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A TRADE IN SERPENTS by Alan Smale

"I would only add, that this Exporting of Felons to the Colonies, may be consider'd as a *Trade*, as well as in the Light of a *Favour*. Now all Commerce implies *Returns*: Justice requires them: there can be no Trade without them. And *Rattle-Snakes* seem the most *suitable Returns* for the *Human Serpents* sent by our Mother Country...."

Benjamin Franklin, writing as AMERICANUS in
The Pennsylvania Gazette, May 9, 1751.

The rattlesnake flowed out of the shadowy alley behind St. Martin's Lane, rippling like a strong sea, a whisper of the alien in the slither of its body across the grime and litter of the London backstreet.

Upwards of six feet long, with regular brown and gold diamond markings -- *Eastern Diamondback*, thought Finny, heart crawling into his throat. Indigenous to a sun-baked wilderness half way around the globe. By rights the beast could not even survive here, let alone thrive.

Let alone rule the streets of London, bringing the mightiest city in the British Empire to a craven standstill.

The snake headed directly for Finny and his son, homing in on their aristocratic blood as surely as a sailor's lodestone swung to face North.

The clatter of its dry, malignant rattle turned Finny's blood to ice. "Get behind me," he said to Simon. "Run."

"Not bloody likely," said Simon stoutly, but his voice trembled nonetheless.

Finny's swordstick had a forked end. He raised it, knowing the snake would attack quicker than he could react --

-- and screamed aloud as it slammed into his waist. Straight as an arrow, fangs spread wide, the rattlesnake struck him and tumbled to the cobblestones leaving Finny unwounded, thick amber venom smeared across his leathers, and Finny, driven only by panic and instinct, swung the fork of the stick down just behind the snake's head, pinning it.

In theory Finny should now draw the sword from the stick and dispatch the foe, neat as Saint George. In reality the diamondback was a monster of solid muscle, and it took both Finny's hands and all his weight just to anchor it to the pavement. At leisure, Finny would reflect upon the dangers of accepting the glib claims of Cockney weaponsmen at face value.

Simon danced, kicking at the rattler's tail until he could get a clear shot. Finny stamped and missed, the snake thrashing all the while, then Simon lunged in and ground its malevolent triangular head beneath his heavy boot, shouting "Hah! Hah!" -- not laughter, but a demented war-cry to hide his fear.

The dead snake lay like rope. Simon continued to eviscerate it, stomping its powerful body, its reptile blood smudging those bright diamond markings. "Enough," said Finny. "Simon! If we delay, other snakes may come."

"Bastards!" shouted Simon. "Let them come! Let them!"

Finny shoved the carcass into the gutter with his boot, but Simon seized up the snake and carried it to the coffeehouse in his bare hands. He spat on it and whipped it tail-first into the walls to shatter its rattle, punishing it even beyond death with a victor's righteousness.

Finny did not chastise Simon further. His son was fourteen years old, in the full blaze of youth, and this had been his first battle. "Good job," said Finny belatedly, and "Well done," but Simon's bloodlust unsettled him, and he was glad to reach the door of the coffeehouse with no further incident.

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Malbon's coffeehouse graced the corner of Bow Street and Russell Street, just past the darkened stalls of Covent Garden. Nearby were the cheaper haunts of the tradesmen, but Malbon's was a cut above; a popular haven for brokers and politicians, wits and men of letters.

In happier times a roar of conversation would have greeted Finny and Simon when they opened the door. This afternoon Malbon's was empty. And instead of the familiar *dame de comptoir*, Tom Malbon himself sat behind the counter, gloomily paging through the *Daily Courant*.

This was Simon's inaugural visit to Malbon's, yet he strode in with confidence. "See what we will endure for a pot of your most excellent coffee!" he cried grandly, and tossed the bloody snake onto the long wooden-topped serving table. Finny winced.

"Finny-my-Lord," said Tom in amused greeting. "The pup yours?"

"My son, Simon. Please forgive his exuberance."

"Gladly, if it brings me custom."

Finny ordered two dishes of Turkish Fine at one and a half pence apiece, and the proprietor placed the pot on the stove. As the aroma of the coffee blended into the comfortable smells of mahogany, fire-smoke and old tobacco, Finny's tenseness began to abate.

Simon propped open the snake's mouth with a spoon, and he and Tom discussed the beast's hollow fangs, only one of which had been broken by Simon's boot. The rattle was smashed to pieces, but Simon did his uncanny imitation of the dry chatter it had made when whole. Tom laughed; Finny shuddered. To his quiet relief, once the coffee was served the rattlesnake was removed to the fire.

“They say you can eat the meat,” said Tom, “but I know of none with the stomach to put it to the test.”

Simon laughed edgily. “I’d cram one down Franklin’s throat, perhaps. And another, till the man was quite full.”

Finny took a gulp of the too-hot coffee. “Simon, let us not... Let us behave as gentlemen.”

Simon turned to him, bright with excitement. Finny held his breath, wondering if his son was set to betray him. But Simon merely winked and said “I apologize, Father,” and the conversation shifted to lighter matters.

But Tom Malbon was a sharp man and well knew of Finny’s Parliamentary connections, and Finny wondered how much more it would take for Tom to add two and two, and once he guessed their secret, what he might do with that knowledge.

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“...these venomous Reptiles we call RATTLE-SNAKES; Felons-convict from the Beginning of the World... some Thousands might be collected annually, and transported to Britain. There I would propose to have them carefully distributed in *St. James’s Park*, in the Spring-Gardens and other Places of Pleasure about *London*; in the Gardens of all the Nobility and Gentry throughout the Nation...”

Benjamin Franklin, *ibid.*

“I have oft been called a man of potent dreams,” said Franklin complacently, thumbs hooked into his waistcoat pockets. “And aye, many of my best dreams come true. But these are directed towards the advantage of mankind, and come about through my own industry, and the toil of those whom I manage, in my modest way, to influence.”

Ben Franklin did not have the air of a sorcerer. Broad-shouldered and thickening, balding and tending towards jowls, Franklin looked just like what he was: a newspaper editor and junior provincial politician. Moreover, his britches, stockings, and crisply-buckled shoes made a relic of him, British fashions having recently lurched in the direction of tough dark leathers and heavy fabrics worn like armor.

The man’s only uncanny aspect was his ability to talk about himself without cease. Interrogating Franklin made Finny’s head throb, and their current session was well into its fourth hour. The two soldiers in the corner of the drawing room sat brain-numbed and slack-mouthed.

Finny pressed on. “And none of your previous dreams, nor your writings or predictions, nor any other of your pronouncements have come to pass in any... *unnatural* fashion?”

“Never!” said Franklin. “Not in my lifetime have I seen an event that natural science might not readily explain. However, since we’re covering familiar ground, let me repeat that I wrote my rattlesnake polemic in a most unusual frame of mind. As I composed my tirade against your government’s policy of transportation, and of the tens of thousands of convicted murderers, rapists and thieves forced upon our young land these past years, brigands who then continue their loathsome careers upon our shores -- as I crafted my prose I was moved to such a state of fury that I dared not even blot my writing, lest I smear the ink. A thunderstorm crashing in the skies overhead found its echo in my soul. I was in such torment that my heart must explode -- yet it did not. Exploded onto the paper, rather.

“And, aye, I surely used the organ of the press to curse my Mother Country, and indeed I wished serpents upon it -- as a grim satire, a carefully-chosen analogy to drive home my message. Only to learn several months later, to my horror and confusion, that my curse had become true.

“Since then I have, as you know, recanted, and in print, but to no avail.”

Finny suppressed a shudder. The rattlesnakes had welled up from grates and gutters, from flowerbeds and basements, and while they were chiefly drawn to the nobility, the common folk were not spared. By midsummer the death toll from snakebite in London had outpaced any other cause.

The confusion had not been Franklin’s alone. None in England could guess the cause of the scourge. Eventually, news of the infestation reached the Americas, and certain information percolated back in the reverse direction, and the chain of events at last became apparent. But by the time British troops came to call at ‘Americanus’s house in Sassafra Street in Philadelphia, Franklin had fled.

Winter brought a temporary respite, but when the spring thaw came the rattlesnakes and their new young again assaulted the streets of London, spreading out across the Cotswolds and the Fens into other cities. Transportation to the Americas had been discontinued, but it made no difference. Once activated, the daggers of vengeance were apparently impossible to resheathe.

Franklin was still in full spate. Finny forced himself to concentrate. “...Satire, aye, yet I felt neither wit nor subtlety in its devising, urged on as I was by the sure and steady presence of the Americans wronged, the Americans dead.”

Franklin raised his hand to his cheek in a way Finny thought rather affected. “I speak metaphorically. But perhaps even then I knew I had brought about something extraordinary. Perhaps I felt a foreshadowing of the power I had unleashed.

“I believed that Providence drove my pen. Now, of course, I’m not so sure. But -- please understand -- I have always been the King’s loyal subject. I have always loved Britannia, and have never sought to bring her harm.”

“Indeed?” said Finny, at last getting a word in edgewise, and investing it with a healthy dose of irony.

Franklin smiled. “Remember, I traveled here at my own expense and yielded myself up to your government of my own free will. I came to lend whatever assistance I may, sir, as you must surely realize.”

Another surge of sick pain in Finny’s forehead. He rose and placed his hands flat on the table that separated him from Franklin, looming over the American. “*Sir*, I do not. As a matter of fact, I believe the opposite to be true: you came to gloat, to see for yourself what your magnificent but mysterious powers had wrought. To satisfy your curiosity and confirm your measure of your own importance. Do you deny it?”

“Certainly,” said Franklin smoothly. “You ascribe to me a motivation I cannot even comprehend.”

Finny narrowed his eyes. “Let us be candid, Mr. Franklin. You could never have escaped us. British troops stormed your house scant days after you decamped. We arrested your wife and your children, and interrogated them *most* thoroughly. We detained and questioned your neighbors. Thus, we quickly caught up to you. When you sailed from New York, our agents lined the docks and our men were installed in the cabins alongside you. Onboard, you had no conversations we did not overhear.”

As Finny spoke, Franklin’s face had changed utterly. His expression became harder, and the veneer of sophistication fell from it. *His family*, Finny thought. *That was the key*.

He drove on. "Had you attempted to hide we would have unearthed you and dragged you -- and your family -- to England in shackles. We would already have broken you on the rack. You would have kept back nothing.

"But do not think yourself secure. Even now, few men know your whereabouts: myself, the Prime Minister and his closest cohorts, a few trusted functionaries. We may still pursue a more dramatic method of extracting the truth from you. And if there is no truth to be had, well then, you have already been burned in effigy in every square in London. A few words in the right ears.... The English can be merciless in war, Mr. Franklin. And do not doubt that we are at war with you now."

The new Franklin bounded upright and lunged forward to challenge Finny, eye to eye. The soldiers, awake now, stood also and grabbed at their sword hilts.

Franklin snapped, "A cowardly bullet in the night would be more the British style! 'Cleaning house,' I believe you call it? But perhaps you should beware, you and your precious Prime Minister and valiant countrymen! If I own the demonic powers you ascribe to me, I'm a dangerous man, not to be crossed, eh? Not to be crossed! Perhaps I shall burn *you*! Or summon snakes out from the walls right this moment, to do my bidding! Eh? Eh?"

"I doubt it," said Finny contemptuously, though not without a prickle of fear between his shoulder blades. "You have no idea how you did this. And maybe it's none of your doing after all. Perhaps a more powerful magician did it on your account." He eyed Franklin up and down. "Yes, I believe that's it. You're nothing but a distraction. A scapegoat. You're completely harmless, Mr. Franklin. Just another self-important colonial windbag."

The very air crackled. Finny did not so much as blink. For an instant he believed it had worked, that he had penetrated Franklin's defenses.

Then Franklin grinned, and the change rippled down through him. Civilization reasserted itself, his pugnacity draining away. "Ah, you goad me, sir. Did I employ an Indian medicine man to do my bidding? An old Salem witch? And would it solve your mystery, if I had?" Franklin shook his head and relaxed back down into his chair. "I enjoy your company immensely, Mr. Finny, but now you taunt me with trumped-up tales you cannot possibly believe. I fear we have reached the limits of what we can usefully discuss."

"I will decide that," said Finny coldly. "Who are you, Mr. Franklin? What are you? Don't you want us all to know how clever you are? So tell me, man. Quickly, now."

Cool as milk, Franklin pulled out his pipe and studied the bowl. "You're floundering. Pass me along to your masters, sir. Let us take the next step in the dance."

Finny had been so close; on the verge, perhaps, of a breakthrough. But the opportunity had evaporated. Franklin was too many for him.

"Very well," said Finny curtly. "Onward and upward with you."

The brittle pause stretched to cover the best part of a minute. Then Franklin smiled again, and Finny reluctantly smiled in return, and the two men shook hands.

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"Send word to the Secretary of State," said Finny. "I shall await him at Malbon's."

The spy nodded, and left the room without a word. The guards were similarly taciturn. Finny wondered where the Pelhams found such solid mutes, and if they could be persuaded to talk, what tales they might tell.

Enough. He was weary and his head was sore. Only coffee would ease the terrible ache that three and a half days with Franklin had installed there. Lost in his thoughts, Finny approached his private rooms.

-- Suddenly, he heard the rattle of a snake, like Satan's tongue in a pile of leaves.

Finny spun and backed up, searching the thick carpets around him for the intruder. Then came the muffled wail of a child, and a laugh that was almost his own. He strode to the parlour and flung open the door.

Alice, eight and tousle-headed, stood upon a chair with her hands over her mouth. Simon, six years older and approaching a languid elegance, lolled on the ottoman with a cruel and self-satisfied smile. At Finny's entrance his children turned to face him, Simon's expression transforming to butter-wouldn't-melt, Alice's to disappointment.

Because she always hoped against hope that it would be her mother returning?

Damn it.

"Alice? Explain."

"Nothing, Papa," said Alice, but her eyes still scoured the room's deeper corners. "We were just playing."

Finny knew better. Alice was deathly afraid of snakes, and Simon had just performed a perfect imitation of a rattler to terrify her.

He wanted to tell her that the code of the schoolyard was written by the bullies, that she should speak out if Simon were tormenting her. But he could not bear to see the derision in his son's eyes.

Frustrated, Finny pointed to each of them in turn. "Alice! Latin translation, Virgil's Aeneid, two pages. Simon! Fetch your boots and hat. You're coming with me."

"Papa?" Alice still stood on the chair, uncertain.

Ah, such a fine father he made. His son bullying his daughter, and his response was schoolwork for the victim, and for the aggressor... a cup of coffee.

Finny strode across the room and scooped his little girl up into his arms. Snakebite could easily be fatal to a child Alice's size. He felt her life in the balance every single day, and cursed his estranged wife for refusing to allow the children to go and stay with her in the country.

Alice was a-quiver. He kissed her forehead and whispered: "You know you can't come, darling. It's too dangerous outside. You're safe here, and we'll be back soon. You're not frightened, are you?"

A forlorn hope. For Alice, snakes lurked under every table and behind every door. She awoke screaming so often that Finny had moved a cot for her into his own bedchamber.

"Course not," Alice whispered back. "But, Papa, if I should become so...?"

Her words hung in the air. "Yes," said Finny reluctantly. "If you wish, you may go and see Mr. Benjamin."

It was all he could do.

"I don't even like coffee," Simon complained, as they pulled on their leathers and thick boots.

"Learn to," said Finny shortly. "The business of London is carried out in coffeehouses."

"I don't want--"

"You're coming," said Finny, with the absolute rule of fathers throughout the Empire, and the matter was settled.

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Now, it no longer seemed such a good idea.

“They say Franklin is impervious to snakebite,” said Simon comfortably. “What do you think of that?”

“Folks can dream up a fine yarn about a man who’s nowhere to be found,” said Tom Malbon. “With no facts, rumors’ll spread thicker than flies.”

Simon took another swig of coffee. “D’ye know, I could learn to like this stuff. It really isn’t so bad.”

“It was supposed to be a punishment,” said Finny, and Tom laughed, unoffended.

“So, come now, Tom,” Simon persisted. “What would you say to Mr. Franklin, if he were here now, in front of us?”

“Wouldn’t say nothing,” said Tom. “I’d punch him in the mouth and tie him to a chair. Then I’d put a dozen of his favorite rattlesnakes into a cock-pit, and toss him in along after, chair an’ all, and see how clever a gentleman he thought himself then. And so we’d put your rumor to the test, young Simon, concerning his imperviousness. That’s what I’d do.”

“Would you indeed?” said Simon. “That does sound like a capital notion. Your thoughts, Father?”

“I say we are not Frenchmen,” said Finny calmly, “and that no man should be punished without trial.”

“I’d trust no magistrate,” said his son. “For I’m quite certain that Mr. Franklin could twist his heart just as readily as—”

The coffeehouse door burst open, and in rushed five men with swords drawn, one clearly nobility, the other four surrounding and protecting him. They slammed the door, panting, and took stock of themselves and their clothing.

“Saved by the Duke,” said Finny under his breath.

*

“Nine of ‘em!” cried Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State, and brother to Henry Pelham, the Prime Minister, as he stamped back and forth in front of the fire. “Nine!”

“Your blood must be richer than mine,” said Finny, and stepped up to shake his hand.

“Ha bloody ha,” said Newcastle. “I should be wearing plate armor and riding in an iron carriage. If any horse could be persuaded to trot through these snake-infested streets, that is.” He threw his gauntlets angrily onto the tabletop and sat to allow his man to tug off his heavy boots. The other guards prowled the room, checking behind doors and under tables, scanning the walls expertly for spyholes.

“As a silver lining, at least London’s rat population has been seriously curtailed.”

But Newcastle was clearly in no mood to joke. “Come,” he said curtly, and stalked off into Malbon’s back room even before his crew gave him the all-clear.

Finny caught his son’s eye. “Don’t get into any trouble,” he warned. “We talked about this.”

Simon just nodded and smiled, and raised his cup.

*

“Thus it may perhaps be objected to my Scheme, that the Rattle-Snake is a mischievous Creature, and that his changing his Nature with the Clime is a mere Supposition, not yet confirm'd by sufficient Facts. What then? Is not Example more prevalent than Precept? And may not the honest rough British Gentry, by a Familiarity with these Reptiles, learn to *creep*, and to insinuate, and to *slaver*, and to *wriggle* into Place (and perhaps to *poison* such as stand in their Way) Qualities of no small Advantage to Courtiers!”

Benjamin Franklin, *ibid.*

“Pitt is breathing down our necks,” said Newcastle once the door was closed. “His spies are out shaking the bushes. He guesses some game is afoot, but he doesn’t know what. Should he learn we have acquired ‘Americanus’ and kept him close, Henry and I should be in devilish hot water. Please tell me you’ve made some progress with the man.”

Finny grimaced as they sat. “I’m out of my depth, and that’s the truth.”

“As are we all in this sorry world. And especially so if a raggled-arsed American can blight us with the wrath of God. But I hope that’s not the total of the wisdom you summoned me to hear?”

“Not quite.” Finny steepled his fingers, marshaling his thoughts. “Since you dumped Franklin in my lap, I’ve spent long -- interminable! -- hours questioning him on all aspects of his background, his beliefs and opinions, so forth.

“However you look at it, there’s more to Franklin than meets the eye. Obviously he edits and publishes his own newspaper. In addition, he claims to have also founded a Library Company, a volunteer fire department, an Academy, a Philosophical Society, a military company, a Hospital, and for all I know, a cluster of other miscellaneous institutions that have slipped his mind. He’s served as Philadelphia’s Postmaster, and a Justice of the Peace. And just before he fled the city he was elected to a seat in the Pennsylvania Assembly.”

Newcastle eyed him shrewdly. “And you believe such a list?”

“Yes,” said Finny. “Surely a little exaggeration here and there, some glossing over inconvenient details, but as far as I can tell the basics are true.”

The Duke nodded. “They are indeed. That matches my intelligence. Go on.”

“Very well. So, our Mr. Franklin gives all the appearance of being a solid, civic-minded citizen. A clever man. Pragmatic. Worldly.

“Despite that, I do also believe his guilt. Through his writings he somehow conjured up this plague upon us. But, here’s the nub of the matter: I don’t believe even Franklin knows *how* he did it.”

Newcastle snapped his fingers. “I’m not interested in *beliefs*. Facts, man. Evidence.”

Finny nodded. “Then let’s consider the rattlesnakes themselves. They’re clearly of unnatural origin; confoundedly aggressive, and active out of all season. The American rattlesnake avoids people and rarely strikes unprovoked, and could not survive in this climate. Our London snakes resemble them closely, but can strike quicker and higher than your American rattler. And the clincher, the unquestionable link to Franklin? -- The snakes avoid him completely. I’ve seen it with my own eye.”

“Go on.”

During one of their earliest sessions, while the atmosphere between them was still cordial, Finny had invited Franklin to join him in a walk around his garden, believing that in a congenial setting his guest might let something slip. They had ambled among the rosebushes, with Franklin holding forth; today it was philosopher-Franklin, and he was prating at length on the Inherent Nobility of the Snake and its use as an emblem of wisdom, endless duration, vigilance, and true courage, and the resulting ironies of the infestation of London. Finny, half-listening, was making a mental note to have the rosebushes sprayed with vinegar to ward off bugs.

Then a rattlesnake barreled at them from the rhododendrons, propelling itself in an uncanny rolling spiral. "Guards!" called Finny, but the soldiers were too distant, and the snake was moving far too swiftly to be intercepted.

The snake rattled like hail on glass. Finny drew his sword, heart leaping. Franklin stood with his hands behind his back, and regarded the creature with interest.

At a distance of a dozen feet the snake halted and looked directly at Franklin. Its tongue flickered. It did not blink. Then it struck like lightning -- not towards them, but off sideways, into the rosebushes and away through a hedge into the depths of the garden.

Belatedly, soldiers careered down the path. Finny waved them away.

"Side-Winder," said Franklin. "I've never laid eyes on one before. A remarkable method of locomotion, would you not agree?"

The blood thumped in Finny's ears, and he could smell his own sweat. Franklin regarded him coolly, his face displaying no hint of either contempt or sympathy.

For a mad moment Finny was tempted to run Franklin through and have done with him. But he sheathed his sword.

"Remarkable. And would you also agree that, in your own country and almost within your own lifetime, that little display would have proved sufficient to have you hanged as a servant of the Devil?"

Franklin set off walking again. "Then we must thank the Lord these are more serious times, and we are gentlemen not prone to superstitious hysteria."

-- In the back room of the coffeehouse, Finny took a deep breath. "There it was. The only time I have ever known such a beast to approach and not complete its attack."

"Franklin admits his affinity with the creatures?"

"Franklin admits nothing," said Finny wryly. "For, in addition to providing us a perfect excuse for convicting him, it would be against natural science, and Mr. Franklin will insist until the cows come home that he is, above all, a man of reason. He has indeed achieved some fame as an inventor, having devised a novel type of stove, amongst other practical devices. Most recently he has indulged in some advanced speculations with electrical apparatus that have earned the attention of the Royal Society. His mind is unusually fertile, well ordered and logical."

"You like the man," said Newcastle bluntly.

Finny sighed. "No. I find him completely impossible. But he owns qualities it is difficult not to respect."

*

Alice Finny has a recurring nightmare in which she stands at the top of the staircase as rattlesnakes flow up the stairs towards her. Timber snakes and diamondheads, spotted and mottled and banded in stunning hues of orange and silver, brown and green, they slither up from one step to the next, rattling as they come.

As the leading snake approaches the top stair, Alice clearly hears its scales gliding on the dark wood, and the dry, dangerous sound breaks the spell that holds her.

She turns to run, but behind her there is nothing -- no landing, no doors, only complete blackness.

Alice teeters between the snakes and the inky dark. Then she tumbles backward, down the stairs towards the serpents, and wakes with a shriek and a start.

At this moment Alice Finny is well and truly awake, yet she has been so spooked by her brother's teasing that she still seems to hear the rattle and slither from her dreams. She climbs back onto the chair and looks all around, shielding her eyes from an imaginary sun. She pretends this is all make-believe, but her fear is real.

Surely there are rattlesnakes in their home, and Papa and Simon have left her to face them all alone.

Alice jumps down from the chair and runs to find Mr. Franklin.

*

Tom Malbon brought in a fresh dish of coffee. The two men paused, waiting for him to depart.

Newcastle sipped and grimaced. "You drink this stuff often?"

"Constantly."

"That may explain a great deal." Newcastle pushed the cup away. "Anyway, while you've been *respecting* Mr. Franklin, we've sifted through a heap of intelligence gathered by our New England agents. They have found no shortage of reputable witnesses willing to assign demonic or, at best, unusual abilities to Franklin, even among those still ignorant of the creeping horrors he has unleashed upon London.

"Franklin was born just fourteen years after the Salem witch trials, and grew up not a day's walk away from there. That area is still rife with bizarre happenings. Yet, even by the standards of such a benighted place, Franklin's family -- in particular his mother and some unsavory aunts -- are viewed with unusual fear and suspicion. Disappearances, fortuitous accidents, uncannily bad luck, curses and blights... anything you can possibly imagine."

"Americans are prone to quaint superstitions," said Finny. "The colonies were founded in the first place by a collection of heretics odd enough and loud enough to be chased out of England." He paused, meaningfully. "Evidence?"

"The lack of evidence may be the strongest evidence there is," said Newcastle. "The Franklins' neighbors, both in their home town and in Philadelphia, are so desperately afraid that they won't provide details. They're scared to open their mouths. That in itself speaks volumes."

Finny shook his head. "Beg pardon? You're losing me."

"They fear him, Finny, and surely not for his logical mind. Convenient enough to pose as a man of reason. What better cover, for a servant of Satan?"

Finny laughed. "You think Franklin purchased his many civic successes by making a pact with the Devil?"

"I didn't say that *I* believe it." Newcastle drummed his fingers on the table. "I'm reporting what *they* say, his neighbors and friends. Even his business partners accept the possibility. Unaided, surely no one man could be capable of all the achievements Franklin is credited with. And Finny, let us not forget why we are having this conversation. No normal man's words come true merely by being published. His intimate connection to this calamity is indisputable. Only the

mechanism is in doubt. And there *is* no natural mechanism. For a God-fearing man, what other conclusion could there be?"

"What does the Prime Minister think?"

"Henry will believe whatever you and I tell him to believe," said Newcastle bluntly. "But, come now. You have been with Franklin for days. What else do you have? How would you assess the man's character?"

Finny quickly decided to be candid. With a prominent Peer of the Realm advancing the belief that Franklin was in league with the Devil, Finny's own private theory did not seem so outlandish after all.

Yet, it was still a ticklish idea to get across.

"His character?" said Finny. "You'll need to be more specific. For *I* believe that Franklin has several, all occupying the same head."

"What?" said Newcastle.

Finny drained his coffee, and reached over to slide the Duke's abandoned cup closer. "Aye. Many completely different characters. Characters that make war against one another for control of him."

*

Alice stays away from the walls, the corners, the curtains. Listening to her own racing heart, she yearns for the innocence of her childhood, when hiding beneath her bed was the shrewdest way to avoid monsters.

She sees no soldiers on her way to Franklin, but in her distress this does not strike her as unusual.

Alice enters Franklin's quarters.

Franklin is seated comfortably in an armchair reading a book, legs crossed at the ankles, eyeglasses perched upon his nose. He glowers at her in irritation at being disturbed. "How dare you?" he snaps....

Then the Change occurs, and the aloof, scary Franklin is supplanted in an instant by Mr. Benjamin, the jovial teller of tall tales.

Privately Alice views Franklin as a collection of boxes. If she waits patiently, the right box lid will always open.

*

"When you interview Franklin, sir, observe how his demeanor can alter in an instant. An example: his two most diverse aspects are the politician and the scientist, and neither could ever be confused for the other. The politician is the most charming and persuasive gentleman you'll ever meet. He could arbitrate any dispute, lead any disparate group of men to agreement in a trice. Should he take a fancy to be King of America, I don't doubt he could rally a sizeable array of rich and poor to crown him."

"Charismatic, I'm sure, yet—"

"Wait. Then broach with him the subject of, say, electrical phenomena, his current passion. In the blink of an eye, Franklin changes. He shrivels in stature, his attention focuses inward rather than out. He is immediately in thrall to an obsession, and here's the meat of it: he can no longer explain himself in straightforward words, but jabbars about electrical jars and prime conductors and negatives and positives and self-moving wheels and jostling water-drops in

thunderclouds and Lord-knows-what-all. His other souls are literate, compulsive explainers, clear-worded men, yet *this*.... The scientist in him cares naught for explanation. His relationship with electricity is intimate and personal, and if you cannot share it or follow his line of thought, Franklin scorns and berates you.”

“I’ve known many men who--”

“Another example,” said Finny doggedly. “I am a father. So is Franklin. He has two sons, and a daughter named Sarah of a similar age to my own Alice. The politician in Franklin may well kiss babies for electoral advantage and pretend to be solicitous of their welfare. The scientist might study them, with a clever treatise in mind. But neither man could even talk to a child, let alone raise one. I would not suffer them to share the same room as my family. Yet when my Alice enters the room, a new Franklin emerges who is a born father, who speaks to her on her own terms and instinctively understands her. *That* Franklin I would trust with her life.

“In a second, he transforms completely. Half a second! The Franklins are different in temper, in expression, in recollection, almost even in physical form. They are not mere moods or humors. I tell you, Newcastle, they are *different men*.”

“I see,” said Newcastle, sitting back.

Finny drank a mouthful of the Duke’s coffee, for courage. “My conclusion is as follows: I believe there is a Franklin I have not yet met, and *that* is the Franklin who bears responsibility for our current plague of serpents. You must lure out and question that Franklin. Consult any of the others and you’ll just waste your time.”

“Finny, Finny,” said Newcastle gently. “I don’t doubt your sincerity, but this is utter balderdash. I fear the departure of your wife has unhinged you. Did you not tell me just a month since that she, too, was a completely different person these days?”

Finny gaped. “I... no, that was purely a figure of speech. I was... upset.”

“By her desertion of you, and especially of your children.” The Duke consulted his pocket-watch. “I understand completely. By the way, I hear tell that she is suing you for independent maintenance.”

Finny gripped the arms of his chair, suddenly adrift in dire seas, and Newcastle hurriedly added, “I mention it only so that you will be cognizant of how the women are gossiping. Eh? And I’m sure you’re right about Franklin. But, *tempus fugit*. I must report back to my brother at Downing Street, before nightfall further increases the hazard of the journey.

“In the morning I shall send my men to reclaim Mr. Franklin. Our committee is assembled: a couple of gentlemen each from the Cabinet and the Royal Society, a colonel or two, men of discretion all. And, in deference to your theories, I’ll add a doctor and an asylum master. Rest assured that your efforts in this matter will be rewarded at the appropriate time.”

The Duke stood, but paused a moment. “One thing I’ll say for your notion. Franklin writes polemicals under a series of assumed names, each with their own distinct voice. Silence Dogood, Poor Richard Saunders, Martha Careful, Celia Shortface. Polly Baker. ‘Americanus’ himself.” He shrugged. “It may mean something, or nothing at all.”

“Celia Shortface?”

Finny found himself smiling. It seemed that, after all, at least one of the Ben Franklins had a sense of humor.

“Thus Inconveniencies have been objected to that *good and wise* Act of Parliament, by virtue of which all the *Newgates* and *Dungeons* in Britain are emptied into the Colonies. It has been said that these Thieves and Villains introduc’d among us, spoil the Morals of Youth in the Neighbourhoods that entertain them, and perpetrate many horrid Crimes...”

Benjamin Franklin, *ibid.*

Mr. Benjamin has just told Alice a funny story involving a talking goose. She never knew geese had such deep voices. Papa never does this anymore, this relaxed happy storytelling, and Alice misses it.

She is still giggling when she hears a distant splintering crash from the front of the house, and moments later, a cry of pain.

Mr. Benjamin twists like an eel and another box opens; he is now a jerky, intense man Alice does not recognize. He springs up onto the balls of his feet and listens, alert as a terrier.

“Don’t go,” Alice urges him, afraid.

He waves at her to be quiet, and mutters his reply. “How could I? I am held prisoner here.”

“But the soldiers are gone,” says Alice without thinking, and then puts her hands up to her mouth at the awful realization. What if Franklin runs away and Papa blames her?

He shows no sign of doing so. She sees his mind racing and hears, from the hallway beyond the closed door, the sound of stealthy footfalls approaching.

“Damn it,” murmurs Franklin, twitching.

She gasps. “What?”

“I think perhaps someone is cleaning house.”

Alice shakes her head, baffled. Housework is much noisier than this uneasy quiet. She begins to walk towards the door -- maybe the soldiers are returning -- but Franklin hisses in frustration and shoves her back behind the leather armchair, where she will be unseen by anyone entering the room. Darting to the fireplace for a poker, he steps forward boldly and waits.

The door opens. Men glide into the room like winter shadows. Alice smells a sudden reek of mud and sweat and worse, and stops inhaling. A strong Cockney voice that might have been amusing under other circumstances says, “Hamericanus?”

“What of it?” says Franklin in a low grating voice and hurls himself at them. Alice hears a violent blow and a cry, and runs around the chair.

Franklin crouches, clutching his stomach, coughing. He has knocked one of their attackers back on his arse, but five others surround him, vibrant with menace. They are ruffians, men of the docks and the alleyways, shabbily dressed, and they seem to fill the room to capacity.

Alice steps up and places her hand on Franklin’s arm. She glares up at the rogues with unblinking imperiousness and says, “Leave him be, or my father shall see you hanged.”

“Get away from me,” gasps Franklin. Alice cannot tell whether he is addressing her or the intruders.

They push her aside and hustle Franklin towards the door. Then, “Bring ‘er too,” says their ringleader, a man slightly less filthy than the rest, with more of his teeth remaining.

“Cobbett, no!” one of the men protests, but Cobbett leans back and says “Yes!” with a dangerous finality, the brass knuckles on his fingers glinting in the gaslight, and two of them reach back to grab Alice’s hands, yanking her off her feet.

*

The butler stands in the front hallway, flanked by two more of Cobbett's men. His eyes widen when he sees Alice and Franklin being frog-marched down the stairs. Another rogue stands at the broken front door watching the street.

"Allo again, pal," says Cobbett, grabbing the butler's lapel. "Found 'em. Despite your sad lack of 'elp. My, but you're all clean and tidy. Shall I blood you, so you can tell of 'ow bravely you fought us?"

Not pausing for an answer, Cobbett draws his dagger and slices a long furrow through the man's starched shirt and into the meat of his chest. The butler's howl is abruptly choked off when one of Cobbett's henchmen whacks his blackjack across the man's neck. Alice, eyes closed, tries to keep breathing.

"Right then," Cobbett says. "Ow's the outside?"

"All quiet," replies the lookout.

"Very good." Cobbett turns to Franklin. "Your rattlesnakes may be hell for business, but at least they keep the streets clear, eh?"

"You won't get away with this," says Franklin calmly.

Cobbett rubs his thumb and fingertips together. "Don't be bettin' on yer soldier-boys, now. They're long gone, spendin' what I gave 'em, and pawnin' the house silver besides. I reckon they wasn't cut out for the military life anyway."

*

"We should have told Tom Malbon we have Franklin," said Simon, half-walking and half-skipping down the street. "Picture his expression!"

"You swore me your oath as a gentleman," said Finny sharply. "An oath that you came close to breaching."

"I promised I wouldn't tell a soul, and I haven't and shan't. Really, Father, even with a hint as broad as the Thames, Malbon could never have guessed it. For all the world knows, 'Americanus' is cowering in a bolt-hole in the Canadas. But just imagine--"

"Never mind!" said Finny. "No more imagining. We're washing our hands of Franklin, and thank God. Tomorrow he goes forward to a motley inquisition of soldiers, politicians, and natural philosophers, handpicked by the Pelhams."

Only a single rattlesnake accosted them on the journey home, a small creature like dark green ribbon that Finny nimbly dispatched with a stroke of his sword. But this splendid luck did not hold: they arrived back at Hanover Square to find the front door crookedly ajar, the butler prone and bleeding, and no trace of Franklin, Alice, soldiers, or maids.

*

A broken-down terrace house, off a dirty alleyway dappled with shadow. The rogues usher Alice and Franklin down slippery stone steps and through a door into a dank basement cluttered with cheap, decrepit furniture: a table, chairs, an iron clawfoot bath, a packing case. The wooden piling that lines the walls is splintered and rotten; Alice can smell mold and other, more evil odors. The place stinks like dirty bathrooms and rotting rubbish combined.

Alice clutches Mr. Benjamin's hand. Despite the chill, his palm is damp. At first he seemed unnaturally calm, and Alice took strength from him, but now Franklin shakes and breathes hard, and Changes compulsively.

Franklins come and go, advertised by the altering pressure of his hand. Each Franklin holds himself uniquely, contorts or straightens like a ramrod, clings to Alice or guides her, mutters or purses his lips.

Now, as they position him in the center of the basement, and the man they call Cobbett marches up to stand toe to toe with him, Franklin becomes very still. Alice cannot tell which box is open now, and this is perhaps the most frightening thing of all.

*

"We need soldiers!"

They ran out into the street, as if help would magically appear for the asking. It did not. Finny's mind was a void. He forced reason into it.

They had been betrayed after all. Villains had come for Franklin. And, for whatever reason, they'd stolen Alice as well. As a bargaining chip? A plaything?

Finny only realized he had unsheathed his sword when he saw the blade wavering in front of his eyes.

Snakes were driven by blind instinct, but men could be cruel, sadistic, black-hearted.

Finny turned.

"I told nobody," said Simon quickly, backing up. "I hate Franklin, of course I do, any true Englishman must, but I'd never defy you, Father, never risk... this! Harm to us! To Alice!"

"Ridiculous," said Finny. "Stupid."

He seized Simon by the throat and rammed him up against the wall of the house. "Who else? You're a stranger now. Headstrong and vicious, always out for your own amusement. Who else but you?"

"The soldiers, perhaps..." Simon reached for Finny's hand and tried to ease its terrible grip on his neck. "Maid. Butler. Mr. Pitt could have learned.... Any of dozens..."

"Did they give you money? Or did you do it just for hatred's sake? If Alice dies--"

"She shan't," said Simon. "We mustn't allow it."

And then, looking beyond Finny's shoulder, Simon's eyes widened. "The snakes, Father. Look at the snakes."

*

Alice scans the basement for anything that might aid them in their plight, but sees nothing. The only way out is through the door they came in, and that way is blocked by five of Cobbett's dreadful men.

They peel her away from Franklin and sit her in a nearby chair, dirty hands pressing upon her shoulders to keep her still.

"You'll find us blunt fellows," says Cobbett to Franklin. "Plain questions, quick results. Get me?"

"I understand," says Franklin. "You're souls of the utmost simplicity."

Cobbett slaps him. "Don't need any of your lip. Nor yer filthy snakes neither. Tell us where they come from, and 'ow to stop 'em."

"Who's paying you? What will it cost to secure our release?"

Brass knuckles pound into his gut. Franklin bends double and spits on the floor, a ragged red.

“We’re our own men.” Cobbett grasps Franklin by the hair and pulls him upright again. “This is our city too. Our families are here. Our livings. Don’t insult us.”

Franklin smiles grimly through teeth flecked with blood. Little puffs of brightness seem to sparkle around him from the blows. “Very well. I understand. But, my good fellow, there’s no single source for the serpents. No pipe you can block, no tunnel to brick up. They appear everywhere. Even your own people realize this.”

Cobbett draws his dagger, still bloody-edged from the butler. “But you brought ‘em. So you can tell us ‘ow to be shot of ‘em.”

“Club them, cut them up. Burn them, one by one,” says Franklin. “*En masse*, as a phenomenon? I can’t tell you. I comprehend this little better than you do.”

Without looking at her, Cobbett points the dagger out sideways towards where Alice sits. She cringes, even though she has been trying so hard to sit up straight and be brave. “All right, then. This ‘ere girl. Mean something to you?”

Chills run up her spine.

“Tell us what we need to know, Mr. Hamericanus. Or...”

“I’m not afraid!” says Alice, and her clear voice does not tremble.

“You’d harm a child?” says Franklin coldly.

Cobbett whips the dagger back and presses it to Franklin’s throat. “I ‘arm anyone I need to. The snakes, man. Talk to me.”

*

Only a few feet separate them, but when Franklin turns his head to stare at her long and hard, Alice immediately understands that he is saying goodbye.

Another Change is coming. This time the box opens slowly with an almost audible creak. Shadows move behind Franklin’s eyes, sinuous shapes that Alice cannot fathom. For a moment he looks angry, and then sorrowful, and then his features begin to twist and warp until he no longer looks like a civilized man.

And perhaps even Cobbett is aware of the impending threat, for now he tucks away the dagger and punches Franklin coldly and methodically in the mouth, stomach and kidneys. With each callous blow, Alice screams and wriggles; fighting now, determined to help Franklin if she can or at least to cause as much trouble for these awful men as possible in the time they have left.

Cobbett steps away. He looms over Alice, dagger again in his hand, and stares into Franklin’s eyes. “Well?”

On hands and knees in this reeking basement, coughing up blood, Americanus glares up at Cobbett and his accomplices and says, in a voice that freezes and crackles, simply, “*Stop.*”

“Oh, you’re in trouble now,” says Alice.

She is talking to Cobbett, for she can see that nothing of Papa’s Franklin or her Mr. Benjamin remains. Power radiates from him. And he *outnumbers* them.

Perhaps Mr. Franklin is finally admitting a strand of himself that he has spent years burying deep beneath his other selves, for at that moment Alice hears him chanting words she cannot understand, in a voice she does not recognize; an ancient cunning, wrapped in an angry malevolence.

The new man within Franklin tilts up his head and raises his voice. He calls to New England, to the ancient ones of fire and water. He calls to his aunts.

The air ripples around them. Far above the cellar, the sky shifts. Franklin rears up on his haunches and lifts his hands to massage and weave the air, babbling.

The ruffians gape. Alice sits absolutely still, eyes wide. She knows that Franklin has already forgotten her name.

*

The trickle of snakes became a flow. Rattlesnakes slithered down the street past them.

His red-smearred mind primed to kill, Finny released his son and walked into the path of a five-foot timber rattlesnake, ready to smash its skull. America squirmed at his feet.

Finny's blow never fell. The reptile slid fluidly around him, as did the next snake, and the one after. The rattlesnakes were no longer interested in spilling noble blood.

The men -- for Simon must surely now be accounted a man, responsible for his own actions -- looked at each other, and back at the snakes.

The wind rose. Storm clouds scudded across the sky. Dust and leaves skittered along the street. Wind, clouds, and snakes; all shared a single direction.

"Come along," said Finny.

*

Alice hears a rattling sound and for a blessed, unreasonable second she believes Simon has come to rescue her. Until a rattlesnake, a brown-and-gold monster with a darting tongue, appears from a hole in the wall five steps away from her.

Suddenly the walls are alive, every movement a head shimmering, a body sliding. They pour into the cellar like deadly water.

Alice opens her mouth, but this time her muscles are too tight for the scream to escape.

Franklin leaps and whirls like an Irishman dancing. His fist cracks against Cobbett's jaw, and the dagger flies through the air. Then Franklin scoops Alice up and lifts her high off the floor with both hands, a floor that is quickly becoming a morass of rattlesnakes.

Franklin's eyes are wide. He is sweating and shouting something she cannot make out over the rumble of thunder and the hissing racket of the serpents. His rage is solid, tangible; any moment he may cast her down. Alice gulps and her eyes roll back in her head, and mercifully, she faints.

*

Finny and Simon walked quietly amid the rattlesnakes. By now they were beyond terror. To Finny, they seemed to be almost floating down the street, with Alice somewhere ahead of them and only darkness at their backs. As yet, no snake had attacked them.

They turned a corner into a Soho alleyway, and now there was a real chance they might tread on a snake in the gloom. Finny found he was clutching his swordstick with a deathly grip and, in relaxing that grip, further realized he had left his gauntlets back at the house. His hands were unprotected, his sleeves gaped.

He heard a high scream and looked up to find three thugs rushing towards him.

The air was suddenly full of darting snakes. One after another they struck the ruffians, coiled springs that became lances, the hiss, the rattle, the stab. One man spun in the air, another

tripped. Both went down, to be instantly submerged beneath a roiling sea of death. The third smashed headlong into the pavement like a falling tree.

A fourth thug high-stepped toward them, eyes wide, but more calm and careful about where he trod. Simon curled his shoulder down as if he were on a rugby field and tackled the man hard into the wall. Half a dozen snakes arrowed out to strike Simon from ankle to thigh, but he was oblivious. They fell away from his protective leathers and squirmed off into the night.

The ruffian gave a titanic twist that almost broke Simon's hold, but froze when he found Finny's blade at his neck.

"My sister," said Simon. "The little girl. And the American. Where are they?" He threw a hard punch at the ruffian's nose, in the process bashing the man's head against the brick wall behind him. He rapidly became cooperative.

"In the cellar, gov'nor," said the thug, pointing. "But the place is a nest o' vipers..."

Simon kicked the man's feet out from under him, dropping him to the street. As the snakes struck at the rogue's face and arms, chest and trunk, Simon snatched Finny's sword and slashed the man's throat open.

Without another word, Simon walked on.

Finny's ears rang with the boil and gurgle of the thug's death. He gaped at his son's retreating back.

Simon's valor held until he was at the brink of the stone steps, and then evaporated. Snakes flowed over his boots and down the steps like a waterfall. He reached a hand to the wall to steady himself and began to sob. "Alice! Alice!"

Finny did not hesitate. He went to Simon, gently reclaimed the sword from his shaking hand, and walked down the stairs to the hissing cellar.

*

Only the force of a father's love could have propelled Finny down those steps.

The cellar stank of mold and rot, overlaying the bass reek of excrement. Finny stopped on the next-to-last stair and a canebrake rattler lunged at him, fangs striking his jacket just above his bare wrist.

Finny hardly noticed.

Virgil, he thought distantly. *A Virgil translation, my last gift to her. How cruel and foolish.*

The cellar was ankle-deep in snakes, and still they came; out of the walls, down the stairs, through holes in the ceiling, up through the floor. It was a purgatory of rattle and hiss, lit only by a single swaying lantern that cast dull ripples of yellow across the unearthly scene.

Through his trance, Finny felt his eyes drawn to the one area nearby that did not undulate. It was a man's body, torn bloody, lying back over a chair. Clearly dead, the corpse continued to shudder as snakes struck at it again and again. Finny saw the glint of brass on the man's fingers, just before a snake's head flickered out of his sleeve.

Nauseated, Finny's knees weakened. He might have fallen or fled had he not caught sight of Benjamin Franklin, who stood at the far side of the cellar, grabbing up snakes with his bare hands and thrusting them into his pockets.

Finny blinked, rejecting the vision. Where was his daughter? What had become of Alice in this hell? He prepared to wade out into the churning sea of rattlesnakes, but could not bring himself to leave that final step.

The American's expression was as sheer as a chalk cliff. He wore no leathers, merely his usual dark breeches and stockings, and those flat-heeled shoes with high round tongues and large silver buckles. Madness.

Finny could see the shoes because Franklin stood in a clear circle, no snake within six inches of his feet. Again Franklin bent and plunged his hands into the seething mass.

"What are you doing?" Finny shouted. "Get out of there!"

Franklin straightened, a rattlesnake twisting in each hand, and glared at him. Finny shivered.

This was neither the politician nor the philosopher. Not the scientist or the father. This was a new Franklin, a Franklin of irrational power, spawned of witches. Finny did not doubt that he was at last seeing the sorcerer who had laid the killing curse of serpents upon England.

And his glare was pure frost.

I told him we arrested his children, Finny thought suddenly. He took a step back away from the icy shaman and tripped on the stair. Tumbling onto his arse, he felt a terrifying writhe-and-shiver beneath him as a rattlesnake squirmed free. Finny leapt up as the snake whipped wide-jawed into his knee and ricocheted off into the mass of its companions on the cellar floor.

Once again Franklin shoved snakes into his waistcoat and jacket. A rumble of thunder carved through the roar of the snake pit. "What are you doing?" Finny shouted again, his voice shrill with hysteria. "Where's Alice?"

For an instant the scientist in Franklin awoke and frowned impatiently. "I surely don't know." Then he dismissed Finny once more and returned to his absorption of the endless stream of rattlesnakes.

A third time, thought Finny. *If I ask a third time, maybe he'll tell me the truth.*

The cellar walls began to vibrate and flex, and Finny had the sudden image of the entire house transforming into a huge serpent, trapping them inside. The air thickened.

Franklin spread his arms wide. Finny felt a prickle along his own arms and shoulders.

"Franklin!"

-- All at once rattlesnakes attacked the American, darting and stabbing him from all directions. Simultaneously, Finny was deafened by a giant roar. The stink of burning flooded his nose.

The building *jumped*, as if slammed by a colossal sledgehammer. Finny stumbled, raised his bare hands, and toppled forward into the sea of snakes.

*

Hard floor beneath him. His son staring down, open-mouthed.

"I'm all right," said Finny. If he was still alive, it must be true.

Simon helped him up. The cellar was blackened, the table charred, the floor ankle-deep in ash. In one corner the ceiling had collapsed in a mess of brick and splintered wood. The body over the chair was now a twisted charcoal-heap, blasted beyond recognition. Of Franklin and his rattlesnakes there was no sign.

Hot pain drenched Finny's hands. His palms were burnt sooty. On his left wrist and the back of his right hand he wore the doubled red puncture wounds of snakebite, yet Finny felt no fever or deadening of sensation in his arms. He would live.

They found Alice under the upturned bathtub, wrapped in rags and dusted with fine ash, unconscious but unharmed. Unbitten. Breathing evenly. Simon dissolved into racking sobs. He snatched up his sister and fled out of the cellar.

Just like Franklin, Simon was a collection of miraculous strangers.

Finny walked slowly upstairs after them. Father and son sat on the curbside cradling Alice, looking everywhere but at each other. Simon snuffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Above them the night was radiant with stars.

“A lightning bolt,” said Simon suddenly. “Like a snake, striking from the sky, straight into the building. Blew me backward into the street. Then a smell like nothing on Earth.”

Finny nodded. “Franklin’s doing. He was in there, with the snakes. He raised his hands and drew down the lightning, and that’s all I remember.”

A high-pitched laugh forced itself out from Simon’s throat. “I suppose none of this should surprise us. After all, by Franklin’s own admission, he *is* superlative at everything.”

“Was,” said Finny grimly. “No one could have survived that.”

“*You* did,” said Simon. “I’ll wager that in a couple of months, our Mr. Franklin will pop up again in Philadelphia and resume his political career as if nothing untoward has occurred.”

Finny recalled the snakes springing at Franklin from every side. “Impossible,” he said. “Inconceivable.”

Unless... the snakes had not been attacking Franklin, after all.

The weight of mystery became too great to bear. Finny stood, swaying as he lifted his sleeping daughter.

Simon said shyly, “I can carry her. If you like.”

“No,” said Finny.

On Long Acre they glimpsed a lone rattlesnake retreating into the dark, obeying its natural habit of timidity.

Alice stirred, her movements sending shards of pain through Finny’s hands. He feared that she would awaken hysterical, but she looked around and took in the situation with calm aplomb. “He’s gone, isn’t he, Papa?”

Finny did not ask how she knew. He could no longer distinguish the remarkable from the commonplace. “Yes, Mr. Benjamin has gone, and taken the worst of the snakes with him. And the nightmares have gone too, Alice, gone forever. You’ll always be safe now.”

He paused, then continued firmly. “And, Alice, very soon, your mother will return.”

Alice closed her eyes again, content.

Sometimes, saying the words can make them true.

Sometimes.

“I told Franklin a lie,” said Finny presently. “I said we’d arrested his children. Treated them roughly. I invented it, just to provoke him. I surely wish I hadn’t.”

“I expect he realized that.”

Finny glanced sideways. His son’s stride was relaxed enough, but his shoulders were stiff and his gaze downcast.

“You *did* betray us, Simon. You did. Didn’t you?”

Briefly, Simon closed his eyes.

“It’s all right,” said Finny, forcing the words out. “Under the circumstances.”

“No,” said Simon, desolately.

Finny sighed. “Carry your sister,” he said, and guided his children home.