

Third Instar

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MAZEHEW LEFT the high-ceilinged rail terminus when he saw the gendarme's red bonnet. He sat on the kerb near the taxi rank, smoked a cigarette from his tin and watched the station clock.

His clothes were old but cared for: a battered traveller's hat and maroon waistcoat, baggy sand-stained trousers, decent boots. A plain gold ring hung from his ear, three days' stubble on his jaw. A patched and faded elan clung to him as false as his accent.

The city had a coastal feel, the reach of the sky deeper in one direction than the other. From the railway terminus to the great square called Kala Agr, all along the tree-lined Avenue of Princes with its petrified gods, down through the dusty souks and narrow lanes, the entire city faced the boundless skies beyond the Grand Parade. The place the whole world called the Edge.

An inbound train arrived, a surge of tourists spilled down the terminus steps. Acrid blue smoke plumed from the two-stroke taxis. Male and female hawkers worked the crowd. They sold nuts and juice, kite rides, sweetmeats, pterodactyl finger bones, black lotus, themselves.

Mazehew spotted a tired couple with two young children. He roused himself and went to work.

That evening he connected with a lone traveller, a waif-girl from the cities of the central plains. He'd had an unsuccessful day – nobody had needed escorting to their hotel or wanted a guided tour of the town or a trip to the iron cauldron.

She was dark and slender with a hint of a frown across her brow. The hem of her long skirts swept the dusty ground, the sleeves of her purple top hung below her fingers.

She stood in front of a waffle stand with a coin in her upraised hand. Other people came and went, she stood like a statue in the shifting crowd. Mazehew had seldom seen anyone so unnoticed. It was almost as if the world had

forgotten she was there – almost. A young man with bad skin and a wisp of beard stared fixedly at the open bag on her shoulder. Mazejew observed with interest.

The young man sidled forwards, his attention falsely and obviously directed elsewhere. Close behind the woman he looked guiltily around.

Mazejew's mouth twisted with contempt – an amateur. He closed the gap in the three long strides, seized the man's wrist and yanked his arm into the air. "I don't think so!"

"Let me go! What are you doing?" The man twisted in his grip, all injured indignity. Mazejew smoothly palmed the purse in the woman's bag with his other hand.

"I saw him," the waffle-seller shouted at Mazejew. "Pickpocket."

The city lived on tourism. Stall-holders and passers-by surrounded the thief in a bad-tempered crowd.

Mazejew put his hand under the woman's elbow, touching but not holding. "Madam, come with me please. Quickly."

She blinked, startled, and lowered her arm. "What's the matter? Am I in trouble?"

"Not at all. Please – this way."

He deftly steered her into the nearby souk, released her and stood back. Most of the evening crowd surrounded the pick-pocket but Mazejew knew the rest watched him.

She studied him warily. "What do you want?"

"There was a thief." He gestured at her shoulder. "Your bag –"

She stared wide-eyed then dug frantically through her bag. "No, no. Not again –"

Mazejew proffered the red purse. "Is this yours?"

"Yes!" She checked the contents and looked up in happy disbelief. "It's all here. Oh, thank you!"

Mazejew smiled. He held out his hand. "I'm Mazejew."

She briefly held his fingers. "Frayel. I – thank you so much." She looked past him to the food stalls. "I just wanted –"

"There are better places to eat."

Emotions burned in Frayel's eyes: betrayal, disappointment, relief. "I need a drink. Let me buy you

one.” She had a lopsided smile. “People say you shouldn’t drink alone.”

Mazehew pulled off his battered hat and ran his hand through thinning hair. “I could use one, I don’t confront thieves every day.”

He made her smile, she made him laugh. She bought him a drink, then another. Frayel was easy company. On impulse, Mazehew took her to his favourite cafeteria deep in the old town – half a dozen square tables with plain white tablecloths, each with a jam jar holding a single marigold. They ate braised lamb cooked with spices from the bazaar and vegetables from the old market. Mazehew relaxed in the lamp-lit atmosphere rich with warmth from the kitchen and tinged with tobacco smoke. This was a place he kept for himself, for pleasure. He never played his plays or talked the talk here. The owners enjoyed his custom, the regulars his dubious company.

Frayel was lonely in the ways that someone who has travelled long and far can be. Mazehew worked his ordinary charms and let the magic of the city and the café’s food and wine weave their spells.

After they had eaten she grew introspective. Her soft voice became strong. “Were you looking for me?”

“How could I be?” Mazehew leaned back in his chair and sipped his wine. Sweet and soft, it was the best in the café and surprisingly good. Wine Frayel had insisted on buying.

She touched his hand, understanding, accepting. “I mean someone like me.”

“I wasn’t –” Mazehew halted mid-protest, confused by his own motivations. “No,” he said firmly. “Call it fate, kismet, what you will, our paths simply crossed.”

She bit her lip and smiled, turned the stem of her wine glass between her fingers. Self-consciousness returned; she looked away. “We all dree our own weird.”

“What is that?” Mazehew said with a puzzled laugh.

She lifted his fingertips to her lips. “To follow your fate and do what must be done.”

“Were you born here?” Frayel lay nude on her bed, one leg over the side, her hair over one shoulder, unselfconscious in the afterglow. Mazeheew’s one real talent was bringing physical pleasure.

“I was travelling like you. Somehow I just stayed.”

“Why?”

If he had known the answer she wanted, he would have told her. He pulled aside the curtain and looked down into the narrow lane. He considered lying. Truth was seldom easy. “I ran out of reasons to leave.”

Which was not the half of it. Not the happy childhood or the bright self-centred student. Neither his dissatisfaction with convention nor its rejection. Certainly not the slow slide from seeker to drifter to – whatever he had become.

Her faint frown had returned. She traced a vein along the inside of her forearm “There are always reasons to leave.”

Frayel was beautiful. Mazeheew did not understand.

The next day they went to the bazaar. Mazeheew gently steered Frayel to the stalls where he had an arrangement with the owner. The goods were from the same workshops, what difference did it make?

All through the various quarters, Frayel felt the drape of the silks and cottons, tried to open the magic boxes, and peered into bins of snails and baby tortoises. She admired the gold and silverwork, the lamp-smiths, the spices heaped like coloured volcanoes. At each stall she smiled and moved on. Behind her, Mazeheew and the stall holders exchanged looks of quiet exasperation.

It was only at the kite-makers that she showed real interest, fascinated by the animal, bird, and flower-designs of the big kites hanging from the rafters by their guy lines.

Mazeheew had no relationship with any of the kite-makers. He leaned against the jamb of the entrance and rolled a cigarette.

Frayel looked up at a huge kite in the shape of a midnight-blue swift with wing-tips and tail trimmed in white.

“The night-swift is a man-kite.” The shop assistant was dressed in a kite-flyer’s close-fitting black tights and vest. He tried to turn Frayel towards the smaller kites. His hip

brushed against hers. “Mayfly and marigold kites, very pretty designs.”

Frayel returned to the night swift. “I like this one.”

“It is for a man, someone of heavier build.” A waft of tobacco smoke drew his attention to Mazeheew silhouetted in the entrance. “Perhaps your –?”

“My friend.” Frayel smiled at Mazeheew. “My good friend.”

Mazeheew pinched out his cigarette and strolled inside. His arm slipped around Frayel’s waist, he kissed her cheek. “Are you going to buy one?”

“Perhaps.” Her eyes lost focus, her voice dreamy. “Would you watch me fly? Come out there with me –?”

Mazeheew didn’t like the Grand Parade where the kite-men flew beyond the Edge. He didn’t like the sky beyond the railings, a sky that reached up and out and also down. He didn’t like the utter absence of ground inches from his feet, the way the blue air faded to stars in the evening, up and out and also down. Most of all he didn’t like how the Edge made him feel – small, like nothing. Insignificant.

“Yes,” Mazeheew said. “Of course I will.”

The kite seller hung a harness over Frayel’s chest. He tightened the straps around her thighs he explained how the D-rings at shoulder, waist and leg secured her to the kite and left her arms free to control the winch.

Frayel spoke in an awed whisper. “Just imagine ... Floating on air, suspended over –”

The kite seller’s eyes gleamed. “Infinity.”

“What if the rope breaks?”

“Our ropes are very strong.”

Frayel looked into some inner space. “I don’t want this, it’s ...” She opened the buckles, stepped out of the harness and hung it over the counter.

Out on the street Mazeheew suggested she ride in a tethered balloon. “They are very safe, I know one of the operators.”

“Take me back into town. I want to see the smoke-dancers and the stone gods.”

“They’re not made of stone.” Mazeheew said sharply then immediately regretted his tone. “Everyone thinks that at first.”

Frayel bought roast nuts and cinnamon *lokma* from street vendors. They ate them as they walked, licking the honey from their fingers. At the Avenue of Princes, they wandered between the petrified gods under the high canopies of ancient chestnut and blue beech. Part animal, part human, the gods were big as houses. Some crouched, others reared with their arms and other limbs upraised.

"They look scared," Frayel said. "What could scare them?"

"Some say it is adoration."

One massive form was sleekly graceful, with a fan of dorsal flukes. Frayel laid her palm against the hexagonal plates along the flank. Her eyes widened, the armoured surface looked like grey-blue stone but had the texture of leather. "It's warm. She's warm."

"They are not stone," Mazejew said gently. He laid his head against the goddess. "Listen."

Frayel put her ear to the goddess's side and heard the same sounds Mazejew first heard many years ago: a soft rushing like wind in trees, a ponderous kettle-drum beat.

Frayel looked up in awe. "They are not dead."

"If they ever truly lived." Mazejew pointed down the avenue to where one of the Gods was framed in scaffolding. "A hereditary guild cares for them."

The Gods grew stranger closer to the Edge with baroque horns and fins, asymmetric hybrids of human, animal, and *other*. Here the avenue widened as both buildings and trees drew away from the extravagant, disturbing forms. Frayel looked up at a rearing elephantine thing with a tentacle face, jointed arms and five unequal legs. She shivered under the late afternoon sun. "I'm glad we came here in daylight. At night—?" She hugged herself and shivered again.

As dusk drew down, they ate at Zapotek's, the roof café overlooking Kala Agr square. Once again Frayel insisted on paying. Mazejew picked at the chipped edge of their table with his thumbnail. "Let me buy the wine. The most expensive isn't always the best."

"Thank you."

Mazejew's heart lifted. "You're welcome."

As they ate, darkness fell and stars spread across the sky from the endless night far beyond the Edge. All across the ancient square, story-tellers lit their yellow torches. A circle of listeners gathered round each one, dark rings around pools of light.

“Do you want to go down?” Mazeheew said.

“How long have the story-tellers been here?”

“A thousand years.”

“Then they will be here tomorrow.” Frayel leaned back into her chair. “The petrified Gods were eerie things. When I shut my eyes I can still see them. Until the dancers come, I just want to look at the stars, smell the spices in the air and drink wine with you.”

An hour passed. The voices of the storytellers and their drums and gongs came up faint from the square. Mazeheew and Frayel shared tales of life and past loves.

When the dangle and rattle of tin cups and chains said that the wine sellers had arrived, Mazeheew led Frayel down the stairs then through an open crowd across Kala Agr.

The storytellers had gone; everyone was buying hot spiced wine. The nearest wine-seller was a cheerful and almost toothless young man. Dented tin cups hung from chains attached to the urn on his back. He filled two and Mazeheew paid him.

“The spices are part of the dance. They help you see into the smoke and feel the dance with your body.”

Most people asked if it was addictive. Frayel simply pulled down her cuff and took the hot cup. The wine was pungent and syrup-sweet. Under the cinnamon, molasses, cloves and nutmeg was an aftertaste – something bitter, an earthy taint. She sipped again and whispered, “What happened to the wine seller’s teeth?”

“At the end of the night, they drink what they don’t sell. The sugar rots their teeth.”

“Why don’t they make less wine?”

Something softly broke inside Mazeheew. He wanted to hug her. “I don’t think that’s the point.”

“Oh.” Frayel said, then laughed. “Oh!”

Only the locals and people like Mazeheew noticed the smoke dancers arrive – a nondescript group of stocky men and women wearing dark trousers and plain smocks.

Mazeheew finished his wine, let go of the cup and watched it swing back on its chain with fascinating slowness. The cup hit the others hanging there and a moment later he heard the sound. The whole world moved at three-quarter speed.

Silver grey smoke rose in a wall across one side of the square. Fans of shadow and light swung through the smoke as it rose higher and higher. The smoke-dancers danced, simple silhouettes of ordinary men and women. The shadows-shapes grew and grew. One by one they disrobed and danced as beautiful naked giants. Shadow feet left the ground, the dancers floated into the sky. Silver smoke arched over Kala Agr like a curved shell.

Frayel clutched Mazeheew's hand. "This is wonderful. How do they do it?"

Mazeheew had seen it all before, many times. "Which?"

"Any of it. All."

He whispered like an enchanted child. "I don't know."

The smoke drew back into an extra dimension, no longer a wall but a place. In the far distance, enormous shapes swam closer. A pulse of awe moved through the gathered crowd. Mazeheew and Frayel saw the shapes for what they were – the Gods from the Avenue of Princes. Among them flew the finned half-human goddess Frayel had touched.

The shadow-dancers rose higher and embraced the gods, coupled with them.

Frayel's feet left the ground. She hung on to Mazeheew. "I can fly," she exulted. "We can join them. Come with me."

Mazeheew wanted nothing more. His blood sang, his body was left behind. Together they rose into the air.

Afterwards there was nothing but a crowd of people under a midnight sky. The dancers, the smoke, and the Gods were gone. Strangers looked at each other and smiled.

Frayel danced in the sparse torchlight, her eyes shone. "One great leap –" She flung her hand up to the sky "– and I could be there."

Mazeheew felt the same breathless ache. "Would you?"

"Yes." She looked at him steadily. "Would you?"

He was filled with a rare peace. “Yes.”

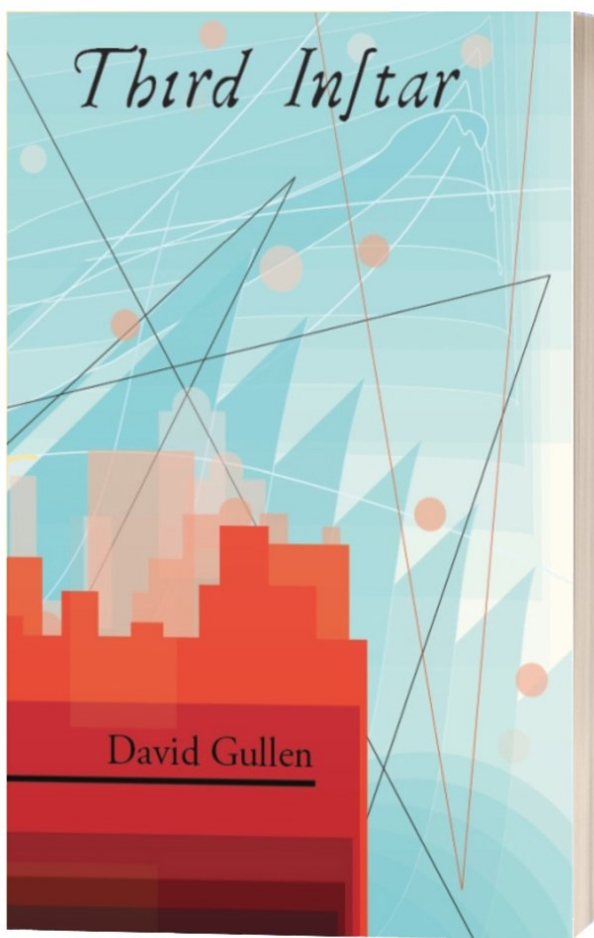
Frayel kissed him passionately, she pressed her body against his. “Give me a night like last night. Make this a perfect day.”

Later, in their room:

“Did you hear the singing? Like birds and angels.”

“Yes,” Mazejew said. There had been no music, yet he had its memory.

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