

We had something called 'mail' in Gaithersburg. Three or four times a year a *senegalois* would ride up from the gridpoint with letters and packages, and deliver them around to the people they were supposed to go to. Most of the houses in Gaithersburg had little boxes out the front, stood up on poles, for the *senegalois* to put the letters and packages in. When he had emptied his saddlebags the *senegalois* would go to M. Tran's shop, and leave anything he had for people who didn't have boxes set up in front of their houses. Then he would see if there were any packages or letters to be taken the other way and he would carry them back down to the gridpoint and then to wherever. You could send them anywhere, anywhere at all.

You would think something like that would be too complicated to work, but it did. Old Mrs. Heath wrote a letter once to her cousin on New Georgia, and next time the *senegalois* came up to Gaithersburg he brought a letter all the way back from Mrs. Heath's cousin, and you could tell from what was written in it that she'd read Mrs. Heath's letter that she sent. You had to pay M. Tran to have your letters or packages sent off- it cost a lot, and the the heavier the package, the more it cost- but it didn't cost anything to get mail from somewhere else. We never left any mail with M. Tran, because Pa lost track of his kin a long time ago and Ma's kin all live around Gaithersburg so far as we know. We never got any mail, either.

I had to explain about the mail because of what happened a week before Christmas that started all the trouble. I was riding back from M. Tran's shop with some things and I happened to be going past the Brice House just as the *senegalois* was coming by the other way on his bicycle, and I saw him put a package in the box outside. I thought of saying something, but I didn't. I should have said 'nobody lives there anymore', and then the *senegalois* would have said 'merci' and put the package back in his saddlebags and taken it off to wherever. But I didn't say anything. The *senegalois* kept on going toward M. Tran's shop, and I kept going up the other way with flour and salt and nails for Ma. The next day the *senegalois* went back down to the gridpoint, and since I didn't tell anybody, that meant I was the only one in Gaithersburg who knew there was a package in the box outside the Brice House.

Now I should explain about the Brice House. The Brice House was the second or third biggest house in Gaithersburg, and had been built Before for a man who had come to Gaithersburg to get rich when it was still that kind of place. Since Ma was a little younger than I am now a man named Mr Brice had lived there: he wasn't any kind of relation of the man that built the house, and when he moved in it had been sitting empty a long time and nearly falling down, but he fixed it all up. He made his living doing bits of carpentry like that, and also fixing what engines we had in Gaithersburg. He was devilish clever with those things. There were odd things about Mr Brice that seem a lot more odd now that I have been to more places than Gaithersburg. We were all coloured folk in Gaithersburg except for two families of white folk, and M Tran and his family, and Mr Brice. M Tran's people were called yellow, but Mr Brice really was yellow, like the label on a rum bottle. He had blue eyes, and was as bald as an egg. People said that Mr Brice didn't look any older than he had when he first came to Gaithersburg, but we figured that was just the way of his kind of people, like M Tran's people seem to go straight from being boys to wrinkled old men without anything in between.

Mr Brice was the sort of person who doesn't go around making small talk. He didn't smile much so as you'd notice, but he didn't scowl either, or get angry. He was never rude, and pleasant enough if you talked to him, but he would always get out of talking quick and go on with what he was doing. Not that I ever used to talk to him much- I guess I was a little afraid of him. He had a nice voice to listen to, though, a bit like the preacher's.

Anyhow, at the end of September Mr Brice had caught the bird quinsy and died. Reverend Darke buried him, and gave away some of his things that he had left instructions to give away, and then two men and a cart came up from Elm River and took the rest of his things away. Pa got a handsaw from Mr Brice when he was dead, and Ma got some spoons and a tin of sugar. Theo got one of his old hammers, and Dan got a framed picture of the New Jerusalem that used to hang in Mr Brice's shed.

So now that I have explained about the mail and about Mr Brice you know what I mean when I say what I should have said, and maybe why I didn't say it.

Did you ever have the feeling that if you did one tiny thing different one day, your life would be completely different forever? You should, because if you did, it would be. You just can never tell what that tiny thing is. Christmas day I didn't get anything much. I won't say I didn't get anything, since that wouldn't be true, but Dan and Theo got better than me. Then when the afternoon was beginning to wear on Ma sent me out to take Mrs. Kent something she had forgotten at our house that morning after the service.

It happened I rode by the Brice House, and it happened it was all quiet when I was going by, so I thought to myself 'I'll just stop here and see if that package is still in Mr Brice's box'. So I stopped Japheth, opened the lid of the box and shut it again. The package was still there. I stood there a minute, feeling that everyone was watching me, though I couldn't see anyone, and also like I needed to pee. You know what it is like when you know what you are going to do is wrong, but you also know that you are going to do it anyway. Don't be a wicked thief, Persephone Grainger, I told myself, but this just made me feel that it would be exciting to be a wicked thief. I was in a contrary mood, and wanted to do something wicked.

I opened the lid of the box again, picked up Mr Brice's package, and quickly put it in my pack without looking at it. The package was heavier than I thought it would be, and as I rode on to the Kents' I tried to reckon how much it would cost to send a package like that from M. Tran's shop. A hundred francs? Two hundred? More than I could make in a whole summer running errands, that was certain. Someone must have thought it was important to send it to Mr. Brice.

On the way back from the Kents I stopped off at a place where I was sure nobody could see me, and took a closer look at Mr. Brice's package. It was about the size of a brick, and about as heavy as it would have if it was full of salt, and was all done up in thick white paper. In one corner were pasted little bits of paper with numbers on them and pictures of an angry-looking woman who I recognised as the Empress. You sometimes got these bits of paper on mail that came from far places, I knew. There were a lot of them, which meant it had cost a lot to mail the package here, just as I thought. Mr Brice's name and where he lived were written on it in straggly writing, straggly enough that I would have been embarrassed to write like that: 'M.A. Brice, Gaitersburg, Weiß-See Provinz, Mirepoix.' There wasn't anything written on it to say who had sent it or where from. Whoever they were, they weren't all that great at spelling, either. I looked around again, to make sure nobody else was there- even though I knew there wouldn't be.

Then I sat down by the side of the stream, sitting the package on my lap. Mr Brice was dead, I said to myself, and he didn't leave instructions for you to have any of his things, even though he left instructions for Pa and Ma and Dan and Theo to have some of his things. And Dan and Theo got decent things for Christmas, and I only got shoes that pinched and sent on errands. Yes, I said to myself, but that still doesn't mean you should open his package. That would be wicked. Then I told myself, I can just have a look at it, and then take it to M Tran's shop and say I noticed it outside the Brice House. I wouldn't be a thief unless I mean never to give it back where it belongs, and I didn't mean to do that. That's what I told myself.

The paper was hard to tear, and I had to start a hole in it with my teeth. There were two or three layers of the stuff, and inside it was a bundle wrapped up in the most lovely silky cloth I'd ever seen, the colour of the pearl handle on Ma's comb, all shiny and almost too bright to look at, but soft like baby's skin. I couldn't see any weave to it, like it was some sort of leather rather than cloth. I piled this wrapping cloth up on my lap as I unrolled it so it wouldn't touch the ground, but it didn't seem to make any difference- a corner of it dropped in the dirt before I got up, and not a speck of the dirt stuck to it, I swear. Wrapped up inside the cloth were three things: a bell, a book, and a candle. The book was only small, and printed in a language I didn't recognise, and somebody has scribbled on most of the edges of the

pages, and some places in between, in another language I didn't recognise. The bell was a bell-shaped piece of metal without a clapper, only small, but very very heavy, and was made of a silvery metal that made the cloth look dull. The third thing really wasn't a candle: I know that a bell, a book, and a candle are supposed to be what the Papists use to banish ghosts, and thought I would say that. It was a silvery thing shaped a bit like a candle, but wider than usual, and was as light as the bell was heavy. This was because, as I soon found out, it was hollow. It had two halves that slid together so neatly you could hardly see the join, and inside there were a lot of papers all rolled up, typewritten things in the language that was scribbled in the book. Some of them had official-looking seals on, and there was a strange burnt smell to them. It was a pleasant enough smell, and I brought the roll of papers right up to my face to take it in. The first other world I ever smelled, that was, though I didn't find out what world it was until much later. There were dates on some of the papers, and they were all thirty or forty years ago.

So those were the things somebody had sent Mr Brice, not knowing he was dead. I looked at them for a long time, and was none the wiser for it. I half thought that I would take them to M Tran's shop, but I half thought I wouldn't. I told myself, he won't know who sent them to Mr Brice, no more than I know, so he would just have to give them to the *senegalois* if he didn't keep them himself, and if the *senegalois* didn't keep them to himself they would just be passed on to an Inspector, or some Officer of the Empire, and they would keep them. It may as well be me keeping them as an Officer of the Empire, I told myself, and then I told myself again, Yes, but you shouldn't be a wicked thief, Persephone Grainger. That didn't help at all. I wrapped the three things back in the cloth, and wrapped bits and shreds of the paper that was left around the bundle, and rode back home. I kept everything in my satchel until it got dark, and then I snuck out and put the bundle and every shred of paper from the package under the loose board in the henhouse.

The nights on Mirepoix are really too long for sleeping, as the days are too long for staying awake, so I had a lot of time to lay there and think. Before June I would have told Leonta, but in June the bird quinsy had come through for the first time and taken her Ma, and since then she hadn't been able to keep secrets. She took things you said badly even if you didn't mean them that way, and if you asked her not to tell something, she would tell it the next time she lost her temper with you. I didn't have any other friends to speak of. My brothers were three and four years older than me, and I didn't dream of telling them or my parents.

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I guess I was kind of distracted all the next day, and got half my chores in the wrong order, and Ma said things like 'I don't know what's gotten into the girl'. Truth is I didn't have any idea what it was I should be doing. Or, I knew what I should be doing, which was handing all of Mr Brice's things over to someone responsible, but Ma was right, something had gotten into me, and I didn't want to do what it was I should be doing.

If I could have read the language on the papers and in the book, then I might have had a better idea of what the package was all about. Reverend Darke, or M Perrault the gendarme, or even Mrs Heath, were all educated and might have been able to read the language, but they were also sure to ask me awkward questions which would end up with them holding onto the things from Mr Brice's package. Even then I had a vague feeling that telling anyone who might get word back to an Officer of the Empire might get whoever sent the package to Mr Brice in trouble, and I needed to figure out for myself if they were someone who deserved to get in trouble. So this is my plan, which I worked out while I was doing my chores in the day after Christmas:

I would copy out a little bit of the writing on the pages and show it to Reverend Darke, and ask him if he knew what language it was, and I could make up a story about where I had seen the writing that would be easy to stick to. Then I would get a book on learning that language from the travelling library, or from Sears Roebuck so I could figure out what it said on the papers. I didn't think this would take me more than a week or two once I got hold of the book,

because I had never learned a language before that I could remember. While I could speak both English and French tolerably well, I couldn't remember learning either of those. The problem was mostly just that I didn't know when the travelling library would be around next- probably not for a couple of months- and that I had precious little pocket money to be buying books from Sears Roebuck with.

Then there was the bell thing. I knew it was too heavy to be iron, and it didn't look like lead. I didn't know much about other metals, but I knew there were lots of other ones that were heavy and shiny. Like uranium, for nuclear machines, or coronium, for difference engines. Some of these cost plenty, and I figured that even a little bell like this might be worth a lot: enough to send a girl to another world, rather than just mail, for instance. It wasn't that folk were hateful to me at home, or Gaithersburg was one of those heathen places where I would have already been picked to be married off to some old man, or that I hated long hours and soil and livestock and sawdust so very much. It was just- it was just that going places was in my blood, like it was in Pa's once. It says in the Bible that God said to Adam and Eve: 'Fill the worlds, and subdue them,' and I think in all of us those words are still echoing somehow in our blood. Some of us can't hear them, and some of us just ignore them if we do hear them, but for some of us they're so loud that we can't bear staying on a world that's already filled and subdued, any more than you could bear eating nothing but corned mutton all your life. So I thought, if this bell was worth anything much, I wanted to keep it for myself, as a despicable thief, as my prize from Mr Brice who had forgotten to give me any other present. While I kept the bell safe I thought I would see if I could find a book from the travelling library, or from Sears Roebuck, about different sorts of metals and how to tell one from another. But I never did manage to do that, as I will tell in a minute.

The last thing I decided was that I should find a better hiding place again than under the loose board in the henhouse if I was going to be keeping these things for weeks and weeks, as I was pretty sure my brothers knew about that place. They hadn't let on, but they would have had to have been pretty timid little boys not to have found it for themselves once upon a time.

So you see my thoughts were all of a porridge. They were base and ignoble, and shot through with stupid romantic ideas out of gazeteers and Sears Roebuck catalogues. They were my thoughts, so I can't shift the blame for them onto anyone else. I'm not the sort of person who's any good at making excuses for themselves, and you're not the sort of person who has any patience for listening to those sort of excuses anyway, so I'll leave it there.

I took one of the typewritten pages- one of the shorter ones- out of the metal cylinder and took it up to my school desk, shuffling it in with my pages of Proverbs copied for Sunday. When the sleepy time of the afternoon came around, and the rest of the family were busy elsewhere, I copied out the page as well as I could to show Reverend Darke.

Sei es gewuBt daB derTräger dieses Dokumentes, Peter Johannes Drucker, ist zum Status des Proberitters vom Wolfgang von Seligmeer, Herr durch die Anmut des Gottes der Dreikönigreiche, zugelassen worden. In Übereinstimmung mit diesem Status der achtbare Proberitter, Peter Johannes Drucker, ist alle Länder auf dem Kontinent von Plevon zwischen 18° 40' S und 19° 10' S, und 112 ° 30' O und 111° 30' O zum grösseren Ruhm des Gottes und der Dreikönigreiche, halten und verteidigen, sich entwickeln und anreichern, verschönern und widmen. bewilligt worden.

Unterzeichnet an diesem Tag, 12ten Mai 1972, Palast der Dreikönigreiche, Hochgaussburg.

Sound travels a long way in Gaithersburg at night, and making up my mind about Mr Brice's package hadn't settled my thoughts much, so I was still tossing and turning. That's how I heard the 'pop' sound, before all the dogs started barking. It's a familiar enough sound by now- I must have heard it a thousand times- but that first time I didn't have a clue what it could be. It was the sound of the air being pushed away, quicker than thinking, when a difference ship pops in. It set all the dogs in Gaithersburg barking, and that sent the horses

off, and I could hear Pa stomping about the house and cursing. About the time he went outside I got out of bed and went and peered out the window. Pa was yelling at Balthazar and Ged to shut up and heading over to the stable, where Seth was raising a fuss and kicking at things. I thought that 'pop' sound had come from somewhere over west, but I couldn't see anything unusual off in that direction. I kept looking, but didn't see anything, and when Pa came back inside I went back to bed.

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When I went down to M Tran's shop at daybreak, Leonta was there, sitting on the porch eating a stick of candy rock. Her little sister Amelia was with her, her face all sticky with the candy. Leonta didn't waste any time making sure she was the first to tell me the news.

'Did you hear about the burglars?' she said.

'No,' I said.

'Morty saw burglars last night at the Brice house. There were four of them all dressed in black like in the stories. He's gone off with the gendarme looking for the burglars. He said they must have come in a difference ship.'

Morty was Leonta's beloved uncle, a handsome young fellow who knew it. I had never had much time for him. Leonta kept talking without pausing for breath.

'Morty said it looked like they took some stuff out of the sheds at the Brice house. I don't suppose there was much left in the house. But they broke a window to get in, and the lock to get into the attic, Morty said.'

I must have looked stunned. My thoughts were racing ahead of me, thinking of the package I had hidden. Amelia sat silently sucking on her candy rock, staring at me with big wide eyes.

'Don't be so worried,' said Leonta. 'I expect they'll clear out and not try to burgle anyone else, now that we're on to them. Either that, or the gendarme will get them in a shootout.'

Maybe it was a coincidence. But it didn't seem likely that the burglars had just happened by chance on the Brice house, a few days after that package turned up.

'Morty took his shotgun,' Leonta added, nodding solemnly. 'You look like an old lady, Percy. It's not like you or me are rich folks who have lots of stuff burglars would come from other worlds to steal anyway.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'That's right.'

'They must have heard somewhere that Mr Brice was dead and decided to break in before all his stuff was given away. A fellow like Mr Brice, he might have had all kinds of stuff hidden away.'

'Yeah,' I said.

'Not meaning any disrespect to Mr Brice, but maybe they were people who knew him before he came here. Maybe he had a dark past and was something like a burglar himself before he came to Gaithersburg.'

This was something I had thought of myself, and didn't know enough about Mr Brice to discount. Leonta had spoken to him more than me, and had been given a sewing box when he died.

'D'you think so?' I asked her.

'Could be.' Leonta shrugged. 'I hope they catch the burglars and put them in the lockup. I'd like to see them up close.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Hey, do you know where they've gone looking for the burglars?'

‘Morty said they were starting out by the Drury farm, where the old airfield was. Difference ships used to pop in there in the old days sometimes.’

The Drury farm: that was almost directly opposite from the direction I had heard the ‘pop’ last night, which I was now pretty sure must have been a difference ship arriving. Should I tell this to the gendarme? They would probably find it soon enough anyway, whether I did or not. And in the meantime, what about the package? Should I tell the gendarme about it? Should I find a better place to hide it? Did the burglars have some way of tracking it down, or would they just have to search everywhere in Gaithersburg?

‘I have to pick some things up for Pa,’ I told Leonta.

‘See you,’ she said.

‘See you,’ I said, and went in to M Tran’s shop. When I came out I just waved goodbye to Leonta and Amelia and ran over to Japheth, as if Pa wanted me back in a hurry and I had just remembered.

The sun was just coming up over the treetops as I trotted Japheth back home, making Gaithersburg look all pink and gold like the New Jerusalem. I dumped Ma’s parcel on the kitchen bench and went straight out to the henhouse to get the things from Mr Brice’s box. I wanted to have them close to me, so I knew exactly where they were. I dumped them all in my satchel, not bothering to make sure they were wrapped carefully or anything, and rode off toward the Drury farm. If you were to ask me was I going to tell the gendarme about them, or just to hide them somewhere as far away from the burglars as I could, I couldn’t tell you. Decisions are a bit like babies: you don’t know you’ve made them until after you’ve made them. You will probably think that I am a damned fool, or a fool at least, and I won’t argue with you. But you know it’s one thing to sit back in your chair in front of the fire in your fine house and see what the right thing to do is, and it’s another thing when you’re there, and things are just happening around you, and you have to do something right then and there. You worry, and you think the same thoughts around and around in a circle, and then you make a stab at what the right thing to do is, and nine times out of ten it is dead wrong. Or maybe you don’t. Maybe you’re different, and that’s just me. I didn’t say I wasn’t a damned fool. All I can say is that with all the things I’ve picked wrong, and all that has happened, I do think I’ve gotten better at jumping the right way instead of the wrong way as the years have gone by.

The quickest way from the Grainger farm to the Drury farm goes pretty much straight uphill, and in the middle it is just a narrow track with blackberry and scrubby little poplars six or eight feet high on either side. It was here that they found me. I’ll explain later how it was that they did find me, but at the time all I could think of was that they were in league with the devil. I couldn’t believe it.

A woman stepped out in the path in front of me, thirty or forty feet ahead, and called out in english, ‘Wait up.’ I got a good look at her in an instant. She wasn’t wearing black like Leonta had said, but a sort of dirty grey to blend in with the dust, long pants and a jacket with gloves on her hands. She had glasses with dark glass in, and a broad-brimmed hat. I said we had some folk in Gaithersburg who were called white, but she was the first one I saw that really was white, not browned from the sun. I used to go swimming with the Heath granddaughters sometimes, and I guess they went swimming enough so that even their butts were darker than this woman’s face was. It was like she had never been out in daylight before. She looked pretty spindly, and I figured the only problem would be if she got too close and Japheth stopped rather than go over the top of her. He’d hate to run over anyone. I got close enough so that I could see the woman’s teeth, when she called out again, ‘Wait up there, girl.’ She had small, white, even teeth, like she still had her milk teeth. She was as cool as anything as I urged Japheth toward her along the path, just stood there until I was right beside her and then made a lunge for the reins. At the same time a man stepped out from the other side of the path, a little further up, waving his arms and calling ‘hey!’ I didn’t get a good look at him because Japheth shied like anything and nearly tossed me off. All I could see was

that he was tall and white. The woman was dragging at Japheth's head, trying to pull him in a tight circle and nearly getting trampled. I'm pretty sure Japheth trod on her foot once.

'We just want to ask you some questions,' said the man, this time in French, with a metropolitan accent. I couldn't have answered him even if I wanted to. Japheth was snorting and twisting around like a crazy thing, and it was all I could do to hang on. The woman swore at me, and let him go. 'Wait,' said the man, but Japheth bolted. He didn't go back down the path, but straight the way he was facing when the woman let go, into the blackberries. I dodged to avoid a tree and fell off.

I had been tossed off into blackberries before, but it isn't the sort of thing you can get used to. I scrambled to my feet as fast as I could and thrashed after Japheth through the scrub, hoping he wouldn't impale himself on anything and do himself real damage. I figured being smaller than this pair I could lose them on a scramble through the undergrowth.

'Shoot the girl,' someone said in English. I threw myself face down into the blackberries, but at the same time it felt like someone stuck a knitting needle in at the back of my left knee, and there was a popping noise. The voice hadn't been either of the two I had seen. It was a different woman's voice, deeper than the first one's, and not so white sounding.

I lay on the ground, on my face, in and on and under the blackberry bushes, listening to the sound of branches snapping in front of me- Japheth- and behind me- the burglars.

The pain was spreading out from behind my knee and getting less strong as it spread, like sugar in water. I couldn't move my leg at all.

'Good shot,' said the man's voice. The white woman just swore. I hoped Japheth had broken her foot. 'Goddamn blackberries,' I heard her say, and the man agreed.

'Hurry up,' said the second woman's voice from back on the path. 'They're closing. I can hear them'. I wanted to get away, but it didn't seem that I could move my arms or legs very well. I was starting to feel lightheaded, and the sound of the blood rushing in my ears was getting louder and louder.

The man reached me, and pulled the satchel from my back.

'Is it there?' called the second woman.

There was a pause as they looked through my satchel.

'Yes, it's here,' said the man, sounding pleased with himself. 'Hallelujah!'

'Time for that later,' said the woman on the path. 'Time to go.'

'Good,' said the white woman.

'What about the girl?' asked the man.

'Leave her,' said the woman with the deep voice. Which proves you don't have to be young to make bad decisions. I could hardly tell where my arms and legs were by now, and everything I saw was black with yellow lines around it. I felt sort of calm and floaty. So this is what dying is like, I thought. It wasn't so bad.

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Waking up was very bad.

I felt as awful as I could ever remember feeling: my head was aching, and my guts were all twisted up, and all my joints and muscles hurt. Mr Lundy thought I had been shot with some sort of drug, enough to knock out a full grown man. I had been out for a whole day and had missed the New Year. Dr Boussy, a *senegalois* from Hectorville, had been called to see how I could be woken up and should be there soon, but it seemed that I had woken up myself.

Everyone in Gaithersburg knew I had been shot by the burglars.

‘They got away, too,’ explained Dan, who had to take a turn watching over me. He was helping me to eat soup. ‘What were you doing up where we found you, anyway? You weren’t fool enough to want to watch them hunt down the burglars, were you?’

I mumbled that I supposed I was. That seemed to be the easiest way to avoid long explanations.

‘Well, don’t do a fool thing like that again,’ said Dan. ‘You gave us a godawful fright when we saw you lying there. We were all sure you were dead.’

I mumbled that I was sorry and would be sure not to do it again.

‘Good, then,’ said Dan. ‘I don’t have so many sisters I can afford to be careless with them.’

‘Sorry,’ I said. Dan saw that I wasn’t eating any more of my soup, and carried it back to the kitchen for me.

Dr Boussy came a few hours after I woke up and looked at my eyes, and my tongue, and pretty much all of me, and gave me an injection and went away again. I could hardly understand anything he said because his voice was so soft.

Leonta was jealous, even though I was half killed, and said I should have brought her along. Ma was cross with me, and Pa was crosser with me, but I stuck to my story of going off to see the excitement like a silly girl because it seemed easier to explain than the truth. There is a problem with lying, that I already knew then, but know much better now, that the story you make up to keep things simple always turns out much more complicated in the end. It would have been a lot better for everyone in Gaithersburg if I just told everybody everything, as you will see. But I told my brothers and parents and the gendarme and everyone else who came to see me what the burglars looked like- at least the one I got a good look at.

‘There’ll be no finding them now they’ve jumped out,’ said M Barrett, the gendarme, shaking his head sadly. He had just carefully written down my description, and was holding it awkwardly waiting for the ink to dry. He had such a sad, kind face, M Barrett. He was only about forty, but his hair was mostly grey.

‘Your attackers could be anywhere by now, Persephone,’ he said. And they could, of course. It wasn’t just any difference ship that could jump from point to point, without a grid, from God-knows-where to Gaithersburg. They could be anywhere on any one of fifty thousand worlds by now. But you know all that.

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I didn’t talk much for the next few days, because I seemed to get worse instead of better after the injection. I’d laid in the blackberry bushes for about four hours and got a chill. I didn’t eat anything but soup, and not much of that. All the pains I felt when I woke up were a long time going away, and sometimes at night I felt like I was going to die, honest to God. But you don’t want to listen to me going on about my ailments like some old woman. There came a day that was like sunshine after rain, everything cool and crisp and new looking, and me sitting up in my bed eating scrambled eggs for second breakfast.

‘It’s good to see you looking better,’ said Ma, opening the windows. She smiled at me, but I thought she looked a bit nervous. I asked her why.

‘There’s a man from the government just come to see you,’ said Ma.

I’d just shovelled another forkful into my mouth, and said ‘From the government?’ with my mouth full.

‘Wait until you’re finished, Percy,’ said Ma. ‘I said you were poorly, but I think you’re probably well enough to talk to him now. He’s a Regulator from offworld, chasing those burglars who shot you, and he must be busy. I’ll bring him up when you’ve finished second breakfast.’



I swallowed and put my fork down. 'I already told the gendarme everything, Ma.'

Ma shrugged. 'Well, I guess there's nothing like hearing something with your own ears, even if you are in government. Are you done?'

'I guess so.' I let Ma take my plate, and sat up a little bit straighter to make myself look more presentable for the Regulator. Or would it be better to slump and make myself look sicker? No, Ma would give the lie to that.

The Regulator was younger than our gendarme, maybe in his late twenties. Though he wasn't wearing any kind of uniform, his suit was the kind of suit men in Gaithersburg only wore to be buried in. He had a cheerful face, all angles with a beak of a nose, and he was dark for a white man. He had long black hair tied up in back, which was in fashion then, but not on Mirapoix. He also wore some kind of perfume- like a woman, we would have said in Gaithersburg, being behind the metropolitan fashions. It smelled like wood polish to me.

'This is Regulator Vesny, Persephone,' said Ma. 'Monsieur, this is my daughter, Persephone.'

'Bon soir, mademoiselle,' he said, giving a formal little bow.

'Bon soir, Regulator,' I replied, feeling awkward to meet such an important man as an invalid. Ma gave me an encouraging look and left, closing the door behind her softly.

'Your mother has told me that you are feeling much better today,' said the Regulator, in crisp French with a metropolitan accent. 'I am pleased to hear it, for it would be a great shame for me to travel so far to find you too ill to speak to me.'

I nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

M Vesny sat down at the end of my bed and grinned at me, his manner suddenly a great deal less formal. His teeth were astonishingly large and white, and I couldn't help looking at them whenever his mouth was open. 'I have asked your parents that we speak privately,' he explained. 'I think it will be easiest for you to speak with me if nobody else is listening.'

I nodded.

'Good,' said the Regulator. 'Now, I will dispense with the formalities. I have your name and birthdate, and everything else that is known about you, from your mother. So we can begin more recently. On December 30<sup>th</sup> of the year just past you were riding your horse along a track about two kilometres from here. You have stated you were going to a farm called the Drury farm from here. It was here to there, correct, not there to here?' He looked at me and raised one eyebrow, and I nodded.

'So. Tell me what happened then. Take as long as you like, and don't leave anything out. Oh, and you can expect me to interrupt.' He winked.

This was not the sort of thing I had expected. I told M Vesny how I had been riding along, when this woman had appeared and asked me to stop.

'Why do you think she wanted you to stop?' he asked me.

'I don't know,' I said. I blinked. 'Maybe she wanted my horse.'

'Do you think that is likely?' asked M Vesny.

'I don't know.'

'Well, when you were unhorsed, did she try to catch your horse, or did she try to catch you?'

'Me,' I said.

'Then she didn't want your horse.' The Regulator looked at me patiently. 'She wanted you. Why?'

'I don't know,' I said.

‘Really?’ For the first time, the Regulator’s voice had a hint of sharpness to it. I tried to think of something to say, but nothing came.

‘These men are wanted criminals, Mme Grainger. They have taken a risk to come here, and know they are being pursued by the authorities. Their time here is limited and they will do nothing unnecessarily rash, if they value their liberty. Yet they ask a girl of twelve riding by to stop, and when she does not stop, they drug her. They are not looking for a hostage, since having drugged her, they leave her behind to give their descriptions to anyone who asks her what happened. Why do you think they might do this?’

‘I don’t-’ I began.

‘Don’t say you don’t know,’ snapped M Vesny. ‘Guess. Think of something.’

‘I can’t,’ I began.

‘Try. Don’t just say you can’t. That is not a road that leads anywhere good. That is not the spirit that built the Empire.’ He lifted a finger as if to admonish me. What a slender finger, I thought. What long, white nails. Men and women in Gaithersburg didn’t have fingers like that. I noticed, too, for the first time that the Regulator did wear one sign of office, a big signet ring of pink diamond.

‘I can think of two reasons immediately,’ said the Regulator. ‘One. Perhaps they left something with you. Maybe they were looking for a suitable host for a particular plague they wish to introduce to this world. They are anarchists, and no friends of the Empire. So they shoot you full of their plague, and leave the planet, knowing that we will fuss over you and cosset you and be infected ourselves. It does seem quite plausible. I will recommend that you be placed in protective quarantine, together with anyone who has come in contact with you, as a precautionary measure.’

The Regulator paused for a long moment, and gave me a stare. I gripped the sheets tightly and stared back at him. Quarantine?

‘I have seen plague worlds, Mme Grainger,’ continued M Vesny. ‘They are not pretty. Yes, I will definitely recommend that course of action.’

I shook my head. ‘No,’ I said. ‘Not that.’

‘No?’ He almost laughed at me, the scoundrel. ‘Well then, Two.’ He raised two fingers. ‘Perhaps they took something from you. However, as you did not mention anything missing, I am inclining towards the first possibility.’

I knew what the Regulator was trying to do. How much did he know already? Was there any point in me keeping my stupid secret? I guessed not.

‘They took some things I had with me,’ I said miserably.

‘Yes?’ The Regulator leaned forward intently, as you do when someone is telling you a secret.

‘They were in my satchel. They were out of a package that was addressed to Mr Brice, who died this year. Last year, I mean.’

‘Describe them.’

I described them. The bell, the book I couldn’t read, and the case full of papers that I couldn’t read either.

‘And that was all?’ The Regulator’s voice was calm, unsurprised.

I thought for a moment. ‘They were wrapped up in a cloth, that’s all,’

‘Just any old cloth, I presume? Nothing interesting?’

I sat up a bit straighter. ‘If you know these things already, why-’

He raised a hand, and made shushing noises. 'Yes, I have heard these things described before, but I have never seen them myself. Your description may contain important elements missing in other accounts. It is procedure. Please go on.'

I described the cloth wrapper, and then told him about the one piece of paper I still had. 'It's on my school desk, over there, in those papers.'

The Regulator dumped the pile of schoolwork in my lap and sat patiently while I sorted through them for the foreign document. It didn't take long to find, and he held it up close to his beak nose and read it swiftly.

'What language is it?' I asked.

'It's German,' he said. He folded the paper up and put it in his vest pocket. 'This is the only one you kept? You haven't forgotten to mention any others?'

'No,' I said. Something had been bothering me. 'Why aren't you taking notes?' I asked.

'Would you rather I was taking notes?' retorted the Regulator. 'I have a good memory.'

He looked at me, calm and cheerful, and I decided that I really did not like M Vesny at all. I regretted telling him anything. I tried to stare him down, but blinked and looked away first.

'I want my mother,' I said.

'In a moment, mademoiselle, in a moment,' said the Regulator. 'There are just a few other things. What did you intend to do with these items?'

'I don't know,' I said.

He gave me a warning look, like a dog might. I could almost hear the growl. 'Really?'

'I don't, really,' I said. 'I had thought of telling the gendarme about them, especially after the burglars came, but I hadn't made up my mind.'

'But you didn't tell the gendarme about them.'

'No,' I said.

'You didn't tell anyone about them.'

'No,' I said a little more uncertainly.

The Regulator leaned over and put his hand on my arm. He did smell a lot like wood polish. 'Now, Mademoiselle, do you want to know the real reason I didn't take any notes?'

I shook my head. I just wanted this horrible man to go away.

'Because I have a machine to do it for me. I just had to be sure, first, that it was necessary to use it. You are going to get out of that bed now, Mme Grainger, and walk out that door with me, and you will repeat everything I have said into a machine on my ship that will record everything you say, and what is more-' he squeezed my arm in an unpleasant way- 'it will tell me whether you are speaking the truth or not. You soon learn, in this line of work, not to trust everything people tell you.'

My heart sank.

'I've already told your mother that this might be necessary,' he said. 'Hurry up. The sooner begun, the sooner ended.' He took his hand from my arm, finally, stood up, and walked over the window. 'Won't be long,' he said, looking out the window towards the stable. 'I'll wait here while you get dressed.'

I got out of bed carefully, on the opposite side to where the Regulator was, and got dressed while staying as far away from him as possible. The room wobbled around me, but not too badly. As an afterthought, I took the copy I had made of the document and stuffed it in my shoe.

When I was finished, M Vesny led me out with his hand on my elbow, just like I was some old lady and he was my doting son.

‘We’ll be back in a moment, M Grainger,’ he said to Ma, as we passed her in the kitchen, her sleeves rolled up and her hands covered with flour. ‘I need to ask just a few short questions in the ship, as we discussed.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Ma. ‘Are you feeling well enough, Percy?’

‘I don’t think so, Ma,’ I said. ‘I feel pretty rotten.’

The Regulator tightened his grip on my elbow. ‘Her testimony is very important, Madame. And I assure you it will not take long.’

I may as well get this over with, I thought. No point in making a big fuss and looking like a baby. ‘I guess I’ll be alright,’ I told Ma. ‘I’ll be back soon.’

‘Good girl,’ said Ma. ‘You come back and have another lay down, and then these biscuits will be ready.’

‘Thank you for your patience, Madame,’ said the Regulator. He steered me out of the house, taking his hat as we left.

‘I really don’t feel that well,’ I said. ‘I wish you had just written it down.’

‘Just a tiny bit farther to walk, Mademoiselle,’ he replied. ‘Then we’ll be at the car. Have you ridden in a car before?’ His voice was remorselessly cheerful, and it made it hard for me to hate him completely.

‘Yes,’ I said. I couldn’t remember, because it was when I was very small, but I knew I had.

‘It’s only a little car, but then I can’t go travelling from world to world lugging a great beast of a thing with me, can I?’

The car was parked out the front of our house in the shade of the house tree, and it was covered in completely to keep the weather out. There were two seats in front, and an enclosed space for cargo at the back over the top of the batteries. I don’t remember what kind it was. M Vesny opened the door for me and waited until I sat down to close it. Inside, the car smelled of M Vesny’s wood polish, and also like something else, a slightly off yeasty kind of smell.

‘That’s Karamchand you can smell,’ said M Vesny, seeing my nose wrinkle up. ‘Last world I drove this thing any distance on. Open the windows and it will go away, but leave them closed for a few minutes and its back again as strong as it was. Ah well, it will pass in time. Nothing lasts forever.’

The car was quieter than I expected. It made sense that they would be noisier on the outside than the inside, but I hadn’t thought of it before. We zipped along Vache’s Road and Pitt Road at a frightening rate, then turned onto the track the led of to the Linden farm- about the place where I thought I had heard the burglars’ difference ship arrive. The jolting of the car did nothing for my stomach, and I could feel my headache coming back.

The Regulator’s ship was sitting in a bare field at the Linden farm, with a couple of curious cows looking at it from a distance. Like the car, it looked new and shiny to me, and it didn’t have anything on it to show that it was a government vessel. ‘I usually work in secret,’ M Vesny had explained when I asked about the lack of a badge on the car. ‘It’s not good to advertise who I am in some places.’

The ship was half again as tall as our house, and half again as wide- and, you know perfectly well what a 2003 Lemaitre Centroid looks like, so why am I telling you? M Vesny drove right up the ramp into the guts of it. I felt pretty queasy, so he steered me again, out of the car and up the stairs into a poky little room. There was nothing much in it, just two ugly upholstered chairs and a little table bolted to the floor. It was the first room I had been in that was lit by electric light, with a little glowing panel in the middle of the ceiling.

‘Just sit down here a moment,’ said the Regulator. ‘You look a bit tired. I’ll get you a glass of water, and then we can start again. Remember, I can recall everything perfectly-’ he tapped his temple with a forefinger- ‘so make sure you say the same things you said last time.’ He grinned at me, and the next instant it seemed he was through the door, which he closed with a click.

The room was a bit stuffy and had an odd peppery smell, but it wasn’t jolting down the road, so for a long time I was happy just to sit in one of the comfortable ugly chairs, feeling less dizzy, and less like I was going to throw up, than I had before. I could hear the humming of machinery- had that always been on? I couldn’t remember. Then came the sound of a woman shouting in a language that was neither French nor English. She had a shrill voice and sounded like she was only a room or two away. I got up from the chair and went over to the door. It was locked. Of course.

‘Hey!’ I called, adding my voice to the noise the woman was making. ‘What’s going on? Why am I locked up?’ You know, you tell yourself when you’re young that if anything like this happens to you, if you ever get kidnapped or arrested, you’re not going to say anything stupid and obvious. But you do anyway.

The sound of the machinery grew louder, and over the woman shouting I could hear M Vesny growl, in English, ‘Shut up! And sit down!’

I assumed that was meant for me. ‘No!’ I shouted back, deciding, too late, not to do anything else this so-called Regulator told me to do. An instant later I felt too dizzy to stand up, and twenty pounds heavier. I fell forward, banging my nose against the door, and slid to the floor. I clung to the floor so it couldn’t throw me off and waited for the terrible dizziness to go away. A drop of blood spattered in front of me, and then another. My nose was bleeding. I pinched it shut and tried to put my head back, but that made the dizziness worse. I was still sitting on the floor, waiting for the room to stop moving, when the door opened.

‘I told you to sit down,’ said M Vesny, not unkindly. He was still grinning, but now held a gun in one hand. He offered his free hand to help me up, but I swatted it aside, and somehow thrashed my way into one of the chairs. M Vesny coolly took a seat in the other, keeping the gun pointed at a point a few inches to the left of my belly.

I was angry enough not to be scared. ‘You’re no damn Regulator,’ I said. It was hard for me to talk, since I had been snorting up the blood from my nose, and my mouth was full of it.

‘I am a Regulator, in truth,’ he said. ‘I have lied to you about very few things. The recording machine, for instance. The truth is the machine is very small, and I was recording your words all the time.’

‘You’ll be in trouble,’ I said.

‘I don’t think so,’ said M Vesny. ‘Whole worlds of people like you go missing every year. Hundreds of thousands, millions of people. You won’t be missed by anyone who can cause trouble for me.’

This was probably true, but I clung to my sense of cosmic justice. ‘You’ll still be in trouble,’ I growled.

M Vesny only smiled. ‘We have to make a couple of jumps in quick succession. I advise you to just sit there. It won’t be long.’

I began to feel more frightened than angry. ‘Why?’ I asked, sounding small and whiny to myself.

‘Why what? Why are you here?’ asked M Vesny. ‘After I heard your story, I knew you could make things very complicated if I left you where you were. This way, things will be much simpler.’

We shall find all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil: