



She arrived late that day, when we at last were able to meet. I remember her, out of breath and coated lightly with the dust that had swept over everyone and everything that day. I deserved to be kept waiting after my weakness of the night before. I was not used to the dry air of this city, and felt unable to go through with the meeting in that crowded and smoky place. Once on the hilltop the air around me became clear, and it was with gratitude that I accepted a warm towel for my face from the owner of a drinks counter near the monument. I made my way to the third arch, where there is a comfortable place to sit and relax in relative secrecy. I had bought us two cool drinks, but didn't have the patience to wait before beginning mine. I hadn't realized how dry my throat had become, and my eyes as well felt slowed. I had kept my coat with me, despite its odd appearance in the mild climate here. I am told I carry the cold with me when I leave the North, and cannot be really comfortable without its presence. Though

it seems barbaric to some, it's a solid tradition of the northern mountains, not one I am about to give up for a difference in fashion sense. I pushed my hair out of my eyes, and it too was brittle from dust. *I must leave here* was my most urgent thought, an impulse from inside, an instinctive fear of this attack by nature on me and on the city. I am used to exacting control over my surroundings, gearing them for comfort, and taking that leisurely ability in my stride. Now I coughed and headed for shelter, as though I were one of the nameless people around me.

I have always loved this city. Even on my first trip here several years ago, I sat in this spot and bought a drink from the same counter, admired the same view. You can look up into the higher arches of the monument, and see carvings in the stone that tell of both ancient myths and the history of the country, from its beginnings until the most recent years, as several stone panels are left blank and a new carving is commissioned every decade.

The famous meteor glass tower is nearby as well, a unique monument to the city's history. Earlier in this century, nomads who subsist in the dry plains and deserts south of the city found great pieces of silvery glass, as in if a giant marble had fallen from space and shattered on the surface of the desert. The hill areas on which the central city is built had once been the grounds of the nomads' great riding competitions and endurance quests, a site they'd never relinquished their claim to, and leaders of the tribes had come riding into the city's old governing center brandishing pieces of the glass and calling for a symbolic architectural uprising toward the heavens that had disgorged the glass—along with a repatriation of the hill-site that had been theirs.

Somewhat miraculously the city had agreed, and laboriously, the people had hauled large pieces of the glass up to the top of a hill in the middle of town and had secured them together with

a metal structure, to create the current architectural concatenation.

A symbolic confluence between the city people and the wild nomads, its mystic passages were said to guide the pilgrim toward heaven. Visible in the great distance, it served as a compass for the nomads, an orientation to the heavens. An inscription on its south side reads, in a desert language, "At upward angles walking, our faces are in view of god." They claim this lettering catches the sun's blaze and is visible from miles away, but I think it may be fanciful desert talk.

They didn't used to charge people to walk around in it, either. But now it's so mucked about with tourists there isn't any choice. The desert people protested the fee being implemented, and there was an unpleasantness at the site about twenty years ago. The government wanted to keep this unpleasantness under wraps and so appeased the nomads' demands with a token treaty right: if you can prove you hold desert ancestry, you may walk the passages for free. Though I respect their courage and ancestral rights, I'd dishonor my own clan if I claimed relation to another tribe, and simply paid the couple of beads at the entry counter. Though my feet have been wetted in a privileged stream since my birth, I've not become a party to every advantage in these lands!

I could see the meteor tower from my spot at the older monument. In design, the glassworks relates to some astronomical system of one of the nomadic groups, and casts an unruly sense of disorder over the delicate, somehow vulnerable city at its feet. I know I have a prejudice, having been brought up with my ancestors' rigid codes of belief, but the glassworks vexes me nonetheless. I always feel much more comfortable under the ancient and venerated curvatures of the monument in which I sat.

My study of history began in this city, and when I earned my fortune I set up a second residence here, where I do work in the early part of each day. I don't mind being away from my home in

the north as long as I know I can easily return there and tend to my family's spring. Wherever there is freedom I am home, and the political unrest boiling over in the northern capital has an unpleasant way of spilling over into everyday life, so I am glad of the occasional respite. In fact I had planned to stay here much longer than I now anticipated.

My personal life has been a bit of a wasteland these days, I have to admit. I have a bad habit of forming my friendships from a light, weak substance and so have a wide but shallow band of acquaintances, all with busy lives conducted in far-flung places. It's the unfortunate way my life has panned out, so I'm alone most of the time, though I am well connected in a variety of circles.

My last encounter with a woman turned out so badly that I regretted ever having gotten involved. With most I have a degree of success, and even a feeling of having come away with something, be it a piece of another's soul, or a more concrete souvenir. But this woman was of so inhuman a caliber, and of such a robotic nature, that I could gain no sort of ground or closeness, and almost lost myself in the end. I concluded that one powerful being cannot effectively form a union with another without one or the other being eclipsed, and eventually consumed. I have been months in recovering. Work heals me, and my place in the world makes sense again. I'm bored of solitude once more.

What I hope for from Sarah is an experience of redemption. From her letters I can see her so clearly that I feel safe in resting my hopes on her. In short, the weight of the life I live can't be supported alone, and I need another to take up the edges of the sailcloth, and be a part of all that is to take place.

I contemplated the meeting that was to occur, and wondered at how much I could expect from it. Would Sarah as well be willing to travel away and escape the dust as I was anxious to do, or would she need time to establish trust in my purposes? I could not stand many more days in the city with the impending storm.