

GREYWAREN

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I

Art crime used to be funny. Not ha-ha funny, but strange funny. A lot of crime goes in and out of fashion, but art crime is always in. One would think that art lovers would be the least likely to tolerate theft or forgery, but in fact, they're often the ones who find it the most intriguing. It's art appreciation on steroids. Art appreciation as a board game, a team sport. A lot of people will never steal a statue or forge a painting, but a lot of people find it interesting when someone else does. Unlike when seeing someone stealing a handbag or a baby, a reasonable number of onlookers might secretly root for the thief.

The stakes never seemed that high. Art was valuable, but it was never a matter of life or death.

But the world had changed.

Now, if someone owned a piece of art, it meant that someone else didn't.

And that *was* a matter of life or death.

No one so much as glanced at Bryde as he headed into the Museum of Fine Arts. He was just a tawny-haired man in a gray jacket too light for Boston's winter weather, dwarfed by the scale of the column-fronted museum as he jogged lightly up the stairs, hands in pockets, shoulders shrugged against the cold. He did not look like someone who had destroyed valuable things in the

recent past or like someone who intended to steal valuable things in the near future, although he was both.

Desperate times, etc.

It had only been thirty-six hours since tens of thousands of people and animals had fallen asleep all over the world. They fell all at once, all together. It hadn't mattered if they were jogging down the sidewalk or tossing their child in the air or stepping onto an escalator: They fell asleep. Planes dropped from the sky. Trucks rumbled off bridges. Seabirds rained into the ocean. It did not matter if the sleepers were in a cockpit or behind the wheel of a bus; it did not matter if the other passengers were screaming; the sleepers kept on sleeping. Why? No one knew.

Well, some knew.

Bryde walked in his quick, neat way to the ticket counter. He blew on his cold fingers and shivered a little. His bright eyes looked here, there, back again, just long enough to note the guard lingering by the toilets and the docent leading a group into another room.

The young woman behind the ticket counter didn't look up from her screen. She asked, "General admission ticket?"

On the news, a rotating cast of experts had used phrases like *metabolic disturbances* or *zoonotic disease* or *toxic gas inversions* to explain all the comatose people and animals, but these morphed as the experts struggled to come up with an explanation that also included the hundreds of windmills, cars, and appliances that had also failed. Did it have something to do, one expert postulated, with the billions of dollars of industrial sabotage that had been happening on the Eastern Seaboard? Perhaps it was all an

attack on industry! Perhaps the government would reveal more data in the morning!

But in the morning, no new information came.

No one claimed responsibility. The sleepers kept sleeping.

“I need a ticket for the Vienna exhibit,” Bryde said.

“They’re sold out until March,” the counter attendant replied, in the tone of someone who had repeated this many times already. “I can put your email on a waiting list.”

The once-in-a-lifetime traveling exhibition of Vienna Secession artists had sold out the day it was announced. It was bound to. At its center was Gustav Klimt’s *The Kiss*, a painting that never left its home country. *The Kiss* is a knockout of a painting that most people have seen even if they don’t think they have. It features two lovers completely consumed by both a gilded blanket and each other. The man kisses the woman on the cheek. He wears ivy in his hair; his hands touch the woman prayerfully. The woman kneels serenely on flowers; her expression is certain she’s adored. How adored? Hard to say. Previous Klimts, less famous, had sold for one hundred and fifty million dollars.

“I need to get in today,” Bryde said.

“Sir—” The counter attendant lifted her gaze to Bryde, looking at him for the first time. She hesitated. She stared too long. At his eyes, his face.

“Bryde,” she whispered.

It was not only the sleepers whose lives had changed the day planes fell from the sky. The dreamers—far less numerous than the sleepers—had lost their ability to take things from their dreams, too. Many didn’t know it yet, because they dreamt so rarely. And many had already been failing (at dreaming, at living) for a long time.

Bryde had visited some of them in their dreams.

“The Vienna exhibition,” Bryde repeated quietly.

Now there was no hesitation. The counter attendant took her own badge from around her neck. “Put your, um, finger, over the photo.”

As he walked away, looping the lanyard over his neck, she put her fingers to her mouth and stifled a little cry.

It can be a powerful thing, to know one isn’t alone.

A few minutes later, Bryde calmly lifted *The Kiss* from the wall of the busy *Vienna Secession* exhibit. He took it with the quiet certainty of someone who was supposed to be taking a painting, which is perhaps why none of the other visitors realized anything was amiss at first.

Then the weight-sensitive alarm began to scream.

Thief, thief, thief, the piercing electronic tone warned.

Now the visitors stared.

Bryde staggered back with the painting, which was every bit as big as he was. What a piece of art *this* scene was: this light-haired man with a hawklike nose, something about his proportions neat and predictable, and this beautiful painting, with its own elegant balance.

The corner of the frame hit the floor. He began to drag it toward the exit.

Now it was obvious that the painting was being stolen. This was not how one carried priceless masterpieces.

And yet the onlookers did not stop Bryde; they watched. That was what one owed art, after all, wasn’t it? They watched him stop long enough to rummage something that looked like a paper airplane from his jacket and hurl it at a docent hurrying into the exhibit. As soon as the plane struck the docent’s

chest, it melted into an oozy coating that glued him to the floor. Another docent got a faceful of glittering powder that shrieked and sparked when it touched her skin.

A third docent skidded to a halt as grass and brambles grew rapidly from the floor, released from an ordinary-looking tennis ball Bryde had tossed from his pocket.

Bryde struggled farther on.

At each turn, he faced more guards, and at each turn, he found yet more odd knickknacks in his pockets to distract them, like he was pulling from a gallery of works by disparate artists. The objects were beautiful, strange, frightening, mind-bending, loud, apologetic, shameful, enthusiastic—all gifts collected in the last thirty-six hours from those who'd thought they were alone before Bryde had reached out to them. In the past, he could have dreamt new weapons to keep the guards at bay, but not now. He had to make do with gifted dreams from *before*.

But he did not have enough of them to get him out of the museum.

There were more walkie-talkies crackling from deeper in the building and more alarms shouting and ever so many stairs left to go.

He was nowhere near escape.

One could not simply stroll into one of the largest museums in the world, select a Klimt from the wall, and drag it out.

It was bound to fail from the start.

“Don’t you want them to wake up?” Bryde snarled to the bystanders.

These words landed more powerfully than any of the dreamt

gadgets had. They invoked those not there, the sleepers, who slept and slept and slept. In loved ones' spare rooms. In nurseries with doors left hopefully cracked, the baby monitors' batteries running dead. In geriatric wards devoted to sleepers no one had claimed as their own.

A handful of onlookers rushed forward to help Bryde carry the painting.

Now it was truly a work of art, Bryde and this group of museumgoers shouldering *The Kiss* past the displays describing Klimt's process, the arduous journey this painting had made already, the acts of rebellion Klimt performed again and again in his artistic life.

Out they strove, five, six, seven people carrying the painting as far as the museum's front entrance, other museumgoers pitching in to blockade the guards.

On the grand stairs of the MFA, the police were waiting, guns raised.

Now that he had run out of gifted dreams, Bryde was just a man with a famous painting held tight in his grip. It took only a few officers to relieve him of it. Really, it was not surprising that the theft had failed. It was surprising that it had taken so long to fail. But that was art for you: hard to predict what would stick and what wouldn't.

As they escorted Bryde in cuffs toward a parked cruiser, he stumbled.

"Easy there," said one of the officers, in a not unkindly tone.

"No need for anyone to get hurt," said the other officer.

Behind them, *The Kiss* was whisked back into the museum. The farther it got from Bryde, the slower his steps became.

“What were you thinking?” the first officer asked. “You can’t just walk in there and take a painting, man.”

Bryde said, “It was the only thing I could think of.”

He no longer looked like the person who’d walked into the museum earlier. All the intensity was gone from his eyes. He sagged to the ground, a man in a jacket empty of dreams.

“One day,” he told the officers, “you’ll sleep, too.”

Asleep.