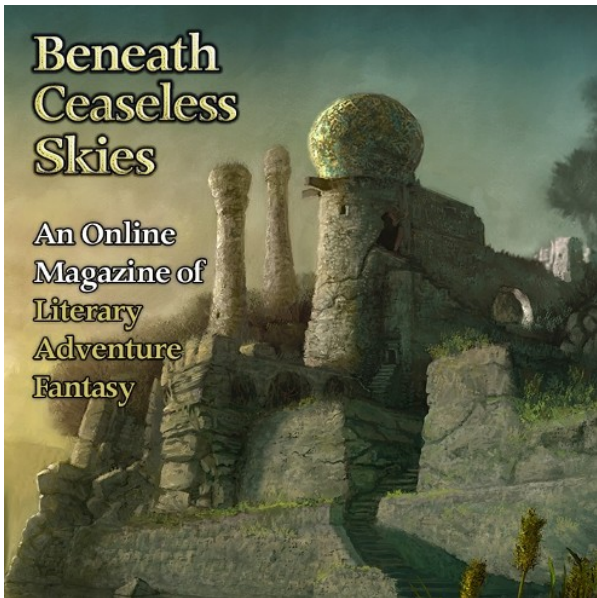


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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BETWEEN TWO TREASONS

by Michael J. DeLuca

A calloused hand in the small of Periphas' back awoke him.

The desert dawn beat against his eyelids. The naked flesh of his hip and shoulder had reshaped itself to fit the cracks in the parched earth where he lay. The stone on which he'd laid his head was cold, but soothing: his skull throbbed with the fading effects of the poison. He forced his eyes unseamed.

The face that met his gaze—that grotesque wooden mask, its hooked beak, the black hollows with human eyes behind them—had woken him every dawn for weeks. He knew he shouldn't fear it. Its features belonged to a god, a monster, but the eyes behind it were not a god's, nor even a centaur's. They were fallible, weak, uncertain—*human*—but untrusting, and thus as terrifying as ever.

The elder flung back the wings of her feathered cloak, shook the snakes' rattles bound about her wrists, and pounded her feet upon the ground in rhythm with the pounding in his head. Periphas recoiled from her, scrabbling backwards on his hands. Did she know what he was? Did she suspect?

Young men and women his own age lay sprawled around him, like the lotus-eaters of the myth, in various stages of the

struggle to emerge from dreams. Each body, like his own, was naked, painted with sorcerous symbols, skin sunburned, frail human feet mutilated, fleshy human legs trembling with exhaustion from weeks of walking over parched and stony ground. They had come across a continent at the elder's summons—the scions of a hundred different savage tribes—seeking the means to defend their people from the onslaught of the centaurs.

You're not like them, his mind recited. You are here as a ringer and spy.

Above, buzzards wheeled against a cloudless sky, bewildered, perhaps, by this madness of their human neighbors, but interested no less—to them it all must smack of death. Their wings traced iridescent trails across Periphas' poison-twisted vision, leaving spirals burned there, shifting between gold and black.

He thought of his master, the centaur Eurytus, standing somewhere far away atop a butte, this same breeze lifting his pitch-dark mane, this same sun glinting from his stolen rings and torques of gold, the brim of his hat pulled low to shade his face, his fingers tracing the sorcerous spirals carved in the stocks of his revolvers.

The elder's eyes were hard behind the mask. If she guessed what Periphas was, he would be required to choose between a

human hand like a bird's talon ripping out his throat and a centaur's iron-shod hoof smashing open his skull. The east horizon dragged his vision.

Somewhere behind the dazzle of the sun, beyond the red buttes and pale sage, burned the remains of the signal-fire Periphas had set the night before—the fire by which Eurytus could track him. Periphas searched the line between land and heaven for the smoke that would betray him, for the dust cast up by an army of centaurs. There was nothing.

How long would Eurytus wait?

The elder, wordless, thrust towards Periphas a cupped hand brimming with the poison hearts of flowers.

She had not guessed. Periphas sagged. For the moment, he was safe.

He crawled to her like a child, took hold of her wrist and pressed his open lips against her palm. The skin was like old vellum stretched too thin over bone. He gagged at the medicine's sick-sweet scent, but slid his tongue across her palm, filling his mouth with the buds. The monumental bitterness sent spasms through his jaw. Tears leaked from his eyes, but he forced himself to swallow.

The elder wrenched her hand away. She stalked past Periphas, rattles shaking, towards the next prone form.

Someone set the giant earthen jug before him. The jug—carved with birds and snakes and things that were both birds and snakes—was always waiting there at dawn, always full, though he could not fathom how. Some trick of the elder's power. Some sorcery the centaurs did not know. But what did it matter? What purpose would such a secret serve once the centaurs had enslaved her?

Periphas drank, hunched at the lip of the jug like a mosquito at a pregnant belly, not stopping to breathe until it was taken away. Then he sat back on his haunches, gasping, clutching his knees to his chest and blinking in the sun.

The young sorceress beside him swallowed her medicine in turn. She drank of the jug, then climbed to her feet, eyes glazed, tired muscles shaking, whispering to herself in some human dialect he had forgotten. He watched the power progressing through her, quelling her trembling, driving back exhaustion, replacing it with strength.

She caught his gaze, offered a hand to help him up. The skin beneath her high, small breasts was blazoned with a symbol like a jawbone trailing strings of desiccated flesh. She stood a head taller than the men surrounding them, as tall as Periphas himself. She couldn't be older than sixteen.

He tried to rise without the jawbone-blazoned sorceress' aid. His left knee buckled. He flung out his arms to

compensate, but pitched forward, flailing. She caught him, a hard hand on his collarbone, her dark eyes too much like his own.

She came from the tribes of the Abyssine Sea. He knew it by her height, by the angle of her nose, the sharpness of her chin, by those familiar whispers he had not quite managed to decipher. She was a fragment of his childhood, before the centaurs had come: the cannibal tribes endlessly warring across the same mile of beach, wearing each other down almost to nothing, then sitting back, panting, waiting only long enough to stop spitting blood before setting out to prune each other's ranks again.

If not for Eurytus, he told himself, you would have been no different. For all your learned sophistication, your subtle aesthetics of wine and domination, there is more alike between you than this disguise of nakedness and paint. You are like her. You are human.

Of course, if it weren't for Eurytus, he would have been dead.

Periphas took his place in line with the rest.

* * *

The elder led the way across the desert. A hundred sorcerers struggled behind her, so weak that save for their *power* they would topple in the dust. Each stepped in the next

one's path, so the track they left seemed that of only one. The buzzards followed, undeceived. Crooked cacti appeared like giants on the rims of distant ridges, grew and loomed, then shrank away behind them. A coral snake coiled in the sun did not stir at their passage, though it hissed and slithered into hiding when a buzzard's shadow brushed its skin. Periphas walked with his head down, watching the feet of the jawbone-blazoned sorceress lift free from her footprints, settling his own feet in their place. He fought the temptation to turn, to search behind him for the telltale cloud of dust. His thoughts dwelt upon the inexorability of hooves.

It was six weeks since he had left New Ilium, six weeks since he had held a gun or dressed in the supple skin of minotaur. He had never come so far from the River Acheron's shores. He was lost. For weeks he had been forced to trust in the elder, to follow her lead. He told himself it didn't matter. Eurytus was behind him.

The elder lectured as they walked. "We are stalking death," she said. Her voice, unsteady with age, raw with the harshness of dry desert air, belied the terror of the mask. "Death—the one certainty, the only end no diviner need predict, no vision is required to foresee. Be aware of death's presence. Let it walk at your shoulder. Follow its lead. That is the root of sorcery, the key to vision."

Another day, when Periphas was not so tired, he might have had to fight off laughter. Death, he knew, was stalking her.

“But this is not a quest for vision,” the elder emphasized—as if any of them could possibly still believe that it was so. “Since the days when humans came to Upper World, when Old Woman showed our ancestors the path to climb from below, young sorcerers have met here in the desert, seeking wisdom, truth. But traditions, like sorceries, like truths, are fluid things. Only death is fixed. And where meanings shift, so must ritual. We are become a hunted people—a race of insects infesting a house that is no longer ours. We can’t afford anymore to seek wisdom for its own sake. Should vision come, accept it. Learn. But that isn’t why I called you here, so far, from so many different tribes.

“This tradition has become a quest for power.”

Periphas dug dust-caked fingernails into his palms; he knew the elder’s polemics by now as intimately as though they were his own. If she had nothing more to teach, why were they still walking? What was Eurytus waiting for?

A memory arose to Periphas’ eyes, made vivid by the poison: of sitting at his master’s hooves before a fire, of Eurytus lifting the haunch of a slaughtered foe from a platter offered by

a slave. Of the dead stare that glazed the living slave's eyes as the juices dripped, gleaming, down Eurytus' chin.

Eurytus had nodded, following his student's eye. "Do you wonder how our servant can so skillfully conceal his rage? How he can come so close to the enemy he serves, yet keep from rising up to throttle me? He believes himself aloof from pain. He believes he has transcended, that this world and you and I within it can no longer touch him. And he's right! That is half the nature of sorcery: delusion. Within the boundaries of the lie, the slave is free."

There had been laughter then from the fire-edged dark, where other centaurs slaked themselves upon the fruits of conquest, indulging their own illusions. Eurytus' stained lips drew back into a white-toothed leer—but his voice remained intent. "Understand me, Periphas. All that separates us from the slave is this: he lacks the will, the control, to impose his lie upon us."

Eurytus ate the meat, and Periphas shared it. When the slave returned to clear the platter, Eurytus took the bone and clubbed the wretched man to his knees among the ashes. The slave wiped a lump of gristle from the hollow of his eye. He grimaced briefly. Then his face relaxed. He crawled away.

"Do you see?" asked Eurytus.

Then he'd flung the bone into the fire.

* * *

The jawbone-blazoned sorceress cursed in that half-familiar tongue, startling Periphas from his daydreams.

At the front of the line, the elder had halted. The sorcerers, lulled by the rhythm of the march, spilled from her track across the dust, marring it with missteps. Periphas stood with one foot in the air, no place to set it down. The elder turned to face them; the cloak of feathers lifted from her shoulders, then settled to stillness. The mask was blank.

She had stopped at the mouth of a gorge. Sandstone cliffs, jagged with desert growth, sheared the sky into planes. Shadows divided the ground. And between the gorge's walls, an ancient, wind-worn ruin waited. Two vast semicircular earthworks, set with row on row of sloping tiers, faced off across an open court: an arena, like the one the centaurs were constructing on the Oxbow Island north of New Ilium. This one was simpler, its lines more austere—but surely its purpose had once been the same: a place where battles could be staged, grudges played out, hatreds spent. Periphas wondered at this parallel—wondered if it meant there was a time in distant past when his ancestors had not been savages, not been fools.

“What is this place?” one sorcerer shouted. “Elder, what does it mean?”

No sound emerged from behind the elder's mask. Even her

rattles were silent. Yet he found he understood why they had come.

A quest for power. They had answered the elder's summons not only to learn, but to be tested. She intended them to find out which was strongest—who among them would lead. There was no other way to interpret it: they'd been brought here to fight.

Unified by poison—by the power of the elder's will—the ragged line of sorcerers dissolved, passing through a ring of tall stone stelae carved with human shapes, spreading silently like ancestor spirits to occupy the ruined court. Nods and mumbled words shaped tenuous alliances along demarcations of homeland and creed. Every one of them came from a different tribe; of course there would be grudges. The buzzards found perches among the empty seats. Periphas put one of the stelae at his back.

The elder herself took three running steps, and in a motion that belied the distances behind them, belied her birdlike thinness and the mask's monolithic weight, leapt to the top of a stele taller than she. Then she sat back to observe.

This, Periphas realized, is why Eurytus waited. The humans would fight, exhaust themselves to within inches of death; then the centaurs would gallop in, laughing.

Periphas opened his hands. He turned them, studying the calloused palms, the scarred knuckles, the sorcerous symbols trailing from between his fingers and down his arms. The lines were thin, sometimes jagged, sometimes smooth, like the ragged ranks of weeds and jetsam tossed onto the shores of the Abyssine Sea. Those symbols signified his choice, his sacrifice. He had given up a history he might have shared with those around him, traded it for the love and the cruelty of centaurs. Eurytus meant him to test that choice.

The jawbone-blazoned sorceress shot Periphas a smile and a two-fingered gesture he had come to interpret as obscene. Her irises were poison-swollen, encroached upon by black. As she had that morning, she offered him a hand. Periphas reached for it, knowing her intent.

She gripped his wrist, dust-caked nails digging deep. She pulled him close. Her breath was bitter. One of her ankles snaked around his.

Periphas flung himself backwards to the stony ground, just in time to avoid the blow that would have split his temple. He broke her grasp with a twist and a wrench, reversed it, planted a foot against her chest and heaved her away from him. Somehow she caught herself upon her hands. Periphas rolled to his feet.

The jawbone-blazoned sorceress sprang upright, steadied herself, reasserting her balance. A bruise blossomed subtly where his heel had struck her, marring the symbol below her breasts. Her eyes flicked left and right.

Four forms closed around them.

Tingling with the rush of fear, Periphas found himself wishing for a knife in his fist, or a gun. He drove the thought away. What would Eurytus say if he showed himself weaker than these? Skin sunburned dark as leather, eyes darker yet with ignorance and self-delusion: they were nothing more than human, indistinguishable save for the symbols on their skin.

Indistinguishable, but for one. The eyes of the jawbone-blazoned sorceress offered him kinship, respect—offered him an ally. He thought of Eurytus.

He gave no signal; she must have seen the conflict in his eyes.

The jawbone-blazoned sorceress struck, a vicious kick that left the man beside her gasping, clutching at his shattered knee. Periphas, driven by Death's whisper in his ear, took full advantage. A momentary foe spun through the air, slammed into another, and knocked him sprawling. A skull cracked hard against the stele where the elder perched. The last attacker fled. Periphas and the jawbone-blazoned sorceress adjusted to defend each other's flanks against new foes.

The shadows of the stelae stretched and turned. A thin cloud rolled past overhead, never crossing the sun. The day wore into afternoon. Alliances changed as sorcerers fell, but Periphas and the jawbone-blazoned sorceress held firm. He watched her carefully, betrayal in his thoughts. She was a sturdy warrior, decisive, if vicious—she resorted too quickly to a crippling blow. But what choice did she have? The numbers assailing them steadily grew.

Do they know my treachery? he wondered. *Is the mark of centaurs so apparent in me?*

He had taken such care to seem savage—to keep his hands from straying to the seams of the long coat he no longer wore, to walk as though his feet weren't accustomed to shoes. He'd barely spoken for fear he would stumble on the subtle consonants of the human tongue. Had they seen, by some gift of the poison medicine's vision, the ghost of the massive, powerful body that ought to begin at his waist, the sable coat shifting over piston muscles, the flash of the steel-shod hooves he had so often possessed in dreams?

A burst of red out of the corner of his vision dragged him from detachment. A shriek of pain echoed off the heights. The jawbone-blazoned sorceress gripped a skull-sized chunk of a ruined stela in her hands; one of nine attackers staggered, blood coursing from a deep gash in his brow. She swung the

stone back, ready for a second blow. The buzzards beat their wings.

The jawbone-blazoned sorceress flicked her eyes towards Periphas, as though seeking his permission. His mind reeled. *Why should she care?*

She was ready to kill a fellow human, an ally. Periphas saw what would happen. How many of them had even seen centaurs? The threat of conquest by a monstrous race—how could they accept such a thing on another's word, even the elder's? They would forget why they were here. Even if she didn't kill him, the young man with the bloodied face would find some weapon of his own. Then his allies would follow, and then his foes. They would batter each other to death with the rubble of their own history—Eurytus would say it was only fair.

Periphas looked to the spike of the stele atop which the elder perched like a bird. If she couldn't unify them, against the centaurs they would never stand a chance.

If she reacted at all, the mask concealed it.

With the heel of his hand, he knocked the weapon from the jawbone-blazoned sorceress' grasp. The chunk of rubble spun across the court, hit the wall with a crack like a rifle shot and fell to the ground. The dust cast up by its impact trailed west on the breeze. For a moment, all eyes followed it. Then they shifted to Periphas himself.

He fought to regain the illusion of distance. *What does it matter if these humans kill each other—save that it deprives Eurytus of the pleasure?* The patterns the poison traced across his eyelids evoked the symbols burned into his wrists.

You're not like them, he told himself, using Eurytus' voice.

He alone, of all those here, had seen the centaurs. He alone understood them. Who in the world knew the mind of Eurytus better than he? Of course he could see these people's death coming. He knew exactly what would happen. It had happened to him.

He made a gesture, dismissive. *Go on, then. This isn't finished. Fight.*

The wounded man wiped blood from his eyes. The stillness was broken by the blur of bodies moving as though in a dance.

Anger throbbed with the poisoned pulse in Periphas' temples. He'd deluded himself. He didn't need help. What threat, what challenge, could mere humans make against one who had wrestled centaurs?

He left the safety of the elder's stela, left the jawbone-blazoned sorceress' flank. He found himself intervening in uneven fights, hurling people apart, twisting weapons from their hands. He found himself wanting to do more: to snap wrists, dislocate jaws, shove his fists up through the flesh of

stomachs and rip out hearts. Why was he helping them? He was here to destroy them. He ought to be laughing.

The sigils on his skin grew hot, began to sear. He spun and rolled and snaked away from blows, untouchable, more than human—like Achilles, like the god Eurytus had trained him to be. Every detail stood out in his perception, every contour of the wrinkles on a stone-faced stela's brow, every catch in the breeze, every gap in a buzzard's feathers where an old wound had not healed. Those around him seemed to flail and founder, as though the muck-choked marshes of the Acheron had caught their limbs while he alone danced free. He felt their intent trained upon him: surprise, respect, envy, despair. The elder's gaze he felt keenest of all. He returned it with a seething glare and went on destroying their illusions.

No words passed, no sounds but grunts and thudding blows and labored breathing and the screeches of carrion birds, but something changed. The chaos of the battle slowed. His enemies fell back from him, then from each other.

He emerged from the trance that had taken him and found himself alone, but for the stelae, in the center of the court. Ninety-eight sorcerers formed a ring around its edge.

He searched their eyes, their symbols and bruises. They wanted a leader, he realized. They too resented the elder and her mask. They were as weak, as uncertain as he.

He chose a face he hadn't fought. He beckoned.

When he had struck that one down, he found another.

Still the elder crouched atop the stele, silent as though she were part of the stone, patient as the buzzards.

The sun yellowed, descended. Sunlight broke and fled; the shadows grew until they swallowed everything. The moon crossed, drawing clouds behind it like a feathered cloak. Like dust-billows, cast by an army too distant to be heard.

At a lull in the fighting, the clouds finally broke. Periphast stood catching his breath, staring at the ground, thinking of nothing. Starlight struck his stinging face, and he looked up.

The jawbone-blazoned sorceress stepped forward. Her hands were empty, dangling at her sides. She was mumbling to herself, unintelligible words half-formed around swollen lips. The bruise his heel had left below her breast was hidden now by darkness.

His muscles were rubbery; his consciousness waned; exhaustion gave the poison reign, laying fog and ghosts across his vision.

He shook his head at her. There was nothing she could show him.

She flung back her shoulders.

He took a long breath and dropped into a defensive stance, so familiar by now it was like falling into dreams.

She fell to one knee.

The sorcerers were scattered, nursing their own hurts, tending to each other's wounds or hovering at the edge of sleep. A murmur made its way among them. Heads turned; the whites of eyes glowed. She was yielding to him.

Periphas brushed blood from the hollow of his eye. His gaze crossed the circle, disbelieving, but found no challenge. The centaur in him laughed harshly.

He held out a hand to the jawbone-blazoned sorceress and pulled her to her feet.

He looked to the elder. Was this what she'd intended by her distance? Was this why she had interposed that monstrous mask, cheated her students of her trust? To make a leader of the spy who'd been sent to destroy her. He beckoned, though his body was jelly and the flower-heart poison was whispering the fates of traitors in his ears in Greek. *Prove to me I belong here*, he said with his gaze. *Prove you have something to teach me Eurytus cannot. Only give me some excuse to respect you, and perhaps....*

In the myths it was never armies who won or lost wars, but individuals.

The elder descended from her monolithic human pillar to challenge Periphas herself.

She seemed suddenly tiny beneath the massive wooden mask. Her legs, protruding from the feathered mantle, were knob-kneed, stick-thin. She looked as though she might be blown down by the wind. How old was she, he wondered? Eighty years? A hundred? A hale enough age for a centaur, but for a human savage, she might as well be dead.

Periphas bled from split lip and swollen eye, his body leopard-spotted with bruises in the starlight. It was sorcery alone that kept him standing, the tenuous command of a mind besieged by poison, torn between two treasons. He drooped forward, shoulders sloping, leaning on his power, like a man impaled through the chest on a post.

She nodded readiness; Periphas sucked in a breath and closed in. For an instant, he allowed himself to fantasize. In his mind, he pitted himself against Eurytus.

The elder flicked a wrist, sending one of her rattlesnake's rattles hurtling at his chest. It made no sound as it flew through the air, but struck with the roar of a rainstorm. Buzzards departed the earthwork's rim like startled swallows. It knocked him sprawling. He tumbled a dozen feet, rolled to a stop and lay still, looking up at the sky.

The elder leaned over him. A sigil on her palm, like a talon or a peak, took on the glow of the brand that had inscribed it, throwing a red light between them. The mask was wooden and

immense, slit-eyed, bird-beaked, as much for terror as religion. She pulled it off, revealing for the first time the face beneath. It was wrinkled deeply at the lips and eyes and showed no optimism. “Your name,” she said, “and your tribe.”

Periphas gave her a name that meant Sandpiper, and a tribe whose people had been killed or enslaved a dozen years before. The words tasted foreign. Eurytus had named him.

* * *

He slept where he had fallen. He dreamed of riding half-awake on a centaur’s back, as he had so often as a child: arms wrapped tight around a torso streaming sweat, his face flicked by a long mane streaming in the wind. He felt the hooves pounding beneath him slow to a halt. A set of hands lifted him down and laid him beside a fire. A dead human, anonymous, had been spitted and laid across the flames to sear. Eurytus basted the roast with blood, his sable, richly-muscled horse’s body glistening. He hacked off a leg with a toothed knife and offered to share it. Periphas, for once, refused.

He woke to the deep blue of predawn. The earthwork was silent. He climbed to his feet, unsteady. The hulking shapes of the ruins and the gorge’s mouth were limned in his vision by pulsing trails of white. His sore muscles throbbed in the cold.

Atop the east arena wall, a giant bird perched, a silhouette against the fading stars. The elder, keeping watch.

He drew in a breath, smelled a stain on the air. Something was burning.

The signal fire. He had lit it six times in the past six weeks. Every time, he'd been terrified of being caught. Every time, he had woken the next day in fear for his life. Had he lit it tonight? He couldn't remember.

He sat up. The uncertain forms of sleeping sorcerers lay all around him. The smell of smoke faded until he thought it just a trick of the medicine. Then it returned, sage-scented and strong.

A snake's rattle came from impossibly close. He felt a feather brush his spine. He choked back a cry.

The elder crouched behind him. "Fires," she said, "on the east horizon."

She led him winding among the sleeping bodies. Out of habit, his eyes followed her feet: stealthy but frail, like his own, like any human's. A single step from a centaur would shatter every bone. He walked where she walked: climbing steeply up the terraced rows of the earthwork to the rim, where she had perched.

Periphas remembered: he had set no signal-fire tonight. Nine pinpricks of light lined the horizon. Eurytus had revealed his presence.

Why would he give himself away?

A lure. Another test. Eurytus the aesthete, the connoisseur of hatred and deception. Why would he choose the easy win, when opportunity offered a chance for finesse?

“You have to run,” said Periphas. “If you ever hope to rally the tribes, to have the chance to stand against the centaurs, run. Take the others into the gorge. Find somewhere steep to climb it, where speed can’t help them. When you reach the top, go west.”

The heavy mask was slung across the elder’s back. The contoured wrinkles of her face made her harder to dismiss as distant and oblivious. Made her easier to fear for in what was to come.

“Are you not coming with us, Sandpiper of the Karankawa? You who have shown yourself strongest, wisest among us?” Her smile was wry, but not sarcastic; it accepted that had Periphas not been half-dead, more than half asleep and nearly starved, she would have had no chance to beat him. He saw that she had little hope, and no illusions. “What will you do instead? Go off and hide? Stay here and face them down alone?”

He shook his head. “I’m not the leader you’ve been seeking. I can fight. I have more capacity to kill than any ten of the others. But against centaurs, that isn’t enough. You need a warrior who can change people’s minds, unite them. No one

knows me. I can rally no tribes to your cause. I am the only Karankawa left. My people were enslaved or killed a dozen years ago.”

“Then stand with us, Sandpiper, to free those who survive.”

“Have you ever fought a centaur? They have two hearts—did you know that? Spear a centaur through the chest and he will not die, but only go drunk with pain and rage and loss of blood and go on killing.”

Emotions fled across her lips like flash floods across a droughted wilderness, changing the land forever as they passed. She was awed. She was afraid. “You *have* fought them,” she said.

The elder was no warrior. He imagined her in another time, leading her students among white peaks, looking down upon the backs of eagles. *A healer. A philosopher. A seeker of visions, drawn by desperation far beyond her league.* And yet she’d called Periphias wiser than she. He wondered—could she see the future?

Surely not, or else she would have seen his treachery.

He watched the horizon, the smoke and dust rising against the rose-gray approach of the sun.

She clutched his shoulder with a talon hand and drew him around to face her. “Then we’d have no chance at all without

you.”

He saw it in her face. She *knew*. How she had divined it, or when, he couldn't guess. There was no such thing as prophecy. Even Eurytus lacked such power. Yet somehow she knew how he had learned to fight, who had taught him.

And still she wanted him to lead.

He understood at last why she had worn the mask: her face was too expressive, too human, to hide what she knew. What he could not comprehend was why she had removed it.

She gestured behind her, at the bodies of the sorcerers scattered prone. “Do you think I called them here to follow *me* to war? For generations I have led the scions of the tribes in quest for vision. I am acquainted with the minds of thunderbirds, the acts of ancestors a thousand generations dead. I am the only one among you who will ever see the shape of wind. I know myself, Sandpiper, as you and they do not.”

She padded barefoot, rattles shaking, down the earthwork's bank.

Periphas touched the red marks she had left in his flesh. Then he followed her.

At last, he would defy Eurytus.

* * *

The sun reached its first beams along the heights of the gorge, and one of those sorcerers born among the western

peaks waved his arms and cried out. He had found the route that Periphas sought: a steep defile in the western cliff, carved by runoff falls in wetter seasons, marked now by rich and jagged growth. It reached a thousand feet from floor to rim; at times the ascent was almost sheer. Sorcerers could climb it, if they must. Centaurs wouldn't have a chance.

The elder began to climb, her students following in single-file, as though this were no different from any other path they'd taken since they met. Battle-cries and the thunder of hooves echoed around them, multiplied, distorted by the gorge's labyrinthine curves.

Periphas waited, last in line, massaging the swelling from his fists, watching the bend in the gorge from which Eurytus and the centaurs must emerge. Every second, deceived by the echoes, he expected that black-maned head, those golden-mantled shoulders to appear behind the muzzle of a rifle.

Treachery. He'd seen it before among the centaurs. Given time and leisure, any centaur's ambition would swell to the point that it eclipsed self-preservation. Eurytus himself had committed it, when he made himself the centaurs' lord. Did that mean he would forgive it in another? Perhaps. Amycus had sided with savages once, and Eurytus had shown pity—even mercy. Enough, at least, to merely smash Amycus' pride and sanity apart instead of destroying him completely.

Would he do the same for me?

The numbers waiting at the canyon bottom dwindled; the pairs of apprehensive eyes that fixed, not on the bend, but on Periphas' own face, went from ninety to fifty to ten. He wondered at the lies they must have had to tell themselves to come so easily to trust him.

At last he found himself alone, the time for doubt behind him, all the others climbing steadily above. Then he was selecting a toehold in the sandstone, gripping a juniper root or a tuft of desert grass, pulling himself upward hand over hand. All that remained to be feared were the guns.

He found himself believing they would make it.

When he had climbed perhaps a third of the way, he spared a moment for rest, letting those above him get farther ahead, making himself the easiest mark. At this range, the centaurs wouldn't recognize him. He was just another savage.

He craned his neck over his shoulder, eyes on the bend in the gorge. He swallowed. He slipped an inch before he caught himself.

The first ranks of the pursuing army emerged: stumbling over each other, shoulders hunched and crisscrossed with red, heads bowed low. Humans. Human slaves, their feet bound up in irons so their footsteps rang like hooves. The white spiral brand of Eurytus stood out clear against their skin. Minotaurs

ran among them, lowing and shaking their horns, on the verge of stampede. A handful of centaurs stalked behind them with scourges and prods, rifles slung across their backs. The cries of war he thought he'd heard were cries of pain.

Eurytus had divided his forces.

A tall bay centaur with a close-cropped mane unslung the rifle from his shoulders, lifted it, and laid his cheek against the stock.

Periphas threw himself laterally across the defile and upward, scrabbling for purchase against the loose earth and stone. The rifle cracked, and a clod of dirt burst from the cliff face where he had been. "Faster!" he shouted at those above.

The fires on the horizon—a ruse. A cover, while Eurytus led the bulk of the centaurs elsewhere. Periphas guessed it was three hours since dawn. How far could they have gone?

He looked up in time to glimpse the elder's feathered mantle disappear over the top of the cliff.

He gave no warning, just went on climbing, hand over hand. If the centaurs were waiting, then every one of the humans above him was dead. They would find out soon enough.

The rifle cracked again. One of the sorcerers screamed and fell past Periphas into the gorge. He couldn't tell who it was.

Black hair dancing like a gorgon's, dark eyes already blank. Enemies or allies, he still couldn't tell them apart.

Dislodged dust and pebbles clattered past Periphas, striking his shoulders and face. Silt lodged in the cut above his brow. It stung; his eyes watered. His bruised muscles ached as they loosed and contracted, pulling him closer to the place where he would learn his end. A hundred feet remained, and only a dozen still climbing ahead of him.

He passed a colony of swallows, houses built from dust and spit against the cliff-face, crowds of chirping nestlings begging to be fed. In the sky, the buzzards were silent, certain this time of their feast.

A shotgun bellowed. The roar resounded from the far side of the gorge, its after-echoes mingling with panicked shouts. The swallows burst from the cliff wall in a terrified cloud. Periphas knotted his fingers in a clump of grass and pressed his body against the rough sandstone as another form tumbled past in a rush of air and dust. He blinked sand from his lashes. The body was a centaur's. It slammed against an outcrop, snapping bone. Ribs punctured skin; the humanoid part of the centaur went limp, the equine limbs still kicking.

He kept climbing, engulfed by the tiny, beating wings and fevered wails of swallows. He thought of what he could say to the elder. He would tell her it wasn't her fault.

Then he was pulling himself up over the lip of the gorge.

Human sorcerers knelt or lay prone—most, it seemed, unharmed. A few had been dismembered, the pieces scattered—not cut apart, he saw from the wounds, nor blasted into bits by lead, but ripped. Torn limb from limb. The elder alone stood erect, untouched. She wore the mask. Her back was to him. He couldn't see her eyes—and for that, he was glad.

Centaurs surrounded them, bristling with guns.

“Periphas! Welcome—well done.” Eurytus stepped forward, nearly pranced. He holstered a massive revolver, pushed back the brim of his hat from his sun-bronzed brow. Every contour of him, every muscle, exuded almost childish glee. Grotesque faces, like stolen souls, grimaced from his golden torques—royal emblems of the conquered nations to the south. Eurytus' own ivory grin was predatory and immense. “We've waited for you. So you could help us celebrate your great success.” His voice leaked irony like sweat. “Shall we begin?”

Eurytus cast his gaze over the cowed human sorcerers. He chose one carelessly. He closed a hand around her throat and lifted her to arm's length, forcing her to balance on her toes. There was a symbol painted below her breasts, like a jawbone trailing strings of desiccated flesh.

He turned to Periphas. “Would you care to do the honor of slaughtering the first?” The other centaurs stamped their hooves.

Do it, thought Periphas. Prove your faith.

“No?” asked Eurytus, and then began to laugh.

The jawbone-blazoned sorceress thrashed and fought against his grasp. She aimed a vicious kick at his stomach. He twisted, letting the blow glance off his ribs. She wrenched open his grip on her throat, stumbled half a step back towards the edge of the cliff, dropped into a crouch.

A knife had appeared in her hand—a knife of steel, flashing in the morning light that angled in across the gorge. There were gasps from the sorcerers—to those who had never seen steel, it must seem a thing of power. And they were right. The knife belonged to Eurytus—his spiral was etched on the blade. She’d stolen it out of his belt.

Her gaze settled briefly on Periphas, her expression familiar: challenge, entreaty, as though all she needed was a steadying hand. She was asking for his aid. With a hundred guns trained upon him. Asking him to sacrifice his life. For a chance to kill Eurytus.

Blood ran down Eurytus’ forearm, but he didn’t stop laughing—not until Periphas stepped towards him. Then he

drew the handcannon from its holster, leveled it against Periphās' throat.

"I remember the night I met you," he said, "when I dug you from that dune where you were waiting to be slaughtered. There was the grease of human fat upon your lips. Spittle flew from your teeth like the froth of a dog mad with rage, and you fell upon the throat of Amycus, a centaur I relied upon and respected. One of my own kin. You broke Amycus' nerve that night; left him useless, a coward. There was nothing *human* about you. You were a beast, a monster. I've loved you ever since."

"Master," said Periphās. His treason, his redemption, had been no more than an illusion. He served Eurytus. He always had.

But perhaps he could use Eurytus' love to save her—save them all. If he could offer them a semblance of their lives—the chance to survive in delusion—wasn't that better than this? "Master, you don't have to kill them. They are ignorant—they hate us because they don't understand. But I've seen them fight. They have power. Take them as slaves. Teach them, as you did for me."

Eurytus inclined his head. "Why, you're right," he said. "I recognize her now...." His eyes angled away from the woman at

his hooves. A thin crease marred his sculpted brow, then smoothed away. “She’s what you could have been.”

The jawbone-blazoned sorceress lunged at Eurytus, angling the blade at his throat, spitting curses in her savage tongue.

Eurytus reared effortlessly, anticipating her attack. One of his hooves caught her square in the face. There was the wet sound of caving bone. She pitched backwards, silent, into the gorge.

“I have loved you, Periphas.” Eurytus struck him across the face with the muzzle of the gun, knocking him to hands and knees. Then he wheeled and galloped the three strides back to the line of centaurs.

There was a storm of cocked hammers and shotgun barrels snapping closed.

Periphas sought out the elder. He found her eyes upon him. He remembered the labyrinth of wrinkles hidden beneath the mask. He imagined how despair must twist them. Yet in her gaze, he sensed no accusation, only regret.

The roar as the centaurs opened fire was deafening. Humans toppled from the cliff’s edge, arcing down gracelessly into the gorge. Not a single buzzard altered the course of its spiral by so much as a hair.

The elder's hair and cloak distended as the impact of the bullets drove her past the brink, her arms flung back, her shoulders, knees and body hunched around the mask.

Then she fell, and Periphas covered his face.

* * *

In the still that followed, he realized that he was unscathed. "I'm sorry, master," he whispered. "Forgive me."

Eurytus gestured; two centaurs caught Periphas beneath the arms and helped him to his feet. "There, there, my boy. You only did what was required. I sent you alone among your own race. How could you help but betray me?" A quirk in his lips, a half-sneer, sensuous, triumphant. Eurytus drew a length of metal rod from a leather sheath at his withers. He turned it in his hands. One end was twisted around itself into a spiral—a brand. By his sorcery, it began to smolder, then to glow.

The two centaurs flanking Periphas gripped his arms, holding him still.

"Besides," Eurytus added, "I've been looking for an excuse to do this." He pressed the red-hot iron into the flesh of Periphas' shoulder. The skin hissed and smoked in the path of the spiral, bubbling up into blisters. The scent of seared flesh, to his centaur-trained palate, was mouth-watering. The pain was slight and numbed swiftly, but he found he couldn't hold back the screams.

The buzzards spiraled down into the gorge.

* * *

Later, when the brand had scabbed, he searched among the bodies. But he never found the mask.

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OIL FIRE

by Kate MacLeod

If I had been a child of one of the twelve great Houses, my crime of stealing scrolls from the priests' library would have been punishable by death. My body would have been left atop my House's tower until my flesh filled the bellies of the sentinel birds, then my picked-clean bones placed in the city walls so that in death I would still serve a purpose, warding the city from the demonic vapors that swept down from the mountains at night and filled the river valley all around Ummur's walls. Not even the humblest goatherd dared remain outside the city's walls past moonrise.

But I was not a child of a great House. My death would serve no purpose, but I could not be tolerated to live among the chosen. So I was banished. I walked down the dusty road south of Ummur, the priests watching every step I took until the road dipped out of sight.

But I was back within the walls well before moonrise, using the knowledge I had "stolen" from the priests to hide from the guards' sight. There was more in their library I needed to know before I could leave Ummur.

As I skirted around the marketplace filled with farmers and artisans setting out their goods I wondered if that was still

true. There were a few scrolls left that I had never read, in the library off limits to all but the highest-ranking priests, but I would have to face great risk to get to them. Perhaps it was time to move on, to follow my clues to the city of the goddess far to the north. I was certain I could find it, if only I had the courage to take the first step outside the walls of my city.

Those walls towered over me as I neared the hiding place I called home. It was the blood and the bones of the members of the great Houses, the descendents of the city's twelve founders, which the priests said had the protective magic that kept the vapors without, but as with all things magic the common people believed there was power in imitation. So within the mighty walls and watchtowers of Ummur there was another humbler wall, a row of former homes and shops now given over as abodes to the dead so that the common folk could feel that their ancestors too were guarding them. It was unthinkable that a sentinel bird should be tempted to eat profane flesh, so the rooms containing the bodies were sealed, windows and doors. Airy mud brick homes became ovens in the hot summer, and the smell of slow-roasting flesh hung thick in the air. No one lingered needlessly in the neighborhoods of the dead. It was the perfect hiding place.

Being banished served me well. No longer needing to spend my days among the sisters keeping the temple, now I

studied until weariness took me, then woke to study again. Soon I would know all the priests knew. Only then would I allow myself to be banished from Ummur, to go out into the world and find more knowledge than the priests could ever dream of.

That had been my plan. But one hot summer day I woke to the sound of a funeral procession, the clatter of tambourines and sistrums and the wailing song of the dancers. The procession was passing on the main road that ran from the ziggurat at the heart of the city out to the watchtower for the House Elam. I saw the number of dancers who were employed in singing and scattering wilted flower petals, the finery of the mourners' clothing, and the ornate bier being used to carry the veiled body of the deceased, and I realized they were not bound for any of my neighbors' houses; they were going to climb the tower itself, the tower of House Elam.

Oh, poor Enanatuma, my sister in all but blood! This could only mean her father, the head of House Elam, was dead. Her father, who had welcomed me, his daughter's strange orphan friend of no House, her fellow temple dancer, into his home. He who had given me the most important gift of all when he had shown me how to read, to unlock the mysteries of the library it was my tiresome duty to keep clean. Her father was gone, and her House would need a new head.

I watched the procession go by from the shadows of an alley. They were close enough to touch; some of the dancers' skirts brushed against me as they passed. I had to be that close to see their faces, to see Enanatuma. I bit my lip to keep my voice from joining those of the dancers and pulled my veil closer around me. It had jewels that hung over my forehead, the largest one positioned over the blue tattoo that marked me an outcast from Ummur. That was a bit of cheek on my part; in truth that enspelled jewel hid more than the mark from view. The moment its cool facets touched my skin I could not be seen; I did not even cast a shadow.

A familiar face passed by, Enanatuma's cousin Amar-Sin. I had never known him well, had only seen him a few times waiting to walk Enanatuma home from the temple. The years had not been kind to him. Some great pain, some frustrated longing was etched on his face. It was too much to be for his uncle; the furrows it had left in his face were too old. He walked alone, no wife at his side, no children around him. He was a noble son, so it was unthinkable that he wouldn't marry. It was nearly unthinkable that he wouldn't marry again if his first wife had died without bearing him children, but surely that must be the case.

Enanatuma and her family walked at the end of the procession. Her husband Shulgi carried their little daughter in

his arms and held their son by the hand. Enanatumma looked pale and confused, as if she hadn't yet realized what was happening. I fell into step beside her and slipped my arm through hers, giving her hand a squeeze. She stopped walking, letting the procession carry on without her.

“Puabi?” she whispered. “Is it really you?”

“Yes,” I whispered back. We had been estranged long before my banishment. I had seen her only once since the day ten years ago when I had given up dancing and devoted all my energies to magic. I had done her a favor in return for the thousand kindnesses she and her father had shown me and had intended never to see her again. But she was still my sister.

“I need you,” she said. I couldn't tell from her words whether it was Puabi her sister or Puabi worker of magic that she needed, but either way I had only one answer to give.

“I shall come. Tonight.” I got up on tiptoe to kiss her cheek, for she was tall, with arms that didn't come from spinning and weaving. Which goes to show that sometimes people don't need my spells to fail to see the obvious. “My heart weeps with yours, sister.”

“I know,” she murmured back. Then she was gone, running to retake her place at Shulgi's side. He turned to look back. The last time I had seen him he had been dressed in cast-off rags and covered with brick dust, and I had thought him the

finest looking man in all Ummur. Ten years of easy living had softened him, but only a bit, and the violet robes of a noble son suited him more than I had ever dreamed they would. I found I could not turn away; I had to take this moment of seeing him that I had so diligently denied myself for so long.

I think his dark eyes almost saw me even through the spell, his gaze was so intent, but then his daughter tugged his hair sharply and he turned away.

* * *

Enanatuma and I had been terrible dancers. We both loved the movements and the feeling of being in motion, but we never had the proper reverence to the gods, which was the first calling of a temple dancer, or so Sister Nata had told us over and over. This was perfectly true. Neither of us wanted to learn to use our bodies to honor the gods. I used my dancer's grace and strength to run from rooftop to rooftop across Ummar, vaulting garden walls and climbing to tantalizingly forbidden rooms. Enanatuma used hers to practice the art of gis-gis-la.

Her father teaching me, a girl, to read had been a grievous sin. But it paled in comparison to teaching his daughter the gis-gis-la. I knew from the ancient scrolls that once all had practiced the gis-gis-la, but over time it had been restricted to just members of the twelve Great Houses, and then to just the men. If it were ever known that Enanatuma's father had taught

her this martial art, their entire House would be put to death, from the members of the House council to the lowliest cousin of a cousin, and their watchtower and the city walls containing the bones of their ancestors razed to the ground lest the demonic vapors take advantage of the weakness such a sin represented.

It was still a danger to the rest of the House even now that he was dead, which was why I was not surprised to find Enanatuma's house empty of servants as I slipped over the garden wall. I could hear the clang of blade on blade as she drilled with her husband. No servant could be trusted to keep such a secret, especially not considering which of them was the student and which the teacher.

I lingered in the garden, waiting for them to finish and Shulgi to leave. I had often watched Enanatuma practice the *gis-gis-la* with her father, mastering the spins and leaps, slashing away with her long-bladed sword and catching her opponent's blade with the prongs on the hilt of her dagger.

She had gotten very good since I had last watched her fight. Shulgi was clumsy and slow by comparison. At last he gave up with a curse, throwing the blades to the floor and storming out of the room.

I felt a cold chill in my heart. This was not the Shulgi I had once known so well.

Enanatuma fetched up the blades and set them reverently in their place of honor around the family altar. She had just bowed her head in prayer when she twitched at the sound of my sandaled feet on the stone floor. I tugged off my veil and her face lit up briefly before darkening once more, as if she wanted to smile and burst into tears both at once.

“Sister,” I said. “What ails Shulgi?”

“Oh, he—” But the tears at last came and it was several minutes before she could continue. I held her close, as once upon a time she had held me, and waited to hear how I would be needed.

“It is as you feared,” she said at last. “He truly believes he is a noble son of House Akitu. So he gets angry when he cannot fight the gis-gis-la as any noble son can do, and he will not listen to my advice on how to conduct House business.”

“With your father dead, he is head of House Elam?” Enanatuma had no uncles, no close family at all, only distant cousins. But they were cousins very covetous of power.

“Only until Eku comes of age,” Enanatuma said, “but yes.”

“What do you need me to do?” Ten years ago I had not appreciated that magic raged like an oil fire. If one were not careful it would grow too hot too fast, and trying to douse it would only spread it more. I had learned more control since I had crafted that spell for Enanatuma, one that made everyone

believe Shulgi was a long lost son of Akitu, but at the time I had had more confidence than skill. The spell had worked, but it was as though I had used too much oil for such a small spell. It made a flame that was higher and hotter than needed for the task. I could not extinguish that flame; I could only try to keep it from spreading further.

“I don’t want you to undo it,” Enanatuma said.

“He will go deeper,” I warned. “Soon he will realize he should not allow you to practice the gis-gis-la. What then?”

“Then I give up the gis-gis-la,” she said.

I did not believe her. For her to put up her blades would be like me giving up magic; it was unthinkable. But there were still tears in her eyes, and I didn’t have the heart to argue with her.

“What is it you need?” I asked.

“Help Shulgi. Help him to be a good head of House Elam, and keep him safe. I fear my cousins are watching him closely, waiting for him to make even the smallest misstep. Particularly Amar-Sin.”

“Amar-Sin wants to rule your House?” I recalled the man I had seen that morning, wrought with grief. I found it difficult to imagine him conspiring to do anything.

“Sometimes I think so,” Enanatuma said. “Sometimes I think he suspects Shulgi is not what he claims to be. He almost seems to hate him, although I don’t know how that could be.”

“Has he changed since his wife died?”

“What? Amar-Sin never married.”

“Never married? Then why the grief?” But Enanatuma was already impatient with me.

“Please, can you help Shulgi?”

“I confess, I do not know any spells to make him a great leader, but at the very least I can make a protective charm to shield him from poisons and magical attacks.”

“Thank you, Puabi.”

* * *

It took me longer than I had anticipated to make the charm, an armband of gold studded with assorted gemstones. Each gem was the focus of its own protective spell; in truth every such spell I knew. If there were anyone in the world who wanted Shulgi kept safe more than Enanatuma did, it was me. The individual spells were easy enough, but finding a way to mount them on the gold band so that they created harmony took a little more work.

And so it was three nights later when I came to bring it to Enanatuma. I was quite proud of it, the most complex magic I had ever worked, but the moment I saw her stricken face I knew I was too late.

“He has been challenged,” she said dully. “He ignored my advice about how to conduct House business and has offended

Amar-Sin, who was looking to be offended, like as not. Now my cousin has the excuse he was looking for and has called Shulgi out.”

“Amar-Sin is good at gis-gis-la?”

“One of the best,” she said. “Not that it matters; a 10-year-old boy could beat Shulgi, and he knows it. He will not speak to me about it at all, only keeps drinking bowl after bowl of date wine.”

The challenge would be a fight to the death. Worse, the victor would control the fate of the defeated’s family. Amar-Sin would as good as own Enanatuma, and her children could be cast from their home or banished from Ummur entirely at his whim. If he were feeling particularly vindictive, he could have young Ekar executed to ensure he never sought revenge for his father.

The words were out of my mouth before the thought even entered my mind: “Could you beat him?”

Enanatuma looked surprised, then thoughtful. “Yes,” she said at last. “Yes, I could.”

“The challenge is at dawn?”

“Yes. At the square before the ziggurat.”

“I need a piece of jewelry, something you can wear under gis-gis-la armor.”

Enanatuma nodded and pulled a long necklace from around her neck. It was a simple thing, an imperfect piece of lapis lazuli tied to a cord of leather. It had been tucked unseen under her gown. The lapis lazuli was still warm from her flesh.

“Shulgi’s first gift to me,” she said. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I knew the piece well; I had worn it myself for just one night before it was ever Enanatuma’s.

“When I am finished with this, it will disguise you. You will look like Shulgi, but you won’t sound like him,” I said. “Can you do this?”

“Yes. It will be tricky, but there is no ritual which says I must speak.”

“It would be best to keep the fight brief.” She rolled her eyes at me, just for an instant like her younger self as scornful of me telling her how to fight the gis-gis-la as I would be of her telling me how to cast a spell. Then she was serious once more.

“I will tell the servants I am going to the temple to pray for his victory in case they should notice my absence,” she said. “But what about Shulgi?”

“I will see to Shulgi,” I promised.

* * *

There was scarcely enough time for me to cross the city to my room, imbue the stone with the spell, and then carry it back across the ever-brightening city to Enanatuma’s house. She was

anxiously awaiting my return, casting nervous glances at Shulgi's form on their low bed. She was already dressed in his armor, which needed only a little padding around the shoulders and waist to fit her.

"He will wake soon. He had a lot of wine, but even so, he is always an early riser," she said.

"He will remain here with me until the fight is done; you can trust me on that." I slipped the leather cord over her head, tucking the stone beneath the breastplate. Then I looked up into Shulgi's dark eyes and my breath caught.

"I just thought," Enanatuma said, her voice snapping me out of my reverie. "I will always be Shulgi when I wear this now, won't I?"

"Yes," I said. "The spell will not fade, and it cannot be broken." I wondered for the first time what dangerous power I had just given her. But she was my most trusted sister; I kissed her cheek and let her go.

I sat with my back against one of the pillars that divided Enanatuma's bedroom from the garden beyond and waited for Shulgi to wake. The sun was not yet over the garden wall, but the air was already still and hot. I imagined Enanatuma fighting in that metal armor in the shadeless square before the ziggurat. No wonder challenges were always met at dawn.

Shulgi had passed out draped facedown across the bed, still dressed in his formal garb from the House council meeting that had led to the challenge. This close to him, I could see the strands of silver just beginning to show in his still-thick hair. My hand itched to touch it, to see if the waves of it were as soft as I remembered.

This would be the hardest part. I had not spoken to him since the morning so many years ago when I had left him alone in our makeshift bed with only the lapis lazuli necklace on the pillow beside him. I hadn't trusted myself. Now I would have to speak to him, to keep him here until Enanatuma returned. Worse, I had to let him speak to me and not search his every word, every tone, for clues to his true thoughts. The past must stay in the past.

At last he began to stir, groaning and rubbing at his face. Then he saw the sunbeam nearly touching his hand and remembered.

He jumped up from the bed, sober and alert in the blink of an eye, and rushed towards the cedar chest that held his gis-gis-la armor, or had before Enanatuma had taken it.

"Shulgi," I called softly just as his hand touched the lid. He spun, eyes searching the garden before at last falling upon me.

"Puabi?" He had a strange look to his face, as if he had just spoken a name he had heard once and had no idea whether it

was connected to me or not. A look of recognition almost washed over his face but retreated just as rapidly.

“It is I,” I said simply. “Puabi.” Was it the mere affirmation of his confusing suspicions that brought that look of recognition back, or was it the sound of my voice? Whatever the cause, his eyes lit up and I knew he knew me.

“I searched everywhere for you!”

“I know it.”

“I went every day to the temple in hopes of seeing you.”

“So I gave up being a dancer.”

“Why?” There was no need to search the tones of that word for meaning; it was filled with pain and loss that could not be hidden.

“You know why.”

But I wondered if he did anymore. He believed himself a noble son; believed it mind, heart and soul. How would he remember our time together, I an orphaned ward of the temple sisters, he a refugee from a far-off city who had found work repairing the high city walls of Ummur, dangerous work with little pay. Neither of us much better than slaves. How could we marry with no money for a home, no money to feed children?

And yet I had convinced myself that it was possible. I had accepted his proposal and his gift, the lapis lazuli necklace that had been his mother's; it was all he had to give. I would have

married him, I know I would have, if my sleep that night hadn't been disturbed by the wail of a child.

I had left Shulgi's side, crawled to the edge of our hiding place on the roof of a shop near the temple. It was the perfect place to sleep on hot summer nights. From my vantage point I saw a woman laying a squalling infant on the temple steps, just as I had been left so many years before. She kissed the baby, wiped at her eyes, then hurried away.

Another child waited for her in the shadows of an alley, a boy of six or seven years. She took his hand, and after one last long look back at the babe she was gone.

What had happened? The child on the steps was a baby, but not newly born. Some change in this woman's circumstance meant she could no longer feed both children, I surmised, but what? Had something happened to her husband?

A sudden vision filled my mind: Shulgi falling from the city walls to be dashed on the rocky ground below.

I didn't know what had happened to that woman; I only knew I could never be her.

I wasn't certain how much Shulgi remembered beyond my name. He looked confused, his eyes washing over me and then looking around the room and then back at me. His past and his present didn't seem to connect in his mind.

He would never know what I had done for him, how I had made sure he and Enanatuma would meet. Noble daughter that she was, she had money enough for both of them. She could keep him safe. She was the one person I knew who would raise him up from his lowly place in the world, who would see what he could be and not just what he was. And he had been perfect for her, he would never try to make Enanatuma a meek woman, touching only spindles and looms. He would love her as she was.

So he would have, had I never cast that spell.

Enanatuma never realized what I had done, either, to bring them together. How nervous she was, the day she asked me to weave the spell that would make him a noble son, the little difference between a man she could marry and one she could not. I hadn't even needed a jewel to focus the spell on, only a scrap of paper, a genealogy of House Akitu that could hold a few extra "long-lost" branches. I gave Shulgi an ancestor so I could give him to Enanatuma.

He was still staring at me, confused. Then he looked down at his hand resting on the cedar chest.

"Shulgi!" I said, stepping forward, but too late. He had already thrown back the lid and was staring at the empty space where his armor should be.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Where is Enanatuma?"

“She is saving your life and her House. Be still and let her do it.”

“What do you know of my wife?” he demanded.

“Think of your children. Think of Eku. This was the only way,” I said.

“What was the only way? And what do you know of my children? Why are you even here, now?” Then I saw his eyes move up to my forehead, to the blue mark the priests had tattooed there. “You were banished. Why?”

Before I could answer, Shulgi’s eyes moved past me to the garden and a look of shock froze his features. I turned to see his mirror image in dusty armor clutching a blood-soaked cloth to the side of his face.

“What happened?” I cried.

“I was victorious,” Enanatuma said, “but I paid a price.” And she pulled the cloth away from her Shulgi-face to reveal a gash starting near the corner of her mouth and extending up into her hairline, just missing an eye.

“Oh no,” I said, looking from her to her husband and his unmarked cheek.

“What have you done?” he asked, a whisper which held all the urgency of a scream. He dropped onto the edge of the bed, hands clutching violently at his hair.

“What you could not,” she said. There was no hint of accusation in her words, only her own fierce brand of love. She gave me the bloody rag and pulled the necklace off over her head. She was Enanatuma once more, but the injury remained.

“It’s not serious, sister,” I said, for the bleeding had already stopped. “It will heal.”

“It will leave a scar,” Enanatuma said. “A scar on my face, not Shulgi’s.”

We must cut him. And yet I couldn’t bring myself to say the words aloud. Even if we gave him the scar he lacked, how to explain Enanatuma’s? More magic, more illusions?

Ten years had taught me nothing; I was still spreading oil fire even as I tried to douse it.

Shulgi lifted his head from his hands. Enanatuma stood over him, her gis-gis-la dagger in her hand. Her thoughts had followed mine, but she too shirked away from the inevitable. She lowered her arm.

“What you have done has damned every soul in this city,” he said to her. “You can cover it up from the eyes of men, perhaps, but not from the eyes of the gods. The wards of House Elam, how will they hold out the demons now that you have done this thing?”

“The same as they have these last twenty years, since I first took up the swords,” Enanatuma said.

“How did I allow it?” He was genuinely confused to the point of anguish. Did he remember nothing of his former life?

“No one knows what the vapors are or why the walls keep them out,” I said. “The priests act confident, but I’ve read their most secret texts. They don’t really know.”

But Shulgi only grew more enraged, leaping to his feet to pace the room. “Do not tell me this was no sin! You who are not one of us, not one of the noble Houses; you don’t know what it is to hold this sacred trust that protects us all. To keep the magic in our bones strong throughout life so that they will serve their purpose after death. But Enanatuma knows.” And he turned on her. “She knew the sin of it every time she took up the blades. She felt it in her bones. Every time.”

Enanatuma met his gaze steadily, saying nothing, but I saw the glint of a tear in her eye and realized there was truth in what he said. I had broken every law of Ummur in my pursuit of knowledge, but I had never once felt I was doing wrong. I had never felt guilt.

But Enanatuma had, and she had never said a word, not even to me, her closest sister.

“You have to leave,” Shulgi said at last, and there were tears in both their eyes now. “Leave Ummur. There will be no covering this up, no more illusions, no more tricks.”

“Shulgi,” I said, but I was unheard.

“You should die, we should all die,” he said to her. “It’s the law.”

“Shulgi, the children-” Enanatuma said.

“Not just our children,” he interrupted. “Every child of House Elam will be condemned, and what then? The priests say the walls containing Elam’s bones must be razed. The walls of the Houses to either side must be extended to fill the gap. Do you know how long it would take to build those walls? How far we have to go to quarry the stones?” He broke off, a far-off look to his eyes, as if he were trying to recall the details of a dream he had had long ago. “I know,” he said and looked down at his hands, as though a part of him expected to find calluses there.

He broke himself out of his reverie with a shake of his head. “And I’ve spoken only of the stones, not what lies between, what really keeps us all safe. How many would die each night before Ummur was made whole again? Not just our children.”

Enanatuma’s face contracted as she fought the tears. The gash on her cheek began to bleed anew.

“What else can I do, Enanatuma?” he asked. “What else? I cannot undo what you did. I can only hope your actions have not dishonored us to the point where the gods no longer smile on House Elam.” He grabbed her arms now, pulling her close. “You should die for this, I know. But I can’t condemn you. Even

to save us all, I can't. So you must leave and never return, and be as dead to all Ummur."

"I will go," Enanatuma said. "If Puabi swears to watch over my children, to protect them for me until they are grown and wed."

"How can she, marked as she is? She could never be seen with them," Shulgi said.

"Puabi knows what I am asking," Enanatuma said.

I nodded, and in so doing sealed my fate. It would be years now before I could leave Ummur. Enanatuma hugged me a little too tightly before turning back to Shulgi. "May I say farewell to the children?"

"No," Shulgi said. "My love, your injury. They can't see it, can never know what you've done. We cannot force them to keep such secrets."

"What will you tell them?"

"I don't know. What will I tell anyone?"

"She fled," I said, my words sounding dull in my own ears. "She was certain you would lose, that you would leave her at the mercy of Amar-Sin, who hates her."

Shulgi barked out a laugh that almost sounded self-mocking.

"What?" I asked.

“Amar-Sin does not hate Enanatuma. Quite the opposite. Exactly the opposite.”

“What are you talking about?” Enanatuma asked, barely more than a whisper.

“He told me once. It was at our wedding feast. He pulled me aside and told me that you and he had made a vow, that when he returned from his journey to the south the two of you would marry. It was a secret vow, not one sworn before a priest as such things are meant to be done. Don’t you remember? I told you about it and you laughed it off as some ridiculous story in his imagination.”

“I don’t remember,” Enanatuma said, but her face had gone very white.

“He’s never mentioned it again, but in every look he gives me, in every word he utters, he makes sure I never forget. No, he does not hate you.”

Whatever more was going to be said remained unspoken as we heard voices from across the garden and the footfalls of a servant approaching.

“You were seen leaving the fight with rude haste, ignoring many well-wishers. You will need to make apologies and explanations to keep your allies,” Enanatuma said. “And if I am gone, you will need those allies more than ever.”

Shulgi looked at her, and I could see that he still wrestled with the obligation to surrender his family for the good of the city. I stepped up, pressing the blood-soaked cloth into his hand and raising it to his unshaven cheek.

“Not good enough,” Shulgi said, pushing away the cloth and taking the dagger from Enanatuma’s hand. One fierce motion and his decision was irrevocably made. Enanatuma tore the cloth from my hand to press it to his cheek, but he pushed her away, knocking her to the floor behind the bed. Then he caught my arm and threw me down beside her.

“Stay down,” he hissed, slamming the lid down on the empty armor chest just as the servant appeared.

“What is it?” Shulgi asked.

“Guests, my lord.”

“Now? Damn, but this gash is bleeding again.”

“Shall I fetch a surgeon, my lord?”

“Why bother? The blood is what they’re all here to see,” Shulgi said. Enanatuma and I watched as the sandaled feet of the servant left the room, then Shulgi’s followed. He had not even said farewell to his wife.

We got to our feet, Enanatuma looking more than a little dazed. “I think what Shulgi said might be true. I think I remember, like a dream I had long ago, making that vow. And

we....” She broke off, eyes gazing off into the distance. “Do you remember him?”

“Not at all,” I confessed.

“Did I love Amar-Sin once, and *forget*? I abandoned him for Shulgi and forgot every moment we ever had together?”

“Enanatuma....”

“I felt something when he died. I had stabbed him with my parry blade; we were quite close at the end, practically in an embrace. Puabi, I thought at first that he had seen through your spell, because my name was the last word from his lips. Except the way he said it, it brought back such feelings. It felt so familiar. I did love him once, didn't I? If I had I would've told you, my sister. Don't you remember?”

“No, you never told me any such thing.”

“Can you get caught up in your own spell?”

I could not answer. Enanatuma was desperate to know if she had broken faith with one betrothed to take up with another. I was certain to spend the rest of my life questioning whether I had broken that betrothal myself to bring Shulgi into her life. It was also possible that Amar-Sin's story was truly just his imagination, or something he had invented to try to raise his position in House Elam. But was it possible that the spell I had cast to give Shulgi a noble line had not been my first spell

on his behalf? Had I first done something to get rid of Amar-Sin?

I would never know. Magic was truly oil fire; it had spread and spread until even I was burned. The spell meant to save the life of my love had led to my dearest sister killing her own lover. I knew in my soul that it was true. Admitting it would give no comfort to my sister, though. All she had left now were memories of her husband, and I wouldn't do anything to poison them.

"You will forget again," I promised her. "Think only of Shulgi and your love for him, and you will forget these other ghosts of memories. But now it's time for you to leave. Take my veil."

I draped it over her and she vanished from sight. Her strong arms pulled me into one last hug and then she was gone.

I would never see her again, never hear of how she fared or whether she even still lived. Would she ever put the necklace on, I wondered, just to look at the reflection of her husband's face in a bronze mirror or a still pond?

As I waited through the hot day for nightfall so that I could leave the house unseen, I fell asleep on Enanatuma's bed. It was well past sunset when Shulgi shook me awake. A surgeon had indeed been by, as a row of coarse stitches adorned his cheek. He had cut himself more deeply than Enanatuma had

been wounded, but I doubted any but the three of us would ever know the difference. Just two of us now.

“You knew Enanatuma. You were both dancers, sisters at the temple,” he said.

“Yes.”

“I forgot about you when I married Enanatuma. Not willfully, not like a man putting aside thoughts of an old love for the sake of the new. I forgot you, completely.”

“Shulgi,” I said, desperately not wanting to have this conversation. “You’ve forgotten many things.”

“They’ve been coming back since this morning. It’s like the story of my life is actually two stories, and I remember them both. They both seem equally true. I’m not sure which is true.”

“I am sorry.”

“Why?”

“Because it was my spell that....” Broke you? Is driving you mad? “It’s my fault.”

“Yours and Enanatuma’s, yes? The two of you plotting together and never once speaking of any of this to me!” He paced again, the violet robes snapping around him in sympathy to his growing fury.

“It was to keep you safe. Everything I did was because I couldn’t bear the thought of you dying.”

“You made my life a lie!” He turned to face me, and there was something deliberate about the space he left between us. “I have many hateful things to say to you, to you and my now departed wife. How you used me; how you played with me, just another doll in some girls’ game.”

“No-”

“I won’t say them. I choose not to. If I even still have a choice. Enanatuma is gone, now I want you gone as well.”

“I cannot leave Ummur,” I said. “I promised to watch over your children.”

“I will not see you,” he said, spitting out the words. “Ever. I will not once ask myself if I’m not secretly pleased that she is gone and you remain. I will not wonder if that was even your intention from the first.”

“Shulgi, I never-”

“Go!” he roared, his face so contorted with rage I feared for his stitches.

So I left.

* * *

I watch over them still, he and the children both. He found the armband I had made for him; I have seen him wearing it. It had been left in Enanatuma’s clothes chest; he must have taken it to be a last gift for him that she had never had a chance to give. The children have wards as well, spells imbued in pretty

little stones they just happened to find lying in their path and picked up and kept, as children are wont to do.

I wondered what Shulgi thought of it all. I wondered if he would forget me once more, as his past as a noble son would once more become “true” for him, matching his present life as his past as a builder of walls did not.

And sometimes, as I lay in the heat of the day waiting for sleep to take me, I wondered if he had been right about my intentions, and whether he ever did think about me in Enanatuma’s place. And I would admit at last, now that it was too late, that it had never truly been the priests’ library that had kept me in Ummur after my banishment.

Then I would go to sleep in my little room among the rotting dead, waiting for the day when Enanatuma’s children would be grown and I would be free to leave Ummur. Waiting, and fearing when the time came I would find I could not go, and I would linger on to be near to the man who would not see me. Me, the only true ghost in Ummur.

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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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