

To Live Forever by Jay Lake

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Evacuation, Last Day, in January Landing

“Merry Jack Battiste!”

Dismas’ breath heaved in his chest, his vision narrowed by rage. He clutched a sharpened iron rod in his right hand. In a rented room not far away, Dismas’ sister lay terribly mutilated, a forged shuttle ticket clutched in the bloody stumps of her fingers.

A ship thundered overhead, vapor plume visible in the narrow crack of pale sky above the alley rooftops. A dozen yards distant, Merry Jack turned to face Dismas.

“Oh, it’s the brother now, is it?” Merry Jack grinned. “I believe your sister needs some help. Better get along.” He patted his gear bag. “I’ve got a date with a shuttle, myself.”

“Bastard,” whispered Dismas, sprinting toward the other man.

It was Evacuation, the last day before the Children’s Compact took effect, trapping the planet of Gol Goth in deathless splendor. The alien intelligence called the Children of Gol Goth had been unrecognizable to the First Emigration until it began to speak through the mouths of human dead. The Children had bargained with the twinned coins of terror and immortality to halt the tide of Second Emigration in mid-flood.

Merry Jack ducked, swung his gear bag wide and spun into Dismas’ assault. Dismas leaped past the bag and slammed the iron bar against the side of Merry Jack’s head with a sound like fruit being dropped. Merry Jack stumbled against the wall of the alley.

“Nobody uses *my* sister,” shrieked Dismas, smashing one of Merry Jack’s kneecaps. The other man collapsed to the cobbled street, shocked surprise written on his face.

As Dismas raised the bar for another blow, Merry Jack smiled through his pain. “At least you’re never leaving either,” he gasped. “And she always was a lousy lay.”

Dismas eventually left his bar point-down in Merry Jack’s right eye socket. He didn’t bother to take the gear bag. Dismas didn’t have a shuttle seat, and Merry Jack’s bag would only have marked him as a thief, or worse.

Instead, he stayed with his sister until the infection that was the Children came for both of them, and she died of it.

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Port Edward, centuries Later

Gestas settled his great black cloak around his body. It was cold on the widow's walk atop Dismas' rented manor house on the ridge west of town. He watched as Dismas surveyed Port Edward through a brass spyglass. The older man's voice was dour. "In these reduced days, people only dream of electricity, of clean water. Whereas once we flew between the stars."

"They doubtless had their complaints in those times," said Gestas. All he ever wanted to do was fly between the stars, an impossible choice within the isolation of the Children's Compact.

"Certainly. But consider what we have left to work with. We conspire at metallurgy, to overthrow the world by base means. Not for us the operatic splendor of high finance or politics."

Gestas laughed. "You just can't stand a quiet little town."

Dismas turned the spyglass in his hands, studying the fading mark of each fingerprint on the brass barrel. "As to conspiracy, how old are you, friend Gestas? When were you born?"

"You know I can't tell you that," Gestas said quietly. The question was the height of rudeness addressed to one of the Lost such as he.

"The story is always the same." Dismas sighed. "Babies vanish as prisoner to the Children. Once grown, some return as Deadwalkers, others come back more or less whole—the Lost. One day you just walked into a tavern or a boat slip and said, 'I am a man, sent to live among my people.'"

Gestas stared at the gardens below, seeing the beginning of his memories in sharp relief. "'I am a man, come to live among men,' I said to three woman herding pigs along a path near January Landing. That was my first day, these twelve decades past."

Dismas laid a hand on Gestas' shoulder. "Put away your shame, my friend. I was born under the light of another sun. I came in the Second Emigration, and I have seen every midsummer dawn in the centuries since the Children's Compact. I feel no older than I did that year. And I would trade all the endless decades to see a son of mine grow to manhood."

“At least people of your day had a choice. You could have left.” Gestas glanced up at the blue sky, where ships had once sailed to and from their world.

“It was not that easy, then. It is certainly no easier now. Your complicity in our conspiracy is simple enough—you want to leave this place. My memories, the hard truths in my past, they are why I conspire against the Children’s Compact.”

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Dismas and Gestas walked along Exchange Street, a wide cobbled thoroughfare that paralleled the reeking barns, slaughterhouses, and tanneries lining the Grain Quays along the western bank of the Uffratte. In that part of town, smiths and metalwrights kept company among the barraters, clowns and jossmen who lived off the excess funds spilling from the pockets of ranchers come to market. To be a smith in Port Edward, or any town on the world of Gol Goth, was an occupation fraught with risk and dubious practices. The Children forbade the working of ferrous metal. By extension, even necessary metalwork in brass or copper was suspect.

“Ahasuerus, under the sign of the hoop,” said Gestas. “My inquiries led to him as most likely to assist our cause.”

“Where is the sign of the hoop, then?” Tapping his cane on the cobbles, Dismas scanned Exchange Street, looking across the milling crowds of tradesmen and drovers with their cattle, pigs, and native buffalo. The tall aniline hats of the two gentlemen marked them out from the crowd, which swirled around them without ever brushing too close. Dismas kept his free hand on his sword hilt, wary of cutpurses.

“Behind the Martinelli Grangery, I believe,” said Gestas. He paused by a great barn that had once been painted white, then stepped beyond it into a narrow alley backed on the other side by the dressed-stone wall of a public house.

Dismas followed Gestas down a meandering cleared path in the alley’s center, saying, “I am confident that you know your way, but still you surprise me.”

Gestas picked his way along. “That is our bargain. You keep us in funds, I keep us informed.”

Past the back of the public house, a corroded hoop stuck out above a thick door in a smaller, older wall. This second building was made from fired brick, in the style of the First Emigration, and ran the remaining length of the alley to where a wooden stairwell debouched to the dark waters of the Uffratte.

Dismas reached up with his cane and tapped the hoop, which was mounted so high that even at full stretch he could barely reach it. The hoop rang metal on metal, and a small shower of rust scaled from it.

“True iron, openly displayed,” he whispered. “Gestas, you have brought us to the right place. Here is a man unafraid.”

Gestas nodded at the river stairs. “Here is a man with a quick exit as well, you might note.”

“Is there a protocol, secret words?”

“Knock, I was told, and speak with as much honesty as we can bear.”

Dismas swept back his cloak and hammered on the smith’s door with the brass tip of his cane. He bellowed in time with his thumping, “Arise, sir Ahasuerus, two gentlemen desire your company!”

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After five minutes and more of knocking, a reddened eye, mostly obscured with pale hair, peeped through a judas hole in the door. “Is subtlety a lost art among the gentlemen of Port Edward?”

Dismas struck a pose, cane touching the muck between his feet. “Some notices are best served with enthusiasm.”

“And are the Children such idiots they might not hear you?”

“Most pause to say that name aloud,” said Gestas, “even here among the despised, meaty reek of our city.”

“We are all barbarians, crouched at the gates of the world,” grumbled the owner of the eye. “Whence did you come then? Are you both of the Lost?”

“He is,” Dismas nodded at Gestas, “though he has made up for it well enough these past decades. I shipped on the *CTS Michael’s Rowboat*, in the Second Emigration.”

“Who was captain of that ship? Merry Jack Battiste?”

Dismas stiffened. “Merry Jack was the CoDep agent, may the Pilots take his eyes. You know perfectly well none of us groundworms ever met a captain in the flesh, but ours was a Farsi woman named Yasmeen Ibrahim.”

“Come in then, but be warned.” The door swung open. “There’s some in here with no use for gentlemen, and quick to cut in with their ideas, if you take my meaning.”

Dismas bowed, sweeping back his cape to show the bronze foil at his side. The two gentlemen walked into the darkness of the smithy. In the narrow hallway within, Gestas could tell that Ahasuerus the smith was a tired man. It showed in his voice, in the stoop of his shoulder, in the odd slackness of his skin.

“I have never seen a man with white hair,” Gestas whispered to Dismas, who shushed him.

Ahasuerus led them to a workroom, two stories high and quite deep. What had once been windows were filled with cruder stonework, the carefully laid arches now only punctuation for a stolid wall.

An unlit furnace dominated one end of the room, surrounded by chains leading into high shadows from which depended ladles, buckets, and lengths of trough. It was flanked by two bronze kilns that seemed to have seen more recent use. The floor was littered with oddments, wooden vises, copper shavings, broken barrels, ropes, debris far too varied to surrender to a casual inventory. There was no sign of the threatened confederates, but judging from the smith’s muscles, Gestas was certain Ahasuerus needed little help in dealing with unwanted guests.

Ahasuerus coughed, a heavy, wet sound from deep in his chest. “Water, then? I’m no drinking man.”

“No, thank you.” Dismas swept dust from an intact barrel, then sat down. “I prefer to talk.”

“Talk, then.” Ahasuerus paced the room. “You came off *Mike’s Boat*, that buys you some of my attention.”

“I can see how busy you are.” Dismas glanced around at the cold furnace, the quiet kilns, the unemployed worktables. “I will waste no time. We have come to seek your aid.”

“I’m a bronze smith.” Ahasuerus paused to cross his arms, facing down Dismas with a sneer. “I make horseshoes and spear heads and axle fittings. Which of those do you need?”

Dismas glanced at Gestas, who pulled a pouch from beneath his bloused shirt. The pouch was copper mesh, lined with raw native silk, bound with a leather thong that also formed a necklace.

Ahasuerus snorted. “I also know a charm bag when I see it. Some farmwife finds an iron nail in an ancient plank at the bottom of the midden, she puts it in one of those. Sorry, no nails for sale here.”

Gestas smiled, opening the bag to spill out a single iron coin. It tingled in his

hand. He tossed the coin toward the smith, who caught it without breaking eye contact. Ahasuerus rolled the coin in his fingers a moment before looking down at it.

“Ah...” He sniffed the coin, then passed it from one hand to the other, feeling it from all angles. “Ah.”

Dismas and Gestas both held their silence.

Ahasuerus sighed, then resumed his pacing. He cradled the iron coin gently in one hand. “River Watch found six Deadwalkers this morning. That many sent back to us at once means the Children are upset. Now I know why.” He looked up at the two gentlemen. “How many? How much?”

“Over four hundred pounds of cold iron coin, Ahasuerus.” Dismas’ face blazed. “Think what could be done with *four hundred* pounds.”

“How did you find it?”

After glancing at Dismas, Gestas spoke reluctantly. “The usual sort of thing. Rumors, hand-drawn maps, skulking in dark alleys.”

The smith laughed. “Dead men may tell no tales, but when hardly anyone dies, no secret lasts forever. You dug up the Bosun’s Grave.”

“We understood this to be a lost hoard,” Gestas said.

“Lost in the sense that Merry Jack and I buried it there.”

“Merry Jack...” Dismas seemed to be reaching for difficult words. “He ... died, during the Evacuation.”

“No, gentlemen. He did not.” Ahasuerus smiled, displaying gapped yellow teeth behind cracked lips. “And it seems I do know you, sir.” He stabbed a finger at Dismas. “You’re the man who tried to kill Merry Jack at January Landing, on the Last Day. He warned me about you. A failed effort on your part, although Merry Jack found another path to a bed beneath the earth this hundred years or more past. Childshot, he was.”

Dismas shook, knuckles whitening on his cane. “He *died*. I struck him down.”

“No, not then, although I would imagine he felt little call to inform you of his survival. Not that he didn’t deserve what you did to him. But after that, missing the ships, you smashing him up, I don’t know which, but Merry Jack came to a change of attitude.”

Dismas seemed caught between anger and grief. Gestas spoke up. “I may be

Lost, but I've come back, and there's nothing wrong with my head. Why did you bury the hoard in the first place?"

The smith's eyes focused on an invisible distance. "Oh lad, the days were terrible then, after the Evacuation. The Children, they sent ... Powers, roaming the land to terrorize and kill. Lot of cold iron then, humans always have iron, and it was being thrown into the sea as fast as people could move it.

"You don't realize how the whole world of human technology was built on iron—electric generators, machine tools. Everything had to go, very quickly. A disposal team didn't move fast enough to suit the terms of the Compact, they'd wake to find a man Childshot, turned to a Deadwalker right there. Or just gone, in a bloody trail and no screams heard by the night sentry. Lots of people wanted to take their own lives, hard as that had become, but few wanted to be killed out of hand."

"But surely—"

"Enough!" Dismas again laid a hand on Gestas' shoulder. "We live now, not then, and the Powers are long since gone. Only a fool gets himself Childshot these days. We have iron. Will you help us?"

"Only a fool digs up four hundred weight of cold iron," the smith said quietly. "What did you plan to do with this stuff?"

Gestas answered. "Our babies are born and surrendered within a day, or they rot and die. Somewhere, under earthen mounds or perhaps beneath the water, the children of men grow in silence, hosts to the Children of Gol Goth. Some like me come back to the world, Lost but returned. Others come back, Deadwalkers, who move and breathe but for a few weeks at best. Most never return at all. We need to interrupt that cycle of control by the Children, do away with the Compact to bring death and childhood back among us. Then we can take back our lives and rejoin the worlds of men."

Ahasuerus cocked his head. "How do you plan to do this?"

"The Children hate iron, so it follows that iron must have power over them. We don't know the best way to apply that power. I understand you have given the matter some thought over the years."

"This is a dangerous game," said Ahasuerus, "for you and everyone around you. But I've been dying for almost three hundred years and I'd like to finish the job like a human being." He sighed his way to a rheumy cough. "You are right, there are some old ideas, plans drawn up before we all lost heart. I'll help."

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Dismas and Gestas walked back uptown, stopping by silent agreement for a drink in a little bistro that smelled of powdered sugar and steam.

Gestas sipped a mug of swamp ale. Thick stuff redolent of anise, it was brewed from the bladders of a native water plant. “What’s wrong with him?”

Dismas stared out the window of the bistro, looking at the tattered Terran elms that lined Morrigan Avenue. “Ahasuerus is old, and sick.”

“How? Like a chill?”

“He was old and sick, before the Compact. Old, it’s when you’ve lived too many years, like happens to horses or dogs. Your hair goes gray or white, you lose your teeth, muscles wither and bones grow brittle, then one day you just die. And as for sick, I don’t know what he has. I was never a doctor, but maybe pneumonia. Could even be something like cystic fibrosis. It’s in his lungs. *Before*, people died from being sick if they didn’t get old first. Somehow he survived the coming of the Children.”

“Really?” Gestas had never seen an old person, any more than he’d ever seen a child. And no one was ever sick.

“Death,” said Dismas, “was once a process of time.”

“Merry Jack died, you said. But Ahasuerus claims they buried those iron coins we recovered.”

Dismas shook his head. “He wasn’t breathing when I finished with him.” Dismas laughed, his voice brittle as glass. “I eventually became a gentleman because of him. Merry Jack taught hard lessons. And he was definitely dead.”

“Then who helped Ahasuerus bury the coins?”

Dismas shrugged. “Someone who took the name of Battiste, thought him a powerful man to be. I make it a policy to look to the future, not the past.”

Gestas sipped his swamp ale before answering. “At least you have a past.”

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“Once I start working it, they’ll know. They won’t know where, not right away, but they’ll find it.” The smith shuffled the spilled masses of iron coins that covered the library floor in Dismas’ manor. Ahasuerus was careful not to touch them with his feet.

A thin new moon spilled gentle violet light through the tall windows. Gas jets

on the wall guttered at their tightest choke, just enough to fill the room with shadows, while keeping it as chill as the night outside.

“How?” asked Dismas.

Ahasuerus shrugged. “Our best guess was that the Children are extremely sensitive to magnetic distortions. You were smart to bring the coins here. The iron rods in these First Emigration walls will mask the coins. It’ll take a while, but the Children will find the coins here. Then, poof...” Ahasuerus pointed a finger at Dismas, then Gestas. “Then you’re Childshot. If you’re lucky. There are worse fates.”

“Why did this place stand?” Gestas asked.

The smith shrugged. “High on the limestone ridge, away from earth and water where the Children are strongest. Low on the disposal list, never got to it before everyone got lazy and slow. Who knows? Structural iron doesn’t bother them as much. It’s cold iron, free in a man’s hand, that spells trouble.” He kicked at one of the rotted sacks still enclosing portions of the hoard. “I need to work it up here. Don’t fancy transporting this stuff across town.”

“What are you going to make?” Dismas asked. This had been a potentially fatal flaw in their plans. They knew the worth of iron, from legend, from tales told by firelight, from the strength of effort the Children put into dispersing it. The Children were vulnerable to iron. Neither Dismas nor Gestas knew precisely why. That was one reason they needed Ahasuerus.

The smith smiled his gapped, yellow smile, teeth gleaming in the dim light of the gas jets. “Oh, I designed a Child trap a couple of centuries ago. Clever little thing, uses less than a quarter pound of steel. Perhaps five or six of those coins, melted down. We could make almost two thousand of them from your hoard. The question is, how to use them?”

Dismas unfolded himself from a maroon leather wingback chair. He began to pace the room, orbiting outside the smith’s tight circuit of the spilled coins as his cane tapped the carpeted floor. “They will feel the approach.”

“Not inside copper cladding. A mesh glove of copper, grounded through the body. Like Gestas’ charm bag in which he brought me the sample. The iron in our blood troubles them, too. That’s why they never just took us all over.”

Dismas smiled back. “Ah. And this is why you are the smith and I am a gentleman idler.”

“An idler who troubled to find the iron hoard, after all these years.”

“I don’t understand why you made coins.” Gestas stared at the hoard, left where it had spilled out from its concealing coffin. In the flickering shadows of the library they could be legendary gold, treasure of some space captain trapped on Gol Goth after the Evacuation. “Why not ingots, or sprues, or even blank discs? Why bother to actually mint iron coins?”

“Mint, lad,” said Ahasuerus. His voice was almost dreamy. “Mint’s the key. That was Merry Jack’s greatest idea. Use the mint they once had here in Port Edward to work the iron. There were dies there, hammers, small tools, sufficient iron to confuse the issue. It had survived the disposal. The Children didn’t care about metal at the mint, not by then. And coins, they have a patina, almost a soul of their own, that hides myriad truths. We buried treasure, not gold, that night in the boneyard. We hid real iron behind the idea of gold.”

“The Children would hardly be fooled by that.”

The smith’s voice hardened. “We hid it from ourselves. Until the Children grew lazy, and some among us grew strong enough. Like you and Dismas.”

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There was an old forge behind the manor house’s stables, but Dismas and Ahasuerus agreed the smith should work in the kitchen, hidden within the ancient steel-braced walls.

Cook had resigned when the tongs and braziers arrived on the baking table, so Gestas was forced to make stew for them each day. Dismas had dismissed the rest of the house servants in Cook’s wake. Longines, Dismas’ man, remained available for needful errands, but most of his time was spent practicing a cultivated paranoia that kept them safe within the house.

The smith had brought up a good number of tools from his workshop. Copper, brass, bronze, clay, wood, ancient plastics, materials of every description filled the kitchen, all shapes and sizes. Gestas was amazed at how quickly the cluttered spirit of the workshop off Exchange Street had possessed their kitchen.

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Dismas watched Ahasuerus heat a coin over a brazier, work it with tiny tools, then place the shaped metal in a copper urn. Six such urns sat before him on the chopping block, next to some copper mesh worked into the shape of a glove, slipped over a carved wooden hand. He would pause, then select another coin from a different urn.

“Do the urns hide the coins from the senses of the Children?” asked Gestas.

Ahasuerus twisted a coin further out of recognition. He shrugged without looking back at Gestas. “When I work the iron, it cries out. Even I can tell that, with my old human ears and deaf human mind. Who knows what the Children really hear? Besides, it keeps my hands from stinging overmuch from the touch of the iron.”

“And how will you make a thousand of these, one at a time so slowly?”

“Never, if you keep questioning!” The smith put the coin away. He turned to look at Gestas. “Have you not heard of a prototype?”

“No.” Gestas felt almost foolish.

Ahasuerus laid his tongs down, mopped his brow. “A break then. What do you know? Not metallurgy, I am sure, but algebra? Geography, perhaps? Can you name the human stars in the sky?”

“I am a gentleman,” Gestas answered slowly, seeking words that might win respect. “I can fence, and discriminate wines by taste alone. I am a fair horseman, can read English well and Arabic poorly, though I know none of the other languages of Gol Goth. I can do sums, and calculate angles, and know a few of the arts of war.”

Ahasuerus snorted, almost launching himself into another coughing fit. “So you’re a journeyman idler and an apprentice military engineer. What else did they teach you?”

“Nothing.” Gestas stared at his polished boots. “No one teaches the Lost. I was lucky to find Dismas, who gave me some chance to learn.”

The smith smiled, a gentle smile lacking his ordinary rancor. “My apologies, gentleman Gestas. I intended no mockery. An old man forgets new things.”

“No offense.” Gestas looked at the worktable, framing another question in his mind. “Dismas says all of human technology is built on iron. Were we doomed when we surrendered to the Children?”

“No.” Ahasuerus sighed. “There are other ways. We can generate electricity with copper. Machine tools could be made of brass. I think we lost our hearts, lost our nerve to the Children’s Compact. No one was ever willing to risk the alternatives.” He waved at the copper mesh glove. “Tomorrow, are you willing to test the Child trap? It is a dangerous but necessary step.”

Dangerous but necessary, thought Gestas. Two conditions to which any gentleman should aspire. “Yes. I would be pleased, although I imagine Dismas fancied going first.”

“I shall speak to Dismas,” said the smith. “We understand one another all too well.”

“And from your iron we will forge steps to return us to the stars,” whispered Gestas.

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Gestas walked like the gentleman he was, tall and proud in his aniline stovepipe hat and great cloak, breaking his stride for no one. Longines, small, dark-complected, scurried beside Gestas to glower at onlookers with some help from Ahasuerus. Gestas kept his copper-clad hand hidden from view under the black cloak. The Child trap lurked in his palm, a malevolent metal spider barely caged by the strength of Gestas’ fingers.

“You have had the design for two centuries, Ahasuerus. Did you never build one before?”

Longines glared at Gestas. The manservant’s face twitched, a sign of nerves or distress.

Speaking quietly, Ahasuerus ignored the warning. “That is not the way of things. Weapons, like coins, have a transcendent meaning of their own. A knife *will* be drawn, if you take my meaning. We were never ready before, so I never made one. I am not sure we are ready now, but the time must come someday and I am a tired man.” He waved his fist at a bullock driver. “You, mudfoot! Get those Lost cattle out of the gentleman’s path!”

Longines spoke, his voice rough. “If you value our safety, silence on these matters. We will be in trouble enough before long.”

They walked down the boardwalk that lined Settlement Avenue, toward the fare docks and the west bank station of the River Watch. Jostling herds and rumbling wains gave way to lines of people, filing up from the river ferries, filing down to the river ferries, passing through Port Edward to seek or lose their fortunes. The backcountry swallowed most of the broken poor eventually. Gestas thanked the luck that had set him on another path when the Children had first released him to consciousness.

“This way,” hissed Longines. He limped slightly as he led them into an alley.

“Are you hurt?” asked Gestas quietly.

“A fall chasing intruders on the manor grounds. Silence now.”

They skulked down a narrow alley with clapboard buildings on both sides. It

ran parallel to the Uffratte, but Longines pushed through a rotted fence into a midden on the river side, carefully replacing the boards behind Ahasuerus and Gestas.

Gestas covered a choking cough with his free hand. The stench was dense and foul.

“We are behind the holding house where they take the Deadwalkers,” whispered Longines. “I will bring one out to you. The test is up to you and the smith.”

Gestas glanced at Ahasuerus, who smiled and made a clasping motion with his right hand. Gestas tossed open his cloak and let the copper glove hang free at his side. Longines pried open a low door and vanished into one of the wooden buildings. A muffled thump echoed from the doorway, followed by a grunt.

The female Deadwalker who came out the door a moment later was one of the youngest people Gestas had ever seen. She had long blonde hair, stringy and knotted. Her ragged gray dress was rent open from her neck to her knees, hanging from her shoulders like rotten peels of fruit. The breasts that peeked out were so small as to be barely rounded. Gestas looked up at her eyes, then stepped back against the opposite wall of the midden.

The Deadwalker’s eyes were filmed over with dark, narrow threads that writhed, extending from inside the sockets. A few hung from her nostrils. Her face was as slack as a sheep’s hide hung to cure, muscles so loose Gestas could believe they might simply drop away. A dribble of spittle flowed from her lips to dangle in long loops toward her breasts.

No one knew what made the difference between the Lost, children like Gestas restored to humankind in their young adulthood, and the Deadwalkers, addled corpses too stubborn to die. Here but for the grace of the Pilots was he, Gestas realized. His throat closed as his stomach wrenched, bile flooding inside him as his knees threatened to collapse.

“Now,” Ahasuerus whispered fiercely. “The Children are strong within any Deadwalker. We must test the trap and leave.”

Gestas swept his gloved hand out wide. He stepped well within the Deadwalker’s reach, an act that took more courage than any duel he had ever fought. He caught her at the waist with his free hand, touching bare skin just inside the torn dress.

She was warm. This surprised him.

He stepped around to the Deadwalker’s left as she stood unresisting, dragging his left arm across her bare belly to wrap her in a loose hug, finishing with his body

behind hers. Gestas stood like a lover intending to kiss her neck. The little hairs of her belly thrilled his hand and warmed his groin even as his gut threatened to disgorge.

Gestas threw his right hand, copper-clad with the Child trap, around her to touch his left. This closed the circuit of copper-wrapped iron that ran in a thin wire from the copper glove, up his sleeve, across his shoulder and down to the wrist of his left hand.

He brought the copper-clad hand directly on to her tiny left breast. As his palm flexed, the Child trap clicked open, driving an iron spike through the skin toward her heart.

The Deadwalker's shriek rose to meet the sky. Her head slammed back into Gestas' face even as her body erupted, skin rippling to shreds as thousands of black threads shot outward, upward, in all directions.

Gestas screwed his eyes and mouth shut, swallowing a shriek of his own as the body in his arms disintegrated, falling through his grip like so much offal. His own gut finally betrayed him, sending a flood of bile and vomit rushing to his head so fast his mouth threatened to explode. Gestas leaned forward, slapping his hands to his thighs, and violently spewed everything in his stomach atop the bloody, bone-filled mess at his feet.

He noticed flowers stitched into the collar of the gray dress as Ahasuerus and Longines pulled him away, fleeing distant shouts of alarm. His nose and sinuses stung with sharp, bitter bile, and he kept wiping blood from his eyes. It was some time before Gestas realized that he had stabbed himself deep in the right thigh with the Child trap.

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"My hat," said Gestas. "Where is my hat?"

Ahasuerus snorted. "Filled with blood and vomit. I did not think you would want it back."

They rode in a vegetable cart, driven by Longines after a brief and forceful negotiation with the previous owner. A patched canvas cover stretched over them, sealing in the fetid heat of their bodies, the odor of the turnips on which they sat, and a stench of blood and bile Gestas could swear he would always carry inside his skull.

Ahasuerus patted Gestas' hand. "Well, the trap was a success, of a sort."

"Success?" Gestas was shocked. "What would failure have meant?"

“Being Childshot, perhaps. Had you never seen a Deadwalker before?”

Gestas shuddered. “Not so close, no.”

Ahasuerus was unsympathetic. “The Lost are little different, at first, save for the eyes.”

“Her dress was torn open. Did the Children—?”

“No. They cannot use us that way. Perhaps one of the keepers at the pen. Or there are those who bribe their way in to take a dark pleasure. Where there are no youths, there are no young upon which to satisfy ageing lust.”

Gestas stared at Ahasuerus, but the old man looked sad, fallen into bitter memory. He could not imagine suckling, touching, mounting anyone, any creature with those horrible, threaded eyes and that blank face.

“May the Pilots preserve me,” whispered Gestas.

“No stomach for it now? This is what you sought when you went digging in the mud of the Bosun’s Grave.”

Gestas remembered the shriek, the shredded face splattering into his as he closed his eyes. “Not this. I will live that moment again in sleep every day of my life.”

“It is tragedy indeed to live forever, young man.”

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They burned Gestas’ bloody clothes in the kitchen hearth, even the boots, which were his best pair. Gestas nearly boiled himself in the copper laundry tub that Longines had dragged, limping, into the library.

“Hotter, hotter,” he kept insisting, even as blisters rose on his skin. He scrubbed himself raw and bloody with copper wire brushes, trying to remove the taint of the Deadwalker, until Ahasuerus took the brushes away. His lips inflamed from repeated dunkings to gargle clear his sinuses, Gestas sat in the steaming tub of bloody water and wept.

Outside, the turnip cart burned in the afternoon sun, its smoke pushing into the library with the odors of roasted vegetables and wood smoke. Longines had freed the mule team, shooing them out to the road where they would presumably find their own way back to their owner.

Dismas tapped the copper tub with the brass tip of his cane. "Gestas, you need more fortitude."

"It was worse than you think," said Ahasuerus quietly.

The cane continued to tap, a metallic ringing muffled by the water that enclosed Gestas. Dismas looked down at him. "But something of a success, I presume?"

Ahasuerus grabbed the cane to stop the tapping. "That depends on your goals. It was a violent and wholly fatal exorcism."

Dismas smiled. "We drove the Children out of a human being."

"They took her life as they left," muttered Gestas from his bloody bath.

Ahasuerus nodded. "She was already dead. I had hoped to draw them out, poison them with iron, but that was a catastrophe."

Gestas looked at the smith, studying his face. "Those threads I saw, they are the Children?"

The smith shook his head. "You said no one teaches the Lost. Listen, then. The threads are a manifestation of the Children. The Children's Compact was an infection as much as anything. In an adult, it is passive, symbiotic, maintaining the host in youth and health. We look to live forever, barring accident, injury or murder, because we are filled with their power. Have you seen the inside of a man's arm, perhaps laid open in a duel?"

Gestas nodded. "Yes, my own, in the moments before it closed to heal."

"Then you are aware that the muscles are shot through with white threads. Those are a part of the infection. If you ever saw the brain of a corpse, you would see the same, in great knots. Some say they only have minds because of us, that the Children were dumb as animals before we came and they stole our thoughts. I do not know. But iron in concentration unbinds the threads and draws them out. They are sensitive to it, and afraid."

"So why aren't we affected by iron the way the Deadwalker was?"

"Look at your thigh."

Gestas drew his leg up out of the water. The deep cut in his thigh still bled. "By the Pilots, I have had this cut for an hour and a half."

"If you can stand the touch, pull the wound open for a moment. You should

see no white threads. They have retreated, leaving that part of you vulnerable.”

“I choose to believe you,” said Gestas. “So the Child trap does work on us, just slower.”

“Exactly,” Ahasuerus said. “Did you notice the Deadwalker’s threads were black? That is a much later stage of the infection than our white threads. The brain tissue is overwhelmed, the Children are in direct control. In you and me, their influence is much lighter, so the influence of iron is as well.”

Gestas stared at his bloody hands, two nails torn loose on the right from his scrubbing. “There is so little distance between the Deadwalkers and the Lost. We never know our children.”

Freeing it from Ahasuerus’ loose grasp, Dismas tapped his cane on the copper tub. “So you believe, about the children. What is on the bottom your left foot, Gestas?”

“My birthmark. A small brown scar, narrowing at one end.”

Dismas’ face was set. “I branded my newborn son, over one hundred thirty years ago, by pressing the point of a hot poker to his left foot. The midwife tried to kill me for it. Our differences resolved, we then laid him at the doorstep as the Children’s Compact requires. He was gone in the morning light. I wanted a way to know him if he ever came back.”

Gestas stared up at Dismas. “That is why you asked to see my feet, that day in January Landing?”

Dismas’ face looked ready to dissolve into hysteria. “I spent decades crafting excuses to see the feet of tall, pale men who resembled me.”

“Pilots above,” whispered Ahasuerus. “Father and son.”

As Gestas erupted into fierce, heaving sobs, Longines shuffled to the door of the library.

“Gentleman Dismas, there is a Power loose in the city, down along the river bank. You should go to the roof and see.”

Ahasuerus grabbed the robe laid out for Gestas. “Come, boy,” he said, dragging the sobbing man out of the tub by main force. Bloody water sluiced onto the carpet. “You are clean enough. Let us go with your father to see what we three have wrought.”

* * * *

The smoke from the burning turnip wagon drifted away to the south on the prevailing wind, leaving their eastward view toward the city clear. Dismas leaned his cane against the railing of the widow's walk and gazed through the brass spyglass.

"What is it?" asked Ahasuerus. Gestas stood beside him, lost in the inner horrors of murder of the dead and suddenly discovered family.

"A water snake. Perhaps forty feet in length. It rampages along Exchange Street." Dismas passed the spyglass over. "Look by Martinelli's. It is killing horses very near your alleyway."

Ahasuerus scanned the town. "I see the coachworks is ablaze as well. There has not been a Power afoot in two centuries. We have certainly opened a poorly chosen door."

Gestas had recovered his composure. Without speaking, he reached for the spyglass. Ahasuerus surrendered it, and Gestas swept it across the waterfront.

The Power was a water snake, literally—a tube of writhing water that lashed in the middle of Exchange Street and crushed men, women and livestock that fled its wrath. Its progress seemed purposeful, but Gestas feared to imagine its goal. "What have we done?" he whispered.

"We have begun a rebellion," Dismas answered. "A rebellion against life everlasting."

"I don't want to live forever," said Ahasuerus. "I am tired."

Gestas watched the water snake continue its rampage. "All I wanted was to leave this place and see the stars." He folded the spyglass with a snap. "The Children have responded to us. Now is the time for action. We go to the waterfront. Dismas ... Father ... have Longines ready the fiacre. I will dress quickly."

Leaving the spyglass on the rail of the widow's walk, Gestas trotted down the steps into the manor house. Dismas called down to Longines, who limped in the gardens three stories below them.

* * * *

The two gentlemen and the smith sat in the back of the fiacre, while Longines drove. He had harnessed Dismas' two best riding horses, both unaccustomed to draft duty. They danced out their nervous displeasure as Longines whipped them, causing the fiacre to sway dangerously.

Gestas sat wrapped in a great black cloak, Dismas' second best as his own

good one was burned. “Did you see his eye, Father?” he asked Dismas quietly.

“Whose?”

Gestas nodded toward the driver’s bench. “Bleeding. Your man has been fighting.”

Dismas changed the subject. “How quickly can you make a thousand of those traps, sir smith?”

“Never, now.” Ahasuerus shook his head as the fiacre lurched to the right. “Just the one brought a Power rampaging from the waters. We would not have time to get many done.”

“And if we took the coins and fled inland, to high, stony ground?”

Ahasuerus shrugged. “Let us see what becomes of this day before we plan our flight.”

“Who wouldn’t want to live forever?” asked Gestas from deep inside his own thoughts. “To have that and the stars, too, would be a noble goal.”

Dismas laughed, tapping Gestas’ cloaked knee with the tip of his cane. “That, my son, is the riddle of our times.”

* * * *

Longines stopped the fiacre at the point where Kali Avenue crossed Exchange Street. Three blocks down, the water snake sat quivering in the middle of the road. Smoke drifted from several fires, mainly the coachworks, and the crowds were gone, except for a few panicked cattle huddled on the porch of a fruitery.

Gestas, seated on the left, pushed open the half-door and jumped from the fiacre. As his cloak billowed behind him, the copper glove on his right hand was clearly visible to the others for the first time.

Longines jumped down next to him, stumbling. “Gentleman Gestas, I counsel you do not approach too close to the Power.”

“Really, Longines?” Gestas reached toward Longines with the copper glove and the Child trap within. Longines flinched, as his right eye wept blood.

Dismas and Ahasuerus stepped around the lathered horses to stand behind Longines. Longines glanced over his shoulder at Dismas, then back at Gestas. “There is no point. It will not speak with you. It cannot. It is a Power, a blind force of the nature of this world.”

Gestas flexed his copper glove. “And where, Longines, would I go to find a Child of Gol Goth with which to speak?” With his gloved hand, he swiped the Child trap across Longines’ face, barely scraping the man’s cheek.

Longines shrieked, then stumbled backward to a sitting position. Gestas watched Longines’ scalp sag, as his right eye melted into a flow of blood. More blood pooled onto the cobbles from his groin. Black threads peeked from his wounds. The color of his skin changed as the Children withdrew their protection.

“Ghosts of the Pilots,” said Dismas from behind in an awed voice. “Merry Jack Battiste. My sister’s lover has returned as an immortal Deadwalker.”

“Should then I call you *Uncle*, Merry Jack?” Gestas. He had slipped beyond any sense of consequence. With his left hand he grabbed the front of Merry Jack’s shirt, pulling him back to his feet. Gestas was tall and thin, strong enough to dangle the other man, whose left leg hung lax and bent at the knee while his right scabbled vaguely for purchase.

“You may call us Child.” Merry Jack grinned. His remaining eye gleamed as it filmed over with writhing black threads. More threads extended from the guttered socket of his right.

“Come see your handiwork, Father,” called Gestas. “The Children repaired him for their use.”

“We return him to you now.” Merry Jack’s voice had expanded to a vast hollow rushing. It sounded as if the black threads had filled his lungs. “You would reject our gifts of life and health.”

“No one wants to live forever!” Gestas shook Merry Jack. “We are human. We live on through our sons and daughters, whom you have taken from us.”

The horses whinnied and began to back in their traces as the three men surrounded Merry Jack.

“No, *we* go on through your sons and daughters. We go on through you all.” Merry Jack threw back his head and howled. Gestas dropped the screaming, broken body, victim of a murder two centuries past. With a great shudder, Gestas began to stab himself with the Child trap, in his chest, his groin, his left shoulder.

Ahasuerus grabbed Gestas’ gloved right hand. “What in name of all good sense are you doing?” the smith screamed.

“Driving out the Children.” Gestas sobbed, breath coming in great, ragged gasps. Blood streamed from the wounds on his body, white threads wiggling

outward with the flow. "I will be my own man if it kills me!"

"No." Dismas grabbed Gestas' hand, taking the iron spike through his own hand until they were trapped together. Father and son, the two men strained for control. "You will not die now, for this."

"Dismas," croaked Merry Jack from where he lay on the street. "You never did leave." He laughed, more of a burbling cough. "Neither did your sister."

Dismas wrenched free of Gestas in order to kick Merry Jack in the ribs. Gestas looked up to see the water snake towering above them. The horses screamed, backing against the set brake of the fiacre.

He could smell Merry Jack's body rotting as it was released by the Children, even as his father continued to crush the dead man's ribs in a blind rage. Dismas could smell cattle and the sharp sting of the fire at the coachworks. He could smell his own blood, taste his hot breath with traces of that morning's vomit clinging like wasp stings on a summer beach. Gestas could smell his life.

He knew he would never see the stars.

As the water snake came crashing down on him, Gestas plunged the Child trap into his left breast, over his heart. "I will be free," he whispered as his voice was snatched away by the flood.

* * * *

"Well, come on then."

A middle-aged man holding the leads to two mules towered over the young man. The young man realized it was because he lay upon the ground. The ground was hard, many round rocks pushing against his back. Cobbles?

The older man leaned down, grasped the young man's hand to help him stand. The older man smelled of turnips, and seemed familiar. "You're a bit big for this, aren't you, lad?"

"I suppose." He choked, coughing up water. His hands felt oddly light, and he noticed ragged holes in his clothing through which thin, pale scars could be seen.

"You have a name?"

Memories roiled, then faded. "Gestas, perhaps." He sought the words, the ones he had been given to say. "I am a man, come to live among men."

"Yes, yes, I know all about that Lost bit. Look, I could use a big lad like you

down in the fields. I've had my wagon stolen by madmen, and there's much hauling to be done by wheelbarrow. You'd be fed, and have a place to sleep. Things will seem better by and by."

The farmer walked away, leading his mules around two horses dead in their traces in the middle of the street. A smashed carriage lay in pieces behind them, a rotten corpse slumped against the wreckage. An old man and another dressed like Gestas himself sprawled nearby. Everything was soaking wet. The farmer glanced over his shoulder.

"You coming, then? There's much that needs doing. Nobody lives forever." He laughed. "Well, you know what I mean."

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