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Borne

Written by Jeff VanderMeer

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BORNE

'A THOROUGH MARVEL' COLSON WHITEHEAD



JEFF VANDERMEER

BORNE

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PART ONE

WHAT I FOUND AND HOW I FOUND IT

I found Borne on a sunny gunmetal day when the giant bear Mord came roving near our home. To me, Borne was just salvage at first. I didn't know what Borne would mean to us. I couldn't know that he would change everything.

Borne was not much to look at that first time: dark purple and about the size of my fist, clinging to Mord's fur like a half-closed stranded sea anemone. I found him only because, beacon-like, he strobed emerald green across the purple every half minute or so.

Come close, I could smell the brine, rising in a wave, and for a moment there was no ruined city around me, no search for food and water, no roving gangs and escaped, altered creatures of unknown origin or intent. No mutilated, burned bodies dangling from broken streetlamps.

Instead, for a dangerous moment, this thing I'd found was from the tidal pools of my youth, before I'd come to the city. I could smell the pressed-flower twist of the salt and feel the wind, knew the chill of the water rippling over my feet. The long hunt for seashells, the gruff sound of my father's voice, the upward lilt of my mother's. The honey warmth of the sand engulfing my feet as I looked toward the horizon and the white sails of ships that told of visitors from beyond our island. If I had ever lived on an island. If that had ever been true.

The sun above the carious yellow of one of Mord's eyes.

To find Borne, I had tracked Mord all morning, from the moment he had woken in the shadow of the Company building far to the south. The de facto ruler of our city had risen into the sky and come close to where I lay hidden, to slake his thirst by opening his great maw and scraping his muzzle across the polluted riverbed to the north. No one but Mord could drink from that river and live; the Company had made him that way. Then he sprang up into the blue again, a murderer light as a dandelion seed. When he found prey, a ways off to the east, under the scowl of rainless clouds, Mord dove from on high and relieved some screaming pieces of meat of their breath. Reduced them to a red mist, a roiling wave of the foulest breath imaginable. Sometimes the blood made him sneeze.

No one, not even Wick, knew why the Company hadn't seen the day coming when Mord would transform from their watchdog to their doom—why they hadn't tried to destroy Mord while they still held that power. Now it was too late, for not only had Mord become a behemoth, but, by some magic of engineering extorted from the Company, he had learned to levitate, to fly.

By the time I had reached Mord's resting place, he shuddered

in earthquake-like belches of uneasy sleep, his nearest haunch rising high above me. Even on his side, Mord rose three stories. He was drowsy from sated bloodlust; his thoughtless sprawl had leveled a building, and pieces of soft-brick rubble had mashed out to the sides, repurposed as Mord's bed in slumber.

Mord had claws and fangs that could eviscerate, extinguish, quick as thought. His eyes, sometimes open even in dream, were vast, fly-encrusted beacons, spies for a mind that some believed worked on cosmic scales. But to me at his flanks, human flea, all he stood for was good scavenging. Mord destroyed and reimagined our broken city for reasons known only to him, yet he also replenished it in his thoughtless way.

When Mord wandered seething from the lair he had hollowed out in the wounded side of the Company building, all kinds of treasures became tangled in that ropy, dirt-bathed fur, foul with carrion and chemicals. He gifted us with packets of anonymous meat, surplus from the Company, and sometimes I would find the corpses of unrecognizable animals, their skulls burst from internal pressure, eyes bright and bulging. If we were lucky, some of these treasures would fall from him in a steady rain during his shambling walks or his glides high above, and then we did not have to clamber onto him. On the best yet worst days, we found the beetles you could put in your ear, like the ones made by my partner Wick. As with life generally, you never knew, and so you followed, head down in genuflection, hoping Mord would provide.

Some of these things may have been placed there on purpose, as Wick always warned me. They could be traps. They could be misdirection. But I knew traps. I set traps myself. Wick's "Be careful" I ignored as he knew I would when I set out each morning. The risk I took, for my own survival, was to bring back what I found to Wick, so he could go through them like an oracle through entrails. Sometimes I thought Mord brought these things to us out

of a broken sense of responsibility to us, his playthings, his torture dolls; other times that the Company had put him up to it.

Many a scavenger, surveying that very flank I now contemplated, had misjudged the depth of Mord's sleep and found themselves lifted up and, unable to hold on, fallen to their death . . . Mord unaware as he glided like a boulder over his hunting preserve, this city that has not yet earned back its name. For these reasons, I did not risk much more than exploratory missions along Mord's flank. *Seether. Theeber. Mord.* His names were many and often miraculous to those who uttered them aloud.

So did Mord truly sleep, or had he concocted a ruse in the spiraling toxic waste dump of his mind? Nothing that simple this time. Emboldened by Mord's snores, which manifested as titanic tremors across the atlas of his body, I crept up farther on his haunch, while down below other scavengers used me as their canary. And there, entangled in the brown, coarse seaweed of Mord's pelt, I stumbled upon Borne.

Borne lay softly humming to itself, the half-closed aperture at the top like a constantly dilating mouth, the spirals of flesh contracting, then expanding. "It" had not yet become "he."

The closer I approached, the more Borne rose up through Mord's fur, became more like a hybrid of sea anemone and squid: a sleek vase with rippling colors that strayed from purple toward deep blues and sea greens. Four vertical ridges slid up the sides of its warm and pulsating skin. The texture was as smooth as waterworn stone, if a bit rubbery. It smelled of beach reeds on lazy summer afternoons and, beneath the sea salt, of passionflowers. Much later, I realized it would have smelled different to someone else, might even have appeared in a different form.

It didn't really look like food and it wasn't a memory beetle, but it wasn't trash, either, and so I picked it up anyway. I don't think I could have stopped myself.

Around me, Mord's body rose and fell with the tremors of his breathing, and I bent at the knees to keep my balance. Snoring and palsying in sleep, acting out a psychotic dreamsong. Those fascinating eyes—so wide and yellow-black, as pitted as meteors or the cracked dome of the observatory to the west—were tight-closed, his massive head extended without care for any danger well to the east.

And there was Borne, defenseless.

The other scavengers, many the friends of an uneasy truce, now advanced up the side of Mord, emboldened, risking the forest of his dirty, his holy fur. I hid my find under my baggy shirt rather than in my satchel so that as they overtook me they could not see it or easily steal it.

Borne beat against my chest like a second heart.

"Borne."

Names of people, of places, meant so little, and so we had stopped burdening others by seeking them. The map of the old horizon was like being haunted by a grotesque fairy tale, something that when voiced came out not as words but as sounds in the aftermath of an atrocity. Anonymity amongst all the wreckage of the Earth, this was what I sought. And a good pair of boots for when it got cold. And an old tin of soup half hidden in rubble. These things became blissful; how could names have power next to that?

Yet still, I named him Borne.

WHO I BROUGHT BORNE TO

There is no other way to say this: Wick, my partner and lover both, was a drug dealer, and the drug he pushed was as terrible and beautiful and sad and sweet as life itself. The beetles Wick altered,

or made from materials he'd stolen from the Company, didn't just teach when shoved in your ear; they could also rid you of memories and add memories. People who couldn't face the present shoved them into their ears so they could experience someone else's happier memories from long ago, from places that didn't exist anymore.

The drug was the first thing Wick offered me when I met him, and the first thing I refused, sensing a trap even when it seemed like an escape. Within the explosion of mint or lime from putting the beetle in your ear would form marvelous visions of places I hoped did not exist. It would be too cruel, thinking that sanctuary might be real. Such an idea could make you stupid, careless.

Only the stricken look on Wick's face in response to my revulsion at the idea made me stay, keep talking to him. I wish I had known the source of his discomfort then and not so much later.

I set the sea anemone on a rickety table between our chairs. We were sitting on one of the rotting balconies jutting out from a sheer rock face that had inspired me to name our refuge the Balcony Cliffs. The original name of the place, on the rusted placard in the subterranean lobby, was unreadable.

Behind us lay the warren we lived in and in front of us, way down below, veiled by a protective skein Wick had made to shield us from unwelcome eyes, the writhings of the poisonous river that ringed most of the city. A stew of heavy metals and oil and waste that generated a toxic mist, reminding us that we would likely die from cancer or worse. Beyond the river lay a wasteland of scrub. Nothing good or wholesome there, yet on rare occasions people still appeared out of that horizon.

I had come out of that horizon.

"What is this thing?" I asked Wick, who was taking a good long look at what I'd brought. The thing pulsed, as harmless and functional as a lamp. Yet one of the terrors the Company had

visited on the city in the past was to test its biotech on the streets. The city turned into a vast laboratory and now half destroyed, just like the Company.

Wick smiled the thin smile of a thin man, which looked more like a wince. With one arm on the table and left leg crossed over the right, in loose-fitting linen pants he'd found a week before and a white button-down shirt he'd worn so long it was yellowing, Wick looked almost relaxed. But I knew it was a pose, struck as much for the city's benefit as mine. Slashes in the pants. Holes in the shirt. The details you tried to unsee that told a more accurate story.

"What isn't it? That's the first question," he said.

"Then *what* isn't it?"

He shrugged, unwilling to commit. A wall sometimes formed between us when discussing finds, a guardedness I didn't like.

"Should I come back at some other time? When you're feeling more talkative?" I asked.

I'd grown less patient with him over time, which was unkind as he needed my patience more now. The raw materials for his creations were running out, and he had other pressures. His rivals—in particular, the Magician, who had taken over the entire western reaches of the city—encroached on his thoughts and territory, made demands on him now. His handsome face beneath wispy blond hair, the lantern chin and high cheekbones, had begun to eat themselves the way a candle is eaten by flame.

"Can it fly?" he asked, finally.

"No," I said, smiling. "It has no wings." Although we both knew that was no guarantee.

"Does it bite?"

"It hasn't bitten me," I said. "Why, should I bite it?"

"Should we eat it?"

Of course he didn't mean it. Wick was always cautious, even

when reckless. But he was opening up after all; I could never predict it. Maybe that was the point.

"No, we shouldn't," I said.

"We could play catch with it."

"You mean, help it fly?"

"If we're not going to eat it."

"It's not really a ball anymore."

Which was the truth. For a time, the creature I called Borne had retreated into itself but had now, with a strangely endearing tentative grace, become vase-shaped again. The thing just lay there on the table, pulsing and strobing in a way I found comforting. The strobing made it look bigger, or perhaps it had already started growing.

Wick's hazel-green eyes had grown larger, more empathic in that shrunken face as he pondered the puzzle of what I had brought to him. Those eyes saw everything, except, perhaps, how I saw him.

"I know what it isn't," Wick said, serious again. "It isn't Mord-made. I doubt Mord knew he carried it. But it isn't necessarily from the Company, either."

Mord could be devious, and Mord's relationship with the Company was in flux. Sometimes we wondered if a civil war raged in the remnants of the Company building, between those who supported Mord and those who regretted creating him.

"Where did Mord pick it up from if not the Company?"

A tremor at Wick's mouth made the purity of his features more arresting and intense. "Whispers come back to me. Of things roaming the city that owe no allegiance to Mord, the Company, or the Magician. I see these *things* at the fringes, in the desert at night, and I wonder . . ."

Foxes and other small mammals had shadowed me that morning. Was that what Wick meant? Their proliferation was a mystery—

was the Company making them, or was the desert encroaching on the city?

I didn't tell him about the animals, wanted his own testimony, prompted, "Things?"

But he ignored my question, changed course: "Well, it's easy enough to learn more." Wick passed his hand over Borne. The crimson worms living in his wrist leapt out briefly to analyze it, before retreating into his skin.

"Surprising. It is from the Company. At least, created *inside* the Company." He'd worked for the Company in its heyday, a decade ago, before being "cast out, thrown away," as he put it in a rare unguarded moment.

"But not by the Company?"

"It has the economy of design usually only achieved by committees of one."

When Wick danced around a subject, it made me nervous. The world was already too uncertain, and if I looked to Wick for anything besides security, it was for knowledge.

"Do you think it's a mistake?" I asked. "An afterthought? Something put out in the trash?"

Wick shook his head, but his tight frown didn't reassure me. Wick was self-sufficient and self-contained. So was I. Or so we both thought. But now I felt he was withholding some crucial piece of information.

"Then what?"

"It could be almost anything. It could be a beacon. It could be a cry for help. It could be a bomb." Did Wick really not know?

"So maybe we *should* eat it?"

He laughed, shattering the architectural lines of his face. The laughter didn't bother me. Not then, at least.

"I wouldn't. Much worse to eat a bomb than a beacon." He leaned forward, and I took such pleasure from staring at his face that

I thought he had to notice. "But we should know its purpose. If you give it to me, I can at least break it down into its parts, cycle it through my beetles. Discover more that way. Make use of it."

We were, in our way, equals by now. Partners. I sometimes called him my boss because I scavenged for him, but I didn't have to give him the sea anemone. Nothing in our agreement said I had to. True, he could take it while I slept . . . but this was always the test of our relationship. Were we symbiotic or parasitic?

I looked at the creature lying there on the table, and I felt possessive. The feeling rose out of me unexpected, but true—and not just because I'd risked Mord to find Borne.

"I think I'll keep it for a while," I said.

Wick gave me a long look, shrugged, and said, too casually, "Suit yourself." The creature might be unusual, but we'd seen similar things before; perhaps he believed there was little harm.

Then he took a golden beetle from his pocket, put it in his ear, and his eyes no longer saw me. He always did that after something reminded him of the Company in the wrong way, unleashing a kind of self-despising rage and melancholy. I had told him confessing whatever had happened there might bring him peace, but he always ignored me. He told me he was shielding me. I did not believe him. Not really.

Perhaps he was trying to forget the details of some personal failure he could not forgive, something he'd brought on himself or actions he'd taken toward the end. Yet the job he'd chosen—or been forced into—after leaving could only remind him of the Company hour by hour, day by day. It was hard to guess because I didn't know much about biotech, and I felt the answers I wanted from him might be technical, that maybe he thought I wouldn't understand the details.

If I'd had his full attention, if Wick had argued with me over

Borne, the future might have been different. If he'd insisted on taking Borne from me. But he didn't. Couldn't.

WHERE I LIVED, AND WHY

By the time I found Borne, I was entangled with Wick in so many ways. We were bound by our mutual safe place: the Balcony Cliffs, which existed on the northeast fringe of the city, overlooking the poisoned river. To the west as the city sloped toward sea level lay the territory of the Magician. To the south, across desolation and oases both, the remnants of the Company, protected by Mord. Much of all of this sprawled across a vast dry seabed that extended into the semiarid plain beyond the city.

Wick had found the Balcony Cliffs and held them for a time without me. But only by inviting me in had he held *on* to that place. He provided his dwindling supply of biotech and chemical deceptions and I provided a talent for building traps both physical and psychological. Using Wick's blueprints, I'd reinforced or hollowed out the most stable corridors and the rest now ended in hidden pits or floors strewn with broken glass or worse. I used a terrifying nostalgia: book covers with death's-heads drawn on them, a bloody cradle never meant to break, a few dozen pairs of shoes (some with mummified feet still in them). The brittle remains of a doglike animal that had wandered in and gotten lost hung from one ceiling, while the graffiti added to the wall opposite would haunt an intruder's nightmares. If they knew how to read. A horror show linked to Wick's pheromones and hallucinogens, activated by trip wire. Attacks had come and squatters tried their luck, and always we had fended them off.

One route we'd made led to Wick's rooms, another to the stairs in the former lobby that granted access to a blind hidden near the

top mulch. Another route came after subterfuge to the converted swimming pool where Wick stirred a vat of seething biotech creations like a mad scientist—and then from there to the cliff where lay the balconies that had given the place its name.

From the center, near Wick's workplace, the lines in my head were drawn most urgently to the southern edge of the mound, which faced the Company across the great broken divide of the city's southwest flank, the confusion deliberately multiplied, my purpose to create a maze for any unexpected visitors . . . before simplifying again at the exit to three passageways, only one of which led anywhere safe, and before that the door, which from the outside appeared to just be a part of the mound, obliterated by an inspiration of moss and vines. A strong smell of carrion, one of Wick's most inspired distortion pheromones, grew unbearable closest to the door. Even I had trouble leaving by that entrance.

Throughout the warren we had made of the Balcony Cliffs there now existed allegiances that felt intimate—more intimate even than our sleeping arrangements. Corridors? Tunnels? Even those kinds of distinctions had been lost under our excavating rule and Wick's addition of special spiders and other insects. I kept track of my traps with a map, but Wick, Company-savvy, used a flounder-creature in a shallow pan of water as his command and control, an ever-changing blueprint traced delicate across its back.

At some point, just as our systems of defense had become entwined, so too had our bodies, and that had wrought an unexpected synergy. What had been created from extremes of loneliness, of need, had moved beyond mutual comfort into friendship and then toward some amorphous frontier or feeling that could not be love—that I refused to call love.

In weak moments, I would run my hand across his wiry chest and tease him about his pale, almost translucent skin against the deep brown of my thighs, and for a time I would be happy at the

hidden center of our Balcony Cliffs. It suited me that we could be lovers there and retreat to being mere allies in the aftermath.

But the truth is, when we were together on those nights, I knew that Wick lost every part of himself and let himself be vulnerable. I felt this quite strongly, even if I might be wrong. And if I held back something from Wick because of it, still I let the Balcony Cliffs in, connected by something almost like lasers. These lines that radiated out from both of us surged from body and brain and through the rooms our talents kept safe. Sensors, trip wires, sensitive to touch and vibration, as if we lay always at the center of something important. Even lying there, beneath me, Wick could not be free of that connection.

There was also the thrill of secrecy, for to preserve our security, we could not be seen outside together—left by different pathways, at different times—and some of that thrill entered into our relationship. Anyone passing furtive far above us would have thought that underfoot, beneath the copse of sickly pines, lay only a vast midden, an old garbage dump with dozens of layers of crumbled girders, human remains, abandoned refrigerators, firebombed cars—crushed into a mulch that had a springy, almost jaunty feel.

But beneath that weight lay us, lay the stalwart roof of the Balcony Cliffs and the cross-section of body that served as our home—the lines that connected a woman named Rachel to a man named Wick. There was a secret shape to it all that lived inside us, a map that slowly circled within our minds like a personal cosmology.

This, then, is where I had brought my sea anemone named Borne—into this cocoon, this safe haven, this vast trap that took time and precious resources to maintain, while somewhere a ticking clock kept track of the time we had left. Wick and I both knew that no matter how much raw biotech material he created or bartered for, the beetle parts and other essentials he had taken from the Company so long ago would run out. My physical traps without

Wick's almost uncanny reinforcement would not keep scavengers out for long.

Every day brought us closer to a point where we would have to redefine our relationship to the Balcony Cliffs, and to each other. And, in the middle of all routes, my apartment, where, pulled taut by our connections, we fucked, we screwed, we made love, equidistant from any border that might encroach, any enemy that might try to enter. We could be greedy there and selfish there, and there we saw each other fully. Or at least thought we did, because whatever we had, it was the enemy of the world outside.

That first night after I had brought Borne into our home, we lay there in my apartment and listened to the remote, hollow sound of heavy rain smashing into the mossy surface far above. We both knew it was not real rain; real rain in this city came to us ethereal and brief, and thus we did not venture out. Even real rain was often poison.

We did not speak much. We didn't have sex. We just lay there in a comfortable tangle, with Borne on a chair as far from us as possible, in the corner of the bedroom. Wick had strong hands with fingertips worn almost smooth from his years of handling the materials that went into his vats of proto-life, and I liked to hold his hands.

This is how far we had come, that we could be silent and we could be still together. But even then, that first night, the presence of Borne changed things and I didn't know if part of the silence was because of that.

In the morning, we peeked out through one of our secret doors to find the cracked earth writhing with the death throes of thousands of tiny red salamanders. So intricate, their slow-questing limbs, their obsidian eyes. So much like a mirage. A mosaic of

living question marks that had rained down from the darkened sky without meaning. And already to the west we could hear the rage of Mord and feel the tremor of his passage. Rage against this illogical rain or against someone or something else?

Once, comets had appeared in the heavens and people mistook them for celestial creatures. Now we had Mord, and salamanders. What did they portend? What fate was the city working toward? Within minutes of the sun hitting their bodies the salamanders dissolved into liquid, absorbed by the earth so that only an off-red sheen like an oil slick remained behind, dotted with the tiny tracks of investigating animals.

Wick did not seem much concerned about the salamanders despite his need to replenish the supplies in his swimming pool.

"Contaminated," he said, which I had known already from the look on his face.

WHY I CALLED HIM BORNE AND HOW HE CHANGED

I called the creature Borne because of one of the few things Wick had told me about his time working for the Company. Remembering a creature he'd created, Wick had said, "He was *born*, but I had *borne* him."

When I wasn't scavenging for myself or Wick, I took care of Borne. This required some experimenting, in part because I had never taken care of anyone or anything before—except some hermit crabs as a child and a stray dog for a day that I had to give up. I had no family, and my parents had died before I had arrived in the city.

I knew nothing about Borne and treated him like a plant at first. It seemed logical, from my initial observations. The first time Borne felt comfortable enough to relax and open up, I was sitting

down to a quiet dinner of old Company food packets I'd found buried in a half-collapsed basement. He was sitting on the table in front of me, as enigmatic as ever. Then, mid-chew, I heard a whining noise and a distinctly wet pucker. As I set down the packet, the aperture on top of Borne widened, releasing a scent like roses and tapioca. The sides of Borne peeled back in segments to reveal delicate dark-green tendrils that even in their writhing protected the still-hidden core.

Without thinking, I said, "Borne, you're not a sea anemone at all—you're a plant!"

I'd already gotten into the habit of talking to him, but at the sound of my voice Borne snapped back into what I thought of as his "defensive mode" and didn't relax again for a full day. So I put him on a plate in the bathroom, on a shelf beneath a slanted hole in the ceiling that let in improbable sunlight from far above. I savored that green-tinged, musty light in the mornings before I went out to do Wick's work.

By the end of the second day, Borne had taken on a yellow-pink hue and the tenacity of his defensive posture hinted at either sickness or religious ecstasy, both of which I had seen too often out in the city. He smelled overcooked. I removed Borne from the shelf and returned him to the kitchen table. However, by then I noticed that the worms that composted my bathroom waste and excreted the nutrients Wick used in his vat had "disappeared."

Now I knew a few useful things. Borne could overdose on sunlight. Borne was a glutton for compost worms. Borne could move around by himself but wouldn't while I was there. So Borne chose to overdose on sunlight. Nothing now indicated that Borne was malformed or in any way a mistake.

I upgraded Borne from plant to animal, but still did not reclassify him as "purposeful." I should have, though, because following his bathroom adventures, Borne made no attempt to disguise his

movements. I would come home to find him in the bedroom when he had been in the kitchen when I'd left—or back in the hallway when he'd been on the living-room floor. Upon my approach, Borne always remained silent and unmoving, and I could never catch him in the act. I sensed amusement from Borne over this, but I was probably projecting. This made me smile. It became a kind of game, to guess where he might be when I returned. I looked forward to coming home more than usual.

When I mentioned this to Wick, while giving him a half-dead azure slug I'd found near the Company, he didn't find it funny.

"You're not worried?"

"Why should I be worried?"

"Because it is concealing its capabilities from you. Already. You have no idea what it might do next. You're telling me it's organized and possibly as intelligent as a dog, and we still don't know its purpose."

"You said Borne didn't have to have a purpose."

"I might have been wrong. Give it to me. I can find out what it is."

That made me shudder. "Only by taking Borne apart."

"Maybe. Yes, of course. I don't have any sophisticated equipment here. I don't have the time or the ability for anything noninvasive." The Magician encroached, the supplies wouldn't last forever—the rhythm that ruled our lives.

To Wick, Borne was just another variable, something he needed to control to manage his own stress. I understood that, but perhaps the lie created by life inside the Balcony Cliffs was that at some point we might think beyond the next day or the next week. That was the sliver of doubt that had crept into me along with the laughter at Borne's antics.

On impulse, I hugged Wick, held him close, even though he tried to pull away. *This was business, this was survival,* that resistance

told me, and I shouldn't mix our personal relationship with business. But I couldn't help it.

And I still couldn't give him Borne—not out of pity or concern or anything else false. And because I couldn't give him Borne, I stopped talking about Borne with him. When he asked about Borne, I kept my answers brief and casual. *He's fine. He's really nothing more than some kind of vegetable. A potted plant that walks.* Wick would look at me like he saw right through me, but he didn't take Borne away from me.

It was all a test as to whether trust could still exist between us, and every time I extended that trust a little further I expected it would be unable to take the weight, or the pressure of my weight on it, and snap.

WHAT I FOUND IN WICK'S APARTMENT

Trust, though, required certain betrayals. Long before the arrival of Borne, I had searched Wick's quarters while he was out selling his drugs. I assumed he had done the same to me, but who knew? This aspect of trust you don't talk about with the recipient.

My betrayal required skill—to un-puzzle locks, to bypass traps, to snuff optics—but in the end it wasn't worth the effort. Wick's three rooms did not reveal much about the man. The sum of his existence in that cramped space came to so very little. No family photographs or portraits, few personal items.

Perhaps, I thought, he chose to live so small to keep whatever secrets he hid out of his mind? I imagined that somewhere buried deep in our Balcony Cliffs midden lay a warehouse full of artifacts Wick kept locked away so he could not be compromised by them. But if that was true, I never found that place.

I had only the stark evidence at hand, coerced gently from a

desk drawer with a little creative lock-picking: a diagram of a fish curled inside the outer tube of a broken telescope and a metal box filled with tiny vermilion nautilus shells, curled up and dry.

I pocketed one nautilus shell for later, examined the fish diagram. I held the diagram unfolded beneath the dim light of the fireflies Wick had embedded in the ceiling. I knew it was a relic from Wick's final project at the Company, the one he would only talk about when he was drunk. Certainly nothing like this had ever arisen from Wick's makeshift swimming-pool vat. Yet.

Whatever purpose the schematic had served, in the end it depicted an ugly fish, like a huge grouper or carp. A sideways, cutaway view, with lines radiating out from the brain, but also other parts, with numbers and random letters at the end of the spikes. That the fish had a wistful face of a woman with pale skin and blue eyes did not help, the effect ghoulish. It made me wary, as if some mad scientist had decided to make real a figurehead from an old sailing ship.

Wariness was not the term for the scrawling on the back. The more recent notes around the edges I could tell were in Wick's handwriting, and amounted to nostalgia: little nudges about how he might re-create the fish project, which had clearly petered out over time. But there was also a second writer, dominating the center space, with what looked like older marks, whose clear passion had increased into madness. The handwriting devolved into sweeping or stabbing marks, less and less legible, and then became gouged dark clouds of scribbles. The damage obscured meaning or told me too much. And what words that did peer through the mess were less than useful. Near the end of legibility, the scrawled words, *No more company.*

I put the empty telescope on the bed, continued my rummaging, worried Wick might catch me in the act. But I quickly realized there was nothing left to riffle through. So some scavenger's sixth sense made me return to the telescope. A patina like mother-of-

pearl covered the surface. I held the telescope up to the firefly lights to admire it.

Then frowned. Something seemed etched on the surface. In fact, up close, the "metal" surface revealed itself as hundreds of tiny hard fish scales forming a pattern so integrated you almost couldn't see the joins. The surface was still silver shiny, blank, but when I adjusted my grip I discovered that the heat of my fingers had done something to the scales: miniature photographs had formed there. Sneaky, sneaky Wick—although I couldn't understand the purpose of concealment. The photographs appeared to date from before the city's ruination, reproduced from old books, but hardly seemed worth keeping secret.

Curious, I made quick work of the telescope's surface, heating up every scale with my touch, almost as if playing a musical instrument, and then squinting at the results.

Most that weren't photographs of places now destroyed held a record of impressions of the city. There were lists of places under titles like "Reclaim" and asked/answereds like "How do you kill a building? Do nothing." Some of it appeared to be the equivalent of microfiche containing a rich history of the city before the Company's appearance. Other fragments were so microscopic I could only guess at their importance, and wondered how Wick could read them, unless he had some viewing device hidden away, too. None of this seemed like the Wick I knew—who was a loner, who had never mentioned the city as it had existed before the Company, and who seemed to have blocked the hope of any future for the city from his mind.

But I finally understood the need for secrecy when I realized it wasn't just old photographs and older data. Some scales held monstrous visions of projects never completed that scared me because they made Mord seem mundane. Most important, other scales included a fair number of technical specifications for biotech

that I knew Wick had created. None of our enemies needed that information.

Sometimes I wondered whether I would still find Wick fascinating if I uncovered all of his secrets, if I would even know who he was without them.

Back in my apartment, I dropped the nautilus I had stolen into a glass of water and watched as it reanimated, turned a brilliant shade of crimson, began to uncoil as it stared at me, almost defiant, and then disintegrated into nothing as if it had never existed. A disappearing trick. An illusion.

Drinking that elixir of Wick mysteries was impossible for me. I poured the water out, cleaned the glass, tossed the glass onto a pile of dirty old clothes out in the corridor.

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My other betrayal was simple: I liked Borne too much. I knew this in my bones, knew I really should give him up. But I also knew it would take something catastrophic for me to do so. The more personality Borne showed, the more I felt attached to him.

Borne also made it easy to keep him because I discovered he would eat just about anything—any crumb, lowly pebble, or scrap of wood. Any worm of any description that came within reach would disappear, never to be seen again. Borne ate a lot of what I would have discarded as trash and in a sense made a compost pile redundant. I think he would've eaten a garbage can if he'd been hungry enough.

This ease of life with Borne didn't stop him from continuing to puzzle me. The most basic and troubling puzzle? Even though so much went into Borne, nothing ever came out of Borne. This fact struck me as absurd, even humorously sinister. It actually made me giggle. *No pellets. No dung. No little puddles. Nothing.*