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ALISON RUTH

SPELLBOUND

Kristin let the word spellbinding float with her, from the opalescent bathwater to the opened window, to the mirror that reflected the sky. Translucent powder in a jar, cotton balls tumbling, her blush from the heated water or anticipation. There was not so much to get ready for before, and now there was: $x + 1$ could disturb a universe. Crystal bottle of perfume, a champagne glass, a palette of nude eyeshadows, each one increasing in paleness, to enhance eyes that needed no brush of sparkle across the lid. The soul station broadcast from a far-away city, a far-off time, when hair was roller-set and eyeshadows in the color of the rainbow. Music was the only way to time travel, but tonight she would be nowhere else but the date on the calendar, marked neither by an X (like a prison sentence) nor a circle (like an company conference) but a heart (like a teenager's notebook). She left the bathroom in a shimmer of steam and a scent of Daisy Dream, a watermark of footprints that seemed more fairy than human. Spellbinding.

Frankie knelt towards a soundless distance. Some ripped out sod, the tread of boots, raked free of shells. A day moon, pale against blue, reminded him of daylight fading; its target shape, the futility of trying to hit a bullseye. His ears were protected from cacophony, his eyes from glare, so that all he had to achieve was $\text{distance} \div \text{time} = \text{velocity}$. His rifle

was designed at a supersonic range, so around a thousand ft per second per bullet. He admired the mind of the physicist who realized shock waves would slow a bullet down. At what price accuracy? More of a chance to live? He was delving into statistics again, damn his own shockwaved brain. His rifle rattled in his hand, but in fairness, it was his mind that was reverberating, headphones and sunglasses be damned.

Kristin dolled her up with a curling iron, a light hand with the Final Net. She pierced opals in her ears, stones that each burned with their own small fire. The soul music followed her into her room, candle flame smoke whispering up the walls, a bed draped with lace. A smaller mirror here, but larger windows, a glass for the fields and the twilight. If she had time she would think about space, but she did not, she had only time to think about her T shirt and jeans, her hair and her face, her sandals and opals. But between the twirl of a comb and the unscrew of a gloss, she ran through their future conversations, like superflash fictions. “Where do you want to go?” he would ask, and her reply, “Anywhere.” It was not trite because it was happening to her. Her fiction could be moss and fresh leaves, but her romance would be overbred hothouse roses.

Frankie picked his rifle up. He had started to see shadows crossing the open field, as if people were strolling, oblivious to the hailstorm of fire around them. He was not only hitting other targets, but to avoid these specters, he was aiming away from his own. These are blocks of wood. They are not human. But it may have been waving branches, passing clouds, that tricked his flawed eyesight away from his post. At

what did he shoot? He was in some kind of silent movie, the grays of the scenery and the muteness of the surroundings. A fellow trainee seemed to roll his eyes at his inaccuracies, but his shells were flying to the ground uninterrupted, and he would not interrupt his own pointblank practice to assist the chaos of his colleague. Indeed, Frankie had studied chaos theory, and the patterns of his shots had begun to randomize. They'd have to close the range, or at least tell everyone to duck. Was not shooting against the pattern of the universe anyway? Did it not go against its theory of natural order? His arm began to shake, but whether it was his exhaustion or his fear, he could not tell. He set the rifle down and winced from it as if it were a living thing.

Kristin kicked gravel from the drive, with the sole of a sandal. The clouds had descended, beading the parked car, the lawn, her face, with dew. Everything shone gray. She waited for Frankie's car to crest the hill; her house was at its apex, a winding wooden fence led to the side garden, the arbor twined with antique vines, the skyblue clematis that wove its way toward the clutches of blue grapes. She would meet Frankie at the driver's side door. But first, some flowers for her hair. She spiked their stems into the braids at her crown, while her mother's radio murmured open-air opera from her kitchen. The soundwaves tricked the fog, arias airy in her ear, and arpeggios sent sailing over the hills.

Frankie stashed his rifle in the backseat, long before the others left. He'd trudged to the parking lot, his eye on the path as if the gravel reflected his defeat. His colleagues were far too engrossed in firing to

notice that he was gone, only that their targets were not being shot at from rows over. Their shots were swift and accurate; they had not only clearly mastered velocity, but triumphed over chaos theory, no matter how fast their rifles shot. They would crow over Styrofoam coffee cups tomorrow, but Frankie would ignore them. He would not admit he was too scared to shoot well. Would it not be more dangerous to shoot inaccurately? He ordered himself to stand down. He ordered himself to stand down. We're not taking any questions now.

Frankie drove with the parking lights on, windshield wipers intermittent, defroster on, seat forward. The radio broadcast a baseball game with that AM echo. Was this because it was an electrical image of sound? He imagined the peaceful heartbeat of soundwaves and just let the balls and strikes wipe away. The rifle lay spent and silent and unloaded. He preferred the steering wheel.

Kristin caught the parking lights peering around the curve of hill. The gray had been darkening, the blues of the flowers had deepened too. She waved, like she was her own electrical signal.

Frankie pulled over, braked, let himself out, locked the rifle in. He was still jammed with images of electrical signals, so must lower his voice. He would broadcast nothing except to her.

“You're shaking.” Displacing fog as she took his hand.

“I'm tired.” The rifle sneered from the back seat. He turned his back to the car.

“What are you hiding?” She leaned over his shoulder, the window

tinted by menace.

“Just a gun.”

“Target practice.”

“I can’t call it practice.”

Cloud-faced. “Why?”

“I can’t hit for nothing.”

“Why do you need to?”

“Part of the job.”

“Maybe you can use other weapons.”

“Like a Taser?”

She half-smiled. “No, like reason.”

“You can’t stop a guy on PCP even with a gun.”

“How many guys are on PCP nowadays?”

“It’s about defense.”

“Maybe your offense is better.”

“I’ll need to drop out of the Academy.”

“Over a gun?” She wiped the window down, trying to see it amidst the cans of Coke and coffee cups. “Oh, that kind of gun.”

“Do you see?”

He pushed up his sleeve, bruised all the way up his arm. “Pretty.”

“Each shot is a bruise.”

“Pretty much.” He rolled back his sleeve; these bruises were no badges. “The cop shows, they don’t show what it’s like.”

“Did the targets morph into people?”

“Yes.”

“You stopped to think before you fired.”

“That’s bad.”

“That’s some part of your brain that takes over.”

“The wrong part of my brain.”

“That’s debatable.”

“Debate it?”

“No. You’re wrong. It’s the right part of your brain.”

“Why won’t it protect me?”

“Because you’re not thinking of yourself.”

“That goes against nature.”

She could’ve lain him down on the lawn. She held out her hand.

“What do you want?”

“Your keys.”

He stared up at her house, the wraparound porch, the lights on in the kitchen, the clouds at the second floor. “Do you want me to stay?”

She took his keys from his palm, and led him up the hill. The summer grass was long enough to brush their ankles, and they dipped in and out of each other’s vision as the fog breathed them along their way.