

In the silence of night, sounds of life have a greater chance of being heard.

One of these sounds woke Chase Ellis from deep sleep at a heavy predawn hour. His rousing was sudden and full, so that without any bleary transition he found himself aware of his own thoughts. He lay on his back under a rhythmic ceiling fan. The blades made their circuit and caused the fan's light chain to tink against a glass globe. This familiar noise usually rocked his mind into rest. Something else had disrupted him.

The shadows of his father's room possessed all their usual shapes, though Chase evaluated them as being darker than usual by twelve to fifteen percent. The saturated dimness was due to the time, a full three hours before his intuitive rising with the sun. He needed no clock to know this.

A vivid scene unfolded in Chase's mind: On the other side of the world, where his father had slept and awakened for the past ten years, the sun blazed over a desert afternoon. There were no trees in that dry land, only people, who moved slowly like Tolkien's Ents. The hot light shone on his father, whom Chase envisioned as one of the world's most enduring trees. *Pinus longaeva* had been dated to thousands of years, and in some cases a tree stayed firmly upright long after its death.

Chelsea said their father was certainly dead by now, but in Chase's thoughts the man was green and bursting with seedy cones, and so Chase could not agree with her.

He heard the noise again. He lifted the corner of the blanket and peeled it off his body, then did the same with the sheet. He sat up, then pivoted so his feet swung together over the edge of the bed. The stiff fibers of the carpet brushed his toes.

By the timing of the overhead chain, which hit the globe precisely on each second, Chase counted one minute and seven seconds of waiting before the sound came a third time: the rattling of sticks in a tin can. It came from the room across the hall, which had been Chase's as a child before his father was deployed, before Chase's drawings took over that space and Chase took over his father's room.

Chase walked through shadows without turning on the light, because he did not need it and was not afraid. He knew the width of every passage and the protrusion of every sharp corner, the location of every shoe and book on the floor. He walked out of the room and through the hall, past the closed door of the bathroom. The rattling ceased.

His entrance into his old bedroom moved just enough air to lift the edge of a drawing tacked to the wall. The movement created a mild papery rustling among his other sketches—like leaves in a spring breeze—before sighing back to rest. This was his welcome.

Chase crossed the room and turned on the desk lamp, which leaned over a spiral-bound book of black drawing paper. The light bounced off his white T-shirt.

The red fabric of his basketball shorts turned shiny and felt weightless against his skin. He did not play basketball, but he liked the texture of the pants. The brilliant bulb transformed the uncovered window behind the desk into a sheet of black glass, as black as the paper Chase used for his drawings.

On either side of the wide obsidian, built-in shelving reached all the way up to the ceiling and all the way out to the adjoining walls, and each shelf was lined with cans and tin cases. These contained stumps and brushes and sticks and tools and pencils. White pencils. White was the only color Chase used.

But not only pencils. The cans and tins were filled with many white substances suitable for drawing: water-soluble ink pencils, oil paint sticks, oil pastels, white-charcoal pencils and sticks, pastels and pastel pencils, color pencils, woodless aqua pencils, Conté crayons in which graphite had been mixed with clay, white-tinted graphite pencils, and china markers. He had a seamstress's marker, blackboard chalk, a few paperless white Crayolas, stage makeup, cornstarch and talc (which could be liquefied and applied with the nub of a quill pen), and also bars of soap.

Chase listened to the shelves. He owned 210 containers, 105 on each side of the window, fifteen items on each of the seven tiers. He knew the contents of each. He waited for the one that had awakened him.

On the right side of the window, third shelf from the top, the sixth canister from the left began to hum. The former Progresso soup can, stripped of its blue label, contained a broken stick of quarter-inch General's white charcoal, one

General's pencil, two Derwent Graphitint pencils, and a rubber blending stump. The hum increased to a rattling in earnest, a vibration that shifted the can toward the brink. Chase watched it fall.

The contents scattered across the carpet at his feet, and the broken stick of charcoal chipped on the lip of the can. The utensils begged for him to draw. Chase bent to collect each item and returned everything to the can.

As he stooped, a rustling of paper called out to him. Holding the can, he straightened, then pivoted to scan each wall in the room. He thought the sound came from there, from one of the hundreds of drawings tacked up in overlapping rows.

These were pictures he had made of trees. White, ghostly trees on dark sheets. For starters, Chase had drawn every species known to the Pacific Northwest: the cascara buckthorn, with its wavy-edged leaves and pronounced veins; the Pacific dogwood, covered like snow in the white bracts that framed its tiny flowers; the towering black cottonwood, its seeds hanging from strings like pearls on a woman's necklace; quaking aspen, the heart-shaped leaves fluttering. When he'd exhausted the region he moved on to other species of the country, the continent, the world.

None of his art appeared out of order. He rotated until his toes pointed once again at the desk. Chase lowered the soup can to place it on the surface, but stopped. The black drawing pad that had been closed now lay open, a fresh slate.

This was highly unusual. Still holding the can, he pulled out his chair and sat. The Mi-Teintes pastel book was bound with wire at the top and contained sixteen sheets of 9 x 12 black textured paper. Each of these was separated by a translucent sheet of glassine. Chase stared at the exposed page. He heard the rhythm of the fan chain in the other bedroom.

At the top of the page a letter appeared, an *A*, as in the beginning of the alphabet, as in *A is for alder* or *acacia* or *abele*. The letter did not appear all at once, but as a tilting line that rose to the right, then fell down to the right, then was crossed in the middle, written by an invisible hand with an invisible pen.

Not a pen. A soft white wax. A china marker. Chase lifted his eyes to his shelves, seeking a flat Hershey's collector's tin with a hinged lid on the left side of the window. Bottom level, third from the left. He retrieved it and flipped open the top with one thumb. All nine of his markers were inside, in Sharpie, Dixon, Berol, and Sanford brands. What instrument was making these marks, and how?

On the paper, a new letter had appeared after the *A*, following a space. An *l*, lowercase, and then an *o*. Bold strokes, firm and authoritative. *N*. Chase sank back into his chair, candy tin in one hand and soup can in the other, mesmerized. *G*. The letters formed words and the words formed a phrase.

*A longing fulfilled is*

Familiarity came over Chase like sunshine, a comforting assurance that everything about to happen was good.

Chase set the containers next to the sketchbook, then lifted the page to see whether the words were being applied from the backside or through the desk. Nothing. On the front, the script continued to flow. He lowered the page and ran his fingers over the fresh words, which had taken on the texture of the paper. The silky wax and dry pulp were Braille to Chase. His fingertips tingled.

*A longing fulfilled is a tree of life.*

At his bidding, an image from his mind became lifelike in the room. It was helpful for him to put the contents of his head out in front of him. And so he was able to see the figure of a Great Basin bristlecone pine tree—far too large for the room, impossibly large, and bent by the confining ceiling—leaning over the page, writing with one of its branches.

Chase did not evaluate why he had envisioned *Pinus longaeva*, because the words on the page demanded his attention. They were an adage he knew well, a passage from the Bible's book of Proverbs, in the thirteenth chapter.

He picked up the broken white charcoal stick and made several broad strokes along the margin of the page. The strokes formed a shape: a complex trunk, wide and twisted like flame, a branch. He set the charcoal in the soup can and wiped his fingers on his red shorts and reached for the Graphatint pencil, which would give him finer detail than the charcoal. With this he created a cluster of needles. Many, many spiny needles in tight brush formations.

Trees lived and breathed and should not be made motionless on paper, and this had always presented some challenge to Chase. He lifted the notebook and let the page dangle. He shook it firmly one time, causing the sheet to buckle. The branches moved. The needles stayed erect. Chase was very pleased. He returned the book to the desk, then held the pencil above the proverb.

The majestic tree of life he intended to finish drawing vanished from his mind.

*A longing fulfilled is a tree of life. Draw the longing, for time is short. Fill the heart, for days are full.*

All he could see were words, and then the meaning of the words disappeared and all he could see were strokes. He saw the movements of a man's hand gripping a grease pencil and forming each symbol, the sweeping and swooping of lines, the tight angles, the free-flowing tails.

This was his father's handwriting.

Chase felt happy to see it. He turned the page over and waited for the bristlecone to reappear, waited for his father to write more.

The bluffs above the ocean were the winds' playground. Brisk breezes dashed in all directions and teased the twisted cypress trees. Tarnished clouds advanced low over the Oregonian coastline, bringing rain to challenge the late-morning sun. Where storm and sunlight met, shades of blue and gray shimmered.

While she waited for the artist who'd hired her, Promise leaned out over the weather-worn split-rail barrier separating her from the sharp drop to a narrow strip of sandy beach some forty feet below. The wood complained, and she retreated.

If she were the suicidal type, this would be a poetic time and place for dying. But she wasn't. Her life would end prematurely, there was no doubt about that in the mind of anyone who knew anything about her, but it would end only against her will, and only at the height of her fame.

Which was on its way. Soon. Very, very soon. She pleaded with whatever unseen force governed the world that this would be true, because her days were winding down with every turn of the earth.

For two weeks Promise had ignored the familiar heaviness creeping into her lungs, the declining pulse-ox numbers, the less productive chest-therapy sessions, the fatigue that hit her earlier in the day than usual. She knew as well as she knew her name that she was sick and wouldn't be able to avoid the hospital many more days. This didn't bode well for her plans. Auditions for the fall musical production—

which two agents had just this morning promised to attend—were next week. It would take every antibiotic and home remedy known to man to stay on her feet until then.

There were at least a dozen advantages to dying young, enough that Promise generally ignored the death that shadowed her like a pesky black puppy. Feeding the needy animal was a waste of resources and didn't do a thing to solve the problem that most frightened her: dying before anyone really knew who she was. It wasn't that Promise wanted fame, exactly, but that she didn't want to be forgotten. Fame was a practical means to that end.

She coughed several times to loosen up her lungs and then lightly slapped her thigh in a perky beat and hummed to ward off the anxiety that crept up on her.

The teasing atmosphere of the sky turned mean. Her long hair snapped at her eyes and caught at the corners of her mouth. She pulled her woolly wrap tighter across her chest and thought about leaving, asking Zack Eddy to reschedule. On the bright side, he would have to work quickly, and she wasn't being paid by the hour. But her health deserved a hasty retreat. She'd give him five minutes.

Which was precisely when he arrived. The sound of a car door slamming turned her head. Behind her, in the lot at the end of a meandering downhill path, Zack had parked his economical Honda next to her flashy BMW Roadster, the only other vehicle at the park. His dyed black hair, gelled flat to his head like a slick beanie, didn't budge under the huffing sky.

He bowed into the trunk of his car, retrieved a bag on a long strap and slung it over his shoulder, then locked up and hoofed it to the trail. He wore skinny jeans tucked into socks, skateboard shoes, and layers of T-shirts. No jacket, like a local. Truly, it was more blustery than chilly, though a reversal probably wouldn't have mattered to him. Zack's trademark trench coat was missing, and she thought, smiling, that she'd only seen him wear it indoors.

She shouted at him and waved. Her toes lifted her heels off the ground in a sort-of jump. Real, take-to-the-air jumping was something she avoided for energy-conservation reasons.

Zack responded with a slight hike of his chin.

She modeled in Zack's figure-drawing class at the university for spending money to call her own, even though her wealthy parents gave her everything she asked for and even more that she didn't. But independence wasn't something they could buy on her behalf. Her tiny paycheck gave her the mental strength she needed to keep up with her career plans, short-lived though they might be.

Zack was the last student there she had come to know, but not because she hadn't made the same attempts to befriend him that she'd made with nearly everyone else.

She pegged him early on as intelligent but morose, willfully depressed because the concept of tortured genius was perennially trendy. The trench coat he

usually wore had a suspicious, illicit smell. She imagined he wrote dark poetry in the bleakest hours of the night, after finishing shadowy and sinister charcoal drawings.

His first words to her, which he spoke after three months of silence, were a question: *Will you pose for a painting I've got to finish?* Finding his question sweet and boyish rather than spooky, she'd made him promise not to draw her bodily form in the context of anything like a coffin or a Goth castle or a medieval torture chamber. He answered this request with the most beautiful, genuine, happy laugh, giving her hope that his black moodiness was only a front.

“Been here long?” he said when he crested the hill, not even breathless. The climb had taken her fifteen slow minutes.

“Awhile. You don't happen to keep your long coat in your car, do you?”

“No, why?” He kept moving toward the wood fence. Looked out, looked down. Test-kicked the post for no apparent reason. A light shower of powdery dirt rained off the rail.

“Thought I might borrow it.”

“If I had it, you could. That's what I call a drop.”

“The higher the bluff, the better the vertigo.”

There was no laugh to reward her joke this time. Zack withdrew an expensive-looking camera from his bag. He attached a lens that was probably capable of photographing Mars, then repeated the looking out, the looking down, this time through the digital display. Not what she had expected.

“This lighting is killer,” he said.

“Where’s your sketchbook?”

“With the trench coat.” He directed the camera at her, took a step backward.

“I liked what you were doing when I was coming up. Holding that shawl thing tight, chin back over your shoulder.”

“Look, I’m sorry if I wasn’t clear about this when we scheduled, Zack, but I don’t do cameras.”

Zack moved around her like an orbiting moon. “What do you mean, you don’t do cameras? No, no. Keep your back to me.”

Promise faced him in full. “No pictures.”

“What?” The shutter clicked.

“Zack, I mean it.”

His eyes rose above the massive lens. “Why? What did you think I’d be doing up here?”

“Drawing. Sketching.”

“In this weather?”

“You called it,” she said.

“I’m a painter.”

“Painters make thumbnails. For reference.”

“I take pictures for reference.”

“I guess we both made some assumptions, then. Sorry about that.”

Zack exhaled between thin lips and studied the morphing horizon. “What’s your thing about pictures?”

“I can’t control them.”

“What?” He came closer and leaned in as if he was having trouble hearing. She smelled the alcohol in his hair gel.

“I can’t control what you’ll do with pictures of me.”

“You don’t have the same objection to those videos of you singing. I’ve seen them all over the Web.” An uncontrollable twitch at the corner of his mouth was almost a smile.

“That’s not the same. I own the rights to those.”

“Who cares about rights anymore?”

Promise didn’t like to argue. It was her policy to make friends, not enemies. “Some people do. Did you see the one I posted last week?”

“Maybe.”

“What did you maybe think of it?”

He took a picture of her. She crossed her arms but tried to keep a playful expression. If he persisted with this and posted photos of her online, against her will, ugly ones would get the most attention. No point in helping that to happen.

“Do you think I have a chance?” she asked.

“I don’t know anything about music.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“I think you’ve got a nice voice. But your stuff is a bit perky for my tastes.”

“Three different agents e-mailed about it.”

He lowered the camera. “No kidding.”

“And a record label. But a small one. I really want an agent.”

“Is all that stuff you claim on your Web site true?”

“You mean did I write all the lyrics? Did I make the musical arrangements?”

“No. I mean, do you have cystic fibrosis? You cough a lot in class. Are you really going to die before you’re, like, twenty-one?”

Promise was open about her disease—this broad disclosure was part of her strategy—and most people thought she was seven notes short of an octave to pick a career that was dependent on a healthy set of lungs. But they didn’t have the guts to say so, as if her feelings might be as fragile as her health.

“Actually, I’m twenty-two already. The life expectancy of people with CF keeps going up, you know.”

“I didn’t.”

“It’s somewhere in the midthirties now.”

“So do people feel sorry for you? Say you have a nice voice just to make you feel good?”

She’d wondered now and then. “Some. I guess.”

“I’ll bet the agents who wrote to you might like your story more than your voice. It’ll sell albums, you know, especially when you die.”

Promise blanched.

Zack shrugged, and his shutter clicked away. “But I don’t have any reason to lie to you. You sing good enough.”

“I hope you’re not studying to be a doctor or minister or something, where it’d be your job to make people feel better.”

He finally gave her the laugh she was looking for, though it had cost her more than she’d wanted to spend.

“No worries about that. Can we get to work now?” he asked while he was still smiling.

“What are we going to do about my photo issues?”

“Hate to break it to you, but you actually have less control over how people paint you in class.”

She shook her head. “A drawing is only an interpretation of me, and artists take more care to protect their intellectual property than they do a snapshot. It’s not the same. Class paintings of me aren’t going to show up all over the Internet or be sold on stock-photo sites or to tabloids or wherever.”

His thin eyebrows, dyed to match his hair, disagreed with her. “Are you calling my photography *snapshots*?”

“I’ve never seen your stuff. I wouldn’t know what to call it. But why do you think Dawson doesn’t allow cameras in class?”

“I’ve never met a model who—”

“I’m an artist’s model, not the runway type.”

“Still, it’s strange.”

“Strange looks good on celebrity,” she said.

He sighed, maybe thinking, maybe annoyed. “It doesn’t seem like a good plan for someone who isn’t a celebrity yet.”

“I wasted your time,” she said. “That’s my fault. I know someone else who—”

“No. I wanted you. I mean . . .” He gestured to the waters. “I’ve got minutes to make this work, then the moment’s gone. We’re here. You’re perfect, this is perfect. Can’t we work something out?”

“Like what?”

Zack’s fingers fiddled with his camera’s dials. He was clean-shaven, baby-face smooth but grown-man angular in the cheek and narrow jaw, every limb and feature long and slim. He’d be an interesting subject for drawing himself.

“Like what if I give you my memory card when we’re done here? You make the prints for me, erase the card. No electronic files anywhere.”

“You could scan the prints.”

His expression was definitely annoyance this time. “I respect your . . . issues, I really do. But I’m in a bind here.” He started shooting at the oceanscape without her in the frame. “I’ve got less than two weeks to get this piece done. If it doesn’t happen today, it’s not going to happen at all. And I mean really, never. When I’m

done with this, I'm done with painting. This is it. And like you, I'd like to go out with a really good work under my belt."

Promise wavered. She wasn't principled for the sake of making life difficult for others, and she thought he was trustworthy. Weird, in a brainy-artsy kind of way, but in the absence of contradictory proof, trustworthy.

"I won't scan your pictures," he said. "Okay? I don't know how to prove that to you. I can only give you my word. I promise not to scan your pictures." He smirked. "I promise, Promise."

She relented, stepping between his camera and the sky, her back to him as requested. His camera shutter was fast and rhythmic. She wondered how many prints she'd be developing for him.

"So what are you going for?" she asked, removing the wrap from her shoulders. She had to cough a few times.

"Leave that on," he instructed.

"This?" It was a favorite burnt-orange wool that she'd worn for comfort and warmth.

"It's a good color. Besides, the wind will blow right through you without it."

"Most people don't like orange."

"Earthy rust, stormy blue. Lucky me that you're strange. It's a study in contrasts."

"A fine cliché."

“Not for me. I prefer shades of black, see?” He pointed to his T-shirt and jeans ensemble.

“So if I hadn’t worn orange, what would you be going for?” She struck a pose that matched the weather’s glum mood.

“Not that.” He frowned.

“The more you tell me the better I can do.”

“Don’t think about it as ‘doing,’ okay? Just be.”

“Just be. What does that mean?”

“Whatever it means when you pose in the classroom.”

“There are no cameras there. I’m sorry, but honestly, you might have picked the wrong model.”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, I guess that settles it then.”

“Seriously, be yourself. Relax. It’s you against the world out here. That’s all I’m after. It’s simple. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“I should levy a surcharge on you for breaking my policy,” she said. She returned to the position she’d been in while waiting for him to show up.

“How’d you get a name like Promise?” he asked.

“You talk a lot for an artist.”

“You have a narrow stereotype of us!”

“My name’s a long story. How long is this going to take?”

“As long as the light lasts. Try turning around here. That’s good. If we run out of time, maybe you can finish your story over coffee.”

“Why don’t we keep your information gathering to imagery for now?” Her words came out more curtly than she intended.

“Message received.” Zack’s voice was level, but he hid his face behind the camera, which might have meant something or might have meant nothing, and uncertainty only made Promise more stiff and unnatural. As a classroom model she was used to stillness, to holding poses for a half hour or more.

Still, the dancing air begged her to move with it, and when Zack didn’t say more she responded with subtle shifts in her weight, in her posture, in the line of her neck. She hid her ugly fingers, misshapen at the tips by her disease, in the folds of her wrap. She ignored her hair entirely. Promise felt a drop of rain tap the bridge of her nose.

Bowing her head away from the sounds of the working camera, she turned her shoulder and felt her hip brush the split-rail fence post. A splinter snagged the wool shawl, and she paused to release it.

“I’m a little jealous that you’re going to see these prints before I will,” Zack said, continuing to shoot as if this mundane task of splinter-removal was worth recording. When she finished, Promise leaned into the wooden support and lifted her face to the sky’s spare drops. “I like that. You’re good.”

Zack was a camera head on a human body. The sunlight was nearly swallowed by the clouds now.

“Why are you going to stop painting?” she asked.

“Asked you first.”

“Asked me what?”

“How you got your name. Turn your chin this way.”

“My father named me Promise, over Mom’s objections. She wanted to call me Trinity, but Dad thought that was pretentious, maybe even sacrilegious.” She propped her foot on the low rail of the fence and pushed herself up to sit on the top beam. She had worn her sheepskin boots today, as she did nearly every day, since Zack hadn’t given her other instructions.

“Does this mean you’re going to have coffee with me?”

“No.”

“Can you go sideways and balance one foot on the top?”

Promise complied, and the rail groaned under her slim form. “Be quick.”

“Look away.” And seconds later, “Now back at me over your other shoulder.”

“I’m a pretzel already, Zack.”

“Trust me.”

She nearly lost her balance. Of all the foolish positions to allow herself to be put in. After two or three camera clicks, she announced, “I’m coming down now.”

“Got it.”

The fence creaked when she dismounted. “Actually, the real reason my dad wanted to name me Promise was because I was born the day after he was deployed to the Gulf War.”

“What can you do with that shawl?”

She opened it like wings, and the wind snapped it.

“Let the air have it,” Zack said.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Try just one hand.”

Exposed now in her lightweight turtleneck, Promise shivered. Her eyes followed the updraft of the wool that buckled like a flame.

“I don’t think this is working,” she said.

“Sometimes it seems that way, but you never know.”

“My dad said I’d be Mom’s Promise from him, no matter what happened.”

“What if we try draping it over the post without you?” Zack suggested.

She saw there was little point in her telling the story so long as coffee wasn’t involved, which disappointed her a little. On a professional job as this one, though, personal tales probably weren’t appropriate. She was always messing that up, especially with peers. Her expectations of life and theirs rarely aligned, it seemed. She needed intimacy swiftly; they weren’t conscious of time the way she was, though

maybe everyone should be so aware. This was something she would definitely have to work out before—

The selfish wind yanked the wrap right out of her fingers.

“Oh, drat.”

The fiery sheet hovered briefly before dropping to the scruffy ground, then escaped the toe of Zack’s skateboard shoe when he tried to pin it down. It rolled once, evasive, then returned to the air on a puppet string and streaked for the water.

Promise kept her eye on the fringe and made three long strides, quick and agile, then lunged for it.

Her body went through the decaying wood rail as if it wasn’t even there, as if it had chosen that precise moment to disintegrate into a pile of termite dust. She would have expected a splintering or clattering or some audible protest from the wood, but there was only Zack’s distressed shouts and a fluttering of weighty fabric and the skidding of her body slipping over loose rocks as the ground released her to the air.

*Not now, not now. This is not the right time.*

And then the silence of the fall.

After devoting more than six decades of her life to mastering the magical arts, Porta Cerreto didn't need a spell or an incense or a ritual in order to have a vision. She liked being in control of things, though, so she preferred these methods to spontaneous revelations. Still, sometimes the spirits of truth sought her out first. When they did, she tried to take their attention as a compliment.

Today, however, they caught her flat-footed.

She was standing on the historic-downtown sidewalk of a charming city. This seaside district was known to locals as “the Shore,” though the beachfront was technically a few blocks away. She faced her new gallery, which she had quite cleverly named ART(i)FACTS. A pot-bellied contractor was installing the front door, a beautiful glass entry with beveled edges, an oak frame, and matching sidelights. Under the name frosted into the glass, a stylized chisel and mallet chipped away at the motto.

#### UNEARTH YOUR TRUTH

The morning storms had passed on, yielding to a stunning domed-sky day. Porta breathed deeply. The air approved of her plan to open in this town, at this time of year. Oxygen seasoned with ocean salt promised her efforts would be nourishing, appealing, and enduring. These were good omens, and she expressed her gratefulness

with sighs of relief. At seventy-six she had little time for efforts that would not be profitable.

Beauty had long since failed to satisfy her. True enough: the people who entered her art gallery through that gorgeous glass door wouldn't exit in the same state, not if their spirits were receptive to their true callings. At one time, the prospect of enhancing others' lives had been noble enough. But now, as her own wheel of life came full circle, she wanted more.

Porta heard a delivery truck brake at the back of the gallery. More artwork for tomorrow's grand opening would be aboard, and she hoped for one piece in particular. The carpet had been laid, the furniture arranged, and now her designers were hanging canvases and frames on the walls.

She entered the neighboring "Irish" pub, an Americanized hangout that didn't come close to being authentic, and nodded to the old owner, who had kindly suggested she use his store as a pass-through while her front entry was blocked. He waved and placed a foamy beer in front of an early bird at the bar. The man had been in business here forty-two years, he'd said, and Porta believed the fisherman sweater he wore daily was certainly the same age.

At the rear of the pub, she emerged onto a wide alley and spotted her delivery. The driver dropped a clipboard onto the back of his open freight truck, then jumped in. He slipped a hand-operated pallet jack under a wooden shipping

box, roughly four feet by three feet, then dragged the crate onto the truck's lift, which whined and whirred and lowered its load to the ground.

She looked at the labels on the crate and clapped her hands together once.

“Ah, the one I've been waiting for.”

“If you say so, ma'am.”

She accepted the necessary shipping receipts but declined to sign them.

Instead, she directed the man to the ramp at her small receiving dock. “Let's have a look first, shall we?”

Thirty years ago, at a more golden time in her life, she had commissioned a sculpture from a promising young Iranian artist living in Jordan. The piece was carved from a solid piece of jade Porta had acquired from a Zoroastrian mobed. The priest had been fond of her, having traded the large stone for a small collection of sardonyx jewelry and a few more personal, sensual favors.

She had taken the priceless green rock to the Iranian and asked the young sculptor to find the beautiful woman within it. The figure that emerged would be her Ameretat, the Zoroastrians' divine feminine ideal of immortality. Ameretat was not a goddess, per se, though Porta found it helpful to think of her as such. Her verdant form had become a sort of divining rod to Porta, for the sculpture *Ameretat* held a jade pot of rich, real soil. This soil would, according to the mobed who blessed it, give birth to a blooming vine when in the presence of life that could outwit death.

This was one piece of art that would never be for sale.

Its size, however, required that Porta be separated from it whenever she was uprooted and transplanted. She had not laid eyes on *Ameretat* since leaving it in New York six weeks earlier with twenty pages' worth of other insured inventory and shipping instructions.

Inside the gallery's storeroom she instructed the driver to put the crate in the center of the floor, then fetched a flat-head screwdriver and hammer from under a workbench.

"Do you mind?" she asked, holding them out to him.

Within seconds the metal brackets holding the five-ply birch together at the sides were moaning and creaking, giving birth. Porta lifted the lid and took off the top layer of cushioning foam. A golden-colored head appeared.

Gold, not green. Metal, not gemstone.

"This isn't right."

Inside the box, the metal sculpture was held steady by plywood braces. The driver helped her to remove these, then placed his hand on the figure's head and tilted the entire piece forward until he could grasp the heavy base. He set it in front of her on the concrete floor.

Porta crouched in her black business suit and frowned.

This was no goddess of immortality. Instead, a young boy walked with his cheerful face turned up to the sky, eyes shut beneath the implied sun. The sculpture wasn't bronze, but some less reflective metal that she couldn't name right away.

“This crate has been mislabeled.”

The driver consulted the shipping container and then examined his clipboard. He allowed her to look over his shoulder at what he had: copies of the airway bill, the pro forma invoice, the shipper’s invoice.

“It all appears to be in order, but this isn’t the piece,” Porta said. “I can show you photographs. There’s been a terrible mistake.”

The driver shook his head but didn’t argue, and she imagined that this happened all the time, though none of it was his fault.

“Let me make a call,” he said and returned to his truck.

Porta stared at the little boy. The smell of fresh paint coming from the gallery mingled with her disappointment. This was practically disastrous.

It wasn’t a poorly made piece. In fact, she noted that it had been formed by welding rather than soldering. That welding could have achieved the finer details of the boy’s uncombed hair and untied shoelaces surprised her. She wondered how the artist had managed the high temperatures necessary to the process.

Technical admiration aside, the boy was too sweet and too innocent and far too commercial for her liking. It was a wonder there wasn’t a bird on his shoulder and a dog at his heels! The concept was amateur. Common. Uninspired. She flicked the child’s head and heard a hollow hum.

She groaned. Where was the *Ameretat!*

The hum persisted and rose over the sounds of hammering and low voices from the front room. What material was this? Porta raised her aging but pretty hand—she cared deeply about the appearance of her hands—and placed it on top of the upturned forehead to put an end to the vibrations. She did not expect the warmth of a fever. Even more unexpectedly, her fingers sank into the boy's scruffy hair as if it were soft wax; it surrounded her knuckles. In a second it hardened and gripped her tight.

The bones within her fingers began to tingle.

If she had not been seventy-six and on intimate terms with the spiritual elements of the earth for most of her life, she might have shrieked or cried out for assistance. But she recognized the unexplainable for what it was: not a physical event, as trapped as her hand really felt, but a perception of reality. A vision. The announcement of a message, prepared for her and delivered into her own hand. Quite specifically.

She relaxed, preparing herself to receive. The hum transposed into a buzz, and then a ringing in her ears.

“Your moon is waning, crone.” It was the child speaking to her.

“As it does for us all,” she said.

“Porta Cerreto ought to believe what she says. And yet she doesn't think death will come to her.”

This announcement was mildly troubling. Death was a subject—and a state of being—she aimed to avoid.

“I have devoted my life to the search for immortality, that is true.”

“Her search is vain.”

“Why?”

“Because she has put her faith in gods that have no power over death.”

Who was this rude and sassy little boy that found her unworthy of direct speech? Until she identified him, she would have to summon her self-control or risk offending a deity who might be greater than he appeared.

“Who has this power, if they don’t?”

“There is but One who knows the way.”

“Who? I’d like to meet her. Or him, if that’s the case.”

“Porta Cerreto walks away. She leads many down the trail to death with a torch high above her head.”

She attempted to withdraw her hand from the trap of the child’s wild hair but couldn’t.

“That’s a lie! Don’t disrespect me any longer—speak to me! Tell me who has the power you speak of.”

The sculptured child opened its eyelids, and the spaces behind them were vacant. Porta stilled.

The child spoke. “Behold, I have come out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me. No man or woman hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. She that believeth on him is not condemned: but she that believeth not is condemned already.”

This vision was an underling escaped from the pit of hell to tease as if she were a novice!

“What is your name, demon?”

“I am your life! Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among the people.”

“What is your *name*?”

“It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Naz—”

Now Porta shrieked, a cry of fury. She spat on the metallic hair that seized her and kicked at the child’s pedestal and uttered a curse: “*Avaana! Avaana ahmega, no stolia eudab avaana . . .*”

Her hand came free. The sculpture toppled, and she crouched over it, agile because she had held onto her youth in a way this . . . thing would never acknowledge. The vision skewed. Her fingers took the child by the throat as she ranted, commanding the abomination back to its underworldly hole. The eyelids closed.

The lips kept moving.

“In five weeks of five days, Porta Cerreto will breathe her last.”

She raised her voice to drown out the monster’s words but heard them anyway.

“How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. Porta, Porta, I call to you.”

She turned the sculpture onto its face and slammed it into the ground one, two, three times.

The hum that had speared her ears faded away. She finished her curse, breathing heavily.

She stood. She smoothed her pant legs with the palms of her quivering hands. It had been a long time since anything like this had happened to her. In fact, she couldn’t recall any incident in her long history that was quite so upsetting. She’d consult the Raven, find out what he knew of this shenanigan. What trickster would have imitated the poser god who insisted he stood above every other deity in the universe?

Porta had long ago rejected the One who rejected all humanity, and all deity associated with him, be they spirits or sons. *The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.*

It would not be beneath her own son to mock her with such a joke. A housewarming gift, of sorts.

As she stood over the still, cheap form, the stunt finally struck her as funny. She chuckled and bent to right the figure. Poor little boy, abused in such a manner.

Five weeks of five days. Did that mean five business weeks? Or twenty-five days in a row, counting weekends? Or something more cryptic? Whatever it meant, it didn't seem to be a long time; it might take however long it was to track down the *Ameretat*, which was to have taken center stage in her front window, where the figure could evaluate everyone who came through the doors. This, after all, was Porta's aim in drawing lovers of art to her: only beauty was immortal, and only beauty would draw the life-giver she sought. The *Ameretat* had not yet identified the one, not once in three decades. But Porta had faith that it would. In its own time, it would.

She imagined this child sculpture in her front window and weighed whether she had the nerve to put it there. It might draw a broader crowd than the goddess would have, which was important to a new gallery in establishing itself.

But the real reason she wanted to put it there was to thumb her nose at the devil who'd tried to scare her. If her son saw it there on his first visit, the reward of his expression would be worth her display of such schmaltz. And if she couldn't sell this overly cute thing in five weeks, maybe she deserved to die. Ha!

Porta walked lightly to her dock door and leaned out in search of the driver. He sat on the driver's seat of his cab, ear pinching a phone to his shoulder.

“Never mind!” she called out. “I’ll keep this one, sort out the rest later.”

He lifted his sunglasses as if he hadn’t heard.

“Just bring me the papers. I’ll sign right now.”

Porta went back into her storeroom and examined the little guy. He was durable if nothing else. The piece was light enough to lift onto her workbench. She touched his face, avoiding the hair on his crown, and found it solid as ever. She ran her fingers down his tender arms. The boy was an odd choice of messenger for whoever dreamed it up.

She glanced at a calendar hanging over the table. Today was Friday, August 10. Her grand opening was tomorrow. She counted weeks. Five would take her into the middle of September, around the fourteenth or fifteenth. Nothing significant about those dates came to mind. The fall solstice would fall a week or so afterward. She counted squares. Twenty-five days from today landed her finger on September third. Her seventy-seventh birthday.

An involuntary shiver passed between Porta’s shoulders as she stared at the date. The significance of it changed nothing, but she was filled with a knowing that she resisted. The spirits of the fates and not some prankster had come to her this time, in all their veiled mystery. The truth was, her immortality was not secure, and though she felt closer to it than ever, it remained outside of her grasp.

No, no. Some truths were not truth at all, but a choice to be made, a pessimism to be rejected. She rejected this one. The fullness of life would come to

her. It would hear her call and walk through those front doors of her gallery to reward all her years of faithful searching. When it arrived, she'd seize it and never let go.

Porta crossed her arms and scowled. She considered what special induction she needed to bestow on this particular piece of art. Considering the circumstances of its arrival, the usual spell she placed on her works ran the risk of being insufficient.

She lifted the child off the bench and carried it out through the gallery into the private viewing room that occupied one corner. The space was a misshapen pentagon, because its door stood at an angle between the walls that protruded into the main store. Porta liked this detail, because the unequal sides would have irritated her sisters back east no end. The area was lit by three recessed lights. One of these fixtures formed a cone-shaped spotlight at the center of the room.

This is where potential clients would interact with artwork alone, undistracted, aided by the room's charms and the scents coming off the heated rocks of her incense bowl. Her former family would have been rankled by this sales technique too, but Porta failed to see the problem with helping a customer's brain along, showing it how to see what it was trying to see anyway.

Porta placed the sculpture in one corner near an unlit candle. She bent to lift the edge of the area rug that covered most of the unfinished concrete floor, then she

rolled it away to the wall. That done, she moved the little boy onto a black dot she'd painted on the slab, precisely in the center of the room.

There was a wall switch behind the candle where she'd placed the statue. She flipped it on, and the dim recessed lights were extinguished and replaced by florescent blue beams from a projector installed in the ceiling. Thanks to technology, she no longer had to waste time casting her ceremonial circles with chinks or salts or silky cords or dry pine needles. The computer-generated image of a perfect three-dimensional circle—a snake biting its tail—floated over the floor like a hologram. The snake's head was positioned to the north and also provided the circle's door; Porta didn't care that the snake didn't face east, as tradition requested. With the aid of a tiny remote control, she could cut the door and also close the circle without being distracted from the more important details of her spells.

The sculptured boy stood in the middle of all this, and she appreciated how the snake held him captive.

She scolded the child. "You've had your fun. Now you're in my house, and you'll play by my rules. I'll be right back."

Porta closed the door and returned to sign the driver's paperwork. Then she would drive all tricks from that hunk of metal forever.