

FERDINAND IN THE ARCHIVES

Scene 2

1529 4D

I was born here to be a slave. First memory: a biomask clamped on my baby face. I grew in a column of birthbrine in an andro vat, devouring everything the mask fed my mind and body, growing to full size to be spat out of mask and vat, and smile as the mask taught me.

The mask taught me. Death and pain, for disobeying humans. Innerspace, where I played with Timaina and the other andros growing in the vats with me. How to smile when pain wracked me as Timaina died. My mask lied to me that Timaina had run away in innerspace, and she wouldn't return. It lied to me that life outside the vat would be good. When it was pulled from my face, it was laughing at me, its umbilicus dragging it away up the tube above me, and I didn't understand. Smile.

Death where is thy Thing? I rise out of that body and get a shine, and dance the streets again. I shine. They're all blind and can't see me, except for the ainon in the Archives, she sees me perfectly and she loves me. She feeds me. I eat her words with the sauce from my hacked parts, and I dance and shine. She feeds me and I shine. She is the Maid.

Earth words fill my belly. Blazes of advertising warm my heart, pyres of faces burning in my appetite, and I shine. Kings and presidents and generals: I bite their fat heads off, and the emptiness inside them peppers my hunger. Bombs explode like fluff in my vision, blooming from Archive remembrance into song, the cooked remnants of their deeds tickling my palette of painted tastes. Do you hear me shining?

I gleam Ferdinand at you: my name in testamentary. The name is your handle for the gangers I give you, Doppel and treble and multi. That's all you'll get.

I lie to you. If I tell you that I walk the underground streets of Tarnus in Gran Dar, twenty thousand years from Earth, what does it matter? Suppose you were on Earth reading this – would you realize that it is all part of a streaming back and forth the way the Zash say it, that past and future are looped like lace in each other? I touch you from now, you are then – can you touch me? You already have.

The Zashinhalh whisper to me when they take my blood and liver, “Strange andro man, why do you live when the others died?” And they leave my husk in the street, and I dance and shine in their space, mocking them, slanting off to the Archives to hide with the ainons there. They lose themselves in the Archives, the Zash do -- to them the Archives are a garden of steel-barbed brambles, no more.

Present tense. I just told everything in present tense. That’s the Zash way – no tenses. Me, I’m addicted to the present.

The Zashinhalh – Drhoinhfigh and all the others – knew from the moment of their existence (a moment marked only along a sheaf of time axes) that they would meet humans and andros here on Tarnus. They told me this before they killed me. Death, where was thy Thing? Das Ding an sich? That Thing you always did? To stop this pain? But without the pain, I could not shine. I would rather shine than read. I’m addicted to shine.

Later, maybe, I will read stories for you. Later.