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TWENTY YEARS AFTER the end of air travel, the caravans of the Travelling Symphony moved slowly under a white-hot sky. It was the end of July, and the twenty-five-year-old thermometer affixed to the back of the lead caravan read 106 Fahrenheit, 41 Celsius. They were near Lake Michigan but they couldn't see it from here. Trees pressed in close at the sides of the road and erupted through cracks in the pavement, saplings bending under the caravans and soft leaves brushing the legs of horses and Symphony alike. The heat wave had persisted for a relentless week.

Most of them were on foot to reduce the load on the horses, who had to be rested in the shade more frequently than anyone would have liked. The Symphony didn't know this territory well and wanted to be done with it, but speed wasn't possible in this heat. They walked slowly with

weapons in hand, the actors running their lines and the musicians trying to ignore the actors, scouts watching for danger ahead and behind on the road. "It's not a bad test," the director had said, earlier in the day. Gil was seventy-two years old, riding in the back of the second caravan now, his legs not quite what they used to be. "If you can remember your lines in questionable territory, you'll be fine onstage."

"Enter Lear," Kirsten said. Twenty years earlier, in a life she mostly couldn't remember, she had had a small nonspeaking role in a short-lived Toronto production of *King Lear*. Now she walked in sandals whose soles had been cut from an automobile tire, three knives in her belt. She was carrying a paperback version of the play, the stage directions highlighted in yellow. "Mad," she said, continuing, "fantastically dressed with wild flowers."

"But who comes here?" the man learning the part of Edgar said. His name was August, and he had only recently taken to acting. He was the second violin and a secret poet, which is to say no one in the Symphony knew he wrote poetry except

Kirsten and the seventh guitar. “The safer sense will ne’er accommodate . . . will ne’er accommodate . . . line?”

“His master thus,” Kirsten said.

“Cheers. The safer sense will ne’er accommodate his master thus.”

The caravans had once been pickup trucks, but now they were pulled by teams of horses on wheels of steel and wood. All of the pieces rendered useless by the end of gasoline had been removed—the engine, the fuel-supply system, all the other components that no one under the age of twenty had ever seen in operation—and a bench had been installed on top of each cab for the drivers. The cabs were stripped of everything that added excess weight but left otherwise intact, with doors that closed and windows of difficult-to-break automobile glass, because when they were travelling through fraught territory it was nice to have somewhere relatively safe to put the children. The main structures of the caravans had been built in the pickup beds, tarps lashed over frames. The tarps on all three caravans were painted gun-metal grey, with THE TRAVELLING SYMPHONY

lettered in white on both sides.

“No, they cannot touch me for coining,” Dieter said over his shoulder. He was learning the part of Lear, although he wasn’t really old enough. Dieter walked a little ahead of the other actors, murmuring to his favourite horse. The horse, Bernstein, was missing half his tail, because the first cello had just restrung his bow last week.

“Oh,” August said, “thou side-piercing sight!”

“You know what’s side-piercing?” the third trumpet muttered. “Listening to *King Lear* three times in a row in a heat wave.”

“You know what’s even more side-piercing?” Alexandra was fifteen, the Symphony’s youngest actor. They’d found her on the road as a baby. “Travelling for four days between towns at the far edge of the territory.”

“What does *side-piercing* mean?” Olivia asked. She was six years old, the daughter of the tuba and an actress named Lin, and she was riding in the back of the second caravan with Gil and a teddy bear.

“We’ll be in St. Deborah by the Water in a couple of hours,” Gil said. “There’s abso-