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The Blind Plunge
By Nadim Silverman

Coming back to the flesh felt like I was drowning just quick. LEDs in the helmet turned off. All the eyes saw was black, black, black. But I felt the water on the skin, and I was all pocked, chicken-like because it's not a warm womb, but cold, almost ice. The head was still in the other world, the digital one, where I was getting stabbed and jabbed for sport. Took me time and time to unlock from the fight, unclench, reorient, realize the game was done. The mind was acting the laggard, didn't compute nothing. The tank made no sense, and I forgot how *I* plugged in, jumped in, my choice.

The pain, bai, was always a rough ride. The cost of playing, I guessed. It worked at the brain, needles all over, made me forget. Turned me simpler than simple, mono-cellular, all nerve, no mind. The heart was running wild, the arms, they were whips, and I was flailing like the kid.

Poor kid, Blue Rami was made with a mad mind. Always freaking, freaking all the time. Day and day, I was becoming like him. The game—the job—was doing it to me. Outside, all those people watching, watching on their screens, no one suspecting nothing. Playing online, even fighting, slicing, bashing like us players do, it shouldn't hurt. It's just a game, yeah? But, bai, people liked to see it hurt, didn't they? In the face, in the body, shudder, shudder when those digital blades pierce the skin.

Problem was the guy in the game was all me, me all over, though he's got those fangs, don't he, and green stuff for the skin. When the face made a look here in the tank, so did he on the screen. And, bai, I was no actor, couldn't fake it for the life. So The League, going out of its way like, made it so I didn't have to fake it. Those big boys, they made the pain real.

Back and back, when I was whiffling, brand new, barely twenty, and hungry, I liked the hurt. Felt like I was proving something, didn't know what, didn't really care. But the more I plugged in, bruised online, surfed those hangovers of pain that came after, lost myself in flashes, and rage, rage, rage, more I thought that Blue and I'd both end up in the madhouse. Bedlam and burbling, bai, we could share a room, like spittle brothers, not man and son.

Now-here, I still had some of the wits. All the head needed was a sec to make sense of the tank, being in it. I knew I was no fish, but a man. A big man. A sports man. Then, Chessie's voice was in the ears. She counts down, real slow like.

"Five, four, three..." She never finished, just faded. Like falling asleep, but backwards. Coming back into myself, remembering, *Ok, yeah, I'm here-now, this is me, bai*. The other self, the guy in the game, wearing pixels for skin, I let that guy go—till next time.

She pulled me out of the tank, one good pull, arms like ropes, thick ropes. Unplugged me. So many wires going in. Took the helmet off. Gave me a slap. That always helps. The world came back to me. A metal room, blue lights, and the tank. Slow and slow, I remembered the reasons for things; being in the water, suspended like, the body could move any which way. And so the game me, the one made of code, he could move too. Any which way.

I was a lucky one, wasn't I, to have this place to myself—privacy to recover in peace, push down all that hurt. Swallow it up. Suck it down. Didn't want no one but Chessie seeing me this way—shivering like no man should be shivering.

I noticed Chessie's got this serious look, eyebrows flat, nearly meeting in the middle, all man from a cave.

"Bai, you got a note," said she. "Big boys want you in."

His fingertips were green like. Too much Deep Kush Dip, I supposed. Me, I could never handle the stuff, all that bombinating in the head. Most times, I needed to slow down, not speed up. But he was good. Yeah, he was flying, python fingertips dancing some kind of jig, and his eyes were buzzing. The rest of him though, all business, dressed so nouveau riche. Starched shirt, badges along the collar. The tattoo on his face was pretty like, but meant nothing. No glyphs about his daddy, or his daddy's daddy. No one to *know* in his blood line. Neils Baghu Jo was a self-made man, bai. Like me, I guess. But, my cheeks were clear and soft as a baby's butt. Besides, working for the League and playing in it were two different things, yeah? So the mug was in the lights—my other mug I mean—he had the real power.

When me and the minder—his dog—came into the conference room, Neils had pulled out a chair for me, all gentlemen like. But I took one facing the window with that million-dollar view—city skyline, web of highways, a murder of cars, the works. Neils's little mouth got small, just quick, like Blue Rami when he tasted sour plum. He smiled so, running those green fingers through butter-slick, black hair.

“Been up early early, Gala's been a big fuss. Fuss, fuss, fuss,” said Neils, voice so trained, practically blank. There's no place left in it. No way to tell where he's from. My place—the Pubs in Dhanmon square and the light cafes along the Sonigow River—I spoke it like a song. Said two words, and the roots were out there.

We sat quiet, no chat going for a bit, while Neils took a beat to compose himself, rolling his shoulders, keeping that high down. Anger could twist a high lad, unleash him. When I used to fly like he was now, I could be a real bruiser, making fights out of nothing. He's nothing like that, doing good like, holding it together so, keeping it mostly in his hands and eyes. But those

rolling shoulders gave him away, didn't they? Whispered in the ear things he didn't want me to know. Told me he was rankled, riling, ready to burst.

"There's been a breach," droned him.

"Yeah?" said I, pretending, bai, no big deal. But this was a big deal. "Someone squeaking?"

"It's someone you know."

"Don't beat around it. Who's been talking?" A breach of contract, that was serious business. A few faces came to the mind. People who'd been stretched thin-like by the game, what it does to you, and all that pain. The same pain we're paid to say doesn't exist. Yeah, I could see one of them squealing, especially her.

Marcy-Anne, she wasn't like me. She had glyphs on her cheeks, ten generations deep. Raised inside cantonment walls. She thought she was tough, like her mom and her mom's general's badge. It turned out Marcy-Anne wasn't tough enough. Now-here, she doesn't play any more, but she's still printing checks from the League, interviewing lads like me, who can't get out or don't want out. Not yet. Yeah, Marcy-Anne could be dumb, brave, desperate enough to breach. Bai, I could see it.

"*Dante's Child*," said Neils Baghu Jo.

Good news. *Dante's Child* had no head about him. Always trying to get some chat going during games, distracting like, thinking we're friends. But for me, friends are of the flesh. I needed to shake a hand, feel a pulse. Knowing you on the screen, wearing avatar skin, that's all facade, no truth. I needed truth.

Neils was watching me, waiting for me to blink, start things up, but I'd nothing to say. *Dante's Child* and me, we were unattached.

“We know you two were acquainted,” said he. He wasn’t asking questions. He was telling me about me. I didn’t like that much.

“Yeah?” said I. Now my fingers were going too—not dancing—but drilling into the tabletop.

“According to who? *Not me*. Up till here-now, I saw him in-game. Didn’t know he was ‘he’ till you started chatting.”

“There’s video of you two standing near each other at last season’s gala,” said Neils.

The minder took out a tablet and showed me a video of two men, one me, the other a stranger, both in monkey suits, squirming, uncomfortable in the skin. The minder was no real dog, but he was Neils’s dog. He spent all his days with me, like the nanny with the babe, but he worked for Neils. He wore his tail up front, under his collar, neat-knotted like his daddy taught him, always desperate for a pat on the head, Neils always happy to oblige.

“A party’s a party. Stand near lots of strangers, yeah?” said I.

Neils eyes tried to settle on me, but the left one went astray just quick.

“Hmm... Good. That makes things easy, easy. We can clean this up real good, real fast. Obviously, you won’t see *Dante’s Child* in-game anymore. And, I shouldn’t have to say, but we expect absolute discretion, tight lips, yeah?”

Neils looked at the minder—his dog. Execs and minders, they’ve this way of chatting without *really* chatting. Like they’ve got voice in their eyes, instead of their throats. The minder—his dog—nodded, and pulled out a form and pen from his jacket pocket. A simple NDA. No big fuss, yeah? I signed one after every game. Everything was absolute discretion. That, bai, was the norm.

At home, Blue Rami was raging. Face grog-blossom pink, boy was freaking something special. When he was a kid, I'd wrap him up, like. Didn't feel good, holding him down so, treating him rough. He'd be biting, biting, biting. Hurt even for me.

Now-here, he wasn't young and wee, but sixteen and stalky. Big boned like his daddy. Stuck in the head, beef-witted for sure, but strong. Acting up, wheeling all the time, it wasn't his fault. Boy was born with a bad-trick. It was his mom and me. Two of us just didn't mix—her brooding, my biting, our genes—always brabbling, brabbling, brabbling. It's better now, with her far away.

I could see Blue's keeper—his nanny and his daytime nurse—so peeved-red and sweating. Hair pulled back, but coming undone.

"What's got him running?" asked I.

"Oh bai, his bowl—it's hiding somewhere real good," said she, heaving and hawing.

"Hmmm... like that so? Did you check—"

"Everywhere," sighed she.

"So, so..." said I, breathing in air, hoping there's patience in it.

I turned to the kid and tried to calm him like when he was young. Grabbing him up, making myself big. Blue made himself big too. And we tussled, went rolling. Boy bucked, caught me good like. Head against head. Somewhere, his keeper was bleating, "Bai, you're bleeding! You're bleeding!"

"It's okay Blue, yeah? Quiet, here-now, okay? Quiet for me," said I more for me than Blue. I was a livewire, easy-trigger—the quickfire kind. Even little pains, just a nose bleeding, bai, it could twist me. Make the head spin back and back. Think I'm not here, I'm there. Bruising on a thousand screens—playing the game—not wrestling the kid. Soft words, even my own

when Chessie's not around, kept me from running out of the head, kept me in the room: Blue screaming, keeper bleating. Here-now, bai, I let him go, and held the nose from spilling.

"Give me a sec, yeah? I'm gonna check Blue's room."

"I checked everywhere," said she, handing me a tissue. She's got care in her, all warmth, and good vibes. Premium vibes, platinum, vibes that cost buckets.

"So, so. I'm still gonna check," said I.

The room has stayed the same since he was a little thing. A small bed, now-here, for a big boy. Long legs, giant's feet hang out over the edge. Time and time, when I'm rolling in bed, nightmares keeping me up, I go and sit in his room, all quiet, watching those big feet bob. They have a rhythm just so, and I think I can read it. Sleeping Blue I could understand easy—like telling when waves were raging verse rolling. His two legs soft-pedaling when dreaming something good like, and flying, wrecking, cover-throwing when it wasn't so nice.

I checked every corner, good and deep. Put the hand in small spaces, some so small no way his bowl would fit. Then, something caught the eye: a lump in a pillow, turned over while I'd been searching, searching. I shook the case and out it rolled—blue, like his name, crusted with yesterday's cereal.

"So, so," sighed I, holding the bowl—all man with a trophy.

"I found it, Blue!" called I.

Just quick, the boy's storm blew out.

"You lying, so?" said he, peeking his head in through the door. His hope turned to up-talk, his tenor rising, mouse-squeaky by the end.

“No Bai. I don’t lie.”

#

The minder helped me dress, tied the tie, buttoned me up tight. When he was done, I didn’t know the man in the mirror. Suit loud, red, and yellow, like a mascot for the League. Put together so. Made of money.

On the drive to the gala, I sat in front, and watched traffic storm by, like a school of angry fish. Me, bai, I haven’t been behind the wheel since I was stripling-young. Never drove without a drink, or a little something in the blood. Needed a buzz to weave like you do. To pull and sweep the car, avoiding crashes now, now, now. I knew the car’s edges like they were my own. I used to love that car. But I signed away the right to drive when I joined The League. They said it’s for me, to keep me safe. But, bai, I knew what was up. They wanted me here, with the minder, under the thumb, kept in place.

There were so many people dressed in their best. They twattled, held glass-stems under diamond chandeliers. Me, I got nervy, standing under them—those daggers of glass. I felt like a target.

Early days, a woman in gray cloth found me by the drinks—colorless in a colorful room. I couldn’t see much of her, sari wrapped tight. Hair covered, lips covered. Just eyes meeting eyes.

“You an assassin?” said I, playing charmer.

“No, just a fan and aspiring gamer like you.”

“Oh don’t be like me,” said I, pretending it’s nothing, just charming, charming. Inside, I went stoney, sunk-sinking, upset. Couldn’t tell her outright, with the minder so near, but, bai, I didn’t encourage the game, not to no one.

“Looks nice on you,” said she. “Think it would be nice on me.”

“It’s not for everyone,” said I, talking without saying, running circles.

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

The minder cut in just then, said I had an appointment with a cockalorum in a suit—not his words, but mine. I said goodbye, and let the dog escort me away.

The minder introduced me to a man with trees and leaves on his collar and a badge on his chest. By looks, a forest ranger, a captain with stripes.

“I thought you’d be bigger,” said the captain, a drink in his hand, looking up at me from down under the chin.

I smiled, “Oh yeah? Pictured me with horns and fangs, bai? That’s just the game-me. Here-now, I’m just flesh, yeah?”

He laughed from his belly to his head, “Yes, of course. The boys in my platoon, we’re all big fans. Watching, watching, watching, every week. You, bai, can fight like a gun boy.”

“That’s big coming from a *real* gun boy. I’m just a sports man, playing games on the web. Safe like. No pain.” The pre-prepared lines—League lines—came easy. Been saying this shit for years.

“Can I ask, what’s your division?” asked I—acting the blind man.

He looked concerned, eyebrows pressed, at me and his badge, like couldn’t I read?

“The forest rangers, 95th division,” said he, like explaining bothered him bits.

“Oh yeah? Big job, bai. Big, big. You boys out in the field much?” asked I, the snaggletooth showing.

The small man coughed in his drink, then gulped it all down just quick. He had eyes, not for me, but the minder. *Stop him*, said they.

“Yes. More and more. The forests, they’re doing well,” said he, really wobbling.
“Growing larger day and day.”

“Good, good. So, so. Bai, I got an idea. Maybe I can come pay respects. Meet you boys out there, yeah? Could be special.”

I was playing dangerous among the dangerous, picking on a man with some real old glyphs. A connected type. Probably born without skill, yeah? But who needed skill, when your blood runs gold.

“Forest ranger captain” sounds big, yeah, but it’s nothing. Just a title made bespoke for a bespoke man. Everyone else would buy in, act polite, like it’s old days, gun boys in camo strapped in the forests. But I won’t pretend. The forests were gone. Not one left. Gun boys all grown fat, waiting for the next war, the one that won’t come. This little captain spending his time fussing, fussing with his badges, chatting, chatting at fancy parties with fancy people. Never fighting or bruising or killing. No pain for him, just me.

The minder stepped close. His little dog paw on the shoulder. Telling me with gesture, calm down, go slow. Then-there, I wondered if the dog had forgot his tongue. Too much ass-kissing, not enough talking.

“Please excuse me,” said the captain, raising his empty glass.

I gave a little bow, and let him go.

The minder was crossed so, his arms, face, and legs. Guessed he didn't trust me and the big mouth flapping. I wouldn't breach, he knew that, though I could make a mess. But bai was smart-like, adaptable, and let me be seen. These good people with big-pocket-pants overflowing, they paid to see me, feel big by my side.

The others, players like me, who played for The League, were better behaved. They kept to the script, got chat going up close with the big spenders, fed egos, big smile-smiling, the wide kind. Meanwhile, I practiced the wave at a distance, balcony-side. Easy to spot so, hard to get close. When rich heels, click-clack, got near, the minder made his-self a shield. Pretending we were talking something long like, heavy too, and under our breath. He mouthed words without sounds, and I listened so to all of his nothings. We looked busy, busy, hard to interrupt. And people left us alone.

My beauty-queen waving ended like a shock. There was a clatter below, silver trays spilling, waiters pushed, glassware breaking on the dance floor. The girl from before—woman really—was running, pushing, fighting. Her gray sari smoke-wisping, unfurling behind her. Didn't get far, did she? Grabbed hard, treated rough-like by big men in dark suits, shoulders so square and high. I leaned forward inches, holding the balcony. Neils Baghu Jo pulled me back with flying fingers. I hadn't even known he was near.

"Girl's been crashing and snooping. Working for a rag. The underground kind. Publishing stories that stink."

"Oh yeah," said I, sounding not cool one bit.

"Chatting, chatting, chatting with everyone who has an ear. Looking for the big ears, the ones that stick out, fishing. You know the kind, yeah?"

"What are they gonna do?"

“Who to?” asked he.

“Her.”

“Don’t mind about small things. Keep your head on your games. Leave the rest to the big men like me.”

So, bai, I thought, That’s how it is. You’re the big man. Me, I’m playing games.

#

Neils got the whole thing going—the interview with Marcey-Anne. Bai needed a friendly face talking small and easy nothings about The League, the game, and the rest.

He’d been fussing, fussing, flying dangerous since the gala. Many big eyes saw all that drama, girl taken away, right off her feet. Bai, it’s hard to hide a thing like that. Hard to stop the talk. I asked around, kept the ear low, on the ground like, trying to catch a whisper about where she landed. Don’t know why I cared, but I did, like me and she were bosom buddies. Didn’t even know her name. Poor girl, she left no trace. People talked. They liked to talk. Some saw the action. But, about after, no one knew nothing. She was smoke—less than smoke.

Marcy-Anne wanted to do the interview in a park, walking and talking. A rare green place in a city of gray on top of gray on top of gray. She got cameramen behind trees, hiding like kids at play. She was good at the unseeing bit, pretending this was normal like, nobody watching, watching, tracking everything we did. Not easy for me. Felt like I was under fire, sitting easy in a gun boy’s scope. Nearly forty, I was acting the babe, forgetting what to do with the face, how to look easy listening, and thinking. The face just wouldn’t settle. And the hands, bai, kept rubbing them together like I got something nasty up the sleeve.

It was a strange interview, backwards from the start. My answers were short, staccato like, drum beats without rhythm, nothing giving, and she was doing most of the talking. But then

she started asking me questions about Blue, how it's been with his head, and I could talk about that.

"He was different early, early. Took him age and age to do things normal kids get on with real quick. Eighteen months here, he was speaking little things, but in his own tongue. Me and his mom, we were living like nurses. Spending days at the doctor's, always something new. One time, I was waiting, tapping the legs, all nerves and pressure. They make you wait like. Didn't know what to do with the self, so I got to reading pictures on the walls. One got me good so. All about autism... Bai, straight away I knew. Diagnosis wasn't in print until he was two, but—."

"But you knew."

Once she got the mouth running, I felt more myself. Did some of that unseeing that she was good at, forgetting, just quick, about those cameras in the trees. Buttered up so, talking about the kid, I didn't even notice when her tune changed, course shifting, shifting towards the dark. But, looking back, all twenty-twenty, it did.

"Do you remember when I was retiring?" asked she, eyes looking, not at me, but ahead. "You used to sit at the bike in front of me, cooling down so. I was saying, day in day, 'I've only got ten days to go, eight days to go.' There was a countdown. You don't remember that, do you?"

"I don't remember a lot of things, no."

But I did remember, and it was nothing like that. She wasn't biking, but flailing on the ground, pain ruining, practically melting her head. Screaming, screaming, screaming. Saying she got enough. Crying for her mom, but, then-there, all she had was me.

In the end, her mom did get her out. A general, a lady with power, she pulled the strings she had, got Marcy-Anne as far as The League would let her go. Now-here, she's got that luxury back, not playing, but interviewing fools like me.

“I think the execs must've known I was thinking about quitting. Got so many calls, big men trying to keep me on. But I'd had enough. People don't understand, do they? Seems all glam from the couch.”

“You were still playing alright. Caught us all by surprise,” said I, trying to state without stating that I wasn't interested in spilling, not these beans. Bai, these beans could turn easy to bullets in the brain.

“No, not really. I was tired. The legs were gone, the feet were slow. Getting caught out, time and time. Losing more than winning. Bad performances were getting in the head. You know, by the end, I was looking forward to it. Thinking, please just end it.”

So much code in her talk. Her words working in layers, meaning one thing on top, and another thing just under for me. I didn't know what to say and the chat stalled out. She had me thinking abstractly, thinking what ifs. Felt a stranger in the skin, my skin. She's pulling me, at a part I didn't know was there. A part that was all kinds of weary, running low on fire and fuel—those secrets, nightmares, and the pain dragging me down like irons, anchors, chains.... Bai, somehow, she knew. She knew there was something there-there to pull. Kept saying nothing, then saw a cameraman throwing his arms round, saying with limbs, ‘get on with it.’

We did two more loops round the park. She was rattling questions about stats, my opposition, upcoming matches—the type of things the minder had prepped me for—so, it was easy to stick to the script.

Afterwards, I was all boiled up. I knew she'd never forgive The League for what it did to her, holding so onto the grudge with her whole life. But that had nothing to do with me. I was the one who helped her through the bad nights. And now-here, she wanted me to do the work, squealing, squealing on her behalf. Stick the neck out for the executioner's blade, while she

made out like a charmer, do getter and gooder all in one. Well, I already had the skin in the game. She was out. Free. For her, born so proper, that freedom probably felt small—still stuck working for the people she hated. But freedom was never a small thing. It's a large word that deserves capital letters all the way through.

I wanted to tell her no again with something extra, deep-steeped, and strong like. There wasn't time. She was busy, busy, and so was I, always a "what's next" on the calendar for us both. For her, the studio was calling. Got other primetime-people waiting. Me, training, training all the time, Chessie waiting at the tank, ready to plug me in, have another go. But before Marcey-Anne went off, she gave me a handshake with a prize in it: a folded piece of paper. I palmed it like a bag of kush, and slipped it in the pocket for later. I should've waited to read it, when I was home, safe, and alone, but I couldn't. Thing was burning holes in the pockets. So, I told the minder I needed to take a piss. Ducked into a tea shop—the kind with no doors, where they make paratha outside, and curry in tight kitchens in the back. Bathroom was dank, the toilet just a hole on the porcelain floor. Breathing through the mouth, I read the note:

"When you're ready to talk, find me. It's not just me and you."

A phone number was written in vertical script. I chanted it mantra-like, twice and thrice, till it stuck. Then ripped it up good, and threw it in with the shit.

#

Morning of the match, the alarm went off early, early. Days like that, I was so in the body. Didn't matter I was fit, muscle-tight, I felt soft like. A blubber balloon. Prick me, I'd be leaking, then go explode.

Didn't have time to be tied to my own head. Blue Rami, his ears extra sharp, always waking when I'm waking. Time and time, I've asked the League to lower the volume on the alarm, but they want me on time, they don't want me sleeping late.

I made us some cereal, cold milk for me, hot soy for him. He told me about his dreams, chatting slow-like, part of his head still there, walking on soft dreamland floors.

His keeper and the minder came up as a pair so. Had me wondering if Neils and his dog had been working her, asking if I'm slipping. I pretended, no big deal, just gave them hellos. Blue Rami was happy to see her, started clapping. Don't know if he even clocked the dog. I gave him a kiss, just like my daddy, man enough to be sweet.

#

At the tank, before a big game, the minder always gave me space, let me and Chessie do our thing. When it came to the game, The League wanted me to be me.

The two of us sat on a metal platform above the tub. Chessie's fingers, sun-stick warm, placing things all over: sticky patches with a plug, long wires attached on the head, under the arms, between the legs. Took a while, almost an hour to get me prepped.

"Where's your head?" asked she.

"Right here," lied I. The head was still on the woman in gray, Marcy-Anne, and even *Dante's Child*.

"Good," said she, not meaning it.

She put the helmet over the head, and gave it a slap to wake me up. I did wake up a bit. Felt a little more there-there, a little more ready. Everything was still black. The screens inside the helmet wouldn't turn on just yet. Not until the plunge. Then-there, like every time, I was bat-blind and fumbling, and Chessie had to lead me like a dog. I was fine being her dog.

Without the eyes, the ears grew strong like, hearing everything: the latch and hatch opening, tank water lapping inside. She takes the hand, with those fingers, holding on so as I sit, legs dangling over the lip. There were a few clicks just quick, as she attached breathing tubes to me and the helm. She gave me another slap on the head, this one for good luck, and I pushed off and below.

Doesn't matter that I was eighteen years in, that initial blind plunge turned the heart yellow, scared the guts, and turned me wild. The water was cold, hard as bricks, because the body had to be cadaverous for everything, all that good science, to work just so. The change in temperature did the stomach in. I could feel it drop, then get real small. In the dark like that, it was easy, easy to feel all crunched in. Time and time, I've panicked. But, today, the mind was someplace else.

"I'm going to count you in," said Chessie in my ear. "Five, four, three, two..."

Her words worked their magic.

The LEDs in my helmet went bright, those sticky electrodes buzzing, buzzing, buzzing. Just like that, I wasn't here, I was there, in that other world, wearing the other face: big teeth, green skin, with pixels for cells, and an ax in the hand.

I watched the names of other players log on, one by one. *Ares's Slaughter, Rundown King, Greasefire 225...*

Just as Neils promised, no *Dante's Child*.

#

When I came to, I was sprawled out. The pain, bai, it could split a man. Someone in-game had cut me deep, like. Slicing, slicing, slicing. Down to the bone. Now-here, in the real

world, in the flesh, the wounds carried over in the head, and it felt strange seeing myself whole, when I felt like I should be nothing, just pieces.

Chessie knelt down with a needle the size of God in her hand. I didn't even notice when it went in. She hit that plunger with her thumb so, and, bai, I got a heavy blast of that great, green, capital G Good. I was high up and oxidized. The pain was still rippling, giving me shakes like it was cold outside, but all that felt like a far away thing.

The game was over, so the minder was free to hover, and get in the head. He stood over Chessie's shoulder watching as she worked on me. I was fugue-ing, yeah? So, I didn't trust everything the brain was telling me, but I'm sure I heard the dog say, "That was a rough one. Bai let it slip."

The body was a little dinghy steadying after a storm. Sleep took me just quick, vision fading, smoking over. And I hoped my dreamland was something like Blue's—obviously the good kind.

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When I woke up, twelve hours had gone by and by. The feet shook under me, and Chessie had to help carry some of the heft. The minder didn't offer a hand, just watching as we struggled. The doors were electric, thick metal, could stop a batter and a ram, wouldn't open up until I signed another NDA. Must have been my thousandth one. As I signed, the head started thinking dangerous—Marcey-Anne's letter, now lying in bits underfoot, sewer-deep, sludge-covered, but the offer, intangible, still there. Didn't know what I was to her: a weak link or a breaker of chains. Didn't really matter. Ten years ago, I'd probably have done it for her if she asked, but now I'd do it for me, if I did it at all. To be FREE from the pain, capitals all the way through.

Outside, the minder's car was waiting, engine rolling. Dog already had his paw on the wheel. It was late and bai wanted to be homebound. It was a struggle, getting me in the back seat. Time at time, it felt like Chessie was stuffing me in like a sleeping bag into its case. She buckled me up good, kissed me on the cheek, said I'd feel better in the morning.

The car pulled away, with me lying flat, daydreaming about breaking and breaching. Going in front of Marcey-Anne's cameras, throwing Neils under the bus. But, bai, that's all it was. A daydream. The kind that gets the smile going and a light feeling all about. A dream, just a dream, just a dream. They'd get me good if I made a scene. They'd get Blue too. They'd take all we had, they'd make us disappear like the woman in gray, like *Dante's Child*. No, I'd have to stay, keep bruising, keep fighting, till the body and the mind faded black.

"Boy," said the minder. "We're home."

End.