

THIS ONE SHALL BREATHE SOMEWHERE ELSE

Eleanor and I sit on a bench in the park. Our engagement rings touch as we hold hands. A city guard stands a little ways off. In the distance, over the city walls, we can hear the blasting of grand horns from the lunar monastery, celebrating the coming of a full moon. Eleanor and I look up at the moon, green and blue and pink, cloud-streaked, shimmering, a world unto itself.

The details of what happens next don't entirely matter. Suffice it to say, a beggar is accosted, the guard does nothing but watch, I call him an asshole and tell him to do his job, the guard breaks both my legs, and Eleanor leaves one day pretty soon after. I fall to drink, heavily. One day while at the bar, a baldheaded and cleanshaven man in a white robe sits down beside me and orders a water.

"How fare you?" the man asks.

"Fah," I half-laugh, and drink.

"I have seen what happened on the night your legs were broken," he says.

He has my interest.

He tells the tale, exactly as it happened. "The guard has been removed from duty," he concludes. He pantomimes reaching down to his feet and hefting something off of the ground. "Feel," he offers, nodding to the thing he pretends to hold.

I reach out, and my hand collides with a warm body, invisible.

I yank the guard's invisible dead body out of the man's hands and push it to the ground, then give it a kick, and another, and a

third before my legs remind me that just because this is cathartic does not mean they have ceased to be mangled.

“Would you like to come see how I knew about this?” the man offers.

“Please,” I agree.

“Tony,” he says, offering his hand.

“Atomizer,” I tell him, and we shake.

He picks up the body, and we go. He tells me he is a monk from the lunar monastery, which I had indeed guessed. We exit the city walls through a minor gate that takes us directly into the wilderness in which the city is hidden. Out in the woods, Tony sets down the body, and runs a hand across some part of it. The guard pops back into view. It is certainly the same one who beat me, and he is certainly dead now. It appears that Tony just smudged a symbol that had been drawn on the guard’s forehead.

From his robes Tony withdraws a charcoal pencil and makes the same mark again on the body, this time on the neck. When the last stroke is made, the body vanishes.

“Put your hand over the rune,” Tony tells me.

I do so. Even though the rune is invisible, I feel the meaning of it as though I am reading a written phrase in my mother tongue. The rune reads, *This corpse shall be hidden*.

“Handy one, that,” Tony tells me. Only one instance of a rune can be made in the world at a time. How to draw one is difficult to divine, though easy to remember once one has been given it. Tony smudges off both instances of the rune on the corpse thoroughly, leaves the body behind, and we continue to the monastery.

Waiting for night, we pass the day in the gardens and in the library. At night he takes me to an observatory, finds something in the lens, and invites me over to look. I see the moon’s pink ocean, swirling.

“The moon sea reflects our world back to us,” Tony says. “But it does not always do so right away. Sometimes it holds things, roils them around in its swirling whirlpools, and dredges them back up to reveal to us after they have happened. The founder of this monastery, Gertrude, on what would become the first day of the calendar we use now, looked into the moon sea, and it

showed her the formation of the planet on which we stand, and it showed the forging of our sun overhead. Compared to the moon, all else is young and new. On the last day of her life, Gertrude was shown a reflection in the moon sea of where the moon had come from before, another solar system on which giants lived, where one giant plucked up a small giant, placed her on the moon, and hurled the moon out into space.”

In the whirlpool in the pink sea, I see a reflection of my legs being broken by the guard who is now dead.

“Would you like to join us?” Tony offers.

“Please,” I affirm.

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It is the first day of the 17,984th lunar cycle. The other monks and I sit in a circle, legs crossed, knees touching, hands holding the hands of our neighbors, stark still, the air vibrating with our droning hum. We are at the spacious outdoor altar in the center of the monastery’s innermost courtyard. There are one hundred and ten of us in the circle, and one standing in the center. The one in the center wears robes while the rest of us are unclothed and cleanshaven from head to toe.

The one at the center sways with our humming, her head craned to face the full moon overhead. Her eyes are open as wide as the eyelids will allow, staring. In her hand, she holds the marking blade.

The instrument is quite like a sabre, but that the blade is only an inch long. It vibrates with our humming, and glows silvery pink in the light of the full moon. Pressed to the skin, the blade will leave a tattoo rather than a traditional scar. More importantly, during this ceremony, somebody will be given a rune.

I have one rune tattooed on myself already. At the top of my neck, near the back of my right ear, there is tattooed a symbol. When one presses their hand to it, they can feel its meaning as though reading from text in a familiar language. My rune reads something to the effect of, *This one shall breathe somewhere else*, with a connotation that somewhere else in the world, there is a rune which reads, *That one shall breathe from here*. I do

not know where it is that I breathe from. When it is winter here the breath that I draw in is warm, and when it is summer here the breath that I draw in is cold, so I suspect that the other rune is somewhere in the hemisphere opposite myself. Sometimes the air I breathe smells faintly of oranges. My body here in the monastery does not need to be in air to breathe. I have spent days on end submerged in a pond in the monastery's garden, when I have the spare time to do so.

The one at the center of the circle shudders, and then shrieks a name: "ATOMIZER!"

I feel the same shudder vibrate through myself. I am chosen a second time. I stand, keeping my hands locked with the person to my left and the person to my right. I call to the one at the center, "Here am I!"

She turns to me, her eyes just as wide as before and never blinking. She stomps towards me, brandishing the marking blade with clear intent to stab me.

When she arrives, she pries my left arm upwards as I strain to keep holding the hand of the one to the left of me. She begins marking the skin over the left side of my ribcage. Rarely—perhaps one in forty times—when the rune is complete, the one who drew it will see what it reads, and for the good of the world, will stab the recipient with the marking blade and kill them. It is rare, but this is a longstanding tradition. The blade with which I am drawn on has killed many.

I grit my teeth and continue to hum with the rest of the circle. As she drags the sharp instrument across my skin, I can feel the shape of the forming symbol, and I can read the rune as it comes into existence. It is intricate, and for a long time, it seems to be reading, *This one shall move as a shark through the water*. The pain of the marking seems trivial: I am giddy at the thought of the possibilities of this, given the rune that is already drawn on me.

At the last moment, she makes a mark that is profoundly unexpected, and changes the meaning completely. Finished, she yanks the blade away, and puts her hand over the new rune to read it. Still feeling it resonating over myself, I read it again and again as well. *This one shall move through the air as a shark moves through water*.

She stares at me, blade poised, considering.

If she will kill me, it will be a good death. They are lucky, those who glimpse greatness and then are gone before the cruel realities of carrying it out.

She turns to face the center of the circle and shrieks wordlessly.

At once, the humming stops. She stows the blade. We let go of each other's hands. One by one, we stand.

Some have their clothes lying on the grass nearby the altar, and go promptly to retrieve them. Others have come here from their quarters bare, and will spend the night exposed.

I am one such person who has opted to leave their clothes in their quarters. I have long found the occasion amusing, the night where the odd person is unclothed among the rest who are robed.

I turn to face the mess hall, where a feast is had each cycle on this night. As I turn to go, I do not step to face the other way, but rather, my feet swish above the ground, and I am turned.

I look down. Neither foot touches the ground.

I make a movement that feels as though I am underwater and giving a stroke upwards. In the span of a second, I rise ten feet above the ground, and there I remain, floating as though suspended in water. This soon draws the attention of all.

I look down at them, and then, quite naturally, up at the moon.

It is hardly a decision. I look back down once to give a gesture of thanks, true gratitude for all that has been here, and then I dart upwards, away from the planet, rocketing towards the moon.

It is a long journey, and delightful. When I feel the moon's gravity pulling me towards it, it feels like a long lost friend beckoning me to embrace. I plant my feet on the moon, then fall to my hands and knees, and kiss the soil. I spend a long time in thankful prayer.

When I am ready, I stand, and walk about the grove that I've arrived in. The trees here are enormous: it would take ten monks to link their arms around one of the trunks, and as they go up and branch apart, they hardly narrow, and in some branches become wider than the trunk had been. The bases are

greyer in color, the thick trunk-like branches bluegreen, and the actual twigs and leaves a familiar green. Fruit grows high up on these trees. I stroke up to a fruit, and hover looking at it. Its shape resembles a bell pepper, its color is swirls of blue and purple. Because I breathe somewhere else, I cannot inspect it by smell. I pluck it off the branch and eat. It tastes well. It tastes of the smell of rain.

I swim about through the vast forest, sometimes upright, sometimes on a backstroke. The day passes, and I spend the night asleep, drifting slowly over a lake.

In the morning, I know that I have had my fun here, and it is now time to fulfill something greater. I go high above the forests, into the sky, to gather my bearings, to see the moon as though I were looking at it through a telescope from the planet.

Far east of me, a country-sized peninsula juts out into the pink ocean. I begin my journey towards it.

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I arrive. At the end of this peninsula, just a mile inland, there is a ziggurat made of gold, tall as a castle. We have known of it a long time, but of course could only observe that it existed, unmoving, nobody coming or going. From the revelation of Gertrude's last day, we suspect that this is the prison of Lunelle, the small giantess.

I float through an entrance that exists halfway up the ziggurat's slope. Even on the interior, the golden walls all glow. The passage inside takes me around and around the circumference of the ziggurat, descending slowly with each lap, until with a final turn, I am faced with a woman chained to a wall. Her body is covered in runes from head to toe. She stares at me, blinking.

Just out of her reach, a nail is driven into the wall, and from the nail hangs a key. I clasp my hands together, bow my head, and tell Lunelle, "Every apology we could not free you sooner." I go to the key and take it. I go to Lunelle. Gently, I take hold of the cuff at one of her wrists, and unlock it. As soon as the cuff falls, she takes the key from my hand and unlocks her remaining bounds herself. Then she hurls the key away, and embraces me

tightly. I embrace her back, and together, we exit the ziggurat. Her footsteps are clumsy, unpracticed, though she does not look unhealthy physically.

Outside, in tears, she falls to her hands and knees on the ground and kisses the soil. In the low gravity of the moon she easily bounds up a tree, plucks a fruit from a high up twig, and eats it. She runs through the forests, and elated noises escape her mouth.

That night, the two of us sit on the beach of the pink sea. We each sit on a comfortable rock, side by side, facing a flaming vent that has come up out of the ground here—they are dotted all up and down the beach, and some can faintly be seen underwater. They are quite like a natural campfire.

“Can you speak?” I finally ask her. I have been speaking to her all evening, telling her all about the planet, pleasantries of the monastery, a brief overview of major historical events she may have missed.

She does not answer me, though she seems to have at least gleaned I have asked her a question.

I stop speaking to her. We sit quietly and watch the fire.

Gently, she takes my wrist. She bring my hand to her neck, and places my fingertips on the underside of her jaw. I lay my hand flat against the rune there. *This one shall not speak*. She opens her mouth, and I suppress the urge to recoil. Her tongue has been divided into hundreds of narrow tendrils, writhing about independently of one another.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her.

She takes my hand again, and this time places my fingertips to her wrist. I lay my hand flat there to read the rune she has guided me to. I am taken aback to realize it is not one rune here, but two overlapping: *This one shall not write* and *This one shall not make gestures*. In the same way that an S and a Z may overlap to nearly form an 8, the two runes on her wrist overlap to nearly form *This one shall not make symbols*.

I tell her again I am sorry. She looks back to the fire.

Gently, I take her wrist in my hand. She looks back to me, head tilted. I place her fingertips to my ribs. She lays her hand flat against the newer of my runes. *This one shall move through the air as a shark moves through water*. As soon as she has

read it, she breaks into a laugh. It is contagious, and I laugh along with her.

That night, when I drift through the air to fall asleep, Lunelle grabs me, and holds me to the ground, and we sleep together.

The next day, she begins working on something. I wish to help, though am resigned to only float around, knowing not what she is making. If I see her gathering branches, I help her gather branches. If I see her collecting up sea shells, I collect sea shells. She is building something much taller than herself—it seems to be a sculpture. In the low gravity, she jumps up to the higher parts when she needs to, and perches on what is already made to build it up higher and higher. Eventually, I realize it is a person. Eventually, I realize it is an effigy. As soon as it is done, she looks up at it in tears, screams wordlessly at it, and then with fire from a vent, lights the giantess's foot. We stay up through the night, I floating quietly, her sitting with her knees huddled up to her chin, crying, watching her prisoner burn. When it is all ashes and a few smoldering cores, she wades into the ashes, lies down, and goes to sleep. I float, a watchful spirit above her.

The next day, she washes the ashes from herself in the pink sea, and when she emerges, she takes me by the hand, and carries me like a balloon into the forest. We wander a ways until finding a sunny clearing. At the center, she stands us face to face, and she places my hand on the top of her bald head, where a rune is placed. *This one shall not forget the happiness felt in her first home.* One by one, she guides me through all of the runes on her body. To name a few: *This one shall not find her first home ever again; This one shall not starve; This one shall not grow hair; This one shall not wax weak; This one shall not wax strong; This one shall not bear fruit; This one shall not be blinded while she blinks; This one shall not have dreams.* On the sole of her foot, *This one shall not leave her planet.* I take this to mean the moon, as we would call it by. She takes my hand off of the sole of her foot and places it on her sex. I tilt my head—there is no rune here, certainly. She presses my hand against herself more insistently, and I realize with a smile that this is no longer about the runes. I am pleasantly surprised, and certainly not unwilling to be warmed up to this, though I suspect

strongly that I'm being used, and that a statue would serve exactly as well as I. In the afterglow she lies draped over my chest as we drift, I on my back, through the forest.

The next day, and several more after that, we spend walking. Her walking, I paddling alongside. There are so many things that I want to ask her that she cannot tell me. Is this planet the same as it was when you were forced into the ziggurat? What was the old solar system, your first home, like? I know you cannot find home again, but do you think there would be anyone out looking for you? In some sense, I suppose these are none of my business. If they become my business, then I will know the answer at that time anyways. We have breaks from traveling to eat and to nap. One day, as I am scratching my short beard, we crest a hill and I see what we have been traveling to. A city, every rooftop covered by a tree's branches, only a forest when viewed from the sky. We walk into the city gates which hang open. We walk through deserted streets. We walk up to the castle gate, over the castle grounds, into the royal antechamber, through ornate hall after hall, until we arrive at the throne room, where there is one throne with two backs and a seat wide enough for a couple. Lunelle sits on the left side of the throne. She looks at me, and then at the empty space beside her. I sit, and we lock hands.