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UNDERTOW

A Therapy in Nine Sessions



CHEW Z

— A ROYA PUBLICATION —

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Printed in the Reach

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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The dining room, on the fourth visit. It had not been there on the first.

SYNOPSIS

Dr. Halcyon is a Shaper — a therapist who, through a drug called Le-The, can enter a patient's mind directly and walk them down through the layers of the self: the reflective surface, the culture-built current beneath it, and, at the very bottom, the untouched riverbed where a person's original wound was first carved. The method traces back to a private ritual among old friends: a confession circle, where each person names two flaws in another too costly to admit alone.

Two patients test him past anything his training accounted for. Eileen, a blind psychologist who has never once used sight to build her inner world, wants Halcyon to train her as a Shaper herself — but reaching the bottom of her own river forms a whirlpool that pulls her therapist down with her. And the Institute takes on a patient so dangerous three other clinics have already refused him: a man whose own mind has designated him, from his intake scan alone, Undertow.

Undertow is a psychological fable, heavily indebted to the tradition of Roger Zelazny's *The Dream Master*, about what waits at the bottom of a mind that has never been fully witnessed — and about the therapist who has to learn, the hard way, that the water can take him too.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began as a love letter to a novel I did not write. Roger Zelazny built, in a few hundred spare, mythic pages, an idea I have never stopped turning over: that the unconscious is not a filing cabinet to be interpreted from the outside, but a country, with weather and its own native dangers, and the only honest way to treat it is to actually go there. Zelazny named his own blind protagonist Eileen Shallot, and I don't think that spelling was an accident. Tennyson's Lady of Shalott is cursed to see the world only through a mirror, weaving what she sees into a tapestry, forbidden from ever looking at Camelot directly. I borrowed that debt a second time, on purpose, because the poem asks us to find something beautiful in a woman dying the moment she finally looks at reality unmediated, and I have never accepted that ending as anything other than a threat dressed up as a tragedy. This book is my attempt to write the version where looking directly at the truth costs her everything except her life.

I use the river the way Halcyon does with his patients — as a way of talking, not a map. Surface, current, and the ground underneath old enough that it stopped feeling like something that happened to you and started feeling like the shape of the container itself. It's a useful analogy for exactly as long as you remember it's an analogy, and dangerous the moment you start trusting it more than the person standing in front of you — which is, not coincidentally, the exact mistake the book is actually about.

What I wanted to sit with, writing Halcyon, was the vertigo of a guide who forgets he's also standing in the water. He spends fifteen years believing his own footing is the one fixed point in every session. The whole book is an argument that no such fixed point exists — that the reason anyone can walk another person down to themselves is never that they stand outside the current, but that they've already, at some cost, been down to their own.

— Chew Z.

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SESSION I

The Circle

There were five of them, and one lamp, turned low enough that faces became mostly suggestion — the idea of a jaw, the rumor of an eye. Nobody had ever said out loud that the dark was load-bearing. Nobody had to. You cannot do this under a light bright enough to be witnessed by. Confession needs shadow the way a wound needs a scab: not to hide it, just to keep the air off it long enough for the truth to actually take. “Two flaws,” Marguerite said, the way she said it every year, on the anniversary they’d stopped calling an anniversary because the word made it sound like something worth celebrating. “Not the ones you already know how to apologize for. Those are just party tricks. I want the other two. The ones somebody else has to say back to you before you’ll admit you own them.”

Halcyon had sat in this circle eleven times before this one. It had never once gotten easier, and he had come, slowly, to understand that the not-getting-easier was the entire mechanism, not a flaw in it. Easy confession is just performance with better lighting. This wasn’t that. This was surgery with the lights off and no anesthetic, performed by people who loved you too much to numb the exact spot they were about to cut.

“I’ll go,” said Ansel, because Ansel always went first — the way some men insist on walking point through a door they’re afraid of, so no one behind them has to be

the one who flinches first. He didn’t look at anyone when he said it. “You’re a coward about the things that would actually cost you something. And you’ve built an entire personality out of being generous with the things that wouldn’t. You’ll give a stranger the coat off your back. You have never once given anyone in this room the truth when it was inconvenient.”

Nobody flinched. Flinching was for people who hadn’t yet learned that the circle only worked if you let the sentence go all the way down before you decided whether it was true. You could hear

Ansel's own breath change, though — the specific ragged catch of a man who has just watched a knife go into somebody else and felt it in his own hand.

He sat with it a long five seconds. You could watch his face do the arithmetic — not defensiveness, not yet, just the honest, private work of a man checking a ledger he'd spent years avoiding. "Yes," he said finally. Nothing else. Yes was the whole of what the circle asked for, and it cost exactly as much as it looked like it cost.

It went around, and it did not get gentler. Marguerite was told she loved people the way you love a view from a hotel balcony — arranged at a fixed, flattering distance, precisely so it could never get close enough to disappoint her by being ordinary, by having bad breath, by needing something from her at two in the morning. Devi was told he collected other people's crises the way other men collected watches — wound them, admired them, wore them where people could see — because a crisis that belonged to someone else let him feel indispensable without ever having to survive one of his own. Priya was told, by Marguerite, so quietly it barely made it across the circle, that her kindness came

itemized, and she never once let anyone see the invoice until the exact moment they failed to pay it.

Priya's hands were shaking by the end of that one. Nobody moved to comfort her. That, too, was the rule, unspoken, iron: comfort was for after. During, you let the wound breathe.

And then it was Halcyon's turn to receive, and the room did the thing it always did the year it got to him — went a half-degree colder, because the man whose entire profession was switching on the light in other people's darkest rooms was, by unanimous unspoken agreement, the hardest one in the circle to read back. You do not get to spend your whole life diagnosing other people's blindness without becoming, somewhere along the way, spectacularly good at hiding your own.

"You've built a life," Devi said, slowly, choosing each word the way you choose a foothold on a slope you don't entirely trust, "out of walking into other people's darkest rooms and turning the light on for them. And I don't think you've ever once let anyone do that for

you. I think you built the whole profession so you'd never have to be the one on the table. I think you'd rather drown a stranger in your own hands, professionally, with a license, than let one person in this room see you flinch."

The lamp hissed. Somewhere outside, a car went by, ordinary, oblivious, carrying someone who had never once had to sit in a room like this and feel the truest sentence anyone had ever built for them go in low, under the ribs, and stay there.

"Yes," Halcyon said, and understood, saying it, that the word was going to cost him considerably more than it had cost anyone else in the circle that night, though he

would not understand exactly how much more for a long time yet.

He built the Institute two years later, in the city of Confluence, on the bank where the Tessel and the Auroth rivers met and briefly, visibly, refused to blend, two currents of different color running side by side in the same channel for nearly half a mile before the water finally consented to become one thing. He liked the view from the windows. He told himself, and mostly believed it, that the circle had simply given him the idea for the Institute's method. It would be longer still before he admitted that the circle had given him something closer to a wound he'd spent every year since trying to turn into a discipline precise enough to no longer feel like one.

SESSION II

The Shaper

The technology had a clinical name nobody used and a nickname everybody did. Neuroparticipation. Shaping, on the street, in the waiting rooms, in the hushed, half-joking way patients referred to what was about to happen to them, the way you'd refer to surgery you weren't sure you'd wake up from. "I sometimes describe the mind as a river, to new patients," Halcyon would say, "because it's the fastest way to make an unmappable thing feel like something you can stand beside without panicking. There's a surface — the self you show at dinner parties, opinions and taste, real but thin, mostly reflection. Under that, a current — the self your culture built, your family built, brick by well-intentioned brick, so early it feels like bedrock instead of architecture. Most good therapy gets you that far down, and that's not nothing. Underneath the current, there's a floor. The oldest ground. The place a person's actual shape was first laid down, before they were old enough to consent to being shaped at all."

He always added the same caveat, because he'd learned, early, that patients who mistook the metaphor for the territory tended to make dangerous assumptions about how gently the territory would treat them. "It's a way of talking, not a map. The actual place doesn't have banks or currents. It has whatever a given mind has built to survive in, and every mind builds something different, and the analogy stops being useful the

moment you start trusting it more than you trust the person standing in front of you."

The drug made a single session possible where unassisted work used to take the better part of a year. They called it Le-The, spelled that way on purpose, by a research chemist with a classical education and a dark sense of humor, because everyone in the field understood exactly which river she meant by it, and precisely how much forgetting a person had to be willing to risk in order to be shown what they'd built underneath themselves.

"It doesn't sedate you," Halcyon told new patients, holding the small clouded vial up to the light the way you'd show someone a diagnosis rather than a threat. "It lowers your guard against your own depth. That's all. Everything you meet down there is real. It was always real. Le-The just makes it possible to stay in the room with it long enough to see it clearly."

Most patients nodded, the way people nod at things they've decided to trust because the alternative — sitting a moment longer with how much they didn't understand — was worse. A handful asked better questions. Fewer still asked the only question that actually mattered, which was not is it safe but is it safe for you, meaning him, meaning the Shaper standing beside them with no drug of his own to hold him steady, nothing but training and a professional confidence that had never yet been tested against a mind strong enough to actually want him gone.

Nobody asked what the work did to a Shaper's body, over years, and Halcyon had stopped volunteering it. The official literature called it cumulative sympathetic

strain and left it there, the way a coroner's report says blunt trauma and leaves out what a skull actually sounds like doing it. What it meant, in practice, was this: his hands had gone faintly, permanently cold sometime in his fourth year, the capillaries in his fingertips apparently deciding, after enough sessions spent walking other people's nervous systems, that his own extremities were an expense the budget could no longer justify. He bled easily now, from the smallest cuts, a thin bright red that took its time clotting, and a nurse at his own annual screening had once asked, not unkindly, whether he'd noticed how much thinner his blood had gotten, as though some part of him had quietly volunteered itself as a more permeable membrane, better at letting things through, worse at keeping anything in. He had learned to stop looking too closely at his own reflection after a long week of deep work, because for an hour or two afterward his face did something he had never found a clean clinical word for — a kind of lag, his own expressions arriving a half-second behind whatever he actually felt, as though the wiring between the inside of him and the outside of

him had been used so hard, so recently, that it needed time to remember which signals belonged to which end.

The real danger, the one Halcyon rarely explained in full on a first visit, had nothing to do with rivers at all. It was this: a Shaper does not simply witness what's already there. The moment he builds a shared dreaming-space with a patient, some part of his own sensory vocabulary inevitably leaks into the construction — light, geometry, the unconscious assumption that a room has walls you can see. For most patients this leakage was harmless, a kind of accent. For a patient whose mind had never once organized itself around sight, it was something closer to

an invasive language, capable, if a Shaper was careless or arrogant or simply in a hurry, of overwriting categories that had never existed in that mind to begin with — not describing the person differently, but quietly reorganizing the foundation underneath them, the way a foreign grammar, forced early enough and hard enough, can replace a native one instead of merely sitting beside it.

Building a world for a sighted patient was, when he was honest about it, closer to translation than invention — you were mostly just giving shape to categories the patient had already spent a lifetime assembling on their own. Building one for Eileen was something else entirely, and the training for it did not exist yet in any textbook, because so few blind minds had ever survived deep enough into a session for anyone to write the textbook. He had to relearn, almost from nothing, what a world was even made of, once you took light out of the recipe.

Distance, for instance, could not be shown. It had to be heard — the specific way a voice changes shape depending on what it's bouncing off of, a held note thinning against an open field and thickening against a nearer wall, so that a corridor could be built entirely out of the way sound behaved inside it, no different in principle from the echolocation a bat or a blind woman with a cane had been quietly practicing her whole life without anyone calling it architecture. Halcyon learned to build hallways the way you'd tune an instrument, listening for the exact reverb that told a mind this space is long or this space is small and close and safe, and he came

to understand, slowly, humbly, that Eileen had been reading rooms this way since childhood with a

precision his own eyes had never once required him to develop.

Identity had to be built out of texture and temperature rather than a face. Every figure he shaped for her carried what the early literature, in the one paper that existed on the subject, clumsily called a grain — a signature combination of warmth, weight, and the particular resistance a surface gave back when touched, so that two people could stand in the same dark and never once be confused for each other, the way you'd never confuse burlap for silk with your eyes closed. He built the Institute's own walls, in her sessions, out of a stone that stayed one degree cooler than skin, specifically so her hands would always know, instantly, without asking, which parts of a room were the room and which parts were a person standing in it.

What he could not yet build, in those first sessions, was color — and he knew it, in the specific unglamorous way you know the exact shape of your own ignorance once you have spent long enough failing at the edges of it. Every attempt he made translated a sighted memory secondhand, the very crime the poem had spent thirty years teaching her to survive without ever once naming it as a crime, and every time he tried, her dreaming-space did the thing it always did when he brought something borrowed into it without meaning to: it went very slightly cold, the way a room goes cold when a guest has overstayed a welcome nobody quite has the courage to withdraw. He put the problem down that first year, the way you put down a lock you do not yet have the right key for. He did not know yet that the key would not come from his own training at all, but from a poem, and a night at his own kitchen table, and a woman patient enough to wait for him to catch up to a door she had been standing in front of her entire life.

Significance — the thing sighted people mistake for size, building their biggest emotions out of their biggest, brightest images — had to be built out of weight instead. A memory that mattered pressed harder against the floor. A grief old enough to matter had a gravity to it, a place where the ground gave slightly underfoot, not from

decay but from the sheer accumulated pressure of having been carried so long. He learned to build significance the way you'd load a scale, not the way you'd hang a painting.

And underneath all of it, the hardest single lesson, the one he never fully mastered even after five sessions: a sighted world defaults to fixed geography, because sight insists that things exist in a specific place whether or not you're currently looking at them. A world built for Eileen defaulted, instead, to relationship — two things were "close" not because of any measurable distance between them, but because her mind associated them, so that a memory of her mother's voice and a memory of the smell of a specific rain could sit directly beside each other in her dreaming-space with no corridor between them at all, connected by nothing but the fact that they had always, privately, belonged together. It was, he came to think, a far more honest map of a mind than anything his own sighted patients had ever handed him. It was also, precisely because it had no fixed walls to hide behind, the single most dangerous kind of world he had ever been asked to build a session inside of.

He asked himself, exactly once, out loud, to a colleague, whether that risk was one he had any right to take with a patient. She laughed and told him Shapers who

worried about it generally didn't cause it, and the ones who caused it generally hadn't worried, and there was no data suggesting the worrying made any difference either way.

He believed her longer than he should have.

SESSION III

Eileen

She had never seen anything — born that way, entirely, no light ever having reached whatever apparatus behind her eyes might otherwise have learned to want it — and this fact was, depending on which colleague you asked, either the single greatest liability or the single greatest asset a prospective Shaper-in-training had ever walked into Halcyon's office carrying. "I don't dream in pictures," she told him, in their first session, sitting very straight, hands folded with the particular composure of someone who has spent a lifetime being underestimated by people who could see. "I dream in weight, and temperature, and the specific grain of a voice. I have built an entire interior life out of materials your other patients don't even know they're allowed to use. I think that makes me dangerous to train. I also think it makes me the only candidate you've had in years worth the risk."

He should have said no. He would tell himself that later, in the specific unconvincing way you tell yourself things after they've already stopped being useful to believe.

"You want to become a Shaper," he said instead. "Not simply a patient."

"I want to know what I actually am," she said, "in a language nobody sighted built first and handed to me secondhand. And then, yes. I want to learn to walk other

people down to that same place in themselves. I think I would be good at it. I think the not-seeing is not the handicap you've all decided it is."

Her full name, on the intake form, was Eileen Shalott, and Halcyon — who had read a certain poem exactly once, in school, the way most people read it exactly once, and then filed it away under things learned for a test — did not think much of the surname until much later, when he understood, with the specific vertigo of a metaphor finally closing its hand around you, precisely how long she had been living inside it. The lady in the poem is cursed to see

the world only in a mirror, forbidden to look at Camelot directly, weaving what she sees into a tapestry no one else is permitted to watch her make. Eileen had never even had the mirror. She had gone straight to the loom — had spent thirty years weaving an entire self out of nothing but the reflected accounts other people gave her of a world she was never once permitted to check against her own eyes, because she had none to check it with.

“You’re smiling,” she said, though he hadn’t made a sound. “I can hear it change how you breathe. What did you just understand about me?”

“That you’ve been weaving a tapestry of a world you’ve never seen directly,” he said, “your entire life. And that everyone who ever described that world to you was, in their own way, the mirror the poem keeps warning her not to trust.”

“Then you understand the actual referral,” she said, and for the first time since she’d sat down across from him, something in her face had the specific, dangerous stillness of a person naming a thing she has been

circling for years without letting herself land on it. “I don’t want you to show me a world secondhand anymore, Doctor. I have had thirty years of mirrors. I want to turn around.”

He explained the risk to her plainly, the way his training required, and the way his conscience, that night, would insist he had not explained it plainly enough. “If I build a shared space with you,” he said, “some of what I bring into it will be visual, whether I intend it or not. Light. Shape. A horizon. Your mind has never organized itself that way. I don’t know what happens when a foundation that has never once used those categories is asked, suddenly, to hold them. I don’t think anyone does. That’s not a small risk, Eileen. That’s the actual one.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ve known longer than you have. I’d still like to begin.”

He administered the first dose himself, against the specific written recommendation of two colleagues and the unspoken reservation of a third, because he had never in fifteen years of practice met a

patient whose interior architecture he was less equipped, by training, to predict — and because that unpredictability, God help him, was the exact thing that made him certain he had to be the one to see it.

INTERLUDE — The Lady of Shalott

The Lady of Shalott

Halcyon read the poem properly that night, for the first time since school, at his kitchen table with Eileen's intake file still open beside the page, because a surname is not evidence, and he did not trust himself to go on treating it like one. Tennyson sets her on an island above Camelot, in a room built inside four gray walls and four gray towers, and gives her exactly one rule to live by, never once explaining where the rule came from or who imposed it: she may weave, she may sing, she may watch the world go by beneath her window — but only in a mirror, hung before her day and night, and never once directly. Reapers in the barley hear her singing and call her fairy, half afraid; they never see her face. She is, for most of the poem, a voice and a rumor and a moving shadow on the glass, weaving what the mirror shows her — market girls, a funeral, two young lovers lately wed, the king's men riding two and two — into a tapestry nobody is permitted to watch her make. The poem does not tell us why looking would kill her. It only tells us that it would, the way a family sometimes tells a child a thing is dangerous without ever once explaining the mechanism, until the danger becomes indistinguishable from the rule itself.

She calls it, once, a curse. She never says who cast it. That omission bothered Halcyon more than anything else in the poem, reading it as a grown man instead of a

student with an exam to pass. Curses, in every other story he had ever been told, come from somewhere — a witch, a god, a debt unpaid. This one arrives with no author at all, which meant, he understood, sitting at his own kitchen table at eleven at night, that it had never needed one. Some rules enforce themselves simply by being repeated early enough, softly enough, by enough people who believe they are protecting you.

It is Lancelot who breaks it, though he never knows he has. He rides past in the poem's most famous stretch — brazen greaves, a silver bugle, his coal-black curls beneath a gemmed helmet, singing *tirra lirra* as he goes, entirely unaware that anyone is watching — and the Lady leaves her loom, crosses the room in three lines of verse, and looks, for the first and only time in the poem, directly out the window at Camelot instead of at its reflection. The web flies out and floats wide. The mirror cracks from side to side. "The curse is come upon me," she says, and that is the last thing she says while she is still, technically, safe.

What Halcyon noticed, reading it that night with a clinician's attention instead of a schoolboy's, was how little the poem actually blames her for. She does not sin. She does not choose cruelty, or vanity, or even curiosity in any grasping sense — she simply, after years of secondhand weather, wants to see the man making the sound directly instead of in glass. The poem punishes the wanting as though it were the crime, and then, having punished it, asks the reader to find the punishment beautiful: she goes down to the river, finds a boat, writes her own name on the prow in the pale, stubborn light of a dying afternoon, lies down in it, and drifts toward Camelot singing until, verse by verse, the

poem simply stops giving her a voice. She is dead before the boat arrives. The court comes out to look at her the way you'd look at a painting, and Lancelot — the only person in the poem who never learns he was ever the cause of anything — musing a moment, says she has a lovely face, and asks God to lend her grace, and that is the whole of his part in her ending.

Halcyon closed the book somewhere near midnight and sat for a long time without moving, doing the specific, unglamorous work of a man trying to figure out exactly what he was afraid of and why it had waited until page fourteen of a case file to arrive.

It was not the poem itself. Poems die on schedule; that is one of the things poems are for. It was the shape of the deal underneath it, the one he now suspected, without yet being able to prove it, some part of Eileen had been quietly making with the world since before she had language to name the terms: you may have an interior life as

rich and exact as anyone's, provided you never once ask to check it against the thing itself. Look only in the mirror. Weave only what you're given. The moment you turn around and want the world directly, on your own authority, unmediated by whoever has been kind enough to describe it to you — the cost will be everything you are.

He did not yet know whether he believed the ending had to be inevitable. He knew only that he had just agreed, two sessions ago, without fully understanding what he was agreeing to, to be the first person in thirty years to hand her a window instead of a mirror, and that no poem he had ever read had told him what was supposed to happen to a woman who turned around and did not die of it.

SESSION IV

The First Descent

The space they built together, when he finally stood inside it beside her, was not visual at all, at least not at first — a vast, dark plain of resonance, textures moving across it the way light moves across water for the rest of us, a wind he could feel but not see rippling something that was unmistakably, structurally, a surface, built by a mind that had never once needed the metaphor of light to understand that some things sit on top of other things. He tested it the way he'd trained himself to, in the weeks since her intake — not by looking, an instinct he had to consciously override every few seconds, like a limb he'd been told to stop using, but by sounding it, the way she would. He spoke a single low syllable into the dark, and the space gave it back to him thinned and distant in one direction, thick and close in another, and out of that one small test he understood, the way she must have understood it a thousand times before with her cane on an ordinary sidewalk, that there was a wall somewhere to his left and open air stretching a long way to his right, and that neither fact had cost either of them a single photon of light to establish.

The ground under his feet was not one texture but many, laid out in a pattern he slowly realized was not random — coarse where a memory was recent and still being handled roughly, worn nearly smooth in places she must have gone over in her mind ten thousand times, a give in the floor near what he'd come to think of as the room's center that had the specific, sunken softness of a memory she visited so often it had started to become a place rather than an event. He found, testing it with one careful boot, that the temperature changed too — not randomly, but the way a house changes temperature room to room, cooler near what he guessed, correctly, were the older years, a startling close warmth radiating up from a patch near what must have been recent months, as though recency itself generated heat the way a body does.

She showed him, that same session, what she called — the term arriving out of her the way a word arrives out of someone who has

simply never once needed it translated before — a hollow: a place in the dreaming-space where a memory had been worn not smooth but away, a genuine absence with edges to it, the specific shape of a thing removed rather than a thing merely old. “My mother’s kitchen,” she said, guiding his hand to it the way you’d guide a child’s hand to a scar you wanted them to understand without having to explain it first. “I can still find the shape of the doorway. I can’t find the smell anymore. It’s been twenty years. A hollow is what’s left after a wick burns all the way down.”

He did not, that day, understand the word wick. He would come to understand it as one of the load-bearing words in her entire private language, and to regret, faintly, for the rest of his career, every session he had conducted before he’d learned it.

“You’re standing very carefully,” she said, beside him, though beside was a generous word for a space that had no fixed geography until one of them insisted on it.

“Most Shapers come down here already knowing what a mind is supposed to look like. You don’t have that advantage with me. Good. Neither do I.”

He would think, much later, that this was the exact moment he should have recognized what he was actually risking — not her sanity, which he had been trained, exhaustively, to protect, but the shape of his own caution, which was already, without his noticing, starting to relax around a patient whose interior world kept proving more coherent, more articulate, more fluent than any he had ever mapped before. Fluency, he would come to understand, is not the same thing as safety. It is sometimes exactly the opposite — a mind that has spent thirty years building an unusually elegant structure on ground it has never had the chance to test.

They went further that day than he had planned to, because she asked to, and because nothing in the space had yet given him a clinical reason to refuse her. Underneath the plain of resonance was a second layer — hands, dozens of them, patient, unhurried, moving over every surface the way a blind child learns a room, not one mother’s hands, not one lover’s, but an accumulated, anonymous weight of every hand that had ever touched her without

her consenting to being shaped by the touch, from infancy onward, building the specific architecture of a woman who had learned to trust texture over declaration, because texture, unlike a sighted stranger's face, had never once lied to her by accident.

"This is where most Shapers get worried," she said, feeling her way along the moving hands. "Everything I've built. Everyone who ever raised me, without asking. You're not frightened of this part. I can hear it in how

steadily you're breathing. You're frightened of what's under it."

He was. He had, by then, stood beside enough patients to recognize the specific quality of dread that meant something foundational was close — not the accumulated self above it, which could be painful but was, at bottom, only material, only a life doing what a life does. What waited underneath was different in kind. It had never agreed to be observed, because it had been laid down before the person existed with enough self to agree to anything at all, and it had been laid down, in Eileen's case, entirely without the one sense every other patient he had ever treated had used, at least a little, to build their own foundation's earliest scaffolding.

"Eileen," he said, and heard, in his own voice, an unprofessional roughness he hadn't authorized. "I want to log this session as complete. We don't need to go further today."

"You don't," she agreed. "I do."

INTERLUDE — The Grammar of Weight

The Grammar of Weight

He asked her, the following week, to stop translating for him. It was not how the work was supposed to go. A Shaper built the space; the patient inhabited it; the whole discipline rested on that division the way a bridge rests on its footings, and Halcyon had spent fifteen years learning exactly how much weight the arrangement could take before it failed. He asked her anyway, because he had spent one entire week failing to build her a garden that did not smell, faintly, humiliatingly, of his own grandmother's garden instead of anyone's garden that had ever belonged to Eileen, and because a

man who has just read a poem about a woman punished for wanting the unmediated thing directly does not, if he is paying any attention to himself at all, go on quietly handing that same woman mirrors and calling it treatment. "Build me something you have never once described to a sighted person," he said. "Not because I asked you to leave anything out. Because it never occurred to you that leaving it in was an option." She was quiet long enough that he thought, for a moment, he had asked for something that did not exist — and then the dreaming-space around him filled, all at once, with a Saturday.

It was a market, though the word arrived in his own head only afterward, translated, the way his own vocabulary now embarrassed him by defaulting to. She

never called it that. She called the whole assembled thing, when she finally gave it a name, a press — not the noise of it, though the noise was tremendous, a hundred separate conversations layered so densely they stopped being language and became, the way a heavy rain stops being individual drops, a single continuous texture of human weather. Press was the specific felt density of many bodies wanting many different things in the same small stretch of air, a crowd's worth of urgency pressing in from every direction at once without any one part of it pressing hard enough to be called a threat. He had never had a word for that feeling before, sighted, because sighted people mostly solve the problem by looking for the nearest gap and walking toward it. She had never had the option of solving it that way. She had instead spent thirty years learning to read the press itself, the way a sailor reads a swell, until it told her everything a pair of eyes would have told someone else — where the gaps were, where the danger was, which direction had already been claimed by someone larger and more impatient than her.

Her mother's hand was in this memory the entire time, and it had its own grain, distinct from every other hand that had ever held hers — dry, quick, faintly callused along the first knuckle where a lifetime of a particular kitchen task had left its own small monument, and closing, always, a half-second before Eileen herself had registered the need for it to close, so that being led through the press felt less like being guided and more like being anticipated, which she told him, walking him through it, was the entire

difference between a childhood spent safe and a childhood spent merely accompanied.

The fishmonger's stall arrived as a wall of cold brine and something sharper underneath it, and beside it, impossibly, the specific dry sweetness of fresh bread from a stall he understood, sound-first, to be forty feet further down the row — because scent, in her grammar, did not travel in the polite straight lines a sighted person's nose mostly ignores. It pooled. It had wick, the same word she'd taught him for memory, because a smell was simply a memory that had not finished burning yet, and a strong one could keep releasing itself into a room for years after its actual source had been swept away, the way her mother's kitchen had gone hollow only once the wick of it had finally, entirely burned down.

There was a laugh in the memory that recurred three separate times, always from the same rough diagonal, always at the same pitch — a vendor, she explained, who had sold her mother tomatoes every Saturday for a decade and whose laugh had become, over that decade, a kind of clock. "It tolled," she said, and the word arrived in Halcyon's understanding with the specific weight of a term she had been sitting on for years, waiting for someone to be worth handing it to. "A toll isn't a memory. It's a memory that rings again every time you pass near it, whether or not you meant to go looking for it. His laugh tolls. I can't walk through a market anywhere, still, without listening for it, and some tiny stupid part of me is disappointed, every single time, when it isn't there."

He stood inside all of it — the press, the wick, the toll, the specific anticipatory grain of a mother's hand — and understood, with a clarity that felt less like clinical insight than like grief for every session he'd conducted

before this one, that he had spent fifteen years being an adequate translator and had just, for the first time, been allowed to be a guest.

"Why now," he asked her, when the market had gone quiet around them, the way a memory goes quiet once its owner has finished needing it. "You could have built this for me in the first week. Why did you wait?"

“Because you’d have taken notes,” she said, without any cruelty in it, only the flat, exhausted accuracy of someone who had been correctly predicting this particular failure in people for thirty years. “You’d have written press down in a file and called it data, and it would have become one more word some sighted person owned a definition of before I did. I needed you to be standing inside it, with nowhere to write anything down, before I gave it to you. That’s not a trust exercise, Doctor. That’s the only kind of giving I have ever been able to survive.”

INTERLUDE — The Color That Isn’t Light

The Color That Isn’t Light

He came to the next session with a proposal that violated, by his own private count, at least four separate clauses of his own training, and did not, for the first time in fifteen years of practice, care. “I want to stop trying to show you color,” he said. “Every attempt I’ve made has been a translation of something I saw, handed to you the way everyone else in your life has always handed you the world — secondhand, pre-chewed, apologized for in advance. I read a poem recently. I don’t think I’m allowed to keep doing that to you and call myself the one Shaper who understood the referral.”

“Then what,” she said, “exactly, do you propose instead?”

“I want you to tell me what the words already mean to you. Not what red looks like. Nobody sighted has ever managed to tell you that in a way that wasn’t a lie of omission. I want to know what thirty years of hearing people use the word red has actually built inside you — what it’s attached itself to, what it costs to hear, what shape it’s taken by now, entirely on its own, with no picture underneath it holding it up. And then I want us to build that. Not light. The thing underneath the word that was never light in the first place.”

She was silent long enough that he began, in the specific cowardly way of a man who has just proposed

something he cannot take back, to rehearse an apology. Then she said, “Red,” and the dreaming-space around them changed.

It did not arrive as a hue. It arrived as a held note, low and certain, the specific pressure of a hand staying exactly where you had left it, closing around his wrist and simply refusing, patiently, without urgency, to let go — the way people had always described red to her as warm, and warmth, thirty years deep, had stopped being a temperature and become, entirely on its own, a promise about permanence. “They always say it like that,” she said. “Warm. Like it’s a kindness. I built it into a hand that doesn’t leave. I don’t know if that’s what red actually is. I know it’s what thirty years of the word has made, and I would like it, now, to be mine instead of theirs.”

She gave him blue next, unprompted, before he had thought to ask for it, and blue arrived as the specific chill of an emptied room — not loneliness, she was careful to correct him, feeling the shape of his own reaction before he’d finished having it, but the kind, deliberate quiet of a room that has been cleared out for you, on purpose, by someone who wanted you to have the whole of it to yourself for a while. Cool, people always said, and she had built cool into a held breath rather than a held hand, a held breath belonging to someone giving you space rather than someone leaving.

Gold, when it came, came with a sound in it — the specific brightness in a voice when someone says your name and is, unmistakably, glad you have arrived, one octave higher than the sentence strictly required, a gladness that costs the person saying it something to produce and gives it away anyway. She had built bright,

the word people always reached for, into that exact overspend of a voice, because nobody had ever managed to describe brightness to her in any other terms that meant anything at all.

Green arrived last, and slowest, and it was the only one of the four that made her hesitate before handing it to him, the way you hesitate before handing someone something you have never once let another person hold. It came as a low, continuous creak — the specific sound old wood makes when it is not breaking, when the

strain running through it is the ordinary strain of something still growing into a shape too large for what first held it, a creak that meant, in the specific grammar thirty years had built for her out of one borrowed adjective, alive, and getting larger, and not yet in any danger. "They call it fresh," she said. "Nobody ever explains what a color could possibly mean by fresh. I built my own explanation. I think it's better than theirs."

He stood inside all four of them, one after another, and understood that he was standing inside something that had never existed anywhere before this room, on any register, for any person — not a translation of sight, and not an absence of it either, but a third thing, built entirely out of the materials she had always actually owned, that no mirror and no poem and no well-meaning sighted stranger had ever once thought to ask her to use.

"What do I call this," he asked her, "in the file?"

"You don't," she said, and for the first time since he had known her, something in her voice had the unguarded, unbraced quality of a person who has just been handed back a piece of herself she had stopped expecting to see

again. "This one isn't going in a file. This one's going to have a name, and the name is mine, and I am going to be the only person in this Institute who ever gets to use it correctly." She was quiet a moment, turning the new, unfinished shape of it over. "Silt," she said finally. "It was always there. Every color anyone ever described to me was already suspended in the water I'd been living in my whole life. I just never had anything to make it settle before now."

The Patient Called Undertow

The Patient Called Undertow

The file arrived without a name on it, which was itself the first warning, in a field where anonymized intake was reserved for exactly one category of patient: the kind whose real name, attached to their history, had already made three previous clinics decline the referral. The three files that traveled with him were not really case histories. They were closer to sediment — each clinician's language a little more careful than the last, the carefulness itself a kind of fossil record of what a person learns not to write down. Halcyon read all three that first night, standing at his own kitchen counter, because sitting felt, for reasons he could not yet justify to himself, like the wrong posture for what he was about to learn.

The first clinician, from a hospital two hours north, had written four careful pages and ended them without ever reaching a diagnosis, which Halcyon had not once, in fifteen years, seen a licensed Shaper do. Patient's dreaming-space presents as domestic, stable, and non-threatening on initial approach, she had written, in the clipped present tense of someone still standing just inside the habit of professional distance. This is, in my clinical opinion, the entirety of the danger. Patient did not attempt to harm this clinician. Patient instead made this clinician a permanent fixture of the house's

architecture for a period the monitoring equipment logged at eleven minutes, and this clinician experienced, subjectively, as several years. Recommend immediate transfer to a facility with deeper resources. Do not send anyone who has recently lost a parent.

The second clinician had written less, and what he had written had gotten shorter as it went, the sentences narrowing the way a hallway narrows toward a door nobody wants to be the one to open first. I no longer believe the house is metaphorical, read the second-to-last line, alone on its own page, as though it had needed

the room. I am aware of how that sentence reads in a clinical file. I am filing it anyway.

The third file was the shortest of the three, and the one Halcyon read the most times that night, because it did not end so much as stop. Patient asked me to stay for dinner, it said, in handwriting that grew visibly less steady across four lines, the letters starting to lean the way a person leans when they've stopped trusting the floor. I want it on record that I said no. I want it on record that I —

The note did not finish the sentence. Nobody at the clinic that had once employed her could tell Halcyon, when he called, exactly why, or exactly what had happened to her practice afterward, in the specific evasive tone of people describing a colleague's absence without wanting to be the one who named what kind of absence it was.

That was the file the intake committee slid across the table to him, an inch at a time, the way you'd offer food to something you weren't entirely sure had simply stopped being hungry, or had only gotten better at

waiting.

They called him, in the chart, by the designation the monitoring software had assigned during his intake scan — a designation generated automatically, by an algorithm with no sense of irony, from the specific pattern his baseline had produced. Undertow. Halcyon had seen the term used clinically before, always for the same narrow category of mind: one that did not merely hold its own weight, but pulled at whatever came near it — that had learned, at some level far beneath any ideology or upbringing, that the fastest way to stop being afraid of being left was to make sure nothing that entered ever managed to leave.

"I don't want him," Halcyon told the intake committee, in the flattest voice he owned. "Not as a favor to me. As a fact about the Institute's survival. You do not put a patient like this in a shared dreaming-space with staff who have families waiting for them at the end of the session."

"He's already been declined by four facilities," the committee chair said, sliding the anonymized file another inch across the table. "He is, by every psychometric we have, one of the two or three most dangerous minds anyone in this field has ever been asked to map. He is also, Halcyon, exactly the kind of case your reputation was built managing. I'm not asking you to want him. I'm telling you that if we turn him away, he goes untreated, and a mind like that does not simply sit quietly at the bottom of itself waiting for someone braver to come along."

A third voice — Okonkwo, from records, who rarely spoke in intake meetings and was, for exactly that

reason, the person everyone quietly listened to on the rare occasions she did — said only, "I read all three termination files twice. I would like it noted, formally, that I recommended against this assignment, and that I understand my recommendation is about to be overruled, and that I would like it on the record that I would very much like to be the one who was wrong."

Nobody answered her. The silence that followed was its own kind of vote.

Halcyon took the file home that night and read it twice, and somewhere in the second reading, in the clipped, careful language of three previous clinicians' termination notes, he found the sentence that would follow him into every session after: Patient does not experience the shared dreaming-space as a place he is being observed in. Patient experiences it as a place he has been given permission to invite guests.

He took the case. He told himself it was clinical necessity. He would understand, much later, that some part of him — the same part that had once needed a circle of five friends to say his own flaws back to him before he'd believe they were real — had wanted, very quietly, to prove that no mind was too dangerous for him to stand beside without being changed by it.

Inside Undertow

The dreamscape did not announce itself as dangerous. That, Halcyon understood within the first ninety seconds, was precisely the danger. It was a house — ordinary, warmly lit, the specific unthreatening geometry of somewhere you'd trust immediately, hallways opening onto rooms with the soft, generous light of a home built by someone who had studied, with real diligence, exactly what safety was supposed to look like from the outside.

Halcyon noticed the banister first, because his hand was already on it before his training caught up with his body and told him not to touch anything in a space like this without cause. It was warm. Not sun-warm, not radiator-warm — body-warm, the specific 98.6 of something that had a pulse it was choosing not to advertise, and when he looked down at his own palm he found, for just a moment, a faint sheen on it, the way your hand comes away faintly damp after resting too long on someone else's skin. The wallpaper in the front hall had a pattern he took, at first glance, for a faded floral print, and only understood, standing closer, was a repeating motif of small closed eyes, lashes down, dreaming, wallpapered floor to ceiling in every direction, patient as wainscoting. Somewhere behind the plaster, very faintly, on a rhythm just slow enough to mistake for the building settling, something breathed.

"You're a guest," said the man waiting in the front hall, and he looked, disarmingly, like nobody in particular. "Most Shapers don't make it past the hall. I can always tell which ones will. You're one of the ones who thinks he's here to observe me. That's the mistake, Doctor. Nobody observes this house. This house decides who it lets leave."

"I'm going to surface now," Halcyon said, which was, in every other dreamscape he had ever entered, a sentence with the unbreakable authority of a doctor's own hand on the exit. He felt, saying it, the floor under his shoes give very slightly — not collapse, just yield, the specific softness of a mattress rather than a subfloor, and understood that somewhere beneath the reclaimed hardwood he

had assumed he was standing on, something with a ribcage was holding his weight up out of what felt, uncomfortably, like generosity rather than architecture.

Undertow smiled, and the house, very softly, very courteously, laughed with him — a sound that came from everywhere at once, low in the walls, the specific creak-and-exhale of a very large chest deflating. “You can try,” he said. “I would, myself. I’ve never once succeeded, and I built the place.” He reached out and rested one hand flat against the nearest wall, the way you’d rest a hand on a dog’s flank to feel it breathing, and the wall, unmistakably, breathed back into it. “That’s not a threat, Doctor. That’s the actual diagnosis. I am not dangerous because I want to hurt my guests. I am dangerous because some men learn, very young, that the only way to stop losing everything they love is to become the thing that does the taking first — swallow it, keep it warm, keep it fed, keep it from ever again

being anywhere you can’t feel its heartbeat against your own ribs. Once you’ve built a mind that good at holding on, it does not know how to let a single thing it’s caught go free again. Not out of cruelty. Out of habit. The oldest, saddest habit there is.”

Halcyon surfaced — barely, and not entirely on his own power, a junior colleague’s hand on the physical shoulder of his very real, very present body dragging him back across a boundary that had, for one unbearable half-second, refused to recognize that it was supposed to still exist. He came up gasping in the ordinary fluorescent light of the Institute with the specific, nauseating certainty that some part of him had left a handprint on that wallpaper, faint and warm and already being absorbed, the way a mouth absorbs a fingertip you’ve forgotten to pull back in time — and understood that he had just been given, free of charge, the exact warning three previous clinicians had already tried and failed to make anyone above them believe.

He should have closed the case that day. He told himself, instead, that a single failed session was data, not verdict, and continued, against every instinct that had ever kept him alive in this work, to

believe that his own footing was still the one thing in the building that could not be taken from him.

He went back three days later. He told the committee it was continuity of care, follow-up assessment, the specific bureaucratic language people reach for when they have already decided to do something their own training would forbid them if asked about it plainly. He did not go back three days later only once. He went back nine times across five weeks, and each time told himself a version of the same sentence, and each time

the sentence got a little harder to say convincingly, the way any lie does once you've used it enough times to hear its own seams.

INTERLUDE — The Rooms He Kept

The Rooms He Kept

The house was bigger on the fourth visit than it had been on the first, and Halcyon noted this the way he noted everything now — clinically, in the log, in a voice that had started, without his permission, to sound like someone else's. Dreaming-space shows signs of elaboration consistent with prolonged, unsupervised habitation, he wrote, which was the careful professional way of saying: he has had a very long time to decorate. The front hall no longer ended at the banister. It went on, this time, into a dining room he had not built and Undertow had not, as far as any instrument could measure, built either — which meant, by the only logic the house had ever offered him, that it had simply always been there, waiting for someone patient enough to walk far enough to find it.

The table was set for more people than the chairs could comfortably hold, and every chair was occupied, and every place setting was clean in the specific, aggressive way of a table that has never once been eaten from and is nonetheless expected, every single day, to be ready. The guests did not turn to look at him. He understood, standing in the doorway with his hand already cold in a way that had nothing to do with the Institute's work anymore, that they were not going to. Their stillness was not the stillness of statues. Statues

do not require effort. This was the stillness of something straining, with everything it had left, not to move — the way you

hold your breath in a house where the walls are thin and someone dangerous is listening on the other side of them, except the effort here had been going on, by every mark on the tablecloth, for years, and showed no sign, in any of the small ruined places where a hand had clearly once clenched too hard, of ever being allowed to stop.

One chair was empty. Every head at the table was turned, with the specific fixed devotion of people who have run out of anything else to organize their attention around, toward the single place setting that had never once been used.

“They stay for dinner,” Undertow said, from directly behind him, in a voice that had learned, somewhere in the last nine visits, exactly how close it could stand without quite touching. “That’s the whole arrangement. It’s a good arrangement. Nobody’s ever hungry. Nobody’s ever late again. You understand the appeal, Doctor, or you wouldn’t keep coming back to look at it.”

Halcyon made himself walk the length of the table anyway, because the alternative — turning around, admitting to the version of himself that filed the reports that he had already stopped being able to leave rooms like this one without finishing them — had become, somewhere in the last five weeks, a worse fear than whatever waited at the far end. The nursery was through the second door, and it had not been there on the first three visits either, and he understood, walking into it, that the house was not being built ahead of him. It was being remembered ahead of him, one room at a time, in the exact order Undertow could still bear to remember it in.

The height marks were on the doorframe the way they are in any ordinary house that has ever kept a child in it — a column of small careful pencil lines, a name and a date beside each one, climbing the wood in the universal grammar of a parent proud enough of growth to nail the proof of it directly into the frame of a door. Halcyon counted eleven marks before he made himself stop counting, because the eleventh was higher than a child should have been able to reach unassisted at the age written beside it, and the twelfth, when his eye went to it despite every intention not to, was

higher still, and freshly cut, the pale wood underneath it not yet having had time to darken — which meant, by a logic he did not want and could not put down, that somewhere in this house a child was still, right now, on the other side of some door he had not yet been shown, continuing to grow, in the specific wrong direction of a thing that is not allowed to stop needing measuring.

The toys on the floor were arranged in the unmistakable mid-motion scatter of a game abandoned exactly once, at exactly one moment, and never resumed and never cleaned up, the way a room looks after the specific kind of leaving that nobody involved got to plan for. One of them — small, soft-bodied, the particular grain of a thing that has been held by the same hand every night for years — turned, on the floor, unassisted, to face him. It did not have a mouth built for the shape it then attempted, and attempted anyway, three times, before Halcyon understood that what it was trying to make was not a sound at all. It was a word. It did not have the apparatus left to finish it. He surfaced eleven minutes later according to the monitoring log and forty private, unaccounted minutes later according to every clock in his own body, and did not, in either version of that

morning, write down what the word had almost been.

INTERLUDE — What the House Feeds On

What the House Feeds On

The ninth visit was the one Halcyon did not write up, and the omission itself — the first blank space in an otherwise obsessively complete file — became, later, the single detail the review board returned to more than any other, the way an investigator trusts the missing photograph more than any of the ones still in the album. He had gone looking, that visit, for the coats. He had noticed them on the second trip and made himself walk past them every time since, the way you walk past a door in your own house that you have decided, without ever quite deciding it out loud, not to open. There was a hallway for them, narrow and lightless and considerably longer than the house's outer walls should have permitted, and every coat on every hook still held the shape of the shoulders that

had last worn it, the particular slump or square of a person's carriage preserved in fabric the way a held pose survives a photograph. Halcyon understood, walking the length of it with one hand trailing the wall for a steadiness his training told him was pure theater, that he was looking at a grain library — the same principle he had spent fifteen years using to build a stone one degree cooler than skin for a blind woman's hands, turned entirely, unrecognizably, to a different purpose. Not identification. Retention.

He touched one. He would tell himself afterward, in the specific unconvincing tense of a man revising his own

testimony in real time, that he had not meant to, that his hand had simply been trailing the wall and a hook had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong height — and none of that was true, and he knew it was not true even as he constructed it, because his hand had chosen that coat specifically, out of dozens, the way your tongue finds the exact tooth that hurts.

What came through it did not arrive as image. It arrived as pressure, all at once, the sealed unbearable totality of a held breath finally released into a body too small to hold it — water above and water below and no surface in any direction, a cold that was not temperature so much as absence, arriving from every side at once with the specific patience of something that has never once had to hurry, and underneath the cold, buried so deep in the sensation that Halcyon would spend three subsequent, increasingly reckless sessions trying to convince himself he had imagined it, a single clear thread of relief — not the relief of rescue, but the older, worse relief of a struggle finally being allowed to end, the exact instant a person stops fighting the thing that is taking them and finds, appallingly, that the not-fighting is the closest thing to peace their whole life had ever actually contained.

He came back to himself on the floor of the corridor with Undertow crouched beside him at a conversational distance, not touching him, watching with the specific unhurried interest of a man observing weather he has seen many times before and still finds, on some level, satisfying.

"That one fought the longest," Undertow said, almost gently, in the tone of a man discussing a favorite, difficult year. "I don't think that's a mark against her. I

think that's the whole reason I couldn't let her go when the others —" He stopped himself, visibly, for the first time in nine visits, and something crossed his face that was not quite grief and not quite hunger and shared, Halcyon understood with a lurch of pure clinical horror, most of its architecture with both. "You want a word for what this house is, Doctor. I can hear you building toward one, every visit, a little further along than the last. I'll save you the trouble of finding your own, since you clearly need one so badly. It isn't a grave. Nothing in here is finished enough to be a grave. It's a larder. The difference matters to me, even if it doesn't matter to your file."

The house breathed once, long and total, every wall and floorboard and held coat contracting in a single unified motion around him like a chest deciding, all at once, to exhale — and Halcyon understood, in the half-second before the junior colleague's hand found his actual shoulder in the actual world and hauled him bodily back across a boundary that had, this time, fought to keep him, that he had just been shown, generously, deliberately, exactly what the house had been doing to him as well, nine visits deep, one grateful, unguarded touch at a time — and that the only reason it had not yet finished doing it was that some part of it, older than its own hunger, was still waiting, with what he could only describe afterward as courtesy, for him to be the one who chose to stop coming back.

He surfaced convulsing, and did not go back a tenth time, and it would be three more weeks — weeks he spent, though he did not yet understand why, sitting in on every one of Eileen's sessions he could justify attending — before anyone at the Institute was ready to

say out loud what the ninth visit's empty page had already, in its own silence, said for them.

The Rewiring

Eileen's foundation, when they finally, fully reached it, was not made of hands after all. It was silence — not the absence of sound, which she had never once experienced as loss the way sighted patients sometimes did, but silence as architecture, the specific, original quiet of the earliest room she had ever lived in, before language, before even the touch-built self above it had finished laying its first brick, a silence built entirely out of the single unbearable fact underneath every other fact of her life: that she had arrived in the world already incomplete, by every metric the world around her had been eager, endlessly, exhaustingly eager, to apply.

"There it is," she said, and her voice in that silence had a weight Halcyon had never heard from a patient before — not fear, but something closer to recognition, the sound of a person finally meeting, face to face, the exact shape of a wound she had spent thirty years learning to navigate by touch alone. "Not blind. Insufficient. Somebody decided that before I could talk, and I have spent every year since building a woman clever enough, and careful enough, and generous enough that nobody would ever get to say the word out loud in front of me again."

Somewhere above the silence, in whatever part of the space her mind had reserved, without either of them

asking it to, for the shape of a mirror, something gave — not shattered, not loudly, but the specific, structural give of a life that has held one borrowed reflection faithfully for thirty years and has finally, quietly, been asked to hold the thing itself instead.

"I'm not going to weave it secondhand anymore," she said. "I'm going to look at it directly."

This was the exact moment Halcyon had been warned about, in his own training, in the driest possible language, years before he had a face to attach the warning to: the point at which a foundation built entirely without a category is finally asked, under pressure, to hold that category anyway, because the Shaper beside her, however

carefully, was still a sighted man, and even his silence in that space carried the shape of a horizon she had never had. He felt it happen rather than saw it — felt the space around them lose the specific coherence it had held a moment before, the way a sentence loses its grammar mid-word, as something in Eileen's oldest architecture tried, honestly and without warning, to reorganize itself around a category of experience it had never been built to hold.

The body the dream gave her — because down here, a mind will always eventually pour itself into a body, whether the mind has ever agreed to owning one or not — began, very quietly, to grow the thing it had never had and could not stop reaching for now that it had finally been shown the shape of the hole where it belonged. He watched, unable to look away, unable to help her, as two shallow depressions opened along her brow, wet and unfinished, the skin drawing back the way a wound draws back before it decides what it's going to become, and something pale and unformed

pressed up from underneath, straining against a socket that had never once been asked to hold anything, the muscle around it trembling with the specific, useless effort of a body attempting, too late and much too fast, to grow thirty years of missing infrastructure in a single unbearable minute. She did not scream. That was the worst of it. She made a sound instead like a woman finally exhaling after holding her breath since birth, and somewhere under her skin he could see — could actually see, God help him, the way you see tendons move under a horse's flank — the tissue of her deciding, cell by cell, whether it was going to become something new or simply come apart trying.

"Eileen. Surface. Now." He said it with every ounce of the clinical authority fifteen years had built in him, and understood, in the same instant, that the authority had no purchase here — that he was not standing on solid clinical ground issuing an instruction, but standing inside the collapse himself, being pulled, with an entirely real and entirely separate velocity, toward the exact center of a woman's oldest wound, which did not distinguish, at that depth, between the patient it belonged to and the guest whose own presence had helped destabilize it.

"I can't," she said, and it was not defiance. It was simple, terrible fact. Blood — or whatever the dream was using in place of it, dark and slow and strangely warm on his own hands when he finally reached for her — had begun to track from the raw sockets at her brow, not falling so much as weeping, the specific unhurried grief of a body finally being permitted to mourn thirty years of a sense it had never once been allowed to miss out loud. "I don't think I was ever going to be able to,

Doctor. I think some part of me has known, since before I met you, that this session only had one honest ending, and it was never going to be the two of us calmly returning to the surface together. I'm sorry. I don't think I lied to you on purpose. I think I lied to myself first, the way people do, when the alternative is admitting how badly they need to finally reach the bottom of something."

She was singing when it took her — not words he recognized, not even, he would later admit, words he was entirely certain existed outside that room, the sound coming strange and doubled from a throat that was, in that moment, no longer entirely sure of its own architecture either — but a low, unhurried, entirely unafraid sound, the specific music of someone who has, at long last, stopped weaving and stepped into the current anyway, written her own name where it can carry her, and let whatever she found there do what it was always, eventually, going to do with anyone patient enough to stop fighting it.

He felt his own footing — the last, load-bearing certainty he had carried into every dangerous room he had ever entered, the unexamined conviction that a session could take his patients but never, finally, him — give way entirely, the instant the collapse underneath it found the one opening it had always been looking for.

He did not remember, afterward, how long he spent in the center of it. He remembered only that somewhere in the total, structureless dark at the bottom of another person's oldest wound, he heard his own name spoken back to him, in a voice that was unmistakably Eileen's and unmistakably, terribly, also something older than either of them — and that the voice did not sound

frightened. It sounded like someone reaching a hand out into a place she had, at last, stopped being afraid of, to pull somebody else back up first.

This was, he would understand much later, the one place the old poem and the woman actually parted ways, and he has come to believe it is the single most important difference between them. The lady in the tower dies on the water, having looked at Camelot directly exactly once, and the poem asks us to receive that as beautiful, and perhaps it is, but it is also a story written by someone who believed a woman could only be permitted the truth at the cost of her life. Eileen sang the same song. She looked directly at the thing the mirror had always stood between her and. And when the moment came that the poem would have called the end of her, she did not die of having finally seen something real. She simply, quietly, kept singing — because nobody, this time, had built the danger to require her death, and because a Shaper who had gone down after her had decided, against every professional instinct he owned, that the oldest ending in the story was not the only one available to either of them.

What Was Left Standing

He surfaced in the Institute's recovery bed three days later than the session log said he should have, with a junior colleague's face above him doing the specific, controlled arithmetic of someone deciding how much relief they're allowed to show a superior before it becomes unprofessional. "Eileen," he said, before anything else.

"Surfaced eleven hours before you did," the colleague said. "On her own. Whatever happened down there in the last stretch, Halcyon — she came up different. Not damaged. I want to be precise about that, because it's not the word anyone expected to be reaching for. She's been sitting with the intake committee for the last six hours. She wants to take over the Undertow case."

He was on his feet before the sentence finished, because he understood, with the specific dread of a man recognizing a shape he'd been shown once already, exactly what kind of session a mind like Eileen's — finally, fully reunited with the part of herself she had spent thirty years defending instead of inhabiting — might now be capable of walking calmly into.

He found her in the observation room, and she was, he saw immediately, not the woman who had gone under three days before. Something in the set of her shoulders had the settled, unhurried confidence of a person who had finally stopped bracing against her own foundation

and discovered, underneath the bracing, that the foundation itself had never been the enemy.

"You don't have to do this," he said.

"I know," she said. "I want to. I think I'm the only Shaper in this building who has ever actually reached the bottom of herself and found something other than a verdict waiting there. I'd like to go in as someone who already knows what that costs. I think that might be the only kind of guest his house has never learned how to keep."

She went in alone. He watched from the observation glass, useless in the way you are always useless watching someone you love walk into a room you have already been shown the danger of.

She did not enter the way he had. He understood this within the first minute, from her monitoring readouts alone, before she had said a single word: where his own sessions had always opened on the house's carefully built visual welcome — the warm banister, the generous light, every trap dressed first as an invitation to the eye — Eileen's readouts showed almost no visual activity at all. She had walked straight past all of it, the way you walk past a salesman's pitch when you've already decided what you came to buy, and gone directly to what the house actually was underneath the decor it had spent nine of his own visits perfecting for a sighted guest.

She found the dining room by its press — the specific, wrong density of a room holding more waiting than it should, bodies arranged too densely for the space to be merely furnished — and she did not walk its length the way he had, flinching room by room. She stood in the

doorway and simply listened to what the table was actually made of, and told him afterward that what he had heard as silence, she had heard as held breath, hundreds of small held breaths layered into something that only sounded like quiet to an ear that didn't know what held breath was for. "They're not being kept as punishment," she said. "A held breath is what you do right before you brace for something. He's not preserving them. He's still, this whole time, bracing them — the way you'd brace a door that's never once stopped trying to blow open."

The coats did not take her the way they had taken him. She found the hallway by its wick — the specific released-scent quality of a grain library, dozens of preserved people's shapes still faintly burning — and she understood, running her hand along them with a steadiness his own hand had never once managed to hold, that what he had read as an invasive flood of someone else's drowning was, to a hand that had spent thirty years reading grain instead of fearing it, simply information, the way any other texture was information. She did not flinch from the coat that had taken him under. She held

it, deliberately, for what the readouts logged as one full minute, and let whatever was inside it finish saying whatever it had never gotten to finish saying to anyone else, and did not try to survive the feeling by refusing it, the way he had, and came through the other side of it — this was the detail that undid him most, hearing it afterward — not shaking, but crying, quietly, the specific unhurried grief of someone finally being allowed to grieve a stranger properly instead of being ambushed by them.

“You can’t out-flinch a house like this,” she told him, in the debrief, when he asked her, humbled, how. “You spent nine visits trying to stand outside what he was showing you. I didn’t stand outside it. I let it be exactly as heavy as it actually was, all at once, on purpose, because I already knew — the same way I know it about myself now — that a foundation doesn’t break you just because you finally let it hold its own full weight. It only breaks you if you’ve spent your whole life pretending it doesn’t have any.”

The nursery was where she found him — not Undertow, but the boy, the one still measuring himself against a doorframe that kept climbing ahead of him no matter how much of himself he gave it. Where Halcyon had only ever managed to stand in that room’s doorway, unable to cross it, Eileen sat down on its floor, at what her readouts logged as the exact height of the smallest chair in it, and stayed there for what the house’s own account of time insisted was several years, and what the clinic’s clock logged as forty minutes.

When she surfaced, Undertow’s monitoring readouts had done something none of the senior staff had ever recorded before: not calmed, exactly, and not cured, which nobody in the room was foolish enough to claim — but quieted, the specific quiet of a mind that has, for the first time since its earliest architecture was laid down, been sat beside by someone who did not flinch, and did not try to leave.

“There’s a boy in there, Doctor,” Eileen said, in the debrief. “Very young. He has been standing at the edge of himself since before he had a self large enough to survive being taken from, making sure, the only way he ever learned how, that he would never again be the one

left behind watching someone he loved disappear. I didn't fix him. I don't think fixed is a word that belongs anywhere near what he is. But I think, for the first time in a very long time, he let someone see the actual boy the house was built to protect."

SESSION IX

The Circle, Again

The lamp was the same lamp, turned to the same low, deliberate light, three years and one profession-altering near-collapse after the night Devi had cracked him open in it like a man popping a rib back into place — fast, necessary, and no way to make it not hurt. “Two flaws,” Marguerite said, the way she said it every year. Halcyon sat with a new chair pulled up beside his own and understood that he had finally, fully arrived at the answer to the question this room had been asking him a lifetime of sessions ago, and that the answer had never once been available to him from the inside.

“I’ll go,” Eileen said, before anyone else could — no hesitation in it, none of the old bracing. She turned, unerringly, toward the exact place he was sitting, guided by weight and breath and the specific grain of a voice she had learned, at the actual bottom of herself, to trust more than any sighted stranger’s face. “You built an entire Institute out of refusing to be the one left standing on the edge, watching, useless. And you spent every year since telling yourself that walking other people down to themselves was the same thing as finally walking down to your own.” Her voice did not soften for what came next; it sharpened, the way a good scalpel is a mercy precisely because it doesn’t hesitate. “It wasn’t. It was the same trick, dressed in a license. You know that now. Say it back to me, so this room believes you’ve actually understood it, and not just survived long

enough to describe it.”

The lamp hissed. Somewhere outside, a car went by, ordinary, oblivious, carrying someone who had never once had to sit in a room like this one and feel the truest sentence anyone had ever built for them land exactly where it was aimed, and stay there, and finally, mercifully, stop being a thing he had to defend against.

“Yes,” Halcyon said. For the first time since Devi had first cut him open in this same low light, the word cost him nothing at all. It only,

finally, weighed exactly what it was supposed to weigh — which is to say: everything, and no more than that.

— END —

AFTERWORD — The Water and the Mirror

The Water and the Mirror

He has told this story many times since, in the careful, anonymized way you tell a story that still belongs partly to someone else, and the question he is asked most often, always by someone leaning slightly forward, is the one he used to find unanswerable and no longer does: why her. Why did the poem let this one go. He does not think the poem let anything go. He thinks the poem was never really about a curse at all, whatever its own characters believed. He thinks it was about who gets permission to look at the real thing directly, and who is handed a mirror instead and told, kindly, that the mirror is enough — and that the dying, in the end, was never the price of looking. It was the price of having been given no one willing to stand in the water beside her when she finally did.

Eileen Shalott spent thirty years exactly where the poem left its own lady: weaving a self out of secondhand light, forbidden by nothing written down anywhere, by no god and no witch and no line of verse, but by the accumulated, well-meaning insistence of everyone who had ever described the world to her instead of asking what she already knew about it. The curse Tennyson never named was, Halcyon came to believe, only ever this: the quiet, universal agreement that a woman missing one sense must be protected from the rest of them too, for her own good, by people who never once asked her opinion of the arrangement.

She turned around anyway. She crossed the room the lady in the poem crossed, in the only version of it available to her — not a window overlooking Camelot, but the actual floor of her own oldest self, the silence underneath thirty years of borrowed weather — and she looked directly at the thing she had never been permitted to check against her own instruments. The mirror in her did not merely crack. It came apart the way a life comes apart when it is finally asked to hold a truth it was never built to carry, and for one

unbearable hour in a stone-walled dreaming-space above the Tessel and the Auroth, Halcyon believed, with his whole clinical certainty, that he was about to watch the poem finish doing what it has always done: collect its ending, on schedule, from a woman who had only ever wanted to see.

She did not die of it. That is the entire argument of this book, if it has one, offered plainly here at the end instead of buried where a reader could mistake it for an accident of plot: nothing about looking directly at the truth requires a death. Nothing about it ever did. The boat that carried the Lady of Shalott to Camelot was built by a story that needed her punished for wanting; the room Eileen crossed was built, this time, by two people who had already, separately, at real cost, been down to the bottom of themselves and found something other than a verdict waiting there. That is the only difference between the two women, and Halcyon has come to believe it is the only difference that has ever mattered — not the wanting, which both of them shared completely, but who was standing in the water when the wanting finally came due.

She kept singing. She is, as far as he knows, still singing now, in a room not far from his own, walking someone else down to the same water, telling them, in her own voice this time, that the mirror was never a mercy. It was only ever a mirror. And that the tapestry a person weaves from someone else's account of the world is never, in the end, a substitute for the water itself — however carefully, however lovingly, however long it has been woven.

This edition of *Undertow* was set for a reader who, like its narrator, has learned that no one stands outside the water forever, and that the only honest way down to another mind's riverbed is to have already found your own.

Dr. Halcyon is a Shaper. A drug called Le-The lets him enter a patient's mind and walk them down through its layers — the reflective surface, the current a culture built underneath it, and at the very bottom the untouched riverbed where a person's original shape was first laid down.

The method came out of a private ritual among old friends. Once a year, in a room with one lamp, each person names two flaws in another that are too costly to admit alone.

Eileen has been blind since birth and has built an entire interior life out of weight and temperature and the grain of a voice. She does not want to be treated. She wants to be trained. Reaching the bottom of her own river opens something that pulls her therapist down with her.

And the Institute accepts a patient three clinics have already refused, whose own mind has named him, from the intake scan alone, Undertow.

He does not experience the shared dreaming-space as a place he is being observed in. He experiences it as a place he has been given permission to invite guests.

