

Death Valley

Part 3: David Made Man (Top Half: His Mind)

"Davide."

There is a night sky drawn into quadrants by the thinnest lines. At their center grows an oval, glimmering. The lines are, clockwise, yellow (12), white (3), blue (6), and red (9) and lined by couples of stars (lamps) and the blackness is a soup of water and brush. The oval's metal grid lines pixelate a scene. This obese man sits in a chair in Queen's pawn position on the chessboard floor and pokes at a pane of the surrounding aquarium floor with an ivory cane, dressed in an unbuttoned summer suit colored the same, summoning a frenzy of carp in the light of a submerged lamp. The mist of the greenhouse hangs about the night-blooming flowers of potted cacti and mandrakes planted in clear canopic jars at the periphery and climbs up the slithering roots of a central Strangler fig Tree (overhanging religiously and framing that fat man's chair like a throne) to dab dew also on the purple fruits hung from its skyscraping crown.

"Fox."

The cavernous insides of low mangrove trees packed against the glass walls house the dumb faces of Rousseauian deer, monkeys, and tigers of the Sundarbans. Eyes are inspecting this big man clothed for a formal Safari or lazy day on the plantation. He drinks from a fogged glass of ice water and runs a checkered cloth over his baldness. His skin is so white that it is nearly a Robin's egg blue.

"I am Big Man."

Hands are bound by silk rope so loose as to slip away, to the brittle front spindles of a wobbly Windsor armchair, whose miniature scenes carved all over it in lacquer press against this skin, from which the thighs read catastrophic detainment and the shoulders read five thin scrolls of enlightenment to come.

"I am the Man Upstairs. You have lived a very interesting life."

"Who am I?" he said, finding himself unable to break his holds, as a student unable to plant a blow on his motionless Zen master.

"You are Davide, a criminal technologist, known also as Fox, Foxychan, Kitsune, Huli Jing and Julie Hing, Crossbearer of the Order of the Canine Suns, Incombustible Effigie of the Foxstar, and, secretly, Keeper of the Foxstar. You led the aforementioned murder/suicide cult to great

heights until your capture in 2064. You stand before me now because I bought you. I was informed by one Detective Green that you were seeking Witness Protection. My team met with you and brought you here. You have been in a coma, which I believe you intentionally induced upon capture by the use of a neurocircuit of your own design. It would appear, too, that this neurocircuit acted on your memory. If you can remember who you are, I have not been able to tell through my analysis of your mind in dreamstate. I am certain of who you are. That is not my problem. The design of the befuddling neurocircuit is just one piece of information I need from you. If I am not mistaken as to your worldly identity, your company is in possession of remarkable means of psychic manipulation, and it was more than just charisma that enabled you to run such a record-breakingly deadly terrorist organization. That organization, too, I need your help rejuvenating. My own could benefit from its reactivated resources. I am already embedded in your Order through an informant of Detective Green's, but I need you, its rightful leader, so wondrously enchanting, to make real use of it.

If you do not understand a word I am saying, that is okay. I reached the limit of what I could find and restore in you in an unconscious dreamstate form. To be clear, you are not in the room you appear to be, and I may not look anything like what I appear to you — although, as a matter of fact, this is my true appearance; in so secretive a life as mine, it is nice to share it with someone now and again, and you present that rare opportunity. This space, too, is the one you are really located in: my compound in Bangladesh, surrounded on all sides by hundreds of miles of uninhabited saltwater swamp, not to imply that that is what will stop you from leaving. Things won't come to that. I am really in this chair, while you are really locked in what looks like a felled refrigerator in a nearby building. Your body rests in an electrically stimulated nutrient saline Bath, as it is called, designed by Orange Technologies for forms of deep virtual reality acting on cognitive systems downstream from perception — dreamstate — and offering practically unlimited stays. This would be perfectly familiar to you as Davide, who, before inventing Fox, had quite an addiction to dreamstate and the plenitude of possible worlds available to its inhabitants in the Pyramid complex in Death Valley. There you spent medically inadvisable amounts of time and nearly bankrupted yourself before seeking treatment in the so-called "Love Hotel" at the Death Valley Medical Mall. I think it is there that you must have invented Fox in a fever dream.

Is any of this ringing a bell?"

"No."

"That is okay. At least your capacities for cognition and language evidently remain in place, among other things I hope I was able to properly reconstitute while you've been here with me. If so, then everything else will come with time: your memories, abilities, and I do hope much of your winning personality. I was perhaps the biggest fan of your work as Fox. I had to have you. Our trouble now, why you are awake, is that you will need to be conscious to receive the methods needed at this point to reconstitute the remainder of your mind and share it with me."

Big Man dabs again his head and takes a gulp of water into the toothy start of his next words.

"To say I am sorry for what will be needed is not enough. It will be totally out of joint with the level of respect I hold for you and your work. Ours will have to be a somewhat adversarial interrogation. Our trouble is, much of the information I need from you will be things you may not want to tell me, and things of a complexity that I would not be able to simply read them from your mind myself when they pop up. In parallel, owing to your memory loss, it will at times be impossible for you to know if you are withholding information from me. However, you will know when you are lying, and I beg you not to bother. Firstly, and I say this with no sadistic bent, you are quite without any means of escape from your present situation...although I am open to the idea of allowing you a greater measure of freedom, even a full return to your former life, long after we have reached a certain level of mutual understanding and trust, that is, in a distant possible future. Secondly, everything you have worked toward in your life, that your instinct may say you should hold close, can be continued here with me: your work as a technologist, your work as Fox, all of these are of the greatest value to me and my operations: I beg you to continue them here, and at the much grander scale I can support. My mission, which I hope to divulge in its entirety to you one day, is one I have no reason to think you would oppose, and I am interested, too, to learn what your mission was and help you carry that out in tandem, if possible.

Before we begin, please hold on to what I have just told you, and this: I believe the neurocircuit you ingested may have given you false memories as well as removing your true ones. Indeed, my understanding is that such an addition of new memories was considered the key to safely removing old ones in the leading theories of how a reversible amnesia could be created, at the time you apparently did create it: presenting before the court of logic and epistemology at the foundations of the mind overwhelming evidence against the truth of beliefs targeted for removal. Is this all making sense? Are you familiar with these concepts, at least?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then remember these three easy principles:

One: When you think you have absolutely no knowledge of something, you may nonetheless have the deepest knowledge of it.

Two: When you feel absolutely certain you know something, whether it is a trivial fact about the world or a vivid personal memory, it may nonetheless be a fabrication of your mind.

Three: When your mind commits a fabrication, its purpose is to defend you from knowledge of the truth.

Four: Do not attempt to lie."

Davide Fox rubs the arms of the Windsor to which his wrists are tied, thumbing carved animals.

"Please think of what we are about to do as analogous to physical therapy, in that even in the complete absence of an adversarial bent in our relationship, I may need to cause you pain, or even sorrow or fear, unfortunately, to bring you back to your full capacities. I wish you, in fact, as little harm as possible.

While I am quite certain of who you are, it is important to me to start with questions whose answers are potentially confirming or disconfirming to my hypothesis. These, regarding Davide's technologies, knowledge of which could be held by none other than Davide, should hopefully be some of the easiest for you to answer. That said, there are some matters regarding your downfall and capture as Fox that I am more immediately curious about for far less scientific reasons.

It will be helpful, now, and hopefully wondrous and even entertaining for you, to prime you with only my absolute certainties regarding who you are and the story of your life and work. With this, much of what you do not remember now should come rushing back to you as quickly as if you spoke the password to your amnesia circuit. (If you remember *that*, please immediately do me the favor of speaking it...)

Firstly, while I am less certain that you are Davide Hwang, engineer at Orange and producer of illegal neurocircuitry under a number of pseudonyms (rainbow, hitler, butterfly, gödel...) and I am even less certain that you operated the personas of both Fox and the Keeper of the Fox, you are, without a doubt, Fox: You have her tattoos, known to fans and the FBI, which I was a bit surprised to see were real, risky as that must have been to your worldly lives."

Davide Fox looks down to see the Yin Yang symbol and letter Bet that do, with certainty, belong to Fox, on his own stomach and chest, and wishes he could touch them. His face returns to a hand mirror.

"You have her green eyes and black hair. Her face. The eyes I could never forget. I never will be able to. I was doubly surprised to see this male face, first for its decided masculinity, then for its perfect femininity. You hold her eyes like fog lamps and her secrets in your mouth. Bare your teeth: they have her sharpness. Your bodily and facial structure are consistent with all recorded footage of you, down to the scratch. You are Fox."

The mirror pulls back to show Big Man leaned dangerously forward, sweating, arms outstretched to Davide like the head of a streetlamp from which he just pulled a bulb while balanced precariously one-legged on the cap of a standing ladder, now remounting his larger Windsor with stomps, hops, and rotating slides that threaten to break it under questioning, it squeals but shuts itself up as he relaxes home free, distracted but retraining his eyes on Davide with a self-centering smile.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

"Yes. Who is Detective Green?"

"Yes...An answer to that will largely overlap with what I plan to tell you in my complete story of your life and works. However, I'll say he is an exceptionally corrupt member of the Death Valley Sheriff's Department involved in the drug trade and human trafficking. If you ever did trust him, I would advise you revise your assumptions about him as your memories of doing so unfold."

The Windsor first buckles a cracked leg sideways toward C2, Bishop's pawn, before giving way to Big Man's attempt at corrective weight shifting toward E2, King's pawn: leg, spindle, and arm alike now blow in rapid succession like timed charges at the columnar base of a great tower, like such a towering mass Big Man is bucketed forward and blows headfirst through the aquarium glass pane before him in a soon-suppressed Seaworld splash, rolls of his waist sealing the opening below which drowning arms flail but fail to find seabottom as legs up in the air kick elephantine in vain search of purchase on the Windsor chair now kindling. When an alarm sounds and casts the darkened greenhouse red in its rotating glows, Davide Fox leaps with instinct and this time frees himself of his Windsor chair effortlessly and grabs hold of one great leg, feels hopeless after his heaves achieve so little, then relieved and confused to see his body double sent down the white path through the White Door and now holding Big Man's other leg: this other Fox is identical but leaner and meaner, and the abstractly painted bodies of the two together are enough to scream enough strength into the heaving task to expose first Big Man's chest and then his neck, and at last his head to the flashing red light, under which he looks purple. He still looks purple when the alarm winds down and the lights slam back on in the steamy jungle room. Other Fox is upon him like a hill and administers CPR until a little gold fish pops from his mouth atop the crest of a sustained fountain spurt of water: it lands two bounces to the left and starts flopping. Big Man awakening spins his head around the scene and blurts out to Other Fox upon sighting her, "Get that fish in a bowl!" and laughs apologetically to Davide Fox with a wildly waving hand, "You have met my protege a bit earlier than planned! Wynona Koo," spitting bits of water and seagrass on the floor, "Premier Puppeteer."

Koo, working like a cook, has already pitched a ripped-out mandrake *plunk* into the aquarium and cleaned out its jar to home the fish in bowled water. In Big Man's hands, this fish takes on confident command of its vessel. He gradually stands himself up to marvel at the fish in a better light and addresses Davide Fox through the warped optics of the bowl, drenched, dripping a pattering rainstorm on the floor and dumping glasses of water with certain turns of his big, huge, Robin's egg blue and ivory white suited body.

"As you can see, my plans fell through. You'd think this whole world would be totally under my control — but its unpredictability is precisely what makes it worth inhabiting to me at all. To find a small fish like this, to save it, is a great stroke of luck in any space capable of carrying consciousness. Perhaps more than that. Koo, could you wrap up with Fox? I will deliver my story to you word-by-word from the Baths, but I have to tend to this fish there. Thank you. You are gracious, Koo."

The identity of Koo's hands with Davide Fox's as hers replace the silk ropes on his is perplexing to a mind unreconstituted with knowledge of the tale she goes on to relay.

She sits cross-legged in a replacement Windsor with hands interlaced upon her knee. Whoever she is in fact, in this world she is Davide Fox's mirror image — only: distinctly more feminine, ever-so-slightly, as if this feature were compressed into a matter of linear degree involving all parts of her face and body.

"As I was saying," her delicate lips deliver, "before I was so rudely interrupted by my chair! About all I know about Detective Green is that he is the corrupt cop who sold you to me, and that he is an accomplished criminal with an organization about as large as yours or mine, far larger than most. Mine is by far the largest, though. After that...do you have any further questions for me?"

"Who is Wynona Koo?"

"Okay, to get a little ahead of ourselves," she communicates, twirling her hair behind her ear both in mirroring Big Man's hesitation and to more firmly place her earpiece with a quick tap of her finger to better hear, "She is a puppeteer, like me, who studied under me when I was still teaching the craft at what I might as well call simply *The School*, because that's all we ever called it ourselves. When I say we are puppeteers I mean we perform shows with bodies, people, who are unwittingly under our direction — not like I am doing right now with Koo, who is entirely aware of her purpose here and commits herself to it voluntarily, and neither do I mean like straightforward human puppets (the technology is not there yet, except in zombies), but I do mean something much more like police who lead their confidential informants to murder their rivals under fabricated pretenses, or the child who asks both of his divorced parents separately to pick him up from the same dangerous alleyway, where he invites his friends ostensibly to play cops and robbers, but actually to demonstrate to them how comically his parents argue and neglect to search for him, or perhaps more mischeivously, invites these friends to have one kid play loudly at dying in the alleyway until the others jump out to mob and pickpocket whoever ventures in to help, thereby allowing him to search his mother's and father's stolen phones — before they find these thankfully unharmed at the police station later that day — for the names of their new lovers, and to swap their contacts such that a romantic conversation unwittingly between the two of them later that week leads them to meet accidentally yet again, this time in the same French restaurant where, initially cold toward one another and both refusing to be the one to take their date elsewhere for the other's sake, both the tardiness and outright absence of their lovers and the bitter serendipity of their now second accidental meeting brings them finally to question the need for their separation as the host suggests folksily that they might as well dine together, a fine pair such as they both so unfairly abandoned. That is who Koo is. That is who I am...and who *you* will be in time."

"I don't understand."

"I put Koo in *femme fatale* roles between armed men, one of whom is my assigned target. When her lover hears word of what my target did to her, his vengeance executes the hit I am hired for. If that man is ever caught, he carries her secret to the grave at her word, before her sullen

suicide. Better yet, she goes to the grave first at the hands of my target, he thinks, leaving behind only a worried letter to be burned. She's one of hundreds of tragic romances covering coldblooded murders up in passion in the back-shelved case files of overburdened city police departments, who are too busy picking up after terror attacks and rounding up herds of Love zombies to bother much with unpeeling a well-crafted plot. The truth is that I could send someone up to shoot the target on the street and then to eat lunch on the restaurant patio opposite: two bombs and three car crashes caused by an expanding involuntary orgy would take up the space between police and their suspect, surely. The secrecy is rather for my employer that day, whose responsibility must remain unknown to my target's employer, per our contract. My plots fool criminals, not just cops. How?

One: Complex characters like Koo: utterly ineffable, absent, sworn to silence by her complexity beyond words, able thus to say whatever must be, so beyond printing her own thoughts, she is superhuman and makes any appearance real. Why not? Words are beneath her. Her own life is beneath her. She is her own machinery running in the background while she looks out, totally empty, at the sea. She wants to be an organic farmer after this."

Koo smiles, happy.

"Two: Total ambiguity: structures of violence built from dozens of people told dozens of stories by dozens of impersonations of each other and themselves. By means of Koo, by means of my mental technicians stationed in the Pyramid and like dreamstate Bath houses worldwide, or by my own trusty computer skills, I get the full picture of a group that stays carefully obscured to one other — protest brigade, vigilante watch, kompromat club, monthly orgy — and marionette them into a Mexican standoff. No two survivors recall the same series of events leading up to their violent dissolution, or put forward the same theory as to who sat behind it, but all reach unanimous agreement that my employer's involvement is impossible.

Three: Realistic diversity: Koo is one of an elect few who know what they do for me. Most of my characters come from the remnants of my past plots, through which they were imbued with reliable controls — romances, secrets, enemies, missions — that, reactivated, add new color to any contract thrown my way. These characters number in the high thousands, span the spectrum of human experience, and put their whole lives into their work.

Now, Fox, I have a question for you. Where does the kitsune mask come from?"

"I don't know."

Davide Fox is in black water lit with pins of white-green three inches from his face. His body is encased in scarabesque pads of plastic. There is ringing silence except for gentle bubbling. His kicks and punches and headbutts against the loose armor he is buried in do no more than produce the sound of bubbles. Water drowns everything. Piercing pain centers in his chest after a minute. He can hear bubbles and the rapid thuds of his heart but barely his own screaming. No air comes out. His brain screams. There was no air in him to begin with.

Davide Fox has pressed the shape of an animal into his left thumb gripping the carved lacquer of his chair and bruised one heel kicking. His wrists got chafed by the silk rope and he bit his tongue.

"I am sorry, Fox. Davide, I apologize," she says, stroking his arm from shoulder to elbow and placing a bone-dry kiss on his cheekbone, "but it is necessary. Where does the kitsune mask come from?"

"Wait!"

This time he sees how a soft light goes out in the Bath before blackness and pain, how a gentle buzzing goes silent and a fizziness in the water subsides, before hard black pain, and howling fear. He knows the severity of the switch before he knows...

"It is a spirit," he speaks himself back into the chair and the care of his twin sister, now behind him and running both hands down his arms to soothe him, face beside his, whispering in his ear: exactly his words, "from *The Creation of the Gods*. A fox spirit that—"

"—terrorizes a King, I know, Davide. This therapy brought that back to you, and what else?"

"I killed thousands. Everything. I am in Hell."

"No, far from that. You are being reconstituted as an angel among your peers. You remember everything?"

"I do and I am not David, Davide, no...I am Davide. Davide Hwang. But I am not the Keeper of the Foxstar. You said you didn't know that, you were...I did not speak to Detective Green. I didn't know his name. The Keeper of the Foxstar did. He was..."

"Rahm's accomplice?"

"What? Wait, before you put me back there. Listen to me! I did not know Rahm had an accomplice. Who are you talking about?"

"Nothing to worry about, Davide, my doll. Detective Green gave me that name for his source, that reason for keeping his source a secret from me. His source is the Keeper of the Foxstar, if he does not simply operate his accounts in his absence — I know this. Who is the Keeper of the Foxstar?"

"I don't know!"

"It was not you? You were never in contact with Detective Green? He cannot contact you?"

Black pain envelopes tightly the heart pierced by cold daggers through choking smoke.

"No! No! No!"

"Who was?"

Smoke falls down in blocks blocking all exits from the black fire that booms as alarms blare.

"I don't know! I never knew his name. I told him to make contact and arrange things. He was nobody."

"Why? When it could have brought you to exactly this? It did. Why trust him?"

"Use him, put his fingerprint on the call. Trust him because he was nobody. Someone in love with me is all I know. They all were! Rahm had no accomplice. He says that because he wants that guy to himself, whoever he is. The detective. Because he wants to imply that he and I didn't work together. I told him about Rahm, not some accomplice. Me alone. I put the Keeper of the Foxstar on the phone with him to do it."

"Fine."

Fire rises on the horizon of the Sundarbans and sends muffled beams through the greenhouse glass. Big Man in a headset can be seen at the window of the Bath building, looking out at his angels at play in the greenhouse past shadowy mangroves. In a blip the scene is dustier and less vivid in color. They've disappeared from the greenhouse. He views their nakedness in adjacent uncovered Baths beside him. He pulls them out onto the drain-intersected coarse concrete floor. When they can stand, he walks them cold, shivering, and still hypnagogic down the white path to the greenhouse and sits them in two chairs opposite his. He sits, heavy with comfort, and drinks from a new glass of ice water. Their heads hang, then face him on straightening necks, their green eyes returning, bright though through interfering black hair they shine. Ice water glasses sit on tables by their sides.

Big Man raises his. "Fox, Koo. Pick up your glasses." With their dreamstate shaken off, they do. "Fallen angels. Hold up your glasses and repeat these words. We will rule the world."

It is February 10th, 2065.

Fox cannot escape Koo's unifying drone, nor can Big Man. "*We will ruule the woorld!*"