Part I

Mimi

All things are taken from us, and become
Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.

— Tennyson

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Nyiregyhaza, Northeastern Hungary: June, 1864

My wife sits mute now in the corner of our caravan, because this morning it is her personality which has come to the fore. Her hands are folded quietly in the lap of her skirt. Just above her left hand is a thick purplish scar that circles her wrist like a hideous bracelet. I don't want to think about the scar, about how it is the source of the evil afflicting our lives.

If I raise my head from the sweat-soaked pillow I can see her bare feet splayed against the worn floorboards, but it is her face I find myself staring at: small, kitten-shaped, dominated by her huge dark eyes. She has gypsy eyes. They were very bright when we were both younger; now they are ringed by deep gray shadows like bruises and filled with pain. Meeting mine, they beg: *Save Lenore.*

My wife is right of course, and she is living evidence of what will happen to Lenore, our daughter, if I don't intervene. But Christ, I think, how can I save her when the foul disease I've taken is ravaging through me like a brushfire? I close my eyes and instantly hear the swish of skirts, so I know she has gotten to her feet, she is moving toward the bed. And now I feel her hand tapping my shoulder urgently.

I open my eyes; her face is full of defiance. Her black brows contract angrily and she points at her wrist. Again.

"Yes," I say, my voice a ragged whisper, "I know." I know we will die shut up in this stinking grave of a caravan and Lenore will be possessed by the same hungry spirit that has taken my wife's life, that killed Joseph and punished me.

No. She shakes her head, and suddenly her thin hands go to her face; her shoulders hitch and great wracking sobs shake her small frame. She is crying, and the wailing voice I hear is the first sound she has made as Mimi, as my wife, in more months than I can count. *She speaks when she is Anyeta*, I think bitterly, *but never as Mimi*. Anyeta has taken that from her, too.

She sinks onto the edge of the bed, her long hair falling forward, and I want to comfort her. I sit up but my chest burns. I cough, my throat a column of fire, but it's so hard to breathe. I make myself cough harder and up comes a wad of greasy yellow phlegm streaked with blood. I manage to hide the clotty mess in a handkerchief before Mimi turns her head and sees it.

I put my arm around her shoulder. Her eyes flick toward my fingers. She whirls around and points at the livid scar on her wrist. I nod. Mimi is reminding me again. She has tried to save Lenore herself, but her powers have fled. I admire her courage. It wasn't failure.

"Not your fault," I rasp before the rumbling cough cleaves me again. We both wait until the fit passes. I let my hand rest on her knee.

All at once, Mimi seizes my wrist hard. Her grip is like iron, like steel pincers, and I'm suddenly terrified the change is on her and in a second her eyes will blink and I'll see Anyeta's demonic eyes, hear her mocking screams and taunts.

But Mimi throws my hand back at me and runs to the oval mirror. She jerks it from the plastered wall so fiercely the nail pops out with a shriek and she nearly loses her balance. The silvery mirror sways between her hands, she holds it to her chest like a shield, she moves toward the bed. She is making a grunting noise, trying to tell me something. I concentrate on her lips. She is moving them carefully, slowly. Then I have it:

"Look, Imre."

In the mirror I see my features are blurred with thick scabs and crusts. My face is overrun with the red weeping sores and I would weep for the sight except I think she has seen it spreading and nursed me and never shown revulsion or fear.

Mimi thrusts the mirror toward me again and makes a furious sound, shapes the word, *"Look!"*

She wants me to know that time is short, that I'm dying, that the pustulent blisters will eat through my lungs, completely consume my flesh—

Mimi hurls the mirror to the floor. The sound is deafening inside the caravan. I see her feet moving among the splinters from the shattered mahogany frame, the chunks of broken glass. She

squats. Heedless, she clutches a long sharp shard and I see drops of blood welling from her palm and fingers then running down and staining the white filmy sleeve of her blouse. She points at her wrist with the glass knife, then at mine, and pantomimes sawing.

And then, Christ, *then* I know what she wants. A sick feeling eddies through me, and I feel the vomit rising in my throat. I push it down because Mimi is asking me to be strong, to save Lenore. I look into her dark eyes and I know what she wants. She wants me to claim the hand of the dead.

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I take a deep breath. We both know that claiming the hand of the dead is no small matter, and I glance up at Mimi, expecting her to be looking back at me with sympathy, with understanding, perhaps a little sadness. But she is already climbing the short flight of wooden steps to the cramped loft space above the bedroom. I hear the creak of her tread on the floorboards over my head. The roof is low, so I know she is bent over rummaging through the boxes and kegs, the rolls of dun-colored canvas we use as tents in summertime, Lenore's outgrown toys. We don't let Lenore go up in the loft. We tell her it's dusty, dangerous. We don't want her to find what my wife has kept hidden up there. Even I don't know where it is, and when I go up to look for a tool or a bit of leather to mend a broken harness, I keep my mind on my business. I don't think about the savage charm.

Mimi is on the third step, standing upright now. And I can see she has the glass-topped box in her hands. My breath catches in my throat.

The box is a rectangle. The bottom is the brilliant orange of hammered copper. It's very old, the finest craftsmanship. I think at one time the top was probably a kind of thin metal tracery or fretwork so the owner could look inside and see the relic. But the soldered hinges show signs of repair, and someone—maybe Anyeta—has had it replaced with glass. It reminds me of a miniature coffin made for a prince or a statesman.

My wife opens the lid, and the caravan is suddenly filled with a sweet fragrance. Briefly, the smell of lilies, tuberoses, gardenia overpowers the sickroom stench—the wet swampy odor of my disintegrating flesh.

She nods at me and sets the box on the low deal table between the bed and the sidewall.

The hand is nestled in a bed of worn velvet the maroon color of drying blood; displayed as if it were a wondrous antique jewel in a shop window, instead of an ugly lump of flesh.

It is black with age and has shrunken in on itself, so that the fingers are curled into a fist. It looks more like the hairless paw of some mummified dog than a human hand. If my wife were to turn it over I would see the fingernails. They make round, slightly glossy spots like stove windows made of smoked mica. At the wrist two small bits of cracked yellowish bone can be seen.

The thought of claiming it makes my head whirl.

Mimi goes to the wooden door at the rear of the wagon. At the threshold, she turns and looks at me. In the half gloom her face is nearly as pale as her white blouse, and her eyes are the violet brown of pansies. She swallows nervously, then hangs her head a little. She doesn't want this for me, but we are both afraid Anyeta will dupe Lenore as Mimi herself was tricked into claiming it.

There is no air of command in her eyes or her posture, only pleading. She pauses, her hand touching the iron latch, and gives me a small smile. For a second I'm reminded of the young girl I fell in love with.

I don't know if I can summon the strength or courage to claim the hand of the dead. I settle deeper into the feather pillows, my arm resting crosswise over my brow. Mimi seems to know that I want, need, to think about the dark twisted tale of our lives.

I sigh, and suddenly she is at my side, her hand in my graying hair. She leans over the bed and kisses my eyelids one at a time.

"I love you, Imre," she shapes, and then she is hurrying toward the door. It shuts behind her. Neither of us knows whether she'll come back as herself or Anyeta.

Outside I hear Lenore's voice trembling with fear and grief. "Papa," she blurts. "He—?" Her question hangs for several seconds.

"Dying," comes the soft reply. And I know that my child is out there, alone, speaking with a demon that pretends to be her mother.

My eye is drawn to the copper box. The blackened hand seems to vibrate. I feel its power calling me, whispering promises like sighs in the hot wind that blows over the flat Hungarian plain. I grit my teeth. Drops of sweat break out at my hairline. Oh Jesus, no! I don't want this. I shake my head and a sharp steel cough racks my chest.

"Please. I can't."

A constellation of pallid faces—Joseph, Constantin, Mimi, Lenore—crowd the air around my head like cherubs in a religious painting. Their eyes are full of sorrow, begging me to intervene.

"Think of the power." A musical voice hums in my mind—fills it.

"Christ, Christ," I moan. For then I am hearing the haunting sound of gypsy violins. I see the *bosa venos* around the campfire, their faces lit in the ruddy glare. Their heads are canted over the shining instruments. The bows are flying faster, faster. Feet moving over scattered rose petals, the swirl of a gauzy scarf. Mimi dancing. I cover my face with my hands.

"Remember, Imre?"

Yes. After the feast, Mimi danced again—for me alone— in our caravan the night of our wedding. The women had drawn dotted patterns on her hands with red henna for the ceremony; but when I undressed my bride I found she'd privately, daringly rouged her nipples. Her boldness fled, my delight made her suddenly shy. She was afraid the Romany women would show the white nuptial sheets in the morning, and there would be no virgin's blood because we'd been making love, secretly, for months. They didn't. But we stained and reddened the sheets with the henna on her body that transferred to mine. And in the times between our long sweet couplings, I got on my knees and vowed I'd never betray her. I didn't know I was telling a lie. And it *wasn't* a lie until Anyeta came into our lives; I wince hearing a low throaty chuckle bubbling with mockery.

"Look, Imre," the voice croons slyly. I watch transfixed. The copper box opens, closes, opens, closes. Each time the lid thuds down the caravan walls seem to reverberate. There is another crash, and then I'm lost in the tunnel of memories, hearing the sound of the stranger pounding the door on the night it all began ten months ago.

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Late August, 1863. Buda-Pest.

I clearly remember the evening Anyeta's messenger arrived. It was toward twilight and I was standing at the long wooden counter in the kitchen, hacking at a fat brown hare and putting the chunks of meat into an enamel stewpot. Mimi and Lenore sat at the table slicing wild mushrooms. Through the window I glanced toward the clearing and saw wisps of drifting smoke from a ring of abandoned campfires mingling with the gathering shadows and the gray mist. The only sound was the wind moving through the trees, or the occasional soft blat of insects drawn to our light and bumping against the glass. Hearing these small noises against the deeper quiet made me feel isolated, a little lonely. There had been a big, noisy wedding feast for Tomas and Helene a few days before, but with the celebrating finished, the rest of our small troupe—some twenty gypsies—had left that afternoon to roam south toward the Lake region with its spas and resorts and tourists. Sometimes I like to think if Mimi and Lenore and I had gone with the troupe, Anyeta's messenger would never have found us, or at least we might have left Lenore in safety with the others, but it isn't true. I'm sure Anyeta's messenger had orders to track us half way across the continent, if it came to that. Anyway, I—we all—wanted to stay in the wooded camp in the hills above the city. There was a rumor circulating that Empress Sisi was coming to the capital. Buda was celebrating the feast of Stephen. Mimi—and especially Lenore—wanted to see her. There were heavy holiday crowds in the marketplace, and I wanted to earn enough money to get us through the coming winter.

"Tourists," I said, thinking of the departed troupe on its way to the resorts, "don't buy horses." I cut an onion into rough quarters and added it to the pot. "It's all right for the others—Rudolph can sell wood carving anywhere, or Kitta can get in a bit of fortune-telling—"

"*Dukkeripen*!" Lenore jumped up from the table, her long braids plaited with brilliant red cotton swinging wildly, her round brown eyes wide. "I'll go right up to Sisi in her glass carriage—"

"They only use that one for weddings, honey," Mimi said, smiling. Lenore had heard that the Habsburgs, Franz Joseph and Elizabeth, had a special glass carriage designed by Rubens and nothing could convince her that the Empress didn't ride in this airy confection all the time. "Why not? If it was mine, I would," Lenore used to say.

Ignoring her mother, Lenore went on. "I'll say, 'Your Ladyship, your Worshipfulness,'"—she mimed bowing her head, dipping her knees in a low curtsy—"'I am but a poor, poor gypsy girl, unskilled in the art of *dukkeripen*, but let me tell your future. You will have many more children and much happiness. You will live to a great age, and when you are finally called, your Highness will make what we gypsies call a good death—peaceful, surrounded by all your beloved children and grandchildren. Amen.'"

At the end of this crazyquilt prayer-speech, Lenore made the sign of the cross, then clamped her hands together at the same time she squeezed her eyes shut as hard as she could. She was so small for her age, and her face was so earnest, Mimi and I were laughing. Curious, Lenore opened one eye to see what we were laughing at, just as I caught the distant sound of hoofbeats ascending the rise toward the campsite.

"One of yours?" Mimi joked.

I'd sold a slicked-up nag the day before to a young farmer whose enthusiasm made him fasten on the gleaming new saddle I'd thrown into the bargain, when he should have been looking at the mare's considerable defects. But dissatisfied or not, my customers didn't seek me out. All bargaining was final I'd tell them before I took the cash or the trade. Now, hearing the horse and rider approach, I wiped my hands on a towel, thinking Mimi had been doing a brisk business with her herbs and tonics; her best seller was a bottled brew she called *Santekash*. It was willowbark and ordinary water, and while it did cure headaches, she stressed its ability to stop a hangover dead in its tracks. Buda on holiday was a big drinking town. Maybe, I thought, it was some drunken Hussar who'd made his way

to the gypsy camp looking for a quick cure. Outside our caravan, I heard a man's low voice reining his horse, the creak of leather as he dismounted quickly.

"One of Mother's customers," Lenore said alertly.

But before either of us could make an answer, there was the sharp staccato of bootheels hurrying up the wooden steps, and a fist striking heavily over and over again just below the carvings on the green caravan door.

A Rom I'd never seen before stood shrouded in the gloom of the doorstep. In the dim light I picked out the gleam in his dark eyes, a long sharp nose, a thin sickle of a smile. His face and clothes were streaked with road dirt. A spattered cape swirled lightly around his legs, near the rolled tops of a pair of travel-scarred boots.

"Anyeta sent me," he said, at the same time he thrust one hand against the center of the door, pushing it wide. He stepped high to cross the threshold and brushed past me.

"You've seen her?" Mimi said.

I felt a low dread settling over me like the chill damp in an earth cellar. There'd been no news of Anyeta in Hungary for twenty years—not since before the uprising in '48, when the Emperor brought in Russian troops to squash the revolt. And I realized suddenly that some part of my mind hoped or believed she'd died in the uprising or its aftermath. Shot. . . starved, perhaps.

He came to a stop in the center of the room. There was an eerie stillness in his face and form—all except his ebony eyes, which glittered too brightly. He peered down at Mimi. "The sorceress is camped three, maybe four days east of here, just beyond the Romanian border."

An image of the Carpathian Mountains—dark, steep, wild—that lay between us and the old woman rose in my mind. "And what does she want now?" I asked, but I saw the answer was already glimmering behind the brilliant eyes and sardonic grin.

"What any Romany mother wants." He paused, and his shrewd eye fell first on Mimi and then on Lenore. "A good death," he whis-

pered. I heard Lenore's quick inhale, saw her narrow shoulders stiffen, but before I could intervene, the stranger spoke again.

"Anyeta's dying, she wants her child. She said, 'I want Mimi to have my place in the troupe. Tell her I have secrets.'" His voice went high and reedy. "'Things inside me that belong to her, to her daughter if she has one.'"

There was a sudden silence in the room. Anyeta's voice, I thought, not just her words, but her voice—the quivery way it would sound if she were near death. I thought of Lenore pretending to tell the Empress hers would be a good death, of the stranger's oily insinuating gaze as he'd hissed the same words. I felt my heart speed up. It was as if the old woman had somehow reached across the distance and hidden herself in the room to listen, like a spy skulking in the shadowy corners of things.

"No," I said, "*No*." I wanted no more talk of the old woman in front of my daughter. I caught Mimi's eye, signaling a reminder that Lenore was in the room.

"Lenore," Mimi said, "go to the bin and get more potatoes for the stew."

"But—" She began to protest, having peeled some half dozen already, but Mimi was firm. I moved to the window and waited until I saw Lenore go on her knees to crawl toward the storage bin under the caravan. Then I spoke up.

"Secrets be damned, Anyeta's a whore," I said, pacing, remembering the night Mimi lost our first child, a stillborn girl. I'd woken alone, to candlelight. Anyeta stood naked at the foot of the bed. "Your wife is *marhime*—unclean. You cannot lie with her all this month," she'd said, grinning. It was not the first time she'd propositioned me and I threw her out. Mimi never knew, but she had no regrets about leaving the old woman or Romania when we decamped a few weeks later.

"Witchcraft." I shook my head. "It's trumpery. She's nothing but a clever whore, and you know it."

"Do I?" His deep-set eyes met mine, and it came to me he'd been cradling one arm beneath the heavy folds of his cape. I heard the faint slurring of the wool as he extended the arm beneath it. The hand he showed was studded with brown bulbous swellings of

different sizes. The smaller knobs had the shiny look of tightly stretched skin. The largest—the size of an egg—hung like a soft sac from just above his wrist. He began to roll back his shirt-cuff, and the tumor made a flopping sound against his skin.

"It's pemphigus," Mimi said.

"Is it, *gule romni*?" He'd called my wife a healer, but his voice was thick with sarcasm. "This arm," he said, "only this one, and there is a bloat like the rotting flesh of a fruit in the webbing between my shoulder and chest." He started to undo his shirt.

I felt myself go white. "No, no more." I reached out to stop him. My fingers grazed the brown egg-like sac; it ruptured and began to ooze a thick mucky-looking fluid.

He jerked his arm back, hiding it once more beneath the voluminous cape. He took three long strides to the door, then paused on the threshold. "She's a *choovahanee*, I tell you. Don't do anything foolish; don't keep her waiting. Leave at first light."

"Yes," I said vaguely; I had no intention of trekking across the border. The Romanian gypsies were a superstitious lot, and he'd called Anyeta a sorceress. I didn't know what the course of his disease was, but it was clear he believed Anyeta had afflicted him; he'd brought her message because he was terrified she would do worse.

"But you haven't asked the way," he said, pulling a small paper from his breast pocket. I saw it was a crude map, the route traced in pencil. I put my hand out for it and was suddenly aware of Lenore's light step coming around the side of the caravan. She was singing softly to herself.

"Go on, leave us now," I said, edging him onto the stoop and pulling at the door handle behind me.

Smiling that narrow unctuous grin, he pushed the map at me, then clattered down the stairs. The paper fluttered to the wooden boards. I bent down, scooped it up, found myself at eye level with the Romanian gypsy. Lenore now stood in the thin, trampled grass at the foot of the steps. Her skirt was spread between her hands and sagging a little with the weight of the potatoes.

"*Bahtalo drom*," she said politely, nodding at the stranger. She was wishing him luck on the road ahead.

"Your grandmother's very words," he said, at the same time I saw the phrase scrawled at the top of the map. I frowned at the coincidence. He began to laugh softly, then pulled the heavy wool cape tighter across his chest and moved into the denser shadows. I listened to the muffled sound of his boots in the high summer grass; his footsteps faded, then finally ceased. It was then I realized, with something of a jolt, he had walked off into the night. I had imagined hearing hoofbeats climbing the hill and signaling his approach, but there was no horse in our campsite on the rise.

"She's dying, Imre."

Mimi had spoken first. I knew she would. She doesn't keep things back or brood. None of us had eaten much dinner, Lenore was asleep, and my wife and I sat at the kitchen table, each with a small glass of brandy. The oil lantern overhead made a circle of yellow light against the white cloth, our hands; I looked at Mimi's shadow wavering on the wall behind her.

"You hated her," I countered.

"But she's my mother," she said, getting up and coming round to my side of the table. I watched her shadow flickering on the wall as she paced.

"You couldn't wait to get away from her, from all of them."

"But I was so young. I was nothing in that troupe, I had no status, no place. *Gule romni!*" She spat the words. "Not even that, not even a healer, just a girl puttering and playing with herbs." Mimi lowered her eyes. She looked sad, a little anxious. "Imre, there are things you don't know—"

"What—those secrets? *Dukkeripen*—saying the future? It's ridiculous, too asinine to even consider. You've told me a hundred times it's nothing but keen observation. You watch for the rubbed flesh on the fourth finger where a woman has taken off her wedding ring and thinks she's going to fool you. Or for that slightly anxious look in an old maid's eyes. And then you tell them what they want to hear. Christ, even Lenore knows it—that silly play acting about the Empress—"

"Maybe you don't understand because you're a *diddikai*," she said.

She'd called me a half-breed; well, I was—my mother was English, but my father was a gypsy and I'd lived with one troupe or another all my life. She was a *puro-rati*, a pure-blood, but it was the first time she'd ever made mention of what I thought of as a minor difference between us. I stared at Mimi, but her face was closed.

"My mother—she—" Mimi hesitated, biting her lip. "She helped me get you."

If it were true, I thought, recalling Anyeta's naked appearance by my bedside, she would have kept me for herself.

"I had a crush on you," she went on, "but you didn't know I even existed; and then my mother made me a charm to wear on my wrist, to bind you to me. It was a *mulengi dori*, and I tied it into seven knots and—"

As a rule, Mimi was not at all superstitious and I felt my anger rising. I struck the table with the flat of my hand. "Are you going to tell me you believe that a piece of string that someone used to measure a dead man for his coffin brought us together? We've been in love twenty-two years, Mimi! *Twenty-two years!"* I seized her wrist. She tried to jerk it out of my grasp, but I held on. "I'll grant you that it was your mother's influence that forged the bond between us—but it was because you despised her! Have you forgotten?"

I squeezed her wrist harder, and below the fragile bones the flesh of her hand paled, revealing even more clearly than usual a patch of livid wrinkled scar tissue—the faded remains of a hideous burn—in the center of her palm. "Have you forgotten? Have you?"

"No," she whispered. Tears glistened at the rims of her eyelids, and I knew I shouldn't press her, but I did.

"Tell me," I said, "if she was such a great sorceress, if she had so much power, tell me why she had to hold her own child's hand against a cast iron tea kettle while that child screamed and squirmed and begged her to stop?"

"She caught me spying," Mimi breathed, and I thought she looked younger, more vulnerable with the memory. I let go of my wife's wrist and she stepped back, rubbing at the tender flesh.

"And *what* did she say? 'The next time I catch you watching me, Missy, I'll put out your eyes. . . .'"

"Yes," Mimi hissed.

"And is that what you want for our child, for Lenore?"

"No, no!" She shook her head, her dark hair swayed around her shoulders; the shadow behind her rippled in tandem.

"Is this a fantasy then? Grandma Anyeta sitting wrapped in her shawl by the fire telling her beloved granddaughter the old gypsy tales, while you play nursemaid, make honeycake and fluff the pillows?"

"Yes," she said, but too low for me to catch. Her eyes showed it.

"Everything she did healed, forgotten, forgiven? Tell me why you want to go!"

"Guilt," Mimi said. She sat heavily at the table. "If only you know how it makes me feel inside, how the hatred for her is all mixed up with these terrible hating feelings I have for myself." Mimi's voice went high and tight. "You think I don't know what happened the night I lost Elena? She taunted me with it! Told me not to trust you at the same time she was gloating. 'He's delicious, darling, but you'll have to watch him like a hawk—a handsome man like that, and so very good with women. But then, you must know,' and she put her hand low on my belly, like this," Mimi said, touching herself, "and gave it a nasty little squeeze."

"And did you think I betrayed you—with her, with *anyone*?"

"No. But I would find myself flirting, fantasizing about other men, half-wishing something would start up between us, and it made me afraid that deep down I was just like her, a woman who used men, a whore." She shook her head slowly. "And even that isn't the worst. Sometimes," she pressed her hands to her eyes, "Oh Christ, Imre, sometimes Lenore would do some little thing—trying to help, she'd drop a loaf of bread I had ready for the oven, and I'd hear the roaring clatter of the pan against the floor and see the white dough shapeless on the dirty boards, and my mind—I just—" She stopped, grinding her teeth.

"Black anger would spiral, screaming through me, and I'd hear myself screaming, 'I told you to leave it alone, Lenore! And now look at *this*! The bread is ruined, it's been rising all morning, and *now when I'm ready to bake it's ruined!'* And my hand would flash up. Christ, I'd want to hurt her, hurt her bad, and I'd see you." She began to weep quietly. "And at the last second, I'd get hold of myself and stop. I'd take Lenore and hug her and we'd both be

crying. Lenore, because I'd frightened her, and me because I knew if I'd hit her, I would lose you forever." She paused, and I sat stunned, silent.

"You were my strength, Imre," she said simply. "Without you I would have been just like Anyeta. But you kept me from it. Because you were loyal to me, because you knew how to love me and Lenore. Because you were kind and good."

Mimi wiped her eyes and I took her moist hands in mine. "These things are more reason yet to stay away from her," I said.

"No, I have to see her. I can't forgive myself until I forgive her—"

I felt another surge of anger. Anyeta deserved not forgiveness but to die, tortured. "Forget this guilt—you did nothing! It was her. Why don't you understand that she did these vicious things, that none of it was your fault—"

"I want peace of mind. I have to go—"

"No, I don't want Lenore anywhere near her—"

"It's twenty years, Imre. People change. Maybe she has no secrets, no place in the *kumpania*." Mimi's dark violet eyes took on a far off look, and I thought about how she'd lapsed into the Romany of her girlhood. "Maybe she just wants my forgiveness before she dies."

"No, I won't have it." But even as I said the words, I knew it was only the last of my anger showing itself against the backdrop of the helplessness I felt, the control I was trying to maintain. I felt my ire draining rapidly. Already I could see myself packing the caravan in the gray gloom before dawn, consulting the stranger's pencilled map.

"My mother needs me. I need to see her." Mimi's voice held a peculiar note and I found myself wondering what really lured her. Did she need to forgive herself for despising Anyeta all these years? to exorcise the specter of those old painful memories? Or was it her mother's dark promise? *Tell Mimi I have secrets.*

"All right," I nodded, giving in. I didn't believe in sorcery. And I expected no deathbed apologies or change of heart from Anyeta, but Mimi was my wife, we were a family, we would go.

-4-

Romania

"A miserable trip through a miserable country," I said aloud, looking up at the moon casting its harsh light high on the tall alien peaks of the western Carpathians. Mimi had urged me to drive hard, and the days were a kaleidoscope of images: Lenore wailing, "Now I'll never see the Empress!" and taking her last look at the massive stone towers of the Lanchid Bridge when we crossed the Danube from Buda to Pest; the long sweep of the *puszta*, the grassy plains with their herds of wild horses that stretched north to the Nyirseg region, my boyhood home; and then as we crossed the border near Oradea and the land began to rise, the kaleidoscope shifted, revealing bad roads, hurried meals, old, crumbling towns, lumpy women and closed-face men in their crude shapeless shoes bowing at the wooden shrines.

Sorceress or not, with each passing kilometer I dreaded more and more the thought of facing the old woman. Far off a wolf howled and I shivered. Mimi and Lenore were sleeping in the caravan. I had a cold, I was tired. I stopped the wagon, unsure of the way, and leaned out over the edge feeling queasy when I registered the drop.

"Christ." Sheer rock face rose straight up on the left. To my right was a valley, shrouded with mist; here and there trees broke through and glittered darkly. The descent looked menacing. I wanted to stop and sleep a while but there was no place to tether the horses. I curled my toes in my boots trying to warm them a little, sniffled, then gave the reins a flap. The caravan lurched forward. I caught the sound of the wolf's mournful cry; it was still distant, but the lead horse suddenly laid back its ears, snorted in fear and began to bolt.

The rear wheel slewed out until I thought it would buckle under the weight, the wagon tilted and swayed. I saw the sharp outcroppings of the rocks loom up in a second of heart freezing clarity, and then the horses countered the strain, jerking us right, but we were still roaring downhill through the night.

"Whoa!" I stood up, screaming at them to halt, the wind whistling past my ears. My voice echoed and rumbled in the canyons, but in my terror it came back to me as *Run, run, run!*

The team was in a frenzy. I saw their sides heaving, the thick cloud shapes from hard breathing, heard the sound of their hooves and the racketing caravan, and a flash went through me—someone else was controlling the horses, I thought wildly. We were going to be killed. Now moving through dense forest, the road dipped. We rounded a sharp turn and the carriage lanterns bobbed and swayed crazily. Up ahead, lights gleamed dimly through the heavy fog, and for a brief instant I was disoriented. I heard the sound of muffled voices.

"Back, get back," someone warned. A pale hand appeared and faded eerily in the mist.

The road widened through the wall of trees, and in a panic I realized there was another caravan dead ahead of us. I yanked the reins, closed my eyes, threw my arm up and tensed, waiting for the crash. The wagon slewed and jolted against an ancient oak on the right. I felt the blood rushing to my head. Everything came to a sudden and immediate stop at the impact.

In the moments that followed I was groggy and confused. Footsteps and voices seemed to come and go in the cold fog. Through a haze I thought I saw a tall woman in a white gown, laughing with her head thrown back; I thought I heard a man growling at her angrily, "Keep off, you've done enough." But the white figure blurred, then slipped through the trees, and I slipped into a darkness of my own.

"Imre, Imre," a voice called low in my ear. "You passed out."

I opened my eyes, blinking, and an old man's face came into focus. His cheeks were thin, with no pad of flash under the chin; his eyes were hooded, set under heavy white brows. He dragged on a cigarette, and I saw a gold signet ring gleam on his middle finger.

"You remember me?" he asked.

My eyes flicked from the ring to the gaunt face. "Joseph?"

He nodded, absently rubbing one knee. He walked with a limp, I recalled; he was a Lovari gypsy—like my father—one of the skilled

horsemen. He was the leader of the troupe Anyeta belonged to. My fingers strayed to the base of my skull where I found an egg-shaped bulge, and his eyes caught the movement.

"Gave your head a hell of a knock." He indicated the rear wall of the caravan. "Lucky you weren't thrown."

"Mimi, Lenore," I began.

"Sleeping—they're all right." He flicked the cigarette over the side of the wagon.

"That's impossible," I started to say, rising from the seat. He laid hold of my coat lapel, his piercing eyes meeting mine.

"They sleep," he said, briefly touching one dry finger to my temple. "And sleeping easily, they dream. Listen."

It seemed to me I heard the sound of breathing inside the wagon—a soft, peaceful riffling. "They're asleep," I whispered. He nodded, and his hand dropped away from my face.

"Your *vurdan's* scraped some, but the wheels are sound." He paused. "I've been waiting here the last two nights for you."

I thought of the flash that went through me when the horses bolted. Had he meant to kill us, stopped in the road like that?

He sat forward, his eyes glittering, and I had the feeling he sensed what was going through my mind. I shivered, dismissing the thought. It was fatigue, the cold, the jarring accident, the damn country—riddled with superstition and dread—all combining to make me confuse fact with fancy.

"Anyeta's dead," Joseph said.

I felt my stomach tighten. We made the trip for nothing, I thought dismally, and slumped against the chill wood.

"It's better this way," he said. "Nobody wanted you to come—nobody wanted Mimi to come. They were beshitting themselves with fright, convinced the old sorceress would give Mimi her powers, and they'd be right where they were before—under some witch's thumb."

"You don't believe that. You're the leader, tell them—"

"My son Vaclav is the *prima*. He leads the gypsies now." He gave a weak smile, and the image of his son—a big, arrogant man—went through my mind. I'd never liked Vaclav. "It doesn't matter what I believe, but you might do well to stay away—'til afterwards. The funeral's the day after tomorrow."

"'Til she's buried, you mean."

"It wouldn't be hard," he said. "You could take the wagon, drive beyond the pass, meet me here two or three nights from now. There's enough forks and turnings that without me guiding, you'd probably miss the camp even in daylight."

"I—" I didn't know what to say. There was something deeply persuasive in his voice, and the idea held a kind of pearly glow, like the deep comfort of a pleasant dream. Yes, I could *pretend* I lost the way, we would see the grave in the woods, Mimi would stand, head bowed, brushing tears from her eyes, and then we would pack our things, take Lenore, and leave the country forever. And then a small nagging voice spiked through me: *She'll know, she'll guess and she'll never forgive you.*

"I can't do it," I said. "Anyeta was her mother. She wanted to come, she deserves to see the old woman one last time before she goes into the ground."

"Suit yourself." He shrugged and began to stiffly climb down from the wagon.

"Look, Mimi's told me the others were terrified of her mother, but you know the Romanians, Joseph—Christ, if you believe them every town has more ghosts than people—and the gypsies are even—" I stopped, ashamed of my slip.

"Worse," he finished. "But seeing more, they have more reason, perhaps." He touched one finger alongside his bony eyesocket. "You're like your mother, Imre. You never believed—not even when your senses might have told you different." He paused, one hand played over the lead horse's nose, the horse nuzzled his palm. "Keep your skepticism, half-gypsy, as long as you can—but don't let Mimi go into the old woman's wagon alone."

"Anyeta's dead—"

"I know," he said, slapping the horse's flank lightly, "but if they catch her alone with the body, there's going to be a lot of ugliness."

Joseph limped toward his barrel-topped caravan. He paused, coughing painfully, then heaved himself up onto the box. *He's grown old*, I thought sadly, clucking to gee up my team, and the old are more liable to superstition. Then his wagon, perpendicular to mine, shot ahead inthe early gray light, and for a second I

would've sworn the reins were gathered in a knot to one side of the rail, and that he was resting, arms folded, a cigarette idling between his pale thin lips. But that was impossible. No unguided team could navigate the pitted twisting roads in this godforsaken country. I was tired, it was foggy, it was a trick of the light.

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An hour and half later we drove into the camp. I pulled into the rough semicircle of ten or twelve shabby caravans ringing a communal fire. It was just a little past dawn and I was surprised at the emptiness of the place. A baby wailed from inside one of the wagons, making the tree lined clearing with its dark towering pines seem lonelier still. I was just about to ask Joseph where the other gypsies—what he would call the Vaclav-*eshti*—were, when I turned to see him disappearing through the canvas flaps of a faded blue wagon. Sighing, I unhitched my horses, set them to crop grass, then walked toward the rear of the caravan to go in and wake Mimi, tell her the news.

Behind me I heard a swift rattle of chains. *Someone's monkey*—before I could complete the thought, a short tubby man, dark hair twisted into greasy spikes, leaped out at me, forcing me against the caravan. I heard the slither of the chains at his feet, saw the broken end of one link.

"Wa—re, wa—re," he gibbered in a broken guttural voice. He went on tiptoe, pushed his stubbly face into mine, and I smelled the hot sour odor of decaying teeth. He began to mutter again and I turned my face aside, but not before I'd seen the raw wound where his tongue had been cut away.

I tried to dodge him, moving from one side to the other, but he was quick. His hands shot out, thwarting first one of my shoulders, then the other. I bounced between them like a steel ball rattling back and forth against the pins in a game of bagatelle, while he laughed at me.

"Constantin," Joseph called out sharply. I saw the old man standing at the end of the alley-like passage between the wagons. "Leave Imre alone." The short man backed away at once and stood rubbing his wrists as if he were ashamed. I saw the red marks of handcuffs on his skin.

Joseph grabbed Constantin's arm and attached one end of a pair of old heavy manacles. "Where is it?" Joseph demanded.

The tubby little man made a gurgling sound, shrugging off the question. "None of your nonsense, hand it over," Joseph said. The man hung his head—like a child with a jelly smeared chin caught reaching for a second bun.

"C'mon," Joseph said, putting his hand out. Constantin squirmed his bottom, then reached inside his trousers and withdrew a file. Joseph took it from him and put it in his own breast pocket, saying, "I keep him in my wagon most days—not last night, though. I went in to fetch him from Stephan, who was out cold. Hangover," Joseph grunted. "Constantin saw his chance and cut the chains and cuffs. I knew he'd be here."

"How?" I lit a cigarette to calm my nerves.

"Constantin sniffs out anything out of the ordinary—like the arrival of another caravan." Joseph paused, and he tugged at the gold ring on his middle finger.

Constantin. I knitted my brow. I knew the name. The memory of a plump young man rose in my head. He'd been a great practical joker, a good storyteller. "He went mad?" I breathed.

Old Joseph nodded. "Anyeta did it."

"Say what you want about *her*, but *you* keep him in chains."

"He wouldn't hurt anybody, that's so he doesn't hurt himself—again."

A spurt of revulsion sluiced through me. "He—Constantin cut out his own tongue?" As soon as I said these words, the short man screwed up his eyes and began to weep, his mouth jerked and twitched. The dark stubble on his face shone with a mixture of tears and saliva.

"That'll do," Joseph said, then turned to me. "If he gets to crying hard, he'll start howling. It's hell on the nerves." Joseph laid one hand on Constantin's head, and I had the uneasy feeling I was watching

a dog heel to his master. "Buck up, now," Joseph said. Sniffling, Constantin wiped his face with his sleeve and smiled weakly.

I couldn't look at him. The ghostly little grin was more horrible than his tears.

"Two—maybe three months ago," Joseph said, "we heard a big ruckus in his wagon. Shouting. He was screaming, over and over, 'I'll teach that liar's mouth to smart off to me!' and then we heard shrieks, a series of thick babbling grunts, the sound of hammering."

Joseph's lips were tight. "We had to break the door. When we got inside, he was passed out at the table, lying with his face in a pool of blood. He didn't just cut it out—the severed tongue was smashed against the table," he said. "And if you ask me what was worse—the sight of his white face with the blood pouring over his lips, or the sight of the pulverized flesh clinging in flecks and gobbets to the head of the hammer—I'll tell you I don't know." He closed his eyes. "I see them both—his face and the bloody hammer—in my dreams." He paused. "So I keep him with me, keep him clean and comfortable—as much as one man can do for another."

"And you believe Anyeta cursed him?"

"Imre," he said tiredly, "there is much I've seen—more than there's time to tell you. Let your wife do her duty, and take your family away."

He led Constantin off, and I considered what he'd said. The last advice was sound, certainly. I crushed out the cigarette and looked up. In the distance I could see Anyeta's peeling yellow caravan, driven out of the rough circle in the clearing. The whole campsite had a dispirited, depressing air—here and there I saw a rusted chimney flue slanted at a weird angle over roof boards, or a set of stairs made from knocked-together crates—as if times were hard of late, and I thought about how poverty and superstition went hand in hand. Young men dream of the future, of prosperity; it was the poverty that chafed and galled me twenty years ago—and standing there, I suddenly remembered exactly why Mimi and I had left the troupe:

"What's that in the bag?" Mimi had asked. She was too thin in my opinion, recovering much too slowly from Elena's stillbirth. It was dusk and I'd just come into the caravan carrying a large burlap sack, and the smell in the air told me we were about to sit down, for the third night in a row, to another supper of roasted onions.

The troupe was camped in the mountains near Tirgu Mures I recalled, and all that winter there'd been no money in the district, and therefore no horse trading. All of us were pinched and pale—except Anyeta—she looked as rosy as a milkmaid lapping cream night and day. Now it was coming on for spring, but I'd spent another depressing day in town to scare up a few *lei*, and I'd fallen back on what were time-honored occupations among gypsies, but for me strictly marginal work. I'd spent a dull morning shining shoes and grinding knives. In the afternoon I had the choice of two other menial jobs commonly given to gypsies—teeth pulling or rat catching. The idea of chasing around someone's mouth for a rotted tooth seemed even more horrible than grubbing behind dank walls for the rats. And after I consumed a very small loaf of bread and dispensed a very large hunk of palaver, I struck a deal and shook hands over a dirty wooden counter with the fat owner of a cheese shop.

Inside the dank cellar under the shop I found myself wishing I were in a field, listening to the ringing sound of the anvil, the whinnying of horses instead of the squeak and scrabble of rats. With a sigh, I brought out what I privately called the tools of the rat pulverizing trade—a hammer to clobber them and a bag to stuff their bodies inside.

But the rats were cunning at hiding from me, and I'd been so late at it the cheese shop owner finally left, taking his cash box with him and leaving his underling to put up the shutters and lock the door. The shop keeper promised to pay me 50 *lei* per rat when he returned in the morning. I didn't trust the underling—a pimple faced boy of thirteen or fourteen—to keep track of my quarry. In fact, he looked like the kind of boy who could think of several interesting things one could do with dead rats, from scaring small children to seeing how rodent guts splattered when you lay the filthy creatures in the road and watched horse carts run over them. So instead of leaving the dead vermin in the shop cellar, I brought my bounty—four or five large ugly gray brutes—home.

"Is it meat?" Mimi said. I guess my frustration made me decide the countermeasure of a joke was in order.

"Yes," I said, plumping the burlap bag onto the table.

"What kind?" she said, untying the knotted rope that held it closed.

"Mostly dark," I said, at the same time she peered deep into the sack and began to shriek.

"*Rats*!" she shouted. "Oh mother of God, you can't mean you expect us to eat these disgusting rats!"

"I admit they're a little scrawny—but somebody else beat me to the choicer, plumper specimens in the butcher shop—"

She suddenly pressed her hands to her eyes; at first I thought she was laughing; a little hysterically, perhaps, but then her shoulders shook and she began to sob. I took her in my arms. She tried to shrug me off but I held on, saying over and over I was sorry, cursing my stupidity. It had been a mean winter for everyone, and spring had finally come but nothing was better. The thought crossed my mind that she was crying not on account of the rats but because she was secretly afraid she'd lost the baby because of the scant food.

"We have to leave, there's nothing for me here," I said.

"I hate the wandering, the endless roaming," she said, and I nodded, knowing she was feeling edgy and weak and I debated whether or not I should tell her about two incidents.

Yesterday I'd seen a man burning down his own house, the flames roaring against the gray sky when the small bright tiled roof collapsed. It was five years before the revolution of '48, when Transylvania would be ruled by the Habsburgs, but like all uprisings, the seeds were already being sown. He had no money to pay the chimney tax; they would take his land if he didn't pay. "Now I got no chimney, Mister, and I don't owe no tax," he'd said, pointing to the black tumble of stones and spitting on the soft brown mud between his cracked boots. "But where will you go?" I'd asked. His round, chapped face was impassive, his voice dull with resignation. "Up there," he said with a sweep of his arm, toward the towering mountains on the horizon, "to the hills." I wasn't sure what he meant, I guessed he saw the puzzlement on my face, my brows narrowing, and he went on. "To the caves, Mister. I will take my wife and my children to live in a cave." He shivered lightly in the cool spring breeze. "God takes care of the animals, perhaps things will go better next year, or by His grace, the year after that." In my mind's eye I pictured the farmer and his family huddled inside a cold stony tomb like a dark wet mouth and I shuddered. The fact that Mimi and I were living in a caravan was meager comfort. I felt my heart pound

lightly with anxiety; I wondered if things would be better next year or the year after that, if telling Mimi about the other incident would frighten her, or maybe make her angry enough to leave—

"We could ask my mother for money," she said, taking my hand lightly; unconsciously she had keyed into my mental debate, and I winced. A month or two before I'd gone to Anyeta to ask for money.

"I don't think so," I said to Mimi, hearing Anyeta's answer, her taunting voice echoing in my head: "Let your wife go whoring," Anyeta had said, her eyes dancing as brightly as the flames behind the isinglass in her stove. She was warming her plump backside by the fire, her hands behind her, fingers stretched toward the glowing flames.

I stood there, feeling her eyes crawl over me and absently turned my black hat in small circles in my hands. I knew she had gold pieces by the dozen sewn inside her mattress.

Filthy bitch, I thought, dropping my eyes, telling myself to try another tack. "Mimi is your daughter."

"Money is money," she shrugged. She didn't add *whoring was good enough for her;* instead, she moved off from the fire, flat hips swaying like a cat's, and let her sensuous walk say it for her.

"She's pregnant," I said, seeing Anyeta turn her back and retreat to the other end of her cozy caravan. "I'm asking for her sake, because there are things she needs." *Ask her for a goddamn loan instead of a gift and get out*, a part of me considered.

Anyeta sat on the edge of her bed and I heard the brief shift and tinkle of coins inside the feather mattress. At the sound, her sharp eyes fastened on mine. "I never loan money," she said. She suddenly lay down on her side, one hand supporting her head with its mass of dark heavy hair, the other lightly sweeping back and forth, tracing a path between the place where her right breast touched the patchwork quilt and one hip rested.

"Loaning money is out of the question," she said again, patting the red and blue quilt, and turning liquid eyes up to mine. "But I might give it—as a favor."

I was a poor excuse for a husband, I told myself, but Mimi deserved better than this degradation—a life of poverty or a life of whoredom.

"And I'm no whore, either," I said, turning to leave. I heard Anyeta's throaty laugh when I shut the door.

Looking at the bag of rats on the table, I decided not to tell her any of it. I would make my appeal based on hope, on the future. I shook my head, "I don't want to ask your mother. I want us to make a life for ourselves." I told her my heart was in Hungary with the wild horses, and in my mind's eye I saw the cowboys we called *csikos* wearing their wide sleeved linen shirts and hairy sheepskin capes, squatting by their campfires, galloping over the prairies.

I don't remember everything I said that night, but Mimi took a chance on me. I never forgot that. She believed in me, agreed to risk the known for the unknown, and less than a week later we left Romania for good.

Now, standing in the tall grass and gazing at Anyeta's broken-down wagon in the distance, I saw her malicious grin, heard her mocking voice in my mind, her contemptuous answer when I spoke of our need: *Let your wife go whoring*. It was twenty years later, the country was still ruined by poverty and superstition. We would take Old Joseph's advice and leave soon, I thought; Mimi had trusted in me before, she would trust in me again.

I climbed the set of spruce little folding stairs I kept for when we traveled and went inside to tell my wife her mother was dead.

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Mimi's hand was clenched tightly in mine as we walked through the high grass toward Anyeta's wagon. She'd taken the news better than I thought. She sat with her hands clasped between her knees, nodding vigorously as we all do when we hear something that shocks or stuns us. She didn't say anything. After a few minutes she stood up from the table. Her eyes were misty looking, but she wasn't crying hard.

Now I opened the canary colored door and Mimi followed me into the half gloom. Anyeta lay propped on her bed like a huge wizened doll. Her head lolled against her shoulder. Her dark eyes

were open, staring vacantly and I saw that one of them had gone white and droopy looking. It bulged slightly toward her sharp cheekbone. Her scrawny hands were like wax sculptures hooked over the edge of the graying coverlet.

"Christ, they left her in filth," Mimi said. She stepped to the foot of the bed, and nervously fingered one of the tatty muslin drapes that pooled over the warped floorboards.

"She must have been ill a long time," I said, caught on the memory of her plump well-fed face as my eyes ranged over the room that had been once cozy, nearly sumptuous. Now, broken windowpanes were stuffed with balls of fabric. Bedding and ragged clothes were jumbled on the floor, trailing over the edge of the loft. A cupboard door hung crazily, disclosing shelves crammed with a grimy riot of pots and crocks and glassware. On the table I saw a clutch of sticky medicine bottles mingled with dishes of uneaten food, and the dusty remains of blackened herbs.

"The smell," she said, wrinkling her nose.

I nodded. It was something like the gaminess of a wild animal den: a dreadful stench of dirt and feces and flyblown meat.

"It can't be her—her body," Mimi said, "not so soon." Her eyes flicked from the pale wrinkled corpse to the gloomy disheveled room. She moved away and ran one finger over a water stain that swelled and bloated the wood of the right wall. "It makes my heart ache," Mimi said softly.

I agreed. Our childhood landscapes have that power over us, and seeing the place that was home cracked and ruined is like feeling your insides blocked with the weight of hard gray stone. "Let's go," I whispered, thinking this was making Mimi more and more uneasy. "If you stay longer, this will be the memory you take away with you."

She sat heavily on a bench that had been built into the kitchen wall. "They left her to die, the least I can do is straighten the place and sweep it out."

"Mimi," I said gently, sitting down and taking her hand, "after they bury her, they're going to burn the caravan."

"*Yag*," she said, repeating the word for fire in Romany. Her fingers were cold against my palm, she took her hand away and

stood up. "You go to Lenore, I'll just carry the mess to the loft, sweep. A few minutes—no more."

I thought I understood. Anyeta had been cruel, but to leave the place in such a shambles would disgrace a beast.

Mimi kissed my cheek, pulled me up. "Go on," she said. "I won't be long."

I was on my feet, nodding agreeably when Joseph's warning flashed through me. *If they catch her alone, there's going to be a lot of ugliness.* Anxiety darted through me. I was her husband, but suppose they thought that was the same or worse than her being alone. I should've brought Joseph along, I railed inwardly; too late now. I sat down, folded my arms. "I'll wait, but be quick about it."

Mimi found a broom, opened the door and began sweeping a great cloud of dust outside. I yawned, leaned my head on my chest. I remembered thinking—only half-humorously—that I hoped no one broke a leg or had a heart attack while we were still inside the old woman's caravan. I peeked at the corpse under my lashes, then drifted toward a light sleep.

"Goddamn them to hell!" Mimi shouted.

I snapped awake. The door was ajar, a great deal of the mess had been tidied.

"Those *bastards!*" Mimi stood holding the bedcovers in one hand, blocking my view of the body.

"What, what is it?" I got to my feet, my spine crickled and snapped, I moved quickly toward the bed at the same time a great racking sob burst from Mimi. She dropped the covers and shrank against the wall, shaking her head in disbelief.

Suddenly she rushed forward again, crying, "Bastards, *bastards*. Christ, oh Christ!" She jerked the covers back and pummeled the bed with her fists, jouncing the body. She slumped to her knees, then sat heavily, clinging to one of the drapes. I saw it strain against the rail at the top of the bed, then plummet in a heap between her hands. "Pull up her nightdress and look," she said in a thick voice.

I tweezed the thin garment between my fingers, and slid it up the old woman's wrinkled flesh. My stomach tightened, I heard the blood singing in my ears.

Above the shrunken cleft of her sex, in the center of her abdomen was a series of long jagged knife marks, as if someone had dragged the knife from her breasts to her belly over and over and over. Dark crusty blood clotted the wounds.

"She was murdered," Mimi whispered from what seemed far away. "They murdered her."

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"There's no blood on the sheets," I said. Someone had sponged and dressed the body, arranged it under the quilt; I felt my eye twitch, and before I could stop myself, I said, "Now it makes sense, Joseph was afraid you'd find out."

"What?" I heard her scrabbling, getting to her feet. She moved rapidly across the room, shook my shoulder hard. "What did you say?"

"Joseph—he—"

"He *what?* Don't stop, go on—"

"He told me not to let you come in here alone," I said quietly. "He knew, but I don't think he did it." My mind jumped to the image of Constantin, the dangling chains. I told Mimi about him. I sat down on the wooden bench, rubbing my hands over my thighs, trying to think. "Suppose Constantin cut her up, he's crazy, so he's not responsible. Joseph finds out—he's not trying to protect Constantin—only spare you."

Mimi flared. "And they hated her, and she was dying anyway, so if someone killed her, so what?" Her eyes glowed hotly, she paced rapidly, skirts swirling.

"Of course not," I said, wanting to tell her I was sad for her.

"Look at her arms." Mimi seized one limp hand. "No marks," she said, letting it fall. "She never had a chance, she didn't defend herself. They came at her when she was sleeping." Mimi shook her

head, then suddenly she was kneeling between my legs, looking up at me.

"Imre, don't you see? It wasn't a madman, it was someone cunning. Someone who knew we were on our way and killed her before she could tell me—"

"Shhh." I grabbed Mimi's arm, heard the sound of someone clumping through the weeds. "Someone's coming." I pushed at her, we scurried up into the rickety loft, laying flat on the floor behind a tower of footlockers and boxes.

"We can't see," Mimi whispered in my ear. But the door was opening, and I didn't think we should risk creeping forward to peer over the edge.

I closed my eyes, listening for sounds—a heavy tread to indicate a man, the sweep of skirts. But whoever entered stood silently in the middle of the room. I could imagine the gypsy looking at the dishevelled corpse, at Mimi's work with the broom, wondering if we were still inside, and I expected to hear an earthy chuckle, slow stealthy steps advancing up the stairs.

Instead, the room was plunged in cold darkness—as quick and sudden as nightfall in winter, and I felt Mimi shrink against me.

There was a tinkling of glass—windowpanes being shattered one by one in a dread sequence coursing around the room. The wind gusted up. I heard the cupboard doors flying back, the sound of bottles ringing against each other and falling, of the bedcurtains sailing high and brushing the wood ceiling, and I knew something evil had swept in and stood waiting below us.

I heard a low menacing laugh. "Rise," a sexless voice whispered. "Rise," it intoned, and then a kind of brittle excitement infused the voice. "Rise!"

I buried my face against Mimi, trying to shut out sounds: the slow terrible hissing cataract of the falling bedclothes, the double thump of stiff wooden feet striking the floorboards and in my mind I could see the corpse—as pale as the lank white hair that streamed from its head—standing awkwardly in the center of the room and staring blankly with its good eye.

"Who owns the hand of the dead brings healing. Who owns the hand of the dead breeds destruction. Who owns the hand of the

dead can take a life or restore it," the voice recited, and the words sank like acid in my flesh.

I sensed the gypsy was watching, waiting.

Then I heard the creaking sound of Anyeta's jaw dropping: "As you have restored mine," she said, and her voice was utterly empty, desolate. "Ask what you will."

My heart began to beat with a huge hollow resonance.

"*Ask*," she said again, and her breath whistled out of her chest in a high thin screeing—like the eerie moaning of winter wind swirling over rooftops—in the cold, nightfilled room.

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"Nooooo!" Mimi screamed, and I felt her scrambling beside me. The footlocker slid forward, the boxes trembled as she lurched forward and struggled to her feet. I was up in an instant. We heard the boxes teeter and crash below. The caravan was suddenly filled with a thick bone-chilling mist. I peered over the edge and saw a white figure—the same I'd seen at the sight of the crash, I thought—receding through the door. The fog thinned, and now I could see the corpse toppled on the floor, one of the heavy wooden boxes rocking lightly against the body.

Mimi trembled against my chest. "Obscene," she wailed. "Imre, it was so obscene."

I put my hand in her dark hair, soothing her. She pulled away, looked up at me. Her eyes were dull with shock, and it frightened me. I leaned to kiss her or maybe take her face in my hands to let her know I was there, that she mattered. My thumb strayed to the angle of her small jaw, and with the caress I saw something flicker in her eyes. A kind of painful knowledge swept across her face.

She moaned, her hands covered her eyes, and then slowly she lowered the left—the one with the old scar—and stared at it. "I knew," she said in a dusky voice. "I knew. My mother caught me

the first time, and she burned my hand against the kettle, but after that I was more careful, and I watched her, and I saw where she hid the glass-topped box." Mimi's gaze went to the ceiling. She nudged a crate into place and climbed up, then leaned out over the loft and tapped at a board in the ceiling. "See the marks."

Under the coating of soot and grime was the outline of a small rectangle cut into the panel over Mimi's head. She was straining to push at it. The sawed rectangle suddenly yielded, disappearing into the dark hole. She gave a little gasp, and I was afraid she'd fall. I darted toward her, clasping her around her thighs, my face buried in her skirts. "For God's sake, be careful," I said.

Above me I heard her saying the same words over and over into the dim recess. "My mother meant me to have it." Her voice had a peculiar lilt—like that of a miser, whispering and sifting through his gold. She went on tiptoe, her hands flailing inside the small space. "The hand of the dead belongs to me."

A shudder racked me, and without thinking I pulled her down from the box. She cried out. I saw she'd skinned one wrist against the sharp edge of the panel. She stumbled against me, stepping on my ankles and feet, throwing us both off balance, but I had her now by one arm and I righted us.

"What are you doing?" she said fiercely, trying to pull her hand out of my grasp. I held on.

"Obscene," I whispered. "You said it yourself." I jerked my chin toward the corpse. "Is that what you want?" She began to struggle toward the crate, crying for me to let her go, and I lifted her up and carried her down the stairs.

I set her on her feet, held on to her arm, made her look at the graceless, crumpled body lying gape-jawed like a mechanical toy that spent its gears and collapsed.

"That's what you want to wind up?" I asked, panting heavily.

"The hand can bring healing," she said calmly, and I felt her muscles slacken under my grip. I let go and she stood quietly.

"Leave it alone." The gypsies would burn the caravan, and with it the savage charm.

"All right, Imre," she sighed, but I saw her eyes lift toward the cutout in the ceiling.

I put my arm around her and led her toward the door. She suddenly stopped near the threshold. "The box isn't there," she whispered. "Someone took it."

"I imagine the woman—whoever she was—thought she'd use it for good, too—" I began.

"I saw a man in here."

"It was a woman with dark hair in a white dress."

Mimi shook her head. "Visions, confusion, it's part of the power—" She stopped. "It was Joseph. He knew we were watching. He wanted me to know he claimed it. Imre, please, just let me look once more—"

"No—"

"Just to see if it's really gone," Mimi pleaded, and all at once I saw a way to end it.

"All right," I nodded. "But you're too short, you'll kill yourself leaning out over the loft." I started for the stairs, moved along the edge. I could see there'd been a railing at one time to prevent falls. The small round dents where the spindles had rested were obvious; some of the boards had a splintered, powdery look and it occurred to me they might be rotted. We'd been lucky—with two of us up there we could've collapsed the whole structure.

I began to move carefully, testing for mushy places. I stepped over the pile of sheets, and now I saw they were stiff, streaked with dried blood. *Hidden by whoever killed Anyeta*, I thought. The boards moaned under my heels.

I realigned the crate Mimi had used, stepped onto it and palmed the ceiling. Then I leaned over the edge of the loft and felt inside the cutout with my right hand. The first thing I touched was the rectangle Mimi had pushed aside, and I nudged it lightly with my fingertips. I stretched further out, my weight shifting to the arm that was shoved inside the hole, my mind spinning with irritation. I wondered how the hell the old woman had reached it.

"Is it there?" Mimi called from down below, startling me, and I tottered, felt my heart rattle, then caught myself.

"Doesn't seem to be," I said. It came out neutral enough, but a spurt of annoyance rushed through me. I was up here doing what she wanted, couldn't she just let me do it without hocketing at me on top of it all? Buggerandsod, I thought, tell her the thing's gone and get down. I danced my fingers around for effect.

"No." I shook my head and glanced down at her upturned face. "Not here." I prepared to shift my weight back. I leaned, withdrawing my hand carefully, and that was when I felt it.

The copper side was slick, loathsome, but I felt a strange longing to touch it again. I paused, and my fingers crept toward it. It gave off some odd vibration—a low persistent hum I sensed rather than heard—and my fingertips began to tingle.

I brushed the cold greasy surface of the box, and the tender skin of the quicks throbbed the way they do when your fingernail suddenly shears off. I drew my hand back, the pain dulled. My brain pulsed, I felt a power that reviled and drew me, like the sickening sensation of holding ice against the hot battered fingers you've slammed hard in a door. I wanted the copper box with the glass top and yet I wished it were a thousand miles away instead of idling on the edge of my grasp.

"Imre," Mimi began, and I wondered if she'd seen me hesitate, seen the mix of fear and wonder on my face, and guessed. "Imre," she said again, and I heard the hush of caution in her voice at the same time I was aware of the steadily increasing sound of wood and metal giving way.

I turned my head, saw the breach: The floor of the loft dipped alarmingly, exposing a series of bent nails driven into the wall. There was a groan, a ripping sound, the loft swayed.

"It's coming down!" Mimi shrieked.

I swung out over the space, the box skittered deeper into the recess. Behind me I heard the loft splinter and crash. The ceiling was thin, I knew it wouldn't hold me. "Move, move!" I shouted, and let go.

I landed badly, the bottoms of my feet stung like fire. I lost my balance, tumbling backward. A jagged piece of the ceiling plummeted and struck my knee.

Mimi was at my side helping me to my feet, pulling me toward the front of the caravan.

I looked back. The other end of the wagon was a crazy litter of boxes, rubble, sifting dustmotes. The bed was demolished; its dirty drapes lay in a flummox of wood and fabric. One leg of the corpse stuck out from under a broken board. I didn't care if they left the old woman to burn in her caravan or dragged her out of the mess.

My eye went to the crushed stairs, then up to the torn ceiling. *No one can get at the filthy thing now*, I thought. My head throbbed at the memory of how the charm enticed me like a siren song and made me yearn for it. I saw Mimi standing on the crate, whispering *My mother meant me to have it* and realized it had drawn her with deadly fascination when she reached for it. I was sick, thinking I'd touched the slippery box.

I moved toward the threshold gingerly, conscious of the sharp pain in my feet, and I wondered if I'd managed to break one or both arches when I jumped from the loft. My boots seemed tight, the stiff leather pressing on swollen flesh. I limped a little, and it felt good. I eased myself down the first step. "C'mon," I called over my shoulder, and I turned to see her gazing up at the ceiling.

"He tried to kill you," Mimi said.

I shook my head. "The whole place is falling apart."

"It's there," she said, "I sense it." Her eyes were riveted on the ragged hole.

A wave of guilt rushed through me, my throat tightened. "There was no copper box," I said in a thin papery voice.

"How did *you* know it was made of copper?" she asked, staring at me. I looked away.

"Please," I said, "let's go before someone sees us." It was nearly sunset now; the men would be returning to camp, the women bustling around cookfires.

Mimi shut the yellow door, then hooked her arm in mine and let me use her shoulder for support. We ambled down the steps. I was relieved to see the clearing was deserted. A dog barked in the distance. At the entrance to our caravan, Mimi stopped and looked back. Anyeta's wagon was a dark monolith in the dying light.

"It can be used for healing." A little sighing breath heaved out of her. She stuck her hand out briefly—palm up, waist high—and

I saw the old scar in the center of her hand, the raw abrasion on her wrist. For the first time I wondered if she'd scraped herself on a sharp corner of the box, not the wooden edge of the cutaway, and whether, like some deadly infection, its power was working inside her.

I wanted to look at her face but I didn't. I knew her violet eyes held an odd capering light, and I knew its source. After all, the lure of the box was strong.

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"Where's Lenore?" I asked, brushing through the green drapes that separated our daughter's sleeping compartment from the main part of the caravan. I was in the kitchen area, I could see clear to the other end, down the two short steps to our bedchamber.

Mimi's back was to me, and she was rummaging through one of the kitchen cupboards. "There was a gang of kids outside earlier, she's probably with them."

"I didn't see anyone out there," I said.

She shrugged, pulled out a roll of gauze, and patted a wooden chair, motioning for me to sit. Away from the old woman's caravan and the savage charm, she seemed more at ease, more her self, I thought with relief.

I pulled off my boots, a pair of wool socks, and we both looked my feet over. She handed me a jar of salve and wincing, I rubbed it on my feet.

"Hurt much?" Mimi asked, probing lightly with two gentle fingers.

"Call me tenderfoot," I said, and Mimi gave out a small giggle. The Lovari gypsies, the horsemen, used the term to mean a timid man—something like a horse with a stone in its hoof stepping carefully.

I began wrapping my feet with the gauze, and I was luxuriating in the soothing feel of the cloth on my skin.

"Tenderheaded is more like it. You're making a mess of the bandage." She frowned at the trailing white strips and lumpy spots. Mimi took the gauze out of my hands, and I stuck my feet out while she began winding more neatly.

"Some of me's not tender," I said, grinning, and Mimi caught my eye, gave a little smile. I put my hand on her shoulder. "While Lenore is still outside. You know you always relax more," I prompted.

She nodded. We finished the bandaging, and Mimi drew the drapes. She left a plate of supper for Lenore on the stove. We went to bed.

The room was thick with shadows. I was dimly aware of the caravan door opening, and I dismissed it, thinking Lenore had come in for dinner. I heard a series of small movements in the kitchen and kissed Mimi more avidly to distract her from the noises. If she heard Lenore, I thought, she'd get up, and who knew when she'd come back to bed.

I rounded her breasts with both hands, then pressed my mouth to one brown nipple, felt her hands in my hair. She gave a little hum of satisfaction.

"Yes," she murmured, and I felt her hand slide down between us. My heart quickened, it wasn't like her to touch me. I felt myself getting more excited.

Surprised, I drew back. Mimi's fingers slid between her own legs, moving in a slow rhythmic circle. She arched her hips, then suddenly sat up, pulling me with her, rubbing her breasts over my chest. "Umm," she breathed and I felt her slick-damp fingers on my mouth, my chin, poking at my lips, and I sucked at them.

Her legs curved over mine, my hands kneaded her hips, and they seemed softer, more yielding than usual. I pulled her closer, feeling the point of her chin in my shoulder, her hair hanging in a flood over my back.

She was more sensual than she'd ever been and that inflamed me. We slid together smoothly, rocking along on a slow silent tide.

Eyes closed, I rested snugly inside her and savored the last of our lovemaking. Skyrockets and stars, I thought, smiling to myself, and after all these years. I chuckled aloud.

"Share the joke," she said huskily into my ear.

"You were so good in bed I was just wishing your mother would die everyday," I said, shifting back, and hearing the soft ripply sound of our sweat damp skins parting.

"Do you?" she asked, and I thought her voice had a throaty sound that was different.

I gazed down. In the twilight gloom, her thighs had an unfamiliar heavy look, her belly was more rounded, topped by large pendulous breasts. "Don't sit like that," I snapped without thinking.

"Wha—?" she sat up quickly, and the moving, blurry face I saw was not my wife's. My pulse throbbed, my head whirled. The woman I saw had dark brows that were more sharply defined. Her full lips were red, pouting. Her hair was longer. I recalled how it hung softly over the skin of my back, and a spurt of panic went through me. I closed my eyes, kneaded my hands into fists.

She got out of bed, reached for a dressing gown, and I heard the whisper of silk. I peeped through my lashes.

Mimi's white dressing gown, which trailed to the floor on her, hung to mid calf on this woman. Tied at the waist, it scarcely covered the bulging breasts, the flaring hips. Not a fat woman, I thought, but lush, overblown like a rose before the faded petals drop. I swallowed anxiously, felt sweat breaking out on my face. You're imagining this, I told myself, you're feverish, fevers can play havoc with your mind.

"Imre, what's wrong?"

I looked up, absurdly relieved to see Mimi's small plaintive face glancing back at me.

"Nothing," I said shivering, hugging her small body. "It's this damn cold." I sniffled, absently rubbing my nose. I caught a vague female scent and I shuddered with dread.