

CHAPTER NINE

A FUNERAL DIRGE FOR HUMAN SOVEREIGNTY OVER NATURE

February 4, 1988, Hashima, Japan

The waves were high and cold, but the travelers' boat smashed right through them. "God, I wish I was shooting right now!" Marla Crowne said, eyes bright. The sullen, pale Briton behind her muttered something, but over the roar of the engine and the battering crunge of the water, she couldn't hear him. This was just as well. Having spent time sailing off the coast of Scotland, Donal Fitzwilliams wasn't prone to seasickness. The same could not be said of his guitarist and drummer, who were huddled belowdecks filling sack after sack with vomit, nor of the roadies and grips who'd come along.

"Isn't it just perfect?" Marla asked, almost demanding, but Donal was spared the need to answer by a wall of water smacking the bow and coating her with icy spray. The sound she made was equal parts surprise and exhilaration. A stocky woman of the type Donal had never fancied, Marla had gotten the job of shooting the first video for the Ruins, Donal's band, on the strength of her documentaries.

"You only get one debut video," Laszlo Szidonya, the Ruins' manager had said. "We could do another pile of smash cuts, band, tits, band, tits, band, ass, maybe throw some graphics in to spackle the crap together, but it would still be the same damn crap. Did you look at the videos I sent? Did you look at Marla's stuff? She thinks she can do it in *one long cut*, outdoors, lots of scenic movement, it wouldn't look like anything else. You'll like her, you really will, she's got a very strong environmental sensibility, she'll get the Ruins' aesthetic."

Now, huddled in a leather jacket that didn't feel really adequate to the weather, Donal longed for hot tea, a warm fireside, and a good book. This was not, he realized, very 'rock star' of him. But sometimes it seemed like Laszlo, and Norton (his guitarist) and the entire machinery of the Ruins simultaneously wanted to celebrate Donal's un-rock-ness by (ironically) pouring it into the rock-star mold.

He did not like Marla. He really did not. She had a cheerful disposition, practical brown ponytail and an energetic, can-do attitude that radiated from her North Face jacket, her rosy cheeks, her L.L. Bean boots, her unfashionable jeans and her firm, commanding gestures. In the most private darkness of his mind (and, of course, when writing a song or singing onstage), Donal identified with the *poètes maudits*. Not to the extent of committing crimes or taking hard drugs or breaking off from society completely, but to the extent of smoking pot, flouting some unpopular norms, and encouraging the people who paid for his tickets to think for themselves and break the shackles of society.

"Ruins," Marla said with relish. "We've got your ruins right here!"

Looking up, Donal couldn't help but admit that she was right. Hashima—now called "Gunkanjima" or "Battleship Island"—looked, in profile, very much like a gray destroyer sulking in a harbor, waiting to open fire on a civilian settlement. It was ringed all around with a sea-wall, and buildings soared up from it, gray and stern and terribly grim. It wasn't just that the towers were dark, vast, and empty of human life: The island itself was so small that in comparison they seemed all the more imposing.

"Initially the island was four hundred meters by a hundred and forty," Marla said. "At its peak, *five thousand people* were living there. But of course, they built out the island, and do you know how?"

"I bet you're going to tell me," Donal mumbled, but Marla had steamrolled right along.

"They used garbage! Mining tailings, I reckon, probably a lot of leftover building materials, anything they could dump and pave over. It's garbage on top of garbage, abandoned by people who were *treated* like garbage!"

It grew before them as the boat got closer.

"Cool," Donal admitted.

#

The problem with going cool places when you were trying to be famous was that you'd either get treated famously, in which case you never got the full and genuine sense of it, or you weren't treated famously, which was a bit of a letdown. In this case, the Ruins were led off the boat and immediately babysat by a cameraman while the grips hauled out gear.

"C'mon, let's have a walk around then," Norton said. He was gray from the trip, smoking furiously to get the taste of vomit out of his mouth and had only recently stopped cursing the assistants who'd somehow 'forgot' to bring his whiskey along for the shoot. He looked like he should be in a hospital bed being gently told his condition was inoperable, but he forced himself to his feet. He was short, bulldoggy, with a bristly black crew cut and horn-rim glasses guarding fierce brown eyes. His split beard made his round face look like a clock at 5:37.

Their drummer was crumpled in a folding canvas camp chair, head in his hands. He just groaned.

"Herself wants us to stay," Donal said, voice halfway between mild and resigned.

"Herself can go fuck a chainsaw," Norton replied. "Whose video is this, ours or hers? Who's going to be seen and heard, huh? Take some ownership for Christ's sake."

Next to Norton, Donal looked unusually tall, thin and languid. Next to Donal, Norton seemed uncommonly intense, assertive and determined. Donal had the feeling that Norton and Marla were on their way to an immovable object/unstoppable force collision. He wanted to be nearby but not between them when it happened, and he didn't give Norton good odds right after a puke-blasting sea voyage.

"Oh guys, you have to come see what I found!" Marla said.

"Oh, we've got permission now, eh?" Norton stalked forward, nostrils flared and face grim.

"C'mon," Donal said to the drummer, who released his face with one hand to wave him away, but did not raise his head.

"Ooh, how about a nice Lucozade?" the cameraman said, rummaging in a coleman cooler. "Replenish some lost fluids, yeh?" Donal left his third bandmate moaning and strode off after the director and the guitarist.

The open space before them was a mosaic of hardy weeds and broken pavement. "Look," she said, pointing to a stairwell jutting out of the wreckage, the building around it decayed, leaving only steps and girders. "Look!" She gestured again, at a string of red brick arches, partially collapsed, looking like gums with the teeth pulled.

"So where do we play?" Norton asked.

"I dunno," Marla replied, not even breaking stride. "I haven't seen half what's here! Yasuo talked about 'the stairs of hell,' a central vertical thoroughfare between a couple buildings I think."

"Probably just telling you what you wanted to hear, or that translator guy was," Norton said.

"Why would he need to make anything up? This is perfect, perfect!" She turned and her eyes were shining. "The first time I heard 'Squatters,' I wanted to do a slow, roaming point of view through an urban ruin. When I came out to scout, this was better than anything I could have ever imagined. You'll see! It just goes on and on!" She knelt, making a frame of her hands and said. "Oh yeah. We start with a

pan, with that bass intro throbbing, we steady-cam in here really slow, it'll be... *elegaic!*" Her voice peaked with excitement. "A funeral dirge for human sovereignty over nature!"

"What was that?" Norton said, sharply.

Marla looked up, alert, and Donal followed suit more slowly. The dreamlike quality of the desolated landscape was starting to get him and, in a strange way, Marla's excitement was infectious. She was so happy to be in such a sad place. She was so thrilled by the stillness, brought hummily alive by her enthusiasm for its deadly hush.

But their voices had broken that hush, and now another sound did as well. It was a rattling, skittering noise from a nearby bank of empty, glassless windows.

"I didn't hear anything," Marla said.

"It was in that building," Norton said firmly, tromping towards it.

"An animal?" Donal asked. Norton paused to turn back and sneer.

"Yeah, I'm sure this place is, like, full of squirrels and fuckin' wolverines."

"It's probably just the building settling," Marla said. Norton didn't bother to respond, just stalked onward.

"Stay out here! Who cares?" she demanded. "We're not shooting any interiors so it doesn't matter, *stay out*, you could break an ankle."

"Ugh." Donal shook his head. "I don't know if you picked this up about Norton, but he can be a bit... prickly."

"You mean 'like a prick'?"

"I mean telling him not to do something like you're his boss nanny is the absolutely last approach likely to work."

"I'm going after him."

"Don't," Donal said, surprising himself by laying a hand on her sleeve. "Let him be. Don't be there to prove something to. When he's alone, he's quite sensible."

Marla turned a speculative glance on Donal and then wordlessly turned back towards their gear and their staff.

#

"Hashima island was home to the very first ever concrete residential tower," Marla told the drummer, later, as Norton came stomping back. "The precursor to housing projects everywhere." Her audience gave no sign of caring.

"Find your squirrel?" Donal asked. Norton grunted.

"Listen up!" Marla called, "Gather people, gather round and listen!"

The Ruins rolled their eyes, but her grips, the band's two roadies and the pair of cameramen stood attentively.

"Donal? Norton? You guys are in decent shape, right?"

Donal shrugged. He wasn't.

"I'm buff," Norton said drily, "But I'm not taking off my top as a matter of principle."

She laughed. "You willing to do a little running?"

"What're you thinking?"

"Walk with me, everyone." She led them toward the open area. "The video starts here. Camera's almost in the dirt, right Sean? You move it forward, slow, and off in the distance, framed in *that* doorway, we see Donal, all right? We close in," she said pacing forward at a measured rate, "About this speed. The

viewer thinks we're going to get in for the glamor closeup just as he starts to sing, *but!*" Slowly she turned. "The camera glides off him just as he starts and over there, half shadowed in the big crumbly storefront, see all the glass broken out? Drum set's in there and we just see him thrashing away, you can do some big arm movements, right?"

The percussionist nodded, looking at the dusty, jagged glass and frowning.

"Couple steps closer, but then we turn. Now Donal, as soon as the camera's off you, you run, and I mean *sprint*, this way." To demonstrate, she bolted through the arch at top speed, darted through a doorway and along a long-empty corridor full of trash, broken wood and dust-covered *shoji* screens. "You get to here and start playing again, don't worry about having anything plugged in, we're not showing speakers, no one'll care, you get playing here and Sean, *you* slide the camera along here, through this window, you're going to have to climb in... a few steps back, nice and quick, we'll have someone with a hand on your back to clear your way and make sure you don't stumble, you keep the camera on Donal as you back away... slowly drop... pan down *here*, see how the surface is all stained and discolored? We may have to light that. But you play over that, turning, nice and slow, I'm thinking this is about the two minute mark, where the line about 'stains the soil, toil cheat and cheapened' is? Then you pan up and look!" She gestured at a balcony. "Norton's up there, we just get a glimpse. Sean, you step sideways here and you move *smoothly but swiftly* along here, sideways, up the staircase and *look at this gorgeous exposed hallway full of fallen beams!* Look at it! Norton's at the end and we see him play his guitar solo, we close in and then look out and down over the rubble. Now," she said briskly, "While Sean's doing that, Donal, you *run run run* over to the staircase there, I think it was some kind of industrial loading... *thing*... you climb up there and we have a second drum kit up there, another bass and guitar, you two are already there while Norton runs down inside, across here... Sean's coming back down this way, around this sort of impromptu pillar... we pan... catch a glimpse of the band over the rim... the camera comes here like it's chasing an answer, an explanation, a *reason why*, we go up these stairs, seeing the walls, the sea, the rubble, the hill, walls again, sea again, we're on the top and it *looks like* a standard band glam pose but it's skewed, tilted, our point of view never stills it slides off them over to..." she paused for breath, having rushed up the exposed staircase. "...the *coal mine!* And the music stops. And the camera, for the first time, stops. We'll have to have some kind of brace or platform. The last, haunting view, is *that*. Then blackness."

She turned to her listeners, triumphant.

"Lot of running," Norton said.

#

They tried a rehearsal. It was a mess. The grips and roadies were trying to clean paths so the musicians could run safely without spoiling the rugged, destroyed appearance of the terrain. The compromise was for the run-tracks to go behind walls or inside buildings, where the camera wouldn't point. This left Donal and his band-mates running farther and turning more corners.

"Make as much noise as you like!" Marla told them. "Just get to your mark, fast! C'mon, you guys perform onstage all the time, that's like an hour of cardio, right?" In between exhortations, she kept looking at the sky, which was starting to cloud up, and the sea, where the waves were developing tips of yellow-white froth.

"I'd like to see her try it," the drummer muttered mutinously.

"She does triathlons," a grip told him.

"That sea is going to look great *if* we can catch it before the light goes," she fretted after their third try, which, while still a failure, had been the least disastrous. Pulling her lower lip, she looked at the clouds, the water, the sullen band, and she came to a decision. It was visible in her posture. She straightened up, squared her shoulders and said, "Right: Ruins, take twenty, hydrate, catch your breath. You guys are doing *great*. We are ready. We're going to set the cameras, we've got the lights hung, and we are going to

do this in *one take*. One take and we can be finished! You are going to run hard, play hard, hit your marks like they owe you money and at the end we're going to have a single shot video what will win a VMA and get you the recognition your music deserves. When you accept your awards, you can joke about what a bitch I am but you will do it with affection because this thing *will be awesome*." She said it as if sheer force of intent could make it true.

There was a pause while everyone made sure she was finished.

"That's it," she said brightly. "Go! We're burning daylight!"

As she turned to Sean the cameraman, Donal came up from behind and touched her shoulder.

"I would not ever call you a bitch," he said, looking deep into her eyes.

She turned to him and put her hand on his. "Thank you, Donal."

"I find that 'shit-blob' is just as insulting, and it doesn't reinforce negative gender stereotypes."

She blinked, then laughed out loud. "Save your breath for running, you charmer."

#

Donal took a deep breath and watched Sean. Marla was right behind the cameraman, who was aiming down at the broken concrete. Donal had time to contemplate how ridiculous this all was, the pure inane silliness of making a music video, especially one intended to convey some sort of ecological message. He'd much rather be home with the latest Ken Follet, or with Bob Woodward's *Veil*, he'd brought it with him but hadn't been able to focus during the boat ride...

Then he saw Marla start waving her arms and he knew they'd started. He pretended to play his bass, which was electric and unplugged. Marla had the single on a Walkman and was listening as she tailed Sean. In fact, she pointed at him and started singing along, loudly and out of tune.

"...Televised pagan parades! Can't drown out the helicopter blades!"

He sang along and tried to look austere. Gradually, Sean pulled the camera off his face and glided away, in a crouching stance that made Donal think Sean's legs and back must be in sheer agony, as Marla continued to sing, at the top of her lungs, now fitting her instructions to her poor grasp of the melody.

"...the soil beneath our tread! Donal, get your ass to your next mark!"

They had another bass waiting for him, he'd brought two of the same design, neither tuned. He handed the first to a roadie, struggling out of the strap, then skidded on loose gravel as he tried to sprint towards his next location.

"Fuck!"

"...the desert ripped asunder... One take! Keep going, one take!"

Donal ran, unable to keep from glancing up at the darkening sky. He hopped through an empty window, an assistant on the other side helping him through.

"C'mon, she's getting closer,"

"I hear her!" he struggled into the second bass and started singing along, wincing as pain shot through his right ankle. Had it cramped when he slipped? Or was it something worse? He could only hope the grip who'd helped him through had gotten under cover in time.

"...chaotic clash of cultures..." he howled along with Marla, staring straight into the camera, trying to look intelligent and impassioned.

"You're doing great!" she shrieked, pulling Sean backwards with one hand and gently pushing him towards her chosen floor-splotch.

"You're outta frame, go, go!" Sean shouted. Spinning, Donal ducked under the strap and set out along a course marked with flashlights and reflector tape, through some abandoned maintenance corridor to a caved-in wall, they'd draped moving pads and blankets over it where he had to climb through, the

shortcut towards the exposed steps, his lungs were all right but that ankle was throbbing with each step and then he saw the face.

Deep in the building, right before he turned to the open air, in the shadows and dust, he saw great staring eyes, lank hair, mouth invisible in a stripe of darkness but the hint of a shoulder, black against dark gray. He stopped, blinked, then saw nothing. Distantly, he could hear Marla trying to howl along with the guitar solo and he knew he was behind the pace, he bolted for the gap and pelted towards the stairs. As he crossed the open space he saw the drummer rounding the top, coming out into the open, sitting at the kit with his back to the coal mine and then Donal was on the first step, his thighs starting to really burn as he chugged up them, but it was nothing next to that damn ankle, he was thinking about it so hard that he missed a step with his left foot, only the toes caught and they slipped off. He was moving far too fast to stop and the first point of contact was his left shin, bone on stone, then palms and elbows clattering against unyielding, dusty edges as he sprawled up the stairs. He managed to catch himself enough that his face only touched gently, the concrete rough but soothingly cold.

"Donal, what? Fuck!" Norton had pulled to a stop right behind him and spoken in a voice of impatience and resentment, turning to surprised alarm.

"I slipped."

"Get *up!*" Norton was, indeed, buff. He put one hand on a stair-rail to brace himself and with his other, grabbed Donal's bicep to haul him up. Unfortunately, the bannister ripped free of the wall, sending the guitarist toppling onto the singer.

"Owww!"

"Shit! Fuck! Sorry man!"

"*CUT!*"

#

The rain started before Marla could suggest another take.

One of the roadies had solicitously turned the pads from the run-course into a makeshift pillow for Donal before hustling off for the first aid kit. Another had prodded his swelling ankle and put a plastic bag of ice on it. Norton, who'd boxed quite a bit, asked Donal a few stupid questions and pointed a light in his eyes before declaring him "basically fine."

"Good thing you kept your face up, man," he said, flopping down on the cushion, provoking a cloud of tobacco-smoke dust.

"What, because I don't need my hands to play? Fuck."

"You don't need your hands to film a video," Norton said firmly. "Look, everyone knows you're the visage of the band, that's just the way it is, teeny-boppers aren't going to experiment with touching themselves while thinking about my pudgy mug."

"Nice to know what you think of me, mate. Every band needs its wank-fodder, then?"

"Don't... Donal, just don't, okay? I'm sure you'd play just the same if you looked like Ric Ocasek, but the fact is, those Ben Orr cheekbones doesn't hurt."

"Stop, you'll make me blush." But he didn't blush, he winced.

"Hey, let me," Norton said, reaching for the gauze wad Donal was pressing to his shin.

"I've got it!"

"You gotta push harder if you want the bleeding to stop..."

"Leave it be!"

"Right," Marla said, striding over, her hair frizzing out around its rubber bands in the humidity, making her look more manic than ever. "Donal, how are you doing?"

As she spoke, the roadie arrived, pulled on gloves and gently pried the gauze off. Donal hissed.

"I see bone," Norton said, voice tight. Marla squatted down to inspect the injury.

"I don't think it's chipped though," she said. Donal cursed as he felt the sting and burn of disinfectant.

"Why don't we just film *this* and call it the video?" he asked. "Christ. Charge tuppence a look."

"I don't think you're doing any more running," Marla said.

"Oh, you *think*?" Norton said, standing and rounding on her. "Jesus, you're just lucky you didn't knock his teeth out, you dumb old cunt!"

The assistant paused in his bandaging. Marla stood up and took two steps back. "Norton?" she said, surprisingly calm.

"I oughtta beat some sense into you."

She just stared.

"Norton, it's okay," Donal said. "Back off. Have a sit down and cool it."

The guitar player turned, grimacing, but after two steps spun back and pointed at her.

"Nobody runs. Got me? I don't care. Nobody's running."

She didn't reply and he didn't continue. Instead, she took his seat next to Donal and said, "Are you okay to go on?"

"I don't exactly want to be the dick who pisses away our video budget. It's small enough as is."

The first aid recommenced.

"Well, shooting on location is fairly plush actually..."

"Yes," Donal said. "Plush. That's just the word I was looking for about now."

She laughed again. "Right, but being flown to Japan? Come on. The label clearly has some juice behind you."

"Mr. Szidonya really wants us to be the next Duran Duran," Donal said morosely.

"Does Laszlo really have all those Hungarian underworld connections the roadies talk about?"

Donal shrugged.

"All right." Marla sighed. "The light's gone. Weather's turned, but we've got all the stuff parked in the dry. I'm going to go scout some interiors. If we can't do one long, smooth shot, we can still get a lot of evocative atmosphere. I just gotta practice non-attachment and let go of my initial idea. Right? It was a good idea, but I'll have more. That's what being creative means. Right?"

"Why do you keep asking the bloodstained prettyboy if you're right? Norton writes all the music and half the lyrics."

"Yes, but Norton also wants to be the Ike to my Tina Turner, though not in any kind of musical sense." She stood.

"You know, Ike gets a lot of bad press and wife-beating is inexcusable, but he did discover Howlin' Wolf."

"I'm sure you wouldn't call him a bitch either."

"Clearly a shit-blob."

"That's as patched as you're going to get, friend," the roadie told him. "I gotta go make sure the gear's dry and secure. You just get some rest, okay?"

Donal nodded and watched him go. He wondered where his copy of Veil had gotten to.

For a while, maybe twenty minutes, Donal just sat, feeling his muscles starting to stiffen and complain. He heard a noise behind him and turned, but no one was there.

"Norton? Is that you?" He stood and started picking his way through the shadowed corridor, rain drumming on the roof and, in places, forming waterfalls straight through the decaying walls. He

stretched and twisted, trying to restore some play to his body, and he came to the place where he'd seen the face.

"Hello?"

He started inward, wondering if he should get one of the lights from the path or if they'd all been gathered up. He went slowly, checking his footing, which meant he noticed the rain gathering at his feet. At first just a bare skin of water, it deepened slowly, indicating that the floor was tilted. When Donal estimated himself to be where the person had been (if there was one) he paused.

Donal knew all about false-face identification. He'd had an ex-girlfriend who was very enthusiastic about the alleged face on Mars, and right before their protracted breakup began he'd gathered all kinds of information about the human brain's circuitry for recognizing faces and how it could see them anywhere. He showed her pictures of faces in wind-blown snow, microscopic tumors, clouds and leafy shadows. She'd called him a pig and broken one of his MC5 records right in half.

Standing where his phantom would have been, he turned and looked at the running path, where he'd have stood then, silhouetted in the brighter light. And as he turned, he smelled something. It was foul, fishy, overripe. Finding the source was not hard.

It had once been a television set, an old one, but the tube was smashed, leaving jagged glass teeth on the top and bottom. Stepping wetly closer, it occurred to Donal that the placement of the shards was no coincidence. There wasn't glass on the floor. Moreover, if the frame and jags made a 'mouth,' there was something inside it. Squinting, Donal saw a fetus-like profile... no, just an old doll, its plastic face and arms resistant to time and the elements. Squinting into the dark cavity, he saw that fish bones had been pushed into the doll's cloth body, as if it was being impaled or mounted from behind. Something oily and dark glinted on the tips of the glass points.

He heard a movement behind him, something that stood out over the drip of water and drum of rain. Something slower, more solid, more deliberate. Like heavy footsteps getting closer.

"I didn't touch it," he said, to nothing, backing away. "I'm leaving. I'm leaving now." His instincts wouldn't let him turn and run, so he had to pick his way guardedly back, watching the blackness and straining to listen.

When he got back to the cushion, he heard a woman scream.

#

At first, Donal thought it had come from the same direction as the unseen footsteps and, to his shame, his first instinct was to run the other way, into the rain-swept open. But he couldn't run. Despite twenty minutes of ice, his ankle was still tender and unresponsive, and every step on his left leg sent a jolt of pain that seemed to streak from his shin all the way up to molars. He managed to get out into the rain before seeing Sean heading his way.

"Did you hear that?" Sean demanded, and Donal nodded, letting himself be pulled out of the downpour.

"I think it came from the coal mine," his percussionist said, seemingly appearing from the shadows.

"What should we do?" Donal asked.

"Marla went that way to scout locations," Sean said. "You guys stay here, I'll find..."

"No, we're coming," the drummer said firmly and Donal found himself nodding.

Sean looked from one to the other and his face phased through annoyance to trepidation. He clearly didn't want to alienate his employers, but as his eyes flicked down to the bloodstained rip on Donal's trouser leg, his doubts were visible.

"C'mon Don," the drummer said, slinging Donal's arm over his own shoulder. "We'll keep up."

"Let me go first," Sean said. In the distance, they heard a shrill, piercing note.

"That's her whistle," Sean said, squinting into the dark and grabbing a huge flashlight. "This way."

"Marla has a whistle? What, did she used to be a gym coach?"

"No," Sean said, leading them on through a dust-choked hall. "For rape."

The rockers had no answer to that and were, in any event, struggling to keep pace with the anxious cameraman. Soon, they found themselves in another courtyard, this one much smaller, coal-darkened buildings rising above it like judgmental adults circling some schoolyard disgrace, their faces inscrutable.

"Footprints," Sean said. He pointed towards an edge, where wind-struck rain couldn't quite reach. In that dry sliver, the prints of hiking boots were faintly visible.

"Probably wanted to keep her prints out of a potential shot," the drummer said.

"Or just stay dry," Sean grunted as they followed. Donal, being on the right, was half-exposed to the falling water and kept asking himself why he'd come along. He could be sitting on his pile of moldering pads. Not exactly dry or comfortable, but at least there the humidity in the air wasn't falling and, while the rag heap wasn't luxury, it was somewhere he could sit instead of going back and forth between the sharp stabs of each left step and the deep, bruised complaint of every right.

But the whistling was certainly getting louder, echoing within the door ahead of them.

"Marla?" Sean called, and got three sharp toots in reply. They entered.

"Be careful!" she shouted. "The floor's weak!"

"We'll just stay back here," the percussionist said, clinging to the doorframe with one hand.

"Where are you, Marla?" Sean called.

"I'm down here! I fell!" They heard the sound of splashing. "It's flooded down here!"

Sean turned to the musicians. "You know where we stowed all the gear, right? Go get rope and bring back anyone you can." Giving orders to his bosses no longer seemed to bother Sean, with Marla in distress. Testing the floor with each step, he made his way forward until, with a protesting groan, he found a plank suspended over the gap like a very dangerous diving board. He hesitated, then got down on his stomach.

"Careful!" Donal called.

Sean crept forward and aimed the light downward.

"Thank god!" Marla called, sounding surprisingly cheerful, given the situation.

"What happened?" Donal shouted.

"Oh good Lord, is Donal with you? He should be off lying down!"

"He insisted," Sean said. "Marla, are you hurt?"

"Only my pride. I was checking around—found the 'stairs of hell,' I think—walked right in here, heard a creak and then the whole thing gave way. Lucky really."

"How d'you figure?" Donal asked, looking out to see if more help was coming.

"I could've fallen on something solid and broken some bones, or I could have fallen a lot deeper. The water here's about four feet deep, so I got a nice filthy splash but I don't have to tread water."

"What happened?" Two roadies came through the door, a heavy loop of cable over one's shoulder and the other carrying a case of equipment.

As Sean repeated Marla's story, the pair started carefully bracing and planting and tying down some sort of ratcheted lifting device. "Leeds all over again, isn't it?" one said, prompting the other to laugh. Donal had no idea what they were talking about.

"Should someone go start a fire?" Donal said. "She's going to be icy when she gets out."

"Fine idea," Sean said, watching the two men.

"We got this," one of them said.

With some reluctance Sean said, "Yeah, I'll go start that in, um, the stairwell I guess. There's some dry wood near there.

"Use the second landing," Donal suggested. "It'll be enclosed. Out of the wind."

"Yeah." Sean nodded. "Bring her there when she's up."

"Here's the rope then, Marla," a roadie said, casting the knot-tied end down with a splash.

"Got it!"

"Okay love, the ideal would be for you to sit in that loop but, failing that, get it across your back with your arms outside then, can you do that?"

"I'm sitting in it now." Marla sounded very pleased, both with herself and with the roadies, who began slowly winching her up.

Then she screamed again.

"Are you hurt?"

"SOMETHING'S DOWN HERE!"

"Marla, what?"

"GET ME UP! GET ME UP! GET ME UP!" The rope began to thrash and wiggle back and forth, its support wobbling unstably as one cursing roadie seized the frame and tried to steady it while the other (also cursing) started turning the crank at a frenzied pace. Unsure what to do, Donal hobbled forward. He'd just decided that he could hold the light for them when he saw Marla's hands on the rope, clutching tight while she hauled herself up. Her face was as white as her knuckles and her legs started pedaling wildly in midair.

"HELP ME!"

"We gotcha, love," a roadie said, but Donal stepped back as he felt the wood beneath his feet start to sink, slowly, but with the occasional vibration of snapping fiber.

"Hurry!" he cried. Marla's thrashing legs pushed her back, she swung out and the entire contraption started to tilt over the darkness just as something dark and wet rose up, then sank with a splash. Donal lunged forward and grabbed a squatting, tipping man by the gap at the back of his jeans, right at the plumber crack, hauling back with all his meager weight just as Marla's swing hit apogee and she started to return. Donal had one man and was tugging hard, the other reached out and seized Marla's legs and they all started to pull back towards the wall, stumbling and crying out.

Something came out of the hole.

First just two swipes of darkness, paws tipped by sharp-curved points, they flung themselves up on the sagging board floor. Then a dome began rising behind them, a horribly familiar movement, that of a swimmer slapping the pool's rim with two palms and then heaving his head and chest up before raising a leg...

"JESUS!" Donal screamed and aimed the light at the rising form, half from a sick desire to see the worst, half from a flagging hope that it would somehow turn out to be a normal human even though this outline was too big, moved too easily from the water...

As his flashlight's beam skated across great, black, shot-glass eyes and pallid, froggy skin, the thing flinched and lashed out. A roadie cried as a crimson spray flew across Donal's narrow field of illumination, but then the floor gave way with a roar, dropping intruder, winch and man down into the water below.

"Nardo!" the other roadie said, leaning forward.

"Leave him!" Marla snapped, and her voice was so firm, her tone so certain, that both men immediately stood and staggered to the door as quickly as they could, her behind them shoving.

An earsplitting scream, agonizing falsetto, echoed from behind them. The roadie paused.

"BERNARDO!" he shouted.

"He's dead," Marla said, still pushing.

"I'm going back!"

"Fine, meet us at the staircase," she said, dismissive, and grabbed Donal around his ribs. Side-by-side, her trembling, him still wincing with each step, they began their trek back to the others. The roadie started at their backs, then at the door. Marla didn't look back but Donal did. The last thing he saw behind was the lone man's measured, resigned steps. Then Donal's hurt ankle caught on a heavy shingle, blown loose in some long-forgotten storm, and he cried out and faced forward, head down to watch for other hazards.

He tried to look for smoke through the rain, but it was impossible, the buildings soared too high in the way. It wasn't until they were inside again, heading past a pile of empty bottles, that he realized he was crying. He couldn't have said if it was from the pain, or the loss of Bernardo, or if it was because he hadn't learned the man's name until he was abandoning him.

"C'mon," Marla said, and Donal felt humiliated that he was crying in front of her until he realized the rain would hide it. He took a deep, snuffling breath. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

"Yeah, fine." It wasn't sarcastic, just intense, and then he smelled woodsmoke. They were in a familiar area, there were the pads, his makeshift sofa, and they went to the crumbling gap in the wall, no longer swathed in softening cloth, she held him steady as he stepped around it and then he tried to do the same as she stumbled back out into the rain, which had intensified into a savage downpour.

"Just a little farther," she said.

"Yeah." Arm and arm, they went into the stairwell and found Sean staring at them with the other cameraman and the two remaining grips.

"Where's Bernardo and Jacob?" Sean asked and Donal pummeled his memory. He knew he'd been introduced to all these men. He'd shaken their hands, shared horrible expensive hot sake with them the night before, made jokes and heard about their previous jobs. Craig, that was the other cameraman. Dale, one of the grips was Dale but he couldn't say which one. The other name just wouldn't come.

Marla stared at her men as they draped a sleeping bag over her shoulders and drew her closer to the fire.

"Where's Norton?" Donal asked.

"Your drummer went looking for him," Sean replied. "I haven't seen him for nearly an hour. What about Bernardo and Jake?"

"They fell in," Donal admitted.

"What?" Sean got to his feet and looked at Craig, who sighed and started to rise as well.

"No!" Marla said sharply. Everyone but Donal looked at her, eyebrows rising.

"It's really dangerous in there," Donal said, voice low, looking at the guttering little fire.

"And you just left them?" one of the maybe-Dales said, glaring, not at Donal, but at Marla.

"What's she going to do, she's getting hypothermia, and this one can barely walk," the other replied. He turned to Marla and said, "What's so dangerous? Clearly you got in some water..."

"Yeah," she said. "The whole floor is rotting and underneath, it's flooded." She was starting to shiver in earnest.

"Did the lift gear fall in?"

"Yeah," Donal said. "That and Bernardo. Jake went back to get him."

"We'll go fetch them out," Sean said, starting towards the exit. "You stay put, Marla, get some dry clothes on, this shouldn't take long unless Nardo's hurt."

"Wait," Donal said. "There was... something in there."

"What?"

"Something attacked us," Donal muttered.

"When you say 'attacked'..." Craig started, while one of the others asked, "What did it? Like, an octopus or one of those box jellyfish?"

"I didn't see it clearly," Marla said, hunching deeper into the sleeping bag, not meeting anyone's eyes. "Look, if you go, take lots of lights. Dale, you packed a flare gun, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

She didn't answer. The rapid shivering visible through the sleeping bag changed into larger, more purposeful motions. "I've got dry gear in my red sack," she said. "If one of you could fetch that, I'll take you back to Nardo and Jake."

There was a chorus of refusals, though Craig ducked out to get the bag and one of the men remaining, the one with the slenderest build, took off his soaked windbreaker and damp sweatshirt, revealing a dry henley shirt beneath. That came off too, revealing a pale and hairy chest. "Here," he said, holding it out to Marla's sleeping bag. "Pre-warmed."

"Aren't you thoughtful?" she said through chattering teeth as he wrestled his outer layers back on. "Hey Craig, hand me that black satchel, would you?" To Donal's relief, she rummaged in it and produced a bulky two-way radio. She started fiddling with the knobs as Craig returned. "Yasuo?" she said. "Yasuo, come in. Come on Yasuo, *konichi wa*." She handed the radio to Donal. "Try to get him," she said, scooting her sleeping-bag drape over the red bag and then disappearing under the cover.

"H... hello?" Donal said. "Is anyone out there?"

A squall of static answered him, matching the hiss and roar of ocean waves crashing against Hashima's sea wall.

"Is anyone there? Please, we need help, we're stranded! Yasuo, are you there? Come in, Yasuo!"

"Yasuo talk," said the radio in a thin, barking voice. Immediately Marla's head popped out of the bag, along with her gray-clad arm. She reached out for the radio, hand beckoning imperiously and Donal handed it right over.

"Yasuo!" she said, "You have to come get us!"

"...no go...rain...sea!" Yasuo replied, or at least that's what Donal got between the static and the storm drumming around them.

"Oh, fuck, it's... um... *tasukete kudasai!* C'mon, Yasuo, we're hurt! We have injured people, you have to come now!"

"..."

"Dammit Yasuo I can have your license taken! I say the word and Hisoka can get your license yanked! Do you hear me?"

"Seas very bad!" Yasuo squawked, his 'very' marred by that Japanese linguistic elision between 'r' and 'l'.

"Hisoka! Hisoka take Yasuo license! No license for Yasuo!" She was holding the radio right in front of her face and screaming into it now.

"..."

"Yasuo?"

"I coming soon."

"You're on your way?"

"Soon as can come, I come. Over and out."

There was the distinctive scratchy sound of a microphone clearing. Marla twisted the knob to shut the radio off and leaned back. Her bare feet poked out from under the sleeping bag's orange fabric as she finished pulling on dry pants.

"Right," she said, "That warmed me up. Here's the plan. Donal, you stay here, tend the fire and watch for the other Ruins. Everyone else, with me. We've got ropes?"

"Straps... some bungie cords..."

"Great. Leave Donal a big light. Flash that out every now and again, will you Donal? Maybe your mates will see it." She was struggling back into her soaked boots, which steamed as she put them perilously close to the flames. "I should've brought a second pair of shoes, dammit."

"Wait, shouldn't I come along?" Donal asked. It was out of his mouth before he realized he was volunteering to go back where that thing was. He was relieved when Marla pointed out that someone had to watch the fire and keep it from spreading.

"Who else has clothes?" she said. "Any other sleeping bags? Right, spread that stuff out by the fire, get it warmed up for Jacob and Bernardo if they make it back. I'll take this in case Yasuo calls again," she said, slinging the two way into her bag, rapidly repacking it with first aid supplies, throwing out light meters and viewfinders. "Whiskey? Come on, someone has booze!"

"We left it back," Donal said dully. "Norton gets in a state."

"Fair enough," Marla said, rolling her eyes. "Sean, bring that crowbar. We'll be back as soon as we can," she told Donal, then held out a small black walkie-talkie. "Use this if you have to, but don't call unless something's going on. I'll keep you updated on us as much as I can." Donal understood that she didn't want him to alert the thing in the pit with an unnecessary word. She caught his eye and he nodded.

Then with a clatter of gear and shuffling feet, and the sound of a nose blown on a sleeve, they departed. Donal was alone.

He sat. He huddled by the fire. He added fuel, ancient timber from one of the cement block houses, maybe a piece of baseboard or part of a shoji screen. The wood was well-weathered and seasoned, dry on one side. He put that side facedown and it caught quickly, its wet side spitting and hissing.

He stared at the flames. Then he started poking through the equipment until he found a jangling sack of scaffold bars. Frowning, he fiddled with a cotter pin for a few minutes until he'd adjusted a pole to roughly the height of his armpit. Then he covered an end with some rags for padding, held it in place with gaffer's tape, and capped it all with a taped-down nylon case. He now had something that looked like a small 'i' or an inverted exclamation point and, cramming the padded end into his right armpit, he used it as a crutch and hobbled over to shine his light across and around the buildings.

"Donal, you there?"

He jumped, spun, and nearly fell before realizing the voice was coming from the radio clipped on his belt. He pulled it up.

"Donal, we're just about to the mine, can you hear me? Over."

"I hear you," he said, then realized there was a 'Talk' button. He pressed it and repeated himself, adding 'over.'

"No problems at the fire?"

"All quiet. But no one's turned up, I'm still alone. Um, over." Even as he said it, he continued to wave the light out the window. The rain had lightened, and its thin, foggy drops made the beam of the bright light sharp-edged and clear. As he swept it over a tier of missing windows, he thought he saw, just for a moment, the shape of legs. But when he reversed and peered close, he saw nothing.

"Right," Marla said, her voice low. "We're going in."

"I'll stay quiet," Donal assured her.

"I'll keep the line open so you hear what's happening."

Donal went back to the fire, poked it with the metal end of his crutch, and listened. He heard Marla's muttered instructions that the group should stay close to the wall.

"...that blood?" said a faint male voice through the radio.

"Right," said Marla, and Donal wondered how many times she'd said it, in just that reassuring tone, on this trip. "I'm lightest. I'll crawl to the edge. Dale, if you could...? Great." There was a loud rasp, louder than the voices, as the casing of her radio scraped the floor. "I don't see anything," she said. "Wait! No. Oh, hold on, there's the winch... it's trashed," she said, her voice strangely conversational. "I'm going to call out." She cleared her throat.

"Jacob? Bernardo? Can you guys hear me?"

There was nothing. Donal heard the shrill of her whistle and flinched away from the headset, and as it stopped he wondered if he was hearing something else, outside, a high distant sound warped by the rain? Just the echo in his ears of the radioed note?

Again, the velcro-rip noise of the floor on Marla's radio as she crawled back. "I don't think they're there," she said.

"One of us has to go down for a closer look," said a man's voice, firm and decisive even through the broadcast.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Marla said.

"You just want to leave them there? What if they're hurt and can't reply?" The voice sounded muffled and faint compared to Marla's nearness.

"If I had to guess, I'd say they're drowned," she said grimly.

"I'll go and you're not stopping me."

Then a shadow shifted on the wall and Donal cried out, "Who is that? Who's there?"

"Donal..." The voice was raspy and wet. Pressing his back against the wall, Donal struggled to his feet, the hot sting of his shin a sour counterpart to the icy clench of fear in his belly.

"I'm, I'm armed!" Donal squeaked, half-registering an argument on the radio behind him, and then his percussionist came into the circle of firelight.

"Help me," he whimpered, and Donal stumped forward as fast as he could. Blood covered the drummer's pants-front and one side of his windbreaker, shiny and dappled by the impact of raindrops. Donal helped him to a sleeping bag and wrapped him in it, realizing as he did that the wet slickness under his fingers wasn't cold and thin, it was hot and thick and sticky on his fingers.

"Are you bleeding?"

"Uh huh. They got Norton. Norton..." The musician coughed and a red bubble puffed out of his lips, popping and leaving a red streak down his chin. "He had a... piece of twisted metal. He gouged one, split its skin like... like fuckin' cheese man... it didn't bleed."

"What? What... attacked you? Where are you hurt?"

Twitching, the drummer plucked at shreds of nylon, revealing his red left shoulder, deep gouges bleeding freely underneath.

"Right." Unconsciously aping Marla's decisiveness, Donal ignored the distant cry coming from the radio and picked up the first cloth that came to hand. It was Craig's Def Leppard t-shirt. He crammed it against the gouge marks, and his patient cried out.

"Shh!" Donal hissed. "You must push hard if you want the bleeding stopped." Half crawling, he seized a roll of gaffer's tape and ripped out a long strand of it.

"Donal! Donal, what's happening? Can you hear me?" Marla's voice was small and distant as Donal wrapped the tape, then went again tighter and tighter.

"Ahhh! Ow, oh, shit... Donal, they have claws, they're big but so goddamn fast..."

"How many?" Donal demanded propping his band-mate up against the wall and looking fearfully down the steps. "How many where there?"

"Just two, just the two we saw..."

"Are you hurt anywhere else?"

“...back...”

“Your back? You’re hurt on your back?” Donal tugged the other man’s shoulder, but he’d passed out and was dead weight. Swearing, Donal wedged his crutch under his patient’s side and stirred him over, only to see a pool of blood visibly growing. The fabric of his jacket had four thick holes, the size of pound coins, clustered above his right kidney. It was all red, layer upon layer soaked in gore, and it was clear to Donal as he pulled up coat and shirt that something sharp had gone through the man’s clothes and dragged them along while tearing four deep and bloody furrows in the flesh beneath. Each stripe was at least four inches long, starting shallow on the right side but deepening quickly as they neared the spine. Donal couldn’t think how this man, so ordinary, someone he’d shared cigarettes and card games with in a van, someone who was a competent showman but uninspired musician, could have walked even a single step with these gruesome holes.

Quickly on the heels of that thought, Donal realized the wounding must have happened nearby.

Not long after that, he looked up and saw a hunched form standing in the stairway, staring at him.

“Don’t come any nearer,” he whispered. But it did. It stepped forward into the light.

Its body was swollen, pale, egg-shaped in outline. One green-black nipple was stranded on its left side, while on the right there was only a curdled mess of torn but bloodless flesh. Something cloudy and half-liquid, like snot, was beading or oozing out of the gashes. Donal guessed that was where Norton had hit it.

Its legs were bulbous as well, thighs the size and shape of an uncut gyros slab but colored a toadlike greeny-gray. The hip joints, and the sides of the knees, had bony discs bulging out, connecting to pyramidal calves, broad and leathery, ending in long-clawed toes that scratched against the concrete as she came forward.

Donal felt puke rise in his throat as he realized it was a female. Donal adored the look of a woman and had used his position as a rock singer to celebrate it often. This was a feminine travesty. The arms, thick with muscle, ending with monstrous, webbed, gore-stained fingers, were somehow still girlish in proportion. It walked like a woman, like an awkward and self-conscious girl, though it made no move to cover its vestigial nipples or naked, hairless pubis.

It had a face.

Its trapezius muscles were massive arcs, rising up as far as the lobes of its ears, terrible ears, obscenely overgrown like some frilly forest mushroom but, at the same time, rotted, gnawed along the rims, shredded and ripped without blood. In the left was the twinkle of a metal decoration. The right ear at the same place was so swollen, wart-knobbed and distorted that, if an earring were present, it could easily be completely encased in sloughing, decaying skin.

Hanging in front of the ears were long tangled strands of straight black hair. It was thinning on top, but to Donal’s horrified eyes it had some sad vestige of girlishness. The eyes bulged, liquid black and impossibly round, but with a girl’s graceful forehead and nose as a setting. The shadowy sketches of a pair of cute little eyebrows remained, and even the bloodless worm-lips were unwrinkled, sad... but those of a human woman.

It stared. The mouth opened.

“Ah...” it croaked. It had a booming bass tone. “*Ahnahtah waah daare desuu kaaah?*”

They were words. It was speaking words to him, Donal knew it, even though it sounded more like whalesong. It took a step to the left and started coming around the fire towards him. He circled right, keeping the meager flames between them.

“Please...” he said, makeshift crutch slipping amidst the litter of sleeping bags and clothing. “Please don’t hurt me. I’m sorry. Please don’t. Please.”

“*Doooushiiiiite koko niii iruuu no?*”

"I don't understand," he whimpered. When it spoke he could see its shockingly pink tongue flicking amidst teeth the size of his thumb, sharp predator's teeth.

"*Ahnahtah wah dare desu kaah?*" it repeated, its voice louder. "*AHNAHTAH WAH DARE DESU KAAH?!?*" As it stretched its lips for volume, he could see a second row of teeth behind the first, smaller, rings receding into its throat like the fangs of a shark or an eel. It was now two thirds of the way around the fire. He was stepping across his percussionist's corpse. He saw its massive foot fall on Marla's radio and he didn't even remember dropping it as the plastic crumpled flat.

"AaaaaiiiiiieeeeEEEEEE!"

Donal flinched. The shriek was sudden and sharp and it came, not from the monster he faced, but from the stairs at his left side. He twisted and saw Marla, halfway up the steps, raising some massive pistol in both hands. He squeezed his eyes shut a half-second after a blinding red light streamed from the barrel. The beast's deep howl blended with Marla's scream and he staggered forward towards the steps, hearing her footsteps clattering in front of him.

Opening his eyes, a great dazzled blot floated in front of the gray and rusty steps, his black shadow before him limned in firelight orange and a brighter red. The pain from both ankle and leg were gone or, if not gone, simply not registering through the primal panic driving him to follow Marla as she raced out into the dying rain, taking a hard right and heading towards the island's northeast corner. A wave crashed into the island's side, but instead of the great rising spray curtains of the last hour, it only showed a brief line of white above the sea wall's stony lip.

When she paused to look back, Donal stumbled into her.

"Sean?" he panted. "Dale?"

"All gone." She was fumbling with the gun and her windbreaker—actually, Donal was pretty sure she was wearing one of Craig's windbreakers now. He realized she was holding the flare gun and, with clumsy, trembling hands, reloading it.

"They got everyone else," he said, eyes wide.

"Listen. There's an atoll to the northeast, uninhabited. It's maybe a half mile, maybe only a quarter mile, can you swim that far?" She started to scramble up the slippery enclosure that circled Hashima.

"Swim?!?"

At that moment, the thing crashed around the corner behind them, its hair still smoldering and the burning remains of a sleeping bag tangled around one foot.

"*AHNAHTAH WAH DAAARE DESUUU KAA!?!?*"

It started charging, slow at first but gaining speed. Donal didn't even realize he'd made a decision before he was climbing, Marla dangling a foot and then a hand to help him up, his hands as bloody as his shin with the effort of his panic. He was beside her as the female grotesque closed in, and then there was another red streak as Marla fired a second flare. This one missed, puffing into brilliant flame against the ground and skittering away, but it did make the creature throw up its arms and flinch.

"Go!" she shouted and leaped out over the surf.

Donal's head jerked and he watched her arc down, it had to be at least thirty feet, and hit the water with a splat. He took a sharp breath. From the way she'd hit, the water had been a foot deep at most. She hadn't even submerged, just impacted with a splash and a jerk as her momentum piled up into her arms and head. He was trapped.

"GWAAAAH!"

The girl-thing was just howling now. He looked back and everything seemed slow, as if he was trapped in amber and unable to move, it was eerily clear, the thing's hands grasping as it climbed, nails leaving scratches on the rock, rain diluting Norton's blood on the textured skin of its hand as it rose, eyes fierce, teeth bared.

“Frank,” Donal muttered. That was the last grip’s name. Frank Dawes, of course, he was from Philadelphia. He smiled, forcing the monster below him to pause. Then with a turn of his hips, Donal slipped away from it, down the far side of the Hashima sea wall.

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