

Awakening and the Afternoon

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Awakening and the Afternoon

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Summary

When Ariadne awakens, the sun is rising and all over the outside, the fire pits flicker.

Notes

Thank you, faceofstone, for asking me for REALLY WEIRD STUFF XD I'm not sure how weird this ended up being in the scheme of things (though maybe I am losing all perspective :D), but I hope it captured some of the dreamlike bittersweet you were looking for :)

There are two men by the statue of the Hero and its changing face. They are noted gossips and the gossip of the day is as simultaneously facile and entrancing as it always is. The chancellor's granddaughter has gone into the University and is assisting, of all people, the widow of that deranged anthropologist. He saw her last year, the granddaughter, playing hoop-la in one of the stretching empty watching streets by the tower, dwarfed and vulnerable and guarded from every doorway. It is hard to imagine the child in the red tower—if nothing else, she is far too young. Perhaps the whole story is slander. If the chancellor were going to let her own tiny descendent into the departments, it would hardly be in the lingering cells of a fire-starved corpse.

He is not here for the gossip, regardless. He leaves the pair to their murmurs, ignores the Hero and crosses the Piazza. Ariadne lies contorted in the long shadow of the Tower, and he lends his ear to the statue. Ariadne tells him that it is dangerous to challenge the gods—which is not a revelation. Ariadne tells him that curiosity, and ambition, and hunger, and mortality killed the cat. Ariadne tells him that the moment of transcendence when the gods tear you to threads is almost worth it.

Ariadne is hardly a reliable source. Aside from everything else, she's a statue.

He is the area's designated Drifter, and these things come with a degree of responsibility, even if he is plain clothes today. The uniform is entirely ceremonial, anyway – it's decades since the last time any functional FPG could have mistaken a Drifter for actual homeless. Might as well be comfortable.

By mid-afternoon, his chin is very red on one side, the chiaroscuro glare of urban June carrying long shadows from which, sadly, he cannot practicably do his job. Whoever invented the bowler hat has a lot to answer for (mostly his unfortunately angular sunburn, though also perhaps the sweating of his scalp). Maybe he could bring back those full brim straw things, oversized costume sombreros from derelict Mexican restaurants in other parts of the world. He's a Drifter; no one's going to complain that it doesn't match his suit.

Maybe he should just request transfer back to inside a circle. There's little enough good done here; the real investigation's done by proper undercovers outside the wall, on and off the trains, watching the cargo in from the east, dying trying to seize the arcanities the Peegees smuggle by ship. Here he's just patrolling, really, as though they're going to cross the wall and infringe upon the outer ring. There are few folk here to protect—the gossips, the mourners, the statues. If a gang did ever cross the wall—and what would it be then? Even a registered fire pit gang can hardly be one if they're moving away from the pits. Probably everyone would still call them Peegees. No one but Patrol and Justice remember what it's short for anyway, or that what it's short for is an acronym. But if one did, come over the wall, or force their way in through the station arch, it wouldn't be the folk here they'd be coming for. Might be the statues, maybe, but more likely they'd be passing through. On to revolution,

trailing their wrack and ruin miasmic through the gardens, and they'd storm the Tower if they were angry, or the red tower if they were smart.

They wouldn't stay here (almost no one does, save the statues). There'd be nothing he could do about it.

The mourners are all mad, but the mad anthropologist's widow is the maddest of all. She comes through the arches with a rough, bulge sack, artefact of some other aesthetic, like a sphere of sheet with a hole in it. It's filled with artichokes or with bananas, depending on the season—artichokes in spring and summer, bananas when they're unavailable. No one knows the significance. He's not convinced artichokes are anyone's favourite food. Probably he's wrong. She leaves them around the ring, in strange places, mostly where they're not in anyone's way. Sometimes, once she's gone, he brings them to Ariadne. She doesn't eat them—she's a statue—but it serves well enough as an offering. Sometimes other people take them home. Sometimes they rot in the cool shadows of the station cloisters, out of sight, the smell of death and distant jungles grasping at grey stone and restless air.

The outer ring is baked with the stultifying, packed dust enthalpy of grief. That's why the mourners like it, she thinks, as much as for its marginal proximity to the outside. The squareness of things, the depth of the shadow, the choice between heatstroke and shivering cloister cold. Everything is black or white here, and nothing is. Everything is grey or brown.

She could escape the inertia, she thinks, sometimes, if she seized some fatalistic rush of arcanity as a launcher, took passage on one of the ships like a Chinese rocket and just went, beyond memory and security. They're not ships, from inside the wall: they're strangely bisected rectangles of bed sheet, carried by trees in linear motion. They're the firs of the Tower garden denuded and grown legs. They're the skeletons or the severed heads of film footage and the one time she stood atop the rooks and watched them slide down the canal. Sal used to talk about the things that came in and went out by ship—it wouldn't be abandonment. The research could go with her. Furnished with almost certain death, the way Sally liked it.

That's not fair, of course, but nothing is.

The libraries can't go with her, and Sal believed in what's censored but still here.

The unspoken part of his job, but the part that really matters, is the keeping people in. He has no idea how he's supposed to identify that reckless soul, or stop them, and no concept of how he might begin to convince them to turn around. Anyone mad enough to creep out of safety and comfort to go die in a tumble clearly lacks the rationality to be reasoned with.

He wasn't on duty when the Chancellor's grandson walked out (but Ariadne's whispered of it, in vagaries), and he didn't see the Chancellor's daughter fall from the walls afterward, a tragic accident unrelated to the recent death of her son (but he's seen the footage on the news, like everyone else, falling and falling again).

He wasn't on duty when the mad anthropologist walked out, but he heard the widow, once, pointing a hand of bananas at one of the gossips as though she'd switched off the safety (the theoretical safety; bananas don't, as a rule, fire bullets).

"There was another tumble at the pits last night," he said, loitering by the white-light mirror of the dormant fountain, or was it by the Hero on the Horse?

"Boys with garden walls have tumbles," she said, bananas held steady. "Thirty young people blowing each others' brains out isn't a tumble."

It sounded more like recitation than spontaneous outrage, but he wouldn't know.

Their third date was not a date by anyone else's standards, and involved sitting across from one another at a University function. She was in love, and she flirted awkwardly and outrageously and effectively, licked liquid butter off of artichoke petals, planted the hearts back across the table like tokens from a child's valentine.

They were kicked out halfway through the meal when Sal told a senior Reader that his lexical choices were trivialising human lives and deaths, as though literally every single person in the city (but Sal) didn't call them tumbles.

She orders artichokes from the kitchen, now, uncooked, and leaves them around like the closest thing left to conversation. They're usually not left long enough to rot. Hopefully someone's eating them.

Maybe it's the statues.

Maybe it's the ghosts.

When Ariadne awakens, the sun is rising and all over the outside, the fire pits flicker. The gangs exchange glances, and contemplate war.

She helps the statue straighten, twist its shoulders into something closer to actual human proportions. Then they go to the cloisters. The right train doesn't leave until mid-afternoon, the one that goes to where the ships slide in and stop, and it's best to be out of sight, and better still to be out of the sun. Ariadne eats bananas, which were Sal's favourite food, and that doesn't mean anything—actually doesn't, and she doesn't mean it to. It's just what she orders from the kitchen, when artichokes aren't in season. When Ariadne opens her mouth for the first time, the inside is grey. She swallows the banana anyway, in squashed segments, palate powdery and scraping. Her skin should colour with time and input, the books suggested. She's upright and walking and eating, so maybe for once the books are actually right.

By ten to three, Ariadne's skin is faintly banana coloured (the books didn't mention that). They'll have to avoid blueberries, if they find anywhere they grow. They exit the narrow archways; they cross the ring in the baked sun. They stand by the station as the clock creeps to 2:55.

There's a Drifter, arrives as the train does, as they step through the arch. He doesn't follow but he watches, through the arch, as they board.

There's a creak and a groan, and Ariadne waves to him through the window as the train pulls away.

He's wearing the most ridiculous, brightly coloured, oversized straw hat.

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