

The Song of Paris

by Edith Lyre

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The end of Allison's shift was four minutes off, the bar was quiet, and his replacement had already signed in at the register. He told her, if she had the bar, he might go upstairs and finish collecting towels – the washer was loaded only thirty minutes ago, but that didn't need to be mentioned – and then climbed upstairs to sit out the remainder of the hour scrolling his phone in E's bedroom. (His room, and the rooms of the other live-in staff, were on ground-level, technically at a separate address (1B, instead of 1A) and they attached the hostel to its staff carpark. There was no way to get over there without everybody knowing he had stopped working.)

His back hurt and he was exhausted, it being a Monday, his break not beginning until tomorrow, and having worked all three nights of the weekend. He lay on E's sheets and fell asleep. (When he never came down from his towels-job, his coworker on the bar came to check on him,

laughed when she found him, and got him to lift his head so she could yoink the employee card from around his neck, run downstairs to sign him out, then run upstairs again to stuff it into his pocket while he slept.) A few hours later he stirred, and realising where he was, forced himself awake, pushing himself to stand upright and get downstairs, praying no one from management would spot him on his journey to the staff rooms – but, as it would come to pass, more threatening forces than management awaited him.

The door to the bar-area squeezed open to reveal a cacophony of shouting, flying glass, and cracking masonry. A thin, pearlescent chariot had crashed through the entrance to *The Door in the Floor*, bringing the frame and half the wall in with it. ‘I will fix this! Shut up, it’s easy to fix!’ screamed a drunken voice that, the door now wide open, he saw belonged to Cassandra of Troy.

‘Oh!’ cried Cassandra, pose triumphant amid the rubble of the bar, ‘It’s the finest tale!’

Between the charity ball and the hostel, Cassandra and E had amassed an entourage, and the only remaining bartender was moving so fast she didn’t even notice Allison’s descent. Once, management said to him, and a few other staff, ‘If the bar’s understaffed and you don’t want to work, that’s fine, that’s on you – but drink somewhere else. If you don’t want to help, that’s on you – but I don’t want to see any of you on the other side of that bar, if that’s what’s happening.’ Allison had always thought it was kind of funny, though, when the worst customers were coworkers – made establishing rapport with the general customer-base a smoother process, less *deliberate* perhaps. What stood on the other side of the bar was now both harder to hate, and easier to despise. The ideal attitude, in customer service.

‘Can she actually fix it?’ he slipped through the crowd and asked E, who noticed him for the first time. ‘I mean, there’s probably circuitry or something running through that wall, it’s easily a fire hazard.’

‘Well,’ said E, now looking at the shattered wall, ‘how’s a massive lump of empty space a fire hazard? If there’s a fire, just walk through it, you’re on the street, it’s easy, keep going, it’s not

too far now – and now you’re nowhere near the fire. Sure, there’s, like, masonry all over the floor that people might trip on but that’s how clubs are.’

‘Management...’

‘Management knows! Let them take it up with my sister!’

‘Who?’

‘With Princess Cassandra, fuck! Relax, take my drink. I know the rule. She’s about to tell a story anyway – listen while I get this drink.’

‘Do you need money?’

She flashed her ZDB and winked, before stealing into the crowd.

Cassandra leapt atop the bricks and drywall planks piled beside what once was the door to the *The Door in the Floor*, champagne glass thrust toward the ceiling, and began.

Allison just stood there, paralysed.

‘The finest tale!’ glancing E’s way. From the bar, tilting her ZeeDeeBee as if it were a glass, E signalled permission. Cassandra swallowed and renewed, now in earnest. ‘Millennia ago, in the City of Troy, my mother Hecuba suffered a nightmare. She dreamt the excretion of a flaming torch, and she believed the flaming torch to be her child. She nursed it, raised the torch as she would a human child, suckled it at the breast, until one night bandits snuck into her domicile, her penthouse apartment, the ritziest spot in Troy, and snapped all the discs in her game-collection, laughing as they went. But she’d hidden her favourite game-disc, the disc for Bloodborne (Game of the Year Edition) — which on her PSN account was only two trophies from platinum — in the bedroom she shared with her child, the flaming torch. She’d hidden the disc beneath its cot, but now she feared what might happen should the bandits see the torch’s light and come looking. They would discover the disc for her favourite game (Bloodborne), and snap that too! As a mother, she prepared herself for the worst, knowing in her mind that the right thing to do, the one ethical choice, was to sacrifice her game-disc for her child, the flaming torch. But, to her heart, she could not lie. She knew the truth. Who she was. What she wanted. Trembling and weeping, torn by the

agony of duty, she reached out to the flaming torch's cot and, covering her mouth with one hand, lest the disc-snapping bandits overhear her cries, with her child's own blanket she smothered its light, the flaming torch's light. The fire dimmed at first, then darkened outright, and all was silent but for the snaps and jolly guffaws of the disc-snapping bandits beyond the wall. Bloodborne (Game of the Year Edition) was safe.

'And she woke with a start! Straightaway, she opened Discord and recounted the strange dream to her guild. Her stepson Aesacus, who called her 'Hecky,' was online and said, in his opinion, it sounded as if the gods were saying she should, after her child's birth, drown it lest Troy be burned, razed to nothing but dust and blood. She figured that made sense and, after checking with Priam that he approved the plan, gave birth, called the kid Paris, then tossed the mite into the nearest river. The infant flowed on and on and came to rest, in time, at the feet of a bewildered herdsman, who tucked a handful of McDonald's vouchers in the baby's breast-pocket and, with his crook, poked the innocent on down the current.

'Flowing out and out, out to the farthest outlet of the seas, Infant Paris at last snagged on some reeds along the estuary of the Styx. A ferryman, a cosmopolitan sort who'd been hither and thither, gone all around the multiverse and stopped a while in many an era, happened by in a big canoe. "What's that now," he called and paddled over Paris's way, "a customer? You don't look well-to-do," he warned the creature, only being fair and open, "and I don't make free trips."

Paris said nothing.

'But the ferryman spied the McDonald's vouchers in Paris's lapel. 'Ah,' he said. 'Mind if I?' He took them from the baby and thumbed through. "Fair enough," he concluded with a stiff, transactional nod. "Get onboard. Need a boost? My, you're a small fella." He piled the infant aboard and listened with sincere interest to its wailing, very curious. "My dear friend, you know I've been a lot of places. But not even I can tell what language that is. New things, eh?"

'Down the River Styx, the ferryman thought to ask Paris his destination—.'

'Excuse me, I don't get it. Who's E in the story?'

Cassandra blinked, then turned to E. ‘Does he really not know?’

E, who had returned to Allison’s side, drink in hand, squinted at him. ‘Can you really not tell?’ she said.

‘Oh!’ he blurted, seeing his mistake. ‘I get it, sorry.’

‘All good,’ said E.

‘Yeah, all good,’ said Cassandra. ‘I’ll continue... Paris, of course, said nothing. Hence the ferryman, just thinking aloud, said, “There’s a sort of *hub* nearby. A shop Heltixes stop at. We’ll try that route and, when you choose a destination, wherever you choose, the Shop’ll get you there.” Upon the distance, the Shop bobbed on the waves, jetty halogen-lit and jingles chiming, softly on the wind. “You ready to climb out, mate?” asked the ferryman, mostly joking.

‘A hearty chuckle and a handshake met their arrival at the jetty, the Shopkeeper having jumped out to meet the canoe and shake his old good friend’s hand. “What’ve you got?” asked the Shopkeeper.’

“*Who*’ve I got. This here’s a customer. Can’t speak a lick of their language, not sure where they’re trying to get to, but they paid up and that’s what matters. I thought, if anyone could get someone where they’re going, that’d be you.”

“Alright, alright,” he said. “Don’t need to sell it so hard, else they’ll be calling *you* the Shopkeeper next. Let’s meet ‘em, then.” He came to the canoe’s edge. “Right-o!” exclaimed the Shopkeeper. “Not seen one of these in a while. Can’t speak ‘til they’s proper grown, and that can take... centuries. I’ll put this one in a vat and file it. When it’s done, I’ll ask where it’s headed.”

‘Both men nodded, a solid plan and service rendered. They shook hands, the infant’s neck in the Shopkeeper’s grip, and the ferryman pushed free his canoe and paddled on his way.

‘And the rest, as they say,’ said Cassandra, ‘is history’ – and looking into Allison’s eyes, as if nothing would ever be history again, she smiled. ‘Ot,’ she said, and a long, cold needle tore through his spine, ‘ot,’ blindness, nothing, ‘otoi’ – *oh, good hunter* – ‘po’ – *do you remember now, Aeschylus?* – ‘poi da.’

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‘And the rest, as they say, is history’ – but the attention of the audience had drifted from Cassandra to the Sirenian bartender, whose eyes and skin were glazed a deep, angry crimson. Crowds parted before the slow but sure, zombie-like step of Allison/Aeschylus, the empty, dissociative fumbling he made for the keys to the staff door politely ignored, gazes downcast with respect – soon he slipped through, vanished and forgotten, and the hostel-entire returned their focus to Cassandra’s tale.

But it was over.

E started a little clap going, which washed through the mass and rinsed back into silence in three seconds flat. ‘Thank you,’ said Cassandra, and stood down from the rubble.

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Fresh infants went in the back, to wait for parts. It took decades – sometimes longer – to get everything together. Every customer who found their way to the Eternal City was confronted with the same questions, the same terms of barter. Had they brought any biotech hardware from before the most recent apocalypse? And no, their currency wasn’t accepted here. How could they pay for an infinite sum with a finite one? (That was always what they came for – the legendary Zero Dollar Bill.) Get the Shopkeeper something he could use. He had a new human in storage and was working on fixing it. *What was wrong with it?* How should he know? Did they know anything about the species? They were welcome to take a look. *No. I guess I don’t.* Find something human, the parts they needed to grow up, and he’d bestow the sought-after Z.B.D.

A few thousand years passed before one customer, sporting a trim white beard marked with a lone splash of auburn in the place and shape of a goatee, called in and introduced himself. ‘Good afternoon,’ he said.

The Shopkeeper kept his hands hidden, his palms twisted flat against the back of the counter. *Afternoon? A mortal, lost.* ‘I suppose it is.’ Nodding, ‘I suppose it is.’

‘Is this The Shop?’

‘Yes, you’ve found your way. What can the shop do for you?’

‘So, I made an order a while ago – the order was on my Z.D.B. – and I wanted a cashback. I tried requesting the cashback online, but the system couldn’t understand what I was saying. I tried to call in, too, but the woman on the phone, I think, either didn’t understand what I was asking or didn’t have the authority to do what I was asking. I found her a bit evasive if I’m honest. So, I’m coming in, just to get this all organised and closed up.’

The Shopkeeper blinked, now less sure of the customer’s mortality. ‘You already have a Zero Dollar Bill?’

‘Yes. Is that really relevant?’

‘It could be. Did you get it here?’

‘As I said, I don’t consider how I acquired the card particularly relevant – I simply want to organise the cashback, which I must be able to do somewhere.’

The Shopkeeper supposed that was fair enough. It was his job, after all. ‘Order number and name for the delivery?’

‘5-5-0-1-2-1-1-4-8-8-0-6-H-E-Z. Ray, just Ray.’

He punched it in and a list of about ten thousand recent purchases lit his vision. Bigger than most orders. ‘A bunch of these have already reached third-party shipping. There’s nothing we can do for those until they’re delivered. The others, maybe – it depends. I can request a recall on them but that will only be satisfied if those items haven’t already reached a third party, or been delivered, by the time the recall is processed. Is that what you want me to do?’

‘I just want everything to go back where it was,’ said the man. Ray. He was, the Shopkeeper realised, at a total loss – things were evolving beyond his control and he needed someone to step in and set things right, point him in a useful direction.

‘Everything can go back where it was, that’s doable, but that’s something other than a cashback. That’s an additional service. They wouldn’t even go back where they were, through a cashback. They’d go to the nearest warehouse or storage facility. What you’re looking for is something like an army of couriers, thousands of workers with thousands of vehicles intercepting and loading all this stuff up, negotiating its return – and if necessary, its disassembly into its former components – all the while extracting the funds of the people they’re negotiating with, making sure not to enrich them, otherwise the money you sent out would stay in the system. Things would still not be back where they were.’

Stroking the goatee-shaped part of his beard, Ray considered this. ‘The couriers are a problem there. They get my money too. It remains in circulation.’

‘Sure – if you pay. We’ve both got ZeeDeeBees. I’m prepared to make an offer. What if all that were my burden, and you could wash your hands of it?’

‘Everything with my name on it would be back where it started, nameless, and only your name would be out there, all over the refunds, all over this legion of couriers?’

‘Exactly what I’m proposing.’

‘What do you want in return?’

‘Well – it can’t be money, can it? Do you know much about humans?’

Eyes flicking, Ray glanced past the Shopkeeper and examined the walls, the lines of the ceiling, apparently looking for cameras, any surveillance device. Being one of those people who

simply cannot moderate their own pitch, his voice dropped to a loud and clumsy whisper. ‘You shouldn’t know that about me.’

‘Know what?’ The Shopkeeper’s face unfolded with interest. ‘Nothing personal. For the last few thousand years, I’ve been asking everybody. I’ve got an infant human in the back I’m trying to fix. They’re from this world, did you know?’

‘I did.’ What choice had he? He needed these refunds processed. ‘Would you like me to take a look at it, is that what you’re asking?’

‘Please.’

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As it turned out, this Ray person was something of an expert. ‘Firstly,’ he explained to the fascinated Shopkeeper, ‘it’s not broken. It’s meant to be fed and cared for by other humans until it grows bigger. It takes about twenty years, but that’s what’s meant to happen. Don’t worry – you don’t need to wait that long. There’s a self-feeding case you can get, and you can move its nervous system into that. They’re not on the market anymore, but I know the right parts. If you go on the store and buy them, I can put them together.’

When, at last, the infant was moved into its new case and was almost ready to activate, Ray discovered he’d made a mistake. He swore and slapped himself across the head.

‘What’s the issue?’

‘The body kit’s wrong. I didn’t know which parts go with which type, exactly, because they’re mostly all compatible and it’s a stylistic thing, but there’s an essential network basically – it came in one box – that you’ve got to make sure you match up to the system that’s on the neural core. It’s not matched.’

‘You want me to buy a replacement?’

‘No,’ he said, taking a chisel and poker to the skull, ‘there’s an easier way.’

Chunks of E’s brain were scanned, cleaved off, and replaced with synthetic near copies, each chunk altered in the same, small way. What had been the mind and body of Paris – the forgotten name given to the abandoned son of Hecuba – was now E’s. The Shopkeeper was delighted. What this customer had done for him could not be repaid. What difference was there in one tiny, cost cutting modification? So the Shopkeeper had a human girl instead of a human boy? Whatever. Close enough. What did it matter if one’s pet rodent were a boy rodent or a girl rodent, so long as it had no other rodents to play with? He could not possibly care.

Per their bargain, the Shopkeeper hired the promised army of couriers, and undid the deeds of Ray’s ZeeDeeBee. Once everything was back in place, his name scrubbed from all universal memory, Ray was overcome with gratitude. Infinite wealth was not for everybody. The Shopkeeper respected that – and when the onset of relief drew tears from his customer, the Shopkeeper was ready with a shoulder and a tissue-box.

At last, still bowing his thanks, Ray gathered up his tools, along with all the odds and ends that had gone into E’s construction, and incinerated them in the shop’s furnace. He let the Shopkeeper buy him a ride to a world far away from the Desert Eternal, where he planned on living on his own terms, getting a job, being self-sufficient. They discussed, if that were the plan, whether the ZeeDeeBee shouldn’t be left in the Shopkeeper’s care, or at least thrown with all of E’s now obsolete body parts into the furnace. Ray took this suggestion seriously, but in the end, he kept the card with him, just in case.