

THINGS TO DO IN DEIMOS WHEN YOU'RE DEAD

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Per Ludecus woke with his face pressed to black marble.

He remembered almost nothing. He had no idea where he was or how he had got there.

He was laid out too artfully to have just stumbled and blacked out. It was more as if he had stretched out to sleep, letting go of a spray of cut flowers that he must have been holding. Their pastel-colored bulbs formed a frozen firework-burst around his head and upper body.

He ached a little, but it was only the sort of ache that came from lying in one position too long. The discomfort abated as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. There was a little dizziness, so he did not rush to get to his feet.

Through semi-blurred eyes he took in his surroundings.

Buildings enclosed a wide square floored in black. The buildings were white, their style classical, with arches, pillars, porticos, cupolas, gables, and so on.

Italianate? Possibly. But that was as much as Per knew about architecture.

Judging by their black-paned or mostly shuttered windows, the majority of the buildings were no taller than three or four stories in height. A few spires and clock

towers loomed higher, but nothing that struck him as out of keeping with the others.

Above the buildings hung a sky of a deep heraldic blue. The Sun was a yellow coin, neither too faint nor too bright, and low enough to cast mauve-tinted shadows where its light was denied.

Various clocks, dotted on towers, spires, gables, and ornaments, all displayed contradictory times.

Grit pricked his left palm.

It was a dusting of fine pale sand, blown across the square, individual grains sparkling against the marble. Per raised himself to a crouch and gathered up the flowers, feeling some protective impulse toward them. Other than a few petals still dappling the floor, they had not been harmed.

A line from an advertising brochure floated into his consciousness:

Luducus cultivars: robust against damage.

Per stood up, the last traces of numbness ebbing away. Someone had put antique clothes on him. He wore a loose, billowing arrangement of sheets and gowns, as if he had just stepped out of a Renaissance painting. His arms, legs, and feet were bare. He felt instantly vulnerable, reminded of one of those dreams where he found himself away from home, inadequately dressed.

Pressing the flowers close to his chest, Per padded across the silent square. Gaps lay between the buildings—black-floored alleys and streets feeding off in different directions. All he saw down them were more white buildings, their lower parts steeped in shadow.

He remembered . . . something.

Being on his way somewhere. A duty to family, goods to sell. He looked down at the flowers again.

Touting for business down-system, in the warm worlds much nearer the Sun than Neptune and Umbriel. Starting with Mercury, then working back out.

Twelve months away, he had told his wife. Fifteen at the most. Eighteen at the very worst.

Nestor had accepted. She had known there was no other choice, if the business was to survive.

But this was not Mercury. Or at least no version of Mercury that conformed to his preconceptions. They had domes on Mercury; cities where a person could walk around without suffocating, boiling alive, or freezing. But on Mercury the dayside Sun should have been much larger than that yellow disc above him, larger and fiercer by far.

So not Mercury.

Per circled the square again, uneasily. The city had to be somewhere in the system. If he had arrived here, then sooner or later he would be noticed. If he had been meant to arrive somewhere else, then sooner or later his absence there would be noted as well. People would work out where he had ended up. Nestor would expect to hear from him before long.

That was how it worked. No one just went missing.

The statues had been in the square all along, but his attention had skipped over them on first examination. There were broken ranks of them, tucked close to the bases of the buildings, sometimes beneath overhangs. At first glance, lost in partial shadow, they might be mistaken for columns or other embellishments.

Per walked from statue to statue, studying them intently, as if they might hold some clue to his predicament. But none of the statues struck any chord of recognition. They were nameless, uninscribed. There was a grandeur in their stances, but their faces were anonymous, neither particularly heroic nor exaggeratedly beautiful: just ordinary women and men, albeit draped in loose, unostentatious garments not

unlike the clothes in which he found himself. Heel-high banks of white sand softened the lower edges of their plinths.

Something caught his eye: a fast flicker of color in the square. Per snapped around, but whatever had snagged his notice was gone. All that remained was the subliminal impression of movement, of something flashing low across the marble from one corner of the square to the other.

Unease transmuted to annoyance and then quickly to anger. This was not just wrong, it was negligent.

“Hey!” Per said, cupping hands to mouth. “I’m here, you know! Somebody do something!”

His words echoed out uselessly beyond the square.

No answer came.

With a certain reluctance—as if cajoled into a game that he had no desire to play—Per ventured down the nearest of the peripheral streets. The black marble continued, cold and gritty under his soles. He wandered past rows of white-fronted buildings displaying the same classical forms as the structures around the square. Gloomy, shadow-haunted alleys led off to either side, sometimes sloping up and down. Now and then a covered bridge crossed overhead, and occasionally he looked down at a darkening alley beneath him.

The statues continued, dotted along the street, flanking intersections. The amount of sand along their bases was increasing, and with that came a realization that the marble was becoming grittier, the influx of sand more noticeable than in the square. It was piling up around the columns of buildings, forming knee-high drifts in abandoned doorways.

Some way out from the square Per came across a curious and forbidding thing. It was a bridge, accessed by a side-alley. Humpbacked, floored with marble, it vaulted out over a street one level beneath his present elevation. But the bridge had no other end. Halfway across it ended in a display of jagged, broken masonry, as if it had been made complete and then broken in two. Yet there was no trace of the other half: no foundations, abutments, or even a rubble pile.

Per walked the rising curve of the bridge until he was near the edge. He noticed that the broken masonry was a deliberate artistic effect, rather than the result of neglect or vandalism.

He stood near the bridge’s termination, but something compelled him against venturing any further. The drop to the street below was no more than twice his height: enough to sprain an ankle or break a bone, but not exactly the sort of drop to induce a dread of vertigo.

And yet feeling there was: a knot of foreboding in his stomach that seemed to harden and enlarge the nearer he got to the edge.

It was something more than vertigo.

The bridge unsettled Per, but once he reversed his steps to its completed end, all ominous thoughts dissipated. Looking back, it was no more than an odd, folly-like piece of civic art.

Per was certain, nonetheless, that the feelings would return just as swiftly if he went back to its edge.

* * *

Putting the bridge behind him, he wandered further, sometimes turning corners, going up and down sloping alleys, crossing complete and perfectly ordinary bridges and ducking under others, no trace of that specific knot of foreboding returning, but always keeping a mental tally of his movements. The tallest clocktower was just off the square, and he made sure not to lose sight of it for too long.

In truth, there was little chance of getting lost. The city turned out to be surprisingly

finite. If the square's width was a baseline of distance, Per could not have walked—as the crow flew—more than ten such units before he reached the city's termination.

The marble vanished into sand. Banks of sand hugged against the walls of the buildings on the very edge, half-smothering them. Beyond that limit, the sand had built up into dunes with a humped, angular look to them, betraying the carcasses of buildings now entirely swallowed. One or two taller spires and clocktowers jutted out in the distance, but they were tilted over, leaning into some inevitable future collapse.

Per called out again, but with less conviction this time. Where the city had echoed his voice back to him, the pale sand absorbed it with deadening finality.

"Help me," he called, with diminishing will. "I'm not meant to be here. I've got a wife and children!"

He turned back to the square, still treasuring his flowers.

Ludacus cultivars: robust against damage. Five centuries of genetic shaping have given our flowers unrivaled tolerance against vacuum and radiation.

If Ludacus cultivars won't thrive, nothing will.

Per had wandered vistas like this in dreams. Unlike in a dream, though, the city remained stubbornly rational within its own terms of reference. The steps he had taken, the routes he had chosen, were all reversible. In so far as any part of it was becoming familiar, he recognized statues and architectural features. The clocktower brought him back to the square—the Main Square, he now thought of it—since he had crossed smaller ones on the way to the margin, but nothing comparable with the first.

Per found the approximate spot where he had first come round, still marked by a few loose petals.

He sat down dejectedly, flowers nearly spilling back onto the marble. He had no clear sense of time. None of the shadows around him seemed to have moved an inch. The Sun was still where he remembered, as if jammed in its course.

A thought crystallized: they had put him to sleep and he had woken here. But what if this whole experience was a fault in the process, a sort of pseudo-conscious episode, when he was still meant to be properly under? What if he was still under, in some sense? Perhaps all Per needed to do was go back to sleep again, or at least go through the motions.

He lay down, still holding the flowers, but assuming the position in which he had come round. The marble's cold reached him through the billowing garments. It was an awareness of cold, rather than the feeling itself: a secondhand report than a direct impression.

He closed his eyes, trying to submerge back into whatever condition he had been in before rousing. Around him Per grew conscious of the city's stillness, the unblemished sky, the unmoving Sun, the labyrinth of quiet, gloom-dappled streets radiating out from the square.

No movement or change except the stirring of sand, propelled by breezes too faint to register against skin.

Something flashed, pulsing through his eyelids.

He opened his eyes in time to catch a thread of bright color speeding through Main Square. He had been in error before: it was not moving above the marble, but just beneath it, as if what he had taken to be marble was only very dark glass, capable of transmitting light if it was sufficiently bright.

Sensing sleep's futility—intrigued as much as troubled—Per stood up again.

He watched and waited.

A flash of color came again, but this time taking a different course through Main Square. It was a rapidly moving thread, with a head and a tail, like some swift-slithering luminous snake. Its course was angular: straight lines and hard corners.

Per waited some more.

Once every few minutes, one of those streaks of color crossed Main Square. They came and went so quickly that it was easy to understand why he had missed most of them before. They were easier to see where the buildings' shadows jagged across the marble; harder to see where the Sun's light fell unimpeded. Now that Per was fixated on them, though, he realized that the threads followed predictable paths. It was as if there was a fixed network of angular channels beneath the marble, intersecting and branching.

He moved to one of these apparent tracks, wondering if the marble was different in coldness or texture directly above it. He stroked his free hand across the surface, brushing aside sand grains, until his fingers touched a narrow band that was warmer and more yielding than the areas surrounding it.

He pushed a little, and his fingertips dipped into the black.

Per withdrew them just as quickly, then—satisfied that nothing had happened to them—he pushed in deeper, submerging his entire hand to the wrist. The warmth gloved them, a gel-like pressure pushing in from all sides. A dim, watery impression of his hand showed through the black.

It had been no part of his experiment to have his hand in the floor when the next thread arrived, but Per had not really thought that part through. By the time his eye detected the arrival of a thread, it was much too late to instruct his muscles to withdraw. By chance, the thread picked exactly the course across Main Square to intersect his hand. Per felt a sudden electric surge: not pain, exactly, but an intensity of impression that was almost orgiastic. He was already pulling out the hand, but it was still far too slow. The thread fire-hosed through his palm, shattering into smaller, disconnected threads as it did so. Even as he wrenched his hand out of the floor and staggered back, Per observed these smaller threads worm away on divergent paths.

A voice shouted: "The damned fool!"

Another, the tone fractionally more reasonable: "Perhaps we should help him first, then do the judgment-casting?"

The first, a woman: "He won't know the damage he's done!"

"No," said the second. "But given that no one was here to welcome him and explain things, he can hardly be blamed. Remember how it was for us?"

"I don't want to remember," the first said, with a melancholic edge to her answer.

"Thank goodness he didn't try to cross the Bridge of Oblivion."

"Maybe that would have been the kinder thing."

"No," the second said firmly. "I don't believe that, and neither do you." He added, encouragingly: "Come on, old thing. Let's see what providence has gifted us, after so long a wait!"

Per's left hand tingled, even though it was now fully out of the grasp of the floor. A reflex had him dropping the flowers from the right hand and rubbing life back into the left. He had sprawled onto his back, but at just the right angle to be able to see the two figures crossing over to him through Main Square. They were like the figures on the statues brought to life: a woman and a man, perfectly ordinary in their appearance, wearing loose, billowing gowns, their limbs mostly bare. Like him, in fact.

They reached Per, and without any initial word helped him back into a sitting position. He studied them more closely. They both appeared to be middle-aged, with the woman perhaps a few years older than the man, although of course it was nearly impossible to tell. She had a broad, symmetrical face with expressive lips and narrowed, faintly distrusting eyes. Her shoulder length hair was thickly curled, black threaded with silver. The man had a narrower face, with an aquiline nose and a doubtful, worried set to his lips. His hair was white, cropped close to his scalp: blazing and pale as the sands beyond the city.

"I shouldn't be here."

"Nor should anyone," the man answered, his eyes lingering on Per's for one foreboding instant.

"How long have you been here?" the woman asked.

"I don't know. Two or three hours. Maybe more, maybe less. My wife will want to hear from me." He glanced down at the marble again. "What are those threads? Where is this place?"

The man asked: "What do you remember, before coming here?"

He hesitated before answering. It was as if the memories were sticky, not arriving as fluidly as they ought.

"I was on my way in from . . . Umbriel, on commercial business. My name is Per Ludecus. I'm a flower seller. A plant geneticist. My wife is . . . Nest. Nestor. My children . . ."

The woman cut across his rambling. "You work alone, or in a small, privately run concern. Business is challenging. Your margins are tight."

"Yes," he answered eagerly. Then, frowning: "How would you know?"

"Because you traveled the cheap way," the man replied. Then, nodding at his companion: "Just like we did. Just like everyone else who ended up here."

At last Per found some cause for hope. "Others ended up here?"

"Indeed," the woman said. "But they've gone now. There's just the two of us, and it's been that way for a long time. We weren't really expecting anyone else."

"If others have come and gone, as you say, then there's a way out. A way to resume my journey."

The man made a low sniffing sound. He looked to the woman, some silent, difficult exchange passing between them.

"He may as well know," he said quietly. "This isn't a pill that gets any less bitter by delaying it."

"I'm worried that he's not what he seems," the woman confided. "It's been such a while. What if he's something sent in from outside, to root us out?"

Something, she said. Not someone, but something.

"If he was an agent, old thing, I doubt we'd have caught him messing with the flow the way he was. He'd be trying to blend in as one of us, not cause aggravation."

Per regarded his hand as if it had been snakebit. The tingling had abated, but he still had the memory of it. "What did I do wrong?"

"Did you look at the small print, when you choose your mode of travel?" the man asked. "No, silly question: I mean, who does that?"

"What small print?"

Some part of the woman's lingering distrust seemed to melt away. "I'm Hypatia. This is Cicero. You'll take a name for yourself, soon enough."

"I just told you my name."

Pity creased her features. "That's your old name. We've all had old names. But the sooner you discard them, the better it is. Your old life is over. So are all the ties to that old life, including your former identity."

"I'll decide that for myself."

"He looks like a Hector to me," Cicero said. "Shall we call him Hector, until it sticks?"

"You'll call me Per. And, again, what small print?"

"What Cicero's referring to are the conditions of transit you agreed to when you set off from . . . Umbriel, was it?"

"Conditions of transit?" he echoed.

"There are really only three ways to move around the Solar System," Cicero said. "Those with money and time may travel awake, in a luxury passenger berth, on one of the high-burn liners. It's boring, but it's *expensive* and boring, so for some it's a way to

advertise their wealth. And you get to see a little scenery on the way. The middle way, the most common choice, is straightforward hibernation. You travel on the same high-burn liner, but they can squeeze more sleepers into the holds, so it's reasonably affordable. But still not what you'd call cheap. So you go the third way. You're still frozen, but all corners are cut. The procedures for going in and out of hibernation are streamlined. Significantly higher risk of medical complications—say one in ten thousand chances of death, against one in a hundred thousand, otherwise. And you get shipped whichever way works, on any routing. You're packed into a self-contained module about the size of a coffin, and that module can be tucked into any vacant slot in any cargo hold, with any consignment, in any class of ship, all the way down to the lowliest robot freighter, or even just shot ballistically from point to point. Statistically it's the fastest way to get around the system, since you don't have to sit around waiting for some plump luxury liner to swing round. Fast, usually, but with downsides."

"I accepted the risk," Per replied. "One in ten thousand is still low." He frowned against the stickiness of recollection. "We were in trouble! The slump. The increased rent. Nestor . . . my odds on bankruptcy were about one in two unless I found new customers! I have a family to think about."

"Had," Cicero corrected gently.

Per stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Don't worry, Hector: there's no reason that those loved ones aren't still alive back on Umbriel. But they're not *your* loved ones any more. You're gone. You're dead to them: quite literally."

"Your family will already have been informed of your demise," Hypatia said.

"This is the point where you have to start letting go of them," Cicero continued. "It's hard. Trust us, we know. We've both been through it. We had lives and loved ones before we ended up here in Florentine, cut off from everything we used to know. We tried to cling on—it's only natural—but in the end it just causes more pain. You're dead. There's no way back for you now."

"I'm not dead," Per asserted.

"In the small print," Hypatia said, "there was a specific clause about conditions arising from a medical or technological event leading to your brain death during any point in the transit. They said that Swift Intersolar had the right to monetize any neural patterns still recoverable from your head. That meant that the company was allowed to extract and commoditize any memories, transferrable skills, or useful personality traits that they felt had market value."

Per shrugged. "I agreed to that. It's just small print. It's how they offset the costs of transit, which are still considerable. And you just said it—it *only* applies in the case of brain death." He touched a hand to his chest. "Hello! I'm here and I'm conscious, otherwise you wouldn't be talking to me. I remember my name, my family, my profession, everything! So there's been no brain death!"

"Now and then," Cicero said patiently, "they get it wrong. An event happens—some incident along the way. Probably a genuine accident. They assess your brain and the system marks you down as brain-dead. Maybe there's damage, who knows. But what matters is that the terms of the small print are activated. You get scanned at a much deeper level, squeezed like a sponge, for those memories and skill-sets they can sell on. But here's the rub. You're not actually brain-dead. So more of you comes through the scan than is meant to. Your consciousness comes along for the ride, but no one realizes it. You end up inside Swift Intersolar's computers: a data-ghost that isn't meant to be there. Even the computers don't know you're inside them. You're just drifting around, a loose end running on surplus processor cycles, lost to the world, smoke on the wind. And not long after this has happened, your physical body's already been marked for chemical recovery. Not that it matters: there's no way back

into that bottle anyway.”

“No,” Per said, in flat denial. “I’m not dead. I’d know if I was dead.”

“I can’t remember if we’re still placing bets on them saying that,” Hypatia lamented. “But I think if we were, I’d still be ahead.”

“Thing is, Hector, everyone feels the same way. They can’t be dead. But eventually it sinks in. Gradually you’ll come around to it, too. You’ll notice things, like the absence of hunger or thirst. Or the fact that you can feel things, like warmth and cold, but everything’s at one remove. That’s because none of this is real.” Cicero swept his arm around the square. “Danae made this. She was the first of us. If not the first, then certainly the first to have enough force of will to impose some kind of structure on the limbo in which she found herself.”

“Danae dreamed up this city,” Hypatia said, with a reverence in her voice. “Out of nothing. All was formless and void, and then Danae forged this. Think of it as a consensual illusion, shared only by those of us who arrive here. She named it Florentine: a city made of willpower.”

“Are you really the last ones left?”

“Yes,” they replied in mournful unison.

“So where did Danae go, not to mention all the others?”

Hypatia and Cicero bid him to stand. They walked to one of the statues Per had surveyed upon his arrival. It was the image of a proud-looking but otherwise unremarkable woman, with scrolls in one hand and the other arm raised in a loose, commanding gesture out to the square, as if to say: *look on my works, ye mighty*.

“Danae left us eventually,” Hypatia said. “She died the Second Death: ceasing to exist even as a pattern within the system. We fade away, in time. We aren’t meant to be here. There are no error-correction mechanisms working to safeguard our patterns against gradual attrition. Entropy chips away at us. We can slow it, but not stop it. Nothing is permanent.”

“Except Danae’s city?”

“Not even that,” Cicero said. “How far did you wander? If you went more than a few blocks in any direction you’d have eventually reached Florentine’s civic limits.”

“I saw sand dunes, and what looked like buildings swallowed up whole. I also came across a strange bridge that I didn’t like.”

They exchanged guarded looks. “You *did* find the Bridge of Oblivion, then,” Hypatia said. “Well, don’t worry—there’s only one of them, and by the fact of you still being here, it seems you had the good sense not to cross it.”

“I couldn’t cross it—half of it was gone.”

“But if you had stepped over the threshold . . .” Cicero said, leaving the rest of his thought uncompleted. “Never mind that for now. At least you’ll know what to avoid.”

Per remembered the knot of foreboding. “Why put something so unpleasant in a city?”

“Don’t judge it by that one feature,” Hypatia said. “There is beauty in Florentine, as well. Of course much less than there used to be. You could wander in it for days, and never retrace your steps. There were lovely gardens. Gardens and fountains. It was wonderful, once. And it wasn’t empty, like it is today. There were many more of us. There was life, of a kind, even in death. Life and laughter.”

“Danae died, then,” Per said. “And so will you?”

“Each of us,” Cicero said. “Including you. There’s no way to prevent it. In the tiniest of degrees, you’ll have already suffered some small attrition. Some tiny, inconsequential memory, that you could have recalled when you first arrived, but which is now lost. But it goes beyond memory. The sand scours us away completely. It blasts us to nothing. There’s no reversing it, no fighting it. Your fate is to live and die in Florentine, and you can’t change it.”

“Nothing matters, then,” Per said, accepting these propositions as true for the time being, for the sake of argument, even as his core rebelled against them. “Then this is pointless! You’d have been better off evaporating away the moment you were scanned. What’s the sense in an afterlife like this?” But some prickling intuition dragged his thoughts back to the moment when they had found him, staggering backward as he wrenched his hand from the bright flow beneath the marble. “Something *does* matter, doesn’t it, or you wouldn’t have sounded so concerned.”

“He’s not ready,” Hypatia said.

“Let’s face it, old thing,” Cicero replied. “When was any of us ever ready?”

* * *

They walked to the limits of Florentine, but in a different direction than Per had taken initially. He sensed that they wanted him as far away from Main Square as possible, until they were sure that he was not going to react in some impulsive, damaging manner. There had been threads beneath the marble some way beyond the square, in the side streets and alleys, but they had thinned out as they neared the margins, and now the black surface beneath his feet was untroubled by flashes of speeding light.

They stood on a stone-railed balcony, overlooking silvery dunes. The dunes pushed a permanent warm breeze their way, driving fingers and flurries of sand into the city, augmenting the mounds already gathering at the bases of statues, pillars, and walls.

“Danae did more than forge Florentine,” Hypatia said. “The threads you’ve seen are her greater gift, trumping the city itself. Before I explain the nature of the threads, though, it will help if you understand a little more about the nature of Florentine and where it resides.”

“Something has to exist to reside,” Per pointed out.

“True, and Florentine *does* exist—albeit as a furtive, slowly degrading data-structure persisting undetected inside the Swift Intersolar computer cores. Those cores have a very real physical manifestation, though. They’re inside Deimos, one of the moons of Mars. That moon is where Swift Intersolar conducts its corpse-scanning, data-extraction, commodification, and corpse-reprocessing. When something goes wrong during a transit, the damaged bodies are always routed to Deimos.”

“I can’t say it was on my itinerary.”

Next to him Cicero smiled. “It’s on nobody’s itinerary. Swift Intersolar owns the moon and keeps a tight lock on it. What goes on here is commercially sensitive. But it’s more than just corpse harvesting. That’s not even the main profit line now.”

“What is?”

“Secure data services,” Hypatia said. “Swift Intersolar has a developing sideline in information brokering, across the whole system. Financial transactions, ultra-secure private communications, extralegal content—it all gets handled by Swift, and it all comes through Deimos.”

“That doesn’t sound very efficient.”

She went on: “Efficiency isn’t the point. Swift’s clients are paying for privacy, not speed. It doesn’t matter where Mars is, relative to any of the other worlds, just that the communications are guaranteed to be secure. Discretion is the watchword. This is a service so expensive, and so exclusive, almost no one outside of Swift’s client base even knows it exists.”

“And the threads?”

“Danae’s masterstroke,” Hypatia said warmly, her eyes moistening as she stared out to the dunes. “A reason for all this. Those data services come to a nexus in Deimos, a tangle of junctions and exchanges. Florentine is built around that tangle! Beneath her streets, the data-flows are made manifest. When you dipped your hand

beneath the marble, you were disturbing one of those communications bursts! You shattered the packets, sent some of them one way, some more another. You affected a change in the physical world!"

"Fortunately," Cicero said soothingly, "your intervention was too brief to draw any serious attention to itself. Swift's systems would have detected a problem with that data transmission, put it down to noise, then quickly remedied itself. You did no lasting harm." After a moment he added: "No lasting good either."

"Good?" Per queried.

"We'll talk about that."

* * *

They walked back to Main Square. Nothing much had changed since they were last there: no alteration in the position of the Sun or the encroachment of the shadows.

"It's always a long, sleepy afternoon here, isn't it?"

"There used to be days and nights," Hypatia answered. "And the clocks used to tell the same time. But Florentine is deteriorating. Danae knew that the decay was inevitable: the best she could do was prioritize the things that matter, like the flows beneath the marble. This square is the crux, and it'll be the last thing to go. When the dunes finally claim these buildings surrounding us, there will still be a little patch of marble, with these flows under it. That will succumb sooner or later, but at least there will still be a chance to intervene right until the end."

"Assuming someone is left around to do the intervening," Cicero added morosely.

"While there's still commerce, and corner-cutting, and small print no one bothers reading, others will come," Hypatia said.

"What were you, before you came here?" he asked.

"Who remembers, or needs to remember?" Cicero asked rhetorically. Then, after a thoughtful pause: "Sometimes I catch myself humming notes. I stop and think to myself: that interval's a perfect fifth, or a suspended seventh, or suchlike. That's the Phrygian mode, or the Aeolian. It suggests to me that I must have had something to do with music, but I can't really be sure. Perhaps I just liked music. Not everything that flits through our minds is a clue."

"I may have been a landscaper," Hypatia said. "When we go to the edge of the city, and look out to the dunes, I feel an urge to shape, to move matter around in large quantities. I want to get dirt under my nails. I want to put a river here, a lake there, a mountain over there. It's an itch that persists after all else is gone."

"Perhaps you would have had a use for my flowers."

"They're an exogram," she said. "A mental projection: a solidification of some important part of your identity. Many of us carry exograms into Florentine, but they fade in time."

"Fade?"

Cicero clarified: "A nice way of saying cease to exist."

"Is that what happens to us, as well?" Per asked. "Or do our patterns end up somewhere else?"

"You're still clinging to hope," Hypatia said, shaking her head slowly.

Cicero smiled in Per's defense. "He'll come round. We all came around in the end." Then he knelt to the ground, lifting his eyes out across the square. By the time Per saw the thread worming its way across the open ground, zigzagging sharply, Cicero had already plunged his hand into the yielding surface. The flow rocketed beneath them, Cicero's face tensing in concentration. "The trick . . ." he said, through gritted teeth, "is to cup the flow, but not interrupt it. Squeeze and constrict, but not block. When you've done this a few hundred times, you'll start to develop an awareness. At first all you sense is a juddering rush of impressions, too rapid and complex to

understand. Over time, you begin to read the flow. Information leaks through: information, meaning, intent. You learn what the flow signifies, and where it's going."

"And how to alter it," Hypatia said. Mirroring Cicero, she knelt down a few paces from him and dipped her own hand into the black, locating a parallel course.

Soon a flow slithered beneath her: a luminous banded snake of many colors.

"Our interventions must be subtle," Cicero said, relaxing in the hiatus between flows, but still keeping his hand beneath the marble. "We make very deliberate, small alterations to the information streams passing through Deimos, enough to effect a beneficial change in the real world. But it can't be anything too large, anything that might draw attention to ourselves."

Per frowned. "Isn't drawing attention to ourselves exactly what we should be doing?"

Cicero lifted an eyebrow. "Because you think there might be a way out of this?"

"I don't know. Even if there isn't, even if we're stuck in here forever, wouldn't you still want the world to know? That way they can stop Florentine being eroded away, and keep our patterns the way they are now. At least we wouldn't have to die the Second Death." Per echoed the way Hypatia had spoken about Danae's end, putting a hard emphasis on those two words. "That's worth something, isn't it?"

"I like you, Hector," Cicero said. "You have a refreshing absence of cynicism."

"I'm not called . . ." But Per sighed, too weary to fight that particular battle. "What do I need to be cynical about?"

"Everything," Hypatia said. "Especially the likely consequences of Swift Intersolar discovering that their computer cores are haunted by the spirits of lost travelers. They wouldn't act to preserve us. They'd run a deep-level audit and erase us for good."

Per waved his flowers in feeble protest. "I don't really believe I'm dead, you know."

They looked unsurprised. Hypatia said: "Of course not. No one ever does. To start with."

"But if I accepted it—which I'm not saying I will—but *if* I accepted it—then the injustice of this . . ."

"The injustice is our burden to carry," Cicero said patiently. "Revenge gets us nowhere. Even if you did by some miracle manage to get a message out to someone who cared, someone with the means to stop us being erased, even the ability to turn back the decay, it would end our ability to make beneficial alterations." He tensed again as another flow came speeding into his cupped grip. "It's a balance of two opposing societal goods. You want restitution for what's happened to you, and that's understandable. But while we remain undetected, we can do many small deeds. Numerous small acts of charity, set against one singular act of justice. That's the balance that has to be struck."

"I suppose you made your choices long ago."

"Right now," Cicero said, with a determined set to his face, "I'm making a minute adjustment to a set of credit ratings. Too tiny to be detected by the error-correction systems, but enough to change a few lives for the better. There is a family on Triton, an agronomist smallholding collective that's had a few lean centuries. They need a loan . . . a microscopic loan in the scheme of things. It'll be turned down with their existing credit rating, but with the change I've made they'll just scrape over the threshold for authorization. No one will be hurt; no one else will be made materially poorer, but this family gets a chance." His expression turned impassive. "It'll still be difficult for them, I know. They might still fail. But at least they've got a chance now."

Hypatia said: "I'm making tiny adjustments to medical insurance claims, all over the system. Nothing big enough to raise any flags, automated or human, but sufficient to help some lives for the better. As an example, there's a young woman on Titan with a rare congenital condition who can't quite meet the criteria for treatment under her existing policy. Now she can, by a whisker. She won't know how her fate

was changed, and neither will anyone else, but that's how it has to be."

Cicero said: "Yesterday—by which I mean yesterday in the real world—I assisted a political activist on Iapetus. He'd made enemies by daring to stand up to some powerful vested interests. There was a concerted effort to spoil his chances in a local election. But by a narrow margin the vote went his way, and he's now riding a groundswell of support."

"You could do damage to people, as well as good," Per said.

"Yes," Hypatia admitted. "But it's far better that we don't. Cicero could have exposed that man's enemies, but sooner or later that would have risked the light being shone onto us. While we can still continue to do good, we intervene only in a fashion which is all but undetectable. And we—or whoever's left—will keep doing that until the sands finally take Florentine."

"You want me to be a part of this."

"It's your decision," Cicero said, with an unconcerned shrug. "It's not like we'd force you, even if we had the means. Ultimately, it boils down to a simple moral choice. You can refuse to act, or you can act recklessly—getting that adrenaline-kick of revenge you crave so badly—or you can keep making things a little bit better for people you'll never meet, who will never know they were helped, and who will never know you existed."

"The ultimate selflessness. The gift given without the least hope of reward."

Hypatia regarded him. "It's not the worst thing to do, if you're already dead."

"I'm not."

"No, but imagine that you were. And then wonder why anyone would put you through this charade unless it was the truth? Put those two thoughts together and you're already a step closer to acceptance."

"You might think that."

"Only because we've both been through it, and we've watched others make the same adjustment." Cicero extended his free arm in a friendly, encouraging gesture. "I know it's hard. Look, how about this. Play along with us, treat this as a purely intellectual exercise, and we'll say no more about being dead. At least it'll give you something to do; a challenge to focus on."

"Purely intellectual?" Slowly, Per set his flowers down onto the black marble.

Cicero extracted his hand and moved to Per's side. He took Per's wrist and guided it to the spot where he had been cupping the flow. "Wait for it, and close your fingers just enough to make contact. Hold it for as long as you can. That'll be enough of a challenge for now."

* * *

Cicero was right: it was a challenge.

But Per learned and learned well.

There were no days in Florentine, no weeks or months, but there were interminable changeless hours, and he needed thousands of them to begin to approach the skill of his mentors. They were patient, Hypatia and Cicero, for they had each been through the same protracted tutelage. Each understood that there was no part of that education that could be safely rushed. Per had made one blundering intervention when he first arrived, but now that he had a modicum of ability he was capable of doing far more harm. A little learning was a dangerous thing, as the saying went. It was a strain for them, to observe the slow progression of his talent, yet know that it must be allowed to develop at its own rate. And there was pressure, although neither spoke of it openly. Per could only be mentored while his mentors existed.

His initial interventions, closely supervised, were of the smallest possible kind. That way there was less risk of exposure if he made an error. He did not change lives, but he made entire days better for the people whose fates he touched. Only when he was judged to have achieved the most basic competence was Per allowed to

make more lasting interventions, and even these were intensely monitored. When he made the inevitable mistake, Cicero and Hypatia were quick to put things right. Per was neither chastised nor punished for these lapses, but his training reverted a step, circling around until he was ready to progress again. He accepted these setbacks with grace and patience. Slowly he made fewer errors, and then eventually he made hardly any at all. His mentors began to allow him more freedom to select and implement interventions of his choosing. They looked over his shoulder less and less, trusting in Per's growing wisdom and judgment. Per would always be the newcomer, in his eyes as much as theirs, but in all other respects he had become an equal.

Slowly he allowed his old life to recede. One hour, without warning, he became aware that he had somehow discarded the flowers, leaving not a trace of them to be found anywhere. He had accepted the fact of his death, as quietly and without fanfare as if he had crossed some line of longitude while asleep.

Durable . . . he thought. But only up to a point.

In deference to Cicero, he accepted Hector as a name. It was as good as any other, and his easy assumption of it seemed to amuse them both. Hector-who-had-been-Per thought about his lost family from time to time, but with each instance of recollection there was an additional fogginess, a greying opacity to his memories, as if he viewed his past life through thickening substrates of imperfect glass. Time stripped more of him away. Gradually the specifics of Hector's life became vaguer. He had been a merchant of some kind, on one of the remoter moons. He had been loved and had given love in return, but when he tried to summon the specific texture of these feelings all that arrived was numbness, as if all of his emotional nerve endings had been painlessly severed. It saddened Hector that he had once been alive, but he was no longer sad to be dead. Being dead had become his natural condition.

Hector had a purpose, and that was enough.

He had put aside all thoughts of restitution. He accepted that what had happened to him was an offense of sorts, certainly a form of gross negligence, but as his interventions grew in subtlety and range he came to appreciate the balance of societal goods Cicero had once discussed. Now it was clear to him that it was a better thing that they did, even if their ministrations must be anonymous, the crimes against them forever unwitnessed. There was nobility in their altruism, as well as an endless intellectual challenge in finding new ways to influence the world. It was enough. Hector was satisfied; even, in a modest way, happy. His companions were dear to him. They had discarded their old lives like surplus baggage, but they had made new ones in Florentine. Hector was content.

Or at least he imagined so, until Hypatia left them.

* * *

They had hardly spoken of the Second Death after those first conversations following his revival. To his companions it was an unavoidable fact of their future, an enemy against which all negotiation was futile. Thinking about the Second Death would not delay it. Talking about it, earnestly confronting its nature, would not lessen its sting. Their actions in Florentine made no difference to the speed with which entropy attacked them. All they could do was cling onto those diminishing parts of themselves that the attrition had not yet touched. Memories and traits of their former selves were being stripped away like dead leaves on withered branches. They felt that autumnal pruning only as a slow, remorseless thinning out of their essential beings. They could not even mourn what was gone. To mourn something, it was necessary to hold a clear idea of what had been lost.

Hector supposed he had detected something of Hypatia's gradual thinning out, as indeed had Cicero. But since both of them were subject to the same process, albeit at different stages of progression, they had no fixed baseline against which to calibrate

Hypatia's decline. They were like guests at a party, getting drunk in lockstep. Although a sober observer would have registered their descent into blurry incoherence, to themselves they remained souls of sparkling, lively wit.

By the end, Hypatia had lost all memory of who or what she had been in her former life. Cicero had lost nearly everything, and Hector was only a little way behind him. What remained now was the expertise they had learned in Florentine. But even that was subject to decay: Hypatia had become slower, her interventions less precise, the outcomes of her actions necessarily smaller. She recognized that part of her decline and accordingly limited her exposure to risk, for fear of doing harm rather than good. Her instinct for kindness remained, but she was increasingly unable to channel it. Cicero and Hector did what they could, assuring Hypatia that they were a team, that it was the sum of their intentions that mattered, but Hypatia's grief could not be assuaged. It was grief for the loss of the one thing that gave meaning to her existence in this half-life between stations of death.

Over the course of her final hour Hypatia became unresponsive, then immobile, and then her form hardened to a blank-eyed effigy of pale stone. This was the Second Death, and at last Hector understood. Hypatia's effigy slid away from them across the marble, a game piece being moved by an invisible hand. She reached a corner of the square and a nameless plinth rose up beneath her, and she took her allotted place among the statues.

Wordlessly, Cicero and Hector had followed Hypatia to her resting place. Now Hector stared at her, finally comprehending the end that awaited them all. It had been there all along, but abstract, unconcretized. Hector shuddered under the sudden burden of realization. He turned from Hypatia's frozen cast to Cicero, and within him grew the first stirrings of a rage that he had long thought quenched.

"No more," Hector said. "No more. Someone pays! Someone finds out what's happened to us!"

"Hector . . ." Cicero began, reaching out to him.

Hector slipped out of his grasp and raced back across Main Square. By then he had developed a prickling intuitive sense about the imminence of the flows and the courses they would take beneath the marble. One was on its way. Hector balled his hand into a fist and rammed it into the black, just in time to intercept the flow. Not to cup it, not to influence it in a thousand subtle ways, but to shatter it, to render it senseless. To make a noise that no one and no thing in the world beyond would be able to ignore.

Bursting through his fist, the flow shattered and unraveled. Shards of broken color splintered out across Main Square.

Cicero fell on him. He grasped Hector's wrist and tried to wrench his hand from the flow.

"Hector, no!"

"This ends today," Hector replied, groaning against his strength. "You feel the same anger I do, Cicero—you've just pushed it away. But she deserves better than this! We all do!"

"They'll neutralize us. They'll erase Florentine. They'll erase you and me!"

"I don't care, so long as we make a mark. So long as someone, somewhere, pays attention."

He found leverage, grunting with effort. Hector's footing failed him and he collapsed back, his hand coming with him. His fist was a ball of prickling agony.

"Let me," Hector pleaded.

Cicero pressed his face close. Hector saw it then: the exact mirror of every emotion he was still capable of feeling. Cicero felt it all, his sense of shock and loss and fury no less than Hector's. But he held it in check.

"You're right," he said, his jaw grinding out the words. "She does deserve better.

But she believed in something better than revenge. She believed that a billion little deeds were better than one act of retaliation, however righteous the cause.” He nodded back out across the square. “You want to honor Hypatia? So do I. But there’s only one way we do it. By continuing the good work, with every fiber of our beings, while we still can.”

Something in Hector eased. He could struggle, but deep down he knew that he would eventually come round to the wisdom of Cicero’s position.

“I’m frightened.”

Wry amusement danced in Cicero’s eyes. “So am I. So were we all.”

“You’ll go the same way as Hypatia, sooner or later.”

Cicero mulled Hector’s words. “Later, rather than sooner, one might hope.” He began to straighten Hector’s garments, where their brief tussle had pulled them asunder. “Come. We’ve work to do. I think you were close to doing real harm, but not quite close enough.”

Hector worked his fingers, the prickling beginning to fade.

“Hypatia was right to distrust me, when I first arrived. When it came down to it, I nearly threw everything away.”

“Nearly,” Cicero said, easing them both to their feet. “Nearly, but not entirely. That’s the difference.”

* * *

Of course there came a day when Hector found himself alone at last, when Cicero assumed his place in the mute ranks of statues. By then, the rage had long since guttered out. Hector knew it to be so, for when Cicero underwent the Second Death what came over him was no longer anger, no longer a reckless longing for justice, but only an immense and abiding sadness, no easier to bear for all that he had tried to prepare for its eventuality.

Unable to gather his thoughts clearly enough to attempt any sort of intervention, even a kindly one, Hector ventured to the limits of Florentine. He did not have so far to go by then, for in the endless afternoon that separated his arrival from the death of Cicero, the dunes had encroached about a third of the way closer to Main Square. The streets and buildings that had once stood vanguard against the sand were now memorialized within it, slowly succumbing to the grinding predations of time. The balcony where Hypatia, Cicero, and Hector had overlooked the dunes was now a part of that wasteland, its shape only dimly apprehended. The towers and spires that Hector had once glimpsed in the distance were gone completely, although newer ones now projected above the dunes’ nearest flanks, beginning to tilt and crumble but not yet obliterated.

The incomplete bridge still stood, for it lay within the boundary of Florentine not yet consumed by sand. It would be swallowed eventually, but not for an eternity of hours.

Hector wondered if he could endure those hours, finally alone.

He had thought himself alone in Florentine after his arrival, but had soon been disabused of that notion. He had gained company, friendship, and purpose.

Now his solitude was complete.

He walked to the bridge’s broken limit, testing his will. He was ready for dissolution. He had committed good deeds. No more needed to be asked of him.

That was when Danae appeared, standing to one side on the bridge: neither blocking Hector from going on, nor encouraging him to turn back to the unconquered heart of Main Square.

Her form was neither of a living woman, nor of a statue, but some intermediate condition, and when she spoke it was with a voice like the warm breeze blowing in from the dunes.

"You are the last," she said.

"So it would seem. Are you real, Danae? I mean, as real as any of us ever were?"

"Your question begs the answer you already know. No, Hector. I'm not real in the sense you mean. I'm a condition of the city, when it detects its last living occupant. I made it so, before my own Second Death."

Hector nodded sadly, his hopes of companionship dashed as soon as they had been raised.

"A message from the grave, then."

"But a well-meant one." Danae nodded knowingly, as if he had completed some difficult task to her satisfaction. "You have found the Bridge of Oblivion, I see. That was another of my late gifts. I knew that there would one day be a last living soul in my city, and I did not think it kind that they should be condemned to inhabit it alone. Rather than wait for their Second Death, I provided a means of release."

"It was thoughtful of you, Danae."

"You need not hesitate, Hector. I promise you it will be painless. I promise you also that your good works here have meant something." The effigy touched a hand to her collarbone, breathing in. "But know this, before you decide. There is still good work to be done. And while it has been a very long while since you came to us, that does not mean you are necessarily the last."

Hector shook his head. "No one has come through since me. They must have tightened their procedures, closed whatever loophole allowed us to slip through."

"But someone may arrive, in time. That is not a certain thing, but it is at least an outside chance. Now ask yourself: would you wish them to arrive without a welcome?" She raised her chin, looking out beyond the bridge's completed end, to the remains of the city beyond it. "I made Florentine to be lived in, not haunted."

"No matter who comes through, there'll always be someone who ends up here, on this bridge."

"But until that day, there is possibility." She favored him with a distant, regal smile. "Think on it, Hector. And whatever decision you make, you have my blessing."

Danae faded, and Hector found myself alone again on the Bridge of Oblivion.

Pensively he knelt down and scooped pale sand from its marbled floor. He let it rain through his fingers, and when the last of it was gone he knew that his mind was settled.