

This Tragic Glass

by Elizabeth Bear

*View but his picture in this tragic glass,
And then applaud his fortunes as you please.*

—Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Part 1 II 7-8*

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The light gleamed pewter under gracious, bowing trees; a liver-chestnut gelding stamped one white hoof on the road. His rider stood in his stirrups to see through wreaths of mist, shrugging to settle a slashed black doublet which violated several sumptuary laws. Two breaths steamed as horse and man surveyed the broad lawn of scythe-cut grass that bulwarked the manor house where they had spent the night and much of the day before.

The man ignored the slow coiling of his guts as he settled into the saddle. He reined the gelding about, a lift of the left hand and the light touch of heels. It was eight miles to Deptford Strand and a meetingplace near the slaughterhouse. In the name of Queen Elizabeth and her Privy Council, and for the sake of the man who had offered him shelter when no one else under God's dominion would, Christopher Marley must arrive before the sun climbed a handspan above the cluttered horizon.

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"That's—" Satyavati squinted at her heads-up display, sweating in the under-air-conditioned beige and grey academia of her computer lab. Her fingers moved with automatic deftness, opening a tin and extracting a cinnamon breath mint from the embrace of its brothers. Absently, she crunched it, and winced at the spicy

heat. "—funny."

"Dr. Brahmaputra?" Her research assistant looked up, disconnecting his earplug. "Something wrong with the software?"

She nodded, pushing a fistful of coarse silver hair out of her face as she bent closer to the holographic projection that hung over her desk. The rumble of a semiballistic leaving McCarran Aerospaceport rattled the windows. She rolled her eyes. "One of the undergrads must have goofed the coding on the text. Our genderbot just kicked back a truly freaky outcome. Come look at this, Baldassare."

He stood, a boy in his late twenties with an intimidatingly Italian name, already working on an academic's well-upholstered body, and came around her desk to stand over her shoulder. "What am I looking at?"

"Line one fifty-seven," she said, pushing down a fragment of panic that she knew had nothing to do with the situation at hand and everything to do with old damage and ancient history. "See? Coming up as female. Have we a way to see who coded the texts?"

He leaned close, reaching over her to put a hand on her desk. She edged away from the touch. "All the Renaissance stuff was double-checked by Sienna Haverson. She shouldn't have let a mistake like that slip past; she did her dis on Nashe or Fletcher or somebody, and she's just gotten into the Poet Emeritus project, for the love of Mike. And it's not like there are a lot of female Elizabethan playwrights she could have confused—"

"It's not a transposition." Satyavati fished out another cinnamon candy and offered one to Tony Baldassare, who smelled faintly of garlic. He had sense enough to suck on his instead of crunching it; she made a point of tucking hers up between her lip and gum where she'd be less likely to chew on it. "I checked that. This is the only one coming up wrong."

"Well," Baldassare said on a thoughtful breath, "I suppose we can always consider the possibility that Dr. Haverson was drunk that evening—"

Satyavati laughed, brushing Baldassare aside to stand up from her chair, uncomfortable with his closeness. "Or we can try to convince the establishment that the most notorious rakehell in the Elizabethan canon was a girl."

"I dunno," Baldassare answered. "It's a fine line between Marlowe and Jonson for scoundrelhood."

"Bah. You see what I mean. A nice claim. It would do wonders for my tenure hopes and your future employability. And I know you have your eye on Poet Emeritus, too."

"It's a crazy dream." He spread his arms wide and leaned far back, the picture of ecstatic madness.

"Who wouldn't want to work with Professor Keats?" She sighed, twisting her hair into a scrunchie. "Screw it: I'm going to lunch. See if you can figure out what broke."

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The air warmed as the sun rose, spilling light like a promise down the road, across the grey moving water of the Thames, between the close-growing trees. Halfway to Deptford, Christofer Marley reined his gelding in to rest it; the sunlight matched his hair to the animal's mane. The man was as beautiful as the horse—groomed until shining, long-necked and long-legged, slender as a girl and fashionably pallid of complexion. Lace cuffs fell across hands as white as the gelding's forehoof.

Their breath no longer steamed, nor did the river.

Kit rubbed a hand across the back of his mouth. He closed his eyes for a moment before glancing back over his shoulder: the manor house—his lover and patron Thomas Walsingham's manor house—was long out of sight. The gelding tossed his head, ready to canter, and Kit let him have the rein he wanted.

All the rein he wants. A privilege Kit himself had rarely been allowed.

Following the liver-colored gelding's whim, they drove hard for Deptford and the house of a cousin of the Queen's beloved secretary of state and closest confidant, Lord Burghley.

The house of Mistress Eleanor Bull.

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Satyavati stepped out of the latest incarnation of a vegetarian barbecue joint that changed hands every six months, the heat of a Las Vegas August afternoon pressing her shoulders like angry hands. The University of Nevada campus spread green and artificial across a traffic-humming street; beyond the buildings monsoon clouds rimmed the mountains across the broad, shallow desert valley. A plastic bag tumbled in ecstatic circles near a stucco wall, caught in an eddy, but the wind was against them; there would be no baptism of lightning and rain. She crossed at the new pedestrian bridge, acknowledging Professors Keats and Ling as they wandered past, deep in conversation—"we were going after Plath, but the consensus was she'd just kill herself again"—and almost turned to ask Ling a question when her hip unit beeped.

She dabbed her lips in case of leftover barbecue sauce and flipped the minicomputer open. Clouds covered the sun, but cloying heat radiated from the pavement under her feet. Westward, toward the thunderheads and the mountains, the grey mist of verga—evaporating rain—greased the sky like a thumbsmear across a

charcoal sketch by God. "Mr. Baldassare?"

"Dr. Brahmaputra." Worry charged his voice; his image above her holistic communications and computational device showed a thin dark line between the brows. "I have some bad news ..."

She sighed and closed her eyes, listening to distant thunder echo from the mountains. "Tell me the whole database is corrupt."

"No." He rubbed his forehead with his knuckles; a staccato little image, but she could see the gesture and expression as if he stood before her. "I corrected the Marlowe data."

"And?"

"The genderbot still thinks Kit Marlowe was a girl. I reentered everything."

"That's—"

"Impossible?" Baldassare grinned. "I know. Come to the lab; we'll lock the door and figure this out. I called Dr. Haverson."

"Dr. Haverson? Sienna Haverson?"

"She was doing Renaissance before she landed in Brit Lit. Can it hurt?"

"What the hell."

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Eleanor Bull's house was whitewashed and warm-looking. The scent of its gardens didn't quite cover the slaughterhouse reek, but the house peered through narrow windows and seemed to smile. Kit gave the gelding's reins to a lad from the stable, along with coins to see the beast curried and fed. He scratched under the animal's mane with guilty fingers; his mother would have his hide for not seeing to the chestnut himself. But the Queen's business took precedent, and Kit was—and had been for seven years—a Queen's man.

Bull's establishment was no common tavern, but the house of a respectable widow, where respectable men met to dine in private circumstances and discuss the sort of business not for common ears to hear. Kit squared his shoulders under the expensive suit, clothes bought with an intelligencer's money, and presented himself at the front door of the house. His stomach knotted; he wrapped his inkstained fingers together after he tapped, and waited for the Widow Bull to offer him admittance.

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The blond, round-cheeked image of Sienna Haverson beside Satyavati's desk frowned around the thumbnail she was chewing. "It's ridiculous on the face of it. Christopher Marlowe, a woman? It isn't possible to reconcile his biography with—what, crypto-femininity? He was a seminary student, for Christ's sake. People lived in each other's *pockets* during the Renaissance. Slept two or three to a bed, and not in a sexual sense—"

Baldassare was present in the flesh; like Satyavati, he preferred the mental break of actually going home from the office at the end of the day. It also didn't hurt to be close enough to keep a weather eye on university politics.

As she watched, he swung his Chinese-slipped feet onto the desk, his fashionably shabby cryosilk smoking jacket falling open as he leaned back. Satyavati leaned on her elbows, avoiding the interface plate on her desktop and hiding a smile; Baldassare's breadth of gesture amused her.

He said, "Women soldiers managed it during the American Civil War."

"Hundreds of years later—"

"Yes, but there's no reason to think Marlowe had to be a woman. He could have been providing a cover for a woman poet or playwright—Mary Herbert, maybe. Sidney's sister—"

"Or he could have been Shakespeare in disguise," Haverson said with an airy wave of her hand. "It's one anomaly out of a database of two hundred and fifty authors, Satyavati. I don't think it invalidates the work. That's an unprecedented precision of result."

"That's the problem," Satyavati answered, slowly. "If it were a pattern of errors, or if he were coming up as one of the borderline cases—we can get Alice Sheldon to come back just barely as a male author if we use a sufficiently small sample—but it's the entire body of Marlowe's work. And it's *strongly* female. We can't publish until we address this. Somehow."

Baldassare's conservative black braid fell forward over his shoulder. "What do we know about Christopher Marlowe, Dr. Haverson? You've had Early Modern English and Middle English RNA-therapy, haven't you? Does that include history?"

The hologram rolled her eyes. "There's also old-fashioned reading and research," she said, scratching the side of her nose with the gnawed thumbnail. Satyavati grinned at her, and Haverson grinned back, a generational acknowledgment. *Oh, these kids.*

"Christopher Marlowe. Alleged around the time of his death to be an atheist and a sodomite—which are terms with different connotations in the Elizabethan sense than the modern: it borders on an accusation of witchcraft, frankly—author of seven plays, a short lyric poem, and an incomplete long poem that remain to us, as well as a couple of Latin translations and the odd eulogy. And a dedication to Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, which is doubtless where Baldassare got that idea. The only thing we know about him—really *know*—is that he was the son of a cobbler, a

divinity student who attended Corpus Christi under scholarship and seemed to have more money than you would expect and the favor of the Privy Council, and he was arrested several times on capital charges that were then more or less summarily dismissed. All very suggestive that he was an agent—a spy—for Queen Elizabeth. There's a portrait that's supposed to be him—"

Baldassare jerked his head up at the wall; above the bookcases, near the ceiling, a double row of 2-d images were pinned: the poets, playwrights, and authors whose work had been entered into the genderbot. "The redhead."

"The original painting shows him as a dark mousy blond; the reproductions usually make him prettier. If it is him. It's an educated guess, frankly: we don't know who that portrait is of." Haverson grinned, warming to her subject; the academic's delight in a display of useless information. Satyavati knew it well.

Satyavati's field of study was the late 21st century; Renaissance poets hadn't touched her life in more than passing since her undergraduate days. "Did he ever marry? Any kids?" *And why are you wondering that?*

"No, and none that we know of. It's conventionally accepted that he was homosexual, but again, no proof. Men often didn't marry until they were in their late twenties in Elizabethan England, so it's not a deciding factor. He's never been convincingly linked to anyone; for all we know, he might have died a virgin at twenty-nine—" Baldassare snorted heavily, and Haverson angled her head to the side, her steepled hands opening like wings. "There's some other irregularities in his biography: he refused holy orders after completing his degree, and he was baptized some twenty days after his birth rather than the usual three. And the circumstances of his death are very odd indeed. But it doesn't add up to a pattern, I don't think."

Baldassare shook his head in awe. "Dare I ask what you know about Nashe?"

Haverson chuckled. "More than you ever want to find out. I could give you another hour on Marlowe easy: he's a ninety-minute lecture in my Brit Lit class."

The Freshman Intro to British Literature that Haverson taught as wergild for her access to Professor Keats and Ling, and the temporal device. The inside of Satyavati's lip tasted like rubber; she chewed gently. "So you're saying we don't know. And we can prove nothing. There's no period source that can help us?"

"There's some odd stuff in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* that seems to indicate that the protagonist is intended to be a fictionalized reflection of Marlowe, or at least raise questions about his death. We know the two men collaborated on at least two plays, the first part of *Henry VI* and *Edward III*—" Haverson stopped and disentangled her fingers from her wavy yellow hair, where they had become idly entwined. Something wicked danced in her eyes. "An—"

"What?" Satyavati and Baldassare, in unison. Satyavati leaned forward over her desk, closing her hands on the edges.

"The protagonist of *As You Like It*—the one who quotes Marlowe and details the circumstances of his death?"

"Rosalind," Baldassare said. "What about her?"

"Is a young woman quite successfully impersonating a man."

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Kit ate sparingly, as always. His image, his patronage, his sexuality, his very livelihood were predicated on the contours of his face, the boyish angles of his body, and every year that illusion of youth became harder to maintain. Also, he didn't dare drop his eyes from the face of Robin Poley, his fair-haired controller and—in Kit's educated opinion—one of the most dangerous men in London.

"Thou shalt not be permitted to abandon the Queen's service so easily, sweet Kit," Poley said between bites of fish. Kit nodded, dry-mouthed; he had not expected Poley would arrive with a guard. Two others, Skeres and Frazier, dined heartily and without apparent regard for Kit's lack of appetite.

"'Tis not that I wish any disservice to her Majesty," Kit said. "But I swear on my honor Thomas Walsingham is her loyal servant, good Robin, and she need fear him not. His love for her is as great as any man's, and his family has ever been loyal—"

Poley dismissed Kit's protestations with a gesture. Ingrim Frazier reached the breadth of the linen-laid table with the long blade of his knife and speared a piece of fruit from the board in front of Kit. Kit leaned out of the way.

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"You realize of course that textual evidence isn't worth the paper it's printed on. And if you assume Marlowe was a woman, and Shakespeare knew it—"

"You rapidly enter the realm of the crackpots. Indeed."

"We have a serious problem."

"We could just quietly drop him from the data—" He grinned in response to her stare. "No, no. I'm not serious."

"You'd better not be," Satyavati answered. She quelled the rush of fury that Baldassare's innocent teasing pricked out of always-shallow sleep. *What happened a decade ago is not his fault.* "This is my career—my *scholarship*—in question."

A low tap on the office door. Satyavati checked the heads-up display, recognized Haverson, and tapped the key on her desk to disengage the lock. The Rubenesque blonde hesitated in the doorway. "Good afternoon, Satya. Baldassare. Private?"

"Same conversation as before," Satyavati said. "Still trying to figure out how to

salvage our research—"

Haverson grinned and entered the room in a sweep of crinkled skirts and tunic. She shut the door behind herself and made very certain it latched. "I have your answer."

Satyavati stood and came around her desk, dragging with her a chair, which she offered to Haverson. Haverson waved it aside, and Satyavati sank into it herself. "It assumes of course that Christopher Marlowe *did* die violently at Eleanor Bull's house in May of 1593 and did not run off to Italy and write the plays of Shakespeare—" Haverson's shrug seemed to indicate that that was a fairly safe assumption.

"The Poet Emeritus project?" Baldassare crowed, swinging his arms wide before clapping his hands. "Dr. Haverson, you're brilliant. And what if Marlowe *did* survive 1593?"

"We'll send back an observer team to make sure he dies. They'll have to exhume the body anyway; we'll need to be able to make that swap for the living Marlowe, assuming the recovery team can get to him before Frazier and company stab him in the eye."

Baldassare shuddered. "I swear that makes my skin crawl—"

"Paradox is an odd thing, isn't it? You start thinking about where the body comes from, and you start wondering if there are other changes happening."

"If there were," Baldassare said, "we'd never know."

Satyavati's dropped jaw closed as she finally forced herself to understand what they were talking about. "No one who died by violence. No one from before 1800. There are rules. Culture shock, language barriers. Professor Ling would never permit it."

Haverson grinned wider, obviously excited. "You know why those rules were developed, don't you?"

"I know it's a History Department and Temporal Studies protocol, and English is only allowed to use the device under their auspices, and competition for its time is extreme—"

"The rule developed after Richard I rose from what should have been his deathbed to run through a pair of History undergrads on the retrieval team. We never did get their bodies back. Or the Lionheart, for that matter—" Baldassare stopped, aware of Haverson's considering stare. "What? I'm gunning for a spot on the Poet Emeritus team. I've been reading up."

"Ah."

"We'd never get the paperwork through to pull Christopher Marlowe, though." He sighed. "Although it would be worth it for the looks on the Marlovians' faces."

"You're awfully certain of yourself, son."

"Dr. Haverson—"

Haverson brushed him off with a turn of her wrist. She kept her light blue eyes on Satyavati. "What if I thought there was a chance that Professor Keats could become interested?"

"Oh," Satyavati said. "*That's* why you came to campus."

Haverson's grin kept growing; as Satyavati watched, it widened another notch. "He doesn't do business by holoconference," she said. "How could Percy Shelley's best friend resist a chance to meet Christopher Marlowe?"

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Kit leaned back on his bench, folding his hands in his lap. "Robin, I protest. Walsingham is as loyal to the crown as I."

"Ah." Poley turned it into an accusing drawl: one long syllable, smelling of onions. He straightened, frowning. "And art thou loyal, Master Marley?"

"Thy pardon?" As if a trapdoor had opened under his guts: he clutched the edge of the table to steady himself. "I've proven my loyalty well enough, I think."

"Thou hast grown soft," Poley sneered. Frazier, on Kit's right, stood, and Kit stood with him, toppling the bench in his haste. He found an ale-bottle with his right hand. There was a bed in the close little room in addition to the table, and Kit stepped against it, got his shoulder into the angle the headboard made with the wall.

Ingram Frazier's dagger rose in his hand. Kit looked past him, into Poley's light blue eyes. "Robin," Kit said. "Robin, old friend. What means this?"

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Professor Keats looked up as they knocked on his open door: a blatant abrogation of campus security, but Satyavati admitted the cross-breeze felt better than sealed-room climate control. Red curls greying to ginger, his sharp chin softened now by jowls, he leaned back in his chair before a bookshelf stuffed with old leatherbound books and printouts: the detritus of a man who had never abandoned paper. Satyavati's eye picked out the multicolored spines of volumes and volumes of poetry; the successes of the Poet Emeritus project. As a personal and professional friend of the History Department's Bernard Ling, Professor Keats had assumed the chairmanship of Poet Emeritus shortly after the death of its founder, Dr. Eve Rodale.

Who would gainsay the project's greatest success?

The tuberculosis that would have been his death was a preresistant strain, easy prey to modern antibiotics; the lung damage was repairable with implants and grafts. He stood gracefully as Satyavati, Haverson, and Baldassare entered, a vigorous sixty-year-old who might have as many years before him as behind, and laid aside the fountain pen he still preferred. "It's not often lovely ladies come to visit this old poet," he said. "Can I offer you a cup of tea?"

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"Soft," Poley said again, and spit among the rushes on the floor. Bits of herbs colored his saliva green; Kit thought of venom and smiled. *If I live, I'll use that—*

The stink of fish and wine was dizzying. Poley kept talking. "Five years ago thou would'st have hanged Tom Walsingham for the gold in thy purse—"

"Only if he proved guilty."

"Guilty as those idiot students thou did'st see hanged at Corpus Christi?"

Kit winced. He wasn't proud of that. The pottery bottle in his hand was rough-surfaced, cool; he shifted his grip. "Master Walsingham is loyal. Frazier, you're in his *service*, man—"

"So fierce in his defense." Poley smiled, toxic and sweet. "Mayhap the rumors of thee dropping thy breeches for Master Walsingham aren't so false, after all—"

"Whoreson—" Kit stepped up, provoked into abandoning the wall. *A mistake*, and as his focus narrowed on Poley, Frazier grabbed his left wrist, twisting. Kit raised the bottle—up, down, smashed it hard across the top of Frazier's head, ducking Frazier's wild swing with the dagger. The weaselly Skeres, so far silent, lunged across the table as Frazier roared and blood covered his face.

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Satyavati had turned a student desk around; she sat on it now, her feet on the narrow plastic seat, and scrubbed both hands through her thick silver hair. Professor John Keats stood by the holodisplay that covered one long wall of the classroom, the twelve-by-fourteen card that Baldassare had pulled down off the wall in Satyavati's office pressed against it, clinging by static charge. Pinholes haggled the yellowed corners of the card; at its center was printed a 2-d image of a painfully boyish, painfully fair young man. He was richly dressed, with huge dark eyes, soft features, and a taunting smile framed by a sparse down of beard.

"He would have been eight years older when he died," Keats said.

Haverson chuckled from beside the door. "If that's him."

"If he *is* a him," Baldassare added. Haverson glared, and the grad student shrugged. "It's what we're here to prove, isn't it? Either the software works, or—"

"Or we have to figure out what this weird outlier means."

Keats glanced over his shoulder. "Explain how your program works, Professor?"

Satyavati curled her tongue across her upper teeth and dug in her pocket for the tin of mints. She offered them around the room; only Keats accepted. "It's an idea that's been under development since the late twentieth century," she said, cinnamon burning her tongue. "It relies on frequency and patterns of word use—well, it originated in some of the metrics that Elizabethan scholars use to prove authorship of the controversial plays, and also the order in which they were written. We didn't get *Edward III* firmly attributed to Marlowe, with a probable Shakespearean collaboration, until the beginning of the 21st century—"

"And you have a computer program that can identify the biological gender of the writer of a given passage of text."

"It even works on newsfeed reports and textbooks, sir."

"Have you any transgendered authors entered, Satyavati?"

John Keats just called me by my first name. She smiled and scooted forward half an inch on the desk, resting her elbows on her knees. "Several women who wrote as men, for whatever reason. Each of them confirmed female, although some were close to the midline. Two male authors who wrote as women. An assortment of lesbians, homosexuals, and bisexuals. Hemingway—"

Haverson choked on a laugh, covering her mouth with her hand. Satyavati shrugged. "—as a baseline. Anaïs Nin. Ovid, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Tori Siikanen."

"I've read her," Keats said. "Lovely."

Satyavati shrugged. "The genderbot found her unequivocally male, when her entire body of work was analyzed. Even that written *after* her gender reassignment. We haven't been able to track down any well-known writers of indeterminate sex, unfortunately. I'd like to see how somebody born cryptomale and assigned female, for example, would score—"

"What will your 'bot tell us then?"

"Chromosomal gender, I suppose."

"Interesting. Is gender so very immutable, then?" He raised an eyebrow and smiled, returning his attention to Christopher Marlowe. "That's quite the can of worms—"

"Except for his," Satyavati said, following the line of Keats' gaze to the mocking smile and folded arms of the arrogant boy in the facsimile. "What makes him different?"

"Her," Baldassare said, in a feigned coughing fit. "That moustache is totally gummed on. Look at it."

Keats didn't turn, but he shrugged. "What makes any of us different, my dear?" A long pause, as if he expected an attempt to answer what must have been a rhetorical question. He turned and looked Satyavati in the eye. His gingery eyebrows lifted and fell. "Do you understand the risks and costs of this endeavor?"

Satyavati hunched forward on her chair and shook her head. "It was Sienna's idea—"

"Oh, so quick to cast away credit and blame," the poet said, but his eyes twinkled.

Haverson came to stand beside Satyavati's desk. "Still. Is there any writer or critic who hasn't wondered, a little, what that young man could have done?"

"Were he more prone to temperance?"

Keats was being charming. *But he's still John Keats.*

"Poets are not temperate by nature," he said, and smiled. He folded his hands together in front of his belt buckle. His swing jacket, translucent chromatic velvet, caught the light through the window as he moved.

"In another hundred years we'll change our gender the way we change our clothes." Haverson pressed her warmth against Satyavati's arm, who endured it a moment before she leaned away.

"I confess myself uncomfortable with the concept." Keats' long fingers fretted the cuff of his gorgeous jacket.

Satyavati, watching him, felt a swell of kinship. "I think there is a biological factor to how gender is expressed. I think my genderbot proves that unequivocally: if we can detect birth gender to such a fine degree—"

"And this is important?" Keats' expression was gentle mockery; an emergent trace of archaic Cockney colored his voice, but something in the tilt of his head showed Satyavati that it was a serious question.

"Our entire society is based on gender and sex and procreation. How can it *not* be as vital to understanding the literature as it is to understanding everything else?"

Keats' lips twitched; his pale eyes tightened at the corners. Satyavati shrank back, afraid she'd overstepped, but his voice was still level when he spoke again. "What does it matter where man comes from—or woman either—if the work is true?"

A sore spot. She sucked her lip, searching for the explanation. "One would prefer to think such things no longer mattered." With a sideways glance to Baldassare. He gave her a low thumbs-up. "This isn't my first tenure-track position."

"You left Yale." Just a statement, as if he would not press.

"I filed an allegation of sexual harassment against my department chair. She denied it, and claimed I was attempting to conceal a lack of scholarship—"

"She?"

Satyavati folded her arms tight across her chest, half sick with the admission. "She didn't approve of my research, I think. It contradicted her own theories of gender identity."

"You think she knew attention would make you uncomfortable, and harried you from the department."

"I ... have never been inclined to be close to people. Forgive me if I am not trusting."

He studied her expression silently. She found herself lifting her chin to meet his regard, in answer to his unspoken challenge. He smiled thoughtfully and said, "I was told a stableman's son would be better to content himself away from poetry, you know. I imagine your Master Marlowe, a cobbler's boy, heard something similar once or twice—and God forbid either one of us had been a girl. It's potent stuff you're meddling in."

Rebellion flared in her belly. She sat up straight on the ridiculous desk, her fingers fluttering as she unfolded her hands and embraced her argument. "If anything, then, my work proves that biology is not destiny. I'd like to force a continuing expansion of the canon, frankly: 'women's books' are still—*still*—excluded. As if war were somehow a more valid exercise than raising a family—" *Shit*. Too much, by his stunned expression. She held his gaze, though, and wouldn't look down.

And then Keats smiled, and she knew she'd won him. "There are dangers involved, beyond the cost."

"I understand."

"Do you?" He wore spectacles, a quaint affectation that Satyavati found charming. But as he glanced at her over the silver wire frames, a chill crept up her neck.

"Professor Keats—"

"John."

"John." And that was worth a deeper chill, for the unexpected intimacy. "Then make me understand."

Keats stared at her, pale eyes soft, frown souring the corners of his mouth. "A young man of the Elizabethan period. A duelist, a spy, a playmaker: a violent man, and one who lives by his wits in a society so xenophobic it's difficult for us to properly imagine. Someone to whom the carriage—the horse-drawn carriage, madam doctor—is a tolerably modern invention, the heliocentric model of the solar system still heresy. Someone to whom your United States is the newborn land of Virginia, a colony founded by his acquaintance Sir Walter Raleigh. Pipe tobacco is a novelty, coffee does not exist, and the dulcet speech of our everyday converse is the yammering of a barbarian dialect that he will find barely comprehensible, at best."

Satyavati opened her mouth to make some answer. Keats held up one angular

hand. As if to punctuate his words, the rumble of a rising semiballistic rattled the windows. "A young man, I might add"—as if this settled it—"who must be plucked alive from the midst of a deadly brawl with three armed opponents. A brawl history tells us he instigated with malice, in a drunken rage."

"History is written by the victors," Satyavati said, at the same moment that Baldassare said, "Dr. Keats. The man who wrote *Faustus*, sir."

"If a man he is," Keats answered, smiling. "There is that, after all. And there would be international repercussions. UK cultural heritage is pitching a fit over 'the theft of their literary traditions.'"

"Because the world would be a better place without John Keats?" Satyavati grinned, pressing her tongue against her teeth. "Hell, they sold London Bridge to Arizona. I don't see what they have to complain about: If they're so hot to trot, let them build their own time device and steal some of our dead poets."

Keats laughed, a wholehearted guffaw that knocked him back on his heels. He gasped, collected himself, and turned to Haverson, who nodded. "John, how can you possibly resist?"

"I can't," he admitted, and looked back at Haverson.

"How much will it cost?"

Satyavati braced for the answer and winced anyway. Twice the budget for her project, easily.

"I'll write a grant," Baldassare said.

Keats laughed. "Write two. *This* project, I rather imagine there's money for. It will also take a personal favor from Bernard. Which I *will* call in. Although I doubt very much we can schedule a retrieval until next fiscal. Which makes no difference to Marlowe, of course, but does mean, Satyavati, that you will have to push your publication back."

"I'll consider it an opportunity to broaden the database," she said, and Keats and Haverson laughed like true academics at the resignation in her voice.

"And—"

She flinched. "And?"

"Your young man may prove thoroughly uncooperative. Or mentally unstable once the transfer is done."

"Is the transition really so bad?" Baldassare, with the question that had been on the tip of Satyavati's tongue.

"Is there a risk he will reject reality, you mean? Lose his mind, to put it quaintly?"

"Yes."

"I can't say what it will be like for him," he said. "But I, at least, came to you knowing the language and knowing I had been about to die." Keats rubbed his palms together as if clapping nonexistent chalk dust from his palms. "I rather suspect,

madam doctors, Mr. Baldassare"—Satyavati blinked as he pronounced Baldassare's name correctly and without hesitation; she hadn't realized Keats even *knew* it—"we must prepare ourselves for failure."

.

Kit twisted away from the knife again, but Skeres had a grip on his doublet now, and the breath went out of him as two men slammed him against the wall. Cloth shredded; the broken bottle slipped out of Kit's bloodied fingers as Frazier wrenched his arm behind his back.

Poley blasphemed. "*Christ on the cross—*"

Frazier swore too, shoving Kit's torn shirt aside to keep a grip on his flesh. "God's wounds, it's a wench."

A lax moment, and Kit got an elbow into Frazier's ribs and a heel down hard on Poley's instep and his back into the corner one more time, panting like a beaten dog. No route to the window. No route to the door. Kit swallowed bile and terror, tugged the rags of his doublet closed across his slender chest. "Unhand me."

"Where's Marley?" Poley said stupidly as Kit pressed himself against the boards.

"I am Marley, you fool."

"No wench could have written that poetry—"

"I'm no wench," he said, and as Frazier raised his knife, Christofer Marley made himself ready to die as he had lived, kicking and shouting at something much bigger than he.

.

Seventeen months later, Satyavati steeped her fingers before her mouth and blew out across them, warm moist breath sliding between her palms in a contrast to the crisping desert atmosphere. One-way shatterproof bellied out below her; leaning forward, she saw into a retrieval room swarming with technicians and medical crew, bulwarked by masses of silently blinking instrumentation—and the broad space in the middle of the room, walled away from operations with shatterproof ten centimeters thick. Where the retrieval team would reappear.

With or without their quarry.

"Worried?"

She turned her head and looked up at Professor Keats, stylishly rumpled as ever.

"Terrified."

"Minstrels in the gallery," he observed. "There's Sienna ..." Pointing to her blond head, bent over her station on the floor.

The shatterproof walls of the retrieval box were holoed to conceal the mass of technology outside them from whoever might be inside; theoretically, the retrievant *should* arrive sedated. But it wasn't wise to be too complacent about such things.

The lights over the retrieval floor dimmed by half. Keats leaned forward in his chair. "Here we go."

"Five." A feminine voice over loudspeakers. "Four. Three—"

I hadn't thought he'd look so fragile. Or so young.

.....

Is this then Hell? Curious that death should hurt so much less than living—

.....

"Female," a broad-shouldered doctor said into his throat microphone. He leaned over the sedated form on his examining table, gloved hands deft and quick.

Marlowe lay within an environmentally shielded bubble; the doctor examined her with built-in gloves. She would stay sedated and in isolation until her immunizations were effective and it was certain she hadn't brought forward any dangerous bugs from the 16th century. Satyavati was grateful for the half-height privacy screens hiding the poet's form. *I hadn't thought it would seem like such an invasion.*

"Aged about thirty," the doctor continued. "Overall in fair health although underweight and suffering the malnutrition typical of Elizabethan diet. Probably parasitic infestation of some sort, dental caries, bruising sustained recently—damn, look at that wrist. That must have been one hell of a fight."

"It was," Tony Baldassare said, drying his hands on a towel as he came up on Satyavati's right. His hair was still wet from the showers, slicked back from his classically Roman features. She stepped away, reclaiming her space. "I hope this is the worst retrieval I ever have to go on—although Haverson assures me that I made the grade, and there will be more. Damn, but you sweat in those moonsuits." He frowned over at the white-coated doctor. "When do they start the RNA therapy?"

"Right after the exam. She'll still need exposure to the language to learn it."

Baldassare took a deep breath to sigh. "Poor Kit. I bet she'll do fine here, though:

she's a tough little thing."

"She would have had to be," Satyavati said thoughtfully, as much to drown out the more intimate details of the doctor's examination. "What a fearful life—"

Baldassare grinned, and flicked Satyavati with the damp end of his towel. "Well," he said, "she can be herself from now on, can't she? Assuming she acclimates. But anybody who could carry off that sort of a counterfeit for nearly thirty years—"

Satyavati shook her head. "I wonder," she murmured. "What on earth possessed her parents."

.....

Kit woke in strange light: neither sun nor candles. The room smelled harsh: no sweetness of rushes or heaviness of char, but something astringent and pungent, as like the scent of lemons as the counterfeit thud of a pewter coin was like the ring of silver. He would have sat, but soft cloths bound his arms to the strange hard bed, which had shining steel railings along the sides like the bars on a baiting-bear's cage.

His view of the room was blocked by curtains, but the curtains were not attached to the strange, high, narrow bed. They hung from bars near the ceiling. *I am captive*, he thought, and noticed he didn't *hurt*. He found that remarkable; no ache in his jaw where a tooth needed drawing, no burn at his wrist where Frazier's grip had broken the skin.

His clothes were gone, replaced with an open-backed gown. The hysteria he would have expected to accompany this realization didn't; instead, he felt rather drunk. Not unpleasantly so, but enough that the panic that clawed the inside of his breastbone did so with padded claws.

Something chirped softly at the bedside, perhaps a songbird in a cage. He turned his head but could only glimpse the edge of a case in some dull material, the buff color called Isabelline. If his hands were free, he'd run his fingers across the surface to try the texture: neither leather nor lacquer, and looking like nothing he'd ever seen. Even the sheets were strange: no well-pounded linen, but something smooth and cool and dingy white.

"Marry," he murmured to himself. "'Tis passing strange."

"But very clean." A woman's voice, from the foot of the bed. "Good morning, Master Marlowe."

Her accent was strange, the vowels all wrong, the stresses harsh and clipped. A foreign voice. He turned his face and squinted at her; that strange light that was not sunlight but almost as bright glared behind her. It made her hard to see. Still, only a woman. Uncorseted, by her silhouette, and wearing what he realized with surprise were long, loose trousers. *If a wench with a gentle voice is my warden, perhaps*

there's a chance I shall emerge alive.

"Aye, very," he agreed as she came alongside the bed. Her hair was silver, loose on her shoulders in soft waves like a maiden's. He blinked. Her skin was mahogany, her eyes angled at the corners like a cat's and shiny as gooseberries. She was stunning and not quite human, and he held his breath before he spoke. "Madam, I beg your patience at my impertinence. But, an it please you to answer—what *are* you?"

She squinted as if his words were as unfamiliar to her as hers to him. "Pray," she said, self-consciously as one speaking a tongue only half-familiar, "say that again, please?"

He tugged his bonds, not sharply. The sensation was dulled, removed. Drunk or sick, he thought. *Forsooth, drunk indeed, not to recollect drinking ... Robin. Robin and his villains—* But Kit shook his head, shook the hair from his eyes, and mastered himself with trembling effort. He said it again, slowly and clearly, one word at a time.

He sighed in relief when she smiled and nodded, apprehending to her satisfaction. In her turn, she spoke precisely, shaping the words consciously with her lips. He could have wept in gratitude at her care. "I'm a woman and a doctor of philosophy," she said. "My name is Satyavati Brahmaputra, and you, Christopher Marlowe, have been rescued from your death by our science."

"Science?"

She frowned as she sought the word. "Natural philosophy."

Her accent, the color of her skin. He suddenly understood. "I've been stolen away to Spain." He was not prepared for the laughter that followed his startled declaration.

"Hardly," she said. "You are in the New World, at a university hospital, a—a surgery?—in a place called Las Vegas, Nevada—"

"Madam, those are Spanish names."

Her lips twitched with amusement. "They are, aren't they? Oh, this is complicated. Here, look." And heedlessly, as if she had nothing to fear from him—*they know, Kit. That's why they left only a wench to guard thee. An Amazon, more like: she's twice my size—* she crouched beside the bed and unknotted the bonds that affixed him to it.

He supposed he could drag down the curtain bars and dash her brains out. But he had no way to know what sort of guards might be at the door; better to bide his time, as she seemed to mean him no injury. And he was tired; even with the cloths untied, lethargy pinned him to the bed.

"They told me not to do this," she whispered, catching his eye with her dark, glistening one. She released a catch and lowered the steel railing. "But in for a penny, in for a pound."

That expression, at least, he understood. He swung his feet to the floor with care, holding the gaping gown closed. The dizziness moved with him, as if it hung a little above and to the left. The floor was unfamiliar too; no rushes and stone, but something hard and resilient, set or cut into tiles. He would have crouched to examine it—and perhaps to let the blood run to his brain—but the woman caught his hand and tugged him past the curtains and toward a window shaded with some ingenious screen. He ran his fingers across the alien surface, gasping when she pulled a cord and the whole thing rose of a piece, hard scales or shingles folding as neatly as a drawn curtain.

And then he looked through the single enormous, utterly transparent pane of glass before him and almost dropped to his knees with vertigo and wonder. His hand clenched on the window ledge; he leaned forward. The drop must have measured hundreds upon hundreds of feet. The horizon was impossibly distant, like the vista from the mast of a sailing ship, the view from the top of a high, lonely down. And before that horizon rose fanciful towers of a dominion vaster than London *and* Paris made one, stretching twenty or perhaps fifty miles away: however far it took for mountains to grow so very dim with distance.

"God in Hell," he whispered. He'd imagined towers like that, written of them. To see them with his own undreaming eyes— "Sweet Jesu. Madam, what is this?" He spoke too fast, and the brown woman made him repeat himself once more.

"A city," she said quietly. "Las Vegas. A small city, by today's standards. Master Marlowe--or Miss Marlowe, I suppose I should say--you have come some five hundred years into your future, and here, I am afraid, you must stay."

.

"*Master* Marlowe will do. Mistress Brahma ..." Marlowe stumbled over Satyavati's name. The warmth and openness Marlowe had shown vanished on a breath. She folded her arms together, so like the Corpus Christi portrait—thinner and wearier, but with the same sardonic smile and the same knowing black eyes—that Satyavati had no doubt that it was the same individual.

"Call me Satya."

"Madam."

Satyavati frowned. "Master Marlowe," she said. "This is a different ... Things are different now. Look at me, a woman, a blackamoor by your terms. And a doctor of philosophy like your friend Tom Watson, a scholar."

"Poor Tom is dead." And then as if in prophecy, slowly, blinking. "Everyone I know is dead."

Satyavati rushed ahead, afraid that Marlowe would crumple if the revelation on her

face ever reached her belly. *A good thing she's sedated, or she'd be in a ball on the floor.* "I'm published, I've written books. I'll be a tenured professor soon." *You will make me that.* But she didn't say it; she simply trusted the young woman, so earnest and wide-eyed behind the brittle defense of her arrogance, would understand. Which of course she didn't, and Satyavati repeated herself twice before she was certain Marlowe understood.

The poet's accent was something like an old broad Scots and something like the dialect of the Appalachian Mountains. *Dammit, it is English.* As long as she kept telling herself it was English, that the foreign stresses and vowels did not mean a foreign language, Satyavati could force herself to understand.

Marlowe bit her lip. She shook her head, and took Satyavati's cue of speaking slowly and precisely, but her eyes gleamed with ferocity. "It bears not on opportunity. I am no woman. Born into a wench's body, aye, mayhap, but as surely a man as Elizabeth is king. My father knew from the moment of my birth. S'death, an it were otherwise, would he have named me and raised me as his son? Have lived a man's life, loved a man's loves. An you think to force me into farthingales and huswifery, know that I would liefer die. I *will* die—for surely now I have naught to fear from Hell—and the man who dares approach me with woman's garb will precede me there."

Satyavati watched Kit—in that ridiculous calico johnny—brace herself, assuming the confidence and fluid gestures of a swordsman, all masculine condescension and bravado. As if she expected a physical assault to follow on her manifesto.

Something to prove. What a life—

The door opened. Satyavati turned to see who entered, and sighed in relief at the gaudy jacket and red hair of Professor Keats, who paused at the edge of the bedcurtain, a transparent bag filled with cloth and books hanging from his hand. "Let me talk to the young man, if you don't mind."

"She's—upset, Professor Keats." But Satyavati stepped away, moving toward Keats and past him, to the door. She paused there.

Keats faced Marlowe. "Are you the poet who wrote *Edward II*?"

A sudden flush, and the eyebrows rose in mockery above the twitch of a grin. "I am that."

"It's a fact that poets are liars," the old man said without turning to Satyavati. "But we *always* speak the truth, and a thing is what you name it. Isn't that so, Marlowe?"

"Aye," she said, her brow furrowed with concentration on the words. "Good sir, I feel that I should know you, but your face—"

"Keats," the professor said. "John Keats. You won't have heard of me, but I'm a poet too."

.

The door shut behind the woman, and Kit's shoulders eased, but only slightly.

"Master Keats—"

"John. Or Jack, if that's more comfortable."

Kit studied the red-haired poet's eyes. Faded blue in the squint of his regard, and Kit nodded, his belly unknotting a little. "Kit, then. I pray you will forgive me my disarray. I have just risen—"

"No matter." Keats reached into his bag. A shrug displayed his own coat, a long loose robe of something that shifted in color, chromatic as a butterfly's wing. "You'll like the modern clothes, I think. I've brought something less revealing."

He laid cloths on the bed: a strange sort of close-collared shirt, trews or breeches in one piece that went to the ankle. Low shoes that looked like leather, but once Kit touched them he was startled by the gummy softness of the soles. He looked up into Keats' eyes. "You prove most kind to a poor lost poet."

"I was rescued from 1821," Keats said dismissively. "I bear some sympathy for your panic."

"Ah." Kit stepped behind the curtain to dress. He flushed hot when the other poet helped him with the closure on the trousers, but once Kit understood this device—the zipper—he found it enchanting. "I shall have much to study on, I wot."

"You will." Keats looked as if he was about to say more. The thin fabric of the shirt showed Kit's small breasts. He hunched forward, uncomfortable; not even sweet Tom Walsingham had seen him so plainly.

"I would have brought you a bandage, if I'd thought," Keats said, and gallantly offered his jacket. Kit took it, face still burning, and shrugged it on.

"What—what year is this, Jack?"

A warm hand on his shoulder; Keats taking a deep breath alerted Kit to brace for the answer. "Anno domini two thousand one hundred and seventeen," he said. The words dropped like stones through the fragile ice of Kit's composure.

Kit swallowed, the implications he had been denying snapping into understanding like unfurled banners. Not the endless changing world, the towers like Babylon or Babel beyond his window. But—"Tom. Christ wept, Tom is dead. All the Toms—Walsingham, Nashe, Kyd. Sir Walter. My sisters. Will. Will and I were at work on a play, *Henry VI*—"

Keats laughed, gently. "Oh, I have something to show you, Kit." His eyes shone with coy delight. "Look here—"

He drew a volume from his bag and pressed it into Kit's hands. It weighed heavy, bound in what must be waxed cloth and stiffened paper. The words on the cover were embossed in gilt in strange-shaped letters. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Kit read, once he understood how the *esses* seemed to work. He

gaped, and opened the cover. "His plays ..." He looked up at Keats, who smiled and opened his hands in a benediction. "This type is so fine and so clear! Marry, how *ever* can it be set by human hands? Tell me true, Jack, have I come to fairyland?" And then, turning pages with trembling fingers and infinite care, his carefulness of speech failing in exclamations. "Nearly forty plays! Oh, the type is so fine— Oh, and his sonnets, they are wonderful sonnets, he's written more than I had seen—"

Keats, laughing, an arm around Kit's shoulders. "He's thought the greatest poet and dramatist in the English language."

Kit looked up in wonder. "T'was I discovered him." Kit held the thick, real book in his hands, the paper so fine and so white he'd compare it to a lady's hand. "Henslowe laughed; Will came from tradesmen and bore no education beyond the grammar school—"

Keats coughed into his hand. "I sometimes think wealth and privilege are a detriment to poetry."

The two men shared a considering gaze and a slow, equally considering smile. "And ..." Kit looked at the bag, the glossy transparent fabric as foreign as every other thing in the room. There were still two volumes within. The book in his hands smelled of real paper, new paper. With a shock, he realized that the page-ends were trimmed perfectly smooth and edged with gilt. *And how long must that have taken? This poet is a wealthy man, to give such gifts as this.*

"And what of Christopher Marlowe?"

Kit smiled. "Aye."

Keats looked down. "You are remembered, I am afraid, chiefly for your promise and your extravagant opinions, my friend. Very little of your work survived. Seven plays, in corrupted versions. The Ovid. *Hero and Leander*—"

"Forsooth, there was more," Kit said, pressing the heavy book with Will's name on the cover against his chest.

"There will be more," Keats said, and set the bag on the floor. "That is why we saved your life."

Kit swallowed. *What an odd sort of patronage.* He sat on the bed, still cradling the wonderful book. He looked up at Keats, who must have read the emotion in his eyes.

"Enough for one day, I think," the red-haired poet said. "I've given you a history text as well, and"—a disarming smile and a tilt of his head—"a volume of my own poetry. Please knock on the door if you need for anything—you may find the garderobe a little daunting, but it's past that door and the basic functions obvious—and I will come to see you in the morning."

"I shall amuse myself with gentle William." Kit knew a sort of anxious panic for a moment: it was so necessary that this ginger-haired poet must love him, Kit—and he also knew a sort of joy when Keats chuckled at the double entendre and clapped him

on the shoulder like a friend.

"Do that. Oh!" Keats halted suddenly and reached into the pocket of his trousers. "Let me show you how to use a pen—"

The slow roil of his stomach got the better of Kit for an instant. "I daresay I know well enough how to hold a pen."

Keats shook his head and grinned, pulling a slender black tube from his pocket. "Dear Kit. You don't know how to do anything. But you'll learn soon enough, I imagine."

.....

Satyavati paced, short steps there and back again, until Baldassare reached out without looking up from his workstation and grabbed her by the sleeve. "Dr. Brahmaputra—"

"Mr. Baldassare?"

"Are you going to share with me what the issue is, here?"

One glance at his face told her he knew very well what the issue was. She tugged her sleeve away from him and leaned on the edge of the desk, too far for casual contact. "Marlowe," she said. "She's still crucial to our data—"

"He."

"Whatever."

Baldassare stood; Satyavati tensed, but rather than closer, he moved away. He stood for a moment looking up at the rows of portraits around the top margin of the room—more precisely, at the white space where the picture of Marlowe had been. A moment of consideration, and Satyavati as much as *saw* him choose another tack. "What about Master Marlowe?"

"If I publish—"

"Yes?"

"I tell the world Christopher Marlowe's deepest secret."

"Which Professor Keats has sworn the entire Poet Emeritus project to secrecy about. And if you don't publish?"

She shrugged to hide the knot in her belly. "I'm not going to find a third tenure-track offer. You've got your place with John and Dr. Haverson, at least. All I've got is"—a hopeless gesture to the empty place on the wall—"her."

Baldassare turned to face her. His expressive hands pinwheeled slowly in the air for a moment before he spoke, as if he sifted his thoughts between them. "You keep doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Calling Kit *her*."

"She *is* a her. Hell, Mr. Baldassare, you were the one who was insisting she was a woman, before we brought her back."

"And he insists he's not." Baldassare shrugged. "If he went for gender reassignment, what would you call him?"

Satyavati bit her lip. "Him," she admitted unwillingly. "I guess. I don't know—"

Baldassare spread his hands wide. "Dr. Brahmaputra—"

"Hell. Tony. Call me Satya already. If you're going to put up that much of a fight, you already know that you're moving out of student and into friend."

"Satya, then." A shy smile that startled her. "Why don't you just ask Kit? He understands how patronage works. He knows he owes you his life. Go tomorrow."

"You think she'd say yes?"

"Maybe." His self-conscious grin turned teasing. "If you remember not to call him *she*."

.

The strange spellings and punctuation slowed Kit a little, but he realized that they must have been altered for the strange, quickspoken people among whom, apparently, he was meant to make his life. Once he mastered the cadences of the modern speech—the commentaries proving invaluable—his reading proceeded faster despite frequent pauses to reread, to savor.

He read the night through, crosslegged on the bed, bewitched by the brightness of the strange greenish light and the book held open on his lap. The biographical note told him that "Christopher Marlowe's" innovations in the technique of blank verse provided Shakespeare with the foundations of his powerful voice. Kit corrected the spelling of his name in the margin with the pen that John Keats had loaned him. The nib was so sharp it was all but invisible, and Kit amused himself with the precision it lent his looping secretary's hand. He read without passion of Will's death in 1616, smiled that the other poet at last went home to his wife. And did not begin to weep in earnest until halfway through the third act of *As You Like It*, when he curled over the sorcerously wonderful book, careful to let no tear fall upon the pages, and cried silently, shuddering, fist pressed bloody against his teeth, face-down in the rough-textured coverlet.

He did not sleep. When the spasm of grief and rapture passed, he read again, scarcely raising his head to acknowledge the white-garbed servant who brought a tray that was more like dinner than a break-fast. The food cooled and was retrieved

uneaten; he finished the Shakespeare and began the history, saving his benefactor's poetry for last.

"I want for nothing," he said when the door opened again, glancing up. Then he pushed the book from his lap and jumped to his feet in haste, exquisitely aware of his reddened eyes and crumpled clothing. The silver-haired woman from yesterday stood framed in the doorway. "Mistress," Kit said, unwilling to assay her name. "Again I must plead your forbearance."

"Not at all," she said. "Mmm-master Marlowe. It is I who must beg a favor of you." Her lips pressed tight; he *saw* her willing him to understand.

"Madam, as I owe you the very breath in my body— Mayhap there is a way I can repay that same?"

She frowned and shut the door behind herself. The latch clicked; his heart raced; she was not young, but he was not certain he understood what *young* meant to these people. And she was lovely. And unmarried, by her hair—

What sort of a maiden would bar herself into a strange man's bedchamber without so much as a chaperone? Has she no care at all for her reputation?

And then he sighed and stepped away, to lean against the windowledge. *One who knows the man in question is not capable as a man. Or—a stranger thought, one supported by his long night's reading—or the world has changed more than I could dream.*

"I need your help," she said, and leaned back against the door. "I need to tell the world what you are."

He shivered at the urgency in her tone, her cool reserve, the tight squint of her eyes. *She'll do what she'll do and thou hast no power over her.* "Why speak to me of this at all? Publish your pamphlet, then, and have done—"

She shook her head, lips working on some emotion. "It is not a pamphlet. It's—" She shook her head again. "Master Marlowe, when I say *the world* I mean the world."

Wonder filled him. *If I said no, she would abide it.* "You ask for no less a gift than the life I have made, madam."

She came forward. He watched: bird stalked by a strange silver cat. "People won't judge. You can live as you choose—"

"As you judged me not?"

Oh, a touch. She flinched. He wasn't proud of that, either. "—and not have to lie, to dissemble, to hide. You can even become a man. Truly, in the flesh—"

Wonder. "*Become one?*"

"Yes." Her moving hands fell to her sides. "If it is what you want." Something in her voice, a sort of breathless yearning he didn't dare believe.

"What means this to you? To tell your *world* that what lies between my legs is

quaint and not crowing, that is—what benefits it you? Who can have an interest, if your society is so broad of spirit as you import?"

He saw her thinking for a true answer and not a facile one. She came closer. "It is my scholarship." Her voice rose on the last word, clung to it. Kit bit his lip, turning away.

No. His lips shaped the word: his breath wouldn't voice it. Scholarship.

Damn her to hell. *Scholarship.*

She said the word the way Keats said *poetry*.

"Do—" He saw her flinch; his voice died in his throat. He swallowed. "Do what you must, then." He gestured to the beautiful book on his bed, his breath catching in his throat at the mere memory of those glorious words. "It seems gentle William knew well enough what I was, and he forgave me of it better than I could have expected. How can I extend less to a lady who has offered me such kindness, and been so fair in asking leave?"

.....

Satyavati rested her chin on her hand, cupping the other one around a steaming cup of tea. Tony, at her right hand, poked idly at the bones of his tandoori chicken. Further down the table, Sienna Haverson and Bernard Ling were bent in intense conversation, and Keats seemed absorbed in tea and mango ice cream. Marlowe, still clumsy with a fork, proved extremely adept at navigating the intricacies of curry and naan as fingerfood and was still chasing stray tidbits of lamb vindaloo around his plate. She enjoyed watching her—*him*, she corrected herself, annoyed—eat; the weight he'd gained in the past months made him look less like a strong wind might blow him away.

Most of the English Department was still on a quiet manhunt for whomever might have introduced the man to the *limerick*.

She lifted her tea; before she had it to her mouth, Tony caught her elbow, and Marlowe, looking up before she could flinch away, hastily wiped his hand and picked up a butterknife. He tapped his glass as Keats grinned across the table. Marlowe cleared his throat, and Haverson and Ling looked up, reaching for their cups when it became evident that a toast was in the offing.

"To Professor Brahmaputra," Marlowe said, smiling, in his still-strong accent. "Congratulations—"

She set her teacup down, a flush warming her cheeks as glasses clicked and he continued.

"—on her appointment to tenure. In whose honor I have composed a little poem—"

Which was, predictably, sly, imagistic, and *inventively* dirty. Satyavati imagined even her complexion blazed quite red by the time he was done with her. Keats' laughter alone would have been enough to send her under the table, if it hadn't been for Tony's unsettling deathgrip on her right knee. "Kit!"

He paused. "Have I scandalized my lady?"

"Master Marlowe, you have scandalized the very walls. I trust that one won't see print just yet!" Too much time with Marlowe and Keats: she was noticing a tendency in herself to slip into an archaic idiom that owed something to both.

"Not until next year at the earliest," he answered with a grin, but she saw the flash of discomfort that followed.

After dinner, he came up beside her as she was shrugging on her cooling-coat and gallantly assisted.

"Kit," she said softly, bending close so no one else would overhear. He smelled of patchouli and curry. "You are unhappy."

"Madam." A low voice as level as her own. "Not unhappy."

"Then what?"

"Lonely." Marlowe sighed, turning away

"Several of the Emeritus Poets have married," she said carefully. Keats eyed her over Marlowe's shoulder, but the red-haired poet didn't intervene.

"I imagine it's unlikely at best that I will find anyone willing to marry something neither fish nor fowl—" A shrug.

She swallowed, her throat uncomfortably dry. "There's surgery now, as we discussed—"

"Aye. 'Tis—" She read the word he wouldn't say. *Repulsive*.

Keats had turned away and drawn Tony and Sienna into a quiet conversation with Professor Ling at the other end of the table. Satyavati looked after them longingly for a moment and chewed her lower lip. She laid a hand on Kit's shoulder and drew him toward the rest. "You are what you are," she offered hopelessly, and on some fabulous impulse ducked her head and kissed him on the cheek, startled when her dry lips tingled at the contact. "Someone will have to appreciate that."

.....

The door slides aside. He steps through the opening, following the strange glorious lady with the silver-fairy hair. The dusty scent of curry surrounds him as he walks into the broad spread of a balmy evening roofed with broken clouds.

Christopher Marlowe leans back on his heels and raises his eyes to the sky, the

desert scorching his face in a benediction. *Hotter than Hell*. He draws a single deep breath and smiles at the mountains crouched at the edge of the world, tawny behind a veil of summer haze, gold and orange sunset pale behind them. Low trees crouch, hunched under the potent heat. He can see forever across this hot, flat, tempestuous place.

The horizon seems a thousand miles away.

The End