

AS  
DUST

*Margaret Killjoy*

We at Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness are pleased to bring you this gloom-ridden story, the tale of a strange future of endless urban sprawl and misfit half-humans.

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DON'T THINK THERE'S ANY FUTURE. THAT IS TO SAY, I DON'T REALLY think there's anywhere for the world to *go* from here. Where I'm from, we seem to be killing each other as fast as anyone is breeding, and half the kids are freaks like me.

I'm a moose. Let's get that out of the way right off so I don't leave you wondering. And by moose, I mean that my head is over a foot long and my body is covered in short brown fur. I'm bipedal—thank god—and I've got opposable thumbs, but other than that I'm the spitting image of that animal that used to be around that I'm named after. I weigh twice what you might and I can't digest meat. That's alright by me, because flesh is pretty much the only food you gotta pay for. Whatever's in that packaged crap, it keeps me going.

Sometimes people tell me that as a moose I'm supposed to have some kind of primordial longing for the woods, that I gotta get outta the city. It's true that most folks born like me skedaddle off pretty young, but I've got theories about that, and they aren't pretty.

Here I am, off at a tangent from the very beginning. I'm prone to that, you'll have to bear with me. The story I'm *trying* to tell doesn't get to the government conspiracy stuff for a long time yet. The story I'm *trying* to tell starts off... let's start with that show I went to.

Down on the boardwalk overlooking the bay. It's a nice place to hang out, much safer than where I live. There're fewer gang types over that way; it's mostly musicians and art-scene folk. I'd live there if they weren't so... well, you know how those artist-types can be. Not much room or use for a clerk thereabouts.

But yeah, I'd walked the couple few blocks to the boardwalk and was set in for a long mid-summer twilit evening at Laughing Mare's Lounge (a centaur joint, you understand). The show was pretty good. The singer cavorted and stamped and crooned her way through a dark jazz kind of set; just my kind of music, that moody, spooky stuff that hearkens back to a time when there *was* a future and that future it was *bleak*. Man, that singer really knew how to draw a

suitor's eye, too. Sometimes you see these folk who think you gotta dress scanty in order to get attention, but of course that simply isn't true.

There wasn't a bloke or a lady or anything else in that place that wasn't eying that centaur with a sexual eye, just wishing they could catch hers in the same fashion. Or maybe I'm just saying that so I feel better about my own staring. Tangents again, Emmanuel, tangents.

The sun had barely gone over the horizon before the sky turned black. At first, no one really thought about it, or at least *I* didn't. But in retrospect, it was nearly mid-summer and we shoulda had a twilight. I sat drinking my grass-juice at a table alone and longing for a filly jazz singer to call my friend, all the while everything pretty much went to shit outside.

I didn't even notice till I stepped out of the place and saw smoke. No, what I saw was blackness. It was *caused* by smoke, but the sky was just blotted out everywhere over the water. Turn around and sure enough, there's still light in the sky. Turn back around and face the water... nothing. A crowd had gathered and was mumbling incoherently. Some jackass (there ain't no mule people, don't get the wrong idea) had set up his easel out there and was painting the mess. I even saw a camcorder—one of those big ugly early models—out there

taping. There would have been more, of course, since like I said the place was swarming with artist-types, but they don't really make video cameras anymore. I guess they don't really make too much of *anything* anymore, except food and weapons. What kind of world is it, I ask you?

So some artists were out there trying to capture all the weirdness while the rest of us just kinda soaked it in. A few lights—probably fires—filtered through the haze once you got to staring proper, and more than once I heard the loud rumble of metal scraping and banging on metal. I gotta admit, it fit my mood perfectly. A slow, dark melancholy with a threat of danger and at least a little beauty.

I didn't even notice that the singer was standing right left of me until I turned and looked up at her face (I may be pretty tall, but there's no bipedal who ain't gonna look *up* to make eyes with a centaur). When she wasn't on stage, she seemed kinda plain. Pretty, but not the goddess we'd all been worshipping inside. I liked that. Before, I'd been attracted. Now I was crushing.

There's a point to telling you this, I promise. It just won't come up for awhile.

Another centaur stood to my right, and the two of them with their bulk

kinda kept the crowd at bay. I had a lot of breathing room, which was good because I get a little panicky in tight crowds. But yeah, so it was that when the raft washed up, I got a good look at it first.

It was an inflatable, one of those boats you can blow up by breathing heavy into a little plastic nozzle. Only this one musta been something like 40 feet long and 10 feet wide, so there was a hell of a lot of little nozzles. Not the kind of thing you take out solo. The whole thing was patched together with borrowed wood and plastic, and one prominent piece of black tubing had “History Channel” printed across it in letters like they used to do. I liked that. “History Channel.” I’m just imagining some old spiritualist channeling history and telling grand stories about our past back before it all kinda stopped. The raft was half swamped, and it didn’t take much looking to find the cause of the problem: a huge chunk of the wooden bottom was torn out, like an artillery shell had hit it. That’s actually probably exactly what had happened.

Rules of salvage being what they are, I hopped onboard. It shook and rocked with my weight, but I’m nimble enough for 350lbs. and I clamored about looking for anything worth saving. Only thing I found was a handbag, soaked in the salty water of the bay. Inside, among hair-ties and makeup, were a couple

portraits done in ink, and though they were a little bleedy from the soaking you could still make out a pretty man's face in both of them. On a whim, I slung the bag over my shoulder.

I wanted to take the boat out for a ride, maybe go see what the fuss was about out there, but there were no oars and the thing was swamped anyhow, so I got back out on the boardwalk and watched with the rest of the spectators for a while. We never got any better clue as to what had happened, and the crowd—myself included—eventually dispersed before the smoke did.

A FEW DAYS later I was at the market. Best kind of market, the kind where you don't have to barter or buy, the kind where everything's free. See, most of the gangs around the city don't work like this, they work the old stupid way. Some of 'em print their own currency, others use the most ridiculous shit as money... I've seen one that runs on four-leafs. Clovers. A market running on plants isn't really the place for a grazing herbivore like myself, cause the jokes don't stop coming.

But there's people in this world that realize what's going on. History is over, like I keep saying. So I was at the market a few days after that whole "blackened

sky, abandoned boat” incident watching my friend Jasmine’s stand. Jasmine’s a wonderful person. She runs a knicknack table at the free market, mostly full of junk she’s made from other junk. Since she’d rather be making junk than figuring out who to give it to, I step in as clerk a few times a week. Even though I’m not in her gang per se, it entitles me to some of the benefits, like access to the free market.

Now, Plebeius—that’s the name of Jasmine’s gang—doesn’t call itself a gang. But everyone else does. It’s a group of people with shared interests who have gathered together to provide a mutual defense network, Jasmine says. Which qualifies it as a gang as far as I’m concerned, but it don’t bother me none. They dress pretty much the same as one another and they’re constantly at war with this group or that, but they’re alright folks, really. They let freaks in and they don’t exclude the norms either.

I just wasn’t one to do much fighting, or maybe I’d’ve joined up. Plus, since my apartment was outside their turf, I’d’ve had to move.

But I loved their market. I loved being a clerk. I loved helping people find what they need and I loved giving it to them for nothing.

So I was there and it was near the end of the day so nobody was really

shopping; they were all loitering. I leaned back against the brick, feeling the low summer sun warm up my fur, just watching people. I don't mean to sound strange, but there's probably nothing that makes me so happy. I'm better off watching people than talking to 'em, at least sometimes like when my mind is lazy and a warm summer night is getting underway.

So there I was leaning up on the wall like I said, and Jasmine walked by in a rush, didn't even look at me. That'd be kinda odd even if I hadn't been watching her stall, which I had been. Her skirt flew out behind her in her haste, the carefully stitched black rags catching the breeze the same as her long black hair. Picture a norm, around fifty but real healthy, a bit severe in the facial features but kind in the smile. That's Jasmine.

She didn't need to shout or nothing to clear people outta her way; the lethargic crowd moved around her and she ran through it like it was so much smoke and holograms.

And then you've got this fuckin laser-ray what shoots outta the sky and misses her by maybe a foot and everything goes into panic. Or maybe it was just me who panicked. I see lasers and I duck (sometimes scream, I won't lie). I lifted my head from out between my knees and it was over pretty quick. None

of *us* dead but the asshole on the roof had kinda slumped over the railing up there, cooked as dinner. Only one who got hurt (not including the dead lady on the roof) was Wally, food vendor who was set up across the street; he got beamed by the dead lady's laser pistol when it fell out of her hand.

So Wally was clutching his head like he was mad enough to kill but he's a moose too and we've got pretty tough skulls so I wasn't too worried. Jasmine was halfway up the fire escape already to check out the sniper and the crowd was split in half, one half watching Jasmine, curious, the other congratulating Hector—the person who did the defensive shootin.

Now if all this nonsense had gone on near my apartment, it wouldn't really be surprising enough to relate. People get microwaved and tased maybe two, three times a week on my block because it's always under contention. It's always the gang warriors who do all the shooting and all the getting shot, though, so it doesn't really matter to me one way or the other.

See you've got all these little gangs and then you've got the big gang that calls itself the government. All the little gangs, the more apartments they control, the more food and toys they get from the government. Then the local gang is in charge of distributing the food to us. If they don't do a good job, we people

on their turf could turn to one of their competitors, which would mean the gang wouldn't get as many toys (you know, computers and lasers and all that useless crap). Not the best system of course, but I didn't really see it changing.

Now, Plebeius said they didn't say anything to or get anything from the government, but they seemed to have the same foodstuffs as anyone else so I wasn't really sure I believed 'em.

So back on the street at the free market, I stood and leaned back up against the wall and joined the curious starers. Jasmine reached the top, threw her legs over the railing, and proceeded to search the body. She came back down looking triumphant (or perhaps we on the street just felt that way, the interloper being dead and all) and, after a brief conversation with Hector, walked over to join me at the table.

"I need a hug," she said, and I complied.

With my friend held in fond embrace, I got lasered in the back.

I'D NEVER BEEN microwaved before, and I really don't recommend it. Especially if you're not one of us bigger freaks. I can't really describe it except that it hurt like fire and it hurt like fever and I had trouble forming the thoughts I

felt it appropriate to consider as one was dying. I wanted maybe to go over my life and get a last little bit of appreciation for it all but all I could think was a string of curses.

Fortunately, I survived. I hope when I *do* go down for good it's from something a bit less distracting so I can really focus on getting the most out of my last few moments.

I lifted Jasmine and ran, knocking over her stall. Folks didn't move effortlessly out of my way as they had for Jasmine, but people bowled over well enough when shoved and, once clear of the crowd, I ran faster than most anything on two legs. I didn't really give it much thought. I just ran, ducking through alleys and bolting across open spaces, hoping to break line of sight with whoever it was that shot me. Finally, I reached a boarded-up building and burst in through the alley door with all of the stealth a hydraulic hammer.

I set Jasmine down on the ornate tilework floor and I must have been holding her pretty tight because as soon as I let go she got a headrush or something and passed out cold. And *that* is when shit got weird.

There was some daylight bouncing down through a skylight or something, and all the dust I'd kicked up was floating in the air and giving the

light a bit of body so I could see the rays themselves as they lit up the walls. I guessed then that the place used to be a fancy hotel or something because the room I'd stumbled into was practically a cavern with a great big staircase at one end and the fanciest decrepit revolving doors I'd ever seen at the other. Turns out it had been a hospital, I found out later, but that's beside the point.

I turned my attention back to Jasmine and she was transforming. You know how some women will wear a bustle that sticks their skirts so far out to the back that it looks like they're practically a centaur? Well, maybe you don't but it happens sometimes and that's what Jasmine looked like all the sudden as she lay on her side on the cold tile. But it wasn't a bustle that stuck her skirt out, it was legs. Big ol' hairy spider legs.

Jasmine had been a norm when I grabbed her and took off running, but here she was a spider. And as we all know, spiders don't exist. Sure, I mean, the little eight-legged buggies the size of your fingernail or the size of your hand, they exist. But everyone knows that spider-freaks are just a story that old men tell to scare their grandkids. So, imagine my surprise. Turns out a spider is kinda like what centaur is to a real horse; her torso, head, hands were all "nor-

mal” but from her waist down she was pretty far out. Not quite as dramatic as a centaur though, because she was still only five foot six or something and her spider-body wasn’t more than three feet long; all the legs looked jammed together. Not that I was looking up her skirt or anything, mind you.

I took a few small steps back, thought about it, and took another six. I had no idea what to do. Jasmine was my friend, so I couldn’t just leave her, but I’m not going to pretend I wasn’t scared of her and mad at her. And confused, of course.

So in the end I backed off and sat down on the reception desk. It creaked but held—real wood and none of this cheap recycled stuff folks use today. I shuffled through the old ledger (its paper still bleached white after all these years) and dinged the golden “ring for service” bell a few times as I fretted.

I figured out from the papers that the place had been a hospital that’d been converted for freak-curing duty and I decided I’d no desire to explore upstairs. I’d heard about this kinda place. The doctors back then had been afraid of us—it’s like they knew we signaled the end of everything—and had locked us up and had done test after test on the freaks who hadn’t any cash and had tried to “cure” the rich ones with surgical manipulation.

Whatever elder god had plotted against the old world had played its game perfect, too. All the human powers were so wrapped up worrying about bear-women and duck-men they hadn't noticed the doors to oblivion that had opened, warnings unheeded. Even the gods play smoke and mirrors.

Actually, gods *are* just smoke and mirrors.

But anyway, I was at the hospital and was picking at my teeth with my fingernail when Jasmine woke up.

She staggered and stood, brushing her hair away from her aged, well-preserved—and not at all spider-like—face, adjusting the strap of her tanktop. She saw me and smiled and took a few steps towards me (how do you count steps when you've got eight legs?) before a pretty leaden look went across her face as she realized her secret was out. She grabbed her loose skirt by the hem gave it a quick shake, and I swear to you she looked as norm as any person I ever saw.

“Weirded out?” she asked me, still walking closer but keeping a respectful distance.

“Yeah,” I said, staring.

“No need pointing out the hypocrisy of a fellow with a moose head getting

freaked out by an arachnid?”

“Yeah,” I stammered, “I mean no.”

Maybe eight feet away she stood (no pun intended) and we just kinda hung out there for a moment, each lost in our own thoughts. Then we heard the flutter of a pigeon or something from the dark ceiling and it snapped us (well, at least me), back into the moment.

“I just didn’t know spiders...” I started.

“Were real,” she finished. “We’re one of the rarest. And there’s people out to make us rarer yet.”

“You’re talking about...” I started.

“Dust,” she finished. Norm’s granddads used stories about spiders to spook their kids. Dust was what we freaks heard about. Brothers of Dust, a secret society? Or DUST, a hidden branch of the government with an acronym lost to time? I’d never given it much thought. There used to be scores, maybe hundreds or thousands of different types of freaks, but it settled down pretty quick and you’ve got eight common freaks and another two dozen or so rarities. Could be natural selection, could be conspiracy.

“You’re serious?” I asked.

Jasmine looked at me funny.

“Alright, but how do you, uh,” I was clearly looking at her human legs, trying to figure out the trick.

“Can’t tell you,” she said, “but look, thanks. For saving me. Just don’t uh, just don’t tell anyone. About the spiders.”

“Course,” I said, pleased to be thanked. What can I say? Aside from my schnoz, I tend to go unnoticed in life. I hopped down off the desk and walked towards her.

She walked up, grabbed my shoulders, and pulled herself up to kiss me quickly on the mouth. And you know what? For an old lady, she kisses pretty good. For a moment I forget she was old enough to be my mother. Hell, for a moment I forgot she was a spider. That’s what a good kiss can do. A kiss can be so intimate without any sexuality.

To be sure we weren’t followed (and to avoid the neighborhood after dark), we spent the night in the hospital. Jasmine wanted to explore, but I wouldn’t have any of it. We lay on our backs, hidden behind the front desk, and I counted tiles in the wall until I slept.

THE NEXT DAY I escorted Jasmine back to her apartment. She told me she didn't need protection but didn't mind the company. Turns out she lives in an unregistered warehouse. Which is to say, Plebeius doesn't get any government kickbacks for holding the building. I asked her about it, and it turns out Plebeius doesn't hold *any* registered property. So I asked her where they got their food.

"Where do you think the government gets it?" she responded.

And I was stumped.

"We've got the same machines they do. Shit goes in, food comes out. Robot worms in there break it all down, separate out the nutrients, extrude the yeast and fungi and crap which gets hacked together to serve as paste. Simple as that."

"That's pretty cool," I said.

"No, it's not." Jasmine was always grumpy in the morning, so I wasn't taken aback by her manner. "You know what we want? Plebeius? We want to get somewhere where we can grow our own food, real food. Potatoes, quinoa, kale, artichoke, plums."

"So head out to the woods," I said.

“There are no woods.”

“No, no,” I didn’t believe her. “You take a train for a few days to get to the edge of the city and you take a ferry over the river. I went with my uncle when he went out.”

“Did you take the ferry?” Jasmine asked.

“Nah, I stayed on the near side of the river, with my folks.”

“There are no woods, except maybe over the ocean.”

I just shook my head, because I was started to get angry. I’d worried about it before, what she was talking about. Hell, when I was a kid I was *convinced* that my uncle was getting on that ferry and was just heading off to die. I just didn’t want to hear it from her because I didn’t want to believe it.

We were hanging out outside her place, so Jasmine reached up to scratch my back between my shoulderblades, smiled, and went inside. My anger was gone as soon as her fingernails touched fur. Life’s like that. I’m glad, too.

I whistled a tune I’d picked up somewhere, some folk song that I’ve never heard nor imagined words for, and set out to walk around for awhile. Walking is about the best thing in the world, I’d wager, and cities are plenty good for walking. Who needs the forest, I was thinking, when you’ve got the city.

But then my brain just kind of went dark and it was like my mind was glowering at me. Maybe my uncle was dead, and not happy-dead like eaten by a wolf but haunted-dead like dissected by some bastard out of my nightmares. Worse than whatever happened to my uncle was what if there was no woods? The city without the woods is a prison. Just like your brain would be a prison for your soul if you didn't get to sleep sometimes, right?

But before my brain could lose itself in any more of that I was struck upon a vision of light and grace and song.

"Hey, you!" I heard as I walked past a market a few blocks from the boardwalk. I turned and saw that mare from my wildest waking dreams, the singer. You know, from that dark jazz show I was at, the one I started telling you about. She was dressed pretty much the same, in the same leather coat—cut so that the front ran down to her knees and the back only to her lower half—with dull metal strips mounted onto leather barding running back across her horse-flank. Her blonde hair was trimmed to a wide mohawk across her head and kept short down her human back (where centaurs, unlike norms, can grow thick, long hair). Her chestnut fur was a little long around the knees and feet.

See, I hate this. I didn't know fuck-all about her then except what she looked like and how well she sang, so here I am describing her body, what she wore. Believe me, I'd be happy to go on about how smart she was and how generally awesome she was (or hell, what a shitty drunk she was) but I didn't know all of that yet, now did I?

So I turned and I saw her and I'm pretty sure that my big ol' jaw dropped a couple of feet when I realized she was talking to me. She walked up beside me.

"You were at the boardwalk the other night, yeah?" She asked. "The fire on the horizon?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Name's Lilac," she introduced herself.

"Emmanuel," I said, that being my name.

She started walking with me (well, she may have been walking, but I was floating). Now, it didn't take long for it to come out that I wasn't really going anywhere. She said she wasn't either, so we set off to the Laughing Mare.

"I drink there for free," she said.

It's not my habit to drink when the sun's still out, but it's downright against my nature to let someone as intoxicating as Lilac drink alone. We sat against

the back wall, tucked into a corner booth. Well, she was tucked. I was sprawling on the centaur-sized cushions. The vinyl seats were cracked and patched like pretty much everything (and everyone) else in the world, and the beer, well the beer tasted like piss, but like piss would taste if you wanted to drink it. You know what I mean. If you don't know what I mean, you don't drink cheap beer.

We were two or three pints into our respective pitchers before we really got to talking. I'm a bit shy and maybe she was a bit standoffish, I don't know. Could be the other way around. So anyway, the first thing she says to me, outta the blue:

"I'm so angry, all of the time." She said this and I was a bit taken aback, you know. Maybe she realized that that was a kind of awkward so she elaborated: "Not at anyone, really. Or maybe at everyone. And it's not like, anger that makes me want to hurt anyone. It's just... I'm upset. I'm pissed off. I've been this way for months. I'm angry when I'm sober and I'm worse when I'm drunk."

"Why you figure?" I asked, clearly the paragon of eloquence.

"I'm mad at the system. You ever really thought about what if there's anything better?"

“No, not really,” I said, cause it was the truth.

“I’m mad about that. I’m mad they you’ve never thought about anything different.” She snorted like a horse (okay, like a centaur) and she kinda stopped looking me in the eye, her hair tossed over her face, her plastic glass to her lips.

“I’ve got this friend, her and her friends say they want something different,” I offered, trying maybe to impress her or maybe just trying to dig myself out of her contempt.

“I bet I’m mad at them too. I bet they go about it all fucked-up. Last people I talked to like that were just another gang, killing and controlling people. But you know what else? I’m mad because I know it’s wrong for me to be so mad. I got no reason to be mad at you, or your friends, for caring or not caring.”

It was a weird conversation, as you’ve probably figured out. She finished her first pitcher and started into her second. Not that surprising, when you figure she probably weighed, I dunno, 1,700lbs. What I don’t get is why centaurs don’t drink whiskey like you or I would drink beer. Not the kind of question you just ask though. There she was pouring her heart out to me and there I was

thinking about the mathematics of alcohol consumption and body weight. No wonder she was angry all the time.

“You remember that fire that other night?” I asked, figuring it was something we could both talk about.

“Yeah.”

“Whaddya think about that? It was like someone painted fire across the skyline. You ever seen anything like it?”

“No,” she said. “You think people were trying to get outta here?”

“Outta here?”

“Yeah, you know. Get the fuck outta the city. I want to. Maybe someone else did. And maybe someone kept them from it.”

As soon as she said that I knew she was right. It made sense to me somehow. Still, I couldn't give in that easy for some reason. “Nah,” I said.

“You wanna get outta here?” She asked, taking the pitcher in both hands and tipping her head back (quite provocatively, I'll tell you), emptying the last half of it in one go.

I held up my pint glass, still half-full, to say I wasn't ready.

“No, no, not the bar. The city.”

I was about to tell her about going over the river, about my uncle, about my thoughts on all that, but I didn't. No reason, really, I just didn't. Instead, I reached into my sidebag and pulled out the two portraits I'd pulled off of that boat and put them on the table between us.

She brushed her hair out of her eyes and picked up the pictures. Her face did something funny, kinda scrunching up around her eyes, and her lips curled back a bit (see I love to watch a centaur's face cause though they got the face of a norm they got facial expressions more like one of us funny-heads) and it was pretty obvious she recognized the fellow.

"Where'd you..." she started.

"On that raft. They were in the bag I grabbed."

She dropped the pictures back on the table. "You know who that is?" she asked.

"No."

"That's Charlie. Charles, rather."

"A friend of yours?"

"A regular at the club. One of the only norms we'd see almost every week. He stopped coming awhile ago, though. Like four months or something. I saw

him once, on the street, dragged him back here, talked to him like I'm talking to you. You know, just for something to do. He told me he'd found some people who wanted to see things get different. Talked about the system." Lilac put down her beer, laughing a little. "You know, I think that's when I started to get all angry all the time."

"You don't seem all that angry to me," I said.

"Trust me."

Lilac went off to use the toilet. I'd like to say I was busy thinking while she was gone, but I'll level with you that I'm not much of a thinker when I'm sober—don't like to dwell on things—and I'm even worse after a couple pints.

She returned, I looked at her with a googly eye pried loose with booze, and she offered a hand to pull me to my feet.

"I want to meet your friends," she said.

I KINDA STUMBLED out of the place, but she strode, as sure-hoofed as if she'd been sober. We started off back the way we'd come from, cause I was going to lead her to Jasmine's place, direct-like. I thought, fuck it, Jasmine was sure to have had her tea and calmed down, right? Also, I was drunk.

And we walked right into a turf war. Broad daylight, there were bastards running around pegging each other with all kinds of energy. A norm was convulsing in the middle of the broken pavement, angled face first into a two-foot pothole. On the other end of his electric leash stood a stoic duck holding a taser, not smiling or anything, just watching the damage.

We backed off and tried a side street. No good. The ducks were in formation, no getting past. Next block? Three norms in a dead run. “Freaks!” they yelled in unison, and one drew a laser pistol, holding it out at arms length. He looked pretty funny, running like that and trying to hold on to the little plastic gun. I’ve seen pictures of the old guns, the ones that wasted metal every time they shot. *Those* things looked like guns. Rayguns just kinda looked like toys, as far as I’m concerned. Then I realized the lousy brat was pointing the thing at *us*.

Lilac took me up in her arms and galloped away, weaving side to side as an evasive measure. I heard the little fizzing sound of a microwave gun behind me, but we were moving pretty fast and those things really aren’t very accurate.

Lilac set me down when we hit the boardwalk. I brushed myself off and

looked up at her appreciatively.

“You see why I’m angry all the time?” she asked.

I never really took all the fighting personally, even when it involved me. Not sure why. Probably cause I don’t want to spend all my time angry at everything. But I’m not one for trying to express shit with words, so I just nodded.

“That fight blocking the way to your house?” she asked.

“Nah. Yours?”

“No,” she said.

“Well, I work at the day market on MLK and 394<sup>th</sup>. Come by in the evening sometime, I’ll introduce you to Jasmine.”

“I’ll be there tomorrow,” she said, and I grinned like an idiot.

NEXT DAY WENT on forever. Not like it dragged. It was more like a week’s worth of thinking and talking crammed into what, eight hours or something at the market. I mean, my whole world had changed. Jasmine was a spider. Who else around was a spider? I stared and I stared but I never figured it out. I saw Jasmine head into the alley with some other associates from Plebeius and I was wondering if they were spiders one and all.

Lilac came by, I introduced her to Jasmine. They got on like whoa. Pretty soon they were plotting too, right out in the open, right in front of the stall I was working. They were talking about building a boat and getting out over the ocean. They said that there was somewhere to go, a whole ‘nother continent out there. I’m not sure where they got their information from.

So like I said that day seemed like a week or something. After the market closed for the night—no snipers this time—Lilac and me went home with Jasmine. More talking to do.

I’d been working for Jasmine for something like a year at that point, and I’d never been to her place. I guess it’d never occurred to either of us.

Her apartment was on the ground floor of a converted warehouse. Her walls were just partitions separating her and us from her neighbors. It was a nice place though, nonetheless. I live pretty spartan, but Jasmine’s place was fancy as hell. She had all kinds of gadgets and switches built into everything. Her bed was done up with veils around it, like in the old, old books. The floor was done in tile, which was impressive since the rest of the warehouse was bare cement. Colors glowed out of displays set into the cabinet and there was a whole drum-machine setup in one corner. Oh hell, I can’t really describe it

right. It was real lived-in. I couldn't help but imagine Jasmine the spider, spinning herself a web of wires and ornament.

Lilac lay on a small rug and Jasmine sat on the bed. I found a piano stool over by the music setup and sat down, careful so I knew it would hold my weight first. Wine came out of the cabinet and the two laid out their plans. I just sat and listened.

Turns out that Jasmine knew that Charlie guy too. Turns out Plebeius helped him and his friends—something like 50 of them—get the rafts they took out towards the ocean. Turns out there was a *lot* I didn't know about my employer.

“So the Dust got em,” Lilac said, after the two had traded what they knew about the flotilla.

“I mean, that's what I figure. A few days later they ambushed me at the market, too. Emmanuel got me out, fortunately.” Jasmine looked at me, and I was glowing. There's nothing like getting complimented in front of someone like Lilac.

Liliac, Lilac. I keep going on about her. I guess it just makes sense for you to know how smitten I was. Otherwise, why would I have gone with them?

Anyhow Lilac looks at me and she smiles and then I smile, and then she says, to Jasmine, “Think they were after you cause you helped them get the rafts?”

Jasmine kinda mumbled something. I figure she didn’t want to lie but she didn’t want to let the whole world know she had twice the legs of a centaur.

Drunker and drunker, they got more specific with their plans. They decided that where Charlie and his bunch had gone wrong is that they went with so many people. That was no way to not attract attention. It would just be the three of us—they just assumed I was going, so I guessed I was going—and enough food and water for the couple weeks they thought it would take to get across the ocean.

I know, I know, it was idiotic.

The wine ran out and out came the brandy. That’s when Lilac started to get a little rough. Maybe that’s why she was only drinking beer before, at the bar. I don’t know. Guess I never will. So she gets real drunk—not like I was walking any straight lines myself—and she starts whinnying and stamping. She was crying about something, and she started singing. I think we were singing too, but Lilac, what a singer. There she was screaming an operetta and she up and puts

her hoof through the partition to the next room.

I blacked out sometime around that point. So did Lilac, so did Jasmine. Actually, I think Jasmine remembered but she wasn't telling.

I woke up with that dry throat and burning head, the remorse that kind of thaws your brain out and creeps in through cracks. I was in the bed, shirtless but still wearing pants. My fellows lay nude on the rug on the floor, Jasmine laying with her head on Lilac's flank. I know what it seemed, but I don't think anyone fucked anyone or anything.

I found my shirt—it was under my head—and crept home.

IT WAS LESS than a week later that we left. Lilac had all sorts of connections with the artists, and the artists they've got a pretty good idea about how to get pretty much anything you'd want. Even got Lilac a gun. One that shot bullets. Eff'd up, I know, wasting all that metal on something like killing people, but Lilac said she didn't think electric weapons were such a good idea out over the salt-water ocean.

So we had a raft almost exactly like the one I'd found washed up to the boardwalk. We had provisions of food and drink—no brandy, I noticed—and

we had each other. Lilac was pretty scared, in the end, but took it fairly stoic. I think Jasmine was sad to leave her friends behind, but she didn't show it. Me? I didn't really know why I was going, so I didn't really know whether I was supposed to be scared or excited or sad or what. I was just kind of there. It suits me, I think.

We were docked way north of the boardwalk, in a chunk of rotted waterfront buildings that I figure were some kind of port way back when. No ceremony, we waited till full dark and unmoored. Jasmine got the motors running and we went off into the night, buzzing something loud.

I don't know I've ever had a more beautiful night. I'd never been so far away from buildings. It was kind of crazy, actually, not having the comfort of the city's closeness. But the moon was beginning to rise and lay huge over the water in a way I hadn't really thought could happen.

Did you know that you've got a moonshadow? Well, you don't in the city. But out on the water, the moon was so bright that I had a shadow. And alright, here's maybe the most obvious thing I'm going to say this whole story, but Lilac was twice as pretty in the moonlight. It was the perfect soft light, a perfect pale color that stripped everything of its color. Like an old

black & white photo.

I think we were all feeling something, a kind of awe. We were in awe of ourselves, for doing what we'd done. We stood side by side by side, the three of us. I put my arm up on the small of Lilac's human back and Jasmine slipped hers around my waist.

I'd never been so in love, and for once I wasn't just in love with a person. I was in love with my life, with the world. I was in love with everyone on the boat, I was in love with the water and the moon and I even loved the city I was leaving.

The firebomb that hit us a moment later? Well, no, I didn't love that. The sky lit up like a shooting star and suddenly I saw the silhouette of something sinister—a gunship, I think—pretty far off. I didn't even get to panic. None of us did. One minute, we were in love with the world. The next, something fell through Lilac's torso and hit the boat. Everything turned into flame.

Even the water seemed to be burning. I fell into it and I couldn't get back to the boat. I watched Jasmine burn to death, screaming.

It took me a long, long time, but I swam to shore.

I KNEW SOME other people, acquaintances, but I didn't talk to them. I just went home. I quit drinking. I quit working. I pretty much quit going out.

Maybe six months later I got the idea that I was going to go across the river. Maybe if the ocean wasn't the way out, I could get out to the woods, find my uncle. I took a briefcase and I put some clothes in it, my nicest clothes. The suit I got from my grandfather.

I got on the trans-city train, runs all the way from the coast to the river, past endless neighborhoods. I sat on it for the three days it took me to go from one end of town to the other. A couple people tried to talk to me, including the handsomest tortoise I've ever lay eyes on, but I gave each of them a weak smile and they left me be. I got off the train at the last stop and walked to the dock.

The ferry rolled up and the driver stepped off. About a dozen people, all freaks, most much older than myself, stepped aboard.

"Do many people come back across?" I asked the driver, the first words I'd spoken since the raft.

"Nope. Not a one."

"Why's that?"

"I figure it's probably pretty good over there," he said.

I wasn't sure if he was playing me straight or not. "You've never seen it yourself?"

"Nah," the conductor said, "I never stepped off. Not my job."

See, I was thinking the whole train ride over that the ferry probably just took freaks off and laid em low. I just didn't care. Worth a shot, I figured. Looking at the others as they boarded, I thought they musta been thinking the same thing. They wanted out so bad they'd take it either way. If it was the woods? All the better. The grave? Good enough.

I looked down at myself. I was wearing my grandfather's suit. I looked up at the sky. I turned around, I looked at the city. I was broken, irreparable. But I wasn't dead, you know?

I gave the driver one last look. "Fuck yourself," I said. And those were the last words I said, the last words I mean to say. Back on the train, back home.

A few days later I was back working at the free market. Still wouldn't talk to no one. Don't think I ever will; no good comes of it.

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# Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness