

WISDOM

“I’m in sales.”

It was the first thing that came to mind. The three soldiers looked bored, and like they wanted to get back to their dinner she had interrupted when she stumbled into the clearing. The lieutenant looked skeptical.

“Siding. Aluminum siding.”

She mentally kicked herself. After everything she had gone through to escape the city: waiting for the cover of a snowy night during an unusually warm winter; borrowing,—no, *stealing*; no: borrowing—she would return it someday—the suit and briefcase from her neighbor who is two sizes too big. Making her way past the checkpoints where her salesman story seemed to flow out so naturally. Why, this time, does it sound so much like the lie it is?

The Lieutenant’s voice was deeper than she would have expected to look at him. “Why did you come this way during these troubled times? Seems a good way to get yourself shot.”

This one she was ready for. “I have been far afield, Captain, and on lonely roads. I wasn’t aware of the invasion and occupation until it was more dangerous to go back than continue forward.”

Silence.

“Lieutenant. *Intervention.*” He pronounced it “Lef-tenant” as was common in that part of the world.

“Excuse me?” *This is it, she thought. He’s going to shoot me just out of irritation.*

“My rank is lieutenant, not captain. And this is a military *intervention*, not an invasion and occupation.”

Silence.

“Of course. My apologies, *lieutenant.*”

“We were just eating. You may join us and get out of the rain if you like, Ms...?”

“Jones. Smith. Jane Smith-Jones.” After flicking a glance at her proffered hand, the Lieutenant nodded to the soldiers, turned on his heel and strode back to their tent. One of the soldiers resumed sentry duty while the other two, with weapons lowered, waited for her to move toward the tent. She got the sense that she couldn’t turn down the lieutenant’s offer of a meal and shelter.

Inside the tent, around a small propane fire, the food was lukewarm army rations. But it was food.

“I believe it is customary in this country for the guest to entertain her hosts as payment for supper, is it not?”

She recognized the trap. “I do not know much of this country’s customs, as my trade is generally further East. But we have a similar custom in my country, as I imagine you do in yours?”

“We do,” said the Lieutenant. So tell us of those magical cities in the East, for I have never been there. Their history goes back millennia I am told, back to the First Cities of Man. Tell us a fairy tale from the East which you seem to know so well.”

She hadn’t expected this, but could see no way to refuse. “As you wish, Lieutenant. I know of a legend from the city of Zoya, where I recently filled several large orders for our highest quality siding, to cover the walls of that city’s ancient homes. Let me remember how it begins....”

Once upon a time, there lived a princess of a great empire. Her palace overlooked a golden gulf where dolphins played day and night, her rooms were painted in porphyry and their corners lined with gold; her gowns were made of

silk and her jewelry weighed her proud beautiful head down. Her name was Zoya, and such was her fate that one day she fell mortally sick.

Her father, the most powerful man in the world, summoned his well-learned doctors and paid them fortunes to find the rarest herbs for their medicine. When these cures failed to help Zoya, the emperor had his priests, dressed in their richest gowns, chant day and night by her bed, burn incense and spray holy water over her chest, and put holy relics to her lips to kiss.

Days and days did the priests pray ceaselessly on their knees by her bed, but still she would not be cured. So the shamans of the East were called forth, and then also the alchemists, who drew countless chalk circles, and the magicians with their long white beards and lilac turbans. Yet nothing would help, and the princess grew worse by the day.

And at last her father himself left his crown aside and walked all the way to the ancient Oracle – for this was in the last dying days of her ancient might – and asked her what he was to do.

“There are a wild and free people outside of your borders,” the Oracle said, “let the princess wander alone among them and taste their life, and she will be cured.”

So it came about that princess Zoya, the bright and beautiful, left her high palace and her porphyry rooms, and traveled west on a road as ancient as the Oracle herself among those people who enjoyed horses and wine, and handled gold with ease. She kept walking until she reached a valley of warm water springs and lush forests, where a mountain loomed in the clear sky and the air smelled of life, and there she lay herself, convinced she would die.

Yet something happened, and Zoya never knew whether it was the water she drank, or the air she breathed, or the freedom she had known – or perhaps even the wreath of golden leaves her hosts in this land had given her, - but when she next woke, she knew she was cured.

She sent word to her father, but when he asked her to return, she refused; and in wonder and puzzlement the emperor went again to the Oracle to ask whether his daughter should stay in her valley.

“My lord,” said the Oracle, “here is what I have seen: should she return in your palace, she will die; should she stay, she will die all the same in the end. Yet heed to her wish, for here is her future where her heart dwells:

“For ages and ages shall she stay there, wearing her golden crown, just as proud and beautiful, and she shall always grow but never age.

“And though she may yet see times of sickness and sadness, and change each time she does, her beauty will never wither, and beneath her face people shall always see the one she had before.

“She will know many lovers: Emperors will court her but a great Khan will have her at last; still many a strong man will fight for her after him, and even more shall die in her arms.

“Countless children will she bear, and be a good mother to them all. They will build churches in her name and pray for her there, and in return she will shelter them in her beautiful heart.

“Is that not a fate worthy of your daughter, my lord?”

The Emperor agreed and sent word to the princess that she may stay where she liked.

Yet when he went to visit Zoya later, he found there only her golden wreath and knew she was gone: her soul had been built in into the foundations of a city and would never be again. And the Emperor wept, for he knew now how her destiny would be fulfilled, but it still hurt him to have lost his only child.

In the city of Zoya, they say, to this very day dwells the soul of the princess.

“I have not heard of Zoya,” said the lieutenant after a moment’s pause. “But I have told a similar story to my children at bedtime, one that my mother told me and her mother told her. It is interesting, is it not, how legends travel from place to place and land to land, each retelling of it changing it slightly, but never altering its core. Is Zoya a beautiful city?”

“It is, sir. Very beautiful, with its ordered boulevards and uniform façades and trimmed gardens. Beautiful-but not, perhaps, quite to my taste.”

“So tell us, Jane Smith-Jones, of the most beautiful city you have seen. Or would that honor go to your home city? We are, of course, all quite fond of the place we were born.”

“I am from the country, sir, a small farm of sheep and goats,” she lied. “So I think I can judge quite clearly which city is most beautiful, and I don’t have to think for another moment on the subject. It is Triadna, without doubt.”

“Tell us of Triadna, then, Ms. Smith-Jones.”

There is no way grand enough to enter Triadna. Even when you approach her from the curvy road crossing the Ridge Mountain and see her spread below in the misty valley, with the Yunosha mountain rising on the other side, even then you descend into the plains and travel on for long enough to forget that one sight or attribute it to dreams. No other road is high enough, or picturesque enough, and a flight flattens the ground so that the most beautiful of views looks like a fly upon a rotten carpet. Not even Kingcity road, with its long wide lanes and even lampposts, descending softly into the city, does Triadna justice. Nothing can prepare you, entering her for the first time, for the treasure of her heart.

No matter how you approach her, it would be the gray or yellowish neighborhoods of socialism you will see first, with their endless apartment buildings, each like the one before, designated only by numbers; you will pass by labyrinths of uneven streets and wayward buildings, built not for people to live in but for people to get lost in. Yet, you will see, the walls there have turned colors, like a quilt sewn together of many pieces: a different color for every apartment owner who decided to isolate his home, not merely

from the cold, but also from the gray. You will find graffiti livening the walls no one owns; there will be balconies covered with flowers, balconies turned into storage, and balconies glazed to enlarge a kitchen. The shops will be beaming colorful and new in place of the empty dusty window that might have been there years ago. The girls walking by their grandmothers seated on the benches in front of each entrance would be dressed according to latest fashion.

That is Triadna, true, but not the heart of Triadna. Perhaps if you pay close attention to the paint on the walls and the shirts of the girls, you might foresee those sights of your unfinished journey that would otherwise have taken you by surprise. For Triadna is slow to reveal her secrets.

Inevitably now, no matter how you approach, you will hit traffic, as if the city is trying its best to hinder your progress, but by now you would have seen the outskirts of its older core. No more ten-storied apartment blocks, no more grayness and carpet walls – welcome to the city of charming old houses and orderly streets, and hidden treasures. If you have been traveling from the West, you will come upon Lion Bridge; if you are approaching from the East by Kingsroad, it will be Eagle Bridge; and in both cases you will know you're there.

You may wonder in the old neighborhoods and to you, stranger, they will seem all the same – all pretty old houses, all criss-crossing streets, an occasional boulevard with trams and trees, and several parks. You will not know anything of the shops, you will not recognize the names on the signs, no memories will flood each street, every corner, every sidewalk – every step. So you may not stop there. For you it is just another layer you must strip down to get deeper into the heart, in search of the hidden gold, wherever it might be.

Keep on walking. You will soon see the yellow brick road.

Here is your golden Triadna, visitor: the King's Palace, the Galleries, the National Theatre, the Banks, the Parliament, the Presidency, the huge cathedral, all on streets and boulevards paved in yellow. The paving stones are slippery, be warned – many a foot has twisted an ankle while looking up the Palace's staircase, or that one balcony framed by trees in the garden.

Go deeper now. Descend into the central subways and peer into the basement of the Closed Market, drink a cocktail in the lowest level of the luxurious café behind the Archaeological Museum. Here is the lost Triadna of ages long past, the ruins of a city ancient and divine. Here is the beginning, stranger.

But you have yet to see Triadna's heart, and you never will, for you are just a traveler and you are leaving. Triadna's heart is in those streets you'll never find, in the ruins they discovered under major crossings and buried again, in the shops you'll never visit and the restaurants that will hold no memories for you. You cannot know the heart of Triadna, stranger, because your very search for it proves you aren't meant to find it.

The Lieutenant cleared his throat. He seemed moved by the story, and took a moment to return to himself. “A city, like a woman, harbors many beautiful secrets in her heart. Do you have secrets, Jane Smith-Jones?”

“No more or less than you, Lieutenant.”

“Touché.” A wry smile glanced off his lips.

She mock-bowed from the waist.

“What you said before, about how legends travel and change but keep their truths constant—this reminds me of the city of Serenca. Have you ever heard of it, Lieutenant?” She was becoming bolder in her deceptions, as the storytelling took hold. And the secret sadness of exile from the city of her birth, the secret homesickness that had so recently taken up residence in her heart, was receding slightly as she spun her stories around their own core of truth.

“I remember a city with a similar name from my history books, although I don’t remember much else about it. What is Sereneca like? Do they buy my aluminum siding there?”

“Oh yes sir, for tastes and whims are constantly changing...”

Of Sereneca it is said, “A city of sand built on water,” and rightfully so. She never sits still, except when she is about to shatter into a flurry of motion, hurricane of events, sweeping like a sandstorm or a current. Her shapes are constantly twisting, eluding your fingers, tricking your sight, all the while letting you believe your senses are in control. It is what makes her irresistible.

Should you attempt to control her, beware! - for no one can claim to know all of her. Those who have seen her once may not recognize her upon their second visit. Those who left her for but a week may find their favorite place changed – yes, and even those who live there feel lost in the morning sometimes.

Sereneca is alive and moves constantly so as to prove it. Streets disappear, rivers change their course and then get back, leaving gardens become channels, right next to playgrounds transformed into tennis courts magically turned into soccer fields. Houses are reborn as business centers or tall fashionable apartment blocks, while market stalls grow overnight into a mall, which claims for its own a crossing that once belonged to a hotel across the street.

There are also changes you may not remember. Landmarks destroyed, old demolished buildings restored, museums transported into palaces out of town so that the courthouse would once again reside in the courthouse. Your grandfather's house was destroyed by the bombs of a war and there is now a

hotel in its place; the streets you would have longed to wander on were demolished and rebuilt beyond recognition thereafter. The ruins of an ancient city remind you that Sereneca has been changing since her birth.

Some things do seem to remain the same. The ice cream house, the book market, the Apartment (where, no matter who you are, you can just walk in, sit, and talk – perhaps, if you are so inclined, buy something from the kitchen as well, – and then leave), the little plaza on *that* street and the cars parked on the sidewalk. There are things, you feel, that will always be there.

Yet even they change, in a way, because this is Sereneca. The ice cream house will never again be the same after you sat there with that boy and the book market is just as it was when you were five, but you will probably never again buy a book from the vendors, not since Orange; the Apartment is so different now that you have seen it so many times, and the plaza has transformed into the place where you sat with your best friends on a beautiful day. How precious these places are to you now! And how much more precious they are when you know that, should you return, Sereneca will change them, adding more or stripping them down, because such is her nature.

Dreams change. Paths trod on for years fade forgotten, new pathways are paved for bikers who then prefer to walk. Colors change, memories change. A song that used to boom from the speakers *there* can now be heard playing softly in a candle shop *there*. The corner where you bought colorful paper is now the corner where you turn on your way to the orange bookstore, which is different from Orange, the bookstore. The playground with the huge marble slides is now the playground with those marble slides that once seemed huge, and it will never again be as it was then.

Sereneca is built on water and moves like water. Some of her inhabitants are afraid to close their eyes for as much as a minute.

“The surest way to lose Sereneca,” they say, “is to try and imagine what she is. By the time you have fixed her image, this one shape of her will no longer be there.”

Sereneca, they would tell you, has all those ages survived as herself, Sereneca, only because she has never once seized to change.

“I have never been to Sereneca, Jane Smith-Jones, but I think there is a little bit of it in almost every city. Just last week, while we were still stationed in the Capital, I was heading to a bookstore I had been frequenting ever since we arrived here for the intervention. The last time I was there I saw a lovely three volume set of Herodotus on Thermopylae which I intended to add to my collection.” He gestured at the small portable bookcase in the corner of the tent, unnoticed until now. The books were beautifully bound and lovingly cared for. *Like his deep voice*, she thought, *the Lieutenant is a man of surprising layers.*

“I turned onto the street where the bookstore was, but instead found a vast ice cream parlour, filled with uniformed schoolchildren on their way home from the Academy. I thought I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, but no: there were the cobblestones stamped with the seal of the Eastern Empire, a gift from that land’s inbred royal family. And the ordered rows of stately maple trees lining the sidewalk, I am certain they were the same ones outside the bookstore. But the bookstore was gone.”

It pained her to hear him speak of her city because she knew exactly the bookstore he spoke of, and had herself been one of those uniformed schoolchildren once. He seemed to be watching her closely, but she did not notice.

“Cities can surprise you, Lieutenant.”

“That they can, Jane Smith-Jones. The ice cream from that parlour that had sprung up was the finest I have ever tasted, so I do not regret its appearance. But I *am* sad about the loss of the Heroditus...”

“But the Heroditus is still out there somewhere, Lieutenant. Books have a life of their own.”

“That they do.”

She opened her briefcase to find a pen and paper. “I will write myself a note about your Heroditus, Lieutenant, and if I encounter such a set of books in my travels I will endeavour to send them your way.”

He seemed surprised by this unsought kindness, which distracted him from peering into the briefcase. “Thank you, Jane.” Their eyes met for a moment.

As she started to close the briefcase he asked, “What is that in your briefcase, Ms. Smith-Jones?”

He was staring at two balls of string, one red and one white, which were crammed in next to various siding catalogues and order forms in triplicate. *Shit*, she thought. *Take nothing of home!* her sisters had warned her from their home in exile. *Bring only yourself and your memories, for those cannot be spied by the enemy.* But she hadn’t been able to resist, and it was only string—seemingly so innocuous, until you had to explain it to armed men.

“Those, sir,” she said, thinking fast. “Those are souvenirs for my sister, who dearly loves needlepoint, brought back from the northern city of Martengrad where I was earlier this winter.”

“And why do they have balls of red and white string in Martengrad? Seems an odd souvenir.”

“Well, to understand that, sir, you must know this about that city, which is white with snow for so much of the year....”

January in Martengrad, they walk heads down, collars up through the muddy snowy streets, shivering and cursing the salt ruining their shoes. Yet come February, they breathe through their noses again, feel their coats less heavy and have cheeks less red, not even when, mid-month, they celebrate the day of wine. Because it is then, mid-month through the little of the Sechko brothers, as they call February, that the days of red and white emerge.

Even if you had lived all of your life there, you would have forgotten about it. The cold of the winter winds falling from the mountain would have frozen the notion in your mind, up until you turn at a corner and see it, the first one. It would be a stall, nothing more, but it would be covered in red and white, and this is when you will remember that winter is taking its last weakening breaths, that spring is coming, and, above all, that the first of March is near.

And it is all because of those innocent red and white beauties, almost too fragile to be thousands of years old: the precious, precious treasure of the martenitzi.

They come in all shapes and sizes: bracelets and brooches, but also rings and earrings, door decorations, tiny pins, dolls, necklaces, bracelets again, weaved pictures, useless figures. Perhaps that one first stall would only have the simplest bracelets and dolls, but once you've seen that, they're everywhere, more and more as the end of the month approaches.

Soon now, Martengrad will live entirely for the martenitzi. You would walk downtown and trip over one stall of them to land at another, next to a third; you would get out of the bus on the market stop and be greeted by beaming wall of martenitzi, and a crowd of people waiting to buy one. There would be the cheap ones, made, who knows why, in China; and then there would be the ones of the March Company, whose stalls are high and wooden and whose sellers wear huge hats in red and white.

There is more to come. People will wrap the trunks of trees in red and white and put up signs and hang red and white dolls on their doors and inside their houses. They would buy tones and tones of bracelets, review their collection from the years past, calculate which ones they can give away and to whom, and who it is exactly that should have the big brooch martenitza from their favorite aunt. On the great eve, all of Martengrad holds its breath.

And the next day, the first of March, everyone has martenitzi and exchanges martenitzi so that there are more and more to be worn; students dress in white and red and compete among each other to collect the most and keep them for the longest time. They'd wear as many as possible – all the

bracelets (for these are the common favorites), and all of the brooches, and the rings and earrings, and the necklaces, and everything else that can be worn. People in the buses would be red and white, as well as the ones in the streets. The day might be gloomy or bright, but the faces would be happy.

Some time thereafter, the frenzy would die out a bit and not as many people would wear as many martenitzi. The arms once covered from wrist to elbow would now carry ten bracelets, and then maybe five, and in the end two at most.

But everyone will hold on to them for a while, for Martengrad is not done waiting at all. There is something more expected, and you can feel it in the air, in the first rays of the sun, in the first song of a bird in the park. And then, when you feel like no one can possibly hold their breath any longer, it would at last be there. It wouldn't be a stork, at least not in the center of Martengrad, but some of those who live at the edge would take their martenitzi off, and you would know there has been one, and wait to see it yourself. But for the most part, it wouldn't really be until you see the first bush covered in yellow, or the first tree blooming in white or pink, that you would take your last martenitza off and tie it on a twig.

For the rest of the year, Martengrad pretends to be normal, as if spring has been like any other season. Yet, should you look around, you will no doubt find a fruit-tree with hundreds of martenitzi hanging shyly from its branches. Some of them are perhaps older than you are.

There isn't a single person in Martengrad to whom it might ever occur to take them down.

“I think your sister will enjoy the string immensely, especially if you were to tell her that beautiful story. Have you witnessed this festival personally, or only heard of it from the citizens of Martengrad.”

Lost in memories: “I have witnessed it many many times, Lieutenant.”

“How lovely it must be, the city draped in white and red. All of your cities are beautiful, Jane Smith-Jones. Is there nothing ugly to the East of this land? No gutters, no smell of trash and sewage, no rats or dirt or smog-filled skies? Is there no building which the people of the Cities of the East cringe as they walk past and wonder, ‘Why is this still here?’?”

Still remembering, almost in a trance, she spoke almost without thought.

“Of course there are. There is the most amazingly ugly monument in—“ She jolted out of her trance a second before it would be too late. Thinking fast: “— in *Vsemiremara*. In *Vsemiremara*, in the land of Bhaddiakar...”

She looked at the Lieutenant to see if he had caught her correction, but his face was like a mask. He spread his hands for her to begin.

When Bhaddiakar turned a thousand years old, the Authorities built a huge monument in its honor. They were so very proud of their neat idea to celebrate the grandeur of their country that they made huge plans and picked quite a central spot indeed.

But Vsemiremara, in whose heart they built it and who was seven times older, grew jealous and bitter that she had been forgotten, and cursed the monument so that it turned out the ugliest thing ever made by man.

Like an egg gone bad, it was dark and shapeless. Its many sides were of black metallic material meant to resemble marble, and were covered with weird statues and lines of text chosen at random; and in fact, it was hardly certain whether it was really the sides, or the front, or the back – perchance it was even the bottom or top.

Its shape was so twisted, so pointless, and so incomprehensible, that the citizens of Vsemiremara quickly got into the habit of calling it the Fiveangled Sixdicker, and varied the numbers any time they mentioned it. Each day they walked by, they cast scornful glances up at its shapeless silhouette, which they recognized so easily from afar by its complete lack of character.

Its unsightliness features got so famous that it was the topic of small conversation instead of the weather, and for long years people mocked it and regretted its existence. Students wrote about it in their most sarcastic essays, politicians promised to build nothing like it, and optimists excitedly claimed that one day people might believe Bhaddiakarians invented time travel just by looking at the Threeangled Sevendicker.

So hideous it was that, once they could chose for themselves, the citizens of Vsemiremara let the huge monument fall apart in shame of its own ugliness. They built a wall around it to prevent anyone from going near it by accident, and covered that wall with graffiti so as to liven up its appearance. Thus it was let to rot and disintegrate, and for the longest time in the world the Fourangled Threedicker was left alone.

* * *

Years passed, and Vsemiremara began changing. They had been taking much care of her now, fussing all over her, tidying up her attire, painting her face, filling her arms with beautiful things to behold. They'd built a statue of her, with a skin of gold, they'd crowded her vessels, the streets and boulevards, with the blood of their crowds, and talked much about how young she looked for her age. And so, by and by, her heart lightened up and her bitterness was mollified. She felt sorry now for that ugly loner she had condemned, and although she could no longer change what had been done, she thought that, at the very least, she could change its fate a little.

And so it came about that sometimes, in a proper light, in a right mood, while those passing by would still think or say “Oh, how repulsive an abomination!”, their hearts would often shyly whisper back: “Remember,

remember all the times you've laughed here at its ugliness? Remember how you kissed in its shadow, or joked with your friends, or rejoiced at the sight of the wondrous graffiti?

“Oh, it is beautiful!”

She was pleased with herself for having concocted this story, so quickly after having nearly betrayed herself to the Lieutenant. He was nodding slightly as he thought about the story she had just told him. Still looking at the fire, he said:

“I think only a native of that city could speak of it with the love you just have, the way only a mongrel dog’s owner finds the poor mutt to be beautiful. It almost makes me believe that you are yourself a native of far-away Vsemiremara, to hear you speak of it this way.”

He met her eyes. “But we both know that this is not true, don’t we? Because the fiveangled sevendicker is not in Vsemiremara, but in that very capital city which lies so close to us down the Western Road. It is not in some mysterious city to the East, but right here, not more than a few hour’s drive from our camp. And you are correct in your descriptions of how horrible it is, because I passed it as I walked to work every day that I was stationed in the City which you call home. And there is no such place as Martengrad either, because that is also your city, and I have myself seen the ‘martenitzi,’ which we both know have a different name entirely. But I, too, thought them a lovely souvenir, a memento of my time in your city.” He unbuttoned his sleeve and rolled it up to reveal a bracelet of red and white tied about his wrist.

“In fact, Jane, you have been spinning tales for us all night, and in each of them you have spoken of home. I have drunk coffee in the café of the Archeological Museum, which is actually the Symphony Hall, and a more beautiful and strange piece of architecture I have never in my life seen. We both know that there is no subway in your city, because instead your ancestors constructed a network of tunnels and underground bridges, sheltered from the bombs which rained upon your city for a decade, so that the milkmen could continue on their rounds and the lawyers could go to work without getting dust on their three-piece suits, and the architects could continue planning your city’s miraculous rebirth after the Long War. And the yellow bricks you spoke of, which *are* so very slippery in the rain, are the same bricks stamped with the seal of the Eastern Empire that I spoke of, outside the bookstore I so loved and which disappeared from one day to the next.

“When my regiment marched into the city we crossed Lion Bridge, which is actually guarded by paired tigers. And I have stood on Eagle Bridge, which is actually Dragon Bridge, and thrown herring to the dolphins that frolick underneath. There is no city you have spoken of but the one you are now

fleeing, seeking asylum in the West with your sister—for perhaps that part of your story, at least, was true. You do have a sister?”

She was frozen in place like a rabbit. She licked her lips and blinked several times. Softly:

“Yes. Three.”

“Ah. Well, it was partly true, at least.”

Silence.

“So tell me, Jane, because I could never figure it out: how do you find your way about the City? Because I could never find a decent map and was continually getting lost in the twisting streets, but everyone I met who was from your city could rattle off elaborate directions for getting anywhere I might name—though no two people would ever tell me the same path to take.”

She was shocked by the question, and more so by the conversational tone of voice. Sensing a trap, but knowing there was no way out, she spoke:

“My mother.”

“Your mother?”

Breathing deeply, and as if this were her final confession, she began to speak truly of the city of her birth, the city that was her first love, her most successful love to date, and which she was almost certain she would never lay eyes on again.

When I was a child, Sofia was a Labyrinth of streets and streets and streets: a sea of names unknown and puzzling, and above all far from my own.

“Kitten,” my mother said to me once, “this will not do. You need to know your streets.” And I tried, as a good daughter should, to memorize all of those names, to the very last one, but it wouldn't work: Pirotka meant nothing, Solunska was the same as Slivnitsa, Krakra could be an exotic bird and Alabin was the misspelled name of a Disney hero. There were too many of them for a poor little girl, and all I knew was that I was never going to remember them all. “It'll come to you,” my mother said then, “you'll see it will.”

And, as it usually happens with mothers, she was perfectly right.

I'm convinced it started with the books. It was Slaveykov that did it for Solunska, because that's where you need to turn from Vitoshka if you need to reach the book market there; and then it was the Booktrading bookstore that opened on Grafa just past Sveti Sedmochislenitsi. I would make maps of bookstores in my head: the small chaotic one on Levski, or the other one on the

elusive Alabin; the one in the small NDK and the biggest one, Hellicon on the Patriarch, where the old movie theater used to be before I was born.

It was also traveling to school, lessons and all that did it, for the mysterious numbers of buses, trams, and trolleys were no longer so unfamiliar, and I knew that to get to Mladost I had to take the 76 but to reach Druzha I needed 204, while for Nadezhda my best bet was tram 1, my magical Center Express, and then the subway. I learned the graffiti on the walls around the Channel by heart while observing them from behind the bus's windows, and knew each of the stops by the number of my breaths in between. Often I would look at the passengers in the bus when I got on and play a game with myself, keeping track of those who travel more than I do. That must have done something, I am certain of it.

And after that it surely was because of the other shops I learned. There was a weird herbal one on Krakra, and a bead shop on Han Krum, and a candle one on Shisman. I found my favorite designer clothes' studio on Angel Kanchev, and had my prom everything done in a cosmetic center on Neofit Rilski--

But I *must* be getting ahead of myself, because Divaka was earlier than that, and the first one I knew was on the Sixth of September, but there is another on Gladstone, and a third one on Belchev (but that's the one nobody goes to). There is also Ugo, and that is everywhere, really, like the Jimmy's; there was the Chinese restaurant on Slavyanska where I celebrated my birthday and the small Italian place on Tsar Asen where a friend celebrated his. The Restaurants at the End of the Universe – the one in Studentski Grad, which *is* the end of the Universe for all true Sofians, and the one in the center, where you can only find the indistinguishable gray door if someone has showed it to you before; the Apartment, the small charming bars – oh they were so many, so many...

And it was all of that, somehow, that made it happen, but I had to come all the way over the ocean to understand it: that the Labyrinth became mine, and I became the Labyrinth, and my own shadow, much like the soul of poor princess Zoya in her own shadowy city, was left behind to dwell there. My heart had been rooted in all of the paths I had walked in my city, my Sofia, in all of the places I went to, all of the streets I walked, all of the trams I took, rooted too deeply to let go, and I never really knew.

My Sofia was the first thing I missed bad enough to cry.

Every day now, I fear with all of my heart that I will forget the streets of my Labyrinth, the veins for my blood.

Her eyes never lifted from the ground throughout the whole story, though they darted back and forth as if inscribing with the force of their gaze a map, the perfect map, of her City. She waited for the Lieutenant to speak, to bind her arms and feet, to draw his revolver and shoot her in the head.

“I asked you to pay for your supper with stories, and you have certainly done so. Thank you.

“Now I think it’s time for my men and I to get some rest, Ms. Smith-Jones.” The way he said her name told her that he knew it to be fake, and had known from the start. “Were we to wake up in the morning and find a citizen of the City fleeing the occupation, we would certainly be forced to bring her into custody...I might suggest that you not allow that to happen.”

They looked at each other for a long moment. She broke the silence first:

“Intervention.”

A rueful smile broke out on his face, and this seemed to surprise him as much as it did her. “Words, words words...” he said as he turned his back to her and began preparing his bedding.

Quietly she gathered her stolen—no, *borrowed*—coat and briefcase, and walked towards the snow falling softly outside. Just after she crossed the threshold of the tent, he spoke again in his deep deep voice.

“Should you find the Heroditus in your travels, I would certainly be interested in buying them from you. I know that books are not your stock-in-trade, but perhaps you could make an exception.” He walked toward the entrance of the tent, a piece of paper in hand. “You can send them to me at this address, my home. Be sure to send me your own address so I can send you something for your troubles.”

He folded the paper and placed it in her trembling hand, folding her fingers over it for protection. All this time he was looking to one side or the other of her face. “Or you could bring them yourself, if it wasn’t too far out of your way. I am certain there is a market for aluminum siding in my city.” His hand was still over hers, but as the silence stretched on he let it drop.

“Perhaps I will do that, Lieutenant. Assuming that I can find the Heroditus.” She turned and walked through the snow and disappeared into the trees that stood black against the white-dotted sky like towers against stars.