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The Commission

He could tell she knew just the expression she wanted, that she'd seen it in the mirror before, or in an atypically pleasing photo. She tilted her head slightly to the left and stared directly at him through her thick lashes. She parted her lips as though just about to speak, trying hard to recapture that glimpse of herself that she'd seen somewhere, that had delighted her so. Her friends giggled and whispered behind him watching his hand stroking pastel color onto the paper.

"It's coming out good, Donna," one of them said. Donna smiled with half her mouth, not wanting to distract the hand recording her pale, thin features. People walking by slowed a bit as they passed, glancing first at the artist's sketch, then at the young model. Some stopped to watch.

"All set," the artist announced after a few more minutes. He took the sketch down from his easel after slashing his name across the bottom. Donna smiled breathlessly as she leapt from her chair to see the portrait being cooed over by her friends.

“Oooh... It’s good,” she murmured, pleased at the way he had concentrated on her eyes, her best feature, taking attention away from the long thinness of her nose.

She walked away surrounded by her friends, all marveling at the simple portrait.

Eric Tunnille watched the mildly interested crowd disperse. He sat down and kept an eye out for any interested glances from the mob slowly plodding through the shopping mall. He unwrapped a piece of gum, folded it into his mouth, rapidly adding the ones, fives, tens and some change in his pocket; he wasn’t doing too badly this month. The cash box safely tucked into his drawing supplies held a fairly respectable amount. It was bitter cold out and he knew people had that need to get out of the house, to believe they weren’t trapped in there, even if freedom only took the form of making a break for it to the mall. He felt it himself. So for the sake of a very small brief adventure, quite a few people had handed him ten dollars to render their faces in pastel. He didn’t do caricatures; he didn’t draw in skateboards or gardening tools or guitars to define his models. He liked adding a dreamy gaze here, a sly smile there, and generally they were pleased with the result.

His gaze lit on the far wall where his photographs were mounted. From here they were just grayish squares scattered across the white, but he had a good idea which ones were which. There was a man standing in front of one, hands in pockets, bent forward a little, peering. Eric Tunnille stirred uneasily, watching that broad, hunched back in its down vest, anxiously studied the tilt of the big, graying head; he imagined that the man would turn and he’d see a lion’s face with a thick, tangled mane framing it. A long, slow shudder ran through his body.

“How much is it?”

He jerked his head around, startled. A tall, lanky boy was holding his girlfriend's hand. She was laughing, embarrassed and saying, "Tony! I don't want to... Really!"

"How much for a portrait!"

"For both of you?"

"No. Just her."

"Tony!"

"Ten dollars."

The boy gave him the money. "I already paid him. Now you've got to let him draw you."

He sketched her face, trying to ignore the self-conscious, amused and helpless looks she kept shooting at the on-lookers who always materialized when he started a portrait. It took him a long time to concentrate on the drawing. He kept glancing at the man at the far wall who was studying his photographs. When finally he put his attention to his work, he colored her cheeks flushed and excited, as if she'd just come in from the cold.

The man who'd been looking at the photographs, he was gone now. He saw that John, the man in the jewelry store who handled his sales for him had pasted an orange 'Sold' sticker across the price tag of one.

He rolled a charcoal stick between his fingers, staring at the matted photograph and wondered if it was the one he thought it was. It was a shot of a shadowy street, was all, with a figure up ahead just emerging from around the corner. It was an odd, stilted picture, which gave one the impression that it had been shot a moment too late or a moment too soon. You imagined that something had or was about to happen, and the photographer had not quite caught it. There was an uneasy, empty look to it.

He had had the photograph for two years and he didn't remember where or why he'd taken it. Now someone had bought it and he wished he hadn't let it hang there with the rest, wasn't sure why he had in the first place. It was his photograph, his street, and he imagined that it was he who was just turning the corner. There was someone behind him, unseen, a stranger. As he turned the corner he was quickening his step to outpace this stranger because the stranger was not just walking behind him, he was following him.

Money was being pushed into his hand and looking up he felt fear snap through his body. It was the man he'd seen before, looking down at him with a wide rapacious grin. He *did* almost have a lion's face; his green eyes were slanted and watchful, his smile was gluttonous.

"Ten dollars, right?" the man asked. "For a portrait?"

“Did you buy a photograph?” Tunnille asked, his voice quavering a little. When the man took a hand out of his pocket to push back the thick gray hair he expected it to be a massive paw with the tips of claws barely showing.

“Yes, I did. The one of the dark street.”

“Why that one?” He watched the man shift his weight like a huge, restless animal.

“I liked it. Why do you ask?”

The grin never wavered at all as though it was his natural expression. He slept grinning, ate grinning... And he looked like -- Christ, Tunnille couldn't believe the images tumbling through his head – he looked like he'd bite and tear at you with those teeth if he got mad.

“You want your portrait done?” He stared down at the two fives in his hand. He didn't want to sketch that face. There was a brutal look to it, every line was hard and deliberate. It could be, actually, an easy face to draw; there were no soft places in it, no subtleties to find and interpret, none of those hints and allusions that were the hardest things to capture in a portrait but which were essential to its success. This face was unequivocal, blatant in its every line and curve. He was, he realized, afraid of the face because it wasn't quite human. One's attitudes, desires, hatreds, passions all crept into one's eyes, but he... this man had none of that. As though there was no soul pulsing behind it to add color and meaning to the original idea. Primitive. Untouched.

And he'd seen him before. That was frightening, too, because how could he have seen this face but be unable to place it? The man was somehow familiar to him, as if he'd glimpsed him in the darkest, most menacing regions of his nighttime imaginings.

The man was settling himself down on the little chair beyond the easel, crossing his legs and folding his hands on his knees, moving with great, restless strength.

Eric Tunnille picked up his pencils and looked at them for a long time as though deciding which one to start with. He wanted to avoid confronting the face, he didn't want to look at the grin and the slanted eyes. The shopping crowds milling past, their continual and monotonous murmuring should have been reassuring to him but were not; and, as well, he noted that for once a group did not gather to watch him begin a sketch, so he was deprived of that small, cold comfort as well. Despite the people moving past him down wide corridors, he was isolated, unsafe.

“Why not simply begin, Tunnille?” called the man, and he looked up sharply at the inexplicable use of his name.

He began to draw, his fingers tight, the lines jerking and hard, trying to calm himself, remind himself that he was surrounded by humanity, not trapped helplessly in a jungle snare. The man in the chair stared straight ahead at him as he drew, always smiling, looking as though he might burst into ghastly laughter at any moment, might throw back his head and give a lion's roar.

He'd had his wobbly moments in life, like so many others. He did not always move steadily through the world and he often could recognize his fellow seasick passengers. That girl, Donna, whose portrait he'd just done. Somehow he could tell she would occasionally find herself in treacherous waters that her own mind had created for her. Some people hemmed themselves in with perils of their own invention. From childhood he recalled the term 'overactive imagination' being applied to him, but it was something beyond that. He knew that feeding his fears gave them the nourishment to flourish and what had not been real could become real.

He drew with a crude accuracy and saw what was happening under his hand. What the face had not revealed outwardly was becoming manifest in the slashing lines he used to draw it. The sensed brutality was emerging, elicited by his own unfathomable fear. And after some minutes, when he was finished, he hesitated to show the drawing, afraid this gray haired beast, should be disapprove, might seize him in a powerful grip, shake him by the shoulders and howl with fury.

“May I look?”

He wiped the colored smudges from his fingers with a white rag, wiped the sweat from his forehead. He heard the man rising from his seat and drawing near. Their shoulders brushed slightly as he passed to the easel and Tunnille recoiled slightly. He waited to hear perhaps a low purr of satisfaction or maybe a soft, thoughtful growl. He finally turned but the man had apparently given the portrait only a cursory glance and was now gazing back to the far wall.

“That photograph I bought,” he said, “it wasn't very good. But it had a disturbing, unfinished feel to it. I like that quality in art.”

Tunnille mumbled something, straightening out his drawing things, trying not to look at the man.

“Art,” the man continued, lighting a cigarette, “should provoke the mind, I’ve always felt. It should tease and disturb a bit, force one to contemplate.”

Tunnille stared at the lit cigarette. He was aware of a security guard down the hall at a distance, looking at it as well, hesitating. Fascinated, Tunnille watched to see what the guard would do and was unsurprised to see him look the other way and move on.

“I see no point,” the man was saying, “in a work of art which is completely inclusive of itself. There should always be something left out to give one a reason for looking at it again and again. One should wonder, ‘What is going to happen here...?’”

Tunnille was watching the man now, cautiously fascinated.

“When you snapped that shot,” the man said, “what were you thinking? What did you see?”

Tunnille didn’t like those green eyes upon him, their hint of laughter about to erupt. He began to feel chilled. “I was thinking... of what should be in the picture,” he answered. “Or what was missing.” This was a lie, wasn’t it, since he had acknowledged earlier that he couldn’t remember taking the picture at all.

“What I see on the street,” said the man, “is a figure running, wondering, perhaps, where to hide. There’s someone behind him, you see, following. Not yet in the picture, but only a few steps behind. You know, there is a primitive kind of bond between the man and his pursuer. The kind found on the hunting plains, between weaker and stronger animals.”

Tunnille watched the lion’s head tilt slightly to the right, pensively, the muscles in the face seeming to relax momentarily. Then he shrugged one broad, square shoulder. “But you see?” he said, the grin sliding back. “It is as I said; a provocative piece of art forces one to think. To imagine.”

Then brusquely he thrust out one long-fingered hand. “My name is Marchetti,” he announced. “Anton Marchetti.”

Tunnille reluctantly offered his hand to the grip of the other and for a moment as those clasping fingers closed over his own, he felt that their hands were being welded together in some irrevocable contract.

“Eric Tunnille,” he said, and the lion’s grin widened, satisfied.

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At home, late that night, he painted with broad, harsh strokes, a simple landscape was all. But so slashing were the lines and colors that one imagined the ground was quivering, about to erupt from some heated pressure beneath.

He stopped painting abruptly when he finished, dropping his brushes into a can of turpentine. He didn't pause to contemplate the oil landscape, consider final details or embellishments. As was his way, he simply stopped when he knew he was finished.

Outside he imagined a gray, sinewy lion padding slowly down the sidewalks, regarding the house numbers through narrowly laughing eyes. He saw the beast pause before his building, gazing at the door, tail twitching thoughtfully. Then, with a short rumble of a growl, it trotted up the steps on heavy clawed feet.

Tunnille switched on the light in his small kitchen and made himself a cup of instant coffee. He looked down onto the streets from his window, pushed back the thin yellowed curtains to peer outside. It looked cold, empty on the streets tonight. It was so silent and still that even the shadows and lights in the windows seemed painted onto cardboard scenery.

He went back into the living room, sat down on the couch and stared at the painting he'd finished for a moment as he drank his coffee. Turning his head, he saw two thin eyes regarding him with dark mirth, saw a grinning mouth stretched wide, baring white, sharp teeth.

He picked up the portrait gingerly as though imagining the face could lunge off the paper at him, snapping those long teeth. He wondered why Marchetti had left not only the portrait but the photograph he'd bought; the photo still hung in the mall, an orange 'Sold' sticker below it. He wished Marchetti had taken both with him. Now there was a reason for the beast to come back to the mall or maybe even (the thought was irrational) to this apartment, should he somehow learn where he lived, to collect his belongings.

He tried to analyze the fear, bordering on outright panic, he had felt in Marchetti's presence. He'd never experienced that brand of mindless dread outside of nightmares. Even now, safe in his apartment he remembered it vividly and was bewildered and frustrated by it.

When he went to bed that night he lay awake for hours imagining he heard soft, furred steps padding quickly up the stairs in loping strides, a dangerous rumbling purr and a scratching at his door. When at last he slept, the noises ceased, but the dreams began.

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“These paintings are mostly from a much earlier period; note the crudeness of the lines, the almost assaulting vividness of the colors. There's a primitive, childlike quality to these, and a self-indulgence, too. Nothing is held back. In the childhood of my career, in a manner of speaking, my works showed the lack of self-restraint observed in children.”

There were quiet murmurings, hushed comments from the crowd. He stood back to wait as they studied the canvasses mounted upon the walls. He was smiling slightly, excited at their interest, but attempting to appear aloof. When they'd all had their fill of these paintings, he led them into the next room.

“Here we observe the beginnings of an evolution in style. Gone is my tendency toward self-indulgence, gone is the almost riotous freedom. In its place we see a new tension, a taut restraint. My colors, though still vivid, now seem tightly, even painfully controlled. Are there any questions?”

A woman lowered the pamphlet she'd been leafing through. She looked up and said tentatively, looking at him over her reading glasses, “Have you ever been very, deeply wounded?”

I mean... not physically, but..." She fluttered a hand, trying to frame her question. She did not know much about art, but was trying to learn. "Not in body, but..."

"Psychically?" suggested an older man standing among the crowd. He raised his eyebrows at her, hoping to help out.

"Ah!" nodded Tunnille. "To that I would have to say that I've been wounded no more deeply than the average person. I do have a tendency to exaggerate my response to pain, I will say. I'll admit to almost wallowing in it. You'll see more of that as we move on. Shall we?"

He led them through several more rooms. *The idea that something is being hidden... A restrained violence... A fearful expectancy...*

He brought them to the last room and paused in the doorway, uncertain. His eyes moved, bewildered, across each canvas. He didn't remember doing these paintings. He had never seen them, yet he knew they were his. He was in every brush stroke, his name was signed carefully in each corner. What was more, though he couldn't remember having painted them, they seemed familiar, as though he had once imagined them. The crowd milled curious and restless behind him.

They were frightening paintings, they were the fear and violence that had been hidden beneath the colors of the previous ones. There were scenes of dark hallways with one door slightly ajar. There were figures approaching through the night, bodies tensed, ready to lunge. There were confrontations in dark, empty places where you knew no one would ever hear you should you call for help.

The people finally pushed by him into the room and he hovered helplessly against the wall watching, not knowing how to explain this last development.

He tossed, sweating and murmuring in his sleep. He pressed his face deeply into the pillow hearing the wind rise far away.

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“What’s the scariest thing that could ever happen to you?”

They were all sitting around in a circle, cross legged, in Mark’s backyard. Mark’s mother had just brought them paper cups of fruit juice and a plate of cookies.

“Somebody breaking into your house when you’re all alone, by yourself...”

“Or at night, and you go to get your mother and she’s *not there*...”

“Somebody under your bed and they reach up slow and grab your arm...”

“You’re in the woods and something’s following you, but you can’t see it...”

Eric bit into a chocolate chip cookie, listening and shuddering with the rest. But it was broad daylight, Mark's mother was right there in the house and you couldn't get too scared except at night, alone. And they were just making these things up, anyway. Just thinking about things didn't make them real.

...somebody following you...

...somebody is following you...

*

It was Sunday. He lay with his head turned toward the window, blankly staring through the gauzy color of the curtains at the light beyond. He felt as though he hadn't slept at all last night. But he'd dreamed, and if he'd dreamed then he'd slept.

He lurched out of bed and in that stilted way, when the body and the mind haven't yet connected, he made himself coffee, a bowl of cold cereal. He ate standing up and stared out at the white dusted street. It had snowed lightly during the night. It must be early yet because it still looked clean, unbroken. He looked at the clock: 6:45.

He rinsed out the cereal bowl and took his coffee into the living room. The painting he'd finished last night was propped neatly in a corner, a fresh new canvas waited for him on the easel. His brushes lay cleaned and ready by his palette.

He hadn't put them there.

Standing in the kitchen doorway he stared at that white, blank canvas, knew that it had been stacked with a pile of other canvases in the closet when he'd gone to bed last night. He didn't want to touch it.

Then he stepped a little closer. When painting from a sketch he tended to tape the drawing along the bottom of the canvas where he could glance at it from time to time. There was a sketch there now, the portrait of Marchetti.

He'd walked in his sleep once, he'd been told, when he was a kid. His mother said he had come downstairs, watched t.v. with her, talked awhile and then gone back to bed. The next morning he hadn't remembered any of it. He thought about this.

There was a smudge on the painting he'd done last night. It was an immense, blurred thumbprint, it was as though someone with huge, clumsy hands had carried it to the corner here and left this mark while doing so. There was a thin scratch, too, from a long fingernail. His signature, he saw, had been tampered with. Dully, he noted that exclamation points had been added. His signature now read: *Eric Tunnille!!!* He moved the painting behind the chair where he wouldn't have to look at it. Then he got dressed and went outside.

There was still no one on the streets. It was quiet, hushed. The snow dusting the sidewalks was white and even; the only prints he saw were from those of a dog. A very big, heavy...

He ground his teeth together, angry to find that he was just about ready to cry.

He got to the corner store just as the Sunday papers were being delivered. He took one, not planning to read it, then walked up and down the short aisles trying to find something else to buy, trying to kill time because he didn't really want to go back to his apartment. But finally he paid for the paper, went out into the snow again and headed home.

And he was thinking, Marchetti is miles away, probably in bed, maybe with an ordinary, middle-aged wife preparing coffee. He isn't where you're imagining he is, dozing in some damp, shadowy cave, lion's head resting on outstretched paws, tail twitching slightly. Or maybe cleaning his fur, trying to get the smudge of green paint off his paw.

As he walked, he forced himself to think coldly and rationally: The fact was, someone, last night, had tampered with his painting and his supplies. That was an irrefutable fact, and for this, there were precisely two possible explanations. First, someone (Marchetti) had gotten into his living room quietly enough so as not to wake him, and moved the painting, altered the signature and put the pastel portrait and a blank canvas on the easel. Second, he himself had walked in his sleep and done those things. It was possible that he sleep walked frequently (he lived alone, so who was to tell him about it?) and this was the first time he'd left evidence of his prowlings behind to find in the morning.

He came to his building, and stared up at his window. The sleep walking scenario was the one that made sense. After all, his mother had told him about that one time as a kid. Plus, he'd been weirdly shaken by his encounter with Marchetti yesterday and had been thinking about it when he went to bed.

There was always that third possibility, of course. The possibility that he was simply nuts. But if that was the case, well, there wasn't too much he could do about it, was there?

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It was an easy painting to do. The dark colors vibrated upon the canvas, the hard lines, no matter how crudely he lashed them on, seemed to pulse and then fuse together into a vivid, breathing reproduction of the sketch.

He stood back at one point, saw the face growing and shimmering with life and a great dizziness seized him, swept over him causing the sweat to pour and his vision to blur. And from some rediscovered recess of his imagination came a joyfully echoing lion's roar, which threatened to shatter his skull with its merry ferocity.

When he opened his eyes again he abruptly put his brushes down and stared at the painting, wondering what horror he was bringing to life. He stared at Marchetti's face, fascinated and horrified. He picked up the canvas and put it in the closet.

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“Come on, Pauly, smile... Can't you smile for the man, honey?”

She held the two year old on her lap, trying to convince him that there was something interesting about the man over there, scribbling behind that big board.

“Look, Pauly! Look over there at the man...”

Tunnille would rather be doing her portrait; her face was an attractive blend of strong and soft lines. Dewy eyes, straight nose. Full mouth, square jaw. He could tell that the child would resemble her so he only made a pretense of studying his face. Instead he vaguely sketched in her

features and covered them in soft round cheeks and a pouting expression. When he was finished, she cooed and marveled over the portrait, genuinely impressed, and tried to get Pauly to comment on it.

“Oh, he’s so shy…” she told Tunnille.

Tunnille smiled weakly.

This morning the canvas and easel had been brought back into the center of the living room. The brushes and paints were arranged close at hand.

It was still early, so not too many people were roaming the mall yet. He put up a small sign (“The artist will be right back!”) and went in to a coffee shop farther down to order a muffin for breakfast.

He’d dreamed again last night. They’d been those types of dreams he hadn’t had since he was a kid. There had been that primal fear that adults forget over time because it was too basic, too raw a fear for them to understand in the way they understood overdue mortgage payments, restless spouses, backstabbing co-workers. An adult sees a door ajar which had been previously closed and decides they must have left the door open after all. A child sees the same thing and feels the immediate presence of malice, of dozing beasts under their beds waiting for the lights to go out.

He couldn't remember the dreams themselves, only that childishly crude fear. Which response to the door ajar made more sense? Was it more sane to assume you'd left it open when you recalled closing it, was it more sane to automatically doubt yourself? Or was it more reasonable to wonder who (or what) was slyly signaling its presence to you?

When he went back to his stand, he saw Marchetti across the hall studying his photographs again, the one he had bought Saturday tucked under his arm. Tunnille stood numbly by his easel, watching the lion peruse his work. As Marchetti turned, Tunnille imagined the slanted eyes alighting upon him with glee, imagined him bounding across the hall with delight, tongue lolling, tail switching. He would come gnashing his teeth and roaring hungrily. And no one would see as the lion pounced upon him, tearing and ripping. Marchetti would be bellowing, "Why didn't you finish my portrait? Why did you put it away?"

Instead, MarchettiS strolled over to him, smiling as if at an old friend he'd run into. Tunnille saw a new lightness in his step, a vigorous grace, a new terror. The massive body seemed to be imbued with a virile flame. And there was also a self-satisfaction in his face, almost a smugness, as though he were very aware of some new potency coursing through his blood and was well pleased. Tunnille told himself, "I didn't do this... I didn't do this with my paints and brushes..."

"Tunnille!" called Marchetti cheerily. "I had to return for my photograph. And my portrait. I had other errands to do the other day and left without taking them. You do have my portrait, don't you?"

After the hand had snaked up from under the bed to grab your arm, what then? His fears had never continued beyond that sickening moment. Did it drag you back down with it, into some soulless abyss that your mother never noticed when cleaning your room?

“Tunnille?” said Marchetti calmly. “The portrait. Do you have it for me?”

Marchetti knew he didn’t have it. Of course he knew it wasn’t here.

“When you didn’t... didn’t take it,” Tunnille told him, “I brought it home with me. I threw it away. I didn’t think you’d be back for it.”

Then he wished he hadn’t said this, because Marchetti’s eyes narrowed horribly and the grinning mouth bowed down in a sudden grimace. Tunnille saw something else changed in that face; Saturday he had sketched what was sensed below the skin, the crudeness, the brutality which was not quite seen. Now it was there on the surface, as though the portrait had drawn it out from its depth.

“I’m sure you must have it,” Marchetti told him in a moment, suddenly smiling good naturedly again. “Poke around a bit. I insist that you find it for me. I was quite pleased with it.”

His voice had a humorous lilt, as though he and Tunnille were sharing a joke, as if it were amusing to go on with this pretence, so long as they both knew what he *really* wanted.

Tunnille toyed with a charcoal pencil. “It’s just a picture,” he said.

“Yes,” agreed Marchetti amiably. “But your style... I admire it. You have a way of... bringing things to *life!*”

And to prove this, Marchetti stretched out his long, thick arms, tilted back his gray head and seemed to deliberately quiver and thrill in a new-found vitality. This sickened Tunnille, brought on a slight dizziness. Marchetti took a step toward him. “Now I insist,” he repeated. “I insist that you finish that painting.”

Naturally they were not talking about the sketch from Saturday, they were speaking of the painting Tunnille had, for unfathomable reasons, started on Sunday. But he couldn't admit this, he had to deny it or acknowledge things he wasn't prepared to acknowledge. Marchetti had never seen the painting, he didn't know it existed. There was no painting.

“I'll look for it,” Tunnille said, keeping his voice calm. “Maybe I didn't throw it away after all. The sketch. The sketch from Saturday, I'll look for it at home.”

And then Marchetti did something Tunnille had only imagined in hellish dreams. He growled low in his throat, a quietly thunderous sound no human could produce, and with his lips curled back, eyes narrowed to angry slits, he violently gnashed his teeth in Tunnille's face.

“Not the sketch! You know very well, don't pretend you don't! I want the painting!” snarled Marchetti in a voice not remotely human. “Finish the painting!”

Tunnille fainted.

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He started to enter his apartment but there was something in the way, blocking the door so that it would only open a foot wide. He put his head through the small space to see what was obstructing his way.

The half-finished painting on its easel had been placed in front of the doorway, facing him at eye level. He managed to get past it and into the room, slipped into the kitchen where he made himself a strong drink.

Far away he imagined impatient rumblings, steps padding restlessly back and forth as he put off going to the painting. Would Marchetti come back tonight if he refused to finish the portrait? What would happen if he *did* refuse, refused to apply the colors and lines, the blood which was invigorating Marchetti's unnatural existence?

He hesitated, then made another drink, feeling nauseous but gulping it anyway. Probably a very bad idea, drinking after the rap he'd gotten on the head when he'd fallen. He touched the tender spot above his left ear. He'd come to with John from the jewelry shop and some mall customers milling around him, helping him to sit up. Marchetti was gone, but he supposed he was watching from a distance, growling quietly. He'd pleaded a combination of flu and exhaustion, declined their urgent suggestions of a trip to the E.R. But he'd heeded their advice to pack it up for the day and go home.

He had no choice, he supposed, but to add the final touches to the portrait, bring his nightmare to full life and then hope for mercy, hope that Marchetti would feel kindly to the creator who had first conceived him in childish dreams.

He went to the easel, brought it into the light. He stared into that harshly smiling face, wondered how much power his child's imagination had invested it with. Then he got his paints and brushes and set to work.

An hour or so later he stepped back. The face was finished; the green of the eyes shone with ferocity, the skin glowed with real, pulsing life. But there was one more touch to be added.

He rummaged in the wooden case that held paints, brushes and pallet knives and he took out three tubes that he had not used up until now. He squirted globs of black, steel gray and glimmers of white onto his palette. He could almost see the painted eyes on the canvas narrow with suspicion and curiosity.

Then, hearing a startled, outraged bellowing in his head, he began painting thick iron bars in immovable vertical lines upon the canvas.

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He lay in bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Pellets of sleet tapped quietly at the window. It was now almost three o'clock in the morning and he still hadn't slept.

He shut his eyes but this only made the roaring, snarling and clanging noises seem closer. For hours he'd heard it, the enraged bellowing and the metallic rattlings of the cage bars. He was tired, tense, but he wasn't frightened anymore; he'd made the bars strong.

He wondered how long it would take for the noises to cease; would they follow him now, waking and sleeping, until Marchetti grew exhausted or resigned?

He turned his face to the pillow, plunged himself into the darkness to smother the sounds. And finally, sleep seemed near. His breathing grew slow and potentially deep.

There was a crashing metal against metal noise, louder than the rest. Tunnille's eyes flew open, confused and bleary. Then, apprehensively, unwillingly, he got out of bed, turned on the living room light and went to the painting.

The first of the iron bars had given way.

He looked at the clock. It was well after three o'clock now and he was tired, painfully tired. But he didn't really have a choice. Reaching for his brushes and paints he set to work, repairing the damage.

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