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Lash by Lash

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After we have made love, Axtol tells me there is a river where the full moon crazes the fish. They jump into your boat and flail against the bottom, piles of them churning in silver flashes. We cleave to each other as the workers outside take down the tents. He tells me that he will take me to the village at the edge of this river, that he will marry me there under a wide blue sky. We will honeymoon on an island and watch the fish break the surface as they lunge for the moon. It will be a night of lovemaking and bright splashing, one we will remember forever.

But back in my small trailer he grunts and gets up, and it's as if I've had an incredible

dream. He pulls on his boots, and while I'm feeling terribly awake and the shouts of the men folding the circus up into itself come through the thin metal of the walls, I ask him not to go.

"I have to help," he says, but through the tiny porthole window I watch him smoke and stand, exhaling yellow clouds, watching and laughing with the others, swatting away flies with a quick, practiced motion. In a while he moves into the dark.

The next night the new town sees me for the first time, spangled

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and afraid as I hold the torch to my smile. It's not a burnt lip I fear, for I've been burned a thousand times upon every inch of my body. My real fear is that my brother will say enough is enough and take me with him when he leaves the circus. Then I'll have to bring the fire to the streets again, watch as he watches me, as the smelly street crowd stares. The only spark those crowds have in their eyes is the reflection of my torch, and when I swallow it at the end of my act, their eyes turn as gray as spent coals.

But tonight the crowd is high class: ladies in expensive shoes, their lipstick ignited by our swirling lanterns and the spotlights that wheel and swing. Axtol moves along the edge of the crowd, his boots making black marks in the dirt. His shiny mustache quivers as he laughs with the men in the audience, shoves his hand into their bags of popcorn and takes sips from their cups. He holds the ladies' hands in his and kisses the pink knuckles, and even though the drums beat and the animal trainers yell and the crowd claps in a steady, simple way, I hear the echo of his kisses, the tiny grunt that accompanies them.

I watch the ladies as they are entertained, and I want to be one of them, to be awed as the giraffe bends and nuzzles them, as the tumblers stack one another to the rafters. These women look as if they have lives of simple luxury. Their husbands point to the dwarves in their robes dancing in the corners, to the lone tiger in his red cage. Their husbands (or lovers) hold them when the clowns perform, laughing at the ladylike fear that hides some unmentionable excitement. It would comfort me

to have a strong man laugh at my fear, as if he had never known what fear was. But the way the men look at me—I know I would fulfill only simple needs and never rank with a wife.

I juggle my lit torches on the periphery and wait, always wait until the spotlight comes to me and I move into the middle ring and begin. My mother taught me to eat fire as a child, to stand in the middle of a room and press the hot, bright flame to my lips. I have been seared shut a million times; all my childhood burns have been healed and re-burned. The burning is an old friend. I know its pattern: the first itch before a pinch of pain, and then the dull ache against the sheets at night.

Tonight I do not drop the flame. Some crowds seem bored with my act, but these ladies—their own mouths so nearly on fire—they gape at me with a sort of envy as they look sidelong at their men. The men—how they lean forward until they almost spill their beer. I look straight upward at the top of the tent above me, the wooden rafters tied together with strong, dirty rope. I lift the torch and bring it down in a slow arc, an invisible fuse burning in the hushed dark. And when I've swallowed the torch and my smile, etched in embers, flashes out at them all, they applaud and turn to one another as if to say "Did you see her?"

They call me out a second time and after I have curtsied and trotted away I see Vilni slinking toward me. He is the tender of the elephant bulls and smells of their dung.

"We might live in this town," he says running both hands through his dirty hair. In the crowd, plastic cups of beer glow amber in the swaying lantern light.

"I don't know if I like the men," I say. Their eyes sift the glitter on my belly.

"You'll like them better than our men," he says with a nod toward Axtol, who has stolen the cigar from a fat man in the front row. He and the fat man laugh in chorus as he exhales a cloud of smoke.

"I don't want to leave tonight," I say. Even this town has deserted streets, dark corners and alleys.

"No, not tonight," he says. He looks up at the rafters, beams the size of elephant legs that seem ready for collapse. The drums are reaching their ecstasy. The clowns move forward now. I recall that when we joined more than a year ago the clowns would spray water into the crowd, but now they have repainted themselves in more ominous

shades. Children are not allowed at the night shows and the clowns have added horns and deaths to their act. I want to see how those bright-lipped ladies in the audience will react. Vilni slips away, his eyes wide in awe of the clown show. They form a circle in the middle of the ring. The spotlight is now a reddish orange, the color of the sun before it disappears, and it swings to and fro as the bass drums boom. The smallest clown, fragile in a white costume, is pushed between his larger companions. Hurrahs spring from the men in the audience. A knife-shaped balloon is unsheathed (or is it a balloon-shaped knife?) and the small clown in white is cut again and again and pushed from one mad assailant to another. The spotlight follows him. Some dark liquid sprays. The balloon-knife looks light and harmless as it sweeps across the small clown's face. Somehow his painted smile melts into a frown. The dark liquid could be show blood or it could all be real. I've never been told how this dance is done.

It's nearly finished—the small clown's head will be cut off at any moment and bound into the dust. I watch the ladies, their mouths open and black, their white teeth, their eyes catching the red-orange spotlight glow. The drums stop and there are shrieks and a hundred well-coiffed heads drop as the small clown's head tumbles and knocks, wood-like, against a tent support.

With the spotlight out they become mere shadows bustling in the near dark. But the clown's show must be cleaned up out of anyone's view—even Axtol's. Only a few flames, none mine, give any light now. I hear Vilni singing somewhere outside. It's a song our mother made him learn many years ago.

That night Axtol wants to watch me put out flames on my body. He sits across from me in my trailer, a cigarette in his hand, his legs crossed like a woman's. I light and then snuff the flame out. I know the progression he likes, the intimate spots that make him shake. He has said that he could crumble before my feet at any moment.

I am burned, and when he makes love to me he passes his thumb over my burns as if he's trying to move them aside. The pain is something dull and far away, like the memory of my first father walking the house in his own giant boots. Once ecstasy has taken Axtol's breath for a few moments, he holds me in his rough, hairy arms. These are the best minutes of my life, when the bed feels as wide as a raft and I almost sleep

and dream of drifting away on that river full of leaping fish.

The moon is framed in my porthole and we stare at it together as he strokes my hair.

"It's full tonight," I say. "I wonder if the fish are jumping in the river you told me about."

"If you ever leave me," he says. "I'll have to take the flames to myself."

"I'll never leave," I say. The moon is moving as we doze; three-quarters is in the porthole. "The moon is a fat man moving slowly behind a curtain," I say.

"Were you talking with Vilni?" Axtol asks. He does not know we are siblings. He knows we have a past; he saw us together on the street as I did my act. He thinks of Vilni as an insignificant rival.

"Vilni talks to me. He stinks."

"Vilni should become a clown," Axtol says. He moves to get up. As he reaches for his boots, he grunts.

"He is already one, but not in a show."

I watch as he dresses. The process is slow, painstaking. He always wears a purple cravat. I only see him without one when he makes love to me. He ties and reties it and I watch as he makes it perfect. When I turn back to the porthole, the moon shows only a sliver.

"Yes," he says as he pulls the handle on my trailer door. "Vilni has the stature of a perfect clown."

I try to sleep, but now I think that my brother may be right, that we need to leave soon. It's been a long time since I've felt this way, since I've thought there might be something better hidden from me. These happy crowds have rekindled something in me. I want to be one of the women from the crowd tonight, with fire my lipstick and not my food, with flames dancing in my eyes and not in my mouth. I want to burn things in my own fireplace and not be watched as I burn myself. I want to live so long in the joy and comfort of this town that I forget what it feels like to have flame scorch the flesh, live in it so long that one day, as I cook supper for a strong and loving man, I'll touch a heated skillet and cry out with a pain long forgotten.

Vilni raps against my door and the whole trailer shakes with a metal thrumming.

"In three days," he says when I let him in, "we move on to the next

town. But when we're there, we'll sneak back here and they'll never find us."

"What if they do catch us?"

Vilni shrugs, but then he smiles and draws his finger like a knife across his neck. "But that's just for me," he says. "You? They will burn you at the stake."

He sings the song our mother taught him, looks out the porthole, and seeing no one, slips away.

The first night in the next town I am given an apprentice. She is young, just run away from home. I've seen her cleaning slop and feeding the tigers. Her name is Paulice. She has brittle arms and a half-crumbled smile.

"Why do you want to eat fire?" I ask her.

"It's better than being cold," she says. She is too thin to hug, and her skin seems permanently stained, dirty and orange. Axtol moves his gaze from her to me to her.

"Aren't you afraid of being burned?" I ask.

She doesn't answer. She is so young and new. I assume she had not thought of the burns before I mentioned them.

Axtol takes her away, his arm around her waist. She walks through mud and puddles without looking at them.

The next time I see Axtol he smells like her, like licorice and some kind of exotic medicine. But I still hold him and light the end of my torch. He runs his hands through his graying hair as I perform. I let the flames linger longer than usual on my skin, until the pain grows unfamiliar and new. He wipes his brow. When he comes to the bed, he caresses me with renewed vigor. His breath escapes him in deep shudders, and before he leaves he throws his handkerchief into the small oval garbage can by my trailer door.

Before he can shut the door on me I ask him, "Will you remember me forever?"

He turns, his face slightly sooted from kissing my burns. "Forever," he says. "Yes, and even more."

The deep aches keep me awake. I feel every thread in my worn blanket as I draw it over me. I wait for Vilni to come take me away, but he never arrives. After hours of waiting, I know the sun will rise and

brighten all the dark places where we could hide as we run away.

The night, years ago, when Vilni and I first ran away, my mother brought home our fifth father. He came into our house with an enormous net that smelled like a rock just pulled from damp earth. His name was Gorin and he claimed to be a fisherman, but Vilni said that he had never seen him in any boat, and Vilni spent his days chasing gulls by the sea.

He stood like a stone just inside the doorway. I thought he might run away at the sight of Vilni and me in our ragged clothes, our bones pushing against our skin. We talked uncomfortably for a few minutes, but then my mother brought out my torches and soaked them in kerosene. She lit them with my first father's silver lighter and smiled orangely as she handed them to me. Gorin soon moved farther inside and sat on the floor. His blistered lips parted in wonder.

Later that night I woke up underneath Gorin's net, as wet and heavy as the dark in the room. The only light and warmth came from the fire in the opposite corner. I saw his eyes caked with that light and behind that a certain dark motion. He laughed, and it sounded like an axe sinking over and over into wood. Soon he was on his knees beside me; a smell of something stronger than fish seemed to emanate from his very bones. I pulled and pulled at the net, but the more I did, the more entangled I became. He passed his hand through a hole in the net and searched for me in the piles of blankets. I screamed, and then, when I looked again, I saw Vilni behind Gorin, standing like one of the warriors from his boyhood books.

A blade flashed and Gorin gurgled a laugh into the room. I ducked under the covers, but soon a hand found me. I tried to fight it off, but he pulled and I was free. Vilni grabbed a pillowcase and we ran outside, through the neighborhoods where the dark and crumbling houses seemed ready to fall on us at any time. We moved through the night,

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past the outskirts of town and into the forest. We stopped to rest just as the dawn began to soak through the edge of the sky. I sat on a large rock, freezing and nearly starved, heart clutching like a dying bird.

"I hope you have food in there," I said, pointing to the pillowcase.

"It's something we can turn into food," he said.

He went to the stream and returned with water in his cupped hands. As he reached out to offer me a drink, the moonlight stroked the water and made his palms glow white. Soon, morning noises began to come to us, animals stirring, and people perhaps.

"Have any of the others touched you?" He asked. He pulled the knife from his pocket. A thin red line of blood ran along the edge. He wiped it clean with the open end of the pillowcase.

"No," I said. They had looked, their eyes on me as hot as any flame.

"Well, we have that at least."

He slung the pillowcase over his shoulder.

"I'm starving," I said.

He reached into the bag and pulled out my torches. Then he fished to the bottom and pulled out our first father's silver lighter. He smiled and began to walk away from the direction of our home. I picked up the pillowcase and dropped it again when I found it as empty as my stomach.

Iburn Paulice only a little, and she screams, metallic and desperate. The tiny trailer shakes and she rolls on my bed. Axtol never told her what it's like because he cannot understand. Axtol runs the performance, a watcher and announcer, but he is no actor. He is too scared of the flame to approach anything but its aftermath.

"It gets worse before it gets better," I tell Paulice. Faces have appeared in the window to watch me train her, but I have tired of their laughter outside. I hang a green silk over the porthole.

"I can't do it," she says.

"You come to this late," I tell her. Across her stomach are red burns grown tight and shiny with pain. I open my last jar of salve and dab each of her burns. They glisten and there is a sound like sizzling in the trailer that must be Paulice breathing. After I've tended her wounds, I lie beside her and stroke her hair, my fingers still greasy from the salve. She whimpers.

“Why are you here?” I ask her.

She shakes and moves to face me. “I’m looking for something,” she says.

“You won’t find it here.”

“What will I find here?”

What is left to find? Here, these people, this is where you go when you’ve grown tired of finding, when you want to forget that there is something out in the dark world worth hunting for. You accept Axtol’s caresses when you know that happiness is extinct, a dead end. You take the fire to your belly when you are done with your search, when the idea of searching becomes a cruel joke you can’t believe you fell for.

I look at her prone body, so skinny and young and bright. I could snuff out her hope, leave her with only the smoke of thought, with what could have been if she had never found us. Or I could rekindle her dreams, wet and cold as they are. Which, on this night, would be less cruel?

“Here,” I say, “You will find the real world.” And I blow across her burns not knowing if it will hurt or soothe. She shivers and before long is asleep.

Even the clowns fear death. They move in packs, their faces painted white for the day shows and red for the night. Sometimes they have painted-on smiles, but you can always see their real mouths, tight and terror-gripped. A loud noise will send all of them turning. They sleep together in a large trailer, a lone sentry clown always out front, eyes painted onto his eyelids in case he falls asleep. It’s rare to see a clown all alone, walking through the camp, but as I come back from leaving Paulice with Axtol, a single clown walks toward me, the red makeup on his face clotted with dirt.

“Hail to the fire-eater!” he says, the voice high and strained, but unquestionably Vilni’s.

“So now you’re a clown?”

“Axtol offered.”

“Why are you alone?”

He shifts in the moonlight, begins to wipe his face with a soiled handkerchief. “I’m rehearsing. I can’t move into the trailer until after the first performance.” He pulls a silver balloon from behind his back,

swats it blade-like across my arms and legs as he laughs. His large clown shoes make gritty sounds in the night, like tinny coughs from an unseen audience.

“So we’re not running away?”

He stops. “Why should we go now? I don’t have to shovel shit anymore.”

“Maybe you’re not supposed to be a clown.” He laughs and his head swings back. I see finger-shaped smudges on his neck where he has misapplied his make-up.

Before he looks back, I snatch his balloon away and twist it until it pops.

“I might get in trouble for that,” he says, frowning through his smeared-on smile.

“Then let’s go tonight,” I say, moving in close to him. “They won’t come after us because they have Paulice to eat fire now. Axtol won’t know we’re gone. They’ll forget us by the next town.”

Poor Vilni. He’s always sat by as I juggled my torches. The only light ever cast on him was reflected by me, and now he longs for the red-orange spotlight, for the dense sound of drums, for the hush of the astonished crowd. There’s no stopping him now, with his painted face, with his new and paranoid comrades.

“They said people would try to stop me,” he says and spins on his heel away from me, singing again, an unfamiliar song—and a dark one—as he disappears into the blackness between trailers.

I had worked the street for the first few nights after we ran away from home, but the towns we first stumbled into had no need for a girl who played with fire, so Vilni took to robbing bakeries while I performed for the customers inside. I smiled as they threw me a day-old crust, but only because I knew Vilni had swiped some loaves while their eyes were on me. The streets were worse. Fat men with burrs in their beards offered Vilni money for my virginity. He robbed a few, sawing at their red hands with the knife. But many times we slept in the same places they did, in cobblestone alleys or on the muddy banks of dark rivers. We fished a few black fish out of those waters and ate the bitter meat without cooking it.

It took a few months for Gorin to catch up to us, probably because

he walked with a cane. It was a new moon night on the bank of river just before dawn. Some boats were beginning to move into the dark water when he ripped Vilni from beside me, landed a blow on his back with that twisted red cane.

“So you’re the one who gets to sleep with your sister? I understand why you tried to slit my throat.” He pushed Vilni down into the sand, landed more blows. Vilni scrambled to a large stone and ducked behind it.

“Leave him alone,” I said.

Vilni pulled out the knife, but Gorin slapped it away.

“Cut me once. That’s all you’ll have.”

I took our first father’s silver lighter and came up behind him as he flailed on my brother. I had the jug of kerosene too. The sparks wouldn’t come at first. I doused his coat and let the flames do their work.

It was a moment before he felt the heat, but as soon as he did, he whipped the coat off and stomped it with the foot on his good leg. Vilni moaned from behind the rock and Gorin stood over me.

“You can have me,” I said. “I’ll go willingly. But not here. Somewhere warm.”

His jagged smile made me want to light myself and burn to ash before he touched me. But then what of Vilni?

Paulice grows more accustomed to the pain, but her face still tenses and tears still soak her cheeks. Tonight I take her with me to perform, another new town where the men are huge and hairy and the women seldom have teeth. They smile blankly at us through the dim light and Paulice and I smile too, standing to the side with our torches, waiting for the cue. Axtol approaches the crowd, but they treat him roughly and he stumbles back into the ring. Some of the huge men who do the heavy lifting for the circus are employed as security. Fear makes Axtol’s smile quiver in the spotlight.

Normally I go on without an introduction, but tonight Axtol senses a yearning in the crowd, a dark longing from their huge, scowling faces. He quiets the drums, hushes the crowd. A single silver light shines on him.

“I know what you want,” he says to them in the near-silence. “I know the urge that seethes under that skin. Oh, you have a smooth

enough surface, but underneath you are all crags." The crowd rumbles in disapproval, but they listen. "I know you want something new, something that shines. I know you want to see what the world has only hinted at." He points to Paulice and me, and the spotlight swings to us. The crowd roars and stomps and a second, dimmer spotlight is thrown on Axtol. "I've been to villages that soak half the year in fog. I've been to caves where the children grow up blind without the sun. I've been into secluded valleys where the people mumbled in unheard languages. So, for your thirst, tonight we have a new girl, ready for her baptism in fire. We have a novice, a desperate amateur and you will be the first ever to see her perform."

The crowd responds in a murmur, which begins to instantly grow frantic. When Axtol snaps his fingers the spotlights go and all is dark. I hear his footsteps, then feel as he grabs me by the arm. "It's her turn tonight," he says.

"She was only supposed to juggle," I say.

"She has to now. The crowd wants her." And the crowd has begun to stomp in the dark, shaking the weak bleachers. Their rhythm grows. All is blackness and the growing stomp of the crowd, as if they were making their hunger and lust audible for us. I turn to Paulice and hand her all the torches.

"I can't do it," she says, but Axtol has already grabbed her by the wrist and a spotlight the color of flame is on them as they move to the center of the tent. He doesn't leave her side, steps back only a few feet to watch her juggle. When she has finished to a weak round of applause, he approaches and tilts her head back, lowering the fire to her lips. There is renewed stomping and chanting from the audience as she opens her mouth and Axtol lowers the flame. Her tears roll, each pregnant with a tiny spark of light, but she is still and does not scream. Because I have taught her that screaming is an invitation to a burn.

Axtol holds another torch to her stomach as the last of the fire disappears into her. The flames lick against her belly, yet she does not move. The skin there grows gray with soot. She closes her lips around the torch in her mouth and Axtol drops the other torch to the ground. He places his hand in the small of her back and turns her around, showing her even to the people who paid only a few coins to get in. When she completes her turn, she opens up and he lifts the torch, still smoking, from

her mouth. She blows on it and the flame bursts out again, this time somehow redder, casting its heat on my face, as far away as I am. The spotlight is killed and the flame is all that's left in the dark center. I turn away and leave the tent as the crowd roars in an ecstasy.

I wander through the black trailers, each as immovable as night. A few of the hands cough and smoke, but they move out of my way. So I have become useless. I find my trailer and crawl under the sheets. They become wet with my sweat, like the night I first slept with Axtol, knowing Vilni was outside in the dust, kicking it with his feet, the blade worn away to the handle and all his power gone too.

The sheets are as wet as water and I long to drown in them, to pull them over me and let their coolness extinguish me.

Gorin led me by the hand. I expected to find a boat hidden among the reeds, but instead he led me along the bank of the river to a small tent by the remnants of a fire. Fish bones were strewn around as if by some animal.

"I knew your father," he said into the darkness of the tent. The flap was open only a slit, and through it I saw lights scattered across the river like stars.

He grunted a while through the shifting of fabric, and I understood that he was undressing. I could only make out a heavy shape near me, smelling of sweat and raisins, of dead fish and rum. He breathed hard, like some boat struggling against the current. In my hand I still had the lighter.

"Why don't you show me one of your tricks?" he said. I felt fear, like the night with the net. It would have been better not to see through the space in the flap to the river. If only it had been the river Axtol told me about, if only I could have seen something flash through that dark and star-scarred surface, maybe I would not have made the deal with Gorin, maybe I would have let him hold me instead of taking the lighter to myself. The idea came easier by knowing somehow that there was nothing under the surface of that dirty river flowing through that dirty town, nothing beyond the shiny surface but the detritus of people, the bones of the animals they had eaten, their waste flung from jars over the sides of party boats. Nothing alive in its depths, just a slick, wet surface hiding filth.

So I told Gorin to lean back and I'd show him. I took off my clothes and sparked the lighter. I wouldn't let it catch because I wanted the suspense; I wanted the spark to take only tiny bites out of the dark. When I finally let the flame catch, I put on my first real show, the flame against my skin until Gorin was asleep in the darkness. Then the flap was pulled back and Vilni crouched inside. I flicked the lighter again. His face was swollen, his eyes black slits. But he could still see that I had been taken apart by the flame, inch by red inch. He saw that it was somehow worse than the worst he could imagine.

“There’s so much more to teach her,” Axtol says, his smile pulsing. He let his hand fall along my back as we walked. “It’s not that you’ve been replaced.” This was to be the last night in town, so all the hands were packing up what could be packed before a show. In the morning, all the trailers would be strung together and a new town would be found tucked into a valley, a new town with wild crowds teeming at the tents, teeth clogged with our roasted meat, faces greasy and glistening in the bleachers. Axtol still tells some of the young boys that there are towns full of cannibals, that you can never tell which is which. This way, they rarely run away.

“You’re the elder girl,” he says to me. “We need you still.”

“I’ll teach her everything,” I say.

Axtol smiles and leans in close, his breath hot and clove-scented. “Everything?” he says with a twitch of his lip.

“All of it,” I say, and he shuffles happily away.

I move my things into Paulice’s old place as she has moved into the trailer. She shared the back of a wagon with a fortune-teller who rarely speaks to anyone except her customers from the town. She sits across from me and watches as I lay out some of my silks, presents from Axtol in months gone by.

“Is it bad luck to burn them?” I ask.

She bends her face and looks away.

I sleep for a while and when I wake up I hear the drums in the distance, like some army moving in on our camp. The fortune-teller is gone, even some of her things have been taken away. I make my way to the main tent. A rain has fallen during my sleep, and the world is muddy and damp, the air hangs with a brown mist clinging to the last

of the twilight. The tent bulges with life; it seems to sway to the drums, drunk with them. I move inside, aware of the smell of rosemary smoke and roasted meat left too long on the fire. I have missed Paulice's show. She looks bewildered as she stares at the group of clowns in the ring, the smallest one being pushed between the larger ones. The red-orange spotlight licks his face and I know the ill-applied make-up of Vilni. He's uncomfortable in his role as the smallest clown; he moves with too much worry of falling down into the ring, of getting dirt stuck to his face.

He's useless now, since his only purpose for Axtol was to keep me here.

I feel as Vilni must have felt that night by the dirty river, lifting the flap of a tent only to see someone he loves so low, knowing all the rivers in the world can only wash off so much, can only hide so much that we'd like to forget beneath their shining, moving waters. What did Vilni think he was saving me from when he finished the job he had meant to do at our home, when he plunged the knife into Gorin's sleeping neck? "It's not the first man I've killed," he said as he led me away that night. We walked along the bone-clogged bank. We moved as fast as bare feet could go on a warm night.

I want to save Vilni from the silver balloon the clowns whip about. The drums halt every few seconds so the crowd can hear the swish of the balloon as its blade cuts through the air. I want to save him the way he saved me, but I have no blade and no sleeping enemy. And the clowns move in on him, slowly, drum-crazed, their faces white, red, leering.

The lights flicker like lightning and after the clamor of drums has resolved to an abrupt silence, I see Vilni's head bound into the dust. His body collapses like a dropped marionette. His head rolls to a dead stop, and the crowd gasps and applauds the trick. Before I leave to get my things I see Paulice, her body dredged in glistening sequins, her face twisted in horror. I see her knees loosen, but I know she will hold up for at least a little while.

Axtol's voice booms from behind me, the tent thrashes in the dark and I move through the mud to my old trailer. I step inside and watch for them through the porthole.

There was a rumor about Gorin's son looking for us, but we treated it as rumor and ignored it, moving from dim towns by night and forest. Our feet soon grew as callused as our hearts and we loved only one another even as we held our bitter rage and breath inside. Once or twice I wanted to ask Vilni if we could find our hometown and go and see our mother, but I never did because I knew he would drag me reluctantly back and they'd find him and punish him. Even mother would help to see him in chains. So we held each other for warmth on cool nights and soon we met a man named Axtol in an alley as he watched me swallow fire. His hands were clean and soft, his voice like some hollow musical instrument played by a master. He took us in and ended up, finally, chopping us apart.

They come in together, Paulice still not over what she has seen so close-up in the dusty ring. He lights the lamp and they see me beneath the sheets. My eyes must be wild because even Axtol takes a step back.

"I'm ill," I say. "A fever." This relaxes them and Axtol sits down and begins to remove his boots.

"You should go and rest now," he says. "It will be hard to sleep tomorrow when we're moving."

"Especially in my wagon," I say, looking at Paulice, her eyes on her feet.

"Yes, well," Axtol says. "We'll find you something more permanent."

Paulice smells of fire, fuel and salve. The whole trailer reeks of kerosene. The sheets are cold and wet against me and when I come out from underneath them, a cool breeze chills me.

"I'm sorry about the sheets," I say. "I think my fever broke." Axtol places the back of his hand against my forehead and looks into my eyes. I've got the silver lighter in my hand and I think of how sweet it would be to burn him lash by lash. He drops his hand and grins.

"Something for you," I say when I turn away from him. I hand Paulice the lighter and close her fist around it. "Be careful. Fire is a jealous lover." She chuckles, thinking, perhaps, that I am talking about Axtol.

Before I close the door of the trailer they are already embracing,

they are already moving toward the bed, groping blindly for the damp sheets, climbing awkwardly between them. In a few moments he will ask her to apply the lighter. In a few moments the kerosene-soaked sheets will ignite, then the rug, the curtains and all the silks he's given her in the past days. As I grab my bag of belongings from the wagon I hear the first alarms raised, the calls for water, the scrambling hands. I also hear, as faint as breathing under the rush and panic, a sound I've heard in my own belly for years: a rumble, a roar, a crackling.

Outside of our camp there is a path into the woods. I take it and soon there is no sound but the wind in the highest branches. But in a while I hear a waterfall and find beneath it a shimmering river, which I follow for miles. This could be the moment; this could be the last lonely place. I sense it as I look out over the waters. I feel it as the apricot moon climbs above the dark edge of trees. Underneath the endless burbling there is something beautiful that longs desperately to break through, to rise above, to flash. I wait for it in the cold. I will wait for it forever, yes, and more.

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