



The Girl Who Sang Rose Madder

Elizabeth Bear



illustration by Brad Holland

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A real backstage mostly resembles the opening tease of *The Muppet Show*: dust, bustle, and unflattering light. Em had gotten over her delusions of glamour pretty fast, though the delusions of grandeur took a little longer to kick her off the ledge. Now, she dodged a costume trolley, sidestepped a roadie, and managed to find a corner that wasn't immediately in use. She rose on tiptoe, craning her neck to look for Ange. Maybe over by the service table, although Em thought it possible that her sister hadn't consumed anything more solid than gin and protein shakes since the early eighties.

Someone touched Em's shoulder, and she spun, heartbeat drowning out whatever he said. A side of beef in a SECURITY shirt loomed from the shadows, and Em instinctively drew herself up in her boots. Her flight reflex had been broken for years. She made it up with housecat bravado.

"Your pass." He poked at her chest. She glanced down, pretty sure that he wasn't copping a feel—Ange got all the looks, and if Em was feeling like a shit, she'd say it was an even trade for brains and talent—and realized that her all-access pass had twisted under her leather vest. "Sorry." She hauled it out.

He studied it until he was satisfied, even breaking out his flashlight, and only then glanced at her face.

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The double take was gratifying. “Shit. You’re Emma Case. What are you doing at a Trial show? You used to be great!”

Em ... was feeling like a shit. She blinked at him, slowly, and let herself smile.

“I mean—” he backpedaled. “I’m a fan. I just mean I’m a fan. You’re amazing. Number 19 on the *Rolling Stone* top 100 guitarists of all time—”

“Yeah,” she said. “Joni Mitchell is better. It’s a crime she didn’t make the list any higher than number seventy-two, but it was a total boy’s club anyway. Maybe they got her confused with Jack White when they were putting things in order.”

He was already backing up. Em pushed up the sleeve of her henley and scratched the pad of scar tissue in the crook of her right arm with uncallused fingers. She really ought to get her ink touched up; if it faded any more and if she got any grayer, people were going to start mistaking her for Johnny Winter.

Hah. She’d be lucky to live long enough to go gray.

But he wasn’t done gushing. He bounced in place and tried again. “You were a *Warlord*. I have all your albums from the seventies. On vinyl. I used to play the first two every damn day after high school. *Madder Rose*. And *Stick It In*.”

“Class of ’89?”

He blushed. “’87.”

“Let me guess. You loved the Who, the Pretenders, Led Zeppelin, and the Rolling Stones.”

He shrugged. “You know? Never so much the Stones. They had started to suck so much by then ...” And then he recollected himself and stuck out a hand. “I’m Earl.”

She took it. What the hell. “Em.”

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He held onto her hand too long, but the handshake wasn't too creepy otherwise. Em risked a smile. And then he put his foot in it for good. "So what happened?"

"Seth Savage got completely fucked up on heroin and hanged himself from a hotel room shower rod in Las Vegas six years ago," Em answered, in practiced staccato. She turned her face away. "It kind of sank our chances of getting the band back together. Look, have you seen my sister around? I kind of need to find her."

* * *

Yeah. She used to be a Warlord. Some days, she got up, showered, walked the dogs, made scrambled eggs and was on her second or third mimosa before she remembered.

It was one of the reasons she lived alone. She'd had enough of fucking rock stars for two lifetimes, and the last thing she needed was some doe-eyed young creature padding across her terrazzo floors barefoot in silk pajama bottoms, looking at her like she used to be Emma Case before she'd had time to drink a pot of coffee and tie a good buzz on.

Easier to keep a couple of borzoi, if you needed somebody around to yell at once in a while who was big enough to take it. Anyway, it could have been worse. Thank God for small mercies and all that. She could have used to be a Beatle.

Earl had said Ange was in Graham's dressing room. The opening act, Objekt 775, was just coming off, which meant he could still be fucking around in there for a good fifteen minutes yet while the stage got cleared. But if Ange could stand him, Em guessed she could do it too.

She tapped on the door. "Ange? It's Em."

The door wasn't locked; it swung right open. Em leaned around an even bigger side of beef and peered under his arm. All she saw was the size-two ass of Graham's hairdresser, lacquered into a turquoise leather skirt. "Ange?"

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“Mike, let her in,” Ange said, appearing from the corner. She hooked a finger at Em, and Em—holding her breath—ducked under the security guy’s arm and strode across the room to her sister. Smooch smooch, air kiss, click of high heels and the carnauba wax smell of too much red lipstick. Powder caked in the creases beside Ange’s eyes was obvious when you got close, and she was wearing enough mascara and black liquid eyeliner for a cheerleading squad, but Em had to admit she’d kept her figure.

“Hey, Graham,” Em said.

Shirtless, naked except the black leather trousers she was glad she’d never seen him without, he waved at her in the mirror. A sterling skull glinting heavily on the back of his left hand. “Hey, Em.”

Ange might be mutton dressed as lamb, but Graham’s face looked like it was about to wilt off his skull. Hard to believe he was only sixty.

Hard to believe he was *even* sixty, if you just looked at his abs. The chesticles were terrifying enough to make up for it, though. Still, Em poked herself in the gut through her T-shirt and winced. Fifty-seven, and she hadn’t had a belly like that since 1982. More crunches.

God, what did it matter? She had her money. It wasn’t like she ever needed to climb up on a stage again.

It wasn’t like she was ever going to have a chance.

Ange dragged her over into the corner behind the guitar stands. The teal-green Strat made Em’s hands itch, but her fingers were soft. She’d cut them to ribbons on the strings. Instead, she fumbled for a match and a cigarette.

“It was good of you to stop by while we’re in San Diego. Are you staying for the concert?” Ange asked, steadying Em’s hand on the match. She bummed a cigarette from the open pack without asking, and Em lit it for her. Once upon a time, it had been lines of coke all night.

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She'd quit because it was bad for her. It wasn't easy, getting old. She shook the match out and dropped it in an ashtray. Thank God half of rock and roll still smoked.

"I might." She let the smoke stream out in lazy snakes, and smiled. The trick was to hold off long enough so the cigarette tasted *really* good. Delayed gratification was the best sort.

She touched Ange's hand. The diamonds on the left one hadn't changed, though Graham must have bought her that bigger canary-yellow rock for their anniversary. But on the right one Ange wore a skull much like his, and Em wanted to look at it. "That's gorgeous work," she said. It didn't look like a headshop model. "You know, Keef has one of those. And, shit—" She scratched her head with the hand with the cigarette in it. "Jim wears one, doesn't he? Is it the eighties already again?"

"Yeah," Ange said, and pulled her fingers out of Em's grip, but not before Em felt her start to shake. *What the fuck?* "It must be; I've been wearing that ring since '81 and you never noticed it before." She frowned at Em astutely. "Intimations of mortality getting you down?"

Em managed to divert the reflexive gesture of her hand toward her temple into a drag on her cigarette. She shrugged.

And Ange was already off on a more pressing topic. "Oh, one sec. Graham? Your call—" A half-second before the tap came on the door.

He jammed his feet into buckle boots and stood, nipple ring sparkling against graying chest hair. The hairdresser jumped out of the way. For the life of her, Em couldn't see what the woman had accomplished, but maybe she was worth her salary for the tight skirt and the scalp massage.

Graham knew better than to cheat on Ange these days. And Em hadn't even minded the cite for drunk and disorderly and for disturbing the peace. He'd been man enough to drop the assault charges. If the secret monster growing in Em's head kicked her over dead in the shower tomorrow, she'd accomplished that.

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That, and three platinum and four gold records.

“Hey, Em,” he said, practicing his rock-star glower at her over the bridge of a nose that might have been knocked down from Frank Zappa’s spare. He gave her shoulders a quick squeeze; she slung her arm around his waist and squeezed back. He smelled like wax and camphor, too, and his skin was clammy; she gritted her teeth to hide a reflexive cringe at his touch. It seemed to be her day to make a closer acquaintance with tall men’s armpits.

Hound-dog ugly as he was, his face twisted around to something fascinating when he smiled. “I saw you eyeing that Strat. You sure I can’t bend your arm to come out and play a couple in the first half? It’d be on YouTube by the time you got home tonight, I promise.”

Em punched him lightly. “Not a chance. Don’t trip over your leads, man.”

“I won’t trip over my leads, man,” he said, and reached past her to pick up the Stratocaster. Holding it wide, he bent down and kissed Ange on the mouth. Then he turned, and the entourage outside the door extended a pseudopod, enfolded him, and pulled him away.

Em jammed the cigarette between her lips and her hands into her pockets and told herself that she didn’t miss it at all.

“Shit,” she said. “Ange, is he back on smack? He looks like shit.”

Ange ground out her cigarette. “Look who’s talking.”

“Hey, I’m just saying—”

“No,” Ange said. “You know what? I know you can’t stand him. But I appreciate you trying to hide it when he’s in the room.”

“I’m just saying, you oughta find the egg he hid his death in.”

Ange snorted, unladylike as hell, and all of a sudden Em could see the wild girl of 1971, bell bottoms and a knotted shirt. Back when they both still played guitar—though, to be fair, Ange had quit long before Em had. About when she

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quit eating, too. “I’m just saying. Maybe you should think about taking the cure yourself.”

“I’m clean,” Em said. She shook her head. “Just not sober.”

Ange shot her a sidelong glance, and Em thought she almost smiled. “Come on,” she said. “We’ve got seats.”

“You got me a ticket?” Em slapped Ange’s biceps with the back of her left hand. “Aw. Sweet.”

* * *

Their seats were row three, stage center. Em kept her face tucked behind her collar until she was seated, then let her head slide down between her shoulders. They barely made it in time; the amphitheatre was already full, and the lights dimmed as she dropped her butt into the rickety folding chair. Trial opened with a three-song run off the new album, and Em thought the audience was restless. Not settling in; not giving up their energy. Most of them wouldn’t have heard the new material yet, except the single. It wouldn’t have had the time to wear the groove in their psyche that the back catalogue had.

And honestly, Em didn’t think the new songs were as good. They were mostly colorless, and it might have been uncharitable, but they sounded to Em like flat, juiceless versions of the sort of thing the band had done better decades before. And only the third one, a thumping antiwar number in which Dagan Kennedy dropped his vocals for a harmonica solo on the bridge, got anybody on their feet. Fucking baby boomers, too goddamned middle-class and entitled these days even to get up on their chairs and dance.

It wasn’t that Graham was phoning it in, Em decided. It was that he was dead up there; the energy wasn’t flowing. There was no spark, no contact.

But then Graham handed the Strat to a roadie and took an electric/acoustic Breedlove in exchange, and Dagan swapped out for a mandolin. Em didn’t realize she’d rocked forward in her chair until Ange put a gentling hand on her arm. “You should have taken him up on it,” she said, twisting her neck to yell in Em’s ear. “Anybody can see sitting down here is killing you.”

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Ange was right, and she was wrong at the same time. Those days were over for good, unless Em wanted to find herself doing endless half-assed fifteen-minute versions of “Road Too Far” with some thirty-year-old bassist that would never be one-tenth the musician or the lay that Seth had been.

Em dropped her head, pressed her palms over her ears, and wished she were home in the hot tub with a bottle of Bordeaux and the Bad Seeds cranked up really loud.

She'd bet a platinum record there weren't ten people in this audience who would know Nick Cave if he gave them a lap dance. 1976 was thirty fucking years ago, and none of the fat shuffling zombies in the chairs around her wanted to hear anything newer.

And *that* was a reason to hang up her guitar.

Ange squeezed Em's arm, about to say more, and Em just shook her head hard, harder, until the opening strains of a deeply surreal cover of Dylan's “The Changing Of The Guard” blotted out whatever her sister might have been about to say.

“AOR is dead,” Em muttered under her breath. “Long live Jack FM.”

* * *

Afterparties weren't what they used to be. Em found herself perched on a hotel suite window-ledge, legs draped over the air conditioner, a glass of adequate too-sweet red wine in her left hand and a succession of cigarettes in her right. The window didn't open, which was a pity, because within an hour the whole room reeked of sweat and perfume. But she had her back to a wall and a place to sit, and she wasn't about to abandon that advantage to wander over by the television where Ange and Graham were holding court.

She was in the middle of a reasonably entertaining conversation with a *Rolling Stone* reporter (ah, *Rolling Stone*, another shuffling instance of the living dead) when someone touched her sleeve. She took a drag on her Marlboro and turned, finding herself eye to kohl-smudged eye with a pale-skinned bleach-blonde whose matted white-girl dreads had been twisted into thick, clumpy

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ponytails over each ear. She wore black, collarbones like knifeblades over a mesh top and tank. And she was holding up a fresh glass of wine.

Bemused, Em let her make the exchange. The girl had no chin to speak of and a nose that took off across her face with a Gypsy spirit of adventure, as if it would know its destination when it found it. “Thank you,” she said. “Is this a roofie?”

“No.” And the girl plucked that glass from Em’s hand and exchanged it with her own, and then drank down half the glass.

Well, Em thought girl, but the woman might have been thirty. Or twenty-five under a lot of makeup. *Women spend our whole lives trying to look older or younger. What is that shit?*

Why was it, indeed, that no matter what you were it was never good enough? Did men get that too, or was it a feminine affliction?

Seth’s death-fouled body, twisting from a noose improvised from telephone wire. No, she rather thought intimations of lethal inadequacy were a *human* condition.

“I’m Sanya Poe,” the blonde said. “I’m the keyboardist and singer for the opening act.”

“Objekt 775.”

“You remembered. Impressive.”

Em rummaged in her pocket for a handful of supplements, and washed them down with the wine. “I never forget a band name,” she said. “The High Numbers, The Small Faces, Objekt 775—”

The blonde laughed hard. “Oh, from your lips to God’s ears.”

“Don’t say that too loud. He might hear you. Are you here to receive my blessing? Because I left my sack of indulgences in the car.” Em was,

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apparently, drunk enough to let herself sound smart. Always a surprise when that happened, though why it should be, she was never certain.

“No,” the blonde said. “I just wanted to say thank you, actually. This is a shitty business to be a girl in, and you were an inspiration to me when I was a kid. I mean, you were just as good as the guys, and just as hard as the guys—” She shook her head. “You made it okay for chicks to be rock stars first and chicks second. And you had the sense to walk away at the top instead of taking the long slow spiral down. It’s more important than you’d think.”

Em stuck the wine glass in her left hand and stuck her right one out. “Pleased to meet you, Sasha Poe.”

“Sanya,” she said, and grabbed Em’s hand. “Seriously. You rock. You always rocked ... but I kind of wonder what you’d do if you picked up an axe again.”

“Same old shit,” Em said, and Sanya laughed warmly. “It’s not like I’ve learned anything this decade.”

The small talk was as awkward as small talk always was, and Sanya excused herself after a minute or two. Em shook her head. It wasn’t like she was going to be around long enough to mentor any starry-eyed young hotties, she thought, watching Sanya pick up the arm of a tall man who looked mixed-race. Maybe black and Latino? Em, warmed by the wine, smiled after her benevolently and turned to resume the previous conversation, but the guy from *Rolling Stone* had wandered off, and Graham was at her elbow, smelling of Bordeaux and carnauba wax. “Come over here,” he said. “The wife wants to see you.”

* * *

When Em woke up in her own bed in her own home—to which she had been taxi-delivered a little before sunrise—it was after noon the next day. One of the blinking lights on her machine was a call from Ange, inviting her to the Los Angeles show on Friday night. The other one was from Em’s oncologist, expressing concern that Em had missed another appointment. She wanted Em to start chemo last week, if not sooner, and she was concerned about diagnosis-related depression. She thought Em should see a psychiatrist—

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Em hit delete on that one halfway through and walked away from the machine with her pajamas swishing around her ankles. The depression had nothing to do with the cancer; if anything, the cancer was a welcome solution to a depression that had been lingering since long before Seth's irrevocable decision.

"You bastard," Em said, only half out loud. "You were supposed to take me with you, you son of a bitch."

She dropped to her knees beside the liquor cabinet and fumbled it open. Glasses were on the top shelf. One of the wolfhounds came over and poked a cold nose into her ear while she rummaged; rather than pushing his head aside, she hooked her arm behind his ears and hugged his brindle-and-white neck. He huffed at her and pushed her over sideways, and while he stood over her, she lay on the floor on her back and scratched behind his jaw.

By the time she was halfway through her second breakfast Talisker, she was in the guest bath, eyeing the electric razor.

* * *

Ange clutched her forearms, forehead wrinkled hard enough to crack her foundation. "What on *earth*?"

"What, you've never seen a shaved head before?" Em smoothed a hand against the soft prickly bristles decorating her scalp. "I just wanted to see what it would look like."

Ange glowered over crossed arms. Behind her, the backstage bustle redoubled. "Em. What is it that you're not telling me?"

And dammit, Ange was not *supposed* to be that perceptive. She was supposed to be shallow and self-absorbed.

Em, Em realized, was not the only one who could pretend to be stupid when it suited her. "I came to LA to see you," Em said. "Not to get quizzed about my haircut. Look, I was drunk, it seemed like a good idea at a time. At least I didn't shave my eyebrows off."

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“So that’s *one* way you’re up on Bowie.” Ange stepped away. “If you’re not going to tell me, you’re not going to tell me. Graham’s gonna ask you to play again, you know.”

“I know,” Em said. “Anything to get on YouTube, right?”

“Right,” Ange purred, grinning. “What are you going to tell him?”

“I’m going to tell him yes.”

* * *

This time, Em watched the opening act from backstage. Objekt 775 was a five-piece: Sanya on keyboard and vocals, two guitars, bass, and the tall mixed-race boy on drums. They were loud and crude and they didn’t suck at all, and there was one other girl besides Sanya, even. Through most of the six-song set, Em surprised herself by paying attention.

Enough attention that she didn’t notice Graham at her shoulder until he cleared his throat with precise timing, in that fraught and ringing silence between songs. “Good, you think?”

“Good enough,” she said. “The rhythm section doesn’t fuck around.”

“You got that right.”

She turned to him. He was in stage clothes, except the flannel shirt buttoned over his bare chest for warmth he wouldn’t need when the spotlights hit him. The skull ring glinted on his hand. “Hey,” he said. “I like the hair. Or lack of it.”

“I said I’d play,” she said. Her fingers already ached from an hour’s fumbling, but she had surprised herself with how fast it came back. “One last time.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Look, about that—”

It startled her that her heart sunk. “I don’t have to. It’s alright.”

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His stare, the twist of his lips, could not have been more nonplussed. “I talked to the guys,” he said. “We want you to do two songs at the top of the first half. One of ‘em a Warlords tune.”

“Graham—”

He rolled over her as if she hadn’t even opened her mouth. “How do you feel about ‘Galleons Gallant’? Then we’ll jam on the Dylan while the band takes a piss break, and then you can hit the showers?”

“The band takes a piss break? What about you?”

“I don’t piss,” he said, and grinned at her. “Look, Em. I know you hate me—”

“Hate’s a strong word.”

“Shut up and let a man talk, would you?”

Startled, she held up a hand. *Talk, then.*

He took a breath, and held it in a longer time than she would have imagined. He touched her wrist. His hand was strong and cold. “Ange thinks you’re dying.”

And Em, who had been seven kinds of weak in her life, but never a coward, looked him in the eye and said, “I have a grade four astrocytoma. Inoperable. My doc wants to try radiation and chemo.” She shrugged. “I’ve gotta decide if I want to live that badly. And that poorly. If I lived.”

His eyes were bottomless in the backstage dark. “What are the odds?”

She turned her head and spit behind the Marshall stack.

He said, “Suffering for nothing.”

“Pretty much,” she answered. Oh, sure. There was hope. While there was *life*, her mother used to say, there was hope. And if hope seemed more like a punishment than a protection, that was hardly God’s fault, was it?

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He let his hand slide away, soft as a breeze. Even in dim light, veins and tendons stood out like a relief map under papery crumpled skin.

“I died of an OD in 1978,” he said. “Heroin. It was after that concert at Hammersmith. Do you remember?”

“Jesus Christ, Graham,” Em said. “Don’t tell me the coke paranoia finally got you.”

He laughed, though, big and brash, and put his palm against her cheek. It was cool, room-temperature. He took her hand and pressed it to his chest. “Feel anything?”

And of course, she did not. Not even the rise and fall of his breathing.

Nothing at all.

She tried to say his name. Failed. Would jerk her hand away, if he would let it go, but he didn’t and so she stood shaking with her palm pressed to his cold self.

He shrugged and let her hand drop, finally. “Ange said she told you that you should take the cure. And me, I’m here telling you that you don’t have to—”

“Die?”

“No.” A dismissive snort turned into a much less dramatic laugh. He was half-yelling to be heard over the stacks. It didn’t matter; nobody who wasn’t standing right behind her would ever overhear them. “You have no choice about dying. But what happens after death—for most people, it’s just a candle snuffed out. All those pretty stories amount to nothing.”

“How do *you* know?”

He smiled.

He knew.

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And while she was processing that—the O.D., the idea that maybe you didn't even need to put the ring on *before* you died—he shucked off his flannel, leaving the shirt slumped on the boards like a discarded skin. Em looked away from his withered pecs. He cleared his throat and said, “You don't have to stop existing, is what I mean. Actually, all in all, I expected undeath to be a bigger deal.”

“Jesus, Graham.”

But he was holding out a hand, and she reached out and lifted hers up underneath it, open, flat, and expectant.

He laid a silver ring across her palm. It was cool to the touch.

“When you put it on,” he said, “you'll seize. It's pretty awful. You'll want to be someplace safe and easy to clean. You'll heal damage after, better than before, but it still takes a while. Give yourself a few hours for the transformation.”

“Uhm.” She stared at the ring, and it stared back, unwinking. “Ange too?”

“1981,” he said. “Sorry. We would have told you—”

“No,” Em said. “It's all right.” She weighed the ring on her palm. “What's it cost?”

Oh, that grin, and all the lines on his face rearranging themselves. “You lose weight,” he said. “Mostly desiccation. It's not great for your facial tone.” With one hand, he rubbed slack cheeks. “Ange has had her face pinned a couple of times.”

“That's not a *cost*.”

He shrugged. “Life isn't Hollywood. Everything doesn't come with a price. Hey, I gotta get my hair fixed. See you onstage?”

“See you onstage,” she said, and held out the hand with the ring in it. But he brushed past her, making a dismissive gesture with one long hand. *Keep it.*

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So she slipped it into her pocket and did, pausing to congratulate Objekt 775 as they came off.

Sanya beamed at her, and gave her a quick, sweaty, distracted, euphoric hug. She ran her palm across Em's scalp and laughed, but the noise from the audience was too loud for talking. The hug was sincere, and she leaned in and shouted "That was for you, Em!" and kissed Em on the cheek.

A pretty girl kissed me, Em thought. She blinked back the sting of tears, but the embrace made it easier to contemplate the blood blisters from the Strat. That hour warming up didn't make calluses miraculously grow back. Neither would lubing the fretboard and her left hand from an aerosol can of Finger-Ease.

Those new Trial songs just weren't getting any better, no matter how many times she listened to them. And it was Graham, all Graham. His playing was technically great, better than ever.

But he might as well have been dead up there. She thought about that as she heard her name, and strode out to a roar, swinging the strap of the borrowed guitar over her head.

She might be out of practice, but she still had her ear. When she jammed with the band, they took *fire*.

* * *

When Em got back to the house in Carlsbad, the dogs were waiting on the cool marble of the entryway. She scratched chins and fondled ears, and they pushed one another out of the way to lean against her thighs. She picked her way through them, moved to the living room, and raised a hand toward the dimmer switch.

The silence in the big house stopped her. The whole place was sealed up and alarmed; she couldn't hear the swish of the sea, far below. And suddenly, she needed to.

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So she was outside on the deck that cantilevered out above the cliffs when Ange found her, tossing stones over the rail into the hissing ocean forty feet below.

Ange had the key and the codes, of course, because somebody other than Em and her business manager had to. In truth, Em would have been surprised if Ange hadn't followed her home.

Ange sat down on a cedar recliner beside Em, and put her feet up. "Did you put on the ring?"

"Can't you see in the dark?"

"Not that well," Ange said, and reached out to take Em's wrist. Her touch was as chill as the night air, and Em bit her lip, forcing herself not to pull free. Instead, she reached out and folded Ange's hand in her other one, her sister's silver ring like a cool nugget against her palm. "And I'm not tired either," she said. "I don't sleep any more, before you ask."

"It's a mug's game, Ange."

Ange shuffled her chair closer, near enough that Em would have felt her warmth at hip and shoulder if Ange had any to give. "You live forever."

"And cut the same old fucking albums."

"Oh, yeah," Ange said. "At least Graham's *cutting* albums."

"And at least you had the integrity to put down your axe when you figured out you couldn't play worth shit any more. Isn't that right? When was the last time you picked up a guitar?"

Ange stared at her. And then she sat back in her chair, released Em's wrist, and swung her feet up. "Not since I broke up the Sisters. You figured that out?"

Em nodded. Far below, the sea fluoresced. The sky behind them was graying; they were facing the wrong way for sunrise. She tossed another pebble. "You died, and that broke up the Shock Sisters. And I'm sitting on my ass and

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drinking myself to death because Seth broke my fucking heart and I never got over it. You could just say it.”

“Do you want me to say things you already know?”

“Hell. Nobody could ever tell me shit. Why should anything change now?”

“It’s because you already know everything,” Ange said.

Em laughed.

Family. Damned if they didn’t know you.

Ange sighed and plucked a stone from Em’s pile. The first one she selected glistened silver; she placed it back atop the pyramid. The second she kept, rolling it between her fingers. “Hell, Robert Plant made a comeback.”

“Yeah, but it’s easier to live off your fucking royalties forever.”

And *that* got Ange to laugh. “You don’t want to be the girl who sang ‘Rose Madder’ forever, do you?”

“No,” Em said. “I don’t. And that’s pretty much it. And if I die now that’s all I’ll ever be.”

“You have a legacy. So does Graham. It’s more than me.”

The ring had found its way into Em’s hand, this time. And Em held it up to the light. “Fuck me. Do you make art or do you make life?”

“You opted out of both already. Which is more important?”

“Art,” Em said. Then she shook her head. “Life. It’s not an easy fucking question.”

“If it was,” Ange said, “somebody would have answered it by now.” She tossed another rock. “You only get asked once, Em. I don’t want to lose you.”

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“I don’t want to lose me either,” Em said. “Look, there’s always chemo.”

Ange snaked a long arm out and stroked Em’s shaven head. “Well, then the hard part’s done already.”

* * *

Em wandered down the long hallway to the music room, accompanied by toenail-clicking dogs. The door was keypad-locked; it took a minute to remember that the code was Seth’s birthday, then a longer minute to remember what that birthday was.

Dim gray light, filtered through the June gloom, soaked through big windows. To Em’s dark-adapted eyes it was enough. She found the old maple and mahogany Gibson Black Beauty by touch and let her fingers curl around the neck, lifting it into her arms like a sleeping child. Slowly, she ducked over the guitar, smelling skin oil soaked into the fingerboard, and lay her cheek against the glossy black-lacquered surface.

She had strings, somewhere. She’d probably need to turn on a light to find them. She closed her eyes, imagining she inhaled the acetone and cherry scent of Finger-Ease. The blood blisters on her left hand throbbed. She was hungry.

Her oncologist’s office didn’t open until nine. She had time before she called.

It would take at least a month to grow her calluses back.

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