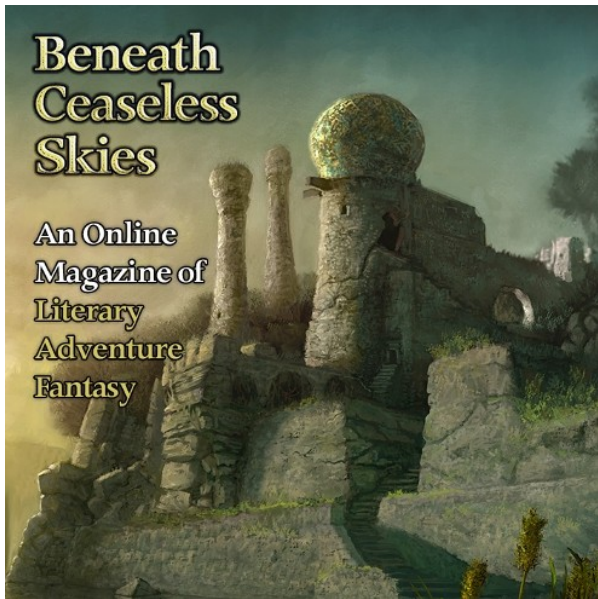


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online
Magazine of
Literary
Adventure
Fantasy



Issue #18 - Jun. 4, 2009

[“Wolf’s Clothing,” by Renee Stern](#)

[“Thistles and Barley,” by Kamila Zeman Miller](#)

For more stories and Audio Fiction Podcasts, visit
<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

WOLF'S CLOTHING

by Renee Stern

I lost my grip on my cousin Terrel's trail on the last night of the round moon. The beacon of his being winked out, and I mourned alone that night and every night until I finally confirmed his death.

He'd had a good lead on me. After a month of painstaking searching I hiked into Dyerstown and asked about him at the only tavern. Answers poured out faster than the first keg of the year's new brew. Naked dead men don't turn up every day.

With a practiced twist, the tapster topped off a mug and handed it across the smooth-sanded plank between us. "A fellow with gray in his red beard and plenty of scars?" She pushed back the frizzes of sandy hair that had escaped her braid. "Nydor found him dead up in the grazing, bare as a babe. We heard he was tangled in some trouble over in Samis' holding."

"What sort of trouble? Where was this?" The description matched my scapegrace cousin, right down to the trouble. "My name's Garold. I'm a Finder."

The title served me. True Finders cast spells; some element in kinfolk's blood tugged me, an itch inside my head, like calling to like. The clan worked my rare talent hard. Mostly

we stuck together, but we always had roamers. Strays kept me on the road more than at home.

Dyerstown showed the usual respect for Finders. The tavern's midday hum faded and the tapster ignored my coin. "Samis holds land from the king, east across the Milk River," she said. "We heard they suspected a stranger of theft and held him for judging, but then he went mad. Gave him a calming dose, but he shrugged it off and ran right over everyone." Her appraising look turned wary. "Was he really a thief?"

"Cousin. Our family sent me to track him down."

"Maybe it wasn't him."

I drained the beer in two long swallows, needing both the time and the strong drink. Terrel and I had grown up together, as close as brothers, the only two births to the clan in a nine-year stretch.

"Was it a wound that killed him?" I asked at last.

A weathered man in a sheepskin jacket stood up with a scrape of his bench. "All the marks on his body were old and healed. I helped Nydor prepare him for burning, but we found no sign of how he died. The cold, maybe, or sickness."

Exposure was a natural conclusion, considering they'd found him naked at the tail end of winter, and one I was happy to leave intact. But Terrel would have taken a lot of killing. We all would.

Poison was more likely. I could guess what Samis had dosed my cousin with, but his murderer, inadvertent or not, would have to wait.

“You burned the body?” I asked. “Where?”

“Where we found it,” the shepherd said. “It’s our way. We said a blessing for him too.”

The tapster rested a cool hand on my wrist, and I flinched. It was a bad day for this sort of news and dealing with strangers; my control was shaky. I smiled an apology.

“You still don’t know he was your cousin,” she said. “Would the scars identify him?”

Terrel’s ashes had danced over the grass a month ago. I knew that with the certainty of the round moon rising tonight. But he’d surprised me before, so I asked the shepherd to describe the body.

“Nicks and slashes, nothing distinctive,” he said. “Bites from what must have been a pack of dogs. An old puncture in his gut he was lucky didn’t kill him.”

I pointed to a spot just below my ribs, left of center. Nightmares of pit traps had taken two years to fade. “Here?”

“I’m sorry then.” His eyes gleamed with honesty. “At least you know the truth.”

Part of the truth—perhaps. Tavern rumors weren’t enough. Beyond the bond I’d shared with Terrel, my post in the clan

demanded thoroughness. I had to investigate further before going to Samis.

The shepherd gave me clear directions to the draw where they'd found Terrel, as well as where this Nydor grazed his flock, and I hiked north into a clean breeze. Dyerstown stank, of men and women who sweated at their work for days without bathing, of wool washed with lye, of bitter dyes and pungent mordants. The wind blew the lingering stench from my nostrils and replaced it with the fresh, wet scent of early spring.

A faint odor of sheep made my mouth water with sudden hunger. I'd hunt later, but not for lamb or mutton. Terrel's poisoning was trouble enough.

The wind shifted and carried a whiff of sweet birch with its wintergreen overtones, evoking wild days when I had tried to match Terrel prank for prank. He'd loved birch beer. Drink led us into trouble, usually no more than a scolding. I'd stopped drinking with him after the pit trap. Birch beer no longer tasted sweet; sometimes the smell alone left me queasy.

Memories roused a month-old ache. I focused on one step after another, a stride that devoured distance over long hours. A rocky stream marked where the uplands began. I scooped up a drink, then jumped across. The wind tasted empty of sheep and shepherds. Dried scat crumbled at my touch. The flocks had moved on about a week ago.

My nerves stretched tighter as the sun dropped lower. Walking faster bled off anticipation even as my body tracked the moon's steady climb.

The draw was somewhere ahead, but I'd never reach it before moonrise. I stopped, shucked my clothes and stashed them with my pack in a cluster of rock and bunchgrass.

The instant the round moon broke the horizon, the light changed somehow. I've never been able to describe it, though I've watched all the other moons from dark to nibbled. They belong to the night sky, ordinary sights. The round moon made my skin tingle and my insides itch with the urge to move.

Shifting was always a shock. Everything zoomed into focus. For some brief time sensation bombarded me. Tonight the sour tang of winter-killed plants almost masked the sweet scent of new grass. My body felt looser, the muscles springier under my dark, gray-speckled fur. Beneath my paws the ground was hard, just on the edge of softening. My ears swiveled at the squeak and scrabble from a nearby nest of ground squirrels; saliva flooded my mouth.

A few scrapes with my front paws startled the squirrels out their back door. I lunged, dodged back after them, and snapped my jaws around dinner. Immediate business dealt with, I settled back on my haunches and filled my lungs with air to howl out my presence.

The howl died in my throat. The crisp air cleared away the last of the fuzz in my head that always accompanied the shift, leaving a faint itch behind my eyes. It resembled the signs that helped me track Terrel or any of the clan, but somehow different.

I loped north, following that unfamiliar tug. A puzzled whine squeezed past my teeth. Was I tracking a wolf from a different clan? Only kin had triggered my Finder's sense before, but I'd never yet crossed trails with any other clan of shifters. We were territorial folk, whether on four legs or two. Would another pack accept me, or would I have to fight their leaders?

The last time the round moon had shone over these uplands, Terrel had died. Had this wolf turned on our own kind?

The thought stabbed me like a silver spike, and my gait faltered. But my skills and my extra weapon surpassed Terrel's. I poured out the cry that had built during my chase. A warning, a pledge—let the shifter out there hear and prepare for a Finder's judgment.

The rusty bite of blood, still fresh and not quite clotted, drifted to me. I slowed into a turn and nosed my way toward it. Death lay ahead. If the wolf—no, now I realized the tugging thread was a many-stranded rope. If a pack had killed here, they hadn't lingered.

The air held no musk of wolf, only the related spice of dog and, over that, the wet oil-and-meat scent of sheep. Many of them.

I padded over to the body, ripped apart as if by a rabid beast. Blood and torn flesh almost completely disguised what had been a good-sized black-and-white bitch. The wounds seemed off somehow, unusual in a way I couldn't pinpoint. I bent closer, trying not to drown in the smells to the point of unwariness. Still no hint of any creature but this dog and her missing flock.

I pulled back and circled the body, hunting tracks. Hoofprints lay over everything but my own sign. Sharp sheep hooves came in from the east and fled in a cohesive group north—the same way the itch in my head tugged me.

Wings whispered overhead: an owl, larger than any I'd ever seen, but no threat. Another hunter, prowling the night on its own business.

I followed the backtrail, nagged by another flash of vague not-right until at last it hit me. The dog's prints never showed clearly. The sheep had overrun her tracks, as if they'd chased her.

Whatever had happened here was unnatural.

The fur on my neck and shoulders bristled. I wished I was elsewhere, that my pack crowded around me. Instead I forced

myself back to study the dog once more.

Although the killers had ripped apart their victim, they hadn't fed. Nothing was missing. That was what had disturbed me earlier. I faced mad wolves. Even in our strongest blood-hunger we hunted only for food. We fought each other only in formal bouts; outsiders, only in defense. So why had my quarry gone after the sheepdog?

I focused again on my Finder's sense and followed the tugs north, in the same direction as the sheep. Easier prey now with their protector dead. Would tradition bind mad wolves, so I might face them in a formal bout? Or would the pack tear me apart? Perhaps I should have waited until morning, to stand before them holding the powerful weapon entrusted to me. Just thinking about touching unshielded silver made me flinch. I'd never had cause to use it until now, but to do my duty and survive, I might need it.

An overpowering sheep smell dragged me from my thoughts. I'd lost myself in planning, relying on my senses to alert me to the presence of wolves and other dangers. Only sheep—and the worrying tang of blood—filled my nose.

Five sheep milled before me. I skidded to a stop, growling low in the back of my throat. Why hadn't they fled?

One by one they lifted their heads, eyes glowing with a red tinge that woke memories of an old clan tale, the fable of the

cub who didn't finish his kill. One wounded raccoon escaped a clumsy cub and rampaged through the countryside with each round moon after, unstoppable, unleashing a swarming plague of bloodthirsty red-eyed raccoons, ground squirrels, mice, and rabbits.

The sheep charged toward me in a woolly mass, burlier than normal sheep, like creatures out of my boyhood nightmares. I couldn't help backing up, only a little, before my pride took over and insisted that I faced nothing more than five miserable sheep—my natural prey, however unnaturally they might act.

I snapped, growled, and bared my teeth in a display ferocious enough to suck the fight from any mere grass-eater. Still they ran at me, baring their own pointed teeth. Their muzzles were stained dark with something that had splattered their throats, breasts, and forelegs, and they reeked of blood.

Some of the itches in my head led to these five sheep.

My thoughts stumbled over a fable come to life, while instinct threw all my effort into defense and victory. One wolf should be more than enough for five sheep, especially one shifter wolf. But one shifter wolf against five feral sheep with wolfish instincts racing through their blood under the round moon's power? We'd almost died out, according to the fable,

hunted down by ordinary men with deadly silver targeting every shifter they found, guilty or innocent.

A ram caught me down the shoulder with a horn, but somehow I sprang over its back and walled away the pain during a few panting breaths. They worked together, trying to pin me between them to kick and stomp me with their hooves, rip at my body with the canines and incisors they'd gained in shifting.

I dodged and spun, finding tight gaps to avoid a crush. My teeth tore at vulnerable spots, but the predator infecting their veins toughened them, let them shake off even killing wounds.

The same advantage kept me alive.

Then the wind turned and slapped us all with a mingled scent of sweat and smoke. Men. The sheep around me twitched and shook their heads as if fighting themselves. I growled more fiercely, sensing weakness, reminding them that they were grass-eaters against a predator.

Instinct grabbed them and they fled north again, toward what I now realized was a larger mass of shifters. My wolf-shape wasn't able to groan. I'd managed to fight five to a draw.

I couldn't linger where the men might find me. Bad enough I couldn't disguise my prints in the signs of the fight here, or around the dead sheepdog behind us. They'd reach the inevitable conclusion, however wrong.

I loped west as fast as my injuries allowed. In a hollow thick with hawthorns, I licked the worst wounds until they stopped bleeding, then washed my mouth clean with gulps from a spring-fed pool that tasted of cool limestone with hints of rotting wood.

All my senses stretched tight, seeking signs that the men had followed me. They'd blame me for tonight's dangers, and they wouldn't be entirely wrong. Not me specifically, but my kin. Terrel, dead after the last round moon. Dead out here in pastures full of sheep.

I could see so clearly how it happened as I headed south toward my cache. Caught among unknowing men just before the round moon rose, force-fed what could only be monkshood to calm him. Monkshood, aconite, wolfsbane: under any name, a chancy plant for ordinary men and always deadly for shifters. After it made us even stronger and drove us into a frenzied rage.

Somehow Terrel had escaped without making a single captor into one of us. Or if so, the stories hadn't yet crossed the river from Samis' holding. Another reason for me to head there once I dealt with these dangerous sheep.

Only Terrel could turn a cautionary tale for children into breathing, biting, bloodthirsty life. I had to bring them all down before the moon cycled through its phases again to deadly

round. Terrel's mistake, the kill that survived, had spread through part of a flock, maybe the whole flock, maybe more than one, in a single moon cycle. They'd killed at least one dog, though better a dead bitch than bitten-but-survived.

I had to stop this plague here. Nowhere would be safe for any of the clan if I didn't act now. Me, alone against disaster.

I reached my hidden gear near sunrise. The itch in my head remained, but distant, and became still more tenuous once the sun's rays washed over me and I shifted back to man-shape.

Knowing better didn't stop me from grabbing after that sense of my foes to clutch it tighter. The change affected me more than usual. Though my senses were keener than ordinary humans' even during the dark moon, they peaked on nights of the round moon. At daybreak, for a few moments, I always felt noseless, deaf and blind, as near sense-dead as I cared to come. This morning, after a fight I hadn't won and nightmares come to life, losing touch with the world even for a brief time left me shaking.

But the day promised to be bright and sunny and mild. I treated my wounds, dressed and settled into cover for a few hours' sleep, building my strength for the coming fight.

* * *

I set off first after a small knot of infected sheep to the northeast. They were closest, but also an easier target than the larger flocks I sensed.

By midafternoon I came near enough to stalk in earnest. The wind blew toward me, whispering of sheep, sweet young grass, and fresh water. They'd found a welcoming haven in this dry reach, where tough, thorny shrubs and sharp-edged rocks broke through short tufts of grass.

I shrugged off my pack and knelt to tug heavy leather gloves over my hands. After two deep breaths, I could delay no longer and drew out the wood case. I'd never before needed the knife within.

Gritting my teeth, I freed the catches and closed a cautious fist around the leather-wrapped hilt. The blade was almost as long as my forearm, with an edge that looked as sharp as the day it was forged. The silver worked into the steel vibrated in my grip, even through the glove and handle.

My gut rolled. I shook open my hand, dropping the knife back into the case, then turned just in time to empty my stomach. How much stronger had my predecessors been to face down rogue shifters, hampered by this reaction? Had their opponents been just as shaken?

Sipping water from my flask cleared away the taste of sickness. Prepared now, I gripped the knife again and found

myself better able to deal with the silver. I wondered if the sheep would sense it, and at what distance.

Better to learn now, with too few of these abominations to pose a threat if they charged. Last night's encounter proved they didn't always react like normal grass-eaters.

I shouldered the pack once more and tightened my grip on the knife. The wind stayed steady, blowing a constant stream of information toward me. As long as the wind and I held our courses, I'd know exactly when the sheep started.

The ground rose as I slunk from shadow to rock to thornbush. I couldn't yet see the sheep, but their lair's scent grew stronger.

The itches leading me tightened suddenly, snapping out slack like a rope. I froze, trying to build the truth while blind, then realized the sheep were moving. Within their lair still, but spooking.

As soon as the image formed, I charged. Reaching my prey, winning the kill with its hot, heavy blood on my skin, on my teeth, on my claws—instinct overwhelmed me. Instinct warned me to pen the sheep quickly, cut off their escape, just as it shouted the danger of the silver in my hand.

The knot of sheep resolved into three individual beasts, dashing back and forth within a ravine seeking escape. Two ewes and a lamb kicked up bits of turf, hemmed in on one side

by a steep hill that water trickled down. Thornbushes wove a nearly impenetrable wall on the opposite slope.

Then I was among them. The silver in the knife vibrated, heightening the storm that danced in my body and propelled me. The ewes turned to face me, blocking me from the lamb quivering behind them.

We bared our teeth, even the lamb. Their eyes lacked that disturbing red tinge, but even without the round moon's influence, they pawed the ground and snapped their jaws.

I closed, slashing with the knife. They edged away and I stumbled, stretched out to scratch one while avoiding a deadly wound from my own weapon. The blade sliced into something without the meaty give I wanted. Matted wool. I growled, hungry for the kill.

The second ewe charged, head lowered to butt. I dodged, swinging the knife back around. This time it bit deep. Blood sprayed, tainting every other scent in the air; my mouth watered, automatic reaction. The cut was deep but not fatal. The ewe shuddered, then dropped to its knees, bleating weakly. I swallowed hard, suddenly hating the blood-reek that filtered in everywhere. Silver was a foul death.

I'd forgotten the other sheep. Tactical error. The lamb tossed its head up, then lowered it to charge over its mother's body.

The remaining ewe wheeled around at almost the same moment, trying to pin me between them. One knife, two fronts—they might well knock me down if I didn't take care.

The ewe was the greater danger, the lamb a quicker kill. I lunged toward the lamb, hoping the sudden movement would throw off the ewe's attack.

Not entirely, but just enough.

Pain snapped everything around me into even sharper detail. The ewe ripped my calf, not deeply enough to cripple me. Not immediately.

I staggered, knife arm still outstretched, straight into the lamb. Another one down. The reek of blood was everywhere, its sticky, iron taste coating me inside and out.

I shook off distraction, whirling to face the ewe. It trembled as it swung its head, seeking an opening. Not from fear: its throat loosed an unpracticed growl and a hint of red glimmered in its eyes. Tasting my blood seemed to wipe out any fear of the silver in my hand.

I leaped, knife first. The ewe charged at the same time, and we crashed with a tearing shock. I stabbed its shoulder while my free arm held its muzzle away from my throat. It thrashed as it died, teeth ripping at my forearm.

Another wound to weaken me, but without the power to kill. I shoved away the carcass and stood panting a moment,

shivering with the forces around me—blood, silver, the approaching moon. I lifted my head to howl out my victory and scented men on the wind. Close, too close.

Victory tasted like ash. I willed my hands to remain steady as I shoved the knife back into its case without cleaning it. In either form, man or wolf, I'd gain no friends among shepherds for killing their sheep. Yet even dead, these abominations might present dangers to unprotected men. I had to warn them before they added themselves to my problem.

Feet rustled through grass and scraped against stones. Someone cursed. My skin skittered as if ants crawled all over it, but I straightened to meet them, lining up words of peace and warning. Then, above the sweat, smoke, musky dog and sour wool, I smelled wolfsbane, unmistakable in its sharp danger-cry.

We all learn that smell as pups. I flinched and scrambled away, pushing up the thornbush slope, heedless of scratches. Somehow they knew—but did they know enough?

I reached the top just as they shouted in surprise at their slaughtered sheep. They knew their business, six hard men and women with arrows nocked to their bows sweeping the ravine for threat.

“Stay clear of the blood,” I called down from cover. “I wish you no harm, but I fear it may carry harm to you.”

A great horned owl with a wingspan rivaling my outstretched arms flew between us, settling lower, the same one I'd seen the night before when I came across the butchered dog—or another one like it. Its shape blurred, and I stepped back, reaching out with my Finder's sense. But it didn't register as a shifter, and it flew in daylight.

The feathers melted away, the wings drew in, the legs lengthened and the beak transformed to a proud, razor-sharp nose set below too-large eyes. None of the shepherds flinched at the man suddenly standing before them wearing only an amulet on a chain. He was small and wiry, dwarfed even by the three women with him.

“What happened here?” His voice cracked with command. *Pack leader*, the wolf in me recognized.

Someone handed him clothes and he pulled them on, his golden eyes seeming to see through my skin to my bones and the thoughts in my head. His clothes smelled of sheep, but he didn't; his scent was warm feathers and something clean, astringent, that reminded me of the high peaks. The dangerous bite of wolfsbane swirled most strongly around him.

I took another step back, my eyes never leaving his. I'd grown up among shifters. The transformation of man into wolf was natural, commonplace. This man unnerved me, and I now

understood a little of why ordinary men feared and hunted my kind.

“What are you?” I asked, voice hoarse.

He studied the three dead sheep, then stared back at me with hard eyes. “I’ll ask the questions for now. How did our sheep die?”

Hard and angry, I wanted to say, but didn’t dare, not with wolfsbane in their hands. “They were infected with something deadly, something that’s already spread to more of them out there.”

He nodded, as if he already knew, and the wolfsbane told me he knew too much.

“I told the others I mean you no harm,” I said, “and I meant it.” I held up my empty hands. “I’m unarmed now.”

“You fought some of our sheep last night, I believe.” His eyes glinted with warning. “What about before then? Say, a month ago?”

I lowered my hands, hooking them in my belt to keep from rooting out my knife. “Yesterday was my first time in your lands.” I wondered how this man knew about Terrel, and added, “A kinsman may have been here last month, though. I’m looking for him, and heard about your mysterious dead man. I was told to speak with someone named Nydor.”

“I’m Nydor, Warder for our lands.” He grinned, disconcertingly toothy. “It seems we have much to discuss. Let’s step away from this bloody mess for now.”

My turn to nod. Danger or not, I needed answers. And perhaps I could persuade these suspicious shepherds to join me against their flocks. We were all fighting to protect our own people.

We settled in a semicircle, me facing the others, just far enough outside the ravine that the smell of wolfsbane and their sweat covered all traces of sheep’s blood. I knelt on one knee, ready to leap away. The shepherds clustered behind Nydor, all but one of the men, who stood apart, an arrow nocked and ready.

“What are you?” I asked again, trying to ignore the threat of that arrow. “You’re not like any shifter I know.”

“I suppose you might say I’m a shapeshifter, but it’s a spell locked in the amulet a Warder carries.”

I forced down all reaction, though I’d never heard of a magic that mimicked our ability to show outwardly the animal within us.

“With it I keep watch for my people, bring them swift warning of danger.” Nydor leaned forward, eyes fixed and unblinking like a bird’s. “And we’ve had dangers I’ve never

heard of for the past month, ever since I found that stranger's naked corpse. A kinsman, you say?"

I forced words through a throat tight with Terrel's memory. "Cousin. I tracked him here. I'm a Finder." None of them stirred at that revelation. "My name's Garold. I'm afraid my cousin was not himself when he created this problem in your flocks, but I mean to deal with it and then lay the account to the one who drove him out of his head."

Nydor touched the amulet around his neck. "Samis, you mean? I've heard the rumors. He's your concern. My duties end at the banks of the Milk, and they call me to stop what's killing our dogs and our friends."

I rubbed my calf, where the ewe's ragged bite was now a red scar-knot. A shifter's bite was safe for *me*, but how could I tell them to be grateful their dogs and friends had died? My fingers dug into the scar, forcing away echoes of nightmares.

"You'll have to burn these sheep, and slaughter and burn any others that are infected," I said. I had no idea what eating tainted meat might do, but I couldn't risk something lingering in flesh and blood to be passed along in an innocent meal. "You'll need my help."

I knew only three ways to kill us. If these sheep shared all our strengths, they likely shared our weaknesses. Nydor ran the

right trail with wolfsbane, but I'd sooner face a moonless life than tell him any more than I had to.

"The poison on your arrows doesn't kill immediately," I said. "Before they die, your victims will grow stronger, attack without caution in a rage you might not withstand. It takes only one bite to infect you."

The sentry tensed. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"But how will you find your quarry?" I asked. "They can hide unnoticed among your flocks and your families."

Behind Nydor, the shepherds shot questioning looks at each other. He rubbed his chin with a thumb and forefinger, never looking away from me. "I take it you have an answer."

Some reason to keep you alive, I read in his eyes. I dipped my head at him.

"As I said, I'm a Finder. I sense hidden shifters, even at a distance. I can guide you without error, to help you avoid a pile of innocent victims. I can also cut out the infected sheep from your flocks, drive them into range of your arrows."

Nydor twisted around toward the others. "Mila? Dallard? Your kin and your flocks have borne the toll so far."

A man whose eyes glinted like polished limestone folded his arms across his chest. "He tells an interesting tale. I'll follow Mila's lead. My losses of sheep and a dog can't match hers."

My breath caught again, and I wished myself anywhere else as the oldest woman stood. Her face was hard and weathered, twisted now into more severe lines. The other two, I realized, were younger versions of Mila.

“What recompense do you offer for my youngest, torn apart by your shapeshifters a month ago?” Her voice was raw, the only sign that escaped her tight control as she spoke of her loss. One daughter blinked away tears; the other ground her teeth on obvious pain.

I had to shut my eyes, but it didn't block the heavy grief in the air. Somehow I smelled salt and bitter ash.

My grief for Terrel rose again, unexpectedly strengthening me. I blew out a breath and looked at Mila. “Where will I and the rest of my kin find recompense for our own loss, murdered with a careless cup of monkshood? I grieve with all of you, for my cousin who was as close as a brother, for your child I never met, even for the sheep we must exterminate to end this before more of your people are attacked.”

Nydor's face gave me no clues, but the sentry was wide-eyed, Dallard chewed his lower lip, and the youngest woman's mouth gaped in clear shock. Mila's eyes narrowed and she drew a breath, clearly preparing to speak. I jumped in first: “What more can any of us do but work together to end this threat? We'll have time to grieve properly after.”

She slumped a little, rounding her shoulders. “Cold words, but true,” she whispered. “I’ll call a truce with you, but once this work is done, never cross our lands again, neither you nor any of your kin.”

Her daughters stroked their bows. Dallard gave me a knowing look. “I said I’d bide by Mila’s decision,” he said. “A truce it is.”

Better than I’d hoped for when I first caught wolfsbane on them. Nor would it be wise for any of the clan to return to Dyerstown or its grazing. “What of Samis?”

Nydor’s unblinking stare made my neck itch. “Our concerns lie within our borders.”

Was that permission to seek justice for Terrel? Shouldn’t he defend a human against a shapeshifter? Did his amulet help him understand us? Or did he have some existing grievance against a neighbor, to launch me against Samis like an arrow?

Nydor showed his teeth in a fierce smile. “Do we have an agreement?”

We clasped hands briefly to seal our bargain. All my senses were too high to stand much contact. His heartbeat pounded through his skin and I almost heard the blood rush through his veins. My nose, already assaulted by the wolfsbane, twitched at the sour smell of suspicion coming from the watching

shepherds. I needed my kin, control, a peaceful run with the moon.

That too would have to wait. Dusk and moonrise were rolling closer. I stepped back. "I'll camp apart if you don't mind. In the morning I'll sniff out our trail."

Nydor pursed his lips, but then he nodded. The sentry eased back on his bowstring, though the arrow pointed still in my direction as I walked away. My body felt tight, on edge, with every step until I was long out of range.

* * *

After I shifted, I spent the night wedged into a crevice in a tumble of rocks, dozing or staring out at the nearby trees where Nydor-the-owl roosted and watched me back. I'd expected it, and I couldn't quite blame him, but I kept startling awake, certain I smelled wolfsbane.

He was gone when I crawled out of my temporary lair to dress soon after dawn, but he and the other shepherds were waiting nearby, ready for the hunt. I sought the closest of the abominations: two straggling sheep, far behind the main groups. The shepherds spread out in an ambush line when we came close, Nydor directed them from the air, and I swung wide to drive the two ewes to their death. They chose wolfsbane over the silver in my knife. The aversion to silver, it seemed,

was instinctive, twined into blood and bone. We had to teach our young to fear wolfsbane.

I wanted to pity the sheep. But they were still grass-eaters.

We burned those two and headed further east, toward the nearer of the two large groups left. One thread among the skein linking us vibrated with tension. I halted, waving on the shepherds to put more distance between me and the wolfsbane that hovered over them like a storm cloud.

Sharpening my focus, I pushed along that humming line. Halfway out, perhaps farther, I bounced off something. Not solid like a wall—more like running headlong into another person. I stood open-mouthed in the middle of the uplands staring east into the horizon. Nothing in my training had prepared me for this.

The thread slackened again. Then that sheep and those around it bolted, north and east, away from us. Away from *me*, as if one of them somehow had Finder instincts. Untrained instincts, luckily, though that was obstacle enough.

A wolf pack would barrel through these sheep. I whistled the signal to summon Nydor. A howl carried farther and conveyed far more meaning than any whistle, but ordinary men, even with abilities like Nydor's, couldn't fathom the layers we built into a single cry. I had only ordinary men to help me. With Nydor's wings, we might approximate a pack.

The shepherds stopped at my signal, turning questioning looks my way. “Keep moving,” I shouted, and started forward myself. “We need to angle north to catch them now.”

Nydor banked down, shifting as he neared the ground to land on human legs. The change worked up his body, wings shifting to arms last. I forced myself to look, trying to grow accustomed to his ways, but again my mouth dried and my skin chilled.

“What is it?” he asked.

“They’re skittish,” I said. “A fixed ambush line won’t work here. We’ll all need to keep on the move, and we’ll need to stay in closer contact.”

“My task.” He strode after the others, heedless of his bare feet and naked skin. I hurried to keep up. “I’ll teach you the rest of our signals.”

They were easy enough to grasp. Man, owl, and wolf, we shared predator minds. Before long, he was again in the air, circling above us.

The sheep had slowed but continued northeast, closing on the second flock and bringing together all our prey. My heart beat a little faster and my skin itched with the need to run. After tonight the round moon would vanish for another month.

“I’ll leave you here,” I told Dallard and the others. “Stay on this course until Nydor signals otherwise. Be ready with your

arrows. This should be the last of them, and they'll be tricky."

Mila's upper lip curled. "Do your job and leave us to ours. If you fail us...." She reached back to her quiver to stroke the fletching on an arrow.

I smiled without any warmth. "We understand each other perfectly."

We had a truce until the last feral sheep died, and not beyond. The sooner we killed them all, the sooner we could part ways for good.

Once I left the shepherds behind, my gear stopped dragging at my shoulders. I took deeper breaths now; the air away from them was crisp and clean. The wild thrill of the hunt—and the tingle of the coming moon—filled my veins.

Nydor flew back and forth as we maneuvered into position while the afternoon tumbled away. We stalked them up a barely noticeable rise, where the grass grew thick and spring-green, blanketing rare rocks. Prime pasture.

Here the two groups had met and mingled. Plenty of grazing for all, and they seemed content to fill their bellies.

I hugged the ground, working slowly nearer, ignoring the grass prickling through my clothes. I focused only on scent, sound, and sight, forgoing all thought of Finding now. We were too close, that sheep with Finder instinct and I. Even untrained, at this distance it might still sense me before I was

ready. The silver in my hand, chiming waves of danger against shifter flesh, was risk enough.

The sheep milled restlessly, hooves tapping an uneasy beat through the ground that echoed off my bones. I slanted a look at the slice of sky where a hint of plum heralded dusk, searching until I spotted Nydor arcing in wide circles, and signaled my readiness. He snapped his wings twice, acknowledging, and shot away to warn his friends.

The moon sang in my blood, urging me against my grazing prey. It clashed with the shriek of silver and the hum of the nearby abominations. The moon and my duty twined into an even stronger force that pushed me upright, to charge the sheep whose wool looked gray against the bright green grass.

They fled in clumps that merged and split and merged again into a larger mass, heading almost straight north until I veered in to herd them east. They broke into two groups and the larger one jinked south.

I didn't have breath to swear, trying to cover all flanks like the prize sheepdog I needed to be. What use was a lone, two-legged wolf here?

A howl burst into my throat before I wrestled that impulse into submission, unable to waste that breath either. Instead I fed all my defiance into speed and stamina to stop the sheep's southward move and to counter two other sallies.

Wolf cunning and determination would bring me victory over these grass-eaters. I would hold their trail and see their blood paint the grass, whatever it took, on two legs or four.

Nydor swooped down, closing on a group just as it tried to break away, and raked the leading ewe with his talons. The sheep leaped back into the flock's main stream.

Now I howled, the triumphant notes as wolflike from my human throat as they sounded beneath the round moon. Our plan couldn't fail now, not when man and wolf joined forces. This would be a tale for the clan to savor and cheer.

I raced the wind, harrying the sheep with Nydor. Lost in the joy of the chase and the rising surge of the moon, I almost forgot the silvery itch running up from my right hand. The day was waning, Nydor a smudge against the sky. The green smell of bruised grass mingled with the savory scent of sheep, spiced with prey terror. I howled again and ran faster.

Scattered sheep faltered, then tried to turn. I glimpsed muddy red eyes. Their infected blood fought their instinct to flee.

I growled and bared my teeth. The wolf in me hungered for a fight.

Most of the flock ran forward still, carrying the rest with them. Then, above the pounding pulse in my ear and the blatting sheep, I caught the windy whistle of arrows slicing the

air. My nose wrinkled an instant later: wolfsbane, at least a dozen pinpoints. The shepherds had sprung their ambush.

I slowed. My part was almost done. Let the shepherds butcher their sheep. I'd stay out of range and head off escape attempts.

A ewe darted north, a lamb tight on its tail. I chased after, reading every twitch of their hindquarters and swing of their heads to place myself within striking range. The knife was more a part of me now than I'd ever imagined, a longer, deadlier finger. It swung as lightly as air in my grip until it connected with their flesh to slice as cleanly as an executioner's ax. Blood seemed to weight it, then the blade slid free of flesh, the knife once more a gleaming finger of air. Both sheep kicked on the ground, already dead.

I turned back to the slaughter. More bodies than I had time to count sprawled on the ground, and others staggered forward, wounded, fierce with the wolfsbane in their veins. Nydor had landed near his advancing shepherds and transformed, a naked archer picking off wounded sheep with killing shots to the throat or heart.

The sheep's eyes were all more red than brown. My limbs twitched with extra energy as moonrise approached. It would be close, but dead sheep now outnumbered living.

The remaining beasts, however, were the canniest, darting everywhere but forward. I killed another and loped after a pair of yearlings making for an opening due west.

They split as I drew near. I dropped one before the Finder's sense I'd squelched flared up like flame in a pocket of pitch, blinding me. My head clanged like an alarm bell.

Snarling at my error—a green cub's mistake—I groped after what senses remained and grabbed a single, violently vibrating thread. It *had* to link to the sheep with Finder talent.

A ram charged me, its heavy, yellow teeth too close to my thigh, my weapon still moving into position. If it knocked me down, those teeth would savage me, its hooves trample me to the same bloody mess its cousins had made of the black-and-white bitch. Better both of those, though, than stabbing myself with my own knife. A silver death was no longer a phantom but all too sickeningly real.

Desperate, I yanked that linking thread. The ram stumbled, just enough for me to swing my body into guard.

The ram's eyes were red coals in its black face, coals that fanned into flame as I watched, and I realized I'd lost track of the moon in that instant I'd been stunned. The ram was shifting. *I* was shifting.

Panting with the effort to hold conscious control a little longer, I leaped away and hurled the now-useless knife in the

opposite direction. Clinging to man-shape even for those few heartbeats made the change painful. My body contorted, snapping and pawing to be free of binding clothes and packstraps. Through it all the stench of blood and wolfsbane choked me, and deadly, scraping silver reached out for me.

I wriggled at last from my ruined clothes and wheeled to count the dangers. Noise slammed my ears: shouts, bleats, the dull thuds of arrows into meat and the whistles as they sliced the air. My nose ignored a clamorous jumble of scents, focused tightly on the now-overwhelming blood and wolfsbane.

My contortions had thrown off the ram's attack just long enough. Now it reared and charged me again, with the moon's gifts of more mass, more muscle, and more fury.

I gathered myself to leap and tear out its throat, but checked when I spotted an arrow protruding from its shoulder. Wounded, dying—and tainted with wolfsbane. I backed away. Let Nydor finish off this one from a safe distance.

An arrow slammed into the grass where I'd stood a moment ago. Another howled toward me—unmistakably toward me and no other target. I tracked it all in a single glance and bounded away, far from danger. Far from treachery.

Once safely out of range, I looked back. The archers, with Mila and her daughters in the front, had control. One by one the sheep dropped. Only I had escaped.

If any other abominations survived tonight, I'd finish them on my own. Who had shot those last arrows—one of the women, Dallard, Nydor—didn't matter. Those arrows killed our truce.

I gifted them all with a final howl, pure anger this time, and showed them my tail.

* * *

I raced east that night with the round moon in my eyes and my blood. I ran the flood of anger and betrayal dry, and found at last the moon's peace I'd craved ever since Terrel had died. It would suffice until I reached home and my pack's comfort.

Soon, but not yet. I still had business with Samis.

I reached the banks of the Milk as the moon dipped toward the western horizon, and, after drinking my fill, curled up beneath a sturdy black cherry tree. I wanted to be out of Nydor's lands, away from double-tongued, truce-breaking shepherds, but didn't dare swim this current without rest.

The river as it rolled and rushed along the bank soothed me. My nose filled with the smells of water, wet dirt and the fragrant cherry of the bark and leaves around me. Nothing at all to remind me of men or sheep. I dozed as the night waned, falling deeper into peace.

I slid back into man-shape half-asleep, chasing a dream of Terrel where we ran and wrestled together under the round

moon as we did as boys. We shifted together in the dream, and my last sight before I tensed awake was his face, lips mouthing words of apology and gratitude.

Smiling back at him, I stretched and scratched. A nighthawk skimmed across the water, chasing insects. A low, sonorous “hoo” broke from my right; the nighthawk flapped away with a rattling alarm, and I dropped into a crouch.

The great horned owl clutching a sack in its talons could only be Nydor. I flexed my fingers and snarled. I had no way to outrun him, even without the river blocking me.

He dropped the bulging sack nearby and flapped silently upstream a short way. I shivered in the breeze from his passing, and divided my attention between his transforming body and the sack. What did he want?

Understanding hit me. The shepherds wondered if shifter danger still threatened them. I owed them nothing with our truce broken, but my duty to the clan still held, so I cast my awareness outward. No trace of shifter itches remained. The nightmares of a horde of red-eyed feral beasts spreading across the land sank back into my deepest memories. We were safe.

“Our business is done,” I told him. “No remnants of the infection are left here.”

His eyes pierced me. “Save you.”

“Is that why you hound me? I waited only for dawn to cross the river. Then I’ll be gone from your lands, as we agreed.” I bared my teeth. “It was not I who broke our truce.”

He dipped his head. “Reason enough to follow you—not to hound, as you put it, but to beg your pardon for Dallard’s foolish action.”

I blinked, both at the unexpected apology and the discovery. Dallard had tried to kill me, not Mila or her daughters, women with cause to hate my kind? I would never understand the minds of ordinary men.

“You did us a service,” Nydor continued. “It would be churlish of us to let you leave without your goods.”

I edged up to the sack and sniffed. Not a whiff of wolfsbane on it, and within it I sensed the faint prickle of my silver knife. “My thanks for that then.”

He folded his arms across his chest, right over left, then reversed them: defensive, uncertain, rather than belligerent. “You owe us no thanks when the debt is on our side. Let me offer you something to help deal with Samis.”

I studied him, baffled by the offer after yesterday’s grudging truce. But I knew too little about the holding across the river.

Nydor jumped into the silence. “Samis cannot withstand another black mark. Too many of us have sent complaints to

the king, and though Samis has always managed an explanation, I'm told he's been warned to avoid another incident or see his lands passed to another."

"That does help," I said. "But cornered prey is the most dangerous."

"I'll back you. I found your cousin's body, after all." Now Nydor bared his teeth in a fierce smile. "He died naked and alone after fleeing Samis' holding, no doubt poisoned by the monkshood I smelled on him. The rest—our troubles with our sheep, our other losses—will be our secret."

I stared a moment, then nodded. "That more than pays any debt, and I thank you for it. If ever my kin or I can aid you —"

"Best we part here," he said. "We're different breeds."

I couldn't argue that. Predators together, it's true, but I saw his help for what it was, and gratitude was the least part. Nydor would use me once again, this time to curb Samis or bring him down.

Again I would let him, for it served my own aims: safety for the clan and justice for Terrel. Picking up the sack, I waded into the river, hoping it would wash me clean.

[Comment on this Story](#) in the BCS Forums

Renee Stern is a former newspaper reporter turned freelance writer whose short fiction credits include Oceans of the Mind, Aeon Speculative Fiction, the anthology Sails & Sorcery, and an upcoming issue of Black Gate. She now lives outside Seattle, breaking up work on magazine articles, short stories, and a historical fantasy novel with outdoor activities in the mountains and on the water.

Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

THISTLES AND BARLEY

by Kamila Zeman Miller

I've seen him deal killing force with a casual swipe, but what I fear is his silence and the wounded looks he gives me when we can't agree. He values peace so much, but my heart is turning to mud.

He has a swordsman's heavy shoulders, thick chest, and equally thick waist. No one would mistake my husband for a farmer, but we're both out in the barley field pulling thistles, farming. We'd rather yank them young than deal with thickets at harvest. I keep glancing his way, hoping to catch his eye so I can smile at him. He doesn't look over. I give up on the casual lead-in and stretch my back, gathering strength from the cool blue sky.

I take off my gloves. "Merald."

He finally looks up. His large hazel eyes smile at me. The bright red scratches on his arms have attracted a fly and he swats at it. I snatch it out of the air when it zips my way and crush it. Its blood is cold and sticky.

"I've been thinking." I look away, but not in time to miss his shoulders sagging. "It's been ages since we've seen Seraf. I hope he's doing all right." I wipe the fly bits off on my work skirts. I hate working in skirts. I wear them for him.

Merald lets out a sigh and gets back to work. He always does this and I've always given in.

I won't let his 'we've had this talk before' wall stop me this time. "Besides, it's been forever since we've been to Edina. I'd like to do some shopping in a real city."

Merald keeps working. He's not ignoring me because his breath is working hard and this isn't hard work, not for him.

"Our neighbors can watch the animals. The fields are set." I look around at my land. Our land. There's more work than two can handle. I used to work the farm alone and it was a mess. Now it looks half-decent. I wonder what Merald sees when he looks around the place. He was noble born, only a third son, but still he wasn't raised to this life.

I've been terrified to ask, but I'm tired of keeping my thoughts in my purse. "Are you ashamed of us?"

He stops and looks up at that. "No. Of course not."

I'm relieved that he's offended by the question. "Good."

"Why would you even ask that?"

"It's just that we've been cooped up here for years and—"

"I love it here. The way you spoke of the farm and the river and the village caught my heart well before I ever saw it. I've never regretted trading silk pillows and glass windows for fur rugs and a stone hearth." His gaze drops and he reaches for a thistle, changes his mind, and pulls work gloves off of hands

made to fill gauntlets. “I don’t understand why you don’t love it. This is your home.”

“Our home.” I brush the sweat off my face. “I’ll always come back here. But sometimes I have to chase the wind. That’s how we met, you know. I was a long way from home.”

“There was a war.” He looks away, toward the river.

The war was horrible, but I don’t want to forget the friends I made, or the places I’ve seen. I need to get away from the village that I love and despise in the same breath.

Merald used to be a knight. He became a war hero the day he rode in defiance of the emperor to stand alongside a country lord against the conscription to build another pointless monument. I can tell by Merald’s expression, set like an angry man’s but with sorrowful eyes, that he’s thinking about the hopes his parents once had of winning the emperor’s favor. They claim they’re proud of him, but he told me they mourned when the Court of Song collapsed.

I used to be a troublemaker, *that* woman. Well, I’m still *that* woman, the one who took up fighting rather than become a proper victim. The council hated my competence and cheered at my darkest moments, despite the fact that my successes ultimately became theirs. They cared more about appearances than victory. I cared about who lived and died.

Even before the war I wasn't exactly respectable. The man I loved got married and didn't tell me. The people in the village think I seduced him. Women still grab their husbands' arms and glare when I go into town. That and my unapologetic nature are the safest things for them to hold against me. If they accuse me of bringing the war here it might sound like they hadn't been willing to fight for their lord, the very one who protected them from hardship.

I guess if Merald let himself notice their gossip then he'd have to throw down his gauntlet, and neither of us wants that.

I shake off my sour mood by thinking back to better times. "You know what I miss?" I grin. "Sir Raffinel's *Stop Me* song."

Merald's mouth twitches into a brief smile.

"I bet he's made up a thousand verses by now. Last time in I heard someone in the village singing a few." That's what got me thinking about Seraf, and spying, courier work and forest battles, and helping refugees during the war. Raising good barley matters, but not like that.

"The council wants to forget about us." Merald pulls his gloves back on.

"You want to forget about us." I wince at the harsh accusation in my voice and pull my gloves back on. My hands are shaking.

"What are you talking about?"

I can't look at him. I yank out a thistle and fling it to the ground, step on it so that it's flat. "Farming isn't all that I am. This isn't who you fell in love with." There's a thistle thorn stuck in my glove near the wrist. I try to ignore the pain and pull more thistles.

"Erylis, you're exactly who I fell in love with."

"So you wouldn't mind if I went on my own, then? Strapped on some weapons, took Longfellow, and rode off to Edina. I'd be gone three weeks, maybe."

His back straightens hard and his chin lifts. "You're not twenty anymore."

My temper gets the better of me. When we argued during the war and his back went up, I was stubborn enough that I could endure it if he didn't talk to me for a week. I feel stubborn like that again. "So?"

"You could run into trouble."

"Trouble comes here. Just last year we fought those brigands."

"It's *asking* for trouble, a woman traveling alone."

"I used to travel alone all the time. I lived here alone for years." I have a nasty scar along my spine from that time, proof that I can survive, a reminder that it's not easy.

He turns his back to me.

Late in the war Merald held my retreat point when I went out on especially dangerous missions, or rode with me when I needed an escort. I loved it when he served as my guardian, and I feel blessed to have him as lover, friend, and protector. My temper falters as his silence smothers me. Is what I want really worth the vexation I'm bringing to both of us?

I almost give up, but then I think of a compromise. "I could visit Parke and Jannis." They weren't as far off as Edina, about three days on horseback.

"They have a family to see to. They can't take on guests."

"Is there anywhere I can go?"

He doesn't answer.

He doesn't talk to me the rest of the day, or at dinner. After we eat he washes the dishes and I sit with my chamomile tea. I usually write in my journal while I have my tea. The sweet, hay-like scent makes my hand itch to write, but I have nothing to write about.

I get up and go to my old war chest. I wipe down the carved top once a week, but when I open it dust wafts up from the inside. My weapons are all well put away, but the metal looks dull from dust sticking to the oil. I kneel. The scent reminds me of an attic, of things forgotten. I pull a sleeve over my hand and wipe the dust away. It leaves a shiny spot and a

greasy stain on my cuff. It's just a work shirt but the stain bothers me. It'll always remind me of this argument.

Merald comes out of the kitchen and stands in the living room doorway. He's wearing an apron, rubbing a plate with a stained checked cloth.

I lift my sword from the chest and pull it free of the scabbard. "I don't want to fight. I just want to live." There's no rust on the blade, but time has made the dents, nicks and scratches on the metal more apparent.

"This is living."

I'm surprised that he spoke. I want to talk to him, but I can't come up with anything that doesn't sound ungrateful.

His eyes are sad and his mouth is drawn down. "I don't know why you want to go to Edina. All those loyal to the council will try to embarrass you and our friends. Why do you want to see Seraf at any rate? He has no honor."

"He has plenty." I huff and sheath the sword.

"He was cast out of the knighthood well before—"

"Yes, well before you resigned the emperor's army. Maybe Serif shouldn't have left his post, but at least he knew something was wrong before people started starving." That was too harsh, no matter how true, and I regretted saying it. "He saved your life," I remind him.

"I don't trust him with you."

“But do you trust me with him?” I smile, but I realize I’ve put my foot in my mouth because he didn’t take that remark well. Has the village infected him with mistrust?

He retreats to the kitchen. I set my hands on my hips, determined to get us both out of here. “Let’s go the day after tomorrow, together. We don’t have to flaunt around as a couple if you think that’s going to irk the council. Even if we did I doubt anyone would notice us.” I wait, hoping, though honestly it’s unlikely we’ll go unnoticed and he knows it. Between the legend that is us, his height and my preference to go around armed like a man, people will gawk and talk even if I wear dresses, which I won’t, not on the road.

So we’ll stand out, so what? We won’t be invited to elegant dinners, but plenty of soldiers and knights will want to talk and remember the war as all of us fought it, not as council historians were told to rewrite it. All the council cares about anymore is legitimacy, in the eyes of the neighboring empire, in their own eyes.

I want to talk to my comrades in arms. I felt like I belonged among the soldiers, as much as I’ve ever felt I belong anywhere. Are they restless in peacetime like me?

Our lack of official welcome in Edina isn’t all my fault, though sometimes it’s easier to blame myself than to point at Merald’s own stubbornness. He could have sworn fealty to the

council, but instead he turned his back on them. They didn't like that. They shouldn't have been surprised. He didn't want to put himself in a position to have to break an oath again.

Dishes slosh and clink against each other in water. A rag makes squeaking noises on porcelain.

The dishes were a gift from his mother. They arrived with a formal letter of congratulations a full year after we'd settled in. They're the only fine things in this stone house besides the weapons and horses, and none of them fit on a farm. I'm too aware that Merald and I don't fit together either, by law or right. The reality of a commoner marrying a noble makes him appear cheap and me look like a thief.

I don't want to, but I care about what Merald's parents think of me. The fear makes me want to visit them, to poke at them, see if they'll smile or spit. I'm pretty sure they'd spit, maybe just after I leave.

"I've fought hard all my life for everything." I doubt he can hear me over the dishes. "Is that why I'm so restless?" I listen, but there's no stop to the washing. I think about leaving without him, now, just take my sword and daggers and some money. It hurts. Maybe it'd be considered abandoning my post, so to speak. I don't know if Merald would have me back if I did that to him. What would honor dictate? I've lived with him long enough to answer a lot of questions about his code of honor for

myself, and even challenge the sense in some of it, but this one I can't answer.

I'm chilled by the thought that he might call for my arrest if I left. Would he? He might consider it his duty. I don't want to force him to it, or shame him.

Merald didn't have to marry me. I smile, remembering how he put it. He wanted to do me the honor. The implied arrogance made me mad at the time, though thank goodness I held my tongue. It really was an honor.

He goes to bed and I stay up late. He's not asleep when I join him, just quiet. I'm tired enough that I fall asleep right away.

When I wake I'm rested and happy until yesterday returns behind my eyes. I clean up, weighed down. I can't do it to him, never mind the legal absurdities. I can live without our friends. I could never live with hurting him. Yesterday frustration drove me to the edge, but in a quiet house with the late morning light reminding me that I've shirked my early chores, I refuse to ride away while he works alone in the barley fields. We belong together. He wants to stay, so we'll stay.

I pull on my shirt and skirt from yesterday, don't bother to tuck anything in, and go out to the living room. And I stop.

My bags are packed.

My stomach lurches and I think I'm going to be sick. I rush out the back door into the barley field. There's Merald knee-deep in green, pulling thistles. He sees me and starts wading toward me.

I nearly run him down. "Merald—"

"What's wrong?" He looks past me. His face is smooth and his eyes make winter look warm, like he's expecting an army to charge us two alone.

I'm gasping, confused now. "My—you—are we all right? Or are you throwing me out?"

His gaze falls to my face. His brows rumple up, and then he crushes me close. I'm tight and afraid but he's warm and holding me. I relax though my heart is still tripping fast. He smells like home and safety and love and I can't lose him.

"I love you," he says. "Do you love me?"

"Forever," I swear.

"Come back to me." He kisses my hair. "Just three weeks, Erylis?"

I smile, though I'm not glad. I'm scared as badly as I was during the worst parts of the war.

As hard as it's going to be for me to ride on alone, I know it'll be harder for him to watch me ride away. He hasn't packed his bags, which means he isn't ready to ride with me. I don't know if he'll ever be ready again.

He looks so fragile. It's not just the trust he's giving me. I think he's afraid that I don't need him anymore.

"You'll be safe while I'm gone?" I smile at him, teasing, but I'm serious. "It seems I need you to hold my retreat point, once again."

"I'll hold." Merald kisses my hair again. "Give my regards to our friends. Even Seraf."

Joy at the thought of seeing Seraf again makes me laugh. "I'll invite him to come visit us." He pulls away and I hastily add, "if that's all right with you."

His hesitation is so brief anyone but me would have missed it. "Invite them all. I do miss them."

I feel so awful and selfish, but I can't wait to ride into Edina. I pull him along by the hand toward the house. "Will you send me off with a reminder of the warmth of our bed?"

He turns pink. It makes me laugh and love him all the more. He's so shy about that, even after all this time.

As we walk out of the barley I can tell that his mind is too full to indulge in simple pleasures, and honestly, so is mine. He's quiet, his head bowed, but when he looks my way he smiles. "You look so happy to leave," he says.

I halt and hold him close. "I'll be even happier when I come back home to you." I hope he believes me.

Merald takes my hand and we walk to the stables. He helps me saddle Longfellow. I rub the scar on Longfellow's flank, remembering hard fights and nights wondering if I'd live through the next day. Longfellow looks at me, curious, maybe even knowing. Does he remember too?

Merald and I load the saddlebags, make certain they're balanced, and he helps me into the saddle even though I don't need it. I bend down and we kiss, the kind of kiss where the warmth leaves too quickly but the memory lingers. I'm drawn back in time as I ride away, looking over my shoulder at him as I always used to. There are no words, have never been words between us in moments like this. I raise my open hand. He raises a fist, and we turn away, one toward home, and one toward the unknown.

Copyright © 2009 Kamila Zeman Miller

[Comment on this Story](#) in the *BCS* Forums

Kamila Zeman Miller lives with her family on small acreage in the Columbia River Gorge, where she paints and writes speculative fiction. She has the obligatory large number of rescued cats, as well as dogs, goats, rabbits and a very

raccoon-savvy but consequently lonely chicken. “Thistles and Barley” is her first published story.

**Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies**

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

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>.



This file is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 U.S. license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/). You may copy and share the file so long as you retain the attribution to the authors, but you may not sell it and you may not alter it or partition it or transcribe it.