

# Three Days in a Border Town

a novelette

by Jeff VanderMeer

You remember the way he moved across the bedroom in the mornings, with a slow, stumbling stride. His black hair ruffled and matted and sexy. The sharp line down the middle of his back, the muscles arching out from it. The taut curve of his ass. The musky smell of him that kissed the sheets. The stutter-step as he put on his pants, the look back at you to see if you'd noticed his clumsiness. The way he stared at you sometimes before he left for work.

## *Day One*

When you come out of the desert into the border town, you feel like a wisp of smoke rising up into the cloudless sky. You're two eyes and a dry tongue. But you can't burn up; you've already passed through flame on your way to ash. Even the sweat between your breasts is ethereal, otherworldly. Not all the blue in the sky could moisten you. *A mirage has more substance.*

The border town, as many of them did, manifested itself to you at the end of a second week in the desert. It began as a trickle of silver light off imagined metal, a suggestion of a curved sheen. You could have ignored it as false. You could have taken it for another of the desert's many tricks.

But The Book of the City corrected you, with an entry under "Other Towns":

Often, you will find that these border towns, in unconscious echo of the City, are centered around a metal dome. This dome may be visible long before the rest of the town. These domes often prove to be the tops of ancient buildings long since buried beneath the sand.

Drifting closer, the blur of dome comes into focus. It is wide and high and damaged. It reflects the old building style, conforming to the realities of a lost religion, the metal of its workmanship predating the arrival of the desert.

Around the dome hunch the sand-and-rock-built houses and other structures of the typical border town. The buildings are nondescript, yellow-brown, rarely higher than three stories. Here and there, a solitary gaunt horse, some chickens, a rooting creature that resembles a pig. Above: the sea gulls that have no sea to return to.

Every border town has given you something: information, a wound, a talisman, a trinket. At one, you bought the blank book you now call *The Book of the City*. At another, you discovered much of what was written in that book. The third had taken a gout of flesh from your left thigh. The fourth had put a pulsing stone inside of your head. When the City is near, the stone throbs and you feel the ache of a pain too distant to be of use.

It has been a long time since you felt the pain. You're beginning to think your quest is hopeless.

About the City, your book tells you this:

There is but one City in all the world. Ever it travels across the face of the Earth, both as promise and as curse. None of us shall but glimpse It from the corner of one eye during our lifetimes. None of us shall ever fully see the divine, in this life.

It is said that border towns are ghosts of the City. If so, they are faint and tawdry ghosts, for those who have seen the City know that It has no Equal.

A preacher for a faith foreign to you quoted that from his own holy text, but you can't worship anything that has taken so much away from you.

He had green eyes and soft lips. He had calloused hands, a fiery red when he returned from work. His temper could be harsh and quick, but it never lasted. The moodiness in him he tried to keep from you. Most of the time he hid it well. The good humor, when he had it, he shared with you. It was a good life.

At the edge of town, you encounter the sentinel. He sits in his chair atop a tall tower, impassive and sand-worn, sun-soaked. An old man, wrinkled and white-bearded. You stand there and look up at him for a long time. Perhaps you recognize some part of yourself in him. Perhaps you trust him because of it.

The sentinel stares down at you, but you cannot tell if he recognizes you. There is about him an immutability, as if beneath the coursing red thirst of his flesh, the decaying arteries and veins, the heart that fights against its own inevitable stoppage, there is nothing but fissured stone. This quality comes out most vividly in the color of his eyes, which are like gray slate broken by flashes of the blue sky.

"Are you a ghost?" the sentinel asks you. A half smile.

You laugh, shading your eyes against the sun. "A ghost?" There'd be more moisture in a ghost, and more hope. "I'm a traveler. Just passing through. I'm looking for the City."

You catch a hint of *slippage* in the sentinel's impassive features, a hint of disappointment at such an ordinary quest. Half the people of the world seek the City.

"You may enter," the sentinel says, and suddenly his gaze has shifted back to the horizon, and narrowed and deepened, no doubt due to some ancient binocular technology affixed to his eyes.

The town lies open to you. What will you make of it?

Your father didn't like him, and your mother didn't care. "He's shallow," your father said to you. "He's not good enough for you." You knew this was not true. He kept his own counsel. He got nervous in large groups. He didn't like small talk. These were all things that made him seem unapproachable at first. But, over time, they both grew to love him almost as much as you loved him.

Everyone eventually wanted to like him, even when he was unlikeable. There was something about him -- a presence that had nothing to do with words or mannerisms or the body. It followed him everywhere. Sometimes now, you think it must have been the presence of the City, the distant breath and heat of it.

In this border town, as the streets and the people on them come into focus, you realize the sentinel's question was not baseless: you *are* a ghost. As you reach the outskirts, the sand somehow finer and looser, you stop for a second, hands on your hips, like a runner who has reached the end of a race. Your solitude of two weeks has been broken. It is as if you have breached an invisible bubble. It's as if you

had lunged through a portal into a different place. The desert is done with. You are no longer alone.

Although you might as well be. As you walk farther into the town, no one acknowledges you. These are short, dark-skinned people who wear brown or gray robes, some with a bracelet or necklace that reveals a sudden splash of color, some without. Their eyes are large and either brown or black. Small noses and thin lips or wide noses and thick lips. Some of them have skin so black it's almost looks blue. They speak to each other in the border town patois that has become the norm, but you catch a hint of other languages as well. A smell of spice encircles them. It prickles your nostrils, but not in the same way as a hint of lime. Lime would indicate the presence of the City.

For a moment, you think that perhaps your solitude has entered the town with you. That somehow you really have become a wisp of smoke. You are invisible and impervious, as unnoticeable as a speck of dust. You walk the streets watching others ignore you.

Soon, a procession dawdles down the street, slower then faster, to the beat of metal drums. You stand to one side as it approaches. Twenty men and women, some with drums, some shouting, and in the middle four men holding a box that can only be a coffin. The coffin is as plain as the buildings in this place. The procession travels past you. Passersby do not acknowledge it. They keep walking. You cannot help feeling the oddness of this place. To ignore a stranger is one thing. To ignore twenty men and women banging on drums while shouting is another. Even the sea gulls rise at its approach, the chickens scattering to the side.

When the procession is thirty feet past you, an odd thing happens. The coffin opens and a man jumps out. He's naked, penis dangling like a shriveled pendulum, face painted white. He has a gray beard and wrinkled skin. He shouts once, then runs down the street, soon out of sight.

As he does so, the passersby stop and clap. Then they continue walking. The members of the procession recede into the side alleys. The empty coffin remains in the middle of the street.

What does it mean? Is it something you need to write down in your book? You ponder that for a moment, but then decide this is not about the City. There is nothing about what you saw that involves the city.

Then dogs begin to gather at the coffin. This startles you. When they bark, you are alarmed. In *The Book of the City* it is written:

Dogs will not be fooled. They will not live silent in the presence of the City -- they will bark, they will whine, they will be ill-at-ease. And the closer the City approaches, the more these symptoms will manifest themselves.

Was a piece of the City nearby? An inkling of it? Your heart beats faster. Not the source, but a tributary. Otherwise, your head would be aching, trying to break apart.

But no: as they nose the coffin lid open, you see the red moistness of meat. There is raw meat inside the coffin for some reason. The dogs feast. You move on.

Above you, the silver dome seems even more enigmatic than before.

His name was Delorn. You were married in the summer, under the heat of the scorching sun, in front of your friends and family. You lived in a small town, centered around a true oasis and water hole. For this, your people needed a small army, to protect it against those marauders who might want to take it for themselves. You served in that army, while Delorn worked as a farmer, helping pick dates, planting

vegetable seeds, fine-tuning the irrigation ditches.

You were in surveillance and sharp-shooting. You could handle a gun as well as anyone in the town. After a time, they put you in charge of a small band of other sharp shooters. No one ever came to steal the land because the town was too well-prepared. Near the waterhole, your people had long ago found a stockpile of old weapons. Most of them worked. These weapons served as a deterrent.

Delorn and you had your own small home -- three rooms that were part of his parents' compound, at the edge of town. From your window, you could see the watchfires at night, from the perimeter. Some nights, you watched your house from that perimeter. On those nights, the air seemed especially cold as the desert receded further from the heat of the day.

When you came home, you would crawl into bed next to Delorn and bring yourself close to his body heat. He always ran hot; you could always use him as hedge against the cold.

So you float like a ghost again. You let your footfalls be the barometer of your progress, and release the idea of solitude or no solitude.

As night approaches, you become convinced for a moment that the town is a mirage, and all the people in it. If so, you still have water in your backpack. You can make it another few days without a border town. But can you make it without company? The thirst for contact. The desiccation of only hearing your own voice.

Someone catches your eye -- a messenger or courier, perhaps -- weaving his way among the others like sinuous snake, clearly with a destination in mind. The movement is unique for a place so calm, so measured.

You stand in front of him, force him to stop or run into you. He stops. You regard each other for a moment.

He is all tufts of black hair and dark skin and startling blue eyes. A pretty chin. A firm mouth. He could be thirty or forty-five. It's hard to tell. What did he think of you?

"You come out of the desert," he says in his patois, which you can just understand. "The sentinel told us. But he also said he thought you might be a ghost. You're not a ghost."

How had the sentinel told them already? But it doesn't matter...

"Could a ghost do this," you say, and pinch his cheek. You smile to reassure him.

People are staring.

He rubs his cheek. His hands are much paler than his face.

"Maybe," he says. "Ghosts from the desert can do many things."

You laugh. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm a ghost. But I'm a ghost who needs a room for the night. Where can I find one?"

He stares at you, appraises you. It's been a long time since anyone looked at you so intensely. You fight the urge to turn away.

Finally, he points down the street. "Walk that way two blocks. Turn left across from the bakery. Walk

two more blocks. The tavern on the right has a room."

"Thank you," you say, and you touch his arm. You can't say why you do it, or why you ask him, "What do you know of the City?"

"The City?" he echoes. A wry, haunted smile. "The ghost of it passes by us sometimes, in the night." His eyes become wider, but you don't think the thought frightens him. "Its ghost is so large it blocks the sky. It makes a sound. A sound no one can describe. Like...like sudden rain. Like..." As he searches for words, he is looking at the sky, as if imagining the City floating there, in front of him. "Like distant drum beats. Like weeping."

You're still holding his arm. Your grip is very tight, but he doesn't notice.

"Thank you," you say, and release him.

As soon as you release him, it's as if the border town becomes real to you. The sounds of shoes on the street or pavement. The trickling tease of whispered conversations become loud and broad. It is a kind of illusion, of course: the border town comes alive at dusk, after the heat has left the air and before the cold creeps in.

What did the Book say about border towns:

Every border town is the same; in observing unspoken fealty to the City, it dare not replicate the City too closely. By necessity, every border town replicates its brothers and sisters. In speech. In habits. If every border town is most alive at dusk, then we may surmise that the City is most alive at dawn.

You find the tavern, pay for a room from the surly owner, climb to the second floor, open the rickety wooden door, hurl your pack into a corner, and collapse on the bed with a sense of real relief. A bed, after so long in the desert, seems a ridiculous luxury, but also necessity.

You lie there with your arms outstretched and stare at the ceiling.

What more do you know now? That the dogs in this place are uneasy. That a messenger-courier believes the ghost of the City haunts this border town. You have heard such rumors elsewhere, but never delivered with such conviction, hinting at such frequency. What does it mean?

What do you want it to mean?

You don't sleep well that night. You never do in enclosed spaces now, even though the desert harshness has expended your patience with open spaces, too. You keep seeing a ghost city superimposed over the border town. You see yourself flying through like a ghost, approaching ever closer to the phantom City, but becoming more and more corporeal, until by the time you reach its walls, you move right through them.

In your book, you have written down a joke that is not really a joke. A man in a bar told it to you right before he tried to grope you. It's the last thing you remember as you finally drift away.

Two men are fighting in the dust, in the sand, in the shadow of a mountain. One says the City exists. The other denies this truth. Neither has ever been there. They fight until they both die of exhaustion and thirst. Their bodies decay. Their bones reveal themselves. These bones fall in on each other. One day, the City rises over them like a new sun. But it is too late.

You loved Delorn. You loved his sly wit in the taverns, playing darts, joking with his friends. You loved the rough grace of his body. You loved the line of his jaw. You loved his hands on your breasts, between your legs. You loved the way he rubbed your back when you were sore from sentinel duty. You loved that he fought his impatience and his anger when he was with you, tried to turn them into something else. You loved him.

## *Day Two*

On your second day in the border town, you wake from dreams of a nameless man to the sound of trumpets. Trumpets and...accordions? You sit up in bed. Your mouth feels sour. Your back is sore again. You're ravenous. Trumpets! The thought of any musical instrument in this place more optimistic than a drum astounds you.

You quickly get dressed and walk out to the main street in time to watch yet another funeral procession for a man not yet dead.

The sides of the streets are crowded and noisy -- where have all these people come from? -- and they are no longer drab and dull. Now they wear clothing in bright greens, reds, and blues. Some of them clap. Some of them whistle. Others stomp their feet. From the edge of the crowd it is hard to see, so you push through to the front. A man claps you on the back, another nudges you. A woman actually hugs you. Are you, then, suddenly accepted?

When you reach the curbside, you encounter yet another odd funeral procession. Six men dressed in black robes carry the coffin slowly down the street. In front and back come jugglers and a few horses, decorated with thin colored paper -- streamers of pale purple, green, yellow. There is a scent like oranges.

To the sides stand children with boxy holographic devices in their hands. They are using these toys to generate the ghosts of clowns, fire eaters, bearded ladies, and the like. Because the devices are very old, the holograms are patchy, ethereal, practically worn away at the edges. The oldest holograms, of a m'kat and a fleshdog, are the most grainy and yet still send a shiver up your spine. Harbingers from the past. Ghosts with the still very real ability to inflict harm.

But the most remarkable thing about the whole process is that the man in the coffin is, again, not dead! He has been tied into the coffin this time, but is thrashing around.

"Put it back in my brain!" he screams, over and over again. "Put it back in my brain! Please. I'm begging you. Put it back!" His eyes are wide and moist, his scalp covered in a film of blood that looks like red sweat.

You stand there, stunned, and watch as the procession lurches by. Sometimes someone in the crowd will run out to the coffin, leap up, and hit the man in the head, after which he falls silent for a minute or two before resuming his agonized plea.

You watch the dogs. They growl at the man in the coffin. When the coffin is past you, you stare at the back of the man's neck as he tries to rise once again from "death." The large red circle you see there makes you forget to breathe for a moment.

You turn to the person on your left, a middle aged man as thin as almost everyone else in town.

"What will happen to him?" you ask, hoping he will understand you.

The man leers at you. "Ghost, they will kill him and bury him out in the desert where he won't be found."

"What did he do?" you ask.

The man just stares at you for a moment, as if speaking to a child or an idiot, and then says, "He came from the outside -- with a *familiar*."

Your body turns cold. A familiar. The taste of lime. The sudden chance. Perhaps this town does have something to add to the book. You have never seen a familiar, but an old woman gave you something her father had once written about familiars. You added it to the book:

The tube of flesh is quite prophetic. The tube of flesh, the umbilical, is inserted at the base of the neck, although sometimes inserted by mistake toward the top of the head, which can result in unexpected visions. The umbilical feeds into the central nervous system. The nerves of the familiar's umbilical wind around the nerves in the person's neck. Above the recipient, the manta ray, the familiar, rises and grows full with the knowledge of the host. It makes itself larger. It elongates. The subject goes into shock, convulses, and becomes limp. Motor control passes over to the familiar, creating a moving yet utilitarian symbiosis. The neck becomes numb. A tingling forms on the tongue, and taste of lime. There is no release from this. There should be no release from this. Broken out from their slumber, hundreds are initiated at a time, the tubes glistening and churling in the elision of the steam, the continual need. Thus fitted, all go forth in their splendid ranks. The eye of the City opens and continues to open, wider and wider, until the eye is the world.

So it says in the *Book of the City*, the elusive city, the city that is forever moving across the desert, powered by...what? The sun? The moon? The stars? The sand? What? Sometimes you despair at how thoroughly the city has eluded you.

You stand in the crowd for a long time. You let the crowd hide you, although what are you hiding from? A hurt and a longing rise in your throat. Why should that be? It's not connected to the man who will be dead soon. No, not him -- another man altogether. For a long, suffocating moment you seem so far away from your goal, from what you seek, that you want to scream as the man screamed: *Give me back the familiar!*

In this filthy, run-down backwater border town with its insultingly enigmatic dome, where people believe in the ghost of the City and kill men for having familiars -- aren't you as far from the City as you have ever been? And still, as you turn and survey your fate, does it matter? Would it have been any different walking through the desert for another week? Would you have been happier out in the Nothing, in the Nowhere, without human voices to remind you of what human voices sound like?

Once, maybe six months before, you can't remember, a man said to you: "In the desert there are many other people. You walk by them all the time. Most all of them are dead, their flesh flapping off of them like little flags." A bitterness creeps into the back of your throat.

You look up at the blue sky -- that mockery of a sky that, cloudless, could never give anyone what they really needed.

"We should harvest the sky," Delorn said to you once. You remember because the day was so cool for once. Even the sand and the dull buildings of your town looked beautiful in the light that danced its way

from the sun. "We should harvest the sky," he said again, as you sat together outside of your house, drinking date wine. It was near the end of another long day. You'd had guard duty since dawn and Delorn had been harvesting the last of the summer squash. "We should take the blue right out of the sky and turn it into water. I'm sure they had ways to do that in the old days."

You laughed. "You need more than blue for that. You need water."

"Water's overrated. Just give me the blue. Bring the blue down here, and put the sand up there. At least it would be a change."

He was smiling as he said it. It was nonsense, but a comforting kind of nonsense.

He had half-turned from you as he said this, looking out at something across the desert. His face was in half-shadow. You could see only the outline of his features.

"What are you looking at?" you asked him.

"Sometimes," he said. "Sometimes I think I can see something, just on the edge, just at the lip of the horizon. A gleam. A hint of movement. A kind of...presence."

Delorn turned to you then, laughed. "It's probably just my eyes. My eyes are betraying me. They're used to summer squash and date trees and you."

"Ha!" you said, and punched him lightly on the shoulder. The warmth you felt then was not from the sun.

The rest of the day you spend searching for the familiar. It might already be dead, but even dead, it could tell you things. It could speak to you. Besides, you have never seen one. To see something is to begin to understand it. To read about something is not the same.

You try the tavern owner first, but he, with a fine grasp of how information can be dangerous, refuses to speak to you. As you leave, he mutters, "Smile. Smile sometimes."

You go back to the street where you found the courier. He isn't there. You leave. You come back. You have nothing else to do, nowhere else to go. You still have enough money left from looting desert corpses to buy supplies, to stay at the tavern for awhile if you need to. But there's nothing like rifling through the pockets of dead bodies to appreciate the value of money.

Besides, what is there to squander money on these days? Even the Great Sea rumored to exist so far to the west that it is east is little more than a lake, the rivulets that tiredly trickle down into it long since bereft of fish. It's all old, exhausted, with only the City as a rumor of better.

You come back to the same street again and again. Eventually, near dusk, you see the courier. You plant yourself in front of him again. You show him your money. He has no choice but to stop.

"There is something you did not tell me yesterday," you say.

The courier grins. He is older than you thought -- now you can see the wrinkles on his face, at the sides of his eyes.

"There are many things I will not tell a ghost," he says. "And because you did not ask."

"What if I were to ask you about a familiar?"



The grin slips. He probably would have run away by now if you hadn't shown him your money.

"It's dangerous."

"I'm sure. But for me, not for you."

"For me, too."

"It's dangerous for you to be seen talking to me at all, considering," you say. "It's too late now -- shouldn't you at least get paid for the risk?"

Some border towns worship the City because they fear it. Some border towns fear the city but do not worship it. You cannot read this border town. Perhaps it will be your turn for the coffin ride tomorrow. Perhaps not.

The courier says, "Come back here tomorrow morning. I might have something for you."

"Do you want money now?"

"No. I don't want to be seen taking money from you."

"Then I'll leave it in my room, 2E, at the tavern, and leave the door unlocked when I come to meet you."

He nods.

You pull aside your robe so he can see the gun in your holster.

"It doesn't use bullets," you say. "It uses something much worse."

The man blanches, melts into the crowd.

He wanted a child. You didn't. You didn't want a child because of your job and your duty.

"You just want a child because you're so used to growing things," you said, teasing him. "You just want to grow something inside of me."

He laughed, but he wasn't happy.

That night, you still can't sleep. Your head aches. It's such a faint ache that you can't tell if it's from the stone in your head. This time the sense of claustrophobia and danger is so great that you get dressed and walk through the empty streets until you have reached the desert. Standing there, between the town and the open spaces, it reminds you of your home.

There's a certain relief, the sweat drying on your skin although there is no wind. You welcome the chill. And the smell of sand, almost like a spice. Your headache is worse, but your surroundings are better.

You walk for a fair distance -- this is what you've become most used to: walking -- and then turn and look back toward the town. There is a half-moon in the sky, and so many stars you can't count them. Looking at the lights in the sky, the sporadic dotting of light from the town, you think, with a hint of sadness, that the old stories, even those told by a holographic ghost, must be wrong. *If humans had made it to the stars we would not have come to this. If we had gone there, our collapse could not*

*have been so complete.*

You fell asleep, then, or so you believe. Perhaps your headache made you pass out. When you wake, it is still night, but your head pounds, and the stars are *moving*. At least, that is your first thought: *The stars are moving*. Then you realize there are too many lights. Then, with a sharp intake of breath, you know that you are looking at the ghost of the City.

For you have seen the City before, if only once and not for long, and you know it like you know your home. This sudden apparition that slides between you and the stars, that seems to envelop the border town, looks both like and unlike the City.

There were underground caverns near where you grew up. These caves led to an underground aquifer. In those caves, you and your friends would sometimes find phosphorescent jellyfish in the saltish water. By their light you would sometimes find and catch fish. They were like miniature lighted domes, their bodies translucent, so that you could see every detail of their organs, the lines of their boneless bodies.

This "City" you now see is much like that. You can see *into* and *through* it. You can examine every detail. Like a phantom. Like a wraith. Familiars and people transparent, gardens and walls, in so much detail it overwhelms you. The City-ghost rises over the border town ponderously but makes no sound. The edges of this vision, the edges of the City crackle and spark, discharging energy. You can smell the overpowering scent of lime. You can taste it on your mouth, and your skull is filled with a hundred hammers as your headache spins out of control. You think you are screaming. You think you are throwing up.

The City sways back and forth, covering the same ground.

You start to run. You are running back toward the border town, toward this Apparition. And then, just as suddenly as it appeared, the City puts on speed -- a great rush and flex of speed -- and it either disappears into the distance or it disintegrates or...you cannot imagine what it might or might not have done.

Sometimes you argued because he was sick of being a farmer, because he was restless, because you were both human.

"I could do what you do," he said once. "I could join your team."

"No, you couldn't," you said. "You don't have the right kind of discipline."

He looked hurt.

"Just like I don't have the skills to do what you do," you said.

They seemed like little arguments at the time. They seemed like nothing.

When you reach the outskirts of the border town, you find no great commotion in the streets. The streets are still empty. You spy a stray cat skulking around a corner. A nighthawk worshipping a lamp post.

You approach the sentinel's chair. He peers down at you from the raised platform. It's the same sentinel from the other day.

"Did you see it?" you ask him.

"See what?" he replies.

"The City! The phantom City."

"Yes. As usual."

"Every two weeks, at the same time."

"What do you see? From inside the town."

He frowns. "See? A hologram, invading the streets. Just an old ghost. A molted skin -- like the snakes out in the desert."

Your curiosity is aroused. You hardly know this man, but something about his dismissal of such a marvelous sight bothers you.

"Why aren't you excited?" you ask him.

A sad smile. "Should I be? It means nothing." He stands on his platform, looking down. "It doesn't bring me any closer to the City."

And in his gaze, you see a hurt and a yearning that is mirrored in your own. You mistook his look when you first met him. He wasn't disappointed in you, but in himself.

Maybe all reasons are the same when examined closely.

You walk home through a border town so empty it might as well be a ghost town itself. No one to document the coming of the wraith-City. How had it manifested? Had, for an instant, the dome of the border town and the dome of the City been superimposed as one?

When people begin to ignore a miracle, does that mean it is no longer miraculous?

A man stands in your room. You draw your gun. It's the courier. He has a sad look on his face. Startled, you draw back, but he puts out a hand in a gesture of reassurance, and you're so tired you choose to believe it.

"It is not what you think," he says. "It's not what you think."

"What is it then?"

"I need a place. I need a place."

In his look you see a hundred reasons and explanations. But you don't need any of them. This is a man you will never know, that you will never come to know. It does not matter what his reasons are. Lonely, tired, lost. It's all the same.

"What's your name?" you ask.

"Benkaad," he tells you.

He sleeps on the bed with you, facing away from you. His skin is so dark, glinting black in the dim light from the street. His breathing is rapid and short. After a time, you put your arm around his chest.

Sometime during the night, you reverse positions and he is curled at your back, his arm around your stomach.

"There is a scar on the back of your head."

"Yes. That's where the doctor put the stone inside of me."

"The stone?"

"The stone that pines for the City."

"I see."

He begins to rub your head.

It is innocent. It is different. It's not like before.

Once, you had to shoot someone -- a scavenger, a rogue, a man who would have killed someone in your community. He'd gone bad in the head. It was clear from his ranting. He had a gun. He came out of the desert like a curse or a blight. Had he been crazy before he went into the desert? You will never know. But he came toward the guard post, aiming his gun at you, and you had to shoot him. Because you let him get too close before you shot him -- you shouting at him to drop his weapon -- you had to shoot to kill.

The man lay there, covered in sand and blood, arms crumpled underneath him. You stood there for several minutes as your team ran up to you. You stood there and looked out at the desert, wondering what else might come out of it.

They told Delorn, and he came to take you home, you dazed, staring but not seeing. Once inside, Delorn took off all of your clothes. He placed you in the bath tub. He used precious water to calm you, massaging your skin. He rubbed your head. He cleaned the salt and sweat from your body. He towed you dry. And then he laid you down on the bed and he made love to you.

You had been far away, watching the dead man in the sand. But Delorn's tongue on your skin brought you back to yourself. When you came, it was in a rush, like the water in the bath. It was a luxury he had given to you, that made you reconnect with your body.

You remember looking at him as if he were unreal. He was selfless in that moment. He was a part of you.

### *Day Three*

In the morning, Benkaad is gone, leaving just the imprint of his body on your bed. The money you'd promised him has been taken from what you'd left in your bag. You try to remember why you let him sleep next to you, but the thought behind the impulse has fled.

Out into the sun, past the tavern keeper, cursing at someone. The day is hot, almost oppressive. You can walk the desert for two weeks without faltering, but after two days of a bed, you've already lost some of your toughness. The sun finds you. It makes you uncomfortable.

Benkaad waits for you on the street. As soon as he sees you, he drops a piece of paper and walks away. His gaze lingers on you before he's lost around a corner, as if to remember you, for a time at least.

You pick up the paper. Unfold it. It has a map on it, showing you where to find the familiar. A contact name and a password. Is it a trap? Perhaps, but you don't care. You have no choice.

That morning, you had woken refreshed, for the first time in over a year, and somehow that makes you feel guilty as you follow the map's instructions -- through a warren of streets you would not have believed could exist in so small a town. You forget each one as soon as you leave it.

As you walk, a sense of calm settles over you. You're calm because everything you face is inevitable. *You have no choice.* This is the missing piece of the Book. This replaces the Book. You're afraid, yes, but also past caring. Sometimes there's only one chance.

Finally, an hour later, you're there. You knock on a metal door in a run-down section of town. The directions had been needless complex, unless Benkaad meant to delay you.

You've got one hand on your gun as the door opens. An old woman stands there. You give her the password. She opens the door a little wider and you slip inside.

"Do you have the money?" she asks.

"Money? I paid the one who led me here."

"You need more money to see it and connect to it."

Suddenly, the surge of adrenalin. It is here. A familiar.

Two men appear behind the woman. Both are armed with bullet-fed guns. Ancient.

You walk past them to the room that holds the familiar.

"Only half an hour," the one man says. "It's dying. Any more and it'll be too much for you, and for it."

You stare past him. Someone is just finishing up with the familiar. He has detached from its umbilical, but there is still a look of stupefied wonder on his face.

The umbilical is capped by an odd cylindrical device.

"What's that?" you ask the old woman.

"The filter. If that thing gets all the way into your mind, you'd never get free."

"Strip," one of the men says.

"Strip? Why?"

"Just strip. We need to search you," the man says, and raises his gun. The old woman looks away.

That's when you shoot the two men, the old woman, and the customer. For some reason, none of them seemed to expect it. They fall with the same look of startled surprise on their faces.

You don't know if they'll wake up. You don't care. It surprises you that you don't care.

Your head is throbbing.

You enter the room.

There, in front of you, lies the familiar, its wings fluttering on the bed. It seems to both press down into the bed and try to float above it. Its wings are ragged. Instead of being black, it is dead white. It looks as if it were drifting, wherever the air might take it.

You take the umbilical and bring it around to the back of your head. The umbilical slides through the filter. You feel a weak pressure, a probing presence, then a firm, more assured grasp, a prickling -- then a wet piercing. The taste of lime enters your mouth. A scratchiness at the back of your throat. You gasp, take two deep breaths, and then you hear a voice inside your head.

*You are different.*

"Maybe," you say. "Maybe I'm the same."

*I don't think you are the same. I think you are different. I think that you know why.*

"Because I've actually seen the City."

*No. Because of why you want to find it.*

"Can you take me there?"

*Do you know what you are asking?*

"I attached myself to you."

*True. But there is a filter weakening our connection.*

"True. But that might change."

*You don't know how I came to be here, do you?*

"No."

*I was cast out. I was defective. You see my color. You see my wings. I was created this way. I was meant to die in the desert. I let a man I found attach himself so that would not happen. Eventually, it killed him.*

"I'm stronger than that."

*Maybe. Maybe not.*

"Do you know your way back to the City?"

*In a way. I can feel the City. I can feel it sometimes, out there, moving...*

"I have a piece of the City in my head."

*I know. I can sense it. But it may not help. And how do you plan to leave this place? Do you know that even with the filter, in a short time, it will be too late to unhook yourself from me. Is that what you want? Do you want true symbiosis?*

Is it what you want? You don't know. It seems a form of madness, to want this, to reach for it, but there is a passage in the *Book of the City* that reads:

Take whatever the City gives you. If it gives you a cane, take it and use it. If it gives you dust, take the

dust and make a house of it. If it gives you wisdom, take wisdom. The City does not give gifts lightly. It is not that kind of City.

You're crying now. You've been strong for so long you've forgotten the relief of being weak. What if it's the wrong choice? What if you never get him back even after all of this?

*Are you sure?* the familiar says inside your mind. It is different than connecting for a short while. It is a surrender of self.

You wipe the tears from your face. You remember the smell of Delorn, the feel of his body, his laugh. The smell of lime is crushing.

"Yes," *I'm sure*, you say, and you find that it is true, even as you disconnect the filter, even as you begin to feel the tendrils of unfamiliar thoughts intertwining with your own thoughts.

You have chosen.

The most secret part of the *Book of the City*, which you have never reread, is hidden on the back pages. It reads:

I lived in a border town called Haart, where I served as a border guard and my husband Delorn worked as a farmer at the oasis that sustained our people. We loved each other. I still love him. One night, he was taken from me, and that is why I keep this book. One night, I woke and he was not beside me. At first, I thought he had gotten up for a glass of water or to use the bathroom. But I soon discovered he was not in the house. I searched every room. Then I saw the light, through the kitchen window, saw the light, flooding the darkness, and heard the quiet breath of the City. I ran outside. There it lay, in all its glory, just to the west. And there were the imprint of my husband's boots, illumined by the City -- heading toward it. The City was spinning and hovering and gliding back and forth across the desert. Then it was gone.

In the morning, we followed my husband's tracks out into the desert. At a certain point, they stopped. The boot prints were gone. Delorn was gone. The City was gone. It was just me, screaming and shrieking, and the last set of tracks, and the friends who had come out with me.

And every day since I have had a question buried in my head along with my love for my husband.

*Did he choose the City over me? Did he go because he wanted to, or because It called to him and he had no choice?*

At dusk, you escape, the familiar wrapped around your body, under the robes you've stolen from a dead man. Your collar is high to disguise the place where it entered you and you entered it. Out into the desert, where, when the border town is far distant, you can release him from beneath your robes and he, unfurling, can rise above you, your familiar, crippled wings beating, and together you can seek out the City.

It is a cool night, and a long night, and you will be miles away by dawn.

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