

## The Naming Song

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She delivered *echo*. She delivered *echo* into a nameless gorge at the edge of everything she knew. Water dripped from rock walls and from the limbs of trees by the river down there. She called out the word, and the word rolled back to her three, four, five times, the thing calling itself by name: *echo*..

Birds flew out of the gorge. One of the men who'd followed from Jawbone spoke *echo* quiet to himself. He said the word sounded strange to him.

"They always sound strange at first," she said.

She delivered *stowaway*. She climbed aboard a freight train, hid herself in one of the boxcars, dozed as the train rolled east along the canal.

The doors slid open to gray light and the rumble of Hollow's factories. Two watchers peered inside, ghost lenses flashing. She let one of the watchers see her, and he reached for his signal box. Before he could break it open, she stood and spoke the word for the thing she was, *stowaway*.

The watchers spoke the new word, to her and to each other, until they were sure they had it right. Then they helped her down out of the car. The watchers were happy to have a word for those people. Easier to catch them that way.

She delivered *brass*. In an empty house at the edge of Tooth, she found a brass doorknob, a dented brass bowl, a brass cup. She tested their weight, felt the metal grow warm in her hands. She filled the cup with water from her canteen and drank. With the taste of brass still on her tongue, she went outside and made the delivery.

From boxes and trunks, out of attics and basements, people brought brass clocks, brass locks, brass toys, brass rings for the fingers, wrists, and neck. Some made noise with brass horns while others covered their ears or smiled and shook their heads. Nobody knew how to play.

From the factories of Hollow came new things of brass. The couriers of the names committee were issued brass buttons for their uniforms. She sat alone at her desk, working with heavy thread.

She delivered *moth*. She wrote in her report that she had seen many kinds of moth out there. More kinds of moth, maybe, than they had numbers to number them with.

The diviner who found names for flying things sat with her at the morning meal. His name was Rope, and his arms were long with ropy muscles, and he used a length of knotted rope for a belt.

“We’re still finding more birds after all these years,” Rope said. “*Moth* could be *bird* all over again.”

She wasn't sure how long Rope had been with the committee. Sometimes, when she saw Rope, it took her a moment to remember who he was.

*"Starling, kestrel, magpie,"* Rope said, rubbing his head as though the birds were within, trying to peck their way free. His pale hair was bristly, like frayed rope. "And those are just this month."

He was often like this, she remembered. Unhappy and a little resentful. Was it because the others forgot about him, too?

"You seem tired," she said.

Rope sighed and said, "Hard to sleep some nights. Especially since Buckle."

"I try not to think about Buckle," she said—trying, as she said it, not to think about Buckle.

"It's best not to think about Buckle," Rope agreed.

She delivered *harrow*. An old farmer had built one out of scrap and railroad spikes. It was a new thing, or a thing from before that was back again, which was probably more dangerous.

On the southern border, at the foot of a nameless mountain west of the Well-Named Mountains, the courier found the farmer in her barn. She was making modifications with a naphtha torch. The thing was all shadows and sharp points in flashes of hot light.

The farmer lifted her mask. Juniper, her name was. She looked at the courier's uniform and said nothing.

The courier helped her hitch the heavy frame to an old horse. Juniper had no ghosts to work her land. Out in the fields, the courier walked behind, feeling the softness of the broken soil under her boots. She took an unbroken clod in her hand and broke it. She spoke the word for the thing the farmer had built, *harrow*.

Juniper did not repeat the word aloud, the way people usually did.

The courier told her that she should have filed a request. The sayers rarely made exceptions these days. "They told my committee to send someone," the courier said. "They could have sent some of their own."

Still Juniper said nothing. But she took the courier inside and set out two bowls, filled them with potato and onion soup. A moth flew in loops around the lantern while they ate.

She delivered *whiskey*. A sayer's son had distilled barrels of the stuff in an old granary, then sent jars to senior members of the committees. *Samples for your inspection*, he wrote.

Book invited the courier to his office to share his portion of the nameless spirit. "Obviously a bribe," he said, turning the jar in his hand. "Wouldn't be right to drink it alone."

Book served as chair of the names committee. He decorated his office with purple fabric and soft pillows. He owned a stack of

phonograph records from before the Silence, along with a phonograph to play them on. He wore gray suits and vests, purple ties and handkerchiefs. There had been no word for handkerchiefs until Book himself requested one from the diviners, so he could stop calling it “that rag I keep in my jacket pocket.” There had been no word *purple* until Book delivered it, back in his own days as a courier.

“Let’s drink until we’re both of us shabby,” Book said. Another courier had just delivered *shabby*, and Book liked to use the newest words. He liked to stretch them where he could.

They drank from small tin cups. Book smoked tobacco wrapped in dried tobacco leaves. He had told the diviners to take their time with that one, because sometimes Book liked the taste of something nameless.

He winced with each sip and was happy. As they drank, he told the courier about the assignment. Told her where the young man kept his still. Gave her an envelope containing the card on which was inked the word, divined by a diviner but still unspoken, unspeakable until a courier made the delivery.

“You know I’ll just have to drink more when I get there,” she said.

“Then you’ll need the practice,” Book said, refilling her cup.

The courier sank back into the cushions and Book put his feet up on his desk. It was late; most of the committee was asleep. Book wore gray slippers, his softest pair.

“You’re keeping up on your training?” he said. “Keeping fit?”

She was. The courier trained every day. She stretched and lifted weights and ran end to end in the committee's small gymnasium. She read and read again what the old couriers had written down. *Moon's Words on Paper, Glove's Deliveries*—those texts she could recite from memory. She was the best the committee had, and Book knew it.

"I could deliver this right here," she said.

"Better to go out and make a show of it," Book said. "We can't let the sayers think that what we do is easy."

"Let the sayers think what they want," she said.

Book frowned. He did not like this kind of talk. The sayers stood above all the named, and what they said was law. More than that: their words were the shape of the world.

So he switched to his favorite subject, the latest gossip about the other committees. A daughter of the maps committee chair had run off and taken up residence in the nameless quarters of Hollow, among the thieves and poets whose stray dreams slipped from open windows to wander the streets.

"Of those kids I am perhaps a little jealous," Book admitted.

He smiled, but the courier could tell that something was troubling him. Not this assignment, not the other committees, not runaways. Something about Buckle, maybe. Something about her. She started to ask, but he downed the last of the liquor and interrupted her with a loud sigh. "I hope it's still this good after you've stuck a name to it," he said.

They both knew it wouldn't be.

She delivered *float*. She lay face-up in water and let her legs dangle. She listened to her own breathing. She had done this as a child, in the pond behind the cottage where her father had studied ghosts and nameless things. Now, in another pond on the other side of the named territories, yellow leaves fell from maples and landed on the water. The sun warmed her face and belly, but the water was cold. It rippled from her shivering.

A crowd of people watched from the shore. The water made their voices small. Fish tapped her feet with their mouths. She lay there long enough to forget what she was doing. Then she spoke the word, swam ashore, and put her clothes on.

*Float, floating, floated, floats.* Once the word was delivered, anyone could speak it, or change it a little to suit what they needed to say. *She floated. We saw her floating.*

Her committee employed diviners to find the words in their quiet chambers, using tools and methods known only to them. Couriers to deliver the words into the world. Committee pages to add the words to the next broadsheet, to print and carry copies to every place with a name. To Whisper, home of the sayers. To Hollow, the largest city of the named, with its booming factories. To Tooth in the Well-Named Mountains, and to Tortoise on the shore of the Lake. To the cities built on top of cities from before; to the towns cobbled long ago from the nameless nothing; to the new towns on the borders, where

settlers waited anxiously for words, because words were a better defense against those for whom the watchers watched than all their guns and palisades.

*A cloud floats. Leaves float. The body floated.*

She felt that the world might not keep a strong enough hold on her. A new word was a welcome weight, and each kept her stuck more firmly to the ground. But *float*, when she delivered it, was the opposite of weight. When she delivered *float*, the people laughed to hear it. They went into the pond themselves, some clothed and some naked, to say *float* while they floated, in spite of the cold. It worried her, how easy *float* had been.

She delivered a name for the ninth month. She went out on the first day and wandered. She watched what people did this time of year, and some stopped what they were doing. Stopped canning vegetables, stopped carrying wood, stopped sewing and tinkering and shoveling. They left fields and mills, left dream scraps drifting in the corners of their rooms. They followed the courier. They wanted to know how it would go. They wanted to be the first to hear.

From charts discovered on walls of structures built before the Silence, the named knew that the year was divided into twelve parts. It was the courier Glove who had delivered *month* and then, in his later years, names for most of those months. He had needed no diviner because he named the months for named things, as towns and people were named. *Under, Ink, Copse, Cloud* ... But each time he named a month, he found it harder to



deliver a name for the next. Now Glove was over one hundred years a ghost, and still the month between Axe and Stone eluded the committee. The named called it *After Axe*, but that was not its name. These were dangerous weeks, a span of time that made the nameless bold.

The courier wandered in the hills and in the forests, and the others followed her. They walked the rails, and for a while they followed the River. Rain fell, and she listened to the sound their boots made. She felt the bite of the wind on her face and hands.

In a frigid gully, among tall pines, she stopped walking. It was the last day of the month. She told the others what name to call it by. *Light*.

They were surprised. This time of year, light was something they had less of every day. They were cold and tired from their journey, but few of them left when the courier left. Most made fires by the banks of the stream there, and they hung lanterns in the pines. They tinkered and shoveled and chopped wood and built shelters. Later, when the sayers said that what lay in this gully was a village, another courier came and named it after the month of its founding.

The people who lived in the village had a saying: *In Light, even the dark feels at home*.

For the courier, home was with the names committee, aboard the train called the Number Twelve.

In the booths of the eating car, and between the broad windows of the common car, namers and crew gathered late into the night. They drank beer and wine and mugs of hot tea. Some brought fiddles and drums, and they had a piano, the one to which the courier Glove had delivered the word *piano*. The piano was never quite in tune.

In the kitchen car, cooks worked the ovens while ghosts carried water and cleaned, ducking the pots swinging from hooks. Whenever there was music in the common cars, some of the cooks came out to listen. One had a very good voice, and others would call for him to sing. A favorite was the song about the soldier who went over the border to fight the nameless, then went so far he forgot every word but the name of a woman whose smile still shone in his mind—but even that wasn't enough to bring him home.

Most days, though, few spoke above the creak and rumble of their ancient rolling home. Mahogany tables gleamed under the shaded naphtha lamps of the conference car. In the garden car, rain leaked through gaps between the ceiling's glass panels, dripping onto plants and onto the plaques that bore their names. In the ghost car, the committee's off-duty ghosts stared out the windows, or fiddled with the buttons on their dresses and shirts, or dozed in the way only ghosts dozed: perfectly still, emptying of color until you could see right through them.

When the Number Twelve came to a bend, anyone riding toward the back of the train might glimpse the engine out front, black

and gold and spewing smoke, the oldest machine on the rails.

From Tortoise near the northern border, the Number Twelve could reach the mining towns of the south in one week. From Jawbone in the rugged hills of the west, four days to Hollow and the east's green lowlands, its streams and mills. Book and the train's chief engineer worked in secret to plan their route, keeping mostly to the main lines, constructed before the Silence, maintained now by crews of silent ghosts. The train's route was always changing, and the committee stayed nowhere for long. That was old law, spoken by the sayers shortly after the founding of the committees—for the safety of the namers, or so they had said.

The other three standing committees—maps, ghosts, dreams—all had offices in Whisper, and in other cities as well. Their members came and went as they pleased, or as their work required. But the namers were the exiles, the strange people, cast out and feared and on the move forever. Moon, the second namer, who divined and delivered *ghost* and who brought upon the committee its great shame, had written: *We do not belong to the world we name. We are only the words we deliver, and then we are not even those.*

The cars closest to the engine were forbidden to the couriers. These were for the diviners and their work, for the chief engineer and the assistant engineers. The courier never went farther up the train than Book's office, which filled one side of the seventh

car.

After each of her assignments, Book summoned her there and kept her up too late. He never went farther from the train than a station bar, and he wanted to hear everything.

“Give me the finer details, won’t you?” he said. “Your reports are so dry I have to take them with whiskey.”

He drank whiskey anyway as she told him about the flying machines of the watchers, gliding silently into dock at the watchtower in Whisper. About dredgers hoisting sunken boats and old ghosts from the poisoned lakes north of Hollow. About the ghost wranglers, rough women and men, leading columns of their quarry from the border to the auction houses of Jawbone.