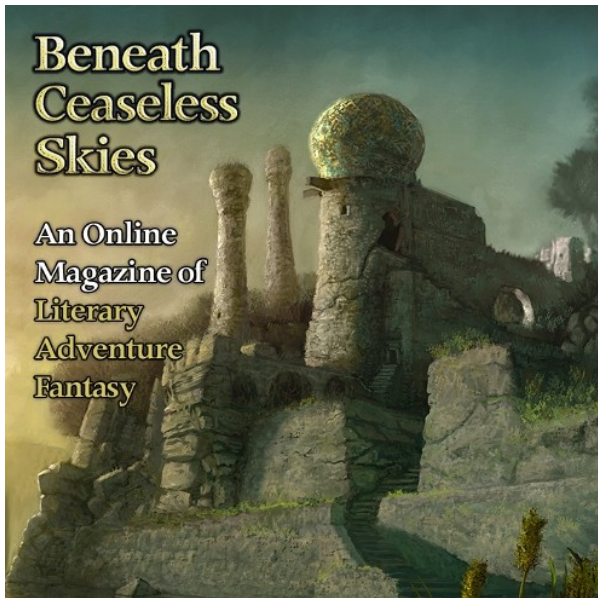


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy



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[“More Than Once Upon a Time,” by S.C. Butler](#)

[“Where Virtue Lives,” by Saladin Ahmed](#)

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## MORE THAN ONCE UPON A TIME

by S.C. Butler

Pebbles bounced into the vast gulf beyond her feet as Hubley skidded to a stop at the bottom of the Sun Road, deep within the Stoneways' dark caves.

“What was that?”

One of the diggers she'd been trying to avoid looked straight at her. Heart pounding, Hubley stood completely still. Invisibility was an imperfect art at best, but the sorceress who'd brought her here—an elder version of herself who was who knew how many hundreds of years older — had taken great pains to explain that Hubley had to stay hidden from the rest of the company, no matter what. “No one would ever understand if they saw both of us at the same time,” she'd explained. Irritably Hubley wondered why she'd allowed her older self to talk her into this ridiculous situation in the first place. But no, she had to rush off the moment the prize was dangled before her eyes.

Despite the skidding, her older self didn't even glance her way. “A lizard,” she said to the two diggers. Then they all looked back up the tunnel as a man and a woman dashed breathlessly out of the dark to join them.

“The sissit’ll be on us in a minute,” gasped the man. “We persuaded them to pause a bit back there, but we couldn’t stop them.”

The woman peered over the edge of the road. “There’s a ledge about three feet down,” she said. “We can hold them off from there as long as our arrows and your magic last.”

“Hopefully we’ll be out of here sooner than that.”

The older Hubley kicked away the broken stone covering the road and pointed to an iron ring embedded in the rock.

“There. You don’t think I led you into a trap, do you? Omarose, Canna, I’m not as strong as a Dwarf, but you two might be.”

Omarose slung his bow over his shoulder and grabbed the ring with both hands. The muscles in his neck bulged, but nothing happened. Canna bent to help.

“The door is ancient,” said the older Hubley. “Just like everything else in Vonn Kurr.”

She looked like she might say more, but just then the sissit came howling down on them. Hubley still didn’t understand how the creatures had gotten past the wall she’d thrown up to stop them. Even if she hadn’t exerted her full power in the casting, it should still have been more than enough for sissit.

Brandishing what looked like a Dwarf shield, the leader stopped a short bowshot from the party. Hubley slipped down

to the ledge Canna had pointed out to make sure she was out of the way.

“You give up!” the sissit leader called loudly. “You not scare us. I carry great emblem of Ydderri! I guard way to city and worm! We kill you sister! We kill you!”

Hubley wondered what sister the creature was talking about. Then she had to duck as, quick and furtive, the sissit leader tossed a stone at her older self from the end of a hidden sling.

“*Flame!*” answered the older Hubley simply, and raised her staff. A bolt of fire shot from each end into the crowd. Squeals of pain followed, and the smell of charred flesh.

“It’s open!”

Canna and Omarose heaved a round block of stone up out of the floor, exposing the tunnel beneath. A flight of arrows buzzed past, always dangerous even if the creatures were terrible shots because sissit shafts were generally poisoned, but none struck. Around her older self the air glimmered with a bluish light. Only magic could affect her now. Hubley knew the spell well. It was her favorite defense.

“Down the shaft,” her older self shouted to the company. “All of you!”

Canna and Omarose hesitated at the mouth of the hole.

“Just sit on the edge and slide down,” she went on. “The passage is steep, but it’s safe.”

Omarose went first. Then Canna took the diggers and tossed them in one after the other like two sacks of potatoes. More arrows splattered off the older Hubley’s magical shield as Canna stepped into the shaft. Raging at the thought their prey was going to get away, the sissit swept forward.

The older Hubley threw up her arms. A blinding flash blew out from inside her cape, and the sissit tumbled backward. Only the leader, who’d been blown sideways behind his heavy shield, remained. It fell against the inside wall of the tunnel, its shield on the ground beside it. But, instead of scrambling after its protection, the sissit began flailing away at itself like a dog with fleas.

“Blast him!” Hubley shouted, willing to show herself now that everyone else was gone. Kill the leader and the others would flee.

But the elder Hubley only watched intently, as if she was far more fascinated than frightened.

“Well, if you won’t do it,” Hubley said, “I will.”

She began the incantation. Maybe this was why her older self had asked her to come along in the first place, to do what her older self couldn’t. Standing with its back to her, its hands and arms straining as if they held something in their thick-

knuckled grasp, the sissit leader couldn't have made a better target.

“*Fire,*” she said.

As if guided by deliberate malice, her older self stepped into the path of Hubley's spell. There was a burst of fire and, where the older Hubley had been, now stood a column of white flame. For an awful moment Hubley saw herself frozen in the terrible brightness, a grim statue encased in a writhing cone. Then there was only the fire, her body consumed and gone.

She'd just killed herself.

Her heart went numb. Trembling, she took a step backward. But she'd forgotten where she was and, as her foot slipped out over the nothingness above the pit, she gave a last forlorn cry and fell.

\* \* \*

2

She'd been standing at the top of Tower Dale, wrapped in a warm cloak and looking south where the sharp crags of the Bavadars stretched the limits of the sky. Only recently had she mastered the Timespell, and she was trying to decide which unhappy moment in history she would go back to and fix first.

A hand tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned instantly and uttered a spell that should have blasted the intruder to dust. Instead she found herself staring

at a gray haired sorceress whose eyes twinkled at the exact same level as her own.

“Really, Hubley. You have to learn to be less rash. It only gets you in trouble.”

Hubley fought back the urge to try another spell. “Who are you? How’d you get in here?”

The strange sorceress laughed. “Oh, I know the wards on this place far better than you do,” she said. “Look at me. Carefully. Don’t you recognize me?”

There *was* something familiar about the woman. The curve of her mouth, her light brown eyes. But Hubley couldn’t place her.

“No. I’ve no idea who you are.”

“I’m you.”

“No you’re not.”

“It is confusing.” The older woman nodded brightly. “I’m not that you, I’m this you. Oh dear. I’d forgotten how complicated this moment was. Think for a moment, Hubley. You know the Timespell.”

Hubley refused to answer, still suspecting some sort of trick.

The older woman went on anyway. “Of course you do. I know you know, after all. Well, I’m you, and I cast the

Timespell to come back to talk to you because I need your help. It's time you began to play your part."

"Prove it."

The older woman rolled up the sleeve of her cloak, exposing her left arm. Hubley noticed the thimbles on her little fingers. Despite the mottling of age, the other woman's arm looked just like her own.

"Touch my wrist," she said.

Hubley knew what the older woman wanted to show her. Slowly she put out her own hand and took the offered arm between her fingers. The slight swelling in the bone was there, and felt exactly as it felt on her own wrist. The childhood break had healed well, but not perfectly. Her wrist throbbed at the memory as the older woman pulled down her sleeve.

"That doesn't prove anything," Hubley said.

"That's what Mother said, too. But I don't have the time to prove who I am to you the way I did to Mother. Well, actually, I do, but it won't be necessary."

"Ha. You don't see me believing you yet, do you?"

"I think you're going to want to come with me before you even believe I'm who I say I am."

"That'll be the day."

"You'll see."

Pulling her cloak more closely about her throat, the older woman turned toward the stair.

“Come. We have a lot to talk about. I put the kettle on as I came up through the pantry. It’s beautiful up here, but cold. Let’s have some of that Wistlewood tea we keep in the back of the bread box, and then we can discuss our arrangements. And I have a new way of casting that Stairtripper spell you webbed outside the Traveling Room I know you’ll appreciate.”

Hubley found herself staring at the single gray braid hanging down the older woman’s back as she followed her downstairs. Was that what she looked like from behind? Self-consciously she reached back to feel her own still-brown braid. It certainly felt the same.

In the pantry the older woman fetched the tea while Hubley took the cups and saucers down from the cupboard. As they busied themselves the cat came in, a tawny stretch of proud fur. It looked once at each woman, licked a paw, and looked at them again. Then it mewed at both and strutted away, tail stiff with disdain.

If the old woman was her, it would certainly explain a lot. Maybe, if she really did know the Timespell....

“So,” Hubley said when they’d taken their kettle and cups to the library, “if you really are me, why is it you’ve returned?”

The older woman smiled and sipped her tea. Hubley drew back when she realized she was doing the exact same thing.

“I need you to do something important.”

“What?”

“I need you to follow a party of adventurers to Vonn Kurr.”

“Vonn Kurr’s a dangerous place. Why don’t you just do it yourself?”

“I can’t.” Hubley recognized the way the older woman warmed her hands by rolling the cup gently between her palms. “I’ll be the one leading the party.”

“Then what do you need me for?”

“Because that’s what happens.”

“What do you mean, ‘That’s what happens’?”

“I’ve already been there.”

Hubley frowned. “That’s hardly enough of a reason to persuade me to go running off with you.”

“Believe me, when you’ve practiced the Timespell as long as I have, you’ll know that’s more than reason enough. But I do have another reason, just for you.”

The older woman smiled again. Hubley was beginning to be annoyed by the condescension in that smile. It reminded her of her grandmother.

“And your other reason is...?” she asked.

“To go to the future. You’re going to come with me because

this is your chance to break the natural boundaries of the Timespell. You know you won't turn that opportunity down."

The full scope of the older woman's offer came to Hubley in a rush. What the woman said was true. There was no way Hubley could turn down a chance to get to the future. The Timespell only worked according to the memory of the caster, or someone with the caster, and that limitation meant the caster could only go backward, not forward to some time she hadn't yet been. But, once she was in the future, Hubley would be able to travel back and forth between that time and now. And all the years between.

Her impatience disappeared. Or rather, it assumed a different form as she made up her mind in a rush.

"I'll go," she said.

"Of course you will."

"Can you tell me how far we're going?"

The older woman shook her head. "In these matters, it's always better to know less, rather than more. Then you don't have to keep track of so many details."

\* \* \*

### 3

She fell through the darkness. The wind whipped around her in a rising roar. She didn't know how long she had before she hit bottom, but she'd need at least ten seconds to cast her

emergency spell of return. She knew Vonn Kurr was deep; she hoped it would turn out to be deep enough. Raising her left hand, she removed the small silver thimble that covered the shortened tip of her little finger. Then she spoke a single word of power. There was a jar as time snapped...

...and she was lying on her back in the Traveling Room beneath her tower, back in her own time. Her finger itched where the last joint had reattached. It always took a day or two for flesh and bone to get reacquainted.

For a long time she lay with her eyes closed and tried to recover from the shock of having just killed herself. It wasn't that she blamed herself for what had happened. She was too practical for that. If anything, she blamed her older self for putting her into such an impossible situation in the first place.

Eventually she drove the pillar of fire from her mind and began to think instead of what she could do to change what had happened. What was going to happen. What was the point of the Timespell if you couldn't go back and undo whatever it was you didn't want to occur? All she had to do was return to the future a few hours early and make sure the sissit remained on the other side of the wall she'd spelled. If they never found the party, then there would never be a fight at the edge of Vonn Kurr. And if there was no fight, then the elder Hubley wouldn't die.

She wasn't quite sure what she'd do once she found the sissit, but she was sure she'd think of something.

Just resolving to act made her feel better. She went back up to her tower and began the conjuration that would allow her to return to the time she'd just left. With no part of her in the future to act as a lodestone across the years and distance, the process would be more difficult, and take much longer, than her trip home. But the traveling would be just as sure.

She made the necessary preparations, then spelled herself forward to the time when the company had last rested in a small chamber off the Sun Road. Omarose was on guard as she crept past, but she had turned herself invisible again, and made no sound. In the main passage she continued through the darkness, her fingertips brushing the inner wall, until she felt she was far enough away to show a light. She'd lose her invisibility in the casting, but she needed to be able to see.

A simple thought, and a dim flame gleamed at the top of her staff. Its pale light showed the lowway winding down into the depths of the earth. The Sun Road. The way from Grangore to Vonn Kurr, but it had been a long time since anyone but sissit had traveled here. The ruin of ancient Bryddin skill littered the passage; bits and pieces of old sculpture and elegant mosaic lay along the road in shattered fragments. Twisted brackets remained where once had shone the lamps of Uhle. Dwarven

hands had carved this road in their search for the Sun, but those hands seemed to have long since disappeared. She wondered why.

She found the mouth of the side passage where she was going to encounter the sissit in a few hours. This time she was able to push further into the tunnel, coming at length to a flight of stairs that descended steeply into the darkness. The air thickened; at the bottom, water sparkled on the walls in the pallid light. A fetid mist filled the air, oily, but not quite the smell of a bog. A bog, no matter how foul, possessed the stink of life. But this smell was metallic, an odor that brought to mind an image of rusted corpses dissolving in ancient pools.

Unevenly, the passage continued its descent. Hubley found herself avoiding small but growing puddles whose dark water swallowed her light without reflection. Soon she had to stoop as she pushed forward, her cloaked arm held out to brush away tendrils of mold thick as squirrels' tails that hung from the ceiling. The puddles deepened until no part of the floor was dry, and bubbled as her boots stirred them.

The heavy vegetation gave way, and she found herself on one side of a large cavern. The water stretched in front of her to an uncertain distance; the walls vanished on either side. Above, the ceiling was lost in blackness. Not wanting to draw attention

to the very tunnel she wanted the sissit to avoid, she doused her light.

Nothing followed. No sound, no light, no breath of wind. Though she knew she was at the edge of a large cave, the pressing darkness felt solid as stone.

The absence was broken by voices welling across the lake, the wheedling tone of sissit. How far away they were, she couldn't tell. Her ears had been so sharpened by the long hours of silence she didn't trust them. The voices could be on the far shore, or they could be in a rowboat twenty feet away.

"You see it?" asked the first. "Big light by fishway?"

A second voice snorted. "Of course. Everybody see it."

"You think that Glommer?"

"Don't know. What you think?"

"I think Glommer come."

The second voice took on a cunning tone. "Maybe you go look. You see it, you go."

"I not go. You go."

"You see it, you go. Maybe you swim."

"I no swim. Glommer here."

"You do what Obahed say. I eat you else."

"You don't eat me." This was said without full confidence, as if the first speaker were aware of some possibility of the threat actually occurring. "Only Glommer eats."

“I eat too. Glommer say, ‘Obahed, eat that one,’ or ‘Obahed, eat this one,’ and I eat. Glommer say that all the time. I number one chief. I eat what I want.”

“You just fat seeti. Glommer eat fat seeti. You swim.”

The thock of something hollow and hard being hit by something just as hard but not hollow followed. A small splash echoed through the cavern. Then the first voice spluttered as it apparently flailed around in the water. “I see you, Obahed. You feed Glommer. I bring Teekee back and then whole tribe eat you!”

The splashing continued. Hubley strained forward as she tried to hear more. What was a Glommer? Where were the rest of the sissit? How had they all gotten across the water to the tunnel leading up to the loway? The darkness still felt tangible around her ears, and she had an urge to swat at it the way she would a swarm of gnats. She took a step forward, and the oily water leaked over the tops of her boots to squish icily between her toes.

Something hit her on the head.

\* \* \*

4

She woke with a rag in her mouth and her hands tied to a pipe set into the wall behind her. Light splashed across the assemblage of boilers and belts, pipes and pistons that filled

the room, but the machinery was silent. Everything was ancient with decay.

She coughed, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. Gagged and bound, she could invoke no spells. The sissit were either going to dine on her, or they were going to be more creative. With a sinking feeling, she realized that, once again, she'd rushed headlong through time into another unfortunate position.

She tugged at the ropes and pipe. Flakes of rust showered her face. The ancient metal squeaked in a hopeful way, as if the strain was already too great. She pulled at the pipe as quietly as she could and was actually starting to think she might get free when a magician in stained robes surprised her by gliding out from behind one of the machines like a bank of poisonous fog.

He was old. Too old. The skin of his face was stretched taut over bone, and his hands, which he held clasped in front of him, appeared to have no skin at all. Bent into permanent fists, each hand gripped a small crystal globe. Hubley had never seen anything like him, though she could make a good guess at what he'd been up to. Without a Living Stone, there was always a high price to pay for antiquity.

"Ahh, my dear." The magician's voice was not unkind, but lacked the least trace of concern. "It seems you have regained some use of your senses."

Below his black skullcap his eyes loomed even blacker, with no white or iris, two great unblinking pupils like the eyes of an enormous fly, but with only a single facet each. His long, hooked nose divided their hard darkness with a thin, pointed ridge.

“I was worried my servant had struck you too forcefully and that you were not going to waken. At least he neglected to take the odd bite or two out of you.”

He smiled and brought his hands together. As he did, Hubley was able to get a better look at the crystal globes, which were bound to each skeletal claw with loops of thin blumet wire. The shiny coils wound up around the hands and wrists to disappear into the folds of his robe. Deep within the heart of each globe flashed small streaks of blue lightning. Hubley felt the power of his magic swell like a blister out from those strange spheres.

“I hope you are comfortable,” he continued. “Let me unloose that nasty gag.” He raised his right hand, and a shimmer of cold blue light flashed toward the cloth around her mouth. She felt nothing until the rag untied itself with an eerie, flowing motion and slithered away from her face. Then the magician crossed his hands before him, slipping each into the opposite sleeve, and nodded. He seemed quite pleased with himself.

With her mouth free Hubley was no longer defenseless. She spoke two quick words, intending a cloud of noxious smoke to form about the mage's head.

He laughed, his voice a high-pitched cackle seasoned with more than a little madness.

“Oh, my dear!” he wheezed. “That is wonderful! Do you really think I would allow you to conjure in my own workroom? You might have struck me dead, and that would not have been to my liking. No, no. Not after all these years of time and effort.”

He shook his head in silent laughter, and Hubley noticed he had no ears. Just holes, like the nokken back in Valing—which was where she wished she was.

“There are incantations covering this place which prevent the working of any magic, except the magic of my own clever hands.”

Bringing his bony claws back out into the open, he turned them this way and that, looking like nothing so much as a Malmoret baroness studying her freshly painted nails. The crystal spheres gleamed.

“I see so few fellow humans down here to whom I can show off my talents. These miserable sissit are worse than children. Do you know, in all the centuries I have been here, I doubt I have caught even a dozen actual humans? And none of

them magicians. Do you realize how much easier all this would have been if I had found even one? Do you? But, no. No magicians. Just these miserable sissit, which provide all the sustenance of a worm. Until now.”

He leaned forward and beamed. His black eyes devoured her like a pair of mouths.

A cold quiet settled over Hubley as she realized she'd accidentally discovered the easiest way to change the future. She'd get herself killed now, instead of later. She didn't want to even think about what else would change when all the various older Hubleys melted away from the years ahead. Or, considering she was already as far into the future as she was ever going to get, the years behind.

Even worse, once he cut her open, the ghoul would find her Living Stone. As devoted as he was to furthering his own life, he was sure to know what it was. And how to use it.

So happy to have another magician to explain his brilliance to after all these years, he failed to notice her increased unease. “My techniques have worked quite nicely, all the same. I have added my own genius to the ancient art, you know. That is why I came down here. These are Dwarven crystals, naturally. They make the process easier and adapt it to all living things. I could even use the fish out of the lake,

though the gain to me would be too small for any real sustenance.”

The magician’s boasting was interrupted as a large sissit padded in through a narrow door on the other side of the room. The magician spoke sharply before the sissit could say a word. “Obahed! I told you not to disturb me until I am finished! You know my wishes.”

The sissit bowed, trembling. “Obahed knows. But Eebul go see what Teekee doing. Maybe whole tribe coming now to kill Obahed.”

“I will take care of Teekee and the rest when I am done. Now go away. They cannot hurt you here.”

“Obahed hungry.”

“Obahed eats when I am done. Now go!”

The sissit ducked quickly back out of the room, its large, flat feet slapping hollowly on the metal floor. The magician turned back to Hubley. “I would like to continue our chat,” he said, “but time appears to be running low. And I wish to sample you before entertaining my next set of guests.”

His back was to the door as he began to arrange several wicked looking knives and metal tubes on a table. So absorbed was he in his work that he didn’t notice when a new visitor tiptoed stealthily into the room behind him. Not even when she smashed the top of his head with an axe.

“Hi, sis. I’m back.”

Hubley gaped at the sight of yet another Hubley. Only this one was much closer to her own age. The new Hubley grinned, then bent down over the magician’s body.

“I’m not sure he’s dead, yet,” she said, “if he ever was alive. But this is what I did the last time I was here. When I was you, that is. It seemed to work.”

The axe flashed again. Still wired to the crystals, the magician’s hands bounced off and across the room. A final cut at the pipe above her head, and Hubley was free.

“Come on, we’ve still got Obahed to get past.” The new Hubley pulled Hubley up by the arm before she had a chance to say a word. “We’ve got to close this circle we’re both running around in.” Handing her the axe, the new Hubley pulled a knife from her belt, and led the way out of the chamber.

The narrow tunnel outside was made of the same rusted metal as the magician’s workroom. Pipes twisted across the walls and ceiling like vines in a forest. Only the floor was clear, except for occasional puddles where water dripped from the ceiling. At the entrance to another small room, the new Hubley came to a stop and held out a cautionary hand. Hubley peered around her older self’s back to find Obahed seated not five feet away at a rough wooden table against the far wall. It sat with its back to them, one elbow resting on the table, its chin in hand.

The other held a long knife with which it hacked small chips off the side of the table. Her staff lay on the floor beside it. Five or six spells to kill the creature came immediately to Hubley's mind, until she remembered her magic wouldn't work.

The older Hubley took a deep breath, tiptoed up behind the sissit, and stabbed it in the neck just above its shirt.

With a loud cry, Obahed grabbed the knife in both hands. The older Hubley stumbled away until her back was against the wall. The sissit twisted as it tried to get the dagger from its neck, knocked over the bench it had been sitting on, and collapsed to the floor. Twice it tried to sit up, splashing around in a puddle of blood. When it died, its head hit the metal floor with a clang.

Hubley swallowed once, then threw up. The tension of the last few hours came spewing out until she slumped weakly on the floor. Her older self left her alone for a moment, but, when she'd recovered, told her to get the knife the sissit had been playing with before it died.

"And look closely at the place where I stabbed it," the older Hubley added. "Memorize the exact spot. That's the only way you'll be sure to kill it on the first try. Which, as you already know, you will."

Reluctantly Hubley took the bloody corpse in her hands. She had to roll it over to retrieve the knife, which had fallen

beneath its body. She studied the second knife in the creature's neck for a moment, before dumbly realizing the two were exactly the same. Then she fell back wearily onto the floor beside her elder self, wet and miserable and covered with rust and muck.

“Have you recovered?” her older self asked sympathetically. Hubley nodded. “Okay then. It's time to get out of here. You're going to have to watch everything I do very closely, because the only reason I know how to do all this is because I saw myself doing it when I was you. Got it?”

Hubley nodded. She was beginning to understand what her oldest self had told her, back at the beginning of this increasingly unpleasant adventure, about wanting to know as little of the future as possible. All this foreknowledge only seemed to be causing trouble. Here she was, following herself in what was starting to look like an endless circle, all in an effort to change the future. And, for the life of her, she couldn't seem to get ahead of what was happening. The circles just kept drawing closer and closer, like a whirlpool spiraling down a drain.

Wearily she took her staff from its place by the wall. Climbing up on the table, the older Hubley spun a rusty iron wheel fixed to a trap door in the ceiling. The trap door fell open, and a spatter of rusty water rained down. A second wheel

showed on the inside. Behind the table was a flimsy ladder, but it reached up into the door in the ceiling and in a moment both Hubleys had climbed into the tiny room above.

They nearly filled the small, unlit chamber. A third wheel hung from the ceiling right above their heads. Hubley reached for it at once, eager to get out of this constricting place, but a word from her elder self stopped her.

“Don’t. You’ll bring the whole lake down on our heads. We have to close the bottom door first, then pull that lever on the left.” She pointed to a pair of switches on the wall beside them. “You pull the right one when you come back. Don’t forget.”

Closing the bottom door, the older Hubley pulled a lever in the darkness. For a moment, nothing happened. Then gears clanked and metal groaned, and Hubley’s legs jerked as the room around her suddenly moved.

“It’s a lift!” she said, suddenly understanding.

Her older self nodded. They ground slowly upwards till the contraption jarred to a sudden stop. Hubley felt her older self move past her to unscrew the wheel above their heads. She heard the door creak open, and a gust of slightly fresher air swept into the room along with a splash of rusty water.

“Where are we?” she whispered after following her older self outside. A cool breeze fingered her cheek.

“In the middle of the lake.”

“The lake?”

“The one at the end of the tunnel. You were standing in it when the sissit grabbed you.”

That lake. Hubley had almost forgotten. She was very confused. After the light of the magician’s lair, dim though it was, the plunge back into the darkness of the cavern was disorienting. She wanted to flash a light from the top of her staff that would open up the darkness to the highest point in the ceiling above. But her elder self was already tugging at her sleeve.

“Hurry. You have to go back again. I don’t know what happens next, but there are more sissit coming. I’ll take care of them. And don’t forget that knife, or the axe!”

Hubley removed the silver cap from her little finger once again. The wound at the last knuckle was barely a day old and still throbbed. The breeze was gusting more strongly now, and her cape flapped loudly in the wind. She spoke the word of power, and once more her soul snapped back through time...

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5

...and she was lying in her Traveling Room again, her eyes focused on the rune of carved ivory set into the stone ceiling. Her rune of recovery and return.

This time she didn't linger, though she wasn't about to go rushing off a second time without thinking. She needed to be more patient. She was a chronothurge, after all; she was supposed to be in control of time. The axe at her belt belied that thought, perhaps, but right now she preferred not to go too deeply into the how and why of where it had come from.

In a chair in her study she curled up with the cat and a mug of hot tea. The problem, she decided, was that she didn't know enough. About the sissit who'd attacked her. About what might lie on the far side of the cavern beyond the lake. She needed to go back, scout around, and find out where the sissit had come from. The magician, she already knew she would take care of. All she had to do with him was let matters run their course. But the sissit were another question. She needed to find them. Only then could she burn them out of every tunnel in Vonn Kurr, if she had to, to make sure they never found their way to the Sun Road.

This time she would keep events under control.

When she was ready, and after she'd gotten some much-needed rest, she summoned a memory even earlier than the last one, cast the Timespell again, and retraced her route once more through the tunnels of Vonn Kurr to the shore of Gommer's lake. There she discovered a shallow ledge that led around the water to a rocky beach on the far side, where two

small coracles were drawn up on the shingle. She considered smashing the bottoms of both, until she remembered she'd need a way to get to the middle of the lake and the entrance to the magician's lair. So she left them alone.

Beyond the coracles she discovered a pair of tunnels at the top of the slope. The passages were roughly hewn, not Dwarven work at all. They twisted and split among each other like a clutch of snakes, with branching tunnels going left and right and up and down. She spent hours exploring them, but without some way to mark her path she kept going round and round in circles. What she needed was to capture a sissit and make it show her the way. Otherwise she was only going to get lost.

She retraced her steps. As she emerged back into the cavern she heard sounds from the lake. One of the coracles was being quietly paddled. If she could catch the paddler she would have her guide. But the soft splashes faded away and she was left silently cursing her lost opportunity on the wrong side of the cave.

She waited a few minutes to see if the paddler would return. The darkness was absolute. She had risked a small light while exploring the passages, but had smothered that spell before returning to the lake. There was no sense in showing a light now; she would only scare her quarry off. She was deciding to sneak back around the side of the cavern and try to

grab it there, when the sound of flat feet flopping carelessly against the stone came from the second passage. She recognized the voices immediately.

“So. Where is boat?”

“Boat is here.”

“We catch fish?”

“We catch big fish.”

Two sissit, with who knew how many others on the far side of the cave, was more risk than Hubley wanted to take in capturing a guide. No doubt if she acted now she would just start up some new chain of events that would end with her having to save herself once more. No, she had promised herself she would be patient this time. Better to just keep watching. There would be other chances.

The sissit dragged the second coracle into the water. The boat creaked as they climbed aboard.

“Ssh!” the first sissit warned. “No noises. We on Glommer’s waters now.”

“Glommer not worry about us. I tell you, I know when Glommer sleeping. I one smart sissit.”

“I worry.”

Obadeh didn’t seem to care about that. “You got hooks?” it asked.

“I got hooks.”

Several minutes passed with no talking. Hubley guessed they were baiting their hooks, or doing whatever it might be that sissit did to catch fish. A pair of gentle plops marked the moment when they lowered their lines into the water.

Time passed. Hubley began to fidget impatiently, and was starting to cast about for some new course of action when a flash of light burst into the cavern from the far side, exposing the dark water, a hint of stony walls, and the two sissit crouching in their small boat. Then the light was extinguished as quickly as it had appeared.

Hubley was taken completely by surprise. She hadn't thought her younger self would arrive so soon. Now everything was going to get complicated again. She listened as the two sissit had their argument and fought, the first time for them, but the second for her. This time, however, she heard what happened next as the first sissit swam noisily ashore and ran across the beach to the other tunnel. More splashing erupted from the other side of the lake, signaling her own capture.

Obahed called loudly across the water. "Ho, Eebul! What you catch?"

A new voice echoed from the far wall. "Man, I think. You have sissit?"

"No. He fall in water after I hit him. He run to Teekee. But we make fine catch today if you catch man. Glommer be very

happy.” Hubley heard the sissit climb back into its boat and begin paddling toward the far shore.

“Maybe we eat this one,” suggested the far voice.

“No! No!” Obahed answered quickly. His splashes quickened. “Glommer not like that at all.”

“Glommer not know.”

“Glommer know everything,” Obahed insisted. “We make Glommer happy, we stay happy. Glommer not eat us. But Glommer know about human. Glommer know everything.”

The new voice grunted at this wisdom, apparently convinced.

Hubley listened as the creatures loaded her younger self into their boat and paddled back to the middle of the lake. Their paddling stopped, and a low, grinding sound began that she felt more than heard. When the sound stopped, she guessed the magician’s lift had surfaced, and the sissit were now loading her unconscious body inside.

The grinding resumed. When it was gone the cavern was silent again. Hubley waited in the tunnel mouth, her heart beating. Events had been taken out of her hands yet again. Somewhere down there, at the bottom of the rusty lake, she was being trussed to the pipe in the magician’s workroom. Obviously now was the time she was supposed to rescue herself; no other Hubleys seemed to be showing up. Finding

the sissit in the tunnel would have to wait. Again. She curled her fingers anxiously around the handle of the axe at her belt and wondered if she was supposed to swim out to the mechanical island. But, no: she hadn't been wet when she'd come to her own rescue. Better to keep waiting.

Half an hour passed. The grinding resumed, followed by the sound of a single grumbling sissit clambering into one of the boats.

“Go, Eebul,” Obahed say. ‘Go find other sissit.’” The sound of its low muttering floated clearly across the lake. “Always going for Eebul. Never eating.”

Hubley came quietly down to the beach as the sissit paddled itself ashore. The bottom of the boat ground against the rock, then the creature's feet slapped against water and stone as it hopped out. With a word she caused her staff to flare. The sissit shrieked and held up its hand against the glare. She knocked it unconscious with a single blow from the back of her axe.

Taking its boat, she paddled out onto the lake. The light of her staff revealed the other coracle tethered to a low island in the midst of the water. She tied her boat beside the first, then opened the trap door on the floor of the lift and climbed inside.

Two levers stuck out from the wall beside her. Grabbing the one on the right, she closed and locked the upper hatch,

and pulled. The lift clanked downward. When it stopped, she stooped to listen at the lower door. Hearing nothing, she turned the wheel. There was a rusty creak, then the mechanism spun freely and the door fell open.

She expected no one, and she was right. Had she been caught by surprise before, she doubted she would have been able to sneak up on the magician the way she had. She dropped down into the room, her boots clanging on the floor. Carefully she hefted her axe and waited for someone to challenge her. But water dripping into pools from the ceiling was the only sound. Still holding the axe at the ready, she closed the hatch and advanced cautiously down the hall. Everything in this strange cave was just as she remembered; the dank, metallic smell, the reddish water puddled everywhere. Another corridor ran off to the right, turning almost immediately and disappearing.

She came to a quick stop at the sound of footsteps approaching from the tunnel in front of her. She darted into the side passage and around the turn, her heart in her throat. The footsteps padded softly forward, bare feet slapping on the metal floor. She held her axe tight against her chest. Then the sound was past, fading down the corridor toward the room she had just left. With a sigh of relief she cautiously started forward again.

Another several steps brought her to the magician's workroom. Glommer was standing with his back to her, arranging his grisly tools. Beyond him Hubley saw herself chained to the pipe on the wall. A moment of anger rushed through her and she charged forward, banging the axe down sharply on the magician's head. He sprawled across the floor, his skull crushed. She felt a sharp thrill of relief—she was reenacting the past! And for the first time it was working!

She grinned. "Hi, sis! I'm back!"

They snuck up on Obahed in the room with the trap door just as they'd done before. When the sissit was dead, Hubley gave her younger self a minute to pull herself back together. She'd already been through that bout of nausea once and this time was much less moved. Until she brained the magician, she'd never killed anyone by hand before, but the fact that she'd seen herself already do it made the act much less of a shock. Loops within loops. And now she'd taught herself how to kill sissit without actually knowing how.

Her younger self still looked a little green around the edges as she led her back through the trap door in the ceiling and showed her how to operate the lift. Outside again, a faint breeze brushed her cheek.

"Where are we?" the younger Hubley whispered.

"On an island in the lake."

“What lake?”

“The one at the end of the tunnel. You were standing in it when the sissit grabbed you.” Hubley tugged impatiently at her younger self’s sleeve. “Hurry. You have to go back again. I don’t know what happens next, but there are more sissit coming. I’ll take care of them. And don’t forget that knife, or the axe!”

A spot of movement in the darkness struck her eye. A small light had appeared high up in the cavern to her right. She guessed this would be Teekee and the rest of the tribe. Another light appeared, then a third, and now there were enough to cast a glow around the far wall of the cavern. The sissit were arriving from the left-hand tunnel. She reached out to touch her younger self, but she was already gone, back to the past. Eagerly, she faced the approaching sissit instead. Her chance to stop them had finally come.

Brushing a loose strand of hair from her face, she noticed the soft breeze had picked up to a steady wind. Across the cavern the line of lights twisted down to the lake like spots on an uncoiling snake. When the line had come close enough to reveal Hubley standing on the island, the sissit began to jabber excitedly. The leader stepped out of the crowd, and Hubley recognized him by his shield. The emblem of Ydderri.

“Obahed! We see you! Tulum come back, tell sissit everything! We know you try kill him! We not afraid of

Glommer any more. We kill you and Glommer!”

Hubley decided she could use Glommer to her advantage now that he was dead. The sissit were acting bravely now, but one whiff of power and they would turn tail immediately, scampering back to their smelly holes. All she had to do was scare them off and her problems would be solved.

An arrow whistled out of the darkness, passing close beside her. She raised her arms so that her cape spread ominously around her, and lit her staff with a thought. “Foolish sissit!” she called, trying to think of what a magician like Glommer might say to scare them. “I am not Obahed. Obahed is dead. He failed me. But do not be so rash as to think you can challenge me as well!”

Raising her staff, she pointed it threateningly. A word, and a bolt of fire flashed over the sissits’ heads to splash in a shower of sparks on the cavern wall. Half the torches vanished as their owners decided that a magician was more than they’d bargained for and melted back into the darkness.

But the leader wasn’t cowed. “Puny fireman!” it called brazenly. “Sissit knows that magic!” It launched a fireball of its own. Disdainfully, Hubley caught the weak casting with her staff and tossed it into the water at the leader’s feet. A puff of steam hissed up, and a few more sissit disappeared. The leader took a few steps backward and shook its staff.

With a roar of noise a greater burst of wind grabbed Hubley's cape and nearly lifted her off her feet. Most of the sissit torches were blown out, but the light from Hubley's staff was enough to show her what was happening. Small waves had begun to dance madly across the lake's black surface, both with the wind and against it, breaking the water into a churning boil. Another blast, and Hubley had to draw her arms back in and wrap her cloak around herself, or she would have been blown into the water. The coracles pulled free of their moorings and vanished.

A strange current started swirling. The metal island shuddered and thrummed in time with the waves. On shore the sissit were either cowering on the ground or crawling up the hill to escape the surging water. The wind blew even stronger.

Hubley threw herself down as well and scrambled to open the trap door. There would be no more cowing of sissit now. The quaking waves stretched and joined together, circling in a huge eddy that occupied most of the water between the island and the shore. With a great sucking sound and a deeper roar of wind, the center opened. A whirlpool formed; the lake rushed round and round. Waves drenched her. A sudden, twisting wrench knocked the island forward and Hubley would have been pitched headfirst into the whirlpool had she not been gripping the top of the trapdoor. As it was she was left splayed

across the surface of the tilted island while she tried desperately not to slide off.

Finally she wrestled the hatch open and threw herself inside. Clamping the door shut, she spun the wheel tight and collapsed on the rumbling floor. She lay there panting, feeling the strain of the chains that anchored the lift to the bottom as they were rattled by the power of the whirling water. Then they broke and the whole chamber hurtled forward, pounding her flat against the floor as if a huge hand was squashing her chest. The island spun and twisted and jumped as it was caught in the grip of the current. Every inch of Hubley's body was banged and bruised as she rolled about like a die in a cup. She covered her head with her arms and tucked her face against her knees, trying to take all the bruises on her legs and back.

Then the fury slowed. She felt her little chamber get caught in the final swirling of the funnel itself, spinning round and round in the whirlpool. A sudden lurch, her head banging against one of the iron wheels, and she passed into jarring unconsciousness. Again.

\* \* \*

6

When she woke, Hubley decided the pounding must have stopped soon after she passed out or she'd never have survived. Her whole body ached; her head was bloody and her ears rang.

At least her arms and legs seemed to work. The roaring of the whirlpool and the waves was gone, but she thought she still heard the sound of running water. Or maybe that was just her ears. After a moment's groping in the dark to find her staff, she set a small glow burning coldly.

The first trapdoor she tried to open wouldn't budge. Judging from the dents in the walls, the lift seemed to have been banged about as badly as she'd been. Using her staff as a lever, she tried the wheel again. For a moment nothing happened; then, with a sudden grinding of tired metal, it spun free. She let the door fall open and peered outside.

Torches gleamed across a muddy plain. Small pools of water glinted in the hollows; rocks and boulders lay scattered about. Sissit scabbled in the mud, grabbing something from the slime and stuffing it into their filthy shirts. Fish. But where was the lake?

And where was she? Had the whirlpool carried her off to some new cave? Then she recognized the hill above the muddy plain. It was twice as tall as before, but it was the same hill where she'd found the coracles. The beach was now halfway up the slope, where the mud turned to dry rock forty feet above her head. The lake itself was entirely gone. She had no idea what had happened, but she guessed that, by killing the

magician, she'd also released the magic that held the lake in check.

The sound of water at her feet made her look down. The metal island hung above a large, deep hole. To her left a small stream dropped into the darkness in a thin plume of muddy water. Pure luck had caught her at the edge as the lake had drained, instead of sending her spiraling down into the darkness. A massive Dwarven chain, each link thicker than her arm, dangled into the hole, all that remained of the lift's anchor.

She ducked back inside before the sissit saw her and thought about what to do next. There was no way out through that door. She would have to try the other.

The second wheel swung open more easily than the first. She found herself staring at a wall of rusted metal just beyond her reach. Carefully she poked her head out and looked around, but the metal wall curved to block her view. The lift appeared to have wedged itself against the structure, whatever it was. That explained why she hadn't been sucked down the massive drain. She guessed immediately she was looking at Gommer's lair, revealed on the lake bottom now that the lake was dry. The metallic smell was the same.

She pulled her head back inside and cast a quick spell. With her body groaning just as painfully now that she was

invisible as it had before, she climbed out the trap door and up the metal wall.

It was an easy climb. The metal surface was mottled with lumpy bulges that made for excellent hand and foot holds. From the top she could see the whole structure was actually a statue of a giant frog, crouching on its belly with the drain caught between its two front legs. The eyes that bulged from the top of its head were made of thick glass, but so covered in ancient grime as to be completely dark. When she finally got back home, she was going to have to ask Nolo why the Dwarves had built a giant metal frog at the bottom of a lake.

Above her, the lake bed sloped up to the tunnel that led back to the Sun Road. The mud in between lacked pools and fish, which meant the sissit were only scrabbling in the slime behind her. She had a free path all the way out.

Half-climbing, half-sliding down the back of the metal frog to the ground, she began to slog her way through the slippery ooze. The thick muck stuck to her boots, and she had to keep her eyes on her feet as she trudged along. Had anyone been close, they would certainly have heard the loud squelching each time she pulled her feet out of the slime and took another step forward. But no one was and, by the time she reached the high curb that marked the edge of the lake bed, she was well away from the sissit.

She'd just finished hoisting herself over the curb when a large sissit barreled out of the tunnel and banged straight into her, knocking her back into the mud below. She rose, covered in slime. Beneath the mud she was still invisible, but the layer of lake bottom she now wore outlined her as clearly as if she'd been wearing brown paint. The sissit that had knocked her over spotted her at once. With a great cry it brandished its club over its head and jumped from the ledge to finish her off. But its feet slipped out from under it as it landed and, being much larger and heavier than Hubley, it went rolling down the slope beyond.

She scrambled back over the curb as quickly as she could. The big sissit flopped futilely, its curses attracting the attention of every other sissit in the cave.

“There!”

“By tunnel!”

“Is Glommer!”

“Yes, Glommer!”

“Kill!”

A shower of poorly aimed arrows clattered around her as she ducked into the tunnel. She ran up the dark passageway as fast as she could, splashing through the rank water, waving away the grabbing growths. By the time she reached the stairs she could plainly hear the sissit behind her. Banged up as she

was she wasn't sure she could outrun them. She wasn't sure she was thinking too well either. But there was no time to rest. She stumbled over the first step in the darkness because of her slippery boots, then was climbing the steep steps on all fours as quickly as she could.

She'd been climbing for some time when arrows started clanging around her once again. The sissit were gaining. With a desperate burst of speed she scrambled out of range. Below her the creatures shouted in rage.

Her heart pounded and her legs ached. Her panting grew so loud she could no longer hear the sissit behind her. She barely had the strength in her thighs for each step. Then she stumbled badly, falling hard on the sharp stairs, and almost dropped her staff. The sissit whooped and shook their torches.

"We get you, Glommer!" they taunted. "You not get away now!"

The thought of capture sent a final surge of strength through her burning legs. In a moment she was over the last stair, with only the gentle slope of the passage before her. The sissit gave a maddened cry and fired another volley. But she was too far ahead of them now. Another fifty paces and she would be out in the main tunnel.

She dashed forward, and crashed head first into something stretched solidly across the passage. She lay stunned for a

moment on the cold stone floor, the cries of the sissit suddenly very far away. Then, in a daze of memory, she realized she'd run headlong into the wall her youngest self had cast. She was leading them out into the Sun Road! The Timing was exact!

In a sudden terrible insight, she saw that, far from changing anything, she'd been the cause of everything! If she'd only left it all alone, none of this would ever have happened.

But there was no time to think. If she stayed where she was, the sissit would rip her to pieces. Staggering to her feet, she dismissed the spell before her with a word. There was a loud crack as her casting was broken, then she lurched on down the tunnel. The loway loomed just ahead, the glow from the oldest Hubley's staff plain beyond the tunnel's end. An arrow whizzed past her ear, and then another. The sissit were almost upon her. Only five more steps remained. An arrow struck her in the back, sticking in her like a great pin. Two more struck her, their poison already going to work, and she tumbled forward onto the floor of the wider passage. How could she die now? The Hubley who'd sent her off on this wild goose chase was much, much older. Where were the years in between? Had she changed everything after all? Then the pain stopped, the poison grabbed her heart, and the cold stone floor of the Sun Road closed to darkness around her.

\* \* \*

## 7

She woke again, this time in her own bed in her own tower. Her entire body ached, but there was some relief in giving herself up to warm sheets and the smell of fresh brewed tea. A gray-haired Hubley was sitting in the chair by the window, waiting for her.

She remembered why she was there, and wondered if this was the same version of her older self who'd visited her before.

“Don't try to get up,” her older self cautioned. “You still don't have all the poison out of your system. You need to rest for at least another few days.”

Hubley fell back onto the pillow; her older self came over to tuck her back under the quilt. Slowly the wave of nausea that had swept over her when she tried to rise passed, replaced by dull anger. It was all so frustrating. Every time she'd gone back to Vonn Kurr she'd only made things worse. She hated not being in control. There had to be something she could do.

“There isn't,” said the older Hubley. “You're beginning to understand that now, aren't you?”

Hubley didn't like the idea of having someone around who knew what she was thinking, but was too weak to do anything about it.

The older Hubley, however, seemed to want to make certain she'd learned her lesson. “Do you think you've caused

enough trouble yet?" she asked. "So far you've managed to almost get yourself killed twice. And that's after you already did kill yourself the first time."

"It's not right."

"You'll get used to it."

"There's nothing we can do?"

"Nothing. The Timespell is only good for learning about the past. Don't ever think you can change it. No matter how many times you loop through some moment, your own experience is always going to be in a straight line. You can't get ahead of yourself, no matter how hard you try. You'll just be a dog chasing your tail if you do. And as for the future...."

The older Hubley pursed her lips; a painful shadow passed through her eyes. Apparently there just weren't enough years available to soften the blow.

"Just remember, you can never forget what you'd rather not know."

For the next few days, she gave herself up to the care of her older self. Life was easier that way. Lying in bed, she had more than enough time to try and sort everything out. There were still moments when she quivered in frustration, when the memory of killing herself came unbidden and she was forced to live with the thought that she could do nothing about it, that some parts of life were outside even a chronothurge's hands.

At least she knew she'd live to a ripe old age before she died on the Sun Road. Now there would be times when she could be fearless, armed with the knowledge of her place of dying. But she would be careful, too. Having challenged fate once and lost irrevocably, she would be unlikely to do so again.

Still, there was one thing she didn't quite understand.

The day came when her wounds were healed and the poison fully leached from her blood. She was on the roof watching the sun set behind the mountains when her older self joined her.

"Do we really have to go back?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You can't just tell me why you did it?"

"No. You have to see for yourself."

Hublely nodded. She had the feeling the last loop had yet to be closed. Her older self held up a small bottle, no larger than her thumb, filled with a dark red liquid.

"I've already prepared the spell." She handed Hubley the bottle. "It'll bring you back whenever you want. You're not strong enough yet for removing fingers."

Then her elder self spoke a word and the top of the tower was gone, replaced by darkness. She spoke a second word and a pale light shone out from her staff. Before them lay the looming

pit of Vonn Kurr, behind them the gently curving wall of the Sun Road.

“They’ll be here any moment,” her elder self said. “And I still have to make us both invisible.”

She spoke the third spell softly and doused her light. Then she pulled Hubley back against the smooth stone beside her.

A dull boom echoed up the passage to their left almost immediately. Hubley felt the pressure of the sound against her ears. Faint shouts followed the explosion, but soon the cries and crashes of battle grew louder. A glimmer of light appeared up the loway; the oldest Hubley and the diggers came running around the turn and stopped, panting, at the edge of the road.

A skittering of stones at the far side of the tunnel signaled the arrival of the youngest Hubley. There were four Hubleys on the Sun Road now, three of them invisible.

The scene played itself out. The oldest Hubley found the hatch in the floor; Omarose and Canna opened it. The company fled down the chute one by one while the oldest Hubley kept the sissit at bay. Several arrows came close to the two hiding invisibly by the wall, misfires from the sissit’s bows, but the eldest Hubley made sure that none of her magical attacks came near them. Of course she knew they were there. She was the last Hubley, and had the benefit of this moment from at least three other viewpoints. The sissit fell beneath her power; the

cavern began to fill with the stench of their burns. Then Canna stepped into the shaft, and only the four Hubleys remained at the edge of the pit. The sissit rushed the only one they saw, howling with rage at the escape of the diggers and the other two humans, forgetting their fear of magic until the last Hublely splashed them with fire once again and they went tumbling backward.

Their leader rolled away from the blast toward the inner wall. Its Dwarven shield spun away. Even though Hublely saw the sissit coming, she still lost her balance and fell on top of it when it tumbled against her legs. The creature couldn't see her of course, but, thinking itself attacked by some strange new magic, it grabbed her violently all the same. They wrestled in the dust, Hublely trying to escape, the sissit clinging to her desperately, fighting for its life against this new and unseen apparition. Its hard, knobby hands closed around her throat. She fought to push it away, her head twisted to one side, and found herself looking at her oldest self, the one who was about to die. Hublely saw plainly that her oldest self was ready to blast the sissit to a cinder if she could only find a clear shot; willing, even in that moment, to take a chance with history and save herself if the opportunity arose. But the chance, as they both knew, never came.

Then the oldest Hubley's eyes focused directly on hers. A weary smile graced her mouth. And in her oldest self's eyes Hubley saw tenderness, and a message of forgiveness to reassure her. There was no time for anything more. No chance for her eldest self to say all the things they both wanted her to before she took one step to her right and caught the flash of flame the youngest Hubley fired, killing herself. But also saving herself.

The shock from the blast made the sissit loosen its grip on Hubley's throat. She kicked herself free and rolled panting to the edge of the cliff. For the second time she watched her death in a plume of fire and tried not to imagine the pain.

When it was over, the sissit stood silent for a moment, their enemy defeated in a way they didn't understand. They had no idea where that ball of flame had come from. The leader scabbled across the dusty floor for its shield. Once that protection was back in its hands it stood, shook the shield over its head, and let out a howl of victory. That was the signal for the rest to break their silence and cheer as well. Their whoops and bellows crashed across the Sun Road and out into the great, dark deep.

They were stopped, though, when a loud voice shouted, "ENOUGH!" A new Hubley appeared magically in the middle of the circle of ash where she'd died a moment before. Even

Hubley was fooled, until she realized this was her third self, the one who'd been hiding beside her against the wall. But the sissit possessed no such understanding. As far as they were concerned, this was the same sorcerer risen from the dead. A hush fell across their pale faces.

“BEGONE!” the older Hubley cried, and launched her fire once more into their ranks. The sissit ran, even the leader, who dropped his shield and fled with the rest back up the tunnel into the darkness. As the last of their bare feet slapped away into silence the elder Hubley turned back with a weary sigh.

“You know it all, now,” she said. “It’s time to go home.”

“And you?” Hubley asked. “What are you going to do?”

Her older self stooped to retrieve the sissit’s shield. “I have to go on with the others. There’s no reason for them to know I’ve died. They’ll never know what happened.”

“You should get some rest first.”

“I should,” her older self agreed, “but it’s better if I don’t. They’ll be expecting me to be exhausted after the strain of the battle.”

She sat down on the rock beside the open shaft and began to lower herself down. Then she looked back up at Hubley one last time.

“You have many years,” she said, “before you get to this point. You’ll know what to do when the time comes. There’s

still a lot for you to learn. But for now, break the vial I gave you and step into the mist that forms. That will take you home.”

Without another word, she let go the sides of the chute. With the emblem of Ydderri strapped to her back, she disappeared down the shaft. Hubley heard a thin whoosh as her older self vanished; then all was silence and darkness on the Sun Road again.

She went home.

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*S.C. Butler is the author of the Stoneways Trilogy from Tor Books, consisting of Reiffen's Choice (2006), Queen Ferris (2007), and The Magicians' Daughter (2009). A former Wall Street bond-trader, he lives without cats of any sort in Brooklyn, NY, though he recently acquired a dog.*

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Ceaseless  
Skies**

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## WHERE VIRTUE LIVES

by Saladin Ahmed

“I’m telling you, Doctor, its eyes—its teeth! The hissing! Name of God, I’ve never been so scared!”

Doctor Adoulla Makhslood, the best ghul hunter in the great city of Dhamsawaat, was weary. Two and a half bars of thousand-sheet pastry sat on his plate, their honey and pistachio glazed layers glistening in the sunlight that streamed into Yehyeh’s teahouse. Adoulla let out a belch. *Only two hours awake. Only partway through my pastry and cardamom tea, and already a panicked man stands chattering to me about a monster! God help me.*

He brushed green and gold pastry bits from his fingers onto his spotless kaftan. Magically, the crumbs and honey-spots slid from his garment to the floor, leaving no stain. The kaftan was as white as the moon. Its folds seemed to go on forever, much like the man sitting before him.

“That hissing! I’m telling you, I didn’t mean to leave her. But by God, I was so scared!” Hafi, the younger cousin of Adoulla’s dear friend Yehyeh, had said “I’m telling you” twelve times already. Repetition helped folk talk away their fear, so Adoulla had let the man go on for a while. He had heard the

story thrice now, listening for the inconsistencies fear introduces to memories—even honest men’s memories.

Adoulla knew some of what he faced. A water ghul had abducted Hafi’s wife, dragging her toward a red riverboat with eyes painted on its prow. Adoulla didn’t need to hear any more from Hafi. What he needed was more tea. But there was no time.

“She’s gone!” Hafi wailed. “That horrible thing took her! And like a coward, I ran! Will you help me, Doctor?”

For most of his life men had asked Adoulla this question. In his youth he’d been the best brawler on Dead Donkey Lane, and the other boys had looked up to him. Now men saw his attire and asked for his help with monsters. Adoulla knew too well that his head-hair had flown and his gut had grown. But his ghul hunter’s raiment was unchanged after decades of grim work—still famously enchanted so that it could never be dirtied, and quietly blessed so that neither sword nor knife could pierce it.

Still, he didn’t allow himself to feel too secure. In his forty years ghul hunting he’d faced a hundred deaths other than sword-death. Which deaths he would face today remained to be seen.

“Enough,” Adoulla said, cutting off yet more words from Hafi. “I’ve some ideas where to start. I don’t know if your wife

still lives, young man. I can't promise to return her to you. But I'll try my best to do so, and to stop whomever's responsible, God damn them."

"Thank you, Doctor! Um...I mean...I hereby thank and praise you, and beg God's blessings for you, O great and virtuous ghul hunter!"

*Does he think I'm some pompous physician, to be flattered by ceremony?* A ghul hunter shared a title but little else with the haughty doctors of the body. No leech-wielding charlatan of a physician could stop the fanged horrors that Adoulla battled.

Adoulla swallowed a sarcastic comment and stood up. He embraced Hafi, kissing him on both cheeks. "Yes, well. I will do all I can, child of God." He dismissed the younger man with a reassuring pat on the back.

*O God, Adoulla thought, why have You made this life so tiring? And why so full of interrupted meals?* In six quick bites he ate the remaining pastries. Then, sweets in his belly and a familiar reluctance rising within him, he left Yehyeh's teahouse in search of a river boat with painted eyes, a ghul, and a bride whom Adoulla hoped to God was still alive.

\* \* \*

Raseed bas Raseed frowned in distaste as he made his way down the crowded Dhamsawaat street his guide called the Lane

of Monkeys. Six days ago Raseed had walked along a quiet road near the Lodge of God. Six days ago he'd killed three highwaymen. Now he was in Dhamsawaat, King of Cities, and there were dirty, wicked folk all about him. City people who spoke with too much speed and too little respect. Raseed brushed dust from his dervish-blue silks. As he followed his lanky guide through the press of people, he dwelt—though it was impermissibly proud to do so—on his encounter with the highwaymen.

*“A ‘Dervish Dressed In Blue,’ eh? Just like in the song! I hear you sons of whores hide jewels in those pretty dresses.”*

*“Haw haw! ‘Dervish Dressed In Blue!’ That’s funny! Sing for us, little dervish!”*

*“What do you think that forked sword’ll do against three men’s spears, pup? Can your skinny arms even lift it?”*

When the robbers had mentioned that blasphemous song, they had approached the line that separates life from death. When they had moved from rough talk to brandishing spears, they'd crossed that line. Three bodies now lay rotting by the road. Raseed tried not to smile with pride at the thought.

They'd underestimated him. He was six-and-ten, though he knew he hardly looked it. Clean-shaven, barely five feet, and thin-limbed as well. But his silk tunic and trousers—the habit of the Order—warned most ruffians that Raseed was no easy

target. As did the curved sword at his hip, forked to “cleave the right from the wrong in men,” as the Traditions of the Order put it. The blade and silks inspired respect in the cautious, but fools saw the scrawny boy and not the dervish.

That did not matter, though. Soon, God willing, Raseed would find the great and virtuous ghul hunter Adoulla Makhslood. If it pleased God, the Doctor would take Raseed as an apprentice. *If Raseed was worthy.*

*But I am impatient. Proud. Are these virtues? The Traditions of the Order say, “A dervish without virtue is less than a beggar.”*

The sudden realization that he'd lost sight of his guide pulled him out of his reflections. For a moment Raseed panicked, but the lanky man stepped back into view, gesturing for him to follow. Raseed thanked God that he'd found a reverent and helpful guide, for Dhamsawaat's streets seemed endless. Raseed had been the youngest student ever to earn the blue silks. He feared neither robbers nor ghuls. But he would not know what to do if lost amidst this horde of lewd, impious people.

Life had been less confusing at the Lodge of God. But then High Shaykh Aalli had sent him to train with the Doctor.

*“When you meet Adoulla Makhslood, little sparrow, you will see that there are truths greater than all you’ve learned in this Lodge. You will learn that virtue lives in strange places.”*

Before him, his guide came to a halt. “Here we are, master dervish. Just over that bridge.”

*At last.* Raseed thanked the man and turned toward the small footbridge. The man tugged at Raseed’s sleeve.

“Apologies, master dervish, but the watchmen will not let you cross without paying the crossing tax.”

“Crossing tax?”

The man nodded. “And the bastards will charge you too much once they see your silks—they respect neither piety nor the Order. If you wish, though, I will haggle for you. A half-dirham should suffice. Were I a richer man I’d cover your tax myself—it’s a sad world where a holy man must pay his way over bridges.”

Raseed thanked the man for his kindness and handed him one of his few coins.

“Very good, master dervish. Now please stay out of sight while I bargain. I will return for you shortly. God be with you.”

Raseed waited.

And waited.

\* \* \*

Adoulla needed information. Ghuls had no souls of their own—they did only as their masters bade. Which meant that a vile man had used a water ghul in his bride-stealing scheme. And if there was one place Adoulla could go to learn of vile men's schemes, it was Miri's. There was no place in the world that pleased him more, nor any that hurt him so.

*Though God alone knows when I'll get there.* Adoulla walked the packed Mainway, wishing the crowd would move faster, knowing it wouldn't. Overturned cobblers' carts, dead pack animals, traffic-stopping processions of state—Dhamsawaat's hundred headaches hurried for no man. Not even when a ghul stalked the King of Cities.

By the time he reached Miri's tidy storefront it was past midday. Standing in the open doorway, Adoulla smelled sweet incense from iron burners and camelthorn from the hearth. For a long moment he stood there at the threshold, wondering why in the world he'd been away from this lovely place so long.

A corded forearm blocked his way, and another man's shadow fell over him. A muscular man even taller than Adoulla stood scowling before him, a long scar splitting his face into gruesome halves. He placed a broad palm on Adoulla's chest and grabbed a fistful of white kaftan.

“Ho-ho! Who's this forgetter-of-friends, slinking back in here so shamelessly?”

Adoulla smiled. “Just another foolish child of God who doesn’t know to stay put, Axeface.”

The two men embraced and kissed on both cheeks. Then Axeface bellowed toward an adjoining room, “The Doctor is here, Mistress. You want me to beat him up?”

Adoulla could not see Miri, but he heard her husky voice. “Not today, though I am tempted. Let the old fart through.”

For one moment more, though, Axeface held him back. “She misses you, Doctor. I bet she’d still marry you. When’re you gonna wake up, huh?” With a good-natured shove, he sent Adoulla stumbling into the greeting-room.

One of the regular girls, wearing a dress made of sheer cloth and copper coins, smiled at Adoulla. The coins jingled as she shimmied past, and he tried to keep from turning his head. *Just my luck*, he thought not for the first time, *that the woman I love runs the whorehouse with the city’s prettiest girls.*

Then she was there. Miri Almoussa, Seller of Silks and Sweets, known to a select few as Miri of the Hundred Ears. Her thick curves jiggled as she moved, and her hands were hennaed. Adoulla had to remind himself that he was there to save a girl’s life. “When one is married to the ghuls, one has three wives already,” went the old ghul hunter’s adage. *O God, how I wish I could take a fourth!*

Silently, Miri led him to a divan. She glared at him and brushed her hand over his beard, ridding it of crumbs he hadn't known were there. "You're a wonderful man," she said by way of greeting, "but you can be truly disgusting sometimes."

A man's slurred shouts boomed from the next room. Irritation flashed across Miri's face, but she spoke lightly. "Naj is usually so quiet. Wormwood wine makes him loud. At least he's not singing. Last week it was ten rounds of 'The Druggist, the Draper, and the Man Who Made Paper' before he passed out. Name of God, how I hate that song!" She slid Adoulla a tray with coffee, little salt fish, and rice bread. Adoulla popped a fish into his mouth, the tiny bones crunching as he chewed. Despite the urgency of his visit he was hungry. And Miri was not a woman to be rushed, no matter what the threat.

She continued. "Unlike *some* people, though, Naj can be counted on to be here every week, helping to keep me and mine from poverty. It's been a while, Doullie. What do you want?" She set her powder-painted features into an indifferent mask.

"I'm wondering, pretty one, if you've heard anything about a stolen bride in the Quarter of Stalls."

Miri smiled a disgusted smile. "Predictable! Of course you already have your gigantic nose in this nonsense! Well. For the usual fee plus...five percent, I might remember something my Ears have heard."

“A price hike, huh?” Adoulla sighed. “You know I’ll pay what you ask, my sweet.”

“Indeed you will. We may be more than friends here and there, ‘my sweet,’ but we’re not man and wife. *Your* choice, remember? Our monies are separate. And this, Doullie, is about money. Now, according to my Ears...”

A name would’ve made Adoulla’s task easier, but Miri’s information was almost as good. A red riverboat with eyes painted on the prow had been spotted only two hours ago at an abandoned dock near the Low Bridge of Boats. And Hafi’s wife may not have been the first woman taken by the ghul. Two of Miri’s Ears said the ghul served a man, one said a woman, but none had gotten a close look.

Still, Adoulla had a location now. Enough to act on. And so, calling himself mad for the thousandth time in his life, Adoulla prepared to leave a wonderful woman’s company to chase after monsters.

\* \* \*

Raseed approached the well-kept storefront and allowed himself to hope. This was not Adoulla Makhslood’s home, but after Raseed’s “guide” had absconded, an old woman had led Raseed to this storefront, insisting that she had just seen the Doctor enter.

Raseed paused at the threshold. He had journeyed far, and if it pleased God he'd have a new teacher. *If it pleased God.* He took a measured breath and stepped through the doorway.

Inside, the large greeting-room was dim. Scant sunlight made its way through high windows. Tall couches lined the wall opposite the door, and a few well-dressed men sat on them, each speaking to a woman. And at the center of the room, on a juniper-wood divan, sat a middle-aged woman and an old man in a spotless kaftan. They stared as a massive man with a scar ushered Raseed in. Raseed looked at the man in white. *Doctor Adoulla Makhslood?*

It had to be him. He was the right age, though Raseed had expected the Doctor to be leaner. And clean-shaven. This old man had the bumpy knuckles of a fist-fighter. *Can this rough-looking one really be him?*

Raseed bowed his head. "Begging your pardon, but are you Doctor Adoulla Makhslood? The great and virtuous ghul hunter?"

The man snorted a laugh. "Great and virtuous'? No, boy, you're looking for someone else. I'm Doctor Adoulla Makhslood, the best belcher in Dhamsawaat. If I see this other fellow, though, I'll tell him you're looking for him."

Raseed was confused. *Perhaps he's testing me somehow.* He spoke carefully. "I apologize for disturbing you, Doctor. I

am Raseed bas Raseed and I have come, at High Shaykh Aalli's bidding, to offer you my sword in apprenticeship." He bowed and waited for the Doctor's response.

\* \* \*

*Old Shaykh Aalli?* The only true dervish Adoulla had ever known? Adoulla had assumed that ancient Aalli had gone to meet God years ago. Was it really possible this Raseed had been sent by the High Shaykh? And might the boy be of some help? The Doctor sized up the five-foot dervish. He was yellow-toned with tilted eyes and a clean-shaven face. He looked like one who had killed but did not yet value life.

A scabbard of blue leather and lapis lazuli hung at the boy's waist. Adoulla smiled as he thought of the bawdy song that poked fun at an "ascetic" dervish's love for his jeweled scabbard. The tune was as catchy as the words were blasphemous. Without meaning to, Adoulla started humming "Dervish Dressed In Blue." The boy frowned, then bit his lip.

*God help me, he looks so sincere.* Adoulla sighed and stood, avoiding Miri's glare. "We'll talk as we walk, boy. A girl's life is in danger and time is short." He paid Miri her fee, mumbled his inadequate goodbyes, and herded the boy out onto the street.

*A dervish of the Order.* Adoulla decided he could not ignore the advantages of having such a swordsman at his side.

After all, who knew what awaited him at the Low Bridge of Boats? He was easily winded these days, and he had no time to stop by his townhouse for more supplies. He needed help, truth be told. But first the boy had to be set straight.

“The name of Shaykh Aalli goes far indeed with me, boy. You may accompany me for now. But we’re not in a holy man’s parable. We’re trying to save a poor girl’s life and keep from getting ourselves killed. God’s gifts and my own study have given me useful powers. But I’ll kick a man in his fig-sack if need be, make no mistake. A real girl has been stolen by a real monster. God forbid it, she may be dead. But it’s our job to help however we can.”

The boy looked uncomfortable, but he bowed his head and said “Yes, Doctor.” That would be enough for now.

\* \* \*

The thoroughfare the Doctor called the Street of Festivals was lined with townhouses separated by small gardens. A girl hawked purple pickles from a copper bowl. Raseed smelled something foul, but it wasn’t the pickles.

Two houses down a human head had been mounted above the doorway.

The Doctor spat. “The work of ‘His Greatness’ the Khalif. That is the head of Nassaar Jamala. Charged with treason. He

made a few loud speeches at market. Meanwhile, young brides are abducted by ghuls and the watchmen do nothing.”

“Surely, Doctor, if the man was a traitor it was righteous that he should die,” Raseed said.

“And how is it that *you* are a scholar of righteousness, boy? Because you’re clean-shaven and take no wine? Shave your beard and scour your soul?” The Doctor squinted at Raseed. “Do you even need to shave yet? Hmph. What trials has your mewling soul faced, O master dervish of six-and-ten-whole-years? O kisser of I-am-guessing-exactly-zero-girls?”

The Doctor waved his big hand as if brushing away his own words. “Look. There are three possibilities. One, you’re a madman or a crook passing yourself off as a dervish. Two, you are a real Lodge-trained holy man—which in all likelihood still makes you a corrupt bully. Three—” he gave Raseed a long look. “Three, you are the second dervish of the Order I’ve ever met who actually lives by his world-saving oaths. If so, boy, you’ve a cruel, disappointing life ahead.”

“God’s mercy is more powerful than all the world’s cruelties” Raseed recited. But the Doctor merely snorted and walked on.

As Raseed followed through the throngs of people, his soul sank. Despite years of training he felt like a small boy, lost and about to cry. His long journey was over. He had made it to

Dhamsawaat. He had found the man Shaykh Aalli named the Crescent Moon Kingdoms' greatest ghul hunter.

And the man was an impious slob.

Doubt began to overwhelm Raseed. What would he do now? He knew that he needed direction — he wasn't so proud that he couldn't admit that. But what could he learn from this gassy, unkempt man?

And yet Raseed could not deny that there was something familiar about Adoulla Makhslood. A strength of presence not unlike High Shaykh Aalli's that seared past the Doctor's sleepy-seeming eyes. Perhaps...

He didn't realize he'd come to a halt until a beggar elbowed past him. The Doctor, a dozen yards ahead, turned and hollered at him to hurry. Raseed followed, and they walked on into the late afternoon.

\* \* \*

It was nearly evening when they finally approached the abandoned dock near the Low Bridge of Boats. *There should be watchmen here, keeping the street people from moving in, Adoulla thought.* But neither vagrants nor patrols were in sight. *Bribery. Or murder.*

“Doctor!” The boy's whisper was sharp as he pointed out onto the river.

Adoulla saw it too: the red riverboat. He cursed as he saw that it was already leaving the dock. The owner had seen their approach—a lookout spell, no doubt. Adoulla cursed again. Then two figures stepped out from behind a dockhouse twenty yards ahead.

They were shaped vaguely like men, but Adoulla knew the scaly grey flesh and glowing eyes. *Water ghuls. And not one of them, but two!*

Adoulla thanked God that he had the little dervish with him. “Enemies, boy!”

The ghuls hissed through barb-toothed leech-mouths, and their eyes blazed crimson. It was no wonder Hafi had run from them. Any man in his right mind would have.

Adoulla dug into his kidskin satchel and withdrew two jade marbles. He clacked the spheres together in one hand and recited from the Heavenly Chapters.

“God the All-Merciful forgives us our failings.”

The jade turned to ash in Adoulla’s palm, and there was a noise like a crashing wave. The water ghul nearest him lost its shape and collapsed into a harmless puddle of stinking liquid, twitching with dead snakes and river-spiders.

The drain of the invocation hit Adoulla and he felt as if he’d dashed up a hill. *So much harder every year!*

The other ghul came at them. Raseed sped past Adoulla, his forked sword slashing. The creature snaked left. The boy's weapon whistled through empty air. The ghul drove its scaly fist hard into the boy's jaw. It struck a second time, catching Raseed in the chest. Adoulla was amazed that the boy still stood.

Regaining his own strength, Adoulla reached back into his satchel. He'd had only the two marbles but there was another invocation... *Where is that vial?* The ghul struck at Raseed a third time—

And the boy dodged. He spun and launched a hard kick into the ghul's midsection. Its red eyes registered no pain, but the creature scabbled backward.

Adoulla marveled at the boy's speed. Raseed's sword flashed once, twice, thrice, four times. And Adoulla saw that his other invocation would not be needed.

Ghuls fell harder than men, but they fell all the same. The boy had finished this one. Its hissing shifted into the croaks and buzzes of swamp vermin. Its claws raked the air. Then, its false soul snuffed out, the thing collapsed in a watery pile of dead frogs and leeches.

Adoulla smiled at the puddle. *So he's not all bravado, then. Ten-and-six years old!* "Well done, dervish! I've seen

stone-hard soldiers run the other way when faced with those glowing eyes. But you stood your ground and you're still alive!"

"It...it wouldn't die!" the boy stammered. "I cut it enough to kill five men! It wouldn't die!"

"It was a ghul, boy, not some drunken bully! Let me guess: for all your zeal, this is the first time you've faced one. Well, I won't lie. You did brilliantly. But our work isn't done. We've got to find that boat."

\* \* \*

*'Brilliantly,' he said.* Raseed sheathed his sword, trying not to feel pride. He had killed a ghul!

"Thank you, Doctor. I hope—"

He heard a noise from the dockhouse. To his surprise, a scrawny young woman stepped from the shadows. Except that there was not enough shadow there to have hidden her. *How could I not have seen her? Impossible!* The girl wore a dirty dress with billowy sleeves. Her face was a small oval, her left eye badly bruised.

"You killed them," she said. "You *killed* them!"

The Doctor smiled at her. "Well, not *killed*, exactly, dear. They never truly lived. But we stopped them, yes." He bowed slightly, like a modest performer.

"But he said they couldn't be killed! He swore it!"

The Doctor's expression turned grim. "Who swore it? Are you not Hafi's wife? Did these creatures not attack you?"

The girl frowned. "Attack me? I...he *swore*," she said dazedly. "They...gave me time." She shook her head, as if driving some thought away, and raised a clenched fist. As she did, Raseed saw that she held two short pieces of rope, one white, one blue. His keen eyes noted intricate knots tied at the end of each. The girl raised the white rope—tied with a fat, squarish knot—to her mouth.

"Damn it! Stop her!" the Doctor shouted. There was an unnaturally loud whispery sound as the girl blew on the white rope. As Raseed stood there confused, Adoulla's shout twisted into a scream. The Doctor hunched over, gripping his midsection in agony. He spoke around gritted teeth. "Get. Ropes."

The girl blew on the knot again, and Raseed heard another whispery puff-of-air sound. The old man screamed again and dropped to his knees.

*Knot-blowing!* Raseed had never seen such wicked magic at work, but he'd heard dark stories. He charged as he saw the girl raise the blue rope—tied with a small, sleek knot—to her lips. *That one's for me*, he realized. But Raseed was too swift. He crossed the space between them and palm-punched the woman flat on her back. The little ropes flew from her hand.

Before she could get to her feet, Raseed's sword sang out of its scabbard. He held its forked tip to her throat.

The Doctor shuffled up beside him, panting and still wincing with pain. "Let her stand," he said, and Raseed did so. The Doctor's tone was hard but strangely courteous. "So. Young lady. Blower-on-knots. Were these *your* pet ghuls we destroyed?"

The girl sounded half asleep. "No. Pets? No. Zoud said that... Said that...." She eyed Raseed's sword fearfully and trailed off.

The Doctor took a deep breath and gestured to Raseed, so he brought the blade away from the girl's throat. But he did not sheathe it.

The Doctor's voice grew infuriatingly gentle. "Let's begin again. What's your name, girl?"

The girl's eyes lost a bit of their glaze. She had the decency to look ashamed. "My name's Ushra."

"And who has hurt you, Ushra? The magus who made these ghuls? What's his name?"

The girl looked at the ghuls' puddle-remains. "He...my husband is called Zoud. He sent me to stop you while he got away. I'm his wife. First wife. I've...I've helped him catch others. Four...five now?"

*Wickedness*, Raseed thought. *This one deserves death.*

“Well, his girl-stealing days are over,” the Doctor said. “Whatever’s happened, we’ll help you, Ushra, but we also need your help.”

Raseed could not keep his disapproval to himself. “And why have you never run away, woman? Or used your knots on this Zoud?”

“I would never! I *could* never. You shouldn’t say such things!” Ushra looked terrified, and for a moment Raseed almost forgot that she was a wicked blower-on-knots who had just made the Doctor helpless with her magic. For a moment.

“I must go back!” she said. “He’ll find me. He’ll make more ghuls! He’ll feed my living skin to them! He did it with his stolen wives...”

The Doctor sucked in an angry-sounding breath. “We’ll stop him, Ushra. Where is he going in that riverboat? Where can we find him?”

Raseed could not let this interrogation continue. “With apologies, Doctor, this one has worked wicked magics and must be punished. It is impermissible, according to the Traditions of the Order, to twist information from one who must be slain.”

The Doctor threw his hands up. “God save us from fanatical children! We’re not going to slay her. We’re going to stop this half-dinar magus Zoud, and save Hafi’s wife.

Whatever your Shaykhs taught you, boy, if you wish to study with me you will—”

The puff-of-air sound again.

*Another rope. She had another rope hidden in those sleeves!* As Raseed thought it, his vision went black.

*Blinded!* It was so sudden that he cried out in spite of himself. He felt a soft hand on his face. Then his stomach twisted up and his mind stopped working properly. All around him was darkness and his thoughts seemed wrapped in cotton. *What is this? What foul magic has she worked on me?*

Raseed could not ask the Doctor, because the Doctor was not there.

\* \* \*

Adoulla heard the puff-of-air sound again, and suddenly he was alone on the dock. The girl had disappeared and, along with her, Raseed.

*Damn me for a fool!* A whisking spell, no doubt, used to travel from the location of one object to another. Adoulla had seen such magic before—leaving an ensorcelled coin at home and carrying its counterpart to provide a quick escape—but he hadn't known knot-blowing could be used the same way. *She must have touched the boy, too.* The girl's power was great, if feral. Adoulla himself avoided such spells. It only took one bad whisking to break a mind, and the caster never knew when it

was coming. No quick trip home was worth a lifetime of gibbering idiocy.

He had to find them, and fast. Praise God, he had a name now. A crude tracking spell, then. He would have a splitting headache the next day from the casting, but it was his only choice. Standing on the still-quiet dock, Adoulla dug charcoal and a square of paper from his satchel. After writing the Name of God on the front of the paper and “Zoud” on the back, he pulled forth a platinum needle, pricked his thumb, and squeezed one drop of blood onto Zoud’s name. He rolled the square into a tube and placed it in his pocket. The mental tug he felt meant God had deemed Adoulla’s quarry cruel enough to lead His servant to the man. He followed it eastward, the half-sunk sun at his back.

He cursed himself five times as he crossed Archer’s Yard. Adoulla had shown mercy, and the girl had betrayed him. The dervish had been right. Adoulla was a soft old man who called for tea when he should be calling for the blood of his enemies. The Yard’s hay training targets stood abandoned now, a few arrows still sticking out of them. To Adoulla’s mind the arrows seemed accusatory fingers pointing at him—a fuzzy-headed fool whose weak heart had killed a boy of six-and-ten.

No. Not if he could help it. He had brought the boy into this mess. Now, if Raseed still lived, Adoulla would get him out of it.

\* \* \*

Raseed awoke blindfolded, gagged, and bound. During his training he'd learned to snap any bonds that held him, no matter how well tied. But something was wrong here. He was bound not with rope or chain, but with some fiendish substance that burned hotter the harder he tried to escape.

His struggles caused him a slicing pain in his wrists and ankles, but for an uncontrolled moment he thrashed like a madman.

*Calm yourself!* He was disgusted at how easily he lost a dervish's dignity. He went into a breathing exercise, timing his inhalations and exhalations. The first thing was to figure out where he was. They had blindfolded him, which meant that the knot-blower's blinding curse was not permanent. *Praise God for that.* Adapting quickly, Raseed let his other senses take over. He heard the cries of rivergulls and a splashing sound against one wall. He smelled water and felt himself swaying. A boat. *Zoud's. The one we saw leaving.* Raseed was captive on a boat, and bleeding.

He wondered where the Doctor was. *I should not have listened to him. He is old and grown soft.* Raseed could have

ended the girl's life and ought to have done so. Now it was too late. Impermissible panic began to rise in him.

*Inhale...exhale.* He would not feel fear. He would find a way out.

Suddenly Raseed heard a sobbing sound. A young woman crying as she spoke. "I'm sorry, holy man. So sorry. The whisking spell could have killed you."

*Ushra.* Perhaps a yard away from him. From the same direction he heard glass clink and smelled something acidic.

"What can I do?" the girl continued, her voice moving about. "I'm damned. I didn't want to be his wife, master dervish. He...he took me and he made me need him. But the things he did to the other wives..." The girl wept wordlessly for a moment, then took a deep breath. "Please don't scream," she whispered, pulling down Raseed's gag.

*Talk to her!*

Raseed felt that God was with him, for the words came quickly. "You can correct your wickedness, Ushra. You can make amends for your foulness. 'In the eyes of God our kindnesses weigh twice our cruelties.'"

She untied his blindfold, and Raseed blinked at the dim lantern-light. Ushra crouched before him, a long glass vial in the crook of her arm. The look on the girl's face gave him hope.

*'Our kindnesses weigh twice our cruelties.'* The scripture echoed in Raseed's head.

"Zoud's gone now, master dervish, but he'll return soon. He left me to guard you." She took a breath and closed her eyes. "I know I can't fix everything. But I freed the girl, his new wife. That will weigh well with God, won't it?"

Raseed would not presume to speak for Him. He said simply, "God is All-Merciful."

The girl opened her teary eyes and spoke more swiftly. "He bound you with firevine. It can't be untied. I've poisoned it, but it'll take an hour to die. God willing, it'll die before he returns." More weeping. "I *am* foul, holy man. My soul is dirty. But, God forgive me, I want to live. I have to go. You don't know the things he can do, master dervish. I have to go."

Ushra went.

*But she's freed Hafi's wife!* Raseed praised God as he lay there captive, bleeding, alone.

\* \* \*

The red riverboat had docked near the High Bridge of Boats. Adoulla found the hatch open and thanked God. He made his way into the cabins without being discovered, which meant that this Zoud was either blessedly overconfident or waiting for him. For a moment Adoulla half-hoped that he'd find Raseed and the magus's "wives" before Zoud found him.

But then, as he came to the threshold of a cabin that seemed impossibly spacious, he heard whistling. It was “The Druggist, the Draper, and the Man Who Made Paper,” Miri’s least-favorite song. *Not a good omen.*

The room *was* impossibly spacious, Adoulla realized. A magically-enlarged cabin, grown to the size of a tavern’s greeting-room. In a far corner the dervish lay bound on the floor. *Firevine!* Dried blood ringed Raseed’s wrists and ankles.

Between Adoulla and the boy stood Zoud.

The magus was gaunt and bald with a pointed beard. Raseed’s sheathed sword lay at Zoud’s feet, and beside the magus stood an oaf whose size made his purpose obvious—*bodyguard*. There was no way Adoulla could reach the dervish before those two did.

Zoud, disturbingly unsurprised at Adoulla’s entrance, stopped whistling and gestured toward Raseed. “He is in great pain.”

Adoulla frowned. “Why stage this gruesome show for me?”

Zoud smiled. “Simple. I’m no fool—I know your sort. I don’t want you as an enemy. Hounding me across the Crescent Moon Kingdoms on some revenge-quest. No. All I ask is your oath before God that you’ll leave me in peace. I’d hoped to take the boy with me—the Order has enemies who’d pay well for a live dervish. But if you’ll be reasonable you may walk off this

ship, and we'll put the boy off as well. That's fair, isn't it? You've taken much from me already. My new wife. Even my first wife."

*Ushra's not here? And Hafi's wife is free? How?* Adoulla could find out later. What mattered now was that his options had just increased. In the corner behind the magus and his henchman, Adoulla saw a small flicker of blue movement. *Impossible!*

He smothered a smile and silently thanked God.

"So," Zoud said. "Do I have your oath, Doctor?"

Adoulla cleared his throat. "My Oath? In the Name of God I swear that you, with your tacky big-room spells, are but a half-dinar magus with a broken face coming to him!"

Everything happened at once.

He heard a snapping noise and the boy was free. It was impossible to snap firevine. But Adoulla adapted quickly to impossibilities. As Raseed leapt to his feet Zoud darted behind his bodyguard and screamed "Babouk! Kill!" The magus clapped twice.

*Oh no.*

The flash of red light dazzled Adoulla for a moment. But his eyes knew and adjusted to the glamour-glimmer of a dispelled illusion well enough. Adoulla had to give this fool

Zoud his due. The big bodyguard was gone. In his place was an eight-foot-tall cyklop.

*This is not good.*

A blue streak darted at the one-eyed, crimson-scaled creature. *Raseed!* The dimwitted monster grunted as the dervish barreled into it and knocked the mighty thing off its clawed feet.

Adoulla stood there for a stunned half-moment. *Half the monster's size, yet he topples it!* Dervish and furnace-chested cyklop wrestled on the ground until the monster wrapped its massive arms around the boy. Adoulla took a step toward the pair and shouted "Its eye! One sword-stroke through its eye!"

Then he whirled at the familiar sound of blade leaving sheath. Zoud stood before him with a hunted look on his face and a silver-hilted knife in his hand. *All out of tricks, huh? And now you think to buy your freedom with a knife?* Adoulla cracked his knuckles and took a step toward the magus.

\* \* \*

Raseed wriggled free of the cyklop's crushing hug. The monster pressed him again, closing its clawed hands around Raseed's fists. His wounds from the firevine burned, but he pushed the pain away.

As part of his training, Raseed had once wrestled a northern bear. This creature was stronger. Still, Raseed

thought, as impermissible pride crept in, he would slay it. Then he'd know that he had fought a cyklop and won. He twisted his powerful arms, trying to get the leverage to free himself. But the cyklop held him fast. And the pain in Raseed's wrists and ankles grew worse.

Then he heard a small sound and his left hand blazed with pain. His little finger was broken. Another sound. His index finger. The rest would follow if he did not get free. But how?

The cyklop decided for him. Shifting, it hoisted Raseed aloft like a doll. The monster tried to dash Raseed's brains out on the floorboards.

Raseed twisted as he fell, somersaulting across the room. His sword hand was unharmed. He thanked God and forced away the pain of his wounds. He scooped up the blue scabbard, rolled to his feet, drew.

The cyklop grunted. It blinked its teacup-sized eye as Raseed rushed forward. With eagle-speed Raseed leapt, sword extended. He thrust upward.

With an earsplitting howl, the cyklop fell, blood seeping from its single eye. Watching the monster die, Raseed felt more relief than pride.

\* \* \*

Adoulla charged Zoud, making sure that his robed shoulder was his opponent's most prominent target. A sneer

flashed on Zoud's face. The fool thought Adoulla was blundering into his dagger-path.

The silver-handled blade came down.

And glanced off the blessed kaftan, as surely as if Adoulla were wearing mail. Zoud got in one more useless stab before Adoulla let loose the right hook that had once made him the best street fighter on Dead Donkey Lane. With a girlish cry, the magus crumpled into a heap. Somewhere behind Adoulla, the cyklop howled its death-howl.

His tricks gone and his nose broken, Zoud lay bleeding at Adoulla's feet. The magus whimpered to himself like a child yanked from a good dream. Before Adoulla knew what was happening, Raseed was at his side.

"Magus!" the dervish said. "You have stolen and slain women. You dared demand an oath before God to cover your foulness. For you, there can be no forgiveness!" Raseed sent his blade diving for Zoud's heart. In a breathspace, the forked sword found it. The magus's eyes went wide as he gurgled and died.

Adoulla felt ill.

"What is wrong with you, boy? We had the man at our -" He fell silent, seeing the boy's firevine wounds.

Raseed narrowed his tilted eyes. “With apologies, Doctor, I expected Adoulla Makhslood to be a man who struck swiftly and righteously.”

“And instead you’ve found some pastry-stuffed old fart who isn’t fond of killing. Poor child! God must weep at your cruel fate.”

“Doctor! To take God’s name in mock is imper—”

“Enough, boy! Do you hear me? Fight monsters for forty years as I have—cross the seas and sands of the Crescent Moon Kingdoms serving God—then *you* can tell *me* what is ‘impermissible.’ By then, Almighty God willing, I’ll be dead and gone, my ears untroubled by the peeps of holy men’s mouths!” The tirade silenced the dervish, who stood looking down at the magus’s bleeding corpse.

The problem was, Adoulla feared that the boy’s way might be right. Adoulla thought of the girl, Ushra. And of Raseed’s pain as the firevine had tortured him. And of Zoud’s dead “wives.” He sighed.

“Oh, God damn it all. Fine, boy. You’re right. Just as you were about the blower-on-knots.” Adoulla sat down with a grunt, right there on the bloody floorboards. He had fought a dozen battles more difficult than this over the decades, but he did not think he’d ever felt so weary.

Raseed spoke slowly. “No, Doctor. *You* were right. About Ushra, at least. She did what she did from weakness and fear of a wicked man. Yet I would’ve killed her.” The dervish was quiet for a long moment. “It was her, Doctor. Ushra. She poisoned the firevine. She freed Hafi’s wife. I’m ashamed to say it, but I must speak true—I wouldn’t have escaped if not for her.”

Adoulla was too tired to respond with words. He grunted again and clambered to his feet.

\* \* \*

Yehyeh’s teahouse buzzed with chattering customers. Raseed tried to ignore the lewd music and banter. Hafi and his tall, raven-haired wife sat with her grateful parents on a pile of cushions in the far corner. At a table near the entrance, Raseed sat with the Doctor, who was nursing what he had called a “God damned gruesome tracking spell headache”. Lifting his head from his hands slowly, the Doctor fixed a droopy eye on Raseed.

“How many men have you killed, boy?”

Raseed was confused—why did that matter now? “Two. No...the highwaymen...five? After this villain last night, six.”

“So many?” the Doctor said.

Raseed did not know what to say, so he said nothing.

Adoulla sighed. “You’re a fine warrior, Raseed bas Raseed. If you’re to study with me, though, you must know your

number and never forget it. You took a man's life yesterday. Weigh that fact! Make it harder than it is for you now. Remember that a man, even a foul man, is not a ghul."

Again, Raseed was confused. "'Harder,' Doctor? I've trained all my life to kill swiftly."

"And now you will train to kill reluctantly. *If* you still wish an apprenticeship."

"I do still wish it, Doctor! High Shaykh Aalli spoke of you as -"

"People speak of me, boy, but now you've met me. You've fought beside me. I eat messily. I ogle girls one-third my age. And I don't like killing. If you're going to hunt monsters with me, you must see things as they are."

Raseed, his broken fingers still stinging, his wrists and ankles still raw, nodded and recalled the High Shaykh's words about where virtue lives. *Strange places indeed.*

\* \* \*

A quiet settled over the table and Adoulla devoured another of the almond-and-anise rolls that Yehyeh had been gratefully plying him with. As he ate he thought about the boy sitting across from him.

He did not relish the thought of a preachy little dervish in his home. He could only hope the boy was young enough to stretch beyond the smallness that had been beaten into him at

the Lodge. Regardless, only a fool would refuse having a decades-younger warrior beside him as he went about his last years of ghul hunting.

Besides, the dervish, with his meticulous grooming, would make a great house-keeper!

He could hear Miri's jokes about boy-love already.

*Miri. God help me.*

Raseed lifted his bowl of plain limewater and sipped daintily. Adoulla said nothing to break the silence, but he slurped his sweet cardamom tea. Then he set his teabowl down, belched loudly, and relished the horrified grimace of his virtuous new apprentice.

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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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