

SURPRISE PARTY

by James Patrick Kelly

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When Mercedes Nunez woke up on the morning of her fifty-first birthday, there was a man in her head. At least she thought it was a man; his beam barely tickled her neurons. Her mindedness of him was as vague as that of some blurry loser in the back row of her high school class picture. Was this an underage fanboy with a taste for fallen celebs? A sleep-deprived college kid writing a paper on the pioneers of neurality? No—Mercedes's fan base had been skewing geriatric. So, some fossil too feeble to spark enough mindedness to make her blink. He probably remembered her from when she'd been a randy glamgirl pumping neuros onto main menus. That was before her audience passed her by. Before Rake died.

How long had it been since she'd had a beamer? Years. She wasn't sure she wanted one now. She would certainly spend the fee, if it came to that. But at her age she didn't need the hassle of editing her perceptions on the fly. She was used to being all by herself in her head. So she parked him in a blind before she pulled back the covers of her bed. Maybe he'd just signed on for a quick peep show.

Mercedes still slept naked; she only wore anything in bed when she was having sex. How long had it been since she'd had sex? Too long. Mercedes had never really been into porn, although pointy men with thin lips had accused her of it. But in her glory days, she refused to park the beamers when the lights went out. Dai-rinin, her agent, claimed that she had hundreds of them in her head back when she was sleeping with Rake and Kai Lingyu and John Dark and the other stars who had brought neurality to the masses. John Dark used to tease that she was turned on by the idea of all those beamers watching while he licked her nipples. But he was wrong. Part of her felt dirty having them in bed with her and part of her was getting back at her mother for being a slut and yes, part of her liked shocking her audience with her carnality, but the biggest part of her was gloating over what a brave and brilliant career move it was to have public sex in mindspace. She laughed at the memory as she stepped into her slippers, wrapped herself in a robe and scuffed into the bathroom. She had been a girl of many parts. Too bad none of them had quite fit together.

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herself in a robe and scuffed into the bathroom. She had been a girl of many parts. Too bad none of them had quite fit together.

Mercedes took a very hot shower, brushed her wet hair flat and sprayed on a face that made her look twenty years younger. For her beamer; ordinarily she wouldn't have bothered. She slipped into her bra and panties before she let him out of the blind. At first she thought that he might have given up on her, but if she concentrated, she could pick out his pale beam from the dazzle of her thoughts.

She posed in front of the mirror, knowing that he would be watching through her eyes. =Enjoy the view.=

she thought at him. Mercedes could recognize her younger self in the reflection. Was her belly still taut? It was, and she still had the indoor pallor that made cubicle rats drool. Neutrality appealed most of all to people with lives lit by wallscreens and fluorescents. The cosmetic spray had filled in her wrinkles nicely.

=Like what you see?= She turned, gave her ass a slap and leered into the mirror. =Oh, I forgot. You can't think back at me.= She liked taunting beamers with questions they couldn't answer. They had no way to communicate with her in mindspace and were forbidden by the DayScan contract from contacting her in meatspace. =Know what they used to

call people who couldn't speak?= At first, insults had helped relieve her unease at having strangers in her head. =Dumb.= She imagined them shouting back at her in frustration. She found out later that many beamers actually liked having their celeb acknowledge their existence.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” she said aloud, accepting a black clingy from the copier in her closet, “but if you want full frontal, you’ll have to stick around for the evening show.” She draped it over her shoulders and it slithered onto her, cutting a demure boat neckline and hemming its skirt just below the knees.

=Let’s go,= she thought. =We’ve got things to do.=

* * * *

There were six messages twinkling on the wall in her living room. She went through them while she crunched on an English muffin and sipped her first cup of neutriceutical coffee. There was a birthday greeting from her younger sister, Laia, who sent vids of Mercedes's niece and nephew. Rafael loved his famous auntie. When was she coming to visit? Luisana peered into the camera and emitted a sound that might have been Say-say or just baby burbling. They were cute, no doubt about that. But did Mercedes miss having kids? Not really. Besides, who would have been the father? Rake had been too sick, Kai too busy, and John Dark too damn

promiscuous. The feeds said Dark was with Zoe Zanzibar these days. Or was it Kim Barbour? But just because she still followed his antics didn't mean she missed him. There was bad news again from the stockbroker. Mercedes had never figured out Rake's portfolio and had managed it badly since he'd died. If her luck didn't change, she'd be broke before she turned sixty. Ricky Morgan from the library said that the book she wanted was in and if she picked it up around noonish, maybe they could do lunch at Copper? She told Dai-rinin to send a yes and put a smile on it. Someone named Deddy Suryochondro from Surabaya, Indonesia, wanted to remake *Finger in the Sky* as a

worldscape. Mercedes thought worldsapes were plotless and boring but asked Dai-rinin to find out how much Mr. Suryochondro was offering. The last was from Coco Akita, who said that her housebot was in the shop and that she'd be a little late for the lunch at Copper and that Mercedes should save her a seat. She frowned. Save a seat? When had she made plans with Coco?

Then she remembered what day it was.

She groaned, realizing that she was about to be run down by a surprise party. Coco was just scattered enough to have forgotten that lunch was supposed to be a secret. No doubt her friends meant well, but why couldn't they just accept

that, after a certain age, some people needed to mourn birthdays, not celebrate them?

She swung her legs onto the couch, settled back into a nest of pillows and waited for the chemicals in the coffee to set fire to her nervous system. Fifty-one wasn't old, was it? She used to think it was. She'd been just twenty-six when she'd turned the storyboard for *Finger in the Sky* over to Kai. And her mother had been forty-eight. Forty-nine? Always grumbling about how the day would come when Mercedes would understand about the whole maiden, mother, crone thing. Well, Mercedes had only been a maiden for about a minute and a half in her teens and she'd never

been a mother at all and so why the hell would she bother to worry about the coming of cronedom? She wasn't supposed to die until she was ninety-nine, according to her life clock, and if she gave up bourbon like she kept promising herself she might live even longer. Mimi Burgess down the street was a hundred and ten. The feeds claimed that old Ray Kurzweil was pushing a hundred and thirty. Mercedes was barely middle-aged, too young to mope around on a couch at eight-thirty in the morning. She had a neuro to write. She had a beamer paying to spend time in her head.

It wasn't much of a life, but it was all hers.

* * * *

The studio was in a shed that had held farm equipment back when Rake's great-great-greats had worked the land. It had been tacked onto the main house but there was no direct entry; she had to cross the back porch to get to its only door. Some days that was as much fresh air as she could stand. She shut the office door and sighed at the impression of Mick Raven shimmering on the wall. He was about to swing his leg off his bicycle as he eyed the Stallworth mansion. What was he going to find there? She wished she knew.

Opposite the wallscreen were floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with paper books—upright, vertical, slantwise, and

misfiled in every possible way. In the middle of the room facing the wallscreen was a vintage A-dec 500 dentist's chair done in paprika vinyl. The matching hygienist's cart next to it now housed the cognizor where her agent lived. There was a cup with a sludge of day-old coffee on the tray atop the cart. She trashed it and set the cup she'd just brewed in its place. Around the dentist's chair were piles of epaper that she needed either to read or reprocess. A ficus had shed a scatter of leaves on the floor in front of the north window. Her busts of Shakespeare and Peter Jackson needed dusting, as did her three Oscars.

She slumped as she remembered that the beamer was contemplating the mess

that was her life along with her.

“So,” she said aloud, “meet Mr. Chair.” She settled onto Rake’s A-dec 500 and touched the toggle to reposition it. The chair whined as it lifted and tilted backward. Rake had loved that chair. “Guess what, Mr. Chair? We have a guest with us today, a beamer. Mr. Nobody.” She sipped her coffee. “You don’t mind if we call you that, do you? Oh, and you’ll have to excuse Mr. Chair. He’s like you, doesn’t speak. Neither does Mr. Shakespeare or poor Miss Ficus, going bald over there. Mr. Raven, on the other hand...” She paused and curled her fingers over the keypads built into the arms of the dentist’s chair.

“What do you say, Mick?”

She and Rake had first introduced Mick Raven in *A Shot of Moonlight*. That was back in the old virtual reality days, when you watched and listened to neuros, instead of inviting them to live between your ears. Mick was Rake's idealized version of himself—healthier, smarter, and with better hair. He wasn't a private detective exactly, more like a research librarian with a gun. He cracked wise so relentlessly that at first Mercedes had regarded Mick as a kind of joke that Rake was playing. But when Mick got popular, Rake had started taking his hero seriously. Mercedes felt as if she had to indulge him. They churned out eleven sequels in five years and had been recoding them for full

neutrality when she left Rake and their money for John Dark. She'd given Rake permission to do whatever he wanted with their franchise when they broke up, but there had been no more new Mick Raven adventures. Until now.

She snugged the mindreader onto her head, draping its thick cable over the back of the chair.

=Okay,= she thought. =Where were we?=
=

=Scene Five,= thought Dai-rinin.
=Packet 342.=

=The first time he sees the Stallworth place?=
=

=Yes.=

=Begin.= Mercedes concentrated on the wallscreen and Mick Raven swung

off his bicycle.

5.342: [*impression: shrink Ascot House, Buckinghamshire, England 20%. Hold through 5.350*]

5.343: [*Mick's thoughtstream:*] 122 Fairview is the kind of Mock Tudor mansion that would give Henry VIII nightmares.

5.344: [*subliminal: Henry VIII's face pumping like a heart*]

5.345: [*Mick's thoughtstream:*] Its steep roof is covered in bright terra cotta and the walls are a hodgepodge of herringbone brickwork and stucco the color of smokers' teeth.

5.346: [*smellfx: smoker's breath*]

5.347: [*Mick's thoughtstream:*] Someone painted the half timbers blue—

probably a bot.

5.348: [*subliminal: out of control blue bot with blue paintbrush hands painting, walls, windows, doors, etc.*]

5.349: [*Mick's thoughtstream:*] I've never quite understood why bots love to paint things; they don't have the color sense that God gave to shrimp.

5.350: [*neurofx: limbic bump to subchuckle, level 1*]

5.351: [*Mick's thoughtstream:*] The windows on the first floor have heavy iron casements and diamond-shaped leaded panes.

5.352: [*impression: chamfered mullion windows from outside. Hold through 5.358*]

5.353: [*Mick's thoughtstream:*]

Anyone looking out of them is going to see a world that is pinched and dark.

5.354: [*lightfx: continuous darkening of 5:352 from edges @ 5% per second*]

5.355: [*Mick's thoughtstream:*] An accurate view maybe, but depressing as hell.

5.356: [*neurofx: increase serotonin uptake .01%*]

5.357: [*Mick's thoughtstream*] If it were my place, I would've long since busted a chair through those windows to let in some sun.

5.358: [*soundfx: glass breaks*]

5.359: [*impression: chair legs punching through 5.352, daggers of flying glass*]

5:360: [*neurofx: 70mV stim to amygdaloidal fear complexes*]

5.361: [*impression: door at the Stud Gate Entrance, Hampton Court Palace*]

5.362: [*impression: Chevrolet housebot opens the door. Hold through 5.366*]

5.363: [*bot's dialog*] Am I making the acquaintance of Mick Raven?

5.364: [*Mick's dialog*] Not if I can help it.

5.365: [*Mick's thoughtstream*] I don't chitchat with bots.

5.366: [*Mick's dialog*] I'm here to see Bishop Stallworth.

There was a tickle in Mercedes's throat and she coughed. The bot's

impression shimmered on the wallscreen, waiting for its next line. Her agent waited for her next thought. Brainstorm was waiting for the new Mick Raven neuro.

What was Mercedes waiting for?

“Damn it, Rake,” she muttered. He’d always been the one who knew what Mick was doing. This had been his idea, one last Raven adventure. One last adventure for Rake, dying of chronic myelogenous leukemia, one of the few cancers they hadn’t beaten. Only he hadn’t had near enough time to finish it and now she was left alone to breathe life into Rake’s hard-boiled ghost.

5.367: [*Mick’s thoughtstream*] I don’t want to be here, I don’t need this.

This is a mistake.

=Strike 367,= she thought.

=Struck,= thought her agent.

=I'm think I'm done for today.=

=The contract with Brainstorm requires that you submit *The Bishop of Hell* by February first.=

“I’ve read the damn contract!”

Mercedes was surprised to hear anger in her voice.

=Saving,= thought Dai-rinin. =Ending session.=

She left the mindreader hanging over the arm of the chair. On her way out of the studio, she kicked at a pile of epaper. “Happy birthday, bitch.” Plastic sheets sailed across the rug.

* * * *

Mercedes thought about pouring a bourbon, but had Dai-rinin call a carryvan instead. It had two passengers, the Novick boy and Page Buchholtz.

If Page was headed for the birthday party, she didn't let on. "Why Mercedes," she said, "what tears you away from the wall so early?"

"It's ten past eleven in my time zone, Page." Mercedes sat on the bench next to her. She liked Page, even though she was one of the biggest snoops in town. "Ricky Morgan messaged me. I'm picking up a book at the library."

Page gave a teasing giggle. "Oh, is it Ricky now?" The giggle might have fit a teenager but Mercedes thought it was a little tight on a seventy-something who

wore size sixteen. “Tell the truth, Mercedes, is it a book you’re picking up or...” Her voice got all smoky. “...the librarian?”

The Novick kid looked like he wanted to throw up. Mercedes didn’t blame him. It seemed as if all of her friends in town wanted to push her into some man’s bed. Rick Morgan was on all of the shortlists—including her own. But Mercedes wasn’t quite sure what to do with him. Her problem was that he *knew* he was on Melton’s all star bachelor team, and was cocky about it. Mercedes liked it better when she was catching, not pitching.

She swerved to a different subject. “You want to hear something strange?” She leaned into Page. “I woke up this

morning with a beamer.”

“Really?” Page practically squealed. “What happened to him?”

“Oh, he’s still with me.” She touched a finger to the corner of her eye. “Peeping you this very moment.”

“You’re kidding.” There wasn’t anyone else in Melton remotely famous enough to attract a beamer. Page’s face flushed with excitement and she started to babble. “Who is he? What does it feel like? How do you know he’s a he?”

Mercedes was taken aback by the intensity of her reaction. She reminded Page that celebs were never sure who was beaming into their heads. “So I can’t swear that he’s a man,” she said, “but back when I used to have crowds, I

could figure out whether beamers were men or women by what senses they paid attention to. Women like smell and taste. Men watch.”

“Oh my *god!*” Page goggled as if she were the second coming of Zoe Zanzibar. “That is so amazing.”

Even the Novick kid seemed impressed.

When the carryvan stopped at the Highmarket, Page floated off, as starstruck as the first time she’d met Mercedes. Mercedes cursed her own foolishness. Page would bring this bit of gossip to every wall in town. Mercedes had intended to abandon what little fame she had left when she moved to Melton. So what if all her friends here knew that

she had been a neurity star once? Her day had passed. Scripted neuros like *The Bishop of Hell* were passe. Neurity was all about plotless worldscapes and unscripted sense dumps these days.

So why was Page acting like a drooling fan again?

“Lady.” Young Novick pulled one of his earstones out. “You maded *Sleeping on Razors*, did you?”

“I worked on it, yes.”

“With John Dark?”

“That’s right.”

“Is total.” He nodded approval. “What be he like? Feeds say he gets the ladies.”

She didn’t hesitate. “Horny as two

minks and a goat.”

The kid grinned and popped the earstone back in. “You most lucky.”

* * * *

The carryvan dropped her off in front of the library but she scuttled to the rear entrance. She was spooked and didn’t want to run the gauntlet of the front desk and the neurocom and the mediapod and the stacks of books to get to Ricky’s office.

=All your fault, Mr. Nobody,= she thought, as she stole up to the third floor. =You’re giving me a reputation.= Ricky wasn’t in, so she had Dai-rinin message him. Minutes later, there came a tap at the door.

“Are you decent?” said Ricky.

She opened the door and pulled him in by the arm. "I'm not here."

"Let me know when you arrive, will you?" He gave her a polite kiss. "I'm taking you to lunch."

"You and how many others?"

He stepped away from her, then wagged a finger in mock severity.

"So it's true," she said.

"Now I see why you make detective neuros."

"Raven isn't a detective and I do plenty of other stuff." She sighed. "Let's have the guest list."

"There'll be fifteen for sure, maybe as many as eighteen, and that's all I'm saying." He showed her a crooked smile. "You'll know everybody."

She settled onto the chair behind his desk. “You shouldn’t have.”

“I didn’t.” He sorted through a stack of books in a cart by the door. “Janeel and Page put this together.”

“I don’t like surprises, Ricky.”

“And this isn’t going to be one.” He dropped a book in front of her.

“This him?” Mercedes picked up *Raymond Chandler: Stories and Early Novels*.

“I can’t believe you’ve never read Chandler,” said Ricky. “His detective, Marlowe, could be Mick Raven’s grandfather.”

She opened the book to a random page. “I needed a drink,” she read aloud, “I needed a lot of life insurance, I

needed a vacation, I needed a home in the country. What I had was a coat, a hat, and a gun.”

“See?” said Ricky. “You could steal from him six days a week and nobody would know it wasn’t you.”

“What makes you think I need to steal from anyone?”

“Ah, you’re in a fighting mood today.” He held up both hands in surrender. “All hail Mercedes Nunez, queen of...”

She reached into the candy dish on his desk and threw a jellybean at him.

In the fast company she’d kept as a young woman, nobody would have noticed Ricky Morgan. He was fifty-two and looked as if he belonged behind a desk in some drab second floor office

with a view of the company parking lot. Service in the Air Force had straightened his backbone but had left him looking a little rigid. But as soon as he started talking, everything changed. He spoke in complete sentences with a lilting Alabama accent and made eye contact. His laugh made strangers smile. He and Mercedes had dated three times, but were still circling each other. The way she added him up, there were about as many possibilities as liabilities. He had charm, but he spread it promiscuously. He was divorced, but that proved that he was willing to commit.

As they walked down Lyon Street, Mercedes let him take her hand. "If

things get too awful, just give me a sign. I'll get you out," he said.

"I'll be all right. They're friends. They mean well."

"We love you, Mercedes. We're happy you live here with us."

She squeezed his hand but said nothing.

"So I was wondering if you might consider giving a talk at one of my First Friday Forums."

"What kind of talk?"

"Just basic stuff, like where do you get your ideas, how a project gets started. I'm sure there'd be a big turnout. You've lived here almost two years now and you're still our number one request at the neurocom. The demand was there

so I've bought pretty much everything you've done."

"Really?" Mercedes had never accessed the library's neurocom. "The artsy stuff? *Suit of Clay?*

BlueSkin?"

"All of them, although I've put warnings on the sexy material and restricted access. You're our local celebrity, Mercedes. You've won Oscars."

"For Achievement in Neurological Special Effects." She snorted. "The ones they give away in the afternoon ceremony."

"Just think about it, all right? It would mean a lot to people."

* * * *

Copper's lone wallscreen was set to a view of 11th Street, so that whether diners looked out the window or at the wall, they saw the same scene. Mercedes appreciated the understated view—too many restaurants had walls set to calving icebergs or Martian dust storms or, worst of all, vintage football. A copper bar with a dozen stools stretched to the left of the restaurant's entrance. To the right was an open kitchen. Copper-topped tables were scattered artfully around the L-shaped dining room.

Mercedes was surprised when they were shown to a table for two by the bar. As soon as they were seated, however, the singing began.

Mercedes couldn't see the singers because the party was around the corner. Rick nodded at the wall. For the first time ever, it had turned its gaze inward from the street. Half of the wall showed a long table surrounded by Mercedes's party. She and Ricky watched themselves on the other half. "It would be nice if you looked surprised," he murmured.

There was wild applause as she came around the corner; she felt the sound in her bones. What was it Rick had said? *We love you, Mercedes*. Many people in her life had spoken of love, but most of them had just been breathing on her. However, in this moment she could make herself believe that these people

with their glowing faces felt something like true affection for her. Her own face felt odd and she realized that a smile had spread across it, stretching muscles she hadn't used since Rake had died.

“Speech, speech!” called Matti Ryberg.

“Are you surprised?” said Barb Bovyn as she handed Mercedes and Ricky flutes of champagne.

Everyone raised their glasses to her. “To Mercedes,” called Page. Mercedes wanted to acknowledge the toast but there was a brick caught in her throat so she just clicked flutes with those nearest her.

“I fear,” said Ricky, “that she’s been struck dumb.”

Mercedes nudged him with her elbow. “Thank you,” she said and then coughed. “Thank you all for being so wonderful and so crazy.”

Everybody laughed.

“Is there a seat for me?” she said.

As she took her place she began to pick out individual faces. Page and Janeel were conferring at the far end of the table. Coco Akita had made it on time after all. There was a question in her eyes; Mercedes answered it by holding a forefinger to her lips. The Duttons, her next door neighbors, were chatting with Billy and Ambati, who she’d met at Heartprints, her grief support group. She waved to Steve Broulidakis, who had been Rake’s

doctor. Bromley, who built racing bicycles, said something that made Donna DiMatta, the electrician who had wired her studio, laugh. Both were watching Mercedes closely. Some of these people had been Rake's friends first, but they had stuck by her in the year since he'd died. Now Page and Janeel stared at her too, seeming about to burst with conspiratorial excitement. Then Mercedes noticed the man sitting directly behind them with his back turned to the table.

Page clinked a butter knife against her champagne flute.

"Another surprise for our birthday girl," she said. "A special guest."

The man stood, his back still to them.

Mercedes rested both hands on the edge of the table but as she turned, she pushed back until her arms were straight. She gripped the table as if she were afraid her chair might collapse. Her friends started clapping. Then everyone in the restaurant was on their feet.

John Dark bowed to her, a grin on his thin lips.

He was still ridiculously handsome and, as always, flamboyantly dressed. If his celebrity was not enough to bring him to the center of every room's attention, his appearance was. He wore a black velvet frock coat with silver buttons over a powder blue waistcoat. His trousers were black-pinstriped and his loose white shirt was open at the

neck. He seemed not to have aged in the nine years since she'd last seen him, but then he wouldn't. He was in his eighties, but as long as Dow Chemical kept making surgical poly he would continue to stop foolish hearts.

As the applause faded, Janeel spoke up. "He came all the way from Indonesia to see you, Mercedes. What was the name of the town again, John?"

"Surabaya." Dark's voice always made Mercedes think of a cat purring. "A bit more than a town, Janeel—eight million people live there. The second largest city in Indonesia."

Mercedes fought to steady herself against the whirlwind of emotions that Dark always stirred in her.

=Look, Mr. Nobody,= she thought at her beamer. =Look at all that star power.=

* * * *

The party broke up just before two-thirty. Dr. Broulidakis had patients to see and as soon as he bowed out, the others made their excuses. Ricky had to get back to the library. She had hoped he might ask her to a birthday dinner, maybe even to his place, but he gave her nothing but a bland good-bye kiss. How was the birthday girl going to get home? John Dark had rented a carbot at the airport and said he could give rides, space permitting.

He squeezed Page, Lionel and Klara Dutton, Mercedes, and himself into a

Volkswagen Sturm. Mercedes found herself wedged against Dark. Being so close to him brought back memories, not all unpleasant. Nobody said much as the carbot passed down the streets of Melton. Now that the party was over, her friends seemed stricken by their proximity to the famous man. The carbot dropped Page off, and moments later pulled up to Mercedes's house. The Duttons thanked Dark as effusively as if he'd just saved their lives.

She watched her neighbors trudge across Rake's overgrown lawn—except it was her lawn now. She hadn't quite realized that before, but having Dark here made her see her life through his eyes. He'd be wondering what she was

doing with a lawn. And a house.

Dark nudged her. “Too spooked to invite an old friend in?”

“Not spooked at all,” she said, “old friend.” What else could she do? If she turned him away, he would probably have the carbot drive to the high school so he could spend the afternoon hitting on sophomores. Besides, Mercedes doubted that he’d come just for her birthday. He wanted something.

“You still have that glow, Mercedes,” said Dark. “Your superpower. Use it for good.”

“Don’t start.” She walked him to the front door. “Dai-rinin?” she said. The lock clicked open.

“Who knew that living in the country

would agree so well with you? Couldn't keep my eyes off you at lunch."

Even though she had her back to him, she could feel the heat in his voice. She warned herself not to do anything stupid. This *was* John Dark. "It's just a look I sprayed on this morning." She pushed the door open. "It'll wash off."

He brushed against her arm as he passed into the house. "Not all of it."

She pointed him at the couch in the living room and then pulled a chair in from the kitchen. She might have been embarrassed had a stranger seen the crust of English muffin from breakfast on the coffee table, but Dark knew from experience that she was no housekeeper.

"Terrible news about Rake," he said.

“News?” She turned the kitchen chair around and straddled it with the back facing him. “We buried him a year ago.”

“My agent sent flowers, yes?”

“The biggest bouquet in the church.”

He leaned back and unbuttoned his jacket. “Worked with him years ago at Disney—before they sold everything off.” It fell open over the blue waistcoat. “Didn’t seem like the church type.”

“He got scared at the end. I think he blindfolded himself with religion so he didn’t have to see what was coming.”

“And you moved here to ease his pain.”

“He was in remission when he asked me and I had nothing better to do after *Suit of Clay* gassed.” She shrugged. “I

knew he was sick, but he'd always been sick. His doctors claimed they could manage the cancer. They did, for a while."

"Terrible, yes."

"We never slept together," she said. "Here, I mean." She had no idea why she'd blurted this out, except that she hadn't appreciated the crack about easing Rake's pain. Dark always thought that he knew more about her than he really did.

He let it pass. "Working on anything?"

"We started a new Mick Raven before the relapse."

"Scripted is a hard sell these days . " He reached into the pocket of his frock coat. "Even for me." He showed her a

silver hip flask. “Still poisoning yourself with bourbon?”

“What is this, Dark? What do you want?”

“Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage.” He set it on the coffee table. “Got to build up my courage, yes?”

“For what?” She laughed. “You’re such a liar.”

“My superpower.” He laughed too.

She went to the kitchen. “You’re doing well,” she called. “At least that’s what the feeds say.” Dai-rinin pushed two glasses out of the dishcopier. “Will you be nominated for *The Last Lancelot*?”

“Probably.” He sounded uncharacteristically glum. “But so what?”

Been coasting on brains and good looks for years. Can't remember the last time I had a new idea."

"Tell me about it." She set the glasses in front of him.

"Not that there's a market for ideas. All those damn worldscapes. People claim that they don't want to be ordered around in their own heads—but people are morons. They need to be told what to do." He poured a couple of centimeters of bourbon into her glass. "Ran into your mother last month at Antonio's."

"Really?" She took the glass from him. "Did you sleep with her?"

"That was a mistake, Mercedes. You should have warned me." He poured himself a drink. "She said she misses

you.”

“You want me to toss you out?” She held her thumb and forefinger just a sliver apart. “You’re this close to being on the street, Dark.”

“The glow becomes a fire, yes. Remember how we burned together?” He offered her his glass. “So much history between us.” Reluctantly she clinked hers against it. “Not all of it bad.”

She tasted the whiskey. It was as she remembered Williams, starting sweet but finishing dry with hints of oak and caramel and apples. It had been a while since she’d had expensive bourbon. “Tell me about this Deddy Suryochondro. From Indonesia. Is he

even real?”

He tapped the cushion of the couch beside him. She took another drink and scooted around the coffee table.

“A fallback,” he said, “in case you wouldn’t see me.”

“How could I not see you?” She sat an arm’s length from him. “You showed up at my party. You dazzled all my friends.”

“Deft move, yes?” He gave her a look that would melt chocolate. “Gives you a chance to get used to the idea that I’m back.”

“Back?”

“And now here we are. The two of us, alone in your house. Talking. Not shouting.” He swirled bourbon in his glass. “Not like when you left.”

“I hated you then.”

He nodded. “That made me want you even more. You’re hard to give up, Mercedes.”

She started. How could she have been so oblivious? Dark never gave up. “My surprise party,” she said.

“That wasn’t them. It was you.”

“Your friend Page picked the restaurant. Janeel invited everyone.”

“They came to see you.” She set her empty glass down as if it might explode. “Lunch with John Dark. Something to tell the grandkids.”

“They’re nice people. But not like us.”

“I’m not like you.”

“We’re drifting, Mercedes. We need

to find a new way.”

“What do you want, Dark?”

“Want?” He held up his hand with fingers spread. “Want an Oscar for *Lancelot*, even though it’s crap.”

He ticked his thumb. “Want inspiration. Something to make me excited again.” He ticked his forefinger.

“Want to work with you again.” Another finger. “Want to undress you.” Another finger, and the pinky.

“Then make love.”

She laughed at him. And at herself. She’d known he would say something like this when she’d first seen him at Copper. And yet she’d tried to deny that she knew, because she wasn’t sure how she would reply.

“You did say want.” Spots of color bloomed on his cheeks. She’d always liked the way he blushed. “Tell me it’s out of the question.”

“You’re so good at being you, Dark. How often does that line work?”

He grinned.

“And you know why it works? Because of the Oscars and the money and a body that isn’t even yours.”

“It’s a nice body.” Dark’s voice was husky. “Paid good money for this body.”

She felt a dizziness that had nothing to do with alcohol. “I don’t want charity.”

He leaned close and whispered. “And I don’t give it.”

* * * *

She took him to Rake’s bed because

hers was just a twin in the guest room. As they lay entangled afterward, Mercedes examined her feelings. Did she feel guilty? Angry? Confused? No, no, and no. She felt content and warm and alive. She had been cooped up in her head for so long that her body had gone numb.

“You want to collaborate, Dark?”

“That was want number two.” He frowned. “Or was it three?”

“Our first project is finishing the Mick Raven.”

“Scripted is hard to...”

She clamped a hand over his mouth. “Mick Raven. And here in Melton, where all my friends live.”

He nodded.

She let her hand drop and trace the line of his chin. “You worked hard to get me into bed. Devious, but I appreciate the effort. Nobody else was making one.”

“People are morons.”

“How many times have I taken you back, Dark?”

He propped himself up on an elbow. “Are you talking about times when we were together and had a spat, or the times that we were actually separated?”

She sighed. “How long is this time?”

“Forever and ever, amen. Our new way, Mercedes.” She had never seen him embarrassed before.

“Going to be eighty-three in January, and...”

Her hand went back over his mouth. “And when a man gets to be your age he starts thinking about settling down with just one good woman.”

He nipped at her palm and she jerked her hand away, laughing. Then she pitched back onto her pillow and covered her face with the sheet.

“What?” said Dark.

“I forgot,” she said, still laughing. “Just like in the old days. I have a beamer, Dark.” She peeked at him from beneath the sheet. “And I forgot to put him in a blind—sorry.” She growled. “You took him for one hell of a ride.”

“I know.”

She pulled the sheet completely off her face and stared.

“Meet Mr. Nobody.” He shrugged. “One way or another, I was going to be with you today.”

Mercedes was shocked, but not that he would masturbate. The gossip feeds claimed celebrities did it all the time. She had secretly tried it once herself, but it had only given her a headache. No, what surprised her was that he would admit it. “Contact in meatspace, Dark.” She giggled. “I could sue.” Maybe he really had found a new way. “Take you for millions.”

“Go ahead.” He kissed her. “Except if we get married, you’d just be suing yourself.”

“Married?”

“Married, yes.”

She tasted the word and found it to her liking. It sat sweet on the tongue with a resiny, almond warmth and a finish of freshly mown hay. =So how was it for you?= she thought. =Good both ways?=-

“Very enjoyable.” He tugged at the sheet and it slipped off her shoulders. “But it should be even better next time.”