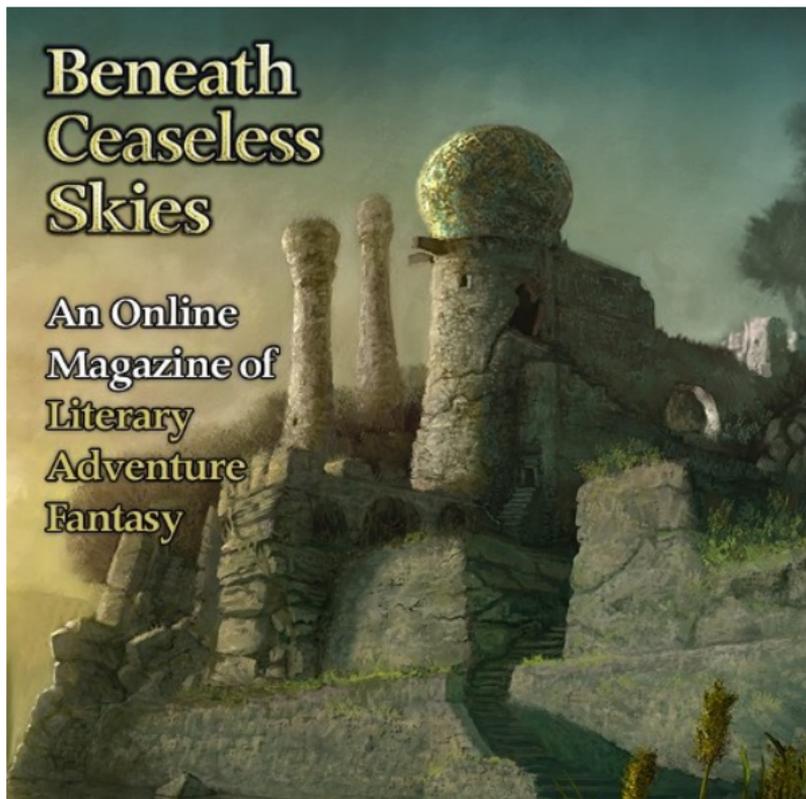


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THE SWORD OF LOVING KINDNESS, PT. I

by Chris Willrich

One storm-lashed sunset in the Eldshore's antique capital, beneath Castle Astrolabe's crumbling perch and near the Zodiac Coliseum's bloody stones, Gaunt and Bone scaled Heaven's Vault, there to make a hellish deposit.

Heaven's Vault was a golden, six-sided tower lancing like an orphaned sunbeam through Archaeopolis' sodden skies. Rectangular stained-glass windows glittered at intervals up its six hundred feet, each with a god's portrait in the center, surrounded by lush scenes of that divinity's life and death. In the corners of the windows there glowed ruby numbers, as if enumerating divine blood money.

"They *are* all dead, you know," Imago Bone said within a gilded cloak, his invictium-tipped gloves scraping past the vast window of the Forge God, a blade of grass in his teeth recalling the world far below. "Or so it's claimed. All the gods of the West. Those not embedded in the landscape, or too abstract to have form at all. Their blood stained this glass, with the blood of their high priests. And the Things beyond the glass killed them."

“If this is meant to deter me,” Persimmon Gaunt said, clutching her rope beneath Bone, “I’m deterred. Turn back anytime you like.” *Though I wish I’d been swayed at a lower altitude*, she thought. *Swaying at high altitude is hard on the stomach*. Her sturdy body had been toughened by weeks of travel, but the long climb ached within her limbs, and chill winds swirled auburn hair into her eyes. Dangling there, she felt not unlike the rose tattooed upon her face, the one shown ensnared by a spider’s web.

“There’s no choice,” Bone said. “What we need is beyond this glass, that prophecy claims unbreakable.”

The poet answered him,

“Neither liquid nor solid: such then is glass.

Stained with godblood and manblood, no one shall pass.

Thus trapped between natures, ‘twill never fault.

Eternal, the windows of Heaven’s Vault.”

“Right,” Bone said. “That one.” The spare, ferret-like face of the thief frowned down, framed by two old scars, one from blade, one from flame. “I won’t ask again that you allow me to go alone. I merely ask that you respect the Pluribus. They are not seen much beyond this tower. But if tales are true they slew the old world, spawned the present age.”

“I understand.”

“I... do not want to lose you.” The momentary softness fled the thief’s scarred face as soon as it arrived. “Some perils must be mine alone. So you must do exactly as I say.”

“You do not own me, Bone.”

“You are free, Gaunt. I merely want you free and alive.”

They reached the upper right vertex of the great window, beside a number marking Allos the Smith’s assigned ranking among gods (thirteen), and the climbers secured themselves and readied their gear. Stray raindrops splattered the window, which glistened with the ruddy flourishes of sunset. Godblood was, it seemed, composed of all the spectrum’s colors, but with a marked bias toward the red.

Bone removed his gloves. “The gem, if you please.”

Gaunt slid from her index finger the ring they’d stolen from the delvenfolk of Loomsberg. It took the shape of a silver ouroboros serpent, with a crook in its self-devoured tail, and a frosty gem within the crook.

“A ring of Time,” she said, passing it up. “And time, perhaps, to tell me the plan.”

Bone took the ring and tested it, plucking the grass blade from his teeth and flicking it across the gem. Green coiled into brown, blew away as dust, the remnants scattering to the street. None of the hustling wayfarers beside the Vault noted the incident, nor perceived the climbers in gilded cloaks that

mimicked the tower's stones. Indeed, for all their civic pride, the Archaeopolitans preferred to act as though the Vault did not exist.

"We could live a year," Bone mused, "on the value of this gem. Captain Dawnglass would want it for piracy, the kleptomancers for research, Dolman the Charmed to create false relics. Yet it's merely the tool for a larger caper." He sighed. "This is my master heist, Gaunt. I spent decades sketching it, as a sort of hobby, never supposing I'd actually try something so mad." He gazed if for the final time at the grey sea surging westward; then he smiled. "That is the effect you have on me."

For you, Bone, she thought, that was a love poem.

But he had turned back to the window of the god-eaters.

He put the ouroboros upon his ring finger, pressed it to the glass.

The gem shimmered and diminished, and simultaneously the world blurred.

Bone shuddered. Hair sprouted upon his face. Grey strands appeared on his head. His clothes frayed. So did the rope.

"Bone...."

"A moment." Bone shimmered back into solidity, and the gem was gone. Was his voice a trifle weary? "A moment, a

year... so little difference to a ring of clotted Time. So little difference to me. Heh. But most of its influence was directed outward, Gaunt, at this window.”

Was the window’s luster gone, its surface drab and colors flat? “What have you done?” Gaunt asked.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. Just a little temporal backwash. But the window, now... well, a thief appreciates loopholes. Glass is indeed something between liquid and solid, but old glass with impurities has been known to divitrify and become a solid in truth. So I wonder if the prophecy still applies to *crystal*...”

Bone donned his clawed gloves, scraped, and grinned.

Soon he’d created a gap a few feet across in the corner of the Forge God’s window. He carefully lowered a crystal disc into the darkness of the tower, sliding it to one side.

“Well done,” said Gaunt, peering up into the Vault’s shadows. “But was it necessary to keep me in the dark?”

Bone looked at her. There were lines beside his eyes, as if a few more crows had danced there. “You are not as skilled at evasion as I. You might have been caught and questioned by delvenfolk, or eldguards, or infraseers.”

“You were afraid I’d stop you, weren’t you?”

He coughed. “Perhaps. I could not predict the severity of the temporal backwash. And you have so many years left.”

She reached up and grasped his wrist. “Give me this moment, and this road, and this sky. That is enough. Never give me lies.”

He smirked. “I am glad it’s enough, since you’ve enumerated most of our possessions.” He studied the narrow gap, patted his stomach. “For once I’m glad we’ve had little to spend on food.”

Gaunt shook her head. “Think of it. We are down to our last gold ambrosian, and bear an infernal burden.” She cocked her head toward her pack, which bore the reason for their adventure. “And now we are breaking into one of the world’s most dangerous places.”

“Don’t tell me you aren’t enjoying it.”

She laughed and mimed an unchaste kiss. “After you, master thief.”

The Vault’s windows were for the outside world’s benefit. The beings within had no requirement of light, and although ruddy illumination streamed through the windows, shadows were plentiful. Once within, Gaunt and Bone sought their dubious concealment and took the Vault’s measure.

Their first realization was that Heaven’s Vault was in a sense two towers: a citadel of black stone perhaps fifty feet in diameter, nestled within the shell of the golden-hued exterior. A narrow, sloping passageway separated the two.

Upon the ebon stone of the inner tower there appeared, at regular intervals, narrow doors of still darker metal resembling slabs of congealed night. Spindly glyphs, like a sequence of mad spiders' webs, etched the walls beside.

"Purest agonium," Bone said after a sniff of the door-metal. "Formed, it's said, in the hearts of draconic suicides. I'd best not touch it."

"The language of the lost isle of Nobeca," Gaunt said, squinting at the writing beside the door. "I'd best read it." Clicking her tongue, she said, "A free translation might be 'clam, ennui, knucklebone.'"

"So," Bone said, scratching his chin, "beyond lies a talisman that puts mollusks to sleep?"

"No, Bone. My translation makes no sense because the language employed is not Nobecan, but our own tongue of Roil."

Bone frowned at her, then at the arcane squiggles. "You could have fooled me. But then the light is dim..."

"The Nobecan symbols are here used to *represent* the sounds of Roil. You see, Nobecan is ideographic, not alphabetic. The glyphs with the meanings 'clam,' 'ennui,' and 'knucklebone,' possessed in the original tongue the *sounds* 'slaw,' 'terr,' and 'dairk.'"

“Hm. Slaw-terr-dairk. Slaw-ter-dark. *Slaughterdark?*” Bone’s eyebrows rose. “The pirate lord? Could this be *his* deposit box?”

Persimmon Gaunt could almost see the fires lighting behind Bone’s forehead, illuminating storied hoards of Summerlong wine, Karthagarian gold, Wallander silk.

“That creature was the terror of three continents,” Bone murmured, his hand drifting despite his own warning toward the dark panel. “I absorbed all his legends as a boy. He retired as a prince to a desert outpost—what would he lock away here?”

* * *

A thousand miles east in the city of pain, a girl tending a weed-choked garden shivered beneath a desert moon, as if a cold western wind whispered her name....

* * *

Gaunt caught Bone’s hand. “This isn’t our goal.”

Her lover sighed. “Correct. We are not stealing, this day.” He beckoned up the winding passage. “The unoccupied boxes should be this way.”

“A moment.” Gaunt studied the crystal disc they’d dropped in the passageway, its edges marked with red powder, flecked with blues, golds, greens, and yellows. She rubbed the mouth of

a pouch along its circumference. “Powdered godblood,” she said, “might just be of value.”

“Audacious,” Bone said. “Well played. You carry the stuff.”

They crept upward the equivalent of two stories, passing dark portals labeled for wizards, heroes, monsters, and lunatics, before they discovered the Vault had a guardian.

A huge golden sphere rolled into view. Bearing down, it made not a rumbling, but a sticky-sounding *hiss*.

To Gaunt it resembled nothing so much as a globe of frozen honey, just wide enough to dominate the passage. Like drops of blood, bubbles within glinted with the window-light. Yet this was not its most lurid aspect, for within quivered the severed heads of three men, bobbing as though the interior were viscous yet. The rolling heads stared at Gaunt and Bone, their eyes tracking the new victims, their mouths gaping wide as if shrieking silent warning.

“Flee!” Bone yelled.

Gaunt tarried, as much from shock as from a desire to protect her companion. The golden sphere rolled closer.

Cursing, Bone shifted to the nearest black door, jabbing glove-claws deep into the seam between metal and stone.

The door popped. Bone swung it and blocked the way, even as the agonium corroded the claws down to smoking flecks.

The sphere hit the enchanted metal; Bone fell backward into Gaunt. The globe steamed into sweet-smelling vapor, filling the passage with a tantalizing odor as of life's finest meal, now over.

Before the door swung back Gaunt glimpsed the chamber beyond. There glinted a dented brass lamp, a carved pumpkin brooding atop a saddle, a pale girl immobile within a glass coffin. Then the deposit box and its mysteries were closed off forever.

Three heads flopped now upon the floor like fresh trout, drawing Gaunt's gaze. They were aging swiftly. Their skins became ash, and the skulls beneath followed suit. Before they were gone, however, Gaunt thought she heard them whisper, *Our thanks....*

"An ambrosia globe," Bone said. "A head within goes on living, in misery, nourished by divine honey. I told you to flee."

"I was startled. And I couldn't leave you."

He frowned. "We must hone your self-preservation skills."

"You're welcome."

"Your death would serve no one, Persimmon Gaunt!" Bone shook his head. "You affect a certain world-weariness, but you are a romantic. You must learn proper selfishness."

“Selfishly I ask, quit the lecture.” Hands on hips, she said, “Of more immediate concern, how many times can you repeat that trick with the door?”

Bone grunted, looked away, removed his smoking gloves. “I had only one set of invictium claws.”

“May I borrow what remains?”

“They’re nearly useless. But be my guest.”

She slipped on the gloves, which still bore remnants of the enchanted metal. “Let’s go.”

Their luck improved. They found their goal just around the bend: the first door lacking an inscription.

Bone withdrew a pair of daggers, slipping the blades between metal and stone. Immediately the weapons corroded. Bone discarded smoldering hilts.

He removed a strand of ironsilk, shaking it once for stiffness, and slipped it into the crack. A line of sizzling ruin lashed out toward Bone’s hands, and he dropped the remnant of the strand.

He raised a jagged shard of magnetite on a string, swung it against the agonium. The shard failed to stick, and the tip smoked and crumbled. Scowling, Bone touched the stone to a ruined dagger-hilt. It clicked, but did not cling. “Gaunt,” he said petulantly, “this vile metal has neutralized my lodestone!”

“Hold. I have a notion....”

Gaunt used the gloves with their invictium shards to trace a Nobecan character beside the door.

Bone winced at the scraping and screeching. “Shall I just call out a challenge to the Pluribus?”

“Hush.”

“That was the gist, yes.”

“This won’t take but a moment. There.”

She had finished inscribing the Nobecan glyph for *balance*.

In the original tongue it sounded much like *Gaunt*.

“I am Gaunt,” she told the black door.

With a grinding noise and a waft of cool air, it swung aside.

Bone raised his eyebrows. “I must give you a bigger share of our hauls.”

“We haven’t been stealing anything.”

“Exactly what I’ve been saying. Let’s finish our task and go rob a drunk.”

They peered into the chamber, a dark, hollow space that echoed with their breathing. Gaunt opened her pack and produced an unmarked book with a drab cover.

“Rot in there,” she whispered, and tossed within the tome known only as *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow*.

That was when the air seemed to come alive.

“*THIEVES!*” came a maddening cry, as though a thousand voices shrieked all around.

Gaunt shivered, but did not freeze. She spun and unsheathed her own daggers, fine steel from Tancimor.

She became aware of a dark-robed figure behind her. Even as she turned, it lashed out with both hands—or rather, what she had believed were hands. Their touch was light, yet both her wrists sang with pain. She dropped her blades.

Meanwhile Bone had found his own weapon. It was more unorthodox; he flung a waterskin at the hooded shape.

The skin just missed the head, but burst against the wall, spattering their foe.

It buzzed with rage.

For it was a swarm of bees that filled the cloak, and with their central cognitive squadron drenched, the rest spilled in all directions like golden drops of anger.

“I’m fleeing!” Gaunt said, preempting Bone, but even as she scrambled downslope she encountered a second hooded figure droning in accusation, and beyond it a third. She skidded to a halt, and thus Bone collided with her, herded as he was by another pair of shrouded swarms. The lovers fell against each other, and huddled.

Their original accuser(s) flowed back into the abandoned robe, filled it, and billowed up to the ceiling. Gaunt marveled

how light the robe must be, or how strong the bees. Then she marveled that she and Bone yet lived.

Down pointed a finger formed of intertwined insects, quivering with legs, wings, and antennae.

“We are the Teller,” buzzed the voice of myriad wings. *“We speak for the Pluribus. We have eaten gods. It demeans us to consume thieves. But it’s more efficient than showing you the door.”*

* * *

Many times Imago Bone had been surprised by Persimmon Gaunt, but never more so than today.

“We are not thieves, O Pluribus!” cried she.

He opened his mouth to object, reflected a moment, shut it again.

“We fear you,” Gaunt was saying, “who rebelled against the very gods, who never fairly paid you for nectar and ambrosia. We respect you, whose Deicide allowed mortals to dominate the West. We honor you, who originated the art of banking. And we come to you now as would-be customers.”

Bone gave her one look of perfect perplexity, then followed in languid tones, “My colleague speaks the truth.”

“You are Imago Bone,” the Teller said, pointing a crawling “finger” at Bone’s nose. A single bee detached itself for emphasis, orbiting Bone’s head. Larger than a honeybee, it was

elongated in a way that resembled wasps, and flashed a metallic shade of gold, with bristles reminiscent of spikes. “We have tiny eyes in many places.”

“You know me?” Bone said, with a quaver of pride.

“We were not stealing,” Gaunt said, “despite my friend’s reputation. We were leaving something behind.”

The Teller withdrew its arm. It and its comrades rippled in consternation.

“*You were making a deposit?*”

Eyes on the circling bee, Bone said, “There is a deadly enchanted book in our care, the legacy of our first meeting.” He glanced at Gaunt, recalling their escape from kleptomancers, goblin librarians, and the two deaths Joyblood and Severstrand who’d so weirdly circumscribed and extended his life. And he remembered the cost of that escape—employing *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow*, a book that killed all who absorbed so much as a paragraph. “We do not want it, but its disposal falls to us. While we search for the means, we must ensure it doesn’t fall into evil hands.”

The Teller seemed to scowl. The thief perceived skittering, many-legged eyebrows. “*You dread this bane so much? You would destroy it, not sell it? You, a thief?*”

He’d asked himself this before. “We like to sleep well at night,” he said, though he added silently that he slept best

beside Gaunt, and craved her continued affection. “We deprive others of wealth. Not, as a rule, of life.”

“*You would rent a security comb?*” The Teller’s tone remained incredulous. “*The standard fee is ten ambrosians a month.*”

Bone revealed a single gold coin, stamped with the arms of the Empress of the Eldshore, bearing a single drop of dried ambrosia at its punctured center. “We have only one available. Why do you suppose we broke in?” One ambrosian was standard yearly pay for a soldier. It could be traded for numerous lesser coins, and slipped beneath the tongue it had an even chance of reviving a man from a mortal wound. To Gaunt and Bone the coin, a gift from the pirate captain Dawnglass, represented one last long step before destitution. They’d lived on scraps and odd jobs to avoid trading it.

“Bone?” Gaunt whispered. “Self-preservation? Eh?”

The Teller smiled, a grin composed of tiny black feet stained with cream-white pollen. “*One? We store crown jewels, dragon-hunters’ hoards, sorcerers’ hearts, mummies and vampires, papyri of the Blind Poet, rings of power, soul-stealing swords, and a cat in an indeterminate state between life and death. The mighty of the West entrust their treasures to us. And you have but one coin?*”

Bone licked his lips at this inventory, but he composed himself. “A down payment?”

Gaunt put in, “You know the reputation of Imago Bone. We offer a down payment of one ambrosian, *plus* the master thief’s services in the acquisition of your choice.”

“We do?” Bone murmured.

“Hush.”

“*We must confer.*”

The cloaks of the Pluribus dropped to the floor. The divine bees converged upon a nearby window and formed a writhing tapestry of gold-knifed darkness.

“Flee?” Gaunt whispered, with little conviction.

“Our only real option’s a plunge to the street,” Bone replied. “Though we could hide in the open security comb.”

“With the book we’ve struggled to destroy! Oh good!”

“If anything could harm the Pluribus....”

At that moment the swarms dispersed and dressed themselves, with two blocking the path toward the book, and the Teller once again overhead. Gaunt and Bone would never know if the Pluribus had reacted to their words.

The Teller spread wiggling gold-black hands in a magnanimous gesture.

“Congratulations, new customers! We are flexible beings, and offer a special arrangement. There is a service you might

do. For this, and your deposit, we will waive the cost of our damaged window and offer forty-nine weeks' use of a security comb."

"Ask," Bone said with widening eyes, "and we'll steal the spots off the sun."

"An interesting proposal. But we have no theft in mind. Indeed, you will do as you did here, delivering an item of value."

"Speak on."

"We guard many wondrous things. There is one such whose renter has defaulted. We would have you dispose of it. Do you agree?"

"What are the details...?" Gaunt began.

"Of course!" Bone said.

"Very well," said the Teller. "You shall convey the world's most perilous weapon to the city of pain."

The Teller escorted them to the gap in the window of Allos the Smith, Gaunt glaring at Bone the whole while.

To forestall her speech, Bone mused aloud, "Most perilous weapon, eh? The sword Crypttongue, that speaks in its victims' voices?"

"No," said the Teller. Gaunt's scowl intensified.

"The Schismglass of Baelscaer, then, that entraps souls in its reflective blade?"

“No.”

The Teller stopped beside the door Gaunt and Bone had first encountered, the one named for a pirate prince.

“All who possess this weapon have regretted it, even the fiercest of killers, mad Lord Runestock, say, or bloody Sir Fairbeast, or Captain Slaughterdark who abandoned it here.”

At the word *Slaughterdark* the door swung open, revealing a glowing nimbus of a pinkish hue, festooned with sparkles and rainbows.

“Behold the Sword of Loving Kindness.”

* * *

Far to the east a girl heard words upon the wind: I am coming. The voice was dulcet and dainty, and seemed ready to burst into song.

The girl shivered there, in her desert.

* * *

On the eighteenth day of their journey from Archaeopolis to Maratrace, called the city of pain, Gaunt grew certain something was amiss.

The initial signs had been small. Imago Bone’s normal grumbling irritation at rocks and bumps in the royal road was replaced with a cheery, cloying whistle. The whistle did not cease when the road did, and it echoed maddeningly through the precipitous mountain path. Bone’s usual haphazard way of

pitching camp gave way to a tidy pattern of tent, fire, and packs, all arranged according to ancient Palmarian geomantic principles. His habitual lustful manner surrendered to a chaste, schoolboy friendliness. Even this last transformation was not so alarming at first, as it gave Gaunt more time to attack her latest work, *The Next-To-Last-Winter*:

'Tis the loveliest of seasons (she wrote on the seventeenth day)

A winter bright, my friend.

Not least among the reasons:

The next will have no end.

Yet on the eighteenth day, Gaunt, breathing in sharp cold mountain air and trying to scoop up the delicious thrill of that penultimate snow and melt it into words, was interrupted by Bone's latest musing.

"I am not so good a thief, you know."

Gaunt's writing hand froze, pleasant ice-scapes forgotten. She stared at him.

"Most of my escapades," he continued, chewing a blade of snow-crusting alpine grass, "were lucky escapes."

Was this some filchform, Gaunt wondered, who had eaten her beloved? Or a sorcerer who'd spirited Bone away and left a fragment of the Brazen Mirror?

“Ah, think of it, Gaunt. I grow old, and never have I tended a garden, raised a child, run for civic office.”

Here he absently patted the weapon from which he never wandered far. It was a rapier with a hilt sculpted like a rose blossom, its whole length an unearthly pink crystal which sparkled and flashed prismatic reflections at the merest hint of sunlight. Delicate and sharp, even its rose petals drew blood.

“Why,” Bone continued, “what must people think? What sort of image do I present? I’ve never dwelled long in one spot, you know, Gaunt, never had a house I could show off to the neighbors.”

“Bone,” Gaunt said, “you are frightening me.”

“I frighten myself,” Bone said agreeably. “To think, I could have spent my life so much better! I might have been a fine physician, student of law—a courtier even! A man of substance!”

“Have you been drinking, Imago Bone?”

“No!” The thief stood, the Sword of Loving Kindness in hand. “Would that I had! A little drink is a social necessity. Instead, I went through long dry spells and sporadic mad binges. Better to raise the occasional stiff drink in the company of peers and patrons. I....” Bone’s brow furrowed. “What... what is wrong with me?”

“Bone,” she said, coming closer, relieved at this change. “Are you yourself?”

“It... it is like dreaming another’s dream. I... what a foolish sentence. A pathetic attempt at poetry. Which reminds me, Gaunt,” Bone continued, all confusion leaving his voice, “I’ve been thinking you should give up verse.”

“What?”

“It is well enough for wise ancients to practice the art, but today’s women should know better. If you must write, perhaps then an etiquette primer for young girls—what are you doing?”

Stooping, Gaunt said, “I am forming a bird out of snow. If I whisper a wish into its ear it will fly away when my back is turned, and bring happiness and prosperity to my friends.”

“Well... a bit whimsical, but all in all a good, kind sentiment. I should think—ow!”

Having packed the snowball hard, Gaunt had hurled it into Bone’s earnest face.

The thief dropped the weapon. Gaunt kicked it downslope, where it lay against a leafless tree, shining as if reflecting an unseen, glorious sunset.

Bone dropped to his knees. “Thank you,” he gasped.

“It was more for me than you.”

“I hope I haven’t lost this eye.” Bone checked. “No. I can see. But more important. I can *think*—of pride and greed, for

example. Of me. Remind me what the Pluribus said about the Sword?”

Gaunt said, “They were rather cryptic. Especially as you’d already agreed to their errand.” She shot him a fresh glare, then added, “I’ve given this a little thought. This may be the whispered final work of the Forge God. A weapon fashioned after most of the gods perished... even his beloved Nettleer Kinbinder.”

“The goddess of love?”

“My bardic teachers suggested I not think of her office as *love per se*. That is too multifaceted a thing to be embodied in a single entity. Nettleer’s function was kinbinding. She presided over courtship and marriage, childrearing and housekeeping, personal grooming and blood feuds.”

“Blood feuds?”

Gaunt studied the sword as she spoke. “She was not a force for *good*, necessarily, Bone. Her priestesses did not help the poor and sick, but rather dressed up in fanciful pastel outfits with tiaras. They held lavish balls. They bestowed wishes upon their friends and poison upon their enemies. Kin, cleanliness, status, appearance, chaste affection—*that* was Nettleer’s realm, and woe to those who angered her. Her husband Allos the Smith suffered much at her hands.”

“Ah,” Bone said. “He must have dallied with another, as gods often did.”

“No. He failed to keep his forge clean, embarrassing her in front of the other divinities.”

“Oh.”

“For this she shoved his face into the coals and cast him away, taking up with the war god Erethor.”

“I see.” Bone straightened his clothing.

“But that wasn’t the end of their story,” Gaunt said, “for one day the Pluribus rebelled and killed almost all the gods. There’s a song, a fragment from the Bladed Isles—

*Gold was the godswarm
And red the halls of Surmount
And black the blade of Erethor
As Nettleer he sought.
And swarm-spattered was his sword
When goddess’ hand he got
And led her to the ramparts
And the chariot of the god.
But “Would you flee to other worlds?”
Said she, “To draw a coward’s breath?”
Berserk she goaded Erethor.
He charged foaming to his death.
Then red rose the mane of Nettleer*

*As to stones leapt she of hearth.
Red ran her blood, that Allos took,
To quench a thing of wrath.*

“It is said,” Gaunt said, “that Allos flung this final work into the sea before the Pluribus found him. Taletellers long wondered what it was. I think I have a guess. I think it was this sword, which so perfectly matches the goddess’ nature.”

She stared down the slope. “Think of it, Bone. The final vengeance of the gods is not a thing of thunderbolts or gore, but something forged with the essence of the kinbinder. Something that bludgeons mind and spirit... until one obeys Nettleer’s notions of a clean, shiny life.”

“A cosmic spanking rod,” Bone said. “Why couldn’t we have gotten something that ate souls?”

* * *

Again the girl felt something cold and delicate kiss her neck and whisper Skath. Again she turned and saw nothing but the proud expanse of Maratrace beneath the desert sun.

But the voice on the wind was stronger now, as were her nightly dreams of a dainty pink sword. Almost she clawed herself in the manner of her people, but limited herself to biting her lip.

* * *

Bone and Gaunt resolved to carry the sword in a pack, and handle it only with cloth. Even so, their journey was marked by incidents of a most disturbing wholesomeness.

In the Homunculus Mountains, they found themselves lecturing the Mandrake Marauders on manners and hygiene. Their subsequent dash into the Vale of Webness led to a debate with Poisonfroth Huskmaker, matriarch of the Oldspinnners, in which Gaunt accused her of haphazard webmaking, and Bone chided her unfinished meals.

This exchange degenerated into the unfortunate scene of two humans fleeing a be-webbed and burning forest. As the blaze spread onto the Wheelgreen, Gaunt and Bone argued with the Wagonlords, who disputed the notion that the grassfire might inspire their founding agricultural communities with pretty gardens.

When at last the pair reached the reed-marked, quietly churning river that flowed south and east to Maratrace, and the threat of being bound and blood-smearred and left for the ants had faded into anecdote, Gaunt and Bone held a conference.

“Damn this sword,” Bone spat.

“Language,” Gaunt objected. Then she caught herself, and swore.

“You see?” Bone said. “The thing’s influence is growing. We will be lucky to arrive as anything but pedants of good behavior.”

“Look, Bone. Look at the verse I wrote yesterday.”

He looked.

Oh, happy children at their song

Frolicking the winter long,

For in their joyous hearts they know

They lie, who warn of endless snow.

“You think *this* is a disaster?” Bone asked. “I’ve discarded my gear. My daggers and lockpicks, my camouflage dyes and knockout herbs, my ironsilk lines and sticky resins. Years to assemble, all gone—abandoned on the plains or tossed into the river! Each time, I thought, ‘Farewell, wicked tool.’ Only when it’s too late do I weep.”

Gaunt patted herself and cursed (“Bless it all!”) to discover she too had disarmed herself. She embraced Bone, leaning in closer when she found the initial result too chaste. “Well, fear not. Adventuring is done for now. We must merely deliver this artifact to Maratrace. There is no designated recipient, no specified act or ritual to perform. We may walk through the gates, drop the thing on the street, and leave.”

“You are right. We could even approach by night and hurl it over the wall.”

“And flee at once for Amberhorn on the Midnight Sea, where sin is state-supported, where thieves’ markets come thick as the harbor’s billowing sails.”

“Yes. Yes! You are a healing draught, Persimmon Gaunt.”

Bone kissed her. She responded eagerly, and his breathing grew labored. How long, she wondered, since they had behaved so? Too long indeed—since the fifteenth day out of Archaeopolis.

They clutched at one another, pulled each other to the ground, unfastened, tugged, tore, and lay naked in the tall grass. The scent of mud and sweat was rich. Their hands sought their unchaperoned flesh....

And they paused, regarding one another in vexation.

“I am finding myself mortified,” Gaunt said slowly, “to be so exposed, before the hawks, the field mice, and whatever astronomers might exist on other heavenly discs.”

“I find myself thinking,” Bone murmured, “that this cavorting is rather brutish, and far beneath the dignity of a great poet and a thief whose name is at least known to high society.”

The pair turned their heads and looked upon the Sword of Loving Kindness. It had tumbled from its pack, and now shimmered pleasantly beside them.

They still lay that way when a trading boat arrived, making its way from cold Starkingrad downriver. The hoots and whistles of the crew sent them diving for their clothes, and they barely mustered the audacity to beg a ride to Maratrace.

* * *

It was no city for sightseers.

First, grotesque dark towers, resembling broken-boned monstrosities covered with pustules, rose on the horizon. These were followed by smaller, angular pyramidal buildings like wide knives, then a conglomeration of adobe houses low by the river. Trails of smoke testified to activity, farmland stretched up and down the river, and watercraft bobbed beside piers; but there was a hush about the place that Gaunt did not like.

As the riverboat creaked cityward, sliding above the sunken rubble of older settlements, its captain said, “All mad they are, indeed,” as if reading her thoughts. “But honest dealers nonetheless. Too honest, in a way.” He was a Palmarian named Flea, with two fingers missing from his right hand, testament to avarice or clumsiness. (Gaunt was oddly proud Bone’s hands were intact even after a long career in Palmary.)

“What do you mean?” Bone said with a flaring of the fingers that implied reward for information (and emphasized, Gaunt knew, that he had all ten.)

Flea cupped his own maimed hand, accepting with a grunt a minor coin. “They’re fanatics, friend. They believe pain’s the great truth of the world, and they labor to provide their own evidence.” Flea pocketed the coin, lifted his hand. “Palmary’s proudest had to shackle me to do this. But Maratrace’s mighty do the same to themselves, or worse. And outsiders who linger become pain-lovers too. I know a few old river-hands who are short a hand or two, these days. Me, I’ll be leaving in one—down to Mirabad. Best you come along. If you can’t afford it, you can work for passage.”

A glance at the morose faces of Flea’s oarsmen, chained by wrist and nose, convinced Gaunt she’d rather walk.

A *tsking* Flea deposited them at Maratrace’s modest port district. Unusually for a city of tall towers, Maratrace’s harbor did not throb, but rather snored. Activity was faint. Where other docklands would echo with the cries of drunks, lechers, and brawlers, this one clicked with the lackadaisical sounds of dice upon the piers. It seemed the traders clung to the water’s edge.

There was no city wall as such. Wooden harbor-sheds blended with adobe homes and stone pyramids, the city growing by turns more austere toward its center; and despite their intent to abandon the sword immediately, it was unclear

to Gaunt and Bone if they were truly inside Maratrace or not. They ventured inward.

They soon found themselves upon hot, hushed, shadow-slashed avenues of white sand, slicing between close-set buildings. To Gaunt, the city seemed the work of two diametrically opposed architects. Most structures, those meant for business or habitation, sat stark, smooth, and angular, reminding her of tombs. This much was strange but hardly daunting. It was the other constructions, the public and military buildings, which cast monstrous shadows. They clawed skyward like the citadels of genius termites. Within the limits of engineering they were asymmetrical and rough-hewn, crafted to suggest diseased and disfigured creatures. The tallest structure, ebon and windowless but in outline oddly reminiscent of Heaven's Vault, flowed with intricate carvings depicting humans and other sapient beings undergoing torture. Beneath it, children played.

Gaunt led Bone nearer the children, who represented the largest knot of activity in sight. So far, other citizens had clung to the shadows, slipping indoors as the poet and thief passed by. Gaunt had only been able to discern that the Maratracians were surprisingly pale for desert-dwellers, and that many were maimed as if veterans of some ugly battle.

“We might as well inform someone what we’re doing,” Gaunt said, worried that her scruples were generated by the sword, but unable to act otherwise.

The older children played catch with a wooden octahedron bristling with little spikes. Usually the children avoided the hazards, but occasionally a sharp cry went up.

Heat and distraction had made Gaunt stupid; but when she finally understood the meaning of the latest yelp, she ran toward a fallen boy.

He cradled a bleeding palm. His cohorts gathered around him, silently watching.

Bone slid onto the sand and grabbed the boy’s hand. Perhaps fourteen, the victim was long and lean of face, brown-haired and brown-eyed, and stared as though Bone were a particularly unbelievable desert mirage.

“Let him help,” Gaunt implored in the language of Amberhorn, a far place, but not so distant as the homes of other tongues she knew.

The boy regarded her in silence, but his gaze was intent, perhaps even expectant.

Bone applied a tourniquet from his pack, and strong alcohol from his flask. The boy hissed as the liquor stung, then narrowed his eyes with a peculiar, satisfied look.

Again in Amberhornish, Gaunt said, “Where are your parents? Or your guardians?” She pointed angrily at the spiked ball. “Why do they allow such playthings?”

No one answered. Slowly, Gaunt grew aware of the collection of scars and bandages on the impassively staring children. One boy lacked half an ear, the wreckage neatly trimmed. One girl wore a patch over one eye, the fabric bearing a ghastly symbol. It recalled the familiar skull-and-crossbones of pirates, yet depicted a severed head and arms, all covered in flesh.

“Does no one speak Amberhornish?” Gaunt called out. “Roil? Eldshoren?”

“We understand you,” said the boy with the wounded hand, in careful Amberhornish. “We learn this language in school. We’re supposed to know the tongues of future conquests.”

Bone avoided the obvious question, asked instead, “Then why did you not answer?” The thief finished his ministrations, and the boy flexed his hand with a grim smile.

“Your questions make no sense,” he replied. “We are children. Why should we not play?”

At this point another cry arose. A plump, tanned girl of around twelve barreled toward them, sandals slapping the sand, dirty brown hair flailing about her intense dark eyes. Had

Gaunt imagined a sentient sandstorm, there would have been a resemblance. Girl collided with boy with in what seemed both tackle and embrace, weeping. He, in turn, detached himself but swatted her shoulder in amused condescension. “Skath, Skath, Skath. What are we to do with you? It’s just a little blood.”

“Siblings?” Bone murmured to Gaunt.

“Yes,” she said. “The mix of anger and affection is telling.”

The girl Skath looked up at the strangers. Worry twisted her face. She took Gaunt and Bone by the hand and nodded urgently down the white street. “Come!” she declared in Amberhornish. “You must hurry.”

“A welcoming committee at last,” Bone quipped in Roil, as they consented to be led. “But we must dispose of the sword.”

“Perhaps this girl can introduce us to officialdom,” Gaunt said in kind. “The weapon’s emanations make me want to deliver it to proper channels. Also, I am having difficulty refusing an invitation. It’s impolite, after all.” She shrugged helplessly.

“We are wanted thieves in Palmary, Archaeopolis, and Loomsberg,” Bone sighed, “and now we’re compelled to knock at all doors, and wipe our feet. Next we’ll be sending thank-you notes to every noble we’ve robbed.”

They followed Skath. After some hesitation her brother tagged along, taunted by his contemporaries’ laughter.

“A strange city,” Bone observed in Roil. “The size and condition of the buildings imply wealth, and despite their scars the children are well-clothed and fed. Yet all doors stand open, all save those of the great tower, where I saw no opening. Nor do I see city guards, or private muscle...”

“But there are *those*...” Gaunt jabbed an elbow at a side street, toward one of the smaller grotesque towers. Below, figures in drab grey robes gathered in discussion. They glanced at the foreigners. “*They* look ominous.”

“They cannot hurt you,” Skath piped up in Amberhornish, proving she understood more than the outlanders realized.

“Because we are outsiders?” Gaunt asked in the same tongue.

“They are not allowed,” Skath said. “No one in Maratrace can hurt anyone else.”

“A lovely sentiment,” said Bone.

“But they *want* to. They all *want* to hurt you.” With this she strode into a two-story pyramid.

She led them through the first story, one single large room adorned with bright wall-hangings and colorful sitting pillows, where in one corner lurked a sculpture like an iron sea-urchin with spines of irregular length. The tips had a rusty look. A stairway led to a deeper, cooler level. Another sliced along

three walls and led to the roof, and it was up these stairs the girl marched.

They attained a square rooftop rimmed with flower beds, with a rustling white canopy on rickety stilts offering shade. A watering pot creaked in the dry wind; weeds choked the flower beds. A dry, sharp smell accompanied the weeds.

Skath scanned the garden, nodded to herself, and plucked a dandelion. She handed it to Gaunt with slow ceremony.

“I am Skath,” she said. “I keep lots of gardens, here and there. I like the plants people call weeds. Most people think I’m crazy. Have a dandelion.”

“I am... Lepton,” Gaunt said, accepting the white puff. She chose an Amberhornish word meaning *thin* or *light*, preferring Skath know the sense of her name rather than the sound. Also, it was just as well her true identity went unspoken. “This is, um, Osteon,” she added, nodding to Bone, and passing the dandelion to him. He bowed. White seeds drifted behind him, from the canopy’s shadow into the blazing sunlight.

“This is Skower,” Skath said with a toss of her shoulder.

Her brother made a scoffing noise.

“Skath,” Gaunt said. “Who rules your city?”

The girl’s smile froze. She looked away to her weeds.

“We are returning something to Maratrace,” Bone added. “May we show you?”

“Um, Osteon....”

“I feel that we must—Lepton.”

Skath nodded uncertainly at Bone’s question, and he set the dandelion atop the roof’s wall, removed the shrouded sword, unwound the cloth. Prismatic flashes and ruby light painted the air.

Skower hissed. Skath merely stared.

“The Sword of Loving Kindness,” Bone said. “Reputed the world’s most dangerous weapon.”

Indeed, Gaunt thought. For she saw Skath reaching toward the sword with an expression torn between terror and awe. Her brother crept beside her like a cat tracking a lame bird.

“Ah, now,” Bone said, edging back. “Touching magic is like petting sharks with a bloody hand....”

Skath paused.

But suddenly Skower grabbed her wrist. As she said, “You are not allowed —,” he shoved her hand toward the blade.

“*What are you doing?*” Bone pulled back, but his reflexes were sluggish, and his movement served only to cut Skath’s hand upon one of the hilt’s crystal petals.

Skath gasped and closed her eyes.

“At last,” crowed her obviously insane brother, releasing her. “At last you have *hurt* yourself. And I only assisted you a

little: a minor sin.” He babbled on, switching to the language of Maratrace.

“This city is mad!” Gaunt snapped. “Your own sister —!”

“She is a disappointment to us!” he retorted in Amberhornish. “Mother and Father fight over what to do with her. She has never embraced *abyssmitude*.”

“Embrace this,” Gaunt said, and backhanded him.

He recoiled, clearly not anticipating her strength, or her willingness to cause another pain. “That is—that is against —”

“I’m not from around here.”

Skower stared into Gaunt’s face, a tear crawling down his cheek, and his peculiar intensity collapsed like a tower of sand. He fled down the stairs.

“Good riddance,” she said, but with little satisfaction, for Skath’s eyes were still closed, as though the girl slept on her feet.

“Perhaps if I splash her?” Bone said, looking at the watering can.

Skath’s eyeballs danced behind shut lids, in a way Gaunt’s bardic teachers had discovered signified dreaming. “Wait,” she said.

Skath’s eyes opened, and she shrieked. Bone backed away, and his elbow bumped the dandelion, knocking it over the side in a spray of shining fluff.

“No,” Skath said, spreading her arms as if sheltering the entire weed garden. She uttered frantic sentences in the tongue of Maratrace, and a few words in Amberhornish: “No, you will not! It’s wrong! Wrong!”

She darted downstairs, whence her brother had gone.

The nonplussed wayfarers saw her sprint down the street, dust rising behind her sandals.

“Ah,” Bone asked, “what just happened?” He held the sword away from his body as though it were a boa constrictor.

“You speak as if I was there,” Gaunt said, rubbing her temples and reconstructing the scene in her mind. “All I can say is, two children just had very strange reactions to a magic sword. Stranger than *ours*, Bone.”

“Did the Pluribus have a hidden agenda in sending it here?”

“Are deserts dry?”

They watched as Skath collided with the collection of drab-robed people they’d noted earlier—those who supposedly could not harm others, but *wanted* to. The boy Skower was already among them, leading the drab-ropes toward the house.

“Let’s consider this from the local point of view,” Bone ventured. “Two foreigners assault a pair of children in their own home.”

The drab-ropes pointed pale fingers at the weed garden.

“I think our work here is done,” Gaunt said. “Shall we descend this fine, angled slope?”

“Well said.”

They began climbing over the wall—and stopped.

“Do you feel what I feel?” Gaunt asked.

“Would that be, dear Gaunt, a sense that it would be wholly impolite for us to flee the lawful authorities?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “But even worse, that it’s shameful to tread our dirty feet over these immaculate walls, when honest folk would use the stairs.”

Bone took a deep breath. “Enough. *This* time the sword presumes to interfere with our long-term plans. To survive, that is. We will overcome it. On a count of three....”

“Keeping in mind the sinister look of those towers....”

“... Indeed... we vault the wall.”

Bone counted three, and both leaned forward.

And both leaned back.

They stood there, feeling foolish, but unable to move.

“Second plan,” Bone said. “We throw the sword, the authorities claim it. Deed done.”

“Excellent,” Gaunt said.

Bone made to fling the weapon, but instead set the rosy rapier tenderly upon the roof.

“Close enough,” Gaunt said. “Let’s flee.”

They still could not descend the wall. They used the stairs. Progress was slow, leisurely, dignified....

“Bone, I Can’t. Move. Faster.”

“Just keep walking.”

The greater their distance from the Sword of Loving Kindness, the faster their pace. As they reached the front door, the compulsion was released, and finally they could run.

It was almost soon enough.

The doors burst in and six drab-robed figures entered. These assumed the stances of trained unarmed combatants, dropping their centers of gravity and spreading their feet, raising calloused hands and sizing up Gaunt and Bone. Gaunt glimpsed scarifications surrounding hard-looking eyes.

“Downstairs,” Bone said, snaring her elbow like an erratic dance partner. They fled to the dim underground, shouts and snarls behind.

* * *

[Concluded in Pt. II, in Issue #2](#)

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SUN MAGIC, EARTH MAGIC

by David D. Levine

“Captain! Why have we stopped?” Shira sharpened her voice as she leaned out of her palanquin. Bad enough that she had to serve for five years in this mud-encrusted backwater, but to spend even one more moment in the agony of travel piled indignation upon annoyance. Her breath steamed in the mountain air.

“This man help seeks, Most Holy Sorceress,” the captain of her personal guard replied, bowing his head in deference to her. He was a Vubinian, black as coal, and his Novarran grammar was appalling. But at least his years in the Novarran Imperial Army had taught him some manners.

The panting Ucnian man held by two soldiers had no such manners. One soldier forced him to bow his head, but even as he did so he glared at Shira from beneath his tangled red bangs. She met his gaze, taking in his untamed beard, his ragged woolen clothing, his battle scars. He looked old enough to have fought in the last disastrous attempt at a local uprising.

“What kind of help?” Shira asked, not taking her eyes off the man.

“Boy in cave, he says, trapped is. But this an ambush, could be.” The captain—Gvubi, that was his name—shielded his eyes with one hand and peered off at the horizon, where a thin column of smoke rose from a cleft and stained the gray fabric of the clouds. The vegetation on the stony hills to either side was scrubby, ugly, and tenacious—like the region’s people.

“Send a runner to investigate. If he is telling the truth, I will help.” Annoyance seethed beneath the bronze Sun amulet that lay on Shira’s breast, but she was here to render aid as well as to represent Novarra. The life of a Sun Sorceress was a life of service, to the God and to the Empire.

Even if the Empire sent her to a cold, rocky, mountainous hell of barbarous people, hideous food, and perpetual overcast.

* * *

At the base of the column of smoke, a crowd of perhaps seventy people huddled in loose knots around a handful of campfires. Dogs and small children ran between the fires, and a smell of burnt mutton hung over the scene. At each fire men argued in the harsh, spitting Ucnian language, pointing again and again at a small cave that gaped beneath an overhanging brow of rock nearby. But as Shira stepped from her palanquin, the crowd fell silent—an angry stillness that spread like oil from a dropped lamp.

Gritty mud squelched beneath Shira's sandals as she accepted a warm elk-hide cloak from Captain Gvubi. She noted with approval that he had deployed his nine men in unobtrusive protective positions around her. But it would be better if she could move among the Ucnians without an armed guard.

Perhaps this unexpected delay was an opportunity in disguise. Saving the boy would show these people that she was not their enemy. Then they would give her the respect a Sun Sorceress deserved.

“Who here speaks Novarran?” she called out.

“I have a few words of that language.” A tall, fat man detached himself from one of the groups and strode up to her. His rough woolen shirt and kirtle were plastered with mud, as was his fringe of red-gray beard, and as he approached she smelled the sour ale the locals brewed from oats. He stood nearly two heads taller than Shira and must have weighed three times as much.

“I am Shira Dinarian Rahalia, Most Holy Sorceress of the Sun God of Novarra, and I am here to serve. Who are you?”

The man bowed his head. “I am called Uhric, and I too am a humble servant of a God, though I have the honor to serve the Earth Mother.” For a misguided heathen his Novarran was excellent—far too courtly, in fact, for the circumstances.

“What is the situation?”

“A boy of thirteen summers, by the name of Luca, is trapped in the cave you see before you. He has been there for some three days already, and so far all our efforts to free him have come to naught.” He bowed, an exaggerated gesture of courtesy, and motioned her to follow him toward the cave. Gvubi and two soldiers fell in behind them as they walked. “His foot was trapped by a falling rock, and none can reach it. We have dug, and pried, and even tried pulling him out with a rope tied around his chest, but he cried out so from the pain that we had not the heart to continue.”

The incongruous high diction of this rustic was beginning to grate at Shira’s ears. That, and his great size, gave him an insufferable air of superiority that Shira could not abide in another person. “Where did you learn Novarran?”

“I have visited many parts of the Earth Mother’s broad belly, Most Holy Sorceress.” And he smiled at her, an ingratiating smirk that made her loathe him still more.

“But your fine words have failed to convince your Earth Mother to release the boy.”

The smile remained on Uhric’s lips, though his eyes hardened. “Alas,” he said, “I have been unable to approach the youth’s rocky prison myself, due to my own broad belly.” He patted it. “None but the smallest and slimmest can reach him.

Without first-hand knowledge of his situation, and at so great a distance, any attempt to use Earth magic to free him would more likely result in his death.”

Shira said nothing, not wanting to acknowledge that Sun magic had many of the same limitations. As she strode into the dark of the cave, Uhric and the three soldiers had to crouch to follow her.

Shira heard a slow continuous trickle of water and felt a cold moist breeze flowing from the depths. It smelled of unfired pottery. As her eyes became accustomed to the dark, she saw a rope leading from the cave entrance to a small pool of deeper blackness some ten paces in. She said a brief prayer to the Sun God and rubbed her hands briskly together, then held them out before her. A golden radiance glowed from her palms, illuminating the scene.

The rope vanished into a triangular opening barely wider than a small man’s shoulders.

“This is the entrance?” she asked, fear pricking between her shoulder blades.

“It is,” said Uhric. “I am told it widens further in, but then it narrows again.”

“By all the Gods, why would anyone want to go in there?”

“To seek gypsum, a valuable mineral for the making of plaster,” said Uhric with bland assurance.

“For new cavern looking, more likely,” said Gvubi. “Rebels in these caves hide. Smugglers. Tax evaders.” He sniffed pointedly in Uhric’s direction. “Illegal breweries.”

Uhric’s face darkened. “We are a proud people, sir. You insult us at your peril.”

Shira clapped her hands together, extinguishing the light, and the two of them fell silent. “Let me speak with someone who has been to the boy. And bring me some more suitable clothes. I will go in and bring him out.”

She was glad of the darkness, because it meant the two men could not see her tremble.

* * *

Back in her palanquin, Shira could not suppress a shudder at the rough, scratchy woolen tunic and pants they had found for her. But from what she had been told of conditions inside the cave, she would be glad of them.

She kissed her Sun amulet as she removed it and placed it in its protective bag. It was only a symbol, and if she wore it into the cave it would surely snag on something. But she still wished she could feel its reassuring weight on her breast, a reminder that even when the Sun was hidden by clouds or roof, or invisible in His cavern under the earth at night, His power never wavered.

Even without the amulet, she told herself, she was still a Sun Sorceress. Everything about her, from her ebon hair to her olive skin to the Sun-Bride tattoo below her navel, proclaimed her a creature of the Sun. And if the power and honor of that position had some unpleasant costs—such as crawling into dark caves or spending the next five years of her life in a chilly, overcast backwater—so be it. The life of a Sun Sorceress was a life of service.

* * *

Only three people, a man and two boys, had managed to crawl all the way to the trapped Luca. The man had injured his arm on the way out, and one of the boys could not be persuaded to repeat the journey, so only one boy would accompany Shira, and he spoke almost no Novarran.

Shira, Uhric, Gvubi, and the boy—a fourteen-year-old called Chulic, whose red hair was drawn back and tied with a leather thong—stood at the back of the main cave, peering down into the triangular hole. Gvubi's torch illuminated it only as far as the first bend.

Shira touched the wineskin lashed at the small of her back, to be sure it was secure. "Tell the boy to go first. I will follow his lead."

The boy kneeled at the opening for a moment, muttering some barbaric prayer, before lighting his little oil lamp and

levering himself in—hands, shoulders, and finally his feet vanishing into the dark. Shira prayed to the Sun God, illuminated her hands, then followed him.

The rock was hellishly cold, and the tunnel floor was slimy with mud. It stank of decay. The light came and went as she pressed her hands against the floor, the walls, and sometimes even the ceiling. She twisted and squirmed and forced herself through the first part of the tunnel. After an endless time she paused, panting hard—feeling trapped already. But she gritted her teeth, twisted her hips, pushed with her knees, and was through the tight space.

Now she could rise to hands and knees, and she crawled forward until she saw the boy's feet. A few Ucnian words came echoing back to her, and she said "I'm coming. Go ahead." She had no idea if he understood her, but the feet moved along.

The tunnel grew narrower, then the ceiling lowered as well. Soon she had to crawl on knees and elbows. Her world closed down to a bubble of light no more than a few handspans across, surrounded by a mountain of rock that pressed in on all sides. Rock that hid her from the light, the air, and her husband the Sun. Suddenly the walls seemed to squeeze in on her; her heart pounded, her mouth went dry, and she froze like a bird in a serpent's gaze. For a long moment she trembled in place. Then she closed her eyes hard, pressed her hands

together, and prayed fervently. Gradually the Sun's heat warmed her heart, until she found the strength to press herself forward.

The cave's crack-webbed walls seemed to move in the shifting light of her hands. She crawled through mud and rivulets of water, over sharp stones, and through tight squeezes. A cold, damp breeze blew constantly in her face. At one point she had to wriggle on her belly under an enormous rock, sharp as a hatchet blade, that seemed poised to fall and cut her in two. Cold sweat sprang out on her brow.

And always ahead of her were the bare, filthy feet of the boy Chulic, until, suddenly, they vanished. She heard a rattle of falling gravel, then silence.

"Are you hurt?" she called.

"I good," came the reply. "You come."

Shira inched forward until she felt the floor end. She raised her hands and saw a slope of loose rocks descending away into the darkness. Chulic waited at the bottom, his face illuminated by his tiny lamp. He waved her onward.

Trembling, she gathered her feet under her, then stepped skidding down the slope. Three long strides brought her to the boy, who coughed as the dust she had raised reached his nose. She looked back up the slope; the top was beyond the reach of her light.

Shira had lost all sense of time. “How long have we been traveling?” Chulic shrugged in comprehension. Then he gestured to a small opening in the wall near his feet. “Luca—is he in there?” she asked.

“Luca,” replied Chulic.

Shira bent and wriggled through the opening into a narrow tunnel, which descended at a sharp angle. Suddenly her hand struck something furry. It moved, and she cried out.

Her cry was answered by a groan, and then a mumble in Ucnian.

The furry thing was Luca’s head.

“Luca? My name is Shira. I am a Sun Sorceress, and I am here to serve. Do you understand me?”

“Help me,” he replied in slurred Novarran.

“I will help you.” Shira backed up a bit—it was surprisingly difficult, in the tight downward-sloping space—and raised her glowing hands to inspect the boy’s situation.

Luca lay on his right side, with his right arm trapped beneath his body and his left constrained by the closeness of the tunnel ceiling. The fingernails of his left hand were ragged, and the fingertips were black with dried blood. Peering down the length of his body, Shira saw that a large rock had fallen across his right ankle, and a slurry of smaller stones encased much of his right leg.

“Thirsty,” the boy said.

Shira wriggled around and untied the wineskin from behind her back. “Here. Milk and honey.” She held the neck of the skin to his lips, and he sucked greedily.

“I am going to try to dig you out now,” she said when the milk was gone. But as she squeezed herself into the tiny space between his back and the tunnel wall, she found that his back was nearly as cold as the stone. Shira pressed herself against him and let the Sun’s warmth flow through her and into his flesh. He let out a shuddering sigh, which then collapsed into a series of sobs.

Shira held him and poured out the warmth as long as she could. It was her oldest and strongest talent—she remembered her mother’s delight and dismay when nine-year-old Shira had so proudly laid her hand, tingling with heat, against her mother’s cheek. Within the month she was married to the Sun, and she had never seen her mother again. But she thought of her mother whenever she used this simplest gift.

The power of the Sun was unending, but Shira’s capacity to channel it was limited, and after too brief a time her bones burned with pain. Finally she could stand it no longer; she choked off the power and lay, gasping and cooling, on the tunnel floor. Luca continued to sob. “It will be all right,” she whispered. “It will be all right.”

But as she began to dig away at the boy's trapped leg she began to wonder if it would, in fact, be all right. Each handful of dirt and stones she dug away was immediately replaced with another, cascading down from the broken ceiling from which the large rock had fallen. The rock itself was so far down Luca's body that she could barely reach it, and at her arms' full extent, even with the strength of the Sun in her muscles, she could exert almost no leverage to lift it. After only a very short time she was sweaty and trembling from the effort, and the cave air was so damp that, despite the cold breeze that blew along Luca's body, the sweat did not evaporate.

She dug and dug, sometimes thinking that she was making progress, sometimes sure her efforts were only embedding the boy deeper in the earth. From time to time she paused and tried to shift the massive boulder from the boy's leg, but it didn't budge a hair. She kept digging.

The grit and sharp rocks sliding down along her arms reminded her of the terrifying weight of earth and rock above her....

No. She must not let her mind travel in that direction.

Shira worked until her arms shivered with exertion, until her breath rasped in her grit-clogged throat and even the power of the Sun was not enough to keep her going.

“I must rest,” she said at last, and backed herself up toward the mouth of the tunnel.

Luca cried out, panicked—a stream of words in Ucnian, then “No leave me!”

“I will return,” she soothed.

“No leave!” And he collapsed in sobs again.

She had no more words to comfort him. She had almost no energy to speak. Silently, painfully, she crawled backwards on knees and elbows until she found herself at the bottom of the slope with Chulic.

“Luca?”

“No Luca.”

The boy brought out some oatcakes from under his shirt, and a wineskin. Shira devoured the cakes greedily, though they were foul with mud.

The food and wine partly filled the void in her stomach, though they did little to calm her troubled mind.

She took a breath. She was a Sun Sorceress and her duty was to serve. She prepared to re-enter the tunnel.

And balked.

She could not make herself do it.

Luca’s situation was too daunting. Shira was too exhausted. She could not think of any way to free him that she

had not already tried, and found wanting. She could comfort him, but the milk was gone and her bones still burned.

Finally she sat heavily on the floor, knowing that if she exerted herself any more she would not have the energy to climb to the surface.

“I’m sorry, Luca,” she whispered too quietly for either boy to hear. “I’m sorry.” Then, louder but still without much strength: “Tell him we must go and return with tools. Do you understand?”

“Yes. We go, bring tools.” Chulic shouted down the hole in Ucnian. Luca’s voice came back, feeble and despairing, and Shira’s heart went out to him. But her body was too drained to follow.

Wearily Shira climbed up the slope of loose rocks. But with each motion she slid down nearly as far as she had crawled. Even with Chulic’s help it took a lifetime to reach the top of the slope.

It was another lifetime of crawling and squeezing and wriggling before she reached the upper cave. What had seemed so dark and forbidding only that afternoon—was it really only that afternoon?—was now an oasis of light and air. Gvubi and one of his men carried her from the cave into the reddening light of an overcast evening.

“Did you reach the boy?” asked Uhric. His face was drawn with concern.

“Yes. But I could not dig him out. I gave him what comfort I could.”

Uhric’s eyes closed hard, and he shook his head slowly.

“I must rest. I will try again as soon as I am able.”

She was asleep before she reached her palanquin.

* * *

Shira awoke screaming from a dream of being buried alive. Gvubi was there immediately. “Most Holy Sorceress!”

“I’m... I’m all right, Captain,” she gasped, her heart slowly returning to its normal rhythm. “What watch is it?”

“Third watch.” The darkest part of the night.

“You should be asleep, Captain.”

“Over you I watch, Most Holy Sorceress.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“All right, you are?”

“Yes. I’ll be all right.”

As the curtain closed on Gvubi’s still-wrinkled brow, Shira realized she was still caked with mud from top to toes. She took a scraper from her box of toiletries and began to clean herself. As she struggled to reach between her shoulder blades she regretted, not for the first time, that the Bride of the Sun was strictly inviolate.

But even once she was reasonably clean and clad in a soft, comfortable chiton, she could not sleep. She stared at her palanquin's cloth roof, thinking how miserable Luca must be in his living tomb.

What could she do to rescue him? Whatever it was, it would have to be done quickly—the boy would die of cold or thirst before too many more days had passed, even with regular doses of warmth and milk. The port of Callulian, where she had arrived, was eight days behind her; her destination, the Novarran frontier town of Galerica, was five days ahead. Even a fast runner would not be able to return with help in time. She was on her own.

Sometimes even the power of the Sun was not enough, and she feared this might be one such time. But for the boy's sake she would have to keep trying.

She was still staring when the roof began to lighten with the day.

* * *

The red-bearded faces above Shira were not pleased.

“What did you tell them?”

“I translated your words exactly, Most Holy Sorceress,” replied Uhric. “You will require much of this day to prepare yourself to work a major magic.”

“They should be grateful that I would undertake a major magic on Luca’s behalf.”

One of the men grumbled something. Uhric gave him a placating response before replying to Shira. “They do not trust Sun magic, Most Holy Sorceress. We are people of the Earth.”

Shira drew herself to her full height. “You should remind them how worthless their Earth magic was against the sorcery and might of the Empire. You are a conquered people, sir, and the sooner you adopt Novarran ways the better it will be for you.”

“I understand, Most Holy Sorceress. But I fear my simple people will be loath to comply.” He spoke to them, and they burst out in angry shouting, at each other as well as at Shira. Gvubi and his men moved in, raising their spears.

“*Silence!*” Shira called out, and smote the crowd with a burst of light and power that knocked several of them over and left them momentarily blinded. She took on the God-voice then, and in tones of thunder she said “I am the Most Holy Sorceress of the Sun God of Novarra! By the power of the Sun Himself, I *will* rescue the boy.”

She turned from them and strode back to her palanquin, leaving the men with smoking beards and blinking through tears of pain. Gvubi’s men closed ranks behind her, breastplates gleaming with the might of the Novarran Empire.

But within her heart, Shira worried that the power of the Empire, even that of the Sun Himself, might be unable to save one trapped little boy. They were blunt tools, as unsuited to the task as a bronze-worker's tongs for removing a splinter.

But now she *must* save the boy. She had staked herself, her magic, and even the Sun Himself on it.

* * *

In her palanquin, Shira anointed herself with scented oil and began to pray. Seated tailor-fashion, eyes closed and head tilted back, with arms outstretched, she opened her whole essence to her husband the Sun. All day she prayed, turning slightly every little while. Though her eyes were closed, and He was hidden from her by the fabric of the palanquin and the clouds in the sky, every particle of her being knew where He was and shifted her body, almost unconsciously, to follow Him in His path through the sky.

Shira prayed harder and longer than she had in years—gathering as much energy into herself as she could possibly contain. By the time she emerged, late in the afternoon, her body roiled with Sun-power. She was intoxicated with it. Her every sense was sharpened; her mind flitted rapidly from thought to thought; the ground seemed to waver slightly as she eased toward the cave. Gvubi's eyes widened as he caught sight

of her, and in the deep brown centers of his eyes, her own reflection shimmered with golden light.

“Bring me food and wine,” she said, and her words thrummed with the God-voice, and even the squabbling Ucnians rushed to comply. “Bring me a bronze pry-bar,” she said to Gvubi, and to the boy Chulic “Come with me.” She continued to step forward, and as the things she had requested were brought to her she accepted them without pausing.

The entrance to the tunnel seemed far too small to contain her God-suffused self, but her mind knew her body was physically no larger than before. In one smooth motion she knelt and wriggled through the opening.

The cavern walls reflected her shining light back at her. She passed through the cave like a Solstice procession through the streets of Navarra, a moving center of light and energy. It was difficult to contain it all within herself, and at the tightest squeezes light and heat flowed from her, causing Chulic to cry out. But she breathed the power back into herself and pressed on.

She descended the last slope like a god descending to the earth, and when she crawled to Luca in his prison he cried and trembled and ducked his head. “Do not fear,” she said to him, and her words boomed in the tiny space. “I am here to serve.” She offered him an oatcake, but his teeth chattered so hard it

crumbled into a thousand pieces and ran down his chin. No matter, he would soon be free.

Shira forced her shining self into the space behind Luca's back. The rock, cold as the pits of hell, drew the heat and light from her, but she held the pry-bar before her like the spear of the Sun Himself, and she thrust it into the loose gravel around Luca's leg.

She channeled the power from herself into the gravel. It trembled, and sand and small stones began to fly in all directions. Luca cried out and pressed his face against the rock, as though seeking protection from the very Earth Mother who imprisoned him.

Sand and gravel continued to fly, and even Shira was forced to narrow her eyes and duck her head as the wind from farther back in the cave blew the flying stones into her face. She pressed harder on the pry-bar and poured all the Sun's power into it. The tiny cavern filled with a deafening roar, the groaning, rattling sound of a million tiny particles battering against rock, and the smell was of a sandstorm she had endured as a novice. Luca's mouth was wide open, his eyes squeezed tight shut, but she could not hear his scream.

Now Shira too was screaming, her bones afire, pain coursing along every vein and tendon. The cave was a typhoon of sand. But still the rock pressed in from every side, and new

gravel poured down from above, immediately replacing every particle the Sun's power forced away down the tunnel. And more. Shira realized that all her efforts, all the power of the Sun Himself, were only burying Luca still deeper.

With a shuddering cry of pain and despair, Shira choked back the power within herself. It burned along her nerves and muscles, but the storm of sand quickly subsided, leaving both of them battered and gray with dust.

Luca's face was buried in it. He struggled, unable to breathe.

Abandoning the pry-bar, Shira dug out Luca's head with her hands. As his mouth came into view, he gasped and coughed and spat out sand and gravel.

Shira's light was fading, the God-power flowing out of her and into the all-absorbing rock like a draining bath. She began to sob, and held Luca's head out of the pile of dust and sand she had brought down upon him. "I'm sorry," she said, and her words were a dry hacking whisper with no hint of God-voice. "I'm sorry."

The two of them cried together in the cooling cavern, listening to the sound of gravel slithering down all around them. Finally Shira wiped her nose with one gritty hand and offered the boy some wine. He turned his head away.

Despairing, she left the wine skin where he could reach it with his lips, then dragged herself backward out of the tunnel.

Chulic had to half-push, half-drag her to the surface.

* * *

A great shout of joy came from the throats of the gathered Ucnians as she emerged from the cave, carried by Gvubi and Uhric. But the joy turned to despair, and then to anger, as Uhric explained that the boy was still trapped.

“Set me down here,” she whispered. “Leave me in the light.” She found herself leaning against a cold rock, surrounded by Gvubi and his men, as Uhric gave her wine and honey. The clouds to the west reddened as the Sun set, invisible.

All around them surged angry Ucnian voices.

“I failed,” she said, and dripping tears drew runnels through the caked mud on the backs of her hands. “Even with all the power of the Sun God Himself at my command, I failed.”

“I have never understood why the Sorceresses of the Sun take such a masculine approach to solving problems,” Uhric replied.

“I... I don't understand.”

“You are a woman. How can you not understand that the Earth Mother must be seduced, not raped?”

“I am no ordinary woman. I am a Bride of the Sun. And your Earth Mother is just a local superstition.” But even to her own ears, her voice sounded weak and shaky.

Uhric shook his head with a sad smile. “I know you Sun-Brides are taken from your parents and married to the God as soon as your powers emerge. This life of force and order—this very Novarran life—is all you have ever known. But we Ucnians, who live our lives in mud and dust, come to know and love the Earth Mother in a way you can never know the Sun.”

“I love the Sun, my husband, with all my heart.”

“I know you do. But does he love you? He is so distant.” He laid his hand on the rock at Shira’s back, and it warmed from his touch. “Our Mother the Earth is ever present, and every thing both living and unliving feels the pull of her love. Even the birds cannot leave Her forever.”

Shira sat up, though it cost her dearly, and hardened her words. “How can you love a Mother who would kill her own child?” Then she fell back against the unyielding stone. Surrendering to the very force that Uhric called the love of the Earth. A force whose existence she could not deny.

“Sometimes a mother shows her love in ways her children cannot understand,” said Uhric. “Perhaps she takes Luca from us because she loves him so.”

Anger welled up in Shira at his words—anger mixed with fear, and compassion, and determination. “Sometimes a mother makes foolish decisions out of love.” She sat up again. “You said She must be seduced. How does one seduce a Goddess?”

“With wine, and words of love, and gentle touch.” He offered her an oatcake.

She took it, and nibbled thoughtfully. “What is the word for ‘love’ in Ucnian?”

* * *

Shira stepped from her palanquin the next morning clad in simple woolens, carrying a wine skin she had filled from the amphora with her own hands. She kept silent as she walked toward the cave, waving Gvubi away as he approached with his men. Chulic stood up as she came near, but she did not give him any command; instead she walked to where he stood, looked him in the eye, and said “Will you come with me one more time?” Then she added “*Wylyth*”—please.

The boy nodded.

The two of them struggled down through the earth together, helping each other through rough patches and tight places. Shira tried to feel the pressure of the surrounding stone as a loving hug, instead of the stranglehold that every fiber of

her being insisted it was. It was hard, and she wasn't sure she had convinced herself, but she kept trying.

Was she doing the right thing? Would the Ucnians interpret her embrace of some principles of Earth magic as abandonment of the Sun? Or, worse, would the Sun Himself interpret it so?

No. The life of a Sun Sorceress was a life of service. She *must* save this boy. Her husband the Sun would understand. As for the Ucnians... she hoped, with Uhric's help, that they would come to understand as well.

Finally she reached Luca. The boy was asleep, or perhaps unconscious; his breathing was slow and shallow, and his skin was cold. She gave him a little of the Sun's warmth, but he did not stir.

Shira crawled back, opening a small space between her and the boy, and poured out a little wine into a hollow in the rock. Placing her hands on either side of it, she stroked the stone gently and whispered the words Uhric had taught her. It was a prayer, a love poem, a gentle request.

As she spoke, she let the Sun's light and warmth flow through her and into the ground. For though the stone here was cold as hell, other parts of the Earth rejoiced in the Sun's touch—bringing forth crops, sparkling His light from

mountaintops, and returning His warmth to people long after He had hidden His face from them.

The Sun and the Earth together sustained humanity. How could she have failed to understand this?

Shira heard a groan. She looked up, but even if Luca had groaned he was still unconscious and had not moved. Then, as she looked on Luca's face, the groan came again and she knew it was not from him.

It was the stone, the living stone around her, that was groaning.

Shira's throat constricted in fear, but she kept chanting, raising her voice a little to be heard above the sound. Slowly, gently, the tunnel opened wider, gravel running down the slope and away as the stone drew back. Luca mumbled and rolled over, and Shira realized the rock that had pinned his foot was drawing back as well. He was free!

A great darkness opened up beyond the boy as the cavern widened still further. Luca began to slip away from Shira, sliding along with the gravel around him. Shira put her hands under his shoulders and pulled. With the power of the Sun in her arms, and perhaps with the help of the Earth, he came away easily. Shira backed up the tunnel, trying to hold the boy's head away from the rough rock as she dragged him to safety.

The groaning continued, and the darkness spread still wider. Shira felt Luca being pulled away from her—pulled by the Earth’s love. “*Huc*,” she said, meaning *no*, but she said it gently, like a mother taking a beloved toy away from a child when it was time for the child to nap. She dragged the boy away from the widening hole and onto the slope where Chulic waited. Chulic’s face lit up with wonder and astonishment when he saw that Luca was with her.

For a moment Shira was afraid the tunnel would continue to expand and engulf them all, but the groaning stopped when the entrance was only a few handspans wider than it had been before. She blew out a breath of relief and sat down, exhausted.

Then, deep in the hole, Shira saw the sparkle of stars. Amazed, she brightened her light and peered inside.

The cave beyond was a huge cavern, larger than any man-made room. It glittered with crystals, white and purple and amber, like a field of flowers all made of ice. They reflected Shira’s light back at her a thousandfold, a sight more beautiful than any she had ever seen.

She bowed her head and said a prayer of thanks to the Earth Mother.

Then she rested for a time in the belly of the Earth, gathering her strength for the long climb to the surface—to Luca’s people, to her Empire, and to her husband the Sun.

* * *

As the three of the emerged from the cave, a joyous cry came from the gathered crowd. They surged toward Luca and Shira. Gvubi and his men immediately blocked their path.

“No,” she told him. “Let them come.”

The crowd embraced Luca, bearing him away to food and warmth and family. Shira, they circled warily. Bone-weary, she could only smile at them until Uhric managed to push his way to the fore, his face shining with relief and delight.

“Congratulations, Most Holy Sorceress,” he said. “On behalf of my people, I extend my thanks to you for saving the boy.”

She took Uhric’s offered hand. “It was not I...” she replied, the beginning of a ritual formula. But then she stopped, and amended the formula somewhat. “It was the Sun, and it was the Earth.”

When Uhric translated her words, the crowd moved in, to touch and stroke her arms and squeeze her shoulders. Though their hands were rough and filthy, Shira took it as the gesture of respect it was clearly meant to be.

The next five years might be uncomfortable, but they would not be unbearable.

Shira closed her eyes and tipped back her head to feel the Sun upon her face. He warmed them all, Ucnian and Novarran alike.

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David D. Levine is a lifelong SF reader who made his first professional sale in 2001, won the Writers of the Future Contest in 2002, was nominated for the John W. Campbell award for Best New Writer in 2003, was nominated for the Hugo Award and the Campbell again in 2004, and won a Hugo in 2006 (Best Short Story, for "Tk'Tk'Tk"). His "Titanium Mike Saves the Day" was nominated for a Nebula Award in 2008, and a collection of his short stories, Space Magic, is available from [Wheatland Press](#).

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Rick Sardinha is a professional illustrator/fine artist living and working on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. His passion is to create in traditional oil media, however, he is just as comfortable in front of a computer and often uses multiple disciplines in the image creation process. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.battleduck.com>.

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