

IAN TREGILLIS

A man in a dark jacket is shown in a dynamic, action-oriented pose. He is holding two handguns, one in each hand, with the one in his right hand pointed forward. The background is a chaotic scene of fire and debris, suggesting a high-stakes action sequence. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones of orange, yellow, and red from the fire, contrasted with the dark tones of the man's clothing and the grey of the debris.

NECESSARY EVIL

“A major talent.”

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN, author of *A Game of Thrones*

necessary
evil

VOLUME THREE
OF THE
MILKWEED
TRIPTYCH



Ian Tregillis



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For Kay, the classiest lady I know

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Author's Note

Also by Ian Tregillis

About the Author

Copyright

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Oh God! Oh God! That it were possible / To undo things done; to call back yesterday.

—Thomas Heywood

prologue

She is five years old when the poor farmer sells her to the mad doctor.

It is autumn, damp and cold. Hunger twists her stomach into a knot. She kneels in a smear of orange leaves, holding a terrier by the hind legs while her brother tries to wrestle the soup bone from its mouth. The bone is a treasure, glistening with flecks of precious marrow. The dog growls and whimpers; they do not hear the wagon approach.

The farmer asks if they are hungry. He says he knows somebody who can feed them, if they're willing to take a ride in his cart.

They are. The dog keeps the bone.

She huddles in the hay of the farmer's wagon. Brother holds her, tries to fend off the seeping cold. Another boy rides with them. His chest gurgles when he coughs.

They arrive at a farm. The field behind the house is studded with little mounds of black earth. He and there, ravens pick at the mounds. They pull at tattered cloth, tug on scraps of skin.

A doctor inspects the children. She realizes he will feed them if he likes what he sees. But he hates weakness.

She watches the coughing boy. Illness has made him weak. And she is so very hungry.

She trips him. The doctor sees his weakness and it disgusts him. Soon there is another mound behind the farmhouse. And there is more food for her.

She considers doing the same to the boy called brother. Perhaps she could know the comfort of a full belly. But brother wants to help her. And she might want other things after the hunger has passed. Brother lives.

* * *

It is winter, long and dark.

The doctor is a sick man, driven to madness by the weight of his genius. And he is looking for

something. He purchases children in order to remake them. He hurts them, cuts them, in his desperate search for something greater.

The days are full of scalpels, needles, shackles, drills, wires. The stench of hot bone dust, the metallic tang of blood, the sting of ozone. The nights are full of whimpering, crying, moaning. Torments pile up like snowflakes. So do the bodies behind the farmhouse.

Brother tries to protect her. He is punished.

But she survives. Sometimes the pain is pleasant; when it isn't, she retreats to the dark place in her mind.

Brother survives, too. She is glad. He is useful.

The doctor operates on her, over and over again. But no matter how many times he opens her skull, no matter how often he studies her brain to awaken a dormant potential that only he believes is real, he never notices that she is different. He does not see that she is like him.

In the meantime, she discovers the joy of poetry. The pleasure of arranging dried wildflowers. She collects sunrises and sunsets.

She grows. So does brother. Taller. Stronger. Wiser. And they are joined by others—a rare few who endure years of the doctor's scrutiny. She and brother differ from the others. Their skin is darker, like tea-stained cotton, and their eyes like shadows, while the others have light skin and colorful eyes. But she and brother survive, and so the doctor keeps them.

One day, deep in that long winter, the doctor sees his first success. His tinkering unleashes the elusive thing he calls the Will to Power. But it consumes the boy upon whom he is working. The screams shatter windows and crumble bricks in those few moments between transcendence and death.

The doctor, vindicated by this fleeting triumph, redoubles his efforts. He drills wires through the skulls, embeds electrodes in their minds. Electricity, he decides, is key to unleashing the Will to Power. When it does not work he opens their skulls and tries again. And again. The doctor is a patient man.

Sometimes the pain is so great that the oubliette in her mind is scarcely deep enough to keep her safe. Some of the others break; they become imbeciles, or mutes. Those who do not break are warped. The doctor is their father; they strive to please him. They think they can. But she knows better. They don't understand the doctor as she does.

The doctor connects their altered minds to batteries. And, one by one, the survivors become more than human. They fly. They burn. They move things with their minds.

Yet she is a puzzle the doctor cannot crack. He takes her into the laboratory again and again. But nothing works. She is unchanged by the surgeries. Until one morning.

When she wakes, her mind is ablaze.

She is wracked by apparitions. Assaulted with visions of unknown places and people. Brilliant and luminous, the images streak through her mind like falling stars flaring across the heavenly vault of her consciousness. The heat of their passage rakes her body with fever.

The light show etches patterns inside her eyelids. A shifting, rippling cobweb of fire and shadow enfolds her mind. It hurts. She flails. Tries to tear free of the web. But she cannot separate herself from the luminous tapestry any more than the sea can divest itself of wet. It is a part of her.

She fumbles for something constant. Through sheer willpower she forces her mind to focus, pluck a single image from the chaos before the cascade drives her mad.

Everything changes.

The web shimmers, ripples, reconfigures itself. A new sequence of visions assaults her senses. She sees them, feels them, smells and tastes and hears them.

The earth, swallowing brother.

The doctor, wearing a military uniform.

War.

Oblivion, vast and cold and deeper than the dark place in her own mind.

She passes out.

When next she wakes, she is sprawled on the stone floor of her cell. Brother kneels over her. He cradles the back of her head, strong fingers running through the stubble of her shaven skull. His fingertips come back glistening red. His eyes widen. Brother tells her not to move, takes the pillow from her cot, slides it beneath her head.

Trembling and cold, she watches it all through the shimmering curtain, past pulsing strands of silver, gold, and shadow. The images wash over her again.

Brother standing ... rushing into the corridor ... bowling over one of the others in his haste ... summon the doctor ... angry words ... the corridor erupting in flames ... she is trapped her skin bubbling blackening shriveling in the inferno heat twisting her body ripping the breath from her lungs before she can scream the agony oh god the agony she is burning to death oh god OHGOD—

Brother runs for the door.

She is going to die oh god the agony oh god—

She cries out. He pauses in the doorway.

The shimmering cobwebs flicker, blink, reconfigure themselves again.

The future changes. There is no fire.

* * *

It is springtime, bright and colorful.

Her Will to Power has manifested, and it is glorious.

The cascade of experiences still assaults her like a rushing cataract, still threatens to sweep her away to permanent madness. A lesser person would embrace insanity for succor and refuge. But not her. She understands now.

The scenes she experiences are snippets of her own future. One of her possible futures. One of an infinity.

The Götterelektron flows up her wires, enters her mind, hits the loom of her Willenskräfte and explodes into a trillion gossamer threads of possibility. A tapestry of potential time lines fans out before her. Countless golden strands, each future path branching into uncountable variations, and innumerable variations on those variations, on and on and on and on. Each choice she makes nudges the world from one set of paths to another.

She is a prophet, an oracle, a seer. She is nothing less than a vessel of Fate.

The web of possible futures is infinitely wide and grows wider the further she looks. It takes strength of mind and will to plumb the depths, to explore the far fringes of possibility. There is no horizon that limits her omniscience, a boundary built from her own weakness.

In the first fragile hours of her new ability, she can't peer ahead any further than a few moments. Brother runs for the doctor, she dies in fire; he stays, she lives.

With practice, she pushes the horizon back several hours. Tell brother she is hungry: he comes back with stew, bread, and cherry strudel. Wait an hour, then tell him: there is no strudel left. Wait two hours, then tell him she is ravenous: the doctor catches him breaking curfew, punishes him with a night and a day in the coffin box; brother rips off his fingernails trying to claw out.

With several days' practice, she can follow the time lines almost a week into the future. Steal a knife from the kitchen, stab brother in the neck: whole branches of the infinite web disappear and are replaced with others that begin with a shallow grave and a sack of quicklime.

The process is beautiful. Mesmerizing. She watches it again and again.

She learns to focus her will like a scalpel, learns to prune the decision tree, learns to slice away the gossamer tangle of unwanted possibilities.

The further she pushes the horizon, the more powerful she becomes. Yet there are still things she cannot do, events she cannot bring to fruition. She cannot make it snow in June. She cannot make brother fall in love in the next two days. Nothing she does will cause the doctor to tumble down the farmhouse stairs and break his neck in the next six hours. But push the horizon back, and possibilities open up. Why hurry? In three days' time the skies will open with a torrential downpour. The doctor will wear galoshes. He will leave them outside his door on the third floor of the farmhouse lest he track mud inside. He oversees the daily training exercises from his parlor window. She distracts one of the others with a well-timed wink; he loses his concentration and destroys delicate equipment in an explosion of Willenskräfte. The doctor flies into a rage. Throws the door open. Does not see the galoshes. Lands at the bottom of the stairs with splinters of vertebrae poking through his lifeless neck.

She can kill the doctor with a single wink. One pebble starts a landslide; a single snowflake begins an avalanche.

But she is comfortable here. The doctor's death would change the farm, compromise her comfort. The doctor lives a bit longer: she has decided his fate.

She has cast off the winter cocoon of her childhood to stretch her wings in the sun.

She is a butterfly, leaving hurricanes in her wake.

* * *

It is summertime, hot and green and glorious.

Her ability is extensive, flexible. Full of subtleties. She can make anybody do practically anything if only she's willing to search the web of future time lines long and hard enough. Willing to practice countless variations on a brief conversation, or a momentary interaction. Infinity always includes the time line that spools out according to her whims.

The doctor fails to comprehend the extent of his creation. She revels in paradox.

She pushes the horizon back years. And when her power grows sufficiently grand, she does what

any self-respecting demigoddess would do: she divines her own fate. Fates.

Alas. She is not a true goddess; she won't live forever. But surely, with the proper choices at the appropriate junctures, she will live a very long time. She plunges ahead, looking for the day her body finally succumbs to age. Is she ninety years old? A full century?

Along the way, she sees other things looming. All time lines show the world soon engulfed in war. It doesn't worry her. Finding a comfortable path through the wartime years is trivial.

She explores the most promising potentialities first. She plumbs the future, and looks deeper still until the branching and rebranching of parallel time lines has woven the threads of possibility into the finest fur ...

... and discovers something watching her.

Something that lurks in the gaps *between* the time lines.

An interstitial horror, prowling the places where nothing should exist. Titanic. Malevolent.

It notices her. And it is angry.

* * *

Winter again. Nothing but ice and shadow.

Nightmares torment her for weeks. It takes longer than that before she recovers the courage to explore the deep future again. And when she does, she encounters that same wall of suffocating malice, that same sense of something vast and ancient watching her from outside the time lines.

Every exploration of the future—discarding, as always, the branches that end prematurely when she is shot, strangled, struck by lightning—ends with her tumbling into that abyss. Ends with darkness so complete that even her fearless heart quails before it.

Again and again and again and again she tries. But there is no avoiding this destiny. She learns what she can.

The demons are called Eidolons. They are everywhere, everywhen. They are the mortar between the bricks of the universe. They are beings of sheer volition, and they despise humanity. Despise the stain, the corruption, humanity leaves upon the otherwise perfect cosmos. For humans are nothing but a pointless accident of space and time—minuscule, meaningless—forever shackled by their spatial and temporal limitations, yet somehow sentient and possessing a limited form of free will. Nothing could be more offensive to the Eidolons. And thus they seek to eradicate the insult.

But the Eidolons' vastness is their weakness; humanity's salvation is its insignificance on the boundless scale of the cosmos. All of human existence rests on a problem of demarcation. This is a precarious balance, stable only as long as the Eidolons never truly perceive humanity.

But they will. For there are warlocks in the world. Men who commune with the Eidolons. Men willing to improve the Eidolons' perception of humanity in exchange for fantastical, impossible feats. For the demons are not bound by the laws of nature.

The horrors the warlocks will unleash are a consequence of the looming war. Even she cannot avoid it. It is far too large, and coming far too soon. The world committed itself to this path before she was handed the reins.

In many time lines, the end comes during the war itself. There are other future paths, mo

complicated and less likely scenarios, where the Eidolons consume the world years after the war has ended. Perhaps even decades. But even at the fringes of possibility, on the most convoluted and unlikely time lines she can discern, everything ends in darkness. Everything ends with the Eidolons.

She ends with the Eidolons.

In every single time line.

* * *

The seasons turn. She struggles to find meaning in the face of her own doom. Slides into nihilism. Brother doesn't understand. He can't. Her concerns extend far beyond mortal comprehension.

What point is there of being a demigoddess if she can't change the things that matter? Can't alter her own fate?

She whiles away the months with desultory explorations of the future. Like brother, many of the same people reappear in her investigations, their fates braided with hers across a multiplicity of futures. But one man piques her interest. In some time lines, their interaction lasts for no more than a few moments. But that is immaterial: she sees him again and again and again.

His name is Raybould Marsh. He is strong. Courageous. Beautiful. Burdened with anger. Not as clever as she, but that is no sin.

Clearly, they are meant to be together. Why else would this magnificent stranger appear in so many of her futures?

She experiences something new: it begins as a lump in her throat, turns into a wonderful ache in her chest, becomes butterflies in her belly, and spreads down her spine to create a warmth between her legs.

She plays at seduction. Explores the futures in which she snares his heart. He is a prickly man, and difficult at times. But love is just another emotion, and she can make anybody do virtually anything—feel almost anything—given enough time and patience. And there are time lines where he succumbs to her charms. Difficult to access, and rare, but they do exist.

On lonely nights she pleasures herself while watching him sleep. It is one such night, spending time imagining his calloused hands on her naked body, when she discovers that Raybould Marsh can be something more than her lover.

He can be her savior. He can save her from the Eidolons.

What would Raybould do in the face of inescapable doom? Every time line ends with the Eidolons. But he would see it differently: every *preexisting* time line ends thus.

So why not build a *new* time line? From scratch?

She sits bolt upright, the first tremors of orgasm forgotten.

* * *

Springtime again. The butterfly stretches her wings.

Outwitting the Eidolons is a superb challenge. The only challenge worthy of her attentions. It becomes her sole focus for years on end: mastering manipulations; piercing the dark heart of the knottiest paradoxes; culling insights from obscure potential futures; skirting her own death at the

hands of enraged allies and determined enemies; weaving cause and effect across decades.

She inspects every detail, for she must leave nothing to chance. The plan must unfold over so many years that the tiniest crosscurrents will grow into cyclones capable of unraveling the slender thread of her machinations.

It is a Herculean undertaking. But she succeeds.

* * *

It will start with a man named Krasnopolsky.

Soon, the doctor will use the civil war in Spain as a field test for his children's abilities, thus proving to his benefactors that he can make real their dreams of conquest. The triumphant feats of Willenskräfte will be filmed for further study. Krasnopolsky will be one of the cameramen. He will witness unnatural things. Things that disturb him.

It will be easy for her to nudge Krasnopolsky's disquiet into thoughts of defection. The British will send a spy to collect him. A spy named Raybould Marsh.

He and she will first glimpse each other at the port in Barcelona. She will set the hook with a wink.

And thus, after the war begins, Raybould will return to the Continent, seeking information about the doctor's farm. She will let him capture her.

He will bring her to England, where he and his colleagues will show her to an Eidolon. The Eidolons will see Raybould, too, and sense what she intends for him. He will catch their interest. At that moment will become her anchor, the graft point from which the new time line will grow. But there will be so much more to do.

With her guidance, brother will rescue her. She will become the most valuable advisor to the highest echelons of the military. She will guide them through the annihilation of Britain's army on the beaches of Dunkirk; direct the systematic destruction of Britain's air defenses. Her Willenskräfte will become a scalpel, cutting away all hope.

Raybould, meanwhile, will attempt to raise a family. It hurts to think of him with another woman. But it's a necessary part of the plan. And his misguided infatuation with the freckled whore won't last forever. He is meant for one woman and nobody else: she is the woman who sees through time, and he is the man who will transcend it.

She will orchestrate a bombing raid that kills Raybould's infant daughter. He will go mad with sorrow. Grief will make him careless. He will spearhead a surprise attack on the farm. The British will use the Eidolons to transport soldiers to Germany. It is a very clever idea. But she will thwart the British, to lay the groundwork for a desperate withdrawal. The Eidolons will claim Raybould's newborn child for themselves before letting the few survivors make a panicked retreat to England.

Britain's survival will require drastic action. Raybould's compatriots will break the Wehrmacht with supernatural winter and lure the Red Army to finish the job. Their ploy will succeed. But in spite of Raybould's efforts to prevent it, the farm will fall to the Soviets. The Soviets will claim the doctor's work for themselves.

Including her. And brother.

Events will coast without her adjustments for over twenty years. The British Empire and the Soviet

Union will settle into a precarious stalemate. Eidolons on one side, the doctor's research on the other. But when the time is right, she and brother will escape. And their return to England will lure Raybould out of retirement.

He will be a different man by then. Bowed, but not yet broken. The strain of living with a child twisted by the Eidolons will have destroyed his marriage. But he endures because Britain is free; he endures because he believes his sacrifices are meaningful.

By then, the Soviets will have improved the doctor's technology. But Raybould's attempt to eliminate the Soviet Willenskräfte army will fail, and he will be grievously injured (not killed, of course; she will never allow that). His beloved Britain will fall under withering attack.

Then, and only then, will Raybould be in the proper emotional state for what she needs.

Lost in despair and rage, he will unleash the Eidolons. But the demons will inhabit his empty soul and use human eyes to see humanity in full. Raybould's anguish will become the thing that hurls the time line into the malevolent abyss.

But. She will have long since set her anchor in the past, long ago laid the bait to lure Raybould back. And in the final moments of that world, when he finally comprehends her plan, he will step forward to save her.

He won't understand he's doing it for her. He'll think he's seizing a second chance to save his infant daughter.

But all that matters is he relents and allows the last of the warlocks to send him into the past. He will arrive at the anchor point, and create a new time line.

One in which she isn't consumed by the Eidolons.

* * *

Saving herself means stitching new threads into the tapestry of possible futures. It means breaking Raybould Marsh, the man she loves, and forging his sorrow into a tool for destroying the world.

It means tempting him with the one thing he desires above all else. It means luring him into the past.

It works.

one

12 May 19

Westminster, London, England

I crouched in the painful embrace of a hawthorn hedge, the screams of a dying world still echoing in my ears.

Hot sweat tickled my scalp. But I shivered from chills, nausea, and the lingering touch of the Eidolons. I hadn't realized just how ill I felt until those demons took me apart and reassembled me twenty-three years in the past.

I was a time traveler. A refugee from the world's end. The sole survivor of a cataclysm that I had caused.

The western sky blushed orange and pink beyond a swath of royal parkland. The last traces of gloaming silhouetted lampposts in St. James'. All dark, all unlit. The only other light came from a narrow gap in the opaque curtain covering the window overhead; a shaft of pale light speared through the shadows above my hiding spot. London itself was a hulking presence sensed but unseen in the night. The Admiralty building loomed behind me, cloaked in blackout. I could smell the dampness from a recent rainstorm and woody sap from where I'd cracked a few hawthorn branches in my haste to exit through the window. Everything was silent but for the occasional distant hum of a car along Whitehall.

The darkness lent an unexpected familiarity to this place and time. Like encountering an old lover after leaving her behind long ago, and discovering she hadn't changed a jot.

This was the spring of 1940. Those early days of the Second World War, before France had fallen and we'd lost an army on the beaches of Dunkirk. Before the first dominoes had toppled in that long chain of events culminating decades later in a demonic apocalypse.

My job was to break that chain. Somehow.

The suffocating weight of that task left me breathless. I couldn't take in the sheer enormity of it all without becoming dizzy. A spasm cramped my gut.

I took a steadying breath and tried to ground myself in the here and now. In a previous life I had been a gardener, and so I concentrated on my immediate surroundings.

Long thin shoots poked randomly from the top of the unkempt hedge. They broke the clean, level

lines of the shrubbery. The slender branches had just begun to swell with white May blossoms, and my shivering caused green thorns to skitter against the window glass of the Admiralty. Thorns like those had pierced my shirt when I leaped from the window. They raked my skin from waist to armpit.

It was probably a quickset hedge, a century old or more. But now there was a war on, and people had more pressing concerns than keeping the hedges tidy.

That simple observation, more than anything else, even more than the blackout, forced me to accept the reality of it all. Will had done it. He'd sent me back.

Picture this, if you will: A man, not quite fifty-three years old, a bit heavier than he ought to be, plagued with a bad knee and a worse temper, his face and voice ruined by fire. Make him nauseated and feverish, alone. Now watch his back bend, his shoulders slump with despair, as he grapples with the enormity of his impossible task.

That was me.

Footsteps rattled floorboards inside the Admiralty, approaching the window where I'd made my escape. I retreated deeper into the hawthorn, clamping my jaw as thorns pierced me in a dozen new places. I put the cold, unyielding stone of the Admiralty building at my back and tried not to breathe. My muscles ached with the effort not to tremble lest somebody heard the bramble rattling against the windowsill. My stomach gurgled.

Somebody fixed the blackout curtains. Darkness engulfed me.

And then a woman's voice floated through the shadows. She had to be standing in the room where I'd landed, just a few feet from where I now hunched in the cold and dark. What she said was muffled by the window and the curtains, but I could still make it out. I think she intended that.

"Ah."

I knew that voice. Another spasm twisted my gut.

A man said, gruffly, "What?"

Of course, I recognized *his* voice as well. But I wasn't ready to think about that yet.

"It worked," said the woman.

God as my witness, I could hear the corner of her mouth curling up as she said it. Only two words, but more than enough to send another volley of chills rattling through me.

Gretel. The clairvoyant who manipulated the world for decades—and killed my daughter and destroyed my marriage—in her paradoxical bid to elude the Eidolons on the last day of history. I and the people I cared for had been nothing more than unwitting pieces in Gretel's long, elaborate chess game. As had Great Britain itself, and the Third Reich, and the Soviet Union. Puppets all. I trembled again, this time with rage.

It worked.

Yes, it had. She'd tricked me into unleashing the Eidolons. And then, as the world had ended around us, she'd dangled an irresistible carrot before me: the chance to save my dead daughter. Because she knew Agnes was the only lure strong enough to yank me out of my apathy; by that point I didn't much care the world was ending.

And now she knew I was here. Knew that she'd won.

Or had she?

For my Gretel, my *bête noire*—the Gretel who instigated the bombing raid that killed Agnes; the Gretel whose specter had haunted every day of my life in the decades since war's end—had perished along with everybody else when the Eidolons ended the world. But, of course, she didn't care. For though she was mad, she wielded the power of the gods. Thus her long game amounted to nothing more than a convoluted self-sacrifice. A feint at the Eidolons, a bit of supernatural sleight of hand, so that another version of herself could thrive. So that a different Gretel, the Gretel of this new splintered time line, could live free of the Eidolons.

What a privileged perspective I enjoyed. A sickening thing, this insider's view of her cold-blooded machinations. Revolting, the extent of that madwoman's psychosis. Terrifying.

I doubled over and retched while the footsteps receded and *he* took the prisoner back to her cell. I knew he was doing that because I had been there.

I am there. Right now. But so is he.

Was this me, shivering and sweating and bleeding in the darkness? Or was I that other person, safe and warm inside the Admiralty? I had his memories, but he didn't share mine. Didn't share my wounds. Didn't share my disfigurement, didn't feel the constant pain in my throat. He hadn't endured two failed attempts to start a family.

Tears squeezed through the corners of my clenched eyelids when I thought of family. My darling daughter, Agnes, dead so young. My son, John, a soulless vessel carved by the Eidolons to facilitate the eradication of humanity. And my wife, Liv, with her freckles, cutting wit, and poisonous resentment.

A new realization hit me in the gut so sharply that it threatened to loose my watery bowels. This was 1940. None of that had happened yet. Liv still loved *him*. Loved him in a way that had long since withered and died for me. Loved him in a way he didn't deserve. It wasn't fair. I hated him for it.

But the seed of an idea lodged in the fertile soil at the back of my mind. I couldn't dislodge it. Not did I want to.

I waited until I was certain Gretel and her escort had gone downstairs and nobody inside would hear me shaking the hedge. An owl hooted in St. James' while I extricated myself from the hawthorn. Several minutes of cursing earned my freedom along with a bevy of fresh scratches. They bled freely as I staggered across Horse Guards to the park.

Footing was precarious; many of the city's parks had been turned over to gardening and home defense. I took a tumble in a trench that had probably been dug for the sake of filling sandbags.

My head throbbed in time with the pulse of sweat down my temples. Another wave of nausea rippled through me. The watery churning lent an urgency to my wanderings. But I knew the park had no public loo. Not in 1940. And I couldn't spare the time to find one.

As I squatted in the mud beside the lake, it occurred to me that I'd once seen this shoreline studded with tents. A staging area. That memory dredged up others in its wake, most particularly of a strange and frightening encounter. But my thoughts skittered away again; I was reluctant to dwell on that though I couldn't put my finger on why.

My relief was short-lived. I had just pulled up my trousers when a light shone in my face. The mild throbbing in my temples flared into a mature headache.

“Oy now, what are you about?”

Oh, dear God, no. Not now.

I couldn't see for the light in my eyes. Something pale fluttered in the shadows outside the torchlight. Possibly a handkerchief. A second voice with a plugged nose said, “Christ. I think he shitted in the lake.”

“I'm ill,” I mumbled. Each word a fire in my throat.

The full extent of the humiliation slowly dawned on me, easily the worst in all my miserable life. The possibility Gretel knew about this made it even worse. At that moment I didn't care about saving the world. I wanted it all to go away.

“Maybe so,” said the second voice, “but the royal parks aren't your personal toilet. That's rotten and disgusting.”

The first man tipped his electric torch so that it wasn't aimed directly into my eyes. I made out the glint of a badge and the silhouette of a bobby's helmet.

“I'd like to see your identity card, sir.”

And that's when I realized I was in trouble. The dread lay so heavy upon me I thought I might sink into the mud.

HMG had issued ID cards to all its citizens at the start of the war, back in 1939. We'd carried them until the early 50s, when the wretched National Registration program was finally scrapped.

But none of that mattered. Because today, in 1940, in wartime, I was required by law to produce my ID card for the coppers. I was required by law to never venture outside the house without the card on my person. But ID cards had been far from my mind as the Eidolons devoured the world.

I started to shiver again. “Lost it,” I rasped.

“Is that so? How'd you lose it, then?”

I couldn't tell the copper that I tossed it during a bout of spring cleaning ten or twelve years ago. But the second copper sensed my hesitation before I could concoct a plausible lie.

“I won't ask again. Where's your identity card, sir?”

“I ... I haven't got it.”

“Right,” he said. “You do know we could haul you in for that? And for *that*.” He gestured at the lakeshore with his truncheon. “Bloody public indecency, that is.”

“Francis,” said the first copper. “C'mere a sec. You,” he said, pointing to me, “stay put.”

I'd been hauled in by the coppers enough times to recognize when a difference of opinion was brewing. I eavesdropped and considered making a run for it. The still night air carried their whispered conversation to me. I had to strain to hear it over the lapping of the lake, but I knew they were arguing.

“We're taking him in,” said Francis, still holding the handkerchief over his nose.

“He needs a hospital,” said the other copper.

“You can't be serious.”

“You can tell the poor old duffer is confused. Look at his eyes. Probably half senile. Could be somebody's da.”

“Maybe that's what the Jerries want us to think.”

“Look at his scars. He's seen some action. Bet he fought in the Great War.”

“Maybe he fought for the Boche.”

“Being a bit extreme, aren’t you?”

“No. You’re being a bit lazy.”

“Let me try to sort the poor fellow out, what?”

They returned. I hadn’t moved. I knew I was in no state to make a proper fugitive. They’d catch me, and that would spike my mission before it ever started.

In my younger days I might have considered taking them both by surprise. And on a very lucky day I might have succeeded. But I was older and wiser now, which is to say slower, so I knew it would take but one well-placed truncheon to make an even bigger hash of things.

The first copper took the lead again, and that gave me hope. “What’s your name, sir?”

His speculation about me being a vet of the Great War gave me an idea. I said, “John Stephenson, officer.”

“Where do you live, Mr. Stephenson?”

“St. Pancras.” I gave him the old man’s address. Still knew it by heart; I’d been married there.

“Haven’t you got any ID on you? A billfold, perhaps?”

The sense of dread lifted, leaving behind a damp layer of sweat. I tried not to let my relief show. I’d been through this with the coppers enough times to know when I was off the hook. They might haul me to a hospital, but that wasn’t a problem. Any hospital was a damn sight better than jail.

“Yeah,” I told him. “I’ve got a billfold.”

“May I see it?”

I nodded, and reached for my coat pocket. I used one hand, moving slowly and deliberately so that I didn’t startle him. I dug out the billfold and offered it to him. He handed the torch to Francis, who kept the beam trained on me. He held the billfold in the edge of the torch beam and flipped through it. He frowned. Then he looked at me again.

Now it was his turn to hesitate.

“What did you say your name is?”

“Stephenson,” I repeated.

“Right. So you did.” He said it kindly, calmly. But his free hand fell gently to the truncheon hanging at his waist. Right then I knew I was well and truly buggered.

His eyes didn’t leave the billfold. “Thing is, if that’s the case, mind telling me who William Beauclerk is?”

“Shit,” I said.

Francis chuckled. “Well. You’ve already seen to that, haven’t you?”

Somewhere in the darkness, I heard the rattle of cuffs.

12 May 19

Milkweed Headquarters, London, England

Blinding agony lanced through the stump of Will’s severed finger. He’d never known such pain, never could have imagined such pain, as when Marsh had snapped shut the gardening shears. But the

cauterization was worse because it never seemed to end. Pain like white-hot lava erupted from his mangled hand. It filled his veins, reduced his heart to charcoal, his brain to ash.

Will flinched, hard enough to yank his hand from the doctor's grasp. The doctor scowled.

"Sorry," Will managed. It came out as a hoarse whisper. The ravages of Enochian, combined with mindless screaming through the wooden bit clenched in his teeth, had torn his throat raw. His teeth felt loose.

The doctor aimed a pointed look at Stephenson. Will didn't know the man's name. He was a naval medic, but probably attached to SIS rather than the Admiralty. That was a guess, but the doctor and Stephenson clearly knew each other. And the doc hadn't asked about the cause of Will's dismemberment, nor shown interest in anything other than treating the wound. Or so Will had gathered during the scant moments when pain wasn't threatening to drive him mad. He'd passed out just after the ceremony and felt like he might again any moment.

Stephenson grumbled, "For God's sake, Beauclerk. You've nothing to prove. Take the blood or morphine. Or at the very least let brandy dull the worst of it."

He tried to push a full tumbler into Will's free hand, but Will waved it away. The effort left his head spinning.

"No." The pain threatened to make him sick up. But he'd endure anything to avoid the danger of becoming his grandfather. He'd never let himself follow in the footsteps of that wretched, twisted old drunk. Will had sworn off alcohol long ago. No amount of physical agony could make him relent. Not even this torture. He'd be a better man than grandfather, even if the effort destroyed him.

Will realized that sooner or later he'd have to explain the injury to Aubrey. Was it too severe for a plausible gardening mishap? That at least had a patina of truth to it. The shears had belonged to one of Bestwood's gardeners, long ago. Back in their grandfather's day.

Will almost passed out when he extended his arm to put his bad hand back within the doctor's reach. He managed to say, "Please continue, doctor."

The doctor sighed, looking wistfully at the morphine syrette lying unused on the desk. Stephenson leaned over Will's chair and used his weight to pin Will's forearm to the armrest. The one-armed man had a grip like bands of steel. The doctor hefted the iron again.

Will gritted his teeth. Yes, definitely loose.

A faint sizzle accompanied the wave of incandescent pain, hotter than the soul of the earth, that flooded Will's body. Delicate curlicues of blue-black smoke wafted around the stump, tracing greasy tendrils across the back of his hand. The stink of burnt flesh filled the old man's office.

Will cast about for a mental diversion lest the pain overwhelm him again. The few threads of his mind capable of conscious thought flailed for something upon which to focus. How did he get here?

The gypsy waif. Eidolons. Marsh.

What was she? What could she do? Why did she have wires implanted in her skull? What had von Westarp done to her? And how could the men and women on the Tarragona film perform such blatantly unnatural feats without appealing to the Eidolons? It was impossible. Yet the Eidolons' answer had been as unambiguous as its rage. The waif was not their handiwork.

What a straightforward answer. And all it had cost was a fingertip. This had been the height of

foolishness, thinking he possessed skill enough to negotiate with the Eidolons. He had been fortunate. The blood price might have been far worse.

Stranger still ... why would the Eidolons bestow a name upon somebody? What did it mean? And why had they chosen Marsh? It was as though they knew him. Acknowledged him. But the Eidolons didn't recognize individual humans. They perceived humanity as a stain upon the cosmos, an abomination, an infestation to be eradicated. Nothing more.

It was too disturbing to contemplate. Will forced his attention toward less chilling mysteries.

He had warned the others to expect strangeness. Though nothing could truly prepare a person for the way the world tended to warp and sag around the Eidolons like candles on the mantel of a burning house. Even seasoned warlocks had been known to go mad from time to time. Will remembered the servants' tales of his own father.

Tonight's negotiation hadn't been any different. Phantom scents, mysterious noises, alien sensations. Effects without causes. There had been a thump, as though something heavy had landed on the floorboards. And then Will's own voice, crying out in abject terror and mindless panic. More strident even than the scream that escaped him when Marsh severed his fingertip. The relentless pain made rational thought impossible. Was there another William Beauclerk somewhere, one who had experienced something worse than a severed finger? Witnessed something more dreadful than a Third Reich with superhuman soldiers?

Surely that was impossible.

12 May 19

Walworth, London, England

Agnes's wrinkled red face traced drool on Marsh's shirt as he held her to his chest. He pressed his nose to her soft scalp and inhaled her scent, tickling himself with wisps of silken baby hair. She smelled so clean. So fresh, so wonderful. Like family.

"Our poor daughter will never know proper sleep," Liv whispered, "if you keep taking her from the bassinet."

She came up behind him, slid an arm around his waist. A swollen breast brushed against his elbow. She winced.

"I'm making up for lost time," he said. "I'm so sorry I missed this."

He'd been in France when Liv had gone into labor. Based on the time listed on Agnes's birth certificate, he'd been crossing the Channel with the Frankensteined gypsy girl when Agnes was born. He'd been doing his job. So why did serving the country feel like infidelity? The guilt clung to him tighter than a second skin.

Congratulations. It's a girl.

He'd rushed to the hospital as soon as he found Liv's note. But not before indulging in a fair bit of panic after finding the front door open, Liv gone, and the bedroom in disarray. The prisoner had found her way under his skin.

What was she? What were those hideous wires for? And how on God's earth did she know about

Liv and the baby?

Liv said, "Agnes might forgive you. Someday."

"Someday?"

"Depends on how stubborn she is. Whether she takes after her father."

"I'm not stubborn."

Liv laughed into his shoulder. Long auburn hair draped across her face, tickling his arm. She hadn't put her hair up since returning from the hospital. "Mulish, then."

"That's better. And you? Am I forgiven?"

"There's nothing to forgive, love. You're here now."

He said, "I'll do everything I can not to leave again. I promise."

"I know."

Marsh brushed his lips across Agnes's scalp. He leaned over, gently cradling his daughter's head as he set her down. Her arm twitched, and her face scrunched into a new pattern of wrinkles while he covered her with the baby blanket. It was pink and embroidered with jolly elephants.

Liv laid her head against his shoulder. They stood together, quietly watching their daughter sleep.

"You should be resting," he said. He took her hand, led her to the den.

"I'm not infirm, Raybould." She clicked her tongue. "You men. I had to tell Will the very same thing."

Will's scream kept echoing in his ears. He couldn't forget the feel of the shears, the sensation of the handles in his fists as the blades crunched through flesh and bone.

But the Eidolon had been so much worse: the way it studied him like an insect under a magnifying glass, the intangible pressure of its presence, the titanic sense of malevolence, the skin-crawling dread. Marsh wondered if he'd ever sleep again. He drew a long, shuddery breath.

Christ. What a bloody wretched evening.

"Just because Will is Agnes's father," said Liv, "doesn't entitle you to be so jealous of him. You should be bigger than that."

"Yes, you're right," Marsh murmured. Then something she'd said snapped him back to the present. He frowned. "Wait. What was that about Will?"

Liv tipped her head back and filled the room with melodious laughter. "You went somewhere just now. I can always tell. It's in your eyes. But when you crack your knuckles..." She touched the back of one slender hand to her face, pantomiming his habit. "That's when I know you're entertaining particularly deep thoughts."

She eased herself to the sofa. Marsh tried to help her, but she swatted his hands away. He sat beside her. Yawned. Rubbed his burning eyes.

Marsh said, "Speaking of Will." He pointed toward the entryway. "Did you know he left the door open when he took you to the hospital?"

"I do believe you've mentioned it. Once or twice."

Congratulations. It's a girl.

"Liv, has anybody come around lately? While I was away?"

She shook her head. "Just auntie. And Will."

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