



ADA PALMER

TOO LIKE THE
LIGHTNING

"The kind of science fiction that
makes me excited all over again
about what science fiction can do."

—JO WALTON, Hugo and
Nebula Award-winning author
of *Among Others*

TOO LIKE
THE
LIGHTNING



TERRA IGNOTA,

BOOK I.

by Ada Palmer



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES Book
NEW YORK

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*This book is dedicated to the first human
who thought to hollow out a log to make a boat,
and his or her successors.*

TOO LIKE THE LIGHTNING

A NARRATIVE OF EVENTS of the year 2454

Written by MYCROFT CANNER, at the REQUEST OF CERTAIN PARTIES.

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Ah, my poor Jacques! You are a philosopher. But don't worry: I'll protect you.

–Diderot, *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*

CHAPTER THE FIRST

A Prayer to the Reader

You will criticize me, reader, for writing in a style six hundred years removed from the events I describe, but you came to me for explanation of those days of transformation which left your world the world it is, and since it was the philosophy of the Eighteenth Century, heavy with optimism and ambition, whose abrupt revival birthed the recent revolution, so it is only in the language of the Enlightenment, rich with opinion and sentiment, that those days can be described. You must forgive me my 'thee's and 'thou's and 'he's and 'she's, my lack of modern words and modern objectivity. It will be hard at first, but whether you are my contemporary still awed by the new order, or an historian gazing back at my Twenty-Fifth Century as remotely as I gaze back on the Eighteenth, you will find yourself more fluent in the language of the past than you imagined; we all are.

I wondered once why authors of ancient days so often prostrate themselves before their audience, apologize, beg favors, pray to the reader as to an Emperor as they explain their faults and failings; yet with my work barely begun, I find myself already in need of such obsequies. If I am properly to follow the style I have chosen, I must, at the book's outset, describe myself, my background and qualifications, and tell you by what chance or Providence it is that the answers you seek are in my hands. I beg you, gentle reader, master, tyrant, grant me the privilege of silence on this count. Those of you who know the name of Mycroft Canner may now set this book aside. Those who do not, I beg you, let me make you trust me for a few dozen pages, since the tale will give you time enough to have me in its own right.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

A Boy and His God

We begin on the morning of March the twenty-third in the year twenty-four fifty-four. Carlyle Foster had risen full of strength that day, for March the twenty-third was the Feast of St. Turibius, a day on which men had honored their Creator in ages past, and still do today. He was not yet thirty, European enough in blood to be almost blond, his hair overgrown down to his shoulders, and his body gaunt as he was too occupied with life to feed himself. He wore practical shoes and a Cousin's loose but comfortable wrap, gray-green that morning, but the only clothing item given any care was his long Sensayer's scarf of age-grayed wool, which he believed had once belonged to the great Sensayer Conclave reformer Fisher G. Gurai—one of many lies in which Carlyle daily wrapped himself.

Following his parishioner's instructions, Carlyle bade the car touch down, not on the high drawbridgelike walkway which led to the main door of the shimmering glass bash'house, but by the narrow maintenance stairs beside it. These slanted their way down into the little man-made canyon which separated this row of bash'houses from the next, like a deep, dry moat. The bottom was choked with wildflowers and seed-heavy grasses, tousled by the foraging of countless birds, and here, in the shadow of the bridge, lay Thisbe's door, too unimportant even for a bell.

He knocked.

"Who is it?" she called from within.

"Carlyle Foster."

"Who?"

"Carlyle Foster. I'm your new sensayer. We have an appointment."

"Oh, right, I..." Thisbe's words limped half-muted through the door. "I called to cancel. We've had a security thing ... problem ... breach."

"I didn't get any message."

"Now isn't a good time!"

Carlyle's smile was gentle as a mother's whose child hides behind her knees on the first day of kindergarten. "I knew your previous sensayer very well. We're all saddened by their loss."

"Yes. Very tragic, they ... Shhhh! Will you hold still?"

"Are you all right in there?"

"Fine! Fine."

Perhaps the sensayer could make out traces of other voices through the door now, soft but fierce, or perhaps he heard nothing, but sensed the lie in her voice.

"Do you need help?" he asked.

"No! No. Come back later. I..."

More voices rose now, clearer, voices of men, soft as whispers but urgent as screams.

"Pointer! Stay with me! Stay with me! Breathe!"

“Too late, Major.”

“He’s dead.”

The door could not hope to stifle mourning, a small child’s sobs, piercing as a spear. Carlyle sprang to action, no longer a sensayer but a human being ready to help another in distress. He pounded the door with hands unused to forming fists, and tried the lock which he knew would not succumb to his unpracticed strength. Those who deny Providence may blame the dog within, which, in its frenzy, probably passed close enough to activate the door.

I know what Carlyle saw as the door opened. Thisbe first, barefoot and in yesterday’s clothes scribbling madly on a scrap of paper on the haste-cleared tabletop, with the remnants of work and breakfast scattered on the floor. Eleven men stood on that table, battered men, strong, hard-boned and hard-faced as if reared in a harder age, and each five centimeters tall. They wore tiny army uniforms of green or sand brown, not the elegance of old Europe but the utility of the World Wars, all grunged and daily wear. Three of them were bleeding, paint-bright red pooling on the tabletop, as appalling as a pet mouse’s wound, when each lost drop would be half a liter to you. One was not merely bleeding.

Have you never watched a death, reader? In slow cases like blood loss it is not so much a moment as a stretch of ambiguity—one breath leaves and you wait uncertain for the next: was that the last? One more? Two more? A final twitch? It takes so long for cheeks to slacken and the stink of relaxing bowels to escape the clothes that you can’t be certain Death has visited until the moment is well past. Not so here. Before Carlyle’s eyes the last breath left the soldier, and with it softness and color, the red of blood, the peach of skin, all faded to green as the tiny corpse reverted into a plastic toy soldier complete with stand. Cowering beneath the table, our protagonist sobbed and screamed.

Bridger’s is not the name that brought you to me. Just as the most persuasive tongue could never convince the learned crowds of 1700 that the young wordsmith calling himself Voltaire would overshadow all the royal dynasties of Europe, so I shall never convince you, reader, that this boy, not the heads of state whom I shall introduce in time, but Bridger, the thirteen-year-old hugging his knees here beneath Thisbe’s table, he made the future in which you now live.

“Ready!” Thisbe rolled her drawing up into a tube and thrust it down for the boy to take. Might she have hesitated, I wonder, had she realized that an intruder watched? “Bridger, it’s time. Bridger?”

Imagine another new voice here, at home in crisis, commanding without awe, a grandfather’s voice stronger, a veteran’s voice. Carlyle had never heard such a voice before, child of peace and plenty as he was. He had never heard it, nor have his parents, nor his parents’ parents in these three centuries of peace. “Act, sir, now, or grief will swallow up your chance to help the others.”

Bridger reached from beneath the table and touched the paper with his child’s fingers, too wide and short, like a clay man not yet perfected by his sculptor. In that instant, without sound or light or any puff of melodrama’s smoke, the paper tube transformed to glass, the doodles to a label, and a purple scribble to the pigment of a liquid bubbling within. Thisbe popped the cork, which had been no more than cross-hatching moments before, and poured the potion over the tiny soldiers. As the fluid washed over the injured, their wounds peeled away like old paint, leaving the soldiers clean and healed.

Thou too, Mycroft Canner? you cry, indignant reader. *Thou too maintainest this fantasy, repeated by too many mouths already? As poor a guide as thou art, I had hoped thou wouldst at least present me facts, not lunacy.* How can your servant answer you, good master? I shall not convince you—though you have seen the miracle almost firsthand—I shall never convince you that Bridger’s powers were real. Nor shall I try. You demand the truth, and I have no truth to offer but what I believe. You

have no obligation to believe with me, and can dismiss your flawed guide, and Bridger with me, at the journey's end. But while I am your guide, indulge me, pray, as you indulge a child who will not rest until you pretend you too believe in the monsters under the bed. Call it a madness—I am easy to call mad.

Carlyle did not have the luxury of disbelief. He saw the transformation, as real as the page before you, impossible and undeniable. Imagine the priests of Pharaoh when Moses's snake swallowed the god himself, a slave god defeating the beast-headed lords of death and resurrection which had made Egypt the greatest empire in human memory—those priests' expressions in the moment of their pantheon's surrender might have been a match for Carlyle's. I wish I knew what he said, a word, a prayer, a groan, but those who were there—the Major, Thisbe, Bridger—none could tell me, since they drowned their answer with their own instant scream. "Mycroft!"

I took the stairs in seconds, and the sensayer in less time, pinning him to the floor, with my fingers pinching his trachea so he could neither breathe nor speak. "What happened?" I panted.

"That's our new sensayer," Thisbe answered fastest. "We had an appointment, but Bridger ... and then the door opened and they saw ... everything. Mycroft, the sensayer saw everything." Now she raised her hand to the tracker at her ear, which beeped with her brother Ockham's call from upstairs. "¡No! ¡Don't come down!" she snapped in Spanish to the microphone. "¿What? Everything's fine. No, I just spilled some nasty perfumes all over the rug, you don't want to come down here ... Nothing to do with that ... I'm fine, really..."

While Thisbe spun her lies, I leaned low enough over my prisoner to taste his first breath as I eased up on his throat. "I'm not going to hurt you. In a moment your tracker will ask if you're all right. If you signal back that everything is fine then I'll answer your questions, but if you call for help, then the child, the soldiers, and myself will be gone before anyone arrives, and you will never find us. Clear?"

"Don't bother, Mycroft." Thisbe made for her closet. "Just hold them down. I still have some of those memory-erasing pills, remember the blue ones?"

"No!" I cried, feeling my prisoner shudder with the same objection. "Thisbe, this is a sensayer."

She squinted at the scarf fraying about Carlyle's shoulders. "We don't need a can of worms right now. Ockham says there's a polylaw upstairs, a Mason."

"Sensayers live for metaphysics, Thisbe, it's what they are. How would you feel if someone erased your memory of the most important thing that ever happened to you?"

Thisbe did not like my tone, and I would not have braved her anger for a lesser creature than a sensayer. I wonder, reader, which folk etymology you believe. Is 'sensayer' a perversion of the nonexistent Latin verb *senseo*? Of 'soothsayer,' with 'sooth' turned into 'sense'? Of *sensei*, the honorific Japan grants to teachers, doctors, and the wise? I have researched the question myself, but founder Mertice McKay left posterity no notes when she created the term—she had no time to spare working in the rush of the 2140s, as society's wrath swept through after the Church War, banning religious houses, meetings, proselytizing, and, in her eyes, threatening to abolish even the word God. The laws are real still, reader. Just as three unrelated women living in the same house was once, in some places, legally a brothel, three people in a room talking about religion was then, as now, "Church meeting," and subject to harsh penalties, not in the laws of one or two Hives but even in the codes of Romanova. What terrible silence McKay foresaw: a man afraid to ask his lover whether he had too hoped for a hereafter, parents afraid to answer when their children asked, "Who made the world?" With what desperation McKay screamed to those with the power to stop it, "Humanity cannot live

without these questions! Let us create a new creature! Not a preacher, but a teacher, who hears parishioner's questions and presents the answers of all the faiths and sects of history, Christians and pagans, Muslims and atheists, all equal. With this new creature as his guide, let each man pick through the fruits of all theologies and anti-theologies, and make from them his own system, to test, improve and lean on all the years of his long life. If early opponents of the Christian Reformation feared the Protestants would invent as many Christianities as there were Christians, let this new creature help to create as many religions as there are human beings!" So she cried. You will forgive her, reader, if, in her fervor, she did not pause to diagram the derivation of this new creature's name.

"Mycroft's right." It was the veteran's voice that saved us. From where I held him, Carlyle could probably just see the tiny torso leaning over the table's edge, like a scout over a cliff. "We've been saying it's high time Bridger met more people, and honestly, Thisbe, does anyone on Earth need a sensayer as much as we do?"

Cheers rose from the other soldiers on the tabletop.

"The Major's right!"

"About time we found ourselves some kind of damned priest."

"Past time!"

I leaned closer to my prisoner. "Cancel the help signal, or we do this Thisbe's way."

The police insist that I add a disclaimer, reminding you not to do what Carlyle did. When your tracker earpiece detects a sudden jump in heartbeat or adrenaline it calls help automatically unless you signal all clear, so if there is danger, an assailant, even if you're immobilized, help will still come. Last year there were a hundred and eighteen slayings and nearly a thousand sexual assaults enabled by victims being convinced to cancel the help signal for one reason or another. Carlyle made the right choice canceling his call because God matters more to him than life or chastity, and because I meant him no real harm. The same will likely not be true for you.

"Done," he mouthed.

I released my prisoner and backed away, my hands where he could see them, my posture slack, my eyes subserviently on the floor. I dared not even glance up to examine him for insignia beyond his Cousin's wrap and sensayer's scarf, since, in that moment when he could have called anew for the police, the only thing that mattered was convincing him I posed no threat.

"What's your name, priest?" It was the Major who called down to the sensayer from the tabletop, his tiny voice warm as a grandfather's.

"Carlyle Foster."

"A good name," the soldier answered. "People call me the Major. These men are called Aimee, Looker, Crawler, Medic, Stander Yellow, Stander Green, Croucher, Nogun, Nostand, and back there is the late Private Pointer." He nodded over his shoulder at the plastic toy which now lay stiffly on its side.

Carlyle was too sane not to gape. "Plastic."

"Yes. We're plastic toy soldiers. Bridger fished us from the trash and brought us to life, but we had a run-in with a cat today, and at our scale any cat may as well be the Nemean Lion. Pointer fought like a hero, but heroes die."

Now the other nine soldiers gathered around the Major at the table's edge. All but the paranoid Croucher had long since stopped bothering to wear their heavy helmets, but their uniforms remained fatigued and pouches more intricate than any human hand could sew, with rifles frail as toothpicks.

slung across their backs.

Doubt had its moment now in Carlyle: “Some kind of U-beast? An A.I.?”

“Wouldn’t that be a relief?” The Major laughed at it himself. “No, Bridger’s power is not so explicable. One touch makes toy things real. You saw it just now with the Healing Potion vial Thisbe drew.”

“Healing potion,” Carlyle repeated.

“Mycroft,” the Major called, “hand Carlyle the empty tube so they can feel it’s real.”

I did so, and Carlyle’s fingers trembled, as if he expected the glass to pop like a soap bubble. It didn’t.

“It works on anything,” the Major continued, “any representation: statues, dolls, origami animals. We have paper, if you want to test it you can make a frog, just no cranes—frogs can be full-scale, but cranes weren’t meant to be a finger tall, it’s too unkind, ends badly.”

Carlyle peered under the table, where an interposing chair half-concealed the figure huddled in a child’s wrap, once blue and white, now blue and well-loved gray. “You’re Bridger?”

Huddled knees huddled tighter.

“And you’re Cousin Carlyle Foster?” Thisbe’s voice and posture took command as she stepped forward. She had freed the sea of her black hair from the wad which had kept it dry through her morning shower, and donned her boots too, tall, taut Humanist boots patterned with a flowing brush-pen landscape, the kind with winding banks and misty mountains that the eye gets lost in. And Humanist transforms, grows stronger, prouder, when they don the Hive boots which stamp each Member’s signature into the dust of history, but if others change from house cat to regal tiger, Thisbe becomes something more extreme, some lost primordial predator known in our soft present only through its bones. She stared down at the intruder, her posture all power: squared shoulders, her dark neck straight, the indignity of her slept-in shirt forgotten. I believe there is some Mestizo blood deep in the Saneer line, but the rest of Thisbe is all India, large eyes larger for their long black lashes, and her harsh glance did not pierce so much as envelop its unhappy target as she repeated the sensayer’s name. I was the target of her eyes this time, the too-slow syllables repeated for my sake, “Cousin Carlyle Foster.” I gave the subtlest nod I could, confirming that, with hidden motions, I had already entered the name into my search, and that the data flicker on my lenses was me racing through police employment, and Cousin Member records, my clearances slicing through security like a dissection knife through flesh. In minutes I would know more about the sensayer than he knew about himself. You would be no less careful guarding Bridger.

“I’m sorry.” The sensayer too squirmed before Thisbe. “I didn’t mean to barge in, it just sounded...”

Her gaze alone was enough to hush him. “Convince me that I should trust you with the most important and dangerous power in the world.”

“Dangerous?”

“I could have written ‘Deadly Super-Plague’ on that vial.”

Carlyle’s pale cheeks grew paler. “You should because I ... can ... offer ... context? An analogy, a comparison, and scenarios, and ‘-ism’ names for things!” His pauses convinced me more than his conclusion, pauses in which the sensayer wrestled against the gag order, forbidden by anti-proselytizing laws and Conclave vows from letting slip whether his beliefs labeled this encounter Chance, Providence, Fate, or the whimsy of pool ball atoms. But Carlyle was good. He didn’t slip, even

extremis.

“Names, scenarios,” Thisbe repeated coldly. “And then suggestions? This thing or that thing Bridger should make? Gold? Diamonds? And then introductions, one friend, then another, then the rich and powerful?”

Carlyle’s brow knit, his youthful skin forming taut, delicate wrinkles. “Money? Why would ... This is infinitely more important than money. This is theology!”

I saw Thisbe’s face shift from the kind of sternness that hides anger to the kind that hides a laugh.

“You can trust me,” Carlyle continued. “The Conclave picked carefully assigning a new sensayer for your bash’ of all bash’es, of course they did. If I were going to abuse my position, all I need is the Saneer-Weeksbooth bash’s door key to wreck the world.”

“Very true.” I doubt Carlyle meant the reference to Thisbe’s work as flattery, but it won a smile. Thisbe touched the wall to taste anew the vibrations of the computer system hiding in the depths, safeguarded by her bash’, their ba’parents, their grandba’parents, back almost four centuries. Gulshan and Orion Saneer and Tungsten Weeksbooth, who made this house in Cielo de Pájaros a pillar of our world.

Carlyle was gaining steam. “If I’m here, it’s because the Conclave knows I’d never exploit my position. Ever.”

Thisbe raised her chin to make her glare the more commanding. “You’ll keep this absolutely secret. Everything you see here. Bridger’s whole existence.”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“Swear.” I interrupted, softly. Thisbe would not have thought to ask.

“I swear.”

“By *something*?” I pressed.

“By *something*, yes.” A smile warmed Carlyle’s cheeks here, pride, I think, in the firmness of his faith in the *Something* he had faith in. “I can help you. I’m trained for this. I’m not afraid of the word ‘supernatural.’ I’m not afraid to explore this, not by pushing anyone to do anything, but with hypotheticals, thought experiments, listening and talking.”

“Are you afraid of the word ‘miracle’?” I asked.

“No.” He was looking at me now, and I turned my head to hide the chunk that is missing from my right ear, lest he match that to the name ‘Mycroft’ and realize who I was. He gave no sign of guessing. “In fact it’s one of my favorite words.”

I raised my eyes and looked directly at the Cousin at last, happy to find few insignia at all beyond his Hive wrap and vocational scarf: he wore a red-brown mystery reader’s bracelet, a tea enthusiast’s green striped socks, and a cyclist’s clip on one shoe, but nothing political, no nation-strat, not even a campus ring. I smiled my approval, and on the table the Major nodded his. Thisbe still held us, a dauntless stare which forbade any interruption of her silent self-debate. When she did soften into a smile, the whole room seemed to soften with her, the pulse-hot current of threat and force swept away by the easing of her stance, like smoke by a healing breeze.

Thisbe knelt beside the table, summoning her softest voice. “Bridger? Would you like to come over and meet this sensayer, Carlyle Foster?”

The boy beneath the table rocked within the cradle of his knees, voiceless crying making his breaths staccato. “Pointer’s dead.”

I apologized silently inside, to Pointer, to the boy, the soldiers, for letting the crisis of intrusion

disrupt the necessity of mourning. Taking care still to tilt my mangled ear away from Carlyle, crawled under the table and wrapped as much of my warmth around Bridger as I could. I stroked his hair, gold-blond now, losing the white-blond of childhood. It was hard to believe he had turned thirteen. “You know what a sensayer is, right?” I coaxed. “You remember what I told you?”

“A sensayer is”—sobs punctuated his answer like hiccups—“somebody who—loves the universe so—so much they—spend their whole life—talking about—all the different—ways that it—could be.”

I smiled at my own definition parroted in child-speak. “Sensayers help people think about where the world came from, and whether there’s a plan or somebody in charge or just chaos, and what happens when people die. Carlyle here is a sensayer. They can help you think about those things. Especially death.”

Armored in my arms, Bridger found the strength to raise tear-crusted eyes and face the stranger. “Can I bring Pointer back? Is that okay? I can make a potion that’ll bring Pointer back from the dead, but I don’t know if that’s bad ’cause I don’t know where they went now that they’re dead, and maybe it’s somewhere good, so maybe it’s bad to bring them back here, but maybe it’s bad where they went or maybe they didn’t go anywhere at all and they’re just gone. Do you know?”

Carlyle smiled, a perfect, calm, real smile, and I admired his recovery, bouncing back in less than two minutes from violent chokehold to being the only really calm one in the room. A sensayer indeed. “No, I don’t know,” he answered, “not for sure. People have made a lot of different suggestions, and there are good arguments for many different versions. We can talk about them, if you want. But what do you think? Do you think Pointer went somewhere?”

Master, do you believe that Chance alone, without Providence behind it, would have sent this child in this moment, so suitable a guide?

“I don’t think Pointer just went away.” Bridger wiped his nose on his sleeve, and his sleeve on mine. “It wouldn’t be fair if they just went away.”

Carlyle’s smile was practiced enough to betray nothing. “A lot of people agree with that.”

“And it wouldn’t be fair if they went somewhere bad.”

“A lot of people agree with that, too. There are lots of good places they might have gone. Some people would say Pointer has been reborn as someone else. Some would say they’ve returned to being one with the whole universe, the way they were before they were born. Some would say they went to an afterlife.”

Bridger’s fingers dug into my arm. “Like Hades or Heaven. And then you get to see all the dead people you knew, like your mom and dad.”

“That’s something some people think might happen after death, yes.”

“Except Pointer’s mom and dad never existed, because they’re made up. I made them up. Pointer remembered them like Pointer remembered the country their army was from and the war they fought, but none of it ever happened because it’s all made up. Do made-up dead people go to the afterlife?”

Carlyle’s five years at in training and four in practice could not supply an answer. I was deeper into Carlyle’s records now, past honors transcripts, parishioners’ endorsements, bios of bash’mates—safe, unfamous bash’, all Cousins, mostly teachers plus a masseur, two mural painters and an oboist. I had even found his orphanage records, expected from the surname Foster. I had not expected the word ‘Gag-gene.’

Perhaps in your age, gentle reader, the human race is better, good enough that you no longer need so dark a tool? The universal catalogue of DNA, our greatest guard against disease and crime, also

ended anonymity for foundlings, whose parents leave signatures in every cell. Courts called it a triumph at first, the empowering of the abandoned, and it took the Cooper scandal and the Chaucey King triple suicide to force law to admit that one foundling in a thousand carries in its genes a past too hard to bear. Hence the little race of ‘Gag-genes,’ which does not mean, as rumor claims, genes whose story is so vile it makes you gag, but ‘Gag-order-genome,’ a court order which denies the child access to the testimony of its own blood, for its own happiness. Law leaves it to the courts, not parents, to decide what case merits Gag-gene status, though parents may plead (and bribe) if need be. Rape is not enough. Incest-rape is likely in your mind, and it is sometimes incest-rape, but it is usually a longer stranger tale than that. If Troy’s Queen Hecuba, impossibly mother of fifty sons, had borne a fifty-first, not in the topless towers of Ilium, but in the slave tents after the city’s fall, where the Trojan women clasped their captors’ knees with hands still white with the ashes of their husbands, if in such an hour vindictive Fate, judging the queen’s defilement not yet absolute, let rape plant one last seed in the womb which had borne so many unto death, and chose no hero’s seed, not Menelaus, or an Ajax, or some other king, but gave her royal body over to the pleasures of bow-legged Thersites, the ugliest and lowest creature who ever came to Troy, a son conceived thus would have been a Gag-gene. I smiled now at the name Carlyle. I had thought at first it was lack of originality which made the orphanage choose what has become Earth’s most common baby name now that I plunged Mycroft off the list. But you must admit a Gag-gene, denied any inheritance, even his parents’ story (which might at least have offered him that patrimony named revenge), deserves at least a hero’s name.

“Problem?” Thisbe crouched closed to me and mouthed it, likely spotting my flinch at the word ‘Gag-gene.’

“Maybe,” I mouthed back. “Best get Bridger out.” I mussed the boy’s hair. “You want to go home, Bridger?” I coaxed. “You don’t have to talk to Carlyle right now. You can go home, have Mommado make cookies, and decide later whether or not to resurrect Pointer.”

“But...”

I squeezed his shoulder. “Pointer’s already dead, nothing will change for now. You can take your time and then make up your mind.”

“What if they’re in a bad place? Like Hell?”

I squeezed him tighter, choking up myself before that word.

The Major faced it better. “Pointer was a soldier, Bridger. They were ready for death, no matter what death is.”

The little dam of courage broke inside the boy now, releasing sobs, half-muffled by his efforts to be strong.

“Come on.” I scooped Bridger forward, my arms forgetting he was no longer so easy to lift.

“Shou—udn’t I—talk—to the—sensay—er?”

His bravery brought wetness to my eye. “They can come another time to talk,” I suggested. “tomorrow, anytime you want. Right, Carlyle?”

Rarely have I heard so passionate a “Yes.”

Timid as a hatchling, Bridger crawled out from beneath the table. Beside him came Boo, his bright blue dog, three feet long and whining now in sympathetic worry, just as real dogs do. Even on close inspection Boo can be taken for a U-beast or some other high-end robot or genetically engineered companion, since Bridger’s touch erases all hint of seams and stitching. It was Boo who first betrayed Bridger to me ten years ago, but I would never have realized what the toy dog was had Fate not placed

him in my path in the moment one of Bridger's miracles ran out, so the living beast reverted to plus and stuffing before my eyes.

Bridger leaned forward and pressed his shoulder against the table's edge. "All a—" One more so "All aboard."

Murmuring layered words of kindness, the tiny soldiers climbed the warp of Bridger's wrap like cargo net, and settled in like sailors into rigging.

"What about Pointer's body?" Bridger asked.

"I'll take care of Pointer," Thisbe volunteered. "You rest up, and eat. I'm sure Mommadoll has big lunch ready."

Bridger rubbed his eyes, smearing the salty wet across red cheeks. "Okay."

I moved to follow the boy out from under the table, but Thisbe stepped close, caging me beneath the table with the firm bars of her legs. Bridger started to move, but froze as I failed to follow. "Mycroft isn't coming?" he asked.

Thisbe excels at making smiles not feel forced. "Mycroft will follow soon, sweetheart, but the have to stay and help me here a little first, all right?"

"All right," Bridger answered. His face showed it wasn't all right at all, but still, brave boy, I tried.

"Hold a second, Bridger," the Major called as the boy opened the door. "Carlyle Foster."

Awe held the sensayer as Bridger paused before him, offering a first close look at these impossible perfect human figures shorter than a finger. "Yes?"

"Word of warning: we're small, but we're soldiers. Real soldiers. We're no strangers to handing out death." He paused to give the word its due. "We'll be watching you. If you betray us, if you even start to, if you endanger Bridger in any way at all, we'll kill you. No second chances. We don't gamble with this power, we will just kill you. Understood?"

"You have my oath. I won't break it."

I couldn't see the Major's expression from across the room, whether he smiled at the passion in the sensayer's conviction, or frowned at his face, so bright, so buoyant, so obviously unable to believe the threat was real. "Then you'll be welcome tomorrow, Carlyle Foster. We do need a priest, or sensayer, whatever you call yourself, the boy most, but the rest of my men too. We've missed that. We'll be grateful, when you come."

Hush held Carlyle, the Major's spell, that tiny voice too seasoned, that tiny face too care-line beyond what can be found in all the faces of our kindly age. Even had the Major stood full-size, think, Carlyle might still have sensed the stranger in our midst.

"Bye-bye, Major. Bye-bye, Bridger. Bye-bye, men." Thisbe killed the moment with a strategic shrill singsong which spurred the boy away. Her smile lingered only until the door closed tight. "Not the serious part." She faced Carlyle, her stance still trapping me under the table's cage. "The Major meant it that he'll kill you if you mess this up, so listen carefully. Rule one: you tell no one about Bridger. No one. Not your bash'mates, not your boss, not the police, not your lover—"

"Not your mentor at the Sensayers' Conclave," I added.

"Right," she confirmed, "not your own sensayer, no one."

"I understand," he answered.

"You think so? Keeping secrets is harder than it sounds." Thisbe scooped up to sit on the table, so her landscaped boots dangled before my face.

Carlyle met her dark, enveloping eyes and held them. “I am a sensayer. I keep my vows, and I keep intimate secrets, every day and always.”

“Rule two: you don’t take samples of things Bridger has created to run tests on them. We’re all in favor of exploring this with science, but we have our own access to labs, people we know and trust who can keep secrets. If you want to run a test you can suggest it, we’re eager for new ideas, but we run it ourselves.”

He nodded. “That makes good sense. I’m glad you’re running tests.”

“Rule three,” she pressed, “you don’t bring Bridger new toys or pictures or storybooks or anything like that without running them by us first.”

He arched his brows. “May I ask why?”

“Attachment,” she answered. “Bridger knows they can’t fill the world with living toys, but sometimes they get upset when they get attached to a character they shouldn’t bring to life.”

He nodded.

She nodded back.

Does it distress you, reader, how I remind you of their sexes in each sentence? ‘Hers’ and ‘his’. Does it make you see them naked in each other’s arms, and fill even this plain scene with wanton sensuality? Linguists will tell you the ancients were less sensitive to gendered language than we are, that we react to it because it’s rare, but that in ages that heard ‘he’ and ‘she’ in every sentence the language grew stale, as the glimpse of an ankle holds no sensuality when skirts grow short. I don’t believe it. I think gendered language was every bit as sensual to our predecessors as it is to us, but they admitted the place of sex in every thought and gesture, while our prudish era, hiding behind the neutered ‘they’, pretends that we do not assume any two people who lock eyes may have fornicated in their minds, not their flesh. You protest: *My mind is not as dirty as thine, Mycroft. My distress is at the strangeness of applying ‘he’ and ‘she’ to thy 2450s, where they have no place.* Would that you were right, good reader. Would that ‘he’ and ‘she’ and their electric power were unknown in my day. Alas, it is from these very words that the transformation came which I am commanded to describe, so I must use them to describe it. I am sorry, reader. I cannot offer wine without the poison of the alcohol within.

Carlyle smiled now. “Those are good rules, good precautions.”

I think he meant the words as praise, but Thisbe gave an irritated kick, nearly catching my nose with her heel under the table. Of course they were good precautions. She was Thisbe Saneer of the Saneer-Weeksbooth bash’, custodian since birth of one of the most powerful engines of our civilization. Who was this little Cousin to pronounce judgment—good or bad—on her precaution? “Then follow them.”

“I will.” Carlyle licked his lips, the thousand questions in his mind struggling to choose a vanguard. “Where did Bridger come from?”

She breathed deep. “We don’t know. They were a toddler when they animated the soldiers, we don’t know anything before that. We’ve been raising them here in secret ever since, and it’s going to remain secret until Bridger is mature enough to fully understand the implications of their powers, and decide for herself who, if anyone, to show them to.”

“You’ve raised them in this bash’?”

“In the flower trench outside,” she corrected. “There are hiding places.”

“Does the rest of your bash’ know?”

“No.”

I spoke up, “Cato.”

“Right.” Thisbe laughed, possibly at herself, or possibly at having a bash’mate so harmless she could forget. “Cato sort of knows.”

“That’s Cato Weeksbooth?” I saw the flicker in Carlyle’s lenses as he brought up the file. “I don’t have an appointment with them yet, but I called to make one.”

Thisbe frowned. “Cato doesn’t know about Bridger’s powers, or the soldiers, or even that Bridger lives here in the trench, but we take Bridger to a kids’ science club Cato runs, to meet other children, so Cato knows Bridger as a kid Mycroft and I are mentoring. But nothing more.”

“Mycroft...” At last Carlyle’s scrutiny fell fully on me. On my knees beneath the table, I tried again to look as nonthreatening as a man could who had just tackled Carlyle with bestial speed. Should I describe myself here? What Carlyle saw? I am nothing much, perhaps as tall as Thisbe had I never learned to stoop, my skin a little dark, with dark hair always overgrown, and a thinness to my face which makes some worry that I eat too little. My hands have acquired something of a laborer’s roughness, and my Servicer uniform of dappled beige and gray hangs on me loose enough to sleep in. On a street you would not give me a second glance, and, even with old photographs before you, you would not know me now without the telltale ear. Mercifully it was my uniform that caught Carlyle’s eye, and I recognized the familiar judgmental half-step back which free men take around the guilty.

Murder for profit is the crime most people think of when they see a Servicer’s uniform, a crime the convict has no reason to repeat now that law has stripped him of the right to property. Those with more imagination might envision a grand corporate theft, or a revenge killing, avenging some great evil beyond the reach of law, or a crime of passion, catching a lover in a rival’s arms and slaying both in a triumphant but passing madness. At the dawn of the Fifteenth Century, St. Sir Thomas More described a humane, though fictitious, Persian judicial system in which convicts were not chained in the plague-filled dark, but made slaves of the state, let loose to wander, without home or property, to serve at the command of any citizen who needed labor. Knowing what these convicts were, no citizen would give them food or rest except after a day’s work, and, with nothing to gain or lose, they served the community in ambitionless, lifelong peace. Tell me, when our Twenty-Second-Century forefathers created the Servicer Program, offering lifelong community service in lieu of prison for criminals judged harmless enough to walk among the free, were they progressive or retrogressive in implementing a seven-hundred-year-old system which had never actually existed?

“You’ve been helping to raise Bridger too?” Carlyle asked.

Thisbe answered, “Mycroft stumbled on Bridger much like you did. I admit it’s a bit of a fudge putting ‘cleaning services’ instead of ‘childcare’ when I log Mycroft’s hours, but it’s no violation of the spirit of the law.”

I held my breath for this moment, when Carlyle held my fragile future in his power. He could have reported me: my false work logs, my too-close relationship with this bash’, almost familial, all things forbidden to we who forfeited home, bash’, and rest when we committed crimes so severe that our lifetime’s labor can never balance out what we destroyed. But Carlyle is a kind creature, and smiles even for me. “Nice to meet you, Mycroft. You must have a court-appointed sensayer?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Who doesn’t know about Bridger?”

“Correct.”

“And Thisbe, you’ve never had a sensayer who knew?”

“No.”

“Then neither of you has never been able to talk to a sensayer before about the implications of it?”

Thisbe paused. “I suppose not.”

“Would you like to? We do have an appointment, if you’re up to it.”

She gawked. “You’re up to it?”

“Always.” I liked Carlyle’s ‘always,’ his firm tone, as if some energy in him were awakened by the whiff of his true calling. “And, Mycroft, if you’d like me to arrange a session for you sometime, I’m sure I could get it cleared.”

“I’ll consider it,” I answered, crawling my way out between the table’s legs and Thisbe’s at last.

She frowned. “Mycroft, you don’t have to leave just because—”

“I have a job.” It was no lie: a summons from the Mitsubishi Executive Directorate had been buzzing in my ear for some time. I had lingered, since Bridger took priority, but now I had a reason of my own to visit Tōgenkyō. My searches had sliced deep. There were not many Gag-genes born precisely 2426, not many parents who would produce a child with eyes that shade of blue, hair edged with that tint of gold, and not many hospitals whose records would not open before the security code I had the privilege of borrowing. That led me to Tōgenkyō.

Thisbe knows she will not learn about my work by asking. “Will I see you tonight?” She leaned toward me, and touched my back, her palm and slow fingers tasting the contours of my flesh. Instantly, I could read it in his face, Carlyle succumbed to the vision of me naked in Thisbe’s arms. That was the great service Thisbe did me. Even without lying outright, the practiced femininity beneath her lazy posture could convince anyone, even the ba’sibs she grew up with, that my constant visits were no more than a mundane, forbidden fling. Carlyle had seen Bridger already, so there was no real need for us to deceive him, but someone who thinks he knows a man’s dirty secret will usually stop looking deeper.

I returned Thisbe’s stroke with my own across her cheek, just as practiced. “Hopefully.”

She leaned close to my ear, trusting our pantomime to make it seem natural. “Is this Cousin trouble?”

“I’ll know in a few hours,” I whispered back. “Meanwhile, use the session, get to know them, tell them.”

Thisbe gave a warm, wide smile.

I was full of fears as I left. Not fears of Carlyle, or fears for Carlyle, but fears of what Tōgenkyō might reveal about who sent Carlyle. Skilled as he was, and perfect for our needs, I could not believe this Gag-gene of all the sensayers on Earth would be assigned by chance. And I shall bear you with me to Tōgenkyō, reader, but not yet. First I must show you what was happening upstairs in this same bash’house before I was summoned down by Thisbe’s cry. I pray your patience. After all, if you choose not to believe in Bridger, then it is upstairs where begins the half of all this that you will admire and reshape our world.

The Most Important People in the World

Another car had touched down that same morning, March the twenty-third, before the san bash'house. Cielo de Pájaros blazes like a glacier on such mornings, white sun reflecting off the long rows of glass roofs which descend toward the Pacific in giant steps, like Dante's Purgatory. The city named for the birds, they say over a million, wild but cultivated, hatched and fed in the flow trenches that separate the tiers, so the flocks constantly splash up out of hiding and fall away again into the trench depths, like the wave crests of a flying sea. Cielo de Pájaros is one of Krepolsky's earliest Spectacle Cities, much criticized for its homogeneity, row upon row of homes with no downtown or shopping districts, but it has never lacked for residents. Critics claim that people tolerate living without a downtown in return for Chile's perfect ocean views, or even that residents choose the city largely out of Hive pride, Humanist Members excited to think the great Saneer-Weeksbooks' computers are humming away beneath their boots. But Humanists are not the only residents; one finds Cousins here, Mitsubishi, clusters of Gordian. I think Cielo de Pájaros is a success because it was the first city designed for those who don't like city centers, whose perfect evening is spent by a window watching gulls and black waves crashing down. What need is there for bustle in a city built for bash' who prefer to be alone?

Martin Guildbreaker alighted from the car and crossed the gleaming footbridge over the flow trench to ring the main door's bell. What could those inside see as he approached? A square-breasted Mason's suit, light marble gray, and crisp with that time-consuming perfection only seen in those who perfect their appearances for another's sake, a butler for his master, a bride for her beloved, or Martin for his Emperor. A darker armband, black-edged Imperial Gray with the Square & Compass on it declares him a *Familiaris Regni*, an intimate of the Masonic throne, who walks the corridors of power at the price of subjecting himself by law and contract to the absolute dictum of Caesar's will. Martin wears no strat insignia, not even for a hobby, nothing beyond his one white sleeve announcing permanent participation in that most Masonic rite the *Annus Dialogorum*. His hair is black, his skin healthy, vaguely Persian brown, but I will not bore you with the genetics of a line that has not worn nation-strat insignia these ten generations. There is no allegiance for a Guildbreaker but the Empire, nor a more unwelcome presence on this doorstep than a Guildbreaker.

"I'm looking for Member Ockham Saneer," Martin called through the intercom.

The watchman of the house stayed inside, so only words met the intruder. "Is the world about to end?"

"No."

"Then go away. I have eight hundred million lives to oversee."

"Not possible." The Mason's tone, if not his words, apologized. "I'm here to investigate last night's security breach." Martin let the computer flash his credentials. "I have a warrant."

“I sent for our own police, not a polylaw.”

“I know this is a Humanist bash’, and I will absolutely respect your Hive sovereignty, but as globally essential property you fall under Romanova’s jurisdiction. They assigned me.”

“You think just because your bash’ ponces around the *Sanctum Sanctorum* you can waltz in here and improve on my security?”

I don’t believe Martin had ever before heard his bash’ mates’ positions in the Masonic Hive’s most honored Guard used as an insult. He managed not to flinch. “Are you Member Ockham Saneer?”

“I am.” Ockham pronounced with relish, as if, with all the lives in history laid out before him, he would have chosen this one.

Martin gave a suitably respectful nod. “This isn’t a simple security breach. You’ve been framed for grand theft. We have your tracker ID logged entering the crime scene in Tokyo late last night, and five million euros appeared in your bank account this morning. I know it’s absurd to suggest that anyone in your bash’ would commit a theft for profit, but I need your cooperation to find out why someone would set up something so implausible. The fact that there was also a break-in here last night can’t be coincidence.”

The door relented at last, revealing a man of dark Indian stock to match his sister Thisbe, and physique beyond common athleticism. His shirt and pants, once plain, were now a labyrinth of doodles: black spirals, cross-hatching, and hypnotic swirls, though he wore them as indifferently as if the cloth had never tasted ink. Only his Humanist boots mattered: veins of knife-bright steel framing a surface of pale, ice-gray leather, real leather which had once guarded the taut flanks of a living deity that Ockham slew himself. Like Martin, Ockham wore no sign of hobby or of nation-strat, nothing but his Hive boots and the overpowering self-confidence of a man who guards something so vital that the law will let him kill for it. Ancient civilizations, East and West, knew the special breath of power granted by the right to kill. That’s what made sword and fasces marks of dominion, lord over peasant male over female, magistrate over petitioner. Our centuries of peace have so perfected nonlethal force that even police serve content without the right to kill. But we are not fools. To those who protect the commonwealth entire, the guards around the Olenek Virus Lab, the *Sanctum Sanctorum*, and Ockham here we grant ‘any means necessary,’ a knife, a branch, even that deadly instrument the fist to guard a million lives. Even if they never exercise this rarest right, still somehow every glance and gesture of such guardians still breathes the ancient force of knighthood. “I am Ockham Saneer. What is it that I’m supposed to have stolen?”

Martin nodded respect. “The unpublished *Black Sakura* Seven-Ten list.”

Scorn deepened on Ockham’s face. “Who’d pay five million for a vacuous editorial that goes to press in two days?”

“I could give you a nice long list. But I don’t know who’d pay five million to frame you. Did you visit the *Black Sakura* office yesterday? Have you ever dealt with them at all?”

Ockham still blocked the doorway, stubborn as a sculpture in its niche. “If I cared about newspapers I’d pick *The Olympian* or *El País*.”

“The paper’s absence was reported at seven o’clock P.M. Tokyo time, six A.M. your time. Any chance you might have taken your tracker off in the hours shortly before that?”

“Paper?”

“Yes. The stolen list was a handwritten manuscript on paper. *Black Sakura* is antiquarian that way.”

Ockham’s face grew harder. “That’s what my breach was, an intruder left a piece of paper in the

house, with Japanese writing on it.”

Martin swallowed. “May I see it? I do have jurisdiction.” He let the warrant flicker across Ockham’s lenses.

The Humanist drew back with a mastiff’s reluctance. “Don’t touch anything without asking.”

“Understood.” The Mason crossed the threshold with the tiptoe reverence he usually reserves for his own capitol.

There was little in the entryway apart from an ankle-high security robot, which let itself be seen to remind the visitor of its myriad hidden kin. As loyal Humanists, the Saneer-Weeksbooth bash’ did their best to line the entrance hall with the traditional relics of triumphs, but since most of them could do little but their work, and their celebrity member keeps his home a secret, their tiny spattering of diplomas and pictures—Thisbe’s trophies, Cato’s book cover—drowned on the walls like an unfinished mural. Is that judgment in the eyes of this young Guildbreaker? Smugness as he surveyed the poor showing of the Saneer-Weeksbooths, whose name rivals his own in the triumphant annals of the bash’ system? I researched which of the two is really older, since so many bash’es form and dissolve with every generation that any famous bash’ which lasts more than three will spawn the rumor of antiquity. I found what I must call a noble tie. Regan Makoto Cullen broke with her great teacher Adolf Richter Brill on November fourth, 2191. “Break with” is easy to say, but not so easy to do, to face the man who has been your patron, teacher, foster father for twenty-five years, the man whom Earth hails as the great mind of the century, who mapped the psyche in undreamt-of detail, who revolutionized education, linguistics, justice, to face him down and say, “Sir, you are wrong. So wrong that I shall turn the world against you. It’s not the numbers, not these rare psyches you’re charting that stimulate great progress. It’s groups. I’ve studied the same inventors, authors, leaders that you have, and the thing that most reliably produces many at once—the effect you’ve worked so hard to replicate—is when people abandon the nuclear family to live in a collective household, four to twenty friends rearing children and ideas together in a haven of mutual discourse and play. We don’t need to revolutionize the kindergartens, we need to revolutionize the family.” This heresy, this *bash’*, which Cullen shortened from *i-basho* (a Japanese word, like ‘home’ but stronger), this challenge to Brill’s great system Cullen did not dare present without extensive notes. In those notes—still held as relics at Brill’s Institute—you will find the test bash’es Cullen set up in the 2170s, including both Weeksbooth and Guildbreaker.

“Is that sound the computers?” Martin half-whispered, not daring to touch the walls, which hummed as if channeling some distant stampede.

“Generators,” Ockham answered. “We can power the system for two weeks even if main and secondary both fail. The processors are farther back.”

He led Martin on to the bash’house’s central chamber, a high, broad living room ringed with cushioned gray sofas, with a glass back wall that looked down over the next tiers of the sloping city to the crashing blue of the Pacific. The western sunlight through the window cast a halo around the room’s famed centerpiece: the pudgy pointed oval silhouette of *Mukta*. You know her from your schooling, duly memorized alongside the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and *Apollo XI*, but you do not know her as we who have walked those halls know her, her shadow across the carpet, her texture as you coax dust from the pockmarks scored in her paint by the bullet-fierce dust of 9,640 km/h.

“Is that the original?” Reverence made Martin’s words almost a whisper.

“Of course.” Ockham gave *Mukta* a careful caress, as one gives an old dog, not strong enough

leap and wrestle anymore. “Heart of the family business. Coming up on four hundred years it’s never left the bash’.”

Martin gazed up through the glass wall to the sky, where today’s cars, *Mukta*’s swarming children raced on, invisibly swift until they slowed for landing, so they seemed to appear over the city like eggs laid by the chubby clouds. “And the computers? How deep would an intruder have to get to reach them?”

“Deep,” Ockham answered. “Many stories, many tiers.”

Thumps through the ceiling made both glance up, the footsteps of a bash’mate upstairs.

“How about to reach an interface?” Martin asked.

“The next room has some interface nets.” Ockham nodded to his left. “But they’re set-set net Cartesian, no one who wasn’t trained from birth could get them to respond.”

Mason: “Your security is mostly automated?”

Humanist: “I could have fifty guards here in two minutes, three hundred in five, but human power is less than four percent of my security.”

Mason: “You think there’s no danger this intruder could return and cause a mass crash?”

Humanist: “A mass crash is not possible.”

Mason: “You’re sure?”

Are you disconcerted by this scriptlike format, reader? It was common in our Eighteenth Century description lapsing into naked dialogue; to such Enlightened readers all histories were plays, or rather one play, scripted by one distant and divine Playwright.

Humanist: “A mass crash is not the danger. The system will ground all the cars if any tampering detected, and they can self-land even with the system dead. The problem is shutting down all transport on Earth for however long it took us to recheck the system, could be minutes, hours. The Censor to me a complete shutdown would cost the world economy a billion euros a minute, not to mention stranding millions, cutting off supplies, ambulances, police. That’s your catastrophe.”

Mason: “Or at the very least the century’s most destructive prank.”

Humanist: “Utopians?”

Confess, reader, the name had risen in your mind too, conjured by stereotype, as talk of secret handshakes brings Masons before your eyes, or war brings priests.

Martin frowned. “Not Utopians necessarily, though such mischief is not beyond them.”

Humanist: “They have a separate system. They’re the only ones.”

Mason: “Do you think they’d reap a profit if they shut you down and then let the other Hives reappear out their cars?”

Humanist: “They wouldn’t.”

Mason: “Rent their cars?”

“They don’t have the capacity to put that many extra cars in the sky, they don’t have the reserves we do. They’d be overrun.”

At Ockham’s signal the house summoned its second showpiece: a projection of the Earth in half slow spin, with the paths of the cars’ flights traced across in threads of glowing gold. Hundreds of millions crisscrossed, dense as pen strokes, drowning out the continents so the regions of the globe were differentiated only by texture, oceans smooth masses of near-parallel paths, like fresh-combed hair, while the great cities bristled with so many crisscrossing journeys that Earth seemed to bleed light. Each car’s position en route was visible like a knot in the thread, crawling forward as the

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