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## THE WOMAN AND THE MOUNTAIN

by Sarah L. Edwards

A woman came up the trail, her footsteps tapping the stones that paved his head. She was one of that race who had come often to him, once. Quiet men, something like stone and something like the rain that ran upon it, had come and lived among his crags. He had liked their company. But none had come for a long time now.

The woman wore robes, loose and heavy. A great pack bent her under its weight so that her breath brushed the rocks. Two staffs dug into the soil as she climbed, steadying her along a trail that no one traveled. Sometimes she stumbled, but she didn't pause. She stopped finally in a meadow now known only to him and the mountain goats. Uphill was the cave, not deep, with a spring in its side that filled a narrow pool and washed on down the hillside. Like chicks returned to live in eggs, men had stayed there once. He remembered.

“Mountain, I have come to beg a boon,” the woman said.

The sound of a voice startled him, a rare thing indeed. “I am not the mountain.” He hadn't meant to speak.

She knelt suddenly, face to the ground, her rapid breaths condensing as dew on the grass. “Are you the spirit of the

mountain, then?”

“I am not a spirit.”

She looked up and he felt her gaze flitting from peak to peak, finding no rest. “Then, O Gracious One Who Speaks, are you the one from whom my people once gained wisdom, whose blessings gave us peace?”

Had he once done such things? He reflected on the memories of long-past dealings with men. There was aching there, and bitterness almost forgotten. “I have no wisdom. I cannot give peace.”

But the woman had gone. He found her, asleep in the cave. It was night.

He waited while she slept and while she bathed in the icy waters of the pool and came out into the meadow. She knelt at its edge and began digging at tuberous roots with a stone.

Yes, he remembered this from before. He might have called it impatience, that they could not wait while he gave their questions due weight. Only, their lives were so very brief. Impatience was a necessity, vital.

“I’ve neither wisdom nor peace to give,” he said.

She didn’t put her face to the soil this time. “Among my people they tell stories of the Great One of the Mountain,” she said, each word spoken firmly and with care. “They say wise

men came to you to learn your wisdom, that you—” A pause. “They say you speak truth.”

“They no longer wish to hear it,” he said. No, it was many years since anyone had wanted such things of him.

She placed her hands to each side of her, pressing them into the grass so that he felt their pressure. Did she know he felt her every step, the very weight of her body? “They also say that noblewomen sometimes brought their infants to you.”

“And why would they do that?”

“Because you have the power of the truth-making name.”

No.

Yet he had not heard voices in so long. “You have no infant,” he said.

“I shall.”

“You are no noblewoman.”

“I am not,” she said. “But still I come to beg of you the favor of a name. I know this is too great a thing to bestow on me, but I come with an offer. I would give you my lifetime’s service for a name for this child.”

“The lifetimes of your people are so very short.”

“Still, it is all I have.”

“You are no noblewoman,” he repeated, though he cared nothing for the inexplicable castes of man.

“But the child’s father was a great man, a warrior lost to the battlefield.”

“And its mother, the daughter of a peasant.”

“I was a serving woman in his house.”

He was wearied by her plea, by the hunger in her voice. “Then I name your child freely. He shall be Dishonorable Union.”

The air drifting past her cheeks warmed on her flush. “You mock me! I’ve enough truth in me to give him that name myself.”

“Go. I do not give names any longer.”

“Please, I do not ask for myself.”

“Only for your motherly pride.”

“No! His father was a mighty warrior, our last. He is dead now, and raiders have come to rob us and kill us. We are devastated, O Mountain. Our crops are trodden and our fields salted. Our livestock is dead or lost. I come to you, that my child may bring us hope.” Her voice had the weight of truth in it, and of other things. Grief. It poured down her face like snowmelt.

“Am I the All-Ruler? I cannot make truth. I can only tell it.”

“But you—”

“You desire some future? I cannot make it. I can do nothing for you, frail daughter of man.”

He turned his thoughts inward, away, before the woman’s grief should call out his own. That was forgotten, and he would not let her return it to him.

\* \* \*

When he again looked in the valley with its hidden meadow, the woman was not there. Her weight, though it was so small compared to a mountain’s, had made itself felt with its stirrings and its breathings. Now it was gone, and he wished for it, uselessly.

But even as he wished, the woman crossed a stony shoulder and walked into the meadow leading a mountain goat, its halter tied from robe cloth torn in strips. The goat bleated, and a fainter, higher voice answered, and then a kid scrambled down the trail behind them.

“What do you do with my goats?”

The woman looked up towards the nearest peak. “I will milk this doe, and when her kid is larger grown I will eat it.”

“Are you not afraid to kill my goat?”

“I am your servant, and so I earn my keep. This is what I have chosen, since you did not answer me when I asked you what you would prefer.”

“I was... not present.” After a moment, “If you are my servant, how do you serve me?”

She did not bother looking up this time from her fire at the mouth of the cave. “In any way you wish.”

Amusement bubbled up, an unexpected spring. “And what could I possibly wish a woman of mankind to do for me?”

“I don’t know. The women of noble birth whose children you named—did they give you payment?”

“They did not.”

“What about the hermits that came to learn and to speak with you?”

“Their only gift to me was the pleasure of their voices.”

He caught her smile then. “Perhaps I may give you that, if you wish.”

“Please.”

“Of what would you have me speak?”

“Tell me... how are things now, among your people?”

He was listening very closely, watching the wind blow faint tendrils of her hair, catching the warmth of her breath. He would not have noticed her hesitation, otherwise. “The marauders came first from the north. They speak some other language, a speech that is laughing and screaming both. Or so it sounds to us. A few escaped from the northern villages to tell us of the coming.” Her voice broke.

Before she could go on, he said, “I did not mean to distress you. I meant, before the marauders, how did your people live? Are the farms many, or few? I heard there was a town that some thought would grow to become a city. Is it so?”

“Oh. Before.” Another pause, but a thoughtful one. Then she told of the manse where she was born, not so far from the once-city of Captua, now burnt into the plain. She told of her father the blacksmith, of her mother who died delivering a stillborn son. Her face softened then and smiles came sometimes, and he was glad, though he did not care to think about why.

“And then they came.”

He did not want to hear it again, but she did not stop this time. “I don’t know what they wanted from us. Just to defeat us, I suppose. I’ve seen it among our people, too—a weak man is cruel to his wife because he cannot stop those who are cruel to him, and so his wife is cruel to the cook’s boy, and the cook’s boy kicks the dog because there is no one else weaker than he.

“But one day, the dog will bite him.” Her tone was brittle as shale. “For are we not the people whose god has given us the mountain?”

“You ask unanswerable questions,” he said.

“I will serve you for a year,” she said.

“First you offered me a lifetime.”

“I offered it in desperation, and if you require me still to give you all my life’s span in return for a true name for my child, then I will give it. But a year of my service is a good gift for such a boon. At the end of the year, I will put my child before you, and you will give him a name of truth. And his life will fulfill that truth. He will be a hope and the beginning of freedom for our people.”

The mountain would not watch her without replying, for such was too close to deceit. But before he turned his thoughts away from the valley and the woman standing in it, he saw once more her face, her eyes that had glittered moments ago with threatening tears. He felt the shapes of her feet, pressing into the soil. Then he looked instead to desolate ridges of stone and silent peaks, but the image of her remained.

\* \* \*

She was speaking. It was her voice, high and wholly foreign to the solitude of his mountain ranges, that had called his attention back from its contemplation of other times, of things better left unconsidered.

“And the headmaiden—she was a good headmaiden, you understand, and the house was always well-kept in her care, but our oversight was not always her greatest pleasure—she scolded young Melonny until the girl would not show us her face for the tears. And the headmaiden was repaid her

harshness, for the girl was so afraid that when next she polished the spoons, she polished them so hard the master broke the neck of one and dropped the bowl of it in his soup. But the headmaiden never said a word to Melonny, only she left the polishing with me after that.”

“Are you well today?” said the mountain, when it seemed she had paused.

She twisted towards the sound, but when her eyes had searched the crags a moment she returned to her twisting of the goat-hair in her hands. “Yes, I am well. Thank you. And are you well, O mountain?”

For the barest glimmer of a moment, he considered. He had not intended to ask such a question; still less had he prepared an answer to it.

“The weather is fair today.”

“Yes.” She looked up to the sky. “I am glad, for the rain beating down these last days chilled me so.”

He had not noticed the rain, except perhaps in some passing thought at the pleasant trickles that splashed down the joinings of his hills.

“Whom were you speaking to?” he asked.

“To you, of course,” she said. “You said I might give you pleasure by speaking with you, and so I have. Though I would

not guess that there is much pleasure to be found in the tales of household doings.”

“No one has told me tales of any kind for some time,” he said. “A great deal of time by your reckoning, I would imagine.”

“Yes, a very long time,” she said. “Why is that? Why has no one come to you for so long?”

He would have turned his thought away, but what he’d said was true: though he knew the voices of wind and wind-troubled trees and water splashing, the tales they told were not like hers. He did not care to turn away so soon.

“Wouldn’t you know better than I why they do not come?” he said.

“I am only a maidservant,” she said, and now she was cooking a rabbit over a fire. “Such matters are not much spoken of to me.”

“Yet you heard enough to come yourself.”

“Yes.” Now it was she who paused, though it was such a pause as when a deer paused just outside a meadow, listening for the predator. “There seemed hints of anger, in the little I heard of you.”

“Anger?” Is that what they would have felt? It had been the truth, however he had told it.

“Yes, as though you had wronged us somehow. But I do not know how it was, nor even how it is said to have been.

Forgive me, O mountain, for these words.”

“It is not needed,” he said. Then, “Does it trouble you, that I might have wronged your people?”

For the first time in some while, she looked up from her fire to glance towards the peaks, from which it must seem to her that his voice came. “I am not afraid,” she said. “O mountain, you are the truth-teller, and it is for this I have come. And perhaps if my people perceived some wrong, they will see this act as a righting of it, whether or not there was truly any righting required.”

“You speak far too well for a housemaiden,” he said, but it was dark, and the tremor of his voice through the stone only stirred her slightly in her sleep.

\* \* \*

Her cries brought his ear to her. It was night, and she lay as she always did, her robe softening the stone of her bed. But now she did not lay quietly, but with tremors, and once her flailing arm left blood trickling on a spar.

“Woman,” he said. He remembered something of this, of the thoughts that troubled men’s sleep. They needed only to awaken and feel the cool air of the night, and they were calmed.

But she did not calm. She continued to cry, though he spoke to her again, and then again. Groans replaced her cries, and her robe grew damp and heavy, seeping blood.

“Woman,” he said. “Woman!”

She did not answer, though slowly her sounds and movements grew feeble, and finally she was still. He could not wake her.

“I am not the mountain,” he said, though he had known its weight, its might, so long that sometimes he forgot. He remembered now, and he looked deep within the mountain, in a chamber dug long ago and long ago forgotten, where he lay. The beat of blood was so feeble, the breath in stone lungs so faint that another would have thought him dead—but he was not.

“Woman,” he said, but she did not answer, and her breath and blood were as slow as his, and slowing still.

The mountain peaks—did they still rise above? The earth’s long-traveled breath rushed about them. He paused to feel the stream of a falls as it crashed against the hillside. But he must not linger; her time was shorter than his.

With a sigh that would have signified trembling, had the mountain heart to tremble, he let go. He pushed against ceilings of granite and shale, and knew motion. He could not feel the frozen summit now. Downward he plunged, down to that chamber awaiting him, to the body lying within, manlike, rendered in stone.

And now—breath. Gasping, burning. Muscles limp, limbs numbed to even the feeble sensations of this lichen skin. He pushed himself down the dark pathways of muscle and bone, returning to them the strength they had yielded so long ago.

Darkness. Yes, but it should be dark. He sat, tried to stand, and stumbled.

She was waiting for him.

With another rush of breath, he put fragile, clumsy hands to the wall and staggered up the passage. He knew the way. Almost he laughed, for in all the world the thing he knew best was that mountain.

\* \* \*

He washed her, held her by the fire when she shivered, fed her bits of the cured game stored among her things. He held her robes in the stream until the water ran colorless again instead of scarlet. She lay deathly quiet, never opening her eyes nor moving. Even her moans had fallen silent.

It was the second day since he had crawled to her side, and she had not grown better. He left her there, wrapped in her robe, and sat outside the cave. He looked up the crags that he knew so well, and beyond them to the sky and the half-moon hanging dirty-white in the afternoon.

“You gave me truth,” he said. “Now I may speak nothing else. You brought this woman here—do not deny it, for you

order all things—and now she will depart from this mountain, from the world, without her child and without whatever truth I could have given her.

“Do not let her depart,” he said. “Do not take her.”

He waited. The stillness of the mountain’s depths settled in him, and with it came the weight that he had known as many years as he could remember, the burden of terrible certainty. His answer lay there, hidden from him only by his refusal to look. He had not looked in many, many years. But then, in all those years there had been no certainty he’d needed. Until now.

Now, he closed his eyes and opened them within to stare, unblinking. He did not turn away until he had seen all of her life that he wished to know.

When he looked without again it was dusk, and though the woman hadn’t moved he thought her breath was steadier. He peered out of the cave’s mouth to the deepening sky. “Thank you,” he said.

\* \* \*

The next day, she awoke. Her eyes grew fearful as she saw him, but he shook his head and smiled a little, and said, “I am not the mountain.”

The confusion remained in her face, but she did not refuse the water he offered her, and afterwards she slept.

The next day she sat up to eat the bits of goat he brought her. “My child,” she said.

“Lost.”

“Yes.” Her grip was tight around the bone, now shorn of meat. “All was in vain,” she said. “I need not have come. I need not have troubled... you.” The wondering returned to her eyes.

“Have you a name?” he said.

“I am called Caris.”

Caris, the golden star-petaled flower that grew scattered and abundant on his hillsides. “It is a pleasant name,” he said. “But it is not sufficient for you.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Once I was as the mountain, bestowing names of truth on children. Now I am only a man again, but still I may speak names of truth.”

“I have no child,” she said. Her hand strayed to her belly, as empty and lifeless as her eyes. “I had no husband, and then I had no lover, and now I have neither child nor home.”

The look in her face was of stone, as though all flesh had fallen away and only form remained. No springs welled from her eyes, for there was only drought there now. There seemed to be drought within him, as well. He reached a hand to her arm, warm and tanned, and she did not pull away, but neither

did she look at him. She stared out the cave's mouth, to the hills that shadowed the distance.

"The marauders," he said, and paused. "They remain in your land."

"Yes," but there was no longer heat in her voice, as there had been once when she spoke of them.

"I would not have them remain," he said.

"Nor I," she said, "but if my breath ceases, it will harm them as much and as little as any other action of mine could do—and it shall harm me no more."

"Do not!" he said. "Please. Please do not."

"The mountain was not concerned with the trifling matters of men and women."

"I was never the mountain. I only knew the mountain, for a time."

"For an age," she said. "There was a time when my people did not come to you—but never did I hear of a time when you were not here."

"I am only a mortal creature. I have a lifetime, as you do."

She did not reply, though for those few words the strain had been less. To keep it so, he said, "You wondered why no man has come to me for so long a while. It is because I knew the marauders before they came—not these, but earlier ones.

Do you remember hearing of earlier bands, stealing your children for slaves and murdering your men?”

“That time is far distant,” she said.

“Not so distant for me. A man and a woman came to me—he was master of all your land, for leagues at any turn. I looked to his infant son, and I could but name the truth I saw—I named him Ruler in Desolation. His father was angry, but his mother believed, and she went with great sorrow. And later I heard it was true—the marauders came and stole and destroyed, and the child was suffered to live, but blinded. And so a blind man ruled a desolate people, as I had seen.

“I did not want to see,” he said. “The names I give do not make truth. They only reveal it. But there were few of your people left when those marauders fell, and no one wished to come because the truth I told held such suffering. Nor did I wish to tell it.”

Her laughter came low and sharp. “And now I bring sorrow to you again.”

“You—do not.”

She shivered, and he pressed her into the cave’s shelter and wrapped the second robe close. Soon she slept, and he sat at her side, watching to see that she breathed.

\* \* \*

Still he tended her, slaughtering a goat now and again, bringing fresh water with which to mix her grain. They did not speak of hard things again, and though the grief still lay heavy in her eyes, twice she laughed at some word of his. Her strength returned to her, night by night.

Finally, in the evening after she had gathered wood with him far across the mountainside, she looked into the fire and said, "If I return to my master's house, I believe I may still be received there. They will not be glad of my absence, but our people are scattering now, and my hands may be useful still."

"Yes," he said. "There remains work for you."

"You know?"

"Yes." He rarely dared touch her unless it was needed, but now he laid a hand on hers. "I told you that Caris is no sufficient name for you. The second night—when I feared your death—I thought it could do no harm to see what truth remained of your life. At worst, it would only be brief, and cave-dark.

"But it was not."

Again this frail woman huddled with other darkened faces, creeping among sleeping soldiers to spoil the ground with their blood, washing the wounds of lean-muscled women and of boys grown suddenly to men, weeping as the last stranger disappeared beneath a cascade of earth.

“I name you Promise of Deliverance,” he said, “for you shall return to your people, and your enemies shall be overthrown.”

“Do you mock?” she said. “I cannot believe it....”

“I would not mock you.”

For some time she stared out across the fire, to the distant plains beyond. “Then I must go,” she said. “You give us hope again. And yet—what of you? Will you come with us?”

His words were all cold stone. They could not tell how he hungered to go, how he would shield her from all the harm he was able and let her tears wet his shoulder when she could accept no other comfort. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I may not leave the mountain.”

She pressed a palm over his cool fingers. “I’ll come back. I’ll tell you everything.”

When she had wrapped her robes around her in sleep, he watched her still face and listened to her shallow breaths. Even when the fire’s embers darkened he could only feel the faint aura of her warmth, he did not stir, though from time to time he glanced out to the late summer stars glittering against the black.

Perhaps she would come again; he hoped she would. But he didn't look beyond to find if she had spoken truth. The truth would find him, in time.

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*Sarah L. Edwards writes science fiction and fantasy, reads a lot, knits (anybody need a scarf?), and wonders what to do with this math degree she just got. Her fiction has previously appeared in Writers of the Future XXIV, Aeon Speculative Fiction, and Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine. She is the author of [“The Last Devil”](#) in BCS #4 and [“The Tinyman and Caroline”](#) in BCS #17.*

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## THE SILVER KHAN

by Stephen Case

The palace rose every morning at dawn to hang suspended over the gardens below. The light would grow in the east, and the thermal sails would slowly become taut. Then it would rise, drifting slightly in the morning breeze. They told me this was for the safety of the Silver Khan and his court, but in time I came to believe that he was as much a prisoner in his palace as I seemed to be. No one would tell me what in the gardens was to be feared by daylight.

“The day is for matters of the court,” my attendant-guard would say. “The boyars meet in their chambers, and the clerks fill their ledgers. The Khan sends and receives messages by the birds in the tower. In the heat of afternoon all sleep, and when evening comes the palace returns to its foundations. That is the time for leisure, when we feast and the musicians play and we wander the gardens.”

It was true. Everyone in the palace slept in the afternoon when the southern sun beat on the bricks and tiles and made the heat rise off in waves. I never became accustomed to the heat, though I took to wearing the robes of silk as they did.

(They sleep there still. In my dreams that is how I see them: in their long, thin robes of silk on beds of sequined

pillows or under canopies of silver. The palace no longer rises in the heat of the day, and in its thousand rooms no one stirs from slumber.)

My room looked south, and I often pushed the curtains back from open windows barely touched by breezes. Standing, I could look out over the gardens far below, viewed over the edges of the thermal sails that extended outward from the walls like a fan. The gardens stretched as far as I could see to the south, and I knew—for the Khan once summoned me to his Chamber of Birds—that they stretched as far as one could see in all other directions as well, a mosaic of manicured lawns, ornamental trees, still pools, and colossal statues. If there was ever any movement, anything to hint at danger below, I saw no glimpse of it from above.

I thought about that quite a bit when I first came to the palace, about what sort of danger would make the Khan raise his entire palace by daylight to hang like a stone bauble in the air. When I first arrived, I thought my task would be to decipher this as well as the functioning of the thermal sails. I understand both now.

Beyond the gardens to the west lay the Great Sea. They said that if you traveled north or south along the coast of the Sea you could sail for a week and still be in lands that paid homage to the Khan. Beyond the gardens to the east was home,

over the mountains. I had planned to travel that direction when I left, but as it turned out my path was determined only by the direction of the wind on the day the palace fell.

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When the sun began to set in the west, one could hear the chink-chink of the great chain being wound as the palace settled slowly back toward the ground. By sunset it would once again touch its foundation stones, and throughout the evening that followed the groan of granite settling and cooling would echo up and down the corridors of the palace. Then the gates would be opened and the court would flood out into the gardens.

The gardens of the Silver Khan surpassed all the legends told of them in the east. It was true that there were brooks running with wine and fountains with mead. It was true that the voices of the Khan's musicians were matched only by the songs of his trained birds, which were every color imaginable and hung suspended in golden cages throughout the garden paths. These things spoken of in legend were certainly true, but what the legends could not speak of was to actually be there, to step out of the ivy-covered gates of the Khan's palace and look down into gardens that sparkled like stars because there were silver lanterns hung from the branch of every tree. They did not tell of the sweetness of the air that came over the hills and

mingled with the smell of incense and the perfume of the Khan's hundred wives and daughters.

As the sun began to set life would come to the palace once again. My attendant-guard would come to my door, and I would slip into the long silver robe that was the only color worn by men in the evening.

"There will be feasting tonight," my guard would tell me. He said this every night.

"There certainly will be."

"You slept well?" He always asked this as well.

"I am afraid not. It is the heat. The lands to the east—"

"The lands to the east are cooler. This you tell me."

He would turn and I would follow through the corridors, now echoing with the soft pad of other slippered feet. There would be courtesans and diplomats I recognized, and they would nod formally or smile in greeting. There were the Khan's clerics as well, somber and dressed in robes of darker silver. They walked silently, their hands folded.

The numbers would continue to swell as we walked together through the palace and into the great courtyard. Here the Khan himself waited at silver gates. The gates were covered with ivy, and the ivy must have been moon-glory or some other night flower, because now its blossoms would begin to open shyly. The Khan would stand with his wives and daughters

arrayed behind him, and behind them his guardsmen stood at attention.

The legends also said nothing of the colors: the Khan was resplendent in silver, his robes woven with more hues of the metal than I could have imagined. His guardsmen wore silver as well, but a brilliant, shimmering argent that was almost too bright to look at in the daylight. In the muted light of the garden it cast reflections so luminous that to see a guard walk past was almost to fancy a piece of twilight torn from the sky patrolling the pathways. And then there were the Khan's wives and the princesses.

They said that the Khan had no sons, and his daughters were his glory. The men of the palace were required to dress in silver alone so there would be nothing to detract from the brilliance of his daughter's gowns. He had more daughters than I was ever able to count, and I never saw two fabrics of the same color.

Had I been watching closely, I would have perhaps seen among them a woman in robes the color of the fading sky over the palace. She surely stood with her sisters each night, though I would not know her until she approached me on the night of which I will speak.

Had I been more cognizant I would have also studied the fabric of their gowns more closely. In my memory something of

the way the silk rustled in the first breezes of evening recalls the snap of sails below my window, but surely that memory is touched by what came later. I could not imagine then that those gowns would be my salvation on the day my friend the artist went mad.

But I find I am getting ahead of my account.

The Khan and his wives and daughters and the guards would stand there, before the silver gates gleaming gold with the last rays of the setting sun, and we would wait for the faint rumble of the cornerstones of the palace kissing their granite foundations. Then the Khan would speak.

“In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful...”

His voice would rise, and for half a moment he would sing alone before the clear, bright voices of his wives and daughters joined the chorus. In another instant the courtyard would fill with the high, almost keening sound of the Khan’s palace singing the evening prayers.

When the prayers concluded the Khan would raise his hands in a benediction and say, “May the evening bring you peace. My gardens are open to you.” His guardsmen would swing the great gates open, and the entire congregation would follow the Khan and his retinue down the pathways and into the gardens.

Sometimes this appearance was all I would see of the Khan in the evening. His attendants pitched his pavilion wherever in the garden his fancy took him, and if it pleased him he would summon certain delegates or friends with whom to speak. If he summoned me, we would talk of my lands to the east and of the Khan's dominions to the north and south. He would ask me about the habits of my people. If he were feeling jovial he would offer me the hand of one of his daughters and the opportunity to serve in the palace as ambassador of the east. If he was in a foul mood, he might make references to the massing of his armies. I did not approach him if not summoned.

If left unsummoned, I would be for the most part left to my own devices. I spent as much time as possible in the company of certain officers of the guard or high-ranking delegates, for I knew I would learn more of the Khan's realm and its workings from them than I ever could from the Khan. Often I would simply wander by myself, eating and drinking with the crowds and then setting off along the footpaths. There were boats for the rivers and a thousand varieties of night-blooming flowers. You were never far from the sound of a fountain.

I was fascinated by the statues in the Khan's gardens. The absence of statuary was conspicuous in the Khan's palace, though at the time I did not understand why. The statues in the

gardens were all of men, clearly warriors, dressed in a strange armor, heavier than that of the Khan's guardsmen and more angular than those of our soldiers in the east. They stood three or four times my own height and seemed carved of white marble.

One night in the gardens I met an artist who sketched the statues in secret. He showed me his portfolio, which contained drawings of the face of a certain statue he had sketched night after night for years.

"He is speaking," the artist said. "See the movement of the lips and the line of the jaw. I do not know what he says, but he is forming words over the months and years."

I asked him how a statue could speak.

"I do not know," he said, shaking his head. "Suppose a mountain were to stir, as our geometers say they do indeed. Suppose it formed words in its throat of stone. Would a man beneath it be able to hear or perceive?"

"The statues live, then?"

He was looking about us in the moonlight, suddenly hesitant. I handed him back his drawings, and he stuffed them into a satchel at his side.

"I don't know whether they live," he told me. "One does not speak of such things."

But we did. I began to seek him out in my nightly wanderings through the gardens. I noticed that the secrecy in which he sketched the statues seemed echoed by the statues themselves. They were scattered, seemingly neglected beneath growing vines or beside unkempt pathways. The more I saw of them, the more it seemed that perhaps they had been created in the time of a predecessor of the Khan's and that the current Khan took no pleasure in them. They seemed forgotten.

“Were they carved in the time of the Khan's father?” I asked the artist one night. We stood beneath one as we spoke, a white figure surveying a line of distant trees.

The artist blinked at me. There was no moon this night, and he squinted up at the statue in the faint light of distant lanterns and then back at his canvas. I couldn't tell whether he was annoyed with my interest or grudgingly grateful he had someone to speak with about the statues that so clearly fascinated him.

“Have you carved?” he whispered. I bent closer and he repeated the question.

“No. I've sketched, but nothing of merit.”

I thought then of the pages of torn parchment concealed behind wooden panels of my wardrobe in the palace. They held drawings of the palace, maps of the land as I could see it from the palace's height during the day, and diagrams—as best as I

could create—of the mechanisms that lowered the interlocking thermal sails from the walls. There was even a rough sketch of what the palace must look like from the valley's edge: a sliver of stone in a bowl of silk, floating almost at the level of the surrounding hills, tethered to the valley's floor by its great iron chain. Even so clearly drawn, I would not understand it until it was almost too late.

I had no time to retrieve them, so those parchments and the drawings they hold must now be as unreachable as the fallen palace itself.

“I have sculpted stone,” the artist was saying. “I can tell you that these statues, all of them throughout the garden, are so similar in form as to have been carved by the same maker.”

I nodded slowly, unsure of the significance.

“And yet there are over three hundred, by my best reckoning.” When I said nothing he continued. “And it would take a man the greater part of his working life to carve even one statue of this size and detail.”

“So they are not stone? They live?”

“I know only that they move, albeit slower than any eye can follow. This one,” he motioned above him, “has not stirred for as long as my father or his father can recall. But I have been studying the finely carved lines around his eyes, and the way they grow from year to year tells me that he tires.”

“But what can he see?” I asked. “Or hear?”

He shrugged. “He looks toward those trees, and if he lives I can only imagine how they must appear to him: sprouts that spring from the soil, mature, die, and decay, all the time flickering back and forth between light and dark as the sun comes and goes.”

It was true. You will not credit it, and I did not myself, but I heard from some of the oldest men at the court that when they had been young a certain statue had been posed at one end of a certain field, and now the statue was three or four paces into the field. Their motion was such that one could stand an entire watch of the night and not perceive it, but if you would come back in another year, so these men said, you would see that a certain foot had raised a matter of inches, that an expression had changed slightly, or that a weapon had been raised or lowered.

You may wonder why I spend so much time describing the garden of the Khan and the statues found there. This was to be an account of my flight from the land and, more than that, an explanation of why my lord the king need never again give heed to rumors of the Khan’s armies massing to the west. I certainly did not set out to bring about any such victory. Yet the statues and the artist play a role in the account of what happened, and the gardens—

Perhaps I simply yearn to see the gardens again.

\* \* \*

I was wandering through the palace one day, padding barefoot down the corridors followed demurely by my attendant-guard, when I passed one of the Khan's daughters walking the opposite direction. I bowed, diverting my eyes respectfully, and she stopped behind me to speak with my guard. I couldn't hear what was said, but she must have ordered him to accompany her somewhere. They left together, and for the first time since my arrival I was alone in the Khan's palace.

I decided to take the opportunity to continue my wandering, hoping that I might gain a better understanding of the palace's layout and perhaps find myself in some area of interest that might otherwise be denied me had I still my guard in tow. I knew that the lower levels were devoted to kitchen staff, stables, the courtyard, stores, and (the lowest level, as I would come to find) the oubliette, so instead I made my way in and up.

After several twistings and turnings, always taking the corridor that would lead away from the outer walls, I was in an area of the palace I had never seen. The windows I passed showed only courtyards or inner walls, so I knew I was near the structure's center. The stone was cooler here, a polished

granite. I found myself in a gently curving hallway that seemed to stretch around a large circular room. After a time, I came across a gateway that opened to the interior.

When I stepped through I feared for a moment I had gone too far and had in fact found myself in the Khan's own personal chambers or, even worse, those of his wives and daughters.

Beyond the gate was a garden, so dense with ivy and climbing roses that I could not make out the opposite wall and thus had no clear perception of how large the courtyard was. Looking up I could make out the tops of the palace towers, one of which was certainly the Khan's Tower of Birds, and beyond that the sky.

In the center of the garden, between the trunks of slender trees so closely arrayed they might have been the bars of a cage, there stood another of the white statues. I went closer to inspect it, because I had never seen them anywhere but on the grounds by evening, and as I neared it I saw that not only was it unique in being inside the palace, it was also clearly a woman when all the other statues I had seen were men.

I have written that the statues were beautiful, that they were more real than anything I had seen carved of stone. To say this one was beyond all that would certainly be taken simply as more words, but there is nothing else to say. The woman, of a height almost on a scale with the trees, was lovely.

I moved closer, pushing through ivy along a thin trail of crushed chalk.

She wore a white flowing robe of a style I had not seen, cinched at the waist with a simple stone chord. The robe had slipped from one marble shoulder, and her left arm was half-raised toward it. The other arm was held down at her side. She looked through the trees with an expression that may have been fear.

\* \* \*

When I slept, you will be sure, and you will smile at your certainty, I dreamed of her. In these dreams I was still within the Silver Khan's palace, and his palace still drifted over the gardens, but now the palace was a ship, and the gardens beneath were the rolling hills glimpsed at the bottom of a translucent sea. We were tacking before a breeze, and I went to the window and stood in the moonlight, watching the soldiers in the sea below.

A woman passed my doorway, striding silently through the stone corridors, and when I followed I saw that she was the woman of stone. She had been brought to life, but her features seemed as marble still, bright as though a flame burned within. Then the moon beyond my windows went behind a cloud, and she dimmed as well, and I knew that she still stood in the courtyard where I had seen her.

I cried out, asking her to wait. When I spoke she turned. Her lips were those of a woman of flesh rather than stone, and she wet my face with her tears.

\* \* \*

“Are there only men then?” I asked my friend the artist when the Khan’s palace had released us into the scented air of the gardens that evening. “Have you never seen a sculpture of this type carved as a woman?”

The artist whistled slowly. I had found him in a grove, studying a grouping of three of them standing shoulder to shoulder with swords drawn. A sapling had sprouted between two.

“It did not take you long to ask, my friend,” he said, smiling. “Sometimes I think that is perhaps why the Khan himself shuns these images. A woman carved as these men? It would drive the men of his palace mad, I should think, to see such a form and know it to be beyond the warmth of life. One might suppose the glory of the Khan’s daughter and wives would be eclipsed at even the suggestion, though I speak this only to you as a foreigner.”

“Then, no,” I pressed, “you have never seen a woman such as these?”

The man sighed heavily. “Seen her here,” he said, pointing to his brow, “often. Seen her here,” he swept his arm to take in

the hills and groves and garden pathways, “never. I have tried to draw how such a woman would look. Other women have purchased these drawings, supposing I was sketching their likenesses.”

I wondered then if I should tell him about the statue I had seen, but I feared that he would insist I take him to it, and surely attempting to venture that far into the Khan’s palace again would not be wise. I doubted I would have another opportunity away from my guard-attendant, who accompanied me even more diligently since he had found me back at my room that afternoon. If I told the artist about it and he attempted to find it himself, I could only imagine the Khan’s punishment on his own subjects would be harsher than it would have been on me. (Why I was certain one would be punished, I could not say.)

I walked alone after that, as I so often did through the Khan’s gardens. I thought of the kingdoms to the east and of those who awaited me there. What would I tell them when I returned? I had learned nothing of merit of the Khan’s plans for the future. I did not know whether he wished to send his armies north or south or east or send his flotillas on the western seas. I had learned next to nothing of how his palace flew, though I had confirmed that it did and perhaps our

engineers could garner something useful from my observations.

I had not wandered far when I realized that my own path was converging with that of the Khan's retinue. The path I walked along ran beside a low hedge, and stepping through a break I found myself on the banks of a stone-lined canal. There were lit candles floating in the water, drifting between the lilies. The silver boats of the Khan were being poled silently down the canal, their slight wakes setting the lights bobbing.

I stood in the shadow of the hedge, keeping my eyes averted as the boats bearing the Khan's daughters passed, trailing behind that of their father. When it seemed they had all moved down the canal and out of sight, someone called to me. I looked up to see one of the Khan's daughters, standing in a boat at the low wall of the canal. Her gown was the deepest blue I had ever seen. I could not tell if she was the daughter I had passed in the corridor before finding the statue.

"Foreigner," she called, motioning me to approach.

I did not know what games the Khan's daughters played in the shadows of the gardens, though I had heard whispers. I did know though that when a daughter of the Khan spoke there could be no thought of disobedience, so I bowed my head and walked toward the water.

\* \* \*

When the stars were bright and the night was thick, I asked her about her gown. We were lying under a tree heavy with blossoms. The blue silk was spread beside us like moonlight on the grass.

She glanced over a dark shoulder at it. "It is wolfsilk."

"We have nothing like it back east."

She reached back and pulled it over us. It felt cool and, despite its thinness, surprisingly heavy. Now perhaps for the first time I felt I had seen the fabric somewhere else.

"Do you like it?" she asked, smiling. "By law only the wives of the Khan's boyars are allowed to spin it, and it can be worn by the daughters of the Khan alone."

"It is beautiful," I agreed. "As I said, we have nothing like it at home."

"There are many things here you will not find there," she said. She smiled again. Her teeth were ivory in the moonlight, and her skin was jade.

\* \* \*

The night was beginning to fade when she woke me. "Come," she said, handing me my robe. I had a glimpse of her form as she slipped back into her gown. We were beneath a low arbor of cherry trees. The boat rested against the bank.

"No," she said, following my glance. "We will take the pathways back. We must hurry."

She held my hand as we walked. I could hear the low trumpets sounding from the walls of the Khan's palace, signaling all still in the gardens that the gates would soon close and the palace would rise. I had no idea how far it was, and I wondered how far we had strayed last night, first trailing behind the other boats and then choosing our own way down the meandering canals before ending at the bower of trees where we had awoken. I was about to ask her when we rounded a bend in the path and saw the palace at the bottom of the valley before us.

"I will go now," she said. "You must wait here and follow." She leaned close and touched her lips to my cheek, then turned and strode down the path.

I had meant to wait only a few minutes, as she had requested, and then follow. The gates of the palace were still open, the torches still burned in the towers, and I would have had time to reach them before the sun had fully risen. I lingered though, watching the last few stragglers of the night hurry from wherever they had passed the evening. I thought I saw her as well, a slip of cerulean in the growing light, pause in the gate and perhaps look back. As the first sunrays touched the highest towers of the palace, the trumpet sounded again and the silver gates swung shut.

If I were honest (something I have been attempting in this account, with varying degree of success) I would admit that I was terrified of the Khan's wrath. It was death to disobey any of the daughters of the Khan, and yet I was sure it was also death to touch any of the daughters of the Khan. There remained the possibility that he would know nothing of what had transpired that night, yet for now it seemed prudent to keep as much distance between myself and the girl as possible.

I was also intensely curious. I had still been unable to ascertain from anyone the alleged danger of staying below when the palace rose, and I had almost convinced myself that the danger was completely imaginary, perhaps engineered by the Khan for some unknown purpose. If it was imaginary, then by remaining below I would be able to witness the action of the thermal sails from a different perspective. If it was not, I would not discover what it was by remaining in the palace each day.

I waited then, as the sun rose, though I admit the hush that fell over the gardens was disconcerting. The great pylons fell from the palace walls one by one, like the petals of some huge flower of cloth and iron, and the sails that stretched between them billowed. I noticed that they overlapped, fitting together tightly very much like the blossoms of the bowl-lilies that floated on the canals. I saw them bobbing on the waters in my mind's eye, and I stiffened suddenly.

With the image came understanding. It came all at once, as they say the words do for the poets when some long-sought expression suddenly rises to their lips. I understood how the Khan's palace flew, because it did not truly: it *floated*.

I had taken two or three steps toward the palace after this realization struck me before the second realization followed.

The stones of the palace were beginning to groan as sunlight warmed them. I turned and ran back toward the river and the princess's boat.

\* \* \*

He wanted to know how I survived the gardens by day.

I stood before the Khan and a good portion of his court, shivering and still soaked in the growing chill of the early evening. I had waited in darkness beneath the overturned boat, standing in the canal in water up to my chest, until the evening trumpets from the palace walls signaled sunset. Many times during the day (which passed for me in complete blackness) I had been sure that I was running out of air or that the boat's bottom was not sealed tightly enough or that I would finally acquiesce to the nearly intolerable desire to push the boat up and breathe in sunlight and air.

Instead I stayed in the water and the darkness, shivering and half-dreaming, forcing my breathing to slow and exhaling only through a reed I had found in those panicked moments at

shore that I hoped was long enough to extend beyond the boat's overturned edge. After what seemed an eternity I thought I heard the stones of the palace grinding against each other, but still I waited until I heard the horns and knew for sure it was safe to emerge.

The Khan's guards, led by my own attendant-guard, found me as I wandered, half numb with the cold of the water, toward the gates. They seemed hesitant to touch me, as though my day in the gardens had rendered me an object of fear or reverence (as perhaps it had). It wasn't until the Khan himself, followed by his retinue and his wives and daughters, came down the path that two of the guards took my shoulders and forced me to my knees.

There was silence then until the Khan voiced his question.

"I hid under an overturned boat in the canal, great Khan," I told him truthfully. There didn't seem to be any reason to lie.

"There are no boats in the river but the Khan's own," the Khan said in a level voice I found impossible to interpret.

I had to force myself to keep my eyes on the ground in front of me. I wanted to look up, past the Khan, at the rainbow cloud of colored gowns that waited behind him. I didn't know if her eyes would meet mine or what a look from those eyes would signal.

The Khan had spies everywhere, I was certain. I had often felt their eyes upon me in the corridors of the palace, and I am sure they walked the garden in the evenings as well. How much did he know of what had taken place? For a moment I felt like a plaything, caught up in the games of those who held power over the fate of their subjects, and I was angry. The Khan seemed to be waiting for an answer to his statement, but I bit my lip and said nothing.

“Why did you remain outside the walls of the palace when day came?” he finally asked.

A lie here seemed more appropriate. “I had become lost in the garden and couldn’t make it back to the walls before the gates closed.”

“This has been known to happen,” the Khan murmured. “But they are found dead the next evening. How is it that you survived?” The Khan was walking closer. I could see his silver sandals before me. “Look at me.”

I did, nervous now.

I know that when I am back in the east, many will want to know what the Khan looked like. His visage was stamped on coins and crests and on his official seal that marked all documents leaving the Bird Tower, and so these will be familiar to many. They are a fair representation. He has the dark skin of those of the west, and his expression, even when friendly,

seems severe. This close to him now I could not help but notice his eyes were the color of his daughter's in the moonlight. I swallowed and began, perhaps weakly, "I hid under—"

"Yes," he cut me off, "an overturned boat." He paused for a time as if considering. "What was so interesting in my gardens that caused you to stray from the path and become lost?"

I dropped my eyes again and felt the color coming to my cheeks. The feeling of being toyed with returned, and I knew that I needed to say something to distract him (or myself) from this line of questioning.

"The statues, great Khan," I said quickly. "They are scattered throughout the garden, and they are the loveliest of anything I have seen in your majesty's realm. I wandered from the paths looking—"

"There are no statues in my gardens!" he cried, suddenly angry. "There are no statues in the palace! They are figments, and such nonsense will not be tolerated!"

I had never heard the Khan explode in such a manner, and I was bewildered. He made a gesture toward my guards and they hoisted me to my feet and led me, not terribly gently, to a cell in the bottom level of the palace.

\* \* \*

The gowns of the Khan's daughters finally tore as the wind bore us up against the hills between his gardens and the Great Sea. By this time night was falling and the Khan's palace would have been settling behind us. There are trees here on the edge of the Khan's orchards, heavy with fruit, and we gathered plenty of them for a meal this night. The women had not had time to bring food.

They are crying now, softly, as I sit by the fire considering this account. They must suspect my role in this. I raised no hand against their father, but I killed him as surely as if I had thrown him to drown beneath the palace myself.

I will sleep uneasily tonight.

I will think of my friend the artist, whom I helped along the path to madness.

\* \* \*

“There are no windows here.”

The artist stood outside the bars of my cell. When I said this he glanced nervously around at the block walls as though to verify my statement.

“We are in the bottom of the palace, the portion that is below the ground when it sets,” he said. He carried a leather folio under his arm. “You....” He paused, and then laughed softly. “You questioned the Khan regarding the statues.”

I shrugged. There were no guards in the corridor outside my cell. I had seen no one since they had brought me here after my questioning in the garden. I wasn't even sure how long I had been here. Again, I wondered how much the Khan knew. Was I being held as a spy? Did he know about his daughter? Or was he simply angry that I had spoken of the statues?

“Why does he hate them?” I asked the artist. And then: “Does the Khan know you're here? Did he send you for information?”

The artist seemed puzzled and echoed my shrug. “He may know I am here. He has many eyes. If I was not to be here, he would have stopped me.”

I repeated the first question.

The artist was quiet for a time, fingering the edges of his leather folio. “My father told me once something that his father told him. It is said that in my great-grandfather's time the first Khan built the palace, but that is not true. At least, not according to my family. My grandfather's father was with the first Khan, the Glorious Khan, when his armies came to this valley, and in that time the palace was already here.”

I leaned forward. In the east we knew that the Khan's ancestors had come from over the sea and that they had settled these lands we had thought to be empty. “What about the statues?”

The artist nodded. “They were here as well. They stood at attention then, row upon row.” He paused. “They guarded the palace.”

“Who were they?”

I could tell the artist was getting more nervous, and I wasn't sure why he told me these things. He waved aside my question. “They weren't guarding only the palace. They were guarding someone *inside* the palace.” His voice lowered. “My grandfather said there was a queen who lived in the palace, a woman more beautiful by far than any of the Glorious Khan's hundred wives. The Khan wanted this land and the palace for his own, but he wanted her as well.” He stopped and looked at me. “I think you have seen this woman.”

“What happened?”

He bit his lip, waiting perhaps for me to address his assertion, then finally continued. “At first the Khan's men were welcomed as guests, but when he made his intentions clear, the soldiers drove his men from the palace. A mage, a technician of the Khan, said he knew a magic sleeping beneath the valley that could make the palace and the kingdom the Khan's own. Under cover of darkness this man led the Khan's men into caverns beneath the palace. When the morning came, he told the Khan to withdraw to the hills surrounding the valley.”

I nodded slowly.

“That night when they returned to the valley, the guards had been turned to the forms in which you see them now. The Khan was elated, but when he went to the palace he found that the queen was stone as well. He would have killed the mage in his fury then, but the man insisted that the Khan and his own men would die as well unless he showed the Khan how to make the palace fly. They did, working for weeks by night, each day withdrawing to the hills. When the sails were finally in place and the palace floated over the gardens by day, the Khan cast the mage from the Tower of Birds.”

I couldn't contain myself. “Does the Khan know how it works? Does anyone?”

“He has many wise men. Perhaps someone has rediscovered whatever it was the mage knew. Perhaps it is simple. I myself do not know the reason.”

“It is,” I said, nodding. “It is simple. I know how it works.”

The artist arched an eyebrow. “So it would seem. You are the first to have survived the gardens by day since the time of the Glorious Khan.”

“What happens to those who stay out during the day? Do they turn to stone?”

The artist shook his head. “They are simply found dead the next morning. Their eyes bulge and something has clawed at their throats.”

“They do it themselves, trying to breathe.” I was musing to myself. “But why would the queen’s guards have been turned to stone when the caverns were vented?”

“They are not men,” he said, as if that explained all. “You have seen them. They were more than simply men when my grandfather’s father came to the valley.” He leaned toward the bars a second time, his eyes sharp. “But again, I believe you have seen *her*.”

It was in that moment—with his eyes on me—I decided what I must do. I knew I truly had no other choice than to wait upon the Khan’s pleasure or anger, so I told the artist of the woman I had seen, of the slender bars that formed her prison, and of how the palace rose. And, by speaking of this last, I told how it might be made to fall.

“She is there?” he said. His eyes were shining. “I will find her there, in the courtyard of which you spoke?”

I nodded.

“We are trained,” he said, almost in a whisper, “our entire lives. To serve beauty. This is for what I have labored years.”

“Do you understand me clearly?” I asked him. “The palace will sink like a stone. The Khan, his court, all who are onboard will perish.”

He was silent for a time, and when I see him in my memory I am certain that I see madness dancing in his eyes,

like a lantern moving among trees. He closed them for a moment, and when he opened them again they were clear.

“Imagine that I am the lowliest servant on the flagship of the Khan’s armada,” he said slowly, as if to himself. “I find that the Khan has taken prisoner a maiden of the sea, that he has pulled her from her people and locked her away in a cabin of his ship. I can do nothing to free her, for she is bound too tightly and the Khan’s guards are legion. What I can do, all I need do, is find a single weathered plank, some piece of rotted wood, some way to let the waters reclaim her. Then she will again be with her people. For any price I would do that, so long as first I could look upon her face.”

\* \* \*

Time passed, and presently words were spoken in the corridor. The door to the chamber opened, and a guard walked in with a eunuch in a long silver robe.

“The gods must smile on you, foreigner,” the guard said, inclining his head toward the eunuch. “You’ve won the favor of the Khan.”

It was not the Khan’s favor though, and my heart sank as I realized I was not being led, as I had hoped, to the Tower of Birds. Instead I was taken down narrow side corridors into an area of silk hangings and incense that I realized were the chambers of the Khan’s daughters. At a narrow door the

eunuch paused. He bowed low, opened the door, and stepped aside to let me enter.

No sooner had I stepped into the chamber than she was in my arms.

“You will be dead in the morning,” she told me.

“We may all be dead in the morning.” I pushed past her gently and looked around the room. We seemed to be in her private chambers. “Where is your wardrobe?” She pointed to where it stood half-hidden behind silk hangings. “Your gowns, are they all made of wolfsilk?”

She nodded.

I hurried to the wardrobe and pulled it open. “We must gather as many as we can and get to the highest storey of your tower. Tell your sisters to come too if they want to live, and to bring their robes.”

She looked at me as though I had gone mad.

It was daylight, and the palace rode high above the silent gardens, but I knew that by now the artist might have already found the woman in the courtyard. After that he would find a way to tear the palace apart if he thought it would be of service to her. I had told him nothing but where to find her and the method of the palace’s flight. Yet I was sure that would be enough. All it would take would be a tear in the fabric of the sails or a crack in the masonry of the lowest level. It might take

the palace days to fall, sinking like a punctured aeronaut's balloon, but it would fall.

I could almost feel the stone soldiers below stirring in anticipation.

The Khan's daughter returned after a moment, her arms full of diaphanous gowns and half a dozen confused sisters in tow.

We worked all that day, and I explained as much to them as I could. I wasn't sure they understood and I was almost sure that none of them believed me, but they smiled shyly and laughed at seeing their gowns torn and fitted together as though it was a game. I didn't know how the silk of the sails was joined together, so I folded the edges of the gowns, had the women stitch them as tightly as they could, and sealed them with wax.

When it grew late and the eunuch came to escort me back to my cell, a long sheet of the fabric covered most of the floor of the chamber. The castle was beginning to settle for the night, and I wondered if it would rise again in the morning.

\* \* \*

That night in my cell in the oubliette, I dreamed of the statues. They were beneath the waves of a true sea, like figureheads fallen from some passing fleet. They were draped in seaweed, calling to each other. Their queen was lost, they

said, and they pointed to show me where. I watched their arms stretching, slowly, for what seemed like years, until the moon rose and positioned itself at the ends of their outstretched fingers.

\* \* \*

The palace did rise once more, with the heat radiating from the stones, soon after I heard the silver gates slide shut above. I spent the day in expectation, either for a slow listing of stones or the tread of feet outside. The footsteps came first, late in the morning.

His guards took me from my cell into the central corridors of the palace. Here the stones gave way to marble, and I was led up wide, spiraling staircases. After a time I realized that we were heading to the Khan's Tower of Birds.

I had been there once before. The tower is large, and the Khan's chamber at the top encompasses the entire upper storey. The final staircase ends in narrow bronze doors that open to the floor of the room, and the room is wide with windows on every side. Along the walls beneath the windows, there are cages upon cages of birds of every type. Birds perch along the windowsills, and there are others constantly arriving or leaving with bits of paper in their beaks or wrapped with ribbon and clutched in talons.

As I passed through the narrow doors and saw the windows open on every side, I was struck by the feeling of floating atop a sea. The palace was my ship, the thermal sails visible faintly below were my sails (though they truly held no such function), and I stood now far at the top of a rigging of stone and iron.

The Khan rose from where he had been consulting with his ministers in one corner of the room and walked across the carpets to where I stood. When I had been in this room once before I had noticed how much like the faces of the hawks around him the face of the Khan had appeared. It looked even harder today, its dark features set.

I bowed slightly, very aware of the guards flanking me, of their huge curved swords hanging at their sides.

“I welcome you to my palace,” the Khan said slowly, “to my kingdom. I welcome you in good faith as an envoy from my brother to the east. Now I ask: why were you sent here?”

I spoke as slowly as the Khan. “I was to gather information of you and your realm, of the habits and customs of your people.”

“And when you return, what will you tell?”

“I will say that the Khan is a very great khan, and that he rules in a land more fantastic than they would believe possible.”

He studied me. “Your people, will they believe this?”

“I do not know, majesty.”

The Khan had taken a half step past me and was looking at the window at my back. Turning, I could see that sun was nearly overhead.

“I pass the noon hours here, to feel the heat off the stones as the palace sleeps beneath me. In the evening, when the palace has landed, I will gather my wives and daughters and release my people into the gardens.” He paused. “Your people, they will want to know how my palace flies.” He did not voice it as a question.

“I’m sure they will, majesty. I will tell it, for I believe I know.”

He seemed to not have heard. Instead he said, “We find a man in my courtyard today, one of our artists. He is gone mad, screaming that it would be him to bring the palace down forever. He speaks of sins of my father and his father before him.” His face had become hard. “He laughs when my guards kill him. You know this man I think.” I nodded. “He was a good artist. I have him sketch portraits of many of my daughters.”

At this last word the guards on either side fastened vice-like grips on my arms. The sun beat down at the sills of the

windows, and I heard very faintly the clink-clink of the huge chain stretching down to the ground far below us.

“Beauty drives some men mad,” the Khan was saying. He stepped closer, and suddenly I was sure that the shape beneath his folded robes was indeed a jeweled dagger.

I would have asked him again then about the statues, whether the stories the artist had told about them and the Glorious Khan were true. It seemed I had nothing more to lose, but it was at that moment that the palace began to fall. I heard a noise like a huge sucking, like something large coming unstuck from mud. From very far below there came the sound of huge gates crashing, then the echoed sounds of hundreds of doors throughout the palace slamming and giving way to an unseen fluid forcing its way up, through corridors and chambers. Everything in the palace began to tilt to one side.

The guards had already released me and were hurrying to the windows to stare below. The Khan yelled orders to his men.

“It’s air, your majesty,” I said quickly. “It’s air being forced upward through the palace. I suppose it’s getting trapped in pockets along the way and pushing through cracks in the rocks. Doors are being blown out too.” It seemed so simple that the explanation brought no fear, though later, when I would think of what it truly meant, I would try to forget.

The palace tilted farther, and now the Khan and his guards were scrabbling for handholds on the stones. Around a gable of a tower roof came his daughters' spinning coracle, a wooden skiff suspended in the center of a bowl of silk, and I threw myself from the Tower of Birds as it passed beneath.

We rose, or the palace fell, until the peak of the Bird Tower was a tiny spoke beneath us, and it truly felt as though we floated upon a sea now, for there was no vastness of stone about us nor was there a chain tethering us to the valley floor.

The wind over this invisible sea pushed us west, toward the ridge of mountains that separated the valley from the true sea, and we rode before it.

\* \* \*

Now in the dying light of this fire at the edge of what had been the Khan's orchards I bring this account to a close. When or if I return to my people in the east, they may or may not hold me accountable for the deaths of the Khan and his court. All evening as the sun dropped we watched birds come and hover over the valley, searching for a tower no longer there. I thought I could see marble shapes moving through the gardens below us, but it may have only been the play of light.

The daughters of the Khan have worn themselves out with weeping, and now they speak of the lands beyond the sea and finding husbands for themselves among the boyars of the

Khan's islands. They wear no silk, but they are lovely, and their sister has come to lie beside me.

My thoughts turn for a moment to the artist, and I wonder what forgotten portal or rusted hatch he must have forced open before the Khan's guards found and killed him. I wondered if he was happy to know his blood had been spilled in the service of a woman of stone. Perhaps the Khan was right and this was all madness.

I end now. I find I have written this only so that one day, if you sail over a strange and silent sea, you will know something of what lies beneath your silky ship.

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## COVER ART

“Sabicu,” by Myke Amend



Myke Amend likes to mix the dark with the lighthearted, the serene with the chaotic, making pieces that can invoke different and opposing thoughts and feelings. He has been featured and/or interviewed in *Kilter Magazine*, *Dark Roasted Blend*, *IO9*, *Fantasy Art*, *Brass Goggles*, *Elfwood*, *Superpunch*, and many other web magazines and blogs. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.mykeamend.com/>.



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