GLASS WINGS

The room where he worked was full of flowers pretending they were birds. The white egret flower specifically, habenaria radiate, orchids that looked like egrets in flight. He admired these flowers, the way they so perfectly mimicked something that they were not, the way they contained all of the elegance of flight without the mess of actual wings.

In amongst the flowers, something flickered. It looked more like the idea of a butterfly, an outline an artist might sketch, than an actual insect, transparent wings banded in darkness, the only color what shone through.

A glasswing.

In front of him, on a long, worn table, small pieces of glass, the same shape as those in the butterfly's wings. In front of him, pinned to boards, glasswing after glasswing. Specimens, their wings pinned open, cut, torn. Puzzles, their secrets still to be extracted.

The glass, no matter how thin he cut it, was still too heavy—it tore the wings from the butterflies' backs. And he needed the glass, a sort of flattened optic cable meant to record images. The glass was the entire point.

A ticking along the table. The small steps, the folding and unfolding of the wings of one perfect mechanized butterfly—cold and elegant, iron and glass. He couldn't see the difference—no. That was wrong. He could see the difference, but for him, there was only improvement. The mechanical glasswing was perfected, not like the others.

Unfortunately, the others were what he had to work with.

The problem, as it had been explained to him, was that the mechanical butterfly was too perfect. A perfection that was unnatural and easily detectable. What was wanted was almost perfection, the flaws of nature engineered into something that could have been flawless. And so he pinned another butterfly and cut another set of wings of glass.

She opened the door into a garden of butterflies, wings like flying flowers, like stained glass in miniature, like rainbows made solid. They soothed her, the delicate riot of colors clinging to the air like smears of memory.

She had memories. They were one of the few things that were still solely hers. Memories of the time before, when she could leave this place. Before her dreams turned into prophecies, before those prophecies became things that could belong to someone other than her. Before she became a thing that no longer belonged to herself. Before her life was no more than a small room and a walled garden and the futures she saw for other people.

She murmured an apology, then lifted a hand, waiting. A white dove landed soft on her outstretched finger, wings fluttering to stillness. With one smooth movement, she broke its neck. Then she cut into the still warm body, spilling entrails like wine. She traced her fingers through the viscera until she saw.

As the visions rushed through her, butterflies landed on the dove's corpse, the brightness of their wings obscuring the ruin beneath.

The butterfly opened and closed its wings. Slowly. He had finally gotten the glass thin enough that it didn't tear through what was left of the natural wings or rip them from the butterfly's back. It still wasn't perfect—he looked again at the fully mechanical butterfly, at its precise movements—but it worked. The butterfly flew; the glass transmitted the images.

There was the faintest of clinks as the wings touched, but he decided he would leave that as it was. The reminder that the glasswing was altered was soothing.

The slow motion of the beating wings triggered the optics in the glass, and the white wings of his orchids played across them. As long as this glasswing flew, it would record images onto its wings. Images of the woman's prophecies. They were the point of this exercise.

Not everyone could have a caged Cassandra, but the future shouldn't be a secret. Not when so many people needed to know. His work would allow everyone to have access to her futures, and to know they had seen them entire—not just what she told or what was approved. That was always the risk in waiting for someone else to say the future for you. Secrets were so easy to keep. And so—clink—the glasswings.

He picked up another butterfly, and cut a hole in its wing.

Wind whirled through the open roof of her cell, scattering white feathers that had fallen from her most recent sacrifice. She tracked the pattern of their path through the air, calculating omens, seeing futures in their fall, then shook her head, clearing those thoughts from her mind. The only future that was required of her was the one told in blood. Anything else could pass by, and so she let it. It was a pleasure, when she could, to live fully in the present and to not have to look forward.

Butterflies swirled around her, seeking refuge from the oncoming storm. Their wings were a future she never read. They were too close, she and these bright-winged things, and any future they showed would be hers. She didn't need to read omens to see what her future would be: It was time spent in this small cell, and then it was over. There was no need for her to count days, or know the precise method by which she would end.

Another gust, the wind blowing the butterflies before it, a sound like a brief burst of hail on glass. And something, something visible just at the edges. The briefest of shimmers. Almost—no. Only rain. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the storm and stood unmoving until she was soaked.

He sat alone, the white wings of his flowers waving gently behind him, and watched the images the glasswings sent back to him. His lip curled in frustration: their flight paths were too erratic to watch things with any sense of order; he wished again that he had been allowed to fully automate them. The living ones went where they wished, hid, watched things that were interesting only to butterflies, and the images that came back from their wings were incomplete, unuseful.

But every so often there were glimpses. Her face, her hands, her knife as she carved the future out of the entrails of a white bird. A messy process, but she—she was precise. Elegant. Almost mechanical.

Spectacular.

He could have watched her forever. If only the butterflies were more cooperative.

They died quickly, his altered glasswings, and the images went static when they did. That part was no matter. It was simple enough now to make more. He placed glass into another butterfly, and another, and another, the discarded bits of their natural wings fluttering to the ground like dust.

Her hands, once again, red and sticky with blood. She had become so used to the sensation that it registered as normal. Behind her eyes, the possibilities of the universe arranged and rearranged themselves. Once they halted, became certain, known, she spoke what she had seen.

Those who were listening would hear. They always did. She knew that they listened, they watched, that they took every secret they could from her. No need for them to be close enough for her work to stain their hems, for the scent of death to wrinkle their noses. So much easier to keep her locked away and separate, wholly apart from the people who would live in the futures she saw.

In the quiet that followed her words: clink. clink. clink. The smallest of noises, a

whisper out of place. A blur of almost something falling, and then a crack on the ground.

A glint of light, and for a moment, even though it had been her hands that called forth that future, she almost didn't recognize it there before her. Replicated on the wings of a butterfly, wings now broken, wings somehow made of glass, the image of a bird. A knife. Blood.

An image of the entrails she had just read, of the future she had seen. An image preserved on wings that would carry that future elsewhere, to other watching eyes.

She picked up the wing-shaped glass, removing it from the tattered, altered body of the butterfly. Blood smeared from her hands, obscuring the image. She traced the shape of the wings with her fingers, and she felt her future in them.

After a while, he didn't even think of it as watching her anymore. The images he saw from the glasswings were simply there, like thought or breath, hovering in the background as he worked. When he did look up, it wasn't to watch her prophecies, to see the truths in her futures. Those were for others to interpret. It was to see the curve of her waist, the smoothness of her hands, the silk of her hair.

He longed for something like that, something beautiful that was his.

He had never built anything so complex, but perhaps. Perhaps. He set out his tools, and looked again at the color of her eyes.

Alone, forgotten, a mechanical butterfly traced a repeated path over and through the dying wings of orchids that once looked like birds.

It was easy to find the glasswings after that. They all had that tiny, telltale clink, and once she learned to look sideways it was easy to see that same outlined shimmer that wasn't quite invisibility as they flew slowly among their more natural cousins.

It bothered her to break their frail bodies beneath her fingers in order to pull the glass from their backs. They had already suffered, it seemed, their wings torn, replaced by sharp-edged glass. But she watched as they flew, haltingly—as if their wings were an ache in their bodies. She was freeing them, and they would free her.

Bit by bit, she took the glass pieces and shaped them into wings. She bound them together with bones and sinews left over from the birds she sacrificed. They were ugly and awkward and sharp-edged, but they would fly. She had seen it.

And when the wings were large enough, she took a knife.

The cuts were awkward, but she was used to slicing through flesh to see futures, and she knew how to adjust when blood slicked her grip. Once she finished, she slid the glass wings into her skin.

They ground together as she moved her shoulders. It hurt, but she only needed to bear the pain for a little while. As the wings beat, images raced across the glass. Reflections of the butterfly garden, of walls, of a future.

Her future.

And then, in a tremendous chiming of glass, she flew.