

Judgement

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Tyrone stopped in front of the statue of Hans Sachs, which had somehow survived the bombings. The buildings around it had all been destroyed. No matter how hard Tyrone tried, he couldn't remember what they had been. The remains of a wall, two stories made of stone, suggested a church, but so many buildings in Nuremberg were made of stone that his impression was probably wrong.

The air smelled of dust, and beneath it, the faint hint of rot. He clutched his camera as he sat on a pile of rubble, the debris loose beneath his feet.

He had known Sachs, although the man did not look like his statue. The statue portrayed a robust figure, draped in robes and wearing medieval garb. The curly hair was right, but the artist failed to capture the thick brown tangles, and the beard was too neat, too well-trimmed.

Sachs had been too busy to be tidy.

Sachs, *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg*. Amazing that Tyrone had forgotten Sachs. Sachs, after all, had been the one to lure him away from the forests and hills of his own people, had somehow started his strange romance with humans, and led to this moment, four centuries and a thousand lifetimes later.

Tyrone couldn't even remember what he had called himself in those early years. It hadn't been his own name -- the magical never let anyone discover their true name. It gave others too much power.

Now he was calling himself Tyrone Briggs, although most of the people he encountered insisted on calling him Ty, a habit he hated, but never decried. He tried not to complain about anything American. He had learned after the First World War that not even Americans were safe from the kind of unreasoning patriotic fervor that made a man with a slight accent and an aversion to being called Ty suspect.

But those days were long past, just like that war was long past. This one was finally past too, but only by a few months.

And he hadn't expected to find himself on his native soil for the first time in forever.

The statue had not been here for all of those centuries. Hans Sachs would have been surprised to see it.

Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg. Tyrone shook his head. How had he forgotten that moment, when he'd hidden in the trees, and watched Sachs fiddle with his lute, trying to find the right words to go with a new melody, one that captured the exact sound of the wind in the leaves?

Tyrone had thought it a new magic, even though his father -- a slight man with ears so pointed they poked through his long black hair -- claimed it was no magic at all.

“You are fooled by something that is not there. Humans only appear to have depth. They are fickle and violent and terrifying creatures. They will be the death of you.”

But they hadn't been the death of Tyrone. He had not become mortal, and they had not discovered him. He had passed for generations. So many generations, in fact, that Tyrone had come to think of Sachs not as the man he knew, but as the title character in Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger*, the opera that had always been performed before the annual Nazi rallies held in Nuremberg, an opera he had always hated.

Tyrone shuddered, even though it was not that cold. The thin November sun filtered through the rubble, back-lighting the crumbling walls, peeking through the falling doorways.

Nuremberg had been a medieval city, with its ancient wall still intact. The castle, Kaiserburg, stood on a sandstone crag above the wall. When Tyrone had first come here, the castle had seemed a lone outpost, the guardian of the city. Over the centuries, it had become part of the city -- a talisman, guarding the place.

Now it was a ghost, windows shattered, walls fallen, an entire section gone. Tyrone had thought some human things timeless. This war, more than the last, had proven him wrong.

He clutched the camera, knowing he should photograph the devastation. That was what he was here for -- he was supposed to photograph the trials, which would start in a few days, and he was supposed to photograph the city, which had suffered a devastating Allied attack, second only to the bombing of Dresden in loss of German civilian life.

It would cheer the Americans to see this -- the good Ole U.S. of A. loved the destruction. It made them feel virtuous. Nuremberg had been the center of Nazism. The frightening newsreels of Adolf Hitler waving his small fist and shouting at the top of his scarred lungs at hundreds upon hundreds of jack-booted Nazis had come from here, from Zeppelin Field, which was not in the old city, but the new. Or what had been the new.

That's why the trials were being held here. To show the world that the Allies had won. To prove to the surviving Axis citizens that destruction awaited anyone who crossed the United States, Great Britain and Russia. Or maybe not Russia. Not any more.

That alliance had been one of convenience, already collapsing.

Tyrone sighed and stood. Human interactions. Human thoughts. He had abandoned his magic in this city, lifetimes ago and had embraced everything human. He last used his powers to round his ears and his eyes, to straighten his eyebrows and to dull his teeth. When he had done that, he had sacrificed his feral beauty -- something which marked him as Other. But a spark of it remained. If he wanted to, he could attract a woman with a simple smile and the glimmer of an eye. He could make men -- some men -- remain at his side for life, ever loyal.

He could bewitch anyone he wanted for as long as he wanted.

But he hadn't done those things in centuries either.

The sunlight was fading. He stood, photographs untaken, the image of Hans Sachs -- as he had been, not as he had been immortalized -- burned into Tyrone's brain.

And the music, nearly forgotten, whispering, whispering -- like a faraway wind through a pile of dead, dry leaves.

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Tyrone had lived through two of what his people called cycles -- near as he could figure 200 years in human time -- and had been betrothed to a woman with a far more savage beauty than his own. Her family's magic was legendary; their penchant for mischief even more so. The sagas he later learned from human troubadours -- sagas of stolen infants, mistaken identities, and chilled souls -- all came from her family, with its courage, and willingness to challenge the humans.

Tyrone had watched the humans long before his betrothal. At first, he thought them a dirty, loutish lot, and could not understand why his people insisted on co-existing with them.

He had been less than half a cycle when he asked his father why the People had not made humans into

slaves. His father had studied him for a long time, as if he had asked a forbidden question, and then had said, _We have magic. They have strength_.

And no matter how much more Tyrone asked, he never got a more satisfactory answer than that.

His people lived in a half-world, a twist away from the world humans called real. The People built their own castles out of air, hiding them inside forests of tall, ancient trees, and believing the cities safe. Sometimes a youngling emerged from the forest, living among the humans as a rite of passage. If discovered, the youngling returned in shame, destined to be one of the Low Folk. If the deception had been successful, the youngling became one of the High Folk, the rulers, the aristocracy of the People, those who decided it all.

His betrothed's family always participated in the rite. She had, and seemed appalled when she learned that he had not. No one in his family had passed for human in several cycles.

Why take the risk, his father had asked, _when our family's place among the High Folk remains guaranteed thanks to the deceptions of our ancestors?_

Perhaps Tyrone had ventured out that day because of his betrothed's taunting. Sometimes he thought it nothing more than that. Then he remembered the suffocating feeling he had whenever he participated in the People's rituals, the knowledge that for twenty cycles, maybe more, he would do the same things, be bound to the same woman, and live on the same land.

There had to be more to life than magic classes in which he graduated to ever more elaborate spells, spells designed to create fancy palaces or beautiful clothing or marvelous pranks with which to entrance the humans. Most of the People loved these games, and found them endlessly fascinating. Some specialized in various parts of the magic -- like his betrothed's family in Passing and Pranks, and his own in Light Weaving and the Architecture of Air.

But Tyrone's mind was restless -- undisciplined, his father said -- and he wanted to use his magic in the old ways, outside the prescribed laws and rules.

He had tried that only once -- a simple spell, changing leaf color before the fall -- and his punishment had been severe. No magic for a dozen seasons, and then, when the ban was lifted, only supervised spells. He had been watched over as if he had slaughtered a unicorn, and even though the incident was five seasons in the past when he became betrothed, he had not forgotten it.

He doubted he ever would.

But other younglings felt dissatisfaction with the People. None had fled before. None had spent their entire lives among the humans.

Tyrone often thought his dissatisfaction a symptom of something more, of a part of him no one spoke of, a part only hinted at. For no one mentioned his mother, and the People were famed for seducing -- and abandoning -- human girls, only to steal their infants later.

Tyrone suspected that his restless "undisciplined" mind may have had another source, one his family was not willing to acknowledge -- one that had given him a fascination with things human that the People could never ever understand.

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The press corps had its own buildings near the Palace of Justice because the world wanted this trial reported. Tyrone had already met two newsreel photographers who planned to record the entire event

on film. He felt almost redundant -- a still photographer in a world that was starting to move.

At least he didn't have to put everything together like the print guys, who would be writing not just about the daily events, but trying to make some sense of the atrocities that would be brought as evidence.

Tyrone had seen none of that material, and he didn't want to see it, although he would have to as part of his job. He had been sent here as principal photographer for a major New York daily, thanks to his own stupidity and an argument he had had with his editor.

Tyrone had spent most of the war in the States -- too old to fight (even in his human identity), and unwilling to tromp through Europe and Asia chasing stories with bombs exploding around him.

He had almost succeeded. He would have succeeded if he had kept his big mouth shut.

Instead, he had argued with a co-worker, telling him that Hitler had not been a mustachioed buffoon as he was presented in the American papers, but a real threat. It had been clear, Tyrone had said, from the moment Hitler's first speeches had aired in the 1930s. Anyone with even a passing understanding of German and the German mind should have realized the danger that Hitler presented.

Of course, Tyrone's editor had overheard that and had expressed surprise that Tyrone knew German or the German mind. Then he remembered Tyrone's phony application, which claimed he was an American raised in Europe, and decided that what the paper needed was, quite simply, a fresh perspective on the war, from someone who hadn't experienced it.

No matter how many arguments Tyrone made, he couldn't prevent the trip to the city he sometimes like to imagine he had been born in, for it was the place when he became truly human, a city he hadn't returned to in hundreds of years.

He had been among the humans so long that it took until he reached the reporters wing in the compound around the Palace of Justice to realize that he could have argued with his boss or simply quit.

Instead, he had come to Nuremberg like a puppet, determined to find the photographs that best represented each day's trial highlight.

So far, he hadn't taken many. He hadn't even seen the prisoners -- Goring, Hess, and all the rest -- the admirals, and generals, and others that had been captured because Hitler had been too cowardly to face his enemies. Even if Tyrone had seen the prisoners, he wasn't sure if he would take their pictures.

Since he had come to Nuremberg, his interest in photography had faded.

That very first night, as he lay in the army issue cot, in a room so narrow that it felt like a cell, he had dreamed of his own past. Sneaking over the ancient wall, going to Sachs's cobbler's shop, and listening for the music, convinced that it was something more than even his people could do.

In the dream, Tyrone had spoken to Sachs, but in life, they had never had a conversation. Tyrone had merely listened to Sachs's music, and tried to learn, thinking music beyond him.

Later, he realized that Sachs would have helped him, that the meistersingers believed that their art was a trade, as simple as shoe-making, and that anyone could have trained in it.

But Tyrone had thought it magic, and had approached it as such, believing that innate ability counted for more than sheer drive and willingness. The People had no musical traditions -- he didn't know what songs were until he had emerged from the forest, and he certainly hadn't understood instruments -- so he had had nothing to build on.

Just as he had had nothing to build on when he had tried his hand at other human "magics" -- painting, and sculpture, and the creation of books. Over the generations, he had tried most of the human art forms, and they had all failed him.

Until photography. The combination of light and shadow, the ability to frame the world into single images, accented his family's real magic -- their manipulation of light, their willingness to create buildings out of air.

In his dream, he had gone back to Sachs' cobbler shop with a camera, trying to photograph the music that had drawn him from the woods, but he had been unable to do so. Too much time had passed; he had learned too much -- realized that Sachs, like most of the other meistersingers, had left no lasting legacy, not like Bach or Beethoven or Mozart. Their legacy had been composition and genius and true music. Sachs, while gifted, had followed the guidelines of his trade: he had rarely composed his own melodies, and his lyrics -- his pride and joy -- had been instructional stories, not cries from his heart.

Tyrone had awakened from that dream shaken and spent. The feelings that rose within him -- the fear, the longing, the loneliness -- seemed as real as they had all those years ago.

He blamed the dream on Nuremberg itself -- on the distinctive sparkle of the Pegnitz River, on the shadow of Kaiserburg falling across the destroyed city of his past, on the stench of the unburied bodies still lying beneath the rubble -- bringing to mind the first deaths he had seen, shortly after he had arrived in the city and learned that humans were not immortal.

The city brought out a disquiet in him, a disquiet he hadn't felt since he had first taken a camera in his hands seventy years before. The nearness of his past, combined with the feeling of violence still shuddering in the air, awakened a part of him that had been dormant too long.

The trial was not set to start for another day or two, and his only assignment was to photograph the city, give the readers a sense of the setting for what his editor called one of the most important moments in human history.

Other photographers were already getting shots of the ruins, of the hollow-faced children, of the women, heads bowed in defeat.

He wasn't interested in any of that.

Since he returned here, he was interested in only one thing.

Home.

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Which was how he found himself, threading his way through Nuremberg, trying to compare the topology of his memory with the destruction before him. The cobblestone streets had been cleared so that Army jeeps could make their way through, looking official and abnormally clean in the late fall sunlight.

Tyrone wore his favorite boots beneath khaki pants and a warm bomber jacket over all of it. His hair was tucked into a stocking cap and he had gloves in his pocket. He also brought a flask filled with water, three candy bars -- as precious as gold here -- and his camera.

The camera seemed like a drag on him; extra weight he thought of leaving behind more than once. But each time he set it down, he couldn't let go of it, and finally he put the strap around his neck, letting the camera hang, heavy and solid, against his chest.

Nuremberg seemed to go on forever. Once he passed the wall, he entered the new city, with its curving streets and burned homes. They had been made of wood, not stone, and the conflagration must have been horrible.

He saw no people here, no lost children, no sad women. Only the occasional shoe and scrawny dog, poking its face in the ruins. More than one of these half-wild dogs chewed on things they had found beneath the ashes; he did not stop to see what that was.

Instead, he walked and walked and walked, and knew he had never walked this far as a young man. He supposed he could have looked at a map -- if he could find one -- or asked one of the locals, if they would deign to talk to him.

But he did not. Instead, he followed the bend of the river, knowing it would take him to the outskirts of the city eventually.

It took half of the day to reach the edge of the city, half of the day and two of his three candy bars. There was only a few hours of light left when he stepped onto the bombed out road, and looked down the slight hill into the clearing beyond.

No trees. That was the first thing he noticed. No trees, and little growth. The brown earth had been churned up by vehicles and bomb craters and scavengers.

This was not the land of his memory. There were no forests, no birds, no green -- only destruction as far as his eye could see.

For a long time, he stood on the slight rise, feeling his heart pound. The breath burned in his lungs -- he wasn't used to walking any longer -- and his muscles shook.

He hadn't expected to find the People, not when he had started on this trip, but he had thought he would catch a hint of them, a flash of light in the trees -- the hint of a building against the clouds.

He hadn't expected to find them, but he had hoped he would -- even imagined it: Ducking into the trees, speaking the old words, having the world twist ever so slightly -- and then he would be in the sky.

His father, a touch of silver in his thick dark hair, would praise him. _You have extended the family honor,_ he would have said. _We will be among the High Folk for several more generations._

And Tyrone would sit on the Throne of Success, telling all about his adventures, showing them the camera and explaining its ability to capture light, singing to them a bit of Brahms' Lullaby, and attempting to explain the purpose of art.

Some wouldn't have believed him, of course. They would think that he hid during his tenure, that he had seen nothing, participated in nothing. They wouldn't know of the human women he had tried to love, the friends he could never quite get close to, the judgements he had formed about a life that would mean nothing inside those gossamer walls.

He would have gone back and once back, he would have to decide if he wanted to stay, decide if now he was ready to do the same things, be bound to the same woman, and live on the same land.

But, he realized now, it wasn't going to be that easy. He stood on the rise and stared at the destroyed land, knowing that he would never go home -- at least not the home of his youth.

He had been wrong. He would not have lived in the same place for all of his cycles. He would have moved on, to somewhere else that humans hadn't invaded, a place that still had greenery, trees, and a bit

of water.

Because his people had to have moved on. They had survived other human destructions -- wars that lasted decades, horrible diseases that sometimes transferred to the magical, terrible fires that destroyed all of the surrounding countryside. But this time something had happened, something which made them find new ground.

But they would be close, and he would find them.

Although he wouldn't find them on this day. He had weeks now. Weeks of a trial which the humans thought would make everything better. Just like the previous war was a war to end all wars. Just like the way Europe thought it was through with dictators when Napoleon was banished to Elba.

Tyrone didn't know how long he was standing there before he lifted his camera. He didn't know how long he shot before he realized he was taking pictures.

Capturing the present in light and shadow, making memories out of air.

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By the time, he returned to his small room, he had a plan. He would talk to the locals, find out if there were examples of pranks played in the last generation -- maybe even on the Nazis themselves.

There would be stories -- there were always stories -- of a haunted wood, visions of light against darkness. Stories of drunken men taken to buildings in the clouds, only to return years later. Stories of women seduced by men of great beauty, only to have the children of those unions stolen in the middle of the night.

He would find his people.

At least, he hoped he would.

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Two weeks into the trial, he had gotten nowhere. The locals would not talk to him, seeing him as the enemy -- one of the destroyers. They seemed to have no concept of their own guilt -- in believing in the filth that Hitler had spoken -- that brought this disaster upon themselves.

Photographs were not allowed during testimony and arguments, unless they were taken without flash from a great distance. So Tyrone rarely stayed for the entire day, preferring to photograph the justices as they gavelled the session to order, or the witnesses as they climbed into the box.

He specialized in candid shots -- a young guard, smoking outside the Palace of Justice, a soldier standing at rigid attention against the doors leading into Room Number 600, a young boy staring at the curtained windows of the east wing, allowing no one to see inside.

His editor proclaimed himself pleased -- _You have an artist's eye, Tyrone_, he had said during an expensive international call. _Keep doing what you're doing. No one else is getting this stuff._

Everyone else was running in packs, trying to be journalists, when the work of journalists was long past.

Tyrone was walking the streets of Nuremberg, familiarizing himself with the city that the Allies once considered bulldozing before they fixed it up.

He finally found himself on Zeppelin Field. Bombs had cratered it, but the marble stands still remained.

He could almost hear the roar of the crowd, feel the vibrations from a thousand jack-boots hitting the earth in unison.

There was an electricity here, a sick and dangerous magic, one that lingered, like the scent of rot in the air.

It was December, and the light was fading early. Even at midday, there was a twilight sort of darkness to the city and no sense of merriment. Germans, who had loved the pagan holiday their priests had confiscated for Christ, were not celebrating this year.

They had nothing to celebrate, nothing at all.

Tyrone was wondering how he could photograph this, how he could catch not just the weeds and craters in the field that once held the flower of Nazi youth, but the sense of illness here, of a twisted and decaying ideology that had somehow captured an entire people.

And then he saw her, huddled in rags against one of the benches, watching him.

She was slender to the point of gauntness, her clothing in rags. Her hair, midnight black, was tangled over her face, but he didn't need to see it.

The magic sparkled off her like the aftermath of a flashbulb's light.

He did not try to photograph her. He knew it would be useless. At best, he would get a collection of rags. At worst, a ruined film with none of his pictures saved.

Instead, he let his camera hang around his neck as he walked toward her, slowly enough to let her flee if she felt she had to.

As he approached, she pushed her hair away from her face. Her savage beauty remained, perhaps even stronger now that no fat lined her bones.

"I thought it was you," she said, her voice huskier than he remembered. She spoke an Old German, one he barely understood. "You look like them."

He could not remember her name, even though they had been betrothed. Like his own, he had not thought of it in centuries. And now she probably blocked it from his mind so that he would have no power over her.

He sat beside her, the marble cold through his wool pants. "I came looking for you," he said.

"Not me." She gave him a small smile, and he was grateful that it was small. He no longer had defenses against even the slightest magic. "You wanted to be the conquering hero, just like those you've emulated for so long."

He almost denied it, and then he remembered his fantasy -- sitting on the Throne of Success, extending his family's honor, becoming one of the High Folk for all of eternity.

"It's like a disease, isn't it? Some kind of infection that gets passed from creature to creature. Now you have it." She shook her magnificent head, then gazed across the empty expanse of field. "And look where it got them."

He started when he realized that she thought he empathized with the Nazis. He wondered if she knew what was going on across town, how Hitler's henchmen were just beginning to find out there was no

justification for their crimes.

Her eyes glittered as she watched him, and they made him even more uneasy. There was a great intelligence in them, but nothing else.

He had never loved her -- the People did not speak of love, thinking it a human invention -- but he had been bound to her, by tradition and fascination and a common heritage.

It all felt so long ago.

"My father?" Tyrone asked. "How do I find him?"

She looked down, smoothed her rags as if they were a gown made of silk. Then she shook her head.

"I can't find him?" Tyrone asked. "Because of what I've become?"

She shook her head again.

"He can't be dead." Tyrone's voice shook. "The People do not die."

"Did not die," she said. "But all things have an end -- ."

She almost said his name then -- his true name -- but she caught herself just in time. He could feel it, hovering between them, before it vanished.

"The People can't be dead," he said. "You're not."

She shrugged. "Dead, scattered, destroyed. Even we had no defense from fire that rains from the sky, burning the trees and sucking away the air. Some of us managed to escape, only to be discovered and taken ... hideous places. Hideous."

She shuddered, lost in memory.

Then he heard his father's voice, as clear as if the man had been beside him. _We have magic. They have strength._

Had his father foreseen this? The craters, the destruction, the rubble? Had his father known?

"Why did you reveal yourself to me?" Tyrone asked.

She brushed her hair away from her face again, and this time, her smile was soft. She put her hand on his cheek, and her skin was cold. Not the cold of a person who had sat too long in the December twilight, but the cold of marble, of something that had no life at all.

"Because," she said, "it is rare to get the chance to say good-bye."

And then she vanished, leaving only a swirl of air. He reached for her, knowing that she hadn't moved, but he could not find her. He recited the old words, but she did not come back.

He sat on the marble seats long into the growing dark. But the only ghosts that surrounded him marched in unison under what they believed to be a bright, sunlight sky. He could not banish them, and he could not photograph them.

Not that he really wanted to try.

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He searched for the next two hundred days, while he listened to testimony about atrocities that shocked even his ancient spirit. He befriended a few locals, but heard only sad stories of beautiful people in rags, of lights exploding against the darkness as if hit with invisible grenades, of a sense of loss so deep that it seemed to come from the earth itself.

And finally, finally, the trial ended, and he was able to go home -- although not the place he had meant by home all those months before. He was an American raised in Europe, a Europe that no longer existed, if it ever had. A Europe as misremembered as Hans Sachs had been, a meistersinger that may not have been a master singer at all.

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Years later, Tyrone was going through his old photographs, looking at the best of the unpublished ones for a history book he had been hired to illustrate, when he found the shots he had taken that afternoon early in the trials, the afternoon he had walked to the edge of town with only three candy bars, a flask of water, and his camera.

Wisps of light appeared at the edge of the exposures, hints of turrets rising in the air. It took him a while, but he eventually located the negatives and made new prints.

The wisps were in every one.

The People were still there. They had seen him, sensed his thoughts, and had judged him unworthy.

So they had sent her, his betrothed, a woman whose family specialized in Passing and Pranks, to test him.

She had fooled the human, just like her family had done for generations.

Fooled the human, and once again maintained her position among the High Folk.

He smiled. From their perspective, he had failed.

But from his, he had not.

For in the past two cycles since he had been gone, nothing among the People had changed.

Nothing, that is, except him.

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