

HUGINN AND MUNINN— AND WHAT CAME AFTER

Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick says, “You asked for bio information. Like everyone else, the pandemic lockdown has been hard on me. With isolation came inertia. With inertia came stillness. With stillness came meditation. With meditation came enlightenment. With enlightenment came the ability to see the universe as the fiction it is. Hence my newborn ability to teleport. I simply redefine my location and there I am! Which is why I’ve left this note on your desk. It saves me the cost of a stamp. Don’t worry, I haven’t been snooping around. But I’m afraid I did steal a stick of gum from the pack in your desk drawer.” Michael recently won the Aelita Award, which is given out at Russia’s oldest convention, also (and not coincidentally) named Aelita. He was the first Westerner ever to receive the award and, he was, “quite frankly, amazed and overwhelmed.”

A word of warning: this story deals frankly with suicide and despair.

Her name was Alyssa, and nobody knew who she was.

When she was a child, perhaps, her mother had known. But that was long ago, when she was somebody else. As a young woman she had sometimes dropped clues leading like a trail of breadcrumbs into the dark forest of her being. But nobody had ever followed them all the way in. Now, she had a husband, friends, and a circle of acquaintances all of whom believed they knew who she was. But they were mistaken.

Only she knew who she was.

Whoever she was, Alyssa was sitting alone with her thoughts one night when the vulture on her left shoulder abruptly flapped its wings. She had two vultures, one for each shoulder, which she had named Huginn and Muninn, and though she knew they were imaginary, they were both as real as radishes.

Huginn clenched its claws into Alyssa's flesh hard enough to make her gasp and then leapt into the air. Muninn followed suit. Flapping noisily, they flew directly at the fireplace and then through the black glass mirror above it.

Alyssa felt a tremendous lightness enter her—lightness and something strangely akin to joy. Then, never one to back off from a mystery, she dragged the coffee table to the fireplace, stepped up on it, and clambered onto the mantel.

Up close, the mirror was a faint, silvery mist. It showed all the room behind her, reversed, but not her own reflection. Was she, then, a vampire? She had often suspected so. When her fingers touched the glass, it proved permeable, so she crawled through.

Alyssa hopped down from the mirror with an agility she had not experienced for years.

Disappointingly, the room on the far side of the glass was as common and uninteresting as that on the near side. There was a corpse lying facedown on the Bokhara rug. Knowing whose it had to be, she didn't turn it over.

Instead, she went outside, into the mirror-world night.

* * *

Three moons hung low in the sky, and the air was heavy with the scent of roses. Alyssa did not much care for the scent of roses. She preferred active odors like that of turpentine when you cleaned your brushes after a productive day at the easel or that wonderful chem lab smell of acetate, ether, and methylated spirit when an experiment was running hot. But there were tremendous mounds of rose bushes all around the house she had just left, rising up above the roofline, obscuring its shape, and all the roses were black as anthracite coal—and those, she had to admit, were striking.

The lawn was tidily mowed, as would be expected in the suburbs, with a quiet, empty street before it. Across the street were blocks of condominium towers, half-buried in a dense rose forest.

A car pulled up, a dark maroon BMW.

Its driver emerged, dressed in a trim black suit, blood-red shirt, and black ascot. Hips slim for a woman but heavy for a man. Brilliantined hair, short for the one sex, but long for the other. Alyssa, who was quicker to discern gender than most, couldn't get a handle on him. Or her. Them.

"Mistral," the newcomer said, slim fingers tapping broad chest. Voice deep for a female, high for a male. Mistral's skin was white and their eyes burned like black embers. "You're early. I imagine you have questions. If you're not too proud to ask."

Alyssa hated being led almost as much as she hated being condescended to. So she said, "The roses—are they really black?" God help her, they *smelled* black. "Or is it just the night that makes them look that way?"

Clearly amused and just a touch annoyed, Mistral snapped two fingers and every rose shone as brightly incandescent as an electric light bulb. Alyssa threw up a hand to keep from being blinded. When she could see again, she studied that confident face, noting the patrician nose, the sculpted cheekbones, and thought: androgynous. Here was androgyny made perfect. "Does that answer your question?"

It didn't, of course. But Alyssa would figure it out for herself in time. She nodded.

Mistral opened the passenger-side door of the car. "Get in."

Alyssa didn't move. "I don't trust you."

Mistral threw back their head in exasperation. "I know what you were up to before you crawled through the mirror. What could I possibly do to you that would be worse?" Then, when she still did not move, "Do you want me to go away? Forever? Say the word and I will."

Chastened, Alyssa got into the car. They drove down the road.

Miles flowed under the BMW's tires. "You feel better, physically, than you have for a long time," Mistral said. "Tell me I'm right."

“You’re right.”

“A side effect of passing through the mirror. You’re ten years younger than you were a few minutes ago. You’ll feel progressively better for quite some while. Time flows backward on this side, though it won’t seem that way to you. People here grow younger and younger until they dwindle away. Those lucky few—like me, like you—who have figured out how to cross between realms can balance their time on each side of the glass, so they need never die or be unborn.”

“So . . . I’m not going to turn into a teenager someday?”

A scornful laugh. “Only if you want to. But why would you? Imagine being a virgin again! I found my ideal age and, since then, I spend half my time on each side. I grow a little younger. I grow a little older. So long as I keep away from falling safes, I should live forever.”

“Oh.”

“There’s more, but I think I’ll wait until you’re ready to hear it.”

The BMW purred out of the rose forest and up a long, winding road to a hilltop restaurant topped by a flashing neon sign reading MUELLER’S. Above the lettering was a neon mule whose hind legs kicked in three shifts of tubing—out straight, up high, and back, over and over. To the far side of the lot, a line of trucks rested, some idling. Mistral found a space as far away from them as possible, and said, “Do you want to eat immediately? Or are you game for a little sport?”

“I’m game.”

They went around to the back of the car and opened the trunk. Inside were two cages and in them were Huginn and Muninn, hooded and jessed, but moving a little, as if uneasy. Alyssa drew in her breath. Mistral handed her a falconer’s glove and, with reluctance, she put it on. Then they took Muninn from its cage and settled it on Alyssa’s fist.

With Huginn on their own glove, Mistral slammed the trunk shut. Alyssa followed them to the edge of the parking lot. There was a grand view of the world there: A dark forest below stretched halfway to the horizon; beyond it was glittering cityscape. The sky was filled with unfamiliar constellations. One of the brighter ones looked like a broken, lower-case letter T. “The Western Cross,” Mistral commented. Then, removing Huginn’s hood, “It’s a perfect night for hunting.”

“Vultures don’t hunt. They’re carrion eaters.”

“Not here they’re not. Passing through a mirror flips your essentials in interesting ways.” Again, there was a gleam of (perverse? yes, perverse) amusement in Mistral’s eyes. They threw up their arm, and Huginn disappeared down into the soot-black woods.

Not to look timid, Alyssa cast off Muninn, though she had no idea what they were after. “There’s something you’re withholding from me,” she said. “Something important.”

“In that way, this world is a lot like the one you left behind.”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I believe we’ve already established that.”

“Are you the Devil?” Alyssa didn’t accept the existence of Heaven or Hell or God. On this last issue, however, she was an agnostic, teetering on the brink of belief.

Mistral’s grin was so bright that the rest of their face faded to obscurity. “Oh, now, that’s a tough one. I certainly wasn’t when I first came here. But that was long ago.”

An enormous flake of darkness flew up from the forest, blinded Alyssa for an instant, and settled itself on her glove. Muninn dropped something at her feet. It was a snake. A cottonmouth. With wings. Following close upon its twin, Huginn dropped a winged rattlesnake before Mistral. The leathery remnants of the creature’s wings thrashed weakly, so Mistral stepped on its head, crushing it with their wingtip. In

response to something that had barely reached Alyssa's consciousness, much less her tongue, they said, "Why not? On the other side, you have mice with wings."

"Those are bats."

"We call *these* skrats." They both then fell into a silence that lasted long enough for the number of flying reptile corpses before them to grow, by Alyssa's count, to thirty-one. At last, Mistral said, "I'm bored. Let's go inside."

They returned the vultures to their cages and went in.

* * *

Mueller's was a truck stop. So far as Alyssa could tell, it was identical to those in her world. There were tables and booths and two long buffets with sneeze guards, one loaded with foods that were heavy on fats and starches and the other with salads. The gift shop was almost as large as the restaurant. Mistral chose a booth and, when Alyssa sat, said, "Wait here. I left something in the car."

Alyssa waited. Time stretched itself thin.

"Looks like you've been stood up, hon." A waitress dropped a plastic-coated menu on the table. She was ruddy-faced, nondescript, plump. "You got any money on you?"

"I . . . no." When she'd climbed through the mirror, it hadn't occurred to Alyssa that she might need any.

"Got friends you can call to come fetch you?"

Alyssa shook her head.

The waitress slid into the booth opposite her. "New to this world?"

Not much later, having heard Alyssa's story through, the waitress led her outside. "Taking off early, Linda!" she called to the woman at the cash register who, without looking up from a clipboard, waved goodbye. They got into an old Honda Civic and headed down the road.

"Name's Francie. That's short for Francesca. Which is long for Frank," the waitress said, and laughed at a joke that was entirely opaque to Alyssa.

* * *

After they'd made love, Alyssa said, "I've got questions."

"Ask away, hon."

But when Alyssa tried to put her confusion to words, her thoughts were in such a tangle that she didn't know where to begin. Seeing this, Francie sat up and said, "I've been through this before, babe. How's about I start?"

"I'd like that, thank you."

"Okay. Take a good long look at me." Francie gestured. "Sweet body, huh?"

"Yes. It is."

"I could tell you liked it. Here's the thing, though. On the other side, I was male."

Alyssa's gaze went down to Francie's sex and back up to her face. "That's not possible."

"How's your clit feel? A little sore, I'll bet. Growing pains. A year from now it'll be a full-sized schlong. You go through the mirror, it switches you around. Male to female, female to male. There's a box of tissues on the end table if you need them."

"I'm not about to cry."

"You're a better man than I was. I cried every night while my dick got smaller and smaller and my insides opened out. Didn't much like the tits neither. Still not crazy about the size of my butt, but there you are. I adjusted. Finding out I could still get it on with girls helped. Tried guys once or twice but didn't think much of it."

Alyssa wanted to feel shocked, but couldn't. All the universe was cold as ice and motionless at its center was her. It was possible that her skin stung a little, but she might have been imagining that. She cast about for another question. "There's something I don't understand. You go back and forth through the mirror, right? To all intents and purposes, that makes you immortal. What are you doing working as a waitress?"

“Gotta earn a living, don’t I? I was a truck driver on the other side, I’m used to hard work. Besides, I like the human contact.”

“Oh.” Then, “Tell me about Mistral.”

“Mistral? Stay away from that one. Bad news. Crazy as a crate of clockwork hornets and twice as dangerous.”

“Mistral dropped me off at Mueller’s. I thought maybe you had an understanding.”

“Give me some credit. You looked lost. I tried to help. Everything else just happened.”

“Are there are a lot of us?”

“Naw. Maybe one every two-three years. They all come through the truck stop for some reason. It never occurred to me that Mistral might be behind that.” Francie rubbed her chin. “That kinda worries me.” She fell silent.

Alyssa got up, went to the window, and twitched back the curtains. She looked down on an alleyway as ordinary as anything she might have seen back home. Garbage bins, oil stains, a Subaru pulled halfway onto the sidewalk. When she turned back, Francie was struggling into her dress.

“What are you doing?” Alyssa asked.

“Mistral brought you to Mueller’s in person. That’s a first. It tells me we’d better get the hell out of Dodge.”

* * *

Francie drove in silence, intent upon the road, keeping a steady speed. It was easy to believe she’d been a truck driver in another life. Alyssa used the time to try to sort out her feelings about this new world she found herself in. It didn’t make a lot of sense to her. But then neither had the old one. So she ought to fit right in here.

Some hours later, they pulled into what appeared to be a seaside resort town. The road ran along a black ocean for a while before Francie turned inland at a traffic light. Three blocks on, they parked in the driveway of a Queen Anne house with two small spots out front illuminating a hanging sign reading *Floral Cottage B & B*. “Got a friend here,” Francie said. They went to the front door and rang. “She’s sure to give us a room.”

It occurred to Alyssa that Francie was going to expect them to share a bed. But what had happened earlier had been done on impulse. She was far from certain she wanted an ongoing relationship with this woman. There wasn’t the time to discuss that with her now, however. If only, back in the car, she had—

The door was opened by a woman who was all bright scarves, bracelets, and hoop earrings. “City Mouse!” the woman cried.

“Country Mouse!” Francie replied.

The two women embraced. Then, in a flurry of questions, light answers, and sudden darts into the kitchen to put a kettle on, the linen closet for sheets and pillow cases, and the kitchen again to turn off the kettle when the offer of tea was declined, they were ushered into the interior, shown the bath, and given a room. The landlady’s name turned out to be Pamela. She and Francie exchanged glances, linked hands, and then went into another bedroom together. “I’ll see you in the morning,” Francie said reassuringly, and the door clicked shut behind them.

Well, Alyssa thought. She washed her face, went into her room, and lay down on the bed. Why were these things always so easy for other people? Conversely, why were they always so complicated for her? All her life it had been that way; she had no idea why.

She had a lot to think about, most particularly the transition she was apparently going to make from female to male. Eventually, however, she fell asleep. And dreamed:

* * *

She was sitting in the living room back home, reading. But when she tried to focus on

the words on the page, they writhed and twisted in her vision, turning to meaningless glyphs. So she put down the book on the side table and lifted the next from the to-be-read stack. Then she flipped to the title page, which opened a blue eye and looked at her.

Hastily, she turned the page. But the next page, which should have been the beginning of the first chapter, was a mirror, and in the mirror was her own face. Her features looked harsh and mannish. Horrified, she slammed the book shut.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?" Sitting cross-legged in the air, red-soled Louboutin wingtips at eye level, was Mistral. "Too bad. Once seen, never unseen."

* * *

The morning was as dark as the evening had been. But the kitchen clock said 7:15, and every now and then there was the soft drone of a car driving past. Evidently, this world had no sun. Pamela appeared, wearing a kimono, yawning and happy. Francie, following after, pulled out a chair for her and said, "No quiche and herbal tea today, sweetie. I'm fixing you a *real* breakfast." She set about making coffee and frying eggs, as if the place were her own.

They ate at the kitchen table. When the last bites of toast were done and the coffee refilled, Pamela said, "So. You have no money and your only friends in all the world are sitting here next to you. The first order of business is to find you a job. Do you have any skills?"

Stung to arrogance, Alyssa said, "I'm ex-military, ex-medical, ex-newspaperwoman, ex-business, ex-everything. I've been an artist, a spook, a musician, a farmer—you name it, I've done it."

Pamela raised her eyebrows. "Oh? Have you robbed a bank, begged on the street, sold your body? Worked the graveyard shift in a herring cannery?"

The contrariness that had ruined so many opportunities, and her first two marriages as well, rose to Alyssa's lips. But she choked it back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to brag."

"So you're adaptable," Francie said. "That's good. What's your background like, hon?"

"My mother was a war correspondent. When I was six, she took me to one of those Middle Eastern wars where the bombing never stopped. We stayed in luxury hotels and we always had servants because things were so desperate people would work for almost nothing. If I dropped something, I clapped my hands, and our 'girl' would pick it up for me. I was dreadfully spoiled."

"That sounds . . . interesting," Pamela said.

Francie added, "Was it fun for you?"

"One day mother took me along to an interview with a warlord of no lasting significance, and he staged an execution for us: a black marketeer accused of price gouging food. I saw his head explode. Another time, I forget why, I was waiting in the limo for my mother when a horse-drawn wagon filled with corpses went by. How they stank! The driver rolled up the windows and turned on the air conditioning. When I asked about the bodies, he turned up the radio. Fun? No. But it taught me a great deal about people; I haven't been surprised by anything they did since. I never could get an explanation from my mother as to why she thought bringing me along was a good idea."

Francie put a hand over hers. "Did you ask your father?"

"Oh, him. He was a lawyer; he stayed in New York. Anyway, nobody took him very seriously. Everything that ever happened in our lives was all about my mother. If you knew her, you'd understand."

Pamela left the room and returned with an atlas. Reclaiming her seat, she opened it. "Let's put off the job for a minute. Where do you think you might want to live?"

“Anywhere in the world, you mean?”

“Got a passport, hon?” Francie asked. “Because if not . . .”

Flipping pages, Pamela said, “You’ll want to keep a low profile, so I would recommend one of the Jeffersonian states. Metropotamia, maybe? Not Equitasia, you wouldn’t like it there. Pelisipia’s nice this time of year.” The maps made no sense to Alyssa until she realized that they had been mirror-flipped so that the West Coast was to the right and the East Coast to the left. The land between the Mississippi and the Appalachians was divided into states with unfamiliar names. The rest of the country was more or less as she knew it.

Possibilities were argued, discarded, adopted. Phone calls were made. In surprisingly little time, Alyssa had a Tuesday appointment with the features editor of the *Fort Pontchartrain Times*, where there was an opening for the position of movie reviewer. “I’ll close the inn for a few days and drive you up,” Pamela said. “The resort’s in the doldrums this time of year, and I do all my business by cell phone anyway. I can make a little vacation of it.”

“Sorry I can’t come with you,” Francie said. “But Mueller’s needs me. If I’m away too long, everything falls apart.”

“I’ll pack you a lunch. If Alyssa and I get an early start, we can be well on our way to Metropotamia by nightfall.”

What Pamela meant by nightfall in a world with no discernable sun, Alyssa did not ask. Instead, she said, “Before you go, tell me. What’s the deal with Mistral? I think it’s time you leveled with me.”

Francie looked at Pamela, who gave her a slight nod. “Honestly?” Francie said. “Nobody knows, really. Mistral just showed up one day. She’s capricious. I think maybe she’s a god.”

“A demon,” Pamela corrected her. “He’s a demon.”

“Whatever she is, she’s dangerous to cross. You know how when you go through the mirror, it changes your gender? That’s a lot of power. Think about it.”

“I have.” Alyssa had thought of little else since arriving here.

“Well, you learn the ins and outs of it and you can use that power. Like when Pamela lit the candles last night. . . . Oh, I guess you weren’t there. Anyway, she didn’t use matches. She can do a lot more than that, too.”

Now Pamela spoke up: “Last time I was young, I was mad for flying. I spent half my life on a broomstick. Of course, I had the body for it then.”

“You were talking about Mistral,” Alyssa reminded her.

“Mistral’s got that kind of power, only a hundred times as much as the two of us combined. And I think we’ve said enough on that subject,” Pamela said.

“More than enough,” Francie agreed.

“Anyway,” Pamela said, “it’s all we know.” And no amount of urging would make her speak further. Nor Francie either.

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Pamela made a brown bag lunch, carried Francie’s travel bag to the car, and shared a long, comfortable kiss with her that Alyssa couldn’t help envying. Then she came back inside and said, “Let’s get you packed. We’re not quite the same size, but some of my clothes ought to do,” and hustled off into the far recesses of the inn.

Alyssa poured herself a cup of coffee, sat down at the kitchen table, and wrapped both hands around it, savoring the heat, savoring the pain. Staring down into its black depths, she felt herself again slipping into a dream.

* * *

She was in a diner, having a pleasant chat with Mistral when Mistral said, “Hey! Want to see my imitation of a cat?”

“No,” Alyssa said. “I most emphatically do not.”

"You'll love it!" Mistral climbed onto the table and struck a feline pose—crouched, hands fisted into front paws tidily together on the tabletop, head held up proudly. They looked a lot like the cat-goddess Bast—alert, noble, serene. Then they pushed a cup of hot coffee into Alyssa's lap.

Outraged, Alyssa leapt to her feet, slapping at the ugly brown stain on her Chanel suit. "What the hell did you—?"

But now a wracking cough made Mistral's entire body shudder. Alyssa thought they were pretending to hack up a hairball, but what finally came pouring out of their mouth was an enormous green tentacle that flopped down on the floor before her. Still, Mistral continued hacking and coughing.

Another tentacle gushed forth. Then another. And another. Soon, neither Mistral nor the table were visible for the mound of slime-green and slug-gray tentacles. They swayed as if alive, and some reached playfully for Alyssa, as if to draw her in.

Alyssa seized the nearest tentacle. It was barely substantial and shattered at her touch like sea-foam. Then she was wading into the mound of filth, smashing the tentacles to nothing with her fists. It was no easy task, for even as she destroyed them new tentacles were being barfed up. But finally she had fought and demolished her way to the heart of the tangle.

There was nothing there—not Mistral and not even the table.

* * *

"Ready?" Pamela asked. "I've packed a picnic hamper with a baguette, mushroom pâté, grapes, and a thermos of iced green jasmine tea, so we can stop at a state park and make a feast of it."

"We're not going anywhere," Alyssa said.

Pamela stepped back, as if affronted. But there was the slightest hint of a smile on her lips. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I can't believe you'd go through all this trouble for me just out of pure niceness. Not that you're not nice. But with the possible exception of the Dalai Lama, nobody's that nice. Closing your business in order to drive someone you've just met halfway across the country for a job interview? Without one word of complaint or self-congratulation? Francie was hard enough to believe in. You're a unicorn."

"I suppose I am," Pamela said. "In a way." With both hands, she seized the front of her blouse. Then she ripped it open—and her body and her face and the kitchen as well.

* * *

Alyssa had taken LSD once, clinical grade stuff straight from Sandoz, back in the sixties—even her husband didn't know this—under medical supervision. The overture, as she thought of it, of the experience had felt much like this. She was on a dance floor under a starry, moons-filled sky in a clearing in a lilac forest. There were hummingbirds in the air and luminous monkeys swinging from tree to tree. A jazz band was playing "Stormy Weather."

She and Mistral were slow dancing.

Mistral led, of course, Alyssa's status still being in flux. They were the best dancer Alyssa had ever known—light, natural, effortlessly in control. But that didn't make her like them any better. "What now?" Alyssa asked.

Mistral shrugged. "I had a series of experiences planned for you before I made my pitch, culminating in your first time in a male body with a woman. But you got ahead of things. As usual, I might add."

"You talk as if you know me, and you act as if you have the right to tell me what to do."

"Of course I do, dear. Haven't you figured out who I am yet?"

"No."

"Give it time. It will come to you."

The music ended. They went to a table. Mistral held out a chair for Alyssa, then sprawled in the one opposite. Glasses of champagne appeared before them. “I’ll cut to the chase. I like my gender and age exactly as they are—and that requires that I make frequent trips to the other side of the mirror. But this world is much like Mueller’s without Francie. If I’m away too long, people get notions. I need a second in command to look after things in my absence.”

“A flunky, you mean.”

“Potato, *potahto*.”

A long silence. Then Alyssa said, “Isn’t this the part of the melodrama where you promise me limitless power and wealth?”

“If you can’t see all that for yourself, then you’re not the person I’m sure you are.”

“Okay. Okay. That brings us to the next question: Why me?”

“Because I trust you, sweetie. Also, knowing you as I do, I’m sure you’re right for the job.” A pack of cigarettes appeared on the table. Mistral extended a languid arm, tapped one out, and lit it. Smoke oozed from their nostrils.

Alyssa sat up straight. There was something hauntingly familiar about that combination of gestures. Alyssa had seen that micro-performance hundreds of times. Always, always, always performed by one and only one person. . . .

—*Mother!*”

“Ah. The dime drops at last.”

It made perfect sense, in its own hallucinatory way, that the woman who had haunted her life would haunt her afterlife—or whatever this was. But even as Alyssa thought that, she knew it wasn’t true. It was just too pat, too tidy, to be true. The Universe was a messy place, and life was a messy business. Only simple matters had simple solutions and only simple minds thought otherwise. “It can’t be. To begin with, you’re dead.”

“Yes, I’m sure she was careful to leave that impression.” Francie pulled out a chair and sat down. “Ooh, champagne. Is there a glass for me?”

There was.

“Francesca,” Mistral said. “And me without a fly swatter.”

They were back in the room where Alyssa had first entered the mirror world. The corpse still lay facedown on the Bokhara among scattered chess pieces and playing cards. The mirror over the mantelpiece was a rectangle of silver mist. But the table and chairs remained exactly as they had been at the edge of the dance floor. Alyssa took a sip of her champagne. It was very dry and so cold that it stung, which was how she liked it. But of course anyone—or anything—capable of imitating her mother so well would know. “You can stop pretending,” she said, “the both of you.”

Francie sighed. “I told you that being her mother was a smidge too far.”

“It’s what she wanted most—the chance to get the old bat in her clutches and squeeze some answers out of her. Was I supposed to deny her that?”

“Game time is over,” Alyssa said. “You both know what I want to know. Which one of you is going to tell me?”

“It really doesn’t matter,” *either Mistral or Francie said*. “We’re both aspects of the same thing. When you passed through the mirror, you created a pocket universe. There are potential universes in every dust mote, atom, and quark in existence. Almost all of them are void and without form. We were one such. Then you brought us to life.”

“We like being alive,” *the other said*. “So, to keep you here, we gave you things we knew you would enjoy. Darkness. Mystery. A new gender. The kind of friends you never got to have in your old world. An adversary for you to outwit and overcome—a kind of trickster or spirit guide to challenge and allure you.” (Alyssa had read Jung, so she knew that Mistral was being defined as her animus. But she did not feel it was worth interrupting the flow of words to mention that.) “Here, you can

have anything and be anyone you desire. Don't try to pretend you never wished for a private world of your own. A world where everything and everybody would be and do as you wanted them. There are no limits to what can happen here. We know you well and we are anxious to give you what you desire.

"It's yours. All you have to do is take advantage of it."

"Are you done?" Alyssa asked.

Mistral and Francie had surrendered their human forms. They were now floating blobs of darkness, like black wax in a lava lamp. As Alyssa watched, they merged and became one. "Yes," *it said*. "I am done."

"You're a parasite," Alyssa said, "and you have no right to my life. The old universe, the one I grew up in, was like you in a lot of ways—tyrannical, inconsistent, sometimes even cruel. But still, there was room in it for courage and cowardice, generosity and selfishness, honesty, wonder, awareness. Oh, and the glorious, rapacious, loving, destructive, yearning human race! In place of all that, you offer me—what? A shadow play? False friends, imaginary enemies, elaborate scripts to keep me dancing for your amusement? The opportunity to sit in the dark talking to myself for all eternity? Better to die in reality than live forever here. You presume to understand what I need and what I want. You say you know who I am—"

"I do! I know you better than you know yourself."

"You don't know who I am!" Alyssa cried in a fury. "Only *I* know who I am."

She stood. At a thought, there was a crowbar in her hand. The champagne and cigarettes had showed her how to do that trick.

"I exist!" *the pocket universe cried*.

"That fact," Alyssa replied, "has not created in me a sense of obligation." She cocked her arm and flung the crowbar as hard as she could.

And broke the mirror.

* * *

How many people get to destroy a universe?

Sooner or later, Alyssa realized, every single one of them.

For what seemed an eternity—it might have been minutes, it might have been forever—she was alone. There was neither light, nor sound, nor smell, nor touch, nor taste, nor dimension. But at last she heard a soft flapping in the distance. Huginn and Muninn came flying back to her, slowly and heavily. First one and then the other settled upon her shoulders once again. Alyssa did not welcome their return. But she discovered, with dull surprise, that she found some comfort in their weight, their certainty.

With that, Alyssa found herself sitting at home in her chair. Her shotgun leaned against one arm, where she had left it at the beginning of this exercise. It gleamed gently in the moonlight, as well it should: She'd spent half the afternoon cleaning and polishing it. There were two shells in its chambers.

She picked up the shotgun. Then she went into her husband's room and, dry-eyed, did what had to be done.

She pulled the sheet over him.

Alyssa sat down on the edge of the bed, her back toward her husband. She did not spare him a second's thought. That part of her life was over.

She touched the stock of the shotgun to the floor. She closed her mouth around the muzzle. Only amateurs shot themselves any other way—the risk of surviving was too great. Stretching one arm downward, she placed her thumb on the trigger. Any last thoughts? Just one: *Memento mori*. Remember you must die. She knew what other people thought it meant. But by her reading, it was simply the last item on a very long to-do list. If you hadn't died yet, you couldn't say that you'd led a rich, full life. Which she had. So she pushed.

Her world shattered like a mirror.