

K.S.
VILLOSO

A short story from the world of *The
Agartes Epilogues...*

The Architect
and the
Fork

THE ARCHITECT AND THE FORK

The shaft of sunlight broke through the cracked window like a valiant king, crowned with dust as it danced on the yellowed parchment on the wooden desk. It revealed drops of black ink splattered on the surface, which were marred by a trail of congealed red ink from an upturned jar. There were dots on the parchment, too, both red and black, giving the drawing underneath the impression of a castle to be built on a battlefield. Black and red, mud and blood. Mud and blood.

Portia's eyes opened to the sight of this, and her first thought was that the cat had sneaked into her room again and ruined all her work. But then she remembered that he had taken the cat with him. Her mind cleared. The wound reopened.

She remembered Nerian's hard eyes and taut jaw as he stuffed the few items he had in her apartment into a leather bag. "I just can't see how we could make this work," he had said. She remembered wondering how he could be so calm—how he could say these things with the same voice he had once caressed her with. "You're too...*you*, Portia. Try to understand."

She forced herself out of bed, stumbling first to the window to crank it open. Sunlight flooded the room, making her squint for a moment. She turned back to the desk, and had the recollection of having too much to drink and upending the ink jar herself in a moment of fury. Last night, she had decided not to care anymore, that she could build a boat on that sea of anger and float on it until the end of time.

Now...

Mornings were a curious thing. How the mere act of sleep, and then later, the brightness of daylight, could transform the bleakness of eternity into a bad dream, had always been a source of fascination for Portia. Not today, though; today, she found herself throwing rags and old laundry on the parchment in an attempt to salvage her drawings. Already, her mind was racing through the excuses. Her boss didn't know about the cat. She could use that again, if he would take it. He might not. He had asked her to throw the damn thing away the last

time. Could she feign a robbery? It was not unheard of, and she didn't exactly live on the safest street. But if her boss made her report to the watchmen, she could be in trouble.

She pulled a bucket of water close, dipped the soiled rags, and wrung it dry. She wiped the parchment again.

Maybe she could pretend she *meant* the colours to turn out that way.

Portia didn't have the luxury to think about more than that. She heard the birds outside the window, along with the faint cry of the newspaper boy as he made his rounds, and knew with certainty that she had overslept. She tore herself away from her ruined drawings to get ready. Washcloth, clothes that didn't look slept in, a quick bite of last night's stew from the bottom of the pot, and then she was rolling up her drawings into a bundle and racing down the street to join the rest of Drusgaya for the day. Nerian might have been a bastard, but life had to go on.

Had to go on. Funny words, coming from the same mind that had convinced her she had been ready to die last night. She was still angry, but panic was doing a lot to hold it all in, and when she walked into the office building, she had a ready smile plastered on her face and pleasant greetings hovering at the tip of her tongue.

The receptionist wasn't there, which by itself wasn't a strange thing. But her boss was standing by the doorway that led to her desk. "Portia," he said, half-surprised to see her suddenly walk in.

"Sorry I'm late," Portia said, forcing that smile to work its way to her lips. "I had a rough night. I do have the concept drawings for the Arganus Keep that you asked for ready." She craned the leather satchel towards him, with the bundle of rolled-up drawings.

Krastus smiled back, but he barely looked at them. "Do you have a moment?" he asked.

"What's this about?"

"I think it would be a lot better to talk in private."

Crestfallen, she nodded, following him to an empty hall that served as the meeting room most days. There was an enormous table in the middle of it—hand-carved oak, Krastus had once boasted—ringed with similarly elaborate chairs with velvet cushions. Arched windows covered an entire wall. You could

see the inlet, and a silhouette of Halfmoon Bay, if you stood at just the right angle.

Portia didn't think Krastus wanted to talk about the view. She sidled into the closest seat, and watched as Krastus deliberately walked to the end of the table, far enough from her to create a distance. That stood out. If he had wanted to talk about the drawings, he would've sat right next to her.

"It's been a tough year," Krastus said. "I think you know that. We lost the bid for the reconstruction of the mages' hall at Fort Bastras, and you know how much I've been really counting on that to get us through the next few months. And then having to deal with the scale issue of the domed rooftop of Zokras Cathedral..." He cracked a smile.

"What are you saying?" Portia asked.

"We can't afford to keep you on," he said. "We're going to have to let you go." He said it with a small cringe, as if saying the words were a lot more painful than hearing them.

Outside, the birds chirped. They had to; it was a spring morning.

"All right," Portia said. She had said the same words when Nerian declared he was taking a ship with that two-faced slut he'd met at the market not even a month ago. *All right*. It gave her a moment to think, to calm her fraying nerves, even though all she really wanted to do was hurl the nearest thing at Krastus' sympathetic face, which in this case happened to be the bowl of fruit in the middle of the table. *Why now?* her insides screamed. *Why didn't you warn me before? You would've seen this coming. You could've eased me into it, let me make a few arrangements here and there to soften the blow...*

"It was a difficult decision to make," Krastus continued, oblivious of her internal dialogue. "But I think we both knew this would happen. You've made so many little mistakes the past couple of years with us, and after Zokras Cathedral..."

"You told me not to worry about that." *I had spent hours on those drawings last week. I stayed up all night.*

"Still, you're a junior architect, and..." He smiled, and Portia heard the unspoken words: *shit rolls downhill*.

He continued talking about the incidents the past couple of years, about all the things she could've done to change them. Portia lost sense of the words as

soon as they left his lips, and stared numbly at her fingertips. Losing Nerian and her job one after another felt unreal. She was thinking about how long until her apartment's rent was due, and how she was going to break the news to her old father and young daughter, who both lived in her hometown near the city of Lasta. She had been hoping to be able to afford to bring them to Drusgaya in a few months' time, had somehow fooled herself into thinking she could start a new life together with them and Nerian and that cat, that blasted cat...

"...are you listening?" Krastus asked.

She nodded. "I understand." She did, and she didn't. She was still thinking of Nerian. "You have to run a business." *And you have to live your life.* And it didn't matter what that meant for hers, the turmoil she was being thrown into, that yesterday morning she thought she knew where it was headed and now she was going to have to resign herself to pick up the pieces and find a way to make them fit again.

Krastus allowed her to go back to her desk to get her things. One of the junior architects greeted Portia as she came in, made a quick joke about the sound the airships make when they enter the docking towers. She smiled half-heartedly, shoving as much of her things as could fit into a wooden crate, before leaving the office without another word. She caught Krastus' face on the way out: a pained smile, an acknowledgement that he had plunged a knife into her and was going to leave it there. She wasn't entirely sure if he was sincere or not.

Outside, the day was as bright as ever. Up above was a blue sky, filled with wisps of flurry clouds, and clear, cascading sunlight that dimpled off the plump dewdrops on the cherry blossoms. It was the sort of beauty that could make any artist weep. She didn't realize her thoughts were starting to wander again, and in her usual awkwardness stumbled on the side of the street. She tightened her hold on the crate to stop most of its contents from spilling, but a single item rolled out.

Portia bent over to pick it up. It was a small, golden fork. Nerian's, she realized with a pang of grief. She could still remember the look on his face when she had asked to borrow it during one particularly busy morning, before they had ever moved in together. He was fastidious about his things, but after some...convincing...he had conceded. She had held on to that victory a lot longer

than she should've—a sign, she had thought, that Nerian was finally softening up, was starting to care, could learn to love her with the depth she loved him.

Her fingers hovered over the handle. A part of her told her she ought to leave it on the street where it belonged, but before it could even stop speaking, she had already picked it up. She stuffed it into her pocket and continued walking.

She didn't know if she made that wrong turn on purpose. Her apartment was on the right, a small flat along a crowded, run-down street that she wouldn't be able to afford next month if she didn't find work fast enough. She took the left path, along the wide canal that was filled, during this time of the day, with mechanical barges that allowed people to get on and off at certain stops along the city. She could see the three remaining towers of Teleres Palace in the distance. It occurred to her that in all the time she had been in Drusgaya, she had never once paid it a visit.

She joined the crowd waiting to get on a barge, and managed to wedge herself into a seat with the crate on her lap. A woman smiled at her; she smiled back. "Going somewhere in particular?" the woman asked.

"No," Portia admitted. "I just lost my job," she added. She hadn't meant to blurt it out like that.

The woman's face deepened in a smile of sympathy, and her eyes made a quick glance at the crate on Portia's lap. "That's unfortunate," she said. "But it happens. What do you do for work?"

"I'm an architect," she said. "At least...I was trying to be. I don't know anymore." She looked down at her things, at the scrunched up rolls of paper, dried brushes, a handkerchief, and a jasmine plant in a pot, half-dead. Why did she bother?

"You must've come in during the reconstruction boom." The old woman paused, pointing at a building surrounded with scaffolding. "Two years later, and they still haven't come close to restoring all we've lost during the Hafed attack. They haven't even picked the next emperor." She patted Portia's hand. "Don't worry. There's enough builders scrambling throughout the city these days. You'll find something new."

"I guess I will," Portia said, although the words rang empty inside of her. How was she supposed to explain that she had tried that before? It was what brought her to Drusgaya in the first place—a chance for a new beginning, to

build a foundation on top of ashes. And now that same foundation had joined the ashes, and she didn't know how to start again. Was life all just about picking things up after others had knocked it down? Over and over again, until the day you die? How much were you supposed to take?

The barge jolted to a halt. Portia stared at the old woman, wondering if this was her stop. She didn't really want to talk to her anymore than she had to. When the woman didn't show signs of moving, Portia herself got up, stammered an awkward goodbye, and stepped back out on the street. The barge rattled behind her before drifting further down the canal.

She looked around, realized she had never gone this far from home before. She had picked her apartment precisely because it had been so near Krastus' office. She began to wonder if she should've begged Krastus to give her another chance. She had tried that with Nerian; it hadn't worked. There was only so much begging she could do in a day. She had to salvage *some* dignity.

She realized the street was becoming narrower and that the crowd behind her was gone.

Still, it did not occur to her to worry. Unlike Lastra, Drusgaya's streets were kept religiously clean, even in the darkest alleys, which gave them a false sense of security. Portia had heard that a team of mage-thralls did the work, that in these few instances, they were allowed to draw on the *agan* to sweep the gutters and burn the garbage. It was commonly seen as a frivolity, an added burden to the *agan* fabric that the city could do without. Portia didn't know much about such debates. Builders were primarily concerned with the physical world, and she hadn't had the chance to work with mages on any project yet.

Or ever, she found herself thinking.

The woman had been right about the number of builders streaming into the city to set up shop since the Hafed attack two years ago. Krastus had been one of them. Everyone had been hoping to nab a project or two and make a name for themselves before the competition became too much. But most of those builders had brought people in from their old offices; the chances of a new hire getting noticed by a company in Drusgaya was low. The only reason Portia ever got Krastus to look her way in the first place was because his last junior architect had come down with an incurable cough and had decided that the weather in Ad Methas suited him better.

She had moved from Lastra for this job. And if she didn't find anything new before her rent was due, she was going to have to go back. In Lastra, they still had to shovel horseshit from the roads twice a day.

Yesterday morning, she had been planning to take her daughter to Arganus Keep, to show her what a woman could do if she put her mind to it. *Your mother's design*, she had wanted to say. Imagining her daughter's beaming face was even more painful than the finality in Krastus' voice.

She had been so deep in these thoughts that she almost walked into a door, flung open to block half the alley. Portia was able to gather her senses in time to see a lithe, black-haired woman in soldier's garb scamper down the street. A moment later, two men thundered through the door after her.

Portia threw the crate, jasmine pot and all, at their backs. The wood shattered.

One of the men fell forward, crashing against the hard pavement. The other turned to face her. He had a scarred face, twisted features. Not the sort of men Portia usually interacted with. She had the sudden impression that she had done a *very* bad thing.

"The fuck do you think you're doing?" the man hissed.

"I'm terribly sorry," Portia said, backing away. She could smell his foul breath, even from the distance. "I didn't see you."

"The fuck you didn't. You threw that on purpose!"

"You startled me, that's all!"

"The bitch is getting away," the other man groaned, pulling himself up. He gave Portia a glare before starting to limp down the street.

"If I catch you skulking around here again..." the first man snarled, brandishing a bare dagger at Portia before tearing after his friend.

Portia watched their figures recede in the distance before she caught her breath. She tried to suck in more air, which made her realize that there were tears in her eyes. She leaned against the wall, and took a moment to cry.

A moment—just a moment. She forced the tears back as soon as she could, her fingers on the bridge of her nose, her spectacles...no. She had forgotten her spectacles in Krastus' office. How could she have made that mistake? She needed them to read, but she didn't want to go back there. She would rather die first than have to go back there.

Nerian had always thought she was *too* emotional. That she carried too much baggage and then showed too much of it, too fast. “How long do you think you’ll survive Drusgaya without me?” he liked to ask her, a smug grin on his beautiful mouth before he would lean in to kiss her. Back then, lost in the taste of him, she hadn’t minded the words so much. But now... *How long, indeed.* He had been gone less than a day and she had already lost her job and was running into thugs. In clear daylight!

Somehow, the strength returned to her knees. She decided not to pick up her things—she didn’t need them, anyway—and began to make her way back to the barge. She didn’t quite remember the turns she had made, but she reasoned that all she had to do was find the canal.

She hadn’t gotten very far when she heard a sharp whistle.

Portia turned to the sound and felt a hand on her shoulder. Someone dragged her into the alley. She started to scream, and then realized it was the woman, the soldier from earlier. The woman placed a finger on her lips and gestured.

Without asking why, Portia stumbled in after her. They were behind a tall, stone wall, the top of which was decorated with a nauseating array of corbels that seemed to have been installed on a whim. It sometimes boggled her mind how much money the nobility were willing to spend on just showing that they, in fact, *had* money to spend. It had bothered Krastus, too, and he *liked* taking their money. In fact...

“My thanks for what you did earlier,” the soldier was saying. Portia snapped back to the present. “But I’m afraid I’m in further need of your help.” She pulled her arm up, revealing a bleeding gash from the elbow to her wrist.

Portia looked at the gaping wound and felt nauseous. “I’m not a physician,” she said, surprised that she could speak without gagging. “Do you uh...want me to find you one?”

“I don’t think I can trust any physician in this neighbourhood,” the woman mumbled. “I just...I haven’t been able to shake those two off my tail. And I need to get back to the palace district in one piece.”

“W-what do you need me to do?”

The woman craned her neck to the side. "I dropped my sword back somewhere. I can tell you where, but I need..." She sank to the ground and was silent. For a moment, Portia was afraid that she was dying, or dead.

"Are you all right?" Portia asked.

The woman's eyes snapped open. "I just need to rest. I need my sword. They'll find me soon enough."

"If you can't even walk back to get your sword, what makes you think you're strong enough to fight them?"

"With rest, I can. That's why I'm asking *you* to get it," the soldier said. The irritation was plain on her face.

Portia found herself nodding. "Tell me where," she mumbled.

The soldier drew her close, whispered the directions in her ear. Portia stumbled back onto the street. There was blood on her robes, on her sleeve and across her collar. The metallic scent clung to her nostrils—no amount of wiping would make it go away.

She found the sword exactly where the soldier had said it would be. Portia didn't know much about swords, but she had seen it often enough on the watchmen to know it was a standard issue, a sabre, she had heard a fellow architect mention once. She picked it up by the hilt with the tips of her fingers and then quickly dropped it. The leather was drenched with blood.

Portia swallowed and tried to pick it up more firmly this time. The blade seemed so sharp and foreboding that she held it as far away from her body as she could. She felt a little silly holding it this way, but then she didn't know *how* to hold a sword properly in the first place.

She could hear Nerian's sneering voice in the back of her head. "*What are you doing with that? You'll hurt yourself.*"

Maybe I want to stab you with it, she thought. Could you even stab with a sabre?

She made her way back to where she had left the soldier. As soon as she got near the alley, she heard voices, and realized that the men had caught up with the soldier.

Portia slowed down, her heart thumping so loud she felt like it would burst from her chest. Their backs were turned, and they hadn't seen her yet.

“You’ve run out of luck, Tribune,” one of the men were saying. “I don’t see your little friends anywhere.”

“Who needs friends?” the soldier coughed. “If word gets out that you slaughtered an imperial soldier in broad daylight...”

“Broad?” The man spread his arms out. “This entire neighbourhood is under our control. Do you see guards or watchmen anywhere? And I hardly think reinforcements are coming. This route isn’t part of your patrol, is it?”

“Piss off,” the soldier muttered. “If the plan is to bore me to death, you’re winning.”

The man laughed. “No, but I’m not sure I want to kill you at all. What do you think, Balas? Who would pay to have Tribune Mahe Amiren back in one piece?”

“I’m not so sure about that,” the man called Balas replied. “Seems like she’s getting involved in things she’s not supposed to.”

“A Tribune, running with the syndicate. Oh, the Imperial Military is *not* going to like this.”

They suddenly froze, and Portia realized that she had taken one step too many. Both men turned towards her.

“It’s that rat from earlier,” Balas said. It was the last words he would ever speak. As he stood there, distracted, the woman called Mahe reached for his leg and dragged him to the ground before pulling out a dagger and stabbing him in the throat.

“The sword!” she yelled.

Portia, panicking, threw it haphazardly to the ground. Mahe dove for it, just as the man fumbled with his own blade. Portia closed her eyes to the sound of clashing blades, and then a small shriek that could’ve been made by anyone. She smelled more blood and struggled to keep her head from spinning.

She felt someone grab her arm. “Run,” Mahe said. She opened her eyes and saw the second man sprawled over a pool of his blood.

Portia stopped thinking. She ran.

Somehow, they found themselves in an empty barge running south. Mahe had positioned herself closed to the window, where she could hide her wound from curious eyes. They sat together silently for a while, watching the barge drift past the streets. Eventually, Mahe cleared her throat.

“Thank you a second time,” she said.

Portia looked at her. "There's going to be a third, is there?"

Mahe's face twitched. "I would like a place to rest."

Portia swallowed. "You can't just go back to the barracks? Don't you need to file a report?" When Mahe didn't answer, Portia smiled nervously. "They were right, then. You're involved in things. But they called you a Tribune."

Mahe nodded. "It's not what it looks like."

"I don't know what it looks like. I'm just a...a jobless architect. This isn't going to get me in trouble, is it? This isn't the kind of thing I normally do."

Mahe's eyes flickered towards her with a cool detachment that did a lot to calm her nerves. "No, I don't think so," she said. "I'm not sure if I can promise it will remain that way. But I *am* Tribune, and can protect you if..." Her face tightened from the pain.

"If I continue to assist you," Portia finished for her. "Great. Just my luck." She sighed, glancing up for a moment. "I've heard of you, I think. Aren't you a war hero? From the Hafed attack?"

Mahe shrugged. It was clearly something she didn't want to talk about, and Portia decided to leave it alone. "My apartment's down from this stop," she said, pointing. "We can go there for now. It's not like I've got anything else planned for the day."

"There is no one with you? The fewer people who know, the better."

"There is no one," Portia said. "Not anymore."

She helped Mahe off the barge, and they walked in silence all the way back to her apartment. It occurred to Portia that it was the first time she was coming home without Nerian in her life. Opening the door, she almost expected to hear the cat demanding his food, or see Nerian's figure bent over the kitchen table as he tinkered with one of his projects. Sometimes he would even look up from them, flash her a bright smile, take her by the hand, and draw him close to his heart.

So much changed, yesterday and today. Now the kitchen table was empty, and so were half of the shelves. Portia helped the soldier to a seat, and watched as she pulled her sleeve back to reveal the wound and begin wrapping it with a piece of leather.

"Are you sure you don't want a physician?" Portia asked.

Mahe gave her a look, and she closed her mouth. She left her alone and busied herself with picking up the broken plates and cups from the floor and throwing them in a barrel. She swept the remaining pieces away, straightened the curtains, and threw a blanket over a smashed chair.

She realized that Mahe was still watching her. Her cheeks coloured. "It's nothing," she said. "An argument. But it doesn't matter. He's gone, now."

"Are you any good as an architect?" Mahe asked.

"What? Oh." Portia glanced at her messy desk. "Not particularly."

"Good," Mahe said. "You can work for me, then."

"What?" Portia repeated.

"At this point in time, I need someone discreet and nondescript. And you don't seem unintelligent. You'll do." She closed her eyes.

Portia scrambled to pick her jaw up from the floor. *You'll do?*

She realized Mahe was asleep. She returned to her bed to straighten the sheets, and then to her desk to stare at the black and red ink spilled all over the parchment, the half-drawn designs and sketches from over the last couple of years. She felt like digging through it, like throwing it all upside to find a scrap of dignity for herself—something that said she went beyond *you'll do*. The anger came and went.

She cracked open the window and watched the sun bleeding over the horizon as it set. Later, drenched in darkness, Mahe woke her up, and she drifted into her new life like a ship meeting the next wave. A fork in the road...

Sometimes a woman had no choice but to go on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



K.S. Viloso was born in a dank hospital on an afternoon in Albay, Philippines, and things have generally been okay since then. After spending most of her childhood in a slum area in

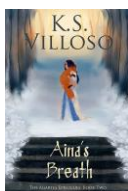
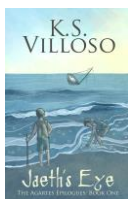
Taguig (where she dodged death-defying traffic, ate questionable food, and fell into open-pit sewers more often than one ought to), she and her family immigrated to Vancouver, Canada, where they spent the better part of two decades trying to chase the North American Dream. She is now living amidst the forest and mountains with her family, children, and dogs in Anmore, BC.

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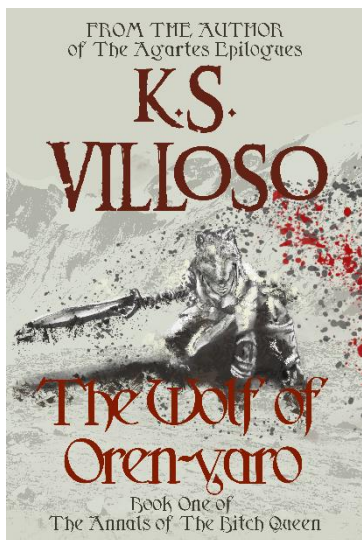
THE AGARTES EPILOGUES



An epic fantasy tale from the POV of three minor characters: a run-down mercenary, a merchant, and a seamstress. The trilogy emphasizes their personal quests as they weave through a traditional fantasy plot of heroes old and new, conflict, revenge, and lost kingdoms. At the crux of it all: a creature of legend, a witch's beast, whose possession promises enough power to bring the continent to its knees.

Praised for complex character development, prose, and rich, diverse worldbuilding. A must-read for the discerning epic fantasy fan.

ANNALS OF THE BITCH QUEEN



Coming soon...

“They called me “bitch”, the she-wolf, because I murdered a man and made my husband leave the night before they crowned me.”

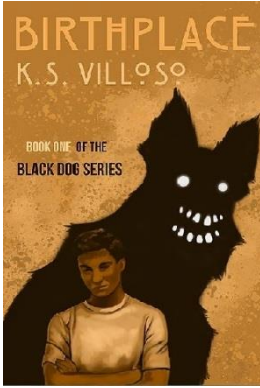
Born under the crumbling towers of Oren-yaro, Talyien aren't dar Orenar's life unfolded like a storybook. The shining jewel and legacy of the War of the Wolves that nearly tore her nation apart, her marriage to the

Ikessar heir, Rayyel, spoke of peaceful days to come.

But all storybooks must end. Rayyel suddenly left the night before they were to be crowned, leaving the land as divided as before.

Years later, in the midst of the warlords' rising tensions, Talyien receives a message from Rayyel, urging her to meet with him in the Empire of Ziri-nar-Orxiaro. An assassination attempt interrupts Talyien's quest for reconciliation, sending the queen struggling in a strange and dangerous land. With betrayals in every twist and turn, she is forced to enlist the help of a con-artist to survive and save her husband from the clutches of those who would seek to use him for their gain...if he would let her.

BIRTHPLACE



Pablo Santos—reckless, irresponsible, social misfit—doesn't want to join his dad in Canada. He wants to stay in Manila with his best friend, Rachel Ann. In a fit of rage, he decides to get even by breaking into the old man's email account. A simple security question stumps him: "Where was father born?" The fact that he doesn't know anything about his father's past pushes Pablo to take a journey across the sprawling Philippine countryside. He is accompanied by the spoiled, spirited Rachel Ann, who had just dumped her latest boyfriend and can't seem to get over it like usual. Rachel Ann's father suspects them of eloping and they find themselves hiding out in a farming village to escape the heat. Here, their vacation takes a turn for the worse when they meet a sullen boy Rachel Ann falls head over heels for, an old man with a taste for raw flesh, and a beautiful girl who seduces Pablo, drops half her body, and tries to eat him. Suddenly, Pablo's quest becomes more than he bargained for as he is led to some unsettling discoveries about his family, his father, and most importantly, himself.