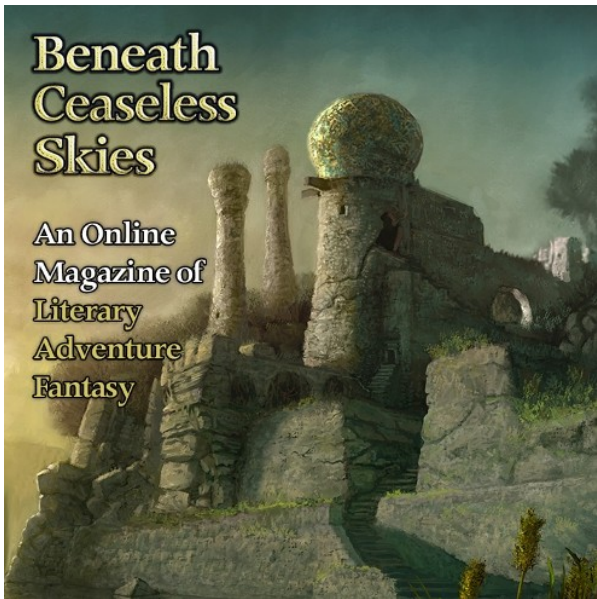


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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Literary
Adventure
Fantasy



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BLIGHTED HEART

by Alette de Bodard

For years my city gave the hearts of maidens to the corn-man to awaken him, but on the day I came to him I was no longer untouched by man. The priests were careless; they had checked the previous morning, but did not check again. Their mistake, and mine, for I had made love to a warrior on the evening before, out of pique, out of a desire to defy them for the last time before they took my innocence away. I was not thinking of the consequences at the time.

The corn-man was in a room at the top of the largest pyramid temple. I came in, half-carried by two warriors, to gaze on row upon row of expectant faces. Dozens of priests had gathered to watch the last sacrifice—mine. I could not breathe; fear constricted my chest with each step. Fear of pain. Fear of loss.

The effigy of the corn-man stood propped against the wall farthest from the door. It was tall, human-shaped, with a body made of twined leaves, and with the hints of corn tassels all over it. Priests crowded around it to renew the preservation spells. Blood had congealed on its lips, as if the last maiden had been sacrificed only the previous day. I tried to imagine my heart in that mouth, my heart devoured by those lips of corn

sheaves, and I thought I would retch. Only the warriors by my side prevented me from running away.

They stretched me out on the altar, bared my chest with expressionless faces. Their hands on my ankles and on my wrists kept me from moving. *It will not last*, I told myself. *It will soon be over*. But when the priests bent over me with their knives drawn, I struggled to avoid them, tried to roll away from the altar, all in vain.

I felt the first cut like a violation. Pain burst in my chest, would not cease. I screamed and screamed until my voice was raw. *No. No. I never asked for this!* I saw a priest lift out a bloody, pulsating thing dizzily high above me, and a sensation of emptiness spread from the hole in my chest and swallowed me.

The priests placed my heart, still beating, in the mouth of the effigy. One of them spoke the healing spells over me. I rose, shaking, numb all over, stared at the corn-man.

His eyes opened.

I saw nothing but those pupils the yellow of corn kernels, a gaze with the innocence of newborns. And a sense of wrongness strong enough to send a chill through me. A shadow, nothing more, I thought. I was weak and prone to imagining things. Nothing was wrong.

“My lord,” one of the priests said. The warriors had let me go, all bowing before the corn-man. I turned away from them, shivering, and left the room with my bloody shift wrapped around me. Their voices followed me across the platform of the pyramid temple, but all I could see as I descended the steps towards the city was the corn-man’s eyes.

At the bottom of the stairway something was thrust into my hands: a jar of clay, dyed the color of blood and closed with the seal of the Rain God. I looked up, startled. A novice garbed in the cotton robes of the priesthood stood watching me.

“Drink this,” he said. His face was gentle.

I shook my head, made as if to push him away.

He said, “Metlicue, you need something to replace the blood in your body. We put a spell in this, to make this potion flow in your veins as if you still had a heart; come to the temple in two years’ time, and we will renew the spell. In the meantime, drink this twice a day until there is nothing left in it.”

I took the clay jar, for what else could I have done? I drank from it that same night, and the draught tasted as bitter as cocoa paste, and it warmed me not at all.

I never saw so many priests after that. To them I never meant anything more than a beating heart. By sending me to the temple when the choice of the priesthood fell on them, my

family had done nothing but their duty; in the priests' eyes I, too, had only given what was expected of me.

Once bereft of my heart, I had no value, no part to play. The priests forgot me, as they had forgotten the other numb, heartless women who had walked away from the temple after their sacrifice.

* * *

The corn-man is not often made. It takes fifty-two years to awaken one into full life, and as many maidens' hearts.

Legends say the corn-man's life is that of the land, and his thoughts those of the girls whose hearts the priests stole to make him. A corn-man is an innocent, a born fool. Only with that purity may he intercede for us before the gods; only with the pain of the land can he ask for rain and be answered.

The priests made our corn-man king. He was our luck, our prayer to the heavens; and when he ascended the tallest pyramid of the city to claim his crown, rain-clouds gathered over the city, and the first drops of water pelted the parched fields.

But it did not last. The rains were slight, not enough to keep the corn growing, and the first seedlings to spring from the furrows were weak and stunted, twisted out of shape as if by the hands of the gods. The priests paid little heed to this; they kept telling us that the harvest to come would be glorious,

more bountiful than we could imagine, and we believed them. Why shouldn't we have?

I found out I was pregnant. It did not bother me, save that thinking back, I realized that the child had been planted in my womb by Paetl, my warrior lover, on the evening before the corn-man awoke.

When my pregnancy became visible, I told everyone that I had made love to Paetl two days after the sacrifice. It was well known that other maidens had lost their virginity soon after the loss of their heart, in an effort to banish the cold that would not cease. So they despised me for my weakness, but they believed me.

Not long after that, two warriors came to the door of our house and asked for me. I came, shivering, and stood in the doorway, staring at the mud-stained jaguar skins they wore as cloaks.

"I am Metlicue," I said. They both looked at my belly, slightly protruding from under my tunic. I did not move.

The eldest of them spoke at last. His words seemed to have been dragged one by one from his throat. "So he did tell us the truth," he said. "I am sorry."

I knew what they had come for, then.

The youngest warrior looked at me, waiting for me to speak. I could not think of anything to say, of any words of grief

to give him or his companion. In the silence that followed, he said, "He ran after a thief, and the thief stabbed him. The wound went bad." He shook his head, a quick, angry gesture. "To die like this, over a few kernels of corn.... As if there were not enough to feed us all."

His companion's grave face told me he disagreed, though I did not know why. "Forgive Mazatl," he said. "It hasn't been easy for us, either."

"I understand," I said, to fill the silence.

"He felt responsible, for the child. He wanted you to have this." And he handed me a cotton bag. Within were three cloaks, one of ocelot skin, one of eagle feathers, and the last of shimmering green quetzal feathers. The sale of each of them would enable a commoner to live for at least two years.

I knew it was only a matter of time before my family disowned me for becoming pregnant without a husband. Paletl had known it too, before he died, and had given me enough to live alone and raise his child. I needed not fear the future.

I held the cloaks in my hands, felt their silky touch. Paletl was dead. I should have wept, for he had thought of me, at the end, had wanted to care for me. Instead, I was numb, as if I had been standing outside all winter, and the chill spread into my blood until nothing more could be felt.

I tried to weep. My eyes remained desperately dry. *What have they done to me?* I cried in my mind, but there was no answer.

In the end I bowed to the warriors, and as I did the baby moved within my stomach. I felt no joy. Neither then nor later.

The eldest of the warriors laid a hand on mine, before he left. “Keep them well,” he said. His face was grave. “Hard times are coming, and you’ll need to keep both of you well fed.”

I wondered what he had meant, but not for long: the harvest came, and the corn from the fields was dry and brittle, and the kernels all shriveled inside; and the food in the imperial granaries soon was traded at extravagant prices. My family had never been poor or miserly, but now they struggled to feed us all—and looked at me askance, as if trying to guess how much the baby would cost them. I had been a disgrace already; now I was starting to be a burden.

I took the cloaks, then. I went out and bought a house of my own with two of them—and wrapped up the last of them in a wicker chest, setting it aside for the future.

I gave birth in that house, on a stifling day nine moons after my return from the temple. My family had all but disowned me, but still they sent two priests for the birth, out of some strange notion of loyalty. I could no longer claim to understand their acts.

On the day of the birth, the tightness of the air seared my nostrils as I fought against the pain. The priests had lit a fire in the hearth, but I was still cold. When they severed the umbilical cord from me and showed me the child, I stared at it vacantly. It was covered in blood, and what little skin I could see was red and raw, sagging in wrinkles like that of an old woman.

“Metlicue, see your child, born on the day Ten Snake,” one priest said. “The Goddess of Rivers and Lakes shall be his protector, the jaguar shall hold his luck. Now give him his name, which shall be recorded in the books of the gods until the end of this Age.”

No name would come into my mind. Nothing. “Paletl,” I said at last. His father’s name.

They nodded, both of them, and left in the morning. Through the haze of sunlight, I watched them leave, holding my newborn child against my chest, my whole being hollow.

* * *

I raised Paletl on my own, weaving in the solitude of my home the *ixtle*, the cloth of cactus fiber that all commoners had to wear, and bartering my makings in the market for what little food I could get. Corn had never been so dear, or so rare. I had barely enough to feed both of us and to keep him warm at night. I took care of him, because it was what I would have done had I still had my heart.

The corn-man was becoming restless. He roamed the streets and the markets, snatching from the stalls and the kitchens and hoarding his possessions in his temple like treasures. At first, it was only small things: dried chilies, amaranth stalks, pepper grains. Then he took living beings: frogs, parrots, monkeys, seized from their wrecked cages and carried away, their forlorn calls echoing through the deserted streets.

The priests told us not to fear, even though we all cowered in our houses. They consulted the gods, offering sacrifices of blood, animals and humans both; but it was all to no avail.

I tried not to think of my single night with Paletl, or of the corn-man's eyes, opening and staring at me with such a sense of wrongness. But there was no connection, surely. Surely, the magic that had made the corn-man was strong enough to withstand my pathetic act of defiance. It had to be.

Five months after his birth, Paletl fell ill. "A fever," the doctor in the market said, with a dour face. She raised Paletl's hands, staring at the bones outlined through the translucent skin. "He's too weak to fight this off."

I spread my hands and said nothing. I wasn't the only one going hungry; not the only one with my belly going hard from lack of food, and a baby at my breast that could only suckle my transparent milk, growing weaker and thinner day by day.

But there was no corn left, no food anywhere; even the sale of Paletl's last cloak would bring me no more than a few withered grains.

Finally, the doctor gave me some berries, but I could see in her face that she expected Paletl to die.

I went home. The streets were filled with the hot air of the marshes. I had closed the shutters of the window against the heat earlier; now I set Paletl in his crib and forced him to swallow the berries. His skin was burning, pulsing beneath my fingers.

I sat near the window, hearing Paletl scream his pain. I should have felt fear, panic, grief. Anything. But such things were gone from me. I should have run away. Anything rather than this. But the very words in my mind were dry.

And then I saw the eyes behind the shutters: yellow, like corn cobs, like ripe stalks swaying in the wind. I sat bolt upright, and before I could think I slammed the leftmost shutter open. I heard a cry of pain, and the shutter swung back against the window. The eyes vanished. By the time I opened the door I saw nothing but a few corn grains scattered on my threshold and stains of blood on the shutter.

"What do you want?" I asked, to the night, to the unfeeling gods. There was no answer. The air was crisp and smelled of

marigolds and steam baths. “What do you want?” I shouted, and remembered the day they had taken my heart from me.

I went after him, into the deserted streets. I did not know where he had gone, but that mattered little. He had looked in— into my house, where my son slept. The shutter had frightened him, but he would be back, as surely as the sun rose in the sky.

Perhaps something in my blood still remembered where my heart had been. Or perhaps some god, watching me, took pity. All I knew was that deep within the emptiness of my chest, I felt something rise, and the further I went the stronger it rose, until it filled me to bursting. I dared not speak for fear of destroying everything.

In the end I stood, silent, in a street on the outskirts of the city, far away from the stone temples and the prayers of the priests, watching a dark silhouette standing behind the shutters of a window, looking inside the house. What little light came from inside threw him in shadow, made him seem like something made of darkness to destroy us all.

“My lord,” I called.

He turned, looked at me. “Metlicue,” he said. “Come.”

And without looking back he took one, two steps away from the house and vanished into the night. I ran after him. He walked, but each stride he took seemed to be greater than the previous one, as if he drew power from the earth under his feet.

Still I followed, until my breath burnt in my lungs and my ribs ached.

He stopped at last in a field, away from any human dwelling. I waded through withered stalks of corn and joined him.

“Here there is no one but us,” he said. His voice was the sigh of the wind through ripe stalks, the crackling sound of corn kernels in the pan.

“What do you want?” I asked.

He did not move. “You know what I want.”

“No,” I said.

He turned to look at me. His eyes, shining yellow in the night, were the ones I remembered from the day I had lost my heart. The slyness in them disturbed me.

“I unmade you,” I whispered, at last, understanding why the harvest had gone bad.

“You came to me tainted, knowing love and lust. You came to me no longer innocent, with a child in your belly, and the heart you gave me was impure.”

What had I made? What monster, born of my defiance, to consume us all? There had never been any innocence in him, only that core of malice hidden deep within, like the corn cob is hidden by the leaves. “Leave me alone,” I said.

“No,” he said. “I cannot call the rains anymore.”

“You are no longer the corn-man.” I would have wept if I had still been able to shed tears.

“I am no longer a fool.” His voice was wistful. “I must regain my innocence.”

“How—?” I asked, and stopped, remembering the animals he’d taken from their cages, remembering that he had been roaming the streets, searching for something.

And tonight, he had found it. “No,” I said.

“I found him at last, Metlicue. He belongs to me. One more heart,” he said, his eyes glittering. “The one you denied me. A heart unmarred by physical desire.”

“He is not yours. Will never be.”

“You came to me bearing him. He is mine as much as he is yours.”

“No,” I said, knowing that if I surrendered Paletl to him I would acknowledge, once and for all, that he had won, that my heart was truly gone, and that all that remained was a pitiful husk kept alive by spells and potions.

“You have no choice,” he said. “Give him up.”

“No.”

“One day I will come for him, and you will not be able to answer thus. Things will end quickly enough.”

I did not see him leave. I was staring straight ahead, seeing only the moment when I had lost my heart, when he had

opened his eyes and I had seen the darkness within.

* * *

I came home with a shiver that would not go away. Paletl was sleeping peacefully in his crib, his fever gone, banished by the corn-man's magic—kept pure and healthy, just as I had been for my own sacrifice.

I was filled with a cold fury that the corn-man should claim my son, that he should think I would accept the loss of my last scrap of humanity. Nothing of heart in that: only fear and greed, which do not need a human heart and blood to exist. And yet I knew I was to blame for this: that my tainted silence was the cause of this, that I was sole responsible both for the withering of the harvest and for the corn-man's claim on Paletl.

I could have let him kill Paletl—I could have let the rains come, let the harvest be bountiful and the granaries overflow with corn. I could have let my sin be atoned for.

But Paletl was my son, and I would not, could not let him die. No mother could.

I had been silent long enough; now was my time to act.

On the following morning, I went to the market with the last of Paletl's cloaks and traded it for an obsidian knife, a parrot, and two hummingbirds.

I went to the temple with that knife and sacrificed the parrot on the altar, opening its chest in a swift flower of blood and removing the heart as an offering of true power.

I laid the knife on the limestone altar. The blade was slick with blood that was not mine; its edge was still sharp.

In the silence of the sanctuary, I prayed to the gods for the death of the corn-man, and for the salvation of my son.

* * *

I drew wards around the house in the blood of the hummingbirds, to keep the corn-man at bay, and walked the streets looking for him, my knife always thrust in the belt of my tunic.

It was night when I found him again. Night and a stifling heat, the air as heavy as before the answer to a prayer. I followed his trail through the gardens and the fields, until at last I stood in the shadow of ripe corn stalks. Everything was silence around me.

“Show yourself,” I said, drunk on my prayers to the gods. I held the hilt of the knife in my hand.

Nothing but the rustle of wind, the gaze of the moon on me. “I know where you are.”

“What do you think you will do, Metlicue?” His voice echoed all around me, as if the very corn had spoken his will.

I clutched the knife-hilt. “What needs to be done.”

“Nothing needs to be done,” he said. I saw him, then, standing amidst the stalks that had bent around him, framed with his true crown of corn tassels, a king that was not ours anymore. Because of me.

“You are no longer the corn-man,” I said. “No longer do the rains fall at your command. I come to make things right.”

“There was another way.” His voice was sad.

I could not afford to dwell on that other way. “No,” I snapped. “Your innocence is lost, beyond recall, and not even a child’s death will make you regain it.”

He laughed, without joy. “Perhaps.” He moved closer to me. His eyes bored into mine. “You have made your choice, and I mine.”

I said nothing. Watched him, watched his eyes, which were dark with the knowledge of what he was, of what I had made him. “There is only one way,” I said.

And then his full weight was on me. I struggled, managed to throw him off. I reached for my knife, but his hands were going for my throat, already tightening. I heaved, pried the hands off, knowing him to have no true strength. His innocence should have been his shield; he had never had any. My throat was burning. I heaved again, felt him fall.

I stood over him, drew my knife. “It is over,” I said, watching him.

“Strike if you must.”

In that instant before my knife parted the sheaves of corn, I saw what it must mean to be the corn-man, the born fool, innocence wrapped around fifty-two bleeding hearts. To ask, day after day, for rain, until all the leaves had parted and only the core was left. The core that I had tainted with darkness. With the fear of death, and with the fear of partings, with what made us all human. With all that he could never understand: love and lust, fear and wrath, a darkness deeper than all he had ever been meant to know.

No wonder that in that last moment he did not struggle. No wonder, as I opened his chest in the same movement that had opened mine, I saw him smile and his lips part to reveal teeth the color of ripe corn.

Inside his chest was his heart, and it was made of red corn grains. It pulsed softly between my fingers as I lifted it free, and I heard overhead the first peals of thunder. No matter the source, blood spilled in the name of the gods is still blood, and he had the blood of fifty-two sacrifices inside him.

It started raining as he died. My whole being was cold, as it had been since the day of the sacrifice. The only warmth was the beating thing between my hands. I remembered the priests lifting my heart high above me.

He had been fed my heart to bring him to life. He had partaken of my flesh. The heart between my fingers was dying, its beat more and more sluggish.

I lifted the heart again, to my mouth. Blood ran down my throat, and it had the salty taste of tears.

I ate it to the end. It tasted not of flesh but of grains and earth, like a harvest of corn. Of darkness, and fears that were not mine, fears that made it pulse all the way from my throat to my stomach.

Standing amidst corn stalks, I felt tears run down my cheeks, like trails of blood down the altar of sacrifices. *I have made things right again*, I thought, but I knew this was beyond amends. The corn-man's darkness was mine to bear for as long as I lived, a price paid to the gods I had sought to cheat.

I left the body lying in the fields of stalks and went home under the stormy skies.

As I opened the door of my house, I heard Paletl's cries. We would have to move, to leave for another city, before they found the corn-man and someone remembered the knife I had bartered for.

I took my son in my arms, nursed him against me. His flesh was warm against mine; he snuggled close to me, knowing nothing of pain or of sacrifices. I thought I would weep again. Instead, I was startled to feel my heart, my stolen

heart, beat so quickly out of fear for him that I thought it would burst through my chest.

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Alette de Bodard was a finalist for the 2009 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Her story "Obsidian Shards" was published in Writers of the Future XXIII and garnered an Honorable Mention in Gardner Dozois' Year's Best Science Fiction. In addition, her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Realms of Fantasy, Interzone, and Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, and she is the author of "[Beneath the Mask](#)" in Beneath Ceaseless Skies #8. Visit <http://www.aliettedebodard.com> for more information.

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THE PRINCE'S SHADOW

by Emily M.Z. Carlyle

The king's sister visited my dreams for five nights before I was introduced to her in person, but it was not until the fifth night that she revealed her intentions to me by introducing the young prince into our shared dream.

I cannot explain why I trusted her and her purpose for me, save to say that where her presence was all degrees of darkness, solid and dependable as my own soul, the boy came into my dream like sunlight, a blazing promise.

Some would find such contrast between darkness and light easy to interpret, seeing in the king's sister a witch—as she was rumored to be—and in the prince an imperiled innocent. I was not so easily fooled. While I was born with eyes as blank and useless as a pair of pebbles, my first act in this world was to squall so loudly and insistently that a peddler found me abandoned beneath a frozen hedge before the feral dogs could get at me.

From that point on and through all the years that the Sisters cared for me, I was never as helpless as my blindness might suggest. Blindness taught me to use my other senses and trust in portents, balancing the evidence of sound, touch, smell and taste against the ambiguous suggestions I sometimes

received in dreams or in waking. The Sisters praised God for granting me self-sufficiency even as they forbade me to speak of my 'visions' to strangers. They placed their faith in God, but their earthly pride barred them from believing He might gift one such as me so abundantly as to make me a visionary.

Needless to say, when the king's sister arrived in person on a warm morning in the early summer of my twelfth year, demanding to see their blind charge and claiming we had met in a dream, the Sisters were mightily confused. Mother Superior did not dare refuse King Hugh's sister, much as hosting a suspected witch in her austere quarters must have galled her.

I felt the tension humming in the close air of her tiny receiving room and smelled Mother Superior's mood, sharp as jaundice. But it was her guest whose assessing gaze absorbed my attention—it was a physical sensation, as sharp and penetrating as it had been in my dream. I stopped in the middle of the bare stone floor and bobbed a curtsy.

"Come here," the king's sister said.

I remembered her name: Alys of Malvento. She exhaled in amusement as I made my way to her in short, precise steps, counting the distance in my head as I followed her voice. Her hand was cold and smooth as she lifted my chin and inspected me.

“What is your name?” she asked.

Mother Superior answered for me. “We named the child Daria after the blind virgin from the legend of St. Brigid.” She spoke sternly, as though challenging Alys of Malvento to gainsay her. I could not blame the old woman: we were both Trattorians. Even a woman of God chafed under the rule of the conqueror king, Hugh of Gillianna, Alys’s half-brother.

“We are all blind in God’s eyes, wouldn’t you agree, Mother?” Alys said coolly.

Mother Superior huffed in outrage at the younger woman’s presumption, but said nothing.

I knew that Alys of Malvento was illegitimate, left to fend for herself by forgoing marriage to become her brother’s housekeeper. They said she was his match in cleverness and strength of will. I stood with my head up and let her inspect me at her leisure.

“Have they told you who I am, Daria?” she asked presently. She spoke to me as to an adult, never addressing me as ‘child.’ I liked her for it.

I bobbed another curtsy. “Yes, madam. You are Alys, Countess of Malvento, half-sister to our King Hugh.”

Dry amusement filled her voice. “King? Are you so news-starved out here in the countryside? He was crowned emperor three Christmases past.”

Mother Superior's plain wooden chair creaked behind me as she shifted in it, torn between annoyance and fear. While I had taken a lay sister's vows, I was not, nor would I ever be, a Sister. The reasons were, as they say, legion. One of them was my boldness, sometimes verging on recklessness.

Alys's gaze roamed my face while I spoke, bold as a marauding army, never faltering in my recitation. "Indeed, madam, we are not news-starved in the least. We heard how the Archbishop of Illia crowned King Hugh Emperor of Gillianna, Trattoria and Aelussia, Duke of St. Giobert, and Prince of the Palatine Cities. We also heard how the Archbishop was then excommunicated for his presumptuousness, while our King was forbidden to wear the imperial crown."

The armrests of Mother Superior's chair fair groaned as she squeezed them, too furious and terrified to speak. Her mood shifted to mute astonishment when Alys of Malvento laughed—an unexpectedly girlish sound.

When she had laughed herself hoarse, I smiled up at her, content that I had not been wrong in my judgment of her.

Alys startled Mother Superior with a request that we be left alone. It took some persuading, but in the end the Sister had nothing on the king's sister. Alys then questioned me as to

my age and origins, the schooling I'd received from the Sisters, and the chores I performed for them.

She asked if I wanted to become a Sister.

I hesitated a little, knowing that I was about to repay the Sisters' kindness unfairly. Harsh they had been to me, and stern in the manner of all religious, yet I owed them much. Yet I could not answer Alys's question but truthfully.

"No, madam," I said quietly.

She pressed me. "You have taken some vows?"

"Yes, madam, the lay sister's vows. Chastity, modesty, obedience, and loyalty."

"Loyalty," she repeated, dry amusement creeping back into her voice like the touch of a midsummer's hot breeze. "Loyalty to whom?"

I lifted my face again, unerringly, as though I could see her. "To my lord and master, madam," I replied.

The Sisters served the One God Who Is Three, but while I had been taught to feel awe and respect for His power, I was cut from different cloth. Alys saw that as clearly as the Sisters always did. Yet while they had hoped I would be content to end my days as a lay helper in the monastery, she knew me for what I truly was: a retainer born but masterless, overflowing with passionate devotion yet lacking the vessel to contain it. I possessed a strong sensual streak directed wholly outward,

away from my own body as I pursued the myriad bits of knowledge to be gleaned from my four living senses and visionary moments, like the broken shards of a stained-glass window depicting all of Creation.

Young as I was, I knew I would hold true to my vows without regret. And just as surely, I knew that my senses were wasted on me alone. I was like a duckling, which attaches itself to the first creature it sees when it opens its eyes, duck or no, except that my mind's eye remained as firmly shuttered as my physical eyes. In my twelve-year-old jadedness, I despaired it would remain so forever.

Alys of Malvento called for refreshments. Over bread, cheese and watery mead, she told me about her nephew, Prince Lys, King Hugh's only son and heir. Some people have the gift of making unseen things appear as clear as strong light by the power of their words alone. Alys was not one of those people, yet I recognized the boy from my dream in her description.

Lys was then eight years old. He had no surviving siblings. His playmates were the sons of Gilliannian nobility, mere tools for their fathers' politicking, their clumsy attempts to undermine or curry favor with their Trattorian ruler.

He was a lonely child, in need of a friend. Even more than that—a counselor, someone he could trust without reservation.

“I am not usually prone to prophetic dreams, Daria,” Alys told me wryly. “But when I have them, I trust them.”

I nodded in full understanding.

I shall not relate the details of our leave-taking, the tears some of the younger Sisters shed as they hugged me or the Mother Superior’s barely concealed relief to be rid of us both, nor the carriage-ride down thawing roads to the Gilliannian capital of Illia. At sundown that day, still reeling with the rapid succession of events, I stood in the middle of an unfamiliar chamber in the palace, waiting to meet the prince.

I stomped my foot on the floor, listening for echoes, but the thick carpet covering the flagstones muffled them. I guessed the walls must be hung with heavy tapestries, for I felt no telltale drafts. The air smelled of furniture dust and old potpourri. I stretched out my arms and spun slowly. My left hand brushed old velvet, an upholstered armchair. Using it as the first marker on my mental map of the palace, I made my way around the room, drawing my feet slowly across the carpet to preserve my dignity from footstools and discarded toys.

My hands were reading the elaborate carvings on the fireplace when I heard two halting footsteps behind me. I smelled Alys’s unique scent: verdigris, ink, and clean linen. The other scent I guessed must be Prince Lys, but I kept playing my hands over carven stone vines, grapes, and birds as though I’d

heard nothing. Presently the boy's footfall ventured closer, hamstrung between hesitation and curiosity. He finally saw what I was doing and cried out loud, sounding cheated: "But she's blind! And she's too *old!*"

I turned then, satisfied to hear him gasp and fall back a step, startled at how accurately I pinpointed his location in the room. I smiled reassuringly, remembering that he was but a boy and no crueller than most seeing people behave upon meeting me for the first time.

"Aye, I am blind," I said, "but I can read your footsteps and your breath, and tell you've been playing in the stables today and had stew for supper." His hands rustled his clothes self-consciously, no doubt looking for leftover straw. I continued: "And what better friend than one blind enough and tall enough to give you a leg up when next your nurse forbids you to climb trees or engage in other hazardous games?"

From her post by the door, Alys of Malvento chuckled. The prince approached warily to peer into my face—I felt his breath. "Your eyes have no color at all!" he exclaimed, more softly, with a sort of hushed awe.

"Color has no meaning for the blind," I said affably.

He pondered this. "You can't read, can you?" he asked without much hope in his voice. "No, of course not. My nurse was going to finish reading me the story of White-As-Snow

tonight, but now she says she won't because I snuck out to the stables in my second-best play clothes."

"I don't like that story," I said.

"I don't like it much either," he confessed. "White-As-Snow is so..." He cast about for a word. "Too girly," he said finally, his voice rising on a note of defiance, as though he expected me to defend my sex against such an insult.

I merely shrugged. "That, and she can't tell a bad apple from a good one, for all that she has two good eyes in her head."

This stirred the prince's curiosity. I bid him have a bowl of apples brought to us, then gave him my hand and asked him to help me to a seat. By then I knew the layout of the room, but I wanted to see if the prince was worthy of my trust. To my relief, he led me straight to a low divan, avoiding other furniture and kicking a toy cart out of our way.

Thus began the prince's apprenticeship in the method the blind apply to learn about the world. Using the apples Alys of Malvento herself brought us, I showed him how to sniff out the rotten core of a shiny fruit, how to feel an apple for soft, darkening places beneath the skin where it hit the ground, how to tap it for hollowness inside. When his nurse came to fetch him off to bed, he picked out the best fruit in the bowl and took it with him, promising that tomorrow he'd give me a tour of the

palace, his pride filling the room with a smell like burning candles.

That night I slept and did not dream, content in the certainty that I had found a vessel capable of containing and, even, increasing my devotion.

After that first night, the night of the apples, we were almost inseparable. We took our toilet and slept separately, and though Lys begged with all his heart I was forbidden from his lessons, but we ate together, played together, attended Mass and public occasions—whether royal audiences or church holidays—together. Lys even profited from my excellent memory when repeating his daily lessons. I taught him to use his senses, emphasizing—after an unfortunate experiment he conducted early in our acquaintance, walking about with his eyes closed, which resulted in a sharp tumble and a twisted ankle—that by ‘senses’ I meant *all* of his senses.

We became something of a palace fixture, a part of the décor pointed out to visitors—here were the tapestries commissioned by the first king of the line which yielded King Hugh’s queen; there were the banners of Hugh’s defeated enemies hung up in the great hall; and here came the heir to Hugh’s empire in his impractical velvet play clothes, leading his blind playmate around, her hand resting on his shoulder, her footsteps oddly unhesitant for one so stricken.

I quickly grew so confident in my knowledge of the palace I could walk its halls unaided, but Lys liked to have the reassurance of my hand on his shoulder. As he grew taller and his shoulders started to broaden, I pointed out to him the indignity of it. He would not relinquish the privilege, so we worked out a compromise: his new young man's wardrobe included several short capes. Wherever he took off, whether exploring the palace and hiding from his tutor or attending an official function presided over by his father and mother, I would clutch the edge of his cape in my hand, trailing a step behind the prince, his constant companion, his shadow.

That is what hushed voices called me behind my back: the Prince's Shadow. Or, sometimes, with cruel humor, the Prince's Sleepwalker, because of the way my eyelids drooped over my useless eyes. At least, that is what moderately kind-hearted souls called me. The plainly jealous and the resentful, of whom there was never any dearth, came up with more imaginative monikers for me, especially as I grew to maturity.

Truth be told, as we both grew, more and more of Lys's scuffles revolved around me. One day, a young Gilliannian nobleman with whom Lys practiced swordplay made the mistake of calling me a false virgin and Trattorian whore, accusing Lys of blindness on a par with my own in choosing my company over that of the realm's princes, and got a bloodied

nose for his trouble. While Lys was at his lessons the following morning, a guard came to fetch me: the king wanted to see me.

Although I had lived in the palace for the better part of four years, I had never met the king or queen in person. I thought they were only vaguely aware of my presence, as though I were an exotic pet their son had formed a childish attachment to.

I was wrong.

King Hugh received me in his private audience chamber. I waited in the middle of the empty stone floor, hands clasped before me, head demurely bowed. I could hear his breath ten paces in front of me, his scent reminiscent of the boar he gladly hunted. His voice, however, belied that first impression: it was rich and cultured—the voice of a gentleman warrior. It reminded me of his sister in her more calculating moments. “Lift up your head, girl,” he commanded calmly, almost affably, in the manner of those accustomed to obedience. I obeyed.

“Hmm,” he said after he’d scrutinized me. “Not bad. I can see why young Montfort would pick a fight on account of you.”

It was the first I’d heard of Lys’s opponent—he had stolidly refused to tell me whose nose he’d bloodied in defense of my honor, and his.

I spoke calmly: “If you permit me, my lord, I doubt young master Montfort picked a fight on account of me. His father the

Duke's objections to your rule over Gillianna are well-known."

The king's laughter rumbled briefly, like a throttled kettledrum. "Clever girl, aren't you? My sister chose well."

I resented being called a girl—he knew my name certainly—but knew better than to show it. I bobbed a curtsy instead. "I am my lord Lys's faithful servant."

The king's chair creaked as he rose, his soft boots whispering across the flagstones as he circled me. I had the unpleasant idea that this was how quails felt just before the hounds flushed them out, but kept my peace. The king's scent was all around me now, potent boar but also something... something else. I struggled to identify it.

He stood before me as he spoke, keeping—despite his vaguely menacing attitude—a respectful distance, no doubt remembering I was still a lay sister. "I've been told you object to my claim on the imperial title." He spoke conversationally, but his blood sang with the challenge, the joy of the hunt.

I picked my words with care. "My lord, I am merely aware of the dispute between you and our Holy Father."

He chuckled darkly. "And if I told you my army was ready to march on the Holy City within the fortnight to settle the dispute once and for all?"

"Then I would wish my lord success and safety in the undertaking."

His tone carried that combination of jesting cruelty and gravity with which people often addressed me. “So I can leave with a light heart, knowing my son safe in your ever-vigilant company while I secure an empire for him?”

He circled me again. His scent slid past me like an unwanted caress. With a slight shock I identified the mysterious ingredient: verdigris. The warrior king carried a strong trace of his sister’s perfume on his skin, warmed by his singing blood.

As I already said, I was too reckless to ever make a proper Sister. Emboldened now by my certain knowledge of just how true the most hushed rumors about the king and his sister were, I faced the king squarely and spoke: “My lord, I do not care a fig about the empire, but I would give my soul and all my senses for your son. If he is to rule an empire, then I will do everything I can to prepare him for it.”

I do not think the king was accustomed to surprises, and I suppose I should be proud that I managed to catch him unawares. In truth, as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I was struck by terror as the king came even closer than before, so close that I could feel his breath on my face and smell his breakfast. Yet despite the closeness, there was no menace in his steps or in his voice: “That is good. I will hold you to that, Daria, my son’s Shadow. And if you ever speak like that to me

or anyone else again, I will have your head on a spike before the day is out.”

He turned away then, dismissing me. I went back to wait for Lys’s lessons to be over with a steady heart, knowing the king had honored me more than he did most peers of the realm or foreign ambassadors: he had given me naught but the simple truth, clear and harsh as winter sunlight.

The Holy City held out for barely a week—Hugh returned to Illia an emperor triumphant, recognized by God and man alike, bringing in his baggage train a sealed carriage in which the erstwhile Holy Father sat, blinded and defeated, on his way to a slow, obscure death in some Trattorian monastery. Many pitied him but dared not voice their feelings. I confess I was one of them, and that I said not a few prayers for the deposed Father’s soul. Unlike most, I did not pity his loss of sight as such—I pitied the transition he had to endure in the winter of his days, from a life accustomed to color and proportion to one in which shape and beauty spoke to one’s hands alone.

But this passed, as most things do, and Lys’s fifteenth birthday arrived all too quickly. He officially came of age as heir to the empire. I kissed his cheeks, noticing with a pang that I no longer had to stoop to do so. He took my hands in his and asked me in a voice broken to manhood but breaking now with trepidation if I would lie with him now that he was a man.

“I have my vows, Lys,” I said gently, tracing the lines of his face, more familiar to me than anything else I ever touched. “As you have yours.”

“I’ve taken no vows,” he said, not quite suppressing the surly disappointment in his voice. He knew me too well to expect any other response, yet I was touched, knowing he’d lain with several kitchen maids already to prepare himself for this day.

“Of course you have,” I countered. “You are vowed to rule an empire, as I am to serve you. It would not be proper for an emperor to couple with his Shadow.”

He laughed at that, half a boy still. His hands squeezed mine, speaking more eloquently than we ever could, no matter that we knew each other down to the marrow in our bones. Some say our bodies are prisons for our souls, while others claim our bodies are the key to salvation. This I know: our bodies are inseparably, undeniably ours, and we cannot—any of us, prince or slave, light or shadow—be other than what we are.

Wanting to console him, I said: “Think on this: when we are both dust and bones, they will still sing of the Lilly-Emperor and his virgin-companion, the blind seer, closer to him than ever a woman was to a man since Eve was Adam’s rib.”

“Closer than my aunt is to my father?” he murmured.

In this, if nothing else, Emperor Hugh and I are the same: neither of us is easily surprised. I gaped. Lys’s smugness was irrepressible, like cinnamon and cloves in a Christmas pudding.

“You know about that?” I whispered.

“Mother told me once, after she’d quarreled with Father. She pretends she meant something else now, but... She loves Alys, you know, much as she also resents her. I think if he hadn’t needed church sanction to become emperor, Father would have married Alys and to hell with the consequences.”

“And then where would you be, my prince?”

Neither of us wanted to voice the answer to that. We hugged, like brother and sister, but with a fierceness that went beyond fraternal affection. Despite all the Sisters had taught me, I could not find it in myself to condemn the emperor and his sister. Their desire harmed no one as far as I could see, and God knew I would do worse for Lys’s sake.

Breaking the hug, Lys told me of a discovery he’d made while poring over old maps of the palace in the library. Ever eager to refine my mental map of the place and unable to deny him a childish game when he was so nearly a man, I accompanied him for an afternoon of exploration.

Gripping his cloak, I followed as he led the way down stone corridors and staircases which grew increasingly grimy and damp as we went, taking us far below the familiar cellars and storerooms, into a disused part of the dungeons, where the only sounds were dripping subterranean waters. Not even rats frequented this part of the castle's bowels.

"Everyone has forgotten this place," Lys murmured. "A true oubliette."

"Hush," I urged, hearing something beyond dripping water and the crackle of the torch Lys carried—a faint scratching noise, as of a body moving on straw. "There's someone here," I whispered, alarmed. I feared neither ghouls nor other folklore creatures which shun daylight, but the wrath of the captain of the guard if we were caught sneaking around in the dungeons. Despite the pretense of a childish adventure, we were no longer children.

Lys grabbed my hand, pulled me along. Contrary to what pretty tales claim, the life of a prince had little room for adventure, and my prince was eager for a thrill. He plunged down the unfamiliar corridor as though its end would recede away from him and resolve into an unreal dreamscape. I kept up as best I could, nearly tripping over fallen masonry. Abandoned the dungeon may not have been, but it was certainly neglected.

The smell of pine resin told me we'd found its unfortunate inhabitant as Lys stopped in front of a new door, its hinges well-oiled, its planks still fresh. Lifting his torch to the high, narrow observation slit he peered in while I caught my breath.

"What do you see?" I asked finally, a bit peeved with him for dragging me so heedlessly, as though I were a puppy.

The voice from the dungeon nearly made us both jump out of our skins: like the door that kept its owner penned in, it was not old, but it contained such a wealth of malice it positively clung to my skin and hair, like bat's claws. "Hello, nephew," it said in cultured Trattorian.

Lys said nothing, thinking hard. I remembered at the same moment he did, but it was he who voiced our surprise. "Prince Philip?" he gasped. I squeezed his hand; he squeezed back.

Philip of Trattoria was Lys's maternal uncle. He had led an unsuccessful rebellion after Hugh gained the throne by force of arms and kept it by marrying into the Trattorian royal family. Philip was rumored to have died in prison years ago.

A vision intruded upon the shadows that shrouded my mind's eye, pushing them apart like dusty curtains: a man in his mid-thirties, his hair and face like golden firelight in the dark dungeon, shackled to the ancient stones by strong new chains, filthy and disheveled as the straw he sat on. His eyes blazed like hell's own embers as he glared at us through the slit

in the door. A century's worth of frustrated anger was pent up in that cell; it made the musty air in the corridor smell like crushed peppercorns.

"Ah," Prince Philip breathed, a cruel smile curving his lips as my vision faded, leaving me disoriented and dizzy. "My dear captor comes to visit. Just like old times."

They were upon us before their footsteps intruded into my consciousness: Alys's scent, verdigris and ink, mingled with the oiled weapons and old cuirasses of the palace guard. I shook my head in vain—the force of Philip's hatred enveloped me still, like a cocoon, muffling but not blocking the rage that speared me now from Alys's direction.

"You!" The single word came out in a hiss, transfixing me. So many emotions roiled in it, a nest of snakes, all of them poisonous. And coming from Alys no less, always so cool and ironically detached!

I groped for Lys's hand. His quickened breath and the smell of his sweat told me he was utterly terrified, not least because he, too, realized that all of Alys's anger centered on me. I understood the reason better than Lys did: when a prince and his companion erred, the companion would bear the brunt of the blame, the prince protected to the last by his position.

But there was more to it than that: slow-witted and overwhelmed by the clashing wills of the imprisoned prince

and the emperor's sister, I remembered that once, when they were both young, Alys had been Philip's warden while he was Hugh's hostage.

The force of the antagonism buffeting me was almost erotic. I needed no visions to tell me that Lys and I had blundered into a veritable witch's cauldron of old resentments and unspent desires. Even so, I doubt Alys was a true witch or that she had ever cast a spell before that day. I doubt she would have succeeded then but for the raging flood of emotions flowing between her and Philip, feeding her anger, giving it shape, loosing it like an arrow pointed at my heart.

I was already stumbling under the direct hit, Lys's hands groping to keep me upright, when she thundered: "Who are you to see what every other soul gladly overlooks? Damn you and your eyes, girl!"

For a while, then, there was only darkness, deeper than any blindness. My other senses intruded only gradually: I smelled bed linens and the dust of inhabited rooms, heard hushed, urgent voices, tasted bile and felt my body laid out in my own bed far above the dungeons, my very pillow throbbing with a fierce headache.

Comforted by these sensations, I thought I still lingered between sleep and wakefulness when the shifting shapes I perceived did not vanish at once—I dreamt rarely but vividly,

all my senses engaged, even the shadows briefly adopting distinct presences, definite shapes. But there was a lack of uniformity to the shadows slipping before me now, a variety of shades I did not recognize, and when one of them came closer, bending over me, the worried questions it directed at me coincided disconcertingly with the movements of its mouth.

I knew it before I believed it: I saw.

Not very well, but I did: I saw with my physical eyes. The profusion of shades must have been what they call colors, but I saw nothing charming or precious about them. The physician's voice shrilled just by my ear, but his mouth seemed to move at a great distance, approaching me then receding. Two young women whispered behind him, pointing at me. All this I registered before a kindly pale face replaced the physician's. My eyes still struggled when I recognized her smell, lavender and roses: Empress Sylva, Hugh's wife. Her smile held an infinite sadness as she lifted a damp cloth to my forehead, which throbbed so hard I thought it would surely burst like an eggshell.

I covered my face with my hands, large as slabs of beef, but the confusion did not recede. It grew over the following days, while I recuperated from the incident in the dungeons. My pains receded, my senses took up the reins, my head shrank

back to its usual size, but my eyesight did not revert to nothingness.

Nor did it improve.

Shapes continued to loom out at me or slip away from my grasping fingers, forks and spoons refusing to obey me, stays and laces transformed into a complex web, walls and doorframes aiming for my nose while furniture sought to trip me up at every step. For all that I'd never made friends in the palace, apart from Lys, till then no one had ever mocked my inability to navigate rooms and hallways by myself. Even when I tried the experiment Lys abandoned long ago—walking with my eyes closed—sharp angles and hard surfaces crowded around me.

In the midst of my misery came the news that Prince Philip was brought out of the dungeons after many years—for his execution. Alys was packed off to Gillianna proper following a violent argument with the emperor. All this I learned from the servants: Lys reacted to my helplessness scarcely better than I did, and avoided my company for the first time in our acquaintance.

I fasted and prayed until my knees were as numb as the flagstones, but no advice was forthcoming. I hoped for a vision to tell me I was not just a millstone around my prince's neck,

but visions only came to me unbidden, never sought. I wept till I was certain my eyes would melt away—in vain.

I thought of my namesake Daria, who begged St. Brigid to restore her eyesight so she might look upon the world, but then begged to have her eyes shut again so she might be closer to God. I felt neither closer to Him nor more distant than I ever had been, but I could see clearly in my mind's eye the chasm opening between me and him to whose service I had pledged my life. I thought of an old Hellene tale Lys had told me, about a king who blinded himself upon learning that, in his ignorance, he had murdered his father and wed his mother. I thought of Alys and Hugh, and of Sylva, who had nursed me out of an obscure gratitude.

And I thought of Lys, always.

We are all blind in God's eyes, Alys had told me once. Despite what she had done to me, I was grateful.

Clumsily I lit a candle, then rummaged in my chest until I found the small cache of ornaments I sometimes used when Lys received foreign dignitaries. I heated the tips of two silver hairpins and crouched on the floor of my room, holding them at eye level.

I reminded myself how when my mother abandoned me under a frozen hedge, I refused to give in and squalled in a rage to live until I was found; how I learned to wash and dress

myself and make my own way around as soon as I was old enough to totter haltingly from kitchen stool to table, from one Sister's long skirts to the next; how I became the bosom-companion of a prince, heir to an empire, and taught him not to rely on his eyes alone.

I said out loud: "I am not afraid," and brought the pins to my eyes.

The heat seared the moisture from the orbs. I hoped it was already done and the pain would arrive in a moment, when of their own volition my eyelids closed, clenching like the jaws of a dog, the tip of one pin grazing the left lid while the other became entangled in my eyelashes.

I threw away the pins and raged like a willful child, beating the hard stone floor with my fists, cursing my weakness.

That was how Lys found me. I looked up at the sound of the door opening, his familiar presence stretching and contracting madly before my eyes, now looming like a giant, now running from me though he never moved. I did not look away, the pity and wonder on his face helping me focus.

"Daria?" he said in his little-boy voice, as though he already knew what I'd attempted. In truth, I barely finished my request before his eyes widened and he started to shake his head.

“Listen,” I said, my words tumbling like water from a miller’s wheel. “You know what the Book says, how Eve gave the fruit to Adam, but it doesn’t say why. I think it was because she was like me, maybe she had no sense of taste or smell, and she thought if she gave the fruit to him she would know what it was to taste. She would know it through him, for she was a part of him. I am a part of you, Lys, but I’m no use to you like this. *Help me.*”

Left and right his head swung, faster now, pendulum-like, his eyes clenched shut as though he could blot out my voice if he did not see me.

Beyond dignity now, I lunged forward ungainly, trying to hug his knees. My eyes deceived me—I did not reach him but fell, skinning my palms on the stone floor and bruising my cheek. In a trice, Lys’s hands were upon me, helping me up, but I shook him off.

“I won’t live like this, Lys,” I stormed. *“I won’t!”*

Where my arguments and pleas had failed, my selfishness prevailed. Or perhaps it was his selfishness, for he knew I never made idle threats.

Lys retrieved my hairpins and knelt by the candle. He gave one pin to me and kept the other. Together we reheated their tips till they shone, then brought them to my eyes. Fleeting I thought that one day soon he would marry, yet the agony his

virgin-bride would suffer on their wedding night would be nothing compared to what we were about to do.

The world was still: no birds chirped, no wind sighed. We did not breathe, we did not think or feel. Our hands moved as though they belonged to one body, one person.

I was determined to show no weakness in the end, but then the heat blossomed into pain like a night-blooming flower, threatening to blow my skull apart from within. Blood and something thicker flowed down my cheeks. My jaw hinged open like the door of an oubliette, like the maws of those fabulous snakes that can swallow a man whole, and the pain escaped in a shrill scream, like a boiling kettle. As the sound waned, I heard footsteps rushing in the hall while Lys shouted for a physician.

True darkness welled up around me, but it was compassed within the circle of Lys's arms, still boy-thin yet with a hint of the muscle that would wield sword and scepter. His arm supported my wet cheek as I slipped away. Tears fell on me, warm as summer rain.

I lay in a swoon longer than after Alys's spell, or so Lys told me later. He was with me when I awoke into blessed shadows, my ears keen with the sounds of everyday bustle in the courtyard below my window, the smells from the kitchens reminding me I'd fasted before the sacrifice. That is how I like

to think of it: as my sacrifice. It is kinder than what the emperor, the physician, and almost everyone else called it.

Lys chose to call it nothing, still too shocked to talk. It would take time, but we had *that* in abundance.

He brought me a present: a velvet strip embroidered with metal thread. Gold, or I did not know my prince. It took me a moment to guess its purpose as I fingered it thoughtfully, but when I did it made me laugh: a blindfold! I did not take offense: my face must have looked truly terrible with the eyelids falling inwards over empty sockets, like an avenging fate or a nightmare.

He tied it on me, caressed my hair. “Just so you know,” he said in a low, gruff, earnest tone. “Your eyes... They were...” He stopped, swallowed, soldiered on. “They *would have been* blue.”

I ran my fingertips slowly, unerringly down his broad brow, his tremulous eyelids, his long nose, across his mouth and chin to his neck, the bite of Adam’s apple bobbing nervously. “Here is all the color I shall ever know or need,” I said softly.

To have said more would have meant exposing my vows to a temptation worthy of Eve. I got a grip on a handful of Lys’s cloak instead; we went down the stairs, into the kitchen garden, the prince with his Shadow restored to him.

The late afternoon sun beat down bountifully on rows of cabbages and carrots. Herbs and freshly churned earth sent up a divine bouquet. Servants greeted Lys with real affection, even hallooing me with more good will than I knew I inspired. “Could do with some rain, sire,” the head gardener said to Lys.

“Yes,” I replied thoughtfully, sniffing the warm, dry air, listening for the breeze absent from the apple trees in the orchard. “But not tomorrow.”

The gardener left us then, muttering. I needed no vision to predict clear skies on the basis of what my senses told me, but even so: it was a start. We stood in the garden till the sun went down, its strong light warm as breath, close as hair. Lys’s hand in mine was thin-skinned on top, callused on the bottom, blood-warm, familiar, and real. More real than anything you have ever seen.

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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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