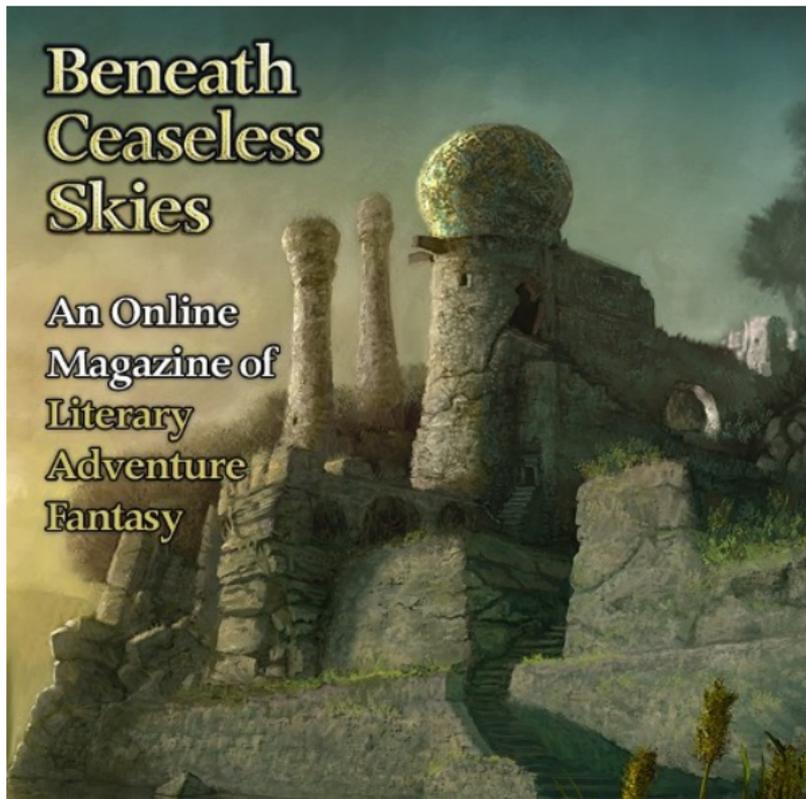


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THE SWORD OF LOVING KINDNESS, PT. II

by Chris Willrich

[Concluded from Pt. I, in Issue #1](#)

* * *

Imago Bone discovered no means of barring the stairs, but a stone passageway revealed side rooms with wooden doors. He ushered Gaunt into what appeared the master bedroom. He regretted they couldn't use the bed, blanched at the nearby torture equipment, and noted a large air shaft. He and Gaunt dragged gnarled-looking furniture to block the door.

Fists pounded the other side.

Bone whispered, "The air shaft leads to the outer wall."

"You are sure?"

"Every thief's an amateur architect. Up you go."

"And you?"

"I will follow. Go."

Though Gaunt was quick to challenge him on matters social, geographic, or metaphysical, at least she acquiesced in matters of survival. Sometimes. He gave Gaunt a boost and she scrambled up the shaft.

“Open!” cried one of the drab-robbers in passable Roil. “We will not harm you.”

“Spare me,” Bone muttered, preparing to jump.

At that moment the door shattered, and a robed hand emerged.

“Spare me,” Bone prayed to whatever gods yet lived. The drab-robbers were far better combatants than he’d feared.

The thief faced a dilemma. He could follow Gaunt into the air shaft, but the drab-robbers would see, and would surely have time to slip outside and trap Bone, if not Gaunt as well. Whereas, if Bone stayed and struggled—*fought* was not really in his professional vocabulary—all the drab-robbers might be delayed, allowing Gaunt a better chance. Who knew? He might even win. The drab-robbers might simultaneously trip each other.

There was another word that was not really in his professional vocabulary, and he’d never quite used it with Persimmon Gaunt. He did not think of it as he threw pain-implements like daggers, as he tripped foes with bedsheets, as he kicked and bit. He did not think of Gaunt at all, save as the fleeting idea of a woman running free beneath the sun.

He did not even consider the word as they grappled him and smothered him with a pillow and toppled him into a hazy

dream wherein he clasped Gaunt's hand in Palmary's finest restaurant, peering deep into her eyes.

Is there something you wish to say to me? said dream-Gaunt.

Yes. I hate magic swords.

An aching haze cleared at last, and Bone awoke upon perhaps the most comfortable chair ever placed within a torture chamber. Later, despite painful associations, the memory of that chair would taunt him. It was vast and velvety and perfectly supported his long-abused frame. If the thief ever retired to a cave in the mountains, he must plant such a chair in the center of his loot and doze in sight of the jewels and gold and easily-transportable paintings. The lords of Maratrace knew their furniture.

Alas, they also knew other arts as well.

All around him there were racks and ropes, needles and whips, boxes and spikes, all dedicated to the ostensible purpose of the room, that of damaging the human body by precise increments. Testifying to their use, there came to his nose a reek of mingled blood, sweat, and excretion, clouded by a touch of incense.

Such torments were perhaps to be expected. What startled Bone were the identities of the tormented.

Four of Bone's drab-robed captors surrounded him—stretched, pierced, constricted, and dripped upon.

Bone sat unrestrained. Those in the devices were, by all appearances, free to leave as well. Even the man within the little confinement box could snake his arm through a hole and release the latch. Instead, the lunatic leered through another hole at Bone. They all bore demented, predatory looks, these drab-robed ones. Here and there Bone caught sight of precise and extensive scars.

A group of more ordinary Maratracians lurked in a nearby gallery, clutching iron bars to peer more intently at the tableau. These citizens were less diligently scarred, with merely the odd missing finger or eyepatch or artistic incision.

“This is some bizarre delirium,” Bone remarked. “I’ve dallied with dreamtellers in Palmary. As that city is fashioned in the shape of a hand, it attracts all manner of soothsayers—except oddly enough the palmists, who claim the layout overwhelms them.”

“So,” said the man in the box, in decent Roil. “What did these dreamtellers say?”

Why not converse? “Dreams (such as this surely is!) toss about the elements of our psyches, as a gourmet tosses a salad. As the arrangement of rent vegetables serves the chef’s

purposes, so the parts of a dream may be impossible to reassemble into their original lettuce heads.”

There were gentle snickers. “Are we the croutons then?” asked the man in the box.

“Indeed,” said Bone, warming to his topic as a mouse warms to the notion of holes smaller than cats. “You are much as old, pebbly croutons in the salad of my mind. No doubt with reflection I could find the symbolism in each of you.” He craned his neck. “You with the water dripping onto your forehead, you might be the father who demanded I join him at sea. You upon the rack might represent my desire for greater romantic prowess.”

“This is fascinating,” said she upon the rack.

“Very true!” Bone eased deeper into the chair. “Now, you inside the box might recall that unfortunate time I was apprehended robbing the delvenfolk embassy in Palmary. I was conscripted into their games of hunchball. You play in a delven-height chamber in pitch blackness, you see, and the balls are of stone.”

“And I?” said a woman upon a slab caged by needles, so tightly penned that even breathing occasioned pricking. “What do I represent?”

“Ah,” said Bone, wincing, “that is perhaps most disquieting. There is a companion of mine, who stirs

unaccustomed feelings. To approach those feelings more closely inspires fear; to withdraw inspires pain.”

The woman grunted, and to Bone’s horror, she clapped, piercing her hands in the process.

“Well done!” she said. “You obviously comprehend much of this universe’s rue. Yet you hold back at the last. Why assume this is a dream? Is it so implausible that you sit here, in truth, in our *mindthresh*?”

Bone swallowed. This was indeed a conclusion he wished to avoid. “Were this truly real—and I assure you, many would wish me in such a room—then surely *I* would suffer, not my hosts.”

There were wry chuckles all around.

“You have never been to Maratrace,” said the man in the box.

“It is you who are in the compromised position,” said the woman upon the rack.

“How can that be?” said Bone. “I lack only a glass of wine and a good book.”

At a nod from the woman among the needles, a noseless citizen entered and proffered a glass of ruby liquid. An earless citizen followed with a translation in *Roil of Darkfast’s Memoirs*.

“I fear this only supports my argument,” Bone said after an agreeable sip.

“You are mired in illusion,” said the man being dripped upon. “You do not understand the horror that underlies reality.”

“Your comfort holds you back,” said the woman upon the rack. She coughed at one of the departing citizens, who obligingly turned the crank near her head. Bone made a point of opening and examining the book. He glanced at the line *Cynics have the most fruitful sense of humor, but they get the least nourishment from it.*

“We by contrast,” said the woman of the needles, “have trained ourselves to understand truth. We rise above the human condition, perceiving it fully. Pain gives us wings.”

Bone sighed. “I concede this much: you are mad enough to be real.”

“You draw nearer to understanding,” approved the man in the box.

Bone sized up the situation. “I am a prisoner then, in the torture chamber of Maratrace.”

“Your terms are crude,” said the punctured woman. “In place of *prisoner*, we would prefer *suppliant*. Instead of *torture chamber*, we would say *mindthresh*. And rather than *rulers* we encourage you to say *Comprehenders*. The citizenry

follows us because they respect our *abyssmitude*, our knowledge of life's pain. I, for example, have no name other than Mistress Needles."

"And to secure my freedom, I must cultivate *abyssmitude*?"

Mistress Needles said, "I am impressed."

"As am I. I appreciate your lesson. Applaud it, even. This wine, which seemed so pleasant, is now revealed as swill." He drank it down. "Ugh. There. May I go?"

Mistress Needles sighed.

"Yes, I rather thought not," Bone said.

"We regret confining you," said the other woman (Mistress Rack, perhaps?) "Though I assure you, we will not significantly damage you without your consent."

"What is significant damage?"

"Whatever we deem so. Do not be overly concerned. We are civilized folk. However, you and your companion do pose a problem."

"What problem? We came bearing a gift —"

"Your gift," said he who might be Master Box, "is a weapon sent by the Pluribus to destroy us."

"Destroy you? The thing warps minds, and even its rose petals draw blood. But it's hardly going to wreck your little madhouse."

“How little you understand,” said the man (Master Drip?) with forehead targeted by waterdrops.

“Our founder, Captain Slaughterdark,” said Mistress Rack, “warned of this blade. It does not inflict wounds. It inflicts *sweetness*. It forces one to see the world through rose-tinted eyes. It is dreadful.”

Bone smirked. “On that we may agree.”

Mistress Needles said, “Then may we be in harmony, to the degree harmony exists in this cesspool of a universe. The sword’s presence may yet prove a desirable thing. For your freedom, Imago Bone, and that of the companion who brings you fear and pain, depends upon its destruction.”

“Um. How might such a thing be destroyed? We could hardly bear to release it, let alone harm it.”

“Things of magic,” said Mistress Rack, “have their own rules of being and unbeing. We believe it can be unmade, if used to destroy an innocent.”

“That demented girl you encountered,” said Master Drip. “The one who raises weeds and refuses self-injury and smiles at nothing. She is the one.”

“Yet,” Bone said uneasily, “I am given to understand your beliefs forbid doing harm without consent.”

“They forbid *us*,” said Mistress Needles. “You are not one of us, outlander. Yet.”

* * *

Persimmon Gaunt was uncertain whom she was angriest at, herself or Bone. It was she who should be the prisoner. Did not all romances feature the damsel's capture? (Though she disliked romances and the term *damsel*.) More to the point, was she not a morbid poet, able to mine the very prison stones for material?

Bone should be out here. Bone was the thief with far too many years' experience, the burglar who scaled buildings like step-stools, the schemer who spied cracks in all defenses. But he was not here, and Bone would insist she flee.

Go on (he'd say.) The dire book is safe with the Pluribus for now. Hone your self-preservation skills. Return to poetry, count yourself lucky to be free.

But she wouldn't abandon him. Did she love him? It almost didn't matter. She had allowed Bone to fall for her sake. Somehow she would get him back.

She almost felt his presence beside her as she skulked through the day. She returned to the harbor district and its clutter and crowds, obtaining hunks of dry bread and moldy cheese, dressing herself in a tattered robe. She lurked like a troll beneath a dank pier, whence she heard officials (*Comprehenders*, the market whispers named them) harassing every merchant stall and vessel. Seeking her. The traders,

drawn to Maratrace's useful location from many lands, did not like the place or the Comprehenders; but they promised to report the auburn-haired outlander.

She breathed deeply as her bardic instructors had taught, watching the sun descend and make the sky recall the Sword of Loving Kindness.

The image kept returning, of the girl Skath and her brother Skower, and their reactions to the sword.

Gaunt's intuition had landed her in trouble as often as out of it, but trouble was already here. She slept, her mission clear. At dawn she sought out Skath.

Gaunt shadowed the girl from her home, and caught her atop the western gate, tending another box of weeds. Although there was no city wall as such, the westward road led through this free-standing maw that snarled with metallic fangs, speared the sky with glass horns, unfurled spiky stone wings; and as the sun rose behind the city, the gate cast spiky shadows piercing the cracked and rocky margin of the desert called the Sandboil. The girl found it easy to crouch among the horns—there were dozens, sprouting like stunted glittering trees—and Gaunt saw the guards below would have great difficulty spotting Skath, let alone catching her.

As Skath knelt beside her stinkblossoms and spikeblooms, her snarlflowers and swamppetals, Gaunt said gently, “I like flowers too.”

Gaunt supposed she might have said something more fugitive-like. *Make a sound and you'll be sorry*, say. But, in fact, she was the sorry one.

“Lepton,” Skath hissed, backing up against a curving, serrated glass cone. “Don’t use the sword,” the girl whispered in Amberhornish.

“I won’t.” Gaunt spread her hands. “They took it when they took Osteon. I have no weapons except words.” As the girl relaxed slightly, the poet added, “Though I suspect it’s not ordinary cuts you fear.”

“The sword is evil,” Skath blurted.

“Is that why you set your Comprehenders on us?”

Skath looked at her feet. “It *hurt* me. It looks like a beautiful flower, but it’s a nasty, angry thing.” She glared at her box of blooming weeds, as if to say *those* were what flowers should be.

“I’d have to agree,” Gaunt said. She sat, laying hands upon bent knees. She studied the deep blue stinkblossoms for a time, wrinkling her nose. “I like your secret gardens. I spotted several yesterday, hiding from the Comprehenders. I used to keep gardens too, in a way. When I lived in Palmary, I knew a

dozen alleys where flowers grew. They were tough little things, like yours. I liked to bring them water. Sometimes I gave them more sun.”

Skath slowly sat, cocking her head skeptically. “How?”

Gaunt smiled. “I scrounged for broken mirrors. Then I positioned the pieces in different spots in the alleys, high and low. It didn’t work that well.”

“I guess it wouldn’t.” Skath frowned. “Why didn’t you just move the flowers?”

“They grew up through cracks and it wouldn’t have been safe to uproot them.”

“Mine will die if I don’t move them sometimes. People will find them and dump them out. My people, anyway—I have some friends by the harbor who let me use their roofs. But Maratracians, they like flowers with lots of thorns. They’ve been breeding for thorns for a long time. They hate weeds.”

“Each flower has its own rules.” After a moment, Gaunt added,

“There are flowers in gardens

Tended by wardens

Kissed by water-cans

Surrounded by cousins.

They are not my kind

They of tended ground

*Of nurtured bud
In a blooming land.
Mine are of the fissure
In a cobbled corner
Starved of sun and water
In an alley with no owner.
They are hardly grown
When the wind has blown
That cuts them down unknown.
They are my own.”*

Skath regarded her garden a long time. Then: “Why did you bring the sword? It’s a bad thing. I’m sorry I gave you away, I’m sorry they took Osteon. But the sword is *evil*, Lepton.”

“Even poets and thieves do things they regret. Tell me why the sword is evil.”

“It spoke to me... like it knew me. Had always known me. I heard it from far away, you know, weeks ago. It thinks I’m its chosen user, but it *hates* me too. It wants to change me. It thinks I’m stupid and useless. Just like my family does.”

“What does it want to do, once it’s changed you?”

Skath shuddered. “Kill everyone in Maratrace who believes in the Comprehenders’ way. Teach everyone who repents how

to wash more often, dress nice, eat healthy food, build pretty houses. Sing beautiful songs. Pull up all the weeds.”

“Is this what the Pluribus wanted...?” Gaunt began.

“Who is the Pluribus?”

“The one... the ones... who sent us here. I swear to you, my friend and I know very little. We were simply hired to bring the sword. I’d wash my hands of it and leave. But not without my partner.”

“They won’t hurt him.”

“That’s good.”

“They’ll make him hurt himself.”

“Why?” Gaunt asked. “What kind of place is this?”

“My people think being hurt is good. They think it makes you strong.”

“Well, sometimes it can.”

“If you break a flower,” Skath said, playing her hand through the stinkblossoms, “it dies. It doesn’t get *stronger*.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Skath. I’m stronger for having endured many things.” She remembered the poor family who’d sent her to live with Swanisle’s bards; and she recalled abandoning those bards to dwell in poverty far from home. “They helped make me who I am. Yet kindness shaped me, too. I don’t hold with those who embrace cruelty.” Gaunt frowned, thinking of greedy kleptomancers and bibliomaniac

goblins and homicidal mermaids. “Those who rant about hard necessity, when the greatest hardness is in their eyes. The ones who, even in paradise, would find an excuse to torture.”

Skath wore a look, Gaunt thought, of the oldest soul within the world’s five corners. Then this ancient-eyed being took Gaunt’s hand, and was merely a girl again. Gaunt said nothing but clasped Skath’s hand in turn.

She felt a surprising maternal need to spirit Skath away—to Palmary, to Swanisle, someplace where a girl who loved flowering weeds would have a fighting chance. Yet this girl had a mother, a family, a life of her own, and Gaunt had a lover to save. As she considered all this, Gaunt felt less like an adult comforting a youth than like an older child defending a younger.

If I am ever a mother, she thought, will I lose this ability to be a child’s true friend? Must I always, then, feel superior? But there could be no answer.

Then Gaunt released Skath’s hand and spun, seeing movement out the corner of her eye.

The boy Skower had entered the hiding place. He looked from Gaunt to Skath with wide eyes, and blurted, “The other outlander.... I heard it from the crowd at the Comprehenders’ tower. They’ve got him in the mindthresh. When they’re done

teaching him, he'll come outside—with the sword. He'll come looking for *you*, Skath. He's going to kill you.”

* * *

I've been entranced in some way, Imago Bone thought, wanting to feel angry about it. Something in the wine? Perhaps. Magic? He saw nothing obvious, but he no longer trusted his perceptions.

Yet even without magic or drugs, there remained the alcohol. The heat. The long hardship of the road to Maratrace. The confinement of the mindthresh. The constant discussion. And the people who came and jabbed him whenever he dozed. Bone had known thieves who'd confessed to far worse than burglary, signed anything, simply for the right to sleep. And also the self-assured voices of his captors, and the strange rhythm of their self-tortures.

Each time the world blurred and the Maratracians poked him back awake, the chamber seemed hotter, more constricted. Eventually he dreamed with his eyes open, his thoughts guided by the Comprehenders' remarks.

Bone had waking dreams of his father (the fisherman) and Bone's two elder brothers (the fishermen) and his mother (the fisherman's wife) and his sister (the fisherman's daughter.)

The Bones of Headstone Beach, on the Contrariwise Coast, were all fishermen. It had not been objectionable that Imago be different—it had been incomprehensible.

Yet Imago had no desire to fish. It was not that he hated the sea; indeed, he could study its wavering surface and shadowy depths for hours, much as others would watch a fire. Imago's dream was to wander that sea as an explorer, not hug the coasts. Imago's father once or twice grumbled acquiescence to the idea. But that was before Imago's brothers drowned.

To the boy it seemed a life sentence had fallen upon him, this assumption he must fish to sustain his family. So he asked himself, how would Slaughterdark the Pirate Lord have comported himself, and he answered *Slaughterdark would do anything necessary to reach free sea.*

With this notion fluttering high, Imago fashioned a mask of old sailcloth and robbed a carriage of the Skullfellows, those merchants who taxed all the trade of Headstone Beach. To his delight he discovered a knack for such work. Triumphantly he presented his father enough money to secure the family for a year.

But Effigy Bone cursed his son for a thief, and kept the money. Imago was not released; he was banished. Though he wandered the Spiral Sea's three great islands and its gnarled

mainland, Imago Bone found no delight in escape. For it is one thing to sally forth, quite another to be exiled.

Other travelers whom Bone met upon the road, alone as they were, seemed possessed of a self-assurance he could never feel. Could it be that these travelers knew the trust and love of unseen, even dead, families? While Bone knew only the contempt of his? He felt like a vessel with a gutted hull, apparently sound and yet inevitably sliding to a fate even Captain Slaughterdark could not evade.

So he turned by slow degrees from the sea. He did not understand it then, but he came to believe he did not deserve his dream. Instead he focused on enhancing the skills that bought him survival on the road. He became, not just opportunistically but occupationally, a thief.

And thanks to Joyblood and Severstrand, two equal but opposed angels of death inflicted by a pair of eager but uncoordinated enemies, his life was strangely prolonged, so that those skills became legend. Yet at heart he was a man who'd abandoned a dream, to punish himself for failing a family long dead.

Bone shuddered as he reached this conclusion, trembled with the need to relate it to his friends, the only people who could comprehend. Only dimly was he aware that he told it hunched up, within a narrow wooden box.

* * *

Gaunt led the children through shadows and dust to her hiding place beneath the pier. There she hissed angry questions to Skower. “Explain yourself, boy. You turn us over to the Comprehenders, and now you want to help?”

“I love my little sister,” the boy said, with a quaver of pride. “I want Skath to be strong, proper, normal.”

“Nothing about Maratrace is *normal*.”

“It is our way, outlander. But Skath has never fit in. She is too gentle. With herself, with others. When she told me about her dreams of the sword, I thought she was at last growing up. Then I *saw* the sword in reality. I knew, somehow, Skath had to claim it.”

Skath said, “You forced me to touch it, Skower. That was wrong.”

He contemplated the muddy sand. “Yes.”

“Then you summoned the Comprehenders, and now everything is worse.”

“I got scared,” Skower said, “after Lepton hit me.” He shot Gaunt a glare. “Of the outlanders. Of the sword. Of you with the sword. But I still believe that you’re supposed to use it, that it’s your destiny. The Comprehenders want to destroy it. They think having Osteon slay you with it will do that. Maybe you

embarrass me, Skath, but I can't let him kill you. I can't oppose the Comprehenders, but Lepton can."

Brotherly love, Gaunt thought, but what she spoke aloud was, "I can't let him kill you either," and she said this as much for Bone's sake as Skath's. "And he will not. Skath, tell me again about your friends near the harbor."

* * *

There were nightmares in the dark, and some happened while Bone was asleep, and some while he was awake.

After a long interval he found himself atop a dark tower rippling with faux spines and sculpted ooze, spearing the air with its spikes and swellings. From this vantage he saw the sun rise obscenely over the city, exposing it like a lamp above a pustulous wound.

He could barely stomach the sight. He felt ill. He studied his own hands, his sandaled feet, noting each blemish and wart, each peculiarity of form. One toe was crooked in a way that offended him. His body seemed a lump of gristle and fat. He loathed the sound of his own rasping breath.

"You perceive," someone said. "You understand."

His friends the Comprehenders circled him, wearing robes that hid the nauseating truth of their bodies. They bore an identical robe for him.

He took it eagerly. Its cover compensated slightly for the sun's oppressive eye.

When he had become as the Comprehenders, Mistress Needles said, "You have come far, supplicant. Since the days when Captain Slaughterdark established this realm, each generation has passed our founder's abyssmitude to the next. You are not so unlike him, and you have progressed quickly. But there is yet a task required of you, our new Brother Box."

And now his namesake approached, Master Box. As if passing a torch, Master Box unveiled the rose-red crystal rapier with its hilt sculpted like a blossom, his hands poised carefully beneath the cloth. The sword greeted Brother Box with a cheery pastel crimson glow.

Master Box said, "Behold the abomination. It teaches us to live in a shallow world of insipid pleasantries and callow smiles."

As one, the other Comprehenders spat. And they spoke, as though intoning a liturgy.

Mistress Rack said, "Our founder plundered this sword, to his everlasting regret. It was to escape its pall that he fled to the desert. There he fed upon locusts and scoured his skin with rocks, until he cleansed his mind of the sword's ways."

Master Drip said, "But he accomplished far more. He broke the illusions that veil the horror of the world. Of all men,

it was he who first truly Comprehended the loathsome nature of the universe. He abandoned his old life, and taught others to share his abyssmitude. And he foretold that one day our creed would encompass the Earthe, freeing all from illusion. The crusade would begin when Maratrace destroyed the Sword of Loving Kindness.”

Mistress Needles said, “You will do the deed, Brother.”

“But...” He could hardly speak, yet felt he should object.

“You fear losing your new-found perspective,” Master Box said. “We understand, Brother, and there is a risk. But if you cling to knowledge against the siren lure of ignorance, you may banish your illusions for good. We would be proud.”

Mistress Needles said, “We would be even more proud, if you could destroy the sword. Slay the girl Skath, she who tends weeds and smiles so shamelessly.”

“To sacrifice such a one with the sword,” said Mistress Rack, “would negate its claim to *kindness*. For whatever else the idiot Skath is, she is *kind*.”

“Do this,” said Master Drip, “and you’ll be free to do as you choose.”

“Even,” Mistress Rack said, “to teach abyssmitude to your beloved Persimmon Gaunt.”

“Give me the sword,” he said.

The touch of the hilt was like a hot gale, and the world seemed to spin around the Comprehenders' tower.

A similar unbalancing shook his mind.

The sword hungered. He could almost hear it hissing its outrage. It longed to stain the Comprehenders's drab costumes with crimson, bludgeon their followers into donning bright, cheery garb to please family and friend. It wanted the citizens to tell all their troubles at bladepoint, with the help of tea and trifles. It wanted to topple this grotesque tower and supplant it with something beautiful and airy, flanked by topiary. It wanted to replace torture chambers with padded cells, each with its complementary book of spiritual devotion.

Come! the sword seemed to sing. *Let us make the world lovely, by smiting the unsightly!*

But Brother Box resisted, for his newfound abyssmitude was strong.

He knew that between the cracks of the sword's shining new world, loathsome vermin would scuttle. Moths would eat the pretty clothing, mold would claim the sweetcakes, and the beautiful happy people would, at last, rot.

"I am ready," he said.

As the girl was known to be missing, he stalked the harbor, where a fugitive might readily hide. Mistress Needles accompanied him, with an eye to maintaining his abyssmitude.

She needn't have bothered. These stinking, muttering bands of greedy, lecherous, sloppy traders were enough to inspire horror in any neophyte. Yes, surely Skath would hide here. Soon he would discover her and be rid of this damnable, mocking blade....

So absorbed was he, he almost missed the fleck of white flaring in an alley to his left. "Come," he hissed, shifting that way, unconsciously seeking shadows.

Mistress Needles had seen nothing. "Eh? Where do you go, Brother?" Her voice was suspicious. But she followed him into a noxious alley cluttered with refuse, so unlike the bleak dusty paths of inner Maratrace.

He knelt beside a trash-heap and lifted a severed dandelion puff. He crushed it and peered at the rooftops. "Gaunt is near," he said. "Skath is with her."

He leapt upon the mound, jumped to catch a window ledge, and scrambled onto an adobe roof.

"Brother, come back!"

"You could never take Persimmon Gaunt on the heights, Sister. I trained her."

He struck out across the rooftops, ignoring the Comprehender's protests.

The buildings of the trading district formed a fractured maze. The Maratracians might impose starkness upon their

own dwellings, but outsiders were not so rigid. As in so many lands, Maratrace could not afford to expel the foreigners it disdained, so it made do with isolating them.

All this he noted with a barely conscious sweep of observation, along with the awareness that Gaunt had set a trap.

She was not visible of course, nor was the girl. But upon a distant roof he spied the corner of a flower-bed. Despite himself he felt a distant flicker of pride. *First, lure me into isolation. Then, force me to cross a long span full of ambush sites. And I must cross, for how can I be certain Skath isn't beside that flowerbed after all?*

His own abyssmitude mocked him for admiring such childish games.

The sword sang its outrage at the indignity of crossing rooftops.

His guts as unbalanced as his mind, he slunk along a roundabout path, from time to time dropping and rolling to see if the ambush was upon him. None came. Perhaps he'd bypassed it.

“Gaunt,” he murmured sadly, “you are brave and gifted. But sorry to say, I'm the master.”

A glint met his eye up ahead, and he stopped, thinking at first to see a dagger, or a crossbow, aimed his way. But no... it

was just a common leather money-pouch nestled in a nook between chimneys, just as if some ambitious trader had stashed it while conducting dangerous business. A gem or two glinted through the loosened top. Only someone of keen senses, passing in just this direction, could have noticed. He licked his lips.

“Gaunt,” he called out. “I see what you are doing. But I am beyond such things. They are but stones, and I play for higher stakes.”

He leapt onward toward the flower bed.

A roof collapsed beneath him.

Sloppy, he thought as he fell. He should have noted that stairway gap, concealed though it was by a mandala-carpet covered with sand.

Tumbling down the stairs, Brother Box caught flashes of beauty foreign to Maratrace: brass statues of six-limbed gods, low oil lamps with wicks sticking out like fiery tongues, incense sticks trailing delicate smoky arms. Pain and distraction tore the sword from his grip; it lay upon another carpet of intricate swirling forms, flashing ruby light as if offended by the contemplative surroundings.

Whatever foreign merchants inhabited this home, they'd gone elsewhere. Shaking his head and wiping his eyes, Brother Box saw only Persimmon Gaunt.

Or rather, he saw the elephant-headed statue she slammed into his forehead.

Through the exploding starfield that filled his eyes he heard her say, "Sorry, O unknown deity. Sorry, Imago." As he reeled, she padded away. He heard a clatter of beads, and when his vision cleared, the sword was gone.

He snarled and crawled through the beaded curtain into the sunlight. He saw Gaunt duck into another mud-brick home, two houses down. Dogs and chickens voiced excitement; humans gasped. The ugliness of existence slapped Bone in the face, but something deeper than his abyssmitude drove him on. He hated to lose. He got to his feet, spat at the onlookers, and ran.

As he passed the next door, the girl Skath emerged and tripped him.

Before he could recover, she darted inside.

He needed both girl and sword. Best he make her unconscious now. He rose and tumbled through the doorway in one motion.

Again an exotic interior confronted him. Red wall hangings coiling with flowing gold calligraphy trembled in a hot breeze. Monochrome scroll paintings of mountainous landscapes hung beside lacquer cases reflecting the dying light

from a fireplace; these sheltered jade and ivory carvings of dragons, unicorns, and flying folk.

Something old stirred in Brother Box, a desire to investigate and inventory these unusual trinkets. Something older longed to wander those imaginary mountains beside the dragons. His abyssmitude whipped him on, however, whispering that all human works were so much junk... the calligraphy, the carvings, the paintings....

The intricate ironwork of the hot fireplace poker in Skath's hands....

She slashed and stabbed, leaping out of nowhere. The scent of hot metal and burnt wood shot past his nose. He scuttled back. He was far, far off his game. Yet though his reflexes were muddled, Skath was no warrior. On her next jab, he swatted the poker away.

Skath kicked him, howling. He shoved her off, following with a gut punch. She toppled with an *oomph*.

A flash of light warned him of Gaunt's approach. He spun.

Shaking, Gaunt advanced with the Sword of Loving Kindness. It shone with a lurid pink glow, bringing out the pigments in her rose tattoo. Rainbows sliced the air. Gaunt winced as one of the hilt's rose-petals pierced her hand. But it seemed to cut her spirit more deeply.

“Bone...,” she murmured. “My poetry.... So foolish and morbid. I should speak of sunshine, of virtue, of weddings and dynasties....”

“The sword,” he answered, “is awake. It is too much for anyone who lacks abyssmitude.” Indeed, his perspective was clearer with the sword lost. He perceived the entropy reflected in the fire’s ashes, the decay that would inevitably claim woman and girl. There was no escape. One could only Comprehend.

“Bone, I am sorry.” Gaunt raised the weapon, and its lurid light intensified. It emitted a sound resembling a shrill birdsong, or frantic harping.

“I am Bone no longer. I am Brother Box.”

He slid beneath her swing. He sensed the sword’s eagerness to sunder his spirit.

“You are not yourself, Gaunt.” He tumbled toward the exit.

“You should talk.”

He sped into the street and ducked into the final house on the row. He must improvise some weapon.

But he found this home not just unoccupied but nearly barren. A life-sized porcelain cat with upraised paw welcomed him to a chamber bearing a little unadorned table with a miniature tree growing from a pot in its center. The very simplicity of the room drew the eye to the complexity of wood

and leaf. Brother Box felt he could lose himself in that miniature world.

A trifle, a vanity, a waste of time. Lacking cover, he picked up the little tree, crouched, awaited Gaunt.

She stepped unsteadily into the room, a wary Skath beside her.

“Give up,” he told Gaunt. “You grow progressively less certain. The weapon overwhelms you.”

“Then we’re even. These madfolk have overwhelmed *you*.”

“Gaunt, you do not see... we were foolish, chasing the beauties of the road. For beauty does not exist.”

“No,” she said, assuming an attack posture, “we were wrong to seek beauty in wandering. We need to settle down, start a family, grow up.”

“*Stop it!*” wailed the girl Skath, looking from one to the other.

“I will stop it,” said Gaunt, and lunged.

Bone threw his miniature tree. Gaunt whacked it away. Skath screamed and caught it.

Gaunt jabbed again. Bone kicked the table toward her and tumbled, and thus avoided her main blow; yet a petal sliced his shoulder even as he stumbled into the porcelain cat and crushed it beneath his weight.

He barely noticed the physical pain. For he screamed with the awareness of his pointless life. He realized he was severed from the essence of existence—the business of loving, of harvesting, of raising many children, of having the tidiest house on the row. He wept, for these things now seemed glorious, not the hollow grotesqueries the Comprehenders saw.

Then the dark perceptions returned to him, whispering that the cycle of life was but a rotting millwheel, its only product a creaking noise.

Yet in the midst of the screaming and the whispering there opened a clear space deep in his mind.

And Imago Bone, who had some experience maneuvering between warring parties, found in that space a chance to know his own thoughts.

The first thought was this: that neither Comprehenders nor Sword of Loving Kindness respected the life he'd chosen.

“*My* life,” he murmured.

“Do you yield, Bone,” Gaunt demanded.

“To nothing... except you.” He tried to squeeze the words out of his mouth, crystallize his new thoughts in language before they collapsed under the force of one impulse or the other.

He rose painfully, turning to Skath. “Girl.”

The young gardener stepped forward, cradling the little tree like a baby.

“The Comprehenders hate you. The sword hates you.”

Skath nodded.

“Do you not see? You must play them *against* each other! Make your own way.”

“But the *sword* is good,” Gaunt said, with a hint of uncertainty. “The sword is right.”

“Then why should it hate Skath?” Bone found his strength now, and his voice. “No. This weapon cannot tolerate whimsical little girls. Or morbid poets. Or wandering rogues. None of us three is fit for grand purposes. And so all great powers despise us.”

Gaunt stared at Bone a long while. With trembling hand she stabbed at the earthen floor and released her grip. The sword quivered there, perhaps angered by the indignity. Gaunt released a long breath.

“Skath,” she said. “Bone is right. But I know something else. Your brother is right about something. *You* must take up the sword.”

Skath looked mystified. “It hates me.”

“Yes,” Bone said, turning to Gaunt, then back to Skath. “And I think it’s that’s because you know your own heart. You needed no philosophy, no etiquette, to become a kind person.

Your intuitions surpass its powers. The sword may fear that quality.”

“There is more,” Gaunt said. “Something I realized while wielding the weapon. I could not strike down someone I loved, even with the sword commanding it. I wonder if at its core it still carries, not just the fury of Nettleer Kinbinder, but the passion of Allos the Smith. If so, a gentle heart may be able to command it.”

“I don’t know those names,” Skath said.

“It may not matter,” said Gaunt, and she fished into her pack, and pulled out her pouch containing the powdered blood of Allos. She poured it upon the Sword of Loving Kindness.

The powder hissed, liquified, and flowed into the sword. The pink glow flickered madly and reddened. It seemed tempered now with the hard, steady quality of forge-light. It stood within the earthen floor, looking less dainty, more solid, like some miniature redwood.

“Take up the sword, Skath,” Gaunt said. “It may be your only chance to stand against the Comprehenders, and the Pluribus too.”

“Is that,” Skath asked in wonder, “what I should do?”

“If it is what you want,” Bone said.

There came the sounds of shouting and pursuit. Bone peeked outside. Beyond the crowd he caught a glimpse of drab-robed figures. "Decide soon," he added.

Eyes shut as if testing whether she dreamt, Skath set down her miniature tree and grasped the sword. She winced in horror, teetered, but mastered herself.

"No. I will *not* change. You will do what *I* want. I *will* command you."

The sword's light grew yet more natural, less lurid, like a waning desert sunset. Rainbows and sparkles subsided. Although a child, Skath now seemed somehow taller than either Gaunt or Bone.

"You do not care about people," Skath told the sword. "But I do."

The silence that followed was swiftly broken. Mistress Needles rushed in, four maimed citizens close behind.

"Success, Mistress," Bone began cheerfully, as he tripped her.

Gaunt smashed the porcelain cat's head over a citizen's. He went down, but the remaining minions advanced upon their foes, one to a person. Given his and Gaunt's exhaustion, Bone calculated the odds at a hair less than fifty-fifty, if Skath did not act.

Skath acted.

Glowing crystal slashed her opponent's arm. The Maratracian regarded Skath with shock and collapsed dead at her feet.

"What have you done?" Mistress Needles hissed, rising from the floor.

Skath pricked Gaunt's foe in the back. He sobbed and fell still. Bone's own opponent fled, and the final citizen ran close behind, brushing porcelain fragments from his hair.

Mistress Needles sized up the situation, spreading her hands. "We called you Brother, Imago Bone."

"You used me."

"Out of expediency. Are you not using this girl, now?"

"Ask her."

The Comprehender was silent.

Skath stared at the bodies. "Lepton, are they ... dead?"

"Yes," Gaunt answered after kneeling beside them.

"I was so angry... the sword doesn't think their dying matters. The sword really thinks they killed *themselves*. By living the way they did."

"What do you think?" Gaunt asked gently.

"I think.... I think I am tired. Lepton, Osteon—come with me?"

Bone and Gaunt trailed Skath, keeping watch on Mistress Needles. The Comprehender shuffled after them, pinching herself.

Meanwhile the crowd had become a throng, Maratracians now mixing with the foreigners. They jostled each other to behold the strange girl with the sword, but they parted for the boy Skower, who charged at his sister, ending with a jump and a shout.

“You command it!”

“Yes,” Skath murmured.

“Now you will be strong. Now you will not embarrass us, or make Mother and Father fight about you. You could become as mighty as a Comprehender. Or a pirate lord. Or a god.”

“It is not that way, Skower. I could not use the sword as you wish, even if I wanted to. I must always be careful of it.”

Skower’s smile collapsed. It was replaced—not by a frown, but by a bulging of the eyes, a set to the brow, that Imago Bone had beheld far too many times, on far too many faces. He tensed for a fight.

“Always you are weak!” Skower screamed. “You don’t deserve this sword. Give it to me. I will show you how to use it! I will show everyone!”

“Skower —”

“Give it to me!”

He lunged at her, and she gave it to him.

But, Bone realized in horror, Skower did not understand it was a gift. The boy grabbed, brother and sister fumbled, and in a dozen places the crystal petals impaled Skower's hands.

Bone and Gaunt rushed forward, pulling the boy away. Gaunt cradled Skower as Bone wrapped the wounded hands with his Comprehender's cloak. Skower had been cut more deeply by yesterday's street game. But Bone understood what it meant to suffer a single scratch from the sword. It was too late.

"I struck at kin," Skower wailed. "There is nothing worse...."

"Skower, no," Skath said. "It was an accident —"

"Destroy us, sister," Skower said. "Destroy us all. We deserve...." The boy's last breath framed no word, only the sound of surrender. His body went still.

Gaunt touched Skower's neck, shook her head at Bone. They lay the child down.

Looking up into Skath's face, Bone thought that Nettleer Kinbinder in her last fury could not have been more terrible. She raised the Sword of Loving Kindness and it blazed like a pyre as she confronted the crowd of people, Maratracian, Comprehender, and foreigner. They recoiled and whispered and clutched at once other, sensing at last a promise of violence that was no game.

Skath lowered the blade to underscore a command, and it dimmed like a shooting star as it fell.

“Bury him.”

* * *

The interment made up in enthusiasm what it lacked in coordination, and although Gaunt and Bone shared a look that said flight was indicated, they both helped, laboring wordlessly beside Mistress Needles and the other Comprehenders.

Soon a low mound of earth rose upon a dusty street of the foreign district.

Skath had not stirred from the site, but when her brother was fully buried she knelt and scooped a hole upon the mound. Biting her lip as though about to plunge into waters deep and cold, she drove the sword into the spot.

Light flared from the weapon, and its petals spread, and its hilt bloomed. A wind rose, creaking the boats on the piers, and the new crystal flower twitched like a supple, live thing, twisting upward toward the sun. Beneath the red blossom, the blade became green. Rose-scent filled the desert air. And all those watching felt their hearts quicken, as the sword's influence waxed. Yet although never stronger, it was not the uncompromising force it had once been.

Out of the sky descended a swarm of bees. They settled upon the changing sword for just an instant before there came

a flicker like bloody lightning. The bees dispersed like dust in a running girl's wake.

They reformed as a humanoid shape, floating in the air beside Gaunt, Bone, and Skath. It made a sound like the purring of a hundred cats spotting a fat crippled bird, or of a thunderstorm shrunk to the size of a bear.

"This is not the desired outcome," the Teller buzzed. *"The sword called to Slaughterdark's strongest descendant. In her hands, it should have destroyed Maratrace. Or else the Comprehenders should have destroyed it."*

"As it happens," Gaunt said, looking at the blood and dirt covering her hands, "the sword is changed. And people still died."

"Too few."

Skath had heard enough. "No more killing!" she shouted. "No more hurting! I don't know who you are, but this is Skower's Rose now, not some weapon!"

"You had best listen to her," Bone said.

"The sword bears as much of Allos now," Gaunt said, "as of Nettleer. And something of Skower and Skath as well. There is more than one kind of love in the world."

"And as I recall," Bone said to the Teller, "its creation was a response to your acts of Deicide. It did not like your touch."

“Indeed not,” the Teller mused. “Intriguing: a crystal rose grows in the soil of pain.”

As the Teller spoke, it turned its constantly writhing face left and right, where the people stood silently, too overwhelmed, perhaps, to fear mere eaters of gods. *“It is an unexpected alchemy. Perhaps you have changed the nature of the sword. But if you believe you will thereby redeem this city, think again. This place is a disease. The future we are shaping belongs to commerce and self-indulgence, not to misery and self-abasement. That way lies the return of gods. Beware!”*

“This is Skath’s city,” Gaunt said. “And Skower’s Rose. I would not underestimate either.”

“Very well; enough. Bone and Gaunt, you have fulfilled your bargain. You saved us the trouble of finding couriers for the sword, whatever our disappointment that sword or city yet endure. You may continue using your security comb.”

“Thank you,” Bone muttered.

“This will,” the Teller said, “bear interesting nectar, at any rate.”

Gaunt watched it fly like a small lonely stormcloud to the west.

* * *

They made their own departure upon the boat of Flea, who had wonder in his eyes. Under the influence of Skower’s Rose

he'd released his conscripts, without quite remembering why, and retained a few as well-paid associates. He was now drinking away his loss.

Already, scores of Maratracians had camped within sight of Skower's Rose, beginning a new, chaotic city growing within the ordered husk of the old. They planted weed gardens and spoke gently to one another. And yet, as Gaunt noted upon departure, they still displayed their mutilations.

As the scene passed out of sight, they glimpsed a man and a woman embracing a young girl, beside the mound of the Rose. Gaunt looked at her hands, clutching tight the rail.

"I wonder," she said, watching the river slosh by, breathing in the smells of water and mud as though they were nectar and ambrosia, "if in a hundred years this change will seem an improvement. Will the world come to fear these people? For it's a dangerous folk who honor both hearth and horror."

"I was torn between the two," Bone answered, watching the clouds. "And I want none of either. I only want to settle the matter of the accursed book."

"Do you still want to rob a drunk?"

Bone glanced toward the captain's cabin. "Soon." He took Gaunt's hand. "For now I only want you, free and alive."

She touched his face. "You have not spoken quite like this before."

He smiled. “I have finally given up following in the wake of Slaughterdark. If the Teller spoke true, Skath is his descendant, and I glimpsed within her the kind of spirit he or I might have become, in richer soil. There is more to life than larceny. There is another whose footsteps I would follow.” He touched his clever fingers to her chin. “But I warn you, I am still a thief and a scoundrel and a disappointment to my family, with little to give.”

“Give me this moment and this road and this sky,” she said, and kissed him.

“Never give me roses,” she added.

(Darkfast and his Memoirs are the inventions of Michael Wolfson.)

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ARCHITECTURAL CONSTANTS

by Yoon Ha Lee

The city

The citizens of the silklands have no name for the city. There are other cities upon the world's wheel. There are others more celebrated, whether for the rooted topiary birds that line their boulevards, or their sparkling, inverted fountains of wine. Others have taller spires with which to focus the unlight of the phantom moon, or deeper dungeons with which to contain the abysses of desire.

In any of these cities, you may mention *the* city or *the* architect, its restless Spider, and no listener will fail to understand which city you mean. *The* city lies at the intersection of leys that move through seas and continents, and stretch into the vastness beyond the visible stars. *The* city extends upwards and downwards in preposterous arches and chasm-spanning bridges.

If you listen during the silence following *the* city's curfew bells, you can hear the click-click-clicking of the Spider's slide rule as she checks her calculations.

* * *

The librarian

Eskevan Three of Thorns had dropped his lensgear in the gutter. Twice he had been splashed by murky water while determining the best way to retrieve the lens. He had another hour before the water started circulating. Having sullied the yellow-trimmed coat that declared him a licensed librarian, Eskevan felt doubly reluctant either to remove his gauntlets or to plunge them into the water.

There the lensgear gleamed, polished and precise. Enough dithering. He would have to hope that no one questioned his credentials tonight. The master archivist always said a shabby librarian was no librarian at all, but it could not be helped.

Other parts of the city boasted libraries of indexed splendor. Other librarians handled nothing more threatening than curling vellum and tame, untarnished treatises. Eskevan did not aspire to any such thing. In the dimmest hours, he admitted that he exulted in the wayward winds and the grime underfoot, the heady knowledge of the paths words traveled.

He had heard the whispers up and down the city's tiers, and the whispers distilled into a single warning: *The Spider ascends*. Eskevan, who lived merely three tiers underground, a child of the chasm's kindly shallows, could not fathom the depths to which the city descended or the vast distances that the Spider must traverse.

The Spider governed the city's processes, designing new foundations to withstand the weight of condensed dreams, or selecting the materials that would best gird the city's gates. If the Spider had roused, it implied that the city was in dire need of restructuring. Eskevan had no desire to involve himself in such troubles.

A trolley approached, sleek and metal-slick. Eskevan plunged into the water and grabbed the lensgear, lifting it clear of the muck.

He imagined that he could feel the effluent seeping purposefully through his boots and socks and the neatly tucked hems of his pants. Feel it canvassing the surface composition of his skin, mapping every pore and uncomfortable callus. Feel it molding his feet into shapes meant to tread alien, unstable shores.

Eskevan stood rooted and terrified and cold as the trolley whisked past. He breathed its exhalations of sterile vapor with relief, then scrambled out of the sewer. He wiped the soles of his boots against the street's gritty surface and shook his gauntlets free of water. From a coat pocket he withdrew gossamer cloth and wiped the precious lensgear. The cloth absorbed the effluent. He blew it away; it dispersed into seedsilk strands, each of these unraveling in the unquiet air.

Closer inspection suggested that the lensgear had not suffered damage. All its facets and toothy edges remained intact. It was easier to break a man than a lensgear. Their values were appraised accordingly.

A cat watched him from a doorway, its gaze slitted and bright. He wished it would go away.

Eskevan closed his left eye and turned to the patchwork of cracks along the walls of the tenement. He stopped. He scrutinized the insolent cat.

Through the lensgear, he saw no cat. The gear click-click-clicked through its several apertures. His teeth vibrated; he clenched his jaw. Each time, Eskevan saw the loose, flat outline of a cat. A paper cutout, if paper could reproduce such glittering eyes.

Eskevan opened his left eye and let ordinary vision reassert itself. He returned his attention to the wall. Graffiti was broken into illegibility by the cracks. Inside the gauntlets, his hands tingled. He used the lensgear again. Amid the tangle of slurs and obscene jokes, he found a single shining line of poetry. With the assurance of long practice, Eskevan reached for the words.

To his astonishment, the words flared white and gold, and whistled from his grasp, leaving him holding an inky afterimage. Eskevan swore. Fumbling one-handed, he opened

his capture tome and pinned the afterimage onto the page. It seethed before settling into dark, angry spikes.

The line read: *The Spider ascends*, except “Spider” was misspelled. That simple fact made Eskevan’s stomach clench.

It seemed he was going to be involved whether he liked it or not.

* * *

The sentinel

Attavudhra Nought of Glass stood at the entrance to the city’s nexus, holding a pistol-bow in one hand. It was a thing of tension and angles, of parabolic urges. At her back was a curved sword. Behind her, light shifted. She whirled and shot.

The captain of the guard, Yaz Five of Masks, let the arrow embed itself in his shield. “It would have hit my heart,” he said.

“It did not,” Attavudhra said. She had dueled and defeated her comrades in the guards’ trials. She had trained cadets to combative excellence. She was agonizingly close to being able to best Yaz.

His tone was amused: “And that’s why you don’t hold my position.” He drew his own sword, which split Attavudhra’s second arrow, then blocked the sweep of her blade. She did not counterattack. Here, now, she was a mirror to his intention, thwarting his motions and nothing more.

Yaz stepped back and relaxed his guard. So did she. “It suffices,” he said. Then, to her bewilderment, he asked, “Have you been dreaming?”

Attavudhra never remembered her dreams or thought of her past. She said nothing. Guard training was the single lens through which she saw the world. Everything else was irrelevant.

Yaz’s smile twisted. “Of course not. Come.”

Another guard came to take Attavudhra’s post. For a second, his image blurred, and it was as though she saw two men standing where one should be, one short and one tall, one fair and one dark. Attavudhra glanced at Yaz, but if he noticed, he gave no sign. *I must be imagining it*, she thought.

Yaz and Attavudhra walked into the nexus, past a kaleidoscope of floating windows that showed varied views of the city: trolleys running behind schedule, orreries out of true with the movements of celestial bodies, shipments of salt and iron arriving at incorrect destinations; the sky’s bright dome above, the endless well of darkness below. For a second, white shapes moved across all the windows, like the shrapnel of a jigsaw puzzle. Then they cleared, except for a child’s bloody fingerprints on the other side of each glass.

They reached the city’s singular gate, beyond which stairs spiraled up and spiraled down. Attavudhra blinked, but she

couldn't make the gate come into focus. Sometimes it looked like bright brass with abstract scrollwork, sometimes like a hole, sometimes like an aged portcullis.

Yaz said, "The Spider will emerge through that gate."

"Then the rumors are true," she said. The guards spoke about graffiti that wrote itself in dank alleys, cursing the city; frost that drew flawed architectural plans on windows; masonry whose cracks outlined the shape of a spider.

Yaz inclined his head. "The city is unraveling, and all her adjustments avail her nothing. She must come set things right in person. Your task will be to keep anyone but myself or the Spider from the gate. And yourself, of course. Tell me, when was the last time you slept?"

She didn't sleep, either, not since—she couldn't remember. Hence no dreams.

"I have preparations to make," Yaz said. "I would have a partner here for you"—his voice was low with some unshared irony—"but you are the only one suited to the task, the only one with the necessary perfection of discipline."

For one mad moment, Attavudhra was tempted to argue with him. The other guards were not as skilled as she was, but that hardly made them incompetent. But Yaz Five of Masks was her captain. It was not for her to second-guess his orders. She said only, "You may trust me, sir."

“Then I will go,” Yaz said. He touched one of the mirrors. It gaped wide, wider, widest; he stepped into it, and away.

Attavudhra blinked as slowly as she could, unable to escape the reflection of her own face, its proportions oddly distorted, staring back from the knife-fine surface of the mirror. Did the other guards dream? Or was she singular in her monstrosity?

She stared at the mirror that Yaz had stepped into. Had he always looked the way he did now? Just as he stepped through the mirror, she had seen a strange shadow bisecting his face.

Yaz had not said when he expected the Spider to arrive. The supreme architect did not travel to the dictates of others’ clocks and schedules. The city reconfigured itself in accordance with her needs, and Attavudhra served the city.

* * *

The silhouette

The city housed many stairs, and Riye Nine of Knots had no guarantee that he had found the right ones. He was not entirely real, especially from the left, as though he had been hollowed out on that side. This restricted his ability to descend clockwise, for he had no corporeality to protect him from the outward rush of wind into sky.

Riye thought he might be breaking, despite his precautions. He had had his left leg replaced with an illegal

prosthetic, carved and fitted from the fossil of a deep-diving leviathan. He regretted disturbing the dreams of something so long dead, and fracturing it from its proper position in the sloughed-over earth. Yet it might be the only part of him that endured long enough to deliver this warning.

Fossils had voices distilled over eons of sleep. Riyeen hoped that, if the rest of him disintegrated into the spaces undergirding all matter, the fossil-song would rouse every dream in the city younger than itself.

He had sung, once, with his own lungs and words. Not as one of the great harmonists who tuned the city's uppermost tiers against the wind's harpist touch, countering the vibrations at resonant frequencies that threatened to unmoor the city from its foundations. Riyeen's aspirations had been other. Now that his voice was a harsh, shadowy thing, given to distorting nuances, he found his thoughts drifting into snatches of counterpoint.

The Spider ascends, said the city's thousand thousand voices. But the Spider's ascension would make her vulnerable. Riyeen had reason to believe that someone planned a coup regardless of the threat to the city. He was not the only broken thing moving in the tiers.

No guards had yet apprehended him in his headlong descent. Riyeen despaired. Of course: he was fading, and they

had no attention to spare for anything but the Spider, even a murderer who had escaped one of their dreaded prisons.

Riyen had tried speaking with a citizen of the 239th tier, with no success. The woman in her high-collared silk coat and baroque pearls had looked through him, imperious in her conviction that a man with half a face would soon cease to exist.

He had not dared look into mirror or window or water since then, fearing that his own gaze would precipitate his disintegration.

How the 239th tier woman could be blithely confident that the Spider would fix the city's growing fractures without interference, Riyen didn't know. Then again, Riyen had dismissed rumors of the prison experiments until he became a subject himself. And perhaps it was simply that citizens did not care what happened to prisoners.

Riyen reached the base of the stairwell. He was no longer breathing. The air's necessary elements circulated directly through his system by virtue of his exposed left side. This could not be anything but a bad sign, but for the moment he meant to take advantage of it.

He had memorized the map of the city in his past life of depredations. This tier was known for its physicians and apothecaries. Indeed, the quarter through which Riyen must

travel to reach the next set of stairs was modeled after the chambers of the human heart. There were drummers in the streets. In his past life, Riyaen had known the dancers who danced to those drums. No doubt they still feared him. Fear, at least, would have been a taste of normalcy in a city increasingly unstable. For the drummers' beats scattered into arrhythmia; the dancers upon their balconies stumbled or swayed. The cloud-light that reflected from the city's convex mirrors raised smoke rather than diffusing heat.

Limping, Riyaen did not expect to find a barrier to his progress. But there one stood.

"I have been waiting for you," said Yaz Five of Masks. He was resplendent in the uniform of the city guard, with sleek, polished armor and grey cloth so rich it was almost blue.

Riyaen lifted his head. "Captain," he said coldly.

The captain was wearing Riyaen's face.

* * *

The poem

Eskevan had not expected to spend so long pursuing the stray line of a poem. Ordinarily, lacunae were one of his easier duties. Poetry was flighty. If it felt unappreciated, it loosened its verses to fly across the city. Coaxing them to come home was rarely difficult. But this verse was already unusual.

He had sent a message to the master archivist that he would be late. Given the city's small disruptions, it would be a matter of no great import. Already the verse had led him through what must be half the shallows' graffiti and crumpled broadsheets. His tome was full of the same relentlessly repeated line, with increasingly creative errors of spelling or grammar: *The Spider ascends*.

The poem had led him to the city's nexus. Eskevan eyed the massive gates and the guard with apprehension. Still, he had his duty. He approached, trying not to notice the guard's discouraging expression. Surely the tome would convince the guard that the poem had to be restored and examined for its portents.

"Sir, I—" he began to say to the guard when a voice keened out of the nexus. Eskevan clutched his head. The guard shuddered and looked ill. For a second, Eskevan saw two people where the guard stood, one taller and one shorter, both deadly. Since the guard was distracted, he waved his lensgear as a badge of identification and ran into the nexus. Surely a single poem could not be the cause of all this?

* * *

The gate

Attavudhra was as alert as ever when the song came out of the gate, high and low and everywhere at once. She was no musician, but she knew the sound of danger.

Attavudhra had not thought to have another use for her pistol-bow so soon. She shot at the small man in a librarian's coat as he stumbled toward the gate. To her astonishment, a streak of white-and-gold light wrapped itself around the arrow, slowing its momentum so it dropped to the ground before the man. Then the light leapt forward to wrap her pistol-bow. Agony nearly blinded her, but she did not relinquish her weapon.

"Read it!" the man said, scrambling away from the arrow, which had turned black.

Out of the corner of her eye, she did: *The Spider ascends*. Nevertheless, Attavudhra drew her sword. She had her orders.

A wind howled out of the gate, bringing with it one man standing, triumphant, and another, half in shadow, slumped to the ground.

"Captain," Attavudhra said wonderingly, for the man on the floor shared his face.

"Don't listen—" cried the man in shadow.

Instinct told her the shadowed man was a greater threat than the librarian. She drove her sword downward. The man

rolled, escaping the blade by a handwidth, and Attavudhra saw that he was not quite whole.

“Stop,” said a dry, whispering voice from her left—from the gate.

Attavudhra froze.

The Spider stepped out of the gate. She was a stooped woman with dark hair. The sockets in her face were empty and scarred over. She wore gloves that were cut off at the first knuckle. At each fingertip was a tiny glittering eye.

“Guard and captain, librarian and silhouette,” the Spider said. She raised her hands, fingers questing: an eightfold gaze.

“Attavudhra,” Yaz said warningly.

“Your duty is to me,” the Spider said to Attavudhra.

For a second, Attavudhra stood frozen between two loyalties that had once been one. Then she thought of the city with its roads unraveled, its libraries mired in unindexed words, its foundries filled with rust and stagnant water. The city must survive.

She blocked Yaz just as he attempted to stab the other man.

Yaz’s eyes narrowed. “There’s a better way than the Spider’s,” he said, his voice silken and persuasive. “We have had enough of chaos, of imperfections and flawed young recruits and emergencies in the middle of the night. We have

had enough of a city that sways every time you breathe in the wrong direction, and that depends on a single architect for its stability. There's a better way."

Attavudhra realized he was speaking not to her but to the Spider, and said nothing. Her sword caught Yaz's shoulder and slashed a bright red line. Elated, she cut him again. The Spider watched, unmoved by their struggle.

The librarian, who had gone unnoticed, flung the lensgear at Yaz Five of Masks. The lensgear glowed when it hit him and made a sharp, loud click. Yaz screamed and shattered like porcelain before reconstituting into a thing of shadows and broken arteries across the floor, sewn together only by a tendon here, a rope of intestine there.

The man in shadow struggled to his feet. His missing half flickered, growing steadily more solid, although his skin had an unnerving translucent quality.

"Let the silhouette speak," the Spider ordered.

"Your captain has been carrying out human experiments," Riyen said. "He stole some of my skills, although he could not help but take my face as well. Other people vanished in pieces. I was the only one lucky enough to escape."

Yaz's voice spoke, horribly, from the floor. "You were almost the perfect murderer until we caught you. The world had no more use for you, except as part of something greater."

Attavudhra remembered the guard she had seen, the peculiar double image. She lifted her hands: for a second she saw the ghostly hands of two women, one pair slender and dextrous, one pair broad and strong. “What am *I*?” she demanded of Yaz. But she already knew the answer.

“You were my latest creation,” Yaz said. “You were the perfection of my hopes. If all things could be balanced by halves, including people, then so could the city.”

“You are a fool,” the Spider said. “People are not to be sacrificed for the city’s symmetries. It is the other way around. If something does not suit the citizens, then the city is what must be adjusted.” She added, “It is much harder to change people than it is to change things.”

“Then I am not a person,” Attavudhra said, chilled.

“Yes and no,” said the silhouette. His face was whole now. “We are all built from broken things.”

So it was, she realized, with the city.

“The city requires a new captain,” the Spider said. “Will you step into your superior’s place?”

Attavudhra stared at Yaz’s bloody remnants. “He still lives.”

“There’s a remedy for that,” the murderer said.

“It is my duty,” Attavudhra said, glancing at the Spider for her approval. The Spider nodded. With several strikes, Attavudhra severed Yaz’s remains.

* * *

The cobweb

“Come here,” the Spider said to the woman. She knew Attavudhra’s name, and Eskevan’s, and Riyen’s too, the way she knew every detail in her city. She laid her hands on the new guard captain’s head. “I must realign the city, but I cannot do it alone. Will you assist me?”

“Of course,” Attavudhra said. She looked at Riyen and Eskevan. “They saved the city.”

The Spider inclined her head. “Nevertheless, the fact remains that one of them is a criminal. What guarantee do we have that he’ll murder no more?”

“None,” Riyen said. “There are never any guarantees where people are concerned.”

“Quite right,” the Spider said. “I am the architect in the city’s depths; will you be its conscience in the sunlit heights?”

Attavudhra frowned. “The perfect killer as the city’s conscience—”

“Perfect no more,” Eskevan said in a quavering voice. The others turned to regard him curiously. “The perfect killer

wouldn't have a heart. He wouldn't have cared about the city's downfall."

"Not strictly true," Riyeon said, "but correct in essence." He bowed to the Spider. "I will do as you ask; it is the least I can do as amends."

The Spider nodded, smiling faintly. "As for you, librarian," she said, "you have words to set back in their proper places, do you not?"

"I do," Eskevan said. He bent to pick up the undamaged lensgear.

Three people with which to weave a new web. She had worked with worse beginnings. "Let's begin our work," she said.

Together, they walked out of the nexus and into the city.

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Yoon Ha Lee's short fiction has appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Clarkesworld Magazine, and three times previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies.



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COVER ART

“Endless Skies,” by Rick Sardinha



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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