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THE PIRATE CAPTAIN'S DAUGHTER

by Yoon Ha Lee

The pirate captain's daughter had no name, although her mother's land-born lovers, male and female, sometimes amused themselves thinking of names for her. Such strong hands, such a lithe frame, one might say, and suggest a name from an island known for its wrestlers. Another might admire the way her straight, dark hair was pulled back by pins with dragonflies on them, and name her after summer nights.

Once, a small woman, dark-skinned and improbably delicate, looked at her for an unnerving moment before suggesting that she be named after a certain type of two-handed sword that had not been forged for over three centuries. "You'll grow tall like your mother," she had said, "and like a fine sword you'll wear leather stitched with bright thread." The pirate's daughter had liked that best of all.

But pirates upon the Unwritten Sea had traditions as surely as did their prey. No one traveled the Unwritten Sea save by poetry. For the little fisher-boats that never ventured far from shore, a scrap of chant handed down from parent to child might suffice. For the dhows and junks that ventured into the sea's storms, cobwebbing the paths of trade between

continents, more sophisticated poetry was required: epics in hexameter, verses structured around jagged caesuras; elegantly poised three-line poems with the placement of alliterating syllables strictly dictated. A poem would guide a ship only so far ahead and no farther, and one had to use a fitting poem for the weather, the currents, the tides, the color of light on the foam and the smell of the wind.

Lesser pirates might content themselves with smaller commodities: chests packed tight with baroque pearls and circlets of wire, rutilated quartz, and the bones of tiny birds, all cushioned with silk cut from the coats of hanged aristocrats; spices named after extinct animals, but no less potent for all that; oils pressed from the fruit of trees planted during meteor showers and comets' passing.

Pirates of the highest tier, the ones whose names and exploits were discussed avidly even in inland cities like those of conquering generals and master calligraphers, raided poetry itself. To understand her trade, a pirate must be a poet herself, and could not take a name until she had scribed a poem in the language of her sea-yearning soul.

And so the pirate's daughter had a problem. She didn't want to leave the Unwritten Sea. Her mother had birthed her on this very ship, the *Improbable Dragon*, on a night when dragons blotted out the five moons with their battling, and

their blood mottled the sea the color of bronze and copper. The sea's dark waters had baptized her, staining the birthmark on her left forearm dark within dark, like a dragon-whelp curled within its storm-shell.

She knew that the *Improbable Dragon* had a vexatious preference for lines with an odd number of syllables, even when the form demanded otherwise, and that the sails and nets tore more easily when the ship's will was thwarted. When she menstruated for the first time, she cut up her stained clothes and braided the rags together, then sank them into the sea with a lump of hammered iron as a pledge toward years to come.

The pirate's daughter studied chapbooks stitched with tidy linen thread, borrowed from her mother's hoard, and copied out poems into a journal of her own. She had stolen the journal from a merchant in a port where dancers wearing jewelry of heliotrope and moonstone greeted the ships each morning, and chaste priests in hair shirts blessed them each night. The journal was actually a ledger, but the pirate's daughter was well familiar with double-entry bookkeeping—piracy was still a business, as her mother liked to say—and didn't mind. The sturdy book with its sober black cover and binding was just the thing to remind her of how serious the matter was.

Though she might be her mother's daughter, she had duties on board the ship. She scrubbed the deck; adjectives (in the languages that had them as a separate category of word) were the worst, staining the wood as deep as they could go. She helped the cooks prepare taro or dumplings or eel for dinner. She sat attentively at lessons in navigation, learning the coordinate systems and cartographic projections favored by scholars in nine dominant seafaring nations.

Let it not be said that the pirate's daughter was not diligent, even during her chores. As she scrubbed or peeled or calculated, she thought of synonyms and homophones, words with branching etymologies across languages in different families. At night, during snatched minutes beneath the radiance of three moons near-full, she curled up in her tiny cabin, wondering why one poet scorned rhymed couplets when another wielded them like sword and dagger.

Alas, for all this, the pirate's daughter knew herself to be no poet.

She tried, how she tried, essaying experiments with a child's toy boat in a large pot borrowed from the sympathetic head cook. She filled it from the Unwritten Sea and watched her reflection in the inscrutable inky water.

The water wrote her face into adult possibilities, showing her as a duelist in a city where the lanterns were decorated with

the wings of rare butterflies, or as a florist who garlanded the blindfolded runners of a foot-race as they bent their heads so she could select blossoms of good omen or ill according to what she read in their upturned faces; a courier changing steeds every waystation, from quagga stripes to dapple grays to skewbalds, all of them with wing-buds grafted to their sides to urge them to the wind's own speed. She tried not to dwell on the fact that none of the images was of a pirate-woman, tall like her mother, wearing supple leather stitched with bright thread.

Instead, she attached a strip of her own poetry to the toy boat with her saliva, hoping water would call to water even if her words were weak. The poem itself was a shy thing, a tercet about the shape of salt crystals and the splash of tears on browning paper. *Just from one end of the pan to the other*, she wished the boat. No prayers.

Of course the pirate's daughter knew of the many gods whose whimsy the sea was subject to, gods of seaweed and coral, shore and reef, dolphin and shark. There were gods who took the shape of long-limbed men and women leaping from the foam, and gods as insubstantial and mighty as the summer air. But the power she needed to rouse was that of the sea itself, and no gods would interfere with something so sacred.

The sea did not smile upon her tercet. The boat bobbed up and down in the pot, water sloshing its sides, but it did not

move forward or backward or even sideways, even in response to the *Improbable Dragon's* own motions. The pirate's daughter, being young, was helpless to prevent the spill of tears into the pot. Still the boat did not move.

She repeated this experiment many times with the same rig, the same pot, the same inky water. It would not have occurred to her to doubt these small fundamentals. No; any failure was inherent to her poetry. She was old enough to take responsibility for her own failures, as a proper pirate ought to.

Her mother was not unaware of these struggles. Everyone on the ship, from the quartermaster to the rats with their kind faces and clever hands, reported to her mother. But her mother lived by the code that all worthy pirates do, and so she, like the gods, would neither help nor hinder.

"Perhaps you should consider the possibility that this is not the profession for her," the quartermaster said one night as he and the captain played wei qi with jade and onyx stones. The captain was letting the quartermaster win at the moment, a sure sign of her foul temper. When she was in a generous mood, she dispatched her opponents leanly and efficiently.

The captain scowled and made another suboptimal move. At this rate she was going to have to pull some extremely underhanded tricks to win. Not that she disapproved of underhanded tricks in and of themselves, but in wei qi, as

opposed to the world, she sometimes liked to know that she was cunning enough to prevail without them. Conceding to the inevitable, she rearranged two crucial stones when the quartermaster wasn't looking.

He looked back down at the go table. "That one," the quartermaster said, pointing, then frowned. "What else?"

The captain chuckled throatily. She replaced the stone that he had correctly pointed out, but not the other. It was their rule.

They played several more turns. The captain purloined a piece or two.

"She's young yet," the captain said. "Somewhere in her is a sonnet, a pantoum, a haiku." Her own name-poem had been a small saga in slant-rhymed couplets. After particularly splendid victories, the pirates recited parts of it in her honor.

"We must plan for contingencies," the quartermaster insisted. He was a great believer in plans. The departure of a ship's son or daughter was never a time for rejoicing. When it happened because the child had failed to write a name-poem, it was a dark omen. Certainly the captain had sacrificed black lambs and peacocks in the past to ward off bad luck.

People who left their ships without earning their names went by some other name in the wide world. Sometimes they chose those names. Sometimes others named them in the

many ways names are chosen: by profession or distinguishing feature, by omen or favored animal. But anyone sensitive to the sea's traditions would know what they had failed to accomplish.

"I will not give her up for lost," the captain said, and that was that. If the crew stepped lightly around her for the next several days, why, the captain's moods were like the sea's. You crossed them at your peril, but they eventually changed.

The pirate's daughter knew nothing of this conversation, and despaired. She had been her mother's joy all her life. "I have three treasures weightier than gold," the captain had said at the girl's birth. "I have my ship, I have my tongue, and now I have a daughter."

As the pirate's daughter frowned over the scrawled lines in her journal, she wondered what her worth would be if she became a wanderer, a warrior, a weaver at the sea's shores. What perils would the inland hold for her?

For once she closed the journal early and went on deck, light-footed, keeping to shadows. She didn't have to venture far before she heard her mother's voice raised in some navigational dispute. The voice calmed her. She might be an inadequate pirate, but nothing could take away her mother's love, and the love of a pirate is fierce and true.

Months passed. In that time, the captain insisted on giving her daughter increased responsibilities, although the days of peeling tubers were not entirely over. The pirate's daughter avidly watched the division of spoils after raids. The greatest treasures, tomes of poetry and literary concordances, were shared out between the captain and those whose bravery and cunning she wished to recognize. Poems published in such fashion were often inert, having had their virtue expended by some previous ship on a long-ago voyage.

Smaller items—robes sewn stiff with gold thread, scepters studded with electrum and aquamarines, clockwork birds that sang the name of your true love—were distributed generously to the rest of the crew. Even the pirate's daughter received something for being the first to spy the other ship's bouquet of sails, a ring of unalloyed gold. It was unadorned, but the band was satisfyingly heavy on her finger, like the best of coins.

At night she continued to read the poetry of ages past. She recorded the day's chants and the prevailing wind; the fish that swarmed by the ship, some of which became dinner, their scales patterned with plural and mass nouns; longitude, latitude, the time at which a falling star winked overhead. But she performed no more experiments.

This time the quartermaster knew better than to bring up the topic of contingencies with the captain.

“I should have given her something greater than a bauble,” the captain said anyway, over another game of wei qi.

The quartermaster had already caught the captain cheating twice. It worried him. Ordinarily she was not so obvious. “There is plunder aplenty,” he said, thinking of other treasures they had accumulated: white wolves’ pelts, black hauberks so finely forged that they shone like fire, and nested boxes that whispered to you of your heart’s desire, every flattery you could conceive of, if you opened them. The *Improbable Dragon’s* hold contained many such things, and they were on their way to a peninsular port to sell what they could.

“I can’t give her what she needs,” the captain said. “I can’t give her words.” Her eyes glittered, although no tears fell.

The quartermaster was silent for a second. “She might visit you in port,” he said, knowing how laughable the suggestion was. Pirates did not keep to schedules. And they did not associate with those who had failed to uphold their ways.

“Oh, yes,” the captain said in her bitterness, “as though any daughter of mine would do otherwise. She would be a ghost on our threshold forever. She was born on the sea. It can’t be gotten out of her blood so easily.”

Bowing to necessity, the captain prepared to say farewell to her at the next port of call. Her black moods troubled the crew. No one questioned her devotion to piratical tradition, but neither did they doubt her affection for the girl who was rapidly becoming too old to stay unnamed upon the ship.

The quartermaster quietly pondered the matter of sacrificial peacocks, which would be difficult to obtain in the region. Should he substitute a firebird egg or a three-horned ram? Normally he would have consulted the captain, but under the circumstances he thought it wiser to take his best guess.

The pirate's daughter could not help but be aware of these preparations. She did not fear for her life. Indeed, it would have been an offense against the sea to cast her overboard or cut her throat. When they set her ashore it would be with enough food and coin to make her way in the world if she was clever. In her meticulous manner she had begun eavesdropping on the crew's conversations about the customs peculiar to this region, curfew hours and tariffs and taboos.

Two days' journey from the port, the air stilled and the sea became flat and darkly glassy. Even the sky was the color of dull metal, with no hint of blue in it. The captain had expected such ill fortune. The sea knew what was to become of the girl

baptized in its waters, the whispers said; the sea sensed her failure and was punishing the *Improbable Dragon* for it.

“Prepare the kestrels,” the captain said, in case those lesser sacrifices were necessary so they could reach port in the first place. If those didn’t work, they would fill nets with books: plays no longer performed yet studied still by scholars in island colleges; pamphlets lamenting the state of affairs in widely disparate polities; quartos containing the contradictory wisdom of men and women from different eras, with footnotes by acerbic and anonymous commentators.

Pirates never sacrificed poetry, even poetry leached of its virtue for seafaring purposes. You could not spend so much time navigating by words without coming to appreciate their beauty. Besides, the wisdom went, in some far future, the deeps of the Unwritten Sea would relent, and old poetry would become as new. In the meantime, the pirates sold volumes to scholars of literature and hopeful treasure-hunters who thought secret paths lay within the lines.

The pirate’s daughter watched from her perch amid the cobwebby shadows of the rigging. She didn’t flinch when the birds’ necks were wrung, or when their small carcasses, laden with rusted chains, splashed into the Unwritten Sea.

As her mother said the words of propitiation to the depths divine, the pirate’s daughter turned her arm over to inspect the

birthmark. It had faded over time, as some did, even the dark stain on the inside. Yet she was no longer a child. Her eyes stung, but she would not give the ship her tears as she had in the past.

The sacrifice had no effect. The *Improbable Dragon* remained becalmed. Not the slightest ripple passed outward from the hull. Someone spat experimentally into the water, to no avail. The sea's silence was absolute.

The pirate's daughter scratched at her birthmark. At first she was disturbed by the sea's stillness, having grown up to the sounds of wind and wave, the ship's cantankerous creaking. It was as though music on a night for feasting had stopped suddenly, without explanation.

She scuffed the toe of her boot against the deck. Even that small sound seemed impertinently loud, now. It made her think about how music was composed both of sound and silence, and how both were necessary to define it. Her breath caught. Sound and silence, words and—

“Captain,” the pirate's daughter said from her haunt. “I have a poem.”

It was presumptuous of her to say so, and would have been even if she had skill equal to that of the captain herself. It was a great honor to recite the first poem on those occasions when the ship proved unresponsive. This was a practical tradition:

during a raid, there was rarely time to waste letting second-rate poets fumble with their forms.

The captain had not attained her position through kindness and sentiment. But she weighed her pragmatist's instinct against the fact that no stranger-ship approached them. Their sole antagonist was the sea itself. All she would lose was her reputation for ruthlessness.

In the end her faith won out; if her crew respected her the less, why, she could win them back afterward. "Speak," the captain said.

Her daughter went to the gunwale and breathed out over the waters. At first the crew thought she was nerving herself to the task and held silent. Then the captain's daughter breathed again and again, wordless each time. The crew began to mutter among themselves: Had the girl gone mad? What trick was this?

The captain's daughter opened her hand and let fall a single slip of paper. As it fell, it danced this way and that, tugged by the whims of a wind from nowhere. When the paper reached the sea, faint ripples pooled outward, then grew into waves, so that the sea became a broken surface of darker water and filigreed foam.

"What poem did you write?" the quartermaster demanded, forgetting in his anxiety that it was the captain's place to speak.

The captain marked this. Nevertheless, she was smiling a fierce smile, a proud smile, and its echo was on her daughter's face. Both mother and daughter stood tall, and if the daughter was not so tall as her mother, a few years remained during which that might change.

“Lacuna,” the pirate captain said, greatly satisfied. “Her poem is the poem that is all things in potential.”

The *Improbable Dragon* bobbed up and down in the water, slowly but perceptibly drifting forward.

“Have you thought of your name?” the captain asked.

The woman—no longer a girl—started to laugh. “I never thought of one,” she said.

The captain smiled in turn and had a team of fishers retrieve the paper from the water. It came to them readily enough.

Soaked as the paper was, a single word upon it could be read in sharp-edged ink. The sea had written upon the blank paper a name for the pirate's daughter. We may say of this name that it meant nothing in any tongue the pirates had encountered, although perhaps some far scholar might find a possible root in some protolanguage. It had few syllables and was easily pronounced by them, and by many who would tell of her exploits in years to come.

In years to come, she would captain a ship called the *Keenly Cutting Mirror*, and fill books with her own sestinas and sijo, each with a scattering of pages left deliberately blank, each notable for how it evoked scenes as much by what was omitted as by what was included. Readers in times to come knew her poetry by those tomes; scholars sought patterns in the pages. When her own children asked her the meaning of those empty spaces, she gathered them into her arms and recited children's verse, nonsense rhymes, random words in alphabetical order.

The older children did not understand. But the youngest smiled up at her and said her name to her, and that was good enough.

dedicated to Cassandra

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Yoon Ha Lee's short fiction has appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction and Clarkesworld Magazine. Her story "Architectural Constants" appeared in [Beneath](#)

Ceaseless Skies #2. She currently lives in Pasadena, California with her husband and daughter.

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SONGDOGS

by Ian McHugh

The True Moon and its False companion hung full in the sky, lighting the night so bright Agnieska could hardly see the stars. The True Moon smiled down like a senile old man. The False Moon rippled like a reflection on water. Out across the dry plain of mulga and saltbush scrub, the songdogs warbled.

Agnieska shivered and looked back at her prisoner. Carrick's eyes were half-lidded but fixed on her, she was certain, rather than on the ground in front of his feet. He sported a patchy coating of brick-red dust from the tumbles he'd taken on the uneven ground. The split in his forehead that she'd given him with her pistol butt had swollen up into a knotted bruise, evident through his mop of black hair. The bottom half of his face was hidden by the tongue clamp she'd put on him. His hands were locked into lead mittens, both hooped to the chain she led him by. She'd been surprised by his age, at least two decades her junior. But then, she supposed, rebellion was the province of the young.

A dry creek intersected their path. Agnieska gave the chain a tug, changing direction to skirt a patch of wait-a-while grass growing down over the opposite bank.

“This way,” she said, when Carrick continued straight ahead. His head wobbled slightly as he stopped and looked around for her in momentary bemusement.

He’d taken longer to get up each time he’d fallen, but Agnieska wasn’t convinced he was as exhausted as he seemed. The compulsion she’d scratched into the soles of his feet, before shoving them into his boots, didn’t force him to watch his step, nor catch himself if he stumbled.

So far, she’d stayed her hand from supplementing the spell. The songdogs worried her, though, even if the pack’s cries were a way off yet and a fair distance from their backtrail. She worried more about Carrick’s mates, who certainly *were* on their trail. They’d got away to a good start before the telltale spell she’d cut on the back of his hotel room door had chimed faintly in her ear. They were making reasonable time, too, despite Carrick’s falls. But she worried.

Aggie-worry, Olly used to say.

She led Carrick along the eroded bank, examining the creek bed in the moonlight. It was furrowed with flood channels and littered with rocks and small debris, but no patches of smooth sand that might indicate a jack-o-box lurking underneath.

He slipped going down the bank, despite Agnieska’s efforts to keep him upright. He knocked her off balance, too, and

caught her a painful blow on the breast with his elbow as they slithered to the bottom. Carrick landed on top. He pressed the mittens onto her chest as he scrambled up, squashing the breath from her lungs. Agnieszka got her arm in the way of his clumsy swing at her head, yelped as she caught the blow on the point of her elbow. Carrick staggered away, trying to run. His escape lasted only a handful of paces before the compulsion spell stopped him and he sprawled once again in the dust.

Agnieszka surged to her feet, her patience shot. With a snarl, she kicked him over onto his back. From her coat pocket she took a pair of steel-bladed calf hooks.

A lot of sheriffs used the things as a matter of course. To Agnieszka they had always seemed a step too far. And she hated forcing a man to endure what her Olly had suffered through. But her blood was up, now, and she grabbed his shirtfront to shake him. Moonlight glinted off the spells etched into the ugly curved blades as she held them in front of his face.

“You know what these are?” She shook him again. His eyes went from the hooks to her. His breath rasped painfully behind the tongue clamp. He nodded. Agnieszka stood back.

“Get up,” she said.

He stared at her, unmoving, for long enough that she was certain he'd called her bluff. She could feel her fingers sweating around the hooks. Get up, damn you.

At last, he rolled himself onto his side, then awkwardly up on his knees and, at second attempt, to his feet. Agnieszka picked up the chain and turned away before he could catch any sign of relief on her face. Her heart clattered inside her ribs. If he *was* less dazed than he acted, he must've known he wouldn't achieve anything more than exhausting her patience. But would he really risk having the hooks put into his legs—making every step a torture while they forced him to walk far beyond his normal endurance—just to test her mettle?

She had to lean on the chain to get him up the other side of the creek bed. Carrick grunted at the added pressure on his compressed fingers, but followed.

Up ahead, the low roll of the desert plain crinkled up into old granite hills, painted with horizontal stripes of age and sparsely capped by stands of twisted eucalypts. Nearer at hand, the stone chimney of a long-gone farmstead rose alone above the scrub. On the far side of the hills lay the railway and the fortress towns it served.

The wait-a-while patch rustled as they passed, although there wasn't much breeze. It looked like wild wheat, but its ears were full of fishhook barbs. Hidden beneath were leach-mouthed creepers that'd slither up out of the ground and into a person's clothes.

The grass was a thing of the False Moon, like the songdogs, the jack-o-boxes, and the rest. Used to be, the most dangerous thing a person was likely to encounter out bush was dingos, or the occasional mob of unfriendly natives, unless they were unlucky enough to lay out their bed roll on top of a brownsnake. Now the snakes and wild dogs were gone, and the surviving natives had retreated to the towns with everyone else.

Used to be, Agnieska reflected upon her tired feet, that a person could ride horseback across the desert, not have to walk. Her grandpapa had learned to ride, growing up in the days before the False Moon came and turned the horses into man-eaters—they and most of the rest of the world. *Used to be*, had been grandpapa's favorite way of starting a sentence.

Even so, Olly would say, when he got tired of the old man's complaining, *we've got it better than some. At least here men are still ruled over by men.* And he'd stare grandpapa down until the old man subsided, grumbling, into his chair. Then Olly would turn to Agnieska and wink and they'd share a secret grin.

The chain in her hand jerked. She turned in time to see Carrick stumble over a spinifex tussock and topple forward, full-length into the dirt.

Agnieska swore, reaching into her pocket for the hooks as she kicked him over, determined to use them this time. He

twisted awkwardly, the weight of the lead mitts keeping his hands where they were. His head lolled. Agnieszka stooped to lift one of his eyelids.

Damn. Out cold. She straightened, then unhitched a water canteen, took a swig, and washed the stale water around her teeth while she fretted over the ground their pursuers would gain.

In truth, her own legs were shaking with fatigue. And even if Carrick's mates weren't just as tired, they couldn't make up too much ground on foot. But the songdogs were out there, too, still making their presence known.

"Not much to be done about it," she said, aloud. Alone, she would've kept going until she found a more defensible site. But it was too late to use the calf hooks now, even if she'd been willing.

Too soft, Aggy, Olly would've said.

She ran Carrick's chain through the branches of a stunted mulga tree and padlocked it, then shrugged off her pack to rummage inside for warding irons, which she dotted around in a rough circle. The irons would deflect scrying eyes, now that movement no longer concealed them, and protect them from at least some of the desert's nocturnal predators. She scattered caltrops and set spring-traps that might do for some of the rest. For whatever else was smart or lucky enough to get through, it

was her carbine and the likelihood that Carrick, out in the open, would be attacked first.

The ritual of laying out her defenses settled her. And then there was nothing left to do but lie herself down under the low canopy of another mulga, with her pack for a lumpy pillow and her carbine cocked in her hands, and hope that she slept lightly enough to wake in time.

* * *

Agnieska came instantly alert but remained still, both habits born of walking the bush alone. She watched through her eyelashes as Carrick stirred. His breath came in sandpaper gasps.

Beyond him, the air at the boundary of the warded circle was thickened as though by wisps of mist. The wisps extended limbs, probing the wards for a point of weakness. Riders, more than likely from the abandoned farmstead, seeking a host to sate their yearning for their lost humanity.

A gunshot would scatter them, but it would also mark their location for the songdogs and Carrick's mates. Slowly, Agnieska eased back her coat and slipped a carbine shell from the row on her belt. Carefully, wincing at the creak of her stiff joints, she raised herself onto one elbow so that she could throw. The riders continued their mindless search.

She flicked the shell backhand. The lead slug in its brass casing whirled end over end, passing straight through a shadowy figure. The rider popped like a soap bubble. Its companions fled.

Agnieska crawled out from under the mulga, reaching back to get her pack. The Moons were low to the west, dawn a couple of hours away. The songdogs were still a distance off as well—too far, yet, for their cries to have any substantial effect. She realized it was too late to be concerning herself about drawing their attention, as their song had changed from repetitive warbling to fluting wails and whistles.

Damn.

She duck-walked the couple of paces over to Carrick. Dark eyes blinked up at her in confusion. She wondered how much he recollected of the previous twelve hours.

“King’s Sheriff,” she said. “Got you at the hotel, while you were napping.” She’d caught up with his rebel gang on the road to a wildcat mining town, had watched and waited, mingled with them in town at the hotel bar, just another feral digger. She tapped the tongue clamp. “You need water and food. I’ll take this off, but you have to promise no spellcasting.”

His eyes flitted from one of hers to the other. He nodded.

“Your oath.”

He nodded again and grunted an affirmative. She helped him to sit and undid the buckles at the back of his head. “Try anything and I’ll burn you where you sit.”

Agnieska held the weight of the mask while she loosened the jaws of the clamp itself. His tongue came free and he gasped. She waited while he worked his cramped jaw, then helped him drink. There were tears in his eyes.

“I’ll get you some food,” she said.

She turned her back on him to reach for her pack, shielding her hands with her body so he wouldn’t see her fingers sketching the words of the attack spell that she mouthed under her breath. She licked her fingertips, holding the spell on the tip of her tongue, and turned round to face him while she dug in the pack for food. She was conscious of his gaze on her as she brought out two cans of beans and a pair of forks and opened one up with expert twists of her belt knife.

He opened his mouth. “Could...” was as far as he got.

Agnieska put everything she had behind the spell, which was enough to scorch all his nerves and knock him flat again, but not much more. She had to put a hand out to steady herself against a wave of dizziness.

Carrick groaned. One knee bent up, then flopped back again. He shifted the weight of the mittens from his belly to the ground beside him.

“You should be more concerned about LeMay than me,” he said, after a while. “I’m not nearly the spellsmith the stories would have you believe.”

Agnieska took a slow breath, trying to still her racing pulse. His witch girlfriend, he meant. Agnieska *was* worried about her. She’d heard enough about LeMay to think that the woman was a genuine headkicker, that little of *her* reputation was inflated.

“Here.” She sat him up again, wedged the open can of beans between his knees and jammed the fork into the hinge of one of his mittens.

“I was going to ask if you could loosen my boots,” Carrick said. “They’re cutting off the blood to my feet.”

She arched an eyebrow at him, and grunted a laugh at her and him, both, before she nodded.

“How’s that?” she asked, when she was done.

“Better.”

For a time he was silent, his concentration focused on getting food from the can into his mouth. Agnieska opened the other can and had a few forkfuls herself, watching him spill beans over his lap, before she relented.

“Here,” she said again. She took the can and fork and shoveled a load into his mouth.

“She’ll be coming after me,” he said, when he’d swallowed.

Agnieska fed him another mouthful. Neither his tone or expression made it sound like a threat. “I reckon she will,” she said. “And the others.”

“Your compulsion spell’s worn off,” he said. “Unless you’re planning to cut my feet again.”

She didn’t say that that was exactly what she’d been planning—although she’d be stretching what was left of her strength, now. “You hear those songdogs?”

A bean from the next forkload escaped down his chin and she deftly scooped it back into his mouth. He listened a moment. His eyes widened slightly and he nodded.

“That’s our trail they’re on,” Agnieska said. “They’re closer than your mates.”

Carrick chewed another mouthful. His lips twitched. “Reckon I’ll walk, then.”

* * *

Agnieska pressed down on her knees with her hands, willing her legs to keep pushing her up the slope. To her left, the hillside sheared off into unevenly stepped cliffs. Killjoys inflated their gas sacs in the morning warmth and spun themselves up into the sky, off in search of last night’s leftover carcasses. Her head felt stuffed with cotton.

Nothing but sharp rocks for a bed. Keep moving.

She scanned the scree ahead for a good vantage point. She wanted to be up over the first line of hills before they stopped to shelter through the heat of the day, but the songdogs were still following, and gaining ground. Willpower alone was still enough to resist the soporific effect of their singing, but she didn't want to let them get any closer.

“What made you become a Sheriff?”

She guessed Carrick wanted to talk to distract himself from the hunters' cries. She'd left the tongue clamp off, since there wasn't much he could do without the use of his hands, anyway, and she judged his mates were too far behind for any voice-only spellcasting to reach them. She reckoned, too, that he'd be leery enough of what experience he'd already had of it, as well as the scorching she'd given him, not to try anything.

Too soft, Aggy.

“What made you become a rebel?” she said.

“I asked first.”

She glanced back, his head level with her elbow. He peered up at her from under the hem of the shirt she'd given him as a shawl, having neglected to put his hat on his head before she'd dragged him out the back of the hotel.

“I've got the gun,” she said.

His toe caught on a rock and he returned his attention to his feet. Agnieszka shook her head but stole a glance at her own footing.

“Rebellion chose me,” Carrick said, “rather than the other way around.”

There was a large, broad-shouldered boulder jutting from the hillside, off to their right. She veered towards it, levering a shell into the chamber of her carbine. The click-clunk of it echoed back off the rocks.

“The town I grew up in was too small to warrant a police station,” he went on. “Until someone dug a chunk of gold out of the riverbed. Then we got a whole squad of troopers. They were scum, and their lieutenant was worse. Ran the town and the diggers’ camp as a private protection racket. Townsfolk got sick of it. Day came when I led a mob down to the police station, took their guns off them, and put them in their own lock-up. Then we sent off a petition to the district magistrate demanding to have them removed from our town and kicked out of the King’s service.

“What we didn’t know was that the bloody magistrate was the trooper lieutenant’s uncle. He declared the whole town rebel, put a price on the head of everyone who’d signed the petition, and sent in the redcoats.”

Agnieska stopped on the uphill side of the big rock and unhitched her pack.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to slow those songdogs down before we get into the hills,” she said. “Stay here.”

She tucked her carbine under one arm and climbed up the sloping side of the boulder, crawling on elbows and knees across the top. She heard the dull clank of lead on rock and knew that Carrick had disregarded her instruction. She didn't look back. He wasn't so stupid as to clobber her from behind, when there was no way he could unlock the mitts for himself and no help was near enough to reach him before the songdogs did.

“Don't break your neck, will you?” she said, scanning the red dirt and scrub below. She cradled the carbine's stock against her cheek and peered down the sights, keeping her eyes on the flickers of black-and-white movement among the mulgas as he lay down beside her. Focusing on them seemed to amplify the effect of their song.

The carbine's barrel wavered. Agnieska steadied herself. “So you fought back.”

“We fought back,” he said. “Fight's grown since then, taken on its own life. There's too much of that kind of corruption

about for it to still be just about me and mine. Lots of folks are angry.”

It’s not all corrupt, she wanted to say. There’s those about that still uphold the law. Carrick’s story lined up near enough to the official version of events that she didn’t think he’d concocted it for her benefit. It sounded like something Olly would’ve done.

“I don’t see them,” he said.

“Gun’s pointed right at them.”

There was a patch of clear ground right in the songdogs’ path. Agnieska tracked them towards it. Her eyelids wanted to droop. She creased up her forehead to stretch them open.

“That’s a long way out.”

“A fair distance,” she agreed.

“It’s your turn now,” he said, the mittens scraping over the boulder’s surface as he rested his head.

The carbine wobbled. Damn it. Was he really stubborn enough to risk his life just to score a point off her? “What does it matter to you?”

His eyes were half shut. “It doesn’t. Does it matter to *you*?”

She swore under her breath—the songdogs had changed course, following the scent.

She searched for another clearing in their path, found one, and steadied the carbine again.

“Used to be,” she said, “I had a fiancé.” She could’ve talked about something else, but what did it matter, really?

As cold as she could, she told the tale. “He was a peaceable fellow, my Olly, but not one to take nonsense. Happened that one day he got himself into some fisticuffs at the pub. He was good with his fists, Olly was, and knocked this other fellow silly.”

She fell quiet a moment, tracking the progress of the hunters down on the plain. “Problem was, this fellow had a gang of mates. That night, they made Olly walk into the desert, and they staked him out and left him for the songdogs.”

The first four-legged shape trotted out into the open, serrated beak close to the ground as it followed the trail, scorpion tail held high over its black-and-white back. It raised its head to sing. Agnieska squeezed the trigger. The crack of the carbine echoed around the hills. Out on the plain, the hunting chorus erupted into startled shrieks. The rest of the pack scattered through the scrub.

“That’ll buy us some time,” she said, trying to sound satisfied rather than relieved. “It’ll take them a while to choose a new pack leader.”

She lifted herself back up onto her knees. Carrick’s mates would’ve heard the shot, but there was no point trying to hide

from them if it just meant getting run down by the songdogs instead.

He shuffled after her. “How did you know it was the leader?”

“Because he was in front.” She watched him slither and scramble back down the side of the rock, coming to rest on his haunches in front of her. “You going to walk, or do I need to put those hooks in your legs?”

“I’ll walk,” he said, picking himself up.

“Good.” She nodded and caught hold of his chain.

They climbed in silence for a while. She could all but hear the thoughts buzzing in his head.

“What did you do?” he said, eventually. “To those fellows that killed your man?”

Agnieska looked back. “I hunted them down and brought them all in, one at a time. I took the bounties and saw them judged and hanged.” All but one. “And then I took the King’s coin to keep on doing the same.”

Quiet, again, for a time. Then, “How long were you following us, before you kidnapped me?”

“Arrested you. Three days, before you stopped in the town.”

“The bounty on me’s the same, dead or alive,” he said. “You could’ve taken me down like that songdog, anytime.”

“Could have.” She didn’t need to add that she could’ve sat on that rock and waited for his mates to come under her sights, as well. “But I’m not a bounty hunter, anymore. And I’m not your judge, or your executioner.”

He looked like he was about to say something more. She tugged the chain to cut him off. “Come on.”

* * *

Over the first ridge, the hills were a confusion of scree-sided gullies and striated cliffs. Agnieska steered clear of the stunted eucalypts that clumped in the crevices and dry watercourses, clinging to the sparse soil amongst the rocks. Not worth the risk when any of them might turn out to be gnarly trees instead.

Late in the morning, the day turned overcast, blocking out the worst of the afternoon heat, and she decided to push on rather than rest.

“What will you do when we win?” he asked, when they paused at the head of a gully for water and food. They’d clambered awkwardly along its side to avoid the patch of bare sand at the bottom that almost certainly hid a jack-o-box.

“When?” Agnieska offered the canteen to him, then took a swig herself and screwed on the cap.

They hadn’t spoken much since she’d shot the songdog. The rest of the pack had since started up their cries again, but

Agnieska judged that they'd opened up most of the gap the songdogs had closed before. Enough, anyway, she thought.

She offered him a strip of jerky. He folded it to one side of his mouth as she picked up his chain again and resumed walking. "If you won," she said, "you'd still need the law. And you'd still need people to make it work." She glanced over her shoulder. "Unless you're planning to purge every magistrate, trooper and sheriff who's taken the King's coin, corrupt or not."

"Too many are."

"One is too many," she said. "But I've seen as bad from your side. There was a town magistrate I reckon you remember, hung a couple of yours who'd been tried under the law and come up short. Your boys came and hung the magistrate's family, his wife and kids. Where was *their* trial?"

"I gave the men who did it back to the people of that town," he said, "for them to judge."

Agnieska stopped to face him. "Them to judge?" She prodded him in the chest. "It was you that did the judging, my fine fellow. You wanted the town to be your executioners. They would've, too. If a sheriff hadn't arrived after you rode those boys back in, the men of that town would've torn them apart."

Carrick's nostrils flared. "And what did the sheriff do but take them off to another hanging judge?"

"They had their trial."

“You know what’ll happen to me if you take me in,” he said.

She couldn’t help a derisive snort. They all came around to this, sooner or later. Some begged, some made it a challenge, but the gist of the words was always the same. She knew her answer by rote: “You’ll be tried under the law. If you hang, then it’s because your own actions have sentenced you—just like those other boys.”

“You *know* I’ll hang,” he said. “Justice has nothing to do with it, only authority. The rule of those in power, not the rule of law. *You’ll* have sentenced me by taking me in.”

Agnieska shook her head. “Sentencing’s not my job.”

“Did you ever?” he asked. “Sentence someone? When you were a bounty hunter, did you ever claim a purse for a kill?”

The question got under her guard, like a punch to the stomach. She turned away from him, yanking on the chain to make him follow and wanting to kick herself for telling him about Olly.

“You did,” he said.

Agnieska heard surprise in his voice, rather than triumph. Shame heated her face and neck. She jerked the chain again, making him stumble.

“Once,” she admitted. “I never claimed the purse for him.” It made what she’d done no better, although she’d always told

herself that it did. Not taking the purse was just a private admission of guilt.

“The man who killed your Olly.”

She was glad he couldn't see her face. “It was a long time ago.”

Carrick was quiet. His footsteps crunched on rock, off-beat with hers.

“The man who started it,” she said, addressing the red stone ahead. “I'd brought all his mates in, one by one, saved him till last. I sat up on a hill and shot him while he ran away, just like that songdog. Not to kill, though. Just his leg.” She felt sick, recounting it. “Then I sat on that hillside and waited for the songdogs to find him.”

She half turned her head, expecting some comment, but Carrick said nothing.

The chain pulled taut in her hand. He'd stopped again. She rounded on him.

“We've come far enough,” he said.

“What?”

Agnieszka realized a heartbeat after she'd spoken what he meant. By then it was far too late. She started to raise her carbine anyway, to mouth a defensive spell.

The world stretched like elastic. Pain lanced through her head like something had grabbed her skull with a fistful of claws.

She lay on her back, paralyzed. Another face appeared beside Carrick's—a hooded woman, a witch's web of purple veins prominent on her chalk-pale skin.

Blackness.

* * *

She woke up where she'd fallen, at the lip of the gully. Deep evening shadows stretched away from the rocks. She felt warm and sleepy. To simply lie there and wait for the stars to come out seemed like the most wonderful idea in the world. Her tongue hurt, though, pulled taut from the floor of her mouth. She tried to move it and found that it was stuck.

They'd put the tongue clamp on her. Fuzzily, she tried to lift her hands to take it off, found them weighted down with the lead mittens. A little part of her, that didn't seem to want to rest, thought: Damn you, Carrick.

She could hear a musical whistling. For a while, she just listened, and thought she might drift back off to sleep. But the wakeful little part of her brain refused to settle, demanding attention.

Songdogs. Her mind cleared abruptly. The tongue clamp muffled her bellow of outrage as she twisted to get her knees under her, willing herself upright.

Damn you, she thought again. I suppose you think this is bloody funny?

The songdogs trotted along the gully rim. Their whistles turned to trills like high-pitched laughter when they saw her. The black-and-white feathers of their shoulder ruffs flared as they broke into a gallop.

Panic jerked her into motion, a lunge downhill because that was the way her feet were pointed rather than any conscious decision.

She realized she was barreling straight towards the jack-o-box patch. The songdogs' laughter seemed right on top of her. She whirled about, swinging the mitts in a pathetic last defense. The songdogs were still a few yards away, bounding across the scree. *Oh, Olly. I'll see you soon, love.*

A crackle of gunfire surprised her as much as them. Half the pack went down; the rest tumbled over themselves in their haste to flee.

Agnieska turned wildly to see where the shots had come from. Already off balance, she put her foot in the gap between two rocks, felt the ligaments in her ankle give. She landed on top of the mittens and skidded head first down the slope.

Winded and trapped by her lead-weighted hands, she twisted her neck, trying to see. She'd stopped only a few feet short of the jack-o-box. Her pulse hammered as she waited for the sand to erupt, for the jack-o-box's muscular rope of a tongue to slash towards her.

Hard footsteps scraped on loose stone. *Lots* of feet. Her skin prickled. Something was *here*, something worse than any jack-o-box could handle. A shadow blocked out the sky. A fanged muzzle pushed into her face, large nostrils snuffing loudly. Horizontally slit eyes examined her from the other end of a long face.

A hand pushed the horse's head aside.

Carrick tipped her over onto her back, then sat her up. A short distance away, other riders let their mounts feed on the songdog carcasses. LeMay sneered at Agnieska. The witch's aura was like the static of an approaching storm front. Agnieska couldn't hold her stare.

Carrick unbuckled the straps around her head and released the clamp. His horse nosed past his shoulder, teeth bared. He pushed it away again and reached up to slap its shoulder for good measure. With alarming abruptness for such a large animal, the horse spun away and trotted up the slope to its fellows. Agnieska watched it shoulder its way into the circle.

"Horses," she said. Damn me.

“They can still be trained, if you get them young enough,” Carrick said. “Sometimes.”

“You didn’t have them while I was tracking you,” she said.

He tapped the side of his nose. “Been our little secret.” He regarded her with a wry smile. “Reckon that might be about to change.”

“When did they catch up with us?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Not long after you shot the songdog.”

“You were judging me.”

“Yes.” He unlocked the mittens. Agnieszka flexed her fingers. His were swollen and bruised, the nails blackened. “Executioner isn’t my style, either,” he said, and dropped the mittens beside the tongue clamp. “A person should know what they’re doing to others.”

She met his eye. Carrick looked away first.

He pulled the magazine out of her carbine and shucked the remaining shells into his palm, then slotted it back into place and offered her the empty gun. Her ammunition belt was no longer around her waist. Ah well, she thought. If nothing else, the gun would do for a crutch. Her ankle throbbed.

He watched her, elbows on his knees, weighing the cartridges in his palm. “I want your oath, that you won’t come after me again.”

Agnieska shook her head. “My oath’s already been given, years ago.”

He nodded, had probably expected the answer. His eyes were amused. “Then promise me that you won’t come after me *today*.”

She considered her sprained ankle, and their horses. “Reckon I can manage that,” she said.

He smirked, then stood and flung the carbine shells out across the scree. Agnieska craned to see where they landed.

Carrick’s lips twitched, almost another smirk, or a laugh. He offered her a slight bow. “Good luck, Sheriff.”

She sat silently as he walked over to rejoin his companions. He said something to LeMay as he mounted his horse. The witch’s scowl broke into a reluctant smile.

The animals whinnied their displeasure at being dragged away from their feast, but they responded obediently enough. Agnieska hauled herself up on the barrel of her carbine and hobbled over to retrieve the scattered shells.

Sunset painted the sky on the far side of the hills. The True Moon stood low in the east, alone for now, shining gold in the last of the day.

She wondered what Carrick’s republic would be like, as she dusted the shells on the front of her shirt and clipped them

back into the magazine. Would it be any better? Her imagination failed her.

Would she hunt him again, tomorrow? She didn't know the answer to that, either.

She spied her pack, ammunition belt, and canteens a short distance away and gave a snort. "I might be a while yet, Olly, after all."

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Ian McHugh is a 2006 graduate of Clarion West and the 2008 grand prize winner in the Writers of the Future contest. His recent publications include stories in Asimov's, Clockwork Phoenix 2, Greatest Uncommon Denominator, and Andromeda Spaceways, as well as podcasts at Escape Pod, Pseudopod, and The Drabblecast. His full list of publications, along with links to read and hear stories online, can be found at <http://ianmchugh.wordpress.com/>.

Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies

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SIX SEEDS

by Sara M. Harvey

My mother's brothel was called "Mrs. D-----'s Orchard," and was said to have the ripest fruits around. It was all marketing, inspiring images of a lush and fleshy harvest, but really the house was stocked with gleaming clockwork Dollies. It had been my job, for as long as I can remember, to rouse them every morning, winding them up with the great gold key that Mother kept at the bottom of a barrel of salt water. I wound them everyday, just enough to get a full shift of work from them before they ran down. She named them clever things like Apple and Cherry and Nectarine, Almond and Hazelnut and Cashew, Papaya and Quince and Persimmon, after all the wonderful things that grew in orchards. And every morning it was like Spring coming as I moved among them and brought them to life.

We catered to all sorts at the Orchard, from businessmen to airship pilots. Dollies are splendid things, they come in just about every shape and size from tall and statuesque to wispy and waifish. Some have quicksilver skin of hard, cold, chrome and they hiss with pneumatic sighs. The ones made of bronze seem to glow as they catch the light and reflect it with a golden cast; they have some of the tiniest, most intricate gears what

whirr and *clickclickclick* and sometimes chime softly. Deluxe Dollies look like any human, with plump padded skin and real hair and makeup that never smears and hand-set eyes faceted like jewels that weep real tears.

Dollies had been such a boon to male and female relations. The men loved them, for they came in all shapes and sizes and types. They were always clean and so easy to care for. They were not prone to diseases and they were always eager to please. It left women with precious idle time away from the voracious cravings of their men.

Of course, this was very nice for all the *other* women of the world, but not for me. For me, Dollies were the chore of my life: winding them, bathing them in oil, mending gears and joints, and keeping good care of their pricier parts which pleased the men. I cannot say that I hated it, nor that I was fond of it, only that it was my task every single day to care for these immortal metal beauties.

And they were, as any creature with a mind of its own tends to be, kind and cruel by turns depending on the day and governed by the mood. The most elitist of all of the Dollies were the Deluxes, who never missed a moment to remind me that while my skin was taut and supple now, it would grow sagged and gray while they held onto youth for all time. I never played that game, flaunting my soul and my beating heart. But

there were days when they were particularly vicious, especially Apple and Peach, and I would be drawn to the parlour where the men would sit and smoke ornate pipes and thick cigars while discussing politics, gossip, or the cost-benefit analyses of switching from faithful gaslight to fitful electricity. I sat still and I listened, eager to always know more. And they were indulgent and allured by the blush in my cheeks and the trembling of my lashes as I opened my ears to such indecent *learning*.

Which is how I came to the attention of Mr. H----. He was a handsome gentleman with a smooth, unlined face that was at odds with his black hair streaked with silver. His deep gray eyes tilted slightly downward at the corners giving him a look of profound sadness, even if he was otherwise merry. He was a soft-spoken man with quiet mannerisms who always waited until last to make his point. And that was what struck me most about him: his extraordinary patience.

“My darling girl,” he told me once when I remarked upon it to him, “in my line of work, one must be patient. There is never any sense in rushing.” He then smiled at me and sipped his brandy.

Later that night, I was able to ask Mother what exactly was Mr. H----’s line of work. She looked quite ruffled for a moment

before composing herself and asking if he had spoken to me himself.

“Yes, Mother, but only to inform me that his patience was due to the nature of his work, but he declined to mention what that was. Do you know?”

“He used to be an undertaker. And you will not engage him in conversation again.”

I was shocked by her crisp reply and the silence that followed, which allowed me no more questions. This of course only piqued by curiosity and served to assure that I would plot and scheme to find out everything I could about Mr. H----. This included speaking to him once more, and it had to be without Mother’s knowledge.

It proved a difficult task. Evidently, it had gone ‘round that Mother did not approve of my interaction with Mr. H----, nor did she appreciate him being in the same room with me at all. I found that I was stonewalled even by the other men, who met my inquiries with silence and would not risk my mother’s ire by speaking to me of this now-forbidden topic.

But while scholars and clerks and scientists and philosophers might have been able to resist the petulant charm of a frustrated girl, I’ve yet to meet an airship captain that could. It did not take me long to encounter a gangly blushing lad with the last hateful vestiges of adolescence on his face. His

uniform was still new and sharply pressed. It did not take long to convince him into the hall closet with me. There, amid the cloaks and coats that smelled of damp wool, tobacco, and kerosene, I let him put his sweating, nervous hands on my breasts and steal a kiss. Only then would he tell me the story.

Mr. H----, the boy explained, had started his career as a doctor some years ago. It would seem that he had a distinct fascination with the inner workings of the body, most specifically how the soul was attached to the body and the mechanisms that separated life from death. He soon began to attract unwanted attentions when the patients in his care tended to die more often than they recovered. When H---- was removed from the medical practice, he went into the funerary field to further his knowledge of and experience with death. But when he began to go above and beyond the call of his embalming duties, often removing organs and tissues to keep for experimentation, he was relieved of this employment as well.

“And so, what does he do now?”

“Now....” The boy pressed very close to me, hooking his thumbs beneath the neckline of my blouse and pushing it down over my shoulders, sending mother-of-pearl buttons clattering to the floor somewhere below us in the dark. “Now, he is a rogue scientific philosopher, claiming to have

cracked the code that binds soul to body, and therefore body to life.” He inhaled the scent of my hair and began to hitch up my skirts.

For a moment I was lost and drifting on the elation of that thought. Mr. H---- had found the key to life itself? To the very soul?

“How?” I whispered, coming to my senses and my situation with a sharp pang of adrenaline.

“Gently, I promise,” he moaned hungrily, intending no such thing. My fragile, tender human life was so much more appealing than any Dolly, Deluxe or otherwise, and I could see his desire building.

“How did Mr. H---- come by his knowledge?” He was balanced on a knife’s edge of lust, and I knew I had but little time to press him before he caved into carnality.

“Oh, that’s gonna cost a little more, lass.” He audibly licked his lips.

I smiled, “No, thank you, I have no more to pay.”

“Yes, you do.” He yanked me close, his fingers pushing further up under my skirts, searching for my hidden treasures.

“I appreciate your information, my dear pilot, but you shall go no further.” I pushed his hands away.

“Too late for that, I’m afraid.” He threw me against the wall and hoisted my skirts up to my waist. I was insulted and

incensed, and I did the only thing a young woman in my situation could do.

I screamed.

“Ungrateful,” he shouted.

“Savage,” I shrieked.

The door opened abruptly, sending us tumbling out into the front hall. I fell into Mother’s arms in a swoon. “The pilot!” I stabbed my finger towards the boy who knelt gasping on the hardwood floor. “He pressed his advantage, he overpowered me!” I even produced a flood of tears and a quavering voice.

Mother’s brilliant green eyes blazed with malice. “Get out! Get out of my house before I beat you bloody with my own two hands.”

The young pilot scrambled out the front door, falling over his own feet as he stumbled out into the fading light. Mother lowered me onto the divan and called for the House Dolls. They came with fans and hot tea and shawls and pillows. They fussed and fretted, their silver finger gears clacking. The men settled down again and began to murmur amongst themselves as the agitation passed.

I saw that Mr. H---- had come into the parlour and I could not meet his gaze. I closed my torn blouse around my throat and pretended not to notice that he was watching me out of the corners of his wistful eyes. He seemed so uninterested in what

was happening around him as he contemplated the crackling fire, but I could feel his awareness of me as keenly as the cold cloth the House Doll pressed to my forehead. For only a moment, as he glanced around the room, our gazes met and I spied that knowledge there, ill-gotten and secret. I wanted it. Like no other desire I had ever felt, I wanted what he knew.

His eyes moved on, lighting on various faces, knickknacks, paintings, before he went back to looking at the fire. But he did not even lift his head when the House Dolls grabbed me by the arms and hauled me up the stairs.

* * *

I was not surprised, however, when I found Mr. H---- at my door when the house had grown quiet for the night.

“You are a dangerous little girl,” he told me.

I squared my shoulders. “I am no such thing.”

He chuckled, with his smile looking out of place on his sorrowful countenance. “I suppose you are neither.”

“Will you come inside?”

“Unchaperoned? You are bold.”

“Bold, perhaps. Curious, certainly.” I stepped back with a welcoming sweep of my arm. “Now, please, come in, before Mother sees you.”

“I assure you, she might come upon us right now and not see me. But I agree, we must be discreet.” He came into the room and closed the door to the hall behind him.

I was able to inspect his face unabashed, and he stood patient and still and allowed my scrutiny. He was a handsome man in his strangeness with his gray eyes fringed with lashes. Yes, his face was youthful, but I could see the soft shadows of wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and his mouth. A faint stubble of beard dressed his cheeks, just as dark as the hair on his head and charmingly touched with silver at his chin.

He seated himself, uninvited, on one of my boudoir chairs. His chiaroscuro features looked so stark against the rosy damask. “Ask me what you will and I shall answer truthfully.”

I could not believe my luck! I dropped down into the other chair, forgetting myself entirely and leaving my skirts tumbled and my robe spilling off of my shoulders. I could not care, my heart was racing so fast! “So, is it true? You were once a doctor? And then an embalmer?”

He nodded.

“And now...now, they say you are a science philosopher. And that you are quite mad.” The last flew from my lips before I had realized it. I clapped my hands over my mouth.

But Mr. H---- only laughed and shook his head. “No, not mad. The mad are rarely this successful.”

“Successful? Do you mean to say the stories are true? You have unlocked the mysteries of life and death?”

“And that I hold the key to the soul itself?” He sharpened his vision, his eyes seizing upon my own, and he read them, poring over my features as if he could see straight through my flesh and bone and divine the truth that was written within me. I refused to shirk from his intensity as I waited on pins and needles for his confirmation or denial.

He sat back and steepled his long-fingered hands beneath his chin and nodded. “I have.” He caressed his words like a lover. “Would you like to see?”

I sputtered, unelegantly, “Yes!”

He leaned forward, touching his cool fingertips to the backs of my hands. “Is there a way out of this house? A secret way?”

“Yes, follow me.” I rose quickly and dashed to the little fireplace in my room. One of the carved panels alongside the mantle swung open on well-oiled hinges, revealing a small passageway. I hitched up my skirts and stepped into the dim corridor. Mr. H---- followed me with a light step and was so clever as to remember to shut the secret door behind us.

* * *

Down in the alley, a dark gray motor-car idled in the gloaming twilight. The driver was a pale-fleshed lad who did

not so much as blink when Mr. H---- opened the door for me. He placed two coins onto the front passenger seat and gracefully sat beside me.

Still silent, the driver fired up the engine, sending a shudder through the vehicle and a billow of steam into the steely sky. The motor-car lurched forward and we were speeding along faster than I had ever moved before. I held the velvet-covered handle as we swept through wide boulevards and narrow side streets alike until we were clear of the city and into a fine residential neighborhood of houses that stood alone on wide, manicured lawns. The houses came fewer and farther between, often with imposing stands of woods between them.

Finally, the fine houses were completely replaced by cottages that sprouted up out of rolling farms and fields and orchards, real and actual orchards with stately rows of trees spangled with ripe fruit. I tasted regret at the back of my throat, bitter as bile. My mother would love this place. Had she ever seen it? She had missed me by now, I was sure. Missed me and Mr. H----, as well. She was sure to have guessed....

“We are nearly there.” Mr. H---- touched my wrist gingerly with his fingertips and it sent shivers all through me. I looked out the window and saw that the rolling fields had become low hills lying in shadowed humps in the impending night. There

were no houses at all now, only trees and rocks and a vast track of lonely road. I was just beginning to nod off when he touched my wrist again. "Here we are."

I looked up, sleepily, at the house. It was simple and spare, backed up to the side of a craggy hill. I yawned and stretched my stiff legs. And in the single most surprising gesture of the whole surprising day, Mr. H---- came around to my side of the motor-car, opened the door, then reached in and wrapped his arms around me. He hefted me into his arms and carried me into the house.

It was a well-appointed front hall with tapestries along the walls and the floor tiled in marble. There were antiques and other curiosities in glass-fronted curio cabinets. He carried me past all of that, straight through the house to a set of stairs cut into the very bedrock itself that lead into a subterranean chamber. Down into the chilled darkness, Mr. H---- still holding me, his fingers dug into the flesh of my thighs. I dared not move nor speak, only let him take me into the shadows under the ground.

He set me down on the damp stone floor when we came to an enormous oak door bound with iron. I heard the throaty bark of very large dogs reverberating from behind it. I must have shrank away, for Mr. H---- patted the back of my neck and assured me that the dog was harmless.

“Dog? As in singular? It sounds like there must be three of them in there.”

“No, just the one.” He turned the key into the lock and pushed the door open, uttering a quick command to the beast that lurked on the other side. Indeed it was a dog: a bull mastiff the size of a pony. “He will not hurt you. At least, I don’t think so.”

I swallowed and his eyes crimped at the edges in a broad smile. I reached my hand out and the great dog leaned forward, his huge, watery eyes on my face. Tentatively he snuffled my hand then licked my outstretched fingers. Satisfied, he stepped aside and flopped down onto a tattered blanket just inside the door. He dragged an enormous bone, a joint of some kind, out of the blanket’s folds and began to gnaw at it with disturbing voracity.

“Well then, it seems that you are admitted entry to my sanctuary.” Mr. H---- extended his arm as if he was a bridegroom waiting to lead me down the aisle. I smiled and placed my hand on his elbow and he threw the heavy switch on the wall. There were a series of flickers before the electric lights flared to life bathing the room in stark, raw illumination.

Before me I saw a series of tables, some laden with instruments of copper, glass, and steel, others piled with collection boxes and clear jars full of bits of flesh and tissue

floating in some fluid. Beside me, Mr. H----- tensed and deliberately looked at the floor, the ceiling, a spot on the wall. I let go of his arm and moved towards the table with the jars. There was one full of eyes, round lidless balls of white gazing out in every direction at once. Another contained a strangely shaped thing, rather like a large clenched fist made of thick reddish purple muscle. It was labeled, "HEART." The largest jar held a slick and gray thing, rumped and wrinkled and shaped somewhat like a loaf of bread. Its carefully written card said, "BRAIN."

I could feel him watching me, there was intensity and anguish in his gaze, but also patient, always patience.

"In which of these, Mr. H----, did you find the soul? Was it in the eyes as poets say? Or perhaps the heart? Or is it truly in the mind?"

Relief washed over his features and his down-turned eyes shone. He went to a basket piled high with fruit and took from it a round thing with shiny flesh the color of old blood. "Do you know what this is?"

I shrugged. It was a fruit of some sort, but like none I had ever seen.

"Let me show you." A small silver pocketknife seemed to appear in his hands and he effortlessly sliced into the fruit's thick skin. And before my amazed eyes, it began to *bleed*. And

more astonishing still, as he split it open, dozens of ruby jewels spilled out onto the table in a small puddle of red juices. Inside pale yellow membranes, hundreds more of these little faceted pieces still rested.

“There is no fruit inside? Only all these little...seeds?”

“This is a pomegranate. Each one is the fruit. They each make up a little bit of the whole. There is not one flesh inside, but a hundred tiny ones, each sweet and tart and powerful as if they were the size of an apple or a pear.” He popped a few into his mouth and offered some to me. I hesitated.

“So, this is like the soul, then?” The thoughts were cloudy, inconstant, but I struggled to bring them together. “Within the body, scores of tiny pieces? Not all of it in one place?”

Mr. H----- smiled wider. “Yes.”

“How did you find this out?”

“It was a long road, strewn with pitfalls. I had once thought to be lauded as a hero of the medical sciences, but now, now I am content to remain in my own private underworld. The world is not ready yet for what I know. The manipulation of life, of death, of the very soul within the body. You saw my driver? He was one of the first. I care nothing for Dollies and Mannequins with hard golden skin and chattering gears. What I build, I create from flesh and bone.” He waited,

sounding me out. His face was still serene, but his hands were trembling.

The room felt chilled around me as the weight of his words settled upon me. He *built* them. “How?”

Like a magician executing his great reveal, he threw back a curtain that hung at the far end of the tables. There on a gleaming steel table was a man; a sheet covered his body and a frightening machine whirred and clacked in time to his chest moving up and down.

“Sometimes when the injuries are severe, the body begins to fail, but the soul remains. Sometimes I can catch it before it flees. Sometimes I cannot, but the organs are left for my study and ultimately, my use.”

“Catch it? The soul?”

“Indeed.”

I boggled at the thought. “How? Where do you keep them?”

He only but shifted his gaze and I followed where he looked. Against the farthest wall was a series of copper boxes with a small glass panel set into the side of each one. And inside, something gleamed, like a flame in a gaslight, it danced. Souls. Dozens upon dozens. My mouth went painfully dry and there was nothing I could think of to say. Nothing.

He set his hands on my shoulders. “I am the steward of them. Orphans and invalids and whores, all the forgotten lives. They are remembered in death.”

His breath was warm on my neck, yet it raised gooseflesh down both arms. I could feel his heartbeat shuddering though his palms and wrists, and my own lurched in response urging itself into a sympathetic rhythm. And then the soul lights in the copper boxes on the shelves began to thrum in unison along with us. The blood in my veins pounded, the soul in me pounded, and the souls all around me responded in kind. I had not noticed the tears until Mr. H---- gently pressed his handkerchief to the corners of my eyes.

“Would you like this knowledge? Think carefully, my sweet, for it means you can never go back to the life you once led.”

“But who, then, would mind the Orchard?”

“It has been your mother’s matter all along; she must learn to stand on her own and believe that Spring will come, whether you are there or not.”

“I cannot abandon her.”

“She will be angry.”

I nodded. The knowledge was there in front of me, resonating with my own heartbeat. I wanted it.

“Then say it, let me hear you say it.”

“Show me,” I whispered. “Teach me.”

He took a pair of goggles, bound in the same gleaming copper as the soul boxes, and placed them on my head like a crown. “Come, then.”

I slid the goggles down over my eyes when he did and watched as he put on a pair of rubberized gloves. We stood together beside the man on the steel table; the whirl and beep of machinery were the only sounds in the room. Mr. H---- had wheeled over a tray of instruments: scalpels, shears, and a many more sinister looking articles. Beside them was a simple copper box with a small glass pane in one side hooked up to a series of wires and electrodes that was just waiting to be touched to the living essence of this man.

“There is one last thing,” he told me. He handed me the pomegranate.

I stroked the leathery flesh of the fruit, ran my fingertips across the moist, dimpled membrane inside. Six seeds tumbled out into my hand. I glanced over at the man on the table and I smiled at Mr. H----. The little rubies lay in my palm, drenched in their own pomegranate blood, tiny tidbits of the soul just waiting for me. They burst between my teeth, spilling their juices across my tongue; sweet, tart, and forbidden.

Mr. H---- watched me, studying my face in his patient, serene way that I had already come to love. “Is it all that you

had hoped?”

I could not answer him. Instead I broke the fruit wide apart. Nestled against one another, the seeds gleamed with their own light, calling to me.

I ate them. Every last one. And I never looked back.

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Sara M. Harvey is an author and costumer living in Nashville, TN with her husband and their dogs. Her debut novel was A Year and a Day, a romantic urban fantasy published in 2006. Currently, she is writing a paranormal Steampunk novella trilogy for Apex Publications that begins with The Convent of the Pure. The second installment, The Labyrinth of the Dead, will be available in Spring 2010. Visit her Official Author's Site at <http://www.saramharvey.com>.

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TO KISS THE GRANITE CHOIR, PT. I

by Michael Anthony Ashley

Imre Usaym Balgas stood near the dais alone, waiting to be judged. In a sling at his hip dangled a living sword grown from the bones of a dead man. This he clutched as he watched Bellico punish.

Maestro Bellico's skin was the color of bronze, his features hawkishly angled, his movements lithe. He and the challenger, a stranger to Imre, circled each other with the patient deadliness of warships in deep water, until by some silent agreement they lunged, stone blades colliding with a thunderous report. Thrice more they crossed with rat-a-tat speed—bark and crash and clack—until a sudden red mist wreathed the challenger, and he sagged to the ground in a heap.

Bellico raised his stone arm in triumph.

The assembly cheered. They were the peers of the clan Barescre. And each had an arm of stone, the right arm, every one. At the shoulder joint, flesh blended seamlessly with a durable substance that composed the entire limb, inside and out, down to the fingertips. It was iron-hard yet very much alive, able to move, turn, and flex. Each stone arm, or *vesti*

ferre as it was called in Silici, differed from the next in color and shape, for it grew according to character.

The Barescres rang out their applause in an amphitheater of sculpted marble, in galleries flanked by ancient archways of wrought stone vines and blossoms cunningly entwined with true ivy.

Imre stood in Barescres garb—linen trousers with a bolt across his chest—upon a tight, pliant sword that made up the amphitheater floor. Even in the dawn chill his bare scalp was beaded with sweat. He struggled mightily to keep his breathing steady. But his father had taught him to at all times observe, so even while his heartbeat raged, he studied. He studied the surgeons as they carried the defeated man away, watched the lurid flow of blood stain the green grass black. He swept his gaze across the gallery, even as dozens of Barescres gazes bent to take his measure. And most intently he studied the souls upon the dais, for that was where his fate lay.

Bellico, with blade in hand and showing no signs of fatigue, had returned to his place next to his wife, Ariosa. Together they ruled the clan, for together they were the deadliest of their people. Two of their children sat beside them: Eroico, a boy at least ten years Imre's junior who nonetheless served as the clan ambassador, and his sister, slender and grim, Cantiléna with the copper-colored arm.

When the assembly had at last settled and Imre's turn came to approach the platform, he saluted the family in their own fashion, a bow at the waist and a strike at the breast with a closed fist. The thump he produced was a far cry from the mighty clap the Silici folk delivered with the same gesture.

"Theca Ariosa, Maestro Bellico," he said in Silici, "I attend your will."

Bellico shifted his hymn, a blade as wide as Imre and longer than Imre was tall. "Be at ease, peregrin," he said. The irony was worth scoffing, nearly. The clan chieftain's weapon was eel-smooth and paler than cream, a platinum vein splashed down its face. It had grown to reflect the heart of its master, pure and firm, large and ferocious. Bellico's *vesti ferre* was, like his hymn, an impeccable white that gave startling contrast to the swarthy skin of his face, though along the stone forearm were inch-long black spikes. The Maestro had lost an eye when he was younger than Imre. In its place grew a bleached stone horn. What, if anything, he saw with it Imre didn't know.

"This morning finds you hale," he said in a loud voice. The assembly saluted with a clap and answered, "It does." Bellico flipped his hymn so the spine of it rested across his shoulders, then stepped forward to the edge of the dais to tower over Imre. This was the second time the council had been called to

order. Imre glanced at the bloodstain in the grass and wondered if there would be any more interruptions.

“For matters of war,” Bellico said, gesturing with his stone hand, “matters that affect our lives and our traditions, we come together as a family, and as a family we enforce our will. This is the law of the Voce. It serves us as we serve it.” He waved toward Imre. “This peregrin came to our shores a fugitive and a meddler, and as payment for his transgression was bound by an honor debt. He has given us his song, for what it is worth, but he has also given us disrespect, disorder. And now he invites war to our doorstep, peregrin navies threatening our isle, even as he besmirches the purity of certain of our clan.”

At this last Imre felt a chill from his scalp to his nethers. So they knew. Eroico had told. The ships were waiting. And his life was soon to be worth naught but a few buckets of jackal dung. Now was the time, this moment or never.

Before Bellico said another word Imre gathered his breath and his courage and shouted, “Maestro Bellico! A moment!”

The indecency sent an angry buzz rippling the gallery until Imre had the sense of many eyes measuring his neck for the edge of a blade. Upon the dais, Ariosa appeared somewhat bemused, as did Eroico. Cantiléna’s face was a mask. The Maestro, though, fixed Imre with a look fit to darken a room. “You speak out of turn, peregrin.”

“Forgive my insolence, I—”

“Your insolence will see you spitted!”

Imre bowed, reminding himself to be careful. “That may be so, Maestro, and though your wrath is kindled, I beg an indulgence before you pass my fate to this noble assembly. I pray my service to your clan these many months affords me a measure of mercy.”

“Your service is payment, and our mercy is short. But you have fought for us. And though you sing like a mule, your talents have seen their use. Ask your favor.”

Imre kept his head bowed, blinked against the sweat in his eyes. “You mention singing, Maestro, and that is well, for I request a song.” This moment or never. “I request *thalamos pugna*.”

The gallery erupted with the roar of a thousand voices—laughter, questions, taunts pouring down in a torrent of Silici that would have put any market auction to shame. Hymns were shaken. The ground beneath Imre’s feet shook from the force of stone fists and sandaled feet pounding throughout the amphitheater. His head remained bowed.

Over the din, Imre heard Bellico’s voice thunder from the dais. “Stand straight, peregrin!” When Imre obeyed, he saw the Maestro glowering, that hard white hand raised for calm. Gradually the assembly quieted. And when the sea could be

heard over the old stone walls, when Imre's own heartbeat rushed in his ears, Bellico spoke the words. "Challenge who you will."

Imre was astounded when both his voice and hand held steady as he raised his dark hymn and pointed it toward the dais. "I would sing with the Third Blade of the Baremescre clan, with your eldest child. I challenge Cantiléna."

This time there was no buzz, no roar, only one collective intaken breath as if all sound had been swallowed in a tempest.

Cantiléna, though, never hesitated. She drew her copper-brown tortoise-shell blade then stepped next to her father. "I accept," she said. And with her arms taut and her trousers rippling slyly in the wind, she looked just as dangerous as that day on the harbor road.

"I call on my clan to sing beside me!" she cried. "Come, all you willing! Come cross hymns with the peregrin!"

Imre's sword point dropped to the ground as his jaw dropped to his chest. Her clan? *Her entire yanking clan?* Damn him to a frozen hell, he hoped he'd misheard. But there it was, plain. The rows above were aswarm, the Baremescre leaving their seats to throng the stairways, flexing their hard stone arms and freeing their hymns from their slings.

Less than ten hours ago, surrounded by smoke and bones, Cantiléna had told Imre he would lose his life today. As he

watched the army of half-stone warriors descend upon him, Imre prayed to the stars she was wrong.

* * *

Verse

Aside from the clothes on his back and a sackful of trinkets, Imre Balgas had made landing at Craggerman's Maw with scant few necessities: two pattern-welded dueling blades, as any gentleman would wear, his father's grimwade musket, and a spool of puppet strings hand-woven by Tayuya the Harmonist. Together they represented all that remained of the beauty in his life, which was why it made him sick to the belly to bring them to shore in a place like the Maw.

Imre carried his musket and spool rolled together in a bundle of oilcloth. This he swung over his shoulder as he stepped from the gangplank into the flow of the great unwashed, old Naldo Randal following close behind. With the Jinan marauders hunting the waters for their trail, Imre and Naldo had need of passage on some new vessel heading further into the tropics, hopefully as far south as Tahan. Imre scanned the ships at berth and sighed. They would be a long time searching.

Trader cogs flying the Jinan flag were jammed into the quay, each no doubt bearing a dozen greedy hearts willing to trade for marauder coin any rumor of the last son of Balgas.

But in the distance were stranger sights that brought no comfort: eight-legged floaters sitting on the water like pond striders; lanky transports with dozens of masts and a thousand woven cords in the stead of sails; gnarled floating fortresses made entirely of black iron, vomiting smoke; hulls of bone, hulls of glass, hulls of a wood bristling with stiff pearly whiskers. The docks of the Maw crawled away to the east and west with one monstrosity after the other.

“Ugliness for the ugly,” Imre said. For in the hills rising to the south, above the confused jumble of shipyards, taverns, and fish markets, rested two estates of red marble, each with tiered garden pavilions overlooking the bustling waterfront. There, haughty and bronze-skinned figures idled in the sun, each with that stone-limb deformity, each with a covey of slaves.

“Do the Silici disgust you so?” Naldo asked.

“They’re mongrels, aye, dirty blood, no doubt. But worse, they trade *flesh*, Naldo. They keep men at their heels like curs.” Imre eyed a craggerman swaggering through the crowd, and spat. “My father would have had them all stretched across a hot dune for the buzzards to pluck.”

“True,” said Naldo. “Any other lord of the League would do the same. But we are fleeing the League, Adalheid has been sacked, and your father, may he bathe forever in light, is gone. You are deep within the Silici Archipelago. There is no memory

of the Djinn here, no history of captivity, no code of liberty. You must accept that.”

Naldo was an arbiter—scholar, tutor, and agent of the will of House Balgas. He'd begun his service with Imre's great-uncle Gideon, for whom he'd lost two fingers and most of the use of his left arm. The limb was a cracked and withered mess wrapped under gauzes of cotton and bound to his body in a sling. Even so, he fancied himself a warrior poet, the tough old man, and with quick feet and sinewy strength in his good arm he swung a wicked knock with the saber. Brains by the bucket, oak in the spine, and a love for lecture—that was Naldo.

“As for mongrels,” he was saying, “know that your own House Balgas is noble for its history of courage, not purity. The firstblood is in your veins, true, but that is simply controlled breeding, young master. Don't confuse it with virtue.”

Imre hefted the oilcloth and chastened himself. Naldo was right. Imre *was* House Balgas. It wouldn't do to place his own prejudices above the needs of his House.

They were wandering past a battle-scarred galleon, Naldo lecturing and Imre doing his best to listen, when a commotion rang out. Imre knew crowds, knew their different voices, and this one screamed *fight*. He craned his neck to spy masses of folk gathering near one of the paved roads winding down from

the hills. He veered off to investigate, Naldo zealously oblivious.

The crowd thickened quickly, a press of elbows and human odor sharp and cloying, but with the now unmistakable sounds of argument rising over the din, his curiosity drove him on. When at last Imre gained a vantage, the crowd, buzzing like an angry hive, was in array about two figures struggling in the road, one male and the other female. Both craggers.

The sandy-blond man, lean but well muscled, was clutching with his hard stone fist the flesh arm of a young woman, no older than Imre and done up in linen trousers under a bolt of blue wrapped from hip to breast. The man was possessed of an ugly black limb, knobbed all over as if covered with dewberries. Hers was smooth and copper, but no less unsightly. It was a case of jilted love, Imre saw at once. Dewberry entreated the woman over and again for some favor, which she flatly refused. Imre understood the words *weak* and *fool* from her stream of Silici, but the rest was lilting gibberish. Instead of listening, he took advantage to examine the far-famed cragger blades.

There was rumor in the League that the craggers used sorcery—Djinni spells, blood sacrifices, all manner of wicked devices—to grow evil-minded swords from the flesh of their young. These babes had hideous bony spurs jabbing from the

inside of the left arm, the sinister arm. As the babe grew so did the blade, until it fell from the body and became a fell weapon. There *was* a large dimple in the woman's flesh arm, catching pools of shadow as she strove with her petitioner. Her sword, darkly rippled like a polished tortoise shell, was straight and double edged and hung from her right hip. It was forged of no metal. Nor was Dewberry's, very long and slung across his back; it was thick as a steak and looked to be ungodly heavy. Imre's own swords were slender reeds in comparison. But in the tales the blades supposedly spoke and saw the souls of men and turned piss into liquid gold. It was folk foolishness, Imre was sure.

No cragger had ever been seen outside of their archipelago domain, not in their long history with the jungle island lords, not in their years of trade with Jinan cities. They never traveled, never showed interest in expansion. But Arbiter Naldo had made landing at the Maw many times before. He likely knew more of these ugly folk than any in all the Jinan League, and it might be he had some bit of truth about their swords.

Imre began to look for an escape from the throng, muscling and jabbing where necessary, but his efforts were spoilt when the cragger man spat something harsh that sent a fresh buzz through the crowd. The collective energy shot in an

instant from pleasantly entertained through to full-on bloodlust. They wanted a fight.

They would not be disappointed.

The young woman responded softly, though her words were surely barbed, for her fretted suitor cuffed her across the jaw with his stone fist. The blow snapped her head round, but she righted herself imperiously, spoke, and was struck once more, this time with an open hand that cracked like a whip. The woman spat blood, yet she faced him. She laid a hand on the hilt of her blade. “*Denuo*,” she said. Imre knew the word. “Again.”

All around him sailors and beggars and fishwives and urchin girls were shouting curses and praises and words of shock. But Dewberry had gone far past caring. As the woman stood unprotected, he clenched his stone fist and slammed it full in her face. The woman went tumbling backward like a batted doll, first her shoulder then her head cracking loudly against the hard road.

Dewberry yanked his monster sword free. He raised it above his head.

And Imre Balgas found himself charging forward, plowing bodies, lifting the bundle from his shoulder. He found himself shouting, “Hold!” and breaking away from the safety of the mob. It was a splash into a pond of silence, and the ripples

spread quickly. Mouths that a moment ago had been jetting spittle, blaring cries with vigor, now snapped closed, their voices hushed until only the gulls gliding above were free enough to caw. The people nearby all but trampled each other to make way, but aside from their grunts and scuffles none made a sound. He had just crossed a line that was likely never spit across in Craggerman's Maw.

But he couldn't turn back.

The jilted suitor shot Imre a poison look. "*Tum podem extulli horriduloso, peregrin!*"

Imre had no idea what the bastard was spouting, but he knew a challenge in any tongue. The woman was standing then, scowling over a bloody mouth. When Dewberry returned his attention to her, Imre filled his own mouth with phlegm and gobbled it at the cragger's foot. "You shouldn't mistreat ladies, you sow-thumping ass," he said as he wiped his lips. "Even mongrel wenches like her." Then Imre Balgas drew his father's musket.

The grimwade was a classic design, water-cooled and fueled by a glossy green ore contrarily named camellia. This one had a ten-blast capacity, but eight had been spent in his and Naldo's escape from the city. Imre charged the remaining two. He set his finger lightly over the triggers. He took aim for Dewberry's heart.

“*Porcus foeda!*” the craggerman snarled, before tilting his sword and shifting his weight. And that was all the warning Imre had. In one instant his space was clear; in the next the bastard was bearing down on him, full tilt. Imre grit his teeth and squeezed both triggers, releasing a double blast of emerald energy into Dewberry’s gangly form. The kickback punched hard against Imre’s shoulder, steam billowing in clouds in all directions, but he hardly noticed, for in dazzled shock he watched as Dewberry swung *just so* and caught the musket blast square. Crackles and light and a rush of ozone, and the shot fizzled harmlessly across Dewberry’s stone arm. He never broke stride.

You can’t succeed in this world, little cub, until you’ve learned to embrace pain. It was Bapa’s favorite lesson, and even now it was stuck in Imre’s mind like a thorn.

As Dewberry slashed with his demon sword, Imre tossed his father’s musket and dove without pause into the arc of the blade. The enormous hunk of stone bit his side with a *thud* and a splash of hot gritty agony, but Imre took it all, jamming the swing short. Dewberry lurched off balance, giving Imre the extra seconds he needed. He wrapped his arm round the stone blade, hugged it close, grasped underhanded the worn leather grip of his own short sword, and slashed across Dewberry’s chest. A startlingly red ribbon opened from hip to nipple, but

the cut stayed shallow as the cragger's very ribs, impossibly hard, turned the slash so that it rode high and sliced cleanly across his eye.

The cragger never so much as flinched.

"Stars be damned!" Imre swore, even as Dewberry, half-blind, came round with a crushing stone fist that knocked him into the dark. The world tipped. He stumbled. With all the focus he could muster he held fast to the hilt of his sword, yet still he reeled. The fight was lost. He knew it. Cursed himself for it. But where was Dewberry? He stumbled on legs that felt sutured. Dewberry should have been killing him.

He tilted about for what felt like hours until with a great effort he caught his balance, forced his legs steady. A few breaths cleared his vision, and with a queasy sense of vertigo he realized he'd been spun around. The crowd was on the wrong side. The cragger woman was now standing before him, still bloody in the mouth and staring intently to Imre's rear. Imre blinked against the motes in his eyes and followed her gaze to where Naldo Randal was saluting with his saber the very angry Dewberry.

"Stand down!" Imre shouted. But his tongue was too thick and his tutor too eager. The old man shot forward on nimble feet. Dewberry rushed to meet him. They crossed once, twice with the clangor and clash of angry blades, shards of

Dewberry's stone sword flying from Naldo's blows. On the third, the cragger bruised him with a shoulder charge then slashed him across the back as he spun.

Imre grit his teeth and moved to stop Naldo, to stop him *and* to gut that brutish cragger bastard.

The coppery woman was faster. She stepped in his path, her freakish arm raised, palm out. "*Nit*," she said, before laying her flesh hand on the hilt of her sword.

Imre didn't have time for this and opened his mouth to tell her so, but a blow with the force of a two-ton ram plowed into his stomach and squeezed nothing but hollow wind out of him. He staggered back, retching, before crashing to his knees with his insides sloshing like porridge.

The moldy wench had hit him! One inch of distance and barely any movement and she'd knocked him to the dirt. When at last his guts unclenched to allow him some air, Imre fixed her with his best evil eye. "Move," he said between breaths.

The wench only stared.

A loud *crack* and grunts of pain from Naldo and Dewberry. Imre rose to his feet.

"Move," he said again, stepping forward, the pain in his belly easing by the moment.

The woman narrowed her eyes. "*Nit*."

Imre unsheathed his longblade and held it parallel to his short. He'd never used steel on a woman, but he was not beyond slapping this one senseless with the flats.

She pulled her tortoise shell blade from its sling and eased into a stance.

Still fighting dizziness, Imre shifted his balance and lunged.

It was then that a scream rent the air. The cragger woman startled from the cry, and the crowd of onlookers finally broke their silence with one collective but short-lived gasp. Imre stumbled to a halt, squeezed his eyes shut as the scream continued on, rising high in the wind, scorching his nerves with the echo of pure animal suffering, until it fell to a gurgle. And silence.

Imre's heart felt squeezed. His city was in ruins, his family... ashes. He and Naldo were all that were left. It took time for him to build his courage, but when he did, he opened his eyes and pushed past the startled cragger woman, just in time to see Naldo, bleeding and haggard, yank his saber free of his opponent's belly. Dewberry let slip his splintered blade before falling like a plank to the paved road, pouring the last of his life out in the dust.

Over the quiet stretched the distant shouts of men on the quays, the cries of gulls overhead, the sun pouring heat into the

stench of sweat and fresh death. And there was Naldo, as he turned to Imre and *smiled*.

“The honorable thing,” he said flatly, before collapsing over the body of the man he’d slain.

* * *

Chorus

For every important event, the Baresmescre sang. And singing, as with all things about these people, was a violent affair. Imre had no reason to expect a wedding to be any different.

The peerage continued down to the amphitheater floor, queuing now four deep, while Cantiléna and her parents conferred intently upon the dais.

Eroico, though, hopped down with his usual vigor. “What a grand gesture to start the morning,” he said, grinning.

To that Imre could only shrug. “Let us call it a gesture. If I am still breathing by dinnertime, then perhaps we can name it grand.”

“Still,” said Eroico, “a wedding song with my clan, and for the hand of Cantiléna of all people. You must be mad, peregrin. Or thunderstruck.”

They rambled together from the dais toward the center of the field, their breaths mingling in the crisp morning air. Thunderstruck was the Silici way of describing a fall into love; a

man could be forgiven much in such a state, for the Silici considered those passions a matter of nature, not of will. But Imre was not a man to the Barescres. He was a *quasi*, a near-man, a mute, stoneless and songless and weak, and Imre had no illusions as to how his choice was being received. Already the Barescres descending from the gallery were pointing at him and, he guessed, discussing the apparent flaws in his physique. “They still come.”

It was Eroico’s turn to shrug. “Most will,” he said lightly. “*Thalamos pugna* is a matter of grave honor. Any who are healthy and able will face you, especially because of your...” here he paused before politely concluding, “foreign disposition. If a man or woman from another clan challenges one of ours to a wedding, my family is very careful to try that outsider thoroughly. But for a peregrin, I suspect we truly will see your dinnertime goal before the songs are done.

“My mother and father will be last to sing before Cantiléna, so there is a fair chance you will die without an opportunity to face her,” he said. “Still, you are hearty, peregrin, and not altogether hopeless. Think on it: just two kisses each and you will be a married man!”

Imre rounded on him sharply. *Kisses*? There was too damned much he was ignorant of here. He’d heard of *thalamos pugna* on the war campaign and knew it to be a duel for the

hand of a Baremescre woman. If any man, even a near-man, could prove his strength, he could count himself a worthy member of the family. That alone seemed enough when he'd set out for this assembly. Now it seemed an obscenely scant bit of information.

His concern went unnoticed.

Bellico was calling the assembly to order, and Eroico inclined his gaze, gleeful and expectant, to attend his father's words.

“Cantiléna of the Baremescre has accepted the challenge from peregrin Imre the Balgas. The law opens this right to any man who bears a hymn.” From the gallery came scoffs and grumbles of “mute.” Imre kept his peace—teeth clenched and hymn gripped tightly—even as Bellico caught his gaze with mismatched eyes and held it firm. The stare made Imre feel as though his soul had been split by that wicked white horn, the truth of his fear spread and pinned for all to see.

He caught the fear and wrestled it down. So he had miscalculated. Who in all hells cared? It was just like his first performances under Tayuya, only now it was *his* story he was conducting. *Don't force the tale. Accept it. Invite it. Then direct it out through the strings.* But in the stead of strings, he had his blade. Imre wiped the sweat from his palms and hefted the black and copper sword.

“You are versed in our traditions for *thalamos pugna*,” said Bellico.

“I am,” Imre lied.

There was a long moment between them as each man tried to understand what the other was thinking. At last, Bellico nodded.

Ariosa stepped forward, Theca to the Maestro, carrying an air of both wisdom and quiet dignity that made her appearance timeless. She was a good deal older than Bellico, had wedded late in life for want of a man to suit her fancy. But Imre had never seen on her a wrinkle or spot. Her hymn curved as a sickle and, like her stone arm, was deeply indigo. The amphitheater fell quiet as she invoked the Voce for strength and sport and good songs. “Invest our hymns,” she said at the finish, “with the strength to kiss well.”

“Now we sing!” Bellico shouted.

The assembly cheered, Cantiléna glared, and unfledged Eroico bounced on his toes at Imre’s side. “Father! Father!” he shouted into the din, stone arm waving gaily. When Bellico finally paid heed, Eroico cupped his hands to his mouth and said, “Please!” The Maestro looked from his son to Imre and back again before tossing his hand in resigned permission.

Eroico’s hymn was short, broad and grown for the close thrust, its brilliantly regal sapphire hue popular among the

younger peers of the Baremescre. Imre had never seen it used in earnest. Not until Eroico, still grinning from his father's indulgence, spun it from its sling and cut Imre across the throat.

* * *

Verse

After the brawl, Imre and Naldo had been seized, stripped of everything save their clothes, and dragged off to separate cells. Imre's was nothing more than a moist and rough-hewn hollow in a cliff side, but after his weeks aboard ship, the silence was as much a comfort as if he sat wrapped in a prince's quilt.

He had dozed and dreamt of a puppet show where his father's corpse danced beneath the strings, ash vomiting from its purple lips, when footsteps outside his cell startled him awake.

This time two guards, both with rock arms and pernicious blades, silently escorted him from the cell into a bright, muggy afternoon. Imre blinked against the light, shook away the last clinging miasma of his dream, then followed the guards down the cliffside path onto a road that cut deeper inland. They spent a good deal of daylight walking this road, resting twice at small manors surrounded by pruned coppices, but pressing on. Soon the sea breezes faded and the southern humidity made good on

its reputation. Theirs was a beautiful country—flowers blooming a dozen hues of every color, shaded by wild fruit trees with thick, broad leaves, the air alive with honeybees and tiny hovering birds. But by the time they reached the sitting garden, Imre had a mind only for the cramp in his back, the sweat in his eyes, and the late afternoon midges dying against his sticky skin.

The guards led him to stand before a rough semicircle of seated craggermen, behind them rippled a freshwater pond skinned by water-lily.

He was instantly relieved to see Naldo reclining nearby upon a pile of cushions. The Arbiter looked drawn, but his wounds had been treated and his color was good. He smiled when he saw Imre. The anxiety, though, was glaring.

The eight craggers that lounged upon the benches each paradoxically bore a combined countenance of languor and barely suppressed action. The grim, one-eyed man sitting in the center with the white rock arm was Bellico, and he alone spoke to Imre, albeit through Naldo's translations. Bellico had brought his wife, one son, four other important-looking craggers, and the nut-skulled wench from the harbor road who, as ill luck would have it, was the chieftain's daughter and heir. Every one of them bore a dimple in the flesh arm.

When the courtesies were done, Bellico bent his hard gaze upon Imre and asked a question.

“Maestro Bellico has inquired after your injuries, young master,” Naldo said.

“My injuries?” Imre asked. When he’d been first dumped in his cell, stoneless surgeons had examined him and, Imre was proud to see, were utterly dumbfounded. Now as then, he lifted his shirt to show Bellico and company the flesh at his side was completely mended, showing not even a scar. He drew the farce out before raising his finger. “Ah, the sword wound,” he said in mock revelation. “A trifling nick. Tell them my clan heals quickly from such things.” A crack to the skull or spine would kill him quick as the next man, but to say as much Imre felt ill-advised.

Naldo translated.

“Tell us the name of your clan,” Bellico ordered.

“Balgas, First of the Firstblood Houses, Lords of Adalheid and Conquerors of the Nefarious Djinn.” Imre went on to explain that nobles of the firstblood enjoyed stouter constitutions and sharper acumen than average men. When Bellico asked for a demonstration, Imre repeated every syllable of conversation the group had exchanged thus far, even the sounds of foreign Silici.

“Your memory is perfect,” Bellico said with a raised brow.

“Nearly. We forget nothing important.”

This led to a long back and forth between the cragger chief and the Arbiter that left Imre to his perspiration and his thoughts. He locked his fingers together in the puppeteer’s ‘*ankabut*’ limbering drill and wondered how far his family’s reputation would carry with a cragger audience. If the stars shined any grace upon him, these folk would not be at all as merciless as this damned sodden climate.

He glanced around the group, whispering a bawdy sea ditty to steady his nerves while relishing the pleasant ache in his hands, and caught another pair of eyes staring back. It was Bellico’s son, and the boy started, flushed, and turned away sharply at Imre’s gaze. *Now what was that?* Imre wondered.

But when next their hard hosts addressed him, it was the idiot wench who spoke, and all other thoughts vanished.

“Cantiléna wishes to know what you do with transgressors of the law in your land.”

“Prison or death,” Imre said with intentional disdain. “Depending.”

“We also have two penalties,” the cragger woman said. “You have fouled our laws, so make your choice: payment or song.”

Imre had learned from Naldo what singing meant to the craggers, and wouldn’t mind a chance at trouncing this reedy

trollop. But to Naldo's palpable relief he asked, "Is this to say we can pay coin for the man we killed?"

The woman's anger flashed hot. "Coin is a toy for slaves and fat foreign merchants. Never presume to trade this for the life of our kin!"

"You said *payment*," Imre began impatiently, but the wench wasn't finished.

"Your Sage slew our man while singing. Singing is always an honor in Silici Tarraneh. Your transgression...."

Naldo stopped and stared at Imre. "You are charged with insulting and humiliating the lady Cantiléna."

Imre nearly choked. "What?!"

The woman was running fast at the mouth now. "The song... the song was hers and you stole it... humiliated her. For that you have a debt to the clan Baremescre."

She sat there with her hand on the hilt of her blade, speaking as if to a pair of dogs. It was too much.

"So all this pageantry and gruff because I stepped in to *save* that poxy shrew, and she's too thick to know it? Stars fall! I'm sick to rot of these wooden-brained fools, and to a hell of boiling piss with *that* mangy mongrel bitch. And tell her I said it. Tell her I wish I'd left her to have her hole ruined to mush by that doghearted, dung-filled, horse-fouling pustule."

Imre cursed onward with a skill to blush a slum whore, vomiting the weeks of pent-up vehemence in one long luscious stream. He damned. He hexed. He described blisters in unseemly places.

And too late, he noticed the cragger boy. The one who'd been staring as Imre sang his bawdy song. The one whose eyes and mouth now grew steadily with Imre's every unhallowed word until they sat upon the boy's face like a trio of saucers. And then, at the height of Imre's crusted poetry, the little mucker leaned to whisper fiercely into his father's ear. And Imre knew suddenly that there was another translator in their midst.

"Audes!" Bellico growled.

Imre switched hastily from curses to apologies. But Bellico was unhearing. He leapt to his feet. He started forward.

Naldo grasped clumsily at Imre's sleeve as Imre darted in front of him with naked fists raised.

Bellico leveled his sword.

Imre's heart hove within his chest.

But even as he braced for the blow, a warm silence clapped down suddenly over his ears, and the dark and handsome woman at Bellico's side snatched his gaze. She was the Theca Ariosa, Imre remembered, and she alone remained cool in the storm of hot ire, her noble-boned face placid as a moonlit dune.

But it was the eyes that were fathomless, and as she stared Imre felt suddenly naked. “*Salvio, mi sentisti,*” she said, and the words were in her mouth and her gaze and under Imre’s skin, quivering like the throb before a storm.

When at last she turned away, Bellico was calm, the garden was quiet, and Imre nearly collapsed from the weakness in his knees, the old folk stories of demon sorcery lurching up from the dark wells in his mind.

Ariosa spoke to Naldo softly, kindly, and the tension continued to melt until Bellico had lowered his sword, reclaimed his seat, and folded his arms as though his outburst had never been.

But her words worked a different sort of change in Naldo. His lip quivered when he answered her in a voice that wavered high like a boy’s, and for the first time in Imre’s memory the old man stuttered.

Ariosa next addressed Bellico, then her daughter, and when they finished, the one-eyed chief was nodding, eased, but his daughter, the half-coppery bitch, only curled her lip and paid unbroken attention to her sword hilt.

Bellico rumbled a series of orders, and at once four of the craggers rose to leave. Only the Maestro’s family remained.

“What’s happened?” Imre whispered.

“Theca Ariosa has offered us... an opportunity,” Naldo said. “I’ve told them you will not sing; you will pay the debt.” He raised his hand before Imre could protest. “Don’t argue, Gideon. There are matters at play here that you’re not yet ready to understand. Much about these people is promising for us, and for the House. I am at all times a servant, but in this, please trust my judgment.”

The Arbiter had had no right to make a decision about the welfare of the House without consulting the damned *head* of the House. But Imre’s anger was for the moment trivial.

“Imre,” he said.

“What?” Naldo asked.

“You called me Gideon.”

Naldo frowned, mouth slightly ajar. Then, “Of course, young master. Forgive me.” He clapped Imre on the shoulder with his good hand.

When the four craggermen had left the garden, Ariosa produced two shards of jet black stone. They were wickedly jagged things, each as long as her forearm. Imre recognized them at once.

As did Naldo. “Theca Ariosa wishes for us to have these gifts,” he said in a strained voice.

One of these shards had only two days ago jutted from the bloody slash in Naldo’s back. But the look on the Arbiter’s face

when he accepted the sliver of Dewberry's blade did more than fill Imre with compassion; it worried him.

"The Theca promises that if we allow it, this hymn will sing for you," Naldo told him in a faraway voice, "and will enlighten me."

Imre hefted his shard and was surprised at how heavy the accursed thing was. Dewberry had flipped and swung several feet of this with the ease of a man painting. *What if I refuse?* Imre wanted to ask. But if they were giving gifts, it meant they weren't going to kill them, and for that he could thank Naldo. He shot a glance at the harbor-road wench before reminding himself that if he died here today, House Balgas died with him.

"What was his name?" Imre found himself asking. "The man we fought."

Ariosa spoke solemnly, and when Naldo translated, Imre felt a chill despite the heat. "The Theca will say this and no more: the dead have no names."

Bellico gestured to his son, the linguist, and the boy leapt to his feet. He saluted Imre by bowing at the waist and clapping his stone fist at his breast. "My name is Eroico," he said in accented Adala, the Jinan tongue.

"Imre Usaym Balgas."

The boy whistled. "All three are yours? Do all in your clan have this many names?"

“Very nearly.”

The cragger boy found this immensely funny and said so before explaining the price Imre was judged to pay. “Work when you are told, speak when you are told, and walk humbly until your debt is paid.”

“In other words, be a slave.”

The boy nodded, ingenuous. “Do you pledge?”

Imre watched Naldo as the surgeons, at Bellico’s command, appeared with a litter and began arranging Naldo upon it. The old man clutched his blade shard like a relic, but showed not the slightest interest in this boy speaking their home tongue. Naldo was prone to flights of whimsy, could spend hours studying the petals of a single blossom, the whole time deaf and blind to the world. And this was piece of a cragger’s sword, after all.

Then what is this dread I’m feeling? Imre wondered. He wiped the sweat from his brow then held up his own shard with one hand and knelt in the grass. “If your father will spare the life of Arbiter Naldo Randal and treat him well, I will pledge my wit, my sword, and my strength to Bellico and his clan until he deems the debt paid.”

Eroico frowned. “There is no bargain. There is a choice: pay or sing.”

“*Quiet, Eroico*,” Bellico said. The cragger boy answered his father, and while they spoke, the late day sun slapped heat down upon their heads. Imre’s stomach growled.

“We accept your pledge,” Eroico said finally. “The Sage has made Father curious, and will be his guest. You are to serve as debtor and work among the slaves daily. And...”—the boy frowned, thinking, before—”oh, yes, and you are to speak our tongue within three months.”

“Understood,” Imre said. Three months. Three months ago he’d been planning his breakout show in Adalheid, an eighty-puppet comedy with the Dry Well Sands Choir. The thought of chatteling about for these people even that long made Imre sick to his stomach. How long before Bellico was satisfied? How long before one of the craggers broke his skull or cleaved his spine or dealt some other wound that wouldn’t heal? How long before the traitorous cities of the League sent their dogs sniffing around this place? A dozen worries swarmed his thoughts, but he swallowed them all down and kept his countenance.

“You will report to me daily for your duties, starting now,” the boy told him. “Follow me. We first find you living quarters.”

“And what about her?” Imre asked with a nod toward the sullen wench rising from her seat. She caught his stare, and matched it with her own.

“My sister?” Eroico cocked a sly smile as he led Imre from the garden. “Be on your guard, peregrin. I think she is in love.”

* * *

Chorus

Imre felt his throat wound stretch and mend even as Eroico stabbed at him, driving forward like a bronze and sapphire arrow. With a cross-step Imre caught Eroico’s thrust along the curved edge of his hymn. The two blades scraped and shrieked—Imre fighting to keep his balance—but in less than a blink Eroico had sprung away, bounced to the left, and was speeding in again. Imre had time only to replant his feet before Eroico feinted then leapt into Imre’s blind. Cloth and flesh tore as a line of fire opened across the back of Imre’s leg. But against the pain he pivoted hard and managed to bump Eroico, sending him stumbling to the turf. From there it was a simple step and slash and he’d opened a red welt across Eroico’s shoulder.

“A song and two kisses!” boomed across the yard. Imre startled and spun to see Bellico standing upon the dais, stone arm raised to the cheering assembly. “Continue?” the Maestro asked him.

Imre’s heart was pounding as Eroico righted himself with a sportive grin and trotted back to stand near his father. A song and two kisses? Would it only be two cuts? If this was true, the

firstblood power of his House would more than suffice: he'd have moments to rest between duels, moments to heal. As Eroico told it, Imre was facing a long, long day. But just two cuts each....

“Continue,” Imre said, his breast swelling with hope.

A raven-haired Silici stepped from the front of the assembly, and in an instant the cheers doubled in volume. “*Rado! Rado! Rado!*” called the Baremescre peers.

Imre's hope faltered.

His name was Glissando, and Imre knew his prowess from the campaign in the lesser isles. A distant cousin of Ariosa's, he was tall, even for a Baremescre, and thickly muscled. His most obvious feature was his *vesti ferre*—its color a riot of burnt oranges and golds and eye-searing reds, as iron glowing fresh from the forge; its stone surface smooth and unblemished; and from shoulder to wrist flared a serrated crest standing out like an oasis bird's plume. Glissando was the only Silici Imre had encountered to have named his hymn. *Rado*, he called the toothed crimson blade. “Scrape.”

Glissando came ready, his hymn gripped firm in his left hand, his right clenched into a fist with that terrible crest turned outward. He saluted.

Imre returned.

And in a flash Glissando was upon him.

* * *

Verse

As long as Imre lived among the Baremescre, he would fight sinister like a Baremescre, and he'd always been more comfortable with a curved blade in his left. Somehow the shard of Dewberry's sword knew this and grew fitly. The edge of a Silici child's hymn took many years to develop: Imre's had grown within a week. Battle scars on most blades required a season or more to smooth: Imre's would often disappear within hours. His hymn, black as a midnight sea, had leapt from a foot-long shard to a sleek killing weapon in less time than it took him to learn all the Silici names for stone.

In the four-hundred-fifty-two days since his pledge to the Baremescre, he'd fought on average three songs per day. One-thousand-three-hundred-fifty-seven songs total. Two-hundred-six of them had been lessons, thrashings to curb his wanton staring or his spitting or his mangling of the Silici tongue. One-hundred-thirteen were chance encounters with surly, half-stone strangers venting wraths that had naught to do with him. Three times he'd raised his blade against other slaves, and of those duels he felt ashamed. But the remaining one-thousand-thirty-five, in those Imre spilt his blood for the honor of his House. He remembered every detail from every slash and parry. He was a better swordsman now than his great-uncle

Gideon had ever been. And still, against the Baremescre, Imre had never won a single match.

One-thousand-thirty-six, Imre thought from on his back.

The Silici man standing over him held a three-pronged hymn in a closed fist. The prongs jutted from between his fingers, razor-sharp, like claws.

These Baremescre—they wielded their blades preternaturally, responding to Imre's slashes and parries *before* his muscles twitched. He couldn't understand such skill, and for that he was labeled a deaf-mute. To the Baremescre, this made him about the measure of a halfwit, a mockery he would not tolerate.

"Be warned!" spat Three-Prong, the latest to mutter that slur. "And harass me no more!"

Imre said nothing as he stood, wiped the dirt and blood from his chest, recovered his hymn, and rejoined the queue of slaves that meandered across the front of the Hall of Elders. They greeted him with nods weighed slow by hollow-eyed fatigue, the mark of men who spent their days hauling sea salt and pots of night soil, clearing roads, and plowing the fields with only the strength of their backs. One handed Imre his water pan, another his rag.

Three-Prong, consternation knotting the flesh about his eyes, jammed his hymn into its sling and stalked away.

Imre smiled. Then he settled against the Hall's cool marble front and waited for his turn to wash feet.

The Barescres peers crisscrossed the Piazza in ones and twos, rolling their lean shoulders and oiling the dust from their *vesti* with good-natured weariness. On occasion a song victim was carried past the heroically poised sculptures that fronted the surgeon's station, though at this hour these were few and far between. Far more bore the tools and callused hands of builders or the dirty fingernails of gardeners, or the clay-stained linens of the myriad sculptors that seemed to Imre an infestation amidst this stone-obsessed clan. The Barescres held combat above all, but labor was a near second. And this was a time for work. Not even the elders were exempt.

As one of them, dusty from the day's labor, climbed the foot-worn stairs to enter the hall, the next two slaves in queue entered at his heels armed with water pan and washing rag. The routine ran on as the Hall filled and the queue shrank, until at last Imre followed a gray-haired woman through the yawning entryway that was shaded by the fragrant leaves of enormous potted gum trees.

"This afternoon finds you hale, peregrin," declared a low silken voice.

Imre stopped in his tracks, water sloshing over the lip of his pan, for Ariosa stood in the entryway waiting for him.

Imre bowed, thumped, answered, “It does.”

“I am relieving you of your duty for the moment,” she said. “We have something to discuss.” She exchanged words with the gray-haired woman then replaced Imre with another slave from the queue outside. When that was settled, she led Imre across the Piazza to a shaded corner beside a fountain.

Ariosa stretched herself across one of the Barescres’ ubiquitous hard stone benches. “My clansmen say you harass them daily, peregrin. Challenges at every turn. Explain.”

Imre forced himself to meet her stare. “Though I am a near-man and the property of your honored husband, the right to sing is mine as a hymn-bearer.” It was Ariosa who had given Imre his hymn, so it was Ariosa who gave him the privilege to challenge whom he would.

Her laugh was throaty. “Indeed, peregrin. You know your rights.”

Imre bowed at the compliment. “Your clansmen have been fine teachers of Silici custom.” *You brutal bastards.*

“Good,” Ariosa said. “Those lessons will serve you well when you sail in the morning to war.”

Her dark eyes weighed him, steady as deep pools. Imre met their gaze, though it was with a dry mouth that he replied, “I was not aware—”

“The Maestro decided only within the hour. You will join the near-man compliment that supports our clan on the warpath. Be at the family villa at dawn. You are excused from your duties until then.”

She propped her chin against her indigo fist. Her flesh hand settled on the hilt of her hymn. Imre was dismissed.

He saluted her then started across the Piazza, his mood bleak. He knew the Barescre only warred within their archipelago. They would sail from isle to isle, raiding the neighboring populations for slaves and wealth. But never did they invade other lands. Never did their eyes turn to expansion of any sort. It all seemed profitless.

“Peregrin!” Ariosa called, startling him. She’d not moved from her bench, but even from a distance Imre could see her smile.

“Yes, Theca....” he called back.

“The Voce will one day teach you this lesson, but I offer it to you now, as a gift. We are born to sing, peregrin. *And we do not sail where we cannot sing.*”

Imre felt no more enlightened, but he nodded like a boy learning his letters, then left the Piazza with the firm conviction to never again think a thought in Ariosa’s presence.

He followed the Falcis road along the crescent cliff side overlooking the sea. At its northernmost point rested a plateau

known as the *Verzi na Spina*, or “great garden of bones.” At her crown was the resting place of the Baremescre clan chieftains. Their stone remains were laid in rows, faces to the sky, feet to the east, their hymns planted deep in the earth through the hard cages that once protected their hearts.

It was here that Naldo spent his days going mad. Daily, down the paths between the dead, the old man trod a tireless rhythm, bent and stooped under the sun, his eyes ever downward. He searched the bones for riddles he’d learned. Always the riddles, always the bones, always the black shard Ariosa had given him for enlightenment. He tucked it against his withered arm in its sling, close to his breast, and spoke to it from time to time.

The Baremescre had no music that wasn’t battle, but they claimed to hear the dead sing. A boneyard such as that upon the *Verzi na Spina* was the closest they had to theater. So this evening when Imre found Naldo among the bones, he and the Arbiter were not at all alone. Silici visitors strolled the open graves as other men might amble among street musicians, inclining an ear, swaying now and again, and wandering on.

Naldo’s cobbled babbling rattled sharply over the quiet. “*Kirei desu, ne... Warum?* A mineral, young master, from the beginning. *Il contenu la peau*, the bones, the stone, the blood, the beginning... *begyndelse... kezdem sejteni... alku, no!*”

Naldo's muttering rose and fell with the wind as Imre sat cross-legged upon a worn alley between two ancient Barescre corpses. He laid his stone sword at his side and set to work carving his new puppet's face, "uncovering a mystery" as Tayuya called the process, for no two were ever the same. This mystery was a brutish, ugly, and awkward buffoonery, with all the elegance of a child's clay sculpture. There was a soul inside this hunk of wood, but he was becoming frustrated as all hells trying to find it. Barescre shadows stretched around him, occasionally falling across his hands and ruining his light. But the shadows passed and Imre worked on, carving at the wood, looking for its true gaze.

He of course noticed Cantiléna. She'd long ago set aside her stealth when approaching him in what Eroico claimed was an effort at truce. She came and crouched near him, the slanted sun rays making copper fire of her hair, arm, and blade.

"The evening finds you hale," he said to her in Silici.

"It does."

For a time they sat quietly while the dull scrape-nick of his work beat a tattered rhythm, until, "You have not been here in some time."

Imre halted.

"It has been nearly a month," Cantiléna said. "The Sage asks for you often."

“The life of a slave is demanding,” Imre replied. He blew the shavings from the puppet’s face before refastening the wooden head to his trousers. It was wasteful to work with distractions.

“The first-duty slaves have their evenings, the second-duty their mornings. Your wooden trinket work must then be what keeps you.”

Imre shifted uncomfortably, watching Cantiléna watch Naldo as he ambled amidst the generations of hymns that bristled like a naked forest. The Baremescre held a special reverence for the mad. There was respect to be had for someone living in both this world and the next, or so they felt. Imre’s regard of the insane differed somewhat, and for that Cantiléna was all but accusing him of cowardice.

“I am sailing to war tomorrow,” Imre told her in a tone of conscious courage.

“So is the talk.” Cantiléna yawned and stretched broadly, her fingers, stone and flesh, spreading into a pair of shuddering fans before curling back into her lap.

“Tell me of your way of warring,” she said, accepting his change of subject, “in the peregrin cities of your League.”

Imre tugged at his lip for a time, the sea-misted wind dancing coolly across his bare scalp, until he decided that there was no harm in telling her a bit of truth. “Jinan men will still

settle affairs with the blade,” he said. “But my home lies within the Zuben al’Akrab. This desert has many ores, stars that fell long ago, and these ores give off powers that can be harnessed into... into many things.

“So when the League turned against my city, it was a war of ships clashing while levitated over leichstone canals, of flame belched from machine-wrought jewels, of emerald energy spat by muskets in the hands of men clad from head to toe in suits of ironsilk.”

“*Muskets*,” she said, trying the word out. “Like your weapon of iron and wood.”

Imre nodded. “There’s no blood, only ash feathering across the grease of burnt flesh. My... a man I knew lived for an hour with a hole in his skull the size of a fig. He couldn’t speak, but he wept. He wept and he grinned and he wept still more, shivering, until he died.” Something on the wind was tickling Imre’s throat. He coughed and turned away to look out over the sea before continuing.

“The Djinn taught our people industry, if you can believe that. They came with dark arts and the strength of lions. They cut down the desert tribes—man, woman, and babe—and put the survivors to work, and worse, made them food. *Living* meals, damn their twisted souls. For the demons liked their

meat hot. Until Fahd the Balgas King and his firstblood rebellion. Fahd ground their hell-spawned hides into—”

“*Peregrin*,” Cantiléna said harshly.

Imre started. He’d let his language slip, drifted from Silici to Adala and back again. He reached for his sword. She was Third Blade of her clan; her lesson would be hard.

But when he noticed Cantiléna’s gaze, he froze. Imre had been too deep in his own thoughts to notice Naldo shuffling near.

With the sun beating red gold from the half-purple sky and the breezes dying softly with the light, Naldo sidled close, as he’d done so many times. “The honorable thing,” he whispered with sour breath. His clothes stank. The whiskers clinging to his jaw made his expression wild. But ruined and dirty, he was still the Arbiter. He was still Naldo.

Imre leapt to his feet, overwhelmed with his shame, and for the first time since their landing he embraced his old tutor. “I’m sorry,” he said into the old man’s neck. “I should have come.” He’d been afraid, disgusted, angry. How dare Naldo become this horrible babbling thing, now when Imre needed him most? But Imre was sailing to war. And like a coward he’d only now come to see his friend.

“I’m sorry,” Imre said, meaning it in every sense. He wiped his face on the old man’s dirty shirt and let him go.

Naldo stabbed him.

He had always been quick. Imre caught only a small movement in the dusk, a coral flash of reflected light before Naldo plunged the shard of the dead man's hymn deep into his chest.

Imre staggered clutching himself, the sudden pain raging across his nerves. Cantiléna was there in a blur with a deft crack across Naldo's jaw that sent him sprawling.

"No!" Imre said. Tried to say. His fingers had all on their own found the shard, grasped and yanked, and availed nothing. The wave of agony twisted his "no" into a growl. Again he yanked, and again nothing. The disciplined corner of his mind was working furiously to make sense of this—the wound should have been healing already, his body pushing out the offending shard—even as noises of struggle in the grass told him Cantiléna was having trouble subduing Naldo. Imre lifted his sticky hand, but as he did a twisting jerk ripped his chest and flooded him with another surge of pain. Then another twist and Imre fell to his knees, moaning aloud. His wound had grown cold, hard fingers spreading now, stretching for his shoulder, his throat. He'd lost too much blood, he thought. Too much firstblood. The idea seemed absurdly silly to him—too much firstblood—and he had the greatest urge to laugh at his own inanity. Instead he let out a shuddering breath and fainted.

They would tell him later how Cantiléna had managed to stun Naldo without braining him, how she found Imre lying facedown and with her stone fist had ripped the hymn shard free. The surgeons were summoned to minister to Naldo while Cantiléna hefted Imre and carried him down the gentle face of the *Verzi na Spina*. But when Imre came to, his only thoughts were of the scar.

He awoke in the gray of predawn, alone in his runty one-room cottage that almost made the Baresmescre cliffside cell seem grand.

The flesh of his breast had mostly knit, but as he ran his fingers across the stretch of skin they brushed a scabrous pucker, like a knot in a tree. He sat up, stared at the black spot. He scraped at it with his fingernails. He rubbed it with his palm. He tried to wash it away in his basin of tepid water. The spot remained. He shut his eyes and forced himself calm, and when he opened them he knew he would see he'd made a mistake. But, no. There it was. A black chitinous thing beside his heart.

Imre collapsed back onto his pallet, shoulders propped against the cool stone wall, and tried to make sense of things. Beside him on the floor lay his hymn, his puppet, and Naldo's ebon splinter. Imre grasped the shard and examined it. He'd been cut thousands of times, even by this very substance when

Dewberry's blade bit his side on the harbor road, and he'd always healed with no ill effect. So why now? Why a scar from this little stab? What was different? He spun the shard round and round in his hand, watching it flash dully in the half-light. It danced through his fingers with barely any effort.

The dawn broke and forced orange light through his half-rotted shutters before he at last admitted that there was only one person who could help him. Imre yanked on fresh trousers and a cotton drape, gathered up sword and puppet and shard, and sprinted from the tiny cottage. He arrived at the main villa just as Bellico and the war party were forming up.

The Baresme who would be left behind waved colored streamers from windows and doorways, many calling with words of envy. Cantiléna was there upon a balcony next to Eroico and their mother. Her gaze followed Imre as he passed through the festive gathering, but he went immediately to the chieftain. He requested a reprieve from his duties. He needed more time with Naldo.

But Bellico would have none of it. "The surgeons say you are healed, peregrin. Your oath still stands, so take your place." When Imre protested Bellico cut him short with a raised hand. "The Sage will be confined to his quarters under guard at all times. He will be treated gently. Now, take your place, or suffer."

Imre cursed quietly and obeyed.

And so it was that he marched that morning amidst a company of near-men following four-hundred Baresme armed only with their hymns and stone limbs. Bellico himself led the column the five miles to the clan dock, where they boarded ship and headed to the lesser isles.

Imre was away for six months, warring.

By the time he returned, Naldo was dead.

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(Concluded in [Issue #28](#))

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Michael Anthony Ashley is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop. He focuses on short fiction, his latest project being the "Story A Day" challenge at fabula-magna.blogspot.com. He writes, teaches, and practices martial arts with his wife in Atlanta, GA.

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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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