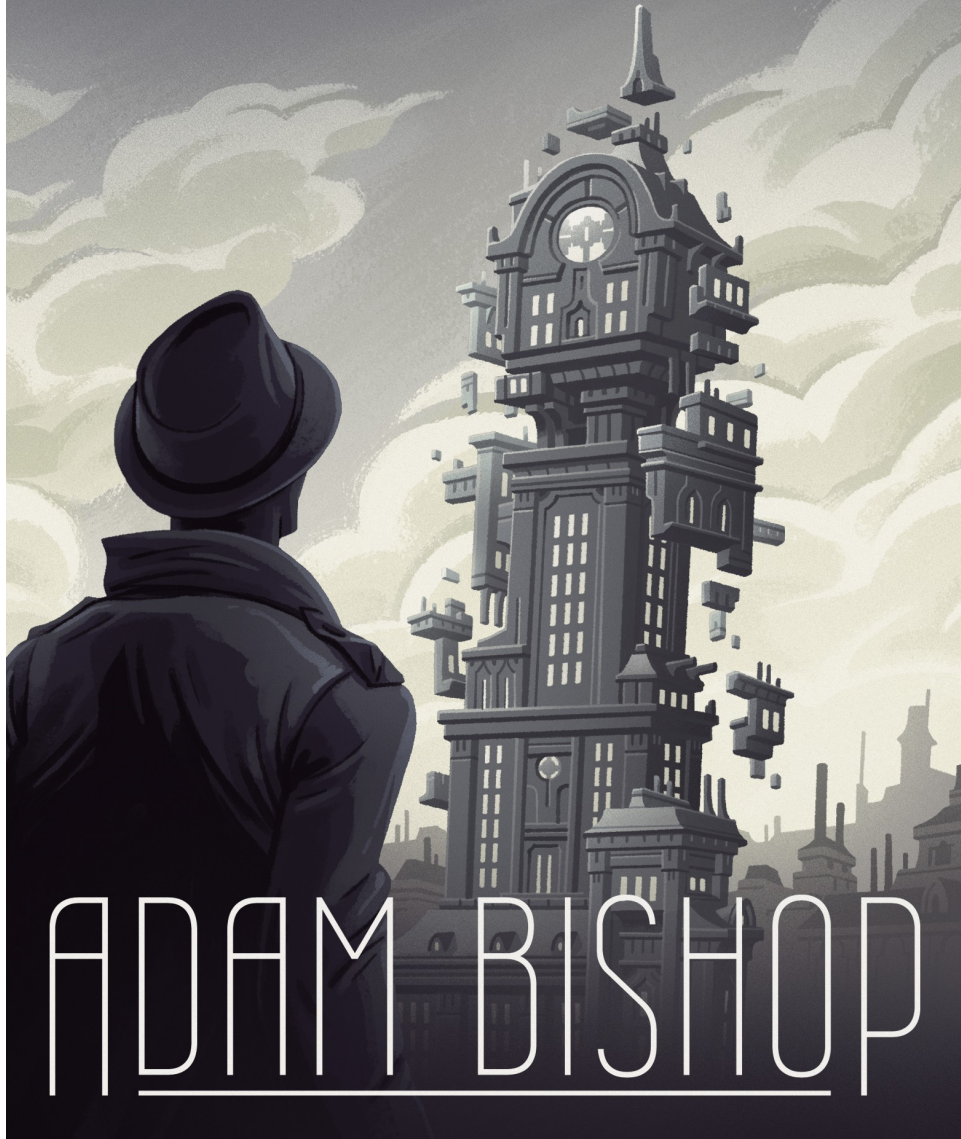


MEDICINE FOR GHOSTS

A DISILLUSIONERS SHORT STORY



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MEDICINE FOR GHOSTS

The rumour that brought Jarvis to Daruma was rather unusual. Prisoners of war weren't uncommon, but prisoners of war who didn't exist? Well, that was something worth looking into.

Jarvis stood outside of a tailor's shop in the middle of Daruma's primary commercial district. The area was almost completely devoid of human life. It was after 10:00 p.m., which at this time of year meant it was quite dark out. The light of the moon was all Jarvis had to see by. He was waiting for a horse-drawn carriage, and he didn't know who would be inside it. The anonymous letter he'd received said to wait here, and the story was too good for a young journalist to pass up.

Whoever was coming must have had money. Advances in Life magic had made it possible for horses to pull long carriages that operated like buses, carrying many people. Smaller carriages like the one Jarvis was apparently waiting for were strictly a luxury, reserved for those who didn't want to travel with the rabble and could afford not to. It was certainly a strange place to meet.

The sound of horse hooves clacking against the cobblestone street began echoing in the empty night air. Several seconds later, a lamp lit up the street as it came around a corner, and Jarvis could see that it was hanging from a horse drawn carriage. The driver didn't notice Jarvis at first, and the carriage went several metres down the street past him before coming to a stop. Jarvis cautiously walked over to the side of the carriage and stood still for a moment. There was no sound coming from within, and the driver made no noise from without. Jarvis rapped his knuckles gently on the carriage door. It opened, revealing the lone occupant.

"All aboard," she said.

Jarvis looked down the street to his left, then his right. There was no one around. Whoever this woman was, she didn't seem to have been followed. On the other hand, it wouldn't have been difficult to track the carriage by sound alone, staying out of sight, if that was what you wanted to do. Jarvis climbed in and took a seat opposite the woman. He closed the door, and the carriage began moving.

"This is a strange way to meet," Jarvis said.

"Isn't it a bit rude to start with the criticisms before we've been introduced?" the woman asked.

"You already know that I'm Jarvis Altair."

"And I'm Malon Hylia."

"Am I free to criticise now?" Jarvis asked.

"That hardly seems proper."

"So it does," said Jarvis. "Your letter was not entirely clear on why I needed to meet you here."

"How familiar are you with the peace treaty that ended the war with Untarezh twenty years ago?" Malon asked.

"Not very," Jarvis replied. "I know it's hell to get good wine any more."

"An avid drinker?"

"No," said Jarvis. In his line of work it was useful to know where to get things that people might want so that he could get what he wanted out of them: information. Freelance investigations didn't always pay particularly well, so he'd learned to rely on the barter system. It turned out that people wanted a lot of things other than money. It turned out that sometimes Jarvis knew how to get them. He wondered what Malon might want.

"So do you know anything about the terms?" Malon asked.

"The terms?"

"Of the peace treaty."

"I've already said that I don't know much."

"Do you always talk like this?" Malon asked, frustrated.

"Like what?"

"Like you don't want the conversation to get anywhere interesting."

“Who are you?” Jarvis asked.

“What?”

“Here’s my concern,” Jarvis started. “I’ve been hearing stories about how Cirilia is holding prisoners of war here in Daruma. Prisoners who we were told – who Untarezh was also told – were released at the end of the war. So I’m trying to see what I can do to confirm or deny these rumours, and then a week ago I get a letter from some unnamed individual who says they can get me proof that these prisoners exist. And so I wonder to myself: ‘Who would have an interest in drawing me out to Daruma and want to talk to me in a secluded place late at night?’ So, who *would* have an interest in drawing me out to Daruma to talk to me in a secluded place late at night?”

“I’m a doctor,” Malon informed him.

“A doctor?”

“A Life Practitioner, yes. I work for the army. I’ve been treating the prisoners for the past few months. That’s how I know they exist.”

“As an aside, how do you know we’re not being listened to right now? How do *I* know that?”

Malon wondered if Jarvis was capable of sticking to one topic for more than a few seconds. She said: “The sound of the horses’ hooves on cobblestone will drown out any sound coming from inside this carriage. No one outside will hear a thing.”

“And if we wind up on softer ground?”

“We won’t. I picked you up in this part of town on purpose, and the way we’re going is covered in cobblestone the entire way.”

“Where are we going, as it happens?” Jarvis asked.

“You’ll know when we get there. But we don’t have all night, so can we talk about what I brought you here to talk about or not?”

Jarvis dropped his interrogation. “Here’s what I know about the peace treaty,” he began. “I know that we’ve been at peace with Untarezh for eighteen years. I know the border is completely blocked off, so neither goods nor people can cross. I know that all prisoners of war were supposed to be released when hostilities ceased, and that people in Untarezh would be pretty angry to discover that loved ones they thought were killed in combat had been kept alive by our government for *Ancestors know* what reason for two decades. Is there anything else I should know?”

“You should know what’s been done to these prisoners,” said Malon.

“What *has* been done to them?”

“Can I trust you?”

“What?” Jarvis asked.

“It’s understandable that you were concerned about who would want to bring you out here. But I have concerns too. I’m offering you incredibly sensitive information about our military. Can you protect that information? Can you protect *me*?”

“I’ve never put anyone in danger yet. Other than myself, of course. But I’m still here so I figure I’m doing all right on that front too.”

“I’ve seen your reporting,” said Malon. “I believe you when you say that you want Cirilians to know what their government is doing in their name. I believe that you want to do what’s right. But I need to know that you can actually do it.”

“What do you want from me?” Jarvis asked. *Here comes the barter.*

“. . . I don’t know,” said Malon, exhaling audibly.

Jarvis did not respond for several seconds.

“Let’s step back for a moment,” he said. “What kind of proof can you offer me that these prisoners exist?”

“I can tell you where they’re being held. They’re in Bayla Castle.”

“That’s a big place. Well defended too,” said Jarvis.

“Both of those things are true,” said Malon.

“Do you work in the castle?”

“Yes.”

“Can you get me in?”

“No. I’m not allowed to bring anyone in with me. Obviously these prisoners are a tightly guarded secret.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant,” said Jarvis. “Is there any kind of flaw in the security that you could exploit to help me gain entrance on my own?”

“I’ve . . . never really looked for that kind of thing,” Malon admitted. “I assumed that you knew your way around a break-in.”

“Not into a castle I don’t,” said Jarvis. People always seemed to think that Jarvis knew his way around this kind of situation. Falsely, as it turned out.

“I’ll be in tomorrow morning to treat them,” said Malon. “I can try to find something then.”

“OK,” said Jarvis. “Where will we meet tomorrow night? And how?”

“I’ll pick you up at the same spot.”

“No. We shouldn’t repeat our meeting like this. It could become very conspicuous very easily.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Malon.

Jarvis looked like he was deep in thought. Suddenly, he swung his head backward into the carriage wall. “OW!” he said, trying to avoid shouting so that the driver wouldn’t hear. He hoped the sound of hooves on cobblestone would be enough to drown out the thud.

“What in the Ancestors’ name are you doing?” asked Malon.

Jarvis rubbed his head and grimaced. “Can you do anything about my headache?”

“Come here,” Malon said, motioning to the seat beside her.

Jarvis crossed over. Malon waved her arms around rhythmically, slightly out of sync with each other, and gently pulled her hands across Jarvis’s scalp. She repeated the motion a few times.

“Do you do house calls?” asked Jarvis, the pain in his skull dulling as Malon treated him. “I think I might have a headache that will need dealing with tomorrow.”

“Not usually.”

“Well, tomorrow you do. I’m staying with a friend here in town. I’ll give you his address.”

Jarvis took out a pen and some paper, and wrote down an address. He handed the piece of paper to Malon.

“This is where we’ll meet tomorrow night,” he said. “Come late, but not too late. And don’t let anyone see that piece of paper I’ve given you.”

“Why did you smack your head like that?” Malon asked.

“I needed to be sure you really know Life magic.”

~

The prisoner hung by his wrists from chains in the ceiling. His feet dangled near the floor, so close that he thought he could feel the cold roughness of the stone. After two decades in the custody of another nation’s army, with all real hope extinguished, this was what you held onto – the feeling that you could reach the floor. It didn’t matter how many times he was strung up like this, every time the prisoner believed that *this time*, for sure, his feet were going to reach the floor, and the pressure on his shoulders would be released. It might not be for very long; surely the jailors would realise he had defeated them and raise him up again. But he would know, in that moment, that he could struggle and win.

The pressure on his shoulders though, oh how it was tremendous. The reason it was so tremendous was this: Force magic. There were three men in long, black coats in the room (it was the customary attire of men in the Ministry of War), each of them a Practitioner of some kind. One, a man with a thick black moustache, was a Force Practitioner. As long as Moustache was in the room, the prisoner would feel heavier than should have been physically possible. Moustache created this feeling by using Force magic to increase the weight of the prisoner’s torso (and only his torso). In reality, Force practitioners modified the gravity of or around objects, but gravity wasn’t well understood in Cirilia. The

academies where magic was taught didn't spend a lot of time discussing physics either, so as far as Practitioners knew, they were actually changing the weight of things. Like the prisoner's torso.

One of the other men in the room had no moustache, and he was a Life Practitioner. While the job of Moustache was to make the prisoner's arms feel weak, the job of No Moustache was to make them strong. As the prisoner hung from the ceiling, No Moustache swayed his arms side-to-side rhythmically. As he did so, he made motions as though he was pulling a vast, amorphous rope in toward his body. This spell caused the muscles in the prisoner's arms to strengthen. That meant he could be held aloft by the chains, pulled down by Force magic, for a longer period of time without passing out from the strain. It meant he could feel the pain for longer. It meant the interrogation could continue with fewer interruptions.

The last of the men in black coats was the interrogator. He, too, was a Practitioner. The interrogator was younger than everyone else in the room, and during his academy days he had studied the most recently discovered of the schools of magic, Charge magic, which dealt with the manipulation of electricity.

"There's no reason that today can't be the day that you finally relent," said the interrogator.

"Ungh," grunted the prisoner.

"I do abhor routine," the interrogator continued. "Two times a week we put you in chains and ask you some questions and then throw you back in the cell. There's no spontaneity to it, no spark of insight or evolution. Chains, questions, silence. Chains, questions, silence. It would be much more exciting if you'd say something that I could work with."

The prisoner's head hung low, weak from exhaustion. He peered sideways through the long bangs of his rarely-cut hair, saw a terrifying glimmer in the interrogator's eyes.

"It would be more exciting for you too, wouldn't it?" the interrogator asked. "I know you spent a long time in the infantry, and so maybe routine is more your thing than it is mine, but, at this point I would have to think that even the slightest of variations has some value for you. The three of us, we all get to go outside. We get to see how the world has changed. We get to meet new people, see new places, try new things. Did you know that we can build things with machines powered by Charge magic now? It's true. The work is a dreadful bore, as routine as it gets, but the advancement of magic is a wonder to behold."

It was true. The prisoner had lost nearly twenty years of his life. He had spent many days in his cell, thinking about what twenty years means for a man with freedom. A man with a family would have seen his children grow up. A man with a career would have learned new skills. A soldier like him could have enjoyed the thrill of victories, felt the terror of each advancing battle. But in here, in the basement of a castle near Cirilia's southern border, twenty years may as well have been a week or it may as well have been an epoch. Time was meaningless. There was just one painful moment that would continue playing out until finally, thankfully, there were no moments.

"But you . . . you're deprived of all that," the interrogator continued. "I do admit, I've played my part in that deprivation. But I *am* making you a bit of an offer here. Let's try something new. Let's have you tell me something interesting about Untarezh. Let's end your routine and mine. Yes?"

The interrogator walked around so that he was directly in front of the prisoner. The interrogator dropped his head slightly to try and look the prisoner in the eye. The prisoner glared back with defiance, but also with defeat. The interrogator raised his eyebrows quizzically, giving the prisoner one last chance to answer.

A shock tore through the prisoner's body, starting in his unclothed torso. The interrogator had swung his fist into the prisoner's chest, expelling Charge into him.

"Ynghagh!" the prisoner cried out.

Twice more the interrogator lashed out – once into the prisoner's gut just under his ribcage, and once into the side of his ribs. A brief blue flash accompanied each blow, and each blow was followed by the same tortured, resigned shout.

"This is a bit more exciting for me than the rest of the routine," the interrogator said, "but it is still, I must admit, beginning to drag a bit. I really do think you should just tell me what kind of magic

Untarezh is developing and let us both be done with it.”

The prisoner shook his head slightly. The interrogator exhaled powerfully. He gathered up some Charge around one hand, then the other. He then placed both of his palms flat on the prisoner’s chest, releasing all the gathered electricity into him.

“Useless, as usual,” the interrogator said, pulling his hands away. “Leave him for a while,” he instructed Moustache and No Moustache. “Just make sure not to leave anything the doctor can’t fix.”

~

When Malon entered the prisoner’s cell, he was lying on his back on his bed, his legs twisted sideways and his arms half-crossed on his stomach.

“Can you sit?” Malon asked.

“Urrrgh,” the prisoner winced. He struggled to rise, but his arms were too weak to help push his weight up.

“OK,” said Malon, “Let me see what I can do. Can you uncross your arms at all?”

The prisoner pulled his arms apart a bit, but his hands still remained on his stomach.

“That’s good,” said Malon soothingly. She held her hands aloft two inches from the prisoner’s right shoulder and began passing her hands back and forth over the top half of his arm, starting where the shoulder meets the neck and moving down to the elbow. Every time her hands reached the end of one pass down his arm, she would make a pulling motion with her left arm, spreading it away from her right arm and toward the prisoner’s shoulder. Eventually the pain and pressure in his shoulder subsided somewhat, and Malon repeated the procedure on his left arm. After that, he could finally sit up.

“There, now. How’s that?” Malon asked.

“It feels better,” the prisoner said. “But what’s the point? He’s right. It’s a dreadful routine that feels like it stretches out forever.”

“Who said that?”

“The man with the lightning,” said the prisoner. He didn’t know the interrogator’s name. He wasn’t supposed to know anyone’s name, though he did know Malon’s because she had introduced herself. He had told her that he was called Luis.

“It won’t always feel that way,” said Malon.

“It will as long as it feels like anything at all,” said Luis.

Malon continued attending to his injuries, easing the pain where he had been shocked and healing the skin so the wounds weren’t so visible. In a sense, the disappearing wounds made Luis feel better – his body looked like it was still healthy, like he was a normal man. But on the other hand it felt like a cruel trick, a way to hide the truth of what his body had been through.

On its surface Malon’s job was to be a doctor to the prisoners, using Life magic to heal their wounds and ease their pain. But on a deeper level her job was to prepare them to be interrogated again. She reduced their pain only to ensure that even more could be inflicted. Malon knew that was her role, and for it she felt deeply ashamed. That was the impetus behind her decision to reach out to Jarvis and communicate to him the plight of these soldiers.

After spending nearly an hour with Luis, Malon was finished her work for the day. She had treated ten other prisoners, all of whom had been visited by the calculating wrath of “the man with the lightning”, as Luis called him.

Malon had spent the day trying to figure out how to get Jarvis into the prison, but it didn’t seem like there was any way to make that happen. The whole castle was well-guarded, and the number of guards didn’t seem to vary by the time of day. The entrance to the prison itself, at the bottom of a set of stairs the led to the castle’s basement, was guarded by two men who never left their posts, except when their shift was over and they were replaced.

Even if Jarvis did somehow get into the prison – which was highly unlikely – it seemed implausible that he would be able to talk to the prisoners. Their cells were made of solid concrete, with thick wooden

doors preventing entrance to anyone without the key. There were windows with metal bars in the doors so that the guards could look in (and so the prisoners had some light), but it would have been foolish to stand in the hallway trying to conduct an interview through those openings. While guards were not posted directly outside of each cell, the area was patrolled at all hours.

After going to the trouble of getting Jarvis to come to Daruma, and putting him and herself at risk by meeting, Malon felt terrible that she couldn't figure out any way for Jarvis to actually speak to the prisoners. Worse, she felt stupid that she hadn't tried to sort the details out before contacting him. Malon had assumed that Jarvis would figure out what to do once he was in Daruma and knew where the prisoners were located. Now it was quite clear that her belief was foolish.

So what could she do to fix it?

~

That night, Malon visited the address that Jarvis had given her. She was greeted at the door by a short man with untrusting eyes.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Hylia," Malon introduced herself.

"Yes," the man replied.

"I believe I have a patient at this address, Mr. Altair?"

"Come," said the man.

Malon entered.

"Jarvis is upstairs," the man said, closing the front door.

Malon wasn't fond of the idea of heading up a staircase in an unfamiliar house, alone with a shifty-looking man she had never met before.

"Mr. Altair?" Malon called out. A moment later Jarvis appeared at the top of the staircase.

"Come up," he said. "My headache is terrible."

Malon ascended the steps. Jarvis motioned that she should follow him into a bedroom. She was still uneasy about being in this unknown house, but Jarvis's demeanour put her more at ease than the other man's did. Jarvis closed the door after he and Malon entered the room. It housed a bed, as well as a chair and a desk, but neither of the people in the room took a seat immediately.

"I have bad news," Malon said.

"How about we deal with the headache first?" asked Jarvis, taking a seat in the chair.

"You really have a headache?"

"I can't fake a noise like the one the carriage made when my skull slammed into it last night," Jarvis replied.

"I thought it was just a cover," said Malon.

"I'm very thorough."

Malon moved her arms as she had the night before, and pulled her hands over Jarvis's scalp as she had the night before, and his pain began to subside as it had the night before.

"Mr. Altair, I need to apologise," Malon said once she'd finished treating Jarvis's pain.

"Why?"

"I . . . I don't know why I didn't think of it before. Why I didn't figure this out before you'd arrived. Why –"

Jarvis interrupted, "What did you not think of?"

"I don't think I can get you into Bayla Castle. And even if I somehow could, the area the prisoners are held in is guarded too tightly for you to be able to interview them without somebody noticing."

"That's not a problem," said Jarvis.

"How is it not a problem?"

"Once we parted the other night, I realised your plan probably wouldn't work," Jarvis said. "Of course you can't break into a castle. To think that you could do that, and then ferret some top-secret information out as well? That's insane."

“That sounds like a problem.”

“It’s only a problem if we plan on breaking me in. Which we don’t. Because it would be insane. We’re going to do something far more sensible. You’re going to interview the prisoners and then give me your notes.”

“What?” Malon was caught off-guard by the suggestion.

“Of course,” said Jarvis. “You already have access to the prisoners. Why make this more complicated than it needs to be? I don’t need to be the one to collect the information, I just need to be the one to distribute it.”

“I don’t want my name attached to those interviews!”

“No, of course not. I’ll write the story as though I found the information all out myself. No one will ever have any idea you and I met.”

“What about your friend downstairs?” Malon asked.

“I told him I was being visited by a doctor for a headache. Which is true. I told you I’m thorough.”

“Won’t he suspect –”

“He’ll have no reason to,” said Jarvis. “You’re really a doctor and I’ve really got a headache.”

It seemed to Malon as though it couldn’t be that simple. But she was unable to think of any particularly specific reason why it wasn’t.

“Assuming I was on board with the plan,” said Malon, which of course she was (and which Jarvis knew), “There’s still a problem: I’m searched before and after entering the prison. They don’t want any evidence of the prisoners’ existence to get out. They’d find a notepad on me and they’d certainly want to read it.”

Jarvis furrowed his brow and scrunched his mouth. “Hmm,” he said, exhaling deeply through his nose and averting his gaze to one corner (he often averted his gaze to an empty portion of the room when trying to concentrate). “How good is your memory?”

“How good does it need to be?” Malon asked. “What do you want to know about the prisoners?”

“Biographical information, primarily. Names, birthplaces, families. The kinds of details that will let me make them sound like real humans and not just hypothetical ones. My article will do a better job of connecting with readers that way.”

There was another reason that Jarvis wanted biographical information, which he chose not to share with Malon. He wanted details that, were they to reach Untarezh, would enable the government there to confirm the existence of the prisoners, ideally leading to a negotiated settlement that would see them released.

“I’m not good with those kinds of details,” Malon said. “It would be much too easy to mix them up if I have to remember them for hours at a time, which I very likely would have to do.”

“Well, if you can’t get in a pad of paper, it’s the best we’re going to be able to do,” said Jarvis.

“Will it be enough?” asked Malon.

“No point in worrying about that. I’ll do what I can with whatever info you’re able to provide me.”

“Is that all you want? Birthplaces and children’s names?”

“That’s all I want you to find out from the prisoners,” replied Jarvis. “But that alone won’t make for a good story. Once you get that information to me, I’ll interview you in more detail about the prison itself. How it’s run, what’s done to the prisoners, that kind of thing. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure it’s obscured sufficiently that it won’t ever come back to you.”

Malon wanted to walk over to the window and look out to the street below, to escape the claustrophobia she was currently feeling, stuck in this room, planning something that she would never be able to take back. But she was frozen in place, using all of her energy to concentrate on what Jarvis was saying and trying to think it through clearly. She wanted to break the tension, to talk about a subject other than the dangerous task she had agreed to take up.

“Do you think it will work?” she asked.

“What? Work how?” Jarvis responded.

“Do you think getting this information out will actually do anything?”

Jarvis got up and walked over to the window. He opened it a crack, then looked outside.

“I don’t know,” he said.

That wasn’t the answer Malon was expecting to hear. “That’s not very reassuring.”

“I never know what’s going to happen after an article runs. Sometimes nothing. And at any rate, I’ve never written an article quite like this.”

“You came all the way out to the border for a story you didn’t know would have any effect?”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” said Jarvis.

“What’s another?”

“That change doesn’t work the way you’re suggesting,” Jarvis replied.

“I didn’t know I was suggesting anything,” said Malon.

Jarvis turned away from the window and looked at Malon directly.

“What I think you’re getting at is whether people will read my article and then something big will happen. And the answer to that is ‘Maybe.’ Maybe people will be outraged and demand change. Maybe Untarezh will be outraged and demand the prisoners be freed. That’s the likeliest outcome, I suspect. But I work on a different scale than that.”

“How so?” Malon asked. Jarvis began pacing about the room.

“The typical idea people have of social progress is that you make your argument and rational people will hear it and then they’ll change. Your argument is rational and true, of course, which is why you believe it. And other people are, broadly speaking, rational too. So when they hear you present your obviously true case, they’ll accept it, and change will happen, and the world will be better for it. Or maybe they’re stupid and they won’t be able to see the truth of what you say, so they’ll refuse to believe, and nothing will change. Either way, the issue is settled once you make your case, and any change that doesn’t happen then isn’t going to happen at all.

“But I believe that change happens on a longer timescale, and in more subtle ways. It’s been very rare in my life that I’ve made an argument to someone, and they’ve immediately agreed that they’ve been wrong all along, and they were glad I’d shown them the truth. And it’s rarely happened the other way around, too, with me immediately accepting the truth of someone else’s powerful argument. What’s happened instead is that sometimes people have said things that stick in my mind. And I think about those things, roll them around in my brain, fit them in with how I already understand the world. Over time, maybe they find a way to fit. And as that process is happening, maybe someone else will make another argument to me, maybe one that’s very similar and obviously related, or maybe one that’s only tangentially related. And that new idea will start mixing with the other one I was already considering. Or maybe it triggers something that makes me reconsider an old argument I’d previously dismissed. Now add in to that process the fact that my own empirical interactions with the world are constantly adding new information. Maybe I’ll witness something that I’m able to think about in a new light because of one of those arguments working their way through my brain. All of those things are happening in various combinations all the time. And it probably won’t happen that there’s one big moment where I suddenly realise that I had been wrong all along. Instead, I’ll slowly begin to work the new ideas into the way I understand the world, partly deliberately and partly in the background machinery of my brain.

“So change isn’t a thing that you force to happen now. It’s a thing you prepare the way for and hope that at some point that magical little trigger flips. So if you ask me what this article will change, my answer is that we might not ever know, except that one day we hope to eventually see what we’ve worked towards become reality.”

Jarvis stopped pacing and nodded to himself slightly, as though he had just made an argument that he – even if no one else – found convincing. He leaned his back against the wall.

“I still don’t find that reassuring,” said Malon, “given the amount of danger that I’m going to put myself in for it. But I suppose it will have to be enough. And as you say, maybe the government of Untarezh can force the prisoners’ release.”

“That’s the simplest thing to aim for,” Jarvis agreed.

They were both silent for several seconds. Malon was the one who broke the silence.

“I should go. The longer I’m here, the more likely it becomes that it looks like I’m more than a doctor.”

“Good thought,” said Jarvis.

“How will I get in touch with you again?”

“We have a follow-up appointment on Tuesday for you to make sure the healing is proceeding apace.”

“You always seem to have a plan so quickly.”

“I told you I was thorough.”

~

The prisoners were tortured twice a week, but the days that it happened on were never consistent. It was often Tuesday and Friday, but sometimes it was Tuesday and Saturday, or Monday and Wednesday, or virtually any other combination. The Ministry of War felt that repeating the same interrogations every day, eighteen years or more after the prisoners were captured, was not likely to yield anything other than killing them more quickly. But they had to keep interrogating them on some kind of schedule, since why were they keeping them if not for interrogations? The key was to keep the prisoners in fear. If they knew which days they would be questioned on, they would be able to relax on the other days, and that just wouldn’t do.

Because of the constantly shifting torture schedule, Malon never knew she would be needed until the night before. It was two days after she paid Jarvis a house call that Malon was told she would be needed again.

Malon descended the cold, spiral stairway that led to the basement of Bayla Castle, where the prisoners were kept. The chamber at the bottom of the stairwell served as a screening room. First, the person who needed entrance into the prison was shuttled off into a smaller, adjacent room to be searched. If the search produced no contraband (like a pen or piece of paper), the name of the visitor (who may have been a soldier, doctor, politician, etc.) was marked down, along with their time of arrival and, later, departure.

There were two guards working in the screening chamber when Malon arrived. One nodded toward the search room. The other soldier was standing by the door; he opened it and ushered Malon inside. If Malon had brought any bags with her, they would have been taken and left in this room while she visited the prisoners, but she had been working here long enough to know not to bring a bag. The guard patted her down – “felt her up” might have been more accurate – and found no restricted items (in fact, he found no items at all). When Malon first started working in the prison she shivered and grimaced every time she underwent the search, but by this point she had learned to reflect her feelings inward, suppressing her fury and her shame. The Ancestors would not have looked kindly on a woman – especially a married woman – being touched in this way, but Malon felt she had no choice. Who would believe her if she accused the guard of inappropriate behaviour? And what would happen to the prisoners if she wasn’t there?

After the search, she was let back into the larger room to sign-in to the prison. As she was writing her name, a thought struck her: There was an unused sheet of paper underneath the one she was signing. If she could somehow take that piece of paper without being noticed, and bring the pen with her as well, she could write down what the prisoners told her and bring the information to Jarvis. She would still need to figure out a way to get the pen and paper *out* of the prison, since there was another search to endure when she was finished for the day, but getting the items in was at least a start.

“There’s a national holiday coming up in a couple of weeks,” Malon said, “do you two get the time off, or are you stuck here?”

“Time off?” said one guard. “Honey, you don’t know much about the army, do you?”

“No rest for the wicked,” said the other guard. “And that means no rest for us.”

“Are you saying we’re the wicked?” laughed the first guard.

“I’ve heard a few stories about what goes on in that room,” said the second guard, motioning toward the room where the searches took place.

“A man has to remain upright for his country,” insisted the first guard.

“Oh I’m quite sure he does,” said the second.

The guards were too busy joking with each other to pay any attention to Malon. She slid the empty sheet of paper out from under the one she had signed. Then, with the paper still on the table, she quietly folded it over once, and then again. As calmly and smoothly as she could manage, she then placed the sheet of paper in a shirt pocket. She did the same with the pen.

“I’ll be tending to the injured now,” said Malon.

“Ancestors be damned, can these women never let a couple of gents have a conversation without interruption?” said the second guard, who waved his arm dismissively toward the corridor that led into the prison.

“Oh, I’ve got a story about interruptions for you,” said the first guard to the second as Malon walked down the corridor that led into the prison.

The first prisoner that Malon had to visit that morning was Luis. The prisoners were never tortured in the same order; another way to keep them frightened and uncertain. Malon planned to speak to Luis first, then write his answers down when she was alone afterwards. She didn’t want to write in front of the prisoners, hoping to keep the pool of people who knew about her involvement as small as possible (ideally just Jarvis and herself).

Luis was already sitting upright when Malon arrived in his cell. He grimaced when he made eye contact with Malon, and he nursed one arm, which slumped low, but on the whole he looked to be in better shape than the last time she’d treated him.

“Shall I start with the left arm?” asked Malon.

He nodded gingerly, grimacing again. Malon made the familiar motions with her arms, and Life magic surged through Luis’s shoulder.

“You have one son, right?” Malon asked.

“Yeah,” Luis grunted.

“What was his name?” asked Malon.

“Sergio.”

“How old would he be today?”

This was sounding like an interview – an interrogation, even – and Malon knew it. But she had no experience gathering information for a newspaper reporter and wasn’t sure how else to broach the subject.

“Why are you asking me this?” Luis asked.

“I don’t want to be the enemy,” said Malon. “I want you to feel better. I’ve been treating you for a few months now, I thought maybe we could get to know each other better.”

“Do you have any children?” asked Luis.

“Yes, a daughter: Saria.” Malon had a son as well, but Luis interrupted before she could say so.

“How old is she?”

“Four.”

“And a husband?”

“Richard.”

Malon had stopped performing any magic at this point, she was too distracted by the conversation.

“Well,” said Luis. “Imagine that Richard and . . . Saria? . . . that they’ve been waiting for you to return for twenty years. Imagine that you knew that. Imagine that you wouldn’t recognise your daughter if you saw her today, that’s how long it had been. Imagine the reason for that is you went away to try to protect them. Imagine how it would feel to be asked about those things now.”

Malon’s nose started running. She sniffed to hold it back.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You don’t want to think about it.”

Luis’s lips quivered, his gaze narrowed: “It is the only thing I think about.”

Malon sniffled again. Before long, a tear ran down her face. And then the flood.

"I'm sorry," she said. ". . . I'm sorry."

It took her a couple of minutes to regain her composure. By then she no longer had the heart to ask Luis any other questions. She finished his treatment and left the cell. When she was safely out of sight of any prisoners or guards, Malon scribbled down the only thing she knew about Luis's background: that he had one son, named Sergio.

Was it always this hard doing what Jarvis did? Were all of the prisoners going to be so reluctant to speak with her? Did they have any good reason not to be? Malon began to despair that the whole exercise would be worthless, would return so little useful information that Jarvis would have no article to write. But she had already taken a tremendous risk by stealing the paper and pen, and smuggling them into the prison. There was no point in doing anything other than following through with the task now.

Ten minutes later Malon was told who needed treatment next.

"Hugo," Malon said to him as she entered his cell. His torso, uncovered, was laced with burns from "the man with the lightning."

Hugo stood as Malon approached, and moved toward the centre of the cell.

"How badly does it hurt?" Malon asked.

"Ask him to show you some time," Hugo replied.

"Let's see what we can do," said Malon, beginning to pass her arms around his chest. "What were you doing before you joined the army?"

"What's this all of a sudden?" asked Hugo.

"I was hoping we wouldn't have to keep doing this in silence."

"I don't believe that," Hugo shot back.

"Wha . . . why not?" asked Malon.

"Because I've been in here for nineteen years and I know how you work."

"But you've only known me for three months," said Malon.

"There is no *you*. There's only Cirilia. You are Cirilia. And I know how you work."

"What do you mean?" asked Malon.

"You're trying to build camaraderie with me. You want me to drop my guard. This whole thing is a set-up so that I'll tell you what I won't tell the men in that room down the hall. I've lost a lot of things in the time I've been in here, but I haven't lost my ability to spot a trap."

". . . a trap?" Malon was taken aback. "I can't . . . no!"

"I get hurt and you calm it down. That's our only relationship. I'm not going to be drawn into anything more than that."

Malon finished Hugo's treatment in silence. Two prisoners in, and Malon had virtually nothing to give Jarvis. Had she let him down again?

"My family . . ." mused Victor, the third prisoner Malon treated that day. "I . . . miss them so much. Ana, Tania, Sofia . . ."

He wanted to say "I hope I get to see them again some day," but he dared not utter such a thought out loud. If he didn't speak the thought, maybe it was less real, maybe it couldn't hurt him as much.

"Tania and Sofia are your daughters?" asked Malon.

"They'd be grown up now," said Victor. "18 and . . . 20. 21? I think?"

"Tania was still an infant when you left?"

"Sofia. Ana was pregnant with her when I enlisted. She's never even seen her daddy."

Victor turned his head towards one of the top corners of the cell, as though there was a window through which he could gaze towards his home.

"What were you doing before you joined the army?" Malon asked.

"I ran a pub with Ana and my brother and his wife. Me and my brother decided to enlist together."

"The war had been going on for years at that point, what made you decide to join then?"

"We felt like we had to do something. People would come into the pub to try and drink away the pain of losing their sons and their brothers in the war. For a long time we convinced ourselves that we

were helping by keeping the pub going. We figured that we might not have much power on our own, but at least we were helping our country deal with its pain in some way.

“Eventually, though, my brother decided that it wasn’t enough. The only thing that was ever going to end the pain was if we finished the war. And the only way to do that was to win it. He convinced me of that.”

“What happened to your brother?” Malon asked.

“We fought together, we fought so damn bravely together. He was right there fighting when I got caught. I don’t know if he got away. I hope he did. He’s not here, that’s for damn sure.”

“Your fellow prisoners here . . . I’ve had a hard time getting them to talk to me so far. Why are you being so open about all this?”

Victor stared at the door of his cell. “Nothing ever comes through that door but pain. It’s either going in or it’s coming out. But you come in here, and you relieve all that. First you came to heal my wounds, and now you’re here to ease my mind. It’s the Hands of the Ancestors, I’m sure of it. I’m here for a reason, and so are you. They’re guiding it. They’re always guiding it.”

Malon spoke to seven more prisoners that day (one prisoner, for whatever reason, was not interrogated). She managed to get useful information, like the story Victor told her, from three of them. From the others she got shreds of details that she hoped Jarvis would be able to spin something out of. She was almost home-free, but there was still one more thing to do: figure out how to get the paper out of the prison. The pen was easy to get rid of – she tossed it in an unattended corner when no one was looking. The paper, she hoped to be able to smuggle out in her sock. She folded the piece of paper four times (enough to make it small but not bulky) and pushed it down her left sock. The guard who searched Malon sometimes felt all the way down to her ankles, and sometimes not. She’d have to hope that this time fell under “not.”

When Malon returned to the screening chamber, the two guards were sitting around, looking bored.

“Come on,” said the guard who searched her on her way in.

They entered the small room where the searches were done.

“A pen went missing shortly after we saw you earlier, you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” the guard asked, as he began rubbing his hands down the side of her torso.

“A . . . a . . . pen?” Malon stuttered.

“I hope I don’t find it on you, that would be very unfortunate.”

The guard placed his hands inside Malon’s shirt pockets and searched quite vigorously. Even though Malon knew she didn’t have the pen, she was still terrified that she would be taken away at any moment. And then the searches would surely get much worse.

“Empty pockets, good,” said the guard. He began feeling down her left leg.

Oh god, this is it, it’s over, thought Malon. As the guard’s hands moved further down her leg, a stroke of madness came over her. The guard’s head was down, so he couldn’t see Malon’s arms. What if . . .

Malon began making the tell-tale arm motions of a Practitioner. She had never tried to induce this effect before, but what other option was there? She sent Life magic at the guard’s mid-section. He clutched briefly at his stomach with one arm, but continued searching with the other. A few seconds later he began grimacing, then stood up and staggered over to a wall; one hand clutched at his stomach, while the other created a cushion between his head and the wall. Malon tried to make the spell more powerful. The pain tearing through the guard’s stomach became too much to bear. He dashed out of the room.

Malon stood in place, frozen. She had just attacked an employee of the Ministry of War in the basement of a castle being used as a prison. It was true that no one had *seen* her using magic, but surely she would be caught nonetheless. Even if she managed to get out now and get the prisoners’ stories to Jarvis, it couldn’t be long until she was arrested.

“The shit he eats for lunch, no wonder that happens.”

Malon was jarred back to awareness by the voice of the other guard, who was now standing in the doorway.

“In the middle of a search and he just runs off to the latrine,” the guard said.

Malon turned and stared at him, unbelieving.
“What are you waiting around for?” said the guard. “Just go.”
She went.

~

Four days later, armed with the knowledge that Malon had collected for him, Jarvis began walking down a large stone bridge that crossed a canal. Daruma was located along the banks of a large lake, which Untarezh was on the other side of. A canal ran from the lake up into Daruma, heading straight through the city before connecting to a river. One side of the canal was controlled by Cirilia’s navy, but the other side contained Daruma’s largest commercial district. At this time of afternoon the whole area was heavily trafficked with both people and boats.

In the middle of the bridge stood a man wearing a long, black coat. He appeared to be alone, as Jarvis had instructed, but there was little chance that Jarvis would be in much danger in the middle of the afternoon anyway. Jarvis walked up to the man.

“General Blaise,” Jarvis said.

The man glared at Jarvis and seemed to mutter some inaudible noise.

“It seems to me,” said Jarvis, “that I’ve got more that you want than you’ve got that I want, so I do hope that you’ll play along. Or perhaps you’re not the General? Well, I’m perfectly happy to leave if that’s the case. But I really do think you are General Blaise, since you’re standing exactly where I’ve instructed at exactly the time I’ve instructed; and they don’t just give those coats out to schoolboys.”

The General’s gaze seemed to get somehow darker still. But he knew he didn’t have much choice other than talking to Jarvis.

“You spoke a strange name in your letter to me,” Blaise said. Jarvis had written a letter to the General in which he said that he knew of the existence of one Victor Alvarez, and that a meeting should be arranged to discuss it.

“I don’t often come across the names of ghosts,” Jarvis replied. “I’m mostly into politics, not magic.”

“Perhaps it should stay that way.”

“Well, you see, the thing is that sometimes ghosts interfere with politics, and at those moments I’m liable to take a much keener interest.”

“Why am I here?”

“I was hoping you could tell me some ghost stories,” said Jarvis.

The General’s right hand balled up and his arm moved as though he was about to strike Jarvis, but Blaise thought better of it and lowered his arm (the fist remained clenched).

“Do you know what I do . . . whatever your name was?” said Blaise.

“Oh come on now, I’m sure you’ve committed my name to memory. I’m sure you’ve got men looking into my background right now.”

“You think this is a game, you stupid little man. You run around cracking wise to people who have more important things to do with their time than talk to rats who scurry about, gnawing at the ropes that hold our country together. I’ll tell you what I do: I keep Cirilia safe from the demons trying to infest its soul. Some of those demons are clawing to get in from the outside, from places like Untarezh. Some of those demons inhabit the bodies of rats, and spread filth and disease from the inside. It is my job to stop both of those kinds of demons. Do you understand?”

“I’m a rat, yes, very well,” said Jarvis. “The prisoners are demons then?”

“Not just the prisoners, little rat, pay attention. Untarezian culture is the demon; Untarezh itself is the demon. The prisoners, as it were, are the head. We could cut them off to kill the body. But first, it would be much more useful to extract all of the knowledge that the head has collected. Do you understand?”

The metaphor was rather tortured, so to speak, but Jarvis did think he more or less understood

what General Blaise was getting at. “So you are planning to kill the prisoners at some point?”

“Of course. Did you think that we were going to interrogate them for twenty years and then let them back out into the wild?”

The crossing of metaphors was sending Jarvis’s brain through a maelstrom. Was that the intent, or was Blaise just getting his images twisted?

“You keep referring to them as animals, as demons,” Jarvis said. “But they’re people. They have families. They had lives.”

“You stupid young people, you’re all so emotional. You get so attached to pretty imagery. You have no idea about reality. There are things that we must do to keep the country safe. We can’t let our emotions get in the way of that.”

Jarvis stared out at the boats travelling up and down the canal. His mind cleared. His plan of attack was clear.

“You think I’m emotional and you’re not?” Jarvis queried the General.

“Of course, little rat. It is the way of the world. Young people and women are driven by emotion. That is why it falls to men like me to protect you, even when you don’t accept the protection you need.”

“You give yourself too much credit, and me not enough. You’re every bit as emotional as I am – maybe more.”

“I–” Blaise began, but Jarvis would not let him interrupt.

“You like to pretend that only some emotions actually count as emotion. Sympathy, that’s very emotional. Compassion? As emotional as it gets. And anyone driven by those emotions, you call them ‘irrational’.

“But what about you? You’re driven by fear, by greed, by anger. You like to say that your conclusions are all rational – that we simply *must* hold the prisoners and we simply *must* consider Untarezh a threat to our survival. You like to believe that those ideas are the mark of an educated, serious mind. But your actions towards Untarezh are driven by fear; your actions towards the prisoners are driven by anger. Those things are every bit as emotional as the compassion that drives me. There is no careful, reflective high ground here. There is my emotion and your emotion, and the conclusions that we draw from them.

“My emotion and my reason have led me to believe that torturing men like Victor Alvarez with Force and Charge magic, for decades on end, serves no purpose but to justify your fear and feed your rage. It does no good for us as a country. It does no good for any of us as people.”

Blaise’s eyes widened. “Who told you about the magic?” he growled.

“Come now, surely you don’t think so poorly of me.”

“Who!” the General bellowed. Passers-by on the bridge stopped to look. Blaise didn’t want anyone nearby to hear anything about the POWs, so he struggled to keep his voice lower. “What are you getting at? Why am I here?”

“To be honest, I was hoping to get a few quotes from you,” Jarvis replied.

“Quotes? What quotes?”

“To accompany my next article, of course! As I said in my letter to you, I’m a journalist with the *Age*.”

“For what article?”

“Have you not received a copy of this morning’s paper yet? I’m very disappointed, you’re missing out on some top notch journalism from yours truly. I’ve got a really fascinating report on some ghosts haunting Bayla Castle.”

Blaise’s eyes grew wide and he clenched both fists.

“I think,” Jarvis began, “once people read the story, they’re really going to wonder what our government is doing, why it would risk further provocation with Untarezh by violating a treaty that our current Minister of War has proudly trumpeted as one of his primary accomplishments. How is Hearth these days anyway? Have you spoken to him lately?”

The General stepped toward Jarvis and made a motion as though he was going to grab him, but

Jarvis stepped back quickly and began backpedalling.

“All right, understood, I’ll mark you down as ‘no comment,’” Jarvis said.

“You will regret having gnawed at my rope, little rat,” Blaise fumed, as Jarvis made his exit.

~

Jarvis stood outside of a tailor’s shop in the middle of Daruma’s primary commercial district. The area was almost completely devoid of human life. It was after 10:00 p.m., which at this time of year meant it was quite dark out. The light of the moon was all Jarvis had to see by. He was waiting for a horse-drawn carriage. The letter he’d sent said he’d wait here.

The day before, Jarvis was returning to the house of the friend he was staying with in Daruma, when he noticed that the front door was open, which was unusual. Jarvis entered slowly and quietly. He made his way through the small front hallway into the kitchen at the back of the house. Then he heard what sounded like a struggle at the top of the stairs. He pressed flat against the corner of the kitchen wall and peered around. There were three men coming down the stairs; one was Jarvis’s friend, and the other two wore the uniforms of the Ministry of Security (Cirilia’s spy agency).

Jarvis pulled his head back around the corner as quickly as possible. He heard the men all exit through the front door. At that moment he darted over to a window in the back of the kitchen, threw it open, and clambered out. Then he ran. He ran away from the house as fast as he could for twenty seconds before realising that made him very conspicuous. He slowed down, then tried to figure out where to hide.

Jarvis considered renting a hotel room to hide out in, but he didn’t want to leave such an obvious trace of his actions as his signature in a hotel’s registry. Instead, he spent most of the afternoon hiding in the corner of a pub. Late in the afternoon an idea struck him. He left the pub and went to Daruma’s city hall. There was a registry of all the permanent residents of the city there, as the law required there be in the capital of each of Cirilia’s twelve administrative regions. He looked up Malon’s address. With his friend placed under arrest (or worse), Jarvis didn’t have anyone else in Daruma who he felt he could trust. Stationery was readily available at the address registry, so Jarvis wrote a note, sealed it with wax, and had a courier deliver it to Malon. The note instructed her to meet Jarvis at the same time and place as they had met initially, and in the same fashion too.

So Jarvis stood outside the tailor’s shop, alone in the dark, again. A carriage approached, as it had done not so long ago. Jarvis scanned the area frantically as the carriage approached. He was fairly certain he wasn’t followed, since he had been waiting at this spot for a good twenty minutes by the time the carriage pulled up; more than enough time for Security to snatch him, if they wanted to.

After the carriage came to a stop beside him, Jarvis rapped his knuckles on the door. It opened, and Malon was inside.

Jarvis pleaded with her: “I need to go into hiding. Can you help me?”