

DEEM

**BY**

**BARRY TOMKINS**

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DEEM

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# COUNTRY OF THE MIND

*Spright Mass surveyed the streets below and remembered how lovely the woods were in mid-winter.* Here in the City of Deem, under its dome, she could not tell, from air or light, the season during the day, nor how the stars might really look at night. There was weather in Deem, and there were stars, but not the kind in the woods of her childhood.

The woods were deep, and dark, and full of snow crackling white under black locusts, maples and oaks. They were not so far from the city as the crow flies, but far in every other way.

Sometimes, Spright was not sure exactly what she remembered—the woods themselves, or how she loved them, or the two mixed; the country or the country of her mind.

But she kept the country alive—the hard, beautiful, natural reality, not the sickly, sentimental, sorry-for-animals, oh-what-a-lovely-flower sort of feeling that passed for love of nature in this day and age, in this unnatural city of Deem.

She scanned the streets from her high window. Not exactly the conventional, historical bustle of city pavements. The population was still coming back slowly. Bad news for the world in general, good that it was slow, but the people below busied themselves well enough about nothing much, getting and spending, amusing themselves and each other, filling terrible emptiness with all the products and services that could be made with unlimited quantities of energy available on demand.

That was the Gift, the curse that had been bestowed on the humans of Deem. Energy in abundance, a gift not from the gods—or even godd, the apologetic modern name—but from aliens most humans did not discuss, choosing to enjoy the Gift and forget the price that was paid for its delivery.

She sighed and grimaced and tapped her fingers on the glass in secret admonition, as if she might warn them of their silliness, the futility of their comings and goings and doings.

She might as well warn a goldfish that it lived in a bowl.

Or a flock of sheep that one among them was not whom she appeared to be.

Spright turned from the window and stood at attention in the middle of the sparsely furnished flat—two chairs, a table, a narrow platform bed, a dark, polished wood floor. She closed her eyes.

She was an expert in several forms of self-discipline that descended, like one thread of her genes, from an East far distant in time and miles, but she had never learned to meditate. She had never managed to empty her mind of images and feelings and thoughts. If she had been able to still that flow perhaps she would not do what she did.

But she could not, and would not. She kept her beloved woods alive in the country of her mind, perhaps the only place in the City of Deem where they still lived.

\* \* \*

*Crackling white snow lay in sheets across the clearing, edges of black trunks wet by melting snow in the hard sunlight of winter. Crow's feet in the snow and rabbit paws and raccoon hands and something that slid with a second little track alongside it.*

“What’s that one, Dad?”

“Looks like a sick one, love.”

“Sick what, Dad?”

“Well, it’s quite big, isn’t it.”

“Like a rabbit?”

“Maybe, let’s look.”

They followed the trail in the chill, windless air, trying to imagine the shape that had made it—a wide groove showing the dark-green frozen grass, alongside it a steady, narrow groove that might be made by a companion or a part of the animal, a limb, maybe, somehow off to one side.

The tracks went straight across the clearing.



*That was one lesson her father made out of it, to show that something here was not natural. No animal would cross the frozen white clearing in broad daylight, in full view of all the eyes watching on the margins where the shrubs stuck up out of the snow and made cover.*

Well, that was not exactly true, he said. There was one great blundering animal that had the arrogance to go boldly where no animal had gone before, across the

middle of the clearing, because it knew no fear and, therefore, knew nothing of true craft.

Not she and her father, though, who taught her to hide in the edges, to stalk, to secret herself camouflaged, to linger and spy—alone, cold and hungry and not minding, enjoying nothing so much as being there. She was an onlooker, a student, a rememberer of what things used to be like, like all humans a blunderer of sorts, anyway, now that it was too late to get back in the mix and be with them. But she could be a watcher, a helper.

“We can’t go back into the mix,” he said. “We’re stuck on the outside, looking in. It’s too late for us.”

Much later, the craft he taught came in very useful, translated into the life of the city of which she pretended to be a part, playing a part, only never desiring to lose herself in Deem as she had in the woods, watching the animals live on the inside, mixed in, clear and pure.

Her craft now was not woodlore and legends written in bark or twigs or tracks in the snow but dark disguises and fake sayings, small explosive devices manufactured with calm concentrated glee and hidden carefully in secret places, plots laid under cover of darkness and carried from one mouth to the other in whispers as she planned her splendid revenges for the greatest betrayal of all. And there was the craft of her other self, the identity she wore like a cloak as a camouflage in the wilderness, how they knew her in the City of Deem.

She remembered that one small animal—a muffled voice, a small, hidden creature—limping along through the snowy clearing with its undone body, and it gave her energy and purpose. It woke her from contemplation of the city, that vacuum that sucked in all minds and feelings and made them numb, the legacy of aliens evicted three decades before, who had left behind the Gift, the tool needed to finish the job humans had started.

The Gift. Whose legacy, then, alien or human?

If they had been proper humans, not these slick beasts slouching across clearings everywhere on earth, they would have spurned the Gift, left it to rot in the fields of Garth, buried it in steaming compost, allowed microbes and insects to move in, let the weeds that grow rank with the rain cover and hide it from future temptation.

She would have to do that for them.



*The trail led to where the snow was broken up into angels, signs of a scuffle near a clump of dwarfed hollies just under some birches. They stood close and still, her hand clutching his ragged trousers, his gloved fingers against lips. From inside the clump came a snuffling, like a small child upset and trying not to be heard.*

He signaled for her to stand without moving and crept forward, crouching down, head going from side to side as he tried to see into the bushes, one forearm raised close to his face. Suddenly he sprang forward and jumped back, his glove grasping something brown and squealing and moving so fast it blurred.

He had it by the back of the neck and held it up for her to see as its jaws spread wide, showing needle teeth in a black mouth. The squealing hurt her ears but that wasn't the hard thing.

"Dad, what is it? Let's have a look, then."

"It's a weasel."

"Like a weasel."

"Like is right."

"What's that, Dad?"

He was holding it now with one hand on the nape and the other on the hind legs, stretching it out long so they could examine it. The squealing went on and on and on.

The torso and abdomen were more or less normal, but the forelimbs were not. There were three—one extra, a big thick one sticking out sideways, ending in a horny lump, a devil's split hoof.

"That's how the trail was made."

"Yes, love. Not much use, is it?"

"It's got a horrible cut."

"From whatever had a fight with it."

"It must have won."

"It's sick, love."

"Set it free, dad."

"It can't be free, love."

"Why not?"

"It just can't."

"Why not?"

"We'll talk about it later."

The thick glove grabbed it by the back of the neck and flipped the body over the wrist, making a crunch. Solemnly, they buried it in the woods, but not deep—under a cover of leaves so the others would find it, and its twisted body would be at rest, "back into the mix," as he put it.

It was hard for her then to understand how giving up your life could be a benefit to yourself and the earth and the sky and all their parts, but the little girl listened as he dressed a brace of birds, threading them on a wire, and hung them over the fire to roast for the evening meal.

“What about us, Dad?”

“We’ve got a job to do, love.”

“Why us?”

“We’re the only ones can see the whole picture. Or some of it.”

“That’s why we can?”

“Yes, love, I think so. Otherwise, we wouldn’t.”

Later, she thought for a while he was wrong and that humans seeing the picture was something like the devil’s foot on the weasel—an extra thing, an abomination against nature, an impediment to life, a carbuncle on the smooth skin of natural goodness, a perversion. Maybe the best thing would be a true sleep after all for all that picture-seeing, the final blinking out of all those human views on nature, looking from the edges of clearings or anywhere.

Get rid of it all and there’d be nothing to worry the earth again. Nothing at all, just the quiet sleep until the next different one, abnormal one, rose out of the natural mix to bother things. If it ever did.

But here we are doing the seeing for the whole thing when all the others are just in it, buried in it. And the seeing grew up by itself, naturally, a product of the mix. Maybe.

“We’ve got a job to do, love, see?”

“Why was it like that, Dad?”

“Probably something in the water when it was growing in its mother.”

“What?”

“Something that was buried a long time ago. Something dirty. One day I’ll show you.”

\* \* \*

*Spright went back to the table where she was assembling wires and other parts. For the next hour, she worked quietly, breathing the pungent odor of hot solder and flux with an absolute concentration she could give only to work of this importance—her revenge. All the rest was camouflage, the false skin hiding the interloper, the uninvited guest, the enemy in the midst who every so often bared her fangs and reminded the flock of their inanity and how much they deserved to die.*



*They took a field trip early one spring day when the snows had melted and the frozen grass softened up and the daffodils came out next to the cabin. He was full of mystery and wouldn’t say where they were going. They hiked along the bottom of the valley where they lived, following the little stream that cut down through the earth’s skin and made its own place—a deep channel in some places, where the soil was soft and thick, topped with springy turf right up to the edge of the cut, wider*

where the ground was hard and the stream laid over rocks and gravel and spread out, sometimes making wide, shallow pools in bends where the earth was flat.

They followed the stream up along gentle rises and small tumbles, up a steeper rise to the plain on top—not really a plain but a giant escarpment where the earth had faulted, sending up a now-eroded and rocky cliff at one end, sloping down slowly on the other side until it merged with rolling hills.

“Not far now, love.”

“I like it, Dad.”

She was not bothered at all by the trek, however long, if she could be by his side and walk with him, breathing the acid smell of bog. Even wet, squelching feet she did not mind.

They stopped for breakfast up high on Dead Horse Rock, where he told her the last wild horse lay down to sleep forever on the flat top. Spright did not cry even then, but felt a special beat in her heart register the loss in her young body.

She tried lying down to see and imagined being the horse, whinnying and twisting and turning so she could get her head where she could see the view. In her girl’s imagination that was why the horse had come, because from there you could see right across the boggy, tilting plain over the tops of the rolling hills and all the way to the mountains—purple, shadowy mountains in a long, toothy ridge.

You could see the history of the earth from here, he said. How the land tipped up and slid into itself. Where the glaciers left terminal moraines like eyebrows and carved out a hand of valleys behind. Where the streams had kept on carving and cutting until they made their way. And the River Deem snaked about in its old age making loopy loops—what she called them then.

“Can we go all the way to the mountains one day, Dad?”

“That’d be more than a day, love. Maybe a week. More.”

“We could, in the summer, and sleep out.”

“Maybe.”

She sat up and ate a rolled-up pancake stuffed with wild greens, wood mushrooms and boiled potatoes, her brilliant idea of breakfast made the night before, falling asleep at the table while he tried to make her go to bed. A bit heavy on the greens but still brilliant.

“Lovely, this is, love. Smashing.”

“Yum.”

They washed the pancakes down with spring water, which was pretty much all they had to drink except when they made a special brew in the summer from a tart purple fruit that grew wild all over the hillside.

“That’s where we’re going, so you’ll see.”

He pointed down towards the hills.



“Where?”

“See that red hill on the edge of the valley with the green blotch on top?”

“Near that triangle-looking thing?”

“That’s it. Just on the other side of that is the Rat Pool.”

“The Rat Pool. It sounds horrible, Dad.”

“You’ll see.”

They stood on Dead Horse Rock like characters in a Western-style entertainment or a survival show, with the sun, barely risen behind them, throwing invisible shadows up into the sky, wearing hats made from big dried leaves sewn together with fiber twisted from bark.

It took the rest of the morning to get there, and then they were on the top of a little round hill made red by a forest of knee-high barberries with wine-colored leaves and wiry stems that thrashed against her legs. The triangle-looking thing turned out to be some kind of processor, maybe for signals, he explained, a receiver and transmitter that didn’t seem to be doing much work, just sitting there pointing a tricorn shell at the sky, where satellites may have once roamed, or still did, waiting for instructions. The green patch on the red hill became a small field of young ferns celebrating the spring with tight-curved sprouts, which she picked as they walked along and ate by the handful. They filled her nose up with a light-green smell, and she fed them to him happily.

They stood on the crown and looked over at the space below. Space was the right word. It was as if someone had taken a great scalpel and cut away the skin of the earth and then sliced away the tissue underneath and exposed the bare bones and then turned those into a black jelly, which quivered in the noonday sun, soaking up the light and sending nothing back. Acres and acres of matte black, flat where hills must have been at one time, the pool now hiding between a ring of them. From the air it looked like nothing but an absence of earth, a missing spot.

“The Rat Pool, Dad?”

“That’s what we call it, love.”

And who, exactly, were “we?” she wondered even then, accepting the collective but wondering who were the other members, the ones in books in the house, the other people she did not meet. The far-off people of Deem, perhaps?

“Why, Dad?”

“A legend lost in the mists of time, love.”

It was one of her Dad’s favorite phrases. She had given up asking if it was a legend how could it be lost. If it were lost it wouldn’t be a legend. So, he wasn’t perfect, and she could add to that fault a few other things he did to drive her crazy, not to mention not always answering when she asked a question.

This time she was lucky, though.

"I bet you know."

"They say that, when they made it, somehow there was a smell to it that attracted rats, and they came here by the millions and disappeared inside forever."

The rats and a lot of other animals that had disappeared, like the ones in her collection of skeletons in the shed. Careful hunting turned up bones everywhere, though it was hard to find complete sets. She had made it her special job and had lots her dad helped her catalogue.

"Dad, that sounds a bit...not true."

"I told you it was a legend lost in the mists of time."

She threw a stone way up and down into the pool, and where it hit the surface, there was a hissing and a ripple and the stone disappeared. She imagined a million rats in a thick rope leading into the pool, each one as it got there pausing a bit so there was a permanent buckle in the rope as it sniffed the surface to be sure what it wanted was there, and then a hiss and a ripple and it was gone, then the next and the next and so on for a million. She threw another stone to hear the hiss and see the ripple. Rats. Millions of rats.

"Dad."

"Yes, love."

"What happens to things that get in there?"

"Well, the idea was that everything gets done down to its under-stages then becomes, well, nothing at all, just this black stuff. Black matter."

"The black stuff is what's left of the rats?"

"A little bit would be the rats of the legend, that's true. Most of it would be all the other stuff it was made for, the bad stuff that was hurting the earth, or some of it. Supposedly, when you get down to the under-stages, a lot becomes a very little."

"They put all the dirt in there, then, is that it?"

"That's it, or that was the idea. They made it for that, to break up the dirty stuff and take it apart to its under-stages—beneath, you know, where things are themselves. If you look carefully, you can see the road they used to bring it in giant trucks, or so I was told."

Spright didn't really know, but tried to get the idea, tried to imagine all the things she could see taken apart and turned into the same inky stuff. She could just see the track of the road as a winding ribbon of trees that looked slightly different from the others, more even in growth as they sprouted from the leveled surface of the ancient road.

But if the under-stages all looked the same, how did things get to be different?

She threw another pebble and listened to the hiss.

“Did it work?”

She knew the answer, really.

“Well, it might have done, hard to say. A bit too late.”

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*In fact, the under-stages were not as clean as they had hoped, nor the process as complete as people thought, and if you could swim down into the black pool of forever-disassembling nuclei to where the edges met the limestone beneath you would see, if you could see, spits and spots of noxious things working their way into tiny crevices and fissures, escaping the fields that were supposed to contain them forever.*

Imagine a thread of black syrup finding its way into a crack that leads away from the Rat Pool and begins a tiny siphon that slowly sucks out a string of dirty stuff into a space between the rock. Then, when that is full, leaching away into the earth around, and when that is soaked and heavy, the slow drip down through the layers until it meets up with the collecting waters to make a tiny bleed, which joins with others to make a twig-thick run leading on to a branch in a rivulet leading everywhere and everywhere, in the end.

It did not work, really, was what Dad was saying.

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