

LOVE, BUT QUALIFY

Part One

Melinda flew nine hundred miles to surprise him on his birthday, and found him with a whore and a saxophonist. The musician, a youth from the college, was standing with his narrow back to Melinda when she flung open the bedroom door, and his stance and the raucous little tune he played convinced her he, at least, did not approve. The woman was already clambering into her clothes, while Gennady sheathed in bedsheets behind her was crooning Ferghana hits of the seventies around his post-coital cigarette. Melinda walked into a *fait accompli*.

She walked out five seconds later and drove to the Fairfield Inn, where she unpacked and called me on the room phone.

“I shut off my cell,” she said. “He kept calling.”

“Good. So you’re going back home? First thing tomorrow?”

“What?”

“Melinda – “

“Why on earth would I leave him just now? When it is obvious he needs me.”

“That’s what’s obvious?”

“Rhonda, listen to me. Gennady Brimshteyn is *sui generis*. He will be the last of his kind.”

“The last Russian writer or the last extramarital adventure? You are your own one-woman cult, of hero worship. I just don’t see you shutting down your myth-making factory. What did you tell Mark this time?”

There was a pause. “Don’t you worry about Mark.” Her voice wore a thin coating of ice. “Mark is just fine. Gennady Brimshteyn, on the other hand, saw his father shot to death and his mother raped by Uzbek apparatchiks. Gennady had to eat his own boiled shoes one winter when there wasn’t any meat. Gennady walked to school each day – “

“Through ten-foot drifts of snow twelve months a year and had to climb a tree when wolves were chasing him. Yes I know.” I held my head. “Only one problem, though. Ferghana’s in the middle of the desert.”

“It snows there! Look at the latitude, Rhonda, develop a clue. And in the summer it was hotter than Death Valley.”

“No place is – “

“All right then, if not Death Valley then your beloved Palm Springs. The first book he published, they used it for toilet paper. Literally. They hauled him in to the local Politburo and kept him tied up in a chair, at gunpoint, while they – crapped – and made him watch it – watch them use it – my God, Rhonda, you would have to be a statue not to care about this man.”

I shrugged. *Shit happens*. Outside in the glare my brother’s second wife was stooping in the garden, doing something with bulbs and a trowel. After the earthquake Donald went extended-family, insisting I stay in his son’s old room, downstairs with its own entrance. I told everyone, “This is temporary,” but it had been six months since my condo collapsed and I had to admit I liked big-house living. I liked the Encino address and the pool and Beth’s cooking and my brother’s sideways comments and his laughter at my jokes. “So Brimshteyn’s had a shitty life. So he acts out. Why should you wreck your life for him?”

“Don’t say that, Rhonda. What life? What matters more, my silly stupid life or his great art?”

“Melinda,” I asked, not for the first time, “why does this happen with every writer you translate?”

“I have to go,” Melinda said. “He’s calling.”

“I thought you said you turned your phone off.”

“I turned it back on while I was talking to you,” and Melinda added, gratuitously in my opinion, “you L.A. philistine. Look, Elinor’s locked herself up on a mountain with her cowboy husband and what you, Rhonda, were pleased to call his ‘sack of shit redneck family,’ and you’re stuck in that glib, fizzy, wise-cracking world of your own down there, yet you think – excuse me, but you *dare* to think – you can get in the way of my trying to preserve and keep intact this man, one of the greatest talents of the late- and post-Soviet era, perhaps of any era. Well, you can’t.”

“I’m just trying to keep you from hurting yourself,” I protested, but the line was dead. Later I realized I hadn’t asked her who was looking after Danielle, but no doubt I had assumed as always that Mr. Melinda, Mark Preis, Prince Preis (for his patience), King Mark (because he was a *cornuto* like his namesake, Isolde’s husband), would deal with the problematic child with all of the Christlike patience and wisdom he had displayed since her difficult premature birth.

By some slipup of genetics the athletic-looking man in the doorway, tall and slim with symmetrical features which is to say looking nothing like me, was my twin. “Melinda, right? Where’s she at anyway?”

“Who knows. Tater Peel, North Carolina. No, it’s called Croone, or Bockett, or something like that. Davyville. Daniltown. I think it’s Davyville.”

”You know she hit on me at my own wedding.” He was grinning at the fact, scratching the scar on his knee from the bike accident.

“Your first wedding. It was zillion years ago.”

“Yeah but Rons, the girl was driven. She just had to put it out there. I’m not saying anything against her, if Mara hadn’t poured the champagne down her cleavage – ”

I reached for a blank VHS cassette and the remote. My needs are few. Give me four outlets and three power strips, a separate phone line for the fax machine, premium cable and off-street parking, and I am content. Perhaps too content. “I have to tape this show. I’m supposed to write about it for the *Times*. And I think I hear Jakey calling you.”

He limped away. Beth brought her son into the marriage, a red-headed screeching thing who to his own innocent misfortune resembled his father, a prominent attorney and rectal orifice. Donald was determined “not to fuck him up.” He makes rubber ducks, my brother does. He owns the company. He has never heard of Philip Larkin.

I watched my show, made notes, pounded out some glibspeak on the keyboard and whooshed it to the *Times*. Writing about television has been my occupation since my days on the college newspaper. I too have written books, or at least mashed them together from my columns over the years. *From Gleason to Gilligan: TV’S Golden Age* had become, to my consternation and secret joy, something of a standard textbook in new-media departments. *Wasteland Update* had done less well, but then most people thought it was a book about T.S. Eliot.

I went to bed at midnight our time, still wondering about Melinda. Was she still in the motel? Did she go back to his house, hopefully with a bottle of Lysol and a jar of Antabuse? I heard some rhythmic noises, repressed but unmistakable, coming from one of the bedrooms upstairs. Why was my brother happy? Why did Art Dlugacz, the love of my life, have to die at twenty-nine? Why can’t they operate on a brain tumor? Why were three *Star Trek* series on the air? Why did Art have to die?

There are days, in Encino and I suppose everywhere else, that seem to be seventy-two hours long. There are some days when worlds give birth to little worlds, to translate freely from my late mother's Yiddish. *A velt mit veltlakh*: all those little globes tagging along by the side of the big one. Art was a cartoonist.

A week went by, ten days. I lost count. Giddy emails arrived from Melinda. She was translating Gennady's new book, *Champagne in Chernobyl*, or *Herring on Pravda*, or *Mikhail and Boris' Excellent Adventure*. The title changed from day to day, and the last I admit was my own contribution, but these and other details did leave the impression it wasn't all vodka and voogie down in Davyville.

Then came the seventy-two hour day, courtesy – and that is certainly not the word – of a repellent and obnoxious medium, the 5 A.M. phone call. Two hours later I was on a plane to Boston.

Part II

"I love Gennady Brimshteyn. Let me qualify that statement.

"I pedestalize him as an artist, because I think he deserves it and after all, reading, teaching and translating modern Russian samizdat or post-Soviet literature has been, is, and always will be my life's work. I love him as a representative, an archetype, an avatar of everything that's drawn me to the field. The dirt. The agony. The slow mental pulverization. The winter. I love his drinking, swearing, boorishness. I love the sex. I do not love his cigarettes, however.

"The qualification is that I do not intend to turn this love into a life. I will never leave my husband for this man who is lighting up my menopause (with fireworks, at that). I will be going

back to Mark any day now, and I am glad of it. My daughter needs me. Mark needs me. He relies on me for everything.

“To paraphrase Ronald Reagan, another hero of mine whom you two don’t understand: not ‘trust, but verify’ but ‘love, but qualify.’ Send your emotions where they want to go, by all means. Only do not let them go so far that you can’t yank them back. Only make sure you understand: there is madness and infatuation and wholly justifiable responses to brilliance and perceived vulnerability but, to quote you, Rhonda, they’re not worth ‘wrecking my life.’ I am not wrecking my life. I have just stepped outside it for a few weeks.”

That was the last email I sent before Gennady came knocking on my door, bearing a dozen funereal lilies to which I am allergic. I left the flowers stinking up my motel room and went out with him, to a bar on the edge of the Davyville campus. The next thing I remember is waking up alone, with a head the size of Lake Baikal and gray bars before my face.

A man on the other side of the bars hung up a phone. A man in blue, pink jowls, an open rectangular mouth. A cop. He said something to me, perhaps a question, but his words were drowned out by a louder, thicker voice, telling someone else in Russian to go fuck his mother. So he was here too. I closed my eyes and smiled.

I am becoming interesting. Daybreak in jail in the mountain South, and my lover cursing in his native language from the boys’ drunk tank across the hall. Well, why not? Why shouldn’t life be like a modern Russian novel, madcap, a little incoherent, coarse, funloving, devoted above all else to great art? I am a scholar. My work depends on the creations of others. Why can’t I turn my life into, not a work of art perhaps, but at least a narrative, at least something with a plot? Everyone says you must separate art from life. I say go fuck your mother.

“Excuse me,” I called out to Pink Jowls, “but I may make a phone call, mayn’t I?”

He hoisted himself to his pigeon-toed feet and approached my cell. “Say something, miss?”

“Yes. And I’m not ‘miss.’ My name is E. Melinda Lelyveld, Ph.D. Dr. Lelyveld is fine. I’d like to get bailed out of here, if you don’t mind. If that is possible.”

“Oh yes, it’s possible. It’s paa-sible.” He mocked my Yankee accent and my trisyllabic words. “All you need is,” and he mentioned some extortionate figure. “That is if you don’t want to take him with you.” He jerked his thumb toward wherever Gennady was howling. “Then it’s twice the price. That the plan?”

Lake Baikal was turbulent, lashing its sensitive shores, threatening overflow. “I would like to make that phone call now.”

He brought me a cordless.

“I know it’s five A.M. in California,” I sputtered quickly before Rhonda could hang up. “But I, we, Genya and I both, we’re in jail here, in Davyville. And since I can’t exactly call Mark – ”

Eventually the grumbles and sighs on her end resolved into words. “Melinda, don’t you have the money?”

“I left Mark with a wad of cash and all my credit cards but one. That one – I lost it last night, I know that. I don’t know where.”

“Didn’t you bring a checkbook?”

“Who carries a checkbook, Rhonda, come on. Get your head out of the seventies. We live in the age of the ATM. But,” I had to admit, “I don’t have my ATM card either.”

I heard the words “common sense” muttered in Rhonda’s most truculent tones. Sometimes I think she is too grounded for her own good. “How much.”

“Well, for drunk and disorderly which I assume it is, Officer Chance? It seems like a lot, but – oh.”

“What?”

“Indecent exposure.” Fat Chance came to the bars and put a stack of glossies in my hands. “Public lewdness. Here, have a look.”

“Oh dear. Oh dear *me*.”

“What?” Rhonda squawked in my hand. “Melinda, what’s going on?”

“Let me call you back. Thanks. This is, well, this is, officer, can’t we just destroy these?”

“Evidence.” The smile of Chance. “No can do. They belong to the Davyville Police Department, miss.”

I became aware that I had not washed and was still wearing last night’s makeup. My dark maroon blouse had an unfragrant stain. A barn-door rip, the worst kind, irreparable, gaped above the knee of my black silk slacks. My phone, my keys, my empty wallet, my daily pills, my return ticket: not visible to the bleary eye. Meanwhile a cop had just handed me photos showing Gennady Brimshteyn and I expressing our love.

In the first one I was undressed and enjoying myself atop a perpendicular shaft belonging to a naked, hairy man who was attempting to curl up and kiss my pendant breast. In another (they were out of sequence), we were up to our chops in each others’ dark brown pubic hair. In a third, vertical congress had been attempted against an ornate wrought-iron fence (memory surfed in from Lake Baikal: that was where my pants tore). In all three pictures, the marbled legs of a hero’s horse posed in the background.

“That a statue?” I managed to ask, indicating the horse’s legs.

“Yep. Confederate Memorial. Right in the town square.”

All at once I knew a ringing truth, and it sprung me. The bars and locks could not contain the brave new fact that I was not embarrassed, felt no shame, and was in fact so far from sorry as I stared at this fascinating triptych that I began hoping to repeat the sequence. "I'd like to speak to the gentleman. You know he is really a very distinguished writer in residence, here at the college? I'm his translator. I teach in Boston. If I had my handbag, Officer, I could give you my card."

In less than an hour I stepped outside into pouring rain. Genya was already there. He was in his usual slouch, usual hands clasped behind his back, staring at a wooden bench. His salt-and-pepper hair was standing up, pushed in heaps away from his face. I inhaled rather than saw his flannel shirt, the frayed jeans, the mud-encrusted boots. I was a poleaxed heifer for his very body odors.

"Hi baby." I nuzzled him quickly along the left temple. "What are you gdoing?"

"I just learn something here," he said. "Ass is stronger than wood."

I looked down, where he was pointing. Judging by its overall style and décor, this police station had existed for two decades. On the bench lay the buttock-shaped proof, the areas worn in the wood by hundreds of glad, glum, or terrified sitters. Despondent or exhilarated, every posterior played a role. Together they had left curves in the wood.

Genya sat down, and I joined him. "Means, humans always overcome oppression. When they are patient. Sit long enough, you too will make a dent."

"Is that for me?" I asked. "Am I supposed to be patient? I'm the one who's married here. I see patience as your role, love."

“Not much longer.” His grin revealed his crooked teeth, a tribute to Soviet dentistry.

“You not married to a man.”

“Gennady, don’t start that – “

“Is because of him your daughter has those problems. Because her father, he is not a man.”

I am so constructed, God help me, as to think that was funny. When I read his masterpiece, *Zek’s Paradise* – I couldn’t sleep. I went cavorting in a blizzard, did the dances of my teen years all over the backyard before cracking my ankle on a buried rock. I limped inside, watched Mark put Danielle to bed and thought, *I have to sleep with this man. No, not him.*

Rhonda complains about my “hero worship.” I can’t help it if the male writers whose work I translate all happen to embody the superlative. I worked hard to learn how to recognize quality, how to discriminate, although that last is on its way to becoming a forbidden verb. I don’t translate bad books, or so-so books, or books that just happen to fall into my hands, left behind on an Aeroflot cushion. Translation is an act of intimacy. One “gets into the pants of the mind,” as Gennady says. Why would I care to investigate the real or metaphoric pants of some just ordinary mortal?

Mark is an ordinary mortal. His delicate and near-albino looks fooled me. I found him hawking hand-made doll furniture in Harvard Square. He had a gentle voice, a modest talent and other qualities appropriate for sainthood. He was also penniless, which I liked: gratitude tends to keep men in place. I had just gotten tenure and wanted to do something big. I married him.

“Genyusha, I will love you forever, for the rest of my life and the next two or three incarnations at least.” I rubbed his freckled arm. “However – my love is qualified. It has an asterisk. It is subject to interpretation.”

“Yes, you explain me your theory. Last night.”

“I did?”

“You did. You don’t leave him because I am too drunk and crazy, yes? Because I have what you call poor track record. But you are wrong, I am married and divorced only three times, not four. But Melinda, I think I am not the one with asterisk. You are.”

“Wait a sec. I didn’t mean – “

“You qualify him,” said my Russian delight. “Your husband. I think he think you have the asterisk. I think maybe he doesn’t take you back this time.”

“Oh honey, that’s preposterous. Mark? What has he got? He signed the prenup. He’d be homeless in a month. No, that can’t be.”

He embraced me. We rose to our feet still entwined. “Melinda, you are gorgeous woman, sexy, brilliant, sense of humor, and you drink like a Russian. You say you want back to your husband, I say go! Just see what happens! Before long I see you again, I know.”

Every time I kissed him I became part of a legend. Helen and Paris had nothing on us. Tristan and Isolde were two frightened kids. Lancelot, Guinevere? Grubby and sordid. No, I thought, as I detached from his sculpted lips on which some scummy fuzz had formed, we are the adulterers for the ages. Were.

Part 3

“It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature. It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature.”

There was a boy next to me at the concert, speaking those words to himself over and over. I looked, and saw a bare-chested young god. Shoulder-length rippling blond hair. Cornsilk mustache brushing his chin. His face suggested that perhaps he was speaking these words as a

mantra, a charm to help him get off the ledge where he seemed to think he stood. There was some fatal terror he was holding off but only barely, judging from his bulging eyes and the clenched hands against his legs in cut-off jeans. His forehead was a mass of sweat beads.

I craned my head closer. Rhonda and Melinda were lost in Dead frenzy, hopping and pirouetting respectively.

“It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature.”

“Oh, don’t worry. She’ll forgive you.”

He turned his gaze on me, and I saw the largest pupils I have ever seen in full broad daylight. “Oh wow,” he said.

Rhonda made the argument that night. “You can’t just go off with some strange guy you met at a Grateful Dead concert. Even if he is on a bad trip and you want to quote help unquote. How do you know he isn’t just faking? How do you know he’s not some strangler?”

I ignored her, and went off with Wade. Twenty-three years later, he was driving me down the mountain.

“Out of control,” he said. “Your friend Melinda has a daughter, doesn’t she? Poor kid’s autistic or something? Who’s taking care of her?”

Beneath his cap Wade’s profile was Rushmoric. The shoulder-length hair had been shorn to a short crop. The shrunken mustache formed a neat gray chevron on his upper lip. The crow’s feet of the outdoor man had long stood guard around his elliptical, narrowed eyes.

I knew he would ask this question. I had just been hoping he would wait until we were out of the pines, past the Joshua trees, down in the rocks at the bottom of the hill. There was still too far to go and too much time for him to dislike what I was about to say.

“Um, actually, Wade, I asked Marley to look in on them. After all, it’s her field. She knows about autistic kids, well, children with whatever poor Danielle has. And she likes Melinda, she always did. And our daughter has no nonsense in her head, give her that, Wade. Never has had.”

He took his eyes from the road for a moment to look at me. As jungle dwellers have a hundred words for rain, in East Rock Fork we have varieties of silence. This was in the disappointed family, cousin to I-hope-you’re-right but closer kin to how-could-you.

East Rock Fork at nearly seven thousand feet is always cooler by some twenty degrees than the desert where the highway meets our road, just outside an incongruous naval base placed three hundred miles from shore. As we approached the tiny airport, Wade flipped down his sunshade, put on his sunglasses, and turned the air fan in the truck up to max. This meant, as I knew, he had something important to say but if the fan drowned him out and I could not hear, then perhaps it was not that important. Wade – no one believes this of him, but it is true – likes to play Russian roulette with necessity. “Bad idea, Elinor.”

“Why on earth? I just explained – “

“Huh-uh. Won’t fly.” He was not a cowboy as my friends liked to say. We have a few horses, a dozen alpacas, some chickens and four dogs (I have not counted cats lately), but he earns his living at Gough & Sons, the family tow-truck concern and the only one of its kind in a fifty-mile radius. Far be it from me to make nasty remarks about my husband’s family. I will admit, though, I thought up the alpacas. They keep Wade away from Big Tim and Big Tim’s shop at least two days a week. “Not a good idea,” he repeated. “Getting our daughter mixed up in this.”

“‘Mixed up’ – Wade. I just see this as good experience for Marley. She is an Early Childhood major. She does plan to teach kids just like this. Hands-on learning for a change. She’s known Melinda all her life – and Marley likes her. She at least talked to Melinda when she came out here.” I shifted in my seat, still discomfited by that memory of some ten years ago. Marley, my oldest child and only daughter, sat by Melinda’s side, went through her purse, asked her dozens of questions about Boston and college and what did Russian sound like and what were Slavic Studies and what did professors do all day anyway. Dylan, uninterested, stayed in the shop with his grandfather. Lennon, at eight, was already off in the woods with his bow.

“This can’t get passed on to the next generation.”

“What can’t?”

He pulled up on the scrap of tarmac. “The three of you. Here you go flying three thousand miles. Rhonda’s coming in too, right? From LAX? What would happen if – just an idea, Nor, I’m just kind of thinking out loud here – what would happen if you just let her fall on her face every once in a while? Let her sit in the drunk tank. Fight her own battles. Deal with her own husband she keeps cheating on.” He unbuckled his seat belt and, turning to me, clamped both hands on my forearm, as if to forcibly prevent my taking off. “Raise her own kid. Not have our daughter do it.”

“Wade, we are all forty-five years old. I don’t think Melinda is going to change. I don’t see the down side for Marley, I really don’t.”

For six hours I puzzled over what he might have meant, and then I was leaving Logan in the rental car, Rhonda driving and Melinda in the back.

“There’s a Mexican place. Can we stop? I want menudo.”

“No.” Rhonda kept driving. “As if the Mexican food around here could be anything but drek.” Facing Boston traffic with her Angelena’s ease, she swung into a market parking lot. In a few moments she came out with a paper bag that she gave to Melinda. “Here’s your menudo. In a can. Your hangover still bad at this point?”

“Ohhhh. Don’t hit those bumps.”

“Melinda,” I turned around, “are you sick? Do you need a plastic bag? I always carry them, Dylan and Lennon got carsick for years.”

Makeup smeared, eyes too large and too dark, my wayward friend shook her head and waved me off. “Not a barfer. He said I drink like a Russian.” She sighed, leaned back, smiled to herself. “Quite a compliment, coming from him. Goddamit, I miss him already.”

We stopped at a light. Rhonda exploded in exasperation. “Melinda, do you want to go home to your husband, or do you want to go back to the airport? I wonder which whore will, ah, service your boyfriend tonight. I can’t believe your self-delusion.”

“Rhonda, be fair.” As usual I had to mediate. “Clearly Melinda’s in conflict here. Condemning her is not appropriate. I flew three thousand miles today to give her my love and support. Did you?”

The short girl gave her short laugh. “Of course. But I also want to get reimbursed. Actually it’s Donald’s money, Melinda, it’s my brother who actually bailed you out.”

Melinda, earrings swaying, was leaning on our seatbacks. “And that’s another thing, Rhonda. Your brother. You’ve never moved on from Art, you’ve had the perfect man right next to you all along. Born together, in fact. I’m not saying you two are incestuous, exactly – ”

“Back OFF! Just because he didn’t go for you – “

“I could have had him anytime. Your precious Donald’s just like any other man. They all think with the wrong end.”

“This is vulgar,” I said. “I just don’t enjoy talk on this level.”

The conversation, I am sorry to say, did not improve. We were yelling at each other all the way out to the suburbs.

Rhonda pulled up in front of the house. “Okay, ladies. Let’s make a plan. Let’s not just barge in.”

“Typical Rhonda,” I said. “That’s so L.A. You just want to do a drive-by. No, we are all going in, to talk this out.”

“She’s right. Don’t you dare leave now.” Melinda was gripping her carry-on. Somehow during the ride she had gotten her looks back and once again was the sleek, put-together academic, albeit with oversized earrings and kitten heels. We helped her swing her rolling bag out of the trunk.

“I really think we should go.” Rhonda looked up and down the sidewalk as if expecting a criminal horde. Melinda fumbled with her key.

“Creeps me out to do this.” She looked up, flashing a grin. “Last time I opened a door I found a whore in the bed. With my boyfriend. And some guy playing saxophone.”

This time we found my daughter Marley in the bed. There was a saxophonist, but he was on the radio, not in the room.

If this day, as Rhonda claimed, lasted three times longer than an ordinary day, the next eighteen to twenty-four virtual hours comprised my descent into hell. Only those who have raised a perfect child, a girl with no apparent flaws, a young woman of charm and grace and decency and intellectual inquiry, only to see her transformed into something between Medea and

a chimpanzee in estrus, can imagine my decimation – and Wade’s too, although at long distance. Marley has my Mediterranean nose, my hair and coloring, but there was a blunt and frank side to her beauty that was Wade, an open quality that made me think of buttes, and horses hobbled for the night. Now she stood before me using language she did not hear on our mountain. Now she was telling me she was Mark Preis’ lover, a word she pronounced with a sickening lingering of her tongue on her lips, and Danielle preferred her and Melinda was a slut and we were, all three of us, horrible people who had wasted our lives and were worthless just like our whole pathetic generation, and should die.

Rhonda said, “It’s like those *Star Trek* episodes where the evil alien enters an innocent body and has to be talked out, or given the Vulcan mind-meld, or I don’t know, burned out somehow.”

“You’re talking about an exorcism,” said Melinda, slurping menudo. “It’s not original to *Star Trek*, Rhonda, believe it or not.”

“My daughter is sick.” I had to remind them. They kept veering off into pop-culture squabbles. “Perhaps it’s schizophrenia. I need to get her to a doctor, fast. Maybe it’s something organic, like a, like a – “

“Brain tumor?” Rhonda stared at me with an arched eyebrow.

“Whatever. That is not my daughter. That woman in there, whom we saw, whom we heard – that is not my daughter Marley.”

“Oh yes it is, Elinor.” Melinda put down her fork and spoon. “That’s the first thing you have to realize. It is your daughter, and my husband. Now the question is, what do we do about it?”

“I want to go home,” Rhonda groaned. “I’m exhausted. I have jet lag. Mind if I call my brother before we go deciding fates here?”

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