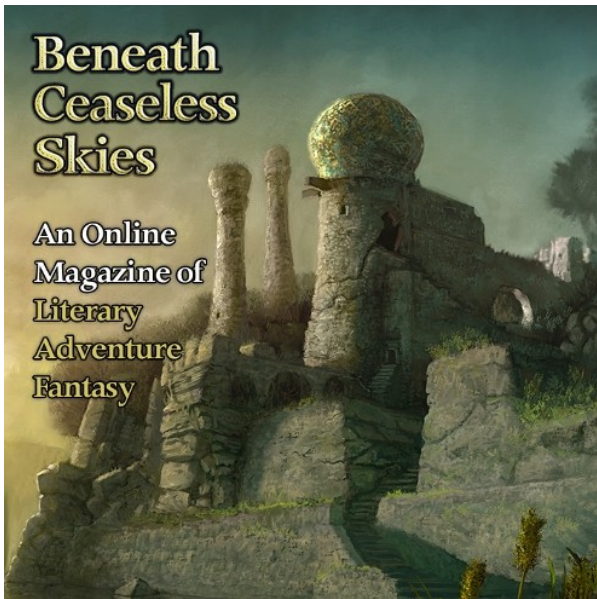


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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## THE TINYMAN AND CAROLINE

by Sarah L. Edwards

None but the tinymen and the rats ran these dark streets beneath the streets, where the river was piss and planks served for bridges. There was a time when Jabey would have traded a hand for a candle, but he'd been a new runner then, and young. Since then long terrified scrambles in this darkness had taught his feet as no map could do.

Now he scurried along the ledges built of dredged sewer rubbish. At a side tunnel he turned and paused, blinking against stabs of light: a drain. He clambered up through its broken bars.

The sun had set while he'd been below—the stabbing light was the glow of a streetlamp. Pressing himself into the shadows of a carriage house, Jabey peered upstreet and down at the dark, massive forms of the istocrats' castles.

The west hill, right. He'd never been this close before. From where he stood it was castles all the way up, or so the chatter said, castles built of diamond windows and brownstone flecked with gold, and livedolls hung from the doors instead of knockers.

Just one pretty was all he needed. One sparkling trinket to buy himself into the clubber chief's service—and to buy his

protection.

Something rustled behind him, and he spun, certain he'd see Yol Stulbrend's mutt closing in to tear him into a clutter of tinyman bones. But no, it was only a breeze scuffing newsprint across the cobblestones. Jabey shuddered against the chill and the trembling deep in his belly and slipped along the shadows to the nearest dark-windowed house. The stones jutted out slightly between their mortar, forming ledges just deep enough for the toe of a determined, barefooted tinyman.

He'd meant to find an opening from the roof, but at the second story a muffled snort drew him to a window. At his touch it swung silently open. On a bed lay a man stiff on his back, eyes closed, the whiskers of his mustache draping his face like rats' tails. Jabey edged past into the hall and drew the door shut behind him.

A pretty, the hard-eyed kid had said, sneering down at him. Sewer running and pocket picking wasn't enough, never mind that Jabey made no claims to be a sneak thief. It was a fine pretty he needed to buy into Sloan's service— "And don't think there ain't others trying for the place, runt."

Jabey didn't let himself think about where that place was. Not yet.

What about jewels? In the safe, likely. Yol's buddies had long complained of those. Silver? Yol boasted of stealing some

rich's silver teapot, years ago. The kitchen, Jabey guessed. Where'd riches keep their kitchens?

He wanted to smack himself for this plan—this *lack* of a plan. Except it was all he had between him and the stingwhip, which Yol'd lay on heavy enough if he got hold of Jabey again, if he didn't set Kingfisher on him instead.

He swallowed the doubts and kept going, glancing in the open doorways as he passed. The rooms were filled with furniture and tapestries likely worth his life and more, but he could hardly have budged them, much less taken them below.

He had to crawl down the stairs, pausing once when he thought he'd heard something creak. It didn't come again. He kept going, through rooms and doorways and more rooms all full of istocrat trappings, and finally into the kitchen. He climbed up a cabinet and wandered the countertops, opening cupboard doors and peering over into drawers. The plates were china and the tools all iron. He found a big pot he could have slept in comfortably, and behind another door a pantry stacked with jars and slouching burlap sacks, but nothing he'd guess for silver.

Not that he'd know it if he saw it, eh?

Brilliance splashed the room, bouncing from the hanging knives in their rack, casting Jabey's shadow a full threefeet

high against the window shutters. He whirled, hands high against the light.

A girl stood in the doorway with a single wavering candle. Above a high-collared nightie wide blue eyes peered at him. Her mouth opened, closed.

“Are you an elf?” she said finally. “You look older than me.” Another glance up and down him, over his stubby arms, his shirt and trousers smeared with sewer grime. “But you’re not taller.”

“Not taller,” he agreed. But not much shorter, which made her... three? Four? He couldn’t remember the year he’d stopped growing.

“I must introduce myself,” she said. “I’m Caroline Elisabeth Morrowbridge.” She set the candle stand on the floor and curtsied.

“Jabey,” he said. Would she called the coppers? Throw him out herself?

“I beg your pardon?”

“Name’s Jabey.”

“And are you an elf, Mr. Jabey?”

“I don’t think so.” She was hardly big enough to hurt him, but he’d enough on his head; he didn’t need to rough some rich’s little girl.

“Do you mean you don’t know? You must come with me, and I’ll show you.”

“I can’t be staying—”

“Then I should have to call Mr. Gaither to come and show you out.” Caroline crossed her arms. “And he doesn’t like being waked.”

Jabey gave a last regretful glance around the kitchen, so empty of pretties, and slid off the countertop. He followed her to the staircase, where she blew out the candle and crept slowly up, quite as softly as he had earlier. He remembered the creaking he’d heard.

She led him into a bedroom, shut the door behind him, and relit the candle.

“We must be very quiet,” she whispered. “I shall be scolded if anyone hears.” She reached beneath the bed and pulled out a book so broad and thick her arms trembled. Sitting on the flowery rug, she opened it to a page and pointed to a red-cheeked man clutching a nut as big as his head. “That’s an elf.” She looked up at Jabey and twisted her mouth. “I believe you’re too tall for an elf.”

Jabey snorted. “Never been too tall for anything.”

She nodded seriously. “I know what you mean. I’m terribly small for my age—I’ll be nine in October.

“Perhaps you’re a sprite, instead? No, that’s silly, you haven’t any wings—have you? You aren’t hiding them beneath your shirt?”

“Ain’t hiding nothing,” said Jabey, freshly conscious of the slave collar scars at his neck—conscious, too, of the rips in his trousers and the sewer-filth crusted on his feet. He wondered if there were any folk like *that* in her book, folk with scars and bruises and mud under their toenails.

She frowned and turned more pages, muttering to herself. Jabey eyed the window—could he get it open? That latch didn’t look shut.

Caroline looked up, pouting, and said, “This book isn’t very useful. You don’t match the descriptions of *any* of the fairy-folk.”

“What, no tinymen in your book?” he muttered. “None of them that run your messages and keep your sewers running nice? Wouldn’t figure a rich’s book would talk about *us*.”

She leaned closer, eyes glowing with reflected candlelight. “I’ve never heard of a tinyman.” Her fingers stretched towards his face.

“Now, you can’t be telling people about me,” he said, edging away. Towards the window....

“Of course not,” she said, dropping her hand. “Father would be fearfully angry. He hates elves and brownies and

sprites and all those things. He says they aren't natural, that they're frauds and foul things a lady shouldn't think about.

"But you're not a fraud—any ninny can see it. I don't understand why Father should object so. Franny Grace—that's my nurse, only I'm too old for a nurse now—she had a hat once with a sweet little bird on it. Every time she passed someone on the street, or said hello, the bird would cheep. And Father made her give it to the rubbish man!"

"Probably was a livedoll," Jabey said.

"A what?"

"From the dark quarter. You know. From the animatists."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you know the dark quarter?" He flicked his hand to the south. "Where the alleys are all closed in and there's canvas stretched over the streets. Where the clubbers are. You know?"

Where poisons bubbled and vaped like the whiskey in Yol's corn still. Where bastard babies were abandoned, never to grow to adulthood—though they might live that long, if you called it living. Where *he* hoped to find a place before night's end, stupid runt that he was.

She was leaning forward, eyes wide. "Is that where you come from?"

"I guess so. Yeah." Every tinyman began in the dark quarter, however quickly he escaped thereafter.

“I should so like to see it.”

“*Why?*” he asked, appalled.

“I’ve never been to Faerie,” she said. “I’ve read about it, the strange creatures and people there—quite dangerous, marvelous things they have in Faerie.”

“Dangerous, right,” said Jabey. “Folk like to knock you in chains as talk to you. Or use you up for their gimmickry, if you’re too old to work.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I know to be very polite to everyone I meet, even the ugly people. I know to follow directions and not go where I’m not invited and never eat anything offered me. I’d be quite safe.”

“You’re crazy.”

Her lips drew thin. “You’ve come to rob Father, haven’t you?”

“Hey, now-” Jabey stumbled backward and fell against a chair only five feet from the window clasp.

“Just because I’m a child doesn’t mean I’m stupid. You fairy-folk are just like magpies, always after pretty baubles. The book said. Well, I’ll get one for you, if you’ll take me to your country.”

“Wait, what?”

“A trade. I give you something nice, and you take me to Faerie.”

“I don’t know the way to Faerie,” he muttered.

“To your country, I mean. Or else I’ll tie you up in my bedclothes and wake the whole house, and they’ll put you in jail!”

“I can’t take you off with me. There’d be riches sending after me like wasps that got their nest smashed in, and coppers, too. I got enough folk after me now!”

“Please, Mr. Jabey, take me to see your country. You could return me before tomorrow, couldn’t you, so no one would notice?”

“Um....”

“Here, I’ll find you something—I know!” She stood up so fast the candle flickered out, and a moment later she’d crept out the door.

He backed the last few steps to the window, reached for the clasp, and hesitated. He’d better get out now. Except... night was wearing on, and he couldn’t flub this chance with Sloan. Couldn’t. Every time he popped up from below, there’d be roughs looking for him—more than one’d like to lay his hand on a tinyman’s bounty.

And then Caroline was back, pressing into his hand something heavy wrapped in cloth. “My opera glasses,” she whispered. “They’re very fine. Father had them custom made. Now, let us go before someone wakes.”

Clutching the bundle, Jabey followed her down hallway and stairs, where he waited while Caroline draped a dark cloak over her nightie. Then she led him past the kitchen and through a side door that she closed behind her.

“How do we get there?” she said.

For a moment he only stared at her, this rich girl just asking to be nabbed and ransomed. And then he shrugged and took out the paper he’d pulled from the ganger kid’s unwilling fingers. On it were the quick-drawn figures—a gemstone inked in crimson and three bronze lamps.

“What curious pictures,” Caroline said. “What are they?”

“That’s the street,” Jabey said, pointing to the gem. “I don’t know what the other’s for.”

He didn’t want to go. Now, with the bundle heavy in his hand and the figures on the paper to direct him, he wanted to drop it all and run, below maybe, to make his home with the rats.

But Yol’d find him, even if another runner didn’t turn him in. He had to come up sometime. Jabey fingered his neck, the scars there reminding him of matters more pressing than old memories—or tagalong istocrat girls.

“Let’s go,” he muttered.

At the drain Caroline balked, peering down between the bars. “Is it safe?”

He lowered himself to the ground and shimmied through the gap. “*Safe* is in your rich house. Go back if you want.”

A pause, and then she was scrabbling down beside him.

\* \* \*

Once he had to pull her aside into a crumbling outlet when he heard the telltale of a runner scrambling past, ferrying message or cargo. Another time he took her hand and they ran by a sideway and the squeaking rats nested there. Caroline didn't let go of him after they were past.

Eventually she said, “I don't understand why you like it here.”

“Like? I got no say in it. Go up above, the real men'll catch me, right enough.”

“Are they—are they worse than the things down here?”

“Only the ones that'd like to beat me. Or shoot me. Or lock me up for being a runt.”

“A runt?”

“A tinyman.”

She shivered next to him, from his words or from the chill. “It sounds like Father,” she said. “I'm sorry we're like that.”

“Sorry?” He choked back a laugh. “You're a rich muck's little girl. What do you care?”

“I care. It's not good manners, or good sense either, to provoke fairy-folk. Besides, I'm rather more like them than

most, don't you think? I'm so small. I asked Father once if my mother was a fairy. I thought that might account for it."

"And?" Jabey said, after a pause.

"And she wasn't, I suppose. Anyway, Father was terribly angry. I think he was afraid. *That's* why I want to go with you. Father's afraid of something to do with Faerie, and I want to know what it is."

"Better you be afraid too, then."

"Perhaps, but I'm not."

"Not even now?"

A couple of deep breaths beside him, and then, "No. Not even now."

And then they were crossing a plank into a sewer line he'd never run before. At the next storm drain he had to sniff at the sluggish air and listen to faraway drips before he could decide the turn to take. The air was stranger here; through the familiar sewage stench floated other odors—bitter, sick-sweet, acrid. The drain holes were few and their bars sturdy, though every so often they passed port doors in the tunnel sides, all clamped shut.

At a drain hole with two broken bars Jabey climbed up loose bricks and gingerly pushed his way out.

"Is it Faerie?" asked Caroline.

"Shh!" he hissed as he stared at the street beyond.

Belying its name, the dark quarter was radiant with the colored glow of dozens of windows. Draped in costumes sublime and hideous, men and women lurched past the windows and burst from wide-swinging doors. Above painted faces there sprouted plumage half again as high as their bodies, and tails of lizards and tigers and peacocks swept behind them.

Caroline pushed up beside Jabey. "It is Faerie," she breathed, staring at the spectacle. "Guess you're seeing things after all," Jabey said, still looking. Something in the crowd's loose swagger was familiar. "They're soaked. Come on. They got no eyes for us."

Bright-hued lanterns lined the streets on both sides, leaving no shadows in which to hide. Instead Jabey and Caroline wound their way amongst the revelers, who were too busy singing, shouting, and spilling pungent brew on one another to pay them any attention. The street ended in a wall disguised by some means of gauze and foam. Jabey boosted Caroline to the top and climbed over himself, and on the other side all was stillness and darkness again, save only for plain yellow streetlamps and the occasional candle in an upstairs window.

At the first cross street dim lamps shone green and gold—emerald, and perhaps topaz, Caroline said. They followed Emerald until they came to lamps of deep crimson that

Caroline opined were garnet. They settled the question of which direction the “3rd lamp” should be counted from by starting off in one direction “until we reach the end—then we can count coming back.” But they didn’t need to. A few blocks before the street lost itself in labyrinthine alleyways, they came to a shop front with bright windows and three lamps glowing over the door.

Jabey looked at Caroline, shook his head. “I know this kind of place. It’s a gang lair—or a club, I guess. They got plenty of uses for a little rich’s daughter, and you wouldn’t like any of them.”

“But this is *Faerie*,” she said. “I can’t stop just because I’m afraid. Besides, you said you have business? Then surely you have safe passage—and I shall, too, in your company.”

“Not this time,” he said. “Here, get out of the light.” He pointed behind a rubbish barrel. Scowling, Caroline huddled in its shadow.

“Now *don’t move*. You’re staying out here and hiding until I get back. Or don’t you want to go home sometime?” As she began to reply, he turned and stalked up to the door.

No one stopped him; few even turned to look as he came in. He was put in mind of Rat Hold, but it was not the same. Where Rat Hold’s walls displayed skin-clad women in garish colors, these walls were paneled in wood. Rat Hold’s tables

were sopping with cheap beer by this hour, but here were only single glasses of a reddish drink, some still half-full, with no evidence anywhere of bottles or kegs. And in Rat Hold at this moment there were surely the personal posses of two or three or even more of the thug chiefs, each jovial or surly as the booze took him. Here the faces all were somber.

He stared for so long that someone glanced at him and said, "You've brought a message?"

"Sloan." he mumbled. "I'm looking for Sloan."

Soon the sneering half-grown kid from the square was chivvying him along through the tables, through the thick sweeping curtains, and into an alcove behind another curtain, even thicker, so that when it was drawn to behind him the outside murmur was hushed.

Another moment, and the curtain swept open and closed again around a thin, pale-faced man in a suit and a string tie. He eyed Jabey from beneath stark black eyebrows and motioned him to a circle of chairs around a low table.

"You realize you are in a peculiar position?" the man said. "The number of individuals beginning their employment in this district after the age of five or six years is remarkably small." One eyebrow arched. "Much like the number of tinymen at liberty to seek employment."

“‘At liberty’ is a manner of speaking, Mister,” Jabey said, lifting his chin.

“I thought it might be,” said Sloan. “If I may?”

Jabey shivered as Sloan’s cool fingers brushed against his neck, pausing at the scars. “I was lackey boy to a ganger named Yol for a long while.”

“Until quite recently, I would guess.”

Jabey met his eyes. “Yeah.”

Sloan dropped his hand and nodded as if this were expected. “If you would show me the item you brought—the token, as it were, of your eagerness to join my enterprise.”

It came to Jabey that he’d never looked at these glasses in proper light; what if they were just a cheap shiny? But the sudden sharp panic receded as he pulled them from his pocket and unwrapped the linen. They were indeed a tiny pair of opera glasses, with a simplicity and a heft about them that suggested expense.

“How very interesting,” said Sloan, taking them from him. “You understand that I do not personally secure raw material?” he said. “And of course, if the child is dead or grown they are *only* a token, but even so....”

Caroline. They were Caroline’s glasses.

Jabey’s nails dug into his palms. A ‘token,’ right. And he was a tinyman, he knew what good tokens were to the dark

quarter's shapers-flesh, what manner of gimmickry they could do without even touching a person, so long as they had a handkerchief or a snip of hair. Stupid muck, what'd he been thinking? Not thinking, that was it.

Sloan was patting at his pockets, finally bringing out an instrument with a gauge at its end, scented faintly of oil. He held the instrument to the glasses. "The child is indeed alive. Yet the reading is irregular...." He frowned and pulled a different gauge from his pocket, this one with tines jutting from its end, and held the glasses beneath the tines. "You are either a fool or far more subtle than I guessed."

Had it been any old gang chief maybe Jabey's bravado could have held, but it melted under Sloan's glare. "Mister, I guess I'm a fool, because I got no idea what you're saying."

"Haven't you?" But it didn't sound like an accusation.

And then the curtain opened and a man huge but blank-eyed stood there, his massive hand engulfing Caroline's. A bogey. He intoned, "Delamander says, 'This girl says she's with your visitor.'"

"Increasingly curious," said Sloan. "Leave her here. Tell Delamander, 'Sloan says, 'Post an alert, and keep an eye on the borders. Security is over-loose.'"

The man walked out.

“Young lady, if you will kindly sit beside your associate here. May I ask how you come to be here, and with what purpose?”

Caroline curtsied and sat. “Mr. Jabey brought me, sir. We made a bargain. I gave him my opera glasses”—she pointed—“and he brought me to his country.”

“His country?”

“She thinks I’m an elf or such-like,” said Jabey miserably.

“And I always wanted so much to visit Faerie.”

“Faerie, indeed,” said Sloan. “May I ask your name?”

“Caroline Elisabeth Morrowbridge, sir.”

“Morrowbridge. Morrowbridge—I could vow I was familiar with the name. Your parents...?”

“My father’s Jonathan Standish Morrowbridge. My mother was Ellen Gainsborough before she married Father, but she’d dead now.”

“Morrowbridge. Of course. And it explains the peculiar reading.” Sloan glanced at his instrument. “Not peculiar at all, actually. What a marvelous coincidence it all is, don’t you agree?”

Caroline sat at the edge of her chair, silent, eyes bright. Jabey shook his head. “Look here, Mr. Sloan, I’m looking for a place to courie, as you like, and any other odd bits a tinyman might do. I didn’t mean nothing by bringing you those bungy

glasses, nor by bringing this girl here, either, which I sure didn't mean to do. If you've no mind to tell, that's fine by me, sir, but just you know I don't know nothing you don't tell me."

Sloan raised an eyebrow. "A wise attitude—a pity more don't take it." He turned to Caroline. "Perhaps you would enjoy a tour of Faerie?"

What about the job, Jabey wanted to ask. Was he in? Did he even want to be in? Gangers were no cheerful companions, but they were as good as kin next to clubbers, who were known for being sheer uncanny—which seemed a fair enough estimate of Sloan.

Not that he'd a choice between Sloan and any old ganger. It was Sloan or Yol.

He followed them out reluctantly, twitching at every sound behind him.

\* \* \*

Sloan led them through warehouse rooms full of rabbits, rooms where goats bawled and lank-tailed monkeys screeched. He gave Caroline an apple to feed a pair of sheep bleating and milling in their pen. He led them strolling through laboratories thick with the same sharp odors that filled the sewers below.

Jabey scanned each new room for familiar benches or shelves, for the particular water-stained ceiling that he remembered clearest of anything in this place because he'd

spent so much time staring up at it, months and months as they drained the growth out of him.

Finally they came to the room he knew, the high-beamed laboratory crowded with benches, instruments, and rows of vats. Sloan swept his hand towards one and said, “And here, as you can see, is how we begin the process of making tinyman.”

Caroline turned to Sloan, eyes huge. “You *make* them?”

“Certainly. Your associate Mr. Jabey was destined to be a full-sized man, once.”

Jabey jammed his fists deeper in his pockets. He dared not look in the vat, where the baby slept. *This* part of the dark quarter he knew quite well; could never unknow, however he'd like to. The bogeys standing over the vats were the same that had tended him, the huge mindless men who spoke only others' words. They'd never spoken any to him.

“Then how did you make him small?” Caroline was saying.

“We've certain methods that we find quite satisfactory.”

“Trade secrets,” Jabey said, amazed at the mildness in his voice. “They don't tell outside folk.”

“The techniques would bore you,” said Sloan. “However, the principle is simple enough. You, as a living entity, enjoy certain quantities of which you are almost surely unaware: quantities such as the general health of your body, the amount

of growth you will experience over your lifetime, the vast complicated sum of your intelligence.

“Imagine yourself a beaker.” He dipped a nearby glass in the vat’s blue fluid. “Here you are. And here is something else—something entirely lifeless, completely inanimate.” He held up another glass, empty. “What a simple matter it is to pour some of *you* into some of *it*.” Fluid sloshed into the empty glass. “A tinyman was a full glass once, but we poured most of his growth into something else... useful.”

What sort of useful? What was it they’d cheated him to make?

And what was this ache in his hands, as though they would snap out and strangle Sloan of their own accord?

“You mean Mr. Jabey is an ordinary man? He’s only—” Caroline paused, searching for the word. “He’s only made?” She peered around at Jabey, eyes glimmering with tears. “He isn’t of the fairy-folk?”

Sloan didn’t seem to hear. “There is one more thing I should particularly like to show you, Ms. Morrowbridge,” he said. “This way, please.”

Caroline gave Jabey a last forsaken look and followed, turning her head away when he caught up to her. He buried his hands in his pockets and stomped ahead. Dumb rich’s girl, he shouldn’t oughta expect anything else from her.

Beyond was another hallway lined with doors, in each a window criss-crossed with bars. At one of these Sloan set a wide, shallow-stepped ladder and held Caroline's hand as she climbed it. Jabey pushed up beside her.

Through the window was a child's nursery, very small, wallpapered and wood-floored and carpeted with a colorful rug. In the bed slept a girl somewhat smaller than Caroline.

"Why is she here?" Caroline said.

"A man has requested a simulacrum of his late beloved," said Sloan. "We procured an unwanted girl infant, and have since been molding her flesh in the desired pattern. But of course she would grow at the rate of any ordinary child if we did not supplement that growth with, shall we say, the contents of someone else's beaker."

"So you shall have another tinyman?"

"Who can say? Human growth is costly. This man offered us a source of his own, rather than pay the fee we asked, and we must extract the growth indirectly, via tokens and potions—an inefficient method. Perhaps he will decide sometime soon that the usual growth rate is sufficient." A slight cough. "I am not sure he will even see the project through. He is rather a nervous man."

Jabey looked at the sleeping girl, doubtless accustomed to her tiny world and the people staring at its window. He had

been her once—only he had never grown, and she would. Maybe. So someone else would be the tinyman....

A suspicion struck, as sudden and brilliant as a flint spark.

He crawled down the ladder, certain every thought was written in the tension of his shoulders, in his glare. If Sloan noticed a change, he ignored it as he ushered Caroline to the floor.

Caroline, who was terribly small for her age....

Jabey kept his eyes low as he followed them, composing his face. What did it matter if Caroline's rich papa was draining her growth away for that 'project' back there, to gimmick up his dead wife? It didn't, that's all. Caroline was a rich's girl; she'd be all right no matter her size. It didn't mean anything to Jabey.

Sloan returned them at last to the club, pausing at the door to allow them ahead. "To the same meeting room," he said. "We've one last matter to discuss."

It wasn't until Jabey had pushed aside the curtain—under the blank eye of a sentry bogey—that he realized Sloan was some distance behind them.

Caroline slid into a chair and watched Jabey carefully as he stood by the next one. That's right, rich's girl, look at him, nothing special, just *made*. "What is he going to do to us?" she asked.

“Won’t do nothing,” Jabey growled. No way a gimmicker would risk gumming up a project.

“He won’t turn us into anything, will he?”

Sloan pushed aside the curtain and smiled down to Caroline.

“Ms. Morrowbridge,” Sloan said, “it has been my unexpected pleasure to show you around my small realm.” Another smile, which Caroline didn’t return. “As a last treat before you make your way home, perhaps you’d care for a bit of a brew we make here?” From a tray behind him he brought a steaming mug and set it in front of her.

She took a gulping breath. “I mustn’t drink things from Faerie. If I do, I’ll have to stay here for always.”

“Ah, but in this corner of Faerie it is different. Here, you must drink a bit of our brew, or else we cannot allow you to leave. And you have had enough adventure for now, have you not? You would prefer to return to your home and your bed?”

“Thank you ever so much,” Caroline said, “but I mustn’t drink it.” Her voice was firm but her hands trembled in her lap.

“Just leave her be, why don’t you?” Jabey said.

Sloan hushed him with a wave of his hand and crouched to look Caroline in the eye. “Ms. Morrowbridge, I shall be frank. I cannot allow you to remember clearly the things you have seen here.”

“I won’t tell,” she whispered, shrinking back.

“That is not enough, I’m afraid. This brew—which is, I assure you, a most pleasant and warming potion—will leave this night’s happenings a dream, and no more. If things have frightened you here, then you will remember them as only a nightmare. If you have been disappointed,”—he gave Jabey the barest glance—“then this brew will dull the sorrow. But I cannot allow you to leave until you drink it.”

She turned frightened eyes to Jabey. She’d reason to be afraid, little rich’s girl in this down-and-under city. Something would have scared her sometime if she’d hadn’t come here.

Still he didn’t like seeing it in her eyes. If forgetting was all Sloan’s drink would do to her, maybe it was just as well. Jabey nodded to her.

“All right,” she said. Her eyes still on Jabey, she picked up the mug with both hands, lifted it to her mouth, and did not lower it until it was empty.

“Excellent,” Sloan said. “Now, perhaps you will find the getting out of our district a simpler matter than the getting in.”

He led them down a long casement of steps to a room with all the damp, dark odor of a cellar. At the far end was a rounded bronze door with a mechanism on its face. “We have our own uses for runners, on occasion,” he said. “Jabey, when

you return we can discuss the details of your employment. I believe we can find a mutually satisfactory arrangement.”

Jabey nodded, mute.

Sloan pressed at one knob and twisted at another, and the whole door swung in—bringing the sewer stinks with it.

“Right. Come on,” Jabey said, taking Caroline’s arm and helping her climb over the door’s edge. It clanked solidly behind them.

The trek back to the west hill was slower because of Caroline, but less tentative now that Jabey’d begun to see the pattern of these new sewers. They’d just crossed a plank into familiar lines when Caroline sniffled. Another three steps, and she sniffled again.

“That wasn’t Faerie,” she said.

“Could have told you that,” Jabey said.

“I knew it wouldn’t be. I know there’s no such place as Faerie.” Another sniffle. “I’m not a baby. But when you talked about it, it sounded *like* Faerie, all full of magic. And it was. Some of it was so very pretty, like the lamps that told the street names, and those creatures we saw dancing. I couldn’t have imagined half the things I saw. It was just like I thought Faerie would be.

“I always knew why people wanted to go to Faerie—it was beautiful and strange and full of things that you couldn’t

explain with ordinary words. But now I think understand why they should want to leave.” A pause. “That’s why I drank what Mr. Sloan gave me. Was I foolish?”

“Maybe you don’t want to remember all that,” said Jabey.

Caroline wrapped both her hands around one Jabey’s. “And I always knew you weren’t an elf,” she said softly. “But you’re still small, like me. I’m sorry Mr. Sloan and those people did those things to you.”

“Nothing for you to do about it,” he muttered. It was just her aristocrat manners talking, he told himself. It didn’t mean anything. “Come on, we gotta get you up there before dawn and people start watching.”

She didn’t say any more, and in another ten minutes he was half-carrying her. It came to him, as they climbed the last few blocks uphill, that there’d be questions regardless. Her dress was streaked with slime and she smelled like a runner. They’d probably think she’d fallen in someone’s privy.

At least she wouldn’t have to worry about explaining, if that muck Sloan knew his business. She wouldn’t know any better than anyone else.

Finally, the right storm drain. He left her leaning into the wall while he clambered above to look for passersby. The faintest hint of dawn hung at the horizon. He boosted her up

and got her the last few steps to the side door, where she fell into a heap, already dozing.

Much longer and the whole world would be waking, not just the milkmen and the lamp-dowers. Regular folk, and Yol, too, hunting his runaway runt. He knew a side drain down the hill where no one would bother him, where he could sleep a while before reporting in to Sloan.

He turned towards the drain, glancing back once to the girl huddled at the door. She was just a rich's girl, and anyway she was safe now. She was no worry of Jabey's anymore. He crawled below and headed towards that side drain.

Terribly small for her age....

It was somewhere beneath the dark quarter, not quite to Sloan's street, that Jabey realized what he was going to do. It didn't feel like a decision, like when he'd stood at the door of Yol's shop, thrown the severed slave collar behind him, and run. It was like the tide washing into Upper Inlet, each wave a little higher until the grounded ship rocked on her hull.

He was going to save Caroline. They'd gimmick no more growth from her; he'd see to it.

And, like a ship knew which way the ocean was, Jabey knew how. Maybe.

He didn't crawl up the same drain this time. He hadn't been watching the way they'd come to Sloan's laboratories, but

his feet knew, even here below. When he was under the right street he started sniffing for that peculiar bitterness of a tinyman's vatwater and followed it to an incoming pipe hardly wider than himself. He squeezed into the drain and edged upwards. Those drain holes in the corners of Sloan's laboratory, they were big enough for him. He'd be fine. As long as no early-rising gimmicker spilled something and no one mopped the floor and no one had bothered to secure those grills that covered the drains, he'd be fine.

Finally the pipe turned upwards and dim light filtered down. Jabey wedged himself against one side and wriggled up, wedged himself against the other side and up again. He reached the top and pressed against the grill, nearly slipping as he did. It didn't move. He shoved his shoulder up and it unstuck. Carefully he slid it aside and heaved himself onto the laboratory floor, cringing as the grill scraped against cement.

Across the room something skittered away. Jabey dropped to the floor, lungs tight. There was a squeak, more scuffling, and then he just saw a rat's tail as it disappeared around the door.

Just a stupid rat, and he was jumping like he'd never seen one before—him, a sewer runt. He took another breath and started walking.

It was a few moments' careful skirting of the benches, twisting of doorknobs almost above his reach, creeping down silent hallways before he found the laboratory they'd first come to, where Sloan had laid Caroline's glasses. Jabey hoped—it was all he had, a hope, a suspicion—that Sloan would not leave a token there unless there were other tokens about.

Caroline's glasses still lay on a bench; whether that was good sign or bad, Jabey couldn't guess. He walked down the row of cabinets, opening them one by one and searching for any collection of oddments that might be tokens. He found squat beakers and glass bulbs with long slender necks, matches and vials of fluid. Tiny white crystals like salt—maybe they *were* salt—sat beside stones the size of his fist.

At the end of the row stood a block of steel taller than Jabey with a wheel in its front and the slit outline of a door. If he were a clubber with gimmicked pretties to keep, he'd keep them here where would-be thieves like him couldn't snatch them. He ran a finger down the groove, felt the solid inflexibility of the thing. He rummaged a blunt knife from one of the cabinets and poked at the groove, wedging the blade in until it began to bend. The wheel, now, that was how it opened properly, wasn't it? He tried it and it rotated smooth and silent under his hand, but the door did not suddenly swing open nor a lock click free.

He shoved at the immobile, immovable mass. No good; the thing was solid as a sewer wall under twenty feet of rock.

Sloan. If he could get a jump on Sloan, make him open it -  
“I meant that you should report to me personally.”

Jabey twisted, already backing against the safe.

It was Sloan, of course, in the same cheap suit, though a rat was now draped over one shoulder. In the half-light Jabey caught a glimpse of its eyes and shrunk from their glittering brightness.

“Perhaps you will explain why you are attempting to deface my safe?” Sloan’s voice was cool, mild.

Jabey straightened as tall as his body allowed and kept his mouth closed. He wasn’t going to snivel even if he *was* going to get gimmicked one last time.

Sloan dropped to a crouch and looked Jabey in the eye—as did the rat. Jabey pressed just a little harder against the edge of the safe. Sloan noticed. “Go,” he said, and the rat hopped down and scurried into the shadows.

“Now, if you will kindly explain....” The voice hardened.

The words burst from him. “You got no right!”

“Undoubtedly,” Sloan said, “but to which wrong do you refer?”

“That girl back there,” said Jabey, “the one growing up for some crack-kettled rich—it’s her father, isn’t it? Caroline’s.”

“Ah.” Sloan nodded, stood. As he lit a lamp on the workbench he said, “I may not violate the privacy of my clients, of course, but allow me to compliment you on your astuteness.”

“Caroline ain’t been left on your doorstep like some cellar queen’s kid. What do you think, you can do your gimmickry on any muck you like, like they’re just air, free to take?”

“Better that she be abandoned before we use her? Better that she slip into the sewers afterwards, like so many sources do, to become couriers and pickpockets for the city’s underlife?” Sloan smiled faintly. “You of all men know our business here in the quarter. You sought employment nonetheless, did you not?”

Jabey stared for a moment, his teeth clamped so hard his jaw ached. And then, “You go on talking like that, like maybe you’re sorry about her and the others, when you *made* us this way. Look at me. I can’t even reach to punch you in the apples. I can’t go abroad for fear the right-living folk’ll catch me. And it’s not just me, either, nor the other bastards folks leave in your alleys. You do this to rich muck’s girls, just for coin.

“I’m some dumb runt, is what I’m thinking, because I’d take those kid glasses and lay your head with ‘em—I know the place, you learn that kind of thing running for gangers, which is all you left me to. All that, and -”

But the words were getting caught and his eyes burned with tears. He could only stare blurrily all the way up to that pale face, those eyebrows sardonically raised.

“All that,” Sloan finished, “and you still find whatever I might offer you preferable to running for Yol Stulbrend, avoiding that cur of his and the stings from his slave collar.”

“Sure don’t. Sure *don’t*.”

Sloan turned away. “Very well, then. Kindly step aside.” Jabey shuffled away as Sloan walked to the safe. He spun the spokes once, twice, back again in some pattern Jabey couldn’t see, and then pulled the door open. Inside were shelves of jars, each with some oddment or two, although not what Jabey had expected: curls of hair, pilings of dull white clippings like maybe istocrats’ fingernails. Sloan plucked a jar from the array, swung the door shut, and twirled the wheel. He held the jar out for Jabey to see. “This, I believe, is what you came for?”

A ringlet of brown hair curled at the bottom. It looked like Caroline’s.

Sloan set the jar on the bench and crouched again. Jabey did not shrink away this time.

“How badly do you want that the contents of that jar?”

Jabey waited.

Sloan sighed. “I planned to offer you our usual compensation: food, clothing, security from all but accident

and your own stupidity. But I see by your face that this isn't enough. Suppose I offered you that jar and its contents as well?"

"Don't make sense," Jabey said. "I'm just another no-account runt. What do you want me for?"

"You shall run my errands and my messages. You shall travel among your old circles of petty criminals and would-be gangster kings and report on all you hear. You shall be a spy, an envoy. In all these things I will require absolute obedience."

"That's dumb. You can have any muck you want for a coin or two."

"But I cannot hold their loyalty as I hold yours. It would be a simple matter to obtain a few more strands of hair from the girl if I wished. If you acted against my interests."

"You give me that jar, and I gotta *trust* you won't gimmick Caroline anymore?"

"As I must trust that you will not betray me."

"Why won't I run out right now and shout to all the coppers and the gangs about you?"

"First, because they won't listen. Second, because you don't yet have anything to tell them. But most importantly because you would not be standing in my laboratory if you didn't care more for that young lady—whom you'd never met until last night—than for your own convenience."

“She’s just some rich’s girl,” Jabey muttered.

“Yes.” Sloan folded his arms and looked down at Jabey, his expression blank. “She is but one of many projects. There is the wife Caroline’s father requested, for example. I make you no promises about her fate, nor about that of any other creature in my laboratories. Think carefully, Jabey Tinyman. Do you trade your liberty for one little girl’s height?”

That was it: a job and Caroline being all right. Everything he’d wanted—*more* than he’d wanted—when he’d crawled out of the west hill sewer, looking for a pretty.

“The glasses, too,” Jabey said.

Sloan raised an eyebrow, nodded in what maybe was approval. “The glasses, too.”

Jabey pushed away the picture of the little gimmicked girl sleeping in her little room. He couldn’t help her. He couldn’t help all those others either, people and beasts and some in between. This was all he could do.

“Yeah, okay,” he said. “You got me.”

\* \* \*

Sloan left him to attendants with instructions to feed him and find him a place to sleep, and when he woke again Sloan sent him with a message to a dive across town. “You needn’t hurry on the way back—just see you don’t get caught. You’ve no security yet from rabble like Yol.”

Jabey heard the hint—though he wondered why Sloan would give it—and after he'd delivered his message to the gape-mouthed serving girl, he ducked beneath the streets and walked the sewer line up, up, following his feet along the turns.

A few candles still lit the windows of Caroline's house. He knew the window he wanted this time, and he climbed up and out to it, remembering how the catch hadn't been quite closed. It wasn't now. He joggled it until it scraped loose. Frozen, he waited, but there wasn't a sound. Silently he swung the window open and crawled in.

There was no sleek head on Caroline's pillow, just a lump of quilt.

"Caroline?"

Nothing, for a moment. Then fingers slipped out of the quilt and slowly it slid down from Caroline's eyes, just glints in the dark.

"Wh-ho are you?" she whispered.

The potion. He should have remembered. "A tinyman," he said. "Like an elf, kind of."

The head disappeared. "I don't want to see an elf." The quilt muffled the words. "Go away."

"I'm Jabey. Don't you remember me?"

But of course she didn't.

She peeked out again, the cover still pulled up over her nose. “I dreamed about you.”

“Yeah?” He took a step forward.

Again the head ducked out of sight. “It was a bad dream,” she said, her voice wavering. “Please, go away.”

Stillness. No sound but quick, sniffling breaths beneath the quilt.

Finally Jabey said, “I won’t bother you again. But I’ll be seeing nobody else does, you hear?” He whispered the last words. “I’ll see you’re all right, Caroline.” He unwrapped the cloth from the opera glasses and laid them on the table by her window, and then he slipped out again, and down, and into the seeping streets known only to the rats and the tinymen.

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*People keep asking Sarah L. Edwards what she’s going to do with her life. While she figures it out, she continues to write science fiction and fantasy, read a lot, knit (anybody need a scarf?), and wonder what to do with her math degree. Her fiction has appeared in Writers of the Future XXIV, Aeon.*

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## SYSTEM, MAGIC, SPIRIT

by T.D. Edge

When I saw Prince Jestin rushing to join my carriage, nose carving the air like a tiny, snotty shark's fin, I actually *wanted* to die in the Spirit Ring tomorrow.

Half a dozen guards protected him, which was six too many by my reckoning. Fifth in line for the throne and about as smart as an earthworm with piles, no one would want to assassinate him anyway, except for maybe the King if he ever got round to anything as public-spirited as a cost-cutting initiative.

Jestin dismounted clumsily, mainly on account of not wishing to lower his gaze to anything so common as the ground, then stood outside the carriage waiting for one of his men to open the door for him. Once inside, he took the seat in the corner diagonally opposite me then waved his men away to flank us.

A long silence followed. Being well past the age of caring what royalty thought, and doomed besides, I could easily have taken a little nap right then. But duty called, or rather tugged at the remains of my conscience, so I said, "Would you like me to instruct the party to move off, sire?"

He waited a moment then turned to face me. “Wizard,” he said, only it came out bearing the latest high society affectation, a lisp—*withard*, God help me. “You may indeed issue such an instruction.”

There’s nothing better than low-ranking, fad-following royalty for extinguishing any last desire to even bother fighting for one’s life against other wizards in the Ring. But I leaned out the window anyway, whistled to the lead man, and we lurched forward, the carriage springs groaning into action. For a minute or two, our little cabin resonated with the sounds of horses neighing, leather straps creaking, men shouting. Dust from the hot road swirled in too, but Jestin acted as if it would never dare clog his royal nostrils. He looked out his window, casually waving a royal hand to the peasants at the side of the road, few of whom, it has to be said, reciprocated.

We didn’t speak as the carriage left the city and headed south along the east bank of the River Dalfang. The quiet suited me, since I wanted to absorb images of the land I loved and would almost certainly never return to. Like most countries in the northern world, however, the beauty of the mountains, wooded valleys and emerald meadows belied the harsh life experienced by the majority of its occupants.

“*Withard*,” said Jestin without looking at me. “We are most pleased with the smooth movement of this carriage. Pray

tell, is this the result of your magic?”

Ah-hah, what was this? A touch of curiosity poking its beak above the mental fog of privilege?

“Actually,” I said, “it’s nothing more than the result of a well-proportioned mixture of lubricants applied to the crucial bearings just before we left. Sire.”

Another silence followed, in which I assumed he’d lost interest and returned to contemplating his gold-plated navel. But then he said, “We would hear more about magic, if you please.”

Now, when I was younger and still full of missionary vim about changing the world for the better, such a request would have engorged my wand faster than a working woman could raise a farm boy’s interest. But experience had taught me that dissertations on magical systems are incredibly dull for all save the oblivious nincompoop who actually believes anyone wants to listen. No, when people ask you what you ‘do’, all they really want is a snappy line or two they can repeat over dinner later.

Well, to hell with that. I said, “Do you believe all good must be paid for?”

He blushed. “Are you implying the necessary comforts of royalty are not earned?”

“Actually, I just gave you the essence of the Legwin system of magic.”

“It seems rather blunt.”

“Everyone would like to be rich, sire, but the truth is there’s only so much wealth a nation can produce; so if one man takes more of it, another man has to live with less.”

I watched him struggle with righteous anger over this and admired his royal training in decorum when, instead of calling the guards to throw me in the nearest sewage ditch with my wand rammed where it hurt, he simply said, “Are there not two magical systems in Arcanadia?”

“Yes; you may prefer the other, sire: the Roeling system.”

“And why is that?”

“Roeling wizards believe magic lies outside the laws of cause and effect, therefore there is no price to pay for using it. Other than the wizard’s fee, of course.”

“I see,” he said. “Clearly, you follow the Legwin system, Wizard Ambrose.”

Well, what do you know? He’d actually bothered to find out my name before boarding. Interesting.

“I’m old-fashioned,” I said, deciding to dispense from now on with ‘sire’ and ‘your grace’ or any other hollow gloss his kind demanded in order to fan the illusion that they didn’t skid-mark their pants from time to time like everyone else. “Correction: I’m *old*. I know that every pleasure has to be paid

for with pain, sooner or later. Yet a life without pleasure isn't worth living."

So it was that my mind wandered across my life, remembering the pleasures; I didn't need reminding of the pains. But he spoke again then, bringing me back. "And why do you go to Nerwan?"

I didn't need to ask why *he* was visiting our neighboring country, it being an open secret amongst the few who cared that his old man had decided to marry him off to King Rusper's youngest daughter, hoping, no doubt, she'd want to set up home next door to her own folks.

"I'm going to die there," I said.

"We do not understand."

"Fifteen old wizard farts are getting together in an underground cavern, and the one who wants to live the most takes all the remaining spirit left in the others. He or she is filled with youth again and the rest die."

"How frightfully harsh."

"We figure it's better to have one wizard full of virile fizz to give the world than fifteen burnt out wrecks whose wands soon won't be good for anything except scratching their backs."

"We think we see...."

I didn't think he did. How could he possibly understand the fair finality of the Spirit Ring—that only the one who still

yearned for life was given it, while those too tired had it taken away?

I turned back to the window, but after only a minute or so he said, “I worry that I won’t love her.”

I should have felt honored—royalty normally confined use of the personal pronoun to their nearest and dearest. But his mention of ‘love’ just wearied me further.

“So what if you don’t?” I said, ignoring his shocked expression at my less than respectful tone. “It won’t stop you doing your duty, will it? I doubt there’s ever been a royal couple who married for love, anyway. It’d be damned inconvenient, what with all that ‘living in separate wings’ business and having to remain two paces apart in public at all times.”

“I don’t mean love like that,” he said. “I just want to marry someone who will speak to me as honestly as you have done.” He blushed and looked away, which was as well since my jaw had fallen open at this most un-royal-like declaration.

“Mother and father don’t communicate,” he said. “They barely even look at each other, unless it’s required by the occasion. I want a woman I can share my life with, so we can both learn and be better.”

Now, to a non-wizard, all this would no doubt sound like the ravings of a spoilt brat looking for a ‘real’ life because he had no chance of getting his hands on his family’s power. But I

followed Legwin and therefore knew about cause and effect. So I reckoned that maybe this prince acted like such a royal ponce in public simply because he was too scared to face his strongest need.

Well, it wasn't my battle, and I needed to prepare for my own end. So I said, "Let's hope the princess is what you're looking for," and, despite his look of disappointment, went back to watching the landscapes of my dwindling life pass by.

\* \* \*

We parted company in the main square of Jondée City. Watching him stick his nose back in the air and stride off as if he had a grapefruit up his backside, I assumed our little talk had been a mere diversion for him after all. I shrugged, made my way to the part of town where the shadows shape themselves, and booked into an inn.

I'd traveled light and had only three items to unpack: a brand new tooth-branch, a book of pirate stories, and a clean set of underclothes. This last made me smile, considering the state my bowels would quickly reach in the Spirit Ring; but there you are—our habits die last, and mine had always been to dress clean each day.

I spent the evening supping bear and reading about pantomime rogues in eye patches who roam the seventeen seas, worrying damsels but ultimately remaining faithful only

to their parrots who always agree with everything they say. You may wonder why I didn't study magic at this crucial stage, to try gaining an edge over my rivals in tomorrow's face-off. But the truth was, it made no difference. All that counted was the desire to live, and no amount of study could increase that at my age.

In the morning, I ordered the most expensive breakfast the inn provided and took it at a table in the small backroom with a large, leaded window overlooking a pleasant garden. I ate more than was comfortable but felt content, and had just poured my third cup of coffee when the door flew back and Jestin entered breathless and wild-eyed.

"Wizard Ambrose!" he burred, "it's taken half the night to find you."

Being royal, he didn't of course seek permission before taking the seat opposite. Whatever had possessed him to find me, it was clear that the curious, animated boy now occupied him once again; which was at least better than the nose-hoisting toff I'd last seen. But I'd had enough experience to know that when a prince, even a low-ranked one, goes looking for you, your buttocks are almost certainly about to be slung over hot coals. So I did not reply, suddenly aware of the age pains in my knees and hips and elbows, not to mention my brain.

“I’m in love!” he declared, as if announcing he’d discovered the existence of God. “She is beautiful, aloof and kind. As soon as my eyes lit upon her, my soul blossomed like a hundred cactus flowers when the rare desert rain falls.”

“That’s wonderful, your highness,” I said. “But I wouldn’t recommend sending her any poetry just yet, at least not yours.”

“I *have* to have her.”

“But you’ve got her, surely: didn’t your father make an arrangement with Rusper?”

“You don’t understand. It’s not Greshun I’m in love with. It’s her sister, Temaline.”

“Ah, I see; and what did you *do*?”

Temaline was first in line to the throne in Nerwan, and as such would surely already be spoken for. By someone important, and no doubt mighty.

“I challenged her suitor to a duel tonight,” he said. “He’s a prince from the fighting lands of Arkbraken; a master of thirteen combat disciplines.”

Well, at least it’d be a short fight. “And what did Rusper have to say about all this?”

“He has agreed to its legitimacy: whichever of us wins will be her husband.”

And in time the new king, I thought. But then, if Rusper had seen this boy, he wouldn’t exactly be sweating on the

outcome.

“You must help me,” he said, snapping back into the urgency that had brought him here.

“Kid, I’m about three hours from shuffling off my worldly flesh and bones; how can I possibly help?”

“Be my second; use your magic to counter his wizard’s. Make it a fair fight.”

“I don’t think you’re listening: by tonight my body will be broken and my magic dispersed upon the astral winds.”

“Then you must make sure you win today.”

So I lied to him, and why not? I wouldn’t be around to cop his anger at my no-show: let him at least spend a day in hope before meeting his inevitable bloody fate. “Okay,” I said, “I’ll win it for you.”

He nodded gratefully, stood, then without another word, left the room, nose for once humbly horizontal.

\* \* \*

The Spirit Ring took place in an abandoned salt mine. The treacherous nature of the unsafe shafts meant only those possessing a wizard’s magic could reach the huge cavern, partly natural, partly man-made, that lay deep at its core.

It perhaps goes without saying that the Ring was for Legwinian wizards only. Roelingians believe magic intrinsically protects every wizard’s spirit, and therefore they refuse to

acknowledge when age brings mistakes and underpowered interventions—addledness eventually proving their point only to themselves.

We gathered to one side of the cavern, greeting each other a little cautiously but for the most part with genuine warmth. I embraced old colleagues I hadn't seen for decades, surprised at how thin they were, how sharp their bones beneath my palms. We looked alike from the neck down, in our black silk cloaks, black tunics, black trousers and black boots. But above the uniform all was, at least to me, a fascinating spectrum of hard-earned individuality—several different glints of wisdom in the eye; wrinkles formed by laughter mainly, some of solemn respect; grey hair frazzled and abandoned or oiled and sleek; but all these differences settled firmly around our spirits and I loved them all because of it.

Someone called time and we shuffled reluctantly into the vastness. Each climbed wearily upon a pedestal of salt-veined rock and above each head a blue globe of spirit-light bloomed, the shadows above us thickening in response. A million silver shards glinted upon the walls, hinting at the natural riches long ago plundered.

Then it began.

My stomach lurched, spirit flooding up my spine and into the globe. My body trembled weakly, quickly depleted, dying.

All that remained of any of us now were our wills. The globes twisted, extended, spun, as our wills engaged. I could not distinguish individuals any longer, but sensed few in any case who cared enough to fight. The effort to remain corporate seemed inversely equal to the years spent holding the flesh against the burning of the magic in our spirits.

My own spirit stretched, lost itself in the generality of our kind, and my self-ness saw no reason to continue to be.

But then, right at the point of oblivion, and perhaps because of it, an irk dug into my will; an absurd but real vision formed: Jestin would be a *good* king. His falling in love with Temaline was not a simple accident of the heart, but a sign that his spirit had chosen a tough and testing path, and my hard-won wizard's instinct *knew* this to be true.

I tried not to care but couldn't avoid the fact that good kings are rare. Any natural feeling of the community of spirit royals may possess at birth is soon flushed out of them by a training heavy in inflated self-worth and righteous dominion. Yet somehow this kid's spirit had remained sufficiently pure that he'd actually fallen in love with someone imminently unsuitable, far above his ranking, in the utterly stupid but ultimately determining toff's order of birth.

And he wanted me to help.

A surge then, like the sheer promiscuousness of a child's love of life, an indefatigable sense of destiny to be fulfilled, exploded in my spirit globe. Magic flared all around, blinding me; then I opened my eyes and my heart broke.

My fourteen companions lay crumpled and lifeless on their pedestals, engulfed by cold shadows, their spirit globes gone. Never had I felt so lonely. But only for a moment, because then the flood of sheer, youthful hope revived my muscles, flesh and mind. Born again, perhaps, but this time with real work to do. My friends, I hoped, would be proud of me.

\* \* \*

Jondee's main stadium was filling quickly; I suppose the promise of blood spilled and a royal princess broken-hearted if the wrong man succeeded is a winner every time. As Jestin and I walked along the marble road towards the entry arch, the aromas of cooked meats and breads filled our nostrils, and the hubbub of market traders making the most of the crowds deafened us. The prince was pale and silent, clearly not hungry, and while I could have eaten an entire roast donkey, I decided to show solidarity with his lack of appetite and go hungry too.

Torches lining our route threw fascinating shadows amongst the multi-colored costumes of the fight fanatics around us. No one knew Jestin, of course, so our passage was unimpeded by well-wishers. He wore a nondescript beige cloak

and, hidden beneath it, oiled body Armour. Holstered to his back was a sword hastily purchased just an hour ago. He'd dismissed his armed guard at my suggestion—I figured the less attention he drew to himself before the actual duel the better.

We made our way to the competitors' quarters under the royal stand where we were assigned a pokey room stinking of sweat, there to wait while the early fights stirred up the crowd. Jestin made practice sweeps with his sword and I sat on a sticky bench, contemplating.

Being a prince, he'd been schooled in combat by the best soldiers in the kingdom. However, what royalty gains in the quality of its teachers it tends to lose in its lack of hunger to excel. Yes, he was fit and well-fed but even I—someone who'd never even touched a weapon—could see that his reach and thrust and swipe lacked the raw brutality that might save his life.

He must have sensed my thoughts for he stopped swinging the sword to say, "I'm relying on your magic to aid me, Wizard Ambrose."

I gestured at my civilian clothes. "I've already explained, it's illegal for a wizard to use magic to aid his master in a royal duel, and highly frowned upon even for him to be a second."

"But Prince Doghmart is sure to be attended by a wizard; one who'll use magic."

“I’ll watch him closely, and if that is the case, I shall do the same. But you are the challenger here, and can’t afford to be the first caught cheating.”

He nodded, not arguing. I was impressed at how much he’d changed; or perhaps not—maybe he just needed a cause to show what had always lived deep within. And maybe I’d just needed a rush of new spirit to appreciate it.

We made our way to the inner stadium, stopping just before the torch-bright shining sand ring, waiting for the marshal to wave us in. Directly opposite, another shadowed arch showed a marshal holding back our opponent, hidden in the darkness.

Then we received the signal and walked together into the light and the tumultuous noise from the rowdy crowd, which mostly sent boos in our direction. As we made our way to the combat circle in the middle of the arena, I glanced around, as did Jestin, looking for the royal box. And it was not difficult to find, on account of the fantastic amount of torch light playing upon it.

In the middle of the front row sat Rusper, ridiculously impassive, as if to show he was above such common blood-lust. But of course I could easily read the pornographic glint in his eye. Next to him sat the young woman who must have been Temaline and, if Jestin needed anything more to drain his

confidence, it would have been her disdainful and very public sneer in his direction before fixing her gaze resolutely on Doghmart: clearly a woman who knew which side of her royal muffin is best buttered.

Doghmart, incidentally, looked like a pile of rubble squeezed into body Armour. He stood, leaning on his sword and smiling good-naturedly, as if deciding not so much whether he could win this fight as to how far to prolong it in order to entertain the crowd.

Next to him, a second dressed in a brown cotton gown had the unmistakable look of a Roeling wizard about him, and we watched each other closely as our boys prepared to fight. Of course, he didn't need to use magic since Doghmart could probably tear off Jestin's head without breaking sweat, but I suspected the king would not take any risks where having a non-entity for a successor was concerned.

And, yes, there it was: a sly gesture from the second, directing etheric poison to Doghmart's sword edge, so that just a nick to Jestin's flesh would finish the boy.

I whispered in the prince's ear that his enemy's second had cheated. He dipped his head so none could see him speak, and said, "Can you counteract his magic?"

"I could, but only by adopting the Roeling system of his wizard, which means if you win there'll be an unknown price to

pay; not now necessarily, but in time.”

He looked at me, torn. Oddly enough, by contrast I felt deeply satisfied then, that being a Legwinian meant I'd always knowingly paid the price and therefore never been dismayed by it. And now I chose to do so again, gladly.

“But there is another way,” I said, “one without a price, for you at least.”

“Tell me.”

“Instead of using his own kind of magic against him, I can activate Legwinian means to boost your spirit with mine. It will be freely given by me so there is no tally for you to pay.”

I let him see in my eyes the admiration of an old wizard whose most precious magic—his optimism that the world can be a better place—had been restored.

“But what will it cost *you*?” he said.

“Just a few years of the youth I have gained from my fallen companions.”

In fact, of this I could not be sure; it might cost me all, but still I judged it a fair exchange.

With the impatient roar of the crowd all but drowning our conversation, he stared into my eyes, searching for duplicity. “You would do this for me?”

And then I saw the true royalty in this man. He understood fully in that moment what it meant to be a king: that while the

people's hearts and minds belong to him, his very spirit is theirs, now and forever. For the ultimate responsibility of those strong in spirit, whether wizards or royalty, is to ensure it isn't wasted.

I prepared to transfer my essence to his, holding out my hands, trusting that the Roelingian wizard opposite would never suspect I'd make such a sacrifice and therefore would see only a last handshake of encouragement between us.

But before I could grasp his hands, the prince turned and ran at his opponent, sword raised. With horror, I saw Doghmart calmly take a step forward, then swing his sword in a cunning arc, at the height of Jestin's neck.

Incredibly, the boy anticipated it, ducked and rolled forward, clattering into the second, knocking him down as if a bag of firewood. The crowd roared with laughter but I dreaded the speed with which Doghmart turned.

Jestin crawled free of the second then sprang to his feet. Re-entering the battle circle, he backed off from his opponent, seeking time to plan a strategy. Doghmart no longer smiled, now concentrated on killing fast, having clearly decided his life came first and entertaining the crowd second.

I called to Jestin, beckoned him to me, determined to transfer the spirit that would give wing to his muscles. But he just shook his head and kept away. I broiled inside with utter

frustration, carrying the means to save him but unable to pass it on. Damn his idealism. Yet I knew what motivated him: the need to go to her, if he won, with a clear conscience that he'd done it purely through his own efforts. Despite my helplessness, I had to admire his choice to take the Legwinian approach.

Oh, and he fought bravely, lasting a full five minutes. But in the end, Doghmart did not need his second's magic; strength and skill guided a series of feints before he plunged his sword through Jestin's Armour, into his heart, then withdrew it.

The crowd shouted in animalistic rapture while I rushed to kneel by my master's side. Doghmart's demeanor was sober as he placed a hand on my shoulder. "He did not let you help him, did he?" he said. I shook my head then put an arm behind my prince's neck.

"I'm glad you didn't have to be a Roelingian," said Jestin.

I looked up to see Doghmart's wizard smirk, and at that moment I did a foolish thing. Using Roeling magic, I conjured an astral bee and directed it to sting Doghmart's sword hand. He yelped and loosened his grip; then I formed an air wedge to send the sword at his second, the blade slicing through the wizard's robe, nicking his leg. It was enough: the magicked edge sent poison into his veins and he fell to the sand in agony.

Such a misuse of my beliefs would no doubt cost me several years of life, but I didn't care.

“I’m sorry,” said Jestin.

“For what?” I said.

“For not letting you help me.” He smiled wryly. “I know now she doesn’t love me.”

“Well, she is her father’s child.”

“What of your father, Ambrose?”

“He didn’t love me; or at least he didn’t love my choice to become a wizard.”

Jestin winced with death pains and I leaned close to hear his last words.

“Tell my father,” he said, “that I chose to be myself.”

“I will, Prince Jestin,” I said. “I also vow to put aside cynicism and carry forward the hope of my brothers and sisters, to look for another like you.”

I don’t know if he heard me before the end, but someone else did.

“Perhaps we could speak later, Wizard Ambrose,” said Doghmart, his serious expression in marked contrast to the still-baying crowd. “I feel there may be more to being a king than winning.”

I raised my gaze to Doghmart and stared hard at him for a moment. He didn’t look away, and was that glint in his eyes—dared I hope—the beginnings of a desire to be something other?

“Yes,” I said, “we should talk.”

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*T.D. Edge won the Cadbury's Short Story Competition at age ten and had several poems published by Heinemann at age sixteen. In the same year, he became the youngest-ever English Table Soccer Champion. After a long wait, during which he had to buy his own chocolate, he had several children's/YA books published in the UK. He has eight SF/F short stories coming out in 2009, and he contributes articles on writing to the SF podcast Starship Sofa (blog at: <http://terryedge.blogspot.com/>). He still plays table soccer but with self-delusion rapidly replacing actual ability.*

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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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