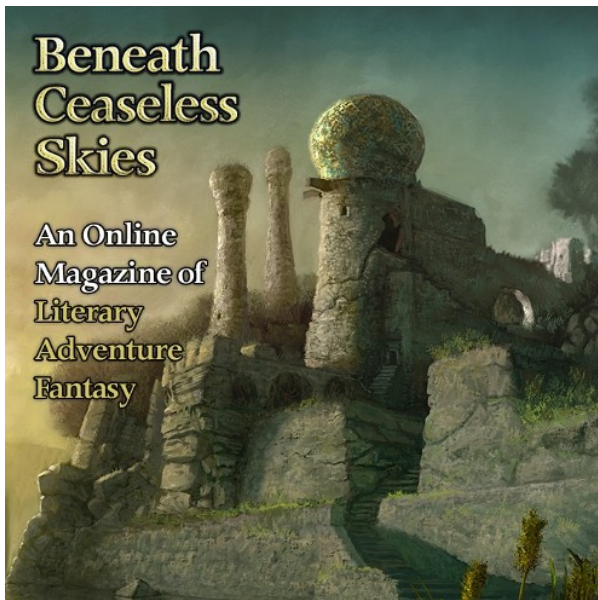


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THIEVES OF SILENCE

by Holly Phillips

Climb the woodshed roof, jump for the eaves, hot pain like copper wires in shoulders and wrists. Swing up, no time for a breather, and climb again. Blind leap into the dark.

The windswept blackness was streaked with snow, the first storm of winter. Zel sliced through the air the way the wind sliced through her sweater, but when she landed on the Bodils' turret roof, bruised and breathless, she felt nothing but the warm flush of survival. She let herself slide until her feet lodged in the narrow stone gutter and began working her way around the curve toward the main roof of the house.

Old man Bodil, Gannet had said, is weak and confused. He wouldn't notice if you carted out half his treasury under his nose. If it weren't for those ice maiden daughters of his, I'd marry him and smother him with his pillow on our wedding night.

The thought of Gannet in bed with that withered old man wasn't a picture in Zel's mind. She was too occupied with keeping herself alive. It was more of a physical thing, a grip of revulsion in her gut she would do almost anything to relieve. As if this cold that burned her face and deadened her hands could

be called relief. But it was, it would be, if Zel could only ensure that Gannet never had to sink so low.

The roof's windward side was clear of snow, so cold her damp gloves stuck to the copper sheeting, helping with the ascent. One moment on the peak, in the heart of the gale, snow for flesh and ice for bones and a black heart borrowed from the storm—and then down, sliding through the snow on the leeward roof until her boots jarred on the gutter. She unwound the rope from her waist and tied it over the bird-shaped rainspout on the corner. Suddenly, morbidly, she was afraid of falling. She tested the knots three, four times, but security was an illusion at best. Her body began to shudder. She took the doubled rope in hands so cold she could not feel how tight her grip was, and stepped over the edge.

* * *

Patience was a virtue in a thief, but it wasn't caution that made Zel wait so long in the small room underneath the eaves. It was pain. Pain in her feet, her face, her ears. Pain in her hands so fiery she curled in a ball on the floor and bit her lips to keep from making a sound. The snow in her hair melted, cooler on her cheeks than her scalding tears. She and Gannet had come up from the south in the early autumn and she had not known how terrible that wind off the frozen sea would be.

She did not see how she could go back out in that cold and survive.

A clock chimed. Midnight. She sat up and tugged her gloves off with her teeth. Her hands felt as if bees swarmed under the skin, but when she bent her fingers they closed against her palm. She stood, feeling every bruise, and let the gloves fall where they would. These northerners hanged thieves ... but she could choose between that and the cold later. Right now she was thirsty. Wrapped in a fatalistic calm, she headed for the door, and the stairs.

Gannet—the thought of her was bittersweet—Gannet had an ear for gossip, and a mind for money. When she had first considered Bodil, she had rambled on about shipping interests and mines, and Zel had forgotten almost everything except the fact of his wealth. Now, walking through his house, she learned something else: the Bodils were not just a rich family, but an old one. Just from the look of the place she knew there would be jewels so famous they had names left lying on the cold daughters' dressing tables, golden goblets gathering dust in a cupboard, a portrait by a great master tucked in a back bedroom because it was only someone's unmarried aunt. There was a strange kind of bliss to strolling through such a treasure house, a thief who might or might not choose to steal something before she left, or died.

Zel had an image in her mind. A figure, not quite herself but small and wiry and black-haired like her, lying asleep in a drift of snow, hoarfrost like feathers across her cheek, a blood-red jewel cupped in the palm of her hand. She smiled, and trailed her hot and throbbing fingers down the banister as she descended the stairs to the entrance hall.

There was a fire burning beneath a marble mantelpiece so masterfully carved that the veins of gray were incorporated into the feathers of the owl that spread vast wings over the flames. Zel looked at it with regret (beautiful, expensive, impossible to steal) but did not linger. Her snow thirst was urgent now. She found the hidden door to the servants' side of the house and followed the dark passage to the kitchen stairs.

There was a pump in the scullery. She drank from a tin cup, the icy water reviving her chill. Despite the heat from the slumbering kitchen stove, she shivered and thought about hot tea, chocolate frothing with cream. But the kettle steaming on the range was huge, her hands hurt at the thought of lifting it to pour, and then the idea came. The cellars. Wasn't that the best way of all for a thief to combat the cold? A sup of clear northern brandy, then the red jewel she had seen in her mind, and the snow.

She grinned, chapped lips bleeding, and found the cellar door. The stairs were dark. When she reached the bottom, a

warm hand slipped over her mouth and a knife blade touched her throat with an edge of frost.

* * *

“I have her,” said a woman’s voice.

“It’s too late,” another woman said. “We’ve begun.”

Zel whimpered against the palm. The shock of steel had broken her out of her calm, and now that calm seemed impossible, insane. She remembered she hated brandy. She remembered she did not want to die. The hand tightened at the sound of her voice, but the blade still did not break her skin.

“Hush.” Her captor’s whisper stirred the fine hair above her ear.

Surprise had made her blind; now she began to see what was in front of her. The cellar, its vaulted ceiling deep in shadow, was older than the house above. In this first room, small hollows had been chiseled in the stone of the floor and filled with oil that burned with red and fragrant flames. The women that moved within the ring of flames wore nothing but their shifts, silk and lace that freed long white limbs Zel could not help but admire. Three women among the flames, a fourth who held the knife: the old man’s ice maiden daughters.

Northerners only hanged thieves. They saved far worse for witches. Zel could not understand why she wasn’t already dead.

One of the sisters sang, the other two danced, blonde hair loose on their shoulders and tinted red by the flames. They danced for so long that the sister with the knife looped her arms around Zel's shoulders to ease the strain on her muscles. She was taller than Zel, they all were. The family resemblance was strong.

One of the dancers said, strain in her voice, "Audey, we need you now."

"Yes," Zel's captor said, "but what do I do with this one?"

"Kill her," the other dancer said.

The singer, still singing, shook her head, and Audey, the woman with the knife, said, "Her blood will taint the work. We will have to deal with her after. But she will wait until then. Won't you?" A warm murmur in Zel's ear. "You can wait for me a little while, and then you can rest. Won't that be nice? A soft white bed for a tired thief, and a pretty necklace for your reward."

The image in Zel's mind was of the girl in the snow, the red jewel now a chain of rubies across her throat. Beautiful. Magical. She sighed against Audey's hand.

"Good." Audey withdrew the knife. Zel swayed, but did not otherwise move as the witch joined her sisters.

The song became a chant, slow and rhythmic as a sleeping heart. The dance wove together three women, then four, then

one alone with steel in her hand. Zel dreamed on her feet, free of pain, comfortable with the prospect of death. The white bed, the rubied throat. Two of the sisters went away into the darkness beyond the ring of fire. When they returned, they bore a white ghost between them. A white-feathered ghost with yellow eyes that burned brighter than the flames.

* * *

The owl's perch was set so the bird faced the singer, but the great white head swiveled on its shoulders to keep Zel in the beam of those blazing eyes. She could not look away. In her befuddled mind, feathers replaced snow, amber took the rubies' place, and then even that vision was burned away by the owl's glare. Her sluggish heart picked up pace, outraced the numbing chant. She gulped the air, felt the pain in her hands. Audey with the knife danced up to the perch, and stopped. The chant stopped. The world stopped. Only the owl carried on through time, leaving them behind.

All of them but Zel. That yellow stare blinded her like the desert sun, left her with nothing but the snow-owl's sight. Audey raised her empty hand—and Zel could see the fine bones in the wrist, a tear in one nail, a smear of blood from Zel's chapped lips on the palm. Audey raised the knife—and Zel saw the room reflected in the polished steel, blonde witches, white owl, dark Zel frozen by the stairs.

Audey clasped the owl's snowy breast, plunged the dagger into the owl's throat, put out the owl's eyes—and Zel was blind. Blind. The bright flames shrank to ghostly pearls, the witches faded into shadows, the magic drowned in the dark.

Terror overcame even the blindness, and Zel ran. Up the stairs, through the kitchen, down the corridor, across the hall. Still blind, how did she manage the bolts of the door? A question she would ask when she had a mind again. Now there was only the night, the snow, the cold.

The bird's heart stolen from the storm.

* * *

Gannet's guests were still there, and Zel did not dare be caught, half-blind and shuddering with terror and cold, so she crawled in silence up the stairs. The lamp was lit in the bedroom, a dim star in her darkness, but the fire had gone out. She needed the fire, the shaking of her body tore muscles and rattled bones. She stumbled over a footstool, tangled her feet in one of Gannet's gowns. (Gannet in her shift: *This one, or this? They're such a stuffy lot*, and would Zel ever see her face again?) Tears scalded her face. She groped after the box of matches and knocked it to the floor. Matches pattered across the hearth. She lowered herself to her knees, and then just crouched there, shivering and blind.

Voices sounded from the foyer, cheerful with the liquor Gannet and Zel could not afford. The door closed. Zel heard Gannet moving about, extinguishing candles and banking the fire, the servant's tasks Zel usually performed. A role, a game, just as Gannet-the-lady-of-leisure was a role, a game. Gannet the huntress, Zel the thief. But what now, when they had nothing but debts, and Zel... She shut her eyes, praying that when she opened them she would see again.

Gannet came in on a waft of tobacco smoke and perfume, shut the door, humming, then squeaked with surprise. "What on earth? You scared me, lurking there. I hope it was worth it, wherever you went. You didn't try the Bodils', did you? The rumors I've heard about that family! And oh! I wish you could have heard the story Willam Torrend told tonight, I hardly knew whether to laugh or scream. These northerners, some of them are so.... Brr. Aren't you cold?" A change of tone: "But what's happened? Zel? Are you hurt?"

And finally, finally, her warm arms were around Zel, her warm hands stroking Zel's skin.

* * *

They curled together in the bed, Gannet flinching from Zel's chill flesh while Zel tried to tell her what had happened. Words, never easy for Zel, slipped away into the dark of the owl's blinding.

“I wasn’t afraid. Cold, but not afraid until...” Until the rope circled the rainspout, a noose around the owl that hunched over the four-story fall. “But then I wasn’t, again, inside. The cold, the warmth hurt so much, I forgot to be afraid. But it wasn’t me. They did something. I saw...” ...a dark girl sleeping in snow with a jewel in her frozen hand, a red flame that burned even now.

“Ssh,” Gannet said, but her breath was like Audey’s in Zel’s hair. “What did you see? Was it really so terrible?” A note of excitement: “Did they kill someone?”

“An owl. They killed the owl.” Zel wept suddenly, racked by sobs that hurt in every aching joint.

“Oh, my dear.” Gannet kissed her bare shoulder, her burning ear. “I don’t understand why you’re so upset. Is it that they saw you? Zel?”

Zel shook her head. She didn’t know how clearly Bodil’s daughters had seen her face, but doubted it mattered. If they wanted to find her, they would.

“What, then? This owl...” Gannet drew in a soft breath. “They killed the owl. Do you mean as a sacrifice?”

Zel nodded against her shoulder.

“Zel,” and now Gannet’s voice trembled on the verge of laughter, “Zel, are you telling me the Bodil daughters are witches?”

Another nod.

Gannet laughed. “Witches! I knew it! Yes, I should have known, they’re so arrogant and cold.” She broke off when Zel thrust herself from her side.

“Don’t laugh. You don’t know. You *don’t* know. I saw their power, I felt it, I—” But she was staring at Gannet’s face and seeing nothing but a shadowed blur, and the words escaped her.

“No,” Gannet said, “I won’t laugh. You’re right. I’m sorry. Come here, come, I won’t laugh, you’re letting in the cold.”

Zel allowed herself to be pulled down into the warmth, and held her secret, the secret of the owl’s eyes, close as a bitter gem. It hardly mattered. Next morning when she woke, she found that she could see.

* * *

The house they had rented for the season was not even a proper house, just a few rooms scattered through the sprawl of an Old City warren. In this place where half the year was spent hiding from the cold, whole neighborhoods roofed their streets and joined their houses together. Only the wealthy could heat an entire house. Everyone else rented only as many rooms as they could afford to keep warm.

Cold as a rich man’s bedroom, they said here. Warm as a poor woman’s heart.

Zel didn't like their rooms. Buried as they were in the Old City warren, half of them were caves with no windows, and the ones that did have windows looked out on nothing but more walls. But the main room, the room where Gannet did her entertaining, was gracious, a fashionable drawing room wedged improbably into the rat's maze. They had counted themselves fortunate that such rooms were popular amongst the novelty-seeking rich this season—less fortunate as it became clear that these hard-headed trader's sons had some instinct that kept them just out of range of the huntress' claws.

Except one, Gannet said. Perhaps.

“And he's coming for coffee this morning, so darling, please, I know you're still tired, but it looked so odd last night having no servant, I had to hint at mysterious errands, but that won't do for this morning, he'd start to wonder what errands I have that would keep you running about in the snow night and day, so would you please, darling? Wear that stiff coat of yours and play the maid?”

Zel didn't mind the coat. Charcoal-gray wool that buttoned throat to knee, it was the warmest garment she owned. She wanted nothing but to be warm again. But that was a lie, of course. She wanted to forget the embrace of witches. She wanted to forget yellow eyes watching death's approach. She

wanted Gannet to see the shadow last night had left on her soul.

“You are tired, aren’t you? Poor love, and with nothing to show for it but a scare. But don’t worry! Our virtuous Captain Torrend will provide, I feel sure of it, if only I can get him to bend his backbone just *once*.” Gannet laughed, a plump, pretty blonde with velvet skin and pansy-brown eyes. “He’d make a better husband than old Bodil. I wonder what the poor man did to deserve those daughters of his? He must have been cuckolded by an ice-gnome. Oh, I know!” She clapped her hands. “I know just what to do. I’ll tell Willam about the Bodil girls’ owl murder, his uncle is the King’s Inquisitor, well really his whole family almost *are* the King’s Guard, he’ll be a commander before he’s thirty, and he’ll be so surprised and grateful—”

“Don’t.”

Gannet blinked. “What, darling? Don’t what?”

“Don’t say that.” Zel was shaking.

“About Captain Torrend?” Gannet studied Zel from beneath her lashes. Her cheeks were appealingly flushed. “Darling, when I said he’d make a better husband, I only meant I’d let him live a week or two before I poisoned his wine.”

“The owl. You can’t tell him about the owl.”

“Whyever not?”

“Because.” For a moment the witch’s hand was across Zel’s mouth again, long nails caressing her cheek. She shook it off. “Because if you told him, you’d have to tell him how you know.”

“Well of course I... My dear, those awful girls really did give you a scare, didn’t they? But of course I won’t tell.” She gave an odd, meaningless laugh. “Come help me decide what to wear.”

* * *

Zel the servant sat in the entrance hall and listened. She couldn’t hear what they said, only the fluid murmur of Gannet’s voice interrupted now and then by a male chuckle, a rumble like stones in the bed of a stream. Her hands hurt in the chill of the hall. She closed them into fists, felt her heart beat hot as the pulse of coals. They had been red when she had served the coffee, clumsy with the cups. Before, Torrend had been just another quarry to her, someone to be flirted with, bamboozled, left with pockets lighter than they’d been. Now—ice-eyed captain of the Guard and nephew to witch-hunters—he terrified her. She worked her thief’s hands and listened while Gannet teased him into bending his ram-rod spine.

* * *

The next morning there were bills, the sort of bills that threatened legal action if the account was not paid in full. Legal action, debtors prison, a lifetime in jail. Zel couldn’t read the

northern script, but she knew from experience what they were by the way Gannet fiddled with the paper, furling and unfurling the corners while she stared into the fire.

“I’ll go out again,” Zel said, feeling the prison walls already growing up around them.

Gannet turned on her with a blank look, a stranger’s look, and then softened. “No, darling.” She softened further. “No, darling, not this time. For once, I am going to be the one to pull us out of trouble by the scruff of our necks. It’s too cold, and these people are too dangerous. Goodness knows what you’ll find in the next house you break into, there is probably a lot worse happening in this city than a dead bird or two. No, this time it’s for me to do.” She slid the bills aside and reached for a fresh sheet of paper and a pen.

“Do what?” Zel tried to keep the desperation out of her voice. What could Gannet do? What had she ever done? But this time Zel was too far out of her native element, here in this cold land of bloody-handed witches, and she did not know herself what could be done. So if she asked in desperation, it was a desperation tinged with hope. “What can you do?”

“My dear, I am writing Willam a love letter.”

Zel said nothing. Feeling again the witch’s knife at her throat, the witch’s hand over her mouth, she could summon no voice for a reply. They were doomed.

Gannet, bent at her writing desk, smiled over her pen.

* * *

Gannet wrote it, but of course it was Zel who delivered it, not knowing what it said.

The Torrend butler took the letter but would not let her leave. He left her under the eyes of a footman and carried the letter off into the depths of the house. The footman, broad enough to be one of the captain's soldiers, eyed her but said nothing. There was a fire crackling under a plain granite mantelpiece. On the mantel, two lamps. Above them, an enormous fan of polished swords.

The Bodils had an owl over their fireplace. Zel, standing in the Inquisitor's hall, felt that she had trapped herself—no, that *Gannet* had trapped her—between the witches and their enemies, like a mouse caught between the owl and the fox. Feeling the footman's stare, she reminded herself that she was a servant, only a servant, of interest to no one. It didn't help. Freedom and safety were calling her from the cold on the other side of the door.

"I don't think," she said to the footman, "that my mistress was expecting an answer."

The footman made a scornful sound. "It's not what your mistress expects, it's what the captain wants."

"You don't know he—"

“You don’t know he doesn’t.” The scorn was now tinged with curiosity. “Don’t they train servants where you’re from?”

Where Zel was from, servants were slaves, born, not trained. She said nothing, though her heart was beating in her throat. The butler returned with a magisterial tread.

Captain Torrend was a tall man, as most of these northerners were. He had closely trimmed brown hair, a mustache, gray ice-chip eyes. Gannet called him handsome, but in Zel’s eyes he was too big, too raw, too cold. He stood by a window with Gannet’s letter in his hand, the white light harsh on the planes of his face. He didn’t seem to notice them enter the room.

“The girl, sir,” the butler said.

“All right, Gherd.”

The butler bowed and faded away. Torrend’s pale gaze found her face.

“What is your name?”

“Zel, sir.”

“That’s not a Pelwarsh name, is it?”

Pelwar was where Gannet was claiming to be from. “No, sir.”

“Southern, I suppose. I think I remember your mistress saying something to that effect.” He studied her, the letter restless in his hand. “Have you been with her long?”

“For some time, sir.”

“Did she find you in the south?”

“No, sir.” The truth felt strange in her mouth. In this context it sounded like lies.

“But you’ve traveled quite a distance with her. She said she is fond of travel. That must make a lot of work for you.”

Zel didn’t answer the implied question. She didn’t want to answer any questions. When did the son of such a house ever take an interest in a maid’s work? Her heartbeat even faster. What did he really want to know? What had Gannet told him?

He persisted. “Has she never had any other servants?”

“Not since I’ve been with her, sir.”

“Yet she strikes me as a woman who is accustomed to a larger establishment. A woman with a gracious past.” His eyes drifted to the letter in his hand, and she realized their color had deceived her: not cold, only pale. Caught in a slant of snow-light, they became transparent, undefended. The letter was, as Gannet had said, a love letter, and he was in love.

Fear kindled instantly into anger. Anger at the needless fright, anger at this fool for causing it, anger at Gannet—for what? For carrying on with the hunt when Zel could not provide? But this one was different, wasn’t it? That smile over the pen, the letter sealed before it could be read aloud and given into Zel’s hands, hands that still burned from that night

that Gannet had already forgotten. She must have forgotten, because to send Zel, a thief and a witness to a crime she dared not report, to this guardsman's house was to send her into the lion's den. Had Gannet also forgotten what they did to thieves and witches here? Was it possible she had forgotten when she sent Zel to answer this man's questions?

Zel spoke now with a voice quiet as the fire in the hearth.

"Yes, sir. She is a woman with a past."

Torrend looked up at her, shocked, then appalled, then bleak. "What do you mean?"

"Only that I'm sure you are right, sir." With a servant's inflection, only the eyes carrying the deadly hint of derision. "I'm sure you understand her very well."

His pale skin flushed. He looked out the window and began to fold the letter in half, then in half again.

"Will there be a reply, sir?"

"No." He didn't look at her. As she turned to go, she saw him bow his head until his forehead touched the frosted glass.

* * *

She was hot, glad of the snow that touched her face. The brief day was ending, the white streets slipping into blue. The blue of heartache, the blue of longing, the tender blue of regret. Tears she would not let fall filled her mouth, bittersweet.

In her mind, a dark girl, jewel-less, walked through a curtain of drifting down.

A tall woman crowned in gold met her in a quiet space.

“Little thief,” she said, “who have you been talking to?”

Surprise leapt into Zel’s throat, died in silence there. The long, wide-browed face was Audey Bodil’s.

“No one.” Zel realized she wasn’t really surprised. Startled, for an instant, but she had always known the witches would find her. “No one,” she said again, without hope of being believed.

“Someone.” Audey gestured her closer. “Tell me.”

“Captain Torrend,” Zel whispered. She could not look away from that hand, the hand that had held the knife. Some of the false peace of the cellar found its way into her pounding heart. Her feet brought her one step closer.

“And what did the pretty thief tell the good captain?”

“Nothing.”

Another step. Two.

“Come now. One does not call on such a distinguished gentleman and say nothing at all. Think what an awkward position that would place him in. Come. Tell me what you said.”

Another step.

The knife hand touched her face with a familiar caress of nails.

Zel jerked away. "I told him nothing!"

The walls of the quiet place shivered, became falling snow. The witch's hand fell away. Zel turned to run.

"Wait!"

Caught again, but this time it was only by the break in the voice, the fear that ruffled through the snow. She looked back.

"Please." Audey Bodil, merely a blonde woman in white fur. "It means more than just my life, more than just my sisters' lives."

"Yes," Zel said. "It means my life as well."

She did run, then, but could not outpace the words that followed. Not in a witch's voice, not in a fearful woman's voice, but in a voice of soft, exultant wonder: "Oh, come back, come back and tell me what you are."

* * *

"What did he say? How did he look? Tell me everything! Do you think we have him yet? Didn't he send a reply?"

* * *

Come back and tell me what you are.

The owl flew through all her dreams.

Come back and tell me what you are.

* * *

Zel was the huntress, now. She lay in the cover of her silence, her usual quiet a camouflage for her secrets, and watched as Gannet hoped, fumed, and gradually despaired. Torrend had not sent a reply. Their creditors were pressing. More letters were written. Torrend still did not reply. Gannet tried to hide her tears. Zel might have triumphed, but she was caught in the same trap, unable to shake her sense of responsibility for Gannet, and for their debts. She prowled the galleries of the Old City warren, the open streets of the rich, but she had lost the daring of the careless thief. She was a huntress racked by guilt, crippled by fear.

Despairing Gannet took fire. “A party! A real candlelit soiree. We’ll invite everyone, douse them with the finest brandy and set them alight, and warm ourselves at the flames. I’ll wear nothing but sheer silk, and you, forget the wretched servant’s coat, we’ll hire servants, you’ll wear crimson satin and marry a duke, and I’ll marry a count, and we’ll be the merriest widows in the city!”

Zel, unnerved, said, “The brandy merchant won’t give you any more credit.”

“To hell with the brandy merchant! I’ll *invite* the brandy merchant and roll him into the fire when he’s drunk on his own wares. He’ll make a fine blaze. And while we’re at it, the seamstress will make a good wick, such a skinny woman, she

should appreciate a chance to flaunt her skirts at a few men. And why not make it fair? She'll be the only woman we invite! Poor men, we'll eat them like pralines and spit out their bones."

Zel slipped from the room, and the house. Without thinking out the risks, she walked down to the harbor and then, in the teeth of a blue-sky gale, back up the hill to the streets of the rich, and finally, in the terrible arctic night, home to lay her finds on Gannet's lap. Purses, wallets, a fine pocket watch with a sapphire on the lid. Her thief's hands had been bit by the vicious wind and had gone red again, swollen with winter bees. Gannet, for once wordless, held Zel's fingers to her mouth. But it was no good. The next day all the stolen coin went to the brandy merchant, the wine merchant, the pastry chef: the party would still take place.

* * *

For all Gannet's wild plans, Zel wore gray wool, not crimson satin, and moved invisibly through the crowd, a ghost with glasses on a tray.

"...barely a season and already, I have it as gospel truth, Commun's has had to send her two letters..."

"...one of the oldest families! My dear, can you imagine? As if the old terror would let any nephew of his..."

"She's saucy enough, but do you think she's as young as she pretends?"

“Oh, age! What does number of years count for? Ask her how far she’s traveled with that desert creature of hers. It’s miles that count, not years!”

Zel went to the kitchen to decant more sweet sherry, stood a moment with her hands empty on the table. She hated it, and didn’t know if she always had done, or if something had changed. What was different, except this wall of silence between them? A lie or two, and was the adventure finished? A lie or two, a love or two, a witch or three or four....

It was not the lies. It was seeing with the owl’s eyes.

She rinsed the glasses, poured the wine, carried them back on her tray.

Gannet wore candy pink, sheer enough to show the lace petticoats beneath. Her fine skin was flushed and dewed with sweat at her temples as she laughed and talked, four or five young men always within reach of her teasing hand. She loved to lay the tips of her fingers on one man’s sleeve while talking to another, while flirting her lashes at a third. Zel noticed her eyes searching for a fourth, but Torrend did not come.

“My dear lady,” said one man with an affected drawl. Zel thought he might have been the one who’d asked if Gannet was as young as she seemed, but they all sounded the same. “My dear lady, however do you manage to entertain in such lavish, such sumptuous, such marvelously—and I do assure you, so

very greatly appreciated—will someone tell me what the devil I was going to say?”

“Style!” called three or four voices.

“Style. Well, obviously. But my dear lady, how? What is your secret? Here, I know! Your little servant girl, she’s really a genie of the southern sands. Am I right? The moment before your guests appear, she is summoned—whoosh!” (A dangerous gesture with a full glass in one hand, a lighted cigar in the other.) “And there it is, yet another impossible feast. And then, the moment the last guest is gone—” (several people stepped back) “—whoosh! again, all put away and the genie back in her bottle, good genie, good-night.”

There was laughter, some of it rather too loud. It was not in the best taste to make a joke of magic, particularly women’s magic. Gannet laughed as well, and put her hand on the man’s sleeve.

“No, no, sir, I tell you it will not do!”

“I say.” He blinked and peered about him. “I haven’t gone and made a silly blunder, have I? Haven’t, whatdoyoucallit, made the inadvertent insult?”

“Not to me, sir, but my poor maid! All the work she does, reduced to a mere—” (it became a chorus) “—whoosh!”

Laughter again. Only the young man abstained. He seemed focused on a train of thought.

“But my dear lady, there must be some secret to your successes. Look at this little do tonight! I swear I haven’t had such a good time since, since— Algar, when was the last time I had such a good one?”

“Never!”

“Good answer! I believe that deserves a toast.”

Brandy glasses emptied; no one notice them being refilled.

“But we are left wondering, what is the lady’s secret?”

“Royalty in exile!”

“Royalty on her way home from exile!”

“Queen Gannet!”

“Huzzah!”

Another toast. Gannet laughed, radiating too much delight. Zel felt her heart go cold. The man was not drunk. She could see his eyes as she filled his glass, and he was not drunk.

“No, no. My friends, we are in the presence of a much more powerful and mysterious thing than that.”

The circle of faces by the fire leaned closer, eyes brilliant with the anticipation of laughter.

“We are in the presence of... patronage.”

Confusion. Gannet’s smile tightened.

“Yes, it’s the only explanation. When one stands so near to such wit and beauty, when one glows with the finest of food

and drink, in the midst of such excellent company, the only real question one has to ask is, whose hand holds the purse?”

There was a faint general movement away. The man went on pleasantly smiling, the brandy in his glass swirling as he toyed with the stem. Gannet’s face was white.

“Or perhaps there are two questions after all. The other might be—as I see Captain Torrend has not seen fit to grace us with his presence—who will hold it next?”

Gannet snatched the glass from his hand and threw it to the stones of the hearth. “Get out.” Zel saw her struggle for breath. She could not summon more than a strangled whisper. “Get out.” Another glass was snatched from a man’s hand, dashed to the hearth. The room quieted. Everyone turned to stare. And finally, the scream came. “*Get out!*”

* * *

Gannet lay across the sofa as if washed ashore from the wreck of a ship, the detritus of the party like so much sea-trash littering the room. Zel sat on the floor by her feet. She’d unbuttoned her coat and put aside her tray. She did not touch Gannet as Gannet cried.

“How could he say his name like that, so cruel? I never asked Willam for money, never, not once, he could never have said I did.” A gasp, a sob, hands clutching her unraveling hair. “He loved me! He did, he did, it was vicious cruel men like—

Why are they so unkind? They must have told him, someone must have told him— And it's all lies!"

"Gannet," Zel said, a protest she could not stifle.

Gannet turned like a snake, her eyes swollen, her mouth red and distorted. "I am not a whore! That's what he meant, you know. Patronage. The vile beast. I am not a whore!" She buried her face in the cushions, but it was not enough to muffle her cry: "He would have married me!"

Zel sat and watched the fire. It was a long time before she could ask, "How do you know?"

"He said. Oh, Zel." Gannet sat and wiped her face, suddenly wistful. "No, he didn't say, but he said so much else and I was sure. Zel, truly, you know I've been asked a dozen times, but this was different. He is so honest and true, Zel, I think he must be the truest man I've ever known, the truest man in the world, and someone—" the sobs returning "—someone told him lies."

Zel touched Gannet's skirt, withdrew her hand. She knew that she had been cruel. She knew that she had probably doomed them. Yet that knowledge had not come home to her before now. "I told him."

"What?" Gannet wiped her face, bewildered.

Zel stood and began to button her coat, knowing this was the end. The knowledge was painless, an ice-cold numbing of

her soul. "I told him."

"What?" Still bewildered, her voice soft, her eyes swimming with tears. "I don't understand, Zel. What did you tell to whom?"

"The truth. I told the truth to Captain Torrend, and now I'm telling the truth to you."

"Zel," Gannet whispered. "Zel, you're so cold." And then understanding finally shafted home.

* * *

Zel had thought the snowstorm terrible, but this dry gale pouring like a river of ice from the north was crueler. The stars raged above the veils of snow torn from rich men's roofs. Like wasps of light they stung her eyes. There was no cold, no shivering. She became transparent to the wind.

Dark girl with wings of night, snow girl with eyes of gold.

The Bodils' door is a great slab of black wood in the shadow of gray stone. Are they birds carved into that oak? Or are they women with wings? Even the owl's eyes cannot be sure. The wind whips the copper roof, thrashes the frozen rainspout owls, rattles the shutters on their pins. The dark girl stands on the bottom stair: come out! For I won't come in.

And they come. Four blonde women and one dark girl.

Five wild things riding on the storm.

* * *

The fire was dead, the candles sagging blobs of wax. Gannet, shivering in her pink dress, stood in the drawing room door.

“Zel,” she said, “where have you *been*?”

“Nowhere. Everywhere.” She started up the stairs.

“Zel, damn you, don’t do this to me. You cannot do this to me! *How can you do this to me after everything we’ve been through?*”

Zel closed the bedroom door and fell across the bed, asleep before her eyes were closed.

* * *

She woke, cold, stiff, and aching, just as the day began its early turn into evening’s blue. The storm ride was a dream, the party and its ending something she could only look at in glances. She rolled out of bed, in dread of seeing Gannet, yet when she went down and found the drawing room still a mess and Gannet gone, she felt no relief. Just an aching body and an exhausted soul. She scraped together a few pennies, gathered clean linen into a bag, and dragged herself off to the public baths. Hot steam was the only solace she dared to seek.

The sauna was deserted at this time of day and so dense with steam the walls were scarcely visible. The heat wrung her out, left her strengthless, thoughtless. Dozing with open eyes,

she watched the halo around the sole lamp shift and sway, a gold veil of gauze so fine it moved at a breath, or a word.

Zel.

The halo became a crown of braids, the lamp a blue-eyed face. Zel observed this transformation almost lazily, lying on the bench, the cedar'd air heavy in her lungs. The steam gathered from the corners of the room like furling wings of white.

“Zel.”

“So soon?” Zel murmured. She yawned.

“Zel, your friend came to speak with us today.”

“My friend?”

“Gannet.”

Zel slowly pushed herself erect. “What did she say?”

The lamp face smiled a wry and tender smile. “My heart, I believed you when you said you had not reported us to Captain Torrend. You were wise not to. Less wise when you told your friend. She appears to think that we should be eager to pay for her silence. Zel, I know you did not send her.”

“No.” Gannet. Gannet!

“You have become precious to us. If she is precious to you, we would suffer your pain if she were harmed. But Zel, bright flame, I must warn you. We are also thieves, thieves of silence,

for we have found that silence paid for is never as pure as the silence taken with a knife.”

Zel’s fingers curled into fists. “There are other ways.”

“We trust you. We do not trust her. However.” The lamp’s blue eyes studied her. “She is precious to you, isn’t she? My heart, acquire her silence, by what manner I leave to your choosing. If you promise us she will not speak, we will believe you. But be sure, my heart, be sure the promise is true.”

The steam wings furred more tightly, drawing all the heat from the air. The glowing face became a mask, a hard shield of gold. Then the lamp went out with a hiss, and the column of steam fell to the floor in soundless feathers of frost.

* * *

Gannet was in the bedroom sorting through her gowns. Zel stood in the doorway, watching. Gannet’s skin was chapped by tears and cold, yet she was still beautiful, sitting on a cloud of silk and lace. Her hands shook as she inspected a weakened seam. She did not look up, though Zel knew that she knew Zel was there.

“Gannet, I understand why. But you must undo what you’ve done.”

“What *I* have done!” It was a cry of pain, but Gannet still did not look up. Her trembling fingers found a lace collar with a raveling thread.

“Gannet, haven’t we paid each other enough?”

“Paid.” An explosion of breath, soon spent.

“I know you would have married him, but—”

“But you would never have allowed me!” Finally Gannet met her eyes. “Tell me that you would!”

“Allowed you?” Abruptly Zel, too, was shaking. “When did I ever have the *allowing* of you, or of anything? Of myself! Zel, play the servant. Zel, play the thief. Zel, deliver the letter to the man I want to marry. Where was the *allowing* in that?”

Gannet gaped. It was probably more than she’d ever heard Zel say at one time. And Zel was not done.

“For once, you said. For once you would be the one to haul us out of trouble, but there was no us, was there? From the moment you decided he was no game— But maybe there was never an us, maybe there was only ever you.”

“That isn’t true.” Gannet’s voice trembled like her hands.

“No? I nearly died, Gannet. Did you ever understand that? Did you even try to understand? They nearly killed me, and they may as well have done, their magic like a knife in my heart —” air like a sob in her throat “—and now all you can think to do is offer yourself on a platter to them, and for what? For what?”

“Money!” Lace tore in Gannet’s hands. She threw the pieces aside. “What don’t *you* understand? We’re in debt to our

ears, we're trapped in this city until the harbor thaws, and we have no money! What do expect to live on? Zel, they throw debtors in prison here!"

"Prison! Dear gods, do you know what they do to thieves?"

"That's why!" Gannet leapt to her feet, gowns falling about her feet. "Of *course* I know what they do to thieves. Did you really imagine I would forget you?" She palmed tears off her cheeks. "I would never have abandoned you, I would *never*."

"No." Zel swallowed, but the words still came out savage and hoarse: "No, you would take me to his house. Lady Torrend's foreign maid. What did you think, that it would be a game I could play for the rest of my life? I was wrong, I should have let you marry him. I should have *helped* you marry him. Then at least I would be free."

Gannet looked away.

After a long silence, Zel took in a deep breath and said with great care, "I cannot undo what I did, and I am sorry for it. But Gannet, this madness, this blackmailing the Bodils, it will get you killed."

Without looking up, Gannet said sullenly, "I know you've always thought me a fool, but I'm not so great a fool as all that. I wrote down everything you told me and gave it to a letter writer in the galleries. If I die, the letter goes to the Inquisitor."

"My gods, you would do that to me?"

“I never mentioned you!”

“And you think they would not investigate? You think they would not question the letter writer, and you, and me?”

Gannet raised her eyes to mirror Zel’s appalled stare. “They wouldn’t.”

“Oh, Gannet, of course they would. They would have less mercy even than the Bodils. Now listen, please listen. The Bodils have held their hand this long for my sake, but they require a guarantee of your silence.”

“For your sake?”

“Yes, for my sake! Do you think they let me go because they trusted me? I wouldn’t be hanged as a thief or a conspirator, I’d be burned as a witch! Now, will you listen? You must retrieve that letter—”

“Zel,” Gannet breathed.

“Listen! You must retrieve that letter, and you must promise me—”

“It was them. They stole you from me.” Gannet suddenly blazed with rage. “They stole you from me! I would be glad to watch them burn!”

“And me with them?”

Gannet stared, hands over her mouth.

“They stole me no more than Torrend stole you. And like most thieves, they take what they value and throw away the

rest. Me, they might choose to keep. You, Gannet, they will kill. You must retrieve that letter!”

Gannet slowly lowered her hands. “If they killed me, would you still go to them?”

This time it was Zel who could not answer.

“You would, wouldn’t you? Yes, thieves keep what they value. Well, you listen, then. You can have them. I wish you joy of their cold hearts and bloody hands, and they can have you, but I will have Willam, too. That is my bargain. Tell them, you tell those bitches, I will burn that letter and carry their secret in silence to my grave, but they must give me Willam Torrend.”

“Gannet.” Zel’s voice shook with tears. “Gannet, please. They could do more than kill you.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care!” Her voice soared. “*I will not be left alone!*”

* * *

The Bodils were having a dinner party. Zel stood across the way as sleighs drawn by bell-harnessed ponies deposited guests at their steps. The sky was still clear and it was so cold the ponies’ breath hung in a cloud the whole length of the street. Zel hesitated, thinking that she should wait, or go and come again—thinking she should not dare to be seen. But the cold cut like a flensing knife, the cold and Gannet’s words. Zel’s words. If only she had held her tongue! If only, if only, cutting more

deeply even than the wind. In a pause between two sleighs she crossed the trampled snow and climbed up to the door.

“Messengers to the servants’ door,” the butler said. He was round, balding, serene. How much did he know of what happened in the Bodils’ cellar? Where did his master keep his wine?

“I am here to speak with Audey Bodil.”

“Servants’ door.” He was about to shut the door in her face when he paused. Bells could be heard singing down the street.

“I am not a servant,” Zel said quietly. “I am here to speak with Audey Bodil.”

The butler looked again, his serenity ever so slightly disturbed. Then he stepped back and swung the door wide enough for her to enter. “Come in, madam. I will see if Mistress Audey is available.”

He summoned a footman to show her to a small sitting room. The young man lit a lamp, poked at the slumbering fire, left without once looking at her face. She stood by the fireplace, indifferent to the ache of warming blood. After a while she unwrapped her scarf and took the mittens off her hands.

The door opened.

“Zel! Should it be my turn to say, ‘so soon?’”

Audey, in the flesh. She wore blue velvet that bared her shoulders and sapphires in her hair. Her smile cooled to a wary

expression. She pressed the door closed without turning her back to Zel.

“You have a face like a lion. Is it my blood you want?”

Zel raised her hand to her face. “Lioness.”

“Yes.” Audey drew a careful breath. “Of course I’ve never seen one. I’ve never been south of the mountains.”

“I have only seen them dead.”

“I’m sorry.” Audey approached the fire with a hushing of skirts. “I’d like to see one alive.”

“They would miss the sun,” Zel whispered.

Audey smiled, cupped Zel’s face in her hands. “I would miss the cold.” She dropped her hands, gestured Zel to a chair as she sat. “You spoke to your friend.”

Zel touched her cheek again, then sat and told Audey Gannet’s demands. When she was done, Audey sat for some time turning the rings on her fingers.

“Is it possible?” Zel asked. “Could you give him to her?”

Audey straightened a ring. She had beautiful hands, long-fingered and strong. “Yes,” she said, but in her voice there was a qualification.

“Will you?”

Audey lifted her gaze. “Do you wish it?”

“Yes.”

A lifted brow. “So easily?”

“Easily!”

Audey smiled briefly, returned to the study of her hands. Finally she said, “I must speak with my sisters, but I think...” She stood. “I think yes.”

Zel stood as well. “When?”

“Oh, tonight, once the people are gone and our father has been put to bed. But Zel, we will not be able to do it without you. And this, too, will not be easy.”

* * *

“Are the witches free where you come from?” one of the sisters asked. Zel thought it was Masha, but they looked so much alike, in the dim cellar she wasn’t sure.

“There are no witches,” Zel said. “Where I come from, there are only priests.”

“Oh, it’s the same,” another sister said. “Everywhere it’s the same.”

Zel smiled, thinly. “Some of the priests are women.”

“It makes no difference,” Audey said. “Hide us in cellars and use us for secret gain, or try and turn us into men: neither lets us be.”

“Is that what you want?” Zel asked. “Just to be?”

“To be left alone,” a sister said.

“To be free,” another said.

“To be unafraid,” Audey whispered.

The women undressed, the Bodils to lacey shifts, Zel to linen undershirt and drawers. Masha poured oil in the hollows in the earthen floor, Liran followed with matches and Godeth with wicks. The northern women's skin bloomed like new ivory in the light; Zel's was rich as gold. Audey let down her hair, careless of gem-headed pins, then reached to undo Zel's. Zel stepped aside. She heard Gannet cry, *They stole you from me!* Audey gave her a sober look.

“This is dangerous work we do, my heart. There must be trust between us or it will turn awry.”

Zel nodded, but she untied her braids herself.

The sisters knelt within the ring of firelight, patting a soft rhythm with their palms on the floor, chanting invocations that were meaningless to Zel, even those in a language she knew. She sat amongst them, silent, but her hands twitched to the drumming. This went on and on. She was tired. The oil-flames blurred to red-gold scarves across her eyes.

Dark girl gleaming like amber in a ring of golden fire. Dark girl dancing like light across a jewel.

She is a bead strung on the web of their intentions. Their knowledge moves in her—moves her—like instinct. Their power, fluid as a cat loping across a desert plain, easy as a bird lying on the arctic wind. Memory, morality, burned away, meaningless to the wild creature she has become. Restraint is

essential, instinct tells her so, but theirs are the hands that have set her free. Let them restrain her if they can. Meanwhile, she dances.

When the owl comes, she recognizes herself. Likewise with the knife.

Likewise, the blood.

* * *

Zel fell into a kind of sick exhaustion while Audey and her sisters made their charm. When she woke on a cot in a dark alcove of the cellar, her hands were stiff with blood, her skin everywhere flecked white with down. Her throat caught on some sound and she struggled to sit. Audey appeared wearing a robe, her hair still loose around her face.

“You’re awake,” she said.

Zel hid her hands between her knees and wept.

“I know.” Audey put her arms around her. “Oh, I know. It’s hard. It’s always hard. Think how terrible it would be if it were easy.”

* * *

She had to deliver the charm to Torrend herself. Audey did not make it an order, but Zel understood the necessity. It was almost a moral necessity, though how—she had to wonder—how could one possibly use that word in this context? A man’s will subverted, his heart and mind ensnared, and why? Because

a thief entered the wrong house. Because a foolish woman fell in love. Yet she could not deny what the Bodils had said. Existence, freedom, fearlessness: these were not trivial desires.

“Don’t pity him,” Audey said, reading her face. “He would burn us like candles and never think himself anything but righteous and just. Our enemies are not innocent men.”

So Zel delivered the charm, which was in the shape of a letter sealed with a fat blob of red wax. When he broke the seal, the magic would take hold.

It was still bitterly cold. Audey had offered Zel a fur cloak, but she had refused, and wearing her servant’s wool she threaded her way past stables and coach house to knock at the Torrends’ servants’ door. A maid answered.

“Come in quick, it’s colder than a witch’s behind.”

Zel, strung tight as a crossbow, broke into painful laughter. When she could speak, she said, “I have a letter to deliver to Captain Torrend. My mistress told me to be sure to put it directly into his hand.”

“Eh, well.” The maid looked her over. “Wait here. I’d best go ask Master Gherd.”

Zel waited.

The butler came, studied her coldly, demanded the letter.

“I can’t deliver it to anyone but him.”

“Captain Torrend is not at home. You must leave it with me.”

“I’ll wait.”

He scowled at her, went away. Came back. “Follow me.”

Willam Torrend was in the same room as before, a high, cold chamber with as many weapons as paintings on the wall. He stood, tall and straight in his black uniform, with his back to the fire. He said, “Wait in the hall, Gherd.”

“Sir.”

Gray eyes fixed on Zel. “I have only agreed to see you because I want it made clear to your mistress, once and for all, that there is no point to these continued attempts at communication. I do not count myself her enemy, but it is impossible that I should count such a woman as any acquaintance of mine. Take that and her letter back to her, and let there be an end to it.”

Stiff and cold, she thought. As stiff and as cold as a sheet of glass that showed all the pain behind. Poor man. He was not making it easier for her. “Sir,” she said, “I’m afraid there has been some confusion. The letter is from Audey Bodil.”

He gave a kind of laugh. “Audey Bodil! Have you changed mistresses, then?”

“No, sir.”

“Then I am doubly confused.”

“Pardon me, sir, but I believe the letter will explain everything.” She pulled the letter from the breast of her coat and held it out.

He shook his head and murmured, “I don’t understand.” Put out his hand, took the letter.

Broke the seal.

* * *

When she left the house, snow had begun to fall.

She walked aimlessly, cut loose, but not at peace. She wanted to see Gannet, yet could not think of a single reaction of Gannet’s she could bear to witness. Joy, fear, regret, guilt: any of them would only add to Zel’s confusion. She had seen the blood rush to Torrend’s face, the sudden shaking in his hands. The charm was cast. Perhaps Zel wanted to see Gannet only because, by judging Gannet’s reactions, Zel might put some name to her own.

The fine snow hissed on the wind. Her face was numb, her hands aching in their bones. It began to dawn on her that if she could not go to Gannet, she had nowhere else to go. No place, no money, no friends—no one but the Bodils. She thought she did not want to see them, she thought she would live a better life if she never saw them again, but it was so cold, and she was so tired, and she had spent all her pennies on the bath. Freedom, she thought bitterly: she had left her father’s home

because she wanted freedom, and now she knew there was no such thing. As Torrend had said, she had only changed her mistress.

She went back to the Bodils', and the Bodil butler showed her to Audey's sitting room as if she were a favorite guest. Audey was on a footstool by the hearth, rustling the coals with a bit of burning kindling. When Zel came in she leapt to her feet. "Well? Did he take it?"

Zel pulled off her mittens, unwound her scarf. "You're going to burn your skirt."

Audey tossed the burning stick into the fire. "He took it." Her color was high, her eyes brilliant. She looked powerful, vulnerable, trembling on the edge of fear.

"Yes," Zel said, "he took it."

"So." Audey's hands gripped each other over her heart. "So." Then, bringing her joined fists to her mouth, she cried, "Oh, Zel, you don't know what we've done!" and she burst into tears.

Strangely, this only served to calm Zel, almost to reassure her. It wasn't really over; she had known as much, without knowing that she knew. She doffed her servant's coat and laid it over the back of a chair. Audey watched, done with her brief storm of tears.

"Tell me," Zel said.

They sat on a low couch by the fire. Audey poured two glasses of wine that then sat on a table, untouched.

Audey spoke to her hands. “We laid a curse on the Torrends. That night, when you first found us. We had never worked such a powerful magic, nor such a dark one. Oh, it was so hard! And then, when the owl died, and you ran, we realized some of you had worked its way into the spell. Everything was wrong. Or at least, everything was changed.”

“Why the Torrends?”

A calm question, calmly answered:

“Because if that family falls, they will take half the witch-haters with them.”

“And you will be free.”

“No.” Audey looked up, a reflection of Zel’s wryness in her smile. “No, but at least we would have a little room to breathe. Then we might begin to think about freedom.” Her look changed. “You know, it isn’t only for my sisters and me.”

“Isn’t it?” A small silence. Then: “So the charm I took to Willam Torrend wasn’t really a love charm, it was a curse on him and his family.” Oh, poor Gannet. Poor man.

But Audey shook her head. “It was both, I think.”

“You think?” Zel gave her an offended stare.

“I think.” Audey held her eyes. “You are the wild element in all of this, my heart. You come tearing into our lives pulling

Gannet and Willam Torrend in your wake, you with your dark eyes and your lion's soul. You broke our curse. We tried to mend it." Her mouth quirked. "Mending a curse with a love charm. Zel, I cannot begin to predict what might come of such a thing. What was in your mind as you danced? What was in your heart when you killed the bird?"

Zel reached for a glass of wine to give herself time for thought. "I don't know. Freedom. Anger. Love. I loved her." She swallowed tears. "I never hated him."

"So." Audey smiled a difficult smile. "My heart, you may have saved us from becoming doom-bringers in spite of ourselves."

Zel met her eyes briefly, looked down into her glass. "I don't know that I could be sorry if that were true."

"I know," Audey said. "I think I might almost be glad."

Zel took a sip. The wine was red as rubies in the firelight, sweet and warm going down.

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WALKING OUT

by Harry R. Champion

It doesn't matter; one day, you'll walk out too...we all walk out.

—common Crossways aphorism

Don't look.

Don't listen.

—another

I woke up looking at the dark blue of a late-morning sky because Boots owed me a favor and we'd settled up on the roof she uses to do business. Her long, long legs were still wrapped around me and I disentangled myself with regret. Another spread was just what my body had in mind this morning, but I didn't want to end up owing her. I was certain enough she wouldn't ask me to pay the same way. She murmured sleepily, curled into a ball on her bed of cushions, and did not wake, so I pulled a light covering over her to keep the sun off.

I stretched the kinks out of my arms, reaching all the way behind me and grasping the stump of my right wrist with my remaining hand. I squatted to limber my legs, straightened and walked to the edge of the roof's waist-high wall to look around at my home, the last I'll ever have.

Thieves, murderers, traitors. If you could be banished for it, Crossways is full of them. No kingdom would ever claim this town, but trade between them was secured only by this barren, desert way-station. Without us, you can't get anywhere else.

I noticed more activity than usual. We're not morning people. The few Crossfolk who meander the streets at this time of day usually do so with a furtive scuttling from shade to shade, eager to be done with whatever business they must attend to before the true heat of the day. Most middays, the streets would be all but empty, waiting for the cool of night to return to life. Now, however, there were knots of gathered citizens on every corner and movement between them was purposeful. I felt a grin surface; caravan coming. I had things to do before it arrived.

I slid down the hanger with its silky width twined around my waist, braking with my legs. Two roughs, Stitcher and Kite, were at the end of the alley in a puddle of shade, watching me silently as I landed. I nodded to them pleasantly enough, hefted the sash weight at the end of the hanger with my good hand and threw the free end back up and over the edge of the wall. No sense in Boots waking up to *them*. Stitcher just looked away, but Kite took the time to snarl a Daärdish obscenity at me.

I responded with a gesture in kind, turned around and nearly walked into Deathly Silence. I strangled my shriek and shied back. Who wouldn't? He looks like a sand-mummified corpse with his withered face and claw-like hands. It's seeing the tiny glittering eyes twitch, way back in their sockets, that gives him his only semblance of life, but the life is insectile. What I can never understand is how he manages to sneak up on anyone, smelling like he does. He was worked up today, undoubtedly from the stir about town, and his blackened lips were pulled back down in a grimace of frustration. "Shhhh—"

"Oh, go twist yourself! Shush someone else—" I had started around him, but he was suddenly in front of me again and, again, I flinched away. His hands were held high, though they were thankfully empty of anything sharp today. He looked like one of the fools seeking Hope in the foothills to the northeast, but I knew Silence wanted nothing from *that* side of town.

"The lady," he moaned in his buzzing, raspy voice, "the lady beckons to you."

"Not to me," I said, slipping past him in the narrow alley, reluctant to touch him. "Why don't you do us all a favor and walk out yourself?"

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than a thin, eerie scream floated down the wind. It rose and fell and I felt

the blood drain out of my face like water into the sand. Deathly Silence had risen triumphantly from his infirm crouch, his beetle-eyes alight and locked on mine. “The lady beckons,” he whispered with bizarre dignity and grin-bared his long, jumbled teeth, “to you all.”

I ran for the southwest quarter.

I passed others shambling for the empty quarter, taking note of those who were going as fast as they could and those who were merely making a show of hurrying. Motherless fools. It could be one of them someday—would be, if Deathly Silence was right. I ran to help because I knew someday I would try to walk out again myself, and I wanted others to come and pull me back.

There was a crowd of twenty standing at the edge of the tumbled wall, gesturing, shouting and cursing. Some of them were edging forward, glancing out into the desert and then turning back quickly. Skinny was perched atop a pile of stones, ululating the alarm back toward the Inn. He left off when he saw me and pointed wildly out into the wastes. “It’s Creeper! He’s walking out!” His piping voice was shrill with surprise. The taut set of his legs made me sure he was about to jump down and try to—

“Stay up there!” I yelled as I reached the wall and swung myself over. I glanced up for a second—Creeper all right, and

already a long way out. There was a flash of white beyond him and I put my head down and ran forward. The pulse in my ears had nothing to do with fatigue—Crossways makes you strong or kills you—I was terrified.

“We’ll never make it!” a voice shouted in my ear. I stumbled and almost fell, glancing back. Thiever was matching me step for step and now drew up next to me. She held her mouth in a tight line while she ran and her nostrils flared with her breathing

“Almost there,” said another voice. Sunshine, laughing easily even as he overtook us. I risked another look and saw that he was right. Distance is funny in the desert. We crossed the last of the hardpack and were onto the first little loose dunes. It felt like the sand fell out from under me at every step, dragging me back.

Then Sunshine had his hand on Creeper’s shoulder and in another ten fighting strides Thiever and I were there too, forming a wall between him and the emptiness beyond. Holding his arms, we braced our feet in the living sand and hauled back toward town. Did I mention distance is funny out there? It seemed a very long way back.

“Creeper?” Sunshine asked gently, obviously repeating the question. Sweat seemed to have oiled the long muscles of his

arms and chest so that he gleamed bronze in the dune glare. “Can you hear me?”

For a second or two Creeper just strained against our hold, pale eyes locked and empty on the horizon. He’s such a little guy, but he managed to push us back a few steps.

Thiever spoke through gritted teeth. “Stop walking, you motherless—”

“Caravan coming, Creeper,” I said, trying to sound as calm as Sunshine. “You don’t want to miss it, do you?”

The strain of holding him eased. “...Lifter?”

“Yah.... Hello, Creeper.”

He met my eyes and shook his head in denial. “Caravan, huh?” Hollow, disbelieving, faintly scornful.

“It’s true.” Sunshine beamed at him. “You can see the dust plume from the east wall.”

There was a high wavering burr of sound, but I didn’t dare look away from him because he was nodding now, the faint Creeper-smile quirking his lips. *Caravan*.

“What are we doing out here?” Creeper said, a sleepwalker awakened.

Thiever spat. “Saving your miserable—”

We took two more steps before I realized something else was wrong. Thiever never cuts herself off. I turned to see that she had stopped and was looking out.

I gasped, tasted hot desert air and swore. “Twist me hard —”

Her eyes were as empty of rational thought as Creeper’s had been, and in the long, long second I watched her, her pointed tongue reached to touch her upper lip and slide. Then I glanced back—looked out, and saw the throat-locking sight of Sweet Death less than two shallow dunes from us. It tore at my eyes to look away, but even as Sunshine pushed Creeper toward Crossways, I snatched at Thiever’s arm, spinning her around. It was only then that the screech trailing at the edge of my awareness resolved itself into a wailing shriek coming from the town. Coming from Skinny.

“Run! ... Madness...there! ... *Right there!*”

Thiever and I looked helplessly toward the road leading south. Less than ten lengths from us was a hunched shape, human, but twisted as far out of true as one of the scrabbling thorn trees. Deadly Madness. Grinning.

* * *

We call them Allegories.

According to Wanderspell, we make them ourselves, give them all the power they need. She says they’re nothing more than collective belief made physical. She was in a loquacious mood one night, and when Smudge had asked if there was a

way to get rid of them, her witch's laughter was like chiming silver.

“Of course,” she said, unheedingly cruel, “simply convince everyone in town that death and madness do not exist. Belief and thought are one—stop thinking.” She looked around at all of us with her gray-black eyes, searching us all in turn. “Why is Sweet Death beautiful? Why is Deadly Madness so persuasive? Why does Dwindling Hope fade away and disappear whenever one draws close?”

Wanderspell tapped her goblet and the Mistress of the Inn refilled it with the best wine. She raised it as if pledging. “All thinking beings are fascinated with death. Every one of us has the seeds of madness sown in our hearts and need the barest of arguments to let them grow. We know that in this place, though we search and search, hope is the hardest thing to grasp....”

I thought I saw the lamplight gleam in her eye, as if shining off a tear, but she laughed again before drinking and I decided I was wrong.

“Once, allegories were thought gods,” she said absently, to herself, “given worship and offerings that made them strong beyond measure.” Her far-wandering eyes returned to the Inn's common room. I got the idea that she was sorry she'd said this much. “Now they are just echoes. Dangerous echoes.”

Creeper was there that night, and I remember him asking her why they couldn't come into town, why they didn't cross the roads.

We thought that Wanderspell was finished and would not answer, but she did.

"They have no need to."

* * *

A low, pleasant voice filled my ears. I can remember each and every word Deadly Madness said to me, how absolutely sane and rational he seemed, urging, wheedling, exhorting, explaining.

But thinking about it too much makes my head hurt and makes me wonder—how close was it? I know that I was convinced that the best thing in the world would be to sit down—or better yet, walk further out—when Creeper suddenly started singing.

"They're almost here so drop your drawers! If y'pull down theirs, they'll pull on yours—" His voice was cracked and tuneless—perfect for that one, a real shouter.

Thiever shrieked unfunny laughter and joined in. *"And when they kneel down by your leg, they'll teach you how t' plead and beg!"*

I felt the numb certainty of Deadly Madness' words drop away like a snapped spiderweb, and Sunshine and I pitched in

on the chorus:

I'll get no sleep from dusk till dawn

The whore has taken all the bed

To drink, drink and lie down on

The floor to take another spread

Creeper shoved Thiever and Sunshine toward town, grimacing with fright and hilarity as I stumbled and he hauled me upright. We staggered back toward the walls, clutching at each other, supporting each other, dragging each other back onto the hardpan as the Crossfolk at the wall made the chain to haul us in. Arm in locked arm, they reached out for us, singing along and drowning out the insistent whispers of Madness.

Spread on table, twist on floor

Spread while able, then one more!

Howl to the moon and scream at the sun

Spread ten more and halfway done—

Someone—I don't even know who—wrapped a big hand around the forearm above my missing hand and swung me up so that I took the top of the wall with my stomach and flipped over it with the breath driven out of me. Faces swam against the sky, looking down at me just before they dropped Thiever right onto my chest.

We'll get no sleep from dusk till dawn

The whores have taken all the beds—

I slapped her ass hard and she rolled off me with a grin. Sunshine had kept his feet and now reached down to haul me to mine before I was quite ready. I coughed twice, then again and looked around for Creeper. Sunshine's head made a slow circuit, his smile gone like a blown candleflame, his frame tensed.

The singing faltered and faded away.

"He is gone," said Totem impassively, looking without trepidation, not at Sunshine but into the desert.

"After he saw you all would make it." Skinny was leaking tears down his front, head down. "He just, he just turned around and went back out."

Thiever and I looked out, but there was nothing to see but the undulation of the dunes beneath the shimmering heat-haze. No Madness. No Death. No Creeper.

"But—" Thiever looked as if she'd been knifed, staring in open-mouthed disbelief. "We *had* him." Her eyes accused me, dared me to contradict her.

The crowd broke up, trickling back toward the other quarters. At other times, interrupted walks had ended in jubilant screams, defiant gesturing and rounds of drinks back at the Inn, but today was all discontented muttering and sullen disappointment. The muscles in Sunshine's long jaw flexed and he spat suddenly on the ground, not a trace of humor or

lightness about him. He scooped up Skinny, who was still weeping, and carried the boy toward the center of town. Totem nodded to me and walked further along the wall to the west, mounting guard against the possibility that Creeper might come back, but no longer as our friend.

Thiever and I stood alone for a while, looking out. She shrugged away from my touch and, faltering for a moment, knelt against the wall in weariness. She glared at me and insisted again, “We *had* him.”

I made a sound of agreement, but she was wrong. No matter what Creeper felt yesterday, or dreamed about last night, or wondered about this morning even as he walked into this corner of town, he was lost from the moment he looked out and saw Sweet Death standing between him and the horizon. The way she stands, she’s always water to a man parched with thirst. I saw it in Creeper’s thirsty eyes when we strained against him. Though Thiever would never admit it, I’d seen it on her face out there too. I know I felt the sudden tug in my loins every time I’d glanced sideways at her.

Wanderspell claims that thought begets belief—maybe if I live anywhere near to her age, I’ll think so too. But right now, I know a different truth. The allegories can’t be given form only by the suicides seeking destruction with their despair, their reasoning, and their plans. We don’t unknowingly wish Sweet

Death into existence with our thoughts alone. Belief is more than just thoughts, it's also emotions—the kind that sear and burn from the inside out.

We don't wish for Death. That's far too easy.

We fall, all of us. We fall in love.

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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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