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Besides, Josh wanted a date. A real date—not just the gallery or Thea’s apartment. And he didn’t count the bistro.

“We’re going out—dancing,” he told Thea.

“Fuck this,” she said. “Do you not understand who I am? My situation?”

“You love to say ‘fuck’ now—so much. You’re a real New Yorker! And Thea, of course I understand. I’m taking you somewhere magical and special. Trust me. This will work. I’ll pick you up at nine.”

They walked out of the apartment, hand in hand. Went left, then left again, to the desolate side of the block. Thea was nervous in the dark, but she gamely kept up with Josh. Midway down the block, he stopped by a manhole. Bending down and using both his arms, he pulled off the lid. It came away easily, much to Thea’s surprise. Squeezing through, it was as expected, a short straight ladder going

down. But not too bad. Not too difficult a descent.

Then Thea's feet touched earth, and nothing was as she'd imagined it. Josh came down after her, his work boots thumping as he hit dirt.

"Isn't this cool, so cool...." He sounded awed. "And, Thea, it's different every time. So cool." His voice echoed slightly in the cavernous space.

Lanterns hung in sconces at regular intervals. There was a clear path, a well-lit corridor leading slightly down, and they followed. Alcoves held mosaics that glittered with bits of gold and the blue of lapis lazuli. Thea saw a woman with a whip, the outline of a maze, the naked legs of a man with the head of a bull, a large egg on fire, a house with chicken legs. One alcove just held an enormous conch shell and one the skeleton of a bird.

Josh took her hand again. It was wide enough for them to walk together. The air was still and warm, pleasantly so. It smelled like dried rose petals, but Thea also caught a whiff of cabbage cooking. She heard wind chimes, improbable in a place without wind. Then a

flutist starting a solo, which trailed off, a long minute of salsa, then silence.

"It's so nice," she whispered to Josh.

"You don't have to whisper," he whispered back.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, they came to the end of the corridor, at a cheap metal door, behind which was an office suite that might have been for the registry of motor vehicles or a neighborhood dental clinic.

"What the...?" Thea looked at Josh.

"It's different every time," he said. "But someone will tell us what to do. Don't ask a lot of questions and do what the official says, and we'll get in."

Thea looked at him. He had not spent his life crossing borders and lying. But she nodded.

Then, one of the prettiest women Thea had ever seen appeared. She wore a short black dress, clingy. Her bangs were cut straight across, shadowing huge, dark eyes. She wore a little corsage of a sprig of rosemary and a pink carnation bud.

She gestured for them to sit opposite her at a table. "Alright," she said briskly. "A short

intake test is needed for tonight's entry fee into Babel."

Josh asked, "Didn't this used to be...a different club? A place with a different name? Kind of a ziggurat feeling? I've been in Babel, but I think I was in it before, like in high school."

"No," said the woman.

She pulled out a flash card. It showed a brightly colored Easter egg.

"What is this?"

"An egg," said Josh.

"Pinsanica," said Thea.

"Potential," said Josh.

"For a chicken," said Thea.

"The sun," said Josh.

"The moon."

"Hope."

"Betrayal."

"Betrayal?" chorused Josh and the woman.

"I'm taking a point off for that," the woman said. "But you pass. You can come in." She gestured them out of the office and into a huge central space.

The dance floor stretched away almost as far as the eye could see. It was very crowded,

people dancing and milling about. A raised platform towards the middle hosted a band with some brass, synthesizer, electric piano, and several guitars. A gorgeous black woman in gold lame was belting out the disco hits of a few years before.

Josh steered Thea to one of many little islands in the crowd, a bar station set up with stools and a counter.

"What do you want?" He yelled over the noise.

"Vodka."

"And tonic?"

"Neat," she said.

"Tonic?"

She shook her head.

It was difficult to hear, to communicate, but what could you expect in a place called Babel?

Thea threw the shot back in to her throat. Josh was drinking some rum concoction, and she took a sip.

They stared dancing, very close. His body was warm and calming. Thea hung on to him as if he were a raft in an ocean.

It was as if they were enclosed in a bubble. Everything fell quiet. Then a lovely, plaintive

tune began, like a strain of gypsy music, turning to a soft calypso.

Josh moved close. They stepped, in, out, perfectly in sync with each other. He spun, she swung, he dipped, she turned.

"Josh," her voice was hushed. "What exactly is...this?"

Outside the invisible bubble she could see the crowd, the band, but she couldn't hear them.

"Like I said, this place is magic. Thank you for coming with me." He kissed her. They kept dancing. Long minutes, maybe hours, passed. Thea felt light and warm. Then, eventually, she had to pee.

"I'm going to the bathroom."

"OK," he pointed vaguely. "That way. And Thea...sometimes if you go out, it's hard to get back in. If we get separated, and you can't find me, let's just meet back at the apartment, OK?"

"You have your key?"

"Yes."

Thea moved away from Josh, aiming towards a far wall and red neon sign reading LADIES. Her ears popped as she left the

bubble and re-entered the dance floor. It took her a few minutes—excuse me, excuse me.

The women's bathroom was chaos. Surprisingly large, it had surprisingly few stalls and sinks. A woman was reading Tarot cards at a folding table in one corner. Two women were making out so intensely Thea looked away—it was too private. Another woman was snorting coke off a corner of a sink—one line, two.

A stall seemed open. Thea didn't see any legs. She peed with relief, wadded up some toilet paper, stood up, and flushed. But when she reached for the lock, the scene had changed. She was outside. It was daytime. She was in a clearing in a forest, where the air was warm but some snow lingered.

Thea saw a little house in a circle of birch trees. The front door was carved in the shape of a big mushroom and painted red with white spots.

A woman opened the door, stepped forward, and looked Thea directly in the eyes for a long moment. The woman was wearing what appeared to be a folk costume with a red bodice and a long white ruffled skirt. On her head was a crown of flowers and ribbons. Her

hair flowed below her shoulders. Her skin was creamy and her eyes piercing.

"Vasilisa?" Thea asked.

"So, you still know who I am?" The woman laughed in a low alto pitch.

"Vasilisa the Wise? Of course, I know who you are. Although I haven't seen you since I was a child, and then not so often."

"Most people never see me."

"I've been lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it. I'm only seen when I want to be."

"Thank you."

"And we have seen each other more recently than your childhood."

"We have?"

"How soon they forget," Vasilisa said.

"Have you forgotten that party, right after you and Jan got together? That art school party with too much to drink and some opium with the hash? With the spirit board calling on me, and spelling out advice? And you asked what was in your heart, and I told you that you and Jan would be happy together?"

"Oh, that party," Thea said unenthusiastically. "I was pretty hung over. And we weren't

happy. Maybe just at the start, but never after that."

"Yes. I might have been...mistaken." Vasilisa did not easily admit to being wrong.

Thea nodded.

"Well, you've come all this distance, so I assume you have a question. What do you want to know?" Vasilisa continued briskly.

Thea paused. These conversations could be tricky. She didn't want to end up asking something stupid like—um, why are you actually here? Or—am I still in the bathroom? Or—why am I seeing a Russian enchantress when I'm not Russian?

"Will I ever get better?" Thea asked.

"No," said Vasilisa the Wise.

"OK."

"Now, ask again."

"Will I ever get better?"

"Yes," said Vasilisa.

"Which?"

"You decide," said Vasilisa. And then, not unkindly, "I think you are already better."

"But..." said Thea. The clearing vanished, the cottage, Vasilisa. There was cracked cement beneath her feet. Off in the distance, it

looked like a bombed-out city burning. There was a wall, waist high, built of round, smooth, white stones. No, skulls. It ran along some directional axis she couldn't see from where she stood. This was no genocide with a date and a name, something to horrify the world for a moment before it sank into its vast indifference. Each skull was once a person, each person once a baby, wanted or rejected, fed tenderly or on scraps. This was no bomb or poison gas. Each person was killed face to face, put to the sword by Tamerlane. Hooves shook the earth, and you ran, but then you fell.

Thea shuddered, but the vision faded, then disappeared. On closer inspection, Thea saw a large Gothic arcade lit by hundreds of votive candles. Some kind of clash metal was playing. People were dancing beneath the arches.

Josh had been right. It was impossible to figure out how to get back. Instead, Thea kept walking, saw an exit sign, followed it, and found herself standing on the doormat of her own apartment. Josh was asleep in bed. The clock read 4:03 am. She could only hope it was the same day and year, but everything looked

as she had left it, and Josh hadn't turned into an old man or a skeleton or anything.

She climbed into bed and fell asleep beside him, too tired to even mull over what had happened. In the morning, their conversation was mundane, as if by mutual agreement. He didn't ask what had happened in the bathroom, and she did not offer to tell.