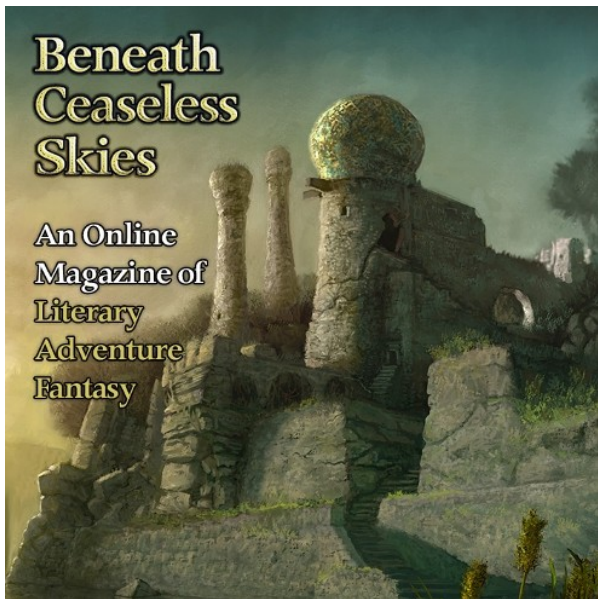


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE LAND OF EMPTY SHELLS

by Caroline M. Yoachim

Long ago when the world was young, two gods sat beside the river for a thousand years and watched the turtles. They saw turtles hatch, saw them grow, and saw them die. Scavengers ate the flesh of the dead turtles, and this was good. But in all the thousand years, nothing became of the shells. They were too hard to be eaten, and none of the animals had any use for them.

So the gods scooped up great handfuls of clay from the riverbank and shaped it in their own image, over and over again, until there were as many people as there were shells. The gods told their people to build homes near the river and make use of all the empty shells.

Then, with the world completely in balance, the gods left.

* * *

Terra dragged her birthing table into the middle of the room. The wooden legs creaked, barely able to support the rainbow-shaped slab of black granite that formed the table's surface. It was nowhere near as nice as Dziko's birthing table, which was carved from a single slab of marble, with legs that curved like flowing rivers. His table was fit to be passed down

for generations, father to son, though in Dziko's case it had been mother to son, since he had only mothers and no father.

They pushed the tables together to form a ring of stone with a wide-open hole in the middle where she and her husband could stand. Dziko stared at her, waiting. Neither of them had made a baby before, but he expected her to guide him through the process. Rain pounded against the roof, filling the silence with a steady patter.

“What next?” he asked.

“Water,” Terra snapped. “Everybody knows that!” She regretted it instantly. This was supposed to be a sacred time.

Dziko placed his hand on the thick rolls of clay flesh that formed the flesh of her back. “Of course, water. The rain comes from the gods to give us life.”

He bowed his head in the direction of the priestess, even though her mountain temple was hidden by the storm. Dziko had served at the temple in autumn, standing watch over the turtles that lived in the sacred river. He had so much faith and Terra had so little, but still they loved each other. He only made her lead the way because he was afraid to make mistakes.

Terra brought out a pair of wood-shingled gloves from the top drawer of their dresser. The gloves were covered with chips of overlapping cedar, like the scales of a fish, to deflect away the rain.

She pulled the gloves over her hands.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded. He opened the window, and she grabbed her turtle shell bowl. As she pulled the bowl inside, a gust of wind blew raindrops onto her arm, above the elbow where her gloves did not protect her. The drops melted her flesh into tiny puddles where they struck. She whimpered and backed away, still clutching the bowl.

“All right, love?” Dziko’s voice was light, but after he spoke his thin lips pressed together tight with worry.

“It’s nothing,” she replied. “Almost dry already.”

She set her bowl on the birthing table and held her arm out to Dziko. The raindrops had formed shallow indentations, like misplaced dimples. None of her flesh had washed away. No harm done. Dziko pushed his palm against her arm to smooth away the rainscars.

He retrieved his bowl. The shells were the only thing they had where hers was nicer than his because turtle shells were only used once, and each person had to find their own along the river bank. Hers was shallow and broad, with ridges that gave the bowl a stable base. His came from a turtle that had died as a juvenile, a smaller shell with a smooth surface. He had to be careful not to tip it over as he laid out his tools—

knives and needles, shapers and smoothers. There was nothing left to do now but begin.

They crawled under the edge of the table and emerged in the center hole. It was a snug fit; the opening was barely big enough. Terra reached down toward her thigh, and her hand bumped against Dziko's.

"Oh, did you want to?" she asked.

"Or we could—" he said at the same time.

She moved to give Dziko more space and bumped against the table. They would have to coordinate their movements to keep from getting in each other's way.

"Each from our own?" she asked.

"Okay."

Terra reached down to her thigh and pulled flesh from her leg into a bulge above her hip. Dziko did the same. They gathered a thin layer of flesh from their legs, a handful from their shoulders, a bit from their rounded bellies—never too much from any one place. Soon, each of them had a lump the size of a baby resting on their hip.

"Is this going to hurt?" Dziko asked.

Terra didn't know. She gave her lump an experimental tug. "Ow. Definitely yes. Help me?"

Dziko stretched the flesh away from her hip, twisting as he pulled. The strand of clay connecting the lump to her body got

thinner and thinner until, suddenly, it snapped. Terra managed not to scream. Dziko set the flesh on the table and reshaped her hip.

“Motherhood looks good on you,” Dziko said, running his hand over her stomach. She was nicely plump but no longer bulging with the excess weight of a childless adult.

Terra helped Dziko separate his babyflesh. Her technique wasn’t as good, and when the lump came free, Dziko yelped.

“Sorry,” she said. She massaged the jagged flesh at his hip until it was smooth.

The rest of the birthing was hard work, but painless. They sprinkled water over the clay to soften it and kneaded the flesh together until there was no way to separate his riverbed brown from her sunset orange. Then they divided the babyflesh into two equal pieces, soon to be their children.

Dziko shaped their son, and Terra shaped their daughter. They made full-sized heads, skinny torsos, and tiny stubs that would one day become arms and legs. Most of their efforts were focused on the children’s faces. Terra gave her daughter Dziko’s lips, her own nose, and Avani’s eyes. Terra barely knew her husband’s sister, but she had beautiful eyes. Her manipulations made the flesh brittle, and tiny cracks appeared around her daughter’s mouth. She dipped her smoothing tool into the rainwater and moistened the flesh until it softened.

“She’s beautiful.”

Terra jumped, unaware that Dziko had been watching. She peeked over her shoulder and saw that he had given their son full lips, and Terra’s eyes. So strange, to see her own eyes staring back at her, empty and motionless.

They crawled out from the center of the table, an easy maneuver now that they had given so much flesh. Dziko held her, wrapping his arms around her newly thinned waist. It was their last moment of peace before the babies demanded all of their attention. Still, they couldn’t wait too long, or the babies would dry out. Terra moved the bowls of rainwater to the top of the dresser and Dziko bowed his head to the temple, silently begging the blessing of the priestess for their children.

“Joren and Urvara,” Terra said.

Dziko repeated the names. He leaned over Joren, and she leaned over Urvara, and together they blew the first breath into their babies. After a long anxious moment, the earsplitting wails of newborns filled the cabin. They were parents.

Over the coming weeks, they would have to flesh their children every day. The babies’ limbs, now little more than bumps, had to be grown into arms and legs. When summer came, she and Dziko would be thin from having given so much flesh, but that was the natural way of things.

* * *

The first people used the turtle shells as bowls and used the bowls to make their children, and it was good. But in those early days, the rain could come in any season, and many people melted away and were lost. So they built a temple, high in the mountains, and chose a boy to be their priest. The boy climbed to the top of the temple and asked the rain to stop coming. The rain refused. The boy expected this, so next he asked that the rain come only in the spring. Still the rain refused. Finally, he asked the rain to warn them before it came. He thought surely this small boon would be granted, but the rain refused.

Defeated, the boy sat atop the temple and waited. It rained, and his flesh flowed down the sides of the temple. The rain saw the horrors of death up close and repented. Now it only rained in spring, and the rain called out with thunder before it came.

* * *

Urvara followed Papa and Joren up the temple stairs. From up here, she could see the whole village, row after row of cabins, all raised up on stilts so they wouldn't flood in the spring rains. Trees blocked the spot where Mama was sitting, waiting at the base of the mountain trail because she wasn't as religious as Papa.

“Don't dawdle, Urvara.”

She walked faster to catch up with Papa and Joren. Midsummer was a strange time. She and Joren were nearly as big as Papa now, which made it easy to keep up. Urvara wondered if it was nice for her parents to not be so fat, or if they missed their excess flesh.

The temple loomed above them, a stair-step pyramid that looked as though it had been carved from the mountain, except for the color. The mountain was gray, but the temple was flesh-colored, a deep red-brown.

“Is it made out of people?” Urvara whispered to Joren. It seemed too ridiculous a question to ask Papa.

Joren shrugged.

“Papa,” she said, “What is the temple made from?”

“Stone, little curious one,” Papa said.

Urvara thought about that. The temple was *shaped* as though it was made from stone. Still, it didn’t look like stone. “Did they cover the stone with... something else?”

Papa laughed. “They paint the stone, Urvara, to honor the priest that tamed the rain.”

Urvara remembered that story, one of many that Papa had told them in the spring, when the rain kept them from venturing outdoors. She thought it was foolish for the priest to sit out in the rain and melt, but she knew better than to say so to Papa.

They climbed up the side of the temple on the flesh-colored stairs. Near the top of the pyramid was a doorway, guarded on either side by turtle statues that were taller than Urvara and carved from the same black granite as Mama's birthing table. Another family was leaving as they arrived, the father holding his son's hand and the mother holding her daughter's. Joren could hold Papa's hand as they left, but Urvara would have to walk alone.

Papa and Joren passed between the two turtles, and Urvara followed them into the dimly lit main chamber of the temple. The priestess sat cross-legged in the back of the room, too far from the door for daylight to reach. Her body was illuminated by a pair of torches. A crack split her flesh from the crown of her head, down the bridge of her nose, and over the middle of both lips. Urvara couldn't stop staring at it. Her face looked like it was about to crack wide open and split in two.

"Go on," Papa said, nudging her forward.

"Make Joren go first," she said, but Joren shook his head. He didn't want to be first either. Papa wouldn't make *him* go until he was ready. That was why Urvara had to go first, so that Joren could see what happened and be prepared. It wasn't fair.

"Go." Papa repeated.

Up close, the priestess looked even worse. Her limbs didn't seem to match, each one a different color flesh. Everything

except her left arm was scarred with deep crevices like the one on her face, but that one arm was almost smooth. Younger than the rest of her, but still covered in hairline cracks.

“Closer.” The priestess barely moved her mouth, which made her hard to understand.

Urvara inched closer, trying not to let the revulsion show on her face. When she was as close to the crackled woman as she could bear, she knelt on the cool stone floor, as Papa had told them they must.

“This girl is sound of body. She has strength and courage,” the priestess said, raising her left arm. Urvara wondered what had happened to her old arm and where the new arm had come from.

“Don’t stare, child, it’s rude.”

Urvara dropped her gaze to her lap, to the smoothness of her own flesh. She started to mumble an apology, but suddenly the priestess reached out and pressed her hand against Urvara’s forehead. Her instinct was to pull away, but she forced herself to be still.

“I give her my blessing,” the priestess declared.

Relieved, Urvara started to back away, but the priestess held Urvara’s head. For an ancient dried-out woman, her grip was remarkably strong.

“I give her my blessing, and I claim her for the service of the temple.” With that, the priestess released Urvara’s head. She fell backwards.

“You can’t,” Joren said. He marched forward and stood before the priestess. “One from each family is chosen, and I should be the one, not her.”

Up to this point, the priestess had moved nothing but her lips and her arm. Now she turned her head to look up at Joren. The movement made the flesh in her neck rumble softly, like stones rubbing together. Urvara expected the flesh to snap, but it didn’t.

“Joren,” Papa said, “What are you doing?”

Joren turned away from the priestess to answer. “It’s supposed to be me. All your stories about the honor of serving the gods, about watching over the sacred turtles, protecting the shells from those who would steal them out of season—you told those stories to me. So I could be like you. So I could do everything right.”

“Kneel,” the priestess said, ignoring Joren’s outburst.

“No.” Joren towered over the priestess.

“This one acts bravely only to deny the existence of his fear,” the priestess said. “He fights against the world, and he fights against me. He is not worthy to serve the gods.”

“Joren, there are other things than serving at the temple. Better things. It doesn’t matter,” Papa said.

Of course it wouldn’t matter to Papa now, when it was Urvara who would serve. She had never been close to Papa, not like Joren was. Mama had been the one to breathe life into her, and the bond with the breathparent was always closer. But it still stung to hear Papa renounce what had once been so important to him, simply because Urvara had been chosen.

“Kneel!” the priestess repeated, her voice loud and low like rumbling thunder.

“I won’t,” Joren said. “You’ve chosen wrong. It has to be me.”

“Very well,” the priestess said, her voice lowered to its normal rasp. “I have no choice but to withhold my blessing. Leave my presence.”

Papa’s expression went blank. Not angry, or sad, but empty. Without a word, he bowed to the priestess and left the temple.

“Come on,” Urvara said, “Let’s go.”

Joren backed away, never taking his eyes off the priestess. He was silent until they left the inner chamber, but once they’d cleared the giant turtles, a stream of protests flowed from him. The next family to see the priestess was climbing the temple stairs—it was Rhea, with her parents Bhudev and Tlaloc and

her brother Yuri. They lived three cabins down the road, but the two cabins in-between were empty, which made them neighbors. Papa had been good friends with Bhudev the summer they were children, and Urvara sometimes played stone toss with Rhea. She and her family were clearly shocked to hear Joren speak against the priestess on the steps of her temple.

“I *am* brave,” he insisted. “I would have done a good job guarding the turtles. Why couldn’t she see that?”

Joren continued down the stairs, mumbling to himself. Urvara waved to Rhea, then glanced at Joren and shrugged. Rhea smiled and crossed her eyes. Siblings, what could you do? Urvara jogged down the stairs, nodding occasionally without listening to what Joren was saying. When Joren faced the priestess, hadn’t that been brave? They had both been scared of the crackled woman, and he had overcome that fear. Or had he simply let his anger get the best of him? Urvara wasn’t sure she knew what it took to be brave. She certainly wasn’t sure *she* had it, whatever it was.

“Where are you going?” she asked. Joren was leaving the main path, heading off along the steep trail that led down to the sacred river. Far below them, Papa stormed down the mountain. He was almost to the base, where Mama could comfort him. Maybe wandering off for a bit wasn’t such a bad

idea. Urvara clambered down the uneven boulders, hurrying after Joren.

The river cut a shallow canyon into the mountainside, and short scraggly trees with twisted limbs lined the water on either side. Some grew almost sideways from the riverbank, their roots clinging to the mix of rock and dirt and clay. Joren had climbed one of the bigger trees and was perched on a branch that hung over the river.

“Joren,” she called, “I can’t get down the canyon wall.”

The drop was only a few arm lengths, but she wanted Joren to come down from the tree, and asking for help seemed like a better idea than telling him to come down because it was too dangerous.

“Liar.”

Urvara sat down on the lip of the canyon. It was mid-summer, so the river was not so wild as in the spring, but it still moved with a steady hiss, like a startled snake. In autumn, when the water was lower, the new temple guards would come to protect the turtle shells. She would be one of those guards, she realized. For now, the river itself protected both the live turtles and the discarded shells.

“Turtle,” Joren said. Big gray rocks dotted the river and the water swirled around them. Something black and round moved on top of one of the rocks. Urvara scanned the river and

spotted a few others, though not as many as she'd expected. Their shells looked like Papa's birthing bowl at home, small and smooth and dark. They must be juveniles. She wondered where all the bigger turtles were.

"They look so strange," she said, in awe of the armored creatures that swam freely in the deadly water. She had assumed they would be delicate and pretty, but instead they were fierce, almost ugly, with big heads and beak-like mouths.

"I'm going to get one," Joren said. "If I take one to the priestess, maybe she'll change her mind."

"The priestess never changes her mind." Urvara couldn't believe that Joren would be so foolish as to take a turtle. "Besides, the turtles are in *water*."

"Not that one." Joren pointed to a turtle that was resting on a large rock beneath his branch. "It's dry from sitting in the sun."

Before Urvara could say anything more, Joren leaned down to grab the turtle. She held her breath. His fingertips brushed the top of the turtle, and it pulled its head and feet inside the protection of its shell.

"It's too far down," Urvara said, relieved. "Let it go."

"I can get it," he said, inching out a little further on the branch.

"Don't, Joren, leave it. She won't change her mind."

“I failed today, by making you go first, and by speaking out in anger. I have to redeem myself in the eyes of the priestess, even if it doesn’t change anything.”

He reached down again, this time wrapping his legs around the branch and letting go with both hands so his whole body dangled down toward the turtle, which was still hiding in its shell. He picked it up with both hands and curled back up to the branch. Urvara let out a sigh of relief as he grasped the branch once more, holding the turtle against his hip with one hand.

The turtle poked its head out and snapped a big chunk out of Joren’s hip. He flung it the turtle into the river. The motion set him off balance, and his legs slipped loose from the tree branch. He fell. Most of him landed on the rock, but his feet were in the river, washing away. He screamed and pulled his legs up against his chest.

“Don’t move!” Urvara yelled. She jumped down from her perch, landing so hard that her feet squashed into her ankles. It didn’t matter, she could reshape them later. She had to get to Joren before he tried to stand up on his slippery half-melted feet, otherwise he’d fall for sure. She climbed up the tree and wrapped her legs around the branch, as Joren had, but she didn’t dangle down. She kept her body snug against the branch and reached down with just her arm.

“My feet, my feet are gone,” Joren whispered, staring at the slimy mess at the end of his ankles. “Urvara, I wanted to be brave.”

“You are brave,” Urvara assured him.

“No, the priestess was right. You’re the brave one. She chose well.” He pushed himself onto his knees and reached for Urvara. They clasped hands, and she pulled him up. The tree let out a horrible creak, and the branch sagged under their weight. She let go of one of Joren’s hands to steady herself.

“It won’t hold us both,” Urvara said. “You hold the branch, and I’ll move back towards the trunk—”

There was a crack and the branch lurched sideways, closer to the river. She tightened her grip on Joren’s hand. He was off balance now, with the branch off to one side of his rock. She reached out to him with her other hand. They’d have to be quick once he was on the branch; they’d only have a moment before it gave way.

“You’re right,” Joren said. “It won’t hold us both.”

“I won’t let go of you,” Urvara said.

“I know.”

Joren reached up with his free hand, but instead of grabbing for the branch he grabbed his own arm, just below the shoulder, and squeezed until his fingers sank deep into his flesh. She wanted to scream at him to stop, but suddenly her

throat went dry as dust. Joren cut all the way through his flesh and hung there for a moment, holding the end of his own arm. Then he let go. His body splashed into the water, sending up droplets that burned against her flesh. She still held his hand, too light with only the weight of his arm behind it.

The river tore Joren apart. Flesh-stained water spread outward from the spot where he fell, and then the river washed even that last trace of him away.

“No,” Urvara whispered. She clung to the branch so tight that the pattern of its bark cut into her flesh. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the place where Joren had melted, as if somehow her gaze could bring him back. The branch creaked beneath her, and only then did she inch backwards, out of the tree and down to the safety of the riverbank. She cradled her brother’s arm against her chest.

“He was brave!” she yelled towards the temple. “He was brave, and you made him foolish. You made him do this. But he was brave.”

She limped home on her mangled feet, carrying what was left of her brother. At the edge of the village, she stopped beneath an old abandoned cabin and leaned against one of its thick wooden stilts. She could see the stain where the floodwaters of spring had risen halfway up; the bottom half of

each piece of wood was the color of flesh mixed with water. The color of Joren in the river.

It was nearly dark by the time she arrived home, and Mama stood waiting in the doorway. Urvara climbed the ladder slowly, and pulled herself onto the porch with her one free hand.

“Urvara,” Mama said, “Your feet! And where—”

Urvara couldn’t answer, she only held out the arm.

“Joren? No. It can’t be. Dziko! Dziko, get out here.”

Papa came to the door. He looked at Urvara, then took the arm from her. He turned it over and over in his hands. Urvara waited for him to say something. To blame her for not watching over her brother, to ask her what had happened. But instead he said, “It’s my fault. All my fault.”

Urvara followed her parents inside. “You have to remake him.”

“Oh, Urvara, we can’t,” Mama said. “There’s so little left.”

“I don’t need to grow,” she said. “You can give him the clay you would have given me. We’ll all be smaller, but—”

“That isn’t Joren. It’s only an arm.” Mama paced around the cabin, walking circles around Papa. He stood motionless, staring down at Joren’s arm and mumbling to himself.

“But he was brave, Mama,” Urvara pleaded. “At the very end, he was brave. You have to save him.”

It wasn't Mama who answered, but Papa. "We have to try."

Mama shook her head, but she got out Papa's turtle shell bowl, the one that that had held Joren's lifewater. "The shells are only supposed to be used once."

"One shell, one life, for the gods must have balance in the world," Papa said. "But we aren't trying to make a second life. It is the same life, and the same shell."

Urvara took Papa's shell and carefully fetched water from the barrel at the center of the village. Not a few drops, like on a growing day, but half a shell's worth.

Mama and Papa worked all through the night, tearing flesh from themselves to make a new head, a new body. It took longer than making a baby, since in summer a child must have arms and legs, hands and feet. Urvara offered to help, even to give some of her flesh, but Mama wouldn't let her do it. "It's not the way of things," she said. Papa gave the most—both of his legs. He insisted, because it was his fault.

It was nearly dawn when they had finished. Mama waited for Papa to bow to the priestess, to seek her blessing once more for their son, but Papa made no move to pray. Instead, he spoke the name Joren, and breathed the first breath back into his son.

But what they had created wasn't her brother. It was a baby as big as Urvara, with fully formed arms and legs that

flailed and kicked.

* * *

The children of the first people were happy, all except the sister of the first priest. The others found mates and had children, but she withdrew to her brother's temple and became the priestess there. She vowed to protect his people, because he had died for them.

The priestess watched over the turtles as the gods did, so the people thought she was wise and did as she commanded. She chose one child from every family to serve her in the season of autumn, to tend to the temple and protect the turtles. Many years passed, and the priestess became old and dry, but she did not die. And she never forgot the sacrifice of her brother, who gave his life to tame the rain.

* * *

Urvara stood at the base of the mountain where the path split. To her right was the winding trail that led to the river. On her left were the stairs that led to the temple.

Jor, who she could not bear to call by her brother's full name, sat in the middle of the path, tracing circles in the dirt. It made the outer layer of his flesh dusty and dry, but no matter how many times she chastised him, he never seemed to understand how important it was to keep his flesh clean.

She had to constantly remind herself that Jor was still young, not even old enough for his first trip outside. At the thought of Joren's death her fists clenched so tightly her fingertips started to merge with her palms. She had half a mind to march up the mountain steps and show the priestess what she'd done.

Instead, she took Jor's hand and led him to the river. It was their first time coming back here. The water level was lower now, and the deadly river looked peaceful, like a sleeping snake. A short distance upstream, she could see the tree that she and Joren had climbed, and the rock that he had balanced on for a brief moment before toppling into the water. The water was so low that the rock was surrounded by land on three sides. He could have fallen from it now without any harm. This time of year, the river was supposed to be patrolled by the temple guard, but it was deserted.

Jor tugged at her hand. When Urvara turned to look, he was pointing.

It was a small gesture, but as precious as a first word. He'd never tried to interact with her before. She stared at his finger, too small and thin for the season, despite Papa's insistence that they use last of his flesh. Poor Papa. He'd lost his will to live when it became obvious that his breathchild was gone. He never forgave himself.

Jor pulled on her hand again. Urvara turned to look where he was pointing. There were three turtles sunning themselves on the shore. The first one lay low to the ground and the other two lined up behind it, each placing their forelegs on the shell of the turtle in front of it and arching their heads toward the sky. Joren had loved the turtles, and it was his arm that did the pointing. Urvara shook her head. She was holding Jor's other hand, so of course he used Joren's arm to point.

"Turtles," she said, hoping Jor would repeat the word.

He didn't speak, but his lips curled into a smile. He started towards the turtles, but Urvara pulled him back. He plopped down on the ground and went back to tracing circles in the dirt. It didn't look any different than what he usually did, but Urvara could swear that he was sulking. She crouched down beside him.

"There's water here, it's dangerous. You have to stay with me. We'll just find our turtle shells and go home."

"Autumn is too early for turtle shells." The voice came from behind Urvara. A young woman stood on the trail, her flesh engraved with the zigzag pattern reserved for the inner circle of those who served the priestess. Joren had whispered once of his dream, not just to be chosen but to be part of this highest class. From all those chosen, only eight were given this so-called honor.

The woman had a basket in one hand and a long walking stick in the other. “Hardly seems fair to come before the adulthood ceremony and take first pick. What if there aren’t enough?”

“What does a woman of the temple know of fairness?” Urvara asked. She stood up, and the woman gasped when she saw how small Urvara was. “You give us back the flesh we’ve lost, and we’ll gladly wait for the start of winter to seek our shells.”

“Urvara? I’m sorry, I didn’t—” the woman began. “I heard what had happened, but I didn’t realize. No one was supposed to be here when... Well, sometimes people come early and try to get the prettiest shells, and I thought that’s what you were doing.”

The woman’s face was familiar. It was Rhea, her childhood friend, almost unrecognizable now that her gaunt face was fat with the flesh of her parents.

“Want to save those pretty shells for yourself, Rhea? I bet you could fit a lot of them in that basket of yours.” Urvara couldn’t stop herself. Rhea served the priestess, and the priestess killed Joren.

“No. Absolutely not.”

Urvara expected her to storm off, but she didn’t. Jor had stopped tracing the dirt. She wondered if he could sense the

tension in the air, the anger in her voice. She rested her hand on the top of his head and smoothed out a tiny nick in his forehead where some branch had scratched him.

“I’m sorry,” Rhea said again. “I didn’t realize it was you. There’s a place further downstream where the creek pools up in the spring. It’s dry now, and there are shells there.”

“How can you serve her, after what she did to us?” Urvara asked. “The priestess chose wrong from my family. She killed my brother.”

Without waiting for an answer, Urvara led Jor along the bank of the creek, downstream to where Rhea said there would be shells. Normally each person retrieved their own shell, but they were so close to the water’s edge that Urvara couldn’t let Jor pick out his own.

Several shells rested on a slimy mix of mud and clay, perhaps some of Joren’s flesh. With a long tree branch, she pulled two shells out of the mud and onto dry land. She picked them up and held one in each hand, showing them to Joren. The two shells were much the same, dark and smooth like Papa’s, one slightly bigger than the other. Looking at the remaining shells, Urvara could see why Rhea had been concerned about people stealing shells out of season—it didn’t look like there would be enough for everyone.

“Which one do you want?” she asked.

He stared at the shells, then scrunched down to look underneath. He made little swimming motions with his hands.

“Turtle shells,” Urvara said. “But the turtles don’t need them any more. Which one do you want?”

Slowly, he reached out to touch one of the shells, the smaller one. Urvara gave it to him, and he hugged it close against his chest. They walked back upstream and she steeled herself for another interaction with Rhea, but she had already gone. In her place was a lower ranking temple guard, his flesh marked only by a pair of parallel lines that wrapped around his arm. He nodded to Jor and Urvara as they passed. Rhea must have told him to let them take their shells.

She and Jor walked home. Urvara held both shells and helped Jor climb up the ladder and onto the porch.

“We got them, Mama,” Urvara called out as they came in. Mama rested on the bed, exactly where they’d left her, dwindled down to little more than a stunted torso with a head. She looked like the end of winter, even though the leaves on the trees had only just started to change color.

“Them? Two shells?”

“Of course, Mama,” Urvara said. “I helped Jor with his. We don’t have to do this now, you know. Jor and I will be small either way, and it’s only autumn.”

“My Dziko is gone, and my children are out of season. You should have taken just one shell, we’ve only enough flesh between the three of us for one adult. Take all my flesh, Urvara, and try to find a mate. I want you to promise me that you will take all of it.”

“Mama, I can’t,” Urvara said. That wasn’t what Papa would have wanted, and Mama hadn’t been at the creek to see how Jor was finally starting to communicate. Besides, even if Urvara took all that Mama had left, it wouldn’t be enough.

“Promise me.”

A knock came on the door. Urvara opened it and saw Rhea standing outside. “The priestess sent me to remind you of your duty. You are among the chosen.”

“I’d rather die.”

“I know,” Rhea said.

Urvara thought that Rhea might argue, but she didn’t. They stood staring at each other across the threshold.

“Can I come in?” Rhea asked.

“No.”

“Oh, let her in, Urvara,” Mama said. Then, to Rhea, “Stand where I can see you.”

Mama studied Rhea, and Rhea studied Jor. He sat on the floor with his turtle shell. He’d set it down as an upside-down bowl, which Urvara supposed was right-side-up for a turtle. He

pushed it around the room, slowly, as though there were a turtle inside.

“She’s grown up very pretty,” Mama said. “Don’t you think so, Urvara?”

Urvara tried to see Rhea as a woman instead of just a servant of the priestess, but she couldn’t get past the zigzag lines that covered every inch of her flesh. Rhea did seem fascinated with Jor, though Urvara doubted she would want to be his mate. Her interest was more that of a mother looking at a child.

“I’m ready now,” Mama continued. “It’s time.”

“I’ll go,” Rhea said, finally realizing what she’d interrupted.

“Oh no, you wanted to come in,” Urvara said, “You can stay and see what your temple has done to my family.”

“Be kind, Urvara. Rhea is among the chosen, but she is not the priestess. My passing is the natural way of things.”

Urvara got Mama’s turtle shell bowl from atop the dresser and set it on top of Mama’s birthing table, which was pushed up against the wall beneath the window. She could see the temple, reddish brown against the gray stone of the mountain, with zigzag steps like the marks on Rhea’s flesh. Rhea made no move to leave. Urvara picked her mother up off the bed. She

was so light. Her limbs were gone and her torso ended abruptly just below her neck.

“Do we have to—” Urvara began.

“Yes. It’s the right time,” Mama said.

Jor was a baby, no matter how big he was, and parents were supposed to stay until winter. “But I still need you. I can’t do this alone.”

“I never believed in the gods,” Mama said. “Dziko was always the one who believed in those stories. To me, these shells have always just been shells, and rain is only rain. There is no balance in the world, and I can’t believe in any god that would leave us here like this. But in these last few weeks, I found my faith. Your strength gives me something to believe. I have faith, in you.”

“Joren was the brave one,” Urvara whispered. “Not me. Never me.”

“Whatever you are, it’s enough.”

Urvara kissed Mama on the forehead, then placed one hand on each side of her mother’s head. The final gift shouldn’t be taken alone, but Jor remained on the floor, clutching his empty turtle shell, unaware that he was neglecting his role. Urvara couldn’t ask him to do this, he wouldn’t understand.

“Goodbye, Mama.”

“Goodbye, Urvara, child of my breath.”

Urvara pressed her hands together, squashing them into Mama's head until her palms met in the middle.

All that was left of her mother was a distorted ring of flesh, wrapped around Urvara's hands. She shaped Mama's flesh into a ball and placed it onto the birthing table. The flesh was dry. Urvara sprinkled it with water from Mama's turtle shell bowl until it was as moist as babyflesh again.

No matter what Mama might have wanted, Urvara couldn't take it all. She took half the flesh to Jor and massaged it over his chest, his arms, his legs. Half for him and half for her. This was the closest she could come to balance in her world. These insignificant things were all she could control. She added the other lump of flesh to her own frame. Even with Mama's final gift, they both still looked like children.

She took Mama's bowl back to the dresser and set it next to Papa's. She should have destroyed his bowl when he gave the last of his flesh, but they hadn't had the new bowls then. Urvara poured the last of the water from Mama's bowl into her own new turtle shell. She crouched down next to Jor. "Can I use your shell?"

She held out her hand, hoping that Jor would give her the shell, but instead he clutched it against his chest and gave her a wary look. The water from Papa's bowl was supposed to go into

Jor's shell. She had to empty both parents' shells so she could break them.

"What does it matter to you, about the shells?" Rhea asked. Her voice wasn't spiteful but curious, as though Urvara was a puzzle to be solved.

"I can believe in the gods without believing in the priestess and her temple. She might tell you that it is all one and the same, but she was just a woman once."

"You believe in the stories?"

"I believe that there must be a balance between our people and the shells. I believe that each shell can only be used once. Jor was born from a used-up shell. Look at him and tell me that he is the same as my brother was."

"Perhaps with time—"

"He will never be the same, no matter how much time passes."

Still, there was no harm in letting Jor keep his turtle shell. Urvara poured the last of the water from Papa's bowl into her own shell, now filled almost to the top. Then she took her father's empty shell to the sharp corner of the dresser, reinforced with stone to bear the force that ritual required, and brought it down hard against the corner, once, twice, three times. On the fourth blow, the shell finally cracked, splitting into two pieces along a jagged line.

She took up Mama's bowl, thick and sturdy. It was heavier than Papa's bowl, and the ridges would make it harder to strike a solid blow against the corner of the dresser. She ran her fingers up and down the rows of spiky bumps along the back of the shell. A shell is just a shell. She clutched the bowl in her hands. The last trace of her mother. She and Jor were supposed to destroy it together, to bring balance into the world. He should hold one side and she the other, so that together they could dash the shell to pieces against the corner of the dresser. Instead, he sat on the floor, poking the new flesh on his chest with his finger.

The ritual was almost done, but she couldn't finish. She traced the rim of the bowl with her fingertips. There was no one to help her now. Mama was gone, and Jor didn't understand.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and turned to see Rhea. Neither of them spoke. They stood that way for a long time. Jor crawled up into Mama's bed, looked around for a moment, then fell asleep. Urvara wanted to be done with death, but she couldn't bring herself to break the shell.

Rhea took the other side of Mama's shell. Urvara wanted to be angry, but she found herself grateful, grateful for anyone who would help, even someone from the temple, because it meant she didn't have to do everything alone.

They lifted the shell as high as Urvara could reach, then smashed it down against the corner of the dresser. It only took a single blow, and Mama's shell splintered into shards.

* * *

Every year, on the last day of autumn, the people went to the riverbank and gathered shells to make their children. But one year there were not enough shells. Fewer shells meant fewer children, and the priestess refused to let her brother's people dwindle away and die. She told everyone to go home and return the next day. She told them she would beg the gods for more shells.

The people left, and when they returned there were enough shells for all who needed them, and it was good. Now the priestess always speaks to the gods on the last day of autumn, and the people collect their shells on the first day of winter.

* * *

Urvara was surprised to see Rhea standing on the doorstep on the third day of winter. She had smoothed away the zigzag indentations in her flesh that had marked her as a servant of the priestess. In her left hand, she held a turtle shell, a large deeply-ridged shell like Mama's had been. It was crusted with dried mud from the riverbank. Rhea had visited four times since she'd watched Mama give her final gift. She said that she

would have come more often were she not needed to do the work of the priestess, away at the temple. It irritated Urvara that Rhea refused to give up her service, and yet she was always so kind to Jor when she came to visit.

“Can I come in?” Rhea asked softly, interrupting Urvara’s thoughts. Her voice had the sad warble of breath that bubbled up through a constricted throat.

“Of course.” It was an amazing gesture of pity for Rhea to bring her shell here. The traditional day of choice was the first day of winter, and it must have taken her two whole days to force herself to come here, to choose Jor instead of a more desirable mate. Rhea was good with Jor, always telling him stories and giving him little gifts—stones smoothed by the river or gnarled sticks shaped like abstract animals. Trivial things.

“You were right about the priestess,” Rhea said. “I should have left, before... “

“I’m grateful you’re here,” Urvara said. “Autumn is ended, and now that you’ve done your duty you don’t have to go back.”

“But I can’t undo what I’ve done.” Rhea held up her turtle shell. “This is what the turtle shells should look like when the turtles are done with them. They should be this big, with spikes and ridges. It took me two days of searching to find it, that’s why I’m here on the third day of winter and not the first. I didn’t want to be part of the higher order. I wanted to stand

guard over the turtles as my father did—as your father did. What she does at the end of autumn, it’s wrong, Urvara.”

Rhea was talking so fast that Urvara had trouble taking it all in. She didn’t understand what the priestess had done, why the shells were smaller. She remembered the autumn day when they had encountered Rhea by the river, a basket in her hand. “Is it something to do with the day we met by the river?”

“No. Well, yes, but that was not the worst. There were no guards by the river that day because no one was allowed to see what I was doing. I was collecting clay. River clay to sculpt a new arm for the priestess.”

“But only the gods... River clay isn’t pure enough—”

“I know. I spent most of my autumn separating out the clay and making it clean. That was the work of the higher order, and it was strange, but we all thought it was good. There were eight of us, and we thought the priestess was wise, and that it was okay for her to live so long, even using the river clay. But.”

Rhea paused for a long time, hugging the turtle shell to her chest. “On the last day of autumn, the priestess ordered us to go down to the river. She told us to... I didn’t want to, but the others convinced me. There are fewer shells every year, and if we hadn’t done it then some people wouldn’t be able to have children.”

“You killed turtles,” Urvara said.

Jor looked up. He made swimming motions with his hands, then stopped and turned the shell upside down. Urvara couldn't help but think that he understood, even if he never said a word.

“I killed one,” Rhea said. “It wasn't even old. It wasn't even an adult. The others kept going, but I couldn't. I ran away, downstream, just ran and ran until nightfall. When dawn came, I knew that all the village would be out collecting shells and choosing mates, and everyone would be happy because they didn't know.”

“But you still found a shell, you still came back.”

“I wasn't going to. I was going to run away forever. But then I found this shell, a shell from a fully grown turtle. It reminded me of your mother's shell, of your family. I could abandon the village, but I couldn't abandon you.” Rhea stood in the center of the room with her shell, staring expectantly at Urvara.

“Jor,” Urvara called softly. He'd need his turtle shell for the union ritual, and... well he couldn't speak the words, he hadn't learned to talk yet, but Rhea knew that, and she still had come. Urvara could speak for him. She ran through the ritual in her head. It was good, that Jor would have someone to take care of him. Jor needed that.

“He can watch from there,” Rhea said.

With the markings of the temple smoothed away, Urvara could see the face of her childhood friend in the woman who stood before her. She smiled at the future they might have had together, but she couldn't be so selfish. “Jor needs you. I can take care of myself. You can't choose me over him, it'd be just like the priestess all over again.”

“It doesn't have to be you *or* him. We can take care of Jor together, and we can spread the word about the priestess and the turtles, and bring balance into the world.”

Urvara shook her head. “Only the gods can bring balance to the world. But stay with me, and at least we can have balance in our hearts.”

* * *

The people lost their faith in the priestess and abandoned her alone in her mountain temple. They stopped killing turtles, and only took shells they found empty on the riverbank. But the damage had been done, and every year there were fewer turtles. With no one serving at the temple, the rain forgot its promise, and washed away the people.

At the end of time, the last turtle was dying. The gods returned and carried that last turtle up the steps of the temple. Inside sat a priestess, her flesh so old and crackled that she could not move. She was the last of the people, the sister of the

priest who'd tamed the rain. Like the turtle, she was dying. The gods lifted the turtle high above her head, then smashed it down with a strength that only gods possess. The priestess and the turtle, shell and all, were reduced to dust. There were no more turtles. There were no more people.

And with the world once more completely in balance, the gods left.

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**Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies**

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

THE BONE HOUSE

by James Lecky

We live in the Bone House, Father and I, in the shade of the ironwood trees, beside a river that is never still, never silent.

Somewhere, far to the south, a war is being fought, a war that began many years before I was conceived and has been fought with growing ferocity ever since. At night I sit on the banks of the river and look to where the great fires burn, lighting up the horizon as if to challenge the stars themselves, and imagine that I can hear the clash of armies, steel upon steel.

In the morning there are bodies in the water—men, women, children, horses, oxen—and it is these that sustain our lonely life here. The river is wide and deep, a quarter of a mile from one bank to the other. Sometimes it roars like an animal in pain as it rushes towards the sea. At other times, when the tide is low and the stinking mud of the shore is exposed, the water swirls and gurgles and sings a discordant tune.

On such musical mornings I walk two miles to where the riverbank dips. I take my hook, wade out as far as I am able, and use the big, sharp blade to grab at the flotsam.

By noon, when the water is rising again, I take stock of what the river has given us, laying out bodies on the bank, collecting rings and trinkets, scraps of paper, anything that is useful, and stripping away their clothing to expose fish-belly white flesh. Then I return some of the bodies to the river to continue their journey north.

Some. But not all.

I like to carve. I like to sculpt. But the ironwood trees in the forest shatter even the finest blades. Father says that the war has changed them, that the magic of the battlemages has infected the land, and I have no cause to doubt him—he has been my educator and my window on the world.

Bone is easier to shape.

Our home is decorated with an abundance of carvings—fairy folk made from fingerbones, a blossoming tree formed from the thighbone of a soldier, a dragon carved from the spine of a horse—even Father’s drinking cup was fashioned from the shattered skull of a southron knight.

“You have made this poor place a bone house, Mikulas,” Father told me once, and there was a touch of wonder in his gravelly voice.

But he has never seen the pride of my collection.

Hidden in the deep, dark of the ironwood trees, a mile or more from the Bone House is a statue—chipped away flake by

flake from a fused mass of human and animal bone.

It is a statue of my mother, her features copied as best I can, taking as my guide the tiny portrait carved into the jade cameo I wear around my neck.

She was beautiful, and so my statue is beautiful too.

I am an ugly thing of flesh and stone. My eyes, like glittering points of quartz, peer out from beneath the ridges, dark as coal, that protrude from my cheeks and forehead. I am my father's son, poisoned by the same rituals that have turned his flesh to rock and that have already begun to do the same to me. It is my inheritance, the thing that, save for some miracle, I will carry to my grave. A condition as inescapable as breathing.

"You were cursed before you ever left the womb," Father once said, and little harsh, sandy tears had fallen from his eyes. "I never realized the harm that I was doing to my flesh, to her flesh. And for what? A pointless war that can never be won."

"Everything must end eventually," I said.

"Ah, my beautiful Mikulas, you are wise beyond your years, but not as wise as you wish. The war will continue forever because of fools like me."

I was little more than a babe in arms when we fled the southern cities and came to the ironwood forest, but I remember the flames and the screams and the vast armies that trudged night and day across the plains. I remember how my

father pored over ancient books by the light of a guttering candle, searching for spells and rituals that would bring peace to the world but only finding the Terrible Words of Destruction.

He was a fool, of course he was, allowing himself to believe that what he was doing was right and just, allowing the Earl of the South to manipulate him, just as the other Earls manipulated their own court mages to the same ends. We need more weapons, they said, more rituals, more soldiers, enough to strike one final, shattering blow that will finish the war. But one shattering blow was met with another shattering blow and the killing continued.

The price my father paid for his naïve compliance was terrible—his flesh poisoned, his son deformed, and his beloved wife dead.

It was her passing that finally opened his eyes. The sorcerous poison worked quickly on her, carried in his kisses, in the very stuff of him, destroying her from the inside out.

She was in her tomb by my second birthday. She was soft and pale, a fragile creature even before the trauma of my birth, or so Father tells me. He does not blame me for her death, nor do I blame myself; I know that she died—as have so many—on the altar of the Earls' ambition.

But in that mass of bone—blended together by fire, enchantment and a quart of my own thick blood—she lives again. And so I chip, I pare, I shape.

At times, when Father sleeps and even the great fires of battle have dimmed somewhat, I come to her and sit for hours, staring at the half-formed lines of her face, her body. Even in the near total darkness her beauty lights up the night.

* * *

It was in the summer that Isoria came into my solitary life.

That morning the river was in full voice and I found myself singing in counterpoint to the tumbling melody, adding my rumbling bass tones to the high soprano of the water. The fighting had been fierce in the preceding months, as if the Earls had acknowledged that magic offered no solution and were attempting to end their war through simple brute force.

As ever, it was the innocents who suffered most—for every figure in blue or red or green livery that floated through the water, a dozen more wore rough homespun cloth. If I had chosen to do so I could have walked from one bank to the other on the backs of the dead.

I had long since grown indifferent to the sight of corpses, no matter how horrific their mutilation. Their humanity had been taken from them at the moment of death—stolen by sword, spear and arrow—and I had no tears to shed for them.

By mid-morning twenty silent, bloated forms lay on the bank, together with the waterlogged carcass of a black dog and the shapeless bulk of a headless warhorse. One of the dead men, a scribe judging by his dress, clutched a small leather-bound book, the pages sodden but still readable. I took it as a present for Father, then began my morning's work.

I had just begun to strip the livery from a dead soldier when I heard a soft moan from the water behind me, so feeble that at first I took it for a discordant note in the river's music.

I heard it again and turned to look. It was a woman, dressed in torn and filthy livery. The coat and breeches were purple—the colors of the Earl of the South.

“Help me,” she said, her voice made harsh by pain and exhaustion. “In the name of Mullitu, help me.” She lay in the oozing mud like a floundering fish, her limbs moving pathetically as she tried to drag herself onto the bank. The broken shaft of an arrow protruded from her left shoulder, another from her side and a third from her right thigh. Her face was contorted, her hazel eyes bright and her teeth glittering whitely in her mud-splattered features.

The wounded have never been my concern—they come with the river, they belong to the water and will live or die by its graces.

But for a moment our gazes locked. She had my mother's eyes.

"Help me," she said again, then the strength went from her and she flopped forward. The water swirled around her, threatening to drag her back into the current.

My body made the decision to save her moments before my mind concurred. I waded out and lifted her. Even with her sodden clothing she was surprisingly light, but then again my strength is great.

I carried her onto the bank and placed her on the grass away from the pile of corpses. Despite the arrow wounds her breathing and heartbeat were strong, and although her flesh was as cold as ice there was no tinge of death about it.

She was the first living woman I had seen since we came to the ironwood forest. Her face was oval, the features delicate, framed by long tresses of hair, bright gold that shone even through the thick coating of mud. A long-bladed knife hung at her right hip but the sword scabbard on her left was empty. The river had washed her wounds clean, though they bled again as soon as I dug the arrowheads from her flesh.

She moaned at the touch of the knife but did not wake.

As soon as I had washed her and tended to her wounds I built a fire and squatted beside it, staring at her. Then I took the cameo from around my neck and looked at it.

She had my mother's face. My own two hands were not more alike.

She moaned again and her eyes opened.

"Am I in Hell?" she said. There was no fear in her voice, she was too exhausted for that.

"No. Nor Heaven either."

"Then you are not a demon?"

"No, I merely have the appearance of one. I assure you that I am human."

She smiled weakly. "Do you have a name?"

"Mikulas. And you?"

"Isoria." Her eyelids closed again as if the very effort of speaking those few words had drained her, and she slept.

* * *

With a few of the Beautiful Words, Father had fashioned our home. But the words and rituals hurt him terribly—the fingers of his left hand merged together in a dark brittle mass—and he swore he would never speak them again.

The Bone House is small but elegant, fitting enough for two exiles and their meager possessions. The largest of the five rooms is the one that serves as Father's library and study. Other than the clothes on our backs and the food in our bellies, the only things we took with us when we left the southlands were Father's books.

“I should have destroyed them a long time ago,” Father said one spring evening. “These words have caused so much suffering that perhaps it would be best if the world never hears them again.” He held one of the ancient tomes up to the dying light. It was a beautiful book—bound in calfskin, edged with gold and every word within painstakingly placed on the paper so that each page was a work of art in itself. “But then, perhaps it is the use to which men put their words that causes pain rather than the words themselves.”

Or perhaps it was that, despite everything, Father’s memories were locked within the tomes as surely as mine were locked within the statue in the ironwood forest.

I did not take Isoria to the Bone House. I knew that Father would not understand my act of kindness, particularly towards one of the Earl of the South’s soldiers. He is a gentle man, but like all gentle men his anger can be terrible—during our flight to the north the city guard tried to stop us and he killed twenty of them with a single syllable of one of the Terrible Words, uttered with all the fury of a paternal wolf.

Instead I carried her to the shelter of a small glade some distance away and left her there, while I went back to the Bone House to fetch food and medicine.

Father was awake when I returned. The early part of the day was difficult for him—his blood cooled in the night,

running sluggishly through his veins like silt-clogged water.

He stirred and sat up in his bed. “How was the foraging today, Mikulas?”

“Rich enough.” I held the skull goblet to his lips and he drank a few mouthfuls of honey-sweetened water.

“You found trinkets then?”

“Trinkets... and more.” I placed the book into his cold, stiff hand. He drew it close to his mildewed eyes and peered at it. His lips moved slowly as they formed the words of the title.

“*Liber simplicis medicinae*. The Simple Book of Medicine.” Then he chuckled, the sound rattling from his throat like a pebble in a cup. “A pretty present, my son, and I thank you for it.”

“A book of medicine?”

He held up his hand to silence me before I could speak again. “A simple book of medicine, and not one that can offer succor for either of us.”

“No cure, then?”

He shook his heavy head. “Not for such as you and I. We are cursed creatures and shall remain so.”

I had not expected him to say otherwise, but the bright flower of hope had bloomed within me for an instant. I had asked him the same question countless times before—almost from the very moment I could speak and understand what I

was—and his reply had always been the same. We were incurable.

“Perhaps one day,” I said.

“No,” he replied. What other answer could he give? Hope is a cruel thing in a world where the wars are endless and life is fleeting.

* * *

After I had fed father, helped him from his bed to the library and placed his favorite books and carvings close to hand, I returned to the glade.

The sun was high, slanting through the trees and glistening red-gold against the bracken. No birds sang for there were no birds here, but small, malformed creatures scampered through the undergrowth, hissing angrily at my approach.

Isoria was still asleep, but the color had already begun to return to her cheeks.

As I bent down to her, her eyes flicked open.

“Mikulas? I thought you a dream.”

“Or a nightmare, perhaps.”

“You saved my life,” she said. “No nightmare would do that.”

“No, I do not believe that it would.” I smiled, but the look in her eyes wiped the expression from my face. She glanced away quickly, her attention focused on a blade of grass. I

unwrapped the small parcel of food and watched her while she ate.

When she had finished I passed her a small pot of healing balm. “Your wounds,” I said. “How are they?”

“Painful, but not too bad. I don’t think the arrows penetrated too deeply.” She touched her bandaged thigh, and I noticed for the first time that her fingertips were stained black. “The Easterners are fierce fighters but aren’t good archers, thank Mullitu.”

“You were in battle, then.”

“It was more slaughter than battle. I don’t remember much about it, to be truthful. There was blood and there were swords and there were arrows. But we made the Easterners pay for every inch of ground, and I’d have doubled the price if my rituals had lasted.” She shoved her fingers into the earth, the gesture full of anger and frustration.

“Rituals? So you’re a battlemage?” The reason for stains on her hands was suddenly clear—arcane power had blackened them.

“An acolyte—but the situation was so bad that we needed every fighter we could get. They overran us and we had no choice but to retreat.” Her lips tightened into a thin line at the memory. “I made it as far as the river before the Eastern troops

caught up with me. It was death by steel or death by water.... I chose the water.”

“And the water brought you here.”

Isoria sat up, brushing her hair away from her face. “Now you know my story, Mikulas. What is yours?” She picked up a crust of bread and nibbled at it.

I had no idea where to begin, or how much I dared tell her.

“I live here,” I said.

“In the forest?”

“Close by.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.” I looked away as I spoke, certain that she would recognize the lie.

We sat in uncomfortable silence for a while. From time to time I glanced up at her. She was young, I realized, hardly much older than myself, but there was a hardness to her features as if she had seen too many terrible things in her short life.

Finally Isoria said: “Why did you take me from the river, Mikulas?”

I stood up and held my hand out to her. “Can you walk?”

She climbed to her feet and tested her weight on her injured leg. “Yes,” she said. “But not far.”

“Come with me, I wish to show you something.”

She placed her hand in mine. Her flesh was soft and warm, and when she leaned against me for support I felt a strange, unfamiliar thrill run through me.

I led her through the bracken and the slanting sunlight towards the gloom of the forest proper. Before long we came to the small clearing where the statue of my mother stood.

“This is why I took you from the water,” I said.

She stepped forward and stared at the statue. For a moment her face was blank—small rivulets of sweat ran down from her hairline and she wiped them away with an annoyed gesture—then something like understanding dawned on her.

“Who is she?” Isoria said.

“Her name was Dalila. She was my mother.”

Isoria frowned slightly, as if the name was familiar. “She has my face.”

“Now do you understand why I took you from the water?”

She shook her head.

I walked to the statue and stroked its cold surface. “She died when I was very young. My memories of her are incomplete at best, certainly not enough to finish her statue. Not enough to do her justice.”

The stillness of the forest was broken by a small, musical sound. It was Isoria’s laughter.

“I never took you for an artist, Mikulas,” she said.

I turned to look at her and she was smiling.

“You want me to be your model,” she said. “So that you can finish her statue.”

“Yes.”

She reached out and took my hand. The roughen tips of her fingers grated slightly against my hard skin.

“You saved my life, Mikulas. How could I say no?”

* * *

Time passed, as time will. By day I scavenged the river and tended to Father’s needs. In the evenings I brought food and medicine to Isoria and worked upon my statue, marveling as its hitherto coarse features gradually smoothed out beneath my chisel.

Isoria sat patiently as I shaped and pared, smiling at those times when I stared too intently at her as I tried to recreate some intricate detail of her features.

And the more I stared at her, the more I became familiar with her face, the more I realized that she and my long-dead mother were utterly unlike. The physical resemblance between them was almost exact, of course, but where my mother had been wan and delicate, Isoria had an underlying strength that belied her dainty features. And where my mother had been kind and gentle Isoria was filled with fury and

violence. Often she spoke of the war, and when she did her eyes flashed with a feral brilliance.

Her wounds healed well and within weeks she was talking about leaving the ironwood forest.

“My comrades will need me,” she said one evening close to sunset. “There will be new campaigns in the autumn—the Easterners hurt us this time around but the wheels of war will turn against them.” She took her long knife from its scabbard and began to hone its edge on a flat stone.

“Why do you wish to go back to the war?” I asked.

She looked up at me. “Because the war needs to be won.” And the way she said those words brooked no argument.

“You make it sound easy.”

“War is easy. The strong win, the weak lose. We will have peace only when our enemies are dead.”

“Only then?”

“Peace is worth any price. Anyone who thinks otherwise is a Draken-cursed coward.”

And with those simple words she broke my heart in two.

“What do you know of Draken?” I said.

“He was a traitor. Not just to his liege lord but to all of us, friend and foe alike. A man who could have brought peace but chose to run instead.” She made a small, arcane sign with her left hand and a little spark hopped between her thumb and

forefinger. “He was a coward who was too weak to use his power. I hope Mullitu has a special hell for him.”

The light was fading, moving from red to black. The little sharp-toothed creatures of the forest were stirring in the undergrowth, and in the distance I could hear the surge of water as the river powered its way inexorably towards the sea.

“I’m sure She does,” I said.

* * *

I returned to the Bone House as quickly as I could. Previously, I had taken circuitous routes through the ironwood trees, carefully covering my tracks so that Isoria could not follow. But on that night I gave little or no thought to caution.

There was a pain in my chest, sharp as a dagger, and my stomach churned every time I recalled her words. I had never believed my father to be a bad man, or that he had been wrong to flee from the southlands, but equally I had never understood what the true cost of his flight had been.

Wars without end. Killing without cease.

“A man who could have brought peace but chose to run instead.”

By the time I reached the Bone House my breath was coming in great, ragged gasps and my eyes stung with salty, gritty tears.

Father was awake and in his study, his lips moving laboriously as he studied a text by the light of a greasy tallow candle.

“Mikulas.” His voice was slow and low, as ponderous as his movements. “What is the matter, my child?”

He rose and made his way towards me. The candlelight fell upon his face and cast his features into deep relief—his eyes were like two glittering points of quartz, peering out from beneath the ridges, dark as coal, that protruded from his cheeks and forehead.

His face.

My face.

The face of Oskar Draken.

“You could have brought them peace,” I said. “Your words could have ended the killing.”

His face displayed no sign of surprise, as if he had been waiting for my accusation for a long time.

“Yes,” he said. “I could have ended the war, if I had chosen to. I could have unleashed the Terrible Words that destroy flesh and blood and stone and steel. True, a world without life would be a world at peace, but the cost would be too much.

“Words do not end wars, Mikulas, no matter how powerful they are. Only men can end them when they choose to lay down their swords.”

“You are a fool if you believe that, Draken.”

I turned and saw Isoria standing in the doorway. Her face glistened with sweat, her eyes shone with hatred and the long knife glittered in her hand.

“Force alone will end the war,” she said. “There are others with the will to use it if you will not.”

“Dalila? No, not Dalila, merely a trick of the fates. Who are you, girl?”

“Isoria Vargha of the Order of the Flame.”

“Another little mage who would destroy the world,” Father said, and there was a bone-deep weariness in his voice. “Go home, little girl. Fight your wars if you must.”

Isoria advanced into the room, her blade held at the ready. “They told us about you,” she said. “We learned to curse your name from the moment we could speak and we learned to envy your power.”

“What is there to envy? The only thing of value here is my son, nothing else.”

“There are the books, the words. You took them from us but I can take them back.”

“Father,” I said. “I’m sorry. I saved her from the water, but I did not mean to bring her here. She must have followed me. I did not know....”

Father looked at me and there was forgiveness and compassion in his smile.

“Of course I followed you, Mikulas,” Isoria said. “Did you really think I would not know you as Draken’s son? You have his features and his curse.” She turned towards Father. “If you will not use your power, Draken, then pass it on to someone who will.”

“To you?”

“I am a Mage of the Flame,” she said. “And worthy.”

“You are a child who would only destroy. Go away—there is nothing for you here.”

“Then there will be nothing here for you either, Draken.” She leaped forward, knife raised. The long silver blade gleamed in the candlelight.

The blade struck my chest with the sound of a hammer striking an anvil. Every ounce of her hatred and fury was behind the blow, her savagery enough to penetrate my hardened skin. Hot, thick blood spurted onto my shirt. I staggered back and fell heavily as she pulled the knife free, raising it to strike again.

Then father uttered a fragment of a Terrible Word. Its effects were instantaneous and awful.

The knife melted in Isoria’s hand and burned the flesh from her bones. She had time to utter a tiny screech before her

blood boiled inside her. She was dead a moment later.

I clambered to my feet and embraced my father, sobbing my sorrow and regret against his shoulder.

He did not move. His skin was cold to the touch, as smooth as granite.

“Father?”

He did not move or reply. He stood before me, a man of stone, his mouth half opened and a single tear, hard and bright as a diamond, on his cheek. In saving me he had destroyed himself and allowed the arcane poison in his veins to do the last of its work.

I held on to him for a long time. Until my rage dried my tears.

* * *

We live in the Bone House, Father and I, in the shade of the ironwood trees, beside a river that is never still, never silent.

By day I scavenge the river, and in the evenings I work upon my statue, softening its lines, removing Isoria’s hardness from it so that my mother’s beauty can shine again. By night I sit in the light of tallow candles and pore over the pages of exquisite books, searching for words and rituals.

One day I will find the words I seek and upon that day I will leave the Bone House and journey south. I will have my

revenge upon those who took my mother and father from me. I will stand upon the battlefields and utter the Terrible Words that that destroy flesh and blood and stone and steel. My father was a kind and forgiving man, but I am not.

A world without life will be a world at peace.

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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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