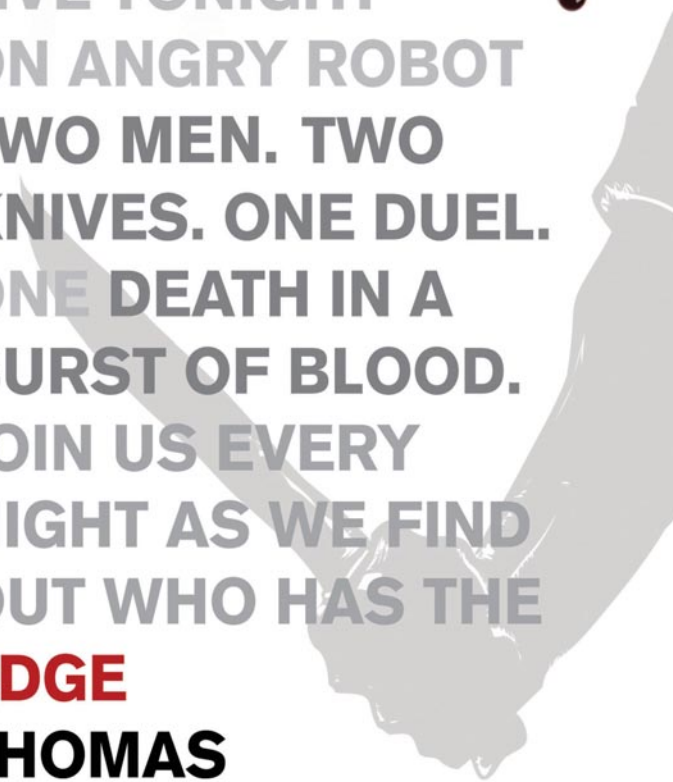




"A SPECTACULAR WRITER" – ROBERT J SAWYER



LIVE TONIGHT
ON ANGRY ROBOT
TWO MEN. TWO
KNIVES. ONE DUEL.
ONE DEATH IN A
BURST OF BLOOD.
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NIGHT AS WE FIND
OUT WHO HAS THE
EDGE

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an excerpt from
EDGE
Thomas Blackthorne

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[ONE]

They drove through the Wiltshire night not saying the name of Sophie. He at the wheel, she in the front passenger seat, tension clamping her mouth. Over and over, not saying it aloud. The insistent thought of her was a black transformation, joy into pain, the sundering of reconciliation; while from over the trees, a golden butter moon watched as it had in the centuries before humans, the eras before primates, aeons before vertebrates, never commenting on what it saw. For Josh and Maria, the suddenness of loss was everything.

Headlights floated in the mirror: call them company. Josh was in no mood for anything but darkness; but perhaps that was wrong. He reached halfway to the dash, needing music to slow down by, then changed his mind. With her name inside his skull, mantra-like – *Sophie, oh, sweet Sophie* – he fastened his hands back on the wheel, 10 and 2 o'clock, the way they had drummed into him, then hammered the engine, the gear too low if he wanted the

car to maintain its value, but on ops they always thrashed the things because you did the business now or there was no later.

“What a *twat*.”

The headlights from behind were incandescent, almost on them.

“What is it?” Maria’s first words for hours. “What’s wrong?”

“Besides the obvious, some asshole coming up our rear.”

And a blind bend ahead. Shadows like ink, the road twisting to one side and out of sight.

“So drop your speed and—”

A blaze in the mirror, a suddenness of black then massive light in front – *lorry coming at us* – white paintwork flashing as the arseholemobile swung across – Audi – fighting to pull in before colliding, while the lorry driver yelled unheard, his face a glimpse of onrushing death as Josh reacted.

“Fuck!”

Magnetic brakes are supposed to be quiet but the car howled and shuddered as he slammed down, the car bucking, then the oncoming lorry and the maniac who’d come from behind to squeeze between them were past. The Audi’s driver had cut in fast enough to save them all, the innocents whose lives he risked. Josh had done worse but always with good cause, and this wasn’t it. At his hip – he grew conscious of it now – was the feel of hardness clipped to his belt: the mark of citizenship, his with the royal coat of arms because that’s what you got for military

service: *William Rex, Dieu et mon droit*. Kill the foreign bastards for the sake of the state; except that if you'd been born in their country, you'd have done the same as them; and that was how it always was, had always been since tribal groups of primates fought, because even the most peaceful apes kill on occasion.

"Jesus. Jesus *fuck*."

He'd stopped the car. Silence was an invitation. Maria looked vulnerable in a way she rarely did these days – when had she become so strong, developed that strength? – and if he found the right words he might perhaps fix everything (*everything but Sophie*) here and now, repair the damage he had done, that the world and random cruelty brought on. Build a bridge; bring her back; and make things whole.

But all he said was, "Motherfucker."

"Josh?"

"Stupid motherfucker."

He shifted gear and pushed the accelerator down, needing the pressure against his back, the kinaesthetic analogue of computation: inertia, vectors of velocity, the tactics of the chase; as he drove his lips were curling back. They call *Homo sapiens sapiens* the smiling ape, and while we're fangless like prey, we have eyes in the front of our heads, for we are hunters too; and when there's a target we need to track it, focus hard and close the distance, all the way until it's dead, and we have bones to crunch between our teeth. As Lofty Young used to have it: "*Identify target. Take 'em out. Repeat until done.*"

He forced the car, accelerating harder.

"Till every bastard is down."

Harder still.

"Every last one of 'em."

And the engine's scream was cutting through Maria's command: "Stop the car!"

His response was visceral, muscles tensing and releasing as he hauled the car through a turn, increasing speed all the way through the arc, hammering down as the road straightened. Red tail lights beckoned like targets on the firing range.

"Josh. Stop now."

Her words were in the air but meaningless because Sophie's name was howling in his blood while the reptile brain that lives in all of us was locked on now, targeting its prey. A lizard might not know the way to stop a speeding car but Josh Cumberland did. His own car was juddering as he drew alongside the white Audi – the driver looking over, eyes wide – and then Josh was past, fingers curled around the handbrake lever – "Dear God, no, Josh!" – and ripping up, the car slewing sideways on to block the road, the burning-rubber stink immediate, smoke-clouds rising from the tyres as he halted and the chassis rocked.

If the Audi failed to stop he'd hit the passenger side, right where Maria was sitting – *shit* – and for a fifth of a second sickness filled Josh. Then the idiot *was* screaming to a halt; and Josh was already out on the road, like some quantum effect, with no memory of unfastening of the seat belt or opening the door. The bulk of his car was between him and his target,

and he did it the quick way, a half step back for the plyometric spring, then throwing himself across the front, shoulder-rolling, dropping feet-first on the roadway, then four sprinting paces to the moron's door.

The guy's mouth was working like a goldfish which has leaped from the tank into a new and deadly world. Josh's hand went for the thermoplastic sheath on his belt – he could hammer the hilt into the window – and then he had a thought. Grinning, he pulled at the Audi's door – and it came open.

Idiot. No idea.

A suicide jockey, with none of the most basic precautions.

No fucking idea.

He unsnapped the guy's seat belt, clamped hands on jaw and the crown of the head, digging in his thumbs and fingers as he twisted, hooked, and pulled. With a squeak, the guy came out of the car headfirst. Still controlling the head, Josh hauled him half upright, then let go.

"Formal challenge." He pointed to the man's hip. "Citizens' confrontation."

"Jesus Christ."

"You're a voting citizen," said Josh. "Aren't you?"

The sheath was shiny with polish, not with use. Likewise the too-smooth hilt.

"Th-that's all. To vote, I mean. I've never... You know. Never."

"Always a first time."

Josh hardly seemed to move, but his blade was in

his hand. Tau-bar, military, balanced for throwing in addition to slash and thrust: it had everything, including the memory of blood, and God but he wanted to use it now.

"I can't." The man was shaking. "I can't. I'm not... Not like..."

His whimper accompanied a rising pungent aroma. In the headlight beams reflected from bodywork, Josh saw the spreading dark patch at the man's crotch.

"Draw or die, motherfucker."

Go on. Draw and come at me.

Trembling, the man fumbled at his sheath. There was a narrow safety strip around the hilt, and it took him three attempts to fumble the clip open. Then he held up the knife, shaking, tears like rain-streaks down his face. The blade was polished and unmarked.

Yes. Do it.

"Josh, no."

Maria's voice was commanding... through the car's open window. She knew better than to climb out of the car, understanding the danger, for in extremis the amygdala takes over, the brain's emergency response bypassing conscious thought, our civilised selves that are far too slow for deadly action. And that was the risk, because there was no rational thought, not here and now – only the need to act.

"Now!" yelled Josh.

He leaped forward, sheathing his tau-bar as he

moved, slamming down with his left hand, tension in the elbow, keeping it bent, while his right hand punched – throat – pulling his aim down – no – hitting the collarbone, not the neck, hitting twice more, then ripping the bastard’s knife from his clammy, slackening fingers. And the man was on the ground, propped on one knee, holding up a useless hand, every limb shaking. Josh grabbed a wrist, twisted, and pressed the knife against soft inner flesh.

“Radial artery, motherfucker.” This was the Timetable of Death which Josh could recite in his sleep (and had, according to Maria). “Penetration to one-quarter inch, unconscious after thirty seconds. Dead in two minutes.”

He slid the blade to the inside of the man’s biceps.

“Brachial artery. Half inch penetration, fourteen seconds then unconscious, ninety seconds to death.” Then the side of the neck, pricking the point against the skin. “Carotid, one and a half inches. Five seconds and unconscious, twelve seconds dead.”

“Please...”

“Josh, I’m calling the police.”

Carefully, he placed the tau-bar’s point against the man’s shirt, feeling for ribs beneath the fat. Here you needed to position carefully before you rammed the point in.

“Heart. Three and a half inches.” Josh moved the point, and the man squealed. “Loss of consciousness: instantaneous. Time to death: three seconds.”

There were other arteries, other places to cut and to stab, each with their own triplet of figures – pen-

etration depth, time to unconsciousness, time to death – and Josh could enumerate them all. *For King and country*. He looked at the man's sweat-covered face – the wide eyes, the gasping, drooling mouth – and inhaled the urine scent of fear. Then something changed, for as he pushed the breath out, he also pushed back the rage, and took a retreating step from the violence that so wanted to blossom forth, to manifest itself in surging aggression, filling the moment and drowning the memories of Sophie, but not for long.

“Sometimes you get to live.”

Josh twisted away, and hurled the man's knife into the darkness, over a high hedge and into darkness. Field and woodland lay beyond. Then he reached into the Audi, grabbed hold of the key – shouldn't do this – and yanked it out – better than killing the bastard – and held it in front of Moron Features' face as the engine shuddering to stillness, quiet now. Josh waited for the moron to speak; but he was too afraid or had learned his lesson, or both. His eyes were very wide.

“Wise man.”

Josh snarled as he threw the key into the night, following the knife. There was a glint, and then it was gone; then a faint, grass-softened thud. Gone forever, and he so wanted to hew the bastard's head from his shoulders, rip that aloft – see the lolling tongue and shocked, dead eyes – and throw it likewise into the wilderness; and that was when he wondered, whimsical yet serious, at the primal ori-

gins of basketball – and suddenly he barked a laugh, then stopped.

Won't bring Sophie back.

Nothing would, that was the point.

Sophie, Sophie, Sophie.

He climbed back inside his car and pulled the door shut. Maria's expression was clamped down, silent, her eyes filled with fear and anger and something more, a mixture he could not decompose or analyse. But he had his own concerns, because Sophie was gone, in every way that mattered.

Oh, my beautiful girl.

The car started forward, and he accelerated gently, keeping control, his attention on the road ahead, refusing to look back at the devastated man and his useless car.

One hour later, in the hotel reception area – all silvery fluorescent lights and stained carpet squares – Josh put down their bags and stood next to Maria before the desk. The young receptionist looked up. Josh wanted to smash that soft face, but the feeling was irrational and the night had been wild enough already, so he forced the feeling down and made his voice soften.

"Cumberland. We've got a reservation."

"Uh, sure, Mr Cumberland. Would you care to—?"

"And a separate room for me," said Maria.

The receptionist blinked and stared at her.

"Not necessary," Josh found himself saying. "I'm not hanging around."

He picked up his black gym bag, leaving her case where it was. Then he stopped, giving her time to speak, to change her mind if she was going to, to fix everything, if only she could.

Nothing.

I'm sorry, Sophie.

He went back out to the car, tossed the gym bag onto the passenger seat, climbed in and shut the door. There was a moment – he closed his eyes – of total lucidity, a deep knowledge of just how stupid and painful everything was, including his own actions. Then he pressed in the key and pushed the gear lever, and rolled the car forward on crunching gravel, out onto the night-shrouded road, a T-junction ahead. There, he turned right for no good reason, not bothering to read the signs, because everything was cloaked beneath darkness and all roads led to the same location: exactly nowhere.

He drove on at steady speed.

[TWO]

The carriage was warm, the air-con half working, as it rattled along the Circle and District line. Suzanne, from her seat, watched the other passengers reading the news or watching movies on their phones, or bobbing their heads in time to music in their ear-buds. Some of the businessmen and women wore the new lightweight suits with trousers ending mid-calf. Her own outfit was dark grey with a silvery sheen, a long-sleeved top and longish skirt; professional, expensive, looking good against her chocolatté-coloured skin.

The man on her left was reading the news on his phone. Hers was switched off – not realising you could go offline was a modern malaise, had been for decades – but she couldn't help reading the headline: ITALY RIOTS AGAIN, 200 DEAD. How else to start the day than by dwelling on the worst that had happened? The rioters would be African camp-dwellers, some with skins as light as hers, railing at the country that had taken them in before failing to deliver

the water-rich paradise they had imagined. In her mind she wrote another headline. BILLIONS TRAVEL TO WORK OK, HAVE ORDINARY DAY. Because geopolitical trends might be bad, but the truth was that half the world prospered, while the majority survived through every day.

As the train pulled in to Embankment she sighed, thumbed on her phone, and put it to her ear. *"Four messages waiting, one urgent. Listen to urgent message first?"* She tapped an acknowledgment. *"From Peter Hall."* It was a synthetic voice, reading out stored text. *"Sorry, Dr Duchesne, but I've got a problem at work, and I can't make our appointment. I'm doing really well. Sorry."*

Shit. She'd have to invoice him anyway because she'd booked the room in Elliptical House for the session. Billing a client for a no-show was necessary but might create a setback. Damn it. The voicemail gave few clues to Hall's mood. She listened to her other messages, all trivial, then put her phone away as the train slid into Westminster. She followed the other passengers off, filing past the kevlar-armoured guards, onto the escalator.

Out on the Embankment proper she watched the stately vanes of wind-turbines. Sailing boats moved along the steel-coloured Thames, the Houses of Parliament glittered in the hot sun, while somewhere a vendor was selling roast nuts and cicadas – she caught the smell, and then it was gone.

"Peter Hall," she told her phone. "Ring him."

She waited.

"Unavailable. Would you like to leave a message?"

Whether he was offline to her specifically or to the world, there was no way to tell. She formed a gesture with her fingers, a simple neurophysiological trigger to create a resourceful mood. Then she held up her phone, smiling at the beady lens.

"Hello, Peter. How much better are you doing? I feel confident that now you'll make the changes you want to make, and it doesn't matter whether you ring me this morning or tonight, because you'll feel better when we talk. Go well, Peter."

Good enough. Through careful tonality, some of her words were covert hypnotic suggestions, combining with the results of the previous sessions to give him a confidence boost as soon as he watched her message, or so she hoped. It was funny because, as a little girl, she had dreamed of being an actress, except when she imagined herself as a scientist or doctor; and now she got to be all three. At least that was the way she saw her life now, so much better – I'm lucky, really lucky – than the old days. As she walked, her fingers touched the inside of her opposite sleeve: always long sleeves, not just for her clients' sake. But it was mostly fine, not a case of "Physician, heal thyself," for in many respects she'd done just that.

Keeping the phone on, she set off parallel to the stone balustrade. The glass barrier beyond was translucent turquoise, the finest of Dutch engineering to keep the capital dry, to ensure that everyone was safe.

So enjoy the day, right?

She made herself smile as she walked.

Stag Place was a plaza in Victoria, its shape irregular, surrounded by sweeping glass buildings. The wind tugged at Suzanne as she stopped near a tall steel sculpture, a shining tree whose leaves were big, bright plastic panels: tomato red, egg-yolk yellow, apple green. Elliptical House was another five minutes away, but there were coffee shops inside the mall, and where better to relax and prepare her—

A ripping sound preceded a woman's scream and the shocking twang of steel cable parting; then came momentary silence, as if something had sucked away the air. And then a maelstrom of dust and flying shards – red, yellow, green, all with edges like knives – filled the world, became the world, while all around were people were throwing themselves down, trying to escape, some plucked upward by the air, levitating for a second, then flung aside like old socks.

Vortex.

This was a snap whirlwind, and dangerous. Suzanne dropped to the pavement, holding her head in her hands, imagining all that glass in flying pieces, sharp and deadly, and even as she had the thought, windows shattered overhead. Then percussive wind was beating on her, slamming her down – *no, please no* – and was gone.

Just gone.

She was on elbows and knees, head hanging,

gasping. Was this the centre, the stillness at the whirlwind's heart, or had the whole thing passed? She dared to look up, then squeezed her eyes shut at the awfulness – no, deal with it – and forced them open. One person was a butchered mess: man or woman, she could not tell, only that the carcass was ripped open and all was soft and slick and glistening, bathed in redness, and none of this was helping. Act professional. As Suzanne hauled herself up, she focused on the ones who needed help: here a blood-soaked face, there a white-haired man, supine and groaning, his arm twisted beneath him. Off to one side, a woman whimpered, trembling, in the throes of seizure. Someone, calm-voiced, spoke into his phone, calling for medics. Others got into motion, crossing to the fallen. One man gave orders: "I'm a nurse. You, press here on his shoulder – yes, there, you've got it, keep pressing – while I help this person over here." All around, like snow in the aftermath of blizzard, shards of glass reflected sunlight, almost pretty if you had not seen the blood. They crunched beneath Suzanne's shoes as she made her way to the shaking woman.

"Look at me."

But the woman's attention remained locked on the bloody mess that had been a person just a few breaths earlier, a living person thinking about the day ahead, a thousand small concerns and perhaps the meaningful events of life, images of lovers, children, parents, all of it shut down in an instant. Suzanne stepped between her and the corpse, block-

ing the view.

“Are you hurt?”

The woman couldn't speak, but she was flapping her hands, staring through Suzanne as if the body were still in focus; and in a very real way it was, but Suzanne dared not deal with that until she was sure the woman was not bleeding. She ran her fingertips down the fragile neck, the narrow torso, while checking by sight. Physically, everything seemed intact.

“Let me help,” said a man's voice.

“We need to get her inside.” Suzanne reached under the woman's armpit. “Come on.”

With the man's help – she had a glimpse of blonde hair, a suit: a thin, thirtyish man – she got the woman moving slowly towards the mall. The entrance was mostly undamaged. *All I wanted was a coffee.* They led the woman into Seattle's Finest, then Suzanne sat her down while the man fetched bottled water.

“I'm Adam,” he said.

The woman did not respond.

“And I'm Suzanne.” To the woman: “What's your name?”

“You saw him?”

Her eyes focused on a point in space, seeing the same thing in her mind, over and over. From the pupil dilation and involuntary twitch, she was recreating the mental picture in vivid, moving colours. It was a textbook precursor to post-traumatic stress, but this wasn't a case study – it was a suffering per-

son, in need of help. *So help her.* Usually Suzanne met clients long after the traumatic event when the memories had been laid down – and replayed over and over before finally seeking help. This should be even easier to deal with, except that she herself was shaking in reaction. Or perhaps she could help herself and the woman at the same time: the point wasn't to kill the flooding emotions, just dampen them enough to prevent future nightmares.

"Just breathe," she said. "Concentrate on blowing the breath out."

The man, Adam, looked at her, then slowly put down the unwanted water. He gave a nod, seeming to recognise that Suzanne knew what she was doing. At least I'm supposed to know.

Synchronising her breathing with the woman's, Suzanne began to alter her mental state. In a coffee shop at normal times, you would see friends chatting, their gestures tending to phase-lock, performing a subliminal dance, its intricacy obvious only to trained watchers. Now, Suzanne was using the process deliberately, entering physiological rapport, before leading the way to a different neurological state. She raised her hand before the woman's eyes.

"Look at my hand," she said, her voice a living thing, every nuance of pitch and rhythm and timbre keyed to some aspect of the woman's physiology. "See the changing focus of your eyes and in a moment you might blink, that's right, and before you enter trance now" – the woman's eyelids fluttered – "you can hear the silence between sounds like time

to sleep and my voice will go with you as you close your eyes... now... and sink deeper... and deeper... into a soft relaxing daydream state... That's right."

The woman slid into trance.

She went fast and deep, while Adam's jaw dropped. In Suzanne's office, the portable fMRI would have shown the brain's activity profoundly altered: the anterior cingulate diminished, the pre-cuneus nucleus in spectacular, multicoloured overdrive on the monitor display. Even to an untrained observer like Adam, the effect was obvious. He remained riveted as Suzanne completed the induction, taking the woman back in time, inside her mind, to situations where she felt secure; and each time the state was at its deepest, Suzanne touched the woman's shoulder.

"Now in the whirlwind, step outside yourself, like watching a screen, then drain the colour out and push the image off into the distance—"

Recoding the recent memory to remove trauma, then using the shoulder pressure to trigger confidence and calm, she left an instruction for ongoing improvement in the woman's life – "*Just fixing the problem isn't good enough,*" her teachers used to say, "*so leave them better than before, better than they thought possible*" – before leading her back to normal consciousness.

"And you can come awake as I count backwards. Ten, nine..."

Finally she snapped her fingers, and the woman's eyes snapped open.

"My God."

"Bloody hell," said Adam.

"I..." The woman stopped, then: "I remember that poor man, but I'm not terrified by it. How can I—? That was amazing, thank you."

Blinking, she pulled out her phone and checked the time.

"You have to go," said Suzanne. "You've a life to lead, after all."

"Yes." The woman stood up. "I don't—"

"You're welcome."

"Oh. Thank you. Just... thank you."

Suzanne hugged her. Then the woman turned and walked out, her posture straight.

"Did she just grow six inches taller?" asked Adam. "Or is that an illusion?"

"Illusion," said Suzanne. "A natural one."

"So can I get you a cappuccino or something?"

"Perhaps I should check whether—"

She was intending to say, whether anyone else needed help, for she had already checked his hand and seen that he was married. The ring was white gold.

"I know someone who should see you," said Adam. "You're a professional therapist, I take it?"

"Yes, but my client list is..."

"My friend is very rich." Adam grinned. "If that helps."

A vision of her bank balance swam before Suzanne.

"I'd love a cappuccino."



Seven hours later she was back in the same Seattle's Finest, having passed through a cleaned-up piazza – the sculpture bare of colourful plastic, but still standing – to find the same seat as this morning. Her last session had finished at four, and this was a good time to wind down and review the day. Over the counter, a thin monitor displayed a weather map, with today's statistics scrolling down one side. Nine flash whirlwinds around the country, four fatalities in all. British summer at its finest.

"Suzanne."

"Hi, Adam."

"And this is Philip Broomhall."

Obviously Broomhall liked gold, from the four rings on each hand to the glimpsed knife hilt as he unbuttoned his jacket. When he shook hands, she noted the way he turned his hand palm-down, seeking to dominate. Alpha male, primate behaviour. No challenge at all for someone with a brain who kept calm.

He's a potential client, that's all.

Adam fetched drinks while Broomhall sat down and told Suzanne that she had a good reputation, with several respected clients recommending her. He'd obviously trawled the Web to check her out. In contrast to Broomhall, Suzanne noticed the lack of a bulge at Adam's hip as he rejoined them. Weaponless but confident.

"It's my son Richard," said Broomhall. "He's scared of everything."

"How old is Richard?"

"Fourteen. And a damned sight softer than I was at that age."

Adam's mouth made a stretched sideways S. "That's what all the old guys say."

"Well, in this case it's true. Anyhow, your clients, Dr Duchesne, say you make phobias disappear like that. A few minutes, and bang, it's gone."

"That's right," said Suzanne. "I maintain total confidentiality. Some clients post open reviews regardless, which is very kind of them."

She had her own downloadable statistics, digitally verified, identifying no one by name, to show the effectiveness of her work. For phobic behaviours, it was ninety-seven percent success in one short session. Broomhall had either read the results, she guessed, or employed someone to do it.

"My son needs help. From someone like you."

Adam's grimace was outside Broomhall's peripheral vision.

So the boy needs saving from his father too.

Perhaps there was something worthwhile here, more worthwhile than the fee.

"So what's his problem specifically?" She didn't believe people were broken like damaged toys – disliking the word *problem* and hating *cure* – but she framed her questions on Broomhall's terms. "You say he's afraid?"

"He's..." Broomhall's eyes shifted to the side. "He's hoplophobic, for God's sake."

"Hoplophobic?"

I so don't want this.

"Yes. It's embarrassing." Broomhall wiped his sweating face. "Excuse me."

What's embarrassing? His condition or your prejudice?

But she said "You can feel confident it's OK to talk about this. It really is all right."

"OK."

Adam leaned forward. "You want me to go?"

"No, no." Broomhall took a swig of iced coffee. "It's fine."

"So what happens to trigger his reaction? How does he do his fear?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know it's a strange question." One she'd anticipated. "If you were about to draw your knife, at what point would he look fearful?"

"The second I walk into the room, if I'm wearing it. He cringes if someone just mentions the word *blade*."

Suzanne understood that reaction. "I guess that is a problem, but I'm really not comfortable with—"

"I'll offer you ten thousand if you can fix him up. Another ten if he improves in school."

"Then I'll do it," she said.

If you couldn't accept the need to pay the rent, you were hardly an integrated personality, not as a grown-up. She helped people for free at times – like the woman this morning – so perhaps it was her turn to get rich, doing what she loved to do. Maybe with a wealthier level of clientele, starting now.

She wondered what young Richard Broomhall was like.

“Glad to have you on board, Dr Duchesne.”

They shook hands.

Marvellous.

Had she joined Broomhall’s non-nautical crew voluntarily or been press-ganged? Was this a mistake, the arrangement she’d just committed to?

“It would be good to see Richard the day after tomorrow, if that’s possible.”

“I’ll bloody well make sure it is.”



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