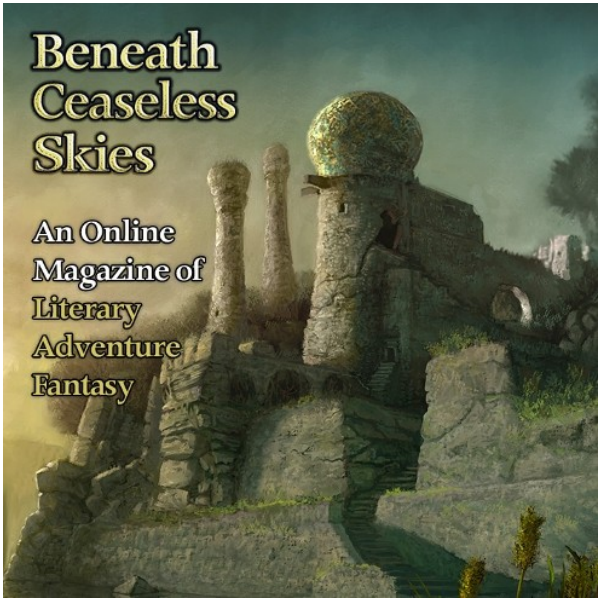


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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GREAT, GOLDEN WINGS

by Rachel Swirsky

Lady Percivalia watched the young cinematographist's hands as he set up his equipment. They were narrow and graceful, dusted with pale-colored hair. His limber fingers moved rapidly as he angled his screens and adjusted his projectors.

Beside Lady Percivalia, the Lady Harrah gave a dramatic sigh. She sank back in her chair, fluttering her lashes, her face arrayed to look attractively ill. Lady Harrah was well-known for feigning such attacks of faintness. They'd won her the attentions of several young men who, while not known for their intelligence, were smart enough to seize the opportunity for getting close to a distressed young woman with a heaving bosom. Unfortunately, Lady Harrah's best efforts had failed to make any impression on the cinematographist.

Lady Harrah enjoyed a miraculous recovery from her faint. She leaned over to Lady Percivalia. "Watch this," she whispered. "I'll get his attention."

She unpinned a dragonet brooch that adorned her ruffled bodice and tapped its head. The intricate gold carving blinked into a semblance of life. It stretched like a waking cat and flew

brightly into the air, a whirl of jeweled wings. It caught the cinematographist's sleeve in its jaws and tugged politely.

The cinematographist looked chagrined as he turned toward the ladies. He disengaged the carved creature from his sleeve and gave a stiff bow.

Lady Percivalia felt a flush rise into her face. She ducked her head and looked at the floor. "Good evening, sir," she mumbled.

She felt the cinematographist's eyes leave her as soon as she finished speaking, and felt grateful to be allowed to blend into the background again. She preferred it when people didn't pay too much attention to her, which was why she spent time with Lady Harrah who usually occupied everyone's attention.

The jeweled dragonet leapt off of the cinematographist's extended hand and flew back to Lady Harrah. It settled on the shoulder of her bodice and became inert again.

"You are so studious," Lady Harrah complained. "Aren't we more interesting than your screens?"

"You are very interesting," said the cinematographist, speaking in a flat tone that made Lady Percivalia suspect he was lying. "However, you must excuse me. The king has sent notice that he may attend this evening's viewing."

In all honesty—the cinematographist reflected as he returned to adjusting gears and levers—he did not find the

ladies interesting. Corsetted women reminded him unpleasantly of jessed hawks. He was aware that certain of the palace's noblewomen had wagered on their ability to capture his romantic attentions. Such knowledge only strengthened his resolve to ignore them entirely.

He had enough legitimate concerns. His current patrons had made it clear that they no longer wished to support his work. No new patrons had stepped forward to replace them. Even worse, he'd heard rumors that the court magicians were petitioning to have him thrown out, even though he'd explained repeatedly that his invention had nothing to do with magic.

Months ago, when he'd been invited to the castle to give showings of his work during the long, dull winter evenings—an honor he'd hardly let himself hope for!—he'd known it was unlikely that the king would ever attend one of his viewings, let alone open the royal purse. Still, he'd hoped. Lately, amid so much indifference and hostility, he'd found his own passion waning. Nearly ten years of his life coming to nothing: it was a sobering thought.

Lady Harrah's scoffing didn't improve matters. She pursed her lips and gave a loud, false laugh. "Why should the king come to see your screens and lights? When he wants an illusion, the Lord Magician conjures him one, just like that."

“It’s not the same,” interrupted Lady Percivalia.

Both Lady Harrah and the cinematographer shifted to look at her. She pressed her hand over her mouth, castigating herself for speaking. She hadn’t meant to say anything. She didn’t want Lady Harrah to realize that she hadn’t accompanied her here week after week because she was fascinated by the cinematographer’s good looks. She didn’t want to lure him into her bedchamber so that she could boast about it later to the other court ladies. She only wanted to watch the beautiful things he made.

Lady Harrah eyed her suspiciously. “What do you mean it’s not the same?”

Lady Percivalia kept her voice soft. “Illusions are manufactured. The screens show real dragons.”

Lady Harrah laughed. She gestured dismissively at the cinematographer’s equipment. “How can you compare this to magic? I agree with the Lord Magician. This may be an amusing diversion, but it will never replace sorcery.”

Lady Percivalia felt the heat intensify in her cheeks. She turned toward the cinematographer but couldn’t bring herself to look at his face. “You needn’t worry. I’ve attended all your viewings. Everything is always perfect.”

The cinematographer made another formal bow. “Nevertheless, I must do my part to ensure perfection. Good

evening to you both.”

He turned back to his equipment, leaving Lady Harrah fuming and Lady Percivalia mortified.

Presently, dusk arrived. Servants passed through, drawing heavy brocade curtains over the windows and snuffing the magic lights that flickered in their lanterns. In the lingering light, the cinematographist looked longingly toward the entrance, but alas, he saw no approaching figure clad in royal red or purple, no line of attendants trailing their liege. Reluctantly, he initiated his machinery for yet another poorly attended show.

The screen images were blurry compared to the tangible sharpness of magical illusions, and of course they only occupied two dimensions. Nevertheless, the cinematographist felt a rush of excitement each time he beheld the enormous golden wings he'd chosen to begin his footage.

He remembered the moment when he'd caught that image: he'd been hiking through the northern mountains, which remained ice-tipped even in summer, when he glimpsed an enormous alpha male overhead, each wing as large as a warship, embarking on a rare solo flight between the peaks. He felt simultaneously terrified and awed, barely remembering to ready his camera. By the time his equipment was in order, the enormous male had almost disappeared over the horizon. He

only captured a few moments of the dragon's flight, but it was more than enough to show the creature's strength and grace.

Lady Percivalia had seen the footage six times, once each week since the cinematographer arrived. The Lord Magician was a powerful influence at court, and no one liked risking his disapproval. Still, curiosity and boredom had driven a number of nobles to condescend to attend the first viewing. Few returned the second week, and even fewer the week after that. Now the only people who still came were predators like Lady Harrah, and scholars who cared more about trivia than their social standing.

And Lady Percivalia.

Lady Percivalia felt a flutter of rapture in her chest every time she watched the dragons take flight. There was something amazing, something unutterable, about watching dragons—real dragons—soaring above landscapes she would never visit. Ladies did not venture where dragons might be found. Even if chance brought her to the frozen peaks one day, she would still never glimpse one of the notoriously reclusive dragons, not with her own eyes.

Lady Percivalia loved dragons' shining teeth, their gemlike eyes, their metal-hard scales. Illusionists always showed dragons preparing for battle. Lady Percivalia shivered when she considered that she might never have had the chance to

behold the wonder of males grappling during their mating flights, or the strange awkward flapping of females' mourning dances. She pitied the courtiers who'd never come to a viewing, and thus had never seen the elegance of a young dragon rising from the river after his first inundation, water cascading from his jade-colored hide like a waterfall.

If Percivalia loved the cinematographer in her chaste way—and she thought despite all propriety that the rising, fluttering, tremulous sensation she felt when she looked at him might be a kind of love—then she loved him because he had brought her the shapes and shadows of creatures that dwelled outside the confines of her life.

The last images fluttered across the screen: tiny gold yearlings dispersing from their mother's nest. They rose up and vanished into the vast sky, and the camera moved upward, capturing a blinding flash of sunlight before the screen went dark.

The servants passed through again, sweeping open the brocade curtains to reveal a night punctured by stars. The audience stirred. Lady Percivalia sat motionless for as long as she could so that she could savor the thrill, hands folded demurely in her lap, breath caught in her throat.

Lady Harrah broke Lady Percivalia's contemplation. "Come along. We can catch him if we hurry."

Lady Percivalia's skirts rustled as she followed Lady Harrah to the front of the room. The cinematographist stood by his machines as always, but he was not alone—a middle-aged man stood beside him, gray woven through his ginger hair. Lady Percivalia frowned. She didn't recognize him. He could be a traveler visiting the court, she supposed, but travelers were rare this deep into the winter, and she didn't remember hearing about one.

It was clear that the conversation wasn't going well. The cinematographist leaned away from the ginger-haired man, trying to avoid his interlocutor's gaze.

"How can you claim that your invention isn't an assault on our trade?" demanded the ginger-haired man. "Your purpose is blatant. We will not be usurped."

"No, no," protested the cinematographist. "You misunderstand. My devices could never replace the art of illusion. That's not what they're for! They occupy a niche. They make permanent records for the purpose of study, like books do. That's all."

"Your argument is no more persuasive now than it was when you began. You are a liar and a charlatan."

"I protest, sir. Your characterization is unfair—"

"It most emphatically is not."

The ginger-haired man wavered like smoke before a fire. His image dropped like a discarded cloak, revealing a much older man who wore his floor-length grey beard in unmistakable braids.

Lady Percivalia's heart tumbled. She watched the cinematographer's baffled expression, and wished there was something she could do.

"My Lord Magician?" asked the cinematographer. "There was no need for this deception. You are always welcome at my viewings."

"There was every need. Your hostility to my profession demanded it." The Magician eyed the cinematographer with disdain. "After hearing my concerns, the king authorized me to dispatch this matter on his behalf. At his urging, I conceded to see your filth for myself, but I find myself unmoved from my initial convictions. You will withdraw from the palace in three days."

"My Lord Magician, potential patrons are on their way from Liendo—"

"Three days!" repeated the Magician. "If you do not leave of your own accord, we'll have you seized and exiled."

The cinematographer stayed silent for a moment. The sparkle vanished from his eyes, leaving them blank and hollow-looking. "Yes, my Lord. I will be gone in three days."

“See that you are.”

The Magician vanished in smoke and sparks, a more extravagant display of magic than he usually squandered on anyone who didn't have royal blood. Lady Percivalia thought it a petty way for the Magician to make his point, but the other onlookers rumbled with surprised delight.

Lady Harrah was one of the few who did not look dazzled. “Couldn't his Lord Magician have waited a week?” she grumbled. “We'll never have a chance at him now.”

Lady Percivalia stepped away from her friend. The cinematographist stood close by, his eyes still blank. His hands moved steadily and rapidly across his machines as he prepared to pack them for the evening.

“Pardon, sir,” ventured Lady Percivalia.

Momentary annoyance marred the cinematographist's expression. Lady Percivalia couldn't fault him. He had no reason to suspect she was anything but another flighty court lady, making one final attempt.

She wanted to articulate all the wondrous things she'd experienced while viewing his work, but the words came out halting and inadequate. “Your film,” she managed. “It's very beautiful.”

He looked surprised. He stood motionless for a moment, still poised over his machines. “I hope so,” he said at last.

“It is,” said Lady Percivalia—and although she knew that Lady Harrah would carry rumors back to the other noblewomen and they would spend all season mocking Percivalia for losing her heart to an out-of-favor artisan—she laid her hand across his. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ll ever see.”

The cinematographist looked down at the place where her fingers—long and pale from a lifetime indoors—crossed his darker skin. He didn’t know what to tell her. What words could contain the frustration of so many indifferent faces? Or the pain of having his life’s work destroyed by angry, fearful men who he’d never intended to harm? On the other side, what words could contain the amazement of capturing images of golden dragons as they winged through the blue, the wonder of transforming something ephemeral into something that would endure?

Years later, when he was a wealthy and celebrated old man, the cinematographist would often think back on that moment when they touched hands. It was the moment that reaffirmed his dedication to his craft, that gave him the fortitude to persevere despite the opposition of magicians and kings. It became one of his most treasured memories—the intense, dizzying sensation of realizing that his work had made a profound impact on the life of a stranger.

He would have liked to have told her all of that, but in the moment, he had no words to describe his tumult. In the end, he simply met her smile with one of his own.

“Thank you,” he said.

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Rachel Swirsky has been published in a number of anthologies and magazines, including Tor.com, Subterranean Magazine, Weird Tales, and Fantasy Magazine, and her stories have been collected in year's best volumes edited by Rich Horton, Jonathan Strahan, and the VanderMeers. She wrote “Great, Golden Wings” as part of a writing exercise spurred by a friend's prompt, “cinema and high fantasy.”

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TO KISS THE GRANITE CHOIR, PT. II

by Michael Anthony Ashley

(Concluded from [Issue #27](#))

* * *

Chorus

Glissando pressed his weight advantage with hymn and crest weaving, sliding from one attack to the next in a whirlwind of serrated spirals. But he was slower than his cousin, and Imre deflected the blows in collisions that shrieked like saws drawn over granite. The spiral assault was ferocious but rhythmic. Imre caught its cadence quickly. And when the time was right, he threw a lunge that brought Glissando up short and jammed Rado hard. The opening was slight, but Imre slashed into it to plant a cut across Glissando's sword arm. The Baremescre growled, swung in an angry hook with his crested fist. Imre saw the blow and raised his own arm so the crest just nicked his wrist. *Two cuts*, he thought, and waited to hear Bellico's call.

Instead came hisses and angry cries from the assembly. "Bad form, mute!" "Scrape him! Scrape the coward! Scrape the near-man!" Their disdain poured down in a torrent. Imre's face grew hot. But he wasn't alone in his chagrin.

“Don’t shame me, peregrin!” Glissando shouted. And with Imre’s attention split between the dais and the gallery, the side slash that took him seemed to come from nowhere. The world spun round, Glissando’s scowling face tilting at every turn, before Imre hit the ground with a rip in his arm and a sob in his throat. He lay reeling for two breaths before a gasp from the crowd told him to move and move fast. No sooner did he roll than Glissando crashed from above in a magnificent wheeling slash with both blade and fist. Imre’s face was pelted by flying clods, but before it was all settled he’d rolled back into the fray and slashed Glissando at the calf.

“A song and two kisses!” Bellico shouted, and the assembly cheered, but not for Imre. They were a hard lot, these folk. When Bellico asked “continue?” Imre sat amidst the torn grass, watching his shoulder heal, and growled, “Aye!”

Glissando left the field in high dudgeon and was replaced by a yellow-haired woman and her double-tipped hymn. Imre dueled her for the better part of an hour before slipping through her impeccable defense. And when Bellico asked if he’d go on, Imre could only nod breathlessly.

* * *

Verse

Imre didn’t know what he’d expected of Naldo’s quarters—filth and chaos, perhaps, the disorder of an unraveled mind—

but they were remarkably well kept. The rooms still smelled of ink and wax and liniment, of the Naldo of old, none of the fetor that Imre remembered from atop the Verzi. The Arbiter's tools and trinkets were stashed away neatly in his carry pack, his linen trousers and bolts of silk folded in a chest near the shuttered windows, his Jinan garb rolled in a bundle and propped in the corner; scrolls for language, mathematics, and navigation formed a small but ordered mountain on his desk, and near the bed were stacks of papers scribbled with the thoughts of his last days.

And, of course, there was the musket blast left for Imre: a letter, folded and sealed, with his name inked across the front in Naldo's flowing hand. There was a new moon that night and the air was misty and chill, so Imre left the windows shuttered and set a fire in the hearth. When it was blazing, he sat in Naldo's chair and by the unsteady light broke the seal.

Seven times he pored over the letter, for the first time in his life doubting his own memory, and seven times he twisted it in his hands until the parchment was a moistened wad and the words became unreadable. Hours passed before Cantiléna found him this way, huddled in the sullen light of a dying and neglected fire. She was moving quietly this time, but he heard her coming down the lane. He'd learned his lessons well.

He'd learned a great many things. In his first battle on the warpath he put two lesser-isle Silici to the sword and on his own defended the body of a Baremescre peer. He'd never before won a Silici duel, so perhaps, he thought, these lesser islanders were of weaker stock. But when he was later challenged to a fight by one of Bellico's nephews, he fought the man to a bloody draw. How he was doing it, he didn't know, but his esteem with the Baremescre grew—infinitesimally, but still it grew. Until word had come to them by messenger of Naldo's passing. Imre had neither the time nor the freedom to mourn. Instead, to his shame, he became a bitter and reckless companion, refusing to speak, rushing headlong into enemy positions, and suffering more wounds than ever in all his days. But he always healed, was always ready to fight.

When they returned to Silici Tarraneh he declined a seat at the celebration feast—he would not have been good company, nor did he think he would be missed. But Cantiléna had sought him out; she always did.

She entered the home—doubtless aware of him as he was aware of her, but saying nothing. Instead she walked softly from one corner to the next, brushing her hand across Naldo's designs and carvings, hovering for a moment over the papers written in languages strange to her, pausing to caress his Jinan clothes with her copper-colored fingers. This was the first time

she'd been here, Imre realized, and he envied her virginal eyes. He tried to observe this room from her perspective, to experience this place without seeing Naldo and his blithesome smiles, without hearing his lectures, without having every possible sensation bound and fettered to House Balgas and its legacy... its lies.

Imre flung the wadded letter onto the embers in the hearth. Cantiléna, smelling strongly of lilies with her soft trousers whispering, came and sat next to him on the thick quilted rug. Together they watched the letter writhe and curl, a worm caught in the sun after the rain.

“Your hymn has shaped well, Imre the Balgas.” He was startled by his name on her lips. Her tone was different than he remembered, canorous and more sorrowful. The music she found in those three words—“Imre the Balgas”—his dark blade, propped next to him, did much the same for the tired firelight, made it dancing and beautiful.

Cantiléna reached with her stone arm and tossed more fuel on the fire.

“Tell me what it is like,” he said, “to use such an arm.”

She laughed. “Tell me what it is like to speak with a tongue, or to walk with feet. I never give it thought, Imre the Balgas.” She held her hands up for him to study. “They each tell me different stories, but the voice is the same.”

Imre very carefully ran a finger across the palm of her stone hand, tracing a line to the tip of her thumb. It was cold and unyielding, but alive. Cantiléna flinched just slightly at his touch. “How did that feel?” he asked in Adala.

She swallowed and lowered her hands. “My family tells me you returned home in grief and anger, yet now you.... You have never touched me, or even looked upon me with a pleasing eye. I wonder now what the Sage has written to change you so.”

Imre steeped his fingers under his chin. What *had* Naldo written? A work of nonsense? The ramblings of a dead mind? Shamefully, Imre wanted the letter to be these things, but he could not lie to himself. Naldo’s words had been written with care and planning. Their terrible truth was just that, truth:

Imre was Djinn. *Djinn*. Enemy of mankind. A child of beasts. The last son of a House secretly descended from the demon race of man-eaters. Naldo had known. Bapa had known. *Do the honorable thing*, the letter had urged, but Balgas honor these countless centuries had been but a romance built on ashes.

Imre had always gone to his father with his secret worries, and Bapa would in a few hard words grind them to bits. Or he would turn to Naldo, who with his easy grin and lunatic bravado would use logic and reason to settle his fears. Now he

had no one. Even their memories were sullied. He was finally and completely alone.

Imre was appalled when the tears spilled down his face. He brushed them away quickly, but more followed; he swept these with both hands and blinked and told his mind to compose itself, but a wildness crept from his breast and took hold of his throat. Soon Cantiléna was there with her hands on his, and he was raging, roaring like a beast, screaming curses at his dead father between hard shuddering sobs.

She spoke not a word, and he allowed her to pull him down to the rug and into her arms. She held him while he grieved.

There were instances, moments before his old Adalheid duels generally, that Imre often examined and wondered what word or gesture had complicated his life so quickly. Who hurled the first insult? Who crossed that deep bold line? What had he done, or not done, to find himself on the road to bloodshed? After that night, in the home of his departed Arbiter and friend, Imre could never decide who first kissed whom, who whispered the first sweet word, who made the first awkward touch. Later moments blazed with detail—the feel of her mouth on his neck, his ear, the astonishing strength in her arm and the cool touch of her stony fingers passing across his chest.

The need was on him like a hunger as he held her down with one arm and buried his face in her hair. Her body arched and she lifted him as easily as if he were a babe, then rolled him beneath her with a weight to make him gasp. When she pressed her mouth to his, her urgency, a rival to his own, crushed his lip. His blood mixed with the taste of her. Imre pushed his hands through her linens along the curve of her waist and found her unyielding, her steely but fevered body taut to match the passionate pleading in her eyes. *Be strong*, they seemed to beg. Imre pulled her close to lift his hips against hers, to oblige her want, his muscles straining with the effort, but Cantiléna held him down easily, her breath hot and sweet on his face. He strained until his teeth creaked, until his shoulders knotted, but Cantiléna slammed him down, and to Imre's deep and fervent humiliation he cried out in pain.

They stopped then, lying atop each other panting, she refusing to meet his eyes, he cursing his own frailty as the passion swiftly fled his manhood. Time stretched on, Imre's limbs numbing beneath her weight, until finally she rose, grasped her hymn and made for the door without a thought to her appearance. At the threshold, she stopped and glanced back over her shoulder, meeting his gaze for the first time with a small and pitying grin. "I *want* to want you," she said, and left.

He lay there on Naldo's floor, his soul battered, his ribs likely broken, thinking only of Naldo's letter and Cantiléna's parting grin, each of them flaying his mind with a different agony.

Then he rose to follow her. He stepped out beneath the dawn. "Wait!" he called, but stopped before finishing. For Eroico stood on the lane, mouth agape as he watched his sister pass, stared at her tousled hair, her half-torn clothes.

Cantiléna kept her head held high and looked neither left nor right as she rounded the bend. When she was gone, Eroico next regarded Imre, began to ask a question then thought better of it. Instead he delivered the news: "Your wildness on the warpath spread fame of the peregrin with the marvel hymn. The traders took with them the stories, and less than one month ago ships from your League arrived on our shores. They have blockaded our harbor. They have fired warnings with their far-flame weapons. They are demanding Imre the Balgas be delivered to them." Eroico relayed the message while jittering like a child with a full bladder. And when he was finished, he turned heel and sprinted up the lane after his sister.

Imre felt a man hollowed, but with nothing else to do he dressed and reported for his duties. He spent a long day enduring stares, avoiding questions, and gazing out at sea, at

the masts flying Jinan's green-star flag. When he returned to his cottage that evening, his body was dough and his nerves were shot.

And his blade, only that morning a deep and featureless black, suddenly had streaking down its spine a single bright splash of copper.

* * *

Chorus

The songs blurred into an endless parade, one challenge after the other, and none complete until the assembly-turned-wedding-party had their two kisses. He fought Tenuto and Tenutea, aunt and uncle of Cantiléna who seemed able to make their blades cling to his, weighed him down until his arms were burning. Then followed Calando, a cousin possessed of a deceptively slow style who snuck past Imre's every parry. Later came Spiranda with a hymn that was more kidney dagger than sword, and Dolenta, the sad-eyed pregnant woman with the blunt blade that hit like a plank.

The day wore on, the fragrance of clean grass and sea breezes miring into an aura of spit and blood and dried sweat. They allowed him water, but Imre's stomach began to twist with hunger pangs sometime after noon; he became with each match just a half-step slower, his mind just *that* more muddled; and worst of all, without food and rest his wounds

were failing to heal. By the time the four Granos stepped forward, cuts from a full two duels past were just mending.

And what could he say of that frightening quartet? Precise, patient, concerted, and entirely without mercy, they were Incalza, quick and dark; Giusto with the rapier hymn; Fuoco whose gaze smoldered with bottled passion; and powerful Appoggia, a woman who fought rhythmless and aslant, like a drunkard with a nature for war. The Granos, the hailstorms, siblings who never faced an enemy alone. For Imre they introduced a special tour of suffering. Their tactics were exquisite as they ribboned his flesh and stymied his every plan. But finally, finally he managed to cut them all.

And when he told Bellico once again that yes he would go on, his hymn was cracked in a dozen places, and weeping blood. He squinted against the evening sun for sign of his next opponent, swatted at the midges and scanned the gallery high and low, but the movement that at last caught his eye came from the dais. For Bellico was walking near, his white *vesti* swinging casually with its wicked black spikes, and Ariosa strode at his side.

It was time to sing with the parents of the bride.

* * *

Verse

Imre was now taking *his* turn to pace the Verzi bones, to mutter and fret and seek for answers. He meandered around the open graves when the night suddenly bloomed scarlet as the Jinan fleet fired their nightly cannonade across the harbor mouth. Mute tongues of flame licked the darkness obscenely, followed long seconds later by rolling thunder. Even the waters seemed afire.

Imre forced his gaze away. He trod down the graveyard lane, watching the hellish light dance upon the dead, and lightly brushed the hymns with his fingertips.

Surrender to the marauders... or toss the die and wait for the will of Bellico and his Barescra. He had a third option, he knew. He could flee, swim to a lesser isle, disguise himself like he used to and take ship with some trader, earn his bread with the strength of his back and the skill of his strings, another sort of death for Imre of the lying House of Balgas, a death he wanted desperately. But Naldo's letter wouldn't leave him to it. The Arbiter had wanted him, *begged* him, to rescue the Balgas legacy, the honorable half of it at least. And thoughts of fleeing left Imre filled with shame.

After a time the Jinan ships quieted. The night drew down her cool blue curtain. And abruptly Imre stood once again in stingy starlight. He had to admire the marauders' showmanship, only they hadn't accounted for the simple fact

that the Baremescre wouldn't scare. Why should they when their stone arms tossed aside musket blasts? No, it was the stoneless slaves who would suffer if those cannon turned inland, another massacre of ash.

Imre kicked at a skull in angry frustration, meaning to send it sailing out to sea, and cursed mightily when his toe bent back on itself. The skull stared up at him, firmly rooted and mocking.

And crouched over, clutching his foot, he saw the torch.

After shunning Imre these sixteen days, Bellico had at last summoned him to a council scheduled for tomorrow morning. The rumors raged: Imre was being surrendered to the dangerous peregrin shipmen, or his penance was complete and he was being sent away, or, most popularly, he was to be executed by song for dishonoring the Third Blade and his hymn's copper stripe was the proof. So Imre had expected her to come. Though, as she crested the Verzi, wreathed in smoke and flickering orange torchlight, he could think of no one he wanted to see less.

He worked his toes in their sandal even as the warm wash of healing flooded them down to the bone. He tied his puppet to his trousers. He stood straight, with his hand on the hilt of his blade, waiting.

When Cantiléna stopped she sighed deeply, her torch casting skeletal shadows across the yard. “The songs here are beautiful,” she said.

In answer, Imre stepped across the offending skull and walked away from her, for in her expression he’d seen that pitying grin, pity for the near-man both deaf and mute.

“Our affairs are our affairs,” she called after him. “I have told them nothing.”

“Your brother no doubt relieved you of the need.”

“And that unmans you.”

Imre whirled on her, fists clenched. “You *dare!* The entire history of my people rests on my fate, and my fate may very well be in the hands of some barbar chief jealous over his daughter’s flesh.” He drew his blade and pointed its curved length at her throat. “If I killed you here, someone else would take your place as Third Blade. Your bones would be stretched out in some yard down in the low lands, and within a dozen years no one would remember your name. Your clan would not mourn you. There would be no sons or daughters to tell your tales. You Baremescre, so proud and strong with no thought to tomorrow. You never leave your accursed island, never make a single lasting change on the world except stonework and bloodshed and the burning ire of the slaves under your feet. Your death would mean *nothing*, would be worth *nothing*. So

do not speak to me of courage, Cantiléna, not until you have something to lose.”

She was quiet against his storm of words, torchlight dancing in her eyes, beauty and strength joined in her form like some sword of legend given life. She slid her flesh hand past his blade and pressed it to his bare chest. And in her gaze were sorrow and passion and joy and longing and everything that would be lost if she left this world. She said not a word, yet Imre for the second time that night felt ashamed.

He lowered his hymn. “You wanted to know, on that night, what the Sage wrote to make such a change in me.” Perhaps she would understand, perhaps she wouldn’t. *But I don’t want to be alone with this truth*, he realized.

Cantiléna nodded.

Imre breathed the charged air and let it out slowly. He told her of how the Djinn had come to the Zuben al’Akrab a dying race. But even at the brink of annihilation they had planned, and with patience reached for the magic hidden within their blood, the magic of change. They enslaved the desert tribes to forge for themselves a civilization amidst the starfall wealth. They consumed the living flesh of their captives to learn it, and by learning they had become year-by-year, decade-by-decade, creatures with the appearance of man. And when enough of them had completed the transformation, they posed as Fahd

the Balgas King and his nomads. They feigned a liberation of the desert tribes. They became a House of firstbloods with superior stamina, great health, and sharp minds, and led the emancipated peoples into the founding a great league of cities.

“Know now, it is not only fear that has driven us south,” Imre quoted from the letter. “It is not by accident that you are here, on this island. The League is seeking to stamp House Balgas into the dust, for by some terrible misfortune they have found our secret truth. How, I do not know. But they will hunt you, young master. They will find you and destroy the last son of House Balgas, if we let them.

“When wit and thw won’t suffice, follow the firstblood.’ These are the words of your House, and I hope that you are now beginning to understand their true worth. You will find no greater strength than among the Silici, born warriors, immune even to the weapons of Jinan. Here is your salvation. Examine these Barescre, find their power and make it your own. Consume it. Change as your ancestors changed. Follow the firstblood, and save your House!”

He had signed *Naldo Randal, Arbiter, Friend, and Servant of Lord Imre Usaym Balgas*. That he’d written in Silici made Naldo’s desire all the more clear.

Cantiléna’s flesh palm was still pressed against Imre’s chest. Her torch was lying in the grass, snuffed out. “So you are

of the race that slaughtered babes and ate men,” she said into the darkness.

Imre nodded.

“And your knowledge of this somehow... turned your affections to me.”

Imre placed his hand over hers. “The Sage’s letter brought me horror, but it also freed me from a burden. I would not continue beholden to a House of liars and fiends, and so I chose for the first time in a long while to follow my own yen, to enjoy what I pleased. You please me.”

She cupped his face with her hands, one hot, one cold. “And of the rest, consuming our flesh, making our strength your own—you will do this.”

At first Imre thought he misunderstood, or perhaps she had misunderstood. But the truth was there plain in her voice. Imre shook his head to free it, appalled. “I could not. Could *not*. Ever!”

But Cantiléna held him fast. “You have killed. In your League and the far lands and here among us, you have slain with your muskets, with your dead-swords and your hymn. But now you flinch from killing, now when it can make you stronger.”

Imre grabbed her flesh wrist hard. “Stronger is what you want, yes. Stronger so you need feel no shame in desiring the

near-man!” Cantiléna said nothing, but Imre’s anger made him bold. “To a hell of flaying with you and your clan!” he shouted in Adala. “Tomorrow you will see how strong this ‘near-man’ can be, Third Blade Cantiléna.” He dug his fingers into her arm. Then in Silici, “I swear on the soul of my father, you will see how strong I can be.”

They stood appraising each other, the last fingers of the torch’s smoke fading in the wind.

“You will not attempt the Sage’s plan,” she said.

“No.”

“And tomorrow’s council...”

Imre slipped his hymn beneath the puppet head dangling from his waist, and with a single swipe he cut the strings. The ugly soulless thing, the product of his time among these folk, struck the ground with a thud. “I am finished submitting.”

Cantiléna sighed then, and plucked his grasp from her wrist. “Then you *will* die,” she said, and walked off beneath the pale starlight. Trailing a scent of lilies. Leaving him alone among the bones.

* * *

Chorus

They attacked together—Bellico driving forward, stabbing with the frenzied speed of white lightning, Ariosa’s curved blade flitting here and there like a ribbon on the winds of the

same storm. They were a single beast, single-minded, many-limbed. Imre could only raise his hymn in defense as the blades bit home and a dozen narrow fires blazed across the flesh of his arms. He backpedaled for space but the pair devoured the void, besetting him once more with their tempest of stone. He lost his footing once, twice, his backpedal melting into a flustered retreat clear across the amphitheater floor, parrying for all he was worth and suffering cuts just the same, until he left a spattered trail of his own blood darkening in the sun-warmed turf. And still they came.

The cheers were deafening, cries and applause and shouts for every flick and slash. Bellico and Ariosa were masters, true, but Imre half expected to see gods incarnate after such delirium. He turned aside a thrust with his hymn but caught another on his shoulder and felt a new wash of blood. “Beauty! Beauty! Beauty!” cried the crowd. *Damn them.*

Not until Ariosa traced a line of hot pain above Imre’s navel did he see an opening. Her slash took her too far round, exposing her center, and Imre drove for it savagely—hip, shoulder, arm, and blade—his cracked hymn whistling as it broke the air. The lunge was brutal, would have opened Ariosa cleanly across the middle, if she was still there.

A heavy pressure struck Imre about the head—the air itself drumming his ears—even as his blade impossibly passed

through Ariosa's shape without slowing. No impact. No blood. Instead she blurred and before his eyes faded into the air, a ghostly mist. "Blind me," he swore as he caught his footing, just an instant before Ariosa reappeared with a hammer-fisted blow that jarred Imre to the spleen. Vesti met hymn with a crack and Imre's battle-scarred blade exploded in a cloud of black and copper pieces.

Even as the shards pelted his arms and chest, stabbing like needles, Imre's mind fumbled with Ariosa's speed. Here one moment, there the next, with a ghost-step in between. He knew of magicians in the Jinan deserts, of snakewives and tattooed ancients and man-scarabs that held entire tribes in thrall with their command over the sands. He'd seen unearthly feats in Silici duels. But he'd never seen the like of Ariosa.

Jeers came down from the gallery: "Beauty, Theca! A prickled coat for the peregrin!" called a woman as Imre struggled, doubled over and hemorrhaging. "Nearly a blade for the near-man!" cried another. And many laughed.

A sudden cold spasm seized Imre and drove the shame from his mind. He fumbled at the shards in his flesh but availed nothing; they were too stubborn and too deep.

It's happening again, he realized, even as the cold slid inch by inch beneath his skin. *The same agony from the Verzi.*

Imre thought of the scar on his chest, imagined dozens. He shuddered. The surgeons were on hand, he need only call them.

But then Bellico was there, blade propped across his shoulders, grinning. “You thought yourself are a man of prowess in the dark with my daughter. Yet here you are. Continue?” he asked, lightly. Imre lifted his gaze and saw the flesh beside the Maestro’s single working eye crinkled in mirth. And Imre thought of Cantiléna. Thought of that pitying little smile. And he heard himself shout, “*Aye!*”

A wind stirred across Imre’s ears; he heard what sounded like distant wolves howling. He frowned: the isle had no dogs or their wilder cousins. But his wonder shattered as the chieftain’s blade came slashing for his face. Imre, hunched in cold pain, scrambled out of Bellico’s range just as to the left rustled another windy sound—a flutter like the beating of wings—and Ariosa was darting there, her body blurred and dark. The winds gusted from this side and that as Imre frantically knocked aside Bellico’s thrusts before whirling to slash savagely at the streak that was Ariosa. She stopped short, and Imre was jarred to the teeth when she caught his broken blade on the edge of her hymn.

But the wolf-sound was there again, raising his hackles, and instinct told him to turn just a moment before Bellico’s hymn came stabbing. The pale blade ripped through Imre’s

trousers and missed his groin by a finger's breadth. He kicked at the Maestro with a raw cry and caught him on the hip, and they stumbled apart, the three of them.

Imre fell to his knees, shivering, his body numb from jaw to palm, but he flung his arms into a cross of defense and flinched from the blows he knew were coming.

Instead, nothing.

Instead, when he looked he found Bellico and Ariosa staring. Brows furrowed. Flesh knuckles pale on their hilts. They were gaping in a way Imre had not seen on a Silici since he and Naldo won their battle on the harbor road. He'd only begun to work out his puzzlement when a single keening birdcry echoed overhead, and Imre felt a shudder that had naught to do with his wounds. In a flash he realized why. The amphitheater was quiet. A cough, a scrape of sandal on stone, whispered linen and whispered voices, all tiny ripples in a yawning silence. Imre's breath came haggard—for the dread fell upon him thick as a quilt. Until he bent to see what awed the assembly so, for then his breath promptly died in his throat.

Follow the firstblood. Those were the words Naldo had written. *When wit and thew won't suffice, follow the firstblood.* The blood of the devouring Djinn. The blood of change.

Even as Imre watched, his body devoured the living stone of the Barescres. All but one of the shards had melted wholly into his flesh, leaving chitinous blotches speckling his arm, his chest. The last and thickest was merging with him now, sinking into the meat of his shoulder down to the bone and spreading cold as it went.

Imre's heart beat like a hammer; his stomach churned; yet deep in his mind a truth fell into place. He'd never won a single duel against a Barescres until he sailed to war, until *after* Naldo stabbed him with the hymn splinter and gave Imre his hard, black scar. And hadn't he, just moments ago, parried Bellico, easily, with hardly a thought? And the *thrust*, hadn't he dodged the Maestro's thrust without seeing? Hadn't he checked Ariosa's ghost-step, even with a broken hymn?

He felt giddy. Naldo hadn't wanted him to eat their flesh. Imre's stone sword had come to learn him, and he it. And it was the *stone* that had the power.

The winds built again with their beastly songs—Bellico's song, he realized, and Ariosa's. Footsteps rustled in the grass, proving that the Maestro and his Theca had finished their gaping, were coming to sort this mystery the Barescres way, with sharp edges. Imre lifted his gaze and for the first time understood the Silici strength: Bellico was practically cloaked

in his wolfish wind, its beating gusts giving power to his every stride.

Imre grasped his shorn stub of a hymn with a cold, clumsy hand, and for the first time since crossing blades with her parents he looked to Cantiléna. She lounged by the dais, regal and poised even with her brow arched in confusion. *In a way you were right about the Sage's plan, you beauteous harpy. But still, we will cross blades, you and I.* Imre scanned the gallery and the Barescre peers who studied him implacably—quiet, yes, but disdainful to a one. He sniffed at the air and caught the smells of the sea, heard the waves crashing off beyond the amphitheater walls, and thought of those ships in the harbor waiting to claim him as a token of war. And he decided.

Bellico and Ariosa had chosen to flank him, but Imre ignored them as he worked his hymn into the ground hilt first, jagged edge up. This blade would sing for him, Ariosa had said, if he allowed it.

The doom Imre felt was crushing, but his thoughts had never been so pure, so clean. There would be suffering from this, of that he was certain. But Bapa had told it true. *To succeed in this world, learn to embrace pain.* And Imre agreed, even as he impaled himself upon the blade.

* * *

Middle Eight

He dreamed he was beside a river of silver threads. They quivered each with a thrum, a note that swelled with its neighbor into music that mellowed the air. He brushed his fingers across the threads and they sang for him. He thrust his hand between them and heard a wild music. He stroked the silver threads until he'd played a song of savagery, of might. And when his melody was honed into a pure and elegant weapon, he dove into the river, letting the threads entwine him whole. For a weapon was what he wanted. And a weapon he meant to be.

* * *

Verse

Imre opened his eyes. He was standing upon the Barescre's grassy amphitheater floor. The turf stank of his blood and others' blood, of starch and ancient death. The sunset scorched the horizon with a riot of colors he'd never seen in the same sky. But it was the wind that overwhelmed: in blasts and whorls it struck him, cut him, rushed beneath his skin. Its cadence was the beat of his heart. Its melody a roar with the menace of a dozen lions.

"What's happening?" he tried to ask. But his mouth was frozen shut. He made to reach for it with his hands but his hands were frozen too. Frantically he squinted against the light

to see what substance restrained him; his neck would not turn. A panic began pawing beneath the floor of his mind.

It was then that Bellico sprang into view, snarling, swinging that white and platinum hymn in a cut for Imre's neck.

Imre made to scramble backward. To duck. To dodge. To flee. Not a muscle gave heed, not an inch. Instead his body tilted *forward* into Bellico's swing, shorting the distance by half. Imre braced for the blow. But of a sudden, a Silici off to Imre's right swung a black *vesti ferre* and caught Bellico's hymn on the back of its fist. In that instant Imre's senses jarred with a clash of sound, as from snarling beasts in a deadly toothed clinch, then Bellico was stumbling away, hymn recoiling wildly, and the moment passed.

Strike me blind, Imre swore to himself. That was a near thing. He tried to see who it was that saved him, only to again have his muscles refuse. He stood helplessly planted in the roaring tumult, facing Bellico, watching him recover his footing. *Move, damn you!* Imre screamed in his mind, but even as he struggled, a sharp breeze struck him from behind. This one was different, a flap and flutter almost pacific. He was deciding if it was familiar when a force spun him round by the hip just in time to watch Ariosa slash at him, and to watch that mysterious ebon fist swat away her blade to another bloom of

violent music. Ariosa's face showed surprise. But the greater shock was Imre's: she was dripping sweat.

She recovered quickly and danced away out of reach, jabbed her hymn into the earth and leaned on it. Her hair was matted to her face, exhaustion and excitement rolling off her body like heat. "A marvel," she said, and her words smote Imre to the quick.

He looked about.

The amphitheater had not changed in form, the same impossibly delicate masonry, the same stalwart gazes from the gallery. The world, though, felt upended. The amphitheater's pale stonework was over bright, the Baresmre's linens in colors too sharp; dust motes in the distance lazed upon breezes that floated smells of impossible things, dead things and living, beneath the earth and above. And this wind that cloaked him, though fierce, never bent a single blade of grass.

What had he done? He'd been hurt, he remembered. Someone had stabbed him. No, that was wrong. He focused as Naldo taught him, and the winds around him settled. What had *he* done? He'd been on his knees after fighting, cold and bleeding, his hymn broken down to a jagged stump... and *he'd fallen on it*. He'd thrust his stone sword into his own heart. He'd done it for power, for a Silici song.

The wind was half a whisper when the truth of his action struck home, but like a thrown door, his awareness opened. And he knew the roaring wind was his. He became aware of its strength seeping through his body. He felt it even in his breath, the roar surging with every exhale, his chest swollen with might. And all through the amphitheater whorled the Barmescre singing winds. *I've been ignorant of this?* he thought, astonished. For though Bellico's howl and Ariosa's flutter were greatest and loudest, beneath them rose a vast chorus—drones, booms, trumps, and squeals, clicks and keens, bells and growls—together only a sword's edge short of cacophony. A musical noise to reach even the stars. And still he found no match for his roaring wind.

I've done it, he thought. *But what's wrong with me?* Imre bent to examine his wounds.

He screamed.

The right arm across his breast *looked* like his arm, could almost be his arm, but when sunlight danced across the back of this hand, the color ran from black to copper to black again. Stone. *A vesti ferre,* he thought giddily. Naldo was right! But when he scanned the left arm he saw it matched the right, and that was wrong. And the chest and belly, they were stone too, and that was worse. His trousers were torn, exposing a dark stone thigh with the scars from his duels outlined in copper.

Black stone feet and matching toes gripped the sod through broken sandals. Imre touched his lips and nose and found stone, clapped his hands to shoulder and back and found the same; he beat his chest with closed fists and over and over felt nothing but distant shocks. And the voice that screamed from his throat was the rattling of gravel echoed between sepulcher walls.

He screamed with impossible breath, on and on past human enduring. But his voice was abruptly muzzled when Bellico's howling song rose more fiercely, when Imre's mouth snapped shut with a painless *crack*. The Maestro was coming. And Imre's new stone body stepped forth all on its own to meet him.

The battle was automatic. One of Bellico's gusts hit Imre in the stomach just an instant before the Maestro, in full stride, thrust his hymn there. The stab was a white blur, but Imre's body pivoted neatly and the great pale blade spitted naught but air. Two more stabs and two more effortless escapes. Bellico stumbled, out maneuvered. But Imre's body wasn't finished. The fingers on one hand bulged, snapped, and in their place bloomed dark stone claws. They raked down in a blinding slash and bit with a *thump*, four wells of blood exploding across Bellico's flesh arm. Another slash. Four peels ripped from his

vesti. And the Maestro tumbled like a grunting rag doll to the turf.

Imre felt giddy but had no time to reflect, for Ariosa was there in a heartbeat. Where her husband's song was a rage, she came with a restrained wind of sharp twittering flits. She slashed high then low, then low and low again, all with her ghostly blur. But everywhere she went, his body was there first, maneuvering with the slightest of motions, until finally it caught Ariosa's hymn in an iron grip, heedless of its bite, and yanked it from her hand. Imre's left hand shoved her backward. His right slashed her across the chest with her own hymn. A red mist exploded in a line as Ariosa staggered back several steps. She did not fall. In response, Imre's body flipped her hymn to seize it by the hilt and brought it down, without a pause or stay, whistling for her exposed neck.

And Imre watched, awed. Bellico and Ariosa had been toying with him before. Their latest attacks, he could barely assemble them into anything that made sense: an image of a face in rigor, a clash of stone on stone, a waft of sweat and musk. They were quick, freakishly quick, and monstrous in their strength. His heart ought to be pounding. But, no—his body had dismantled those fantastic assaults coldly, patiently, like a machine at work.

All of this flashed through his mind in less than half an instant, and still he was slow to realize what was coming.

Bellico was not.

“A song and two kisses!” came his strained cry. But too late.

Far too late.

For to Imre’s horror, his stone war body drove Ariosa’s blade clear through her neck with demonic fury—the sound a horrendous wet tear—until with a jarring halt it caught, lodged in her hip. The fluttering winds hushed. All sound fled. His world was Ariosa’s face, timeless, without wrinkle or spot, her dark eyes *knowing* even as their light faded. She smiled bloodily. And smiling, she died.

Imre was trapped there inside a body of stone that held this stately woman’s corpse like a haunch of meat on a spit. Her viscera spilled across his arm. He tried to look away and failed.

After a time, Bellico limped into view to stand silently beside the remains of his wife. Cantiléna and Eroico joined him, followed by Glissando and Dolenta. Appoggia came with the other three Granos, and soon every Baremescre of peerage had gathered in a rough circle, children and all. As they came, Imre’s body released Ariosa’s hymn and dropped into a defensive crouch, allowing her nerveless remains to at last topple to the earth. Here were faces awed, there intrigued;

many wore the bruises and cuts Imre had delivered in earlier duels, and from these the wariness radiated thickly. But everywhere, the singing winds danced. Not a strand of grass swayed, not a speck of dust stirred, but gusts touched Imre in a thousand places.

Ariosa's body had fallen nearly in twain, spilling her life in an obscene display. But Bellico gathered her carefully into his arms and spoke two words in a clear untrembling voice: "Beautiful song."

The Barescra echoed him, high voices and low giving the only Silici eulogy as the chieftain came cradling his wife's corpse and stood before Imre. Their gazes met, Imre's dread threatening to overwhelm his senses, until with a horrible blow he realized there was no sorrow here. Bellico had on his face a wistful smile beneath faraway eyes, the countenance of a man enraptured in remembered joy. He bent carefully to retrieve Ariosa's hymn while Eroico and Cantiléna watched, each nearly bursting with pride. Maestro Bellico walked alone across the amphitheater floor, the crowd parting before him, and he delivered Ariosa to the surgeons near the dais. Without a word they gathered her upon a litter and carried her through a stone ivy archway, headed for the tombs, Imre remembered, where the bones would be prepared for their place upon the Verzi. The assembly applauded, but Imre thought only of the words

Ariosa had spoken to him so long ago: *The dead have no names.*

Bellico returned, and as the Baresmre quieted they again bent their gazes upon Imre. He knew what came next.

Cantiléna stepped forward with a steadfast expression and a song that throbbed coolly. She slid her tortoise-shell hymn from its sling and flexed her *vesti*.

No, Imre said firmly in his mind. But his body was rising from its crouch. His roaring wind grew. *No*, he said as Cantiléna slid into her singing stance, impeccable—no openings, no tension, a master of space and balance. Imre's body crept forward with supernatural patience. Every flexion controlled. Every extension fluid. His song built in spirals until the air was a roaring cyclone. *No*, Imre pleaded, squinting against the gale though he knew it was no true wind.

Cantiléna remained unnerved as she brought her throbbing wind densely in about her limbs, wrapped it so tight it gave off barely a hint. And when she and he were close, close enough that he caught the scent of her breath, close enough that he thought fear had overcome her nerve, Cantiléna took a deep breath and slammed her song down into the earth. The cool steady throb shuddered far underground, becoming a rumble that grew and swelled until a gush of energy rebounded upward through her slender frame. The multiplied force

blasted through her, producing a shock that jarred Imre to the core. But Cantiléna rippled her body lithely and shot forward, riding the awesome wave in an explosion of power.

Her throb smote the air; Imre blinked; and he was airborne. The vault that was the evening sky tilted round, becoming first a field of grass and then a rapidly scattering crowd of Barescre scalps. Imre's body, displaying a litheness of its own, wrenched itself about so that when he crashed to earth with a *thud* it was in a controlled crouch and on sure feet. Imre's chest tingled in a slash from shoulder to hip, while Cantiléna stood some two dozen yards away, panting visibly. The hymn strike had been tremendous. Imre thought of the fists of his body swatting away Bellico and Ariosa's hymns with no ill effect to speak of, but this—an assault like this could fold a man in two and make dust of his bones.

But Imre was no man. Not anymore. Already his body was moving, shocked but uninjured, undeterred, dashing across the open ground. Cantiléna drew herself up. Her parents had fought methodically, patiently for heavens knew how long, but this woman, so recently a cause for Imre's shame, had sought to end him with a single blow. He found a pride in that, and hated himself for it.

His body attacked in full stride, though Cantiléna took his assault square, struggling gamely for space to counter even as

Imre's hands bulged and snapped from shape to shape and picked her defense apart. Double-weighted fists knocked aside her blade. A sawtoothed arm raked her flank. Spiked palms gripped her flesh arm and yanked her off balance. And only then, when she was teetering askance, did the now familiar claw rake down for her blind spot, merciless. She flung her *vesti* upward. The talons plunged through the back of her hand to the thunderclap of stone on stone, to her guttural cry as her knees buckled beneath the blow. *No!* Imre screamed, his mind afire. But without pause or stay his body, his cold weapon, wrenched its claw free, making an exploded ruin of Cantiléna's stone hand. Her song screamed. Imre's surged. And after an eternal moment, their eyes meeting through the coppery clouded remains of her natural-born shield, the ebon stone claw thrust forward for her unprotected face.

It was too much. Whatever man he'd been, whatever thing he'd become, whatever his Bapa, or Naldo, or the Baremescre believed, this was too much. He was no longer hoping, no longer pleading, but with all his might, all his being, *commanding*.

"STOP!" a cry boomed, snuffing the song winds like a breath to a candle flame.

And the cry was his, cruel and graveled and stonily implacable, but his. All motion stopped. The violent winds of

his song had vanished. Imre opened his eyes to find Cantiléna staring back at him, black claw inches from her face, mouth set stubbornly but cheeks aflush, and not with fright. It was a look only a Baremescre could wield so close to the edge of death. It was a look to melt a man to pudding. Imre felt not a thing.

“Back away,” he said aloud. His body didn’t move. *Back away*, he tried mentally, but the stone was unwilling. *At ease*. “Withdraw.” After a time, Cantiléna very gingerly dislodged her hymn from Imre’s battle-shaped arm and stood to her feet, the ripple of her linens whispering clearly among the chirrup and buzz of the evening insect chorus. She took three steps backward and, cradling her broken *vesti*, bowed to her knees. Imre’s body at last lowered its arms.

Bellico was there at once next to his kneeling daughter. He dripped blood and sweat and held a somewhat misshapen hymn, but he otherwise appeared as fierce as ever. Imre imagined against his will how the tomb servants would go about their work separating Ariosa’s bone from the flesh, and he regretted it.

“We need a solution,” Bellico said aloud as the Baremescre returned their rough circle. Their songs were probing him, most tentatively reaching, others lashing. It wasn’t until Glissando spoke that the reason became clear.

“He cannot be cut, thus they cannot kiss,” he said. “They cannot kiss, thus they cannot marry. It is the law.” The sentiment was echoed in murmurs and nods throughout the assembly.

Imre tore his gaze from Cantiléna and nearly choked on his rage. Even now they were hung on their labyrinthine customs. Did they want him to kill her? Make a minced platter of her face? Didn't they see what he was now? The fools! Didn't they see?

Bellico stepped further into the circle to stand between Cantiléna and Imre. “*Thalamos pugna* is a ceremony of cutting,” he said. “Without cuts there can be no ceremony.” Cantiléna remained kneeling and said nothing. Bellico looked to Imre. “You will need to allow this.”

Imre self-consciously made to rub his brow, but his hand moved less than an inch and drifted off to his side. He cursed to himself and instead ordered it still. This failed. So he chose to ignore the offending hand. “I cannot,” he said at last. The stone had gone into his heart. Stars only knew if he even had blood anymore.

Bellico returned to Eroico, and the pair spoke in low tones. And all the while Cantiléna knelt with her song throbbing, weak but even, and whether that meant cold anger or

detachment or pain, Imre didn't know. He felt like an old blind man suddenly given sight. What did he know of colors?

This time when Bellico came to the circle Imre knew from the grimness on his face that the decision would not likely favor him. "My family," the Maestro said, "we each of us owe our existence to the laws of the Voce, spoken into the foundations of our island and thus into our very bones." He looked down to his daughter. "Thus, despite the many kisses between Imre the Balgas and our clan, we cannot allow this bond through *thalamos pugna*." The gathering was silent, though Imre detected only consent and approval. Damn them, he decided. Damn them all.

"However," Bellico said, and the word hung heavy. "However, I myself have felt the strength of Imre the Balgas and deem myself no match."

"I, too, deem myself no match for this man," Cantiléna said in a voice surprisingly strong.

"As do I," Eroico said.

"And I!" This from the man with the three-pronged hymn.

More followed, and more, until the voices became a murmur, though many were not content; Imre knew them by the aggressive licks of their songs.

"For this reason," Bellico said, voice rising, "and because he is an incarnation of Silici Voce, born here in the land of our

mothers and fathers, from the bones of this isle, in the sight of the peers of the clan Baremescre, we invite Imre the Balgas to lend us his power, to keep us strong if ever we are weak. We ask you,” Bellico said, bending his gaze upon Imre, “to serve us as the *vesti ferre* of the Voce, as *Vindector of the Dettatura Genis Baremescre*.

“And as a sacrifice of trust,” he said, kneeling next to his daughter with Eroico joining, “we concede you the right to the hymn and hand of Cantiléna, Third Blade of her clan, should she have you.”

Cantiléna’s song flared like a blossom.

“Let those in favor so attest,” Bellico said to the Baremescre peerage. And many knelt, one by one, then in growing numbers clapping fist to breast. It was an easy majority.

Imre paid little heed. In his mind one phrase rolled round over and over and over. *Born here... from the bones of this isle*. He had been born in a century rain under a cedar tree on a mountain above the Bath Oasis. His bones were Adala bones. His city was a thousand leagues away in enemy hands. But what, if anything, of that man remained?

Imre looked over his hands at the cool black stone that was his flesh, a killer’s hands, Baremescre hands. He would have damned his own soul for the freedom to weep as he knelt upon

the ground before Cantiléna, as he ordered his fist against his chest. The fist was slow to move. But it moved. And when it did, the clap was deafening.

* * *

Coda

Imre the Balgas, *Vindector of the Dettatura Genis Baremescre*, had two homes. One was of flawless travertine stonework and leonine pillars with slaves to stock his kitchens and beat his rugs and till his gardens and refill his baths with the scorched oil he needed in the stead of soap and water. He had never set foot inside. No one had ever asked why—too polite he guessed. They were all so damned polite.

The Baremescre were even now politely leaving him alone as he sat cross-legged on the floor of his second home, Naldo's old quarters. He was situated one pace from the hearth, the fire's heat a distant sensation but comfortable nonetheless. A pile of wooden splinters rested at his side.

Turn slight left, he told his left hand, and it rotated the puppet head a few degrees. *Now scrape there and there*, and the right hand, holding the wood knife, set to work on the puppet's eye. The hands moved with halting brutality, etching a crude, childish visage that would have given Tayuya apoplexy. Still, it was progress. And he of course had plenty of time to improve.

While his hands worked, Imre spread his awareness to the songs of the Silici isles. He heard every mount and hill and rock, the scrape of every mole, the slither of the worms, the stones of the islands themselves stretching into the bowels of the earth, and on the surface, all the bestial rhythms of the living Silici, mingled with those from the bones of the dead. Ariosa's fainted flutter played among them. Imre shrank quickly from her. Instead he focused on his surveying project.

He'd realized in the early days that the Silici power flowed from the deep stone roots of their islands—sown there by the Voce, the Baremescre would say. Like a fool he'd tried walking the seabed to find where Silici Tarraneh's stone stretched to its limit. What he'd found were the boundaries of his own power. Just a single step too far and his stone body had seized into a lifeless hunk of rock. He'd spent days trapped below the gloomy currents, unmoving and undying, until the Baremescre sent parties to fish him from the abyss like lagan. Those dark, songless days had been a hell, and he understood at last why the Silici never left the reach of their island mother. "We do not sail where we cannot sing," was what Ariosa had told him. Now Imre simply listened, and day by day he added detail to his mental map.

He was exploring the seventh stratum below Silici Tarraneh—the scrape, nick, and sway of his carving work

adding to the lulling comfort of the fire—when his body told that a Silici was coming down the lane. Told and acted. It snapped itself to attention, forcing Imre from his thoughts, and before he knew his right from his left, he was on his feet, the fire to his back, the wood knife tossed aside. And his puppet, his ugly little mystery, was broken to splinters in a fist now sprouting stony spikes.

Imre understood his body's nature as he understood the temper of a familiar ship or mule, and knew he should accept the nature of the thing simply for what it was. But there were splinters in his hand. His work, damn it all! He would have flung the wooden remains aside and roared with a shout to bring the walls down around him, but his body held fast, mouth shut, stance solid. Only his eyes were his. With an effort he pulled them away from the corpse of his puppet to regard the visitor standing in Naldo's doorway.

The girl paused in the face of Imre's aggression, but only for a moment. The Baremescre had by now grown accustomed to him. "Hail, Vindector," she said with a deep bow and a clap, her *vesti* the color of rust and elaborately horned, her song pounding dully like stamped feet. "I have word from the Maestra."

Through the open door Imre saw that it was just a few hours past dawn. But on what day? How long had he labored

this time? The breeze brought scent of a recent rainstorm he'd not noticed. And the birdsong, his cunning ears told him, claimed the days were getting shorter. Summer was ending. *A month at least*, he realized with an inward sigh. A month for a handful of splinters. Imre painstakingly nodded for the girl to continue.

"The traders bring rumor of another peregrin armada nearing our shores. It carries an army of musketmen larger than the one you destroyed on the beach near Falcis. The Maestra is requesting your presence at war council."

As the girl spoke, Imre's body became convinced she meant no harm and relaxed. "Tell me your name," he said in a gravel-and-iron voice.

"I am Acciacciatura."

Daughter of Maestra Cadenza, Imre thought, daughter of Estinto, son of Gaudioso, son of Brillantea, daughter of Lontana, daughter of Libera, daughter of Eroico.

"So you are one of Eroico's," he said aloud. "I knew him well. His sister Cantiléna was—she was very beautiful." And stubborn. And loyal beyond reason. *She would have loved a daughter like you.*

The girl stared at him uncertainly. "I apologize, Vindector. I know of no one with that name."

Imre waved away her confusion. “A project of mine,” he said, “remembering the dead.”

Before Imre agreed to follow the girl, he dropped the splinters onto the pile near the fire. Half an eye this time. Not enough to be a face, not enough to be anything at all. Yet it was the best he'd done in all these years. And that, Imre thought as he left Naldo's room, preparing for a new war, was worth a little happiness.

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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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