

She was a little minx of a book with a coquettish, intricate cover that pulled me in, welcoming me inside her. I ran my fingers down her rigid spine, then spread her open, sniffing the barely tanned pages. Odorless. Like new. My heart pounded at her weight in my palms, the possibilities of this miracle, straight from the ancients' hands into mine.

I whispered the title, "*Frankenstein*," and flipped it open, scanning the text as my four apprentices circled around, the normally boisterous teenagers quiet. For them, this would be momentous: their first artifact. I had to manage their expectations. But how could I, with my own spinning pulse leaving me dizzy?

I closed the pages, rubbing the cover's lattice ridges as I steadied my tone. "How did she find this?"

Nelly fidgeted with her shirt, her words tumbling out. "She was expanding her basement and found a plastic bin full of old things. Mostly rotted and useless. But this..." She stroked the cover in my hands like a rescued kitten. "Almost no wear. And..." She glanced up, her eyes hopeful, her voice quivering. "I believe it's a new title, sir? I've not seen it before."

A weighted silence followed, like the pause between lightning and thunder. I sank into it, stretching it as long as I could, until my grin broke free. "Yes, Nelly. You've brought us something entirely new."

The apprentices hooted and hollered, hugging each other and slapping Nelly so hard on the back that she teetered. I reached for the whisky jug crammed on the shelf between colorful tomes. "We should celebrate!"

In the hall, a door slammed. Tennison clomped in, leaving a muddy trail. He was panting, flushed red, his white shirt mottled with sweat. At twelve, he was my youngest scribe, though already tall and beefy, with slanted eyes and chubby cheeks. He should have been home by this

hour, to tend his mother's farm. "Back so soon?" I teased. "Katie will gut me if the cows miss their milking again."

He hurried to my maple desk, wetting a quill to scratch on parchment, his features contorted with panic. *Come!* the words read. *Stranger at mothers!*

The others tittered, as I laid a hand on his shoulder. "Come now, Tenny. You know strangers aren't real."

It was common among new readers to confuse reality with the fantastical world of books, their minds full of ghosts and witches, vampires and oceans, airplanes and spaceships. Yet, until now, Tennison—mute since he appeared in the colony as a baby—had proven a stoic pupil, immune to the usual hysterics.

He stomped, moving his hands over his face, as if sculpting the head of an ogre. He jutted a finger at me, then swung it toward the door.

"You want me to see something?"

He jabbed the word: *Stranger*.

I gripped the book tighter. Of all nights for Tennison's imagination to grow wild, why did it have to be this one?

"I'll go, sir." Jonathan limped forward on his cane, his club foot sliding behind him on the wooden planks. "You should stay, read this new novel." At his ready smile, the knot in my shoulders eased, my body flooding with warmth.

I'd been only seven when my father was executed, leaving me the sole literate in the colony, our bounty of ancient knowledge at risk of going extinct with only me to transcribe their markings into spoken language. In the years since, I'd discovered over eighty books, rescued

from burn pits, trash piles, and dilapidated metal buildings. Each find I'd celebrated alone. Until now.

It was not my fate to discover the great answers. I knew that. At thirty-two, my life was half spent at best. Yet there was solace, knowing the seeds I'd planted in these students would propagate, so one day some distant disciple *would* learn the truth, discovering who we were, where we were, and why our lives differed so much from that vast, wondrous world of the ancient texts. It was for that future person I strived, for the assurance they'd find answers and my life's work would not have been in vain.

"Thank you, Jonathan. But I have a better idea." Tennison tugged my sleeve, impatient. I settled him with a wave, holding the book to Nelly. "You read it."

She startled backward. "Me?"

"It was your relationship with Bess Greer that led to its discovery. You've found many solutions for her and her neighbors. That's why, when she saw it, she did not burn it for warmth or use it in her latrine." The apprentices laughed. "Because of you, she knew its value. That makes it your privilege to read it first."

Of course Nelly should be the first reader. I ought to have suggested that from the start. Still, as her fingers snaked around the cover, I experienced a spike of regret. She lifted it away, and I felt loss.

Tennison grunted, slapping his hands against his sides. For a boy who could not speak, he could make quite a ruckus when it suited him.

"I know, I know." I grabbed my wool cape from the wall, slinging it over my shoulders. "We'll saddle George Washington and be off."

* * * * *

I preferred walking to Tennison's house, through the winding, well-worn, wooded path. Riding, however, allowed the exhausted boy to sit behind me. Plus, we could travel over the ridge, which was lovely at twilight, offering an outstanding view of the colony. As we crested the summit, I reined in the stallion, his hooves clomping as I inhaled cool air, basking in the lush beauty of the valley, the pink-purple horizon, the clouds reflecting off the encasing perimeter wall. Three times taller than the mountain, the wall shimmered in the waning light, undulating in a soft breeze. Above it all, at the center of the sky, floated a flat, immovable eye, watching over us all, for better or worse.

Tennison choked a sob, clutching my back like a baby possum as he rubbed his wet face on my cloak. I squeezed my legs around George Washington's ribcage, prodding him down the trail, wondering what in heavens had spooked my unflappable apprentice and chastising myself for not curating his reading list more carefully.

By the time we arrived, all traces of the sun were gone. His mother, Katie, stood outside, lit by a lantern on the ground, sucking a cigarette while the little girl, Gracie, clung to her pant leg, an overturned grain sack on her head. "Good eve, ladies." I dismounted, approaching Katie to hug hello.

"What took you so long?" Her sharp tone transformed into a fog between us.

"Sorry Tenny's late. I'll help with his chores; we'll get everything done."

She glared at him with a level of repulsion that made my skin itch, the orange tip of her cigarette bobbing. "D'you tell him nothing? Thought you'd be *less* useless, now you can write words."

“It’s not his fault. He—”

“Just go in.” She gestured toward the house. “See for yourself.”

I turned to the red-brick structure, itself an artifact, repaired and well-enough maintained to have survived all of colonial history, back to the start of our time—if indeed it was the same house, having all its parts replaced, a real-life ship of Theseus.

Perhaps some wild animal had trespassed inside, though I didn’t know why they’d call me for that; even the bears and bobcats feared Katie. A cool wind blew, the stars extinguishing as I marched to the plain, wooden door, rocks and leaves crunching beneath my boots. I imagined Nelly, curled up with a blanket before a warm fireplace, reading. That should have been me. Yet here I was, called to duty on a frigid night, dealing with some dead or dangerous creature—or, worse, a bit of superstitious nonsense.

I pushed open the creaky door, the inside lanterns momentarily blinding me. Then my eyes adjusted, and I saw it.

As soon as I did, I wished I hadn’t.

I averted my gaze—the trash-littered floor; the crackling fire in the hearth; the board table, cluttered with plastic cups and bowls, swarming with flies; the loft, dripping with clothing and blankets. Finally, my eyes completed their spiral, landing back in the center, where, gagged and bound to a chair, sat an angel.

A ratty brown cloak covered most of its body. Above that, its pale skin sparkled, its neck stretching long, its over-large eyes meeting mine, flaring with rage. The sides of its head were shaved bare, but down the middle sprouted a bleached-white mane, held back with multiple ties. It gargled into the dirty rag wrapped over its mouth.

I jumped back, slamming the door, tripping over my feet as I leaned against the brick wall, next to Katie. “What is that?” I panted.

“You mean who.” She slapped the cigarette to her mouth, her hand shaking. “It’s a woman.”

“Women don’t look like that.”

“This one does. It’s one of their pets.” Smoke billowed from her barely opened lips as she pulled her jacket tighter. “She’s here to take Gracie.” At her thigh, the girl whimpered through her burlap face covering.

“You’re scaring her,” I whispered. “Anyway, how can you know that?”

“I found it in the house with her. Talking to her.”

I crept to the nearest shutter, peeking through a crack, hoping to see something to prove Katie wrong. But the thing just sat there, fuming, its huge eyes tracing a jagged path through the air, as though tracking an insect I couldn’t see.

Like almost all of us, I’d been Taken and returned as an infant; I didn’t remember what the angels looked like. But those Taken at an older age described ten-foot monsters, blobs of shimmery skin twinkling with a million embedded stars. More frightening were the powerful machines that did their bidding, enabling them to fly, build, overpower. But this creature—this *stranger*, as Tennison called it—did not fit that description. It was normal height, quite a bit shorter than me, its features roughly human. Below the cloak poked two pale feet, each with five perfect toes.

“It’s wearing your cloak,” I said, returning to Katie.

“Yeah, well. I’d take it back, but what if she’s naked under there?”

I shivered. “What should we do?”

She threw down the nub of her cigarette, grinding it with her heel. “Kill it.”

My heart stuttered. So this is why she’d sent for me? So I could help her murder some sort of angel, provoking the ire of those beyond the wall? I would not do it. It should be released at the edge to be recovered by its kind. That was the only way to avoid trouble.

I opened my mouth to say this when Katie leaned in, reeking of tobacco, her dark eyes sparking. “Or we could try something else. Remember that story you read me about the men who captured an enemy soldier? They tried to trade him back for one of their own.”

My gut twisted, knot upon knot, for I already knew what she was suggesting. “You can’t be serious.”

She nodded. “Let’s swap this piece of shit for my Lily and Peter.”

“In the story it didn’t work,” I stammered.

“Don’t matter.”

“It’s a bad idea.”

“It’s an idea.” She shrugged. “You got a better one?”

I searched her familiar face for any traces of my old playmate. I used to think Katie might recover from the loss of her infants, that time would repair her to her former self. Instead, she’d grown colder and harder. Yet somehow I felt even closer to her for all her jagged edges, her refusal to compromise with reality. Changed as she was, she was still my friend; I had to talk her out of this suicidal plan. “You have two kids left. If this goes poorly—”

“That one”—she pointed at Tennison, standing at the treeline—“ain’t my kid. And what good’s the girl if she can’t even go outside uncovered? Now they send this *thing* to get her? No. They don’t come into my house. They take no more from me.”

It was madness. Angels were superior, with no feeling, no pity. Throughout history, there'd never been a report of conversation with them, let alone negotiation. Still, Katie was correct about one thing: this was the only chance she'd had in the fourteen years since Lily was Taken.

She backed away, nodding, as though my silence signaled agreement, the desperation on her face transforming into hopeful determination. "You do the talking."

"Me? Why?"

She put her hand to the door. "If left to me, I'd gut her where she sits. You're more patient. Smarter. If anyone can make this trade work, it's going to be you."

* * * * *

I faced the monster, unsure how to communicate but knowing I must try. Katie stood behind it, Grace and Tenny in the loft, watching in silence like bloodthirsty spectators. I suppose that made me the gladiator, confronting a never-before-seen beast. My bravery, however, did not rise to the occasion. It was far more satisfying to read about adventures than to risk one's life in their pursuit.

The thing's eyes bulged—my heavens, their size—as they rolled over the contours of my face, the wiry hairs of my cheeks, the dampness on my brow, finally snapping to the small blade sheathed to my belt. It squirmed just enough to show its fear.

What would the angels do, once they discovered we'd captured one belonging to them? They'd been manageable neighbors so far, demanding only one sacrifice: the Taking of every infant, usually returned within a day's time. Sometimes it went wrong, of course, as it had twice

with Katie—leading the more obstinate to keep their children hidden, delaying their Taking. Still, on the whole, it was a marginal ask, considering the angels’ superiority in all ways. If we erred tonight and provoked their ire, the entire colony might suffer for our mistake.

I stepped nearer, hesitating as I reached for the gag around its face, repulsed by its pallid skin. With a quick motion, I pinched the cloth, tugging until it fell to the neck.

At the sight of its unobstructed face, my insides flushed fire.

Katie was right. This *was* a woman. Though the oddest I’d ever seen. Her dewdrop face—wide at the eyes, narrowing into a point at her chin—was no healthy shade of brown, not even tawny like Tennison’s, but shimmering and pale like death, her cheeks, throat, and chest dotted with freckles as bountiful as stars. At the removal of the gag, she jerked backward, exposing the slight curve of her breasts beneath the low-slung cloak. She arched her slender neck away, her jaw angled, lips round.

Yes, a woman. A *human*.

I’d heard tales of human pets on the other side, magically fashioned to look like angels. But these were historical sources, second- and third-hand accounts transcribed by my long-dead ancestors. Until now, I never knew they were true. I glanced around, wondering if the family shared my amazement. Katie tapped her boot, a tremor shaking her frizzy bob, silently urging me to get on with it; so I turned back to the woman, pushing my words through the constriction in my throat. “Hello. I’m Aedan.”

“Brute!” she spat. “Vermin! You think I care your name? There’s no part of you I could ever care about.”

I leaped back, astonished as much by the correctness of her grammar and diction as I was by the acrimony of her words.

Katie crossed her arms. “Should’ve warned you. She’s a talker.”

I mumbled a reply, but the woman spoke over me. “I am an Uli, daughter of Mahagna. How dare you confine me this way?”

I held up my hands, in what I hoped was a universal gesture of peace. “We intend no harm.”

“The female already harmed me. She will be punished. If you wish to avoid the same fate, unfasten this harsh fiber before—”

Katie flew around, slapping her hard in the face.

Silence.

Katie reared back again, and I grabbed her arm, pulling her aside. “I thought you wanted me to talk with her,” I whispered.

“But you’re not—”

“I *am*.” I bored into her brown eyes until at last she softened with a nod.

I had two options: wade deeper into the disaster of this attempted swap or release her and hope for the angels’ forgiveness. The latter was by far the smartest option. But I already knew I was not going to do that. The temptation to speak with her was too great. No one had ever conversed with one from beyond the wall. If I managed it, this night would be historic. What secrets might I learn? Earlier, I’d been excited by Mary Shelley. This was infinitely better: a living book with all the answers, if I could only extract them.

The woman glared at us like a cornered rattlesnake. I strolled behind her, away from her probing gaze, as I contemplated my next move. I’d never been in a situation like this. Yet it was not wholly unfamiliar. I closed my eyes and saw Sam Spade in his office in that fictional colony

of San Francisco, wearing a trench coat and fedora (whatever those were, for I was unsure). *The Maltese Falcon*.

Yes, the ancients often faced scenarios like this. They'd written the secret many times: *never show fear*.

I completed my circuit, steadying my voice. "When you're slapped, you'll take it and like it."

She opened her mouth as if forming a retort, then closed it, silent.

I turned to Katie. "If she speaks out of turn again... Well..." I nodded knowingly, as if this was a routine we did often. I spread my feet wide, glaring down at our prisoner. "My friend found you in her home, with her daughter. Angels don't behave this way. They never trespass the borders." Her lip quivered, and I stepped closer, realizing the truth of my words. "They didn't send you."

"You know *nothing*," she hissed.

Katie punched her—once, twice, three times—each crack of her fist filling the house like a whip.

The woman's head remained low and twisted for so long I feared her fragile neck might have broken. Red blood trickled from her nose, dark against the snow of her skin. "You wear a blade," she rasped. "Pierce my heart and be done with it." She looked up at me, her eyes violet in the warm lantern light. How had I not noticed their remarkable color before? Part of what I'd interpreted as their size was, in fact, an illusion due to their paleness.

I cleared my throat, attempting to focus. "We just want to ask you a few questions, so we can return you to the other side."

"I will not be *returned* anywhere."

“You belong with the angels, do you not?”

“Angels... I do not know this word.”

“But you come from the other side?”

Her delicate jaw slid left and right, as though calculating her words. “I’m looking for my brother.”

I could not help but laugh. “No brother of yours lives here. Of this I’m certain.”

“His name is Leto. He’s a doctor.”

She was confused. Strange-looking infants did sometimes appear, returned in place of the Taken. But if someone in the colony looked like *her*, I would know it. To my knowledge, only six or seven colonists practiced healing, most women, none of whom could be related to this odd creature. “You’re mistaken. I’ve never met anyone named Leto.”

“Then you killed him.” She said the words quietly, her purple eyes turning glossy.

“Probably just like this. Tied to a chair, tortured—”

“Where are my children?” Katie interrupted.

She shrugged. “Behind me, I think.”

“Not those.” Katie hunched nearer. “There was a girl, Taken fourteen years ago and never returned. Two years later, a boy. Also Taken and not returned. In his place, they sent me this useless mute.” She pointed up to the loft, where Tennison squatted, gripping the rails. “I need them back.”

The woman cocked her head, as though she’d misunderstood. “There’s no getting them back.”

Katie grabbed her ears, twisting them back until she squirmed. “Where are they?”

“I don’t know your children.” Her words flowed faster as Katie twisted her ears tighter.
“But there are several reasons why offspring might be kept.”

Katie released her. “Tell me.”

The woman trembled, shaking the pain from her lobes. “The population might be too homogenous. Or the child’s genetics could be needed for a breeding program.” She looked Katie up and down. “If I were to guess about *your* children, I’d say genetic infirmity.”

Katie turned to me. “What the hell is she talking about?”

Before I could answer, Katie seized the knife from my belt, swinging it to the woman’s neck. “We’re going to swap you for my kids. Tell us how to do it.”

The woman relaxed into a sour smile. “They would never do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because they do not care about me. I’m only a breeder. You had two children taken? I had four. Each time, they carve out the infant and send it away for sale. That’s why I escaped.” She looked down. “I want to keep this one.”

I nudged Katie aside. “You’re pregnant?”

She narrowed her eyes. “My brother, *whom you killed*, knew how to deliver an Uli baby. Finding him was my one chance. Still, it’s better to die in childbirth than be returned to those... those monsters.”

Katie’s arms flopped limp at her sides. I wrested the knife from her hand and re-sheathed it, mortified by what we’d done. Katie wanted her children back; that was understandable. My motives were less noble, my curiosity compelling me to torture a pregnant woman who’d entered the colony fleeing from abuse. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“You should be sorry.” She puffed up, turning to Katie as if expecting an apology from her, as well.

“Do you have a name?” I asked.

“Of course I do!” She clinched her jaw, as though stopping herself, swallowing the overflow of her ire. “My name is Tulia. Now unbind me. This fabric cuts my skin. The insects are making me itch.”

Katie swiveled to me, her face desperate. “They’ll make the trade. I’m sure of it. She’s even more valuable pregnant.”

“They’ll take me, yes,” Tulia said. “But they’ll not swap. You’ll never see your children again, and I’ll die in a cage, because they have no use for the disloyal. If you despise them as much as you say you do, then you’ll release me. It’s the only way to keep them from something they want.”

Katie stepped closer to Tulia, her voice lowered. “Why were you in my house?”

“To escape the cold and find warm clothes.”

“Why were you near my daughter?”

“I assumed the house was empty. When she saw me, she’s the one who spoke first.”

I moved behind Tulia, loosening the rope. “She’s done nothing wrong.”

“You can’t let her go!”

“I’m only adjusting it.”

Tulia’s wrists were red where the rope had cut her. I slackened it, pulling it up, where her skin appeared less tender. When I touched her, the white did not rub off as I’d suspected. She was warm, and soft like down. Could it be true she was naked beneath the cloak? At the thought, my cheeks burned.

Katie cleared her throat, scowling as if she could read my thoughts.

Tulia interrupted the silence. “You believe this male is sexually attractive. I assure you, he is not.” With horror, I realized she was talking to Katie. About me. “Furthermore, Ullis do not breed in the manner you are imagining.”

“I don’t care how you breed, revolting *thing*.” Katie rushed forward, yanking back Tulia’s white hair.

I abandoned the rope, shepherding Katie into a corner. The woman did not know when to be quiet. If she’d stopped after the tale of the stolen babies, Katie might have been on her side. Yet she’d continued, yapping about the rope and insects and sexual attraction. It was more than Katie’s raw nerves could handle. “It’s okay.” I stroked Katie’s arms, attempting to sooth her.

“She’s lying! Nothing she says is real.”

“She’s not lying. She just talks too much.”

Behind me, a streak of movement.

A chair fell over. Gracie shrieked. The rope lay coiled on broken tiles before an open door.

Tulia was gone.

I snatched a lantern and sprinted out to the treeline. George Washington clomped, startled. It was dark; I could see no more than three feet ahead as I ran down one footpath, then another. But there was no sign of her. “Damn it!”

I returned to the clearing, where Katie’s silhouette filled the doorframe. “You let her go.”

My face blanched. I’d violated Sam Spade’s rule, showing not only fear but weakness and empathy. Now the woman was gone and, with her, any chance of a trade and all hope of uncovering answers.

“I’ll find her.” I grabbed the reins, hoisting myself atop the horse. “I’ll wait for her at the wall, in case she decides to return there. If not, we’ll organize a search party in the morning. She can’t hide forever.”

Katie strolled forward, rolling a pinch of stringy tobacco. She gestured to the lantern, and I lowered it so she could light her cigarette in the flame. “How many families are there now, with Untaken children?” She blew smoke into the darkness.

“Several dozen. Maybe more.”

“Old Tom’s family is nearest.”

I nodded.

“*That’s* where she’s headed.” She strode around her house, toward the barn where she kept Martha. “I’m coming with you. We have to get there before she does.”