

In a 20XX interview with 106.6 The Surge, the singer YNA set the stage for her own eventual liberation with a seemingly unimportant phrase: she named the men who gave her her start in the business. No one else in the room that morning felt the shift in pressure – not the host Mike Malern nor his co-host Jody Lee, not the young producer at the sound board or the intern bringing coffee – nobody. “Back before I was me,” she began, and like a gas her former self began to leak out of the trap of YNA: multi-platinum chart giantess of *You Never Ask, Yes/No/Also*, and *Young, Naked, Angry* fame, diva and deva atop the slow-rotting corpse of pop. “Before YNA was YNA, yknow, I had help, I needed help from some people who became very special guys to me. Really helped me find myself, you could say.” She felt the words twisting even before they left her mouth, inverting. “It feels crazy to even think about, but back then I was just...” And without meaning to, she spoke her old name, her *own* name, and thus set in motion the ruin of the men who had yoked her pitilessly to the great beast Fame and grown rich and powerful off her back. “Yeah, back when I was just Jennifer, I thought nobody was interested, and nobody really was, I guess. But they found me and that's when I became YNA.” The stillness that filled the studio made it briefly a church for her, a sacred space, and she could see that no one else felt it, she smiled. “So this is really all about them, you could say.”

They called themselves the Schwartz brothers, and no one ever bothered to investigate the fact that they bore each other no resemblance. Nor did anybody consider that Schwartz might be a veiled *svart*, meaning “dark,” without which they could hardly have guessed that this referred to a passage from a certain Kabbalistic text cautioning the reader about “the Black Brothers who dwell in Daath,” where “Daath” meant knowledge without wisdom, untempered by pity, mercy, or charity. And so no one thought to protect themselves when the Schwartz brothers came to pitch meetings, launch parties, studio sessions, et cetera, for what they appeared to be was so much easier to understand than what they were: ruthless black magicians, to whom the power to manipulate others was the finest thing in life.

The one who called himself Ungve seemed as a man in his mid fifties, hair graying but still essentially black, with a carefully thinned mustache, around which his pleasant though ultimately unhandsome face creased perpetually into a damp approximation of a grin. He dressed either in black turtlenecks and jeans or, in warmer climes, outrageous Hawaiian shirts and golf shorts. Ungve was a black joke, a seemingly lecherous figure who was disinterested in sex, enjoying only heated contract negotiations on behalf of his clients. First and foremost among these were his brothers, who sometimes appeared on albums as studio musicians or joined backing bands for big acts. But they also included “rising talent” the brothers collectively chose to “back,” which is precisely what happened to young Jennifer before she became YNA.

The youngest brother, Don, seemed only a few years younger than Ungve: a very trim fifty, clean-shaven and muscular, with a face all cruelly symmetrical lines. He spoke with a bland newscaster's voice, any regional idiosyncrasies buffed off into the amber waves of the mid-American dialect of television and national radio. He played the drums, drank and whored, and occasionally did violence to those who opposed him or his brothers, though he took no particular pleasure in it. Part of his narrative was an abandoned family – a wife and two children – in Minneapolis; this played on the sympathies of men whose real age hovered around his apparent one and who longed to be released from all the oaths and conventions that bound them, who wanted the thrill of risk but were unprepared for its dangers. Don pushed them, showing them a middle-aged man could still *rock*, yknow, just kick ass, party all night and shrug it off the next day with the right pills and a jug of water. He proved to ailing executives it was okay to gamble with other people's lives in the name of eternal youth.

Jean, the middle brother by age but lowest in their unspoken hierarchy, appeared the youngest, though it was a haggard, dissolute youth. Long, thinning blonde hair, erratic eyes, beard dense and wild one day, gone the next, he put out the image of a cult leader or catamite who'd survived beyond the expiration date of his type and was now adrift in a world that owed him no favors. He was pitiful until

he picked up a guitar, which he could play with neither flaw nor rest for hours at a stretch, his sagging mouth drawn up into a blissful smile. Of course if a string broke, or anyone interrupted one of his “breakthroughs,” or if the supply of increasingly exotic drugs ran out, he would go wild, screaming, running away, hiding, breaking expensive things, and so on: the full catalog of *enfant terrible* tropes. He was there mostly to show the talent they “recruited” that the mad genius myth was viable, and thus convince them to destroy themselves.

They found Jennifer in Nashville, or rather a town on its outskirts, playing an mic in a place called the Turtle. She had waitressed there until two months before, when a friend found her a job somewhere more upscale, but was back now for their “local showcase,” and Jean Schwartz was exactly the sort of person she'd dreaded would be there: a former customer with an attention span. He waved at her before she could look away, and immediately all the expectation she'd built up around the night's performance soured. She was just a waitress – there sat the proof. *Fuck it*, she thought, and the tone of her twenty-minute set took a turn that would prove fateful. Jean heard the rage boiling beneath the playful, optimistic lyrics and bubbly major chords, the despair – but most importantly a strand of self-negation, buried but audible to his trained ear, that suggested something he had been thinking about for a long time: the possibility of a level of power over someone that would be unprecedented, something at once deeply pure and utterly perverse.

He rose from his table as she left the stage and walked into the men's room. He stood in front of the sink, looking into the mirror as he turned the water on, and whispered things to his reflection, words that weren't really words so much as commands released in the form of sound (Ungve called this “New Enochian,” imitating John Dee), things like, “Become extremely persuasive” and “Believe your false identity” As he did so, he thrust his hands into the drain until the cold water had no escape and began to fill up the stained white porcelain. Between commands, he hummed; the water rippled in response,

shifted, changed. He splashed it on his face and let it drip off, the drops disappearing as the sink drained and the flow of water shuddered to a stop. He was someone else now: a balding, sanguine fellow in a new suit, a merrily brainless corporate type, an Industry Man. He left the room and found her by the bar, haggling with the owner.

Jennifer was wracked with unfamiliar feelings, even as she insisted that Nikki give her a bigger cut of the door. First among them was terror. She'd decided at the beginning of her set that it didn't matter, that she'd make a little money and less of an impression on the crowd of patronizing bourgeoisie, there on a Thursday to prove to each other that they cared about culture – but not enough to pay weekend prices, no sir. And she'd go back tomorrow to the restaurant where she served their superiors, the “French style, Southern charm” bistro on the edge of Germantown, where the money she made was in direct proportion to the frequency and severity of the condescension and harassment she'd put up with, the pats and leers and cold stares. And everything she'd done to get here, to have a chance at actually playing her songs for a living – the brief careers as stripper, egg donor, and telemarketer, every dime she'd saved til she could move to Music City, the fabled center of her dream-life – would be just a bunch of shit, just nothing. That emptiness had welled up, oozed out her fingers onto the strings of her battered Gibson acoustic, dripped out her mouth, and the bright, anthemic songs she'd written during the high points of her life to date became parodies of themselves, sardonic comments on people who actually believed such crap. The crowd of frustrated bureaucrats, social climbers, and failed artists lapped it up. They gave her a standing ovation – the first of her life. The exultation of that mingled with the guilt of betraying her own happy childish dreams, and with greed.

The Industry Man asked Jennifer if she'd ever heard of the Schwartz brothers while she was still arguing with the club owner about the evening's take, so she turned for a moment, favored him with a sour smile, and said, “Sure. I know all about them.” The stranger was oddly compelling; in the years to

come she'd understand why and how, but at this moment she just knew she couldn't ignore him. She turned back to Nikki, who'd been kind to her in the past, when she'd thought Jen was weak, and said again, “C'mon, Nik. You saw that crowd. I'm makin' you money. Come off a little bit of it.”

“Now Jen. A deal is a damn deal, ain't it? Anyway, this kinda buzz, that's worth more than a few bucks. Y'oughta be happy for yourself, girl.” Jennifer snarled a little at this, unconscious of the look on her face, and Jean Schwartz was so amused by her intransigence that he laughed.

Jennifer looked back at him abruptly. “What?”

“Do you, now?” Jean asked as the Industry Man. “Cause I thought maybe I'd innerduce you to em, but if you know em so well then I guess you *want* to be here on a Thursday night, fightin over a lousy fifty bucks.” He laid what appeared to be a hundred-dollar bill on the bar (it was truly not even a piece of paper – consisting mostly of dust and crystallized avarice – but the brothers had discovered that people wanted so badly to look at money, just to *see* it, that it was easy to convince them they had done so) and asked the owner to settle his tab. “You just remember that the next time you wanna quit doin... *this here*... and cain't.” He stood. Nikki came back wearing a look of puzzlement and said they had no idea which tab was his, what was his name again? Jean Schwartz as the Industry Man smirked and produced a business card, which he handed to Jennifer. “She can tell ya. She's my manager in this here business.”

The brothers discussed that very night what they could do with her – they were eager for a new ploy. They shared a two-bedroom apartment; Don slept in the bathtub. “I tire of using my precious energies to deceive these oafish people,” Ungve was shouting when Jean returned. “But we have nothing to show for our time here – nothing!” Don shrugged, and Ungve whirled on Jean in his fury. “And what have *you* been doing, in that odious guise? Selling used cars?”

Jean smiled. “No. My brothers, I have found it – the seed of our Great Work. I have found her.”

“The Malleablissimus.” Even Don's questions came out with the flat inflection of statements; it

was left to his eyebrows to show his skepticism. “We've looked everywhere. How can you be sure.”

“Her songs!” Transported for a moment, Jean jumped to his feet, shouting. “Her wonderful, terrible little musics! She will make herself a void for us, I can feel it. And we can build within the shell of her what we like.”

It wasn't quite so simple, but it was close: they dressed up the corpse of a failed record label as if it hadn't, peopled it with a few deluded wannabes of their acquaintance, and brought Jennifer there to sign a contract she hadn't read. They used disguises first, Jean continuing to play the Industry Man while Ungve made himself the fake label's president and Don made himself the head of HR. Once past the procedural hurdles, they arranged to be introduced to her as themselves: the Schwartz brothers, a secret, legendary production team that had made and broken more careers than anyone could count. Don and Jean would form the core of her studio band, with Ungve as their sound engineer. With every meeting, every rehearsal, they sent waves of compulsion washing over her, disguising their commands as music: backing-vocal parts, electronic effects layered under her guitar melodies, and squawks of feedback. Each carried the poison messages: *Forget yourself. Let go of your name. Submit.*

Their scheme was cunning, in its predatory way: they would hollow out Jennifer, strip her of her ego, and build in its place a patchwork person, a woman made up of fragments of other women. Some of these other women were real, including the once-acclaimed adult film actress who used the stage name Mara Liaison and a failed pop-punk artist who had made one album under the name Kat Wild. Another they invented, using doctored photographs and forged portraits to create an Eastern European princess in exile who was unable to halt the march of history but could still stop men in their tracks. They set up a Manhattan apartment as the place where she'd lived out her last days, adorning it with fake memorabilia and installing Jennifer there to hasten her transformation. Kat they brought round to the studio during recording sessions; Mara, to the set of the first YNA music video; and others, over the

course of her three-year career, to wherever she might be – tour buses, hotel rooms, cavernous basements beneath the opulent houses of the wealthy and decadent. The other women eventually disappeared: Mara to suicide, Kat under unknown circumstances, all images of the Princess to the bottom of a dumpster. YNA remained, a hive of lost souls in a stolen body, and slowly she filled with power as thousands, millions, listened to her songs of self-negation and screamed back *Yes, yes, me too; you are me and we are nothing*. In this blind devotion, they lost themselves, just as their idol, too, was lost, held in thrall by the black brothers who knew much of the secret world but nothing of compassion.

For three years, they forbade anyone to call her Jennifer, cut off all her contact with her family, her old friends and co-workers and rivals. They were on hand, in one guise or another, when she gave interviews, managing her every response. They controlled her money and what she ate and whose company she kept, and grew rich, though the wealth was always something they treated with disdain. Their real treasure was *control*.

And yet the brothers were not prepared for the news of YNA's betrayal; success had made them indolent, each succumbing to his respective vice. Ungve was in the basement of an antiquarian bookshop in Chicago during the fateful interview, indulging in a little brandy as he perused the owner's personal collection, having recently purchased the entire shop. The eldest Schwartz grunted with obscene enjoyment over the feel of the leather spines beneath his fingers, leered at the imprints of long-gone publishing houses in faraway places, and read aloud the accumulated marginalia of centuries, cackling at jokes in dead languages.

Don and Jean happened to be together at a party, and while Jean tried out a number of chemicals stolen from a CalTech medical lab – all untested, all unsafe – Don was in the bedroom, in the midst of some meaningless sexual indiscretion. He was the first to get wind of it; he glanced over at the screen

of his smartphone and immediately dropped the poor woman onto the bed and walked out into what was left of the party in dishabille, barking “Jean! She's loose!” It was somewhere north of 4am in Pasadena; one of Don's loyalists in Nashville had tuned in to the interview and texted simply, “shes talkin bout yall on the radio,” unknowing of the gravity of his message. Don buttoned his pants, snatched Jean up off the floor, and spat a word of power that sobered his brother instantly. “It's happening,” he said, with apparent dispassion. “She knows.”

They got to LAX and boarded a plane to Chicago with what most people would consider an obscene lack of hassle. While Don summoned their staff with a real, normal smartphone, Jean produced a piece of gray stone carved to resemble one, bit his thumb, and smeared blood on it to contact Ungve. In the basement of the bookshop, the eldest Schwartz brother felt the matching stone in his pocket go suddenly cold, and held it to his throat. “Speak,” he sang-spoke in their New Enochian tongue. To the harried airline staff nearby, stressed to their limits by both obeying Don's unreasonable commands and trying to figure out why on Earth they were doing so, Jean's reply sounded like a typewriter on auto-tune; what Ungve heard was, “She has loosed her bonds.”

Their error was the classic black magician's blunder: hubris. In creating YNA, that error was compounded; they thought that Jennifer's identity would be permanently destroyed, subsumed by the construct of interwoven personas they had layered over her original ego, and that the construct itself was too fragmentary to act independently. Instead, Jennifer was able to hide amid the conflicted mass that was YNA, escaping the brothers' notice, and eventually to give the fragmentary identities of the other women, real and fictional, a dense core. Once drawn into her orbit, they each fed her power, and thus created one woman with the strength of many.

In trying to reassert control, the Schwartzes blundered again by rushing into a direct confrontation with her, painfully unaware of who they now were dealing with. Don did not listen to the interview in question – he didn't even tell Jean it existed. Jean, to his discredit, didn't ask; he had



wondered when this day would come, and the bleak excitement of crisis was upon him. He went along with Don's rudimentary plan – get Ungve, then go get her – in a haze, blinded by fantasies of his own doom. He drank heavily on the flight to Chicago, whetting his appetite for self-destruction. Ungve, meantime, dove into the pages of a notebook he had labeled “Malleablissimus,” poring over every step of the arcane process by which they had made Jen into YNA – so engrossed in it that he didn't notice when the taxi driver took the long way to O'Hare – for clues as to what had gone wrong. He assumed that one of his brothers had done something wrong at the outset, left some fatal flaw in the workings, and cursed them as “intemperate whelps” and “callow dabblers.” By the time the three met up, he had spent more time practicing these insults than the incantations he meant to use to bring YNA to heel.

But by the time they reached Nashville, it was too late; she had gathered all the emblems of her own power to her, and was brimming over with it. Her sold-out show was at a massive arena; they were only able to push through the mob of screaming devotees outside, desperate for tickets, behind a flying wedge of bulky private security guards. On their way down the hall to her dressing room, they found the latest of her several celebrity lovers, this one an actress some years her senior, who menaced them with a handful of expensive fingernails on her way out: “I know what you are,” she hissed, “and she's not going to put up with it anymore.” Ungve's mouth moved, forming the New Enochian command for silence, and the two-time Emmy nominee slapped him across the face. “How *dare* you!” she shouted, continuing past them to melt into the crowd of staff and hangers-on behind the stage. Ungve stood rooted in the hallway, mortified beyond motion (he had allowed an uninitiated woman to *strike* him!), until Don grabbed his shoulder roughly and hauled him the rest of the way to YNA's chamber.

She was studying her reflection in a floor-length mirror when they shoved past her assistant and entered the room. Jean, trembling with liquor and jet lag and several pills he could no longer identify, lost his feet. He could hear the sheer accumulation of energy around her, the love and longing of over fifteen thousand people – they all could, had been listening to her power grow and change for years. It

had never sounded like this: a single *basso profundo* note so low they felt more so than heard it, gravid and final as a stone. Again, Ungve went to speak; Don, ever the pragmatist, lunged forward to hit her. Both fell slowly to the ground as she sang the note they were hearing, holding it easily without a pause for breath until the Schwartz brothers lay flattened before her. Jean managed to gasp, “But your range..! You can't...”

It was Jennifer who smiled at them then, not YNA, and they saw now that she intended to take the stage as such. Rather than her intended costume for the night (a rather unsubtle rigging of golden faux-leather straps and thin chains), she was in a pair of cheap jeans and a Music City t-shirt, her hair loose, the usual panoply of shiny baubles that clacked against each other with her every gesture gone. “Well, I guess I been practicin', Jean, while y'all been gone.” She smiled and picked up a battered acoustic guitar from a chair nearby, and as Don pushed himself to his feet she turned and strummed it at him, striking a chord at once so beautiful and so discordant that he forgot what he was doing and fell again. “Made some changes to the show tonight, since we're back in Nashville. Been thinkin a lot about how this all got started, where I might be now if I'd never met y'all, and even though you might think I owe you somethin, for gettin me where I am today, I figure I paid that debt a long time ago.” The nails on the fingers that plucked the old guitar were much bitten, flecks of old paint lingering around the cuticles, but they were swift and sure on the strings, calling out the high major chords of a country anthem, something vaguely familiar to Jean as he shivered, prostrate. She went to the door, leaned out to call down the hallway, “Hey John!” and continued to play as the Schwartz brothers rose gingerly. The head of her private security detail entered and took in the scene with a cool glance.

“Ma'am?”

“These boys are not feelin well, John, and they don't work for me anymore, so if you'd be so kind, get em to a hospital or a clinic or maybe just a sofa somewhere, alright?” Jennifer smiled at them, and for a moment was YNA again; in that look they saw the practiced lasciviousness of Mara Liaison,

the dignified authority of the Princess, Kat Wild's abandon and desperate rage. Jean burst into tears – the thought of the years of decline that were to come made him so perversely happy he couldn't contain himself – as Ungve cleared his throat and Don squared off with the security man. Jennifer turned to the eldest of the Schwartz brothers: “Not one more word, now. We'll call it 'creative differences,' give you boys a chance to get back on your feet. But I figure when folks find out how you operate, you're done in the music business.”

Don looked her head of security in the eye and tried to sing-say “Be afraid of me” in New Enochian, but the younger man just blinked, frowned, and replied, “Was that a threat, sir?” And at last it was clear: it was all over. Don pushed Jean out the door and shuffled after him, refusing to meet John's gaze. At the threshold, Ungve lingered for a moment.

“You ungrateful bitch,” he whined, “I made you a goddess!” But Jennifer just laughed, and watched him leave her life forever.

Perhaps you already know about that show: the scandal, the rocky start to her career as a solo artist. You may even be aware of the subsequent attempts on her life by mentally unstable admirers, the yellow journals responsible for the label “Fan-atic Killers” when their attempts to violently express their displeasure at her career change took innocent lives. But it is more important to know what became of the Schwartz brothers; they are emblematic of those who use the Art to take power *over* others, rather than building it *with* them. I will tell you only in brief, because to wallow in the sordid details would make us little better than they are.

First they tried again: to be producers, to manipulate young, talented musicians, this time in LA. They changed names and faces, of course; even if YNA hadn't revealed certain damning details of how the Schwartz brothers treated her and other figures in the music industry, those identities had calcified. They liquidated the properties they'd acquired and set up shop in California, burning through their capital to set up a small but functional recording studio just minutes from the beach, hoping the lull of

the tide would bedazzle their next crop of suckers. They even destroyed all their talismanic objects, using the stored-up energies thus released to form new selves: all blonde, tanned, and terribly earnest. Ungve tried to become Malcolm, a expatriate British financier, but he was too young, too desperately handsome, and the battered old wizard couldn't sustain him very long. Don wrapped himself in the armor of fashion, a Millennial called Tanner perpetually clad in suits from the “hottest” designers, but he moved too slowly to keep pace with the trends and soon found himself locked into the role of the has-been without ever having actually done anything. Jean tried to seem as a woman, a pretty young thing meant to lure in male talent, but his cloying version of femininity convinced no one, and none of the names he tried out worked. He went from Jessica to Julia to Janice in as many months, until “Malcolm” finally stung him with the worst possible rebuke: “All begin with 'J,' you fool! All remind us of *her!* You are *smitten* with that treacherous slattern, who sent us here into ignominious exile!” Jean, who had no armor against this barb, looked around the sterile, unfurnished apartment above their failing studio, the wreckage of their power, and wept.

The money ran out first, and for a time they sustained themselves on ever-smaller acts of graft: bid-rigging schemes on behalf of land developers, then election meddling, down to insurance fraud and eventually to petty larceny. By that time, they'd reached the inescapable conclusion that whatever power their study of the Art had given them was waning, and had been in decline since a certain incident at a Nashville arena that was no longer discussed. Fewer and fewer people were susceptible to their invented command-language; more and more saw them as they were, not as they tried to appear. The process took nine years – three for every one they had spent replacing Jennifer with YNA and leeching off her strength – by the end of which they were unable to perform the slightest feat of magic. They traced the old sigils, spoke the ancient words, and nothing happened. They were mundane again, terrestrial, and aged in the extreme.

The years caught up swiftly when their power abandoned them. Don, self-deluding to the end,

was taken into police custody with several bottles of stolen prescription pills, and his belligerence with the police and courts earned him a long enough sentence to ensure that shortly thereafter he would die in prison. Jean succumbed to senility as if he'd been looking forward to it, lost all memory and reason; mindless fear and a persistent craving for sweets defined his final hours. Ungve was not so fortunate. He took a fall going up the stairs of a tiny fifth-floor apartment, shattering the bones in his arms and legs, and found himself confined to a bed in an underfunded public hospital, where his only relief from the cruelly clear memories of his every misstep and indignity was the din of other patients' suffering. He came, in those final days, knowing his brothers were dead and his failure was complete, to feel something akin to guilt – as near as one such as him could manage, anyway.

You may find the substance of this lesson terribly obvious. I have heard such protestations before – from the brothers themselves, before this story bore their names – and will hear them again. Perhaps you will find equally predictable, or boring, or reductive the question I will leave you with... one you will try, and fail, to complicate or to ignore. It is so simple, it has been enshrined in song, written by an uninitiated woman – a miner's wife. It is this: which side are you on?