

[PROSE]

*The One by the Wall*

Elizabeth Baker

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[From the bartender]

There are lots of characters carousing in this part of town after dark. Sometimes, in shady n' smoky little joints like this that only the locals will recommend, you'll see one certain fellow seated somewhere along the wall. There will be a little something nice in his glass: something aged and carefully picked. He seems comfortable wherever he is, alone, but most aren't comfortable near him. It's safe to assume he's waiting on some secret business that you don't want to know. "He's one of those," they say, "who's always got five fingers in a bucket of trouble."

It's hard to see his face for all the cloth he wears, but if you get close enough you'll see it's dark. Even "downright black like the burnt end of a stick." There are other dark-skinned people in this city, but they all have dark eyes and rounder features. Another peculiar thing about him: his hair is straight white.

He watches a lot. It seems like his hobby, but you'll also see him picking up a conversation if there's a fellow who will hold it. Those talks are interesting affairs. He doesn't like to answer questions, though he's fond of asking them. There's a smooth wit to his words. In spite of anything you might expect he's always perfectly polite. All in all, it could almost be called pleasant small talk, and if you don't watch yourself he can make you feel as comfortable as sitting in the kitchen with your mom. But a sharp, wary mind might just spy a detached calculation about him, like the way a scientist watches a rat in a box. He never talks about himself.

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[From a hangar mechanic]

In this city, especially East Reach, it's a wary game to trust people. Money in the right hands is how it's usually played. PC, Paramilitary Collective, owns most of Upper East: an entire arm of the city where you don't go if you don't belong, which only a very particular kind of person does. PC Grounds is the kind of place where you better know what you're doing.

Officially this guy's a wrench in the PC hangers for everything from changing the oil to welding and wiring a wreck back into a working aircraft. But if Special Ops have a job no one else can take, they know who to go to. That's the kind of job most men don't want to think about afterwards. Don't work for Special Ops if you don't want to get your hands dirty is what I say. He doesn't have a lot to say about that.

Frankly, he doesn't have a lot to say. He's like a stray cat: fast, silent, and solitary. He only comes close enough to people to get what he needs. Gets the job done quick and quiet, never has any questions except as to orders, never needs any help. He doesn't put a foot down for promotion, doesn't complain. He's calm. Like those cats I see walking along the edges of rooftops at night: always dead calm, no matter what, but endlessly cautious about everything and especially everyone.

But he's not a scruffy stray. He's got this smooth poise; a well-kept cat. The way he keeps his shoulders back and spine straight could be called regal. You might even say he's got some kind of nobility thing going on; a well-bred cat. But

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he takes to the burnt-out workings of an injured aircraft and grease up to his shoulders like any of the other hands. A well-bred cat on the street. But he doesn't let anyone touch him. Not ever. Pulls away just like a stray.

[From a historian]

If you know where to look, there are books like Albei Dynmer's South Coast Trade Routes and Borschan's Hionabi Continent from c.400-Present, which will tell you of a dark-skinned, white-haired people who used to live in the Green Mountains, at the edge of the Lowlands Savannah. There is not much trace of them now. As a city they were strong, and their structures were great. They built their houses from colorful stones carved from the mountains. From that same stone their artisans carved wares and jewelry; such beautiful stonewares—greens, reds, blues, and yellows—were unmatched anywhere. There were orchards there without compare in the world now. The fruit from those trees and their stoneware were their biggest trade and made them prosperous. Near the trees the people had sculpted a palace of spacious marble rooms, carved pillars, and winding stairs. It was a place that had weathered many years, and it is said that ancient wisdom and strength resided in those halls. Such things that had endured so long ended so fast in blood and fire. The attackers are still anonymous. The mainstream idea is that rivalry with another nation over expansion lead to the slaughter, but that leaves a lot to be explained. Though motive and evidence are lacking, historians of war say that the situation looks more like concerted genocide than anything. If anyone knows exactly what happened to that people or why, they don't speak of it. It is a heavy mystery: it happened not more than fifteen years ago.

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[From an unnamed person]

Sometimes when no one is looking you'll walk the railing of the big bridges, hands shoved low in your pockets, and watch the sunset. Even the wind is haunted. There's an ornament on your wrist that was a gift from your father when you were five. When you turned 18 there was supposed to be a ceremony where he would add another piece to it to complete it.

Some of the oldest parts of town are standing along the river. From the bridge one can see a lot of the abandoned houses of worship, built tall to draw the eyes upward. You've stared at them for hours before, wrapped up in your mind. Those disappointed old buildings seem to characterize this city, seem to characterize mankind. Words run through your mind, a sentence that you once saw carved into the paint on a wall: Jesus you were the savior of the world. Why did you abandon us?

There are other times when you leave PC Grounds (despite the danger), leave the city, and walk under forest canopy. It seems to you like an eternity since someone has timed their steps with yours. Do you know what happens to a baby that is never touched? It dies.

Mistakes. When everything went wrong, you abandoned your own ideals. Nothing is sound to you. Nothing is what you wanted or hoped or thought, and still you hang to a defiance of all of this. You live just to spite death. You accept reality with some dignity, avoiding thoughts of the future, clinging to faded bits of the past, beginning to realize that

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you can't hold yourself together with memories, and terrified of knowing that your life is pointless.

Oh, how you wanted so badly to be good. That was a long time ago.

Yet, have you ever wondered who left those old worship houses first? God or man? And if it is man who abandoned, can man not return? You've based your view of life on cold, hard fact now. You still don't know everything.

There are times, oh there are times, when you're brilliant. You're an explosion of color, raging against the world with all your strength and creativity and ingenuity and the sheer throb of your will to live. I can feel that you're craving to burn your boats, let go of caution, give yourself, destroy these men who destroy. You can run with such ambition, like a reflection of what you wanted to be, like a window to what you could be.