

Dogan Ozgener was in his early thirties, and he had a sad, shabby look. Everything about him—from his dark, unkempt

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hair, bushy eyebrows, and scratchy beard, to his rumpled clothes and his long, delicate eyelashes that reminded me of my dad's—screamed of loneliness and baked-in sorrow. Still, he smiled warmly, let us into the building, and offered us tea.

Dogan lived alone in a dark little ground-floor apartment filled from floor to ceiling with old things. His parents, he explained, lived in the flat upstairs. Books, vinyl records, boxy old television sets, and computer parts were stacked everywhere. A little kitchen nook was piled with pots and pans—more than one person living alone should need. On a narrow stovetop were two metal teapots, a smaller one nestled on top of a larger one. He brought us each a glass teacup and a saucer, and led us to a small table against the wall that wasn't quite big enough for all of us.

“Strong or weak?” the fixer translated. The blindfold was tied tightly over his eyes. It didn't seem to bother him, but he addressed his words to an empty space that was halfway between all of us.

Karl requested strong, and I asked if it could be medium. Dogan headed into the kitchen and came back a moment later with a teapot in each hand. He poured from the smaller pot into our cups. The tea was the color of cedar wood, and the smoky smell of it curled up and filled the flat. To my cup he added a splash of hot water from the larger pot, so that the color inside bloomed into a deep amber.

As we drank, Dogan began to talk.

“He says it's in his back courtyard,” said the fixer, translating. “He says he's always felt like it was his job to look after it.”

“That's not unusual,” I said.

“He says it appeared three years ago,” said the fixer, his voice even and precise. “His parents don't like it. They don't think it's

right that he should be caring for it, instead of trying to find a wife—another wife. They want grandchildren. But . . .”

Dogan stopped talking, and the fixer stopped talking too.

“So you were married?” I asked.

“It was a mistake,” said the fixer. “He says he made a mistake. It ended badly.”

Dogan looked off into the low distance and shook his head at whatever ghosts he saw there.

I could just barely see out to the back courtyard. It was a small, shady patch of humble garden, a few shrubs surrounded on all sides by the walls of apartment buildings. There didn’t seem to be anything unusual or out of place.

“You have a lot of stuff,” I said.

“Too much,” said the fixer, translating Dogan’s rueful words. “He says he can’t get rid of it. Everything means something.”

Dogan stood up and chose a dog-eared book at random from a shelf.

“This,” said the fixer. “He read this book while he was studying at university. A friend gave it to him—a good friend, but one he hasn’t seen in a long time. When he looks at this book, he sees his friend’s smiling face. He feels younger and happier, like he was then. If he threw this book away, that moment would go with it, and that part of him would die.”

Dogan shrugged, and put the book back where he’d found it.

“Everything here is like that,” said the fixer.

For a moment nobody said anything. There was the room, the things in it, the memories they held, and all of it was heavy and still.

“Tell me about your friend in the courtyard,” I said.

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ONCE WAS, ONCE WASN'T.

A gardener to a great lord discovered an unusual shoot sprouting from the earth in a far corner of the grounds. His first instinct was to pull it out, as he would any other weed, but the moment he put his hand on this particular shoot, he felt there was something different about it, something special.

As the lord never visited this corner of his garden, the gardener decided to let the shoot grow, to see what it might become. And truth be told, though his lord was not unkind, he was still a lord, and the gardener was still a servant to the lord, and so his life and all his works belonged to the lord. He wanted one thing that was his alone.

Every day he tended the shoot, as he did all the other plants, and every day it grew. It became thick and fibrous. It spread its roots beneath the soil, it sprouted leaves, and it spread branches, until it had formed a

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most unusual shrub in the shape of a lamb, with a head, and a face, and a body, and legs, all attached to the stalk that had once been the little shoot.

And then, one day, to the gardener's surprise, it raised its head and looked the gardener in the eye, and then it began to walk on its shaky lamb-legs, tracing a small, slow circle around its stalk.

It was not difficult to keep the lamb hidden. The lord was a busy man and rarely visited his garden. When he did, he never walked to the far corner where the strange lamb had taken root. Just to be safe, however, the gardener rearranged the plantings of the garden, so that the lamb was always obscured from view. Only by slipping between two thorny rosebushes could anyone see the small creature trudging in slow, weary circles around the stalk that kept it rooted to the ground, grazing on the grass that grew beneath it, and the oats and hay that the gardener brought for it. The lamb was safe, and the gardener's secret was his alone, and perhaps he should have been happy.

But when he tended the little creature, he sometimes looked into its strange eyes and imagined that he saw something there that ached and yearned. Just as the gardener yearned for some small thing that was his own, so, he imagined, did the lamb yearn for a place beyond the walls of this garden.

At last the gardener resolved that he would help the lamb, for though the creature was safe, it did not seem happy. He came one night to the garden with a saw and went to cut through the lamb's stalk, which by now was

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dry and nearly as tough as wood. But at that moment a thought occurred to him. If he cut the stalk, the lamb would be free; but if it were free, then the gardener would no longer be able to keep it safe. It might wander away, might leave him and the garden forever, might be lost to the world.

So he put down the saw and made a new plan.

The next night, he took a shovel out beyond the walls of the garden and found a place in the nearby woods that seemed similar to the lamb's plot in the garden. There he dug a hole deep enough for the lamb's roots. Then he returned to the garden and dug out the lamb. He lifted the lamb out of the ground and draped its stalk over his shoulder so that on one side of him hung the lamb and on the other side hung the ball of its roots. Thus he carried it out through the garden gates and into the woods, to the place he had chosen for it. And carefully, gently, with all the love of a parent for a child, he placed the roots into their new home and covered them with earth. Then he returned home and went to sleep, certain he'd done right.

The next day, he returned to the woods with a handful of hay and oats. Though the lamb's eyes were bright with the wonder of the wide world, it walked slowly, and took its food reluctantly. Still, the gardener believed he had done right by giving it a new home, and he left it for his duties to the lord.

He returned again the next day, and the lamb's eyes were brighter still. But it ate even less of its food, and it walked its circles even more slowly. Still, the gardener

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resolved to be patient, and fed and watered the lamb as usual, and then left it.

On the third day, the gardener returned to the lamb's new home. But when he came to the wood, the lamb had died. Its roots had soured in this new earth.

| CHAPTER THREE |



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The lamb in Dogan's courtyard was a tangled mass of vines and leaves wrapped around a lamb-shaped frame of branches that somehow seemed capable of a slow, strained movement. Its wool was a moss or lichen that grew in thick patches along the creepers that wrapped around its body. Here and there, pale pink blossoms bloomed among the vines. Only its hooves—prongs of greenish-brown wood like budding branches—were bare.

When Dogan led us out the back door, it looked up from the grass to take us in. Its ears were broad leaves spreading out from its long, triangular head. Between its ears, branches twisted around and back on themselves to create a skull. At the bottom of the triangle, a cluster of vines worked in round, mouthlike motions, slowly pulverizing a spiky little clump of grass. On either side of its wide forehead, close to its ears, a gold-colored flower squeezed its way through the vines and the moss, petals arranged in a squinting hourglass shape around a dark center.

The vines and branches that formed its body seemed to

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gather at its belly, making a gnarled knot there, which lengthened into a twisted woody stalk that anchored it to the ground. The little sheep stood at the end of its tether, watching us with its strange flowery eyes. After a moment a hind leg came up off the ground, almost as if it had its own mind, and scratched absently at its flank.

I felt the thrill of wonder. Even my dull and boring chap-erone was a different kind of silent. This moment, when an impossible thing became possible right before your eyes, it never got old.

The lamb's throat spasmed, breaking the spell. It made a clattery, whispery noise, like a sharp gust of wind through the boughs of a tree. A moment passed, and it did it again. A cough, if plants could cough.

"It has been doing that for a week," said the fixer, translating Dogan's words. "Never before."

"Okay," I said. "Let me see what I can learn."

I approached the lamb slowly, hands out and open, palms up, eyes down. It didn't seem particularly dangerous, nor did it look like it would get far if it tried to escape. But an animal, especially a defenseless one, deserves to know that you're not there to hurt it.

The lamb's flower-eyes followed me, petals narrowing and widening ever so slightly as I passed through a slash of sunlight. Two curling crevices flared gently just above its mouth, where its nostrils would have been if it were a real sheep. I crossed the space between us in slow, easy steps, pausing after each one to make sure the sheep didn't start to panic.

Finally I was close enough to touch it. I turned one palm over and raised the back of my hand for the lamb to smell it. (Could plant-lambs smell? Was there another name for what

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it was doing? Some other plant sense?) With a wispy snort fragrant with thyme and sorrel, the lamb indicated its satisfaction, or at least its acceptance that I was going to be in its business for a few minutes. Its head nudged around my hand, then lowered back down to the grass that it seemed to be enjoying.

“Here we go,” I said, to the lamb and to myself, and I put my palm against its foliage, and then we were connected.

The first time I’d met a creature, this moment had overwhelmed me. I’d had no idea then that there was anything special about me, and I’d had no clue what was about to happen. Eventually I learned, after a bit of trial and error, how to control the feelings when they came—how to turn them on slowly, like a faucet, so that they laid themselves gently over my own, instead of knocking me unconscious. I was even learning to separate them out, to feel them one at a time, instead of all at once.

I was aware of a whole host of senses that felt unfamiliar, and at the same time meaningful. A tingling at the tip of my tongue aligned with an electric ripple that surged down my spine. A comforting warmth swelled and receded, swelled and receded just under my skin. A delicious anticipation glowed toward me from the direction of the sun’s light, and a low, thin pulse radiating in my stomach seemed to come from the earth itself.

I could also sense the connection between the lamb and Dogan. There was a dutiful awareness of his presence, a sense of time built around his coming and going, around the ebb and flow of his scent in the courtyard. It was awkward, seeing this man in this odd and intimate way. It felt impolite, like peeking into a window of a stranger’s house. But the rhythm of his coming and going, and the traces he left behind, were how the lamb made sense of its world.

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I let it all in, let it swirl through me, balanced it carefully atop my own consciousness, until everything was steady and stable, until I could hold all of it—the lamb, and me.

“There you are,” I whispered.

The lamb looked at me, the petals of its eyes opening a little wider. Was there trust in the darkness of its hourglass pupils? Did it sense me in the same way I sensed it? I could never tell how the creatures perceived me. I knew only that something opened up in me to let them in, and it didn’t close.

I felt the lamb’s quiet internal rhythms washing over my own. I let my attention drift gently over its functions—the flow of nutrients, the gathering of sunlight, the transference of oxygen and carbon dioxide, the intake of information through flower petals and root systems. My dad, when he was alive, had taught me diagnostic practices at his veterinary clinic. This was my diagnostic practice. This was how I understood the creatures I met. This was how I helped.

Every sensation was unfamiliar, but nothing felt out of place. There was no unease, no anxiety or pain. The lamb was working as it expected itself to work—a shushing monotony of slow paces, slow nourishment, slow breaths. I was working as I expected too—my consciousness steady, straddled between my body and the lamb.

Suddenly a jagged contraction exploded across the lamb’s body, rattling my thoughts so hard that it took everything I had to hold on to the connection. The cough shuddered in my ribs, and continued to itch in a corner of my chest even after the fit had passed, like a stone or a barb had stuck there.

I took a deep breath, settled back into the connection. There was the flow of life. There was dull evenness of health.

“Again,” I whispered. “I’m ready this time.”

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The lamb coughed again. This time I braced for it, and I felt how it clawed its way outward from that sticking barbed spot. A spot just beneath the right ribs. I slid my hand around the sheep's chest, and felt the angry racking spur inside wheel closer.

"You found something," said Karl from the edge of the yard. "What is it?"

His voice, and the prickle of wrongness that came with it, jarred me. My attention teetered between two separate realities—the small, contained reality where nutrients flowed from the gentle earth and a foreign object poked at the insides of a moss-crusting thorax, and the one with Karl.

I wanted to tell Karl to be quiet, but it wasn't worth the effort to say. It wasn't worth the effort of even acknowledging his existence, not right then, with a creature beneath my hand that needed my help, with that thorny feeling already starting to fade, with the location that had a moment ago been so clear already blurring and becoming less distinct.

I had to work quickly. So I ignored Karl, let my eyes and ears and heart go soft to the things I could not control. Instead I focused on the one thing I could possibly make better.

"Sorry if this feels uncomfortable," I said to the sheep. Gently, but as quickly as I could, I began to pry the leaves, moss, and pale flowering creepers apart. Just beneath them I could see the structure of its ribs, the thick, hardened vines wrapped into a rounded cage, and inside that—

I gasped at the strangeness of it. Bright, vibrant structures like fruits or vegetables filled its chest cavity. Between two purple eggplant-like sacs, a deep red bulb pulsed with a soft, even beat. Gourds in yellow and green and orange wrapped around each other, each one clearly performing some vital purpose. Bunches

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of smaller fruit-like structures—reds, greens, blacks—were tucked here and there, each one alive with its task.

“You’re so weird,” I whispered to the sheep.

The thorny feeling in the lamb’s chest was receding, ducking away behind and within the organ structures, getting harder to pinpoint. But I knew where it was, close enough. I slipped a finger, and then two, between the sheep’s ribs, and when it seemed not to mind, I began manipulating the structures, carefully shifting them aside, following the echo of the cough.

I tried to ignore the queasy vertigo of the lamb’s feelings superimposed on my own—my fingers now becoming an alien presence inside a chest that felt like mine, moving things that weren’t meant to be moved. Not painful, but strange and disconcerting. I couldn’t ignore the feelings; they were my guide. The cough, the pressing barb, I was chasing it. It was more like I had to ignore *myself* and focus only on the lamb and my fingers, until I uncovered a cluster of small orange fruits. In the center of the cluster, one of the fruits had grown larger than the others, and then split open. Inside its brown, shriveled flesh was a rough, hard seed, about as big as my thumb.

“Gotcha,” I said. I caught the seed between two fingers and slid it out from between the sheep’s ribs.

The sheep coughed again as I smoothed the foliage back over its ribs, but it felt different this time. Unfocused, thin, a ghost of the cough I’d felt before. I wrapped my fingers around the seed. A strange urgency radiated from it, so that as soon as I’d pulled it free, I was squeezing it tightly in a clenched fist.

I drew back from the lamb, the seed pressed against my palm. The superimposed awareness peeled away and dissolved into nothingness, so that only the yard and my own body remained. The sensation of returning to myself, of ending a

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connection, was like missing a step on a flight of stairs.

“Well?” said Karl.

“I think I got it,” I said after I’d caught my breath. “Something was pressing against . . . Well, it’s hard to explain. Anyway, I took care of it.”

The seed in my hand had a feeling of its own—a sort of musical frequency that buzzed in my ears and made it hard for me to think. The idea of showing it to Karl had the same spiky sense of wrongness that the seed itself had inflicted on the lamb.

“I see,” said Karl, not impressed. “And it is now healthy?”

“Should be,” I said.

I tried to keep my voice even, but it was hard with the humming in my ears. I held my breath and hoped Karl didn’t notice. Karl glanced at the lamb, and then at me. Then he shrugged, satisfied and bored. When he looked away, I slid the seed into my pocket, and the humming noise went away.

I ran my hand over the lamb’s flank again and felt only a dull, soft ache where the seed had been. The lamb would be sore for a few days. It might still cough a bit. But it would heal.

“The buyer,” said Karl over his shoulder, “will be pleased.”

At the word “buyer” I dropped my hand. The connection severed. The icy shock of betrayal flooded my veins.

“It’s happy here,” I said. “It doesn’t want to be sold.”

“As you may recall,” said Karl, his tone cool and faintly accusatory, “we no longer take orders from animals.” He turned to the fixer. “Please. Inform our host that there will be a sale. The terms will be fair.”

“And if he doesn’t want to sell?” I said. “Tell him he can choose not to sell.”

“I would not recommend this,” said Karl in a patient voice.

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“He seems a good man, with still much good life ahead of him. The small delay he might cause to the closing of the sale would not be worth the trouble he would bring upon himself, and”—he paused and glanced up the side of the building—“upon his parents.”

The courtyard was quiet. The silent threat behind Karl’s words echoed off the walls around us, growing larger, making the space feel smaller and tighter.

The fixer spoke slowly and carefully to Dogan. I saw anger and defiance in Dogan’s eyes as he looked from the lamb to Karl. But as the fixer continued to speak, Dogan’s expression changed to one of mute helplessness, and I knew, without understanding a word of what was said, that the Fells had won, and that the lamb would be sold.

I shook my head sadly at Dogan. I wished I could tell him that I hadn’t meant for this to happen. That I would have left the seed where it was if it would have prevented the sale. That I had been tricked just as much as he had. But it didn’t matter. In his eyes I was no better than Karl.

The lamb’s petaled gaze drifted up to me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. But my words meant nothing, and a moment later it had gone back to its grass, to its oats, to the tiny plodding circle that was the only life it had ever known.

“Well,” said Karl. The word came out brisk and unperturbed, like he was excusing himself from the dinner table. He clapped his hands and rubbed his palms together to punctuate his meaning: *Time to go.*

I glanced at Dogan one last time, hoping for some hint of grace or forgiveness. But all I got was a trembling, hopeless anger, and a hollowing shame where my heart should have been.

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Outside on the street, the fixer was allowed to remove his blindfold. Karl handed him an envelope, and the man bowed as he tucked it away in a pocket. Then he turned and walked down the cobbled road, around the corner, and was gone.

Karl motioned for me to follow, down the hill toward the main street, as if nothing had happened. Watching him, I felt Dogan's helpless rage. I couldn't imagine getting back into a car with Karl, let alone spending half a day on a plane.

"Who's the buyer?" I demanded. "I want to know."

"Not your business," said Karl lightly over his shoulder.

"Tell me," I said. "You owe me that much."

He stopped and turned around.

"I *owe* you nothing more than your usual fee," he said. "But as a courtesy, this one time only, I will show you."

He took out his phone and showed it to me. He'd loaded the Wikipedia page for an unpleasant-looking eastern European oligarch with a meat-processing empire and rumored connections with organized crime. He watched me read.

"You can't do this," I said.

"You are welcome to explain that to him yourself," said Karl with an appraising frown at the face on the phone. "I'm sure he would be an understanding fellow."

"You are literally sending a lamb to slaughter."

"It is business," said Karl. "Maybe we will make a vegetarian of him."

"It's not funny," I said. "You lied to me. You tricked me."

"Then we are nearly even."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He took a step in my direction. "You have something in your pocket that does not belong to you."

Instinctively I put my hand into my pocket. The seed poked

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at my fingers, and a tingle of possibility rushed up my arm.

Wrong, screamed the little voice I was normally so good at ignoring.

“I do?” I said, bringing out my empty hand in a pathetic attempt at innocence that fooled nobody.

“You do,” said Karl, patient but firm.

If you have to make a choice between the right thing and the thing that will get you home safely, Grace had said.

“I . . .”

Wrong, said the thorny thing in my pocket.

No heroes, Grace had said.

Karl held out his hand, palm up. His fingers gestured for me to place the seed inside. His face was smug and assured, the face of someone who, in the end, always got what he wanted.

Wrong wrong wrong sang the humming musical tone in my ears.

And before I even knew exactly what I was doing, I was running.