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Opening Extract from...

The Enchanted

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This is an enchanted place. Others don't see it but I do.

I see every cinder block, every hallway and doorway. I see the doorways that lead to the secret stairs and the stairs that take you into stone towers and the towers that take you to windows and the windows that open to wide, clear air. I see the chamber where the cloudy medical vines snake across the floor, empty and waiting for the warden's finger to press the red buttons. I see the secret basement warrens where rusted cans hide the urns of the dead and the urns spill their ashes across the floor until the floods come off the river to wash the ashes outside to feed the soil under the grasses, which wave to the sky. I see the soft-tufted night birds as they drop from the heavens. I see the golden horses as they run deep under the earth, heat flowing like molten metal from their backs. I see where the small men hide with their tiny hammers, and how the flibber-gibbets dance while the oven slowly ticks.

The most wonderful enchanted things happen here—the most enchanted things you can imagine. I want to tell you while I still have time, before they close the black curtain and I take my final bow.

I hear them, the fallen priest and the lady. Their footsteps sound like the soft hush of rain over the stone floors. They have been talking, low and soft, their voices sliding like a river current that stops outside my cell. When I hear them talk, I think of rain and water and crystal-clear rivers, and when I hear them pause, it is like the cascade of water over falls.

They are so aware of each other, they don't need to speak in complete sentences.

"Heading now?" he asks.

"Room," she says.

"Hard."

"Aren't they all?" Again I hear the rain in her voice.

The lady hasn't lost it yet—the sound of freedom. When she laughs, you can hear the wind in the trees and the splash of water hitting pavement. You can sense the gentle caress of rain on your face and how laughter sounds in the open air, all the things those of us in this dungeon can never feel.

The fallen priest can hear those things in her voice, too. That's what makes him afraid of her. Where can that freedom lead? Nowhere good, his pounding heart says.

"Which one?" he asks.

The lady is one of the few who call us by our names. She says her new client's name. It drops like a gem from her mouth. She has no idea how precious it sounds.

"York." The man in the cell next to mine.

The other men on the row say his mother named him for a slave who traveled with Lewis and Clark, or after

his royal English father from some fabled city overseas—only in prison can you get away with a lie that big.

York knows the truth doesn't matter in here. Inside, the lies you tell become the person you become. On the outside, sun and reality shrink people back to their actual size. In here, people grow into their shadows.

I press my face against the crumbling wall. The soft rocks absorb their voices, but I have learned how to listen. I pick their words off the moss and stone.

He is warning her that this case, above all others, will be tough.

“Ready and prepared,” I hear him say.

“Soon?” the lady asks.

I can hear the pleading in her voice. How can he not hear it? But he doesn't. He is too busy being scared of her.

The fallen priest doesn't hear the whipping in his own voice when he talks to the lady. He doesn't hear the longing and desire. He doesn't feel the wonderful wildness of the world. Though he lives inside this enchanted place, he doesn't see the enchantment in the lady; he doesn't see the enchantment in here or anywhere.

For me, being taken to this dungeon was like landing in sanctuary. For the priest, it was worse than exile. He came here not long ago, with his face dejected and the fluorescent lights shining on his thinning hair, the wrinkles drying around his eyes.

This place freezes you. Then one day they thaw you out and take you to the back of Cellblock H, and you are dead.

“Catch you later,” he says.
I drop my head from the wall.

The lady walks past my cell. I slide along the cell wall toward the bars, careful not to let her see me. If she turns, I will jump on my cot and hide under the blanket. Instead, she keeps walking.

I creep closer to the bars to watch her walk. I catch a triangle of shirt at the bottom of her narrow back, the back of her heel. I have become practiced at this game, so sometimes I catch more: a tendril of shining black hair, a glimpse of a seashell ear.

I listen carefully as her footsteps recede down the row, savoring each tiny, muffled clomp, saving it for later.

The fallen priest is also there, on the other side of my cell, watching her go. Slowly, he turns and walks the other way. His footsteps sound leaden. An inmate calls to him—that would be Striker, on my other side—and the priest moves reluctantly to the cell bars, ready words of comfort on his lips. He has sweat under his oxford shirt from talking to the lady. Sweat rolls down his calf and falls from his bare ankle under his loafers to the porous stone. It seeps down below to the underground caverns where the golden horses run, but no one sees.

The lady doesn't look back at the fallen priest. She strides away, her back straight and firm. She thinks of the priest

and twitches the thoughts away. She needs a clear mind for meeting her new client.

The men watch her pass silently. No one catcalls the lady.

At the far end of the hall, a narrow set of ancient stairs rises out of the gloom. We are buried here in the dungeon, deep under the cellblocks above. The cells here have never seen sunlight, and the lightbulbs in the stairwells are old and flickering.

The tight dungeonlike stairs are dark corners and spittle-drying places that a wise man avoids. The lady takes a deep breath and plunges up them. Claustrophobia has always plagued her. It has taken her years to get used to entering this prison, with its loud slamming gates and shocking claps of metal locks and her own deep memories of knowing what it is like to feel trapped. She got over her fears in the way she gets over everything—she pretends they don't exist.

Still, the stairs in our prison disturb her. Once she happened to glance up at the wall and saw a torn fingernail dangling from a crack in the stone. She knows about the crimes that take place in our enchanted place; the brutal acts that the outside never hears about, the gougings and rapes and killings. She knows these crimes occur not just against inmates but against guards and people like her.

The stairs are so old, they slope at the middle. The stone is porous and absorbs blood. It is true, ancient lettings have left pink stains. The stains have soaked into the margins of the old stones, the lady thinks.

She gets to the top of the landing and lets out a sigh of relief. The door leads down a silent hallway. Now she is at least on the ground floor. She turns down another narrow hall and climbs another short, steep set of stairs.

There, finally, at the top of an old alcove, is the room they call the Library of the Guards.

It is a large open room lined with shelf after shelf of huge ancient leather books. These are the ledgers of the dead, kept back before the days of computers. The guards sometimes pull down the old ledgers for visitors, to show them the archaic names and the spidery writing. A great-uncle of mine is in one ledger, though I would never openly admit to that. Elbert James Knowles, the faint handwriting says, and the date of his death. My own death, I figure, will be written in invisible ink, wound into the secret channels of the walls, where the little men climb with their hammers. Of computers I cannot say. I have never seen one.

In the middle of the Library of the Guards is an old scratched desk. A guard sits bleakly in the too small chair. He is large and looks heavy with discomfort. He is having his meal break. He eats from the blue regulation lunch box that all the guards carry, with an accordion lid and sections that can be flipped open easily to search for contraband. Every now and then they bring in a drug dog to sniff the lunches, though really, there is no way to stop contraband altogether, at least not in this prison, where the temptations are great, the stress is high, and corruption is common. When a guard can sell a pack of smokes

for a hundred dollars inside, you bet the temptation is there.

The guard waves at the lady with a handful of squished sandwich. She is free to enter the door at the far end of the room.

Inside this door is the death row visiting room. The death row inmates jokingly call it the parole room.

The death row visiting room is small. There is a beautiful old yellow glass fixture on the ceiling—not just a bulb in a metal cage but a real glass fixture that throws a warm light. There is a real wood table, too, and you can pretend it smells faintly of lemon even if you know that no one here cleans with anything beyond sudsy gray water.

The important part is the window on the far wall. If the inmates strain hard, they can see the sky through that window. The clouds might be fluffy and white one day, traced with pink and mauve the next, or lit on fire from a sunset.

The window is the reason the death row inmates go to the visiting room to see their lawyers and investigators. The lawyers think their clients want to see them. No, they want to see the window. When the visit ends and they are led in chains back to the dungeon underground, where they spend their days trapped in a six-by-nine cell with no window and no fresh air, a flat cot and open toilet with an endless circle of dark brown in the bowl and a flickering lightbulb in a metal cage, they can remember that scrap of sky. They might go months down

in the dungeon between visits, even years. But on those rare days when they are summoned to the visiting room, they know they will see the sky.

When they return to the dungeon, they can tell the others. “It was reddish today, and the clouds were the color of plums,” they might say. Or “I saw a bird—so pretty.” No one will dispute them. There are some things people lie about in here—okay, people lie about most things in here. But there is one thing on death row that no one lies about, and that is what they saw in those scraps of sky.

York is already in the cage, waiting for the lady.

The cage is just big enough to hold one man. It stands nine feet tall and is made of lathe-carved wooden bars as hard as iron. Back in the early 1800s, a company in Louisiana called Dugdemonia Holdings made these cages from wood they imported from Africa on the slave ships. The slaves made the cages and sometimes died in them. The cages were sold to small towns where jailers needed a place to hold the ranting or insane, and to plantations where owners needed a holding cell for runaways. The Dugdemonia cages became popular with correction officers and revolutionaries, as cells for prisoners and for torture. More than one man has died of starvation in a Dugdemonia cage.

There are only a handful of these famous cages left in the country. One is in our enchanted place, and it is used

to hold the death row inmates for their professional visits. This is where York waits for the lady.

The lady sits in the single chair facing the cage. Her movements are deliberate and relaxed.

The lady and York study each other.

York's eyes are dark and oblong, like a bird of prey's. He has high cheekbones set in a thin face, a narrow skull capped with thin dark hair. Despite the years underground, his skin has a high, resinous color. Usually, the men who work with the lady look bleached by years spent living under the earth. The white men turn a strange translucent shade, like clear jelly, and the black men turn the sad color of eggplant. York has retained color, as if in defiance.

The lady sees York is a small man, bent and oddly formed, as if his bones grew funny. Even in the cage, he holds himself with a sense of contained force.

His ankles are chained above his paper slippers. A heavy bull chain is attached to one ankle cuff, and the bull chain threads back between the wood bars to a huge bolt embedded in the stone wall. The bull chain is in case he tries any funny business. The funny business never ends up very funny, I have noticed.

The lady sees that York's front teeth are oddly notched with a strange little groove in the middle—as if God, or the devil, wanted to fork him. These notched teeth are surprisingly clean. He brushes them three times a day, he will tell anyone with his monkey grimace. He flosses with bits of thread he pulls from the cover on his cot.

Four hundred count, he chortles to anyone who is listening outside his cell door. York keeps up a constant litany on the row. Sometimes he will repeat the same soliloquy for days, until the guards swear they will go mad for listening, and then he will retreat inside his cell and stare at his hands.

York likes to think about what other people are thinking. He believes it gives him an edge. He says that twelve years on the row have honed his psychic abilities, but then, he claims, he was always psychic. Just as a blind man learns to smell better, York says his life has helped him read minds. The intense deprivation of our dungeon, he says, has made him better at what he does best: getting inside your head.

Of course, when he says this, the guards roll their eyes and comment that the only head York gets inside is his own.

Right now York believes the lady is thinking about him. He thinks she is feeling sorry for him, her poor new client who has spent twelve years waiting for death.

The lady isn't thinking that at all. She isn't even thinking about York. She is wondering how bad the roads will be on the way home. The spring weather has been fickle, and floods might close the single road leading away from our enchanted place. If that happens, she will have to stay overnight at the nearest motel, with its clanking radiators and mildew smell. Her mind is disconnected from

her new client. It works better for her this way. She hasn't even brought a notebook to the interview.

The lady smiles at York and relaxes into her chair. She has been on her feet all day, and sitting is a treat. The window shows the sky is full of dark rain clouds, as dark as slate. The yellow light fixture above them is warm.

In a prison full of liars, the lady has the advantage of being completely authentic. Even a man like York—especially a man like York—can see there is no game in her smile. There is warmth and kindness and something that looks like steel. You can tell me anything, her eyes say, because I will see the beauty in everything you say.

Eventually, York has to say something, anything, has to make his mouth move and ease the friction from his throat. The words tumble out as rough as rocks, but they are soon worn smooth, and more and more he hears himself talking—blessed surcease, a person just to *listen* to me—and the vowels round and the consonants grow into planets that become the universe that expands in the light in her dark eyes. She hears me, he thinks wildly—she *hears* me.

York talks and talks until his words sound like poetry even to him. He tells her why he has volunteered to die. “It isn't just that it is torture,” he says, “being locked in a cage. It's never being allowed to touch anyone or go outside or breathe fresh air. I'd like to feel the sun again just once.”

Her eyes show a sudden distance. What he said is true, but it isn't true enough.

“Okay. I’m tired of being meaningless,” he admits. “I’m done, okay?”

He talks about the confused mess inside of him. He says everyone thinks sociopaths are super-smart criminals, but he is just a messed-up guy who doesn’t know why he does what he does. Except there is like a switch in him, and when the switch flips on, he cannot stop.

“If it made sense, I would tell you,” he says. “When you kill people, it is supposed to make sense. But it doesn’t. It never does.”

The lady nods. She understands.

With each secret he tells her, her eyes get darker and more satisfied. York can see from the precious slot of window that the rain clouds have lifted and the sky itself is dark. He has been speaking *forever*; he has told her secrets he has been afraid to tell anyone, secrets he suspects she knew all the time.

The look in her eyes is of a person who drank from the end of a gun barrel and found it delicious. Her eyes are filled with a strange sort of wondrous sadness, as if marveling at all the beauty and pain in the world.

She stands up. For the first time he notices how tiny she is. She looks like a little dark-haired sparrow. Her equally dark, oblong bird eyes could be his eyes, her narrow skull his own. But her bones are long and finely made, while his are crooked and bent.

She raises her hand in a gesture that looks like good-bye but also says yes.

He lifts his hand cautiously. His fingers are thin from

lack of use. He holds his fingers out of the cage. It is the eternal gesture of hope that says *touch me*.

She knows the rule. Death row inmates are not allowed to have human touch. It is part of their punishment. She could lose her license for that gesture alone. So she gives him another gift instead. She steps just close enough for him to feel her human warmth.

The warden hates her. But how we love her, the lady.

When I first fell so long ago, I was placed in general population—Cellblock A, what they call the Hall of the Lifers.

I knew the dangers of prison for someone like me. I was so scared that I hid in my cell when the doors clanged open for yard times. I waited silently until the other men had all gone down the line, then I slipped along the walls until I made it to the prison library.

I can still remember the path from that cell to the library: two turns with the hand you write. Down the stairs. Then turn the opposite direction, like the way you turn off water.

I wasn't very good at reading back then. The last time I remember being in a real school was when I was eight. It was a little schoolhouse near my grandparents' place. I remember the smell of wet woolen socks on the ancient radiator, and the freshly shaved red neck of the older boy who sat in front of me. Those are the only details I can remember. As for most men in prison, my memories of the outside have become faint over time. The outside world