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ONE

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Even at night, the bridge throws a shadow on the river—a black lane where the otherwise shimmering waters seem to deepen. I am invisible gliding down that narrow eclipse. No one can see me from above; no one can spot me from the shore. The whirl of the propeller slicing through the current vanishes under the city's hum that rolls over the river like a mist. The boat and I become nothing. A possibility no one considered.

Still, I sensed a disturbance in the dark as I cruised across the wide stream and through the late-summer night. How is it that one can feel when one's being watched? What is that touchless prodding that is also a pulling in space itself?

I cut the engine, allowed myself to drift to the edge of the bridge's shadow, took out my binoculars, and checked for other craft or a presence on the riverbank. The breeze, laced with the smell of clay, burning wood, and the wolfish call of loons, was a reflection of the river. I've learned not to look too closely at what the water carries, but that night I inspected all the vague shapes floating by. Some of them were seals. The slick curve of a dolphin hooked itself into the surface. Ducks, bobbing in an iridescent row, slept with their heads turned back and their beaks tucked under their wings. The small cluster of islands to the north and

the large ones due south appeared to hover, mute and blind, above the horizon. It was hard to imagine the violence that kept each one of the placid stars shining against the cleanest black possible. Except for a few distant fires, there was nothing on the main coastline. I switched the motor back on and kept going.

The faintest flashlight pointed at the depths would have revealed schools of shad silvering the surface; the oyster beds in the reefs; the eelgrass, perpetually tangled and combed and tousled again by the currents, creating the impression that the water is in fact a wind; sturgeon cruising by, like flexible fossils, with the majesty that only an eternal lineage can confer. This world made itself felt under the thin hull.

I landed where the river grasses were thick. Three or four upright otters stood their ground, glaring at me as I tied up. From beyond the streamside vegetation came the splashes of bass hunting for minnows. I walked over to the pinching site stiffly, with the awkward steps of those who know they're being observed or recorded, and looked around, scanning for my stalker while pretending to be a bewildered castaway. Beyond knolls of flotsam, rubble, and final, unreclaimable garbage, stood the abandoned apartment blocks that surround the heart of the city like ramparts. From the other side, over the ramshackle rooftops and through the gaping windows, came the drone of human activity and, ripping through it, the intermittent sound of a drill, the peal of metal on metal, music receding and bending into the distance, someone screaming "nine" or "mine" again and again.

After rambling around a bit, as if lost, I reached the site. It was safer to work on the uninhabited shoreline, and this was the best spot I'd found in months: The power line from a nearby substation had been easy to

locate and dig up, and luckily it led to a juicy subsidiary node, which makes pinching easier. The driftwood, water chestnuts, rocks, and junk I'd strewn over the brick the night before were just as I'd left them. After a final glance toward the buildings, I decided it was all right to check on the device hidden under the trash. It was untouched. Settings, wiring, load—everything was the same. No signs of intrusion.

True paranoia comes about when one's own paranoia becomes the object of one's own paranoia. That's why I decided to ignore the gaze I'd felt across the night and got to work.

Politburo was playing at Colcha, and they wanted me. Back then, I failed to even hate Politburo. They didn't matter enough. Under normal circumstances, I would never have agreed to power one of their inane shows. Not worth the risk, no matter the pay. But their manager, Alexis, told me that it was an important concert, that nothing could go wrong, that he needed the best. Things managers and brokers will say. He held my hands for a disconcertingly long time while he spoke, as though this somehow would have been persuasive. He also said that if I did this for him, he'd get me to power the Children. I have no idea how he knew this was the right thing to say.

Because of my work, I'm reluctant to discuss or even name the bands I love. The list isn't enough for one hand, and until recently, the Children were at the top of it. I've seen them play on countless occasions, consistently standing in the back, to the side, by the exit. Never wanted them to know I existed. Had no desire to meet them. No interest at all. Cringed at the mere thought of finding myself backstage, pretending to laugh at

their inside jokes and their little cruelties. It's always like that. I don't know what "cool" means but I do know that it can never have any content. It's pure removal. Once attached to something particular, it immediately dies under the weight of specificity. What onstage is magnificent arrogance, aloofness, a rage, in private is devalued into ordinary petulance, pettiness, a fit. This happens with all bands, once you get to know them. But I used to believe no band was or could be as great as the Children. And it was this greatness that I wanted to preserve for myself. Yet when Politburo's manager told me that the Children were looking for a new pincher and that he'd introduce me if I helped him out, I lost my perspective. Meeting the Children was out of the question. Still, working with them, being part of their music by powering one of their shows, had been a long-repressed dream of mine. I would do it from afar, I told myself, without any direct interaction with them. And charge double so they wouldn't suspect I would gladly have done it for free.

This was why I'd crossed the river that night when I first felt I was being watched: to check on the pinch that would power Politburo's show so I could later power the Children's show.

They say it's different in the country, up in the valley, or out by the lakes, where people have solar panels, wind turbines, dams, and such. In the city, however, Tensor holds a monopoly over energy distribution. They own the power station up the river, all the substations, and the lines that feed the larger businesses and the uptown homes of those who can afford to be on the grid. Solar farms are unviable here, since it's impossible for anyone to put up enough panels before they get stolen. With few excep-

tions, the equipment is pilfered in a circle until rightful ownership no longer can be established or the gear is broken beyond repair. Hand cranks and other kinds of dynamos help but seldom suffice. Some communes have succeeded in becoming self-sufficient, but most people have given up. Aside from the basics (stove, stell, a favorite appliance, maybe a bike), many here live close to the way humans lived forever, before electricity. It's fine. It's been like this for generations. But even for those few small basic things, let alone a concert, power is needed—which explains why bricks charged with energy pinched from the grid have become a form of currency.

Running a line from a pinching site to a home or a venue is a doomed scheme. The leak would be too noticeable, and there would be a literal thread leading from the scene of the crime to the perpetrator. The place would be swarming with CTS contractors and volunteers in no time. Most pinchers use bricks they load up as fast as they can, before they're detected. Speed, though, produces a sudden drop in the line that Tensor's brains and monitors can easily detect. This makes pinching a frantic, dangerous operation. And only so much power can be stored in a normal unit. For a typical show, for example, more than thirty bricks are required. More than thirty pinches, more than thirty opportunities for getting caught.

Not too long ago, I designed a new kind of unit. It holds the equivalent of about forty normal bricks. Instead of a lot of small, quick pinches that would require going all over town with cumbersome equipment and several batteries, my brick needs just one slow pinch. It's merely double the size of the average unit, which means I can take it to a venue in a backpack or use it to recharge dozens of normal batteries in the safety of my

workshop. Being so powerful, it has to charge at a low rate to make it as stealthy as possible. The draw is much longer than when using a standard brick, but it is also undetectable. Completely untraceable. Even a brain would mistake the pinch for a normal fluctuation on the line. One site, one pinch, no risk—if no one sees you getting in and out.

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I live on the wrong side of the river by choice. Most people believe that, despite being so clean, it will make them ill. Their near-religious fear is unfounded but understandable. On a calm day, one can see carp and flounder tending to the grounds below, sheepshead feeding on the barnacles scabbing abandoned jetties, slow sunken forests, ospreys stitching sky and water together to then emerge with perplexed trout in their talons. Yet none of this can make up for the occasional sighting of the grim outlines that sometimes drift by, half submerged like heavy ghosts. The river is where we dispose of our dead.

Making a crossing can be challenging. Sandbanks shift with the currents, and even when they look placid, the waters are turbulent. Few know their way through the invisible lanes that circumvent the many hazards lurking in the depths. All kinds of debris litter the riverbed—wrecked vessels, rubble fallen from the bridges, cars, trucks, and even railway wagons. They have become reefs that provide shelter to many creatures, but they have also created a labyrinth that only expert pilots can traverse. Almost no one dares to venture out on a boat, even when they can afford enough bricks to power it. Using the bridges is tricky, and not just on account of their structural damage. They can also become

traps that offer no escape from random CTS checkpoints, volunteers, and creeps. These are sensible reasons for staying on the other side, where there are more resources and people. But I also know that, over the years, a superstitious loathing of the river has swelled into a taboo. There is an unspoken negative reverence for the stream. Overcome with awe, the city has turned its back on it.

The buildings on the waterfront, eroded by storms and floods, have been abandoned for as long as anyone can remember. Time passes more quickly by the river. One can see the city crumbling and sloping into the water. One can sense its urge to vanish.

Two summers ago, encouraged by the total absence of neighbors, Sol, Reni, and I took over two houses on the riverfront. On the wrong side. It was a period of joy, camaraderie, and play. Of excess, recklessness, and impunity. And, oddly, of calm. Because beyond our tempestuous freedom, the three of us felt that, after having been lost for ages, we were finally home.

Sol was the reason why I became a pincher. If it hadn't been for her, I would probably have followed in my mother's footsteps, settled down, and opened a tinkering shop. But meeting Sol changed everything. She was my best friend, and I can barely think of her face, always a little tense with a childlike impatience that also quivered in her green eyes and found its shape in her gloriously chaotic hair, without feeling the sweetest and keenest of heartaches. Given her importance in my life, it's peculiar that, looking back, I'm unable to pinpoint the exact moment when we met. She couldn't remember it either. It's strangely adequate that our story—first as apprentices, then as pinching nomads slinking through

the city, and finally as a little family in the house on the riverfront—didn't really have a beginning.

During our nomadic period, Sol and I worked at concerts and parties together with Reni, a distiller whose unique brews were becoming popular—they tasted like nothing else, as if he'd come across a new fruit or grain, and their effect was just this side of psychedelic. Reni was a bit older than us, perhaps about nineteen. He didn't know. And it was hard to compare him with anyone else: Though not huge, he was exceptionally strong, and his strength made him seem ancient in a stony sort of way. His limp from a fracture that hadn't healed properly and his scars from a bout of smallpox that should have killed him as a child only added to his aura of indestructibility. He swore he never drank his own stuff, but there was something delightfully off-kilter about him, especially in his teetering way of talking, which could waver between nonsense and revelations that had the impersonality of fortunate accidents. There was nothing stumbling about his body, however, with its unique combination of might and grace. The world yielded to him.

As we expanded our field of action throughout downtown, meeting Reni was unavoidable. His brews were a vital part of many of the shows we worked at. Sol and I increasingly overlapped at events with him: Cheapish, Edward Allen Pow, Mucho Pelo, Again, and Seagrave were some of the bands that we powered while Reni bartered his stuff. He would set up shop while we plugged in all our bricks and helped with the sound check. Once all of us had finished, there was a lot of time to kill before the beginning of the performance, so, little by little, we started talking.

"Bricks and bricks," he said as we stacked our bricks before a concert by the Guide.

Or that's what I thought he'd said.

"Yes, lots of bricks," Sol answered in the tone people tend to use to address infants. "Thirty-five bricks."

"I normally keep my brews under twelve bricks. The syrupy stuff is nasty."

Sol looked at me, asking for help. Clearly, the man was deranged. Reni noticed what was going on.

"Degrees Brix," he said, trying to explain himself.

Sol and I still didn't understand.

"Sugar percentage," Reni clarified. "One degree Brix is one gram of sugar in one hundred grams of liquid. I never, ever go over twelve Brix. Disgusting. Anyway. Your bricks made me think of my Brix."

It took Sol and me a bit too long to realize what he meant, but when we did, we started laughing. Now it was Reni's turn to be confused. In the end, the three of us met in the absurdity of it all and laughed together.

"Seriously, though," I said. "Bricks and Brix. Think about it."

Sol immediately saw what I was suggesting.

"Yes. Bricks and Brix," she said as her green eyes seemed to be staring at a gilded city gleaming on the horizon.

In short order, Sol, Reni, and I took over a great part of the downtown music scene. No one had thought of combining the basic elements behind every show—batteries and brews. Before we knew it, we could barely keep up with the demand. We did so well that we were able to afford to supply the bands we liked for no charge.

Through this initial period, Sol and I didn't have a permanent home. Each of us was the only constant in the life of the other. We drifted

around downtown and would take over an apartment on one of the upper floors of a high-rise or camp in a commercial or administrative building in a dismal, desolate part of town. Whatever was out of the way. Sometimes we simply stayed on at the venue where we'd just finished a show. Despite all the roaming about, it was then that I began working on an early design of what later became my new brick.

Generational shifts in this city are unpredictable and sudden. The music scene is a good marker of those changes. In one single year, most of the bands one loves can vanish. It doesn't mean everyone in them dies, of course. Still, at least one loss in each group is to be expected, and that's often enough to put an end to it. The remaining members merge with other decimated bands, creating new outfits; others drop out; new, younger kids come up through the ranks and keep the whole process going. All this makes it hard to stay up to date. But during the year or so that Sol, Reni, and I spent together, time seemed to have come to a halt. We rose with a new wave of people and knew everyone. It was beautiful, but we were filled with a happy disdain for beauty. It was wild, but we were invulnerable. It was short-lived, but while it lasted, it was a long, pure now.

As the distillery and the pinching operation expanded, it made sense to find a place where the three of us could work and live together. A few collectives that were interested in our goods and our connections approached us. We found some of the offers tempting. Living in a small commune that was nearly self-sustaining would have meant a break from the daily hustling and trading. We came close to moving into Cuzco, a thriving community in the middle of downtown. They were great customers of ours, and we often stayed with them for a few days after working at the parties they gave to help sustain themselves with the donations they received at the door. Although we liked it at Cuzco, we soon saw

that it was not for us. Reni, Sol, and I formed a triangle that could never expand into any other shape.

The flirtation with Cuzco made us realize the extent to which we didn't want other people in our business. We'd form our own little commune, our family, and we agreed that the other side of the river, with its largely uninhabited stretches by the water, was a wise choice. We could easily afford a stealthy brick-powered boat, with which we'd have quick access to all of downtown. Reni, who had experience as a pilot from ferrying brew up and down the city, picked a flat-bottomed skiff with the shallowest possible draft, which reduced the chances of colliding with the many wrecks littering the riverbed. And it was from Reni that we learned the location of the safest channels and how to avoid the uncharted dangers lurking below.

When we moved into two conjoined buildings on the waterfront, we left all the rooms facing the street empty and smashed the few windows that somehow had remained intact to signal that those two houses were, like all the others on the same block, vacant. Both places had beautiful tubs, which Sol used on rotation to take her extremely hot baths, drawn with water from a distant station and warmed up with a surprisingly efficient immersion heater of her own design. We left the bigger house to Reni, who needed more space for his distillery.

Plants had crawled from both gardens into the ground floor of each building. Vines, ferns, lianas, and all kinds of tangle had clawed their witchy fingers into the plaster. Succulents dripping gluey sap had colonized every corner. Bruise-colored leaves, greedy for light, fanned out in the shadiest recesses. Trees feeding on the shallow soil accumulated over decades had pushed and toppled, with invisible slowness, in the gentlest of tantrums, the decayed furniture around them. We cleared out the