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Opening extract from
Sky Key

Written by
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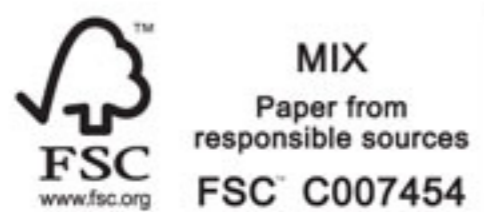
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LITTLE ALICE CHOPRA

Chopra Residence, Gangtok, Sikkim, India



“Tarki, Tarki, Tarki . . .”

Clouds drift over the Himalayas, sun reflecting off their snowy slopes. Kanchenjunga, the world’s 3rd highest peak, looms over Gangtok. The city’s residents go about their day—working, shopping, eating, drinking, teaching, learning, laughing, smiling. One hundred thousand peaceful, unknowing souls.

Little Alice struts across her back lawn, blades of grass tickling her toes, the smell of a brushfire rising from the valley. Her fists are at her hips and her elbows jut behind her like wings. Her knees are bent, her head forward. She moves her elbows together, apart, together, apart, clacking and cawing like a peacock. She calls, “Tarki, Tarki, Tarki,” which is what they call the old peacock that’s lived with her family for the last 13 years. Tarki eyes the girl and does a half turn and ruffles his bright neck feathers and clacks back. His tail fans, and Little Alice dances with glee. She runs to Tarki. He takes off, Little Alice chasing.

The hard lines of Kanchenjunga are in the distance, hiding the Valley of Eternal Life below its frozen slopes.

Little Alice knows nothing of this valley, but Shari knows it intimately. Little Alice follows Tarki to a rhododendron bush. She is less than a meter from the brilliant bird when he bows his head and blinks his eyes and scratches at something under the bush. The bird pushes into the leaves. Little Alice leans closer.

“What is it, Tarki?”

The bird pecks the dirt.

“What is it?”

The bird freezes like a statue, its head low but cocked, stares at the ground with one wide eye. Little Alice cranes forward. Something is there. Something small and round and dark.

The bird makes a horrible sound—*Creeeeaaaaak*—and bolts toward the house. Little Alice is startled but doesn't follow. She holds out her hands and pushes the waxy leaves aside and wriggles into the bush, puts her hands on the ground, finds.

A dark marble, half-buried. Perfectly round. Carved with strange markings. She touches it and it's as cold as the void of space. She digs around it with her fingers, makes a small pile of dirt, pries the sphere free. She picks it up, turns it around and around, frowns. It is painfully cold. The light from the sky filters, changes, is suddenly bright bright beyond bright. Within seconds everything is white and the ground is shaking and a giant crash explodes over the hillsides, rattling the cliffs and the mountains, shaking the trees, the grass, the pebbles in the streams. The sound fills everything.

Little Alice wants to run, but can't. It's as if the little marble has frozen her to the spot. Through the light and the sound and the fury, she sees a figure drifting toward her. A woman, maybe. Young. Petite.

The figure draws closer. Its flesh is pale green and its eyes sunken, its lips curled. An undead corpse. Little Alice drops the marble but nothing changes. The ghost gets close enough so that Little Alice can smell its breath, which is excrement, burning rubber and sulfur. The air grows hot and the creature reaches for Little Alice. She wants to scream for her mama who can save her, for help, for safety, for salvation, but no sound comes, no sound comes.

Her eyes shoot open, and she *is* screaming. Awake now. Drenched in sweat, a two-year-old girl, and her mama *is* there, holding her, rocking her, saying, “It's okay, *meri jaan*, it's okay. It was just the dream. It was just the dream again.”

The dream that Little Alice has been having over and over every night since Earth Key was found.

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SARAH ALOPAY, JAGO TLALOC

Crowne Plaza Hotel, Suite 438, Kensington, London



“How did you get it?” Sarah asks, running her finger over Jago’s jagged facial scar.

“Training,” Jago says, staring at her, watching for signs that she’s coming back to him.

It’s been four days since Sarah retrieved Earth Key from Stonehenge. Four days since Chiyoko died. Four days since Sarah shot An Liu in the head. Four days since the thing underneath the ancient stone monument sprang to life and revealed itself.

Four days since she, Sarah, killed Christopher Vanderkamp. Pulled the trigger and put a bullet in his head.

She has not been able to say his name since. Won’t even try. And no matter how many times she kisses Jago or wraps her legs around him, showers or cries or holds Earth Key in her hands, replays the message that kepler 22b broadcast over the television for the world to see, no matter how many times, Sarah can’t stop thinking of Christopher’s face. His blond hair, his beautiful green eyes, and the spark that was in them. The spark she took when she killed him.

Sarah has only spoken 27 words since Stonehenge, including these. Jago is worried about her. At the same time, he is encouraged by her. “How exactly, Feo?” she asks, hoping that it’s a long story. Hoping that it will hold her attention, that Jago’s words will be as good a distraction as his body.

She needs to think of anything but *what happened*, anything but *the bullet she put through his skull*.

Jago obliges. “It was my third real knife fight. I was twelve, cocky. I’d

won the other two easily. The first against a twenty-five-year-old ex-Player who'd lost a step, the second against one of Papi's up-and-coming bag carriers, a giant nineteen-year-old we called Ladrillo."

Sarah brushes her finger over the harsh rise of the scar where it dives under his jawline. "Ladrillo." She pronounces it slowly, enjoys saying it. "What's that mean?"

"'Brick,' which was exactly what he was. Heavy and hard and dumb. I fainted once and he moved. By the time he was ready to move again, the fight was over."

Sarah lets out a halfhearted chuckle. Her first laugh since Stonehenge, her first smile. Jago continues. "My third fight was against a kid a little older than me but smaller. I'd never met him before. He'd come up from Rio. Wasn't Peruvian. Wasn't Olmec either."

Jago knows that talking about himself is good for Sarah right now. Anything to get her mind away from what she did: killed her boyfriend, found Earth Key, and triggered the Event, sealing the deaths of billions. Playing, fighting, running, shooting—those would probably be better. Talking about them will have to do in the interim.

"He was a *favela* kid, skinny, muscles like cords wrapped around bones. Fast as an eyeblink. Didn't say anything other than 'Hi' and 'Better luck next time.' Smart, though. A prodigy. Of blades and angles of attack. He'd been taught, but most of what he knew he was born with."

"Sounds like you."

"He *was* like me." Jago smiles. "It was like fighting my reflection. I'd stab and he'd stab back. I'd swipe and he'd swipe back. That was how he parried, by counterattacking. He wasn't like anyone else I'd trained against—ex-Players, Papi, no one. It was a little like fighting an animal. Quick, impeccable instincts, not so much thinking. They just attack. You ever gone toe to toe with an animal?"

"Yeah. Wolves. Those were the worst."

"A wolf or—"

"Wolves. Plural."

“No guns?”

“No guns.”

“I’ve done dogs, never wolves. A mountain lion once.”

“I wish I could say I was impressed, Feo, but I’m not.”

“I already got in your pants, Alopay.” Jago tries some weak humor.

“Don’t need to impress you.”

She smiles again and punches him under the sheet. Another good sign that maybe she’s coming around.

“Anyway, I couldn’t hit him. The rule was first blood and the fight’s over. See red and stop. Simple.”

“But the scar—that cut was deep.”

“*Sí*. I was stupid, stepped right into it. Honestly, I was lucky. If he hadn’t got me on the face like this—it nearly took my eye, you know—he probably would have killed me.”

Sarah nods. “So—blood, red, stop. He says ‘Better luck next time’ and leaves and that’s it?”

“I had to get stitched up, but yeah. And of course, since I was training, there was no anesthesia.”

“Ha. Anesthesia. What’s that?”

Jago smiles big this time. “Exactly. Fucking Endgame.”

“Fucking Endgame is right,” Sarah says, her face betraying no emotion. She rolls onto her back and stares at the ceiling. “*Was* there a next time?”

Jago doesn’t speak for a few seconds. “*Sí*,” he says slowly, drawing it out. “Less than a year later. Only two days before my birthday, right before I became eligible.”

“And?”

“He was even faster. But I’d learned a lot, and I was faster too.”

“So you drew first blood?”

“No. We had blades, but after a couple minutes I punched him in the throat and collapsed his windpipe. When he went down I stepped on his neck. Didn’t spill a drop. And I can still see his eyes. Uncomprehending, confused, like when you shoot an animal. It

doesn't understand what you've done. It was outside the rules of his nature, this *favela* boy, best knife fighter I have ever seen. He did not understand that his rules did not apply to me."

Sarah doesn't say anything. She rolls onto her side, her back to Jago. *I'm in bed with a murderer*, she thinks.

And immediately after, *But I'm a murderer too*.

"I'm sorry, Sarah. I didn't mean to—"

"I did it." She takes a deep breath. "His rules didn't apply to me either. I chose to do it. I killed him. Killed . . . Christopher."

There. She said it. Her body starts to shake, as if a switch has been thrown. She pulls her knees to her chest and shakes and sobs. Jago moves his hand over the skin of her bare back, but he knows it's a small comfort. If it's any comfort at all.

Jago never thought much of Christopher, but he knows that Sarah loved him. She loved him and she killed him. Jago isn't sure he could have done what Sarah did. Could he shoot his best friend from back home? Could he kill José, Tiempo, or Chango? Could he put a bullet in his father, or, even worse, his mother? He's not sure.

"You had to do it, Sarah." He's said this 17 times since they checked into the hotel, mostly unprompted, just to fill the air.

Every time it has rung hollow. Maybe this time more than ever.

"He told you to do it. He understood in that moment that Endgame would kill him, and he knew the only way to die was in the service of helping *you*. He *helped* you, Sarah, sacrificed himself for your line. You had his blessing. If you'd done what An wanted, Chiyoko would be the one with Earth Key, she would be the one on her way to winni—"

"GOOD!" Sarah screams. She isn't sure what's worse—having killed the boy she grew up loving or having caught Earth Key as it popped out of Stonehenge. "Chiyoko shouldn't have died," she whispers. "Not like that. She was too good a Player, too strong. And I . . . I shouldn't have shot him." She takes a deep breath. "Jago . . . everyone—*everyone*—is going to die because of me."

Sarah curls into a tighter ball. Jago bumps his fingers along her vertebrae.

“You didn’t know that,” Jago says. “None of us did. You were just doing what Kepler 22b said. You were just Playing.”

“Yeah, *Playing*,” she says sarcastically. “I think Aisling might have known . . . Christ. Why couldn’t she have been a better shot? Why couldn’t she have shot us or taken out our plane when she had the chance?”

Jago has wondered the same about Aisling—not about taking down the Bush Hawk, but definitely about what she was trying to tell them. “If she had shot us down, then Christopher would still be dead,” Jago points out. “And you and I would be too.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Sarah says, as if that would be preferable to everything that’s happened since Italy.

“You were just Playing,” he says again.

No words for several minutes. Sarah resumes crying, Jago continues to caress her back. It’s one in the morning, drizzling outside, the sounds of cars and trucks on the wet street below. An airplane now and then, Heathrow-bound. A far-off whistle, like a boat’s. A police siren. The faint sound of a woman laughing drunkenly.

“Fuck Kepler 22b and fuck Endgame and fuck Playing,” Sarah says into the silence.

She stops crying. Jago lets his hand fall into the sheets. Sarah’s breathing deepens and slows, and after several minutes she’s asleep. Jago slides out of bed. He gets in the shower, lets the water run over him. He thinks about the knife fighter’s eyes, about how they looked as life abandoned him. About how Jago felt, watching, knowing he’d taken that life. He gets out and towels off, dresses silently, eases out of the hotel room, the door closing silently behind him. Sarah doesn’t stir.

“*Hola*, Sheila,” Jago says to the clerk when he reaches the lobby.

Jago has memorized the names of everyone who works at the hotel and in the restaurant. Aside from Sheila there are Pradeet, Irina, Paul, Dmitri, Carol, Charles, Dimple, and 17 others.

They’re all doomed.