
Touching Fire

by Nicola Griffith

That summer I was working nights at Talulah's to pay the rent until school opened again in the fall. It was Wednesday night, getting on time to close, and there was one woman left, nursing a beer over in the corner under the bass speaker. She was small, asian-dark, her dusty black hair cut in spikes and not an ounce of fat on her, but not frail, definitely not frail.

I had to ask her to move her feet so I could get the mop under the table.

"My name's Nadia," she said, "and I'm a National Treasure."

"Right," I said, because the customer always is.

She moved her legs, anyhow. And finished off her beer. Then she looked around like she hadn't seen the place before. It was hard to tell what she thought of it. Talulah's is better than some places, worse than others. I've seen plenty of women's bars, though, and I like this one. On nights when I'm here as a paying customer and the women are high-stepping, flashing lean muscle and white teeth, and the floor almost moves with the weight of the music, it's a fine place, a place of possibility and excitement. But now, with the music down low, and the people paired off and gone, the harsh overhead light showed puddles of spilled beer on the floor, and stains on the wall.

"Thursdays are the best," I offered, leaning on my mop. "And of course, I'll be here then." I gave her my best smile.

That's when she pushed back her chair and looked at me. Her eyes were very dark brown. Black maybe. "How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Trust a stranger. You shouldn't."

"It's never done me any harm."

Her smile was strange, twisty and self-mocking. "I do believe you mean that. You trust me." She said it slowly, like she was tasting it. Then she nodded once, sharply. "Trust for trust then. But when the time comes, just make sure my guards don't see you talking to me."

Drugs, I thought, but she didn't look like she used. Too healthy. "Guards?"

"Privacy isn't one of the privileges of a National Treasure."

Then she slid out of her chair like she was made of oiled snake, not woman, and left.

That night I lay awake in my efficiency, thinking of the way she moved, of her black eyes, of her voice skating through several different layers at once, like ocean currents.



Thursday, she was back. She was wearing black, the same dusty charcoal black as her hair. It made her skin look warm and rich, like cello wood. I slipped out from behind the bar and took a couple of beers to her table.

"You didn't get my name last time," I said, and put a beer in front of her. "I'm Kate." I held out my hand. She turned away, pretending she hadn't seen it.

"Go," she said, not looking at me. "My guards are here."

"Oh?" I glanced round, casually. "Where?" Sometimes if you humor people, they quit.

Not Nadia.

“Over by the pool table. Two of them. Earrings, short hair. One has beer, the other a shot glass.” She’d just described the entire clientele. But she wasn’t finished. “They’re both wearing loose jackets. They have guns.”

If she didn’t want me at her table she just had to say so. But the thing was, I think she did want me there. I stayed.

She watched the dance floor for a minute. “Meet me in the bathroom in five minutes,” then she got up to play the pinball machine.

I served a couple of people, and kept watch on the two women by the pool table. Their faces were in shadow, but one had an outwardly bent little finger, like it had been broken and badly set. They didn’t even glance at Nadia.

In the bathroom, Nadia was by the mirror, standing with feet wide and balanced, hands relaxed, but I could tell she was humming with tension. Even in the harsh neon, she was beautiful.

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” she said.

I didn’t, either.

She spread lean hands, as though offering something. “My name is Nadia Amin. I’m a National Treasure because I’m a LAOM dancer. The only one. I’m here in Atlanta because I’m helping Kyoto-TEC with their latest ad campaign. And when I’m not filming the commercials I’m working with a research team to figure out why I’m the only one who can do it.”

“Do what?”

“The dance.” She was impatient, but I didn’t understand a word.

“Look,” I said, “I’m a communication systems major. I don’t know anything about larm dancing. Is that like ballet?”

Her hands curled, like claws. “L.A.O.M.,” she said, “Light

Activated Orchestral Machines. I dance them.” She must have seen my bewilderment. “They work by laser. I arrange them on a stage, dance through the beams of light, activating them to make music.”

That sounded interesting. “Like those musician robot computers from Taiwan?”

“No. These are actual musical instruments. They’re not pre-programmed.”

I’d worked with light before, semester before last. It’s tricky stuff. Every flicker of movement alters the parameters. “That’s impossible.”

Her smile was a slow slide of lips back from teeth. “Not for me. But as I said, I’m the only one.”

That smile made me nervous. “You said you were a National Treasure. I didn’t know they could apply that to people.”

“They couldn’t. Until now. I was a, ah, guest of the state, but Kyoto-TEC got wind of what I could do and hired some very good lawyers. They argued I was unique, and valuable, a national resource to whom normal rules should not apply.” Again, that slow slide of lips. “Maybe they bribed the judge. Anyway, she agreed to bind me over to Kyoto-TEC. So here I am.”

“Yes,” I said, cautiously, not knowing where that was, exactly.

“They’ve got a lot of money invested in me. And I’m unique. They do everything for me, give me anything I ask for.”

She had no responsibilities. Like a child. I couldn’t really imagine how it might be to live like that. “Is that what the guards are for, then? To make sure you stay safe?”

Her laugh clattered around the cold shiny spaces of the bathroom like a thrown knife, and I remembered she was a dancer, and dancers are very strong. She took hold of my arm. “You really shouldn’t trust me,” she said softly, then walked out into the dark

and slam of the bar.

I stayed to wash my face and try understand what the hell was going on.

When I got back out, she was gone. So were the two women by the pool table.



My apartment is five flights up. At night, when I'm tired, they're hell to climb, and I swear I'll look for a first floor apartment in the morning. But in the mornings I always relent: I'd taken the room because of the view. There's nothing like watching dawn come up over Piedmont Park, turning the trees to peach and orange and gold. Not that I'm often awake at that time.

Monday morning I was: Nadia was sitting at the end of my bed. She held out a DVD, between two fingers.

"I thought you might like to watch me dance."

"Christ..." I levered myself onto my elbow. She was still there; it was still dawn.

She smiled. "You look very soft when you're asleep. Very vulnerable."

She was wearing midnight blue, and her lips looked like plums. I waited, fascinated by those lips, too confused to ask questions. She leaned forward, slowly. I couldn't take my eyes off her mouth. She laid the disk on my chest. I clutched it to me, still stupid with sleep. "I don't have a player."

Nadia turned, looked around the bare white walls. She'd probably spent more money getting her hair cut than I had furnishing the whole efficiency. "No TV either."

"Where are your bodyguards, anyway?"

"Everywhere." She stood up, sleepy lidded, like a cat, rocking my bed, sending my hormone count sky-high. She leaned over me

again, and tapped the disk I was still clutching to my chest. “I’ll leave that for you.”

She slung me a smile over her shoulder as she opened the door and stepped through. The locks clicked shut behind her.

It was only then that I wondered how she’d known where to find me, and how the hell she’d gotten in. You really shouldn’t trust me....



Two and a half hours later the super banged on my door. “Package for you downstairs.”

“I’ll get it later.”

“Came by special delivery. You gotta sign for it. Guys are waiting.”

He sounded like one of those phone sex ads: Call Now, Guys Are Waiting. How could I resist? “I’m coming.”



It was an HDTV flat panel, with DVD player and surround sound home theatre system.

“I can’t pay for this!” I said to the three men in overalls.

“Shipping bill says ‘pre-paid,’ lady. You want it or not?”

It was a Kyoto-TEC shipping bill. Nadia. But how had she done it so fast? And why? I thought about her crazy laugh, and bodyguards with guns.

“Lady...” They were getting impatient.

I nodded. “Follow me.”



The screen went from black to white letterbox: an unmoving shot of a white walled room with bare boards polished by age and countless generations of dancing feet. What looked like seven unfinished metal barrels, each a different girth and height, squatted on the floor

in a huge irregular circle. Thick cables ran back from each and disappeared off screen. Nadia was tinkering with the insides of the leftmost barrel; she straightened abruptly, flicked a switch. A red eye glowed on the closed panel. She moved to the next. The camera remained fixed on the centre of the circle. The red light lit on the second. She went to the third.

A neat line of print appeared in the lower right corner of the screen: Day two: initial assessment performance with Kyoto-TEC prototype LAOM's.

I could tell by the way she walked that her muscles would feel tight under her skin, coiled, ready. Pre-performance nerves.

By now, red glowed on six of the seven barrels. Nadia leaned, flicked the switch on the last one and stepped to the middle of the circle. Her feet were bare. She wore the same dusty black as the second time she'd come to Talulah's, and no jewellery. Her hair was longer than I was used to seeing it, and she looked tired and tense: maybe it was she who was being assessed, not the machines.

She raised her arms. The light in the studio dimmed, and each of the seven barrels suddenly splayed dozens, hundreds of ribbons of light up and out, like straight-line fountain water. At first it looked like white light, but it wasn't, not quite. One barrel poured with ivory, another with sepia, a third shimmered like a heat haze over sand.

Nadia stayed immobile, in the exact center of the ring, black clothes untouched by light. She was smiling faintly, her skin sheened with sweat, breathing even; not nervous now, just ready.

I'd never seen anyone move like Nadia did. One moment she was standing there like she'd been carved from wood a hundred years dead, the next she leapt away in a twirling half turn, slashing her arms down through several beams of different coloured light,

flick flick flick, faster than I could follow, making music. Every time her hair, or a fingertip or a crease of her clothes, the heel of her left foot or the thrust of a knee or hip went through light, there was a sound. Nadia kept moving, and the music poured from the barrels: tubular bells and violas, french horns and African drums: sampled music, like a light-operated Fairlight Series IV. Only instead of taking sampled and digitally stored music that had already been programmed into coherent sequences and then manipulating the waveform using a light pen, she was doing it all simultaneously, with her body, using dance to make music. It was like watching a shuttle liftoff: impossible, but happening right before your eyes.

It was fast music, sun-on-dragonfly music; music like the thousand and one nodding flowers in a field and the flyers and burrowers that played above and below ground. Light-hearted music, but complex, with the rhythms of life and death: computer-aided Grieg, or Camel with violins; marvellous music, intoxicating. And creating it, spinning in it, sweat flying from her skin and making its own, little music, was Nadia: charcoal tunic and trousers stained black in patches, hair slicked down to her scalp and half-smile gone, replaced by utter concentration. I could see and hear the work going into the music: muscles bunched and stretched, her bare feet thumped on the boards, breath whistled. For a few seconds, half a minute maybe, she hit her groove, and the dancing and music came together in a perfect, symbiotic pattern. Her sheened arms slid and swam through the light like fish, faster, faster, and the bass and treble, the horns and strings and woodwind all fit together in an intricate jigsaw making me laugh out loud at the wonder of it. But then she put a foot too far forward and the cello sound faltered, and the synergy of movement and sound was lost; once again, it was just a woman dancing beautifully, making marvellous music.

The screen blanked, cutting off picture and sound mid-bar.

I blinked, took a shaky breath. So that was LAOM dancing. I picked up the remote, wanting to watch it all again, in slow motion, but the screen flicked white again. More?

This time the lettering came up first: Day 163, Performance, Mark III Kyoto-TEC LAOM's. Five or six months later, then. And this time they had a real camera operator on the job: a pan shot of the LAOM's first, eight of them now, seven arranged in a squashed-looking circle, the eighth off-centre. They weren't the crude things of the Day 2, either: these were beautifully finished machines, wooden cases gleaming with soft polish, plates made of burnished high-tensile alloys.

Nadia stood, ready: not the tired, tense woman-under-trial of Day 2, but a different Nadia.

She was wearing arterial red; there were long feathers hanging from one ear, and the fingers of both hands were tipped with razor-blade extensions of dull gray metal. Around her right ankle was a thick ring with a spike on the outside. The quality of her waiting was different, too: not an absence, but a presence. She brooded, like a caged animal, like a storm building on the horizon; a creature of brass and blood. I expected her to slide back her lips from red teeth and hiss.

The LAOM's suddenly spread their fingers of light--jungle colours this time, purples and golds and turquoise--like exotic pine-apples sprouting spikes of virulent greenery. Nadia moved her head, letting the feather in her left ear swing out and touch a turquoise ribbon: a parrot cawed. She moved her head again; the parrot screamed over the thumping start of a deep heartbeat. The camera pulled back its focus: Nadia's foot was tapping deliberately, the spike cutting back and forth through a low gold stream of light.

Then she turned, fast as a panther stalking, and the music came pouring forth.

It was murder music, heat-and-sex music, and Nadia was leaping, whirling, sliding and tricking her way through those thousands of frozen Roman candle lights. She never once missed the heartbeat. Wherever she was, at whatever speed, that footspike came down dead on the beat, every time, over and over.

I could hardly breathe.

She reached and sliced through hot ruby and hummingbird blue with her metal-tipped fingers, and the ribbons of light from two LAOM's began to rotate. She moved faster and faster, but, paradoxically, everything seemed to slow down, become perfectly defined. Each note, each layer of music was absolutely separate from the rest; each beat seemed to have all the time in the world to swell and crest and ebb, then swell and sound again. My heart was thumping and I wanted to shout, or scream, or die. I felt on the edge of something profound.

And the sound and the dance built, and Nadia's ankle spike never missed a beat, only now she was using her fingertips and her feathers and the flick and swirl of her diaphanous trousers to create counter beats, and rhythm upon rhythm upon rhythm.

It was only when the screen blanked again, releasing me, that I found I was crushing the remote control in my hands, bruising my palms; that I was able to cry. I sat on the couch for fifteen or twenty minutes, coughing up sobs from deep places I never even knew I had. Nadia had ripped something away, torn aside the veil we normally wear every day to survive in the city. She made me smell life, feel it, touch it, taste it. She made me want...something. Something more, much more than I had now. She had made me see that there was more to life than just existing the best I could day by day. Life

was to be lived; to be taken and shaken and sucked dry, used up. Every moment was precious. I wanted to reach out and touch her fire, bathe in it, be clothed by it.

Life. Nadia made me ache for it, fiercely, from my bones out. But inside I was scared, as well as excited: there was never adventure without risk.



Monday and Tuesday nights Talulah's stays closed, so they're my lazy days, my weekend. I spent the rest of Monday doing errands: stocking up on food, doing my laundry, the usual stuff. Every so often, vacuum cleaner going, or plate halfway to the sink, I'd pause and look over at the huge entertainment center that took up more space than my kitchenette, and wonder: Why? And that, of course, was closely followed by: How? How had Nadia found out where I lived? She didn't even know my last name--at least, I hadn't told her. And how had she managed to get everything here so fast? And that all led back to why. Why was she doing this?

You really shouldn't trust me.

And then, of course, I'd have to put the plate down or turn off the vacuum cleaner, and play the disk again, just to reassure myself that I'd seen what I'd seen.

I slept badly that night, and my sleep was full of erotic dreams of a feral and primordial Nadia, a Nadia without inhibition.

I woke up Tuesday almost as tired as when I'd gone to sleep, and with my body giving me unmistakable signals that now it knew exactly what it yearned after. I sighed. I had to do something about this.



My laptop was ancient, a hand-me-down from Mom, with dysfunctional battery backup and zero compatibility with any known

modem. So I stuck a disk in my pocket and took the MARTA train downtown to the main Fulton County reference library.

I read first about research trends in computer-assisted composition. Nothing unexpected there: lots of gabble about Fairlights and courtcases pertaining to digital sampling and copyright, and one tiny article in an obscure journal about the possibilities of adapting computers so that physically challenged people could use light to compose music. There was a counter-article detailing why such light-parametered composition computers would, in practice, be impossible to use. I checked the author of the first article and found he worked at Columbia, in the music and computer labs sponsored by Kyoto-TEC. Ah hah. The article was dated two years ago. Nothing since then. Just as Nadia said: new stuff, and the prevailing opinion was that it simply couldn't be done. But Kyoto-TEC had watched the work done in their laboratory and decided differently.

Next, I looked up National Treasure provisions and precedent-setting court cases. There it was, under Decisions: Kyoto-TEC v. US Govt., and the date was about right, seven months ago. Jackpot. I downloaded the abstract.

I ran a search for *Amin, Nadia + interview* and found two articles that were relevant. The first was nothing much, just a paragraph in the Seattle Times about three students graduating with double honors at the University of Washington. Nadia was one of them, majoring in dance and music theory. The second was more interesting.

It was dated eight months after the first--and ten after the piece I'd read earlier on the Kyoto-TEC lab researcher's theories. According to the paper, Nadia Amin, a promising young student enrolled at the Seattle Academy of Performing Arts, had blown the entire electrical system of the Gardner Annex while trying to perform

something she called “Zeus and Semele: An Exercise in Light Composition.”

I looked at the color image of the gutted annex for a long time. Now I knew that it was at least possible for Nadia to be who she said she was. I was looking forward to getting home and reading the abstract of the court case, to finding out just what it took to be declared a National Treasure as opposed to a National Menace.



When I got home there was a message on my machine from my mother, reminding me that today was my father’s birthday and I was supposed to be going over for dinner with the rest of the family. I’d forgotten of course. I dropped the disk on my couch and sprinted for the shower.



On Wednesday I woke up well after midday to the hot, still air of a coming storm. My skin felt tight and I had a headache; the room was stifling. I decided to risk overloading the ancient electrical circuits and turned on my window air conditioner to cool the room.

I always find it hard to concentrate before a storm.

After I’d spent an unnecessary hour puttering about with breakfast and watching local news on my HDTV, I finally got dressed and settled down with my laptop and the abstract of the court case.

I couldn’t understand the first couple of pages at all, gobbledygook, all of it: lists of obscure statutes and indictment codes, and lots of wherases and hereinafters. The air conditioner was laboring, making my head thump. I frowned and concentrated, and around page five the words began to make sense.

The judge, one Honorable Harriet Thurman, agreed to admit the testimony of expert witness Dr. Schubert Macillvaney, psychiatrist. Macillvaney assured the court that Nadia Amin was not usually dan-

gerous, except in certain, already described circumstances, and that in his opinion there would be no danger to the public should she be released into the custody of Kyoto-TEC, as long as stringent prec--

The AC coughed once, horribly, and the current in my apartment died. The words on my screen blipped out.

I sat in the suddenly dark room and stared at my blank screen. Released into the custody... What had Nadia done? Blown up another academy?

You really shouldn't trust me. I thought of her shiny laughter that night at Talulah's; her talk of bodyguards and guns; how she had found me, found my apartment, bypassed the locks, sat on my bed. But I also remembered the way she had leaned forward, so close; the way she moved, oh god the way she moved....

Finally, the level of darkness in the apartment got through to me: it wasn't just the gathering storm, it was getting late. I scribbled a note for the Super about my burned out fuses, and left for work.



Talulah gave me some hard looks; I rang up the wrong money several times, and twice kept customers waiting while I stared off into space, thinking of Nadia with her ankle spike and metal fingernails, the way she curved and arched, her blood red lips...

The women were restless tonight, and Jenny the DJ played strange, hard music with a driving slow beat. The air shimmered with tension and heat. We sold more shots of tequila and vodka that night than any other Wednesday since the fourth of July three years ago. I got bought a few, too, and drank them down eagerly, as though the clear liquid might give me some answers.

Nadia came in a little after midnight. I'd been waiting for her of course. She was wearing diaphanous dark red pants and shirt through which showed her dancer's shadowed curves. I could

almost feel those strong muscles under my hands, and wondered whether if I ran my fingers down her silky calves I'd find a metal spike around her ankle. I turned away as she found a table near the dance floor, and served two women who had just come in. They ordered beer. When the taller one reached out to pay, I noticed her little finger was bent. They both wore jackets, even though it was hot. I swallowed, gave them change. They nodded and took stools at the bar. Where they could watch Nadia.

"Think I'll go round up the empties, see if I can scare up some more orders," I said casually to Talulah. She gave me another of those hard looks, but nodded.

I hit four tables before Nadia's, trotted back and forth with more shot glasses of vodka and tequila. When I thought the bodyguards weren't looking, I cruised up behind Nadia.

"A drink, ma'am?"

She looked up with those sleepy-lidded eyes, those dangerous, gorgeous eyes. She smiled, and I knew she knew I'd watched her dance. She could probably smell it on me. "A drink, yes." Her eyes flickered to the jacketed women at the bar and back. I nodded that I'd noticed them. "Bring me a surprise," she said, and turned away.

I took her a shot glass of Prairie Fire: tequila with seven drops of tabasco sauce. She swallowed it down without looking at me. "Bring me another." I brought her another. She watched the women on the dance floor moving belly to back, and drank it down as fast as the first. "Now you can watch me dance."

She stood up, still without looking at me, and walked onto the floor, moving through the heaving crowd with an easy reach-the-rhythm step that wasn't either syncopated or bang on the beat like a march. Then she danced.

At first she seemed to be more or less standing still, but her hips

were moving, slowly, and she began to run her hands up and down the air before her. Now and again she moved a leg slightly, bending out at the knee, easily, to the music. Then her hands moved, one down, one stroking the air between throat and belly level, up and down. She looked at me then, and smiled, and I blushed a hot, deep red.

Here, she was saying, this is what I'll do to you when I take you to bed.

I couldn't bear it, I wanted her so much, but I couldn't turn away: I stood there, trembling, helpless.

The music changed, and a woman with long hair started dancing at Nadia, who laughed and danced back, ignoring me. I wanted to kill that woman with long hair. I pushed my way through the crowds and out an emergency side door exit into the parking lot.

The night tasted of cars driven too fast and braked too hard, of beer and fragile laughter, of one o'clock in the morning. The sky was dark and thick with thunderclouds. There was a flash in the west, and a low rumble. Sultry, restless weather.

Music blared loud and was cut off again as someone stepped out into the night. I didn't turn, but tilted my head back to watch the stormcloud bunching and heaving like overheated muscle.

A hand touched the back of my neck. Nadia. The hand slid around to stroke my throat. "Let's go," she said in my ear, and, god help me, I went, just like that, without telling Talulah, without even thinking of telling Talulah, without thinking of the court case or Nadia's admonitions not to trust her. I walked to my car, her hand still on my neck, without saying a word, without thinking at all.



The rain started on the way back to my apartment, fat ripe drops. I wanted to drive fast, but Nadia laid a hand on my thigh and I kept

the speedometer exactly at thirty. No dark sedan followed us. My blood felt like molten metal.



At the apartment building, we still didn't speak. Our breathing matched, heavy and rhythmic, as we climbed the five flights of stairs. When we reached the top, Nadia stroked the back of my neck with one hand and tapped in my lock code with the other. We went in.

The power was still off, but the bed sheets shone sodium yellow in the glow of streetlights reflected from rain wet streets. Nadia watched, unspeaking, her face in shadow, as I undressed. I felt as though I was stripping off my history, my inhibitions, my safety. This was right here, right now, like playing with fulminate of mercury. I didn't know what to expect. All I knew was that I wanted her to run a fingertip through the sweat in the small of my back, I wanted her to hold me with those strong arms and iron legs, I wanted her breath hot on my face as her lips came closer. I wanted her, wanted her, wanted her.



Hours later, Nadia stood naked by the open window, watching the night. I lay across the bed, fascinated by her, drunk with her, surfeited, stuffed tight as a drum with sweat and sex and the memory of skin between gentle teeth, of strong fingers, and her belly on my back and arm around my hips.

When the storm had been over the roof over Nadia over me over the bed, the rain had been so heavy it had leaked through the old roof tiles, seeping down inside the walls, mixing with the plaster made of red Georgia clay, making the whitewashed walls weep blood.

That had been hours ago. The storm was gone now, and all that remained of the rain were dripping gutters and the glisten on the

treetops in Piedmont Park. The streets were quiet; it was not long before dawn.

“At this time of night,” she said, “I can almost believe it would be possible to fall out of a high window and be buoyed up by the darkness itself, that we could fly.” She turned back to look at me, and the breath caught in my throat. “Do you believe in flying?”

Yes. But I couldn’t speak. She had made me fly for hours; I had soared. I couldn’t see her face, but I knew she smiled. She moved a step towards the bed, and though the streetlights reflected from below turned her eye the mad marigold of a hawk’s, and I was scared, my blood roared hot under my skin, and the tendons running inside my thighs tightened in anticipation. She laughed, a low double-cream laugh. “Perhaps you would like me to come a little closer?”



I woke up the next day, alone. The window was closed. I sat up. Had I dreamed it? But the walls were streaked with plaster blood, the sheets were torn, and the room smelled of her, my hands and my hair and belly smelled of her. I laughed out loud: pleased with myself; a little ashamed; exhausted.

There was a yellow sticky note on the TV screen: Three o’clock, in the park.

A typically Nadia note. No Please or Thank you or Can you make it?



The power was still off and I was showering in the dark when someone knocked on the door. I didn’t much feel like getting out all wet, so I ignored the tapping and turned the spray up to full force. If they knocked again, I wouldn’t hear it.

I soaped myself absently, shivering as I remembered Nadia’s

hands, the way she had touched the back of my neck and said, “Let’s go.”

How was I going to persuade Talulah to let me keep my job? I couldn’t believe I’d just walked out like that, without telling her.

I sighed and rinsed off, pulled a towel off the rack. I needed that job. Perhaps Talulah would believe a sudden case of ptomaine poisoning, a night in the emergency room.... I padded through into the main room, toweling myself dry.

There was a woman staring at the stained wall.

Obviously she had just let herself in: the door was still swinging closed. She spun around when she heard me. Crooked Finger.

“Oh,” she said, looking at me, then the wall. “Then it’s not....” She shut up, but not before I heard the relief in her voice.

I stood there, naked and confused. “What’s not what?”

She sidled toward the door.

“Wait,” I said. Some of my shock was wearing off, but not the confusion. “What are you doing here?” She opened the door. I noticed the gloves. “Wait just a goddamned minute--”

She bolted through the door, slammed it shut behind her.

I stared at it blankly, then leaped after her. “You stop right there!” But she was disappearing down the third flight of stairs. I swore, and started after her. Old Mr. Hinklemeier popped his head out of his door, and his eyes bugged. I was still naked.

Damn everything to hell and back.



Nadia was by the lake, feeding the ducks. I watched her for a while from the trees. She threw bread like she did everything else: with utter concentration, a kind of ferocity that did not allow for interruption. The ducks didn’t care. They swam around and around, performing for their supper.

I stepped out of the trees, enjoyed the way her pupils blazed big for a moment when she saw me. Mine, I thought with that absurd proprietorship of the day after, and smiled.

She smiled back, and the day suddenly seemed brighter, cleaner. “Watch this,” she said, and threw a single big piece of bread into the centre of the swimming ducks. One of the smaller ones, a mallard with a green head and flashing eye, thrust its way through the squabbling covey and snatched the bread. “He does that every time.” She sounded admiring.

“Why not just throw smaller pieces, so they can all have some?”

“I like to watch them fight.”

She gave me some bread, and we threw it in companionable silence for a few minutes. I did my best to make sure all the ducks got some.

We walked slowly around the water. Two men followed us at a discreet distance. “Are they watching us?”

Nadia did not even look over to see who I meant. “Someone’s always watching me.”

“They weren’t at Talulah’s, that first time.” Or last night, in my apartment.

“That was special. It was my birthday,” and she stooped to pick up a stone which she tossed into the water.

She had been all alone that night, just her and five empty beer glasses and the end of an evening. Her birthday. I wanted to gather her up in my arms, but she was standing so straight and staring out over the water with such concentration that I didn’t.

“There was one in my apartment, earlier. One of the women that came into Talulah’s last night.” She didn’t turn, but a shift in her shoulders told me she was very interested. “She must have thought

there was no one home. I'd just come out of the shower, stark naked, and we stared at each other. I don't know who was more surprised, her or me."

Now Nadia was looking at me. I could see the pleats in her brown-black eyes, pleats I had noticed for the first time last night when she had been moving over me, running her...

"Did she say anything?"

"Um? Oh, no, not really. Just looked at me, looked at the wall, and bolted."

I hadn't realized Nadia had been tense until her muscles relaxed and she turned back to look over the water, relieved.

"Nadia, what's going on? I don't understand any of this. First of all, you tell me not to trust you. Then guards with guns follow us about the place." I took her hand, trying to get rid of the awful fear that was suddenly hauling itself up my spine, one vertebra at a time. "They should know by now that you're safe with me, that I'm not some corporate assassin. I mean, what are these guards afraid of? And what are you afraid of? I really don't get this." Crooked Finger hadn't seemed upset to see me. If anything, she'd been relieved. "I don't like it. I'm not used to people letting themselves into my apartment as and when they feel like it. Even you."

Nadia didn't say anything. I sighed, and tugged her over to a bench. We sat down.

"Talk to me about this." Silence. "At least tell me how you did it, how you knew where to find me in the first place. How you managed to get through my locks."

She tilted her head back, stretched. The sunshine turned her throat to gold. "I told you: they give me everything I want; I have access to more than you can possibly imagine. As for finding you, that was easy. Kyoto-TEC have unofficial tendrils in every pie.

I accessed the local IRS database and found there was only one employee at Talulah's whose first initial was K. So getting your last name was simple. Then I scanned the phone company's information for your address. Easy."

Just accessed the IRS database. Easy. Right. "What about the lock?"

"It's made by Kyoto-TEC. I found out what model it was, then asked one of the designers to show me how to compromise it."

Just like that. I wondered if she had any moral scruples at all. Like a child, she could have something, so she took it, right or wrong. And like a child she refused responsibility for what she did.

Children are notoriously fickle.

"I'd like a number where I can get in touch with you."

"I can reach you easily enough."

"I know. But I'd like a number. Just in case."

Nadia looked at me. "You don't understand," she said finally. Damn right I didn't. "I'm at everyone's beck and call, all the time. They whistle and I have to jump. I wanted, want, to have someone who won't do that to me, where I'm in charge."

"It doesn't have to be either or," I said, and took her hand again. "And you have rights. You could make them give you time for yourself, privacy, like you did on your birthday."

"That was different. They gave me the time because they were desperate: I wasn't able to work anymore." She took her hand away. "Have you ever seen a swan with a lead fishing weight around its neck, choking? That was me. I couldn't dance, I couldn't fly with them wrapped around my neck like that. So they let me have a night, one night."

"Two nights," I said, and kissed her hand. She said nothing. "No?"

“Depends how long it took them to find out who you are, where you live. What time they managed to track us down.”

I imagined Crooked Finger and her colleague crouching by the door, listening to my abandonment, and felt naked and furious. I wanted to march over to the two men standing by the lake and bang their heads together. But underneath my anger was the nagging feeling that I was missing something, something important.

“So,” she said, “I’d like you to trust me. It’s important that someone does. Trust me enough not to ask for my number.”

I understood the need for privacy. The thought of never having it was appalling. If it was that important to her...

I nodded. She smiled at me, then blinked that lazy-lidded blink that sent desire curling through my belly. “Let’s go back to your apartment,” she said.



“I’ll see you tonight or tomorrow night,” she said as she left, three hours later.

It took me thirty minutes to summon up the energy to climb off the bed, but then I hurried: I still had to persuade Talulah to let me keep my job, and it wouldn’t do to be late.



Talulah didn’t believe my story, but forgave me anyway. The evening passed slowly. Nadia didn’t come.

I climbed my five flights slowly, half expecting to find her in my apartment when I got there. Hope springs eternal.

For the first time since I’d rented it a year ago, the apartment seemed bleak and empty. At least the power was back on. The laptop blinked at me. I was tired, and hungry, but all the food in the refrigerator had spoiled. Tomorrow. I’d deal with everything tomorrow.

I touched the stain on the wall and climbed into bed. The sheets smelled of her.



The reporter turned away from the rain streaked window. “Zeus and Semele,” he said, “and she’ll burn you. At least with two women it won’t be a case of Leda and the Swan.” Then he turned into Nadia. “Trust me.” She laughed and the laughter took shape, dark, with wings, and flew out of the window. “You see,” she said earnestly, walking towards me, “it’s not a question of whether you trust me, but whether or not I can trust myself.” She came closer and closer and I began to panic, then suddenly she was choking: a rope with weights was wrapping around her neck, snakelike. “No!” she screamed, “not this time!” and then the one strangling was me, and Crooked Finger was coming through the door with a mop and bucket and a big plastic bag.



I had other dreams, but that was the one I remembered when I woke up at midday.

Zeus and Semele. Some Greek myth or other. Uneasy dream logic.

Last night, if anyone had asked me, I would have told them I trusted Nadia completely, believed everything she said. I’d even thought that I no longer needed to read the court abstract, that I didn’t wish to absorb others’ comments on a woman I was beginning to care for. But sometime during my dreams, little inconsistencies had floated up from my subconscious and now sat in a clump, demanding to be heard.

It’s not a question of whether you trust me, but whether or not I can trust myself.... What did I know about Nadia, really?

When I climbed out of bed I ignored the laptop and went

straight back to the library.



All the way back on the train, hours later, I stared at the smeared window, not seeing the city or reflections of the hot, bad-tempered commuters homeward bound; seeing nothing but a mind's-eye picture of the library screen, with those damning, damning words.

After hearing assurances that Kyoto-TEC were well placed to foster and develop Nadia Amin's natural talents, to the eventual benefit of all Americans, Judge Thurman indicated her willingness to transmute sentence and accord Amin status as National Treasure. The judge expressed some reservations about Kyoto-TEC's precautions. K-T again called expert witness Macillvaney, psychiatrist, who reiterated that Amin was unlikely to prove dangerous to the general public. Despite this, he assured the court, K-T would--under his personal supervision--undertake to keep Amin under observation at all times, and to physically restrain her at those times of greatest risk--during solar and atmospheric storms.

K-T's counsel reminded Judge Thurman that the Secretary of Labor had asked for special consideration of this case, given the number of jobs likely to be at risk should K-T go into receivership, which it assuredly would if their investment in Amin was not realized.

Judge Thurman expressed further reservations but admitted that given the recent directives from the Supreme Court she had little choice. She reminded Kyoto-TEC that the untimely death of a young man at Amin's hands was a good reason, a very good reason, for the original sentence of life in a secure mental institution, and she reiterated her promise that if K-T ever forgot that, if they ever deviated by one iota from their proposed security arrangements, she would send them all to jail, Supreme Court or no Supreme Court.

Whereupon Justice Thurman formally declared Nadia Amin to be a National Treasure, thereby superceding state jurisdiction and overturning any earlier sentences handed down in the United States of America, and remanded Amin into the protective custody of Kyoto-TEC, incorporated, under the conditions set forth in Document 157-3B, until such time as a higher court declared said ruling null and void.

And then, because I hadn't wanted to think about what I'd just read, I'd looked up the story of Zeus and Semele.



I got to the bar early. I didn't know what else to do. I must have been in a daze, because even now I don't remember what Talulah said, or what I said, or anything about the first couple of hours. I moved through the evening on auto-pilot, saying hi to the customers, laughing at their jokes, making the right change.

When Nadia walked in the evening did not so much come into sharp focus as ripple and reform around her, like a cloak. Even knowing what I knew, understanding the risks she had taken, I couldn't set aside the flood of memory images that overlay her appearance as she walked to a table: Nadia dancing at me; her hand on my thigh as we drove; turning with that mad marigold eye and asking from the rainshadow, "Do you believe in flying?"

I had then.

Her keepers came in right on her heels. No more discreet distances; I guess that stain on the wall had really scared Crooked Finger. I walked around the bar, straight to Nadia's table.

She smiled. "I'll have another of those Prairie Fires."

I remembered the taste of tequila on her mouth. "Outside," I said. "Not the parking lot. The patio."

She raised her eyebrows, but got up and walked in front of me,

outside. The air smelled of the honeysuckle Talulah had trained over the trellis.

She reached for me. My blood leaped like a wild thing and there was nothing more I wanted than to put myself under those hands, feel her cool, dry palms whispering over my skin, but I moved away.

She tilted her head, considered me. “Not tonight, Josephine?”

I almost changed my mind; she seemed so utterly normal, standing there with that puzzled look on her face. “I trusted you,” I said.

She understood immediately: I knew. Her eyes were hooded. “The first time we met, I told you: never trust a stranger.”

“You can’t absolve yourself of responsibility like that, with words. I did trust you. And what of your words in the park? ‘Trust me,’ you said, ‘trust me enough not to ask for my number.’ Trust you! What about trusting me? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you wouldn’t have loved me.”

“You can’t know that! You lied to me. You said the guards were there to protect you.” Is that why you have the guards? I had asked. To make sure you stay safe? And she had laughed. At me. At my naivete, my eagerness to believe what she told me. “But they weren’t, were they? You have guards to protect people like me from you. That woman who came into my apartment was relieved because I was still alive: she thought the plaster stain on the wall was my blood. After all, you’ve already killed one person, they were going to put you away forever for it, so why not kill me too?”

“I would never kill you,” she said quietly.

“I don’t know that! How can I trust you when you’ve already lied to me so many times?”

“I never lied. You believed what you wanted.”

“And you think that’s not lying? That’s a solipsism worthy of a child, not a grown woman! You knew what I believed, you knew it was untrue, that’s pure deception.”

“I would never hurt you,” Nadia said again, and she sounded alone and vulnerable and my heart almost broke.

“But you...I...” I just didn’t know what to say. This woman had killed a man, and I still loved her. “Please, tell me what happened.”

“I have a psychiatric condition that manifests itself in a confusion between sex and death. An active confusion. It’s complicated by the fact that I also have a physiological condition, a brain imbalance that’s affected by electrical storms.”

“Don’t. Don’t quote at me. Tell me...” What? What was it I really wanted to know? That she wouldn’t do it to me. That it was all a mistake. That she wasn’t crazy. “Tell me what happened, and why.”

“I threw him out of a window. In a storm. He didn’t believe in flying.” I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. She seemed utterly alien. “You did.”

“And if I hadn’t?”

“You were in no danger. The guards were listening outside.”

“No.” I groped for words. “You gave them the slip. It was some sort of test. You were testing yourself. To see.” She had deliberately put me in danger, had taken me to bed in a storm, when her poor mad brain could have made her do anything, when she knew she could not trust herself. Or...maybe she did. Trust for trust, then, she had said, that first night. I had trusted her; perhaps that had given her the ability to trust herself.

“You’ve made me feel so much.” I couldn’t describe it to her. She would never understand: she was different, elemental, a being clothed in fire.

...and, with child, the princess Semele asked her mysterious lover to reveal himself in his true nature and form. When Zeus refused, Semele denied him further access to her bed and body. In wrath, Zeus assumed the form of thunder and lightning, and Semele was consumed...

But I wasn't some idiot peasant, six months pregnant, and Nadia was mortal. She bled, like I did, and felt, and needed. This wasn't impossible.

"Nadia--"

We looked at one another. She was lovely, lovely like a snake, like a twenty-one foot crocodile, like the edge of the world.

Music burst over us as Crooked Finger pushed open the door. We ignored her. Satisfied that we weren't feeling murderous, she withdrew.

I loved this woman. There had to be a way. "I think you should try therapy," I said, very fast, because I knew she wouldn't like the idea. "And there are drugs you could take, if you thought...when you maybe couldn't really trust yourself. Your trial was more than a year ago. There might be new treatments. Psychiatry is always changing, always moving on." She was shaking her head. "No. Don't make up your mind yet. Do you love me? No, forget I asked that. Don't say anything. I'm going to go back inside now, and serve more beer to more customers. I want you to leave. I want you to think about what I've said, and when you have an answer...when you have an answer..." My throat was closing up. "When you have an answer, let me know." I left her standing there, and stepped back into the smoke and heat of the bar.



When I got home, she was sitting in my bed. Streetlight turned her skin to gold and copper, and the shadows between her ribs were dark

and mysterious as ancient bronze.

“Do you love me?” I asked from the doorway, without turning on the lights.

“I want you.”

“That’s not good enough,” I said, but I was pulling off my clothes.

“Come here.” She held me by the hips. “How shall I answer you? I’m crazy, not legally responsible for my actions.” Her voice was hot and dark and rough as a cat’s tongue. My nipples pebbled. “I’m the only one who can LAOM dance, because I’m crazy, crazy enough to believe I can fly, that I can do it.” She kissed the place three inches above my navel, where all the nerves in the torso come together. “Everyone else knows it can’t be done, so they don’t do it.” She kissed lower. “I’m mad enough to believe in myself, to believe that it can be done. Lie down.” I did. “So I do it. Like an idiot savant. No one knows how I do it, but I do.”

She lay down beside me and began rocking her palm on my belly. She spoke into my open mouth. “And you want me to go to some shrink and be cured of what it is that makes me believe I can fly, that makes me free. Open your legs.” She started inside my knees and stroked my thighs gently, all the way up, cradled my buttocks in one hand. Her eyes were like holes. “I won’t,” she said.

Then she wrapped herself around me like a python.



I woke early, not long after dawn. She was sleeping on her stomach, head turned to the right, one leg bent at the knee, arms above her head, lips parted: perfect, right down to her eyelashes and fingernails and the downy hairs in the small of her back.

I won’t, she had said. And she wouldn’t.

With her eyes closed, I could forget that she’d killed someone,

once. I was willing to take the chance. I wanted to rub her feet when they ached and listen while she complained about the weather; I wanted to see her laugh when I presented her with seventeen brightly-wrapped presents for her next birthday; I wanted to stand in line with her at K-Mart to buy cheap shirts, and work out who owed what on the phone bill.

She sighed and turned her head to the left. Where she had been lying on it, her hair was flat and dark. I wanted to run my fingers through it. Instead, I slid quietly from the bed, pulled on some clothes and wrote a note to stick on the TV screen: Gone shopping to make you a breakfast that'll put the nectar of the gods to shame.



I took my time at the market. For the first time, I enjoyed sifting oatbran through my fingers, fascinated by its cream and gold flow, its smell of dust and biscuit. The rice flour was more gritty, and reminded me of almonds. While I waited for the orange honey to fold, heavy and slow, into my container, I imagined sitting outside in some Florida orchard with Nadia, listening to bees hum through the blossom.

I plumped each loaf of bread to find the freshest; picked up each piece of fruit individually, checking for that perfect, unblemished, ripe-to-bursting skin before I put it carefully in my basket. I even chose the eggs one by one.

I walked back through the early morning sunshine, then up the five flights of steps full of the marvel of the breakfast I would conjure from my paper sack: fruit salad, bran and banana muffins, eggs, toast....



The apartment door was open. The sticky note was gone. Nadia was gone. A strange woman was wiping down the light switches

and door handles, and Crooked Finger was sitting on the edge of the bed, tapping something against her thigh. The DVD.

I put my sack down carefully on the kitchenette table. It needed a good scrub, I thought. I didn't ask what Crooked Finger and her colleague were doing, or where Nadia was.

"We'll have to take this, too," Crooked Finger said to me, meaning the disk. "I'm sorry."

"Are you?" I wasn't hostile, just tired. Very, very tired. She had the sense not to answer. I wondered how many times she had cleaned up after Nadia, and whether she'd ever had to use a body bag.

The woman wiping things down gave a doorknob one last polish, nodded at us both, and left.

"She asked me to give you a message," Crooked Finger said.

I started taking out the eggs, one by one, and breaking them in a bowl. I rummaged for a fork, concentrated very hard on breaking the perfect golden hemispheres into stringy liquid.

"Here." She put a piece of paper by the bowl. A yellow sticky note. "I'm sorry," she said again. I just kept beating those eggs until the door clicked shut behind her.

I picked up the note.

Love can be a lead weight too, and I need to fly.

She had loved me, after all.



I'll never see her again; images don't count. And I somehow don't think there'll be many of those, despite Kyoto-TEC's high hopes. It's just a matter of time before, somewhere, with someone, Nadia loses control, and another body tumbles through the air on a rainy night; Crooked Finger and her fellow moppers-up won't always be able to fix the evidence. Then Nadia will go back to jail, or maybe

she'll throw herself out of a window, try flying for real: she wouldn't be able to bear being shut up, never allowed to dance again.

I sold the entertainment centre, painted out the stain on my wall; I bought new sheets and tucked the egg-stained sticky note in a drawer. But sometimes when I'm sweeping up at Talulah's, I imagine her sitting at that table, alone, like she was the first time, when I asked her to move her legs so I could mop the floor, and whenever the sky rumbles, or I'm driving through heavy rain, I feel a ghostly hand on my thigh, and smell tequila. I still burn for her fire.

Story notes

Touching Fire

This story, of course, is about art and genius. I once read that in the opinion of a clinical psychologist, those who make their living from creating--fiction writers, visual artists, film-makers, composers--must have a belief in themselves that borders upon the psychotic. I think this is true. Sometimes.

The story is also about sex, and about love--how love changes everything. If you let it.

I wrote it in 1991, in Atlanta, in a three-day frenzy immediately after finishing my first novel, AMMONITE. Our house had no air conditioning. It was hot.

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