

EXALTED

THIRD EDITION



TALES FROM
THE AGE OF SORROWS

The cover art depicts a dramatic battle scene. In the center, a shirtless, muscular man with dark skin is shown in a dynamic pose, his body partially encased in a shattered, crystalline armor. He is surrounded by a cloud of golden sparks and debris. In the lower-left corner, the ornate, dark armor of another character is visible, reaching towards the central figure. The background is a hazy, greyish-brown with floating particles. At the top, the word "EXALTED" is rendered in large, golden, three-dimensional letters with a glowing red crosshair behind it. Below it, "THIRD EDITION" is written in a smaller, red, serif font.

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TALES FROM
THE AGE OF SORROWS

Credits

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TALES FROM THE AGE OF SORROWS

Table of Contents

The Maiden's Kiss — Tim Pratt	4
Bronze and Bisque — Wendy N. Wagner	12
A Singular Justice — Steven S. Long	20
The Circle Will Be Broken — Matt Forbeck	34
Exalted Among Us — Natania Barron	46
Secrets in My Waters Still — Haralambi Markov	57
What You Do Not Understand — Damien Angelica Walters	62
When the Moon Is Dark — Thoraiya Dyer	71
For Love of Heaven — Erin Hoffman	83
The Herald of Glorious Death — Tracy Barnett	95
A Resting Place at the Heart of the Mountain — Richard Dansky	102
The Kingdom of Honey — Lucien Soulban	111
Author Biographies	122

THE MAIDEN'S KISS

by Tim Pratt

Winesap's smile curdled when the dice stopped rolling on the rough wooden table, one die showing a plump set of lips and the other two each displaying a long-lashed eye. It was the "maiden's kiss," a winning roll that couldn't be beaten, and his only hope was to match it; so that they'd roll again to break the tie. It was no hope at all.

His eyes slid to Geoffram, his – what, exactly? What relation was the brother of your runaway wife? Geoffram didn't even raise one of his absurdly bushy eyebrows, just let out a long whistle and clapped Winesap's opponent on the shoulder. "That's a roll for the ages, Resalem!" He pounded the table with his fist, making the dice jump, and one showing an eye bounced off to the floor. Geoffram grunted and bent down, disappearing under the table for a moment before coming back up with the die and dropping it on the table again, between Resalem's immense pile of coins and Winesap's equally large heap. The difference was, Resalem, by all accounts, could afford to lose his pile, while Winesap's stake represented his life savings.

Geoffram wasn't taking part in the gambling, not officially. He'd just provided the bare room that smelled of fish, the scarred table, the sour ale – and the scheme to make himself and Winesap rich. According to their scheme, Winesap was supposed to lose and win small sums all night, then risk all on a final roll of the dice, and win every coin on the table. What had gone wrong?

Winesap stared at Geoffram, and his heart sank like a stone in a pond. Maybe nothing had gone wrong. Maybe there was another plan, and Winesap played a different part in it than he'd supposed.

Resalem nodded. "My luck is running well today." He was a stout man with graying hair and a goatee dyed incongruously black, dressed in a suit of clothes suitable for a merchant like Winesap himself, but silver buckles gleamed on his boots, and a fat ring adorned his finger, marking him out as something more, pretending to be something less.

When Geoffram convinced Winesap to go along with his plot, he'd claimed that Resalem Deveelen was a noble of some kind, traveling from Lookshy to Nexus for

his own reasons, and pausing in their bustling little river town along the way. Resalem was an inveterate gambler, Geoffram said, a chicken ripe for the plucking, and already wriggling on the hook. (How exactly a chicken ripened, and what it might be doing on a hook, were unclear details, but Geoffram's words had a way of getting away from him, for all that he was accounted a persuasive and silver-tongued fellow.)

"Your roll, brother." Geoffram nudged Winesap under the table with the toe of his boot.

Winesap swallowed and picked up the dice. The "blessed" dice! They were beautiful, intricate, and looked very old, though Geoffram said they'd been carved from bone not six months ago, then soaked with tea and smeared with dirt and frozen and plunged into hot water to make them appear ancient. Geoffram was a dealer in fake relics and dubious talismans, an enterprise that Winesap, as a respectable river merchant, found off-putting, though he carried the man's goods on the ships he hired often enough – at first he'd done it for his wife's benefit, and after she ran off, he hadn't seen how to wriggle out of the arrangement.

"Fortune favor me," he muttered.

"Fortune?" Resalem smiled, his face red and jolly from ale. "I knew a whore in Nexus named Fortune once. She died of the pox last year. I tend to offer glory to Plentimon of the Dice, myself. At least I know he exists."

Of course Resalem gave glory to Plentimon. Geoffram had come into Winesap's shop two days before and told him a story, chortling: "I sold a man a set of dice today, Winesap, and convinced him they'd once been the personal dice of Plentimon himself, rolled at his casino in the Coral Archipelago, until they passed from his hands to those of a favored acolyte and, through a series of fascinating adventures, ended up in my care."

"Oh yes?" Winesap was in the middle of reconciling his accounts – he had more money than he thought he should according to the day's ledger, which always made him nervous – and wanted nothing more than to be left alone to his work. He'd always found Geoffram loud and annoying, but his wife's presence had obliged him to spend time in the man's company. When she'd run off with a dashing swordswoman two summers before, Winesap had hoped his connection to Geoffram would be cut as well. No such luck.

"I told him that the dice win every game, still carrying some of Plentimon's residual luck, and that he should use them sparingly, lest he be considered a cheat." Geoffram leaned over the counter conspiratorially. "I'm taking him around to play for low stakes with some of the boys. We'll play some tricks with the dice, make sure he wins, and once he's convinced he can't lose... I've made an arrangement with Melton to help me shear this noble like a sheep. Melton will put up all the coins he's been hoarding against Resalem, but this time, Resalem's going to lose the pot. Then Melton and I will split the winnings, half and half. Resalem won't care, he's rich anyway, and if he does make any trouble, well. Swallowhill is our town, and he's far from home."

Swallowhill – named for a nearby hill where people disappeared, sometimes, if they were stupid enough to spend the night sleeping there – wasn’t as lawless as Nexus, but the people looked out for one another, especially when it came to dealing with the strangers who went up and down the river on their way to the bigger cities, places Winesap had never gone.

Winesap scowled. “Melton? Melton?” The man was his greatest commercial rival, adept at getting the better deal, undercutting Winesap at every opportunity, stealing his customers, and generally being a thorn in his side. All that was bad enough, but when Winesap’s wife Glynda ran off with that swordswoman, Melton had seen Winesap in the street the next day and laughed, bending over double, hands on his knees, guffawing so hard he’d nearly choked. Winesap wished he had. “Why Melton?”

Geoffram raised one of his eyebrows, each as bushy as a venomous caterpillar. “I would have come to you, brother, but – well. You’ve never been the adventurous type. It’s a sure thing, of course, but even in such enterprises there’s always an element of risk, and, well. There’s nothing wrong with being a stable and respectable man, like yourself. I’ve always rather admired your... steadiness.”

Winesap scowled down at his ledger. He’d had dreams, as a young man. Taking a riverboat to Nexus, or beyond. Having adventures. Joining high society by virtue of his wit and charm. He’d read widely, quizzed the many passing travelers about the distant lands they’d seen, and talked of making his fortune young so he could afford to travel in style for the rest of his life. His enthusiasms had won Glynda’s heart – she had wanderlust the way a dog has fleas – and in the first years of their marriage they’d planned the trips they would take. But the business grew, and he was always too busy, or his bad knee was bothering him, or the weather was bad, or there were rumors of unrest in the cities, or the exchange rate was poor, or, or, or – until somehow over a decade passed, and he became ensconced in his business, and Glynda ran away with a swordswoman to have the adventures she’d always wanted.

Something snapped in Winesap’s hand, and he looked down to see the pen he was holding broken in two pieces. He dropped the fragments. “Cut Melton out, Geoffram. Bring me in. I’ve got more in my coffers than he does, anyway – he might make more coin than I do, but he squanders it, and I save.”

Geoffram frowned. “Melton... he won’t like it.”

“I don’t care what he likes. Are we family, or not?”

Geoffram nodded slowly. “We are, at that, even after everything that’s happened. All right. Get as much coin as you can – every glittering scrap would be good, because Resalem will match whatever we put up, believe you me – and come to my little place by the river.” Geoffram had a secret shack, where he occasionally went fishing and more often went to hide from furious customers until they left town, its location a closely-guarded secret, but Winesap knew how to find it.

After Geoffram left, he'd felt some misgivings, but also some excitement – even splitting the proceeds with his brother-by-marriage, he'd make half again his total fortune of coin, enough to outbid Melton on every deal and secure his position as the most prosperous man in Swallowhill. Yes, it was dishonest, which Winesap seldom was if he could help it, but cheating a rich stranger from far away wasn't real cheating. It might even be fun. Who said you had to leave home for an adventure?

“Are you going to roll, brother?” Geoffram said.

Winesap blinked at him, the troubled past receding in favor of the terrible present. Geoffram's smile was wide and insincere. Resalem looked entirely confident, as well he should. It was possible Geoffram had rigged the dice so Winesap would roll the maiden's kiss too, and rigged it further so Winesap would win the tie-breaking roll, but why? For his own amusement? To build suspense? No. More likely he'd switched the die that “accidentally” fell on the floor with one that wouldn't land in Winesap's favor.

There was nothing else to do. Winesap rolled. An eye, an eye... and a foot. The roll was trash.

Resalem reached across the table and dragged Winesap's entire fortune toward him.

“Poor luck,” Geoffram said.

“Don't be sad,” Resalem said. “Plentimon smiles on me.”

Winesap opened his mouth – but what could he say? “You cheated me – I know, because I was supposed to cheat you?” Clearly Geoffrey and Resalem had worked together, and this had been their plan all along. Maybe Resalem really was a noble, or maybe he was just a confidence trickster who'd met Geoffram and found out about his stupid mark of a brother-by-ruined-marriage. Winesap was the ripened chicken here, and he'd been plucked.

If he sold everything in his shop, and his house... he would not starve. But his business was ruined. He didn't have the capital to pay for his next shipment, now. He might be able to borrow money, build up his fortune again, but to begin from almost nothing, when he'd come so far... Melton would never stop laughing at him.

The door of the shack swung open, and a man stepped in. He was tall and copper-skinned, dressed in nondescript traveling clothes, gray and worn, except for an immense black broad-brimmed hat. When his eyes met Winesap's, they gleamed like polished gold, a shade Winesap had never before seen. Was he one of the Exalted? Or of the Fair Folk?

“This man has suffered a terrible loss,” the stranger said. “It's only fair to let him roll again.”

Geoffram rose, and he had a long wooden cudgel in his hand. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

"I am a traveler, and I am here because I heard the rattle of dice, and I never could resist that sound. Well? Will you just break this man and leave him penniless, or trust in your luck and give him a chance to win something back?"

"He has nothing left to bet," Geoffram said, and Winesap's shoulders sagged, because it was the simple truth.

"Ah, well. I suppose I can stake him, then." The stranger reached into his coat and drew out a dark leather bag, then tossed it onto the table in front of Winesap. It spilled open when it hit, and every coin that tumbled out gleamed golden. Even without counting, it was clearly worth more than the mix of silver and precious few bits of gold heaped before Resalem. He and Geoffram eyed the bag. "I guess that would be all right," Resalem said, and barked a laugh. "I'm a sporting man."

"Why are you doing this?" Winesap said. "I – it would take me forever to pay you back."

"I am doing it, because if I didn't, the game would be over." The stranger's voice was so sure and level it made that absurd explanation seem reasonable. "And as for paying me back, well – just don't lose, and it won't be a problem." He nodded to Resalem. "As you won the last toss, you roll first."

Resalem scooped up the dice and rolled them.

The dice struck the table, and all three shattered into splintered fragments, reduced to bits of shard and bone dust. Winesap and the others gaped, but the stranger just clucked his tongue. "That happens, sometimes, with very old dice. Here, use these." He reached into his coat again, and tossed three dice to land on the table in front of Resalem. They landed showing two eyes and a set of pursed lips. "The maiden's kiss!" the stranger said. "Now I wish I'd made a bet."

Geoffram was pale as he swept away the fragments of dice dust, and when the table was clean, Resalem rolled again, his face stoic.

A foot. A foot. A foot. One of the worst rolls in the game.

Resalem grunted and shoved the dice toward Winesap. He glanced at the stranger, who gave him an encouraging nod, then took up the dice, shook them, and tossed them on the table.

The lips, and two hands. Not a great roll – "the hand-to-mouth" it was usually called – but good enough to beat Resalem's pitiful showing.

The stranger clapped. "I do so love a reversal of fortune." He scooped up his bag of coins. "Consider me repaid, my friend – I won't even ask for interest on such a short loan – and do enjoy your winnings." With that, he strolled out of the shack, shutting the creaking door behind him.

Winesap looked at Geoffram and Resalem, who stared at him dully. "That was unexpected, wasn't it? I'll just take my winnings, I think, and –"

Geoffram lifted the cudgel. Resalem had a knife in his hand. Not a gentleman's dagger, but a river rat's more functional blade. "Sorry, brother. We'd planned to do it neatly, but..." Geoffram shrugged.

Winesap lifted his hands. "You can keep the money, I don't want it!"

Geoffram shook his head. "No. Before, I could have convinced you it was just bad luck, that Resalem was a smarter gambler than me, that he'd tricked us both, but now... No. Look at it this way. You'll finally get to travel down the river."

"No he won't," Resalem said. "We'll have to weight his corpse so it doesn't float away and get noticed."

"Ah," Resalem said. "That's a –"

His face froze, his mouth hanging open in mid-sentence. Resalem was similarly still. Winesap stood up and backed away from the table, but they didn't move.

The door opened, and the stranger came back in, recognizable by his black hat. His face was gone, replaced by a black void, and inside it, things like stars shone – no. They were specks of silver and gold, tumbling. "I don't like people who don't play fair," he said. He clucked his tongue again, despite lacking a tongue.

"Plentimon," Winesap whispered. He'd heard stories, that the lord of the dice sometimes traveled the world in disguise, bankrupting casinos for his amusement, making bets with mortal stakes, but he'd never thought to see the god himself.

"Hmm? Yes, of course I'm Plentimon. All right, Winesap, you're in trouble. When my attention wanders, they'll snap back into regular time, and snap your neck."

"I – I can run away, hide from them, or..."

Even lacking eyes, Plentimon's gaze was somehow disdainful. "Where's the amusement in that? No, no. Let's wager. One roll. If you win, I'll get rid of them for you, and you can take all the gold on this table."

"And, if you win... my, ah, lord?"

Plentimon considered. "If I win, you lose your life."

Winesap closed his eyes. "Those stakes are... too high."

"Really? If I walk out, you lose your life anyway. They don't mean to let you leave. The time for sporting chances is past, with them."

The god was right. Of course he was; he was a god. "But, you're the lord of dice... how can I possibly win against you?"

"I can grant luck, or take it away, it's true – but I don't cheat when I play against someone." He sniffed. "I have nothing but contempt for those who sully chance by turning it into certainty."

"All right," Winesap whispered. "I'll roll." He picked up the dice, looked at the god, and tossed them.

Three lips. The triple kiss. The second-best roll in the game.

Plentimon grunted. “Not bad.” He scooped up the dice, shook them once or twice, and spilled them out.

The maiden’s kiss. “Twice in a row!” he crowed. At Winesap’s despairing look, he shrugged. “I’ve always been lucky, even if I’m not trying. Time to take my winnings.”

Winesap bowed his head and trembled, awaiting a blow, or fire, or pain, or cold... but instead the door opened, and when he looked up, Plentimon was gone. Before Winesap could react, the god came back in, squeezing a handful of river mud between sparkling void fingers. He flopped the mud into Winesap’s empty chair and kneaded it, and the mud grew, swelling, bulging, taking on a human shape – and then, suddenly, it was a replica of Winesap himself, dressed as he was too, his twin to every detail. “All right, into the shadows.” Plentimon put his arm around Winesap, and the air around them seemed to thicken.

“—fair point,” Geoffram said, and then suddenly struck out, smashing the false Winesap on the side of the head. Resalem came around the table, knelt down, and slit the thing’s throat with one businesslike motion. The blood was very realistic. “All right, let’s clean this mess up,” Geoffram said. He sighed. “The man wasn’t so bad, when he was younger, but he became a pompous fool.”

Plentimon waved his hand, and they froze in place again. “You have to leave, my loser. If they see you, they’ll think you’re a spirit, or something worse, and try to kill you again. You wagered, and lost your life. Your old life, anyway.” The sparkles in his face shifted. “Now you’ll have to seek new adventures.” He stepped to the table, bowed his head, and somehow spat onto the heap of coins. “I do hate cheaters. I’ve cursed their winnings. Every bite of food they buy with those coins will spoil and rot in their mouths. Every house will burn down. Every horse will try to kick them to death. Every whore will carry contagion. Let them enjoy their winnings if they can.” He glanced back at Winesap. “Why aren’t you running? I’m not hiding you anymore, and when I release them, they’ll see you.”

Adventure, he said! Better than death, certainly, and the idea stirred something deep in Winesap’s heart, but that heart was surrounded by a practical shell now. “But, my lord, I have no money, no friends, I don’t know if I dare return home even for my clothes...”

Plentimon scooped the dice up from the table and tossed them to Winesap, who, miraculously, managed to catch all three. “There. Keep my dice. Touched by my own hand. Doubtless carrying a bit of residual luck. They won’t always win... but I suspect they’ll win often enough for you to make your way.” The lord of dice paused. “Unless you’d like to wager something else with me? You don’t have much left, but there are always accommodations that can be made...”

“No! That is, no, thank you, my lord, I... have had enough of gambling tonight.”

“If your travels ever take you to the Coral Archipelago, come to my casino. I imagine you’ll be quite an experienced gambler by the time you make it so far. Now go!”

Winesap ran out into the night, dice rattling in his hands, and gave himself to chance.



BRONZE AND BISQUE

by Wendy N. Wagner

Rhala watched the wind lift white grains from the edge of her sand painting, exposing the dark striations below. The pattern revealed itself, bit by bit, one thing of fragile beauty veiling another. The sand paintings were transient pleasures, but beauty should be like that. A kind of meditation. She could say that now, safe and free on this island.

The breeze shifted. Rhala curled her brown fingers in the sand, listening hard. She'd heard... something. A splash that wasn't a wave against the shore. And on an island like this one, any sound meant trouble. She sprang to her feet and wrenched her glaive out of the sand.

"I did not come to fight, Rhala." The man's voice was colored with humor.

Her ears had been mistaken. The sound came from behind her, not from the patch of forest off to her right. She turned to face the speaker. He wasn't as dangerous as the kinds of creatures that merged from the jungle, but he could be dangerous enough.

The man squeezed saltwater from his linen shirt. He must have waded in from the sailboat she could see anchored just beyond the shallows. He was a good sailor to take his boat so close to this shore in silence. She didn't appreciate such stealth in someone who knew her name.

She leveled the glaive at his torso. "You're on private property." Then she saw the golden mark on his forehead and her eyes narrowed. Another Exalted. Maybe this wasn't about her past after all. Maybe it was about the island.

"Find your own demesne, stranger."

He raised his palms. Empty-handed — but he was a Dawn Caste Exalted, and lack of weaponry meant nothing. Rhala could fight. She'd brought down every nasty creature that had come out of the dense magic-drenched jungle at the far end of the island, no matter how charged up on power and hungry for flesh the thing had been. But this man had skills and power she'd never match.

“Easy, friend.” He looked all too comfortable on her beach, standing tall and broad-shouldered, his black hair bound in a heavy club down his back. The blue stubble on his jaw only outlined clear bone structure and a strong chin. He must have been beautiful once. Not anymore.

She tried not to show her disgust. The left side of his face gleamed with silvery scar tissue — not smooth, healthy tissue, either, but lumpen, pitted stuff that transformed his cheek into something close to pumice stone. The scarring had pulled the corner of his eye out of true, and his top lip, somehow still a soft, perfect pink, skewed up in a vicious snarl.

No, he might have once been beautiful, but something had ripped all the beauty out of his face.

The good side of his mouth twisted in a bitter smile. “An acid attack.”

She jerked her eyes away from the melted ruin of his cheek. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean — ”

“Of course you didn’t mean to stare. No one means to stare. It’s like a chariot wreck, isn’t it? You can’t take your eyes off the broken bones and blood.”

His tone stanching the instinctive rush of pity. “You’re on private property,” she repeated.

He took a step forward, as if he couldn’t care less about the nasty eight inches of steel pointed at his intestines. “I’ve come a long way to talk to you, Rhala. You may have walked away from civilization four years ago, but civilization is still talking about you. There’s never been a bronze artist like you before.” His eyes went to the mark on her forehead. “That’s why you were Exalted. Even the Unconquered Sun knows you’re something special.”

She didn’t lower the point of the weapon. “I work for myself and the Sun now. I’m not interested in any kind of job, no matter how much money you’re planning to offer me.”

“That’s not what they said on the big island. Folks over there said you come over two or three times a year to sell your work. Rhala Kemeik, selling hinges and door knobs? I think that’s a waste of your talents.”

“I make what I want to make. The work is its own satisfaction. Now, if you would, sir, get off my island.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” His face was impassive.

Heat bloomed in her gut and swept up into her head, the fire of her temper that she hadn’t felt since she’d left Kirighast. “Get out!”

She whipped the end of the glaive around and thwacked the staff end on his outstretched hand. He flinched and shook out his fingers.

“That hurt.”

“It was meant to.” She pushed past him and marched up the beach.

“I have given you no reason to hurt me. I just want you to make something for me!”

She lowered her head and walked faster. She could see her house up ahead, its plain stone face looking down at her from its perch on a stretch of exposed basalt. She’d built that house herself, with her own hands and powers. It was sturdy enough to keep out the winter storms — it was sturdy enough to shut out this man and his grating voice.

She broke into a run and left him behind in the sand.



Inside the cool darkness of the house, she sank onto the little hearth beside the fireplace. The anger had already burned out, leaving behind the cold ash of fear. She was used to that. Ever since she’d awakened with the gold shape of the Twilight Sun pressed into her forehead, ever since she’d felt the immense surge inside her of powers that she’d used to destroy that hell of a foundry, she’d been afraid her past would follow her. Afraid someone would find her and drag her back to stand trial for the things she’d done. She was certain her old master had died when she’d stirred up the great fires and let them swallow the building. The woman deserved her punishment, but that knowledge didn’t stop Rhala’s nightmares.

On the other side of the wall, something clanged in her own small foundry. She got to her feet. She was suddenly cold, chilled as much from exhaustion as sitting on the cool stones. She’d been running from the past for such a long time.

Quietly, she slipped through the kitchen and out the back door. The foundry was only a lean-to attached to the side of the wall, the big brick kiln in the middle. Sun filtered in through the trees clustered around the building, filling the space with soft, golden light. The presence of the Unconquered Sun, warm and welcome.

The man from the beach looked up at her, a bellows in his hand. “These are a lot harder to squeeze than I expected.”

Rhala sagged against the door frame. “What do you want? Have you come to take me back to Kirighast?”

He frowned. “No. I came for my own purposes.” He pointed at his scarred cheek. “For this.”

She gave a dry bark of laughter. “I am not a healer.”

“I’ve been to the best money can buy. It’s too late for the scar tissue to ever be normal.” He put down the bellows. “No, what I’m looking for is ... a mask. A good one.”

Understanding began to dawn inside Rhala. “Not a good one, a beautiful one.”

“Yes.”

She shook her head. “No mask is going to make you look like you used to” — she broke off, realizing he hadn’t told her his name. “Whatever you’re called.”

“I’m Vargas.” He offered her his hand, but she didn’t take it.

“I know it’s not easy to accept,” she warned, “but you’re never going to be handsome again, and you need to get used to that. Life goes on.”

He set his jaw. “Yours hasn’t.”

“It has, and I’m happy with it. I may have been the most famous bronze worker in the South, maybe even the world, but I was an indentured servant. Now I’m a criminal, hiding in the backwaters of the West. It’s surprisingly better.”

“I don’t believe you.”

She pushed open the back door and gave him a pitying look. “You should. Now, I’m going to make some dinner. You can join me, I think. Even sleep on my floor. But I’m not going to make you that mask. It would only make you more miserable.”

He stood a long moment outside before he followed her into the kitchen.



By the faint light of the rising sun, Rhala eased around the sleeping warrior and crept into the kitchen to light the fire. She glanced back over her shoulder at him as she reached for kindling. The unblemished side of his face showed above the borrowed blanket, and the pale light of dawn seemed to caress him. The Sun still found him beautiful. So did she, in this light.

She shook her head and focused on the simple tasks at hand: lighting a match, pumping water into the kettle, taking down the jars of grain and nuts for porridge.

“You should have woken me.” The big man leaned against the doorframe, his blankets bundled around him. He blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes. The scars on his cheek looked even more horrifying this morning, swollen and irritated-looking.

“The tide doesn’t go out for another couple of hours. You’ve got time to relax, eat a little porridge. Drink some tea.” She handed him a ceramic cup.

He cupped it in his palm and studied it for a moment. “You made this, didn’t you? I recognize your style.” His eyebrows came together. “How did you become a sculptor?”

She stirred the grain into the pot of hot water. “We make ceramic molds to cast the bronze. It’s part of our training. This I made from clay I found on the island. It’s surprisingly good clay.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He winced and rubbed his scarred cheek with his fingertips. “How did you become an artist in the first place?”

Her back stiffened. She didn't like talking about the past, but it would be rude not to answer. She looked for a pleasant enough response. "My father worked at the bronze foundry. After my mother died, he started taking me to work with him. I picked it up early."

Vargas went into the main room and rummaged in his pack until he brought out a small tin. Working it open with one hand, he came back to lean on the stove beside her. "But how did you become a ..."

"A slave?" She gave a dry bark of laughter. "I suppose the word is 'indentured servant.'" She stirred the porridge. A little slopped over the edge of the pan. She needed to calm down. She needed to shut up.

But the words pushed their way out unbidden. "My father was sick. I needed money to take care of him. The foundry owner made me a deal. But after my father died, I still owed so much money. I worked all day, every day, longer and longer, but I couldn't make a dent in what I owed. I once tried to leave."

He scooped out a fingerful of some kind of ointment. A pungent herbal smell filled the kitchen. "What happened?" He began to rub the ointment into his skin, flinching as his fingers found tender spots along the edge of the malformed flesh.

"She called the city guard. They put me in prison for three days. No food. No water. But they had instructions not to hurt my hands." Her fist clenched around the wooden spoon. "I swore that I would do anything to avoid going back there."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "I won't tell anyone where you are. I promise."

She looked up at him. "Thanks."

"But people are still going to come to your island, Rhala." Vargas closed his tin of ointment. "You and I both know that this island is giving off a tremendous amount of geomantic energy. Plenty of things — creatures, Fae, even Dragon Exalted — are going to be drawn to that. You can't stay in hiding forever."

"I've fought off plenty of things so far," she said, her voice grim. "I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you're good at protecting yourself, but all that magic? It could be used for something more. With your powers, you could tap into that. You could make wonders!"

"Like a magical mask for your face?" she snapped. She immediately regretted the words.

But a horrible splintering sound kept her from apologizing.

"My boat!" Vargas threw open the back door and raced toward the sound.

Rhala grabbed her glaive and ran after him.

A length of timber flew past her head and she barely dodged it. Another massive hunk of wood crashed down behind her. She caught sight of the beach below and slid to a stop.

She'd never seen anything like the thing writhing up out of the waves. It gripped the shattered remains of Vargas's sailboat in a massively fanged mouth, its serpentine head the size of most small water craft. Shimmering blue scales covered its back, and a pair of tiny arms scrabbled in the sand. Its long snaky tail lashed the waves behind it. It had to be faery — some lesser form called by the geomantic energies of the island. The creature spat out the last chunks of sailboat and growled angrily. The depths of the sound resonated in Rhala's chest, even up here on the cliff.

But Vargas was still running toward it on the shore path, and he'd almost left the cover of the shrubs and rocks. Only sand stretched between him and the beast. He didn't even have a sword.

She couldn't let him get himself killed on her island, not when he was only here to see her. To get her help. Rhala raced down the path, cutting the last of the switchbacks in a dangerous jump. She stumbled across the sand and watched with horror as Vargas charged straight at the sea monster. It snapped its head around to face him.

The air crackled with power, the surge raising the hairs along Rhala's arms. Vargas's fist smashed into the beast's flesh with a palpable burst of energy. The sea monster skidded across the sand.

Vargas lowered his head and charged at the creature again.

"No!" Rhala screamed. But he couldn't see the creature's tail sweep around behind him. The massive coil struck him in the legs and sent him flying. The creature reared back to strike his fallen body.

But Rhala was already moving, moving like she'd never moved before. She leaped up over the beast's lashing tail, soaring up into its side, her glaive driving into its shining hide in an explosion of scales and blood. Even as its tail slammed into her ribs and drove her into the sand, Rhala had to admire the beauty of that blow.

Then pain swept through her ribs like molten bronze filling a mold, hot fire swallowing her whole. The world went a strange shade of gray, and through a wooshing in her ears, she heard the creature's rumbling growl.

She tried to push herself up, but her arms wouldn't support her weight. Was that Vargas in front of her, holding her blood-stained glaive?

The earth shook beneath her as something huge crashed down on the sand. She blinked stupidly as the sea monster's head plummeted down beside her, the long handle of the glaive jutting out of its bloody maw.

A cool hand touched her forehead. "I'm not going to let you die, Rhala."

Her mouth moved, but no sound emerged to answer that kind voice.



Rhala woke in the dim coolness of the house, lying flat on her own soft bed. Her ribs ached, but her head felt normal again. She touched her side. Her torso was snugly bandaged, and she could smell the herbs from Vargas's ointment,

even through the linen. Rhala stroked the fabric gingerly. No one had taken care of her since her father died.

She eased herself upright, although her ribs complained. Bruised, for sure. Broken? Maybe. She looked around herself. Vargas lay sleeping on the floor beside the fireplace. His unscarred cheek looked heavily bruised. He'd taken a beating back there on the beach — but the way he'd fought was truly amazing.

He shifted a little in his sleep, but didn't wake. That kind of fighting took something beyond ordinary strength. When she'd made that leap at the beast, she'd felt some deeper part of herself sending her energy. She could still feel the tiredness in her legs. But she had enough energy to do something kind for Vargas. Something to thank him for risking his life for her.

Rhala slipped out the back door and stood thinking for a moment. In contrast to the afternoon heat, the breeze off the sea smelled fresh and new. She glanced inside her foundry, but kept walking. For what she had in mind, she needed something else. Not bronze, not her old skills. Something new.

She opened her heart to the wisdom of the Unconquered Sun as she turned onto a little-used path leading toward the wild end of the island. She had never tried anything like this before, but she was certain it would work. She hurried through the thick greenery toward her clay pit.

By the time she returned, the sun was low in the sky, and sweat ran down her back. Heat energy — Sun energy — burned inside her as she carried the ball of leaf-wrapped clay into the lean-to and placed it on the work table beside the kiln. Twilight would come soon. Her time, as a Twilight Exalted.

With closed eyes, she began to work the clay, feeling the raw geomantic energy infused within it. In another era, this island would have been the manse of powerful Exalted, its magic harvested for their great purposes. But right now, it was all hers to use as she saw fit. She had never felt so free.

"Rhala? What are you doing? You should be resting."

She opened her eyes. How was it night already, the moon working its way up the sky? She felt as if she'd only been working for an instant, and yet her shoulder muscles ached from working the clay. She looked down at her work. The dull gray shape, something like a many-rayed sun cut out of a thin sheet of clay, lay unpromisingly on the worktable.

She got to her feet, which prickled from inactivity. "I had to make you this."

He eyed the worktable. "What is it?"

For a second, she hesitated. No one had ever done this before. But that sense of certainty remained inside her. "It's not quite finished." She used her bench scraper to lift the thin sheet of wet clay carefully from the table.

She crossed to his side. "You saved me back there."

“You saved me.” He smiled, and it lit up his eyes. “I’d say that makes us even. I don’t need any kind of thank you present.”

Rhala smiled back at him. When was the last time she had smiled? She couldn’t remember, but it felt good. “Don’t move.”

She pressed the clay against his scarred cheek. The heat of the sun rose up inside her, flowed through her fingertips. The hairs on her arms rose. The last of the energy left her, and she half-stumbled backward.

He raised a hand to his cheek. The clay shone softly, the soft white of fired bisque, almost the color of the sand on Rhala’s beach. “It doesn’t hurt anymore,” he whispered. He stroked the bisque, his eyes wide.

Rhala just watched him. She was too tired to move.

He cleared his throat. “How does it look?”

Rhala found the energy to stroke his cheek. The bisque was cool, his flesh around it warm. Her fingers stood out like dark bronze against the white ceramic. She remembered a piece of polished bronze she’d set aside for another project, and found it under her work bench. “See for yourself.”

She held it up and heard the air go out of him. The mirror stood between them; she couldn’t see if he smiled or cried, if he was pleased or not. Nervousness coiled in Rhala’s stomach. She had trusted the Unconquered Sun, but perhaps she had failed Him. And failed Vargas.

An odd choking noise came from the other side of the mirror. A laugh. A happy, happy laugh. A beautiful one.



A SINGULAR JUSTICE

by Steven S. Long

Vitarra scowled. Someone was talking in the Atheneum.

She tried to ignore the noise and concentrate on reading Volume 8 of Perresim's *Thaumaturgae*, but the voices came closer. She recognized Master Melroe's, then Master Kessnon's. The third voice, an anguish out of her buried memories, made her sit bolt upright.

"What?" asked Kisa, who sat across the table from her.

"Did you hear that?" Vitarra whispered. "That last voice — I know it."

"So? You know practically everyone at the Collegium; you've been here forever."

"It's not a student or master. It's... Elussin."

That startled Kisa. "Elussin the Brave, the adventurer?"

"Yes," Vitarra said, her nose wrinkling.

"You *know* him?"

"We were both students here when I first came to the Collegium. We worked together under Master Robel on the writings Robel recovered from Stevvon and Jorald. Robel had no interest in them; he told us studying them was probably a waste of time. But I saw their true potential — and for a time, so did Elussin."

"I never knew that! So he helped you create your Spellsmithing theory."

"No. He had *nothing* to do with it. And it's *not* just a theory, I keep telling you."

"I know, I know, sorry. So what happened with Elussin?"

"Nothing 'happened.' He wasn't dedicated to the work, he couldn't see the value of it. Valiseck offered him an apprenticeship, so he left. You know the rest."

"Only what everyone knows: he wrote *Principles of Sorcery* and three or four other books every apprentice reads; he adventured with the Bloodstone Corsairs; he fought Cathak Creos to a standstill. He's a legend."

“He’s a fool.”

“What? Why?”

“...Nothing. Forget it,” Vitarra said as she got up from the table. On slippered feet she snuck down the row with the *Aeaeon Sutras* and its thousand dull volumes of commentary, crept up behind the shelf holding the *Annalects of the Five Sages*, and peeked out.

Melroe, Kessnon, and Elussin were walking toward her, talking about the Atheneum and how much it would help Elussin with his “work.” He looked nearly the same as he had over a decade ago: the black hair cut short but stylishly; the ruggedly handsome, clean-shaven face; the broad shoulders; the Twilight caste mark on his forehead matching her own. His muscles were even better developed now, and he didn’t have that scar on his left arm the last time she saw him. He certainly wore far nicer clothes than he had as a student. She ducked back behind the shelf and slipped away before they noticed her. She hadn’t spoken with him since he turned his back on Spellsmithing to study the magic of the Dragon-Blooded with Valiseck, and she preferred to keep it that way.



By the next afternoon the word had spread through the Collegium like wildfire: Elussin the Brave had joined the Collegium as a master! Vitarra heard a dozen rumors about what he intended to work on: he had unlocked the secrets of the Elemental Dragons; he had developed a new style of combat Charms during his adventures; he had a theory about linking Solar and Lunar powers together. But the most common story disturbed her even more.

“Master Melroe!” she said as she caught up to the kindly old professor in the West Courtyard. “Is it true about Elussin?”

“It is, my dear; he’s joining us here at the Collegium.”

“Yes, sir, I know that; I meant about his work. Is it true he discovered a trove of early First Age occult lore and intends to study and develop it?”

“I believe so, though he hasn’t confided much to me. I know that subject interests you — if you want to study under him I can recommend you.”

“No, thank you, Master, that’s not necessary. I have my own work to pursue.”



Two nights later the Conclave of Magisters held a feast to welcome the Collegium’s newest master. Vitarra, working late as usual, missed the meal, but arrived in time for wine afterward. The Conclave’s feast-hall looked as beautiful as she’d ever seen it. Charm-conjured floating balls of light complemented the muted glow from dozens of caste marks, lending the room a fairy glamour. Masters in their black robes and journeymen in brown mingled with brightly-clad notables from the city, speaking in soft tones as they sipped Turaan wine.

Elussin, who had not yet received his robes, stood out like a ruby among coal in his red and gold clothes, as did the elegant woman at his side.

Vitarra took a glass of wine and mingled, keeping a careful eye on Elussin so she could remain well away from him. Another journeyman, Chanyar, cornered her near the cheese table. “Isn’t it wonderful?” he asked.

“Isn’t what wonderful? I missed the dinner.”

“The money. Besides the purse he received from the Conclave to become a Master here, Elussin has persuaded several of the city’s most prominent nobles and merchants to become his patrons. They’re all so intrigued by the possibilities of his First Age discoveries that he won’t have any trouble paying for whatever research he wants to do.”

Vitarra kept her features composed.

“Who knows? This could lead to a whole new understanding of Sorcery!” Chanyar said. “And if it’s really from the First Age, there must be Solar Circle spells that have been lost for centuries. It could be a new era of magic!”

“Excuse me, I have to speak to someone,” Vitarra said, walking away from Chanyar before he could say anything more. She put her half-empty wineglass down on a table so hard the stem shattered, cutting two of her fingers; fortunately no one noticed. A quick Charm staunched the bleeding as she headed for the door.

“Vitarra? Vitarra, is that you?” said a hated voice behind her. She turned around to find Elussin and his woman approaching.

“I knew it was you!” he said, bending forward to kiss her on the cheek. She recoiled reflexively; he pulled back, a slight frown creasing his handsome face for a moment. “It’s so good to see you after all this time. How long has it been — a decade?”

“Twelve years.”

“As precise as ever,” he said with a chuckle. “How are you? I thought you’d be a Magister by now,” he said.

“I’m fine. My exploration of the principles I’ve developed from Stevvon and Jorald’s notes goes well.”

“You’re *still* working on that? That’s... wonderful. I always said you were stubborn.” He smiled to show he meant no offense. “I’d love to hear about it sometime. I’ve been working on some related subjects; maybe we can help each other.”

The woman nudged Elussin lightly in the ribs. “Your pardon, ladies, I’ve neglected to make introductions,” he said. “This is my wife Ashava. Ashava, this is Vitarra, the most brilliant and determined journeyman at the Collegium. She and I worked together under Master Robel.”

“Solar grace upon you,” Ashava said, extending her palm in greeting.

“And upon you,” Vitarra said, briefly touching it with her own. “If you’ll excuse me, I must leave.”



She walked home through the night-darkened streets, finding her way almost by instinct while her thoughts roiled. She’d never expected to see Elussin again; just hearing student gossip about his exploits angered her enough. When he’d abandoned their work years ago, he’d planted a seed of bitter anger deep in her soul. At first it grew slowly, fed by every injustice, every insult, every scholar who scoffed at her work. But he wasn’t half a world away fighting Abyssals and Wylderlings anymore; he’d invaded her realm. With Elussin in her world again, flaunting his success, it had already begun to grow faster. She clenched her fists, trying to hold her emotions back — but part of her didn’t want that. She’d lived with her bitterness for so long it almost seemed more comfortable to her than cool logic.

Up the stairs to her little garret room, fumbling out her key, finally fitting it into the lock. A moment later she shut the door and closed away the bothersome outside world. She lit a single candle, then built up the fire and put a small pot of water on to heat so she could make tea. She undressed, hanging her tunic on the third peg from the left, her skirt on the second peg from the left, and each of her other articles of clothing in its proper place as well.

She washed with cold water, then poured a cup of tea and sat down in her battered chair to enjoy it. Even as weak as she had to make her tea, the taste of it soothed her. She forced herself to forget about Elussin for a few minutes and steered her thoughts down other paths: the spells she wanted to craft with Spellsmithing; a new song she’d heard in a tavern a few days ago; the Collegium Ball coming up in a few months. Even without an escort or a new gown the Ball would lift her spirits.

Sleep eluded her that night. The thoughts she’d banished returned, chasing themselves through her mind like serpents writhing in a basket. Elussin. His success. His money. His fame. Spellsmithing. Injustice, unfairness. The look on his face when he told her he was leaving to work with Valiseck (proud-smug — no, condescending-pitying). The look on his face tonight. How good it would feel to hit him... or plunge a dagger into his back.

At last she drifted off into a fitful sleep, her hands grasping the thin sheet like claws, her dreams filled with the flash of silver, and visceral red upon black....



Nervousness settled into Vitarra’s stomach like a rock. She hated having to go in front of the Conclave to beg for more money. She needed a patron, but she knew no one among the wealthy nobles and merchants, and none of them would look twice at her in her plain student’s clothing. A flash of anger burned the anxiety away for a moment, but it soon returned.

At last they called her in. “Thank you for seeing me this morning, Magisters,” she said in her politest tone to the murder of old men sitting in a semi-circle before her. “I appreciate the opportunity to present my case for greater funding to you.”

“We have read your request for a dispersal from the Collegium Exchequer,” Magister Alfirin said. “Have you anything to add?”

“Only that I believe my Spellsmithing Runes are the key to a greater, more profound understanding of Sorcery than we have ever possessed. They will lead to a flowering of sorcerous creativity and advancement the likes of which we have never seen. I am, of course, glad to answer any questions the Conclave may have.”

“Your work runs contrary to everything we’ve known for centuries,” said Magister Osrell. “The new student learns one Charm or spell, and that knowledge and experience provides the basis for learning the next one. Why should we abandon our proven traditions for your untested theories?”

“Because that tradition has become a prison for our creativity and abilities. All revolutions are painful, Magister, but they lead to better things. The greater wisdom and power of Spellsmithing are worth any upheaval that might result.”

“Why not keep this secret for yourself then, Journeyman?” asked Magister Beckford.

“I am a scholar, Magister, not a warlord or an *adventurer*,” Vitarra said. “I have no interest in strength or dominance. I only wish to advance learning and creative arcane expression.”

“So much mathematics!” said Magister Baurbain. “I’ve worked Sorcery for hundreds of years, and not even Solar Circle spells require as much calculation as your simplest Charm.”

“But you only have to perform those calculations once for any spell, Magister. After that you learn and cast the spell normally.” Baurbain waved his hand dismissively but said nothing more.

“I couldn’t duplicate most of your workings, Journeyman, much less make these “Spellsmithing Runes” of yours perform as you say they should,” said Magister Sorjan. “Furthermore, I strongly question much of your theoretical work on the... how did you put it...” he checked his notes, ‘interlocking of Essence function elements.’ Some of the interactions you discuss would endanger the practitioner — and perhaps everyone and everything around him.”

“My work addresses that, Magister, by making the dangers clear and advising against them. Like any tool, Spellsmithing can have disastrous consequence if used improperly, but that’s not the fault of the tool,” Vitarra said. “As we work with Spellsmithing we’ll learn more about possible negative Essence interlocks and how best to cope with them.”

“Even if it works, it’s too complicated,” Magister Maspar said in his usual blunt manner. “Can’t you simplify it?”

“If I did, Magister, it would lose the qualities that make it so important and useful. Like anything else in life worth doing, Spellsmithing requires effort.”

After a few more questions the Conclave adjourned to consider her request. The Magisters returned a few minutes later and resumed their seats. “After due deliberation the Conclave denies Journeyman Vitarra’s request,” Magister Alfirin said.

“But...”

Alfirin raised his hand to silence her before she could say more. “The Conclave’s decision is final. The Collegium has little money to spare at present. Most of what we do have has gone to finance Master Elussin’s new research, and we are not inclined to devote funds to expand other projects at this time. You may apply for additional funds next year, if you so desire. Good day, Journeyman.”

• • •

“They’re all idiots! They can’t even *understand* my work, much less its value, so they dismiss it — and me. I’ve been at this as long as some of them, but does anyone call me “Master”? I’m stuck in brown while the likes of Elussin “the Brave” stroll into the Collegium and get the black.”

“I know,” Kisa said. “It’s not right.”

“They don’t have the slightest idea about what I’ve given up to develop Spellsmithing. Like the winter I went without coal so I could buy that rare, complete copy of *Axioms Arcanae*.”

“You got the fire-fever,” Kisa said. “If it hadn’t been for Master Melroe’s healing Charms you would have died. And don’t forget Eiric.”

Vitarra’s expression softened for a moment. “I never have.” The angry glare returned. “And all the opportunities I turned down! I could have studied with Alexven or Sephidar, or even Dasikon. I’d be a wealthy master by now if I’d taken the easy path that Elussin and everyone else takes. But Spellsmithing is *more important*. Eiric left me because he couldn’t see that. They can’t either despite all their learning.

“Damn them and their next years! They’re so busy licking Elussin’s boots and throwing money at him they can’t see a *worthy* project when it’s right in front of their eyes!”

“So what will you do now?”

Vitarra sighed. “Scrape by on my Journeyman’s stipend and keep working to make Spellsmithing even better — like always. Years of effort and sacrifice, and that’s my only choice.”

Kisa smiled sympathetically and reached out to give her friend a hug, but Vitarra brushed her aside. “All that work, for nothing.”

“Not for nothing! You’ve created something amazing and important. You just have to prove it to them.”

Vitarra gestured angrily. “Even if I created enough new spells to show them for the fools they are, they’d just dismiss it as luck and go on doing things the way they always have. People like the Magisters control the world, and they’ll never make a place in it for me. None of them will ever respect me, or acknowledge that my Spellsmithing Runes are better than anything any of them will ever create!”

“Especially Elussin,” Kisa said softly.

“*Especially* Elussin! He turned his back on Spellsmithing. He was there when I discovered its first axioms and showed what they could do. But he just scoffed at it before leaving to go tinker with the old traditions just like everyone else. He made the *wrong choices* and life *rewarded* him for them! He’s got patrons, renown, position, money — everything he could need or want. I did the right thing, and all life’s given *me* is failure and rejection.”

“It’s not fair,” Kisa said in her most sympathetic tone.

“And now he’s *here*. Practically every day I see him walking across the courtyard with a pack of students following along at his heels. Every time I turn around someone’s talking about him or reading one of those pathetic books he wrote. Gods above, I wish I could smash that smug, handsome face of his!” Her hands clenched into fists; she trembled with barely suppressed rage.

“Uhhh... all right...” Kisa said, edging backward a bit.

“Just for *once* I’d like to see *him* suffer. See *him* in pain. See *him* get what he deserves!”

“Vitarra, dear, don’t get so upset,” Kisa said soothingly. “He’s not worth it. You can prove you’re better than he is with your work.”

Some of the tension drained from Vitarra’s body; her hands unclenched slightly. “If the Magisters will ever listen. But I’d still like to see him bleed.” She stalked away, lost in dark, scarlet fantasies.



Three days later Vitarra knocked on Master Melroe’s door. “Come in,” he said.

“You sent word that you wanted to see me, Ma...” She stopped short. Elussin occupied *her* chair, the overstuffed one nearest Melroe’s. He flashed her that smile of his, the one that had melted hundreds of women’s hearts; it was all she could do to keep her disgust from showing. “Master Melroe?” she finished.

“Yes, my dear. Please sit down.” She sat in the uncomfortable chair. “Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you, Master. What can I do for you?”

“I have a project I’d like you to help with.”

“Of course, Master Melroe, I’m always glad to work with you.”

“Not me, my dear,” Melroe said. “Master Elussin here. We’ve discussed his work, and I think some of his theories may relate to your own studies. I’d like the two of you to combine your work. Together I’m sure you’ll make more discoveries than either of you would separately.”

“O-of course, Master Melroe,” Vitarra said. Her mind raced as she tried to think of some way out of Melroe’s proposed torture.

“Vitarra and I always made a good team before,” Elussin said. “I’ve looked at some of your work, Vitarra — you’ve made some amazing strides.” His condescending tone infuriated Vitarra, but Master Melroe didn’t seem to notice it, or didn’t care.

“I’ve prepared a summary of the relevant parts of my work over the past several years, and some notes about how I think your Spellsmithing and my own research could enhance each other.” He handed her a leather folder thick with pages of parchment. “Look it over and let me know what you think. But of course I doubt any of us will get much work done for a while, with the Collegium Ball coming up tomorrow. “Why don’t we plan to meet in the Atheneum two days after the Ball?”

“Very well,” Vitarra said. “Now if you’ll please excuse me, Masters, I’ll start on this right away.”



Vitarra retreated to her desk in the Atheneum. It wouldn’t take long to find the flaws in Elussin’s work and think of a way to convince Master Melroe to change his mind.

She didn’t look up again for two hours.

At last she stopped reading, her mind numb from astonishment. Elussin’s research, his observations, his speculations — this was the work of... of *genius*. His insights into First Age Sorcery agreed with her own, and in some places took the first steps *beyond* the current state of her work. His notes had already given her half a dozen ideas for ways to refine Spellsmithing. Every line, every paragraph, heaped her bitterness higher, for now she didn’t even have the satisfaction of superiority.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. Elussin grasped the importance of Spellsmithing. She could tell the gods-cursed son of an Abyssal had thought about it ever since he learned she’d continued working on it all these years. He, and he alone of all the scholars she’d ever told about it, understood its power and potential. He’d spoken to several of the Masters about it. Despite their dismissive opinions he wanted to work with her on it — not as master and student, but full partners, so he seemed to say. That meant money, the serious attention of her colleagues, recognition of her achievements.

But what did all that matter if she needed his help to get it? If she couldn’t succeed on her own, she wasn’t succeeding at all. *Elussin* was succeeding,

just like he always did. Only this time he'd let her follow along behind him as everyone showered him with praise and academic glory. A year, two years, from now and everyone would think he invented Spellsmithing.

Slowly she shut the folder. She put it in her lower desk drawer, turned the key in the lock. She stood up and walked away.

• • •

"Now they want me to *work* with him!" Vitarra said.

"What?" Kisa said.

"*Work* with him!" Vitarra said. "The gods know how many hours I'll have to spend listening to him theorize, or tell stories about his days as an 'adventurer.'"

"Can't you just refuse?"

"No — if I do it's just one more thing they can hold against me."

Kisa didn't say anything.

"You know what's worse? He'll get all the credit. He'll take my ideas, maybe even *all* my work, and somehow everyone will think it's *his*. He couldn't recognize the value of Spellsmithing twelve years ago, but he's beginning to figure it out now. Once he tells the Conclave about it, they'll conveniently forget that it's mine. Everyone will think he discovered it even though he's the one who walked away from it in the first place! It makes me so mad I could...."

I could kill him.

"You could what?"

"I... nothing, never mind. I'm just upset about all this. Forget about it. I'll talk to you later."

Vitarra kept her face calm as she walked away, but her mind whirled. I could kill him. She'd said things like that a thousand times before, the same as everyone, but she'd never really meant them. That unpleasant feeling returned to the pit of her stomach, colder and heavier than when she petitioned the Conclave. *Could I do it? Could I strike a man down and live with myself afterward?* But an even stronger sensation drowned out the dread: a savage, primeval joy at the thought of Elussin dead, the injustice of his existence erased with a single stroke.

She had to find somewhere to think about this, someplace quiet. She headed for home without even saying goodbye to Kisa.

• • •

The next dawn found her lost in speculation. The thought of killing Elussin pleased her more and more, but how to do it? She couldn't overpower him physically. She didn't dare start a magical duel with him even though she knew she'd win — if anyone realized she'd caused Elussin's death, it would all be

for nothing. She didn't have any poison. She smithed several new spells that had the potential power to kill him unseen, but the results left her dissatisfied. She couldn't guarantee any of them would inflict a lethal wound, and she dared not simply injure him.

Eventually hunger interrupted her work — followed by the realization that she'd almost forgotten about the Collegium Ball that night! She still had to finish getting her dress ready. Unlike Elussin she couldn't afford to shop in the city; she had to make do with whatever she could sew for herself.



Vitarra tugged at the collar of her gown. She hated dressing up, especially in the warmth of summer. The whole evening was going to be miserable — a slap in the face from the stupid and undeservedly successful. Just the thought of seeing them set her teeth on edge.

The liveried servant at the door read her invitation, looked askance at her for coming unaccompanied, and announced her: “*Journeyman* Vitarra of the Collegium.” She went inside, helped herself to a glass of wine, and glanced around. She didn't see Kisa or any of her other friends, but recognized plenty of people: Master Pargoss, already drunk; Lady Arrayne, who attended every party in the city; Lord Benskot, who walked with a distinctive limp and the help of an elegant cane due to an injury suffered years ago; a score of others.

And Elussin. Of course he was there, holding court. He stood with his wife among a large group of toadies; masters, nobles, wealthy merchants. They hung on his every word, laughed at his jests, curried his favor. No doubt most of them had given him money for his meaningless research. More than ever she relished the thought of killing him. All she needed was the right method and the right opportunity.

The solution occurred to her as she discussed theories about First Age binding-spells with Masters Beckford and Drouben. She quickly excused herself and found a high-backed chair away from everyone so she could consider it without being disturbed.

The Rune of Singular Hate, the old grimoires called it — a curse blacker than black, born of the virulent passions that sparked the long wars between the members of the Dynasty during the Empress's early reign. It unraveled the victim's life-force, and no Charm or Sorcery could ward someone against it. The few who survived it were crippled for the rest of their lives. But the Rune exacted a price: one-tenth of the life-force of he who cast it.

Was it worth the cost? If the Rune didn't kill Elussin it would reduce him to nothing, his wit and looks and strength blown away like smoke from a fire. He'd never go on another adventure, never write another book, never condescend to her from his smug pinnacle of success. But what would it take from her? Physical weakness didn't concern her, but would she become less

intelligent, less insightful? Would she be able to continue her work — or even understand it?

She toyed with a lock of her hair. It wasn't like her to hesitate — in fact she despised indecisiveness — but the dangers of the Rune terrified her as much as the thought of making Elussin suffer thrilled her. Perhaps she could smith a spell as powerful as the Singular Hate but lacking the awful price? Or one to restore her lost life-force later? She shook her head. It didn't seem likely, even with Spellsmithing. If either were possible, some sorcerer would have found a way to do it centuries ago. Anything worth having came with a cost. She'd told Master Maspar as much when she defended Spellsmithing before the Conclave; the Rune was another aspect of that truth.

A burst of laughter drew her attention back to the Ball. Through the throngs of beautifully-dressed people she saw Elussin laughing with his rich friends, and her soul-deep bitterness at last came into full bloom. More than anything she wanted to hurt him — to exorcise her own pain by passing it on to the man who ought to feel it. He didn't deserve even a fraction of the fame and success he'd achieved. She had devised the greatest advancement in the history of Sorcery, but everyone overlooked her, scorned her, insulted her work. It was unjust. Unfair.

She knew how to balance the scales — and that would be worth any price.

Without taking her eyes off Elussin she spoke the Rune. No one heard her over the noise of the party, no one noticed what she did. But dozens saw Elussin the Brave stumble, stagger, and drop his goblet of wine. Several people reached out but failed to catch him as he fell to the marble floor. He moaned in pain once, hands clawing at the stone beneath him, and then lay still.

Gasps of concern filled the room; Ashava screamed. Vitarra couldn't hold back a wolfish smile; she was glad all eyes had turned to the dying Elussin so her expression of triumph didn't give her away.

Then the force of the Rune struck her, exacting the toll for its power. A breathless groan escaped her lips as the tenth part of her life-force leeches from her body. She clutched at the arms of her chair with all her strength. A lesser woman would have fainted, but she refused to give in to such weakness.

She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them she saw someone approaching and nearly panicked, but realized it was only Lady Arrayne.

"My dear, are you all right? You've gone so pale."

Vitarra thought quickly. "Yes, Lady Arrayne, I... I'm fine. It's just... Elussin. He and I are... old friends. I'm worried about him."

"Oh, my dear!" Lady Arrayne said, bending over to pat her hand. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Can I get you some wine?"

"I would be most grateful, my Lady." Arrayne gestured for a servant, and soon Vitarra was sipping Ensharta white from a thin goblet. By intense force of

will she kept her hand from shaking until Lady Arrayne left her side. When no one was paying her any attention, she stood up and walked shakily to the door.



The sun shining through her window awakened Vitarra the next morning after a deep, dreamless sleep. She lay in bed for a few moments, savoring her feelings. A pang of guilt made itself known, but it was a tiny thing compared to the delicious thought of a world without Elussin — a just world where he'd paid the price for his folly.

She arose, stretched, washed, dressed. After breakfasting on a small apple she gathered up her things and walked over to the Collegium. The bag of books on her shoulder felt heavier than usual, and her feet seemed less sure. The short walk to the Atheneum exhausted her. Fortunately the Rune seemed to have left her mind unimpaired.

She sat down at her desk and began to work, but for once she couldn't concentrate on the book in front of her. Something was... wrong. She'd overlooked something, and that was intolerable, like a sharp stone in her shoe.

In a sickening rush of realization it came to her: magistrate Charms! If the City Guard or some official decided Elussin's death deserved investigation, would the arcane flows lead straight to her?

She sat back and thought. They might. She couldn't know for certain, having never studied that type of magic closely, but she had to allow for the possibility. She needed to disrupt and disperse those flows right away.

No Charm or Sorcery known to her could conceal her deed from every possible mystic method of investigation — but she had a tool no other Exalted possessed. She could create a new spell to do what she wanted using the Spellsmithing Runes.

She pulled out a sheet of parchment and began crafting. Two hours later she finished — the calculations balanced, the Runes interlocked properly. All that remained was to cast her new spell, Rending the Occult Weft, and all arcane traces of the Rune would vanish. Not even the strongest Solar sorcerer would be able to uncover her connection to Elussin's death.



Vitarra walked quickly through the wintry streets, head down, clutching her satchel of books and papers beneath her to protect it from the spitting rain as much as possible. As she entered the Collegium's courtyard she turned left toward the meeting hall instead of right toward the Atheneum. The Conclave had sent her a message to attend upon them, though it did not say why. Thinking about it had kept her up most of the night. Did they intend to dismiss her from the Collegium? Did they know something about how she'd punished Elussin? Outwardly she maintained her usual composure, but her stomach had tied itself in knots.

The Conclave was waiting for her when she arrived. “Thank you for joining us, Journeyman Vitarra,” Magister Alfrin said.

“I am at the Conclave’s service as always, Magister. What is this about?”

“Are you familiar with the circumstances surrounding Master Elussin’s unfortunate death several months ago?”

She kept her features calm. “Yes, Magister, I was at the Ball when it happened. He had a seizure and collapsed.”

“Collapsed,” Magister Maspar scoffed. “I still say it’s suspicious. Probably one of those merchants poisoned him so they didn’t have to support his work anymore.”

“Peace, Maspar,” Alfrin said. “We’ve done all we could and found nothing. Elussin isn’t the first man to die from something even Twilight Charms couldn’t identify.” Maspar didn’t look convinced, but he said nothing.

Alfrin turned back to Vitarra. “Master Elussin’s passing has left us with something of a dilemma. He was working on an important project to translate some ancient manuscripts that may provide significant information about First Age Sorcery. As a new master he had many apprentices but no journeyman yet — no one we can assign the project to. So we want you to carry on his work.”

“Me?” she said, digging her fingernails into her palm to keep from laughing.

“Yes, you,” said Magister Baurbain. “You’re the most experienced journeyman at the Collegium, and you’ve already spent years studying the Sorcery of the early celestials. When my good friend Lady Arrayne told me that you and Elussin once worked together, it only seemed fitting that you should continue his efforts. Is there some reason you shouldn’t?”

“Your pardon, Magister, I’m simply surprised by the... great honor you’ve shown me. Of course I’m glad to work on the project.”

“Here are Master Elussin’s notes,” Magister Alfrin said, holding out a thick leather folder. “The original documents he found on his adventures are preserved in the Archives; we will instruct Master Archivist to give you full access to them. Naturally, we will transfer the Collegium funds allocated to Elussin for this work to you.”

“Thank you, Magisters, for your confidence in me. I shall bring all my learning to bear on this work to honor Master Elussin’s memory,” Vitarra said, bowing slightly so they wouldn’t see her smirk.

She took the folder and left the hall. Most of the people around her had grim expressions thanks to the wintry weather, but the irony of her situation brought a grin to her face that no amount of cold rain could erase.

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Vitarra tossed the leather folder onto her desk in the Atheneum and sat down. She'd have to read it eventually if she couldn't find some way to distract the Magisters, but she didn't intend start now.

In fact — maybe she wouldn't have to start at all. She motioned Serafina, one of the senior apprentices, over to her. "Yes, Journeyman?" she said, speaking softly like everyone did in the Atheneum.

"I've got an assignment for you. The Magisters asked me to study these papers, but I have no interest in them, so I want you to do it. It's probably a waste of time, but read it and tell me what you think."

"Of course, Journeyman," she said, her pleasure at the opportunity plain on her face. She bowed and returned to her desk, where she began reading Elussin's notes eagerly.

She scowled at the sight for a moment, but then shook off her annoyance. She refused to let Elussin distract her anymore; she had important things to do. She'd think about him later, if she thought about him at all. She pushed the leather folder aside, opened one of her grimoires, and continued her work.



THE CIRCLE WILL BE BROKEN

by Matt Forbeck

The explosion that rocked the Blessed Isle didn't disturb Cutting Remark so much as the fact that he hadn't seen it coming. As one of the Chosen of Saturn — the Maiden of Endings — little ever surprised him. When you could follow threads in the tapestry of Fate as if they were ribbons that glowed like stars, and you'd studied that tapestry for all of your several hundred years of life, you rarely found anything to startle you, much less shock you to your core.

The blast that shook the very bedrock of the empire's capital, though, had come out of nowhere, like someone had taken the sharp end of a stiletto and thrust it through the fabric coalescing from the productive end of the loom of Fate. The number of lives it snuffed out — the threads that it severed — horrified Cutting Remark, but the fact that he could no longer see beyond the hole the blast had created bothered him most of all.

"It's another exigent, husband," Joyful Hummingbird said as she fluttered into their quarters, knowing his meditations would have already been shattered. Quick as a curious hornet, she leaned up and stung his cheek with a sweet kiss. "We must away to the Imperial City and deal with it."

"This is no simple exigent." He tried to steady himself, not wishing to let her see how disturbed he was.

Fortunately, his assistant, Soaring Shale, came into the room then and handed him a scroll tied with a black ribbon. "As you requested," the young man said in an undertaker's tone.

Cutting Remark unfurled the scroll and grimaced at the word there. They only confirmed his terrifying suspicions.

"Are the others ready?" Cutting Remark arched an eyebrow at his petite wife. "You may have been chosen by Mercury, but our compatriots in the Circle of Protection seem sometimes to have been picked by Sloth."

"I've already alerted them." She tugged at his silken sleeve. "They will beat us to the Ebony Office if we don't hustle."

“You have enough hustle for all of us, beloved.” Cutting Remark felt his bones creak in protest as he allowed her to pull him to his feet. As one of the Exalted, he might be next to immortal, but the years he’d gathered still showed the growing distance in the gap that remained between himself and the gods.

She favored him with a flash of a smile. “If only that were true.”

Joyful Hummingbird ignored her husband’s protests and guided him through the halls of Yu-Shan, the eternal city of the gods. Their quarters provided them with a breathtaking vista that included an unobstructed view of the Jade Pleasure Dome, in which the gods vied — through the Games of Divinity — for a fleeting bit of supremacy. But the offices they shared with the other three members of the Circle of Protection lay deep inside the Bureau of Destiny, a place that most of those who lived in Yu-Shan would much rather forget existed.

From the way the light of day beat down from the sky, Cutting Remark saw instantly that the Unconquered Sun had prevailed in the Games of Divinity for the moment, but he knew it couldn’t last. The time would come around for Luna or one of the Five Maidens — including his own Saturn — to foil the supreme god of Creation for a moment and provide Yu-Shan with a blessed break from the heat.

“Should we not simply rally with the others in the Imperial City?” Cutting Remark asked. “I don’t believe we can afford to waste time jawing with Flashing Smile.”

“You just don’t like the way he flirts with me,” Joyful Hummingbird said with a crooked smile.

“I don’t like the way he flirts with everyone. Everything! The man would romance a glass of wine.”

“And make it grateful to him for drinking it.”

“We don’t have the time for such ridiculous frivolities.” Cutting Remark dug in his heels and brandished the scroll Soaring Shale had given him. “This is no ordinary exigent we’re dealing with this time. You can see that the bureaucracy has adorned this one with a Black Flag.”

Joyful Hummingbird giggled. Only Cutting Remark would have heard the current of nervousness that ran beneath it. “That’s just a silly theory those sheaf shufflers have been pushing at us for the past year. No one’s actually encountered a Black Flag in the wild.”

“Not until now.”

Joyful Hummingbird froze like a fly caught in amber and stared at her husband in horror. “You’re not joking. And yes, you do. All the time. Most people just don’t notice.”

“This thing has already killed scores of people, and it will not stop — ”

“Unless we stop it.” She shoved Cutting Remark back in the opposite direction. “Go. Make your way to Gate Ten. I will gather the others.”

He grabbed her by the arm. “You can get there faster than any of us, and you can do the most good. You go. I will rally the rest and bring them close behind.”

“Are you sure that’s the right plan?”

He shook his head. “I am certain of nothing — now, least of all — but this is the best I can see.”

Joyful Hummingbird gave her husband a sharp nod, squeezed his hand, and then was off. She departed so fast she was little more than a blur. He breathed in the breeze she left behind and held it for a moment, then stomped off to find the others.

By the time Cutting Remark reached the Ebony Office, he was already angry and out of breath, but the others stood there waiting for him. He opened his mouth to explain the matter to them, but they charged toward him and swept him up in their path instead.

“It’s about time,” Shining Might said. She carried her sword before her, slashing at the empty air as her long strides zipped her into the lead. “We haven’t had this much excitement in a decade.”

“I would have preferred that we’d gone longer,” Regretful Choice said with a low grunt. “Do we not have other troubles deserving our attention?”

“Your beloved paperwork will take care of itself for a day.” While the old man might be the nominal leader of the Circle of Protection, Cutting Remark didn’t care for his slavish adherence to the rules of the Celestial Bureaucracy.

Regretful Choice cleared his throat and struggled to keep up with others. His walking stick only helped so much. “It builds up fast,” he said. “Perhaps you’d care to help with the overflow this incident is bound to cause us.”

“He’ll be too busy studying the new warps in the fabric of Fate,” Flashing Smile said with a lewd wink. “Isn’t that what your lovely wife calls it these days?”

Cutting Remark clenched his fists and fought the urge to use them to knock out Flashing Smile’s teeth. “This time around, why don’t you just shut up and preen at the rubberneckers so the rest of us can get some actual work done?”

Flashing Smile didn’t miss a beat. “Plan A then? If you’re not tired of going with that old standard, then I suppose neither am I.”

“Less talk,” Shining Might said as she led the others through a doorway that terminated in a courtyard sitting at the bottom of a wide shaft that bored deep beneath the city’s crust. Glancing rays of sunshine illuminated the shaft’s top edge, but only a circle of torches alleviated the darkness in which the four Exalts stood. In the center of the torches rested a black-shelled sphere as large as a dragon’s egg.

The lacquered egg hovered a foot off the ground, neither resting on the stones beneath it nor repulsed from them. A circular door had been cut into the

side of it, and another open circle sat on the front of it, cushioned and ready to hold the aerial rickshaw's driver. Regretful Choice climbed into that seat while the others squeezed into the seats inside the shell and pulled the door closed behind them.

"It would have been faster to take a cloud," Cutting Remark said.

"But that would have exposed us to this exigent you're so worried about." Shining Might spoke as she examined the edge of her blade glinting in the firelight filtering in through the rickshaw's window.

"I never knew you to fear exposure," Flashing Smile said with a lick of his lips.

She skewered him with an unforgiving gaze. "My only concern is for you and Cutting Remark."

"You don't care for the safety of our fearless leader?" Shining Remark jerked his head toward where Regretful Choice sat. The rickshaw leaped into the sky and zipped straight up the shaft.

"When have I ever?"

For not the first time, Cutting Remark wondered why the Ebony Office had ever assembled the Circle of Protection. With the exception of Joyful Hummingbird, he didn't like any of the others — and he knew they felt the same about him.

"You can drop me off at home after this," he said. "My wife and I will be resigning our posts."

Flashing Smile arched a thick eyebrow at Cutting Remark. "Does she know about that?"

"Why are we doing this?" As the rickshaw emerged into the daylight and zipped into the cloud-speckled sky, Cutting Remark gestured beyond the rickshaw's confines to the world around them.

"Because it's your job," Regretful Choice said over his shoulder. His voice passed through a porthole in the wall that separated him from the rickshaw's passenger compartment.

"I mean, why are we doing this? Why doesn't the Ebony Office assemble a team of people who work well together instead?"

Flashing Smile snorted in amusement. "That's never been part of the plan, has it?"

Shining Might stuck out her jaw with defiance. "The Ebony Office selected one of us from each of the Five Maidens to give each of the goddesses equal representation."

"And to remove each of us from our previous departments," Cutting Remark said. "Each of us has a flag in our records that reads, 'Does not play well with others,' I'm sure."

“Is this not a job that needs doing though?” Shining Might’s green eyes glittered at him. “Or do you believe we should allow the fabric of Fate to unravel before us?”

“Not every problem can be resolved with a sword.” Cutting Remark gave her blade an acid glance. “Or do you always try to mend things with a knife?”

“Perhaps they don’t actually want us to succeed,” Flashing Smile said.

Cutting Remark couldn’t tell if the man was joking or not. “Perhaps they just need better tools.”

The guards at Gate Ten held them up for only a moment outside of the sparkling silver archway that framed the Yu-Shan side of the passageway from here in Heaven to the so-called real world known as Creation. One of the great benefits of being part of the Circle of Protection, Cutting Remark had to admit, was the deference most people showed to them, even lower-level bureaucrats. When the guards saw Regretful Choice driving the aerial rickshaw, they usually waved the vehicle right on through.

“We’re sorry, sir,” one of the guards said to Regretful Choice. “But the Imperial City is having a particularly bad day. We’ve been advised to block most travel into the area until the matter is resolved.”

“We are here to assist with that resolution,” the old man said. The guard let him through with a wordless nod.

Regretful Choice guided the rickshaw toward the arch, and with a wave of his hand, the glimmering doors beneath the arch shimmered as if bathed in unseen moonlight. They swung wide and revealed a long hallway behind them.

The hallway was just large enough to accommodate the rickshaw, which had been built for this sort of travel. It scudded through the passage, right past a trio of guardian celestial lions whose coats and manes gleamed with a reddish-golden hue, an interior starlight highlighting their edges.

The moment the rickshaw emerged into Creation and shot into the sky, Cutting Remark knew the troubles there were far worse than even he had feared. Columns of black and bitter smoke smeared the clear blue sky, and screams and wails echoed from every corner, piercing through the crackling of the dozens of blazes threatening to consume the Imperial City.

Flashing Smile loosed a low whistle at the swathe of destruction that had been cut through the city’s heart. “This place has always been a poor reflection of Yu-Shan,” he said, “but I’ve rarely seen it so impoverished.”

Shining Might edged forward in her seat, her fist wrapped around the hilt of her blade. “But where is the creature? The thing that did this — the exigent that caused all this destruction — shouldn’t we be able to see it?”

Regretful Choice leveled off the rickshaw and brought it into a wide circle, giving them a panoramic view of the city. The exigent they’d come to stop had slashed its way through a series of buildings, laying waste to everything in its path, and then it seemed to disappear.

“More importantly,” Cutting Remark said as he peered down through one of the rickshaw’s viewports, “where is my wife?”

“I’m sure that’s not the first time you’ve had to say that,” Flashing Smile said as he slouched back in the seat across from Cutting Remark.

“I’d threaten your life for your slander,” Cutting Remark said with a sneer, “but the line of those you’ve already offended is too long for me to stand in. Even immortals can only wait so many years.”

“You cut me with your words, old friend.”

“I’m sorry.” Cutting Remark’s gaze traced the carved canyon of destruction toward its terminal end. “I meant to run you through.”

“There!” Shining Might stabbed a sharp finger at a block a half a league past the smoking hole in the ground where the exigent had vanished.

At first, Cutting Remark didn’t see what she meant. Then he saw a telltale blur of movement — a flash of brilliant yellow — that he knew so well. “My love,” he breathed.

The sight of her thrilled him at first, to know that she was out there, not too far, and alive. The scale of the destruction had staggered him more than he could ever admit to anyone but her. Now that he could see her, though, he had to be at her side.

“Bring us down to her,” he shouted at Regretful Choice. “Now!”

“Hold but a moment.” The old man hesitated. He brought the craft to bear in the right direction, but he held their altitude steady as he studied the land below.

Shining Might gasped in horror. “We don’t have a moment.”

Cutting Remark followed her gaze. What he saw drove an icicle into his heart.

The land beneath Joyful Hummingbird’s feet was trembling. To be able to see it from this height, Cutting Remark realized, it must have been rolling about like a typhoon-stricken sea.

Streets buckled and gave. Buildings shuddered and toppled. People screamed and died.

Joyful Hummingbird dashed through it all like a gull moving over the waves. She rode above the chaos, which was unable to touch her. Here and there she would dive down into it and pluck someone from the roiling land and haul them to safety. Then she turned back around and did it again and again and again.

With every beat — with every person his wife saved — Cutting Remark’s heart swelled with pride and contracted with terror. She shamed him with her bravery. Moments ago, he’d declared that the two of them would leave the Circle of Protection behind over personal conflicts with their coworkers, and at

the very same moment she'd been risking her life to rescue as many innocent souls as she could.

Every other time, though, when Cutting Remark had seen his wife leap into action, he'd known what would happen. He'd studied her thread on the Loom of Fate more closely than even his own. He knew where it kinked and burred and wove.

And — most importantly — he knew where it ended. Where it was supposed to end. And how.

But this rogue exigent — this Black Flag — had ruined that. Cutting Remark knew nothing for certain any longer, and the closer their threads wove toward the hole the creature had created, the less certain their length became.

"Get down there!" Cutting Remark reached through the porthole at the front of the rickshaw and slapped Regretful Choice in the back of his graying head. "Now!"

The old man glared back at Cutting Remark like a cobra about to spit venom. Cutting Remark didn't balk. He raised his hand to smack Regretful Choice again. "We don't have time to argue about this!"

Flashing Smile reached up to intervene and gave Cutting Remark's hand a gentle push away. "You're exceeding my graciousness. We deal with exigents all the time. There's no reason to be rude about it."

Cutting Remark gaped at the man. "You have no idea, do you?"

"About what?" Flashing Smile said with a carefree shrug.

Cutting Remark could no longer stand the man's leering nonchalance. He punched the Chosen of Venus in the face.

Flashing Smile rolled back cursing, blood spurting from his nose. Cutting Remark considered hitting him again, but he had more important things to concern him. He started for the rickshaw's door, but the presence of Shining Might's blade at his throat brought him up short.

"You just crossed the line." The woman snarled at him with enough fury to make Cutting Remark wonder if he'd made a fatal mistake.

"You don't understand," he said. "This is no ordinary exigent."

"I think we can see that from what it's doing down there." Shining Might scowled at Cutting Remark's idiocy.

"It's a Black Flag!"

"That's just a crackpot theory," Regretful Choice said. The old man had turned around to glare at Cutting Remark through the porthole. "What sort of gods would trade away a boon like an exigent? The Unconquered Sun doesn't scatter such treasures like candy before children."

"Angry gods or bitter gods or stupid gods — the Maidens know we have enough of those — or weak gods or whatever. The point is that it's bound to

happen. It only takes one of them to barter away an exigent to someone with the ability to twist it into something dark and dangerous. It only has to happen once!”

“We’ve had this conversation before,” Regretful Choice said. “And you have yet to be able to verify any of it for us.”

Cutting Remark’s eyes grew wide, and he threw himself against the porthole in the door, uncaring about Shining Might’s blade and the long, bloody line it left on his throat. “You want proof?” he shouted. “There it is!”

The others gawked in horror as they spotted what Cutting Remark had seen. The exigent — his so-called Black Flag — erupted from the center of a building that had been shaking like a leaf in a storm. The pagoda-style roof rocketed up into the sky, missing the rickshaw by yards.

As the roof sailed past the rickshaw, Cutting Remark could finally see the creature that had shrugged it into the air. It was shaped like a severed arm terminating in a fist made of tentacles puckered with blisters that glowed like the heart of a forge. A forest of log-sized cilia squirmed underneath it, pushing it along faster than Cutting Remark would have guessed possible. Covered in scales and oozing wounds that bled what seemed like molten steel, it stretched as long and wide as a street, and it thrashed about like a dying beast, trashing entire buildings with every agonized lash.

Each time it struck, it slaughtered a dozen innocents. Each time it hammered down, the ground around it burst into flames. Each time its tentacles rose back into the sky, the air filled with anguished screams.

And Joyful Hummingbird zipped around it, weaving in and out of its mortal threats, her golden silks blurring behind her as she moved.

“Get me down there!” Cutting Remark bellowed as he kicked open the rickshaw’s door, which sailed off into the sky. “Or I will tear this rickshaw apart!”

With a sharp nod from Regretful Choice, the rickshaw plunged toward the earth, and it was all Cutting Remark could do to hold on. In his mind, the fabric of Fate continued to shred. Everything seemed lost and uncertain and more dizzying than he could bear, and he could only do his level best to cling to the rickshaw’s doorway — and to the emotion most foreign to him: hope.

As a Chosen of Saturn, Cutting Remark knew about Fate. He knew about endings. He knew how things were supposed to be. Hope never entered his mind, never wormed its way into his spirit.

Now, though, unmoored from destiny as he had become, he discovered that hope was the only thing left to him, and he held it to him with unbridled terror.

Despite his fear, Cutting Remark leaped from the rickshaw as it veered near the ground, and he reached for the twisted monster as he went. In his mind, he could see the way the thing should move — the way he hoped it would go — and he stretched out for it only to find it was no longer there.

He sailed past the creature and tumbled across a field of burning rubble, cursing Fate and its unexpected fickleness the entire way. The broken bricks scraped his skin, and fire scorched his clothes, but he rolled to his feet as he came to a bloodied stop and did his best to reassess the situation.

The creature towered high above him, about to rain down death once more. The air resounded with a choir of screams. Blood trickled down Cutting Remark's face, and he didn't know what to do.

He hadn't used a weapon in over a century. With his knowledge of Fate, he was best able to wound his targets with his words. He could describe someone's end to them in such excruciating detail that they would beg for him to alter their destiny — or even bring their doom to themselves.

But this creature, this beast, this gigantic monster — did it even have ears? And even if it could hear Cutting Remark's words, what could he say to it? Its destiny seemed to be to shred Fate, rendering his verbiage useless, making anything he could summon himself to say nothing but the most transparent lie.

A pair of youths — a girl and boy barely more than adolescents — emerged from the end of the imprint one of the creature's blows had left. Scraped, bloodied, and barely alive, they stared up at the monster in stark horror and began to scream.

The world seemed to freeze for an instant as Cutting Remark realized that he recognized one of the youths. The young woman — who was named Blazing Path — had a remarkable destiny ahead of her. She would someday become one of the Sidereal Exalted, a chosen of one of the Five Maidens, like Cutting Remark and the rest of the Circle of the Protection. Her acts would echo down the halls of Fate and someday become the stuff of legends.

At the moment, though, “would” had become “should.” The arrival of the Black Flag had changed everything, snarling and severing the threads of Fate in horrible, unpredictable ways. The only thing that seemed certain to Cutting Remark at the moment was that the woman and her young friend were about to die, and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

At that moment, a platoon of guards in the Emperor's employ emerged from the shattered side of a building and raced toward the creature across an open stretch of ground, their blades held high, their voices raw and loud. The monster's fist of tentacles hovered over them for a moment, just long enough for a trio of them in the lead to swipe at the thing's lower section with their swords. Where the metal touched the monster, it melted, peeling away from the blades in glowing-hot stripes that hissed and burned wherever they touched.

At the violent contact, the creature's tentacles splayed open like the arms of a starfish, and an ear-blasting bellow erupted from their center. The guards cheered in triumph, and the entire platoon set to slashing at the monster with renewed hope, drawing white-hot fluid from its skin with each cut.

And then the creature's fist came slamming down again.

Two of the guards were crushed instantly. Another half dozen were knocked aside like toys on an angry child's table. Others became entangled in the tentacles, which snaked out to snag them by any loose limb.

The creature then hauled its hapless victims in toward the massive maw hidden in the palm of its grotesque hand. The ensnared screeched in horror until their breath left them, leaving only a revolting squishing and crunching sound in sudden absence of their protests.

"Finish the creature," Joyful Hummingbird said in Cutting Remark's ear.

He snapped his neck about to see her standing beside him, sweat streaking through the blood seeping down from a cut above her hairline. He reached out to embrace her, and she melted into his arms.

"You need no weapon, my love," she said. "You are a Chosen of Saturn, the Maiden of Endings. Take that beast and end it."

He began to protest, but she sealed his lips with a kiss. Then she pushed herself away and was gone before he could complain. "I love you," he said, hoping that she could somehow still hear him.

Having finished with the guards, the creature let loose another ear-splitting bellow, and it was all Cutting Remark could do to focus on the monster and bring all his senses to bear on it.

It wasn't that Cutting Remark hadn't killed before. As one of Saturn's exalts, he'd ended the lives of more people than he could count, ensuring that their destinies fit with the pattern of Fate's plans. But those deeds had been chosen for him ahead of time. For this effort, he would have to concoct a plan of his own.

"Make way!" Shining Might shouted as she barged onto the scene. Cutting Remark hadn't seen the rickshaw land, but of course she would be the first one — besides himself — to enter the fight. She always led with her blade without regard for the consequences, confident that her skills would carry the day.

Shining Might charged straight up a pile of rubble that led up near the monster's flank and leaped off its peak. Her gleaming blade flashed above her as she brought it down in a double-handed overhead swing. It struck the beast's side and clanged off it like the clapper on a bell.

Shining Might fell to the ground, her head vibrating and senseless. The beast's flagellating fist turned toward her, and Cutting Remark's breath caught in his chest. He expelled it in astonishment an instant later when he spotted the young woman charging toward the downed Exalt to help her.

The youth scooped up Shining Might's sword and brandished it before her. From her stance, someone might have taught her how to use such a weapon, but Cutting Remark knew that would do her little good. If Shining Might couldn't cleave through the monster's skin, the girl had no chance at all.

Not without his help.

A violet glow began to emanate from Cutting Remark as he called upon the powers his Maiden had granted him. As the glow reached his eyes, it affected his vision, and the monster's skin warped and morphed before him.

In an instant, Cutting Remark saw that the creature's heart wasn't near the end of its fist or even in the middle of its arm. Instead, it lay in the crook of the elbow on which it leveraged itself upward. The right blow at the right angle would slay it.

"No!" Cutting Remark shouted as he staggered toward the girl. "The elbow! Stab it in the hollow of the elbow!"

The youth glanced in his direction, confused by his outburst. It was then that the beast struck again.

As the mass of tentacles plummeted down toward the mortal girl and her awkward grip on her borrowed blade, Cutting Remark mourned for her, for the glorious life of the Exalted that she would never have. In the blink of an eye, though, his heart broke in half for someone else.

Just before the tentacles squashed the girl for good, a golden streak struck her from the side and knocked her in Cutting Remark's direction. The youth released her grip on the blade, and it skittered across the rubble toward him. He stopped it with his foot.

The girl was safe for now, but Joyful Hummingbird had disappeared in the writhing mass of tentacles that pulsed around her in a furious frenzy.

Aghast, Cutting Remark kicked the blade up into the air with his foot and caught it in midair. A wordless shout on his lips, he charged the gigantic beast, forcing himself not to try to slice his beloved free — and fail — but to attack straight at the monster's heart instead.

He reversed his grip on the sword and brought it down in a double-handed strike, plunging it straight into the softest part of the great beast's elbow. His aim proved true, and he felt the blade slice through the monster's sinews, slide past its tendons, and stab right into the beating muscle that drove it on its horrific path.

In a moment, it all ended. The creature clenched tight from one end to the other, raising its flopping fist into the air one last time, and then it toppled over, knocking aside one last building as it fell.

It had dropped Joyful Hummingbird as it went. Cutting Remark spotted her in a crumpled heap, the bright yellow of her dress peeking through the crimson stains of her blood, and he dashed straight for her.

There was little left of his wife that anyone but him would recognize. Despite that, he knelt down next to her and held her remains in his arms, letting his sobs wrack his body with his heaving grief.

After a moment, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He glanced up to see the young woman — Blazing Path — standing there, tears rolling down her face.

"I'm sorry." Her voice cracked with the effort, and a moment later, she collapsed to her knees beside him.

"It was not your fault," he said, still clutching all he had left of Joyful Hummingbird to his chest. "It was hers. She chose to give her life to save yours."

The young woman gazed up at him with eyes almost as anguished as his own. "How can I ever repay you?" she said, choking on her words.

"It's impossible," Cutting Remark said as his beloved wife's blood cooled on his skin. "You can't. But you do owe her something for her sacrifice. Just one precious thing."

"What is it?" Hope rose in the young woman's eyes, and Cutting Remark saw it mingle there with dread. "What?"

"It is now your duty to make sure you were worth it."



EXALTED AMONG US

by Natania Barron

Kem always considered himself to be something of a town patriot. As the youngest of Zik Batu's boys, it was part of his duty. It's why he endured the general disgust he felt on a regular basis when it came to the town of Zoatham. To be successful, his eldest brother Mirgis always told him, it was essential to seem as one of the people. Mirgis knew it well, having been the only Batu boy who'd grown up in Chiaroscuro with enough memories to recollect. If the rabble of Zoatham ever got whiff of the fact that you didn't want to be here, that it was below your breeding or sentiment, they'd drag you into the mud and muck like the rest.

It's why Kem knew everyone on a first-name basis. It's why he spent every morning going out of his way to speak to as many folk as he could manage, why he kept a little ledger scroll in his back pocket to make sure he never visited the same stall twice on the same day — they did blur together after a while, even he had to admit — and why he was so infuriated when he found out that Mina Moray had been Exalted.

On some level, Kem knew that it was pure jealousy that motivated him in his anger. But Mina Moray was ordinary. Beyond ordinary. She was the wife of a lowly jerky trader, completely unremarkable in every way except the fact that she was absolutely a non-entity. She was neither pretty nor ugly, loud nor shy, skinny nor fat. Her hair was dun brown with a slight curl, her skin pocked like almost all the other trader wives. She wasn't stupid, she wasn't smart. Or strong. She didn't even have a good sense of humor! Kem remembered trying to make light talk with her a thousand times, and the woman just went about her business without any regard for forging relationships or getting to know her betters.

Why would she be chosen? It was maddening to him. He was convinced it was an error of the gods, and after consuming the better part of a bottle of fortified rice liquor, he decided to fix the math.

The idea of power finding its way into such an ordinary creature made him feel uneasy, as if something was gnawing at the back of his head. The entire

concept wound its way through his thoughts, a persistent, meandering snake of whispering discomfiture.

So he decided to fix the math. He knew better. It wouldn't change things, but it made him feel more grounded to see all the other more deserving names laid out before him, scroll after scroll, in his neat, sharp handwriting. He was just about to reorder the list again when his sister Eyla finally found him.

Eyla came bearing honeyed figs and goat cheese slathered on fresh flatbread, and a flagon of fire wine. In the reflection of the copper decanter he saw her long black hair plaited in a corkscrew curl to the side and studded with silvered leaves. Even if she hadn't been wearing the hairpiece, Kem would have known that she was headed to an important meeting. She smelled of serra flower musk, and she only brought that out on the best occasions. Their father had once compared Eyla and Myra, his sisters, to very valuable whores, and as they got older — and he became more experienced — he began to see why. It seemed every other evening Eyla was out about town with a new prospective husband. Yet she had yet to marry...

"I'm not hungry," Kem said, turning his back from his sister and adjusting the candle.

Eyla shoved him with her hip. "Oh, Kem. I can hear your stomach growling from two floors down. Food is essential to good digestion. If you just drink liquor, it's going give you the runs."

The food did smell good. Dona in the kitchen made the best flatbread in all of Zoatham, and while he'd managed to avoid thinking about eating up and away on the third floor of their manor, now it was a kind of sweet torture.

He lasted about two more breaths before he tore into one of the pieces of flatbread.

"I'm trying to concentrate," he said, avoiding Eyla's gaze again.

"Tam said you've been sending dozens of requests to the Temple, and a flurry have come back. I can't help but be curious as to what has gotten you to be so... devoted."

Kem snorted, upset that his brother had been such a rat, but tried to act unconcerned. "I'm doing some research."

"Star charts?" Eyla said, dragging her finger down the scroll to his left. "How priestly."

"I have questions," Kem said. "I wouldn't expect you to understand. Some of us worry more about our grand scheme in life than what prospective husbands are packing under their robes."

He didn't have to look to know her lips were drawn tight and her eyes wide. But she did not make a quip against him. Instead, she said softly, "The new Exalted is coming to dinner tonight. I thought you'd be interested."

Eyla left very quickly, and Kem went back to his research, more fevered than ever.

Mina Moray. He had been waiting all day for news of her chart. She wasn't born in the city, and while the priests were clearly doing all they could to attain it — the charts of the Exalted were always the most prized, so he'd had to make a hefty investment — they hadn't succeeded yet.

But when the dinner bell rang, nothing had arrived from the Temple. Not a word. Not an apology. Just a breeze through his window.

So Kem Batu reluctantly allowed himself to be prepared for the evening ahead. He had his beard curled, his hair re-braided, and even agreed to wear the saffron and green high robes he'd had commissioned the week before, though he had planned to wear them to his sister Kyala's wedding in a week. In grand scheme of the stars, he supposed showing his solidarity to the first Exalted in Zoatham in recent memory was slightly more important than looking fetching for Kyala's overblown wedding. He'd already had half the girls that would be there, anyway.

Saffron and green were Kem Batu's colors. They had always been his colors. Those precise shades had been with him since he was swaddled in clothing, and they had always defined him in a way he cherished. Had he lived in a bigger city, he might have run into others who shared his name day and year, but in Zoatham he had not.

Or he thought he had not.

Until Mina.

Mina Moray was still a plain, drab, unremarkable woman. Soft in the middle from squirting out three babies in scarcely as many years. Skin tanned from hard labor. Even with all the plaits in her hair, even with the scarves of green and gold around her neck and the glistening robes and the hammered silver kirtle... even among all that she was plain. Plain!

The gods were playing a joke on them all, Kem decided.

Or they were wrong.

He was banking on the latter. And he knew precisely how to test her. The whole scheme had been stewing in his mind since he heard, and the timing couldn't be more perfect. He'd take her to the Silver Sparrow mine, and she'd perish at the hands of the creature there. The creature that only Kem had seen, as a boy of eleven. He had escaped with his life. Barely. It was his badge of honor, and the catalyst for his political career. Scarcely ten years later, he was already far ahead of where his father had been at his age...

Kem's stepmother, Iniana, was beside herself with excitement when she noticed that Kem and Mina were attired in the same colors. She declared it an omen of the most auspicious sort and insisted that they sit together at the head of the table.

"Kem is such a remarkable boy," Iniana said as she wrapped her bony hands around Kem's shoulders and positioned him precisely. "But as the

youngest, he's always struggled to find his place in the world. But this — this!" His stepmother put her thumbs to either side of her nose and prayed a moment before the tears got the better of her and she went about the duties of directing the servants.

Boy. Kem was scarcely five years Iniana's junior, if she was to be believed. He'd heard of women trying to deceive the Gauntlet of their ages before, but in a town as small as Zoatham, he doubted that was possible. Still, she lorded her seniority over Kem like a shield of honor, mentioning their age discrepancy whenever possible.

It was as if she'd forgotten he'd had her once, too.

But then she was just Iniana Colroa, pretty but newly widowed, stuck playing the same games Kem's sisters were now so deft at. Any rung up would have been an improvement, especially considering her first marriage...

Still, embarrassment at the cold, bony hands of his stepmother was the least of Kem's concerns. Getting to the bottom of Mina's clear treachery was the most important task ahead of him, and he went to work measuring her as the complicated dance of feast serving went about around them.

Mina, for all her raiment, looked peaked. Her dark brows stood out vividly on her face, and when Kem went to pass her the crock of oil for her bread, he noticed her hands shaking. Snickering inwardly, he made a great show of holding the crock for her as she ladled the oil on her plate, and spoke to her softly when tears sprung to her eyes.

"I know, this sort of festivity is a little overwhelming," he said to her. "But after a time you'll get used to it. I suppose you'll have to! The only job tougher than a politician is an Exalted, my father used to say."

"I did indeed!" Zik Batu said, hearing one of his favorite aphorisms from across the table. The massive man had somewhat regressed into his white beard in recent years, but his voice still carried the strength and command it had in his youth.

But that's what Kem was counting on. He had chosen his words and his timing precisely, knowing just when his father would be done ogling the kitchen maid, and anticipating the first bite of his food. Unlike Mina, Kem had navigated the deadly snares of the feast table more times than he could count on the hands and fingers of the fifty-odd guests.

Zik held up his flagon to Mina. "Mina Moray, Exalted among us. You are welcome to this table tonight. May the gods shine their faces upon you each and every day you tread this sacred ground, and may Zoatham hold your name in honor among its highest!"

The guests all raised their glasses and cheered, and whether Mina was ungrateful or stupid, Kem wasn't certain but she simply nodded and held her glass high.

Unaccustomed to such quiet guests of honor, Zik cleared his throat and continued, his chest fluffing up with all the pomp he could manage. “Ah, yes. It is with great pleasure that I welcome you and — ah, and the auspicious priests of this holy order...” Zik continued, gesturing to the hooded figures at the doorway. They wouldn’t sit, but they were part of the agreement, Kem had learned. Exalted weren’t allowed to simply go about their lives as usual.

Again, there was a clatter of approval from the assembled guests. Kem noticed a smattering of the wait staff peeking through the curtains now and again. He’d have them chastised for such behavior, but he’d wait until he needed something from them to exact his revenge.

“Tell us now, Mina Moray, Exalted among us, if you are so permitted, the story of... of your... experience. Your awakening. Your... calling, yes. Your calling.” Zik said with an attempt at a smile. Really, Kem knew he was just eager to get through with the toast so he could sink his teeth into the apricot and brandy-soaked gazelle that was already filling the room with its aroma.

Mina stood slowly, her hands shaking. She looked desperately at the priests at the door, both of whom nodded their approval.

What a charlatan. Kem felt a genuine sense of embarrassment for the poor woman. She was either playing the most convincing idiot he’d ever seen, or she was altogether falling apart at the seams of her robe. What were the Gauntlet priests playing at? If they were trying to pass her off as Exalted — and indeed, why couldn’t they, considering they were the ones to authenticate her calling in the first place — why the obvious ruse?

Opening her mouth once, twice, and the closing it again, Mina took a deep breath and steadied herself on the table. Kem almost went to touch her, but noticed out of the corner of his eye that one of the priests stiffened at his movement, and he relaxed in his chair.

“My name is Mina Moray,” she said at last, and there was something of a collective sigh. The food smelled far too good to be tortured so. “You know my year and day, and while I was not born in Zoatham, my home is not far from here. My parents were simple folk... foragers for the local Temple, and devoted. It is for them I have my greatest... the most...”

She trailed off and looked desperately at her guards, who gave her a sign of peace. Mina shook her head as a horse dispelling flies and continued. “I give them the honor of this calling. More than any other. My husband Eno Moray is a meat vendor in the market...”

Meat vendor? Kem had to will himself to keep from laughing. Eno Moray’s inventory could just as easily be stamped “leather” as “meat.”

“...and together we have raised our three children to be upstanding citizens of Zoatham. I have worried after them for many years now, but they will be taken care of, and that is my greatest joy.”

Applause followed. Tears were shed. Kem smiled as best he could, and then, when the thrill had abated, he stood, himself.

“I know, I know it is not the place of a youngest son to speak — but father, will you forgive me a moment?” Kem asked.

Zik, of course, permitted. He knew well enough that Kem could speak well and fast, and that meant dinner was quicker to the table.

“It is with the greatest honor that I welcome you, Mina Moray, Exalted among us, to our table. Your... grace and spirit have moved all of us here tonight,” Kem continued, pressing his hand to his breast and closing his eyes. “And it is with every bit of humility that I can summon, that I may ask of you a boon tonight...”

Kem felt the eyes of the guests move to him, heard the sudden intake of breath from his sisters. Ah, a boon. None could deny such a thing from the Batu family, least of all an Exalted.

“It has long been a sense of shame that we have been unable to understand the challenges found at the Silver Sparrow Mine — once the gem of the Gauntlet and now under the management of our family. We have lost a half-dozen men trying to get to the bottom of it — and if only you would, before you leave, give us... your talent for just a day...” Kem’s eyes filled with tears, rehearsed and meaningful. “Help us avenged the many souls we have lost there.” There were at least ten among them who had lost servants and, in the case of Jen ‘Nightwalker’ Markis, a brother, at the Silver Sparrow.

Mina frowned, her lips wrinkling and giving her face an even more pinched look.

Kem held his breath, feeling the tears course down his cheeks, waiting for a resolve.

Zik said nothing.

At last the priests nodded their heads in unison, and the shorter of the two spoke:

“The Exalted among us will indeed spend tomorrow, in the company of her priests, and a few others chosen, to discover what lies in the Silver Sparrow Mine, as a show of gratitude to the Batu family, before we undertake our journey to Chiaroscuro.”

Not to be outdone, and just as the gazelle made its grand entrance, Zik announced: “And Kem Batu will lead this expedition — my youngest, proudest son, alongside the Exalted among us, and two of our best men!”

Kem embraced his father, and performed his joy and surprise so well that not a single among the guests suspected the evening went just as he had planned.

• • •

Kem knew the way to the mine, and he had traced the steps a thousand times since that fateful visit ten years before. This time he knew who to take along. He had not the least faith in Mina, but in Jaq and Utya, he would entrust his life — and he had, many times before.

Jaq came from a land so far away Kem could never be bothered to pronounce it. North, far up North. Jaq's face could best be described as misshapen clay, pock marked and scarred from years of illness as a child and years of fighting since then. Zik Batu had found Jaq ten years before in the bottom of one of his ships, hairless and bleeding from a thousand places. He had unsettling green-grey eyes but a kind enough smile. No cold blooded killer, Jaq took directions well and stood head and shoulders above Kem and his brothers. He also had a razor wit, and loved food even more than Zik.

But brawn could not win out alone, and that's why Utya accompanied Kem as well. She had grown up in their household, alongside his sisters — he wasn't entirely sure she wasn't one of his sisters, if the rumors were true, though that hadn't stopped their dalliances — but from her first bleed she began to train in one of the ancient combat styles of the Delzahn. It was something taught by the wet-nurse to all the Batu children. Utya was skilled in a variety of fighting methods, but none so important as hand-to-sword, a rough translation of the almost dancer-like movements she made. Her blade was deadly, but Utya could disarm a man twice her size and drop him to his knees before he knew which way the wind was blowing.

As Mina Moray approached the rendezvous point at the opening of the Silver Sparrow, Utya leaned over to Kem and whispered, "That's it? She's shorter than I am."

"You mean you don't remember that truly remarkable face?" Kem said.

"I'd sooner remember a sack of flour," said Utya.

Jaq snorted into his gauntlet, his hide and chain creaking and jostling under his girth. "It might be easy to confuse the two."

As if the comment needed further explanation, Jaq turned to them and shook his hands at his chest. Kem found it rather ironic, considering Jaq's considerable assets in that particular area, but the Exalted and her phalanx approached too quickly for him to add an additional line of comment.

The day in between had left Mina looking even more sickly than before. The pallor Kem noted before had turned to a greenish hue, her already sallow complexion now deepening to a shade even an unskilled leech would note. Her hair was down and in unkempt waves, her eyes watery and strange.

Was this the face of the Exalted? Kem had to hide his disgust behind his most charming smile, even though it pained his face to do so.

"Greetings to you all!" he said, hailing them. The priests were not the same that had attended Mina the night before, and he did not recognize them

from the Temple. But Kem tried not to let this small change upset his flow. He was like the river, always moving. Always anticipating, always prepared for another turn.

He knew he wasn't the only one playing games.

"Greetings to you, Kem Batu," said the taller priest — a priestess, in fact. "I am Sister Lara. This is Sister Anvina. We are here to help you through to the Silver Sparrow along with Mina Moray, Exalted among us."

"Excellent," Kem said. "This behind me are —"

"Jaq of Clan Morane and Utya, ward of the Batu. Yes, I know," replied Mina, walking straight by Kem and toward the mine. He caught a whiff of sick on her. That would explain her appearance. She was a drunk. "Now, we're on a rather tight schedule, if you don't mind."

Kem didn't have time to reply, however, because Mina was already making good progress, and the sisters behind her.

Without discussion, Kem and his company fell into pace as well. He wasn't certain what they were playing at, but Kem suspected that it wouldn't take much time to test their mettle. The sisters had no swords or weapons on them that he could see, but that didn't mean they were without power; he wasn't stupid enough to assume they were powerless. It was easy to see by the way they walked they were exceptionally strong, their bodies moving with precision and grace. Unlike Mina, who somehow lumbered in spite of her small stature.

As they passed through the mouth of the Silver Sparrow, the group had to work together to clear the debris left by the last party. All that was known of those lost boys was that, after a cave-in, they were never seen again.

Torches were necessary just a few paces deeper, and the smell of the lit tar sent Kem's mind back to his last visit as a child. Something like fear returned, but he choked it down. The thing he saw in the depths had measured him and let him be, had granted him safe passage. He would be safe again. And renowned for showing the uselessness of Mina Moray.

"This place hasn't changed much," he said softly to Utya.

"Do you remember much?" she asked him.

"You were here before?" came Mina's voice, small and unimportant, from the dark before him. "I don't remember hearing that."

Kem felt both furious and ashamed that Mina was unaware of his contribution to the history and mythology of their town.

Utya wouldn't pass up the chance to praise him, though, and told the story before Kem had a chance to elaborate. "Kem was here during the first uprising," she said, her voice gaining in strength and reverberating around them. "He came here when he was eleven, with his cousins Diara and Ysuf. It was a dare, and he was the youngest by five years. Then, the mine was one of the Batu's most prosperous, and deepest. They went in, but only Kem came out..."

“They sent in crews since then, but none returned,” Kem said, trying to reply as flatly and as unconcerned as possible.

Sister Lara’s eyes were appraising, even in the dim light. Kem could tell she was trying to see through to him, to check for his fear. But he had it wrapped under enough artifice that she’d never see it.

As if in answer, he continued: “I don’t remember much, other than a sense of pressure when we made it to the lower chamber. A presence. A... dissonance.” Kem had used that phrase a thousand times when recounting the story before. It felt good to say it again.

Sister Lara stopped moving and adjusted something about her person. “Strange that a simple child managed to stand up so impressively.”

Jaq snorted. “No simple child. Kem’s always been sharper than the rest.”

None of this impressed Mina, or so Kem assumed, as she asked no further questions and instead continued to walk deeper into the recesses of the cave. Not wanting to lose face — even around a false Exalted — Kem picked up pace behind her.

They all fell into silence as the temperature dropped steadily, and they walked on for time out of mind. It became a wretched kind of game, the silence of their voices. And in the silence Kem imagined all the words he would say, had he the tongue to say them. Had fear not taken them from him? They were all afraid — they had to be, why else wouldn’t they speak?

Could she feel the pressure in her head, too? Kem staggered just once, but it sent a jolt of terror through him and his head felt as if it were fit to bursting. His temples throbbed and as his hand touched the wall, he thought he might be sick.

“Not far now...” he heard himself say, as if he were standing across the cavern. “But don’t... don’t touch the walls.”

The walls were slimy, cold. Slick like chilly bones freshly shaved of muscle and fat. But why did Kem feel comforted at this thought? He felt his face, half certain he’d find the maw of a wolf or a jackal, but he was very much himself. Yet the smell of blood was in his nose, the memory of a thousand, thousand slaves at his feet, the redolent taste of their bodies in his mouth.

“I don’t think this was a right choice,” Jaq said, somewhere to Kem’s left. “I can’t see — even with the torches. I don’t trust —”

Except Kem could see. As they entered the great cavern where he had lost himself as a child, he could see Mina, limned in light, ahead of them both. Her hands raised high and illuminating the room, casting bright beams into every corner. And lo! It was a palace of bones, set with a throne made of antlers and bat wings, cast in iron and studded with dead gems and silvered tongues.

And upon it sat a boy of eleven, petrified and mummified, his hands held up in supplication, his clothing torn and tattered.

“The remains of Kem Batu,” said Mina, turning to where Kem thought he stood. “You have lived long among the people of Zoatham, but your time is ending.”

Kem knew the boy. Kem was the boy, once. But now he was better, made fuller. That life force had fed a starved and mad creature once, given him a man’s mind and a man’s weaknesses. And he had waited, inside, growing and changing and hidden.

The whispers in the back of his mind bored into his thoughts again, and got louder, more insistent. That hideous Exalted whore. He would take her power, he would taste her blood and slice through her belly with his dagger-sharp claws, finally free from the fleshy body in which he had been so confined.

At last, Kem Batu was more. Kem Batu was darkness realized, a glorious mountain of strength and power, rippled and slick with muscle and skin. The teeth, rows of needles within a howling mouth, ready to feast. And his mind! That was truly the greatest part. Every murmur he had sensed living as a human was let loose, every thought expanded a thousand fold. He knew and understood the shape of things, the rightful place of his in this cursed world.

He was the ancient darkness, the magnificent beast of fire and smoke suckled here in darkness for time out of mind. Mina Moray, that hideous creature!

He struggled to keep her away, but she seared her being into his mind, slicing his thoughts with an impossibly bright light. A moment ago she had been so small and insignificant, but as Kem’s eyes faded and the demon’s came to the fore she grew in stature.

“Dor’nathel!” shouted Mina Moray, and she was bright as the Sun, terrible as a holy fire. “We bind you again with ancient magic, with sacrifice and fire.”

There was Jaq, piercing him with silver. And Utya, twisting his wings and arms into broken bits. The sisters, the bitter sisters, peppered Dor’nathel with darts tinged with treachery and poison, ancient and as old as the earth itself.

They knew. No, she knew.

Dor’nathel felt the powers that fed him fleeing, and yet remembered his strength. He reared and took Jaq by the head, twisting him on his fat neck. The sound of his spine breaking as easily as a chain of beads made him laugh, but the laughing was a moan of sorrow, too.

The stars. Even from so far below, Dor’nathel felt them burning down at him, judging him. He had lived as a human for so long he had forgotten what power he’d had, forgotten what he was to do. The Exalted was his quarry, and he needed only a few more minutes to gain her. She was too weak, even now. The darkness Dor’nathel had woven in this womb of night began to creep to her.

Freeing himself of the pesky priestesses — Lara gurgled blood and Anvina had no teeth left in her bloody maw — he cast aside the once-called sister he had taken in lust and focused upon the Exalted.

She was, indeed, powerful. But young. Inexperienced. This had been his plan, to live and gain her trust. To use the Silver Sparrow as a ruse. To drink her blood. To regain his glory and rise again, taking his brothers and sisters with him.

Mina Moray took off her cloak, and revealed the robes below. Yes, the same colors as before, but now woven in an intricate pattern of magic and strength. She had not been so ordinary, after all. Her talents had grown in the dark, alone. While her husband had other women, and her children grew to love her for her quiet strength and pride, she had woven spells into the sash around her waist.

Dor'nathel knew she had come for him.

"I offer up the sacrifice," she said, and raised up her hand. In it glittered a delicate blade, fine as a needle, and she plunged it into her belly.

The smell of blood made the demon mad with lust and he propelled himself forward, drunk with the prospect of returning to his power. Of winning the game, the long, long game he had been playing since the world was broken.

He felt his fangs sink into her soft stomach, the blood spill hot and fresh across his spectral teeth. That joy! That perfect, happy joy. At last...

"Foolish creature," Mina Moray whispered into his ear. She was weak, but her thoughts became his as she shuddered in his maw.

I was not the sacrifice. The child was. But he was dead in my womb before I stepped through to the Silver Sparrow... yes. And then prepared with a tincture for the most valiant purpose. You can feel it, can't you? You can feel my sorrow. My pain. The night he died within me was the night I knew my destiny, that I was called. And brought here, to you, anathema to your kind. I will not die tonight...

Mina's voice filled his mind, filled the cave, and Dor'nathel sensed his borders shifting. He had been big as the cavern — bigger than the mine — and now he was shrinking back, back into the body of the boy he had consumed a decade before. A decade? It had been scarcely a moment. A heartbeat.

The blood in his mouth turned to searing acid, sweet and caustic. He wanted to scream, but his throat was cauterized with the poisoned blood, and when Mina ripped open his jaws to free herself, he slithered away, the brightness filling his vision from every corner.

"Goodbye," Mina's voice grew weaker. The remaining sisters were escorting her out, cradling her, healing her. Dor'nathel could hear her body healing as he died.

"I'm sorry, Kem" Mina said it again. "No one noticed, but I knew. I always knew... We were born together under the stars, and I will weave your face into the whorls of my deeds."

Dor'nathel's last thought was of Kem Batu, of the dark-haired boy from above, who had stared him in the face and died.

Then came the brightness, and the end.

SECRETS IN MY WATERS STILL

by Haralambi Markov

I am a lake. My edges grip soil, clay and stones I've worn smooth. My shallows curl with weeds and teem with turtles, eels, and frogs. My surface lies flat and undisturbed. The peace of me is, to many, unbearable, they long to break my skin with stones or sticks. I don't sleep, yet I am not awake, either. I don't eat, yet I absorb the world around me in my being.

I am a body of water that runs through stone and crystal to the very heart of the land, and its inhabitants I carry like children in my womb.

Yet, there's vigilance in my stillness and cognition in my depths. Whispers and rumors travel through sediments at a pace so slow a turn of phrase lasts a season. Where my confines allow I push through the weaknesses and entwine waters with my brothers and sisters – other lakes in the land, a net of water which men call the Spandrel.

Animals come to drink from me and through their thirst I learn about their lives in the forests where everything is in motion. Winds leave their fleeting impressions, carrying tales of distant lands. Those tales I have kept in my folds. Unlike my siblings, I remain a lake, and I am content. They, on the other hand, hunger and leave their waters in shapes of flesh, bone and sometimes something else – gods in the eyes of men with lazy lips full of careless promises in exchange for worship.

Yet, for all my contentment with my immobility, peace lasted a mere exchange between me and my neighbors, for then the land rumbled and men circled me whole, hemming me in, holding back my waters with their walls. Sometimes to quench their thirst. Sometimes to bathe in me, loud and uncaring with warmth that tickles, but I am a lake of patient countenance and pay no heed. Sometimes they throw bodies in me, bundled things rolled off makeshift rafts or dragged towards my center with long metal rods. The bodies sink, weighed down by armor or rocks tied to their husks. Or they slide down my insides to the deeper ends of my being, where my own weight presses them thin and folds them neatly.

It is through these infrequent interruptions that I learn of mankind, for I collect all – women and children and men, the youth and the elderly, the poor and the rich, the warriors and the sickly, those who had magic in their being and those who had none.

Their blood, bile and shit tint my whole with their fears, loves, urges, ambitions – all the words that were never said and remain undisclosed as whispers in my darkness. Violence and pestilence strip the lands of their people and gorge me on their flesh. No land should be wasted on the dead, when there are crops to raise and cattle to feed. I serve as their graveyard to those deemed unworthy to receive burial rites and my depths turn red and my stillness shakes with the rumble of the deceased. Years pass and I digest, until I'm the noise of their stories. Until I give birth to myself.



Birth and pain entwine into a braid. The memories of the mother flutter together, pain layered, hundreds of legs spread open for bloodied heads to emerge. Yet, I'm silence as I sit amidst the clay and stones, waters that are not mine anymore lap at my sides. My own legs are spread, but it's manhood that sticks out between my hairy thighs. Days pass and I adjust to this flesh, discover sensations through my skin – the cold of the ground, the heat of the sun and the pain of cuts and bruises. In these days by my former edges I learn how to live with sight, remember every single secret of the souls inside me, feel their every wish and yearning. Each memory comes to me as distant ripples, repeated in fluid melancholy until they pull my muscles and animate my limbs. Lake-me is overwhelmed at how rapid existence has become, while the humans in my head revolt at my sluggishness – two irreconcilable extremes. I don't expect to live, but I do and I learn pain.



A party of hunters finds me half-mad and starved, the habit of eating as foreign as every other thing about having a body. Their bows sing to me, my fingers remember how to pluck the strings with precision, memories play melodies of death and my flesh ripples to strengthen my wrists, hands and arms.

"What are you doing at Gullet Lake?" the biggest man asks, eyes merciless and bow loaded in warning.

Gullet. The word means nothing to me, but it evokes a reaction so violent from the spirits that I shake and double over in pain.

"You a man?" Another calls, but what he means to ask is whether I'm something else. Language comes to me and the words trickle out as unsure as a newborn spring.

"A man." My mouth is dry and hurts as if I've swallowed twigs. "I'm a man. People who didn't like me tried to drown me. Even stole my clothes." The speech comes from a small choir of spirits who have lived enough to know

what big, strong men who can and are willing to kill you want to hear. My voice holds the same intonation and flavor of their own.

“Eh. A lot of that going on these days.” The leader says and shakes his head. The bow lowers and the string relaxes. I live for another day.



A pair of legs is how a lake becomes a moving thing – a river without the need for a riverbed. The hunters take me to their village, feed me, and I repay them for their kindness. This is how my journey begins. Each stop tints my speech, adds to my body as I’m welcomed for my skill and labor. I tell the stories that fill me, some of those departed who have never been heard in their lives, some, my own conversations with my siblings. I cobble shoes, work in the fields and cut wood. I embroider dresses, cook and weave. I hunt, fish and push heavy carts up the hills. When I can I also sing and dance at weddings.

I am the skill and passion of those who no longer have the opportunity to enjoy them. One last dance, one last song, one last creation, which got stuck in their mind never to be born. These are the things I do to blunt the edge of death that fills me and allow the memories to drift away to a place beyond the here and the now.

Children are the easiest to let go of. All they want in life is to smile. In every town and village, I find the children and play games, run and chase the gaggles of younglings. What I earn with my labor I use to exchange for sweets, which I share with as many children as I can along with jokes their parents might tell at night when strong drinks settle in.

One by one, the ripples dissolve into stillness and the voices quiet.

Still, I pluck herbs with women in the shady spots along the Rocky River and stand between their legs while they give birth, to welcome a babe. Clammy, warm, smelling of placenta and blood, these newborns put those women who had never had the chance to hold their own to rest. However, as I progress I find more souls need closure from their loved ones, need to release their final words, and it is how I grow into a legend.

Deadspeaker – the word spills across settlements and runs like a rapid to communities, to which my feet lead me, following the bidding of their dead. The souls walk me through forests and fields, hills and swamplands, through the wounds of war inflicted on the land. Houses and streets swim to my vision and I smile, full of warmth, at bereft faces as I tell them the last confessions of love, whisper regrets, and lay down instructions for hidden treasures that cost more than ten jade talents.



Time layers. Each day folds into the next. Daily rhythms pulse the same way no matter where I am. Counting fails me, so I might have had my flesh for months, but maybe for years. Nothing grounds me to this form, to this human world but the secrets that build my bones. I’m growing lighter on the inside, fewer ripples traveling through my limbs, feeling more human by discarding the bits and pieces that made me this way.

The Rock River takes me on widening beds of water until the boat I've bought reaches the Yellow River and the murky waters of Marita. There I find my way to the brothels, guided by my loins like sinkholes lure water. I discover my enjoyment lies with men. Petty gambling and snide looks lead me through a parade of hard bodies, rancid with alcohol breaths and thrusts that rival storms in their violent urgency. The underbelly of the city swallows me whole the way rivers welcome their estuaries. There I out-thief the best, spy, and brawl with the roughest. It takes one punch for the memories to foam on my knuckles. I crash into bodies and exchange bruises, a lovemaking of a different kind and soon Marita has a new name for me – the Dragon in the Sewer Water.

Within me I carry Dragon-Blooded bested by their brethren in combat. I remember how they called upon their magic, but all I have from their might are their moves, with which I dance my opponents into submission. Only the ships' beastly mastheads, bobbing next to me on the river, acknowledge my victories with nods.



Every dragon soars. So says everyone. I rise, finally, from the sewer waters to serve as the bodyguard of a lady – a Councilor's mistress. The second I see her face, the spirit of her brother shouts in my head louder than the din in a harbor-side tavern. He has much to say to her and his words are fouler than harbor water. His final words are reproach and hatred. He wishes to damn her for sending him to his death with her advice. He wants to devour her sanity and break her spirit, but I keep my mouth quiet.

She is captivating and bewitching, qualities that lie beneath her soft rolls of flesh and the bright sheen of her dresses. Her spell works me over and to her I speak my remaining secrets, everything else, but not the biggest one that weights me, not the one that would destroy her. What she does with them, I care not. The spirits in me revolt, for these are not their last rites, but once spoken, the information cuts their ties and I push them out, my bones losing their heaviness and my flesh growing softer. My words sentence men and their lines to death, my secrets laying bare dynasties, but the living wrap me in the finest garments and buy me blades that cut through gods.

My lady gains a spot on the Council. Her name in the mouths of others is Poisonsong and together we rule.



A powerful man has enemies. The same holds true — doubly so — for a powerful woman. Assassins come, but they never leave, until She comes to make her claim – swift and forceful in the night, always there when the moon is fullest so she can be seen. Her blades sway and find spots on my lady's guards with the ease of a scythe cutting grain. With her, battle is something holy, and my body responds to her strikes and angles in ways I have not experienced before.

She hurts me more than anyone ever has before and I bleed, my blood thin as water, since I have only the brother of my employer left trapped inside my

body. Our fights end as they begin, silently and in a flash, as she dissolves into the night. Sometimes I contemplate why she comes when we are so evenly matched. Perhaps she arrives only for the prospect of besting me.

All dragons must be slain. Many have attempted to sever my head or pierce my heart as a springboard to notoriety, but all they do is feed my myth. Now my myth waits for her blood.



My lady has resettled in a small, secluded room hidden within the maze in her estate. Although lacking in size, it provides all the luxuries my intelligence and her skill in taking risks and selling secrets have earned. The air presses down with the scent of incense and herbs, protections and offerings to gods outside the calendar – dangerous, but a calculated risk. The giants of Marita are built on risks and no one stands taller than Poisontongue.

Moonlight streams through the cloth screens and I know she's coming. Her dagger ripping the fabric with a little more than a sigh serves as her only introduction. Would I have allowed my employer to sleep in her bed, it would have been her heart the dagger sticks from, and not the one belonging to the servant girl. I rush over to mourn the body on the bed as loud as I can. For my plan to work I need to expose myself to attack. Sure enough the screen opens, but the woman doesn't step in to check her work.

"You failed." Two words and then she is gone.

My body grows rigid, but then my heart beats faster than I have ever felt it. Panic and fear drown even my lady's brother, who is never silent.

I run towards the hiding place where the real Poisontongue sleeps with ten of her best guards. The smell of blood hits me even before I enter the room. The guards lie in bloodied pieces, but she is whole – a red stain blooming in her abdomen. Life clings to her, but barely. In my arms she feels light, lighter than even I feel. She excels at death as she did in life, with grace and ease as her breath quiets down and her eyes lose their discerning gaze.

Now I have the chance to unload. Say everything her brother raves about day in and day out. Unload the obscenities and write his curses with her own blood. Give myself this final confession and dissolve to lake water, so I could wash her wounds with my liquid body, but I stare at her face and I cannot do it. She dies in my arms after a while, peaceful. No words exchanged between us. Just understanding in our silence, a reminder of my life as a lake – I who had such envied peace. Now I have none, even with only one voice in my head.

I leave Poisontongue on the bed and strip myself of the garments and weapons she had bought for me, and make my way to the river.

Her brother screams at me, but I pay him no mind.

Some secrets are better left unsaid.

WHAT YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND

by Damien Angelica Walters

You walk, all smiles and hope, into the shop. Masks line the walls; a few are simply designed, with cutouts for mouth and eyes, others are decorated with lace, ornate beadwork, and feathers. Some, crafted of hammered metal inlaid with silver and faceted semiprecious stones, bear a closer resemblance to pieces of art than to masks. You can't imagine the cost of those but can well imagine your parents' ire if you brought one home. "Just because we *can* afford such things doesn't mean we need to always have them," your mother is fond of saying. But you've seen the contents of her jewelry box and the family vineyards are more than successful, so what your mother truly means is that *you* are too young to spend that sort of money.

The shop smells of fabric and something sweet beneath, something similar to cinnamon but not quite. The shopkeeper, Shalrina, is in the corner of the shop with another customer, their voices little more than whispers, but you know she registered your presence as soon as the bell over the door began to ring, if not before. You've heard the stories, of course. When your neighbor, Aysha, disappeared, everyone said she escaped her brute of a husband by paying a visit to Shalrina (although most believe her husband killed her and disposed of her body so well no one will ever find it). Still, you prefer the thought of Aysha living out the rest of her life somewhere else, somewhere peaceful, even if she has to wear someone else's face to do it.

But you're here for a mask and nothing more. One of the spice merchants recently announced the date for his annual masquerade and you want to make sure you find something fantastic before the rest of the wealthy pay the shop a visit. And you convinced your mother to allow you to come alone, a rarity, although a housemaid is waiting outside, a concession you had to make.

A glass case in one corner displays several masks that make the ornate ones hanging on the wall look simplistic. One is fashioned to resemble a fox with whiskers and ears, the entire thing covered in fur, the eyeholes outlined in what can only be real gemstones. The purchase of something like this would push your parents beyond ire; they might even change their minds about allowing you

to attend the masquerade, and that would be unbearable. The masquerade will be your last public appearance before your father announces your betrothal to Thyler, the son of his best friend. In and of itself, the betrothal isn't unexpected. You are at the right age and your family, the right level of society.

What isn't expected is the way your father has completely shut you out of the process, treating you as if you were incidental, as if your marriage and the rest of your life was of no concern to you. In short, behaving as most fathers do, when he's always treated you with respect and kindness, not as if you were merely a pawn in the family's game of gain and prosper.

It's more than troubling. And you don't understand why. You've known Thyler since childhood. He's your best friend, your confidant, and soon he'll be your husband. Everyone knows that. Everyone has always known.

You cast another glance toward Shalrina. Brown hair, moderately attractive, and while dressed in the latest fashion, she's nothing like what you imagined; she's nothing special. You find yourself comparing her face to yours and in your youthful arrogance, proclaim yourself the winner, never mind that she's Exalted and you are not.

You step away from the fox mask and finally decide on one made of red lacquer with gold beaded edging. It will give you an edge of mystery and danger and will complement the dress your mother chose — a gown in a pale shade of gold, a gown styled for a woman, not a girl, unlike the one she selected last year. Perhaps she's decided that if you're to be plucked from girlhood, you should look like you're old enough for the plucking. You smile, thinking of the scabs on your knees from climbing trees with Thyler a few days ago, something the two of you have sworn to always do, even when he's in charge of his family's orchard and you, their children, even when you're both old and wrinkled.

When Shalrina finishes with the other customer, she walks with a gliding step to you, smiles, and takes both the mask and your coin without a word. When she returns the mask to you, carefully wrapped in silk and ribbon, she smiles again and her gaze catches and holds your own. You have the feeling she can see through your eyes, see all your secrets and fears and you turn away fast, your heart fluttering like a bird in the cage of your ribs.

"Thank you," she calls out from behind you, whimsy in her voice.

You don't answer back.



At the masquerade, you dance with several would-be suitors, but Thyler is the only one you dance with twice. You notice your father standing with a few friends in the corner and although he's wearing a smile, it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Has my father said anything to you?" you ask Thyler.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Why?”

“He seems so strange lately. I don’t understand it.”

Thyler leans closer. “Not to worry, love. He’s probably just worried. It’s natural, I think. You are his only daughter after all.”

“But it’s not as if you’re a stranger,” you say. “So why should he be worried?”

“Because he’s a father, and it’s his job to be worried.”

“Pardon me,” a voice cuts in.

You turn and there’s a man in formal dress wearing the fox mask from Shalrina’s shop. You draw in a sharp breath.

“May I have this dance?” fox man says.

Thyler nods and steps away before you can find your voice to say no and call him back. Too late, the fox man has you in his arms and is leading you through the steps. You dislike the way his arms hold yours, the way he leads almost forcefully.

This close, you can smell a hint of the animal still clinging to the fur and the scent makes your stomach turn. Behind the eyeholes, the fox man’s eyes are dark and piercing and hold a hint of cruelty. He asks a few cursory questions while you dance; you answer with curt responses to which he seems amused.

He leans close to your ear. “The astrologer was right.”

Your arms break out in gooseflesh and you untangle yourself from his grasp, never mind that the song hasn’t yet ended. You don’t dance again, not even with Thyler, ever watchful of the man in the fox mask as he makes his way round the room, pausing to speak here and there. You notice the way people behave around him — even your parents — nodding and fetching drinks as if they were servants, an obsequiousness you find distasteful.



Three nights after the masquerade, your father calls you into his office. Your mother is there, too, sitting off to the side. She gives you an encouraging smile, but says nothing.

“I’ve received an offer for your hand,” your father says.

You open your mouth to speak, but your father brushes the attempt away with a wave.

“I see no reason to mince words. I know that you and Thyler are fast friends, but I’ve accepted an offer on your behalf from Erith Malren, a Southerner of renown and great wealth.”

Your mouth goes dry and your hands start to shake. Accepted an offer? From a Southerner? But everyone knows that you and Thyler have been informally promised to each other since you were small. Your families have been friends and business alliances for generations. This isn’t possible. And how can this Malren be of great renown? You’ve never heard his name before now.

“Malren is an upstanding gentleman and this is an advantageous match.”

You press one hand to your chest. Not only are you to marry a stranger but you’re to move from your home to the south, where greed and corruption hold hands with superstition, and this is considered an advantageous match?

The astrologer was right...

No, oh no. The man in the fox mask, the man who held you too tight, the man with the cold eyes. Could fate be so cruel?

“He was at the masquerade, wasn’t he?” you ask, your voice dull.

Your father’s face brightens. “Indeed he was, and he was most impressed with you.”

“But you can’t do this. I’m promised to Thyler.”

“I’ve already spoken to Thyler’s parents and they understand the position I’m in. They hold no ill will.”

“I won’t marry him. I won’t.”

Your father folds his hands atop his desk and leans slightly forward. A muscle in his jaw tics. “You will. It is said that Malren is close to becoming Exalted. Do you know what that means for you and for this family? You should be grateful. This will raise you in society in a way that marriage to Thyler never could. And if he is made Exalted, child, if he is...”

“I don’t care about society. I don’t care about the Exalted.”

“You should care,” your father says, his voice low but as sharp as a swordsman’s blade. “You should care very much. You are perhaps too young to see it, but the world can be a dangerous place. Malren is a very influential man, and his protection, his name, will mean stability for all of us.”

You stand up fast, so fast your vision twists out of shape for a brief moment. “I will not marry him.”

“Yes, you will, and there is nothing more to discuss about it. The betrothal will be announced tomorrow morning and tomorrow night, we are hosting a dinner so you may formally meet your future husband.”

With tears streaming down your cheeks, you rush out of his office and cry your sorrow into your pillows, barely noticing when your mother comes in to rub your back and offer soft words.

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You stare numbly into the mirror as your maid twists your hair into an elaborate design she knows you love. Tonight, though, the only thing you’re aware of is the pain in your scalp and the hollow in your heart.

Sold to a man from the South. Sold like a prize mare at market to the highest bidder. You cannot believe your father would do such a thing. You know it’s common enough, but your father promised he wouldn’t, promised

he loved you far too much, promised that your happiness meant more than any amount of money ever could. The cruelty of his lies is a branding iron pressed against your heart. All day you've told yourself it's a mistake or some sort of trick, but when your maid arrives with a new dress for you to wear, the lie is dashed away.

As soon as the maid finishes pinning the last spiral, you push away from the vanity table and stride from your room, your spine straight. Hearing voices, you walk into the parlor with your hands fisted tight at your sides and skid to a stop when you see the tall man standing beside your father. They both turn toward you, and your stomach flutters.

Without his features hidden behind a mask, Malren is handsome, with a strong jawline and a generous mouth, but when he smiles, it doesn't speak of kindness. How can your parents not see this? How can they just give you to this man?

He kisses the back of your hand and says hello and you can't speak, can't breathe. You slip your hand from his grasp, resisting the urge to wipe it on your skirts.

When you finally retire to your bedroom, you barely remember any of the evening's conversation. All you recall is the way Malren's eyes found yours time and time again, the way his gaze moved across you as if you were already his property.

• • •

Early in the morning, you sneak out the side door and toss pebbles at Thyler's window — an old trick the two of you did when you were younger, but it's still just as effective.

Thyler comes out, still fastening his shirt. You run to him and fall into his arms. He holds you close for a moment, then steps back, away.

"What are you doing?" he asks. "You shouldn't be here."

"I will not marry that man. I will not move away from my home, from you," you say, clutching his hands. "We can run away. We can go today or tonight or right now."

He pulls his hands away, a strange expression dropping over his face. "I can't do that, I'm sorry."

Your legs go weak. Spots dance across your vision. "How can you do this? How can you do nothing and let them sell me to this man?"

"I'm sorry," he says again.

"What happened to climbing trees until we're old? What happened to our life together? What happened to *us*? Please, Thyler, please."

He grips your upper arms tight. His throat works, then, without meeting your eyes, he says, "Go home. I'm sorry, you have to go home."

“You’re no better than the rest of them,” you say through your tears, and you don’t stay long enough to hear his reply.



You stand across the street from Shalrina’s shop, twisting your hands together. You don’t want to be here. You don’t want to be anywhere, but you will not marry Malren. You won’t. And if Thyler won’t help you, you have no choice. You have nowhere else to turn.

Before you can change your mind, you cross the street. There are no customers in the shop, only Shalrina. You stare at the masks on the wall, your hands knotted into fists. You’ll browse for a bit and then go home. Maybe it won’t be so bad. Maybe...

Then you think of Malren’s hands touching you and shudder. You turn your face to the corner, but not before you catch Shalrina’s gaze move in your direction. You tell yourself it’s your imagination but you know better; you’re young but not stupid.

Footsteps approach and you take a deep breath.

“I remember you,” Shalrina says, her lips quirked in a smile.

“I need help,” you whisper.

“And what sort of help?”

“I need to be...to be someone else.”

“Oh? And what makes you think I can help?”

Her expression is flat, her eyes uninterested. Your fists tighten and an ache builds in your chest. Were the rumors wrong? Maybe she isn’t magic at all.

“I, I thought you could do things. People say you can — ”

She holds up one hand. “Many people say many things. But becoming someone else...what possible reason could you have for wanting such a thing?”

The words tangle in your throat and you burst into tears. When they finally stop, you tell her everything.

Shalrina taps her finger against her chin and your stomach turns to lead. She’s going to laugh at you and turn you away. What a fool you were for thinking she’d help, for thinking she’d be *able* to help.

“Do you have money of your own?” she finally asks.

You swallow hard and shake your head.

“Are you sure you wish to do this? Such things may be possible, but they should not be undertaken lightly, so think hard before you answer. Think very hard.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” you say, your voice thick.

“Your father, he is Hamman Rycker, is he not?”

You nod, terrified to speak.

“Does he still have the Vase of Tremors?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

She holds out her hands. “It’s this big, carved from ebony, with giltwork around the base and the lip.” She steps closer, her eyes intense. “Think, child. Does he still have it?”

You frown, picture your father’s office, and then nod. “Yes, he has one like that in his office.”

“Bring that to me and I will give you what you want. A new identity, unencumbered by your dour betrothal.”

You blink several times. “That’s all?”

She smiles. “Yes.”

• • •

Two nights later, your father goes out of town for business, and when the house falls silent, you creep into his office. The vase is nothing special, ugly even. But when you lift it from the shelf you feel a tiny tingle in your palms. The Vase of Tremors, indeed. What a ridiculous name. And the vase has been in your father’s office for as long as you can remember, probably longer. Your father never mentioned it being special in any way; no one’s ever mentioned it at all. Perhaps it’s only something special to Shalrina.

You carry it to your room as quickly as you can and hide it in your wardrobe behind your winter dresses, swallowing your guilt. Your father will most likely blame one of the servants, but you can’t worry about that.

Even if he finds out it was you, by the time he does so, you won’t be you anymore. You close your eyes and think of your mother, your father, Thyler. After this, you’ll never see any of them again. You could take the vase back right now. No one would know what you were going to do.

Except even if you do change your mind about Shalrina, after the wedding, you won’t see your family again. You’ll be trapped with Malren in the south.

No, you whisper in the darkness. They’ve given you no choice. No one will help you, so you have to help yourself.

You sob silent tears into your pillow, toss and turn for hours, and rise before the sun finishes its ascent into the sky. You change into your plainest dress and hide the vase in a vegetable sack, knowing it would draw as many questions as if you carried it out unhidden, but the only person you see is a lesser housemaid and her eyes are still dulled with sleep.

Despite the early hour, the door to Shalrina’s shop is unlocked. You enter on quiet feet. The shop is empty, then a small door off to the side opens and Shalrina ushers you inside, locking the door behind you.

Cloaks and masks hang from hooks on the far wall, but the masks hanging in this room are different. Brighter, more vivid, and the air radiates with a strange energy that makes the hairs on your arms stand to attention. A plain-faced young woman is sitting on a stool in the corner and she gives you a shy smile.

When you take the vase from the sack, Shalrina smiles as well. The tingle in your palms is even stronger and you breathe a sigh of relief when Shalrina takes it from your hands.

“Perfect,” she says, but she’s not speaking to you.

She turns the vase this way and that and places it on a long table at the end of the room, a table nearly filled with other vases and trinkets of all sizes.

“Shall we begin?”

“Here? Now?” you say.

“Of course. Is there some reason to wait?”

Nervousness twists at your gut and once more you think of changing your mind. Once more you push the thought away. “No, there’s no reason to wait.”

“Come here,” she says, ushering you closer. “Take her hand.”

The plain-faced girl’s hand is rough and calloused, and she’s of a similar age to you, but her face is worn, her eyes dull. Wait, this must be wrong. This, this wretch, is who you’ll be?

You open your mouth to speak, but your tongue will not move. Shalrina waves one hand.

“Don’t be dismayed by her appearance, child. She has more freedom than you can imagine. You’ll be able to travel anywhere, do anything you wish. And in return, you won’t have to marry.”

She waves her hand again. You want to scream but you can’t. You want to run, but you can’t move. Pain washes over you, as if small hands are reaching in, reaching deep, plucking you apart. The pain is replaced with a searing heat and still, you are powerless to fight. Ice cold follows, bone deep, and then a sensation of tearing. Your vision flickers, darkens, flickers again, adjusts.

You blink awake and fall to your knees. Dimly you register that the girl next to you is doing the same thing, except she’s no longer the girl. She’s you.

You stare at your face; she stares at the face you’re wearing now. Both of your mouths drop open. She staggers to her feet; you follow suit.

This body feels wrong. Your back aches, as if you were an old woman. The skin on this face is rough, the mouth feels too small, and there are several gaps in the back where teeth should be.

The girl wearing your face touches the dress, holds out her — your — arms, and she smiles. No, this was a mistake, a terrible mistake. Even belonging to Malren would not be as bad as this.

“Switch it back. I don’t want this anymore,” you say, standing as straight as you can, hating the sound of the other girl’s uncultured voice.

“You are a spoiled child,” Shalrina says. “What’s done is done.”

“I’ll give you whatever you want. You can keep the stupid vase. Just give me my body back.”

The other girl’s eyes widen with a look of horror and she twists her hands in the folds of your dress. The wretch. She has no right to your life. It’s yours.

“That is impossible,” Shalrina says. “That isn’t how this works.”

“I don’t care,” you say. “I don’t want it anymore.”

“I understand this is a bit of a shock, but this is what you wanted. Now you will not have to marry. Now you’re free.”

“You call this free?” you say. “Look at me. No. This isn’t right. Put me back. Put me back, now.”

Shalrina shakes her head.

“I’ll kill you,” you shout. And you strike her across the cheek, the sound too loud, too sharp.

Shalrina’s smile never leaves her face. She whispers a word beneath her breath, all the air catches in your throat, and there’s a sensation of emptying, of deflating. Too fast for you to move or to scream.

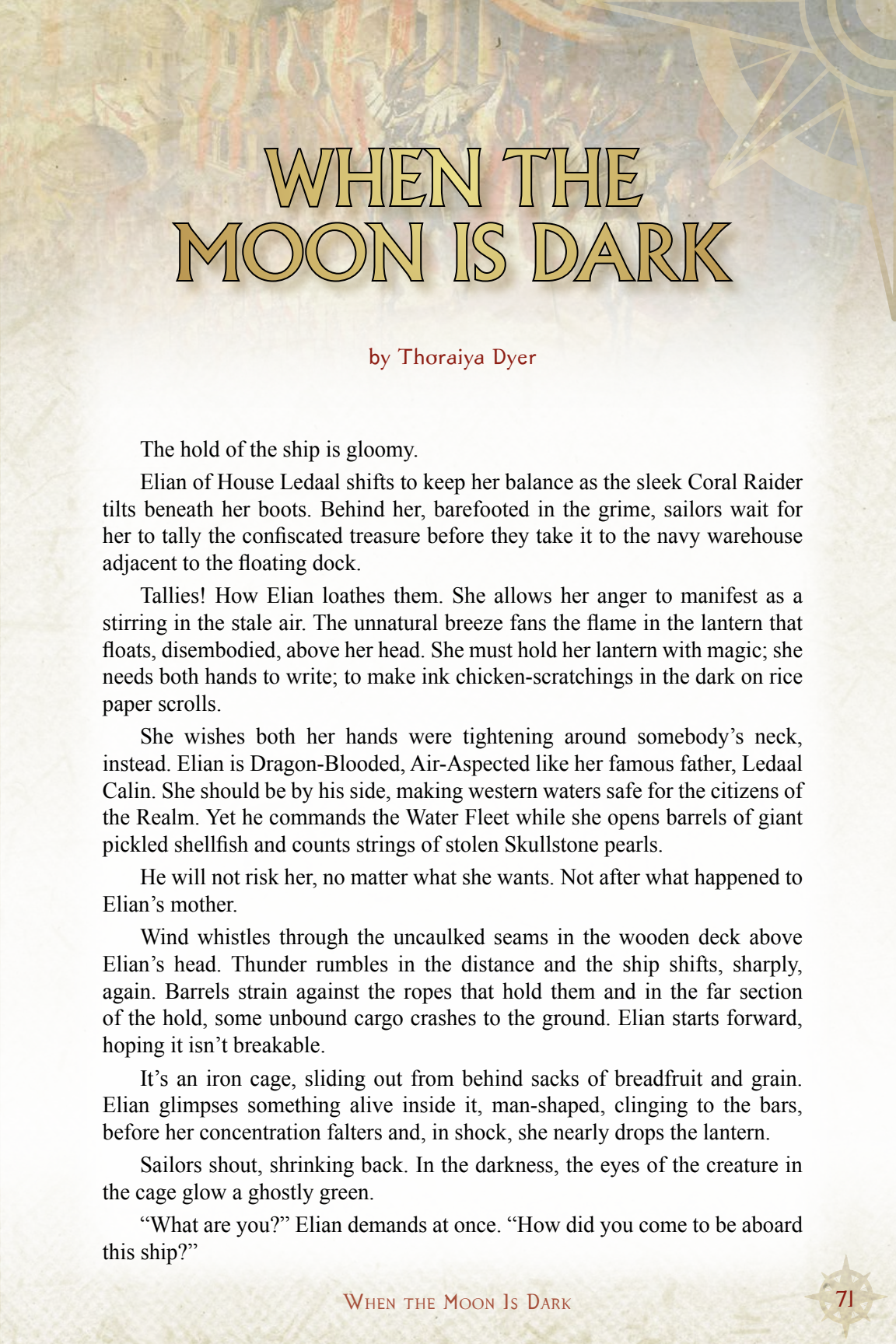
She hangs what’s left of you — a husk, a chrysalis of human skin — on a peg on the wall and too late, you realize that the cloaks are not cloaks, not garments made of cloth at all. You scream, but you only hear the sound in your head.

You watch as Shalrina pats the other girl’s hand — no, it’s your hand, it’s yours — and the two of them disappear through the door.

Inside your prison of useless flesh, you sob. You’re just a girl, a young girl. You made a mistake, but she’ll eventually understand that, won’t she? She can’t leave you here forever. She can’t.

But days turn into weeks and then into months. A mindless husk, that’s what she calls you, but she’s wrong and you have no way to tell her so, yet if you keep screaming, keep trying, you have to believe that one day she’ll hear you.

And that one day she’ll let you go.



WHEN THE MOON IS DARK

by Thoraiya Dyer

The hold of the ship is gloomy.

Elian of House Ledaal shifts to keep her balance as the sleek Coral Raider tilts beneath her boots. Behind her, barefooted in the grime, sailors wait for her to tally the confiscated treasure before they take it to the navy warehouse adjacent to the floating dock.

Tallies! How Elian loathes them. She allows her anger to manifest as a stirring in the stale air. The unnatural breeze fans the flame in the lantern that floats, disembodied, above her head. She must hold her lantern with magic; she needs both hands to write; to make ink chicken-scratchings in the dark on rice paper scrolls.

She wishes both her hands were tightening around somebody's neck, instead. Elian is Dragon-Blooded, Air-Aspected like her famous father, Ledaal Calin. She should be by his side, making western waters safe for the citizens of the Realm. Yet he commands the Water Fleet while she opens barrels of giant pickled shellfish and counts strings of stolen Skullstone pearls.

He will not risk her, no matter what she wants. Not after what happened to Elian's mother.

Wind whistles through the uncaulked seams in the wooden deck above Elian's head. Thunder rumbles in the distance and the ship shifts, sharply, again. Barrels strain against the ropes that hold them and in the far section of the hold, some unbound cargo crashes to the ground. Elian starts forward, hoping it isn't breakable.

It's an iron cage, sliding out from behind sacks of breadfruit and grain. Elian glimpses something alive inside it, man-shaped, clinging to the bars, before her concentration falters and, in shock, she nearly drops the lantern.

Sailors shout, shrinking back. In the darkness, the eyes of the creature in the cage glow a ghostly green.

"What are you?" Elian demands at once. "How did you come to be aboard this ship?"

“Tricked!” The creature rattles the cage. “Trapped! Let me go and I’ll give you the tooth. I’ll give you all of my teeth.”

The hair stands up on the back of Elian’s neck. This is a vodonik, an elemental, rider of brine curs, appeased by tobacco and fishermen’s first catches. For mortals without power, like the Coral Raiders who were masters of this vessel in the morning, who unwisely chose not to flee when they saw the flag of House Ledaal above the horizon, the tooth of a vodonik is a temptation.

Placed under the tongue, it allows one to breathe under the sea. But Elian does not want the beast’s teeth. She barely realises she’s taken several quick steps forwards before the palms of her hands slam the cage. The vodonik hisses and cowers. The sailors have fled. Elian is alone with it and too furious to be afraid.

“How many ships of the Western Fleet have you pulled down? How many men and women drowned? Your tooth wouldn’t have saved my mother. What difference, the ability to breathe underwater, when sea monster teeth tore her limb from limb?”

“You will not free me?”

Elian slams the cage again.

“I will never free you!”

“I can guide you west.” The vodonik’s voice turns cajoling. “I can show you what your family most desires.”

“What my family most desires is for you to dissolve into the slime and sea water from which you are formed. A little more time, yes? An hour? A day? It will be my pleasure to watch you decay.”

The vodonik looks awful; Elian reprises her estimate of its remaining time; perhaps only a few more minutes at most.

“No! What your family most desires is the return of the Scarlet Empress!”

“She is dead,” Elian says, voicing House Ledaal’s worst fear, her knuckles whitening on the cage bars. It is dread of the Empress that keeps her father in command of a navy controlled by a rival house. If Peleps knew that there was no possibility of reprisals, his position could turn precarious. “She is not in the west. If she was, my father would have found her.”

“The Empress is so far west that you could sail, straight and true, for all the years remaining to you, and still fail to find her. He didn’t go far enough, and neither can you; not without me to show you the way!”

The vodonik clutches at its face, screaming wordlessly, now. Elian can clearly see its terrified expression. Have her eyes adjusted? No, it’s her father’s magic, holding a second lantern. He must have been alerted by the sudden evacuation of the hold that something was happening belowdecks.

In the cage, seaweed-green fingers dig into the peeling skin of the vodonik’s face. Its shape becomes distorted. Long limbs collapse. It doesn’t

stop screaming until its melting mouth stoppers a throat already brimming with the sort of scum Elian has oft ordered to be scraped from the bottom of ships.

Ledaal Calin and his daughter breathe heavily in the aftermath of the elemental's dissolution. Together they stand by the cage, staring at the puddle of slime.

"Sir," Elian says shakily, at last. "Did you hear what it said about the Scarlet Empress?"

"It wanted freedom," the Admiral says quietly. "It would have said anything. Carry on, harbourmaster."

But Elian cannot carry on. Her temper is high, her colour, too. She turns from the cage to face the familiar, craggy features.

"Sir, I don't want to be harbourmaster. I beg you, appoint me captain of this ship. I'm ready for my first commission. Charge me with sailing west to find the Empress before it's no longer in your power."

"You aren't ready, Elian. Perhaps you never will be."

"What does that mean?"

"Captain Ensi will take this prize west, with Soraya as his First Mate. They will take it for a troop transport, not on a futile chase on the word of an elemental. We're charged with seeking out Anathema and destroying them."

"But, Father –"

"Carry on, harbourmaster."

Calin stoops to pluck the unfurled scroll from the slick left by the creature's death.

"It's ruined," Elian says. She gazes at him. He brought her toy ships when she was a babe. Before his blue hair turned grey, he stirred his powers to make her childish kites fly, to teasingly flutter the hems of her mother's robes.

Now, his face shows no emotion.

"I'll have the factor bring another."

"Thank you, Sir," she says aloud.

With her eyes, she says goodbye.

After the tallies are complete and the treasure removed, she acts quickly, disguised by the bustle that surrounds the refitting of the ship. Some of the cargo, the fresh food, is permitted to remain. Where the treasure hoard once squatted, acting as ballast, water barrels are placed. They are partitioned off from the newly strung rows of hammocks and bolted racks of weapons by concertinaed folding screens, fixed on the starboard side.

Captain Ensi, who has the habit of adding goat's milk to his tea, orders the iron cage cleaned and stuffed with straw to host his bleating little herd. Extra straw is heaped on a canvas sling and suspended above the stinking bilges.

The Raider's catapults, suitable for lobbing firepots at slower, heavier warships, are removed by sling and pulley. They are replaced by harpoon-hurling giant crossbows positioned fore and aft to fend off denizens of the deep.

Meanwhile, Elian locks her door in the office at the warehouse. She trims her lacquered fingernails with a knife and scrapes off the scarlet shellac. Hastily, she replaces silk robes and calfskin boots with cut-off pantaloons, a red shirt and a red leather vest. The colour is perfect to conceal bleeding wounds as well as symbolizing the Empress.

With her power to influence air, she deepens the timbre of her voice. Her Dragon Blood lends her physical strength and endurance. Passing for a mortal man will be easy.

Finally, she shaves her head and wraps it in a black rag soaked in flea-repelling tinctures. She climbs out her window, lands in mud and is pleased that her pale, clean feet will be camouflaged by the grime.

With full quivers on her back and bundles of heavy iron harpoons in her arms, nobody stops her as she steps back on board the Coral Raider. Captain Ensi, short and black-haired, adorned with the embroidery and braiding of his office, looks on as a humming, golden-skinned female painter with a dainty hand re-names the ship Sail Maiden's Consort.

Elian takes the ammunition down into the hold. It's still dark there. The floor has been cleaned. It smells, now, of animals, fur and life, not cold slime and watery graves.

When nobody is watching, she buries herself in the goat's bedding. She uses her power to form a thin breathing channel of air. Not too much. Her father might feel it.

"Good," says Captain Ensi's clipped voice, hours later. "All is in order. We'll set sail ahead of that storm, and with luck, right action and proper prayer she won't catch us."

• • •

Captain Ensi is not lucky.

The storm catches the Sail Maiden's Consort three days out of port. Elian lies in the warm hay listening to the goats complain as they are tossed against the bars of the cage.

It seems she can sense the sun, at once far to the east and directly overhead, which makes no sense to her. She knows nothing of the sun. Her magic is of the wind, which bears on them, now, out of the south.

She can sense the moon, to the north. She shivers. The moon is hidden. The moon has nothing to do with her. Is she going crazy, so far from land?

Hours pass. The storm intensifies.

What is Captain Ensi doing? Elian wonders with scorn. His over-anxious temperament makes him unsuited to the stresses of life at sea. He cannot swim. Although Dragon-Blooded, his magic is weak.

He has an important redeeming feature, however. Earth is his Aspect. Captain Ensi needs only catch a whiff of continental soil and he can point to the land that it comes from like a compass. He has never been lost at sea. Nor has he ever run a ship aground. Though the ship be turned around a hundred times in fog or battle or whirlpool, all Ensi has to do is open his suitcase full of jars of soil and sniff one in order to bring the men home.

Elian sits up in the straw. She has to know. She sends a questioning zephyr through the hold, up the ladder and across the sheets. She is horrified by what she learns.

The sails are shredded. The mainmast is splintered. Men are missing from their posts. Sail Maiden's Consort has no way to escape the punishing wind and rain. Ensi is roped to a post by the tiller, bellowing orders, but there are too few left to obey him. The First Mate, Soraya, is washed overboard even as Elian's wind wafts past.

Ensi senses her magic and lifts his head. Elian feels the odd sensation of being sucked deeply into his flared, angry nostrils before she returns to herself in the straw. She has not been trained to move ships with the wind. She has never been tested with anything more difficult than drying laundry. But if she is to find the Scarlet Empress and restore the security of her House, her journey cannot end here.

Elian leaps down, landing on the goat cage before being thrown off by a lurch of the ship. She struggles through the hold, clutching at anything tied down to keep her feet. The hold is watertight, she thinks. It is well made. Not leaking.

At that moment, timbers part. There is no submerged mountaintop or stone to hole the hull, only the terrible strain of the wind pushing one way and the waves another. Salt water fountains over Elian. It froths. For a terrifying moment, she imagines the shapes of vodoniks, come to take their revenge on her.

Then a wild magic explodes from her chest, terrifying and exhilarating. Like golden fire, like honey held up to the sun, it flows over the Sail Maiden's Consort, sealing the air in and the water out.

Captain Ensi falls down the ladder, practically on top of her. His gaping face fills her field of view. The hold blazes with yellow light.

"Ledaal Elian," he says, gripping her by both shoulders. "How are you doing this, child?"

"Which way?" Elian croaks. She can't think about how she is doing it, now. She'll think about that when they're safe. "Which way to safe harbour, Captain Ensi?"

Captain Ensi points.

“That way.”

Elian drives the ship in that direction. Wind and waves cannot touch it. Lightning strikes the broken mast and bounces back.

“How?” Captain Ensi screams.

Sail Maiden’s Consort smashes through the seas with incredible speed. After what feels like hours to Elian but could be mere minutes, she senses that they are safely on the western side of the wide, ferocious squall.

The ship drops back into the water. The golden light fades. Elian is immediately pressed to the edge of consciousness by exhaustion.

“Are you dying?” Ensi asks, shaking her. “What do you need? What should I do?”

“Patch the hull,” Elian whispers. “When the light is gone, the water will come in again.”

Then her mind and heart collapse. She is dead to the world.

• • •

Smoke in her nostrils wakes her.

The sun, right on top of her.

No, the moon.

A moon and sun, circling one another.

Neither of them. Only blackness.

She opens her eyes properly and sees bright flames. These are not the colours of her previously unsuspected power. Sail Maiden’s Consort is burning, being eaten by hungry fire at an incredible rate. As she stares upward, the deck collapses towards her, orange embers and grey ash. She’s lying in straw; the easiest material of all to ignite; it’s a wonder she isn’t already burning.

Elian gasps. She reaches instinctively for the comparatively puny power of air that she’s always had and is relieved when it’s still there. The burning timbers are blown back up and away from her, into a leaden sky.

There’s no sign of Captain Ensi. She takes stock of her bruised but unbroken body, listening to men’s shouts above the crackling of the flames and the slapping of water on wood. What’s happened to the ship? How could they allow such a foolish accident after the near-tragedy of the storm? How close are they to the land that Captain Ensi pointed out to her?

Elian stays on her back in the straw, takes a deep breath and reaches for that other power, the power of the sun. She remembers how it encased the ship, keeping it safe. She is sure she can extinguish the fire with it.

But the place inside of her where it came from is raw and exquisitely painful. The power doesn’t respond and Elian gasps again, louder. She turns

over onto her hands and knees and retches. Her mouth tastes of goat's milk. Ensi must have nursed her while she was unconscious, with his unjustified belief in the goodness of white-colored foods. How many days have passed? Salt falls away from her clothes. His doing, too, no doubt.

Just what everybody needs at sea. More salt.

Elian hears a woman's voice, now, loud and imperious. Since Soraya's loss, there are no female officers on the Sail Maiden's Consort. Who could be in command?

She staggers to her feet. Uses clean air from the lee side of the ship to keep from coughing in the billowing black smoke. As she and her bubble of air leave the dirty straw, it finally catches, blazing up behind her. The empty cage is open. She wonders if Ensi put the goats in the lifeboat before he allowed anyone else to board.

Then she climbs the ladder and glimpses another craft pulled parallel to the Sail Maiden's Consort. It is a thinner, faster, meaner-looking shape with slanting masts and an unfamiliar rig. Stitched flags show, upon a green field, a skull split in half by a crescent moon. On the bow, splashed scarlet letters spell the ship's name: Scythe.

Elian keeps climbing the ladder, feeling as though she is in a trance. Their weakness has been taken advantage of by pirates and though the half-deck where the tiller smoulders will put her in full view of the attackers, what else can she do? She can hardly return to the straw bonfire.

Thrashing shark-shapes break up the bloodied water below. Elian stares at them, sick with dread, expecting to see Captain Ensi's fancy coat at any second. Instead, a bamboo arrow, fletched in brown and cream-barred feathers, blossoms in one of the grey shark hides.

Elian glances up. At the Scythe's stern, a lean, brown woman in a long, sharkskin coat reaches for another arrow from the quiver on her back, fits it to the longest bow that Elian has ever seen, draws it past her cheek, behind her head, and releases. More blood fills the water, but it isn't human blood. The giant sharks are trapped on the surface of the water by the frenzy below.

The woman laughs and sets another arrow to her string. Her black hair is twisted into ropes. Her stance is wide, her chin high. She wears a leather harness bristling with throwing knives. For an instant, the hallucination of the moon which has been haunting Elian since she stowed aboard erupts in the woman's chest.

Then it is only the gleam of silver blades, again, and the woman is staring back at her with dark, unreadable eyes. The point of the nocked arrow rises, away from the sharks. Towards Elian's heart.

Elian turns her back to the woman and dives desperately from the half-deck into her burning ship's shadow. Let the sharks have her, before pirates do.

In her head, she says a sorrowful prayer to the Empress, to her father and to Siakal, Goddess of slaughter and sharks.

Shark bodies open as if to receive her. They close over her again. Her hands, stretched over her head in the dive, are grasped by other hands. Cold, sandpapery hands. Elian's eyes fly open. A bubble of blackness encloses her, as though she has been transported to another place.

It is lightless. Weightless. And yet she can still see the five human-headed sharks who float in blackness beside her. The one that holds her hands is a woman, human-handed, shark-toothed and black-haired.

Though Elian's air-sense tells her it isn't air around her, she takes one deep breath and then another.

"An offering of essence," the shark-woman says, still gripping her hands. "Little enough, but perhaps you can bring my mistress the moon."

"Who are you?"

"The receiver of the prayer that you thought to be your last." The child of Siakal laughs. "I should eat you, right now. You could be an enemy of my mistress, some day. But you could also offer her Layla Qamar. Anathema, which refuses to bow to her betters. Killer of my mistress' servants. The Captain of the Scythe is today's enemy."

"Layla Qamar? Is that the woman who was going to shoot me? The one who set my ship on fire?"

"Yes," the shark-woman hisses, and her companions thrash and bare their teeth. Elian thinks of Captain Ensi.

"Have any others survived? Did you spare anyone else?"

"Did anyone else pray to our mistress? No. No. Death pleases her. Blood in the water is her lifeblood. Our teeth in your flesh would please her, but more pleasing would be the blood of Layla Qamar. Will you make this vow? Will you make holes in her ship on a night when the moon is dark? Will you cut her before you throw her overboard? Then, when the Scythe lies beneath the waves, we will carry you to safety."

Elian swallows, hard. Making deals with the servants of gods is never a good idea, but, beyond her instinctive fear, a fury rages at Layla Qamar, captain of the Scythe, for having destroyed her ship and tossed the crew to the sharks. Besides, Ledaal Calin's orders, as he reminded her so recently, and seeming so long ago, are to rid the seas of Anathema.

"Yes," she says, crying out as the shark-woman bites Elian's left palm to seal the bargain in blood. "But how am I to make holes in the ship?"

"You closed the wood of one hull to salt water. This one, you will open. Once you have rested, you will use that power again, in reverse."

"In reverse, how?"

Elian wrenches her wrist from the shark-woman's grip; stanches the small wound. Her blood floats in the nothing-darkness, and the nostrils of Siakal's servants flare, but they make no move to attack her.

When the shark-woman smiles again, Elian's blood is on her white, triangular teeth.

"When you have rested, you will know. And don't forget. When the moon is dark."

• • •

The moon is in its third quarter; it is one week until the new moon.

Elian sits in the rigging of the Scythe, a thin skin of black nothingness hiding her from mortal eyes. She is hungry and thirsty, but the stairways to the lower deck and galley are closed. Although nobody has seen through her Siakal-granted disguise so far, she suspects Layla Qamar might notice if doors started opening of their own accord.

Layla Qamar. The woman sits cross-legged in a patch of moonlight, fletching arrows unerringly in silvery dimness, her sharkskin coat folded neatly beside her. Sometimes, she glances up at the place in the rigging where Elian perches invisibly and frowns, but she makes no move to climb up to her.

Sometimes, Elian looks at Qamar and sees the moon. She has to check that the heavenly body is over her shoulder, high in the sky.

The feathers Qamar strips for the fletchings are long and luxuriant. She brushes fish glue onto the smooth shafts and presses the feathers into place before securing them with strings of sinew.

The First Mate approaches her, bowing deeply and abruptly.

"Captain Qamar," he says. "No change in course before I take my leave?"

"I don't think so," Qamar answers, not taking her eyes from the task of feather-binding. "This wind should take us all the way, the full fourteen days to Cliffhaven. You may check with the prisoner, if you wish."

Elian almost falls from the rigging in her haste to follow the First Mate. The prisoner is chained below. Not far from the galley. Her stomach grumbles and she licks her dry lips. The Mate opens the door and Elian slips through ahead of him.

She ransacks the stores and drinks her fill from a water barrel. By the time she returns to the deck, the crew of the Scythe are forcing Ensi's bedraggled, delirious head into a bucket of dirt.

"Sniff it!" they scream at him. "Sniff it and point, you shit-eating animal!"

Ensi's face is smeared with soil; tracked with silent tears. He points. Elian sees that the broken fingers of his right hand have not been set. She fights to cool her anger.

Soon, she will sink them. She will send them all down to Siakal. Ensi might die, too, but at least he'll have his revenge. It's all she can do to resist the urge to reach right now for that tender place within. She has been resting. The place is healing.

She knows how to reverse what she did before. She is ready.

Qamar looks up, sharply, towards the place where Elian stands. Only then, distracted from her work, does she seem to notice her crew tormenting their captive.

"Enough," she orders brusquely. "Put him away."

Elian takes the key to the manacles from the First Mate's cabin as he settles down to sleep. She slips it into the bucket they have given Ensi to defecate in. No use unlocking him, now. It has to be when the moon is dark.

"Ensi," she murmurs into his ear. She thinks his eyelids flicker, though it's difficult to be sure in the dark. "Ensi, when the ship starts to break up, you need to get the key to your restraints from the waste bucket. I've wedged it into the hoop so it won't be tossed out with the slop. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," he breathes, and Elian feels dizzy with relief.

"I'm going to sink us. I'm going to throw Qamar to the sharks when the new moon comes. Will you pray to Siakal?"

"I will."

She follows the Second Mate, whose shift is just beginning, up the staircase and into the fresh air again. Qamar has run out of feathers. A bundle of unfledged shafts still sit beside her.

The Captain smiles to herself. She bows her head. Silver tattoos flare to life along her brown arms; it is though someone has poured quicksilver over her. Elian stifles a gasp.

Anathema.

Then Qamar's left arm transforms into the long, unfurled wing of a bird. Her flight feathers are cream with brown bars. She plucks the pinion with her still-human-seeming right hand, her lips twisting in pain with each sharp tug.

When she has enough feathers to be going on with, she shakes the wing, hard, and it's a slender arm again.

Elian exhales slowly. Now she understands why she must wait. Layla Qamar is Lunar Exalted. A shapeshifter. Only the waning moon can keep her from flying away to safety; laughing as she leaves the water-bound servants of Siakal behind, gnashing their triangular teeth.

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The sun is high in the sky when Elian feels the tremors of shark bodies bumping the hull of the Scythe.

The First Mate feels it, too. He peers uneasily over the gunwales. The sails are filled by a moderate breeze as they stream towards Cliffhaven, still seven days distant. Elian can't see the moon anywhere, but she knows where it is; finally, it's dark, approximately between the Scythe and the glorious sun, dimmed by the brighter body's magnificence.

Or is it below, where Layla Qamar is sleeping?

Bump, bump, bump.

Siakal is ready, now, for her sacrifice.

Elian goes to the place within where her golden power waits impatiently to be released. There is discomfort, but it is bearable. She splits it, like the skin of a ripe mango, and it floods the Scythe, seeking, this time, not to protect, but to destroy.

Timbers crack, symmetrically, so that the ship doesn't tip, but instead begins to uniformly lower like a slowly submersed stone. Men shout. Bare feet patter. They race for the stairway, to get below, to find out what is happening.

All but Layla Qamar.

She staggers up into the blazing sunshine, red-eyed, a horror of moulting feathers and half-clad sagging skin.

"What are you doing?" she shrieks at Elian, who looks down and discovers that the golden power leaking out of her has rendered her entirely visible, popping in an eyeblink the bubble of blackness that protected her while she recovered her strength.

Silver light shafts from the place Qamar's heart should be. It crashes up against Elian's golden light, seeking to push it back into her, essence overturning essence; power overturning power.

Instead, the two colours wind into one another. They bind. Sun and moon together, and without warning, Elian feels what Qamar is feeling. Alarm. Betrayal. Lust. Astonishment. Trust.

"What is this?" Elian cries, trying and failing to disengage.

"You are Solar Exalted," Qamar says with wonder.

Elian tries to strike her across the cheek, but her hand is Qamar's hand, and the cheek is her own cheek.

"Filthy lies. You're the Anathema here, not me. I am Dragon-Blooded!"

"You are Dragon-Blooded. But a Solar Exalted soul has also been reborn in you. More, it is the counterpart to my immortal soul. We are bonded forever, you and I."

"I'm not bonded! I'm here to send you to Siakal!"

Qamar reaches across, not to strike, but to tenderly hold Elian's cheek.

"You are too strong to be a pawn of that one. Too powerful to waste your essence on blood and waves."

“Don’t,” Elian shouts, but her legs fail to carry her the step back that her will demands. “I’m not what you said. I am Elian, of the Water Fleet and House Ledaal.”

“I – ” Qamar says, and then her face goes pale.

Bump, bump, go the impatient sharks beneath the boat.

Only, that is not what makes the deck shudder, this time, under Elian’s feet. Rather, it’s the repeated stabbing motions of a muddy-faced Captain Ensi as he plunges a blade into Qamar’s back.

Again and again, his face a demented rictus in bright daylight.

“I will be incarnated again,” Qamar whispers, gazing into Elian’s eyes. “Find me again. Bind me again. I beg you, Elian of House Ledaal.”

She slumps to the deck. Roaring like a storm, Ensi seizes her. He lifts her in his arms. He throws her over the side. The silver light winks out. Only a shallow pool of blood remains.

Elian’s power deserts her. Frozen in horror, denial, the sense that Ensi has made a decision for her that she is no longer certain she should have made, she resists when he tries to pull her to a lifeboat already overfilled with Qamar’s pirate crew.

“Make room for both of us,” he bellows at the terrified men. “You’ll never find land without me.”

Each time they pull on the oars, bearing themselves and Elian away from the sinking Scythe, their elbows press into her solar plexus. It feels like being squeezed in a giant’s fist over and over. The heartbeat of a monster.

And Elian is a monster. She knows that now and she weeps as the shark whirlpool retreats.

Find me again, Qamar had whispered. Bind me again.

“I will find you,” Elian whispers back, into the wind. And the wind, which loves her, carries her promise into the west.

FOR LOVE OF HEAVEN

by Erin Hoffman

Fidelis knelt at the bower entrance, parting the ferns with his hands. The creature within gave an eerie sound, part bird and part antelope bellow, as it surfaced from its long hibernation. He crawled in, answering it with a soothing murmur of his own. The bellow rose into a twitter, and there was a rustle of wet leaves and branches as the beast shifted in its den.

A pair of eyes like bright silver moons flared up before him, and Fidelis rushed to place his hands to either side of the creature's face, murmuring again. Little rivulets of light rippled up the long face, trickling between opal scales and slithering up the single polished horn rising from the domed forehead. "Shh, it's me," Fidelis chided, and gradually the light dimmed, the eyes melted into pale blue.

Turning toward the entrance, Fidelis lifted his hands, restoring the guardian charms around the bower's perimeter. His stomach told him he should eat, his bones told him he should rest — but he listened to neither, lifting a packet from his belt and carefully unwrapping the cabochon from its silk shroud.

The creature whuffed at his hand, its soft nose questing after whether the stone was edible. With one hand Fidelis offered the beast a handful of starwort from his pocket, drawing its bearded chin downward and toward his left side; with the other he lifted the cabochon to inspect it in the bower's dim light.

The gem had come from outside Ghedaran, dug from the ruins of an apothecary's hut destroyed in the second age. The location of the hut alone had cost him five years in Ghedaran's archives, not counting the six he had spent prior distilling the identity of the stone in the first place. It was said there were four more of its like in the world, three of them lost and the fourth possessed by the Immaculate Order. All in all, he should thank the Ladies for how cheaply this one had been obtained. Without thinking he performed the calculation: two hundred and forty-nine years since he last saw her; two hundred years lost to the Age of Sorrows and his retreat into the Wyld; fifty years since the reawakening began; forty-seven years since Mikatri taught him the charm that

reclaimed his sanity; twenty-five years since he discovered the mutation theory in Ghedaran; fifteen years since the creature was born, a gangly antelope of the Ice Plains east of Rylea with no horn. A decade among the archives of the sorcerous city was a pittance.

Gingerly Fidelis set the cabochon against the scales of the beast's forehead, just below the spiraling horn that had been years coaxing into mutation. A whisper of some long-dead mage's voice caressed his ear, and then flame leaped up within the stone, seizing the creature's shining scales and melting them into itself. It leapt from his hand, searing itself through flesh and into bone.

The creature stiffened as the stone took hold, instantly and mercifully catatonic as its body changed. Crimson flames radiated outward from the cabochon's center, melting into the channels of light that ran down the creature's neck from its scaled and thickly-maned face. For a moment the flames warred with the white and blue light — a strange side effect of the layers of mutation that gave the creature its unique Solar-seeking ability — but then they flowed together, flickering violet. With senses tuned sharp by years the creature's mutation, Fidelis could feel its essence shifting, sharpening.

In that moment only, mid-mutation, before its center settled into beasthood again, Fidelis could speak to it. "Can you find her?" he asked, and held his breath for the answer. He did not know what his Solar looked like in this life, but he filled his thoughts with her essence, her light.

One of the creature's eyes rolled sightlessly toward him. Fire still flickered through its celestial veins, lending an even greater madness to its round and fish-like gaze. Yes, it said.

His vision wavered as a rush of giddiness washed through his body. A thousand times he had asked that question in this moment, and a thousand times the creature had answered no.

"Will you find her?" he whispered, hardly able to form the words. The books had been very specific about this.

Still catatonic, the creature trembled, involuntarily shaking its mane. No, it said.

The giddiness rushed out of him, replaced by a flash of anger that the creature felt and answered with a low moan of subconscious fear. Viciously Fidelis forced himself to master his emotions: he had been prepared for this. Decades he had spent tuning the creature's sensitivity, and finally it was done. The dark sorcerers who postulated, bit by bit, that such a creature could be made, had also theorized that the seeking was not enough: a final mutation might be required to push the seeker to accomplish its purpose.

The beast squealed as it returned to consciousness, light exploding from its throat to its forehead again, and it pawed the ground with three-toed feet that cast showers of false sparks every time they touched the ground.

"It's all right," Fidelis soothed, and waited until the beast's eyes had dimmed again before offering the remainder of the starwort from his pocket. His knees quaked with reaction, exhaustion from the rushed return from Ghedaran mounting now that he had the answer he had been seeking, and he sank to the bower's mossy floor. As his hand dropped, and the favored treat with it, the creature also folded its jewel-scaled legs and settled to the ground.

By his timepiece, what had seemed moments had been hours, and the day was long gone. The creature tucked its head in toward its side, round as a wine-cask, and Fidelis curled up beside it, taken by sleep in seconds.



The next morning he woke in the bower, bones and muscles stiff with the damp chill.

She had come to him in a dream, all light and effervescence. In the dream he had known her face. In the dream he had known her name.

As consciousness advanced, her presence retreated, and by the time his own name returned to him, she was gone. Still half-awake, Fidelis pressed his fingernails into his palms, letting the aftershock of loss pass through him as the dream faded.

Beside him, the creature stirred, then began lowing in distress. Often it would respond to his emotional state, but this time it might just have been surprised to wake beside him after his long absence.

"Shh, shh, shh," he whispered, hoping that the creature would settle quickly. It threw its head up, flaring, and now the small crest of feathers was rousing around its horn, in addition to the light that radiated outward from the scaled face. Startled at its escalated alarm, Fidelis's first thought was that something had gone terribly wrong with the mutation, despite its apparent safe transfer, and then —

The scent of burning cinnamon rose up in the bower.

It was a scent from his childhood, and one he despised. The original memory of his family home burning was one he had mercifully forgotten, but only by virtue of layering it into this warning charm, where for centuries it would grow to symbolize every bad thing that had ever happened to him.

A familiar and now Pavlovian adrenaline sang through his senses, and equally by rote he called up the bower's meager defenses. Out on the forest floor he heard the first pop! that meant interlopers had triggered the smoke charm and had long passed his first threshold. He cursed himself for an idiot, for the impatience that had sent him rushing in to induce the mutation before checking the bower's defensive lines, many of which had clearly failed over the years.

The darkness crept in, sidling up the veins in his arms. His breath quickened, pulse began racing. Desperately he clasped his hands in front of him, calling up the focusing charm that had pulled him free of those centuries of despair. All the while he fumbled through the charm, the invaders came closer.

Six years ago they would have been confronted by a wood golem eighteen feet high. Doubtless the thing sat inert in the forest, or perhaps some other monster had encountered and destroyed it. Vines should have trapped their feet, poison flowers encircled their heads. How had all his defenses failed?

There was one possible answer, one he did not want to contemplate —

A voice was booming in the clearing outside the fern gate.

“My name is Irenhar Axionis, and you have something that I want. My friends and I have come to bargain with you for it.”

Dragon-Blooded. A Wyld Hunt.

There was a muffled explosion followed by a laugh: haughty and hearty, it cast an immediate picture in Fidelis’s mind. With his chiseled chin and tousled hair, Irenhar would naturally be a paragon of the Terrestrials, arrogance written in every cell of his sculptural body.

“Come out, Fidelis, and meet your new playmates! I promise we won’t bite!”

The creature continued to scream, but Fidelis knew he could do nothing to stop it, not with the Hunt at their door. He scrambled over the beast’s scaled back to the back of the bower, ducked down a tunnel, then another, until he came to a storage room. Little sparks of foxfire incandescenced as they sensed him: the golem might have gone comatose, but the lights still worked.

“Now, now!” This time, a pounding on the ground above his head. “We don’t want to break down your pretty wall, but we will if we have to. Your creature is far too valuable to be hiding away in a hole in the ground.”

Fidelis cursed as he opened a mildewed bureau and fumbled through its drawers. It seemed long minutes before he finally found the puzzle-box: he seized it and raced back toward the bower entrance.

As he dashed he strove to keep his thoughts focused. Useless now to berate himself; of course the Hunt would want the creature, once they got a whiff of what he was up to. He had tried to cover his tracks, but any of the endless spellmongers and petty alchemists he worked his way through in Ghedaran would have squealed at the sight of silver. No matter. They were here now.

“Last chance, Fidelis!” Above, beyond the ferns, some sort of mechanical device was clanking ominously.

Fidelis worked the puzzle-box with practiced fingers. It took over a dozen movements, but at last he pulled free a shardstone and loosed its charm. The ground opened up before them, gnarled roots curling together like the clasping fingers of an old woman, and they carried earth and stone with them. Soon the passage was big enough for the creature. Fidelis gasped the words that called wind around his shoulders, lifting him to the creature’s back and lightening his weight until he could be borne by the beast’s fragile bones. He murmured a suggestion between the beast’s livid white eyes, one it barely needed — as soon as it caught sight of open air beyond the bower, it leapt.

They rose over the startled faces of the Hunt, and Fidelis freed three more charms from the puzzle box: one exploded in smoke just as they passed the one who must be Irenhar, the other cast an eye-turning shadow over their bodies; the third sent the sounds of a fleeing hooved animal in eight directions around them through the forest.

They ran.

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The wind spell began to expire just as they reached the edge of Ardaeth — almost as though it knew the refuge he sought.

Mikatri's household defenses shivered up around them, then folded down like flower petals when they recognized his essence. The creature's legs were beginning to wobble from exhaustion and his weight, and he slipped off of its back, his body a mélange of aching muscle and bone. As he took a step, his vision blurred, and when it cleared again, a hulking figure stood before him, silhouetted against the dark earthen hut.

The arc of her arm wrapped him in herb-scented wool and pine pitch. It carried him back to that shade-drawn time when she had drawn him from the darkness. Her presence now was as it had been then: the tension in his soul fled, the moths in his skull stilled their wings.

The creature, exhausted from its run, sensed his relaxation and followed suit, lowering its head close to the ground. Mikatri led them toward the hut and the creature followed like a loyal dog, its scaled sides shivering with fatigue.

She pushed the heavy door open before them with one log-sized arm, then eased them through sideways. The creature, its head still bowed, followed them in, and she made no move to stop it, but simply nudged the door shut once its horn-hooved feet had passed the threshold. The small hut was mostly kitchen, a fire burning in a clay hearth, and Fidelis was deposited in a rough-hewn chair by her table. She had no eye for him after that, but went to cradle the creature's slender face in her hands. It blinked at her with lambent blue eyes.

"I wondered when you would bring the beast to me," she said. She ran a fingertip under its chin and it tilted its cheek toward her palm curiously. "It's long come from that fawn you smuggled out of that moon garden."

Fidelis rubbed his eye-sockets with a thumb, pushing back the tiredness that crept up his neck. "There's only one mutation left. I need just one more thing."

Mikatri's hand stilled under the creature's chin. She stood and it gave her a mournful look, but she left it anyway and went to the hearth to pour tea. "So you haven't just come to visit. What is it you're looking for?"

"A peach of immortality."

Mikatri plunked a wooden cup in front of him. He wrapped his hands around its heat, wrinkling his nose at the bitter aroma carried by its faintly orange steam, but lifting it to his lips when the Lunar glared at him.

As he drank, she stole up beside him, and before he knew it her hand had dipped into the satchel at his side. For such a massive woman she could move like an oiled ferret.

She pulled a handful of papers out of the satchel and spread them across the table with a fierce slash of her hand. “Are these what I think they are?” Fidelis didn’t answer, instead sullenly absorbing himself in his tea. “I’ve told you that burning sacrifices to the Ladies is courting disaster,” she growled.

“I have to find her,” Fidelis said. “I came to the Wyld to hide myself in its mad branches, but the hunger finds me here. The hunger is what drives me to madness, Mikatri.” He willed her to understand, pleading. “I can’t rest. My soul is starved for light.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “If you’re so foolish as to seek this thing — don’t look at me like that, I know exactly how stupid you are — there is a place you can find it.”

“In the Wyld?” Fidelis sputtered, choking on the tea in his rush to tease the information out of her.

She glared at him again, and now her eyes were searching, looking for something that Fidelis knew she would not find: hesitation, something south of pure obsession. At last she sighed, finding none. “Arlei’i Jakotra. The one they call the Carnelian Duchess.” His eyes must have bulged dangerously, for she continued without having to be begged. “On the border of what was Rokan-jin land, within sight of Carnelian Peak but across the fairy border. She enjoys the chaos being exchanged by the Rokan survivors and the Bull.”

Fidelis’s hands shook around the cup, the gratitude seizing him was so pure that it coursed through his veins as adrenaline. The escape from the bower had taxed him enormously, but this new knowledge sent strength piercing through him.

Mikatri had turned back to the creature. “How long have you been raising it?”

Fidelis answered without thinking. “Fifteen years.” Fifteen years, three months, eight days.

She tipped a sidelong glance at him. “And after all that, you’ll run it to death?” So she knew the properties of the peach. He wasn’t surprised.

“I have to find her. What good is my life if I don’t?”

“That’s debatable, I’ll agree, but why do you have to kill it?”

“It’s the only way to ensure it won’t give up the hunt. And if I don’t end it, someone else will put it to terrible use hunting solars.”

“Someone else?”

“There’s a fire aspect looking for me — ” He detected the suspicious edge in Mikatri’s tone a fraction of a second too late.

“A Hunt’s behind you?” she hissed, and in an instant her muscled arm was across the table, her hand gripping his collar. “You came to my door with those vipers at your heel?”

Beside them, the creature shrieked its alien bird-beast cry, and Mikatri threw him backward, sending him crashing to the dirt floor.

“Get out of my house,” she growled. “And never bring me this insanity again.” She stalked across the hut and threw open the door.

“Mikatri, you have to help us,” he pleaded, lifting his hands in entreaty. “Cast me a skiff and we’ll fly far away from here. We’ll draw them off.”

“Wherever you go, you will not be able to elude the Hunt,” she said, near spitting with disgust. “Now that they have your scent, they will follow you to the ends of creation. Your choice is whether to surrender the beast or die for it.” Even as she spoke, her hands were working, calling up her defenses, checking them one by one — as he should have done at the bower.

“Thank you, Mikatri,” he said soberly, watching her, meaning it.

“You were always an arrogant boy, Fidelis,” Mikatri snarled, and the hurt behind her words cut at him more than the insult. “We shall see how you fare on your own. Come here again and I’ll remove that heart of yours myself.” She cut at the air again with angry fingertips and the cirrus skiff coalesced around them, lifting Fidelis and the creature from the ground together. As they rose into the air, Mikatri lifted the paper sacrifices from the table, held them before her face, and set them alight with a thought. The flames roared up, and when they settled, she had turned from him, and he knew she would never turn back again.



Mikatri’s skiff flew so high that the ground rushed by beneath them like an embroidered quilt, far and silent. The creature succumbed to exhaustion, lulled by the silence of the upper sky, and curled up in the cloud-craft’s soft embrace to sleep. Fidelis stared at the ground as it rushed by below, half hypnotized, half lost in dark thoughts. With the brute Axionis after him, there was but one choice now: he needed to find the peach, mutate the creature, set it on his Solar, and find her before the Hunt caught up with him. Only expending the creature would keep it from them. Likely they would continue to hunt him and his newly wakened Solar, but that was a problem for another day.

The thought of this long ordeal — his own hunt — nearly being at its end was hard to contemplate. Impossible, even. Too much time had passed since those brighter days when she had lived. It was another life, another world. This shadowed place full of war, where this strange creature slept beside him, constructed to abate one small piece of chaos, was the only reality he could imagine.

These lost thoughts may have lulled him to sleep, but now the skiff was descending. The creature lifted its head and lowed, complaining against the pressure in its ears, and Fidelis moved instinctively to soothe it. They were

swiftly approaching the ground, a clearing at the edge of an evergreen forest, and as they fell, the skiff melted away around them alarmingly.

As their feet touched the grass, Fidelis had only half a moment to wonder whether Mikatri's skiff had carried them to the right location. A spear-bearing sentinel awaited them on the edge of the clearing: a towering figure covered from the shoulders upward with plumes from the wings of unnamable wyld birds.

The mask of feathers dropped away, revealing a face of alabaster and eyes of moonstone white. Beside Fidelis, the creature shrieked its deer-bird cry, its eyes searing silver. The fae drifted up toward the beast like smoke, its hands moving in a shadow dance, untraceable by Fidelis's eye. "Fascinating," he whispered, and his voice was the pluck of two harp strings, dissonant and hair-crawling. When the fairy hands touched Fidelis's creature, it immediately calmed its screaming, though its eyes still burned silver-white.

"Who are you?" Fidelis asked.

The magpie-eyes turned toward him; the fae smiled just slightly. "You need no name from me. But you may follow." He replaced his feathered mask and turned, striding without a word into the shadow of the evergreens. The creature immediately moved to follow, startling Fidelis and leaving him to scramble after.

After two turns down paths that were invisible before their guide stepped onto them, Fidelis had no idea which direction they were going in nor how far from the border of the forest they were. In either moments or minutes or hours they came to a curtain of silver cobwebs. Instinctively Fidelis recoiled from its clinging gossamer grasp, but the fae stepped confidently through — and as he passed, tiny white spiders spooled lines of web upward, drawing the curtain away.

A small court greeted them, modest by fae standards — a garden party. Colorful birds caged in filigreed birch branches blended with the feathered masks of faceless courtiers. There was no order to any of their movement, yet all were subtly oriented in one direction, toward a dais made of ice rising up out of a natural slate formation. Moss dripped off the stone like ermine stoles, and sitting in a fluted alder chair atop the whole of it was Mikatri's Carnelian Duchess.

She was not the first fairy noble he had met, but one rarely becomes accustomed to impossible beauty. Hundreds of years of life had not prepared Fidelis to meet her carnelian eyes; all the wonders of the vaults of Ghedaran had not prepared him for the delicacy of her wrist-bones. He bowed, more to save himself from the sight than from deference; as he straightened he saw by the twitch of her eyebrow that she knew it, and was pleased.

"You bring us a guest, sentinel," she said.

"I am Fidelis Rhyse, your excellency," Fidelis began, before the guard could answer for him. "I've come to bargain for a treasure you possess: a peach of immortality." She smiled — a dangerous but promising reply. He had hoped to defy her expectations with directness; all knew the folly of knowingly bargaining with a fairy. If she thought him a fool, perhaps she'd be less likely to kill him.

“And why should I help you?” she asked, still smiling, playing his game of direct bargain.

“I am hunted by a Dragon-Blooded named Irenhar Axionis,” he said, and a chuckle echoed through the court. “He seeks the creature I have bred.” He stepped aside, and now the chuckle turned to a murmur of curiosity as the creature lifted its head and regarded them with its almost-sentient eyes. “For the past two decades I have mutated this creature for the purpose of seeking my lost Solar. Irenhar would use it to hunt all Solars and wipe them from Creation.”

The duchess yawned and the court chuckled again approvingly. “These sound like neither my concerns nor especially interesting,” she said, and the danger of this statement was not lost on Fidelis.

“I hardly expect you to be interested in my welfare,” Fidelis agreed, “but consider the effect of Irenhar’s success on your amusements here with the Bull. An assault on all Solars, a weapon as dangerous as this, is sure to draw their attention and tip the balance in favor of the Terrestrials. The amusements you enjoy here depend on that balance.”

Now the duchess was staring at the creature intently. It had bent its head to the blue-green grass and was methodically trimming blades down to their white stems. Fidelis dared to hope that his point had struck true.

“It is clear this animal is rare and beautiful, and for now we will take you at your word as to its abilities,” the duchess said. “We agree that it would be unacceptable for it to fall into inept hands.”

A chill snuck up Fidelis’s neck. He heard Mikatri’s stone-mill voice berating him for an idiot. “The creature is of course very bonded to me — ” he began.

“I have a counter-proposal,” the duchess interrupted, clapping her hands with delight. “We shall keep the creature ourselves, for it is lovely and strange, and allow yourself and Irenhar to be disposed of. This is far more interesting than reuniting you with your Solar.”

Fidelis’s hands clenched at his sides, and two of the duchess’s plumed guards narrowed their eyes at the movement. Behind him, the creature gave a low trill.

A high whistle sounded, and the two dozen heads of the courtiers turned in one movement toward it.

A scout shimmered into view, bowed hastily, and ran toward the guard captain. After a few muttered words, the captain stiffened and began snapping orders.

Fidelis’s blood went cold. He had not expected Irenhar to find him so quickly. The obvious explanation was that Mikatri had told him where Fidelis was headed; his heart stung at the betrayal, and the thought that her anger had been so great that she would endanger him so. He turned to the creature and

whispered a command to it, activating a charm centered between its shoulders — flee and hide until I find you.

The beast gave a single bound with all four feet, slipping into the forest. The duchess gave an angry cry and the courtiers burst into aghast chattering.

Before she could so much as shout at her captain, the Hunt was upon them.

A fire aspect, this one slim and female, hurtled through the trees, her hands burning. She touched one of the laden festival tables and it leapt into flame even as she spun, drawing a narrow blade from the sheath at her back. One swipe through the flames and the blade caught; a second swipe cut at the sentinel rushing toward her.

The sentinel flashed gossamer at the last second, dancing out of the way of the blade. A second later the sentinel was back again, delivering a precise kick to the aspect's chest. She flew backward into the table, but rolled midair, springing off the burning linen with one palm.

Three more terrestrials had taken the field — fair folk were by turns evaporating into gossamer and shrieking offense — and Fidelis had ducked to the northwest, angling both for a massive oak stump and a table he had been eyeing from the moment he'd entered the clearing.

In Ghedaran, the peach would have been locked in a vault, guarded by armored golems. Here it was sitting in a bowl of fruit — one which certainly was meant to tempt the ignorant. The fair folk would doubtless find it a fine joke for one of their number to eat the speckled fruit unaware and seek the next object of their whimsical desire with an obsession unto death.

Unattended by either the fae or the Hunt, Fidelis swept up to the bowl and smuggled the peach into his satchel, not daring to marvel over it. Behind him, the duchess was screeching for her guards, the unfortunate captain of whom was trying to remind her that their finest had been dispatched to harass the Bull's near encampment.

Fidelis crept around the edge of the clearing, working his way toward the path he had sent the creature down. His heart was pounding, ears alert for any sign the fairy host or the Hunt had turned toward him.

There was no sound, only the iron grip of a gauntleted hand on his shoulder. He rolled instinctively, but the grip tightened, seizing him painfully by the collarbone. It spun him around, bringing him to face Irenhar, his face bloody from a cut at his temple, a savage smile lighting his features.

Beautiful day for a rout!" the aspect shouted, throwing Fidelis backward casually and lifting his greatsword. "Gets the blood moving!"

Fidelis fell to the ground, shadow washing over him. He would never find her; perhaps it was fate.

An opaline flash glinted against the dark forest, and Irenhar suddenly shuddered, then wrenched to one side. The creature was there, its horn

embedded fully into the fire aspect's side. The man's eyes bulged, more with incomprehension than with pain; the creature squealed — Fidelis would swear it was objecting to the inconvenience of the big man weighing down his head. The maned neck shook and Irenhar slid off the horn.

Fidelis scrambled forward, gripping the Dragon-Blooded's throat in his hands. A horn through the side would not be enough alone to bring him down, but if he couldn't breathe — "You're right," Fidelis growled. "It is a beautiful day."

Irenhar's eyes rolled back in his head, and Fidelis vaulted to his feet, whistling the creature after him. Together they slipped into the forest, and did not stop until the clamor of the wyld court was far behind them.



Two days later, after a relentless hike along the edge of the wyld, skirting the edge of old Rokan-jin, Fidelis was finally satisfied that they had eluded what remained of the Carnelian Duchess's court. They came upon a mushroom-lined meadow and Fidelis sank down into the soft grass. The creature made a brief circuit of the clearing, tasted a few mushrooms, then returned to his side, folding its legs and settling behind him. It leaned against him like a dog.

A bump in the satchel dug into his side, and Fidelis reached for it, pulling out the peach he had stolen from the Duchess.

Irenhar might be dead, his Hunt dispersed, but there would be another, and another after that, until the creature was taken from him.

He held the peach up to the beast, which looked at him with pale blue eyes sharp with curiosity. Its long neck craned toward the fruit, jaw dropping to accept it between its strangely delicate teeth. Fidelis's breath caught, his heart swelled with imagined brightness: this was the final piece. The creature would fulfill its destiny, and run until its heart gave out.

For a moment he was there. He thought of the slim legs buckling, of its sides heaving. The creature would look back at him, its blue eyes full of trust, baffled at its dimming vision, as its burst heart failed to deliver blood. He would be there, standing before his Solar, and the spiraling horn, once full of light, would fall and lie still at his feet.

In that imagined instant it should have been the Solar who filled his heart, who completed him, who forever cast back the talons of shadow lingering ever at his side. The thought of her was the only solace he had known in two long centuries. But in this future, in the forest glen where he imagined he had found her at last, all that filled his mind was the sight of the creature lying lifeless on the ground, having given itself at last to his purpose.

He pulled his hand back toward his chest.

Light crept up the creature's face, slithering between the glimmering scales, and it gave a soft hiss of objection as the treat escaped its reaching

mouth. Digging into the satchel, Fidelis pulled a handful of starwort out and offered it instead. Content, the beast munched away.

Fidelis heaved a sigh, his shoulders slumping. He turned the speckled peach over in his hands, thumbing its soft pebbled surface. Then he pulled back his arm and flung it into the forest. It landed distantly with a soft thud.

The creature lifted its head, slowly munching a last sprig of starwort between its lips. It looked after the peach and twitched an ear at him.

Fidelis brushed bits of leaf and moss from his breeches and pushed himself to his feet, slapping the beast's side. "Let's go," he said.

Amiably, the animal stood, snuffing the moss, and followed.



THE HERALD OF GLORIOUS DEATH

by Tracy Barnett

The drummers surround the room, oiled and gleaming in the light from the torches. Each bears a Mark of Death, counting them as the most devoted of the Faithful. A missing arm, a gangrenous eye. Scars and mutilations. The self-destruction that is the hallmark of devotion. Each of the drummers grimaces in pain as they drum, their injuries constant reminders of the life they hope to one day shed. The shrouds on the walls, flimsy and torn, flutter as the drummers pound out the rhythm that drives the ceremony.

The drummers begin, a low and throbbing rhythm. They fill the Shrine of Glorious Death with their rhythm, signaling the beginning of the dance. The Faithful weep in ecstasy, each hoping for the sweet release, and in the same moment, each fearing it. The Faithful are lost in their moment. Sweat drips and pulses race, the dancers are painted crimson by red torches in soot-stained sconces. Myrrh and jasmine and rosemary scent the air, preparations for the ceremony, an offering to Glorious Death. They can't feel the rough stone under their hands as they prostrate themselves before the altar. All they know is their ecstasy, their fear, and the drums.

It is not often that such a gathering of the Faithful occurs. Those who devote themselves to Glorious Death do not gather to offer their True Devotion lightly. But unrest around the Shrine prompted action. Onyx Mace, a legendary Solar, has been threatening them, hunting the Faithful, and disrupting the sanctity of the Shrine. Those Who Part the Shrouds made a choice: the Faithful were to be gathered, and True Devotion paid to Glorious Death; sacrifice and summons. Final endings for final confrontations.

Elsewhere in the Shrine, two bodies move together, pounding in time to the drums, faintly heard in the confines of their room. Teeth nip into a pale neck, drawing another stream of blood. Strong hands run over soft skin. A quivering moment, two beings united in the dying light of a sun's last breath. A little death as a prelude to the deaths about to be offered. And past that moment, recovery. An acknowledgement of the loss felt, the offering to Glorious Death evident in their shared silence.

Now they part, and the true preparations begin. Hands cross over bodies, ashes spread to represent loss. Fragrant oils, olive and sandalwood, anoint brows, arms, and legs. There is nothing sensual in their movements now. Theirs is the acknowledgement of impermanence, of things passing, as they will soon help the Faithful pass. The hands, feminine, masculine, and feminine again, bodies changing as they wish. Each physical change is another tribute to the impermanence of life. Every action of the pair is a tribute; every blink of the eye, the death of sight.

Outside the Shrine, he gathers himself. He tastes the stained power flowing out of the Shrine. His Solar nature will not stand idly by. Mastering himself, he strides to the Shrine, bent on destroying that which he holds to be in contempt of all that is right and good. He seeks to cleanse this place, to burn away what he sees as blight. He thinks he steps forward in righteousness. Instead, these are the steps that will carry him to his final Ending, as is only right at this place of worship.

The drums increase in intensity, low and throbbing, but rising. The sound of an increased heart rate, of anticipation. The sound washes over the two, the frenzy rising in the Faithful near the altar a counterpoint to the air of mourning that surround the pair. Their hands, touching until now, part, stifled sighs from each of them indicating the last ritual parting that prepares them for the ceremony. Now they are naught but vessels for Glorious Death, given over to that which they hold dear above all.

Shrouds part and a hush falls over the Shrine.

They enter.

To call them beautiful would do a disservice to the word. Female, male, both and neither, each a shifting constellation of features. First a pale breast, with a stubble-speckled cheek. A firm, masculine torso, a soft, feminine leg. The torchlight reflects and shines off of the oils on their bodies. The areas covered in ash are dim by contrast, the absorption of the light another symbol, another small death among countless others.

Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful, and Rower on the River Styx stand opposite the Faithful, who are still hushed in awe.

The drums begin to sound once more. They fill the Shrine of Glorious Death with their rhythm. The drums signal the beginning, and They Who Part the Shrouds as One begin the dance. They move their arms and legs, an asynchronous flutter passing between Them. Each movement perfect, each movement a half step out of harmony. The Faithful join the dance, their mortal forms weak approximations of the Abyssal Exalted who lead the dance.

Outside, the drumming fills the soul of the Solar with darkness and doubt. His hand hesitates in front of the wooden doors to the Shrine.

Something like joy crosses the face of Rower on the River Styx and something like pain is echoed in the face of Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful. Each emotion, each feeling passes back and forth between them.

So, too, do their features, female, male, both, neither, all passing back and forth between Them. Their dance weaves a tapestry of life into Glorious Death, and the Faithful weave along.

The drums signal change, and the Moments of Transition begin. One by one, the Faithful approach the altar, each dancing, each hoping, and each fearing. Styx and Lethe dance, waiting for Glorious Death to tell them who is chosen.

Another pounding, a rhythm asynchronous to that of the drums, sounds at the back of the Shrine. It is lost in the drums.

The first of the Faithful is chosen. A slight woman, clad in the common dress of her people.

“Your name?” Lethe addresses the woman, the power of the Abyssal Exalted’s voice shaking the woman’s soul.

“Sesus Denerid Myar.” The woman’s voice trembles in hope and fear.

Quick slices of the knife from Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful and the woman stands before Glorious Death and the Faithful, bare. The dance continues around her, unabated. The movements of the dance bring Them close to her and she receives a kiss from each, in turn. Blessings before her journey. The woman turns to face the Shrine, and gives a choking sigh when Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful pushes the dagger under the woman’s ribs.

She was blessed. The first of the Faithful to meet Glorious Death this day. Her blood pools on the floor of the Shrine to Glorious Death, running in channels, rivulets of red life filling out the mosaic on the floor. And the next of the Faithful is chosen.

A man, young and strong, wearing the clothes of a soldier.

“Name?” Styx asks the man. The man squares his shoulders, feigning bravery in the face of his sacrifice.

“Delectable Caress of Morning Dew.” Styx looks the man over, judging.

“You dare much, naming yourself as we name ourselves.”

Quick slices from Styx, and he stands before the Faithful, bare. The dance continues around him, unabated. The movements of the dance bring Them close to him, and he receives a kiss from one, the other turning away. The choices of Glorious Death are fickle, and the blessings few. The man turns to face the Shrine and gasps as Styx servers his spine with the knife. He collapses, legs useless. Rower on the River Styx, the dance carrying the Abyssal Exalted to the man, lightly slices the artery in his leg. The man’s blood slowly spreads to join that of the women. The man will watch, half-blessed.

“Presumptuous.” The voice of Styx is silk over steel. The dance continues, unabated.

The drums continue to sound, low and throbbing. They fill the Shrine of Glorious Death with their rhythm. Another pounding, a rhythm asynchronous to that if the

drums, sounds at the back of the Shrine. It is heard over the rhythm of the drums and the dance falters. Then the drums falter. The pounding at the back of the Shrine takes over, dominating the soundscape of what had been a religious experience.

“He is here.” The voice of Styx is soft. Their features shift, face changing as the mood changes.

“Then it will end, very soon.” The voice of Lethe is hard-edged. Their face, shifts too, and their body along with it. Every half-realized form that the body of Lethe takes is as hard as their voice, sharp edges and divisive lines.

The pounding at the back of the Shrine changes tone as the door splinters, the smoky light inside flashing off the head of a gleaming black mace that is quickly yanked back. A golden-skinned arm reaches through the hole, opening the door to the Shrine. In steps a masculine form, clad in leather leggings and high boots, chest bare save for the harness designed to hold the weapon in his hand.

“Onyx Mace.” The Abyssal Exalted speak in unison. The Solar Exalted reaches through the hole he put in the door of the Shrine, and grabs the handle. The door swings open on oiled hinges.

“You trespass on holy ground, Solar.” Rower on the River Styx’s soft voice is deadly quiet, filling the Shrine with menace. “But if it is Glorious Death which you seek, then we will be happy to oblige you.” Styx settles into a ready form, lithe muscles loose, long hair pulled back into a braid. Styx walks to Lethe places a possessive arm around their shoulder. “Aren’t we, lover?”

Lethe’s smile is a thing of deadly beauty. Firm muscles ripple under Styx’s arm as Lethe settles into their preferred fighting form.

Onyx Mace looks on, a grim smile on his face. “I, trespass?” His voice is oil and honey. “Your very existence is a trespass against everything the Exalted stand for.” A sweeping gesture takes the entirety of the Shrine, and settles the Faithful still gathered front Shrine. “You and your... sheep shall not live to see one more day of your blasphemy.”

An uneasy tension fills the Shrine, both sides waiting for the other to move. A breeze blows through the open door, bringing the smell of lilies with it, mingling with the scent of death.

The Abyssal Exalted move.

Rower on the River Styx reaches Onyx Mace first, knives flashing in the dim light. Styx cuts towards Onyx Mace’s face, forcing him back. The second thrust, Onyx Mace beats back with his namesake, volcanic glass ringing on steel.

Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful joins the melee, picking up a long wooden stave, the movement of it cutting the air. Where Styx flows like water, Lethe thunders, muscles rippling. The stave clashes with the mace, and the battle is joined. The Shrine fills with a new sound, roaring over the drums of worship, the chime of weapon on weapon and the harsh breaths of those fighting.

An exchange. Weapons flicker and flash. Blood spills, the first of the combat, and Onyx Mace steps back, crimson running down his side. The Abyssal Exalted circle him, weapons at the ready. It should be no challenge for them to dispatch a single opponent, especially one who challenges them in the heart of their own power. Both Rower on the River Styx and Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful move in, grim smiles their faces.

Onyx Mace laughs. Light emanates from his mace and spreads up his arm. His laughter gains a sharp edge, a mania. Lethe and Styx pause, sharing a fearful glance. In that moment, Onyx Mace moves.

His form blurs, elongating and shifting faster than even the Abyssal Exalted can keep up with. Two crunching thuds sound and both Abyssal Exalted fall, one leg each a shattered ruin. Bone, blood, and ruined flesh. Onyx Mace stands over them, smiling at the pain on each of their faces.

“You are everything that I hate in this world. Your worship is an abomination and I will see it ended this day.” He raises his mace high, triumph gleaming in his amber eyes. It whistles down at the unprotected head of Rower on the River Styx. There is a flicker of movement, a desperate cry from one of the Faithful. The mace connects with a wet thud, brain and bone flying in every direction. Onyx Mace laughs, the bright sound jarring the in the Shrine.

Then the shattered corpse of the Faithful shifts off of Styx, the blood of the Faithful covering the body of the Abyssal Exalted. Styx reaches out and pulls in the fading essence of the Faithful who sacrificed himself. The essence flows into the fallen Exalted, the life force of the Faithful mending the shattered leg. Styx stands and faces Onyx Mace, a smile crossing the Abyssal Exalted’s face.

“You arrogant fool. This is the home of Glorious Death, a Shrine to Her honor. You think to destroy us here? The Faithful behind us came to give their lives, as all Faithful do. And from their deaths, we gain strength. Such shall it be until we send our own essences to Her.” Styx stands tall, all sign of injury gone. Nearby, Lethe crushes the head of another of the Faithful, drawing her life essence into the leg shattered by Onyx Mace.

The drums throb and roll, rhythm upon rhythm sounding throughout the Shrine. And the battle begins in earnest.

The Abyssal Exalted leap, taking the attack to Onyx Mace. Fury marks their strikes and is met by the ringing clangs of Onyx Mace deflecting their blows. Limbs blur and shift, speed begetting speed until only glimpses of the battle are visible to the Faithful that dare lift their heads to see.

A slice of a knife, golden skin flayed open. The former near-perfection of a cheek marred by blood and exposed teeth.

A chiming smash as black shards of onyx fly from the mace head as it buries itself in the stone floor.

A rush of air from heaving lungs, a golden fist pushing the muscles below the ribs to their limit.

The popping tear of tendon and ligament forced free of their natural bonds to bone and muscle.

The hush of sandaled feet scraping across rough stone wall and tatter shrouds; a gasping cry as a body launches across the room to its target.

Blood and bone and limb and hair and skin and flesh upon flesh upon flesh.

Drums are pushed aside, the Faithful behind them sacrificed too as the Keepers of the Shrine pull on the needed life essence to keep up the battle with their Solar enemy.

Screaming. Every voice in the room, every throat torn by the sounds of animal rage and primal need to live or to deal death. And the frenzy increases.

The final tributes to Glorious Death are offered.

The middle of the Shrine is a welter of blood and body parts. The stink of viscera fills the air. All is silent now. The drums have stopped. Life has stopped. A picture of death.

For a moment.

A strangled gasp breaks the silence, copper-scented air flowing into lungs. An arm heaves, throwing sweat and viscera into the air. Bone and meat move as one being, somehow still alive, pulls itself from the slaughter pit. It is what was, but...more. Any human seeming is gone from the Abyssal Exalted. It is death, taken into physical form.

It gathers itself as it can, vital fluid dripping from the end of an arm, the hand gone. The being shuffles and sloshes across the room, and leans, gasping, on the rough wall. It plunges the stump into one of the few torches still lit. It gives a strangled cry as the fire cauterizes the wound.

The being slumps down, leaving streaks of red on the shroud at its back. A puddle of gore and mucus flows from its limp form, skin sloughing off its body, a new form emerging. It is dark and beautiful. The dim light of the Shrine dims further as it emerges. It is the Herald of Glorious Death, and in its presence, even light dies. And the only sound in the Shrine is its ragged breathing.

Except.

Another sound. A whimper.

The thing stands, grimacing. It stumbles to the center of the room and begins to push mangled bodies out of the way. There, Rower on the River Styx sees the last breaths of Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful. Styx kneels down, placing a hand on the chest of Lethe. One last shared moment.

Lethe lifts a shaking hand and brushes it across the cheek of Styx. Tears flow from the eyes of both Abyssal Exalted.

“T-take it...” Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful whispers. Rower on the River Styx nods, vision blurred, and presses bloody lips to Lethe’s forehead. Each gives a soft sigh, an echo of the moments shared in the deep chambers before the ceremony. The last of the essence of Drops of Lethe on the Tongues of the Faithful flows into Styx, adding strength and power to the new form.

A roaring shout, and Onyx Mace stands, right arm and eye missing, left leg a ruin of torn muscle and bone. He summons his last ounce of strength and throws himself at Rower on the River Styx.

The new form glows, virulent, violet light spilling out of the Abyssal Exalted. Rower on the River Styx steps sideways, arm blurring as the knife sinks into Onyx Mace’s back. Spine severed, Onyx Mace crashes to the floor, twitching. He tries to move his legs, tries to stand, but his limbs don’t respond. Rower on the River Styx steps through the remnants of the Faithful, through the blood and bodies, to kneel at his side.

“You thought to enter this divine place and destroy it. You succeeded. The Shrine will burn tonight, another death given as offering.” Onyx Mace’s remaining eye stares as Rower on the River Styx leans closer. “Thank you for that. You have given birth to something more. To my new form as the Herald of Glorious Death.” Onyx Mace’s eye widens in fear and he tries to speak, but cannot utter so much as a sound before The Herald of Glorious Death plunges the second knife into his eye.

The Shrine is quiet.

Then, drums.

The drums sound for the Herald of Glorious Death, the drummers fallen and broken. The drums sound, rumbling through this night of death and sacrifice. And as the Herald lights the fires, the Shrine itself a sacrifice, the drums sound on.

The Drums of Death sound, low and throbbing, filling the world with their rhythm.

A RESTING PLACE AT THE HEART OF THE MOUNTAIN

by Richard Dansky

There was a stone bench by the side of the lake, a stone bench and that was all.

The bench, it must be said, was a marvel. Close inspection would have revealed that it had been carved where it stood from a titanic block of basalt, polished to a gleaming blackness that somehow stayed cool in even the worst of the summer heat. Its legs were one with the bones of the earth, its graceful curves melding with the unyielding stone beneath the carefully manicured meadow in which it stood. A single rough path led to it from the abandoned manor house in the distance; before it spread the calm and unruffled expanse of a nameless lake whose surface neither fish nor waterfowl dared disturb without much trepidation. Trees could be seen at a respectful distance, flowering cherry and red-leafed maple obscuring the horizon as they bowed their heads to the wind.

And on the bench sat a woman. Small of frame, she wore a simple white gown, belted at the waist with an embroidered black sash. On her feet were bamboo sandals of the sort a monk might wear, and her steel-grey hair was bound up in a bun, held in place by a single copper pin.

She faced the lake, or perhaps it would be truer to say that the lake had caught her attention, and that its unnatural stillness was its wishful attempt to make her lose interest and turn her gaze another way.

Beside her, a footstep crunched on gravel.

She turned. Beside her stood a man, shaven-headed and clad in nondescript traveling clothes. His left hand held a staff, and a small pack dangled from his back.

"Pardon me, grandmother," he said, inclining his head at a proper angle to show respect for one's elders. "May I —"

"I should certainly hope not," she replied, and crossed her arms.

The man blinked, and gawped, and swallowed twice before finding himself able to speak again. "I beg your pardon?"

She turned back to the lake. "If I were to have a grandchild, which I do not, I would wish them both less clumsy and more polite than you."

"I meant no offense — "

"You bow from the neck, not the waist. Your apology is insufficient in its humility, and you have not laid your staff at my feet as an offering to assist me in my infirm old age. Nor have you offered a name that I can call you by, when I deny whatever ridiculous request you are clearly preparing to make. You have offended from the first word and the first gesture, and every time you interrupt me you offend again. Now, what is it you wish?"

He pointed to the bench. "Might I sit beside you for a while and rest my feet, ere I continue my travels?"

A flicker of annoyance crossed the woman's face. "It is not my bench. You may sit where you wish."

"It is yours in that you currently possess it."

She crossed her arms. "Fine. Sit, then." She shuffled a bit, turning her back artfully away at the slightest of angles. Not enough to cause offense, enough to make her intent unmistakably known.

He ignored it, as she knew he would, and settled himself in with much complaining about his feet, his back, and the size and number of stones - all of which were undoubtedly boulders sufficient to crush a lesser man beneath their weight - that had infested his sandals. She, in turn, ignored this, as he knew she would, and eventually he trailed off so that they sat there for some time in uncompanionable silence. Once, a sort of soft scraping noise came from below the bench.

"Was that..." he asked, before trailing off.

"No," the woman replied, and they both sank into silence, observing the lake. For a very long time, very little happened. A frog broke the surface of the water in pursuit of a rainbow-winged dragonfly that had ventured a little too low. The wind itself had respectfully retired, and only the slow march of the sun toward the horizon and the lengthening crawl of the shadows across the ground indicated any time had passed at all.

Eventually, inevitably, he coughed.

Softly, into one cupped hand.

It resounded like a thunderbolt. The old woman turned and glared at him. "Yes?" she said.

"This is a very restful place. How did you find it?"

She glanced sideways at him. "The usual way. By placing one foot in front of the other until I found myself here."

"I have only just arrived myself," he confessed. "This place was not on any map, nor did any roads lead here. It was only a happy accident that allowed me to find such a serene and unspoiled place in which to meditate."

“Then you had best get to meditating before you move on, hadn’t you?” She looked away and he winced. There was more silence.

Eventually, he tried again. “How long have you rested here, Grandmother? A few days?”

She gave a sharp bark of laughter. “Longer than that,” she said, and then, after a minute, “All right, out with it.”

“Grandmother?” The young man drew back in surprise.

“You obviously have something you want to say, or you wouldn’t keep making these idiot attempts at conversation.

“Do you know the story of this place?” said the man, his tone carefully neutral. “It is a strange and marvelous tale.”

“Only if the teller is any good,” she retorted. “Are you?”

He inclined his head, camouflaging a cocky grin under the cover of a bow. “I have been told that my humble efforts are not displeasing.”

“You’ve been lied to, then,” the old woman said, lips pursed in disgust. “But go ahead. I might as well hear your version of things.”

“You honor me,” he said, and when she responded with a muffled “hmmph”, he felt safe in continuing.

“They say,” he began, hands flopping about in failed attempts at dramatic flourishes, “that long ago, the stone on which we sit, indeed, this whole green and pleasant place, was not here.”

Quickly, he glanced over at her. She in turn gazed out at the lake, eyes narrowed and mouth set in the faintest of frowns. It was not, he decided, an auspicious beginning.

“Instead, rising up from this very place was a mountain, one so high that its peak was forever wreathed in snow, and storm clouds bowed and humbled themselves along its flanks rather than attempt its loftiest heights. The spirit of the mountain, who was named Dzosar Hu, appeared as a giant hewn from living granite, with great gemstones for eyes, and he strode across the mountainside, guiding pilgrims and punishing intruders as he saw fit.”

“Oh did he?” the old woman said, her tone rich with amusement. “Go on, go on.”

“Ahem. In any case, the lands at the foot of the mountain guarded by Dzosar Hu were rich and desirable, and furthermore a very long distance away from the Isle. This in turn made them a wonderful reward for someone who had done a great service for the Empress whom she no longer wished to see or converse with.”

“Or let crawl into her bed.” The storyteller’s face dropped into a shocked “O”, and she waved him off. “Small children know of the great Imperial appetite, young one. Feigned innocence is a poor look for you.”

"I was hoping the mists of history would clothe my narrative in alluring modesty," he grumbled. "But as you say, it was the perfect place for the Empress to banish a lover who had done great services for the Empire as well as its ruler, but who had grown tiresome and perhaps a trifle ambitious."

"Members of House Sesus often do," she said drily. "I knew the one you speak of. Baroth, I think his name was. Could rut like an ox and on rare occasions, outthink one. Got the mistaken notion that Imperial Bedwarmer was a permanent position, and that was the end of him."

"Not the end," said the young man, rallying valiantly. "For the Empress did appreciate all Baroth had done for her - and with her, yes, that too - and so granted him the lordship of the Lake of Cold Silver, and the surrounding fields and manors, and the mountain of Dzosar Hu. So, banished from the Imperial presence, Baroth and his entourage rode forth and claimed all these lands. Baroth set himself up in the main manse, which stood in all its glory at the far end of this field. He had serfs to work his fields and tend his orchards, and servants to gird him to ride to the hunt, and soldiers to command against the brigands who dared intrude upon his lands. In short, he had everything he could desire from a place such as this, save one thing."

The old woman snorted with laughter. "Besides that," the storyteller said irritably. "Your mind is a vile, filthy place, Grandmother."

"You have no idea," she said, suddenly sober and long-faced. "But by all means, tell me what poor Baroth was missing."

"He wanted," the storyteller said, with an air of supremely wounded dignity, "a view of the lake. But the mountain of Dzosar Hu was, of course, in the way. His advisors suggested a path around the base of the mountain which he could traverse at his leisure. He dismissed the idea out of hand and had his advisors executed. One of this servants suggested building a road over the mountain, but such a thing was deemed too long, and too likely to be troubled by the mountain spirit. A third man suggested tunneling straight through the mountain, as the shortest distance between two points is, as you know, a straight line."

"This plan, Baroth agreed to. He sent men to the mountain with axes and shovels and blasting powders and spells, and they began to dig their way through the bedrock at the mountain's base. Soon, this caught the attention of Dzosar Hu, who came rumbling down from his home high up the hillside to see what the ruckus was. When he spotted the men tunneling through his mountain without asking permission, without paying their respects, and without offering a gift to the spirit of the place (that being him), he was enraged. From high above, he rolled great boulders down upon them, and many were crushed. The rest took refuge inside the tunnel they had begun to dig, which ultimately served as their tomb. For while Dzosar Hu was not swift, he was surefooted and wrathful against those who wronged his beloved mountain."

"I assume the workmen were killed," the old woman asked, laconic or perhaps just bored.

“They were indeed, Grandmother.”

“It seems a pity, really. Killed for someone else’s whim so that a famous madman might have his whims observed.”

“Such is the way of things, Grandmother. Or at least of the way of stories.” She fixed him with a cold stare. “Perhaps one should consider other stories, then.”

He swallowed, nervously. “You did ask to hear this one, Grandmother. If it displeases you...” His voice trailed off with only the faintest quaver.

“So I did, so I did. You may continue.”

“Thank you.” He swallowed, closed his eyes to recapture himself, and tried to find the lost thread of the tale he had been spinning. “Baroth heard of the slaughter of his men, and said ‘This insult cannot be borne’. He donned his armor and girded himself for battle, and went forth to slay Dzosar Hu.”

“For three days and three nights they fought, the two evenly matched in skill and power. Boulders crashed from the mountain heights. Torrential rains poured down, threatening to wash them both away. Lightning shattered the very earth on which they stood. But in the end, Baroth of House Sesus stood triumphant, and Dzosar Hu was vanquished.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” said the old woman. “And then Baroth had his men carve the tunnel after all?”

“Ah, no, Grandmother. You see, Baroth felt that the mountain ought to be punished for having had the temerity to oppose his wishes. And so he commanded that it be torn down, utterly destroyed except for its very heart. This, he commanded, would be hewn into a bench where he might sit and observe the lake. His servants, knowing that the price of failure would be death, immediately set to devastating the mountain from its crown to its base. This took many years and cost many lives, but in the end Baroth’s will was done, and the mountain cleared away. Its bones were used for gravel to line the walks of his gardens, and the bench, well, you are intimately familiar with the bench, seeing as we now sit upon it. As for Baroth, he grew bored, waiting for the project’s completion and rode out to battle against a Behemoth. The results were, sadly, predictable.”

“What became of Dzosar Hu,” the old woman asked. “You left that out of your story.”

The young man shrugged. “Nobody knows. It is assumed that Borath slew the spirit, as it seems entirely in character for him to do so, but truth be told, his ultimate fate was unimportant. His role in the story was to be a fierce adversary, a titanic obstacle to be vanquished. It is how legends are made, Grandmother.”

Again there was a noise from beneath the bench. He cocked his head to take a closer look, but she glared at him and he refrained.

“The key to becoming a legend is very simple: Avoid appearing in anyone else’s legends as they are being built. Doing so tends to cut one’s own career short.”

“Short?”

“Generally by the length of one head.”

He snorted with laughter. “But were all men wise enough to heed your advice and avoid those who would become legendary, then we would have no legends.”

“Would that be such a terrible thing?”

“Why, without legends future generations would have nothing to aspire to. There would be no examples held up of the shining virtues for children to emulate, no moral tales of hubris and downfall to warn them against overreach and arrogance.”

“We have plenty of legends already, and yet arrogance is not in short supply.”

“Yet without legends to instruct, it might grow even more common.”

“I fail to see how that is possible.”

“Ah, Grandmother, you are a cynic.”

“I have walked over corpses piled ten deep to speak to those you’d call legends, child, and I have walked away unscathed. I have laid low generals who had obliterated armies without striking a blow, and I have killed creatures whose names still frighten those small children you claim to be so fond of. Do not presume you know more of legends than I do.”

“And yet, here you are. It seems your legend is something to aspire to.”

“One would think that out of ignorance. Or possibly envy.”

“One might know more of your legend than you might think, Grandmother.”

“Do you? I wonder.” And she gathered herself and stood. “So tell me, young storyteller, it has been said that no tale worth the telling comes without a deeper meaning. What’s the hidden message in yours?”

“Well,” and again he inclined his head curiously. “One might take the mountain to stand for the august entity we call the Empire, and note that while enemies might strive to tear it down, it always manages to outlast them. The bench, you see, is here. Borath is not.”

The old woman made a face. “Could one not make the argument that the imposition of order upon nature – say, by the Empire, or one of its more poorly behaved sons – tends not to end well for either side?”

“Or one could merely say that sacrifices are necessary to achieve great things, and that the end result – this marvelously placid view – is well worth the efforts required to achieve it.” He grinned, though the smile did not reach his eyes. “So, Grandmother, what did you think of my story?”

“I think,” she said, and pointed off into the distance, “that you could perhaps have done a better job of hiding your men, Centurion. There are sixteen I can see in the orange groves there, and another dozen in amongst the tall grass.

Four more down by the lake, another half-dozen behind the flowerbeds...have I missed any of your cohort?"

The young man uncoiled himself from the bench. "You have my apologies, Grandmother Blossom. It was deemed a necessary precaution, in case you seemed actively resistant to the notion of conversation."

"Bugger conversation," she said, and farted for emphasis. "I'll have your name, Centurion, and your mission, or none of your cohort will be able to move fast enough to do a damn thing for you. I've crippled priests and shouted down gods. A pretty boy in a fake mendicant's outfit's the work of seconds for me, should I choose."

The man bowed. "Kelzhar Rhey, of house Iselsei, at your service, Grandmother. Sent by express order of the Jade Chamber of the Thousand Scales to locate certain august personages and attempt to suggest to them that the Empire might be a reasonable place for them to exercise their talents."

"Ah," said the woman he called Grandmother Blossom, and turned to face the lake. "They're frightened on the Isle, then. Herself has vanished and Thorns has fallen, and everywhere the barbarians are at the gates. Why not try to bring the wild powers home?"

"You oversimplify, madam — " Rhey began, but she cut him off. "Do not dare to patronize me. The Emperor's a weak fool whose hand is wrapped around his own prick more than it is a sword hilt. The Great Houses strive against each other, the Hundred Kingdoms seethe with revolt, and Heaven itself is too busy to care. And the solution for all this? Bring home Unforgiven Blossom, so that when it all finally fails — as all things must do — then your masters can at least say that they tried."

"They are women and men of good conscience who value the Empire and the order it brings, Grandmother. And you are not the only one I seek."

"Then by all means, go and seek the others. Here's the real moral of your story, boy. The mountain would have worn away in time, regardless of anything Baroth said or did. The bench is just the illusion that we have control of the process. But wind, wave and time, sooner or later they take us all."

In the distance, the soldiers were coming out of the green, bows nocked and swords at the ready. Rhey, for his part, seemed different as well. Gone was the loose smile and the easy stance, cast off like a player's costume at the end of a scene. Instead, he stood ramrod-straight, his priest's staff held out like the weapon it was. "It is not that simple, Grandmother. I have my orders. You are to be found, and wooed. If you cannot be convinced to return to the Isle, then my orders are to ensure you do not leave this place."

"You'll die carrying out those orders," she said. "Your cohort, too."

"Such is the risk of obeying one's orders," he replied, and the smile he gave to this was entirely different than the charming one he'd flashed whilst

inhabiting the role of storyteller. “And while stories of your puissance have been told far and wide, rest assured that we are not entirely helpless.” And at that, he snapped his fingers, and it was as if the entire landscape suddenly became alive with armed and armored warriors, all training their weapons on the fragile form of one old woman. Where there had been dozens now were hundreds, released from behind glamours that hid them and called forth from hiding.

She looked around, slowly. A small grin creased her face. “Very good, Kelzhar Rhey, very good indeed. You almost have the makings of intelligence in you.”

“That is high praise, Grandmother,” he said. “Someday I hope to be worthy of it.”

“You may yet be today,” she said. “Remind me what those bloodless serpents in the Jade Chamber told you.”

“That you would join us, or that you would never leave this place alive.” He frowned. “It seems a fairly straightforward proposition, I confess. Simply by asking you, the Empire reveals its weakness. To have you refuse, and then carry knowledge of our efforts to the Yozi and their servants would be most unacceptable. Therefore, we are left with but two possible conclusions to our most enjoyable discussion.”

“Was it really that enjoyable?” she asked. “I seem to recall you mostly talking. But where you see two outcomes, the clever soldier sees three.”

“Then I’m afraid I’m not that clever. Will you do me the signal honor of accompanying us as an honored guest, Unforgiven Blossom, or will there be carnage and slaughter and regrettable disagreement?”

“Neither,” she said, and sat back down. The whisper of a thousand arrows being shifted in their aim, a thousand sword and spearpoints lowered ever so slightly, followed.

Kelzhar Rhey blinked.

“Madam, I do not believe you understand the gravity of the choice before you,” he said. “If you do not do me the honor of agreeing to come with me—”

“Then I will not leave this place alive. Very well, then. It seems a pleasant enough spot for the remainder of my days. I have sat here in contemplation of my sins for thirty nine years, little Iselsei. I can happily stay here a thousand more, so long as no more wandering storytellers come by to disturb me. So leave. Take your men and your swords and your sarissae shining so brightly and hunt down your next target, may the Divines grant they’re more willing than I am. And I will remain here, and think, and sit on the bench whose story you told so badly.”

Rhey blinked again. And then he laughed, a true laugh that rumbled out over the meadow full of warriors and the mirror-flat lake, and bounced off the

far shore and doubled in on itself again. One by one his soldiers lowered their weapons in confusion, until the rigid military discipline broke and there were suddenly just a thousand women and men in armor, standing ill at ease in a field far from home.

And when the laughter stopped, Kelzhar Rhey bowed deeply to the woman seated on the bench. "You win, Grandmother. I shall leave you here, on terms that you do not stray from this place, and thus both of our conditions are satisfied. Furthermore, I thank you for your company, and wish you many years of cheerful contemplation of this most lovely spot."

"Thank you," Unforgiven Blossom replied. "I wish you well on your journeys, and the wisdom to know when to end them." A mischievous twinkle lit her eye. "And if you wish, I can tell you the true story of Baroth and Dzosar Hu."

"I prefer the legend, madam," Rhey said, and turned to address his troops. "Form up!" he bellowed. "To the northwest, at the doubletime, march!"

March they did, and before long the jangle of armor and the clank of weapons and the dull thud of boots on soil had faded, leaving Unforgiven Blossom alone on the bench that had once been a mountain. She sat there for a while, watching the wind ripple the lake in a way that Baroth of the Insatiable Maw had never seen, and was content.

After a while, a small figure detached itself from the shadows beneath the bench, and climbed up to sit next to the old woman. It was shaped like unto a rough-hewn effigy of a man, and its eyes gleamed in the day's fading light.

"I could have dealt with them for you, you know," the small figure said in a gravelly voice. "It would have been no trouble at all."

"I appreciate the thought, my dear," the old woman replied. "And I am glad you did not have to."

And the enduring spirit of that place smiled, and sat up perhaps a bit straighter, and watched the lake with the old woman until night fell.

THE KINGDOM OF HONEY

by Lucien Soulban

It is the Year of White Petals, and I am thirteen. Spring has surrendered to summer and summer itself grows weary of the year. The elders send messengers to the other villages, but they return with distressing news. The white flowers (the color of death) blossom everywhere in the Scavenger Lands instead of the red we are accustomed to; the parliament of nature mourns for some great tragedy invisible to our eyes, and many bee hives are silent, their queens gone, their nurseries empty; even wild bees are vanishing, their droning no longer playing the air like a tightly-strung lute. It is I who lament their absence the most.

• • •

My mother names me Spring Flower on the day she finds me. That is the story she tells me when I'm older.

She is tending the hives with my father when they spy a chain of bees leaving their home. They follow them through the groves of skinny tallow trees and thick elms until they hear me crying. I have been left to the wilds, unable to fend for myself nor open my eyes. I am barely aware of the world. The bees, my mother says, have fed me dew-like droplets of honey before they return for more.

It is for this reason mother calls me her spring flower; a blossom she had prayed would take root in her barren soil, a blossom the bees will never harm, only feed and nurture. Not even when I am older and reach into their hives to taste their honey will they sting me. I am their adopted daughter too.

• • •

It is hard to find honey; wild hives have become dried husks and only a few keepers manage to keep their bees. My parents are among the fortunate handful for the vibrant green tallow groves with their yellow flowers near the house are thick with swarms.

Daily, my father receives visitors looking to buy his honey, and the use of his hives. Merchants, doctors, alchemists, noblemen, landowners — all treat

my father of greater station than they. They need the honey for their medicines and their sweets, and bees to help fertilize the vast orchards of the Great Forks. But his last visitors are the soldiers of that city.

The soldiers are resplendent in the green of the temple guard. Their scale armor gleams like the skin of jade fish. Their engraved helmets, skirted by their emblazoned neck flaps, are swept with gold swan's wings or topped with peacock feathers. I do not know their ranks, but I recognize the pompous looking bureaucrat-monk with his embroidered green robes stretched across his ample belly and the tiny guan hat atop his greasy black hair. He collects taxes from us, and he looks at my father's row of clay hives with greedy little eyes before entering our home.

I am about to run in after him when a guard steps in my way. His face is like a statue, the jaw and cheekbones cut with such certainty that I suddenly doubt myself under his scrutiny. He smiles, however, a gentle grin that I'd expect on the statue of an enlightened saint, not a soldier. It is the smile of a patient father.

We sit on the grass, under the heavy arms of a willow tree and he hands me a piece of candied fig frosted with thick grains of sugar. I eat, barely aware of my treat.

"I have a daughter your age," he says. He continues staring at the house.

"My parents," I ask. "Are they in trouble?"

"Only if they say no," he responds, still thoughtfully distracted. A moment later, the bureaucrat strides from my home. He nods to the hives and the soldiers move with practiced skill. My parents are behind him, my father begging, my mother weeping. With inflated pomp the bureaucrat announces to everyone that whatever has caused the bees to flee, it is moving toward our village. By royal decree of the Priests of the Most August Court of Three, all remaining hives are to be brought to the Imperial Palace for protection. Honey is now the luxury of the royal family.



It is more than a hot night that keeps me awake, some months after the bees are taken. The tallow groves are mostly silent. The wild bees are all but gone, and the bird song seems to have followed them. In their place are invaders, giant wasps the size of a man's thumb. The yellow-jacketed bandits raid the wild hives and steal the remaining honey. I don't like them. The bees never stung me, but the wasps delight in no such promise.

My legs grow restless and my heart beats with the urge to escape. It claws at my chest and I wish to join the bees wherever they have gone. Follow where, I do not know, but there are moments when a wild terrible panic grips me, and I find myself wanting to run until my heart bursts. The bees know the truth of me, and if they should leave me, then nothing of that truth will be left.

I sit up from the floor mat and stare out the window. The air is absolutely still. It has a weight to it and I struggle with each breath. I want to wake my parents, but my father works in the nearby rice fields, backbreaking work, and my mother is equally noble to her tasks. They sleep only because exhaustion compels them; their dreams are troubled, but it is the only rest they have, and I cannot bear to wake them.

I will for a cool breeze to break the heat on my skin, but none comes. I breathe slowly to still my heart, but it never stops racing and it is an avalanche that grows and pushes me to move.

I am distracted by a darting movement against the silver disk of the moon; there is another, and then more, like fish darting through water. The remaining bees have left their groves and are taking flight.

I put out my hand and a single, solitary bee lands in my palm. It is obedient, docile. It is the most beautiful thing I've seen in a long time. I bring it closer so that I might see it better. Then I notice its injuries. Two legs have been ripped from its body and the gauze of one wing is torn. It is near death. This I feel.

Its wings beat and blur and I can hear its soft tired voice. The drone is like a lullaby and the words seem to come after. I have heard them before; they sang to me once when I was an infant and I do not question their ability to speak.

"Daughter," the bee says softly. "Once, we saved your life, fed you royal jelly and protected you. Our debt is paid, but —."

The wings stutter and then stop beating. The bee topples to its side and I know that it is dead. I cry in the dark, for a friend I did not know, for secrets I might never learn. Who am I that these humble creatures would save an even humbler child? My sobs are stifled lest I awaken my parents. I venture out into the still night and dig a trough in the soft dirt beneath the stairs with my finger. There I leave the bee, cradled in a tallow leaf.

The bees are leaving and with them, my answers. Why was I abandoned? Where am I from? My heart urges me to race, and race after them I do.



My steps are small at first as I leave the village; the bees are barely visible in the night sky except as they flicker against starlight. I run through the fields, my steps growing in stride, my bare feet only touching the muddy paths between the rice ponds every few seconds. I do not question the ground as it blurs beneath me. My heart races faster but does not ache; I am exultant.

Beyond the rice paddies, the night folds me into its cloak and the trees loom over me. My steps fly over their roots, and then I am running on their lower branches, my steps as light as my protectors. I race the wind, the only map is a river of stars above my head. I no longer see the bees but I go where they go, awake to the dangers around me. These are the Scavenger Lands, where sounds twist and become unnatural under the domain of the Pole of Wood. The shadows sway and breathe in these ancient forests.

When I stop, I realize a light of white and gold surrounds me. It seems to emanate from my brow. I touch my forehead but can feel nothing, it gives no heat. From a distance comes the baying of wild Yaomo dogs and the screams of their frightened prey. I am a beacon in the forest, and this scares me more than the darkness around me.

I will the light to dim, to make me a shadow hidden by shadows. My light ebbs, and I am again comforted by darkness, even my steps on grass and leaves subdued.

A village still sleeps as I run past it, lanterns like fireflies in the clearing. Is that Li Xin, I wonder? Have I already traveled a day's journey in a short hour? It is gone before I can consider it, and I am back in forest, heading in the direction of dawn, as though I'm eager to beat it to the horizon.

The stars vanish from their stations and the heavens turn plum-colored. Things move in the darkness of the forest and nudge the trees aside, but I am past them before I can register fear. I grow tired at this gait and stumble in my exhaustion, but I do not stop; I cannot rest, even when day arrives and the heat drives me to drink from a stream. My direction remains clear, but something else is obvious now. While I may be traveling to a specific place that I feel rather than see, that place is also traveling towards me.



In the darkness, my nose and my ears are my guide. I hear the river, and I smell its fresh waters. It is the Rolling River, turbulent in these straights as the Elemental Dragon thrashes its tail in its sleep. Its waters run fast over polished rocks and mist coats its face.

I approach the rocky embankment and drink directly from the cool rapids of the river, grateful for the spray of water that washes over me and breaks my crust of dirt. I sate my thirst until my belly aches, but it is a strange delight, an earned respite. I wash my arms, legs, and face, and I search for a mark on my forehead, but see nothing. The water on my face sends a thrill through me, but my body aches from my journey.

The ancient ruins of the nearby Tan Bridge vanish into the darkness. The wood is rotted away; the stones struggle to remain upright. Once, the bridge spanned the great river, but time and war and contagion have left it to its decay. All that remain are pillar rows of stones in the river and a long spar of bridge joined at the shore that ends suddenly over the water.

Sleep finally overtakes me.



A chilling mist drapes my body and silences the thunder of the Rolling River; tattered scraps of it cling to the rocks for purchase. It is too cold, as though I have slept the summer away and found myself deep in fall. But the bamboo shoots

keep their green leaves. This cold is unnatural. It reaches deep into my bones and freezes my marrow. My teeth chatter and whatever I was waiting for has arrived.

Never have I seen or dreamed of such a ship. My parents once took me to the port of Great Forks itself, and there I saw fishing boats and war galleons. I saw a fleet of trading barges from up the Yellow River and a turtle-deck warship belonging to the Scarlet Dynasty Ambassador from Gloam.

This vessel, however, is a floating castle on the deck of a giant ship. The castle is built with its stories stacked upon the steps of black curved gables, until it finally rises upward to the central tower. Its walls are made from lacquered wood slates and the tower is ringed by fractured balconies and dark mouths where open windows and doors rest. Bamboo shield walls, bound with rope, cover the ship's flanks, and her prow and spine are bronze; I can hear the rocks crack and grind beneath the ram plate. She navigates the waters, fearing no obstructions, not even the river bed beneath.

The bees fly in braids, darting against the stars, towards the ship. I race for the torn bridge, the closest I'll get to it. I have one chance. The rocks are slippery and treacherous, but I hurdle them easily, my footing steady and my legs steadier in their long strides. I am made for this.

The bridge finds its way under my feet; the wood creaks and groans at my weight, but the ship continues to chew on rocks loudly. I will not be heard. The mists ensure I will not be seen.

Something large looms over me as I leap. Arm outstretched, my fingers scabble against the ship's hull as it passes with a roar. For a moment I think I might fall, but my hands find a shield wall and my fingers grab the edges of coarse rope that binds the bamboo together. The ropes are thick, each cord wider than my waist. It takes a strength I did not know was there, but I pull at them and doing so, pull myself up.

Exhaustion awaits me, this journey taxing me to infinite depths, but desperation pushes me to climb up to the ledge of rope. And from there, to another belt of ropes. My fingers ache until I can no longer feel them. I cannot possibly continue climbing, but perhaps, I do not need too. Between the shield walls are portholes; they are small enough to shove the mouth of a ship's cannon through, and I pray I am skinny enough to squeeze into the nearest one. Just below the porthole is a ledge that runs the length of the ship.

Walking this a narrow lip, I hug the shield wall and navigate the rope. The ship shifts and groans, and my fingers burrow into the grooves between the bamboo stalks while my toes dig. I reach the ledge, and from there, I grab the lip of the porthole. My arms slip through. My head fits easily, but I almost break my hips squeezing past.

I fall to the rough wood deck, but in the absolute darkness nothing comes for me. I am glad, for I am too exhausted and too cold to remain awake. I fall asleep warning myself not to.

Something forces the cold to retreat. I still dream, but the ice releases its grip on my bones. I hear a distant droning, a familiar song that is as much a lullaby to me as my mother's voice. I drift away, safe in this warm blanket, but something nags at me. I should not be asleep.

My eyes open against its will, and I realize the warmth is very real and very alive. The bees protect me in a cocoon of their bodies. They cover every inch of me. I have seen them kill wasp scouts this way. They envelope the larger wasp and then their bodies grow hot enough to boil the enemy. Here, with me, however, they merely warm my skin and keep the chill at bay.

I sit up and the bees explode into a golden, buzzing cloud. I am tired but unhurt as the bees retreat to their hives. Slathering the walls and the pillars are open honeycombs. Hunger drives me to scrap the honey oozing from the wall hives. It is rich, a priceless luxury in the starving lands beyond.

The bees watch me. I can tell they are sluggish; they are meant for sunlight, for flowers, for fresh warm air. This place has none of that, and beneath the smell of honey is another stench, a fetid, decayed thing with its own sickly sweet aroma.

"Why are you here?" I whisper.

The bees hum in agitation, their wings beating faster. A thousand whispers rise up into a single solitary drone; a thousand voices woven together to form the fabric of their words.

"Our Empress is a prisoner here. We are prisoners." Their voices carry a sing-song lilt, and I am enamored by it.

"Who imprisoned her?" I ask, aghast.

"The Sovereign of Wasps," the bees reply. "You must hide!"

"Why?"

"The wasps rise at dawn."

My gaze falls to the porthole I crawled through. A dull orange sky creeps through and brings a meager light into the ship's belly. I can see more clearly. The deck is open, with thick pillars at intervals down the ship's length. The bee hives cover most of the walls and the pillars. They coat the ceiling and grow downward like stalactites that touch the ground in many places. Only a pathway is spared for the wooden floor. There must be millions of bees on this deck alone. No, I realize — more than that. These are all the bees stolen from the lands. The entire ship is a hive, a kingdom of honey.

"Hide!" the chorus of bees cry once more. They are agitated, scared, and suddenly, I share their fear as well. I search for a place to hide, but everything lies exposed. Only pillars of wood and pillars of wax surround me. I move through the deck, but there is nowhere I can hide without crushing hives and bees.

It is then that I hear a loud buzzing, an angry hum that seems to live inside my ears. The wasps are coming. I know their sound from my home.

“Hide!” the bees whisper urgently.

But where?

Panic fills my throat, and desperation. I want to push myself through the walls, but all I have is a small, exposed niche near a pillar. I retreat to it, and like the night I willed that strange light to ebb, I wish myself shrouded. The light dims around me, the droning muffled. There are shadows where there are not, and I am that shadow.

I am hidden.

I hope.

The drone of the wasps grows louder, louder than I have ever heard. The thrum of their wings beats against my ears and sends tremors through my jaw. I hold my breath. The hum of wasps is almost intolerable and I fear I might run screaming from my shelter. Then I see them and the decision is no longer mine. My body refuses to move, my limbs held in place.

There are only three of them, they are louder than a legion swarm, and they are as big as my father. They are demons, I am sure of it. They walk upon their hind legs, which are plated with engraved bronze shin guards and tied with red cloth. Their orange and black striped bodies are likewise plated in reddish bronze and etched with patterns of water and flame. Their stingers dangle obscenely near the floor, their wings emerge from slits in their armor and occasionally blur into motion. Their oblong faces, their twitching antenna and their serrated pincers thrust out from plated head-crests. From their thin forelegs dangle barbed spears.

I do not move. Their clicking speech and the hum of their wings silences me to the core of my heart. I want to return home, to see my mother and father. Not the ones who left me in the wilderness, but the ones who raised and nurtured me. My family. But another voice speaks within me as well. It is an older woman, perhaps the woman I will become, but I doubt it. This voice is ancient and wise, and I know I somehow knew her once.

“As are you now, mantle-bearer.”

There is no further discussion. My heart stills. I am the blade they shall never see, I remind myself. The wasps walk past me, though I am there to be found at a glance, a glance they do not give. To them, I am a shadow within shadows, and they vanish past the corner of my eyes. Soon, their drones and clicks fade away, and I am alone with the bees again.

I miss my father and mother, but a doubt lingers; a question must be asked. I may never get another chance.

“Who am I?” I ask the bees. More questions spill from my lips. “You found me abandoned. Who left me? Why did they leave me?”

“You must ask the Empress of Bees,” they respond. “Speak with her, but wait till nightfall when the wasps slumber.”



The ship is a giant hive for all the kingdom’s bees, but above deck rests the castle where the wasps live, and where the Empress is held prisoner. The castle is strange, the architecture unfamiliar. It was built by human hands, I see as much, but nobody is left to repair the decaying ship. The corridor floors are run with worn wood planks; the walls, once made from rice paper, are torn and eaten away. They reveal open rooms with filthy, encrusted mats where the wasps sleep. Their armor lies next to them, their spears propped against the walls. They snore in a drone that feels like a knife sawing my courage in half.

Littering the ground are the dismembered remains of many meals, mostly bees and caterpillars, but insects do not have bones. So... mostly.

My only torchlight is the fingers of the moon beaming in through the windows and holes in the walls, but it is enough to guide my steps, and I am a shadow. The wood floors barely complain of my weight, yet each creak and groan sounds like a cry. I am sure I am caught a dozen times over, and yet nothing stirs the night except the lumbering of the ship through the river and my steps. I have always been light of foot, but now move as though understanding the weight of the very air around me.

I go up, never down. I see stairs descending into darkness, I step around them. I see them rising into darkness, I hold my breath and mount them slowly. Whatever brought me here pulls me up. The stairs end at the head of a corridor draped in shadows. Needles of light stream in through cracks and seams in the walls.

I freeze.

At the end of the corridor is a shape, a silhouette hidden behind a wash of light from an open window. I see the soldier by its size and its dangling stinger. I see it by the light reflecting on its spear and armor. Its wings blur and the drone carves into my chest.

What I seek lies beyond it. Can I find another way around? Something tells me no. I am at the top of the castle, but how can I open the door where the wasp stands? I must reach the window.

Beams of age-roughened wood line the corridor, and I dart from post to post when the wasp soldier turns and moves. It is sluggish, tired. It leans on its thorny spear and nods, its wings humming when it starts awake, its mandibles clacking in annoyance. I move closer, willing the wood to drink my steps, willing the shadows to deepen. The square window is mere feet from me now, the wasp close enough that I can appreciate the wicked tip of its beaten spear and the chipped enamel of its ancient armor.

I want to escape through the window, into the open air and away from this terrible castle. The thought shames me and yet it persists, so I swallow my

panic and wait until the wasp's head dips and its wings slow. I reach for the window mere feet from it, lay both palms on the sill and lift myself up. If it stirs, it will see me; I block the window and the starlight.

I swivel outside, my ears pricked to the strange, rumbling snuffle of the wasp. The castle drops precipitously to the shingles of the gables beneath me; the river seems miles below, but there is a narrow ledge under my feet and the hat like sweep of the black tiled roof above my head. I step to the ledge and take a moment to breathe, the fresh air welcome as it washes away the fetid smell of rot.

The ledge is no more than half-a-foot wide and I refuse to look down. My hands touch the wall as I shuffle along. The wind rises up and shoves me, and my fingers scrabble for purchase. A frightened squeak escapes my lips and I pull myself closer to the wall; and I wait, praying not to be swept from my perch, praying to reach the small window ten feet away, praying the wasp didn't hear me.

Heavy steps approach the window and I am exposed on this thin shelf. Can it fly? Can its spear reach me? I do not wait to find out; there is nowhere to hide out here and the stars have taken my shadows.

I am a handful of feet away from the window when a shriek claws my heart. The wasp is at the window, its mandibles clacking at me. The yellow and black pattern on its face is a mandala of short fur, almost beautiful, but in my panic, my foot slips and I grab the lip of wood I was standing on.

The wasp is too large for the window, but its thin, chitin arms reach out with the spear and thrust blindly at me. I pull away along the ledge, trying to get outside of its reach, and manage to pull myself up to the window. The wasp shrieks at me again before pulling back inside. I don't have much time. I crawl through my window and into the familiar and comfortable darkness.



The top of the castle is a large open room. The roof extends into the shadows of the triangular gable, honeycombed hives covering the columns and rafters and covering the floor in bulbous masses. From the shadows comes the familiar and comforting drone of bees, but there is a rising hum that greets me too. The wasps of the castle are awakening and they are angry.

"Rise my children," a soft voice says, and the million-song drone of bees strikes the air with their thunder. In the center of the room a tall figure unfurls among the cloud of bees that cloak her.

She is elegant, as tall as a cypress tree, her limbs thin like branches and her angular head perched on the flower stem of her neck. She looks like a rose with yellow stripes, her limbs sheathed in polished chitin that I mistake for jade at first. Her forehead rises into a crown of beautiful bone, her face a mask with kind golden eyes. Silver gossamer fabric drapes over the shoulders of her long arms.

“Protect us while we speak with our daughter,” she says, her voice soft and lovely. I smile, for her voice is home, comfort, and lullaby.

The bees respond, flying to the door and through the cracks, and I know they rush to their deaths to hold off the wasps.

“Are you my mother?” I ask.

“No, but you are still our child,” the Empress of Bees says. “Centuries ago, we entered into an accord with a Lawgiver of the Zenith caste to protect his circle should any of you ever return. You have all been reborn and we have fulfilled our promise.”

She hesitates, and from outside comes the sharp-knifed humming and droning of bees and wasps at war, a million warriors outnumbered by armored giants. The cloud of bees around the Empress quiver in agitation.

“But I’m different, aren’t I?”

I sense the smile more than I see it. “You were the last to return and the youngest to inherit your mantle. You needed more protection than the others, so fragile. We adopted you. You are our daughter.”

The sound of battle grows more ferocious and has come to the door outside this chamber. There are shrieks now, enraged wasps enduring thousands of stings, but they do not stop. They will be inside soon. I turn towards the door, balling my fists, ready to fight, but a hand touches my shoulder.

“We did not save you to die here,” she says.

“Then why?” I cry, and realize my face is wet with tears.

“Because now you must save us all.”

My mind reels at that. How can I save them all when I can barely save myself against one wasp?

A wall shudders under the blow of something powerful that splinters the wood. The bees have made it impossible to unlock the door, I’m sure, and what arrives does so with brute force.

The silver gossamer fabric shifts and the bees around the Empress move away as the cloth unfurls to become her wings. She stands fully revealed now, the wings having hidden a second pair of smaller arms, and a cocoon.

Again the wall shudders, splintering open a wide crack at the door. Bees charge through the hole, but not before I see a baleful red orb staring at me. It is the Sovereign of Wasps, I am certain.

Quickly, the Empress hands me the cocoon. “Protect her as we protected you, and the bees might return one day.”

“How — ?” I ask, the warm bundle thrust into my arms.

Talon-like fingers tear the door open wider, despite the hundreds of bees that sting their enemy and die.

“Find your circle, the others already reborn. You will be drawn to them. Remind them of the contract. We saved them and they now must save us. Protect the new Empress until she is grown. Go, child, before all is lost.”

Bundle in arm, I rush toward the window; the door bursts open behind me. I am on the sill when the grotesque and misshapen Sovereign of Wasps squeezes through. He sees me, but the Empress rushes forward with her cloud of royal guard. The sloped rooftop gable is twenty feet below me and the glow returns, surrounding me. I am ready, this time, and drop down to the slope of black tiles as a tremendous crash shudders the walls of the castle.

I am exultant once more as I strike the triangular roof, surefooted in the avalanche of clay tiles. I reach the edge, the river below beckoning and the shore of some dark, deep forest offering shadows. I jump with the queen’s cocoon in my arms, and pray for a soft landing.



The waters carry the castle ship down the Rolling River. A thin pennant of bees leaves the castle, some heading home and some lingering around me. The Empress is no longer prisoner I, realize with profound sadness, and the bees have been scattered.

I swaddle the cocoon in my shirt, cold in my underclothes but eager to run. The wasps will hunt for this egg and I have a long journey ahead if I am to find the others of my Circle to help me. I still might not understand where I am from, but I understand where I am going, and for now... that is enough.



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Natania Barron is a word tinkerer with a lifelong love of the fantastic. She has a penchant for the unusual, and has written tales of invisible soul-eating birds, giant cephalopod goddesses, gunslinger girls, and killer kudzu. Her work has appeared in *Weird Tales*, *EscapePod*, *Steampunk Tales*, *Crossed Genres*, *Bull Spec*, and various anthologies. Natania's first novel, a genre-hopping mythpunk novel entitled *Pilgrim of the Sky*, was called was released in 2011. She is also the founder of *The Outer Alliance*, a group dedicated to queer advocacy in speculative fiction.

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