

Five Vignettes, a tribute to a Gene Wolfe novel, part Deux
by SiriusDF

Thursday Prompt for 05/04/2023

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1. Crime and Punishment

No trial was held. An Inquest found me guilty of Patricide. With Monsieur dead and my conviction, the Estate passed to Aunt Naomi. The presiding bureaucrat handed down the sentence, pronouncing that time would pass on the wings of birds. Instead of a dungeon, incarceration would take place in a valley encampment within the Vermilion mountains. A fence-less prison for those who committed various political offenses or offenders with high born status such as myself.

No memories remain of my journey up to the mountain prison camp. Only that first meeting with reprogrammed war bots serving as guards. Proportioned like fennecs, with helmeted round heads, triangular ears, barrel shaped bodies, portal eyes and fake metal teeth for intimidation. They towered taller than elephants, striding about on two legs; carrying intimidating weapons as long as a sight hound's height.



Their instructions to us were simple. Detainees will work when season and weather allowed. Rations and water would be fed to us in camp or at work sites. No social gatherings at the stone lean-tos where we slept were permitted and any escape attempts would be met with death.

A few did try. The bot guards would race across the mountain slopes swifter than a falcon and scramble up canyon outcrops like monkeys in pursuit, cutting down the would be escapees with beamed weapons. Corpses dragged back into camp and unceremoniously burnt upon a pyre.

Being programmed with a precise mixture of severity and fairness, the fennec like metal guards were surprisingly absent of brutality or favoritism that hired flesh and blood guards would partake. Only those well dressed canines of politics and finance who ran our Government would speak of kindness and cruelty behind shark eyed, fang studded smiles.

During spring and summer seasons, we were marched up the slopes to gather hummock grass for baling. Or down into the taiga pines to cut and collect firewood during the Fall. Stacking the thin logs into cords for collection. Those were the times when we could converse and swap stories while laboring under the sun, rain or wind. Sometimes plans would be hatched to escape or roll a boulder down upon a metal guard. But those plans never came to pass.

Rations were heated, pressed cakes. Some green, a few red, others yellow. Along with tepid, herbal laced water in bowls. Night time would find myself shivering alone, even in the summer under a cloak within a stone lean-to. The true enemies were the various respiratory and sanitary diseases that stalked the camp during winters. A time when food shipments became erratic and the guards rationed what was available. Being powered by nuclear fires, they had no need for sustenance.

This was the time when lips cracked and teeth skewed loose from malnutrition. Those wise enough to collect twik bush twigs in the Fall gnawed the stems, sucking out vitamin charged sap; keeping their gums and teeth intact. Not being allowed to converse in groups, some would pass the time speaking one sidedly to a guard or two who would tower over the talker telling of home, local foods, siblings, spouses, bawdy stories and conquered loves. Their metal heads cocked, antenna dish ears seemingly at attention and listening. But never replying.

If one took ill, death would either close in or one would recover without memory of the passing weeks. Moss grew during the Spring on north facing feldspar boulders. And then retreated during winters in a rhythm of slow breath. Winter deaths and newcomers arriving in the waning and waxing of the mossy seasons.

2. Discharge

Time fluttered its wings. On a spring morning, I gazed hungrily at a forest Dactyl perched on a nearby stone lean-to. It flew off when a guard lumbered up to me. Towering above, growling softly with orders for me to gather my cloak and a few provisions for a march down the valley. No reason given. We set off, I was allowed to lead the way. A tall, emancipated sight hound in rags and cloak, carrying a small bag. Taking directions from a huge metallic fennec war bot treading behind.

On the way, sleet battered my hide when a storm roared over a pass. Taking hasty shelter within a ringed stone cairn, surrounded by cloudy streaks racing forth, lighting bolts skewering sideways. The fennec bot squatted, sheltering me from the worst of the sleet and gale. The storm abated and orders given to march.

The sun had set behind the peaks, when we reached a camp behind a tall, stranded fence that was guarded not by bots, but by well fed sight hounds in uniforms. Stunned, I watched them dismiss my metallic escort who marched off. I was taken into a tub filled with regent to kill the fleas and mites, while my raggedy clothes were burnt. Overalls given to wear. Then, led to a bench to sit while someone placed a bowl of soup and a sliced baguette next to me. Fangs flashing while I devoured bread and soup. Another guard came forth, asking me questions. Hoarse, I answered my name. Speech returning slowly as I stuttered answers to questions regarding my status and sentence.

A night spent upon a cloth bunk under a tent roof. At Dawn, shaken awake by a guard and marched into a smaller, fenced compound. Another guard came up and began reading out loud from a scroll of commutation. It did not seem real that this was my last day of sentence. Even after a rough set of street clothes were given to me in exchange for the overalls. Then, I found myself led to a mule cart. The gates opened, the drover and myself rode the cart that wended its way slowly down the foothills into a country of subtropical, broad leaved trees and flowers that merged into the harbor city of Imitirit. Home.

3. Aftermath

In a street swarming with canines, I stumbled off the mule cart when it stopped at last by the Magistrate Court. Only then, did I notice a date on a news bulletin posted on a board.

Nine years had passed. I had turned eighteen when I was sentenced for killing Monsieur, my 'father'. Although I was twenty-seven, a glance at my reflection in a window told of a tall eared, piebald Ibizan sight hound with a white ring around a brown snout, arthritic limbs and wrinkled forehead. I felt like I was over forty. The last days of Youth had indeed flown away.

A metallic, exosuit being approached from my left. Having no helmet above shoulders, a curved screen projected the holographic image of an Ibizan hound head and ears. Yelping with joy, I wrapped my arms around the name plated trunk of 2.2 meter tall Mr. Synapse. My tail wagging wildly, while the tailless Mr. Synapse's holographic head sparkled and flickered like static; only extreme emotion caused this.

My sense of direction had corroded during my confinement. Fortunately, Mr. Synapse hired a cart and drover for me. We set off, Mr. Synapse striding next to the cart. Eventually, coming to a now recognizable lane that led to the lengthy walls enclosing The Estate.

Mr Synapse swiveled his hologram head towards me, "I sent letters to your work camp. Did you ever receive them?"

I shook my head, the robotic Servitor's ears folded.

"The sad news is our Aunt Naomi died six years ago," Mr. Synapse said.

Given her age, that didn't surprise me, "What happened afterward"?

By now, the imposing main house and roof could be seen, seemingly faded in the sun. Mr Synapse paused in his reply as the cart halted. After paying the carter, I noticed Mr. Synapse approaching the Estate entry gate, now locked with an imposing chain and lock-set. Once, a merely guarded gate never locked in my 'father's ' time.

He unlocked the gate, beckoning me to come in. I arrived to find the Estate and distant buildings with flaking walls, some clearly dismantled, masonry in need of repair, boarded windows. The pathways, gardens and lawns forested in weeds. The iron Cerberus sculpture with his three wolfen heads still stood by the side garden, coated in moss.

Mr. Synapse finally replied to my query, "Aunt Naomi drained the accounts before she passed away. The servants, lab workers and entertainment cortege were dismissed. Her Will designated me as sole caretaker with a small stipend to maintain my mechanics."

4. Reclaiming

Aunt Naomi had left the Estate in physical and financial disorder. She had spent the remaining funds excavating here and there for a supposed treasure hoard, never finding it. Being of the exact mind as my 'father', I knew he had spent it all on lab apparatus, experiments and ruinous bribes.

A few days later, a visitor arrived at the gate. Phaedrea! Now ten years older, the modestly dressed greyhound shyly inquired if she could be employed in some capacity. The former debutante's marriage to a merchant had failed, leaving her in arrears. She was welcomed to help, but payment would be postponed until Estate income could be established. She accepted. Partner in all things. At first, Money was tight. But word of my release along with the Estate's lauded reputation brought forth female Demimondaines willing to sell and males seeking entertainment. Initially all that was done was to introduce them to each other.

The growing revenue launched many changes. From building repairs, hiring new servants, entertainment staff and now lab attendants for producing recreational pharmaceuticals. New garden paths, replacing of mythical statues, the iron, three headed dog cleaned and a new service; cybernetic surgical mods, upgrades and enhancements for female entertainers.

The former office in the Estate's nucleus underwent changes. Dim paneling replaced with brighter stucco, stain glass letting in more light than the curtained window. The dusty oil painting of Cerberus replaced by a kinsugi artist's rework of a haunting Kerberos portrait. Painted upon a meter square window, depicting a two legged dog in flowing mane, kneeling in stunned contemplation as dissolving flesh is pulled forth like strands. One head contemplating, another denying and the last howling in pain. Then, the Kinsugi artist carefully broke the large pane into large fragments. Reassembling with thick seams of gold lacquered glue.



No attempts to reclaim the Old, but move on from the Past.

5. Interview

By the beat of time's wings, six years have gone by. My title is Monsieur. Mr. Synapse serves as always. Phaedria lives with us, holding the title of Steward.

In the labor of days, I've attempted to write an account of myself. To disclose myself to myself. And found after all those years of attempting to solve the mystery of thyself; there was no solution to uncover, only recognition that one's Essence was akin to reassembled Kintsugi crockery. Artfully joined webs of annealed lacquer for memory and aurum lined dreams. But instead of a shattered whole, twas three disparate, brittle souls. Monsieur, Mr. Synapse and Aunt Naomi then. Phaedrea now.

Last night, while working in the genetics lab next to my office, Phaedrea entered the office. Gathering up the satchel, I opened the secondary door. She had the pup with her. I motioned her to leave. The door shut. The tall eared, spindly pup with identical fur patterns stood silent. We stared into each other's eyes of the same color. Fathoming.

Pointing to the sofa by the window, I barked, "Six! Je veux que tu t'assoies!"

Removing the scalp electrodes and annealing unit from the satchel, I added, "Six is the name I shall call you!"

Someday they'll want us.