

"Light?! No, no, the udug will awaken, they will hear and be heard, their voices are like thunder! No light, it hurts the soul, burns like fire. Eyes must pierce the dark, like Ellik's radiance. Sharp eyes, keen eyes, to see shapes and intentions. You are a marvel to behold."

"Thank you. But I need light to read books."

His hand gripped her arm. "You have no light. You are not of Enki. Nay, you are young, you are of Inanna!"

Quickly she yanked free. She cocked the pistol and fired into the air. It was not loaded anymore, but the snaplock gave off a brief spark. It was too small and too brief to make her see him. "If you touch me again I will light this lamp!"

Again the chuckle. "Yes, you always were a fierce one, fair lady. Young and ravishing and ambitious. But there are no writings here. Just memories. The šēgal is a thing of the past."

Like that could withhold a chronoroist. "Please, describe it to me. What it looks like, where to find it and the lay of the land and its people."

"Ahh, you kindle the flames of my heart, young Inanna. Were I young again! You make me lose myself in the memories of the homeland, recall days of warmth and splendor! I will yield to your desire."

He cleared his throat once more. "Dawn in Uruk is the best thing to see. When the first rays of the sun peek over the horizon, they strike the highest spot, the capstone of the Eanna. It scatters them like the flail striking the grain, casting the might of Uruk over the four corners of the world. The voices of the priestesses rise up in greeting, gentle as reedbirds. Slowly the city awakens, shaking its ruffles. Sleepers descend back into their homes, the guard shifts, the markets swell with people like a jug being filled with water for a morning draught. The mighty gates open and workers pour out in long tentacles, like ants from their den. Thousands bestir themselves: peddlers, masons, scribes, gardeners, tax collectors, butchers, perfumers, goldsmiths, prostitutes, overseers.

You know, this is not just a simple town, this is a *city*. The first true city of the world. Not even holy Eridu comes even close to it. I could talk all night and only scratch the surface of it."

"Then do so," she said. "Tell me of the rhythm of the day, the festivals, the looks of the monuments. But also paint the life of the common people, their joys and worries."

That he did, using language that was more poetic than Araz Bivir had ever used. He talked for hours and hours, wrapped in darkness, so that his voice was as the only thing in the world. He talked about the land, the the farmers, the city, the hopes and sorrows of the folk. Hemerythe drank it all in, as she was trained to do.

When she felt that her mind was filled to the brim and the body started to clamor for daily maintenance too, she changed the subject. "And what about šēgal? I need to find it."

"Šeġal is everywhere. It comes from the sky, it flows in the abzu, it is in the stems of the flowers." He laughed again. "But of course you need something more tangible. Something to feel between your legs, eh? I cannot give you that, I am much too old. Seek out the Cursive Man. I suggest you start your search at the Eanna. When you find him, speak the words 'Gab so mon hyag, e peh ta'ram akhne ma'. That ought to do it".

Another quest to find somebody? She was confident that she could handle this one too. Though she knew she was in a chroneiro, she still felt thankful to Gisiš. "How can I repay you?"

"For now you have done enough. You have given me new memories. That is enough to last me for many years."

"I will give you one more memory." She reached out to where she guessed him to be, grabbed his head and kissed him. He felt like dry paper, both outside and in. Maybe the kiss was a bad idea. She turned around and shuffled back to the entrance. Her eyes needed a minute to re-adjust to the light. When she could see again she stepped into the cellar.

And saw Frouri. Another one, not dead but in a dead man's costume, armed with a Swiss dagger. When he saw her his eyes burned with hate; death was written on his face. He came on with all the might of a warrior. She shrieked in mortal fear, while the knife hurtled towards her heart.

And came to in the safety of the semi-darkness that was Araz Bivir's home. "Another nightmare?" he asked. "Did you shoot the guard as I instructed? Did you find the šeġal?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking. Again they tried to kill me."

"But your mission! How did you fare?"

"Patience!" she snapped. "Before I give you a full report, I think I'm entitled to a little more information myself. Who was this Gisiš and why was he hiding under a Slovenian town?"

Araz Bivir regained his self control. He stared at her a long time. "Gisiš is one of our oldest, maybe the oldest of all. He came from the Land of the Two Rivers. He was known as En-men-dur-ana of Sippar, has been an advisor of Sargon of Akkad and was active in building and rebuilding Babylon again and again. His wisdom was profound, his energy boundless, his talent for survival unmatched. But the burden of the years wore even him down. When the barbarians from the desert conquered the city he left to become a nomad himself. Frouri must have captured him and locked him up like some kind of pet Mušhuššu. I tracked him down to Pressburg many years ago, but could not reach him, separated by centuries of oblivion. Until you came."

"And šeġal?"

"His wisdom, his potency, his magic. We must acquire it. Together, you and I. Then I, we, will be king and queen again."

Kiengir

Hemerythe stretched her muscles and quaffed a cup of the metallic wine. "Your precious treasure is not in 1530 Pressburg. It is in Uruk, in Mesopotamia, or rather Sumer. I don't know the exact year, I must consult your books. I guess somewhere in the late 4th millennium BCE. Though that does not matter much. I know how to get there."

But first she wanted a break. She went up to the surface, with tacit consent from Araz Bivir and without Thoan as a guard., She roamed the streets of Boston, which had been her home for many years. Daylight made her uncomfortable, just like on the trip to Europe. So she sampled the nightlife, which was abundant in the big city. But something inside her was different. She saw the bars, the theaters, the hookers, the music as if through a veil, on which was painted the equally bustling nightlife of Uruk. Which was real and which was not? And what did it matter? Once you had access to both, and others, and more than a normal lifetime to taste them, your home could be anywhere. She wandered around, sampling experiences and meeting strangers, feeling like a stranger herself again and again.

It was several nights before she returned to the Osta Gold Investment Group. Araz Bivir had not been idle. He had dug up dozens of books on ancient Sumer, many of them unknown tomes that librarians would kill for. She joined him in his studies, to supplement the descriptions from Gisiš. But she made corrections too. "There is no wall around the city. That is? was? built later. And Gilgamesh belongs to a younger century too. Gisiš points to Uruk somewhere near the end of, what do the historians call it? ah, the Late Uruk period of course. The main temples are quite new. You will see them in all their splendor."

Their roles reversed, she now described the city for Araz Bivir, trying to recall the eloquence of Gisiš,

largely failing yet able to paint the city life adequately. It was the second time he was going into a chroneiro with her. He did not seem bothered with the risk of plunging into such an ancient and alien time. Instead he was burning with passion. Not just for the trip or what lay behind it; his eyes feasted on her with a fierceness that she had not seen before. When their preparations were complete, they drank wine with vathystagma and sank into slumber.

Daylight, and heat. She was alone. Apparently Araz Bivir had entered somewhere else, or failed? She stood on the right bank of the Euphrates. The city lay on the other side, basking in the sun. Of course it looked like Gisiš had described it: a grand city of ten thousand, yet almost as much green as houses and the temples on the hills dominating all.

A walk to the water, which coursed lazily southeast, revealed Hemerythe's latest appearance. She wore a bright blue woolen skirt reaching almost to her knees, above soft leather sandals. Her upper torso was bare, her skin slightly tanned. There was plenty of ornamentation: a silver headband studded with carnelians and a dozen dangling lapis lazuli gems, a gold necklace with smaller gems, golden bracelets. Only her hair was, as she liked, simple and straight, shoulder-length, sunny blonde. Clearly she appeared to be a member of the upper class, just as she had intended to.

She walked over a small path to the north, where there was a wooden bridge that stepped over an island in the river. The road into the city was busy with farmers hauling their wares; inside it was even busier. Somehow she attracted attention. Some people stared at her, though nobody made to speak or act. Was her clothing wrong? Her body too tall?

Feel a bit uncomfortable, she proceeded to the Eanna district, keeping to the main streets. The temple area was a confusing cluster of temple buildings, courtyards, workshops and passageways, in different sizes, not in a planned pattern but built impromptu next to and sometimes over each other. It was not as packed as the lower city, but there were still plenty of people: praying worshipers, scribes writing letters, loungers, workmen hauling supplies, priests and priestesses tending to the whole. Some of these too stared.

One of them stood like stone, peering at her from a side room. She approached him and saw that he was stone, a statue. Now she recognized him, from Gisiš's description. The statue of the shepherd was lifelike, not plain stone but fully painted, like all of the decorations in the city. Yet it was neither large nor flattering. The man was depicted wearing rags, with a wild beard, crooked staff and eyes that seemed to peer in two directions. Then again, he was the husband who had betrayed Inanna.

But there was a quest to complete. There was no sign of a man who could be called 'cursive'. She spotted a woman who was making a libation and muttering a prayer with the speed of habit. That had to be a priestess.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for a man. He goes by the name of the 'Cursive Man'."

The woman rose and looked her up and down. Several emotions flowed over her face, too rapid to follow. She raised her hand up to Hemerythe and gently touched her head. "You look divine! As the goddess herself. Who are you?"

Hemerythe had prepared this part. "My name is Múdsa. I am from Nippur."

"You have arrived right on time. The festival starts tonight!"

"And he'll be attending ...?"

"Of course! How could we celebrate without the hairy one? But speaking to him beforehand will be difficult. He dwells in the abzu. You could call his name in prayer, but I do not think he will heed."

"So I should talk to him afterwards?"

"You? You should line up with the princesses. That should put you into his attention. At dusk, come to the Yellow Temple and make sure you are ready."

This was something that Gisiš had not spoken about. However previous adventures had made Hemerythe bold. "I was born ready."

That left her with several hours of spare time. She wanted to see the city, which had so vividly been described to her, with her own eyes. She wandered through the Eanna district, moving from one temple to another. It was a jungle of stone, with buildings snuggling up and spanning over each other, not old stone but painted everywhere in bright colors, displaying geometric patterns and hordes of animals, people and animal-people hybrids, who engaged in tilling soil, riding, lazing about, reading, screwing, dancing, building and doing all other things that living beings do. These temples were not just places of worship. Scribes wrote texts or read them for anyone who was not literate; there were numerous markets stalls; priests and priestesses oversaw the transfer and storage of many goods.

Again several people were staring. By now she guessed that her blonde hair was the attraction, as the locals were all black-haired. From a market stall she bought a shawl to cover her head.

Somewhat less conspicuous, she struck a street with food vendors. Of course there were no tomatoes, no bananas, no peaches, not even rice. But there was bread in many varieties, meats, fish, fowl, fresh vegetables, sauces sweet and sour, strings of dates and beer in large jars. She bought barley bread with a dipping sauce of sesame oil, fried vegetables, roasted chicken and fresh goat milk and consumed the meal sitting in the shade of an olive tree in the Great Orchard.

Satiated, she went for a stroll through the lower city, where life went on as if in any city. Some slaves were hauling up a cart that was heavily burdened with jars; an old man slept on the roof of his house; a group of people were repairing a mudbrick wall; children chased after a dog, yelling and shrieking. She was a chronoist in a chroneiro, more than 5,000 years removed from them, flung into a period without machines, without knowledge of America, with much of the world still wilderness. Yet she felt as much at home as in Araz Bivir's underground den.

Thinking of her mentor, where was he? Would he be a donkey like that one near the building site? Probably not; beasts of burden enjoyed little freedom in the city.

She wanted to climb the city wall to see the the environment, but it was / would be built in in the time of Gilgamesh, still some three centuries into the future. Apparently the might of the armies was still sufficient to deter raiders and invaders. Instead she walked back into the city, to the hill to the northwest of the Eanna and An districts, the highest point. Beyond the throng of houses and streets lay the fields of the farmers, stretching for miles. They had picked the most fertile patches of ground. Between their fields lay the marshland that was the original ecosystem of the land and beyond that, to the southwest, hardly visible in the restless air, the desert.

In the west the sun was already sinking towards the horizon and turning red. Dusk came swift at this southerly latitude. She had lingered too long. Swiftly she made her way back to the Eanna. Lots of people had gathered for whatever event was going to take place. She pushed through them to the Yellow Temple.

A guard, armed with a spear, stopped her. "If you are not part of the staff, you have to wait outside."

With a dramatic gesture she removed her shawl. "I am one of the princesses."

The man, overwhelmed, immediately let her pass. Inside the temple priests were busy with preparations, though it was unclear what. There were many more women than men, including a lot of young pretty ones. All were dressed in their best outfits, most of them skirts like Hemerythe's, in many colors, with fringes, tassels and jewelry. And all were eyeing each other furtively, as if it was a beauty contest.

Some male priests stretched their muscles and started banging away on huge drums. Other musicians joined in with flutes, harps, lyres and human voices. Dancers moved out to a platform that jutted out to the southeast, rising above lower courts, where the people cheered in anticipation. Hemerythe started to realize that this was religion and show business rolled into one. And politics, because after a while the king of the city made an appearance, together with his staff and personal guards.

"Beloved citizens of Uruk!" he thundered through a brass cone. "Tonight is the time of the festival of Life. Tonight we honor the goddess, the abzu, the hairy one. May she grant us bountiful harvests, as good as last year! The granaries are full, the city grows, our enemies cower for our warriors." He went on about everything that was good in Uruk, frequently referring to his own reign. Clearly this was an ancient public relations department at work.

The people listened politely, but their real enthusiasm was reserved for what came next. The high priestess, clad in a wondrous gown of paper thin linen and gold-thread, took over. She launched into a long hymn that praised the goddess, supported by the musicians. "Oh Sublime Lady of Uruk, hear us! Your might is unrivaled. Your beauty unsurpassed. Our voices are like the rustling of the grain stalks, hear us! From your womb sprout the greens. From your fingers spring the beasts. The shepherds call out: Hear us!"

The hymn had several dozens of lines, each praising the goddess or calling on her. Every time the priestess sang "Hear us!" the crowd joined in. Only the last lines did not refer to the deity alone. "Spread your tresses through the earth, open your womb for the seeds! Awaken your servant, rouse the abzu. Let him hear us!"

The music ended and that was the cue for the princesses to fan out over the platform. Each tried to show off her beauty, angling close to one of the bonfires that provided light, or attracting attention with subtle movements. From the crowd rose whistlings and cheers that did not sound chaste. Hemerythe was among the women, unsure what to do, except showing off herself.

The musicians started a new tune, slowly building up a crescendo. The princesses all moved to the edge of the platform to gaze down below. There the crowd parted, clearing space around a well. Right on cue, when the music reached a climax, a man came up from it, hoisting himself out of the pit with a mighty jump.

He stood on the pavement and shook water from his body, among thunderous cheering from the crowd. Then he ran up to the platform and climbed a rope ladder upwards, each step and pull accompanied by shouts of encouragement.

He conquered the height with a flourish, the epitome of strength and energy. The musicians now played a subdued theme, the kind of music that they could keep up a long time. The princesses fell slightly back, forming a concave line facing him. The man started walking along the line, looking each woman in the eye. Maybe it was a beauty contest, Hemerythe thought. But what was the religious component? Until she remembered that Inanna was renowned for her beauty.

When the man reached her she saw that he had long black tresses that cascaded carelessly down his head, unlike most of the men in the city, who had shaven theirs bald. So this was what hairy meant. He was well built, but his eyes intrigued her more: full of intelligence and something of playfulness, though with an edge to it. The man in turn looked her up and down intensely. She imagined that he looked longer at her than the other women.

Then he proceeded further along the line. When he had sampled the last woman, he walked back to the center and faced them. The tension in the music rose. After a short pause he walked right up to Hemerythe and extended his hand. The music stopped abruptly. The crowd erupted in a cheer that shook the ground.

She took his hand and let herself be led towards the edge of the platform, to receive their acclaim. Together they descended a stairs on the north side, which was much easier than the rope ladder. Again the crowd parted to let them through. Behind them they closed ranks once more and formed a long line, singing, dancing and carrying torches to light their way. Hemerythe and the hairy man led the front, winding through the streets the the southeast, out of the city into the countryside. Neither of them spoke or looked behind. At first the man followed roads, but he chose smaller and smaller pathways, down to mere tracks, leaving the cultivated areas for the marshland. In their rear she could hear the procession thinning out. When the soil became soggy, he lifted her into his arms and carried her into the darkness. The last followers shouted some farewells and then gave up too.

They were alone under the stars, surrounded by the voices of the night animals. The man lowered her down onto her feet. Now was the time to take the initiative back. "I am Múdsa. You are the Cursive Man?"

"I am he."

His voice was a pleasant baritone. She thought she recognized it, but could not label a name. "I am from Nippur. I am not familiar with Uruk rites. What are we supposed to do here?"

"To honor the goddess and fertilize the fields. What else?"

Another Romeo? They were coming on a bit too fast. "I have been seeking you. I carry a message: 'Gab so mon hyag, e peh ta'ram akhne ma.'"

His face showed surprise. "Who told you that?"

"It was revealed to me by a god in a dream," she said, which was near the truth.

"But you do not know what it means."

"I have some idea," she bluffed.

He moved closer to her and gazed at her intently. His hair rippled like waves in the wind. It was hard to keep her thoughts straight; she had attention only for his face. Was she being mesmerized again? She could not resist.

"The ritual will be somewhat different than you may have heard. First I will drink your nectar, to satisfy my personal thirst. Then I will possess you, body and soul, fill your womb with my seed, so that earth will be impregnated with our pleasure. If you prove strong, you will be my queen for a year; if not, you will meet Ninazu." He wrapped his arms around her in a grip that was gentle but impossible to escape.

Suddenly he cast her aside and ducked to evade the blow of a copper axe. "Ah, young but already agile!" a familiar voice exclaimed.

"Who are you?" the Cursive Man demanded. "How dare you disturb the Spring Ritual!"

It was Araz Bivir, in human shape, armed as a warrior of the Sumerians, with copper helmet, axe and short dagger. "You do not know me yet, young Gisiš, though one day you will! But first I will regain the šēgal. Here, in the fertile soils of the First Land, where the magic still lives. Finally you have shown the way. She is my bride and I will take her for my own. She will feel my rod as I plow her field and she will restore my šēgal to me, in the here and now, but also in the far and later! You ... You will die a sparrow's death."

Again he attacked the Cursive Man, Gisiš?, who evaded the strikes with skill. They engaged in a fierce fight, one slashing with the axe and the other evading. Classic, to have two men fight over a woman, though this time both were bent on taking advantage of her. All for 'šēgal'? Men were all alike, even though the ages. She had had enough. It was time she became a true Inanna, taking the reins. But how?

Meanwhile the advantage of the fight was with Araz Bivir. He had a weapon and clearly knew how to wield it, make swift strikes that forced his opponent back again and again. The latter could not retreat forever, reeds and ponds blocking his way. The axe nicked his leg, drawing blood; brushed his head, ruffling his hair. He stumbled over a root and fell on his back. Araz Bivir moved in for the kill.

Though she knew it was just a chroneiro, Hemerythe sprang before him. "No! Not like this!"

Araz Bivir, knowing full well the risk for a psycheathou, hesitated. Then the Cursive Man kicked at his feet, knocking down his attacker. He came on swiftly and before Hemerythe could intervene a second time, knocked Araz Bivir's brains out with a rock.

She looked on with horror and sadness. "He was not really evil. He taught me much."

"But he had a thing or two to learn about survival." As if nothing had happened, the victor resumed his business. "Where were we?" He clasped her waist once more. He grabbed her wrist, pulled a tiny copper knife out of his skirt and cut the palm of her hand. Then he put it to his mouth and sucked the blood out of her. It went on for quite a while, she felt herself growing dizzy.

Finally he had had enough. He ripped her skirt off and started working to put juices into her, instead of taking them out. She felt feeble and unable to resist, a chronoroist manipulated mentally as well as physically. But she too had learned a thing or two about survival. Somehow she rose above the situation. She let him make love to him, wild and rough, taking in his manliness and, with some mental effort, enjoying it too. When she came, it was in full knowledge that that was the end of it. No slave queen for the Cursive Man this year.

The next one

She awoke on the bed, wet but not feeling ashamed anymore. Araz Bivir was lying next to her. He did not snore, he did not breathe. He was dead.

She rose and drank a cup of red wine. Then she started to explore the den in full, accessing rooms that had been off limits to her before. She found a sizable supply of vathystagma, enough for several chroneiroi. Better still, there was a whole room filled with equipment from the CTP. There was the neuro-monitor, inoperative but intact; backup files from the main computer; even the recipe for making more vathystagma. She realized that with enough time, perseverance and caution she could re-establish the project, in any form she desired.

While she rummaged through the appurtenances, Thoan entered. "What has happened to the master?"

Suddenly sure of herself, she answered: "He is dead. I am the master now."

Half to her surprise, he accepted immediately. "What is your wish?"

She thought for a moment. Go back to her personal past to see the team again ... and maybe retrieve all the knowledge of the project? Visit Allaghu / Payvand at a point some years back? Find the remains of Alexander the Great, or meet him in person? Unmask Jack the Ripper? Decipher the Indus script? Talk to the builders of Stonehenge to find out what they really had built it for? The possibilities were endless.

"I will think of something."