

The Swansea 999
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At least once, there was a boy named Hubble Magellan Kemble, who, at this moment, was being chased across Asphodel, an islet formed between St. Vincent and Barbados by the seismic reactions of a missionary ship sinking into a tectonic plate at least 333 years ago on a tempestuous Friday. The islet, once-formed, was so small that its airport only took cargo jets, which risked crashing upon the enormous church steeple that left the town in shadow at noon; tourist pamphlets ignored the islet's existence; and its children, the descendants of Africans and indentured Japanese laborers, couldn't play hooky without risking running into their teachers.

Hubble Kemble, too, was on the run.

'Oye! You *dead*, boy!'

'*Stop running, you fucking sister-fucker!*'

'*Das why she sick! You prob'ly kill your mudder, too!*'

'*Oye! I gan break your head like a coconut!*'

Hubble Kemble, weak heart chugging like an accelerating train, ran as fast as that heart could shoot blood into his bony pink legs. With each step, the mob behind him of his classmates, their little siblings, their older siblings, parents, and at least one Seventh-Day-Adventist priest seemed to grow in both size and critical mass, and as they swept through the dry once-colonial town, three-legged mongrels and roosters leaping into the gutters to evade being crushed, more people flowed out of the houses and zinc-roofed shacks along the cracked white sidewalks, wielding shovels, pitchforks, and even in one case a double-barreled shotgun so old it had presumably helped create the islet's first cemetery. As the mob increased, even the dogs and roosters and mangy agoutis joined in the frenzy, eyes wide and white, tongues flapping against their moon grins. The monthly ferry had brought with it a travelling circus, and leering acrobats in sequined tights and Ephesian twins and buxom clowns on steaming unicycles and knife-throwers and fire-blowers and even a trained Kodiak bear on in-line skates mingled seamlessly with the mob, and soon it seemed the entire world was flying and swinging and shooting after the teenage boy. The green monkeys that had come from Barbados seven years ago and ravaged Asphodel's plantations were now scampering along the telephone poles with the mob. At least one of the simians had acquired a pistol.

As Hubble leapt over a trashcan, he felt the bottle of medicine rise out of his pocket in midair. He shoved it back in, heartbeat quickened further, and turned down an alley. *Hold on*, he thought. *Hold on...* As if to follow his own advice, he paused in the alley, hands on his knees, great eaves of sweat draining from his forehead onto his eyelids.

'*He going down de alley!*'

'*Shoot de gun, Papa Joe Patmos!*'

'Damn, filthy, incestuous little Abraham!' the priest yelled.

Hubble craned his neck. 'I didn't do it!' he wheeze-shouted. 'I never – had sex with –'

A bullet cracked against the alley wall, and he had to run.

The alley opened into a view of the islet's dormant volcano, at the base of which Hubble Kemble lived. He started down the paved two miles of road toward it, then took a sudden right down a rougher road. As he turned, a dart sailed so close to his nape that his shirt collar rippled.

He paused for a second again, panting, and then darted off, the mob's steps sending tremors through the isle.

'Stop, Hubbahkembl!'

'Huh-Huhbbahkembl.'

'Can you repeat that?' his teachers had asked, first in a urine-coloured kindergarten memory that shone darkly like an aquarium, then throughout his life, up into his graduation from Fatima, the island's only secondary school. His parents had moved with him to the islet from the quiet world of Cincinnati not long after he was born and his twin sister had come out an ashen stillborn. Hubble's memories began, or were first recovered, in Asphodel.

'Like the telescope,' he would reply when he reached eight, but as the island teachers still taught that Heaven and Hell were the boundaries of the circular universe, this did not help much.

Each time the question came, he would have already said his name twice in preparation, but the third time, he would look down at his black church shoes, so richly polished that his parakeet face would peer back up at him. The other boys and girls would laugh until the teacher brandished a ruler, cane, or even took off his belt, and Hubble's slurring quickly became his unofficial name, even to the African Gray parrot that had taken up residence outside his home for four years. Its nametag said 'Plato,' and it cursed the mothers (often by name and sometimes by genealogy) of everyone who passed too close to him. Plato was best known, however, for being able to recite passages of classical music unheard of in Asphodel, particularly the descending harps from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* and all twelve of Mozart's variations on *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*.

Only the local European madwoman (she had yet to see him), and Dunyazad, Hubble's sister (adopted fifteen years ago, on the night a blazing comet had struck by like a sailing train), seventeen like him, had never chided him for the didgeridoo he seemed to have lodged in his throat. She had been the only non-Caribbean child in the orphanage when they gave the Kembles a call, for it was the time when the bananas had failed and the orphanage was having its closing-down sale. Pale as a vampire, Dunyazad had been left by a bizarrely dressed man and woman that sweated the scent of Arabica coffee; according to the manager, they had given no explanations and had never been seen again. She played and roughhoused with Hubble, let herself be the guinea pig of his boyhood empiricisms, until, after eight and a third years, she had to remain in bed instead of coming to play, for her heart, already weak, had started beating like a ragged sharkskin drum. Once in a while, she would turn paler than before, her eyes would glaze over, and she'd start muttering about asteroids and something vast chugging towards her.

'She has severe iron-deficiency anemia,' Dr. Glosspan, Asphodel's physician, had said, and she needed iron supplements from another island, which could be ordered and brought by ferry once a month. 'But they are rather expensive,' he'd

continued with an upward-gazing small smile, 'so if you miss the ferry just one month, well, Charon may have a new face to look at in his liner.'

Hovenden Kemble, Hubble's father, had snorted and looked away, while his wife Fanny, who loved explaining that she was the great-great-great grandniece of Fanny Kemble, first female passenger on a public railway, had smiled at Dunyazad with wet eyes. Not four years after, Fanny had been accidentally shot by a mad drunk man and died hours later in the cargo plane that was taking her to Barbados because Dr. Glosspan didn't have the tools to help her. Since then, Hovenden had become a mad drunk himself, alternating between weeping over Dunyazad and strangling her while Hubble strangled *him*, Hovenden's eyes rolling like an Othello, the black beard he had not cut since Fanny's death shaking like a cypress. The Kembles' home, a white two-storey colonial-style creation, had, over years of half-neglect, become green with the algae and ferns bursting out of its walls. He had long ago fired their maid and gardener, and Hubble now bought most of the house's supplies himself with his job money.

After he got home from his job at the bookshop, Hubble would sit by Dunyazad's bed for as long as he could, watching the geckos mate on the rafters above the faded Burne-Jones poster he had bought for her from the ferry and swatting away the mosquitoes that descended on her white-curtained bed like a great shadow. He held her hand, told her stories about the classes she had never been able to take at school, and blushed, a flame running from his loins to his scalp, on the nights she asked him to get under the covers because she felt cold sleeping by herself. Cool arm draped over him as she slept, Hubble would stare at the ceiling, hoping the leg she had put over his thigh couldn't feel, in her dreams, the insomnia-bringing bulge in his pyjamas; and then, after staring into the dark for hours and listening for Hovenden's inebriated curses if he returned from wherever he drank at, Hubble would suddenly find himself waking up to dawn, while Dunyazad snored slowly beside him.

The few times she did get out of bed, she would shuffle onto their front porch in a moth-holed black kimono, its cloud designs shifting as she shuffled. She peered at the stars and nebulae while cocks fought in the yard, and she asked Hubble for more stories if he was with her, her pale blue eyes seeming to light up, like blooming magnesium fireworks, as he spoke.

The morning of the day of the afternoon Hubble Kemble was chased by the mob that was shipwrecking the town, Dunyazad hadn't woken up as usual. Her pulse slipped through her wrist like bluebottle maggots, and her pale forehead had been glossy with sweat. She hadn't opened her eyes, except for one moment, where her eyes, glazed as Styx, had found Hubble's.

'I'm moving away,' she had said softly, with a smile. 'Why are we moving away? It's rattling now. I can see ... are we ... is that the ... the *train*?'

He held her wrist. 'You're imagining it again. Just hold on for a bit. The ferry will be here soon.'

But she had said nothing else, and her eyes had shut. For a minute after, her pulse seemed normal again, but soon it felt as if her heart was giving up. Hubble had drawn the sheets up to her neck, then pulled them back, fearing she would wilt like a fern, and then had drawn the sheets up again. He'd sat by her side until the ferry's horn blew through the islet like the drone of some old god, and he'd flown to the dock, heart and unbuttoned shirt flapping, before he remembered he'd forgotten the

money and had had to turn back. It was a holiday, so he wasn't playing truant, but he had nevertheless, on his second trip to the dock, run into a group of body-building boys who had forgotten it was a holiday and *were* thus playing truant while unaware of its inutility.

'Oye,' one said, stepping in front Hubble as he turned to run back home. 'Why you in such a rush, Hubbahkemb!'

'Um – ah – ' He tried to move around the guy but the other three blocked him. 'My sister sick!' he said, feeling his face tingle. 'I need to get home!'

'Is true you sexing her?' one asked, peering at him without moving. 'Because I hear dat from a guy at school.' He seemed to be half-grinning, half-scowling, like a jack-o-lantern.

Hubble stared at the boy, gulped, and knew his face was turning orange, despite his virginity. 'No – ah, I never – '

'Check his face! He does do it for real!'

'No, I just – I just need to bring this medicine for her – '

'Das why she sick!' the first guy said, leering at Hubble. His voice had risen, and a few people had turned to stare. '*Jah!* Dis nasty bitch here, incestin' *his own sister!*'

'Fuck,' the other said, shaking his head and glaring. He cracked his knuckles. 'You doh know dat shit not *right*, white boy?'

Hubble had been backing up slowly. A boy shoved him, and Hubble stumbled, then darted around them. The boys took off after him into town, yelling. In twenty-two minutes, they, and nearly all the island, were chasing him, weapons in hand, the isle seeming to tilt under the tremor of their feet.

Hubble Kemble stopped again, panting like old bedsprings. He had in his fear gone down a semi-paved road he normally avoided, and he wasn't even sure where he was anymore. The main town was far behind him, and he didn't see any villages nearby. He squinted. Behind him: the mad carnival riffs of the crowd. In front: the jungle began not far from where the road dead-ended, and the only building nearby was a great crumbling mansion on the right of the path, which was owned by the mad Englishwoman, whose husband had, fifteen years ago, vanished into all but the islet's interminable gossip columns, where he lived on as a *jumbie*, a sorcerer, a train captain, and even an astronaut. The mansion boasted great vine-furled bay windows, cut-stone walls, and even a chimney atop, a curl of grey smoke hissing from it like the smokestack of a dozing locomotive. Two tall black gates, always open, led into the madwoman's front yard. Weeds and kudzu filled the space around the stone path that snaked to her wooden front door.

'*Keep looking! He have to be around here somewhere!*'

Hubble swore, peered at the forest, and then darted through the madwoman's gates. The sound of barking and cursing and screeching unfurled like a gale down the road. There were some bushes beneath one of the madwoman's windows. He tried to crouch down behind them, but they weren't thick enough to cover him. He peered at the road outside the gates. His eyes widened as a mongrel hissed past the gate, its mouth red with foam, a French horn looped around its neck. In seconds, the crowd had amassed along the road.

A scrawny boy walked in front the gate. Hubble stared as the boy's eyes glanced around through the madwoman's yard, passed over the bushes, and then returned suddenly to Hubble.

'*He in there!*' the boy shrieked.

'Well, what you waiting for?' someone asked. 'Go!'

The boy shook his head violently. 'No, sir. I not putting a foot inside that mad lady yard, for her to do some shit to me....Must be mad in *your* head too.'

An older boy slapped the back of his head and took a step through the gates. The crowd, animals included, froze, and then seemed to surge through the gates.

Hubble braced himself as he flew out of the bushes. There was no way he could get around the mob in time to get back through the gate; he had lost, *Dunyazad would –*

'*What's going on here?*' a voice, high as a witch's cackle, rang from Hubble's right. He whirled. The mad European woman, skinny as a revenant and draped in a brocade gown, stood by an open door, haloed in the afternoon sunlight, a bony bloodless finger pointed at the crowd. '*Who the hell are all you?*'

Hubble stared at the crowd, which had hesitated again. A second passed as clouds drifted above like great vessels; and then Hubble dashed past the madwoman into her house.

'Wait,' she said, turning to him, 'you can't just run into my –'

'Close the door!' he screamed. 'Close it! *Please!*'

She peered at him for a second, then sighed and shut her door and bolted it locked. The shouts from outside were muffled into such a silence that Hubble wondered how she had realized a mob was outside at all. He braced himself for the door or a window breaking, but all was silent.

After a few moments, he realized the woman was staring at him. Her cheeks, rouged a dramatic pink, had a faint droop to them, and her eyes had the wideness of belladonna drops. Her lips were pale, and her space-black hair was done up in an enormous partly powdered bun that sat atop her head. Dangling off the bun at an angle was a great black feathered headdress. He was astonished, indeed almost heartbroken at the sight of all this atop her ghostly frame, which seemed so frail, so like the bones of a moth, that the gown seemed to hang, homeless, in the air.

'Erm,' he began, his voice surprising him. In the silence, his voice seemed to shatter hundreds of grandfather clocks all at once.

'I suppose you'll want something to drink,' she murmured, hands drooping at her sides.

'No, I –'

'Come to the kitchen, then,' she groaned, shuffling over the floor, her black gown trailing on the floor, her cinched waist swaying like a cypress. He peered at her, then started after her. It was then he realized where he really was. He looked around.

They were in a great circular drawing room with a wooden floor, the air so still and deep that his footsteps felt like a spelunker's. A Persian rug lazed on the floor, and shelves of trinkets flanked the walls. Against one wall stood a grand aquarium, its water faintly bubbling, a stingray lying so still on the bottom that Hubble had thought the tank empty until it blinked at him. He turned, holding his arm. There were no windows. On the opposite wall, old paintings and portraits stood behind glass. Hubble glanced at a still life of an enormous feast.

'Osias Beert,' she muttered, without turning to see him looking. 'He used to

write, but no more. I stretch back from the Van Dycks and Hilliards, you know. My grand-relatives bought the *Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* over there, and the gown, of course. I've lost the panniers.' Her voice rose and fell like a dreamer's chest, as though she were the spirit of a long-abandoned opera singer's dressing room.

Hubble stared as they passed over a little arching white wooden bridge, beneath which was a dark stonewalled pool dappled with water lilies and what seemed like hundreds of koi, floating in a silent orange-to-yellow mass under the surface. Dark stairs, lamplit like steps to the stars, led up on the left to other rooms; a long opera glove lay across the first step.

'Tessaræ.'

Hubble swiveled his neck toward her. 'Sorry?'

'And what would your name be? I expected you to have told me as soon as you burst into my house.'

He held his nape, colouring. 'Hubbah – Hubble.'

Without a reaction, she turned with a swish down a grand hallway arched at the ceiling a gothic church. Along the left side ran a model train's tracks, and at the end of it, a great miniature bullet train lay on its side, its thumb-sized lone driver sprawled on his back. The train was painted blue with patches of green, like a strange globe. 'My husband set it up before he went away,' she said, still not turning to him.

'What happened to him?' Hubble blurted out after a second. 'I-I mean –'

She stopped, and he bumped into her willowy rear. He fell onto his own, cheeks orange. 'He left on the *Swansea 999*, and, of course, he never came back.'

'The what?'

She stopped, her fist momentarily clenching, and then she moved to the side. They had reached the kitchen. 'Will tea do?' she murmured.

He hesitated as he saw an enormous stone oven built into the wall. 'I'm not putting *you* in there,' she said, rolling her eyes. 'You wouldn't fit, anyhow.'

He sat down. The medicine pushed against his thigh, and he shot up again.

'What time is it?' he asked. 'I need to get to my sis – to someone.'

'Who knows?' she sighed. 'We're alive; that's enough for me.'

He stared. 'No, but I –'

'At any rate, it's churlish to stare at a woman whose back is to you, as if I put on my best court gown just for your horny little eyes. Go wait in the waiting room, and I'll bring you your tea there. Now *git*, you little Strephon, or I *will* put you in the oven!'

He swore under his breath and went back into the lobby. The stingray peered at him with one eye, then closed it again. Hubble looked at the front door. He glanced behind him, then went for the door. His hand was on the brass knob when he remembered the mob. His hand trembled there for a moment, and then he swore again and went into an adjoining room, which he had to assume was the waiting room.

Compared to the other rooms, it was small, but the shadows flickering over it from the candles and incense seemed to give it added proportions. A black straw mat formed a spiraling rug, while around it were white tiles finely dotted with every colour Hubble could imagine. A brown bookshelf rose near to the ceiling on the right, and a still life by Willem Claeszoon Heda lay on the left wall, its crab on a platter cool behind the glass. Hubble went up to the bookcase. *Paradise Lost; The Essay on Man, The Rape of the Lock, and other Poems; Tales of Mother Goose; Portraits of*

Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun; The Portrait of a Lady; The Complete Stories of Miyazawa Kenji, translated by a scratched-off name, and others, and others.

He yawned and sat at the edge of the spiral rug. The air felt sweet and light, somewhat crumbly, like dust, but cool. His head drooped – all that running had finally caught up with him. For a few moments, he fought it, thinking of the tea and the medicine in his pocket. But after a silent minute, he sucked his teeth and lay down, closing his eyes. He would rest. He was letting a bottle of medicine become a globe upon his back. The world wouldn't fade in just a few minutes.

There was a sudden sound behind him, like a faint chugging. He remained as he was, then turned as it grew louder, into a roar that seemed to shake the darkening house. 'What the – ' he started as he rose, for the globe-painted train he had seen derailed in the hallway was suddenly rushing upon him, its lights blazing like stars. He stared, then screamed.

And then he was no longer in the house, had never been, more likely, for he was sitting instead on a black-cushioned seat that sprang with the sound of old bedsprings. There were many such seats beside him, three-in-a-row-in-two-long-columns like in an airplane, for he was on the inside of a great gray-walled train. But what stunned him most was that stars and nebulae were flitting by outside its great porthole windows. He shot to his feet, then fell back with a gasp as the train began to rattle, its fluorescent ceiling lights flickering.

'Fuckin' A,' a man beside Hubble said, snorting. He was dressed in the long blue brass-buttoned coat of a boat captain. 'At this rate, we're gonna go over.'

'Go over what?' Hubble asked, looking from him to the window, outside of which suddenly passed alarmingly close a piece of icy rock.

'Mount Fuji. What do you *think*?' He peered at Hubble. 'Are you new?'

'Um – I –'

'New people go at the back, unless they have a special ticket. Captain's orders.'

'Are you the captain?'

He suddenly grinned and tipped his hat. 'That I am.'

Hubble started. 'But then who's driving the train?'

'I am, obviously.' The train rattled again. In another car, someone let out a string of Japanese. 'Don't worry, kid. We're just passing over a belt. It always gets like this on the belts. Then it's smooth sailing – for a bit, anyway.'

Hubble peered out the window. 'But ... where *are* we? How am I ... in space? I don't get it!' His eyes widened as the train chugged past a great yellow-violet cloud of stardust, upon which was planted a flickering neon sign for 'Thanasphere Station.' Beside it was a jumble of stars shaped like a traffic light, the greenest of the stars blazing brightest. The things seemed close enough to touch, and yet when he blinked, they seemed impossibly far.

'Cover your ears,' the captain muttered. 'The bastards around here are loud as fuck. Always talking about doing their brothers and sisters and dogs and monkeys.'

Indeed, as they zipped by the cloud, Hubble's eyes widened, for all around him seemed to be a mob of voices screaming and laughing and barking and even humming classical music.

‘Anyway, didn’t I tell you to go to the back?’ the captain said as the voices fell behind. ‘What’re you still doing here?’

‘How are we in space?’ he tried again. ‘What ... what’s going on?’

The captain rolled his eyes, got up, and began pushing Hubble down the train to the next car. ‘Come *on*, kid, you’re on the *999*. It’s the best bullet train in the business. It won’t go anywhere it’s not supposed to.’ He gave a chuckle. ‘sides, we don’t have anywhere to go...’

He suddenly found himself in another car, which smelled of incense. White petals lined the aisle. A short-haired Japanese man was sitting with his legs crossed, stroking a white heron. Hubble frowned, then gasped as he heard his father’s voice coming from down the aisle. He ran, but no one was there, except for a crumpet-nibbling woman who looked like one Tessarae’s portraits. He went into the next car.

‘Dad?’ he called, then yelped as the train jerked. He fell over the lap of a man with a handlebar mustache. The white petals rained down over the train.

‘Madness, isn’t it?’ the man said, peering down at Hubble and brushing off petals. He had a thick, almost unintelligible German accent. ‘But that’s why they painted it like the globe.’

‘S-Sorry,’ Hubble said, trying to get off the man, who seemed vaguely familiar to him.

‘What for?’ he asked, peering as a monkey scampered down the aisle, blowing a tuba and cleaning a pistol against its thigh. ‘It’s a zoo in here, after all ...’

‘What’s going on?’ Hubble said, peering at the monkey. He suddenly felt crying. ‘Why is – why are we –’

‘Why are you here, do you mean?’

‘Y-Yeah.’

The mustached man looked him straight in the eye. ‘Because you’re dead, of course.’

Hubble stared, suddenly chilled. ‘What?’

‘Or, as they told me after the war, I’d let go.’

He felt like something silent and dusty, something huge as the world, was at the edge of his consciousness.

The moustached man peered at him. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is the *999*, the greatest of Charon’s liners yet. It holds everyone fairly well. The monkey – well, if the ark was rubbish, this is somehow sensible. You should take a microscope over these chairs; you’d never sit down again ... Before you ask again,’ he continued, ‘I advise you look out a window.’

Hubble stared at him, then moved over to a porthole. He squinted. ‘I don’t see anything.’

‘Just blackness, perhaps? A huge space of it? No light, but a kind of visible darkness?’

He shrugged. ‘I guess.’

The man chuckled. ‘That would be because the *999*’s tracks are the very tip of the event horizon – what they call my radius! – of a black hole.’

Hubble whirled around. ‘We’re on a *what*?’

‘The event horizon – the very tip before which everything the black hole consumes is lost forever.’ He chuckled, fingering his mustache. ‘*Those* must have been some blueprints.’

Hubble was staring outside again. ‘You’re crazy,’ he said, turning around. ‘I’ve read about black holes. There’s no way we can be on the edge of one, especially not on a train.’ He felt his arm, then pinched it. ‘Screw you. You’re just a dream.’

‘If so,’ he said, ‘it’s a dream I’ve never woken from. We’re moving faster than light,’ he continued, ‘or so that bumbling captain says. Whatever the case, that is certainly a black hole out there.’ He crooked his neck. ‘If it makes you feel better, we’re not exactly safe; should the 999 tilt just the slightest in the wrong way, or lose a bit of speed, we would all be devoured by the black hole. Think of it as orbiting around an inferno so hot even Dante couldn’t walk through it.’

Hubble swallowed. His heart suddenly felt like a kickboxed punching bag. He wanted to accuse the man of being a dream again, but instead he asked, ‘Where are we?’

‘We are – to quote the captain – ‘in some pretty empty patch of space somewhere.’ I myself am not too sure. There are many, many black holes in our universe, but this one seems rather particular.’ He chuckled again. ‘At the very least, it’s made me think before reattempting to be an acrobat. I wanted to be one as a child, you know, to run off to the circus and all that ...’

The voice suddenly came again. Hubble whirled to it. A figure had just shut the door of the next car, making a giant in a cassock near the door jump.

‘Dad!’ he called after the distant voice. He peered at the moustached man, who had turned his attention to the window. Hubble cursed and ran past the cassocked man through a series of cars, past portholes showing blackness and nebulae shaped like crosses and Buddhas, past enormous squawking macaws and women with hair as long as he was tall sipping tea and essay-writers and petals white white petals, until it seemed he’d reached the penultimate car. As he ran in, he tripped over a cart and fell into a roll onto his rump. As he looked around, the blood drained from his face. It wasn’t his father in front him.

‘D-Dunyazad,’ he said.

‘Oh, you’re here, too?’ she said, frowning. She was sprawled, like a sad doll, against one of the hay-dusted crates all around the room. White flowers grew out of some of the crates. From the box to Hubble’s left suddenly issued a cock-a-doodle-do, and he cried out and fell back.

‘Where are we?’ he said, catching his breath and peering at the box.

‘Coach. I couldn’t afford a ticket, so they threw me here.’ She chuckled. ‘But the kids from your school are even worse off. You couldn’t imagine the car *they’re* in –’

His eyes widened; he’d realized. ‘You mean, you’re – shit! No!’ He got up, took her arm, and tried pulling her up. ‘We need to get you off here!’

‘What? Why would I get off?’

‘*Please!*’ he said. ‘I don’t have anyone else. If you go ... I might as well let them kill me.’

‘But you’re here with me now,’ she said after a moment.

‘But we’re heading for – for *that!*’ he pointed at the window, which was splattered with what looked like the defecation of geckoes. ‘This doesn’t ... *mean* anything!’

She looked at him for a moment, then bowed her head. ‘What’s on that side?’ she asked.

‘What’s – there’s a fucking black hole out there!’ He looked at her. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to –’

To his consternation, she chuckled. ‘Yeah, we’re riding around its edge.’

‘How can you *laugh* at that?’ His hand fisted. ‘Don’t you *care*? Aren’t you *scared*?’

‘Well, yeah, but ... They never showed you the other side, did they?’

‘Other side?’

She smiled at the floor. ‘Look out the other window.’

He peered at her, brow furrowed, then went over to the window, wiping the shit off it with hay. He squinted, and then his eyes shot open. It was – well, it wasn’t anything he had ever seen before, defying his empirical vocabulary. ‘Wh-what –’

‘No one knows,’ another voice said, and Hubble turned, with a chill, to see the madwoman stretched across atop two boxes like an impecunious vampire. She yawned and pushed herself up. A Pre-Raphaelite poster, somewhat wrinkled, was stuck to her back like an opera cloak. ‘I can’t even find words for what that madness is. It’s not to say I like it, but I don’t hate it, either. I couldn’t. It’s just ... just *gorgeous*, isn’t it?’

‘Tessarae?’

‘This train can tip so easy,’ she said, lying back down. ‘I admit I don’t really know what’s on either side. But I rather go down on *that* side. The beauty’s in the uncertainty.’

‘No, it’s not! How can you say that?’ He stared, from the madwoman to Dunyazad. ‘Are you really...’

‘The thing is,’ Tessarae said, ‘I’m as scared not knowing as knowing. Well, no, that’s a jaded absurdity, like thinking a utopia can be boring. I suppose what I mean is, it’s nice to *know* I have the possibility of having possibilities, which I wouldn’t have if I really *knew*.’

‘Yup,’ Dunyazad said, pushing herself up slowly. The train seemed to incline towards the black hole, then towards that other, wordless thing. ‘Even just stand up, and it’s like we’ve changed everything in the world.’ A dusty butterfly flapped off the box behind her. ‘I heard the train runs on stellar energy or something. But that can’t last forever. So when the last star is gone, I guess we’ll all fall. But in a way’ – she took a slow step toward Hubble – ‘I like knowing I can push it, right now, if I just...’

He grabbed her arm, trying to push her back. ‘No. I won’t let you do –’

And then she stopped and screamed as a mob of Asphodelers flew like shades into their car from the darkness of the back, knocking over boxes and sending shrieking roosters into the walls in flurries of feathers, a lurid greenness filling the room. The train gave a great metallic whine, for it had leaned far, far to the side –

– there was this *Jurassic Park* moment where the horror was silent and all seemed okay, but only because the foot had not come back down –

And then amid the rooster shrieks and the scream of the train and the billion yells of passengers off the cars that were falling and the breaking of trillions of wineglasses saucers pill bottles and the cries of the parrot and Dunyazad falling into Hubble – amidst all that, there was the briefest decrescendo of harp strings.

‘Are you all right?’

The young adult's eyes flared open. Tessarae was jostling his shoulders.
'W-What? Did we – ' He shot up. 'Is this – '
'Did you fall? You were just sprawled on the floor! What on earth happened to you?'

'I-I'm fine,' he said. *Shit*. He lay back for a moment, recollecting, and then he shot up again. *Dunyazad*. He started for the door, despite the hollow ache in his bones.

'Wait,' Tessarae said, stepping over a wrinkled Burne-Jones poster towards him. 'Where do you think you're going?'

'I need to get home. What time is – never mind.'

'You're going back? What about that mob that was after you?'

He paused, then continued to the front door. 'They can lick my ass.'

She snorted. 'Well. I see.'

He turned the knob, then stopped a final time. 'How did your husband vanish?' he asked.

'What? Oh...I told you; Sharon went – that was his name – on the *Swansea 999* and never returned.'

He hesitated. 'Where was it supposed to go?'

He could feel her staring at him. 'Into outer space, of course. They built a great ramp for it to go up, off the coast of Japan somewhere, and that it did, but something went wrong, and it stopped functioning. Now, it just floats around in space. Once every fifteen years, it seems to come back, like a comet, for one night. Tonight is its anniversary.'

He felt a chill turn his bones into xylophones; and then, he smiled, suddenly calm and content. 'Thanks.'

He opened the door.

The sky was bright with a great white moon, kimonoed in dark clouds. Faintly, far across the Milky Way, he thought he glimpsed a white speck trail across the black.

The yard had been littered with cardboard, animal fur, shovels, a clown's tights, the monkey's pistol, pitchforks, and sundry rubbish. Amongst the shipwreck disorder were the dregs of the mob – teenage boys leaning against the gates, snoring; dogs and monkeys and a bear sprawled on their backs, legs flapping in dream-excitement; and a few raggedy children, snuggled up among the pistol and pitchforks. Hubble frowned at the scene, lit a lurid green by a nearby streetlamp, and then shook his head and tiptoed through the yard. At the gate, the sleeping sentries suddenly awoke.

'Oye, Jamal, is him! Wake up, boy!' After slapping the other teenager awake, they moved in front him.

'Get the fuck out of my way,' Hubble said calmly.

'Who you think you talking to, you nasty fucking piece of shit?' Jamal roared. 'I should break your motherfucking skull open with my teeth – '

With a *thock*, Hubble right-hooked him in the face. Jamal seemed to freeze, cheek flattened, eye squished against it, and then he and the other sentry were atop him, punching and kicking and yelling.

But it was only short-lived, for Jamal, unfortunately once more on the right, flew to the ground, clutching his eye and shrieking. A broomstick had sailed through the air, its knob smashing into his eye. Hubble turned. Tessarae was standing on the

grass, arm cocked forward.

The other boy looked up at her, swallowed, and then ran toward her, then flew back again as she revealed the gleaming blunderbuss in her other hand. 'I don't wish to break any butterflies on the wheel, but one more step on my property tonight and I'll send you all into the dungeon of hell,' she murmured.

Hubble smiled, though it pained his cheek to do. 'Thanks again,' he said.

'You too!' she said. 'I want you all *off*, on this of all nights in the universal night!'

She fired a shot into the air with the crack of a Tchaikovsky cannon and stepped back, trembling.

Hubble peered at her, smiled again, and then took off as fast as his heart could pump blood into his bony legs.

When he reached his home, Plato was perched on the guttering above the front porch, serenading the night with excerpts from some elegy; as he moved about, dust dribbled off the guttering in a slow pale stillicide. As soon as Hubble got past the dust falls, he drank half a bottle of water. Then, sick, took an enormous urination. Finally, after two agonizing minutes, he reached Dunyazad's room. Before he knocked, he felt for the medicine in his pocket.

There was no answer.

He swallowed. His face and arms tingled. He knocked the door, then kicked it. 'Dunyazad!' he called. Finally, he turned the knob.

She was sprawled on the messy bed like the lady of Shalott, hair strewn over her pillow like a mermaid washed ashore. A single light, the orange lamp by her bed, lit the scene. Hubble ran to her bed, not sure whether to touch her or not, going *shit fuck shit shit* in his mind.

He felt her arm.

She was still somewhat warm, muggy, perhaps. He shivered, then jostled her shoulders.

'Whazzit,' she murmured.

'Dunyazad,' he said. 'Oh, God.'

She swallowed, frowned, and coughed. She raised herself up slightly, then leaned back. 'I feel weak.'

Hubble reached for the medicine, then froze. Outside her window, he had just seen it, for sure this time – a comet. He slowly retracted his hand, medicine still in his pocket, and sat on the bed. He placed his hand on her palm. 'You'll be fine,' he said. 'Just...fine.'

'Do you have the...the medicine?'

He hesitated, and then – 'No. It didn't come this time.'

'Oh, no.' Her face seemed, if possible, to turn paler.

'No, don't – it'll be okay. It's better like that.' He looked away, neck quivering.

Suddenly, his father burst through the door. 'Where the hell have you been?' he roared.

'I –'

'And why didn't you go to work? I had to listen to that retard boss of yours

babble about how you weren't there!' He shook his head. 'Did you at least get the medicine?'

He looked from Hovenden to Dunyazad to the poster to the mating geckoes to the window, outside of which was the darkness of the universe.

'Yes,' he said.

'What?' Dunyazad murmured. 'You did?'

'Ah, yeah –'

'Well, what the hell are you waiting for?' Hovenden said. 'Give it to her! God, give the bottle here. I'll do it myself. Get me a glass of water.'

Hubble rushed to the kitchen, then watched as Hovenden dissolved a pill in water and gave it to Dunyazad. She sipped it down, then leaned back against her bed frame, sighing. 'Do you feel better?' Hovenden said, peering at her.

'I think so.'

'Good. Now get some rest, and you'll take another one in the morning.' He patted her head and then strode past Hubble. 'What are you staring at? Go fix up her bed!'

'Nothing.' Hovenden muttered an imprecation and disappeared down the hall.

Hubble sat beside Dunyazad, peering at her for a moment, and then put his arm over her shoulder. 'I'm sorry,' he said, and then he reddened as she kissed him for a second, her lips smelling of medicine.

'Thank you,' she said, closing her eyes and smiling. 'You saved me again.'

'Ah ... yeah.'

They said nothing for a while, and then she asked him to turn out the light and tell her about his day. He said he was tired and would tell her tomorrow, and she fell asleep against his collarbone, her hair prickling his nose, her hand clutching his. As the night rolled by, he listened for those cries and screams that he hoped wouldn't shatter the silence. When they didn't come, he realised the silence was just as horrific as the cries, or more so, for it held all of them, and more, as though it were controlled by the most volatile of necromancers.

As he tried to fall asleep over her, the lights of the circus tents bloomed on aboard the ferry, which was drifting to another island. From a distance, their yellow lights, which flickered one after the other, looked like stars all aligned around a great, black spiral.

A tremor, slight as a petal, went through the floor and up the bed. Hubble got up, peering at Dunyazad, who was now blinking up at him. He looked from the spiraling lights to her, and then he bent down, hesitated, rubbed her cheek, and kissed her. She started to draw back, and then moved her hand behind his head. He felt for her pyjama pants and started tugging them down, feeling the cool skin above her thigh. After a moment, she reached inside his pants.

Hubble stiffened. He moved back as she, with a strained movement, drew herself up to his level. In the semidarkness of the universe, he saw the frown from her action shift into a smile.

'Took you long enough,' she said.