

All Roads Lead To Winter

by Mark Fuller Dillon

Chapter 1:

Her Slow, Feline Smile

On the second afternoon of his fifth year in the camp (two decades after the parallel displacement), Thomas Bridge stepped out of the warm greenhouse into the sharp air of day's end. He inhaled deeply, felt the sting of winter in his nostrils and lungs, and took a moment to savor the warm tinge of red on the snow. The light suited the cut rose that he held in his gloves: a late-blooming Hybrid Tea with a sunset hue of its own and a deep, rich fragrance. He inhaled that, as well, and the mellow sweetness brought to him the sudden image of his wife.

More than just an image, a memory:

Major's Hill Park, behind the Chateau Laurier in Ottawa. Green leaves in the still air; and beyond, the green copper slopes and the gardens of black wrought-iron that crowned the Parliament buildings. Humidity and stifling heat.

And his wife: leaning on a stone fence, cool and trim in a white shirt and brown corduroy pants, cool and slim beneath his palms as he reached to embrace her from behind, cool and rounded and yielding beneath the press of his thighs and loins as he held her close. He rubbed the side of his face against hers, then watched the slow, almost feline smile that transformed her beauty into something even more haunting.

"When I was in highschool," he remembered saying, "I spent a lot of time here, angry and lonely. And every time I see this park I think of that loneliness."

"Well then," she replied, in her warm, low-pitched, quietly thrilling Quebecoise accent. "From now on, instead, you can think of me."

He blinked in the reddening light, suddenly cold within his parka, suddenly alone.

The snow crumpled and squeaked like styrofoam underfoot as he followed the shoveled pathway along the greenhouse, past the grey shed with its fermenting vats of protein, past the array of solar panels, down the length of the grey barracks (designed for 250 men, but housing only one), and around the corner at the empty stables to what he called the cemetery. At the one grave he paused for a moment, then stooped and lay the rose gently in a scooped-out cradle of snow before the rose-marbled headstone.

"All roads lead to you," he whispered, but the memory had faded, and only the faint trace of flower scent remained, nothing more.

Then he stood, gazed off beyond the snow-fields toward the distant hills black with spruce and veined with pale networks of aspen, and noticed a sudden gleam of reflected sunset light.

It gleamed again, in motion, and he thought of those cloud-like machines brought by the Faces of Dusk and Dawn. But then the motion became recognizable, and he could see the two antlered, high-stepping animals, the gleaming black sleigh, and the slim black form that tugged at the reins.

"Avdryana," he thought, and felt a sudden chill: resentment, perhaps, to a certain degree; dread, perhaps, to a certain degree; and something else that made his heart beat faster. He swallowed, ill at ease, but forced himself to smile and to walk towards the bobbing antlers, the gliding sleigh, the black-furred body and the striking green eyes of Avdryana.

Wading into the powder snow, he drew back his hood and called out to her. "What are they, caribou?"

She tugged at the reins and brought the sleigh to a halt; then leaned back on the red velvet seat and, with feline nonchalance, waved her left hand toward the stamping, pawing animals.

"Reindeer," she said, and he felt an old familiar twinge at the gently deep and smoky tone of her speech.

"Reindeer? That's a bit theatrical, don't you think?"

"For this country? Never."

"Nothing deliberate? Nothing for effect?"

She laughed: a low, purring chuckle. "You will never change."

He allowed himself to smile again, then reached up to clasp her outstretched hand. Even through his heavy gloves, he could feel

the strange bones, the short fur, the sudden warmth of her touch.

She smiled down at him in the way of her people -- a smile without lips, but with a wry tilt of her cougar-like head -- and stepped down onto the snow with a loose-limbed, flowing ease. Not even her winter cloak with its glistening black length could hide the languid, coiled-spring power, the poise, the feline grace of the body underneath. And as an echo of that grace, her long black tail waved slowly like a deep sea frond in the air behind her.

She stood for several heartbeats with his hand in her gentle grip, with the tips of her ears at the level of his chin, and looked up at his face with her startling eyes. Even with her lids half-closed in a warm, relaxed gaze, the emerald tapeta gleamed in the setting of her night-black fur, with a power that made him forget, for just a moment, the necessity of breathing.

She noticed the effect, and again tilted her head in that wry, knowing smile.

"Hello," -- and she lay a finger against her mouth to simulate an upper lip -- "Thom...as."

It broke the spell, and despite himself, he laughed.

"That's a neat little trick. Can you pronounce Bs and Ps that way?"

"Not with ease, no."

"That's all right. I had trouble with your name, too, at that first meeting. Way back when."

"Av-drya-na," she said, with a gentle tap on his hand for each syllable.

"I picked it up eventually. Three syllables, accent on the second, briefly-rolled R."

"As I recall, you took notes."

"Oh... I was conscientious back then."

"And you still are."

She let go of his hand (finally) and then stood back to appraise him.

"And now you look very fit, very strong." She peered more closely. "And even out here, you still shave, every day?"

"Principle, I guess. Take away the dignity, you take away the man." He laughed: "And you never know when voters might come knocking."

"Even after all these years?"

Again, that wry tilt of her head. But the gesture, the words, brought a sudden bitterness to his mind.

"Some people don't forget," he replied, with unguarded curtness.

She blinked, and gave one equally curt flick of her ears, one sudden twitch of her tail, but then recovered her poise and her friendly manner with an ease that did nothing to clear the sudden darkening of his mood.

He turned away and considered the more placid, cow-like gaze of the two reindeer. They peered at his face from beneath the shelter of their antler tines -- patient, unquestioning, without confrontation -- then went back to pawing the ground and snuffling at the powdery snow.

"So tell, me, Avdryana. Why...?"

"Why the visit?"

"Visit, or inspection?" Still avoiding her eyes, he reached out to stroke the white mane of the nearest reindeer.

"For now, a visit," she replied, with a soft and friendly tone. "Five years. That is a long stay for you."

"Five years and two days."

With quiet familiarity, she laughed. "And you would know."

She stepped past him to reach for the halter of the nearest reindeer, then placed a finger on her mouth again. "Can they have the stable yard?"

"Of course," he said, and stepped aside. Then he steeled himself to look directly at her face. "Do whatever you'd like. It's your world."

Another twitch of the ears, another instantaneous recovery. "This is everyone's world, Thom...as." And that smiling tilt of the head. "Even yours."

Suddenly, he felt middle-aged and tired; but he forced himself to hide that lingering sense of defeat. "In that case, I'll make dinner for two. To celebrate five years... and a world for everyone."

"Shall I join you in half an hour? And shall I change in the usual quarters?"

"If you'd like. I've kept your room clean, as always."

"As always." She smiled again, with what seemed like genuine warmth, and he felt something deep within himself spread and recoil simultaneously.

"Right," he said, and looked away. "And what about the reindeer? They'll need food? Water?"

"You could offer, but they would never take it. Lichen and snow and a well-fenced yard will do just fine."

She gazed at the reindeer with obvious admiration. "When they run, they never lose footing, and you never see condensation when they exhale: they can retain even that tiny source of water. They live and thrive in the cold."

"But they wouldn't stand a chance against you."

She must have caught the aggression of his tone. "...Chance?"

"When you hunt them, how long do they last? All night long? Or do they hit the ground before the moon does?"

"Why would I hunt reindeer?" With obvious deliberation, she stroked the flaring muzzle of the nearest animal. "They serve our kind well."

"Then what about the caribou, up north? They never pull sleighs."

A tilt of her head. "Shall I dash over the ice? In this outfit?"

"Better sport than hunting deer. Imagine the cold air and the cold thrill. Imagine gouts of blood on all that pure white snow."

"And would I love that?"

Once again he found himself uncomfortable in the face of her direct, appraising stare; but he forced himself to look right back. "Would you?"

In a low, purring voice, with a finger to her mouth: "Of course I would, Thom...as. You know I would."

One more maddening tilt of the head, one ironic flick of the tail, and then she turned to lead the animals away.

He stood in the fading light and watched the calculated sway of her hips, the candidly seductive ease of her movements. Avdryana: his judge, his jury, his jailer.