

## THE REBUKE

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### I

HACKLE the Smaller, by the spring of his fifty-first year, saw his death almost every day. It was a Death-by-Disease, and like most of this class, was a communicative sort that liked to get acquainted with its clients. The two of them would sit at dusk on Hackle's crumbling porch, talking quietly or pausing in their talk, their eyes musing on the hilly city of Hrabb, just across the Tumble River.

Hackle viewed that city of Hrabb with a stoic bitterness which flared into invective whenever he had a coughing fit. First, of course—whenever he coughed—he shot a questioning look at his death, which had always quietly shaken its head, so far at least. Then, when Hackle had finished the deep, sick labor, and spat out the clot of infection, he would shake his fist toward Hrabb and growl—his voice low to spare his lungs—"Smite and smash you, Hrabb! Whore among cities! Oh that the blow might fall on you!"

His death understood the reference, which was to a fantasy of Hackle's. The prosperous main body of Hrabb, a clutch of marble-studded knolls, was overloomed by a crag—a tall, ragged eruption of naked rock from the riverside hills. In the cross-river slums where Hackle now resided, there was an old saying about this crag: "If the prayers of the poor could push a stone, the Jut would have fallen on Nabob Hill a hundred years ago." Hackle's wish would make this proverb one better.

He had been, before the decay of his fortunes, a Statuarius, Master Grade, and one of his fortes and special loves had always *been* hands. Bodge of the Central Statuarium had been wont to say, when they sat with their colleagues in the refectory: "Now Hackle here, God bless him, friends—Hackle here cuts fingers as articulate, as eloquent as tongues. Hackle's hands speak, and they speak not prose, but balanced stanzas. Have we not seen him convey whole epics with the faintest crooking of a left thumb?"

So that now, on half-pension and dying from the toxic rock dust of the quarries, too poor to inhabit the city where once his profession had been dined and eulogized at the tables of the great—now in his ruin Hackle impotently longed to do a master-work, a stupendous clenched fist of stone poised to annihilate the city under it.

Sometimes Hackle would start running on about this project, which always distressed his death. Averting its small, starved face—usually so sympathetic—it would tactfully encourage him to resignation.

"Ah, well, my dear Hackle! But then, as you know, many of my colleagues have clients here, retired Statuarii. No suffering is unique, after all."

But, in fact, Hackle was no longer really angry at his city. It was half in jest that he picked his fist as literally falling, for its mere sculpting would suffice him, a colossal proclamation of his contempt for all that was venal, facile, and corrupt in the values of his wealthier countrymen. But how could he really hate something as diffuse and masterless as that circuit of follies, the Culture Market? The public purse has always fed or starved the arts according to whim. In truth, he had better cause for anger at his own Guild. If sculpture in Hrabb, after its long supremacy, was now so displaced by other arts, so unattended, who but the Statuarium itself was to blame? In its infallible lust for immediate profit the Guild had energetically

recapitulated whatever sold well, and tirelessly boycotted, blocked, and otherwise muffled every one of those stylistic radicals who might have infused new life into its art. Need anyone wonder that music, haute cuisine, and even literature currently engrossed the well-to-do—their purses? Once the Guild had given steady birth to a marmoreal populace which took up residence in the gardens and grottos of the rich, the lamaseries and monkeries of the hills, the municipal prayer booths and public parks. Now the market was glutted.

Ships plied the Tumble laden with stony refugees, all bound for sale at discounts far above where their history was unknown, and they were oddities. Oh, yes, the Statuarium could be said to have achieved what it had so blockheadedly worked for!

Yet, even for the Guild, Hackle felt little more than the remnants of anger. It did still cause him a twinge to recall the zeal with which the Guild's Directors had lobbied for city subsidies to open the pellucite quarry. How greedily they'd embraced this boon of bright, abundant, easy-working stone! But then they had at least all shared the unlucky outcome of its use, the tainted lungs and shortness of life. What else was to be expected, after all, of a human institution? All were heir to malfunction, self-damage, eventual entropy. Witness the Guild's concluding fiasco—the investment of its long-term assets in western blood-oysters, wherein said assets sank without a bubble. This left Hackle and his fellows hunched in the cross-river slums drawing stipends too small to buy more than one meal a day. What a perfect finishing touch, in a way! Guilds and their like are but men, after all, men are fools.

And so, late one afternoon as they watched the sun wester behind hilly Hrabb, and his companion was gently upbraiding him for some of his typical large talk, Hackle made a sudden gesture—as of surrender—and interrupted his companion.

"Please, my friend. After all, you know, it's really little more than a game of mine to carry on about the city, or the Statuarium. The fist—I'd like to carve it, yes. One last gorgy of expression, my concluding judgment on men and their world fairly thundered out, writ huge! But after all, everyone's world is a trap, a course of obstacles and pitfalls. The game has *always* been to outsmart your world—to excel, to accomplish good work in spite of it. Your colleagues must have told you how some of my retired coworkers rant and repine: 'Oh, but for this evil man or that stroke of bad luck, I'd be a wealthy and healthy success today!' And that's childish, after all, isn't it? To cry foul and swear you've been cheated? Far better to accept responsibility. It's a state of mind that leaves you readier for action."

His death sat hunched attentively, its elbows on its stark-knobbed knees. In their shadowed, bruise-colored sockets its eyes were vague and meditative glints. It seemed—while politely engrossed—to be hearing some faint, contradictory undertone in Hackle's words. Absently it screwed a fingertip into its tattered ear and dislodged a wriggling maggot which, musingly, it flicked away.

"You speak now, my dear Hackle, like the excellent man I know you to be, though perhaps a readiness for action is not the most appropriate state of mind to cultivate in your present circumstances. Still your gameness does you credit, as does your manly acceptance of responsibility. But, you know, strangely enough, in spite of your assurances, I feel that there is some great anger in you, some vengeful fire. There is some deep matter wherein you *do* cast blame."

"Oh, yes, indeed. Nor is it anything I make a secret of. Have I not spoken to you of Haffkraff?"

"Your Guild-sponsor."

"The same. Guide and governor of the first ten years of my education. Oh, brilliant, self-indulgent Haffkraff! How you betrayed me, week in, week out, through the long irrevocable seasons of my first development!"

"I think I have noted some grudge in you against this man. Yet your references to him are elliptical, oblique."

"Have I not said enough in saying that he educated me? Why, after all, did I *not* rise above the Guild? Why *did* I spend my life chained to it, and to Hrabb? Obviously due to a failure of talent—not lack of talent, but failure to master it, to give it the force and focus to accomplish something lasting. Were other worlds ever lacking, had my art been robust and confident enough to put at risk abroad? Why not go free-hammer in one of the south-coast cities, or hang out my shingle as *magus lapidarius* in some city of the Barbarian League, where a theorist's style might try—and get away with—anything?"

"My friend, I see you embrace the very fallacy you just now denounced. You're crying foul and swearing you've been cheated."

Hackle gave his head a firm shake. "I'm sorry, my friend. That is logically true, no doubt. But this matter of education—it constitutes an exception, I believe. For, in every life's budding phase, where is responsibility for its growth if not with its teachers—with those who nurse its development? How, after all, can it nurse its own? The bitter thing is how *able* Haffkraff would have done right by me. He had the talent, and my devotion! Any youngster would have been burned to be like that lean, crankish man, who could make any solemn matter dance in the cold flame of his mockery, and with one laconic flicker of his scorn—a mere phrase—could reduce the most earnest pretension to ash! His chisel was as articulate—and as irresponsible—as his tongue. There was the key to his cowardice, you see—he lived off what he scorned, and shamelessly carved in stone, for gold, every cliché or fatuity he had ever mocked. Yet he would have bridled at a charge of hypocrisy—he believed his mockery absolved him of sin. For he was one of those satiric sorts whose prime concern was, by invalidating all around them, to remain free. Such men are their own audience, but will also use a pupil for audience, careless of his education. I learned his accuracy, his flexible invention—his comic skills. He also swallowed whole his facile misanthropy and nihilism and—with these—his primary rationalization for doing pointless work."

"Can any teacher be omniscient?" his death asked delicately. "Surely the student's budding powers of judgment must be invoked at some point to assess his teacher's limits."

"But how? How could I have guessed the truths that this errant jack-of-all styles concealed from me? That great work is done only by those who risk seriousness—who stake off a ground of Truth and take a stand on it? Had I known these things in time, I might have imbibed the necessary ardor to forge my talent into something rare! I will tell you how I have come to understand—to visualize Haffkraff's crime against me. The teacher must regard a student's work in progress. Each stroke, each pressure on his mind, must be deliberate, intended. The teacher's talent may be mediocre, but the mind he shapes will have learned at least of method, care, and purpose—learned the gravity of art.

But to heedless, hedonistic Haffkraff I was no work in progress. I was a

practice-stone—such cheap chalkstone as stands in apprentices' halls to study technique on and chop out a quick study of some theme. He practiced his notions on me—whatever they might be at a given time. There's his crime in essence, for which I never will forgive the damned old mountebank! And there, my friend, you have my history—what made me a jack-of-all-styles and a myself, a patchy talent, brilliant only in fits and starts—fit, in short, to spend my career, and my life, in the Guild."

After a brief silence, Hackle's death shivered. "Getting cold," it muttered. Leaning forward and plugging one ragged nose hole with a black-nailed thumb, it blew a maggot from the other hole, and crushed it carefully under the ball of its stark-tendoned foot. "I do hate to hear clients recriminating like this," the death breathed sadly. "Rage is so useless for the business we have at hand."

Sighing, Hackle shrugged. The sigh had concession in it. The shrug was somehow multi-layered and unappeased.

## II

Not many days after this conversation, Hackle and his death took an afternoon stroll by the river, along the slum shore's crumbling quays and rotting wharves. They talked, with many lackadaisical pauses, about mankind's love of life.

"An intractable paradox," the death said at length. "People will, on the weakest pretext, waste vast amounts of time on aimless and valueless activities. They will do this to avoid fruitful and productive activities—even when these activities are not difficult. It is enough that they be 'work' to make them shunned. And yet no man or woman I have known would give away one week of his life, even if it purchased some rare thing."

Hackle was greatly surprised. "Can this be true?" The death gave a deprecatory wave of one gaunt hand. "Granting two conditions—that they are aware their deaths are somewhere close at hand, and that they are not in any extreme bodily agony. With these provisos I can swear to you that I have met no one who would willingly trade a week for anything I could offer."

"But this is quite astonishing!"

"Well, not *that* astonishing, surely. There is always the chance that one's fated time of death is less than a week away, and in that case one loses both life's remnant and the reward he sought for it for."

"Certainly, but you misunderstood me. What I found astonishing was primarily the fact that you made such offers in the first place!"

The death showed some discomfort. It stayed Hackle, glanced left and right, and spoke in a lowered voice. "You must understand. These little bargains are in the nature of a personal interest of mine. They are not, ah, sanctioned, or even countenanced, by my superiors. Quite the reverse, in fact."

Hackle nodded sympathetically and kept his own voice low: "I understand. What do you offer in exchange for this week of life?"

"Anything within my power to manage," the death said with quiet emphasis. A tentative smile tautened the yellow skin of its lean jaw. "The only reservation is that your wish involves or aid no evasion of your expiration date. And you *do* understand that this date is immutable."

regardless if it supervene before or at any time during your enjoyment of your wish?"

"I do, indeed. And, without wishing to insult you, I must ask you if you mean this offer seriously. For I tell you frankly, I am most seriously minded to take you up on it."

The death's smile grew wry. "Forgive me if I am skeptical in my turn. The offer is serious, made, be sure, but, as I have pointed out, I have yet to meet the person who dared to take it."

"Be comforted. You have just met him."

"Indeed? And what is your price for this week of your life?"

"An interview with Haffkraff, wherever in death he may lie."

"I must ask your purpose."

"To do myself justice. I intend to rebuke him, who was more father than my father was. I mean to accuse him to his face, I who loved and honored him to my ruin. If I have any life left after doing this, I will be able to live it with peace of mind."

Still faintly smiling, the death gazed at him a moment.

"You ask much, good Hackle. I can implement it, but you must accomplish it. The map, the procedure, and gold I can give you. The going and the doing must all be yours, and it will be arduous."

"Give me the how of it and give me gold. Sweet gold! Gold will serve me for strength through the hardest territories! Give me much gold and then only my Closing Date, by coming too soon, can stop me! But thus, of course, has it stood throughout my life."

"Aye, had you but believed it," replied his death. After a pause it added: "Haffkraff's death was Death-by-Winter, a very great death. Death-by-Winter's fastness is in the Titanleg Basin in Bythoggia Major. You must climb into the Titanlegs and solicit the aid of one of the Death-gatekeepers. I recommend Man-of-Blizzards, for he was Haffkraff's conveyor to Death-by-Winter. I will tell you how to invite his aid. But first, with your permission, I will take the week from your life. There's no point in wasting my breath on explanations if you're not going to survive the gamble, is there?" The death smiled a faintly sadistic smile.

"True enough," said Hackle, squaring his shoulders. "All right, then, take it."

### III

Had Hackle known how long his rebuke's preparation would take, he would have shunned the gamble from disbelief that sufficient life was left him. He had thought, with a week of his time, to purchase one daring but relatively brief exploit, after which he was reconciled to a speedy embrace by his death.

But simply to reach the threshold of that exploit took three months, and the mere standing upon that threshold was a feat of endurance. The snow-toothed winds chewed on his sunken cheeks, and each breath stabbed his sick lungs with air as thin and sharp as knives. When he rested briefly from his work, he did not even try to pry his aching fingers from the handle of his ice-saw.

He gazed downslope where Squamp, the drayman he had hired, flogged his team uphill with yet another sledful of dead wood, and marveled at his own continuing vitality. Perhaps death were not so strictly fated as most thought, he had actually delayed his own by undertaking this rebuke, for a vengeful spirit seemed a tonic to both mind and body.

A tonic had, in any case, been called for, since the invocation-ary acts required to summon Man-of-Blizzards were so toilsome. He must be summoned here, near a mile above timber-

He must be summoned with a fire blazing four times a man's height. And both the preparation and the lighting of the fire must be done strictly during times of snowfall.

Nonetheless, the toil had suited his mood, for as he cut and laid each ice block in the curving wind-wall he was making, his mind was reviewing his past—trimming, dressing and ordering the charges to be laid against his old preceptor. And, as Squamp brought up each of wood and Hackle laid the dead limbs on the fuel heap, his sculptor's eye saw in each one some cryptic, fragmentary gesture of remonstrance and reproof, all soon to combine in one blaze of accusation against Haffkraff.

The load Squamp now dumped before him was, they had concurred, the last one needed. Hackle undamped his hands from his saw, unpocketed and tendered the burly drayman a voucher for the withdrawal of funds from a bank in Bythoggia's capital. The man accepted somberly.

"I must say, Master Hackle, that I'm still affronted by the distrust implied by this arrangement."

"But how can you be, Master Squamp? I am old and ill and already near my time. I've brought you far from the sight of men. If I'd carried the cash, who would *not* have been tempted?"

"I would never have dreamed of committing a crime on the person of a lunatic like yourself, sir. It's bad luck to harm the daft. And, if I may intrude my unwelcome opinion of the matter one last time, I still think you ought to leave the old man alone. I mean, this kind of vindictiveness is really outrageous, you know!"

"Thank you, good Squamp, for sharing your views with me yet again. It saddens me that we must now part ways."

The drayman smiled dourly. "It gladdens me to leave this cold. This storm will surely hold—you should have snow enough to do your summoning." He climbed on his sled and whipped up his team, then slanted leisurely away downslope.

Hackle watched the dark shape's zigzag disappearance into white silence. The air hit a chill in his lungs, and he hugged himself to hold in a coughing fit. It racked him—convinced him for a moment that it would not end. He spat up the clot of infection it worked loose, reelingly inspected it against the snow. Still only veined and freckled with red.

"Oh, splendid," he said sneeringly to the mountain peaks—to his fate at large. "For this execution I humbly render thanks!"

Unsteadily, he marched back to the glacial knoll where he quarried his ice blocks, and picked up wedge and maul again. His pain had anesthetized an obscure pang, a cryptic qualm that the sight of Squamp's departure had caused him. He settled to work, a sense of triumph dawning on him as he considered the nearness of his goal. The wind-wall towered fifteen feet already. One block at a time, he laid the penultimate tier, his numb, boot-bulky feet slogging up and down the ladders of spliced boughs. Donning gauntlets, he wrapped in chain-mail coals from the flaming brazier already sheltered by the wall, and mortared the row in place with melt refrozen by the wind.

In his rage to be done he found himself pushing his lungs too hard, so by way of rest he laid the last of the wood in its place on the huge, crooked mountain of tented limbs. He returned to the wall, trying all the harder to slow his pace because now a dread of what he was so near doing began in its turn to dawn on him. Perversely, the last tier of blocks seemed to leap from

the quarry and spring to their places in the wall, while he himself swam easily through the work of it. Shortly, he found that his moment had come.

The wind had risen, raking the wall with crystal claws. The sky—or rather, the enveloping white swarm—was graying, the light draining from it with what seemed a terrible haste. Hackle stared at the unkindled bonfire as if it were the very essence of his accusation, that grievance he meant to carry to Haffkraff in his death. As if in perfect doubt of it—as if it were the fire-to-be of someone else's outrage—he kicked over the brazier, spilling its embers onto the heap, gaping to learn if they would catch or not. Flames, like fugitive spies, spread with fitful stealth through the mazed limbs. The main assault followed. Increasingly fierce, it forced up in thickening legions which, with a roar and a rush, were finally snatched by the gusts at the rim of the barrier, and hoisted high into the blizzard above, orange saber-tusks and tines which even the blizzard—though it bent them—could not break. Hackle cringed against his wall from the heat, his eyes hunting the snowspume over the flame crests for a revelation. Abrupt as blinking, it appeared. The flame tips tickled the Man-of-Blizzards' boot soles, seemed to hold aloft his ogre's hugeness with these feathery gusts of energy. His shaggy tunic and nude (but also shaggy) arms and legs were sugared with snowflakes. His scalp, beard, and brows, formed wholly of brambled ice, accented and parenthesized a somber-eyed, big-jawed face that was both forbidding and fractionally amused.

"So," the Man-of-Blizzards said, "your wish?" His voice— conversationally pitched—seemed to occur in a miraculous little zone of silence localized around Hackle's head. Against the wind's howl Hackle pitched his own voice at a shout: "I ... WISH ... TO ... BE—"

"Please!" With a pained expression the Man-of-Blizzards raised a palm. "Do not yell. It will only bellow."

"Forgive me. I wish to be taken to Haffkraff, former Statuarius of Hrapp. Death-by-Winter, your lord, has him in keeping." Hackle could feel his voice as a thrumming within his ribs, but could hear no sound of it, which was utterly erased from his hearing by the gale. This disoriented and obscurely frightened him. He had thought of this declaration of his as ringing out, a bold, resonant hammering against the door of Haffkraff's deathly retreat.

"I must ask your purpose," the Man-of-Blizzards answered.

"It is to rebuke him. He was my sponsor. I wish to upbraid him with his failure to protect me, and with the flaws in himself that made him fail."

"Mmmm. I remember Haffkraff. He was part of a caravan of adventurers that I enrolled in during a freak spring storm—at Ragged Pass in the Phystian Gnarlies. I remember my surprise at his age—the oldest in the party. The recruits for such foolish causes run young as a rule."

Hackle nodded, smiling disgustedly. "A caravan of privateers, or so I heard. Bound for honor and booty in the Holy Wars in the Isles of the Northern Splash, was he not, O Man-of-Blizzards?"

"Just so, but a front in fact. A ploy by one of the slave-magnates of these mountains. Unknowingly, Haffkraff was en route to a Death-in-Chains when I took him."

"He was in dotage then, believing his own lifelong affectations of freedom and daring. Are you going to take me to him?"

"Yes." As if he stood on something solid, the Man-of-Blizzards leaped with a firm

launch down to the glacier. Huge as a hill-troll, he scarcely made the impact of an alley cat. "Climb upon my shoulders," he said, kneeling with his back to Hackle. The sculptor, with a horripilation of either loathing or awe, mounted the giant and grasped his thorny neck. The Man-of-Blizzards sprang straight up into the storm.

#### IV

Now the blizzard utterly sealed Hackle's eyes and ears. Blind, up-surgent, for an unmeasurable time he was borne numbly aloft.

Then he was on his legs again, his bearer beside him. They stood on a snowy plain where—close enough, two miles away, to blot half the sky—a tremendous figure lay.

The Behemoth slept on his back. His frosty hair and beard were bound with the ice on the populous, knolled, and gullied plain. Streams of icy melt leaked from his ears and nose and slack, snoring mouth, thawing grottos from the wilderness of his hair. The sky was a skim-~~my~~ opacity without feature. The figures that thronged the plain, grottoed most thickly in his hair, choking the gullies like anemones, were the unmoving dead. Hackle's guide indicated the Behemoth.

"Death-by-Winter, insofar as he does not *notice*, will not *mind* your stealing an interview with Haffkraff. You follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"To ensure that he does *not* notice, look that you exchange nothing but views with Haffkraff. Neither take nor give anything but words. Haffkraff lies just past yon knoll, in his own little hollow. When you have done, return here, and make your own exit." The guide pointed at the ground, where a hole gaped. At its bottom, indeterminately deep, a smoky movement could be seen, and a distant whining heard—a storm noise that seemed minute beneath the vast, rumbling sound ceiling of Death-by-Winter's snoring.

"How?" asked Hackle, knowing, but afraid. "Just jump into it. Oh, yes—where would you issue from it?" "In the slums cross-river from Hrapp?"

"Done. Good-bye." The Man-of-Blizzards leaped into the hole. His bulky shoulders shrank to a spot, a dot, to nothing before he seemed to reach the storm below. Hackle turned toward the knoll his guide had pointed out.

The dead he passed sat staring stupidly at the ground. Some slowly looked up, to blink at him, and a few knit their brows with the remnants of perplexity, but all returned their gazes to the ground. And just so sat Haffkraff when Hackle, arms akimbo, stood before him, relishing the sight.

The old man's back was half propped by an outcrop of ice. He stared dully at his legs, which were sprawled like a dropped marionette's, and frozen to the ground. He wore the raffish two-peaked hat known as the "corsair's cap." Its snow-powdered prongs, jutting askew above his glassy-eyed face, made him look less like an adventurer than a bumpkin got up for fair. The spectacle's pitifulness filled Hackle with horror, hinting the same droll futility his own life had come to.

'Haffkraff! Look up! Look here! Do you know me, old man?"

Slowly, the snowblind, milky eyes lifted to his. Haffkraff's lip hung doltishly. It mouthed vaguely, fishlike, bringing out no sound.

"So," mocked Hackle, "you don't know me? But of course I'm sure you never thought of



enough to have imagined how / would look as an old man. I am Hackle, your journeyman! Hackle, your pupil of ten years!"

A faint palsy had begun to rock Haffkraff's head. His eyes seemed to thaw at the center where two attentive glints grew blacker. Now the sottish lips brought out sound—an all but voiceless gasp.

"Hackle?"

Fury flared in Hackle, a rage to melt this cosmic torpor binding the man he had come, at such risk, to prosecute.

"Yes!" he thundered. "Hackle! Whom you robbed of his true career! You, who should have prepared him for accomplishment!"

Here, somehow, his voice displayed awful power—seemed to roll booming for miles in all directions. The titan's huge snore actually faltered. This, and a tremor of one of Death-by-Winter's eyelids, made Hackle's body rubbery with horror.

"Hackle," said the dead man wonderingly. His voice broke free on the word with a frost crackle. With measured effort he brought out more words:

"How . . . are . . . you . . . so . . . free?" The old man's eyes moved up and down Hackle's body to indicate his standing, his mobility.

The giant's snoring had resumed. Still shaken, Hackle looked at Haffkraff with a somewhat chastened wrath.

"Free!" he grunted. "In all my life I've been free only in this last act of coming here alive to confront you. As for the rest, and all my work, I have *never* been free from the triviality and futility you bequeathed me."

Haffkraff's head, still faintly palsied, showed a catch in its wobble, as though a suspicion had just wakened in him. His eyes looked fully thawed, but his voice hadn't quite reached that state.

"You still live? . . . And come to death? . . . To confront me?"

"And to rebuke you. Oh, to think how I looked up to you! You slight, slippery man! To think how I—yes—loved you!"

"You have come here to *rebuke* me?" The icy gasp of outrage the old corpse gave the wretched inflamed Hackle anew. He almost howled again, caught himself, then leaned close to his old teacher, his teeth clenched:

"You mountebank! You jack-of-all-styles! On call to any mass-producer who needed his clichés trimmed and polished. Yet who praised and detailed greatness better than you did in your swaggering extemporizations? You ducked every artistic challenge, every serious devotion to an idea. What else *could* I have become but the adept and addict of that same hollow facility?"

"Curse you, Hackle, you mealy-mouthed whiner!" Haffkraff's voice was now fully his own with that light, sandpapery, chafing quality—like pumice buffing marble—that had always made the man's diatribes so bright and savory to Hackle's ear. The sound, unheard for twenty-five years, sparked a senseless, automatic warmth in his heart. "Your arrogance astounds me," Haffkraff was saying. "Am I to have no surcease of fools and their follies, not even here?"

"Am I a fool?" choked Hackle. His old master's voice had mixed grief with his rage. He ground his teeth. "If I am, who made me so, who trained me? I did not lack native talent wh

came under your care. *Care!* Ha! If I am a fool, what were you— you there in your corsair's cap? Posturing dwarf! Swashbuckling beetle!"

"Of course. But my follies were my own, and I didn't go whining to anyone else with the charge of them. Did your needs not crowd my career enough, that you should crowd me even here and now with your complaints?" Indignation had so limbered the old man's icy innards that even his derelict limbs began to wake, to tremor with the ardor that had melted his lungs and warmed his words to all their ancient resonance. Now, at last, Hackle felt the triumph of accomplishment. His spirit soared above the pallid, death-encumbered plain. He was touched near the heart of his rebuke, and having it felt.

"Crowd your career? What care did you ever take to show me more than you were expected in? To strut your special tricks, spread your peacock's tail of paltry plumage to an ignorant worshipful eye—*this* you would do readily enough, and at little labor."

"What? My limitations? Have you come to scold me for these? Blame your own upon them. You're in your dotage, surely, Hackle! Look at this trek you've made to me—it can't have been other than grueling and full of risk! Couldn't you have spent all this tenacity and daring on curing your *own* limits, instead of on carrying blame to a dead man's door?"

"Ah, but one never knows one's weakness till it has toppled him, till he has fallen short of what he aimed at!" He was half-smiling, and almost shouting again, careless of the Titan in the background. "By the time I knew whether I must move, my soul had stiffened! My eye and ear for inspiration had grown dull by the time I knew what to look and listen for!"

"So! The sum of your folly is that I was to have taught you what I had not mastered?"

"Yes! A truth your sarcasm cannot avert. For you had talent! You knew at least the shape of what you had not achieved! The frontiers of the territory you had not dared to penetrate. If you had *cared* for my life, you could have taken just one step outside your vanity. You could have sketched for me those realms you *had* to know existed beyond the realms of your small-scale expertise and easy superiorities. In such a spirit of love, you could have let me know there were degrees of dedication in art that purchase something lasting, something rare that repays all effort, recompensing everything death takes from us."

His rebuke, Hackle felt in this moment, was delivered. And yet, amazingly, it felt not so much like the transmission of an idea, as the shedding of an entire state of mind. Everything he saw— abruptly—seemed different. Those white miles of tumbled lives around him, all those wrecks in Death's freeze, now filled him with a giant tenderness. Death-by-Winter, blotting half the sky, shimmered, faintly nimbused by auroral lightnings. The rumble of his slumbering breath now purred with a majesty almost musical, like the trumpets and drumrolls of a mighty army mustering.

But foremost of these transformations was Haffkraff's. The cadaver blinked, stared a moment, and was shaken by a laugh. This laugh—albeit but a single bark, and soft—was like the final thawing of the old man's body. For the first time he moved his hands, stiffly presenting them palms-up to his own wry gaze.

"Nothing, my dear Hackle, recompenses everything death takes from us—recompenses *anything* death takes from us." He lifted his look to Hackle. Weasely, his former student had always thought that look, for instance when Haffkraff was peering at a block and ferreting out with his eyes the shape latent in the stone. "As for loving you, I did," the

corpse continued. "But with the same lazy and imperfect sort of love I showed myself. For I been capable of the pure and strictly honest kind you rant about, I might have shown it to myself and *been* the artist you so rightly say I wasn't. And the same goes for you, of course, doesn't it?"

"Of course," smiled Hackle. The easy concession was like shedding weight, ejecting a ballcast of ancient grievance. Indeed, he felt ever more levitational. His sickish lungs felt inflated, engorged with a healing arctic air of unimagined freedom. "How churlish I've been, Haffkraff!" he almost crowed. "What a churlishness has possessed me in these last few years of mine!" He flung his words jubilantly abroad. His echoes, big and distinct, dispersed over the plain. Half calmly, Haffkraff's hand came up.

"Yes, well, an angry and accusing state of mind is a kind of balm to a hungry spirit, I suppose," he offered. He seemed faintly uneasy at his former student's fire, and cast a glance toward Death-by-winter.

But Hackle was highly volatile now in his heart's emancipation. He was all fire and air and seemed, and could not be bothered to tone down his dithyramb.

"Ah, dear old Haffkraff! Bless your patience with my fractious taunts!"

"Well, *here of* course, calm and patience are—"

"Just think, whatever your faults, how unlucky I might have been with a different sponsor! I could have got some square-nosed sober-sides who would have felt duty bound to pinch and sour and buckle down my imagination! You know it's simply not enough, just to thank you. No! For a decade of instruction? Which, whatever its deficiencies, was always patient, friendly, and inventive in its explanatory methods? Not enough by half, oh, no!"

Hackle had begun to pace a fervent little circuit before his recumbent—and now visibly uneasy—former sponsor. Pacing, rubbing his hands together, he spoke in a tone of dawning revelation. "For haven't you carried me, metaphorically speaking, through my student decade, a major passage of my life? Then I should do no less for you, and carry you literally back to the beginning. Oh, yes! A major passage that, wouldn't you agree, my dear old teacher?"

The corpse, impossibly, blanched. Blatant fear now caused his legs to palsy with his hands, and his shaking blue hands were raised in prevention.

"Madness, Hackle! You are proposing madness! *It is not done!*"

Hackle stood suddenly still, and smiled. Purpose surged through him. "Old teacher," he trumpeted. "Old friend! When an enormity is to be done it must be done at once, to outrun second thoughts!"

He bent and clamped the dead man's ribs between both palms. He hoisted too hard and almost fell, for Haffkraff was bulkily light, like the skeleton of a big bird. Hackle draped his former teacher down his back, clamping the fragile forearms against his chest. He set out striding toward the portal he had entered by.

"It is not done, Hackle! It is not done!" Though Haffkraff's lips were at his ear, his voice sounded eerily distant and feeble. His passenger struggled as he spoke, but this protest, too, was strangely weak. His twitches might have been the wind stirring Hackle's pithless, unshakable burden. For indeed, a stiff wind had suddenly sprung up, and kicked to life ahead of him, shaking shrill wind devils of powdered snow. He had scarcely put behind them his teacher's resting place when the vastly overlooming snore of Death-by-Winter came—with a grinding boom and a pause. Hackle broke into a jog trot.

The wind devils quickened and swelled, came hornet-swarmed against him, expunging visibility. Slothfully, the colossus shifted where it lay, and the ice plain under Hackle's feet groaned and faintly tautened. That torque was slight, but dreadful in its scale and Hackle no longer began to run outright, shouldering fanatically forward through the stinging whiteouts, steering by glimpses of the portal-pit. From this a spumy vortex now towered, as if either this air were draining down it, or the lower air were cycloning out of it. Again the Titan stirred, and awful stresses tensed the icy world-floor. Eyes mad, a war cry on his lips that he himself was dead in those gales, Hackle broke into a reckless sprint. His lungs, in this delirium, were restored to him, and his feet, unhesitant and firm, found their way on that blind and broken ground. His teacher felt ever lighter—like a banner that he towed, a trophy waving behind him like a flag.

A shift in the devil winds showed him the spuming pit was near, a terrible and ambiguous thing to leap into, were it not for the huger thing visible beyond it. This was the slow opening of one of Death-by-Winter's mammoth, nacreous eyes. The immense, cataracted orb rolled toward him, aim down upon the thieving sculptor. A tidal front of fear swept down against Hackle then. With fierce, unslackening drive, mad Hackle hit the portal-pit at a dead run and dove into the howling, eyeless throat of storm as to some refuge from the meaning in the giant's eye.

There was a fall through miles of storm, a strange, buoyed fall that didn't hasten past a certain speed. The storm opened out, its winds made wilder music and the air tasted richer. Hackle hit a snowbank—solidly, but the drift was deep and soft. He floundered instantly to his feet, for he had felt at impact an absence at his back, though his hand still pressed his teacher to his chest.

Indeed, Haffkraff was gone. His pithless forearm had snapped bloodlessly in half. It made Hackle smile, after a moment, to reflect that all he'd brought back of his old sponsor was his right hand. He stepped out of the snowdrift, which was a big, bright anomaly in the arid hills behind the slums. Across the river, Hrabb sparkled beneath the Jut's towering, inarticulate mass.

"Home again," he told himself. He looked anew at his knuckly Memento of Haffkraff. The fingers were frozen in a partial closure which struck Hackle, the longer he looked at it, as remarkably, mysteriously eloquent. He laid it on the ground to look at it from varied vantage. When, after a time, it turned suddenly to ice, then molded snow, and then was gone, Hackle found he had memorized its gesture.

## V

Hackle went home and slept till the following noon. He rose with a determined expression which looked grim and peaceful in equal parts. He had some breakfast and then strolled out to his front steps, where he expected to find his death sitting, and did. He sat down beside it.

"Welcome home," the death said. "Accept my congratulations. You're a rare and worthy man, I assure you, Hackle. I am most impressed with your tenacity and your daring."

"Thank you. May I impress you further?"

The death's affability just perceptibly froze. Dispassion now qualified its smile. "You suggest a further indiscretion on my part?"

"I do, yes."

"Mmmmm. I don't reject this out of hand. Of course, I shall now be harder to impress, if you see what I mean."

"One month of my life is what I'd pay."

"A month?" The death's voice echoed with a note of lugubrious awe. Its pit-black gaze dwelled wonderingly on Hackle, showing him the vacuum that his gamble risked. A maggot if called forth by its host's amazement, shyly poked its snout from its burrow in the cheesy corner of the death's left eye. The death plucked, balled, and flicked it, then replied:

"I am impressed anew. What services would you require?"

"The help of a Death-by-Lightning for one night."

"We can do business." After a delicate pause, it added: "You wish to yield the month up now?"

"I do."

"I don't mind telling you, by way of warning, you're playing this one very close."

"Thank you, but proceed."

That evening a storm gathered over Hrabb. It fell so furiously and long the citizens cowered awake all night beneath their beds. It seemed to center on the Jut where incessant lightnings played—vast, brief blades of fire that whittled and bit and hewed a steady hail of rubble from the crag. Gravel chattered and rattled on the city's roofs like a second rainfall. At sunrise the Jut stood utterly remade before the timid eyes of townsfolk blinking out at the sudden calm. Its form was that of a raised hand, a thousand feet high. Its gesture was ambiguous, and this ambiguity was to father sects in Hrabb in generations to come. Some held that the hand was poised to grasp the city, others that the hand proclaimed a benediction on it.

Only Hackle, who survived by almost a day the carving of it, and spent the time admiring till he died—he alone knew the identity of that gesture: that of a sculptor's hand that is pausing to weigh a concluding stroke upon some labor of love.