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Odds-making

THREE TIMES THE FIRE had come for him, but three times he lived. First in Daughter Paradise, when he was a child, still unaccustomed to the relentless want of burning. What he remembers of that day now is the sight of the abandoned vineyards past the edge of town, high orange curls sprouting out the tops of sheds and the old tasting room. The whole of the world in the rearview mirror of the speeding truck, muddled and half melting: the way heat turns the image of a landscape watery, makes a still thing jitter. He remembers the sound his baby sister made next to him in the truck bed, cooing at the amber tendrils in the sky, the script of some strange and violent cursive, and his mother in whispered conversation with someone who wasn't there—to whom *God's love commits thee here, to whom God's love commits thee here*—as the town disappeared under black smoke.

Fire does this, he learned, brings out the supplicant in all things.

Twice more it came for him, in his early adulthood, during the seasons he spent scabbing on the towers while the firewatchers' union held out for a better deal. Back then the unionists used to crawl around the frontier with their brushcutters, cutting the power lines and snapping the satellite phone antennas, and sometimes a scab might go days or weeks unable to check in with the ranger's office. It happened to him the summer UC-72 tore through the northwestern edge of the valley, and by the time he caught sight of the plume churning out of Butte Creek, the fire had already rendered the sole logging road impassable. And so he ran blind through the brush and past the last standing redwoods and into the river. A year later it would happen again near the place where Bowler Camp used to be, and once again he'd escape but not undamaged. For the rest of his life he'd suffer from corseted lungs and carry a smooth pink scar that ran from his left shoulder down to his wrist. But he lived. It meant something, to live.

THE BETTING HOUSE overlooked the old county road that connected the valley towns to Bald Eagle Mountain. Once, when the burning season was still a passing thing, millions lived in this part of

the country, but now only a few thousand stubbornly held on loggers and ruin-looters and those who remembered what it had once been like and those who believed against all reason that it would be that way again and those who chose to take their chances in the forest rather than the camps or the factories. Without judgment, the betting house served them all. It was a pretty A-frame cabin in the style of the old national park guide houses, dolled up along its road-facing side with a gaudy neon sign that flickered in electric pink: ACTION.

Worm liked to get to the betting house around dawn, when it was still quiet. Although the marks usually started to line up outside around ten in the morning, the book didn't officially open till noon, and before then the only sound in the office was that of the spinning desk fans and the papers and maps rustling. It calmed him, this partway quiet, allowed him to do his work.

It was a common misconception that his job was to pick winners or losers, towns that were most or least likely to burn. Even some of the marks who'd been throwing their paychecks away at the betting house for decades still heckled him in the bar some nights when he'd failed to put an obvious burn site up on the board. *Hey, Worm, how'd you go and miss that one? Don't your bum arm tingle with the wind or some shit? Don't you see the future?*

What they didn't understand is that the house never made money on clear winners or losers. His job was to find the coin-toss towns, the places just as likely to burn as survive. That was the action that got the marks excited, sent them arguing in the hall in wild disagreement as to whether the smart money would take the over or the under. The only thing the house liked better than coin-toss towns was miraculous ones, places that seemed well out of harm's way but ended up burning, or places that stood right at the mouth of a fire but for some reason were spared. These were the picks that brought in big money—it was betting house tradition that every oddsmaker be nicknamed after the town that brought in the biggest haul at the book, and these coin-toss towns were the picks that more often than not earned an oddsmaker his name.

Worm arrived at the betting house earlier than usual, the sun still pale and shadowed behind the blue-capped mountains. He unlocked the rear door and entered the office and turned on the lights. It was a cramped room made more so by the huge Remington safe and the row of filing cabinets in which the house kept six months of past betting

records. Like the smoke from countless fires over the years, the smell of old paper permeated the walls, permeated everything.

He sat at his desk and checked the notes the overnight boy had left in the ledger, dispatches and updates from the watchtowers out near Pious and Elder and Graze Valley, the frontier places: at around midnight the watcher in Melford had reported UC-188 curling back on itself, thinning a little under an unexpected burst of rain. Fifty miles west, UC-192 was spreading east and north, threatening to jump the river.

Quietly he marked these updates down on the massive wall map behind him. It was a chaotic thing, disfigured beyond all recognition with scribbled and pinned notes, crudely redrawn borders, lines in red indicating what the fire had taken and lines in blue indicating what it might take and lines in purple indicating where his predictions had come true; wind markers and elevation markers, weather reports and satellite photos of the earth and the clouds and printed reports from the fact finders the government sent in to every obliterated town, reports that served as proof these places had really burned, proof the house had paid out fairly.

From the overnight reports and radar maps he began sketching the flight path of the fire tearing through the southern end of the valley. In government parlance they were called Uncontrolled Conflagrations, but everyone in the betting house called them birds. Once there had been a fire season, but now the year was the season and the migrations constant. For the last three days UC-196 had been moving northward, feeding on brushland and the places where the state hadn't sent the prisoner crews to clear the ground fuel in time. But overnight the heat dome had lifted, and in its place a southern chinook had come rushing down the mountainside and he began to think the bird might double back, might change its mind.

He picked up the radio and dialed Pine County Tower 18, which stood about halfway between the fire's southern border and the small drywash towns at the very edge of the valley. A squawk of static beat back the quiet of the room and then faded.

"How you doing, Bryce?"

He cleared his throat. "I'm all right, Ruby. How you doing?"

"You think it's coming back, don't you?"

"Just tell me what you're looking at," he said.

"'Bout seventy-five miles upland, bubble clouds, slow-moving.

Nothing between us but drybed and already eaten forest. I just don't see it turning, Bryce."

He didn't like the sound of his given name, had grown used to Worm over the years. But it was only two who called him Bryce anymore. He tapped the map with his marker, little red dots piling like measles on the skin of the outskirts towns. It was a kind of blindness, to be of these places, to come from the crucible of the continent, to not know any other way of living but this. Down to a man the marks who frequented the betting house talked of what they'd do when they finally hit it big, and each one said they'd finally get the hell out fire country, buy a nice big house in the northern Midwest or maybe even Canada, but to a man he knew they'd always stay here. It was imprinted on them, the building and fleeing and rebuilding, the smoke-blinded life. They were as newborn animals to whom the first sight is mother and the first they'd ever seen was fire.

"Listen, do me a favor and close up shop," he said into the handset. "Hitch a ride out to 19 or 21, just till midweek."

"You a ranger boss now?"

"Just go on, all right?"

Ruby sighed. "All right, Bryce. All right."

He set the radio down and sat a while listening to the tongue-click sound the fans made as they turned. The other day one of the sunfarm grunts said the temperature in Furnace Creek pushed past one-fifty though you couldn't really get a reliable read these days, and anyway so long as it's dry your body don't go full helpless. He liked that phrase. It sounded liberating, a body going full helpless.

At ten on the dot the Captain arrived. He was a brittle-looking man, scrawny but what the marks would call soft-lived, with a full head of hair and pristine Chiclet teeth even as he pushed 80.

"Mornin', Worm," he said, shuffling over to the house safe.

"Mornin', boss."

"What's the story of the world today, Worm?"

He'd earned the nickname years earlier when he picked, while still an apprentice, UC-71 to eat up a place called Wormwood. It was a line no other house in the state was offering, a town high up the mountainside, just a day removed from rain and against the prevailing wind, a born loser. But he'd seen something in the satellite photos, a buildup of fuel and the cloud-cover thinning, and the Captain, who was comfortable enough to entertain the occasional bout of reckless-

ness, let the pick stand. No sooner did Wormwood go up on the big board than every mark in the county was lined up to take the under. By the time the book closed there wasn't enough cash in the safe for the house to cover the bets, and it seemed the fire could not possibly move so far by midnight. Then at dusk, purely by chance, a rolling storm set off a batch of lightning burns that quickly conjoined, and in a few hours Wormwood was gone. The house made a killing, and the following year Worm was promoted to head oddsmaker, the youngest in the state.

He circled a small dot on the south side of the valley. "I was thinking Seven Bridges," he said.

The Captain squinted at the map. "The hell's that?"

"Bottom of the valley. Nowhere settlement, tents and trailers. Maybe two, two-fifty."

"Huh. Where's the nearest bird?"

"About fifty miles upland," Worm said. "There's some prison crews working its east wing, but that's spit in the ocean."

"And who's your eyes out there?"

"Tower 18."

The Captain ran his finger along Worm's implied flight path. "Ruby, huh? Better watch out, the marks might accuse you of self-dealing, say the boy and his sister got themselves a scheme of some sort."

"You want I pick somewhere else?" Worm asked.

The Captain chuckled. "Christ no. Personally, I don't see how it pays for us, but I know better than to doubt you. Go on, put it up on the board. Let's live a little."

Later in the morning the bookies and the accountant arrived, and at noon the betting house doors opened and the bouncers began to let the marks shuffle in. They were almost all men, tired drunks and seawall hands and salvage crew contractors and, although it was technically prohibited to take bets from anyone who did such work, hire-by-the-day firefighters. They placed bets with crumpled tens and twenties and spent as much or more money waiting on the burn reports in the Captain's bar across the street. They were men of slow ritual, mean-seeming but weak, and at the end of the day the losers among them could be seen tearing up and stamping their useless betting slips, their faces forest-red from the drinking and the small-making knowledge not that they had lost the previous day's wage but that likely they would lose the next one's too.

Most days, the man at the front of the line, sweltering under his union cap, was a ditch-digger named Miles. In the betting house they knew him as a tiresome four-settlement drunk, and but for his family ties to the house he would have been banned long ago, not for any single transgression but for simply being more trouble than his ten-dollar bets made him worth.

The sound of the house doors opening woke Miles from his nap. He startled and eased himself slowly off the ground, patted the dead leaves off his pants. "About goddamn time," he said.

The men wandered in. The front of house, a wide space funneling in toward the betting kiosks, was decorated along the walls with framed pictures of winners from years past, men who'd placed exceedingly ill-advised or ignorant bets that somehow paid off, and interspersed among these were other photographs of the valley and the forest as it had looked in prior seasons, and of other beautiful places—tropical islands and light-dipped waterfalls and the Hollywood sign glimmering under rain—all of them far away in either distance or time. From the ceiling a discreet vaporizer filled the hall with the scent of cedar.

On the big board the men saw the pick of the day. Some said they knew the place and others pretended to know it and all loudly exchanged opinions and consulted their own sources of information, checking the notes they'd scribbled on their palms from whatever fire reports they read or heard about secondhand. All agreed that the pick was a lousy one, though the men were split on why. Eventually, opinion coalesced: there was no chance any bird could possibly reach Seven Bridges by midnight, and the men, buoyed by this invented communal certainty, began in droves to take the under.

Worm paced the back office. He called in again to Tower 18 and then 19 and 21, but there was no reply. Likely the smoke had killed the satellite reception, or perhaps all the watchers had retreated up out of the valley or simply left their posts for a while; it was still early in the day, and often the watchers timed their breaks for just after the betting houses put up their picks.

He heard a loud knocking on the backroom door. "Open up, goddamit," said the voice on the other side.

"Like clockwork," the Captain sighed. He turned to Worm, who shrugged.

The Captain motioned to one of the bookies, who unlocked the door. For a second the sound of the marks arguing in the betting hall

became much louder, and then Miles walked into the back office and closed the door behind him. He pointed at Worm.

“What kind of loser line is that, Bryce?” he yelled. “You picking them out of a hat these days?”

“Old man, don’t start,” the Captain said.

“First of all, there ain’t no bird within two days’ flight of that dump, let alone one. Second, how you gonna let a boy pick a place one of his own got eyes on? What kind of ship you running here, Cap?”

Worm ignored both men. Again he tried the towers and again there was only static. Although it was frowned upon, he called a friend who worked another betting house’s tower nearby, then a prison guard who ran convict brush-clearing patrols on the side in that corner of the valley, but neither picked up. He stared at the wall map, its many intersecting lines, its many realities colliding.

“Hey, boy, I asked you a question.” Miles said.

Worm shook his head. “What?”

“I said, you trying to put this place out of business?”

“Go on back to the hall, Miles,” Worm said. “Go across the street, have a drink. Better yet, go home, have a shower.”

“Don’t talk to me like that, boy. Don’t nobody who picks a born loser tell me what to do.”

“Christ, would you quit complaining? the Captain said. “If it’s such a born loser, you take the under, you make some money. What’s the problem?”

“I didn’t take the goddamn under,” Miles said. “I took the over.” He flashed the house’s little blue betting slip in Worm’s direction. “You see that, boy? I took the over.”

Miles walked back out into the betting hall, slamming the door behind him. It astounded Worm, how much the years hung on the old man. It wasn’t so much the burns on his hands from working the sunfarm panels or the way all those years out in the forest with the shovelers had put a curve in his spine. It was just the wear of living. He remembered him younger, fuller somehow, in the years before he’d abandoned them, before Daughter Paradise burned, though those memories were shards now.

One of the bookies stood up and locked the door. “Twenty-one years that man been coming here,” he said. “Twenty-one years. Could have bought a house up in cold country with the money he pissed away.”

“He’s Paradise born,” the Captain said. “Stubborn people up there.”

“That a granddaughter town?” the bookie asked.

“Great-granddaughter now. Burned up in ’18, then again in ’28 and ’38. Every ten years, like they’d set a timer. They kept rebuilding in the same place, silly bastards. Got a museum there now with all the trinkets they salvaged each time, a bunch of teddy bears and wind chimes and vineyard signs. Some people got no sense at all.”

The Captain shook his head. He looked at Worm, then pointed at the corkboard on the wall where the house kept the pictures and names of the permanently banned.

“Just say the word,” the Captain said.

“You know I won’t,” Worm replied.

“Of course you won’t. What kind of boy would?”

WORD SPREAD the betting house had picked a loser. In the hour before the book closed at three, a deluge of new marks had come in to take the under, and by close it was clear the house wouldn’t be able to cover. Some of the marks began to complain, nervous now but excited; someone said they’d heard from a friend down south there wasn’t so much as a black cloud in the sky over Seven Bridges. Eventually, after nightfall, as the men waited either for confirmation the town had burned or for midnight to roll round, Miles came knocking again on the back-office door.

“They’re set to riot on you, Cap,” he said. “Don’t think you’ll pay.”

“When have I ever not paid, Miles?”

Miles shrugged. “I’m just the messenger, friend.”

“Those suckers out there know you speak for them now?” the Captain chuckled. “The one genius who took the over on a sure dud?”

Miles smacked the side of the Remington safe. “Just better be ready to empty this thing, is all I’m saying.”

“I tell you what, Miles,” the Captain said, “I’ll give you a mulligan, for old time’s sake. I’ll let you switch the bet, take the under at a half-to-one. How’s that for a Christmas gift?”

“Shove it up your ass,” Miles said. “I bought what I bought.”

“Shut up,” Worm said to the room, as another burst of static came through the handheld radio. “Ruby? You there?”

“It’s a hell of a thing, Bryce,” the voice on the other end said, low against the crackle and hum that every man in the room who’d been caught out by a bird before knew from memory. “Came up from the

south. The whole time I was watching upland and then it came up from the south.”

“Listen,” Worm said. “Go down, get to the next tower over. Get to the river—”

“I swear it’s a language,” Ruby said. “A language all its own.”

The radio cut. For a moment the back room of the betting house was silent. Worm felt the tightness coming on. He reached into a drawer and pulled out his inhaler, pried his lungs open.

“I’m going down there,” he said.

“Going down where?” the Captain said. “You gonna drive a hundred miles south through logging roads and ash tracks? Then what, reason with it? Sit down.”

The Captain picked up the phone and dialed a number Worm recognized as that of another betting house two counties over. “Put Garrison on,” he yelled into the receiver.

“Garrison, I need you to call your tower boy out near 20-block, get me a read on some hole called Seven Bridges. . . Don’t give me that bullshit, Garrison. . . Fine, one per cent of the take. . . Three per cent, that’s it, take it or I swear we’re done. . . Good, call me back.”

The men waited an hour, during which Worm tried calling every ranger station and watchtower within a hundred miles of Tower 18. Quickly it became clear the calling was futile, though no one in the back office would say this, or anything else, to Worm as he tried frequency after frequency, number after number.

At half past eleven the marks began banging on the door. Finally, the Captain let them in.

“The hell’s going on, Cap?” one of the marks said. “We’re a half-hour from the bell and you got no updates for us? What kind of business you running here?”

The Captain came to respond but was interrupted by the office phone. A few of the marks inched their way into the back room to listen but the conversation was short and the Captain said only, Yes, all right, thanks. He set the receiver down.

“Tower boy says a new one rolled up from south of the state border, out past our jurisdiction,” he said. “He just got eyes on Seven Bridges now. Says it’s gone.”

The marks said nothing, confused but unwilling to admit it, then Miles spoke.

“Ain’t no rule says where a bird’s got to come from,” he said.

“That’s right,” the Captain replied. He turned to the bookie. “The over pays on Seven Bridges,” he said.

On hearing this, the marks groaned and shouted their disapproval. Some tore up their tickets and others said to keep them until the fact-finders came back with real proof, and for a while Miles said nothing at all, but then he started laughing, laughing and waving his little blue ticket in the air.

“A winner, a winner!” he said. “Goddamn, a winner!”

Quicker than the old man could react, Worm leapt from his seat and grabbed Miles by the collar of his shirt. A couple of bookies and marks stepped in to break the two men up but not before Worm had punched Miles in the face, a tooth and blood spittle coming out the man’s slack mouth as his knees gave out beneath him.

“You did this,” Worm said. “You did this.”

“Did what?” Miles replied, grabbing his bloodied jaw and searching frantically for the winning ticket he’d dropped. “The hell did I do?”

A couple of marks stepped in to pull Worm away. “What’s wrong with you?” one of them said. “What kind of a boy does a thing like that?”

Worm shoved the men aside. He stepped over Miles, dizzied still on the ground, and left the back room. Out by the road he scanned frantically for logging trucks, convict crew vans, any vehicle that might be headed south, though he knew that even if such a vehicle were to come along, it’d be hours before he got anywhere near Seven Bridges, anywhere near Tower 18. Still, he ran up the road, helpless as a child, as behind him the marks began to spill out of the betting house, one of them clutching a fistful of bills and shouting: A winner. Goddamn, a winner.