

Armory

By Porpentine Charity Heartscape

She appeared one evening at our lonely outpost, in one of those cold, grimy, nameless seasons where the earth coughed up the particles of battles fought before I was born. It had not always been lonely, some told me, when the outpost was on the front line. But when the war ended and the provinces fitted themselves to either end of a hyphen, we found ourselves in the middle of nothing. The borders disappeared, exposing the land as a desolate, bombed stretch of brittle trees and stony fields.

I was apprenticed to the sheensmith two years now, but we had little work. The soldiers resented their post, having been sent there for incompetence, insolence, laziness, and murder, and I steered as clear as I could of them. The few civilians that remained were much older than I, the baby of the bunch, a war-orphan, of which many were born but few bred. I am lucky I was not abandoned on the flat rocks set aside for such things, or suffocated, or worse things I shall not repeat here. But in light of what I must tell before this story is done, you may think it an odd coyness.

She came to have her armor repaired, which permeated throughout her body. The sheensmith, a pious soul, would not examine her, out of bashfulness or fear I do not know. He was used to the external armor of the soldiers. To examine armor that was also breast and hip, which tunneled through gut and skin with no discernible end or beginning, well, he made the excuse that he was no doctor.

The armor-woman said, "And a doctor told me she was no smith."

The sheensmith hummed nervously to himself, picking at a tangle of greasy cords on his desk. The armor-woman took a step across the threshold, her boot creaking in the enclosed space. "I see you've been working on hounds and horses. The principle is the same."

The soldiers had come around by now, attracted by the only interesting thing that had happened all year. The captain asked for her papers, her regiment number, muttering mosquitos of identification. The armor-woman said, "I've come a long way, without and within. If you'll allow me the night, I'll be on my way before the same is through."

"You're a deserter, aren't you?" said the captain.

Silence filled the room until my teeth hurt. I was suddenly aware of a situation the parameters of which I had never been exposed to.

The captain gave a look to the soldier on her left. The armor-woman seemed to recognize this look, for she kicked at a rack of parts, knocking gears, bolts, and binding-glass across the workshop floor, red-brown dust flurrying in the soldier's faces. From my barrel seat I saw her make a remarkable speed across the outpost yard, even with the hitch in her step. The soldiers gave chase but the evening forest is a hard run, full of stones and thistles and dirt-flies.

They seemed excited to have stirred up a threat of some kind, setting about their duties with a rare pleasure. The burn-wires were strung up, the think-chimes were raised, and they made a show of polishing and priming their armor.

But nothing smart stirred that night, and the only thing the wires fried were flies and jelly-rags.

The outpost calmed after a few days and the soldiers returned to dice and narcotics. I went out walking to pick at the scant roots and fungi that enlivened my meals with a deeper shade of gray, but most of all to be alone with my thoughts, away from the soldier's singing and the sheensmith's muttering.

The forest, or what I naively called the thickest stretch of trees nearby, was split open by a ravine. This ravine terminated in a root-choked burrow for some larger animal that managed to gnaw a living from this land. Their droppings made a fertile bed for mushrooms, so I could count on a treat now and then.

As I stretched my hand out for a blue-cap, something shot from the burrow, clutching my wrist tight as if the earth had collapsed upon it. I opened my mouth but it was not my voice that spoke.

"Caterwaul and I'll snap your bony neck."

The arm that held me was dirty and scarred, just like the voice, which I had heard once before. She pulled me inside the burrow, which I would not have thought could contain a person. It widened inside a little, though we were still cramped close as gripped fists. The air stank of dirt and musk, so I coughed and dripped mucus as she spoke.

"You work for the sheensmith, don't you? You know his way, don't you? You'll help an honest veteran of the greatest fighting force there ever was, won't you?"

Her teeth were full of metal fillings. They made me think of the nightmare I had when I was little, after I saw the hound's heads laying across the sheensmith's bench neat as dinner plates, still breathing and lolling their tongues as their bodies were reupholstered.

"I need tools," I stammered.

She mulled to herself a bit, then laid a hand on my shoulder, cold and unusually heavy. "Come back when it's dark. If you don't, I'll find you." She gave me a look of animal sincerity, pupils dilated to soft, wet crosshairs.

I got up when I heard the sheensmith snoring.

I had no idea what tools would fix an armor-woman, but I brought the most useful ones I could carry. Sparrowstick, galver, some clamps, a bag of bolts, and a chunk of light-salt to see them by. I also took a bundle of sprouts and whitecube with a handful of dried berries, thinking how hungry her face looked.

I stepped carefully over the burn-wire, walking in the dead space where the think-chimes were a little too far apart, a game I had played as a small child. They tinkled as I passed.

We hunched in the hollow of a stag, its metal hide torn away to reveal the yellow clouds of night. I used to pretend it was a house, until one day I failed to imagine this, and things stopped becoming imaginary everywhere I looked.

“Where—what am I to fix?”

She shed her dirty clothes in quick, angular movements like a weapon being disassembled. I looked away, heat in my ears, catching only a blur of discolored flesh and bones that stretched too hard at the skin.

“Here.” She laid her arm on the ground, exposing her inflamed wrist. The muzzle of a gun protruded from it, oozing yellowy pus.

At first I thought it lucky the tools could be used on the body of an armor-woman, fitting the grooves and cannula so well. But as I worked I grew afraid, for I realized these familiar tools I had so comfortingly used every day in the sheensmith's workshop were not fitting her out of luck. They were shaped for her body. Their peaceful use was an adaptation, and I had been playing with instruments that once disappeared inside heaving, wet chests and slit-open arms.

Where I faltered she showed me how.

“I need a horse. A fine horse, a fast horse, the best horse.”

“I helped you--”

“You’ll help me again.”

She put her hand on my face. I felt the twitching of something hard in her palm, pushing against my cheekbone.

We went in together. I showed her the way past the burn-wires and think-chimes, although the chimes rattled more loudly at her passing, almost bursting into full peal, as if her thoughts raged past the limit of my own.

The ground behind the stable was soaked with foul fluid from a row of drainage holes in the wall. I tried the maintenance hatch and as I suspected, the soldiers had not locked it.

It was dark and humid inside. Her eyes must have been better than mine, because she pulled me around a corner into a corridor lit by dim yellow-green light. We followed it until we came to a stall. The armor-woman ripped a grill off the stall door and we crawled through.

The horse woke up, mandibles twitching blindly. I rubbed its flank. Through the leather panel I felt the corrugated lobes of the six rib-brains calm under my touch, even if its garlic cluster of hearts seemed to beat until the walls shook.

The armor-woman unhinged the blinders. The eyes of the horse flared huge and white, lashes whipping pale drops across my arm like summer rain.

As the armor-woman lead the horse from the stable and her grip on my nape loosened, I took a breath and tensed my body, once, twice, three times, thinking of myself safely behind the locked door of the sheensmith's workshop.

But the shout of a soldier ended that fantasy. The words she cried left me no illusion that I would be welcomed back as anything but a traitor.

The armor-woman laughed at the look on my face and slung me up on the saddle.

I am ready to tell you what stuck in my throat before. If I am to tell the story I must tell it all, through and through, or else I am serving you bits of a dagger on a plate and saying how kind I am not to have stabbed you. So I will stab you full, holding nothing back, to the hilt.

The sounds the older women make in their sleep, it took me a long time to understand why they made them, and how I was entangled with their terrors.

In pieces I scrapped it together, memories of war, how soldiers did what soldiers always do, the unspoken wage of their profession. But the soldiers of that particular generation were weapon, down to the very seed they spilled.

The children of that violation were born with, for example, an arm like a cannon, or razors for fingernails, or often weren't born at all, poisoning the womb or bursting on delivery, so the women had to deliver wild as animals, midwife cowering behind an embankment.

I was one of those children. When I was upset my irises turned to crosshairs, so I tried very hard not to be upset. Some of the outposters treated me worse for it, and others all the kinder for it. But even the kindest would not cross a certain line, as if it would bring them too close to their pain. I learned to keep my heart cold, my irises tame.

As for the rest of me, clothes easily concealed a few striations of warm metal, useless and random. I was weaker than most children, beset by odd aches, but at least my body conducted my breath and blood, unlike those born with ingot lungs or arteries packed with shot.

I recall one incident when I was quite young. There were a few other children in the outpost back then and we were kicking a ball around the yard. But I had broken the rules, or something, and been shoved to the ground. As the other children ran past, ignoring me in their clamor for the ball, the blood fired in my veins and my eyes contracted as if my face were thrust at a flame.

I looked up and the children flared with holy light, numbers and lines snapping through the air like the sparks of a fire. I could count every drop of blood in their bodies.

But no one noticed how my eyes had split. I just sat there, watching two girls stomp at each other's feet as the ball rolled helplessly between them.

Soon I became afraid, or more afraid than I had been. She kept the same pace as when we were fleeing from the outpost, despite the horrible bellowing of the horse's lungs. Why would she not let me off?

I hoped the sheensmith would know I was good, that I hadn't tried to break the rules. That he would think kindly of me and remember the years we had spent together.

We rode hard, rocking my insides. I became dizzy and vomited, thin and watery on the side of the road.

She slowed a bit, scanning the treeline. "Can I go now?" I said in the smallest voice.

Without looking back, she growled, "We are a mother and daughter traveling to visit family." I stared hopelessly at her brutish back, this wall of meat that could not be searched for pity.

After more time had passed, I tried asking where we were going. She never responded, didn't even seem to hear me.

Hours later, she suddenly started talking.

"They want me at assizes. I do not plan on giving them the pleasure of my company." When she talked in structurally sound sentences, it didn't sound civilized, it sounded like an old wooden frame wobbling on the edge of collapse. Her rough voice grinded on.

"I will leave the continent. I will sell the use of my arm to the queen across the sea."

Silence for a time.

"Do you have friends?" If she wouldn't reveal my fate, perhaps I could deduce from her past company.

"Dead. Or crazy. I am fortunate to remain sharp as a nail."

"...don't they help soldiers when they're done fighting?"

She laughed so hard I thought she'd fall off the horse. Its hearts beat nervous hot against my thighs. "We can beg on the side of the road, if we allow ourselves to be disarmed."

"Why didn't you?"

She looked angry. "Should the sun give up its fire? If you were born whole like me, instead of half this, half that, you would not speak stupid." Her eyelid ticced, and the smell of chemicals sharpened. She took a star of tarnished metal from her pocket. "See this medal? For bravery. Finest fighting force in the world." She straightened up and rode like she was parading.

"They should reward you for your service," I said, trying to appease her.

She looked back, her face hard and sullen. Bats retreated from the rising sun, leaving the barrens devoid of all life but the vibration of gnats. "I will have to collect that reward by other means."

Silence.

"Why did they stop...making you."

"Making us."

I didn't want to argue the distinction. I was just an accident. A wound in the world. She signed up for it. Had it put inside her.

"It was a sensible idea at the time. Not a lot of people were being born. Folks said no one might be born ever again. Had to make every soldier count."

She picked at her wrist-sheath, flicking out bits of foul-smelling coagulate.

"Now babies are happening. Keep the gun and the soldier separate. Okay. We're the last of it."

"What if--"

"You're sterile. It ends with the children. We're just something that happened but it won't happen any more."

I stared at her, eyebrows furrowed.

She holds up a fist. "We're *here*. Stuck in the same place. Plants and babies grow and the sun goes up and down but we're here."

I must have fallen asleep out of sheer exhaustion, a jolting half-sleep, the kind where you watch your body from the outside. I woke to a tremendous shaking. My legs were wet. The horse panted fiercely, foam spraying from its nostrils and soaking its sides. A red-hot strip of dawn warmed the horizon. The armor-woman leaned against the horse's neck as if she was whispering the devil into it.

We were veering off the road. I began to ask why but saw her arms were tensed, as if pulling back on the reins. We started sinking, the earth swallowing us up, and I clawed at the air. The armor-woman slid off the saddle and flung me next to her on the hard dirt.

The horse frothed and died, hooves scraping great furrows in the earth. We were in a ditch, or a fallow trench. It was dense with bones or metal, which had bruised me all over.

I heard her clambering at the horse, but it had no pack hanging from it, so I did not know what she wished to salvage. I went a little closer and saw something sharp emerge from her arm. She sawed at the horse until it split open, spilling out a cornucopia of organs, sour and rotten.

She scooped the guts out and flung them away, laughing at my disgust, holding up her shit-caked hands at me like a clown.

Finally a chamber of the horse's body was exposed and empty. She packed it with loose fragments of wood that had drifted and gathered here from the dry trees, then artfully selected one of the horse's tubes, unplugging it and dribbling the fluid on the wood. She scraped her arm on something, maybe a rock, producing sparks. A putrid fire erupted and the horse's nostrils spewed vapor as if it was still alive.

We warmed ourselves by this foul conflagration, my back turned and my hands cupped over my nose, yearning for the heat but sickened by its smell.

I was tearfully grateful for sleep to come, but as if ruined by the half-sleep of the saddle, it only gave me the other half, and little comfort.

After some time I opened my eyes. She was on her hands and knees and licking up the ashes of the fire, her tongue horribly black. Then she went to the wood-packed chamber, now cold, and gnawed on its charcoal.

We left the ditch and followed the road. She licked her black lips and said nothing, seemed not to notice me, but if I tried to slow down and lose her, she jerked on my shoulder and kept me at her pace. The midday heat dehydrated me until I was wobbling back and forth. She threw me her canteen, which was still remarkably full.

In the soldier's quarters there was a map. I had mostly studied it for the lurid colors it assigned various provinces, which were not brown as in life but pink or green. But I also remembered the general direction of the ocean. Was she headed there? I told her it was very far by foot. "Not ocean," she said.

She pulled me off the road and we slid down a slope. The ground was flat at the bottom, stinking of sulfur, the start of a barren waste flattened and denuded by battle. It was quiet down there, lacking even the public spirit of the road. I had been clinging to a hope that soldiers would gallop up on us, or that we would reach a more populous region where ordinary people rode past and subdued her into feigning civility.

I finally blurted out what I'd been thinking. "Are you going to kill me?"

Her crosshair gaze settled on me. She grinned, her mouth full of metal fillings, stinking like dirty coins. Like something that eats children. Those cold hard teeth made the scar on my hand ache, a sharp memory of a workshop vice's pinch.

The memory triggered another, younger still. When the sheensmith and I worked on the hounds it was mostly just the heads, temporarily decapitated so we could reach into their neckbone abacuses and star-shaped brains. My little body was taut, vividly imagining their muscles spasming, latching onto me. Their eyes rotated to follow us. But the jaws were disconnected, muscle wires bound tautly in clamps.

Instead of answering, the armor-woman got down on her knees, eyes unfocused and hungry. My toes twitched, but I knew running would be hopeless in this flat place. Her tongue drooped from her mouth, long like a lizard, stained black and blue. She licked at the salt crusting the cracked earth, sucking it from the crevices where it was richest and pinkest.

Eventually she found one of those white stretches of ground that I understood to be the remnants of seashells, although I found it hard to believe the sea once flowed over the place I stood, that time had ground the bones of leviathans to dust that tickled the insides of my nostrils. She crunched the fragments in her mouth. Her temple was flushed, and I swear the air was hot around her.

We reached a heap of broken rocks that formed an accident of hills. She became animated, clambering like a goat. She lapped joyously at the rocks, dipping here and there as if spotting treats. I winced at the crunch of minerals between her teeth.

Eventually we found our way back to the road and had to make camp before long, the day wasted with her madness. A spindly grove of trees and foliage, just enough to conceal two people laying down. I wanted to set a fire, for the night quickly began to chill, but she just lay on her back clutching her belly and groaning. Of course you're sick, I thought. That will teach you not to eat rocks. I went to bed hungry, but still felt rocks were not a suitable compromise.

I woke in the middle of the night to her loud cries. I crawled over to her side and tried to shake her awake. Her skin burnt my hand and I peeled it away, slapping my blisters at the dirt and cursing like I'd heard the soldiers curse.

The skin of her arm bulged with round little hardnesses, puffing and shrinking. Her mouth reeked of brimstone and toilets, the smell driving me to the other side of the clearing. I lay there heart pounding until sleep took me.

She shook me awake as if nothing had happened.

We resumed our journey, walking along the slope to hide ourselves from the road. Rocks were a two-sided plate, rainwater above and bugs below. She cracked their shells open with relish, but it was all I could do to get them down. I was used to eating insects in lean times, but they were fried and I didn't have to extinguish their mote of life.

"What's your name?" I asked, bored into desperation.

Was that a flash of shame on her face? "I don't recall," she said.

"What do people call you?"

"My squad called me Armory."

We found a wagon train headed down the road, some of the people almost as dirty as us. Armory scrounged in her pocket, producing filthy coins and a low-denomination bill stained yellow. "All I have", she said. They put us on the rear wagon, which was laden with something tarp-covered and foul-smelling.

After a day or two, we saw the mountain. It was carved into walls on one side, crested with shards of rock. A gate was open and many travelers were passing through. The archway was thronged with big green trees that spilled their leafy branches into the open air under the influence of the wind, as if eager to escape.

As we rode closer, the leaves which were so green from far away were revealed to have little spots of red, their crimson-dipped crenellations worried by the breeze.

Even the small towns closest to the outpost were unknown to me, so entering the city was overwhelming. What I thought to be rock formations were the buildings of the city. Many people must have lived inside. The tallest were carved directly from the mountain, great spikes of reddish-black mineral with patches of white. Alleys and streets mazed below the needles, some carved through the mountain by hand, neat and sign-posted, others seemingly by erosion. These natural ravines were the dirtiest and we stuck to them like we had kept to the side of the road.

At the mouth of an especially foul alley, I saw the only people there with blood like ours, iron-rotted hands holding out beggar bowls. One of them smiled and nodded at me, but I was too ashamed to wave back.

"Are we riding the train?"

"They'll be checking that."

"Horse?"

"Too slow. For us it shall be the Grand Dark Route."

"What's that?"

"Expensive. They won't be looking there. Not first thing."

It was clean and quiet inside the store, marble floor reflecting me like a shade. There were jewels and figurines inside glass counters, and pale figures wearing lavish outfits. It was the first time I had seen mannequins. They seemed occult and disturbing. A lurid, childish notion that you turned into one if you wore those beautiful silks and golden chains long enough.

I took in the scene like itemizing the contents of a dollhouse: A noblewoman in sporty trousers was browsing the jewels, tapping lightly at a case with kid glove fingers. The proprietor, dressed in black and

white with a lace collar, nodding and murmuring. A muscular man leaned against a pillar, hands folded, the strap of a revolver holster hanging around his hips.

He walked over to us, and I realized how dirty we were compared to everyone else. "Can I help you," he asked in an even tone, the chest of his dark uniform thrust out.

"Just looking around."

"Do you have an appointment?" The guard made brief eye contact with the proprietor and nodded slightly.

"I said I'm just looking around. With my dear child." Armory swung her arm around me and pulled me close. The guard's nostrils flared. In this clean place I realized the odor I had become accustomed to was embarrassing and pungent. "Miss, I would like to escort you to the door now."

Armory had the draw on her, seeing as she only needed to lift her own hand. "Slide that back," she said, and the guard let the revolver he had so belatedly tugged at sink into his holster.

She narrowed her eyes at the guard. "You were a soldier, weren't you." I wondered how she could tell.

"I was."

"Younger than me. And you carried your piece on the outside. But you've seen something. Seen enough to know how this'll smell if it goes a bad way."

By then the proprietor had noticed the conversation. "Can I help you?"

"Get on the floor," Armory said. "All of you."

The proprietor said, "Get them out of here," in an annoyed tone, unable to see the gun barrel projecting from Armory's wrist.

Armory cocked her arm and the sound reverberated through the marble chamber. "I know faster ways to get you on the floor." The proprietor covered her mouth and sank down, legs toppling beneath her like blocks of wood. The noblewoman was already on the floor, face pale as pudding.

When I saw the look in Armory's eyes the creases of my body flooded with sweat and my heart hammered. Even in my innocence, it was the look of someone searching for a reason to hurt someone. I'd seen it in small enough ways in the soldiers and other adults of the outpost, those bullying resentments. But Armory's rage seemed rawer than all of them put together.

"Do it," I cried out pathetically. When I wiped the tears from my eyes, everyone was on the floor except us. In this room, we were giants.

"If you do not give me the innards of your lockbox in thirty seconds, I'll kill the guard by the perils of his service. Then I'll kill rich tits over here. Then I'll kill you, you fancy, sniffing, rock-dealing toilet."

The proprietor swallowed with almost comic loudness.

"The back is being watched by my confederate. If you go out that way you will experience a sudden feeling of metal entering your scalp and digging into your brainpan. It will be opened up and it will seem like hot coals are dancing on your organ of intellect. Does that seem pleasant to you?"

The proprietor licked her lips and stammered something. She turned stiffly and went to a room behind the counter. We could see her through the glass of her little office, bending down to what I assumed was the safe.

"This is a time when something funny might happen. Don't fall asleep, kid."

The proprietor brought out a green velvet bag and set it on the floor. Then she staggered back and sunk back down, thoroughly gelatinized.

"Check the bag."

I reached inside and rustled my fingers through it. I'd never seen money that wasn't old and well-digested by its travel through the nation. It seemed fake, something for children to play with. The empress stared at me from a hundred paper eyes, her tiara-cage rendered in purple or green ink, depending on the denomination. I closed the bag and said, yes, it seemed a lot of money.

As I spoke, I saw the guard rising silently from the floor, hand creeping to the flap of his revolver holster.

I was at an unexpected crux. I could say nothing and banish my captor from my life. From her own life. Did she not deserve it? For terrifying me? For uprooting me from my home? For all the crimes she'd surely committed in the past? I thought of my mother, of all the women giving birth to bombs in ditches.

But as the revolver slid from the holster I realized this soldier, while disgusting and wicked, was the only movement I had felt in my life. Perhaps the only movement I would ever have a chance at. The winds of chaos blew with her, and if she was broken and immoral and dangerous, at least she dared to move.

But most of all I knew one thing. She had never been afraid of me. Because she was the truest, darkest expression of the blood we shared.

I pointed at the guard, unable to bring words to my lips. Armory spun and her wrist burst with powder and flame. The guard flew across the room and slammed into a counter with a great crunch of glass, flinging gouts of blood across the proprietor. Armory fired wildly around the room, mouth open, screaming soundlessly.

Each time she fired, her spine twitched and her arm spasmed, neck veins bulging, and her eyes one of them open wide and the other clenched shut. Then it was over.

She exposed her teeth to me in what she must have intended to be a grin. "Kid. You ever have something nice in your whole life?"

I didn't expect to have to peruse my entire life while robbing a jewelry store. But it seemed there was infinite space to ponder, that filigreed world frozen in time by my soldier with the gun-arm.

I had baubles when I was very young, which I played great games of imagination with. Then I grew a little older and my eyes adjusted and I saw they were only pebbles, a thimble, a hound's bolt, things to whisk away when I swept out the workshop.

I went over to one of the shattered counters and tried to differentiate the broken glass from glittering jewels. I had not given much thought to precious things. In the outpost, there was nothing worth having, imaginary or otherwise. One of my earliest memories is of a soldier stabbed another soldier for an old pocketwatch, which in later years I would see and think, it's not even that fancy, and rather tarnished as well. The strange thing is they became lovers afterward, of a fashion. But I digress.

I felt lust for those jewels, the childish lust I felt as a toddler seeing something new which I had not diminished by knowing it. I wanted to experience and be changed by these desirable, so desirable objects which apparently deserved their own building and their own attendants like princesses.

"Go on, kid."

I selected a golden-red stone, what I now know to be a tigereye. But when I held the chatoyant rock, bisected by a searing band of white luster, it felt cold and empty in my hand, and soon warm and sweaty, a worthless extension of myself.

"Take your clothes off," Armory said to the noblewoman, who moaned piteously. I felt primal panic, as if my mother's fear lived in my blood.

"Shut up. I need the clothes, not you." Armory put on the noblewoman's shirt and trousers, tearing them with her awkward movements, then shrugged on the jacket. She pointed to a beautiful dress in a glass box, lace and floral print floating on a mannequin. "Kid. Put that on."

I went to the case and tried to open it from the back. The door fell off, shattering from some unseen intersection with the bullets of Armory's frenzy, but I didn't seem to hear it. I climbed inside, into the warm, trapped air smelling of clean laundry and dried petals. I was in a bubble, staring at the brutal scene of the robbery like a misty dream, these blurred figures and wild streaks of red. I wanted to sit down and tuck my head against my knees and fall asleep in there.

I took the dress off the mannequin and got out and changed behind a counter. From that spot I could hear the guard sucking in air. I was glad he was still alive.

I emerged. There was a summer hat with a wide brim and a ribbon band and I had put that on too. Armory burst out laughing. "Well aren't you the very picture of a refined lady."

"Is he going to die?", I asked. Armory squinted at the guard where he lay arms flung across the broken glass, little drops of blood clinging to the teeth of the counter. "No bullets in him, only shot. My guts were not afforded the finest materials."

I nodded and pulled the hem of the dress down, trying to fit into this strange thing that did not taper securely around the ankles but billowed out like a flower.

The noblewoman, naked except for her gleaming white camisole and underwear, drew my eye with her shivering fear. The line bisecting her belly, the fat bunched at the creases where her shoulders met her chest, seemed like something I shouldn't see. I wanted to leave, it felt wrong, all that blood and nakedness and broken glass, these burnt, metallic smells growing stronger and stronger.

We did something wrong. Someone was going to come and hurt us.

"We should go, right?"

Armory shook her head like a animal, as if to cast the dark look from her eyes. "We should have been gone a long time ago."

I took a step toward the entrance.

"Wrong way." We filed between the counters, past cowed, shivering bodies. We found a door in the back with a pencil of daylight pointing through the keyhole. As I reached for it, Armory turned back and my heart jumped. I wanted to grab her hand but it was loaded.

She regarded the blood-spattered proprietor, flexing her wrist from side to side. "Next time you will be more polite to strangers." She fired at the ceiling and white powder and hard chips rained down. The proprietor coughed and hacked, blinded by the dust. Armory spat on the marble floor and we left the sorry ghost behind.

The sun hurt my eyes when we emerged. As I closed the door, I hoped the nightmare would contain itself to that building. Now I was dressed like a doll and Armory, filthy Armory, was wearing a noblewoman's attire. She tucked her hand into a jacket pocket, for it had a black streak of powder discharge. I could also see traces of powder on her neck. I told her so and she let me dab away the most obvious stains with spit.

I heard horses in the distance and very serious, angry yelling. The tigereye in my dress pocket struck my leg hard as we ran, feeling like it was going to tear through the flimsy fabric and reveal my theft to the city, a common recurrence in my dreams.

The horse-clops became louder and to my ears it seemed the street behind us was being split open with their charge. My heart tore at itself. Armory looked at my pale face and clapped my shoulder roughly. She reached in the bag and flung bills into the crowded market street. A wall of flesh closed behind us, horses skidding and thwarted, screeching from the tiny lungs lining their jaws like grapes.

We doubled back through a maze of alleys, then she paid the seediest, most myopic coach driver she could find to bring us to the entrance of a building carved into the mountain. Many finely dressed people were there, standing in a line. I kept looking back at the swinging doors of the lobby, expecting soldiers to pour in and throw me to the ground and hurt me.

We reached the end of the line. Armory rummaged through her pocket, picked a bill out, noticed it had blood on it, put it back, took another, smoothed it out and presented it with both hands. "Keep the remainder," she said grandly, covering her mouth to conceal her teeth. The clerk bowed.

We descended carved stone stairs into a cool, smoothed tunnel which opened into the hollowed world below the city. As we neared a balconied cliff overlooking a canyon of water, I, who had lived in the flat lands my whole life, not even daring to climb a tree, became so dizzy I thought I would fall. I caught her rough hand and we proceeded down wooden walkways to a steamboat the size of a city block, propelled by a red paddlewheel. The craft had an immense canvas stretched over it, and when I saw the stalactites suspended overhead like a sky of waxy needles, I understood why.

Armory found a red leather bench in an alcove and closed her eyes, hands folded across her belly. I went out on the deck. Everyone else was inside where it was warm and well-lit and automatic piano played, so I thrilled at the chance to explore.

The ship traveled past shadowy galleries of drooping mineral running in cathedral rivulets. As it drifted around a bend in the subterranean river, the blue electric lights, designed to repel the bats, cast shadows which twisted sinuously and blossomed to giants. The harsh, distorted light seemed to reveal a thousand ghouls dwelling in the cavities of the earth, faces twisted and melting.

The dark, empty deck suddenly seemed very lonely. If I fell overboard no one would see. I was not near the railing but this thought consumed me with its totalness, the irrevocability of that altitude and the dead, sunless water below.

I found her in the dining lounge, picking at the food. I stayed close to her, afraid of being talked to by the other passengers and the workers with their smart uniforms. I felt very dirty and obvious.

"Eat what you want," she said, waving a water cracker covered with cheese and fish eggs. I felt the same thrill as in the jewelry store and filled my plate with all these fancy dishes I'd only heard of in jokes about the rich. Despite all that had happened, I was happy, so happy, to suddenly be living like an aristocrat. I had pierced temporarily into another world, and if it was a nightmare, it was also a dream.

After gorging myself on sweet onion pastries, deviled eggs, orange slices, meringues, stuffed olives, and so on, I became sick and went out on the deck again, this time to vomit expensive food into the water. As I wiped my mouth, I hoped at least the fish were getting something out of it, poor blind things, and would not object to the taste of roe.

A heavy hand laid itself on my back. I started, but it was only Armory. She'd commandeered a bottle of wine and was emptying it down her throat. I asked for some and she said, "better not...better not," in a muttering sort of way. She threw the empty bottle as hard as she could. It hit the cavern wall and I clapped. She jerked her torso in a kind of bow.

"Someone in there thought I was an officer, account of my scars." She grinned at her deception, metal fillings shining blue in the light.

When I lifted my dress to use the lavatory toilet, I saw a bruise on my thigh. Had I been hurt somehow, in the robbery? Was this why I was sick? I leaned against the wall, picking at my skin, searching for poisonous bits of metal, until I remembered the tigereye in my pocket, beating me as I ran. I turned it over in my fingers, wondering what to do with it. Something in me wanted to drop it in the toilet.

But it was precious, so I kept it.

We disembarked to blinding sun which faded to an austere town with small estates on high stony ridges overlooking mineral pools. I was sad to leave the hidden world of the subterranean ship, churning through primordially sculpted canyons. No roads or horses or storms, just the mute and patient stone. In the lazy torpor of that night-world, I had almost imagined I was the child of a wealthy noble and I would be cared for all the rest of my life, sailing the boat up and down the river forever...

Armory seemed nervous. I saw passengers from the ship talking furtively with an officer on the docks. Perhaps she had not put on so fine a show as she imagined. I began to feel upset at whatever arrogant flourish she had surely doomed us with.

We left the docks quickly and put the town behind us. My hat was full of meat pastries, but Armory had only stuffed the satchel with bottles, which she was already draining.

"Few more days and we'll smell the sea. There's a port I used to be stationed at. We'll cut free of this shit land." She wiped booze from her lips and belched.

At first I thought it was anger that I felt. And it was. But sleeping near her had changed me in more subtle ways than mere displeasure at her company, like the ectohormonal nesting of animals. A hint of fever, a soreness in my throat. My gaze would stick on something for too long, my arm aching in a sweet way.

She noticed my strange revery and said, "Do you see the place behind your eyes?" When she said that, it seemed obvious. There was a place behind my eyes, dark but calm, and I could hear inside my body that way, like when you stop up your ears, but deeper.

I hated her for thinking I could ever be like her. But I spoke in measured tones, for it was my nature to unlatch a gate instead of climb over it. "Can I ask you something?"

"Alright."

"Why are you a bad person?"

She turned away as if I'd slapped her, although I wouldn't have done that for fear of being killed.

"Is that what you think I am?" She scratched her wrist with brooding repetition.

The counter-question set me crosswise. I had always considered this bad person quality of hers to be obvious. I did not think it entailed a personal judgment on my part, simply that if one motioned to her and said, this is a bad person, people who mattered would agree. To have to undertake this personal judgment gave me great stillness and discomfort. I did not like it.

I looked at her gnarled face with its powder pocks and tarnished teeth. I bit my lip and furrowed my brow. I still remember that sensation, stronger than any other detail of that scene. Like rocks remember erosion. It felt like I was something carved to judge her. It hurt to be carved.

"Sorry."

"Are you still thinking that about me inside though?"

I blinked and swallowed. "I don't think I am."

"Alright. You can if you want."

"I can?"

"No one can hear what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking it. It's not in my heart."

"I wouldn't blame you. I shot someone in front of you."

"They didn't die."

"It's still a fearsome thing. For a young one."

"It's alright."

She turned to look at me with water in her eyes. "It's not. You should hate me. I fucked up and ruined a child's brain with my violence."

Her face didn't change as she said those things but she cocked her arm and held it under her chin.

I said something like, "no", or maybe just a weak sound in my throat.

"I've hurt you so bad and there's no way out." She clenched her eyes shut, the vein on her neck tense and red.

"But we're so close," I said, staring horrified at her wrist like I could will the muzzle back into it. I was angry again, angry that she'd put me through all this horror and for what? So she could blow herself apart on a nowhere road and leave me?

She peeked at me through those clenched eyes with the manner of a hostage, even though she was the one pointing the gun at herself. "I was in the war at your age. But this is no longer the ordinary custom. You have a chance to be happy. Can you promise me something?"

"Promise what?"

"Promise you'll forget all that happened and live ordinary from now on? Happy and ordinary?"

"I'm not happy. I don't have anywhere to go. And you make me scared, and when I said something about it, you made me more scared."

She looked ashamed and put her arm down. The gun didn't go back inside her but she put her hand over it.

After a minute of moping she slung the bag of money over her shoulder and started walking again. "We can talk at the port," she muttered. "I'll give you something to make your way with."

I pressed. "You'll let me go?"

"Sure, kid."

"Shake on it."

We shook hands, her palm hot and loaded.

The wind-carved ravines gave way to shallow, weed-suffocated water and fungi-shelved trees. There were traces of an old settlement here and there, barely distinguishable from decaying logs. A small house remained, roof eaten away and replaced by a pergola of fallen branches and flowering vines. "We'll camp here," Armory said, collapsing with an audible squeak of metal bones. The floor was soft with moss and I eagerly gave it my sleep.

The little dance of the sheensmith's shoulders, his hunched back. Sparks from a galver, somehow soft as candlelight, not sudden and cracking. I was happy to be back in the workshop, but did not dare touch anything without being acknowledged. The sheensmith was angry at me, or perhaps could not hear me. I was very tired but someone was sleeping in my bed. I wanted to ask who it was, but I did not feel the air would brook interruption. The door was ajar, swinging with a draft. I was not cold, yet the figure in the bed was shivering. I wanted to close the door, but I was afraid it would slam with a sudden gust of wind and hurt my fingers. My fingers still hurt, despite going nowhere near the door. I tucked them inside my shirt, twisting it up until my belly was exposed. I went over to the bed, twisting and twisting at myself.

The wind hit the door against the frame, steady as a drum. Her long hair draped over the side of the bed. It had not been combed and was dirty with thistles. Something wet blackened the blanket between her legs. She clutched her stomach, face rubbing against the wall. I wanted to see her face but I was too afraid. I tried to reach for her hair to work the tangles out, but my hands were too small and hurt too much. I put my face on the floor and started rubbing it too.

The door slammed and I woke up.

The cabin was quiet, a private universe of lichen-encrusted walls. Armory slept with her head in the fireplace, limbs splayed in her awkward way. The sound did not come from either of us.

Something snapped outside. Then a crunch. I thought of the earth outside the house, covered in twigs and bark. An animal? No. Steadier than that. And growing faster. Boot steps. Finally our punishment was here.

Armory. She will protect us. The gun in her arm will protect us.

I shook her hard and she hit me in the mouth. She looked around with fogged eyes, her crosshair pupils flicking erratically. I wiped my burst lip and tried to speak. "They're here," was all I could manage. She staggered drunkenly to her feet then toppled over.

The rotten door flew off its hinges and a soldier pointed her gun at Armory, big and bulky in her reinforced fabric uniform with metal shoulderplates. "By her sovereignty, become still and surrender yourself." I saw movement in the corner of my eye. Another soldier aimed through the window, her cheeks puffing in and out with the exertions of her running. Armor on the outside, gun on the outside.

Armory smiled at the first soldier in a way those who did not know her might call friendly. "You've got the lay of me, soldier. I know when I'm beat." She spread her hands out.

The soldier's white-knuckled grip on the rifle slackened by a degree of vascularity.

Armory's wrist dilated, clicking emptily. She lunged at the soldier. The rifle kicked and Armory took the shot point blank. The bullet punched through her torso and hit the back wall. Armory dropped to the floor, shaking the weeds around her face with a wet wheezing.

The soldier backed up carefully so Armory couldn't grab at her, then reloaded her rifle while jerking her head at the other soldier, who came around and grabbed me by the nape of my dress. She marched me away from the house, into the silence between the trees. Their sameness swallowed us, organizing the world endlessly in every direction.

The smell of a hot muzzle irritated my nostrils. But this soldier hadn't fired her gun. It was cold against my back, poking every time I slowed down. Each time she poked, the fever in me swelled. White-hot windchimes in my ribcage.

I fled to the place behind my eyes, trying to hide from this terrible panic, or something I called by that name. I counted the numbers inside me, saw the dark seeds riddling my bones. The itch in my wrist, so pleasant to scratch.

The soldier told me to turn around. Told me to get on my knees. "We're going to wait here," she said. Her pupils were dilated, her posture tense. Did she think I was the same as Armory? I was offended by those black circles which sought to contain me, those pupillary pits which soaked me in inky, identity-stripping black. It hurt to no longer be thought of as a child, to be identified with the old, gnarled, damaged soldier, that alcoholic, used-up husk that was the very opposite of my young, malleable flesh.

This anger was so powerful and violent that part of me became immiscible with it, a logical and pious part that said restraint must have some noble quality, that if anger felt this good it must be a trap. I was not the same as her, I was a reasoning, thoughtful being, capable of some kinder, gentler future. I was young and would never be subjected to the musty dark ways of the past which had misshapen so many

people. Things were improving all the time and could not revert to ways which had proved flawed. This is what I told myself.

This logical part of me wrested itself from my control and grew past its original notion. It was as inexorable as the anger, but laid its argument more patiently, more irrefutably. My anger was a flaming underbrush, ephemeral and burning itself out. Logic was a wall of bricks.

I had been telling myself the soldier would see I was an innocent youth fallen into bad company, would take me to a place where lost souls are accounted for, and I would return to society. But seeing her eyes changed something in me. They were the eyes of some lunar mineral, remote and decided with geological certainty.

What a fantasy I had made myself sick with. She decided a long time ago to put on a uniform and pick up a gun. She signed up to be the one behind the gun, behind the hole that spits death. She signed up so she could be the one doing this, not the other way around. If there was a time for conversation, it was before we were born.

I was small and Armory was big and this soldier was big and the world was big and none of them cared if I disappeared in this thicket like I'd never even existed.

My eyes heated like ball bearings in a furnace. An incandescent rose blossomed to frame the soldier.

She looked away for a moment, toward the house even though we could not see it from here. She should have counted me.

It hurt when my wrist tore open. It felt like the world was red and black, riven with a final dusk that could not be repealed. Twinges in my belly, in the innermost parts of my thighs, strange sweet tearing twinges, saliva pooling in my gums, in my guns.

Then everything was sapped of color like a woodcut except for the ribbon of blood running down my arm, shining like it was the only color in the world.

I painted hers into the world too.

The soldier's chest rose and fell like an earthquake, everything fast and frantic but very slow at the same time. I wonder if it was here that my first unmoorings of time began, but due to the nature of my complaint, I can never know the origin point. The act of remembering is the application of repeated layers to a landscape painting, reinforcing what is essentially there but changing the hue, the outlines, the impasto, ever so slightly, mixing with previous layers to form new colors, cracking with heat, warping with humidity.

She propped herself against a tree, clutching her side as it leaked into the hungry swamp. She stared at me with the terror she probably hoped never to feel the first time she picked up that rifle. Her heartbeat

was a song I could end and my wristgun wanted to in the most musical way, like a composer searching for the perfect note.

But under the fever I felt sudden coldness. I did not want to fire my wrist again, this ugly protrusion of black, caked metal. I picked up the soldier's gun instead, so I could have some separation from the organ of killing. I had never held a rifle but my body nursed it with ancestral comfort. The soldier put her hand up as if to block the bullet. If I fired, she would have the bullets of two eras in her.

I lowered the rifle. I wanted to say so many childish things to her, which no longer seemed acceptable currency. I jerked my head instead. Was this where Armory's miserly gestures began?

I marched back to the house. Behind me I heard the soldier weakly stumbling away, crashing through branches as she raced the clock of her veins.

The other soldier came to the door. Behind her, Armory was on the floor, the moss around her matted red. The butt of the soldier's rifle dripped. I wondered if Armory's brain decorated it.

"Child, put it down." The soldier spoke to me almost gently.

I squinted down the sight. There was no shake in me. I was afraid all the time, had been cringing my entire life, but at that moment the only thing I was afraid of was my total lack of fear. How the only thing in my field of vision was an obstacle, how her features triggered less in my heart than the face on a child's stick figure drawing.

Four four five five. Four four five five. Geometric rose petals flicked between her neck, her belly, showed me the exact position of her various organs.

"Run," I said. Her eyes widened and I knew she could see my irises split into crosshairs.

She bolted, my gun rotating with her. After counting to sixty, I pried my hands off the rifle, knuckles popping like firewood.

Armory silently cleaned her wounds, although the swamp water did not seem clean to me. Her face was swollen and misshapen, only her metal teeth recognizable. She took the bullets out of the rifle and pried them open, salting her throat with the gunpowder. Then she dug the bullet out of her side and ate it too. With great regret, she poured the last of her whiskey into her wound, cursing with fearful oaths. I shook in the corner, sinking deeper and deeper into myself.

I had tried counting but could not keep the number straight. The gun would not go back inside me. My veins were painfully taut. One had burst, leaving lightning scars of purple. I felt suddenly ruined. I saw Armory's gnarled hide and rusted teeth, tasted their tang on my tongue, I spit, trying to get the poison

out, trying to believe the fever was not so sweet. The gun in my wrist vibrated with the indecision of my body.

I wept bitterly, trying to shove it inside with my other hand. I would be this way forever, I was broken, ugly and broken, ruined like her.

Armory grabbed me and held up my bloody hand so I could see it. There was a weeping slit where the gun had cleaved between the eminences of my palm. "Do you want to lose the use of it?" She bandaged my hand with a strip torn from my dress, moss wadded inside. It drank my blood readily and I passed out.

The forest ended abruptly, giving way to a barren expanse rolling with orange fog. I was so eager to discern a horizon that I almost fell into a trench before Armory yanked me back. She pointed to a slope and we slid down, entering the maze of war-fortifications. She kept promising we'd reach this port within an hour, but the trenches seemed endless.

We entered a long, deep trench lined with collapsed dugouts and horses burnt into wire horrors. Her walking became more erratic and I had to keep her from slamming into the walls.

Her eyes were shot with burst blood vessels and her hair was stringier than usual, fingers pulling at it and coming away with long strands. She drank brown rainwater from the tread-marks of a stag, drank from puddles infested with insect eggs. Once she reached inside a burrow, up to the shoulder like she was delivering a calf. She pulled out a furred rat-thing hanging by its teeth from her finger. She snapped its spine and sunk her teeth into the fur, grinding them with scraping sounds until she'd broken the skin. She sucked at it like a fruit, blood running down her throat.

As she picked fur from her teeth she sang an old regimental song, substituting vulgarities here and there and slapping her thighs as if it were the height of humor, looking around reflexively as if others were laughing with her.

I finally spotted a dugout that had not collapsed and guided her inside. We lay there in the dusty, enclosed air, silent except for the strained woodwinds of our respiratory tracts. I thought she would fall asleep with me, so great were her wounds. But I was suddenly awakened by her hands clambering across my back. I had grown accustomed to her violence. Affection was far more terrifying.

She murmured in a guttural sing-song voice, eyes heavy lidded, sniffing at me. "Canteen, Charlotte, Hardtack, I missed you so. Sweet gunner's musk, I was dead and dreaming, I'm awake now, let's run and spill," Her wrist barrel slid in and out of its sheath, clicking in my ear. I tried to bend her arm so it was not pointed at me. "You like to play, Hardtack...give me that chaw." She plucked up a bit of mud and popped it in her mouth, making great smacking sounds of satisfaction. She breathed oaths of loyalty and

friendship at me, but I could only smell chemical earth and bat guano. I curled up and faced away from her, making myself like a rock.

She finally fell over and started snoring. I realized the only time she truly slept was when she had been exhausted trebly beyond what anyone else could bear. Perhaps she defied sleep for so long not because it was in her constitution, but because she needed to create a weight of sleep so heavy it could pinion even her maddened limbs.

She woke me again, but this time only with her voice. She was saying no, no, in a dull, obstinate tone. With each utterance she ratched her body up as if each vertebra on her spine had to be negotiated with personally. Finally she got to her feet, her torso seeming to sag on her legs like a sack of flour. She put one foot before the other, making her way stiffly from the dugout.

I followed. She did not have breath enough to curse me, seemed not to have enough for her own self.

We came to a slope with enough metal debris sticking from it to haul our way up from the great trench. She slid backwards, wheezing and grunting, and I grabbed her arm, helping her up though it felt like mine was going to pop from its socket.

At the top I looked in her satchel and found a bottle of spirits with some dregs she'd somehow failed to suck dry. I pulled aside her bandage-rags and gagged at the smell, emptying the last inch of the liquor onto her wound. I refilled the bottle from the least cloudy puddle I could find and helped her drink it, though her throat seemed to be in much pain.

After half an hour the ground became clean enough for small plants to peer through the soil. Not much longer after that we reached the horizon, a dour grey cliff heavily pocked with erosion. The rains of the battlefield must have been full of acids. I was thankful we had not been caught under such a downpour.

I found a gap in the cliff and we passed through it. Armory pawed at the narrow sides, using the stone as crutch. I was not sure if she could see anymore.

We emerged to a slate-blue sky. Armory's nostrils flared at the scent of salt and she seemed to sober a bit. I put out my hand and helped her to a chalky white road flowing down to the port where ships were gathered like little toys.

When we entered the inn, my body seemed to go into shock at actually being in this place of warmth and food. My head swam, but I could not lose consciousness, for Armory would be without the shield of softness that I was. I told the serving woman that this was my mother and we had been beaten by bandits. But I could tell, by the itching of my irises, that some of the people seated nearby did not find my explanation entirely satisfactory. I reached into Armory's satchel and fished out a bill, which satisfied the serving woman anyhow.

The fish was oily rich and the water was clean and the bread golden with butter and I almost threw up from the realness of it. With enough water Armory's senses, such as they were, seemed to return to her, and she practically ate the plate itself. As I gnawed the last strip of flesh from a fishbone, the murmuring grew more apparent to me.

"Let them stare," Armory growled in my ear. "Treachery has to walk two ways, and we but one."

We rented a room but never entered it, just used the public shower in the back of the inn. Despite her words she seemed nervous, telling me to hurry with the sponge. I kept gasping from how good the water felt, this unsuspecting, cleansing water. I tried to scrub my dress clean as I could, this tattered brown thing spotted with blood. But in the end it was no use. I threw that expensive, ruined dress away as if it had absorbed the sin and violence of our journey, a cast-off soul trapped in a sty, fluttering in its longing to return to heaven.

I huddled naked at the edge of town until Armory brought me rough, cheap clothes from the market. I was that child of the borderless border outpost once more, except for a thousand things that had snapped inside me and did not seem possible to restring.

We went to the docks and she haggled until she found a dilapidated little boat with an old sailor who, after enough bills had been laid down, begrudgingly agreed to take her. "And the young'n?" the sailor asked.

You won't be safe here," Armory said to me with grim finality, extinguishing those last sparks of hope in my heart that had somehow imagined a place for myself on the soil I was so painstakingly birthed on. She jumped into the boat, steadier than I would have imagined. I wondered if she was stationed on the sea at some point, if the salty air reminded her of when she was young and had everything in front of her. I came after and almost fell into the water, tumbling onto the deck with a bang. The sailor hooted but Armory gave a look that silenced her.

I could see Armory's wounds still gave her pain. She had salve and herb from the market, but would not take them until I forced her with my small hands. I ate salted fish while she nursed a bottle of potato wine, licking at the cumin and dill that stuck to the rim. The swaying of the boat made me nauseous, but when I lay on my back and closed my eyes it put me to sleep.

When I woke, a horizontal strip of silver split the night. Cloud shadows grazed upon moon-bleached sands, and further along I could make out the light of a town like a few stars had crumbled across the peninsula.

The sailor brought us toward the shore. I waded onto the sand, eager to be free of the unsteady, stomach-tossing boat. I looked to my side for Armory but she was not there.

Her outline stared at me from the boat, hunched in shadow. The sand under my feet was lonely and colorless, gnarls of driftwood clawing at the sky.

She rose and flung the satchel at me. I grabbed it before it could sink below the waves. I looked up to see the boat shift from under a cloud, revealing her bruised face like a mask under the moonlight. I waited for her to say something but no words came from those twitching lips. She waved at the sailor and the boat drifted away, satchel heavy in my hands. Only after years had passed did I wonder if this was the only way she knew how to speak to me. Handing me ordinance to be spent. Purchasing life instead of death.

I hid the money in the winding, discarded bowels of a stag, a length of tubing snaking through the rocks of the supposedly cursed part of the island. I spent months trudging around begging for menial work, training my eyes to keep them clear of crosshairs. I spent as little as I could to avoid suspicion, but the town had no love for people from the war-continent. Armory's money kept me alive during that season of distrust.

When spring came, the town doctor finally took pity on me and gave me work cleaning the two-room hospital. Of all the professions this was the most difficult for me to serve under, for the smell of blood and sickness was unavoidable in that cramped space.

One day I was sweeping the hall during a particularly difficult operation. I could not put the sounds out of my head. Moaning all morning. Then silence from the table. The alarm in their voices, followed by low resignation. I came into the room and swept back and forth, cleaning the same spot over and over. I could see into the body on the table, see exactly what was wrong. Why were they letting him die?

I came to the table, pulled by the body's panic-song. The doctor looked at me like I was an imbecile, but with no real anger or urgency. She had given up on her patient.

I told her what was poisoning the man and how she could safely get at it. There were two wounds, one fresh and superficial, and another, older and festering, which no one was aware of. The patient was a sailor and had hurt himself on a boat after getting tangled up with rope and metal, ugly but survivable abrasions and bruises. But the previous week his boat had stopped at an isle where he gathered bird eggs to supplement his rations. While climbing the nesting rocks he had stepped on a piece of shrapnel, for this was one of many isles which appeared idyllic and green but was once blasted black and rained with bombs during the war. For unlike the inner continent, which was honestly and evidently ruined, the sea had licked the archipelago clean of its wounds and returned it to a deceptive state of paradise.

The doctor ripped the sailor's boot off and in the end he was saved. She took me on as her apprentice. She must have known I had weapon in me but she never said a word about it.

Time began to move quicker. Everything that happened since was much simpler, did not tangle itself into those knots I presented you with. The rest of the page will suffice.

Her practice prospered with me at her side and she positioned herself as somewhat of a miracle healer. We did not save everyone but we saved enough to become well-known among the affluent of the archipelago. Their dominion over a precise world of account books and property made them all the more insecure about their own bodies and we benefited by it. Although my favorite was working with children, dreaming I could push them in some small way toward a life less turbulent than mine. Sometimes a gentle voice is enough to show someone how they should speak to others, or so I hoped, and hope.

The doctor was quite old when I apprenticed and so when I was 28 she was already giving most of her responsibilities to me. A few years later she passed and I stepped into her role.

In the dark place behind my eyes I counted the flaws in my patient's bodies, as if each organ was on a plate before me and I was studying it under a loupe. I knew exactly where to cut, their veins like a red maze under my fingers. No one died under my care unless death was already in them. I counted as my patrons a marquise and a merchant queen. When war returned as it always does, I could afford a deferment for myself, my friends, and my apprentice. Though many of my wealthiest clients had fled for safer seas, the old satchel allowed me to afford the exorbitant bribes. Those bills which had been acquired in blood and fear now purchased safety and peace. In my heart there was a tight knot that would permit no one I loved to become familiar with the sounds and smells now far behind me, the kind that do not leave your ears and nostrils, but merely sleep until awakened by a door too swiftly slammed.

There is still some money left in the bottom of the satchel. When I am gone, my dear ones will have it, not knowing what that paper has heard, though they may wonder at the stains, as if I had plucked it directly from an incision into a merchant's chest. And in a way it was.

Every morning I grind milky leaves to make my tincture so that time will not steal me. It is always waiting, like the sea visible from my doorstep. Sometimes my memory flows calm and cool through the mind of a doctor. Sometimes the blur of youth rises all around me and I am meek and scared and I am there. When time is loudest and even my tonic fails me, I stare at the scar on my palm and make myself distant as a star.

But there are slow weeks, when I am not anchored by company, when I find a spot of dried blood that has eluded cleaning after an operation, when I see the tigereye hidden in the back of my underwear drawer, when I allow myself to drift back to that cold road in the country where I was born, walking with the old soldier across the blasted hills, unhappy and unordinary.