Where the Cyan Wildflowers Grow

Jerome dug his mineshaft where the cyan wildflowers grew. The old men said the color of the flowers came from cobalt, and it was cobalt that he found. But not only cobalt. In the first days he came across a large rock, too big to carry, rich in the dark-chocolate veins that indicated the ore. He placed his shovel blade against it and struck the handle with his mallet, so hard that he broke not only the rock, but also the handle. Jerome didn't see the tiny, misshapen figure with midnight blue skin that he freed. Trapped in the rock, she swallowed the ore into her intestines, soaked it into her blood until it wholly consumed her. Cobalt: Kobold.

Jerome didn't see the kobold follow him home and become his shadow. He wasn't aware that she murmured her secrets to him in the dark, guiding his shovel to greater concentrations of ore, deeper and more dangerous underground. He wasn't aware that she watched Jerome grow his family, feed and protect them, whisper to his wife Therese his dream that their son Denis might have a different future. He wasn't aware that she stayed with him as his skin absorbed the ore until it took on a bluish tinge, his lungs breathed the dust until rasping punctuated every sentence.

The kobold sat by the bare cinderblock wall while Jerome dug a spot of dirt from under his fingernail. He checked himself in the cloudy mirror over the sink as he took his shirt off the wire hanger where it had been drying since the night before. Denis left his breakfast of fried plantains and rose from the rickety table. He took his own school shirt and mimicked his father, slipping his arms into the sleeves. The kobold noticed a blue cast to Denis's face—too faint for normal eyes to detect—contrasted against the crisp white polyester.

Sometimes children, or those in extreme emotional states, could see the kobold. She usually hid from them, but for a time she had revealed herself to Denis, and he had called her friend. His laughter had quieted the buzzing in her ears from the cobalt electrifying her nerves. As he grew, she faded from his vision and became imaginary to him. She pretended he could still play with her, and it soothed her gnawing loneliness. She even convinced herself that he could still sense her when he paused for no apparent reason.

Denis chewed his lips and shifted from one foot to the other until the words finally burst out of his mouth.

"Father, most boys my age work in the mines."

"That's true," Jerome replied. "You're fortunate not to be one of them."

"I should start working in the mine with you."

"You have school," Jerome continued, his tone becoming firm.

"I don't want to go to school anymore. You didn't go to school—I want to be like you."

"You will NOT be like me." Jerome's throat constricted as he struggled to keep his voice down, and he was overcome by hacking. Denis helped his father to the mattress and poured a glass of water from the sink. Once Jerome recovered, he looked at his son—Denis was standing to the side, staring down at the water trembling in his hands.

"Son, you must understand," Jerome said, taking the water. "My life's not my own. The mine controls me. The men who came from outside and set up shops in town to buy cobalt from us—they control me. The men who own warehouses in the city, the men who own corporations in another country—they control me without even knowing I exist."

Jerome knelt and took Denis's shoulders in his scarred hands.

"Denis, look at me. Cobalt is power. Control it and the world is yours. Be controlled by it and you will spend your life in the mine."

"I'm sorry father. I just want to help. I don't want you to be sick," Denis responded, his eyes red.

"You're a good boy," Jerome said as he stood. "Now, there is something important you can help me with." Jerome pulled a few coins from his pocket and handed them to Denis. "I want to surprise your mother. After school stop by the market and get a bag of flour. Don't tell her! Tonight, we'll make a cake." Denis's eyes widened: flour! His parents rarely indulged in such a luxury.

Therese came up behind Denis and tousled his hair. Jerome winked at him, and he snuck the coins into his pocket. Therese finished buttoning her husband's shirt, then bent down to button her son's.

"My two men, always scheming. What trouble are you getting into now? Enough—Denis, get to school. I'll see you at the river this afternoon."

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The kobold followed Jerome and Therese into the only other room in their home, which was filled with blue polypropylene bags full of rocks from the mine.

"Don't be too hard on the boy. He just wants to spend time with you," Therese said.

"Hard on him?" Jerome said, his eyes wide. "I'm making him a cake!"

"He's only twelve, he's too young to understand what it means to work in the mine."

“He’s old enough. Most of his friends are in the mines with their fathers.” Jerome’s wheezed as he hefted a bag onto his shoulder.

“Your cough’s getting worse.” Therese’s eyes turned critical as she examined him. “Your skin’s more discolored, too. Maybe you should stay home today. One day won’t make that much of a difference.”

“This new vein, it’s the richest I’ve ever found. A few more weeks and we’ll have enough to pay Denis’s tuition for the rest of the year. Then I’ll rest.”

“I don’t like you digging so deep. There’s too much risk.” Therese lifted a bag and adjusted the rocks poking her back.

The kobold heard the concern in Therese’s voice. Once Jerome was finished mining this vein, the kobold would not lead him deeper. There were other tunnels to dig—they would not yield as much, but Jerome would be safer.

Therese and Jerome stepped outside and started down the path to the river. The kobold accompanied them, careful that their bare feet didn’t step on her as they slipped in the mud.

“As soon as Denis graduates, I’m buying a pair of shoes,” Therese complained.

The kobold smiled; Therese said this every morning. When they approached the river, the kobold heard the thud of wood pounding on stone. Women were standing ankle deep in the water where flat stones provided a place to do laundry. As they beat mine dirt from the clothes it flowed off the stones into the current, fanning out in teal-brown streaks.

Therese waved to one of the women.

“Marie’s husband and son haven’t been home for two days,” she said to Jerome under her breath.

“Their mine isn’t yielding, they’ve dug so deep now they’ve been sleeping in it. You remember how hard it was on Denis when they stopped sending their son to school,” Jerome replied. “That’s when he started all this talk about joining me.”

Beyond the flat stones, a shallow part of the river was divided into pools by sandbags to make cleaning mine rocks easier. Past that, children were fishing where the water, now thick as chocolate milk, once again turned deep. Two girls ran up the path carrying a blue-skinned catfish on a line. The kobold rushed behind a rock to avoid them. There were no trees to hide behind—they had all been cut down by the lumber mill when Therese and Jerome were children.

Sunlight glinted in the beads of sweat dripping off the working women. Jerome wiggled his fingers at the infants tied to them with faded sashes made from scraps of polyester fabric printed with red, yellow, and orange paisleys.

“I’m glad Denis is grown,” Therese said. “Those first few months after he was born nearly did me in, scrubbing rocks all day with his weight on my back.”

They found an empty spot and dropped their burdens on a sandbag. Therese pulled out a wire brush and took one of the rocks from her bag.

“This rock,” Therese paused, tracing the dark chocolate-brown veins with her finger, “has enough cobalt for a cell phone?”

“Ten cell phones,” Jerome replied. He pointed to the bag. “There’s enough cobalt there to power an electric car.”

“What’s the point in talking about cell phones?” Therese started scrubbing the rock. “Only the brokers in town can afford such an extravagance.”

“And the diesel truck the village shares has served us for years, who needs an electric car?” Jerome laughed.

“Still, you say a broker told you people in other countries spend millions of dollars on such things?”

“Billions.”

“Nonsense,” Therese scoffed as she threw a pebble at Jerome. “In a good week, we make twenty dollars. That broker’s a liar.”

“Maybe,” Jerome answered, dodging the pebble. “But if you’re going to throw rocks at me, then it’s time for me to leave. Until tonight, my love.” Jerome climbed up the bank back to the path, where the kobold waited for him.

Therese waved at him and started in on another rock. When these bags were finished, there were more at home. The men took a break from the mines every week and went into town to sell the yields, but for the women there was no rest. She would haul rocks back and forth until the sun was low on the horizon, until her legs groaned and her back wailed.

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The kobold squatted at the opening to the mine, a simple hole in the ground surrounded by cyan wildflowers. Jerome fixed a plastic light to his head and slung his tools—a mallet and a broken-handled shovel—across his chest. She scurried below him as he made his way down the

near-vertical entrance. It had rained the last few nights, and the walls were slick. She checked behind her to be sure Jerome's bare soles found each foothold.

Once the tunnel leveled, he was able to move on his hands and knees through the inch-deep water pooled in the depressions on the floor. The kobold crawled along the ceiling to stay dry, but Jerome's pants and shirt-cuffs were soon soaked. Drips of sweat added to the pools. Jerome's diaphragm convulsed—the air was heavy and damp from the overnight stillness. He turned on fans as he moved down the tunnel.

Jerome descended into the deepest part of the mine, reached the end of the shaft, and crouched in the foot-deep pool gathered there from tiny rivulets running down the floor of the tunnel. He placed the shovel blade at a spot in the wall and struck the broken handle with his mallet, clearing away the dirt to expose ore-rich rocks. He was sweating from his labor, but his skin felt clammy.

As the kobold scanned the darkness, a foreboding tingle crept through her nerves. She felt along the ceiling with her fingertips. The rainwater had seeped into the ground and softened it—she found tiny cracks above Jerome. The kobold closed her eyes and focused on the intuition that came from the ore in her cells, probing with her mind into the soil above the ceiling. There, a few feet away, she sensed a massive boulder bigger than Jerome, moving imperceptibly as the water gathered around it. Soon one drop of water, one particle of dirt would shift, and the precise balance holding it in place would fail.

The kobold dropped to the floor and screamed at Jerome, but she knew he couldn't hear her. She rushed into the pool until she was up to her neck in muddy water and tugged furiously at his feet, but she knew he couldn't feel her. Jerome's hammering reverberated through her bones,

and her heart drummed in rhythm with it, louder and louder until she felt dizzy. With every thump dirt leapt from the ceiling and danced off the floor. The beat raced. The tunnel whirled. Glinting flecks of silica cavorted in the air. The elemental chorus reached a crescendo in a single, unified note as Jerome's mallet struck the shovel one final time. A shudder went through the wall and up the ceiling, where the dirt broke loose and fell.

Jerome hesitated for less than a moment, then he scrambled up the tunnel. It was too late. The boulder crashed down on his ankles, mangling them. The kobold ran back and forth, pushing the boulder, pulling on his wrists with all her strength, but to no avail. Then she stopped. Jerome's eyes were wide, and he was staring directly at her. Somehow as the veil of this world lifted to reveal the next, he was able to see her. She crawled toward his face. He tried to speak, but his mouth was full of dirt and his chest was heaving. She placed her hands on his cheeks and sang softly to him as his headlamp flickered and failed. In the darkness she curled up beside his chest, listening to his heart as it slowed and then stopped. Her mind filled with darkness—here she would lay with him until his bones turned to dust. Until cobalt consumed her every molecule and there was nothing left but a fossil of her former self.

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Denis folded his school shirt and placed it next to the bag of flour inside his pack so it wouldn't get dirty at the river. The village's main street consisted of a few one-story concrete buildings along a dirt road, and there was little shade. He sweated through his undershirt as he ran down the path to the river, excited at the prospect of keeping a secret from his mother right before her eyes. When he reached the bank, he stopped to survey the scene. Women and children. But he understood his father's point—someday Denis would be a boss, own a shop in town and buy cobalt from the men instead of digging it himself. They would look at his polished boots and

gold watch with envy while he haggled with them. Maybe he would own more than one shop, maybe even a warehouse in the city. Next to it he would build a mansion for his parents.

A boy sprinted past him into the river straight toward Denis's mother, shouting wildly. Therese calmed the boy until she could understand him, and then a strange look crossed her face, black like an approaching thunderstorm on the horizon. She hastened toward Denis but kept moving past him.

"Denis, come—the mine!" she shouted at him.

Denis's pack slid off his shoulder, his shirt and the flour spilling onto the ground. The flour burst, covering his shins in puffs as though he was a giant rising above the clouds. But the clouds caked onto his muddy legs, and he was just a boy. He hesitated, staring at his shirt leeching water out of the dirt, turning from white to brown. Then he ran after his mother.

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A tremor disturbed the kobold from her sleep. She grumbled and settled deeper into the lingering warmth of Jerome's skin. Another tremor, closer. She did not want to be woken. Scrapes of metal against dirt. She did not want to be freed again. Shouting. She wanted to lie here with Jerome's body until she was no more. A beam of light, and a second and a third. Her eyes snapped open, and her heart quickened. She hastened away from Jerome's body as the men approached and she watched while they tried to revive him. She followed them as they carried him out of the tunnel, trudging through the pooled water. The air grew fresher until she felt a slight breeze. Then the sun set her retinas on fire, and her mind filled with blinding light.

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Denis arrived at the mine just after his mother. A circle of men stood around his father's body with slumped shoulders, limp arms and defeated looks. Therese shoved through them and threw herself on the body, took Jerome's face in her hands and pleaded with him.

"Jerome, wake up! Oh, wake up!" Therese's voice moaned.

She slapped him.

"You can't leave!" Her voice shouted.

She hit him with her fists.

"I told you to stay home! Damn you!" Her voice shrieked.

Suddenly red lightning in Therese's eyes exploded into a wildfire across her face. She grabbed a rock from the ground and dashed it against her chest again and again. Blue-black bruises spread over her skin. The men tried to stop her, and she flailed at them, hitting one of them in the temple and knocking him to the ground. Therese took the rock in both hands and slammed it against her forehead, screaming like an animal being slaughtered.

"Mama!" Denis cried and ran to her.

Therese whirled, her arm flying of its own accord. A sharp edge of the rock ripped across Denis's cheek and trickles of blood streamed down his face, garnet in the hot sunlight. The wildfire extinguished as quickly as it had started; Therese dropped the rock and stood immobile, looking at Denis as though the lightning had turned inward from her eyes and electrocuted her heart. She collapsed at his feet and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his waist.

An earthquake surged under Denis. His ears hummed and will-o-wisps flashed around the edges of his eyes. The quake rose through his feet, up his legs and into his torso, where its

dark-chocolate-veined fingers wrapped around his heart and squeezed. His stomach heaved and his vision darkened. Then suddenly the world stopped moving and came into sharp focus. Looking over his mother's head, past his father's body, he saw the kobold. She froze. There was no accusation in Denis's stare, no wrath. Only wonder, followed by recognition. The kobold's tiny body shook uncontrollably, and she fled. Denis looked down at his mother and gave the kobold no more thought.

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The kobold wandered among the mines, then sat in the mud until darkness seeped across the sky. Without thinking she rose and moved along the familiar path from the mine back to the family's cinderblock home. She waited outside the door. Late in the evening Denis returned, his cheek bound with stitches. He led Therese shuffling behind him.

The kobold thought Denis looked in her direction, but he didn't acknowledge her. She followed them inside and watched while Denis settled his mother on the mattress. Therese lay down with her face toward the rough concrete. Denis lay beside her and put his arm around her; she sobbed quietly. After a time, they exhausted themselves to sleep.

The kobold crouched in the far corner, her arms around her knees, her eyes on the floor. Deep into the night she stayed there. Her lips twitched as though she was muttering to herself, but she said nothing. Then she realized Denis had turned around. He was staring at her, his eyes hard with determination. He motioned toward her. She inched onto the mattress and lay beside his face, murmuring her secrets into his ear. Tomorrow, he would follow her to the cyan wildflowers and dig his broken-handled shovel into the ground.