

Dark Watch

William Morris

“And thorns shall come up in her palaces, nettles and brambles in the fortresses thereof: and it shall be an habitation of dragons, and a court for owls.” –Isaiah 34:13

“I will make a wailing like the dragons, and mourning as the owls.” –Micah 1:8

THE OWL

I'll take the dark watch, if you'll sleep the fitful sleep and thirst in your dreams.

The desert is cold at night. The clouds gather across the broken plateau and race to our bedroom window as I brood over banks of monitors, shoulders hunched and wrapped in a blanket. A trio of alerts begin flashing. Three old ones are awake and terrified, heart rates spiking, breathing quick and shallow. Medical is already on notice, but a quick check of the pattern suggests a breach, and I wave them off. The holographic attack is a rather crude one and only effective on one specific, ancient chipset.

The coders quickly have an update ready for me, and I patch it in to the old ones' halos, broadcasting soothing sounds and images into their heads from my personal, cobbled-together digital storehouse. I switch to camera and watch them until they fall asleep. Their breathing remains shallow. They do not have long, some of these old ones, so we fight for every moment of life, every minute of peace we can offer. They deserve it. They, in their over-optimism, created a world so indulgent and interconnected that it couldn't help but break when resources ran out, but they also broke the most when it broke. So we give them what peace we can. The battle for it is constant and tires me.

I wish I had your vitality. I see how your young talents renew you. But I'm not suited for your work, to drive them, to hone

them. I have a different kind of patience. I mourn with the aged, let them drift in their memories and live in what was. That world they created. That world that circled their skulls with circuits—an implanted crown—and then bombarded them with sensations until everything went mad and shattered into pieces.

I would use what energy I have for something else, but that blessing refuses to come. Turns horribly wrong every time we try. I clutch at my blanket, suddenly cold.

You startle yourself awake, and I am there, holding out a glass of water to you, wishing you could unravel the tangled cries that pulse behind my aching eyes.

You drink and ask if it's your turn. It is.

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THE DRAGON

You call it the dark watch. That makes it sound noble. The reality is hours of tedium. But I love your poetry. So I call it that too.

It has begun to storm. I like the rain. It scours the sky. I like the lightning. It disrupts.

But I don't like the days after the rain when the desert blooms, and the air flies thick with pollen and data. The data we can block if we're good enough and quick enough, but my body cannot tolerate all this teeming new life, and my face, my eyes and nose, become red and weepy. My throat constricts and my sinuses throb with a dull, pressing pain as the earth tries to drown me.

And sometimes the data gets through as easy as the pollen. So yeah, I'll take the dark watch.

The rain pours heavy in the desert. I stand and watch it stream down the glass. There's a strange beauty to this place. This place that we, well, you aren't amused when I call it God's country or Zion. You always say, "Not anymore." I never know how to respond to that, but I still can't seem to stop making that joke.

I review your notes and check in with the talent to make sure the patch will secure the old ones' halos for a while. I let them dive into the technical details of their coding. I let them drone on. They love to show off. And well they should. They're top talent. Sometimes you forget that. Sometimes you take them for granted, reserve your patience and time only for the old ones, forgetting

that, as good as our tribe's talents are, they too are broken and fragile.

And that's the whole point, right?

The only way to make things work these days is through force of personality. And so the personal and the political combine in us and create a space for our relationship, but also demand of us a constant emanation of power and connection to the members of our tribe. Damn. Look at me. I'm getting philosophical again. I feel a sudden urge to wake you and tell you all this. But I don't. You need the rest.

Instead I indulge myself and watch you sleep for several minutes. Your long hair tangled across your face and neck. Your fingers and arms cradling a pillow, like a b . . . —I can't say it. Can't even think it.

Then the swing shift manager buzzes my datacuff. And I'm saved, yet again, by work.

"What's up?"

"We had arrivals during the night. Eleven from the Pacific Northwest."

"Any that have talent we need?"

"Maybe. But . . ."

"What?"

"They're all Peculiars."

I sigh. You will be pleased with this news. The remaining bits of Zion, the Mormons who still want to be a peculiar people finding us again. I thought the great migration south was over and done with by now. It's been months since the last stragglers passed through. I briefly consider keeping this news from you.

"Any corp-rats?"

"Not any that'll admit to it."

"Give them the neutrality lecture and make sure they understand that if any of them are indentured and their masters come looking for them, we'll turn them over in a heartbeat. Any goofs?"

"They're Peculiars."

"Any goofs?"

"Not any that'll admit to it."

"Have the meds checked them out yet?"

"Yep. They all check out."

“Any old ones?”

“Two. They have no problem staying.”

“Tell me about the potential talents.”

“Not much to say. Possibly three or four of them. They’re playing things close.”

“I need to talk to them then. Make sure they are kept confined and out of the way. What kind of gear did they show up with?”

“A pair of four-wheelers with trailers. In good shape with a decent amount of gas. Plenty of rations. A crappy deer rifle.”

“Any hardware?”

“A couple of old-school handhelds. The GPS systems they have are pretty old, but the chips are good enough.”

“Good. Have tech bring the handhelds up to date, but don’t return them until we ferret out the talent.”

“What should I load on them?”

“Caches through the Yucatan. GPS capability through Guatemala. Things are probably weird down there so they’re going to have to work out the rest themselves.”

A pause.

“How’d they find us?”

“They aren’t saying, but I bet it’s your old man, again.”

I sigh. “Yeah. I’m going to have do something about that.”

“You keep saying that, Chief, but it never seems to happen. Not that I blame you. We all get weird when it comes to family. Maybe you should talk to him face-to-face instead of sending him messages.”

“And maybe you should shut up. Keep harping on this, and I’ll send you out to track him down and talk some sense into him.”

“No offense meant, Chief.”

“None taken. I’m going to take a quick nap. Make sure the Peculiaris are contained. Polygamous Dan is flying in with a shipment in a few hours.”

“Sure thing, Chief. Sweet dreams.”

I crawl into bed next to you and you wake up and reach out your arms for me. We steal a few hazy minutes of fatigued talk, both of us drifting in and out of sleep. I tell you about the Peculiaris. You act nonchalant. I tell you that I’m going to need to do something about the old man. You smile, nod, remind me that he is my father and that he isn’t crazy. I shrug and say that, to the

Confederation, peculiar is worse than crazy. That we can't risk him running wild around Utah anymore trying to salvage whatever it is he is trying to salvage. That he needs to either stay with us full-time or head south. You say nothing. You kiss me. And then you get up and start getting ready for Dan.

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THE OWL

I will let you sleep a little later than you wanted me to. I know in what manner you like to receive Polygamous Dan and will have everything ready. You will insist on a formality that probably isn't necessary, that I can no longer tell if you do because you want to keep your Confederation-facing persona consistent or because you actually enjoy playing the role.

I worry that as your reputation as a Chief grows you get too swallowed up in Confederation politics. It's a game you are good at—even though you claim to hate it. I think at heart you really do. It's just that I want you to hate it not only as much as I do, but also in the exact same ways and for the exact same reasons.

But I still put on a dress and brew the Brigham tea and wonder if you'll give me time with the night arrivals.

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THE DRAGON

The radar shows two blips three miles away. They're coming in fast.

"Security, this is the Chief."

"Yes, Chief."

"Anti-aircraft is engaged?"

"Anti-aircraft is engaged."

"Codes are in place?"

"Codes in place, sir."

"Good. Wait until they're a mile and a half away before asking for credentials and make sure your hail mentions that they will be shot down if they come inside the mile perimeter before receiving authorization. I want to force them to slow down fast."

"Will do, Chief."

I know you dislike these little games. But we have only three things protecting us: our coding expertise thanks to our amazing tribe of talents. Our isolated location. And our kick-ass air defenses. Our friends—and our enemies—often need to be reminded of all three.

I'm touched you let me sleep late even though I didn't actually sleep. You know how hard it is for me to get up for this type of thing. I need to work myself into a frenzy of anxiety in order to reach the numb calm that seems to intimidate these fools. My fellow Chiefs. My Confederates. Luckily, this is something I can do in an empty bed with just my blistered mind for company.

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THE OWL

Once everything is ready up top, I head to the stairway and climb down the bluff to meet the other chopper and oversee the QA of the shipment of electronic components Dan is bringing in. A security detail waits me at the bottom. As usual, you go overboard with the numbers. I don't need a full squad of eight for an operation like this, my dear. We walk along the concrete pathway, which is still damp with last night's rain and strewn with pink worms.

The landing area sparkles under the desert sun. Someone has already put down tarps for the shipment. Such details are evidence of the unity and focus of our tribe. I'll have to remember to mention it to you.

I wonder, though, if one of these days one of our own will turn on us. Or—much more likely—one of the other Chiefs will move to depose us. Of course, if we reach that point, we'll probably have grown so weary of administrative details that we'll welcome the chance to leave this existence for our eternal reward. There is that small matter of faith wavered, of directives to migrate ignored, of temple covenants publicly forsworn, but if Heavenly Father doesn't understand the accommodations we've made to help his fallen, broken children, then we'll storm off and live on some other celestial planet, dragging all of our talents and old ones—our only posterity—with us in our wake.

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THE DRAGON

The other chopper is directed to meet you in the valley, but I allow Polygamous Dan to land his personal one on the pad on the bluff. It's a show of respect and trust. Of course, he and I both know that the pad is rigged with explosives and that with a nod I could either fry his aircraft's electronics or blow him and his crew to pieces.

Dan must kind of trust us, though. He bounds out of the chopper in front of his bodyguards/wives and strides toward me his arms spread wide for a hug. He kisses me on both cheeks and squishes me into his girth. I push him away with a chuckle. I hate this part. But somehow I always find the energy for it. I know you think that deep down I enjoy all the playacting. I probably do, but I don't think you truly understand what it costs me. One of these days I'm going to either snap and make some grand, rash statement or withdraw mentally, close-up emotionally and appear weak and halfheartedly supportive of this crazy collection of minor despots and two-bit dictators we call the Confederation.

But today, as tired as I am, I am able to switch on what some of our talents, thanks to you, calls CJ-mode. My dear, I am tired of the Chief Judge thing. Do you have to turn everything into Peculiar speak? I suppose it's my own fault. These little jokes are your only outlet now. Other than what happens in your own mind. And heart.

I speak first as is my right, but I temper it by going informal.

"Polygamous Dan, you fat polygamous bastard! How's polygamy treating you?"

He laughs heartily. "Very well. I'm now up to thirty-three wives. One of these days, I pass your Brigham Young, eh?"

"He's not my Brigham Young. You know I left all that behind when I swore the oath."

"So you say. So you say. And yet what's this here that you're offering me as a token of hospitality?"

"Same thing it always is, Polygamous Dan. Brigham tea. Very suitable for you. And also indigenous to the area."

Dan grimaces.

"So those prefab greenhouses I sold you are sitting empty?"

“Maybe. The beautiful thing is that Brigham tea doesn’t need a greenhouse to grow. And I have nothing else in my stores worth serving. Or at least nothing I’m going to waste on a boorish, polygamous bastard like you.”

Dan laughs heartily and submits to the show of hospitality and as we talk tech and politics, I visualize you checking the shipment. The awkward, no-nonsense manner you take with Dan’s wives. The fully briefed members of the security detail checking each circuit board in silence. Some of them would like to flirt a bit no doubt, but your presence leaves them no room and no time. And it’s just as well. Dan is the jealous type.

Twenty minutes in, I begin to get restless even though we’ve talked so much we’ve barely touched the refreshments you laid out. Nice touch with the gooseberry jelly. It’s one of Dan’s favorites. Did I tell you that? I can’t remember. The specter of my crazy—sorry, love—my *peculiar* father roaming what was Utah begins to haunt the back of my mind. I suddenly feel compelled to deal with the arrivals. I don’t want to pawn Dan off on you, but, then again, he likes you a lot more than he likes me.

“It’s great catching up with you, Dan. But I don’t have thirty-three wives to take care of my every need and whim. Some of us have to use conventional managerial techniques to deal with our talent.”

“I’ll come with you. You know I love to see you in all your bureaucratic glory.”

“No thanks, Dan. You and your lumbering body just get in the way. Why don’t you take your fat self and your pretty little bodyguards and go flirt with my wife. I’m sure she’d love to show you the latest improvements to the greenhouses.”

“Now you’re talking. You know, I’d give you ten of mine for your one, but one of these days, she’ll see the light, and I’ll get her for free.”

I force myself to chuckle, tell the security detail to warn the shift manager I’m on my way, and message you a head’s up.

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THE OWL

We’re not quite done when Dan arrives in the second chop-

per. One of these days you should make him take the stairs. He emerges and greets each wife with kisses and squeezes that are a shade too extravagant. My, how he does smack his lips when he kisses. I try not to shudder, especially when he paws the really young ones. Intellectually, I realize that he is not that much older than us. No one without a halo is. So only two decades' difference. But it's still creepy. You'd tell me that it's a residual discomfort passed on to me from my parents' parents—the true-blue Mormons squirm over overt reminders of ethnic shame; the assimilated Mormons shrinking away from the hard truths of our founding.

But whatever, Mormon boy.

The assimilation is a long time past. It's all tribal now, babe. And Dan's tribe troubles me. And, you know, you could have entertained him longer, especially after I put out such a nice spread. He's just going to get into trouble down here. Gamesmanship? Cowardice? Simply fatigue? I'll cover for you, honey. But you better hope that Dan doesn't push too hard. I'm not in the mood.

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THE DRAGON

The swing shift manager meets me at the entrance to the main building.

"Greetings, CJ. I knew you'd be down sooner or later."

"What're you doing still up? And don't call me CJ."

"Oh, come on, Chief. You gotta let us have our little jokes. Besides, *she* was the one who started it."

"I know who started it. You didn't answer my question."

"Yes, sir. I'm still awake because I knew Fat Dan was coming in this morning and what with the Peculiars arriving last night I figured that I should maintain managerial continuity in order to avoid any intelligence breaches, sir!"

"Well done, my good and faithful servant. Take me to the Peculiars."

You'd be disappointed in that tasteless joke, but blasphemy is part of what keeps me sane. Especially when dealing with Peculiars.

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THE OWL

As we finish checking the shipment, I find myself making a connection with one of Dan's wives. We don't say much, but her darting, liquid eyes search for something in mine. Her fatigues blouse around her boots too much, and her jacket is very loose around the waist. That's strange. She doesn't seem pregnant.

The tech talents finish checking the components. We reject only three. Dan gets bored and wanders back to his choppers, pinching bottoms along the way. Not for the first time I wonder what kind of woman would be willing to take up with him, and not for the first time, I laugh at my flashes of naiveté, and we turn to the dry goods.

The wife with whom I have been connecting is having trouble opening a box so I go to help her. Our fingers touch. Her eyes melt at mine. And all of a sudden I know her story. She was pregnant. She lost the baby. She knows about my losses. Losses known Confederation-wide because of the importance of reproduction and succession planning. She lets the touch linger. She believes we share a certain sorrow. She is correct.

Once, back when you still let me read scripture out loud to you, I read verses from Micah, and you told me that you were the dragon and that I was the owl. But if that is the case, then how come, here in our fortress of brambles, I've been the one wailing and you the one in silent mourning?

The box open and checked, I go to stand up, and as I do I steady myself on her arm and give it a subtle squeeze. She struggles not to react, but I can tell she wants to dissolve in tears and throw herself into my arms. Dan would not react well to such obvious female bonding outside of his harem, and I can't be completely sure that she isn't one of his attempts at subterfuge. He loves to use his wives as emotional or sexual traps. For all that he mistreats them, they can be ruthless on his behalf and as you have tried to drill into me, even though it runs counter to my nature, the one major unwritten rule of inter-Confederation relations is to never tamper with the absolute sovereignty a Chief holds over his tribe. Or at least never get caught doing so.

I wonder how many babies Dan allows per year. You have told

me that his total tribe numbers sixty-eighty. With thirty-three wives, that leaves about fifty adults who aren't part of his succession pool. Most of those are probably sterile or have been sterilized. Accounting for other functions, that probably leaves three or four people for childcare duty and so at most eight to ten children from the entire pool of thirty-three. Add in the strong possibility that Dan selects for gender, and it's possible that her losses are more horrifying than mine.

I want to help this woman.

I can't. I love you too much.

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THE DRAGON

I strap on a firearm and walk into the holding cell.

"Who speaks for your group?" My voice is louder than it needs to be. Damn, I hate dealing with Peculiar. They throw me off my game. You'll be pleased to know that that's still the case.

"I do."

"*You?* You are thin and puny. You are dirty and poorly dressed. You are unarmed. The Confederation does not recognize chiefs who present themselves in such a state."

I turn to the rest of the group. "I am your new Chief. I may or may not execute your old Chief as is my right under the terms of the Charter of the Confederation Article II, Section XIV: Acquisition of Talent."

His eyes widen.

"But the Church Historian said . . ."

I put my hand on my holster.

"Be careful how you finish that sentence, Peculiar."

He shuts his mouth and purses his lips. His hands are trembling. You hate that I'm so harsh with them when they straggle in. But this is not some power trip or show. They need to know the reality of what they're dealing with. And they need plausible deniability and how to frame that deniability if they are going to make it to Guaymas and catch the boat to Peru. I wonder if any of them actually do. You seem to think so. You seem to think that we're still the first stop in some LDS Underground Railroad. It's been three years since we've heard anything definite. For all we know, the

bones of every Peculiar that the old man sends our way are bleaching under the Sonoran sun.

I turn back to the group.

“I see you have two old ones. They will stay with us. Confederation policy is that since old ones are not equipped to deal with the new order of the world, they are to be pitied rather than blamed for what they wrought. They are to be cared for and die natural deaths. Say your goodbyes now. The old ones are about to be transported to our dormitory.”

I want to leave before the tears and hugging, but I stop and say one more thing: “If any of you are talent, it’s in your best interest to make that known before I decide what to do with you.”

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THE OWL

Polygamous Dan whispers something to one of his wives and then walks over to us. I’ve completed the check of his delivery, and it’s time for his team to review the goods we’re exchanging in return. “Stacy, go help Missy inventory the payment,” he says. Stacy, who is the recently-in-a-state-of-pregnancy wife I had been working alongside, jumps at the sound of his voice and flushes slightly. Dan looks at me oddly.

“Everything checks out so far,” I say. “Another fine shipment, Dan.”

He nods and scratches his beard. I start to say something else but before I can, he raises a hand and says: “I’m sorry to do this, Mrs. Esplin, but I’m afraid that I’m going to have to invoke Article III, Section IX of the Charter of the Confederacy.”

I nod. You will not be happy about this. Peer inspections are a necessary part of the Confederation, and even surprise ones aren’t likely to turn up much, but you hate Polygamous Dan poking around things. And with the Peculiars here there is a slight chance he could work out enough to file an Assertion of Breach of Charter.

As we’re walking toward the main compound, one of the security detail whispers in my ear that there’s been a message from you that I’m to help situate a new group of old ones in the dormitory. I’m not sure what you would want me to do here. If I ignore this, it

could lead to some suspicious confusion. If I don't, Dan knows we've added to our tribe recently. I stop walking and turn to him.

"Dan, it occurs to me that you haven't yet paid your respect to the old ones. In fact, I believe you haven't carried out that protocol for several visits now. I'd hate for you to be out of compliance with Article I, Section VIII."

Dan grimaces. I try to hide a wry smile. Most companies only maintain a handful of old ones, usually relatives of the top talent. You and I collect them like Dan collects wives.

"Fine. Let's go get this over with. But if you're hiding something, I will find it."

"I'm sure you will. Although, of course, we have nothing to hide. In fact, I should tell you that the reason I suggested this is that I've got to process a new group of old ones we're taking on."

Dan smiles but says nothing. He knows that you will know about the inspection soon. Not that these surprise inspections ever tend to be anything other than posturing, but I think he thinks that one of these days he's going to get something on you. On us.

* * *

THE DRAGON

The message comes in that Dan went with you to visit the old ones. You made a good decision to stall. I could have hid the Peculiars easily enough. But that would have given them time to have second thoughts and present a united front. To choose martyrdom over splintering. I don't make martyrs out of anybody. They just need to think that I do. So I issue a few instructions to the shift manager in anticipation of Dan's visit and head back in to talk to the Peculiars. You won't like this gamble. If things go wrong, there's a strong possibility that I'll have to indenture the lot of them and some of them will probably be eligible for claims by other Confederation companies. Dan's an idiot, but he's not stupid.

"So. You've had five minutes to talk. Who among you is talent?"

Silence. But I can't tell if this silence is fear, weak reluctance,

or unity. You are better at reading people like this: desperate people of strong belief.

“I’m going to ask once more: who among you is talent?”

The young skinny one who spoke before looks like he wants to say something, but the other men are giving him warning looks. And now I know what you’d say. You’d tell me that I came off much too strong before. That now they think that there’s absolutely no possibility that I’ll help them with what the old man said I’d help them with. They’re partly right. There’s no way I’m not going to exact my price.

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THE OWL

I only take two from the security team into the old ones’ dormitory with me so that Dan can bring four of his wives with him. More and there’s too much chance of incidental contact among details as we walk the narrow halls and crowd into each room.

I tell the supervisor that we’ll meet the two new ones after Dan pays his respects to top floor residents. Dan puffs up the stairs. Surprisingly, he doesn’t seem too put out by this diversion. I make him enter every room on the floor. You should have seen it. He does it right and does it right every time. Takes each old one by the hand and says, “Greetings old one. The Confederation is pleased to have you in our midst. Yes, you and your generation did us much wrong. You over-consumed, over-connected, over-loaded. You gobbled up our birthright and then squabbled over what little remained. But we forgive you, and we will keep you safe. You will die a natural death as is your due as a member of the human race. And until that time, you live as a reminder of a world that we have left behind and will never rebuild. This I swear to you. May God or Darwin rest your soul.”

As we head back down to the ground floor, he says: “I forget how many you have, Mrs. Esplin. They must consume a lot of resources.”

“They don’t eat much. They’re old.”

Dan bursts out in laughter, but laughs a little too hard.

“Very funny, Mrs. Esplin. I do have some concerns that your tribe is taking on too much resource drain. And here you are add-

ing two more today! And it would appear that these two don't even come with any talent attached. Or at least your husband wasn't bragging about any new acquisitions. That's a bit puzzling, in fact."

Polygamous Dan is using the married name too much. Usually he calls me Kate or Future Wife. I'd like to message you, but that would seem too suspicious so instead I'll try to keep him stalled for a few more minutes, or better yet get him to call off this whole farce. I wish I could be more confident about what you were doing with the Peculiars. For several reasons.

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THE DRAGON

I can feel Dan's eyes on you. I can smell the antiseptic funk of the old ones' dormitory. I knew he'd been here too long for things to be going normally and sent the new old ones to you as a tantalizing decoy. Now I can only hope you use them. Because I need to finish this. Because we need more talent. We always need more talent, and we need some sort of payment for the risks we take.

I say nothing to the Peculiars for several minutes. Then I pull the handgun from my holster and gesture for the women to step to one side of the room. One of the men clenches his fists. I stare him down. He looks away. The women are slow about it, but they clear out of the way so now I'm facing the five men. They're looking at the women. Someone starts crying. I begin laughing. I laugh for a long time.

"Really?" I whisper shout.

And now all of them are staring wide-eyed at me like I'm crazy. I wonder, not for the first time, if the old man gets the same kind of stares when he appears out of nowhere like some kind of Fourth Nephite—telling them who knows what wild tales, filling them with who knows what wild hopes. The Church Historian indeed. I wonder if I could get their eyes to pop all the way out of their sockets if I told them he's just my dad running around with a hacked halo and an Isaiah complex.

"Really? Do you really think I'm going to shoot one of you? I mean, hell, it's well within my rights to do so. But do you seriously think that that's what is going to happen here? What kind of mon-

ster do you think I am? Do you think I rule my people with fear? Do you think I'm so stupid, so powerless, so small of a Chief that I need to resort to violence? Oh sure, these trappings are sometimes necessary, and they aren't solely for show. You better believe that when someone messes with my people, I shoot them. I have shot them. But right now all I need from you is to help me out here."

And by the end I'm yelling and waving the gun erratically. You've never seen me yell like this. I hope you never will. I don't know if that's a sign of weakness or of strength or of sexism or marital responsibility. I may think about it later on the dark watch as I listen to you sleep. I go quiet. And then just as their eyes begin to relax, I spit out quietly, hoarsely: "Identify the talent and the rest of you get some help on your way."

A man and a woman step forward. This looks like a score. Coupled talents have extra incentives to work hard around here. But then it turns out that the man is indeed married—but not to the woman who stepped forward. His wife isn't talent. Not for the first time I show mercy and take on all three, even though one is dead weight. Not to mention the fact that I have already relieved them of the burden of their two old ones. This leaves them with six. It barely seems fair to me. I walk out of the room and message the shift manager to have the two new talents tested.

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THE OWL

When we reach the ground floor Dan reminds me that he hasn't paid his respect to the two new old ones. I almost tell him that it isn't necessary, but then I realize that you wouldn't have sent them while he was here without providing for the possibility of them meeting him. Or at least I hope not. I know you better than anyone, but I can't read your mind, dear. One of these days you're going to forget a contingency or wind things too Byzantine, and I'm going to goof up.

"Your dedication is touching, Dan."

I whisper to the supervisor. "Ah, they are waiting for their medical examinations. If you'll please follow me to the exam room, you can pay your respects there."

Dan heaves out a half bow, and I sweep past him with a flourish of my dress.

The exam room is small so Dan and I leave our entourages at the door. The new old ones appear especially shrunken and bony in their dressing gowns; their halos raggedly ring their heads, the skin raw and bleeding in places. I wince and briefly close my eyes and picture them as they'll look in a few weeks of being under my care. That's the trick, the one you can't seem to master: don't see them as they look when they pathetically stumble in, but as they will become. It's the only way to truly bestow them with the dignity they need to flourish in spite of their infirmities. There are a man and a woman, but by the way they are sitting apart, turned away from each other, they don't appear to be a couple.

Dan walks briskly up to the man, who cowers and looks to me. Is this due to my natural charisma and touch with old ones, because you have briefed them, or that I am a woman? I smile warmly at him.

"Welcome," I say. "This is Dan. He is Chief of one of our sister tribes in the Confederation. In the Confederation we pay our respects to the old ones whenever we visit a tribe. That's why he is here. Go ahead, Dan."

Dan does the routine with the old man, and then begins to slather him with questions. The old man replies with vague answers and non-sequiturs. He's distracted and may not be all there. Dan's questions quickly change from oily to steely, although he still tries to keep up a veneer of the conversational.

I look at the old woman. She winks at me. I try not to laugh. Did you set this up? I can't tell if the old man is playacting or not, but it seems like not.

Dan's bluster is getting pathetic now. He knows it and turns to the old woman, grasps her hand and begins to recite his forgiveness. The old woman gazes at his face, a faraway look in her eyes.

Suddenly her eyes focus in on his, and she quietly asks: "Danny?"

Dan stops cold.

"Danny? Is it you after all this time? Oh, how I've missed you, son. I almost didn't recognize you underneath the beard and all the . . ." She trails off, her eyes basting themselves with tears.

He turns to me. "Is this some kind of trick?"

"I don't know. I . . . I don't think so." What are you doing here, honey? This is a dangerous game to be playing. I'm not sure how you want me to spin this.

"Danny? Don't you recognize me?" Her voice is the confused cry of a bird with a broken wing.

"No, I don't," he spits out crisply. "My mother is dead. I have never met you in my life. And . . ." He turns back to me. "This is a disgusting trick to play, Mrs. Esplin. You and your husband better have a good explanation for this."

I panic just a little. "I think this must just be a case of mistaken identity. I'm sorry, Dan. She is new . . ."

"Danny," she said, her tone sharp and commanding now. "Don't lie to the nice woman and make her feel bad. I taught you better than that. First you leave the Church and now you go and get fat. And who are all those women waiting outside the door dressed in the same uniform as you? And why do I smell tobacco on your clothes? Oh, Danny. You were such a good Mormon boy before the world changed. Now you don't even recognize your own mother." And now tears begin to stream down her wrinkled, cherubic face.

"You are mistaken, old one. You are crazy and delusional. Your halo must have malfunctioned." He turns and walks out, his wives hopping madly into formation behind him.

I look at the old woman, but there is no wink this time. Her white hair has grown long, curling haphazardly around her halo. She has a faraway look in her eyes as she sits in a loose dressing gown, the wind-burned leather of her cheeks staining wet. My heart begins to fill, but I must go. Always there is never enough time.

I walk out into the hall.

"I'm sorry, Dan. I had no idea that would happen. And you can believe that I won't mention anything about this to my husband."

His face puffs with indignation. "Your husband better watch himself. He swore the oath, but that doesn't mean him and you and your whole crew don't stink of Peculiar."

Dan stalks off, trailing wives. I follow suit, my own security detail snickering behind me.

* * *

THE DRAGON

Polygamous Dan comes puffing out of the old ones' dorm just as I arrive at the shipment area. He sees me and picks up his pace. His wives scurry to catch up. Then I see you. You in your flowing red dress flanked by two members of your security team. You wear it all so casually, so naturally. You don't think you do. But you are wrong. These people do what I say. Most of them would even die for me. But for you they'd change their lives. They'd push themselves to the limit. Work patiently for years to reach whatever grand vision you dazzled them with.

You are looking at me with your intense gray eyes, but I can't read your face.

"You dare insult me?" Dan clenches his fist. I do believe he wants to take a swing at me, my love. I smile and put on the cheer.

"Dan, it's good to see you. I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm sure we can sort things out. What has happened? Was our payment not satisfactory?"

"You know damn well what happened."

"Dan. Clearly someone or something has upset you. If you'd care to explain, I'd be happy to look into it and take appropriate steps to remedy the situation."

Dan is quiet for a second. I glance away. You are still standing near the entrance of the dorm and are avoiding looking at me. This either means that you think I set up whatever happened or you have made a misstep and are ashamed. I'm guessing it's probably the former and not the latter.

"Explain? Yeah, I'm going to explain so you and your, your lovely wife can snicker at me behind your condescending smiles. I don't think so." The way he sneers out the adjective pertaining to you makes me want to knock his teeth out. I resist even though my twitching hands have desires and designs on my holster. You want me to just let it go. You will tell me later that the insults only mean something if we allow them to and that the only way to win the game is to stay implacable.

Dan turns to walk away, but then he turns back. "Actually, here's what needs to be explained: Where did these latest old ones come from? Who arrived with them?"

“Dan, I’m very sorry about whatever has caused this tension to arise. You know, I value our friendship and treat you with the utmost hospitality and respect. If one of my people has violated that, I will take full responsibility.”

“Very prettily said, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

“We had an arrival last night. Three talents and the two old ones that I presume you just met.”

“Are all of them Peculiars?”

“One or both of the old ones may be, but as you well know, the Confederation understands that old ones can’t help the superstitions and ideologies they were indoctrinated with. The talents were as children, but left that all behind as adults and, of course, they have just sworn the oath to me.”

Dan grunts. His eyes meet my own. He can only push things so far, and he knows it. He doesn’t yet have the power and personnel and support among the other Chiefs to topple me. Then there’s the fact that we’re his most valuable trading partner in the Confederation.

“Well, it’s good to hear you aren’t harboring active Peculiars. I’d hate to report certain things to the other members of the Confederation. Although I’m sure you would easily pass an audit.”

“Of course—we always do. Well, it looks like you are all packed up. Would you like to continue your inspection?”

“That depends. What would I find?”

I smile. “Nothing as interesting as what you apparently already did.”

Dan chuckles. “Oh, that—it was nothing. Just took me by surprise. You are bound to have some startling moments whenever there are so many old ones around. And you do have a lot of old ones around. Best be careful in your collecting. I know the missus has a soft heart, but if you keep down this track, you soon won’t be a sustainable operation.”

You aren’t going to like this—but he isn’t wrong.

We walk over to Dan’s choppers. You move to join us. And as we all join up, his wives and our people all jostle together, and I notice you pretend to stumble as you approach one of Dan’s wives and grab her arm to steady yourself and give it a little squeeze. She’s pretty. And young. Her fatigues fit her loosely. She is trying hard not to look at you. It all takes just a second, but clearly some

sort of knowledge is passing between you and her. This isn't good. Thankfully, Dan appears not to notice; he's talking with one of his wives, getting the full report on the goods we have provided as exchange.

You manage to be charming and conciliatory without referring directly to what happened. I manage to be jocular in that particularly competitive way men are. Dan acts all casual and cool and engages in several public displays of affection with his wives.

* * *

THE OWL

Dan's choppers are over the horizon before your shoulders fully relax. I want to ask you if it was a set-up. But I don't think you'll answer me straight if I do. I grab your hand, and you squeeze mine as we gaze out across the desert. Our people have suddenly become very busy behind us. They're good about giving us these moments.

I decide to try anyway and turn to you. "Is she really his mother?"

"I don't know." You say this with your lips tightened, your head askance. I keep my face turned toward you and say nothing. You look me in the eyes, green meeting gray. "I really don't."

"What are you going to do about Dan?"

"Nothing much. He can hint around that we should be audited, but it won't do him much good since we've been audited twice as much as anyone else in the Confederation, and he's due before us. He can't go in to specifics about our new acquisitions because he knows that if he does that I'll spread around the story about his little encounter."

"How many of them are you letting go?"

"Six. They'll leave tonight and should be able to travel by night until they're well enough way from us."

"What are you going to do about your father?"

You want to reply. Say something definitive. Lay down the law. Your face tightens, and I can tell you are about to lecture me, but my eyes warn you off and instead you kiss me, and we walk hand in hand back to our separate duties.

* * *

THE OWL AND THE DRAGON

We take the dark watch. We sleep the fitful sleep and thirst in our dreams. We mourn with those who mourn and gather up the lost sheep. We put the pieces back together as best as we can.

The two red dots creep across the broken plateau, traveling under a moon almost full, heavy with light. The sky is littered with stars. And so they are gone and heaven only knows if more will come. They were too baffled to be grateful, too saddened by the thought of those they are leaving behind to feel relieved. They've made good time during the evening hours, but they're still well within range of our radar. Neither of us has said a word for more than an hour. We stand arm in arm watching them move across the screen. They promised to somehow send back a message when they make it through. You told them not to bother. I will look for it anyway.

* * *

We take the dark watch. The room is cold. Neither of us moves to grab a blanket. We huddle closer. The tracking devices on the two four-wheelers have been programmed to brick themselves once they move beyond the twenty-mile range. And that, hopefully, will be that.

We can use these two new talents. They fill out some areas of expertise that have been keeping us from winning certain projects. It may have been a dear price for them to pay—but it's for the best. Of course, they hadn't been content to let the fact that we were letting them go speak for itself. They had wanted some other signal that we were one of them. I refused to indulge them. But I looked into your gray eyes, saw what was there and left the room. I don't know what you said to them, what you possibly even did with them. And you know that I will never ask.