

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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MASKS OF THE MUD GOD

by Greg Kurzawa

Miriam fashioned the inner lining of her mask from a single piece of cured and softened pigskin. Pressing the soaked leather over a plaster gauze mold of her face, she cut it to shape with a pair of shears, and with a naked razor carved holes for the mouth, nose, and eyes.

She baked it only long enough to fix its shape without sacrificing flexibility, then conditioned the inside with neatsfoot oil, so it would remain kind to her skin, and supple. She mixed her own plaster with clay, sand, and water, which she smeared over the mask's exterior. She sculpted cheekbones, nose, and chin not from memory but from imagination and desire. With a sliver of wood and meticulous care, she pressed detailed texture into the lips and drew the finest lines around the mouth to suggest kind and frequent smiles. When the plaster dried, she brushed it with the softest hues of pink and red paint. It was a pure face, a face with only a few innocent secrets, if any at all. It was the face of a woman with freedom, contentment, and children who brought her joy—all the things Miriam lacked.

Holding the mask in place with one hand, Miriam presented herself to the full-length mirror in her private suite of rooms on the third floor of her father's manor. Turning slightly to reveal the full weight of her pregnancy, she cradled her swollen belly. There in the mirror was the woman she wished to be. As if in reaction to the image, or to Miriam's pride, the life in her belly kicked and turned. Behind the mask, Miriam smiled.

She almost looked human.

* * *

Miriam's sisters mocked her when she appeared masked in her father's opulent dining room. Brazen Sarai, Miriam's mother and half-sister—and the worst of them—groaned. Abigail revealed a toothsome smile, pleased to be provided an object of easy ridicule in the comfort of their own home. Only meek Ruth, after one look at Miriam, lowered her own eyes, as if to make herself invisible by shutting the rest of them out.

“Don't you look *divine*,” Sarai chortled.

Ignoring their leers, Miriam remained standing—head bowed—behind her chair, both hands on its high, straight back. Her father was already seated at the end of the long table, and it would not do to be seated before his invitation. Elbows resting on the table, thick fingers laced as though in prayer, Miriam's father considered her with dark, hooded eyes.

Momentarily, he uttered a soft grunt, silencing the cackling of his daughter-wives.

“And who is this,” he said to Miriam, “who comes disguised to my table?”

Miriam spoke softly. “It is Miriam, Father.”

“Ah,” he said, brows lifting in bored revelation. “My own child Miriam. Please, Miriam, do sit.”

Murmuring her gratitude with downcast eyes, Miriam slipped into her chair. She’d thought the mask would protect her from her family’s ridicule, a barrier between them and her. But now, under the quiet smirks of the sisters and the disapproving scrutiny of her father, she felt crushed, and fixed her eyes on her plate. The first dish of the evening had yet to be served, and all the dainty vine- and rose-painted dishes remained empty.

“Have you nothing to say?” her father asked. And when she didn’t answer, “Miriam?”

“No, Father.”

“Who encouraged this... charade?”

“No one.”

“Your friends? Your tutors?”

“No, Father.”

Further questioning was interrupted when the door to the kitchen opened and the servants filed in with platters of fruit

and thinly sliced meat, thick wedges of melon, and loaves of bread still warm from the oven. The family remained silent while the servants poured pale red wine into crystal glasses. When the course had been laid, the servants—all of them human—quit the room without a word spoken. Unless essential to their duties, their tongues had been removed.

“What compelled you to... *this*?” her father asked.

Miriam risked a glance at him—but quickly averted her eyes. His previous disappointment had given way to open disgust. But this was the question to which Miriam knew the answer, the *why* of it. This was the question she had prepared for. Even so, she had to force her mouth open, force her leaden tongue to unstick.

“We should be different,” she said.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the shape of her father lean forward. “What?” he said.

Miriam realized she’d barely spoken above a whisper. Determined to persevere, she looked up, but not at her father, nor at any of the sisters, which would have felt too much like begging their protection. And she knew better than to expect that. She looked past Sarai, who sat directly across from her, and set her eyes on the dark wood paneling of the dining room.

“We should be different,” she repeated in a voice she hoped was a little stronger now.

“Different from *who*?” her father asked, a dangerous edge to his voice.

“From all of this,” Miriam said. Her hand moved in her lap but dared not rise to perform the sweeping gesture that would include her father and the sisters. “From the way we are.”

“From all of this,” her father repeated. “And what is ‘all of this—’” he brandished his own arm to encompass the entirety of the room, the house, the sisters, “—to warrant your displeasure? What are *we*, that you despise us? That you wish to set yourself apart?”

Sweat crept beneath the lace of Miriam’s high, tight collar. Her skin itched behind the mask. She gathered herself for her response, perhaps even to look him in the eye, when his hand struck the table, rattling the candlesticks and bouncing the laden platters. His own fragile wineglass toppled, a red stain bleeding across the pristine tablecloth. One of the sisters—Miriam didn’t know which—gave a startled yelp.

The door to the kitchen opened tentatively, but Miriam’s father snarled at the emerging servant. “Out! Leave it.” He righted his wineglass himself, tossing a napkin over the spill. “Now,” he said, his wrath clenched behind sharp teeth. “Miriam. Speak.”

“We should be more like them,” Miriam said quickly.

“More like *them*,” her father echoed. “Humans?”

“Like humans. Yes.”

“You mean weak,” he said. “Subjugated. Or do you mean on the verge of extinction? How should *we*, who have conquered, be more—”

“They don’t eat their children,” Miriam said. She hadn’t meant to say it with such vehemence, but the clarity of her statement silenced her father. At last Miriam raised her eyes. Only Ruth, also pregnant, did not visibly loathe her. But there was no help to be found in Ruth. Barely more than a child herself, Ruth kept her eyes averted as though ashamed.

Before her father could react, Miriam continued. “They don’t eat their old ones, or their sick. They care for their wounded. They write books, and they *make* things. What books have you written? What have you made?”

Miriam’s father was both nodding and shaking his head at once. How tedious were his foolish daughter’s arguments, and how ready he was to dismiss everything she said before she had finished speaking. So near to being disregarded, Miriam blurted her final judgement hastily, before he could silence her.

She said, “They’re better than us.”

Miriam’s father leveled a dark-nailed finger at her. His voice tightened with the effort of control. “Let me tell you, *Miriam*,” he said. “Civilization depends on what we are. The order of our lives—our prosperity—*demand*s we be as we are.

Here we have our place, carved by *these* hands—” he showed them to her, twisted like claws.

“We stole their language,” Miriam said. “We stole their names. We live in homes they—”

“The things I’ve done—that I’ve *endured*—so that we may prosper—so that we may *eat*—are more than you know. But you. You sit at *my* table, eat *my* food—” He scooped a sopping handful of chopped fruit and cast it negligently at her. Miriam flinched when the bits struck her mask and the front of her dress, but she dared not move to brush them away.

“There you sit in your fine dress, bought and paid for by my strength.” He pushed himself to his feet and leaned forward, palms flat on the table. “If I were a weaker man you would have nothing. You would *be* nothing. It is by my strength that you exist. And you *dare* tell me I should be something other than what I am?”

Miriam bent her head, too terrified to move.

“Take it off,” her father said.

Miriam’s impulse was to obey at once, to rip the mask away and cast it into the fire, anywhere to get it far away from her. She would beg for mercy. The sisters would jeer and mock. She would be humbled, but she would be forgiven. Instead, she tightened her hands in her lap, and said, “No.”

Miriam half-rose from her chair as her father came around the table, sure that he would kill her—that he would break her neck with his own hands—that he would open her throat with his teeth and her belly with his nails, ripping his own child from her womb. Such things were not beyond him. But he seized the back of her neck in a rock-hard grasp and shoved her back down. Digging a handful of meat from the full platter, he dropped it on her plate, and with his fingers around her neck, forced her mask into it, though she turned to gasp for air.

“Eat,” he snarled in her ear. “*Live*. But never forget whose hand it is that feeds you, or what it is you eat.”

* * *

Alone in her suite, Miriam sat at the edge of her bed, facing the window. She suspected her father would soon regret the mercy he had afforded her, and would come to kill her. The child in her womb was not irreplaceable, and he had other daughters—less willful daughters—to increase his brood. The view from her high window was of the tiled rooftops of the city. Though unable to see the wide, polluted flow of the river dividing the northern boroughs from the southern, she could see the high towers of the nearest bridge, called Solitude. The lights of the towers along the wide span had been lit, though it was not yet full dark, and it was these she studied.

If her father did not come himself, he would send the sisters. If not now, then later, while she slept. She dared not lock her door—locked doors only enraged her father, and it would do nothing to stop them in the end. They would strangle her, devour her and the child, then never speak of her again. It would be as though she never existed.

Believing these things, the timid knock at the door startled her. “Come,” she said, without rising.

Keila, her very own petite, white-skinned human maidservant, entered bearing a small platter of cold meat and vegetables. Miriam sighed and turned back to the lights of Solitude. She would no more touch her father’s food. “I’m not hungry,” she lied.

“You must eat, Mistress,” Keila said. Closing the door behind her, the diminutive handmaid set out the plate on Miriam’s *escritoire*. After neatly arranging silverware and napkin, she poured a tumbler of fresh water from a porcelain pitcher. She surveyed the arrangement, and finding it acceptable, pulled out the fragile chair in invitation.

“Mistress,” she said, when Miriam still did not come.

“The fifth of the great bridges spanning the Bittern is called Solitude,” Miriam recited from memory. “Joining Lowe Chapel borough on the south bank, to Mudside—a predominantly human slum—on the north, it was built in the

year 582 with carved granite blocks shipped in by barge from the quarries to the west, and with marble.” She turned her head to look at Keila, as though expecting to be challenged.

Keila only nodded.

“Although all the great bridges are marvels,” Miriam continued. “It is Solitude which gives my people most pride. Because it is the longest, and the most beautiful.”

“All true, Mistress.”

“Truths disguising the worst of lies. Who built Solitude, Keila?”

“I do not remember the name of—”

“Who built any of the bridges? All of them. Who built this manor my father takes such pride in?”

“Mistress, I don’t—”

“Human or Raah?”

“Raah, of course.”

Miriam speared her with a glance. “*Of course*,” she said bitterly. It was no wonder the girl had been permitted to keep her tongue.

“You must eat, Mistress,” Keila said. “Think of the child.”

Miriam scoffed. “The child! As though my people need another monster.”

The maid’s face softened, and she left her place by the vacant chair to sit beside Miriam on the bed, very close. She

took Miriam's hand in her own and squeezed kindly. "You are not responsible for the actions of your people. And you are not to blame for what you are. Does the wolf pity the lamb?"

"No," Miriam answered. She rubbed her thumb along the back of the girl's hand, feeling the unblemished texture of it. "The wolf has no pity."

The girl leaned closer, her voice dropping. "Does the snake —"

"Stop," Miriam said. She squeezed the girl's hand hard, and took satisfaction at causing her to catch her breath. "I won't have you preach to me. How can you do... this—" she looked around the room "—while your people suffer?"

"You're hurting me," Keila breathed.

Miriam released her instantly, and Keila withdrew her hand. "I know my duty, Mistress," she said, somewhat cowed. "I know what I am, and I know that nothing stays the same... not forever." She put her palm to Miriam's cheek and brought her face back around. She lifted both hands to the mask, her small fingers prying beneath the edges where they snugged against Miriam's temples.

"Don't," Miriam said, pulling away.

But Keila persisted, and Miriam allowed her to pull the mask away. The skin of her face tingled at the touch of air, and she breathed deeply, watching as her maid laid the mask aside.

“There,” Keila said with quiet satisfaction. She smiled as she brushed her fingers over Miriam’s bare cheek. “Be what you are.” The girl’s fingers moved caress the iridescent scales along the line of Miriam’s jaw. “For a little while longer... be what you are.”

Miriam took her maid’s hand and held it still. “I’ll not have his child,” she said.

“You don’t have to.” It was barely a whisper.

“You’ll help me? You said that you would, that you knew how.”

Keila closed her eyes. “I do.”

“Keila,” Miriam pressed. “You’ll help?”

“I will.”

* * *

Keila fulfilled her promise the very next night.

Miriam lowered herself into the straight-backed chair by the windows to watch her maidservant turn down the bed. The interminable weight of her pregnancy exhausted her. The creature folded inside her womb pressed and shifted, testing the bounds of its confinement. It seemed discontented to her, frustrated with its own slow growth and the insufficiency of its ever-tightening space. It would come soon, her father’s physician had said, a matter of weeks.

Bed prepared, Keila moved to the *escritoire*, where she produced from her apron pocket a diminutive amber bottle, stoppered with a wax cork. This she set beside the glass, which she filled from the pitcher. Miriam stopped watching, concentrated instead on her swollen stomach, where the unborn child rolled and flexed as it moved from one dream to the identical next.

Keila crossed the room to Miriam's chair and stood before her, glass in hand. Miriam accepted it but did not yet drink, regarding it instead as though she could not remember what was to be done with it.

"I brought our book, Mistress," Keila said. Withdrawing a tidy but well-worn volume from the pocket of her apron, she sat on the bed, book in her lap. "Shall I read for you?"

Miriam demanded the book with an outstretched hand, a human book—the only kind she'd ever seen. She let it fall open on her lap, its broken spine dictating the place, displaying a mass of words, no less incomprehensible for their orderliness. She turned pages, pretending to scan the words for something of interest. Human text, human stories. All of it incomprehensible. She had never learned to read it—had never tried, and did not know if she could. She flipped pages until at last finding what looked like the beginning of a new tale.

“This one,” she said, and relinquished the book to her maid.

Swimming alone among the pillars of the world in the bottomless sea, the Bahamut created for himself a son. To this son, he gave the hands and feet from his own body, the eyes and ears from his own head, but his flesh was taken from the mud clinging to the roots of the world. He spit in his son’s eyes, and blew in his face, and said to him, “All the world will be yours if you go up and bring me a bride.”

So the son of the Bahamut left the waters of the bottomless sea to do his father’s bidding. But upon dry land he met only with wild beasts, and found none that was a suitable bride for his father. Despairing not, he resolved to raise the serpents above other beasts.

And so he hid himself in a pool of water until a large viper came to drink. Afterward, the viper vomited out its guts and died, and out of the guts came a tiny snake, which grew large very fast. And in three days it was full grown, and it went among the other snakes and said to them, “My father the Bahamut seeks a bride from among you serpents. This honor is more than you deserve, and you are ill-suited for it, but I will prepare you. Such a task will not be easy, but if you do as I say there can be a little hope.”

The snakes were very hard to teach. They were cruel to one another, and they ate the flesh of their own kind, even though the world was full of birds and mice and apes to eat. But the son of Bahamut showed them how to walk upright, and how to speak. He taught them many things, and gave them many rules, but they failed at all of them. Until at last the son of Bahamut despaired of their ever becoming more than what they already were.

But the snakes begged him not to abandon hope. And so the son of the Bahamut said, “There is one rule upon which all others hinge. You must never eat the flesh of your own kind. You may eat the fruit of the trees and the grain of the field. You may eat the animals: the fish and the birds. All of these things are for your pleasure. You may even eat the apes. But from this day forward you must refrain from eating the flesh of your own kind. If you continue to do so, you will never be more than beasts.”

The snakes knew they could not do this. Instead, they decided that if they could not *act* as the son of the Bahamut demanded of them, they could at least *look* like him, which might soften his heart, and help him to forgive their failures. So they walked upright, and they spoke like him, and they covered their nakedness, and they learned. They did learn a little.

“But not enough?” Miriam interrupted.

Keila looked up, her eyes distant. Soon, she shook her head. “Not enough,” she agreed.

The snakes made masks so that their faces would look like his, and they wore them so long they forgot that beneath them they were still snakes.

They had fooled themselves, but not the son of the Bahamut, for he saw that despite their fine masks and their pretty speech, they still ate the flesh of their own kind. He said to them, “I have told you what you must do, and you have failed again, as I suspected you would. You are abhorrent to me, and now I am leaving you so that you might practice what I have taught. If I find that you have learned when I return, then I will choose one from among you to be the bride of my father the Bahamut, whose eternal body floats among the pillars of the world in the bottomless sea. If you have not, then I will strip your masks away and leave you as I found you.”

“Why do you stop?” Miriam asked.

Keila turned the page, then back again. She did not look up.

“Read.”

The snakes were enraged, and they would not allow themselves to be abandoned. They fell upon the son of the

Bahamut and tore him into a thousand pieces, which they consumed. And when the blood that had been spilt return to the Bahamut, he was well pleased, for he knew the snakes belonged to him after all.

Keila shut the book, smoothing the hair from her face as she turned to the window.

“This Bahamut,” Miriam said. “The one eaten by snakes—he is the same as your god?”

Keila ran her hand over the book’s thin cover. “You think the snakes were evil to do what they did, but you’re wrong. They were more clever than you think. It was the only way they could keep him. They carried him with them always after that—in their bones, and in their blood. As do their children, and their children’s children.”

“But he was never seen again? He did not keep his promise?”

“We still wait, Mistress. He will return.”

“To do what?”

“To save us from you, and you from yourselves.”

Miriam doubted that. Even so, she felt a pang of jealousy for the humans, and not for the first time. But a people must have a history before they have a god, and not a stolen one. She raised her glass to drink, but Keila quickly leaned forward to stop her. “Are you sure, Mistress?”

“Does your god accept sacrifice, Keila?”

Keila opened her mouth to answer, but said nothing. Her hand tightened on Miriam’s wrist, and in the end she pressed her lips together. Whether that meant she had no answer, or that she refused to give it, Miriam did not know. Who, after all, can speak for a god?

“Let this be a sacrifice to him. And let him save me, if he can.”

Miriam drained her glass, and the life inside her turned and turned, dreaming.

* * *

Miriam lay still as her father’s physician moved his stethoscope over the bared flesh of her distended belly, hunting for what she knew could no longer be found. She watched his face, his eyes turned inward, as though in keeping them distant he could better hear what he sought. The stethoscope moved from the rounded crest of her belly down the side, and he paused there, head tilted. Miriam held her breath.

“Has there been blood?” he inquired.

“No.”

Brows furrowed, he moved elsewhere, down low, pressing the smooth instrument painfully deep in what she sensed to be a quiet but building frustration. At last, he let out his breath and pulled the instrument from his ears. He sat very still,

watching Miriam's belly a long while before moving his pale blue eyes to her face.

Before he could speak, Miriam snatched his hand, squeezing in earnest. "He'll kill me," she said.

The physician's eyes softened.

"I've lost two already, and he won't give me another chance. He'll kill me."

"Has there been blood?" he asked again.

"Yes."

Her father's physician opened his hands, a helpless gesture. "There is nothing that can be done."

"Don't tell him," Miriam said.

The physician tried to turn away, but Miriam tightened her grip on his hand. "Three weeks," Miriam said. "The baby will come in three weeks, as you said."

"Stillborn."

"But I will have three weeks," Miriam pressed. "If you tell him now... please." She moved his hand to her belly, as though urging him to feel what wasn't there. Holding his hand in place, she took the diaphragm of his stethoscope and slid it under their hands. "Listen again. Please."

The physician hesitated. His eyes remained on hers as Miriam moved the diaphragm lower on her belly. She smiled for him, nodded. "All is well," she whispered. She held his grim

expression with her forced smile, and continued to nod, urging him to agree. “All is well...”

Leaving his hand on her belly, the physician turned his gaze away from her and out the window. At last, he pulled his hand from hers. He would not look at her as he packed his satchel.

“Rest,” he instructed her. “No birth is easy.”

When he had gone, Miriam sat at the edge of the bed, her loose white gown hiding her swollen belly and trembling arms. She heard the physician’s voice in the corridor outside her room, and the deeper voice of her father. The voices faded, their footsteps receding. When she was sure her father was gone, and not coming back, she covered her masked face and wept.

* * *

Her father’s physician had not been gone long when Keila’s soft knock sounded. Miriam, weakened by her loss of blood, sat up with some difficulty even as her maidservant opened the door and slipped inside. Keila, closing it behind her, stood by the door, hands pressed to her apron.

“Mistress?”

“Dead,” Miriam said.

Saying it wrenched something in her, and she shut her eyes against a slow wave of dull pain. Keila was at her side, arms around her.

“I don’t care,” Miriam said. “I didn’t want it. I never wanted it.”

Keila pressed her down into the mattress, then carefully lifted her feet off the floor and to the bed. She smoothed her hair back, and felt her cheek. “Is there pain?”

“No,” Miriam said. But there had been. There had been terrible pain. She had bit down on a twisted sheet as her insides knotted, as the thing in her lurched and fought to live, flexing in the throes of their shared agony. It had gone on far too long, and she remembered thinking that either it must die soon, or she would. Then the blood came, as though a floodgate had been opened, soaking her thighs, soaking the sheets and towels and spreading across the white tiles of her lavatory floor. She’d slipped in it trying to lift herself into the tub, her bare feet slick and red. Too weak to rise again, she had remained on the floor, sobbing against the tiles as her gut clenched with a final spasm. After that the thing had fallen still, and not moved again.

Keila sat next to Miriam on the bed, and Miriam twisted to rest her head in the maid’s soft lap. With light fingers, Keila

smoothed back Miriam's hair. And as she did so, she whispered prayers to her god, and Miriam calmed.

"My people have no god," Miriam said after a time. "There is no one to forgive me."

"You have a god," Keila whispered. "He is the same as mine. He belongs to us all. And we belong to him. You'll see."

"How? When?"

"He hears our prayers. He listens," the maid said. "Soon... ."

Miriam let her maid's soft touch and gentle supplications lull her to sleep.

* * *

Miriam woke to the sound of retching from the lavatory. Swinging her legs out of bed, she raked the hair from her face and listened. It could only be Keila, but the maid had not seemed ill mere hours ago, and the urgency of the sound concerned her.

"Keila?" she called, crossing the room. Through the crack in the door Miriam could see nothing but a stretch of white tile and one clawed foot of the tub. She pushed on the door. "Keila?"

The girl knelt at the tub, leaning into it. Her hands clenched the rim, and her fine hair hung in lank strands, concealing her profile. The tiles beneath her were smeared with

black muck, as though she had been tramping barefoot through the swamps. The girl raised her head, and Miriam recoiled with a gasp. Black tears streaked her cheeks, running from eyes plugged with sticky black mud. The thick stuff smeared her face and coated her chin. Her mouth fixed in a grimace, showing blackened teeth and tongue. She tried to speak but gagged, then leaned into the tub and retched again, bringing up gobs of dark bile. The sides of the tub were spattered; the drain had clogged with it.

Miriam rushed to her side but feared to touch her without knowing how to help. Instead she turned the taps, releasing a torrent of water from the spigot. Her instinct was to wash it away, to flush the grisly evidence as though it were shameful. She dragged towels from the rack and knelt beside the suffering girl even as Keila started a helpless keening. Miriam tried to wipe the muck from her face, but the girl pushed her away even as she heaved, bringing up more of the black bile.

“What did you do?” Miriam cried. “What happened?”

Keila heaved, unable to catch her breath. Where her nails clutched the rim of the tub, they bled black. The gasping, the panting, Miriam remembered her first child, the stillborn infant she had birthed in this very room, and she knew Keila’s suffering was the same. Miriam looked down—the girl’s knees on the smeared tiles, her thighs slick with blackness.

“I’m getting help,” Miriam declared.

But before she could rise, Keila seized her arm. “No!” she cried.

Miriam could not free herself from the girl’s grasp. Keila grimaced in pain, her mouth a black-painted grin. But also there was a fevered satisfaction—a wild pride at what was taking place.

“—asked for this—” she said in a sticky voice. “—*want* this.”

“Keila...”

The girl’s mouth worked, as though trying to dislodge something caught in her throat. Her body clenched, and her back arched. She heaved again, emptying herself into the tub. “Bahamut,” she gasped. “Bahamut!”

Miriam dug her nails into Keila’s hand in an effort to peel off the girl’s grip, but the skin split under the pressure, opening a long, bloodless tear from the back of her hand to just beneath her elbow. With a cry of revulsion, Miriam wrenched free and fled the room.

She hadn’t yet reached the outer door when she heard her name called from the lavatory, but not in Keila’s voice.

“Miriam!” it called—deeper than Keila’s, guttural and malformed. There came a soft ripping, and Keila’s voice reemerged, picking up a relentless string of rapid prayers

strung tight with heightening panic. And even as Keila's litany spilled out, that other voice slid over and through them, speaking the same words, becoming inside them. A soft rip and a sharp gasp, and Keila's crying voice subsided to nothing, and only the man spoke. The prayers were ended.

He said, "Stay, Miriam."

And Miriam stayed.

She listened to the gentle, sticky sounds of wet clothes being removed and of feet in mud. When the curtain was drawn aside, a naked human male stood at the threshold of the lavatory. Dark streaks of drying mud covered his pale skin, as though he had emerged from the swamp and tried to clean himself with only his hands. Other than his eyes, which were the greenest she had ever seen, Miriam barely noted his face, plain but strangely familiar. He started towards her, but Miriam halted him with an outstretched palm. "Where is Keila?"

"Keila is here," the human said.

Miriam called toward the lavatory for her maid.

"Not *there*," the man said. "*Here*."

"Keila!" Miriam called again.

Caught up in a surge of fury, she rushed to her wardrobe, flung open a drawer, and withdrew the small paring knife she

had kept in reserve for the day of her child's birth. Advancing three steps, she held the knife pointed at his chest.

"Do not move," she commanded him.

Keeping the knife fixed on him, Miriam moved to the lavatory curtain and drew it aside with her free hand. White tiles smeared with black, heaviest where Keila had knelt at the tub. Streaks of it stained the rim where the girl had clutched it in her suffering. Within, masses of thick black mud. And mixed into the slop, the twisted shape of a pale sheet. Miriam turned from the lavatory to face the human, who watched her, but—obediently—had not moved.

"What did you do?" Miriam demanded. "Where is she?"

"Don't you recognize me, Miriam?"

Miriam took a step closer, knife raised in a steady threat. "No," she lied, though she could see it in the shape of his mouth and the line of his nose. She could see it in his eyes.

The human gave a kind smile. "Why do you wear a mask, Miriam?"

Lowering the knife, Miriam touched her mask with a trembling hand.

"It is well made, but doesn't suit you," he said. He lifted a hand slowly, as though to prevent startling a timid animal. When Miriam didn't flinch away, he touched the cheek of her

mask with only the tips of his fingers. “The face you hide is more honest than this, and more beautiful.”

Miriam ran her fingers over the stitching of the mask, remembering Keila’s words to her.

Be what you are.

“Be what you are,” the human agreed.

“And if what I am is a liar and a thief?”

“We are all of us liars and thieves.”

Miriam narrowed her eyes. “Why are you here? What do you want?”

“Your child is dead,” the human said. He moved to place a hand on her swollen belly, but Miriam brought the paring knife up again, this time not so far as his chest. She pressed the point to his gut to keep him at bay.

“Human gods have no power here. You have no authority over me.”

The human cocked his head. “*Human* god? You believe you are the only one who fashions masks?” He grinned for her, and his cruel smile revealed a mouthful of thorns.

Miriam shied from him, but he took her wrist and twisted until she dropped the knife.

“What do I seem to you? Human?”

“No.”

“Raah?”

Miriam shook her head.

“Would you witness what I am beneath this mask? And beneath the next?”

“No,” Miriam said, closing her eyes. “Please, no.”

“I come for my son, whom you gave to me,” the Bahamut said.

Miriam did not realize she was withdrawing from the god until her back met the closed door. By then, he loomed in front of her, one hand on her wrist, the other pressed to her belly, and the infant corpse floating within.

My son.

“No,” Miriam said.

The Bahamut leaned close. “Why deny me now? Is it too great a burden, surrendering to me what you have already given in sacrifice?”

“Yes,” Miriam whispered, but she hid her face from him as she said it. He released her wrist to brush her cheek, to cup her chin and raise her face to look into his cold green eyes. The hand that pressed her womb went deep, and deeper still.

Miriam gasped, and the thing inside her fluttered, then kicked.

She would have collapsed had the god not tightened his grip on her face to hold her tight against the wall. He lowered his cheek to hers, his mouthful of thorns brushing her ear.

Though she could not look down, she felt his hand deep inside her.

“I take only what is mine,” he said. “And I am not cruel. I will not leave you with nothing.”

* * *

Miriam lay on her bed, arms hugging her belly. The weight of the child was gone, but something remained. She was not empty. For a time she wept, but she could not have said if for sadness or relief. She slept without meaning to, and rose when she awoke, drowsy and slow, to take up a candle.

The lavatory was dark and silent. The tiles chilled her bare feet, and the mud that had come so violently and in such great amounts from Keila had dried in clotted smears on the floor and on the sides of the tub. But inside, the black mess remained, and she raised her candle to better see. She studied it a long while before reaching in to tug free the coiled sheet. It came away from the mud, and though she knew by then what it was, still gave an anguished cry. Keila's skin, empty of content, lax and twisted, a parody of the girl's shape, slapped wetly where Miriam dropped it. A shapeless mouth and empty holes where her eyes had been gaped up at Miriam.

She wrapped the skin—still slick with mud—in a sheet from her own bed and buried it that morning in the garden.

* * *

Miriam lay on her back, knees drawn up and spread wide. Around her, the midwives tended to the blood and the agony. When it emerged at last in a gush of brine and the gasps of the midwives, Miriam cried out and was already reaching.

“Give it to me!” she snarled before the baffled midwives had found anything worth swaddling. “Give me my child.”

But there was no sharp cry, no newborn wail. Miriam hunted the muddy tangle of sheets between her splayed knees but found only the twisted rag of skin that the Bahamut had left of her child.

* * *

The midwives could not keep her father from the room, nor did they much try. They barely managed to cover her legs and waist before he shoved through them to rip away the sheets. Miriam turned her face so she would not have to see his face as he witnessed the disaster.

“Where is it?” he demanded. “Show it to me.”

The voice of the physician, subdued. “There is no child, Lord.”

“Stillborn?”

“No...”

“Then show me the child!”

They showed him all there was.

In the quiet moment which followed, Miriam thought that he had gone—that after witnessing the muddy sheets and the empty rag of flesh, that he had simply departed in disgust. But then he had a fistful of her hair and was dragging her from the bed to send her sprawling on the floor. With one hand in her hair and another at her neck, he bent over her cringing form.

“You were my *favorite*,” he snarled in her ear. “It was you I loved the *most*.” But his words were hot with wrath, and his sharpened nails bit into her neck. He lifted her slightly, only to crush her back to the floor again. “*Where* is my *child*?”

Miriam spat back at him. “He is not your son.”

The Lord of the Manor moved his hand from throat to jaw. His nails sunk into her cheeks, and he twisted her face towards the window. Pressing his own cheek to hers, they witnessed the bright stars together. “Look to the sky,” he commanded her. She could do nothing else. “The sun is coming, and coming soon, daughter. But if you do not give me my child I swear you will not see another day.” His voice lowered to impart a secret for the two of them only. “Your sisters, your pretty maid, the servants and the physician—all here now will glut my dogs if you hide him from me.”

And even as the sky blushed with dawn, a vast shape descended to press against the window, and mud seeped in around the panes.

“He is here,” Miriam said. “He is here now.”

She shut her eyes tight just before the window burst inward, giving way to bulging scales and a mud-thick cascade. Her father was torn from her with sudden violence, leaving Miriam to fall wrist deep into the wash. She did not open her eyes when the tramp of people rushing to escape sounded all around her, nor even when the screaming began—a crescendo cut short as living mud clutched at thrashing bodies, dragging them into itself to fill their eyes and pack their lungs with muck. Their suffering was mercifully brief.

In the new silence, Miriam opened her eyes.

The Bahamut gathered himself before her, a writhing column of old flesh and new slime. Rapidly he assumed familiar shapes: arms and legs, a head, until he stood complete before her, neither human nor Raah but something shamelessly new. Dark skin slick and steaming, he smiled down on her with feverish pride.

“None will harm you again,” he said tenderly.

Through the window behind him, Miriam saw the rising sun burning blood-red.

“The time of Man is long passed, and the time of Raah is passing quickly. It is *our* time now. My mother. My bride.”

And Miriam saw the promise and the truth reflected in the wild purity of his vibrant green eyes.

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Greg Kurzawa studied theology at a small university in east Texas before taking a career in information technology. He is the author of the bleak fantasy novel Gideon's Wall, which he self-published in 2006 to learn the process. Since then, his short fiction has appeared in various print and online venues, including previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and he has completed his second novel, The Sickness of Silas Traitor, for which he is seeking representation. Greg has two kinds of favorite stories: tragic ones, and ones that don't give up their secrets without a fight. He currently lives in Omaha with his wife and three children.

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THE MARVELOUS INVENTIONS OF MR.

TOCK

by Daniel Baker

On Wednesday, a girl walked into the south-eastern station of the Ith Tol City Watch and exploded. This was odd. Passing strange. Weird, even. This had not, even in Ith Tol, been known to be something children did. Certainly some walking had been noted, even remarked upon, but combustion was a new and not altogether adorable turn of events. People died. They were watchmen (and women), granted, but people all the same. In certain circles, and these were predominantly dark, hidden, lofty, whispered circles, questions were asked.

Q: What happened *this* time?

A: A girl exploded in a Watch station, my lord.

Q: You don't say?

A: I'm afraid so, sir.

Q: Was it those Unionists?

A: Unclear at this point, sir.

Q: Was anybody hurt?

A: Nobody that you knew, sir.

Q: Thank the Light for that.

A: Indeed, sir.

Q: What are we doing about it?

A: You have requested the local magistrate take the matter in hand, sir.

Q: Did I now? Yes, yes, that does sound like something I would say. And what is, ah...

A: He, sir.

Q: And what is he doing about it?

A: I believe he's commissioned a case, sir.

Q: A case?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: A case. Yes. Well, of course. A case. Naturally. What's a case?

Undoubtedly, it went something like this, and Justice Samuel Latch was handed the case. He'd never had a case quite like this because Justices weren't really given cases—they were given names by their magistrate, who, in his or her not insignificant (but certainly not infinite... at least, not in Latch's experience) wisdom, decided where and how justice was to be meted out. Monday and Tuesday had been something of a blur for Latch, and now Wednesday was shaping up to be a real inconvenience.

* * *

Wednesday.

Latch stared at an ear and sipped his coffee. He grimaced. It was burnt. The coffee, and the ear, and together they weren't doing much to brighten his mood. Standing amongst the rubble of the Watch Station, Latch tried to imagine what it had looked like before. He couldn't. Not really. Not ever having set foot inside the building. He pictured stout wooden beams, squat brick walls, cheap desks with cheaper chairs tucked beneath them, men and women arriving for the day shift, leaving for home after night shifts, both camps blinking at the clock, wishing it wasn't the time that it was. A blasted clock face read 7:43am. It all checked out. Everything, but the ear. That wasn't standard issue.

“Latch?”

“Hmm?”

“You were... chuckling.” A note of warning there, determined to make itself heard. Sunlight, in dribbles through cotton clouds and chilly air. Latch turned to his partner and frowned at her frowning at him. “Might want to chuck that.”

Around them, some of the locals were picking through the wreckage, identifying the dead while traffic backed up down the street. Others gawped, half-eaten pieces of toast and bowls of porridge in their hands, the blast having wrenched them from breakfast. A few of those were staring at him and the stares weren't altogether convivial, more like suspicious and

bristly. He couldn't really blame them. Nobody liked being interrupted during breakfast. He certainly didn't.

"Latch? You're doing it again."

He threw away his coffee. "Just a joke, Elles."

Sergeant Elles, his Watch liaison, was the sort of woman Latch's father used to call a "Good sort!" and his mother would have labeled "Woman shouldn't flounce about in trousers like that! Men could get ideas!". Latch just called her Elles, Elles just called him Latch, together they called the magistrate a pain in the balls, and got on with the job.

She glanced at him, popped the collar of her coat against the chill. "A joke? After that that shit on Monday. And Tuesday. Thought you were suspended."

She was right. He had been. But he was also the only Justice not currently hip-deep in the city's business. Ironic, given the circumstances. He knelt in front of the ear and studied the curve of the auricle, how the lobe was pink and plump. A perfect child's ear. "On us."

"Punch line?"

"Haven't come to it yet, Elles." Where the ear should've had a head, it sprouted wires. A whole tangled mess of them. The magistrate hadn't mentioned wires. Latch picked it up. "But if you get there first, I'm all fucking ears."

She snorted, toed at the bricks. "You're wrong, Latch."

“Not when I’m right, though.”

She sighed and held out her hand. Latch gave her the ear and wandered a little further into what was left of the building, poking at pieces with his sword. Splatters of blood, and scorch marks. Voices carried over the destruction, calling out names and crying. Watchmen from the northern station kept arriving, formed lines to clear the rubble. Bodies, in rows and covered with sheets.

Elles teased out one of the wires, twisting it about her finger. “You think the magistrate knew about this?”

“I think the magistrate, like an iceberg, enjoys screwing anybody in his path with just the tip.”

“Thanks. That’s an image I’ll never unsee.”

“Sir! I...” A grey-faced watchman stumbled towards them, glazed cast to his eyes, something in his hand held as far away from his body as possible. “Sir, we found... this.”

Held by its blonde hair, a small girl’s head rotated slowly back and forth in the watchman’s hand. Latch and Elles looked at the head, at each other, at the ear, then back to the head. About three or four, and smiling a wide, toothy smile. Half of her face was missing. Where it was missing, a chrome skull gleamed. A tuft of wire, where one of her ears should have been. Every now and then, a bluish spark in her nose and a

lingering hint of burning carpet. The rest looked like flesh and blood.

Latch took the head and held it up eye to eye. “What was that you were saying about unseeing, Elles?”

But Elles was doubled over, vomiting, one arm braced against the rubble, the other outstretched, giving him the finger.

* * *

Thursday.

People didn't like justice. They always wanted it, but nobody really liked it. Latch didn't see this as ironic. More like typical. Typical in a “Yeah, you're nice and all, but what have you done for me lately?” kind of way. And then, if they actually got it, they were cut up about how reactionary, slow, cautious, and ultimately unsatisfactory it was. When the law failed, justice had to be done. An eye for an eye. Why eyes? Probably because justice was meant to be blind, and if you took enough eyes, from enough lawbreakers, it'd be able to see a little better. Not that he had any right to talk.

Sitting in his apartment's solitary armchair, sweat prickling his forehead, Latch stared out the window, at the lights of the city. He'd been dreaming, and the ticking had followed him. In the dream, he was holding her hand, walking towards the station. Her hand was cold, the grip painfully firm.

They paused just before the station's door and looked at one another. He knew what she was going to do. She didn't have any thoughts beyond a tick, tick, tick, tick. She opened the door and stepped inside.

Standing before a tall desk, she was ignored. Nobody stopped to ask her if she was ok, where her parents might be, what she was doing there, or why she was a tick, tick, tick, tick? They didn't pause. Didn't spare a glance. Like she didn't exist. Like she was a hole in the ground they'd learned to avoid. Because they had a job to do and were doing it. She sat down on a bench against the wall, beside a drunk who swore and wavered and fell asleep and bled from a shallow gash above his eye that dripped on the armrest tick, tick, tick, tick. Latch sat down next to her, and she exploded.

Still half-asleep, he'd stumbled about the apartment, rifling drawers, opening the cupboards in his tiny kitchen. Ticking from somewhere. He pressed his ear to the floor. He opened the door and searched the landing. Ticking everywhere. He looked under the bed and in the toilet's cracked cistern, and where he looked the ticking was always and never there. Then he remembered he'd never owned a clock and the tick, tick, tick, tick was just the beating of his heart. Now the apartment was cold and dark and, from five storeys up, the sodium streetlamps were like rows of dying suns. On a small round

table beside the chair, the girl's head stared with him. He'd reattached her ear. Given what she'd been through, it seemed like the least he could do.

* * *

Wednesday.

Three of the eastside courthouse's basement walls held recessed alcoves filled with bodies, their chests laced by an autopsy's Y, blue lips and toe-tags. Solid granite breathed frigid air. The girl had been arranged on the steel table before them, the salvageable pieces positioned anatomically, one bright light leaving her pale and stark. It flickered. The medical examiner, a wheezing young man called Davet, looked over his notes, with an assortment of scalpels and saws and retractors shining on a gurney behind him.

"She was never alive. The skeleton is stainless steel," Davet said, halting breaths between clauses, "and the skin isn't hers."

"That's a lot to take in a single sentence," said Latch. "She was never alive. The skin isn't hers."

Sergeant Elles grinned. "Buy a girl some dinner first, doc."

"Whose skin, then?" asked Latch.

Davet shrugged, carefully placed his notes on the table near one of the girl's fingers. "Underdetermined. Single source, though. And the skill required to attach it to the skeleton

beneath. Then there's the transfusive layer needed to keep the cells..."

Davet had a tendency to lose himself in the details. Cooped up down here, absorbed in the how of corpses—Latch couldn't blame him. Details needed you to be close, close enough to lose focus. So close that a bludgeoned body became ruptured capillaries, deepening bruise patterns, and the onset of rigor mortis. It meant he could give you a precise time and cause of death, but when you couldn't see the human for the murder, some people took that the wrong way.

Sergeant Elles stared at Davet blankly. "Are you telling us there's a little girl out there walking around without her skin?"

"No."

"Thank fuck for that!"

"A woman like yourself, Sergeant, let alone a child, wouldn't survive the flaying."

Before the sergeant could regret something, Latch stepped between them and picked up the head, his fingers brushing a slight indentation under the jaw.

"This mark under the chin. What is it?" he asked.

Davet squinted at the head, then retrieved his notes and flicked through. "A hallmark. Out of production."

Sergeant Elles leant against the wall, careful to avoid the dead feet. "A hallmark?"

“Most common to silver and goldsmiths. Jewelers, too,” replied Davet, turning to the gurney. He picked a magnifying glass and handed it to Latch. “Functionally equivalent to a signature.”

“Looks like one of those artists’ dummies with the articulated joints,” said Latch. It was squatting, knees up to its chin, the narrow bulb of its head canted to the side, considering the large cog held between its hands. “Anybody we know?”

Davet nodded. “According to the assayer’s office, this particular hallmark was used by a little known toymaker. Mr. Tock.”

“You’re joking, right?” Sergeant Elles snatched the notes. “A psycho bomber called Mr. Tock.”

She held out the notes to Latch like they were evidence of the world gone mad, like the name was more ludicrous than a clockwork, explosive girl. It wasn’t the strangest thing he’d heard. A touch pithy, perhaps, but Ith Tol’s university attracted more than its share of clever, and the one thing that clever enjoyed more than doing clever was showing clever.

Davet cleared his throat, Sergeant Elles rolled her eyes and handed the notes back. Smoothing them out against his chest, the young man wheezed contentedly.

“Davet,” said Latch. “You said ‘little known’?”

He looked up. “Yes.”

“What was our Mr. Tock known for?”

“Toys. Figures. Animals.” He looked at the girl’s remains. “Anatomically correct and, primarily, fully functional automata. Very intricate designs. Perfect systems.”

With her skin on, Latch figured, and all her bits unexploded, there’d be nothing to distinguish her from any other living, breathing, blonde-haired girl. Yeah, whoever this Mr. Tock was, he’d taken his time and invested it.

“Seems like he’s moved up in the world,” he said.

“Are we seriously going to search for a guy called Mr. Tock?” groaned Sergeant Elles.

“We seriously are.”

“All Gelb wants is a report to satisfy those from up on high. Broad strokes, Latch. You heard him. I know, because I was in the room with you. Right?”

“Right.” Latch nodded. The magistrate had impressed upon them his desire for brevity. Justices, after all, didn’t investigate. They dispensed. They did what they were told. “But you know how much I’m a stickler with paperwork.”

“Paperwork.” She threw up her hands, and wrenched open the door. “What the fuck is the world coming to?”

Latch moved to follow her.

“Justice?” said Davet, pointing to the girl’s head still Latch’s hands. “The head.”

Latch smiled apologetically. “She’s my only material witness, and I’ve got a few more questions.”

* * *

Tuesday.

When Latch kicks the door in, the painful vibration up his leg feels right. The hinges rip straight out of the pulpy timber. He doesn’t care if the rest of the building hears this or what’s about to happen. Latch wants them to hear. The dead weight of his sword, its thick, blunted edges scored with use, hangs at his side. This feels right, too.

Carver is standing in his kitchen, behind the counter, holding a bowl of boiled potatoes. He stares at Latch, mouth wide, waving a spoon like an admonishing finger. Carver has just come home from the courthouse. Carver isn’t expecting him, because Carver thinks he’s done with justice. Carver is wrong.

“My door!” he says around a mouthful of potato. The kitchen is surprisingly clean. There are a pair of silver candlesticks on the mantelpiece. These are equally clean, which is equally surprising. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Not today,” says Latch, stepping into the apartment. He can smell fresh bleach. “Not to you.”

Carver, reading Latch’s eyes, drops the bowl and takes a step back. “You’ve got nothing on me! I’m a free man.”

A Justice's sword isn't like other swords. It looks like other swords—a hand-and-a-half hilt, spherical pommel, short quillons worked into the two pans of a balance scale, a long blade with a narrow fuller—but possesses important differences: a narrow slot cut out of the blade's last thirty centimeters, to catch an opponent's sword; the blade thicker and heavier than is common; no point, and all its edges are rounded off. These design principles suggest that justice disarms, that justice is not to be swung lightly, and that justice is a blunt yet considerate force. Practically speaking, this tells the wielding Justice that bruises and broken bones are not a choice.

“I was cleared of all...”

When Latch swings his sword into Carver's jaw, the wet crunch of it drops the man to the floor. Blood spatters on the wall. The man gurgles and moans, hauling himself across the room, leaving more blood smeared in a slick trail. Stepping around the counter, Latch presses the end of the blade against the back of Carver's head. The man whimpers.

It might not be justice, but it feels right.

* * *

Thursday.

“It's downstairs, Latch.”

Latch examined a clockwork frog, spring legs articulated, a diamond key hole on its back for winding. Overnight, Sergeant Elles had enlisted a handful of her fellow watchmen and found Mr. Tock's toyshop. It had been locked and shuttered. They'd busted down the door and searched it. Abandoned, but far from empty.

"It?" he asked, replacing the frog on a glass shelf bracketed to the wall, in a frog-shaped hole in the thick layer of dust. The room was dominated by cabinets and display benches, all packed with silver and bronze toys, finely tooled, impeccably worked. Miniscule horses and tigers and swans and dogs stared at him through grimy cataracts. "Sounds ominous."

Elles beckoned from an open trapdoor nestled in a corner. "Like you wouldn't believe."

Beneath the shop, Latch had to fight his way through a forest of dangling limbs. Hundreds of wooden arms and legs hung from the ceiling, fingers and toes low enough to brush Latch's face as he pried his way through like some jungle explorer, all reaching out, grasping for him. Hints of solvent and cedar. Against the wall, beastly maquettes reared in the shadows, their rough, hastily sculpted forms freezing them between inanimate clay and his throat. At the far end of the room, Elles stood with a light—a standard-issue induction lamp, its wound-up charge fading.

On a wooden desk sat a clock. Latch had seen such clocks before, built without a case, the intricacies of their function proudly exposed. Skeleton clocks. In front of this clock, strapped onto a metal chair, was half a man—the left half—focused on the time, dried blood in a pool around him. The clock was ticking softly.

Latch squatted beside the dead man. The flat, cut side of him had been capped in steel and covered with an intaglio of dense script. *1. Wash the bones in a solution of...* “What are we looking at, Elles?”

She blinked, gave her lamp a few cranks. The light bloomed a fraction. “Like I’d know.”

“Okay.” Latch kept reading the instructions, made it through to 6. before deciding there were things he didn’t need to know. The diagrams under the instruction were particularly perfect to forget. Carefully, he stepped over the blood and regarded the clock. “But what does it look like to you?”

“Looks like half a dead guy in front of a clock made from the other half of him!”

The clock’s face plate had been taken from the skull or a flatter section of the hip, the numeric hours and minute lines burnt on; thinly braided hair, coated in resin, for its three hands. The movement’s wheels punched out of the shoulder blade, each with six narrow spokes of shaved down fingers and

toes and ribs, every curve straightened by rasp, lathe, chisel, and sandpaper. Filed teeth formed the serrated grooves of the escapement. Driving this was a large balance wheel of thinly cross-sectioned vertebrae, its oscillating rotation turning the reconstituted spine into an ouroboros. This was regulated by a balance spring of tightly spiraled tendons. Stamped on every single part: an articulated dummy holding a cog.

“Do we have a name for the victim?”

“‘Unfortunate’.”

Latch stood. “Anything more helpful?”

“Not yet.” Elles stepped closer and held the lamp towards the clock. The shadows crept over the man’s body. Footsteps in the shop above caused the hanging arms and legs to sway and clonk together. “I’ve got people on it.”

“He left instructions.”

“Mr. Tock?”

Latch nodded. “As though this was a kit model. Something you can do at home with numbered parts and their numbered steps.”

Elles bent forward, painting new shadows onto the clock, splashing strange, distended silhouettes on the wall behind it. The clock, the body, Latch, and Elles fused in a single, black impression. “With numbered parts and their numbered steps... *and* half a body.”

“And half a body.”

“Wouldn’t want to see what he’d make of the bloody magistrates.”

The light moved over the individual parts. Latch frowned. The time was correct. Set and left to tick in the darkness beneath a toyshop. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was looking over his shoulder, watching him, setting another clock to his movements, adding a minute here, a second there, adjusting the pendulum while he ran about the city. Like a fifth figure in their silhouette.

“So, what does it actually look like?” he asked.

Elles sucked her teeth. “Like the mess we were told not to find.”

* * *

Wednesday.

“We don’t need anything more than a cursory investigation with the semblance of diligence, Justice.”

The chambers of Magistrate Gelb were a pretty solid reflection of who the man thought he was. It was green leather chairs and mahogany shelves, a desk the size and weight of a small elephant, and polished hardwood floorboards softened by pelts. It was a third-floor view from the eastside courthouse, overlooking the river. It was dark, heavy, infused with

sandalwood and peated whiskey. It was trying too hard to be somebody with power.

Standing before the magistrate's desk, Latch picked a spot through the window and stared. "I think, sir, that I..."

The magistrate sat forward. "Resist the temptation, Justice. Just do your job."

Latch kept his expression blank. "I serve justice in all things, sir."

"Incorrect," snapped Gelb. His desk was meticulously ordered: a stack of papers aligned beside two tomes of precedent; decanter of red wine in one corner, a set of scales in the other; and an ornate letter opener. Arrayed beneath all that, carved into the wood itself, stretched a map of the city. "You serve me. Your access to justice is mediated by my remit. You would do well to remember that, as far as you are concerned, *I* am justice."

Standing with her back to the chamber's door, Sergeant Elles cleared her throat. "Sir, I don't think that you can blame the Justice for what happened yesterday."

"When I ask for your opinion, Sergeant, remind me to schedule a lobotomy." The magistrate stared at Latch. "If it wasn't for the current situation, Justice, I'd be considering your execution, over that Carver business,. Not how the system

works. Messy. Very messy. As it stands, however, expediency must overcome propriety.”

Latch blinked. “You were saying something about semblance, sir?”

“Indeed.” The magistrate lifted the top page from his stack of notes and placed it on the desk. “As you’ve no doubt heard, the south-eastern Watch Station was the target of a... criminal action. The city’s current difficulties with the Unionists could easily see this regrettable incident become the catalyst for an untenable situation. The Governor’s Seat desires, in all things, a harmonious existence for its citizens, and a certain alacrity in the exteriority of the law.”

Elles snorted. “In other words, they don’t want to hear about bombings and how they might have fucking happened?”

Latch stared out the window a little harder.

Magistrate Gelb leant back in his chair and crossed his arms. “The sergeant is as succinct as ever. Unofficially, your investigation is to find no further evidence of continuing criminal activity. If it suggests the Unionists were involved, they will be dealt with accordingly. If it suggests the involvement of another party, the Unionists will be dealt with accordingly. There will be no loose ends. There will be no surprises. You will remain firmly sealed in the narrow confines of this envelope. Do I make myself clear?”

Clearly, politics was involved, and Magistrate Gelb was nothing if not a politician. Magistrates, their appointments dispensed by the aristocratic assemblies of the Governor's Seat, were, by nature, equal parts unassumingly cunning and viciously accommodating. It wasn't a matter of bending laws, reconsidering statutes, or ignoring precedent. In the end, it was about instrumentality.

Latch nodded slowly. "The semblance of diligence, sir."

"Sergeant?"

"No messes and don't fuck it up," said Elles.

Gelb smiled tightly. "I could not have put it any better myself."

* * *

Monday.

When Latch opens the door, the officers from the Watch look at him grimly. The Carver apartment is splashed with blood, handprints smeared across the walls and on the countertop in the kitchen, drops in a snaking path around the floor. Two feet stick out around the counter. More blood. People mill in the hallways, voices hushed. Two of the officers are taking notes, walking gingerly through the apartment while they scribble. Three others stand in a loose triangle in front of Carver. The man is sitting, staring through them. He, like the apartment, is covered in blood. None of it his.

“She came at me with a knife,” he says, voice oddly monotone. Like he is reading the words for the first time. Like he’s heard other people say them before and he is trying them out. “There was nothing I could do. She was crazy. It happened so fast.”

Latch walks across the room and around the counter. One of the note-takers, a young woman, fresh, is leaning over the body of Carver’s sister, peering at what’s left of her face. It doesn’t take her long.

She looks up. “Justice? Didn’t know you’d been called in.”

Latch waves this off. “I live here. A few floors up.”

“Oh.” She looks back at the body, scratching her head with a pencil. Uncomfortable with the silence death emits. “Did you know her, sir?”

“We met. Sort of,” says Latch, squatting. She’s on her back, arms and legs splayed, shirt and trousers creased, torn. Blood like a halo around her head. A kitchen knife beside her left hand. Unbloodied. Two bloodied silver candlesticks, on their sides, to either side of her shoulders. Extended jets of spatter. “Once.”

“Oh.”

“She was screaming,” says Carver, still rehearsing his lines. The watchmen around him nod along. They know the script,

too. Who didn't in this city? "I don't know what happened. I was scared. I just grabbed whatever I could and..."

The young officer sighs. "Seems pretty straightforward."

"Why use two candlesticks, then?" asks Latch, almost to himself, gauging how gone the world really is, if it's just him that's crazy.

"Sir?"

There are dents in the floorboards around her head. There's no blood on her knife. There's nothing under her fingernails. Latch stands and traces the drops, the footprints.

"I'm in the kitchen and my sister grabs a knife," he says, throat taut like he's shouting. "She's screaming. I back away, trying to calm her down, out of the kitchen, into the lounge room. She's waving the knife around, stabbing the air. I back into the mantel and reach for something. Anything. A hand closing around the candlestick, I swing. She goes down."

"Sounds about right." The young officer writes as Latch speaks, nodding along. "We see it all the time."

Latch blinks away the scene where Carver is waiting in the kitchen with a candlestick for his sister to come home. Smashes her in the face. Follows her around the apartment as she staggers, confused, terrified, screaming. When she gets to the kitchen, he knocks her to the floor. Straddling her, he lifts the candlestick and brings it down. He repeats this, sometimes

finding face, sometimes finding floor, again and again until the blood makes it slippery. He stands, gets the second candlestick, and starts again.

“Then why all the blood on the walls, the floor?” asks Latch. “Why is she in the kitchen? Why two candlesticks?”

“Are you saying he murdered her, sir? Sir?”

Carver is crying, the watchmen shaking their heads sadly, consolatory hands patting the man’s shoulders. It feels like fever dream. Outside, the neighbors slowly return to their homes. Like Latch, they know what happened, and the separation between what they’ve seen and what’ll be claimed is a jagged crevasse. They stand on one side, the other side seems far away, and the question of what happens when you leap across that bottomless gap is too hard to contemplate. Contained in this apartment, what happened has nothing to do with them, is not their problem, doesn’t touch their day beyond the transmission of a story to their tea merchant and their butcher.

“Probably not.” Latch heads for the door. He can’t be here, can’t listen to Carver anymore, can’t stand to see their brand of justice play out. “Don’t you know a good Justice is deaf, blind, and dumb?”

* * *

Friday.

Every day, hundreds of boats congregated on the calm waters of the River Ith and roped themselves together to form the Floating Market. Rafts built a patchwork quilt of courtyards and walkways, barges linked in loud lines of fruit and vegetables, and swarms of coracles, sloops, barques, tugs, and dinghies tied one deck to the next, selling everything from bronzeware to boiled sweets. At the end of the day, the boats dispersed and the river was given back to reflections of rippling moonlight. And somewhere between this routine, Mr. Tock had had another bout of creativity.

“Are we sure this is nothing to do with the Unionists?” asked Sergeant Elles, hunched forward on the steps leading into the market comptroller’s cabin. The small boat rocked. The cabin reeked of cheap tobacco and sweat. “I mean, this feels like some shit they’d be happy with.”

Latch considered the question. Their skeleton clock had been identified as a notoriously mercenary factory owner, Mr. Charles Rudveld, with a penchant for underpaying workers using a rigged punch card machine. Davet had reported that the clock had been keeping perfect time. Not a second lost. Sure, the Unionists railed against Ith Tol’s historically poor industrial relations, but their protests and strikes had, so far, been largely peaceful affairs. This was something else entirely.

“You’re thinking that Mr. Tock is all about workers’ rights in the coming utopia, Elles?” he said, hefting a coin he’d found on the cabin’s floor. “That explains all this?”

“Like I fucking know.”

Just after lunch, a milliner had come to the comptroller’s boat to pay the monthly fees on her steamer. She’d called from outside and received no response. This wasn’t remarkable. The comptroller, a studious man, was known to retreat into his cabin during inclement weather and it had been raining during the morning. The milliner, not wanting to return the next day—the man, however studious, was, as she put it, rather an objectionable fellow—clambered aboard and ducked into his cabin. Here, the comptroller was sitting behind his fold-out table, pen in hand, at work on his ledger. Only there were two ledgers, which was odd, and the man didn’t seem to be moving, which was odder. Odder still, there was a narrow, rectangular hole in his head. It was at this point that the milliner disembarked, started screaming—death, as she put it again, being known to give her a terrible turn—and the Watch was called in.

“Looks like our comptroller kept up the appearance of a public servant,” said Latch. Light squeezed into the cabin through narrow cracks in the walls, flicking scratches of grey across the floor and low-hanging hammock. A few books stood

on simple shelves. The coin seemed heavier than it was, larger than it was. There were jars of them stacked behind the comptroller like a wall. “A true man of the people.”

Elles scoffed. “Yeah. A liar and a thief.”

“Pillar of the community.”

“A right crook.”

Like the milliner had reported, the comptroller had been positioned behind his table, pen held above an open ledger. Beside this, another ledger, its columns crowded with sums owed and paid. And they all worked out perfectly. The hole in his head was actually a rectangular slot just large enough to accommodate a coin. One of the jars had been opened and placed at the comptroller’s elbow.

Latch pushed the coin into the comptroller’s head and stepped back. “But a reformed one.”

Clicking and whirring, the comptroller’s arm moved in stutters, the pen slowly pressed to the ledger, and then he started to write. Tick, tick, tick. First, a name appeared, then what the name owed, and, finally, what the name had paid. The whirring faded and the clicking stopped. It was the third time Latch had used a coin and, comparing the two books, he quickly figured the discrepancy: the comptroller had been overcharging for market berths, reporting takings at uninflated prices and pocketing the profit.

“You reckon that’s what this is about, Latch?” asked Elles. She didn’t sound convinced. “That this Mr. Tock is reformer?”

Latch edged around the table. “No. Not really. Reform isn’t usually about murdering the recidivist.” He remembered Davet saying something about designs and systems. “Transformation might be on his mind, though.”

“You got that right.”

“And these... inventions themselves aren’t all that public, aren’t being held up for spectacle. A reformer exclaims and proclaims, identifies evils and lays a course for their correction. A reformer lectures. Whatever these murders are, they’re not lectures.”

Elles stood, loped over, grabbed a coin from the jar, and inserted it. “What are they, then?”

“Corrections.”

The comptroller’s back had been completely removed, the natural structure of the arms replaced. Unlike the factory owner, though, there was no steel cap obscuring Mr. Tock’s work. All the bones, the lungs, the heart, kidneys, liver, and intestines had been taken out, replaced with pneumatic automata. Pistons pulled and pushed the writing arm, wheezing air bags inflating and deflating, each minute adjustment of the fingers announced by a sharp click. The movements themselves were governed by a row of golden

wheels positioned vertically over a revolving wax cylinder. The wheels were cut with hundreds of slim teeth that caught on equally tiny characters stamped into the wax. The input of each character opened or closed a constellation of switches, thousands of which sat in a block in the comptroller's skull. An infinite assemblage of gears filled the rest of the chest cavity, whirring back and forth hypnotically, lifting and dropping into interlinking combinations. It completed the new line in the ledger and faltered into silence. At the end of every line: Mr. Tock's hallmark of the dummy with its cog.

"They're intimate," said Latch. Dark, close rooms inhabited by corrupt bodies returned to a purity of purpose. They were parts of a system. Broken parts. It wasn't that Mr. Tock was transforming them, he was clarifying them, stripping away the graft to expose better functioning selves. What they were and should have been. "They're letters."

"Letters?" said Elles. "We're not his bloody pen pals!"

"And yet, here we read."

"Fuck that, Latch." She wrenched the pen from the comptroller's fingers and snapped it in half. Ink splashed over the ledgers, blotting out the original and its correction. "He can kill people all he wants; it's got nothing to do with us. You think he's trying to reach out? Open up a dialogue? Forget it! What's

the point in talking to a psychopath, even in your imagination, when all they say it this?”

Usually, Latch might have agreed with her. Usually. But usual wasn't going around lately, and his sleep had been infected by that one repeating dream and its little, ticking girl. The destruction of the Watch Station was specific in its outcome. Only a Justice would be called to deal with it. Again, that feeling of eyes over his shoulder, on his back, watching what he did and how he did it. The more Latch thought about it, the more he was convinced that these letters, these fatal articulations of Mr. Tock's anger, had been composed for someone like him. This didn't really bare thinking about, but what else could Latch do. One question manifested and, like the comptroller's computational kaleidoscope, the turning of this question drove another.

What if these murders weren't an attempt to open communication?

What if they were a reply?

* * *

Sunday.

When Latch hears her knocking on his door, he walks over and clutches the doorknob in his hand. It's Carver's sister again. She's sobbing. His knuckles are white.

“Help me.”

Latch can't speak. His knuckles creak. A Justice can only act after a magistrate has passed sentence, after a case has been brought before this magistrate, after the Watch has made an arrest, after a complaint has been filed with the Watch.

“Please, help me.”

The knocking is fainter now, but he feels their vibrations through the door. His hand aches. He rests his head against the door. He just can't help her.

“Please.”

Hours after she's gone, Latch is standing like this, like he is about to open the door but cannot because his hand is numb.

* * *

Saturday.

He was holding her hand, walking towards the station. Her hand was cold, the grip painfully firm. He knew what she was going to do. She didn't have any thoughts at all, just a tick, tick, tick, tick as she stepped inside. The girl was ignored. Nobody stopped to ask her if she was ok. It was as if she didn't exist. She sat down on a bench set against the wall. Latch sat next to her and she exploded.

Waking, Latch felt removed from his body. It was as if the dream had begun to dilate time, minutes passing between taking her hand and the blast, but when he opened his eyes the night was drained to dregs. Like the details of her face, the

station, the swirling fires of the detonation, leached energy from the dull sluggish hours, rendering them into minutes of the highest clarity. His world, the world punctured by Mr. Tock's designs, had become strange and frightening, its once familiar sights and sounds somehow refracted, askew. It was the same and not the same, and nothing felt as real as the dream.

The curtains were drawn. He frowned. He'd been sitting in this chair, staring across the city, when he'd nodded off. White-blue light boomed off the curtains, the radiance almost painful, whatever was generating it humming steadily. Tears gathered in Latch's eyes, but he couldn't look away, couldn't turn his head, couldn't stand. It was like his body wasn't there. Like the little girl beside him on the table, Latch was just a head. Somewhere behind him, the light projected his shadow against the curtains. His shadow, and another that moved back and forth, attaching to and detaching from his silhouette with a scrunch of unrolling plastic. The tears rolled down his cheeks.

The second shadow enlarged, its head half-engulfing Latch's. "What is it, I wonder, that you see when you look at what I've wrought, Justice?"

The words were close. Close enough to smell the heat of them, the electrical tang of air limned by fading lighting. There was a slight buzz in them, an overlapping chorus of voices, old

and young, men and women, as if a busy street had been recorded, then each individual separated out and replayed in unison. It was like the words didn't follow one another naturally, selected instead from an immense archive of potential expression.

"I see you," said Latch.

"But I don't exist." The shadow dropped back and resumed moving behind Latch. The clink and thump of tools being removed from a bag. Silhouettes of hammers, saws, a long, slightly recurved beam. "You cannot see me, only the revelation of my design. I do not cause a man to become a clock or a calculator. He is those things already."

Latch tried to catch a glimpse from the corner of his eye. No luck. "Clarity."

"Just so, Justice. Just so."

Keep him talking. "So what are you trying to say?"

"Say?" The shadow paused, a gaunt figure stretching up the curtain and onto the ceiling. "You mistake their function. Those models are pieces in a larger mechanism. This mechanism spans the entire city and regulates all of its many lives. Part of this mechanism is called justice."

"Justice?"

"Your particular brand of justice, to be specific." The shadow lifted the recurved beam again and attached a length of

chain to each of it upturned ends. The chains opened and spilt into three slimmer chains that crossed beneath two wide pans. The voice stepped closer. “I think you’ll be happy with your new arms, Justice. Very fine work, even if I say so.”

Latch blinked, willed his legs to move, to leap up, to turn and fight, to run, to jump out the window.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, Justice. The paralytic is quite effective. You didn’t feel a thing when I removed your old ones, so when I hollow out your chest and install these it will be a simple, painless affair. However, when I slice off your ears, out your eyes, tear out your tongue, cut open your skull and scoop out your brain, there may be some discomfort.”

The shadow put down the completed balance beam and picked up the u-shaped form of a manual hand drill. Its bit was abnormally wide and serrated. More like the sort of thing you’d see during a lobotomy, only larger.

The light was so bright. “What?”

“It is said, by some, that a good Justice is deaf, blind, and dumb,” said Mr. Tock as he started boring through Latch’s shoulder. Blood dripped with a tick, tick, tick and he didn’t feel a thing. “We’re going to weigh those words and see how they balance out.”

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COVER ART

“Ambush,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste is a Senior Art Director on videogames and cinematics. He was the Art Director at Ubisoft on such titles as *Prince of Persia* and *Assassin's Creed*, winning a VES Award in February 2006. Wanting to challenge himself in the film industry, Raphael worked as a Matte Painter and Senior Concept Artist on such feature films as *Terminator: Salvation*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Death Race*, and *Repo Men*, then returned to the game industry as a Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts and Ubisoft. His cover art has been featured in *BCS* twice before, including “Knight’s Journey” in

BCS #100. In October 2016, he will release *Worlds*, a limited-edition book of his artwork from iamag.co. View his gallery at www.raphael-lacoste.com.

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