

Nereya

Enrique Dryere

It had been at least a couple of weeks since I'd arrived at this bizarre settlement, clasped by the granite like a precious gemstone atop a twisted plateau. Time lost its most endearing quality in this place. Yes, it had to have been a couple of weeks... just a couple.

I gazed aimlessly through the small, oval portal. It was the same every evening; the sun's golden rays would split the sky, finding their way to my window between the dark, broken clouds of the heavens and the pillowy fog bellow. The room was painted in every color as the light danced through the remarkably cut glass. It was the one time of the day when the weight of my own self was not anchoring. Each breath I drew was lighter and lighter, until the sun would begin to drown in the thick sea of gray and cast the room into a viscous porridge of deep blue shades. Then... I can't explain it. There was a flash of light... it had no color, but I could recognize its smell, though there are no words by which I might describe it. I would say it was akin to something of a flowerbed, flooded over by the metallic ring of something synthetic.

The weight returned to my breath.

A gentle chime announced the opening of the, otherwise silent, door. A smiling woman dressed in a pure azure gown floated into the room. Her dress was perfectly fitted to her svelte figure, a matter not of elegance, but of functionality. She effortlessly carried a sterling tray bearing a wide assortment of exotic foods. She was but a mere servant, though her poise spoke of regality. The dress had a peculiar iridescence that was only made visible should you attempt to ignore it. It was frighteningly sleek; not a single adornment or accessory dared interrupt her graceful curves. "Here you are, Ms. Nereya," she uttered. Her voice permeated all barriers of reason. I could understand her words perfectly, but I could not tell you when she said them. It was a hollow sound, devoid of pitch, tone, and timbre. That was not my name, but I just assumed it was there custom to call their guests in such a manner. She set the food on my lonely table, punctuated by a single lonesome chair.

I might leave, I thought to myself... I might go home, but not today... maybe later, yes, later. The attendant walked over to the tall, pearled lamp that stood patiently by the door and activated it with a dainty touch. It was the only source of artificial light in the dreary room; at the current time of day, it did little more than alter the hue of the shadows into the color of swill. Then, she left without speaking another word.

Despite all the gaudy garnishing, the food was entirely bland. These people just didn't know how to eat. I ate it all anyway, since there was little else for me to do, and pushed the tray a

few inches to make official the end of my meal. The attendant came through the door, [removed “not”] but seconds later, and took away the tray. “I’m glad you enjoyed it, Ms. Nereya. I’m truly glad.” Her words tugged at a loose string in my mind, as though I’d just heard the name of a long-forgotten friend. “Thank you,” I found myself saying, and again, she was gone.

I walked over to the window, as I had after every supper. The moon was something of a second-rate Midas; its lambent radiance bestowed the gray quilt of low-lying clouds with a silvery veil. The clouds above almost escaped its touch, remaining nothing more than doughy shadows swathed in bands of ashen lace.

Only the boldest of stars dared keep the moon company amongst the celestial belt between the layers of obscurity. They’d wait until it had passed, then they’d all come to twinkle and play upon the narrow band of horizon. Something deep inside me screamed with desire to play there too. What a silly thing to think. I yawned for hours as I watched the glimmering little lights turn their slow paths across the ribbon of sky. I must have been all but asleep, for my eyes caught sight of such an impossible figure. It was indiscernible at first, nothing more than a cruel whisper in the night. I promptly dismissed its existence.

My head must have outweighed the rest of my body. It demanded I bury it in a pillow, and I had no intentions of offering resistance. I drew back the violet, silken curtains of my bed and threw myself upon it.

I awoke early in the evening. The hideously lavish curtains tangled around my arms as I labored out of bed. One of my arms had been caught quite well. I struggled to free myself from the entangling fabric, but the more I strained the tighter its grip became. I kneeled next to the bed exhausted, my arm still trapped. I took a nap and woke bathed in golden rays. “Oh no!” I gasped. I was missing my favorite time of the day. I rushed to the prismatic little window and gazed intently out of the largest pane of plain glass. My hand pressed against the surface of the window. I should think I’d like to go outside, I thought to myself. Yes, today I will go outside. After supper, I will go for a nice stroll. I pressed harder and harder against the glass, until I was almost pushing. The sun was all but gone. The glass started to creak under the pressure. I found myself lunging against it, as though trying to move something of great weight.

Then, came that light... and that smell, and I set down my arms in sudden tiredness. I nearly swooned. What had I been doing? “Silly girl,” I told myself. It was almost time for my dinner anyway.

I sat at my lonely table; I hated the thing. It was perfectly crafted, smooth, and just the right size, but there was something about the patterns in the marble I despised. There was

something wrong with them. They had no depth, no passion; they just sat there as stains, doing nothing on end. Staring at them almost dismissed what little appetite I had.

The azure lady came through the doorway, announced by the same sad chime as usual. It was amazing how melancholy a collection of no more than four notes could be. She set the tray upon the table and left the room without a word.

It all tasted the same. These people really don't know how to eat, I mused. The steamy soup, the strange fruit, the plump fillet, I could only tell them apart by texture and temperature in my mouth. I was owed much sensation by this place.

I finished my meal and walked to my window. There was the moon, licking the clouds with its silvery tongue and the stars... I collapsed. I pressed my back against the wall and looked about my room in frantic search of nothing. It was still there, upon the clouds... it had grown larger. Its image chased away my thoughts, a wicked memory of something sinister, long since buried. I could not escape it.

I gathered the strength to peer over the ledge and through the window, desperately wishing it would just be gone, but there it was. A long way off in the horizon, it had advanced ever so slightly since the previous night, but I knew all at once it was headed straight for this window. I squinted my eyes, hoping its form would reveal itself across the void. It grew in my mind, but I could not discern its shape. It was something, not large; it crept slowly over the fog. Its pace was dreadfully steady. I rushed away from the window and scrambled across the darkness, nearly toppling the little lamp that sat on the nightstand. Its light was all but devoured by the same hungry curtains that had nearly had my arm. I sat upon the edge of my bed; my pillow whispered to me, but I did not want to sleep yet. How could I? Not with that... that thing approaching my window.

Before long, I found myself standing in front of my doorway. I remembered I had told myself I would go for a stroll tonight, but I couldn't reason why I'd ever desired it. Now, I wanted to escape the room for an entirely different reason. I didn't want to be here when it arrived. I don't want to explain it; I just don't want to be here.

The door slid open, praised by a chorus of rhythm-less, crestfallen notes. The hallway stretched on into infinity in both directions. It drained me of all desire to enter it. I looked back over my shoulder and saw my bed. It glowed with hunger and I could do nothing more than feed it.

That night I dreamt. The visions were grainy and erratic, flickering images on a slowly-spinning reel of ancient film. I saw a figure, derelict on a cragged field of crawling stone; it

huddled beneath a claw of granite, hounded by the elements. The wind blasted blades of furious stone over the smooth surface of the outstretched rock. The earthen fusillade mercilessly chipped away at its kin.

What a pitiful position to be in, I reflected. My vantage swept beneath the shelter and came face to face with the refugee, stalwartly clutching the ends of a heavy cloak, vaguely adorned with the dusty images of traditional compasses. Despite the bleakness of the situation, her face bore a sturdy smile. There was a sort of [removed “a”] happy roundness to her cheeks and an inextinguishable fire in her eyes that I remembered as nothing more than words.

The storm let up, and she continued to beat her way beneath the broken skies. Competing zephyrs threw her cloak about in every direction. Where was she going? The truth was she had no destination in her mind. This was her job. What a ridiculous fare, but such was the life of a Cartographer. No one knew how the world had been lost so long ago, but it was a Cartographer’s job to find it... such a ridiculous fare.

The sun nuzzled my cheek. It poured through a crack in the emerald curtains drawn loosely around my bed. I took delicate hold of the fabric and slid them apart, the memory of yesterday’s entanglement still fresh in my mind. It was my favorite time of day, and I would not let something as trivial as curtains refrain me from enjoying it. The sun’s light was warm and soothing. I tilted back my head and let it caress my neck. “It will not be long now,” I sighed.

It was gone all too soon. The horrid flash of light came and robbed me of the precious memory, leaving nothing but the smell of musky, metallic blossoms in its wake. I crumpled onto my chair, asphyxiated by an immaterial blue noose.

Dinner came and went, uneventful and dull as always.

Such a small room, never enough light, I muttered as I staggered towards my only window, catching my shoulder against one of its more pointed edges. It was cut at such a funny angle. Who would have such a window? It was not rectangular, but more of a trapezoid, its width tapering into a narrow sill. There was hardly enough room to properly rest one’s weight upon it. I could imagine myself nestled at the base of a deep, oval window, gazing endlessly at the perennial skies. My back curved perfectly to meet this imaginary sill; it supported my shape as though it was its only function, and in turn, I too was given purpose by it. Alas, that was not my window, I sighed, struggling to gain some leverage on the pitiful ledge.

I didn’t have to look; I knew what was there. The moon gave the tiny figure a sterling silver outline. It crept ever so slightly as it made its way through the clouds. My eyes were fixed upon its clockwork movement; it forced me to take another breath when perhaps I should have

exhaled. I threw myself from the ledge, back into the darkness of my room. I crawled towards the door, and it opened for me. I kept my eyes focused on the rushing ground before me as I ventured into the hall. I passed several doors like mine and came to stare at a pair of bright cerulean shoes. They belonged to the woman who brought me my dinner, and she was still in them! I followed the wrinkleless surface of her dress, past her magnificently rounded hips, and over her mockingly perfect bosom, all the way up to her smiling face. “My, my, Ms. Nereya. Whatever are you doing in such a place? Have you lost your way?”

I had to turn my face away from her as she spoke; there was something just so encumbering about her sugary tone. I stood up and rubbed my hands against my sides. My hips were not as round, I thought to myself. “Can’t I be here?” I demanded, feeling inexplicably upset.

She giggled. It was the laugh of a young girl, not troubled by any of the concerns of a woman her age. I could not remember ever having such a laugh. “Of course you can! Shall I take you somewhere? Where would you like to go? You can leave whenever you’d like.” The words were too heavy.

I remember staring at the ceiling of the hallway. It was plain. No mind had ever been paid to it. She stood over me, still smiling.

That night I dreamt of that woman again, the Cartographer. I wish I were as bold as she. She gingerly leapt from stone to jagged stone, as the menacing tempest began to bite at the horizon. All the while, the woman did not lose herself, her heart steadier than the ground she beat upon. Why did I dream of this woman? I recognized her only from my previous dream.

She found herself at the foot of an enormous plateau. A couple of heavy doors loomed before her, built into the sheer cliff. They were hardly discernable, made hastily of stone. The wind had thrown the earth at itself again. It made it rather hard to see, but she was used to such conditions. She sketched something into a tiny leather book and tucked it back away into her cloak.

She pounded upon the colossal doors, but the sounds of the rapping fell like soft rain upon the face of a dormant mountain, crushed by the deafening wind. The storm pinned her to the door. A rocky lance struck a few feet from her face and was dispersed into gravel. A backlash of sundry stones whipped against her helpless body. They stung her through all the layers of protective clothing. The great boulders of the nearby wastes began to teeter in anticipation as the eye of the storm approached.

All seemed lost, when, by unseen means, the doors began to yawn. She shimmied her way into the fissure [removed comma] and flew through. The doors clanged shut behind her as she tumbled into the unknown.

A bright red curtain was drawn over my eyes. If I were a bull, I should think I'd have charged at it, nostrils flaring. Then there was that light... and the smell did linger.

I awoke when the sun slept. The tray of food had already been set upon the table. I drifted to my feet and sat down in my humble wooden chair. It was uncomfortable, but at least it matched the table. Oh! Many splinters did I endure, but one had to eat.

I finished my meal and set it aside. I hesitated to stand from the chair. I knew what I had to do next, but wished I didn't. Finally, I arose and dragged myself to the ornate pane. The moon and stars adorned the sky like an exquisite necklace, but I saw only the figure. It had begun to draw close now, closer to my window than the horizon. I ducked beneath the sill, letting only my eyes and couple of curious fingers peer over.

Was it human? It stalked through the clouds with an increased speed. Although it was so far away, I could envision its fearsome eyes in my head. They set my heart ablaze. I wanted to run far away, and so I did.

I dashed into the hallway and ran for some distance before doubling over in heavy breathing. There was a stairway before me. It wound down into somewhere. I dare not discover where.

I had passed hundreds of doors since I left my room. They all called to me, beckoned I look inside. I made my way to one of them and peeked in through a tiny hole. It was a room very similar to mine; it had all the same trappings. There stood a man, looking out his window. I stared at him from behind the door for quite some length, but he never took his eyes off the horizon. I could not blame him; it was a beautiful sight. I had not been able to enjoy it since that... that hideous thing had shown itself.

I looked into many other rooms, and it was always the same scene. There was a very young girl in one of the rooms; her shoulders were fallen and there were many knots in her hair. I had half a mind to enter the room and brush away the tangles in her locks, but an unexpected feeling suddenly consumed me. I felt entirely small, lost, as if I'd never find my way back to the safety of my little room. There were so many doors! How would I ever find it? I'd die out here for certain!

I felt a gentle hand take grasp of my shivering shoulder; it triggered a small spring in my legs. “Ms. Nereya, have you lost your way again?” the lady in azure asked.

“N... no! Can't I be here?” I responded rather indignantly, but she just smiled.

“There are no locked doors in this place. You are free to roam as you please, and you can leave whenever you'd like.”

She turned and began to slowly walk away. “Wait, please!” I found myself saying. She stopped, and disappeared through the door after having escorted me back to my room.

I dove into my bed and buried myself beneath the heavy quilt.

The Cartographer lifted her battered body from the ground and found herself in the company of many people dressed in gray clothes made especially for them. They all smiled and greeted her ever so warmly. Immediately she felt at ease.

The ceilings were magnificent in this grand hall. They reached so high that they almost vanished. There were many levels to this place; the entire plateau had been hollowed out, it would seem. She unsheathed her little journal and began to write down many things as they took her through a central street. She felt so welcomed; everyone waved at her from the windows of their narrow homes. An elderly woman quietly sweeping her cramped front porch dropped her broom and ran over to her, giving her a greeting normally reserved for chance reencounters with old friends. “What a marvel,” the Cartographer said aloud.

“Why is that?” one of her escorts asked her with happy eyes.

The Cartographer paused, considering her next words. It was certainly not her aim to insult her hosts. She looked over the cramped, featureless homes, the plain street, the broken cobble, and back to the happy faces of the people. “Well, it's just that everyone here is so... so happy,” she finally stammered.

“Well, of course! We are all very happy here! Very happy!” the man immediately responded. A small cylindrical earring dangled cheerfully from his ear. It swung around full of life as he delivered his emphatic answer.

She was in awe of this strange utopia. There seemed very little to be happy about here, yet there was not a frown, not even a down-turned eye in the entire city. Everyone walked around bearing a grin that seemed to be trying to best the last.

Two men carrying a barrel full of a fruit that boasted relation to an apple came to a crossing in which the stone was poorly cut. Surely enough, one of the men caught his foot and caused the entire thing to tumble. The fruit went everywhere, but there was not even the slightest interjection uttered, not a sigh heaved, nor a grimace worn. The two crouched down and began to

recover the bizarre apples all at once. They remained perfectly happy; if anything, it seemed they took pleasure in the little accident.

The group walked up a flight of steps built boldly into the mountain. They ascended for what seemed like hours. In the distance, there was a strange light, different from the ones they had passed so many times before.

The rock of the left wall gave way to a beautiful sight. There, behind a thin layer of protective glass, burned the horizon. They had risen above the thick layer of tenebrous fog that beset the mountain, but still walked far below the reaches of the shatter-storm clouds above. The sun's soaring warmth touched the woman's face. The stairs lost their steepness, rising a mere inch from the last, enjoying this breath-taking scene to the fullest. Further up sat what appeared to be a small town, nestled in the rock. The spires of worked stone blended seamlessly with the natural formations.

The staggeringly polite hosts had already prepared a room for her. The door slid open, announced by a melody of cheerful notes; at least I supposed they were cheerful. All but one of the escorts left the room. It was a woman, dressed in a gown similar to one I was quite used to seeing. In the newfound privacy, the attendant helped the Cartographer out of her heavy cloak. I was in the room too, though I was not seen. She was very grateful to the woman for her help.

"I do hope you will stay here until you are good and healed, Miss," said the woman, playing with her earring.

"I don't know what to say..." began the Cartographer, "you are all just so nice. I am not that hurt really. I don't wish to impose..."

It was clear, even to me, that it was not truly her intention to refuse the woman's generous offer.

"Oh, of course not, Miss! We're more than happy to have you. It can be so hard out there. Please stay with us," she insisted. She took her by the arm and showed her out the door, headed for the baths. Upon returning, the Cartographer was wrapped in many bandages and smelled of ointment. She sat at a small table and continued to write in her journal as she ate her supper. She seemed to enjoy it quite well. She finished the last morsel and the attendant came in to recover the tray. The Cartographer paused and rested her pen. "Excuse me..." she called softly.

"Yes, Miss?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course you can."

“Well, it’s rather silly…” The Cartographer’s vision fell to the pages of her journal as she nervously fiddled with her pen. The attendant’s eyes implored her to continue. “It’s just that, well… everyone seems so happy here and you’ve all been so kind to me. It’s not what I’m used to… out there on the wastes… You see, I am very grateful for what you’ve done, but I’m afraid I haven’t any way to repay you…”

“Oh no, please don’t worry yourself, Miss…” the woman finally interrupted. “You are our Nereya.”

“Nereya? Does that mean guest?”

“Not quite. It means happiness in our language.”

“Happiness?” the Cartographer questioned, turning her head in clear interest.

The woman walked over to where she sat and patted her gently on the head. “There’s a library not far from here where you can learn more about our language, if it intrigues you so. I will show you.”

The two went down a handful of hallways and stairwells, arriving at a vast library. The attendant walked quite purposefully to the shelves and drew forth a heavy book. There was a startling economy to her movements granted only through rigorous repetition. It was a dictionary of sorts.

The Cartographer continued to scribble things in her journal as she excitedly flipped the pages. She had always harbored an insatiable thirst for new knowledge; perhaps that’s why she’d chosen this profession.

She stopped at a well-worn page and ran her nimble finger across it. She gingerly continued to stroke the page as though it were her beloved pet; but I could not make out the words on the fading page from my vantage. Her fingers slowed, and she began to nod as she neared the middle of the page.

Suddenly, she retracted her hand and brought it to her mouth, raising her shoulders ever so slightly, as though something had caused her flesh to crawl. She quickly turned to the attendant who just stood there, smiling. The woman walked over to her and tenderly closed the book. “It is quite late, and you must be tired from your journey… why not sleep for a while?”

“Y-yes… I think a bit of rest should do me a world of good,” responded the Cartographer rather hesitantly. Something she had read still had her troubled. I drifted towards the pages of the book, but could not comprehend the words. They were jumbled, swaying and shifting about constantly, forming endless, unintelligible prose. The scene was destroyed by a piercing light. It destroyed everything; I hated the smell.

Suddenly, I was back in my room. Was it morning? Was it midnight? My waking day was a mere accessory to a life of increasingly vivid dreams.

There was food on the table. It was colorless and had a taste to match. I could scarcely tell I was eating as I shoveled it into my mouth. There were faint traces of textures scattered about my palate, objects suspended in a torpid solution making brief contact. Staring at the other empty chairs tucked into the table, I was reminded of my loneliness. They mocked me. I arose and ignored them, hoping they'd just go away. I sought the refuge of my window, but stopped halfway, a flashing image of the cloud-creeper invading my mind. Had I really seen it? I couldn't have. It must have been a dream. Yes, just a dream.

I looked out the window and glimpsed across the cloud-borne plain. A full moon made its perch exactly halfway between the two layers of clouds, setting the entire sky aglow. The figure was nowhere to be seen. I was relieved. There was something about that being that stirred within me miserable echoes of an inexplicable frustration. It was almost as if death had become a visible entity and slowly prowled its way to our inevitable, grim union.

It had been so long since I had been able to enjoy the skies. My thoughts drifted to my dreams of the Cartographer. I was still interested in knowing what she had read that had startled her so, but I couldn't do anything about it now. It worried me, but I did not put forth any effort to resolve it. How could I?

I leaned onto the sill and peered down the steep mountainside. I followed the rock until it was devoured by the ravenous fog. Something tugged at the corner of my eyes. I turned to look, but it was gone, only endless gray. Then, from behind a wispy thorn of mist emerged the dark figure. "No... it can't be!" I couldn't help but saying aloud. It had progressed so quickly.

How long had I slept?

I clenched my eyes shut and fervently prayed it'd be gone when I reopened them, but there it was! It seemed to catch only the most sinister of the moon's light, the sort of light that bids a child's mind to crawl, the sort of light that cajoles the shadows to dance, the light of the darkest nightmare.

I fell backwards, scrambling towards the door. My legs would not move. I clawed desperately at the sleek marble floor, flesh screeching. The chime sounded and the door slid open. I somehow found my feet again and ran into the corridor.

I ran around the bending hallway for what felt like forever. I doubled over in pain, gasping for life. I felt as though I'd faint. A familiar chime sounded. I stretched an arm for the wall but caught nothing more than air.

I tumbled into a room and lay on my back, collecting my breath. My exhaustion had narrowed my vision. I knew this room. I had seen it before...

It was a room not unlike my own. It was just as it had been in my dreams. Next to the bed was a pile of used bandages. A rugged cloak hung limply from the rack, decorated with faint images of ornate compasses. On the table [removed comma] sat a small, leather-bound book. A tiny candle danced next to it, enclosing the area within a flickering bubble of light. I labored to get on my feet and sat before it. As I touched it, it suddenly became real. It was embossed with an elaborate seal, an image of the long lost globe, anchored to the leather by a compass-shaped seam. It was the journal of a Cartographer. I opened it without thinking twice, my inquisitive nature getting the best of me. [wresting implies a twisting action or a seizing of something like power- the "best of me" is not grabbed or seized]

I was driven to discard reason and approached the book as if it belonged to the Cartographer I'd come to follow in my persistent reveries.

I dug into the book as if in search of buried treasure. The manila pages flapped and fluttered like the free wings of a gull, shackled in leather and laden with dark ink, as I flung them aside. I paused upon reaching a full-page sketch. It was crude, but I recognized it immediately, a sprawling bud of an obdurate civilization, encrusted and entrapped by the immovable law of stone. My heart was there too.

Silly as I am, I continued my search through the book, looking for a note, a scribble, as if something within it might provide me a clue as to what had struck a chord of fear within the protagonist of my dreams. I turned the pages one at a time now, having reached impressions of the author's new hosts. A bold entry caught my attention.

"Amongst the many things one might say that make this place quite peculiar, I have noticed that every man and woman here adorn themselves with a single identical earring, worn invariably upon the left ear. It is sleek, cylindrical, and rather plain to sight. I have yet to catch any of them without it. Certainly, it must carry some sort of deeper meaning to these people... perhaps religious... perhaps something else."

"Earrings?" I questioned myself. I could not remember the attendant that brought me my dinner ever wearing jewelry of any sorts. In my mind, her image was deviously slick and unimpeded by such trivialities. Of course, this could very well be an account of a different place entirely, I reminded myself. It was the frivolous musings of a fool to entertain the possibility that this journal would contain answers to questions posed within a dream.

Nevertheless, I turned the page, and turned it again. The candle began to whisper; too many tears of wax had it wept. Soon its tired heart would ascend as smoke.

The next page crawled across the previous. There, upon the bottom frays of the manila, scribbled in a shaking hand, was an entry that drew my mind before my eyes read it. The words became smaller and smaller as it continued, the author running out of room on the page.

“I’ve found this language to be rather strange. Words, constantly wrapped in metaphor, are never limited to a single meaning. They say that if you understand a language, you understand a culture, but I don’t think I like the conclusion to which this dusty old dictionary is leading me.

They’ve begun to call me ‘Nereya’ here. The woman who has been attending to me said that it means happiness... I’ve confirmed that it does. Their dictionary defines it as ‘tree; source of happiness; producer,’ but something troubles me and I can’t explain why. The dictionary translates their tongue into all sorts of other languages, most of which I do not understand. However, something caught my attention... it was in a second entry in Nereya’s translation into a dead language that I once learned about in the Halls of Compass during my time at the academy. I’m sure it’s nothing. German is such an ancient language... the Academy didn’t even offer classes... “Schadenfreude,” the translation read. I never learned the language, but I remember the word, oddly enough from my classes in literature. What strange diction... something must have been lost in translation, surely.

“Schadenfreude,” something about that word sent a tremor coursing down my back. It was hauntingly familiar. It whispered violent screams of warning from the tattered edge of a desperate page. Even so, its meaning was withheld from me, as though it’d been frozen in a dark shadow of my mind.

The door’s chime nearly stopped my heart. The attendant in the azure dress stood in the threshold, calm and peaceful as usual. She floated over to the table, gave me the sort of smile one might give a child, and collected a tray of food I had not yet noticed. I froze stiff, unable to muster the strength to turn the page. As I gazed into her eyes, my vision narrowed and then it was gone.

When I rejoined the Cartographer, she was already out and about. I wish I had her energy. She had her nose in every affair, peering around every corner, and questioning everyone she came across. She was right; they all wore the same cylindrical earring. It was quite clear that they intrigued her.

Her curiosity led her down a rather dark alley, cleanly cut into the sharp stone. It led her to a dreary street, empty and quiet. She stumbled her way past a few identical, nondescript homes, seemingly housing nothing more than darkness. There was a break of light ahead. An

open door painted the street with a slanted swatch of sharp light; it cornered squarely where it fell. To say this woman, the Cartographer, had an inquisitive nature would be a grand understatement, for she walked right up to the door and stepped inside. She knocked gently enough as not to be heard, while still complying with the protocols of politeness. I followed close behind her, perched upon her shoulder.

I couldn't help but notice how plain and utterly boring this room was. A small, glistening object on a nearby table immediately caught both our eyes. It was an earring, the kind worn by all the inhabitants of this strange city. She picked up the smooth cylinder and rolled it about in her hands. There was nothing much to it, plain and gray like everything else in this smiling city. Somewhat disappointed in its uninteresting design, she shook it gently. It produced a soft rattle. She shook it again, holding the slender chain and hooked tendril between her fingers. The rattle was faint, but undeniable.

After fiddling with it for a length of time, she discovered the earring's secret and unscrewed the smooth cylinder into two equal pieces. A trickle of tiny pills rained onto the table. She scrambled to collect them as they bounced onto the floor and in every which way. She caught one and held it to her eye. It was a soft, round, translucent little bubble, containing some sort of viscous, pearled liquid.

"Oh, don't bother yourself, Miss Nereya" spoke the attendant, emerging from the shadows. Her voice was happy and light, almost elated, but there was no kindness in the sound.

"I'm so terribly sorry! I didn't mean to! The thing just came apart..."

The woman gently took the earring from the Cartographer's hand. She placed a couple of pills in it, sealed it, and placed it upon its usual vantage on her ear. Then, pinched one more pill from the table and swallowed it. "I'm so glad to see you are feeling better, Miss Nereya."

She was lost for words. "Y-yes, I am feeling just fine now, thank you," she finally managed to stammer.

The woman's smile widened as she stared at her quite blankly. The silence whittled away at my sanity.

"Are you ill?" ventured the Cartographer, if for no other reason than to break the silence.

"Not at all," she responded quite bluntly.

"Then what are all these pills for?" She felt guilty for posing such a forward question to her ever-generous host, but such was her nature.

"Come with me and I shall explain everything to you."

She couldn't help herself. The two exited the home and slipped into the shadowy street. The Cartographer had fulfilled her side of the bargain, and now the silver-swathed woman set out to fulfill hers.

"Long ago, this city was not like this," she began, as they passed an old couple, rocking gently on their narrow porch. Their aged faces bore the unmistakable lines of a long-worn smile, delineated clearly amongst lesser wrinkles. "There was nothing but bleak darkness in the halls of stone, choked by an eternal gray sea of clouds. Our civilization was on the verge of collapse, drowned in deep depression."

She uttered the words with all the expertise of a rehearsed script, I mused.

"When all seemed lost, our most brilliant minds found a remedy to the infinite gloom," she said, pointing at a trio of grand statues carved into the living rock. "They produced a medicine..." she continued.

It was obvious she spoke of the tiny little pearls held within the earrings. She claimed the drug was absolutely perfect and made a strong case for her argument. It had no negative side effects, and as for its benefit, pure, unremitting happiness. "Ever since, our society has been the euphoric utopia it is today," she finished.

"I don't know. I just wouldn't trust it. I mean, putting things inside your body... your mind... that don't naturally belong there... Do you even know where it comes from, or what it's made of? I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I'd rather not take the pills if that is alright with you," the Cartographer implored.

"Oh don't worry yourself!" chuckled the woman. "We all know from what it's made, and I can assure you it is quite natural, but we would never subject an outsider to our way of life." She raised an ushering arm towards the door of an ominous building they now stood before.

"What's this?"

"The infirmary, of course."

"But I feel fine..."

"Have you forgotten already, Miss Nereya? You were scheduled for a follow-up examination."

A distant look swept across the Cartographer's face; she did not remember. "Oh yes..." she hesitantly replied.

I stopped at the door. The smell of this place... it was metallic and clinical, unlike any other place in the city. The Cartographer sat upon a reclined examination chair, shaking a nervous leg. A large light loomed menacingly overhead, mercifully off for the time being.

A door silently opened behind her. Something inside me turned. A grotesquely sweet smell of flowers emanated from the darkness of the room. It copulated with the clinging musk of sanatorium cleaners and produced a hideously familiar child.

A heavily perfumed woman emerged from the shadow, clutching an insidious needle low at her side. "RUN! RUN! RUN AWAY!" I wretched and screamed until my breath expired. I collapsed, gasping, defeated. The woman flicked the bulky switch upon the large light. It was bitterly brilliant. I clenched my eyes shut, but could not block its hideous radiance.

I awoke to a distant sound of scratching upon my window. I turned away, still wrapped in sleep. It persisted. I buried myself under many thick blankets. It persisted. I enlisted the aid of a pillow to eclipse the noise. It persisted. I could not muffle it, not even slightly. It came at intervals I could not readily discern. Hours, minutes, days? It was all the same now. Every time it stopped I prayed it would never return. Something about the sound sent my flesh crawling.

I threw off the covers and arose from bed. I quickly drew a heavy cloak off the hanger and threw it over my head, sheltering myself from the window. My motions had lost all purpose and reason. I sat at the table jittering, plagued by uncontrollable spasms every time the scratching would flare. I desperately clutched the cloak over my head, insuring the barrier would not fall.

The chime sounded and the door opened, but the attendant did not bring in my tray. It just drifted in, suspended by air, and set itself upon the table. It didn't matter; it was all the same. I couldn't eat though; the scratching wouldn't let me. I shivered, staring at my lap. Slowly my vision crept upwards to the cloth cave I had formed for myself. The light caught a faint pattern sewn into the heavy fabric, an elaborate compass. I released the cloak in terror.

There, outside my window it stood. The creature that had stalked the clouds had arrived. It was more horrifying than any beast my mind could have possibly conjured. It was a pale image of the Cartographer. The fire had gone from her eyes. Her head was thrown back at a lifeless angle; a dozen needles protruded from her neck ["impinge" is to collide or to infringe]. She clawed at the window with a limp, skeletal hand. She threw me into violent convulsions with every stroke.

I had to get away. I had to get away!

I ran into the hallway and careened down the flight of stairs, but the scratching had followed me. I crashed against the walls or tumbled to the floor every time the nauseating noise came. It was a terrible sound; the sound of scraping bone. I continued my fevered dash, flying past the desolate city streets. In the distance I could see the azure woman. She wore an earring and spoke softly across a great divide, "You can leave whenever you'd like."

The words brought fire to my legs; I weighed nothing at all. The scratching came, and I would stumble, but regain my pace instantly. I was ablaze, a comet streaking furiously through a stone sky. In an instant, I had arrived before the great doors. I commanded them to open, and so they did.

The jagged plains I had traversed sprawled out before me. Their width grew to breathtaking proportions as the doors opened. The azure woman was next to me. “You can leave whenever you’d like,” she whispered.

A chilling draft crossed the colossal threshold. N-No... No! Why!? Why was that smell here!? I raced towards the wasteland, but it dissolved into a brilliant light.

I heard the voice of two women. They spoke happily to one another.

“Do you think they dream?”

“I can’t imagine what about.”

The hollow scratching was louder now, encompassing the whole of sound. It tugged invisible strings attached to my appendages.

“You know, you can leave whenever you’d like. This part can be rather messy.”

“No, I think I should get used to it. I’ll have to do this myself some day.”

The light was still blinding, but I could make out the looming silhouettes of an older and a younger woman. The older woman had her arms reached over my vision, rocking back and forth. The motion inexplicably reminded me of eating, perhaps because it was so similar to the usage of a fork and knife. Scrape, scrape, scrape, the sounds a puppet must hear when its master bid it dance and quake.

My eyes shifted around the room. There were so many people upon so many reclining chairs. They were all adorned with many needles.

“Oh look! I think she’s awake!” spoke the younger woman.

“Hmm? Oh yes, it’s fairly common during times of harvest,” responded the older, rather nonchalantly. She drew forth a syringe, smiled, and plunged it deep into my neck.

The overhead light grew into a ravenous beast. It devoured the faintest traces of color and burned away the final edges of my vision. Oh that light! It was the familiar lid to the pale coffin in which I lay entombed. My eyes remained open; they darted about the room, but I could see nothing, hear nothing... there was only that smell...

For just a moment, I remembered the meaning of “Schadenfreude,” and it made perfect sense: “happiness derived through the misery of others.” Apparently, my assumption had been correct; there had been something lost in this word’s translation, but not into German.

It had been at least a couple of weeks since I’d arrived at this bizarre settlement, clasped by the granite like a precious gemstone atop a twisted plateau. Time lost its most endearing quality in this place. Yes, it had to have been a couple of weeks... just a couple.