

Triangulation of Memory

by RSR

People stared at the heavy mask on his face and laughed at the feral cringe in his step. “How Gothic,” they whispered, falling back into the shadows with the gentle clink of green glowing glass goblets, “and without any redeeming irony.”

The Banik slave was delivered with a shove to the feet of a man in shiny snake skin leather, a suit of glittering black in the smoky darkness, like the eyes of a hungry slithering beast. The man turned to his companion, a tall girl with long red hair shaped into angles around her face and full lips, the sort that the more jaded patrons liked to lick Alaxerian floater-dust from just before slumping back into the cushions, helpless and trembling. Perhaps someone had; her eyes held a liquid, unfocused look, as if, in idly wetting her lips or sipping her drink, she'd ingested a small amount of the drug, the remnants someone else's tongue had missed or a few grains that had dissolved into her lipstick.

“You see, Niem,” said Scorpius, in a voice like sugar cubes melting in warm raslak, “how even the most low of creatures can be of value, *if* they are sufficiently rare.” He watched with attentive, sunken eyes as Stark reacted slowly to the dismissal of his guards.

As the guards retreated, Stark, still crouching on the floor, turned his head to look around him. Eyes watched him, from the darkened recesses and the velvety-cushioned booths, from behind the haze in the air. Smells mingled, both familiar and unfamiliar to him. The soft, sweet, musky smell of ossoh scent filled the room with pheromones and a lazy, distant feel of sex, and mixed with the pungent, almost narcotic, perfume of jikset flowers, which bloomed, small and perfectly-formed, like little drops of ivory every nine cycles. Eyes watched him, but only in glances, not long enough to give him more thought than any other decorative ornament in the room, like the flickering lanterns, or the girls holding them, living statues dressed in intricate, glittering designs painted onto their skin.

The room was full of the beautiful and the rich, and their toys, and he was neither beautiful nor rich, and so he stayed still at Scorpius's feet. He had to know, though, because broken toys are so easily discarded. He looked up at this man, this exotic, slithering creature, with a child's artlessness; as if he had learned vulnerability young, but not the deferential posture an adult used with the man who owned him. “But what do you want from me?”

Scorpius looked down silently, placing a finger under Stark's chin. “What is your *name*, slave?”

“Stark,” he said softly, and swallowed hard, “my name is Stark.”

“So you're my new Stykera.” Scorpius lingered over the words, tasting them on his tongue. He was looking, not at Stark, but at something distant, perhaps some distant day, some distant destiny.

Stark's eye widened in confusion and darted around nervously. “Uh... yes.”

Scorpius put a hand on the slave's head, stroking the short blond fuzz. With something approaching wonder, he turned to his assistant. “He's such an innocent, Niem.”

And then things started to spin. Stop the clock. Turn it back.

The world stopped spinning, forming shapes out of nothingness, and Stark blinked to hold it steady. When he realized where he was, he might have wished he could make it all spin back into nothingness again, if only it weren't so dangerous to be unconscious in this place.

Four figures clad in black stood in a halo of light coming from the doorway. “You need a real test of your skill, my dear,” said Scorpius. “And I need a better test of my Chair.” He made an expansive gesture with his arms, a grandiose motion heavy with irony in the filth and decay of the slave pens. “A Banik Stykera should do the trick. You select one, my dear, and have him delivered to the club this evening. I should return to our hosts and pay my respects.” He turns to the girl with a toothy smile. “My last respects.” With a wave of his hand, the two Peacekeepers with Scorpius and his assistant broke ranks and stood one to either side of the officers. Scorpius turned to leave, followed by his black-clad shadow.

“Oh, and Niem,” he said, turning around once he reached the door, “be sure to get a strong one. It'd be a shame to have to start over in a few months, simply because the merchandise is poor.”

From this distance, Stark saw the four figures break into two groups, one of which left and the other of which walked into the warehouse, towards the slave pens. Niem carefully stepped along the raised metal grate walkway between the pens, followed by her Peacekeeper guard.

As she came nearer, Stark heard a whisper in the back of his head, buzzing and taunting him just outside his hearing. It was a familiar voice, but he didn't know whose, and he forced it back into silence deep in his mind, buried with the voices of the dead. He craned his head to watch her approach, red hair and black-clad hips swaying. Curious, just curious. That was all. You know, interested. He looked around, and saw the Baniks around him ignoring her, feigning sleep, keeping their heads facing the dirt. His heart sank to see it; hundreds of his people, not living at all, just waiting to die here in the slave pens without ever looking up. Not him. He looked back up at Niem, his eye following

her with interest.

He was surprised when she reached over and put a hand on his face, saying “This one,” although he shouldn't have been; his was the one visible face in a sea of dirt and brown and bodies. But it wasn't the first time an attractive woman had picked him out of a slave pen, not even the second. They were curious about Stykera, sometimes. It usually meant a temporary reprieve from this, from the dirt and the squalor and the pain. And he'd return to the pens, to be rotated back to the slave huts, a few days later, or maybe a few weekens later, exhausted in new ways and rested in the old ones, better able to soothe the pain around him after a short break from losing himself in it day after day. He smiled nervously at Niem.

After she left, the voice came back, buzzing and whispering, despite his best efforts to quiet it. “Don't attract attention,” it murmured, “keep your head down, look like the others, be a part of the dirt and huddle down.” He knew that voice. Knew it, knew it, *knew* it. It pressed louder into his head, wouldn't leave him, buzzed angrily. Stop it. Stop, won't stop, louder, his voice, *his voice*, louder, jumbling his thoughts, a roar in his brain.

Stop the clock. Fast forward.

The deafening roar in his head started to fade, leaving him disoriented, with words he couldn't identify ringing in his ears. Stark was still on the floor, but someone had handed him a drink, strong and bitter, the flavor of the tiny orket berries that he remembered picking from hedgerows on summer nights thirty, maybe forty cycles ago. He stared at the goblet blankly for a few moments, trying to sift bits of reality from the sound in his head. When he realized what it was, he gulped a sip of it, smooth and burning, and raised his head to look around the room.

“And the condemned ate a hearty meal,” said Scorpius, looking down at him with a hint of amusement. “Or drank one, at any rate. It'll be the last he tastes of anything like freedom for some time.” He flags down a waiter and looks at Niem. “Then, of course, I shall feed him to the Aurora Chair, and *it* shall have a hearty meal. Perhaps it will grow to like the taste of Stykera.”

Something was wrong. The thick taste of orket berries was still in his mouth, and he couldn't shake the disorientation or the spinning, and the voices (so many voices, so many) came at him with every flurry of metallic glitter. Glitter, glitter, where... glitter wafting into the room on currents created by androgynous Nebari with fans, fans made of soft pale plumes (*where am I going, Stykera?* poor thing, poor thing, somewhere good, yes, somewhere good, we'll all go somewhere good), plumes of soft pale smoke, the color of a Nebari's belly, wafting through the room under flickering points of light (*no! oh, by the Light, make it stop... no!* no, no, no, stop, please, there, yes, there), light as air, the room moved around him, people and things and sounds wafting, yes, people shifting,

suddenly occupying spaces they weren't mere moments ago. Move, move, need to move. Stark leapt up, staggering backwards as he did.

Niem looked at Scorpius uncertainly. "Sir, this isn't what happened." Her voice sounded distant, far-away, and a young officer lifted back her hair and licked her ear slowly. (*What do I do, Stykera? How do I... you know... Just lie back and think of El'ath, and it'll all be over soon.*) The scent of leather and alcohol swirled... this isn't what happened, she said, not what happened. Focus.

"It is, it is! Just *like* this. Real." Stark pushed the table violently, and giggled when she jumped. "See? This is real." Three microts later, nausea hit as the things he could see from his left eye disconnected from the reflections he could sense from where his right eye used to be, and he doubled over. Focus. Keep it together. The room lurched and swirled, and the sound of laughter and glass stretched out. The hazy cloud of ossoh scent soured; the soft, sweet, musky scent of pheromones as it smelled the morning after. A crash; and a woman screamed.

(No, no, not this one again - *Slave, convey me!* - raspy, burning Scarran, go! Just go!) Scarran, in his head, no, no, focus, focus. Scorpius took a drink from a young Sebacean dressed as a mime and swigged it with unusually delicate abandon. "They say if you remember this place, Niem, you were never here."

Scorpius rounded quickly on Niem. "Shut it off," he said with disgust, indicating the glowing screen mounted on the front of the Chair. "I know how this fairy tale ends."

The Peacekeepers threw him back into a filthy cell that smelled of mold and piss and sweat. "How Gothic," thought Stark, "and without any redeeming irony." He laughed hysterically to ward off tears that came anyway, and his new temporary cell-mate looked startled just before he was hauled away, struggling, to take Stark's place in the Chair.