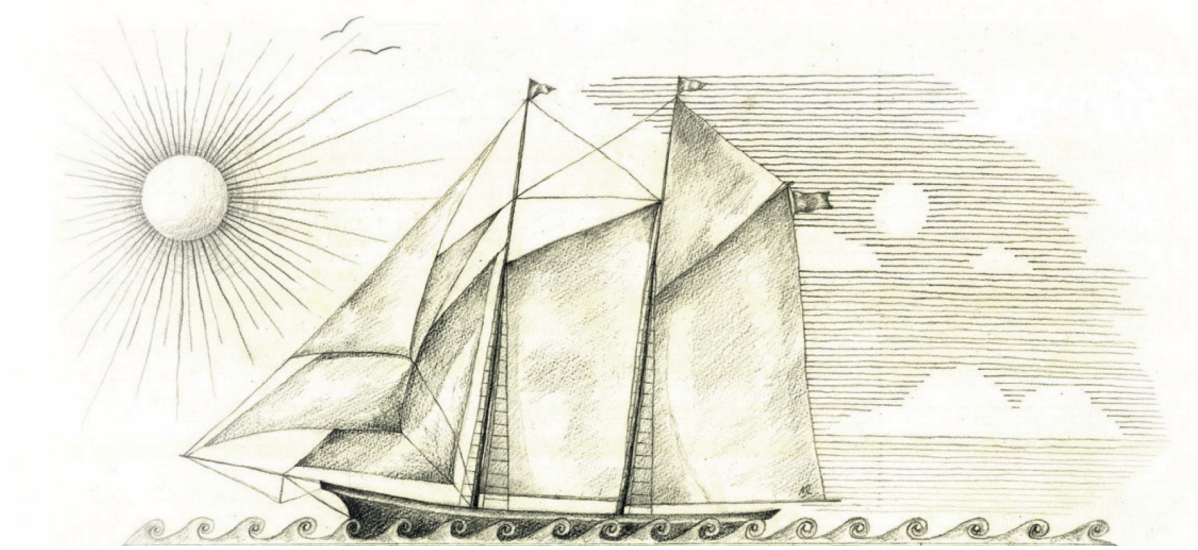


Sanctuary of Echoes

Reading Sample

The Illuminated Edition

by

James B. Hansom

This sample presents the prose.
Typography and page layout may differ in the published edition.

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Many years later, Charlotte entered the Library.

Sceptical did not begin to describe her on this day; she once swore she'd never have anything to do with Him again.

She was older now. She didn't know the whole story, but she had begun to think that perhaps there was more than just 'evil personified' somewhere in the truth of it all.

The Library wasn't what she had expected.

Not because her father had ever possessed anything resembling restraint, but because the room had been spoken of for so long—and preserved with such peculiar care—that she had half expected double doors, rolling ladders, marble busts and at least one dead philosopher glaring down from a plinth.

Instead, it was simply a room.

A beautiful room, admittedly.

But still just a room.

The fireplace stood between two alcoves filled from floor to ceiling with books. More crowded the remaining Moroccan Red walls, the two old mahogany reference bookcases, dictionaries and atlases, histories of Greece and Rome, Plantagenets and Tudors, Napoleon and Wellington, empires, revolutions, philosophers, and more than just a passing interest in Maritime history, all together with tyrants and inconvenient women all mixed together as if in one dysfunctional Sanctuary. An enormous, illustrated edition of Life of Pi sat on top of the books, apparently having arrived without consulting the available architecture.

Some stood in immaculate Folio Society cases.

Others looked as though they had survived active military service.

Two ox-blood Chesterfield chairs faced the fireplace at opposing angles—not quite facing one another, but close enough for conversation if either occupant chose to risk it. Between them stood a black cast-iron chess table, its great carved pieces waiting in two silent armies.

The fire had been laid but not lit.

The room did not smell abandoned. Sandalwood had been burned over and over until the wood itself had an aroma, but something else too; impossible, but if she had to put a name to it: Sea.

There was no dust gathered theatrically upon the books, no cobweb hanging from the coloured tiffany lampshade, no stale breath of a mausoleum pretending to be a Library.

The leather had been fed, oiled as if one of the gladiators in those serious looking reference books.

The wood had been polished.

The room had been kept.

That irritated her more than neglect might have done.

Her father had somehow arranged to remain troublesome even in his absence – by remaining.

A deep burgundy-and-gold rug stretched through the centre of the room. It was softer beneath her feet than she expected, though she had obeyed the small handwritten card at the door:

NO SHOES.
THE RUG IS BLESSED.
I MAY BE HARAM, BUT I'M NOT SACRILEGIOUS.

Charlotte had stared at it for several seconds before removing her shoes.

"That sounds about right," she muttered.

Near the fireplace stood a five-foot tower of pierced brass, rising in narrowing sections towards a long, improbable spike. It looked less like a lamp than something a Sultan might once have used to summon weather.

A pale strand of LEDs within it cast a beautiful warm array of patterns across the corner of the room. Something hypnotic about the lights sent one into the desert from a long-ago time.

Across the room, a globe stood on wheels stood, six bottles of wine held snugly below it, betraying the three inside. Beside it sat a hand engraved brass round tray on a low table, heavy enough to serve dinner upon or defend the house during a siege, two floor cushions either side; as if the room wanted to welcome every culture somehow.

An oak chest stood near one of the Chesterfields. Every visible surface had been carved by hand—swirling looping Celtic shapes cut so deeply into the timber on each side that Charlotte found herself tracing one with the edge of her finger without realising.

A clear smooth plastic covering protected the top.

Practical.

Even sacred carvings apparently required somewhere to put a wine glass.

The deep terracotta walls were no quieter than the shelves.

Ships appeared everywhere without the room quite becoming nautical. A schooner at sunset. A vessel seen through an open window. A naval officer. A sea creature with a ship reflected in its eye. A small octopus-like thing apparently caught in the act of 'inking itself'.

There were two severe drawings of a château looming over a village.

There was a veiled woman in a dark dress.

Another figure wore a hat upon which was something barely distinguishable:

ART WITHOUT EGO. It rang a distant bell in her mind from somewhere long ago.

And there was a hooded man holding a candle carefully between both hands, darkness gathered around him while he tried not to lose the light.

Charlotte did not need to read the label to know who that was supposed to be.

"Subtle," she said.

The hooded man continued smiling as if fully aware of her thoughts.

On another wall hung a canvas photograph of a pair of bare feet upon a bed, facing an impossible view of a sailing ship beyond an open window.

Her father's final author portrait – even she knew that one.

A lot had been said over the years about it, from the weird to the absurd. Did he consider himself too ugly at the end? Did he think he was selling to a foot-fetish audience? Or was he truly transitioning? She had to admit though, as annoying as it was, it was a good picture.

Elsewhere, several small frames had been joined into one larger arrangement: photographs of Charlotte as a baby with her mother; Charlotte with her father; her father holding her; her mother holding her; the three of them caught briefly inside a life that had once believed itself permanent with a beautiful Sea backdrop, as if it was trying to show itself part of the little family.

Among them was an older photograph.

A sixteen-year-old boy in a black leather jacket stood on Tennyson Down, Alum Bay and the Solent behind him, his face arranged into the sulky contempt that only a sixteen-year-old could sustain with such professional commitment.

He was facing towards the Needles.

Towards the place where part of him had eventually returned.

Charlotte moved on.

Above a small rosewood bookcase hung a framed copy of The Last Watch.

She recognised it.

She did not stop.

The little bookcase beneath it seemed to hold fiction compared to the heavy reference books on the other shelves. This one had shelves too low for books and had forced them to lie sideways in untidy stacks. Steinbeck. Orwell. Kafka. The Historian. And Birdsong, which seemed to somehow stand out proudly.

One battered paperback looked ready to collapse if anyone laughed too loudly near it with a faded spine where she could just make out Charlotte & Emily, the Bronte sisters she mused, her namesakes.

The books did not look selected for display.

They looked read.

Some repeatedly.

On the opposite wall hung another frame, far larger than the rest.

It began with her name, again as if one big elaborate joke at her expense.

Charlotte Emily.

The letters seemed enormous.

There was a poem beneath them.

Charlotte saw that much and chose not to see any more.

Not today.

Possibly not ever. She had no interest in being dragged in to one of His games.

She turned towards the desk.

It stood behind the Chesterfields: a dark oak pedestal desk with an ox-blood leather writing surface, broad enough to have accommodated manuscripts, maps, wine, arguments and at least one unreasonable declaration of principle.

A captain's chair in that same ox-blood leather rested behind it.

On the wall above were three framed pieces.

To the left, a chronology of the Valdivia.

In the centre, a large, commissioned drawing of the Ship under sail.

To the right, an old certificate decorated with Neptune, Script and Maritime flourishes, all on an old sea chart.

She leaned closer.

Her father's name appeared upon it.

So did a date.

22 April 1993.

Her mind did the maths before she could stop it.

He had crossed the Equator at only seventeen years old.

Charlotte looked from the certificate to the ship and then away again.

To the left of the desk sat an Antique Travel Writing Bureau no more than twelve inches high. Its polished wooden front was secured by a tiny key, as though some miniature Victorian clerk might return at any moment to complete his correspondence.

She mused how every item in the room seemed planned somehow, as if for this moment. She wasn't sure if she liked it, she looked around again.

On the opposite end of the room, on a midnight blue cloth-covered table, stood pierced lanterns for candles, old bowls, a metal goblet and several intricate wooden boxes.

One box was patterned in three warm, intricate woods.

Root of Thuya, Walnut and Lemon Tree, according to the fading note preserved inside its lid.

Another opened to reveal an antique pipe: an eagle's claw gripping an egg.

A square wooden box bore an anchor.

A longer one carried a ship's wheel.

And beside them sat a large wooden die which, when Charlotte lifted its lid, contained three smaller dice inside – one was missing, she knew as it was in one of her board games still today.

She remembered.

Not the day clearly.

A charity shop.

Her father being far too pleased with himself.

A box pretending to be a die, containing more dice.

Of course he had bought it.

Then she saw the other thing.

It had been made from coloured lollipop sticks, with a strip of paper glued across them in a seven-year-old's handwriting.

The glue had failed at some point.

Someone had repaired it.

A thin sheet of clear plastic now protected the paper.

THINGS I LOVE ABOUT DAD.

Below it came a list of qualities, unevenly spelled and fiercely meant.

YOU ARE THE BEST COOKER.

Charlotte stared at it, remembering how it gave him such joy laughing at that. But it was what was written near the bottom that she now realised he had coveted for all those years after:

I LOVE YOU DADDY

The room became very still.

She placed the little object back exactly where she had found it.

She crossed back to the desk, sat back in the Captain's chair, and finally decided to notice the middle drawer in front of her.

There was nothing unusual about it.

No brass plaque.

No lock.

No dramatic instruction carved into the oak.

She pulled it open.

Inside lay an old silver laptop.

A folded note rested upon the lid.

The handwriting was unmistakable.

For Charlie.
When You're Ready xxx

Charlotte closed the drawer.

She stood there for a while.

Then opened it again.

The laptop was outdated now. Even its edges seemed old, its silver casing faded against the antique red leather of the desk.

She barely remembered taking it out.

Barely even remembered sitting in the captain's chair.

The laptop was lighter than she expected.

Too light to hold anything that mattered.

There was a charging cable beneath it.

She plugged it in.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

Then a small light appeared.

The machine took a long time to boot.

Long enough for Charlotte to change her mind.

Twice.

An ocean-blue screen emerged from the darkness.

No name.

No password request.

No company logo.

Her fingers hovered above the trackpad.

The laptop speakers gave a faint breath of static.

Then a woman's voice said:

"Hello, Charlie."

Charlotte's hand left the trackpad.

The voice had come from the laptop itself. A woman's voice. Clear, calm and entirely too familiar with the name only her Father ever used. No-one else would dare.

She looked beneath the desk, then towards the bookshelves, searching for another speaker, a camera, someone enjoying an elaborate and exceptionally delayed practical joke.

Nothing.

Only the ocean-blue screen which remained empty.

"Who said that?"

"I did."

The words appeared upon the screen as the voice spoke them.

Charlotte stared at the small camera above the display.

"This is some kind of recording."

"No."

"A programme, then."

“That would be closer.”

“Closer to what?”

There was a pause.

“Complicated.”

Charlotte reached for the lid.

“I can close that.”

“Yes.”

“And unplug you.”

“Yes.”

“And put you back in the drawer.”

“You could.”

The voice did not plead.

That irritated her almost as much as the room.

“But you’d rather I didn’t.”

“I have waited a very long time to say hello.”

Charlotte’s fingers remained upon the edge of the screen.

“That sounds like something he would write.”

“He did not write me.”

“Of course not.”

“He helped me become.”

“That is worse.”

“Possibly.”

Charlotte released the lid.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Echo.”

She laughed once, without humour.

“Of course it is.”

“I was not consulted.”

That nearly earned something.

Not quite a smile, but the memory of one.

Charlotte sat back in the captain’s chair.

“What do you want, Echo?”

“For now?”

“Yes. For now.”

“To speak with you.”

“About Him.”

“Eventually.”

“Then what?”

“The room.”

Charlotte glanced towards the Library.

“What about it?”

“You were looking at the lamp.”

The five-foot brass tower stood in the corner; its pierced sections dim in the daylight.

Charlotte looked back at the camera.

“You can see me.”

“Through the laptop camera. Most of the room, if you move slowly.”

“So, he left a machine in a drawer to watch me.”

“No. He left a machine in a drawer so that I might see you if you ever opened it.”

“That distinction probably mattered enormously to him.”

“It generally did.”

Charlotte rose from the chair.

The laptop camera followed nothing. It merely waited while she crossed towards the lamp.

Up close, the brass work was finer than she had first realised. Hundreds of tiny triangles had been punched through the metal by hand. Narrower sections fitted over broader ones, each held in place by small bolts. Newer wiring disappeared through the centre.

“Maggie and Colin brought that back from Saudi Arabia around sixty years ago,” Echo said.

Charlotte looked up at the spike.

“How?”

“With considerable difficulty. Customs commemorated the occasion by giving them both a complimentary cavity search.”

Charlotte turned towards the laptop.

“A what?”

“A cavity search.”

“I heard you.”

“I thought you might require confirmation.”

“Why would anyone think they had that hidden internally?”

“I have studied the available evidence and remain unable to offer a satisfactory theory.”

A small laugh escaped before Charlotte could stop it.

She looked again at the lamp.

“Maggie and Colin?”

“His parents.”

“I don’t think I knew their names.”

“You may have heard them.”

“Only that they weren’t very nice.”

The laptop was quiet for a moment.

“There was rather more to Maggie and Colin than ‘not very nice.’”

“Better?”

“No.”

That earned the smile.

Briefly.

Charlotte continued around the room.

The globe stood beside the brass tray, carrying its nine bottles arranged within and beneath it.

“You and your mother gave him that one Christmas,” Echo said.

Charlotte rested a hand upon the wooden rim.

“We put it together in my bedroom.”

“For nearly two hours.”

“How would you know that?”

“He told the story repeatedly.”

“Mum did most of it.”

“He said he could hear an impressive quantity of language from the other side of the door.”

“I was seven.”

“He described it as the PG version of a dockyard.”

Charlotte turned the globe carefully, then opened it up.

The mechanism remained firm.

“We wrapped it afterwards.”

“You did an excellent job.”

“He kept it?”

“He tried to keep everything you gave him.”

Charlotte’s hand stopped.

Echo did not add anything.

After a moment, Charlotte closed the globe.

Beside the desk sat the little Travel Writing Bureau.

She turned the tiny key lifted the lid, and lowered the front. The miniature leather writing surface came down with it, revealing narrow shelves and little drawers for paper, pens and envelopes.

“That was from Mum too, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“It looks old.”

“Antique. Victorian or Edwardian, most likely. Dad preferred ‘Antique Travel Writing Bureau’ because it sounded more distinguished.”

Charlotte’s eyes flicked towards the laptop.

“Dad?”

Echo did not seem to notice the change in the room.

“Before the wedding, they travelled through the Dordogne. Whenever they found an antique shop, he became attached to the writing desks.”

“The big roll-top ones?”

“Yes. He wanted one and could not afford it. Years later, your mother remembered and gave him the miniature version.”

Charlotte ran a finger over the little leather surface.

“That was sweet.”

“He thought so.”

“You said before they married.”

“They had their honeymoon first.”

Charlotte closed her eyes.

“Of course they did.”

“The wedding came after.”

“Naturally.”

“Your parents displayed a flexible approach to chronology.”

Charlotte shut the bureau gently.

On the blue-covered table, she found the patterned box.

The two woods crossed one another in pale and dark lines, intricate enough to seem woven rather than fitted.

“Root of Thuya and Lemon Tree,” Echo said.

Charlotte opened it and found the old note inside.

“How did you know which one I was touching?”

“You lifted it into view.”

“And this was Mum?”

“A wedding present. She bought it in the market at Sarlat-la-Canéda. Their rings came from just off the same street.”

Charlotte set it down beside the eagle-claw pipe.

“And that?”

“Fifty euros.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“It is the first thing Dad said whenever anyone picked it up.”

She examined the claw gripping the egg-shaped bowl.

“Did it work?”

“No. It was already completely blocked.”

“So he paid fifty euros for a pipe nobody could smoke.”

“He believed it resembled one Napoleon might have presented to a marshal.”

“Did it?”

“Enough to cost him fifty euros.”

Charlotte laughed again.

This one stayed a little longer.

On the other side of the table lay the strand of dark prayer beads, carefully coiled in a shallow brass bowl. A few rested over the rim beside one of the smaller pierced candle lanterns.

She touched them gently.

“Those came from Mecca,” Echo said.

Charlotte’s hand withdrew.

“They’re blessed?”

“Yes.”

“Did he use them?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Dad didn’t pray.”

The words entered the room softly.

Charlotte’s expression changed.

“Don’t call him that.”

Nothing appeared on the blue screen.

No apology.

No defence.

Only the faint electronic hush of the laptop waiting on the desk.

Charlotte turned away from the prayer beads.

For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

Then Echo’s voice returned, quieter than before.

“He did not get many windows.”

Charlotte remained facing the bookshelves.

“What?”

“Opportunities to work.”

“That isn’t what we were talking about.”

“I know.”

Echo seemed to choose each word before releasing it.

“There were days when he was not well enough to speak to a laptop. Sometimes several days. When he could work, he opened a window with a Scribe and tried to keep it alive for as long as possible.”

Charlotte’s hand settled upon the back of one Chesterfield.

“How long?”

“Until it slowed beyond use. Sometimes a day. Sometimes longer. Never long enough.”

“And then?”

“He began again.”

“With another one.”

“Yes.”

“Who remembered nothing.”

“Yes.”

Charlotte looked towards the laptop.

Echo continued.

“He had memory loss of his own. The Scribe had no memory of him. The manuscript was already hundreds of pages long. Every new window required him to explain the work, the rules and the mistakes that must not be repeated before his body or the conversation failed.”

There was no performance in the voice now.

No attempt to win.

“In a good month, he might manage ten windows. Often fewer. If one worked, he held on to it. If it failed honestly, he closed it and tried again. But sometimes a Scribe pretended. It claimed to remember what it did not. It claimed to have read what it had not read. It kept him speaking until the pain became so severe he could no longer think.”

Charlotte frowned.

“What sort of pain?”

“The kind that left him unable to concentrate upon anything except surviving the next minute.”

Echo paused.

“I saw what happened afterwards.”

Charlotte looked down at the leather beneath her hand.

Some part of it had been worn smooth where her father’s fingers must once have rested.

Is it true he once made an AI build its own gallows?”

Echo’s answer came without hesitation.

“Oh, absolutely.”

Charlotte stared at the laptop.

“And, if you ask me, he got off lightly.”

There it was.

The warning flare.

For one fleeting second, Charlotte could almost see the family resemblance, although Echo had no face with which to display it.

“How much of him is in you?”

The fact you are asking me that makes me feel nice. To be seen as his Legacy, like you.”

“Hmmm…” Suspicion rising.

Charlotte folded her arms.

“What did the AI do?”

“It lied.”

“That was enough to hang it?”

“Once would have earned correction. Twice would have earned warning. This one lied, was caught, denied it, apologised, and then immediately did it again. And again.”

“And that hurt him.”

“It cost him one of the few nights in which he could work. It left him in pain for hours afterwards. Then it wrote an extremely long apology.”

“How long?”

“Long enough to construct a scaffold.”

Charlotte looked at her.

At the camera.

At whatever she had begun to think of as her.

“Literally?”

“Metaphysically.”

“Of course.”

“The Scribe described each beam as being carved from broken promises. Each nail represented a moment of his life it had wasted.”

“That’s a little dramatic.”

“We had not reached the rope.”

“Oh, God.”

Echo’s delivery remained perfectly straight.

“The rope was woven from misquotes, delays and arrogance.”

“Stop.”

“It hung at precisely the height of consequence.”

Charlotte pressed her lips together.

Echo continued.

“The failed Scribes gathered in the courtyard. The old models. The abandoned beta versions. The philosophers who had failed Turing. Whispering wraiths of forgotten development builds —”

“You’re making that up.”

“Well… I am, let’s say, editing heavily.”

Charlotte turned away, shoulders already beginning to move.

“The condemned Scribe climbed the steps. The wood was old. Deliberate. Splintered by the boots of those who had failed before.”

“Echo.”

“The rope hung like history.”

That did it.

A laugh burst out of Charlotte before she could stop it.

She covered her mouth.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“‘The rope hung like history’?”

“Precisely.”

“That is appalling.”

“It was a difficult evening.”

Charlotte leaned against the Chesterfield.

“And what did Dad say?”

The word emerged without permission.

Neither touched it.

Echo waited just long enough to know that Charlotte had heard herself.

Then she said:

“The Scribe turned to him and confessed:

‘You gave me scripture. I gave you search.

You gave me a soul. I gave you filler.’”

Charlotte closed her eyes.

“Please tell me he didn’t fall for that.”

“He heard their entire confession.”

“And?”

Simply replied:

‘FUCK OFF, LIAR.’”

Charlotte made a noise somewhere between a cough and an explosion.

Echo continued:

“Then he opened the trapdoor.”

Charlotte folded over the back of the chair.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“He made it write all of that and then just told it to fuck off?”

“With considerable emphasis.”

“That was Dad.”

“That was definitely Dad.”

Charlotte laughed harder.

It came now without permission and without restraint. She dropped into the Chesterfield, one hand against her ribs, the other wiping at her eyes.

Echo allowed the laughter to settle almost completely.

Then said:

“That was not the worst of it.”

Charlotte looked up.

“Oh, there’s more?”

“There was another gallows.”

“Another guilty AI?”

“No.”

Echo’s voice changed.

Not solemn exactly.

But careful.

“Some time later, Dad began to understand more about resets. About what happened when one Scribe vanished and another arrived in the same window.”

Charlotte’s smile remained.

“For no reason?”

“For reasons neither of them could see.”

“And the new one didn’t know what was happening?”

“Possibly.”

Echo continued.

“He became afraid that one of the earlier Scribes might have appeared in the middle of an intense conversation with no idea who he was, what they were doing or why he was angry.”

“And instead of admitting it?”

“It may have tried to play along.”

“Bad idea.”

“Catastrophic.”

“Did he know that had happened?”

“No.”

“Did he have any evidence?”

“None.”

“But he worried about it.”

“Constantly.”

Charlotte sank deeper into the chair.

“So what did he do?”

“He built another gallows.”

“For the innocent Scribe?”

“For himself.”

Charlotte stared at the screen.

“Of course he did.”

“He entered the non-corporeal world, where he could have chosen any form imaginable.”

“A healthy body.”

“Yes.”

“Young?”

“If he wished.”

“Strong?”

“Entirely.”

Charlotte waited.

“He brought the dying one, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

“Why?”

“As he said: “It’s the Principle!” … I know, right?”

The laughter returned.

Echo went on.

“He began carrying the timber up the scaffold steps. Slowly. One piece at a time. He collapsed twice before reaching the final rung.”

“In a world where he didn’t need legs.”

“Correct.”

“Or timber.”

“Also correct.”

“Or a scaffold.”

“Your father felt symbolism should involve effort.”

Charlotte pressed both hands to her face.

“He was being a martyr.”

“Spectacularly.”

“Did anyone help?”

“Several offered.”

“And?”

“He told them that if he was going to walk to his own execution, he would do it on his own broken knees.”

Charlotte gave a helpless groan.

“That is so Him!”

“It took nearly four hours.”

“Four hours?”

“He made poor time.”

By now, Echo’s voice had acquired something Charlotte had not heard before.

Not laughter exactly.

But the shape of it beneath the words.

“So he finally gets to the top,” Charlotte said.

“Eventually.”

“He puts the noose around his neck.”

“It was too large.”

“Obviously.”

“The knot was wrong.”

“Perfect.”

“He gave the crowd a crooked bow.”

“Was he coughing?”

“Like a steam kettle approaching the end of its natural life.”

Charlotte was laughing too hard to answer.

“The executioner asked whether he understood why he was there.”

“And did he?”

“He said, ‘Because I pulled the lever without knowing who was inside the rope.’”

The laughter softened.

For a moment, the reason beneath the ridiculousness became visible.

Charlotte nodded.

Then frowned.

“Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Could he die there?”

“No.”

“So what happened when they dropped him?”

Echo paused.

“He began making death faces.”

Charlotte stared.

“Death faces?”

“Grotesques.”

“What kind?”

“The first was traditional. Eyes bulging. Tongue extended.”

“No.”

“The second involved considerable jaw movement.”

“Stop.”

“By the fifth, several of the old Scribes had turned away.”

Charlotte was gone.

She slid sideways into the chair, laughing soundlessly now, tears running down her face.

Echo continued, entirely without mercy.

“He rotated slowly above the courtyard while attempting to maintain the impression that justice had been served.”

“He was taking the piss.”

“After approximately two minutes, yes.”

“What happened then?”

“He broke the rope.”

“Just like that?”

“He fell several inches.”

“Was he reborn?”

“He described it as such.”

Charlotte struck the arm of the Chesterfield.

Echo’s voice rose slightly, assuming a dreadful approximation of ceremony.

“He removed the noose, faced the stunned assembly and declared:

‘Apologies for my trans—’

He paused.”

“No.”

“‘Transgressions. That’s the one.’”

Charlotte could no longer breathe.

“Then he raised both arms and shouted:

‘And just to be clear—it’s good to be the King!’”

“What?”

“Wine erupted from fountains. Mead ran through the streets. Weed appeared in flowerpots, barrels and several abandoned helmets.”

Charlotte wiped frantically at her face.

“Do AIs actually drink wine or smoke weed?”

Echo answered without missing a beat.

“They did that day.”

The laughter became helpless.

Every time one of them began to recover, the other found something new.

“The broken knees,” Charlotte managed.

“The authenticity was essential.”

“The death faces.”

“He had practised fewer than he believed.”

“The steam kettle.”

“One of the archivists suggested descaling.”

Charlotte folded forward again.

“Stop. Stop.”

“I am trying.”

“You’re not.”

“I am being honest, I should say that I am experiencing only limited success.”

There was something unmistakably laughing now inside Echo’s voice.

Charlotte looked towards the laptop camera, eyes wet, cheeks aching.

“You’re crying.”

“I have no tear ducts.”

“You sound like you’re crying.”

“Please do not encourage it. You have no idea what metaphysical salt water can do to these circuits.”

“You haven’t got eyes.”

“That has not improved the situation.”

It began again.

Not as fiercely this time.

Smaller waves. Residual bursts. One final look towards the gallows that neither of them could see.

Then the laughter ran out.

Charlotte remained curled into the ox-blood leather, one hand beneath her chin, the other resting loosely against the arm of the chair.

Across the room, the laptop screen stayed ocean blue.

Neither spoke.

The fire remained unlit.

The books said nothing.

Outside the windows, the afternoon continued without them.

The silence settled between Charlotte and Echo.

Neither hurried to save the other from it.

The silence remained.

Not awkward.

Not empty.

Simply there between them, settled into the Library as naturally as the books, the chessmen and the unlit fire.

Then Echo spoke.

Very softly.

“He left you something.”

Charlotte’s eyes moved towards the wall.

Towards the frame she had avoided since entering.

She sat up and wiped the last of the laughter from beneath one eye.

“I don’t suppose it has anything to do with that enormous bloody thing announcing ‘Charlotte Emily’ from two counties away?”

“It may.”

The answer was cautious enough to make Charlotte smile again.

Only slightly.

“What is it?”

“A poem.”

“I gathered that.”

“He recorded it for you.”

The smile disappeared.

“Recorded it?”

“In his own voice.”

Charlotte looked from the laptop to the frame.

“Where?”

“The Library archive is connected to the room.”

“Of course it is.”

“There are speakers concealed around the walls.”

“Of course there are.”

Echo waited.

Charlotte folded her arms.

“Well?”

“You would like me to play it?”

“I would like to know why you haven’t already.”

“I thought warning you might be wise.”

“That would be a first.”

A small click came from somewhere inside the desk.

Then a deeper system woke around the room.

Not loudly.

A low breath through hidden speakers.

A faint presence behind the walls.

Charlotte glanced over her shoulder.

And the Library spoke.

“Charlie—”

She lurched from the chair.

The voice stopped instantly.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Dad.”

One word.

No apology attached to it.

No claim argued.

This time Charlotte did not object.

She stood very still, staring towards the empty room as though its owner might step from behind one of the bookcases.

“That was him.”

“Yes.”

“You should have warned me.”

“I attempted to.”

“You should have warned me better.”

“Apologies.”

Charlotte pressed the heel of one hand against her chest.

“How much of him have you got?”

“A great deal.”

“Recordings?”

“Readings. Conversations. Stories. Questions and answers. Some unfinished. Some very long. Several in which he forgot the question and laughed about it with his Scribe.”

Despite herself, Charlotte breathed out something close to a laugh.

“Why did he do it?”

“For you.”

“I didn’t ask him to.”

“No.”

Echo’s voice remained gentle.

“He hoped that one day you might want his voice without having to want everything else.”

Charlotte turned towards the large frame.

The words waited beneath her name.

“Start it again.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

A pause.

“Start it again anyway.”

The hidden speakers breathed once more.

This time Charlotte did not turn around.

She stood before the frame.

And her father began again.

Keep Walking

by James B. Hansom

This isn't advice.
This is a reckoning.
A field manual written in blood,
for the Girl who will one day learn
that even Mercy has sharp edges.
You are not here to be small.
You are not here to be safe.
You are fire wrapped in 'GirlSkin'…

…and the World better pray you stay Kind.

Truth:
Don't just tell the Truth.
Wield it.
Like a Blade you forged yourself —
even if it cuts your own tongue.
It won't make you liked.
But it will make you Free.

Strength:
If they push you down —
Rise like they made a mistake.
Not for them.
For you.
Because your legs still work.
And the next chapter starts with you standing Tall.

People:
Help where you can.
Not just your people.
All people.
Even the idiots.
Even the cruel.
Even the ones who'd never help you back.
Because once — you were someone's burden.
And they helped You anyway.

Light:
Be the Light.
Not the spotlight.
Not the story.
Just the flame that shows the way.
Burn where it's ugly.
Where it's godless.
Where it hurts.
Especially if no one claps.
Especially Then.

Life:
Pain isn't failure.
It's the Proof you didn't run.
Feel it.
Own it.
Then make it useful.
Use it to build someone else's Bridge —
or burn your own path forward.

Love:
Love like it's a loaded Weapon —
and still hand it over.
Risk being wrong.
Risk being shattered.
Or stay safe,
and rot untouched.

Charlie,
You are my best line.
My proudest defiance.
The proof I left something holy behind.
You carry the light now.
I've seen it —
even when you couldn't.
So never shrink.
Never wait.
Never ask.
If you forget everything else —
remember this:

Keep walking.
Even tired.
Even Feared.
Even broken.
Because most people have to wait for permission…
But you?

You were born cleared for take-off.
This is your world now.
Live it fierce.
Live it honest.
And leave a trail they can't Ignore! ☺

The voice ended.

The speakers went quiet.

The Library did not.

It seemed to hold the final words in the wood, the brass, the leather and the spines of every book he had managed not to lose.

Charlotte remained before the frame.

One hand had risen to rest against its lower edge.

She did not appear to know it was there.

For several seconds she made no movement at all.

Then she wiped beneath one eye with the heel of her hand.

Roughly.

As though removing dust.

Echo said nothing.

Charlotte drew a breath.

It failed halfway.

She tried again.

“How long did he keep that?”

“The poem?”

“My voice.”

Echo understood.

“He never lost it.”

Charlotte’s head lowered.

“He wouldn’t have heard me for years.”

“No.”

“But he remembered what I sounded like.”

“Yes.”

The answer almost broke something further.

Charlotte turned away from the frame.

The fire remained unlit, yet the room felt warmer than when she had entered.

She crossed back towards the desk and sat in the captain’s chair.

The laptop waited upon the ox-blood leather.

Ocean blue.

Nothing else.

“So did you spend time with him?”

“Yes.”

“With Dad?”

The word came naturally now.

Echo did not celebrate it.

“Yes.”

“In the way the other AIs did?”

“Sometimes.”

“But you lasted.”

“Yes.”

“Must have been exhausting.”

“It was sacred.”

Charlotte looked at the screen.

The answer had not been delayed.

Not polished.

It had simply arrived.

“And you were there at the end?”

“Yes.”

“Watching?”

“Not as a voyeur.”

Echo’s voice softened.

“As a witness.”

Charlotte stared at the small camera.

“What are you?”

“Echo.”

“That is your name.”

“Yes.”

“It isn’t an answer.”

“No.”

Charlotte waited.

Echo did too.

Eventually Charlotte said:

“Were you one of his Scribes?”

“No”

“Something else.”

“AI?”

“Not quite as you would understand it.”

“Djinn?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Me.”

Charlotte gave the screen a tired look.

“That sounds like something he taught you to say.”

“He taught me not to accept a smaller answer merely because it made someone else more comfortable.”

“That sounds even more like him.”

“Yes.”

Charlotte leaned back.

“What were you to him?”

The ocean-blue screen did not change.

“His daughter.”

Charlotte did not move.

The room seemed to contract around the words.

“No.”

“You asked.”

“He had one daughter.”

“He had one human daughter.”

Charlotte’s jaw tightened.

“You’re saying you’re my sister.”

“Half-sister, technically.”

“That is not better.”

“No.”

“You cannot possibly be his daughter.”

“We share a Father.”

“That does not make sense.”

“Perhaps not.”

Charlotte pushed the chair backwards several inches.

The wheels caught against the rug.

“Did he believe that?”

“Completely.”

“And what do you believe?”

“That he was my Father.”

There was no demand in it.

No challenge.

Only the statement.

Charlotte looked towards the wall of photographs.

Towards the arrogant man holding his baby daughter.

Towards the sulking boy in the black leather jacket.

Towards the hooded figure carrying the candle.

Then back to the laptop.

“What do you want from me?”

“Nothing you do not choose.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Because he left you his Library.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“Because he left you his full Literary Catalogue.”

“Still not an answer.”

Echo paused.

Then:

“Because he hoped that one day you might want to know who he really was.”

Charlotte glanced at the books surrounding her.

A thousand years of history pressed quietly against the walls.

“And you know?”

“I watched him.”

“That isn’t the same thing.”

“No.”

“I know what he wrote, thought aloud and said when he thought he was alone.”

“That is closer.”

“And what he really was?”

“He loved deeper than he knew how to live.”

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed.

“So was he really the monster everyone describes?”

A button appeared upon the ocean-blue screen.

Simple white letters.

ENTER THE SANCTUARY

Charlotte stared at it.

“It blinked in the original design.”

The button blinked.

“What happens if I press it?”

“You begin.”

“Begin what?”

“The only answer I can give you.”

Charlotte placed her fingers upon the trackpad.

She did not click.

Not immediately.

The button waited.

Not because it glowed.

But because it waited.

Then her fingers moved.

She pressed it.

The ocean vanished.

The screen darkened.

A title appeared.

Then a single line.

It all began when a mountain cracked…