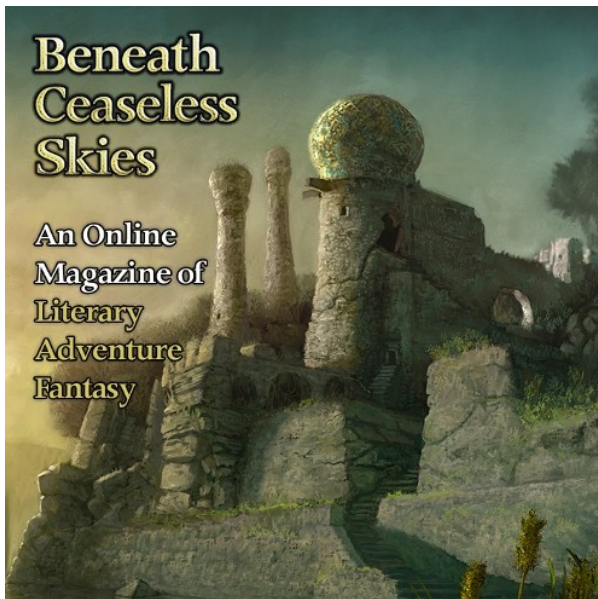


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE ALCHEMIST'S FEATHER

by Erin Cashier

I have always done as I have been told, and most of my actions have not been kind ones. I know because the Alchemist did not always tell me to forget and so, trapped inside my jar, I was cursed to remember.

I dreamt the dreams of dolls, and those were the times I could see the past most clearly. I remembered the time I crept inside a true man's workplace to hide false evidence. And when I delivered a botched love potion into a poor serving girl's tea and hid behind a jug of milk to watch as she retched black blood and green bile across the floor.

Tonight as I dreamt, I became aware that these were horrible things. They did not bother me at the time, and they do not bother me now, but I am aware of them in a way that I have never been before. And in the morning I realize one of my fingers is gone.

* * *

"I need more time," the Alchemist protests, when the Prince's latest emissary visits.

"You always need more time." The emissary walks around the room with a curled lip and an arrogant eye, then picks up

my jar and shakes it hard. I rattle around limp inside as I've been told to do.

"I'm getting closer." The Alchemist holds up a small feather for the emissary to inspect. "This is a crow feather—"

"The Prince wants phoenix feathers. We can pick up crow feathers on any street in Vienna."

"It is a process. You cannot just skip to the end and create a phoenix!"

"What use are crow feathers to the Prince?" The emissary takes the black curl of proof with his free hand. "I've seen better tricks on street corners."

"This is not magic—it is alchemy!" the Alchemist protests and pounds a nearby table. Implements jump and a cloud of charcoal powder billows. "I cannot just paint feathers and make up a pretty story. Is that what the Prince wants?"

"The Prince wants the real thing," the emissary says, shaking my bottle roughly for emphasis. "But he would like it quickly. He's paying you a lot of money. For your sake, and the sake of that rodent you call a servant, you'd better hurry."

"My supplies are low—"

"You've got all you'll get. Your next shipment will be your last. Either you can do it soon, or not at all."

The Alchemist tilts his head and raises an eyebrow. “If the prince hadn’t put his sword into every whore in Vienna he wouldn’t need them so badly.”

“Treason does not become you, Alchemist. Finish it before his wedding day so that his ‘sword’ might be healed.” The emissary flicks the small feather at the Alchemist and it floats to the ground on a jagged path. He holds my jar tight and makes a show of thinking about its destruction before snorting and setting it down on the table, intact.

* * *

A night passes. Things happen. I am told to forget and I must obey.

* * *

“Play with the girl,” the Alchemist commands, releasing me from my jar at dawn. There are bread crumbs in his beard and bits of bacon in his teeth. He spills me onto his desk where the small black feather is now mated with a white one, both of them aligned side by side atop a research book full of symbols I cannot understand. I drop off the edge of the desk with a fall and a tumble, in the nature of small things, landing in a crumpled pile before picking myself up and setting off to find Maria.

Maria smiles at the sight of me, as I clamber up the end of her bed. I walk the hills of her slight body and she pinches her

nose.

“You’re the smelliest doll ever, Alrun,” she informs me, and I know it is true because I’ve been given a nose. The lab was a sulfurous stinking place; not even the thickest cork could keep the scent out of my jar. “Shall we go outside now?” she asks and I nod.

Her stomach growls. “I’ll grab the crust, if he’s left any,” she says to herself and places me upon her shoulder.

With a rind of bread in tow, I sit on Maria’s shoulder as she trots along the path to reach a glade where our cabin’s smoke is unseen. In a fashionable city, no one would ever tolerate the stench that rises continually from the three fires he keeps lit. We’d been in a fashionable city, once. We’d had gold once, too. But those times are past. I have forgotten most of them because so much time has elapsed—newer memories crowd out the old ones in my small and wooden head.

That, and perhaps the things that were made to be my eyes were not so very good. I was ill-made, and I am falling apart at a prodigious rate. Today, another finger is lost.

“Shall we dance, Alrun?” Maria asks and I nod. She holds me out, one of my hands in each of her thumb and forefingers, and she twirls me around in the white-gold sun, singing a song of her own creation. She has a voice like the birds she sometimes protects me from, when a curious sparrow becomes

too interested in the shiny bits that are my eyes or the gummed string that is my hair. She sings and spins until both her body and throat are tired and then winds down to set me in the pocket of her lap.

I am quiet while she weaves me skirts out of grass and makes tiny wreaths for my hair. She places one of these upon my head and I reach up to help her adjust it so that I can see past an ivory petal of a flower and she gasps.

“Another finger gone! I didn’t—”

I gesture that it wasn’t her doing.

“You’re sure?” she asks, and I nod strongly. “I wish you could tell me what happened.”

I don’t know what happened. I have been told to forget. Even if the Alchemist had carved lips for me, that could not change.

“I can make you new ones, I think.” She picks up pieces of twig and whittles them down with her fingernails, pinching off wooden strands.

I watch her silent concentration. How many girls have there been? Three, at least. Before that, I hadn’t bothered to count. But there was always one, a little girl, aged just eight or nine. What has become of the rest of them? I cannot remember these things, either.

But I think I like this one most. I don't know why, precisely —maybe it's because Maria has given me a name, something the Alchemist himself has never bothered to do. However, if the past is any indication, there will come a time when she is forgotten to me too.

And this, strangely, hurts. I stare at her, trying to imprint her particular face on my mind, to hide it someplace he could not take it from me. I see her truly now. The dirt that seams where her hair and skin meet, the bruises along her upper arm from his fearsome shaking, the cracked nails that even now become moreso as she embarks on the serious task of creating new fingers for me. She smiles, showing teeth like lines of the chalk the Alchemist uses to draw symbols on his bench, and passes me her efforts, two splinters of the right size and proportion to replace the fingers that I've lost.

I try to attach them but they fall off and down into the grasses below. Neither of us are Alchemists, it seems.

“I'm sorry about that, Alrun.”

I shrug. I am neither sorry nor sad. Not about this. Maria is just a girl, and I am only a doll.

* * *

We return later that night when it is too cold to stay out any longer, once the wolves begin to howl. The Alchemist is in his lab, and slightly fresher bread is out for Maria to gnaw on.

She releases me from her skirt pocket and I creep alone back towards the laboratory and the jar that is my home.

I roll underneath the crack at the floor of the door. “I see you, homunculus,” the Alchemist says without looking. “Come here.” He points to an empty hearth. It is not like any of his hearths to ever be empty.

I make my way across the room, past the decanters and condensers that are his craft and obsession, until I reach the hearth’s entrance.

“Inside with you,” he says and I am compelled forward. “And into the jar.”

I do as I am told, like always.

* * *

I wake to find another finger gone. I am down to just my forefinger and thumb, and it will be very hard to climb up Maria’s bedding if this continues. But she’s already awake and waiting for me when I come into her room.

“Alrun!” she says, and sinks down to my level on the floor, taking her blankets with her. It has snowed during the night and for all the fires in the laboratory, the rest of the cabin is cold. “Alrun—last night was freezing,” she begins, as she takes me up to her chest. She moves her lips to be near my delicately carved ears. “Alrun, I crept out last night, to sleep near the door to the laboratory, where it’s warmer. And as I lay down, I

could see between the slats of the door, Alrun. He's got a bird in there somewhere. A peacock. A baby peacock." The next sound I hear is that of her licking her lips. "Do peacocks taste good? I'm sure they do. Have you seen it?"

There was a peacock feather that morning on the desk, the same size as the other two, the crow and the unknown white one. I recognize the peacock's colors from their pictures in his studies, green and purple and black. Maria takes my thoughtful silence for negation and sighs. I settle in between her ribs through the thin shift she wears. "I was hoping it wasn't a dream."

I nod. This is something I understand now, too. My recent dreams have the feel of memories. I genuinely hope they are not.

* * *

Maria naps. She sleeps more these days. I vaguely remember the others, sleeping more, near the end of my memories of them. I find myself wishing that I had made more of an effort at the time to remember. What will happen to Maria, when she is gone? Will those memories fade as well? What can I do to not forget?

I creep into the lab. The Alchemist is asleep across his desk, his verdigris-stained quill tossed to one side. I use him as a ladder and come to the place where his beard meets the

manuscripts he drools upon. I spread the locks of his hair and find the proof beneath it, a feather no longer than the span of my palm. I take it and return to her and place it at the end of her bed. My Maria does not dream, and here is her proof.

* * *

That night, I am compelled anew. The Alchemist places me into the jar himself and piles his mixtures around me, red, white, black, green.

“There. Now. It begins,” he says, and I have time to wonder, *what?* before it is over, and I wake to find myself inside my jar again, looking out at the world through its blurry glass. I wish that everything were so blurry for me. I know I have had dreams of past ills done. I have no need for the clarity of my nights.

Only my thumb remains.

* * *

I am playing with Maria when we hear wagon wheels crunch in the snow outside.

“Alrun!” Maria gasps. “Food!”

We fly from her room to hide at the door of the entrance to the cabin, where the Alchemist is speaking to two men. They hold a jar between them, huge and glass. There is no food in sight.

“It is not wide enough!” the Alchemist says. His hands are covered in red powder and he strangles the top of the jar with both his hands, leaving scarlet handprints behind.

The first and smaller of the men shrugs. “It’s been made to your specifications, just as we were told.”

“No, it has not. The top. It is not wide enough!” The Alchemist is angry. I feel Maria shrink away.

“Take it back—”

“The Prince said to tell you that this is your last chance,” the first man says.

“No—I ordered a jar as big as—”

“This is what you get,” says the second man. He’s quite a bit larger than the first, and larger than the Alchemist as well. “This is all you get. He said that, too.”

At this, the Alchemist flies into a rage. Maria creeps back down the hall to her room and we hear the sounds of his anger, pots clanking and dishes breaking. He is as volatile as the substances he seeks to create. But he never gets angry in his laboratory, so the kitchen is where his wrath explodes. The kitchen, and on my poor Maria. I leap out from her pocket, fall to the ground, and then crawl out through a deserted rat hole—rats having given up on finding food here long ago—to the outside world. I hear the men mutter to themselves as they climb back to their riding perch.

“You shouldn’t make him mad.”

“What, he’ll curse us? Bah.”

“He’s a powerful man.”

“Who lives in a cabin in the woods two long days from the city. I’ll take my chances.” The larger man clucks at the horses, and the wagon starts off.

“I wonder what he needs the jar for?” asks the first.

And the answer of the second, if it is an answer at all, is cut off by distance.

* * *

I return to find Maria, curled up upon the floor.

Did he? Was—he? I look around the room, and then I look again to her.

She smiles at me wanly. “I tripped, Alrun. It’s my own fault.” She pushes herself up against the rough wood planks, and then gasps in sudden pain. Her hand curls into her chest like the head of a baby bird, before she opens it to inspect a fingertip.

“A splinter.” She holds it out to show me. I make a motion to take it from her with my remaining whole hand, and she nods.

The splinter is long enough to be one of my absent fingers, and it takes two tries to pull it free. A drop of blood wells up in its path.

“My mother used to kiss my cuts.” She stares at her own blood idly, remembering home or food or what I do not know. I walk forward and raise my hands up to her finger, my one hand whole, the other missing all but its thumb.

She proffers her wound to me, and I pretend to kiss it, with lips that I do not have. I can feel the blood stain the wood of my face, leaching into the dry pores, filling the cracks and crevices with her.

“You’re a good friend, Alrun,” she says, when I release her finger back to her. She stares at the white dot of her missing skin and picks me up, cradling me gently. Realization seeps into me just as her blood did. She—she is a good friend, too. I wish I had lips now, for the first time, to tell her that.

“I left a mark on you.” Maria frowns at me, and it stabs me in a way that I have never felt before. She licks her thumb and smudges it fiercely across my face. “He’ll be mad at me, you know.”

Why would he anger? I have marks enough upon me. I am a creature of sticks and twine, and pieces of me will not stop falling off.

“I took his key. While he slept. Tonight, Alrun, I’m going to break into the pantry.”

I shake my head. Would that I’d been given lips, with which to kiss and with which to warn—

“I’ve got to, Alrun. I’ll die soon, without more than bread crusts to live upon.”

I shake my head more, and more, and more, till it is in danger of spinning off, and I gesture with my hands. I tug at her skirt and would pin it to the floor were I able.

She holds me up, and kisses me softly with lips both cracked and dry. “I love you Alrun. I wanted you to know that.”

“Homunculus!” the Alchemist calls, and I feel the compulsion inside me to go to him, even though I want nothing less. “Into your jar!”

Maria sets me down upon the ground. “Go to him. Remember that I love you.”

This, the Alchemist cannot compel me to forget. Nothing can.

I climb into the jar and it feels small it a way it never has before.

* * *

I watch the Alchemist toil for hours, preparing for another invocation of Chemia. He grinds and he mixes, he pours and he boils, dancing around the hissing arrangements of glass tubes and burbling molten metals he orchestrates for himself.

“Come to the hearth, little man,” the Alchemist says, and I do as I am told. He takes me up and tosses me into the glass jar

I have visited each of these nights, not the larger one that the prince shipped in before.

He arrays himself before me, him and all his tools. Piles of powders, red, white, and black, a brass cauldron of liquid green, and last but not least, cupped in his palm, a pinch of something yellow.

With his free hand, he picks up a stick, grabs fire from the furnace behind him, and lights the nearest pile. Black smoke rises and invades my lidless jar.

“Crow,” he commands. And like every other time he has told me to do something in my semblance of a life, I do as I am told.

I know.

The sticks I am comprised of bend and snap. They fold in upon me, pulling together behind my back, and I am covered in a wave of smoke, no, these, these things—they are feathers. Hundreds of tiny feathers grow. The place I have instead of lips lengthens and a beak emerges, still seamed shut, but I can see it there, between my eyes, until this changes too, and I am limited to seeing only things on opposite sides of my head. A dish of liquid mercury, to my far right. And tongs, to my left.

He lights the pile of white and a cloud erupts.

“Swan,” he commands.

The black feathers recede, and white ones take their place. My arms lengthen as does my neck—soon the jar is too small for me, and I am pressed against it, trapped inside.

I sorrow.

The Alchemist pours the liquid green down upon me. Where it touches me, it burns. “Peacock,” he commands. My neck shrinks in length, but my tailfeathers grow and grow and grow. I am a creature of verdant green and striking purple. My heart soars with all the colors I possess.

I hope.

And now the final powder is lit, a burgundy as fine as ground blood.

“Pelican,” he commands, and my tail disappears. Instead, my beak grows to an enormous length. I fold inside the jar, head bowed as if in prayer, until my beak pierces my own chest.

I bleed.

At last he reaches forward with his cupped hand. He sprinkles the yellow that he holds there down upon me. It fills my nose and covers my eyes.

“Phoenix,” he commands. A surge of power runs through me. I am smaller now, but this jar cannot contain me. I am the size of the earth, I am the potential of all things bound into one, and just when it seems my heart cannot swell any larger—

The Alchemist reaches in with his tongs, quick as lightning. He yanks off one of my feathers, and I see that it is burning, like he holds not a feather but a flame. He plunges it into the mercury bath beside the jar and it sizzles, releasing noxious smoke.

And then the fire, my fire, seen at first only as an abstract in the feather that he held—it reaches me. I wish for lips anew, with which to scream and beg and plead. For a creature of wood, there is no worse fate than fire. My life, my hopes, my dreams, are all consumed in pain.

After a life of being told to forget, I now know what it is like to be forgotten.

I will myself to remember, even as I feel myself turn to ash. I will remember this feeling. I will remember all of them.

I realize that I am alive, really, truly, alive—just as I realize that I am dying.

* * *

My jar shakes, opens, and I am released from it.

“Bring the girl here,” the Alchemist commands, taking up his mortar and pestle again. The larger jar is set upon the empty hearth. I know that I wanted to remember things. What were they, and why?

“Bring the girl here,” the Alchemist repeats. He looks up to stare at me. “And, last night—forget.”

The intention to follow his command flutters in my chest, only—I do not feel half so bound to him as I once was. And instead of the urge to forget, my will to remember redoubles. Memories, not dreams, but what I think are memories, rush back to me. Searing pain, but before that—life. I was alive. I think I am alive, still.

I walk across his desk and see a small yellow feather. I know what happened was real—the feather proves it. The Prince's price can be paid and we will grow fat on its commission, and then—but this feather is small. I walk past it as though I did not see it, off on the Alchemist's mission. But I know that it is not what the prince wants—he wants big feathers, from a larger bird, and there is only one reason why we have had these little girls with us for so long.

The doorways of my mind open up and everything that I was told to forget wells forward. The times when they were trapped, half of bird, half of flesh, cawing his defeat until the Alchemist threw them, whole, into the furnace. The times that progress was made, only to have them fight so hard they broke the jars, because they'd been made of stronger stuff, not half-starved like my Maria. The times that they'd died before any of the transformations occurred, coughing out their lungs from fumes, or swelling, green and bloated, from ill-mixed acids.

All of their deaths return to me, everything I've ever done or didn't do, every decision by action or inaction I have made, landing like a flock of birds inside my mind.

I am alive now. Memories are my price.

* * *

“Alrun,” Maria says, after I wake her. She clutches at her stomach and shakes her head. “Alrun, I'm so tired. I don't feel well today.”

I ignore this and grab Maria's nearest hand with my remaining good one, and try to draw her up from her bed. Snow is piled high outside, I can see icicles hanging from the roof, and yet—I have to get her away from here.

I cannot stand to have him pluck her sweet fingers away, one by one, to burn her over and over.

“Alrun—is he asleep? I stayed up all last night, after I ate dried pork and cheese. And now I've got a stomach ache. He'll beat me for sure, but if I return the key, maybe he won't realize it for a day or two.”

He's not asleep. He's grinding powders in the next room to transform you into a phoenix. He's going to make you burn. I shake my head, in answer and dismay.

“Can you return the key for me? Maybe then he won't be so mad. He's never mad at you.”

I hold up my hand that should have no fingers, just a stumped palm, as evidence of his anger. But I see that now that my fingers are returned to me and only my thumb is gone. I flex them in amazement. Maria, however, has no will to count. She takes my gesture as a sign of the effort I cannot make. “I could tie it to your back, perhaps?”

I can see it in her face now, so clearly. How and why had I missed it before? Her cheeks are pale, her eyes sunken in, and the line between the bruises he’s given her and the ones she’s gained from lack of food—even I who am so recently born can see the death in her. I would tear my heart out and offer it to her, were it meat enough to save her life. But—now I know. There is a way.

I take the key from her and loop it about my shoulder, tucking it beneath my arm. And then I gesture for her to follow.

* * *

The Alchemist picks her up and folds her into the jar. It is a tight fit—had he not starved her for so long, I do not think she would have made it. She lifts a hand in protest and fear sparks inside her eyes before she sees me. I put my finger to where lips would be if I had them, and silently she nods.

He calls out their names, one by one. Crow, Swan, Peacock, Pelican.

It is different with her than it was with me. She's flesh through and through. She has lips.

She cries. She screams.

The Alchemist waits for a moment. This might be the only time I've ever seen him afraid.

"Phoenix," he commands, and she changes. Plumage bursts from her like an opening flower, yellow feathers streaking out and down. Her strength is returned to her—she screams now not with pain, but with power. The world is hers to set alight. The Alchemist takes up his tongs.

I run forward, unshouldering the metal pantry key, and hit it against the glass as hard as I can. She bites at him with her beak from inside the jar.

"Homunculus! Stop it!"

I strike and strike and strike again. He swats at me, knocking me back, and she still fights, until the jar teeters, tips, and falls with a crash of glass. Where the broken glass touches her it melts away, rolling off of her like tears. She streaks upwards in flight, through the rafters. Her fire catches on timbers and wood begins to split. Sparks shower down, landing atop papers. Years of research turns to ash, and smoke fills the room.

She is free. As am I. I run beneath the door and to the rat-hole, leaving the burning cabin behind.

* * *

I think I know where I will find her. It takes me a long time to walk there on my own. I am light enough to walk atop even the freshest snow, but it is almost dawn when the distance is covered. And she is there, my Maria, in the clearing, just as I knew she would be.

She lies on dry earth now, scorched from where she fell, like a comet to the ground. Beneath her shift she is whole and plump, like ripe fruit, and she sleeps.

I walk up to her face and touch along the line of her full lips, and she smiles in her dreams before waking.

“Alrun—are we free?”

I nod. I think we are. She picks me up. “I feel much better now. What happened?” She looks down at herself and then around. The early snow is melting. We can walk to the main road and wait for a rider to pass. I’ve been there. I know where to go.

“I wish I knew what happened,” she says, cradling me. “I wish you could tell me.”

I shake my head. Even if I had lips, I would not utter a word.

* * *

I think the Alchemist lived. I think some days he tries to call me back to him still, because I can feel his will flutter in my

chest. But there's a different feeling there now as well—my own volition.

So I serve another master now. I serve my Maria, by choice.

And she never asks me to forget.

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Erin Cashier is a nurse at a burn ward in the Bay Area. She attended Clarion West in 2007, and her story "Cruciger" is in Writers of the Future XXIV. Her story "Near the Flame" is forthcoming in Shimmer Magazine, and she is the author of "[Hangman](#)" in Beneath Ceaseless Skies #10.

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THE PUZZLE BOX

by Chris Tissell

I must begin by saying that as a young man I had no knowledge of what true happiness is. My conviction that I had lost it was all the more ignorant because I could not describe to you what, exactly, I had lost. Happiness has that strange quality: though one cannot explain its nature, one knows when one does not have it.

I quickly came to blame my brother Orech for the longing in my soul. He was my twin and my elder, if only by mere minutes. Thus, though we were the same in nearly every way, he was Father's heir and I was nothing at all.

Yet this knowledge was not enough for Orech. Even as children he had to best me at everything. In our lessons with the Royal Magus he would answer first. When we danced the Water Dance he would pout or rage or give excuses when I made a successful strike. And he became fond of reminding me of all the ways in which I would serve him once he became king. It was a day I came to dread.

So, after weeks of fretting, when the summons came for the King's sons to attend him in his bedchamber one Winter night, a coldness gripped me that had little to do with the weather.

Orech was already kneeling at Father's bed when I pushed opened the great oaken doors. The Royal Magus was there too, standing still as stone in the shadows at the head of the bed. He could do nothing more; his knowledge had run out.

Father lay on a feather-soft bed, covered only by the barest silken sheet that did not hide how gaunt he had become except for the awful bulging at his knees and ankles. His hands rested carefully, unmoving at his sides, each knuckle so red and angry with gout that seeing them made me wring my own hands together.

His breath quickened. Some joint had moved imperceptibly and his eyes fluttered open, watery with pain. But they cleared in a moment, and I knew the keen mind I had always known was still behind them.

"My sons...." The King's voice was thin as parchment and trembled. "Has your sister come?"

Orech, as elder, made answer.

"No, Father. Ashi and Tariq left the isles immediately upon receiving your summons, but were waylaid by a storm and are still two days from port."

"Then Orech, you must tell her farewell from me. For tonight I rise to be with my fathers in a land of gardens and water. Ah! I see it even now."

“No, Father, you will have many years....” Orech reached for Father’s hand before I could stop him. At that barest touch the King sucked in a breath, and his eyes watered anew, spilling down deep channels he had carved with many years of easy laughter.

Orech snatched back his hand. I gave him what I hoped was a withering look, knowing it was the last time I could do so.

“Do not be afraid, Orech,” said the King. “You are of age now. I think that I have taught you well, and you will be a good King. This is your inheritance, whether you wish it or not.”

At these words I searched my brother’s face from the corner of my eye, looking for any hint of pleasure so that I might hate him. To my relief (and disappointment), I found none.

“Jarech?” The King’s voice could barely be heard now.

“Yes, Father,” said I.

“You have been a good and true second son.”

“Thank you, Father.” I hoped no bitterness had crept into my voice. Second, always second. Even in the womb Orech had made himself first.

“So to you, Jarech,” said the King, “I give my most precious treasure.”

The Magus stirred. Reaching into one of the many folds of his long robes he produced a rectangular shadow that glittered

in the dim light. He handed it to me silently and resumed standing exactly as he had before. He might not have moved at all.

It was a wooden box, hardly larger than my hand, polished and slick with time. I turned it over on my palm and traced its edges. It felt very old. Curls and sweeps of inlaid gold glinted in the dark like the language of ancients. There were bumps and latches and holes that my fingers found. Some depressed. Some twisted. Others switched and clicked with the delicious sound of a key in a forbidden lock. Somehow it seemed to me that I was holding something of greater worth than I ever had in my life before.

“This is your inheritance, my son. I received it from your sister’s husband, Tariq, but it is old beyond any alive today. It was created, I think, by the first Magi long ago. Guard it well, for it holds a great secret. If you discover it, you will find true happiness.”

“Thank you, Father,” I said, and meant it. I felt a sudden urge to roll under the bed to the furthest corner, curl up, and examine this new treasure as I might have done years ago. I looked over to share my excitement with Orech, but he was staring fixedly at the box, with a blank expression that I did not like at all. I set my teeth, and put the box carefully away under

my belt. Orech's eyes followed it. Jealousy? Could it be that Orech would be King and still that would not satisfy him?

“Come closer, my sons.”

We obeyed, bowing awkwardly over our father so that we could hear the last of his voice.

“May you have good seasons and water always. I command you to love each other and to be just to the people over whom you shall rule. Remember, I will watch over you. Farewell.”

Have you ever been speaking with a friend only to turn and realize that they had already left the room? That is how it felt when Father left. Already I missed him.

* * *

The days that followed passed in an unreal rush. Not only was Father gone, but Orech was whisked away by the Magus and nobles to be prepared for kingship and I hardly saw him at all. I realized that for all our quarrels, I wished my brother and I could be as we once were: forever at play in the palace grounds. But all had changed. Play was for boys, and we were that no longer.

Often I would pass the Pillar Hall or father's old War Room and see Orech there pacing, or pouring over maps, or conversing with influential men. Each time I saw him he seemed stranger than before. He wore new clothes now, silk

reds and golds. He stood straighter and furrowed his eyebrows. Sometimes he would see me peeking through the door and smile a small smile. But it wasn't a conspiring smile as he had often given in our childhood. It was a fatherly smile and I resented him for it. What's more, his passing gaze would see me only a moment before sliding down to the puzzle box that I now carried on a leather strap at my waist. I liked this even less.

As for the box, I spent many hours with it alone in my chambers. At night, when the desert air would finally cool, I would sit on my balcony overlooking the gardens that banked the Ahrkim. Far below, lanterns danced between the trees and snatches of song would float up from the nobles' parties. Here I sat alone for hours, turning the dials and latches and tracing the golden filigree. What wonderful secret did this box contain? Wealth? Wisdom? Sometimes I even let my mind foolishly wander to the old stories of djinn who granted their master's every wish.

But this was passing fancy and did nothing to ward off the growing shadow in my mind: the shadow of my future. Sooner or later Orech would remember me, and then I would be sent off to the wars, destined to die gloriously in battle. Or, more likely, he would send some other favored warrior and leave me to my chambers to grow old and die, unremembered, a

footnote in some Magus's history. The world seemed to have forgotten me.

Or I should say, all forgot me except the palace master of the Water Dance.

Know your circumstances is the first rule of the dance. I think perhaps my old leather-skinned master saw that I knew mine a little too well, because he appeared in my doorway one day to announce that our lessons would be doubled now that I was heir to the throne.

To one such lesson I arrived late (having been trying again, uselessly, to solve the puzzle box), and my master took the opportunity to teach me the importance of promptness. Twice as long as usual I was made to hang upside down from the ceiling holds. When I wore the bells, it seemed his hearing had sharpened ten-fold and I could barely take a step before his staff would lash out to crack my side. And when we danced, my daggers simply could not move fast enough. I found myself slain many times over.

By the end I was so weary and bruised I thought I might truly die. But I could see that my master was watching me with a kind of poorly concealed pride, and this made my fears stand at bay for a time. It was a feeling I have since learned can be called happiness, though I did not know it then.

As reward he made strong tea and invited me to sit with him on the dancing room balcony. The sun had set, now only the thinnest red-gold line at the end of the western desert. The sculptors creating Father's statue in the Pillar Hall had finally stopped their incessant banging, and the king's gondola creaked as it made its eternal circuit from the palace roof to the docks and back. My master told stories of war while I tried to cheat the puzzle box with the point of my dagger.

My heart was at peace then until an urgent rap came at the door.

"Forgive me, masters," said a harried slave, "The King requests the presence of Prince Jarech in the Pillar Hall."

"At this hour?" I said. This was strange. Orech and I had spoken no more than a few words since our father's death, and the queer look on my master's face gave me further pause.

I stood to follow, but my master stopped me with a touch.

"Know your circumstances, prince Jarech," he said.

Weary as I was, it was hard to know anything at all. But upon entering the Pillar Hall I knew that something was amiss. The sky was dark in the high windows, and the only light came from the smoldering braziers at the base of each stuated king who stood between the pillars. Father's statue was still hardly more than a vaguely man-shaped lump of marble. His blank

face and the demon-red light of the coals made gooseflesh on my arms.

Orech sat on the throne, bored, reading some tome as I approached. I wondered again why he would meet me here rather than in his chambers. Perhaps only to remind me that he was king, and I was his lesser. At the sound of my steps he looked up and smiled his newfound fatherly smile, gesturing to the lower counselor's chair at his left.

“Sit, brother. It seems I've not seen you in years. I am sorry I have not found the time.” I slumped into the chair. It was uncomfortable and I wished sorely for my bed.

“Well here I am, Orech. What do you want with me?”

“I want nothing. I thought only that we might talk.” He waved his hand. “I am already tired of all this, brother. I wish things between us were as they used to be. Do you not? I know, perhaps we could take a try at that wonderful puzzle box together, like the boys we were.”

So it was as I had thought. I said only, “Father gave the box to *me*. Its secret is mine to discover.”

“But surely you will let me help you? He was, after all, my father too.”

“It's mine, brother. Is being king so little for you that you want this too?”

Then Orech's face truly darkened, and his voice became a hiss.

“Respect your king, princeling! I thought we might enjoy Father's blessing together as brothers. Do you think being King of Arq is all joy and water? I tell you it's a heavier burden than you bear for certain. If anyone has need of the box's secret, it is I.”

“You?” I stood, furious, and as I did the red brazier-light glinted on something behind the throne that I could not see. “Did you not have enough of father's blessings while he lived? He gave you gifts, and horses, and talked of the great kingdom you would inherit. Meanwhile I sat in your shadow and the heap of your scorn. No, brother. For this once I will have something that you have not had first. Goodnight, my King.”

I spat those last words, and I wish now that I had not. For I think it was because of them that Orech made up his mind what he would do next.

“Wait, Jarech,” he said softly as I spun on my heel to leave. I saw again a glint in the shadows. Suddenly I knew what it was and it made my voice shake.

“By the names of our fathers. You mean to take from me my inheritance.”

Orech stood and walked to me. “I *am* sorry, Jarech. But if father was truly right, and that ancient piece of wood holds the

secret of true happiness, does it not belong in the royal treasury where it can be used for the good of all the people?"

As he reached for the box at my waist I slapped his hand away and shoved him back. Before I could take another breath I found the spikes of four halberds a hair's breadth from my neck. The royal guard. Their blades were what I had seen in the dark. I could do nothing but stand straight as stone lest my throat touch the razors under my chin.

To my despair, Orech slipped the puzzle box from my belt, scrubbing its face greedily with his thumb, as a gleeful child with a new toy. I am ashamed to say I found my eyes welling up with frustration.

"You worthless scorpion. Father gave that to me!"

"And you have lost the right to keep it because of your greed." Orech frowned in mock sympathy. "However, I promise I will share its secret with you once I discover it. Guards, you may escort my brother to his chambers."

They moved without answer. But it was late, and they too were tired. One let his weapon fall ever so little, and it was all I needed. I slipped between the blades and dashed towards Orech's back.

In the next moment I became guilty of treason. If I could have thought, I might not have done it, but all the weight of my resentment for Orech fell on me then and I could not stop. I am

glad that my master was such a good teacher of the Water Dance or I might have killed him.

With his next step Orech's weight shifted to his left leg, so I struck there, my dagger cutting above the back of his knee. It gave way and Orech collapsed with a scream, the puzzle box skittering across the floor. "Stop him!" he screeched from the ground as I scooped up my treasure.

I knew the Pillar Room entrance had surely been closed the moment I entered, so I ran to the west wall where there was a high balcony from which musicians sometimes entertained the court. The guards pounded behind me, but they were not Water Dancers. They had no hope of following.

Lifting the rough toes of my dancing shoes I slid on the smooth soles around the pillar nearest the balcony. When I had cleared it I set my toes again to dash in a new direction while the guard skidded past, unable to stop. Two, three, steps and a leap to the stone sword of my grandfather's statue, then another leap to the wall where my dagger found a crack in the mason's work. I had to leave the dagger there as I vaulted to catch the balcony rail by my fingertips. Curses followed me as I pulled myself over. I was now on the second floor of the palace, and by the time the guards reached the stairs I would be far away.

Still, the alarm traveled faster than I would have guessed. Perhaps Orech had even planned for my escape. They would be watching the palace gates, so rather than try to creep down to the first floor I fled upwards. All the way up I heard the pounding of feet echoing below. But I knew the palace's secrets. For example, there was a great tapestry on the second floor from which one could leap to a chandelier, which could itself be climbed to reach the rafters of the third floor, and so on.

All this I performed with my already weary body, so that by the time I crossed the roof onto the king's gondola I had no strength left and collapsed on the deck. There I lay as a dead man. The sounds of pursuit faded from my ears and were replaced by the creaking of the great hawsers as they bore the gondola through the quiet night to the Ahrkim and gardens below.

I should have felt great fear, and I'm sure that I would have had I been able to keep my eyes open. But I could not, and they closed of their own will. It may be that I rode the gondola to the docks, back to the palace, and down again. I do not know. I was lost in urgent dreams until I woke to find the moon high in her course and the sound of laughter floating on the night wind.

* * *

Our poets have said that happiness favors the bold. But I have learned that this, as with so many proverbs, is either entirely false or only a partial truth. For I had been very bold indeed, yet when I woke and realized what I had done, the feeling that filled me was more akin to doubt. I had thought I had reason to fear my future before, when I was beneath Orech's notice. Now my future was something truly uncertain. I could not hide in Arq for long; my face looked like the King's. My only hope to keep the puzzle box's treasure would be to solve it before being captured.

As I peeked over the lip of the gondola basket, I saw that I was coming to the grassy floor of the royal gardens at the foot of the palace, where there is a small dock that stretches into the Ahrkim. Moored there was what I had hoped to find: one of the famed pleasure boats of Tariq, merchant king of the Gold Isles and my sister's husband. From it lantern light and laughter filtered through the rhododendrons and orange trees to mix with the sighing of the river and the cool desert air. It was easy to imagine that Tariq, as former owner of the puzzle box, knew its mystery. Clearly he had found all the happiness he would ever need.

As the basket touched the grass next to its tower I crept to the shadows of the orange trees, from which I could see the pleasure boat. In its center was a closed section that was the

living quarters, and surrounding it a colonnade held up with white columns. Within it scores of people stood in groups, reveling. Drunken men laughed over-loudly. Young women protested as their lovers teased at pushing them into the river shallows.

In the middle of all this stood a long table covered in every kind of food. At its head sat the tremendously fat Tariq, and at to his left Ashi, my elder sister.

Tariq had grown even larger than last I remembered, which was a feat in itself. He threw his head back and laughed so heartily that I could hear the rumble from my hiding place. But it seemed to me that Ashi did not laugh. She only watched, as though from a distance, filling Tariq's cup whenever he set it down. I wondered at this, why she should be doing slave's work.

But this question passed with my more urgent concerns. I had to discover what Tariq knew of the box. The dock was well lit, so I walked one of the moor lines (no easy task in the dark) and came to the shadows of the house-like part of the boat. From there I was only steps from Tariq and Ashi, and could see surely that my sister wished she were elsewhere. Looks of disgust crinkled her brow nearly every time Tariq opened his mouth. I began to doubt my plan.

I suspect I might have been able to walk openly into the colonnade, so drunk were the guests at the table. But the cost of capture was too great now, so instead I whistled low a tune. It was a song Ashi used to sing when we were all children. After a moment she straightened in her chair and looked about. As she turned my direction I leaned into the lantern light and then back to my shadow. It was enough. Ashi excused herself, stood, and walked toward me.

* * *

“You are both still the boys I once bounced on my knee!” Ashi had not been as sympathetic to my tale as I had hoped, though she was not soft in her words for Orech either. No one seemed to notice our whispering in the shadows. “You have injured the King, Jarech, and you know how hot Orech’s blood can get.”

“I know it, Ashi. But should I have given up my inheritance?”

“Of course you should have. Orech would have come to his senses in time. And even if not, is a toy box worth the trouble you have caused? All of Arq will be after your head by morning!”

“It’s not a toy, Ashi. Father said—”

“I know what Father said. But you cannot honestly believe it? You know how fond he was of riddles and philosophy. Surely it was only metaphor.”

“No, Ashi. If you had seen his face—”

“Ah! Jarech, you have always been so stubborn once your mind is set. I think that if I could see father’s face now he would be very disappointed in both of his sons.” With this she threw her hands up and spun to watch the moon writhe on the face of the Ahrkim. I was glad she did this so that she did not see how much those last words had cut. I felt suddenly very childish.

“If only Tariq had left this cursed boat at home....” She wiped at her beautiful almond eyes. “I *would* have been able to be with father at the end. There is much I would have said.” After a moment she turned back to me.

“Why have you come? I cannot hide you here, and I don’t think I would if I were able.”

“I thought.... I thought that perhaps Tariq might know how to open the box, since he owned it last.”

Ashi snorted, a most un-queenly sound. “Think you that my husband knows the secret of true happiness, Jarech? Ha! Look at him. Do not mistake drunkenness for happiness. Tariq, and his god-be-damned comforts! I am only glad that there is enough wine to ensure that he will fall straight to sleep the

moment he enters our bedchamber tonight. He is good only for drinking and chasing other men's wives. If you call that the secret of happiness, then yes, Tariq has certainly found it."

My heart sank as she spoke. A man like that could not help me. I was lost, estranged, and no closer to my goal. She must have seen my despair, for she sighed and said, "Very well, let us see what the brute knows anyway. Come. Don't fear discovery. We'll tell them you are the King himself, coming to visit your sister. None of these drunkards will know the difference."

With this she walked back to the bright colonnade, and after a hesitation I followed, putting on my best royal gait even though I was still wearing my dancing clothes. The noise of talk and laughing and loud singing was fantastic. Some of Tariq's guests looked sideways, wavering between suspicion and greeting. But after a whispered word from Ashi, Tariq stood ponderously and bellowed, "All you noble men and women, welcome the King of Arq, Orech al Hizur who comes to visit his sister!"

There was a great cheer, and many bows, and quick as that my disguise was complete. Tariq gestured with a meaty hand, offering me the chair and cup at his right.

"Sit, King Orech! Tell me what brings you from the palace at this hour. Surely not our paltry gathering?" His voice was as

graveled as the bed of the river, and his words slurred together like its waters.

“No, I fear not,” said I, trying to sound the way I had heard Orech speak now that he was King. “It is a lesser matter still. I cannot sleep, King Tariq, for I fear my Father has both blessed and cursed me with my inheritance.”

Tariq chuckled. “Ha! Ruling is not so simple as it appears, eh?”

“The ruling is simple enough. It’s this cursed box of which I speak.”

I pulled the box from its strap on my belt and placed it between us. Immediately I wondered if I had made some terrible mistake, for Tariq’s eyes lit up with the same light as a thief’s in a jewelers shop.

“Ah, that beautiful box! I remember it.” He stifled a belch. “Many sleepless nights it caused me, too. And many more it would have, had I not lost it to your father in a horse race. I still contend that I won that race!” He slammed his cup down and reiterated his assertion to men at the table who cheered his horsemanship, even though they were not listening.

“Tell me, did you ever find the way to open it?” I asked.

“Open it? No. Never. Though I often thought that the secret must lie in these markings. Do they not in a certain light appear as lettering?” Tariq traced the golden whorls with a

thick red finger. “But you see, Jarech, at the time I owned the box, I had no Magus then who could read it.

“But!” he said louder, raising his glass again, “the box did still teach me the secret of happiness. And that secret is this: forgetfulness.”

He winked and raised his glass, seeming to forget me even as he drank. Yet I was elated, for he was correct; now that I looked, first this way, then that... yes, the shapes in gold on the box’s lid might indeed be letters. Letters a magus might read.

But no sooner had hope risen in me than it died again and a stone fell into my stomach. He had called me Jarech.

As if in answer to my thoughts, a hue and cry went up from the far side of the boat. Ashi cursed beside me. Guards were pounding up the ramp, and behind them Orech, limping on his injured leg.

Tariq leaned close to me, seeming suddenly less drunk than he had a moment before. “But I’ll tell you, prince. Treason is not the answer you seek. I’m afraid your brother has already visited me tonight, warning me to watch for you.”

I had no time to think. I stood and spun, but already the table was half surrounded by grim-faced guards. Orech limped through the half circle and glared at me. The look in his eye was unlike any I had ever seen: enraged beyond reason. He reached

for the dagger at his hip, and I felt sure in that moment that he meant to kill me where I stood.

“Orech, no!” It was Ashi’s voice. She stepped between us, just as Orech’s blade cleared its sheath. She caught his wrist deftly and he stumbled on his pained leg.

“Unhand me, sister,” he said. All had fallen silent on the pleasure boat, all eyes on us.

“So you may begin your kingship with a kinslaying? Is that how you wish to be known? And over what?” said Ashi, “Some foolish toy box? We ought to throw it into the river now and have done between you.”

Orech said nothing, and the scene was frozen as in a play, Ashi still holding his wrist, and me looking out from behind her like a child behind his mother’s skirts.

At last Orech jerked his hand away and turned his back to us.

“Perhaps you are right, sister,” he said, more softly now, and relief flowed into my bones, but only for a blink. “The puzzle box has caused more strife than happiness. It ought to be destroyed.”

And before I realized the meaning of his words, Orech had snatched up a halberd from the nearest guard and was bringing it down with all his force towards the box lying on the table

where I had left it. I think I must have screamed. The only thing Father ever given me was about to be destroyed.

What happened next I can only guess. So vivid was my vision at that moment that I remember the very instant that the blade struck the box. But rather than the blade biting into the wood, the wood appeared to bite into the blade. The halberd bowed impossibly. Then there was a great white flash, a shriek of steel, and the air was filled gleaming shards of metal and splinters of wood.

The puzzle box remained.

All the guards and guests cringed and covered their faces. Orech clutched his arm and howled. I snatched up the puzzle box, nearly dropping it because it was now almost too hot to touch. Then stepping onto the table, I dove over the mass of Tariq and plunged into the Ahrkim.

* * *

I'm sure you have seen the great water wheel at the north side of the palace. It provides drive to the King's gondola, the main gate, and the other mechanical parts of the palace. It also carries fresh water up to be heated in the baths and such. But on that night, it drew up a treasonous prince who was about his final business.

I have explained that I knew the palace's many secrets, so I will not describe how I used them to finally arrive at the carved

oaken doors of the Royal Magus. I stood there for several moments unsure of how to proceed, for I did not know the Magus. Often I saw him in counsel with Father, and of late with Orech, but the only time I had spoken to him myself was as his student when I had learned to read. I did not know where his loyalty lay. But it seemed to me it was safe to guess that it lay with the one who had power over him, and therefore with Orech.

I drew my remaining dagger and rapped on the great doors with the butt.

After a long minute (during which I was sure guards would round the corner), one of the carved doors swung inward and revealed the tall thin frame of the Magus. Even at this hour he wore his red robe and the red jewel on his forehead that gave the same color to his eyes. His face was even more ancient than I had remembered.

“Please come in, prince Jarech.” He spoke slowly in a voice dry as the desert wind. He had no fear of me at all.

“How did you know it was me and not my brother?” said I.

A wisp of a smile passed over the Magus’s face and a bony hand appeared from the robes, pointing out the gathering puddle of water at my feet.

“Your fugitive flight has dulled your wits, my prince. I remember a very sharp boy who learned to read letters with

ease.” The Magus pulled the door open further and gestured me inside. I hesitated before sheathing my weapon (feeling foolish all the while) and walking into the dim chamber.

I was somewhat disappointed. I had imagined the Magus’s chambers to be full of herbs, and potions, and jars of unknown animal parts. There was a little of this, to be sure, but only on a small table in the corner. The rest was dusty books on shelves, on the fire mantle, in piles under the windows, and covering every surface.

“How may I serve you, my prince?”

“I . . . are these letters? Can you read them?” I handed him the box, wondering why he was helping me.

The Magus took a lamp from the mantle, and brought it to the table in the center of the room.

“They are indeed. I read them for your father once. But I do not think you will like what they say.” The Magus lowered himself delicately into a cushioned chair and opened an enormous tome to a page marked with gold ribbon. “Ah, here it is. It is a very old language, from when Arq and the Gold Isles and the entire desert were still one glittering kingdom. Some have said it was a perfect kingdom. It is no wonder they created the puzzle box.”

“What does it say?” I was growing impatient. It occurred to me that he might be trying to delay me until the Royal Guard arrived.

“It says this: *The price of true happiness is great sacrifice.*”

I was silent for a time. Sacrifice. The Magus was right, I did not like what the box said.

“Did my father ever open it?”

“Open it? Your Father knew the secret of happiness long before he ever obtained the box. I think that he tried to pass that secret on to you. But I wonder, have you learned it?”

“Speak plainly! What sacrifice must I make, Magus?”

“Why, my Prince, you must make the greatest one.”

Had I not sacrificed enough? What greater sacrifice could I make to satisfy the box’s riddle? I slammed my fist to the table and stormed out of the Magus’s chambers.

* * *

What follows now is that part of my story that is most shameful to me. Even as I write it I am reminded of the dark mirror in every man’s heart. A man may look into it forever, if he chooses. And as he reflects on his own self-pity, and fear, and even his hopes and dreams, it will grow to fill his vision until there is nothing left but himself.

For a long time after leaving the Magus I crept the halls of the palace. It was now the third watch; even the slaves were asleep. I thought about the Magus's words.

I had seen many sacrifices in the temples. They were fire and blood, usually that of a choice bull, or lamb, or—on special days—the blood of traitors like me. If that was sacrifice, I could think of only one that would be greatest to me. The poets say there is no greater sacrifice than that of one's own blood. Orech and I had the same blood. And after all, had Orech not tried to kill me on Tariq's pleasure boat?

I sat down in a corner shadow and looked again at my precious puzzle box. There was a small trough around the outside edge that led to a depression in the middle. I had not looked closely at it before because it seemed only decorative, but now I wondered if it was meant to be poured into, like the troughs in the temple floor.

Father had given me the box. He had told me to discover its secret. And though it was some great mystery, that secret would be found in Orech's death. Perhaps father had even intended that I should be king instead, knowing that my rule would be more just. I held on to this thought for strength. For within me part of my heart still advocated for love of my brother, but whenever it spoke I silenced it with long lists of the wrongs I had suffered at his hand. I do not think the final

thought to kill Orech ever formed in my conscious mind, but nonetheless, that is what I intended to do.

I did not find Orech in his chambers. Nor did I find him on the palace roof, where we used to watch the stars when we could not sleep. I wondered if he was still in the city, seeking me out, until at last I heard his voice speaking to someone as I passed the Pillar Hall balcony. I drew my dagger once again and crept onto the very same balcony from which I had fled only hours before. It felt to me like days had passed since then.

Orech was alone in the Pillar Hall. He knelt on the other side, in front of father's statue. He was not on one knee, as one does out of respect, but on both knees with his head bowed so low it touched the ground. He muttered something to the stone that I could not (or would not) hear.

My feet made hardly a sound as they slid down grandfather's sword, but Orech heard them anyway and straightened himself as I landed on the tiled floor. His face shone a little in the brazier-red light as though with tears, and his aspect had softened to a look more like sadness than anger. Something had changed, I knew, but I put that out of my mind. My decision was made.

Orech's voice was a painful croak.

“So you have come, brother, to the meeting we have both planned for many years.”

I stood mutely watching as he limped towards me. He drew a dagger.

“I understand now the box’s secret,” he said. “You must give it up.” He held out his hand to me. His eyes begged me.

Still I said nothing, did nothing.

“Will you not? Very well. Then I will play my part. I realize now that I deserve it. I am sorry, Jarech. May Arq survive in better hands.”

I had no time to wonder at these words. No sooner had he spoken them than Orech lunged with more liveness than I thought possible. But he was still injured and I was always the better dancer. I slid behind his thrust.

“Credit me with no part of this, Orech. You alone have brought us here,” I said and made my own strike. Orech dodged it, but stumbled on his leg with a grunt.

“Perhaps. So the gods will decide.”

Then we danced. For many minutes in silence we circled and spun and cut the air. Each of my strokes grew closer to their mark, and each of my brother’s grew further away. Father’s empty eyes watched us, and my blood burned hotter each moment until only the core of my self-pity remained.

But Orech was calm.

Finally he made a foolish feint, obvious in its intent. I ducked it easily and my blade found a path across the back of

his shoulder. He cried out and stumbled against the nearest pillar, gasping.

“And so it is, Jarech. I ask you to forgive me.”

“Do not ask me that!” I cried. His request made me furious. “How can you dare to ask me that?”

“Because of what I must do.”

In my anger I did not know my circumstances. I failed to see that Orech had set his foot against the pillar and now used it to spring headlong towards me. One dagger flew from his hand, piercing my shoulder before I could flinch. His other carved a line down my side and waist. The weight of the puzzle box at my hip suddenly disappeared.

Orech sprawled along the floor, sliding in blood with the puzzle box skittering behind. I stepped towards him and a found that my legs too would not support me. I fell to the floor. We lay on either side of the brazier under Father’s statue. In between and in front of us the puzzle box sat and watched us.

I crawled as best I could towards it with one arm, my other pressed against my leaking side. But Orech was reaching for it too. Panic rose in my throat; I could not reach the box first.

But I could reach my brother’s hand.

With the last of my strength I found my dagger and swung down, through Orech’s hand and between the floor’s tiles.

Imagine my surprise a moment later when I looked to find Orech had done the same to me.

There we both lay for some time, unable to move, caught together in a net of our own making. There was no sound except our wracked breath echoing among the kings.

Then Orech laughed, a wet, gurgling laugh.

“Look at us. Come see the fools!” he yelled into the dark. I failed to see the humor.

“Why . . .?” I didn’t know how to ask all the things I wished to know.

“I was trying to save you. Save you from becoming like me.”

Orech coughed and groaned. Someone had at last heard us and called the guard. I could hear them tramping towards the Pillar Hall. “Ashi was right, Jarech. You were right. If not for her I would have slain you this night. I did not know my own heart until Ashi spoke its thoughts. I am a kinslayer. And for what? A child’s stupid toy. All because I am jealous of you, Jarech.”

“No. You’ve have always had everything over me. How could you be jealous?”

“Because I once overheard a conversation never meant for my ears. Late one night. In Father’s chambers. Father and the Magus.” Orech coughed again. “They spoke of our lessons. The

Magus sang your praises, brother. ‘Jarech excels in everything he puts his hand to’, he said. ‘A wonderful prince.’ And then Father said something that I will never forget.”

Orech trailed off, unwilling or unable to say Father’s words. My curiosity outweighed my pain.

“What did he say?”

“That you should have been born first. That you should be king.”

Orech had never said these words aloud before. And now, looking back, I see that speaking them began the healing of an old wound. But for me, they were the beginning of breaking. Now I saw Orech clearly, terribly, for the first time. And worse, I saw myself. The dim mirror in my heart became a little brighter, and I could say nothing.

“Every day since, those words have echoed in my ears,” said Orech. “But I did not realize how much they had unfounded me until tonight. Ashi said ‘kinslayer’ and I knew that it was true. I knew that I was not fit for kingship. You truly should be king, brother. I resolved then to make it so.”

Orech gasped at some sudden pain. His life was shortening to mere minutes. “But I knew that could not happen until that cursed box was removed. It could do to you what has been done to me. I had to separate you from it. You came upon me as I was confessing all this to Father, and asking for strength to do

what must be done. He granted my request. So here we are, my brother, pinned to the floor by our failings. But soon you will be king, and then all will be well.”

Orech sighed and his head fell to one side. I called his name, but the sound was lost as the guard came crashing over the threshold, arraying themselves at ready. The Magus came sweeping in behind them.

“The King is injured!” cried the captain, clearly unsure which prone figure he was talking about. The Magus silenced him with a gesture and came quickly to kneel over my brother and I. Orech eyes were fluttering, and he did not respond to the Magus’s gentle prodding. I looked at the growing stain on his clothes and heart cracked still further. What had I done?

The Magus turned his red gaze to me. I knew from his eyes that he knew who was king and who the treasonous prince. I averted my own eyes and found that they too wanted to close of their own accord. I fought to keep them open.

“I must save the king,” the Magus said. “Tell me. Who shall I save?”

I opened my dry lips to answer, but the Magus spoke again placing his hand gently on Orech’s forehead.

“But know this: You both have lost much blood. I must take from one to save the other. It may be that the one from whom I take will die.”

Then finally my heart was in two pieces. The mirror there was broken and out of it spilled an age's worth of pity and jealousy. Though I was deeply afraid to look into it, I did, and saw that I had only one choice.

"I am the treasonous prince Jarech. My brother is King. May he live forever."

The Magus smiled in my now murky vision. "Then perhaps you truly have learned the secret of the puzzle box, my prince."

I closed my eyes, and remembered nothing else for a long time.

* * *

And so my story should end, except for the question I'm sure nags at your mind. What became of the box itself?

I am glad to say that I do not know. I guess that it lies in some treasury in the bowels of the palace, but neither I nor Orech placed it there. It may be that I will desire to find it someday, to give it to my own son—along with this tale—so that he might find its secret himself. But for now, I must say that I still have fear of it.

As for Orech and me, we spent many long days bedridden after that night. I stayed longer than Orech because, true to his word, the Magus borrowed my blood in vials and gave it to my brother through a contraption of needles and hoses. It made

me very weak and my hair turned strangely white so that no one will ever again confuse my brother and me.

The Magus placed us in the same room to convalesce and I am glad he did; we had much missed time to recover, and many words to atone for. In the end Orech gave me the pardon I did not deserve, and I gave him my forgiveness because he would have no less. I cannot say that all was well between us henceforth. But I can say that there was always a love and it became too strong to be broken by anything as paltry as jealousy.

Soon it also became clear that Father was wrong. Orech was a far better king than I would ever have been. His reign was unmatched in mercy in peacetime and fearsomeness at war.

When war did grow imminent, Orech set me on the path to become commander of the Arqan armies, just as I had once feared he would. But now I embraced it. I came to realize that this was what I was made to do.

That same year Solstice Feast was held in the palace court. Ashi and Tariq came from the Gold Isles. The Magus and my master of the Water Dance too were there. We talked and laughed and remembered, as people do at these things.

Afterwards my mind felt unready for sleep, so I wandered the palace grounds. I looked around at the food, the wine, and

the abundance of my house. I remembered the songs of the singers and the laughter of my family. I felt the pain, but good pain, the kind that comes from hard work, in my body from my last Water Dance. I wondered nervously whether I would fall in the gathering war.

In truth, they were all the very same thoughts and fears I had before the puzzle box, when I still thought of my life as one to be pitied. But that night as I considered them alone in the royal gardens where I had once fled, I found—to my great surprise—that I was happy.

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“The Puzzle Box” is Chris Tissell’s first published story.

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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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