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Time is a snake
you write your name on.
It grows,
wind blows,
and you peel the molted names
from around your boots.
Sometimes you find your own.

Logan Holt

Nash recognized the half-dozen notes that chimed softly as he opened the door to the office. They were from *Peter and the Wolf*. Was it Peter's theme? He vaguely remembered hearing a symphony orchestra play the piece years before on a school trip.

The door closed and he stood looking around the waiting room. It was nothing like the hard white hallways and chromed elevator he'd seen on his way up. The room had been softened with tan paint and a couple of big, jungly paintings on the walls. A shaggy plant dominated a corner near an empty desk. The four plush chairs parked here and there were also empty. He wondered if he should knock on the door marked Private at the back of the room.

"Are you Mr. Spelvik?" a voice asked.

A tall, slender woman with a bun of black hair at the back of her head stepped out from behind the plant.

"Yes," Nash said. "I'm here for my appointment."

The woman clattered the drawer of a file cabinet shut and pigeon-toed to her desk. The heels of her shoes were long and spiky. Her dark blue skirt was split up one side to the knee, showing a pale but well-muscl'd calf, and her loose white

blouse couldn't hide a yoga-toned torso. Nash put her age at thirty but couldn't be sure with all the makeup. She wore the full mask of powder, paint and glitter highlights.

Her desk was an ornate thing of dark wood carved with vines along the edges, but her computer was minimal. She sat down and tapped at its keys. She looked a little peeved. Nash stepped to the desk not sure if she was irritated with him or her job.

"You're late," she said, pretending to focus on her work.

"Sorry about that. Traffic."

"Well, Dr. Whittaker is in the washroom. Please take a seat."

Nash removed his overcoat, hung it on a wall hook and went to look at one of the paintings. Or at his reflection in the glass covering the painting. He ran a hand through his sandy hair and checked his teeth. A light patch in the jungle showed a dark spot on a canine. He picked with a thumbnail.

"Gauguin," the receptionist said. "It's only a copy of course, but it's a Gauguin."

Nash nodded appreciatively, checked his teeth again and saw that the spot was gone. He straightened his reflected tie and sat in one of the chairs.

The woman pecked at her keyboard. Nash had an angle on the calf beneath the slit skirt. He felt a throbbing in one of his temples but it wasn't from the sight of the leg; he was hungover.

He reached to straighten the crease in a pants leg but couldn't find it in the mass of gray wrinkles. His temple throbbed again and he thought back on his morning. He recalled waking up in the hotel and not knowing how he got there. His watch said nearly twelve, and there was light around the edges of the room's curtain, so he thought he was late for the appointment. He rushed to the bathroom and was finishing at the toilet when he looked at his

watch again. It hadn't changed. He checked his cell phone and saw that it was still early.

The watch was a cheap one so he trashed it, then he went to the window and looked out at a gray day. The city's buildings stabbed up through low-hanging clouds. Fat snowflakes fell like feathers cut from pillows.

A telemarketer called as he was on his way to take a shower. In the cacophonous splash of water his mind echoed words, gibberish. Pelican, cheroot, Abednego. And "dark perpetuation." That phrase kept repeating and he thought he must have heard it in a song somewhere.

He sat on the bed after drying off and picked through the clothes on the floor. He searched for clues about the previous day but found nothing he didn't already know. His passport was in the inside pocket of his suit coat, along with his airline ticket. He'd flown in from Sweden and apparently come straight to the hotel. But why to *that* hotel? He looked around at the cheap furniture and dingy walls. His taste was better than that, so it must have been on account of money. He went through all of his pockets and found a ten-dollar bill, a five and some change. He'd blown through the pay from the Stockholm job like a tornado.

As he got dressed he pulled together piece-meal memories of Stockholm. He'd spent a night there on a stakeout. The big Swede he was with didn't speak English, and Nash didn't speak Swedish, so he passed the time by dozing in the passenger seat of their Volvo. He dozed until the Swede saw the man he was after and jumped out of the car. Nash followed. His Swede tackled another Swede and pinned him to the snowy ground with a knee to the neck. Nash kept watch while they jabbered. The conference didn't take long, and when it was over Nash wondered why he'd been needed for such a simple task.

He sighed and looked around at the waiting room. He thought how this job would be even easier than sleeping in the Volvo. And it was paying well. He'd called his bank from the hotel and confirmed that the money had been deposited, so all that was left to do was pick up the hard drive and deliver it. Easy as pie.

He'd felt like he was slogging through floodwaters as he made his way out of the hotel. He stopped for coffee in a diner next door, and the infusion of caffeine lightened his steps when he went out to hail a cab.

The bank was just five dollars away but he let the cabbie keep the ten and then walked out of the bank with five thousand. The cash in his pocket lightened his step even more and he made plans. He would deliver the drive to Tippet and then shake the last of his headache by investing some of his payday in the hair of the dog. A couple of drinks to celebrate and he might even look for a rail of fresh forty-six longs.

There was a ding and the receptionist hooked an earpiece in place. "Dr. Whittaker's office," she said. She listened and tapped at her computer. "We could fit you in at 4:30 tomorrow." More tapping. "Yes, 4:30. The doctor should be available now." Nash was puzzling over the non sequitur, when the receptionist looked at him and said, "You can go in now, Mr. Spelvik." Her glittery face sparkled when she forced a smile.

The door into the doctor's office didn't play music like the one out front, but it brushed across the carpet with a shushing sound as it swung open and then shut. Nash stepped to the center of the office. It was decorated similarly to the waiting room, a continuation of browns and nature. The desk was like the one out front but larger. A pair of chairs sat facing it. Off to the side of the desk was a chaise lounge covered in dark brown

leather—the psychiatrist’s couch, a catcher’s mitt inviting patients to take a break from their screw-ball lives.

The rest of the office was antique furniture shoved up against walls, paintings above the furniture, and a back wall covered by dark drapes. A plant like the one in the waiting room was to one side of the drapes, the washroom door to the other.

Nash went to the drapes and pulled the drawstring. They separated a few feet directly behind the desk. Floor-to-ceiling window panels. He looked out and saw that the cloud cover was still low, solid, and pearl colored to the horizon. The snow had stopped but the city park twenty stories below was dusted with white.

The park was a clearing among the high-rises. In the middle of the clearing was a frozen pond. Dark dots of skaters curlicued on the ice. A cell tower stood on a hill beyond the pond. The Christmas lights strung along the tower’s guy wires were off at the moment, but they twinkled red and green at night.

Dr. Whittaker came out of the washroom. He hustled toward his desk looking down and fiddling with a button on the vest of his tweed suit. He was in his sixties, bald and had rounded shoulders. A potbelly pushed against the vest. He nearly ran into Nash before he saw him.

“Oh!” He stopped and rocked back on his heels. He was several inches shorter than Nash and tilted his head to look up at his face. “My, you’re a big one.” He pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Please have a seat.” He gestured to the chairs in front of the desk. Nash went to one and sat.

Whittaker settled behind the desk and fussed with some papers, then he turned to his computer and worked the mouse.

“Let’s see, you’re a new patient, Mr . . . Spelvik.

You're twenty-seven, and you work as a . . ."

"No," Nash interrupted. "That was just to get inside. I'm here for the drive."

Whittaker gave him a quizzical, wire-rimmed look.

"The hard drive in your safe. It's government property and, well, the government thanks you for safeguarding it but needs it back now."

The doctor didn't react.

"That's all there is to my message," Nash said. "I can repeat it if you want."

"But I . . . I had no idea that . . ." Whittaker studied him. Nash saw him run his eyes over his chin stubble and down his wrinkled suit, sizing him up.

"Would you like a drink, Mr. Spelvik?"

That caught Nash off guard. "A drink?" He felt his mouth water but said, "No, not while I'm on the job."

"Well, I'm going to have one, and I hope you'll join me. I'll swear it was *part* of your job, if anyone asks."

Nash didn't trust the man, but a drink sounded good.

"Okay, I'll join you. As part of the job."

Whittaker went to a small cabinet beneath a large painting. It could have been another Gauguin, but without the tooth crud. The doctor pushed a hidden button on the cabinet and its top rose and split in half to reveal a dozen bottles and some glasses.

"Scotch?" Whittaker asked. "Gin, vodka?"

"Rye if you have it."

Nash watched him closely. It didn't make sense that a shrink would be serving him a drink. He was up to something. He didn't appear to put any drugs in the rye, but he poured a stiff one, three of his pudgy fingers. For himself he poured a finger of gin and drank it before he brought Nash

his glass and went back around his desk.

Whittaker settled in his chair again as Nash downed half of the drink. The fire in his gut radiated relaxation. He let it spread before he cleared his throat and said, "The hard drive, doc."

"But I need the drive for my work. That's why the government gave it to me, and I'm not finished."

Nash shrugged, drained his glass and looked at Whittaker. They stared at each other across the desk for a moment, then Whittaker said, "You're on it, aren't you?"

"On what?"

"The drive. You're one of the... assets. They'd send somebody like you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'll need to see some ID."

"My real name's Nash. Call whoever you need to, but while you're on the phone..."

Nash got up to go to the bar. The doctor popped out of his chair.

"I'll be glad to fix you another drink."

But by then Nash was reaching for the rye. And he saw the handle of a pistol stuck down among the bottles. He picked it up. It was a .45, an old 1911.

"This is a big gun for a little man," he said, pouring another drink. He downed half and told the doctor to get the drive.

Whittaker was visibly shaken, but he went to one of the paintings and swung it aside to reveal a safe. He reached up to the keypad and was about to punch a button when he said, "Oops. I forgot there's an alarm. Security will be alerted unless my receptionist disables it with a code."

"So give her a call," Nash said, beginning to like the office. Or at least the liquor cabinet. He wasn't in any hurry to leave. He killed the second drink and poured another as Whittaker returned to his desk and the phone.

“Yes, doctor?” the woman from the waiting room said over a speaker.

“I need your help to open the safe, Ms. Bouchet.” He pronounced her name with a long A at the end. French, Nash thought. She looked French. The doctor said, “Atrophy, finish, glutinous, desiderata.”

Nash returned to his chair. He had a double rye in one hand and the pistol in the other.

“What kind of code is that?” he asked. “Does she type it in out there or something?”

He sipped his drink. The doctor smiled slightly and said, “You have no idea why you drink, do you?”

“Sure. It helps with the hangovers.”

The doctor nodded and continued to smile, and Nash got the feeling he was stalling.

“She’s had time to disable the alarm, doc. Open the hidey hole.”

Whittaker returned to the safe but was in no hurry. He took his time punching at the keypad and then he rummaged around inside like he didn’t know what was where. Finally he took out a black metal case that was about four inches square and an inch thick. He returned to his chair and placed the drive on the desk. “You know,” he said, “you can’t just walk out of here with this. It’s too important.”

Nash heard the shush of the door behind him. He thought it was swinging open, but when he glanced back over his shoulder he saw that it was closing. And the doctor’s receptionist was spinning.

He was still holding the gun, casually, in a hand resting on the arm of his chair. The woman kicked the gun. It flew in an arc, hit the carpet and slid under the chair next to Nash’s.

He jumped to his feet and faced the receptionist. She’d ripped her skirt up the side, to free her legs for movement. When she stopped her spin her hair fell loose. Her makeup was still in

place but it seemed to mask a different person, one whose eyes burned with *true* spark in the midst of the fake glitter.

She spun and kicked again. Her spiked heel cut the air an inch from Nash's cheek. He backed into the front of the desk. She spun again but missed Nash by a couple of feet, and he saw too late that the move was just a feint so she could go for the gun.

There was too much distance between them for him to stop her, so he looked for the doctor. He would need him as his ticket out of whatever he'd fallen into. He didn't see Whittaker and knew that he was either crouched behind the desk or in the bathroom. The receptionist was reaching under the chair for the gun, so he gambled and ran for the bathroom door.

He hit it with his full weight and splintered the jamb. Whittaker was cowering in a corner. Nash pulled him to his feet, hooked an arm around his neck from behind and pivoted so that the man was between him and the door. It had swung shut after he came through.

He waited. Nothing, no sound from the office.

"Okay!" he called out. "I have your boss in here! I'll break his neck unless you . . ." He spoke to Whittaker. "Tell her to stand down, doc."

Whittaker was quick to comply.

"Stop the attack, Ms. Nova. The hard drive is on the desk. Plug it into my computer."

Nash still had his arm around Whittaker's neck. He squeezed and said, "Plug it in? What are you doing?"

"I'm saving your life," the doctor croaked. "She's got the gun, not you."

Nash wasn't sure what to think. The doctor should be panicked, with an unknown patient manhandling him and a gun in play. He loosened his chokehold and listened for sounds from the

office. He didn't hear any.

"What's she doing?"

Whittaker ignored him and called out again.

"Do a search of the drive for Nash, or Spelvik. Check the Delta files first."

Nash pulled one of the doctor's arms around behind him. He squeezed hard on the wrist and jacked it toward the shoulder blades.

"Tell me what you're *doing*."

"My arm!" the doctor squealed. Nash eased off and Whittaker said, "I'm trying to save your life. I'll fix you and it will be like none of this ever happened."

Before Nash could ask what he was talking about the bathroom door burst open. The receptionist stood in a perfect firing stance—feet apart, knees bent, a two-handed grip aiming the gun at Nash's head. He shrank down behind Whittaker.

The receptionist said, "I can't open the drive, doctor. It needs your eye scan."

"I have to get to my computer," Whittaker told Nash.

Nash didn't move except to nudge the doctor's wrist up his back.

"She won't shoot," Whittaker whined. "Lower your weapon, Ms. Nova, and back away." The receptionist did as ordered with snap precision, almost robotic. Nash didn't move. He kept his hold on the doctor.

"Don't worry," Whittaker said. "She'll do what I say."

Nash didn't like the way things were going but had to play along. He released the chokehold but kept Whittaker's arm behind his back. "Any problems and I break it," he said before he shoved him forward.

With his free hand Nash grabbed the back of the doctor's collar. He crouched low and kept Whittaker between himself and the receptionist as

he inched toward the desk. A quick glimpse from behind his cover showed that she had raised the gun again. It was sighted on his nose. If she was a good shot she could take him out. He suspected she was a good shot.

He reached the desk and told Whittaker to order her to lower the gun again. She did, and Nash let the doctor sit in his chair. He stood behind him, hands on his shoulders. He made his voice as menacing as he could when he said, "I'll snap your neck if she makes a move to fire."

But the doctor didn't seem to hear. He was focused on his computer. The hard drive was plugged into it.

Nash still had no idea what was going on but knew he needed to come up with an exit strategy, when he heard *Peter and the Wolf*. Somebody had entered the waiting room. Whittaker didn't seem to notice, but the receptionist did. She turned toward the music.

Nash shoved Whittaker aside, dove over the desk and hit the carpet. The receptionist squeezed off a shot and there was a sound of shattering glass. Nash came up beside the woman and grabbed an arm. She tried to pull away but he leaned into a hip leverage throw. He was pumped with adrenaline and threw her hard.

She flipped head over heels and her butt smacked the desk. She slid across it and hit the doctor, who'd risen from his chair. Together they stumbled toward the undraped panel on the floor-to-ceiling window. The breaking glass sound had come from it. Most of the glass was gone.

Whittaker grabbed hold of the receptionist and took her with him through the window. She flailed her arms, still clutching the gun.

Nash was stunned at how fast things had happened. He stood listening to the murmur of city sounds coming in from outside, then there

was an impact below, a car alarm, and screams.

A gush of cold air hit him and he knew he needed to move. He unplugged the hard drive and double-timed it to the waiting room.

A patient was there, a mousy little guy hunched forward in one of the plush chairs. Nash turned his back to him so he wouldn't get a clear look at his face. He slipped the hard drive into a pocket of his overcoat and lifted the coat from its hook.

"I thought I heard something in the office," the man said. "Is anything wrong?"

Nash started to say that the doctor was out, but he held his tongue. He didn't want the man to be able to identify his voice later. He opened the door to the sound of *Peter and the Wolf* and distant sirens.