

1. The Dirt Circle

Huge-o drove his elbow into the left side of Felix's jaw, sending bolts of pain throughout his face, into his eye, and around his skull. Felix staggered backward, vision blurry, tripped on his own foot, and fell on his ass. Upon impact, he bit his lower lip and felt blood squirt around his mouth. Sitting down made Huge-o look more huge, all seven feet of him, torso and shoulders like stacks of cinderblocks, legs and arms a variety of barrels held together by sturdy ropes. Felix had always called him simply Hugo, but the younger kids called him "Huge-o" to his face, and now the audience around the circle chanted: "HUGE-O! HUGE-O! HUGE-O!" Size and a good nickname made him popular.

If Felix didn't get up, Huge-o could hammer the top of Felix's head, knock him senseless, seize the advantage. Father watched. Felix had to move. He scurried back, got traction with his bare feet in the yellow dirt, and stood as Huge-o, slow as his name suggested, lunged and missed. Felix hopped to a more distant part of the circle, spat out blood, and ignored the pain of smiling. "Missed your chance, huh?"

"Not in a hurry," Huge-o said.

People around the circle who could hear Huge-o laughed, but Hugo's answer wasn't bravado. Hugo didn't want to kill Felix, and Felix didn't want to kill him. Felix had been a presumptive contestant since he'd turned eighteen six months ago and been named, but he'd had to wait for a rival. Felix and Hugo weren't close friends, but they were friends, and Hugo's birthday wasn't far enough behind Felix's for them not to worry. First, another boy raised in the

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Lands turned eighteen but wasn't found worthy. Then another boy came of age, same thing. Nobody was surprised when Huge-o Hugo was named on his eighteenth birthday. The contest was set.

The flesh must be torn.

Felix didn't want to kill Hugo, but he felt destined to be a True Son, and Father watched.

Huge-o closed in on Felix's new position as Felix bounced on his toes, building energy and momentum. Felix had attended every contest he was allowed to witness and studied many others. The fights usually began with wrestling, the young men using their full bodies to negotiate control, and then dissolved into chaotic thrashing. Choke holds were forbidden. Strangulation for more than a three-count brought devastating lashes from the Monitor, a woman in a leather mask who stood at the circle's edge with her whip ready. Felix wasn't supposed to know she was Kate, a teacher at the school.

The flesh must be torn.

Instead of wrestling, in which Huge-o might have quickly overpowered Felix due to the weight difference—Felix was a little under six feet and only weighed about one sixty despite an athletic build—Huge-o had started in a street-boxing stance, with such a tight guard that Felix couldn't have grappled him down into the dirt if he'd wanted to. Boxing, though, opened up a venerable strategy for the little guy: tire the big guy out. When Huge-o stopped to catch his breath, Felix could beat the shit out of him.

Huge-o swung his left fist. Felix dodged. Huge-o tried a right hook. Felix dodged, saw an opening, jabbed Huge-o in the stomach, and jumped back. Coughing, Huge-o swung with the right again. Felix didn't even have to dodge.

They were naked. Everyone in the Lands followed cleansing regimens for diet and exercise, so everyone was fit, and the brothers and sisters often moved around the Settlement of Passing with little or no clothing, body consciousness a problem for outsiders. Nakedness was an essential vulnerability, however, for the contests. *Tooth and claw*. Sharpening teeth was forbidden. The nails were to be kept long enough to scratch but too short to pierce. *Tooth and claw*, the flesh must be torn.

Felix jumped sideways, and a punch probably aimed at his face glanced

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off his shoulder, spinning him. His feet tangled—*I will not fall on my ass again!*—but he recovered in time for a more successful sidestep of the glancing punch’s follow-up.

“HUGE-O! HUGE-O! HUGE-O!”

Swing. Miss. Swing. Miss.

Bludgeoning his opponent into submission was how the revealed True Sons won most contests. Once his rival was slobbering silly and on the edge of unconsciousness, a man could take his time to figure out a way to tear the skin. That was probably why Huge-o focused on using his fists: as big and hard as bricks, they *were* bludgeons. Swing, miss, swing—HIT! Felix thought his right eye socket would collapse into his brain, but he didn’t hear or feel bone crack as he again staggered, sideways, backwards, he wasn’t sure. Seeing stars, hearing birds chirp, his head was a whirlwind of dizzying clichés. Father watched. Felix’s bashed eye closed and wouldn’t open, and the other eye only saw, as if through a warped lens, Huge-o growing like the shadow of an eclipse, but Felix could feel Father watching, and he should have felt shame, shame because he was losing in front of Father, but instead—

Father’s strength invigorated him. Father expected *him* to be revealed as the True Son. He felt the expectation in his blood. The noon sun blazed overhead. Trees formed a greater circle around the dirt circle where he fought Hugo, who hadn’t spent the last six months training to fight, who hadn’t overheard a worker from First House say that Father found him “charming.” Charm. Charisma. *Essential*. Felix read the books in Father’s library. He understood many necessities.

Huge-o grabbed Felix’s left shoulder about where the bruise from the glancing punch would be and pulled back his right fist for a blow that might knock Felix’s head from his neck. Felix relaxed, became dead weight, and the sudden drop yanked him from Huge-o’s grip as he crumpled to the yellow dirt. He rolled, noticing the dirt wasn’t all yellow—sun-bleached dried blood from previous contests mixed with the sandy sediment, which contrasted with the grass-covered, deep brown soil surrounding it—and stopped on his back, knees raised to his chest, facing Huge-o’s side. The big lug seemed to be having a “Where’d he go?” moment when Felix kicked with both feet into the

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side of Huge-o's left knee.

POP!

Huge-o yowled, dipped toward Felix, then limped away from him, one, two, three lurching steps. He tried to pivot on his right leg. The thigh and calf of the left leg no longer aligned; the knee was dislocated.

Felix leapt to his feet and in a second stood behind Huge-o, hands clasped together in a double fist, which he swung like a boulder into the right side of Huge-o's head. Huge-o's weight shifted left, and he yowled again as his weight bore down on the crooked leg. He crashed into the dirt. A small cloud rose around him, and whispers rolled through the audience.

Somebody shouted, "Felix!" The crowd did not pick up a chant. Huge-o wasn't out. Lying on his side, he lifted himself with his arms. Father watched. Father wouldn't chant. Father wouldn't cheer. Father wouldn't influence the outcome, at least not in a perceptible way.

From a position in front of him, Felix jumped on Huge-o's cinderblock torso, feet landing on his left side, flattening the bigger man on his back while compressing his ribs.

CRACK!

"OOH!" the audience responded. The audience always responded well to sudden violence, and when one of the contestants ended up prone, like Huge-o was now, excitement became palpable. A few contests ago, Gill, about to be revealed as a True Son, had gotten his adversary on his back and then bitten off his testicles. The shrieks electrified the crowd, who applauded and screamed Gill's name with too much spontaneity to find a rhythm for a chant. Another recent victor, Orion, had stuck his hand inside his opponent's mouth and torn his cheek, then most of his face, off.

One set of broken ribs? Nothing. Felix pounced on Huge-o's right side.

CRACK!

Huge-o tried to yowl but struggled for breath support. His eyes couldn't have been more open, and his lips quivered. He didn't seem so huge now. He was simply Hugo, and he couldn't sit up. His arms reached in all directions, but they weren't fast or coordinated enough to grab Felix. His size was meaningless. He was meaningless, which was all he could hope for, though now he looked

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like he hoped for something else.

A girl named Lenora stood at the front of the crowd. Felix didn't know her well, but Hugo talked about her as if she'd been sent from a Heaven nobody believed in. She was pregnant. She shouted, "FELIX!"

Hugo might have heard because his struggles to make noise stopped.

The flesh must be torn.

Felix had no intention of biting off Hugo's balls, and he didn't know how a person actually ripped off another person's face, so he had another plan. He sat on Hugo's left side, sore ass in the dirt, within range of the left arm that flailed along with the right but without much direction. Hugo was like a baby in a crib trying to catch the animals dangling from the mobile high overhead. Drowning in pain and panic, Hugo might have already lost all sense of what was happening. Maybe that was best. Felix grabbed Hugo's left wrist, twisted the arm while pulling it straight and, when it was tense, kicked the back of the elbow.

POP!

Another dislocation. Hugo's body flopped as if on a wave of electricity, and when Felix didn't stop, Hugo's body didn't stop jittering, either. Felix kicked the elbow joint again, pulling on the wrist. Again. Again. The skin stretched. He pulled as hard as he could, and despite his collapsed ribs, Hugo made louder intermittent noises. Felix kept kicking. The bones of the upper arm and forearm separated an inch, two inches. Felix didn't know all the connective tissues he had to break through, but soon only skin held the arm together, so he twisted and pulled, twisted and pulled, twisted and pulled and kicked. The arm broke apart, and red gushed onto the sand.

Father watched.

"Felix! Felix! FELIX!"

The audience needed to be impressed. *Father* needed to be impressed. As quickly as he could manage, using his fingernails and teeth, Felix cleared away gristle, muscle, and skin from the freed bones of the forearm, spitting away anything that got into his mouth without missing a beat. He exposed jagged white that would have to be sharp enough.

Hugo's chest rose and fell in quick, shallow breaths. When he died, the

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contest would end.

Balancing speed with the slight precision he could muster making long thrusts from above, Felix jammed Hugo's forearm bones into his bare belly, starting below the sternum. Making a jagged line, he stabbed repeatedly until he reached the waist. He set the forearm aside and shoved his fingers into the openings, prying at the edges of individual wounds so the stomach became a single, gaping gash. Reaching in further, feeling the silkiness of inside skin kept safe from air and sun, he pulled out entrails, loops of intestine, the pouch he guessed was the stomach. He stood, carrying the insides with him, and held them up for all to see. Applause roared. Everyone chanted his name.

Father stood from his seat on the dais, and silence was almost immediate. Father set aside his binoculars. "Felix," he said. "My True Son."

Fighting Hugo had made him feel small, but Father addressing him made him feel smaller. In the full sunlight, blood drenched and naked, he held up his friend's entrails like a trophy, and he was absurd. He dropped the guts on the corpse, assuming Hugo was a corpse. At least Hugo wasn't making noise anymore, and he'd bleed to death soon if he hadn't already. For Father, the contest was decided. Father had never addressed Felix directly before, and being the object of Father's attention incapacitated him.

Father, unlike the Father that was, intimidated without trying. He sat on the high dais that moved from the dirt circle to the amphitheater to First House with pageantry he hadn't jettisoned, but his plain chair was identical to the chairs of the True Sons who decided to join him on the platform, not a gilded throne. The Father that was always wore long robes marked with symbols that had meaning he revealed to the True Sons and no one else, meaning related to abnegation and the void. Father wore simple, loose white pants cinched at the waist, the kind stitched at the Settlement and worn by most men. In warm weather like today's, he went shirtless. The Father that was wore his wild hair and knotted beard long, which made him look older. Father kept his hair short and neat like other men's and was clean shaven, which emphasized his relative youth. No one spoke Father's precise age, but he was too young to be Felix's biological *father*. Nevertheless, he required no ornamentation to be Father.

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But no one was beyond ritual. “Ascend the dais,” Father commanded.

The crowd around the dirt circle fell away. Felix knew Father and the stairs that led to him. He felt some awareness of the nine other young men on the dais, the other True Sons who had emerged since Father was realized as Father. The True Sons of the Father that was, and the Exalted Brothers who had survived their time as True Sons, were all dead. Nobody knew officially, though everyone knew, how the fire at First House started. It didn’t kill anyone, but it flushed the True Sons into the streets and fields of the Nothing Lands, where they limped and stumbled, scratched at their skin and raved about rot. They bled from their eyes, noses, ears, and mouths. They snatched anything sharp they found in workers’ hands or anywhere else. They peeled off skin and amputated limbs, screaming about stopping the rot. Some shortened the process by slashing their own throats. Others hacked at themselves until they couldn’t anymore. Most of the brothers and sisters witnessed parts of the madness. Witnesses swore that the raving men smelled like rot.

How did Father, the living Father, the True Father, do it?

Felix stood on the dais with him, inches away, looking into Father’s eyes and being looked into. Father put a finger beneath Felix’s chin and raised his head higher. “I get a lot of vacant stares around now.” Father spoke so only Felix would hear. “I can see the busyness inside your head.”

“I’m thinking about you, Father,” Felix said.

“What about me?”

Felix cleared his throat and glanced over his shoulder toward the Tree Like All Others. “About the day when you became Father.”

“When I tied the old poser to the tree?” Father grinned, still gracing Felix’s chin with his touch.

“Yes.”

“You must have been... fifteen?”

“Almost sixteen, Father.” Sixteen was when a boy gained permission to attend the contests in the dirt circle. When he “tied the old poser to the tree,” Father summoned every man, woman, and child in the Lands to witness. Before he said anything about the Father that was, he told everyone to notice the remarkable qualities of the tree to which the man, stripped of his robes,

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was bound. After a long pause, a girl finally shouted that it looked like all the other trees around it. The man about to be revealed as Father smiled and said she was exactly right. The tree, like the man tied to it, was, in the end, no different from any other. They were nothing.

The younger man removed the older man's head with three swings of an ordinary axe. He only nicked the tree. After that, the younger man was Father. The Father that was, who had established the Nothing Lands decades ago with millions made in industry on the outside, deserved respect, but only Father understood the way forward. Only Father could keep the brothers and sisters moving toward purity.

Father took Felix's bloody right hand into his own clean one. "Do you wish I had secrets to impart, like the meanings the old faker attributed to the scribbles on his costume?" Moving backward, Father drew Felix toward his chair. The nine other True Sons watched. Was being the tenth meaningful or as meaningless as the old Father's symbols, as the Tree Like All Others?

"The ritual is different now," Felix said. "Better."

Without letting go of Felix's hand, Father sat. "Do you seek self-abnegation?"

"Of course." His stomach flipped and knotted because he'd seen eight of the nine True Sons confirmed and so knew what happened next, something he'd done before but never liked, which he knew from school was how things went, different people, different appetites.

Appetite. On the day when he took his place, Father charmed the brothers and sisters with talk about the insignificance of individual trees, individual humans, and the desire for *abnegation*, but they needed more. Ritual. Knowing how to meet people's needs is an aspect of charisma. After the beheading, Father cut out the old faker's heart. And he ate it.

Father said, "On your knees."

Felix knelt in front of him. The audience that had surrounded the dirt circle had crept up to the dais behind him. People murmured. They couldn't see or hear, but they knew. Some called this part Communion. Others called it Joining. Most didn't call it anything.

After today, Felix would live in First House with Father and the other True

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Sons. During the day, First House stayed open to all brothers and sisters, but what happened there at night, when the doors closed, was private. Would this experience be isolated, or the first of many?

“What happened,” Felix muttered.

“What was that?” Father bent forward to listen.

“The axe you killed him with. People say it disappeared.” Felix knelt naked between a man’s knees, and he was asking about a missing axe.

Father sat back with a laugh. “The tree I tied him to became a holy site. I couldn’t stop it. The people insisted on commemorating the damned tree. So, I figured the axe would become a holy object, too. I burned the handle and buried the blade.”

A tingling lightness ran from Felix’s tailbone to his spine, and he giggled, smiling up at Father in admiration. No bullshit. Father was no bullshit. Felix felt ready.

Father slipped his erect penis out through the flap at the front of his white pants. Relationships were off limits, but boys and girls could play together at night however they wanted as long as they avoided anything that could cause pregnancy, so everybody was always putting everything into everybody else’s mouths, and Felix had seen bigger and smaller than what Father offered. Still, having Father’s—maybe not holy, but certainly celebrity—dick in his face made him feel at least as exhilarated as he felt queasy. He didn’t want to do it, but it was an honor. And if he didn’t do it—

Nobody didn’t do it.

Probably a death sentence.

A True Son should feel good about sucking his Father’s cock.

He took the glans into his mouth and lowered his head into Father’s lap.

Sotto voce, the crowd chanted, “*Felix, Felix, Felix!*”

Ignoring the pain from where he’d bitten himself, he kept his lips over his teeth, moved up and down the shaft, and teased the tip with his tongue. The crowd’s chant gave him rhythm. Soon, Father’s quiet moans gave him inspiration. Father was pleased.

When Father came in his mouth, ejaculating into the back of his throat, he almost choked.

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“**I**’m not ready! Not like this! Please!” The woman full of protests looked young, maybe close to Felix’s age, which would make this one her first. She had the bed closest to the small one-room medical building’s main door. The woman on the other bed looked older, maybe mid-twenties, and much calmer. She’d probably been through this procedure once, maybe even twice, before. Women only had to survive three times to fulfill their obligations.

Death required living.

Marianne came back into the building wearing scrubs, surgical gloves, a surgical mask, a soft cap over her pinned-up silver hair, and what looked like safety glasses. She checked the readouts on the monitors for the two women’s vitals. “You, missy, need to calm down.”

“PLEASE!”

“Shush. It’ll all be decided soon.” Marianne sounded like grandmothers were supposed to sound, cheery and indulgent, though nobody who grew up in the Lands knew anything about their grandparents or parents. Some kids who came in as toddlers claimed to have memories that gave them suspicions about who their parents might be, but they were never sure.

“Please, if you loosen the restraints—”

Marianne belly laughed. Her belly was bigger than most. Felix guessed she was in her sixties, which made her one of the oldest people in the Settlement of Passing, certainly the oldest woman. On the outside, she’d been a nurse, and the Father that was had recruited her directly from a suicide support group.

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Why she chose to keep living and perform her current functions mystified Felix, but the Father that was had regarded her as a pillar of the community, and Father did the same. Even the True Sons deferred to her. Father was life and death, but so, in a way, was she.

“You seem like you’ve got yourself under control,” Marianne said to the quieter woman who was not struggling against the leather restraints that bound her to the flat medical bed. She’d also been perfectly calm while Marianne had cleaned and disinfected her. “You’re Beth, right?”

“I’m surprised you remember me.”

“Last time you weren’t as easy-breezy.” Marianne brushed a lock of black hair away from Beth’s face. “Maybe you could help me explain to the new girl—”

“Darlene, my name’s Darlene!” Darlene’s hair was light brown and had waves in it distorted by tangles and frizz. Her pale skin glowed. Not panicked and restrained, she might have been pretty.

“Maybe you could help me explain to Darlene that there’s only foolishness in loosening the restraints, because if she slipped away, what would she do? Run away from the Lands? Have that baby on the outside? Make two foxes for the hunt?”

“You don’t want to be hunted, Darlene,” Beth said.

“Take a good look at her, Felix.” Marianne belly laughed again. Felix stepped closer, happy to be acknowledged for the first time. “Little Miss Foxy here could be your first hunt. The Sons caught the last one before she even went into labor, brought her back in rough shape, but she lived. Had the baby in confinement. But the baby wasn’t welcome back home any more than she was.”

“Wha... what happened to the...” For some reason, Darlene turned her head toward Felix. He felt self-conscious looking at the naked woman with the enormous belly drenched in panic sweat from head to foot.

“You’ve lived your whole life here,” Marianne said. She didn’t need specific knowledge of Darlene to make such a claim: no child over three was ever admitted into the Nothing Lands, so if a young woman was around Felix’s age and nine months pregnant, she grew up here. Felix didn’t know her, but boys

and girls didn't mix in school, and nighttime frolics were often anonymous. Marianne continued, "You've never known hunger or thirst. They can make you do things you'd never dream of doing normally."

Felix got her meaning. Darlene did, too, judging from her pallor.

"Things got worse for her. Things can always get worse." Marianne looked at the small table with her metal tray of nightmarish tools, refined cutting implements, blades of different lengths and curvatures. A large saw looked out of place. It had a squatty U-shaped chrome handle too big for the tray and a straight shiny blade with many small teeth.

"I don't want to die." Darlene punctuated the outrageous statement with an obnoxious snort.

"Nonsense!" Marianne tsk-tsked. "What foolishness has gotten into your head? What about you, Beth? Do you want to die?"

"Yes," Beth said. "I haven't reached a point in my journey where I am certain about *when* and *how*, but if I go today..." she shrugged as much as the restraints would allow, "meh."

"It's exciting," Marianne said. "Your third. Are you hoping for a girl?"

Death required living. A girl meant survival.

"If it would please Father," Beth said. "Father is life and death."

"Yes, dear, so he is." Marianne pressed a firm hand on Darlene's forehead, thwarting in advance the attempt to struggle as Marianne looped the final restraint around Darlene's neck.

Darlene closed her eyes. "Please, Father, let it be a girl."

Father discouraged people from praying to him, as he did not claim divinity, but people prayed to him anyway. What a thing, to be prayed to. Quite a thing. Darlene desired Father's blessing without irony or resentment. She knew Father's rules spelled out her predicament. Felix had questioned the apparent arbitrariness of ritual. Had she? During a trip outside, Salvador, Father's first True Son, had told him that the brutality was not arbitrary. A calculus of suffering informed the confrontation with the void; the Land's traditions and rituals all enhanced the confrontation.

Marianne picked up a scalpel.

Felix glanced at the monitors as beeping signaled another escalation of

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Darlene's heart rate. She whined, a sound from the back of her throat, and her lips stretched in a wide, quivering oval. Marianne lifted her scalpel and examined the blade, which glinted in the light from the conical fixture dangling overhead.

Why, if we're focused on death, do we devote such time and effort to babies, the nursery, school... what's the point of reproduction at all?

Salvador ruffled his hair. "We're not all drinking poisoned Kool-Aid or hoping to ride en masse on a spaceship hiding behind a comet. Everybody dies alone. We are a web of solitary travelers seeking death in our own ways. We cannot search for death without life. Death requires living."

Father's wisdom, Salvador's puffy-lipped mouth that made women swoon.

The ritual, the calculus of suffering, surrounding childbirth didn't call for a large audience like the making of a True Son, but it did require a True Son as witness, the role Felix was performing for his first time. The Settlement could have afforded an ultrasound machine to track fetal development and determine sex in advance, but it didn't have one, and Felix reasoned it didn't because finding out the baby's sex and its consequences was part of the ritual. Likewise, the medical facility could have provided anesthesia—which was available for other procedures—but it did not.

Darlene screamed as Marianne cut into her lower abdomen, splitting open skin with a transverse incision about four inches wide. The incision spread as if the skin felt relieved from being stretched over the belly bulge. Marianne, slow and steady despite Darlene's howls, used a clean white towel to pat away blood that spilled into the opening. The cutting continued past the outer, surprisingly thin layer of skin into some yellowish stuff, followed by red cords, probably muscle, which Marianne pushed past. Beneath she cut into thicker yellow-white spongy material, Felix guessed fat, and with short slices, the blade deepened the incision. Darlene's initial scream turned into an ongoing noise of terror and pain, syncopated by the rhythm of Marianne's cuts.

"You think Mama's going to pass out?" Marianne yelled to be heard over Darlene's noise, and Felix took a moment to realize that she was yelling at him. "Here." She set the bloody towel on Darlene's belly and grabbed an instrument resembling a small, bent spade. "Use this to hold the bottom of the incision

open for me.”

Felix studied the instrument for a moment, figured out how the curved part could hook the loose lower lip of the wound, put it in place, and pulled the incision wider so that Marianne could see her own cutting. He also took the bloody towel and cleared away gathering fluid.

“Thank you,” the former nurse said. “After the fat, what you see here is the peritoneal wall,” reddish-pink, not as vibrant as the muscles, “which we cut, and... there’s the uterus!” Gray and shiny, trying to pop out—“And we cut...” Viscous fluid burst and splashed on Felix’s hands, and Felix saw a small coil of purplish-blue umbilical rope.

Darlene’s noise became coherent. “Don’t want to, don’t want, don’t,” she sobbed.

Marianne set aside the scalpel and reached through the mess, into the opening, and gripped what was inside. Felix stepped back as she pulled out the baby headfirst but flipped it upside down while turning to block Darlene’s view. She looked like she was kissing it, then spat. She patted its back and cleaned out its mouth with her finger. A few seconds later, it cried.

He cried.

Marianne cut the cord, swaddled the baby, and set him in one of the wicker bassinets prepared with a warming pad and many blankets.

Fighting for breath, Darlene asked, “What is it?” Somehow, she’d stayed conscious through the pain. Somehow, she remained concerned about what happened next.

“Congratulations,” Marianne said.

Felix looked into Darlene’s eyes. She did look familiar. Of course she did. They’d grown up together. His mind was a blank now, but later, he’d remember her. An image would come into his mind other than what he’d seen today. Other than what he was about to see.

“Do me a favor, Felix, and hand me another towel.” Marianne’s white gloves had turned red.

“Sure.” Felix fetched a towel from the pile next to the tray of implements. His eyes caught Darlene’s again, and something she saw jolted her.

“No!” she yelled. “NO!”

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Felix tried not to look at her again as he handed Marianne the towel. Marianne didn't bother wiping off her gloved hands. She shoved the towel in Darlene's mouth. Darlene made noises behind the gag.

Marianne retrieved the scalpel. Felix knew what came next from his own childhood and because, like everyone else, he'd studied the process for legitimate births in the Lands at school. He'd also studied natural births and knew that at this point, C-section or otherwise, the afterbirth usually made an exit, but now it wouldn't. Instead, Marianne went back to cutting. She started at each corner of the gaping wound. The scalpel slit skin, which wasn't as eager as before to spread but nevertheless pulled apart as the blade moved from side to side, widening the opening. Blood dripping into hair made Felix more aware of how close the incision got to Darlene's pubic area, the vulva, labial folds, and he felt self-conscious again as Marianne extended the split in Darlene's skin all the way to her hips.

Trading the scalpel for curved scissors, Marianne didn't move around muscle this time. She cut through. Darlene whimpered beneath the gag. Her eyelids fluttered. Felix got another towel to sop up blood near where Marianne worked, but the bleeding became heavier and heavier. Sight wasn't much of an option. Marianne had to be feeling her way through as she dug into the spongy layer of yellow-white fat.

Somehow, she widened access to the peritoneum without damaging what was beneath.

Every boy growing up in the Nothing Lands lived in the nursery dorms until age twelve, and a glass case built into the wall above his bunk displayed something he usually didn't learn about until he was six or seven years old. The cases displayed what generally looked like similarly shaped lumps of meat, different shades of pink and red, a big central mass, two nubby arms and a tail-like extension. They were mysteries for the little kids, and the big kids didn't tell because they'd get in trouble. Rumors got around, though, and kids said it had something to do with your *parents*. Some said it had to do with your *mother*. Girls didn't have them, only boys. These hints made the curiosity more and more titillating.

Finally, during a conference, a nice young teacher, Nicholas, told Felix he

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would never know who his mother was or anything else about her, but the meat on display over his bunk was her womb, along with her ovaries and cervix and other things that didn't matter. The womb was the place where she had carried him for nine months so that he could be born into the world and begin his journey toward death. It was like the stars in the sky or Father's words, miraculous and transcendent and his in a way nothing else but death would ever be. *His*.

At age six, Felix learned the word "transcendent" and held onto it.

He watched Marianne rip the transcendent womb from Darlene's dying body. Darlene had lost consciousness at some point. When didn't matter.

Marianne held up the uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries, and cervix attached, and said, "Got to get this to the Preservationist." After setting the organs by the occupied bassinet, she pressed a button on the wall. Felix heard a faint buzz.

He jumped at Beth's soft voice: "What do you think so far?"

Darlene's open abdomen, the blood-drenched sheets and mattress beneath her, the growing puddles on the tile floor, the exception to her motionlessness, small spasms in her chest that must have been breaths. Hugo might have been dead when Felix had reached in and brought his insides out. Darlene had certainly been alive when Marianne had torn out her woman parts. She might live longer.

Felix looked at Beth. "I think it's harder to watch than to learn about in school," he said. Beth didn't have the same potential to be pretty that Darlene had, or once had, but she had warm brown eyes like two cookies and an endearing softness of expression. He didn't need to see a repeat performance. Beth having a girl would be okay with him.

"What about the next step in the ritual?" Beth asked.

Felix tried to swallow. Failing, he said, "You mean your turn?"

"No. What happens to her."

Small spasms in Darlene's chest. He knew what happened months after she died, but now? No clue.

Two men entered through the main door. One took the occupied bassinet, the other the evacuated womb. They exited in opposite directions. Marianne

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closed the door behind them and returned to Darlene's bedside.

"I don't know what happens to her... now." Felix looked at Marianne and blushed, uncertain whether he should be talking to Beth.

Marianne belly laughed. "What happens now is a lot different than it used to be, but I guess you wouldn't know that, Beth, because you're still young. I've got to do what I've got to do because the butcher got old and lazy and comfortable and had what he called a 'renegotiation' that stuck even when the Father that was became a was, and Father was revealed."

Felix had no idea what she was talking about. Beth stared at the ceiling. Her monitor revealed growing anxiety. Darlene's monitor revealed almost nothing.

Marianne picked up the saw with the squatty U-shaped handle that overlapped the edges of the tray of cutting implements.

"She's too far gone to scream," Beth said, "and I don't have to watch this part again." Face to the ceiling, she closed her eyes. "Felix, you're the witness."

Marianne held the saw in one hand and a bloody towel in the other. "It's not so bad, Felix, but I do want the butcher to finish his journey so I can give back this part of the job to whatever young man takes his place. Anyway, check this out." She tossed the blood-thickened towel into the air and swiped at it with the saw, which halved the heavy fabric like tissue paper. "No electric saw on the market is half as sharp."

Felix looked at the incision in Darlene's abdomen, once a few inches, now a fissure as wide as her hips. Small spasms in her chest. Smaller and smaller.

"No time like the present," Marianne said. "We start with the wings." She picked up one of Darlene's arms, positioned the saw at the top of the shoulder, and moved the blade slowly back and forth, forming a groove beneath the rotator cuff. Darlene didn't react. With the groove established, she made faster, heavier movements back and forth, driving the blade downward through the arm in a spurt of red. Three back-and-forth slides of the blade through the groove were all Marianne needed to disconnect the arm almost completely. It dangled from stubborn gristle. Much as Felix had with Hugo's elbow, Marianne pulled the arm away from its former point of attachment. She'd called the arm

a “wing.” It was like pulling off the wing of a roasted turkey at a feast. With a swipe of the long blade, Marianne broke the wing free.

Felix expected her to remove the other arm, but she bore down the saw next to the neck instead. Blood leaked, but it didn’t spurt. No more little spasms. Darlene was dead, but her death was incidental. Marianne cut along the spine almost halfway down, then back up above the ribs to the shoulder blade. “Chuck,” she said.

Who was Chuck?

Marianne cut along the spine again, then cut outward to the sides until she could slide out half of Darlene’s ribs in a block. “I *don’t* have to remove the organs, and I *don’t* have to get the meat off the bones.”

A diagram he’d seen somewhere—not in the Lands because they didn’t eat red meat—flashed in his mind. A cow, in profile, had its body divided into sections named for different types of meat. Such as ribs. Such as chuck. The last time he checked, cows didn’t have wings... but Marianne was allowed to mix meat metaphors. The butcher would get his meat pre-butchered. Marianne, soaked in dead Darlene’s persistent wet, should have been above this kind of work, but he’d renegotiated.

The venerable lady sawed off Darlene’s calves beneath the knees and thighs beneath the hips. The body from beneath the ribs to the pelvis remained intact, withered testimony to the purpose she had served. Again, Marianne only needed three back-and-forth movements of the saw blade in a groove to remove Darlene’s head, starting beneath the chin. The chest, tits included, was a single piece. Finished, Marianne said, “That ought to be compact enough. What do you think?”

Dazed and bleary, Felix nodded.

Marianne retrieved a cardboard box with a silvery internal lining and arranged Darlene’s parts inside. She sealed the box with packing tape and turned to Felix. “Would you be a hero and help me carry this over to the door?”

Felix agreed as his mind filled with the rest of the process. The butcher still had far more work to do because he *did* have to remove the organs and get the meat off the bones. All the meat had to be collected and reduced—chopped small and ground and minced and pureed—so that it had a consistent, ultra-

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soft texture. Somewhere along the line it would be cooked, but the important thing was that it be preserved, not like the womb, which was preserved like a trophy for years and years of evolving appreciation. Mother's meat had to wait for baby to be ready for solid food. Six months or so.

Every boy had to eat his mother. That's what they taught in school. After a boy left the nursery for the adolescent dorms, he learned that for years he'd been staring not only at the womb in which he'd been carried but at the only fleshy part of his mother he hadn't consumed. The womb-burning that followed was part of the ascension to a new phase of living and another stride taken toward the end. The idea that any part of life was inherently nurturing had to be given up to achieve adulthood.

They set the box by the door, and Marianne pressed the button on the wall. Minutes later, men came and took away the box. Marianne crossed to the sink on one side of the room, stripped her gloves, and scrubbed her hands. As she got herself new gloves, she said, "You scrub in, too. And wear gloves this time. You're helpful."

Felix mimicked the way he'd seen Marianne wash her hands, and he didn't comment on how strange the latex gloves felt against his skin.

They stood on either side of Beth's bed. "Hon, there's no point in holding back from screaming. It hurts like the dickens, and there's no prize for denying it."

When Marianne started the incision in Beth's lower abdomen, Felix mopped blood with a towel, more aware of Beth's nakedness and the closeness of her genitals but less self-conscious. Beth cried out, but the sound was more like a loud dissolve into tears than an actual scream. He admired Beth. He hoped for a girl. How did women not hate all men when maleness was so catastrophic?

Because Father was a man. Father was father of all. The only parent any of them knew.

Father was life *and* death. Hating death meant hating Father. Death required living. Living required death.

Hating death was insanity.

Through the skin, around the muscle, through the fat, through the peritoneum, into the uterus, a gush of fluid, Marianne reached in, retrieved the

FATHER IS PLEASED

newborn, held it upside down, shielded it from the mother's view, and, after she cleared its airways, she helped it cry.

Felix lit up, and despite the tears of agony rolling down her cheeks, Beth smiled at him.

"You spoiler, you!" Marianne admonished. She'd seen what had passed between him and Beth. The new confidence he'd found fled. He blushed, knowing his face must be beet-red. "Well, to make it official, congratulations, hon, on having your third girl. Now you can get old and gray like me, if that's where your journey takes you."

Marianne cut the cord, swaddled the baby girl, delivered her to a bassinet, and pressed a button. She hurried back to Beth, who moaned but seemed delirious enough to be missing out on most of the pain. "Now I've got to get the rest out of you," she said, reaching into the incision, "and stitch you up before you lose too much—wait a minute."

The sudden seriousness on Marianne's face stunned Felix more than her words. What could go wrong now?

"There's somebody else in here."

When women scheduled to conceive went to the fertilization rooms, they had at least four or five men in a night. Biological fathers weren't known—Father was father of all—so predicting the possibility, or probability, of twins—

"NO!" Beth screamed.

The heart rate monitor beeped erratically. Beth must have felt what he felt in his gut. They wouldn't be identical twins. They'd be fraternal. After three, her luck had run out. This fourth baby would be a boy.

"Felix, I need you to turn around," Marianne said.

"What?"

Beth screamed.

"TURN AROUND! DON'T LOOK!"

Felix turned around.

Beth became quiet. Marianne was quiet. Felix resisted the urge to look over his shoulder.

After a while, Felix heard a quiet sob. Beth. "It's okay," Marianne said.

"W-what?" Beth's question betrayed no iota of belief.

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“Felix, come see for yourself. He’s dead.” In her hands, Marianne held a still infant boy with bluish skin smudged by red and flecks of the unknown. “He must have suffocated before I got to him.”

While Felix considered the situation, Marianne set the dead baby on the abandoned bloody bed, removed the afterbirth, and worked on sewing Beth back together. “If there’s no baby boy,” he said, “there’s no need to complete the ritual.”

“True.” Marianne did not look up from her work.

Should one congratulate a mother on the death of her child? “You’ll be okay, Beth,” he said.

“Fucking hell,” Beth said.

Marianne disposed of the dead infant and the afterbirth in the same bin.