

Theresa pushed open the hatch and dragged herself out onto the roof, blinking in the predawn light. She stood in sharp contrast to the world around her: black skin shining in the weak, fog-filtered light, her movements swift and precise beside the aimless meandering of half-frozen droplets, hung in the still morning air.

Once her eyes had adjusted, she set off along the catwalk running the ridge. The roof sloped away to either side, alternating slabs of sheet metal and solar panels plunging down to be lost in the fog. As she walked, her gown swirled around her legs, its red fabric billowing through the mist. It was not a practical garment for her morning rounds, but it was necessary, for she made these rounds not merely as Theresa, but as Theresa Above: Last Caretaker of the Grand Tahoma. The gown was one aspect of that role, that of representative, an affirmation of her and her home's grandeur. The rifle slung from her shoulder was the role's other aspect, the protector. And while the gown was in its way a prop — polyester velvet recut to match Theresa's 6'1" frame, its hem frayed, the aging plastic of its clasps cracking — the rifle was real enough.

She walked the length of the roof, 300 paces along the stamped metal catwalk, checking the equipment as she went. She looked down at the solar panels, ensuring they were clear and ready for the day. She inspected the ridgeline, looking out for damage that could grow to a leak. And every 50 feet she stopped at one of the combiners and held the contacts of her multimeter to its output. Even in this weak light there was already a trickle of current flowing back to the charge controller, and from there, 6 stories down to the battery bank.

All was well until the final combiner, mounted where the roof jutted out, prow-like, into the icy fog. There, with one contact on the live wire and the other grounded against the catwalk, the multimeter read 0 volts. Scowling, she knocked a thin layer of rime ice from the sheet metal housing and swung the cover open. Inside, she found the bird.

It lay still, nestled amongst the wires and circuits, its chest split open by the searing arch of electric current that had shorted through it, tripping 400 amps of fuses in the process. She pulled out the small body, inconceivably light in her hand, and wondered what act of desperation drove it to this God forsaken place, to die in a flash of light so far from the forests and meadows.

As she held the bird, a breath of wind eddied around her, ruffling the gray and brown feathers, and for a moment it was alive, stirring in her hand. But as the wind passed, so did the illusion of life, and the loss stung. She was sorry she could not have given it more, some aid in its journey. Shelter, at least, from the cold of night. But the time for that was past. So she would give it all she could, all it had left to accept. The vitri's gift: a memorial to outlast the mountains.

Theresa left the rooftop with the bird cupped in her hand. Below the trapdoor, a flight of utilitarian metal stairs descended a dim shaft, lit by only a few low-amp emergency lights. Each footfall clattered on the stair's surface, echoing and reechoing off the walls, the racket swelling with each new step until she reached the bottom and pushed open the heavy door to the foyer.

Here, her footfalls were against slabs of ersatz marble, and the echos returned 2 seconds later, attenuated by their journey. Above her, the rafters were lost in darkness. Below, the Grand Staircase — a sweeping spiral of marble and decorative pressed metal — plunged into shadows unbroken yet by pale light seeping in from the East. Her sculptures hung in the stair's cavernous well, twisted silhouettes against the coming dawn.

She brought the bird to her study, a small room east of the upper landing. The room lit up as she entered, half a dozen lamps switching on in her presence, throwing shadows off the carved faces of post-modernist revival furniture. A bookcase loomed in one corner, filled to the top with hard cover novels, chosen for their aesthetics more than their content. An imposing walnut desk filled the center of the room, its high-backed office chair set towards the east-facing windows. Dozens of paintings hung from the walls: masterworks of Monet, Van Gogh, and Picasso forged to the nanometer by the best art fabs the last decade's money could buy. It had all been here when Theresa arrived, left to crumble into dust and mildew.

She kept the desk clear of all but the essentials. A drafting lamp crouched on the right side of the surface. A row of mason jars stood along the back, each filled with a colorful powder, like a rainbow ground into fine dust. In the leftmost corner sat a framed photo of a boy in California Republican Army fatigues. He smiled at the camera, warmth radiating from his light blue eyes. A dog tag slipped in with the photo had slid to the bottom of the frame, hiding all but the engraved title. Pvt. Dillon McAvoy.

She set the bird's lifeless body on the desk but did not immediately sit. Instead, she went to the hearth, for it was there, hidden behind a loose brick, that she kept the vitri. The hiding place was absurd, she knew. If the Consortium ever found out she had a vitri — the last vitri — a loose brick would give them no trouble. But it was the principle of the thing. She had promised to keep it safe, and she kept her promises.

The vitri lived in a 4oz mason jar, the lid screwed on to keep out the dust. It was the same jar it was in when Rattlesnake gave it to her, perhaps the same jar it had been in when he stole it — liberated it — from Veraform. It was still now, hardened in the base of the jar to a metallic grey lump, but when she placed it by the window, in the strengthening morning light, the vitri seemed to stir, its surface rippling and flowing as if blown by a wind she could not feel.

It would be a while before the vitri was ready, so Theresa returned to the bird. She studied the still form, memorizing every feather, every gray speckle. The long curve of its wing, and the sharp point of its beak. She unfolded its wings and set them to either side of the body, spread for a final flight. Then, sure of her intention, she returned to the vitri.

It had changed in the sun, melting to flow like mercury in the jar. Silver veins slipped across its surface, roiled by an irrepressible internal energy. She upended the jar and the fluid spilled out on the desktop, but it did not splash or flow away. Instead, the vitri clung together in a disk the size of her palm, and when she touched it, it deformed beneath her fingers but stayed intact.

Theresa didn't know how it worked, but over a thousand lonely nights, she had learned how to work it as she did now: lifting it from the table in a motion so slow it almost seemed she didn't move, drawing it upward, inch by painstaking inch, through the air. And wherever she drew it, the air itself crystallized, transforming with the vitri's passage into a glass clear and hard as diamond.

Her deft hands shaped it, forming the vitri's shining layer as it rose, pulling it into a flared tail, a beaked head, a pair of wings. Near the top, she took pinches of colored powders from the jars and sprinkled them on to the vitri. They passed through its silvery surface to meld with the glass forming below, coloring the ochre wings, the yellow beak, the small black eyes, and with a final flourish, she pulled the vitri away, her work complete.

Before her lay the bird remade. Its wings swept upwards to catch the still air, its head raised in joyous song. She realized then she made it no feet. But perhaps that was for the best. This bird would never again come to land.

The sun had risen, its rays boiling away the fog to pour into the foyer through windows that rose 5 stories, from the flagstones of the entrance to the steel beams of the roof. They fell on the wide marble steps of the Grand Stair, curving regally upwards in a spiral a hundred feet in diameter, and they spilled through the air within that spiral, where the sculptures hung.

There were hundreds of them — Theresa long ago lost the exact count — sculptures of glass formed by the vitri. Each a unique product of the day, or days, or sometimes mere minutes in which she had pulled them from thin air. Some were abstract and oblong, smooth gradients of color within smooth curves. Others were crystal clear geometric shapes, sharp edges glittering in the sun. All hung from thin filaments of fiber running to the high ceiling above, swinging with every breath of wind that passed through the hallway, and with each sway, setting the morning light in motion. Splitting it, bending it, casting it into a thousand points of dancing iridescence.

For a long time Theresa stood, watching the light, trying to imagine where the bird should hang. But the task eluded her. There were many dark things caught in the glass. Anger, grief and resentment poured into their forming. But never anything so concrete as a death, the last moment of a once living creature, sealed in glass. It was too heavy to decide then. But for her, that was no problem. Up here, there was nothing but time.

With long, unhurried steps, she crossed the landing, and began down the stairs, stopping at the furthest point of its spiral to look out at the world. Above, the sky was the clearest blue, the very possibility of clouds scoured away in the morning's heat. Below, there was nothing but the endless layer of smoke. It had been building since July, and now, a week into September, it consumed the lowlands in its choking embrace. It had been a month since she'd seen even the dulled lights of Seattle winking up at her. She could still pick up radio stations from the metro, but not many now, as the spectrum was given over to full-digital comms: high bands, bot control links and feed outs she couldn't decipher. A conversation at 50 GHz, spoken in the staccato language of machines.

Only the mountains remained for her, the jagged spires of the Cascade Range rising through the billowing smoke. The dragon fangs of the American continent. But this vista of desolation gave her no hope, and it gave her no answers, so she turned: back to the morning rounds the bird's appearance interrupted. But, as she did, the premonition came: a twinge of wrongness she hadn't felt since Los Angeles. The inexplicable raising of hair before the ambush, the itching at the back of the mind a split second before the air raid siren wailed.

She scanned the scene before her, straining her eyes in the morning sun. For a moment she thought she was imagining things, thrown off by the strange start to her day. But then she saw them: two figures, cresting an icy ridge. As yet, specs in the distance. But coming closer.

With a single fluid motion, Theresa slipped the rifle from her shoulder.