For Isak Dinesen
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THE DANCER ON THE STAIRS

I woke up on the staircase.
I spent six months there.
Yestril says he once saw me there, sleeping. He wondered if he should bring me a blanket. He sat on the stair next to me for a while, but I did not wake. I am glad, now, that I did not. He would have regarded me with nothing except sympathy, or interest, or desire, or disgust—the range of human reactions to which I was accustomed. It would have made everything that followed even harder to understand.

The staircase is where we are always found, we waifs. We travelers. Always, I say, but I should say: rarely. Strangers—that is, people from other worlds, like me—arrive there, unannounced and unexplained, very, very occasionally. Once in a century, perhaps. I had lived here a year before I even heard of another one.

Our presence is a mystery. Mystery is not quite the right word: it’s more like “something that does not happen among us” or “that does not command attention.” People here are occupied with their own, intricate, affairs. At first, believe me, I only cared about simple ones, the ones that might keep me alive.

I still remember the flash of terror on waking up, not in the pillowy darkness of my bed at home but in the sudden
light of a huge, unknown stone stairway. The marble was freezing on my back through my thin nightgown.

I sat up, bewildered, to find myself on the edge of a broad stair, about the width of the single bed in which I had gone to sleep in my apartment. I was facing downward, and the staircase uncoiled in a long unbroken spiral below me, giving the impression of endlessness. I turned, and it was the same above me. It was daylight, a dull, even light coming from above, though I saw no windows. Heavy balustrades edged the stairs. Brackets on the walls were filled with unlit torches. The glossy stone was a uniform iron gray color.

I was alone.

There are fifty-five stairs between every floor of this palace, and eighteen floors. I had plenty of time to learn this. I woke up somewhere between the seventh and eighth floors.

One fact kept me in that terrifying, inhuman place for half a year. I had arrived without any crichtén. I had no kin: no-one who was obliged to give it to me. So the hall officers would not let me pass. I could not get off the stairs and into any of the hallways—where there might be beds to lie down on, or food to eat, or people who spoke my language to tell me what to do—until I obtained it. It did not take me long to figure this much out, at most a day or two. There were endless futile conversations, if I can use that word, all the way from the first floor to the eighteenth, with every hall guard on every shift.

By the end of all that climbing, this is what I had learned: the first rule of the staircase is basic and immutable. It will not be broken because you haven't eaten in three days or need to piss. It will not be broken if a woman is in labor, or if a child is injured, or a nobleman angry. It doesn't matter if you are the queen's consort or the lowliest kitchen maid, you will not get off the staircase until you
can present the guard with his crichtén, which has been the hereditary right of his family to collect for—I’m still not very good with the temporal words—something like “time out of mind.”

Many very polite, very determined encounters taught this to me. It was clear they expected something that I could not give them. And crichtén, as I gradually learned, is not something you can bargain for when you have no status. It is a set, honorific sum, expressed in regular money (a sum that is never used to value anything else, the very idea is unthinkable, so it is an unusable number in commerce) that everyone over the age of seven carries at all times. It must be yielded to the hall guards at every floor for passage, and occasionally handed over in certain ceremonies. As soon as it is gone it must be immediately replenished, either from savings or by working the obligations of kinship and association. There are precise rules about whom you can give crichtén, and from whom you can accept it. Given that different families and guilds occupy each floor, it takes real ingenuity to raise crichtén on a hallway in which you have few allies. As only a fool would depart onto the stairway again without it, people can remain trapped for days. Still, there they are trapped in community. Not so on the staircase.

In those first days, crichténless, knowing nobody, what was I to do? I was hardly going to push my way past one of the guards; they are armed men. Their armor is vestigial, but still. They have knives. They stand dangerously still. They are men.

In a very short time I found myself contemplating things I would never have dreamed of. I was continuously cold. I was starving, and terrified that I would fall sick and become helpless. Along about day five, I took all my clothes
off in front of a guard on the thirteenth floor. He was young and seemed the likeliest candidate. It’s hard to say which one of us was the more appalled. I nearly succeeded in forcing him back down his hallway because he was so reluctant to touch my bare skin. I was filthy by then, but it wasn’t the reaction I expected. A man from home would have tried to make a deal, or taken what he wanted either violently or furtively, or despised me.

His reaction was fear. I was amazed. A young man in a position of power confronted with a naked woman. It was as if I might kill him if I came near. I remember the terrible moment when he came to the perimeter of his watch and could not back any further away, the slight shine of his armor as he came into the shadow of the archway; he stood at bay and his whole body yearned backward. His eyes were wild. I thought he might collapse. I smelled cooking meat in the hallway but I still couldn’t push past him. There was no predicting what he might do.

The next day, he brought me food. That young guardsman of the thirteenth, whose name is Galvah—to me, that is, his name is Galvah, his tribe name is something like Galver’oh, though I know that only from overhearing and of course cannot use it, and his lineage name is Háldec-can, which means thirteen—brought me food, water, and clothing the very next night, his next watch. Out of pure compassion, even though I had shamed him. He was careful not to touch me and would scarcely look at me, but he brought a large metal pail of clean water, a stiff silk dress in a soft pink shade, and some spicy vegetable stew in an ornate fired-clay bowl. I am still grateful to him. I send rice to his family three times a year on the Gratitude Days.
Nothing has ever been as wonderful as that water. It was quite a large pail. I drank a lot of it straight off, though I had to wash my hands first. They were filthy with excrement. You have to shit right out in the open on the staircase, something incredibly hard to do at first, and there is nothing to wipe with. By then I had used up almost the last shreds of my nightdress. I was presented with a horrible dilemma therefore: whether to dip my hands in the water first, to wash them, and thus taint it before I drank, or not. I was nearly mad with thirst, and I could not easily reach it by mouth, as it was not full and my head would not fit inside its circumference. I was too weak to lift it. Finally I dipped part of the skirt of the new dress in and used that to scrub my hands, figuring that a stain was better than a disease. I am still proud of myself for this piece of reasoning.

I drank some water, ate the stew, which burned my mouth, drank more water, and then washed. My genitals, my feet, my armpits. I could not stand it any longer. I knew it was a risk to waste the water, but I felt so much at risk already that I hardly cared. After five days of fasting you become foolhardy when you eat. Food is a powerful drug: you feel the nutrients moving through you and the chemicals of your body responding with warmth, satisfaction, and a brief release from fear.

It is not as difficult sleeping on a staircase as you might think. I have never been a good sleeper. I never could sleep more than four hours together in a comfortable bed, with sleeping pills, so it was not appreciably worse on a cold marble stair in a great state of exhaustion. The stairs are broad, almost two paces deep. They are used in many ceremonies, and there must be space on each stair to put down a palanquin. There is little risk of rolling off them. I found that if I installed my head between the mighty marble feet
of the railings it provided an added sense of security. The body needs security more than comfort. I slept enough to keep going.

It wasn’t long before I met other denizens of the stairway. I couldn’t speak to them, and many of them shunned me. Their responses to my overtures were, like the guardsman’s, extreme. This was horrifying and puzzling. Most were householders, far better dressed than I, stuck there without crichtén for a prank or by accident. All they had to do was walk up and down bargaining with the guards or passersby to find someone willing to provide crichtén for them, banking on their honor. They were rarely there for more than a day or two. I have heard since that feuding or estranged spouses have been trapped there for much longer. Angry kin can have wide influence on the stairway guards if they are well connected and the case against the offender is deemed to be good. One blood prince of the second family lost his claim to the throne because of it; he was there for three weeks, and the shame was ruled too great. What his transgression was against his wife I have never learned.

I met no estranged spouses or abandoned princes at the time, as far as I am aware. People came and went quite quickly. I tried persistently to speak to them, but the language was complicated, and people were preoccupied with obtaining crichtén and clearly could not get it, or anything, from me. The worst was the violence of that intermittent rejection, that repulsed, fearful drawing back. I felt that I had been transformed into something hideous.

Then I met one of the hardingrhán. These are rare, so I was lucky. The hardingrbá on the stairs in my time was Prevostán, so I was doubly lucky. I owe him much more than tri-annual rice; there aren’t enough Gratitude Days in the year to contain what I owe him.
A hardingrhá is vowed to spend a certain part of every year out of tribe. This doesn’t sound like much, but it is practically like being dead. The words for “person” and “tribe” here share the same root: a person is a member of a tribe. Prevostán taught me that; he is a scholar, as are many of the vowed ones, all of whom are members of the officiating class. Officials are learned men; a certain breadth of vision applies to them. Yet most do not see the need to vow, or to pass out of tribe, and treat the decision with skepticism, even derision, if it is made. Other people, not officials—princes, commoners, servants, the owned and half-owned—treat the vowed ones with great reverence, though they can hardly interact with them, as they are all in tribe. Food, water, wine, clothing, flowers: these are left for the hardingrhán anonymously in certain places on the stairway and elsewhere. Prevostán shared his gifts with me. That was his privilege.

He shared utensils and food and blankets with me though I had no sigil. I was unnatural to him, and touching me made him weak and ill. Yet Prevostán held me when I cried, and gave no sign. That also was his privilege. For when you are out of tribe, you have no sigil. That was the burden he had taken on, though I am sure he never expected it to be so sorely tested. I remember him pale and sweating when he broke bread to share with me, and once he cried out in alarm when I woke him from sleep by touching his shoulder. Everything was so strange to me that I thought little of it then.

We were two outcasts, scarcely even human. His own kin, those he had abandoned, could only look at him with mirrors and were forbidden to offer him crichtén; officials passed him sightlessly, offended by his decision to vow; only those to whom he stood in no kin relation were allowed to
aid him. This is the great reversal of being hardingrhán: only those to whom you owe nothing can help you, those with whom you have only money relations, not real, honorific ones. Money relations, dysala, are forbidden on the stairway. So they must help you only because they want to.

When we were on the stairway together I saw many people, great and small, old and young, offer him crichtén. He refused. He stayed with me.

He explained the sigil bond to me. It was incredible to him that I should have to ask about it, even though he knew—knew painfully, as I understood later—I had none. It’s like asking about breathing or using language. It took a long time for the ideas to come clear. I had precious few words of the language, and his explanation was long and complicated. I still lack the words to translate it properly: the concepts do not exist in the language I grew up with.

I remember that I had to dance the first, crucial question: why do they shun me? Prevostán and I were sitting side by side on a stair between the ninth and tenth floors, near a place where people customarily left out food for him. Someone passed, making the usual wide berth around us. Spontaneously, I made as if to follow him, reaching out, and then turned round, impersonating him, making shooing gestures, pushing away, my face horrified. I looked back at Prevostán. It was clear he had understood me. After that, we had various conversations that way: it’s probably what made him think of protocol dance.

He went on, eventually, to explain how each birth-month makes an inborn, invisible mark—he could not say how it is detected, exactly, not by smell or sight or touch—and how people born in the same birth-month know each other and are compatible. With some other months they are strictly—incompatible. Some others they
can tolerate and can interact with in various contexts. These are not quite the right words. At any rate, in this system I was invisible, unreal. As uncanny as if I had never been born.

Terrible knowledge, but I was grateful to get it. It is not the kind of thing most people will, or even can, discuss. Eventually, I left Prevostán there, on the staircase. After I had earned my passage out, it was many weeks until I saw him again. Yet none of the rest could have happened but for him. I owe him my life, this privileged life in the first hallway: the life of an honor-consort of a prince of the blood.

I have been living here, in the hall of the first kin, with the wide windows and doors opening directly out onto the palace grounds, my feet stepping on that envied grass, for seven years. Some people in the upper halls touch it only once or twice a year. There is nothing like the grass of the palace grounds for dancing. It is remarkable stuff, a smooth, even greenish-yellow, every stalk growing to precisely the same length without cutting. I have never seen anything like it. There was very little grass left at home.

We had three trees left in the city I grew up in, outside of those cultivated for air in the arboretum, and no one ever saw those, except for the foresters. They were too valuable, and the story was that they were prone to disease. I’m not sure if I ever believed that. I always had a suspicion that there were no trees there at all, just oxygenating machines.

Here there are trees everywhere, and the grass grows that perfect, even greenish-yellow for miles around the palace. Then it just stops. The boundary is clear, and nobody does anything to maintain it. It’s always been that way—time out of mind. The land beyond is arable. Most of our food grows there. People must cultivate it. Nobody in
the palace talks about it at all. To them, the world ends at that boundary.

I am a protocol-dance instructor of the second grade, teaching the children of the first five families. I was promoted to this rank two years ago. For the first time, this winter, I will have the opportunity to teach my own son, Yarren, who is just turning five. That is the age at which the training begins, and it is fortuitous, as I will now be able to teach him from the beginning. I would not have been able to do so before, when I was still third grade and able to teach only the sixth to the eighth families.

It is my mother I have to thank for this. My mother, the person I was gladdest to leave behind in the world I grew up in. It is because of her that I am a dancer. She was a vain woman, a hard exerciser, obsessed with not gaining weight; she got me into dance classes early in life, and I never stopped. I left home early to get away from her, and I never became a professional, partly in spite. She was never impressed with my career in personnel, but then, neither was I. It was a pleasant way to live, and it kept me in the city. I always kept dancing. Three evenings a week.

There are plenty of personnel in this palace, and they don’t need me to manage them. I still don’t even know what most of them do. But I told Prevostán, all those years ago, that I knew how to dance. I showed him, there on the stairs. He was able to get me a place with a non-rank troupe that performed at festivals. The owner-senior, Arian, whom he brought to see me, became my first crichtén sponsor. The members of the troupe are still my honor-kin; Arian was present at the birth of my son. I made sure she was present. Attending a first family birth festival opened many new avenues for her as a non-rank performer. It was the greatest service I could do her.