



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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CHILD OF SUNLIGHT, WOMAN OF BLOOD

by Tina Connolly

In a narrow cave of a hot green earth that circled a red sun, I faced off against a woman who would command the world. The battle had raged ten years; fought on wheat-dusty plains, on the tops of woven sky-trees, on the crusty foam of sand-flecked oceans. Now I pulled ahead, now she. But these last three years had closed around me. My companions had been stripped away, my defenses sundered, and now the pitch-black of the cave slashed me from Mother Sun. Yan, Bloodwoman of the Plains, enslaver of two races, closed her hand on my throat.

I am only the last of the *maar*, the sun-beloved *maar*, and she had broken my feather-wove wand with a blow of her hatchet.

The *maar* have sheltered the people of the jungle since shortly after humans were first birthed from sunlight and coal, since the gods saw that the cruel leaders of the blood-drenched plains would overrun the peaceful junglefolk. We are the last gift of the gods—human with a purpose, we say. Sworn to bring *freedom*.

Here in the blackened cave I was at the mercy of the Bloodwoman of the Plains. But I could still spit.

Yan released me. “After a decade, I will not martyr you,” she said. “You should never have dared look at me, let alone challenge.” I could see her only in the haze of her spellglow—Yan would never risk fire near me, fearful I could draw from it the way I could the sun. Her lips and eyes were blood-red, a magical affectation. No surprise that the Bloodwoman of the Plains would use power drawn from sacrifice to her own glory.

“I’d dare anything for my people,” I said. My hand closed on my broken wand.

Yan stomped the cavern floor like a thundering bafalo. “Your people? The junglefolk don’t care about you. You think you fight for them, but they see us fight, and to them it is like trying to understand the skirmishes of the gods. They don’t care that you’ve spent your life for their...what is that word you cry, that word of your sun-deviled *maar* tongue?”

“*Freedom*,” I said. “It is not so untranslatable.”

“I have yet to hear a definition I like,” said Yan. She pointed a taloned finger at me. “You may think about your failure. You will have time.”

“And so will you,” I said. “Will not one who maintains her own life through others’ blood come to regret it? How long can you live before they tear you limb from limb? You are not a goddess, Yan. I bid you remember that.”

A tight cruel smile was the only answer. “*Essan y temporo.*”

The blood-power of Yan was legendary. She had presided over so many sacrifices that blood caked under her nails and would not leave; blood coated saltily over her teeth and would not flake free. A child of the *maar* has the might of the sun when it is visible, has her wand to tide her through the night. Yan’s power was accessible any time, any place. A searing wave of ice swept me.

There is one spell you can do with a *maar*’s broken wand. I set it *free*. *Free* to turn against the one who shattered it, if that was its wish.

Such was Yan’s blood-given power that ice swept up my feet and shins before the wand had half fallen from my hand. By the time she put the last locking words on, I was encased.

The outside world stopped for me.

* * *

It is an old saying that the *maar* can track a jaguarro by understanding the heartbeat of the sun. Like all sayings about the *maar*, it is truer than you think. But I tell you, take away that sun and we are as helpless as any.

In that coal-dark cave, time ran for me like a hobbled spider, now fast, now slow, lurching as the world ran ‘round its clock. For the first century I thought of strategy. What I would

do with the changed world when I was freed, for Yan could not live forever. In the second century I found solace in remembering the tales of the gods, in repeating to myself the words of their failures and miseries, triumphs and joys.

For the third I thought only of food. Bafalo haunches spitted and roasted over fire, crackling crisp black-gold on the outside. Tender spinica leaves, folded around melting pepperpear fruit. And chokolat, always chokolat. The human part of me overcame my *maar* heritage, and I spent my precious time arranging menus.

Thus three centuries passed for me: the last of the *maar*, frozen in ice, unable to fulfill her sworn purpose.

* * *

Pleny was the one who freed me. I knew her not then; but as a many-great granddaughter of my sworn enemy, I knew her soon enough.

The first I saw of her was a light in the cave, interfering with a tender reminiscence of warm artikokes in the spring. The light might as well have been a sound, a touch. At first it seemed impossible to reconcile with something my eyes could use, so unaccustomed was I to vision.

Pleny prepared a spell, I understood later. For next I saw the dusky copper blur of her as water shimmered across my eyelids, melting down my cheeks. The ice cleared my nose and

smell returned immediately, perhaps because I had been priming it for the last century. But it was not the fresh earthy smell of artikokes.

It was the dark acrid tang of a blood-powered world of sacrifice.

Ice dripped from my eyes like tears as I saw that the world had continued to fall without me. It had not righted itself, and—I knew not how, yet suddenly cold fright ripped through me—Yan was yet alive three centuries hence. Living on blood, a mosquito Queen.

When the ice fell from my lips, Pleny asked me my name and my greatest wish. Waterlogged as I was, I recognized the reference. Had I not comforted myself with this very tale a mere century and a half ago? When the goddess of grief was imprisoned as a cloud, she became thick and grey, and drought swept the land. The hero Mashavo soared to the heavens on a phenyx and released her with flame. As the rains fell, he fell with her, fell broken on the land. Dying, he begged of her to tell him her greatest wish.

Though I would not rate any descendant of Yan near a hero, I appreciated the courtesy.

“I am Ifit,” I said, “and I wish for only what the grieving goddess once wished for: that a desolate land should be rejuvenated with the water of tears.” Which was true enough,

though for this land to be reborn, the jungle people needed *freedom* from the plains. Needed to be left in peace to gather their peppercorns and trade peacefully for bafalo. Not pressed into blood-caked service, sacrificed to the glory of a despotic ruler with a thirst for gore.

I did not say that. When one is half immobilized, one should see which way the wind is blowing...before it topples you over.

A wise move, that was. Pleny finished dissolving the ice that held me, led me up the riverbed and into a new world.

A world with a long road that led straight from the river to the heart of town. At that heart I saw her, a massive golden statue of —

“Yan,” said Pleny, touching the pulse of her throat in obeisance.

My head swam as we started down that long road. Carts jangled around us, crossing back and forth through town; new styles, new colors. Gentled bafalo pulled machinery whose purpose I could only guess at. And everywhere I looked I saw the black straight hair of the plains, the brown curls of the jungle, all mixed together, some pulling carts, some riding in them. What new world was this?

I shivered, wondering why the rising dawn was not restoring my warmth, my spirits. My bones felt thick and cold,

and they ground against each other like stone in my sockets. Surely Mother Sun had not forgotten her final child.

Yet even a forgotten *maar* knew her duty. *Freedom*. It was time to think of strategy once again, and not sun-warmed artikokes. “Tell me,” and I closed my eyes against the cacophony of *new*, praying my insight on my release was correct, “do you have need of me?”

“Yes,” Pleny admitted. Something in my eye may have reminded her of my heritage, for as she knelt, the pearls on her gauze veil thumped the dirt. A bafalo rumbled behind her, its mere presence reminding me of my stomach.

“Rise, my child.”

She was wary, and her veil trembled in front of erratic breaths. “Though it was high hubris to advise, I counseled the great Yan not to release you. Yet she has said you shall help us, and not harm. Is it so?” I picked out her words slowly, hearing the shifted tones, the new slurrings, the whims of three centuries of change.

“Place one drop of the venom of the siniss in one well of purest water,” I said, “and the water does not kill but cure. But why is Yan so sure?”

“Oh, no!” she said, ignoring my pointed question. “Teachers. Run!”

One man and two women suddenly appeared out of the cart traffic. The man held a fishing net; the women ropes. The man swung his net for us, but Pleny pushed me aside, pulling out a stone knife. Despite her veiled costume, she seemed competent at this form of fighting. Perhaps, too, the Teachers were bound not to hurt us, for though the women tried again to circle us, they did not bring forth weapons.

I was cold inside. There was no sunlit warmth to draw from. I could not even protect myself.

Perhaps I was not forgotten, but being *punished*. Retribution for my failure of three centuries ago.

Pleny dragged me behind her, off of the main road, cutting through side streets. My frozen joints stumbled behind, my thoughts numb and circling. “You said we’d been released by Yan herself.”

“Won’t matter to them,” said Pleny. She dug at her belt. “The traitors stop at nothing.” Quick flips and sharpened notched discs went flying from her fingertips. One of the women yelped and went down with a disc sticking from her thigh. The man was nowhere in sight, but the second woman angled through a crunch of people and still chased us.

“Who are these Teachers?” I panted.

Pleny maneuvered us around a sight-blocking wagon, darted into an alley and yanked me down it. A black door stood

an inch ajar and she tugged me through the doorway, into a room stocked with grain and curing bafalo hocks.

“They are disbelievers,” whispered Pleny, and her veil shot out in sharp puffs. “They reject the worship of all gods and treat the well-known history as children’s tales.” She clambered onto a cocoa-colored barrel, limber despite her heavy skirts, and peeped out a dirty window set high on the wall. “Last one’s gone. Come, we will go out a side door.”

I was shocked at the foolishness of these Teachers. “Surely they are addled,” I said. “Three centuries may bring strange changes in man, stranger even than his syntax or fashion.”

Pleny did not answer. She tugged on my arm to follow her. This I saw, but did not feel. My arm might as well have been made of stone. Had it been stone when Pleny touched me upon my awakening? No, I had clearly felt the water running down my cheeks.

Yet I was not all stone. When Pleny led us through a crowded kitchen, my old cold stomach roared in answer. Fire flashed on a hearth and men shook copper pots of grains over it. A man sliced bafalo sausage against his fingers, dropping it into a massive, pitted iron pot. The sharpness of pepper and fennel, the richness of fat and starch shook me like a physical blow. But I suppressed that earthly desire. My century of food

dreams were meant to be instructive and comforting, much like the century of the stories of the gods.

My gods, my beloved gods.

My Mother Sun.

We slipped past a cloakroom and out the side door of the restaurant, for such it was, though taverns were never that grand in my day. The women unveiled themselves at breakfast, I was glad to see. Perhaps the overwhelming modesty I had seen on the streets was merely a fashion choice, though an unflattering one.

Still, my mind was on our gods, on the foolishness of the Teachers. “Consider the two moons that light our night sky,” I said to my modern guide. “Who placed them there if not the god of suffering, hoping against hope that his beloved, the god of justice, would return home from the war? As long as the moons hang in the sky, we are all watching for justice to return.”

“The Teachers do speak of a power known as Natural Causes,” said Pleny.

“Like unto a god?” We turned on a street filled with painted carts. Men in striped aprons accosted me with speared pineapple, pancakes folded around pepperpear and coconut curls, sticks of peppered bafalo. I touched my lips, wondering if they tinged with drool I could not feel.

Pleny strode through this bounty, uncaring. “Like unto,” she replied. “And yet, not. It is a featureless power, stripped of all personality, bereft of possibility of human understanding.” She stared down a man holding a lockable metal box, open to display morsels of chokolat. “We are not interested.”

But I could not seem to move my feet past that spot, and the man knew it. “Melted chokolat inside,” he said. “Warm and nourishing. The drink of Altea, the goddess of love as she seduced the human scholar Timon. *‘Come, my love and drink your fill / Be warmed and readied at my touch / Wet your tongue, my love, and come, come in.’*”

“You blaspheme to the last of the *maar*,” said Pleny. “She is not interested in your tales.”

I saw her grab my arm and then I was pulled along again, out of that bustling street and back down alleys.

“He was correct that Altea drank chokolat,” I said, trying not to think of its warmth. “It is one of the few earthly foods so blessed.”

“He was quoting a play performed by the Teachers,” said Pleny. “One by one the gods revealed to be impotent fools. The glorious romance of Altea and Timon is played as a lustful farce. The chokolat is mud.”

The changes of this modern world reeled in me like the hunger that tortured my cold bones. I felt as struck dumb as

the Heroine Menyna when she surrendered her tongue to the god of honor for the sake of a sword to slay all men who had even a drop of evil in their hearts. When her little brother pricked his finger on the swordpoint and died, Menyna shouted her rage and betrayal at the gods, and that tongueless cry was heard from ocean to ocean.

Pleny's veil trembled. "Do you understand now why the great Yan has need of you?"

I had never thought I might join forces with my greatest enemy. It still hardly bore thinking on. Yet I was the last child of the last gift of the gods. Was I not bound to uphold the truth and glory of them in this bewildering modern age?

"Lead me to her," I said.

With a weather eye out for more Teachers, Pleny led me among the alleys and houses. As we passed a myriad of strange things, I asked questions, and Pleny spoke to me of the changes of this modern world; of the new fashions, the new style of roofing, advances in sanitation. She spoke of a world that was greatly improved in the mingling of blood and the mixing of races, strange though that sounded to my observations of two tribes that had hated one another.

Yet I discerned that other oppressions had befallen the city. A weak puppet king ruled, a bloodfollower of Yan. Women were second-class citizens who could not own land or money, a

concession Yan had been forced to grant the puppet king's great-great-grandfather. Meanwhile the Teachers (and Pleny spoke of them with scorn and fear intermingled) were making frighteningly fast progress, gathering their forces to overthrow the current rule.

I had no time to sort through my thoughts on the current situation before we arrived back on the main road, heading to the statue of Yan. We were very near it now, and here the crowds thinned; no people or carts impeded our progression to the monument.

The statue was perhaps twenty feet high, of a heavy naked woman sitting crosslegged in the waterlily position. She was a deep reddish gold, as if blood had mingled with the metal when it was poured. Her eyes were garnet, and her skin was studded with sharp crystal structures that glittered in the steadily-rising sun. It seemed a perfect likeness of Yan, though not as I had known her. This Yan was old and obese, her burnished cheeks and breasts full and drooping. Whereas the Yan who had faced me in the cave was middle-aged, trim and athletic, a fighter Queen.

We went right up to the statue, and Pleny placed my hand alongside hers on the cold gold knee of Yan.

“Great Yan, I have brought you the evil one,” said Pleny. She inclined her head and the pearls on the veil clacked against

the statue's thigh. "She is ready to hear your wisdom."

Shocked by Pleny's words, my gaze fastened on the cold garnet eyes. It was not a statue of Yan, it *was* Yan.

How could this be?

"I have calcified while you sat," Yan said. The statue did not move, but her words resonated inside my skull. "The tail of your wand's curse caught me. But for all that, I am still here, and you are a forgotten anecdote of a forgotten war."

"Wait for the sun to hit noon," I said boldly, "and I will rally my people soon enough."

Silence. Then Yan laughed, and it rumbled the earth under my feet. "Did you ever before have to wait for noon?"

"No," I admitted. "But never was I frozen for three centuries. I expect it takes more time to feel the power return in me. It is a slow working to warm my old bones."

But I did not believe this, and Yan knew it.

"The benefits of a lifetime of service—no! Of an entire family's lifetimes of service," said Yan. "Your centuries in the cave have severed you from your weakling goddess. The gods are nothing compared with my host of souls."

Pleny pointed dramatically down the road with her free hand, as if she understood what grand gesture the gold and diamond statue would make. I noticed then that Yan sat in a shallow depression in the rock. Two troughs formed long

canals on either side of the road, from Yan to the distant end near the river. I had thought them gutters, but now I understood why they were the color of rust.

“Every day they march to feed my glory,” said Yan. “They hate it—still they come. Oh, your people are equal enough now. Junglefolk, plainsfolk—they all mingle together, dally in the sheets and knife each other for coin. And every day they make sacrifice. Blood I get. Toes, ears, fingers. Lives. And all willing...so to speak.”

I ignored Yan’s familiar boasting. “I heard they have broken with the old gods,” I said. “This troubles me greatly. Why have you not stopped their foolish ways sooner?”

“I am powerful beyond imagining, yet your curse caught me and I cannot move. Pleny is my eyes and ears here in town, but it is not the same. Women are not as they were in my day—oh, the whole climate’s changed.” The golden form rumbled regret.

“You no longer rule,” I said. “They bring you gifts and blood, wrong though it is. But you no longer rule. A handful of men hold this city; I am told others hold groups in the jungle, wagons on the plains. Afeared, the cityfolk all praise you...but you no longer rule.”

“Which is why you shall be my commander,” said Yan. “You have the power to roam. You will fight the others back

from this city, and take it for us.”

“I am shocked you woke me for so feeble a reward,” I said. “Of course I have no interest in your plans.”

“You are the last of the *maar*, and you are bound to protect your people. Your people and my people are now the same. Win back the city and we shall praise the gods once more.”

“You cannot think that I would help you!”

“Our people want peace,” said Yan. “You are sworn to aid them to get it.”

By some rumbled transmission Pleny knew that our audience with Yan was through. She pulled me down the long road away from the statue as I mulled my options.

Ever did Yan mistranslate *freedom* as peace. Still, protecting my people from the crazed and foolish rule of the Teachers? Yes, on that, at least, we might agree.

Yet my natural stubbornness warred in me. Aiding my lifelong enemy was so repugnant I could scarce countenance the thought. The last child of the *maar* was not a coward, but surely the gods did not reward a lifetime of service by severing me from them and suggesting I enslave myself to a bloodthirsty monster.

“I do not understand why Yan has need of me,” I told Pleny.

Her veil trembled, a motion I had begun to associate with her smoothing away her natural fear, replacing it with a learned courage. I admire learned courage, for our inner selves are not easily mastered.

“Our goddess is great,” she said. “We who worship know it. But a man named Ton has come to prominence in the city, and he would have our goddess destroyed. Our goddess is unwilling to smite him with her own hands. Thus she needs you.”

“Unwilling?” I said. I hardly dared hope that my wand, child of my heart, had done a slow working against the terrible Yan. “Unwilling—or cannot?”

Pearls clacked as her chin raised. “Do you need to be told that you malign the great Yan?”

“I would assist our people,” I said. “I need to know what I work with. When did Yan last use her power?” I imagined my wand working against her, turning her slowly immobile. Until all she could do was receive blood worship, but not send it out.

“Yan has plenty of ability to strike with you. That is all you need know.”

I could not stop my loose tongue from talking. “But what is this of your goddess? Does Yan claim to speak for one of the goddesses?”

“Yan has become one,” Pleny said. “She is our goddess.”

I sucked in my breath, appalled.

“You will see Yan at sundown,” Pleny said sharply. “Then you will believe.”

“Blasphemy,” I said. “Yan is as human as you or I, for all she has four centuries of blood-debt accrued to her name. When the gods take her at last, she will be not the tender morsel of a single human soul, but an entire feast.”

“There is still time to return you to your cave,” said Pleny. “I might claim that my poor mastery of the spell failed to fully restore you from your icy bonds. Alas, you sickened and refroze by nightfall.”

It was the first spark of independence I’d seen from her. As one who loves *freedom* I was pleased, though her words rang too close for comfort. As the last of the *maar*, I was not skilled in practicing cowed submission, so I only said, “I am well-reminded that the world has changed,” and touched the pulse of my throat.

I could not feel the lifeblood beating in my heart.

* * *

I wandered the city all that morning, picking through crowds, on feet I could no longer feel. Though Pleny was clearly reluctant to allow me my liberty, Yan had told her to let me go. I was bid to return at sundown to see the miracle of which Pleny spoke. The miracle that would make me believe Yan was a goddess. Little enough chance of that.

The people were endlessly surprising to me, with their mixtures of plains hair and jungle skin, and vice versa. I did not know how I felt about it, but I reminded myself that these people were not the same as the people I knew three hundred years ago. If my people were *free*, than I would be content, even if it was in a way I could not have predicted.

But were they *free*?

Yan spoke of the Teachers as the oppressors, threatening our folk. I studied the people in the market, listening for words to support this. Yet what I heard were men speaking quietly that the Teachers would liberate them from their blood duties (for through the puppet King, Yan demanded it twice a month from one from every household). This was what she meant by voluntary sacrifice? I was unsurprised.

I heard women fluttering behind veils that the Teachers believed in the equality that had been practiced as recently as two centuries ago. I heard scholars, concerned with the Teachers' blasphemy yet willing and eager to learn their strange theories about Natural Causes. I even heard whispers of my own name, spoken in deepest secret yet. They have brought back Ifit, they whispered. The last of the *maar* will know what to do.

And I saw a man from the government grab an urchin for pickpocketing, and another man said: "They'll cut his throat

for Yan tonight, sure enough....”

When at last the Teachers approached with their feeble ropes I let them take me.

* * *

When the Teachers uncovered my eyes I found I was in a dark building that smelled strongly of husked grain. A low noise thrummed like rushing water—why did its beat seem so familiar?

I held out my hands, bound with twine I could not feel. “You may untie me,” I said. “I wish to hear from your own mouths what your plans are.”

“We shall not,” said the man who held my blindfold.

“Then perhaps you might feed me,” I said. There was a cauldron of stew on a hearth and I was far too aware of it. A common stew, with tubers and grains and bafalo bones reducing to give up their hidden marrow. “I have not eaten for three centuries.”

“Bah, lies,” said another. “Trickery. If you claim to have just woken today, then tell us what you have learned since you returned.”

The rushing water sound filled my skull. They had denied me *freedom*, food—they would not deny me this. “I know where we are,” I said quietly. The man with the blindfold started to speak, to accuse, but I did not let him finish. “One

gift of the gods will always know another. I must see Moxwith's Wheel for myself."

A man with the hair of the plains and the skin of the jungle stepped forward then. "Let her," he said, and he opened the door, filling the room with the thundering of the rushing water.

On the river at my feet turned an immense golden wheel, pouring a crashing waterfall that glittered like glass and diamond. Moxwith's Wheel.

The waterwheel is one of the seven gifts of the gods; this one from Moxwith, best known for creating the mountains for the love of Maenea, who spurned his gift and dropped him down one of his own volcanoes besides. In fire and ash he ran to the sea and his burning feet left gouges for the Many Lakes. The Wheel has been turning since our earliest recorded history; it will no doubt still be turning when the stars are still and cold in their beds.

In my day it had powered a mill, and it seemed that it did the same now. In fact, it looked exactly the same. Exactly the same after three hundred years. Somehow this struck my heart harder than any of the new I had yet seen.

Tears poured from my eyes and I wept on the riverbank beside Moxwith's Wheel, wept for my lost life. I had vowed to bring freedom and failed, vowed to destroy Yan and failed. What use a life so spent? I had as little to show for it as

Moxwith did for dedicating his life to Maenea. Less, for he had made a fine range of mountains. Yet here I was, grasping to understand the intent of the gods. Why had they gifted me at all?

“You have seen the Wheel,” said Ton, for this was the leader who had stepped forward. “Now tell us what you have learned.”

I straightened, my face wet with tears and spray. My mind raced as I translated some of my thoughts into words. “Your city is faced with a problem,” I said. “Yan blasphemes by calling herself a goddess. You blaspheme by denying the gods. Is the gods’ jealousy greater than their need for worship? Or do they have other tricks up their sleeves? I am only the last of the *maar*, and I do not pretend to know.”

Ton took the blindfold from the other man and dried my cheeks. “We have had enough of the old ways,” he said. “We would bring freedom to all men and women.”

My heart leapt to hear how casually he said the word.

“Freedom,” I breathed, and heard how that word sounded in a world where it was known. It was as rich as chokolat on my tongue.

Ton untied the bit of twine that bound my hands. “You say you are the last of the god-given *maar*,” he said, and I saw the

stubborn set to his jaw that must have helped garner him his followers. “So prove yourself.”

“Alas, I cannot,” I said.

“Those who worship the statue claims she talks to them, tells them of her power,” said Ton. The churning of the Wheel was an undercurrent to his words. “Yet the tales of the Bloodwoman of the Plains died nearly two centuries ago. What fools are we to think that a golden statue is the same woman? We are not such fools, to believe stories from generations ago, when our ancestors were gullible and easily tricked by pretty trinkets and tricks. Your story of being frozen may have swept the city. The legendary *maar* will know what to do, as our city schisms itself.” He dropped the bit of twine into the river, where it was whisked downstream. “But as a rallying cry you are a disappointment.”

“The gods do not explain themselves,” I said, “and yet we may interpret their wishes through their actions.” It was true, and yet what was I to interpret from inaction? If Mother Sun had not forsaken me, then I would have had my tools. I might have joined with Yan and destroyed the Teachers. Or I might have understood how to strike at Yan. Yet I had nothing. What was I meant to learn from this?

“What actions?” said Ton. His narrow shoulders shrugged. “I see no gods today. Today we believe in the power of man’s

mind. In the power of the Natural Causes that allow a waterwheel to turn a river into energy.” He gestured at the gleaming golden wheel, raising his voice over the spray. “Man has made many copies of the Wheel, and yet, what else have we done? Once we free ourselves from this tyranny, we will have the freedom to create our own miracles, to learn from ourselves. I had hoped, that as one sworn to freedom, you might be on our side. But perhaps you are afraid of Yan. Afraid of death.”

“I would rather die in her trough than know that the gods have deserted me,” I said quietly. “The *maar* were put here for a purpose. A purpose of keeping all peaceful men free of their warring neighbors, a purpose that is nearly swept past. Who would have foretold that the tribes would merge? Who would have foretold that the last of the *maar* would be separated from her ancestors and appear in the world three centuries hence of her birth?” Who indeed but the gods, the same gods who had gifted us Moxwith’s Wheel.... A strange thought formed in my mind.

Ton shook his head, but I pushed through.

“Yan was ever a divider. If she is against your people, it is because you would unite. Hubris was ever the chink in her armor, and the gods have used it to convince her to release me.

They have a purpose in mind. I am told there is a ritual each night at sundown?"

"A perverted mass delusion. Fools impressed by tricks."

"Yet I bid you come tonight and observe," I said. "I am the last gift of the gods, and who among you would not choose to see how the last gift is spent?"

Ton shook his head, his dismissal of the gods plain on his stubborn face. "Leave her," he said to his followers, "She's of no use." He waved dismissal, but he did not turn to see the faces behind him.

Faces who had grown up with belief.

There were thinking men among this crew. Scribes and orators, men who would use their senses, women who would be led by logic. Logic said that the last gift of the gods must have a purpose, and Moxwith's Wheel had suddenly given me hope that I knew what that purpose was.

Whatever happened tonight, they would observe its truth.

* * *

I walked all that long-falling afternoon. Made my way from Moxwith's Wheel to the plaza of the Bloodwoman of the Plains. Mother Sun sank lower in the sky, and I, wearier and wearier, pressed on without her help. I thought longingly of those bafalo sausages I'd seen in the restaurant, oily and laced with fennel. If I were to have a last meal, I would request those, and the

poiyenta I had seen cooking in the pot, with peppers and onions, and besides all that a ceramic bowl of warm chokolat, spiced with pepper and drizzled with cream.

I might be the last of the *maar*, but I spent my last minutes being all too human. Warily I dragged myself on, though my bones stiffened with every step, though the ankles I could not feel twisted and swelled, though the feet I could not feel left blood in my sandals.

I made it with a few minutes to spare.

The crowds pressed in around the square, watching for the daily miracle. They marched along the road, slit their fingertips or shins to bleed in the stone trough. The blood seeped into the statue. Pleny stood by her goddess, veiled and nodding at the endless line. The pickpocket had already been brought forth, or so I counted the small body at the foot of the statue.

As the sun sunk to the horizon line, it reflected off Yan. Dully her gold skin glowed, and her glass and crystal bits sharper than that, glittering, focused. In that light Yan seemed beautiful, in that light she seemed to move and smile down on us. Her reflected light filled the plaza in gilded rays, and we were all red-golden with light.

Light heavy with pain, heavy with the scent of blood.

I am the last of the last gift of the gods, and I am sworn to bring *freedom* to those who desire it. I am not here to uphold

their glory, for if they are gods they have no need of that. It was an irony of the gods that men who would finally bring freedom were unbelievers. Yet here at the last I did not doubt.

After all, the gods put a golden waterwheel on earth for men to copy and improve their condition. Surely these gods are not afraid of men who think and aspire to new things?

I am their waterwheel. I am their child. And if I have broken like a feather-wove wand, then as surely they have set me free.

I opened my arms to the Bloodwoman of the Plains and then Yan's rays filled me, filled the plaza. It was the warmth I had wanted all day, but from a debased source. Tears streamed from my eyes as I used Yan as if she were my goddess. I let all the darkness of the Yan-touched rays into me, let them out again, let everything focus and build until the sunlight drained from the plaza and focused only on golden Yan, and she was too bright to see.

I screamed, I knew not what, but cleverer humans than I wrote it down, later. And if they translated the words of the last of the *maar* into words to school a world, into words to free them from false idols, from a blood-soaked currency—they translated what was in my heart. I may have screamed simply from the pain of being the weapon to smite the Bloodwoman of the Plains, screamed as my stone-cold form burst into a

thousand cracked shards. I may have forgotten, in that moment, who I was.

I may have forgotten, but as Yan cracked and melted, I knew it all the same.

When the gods take up Yan in their arms tonight, they shall find a feast. The million souls Yan has collected, come home at last. There will be rejoicing in the heavens tonight.

But I pray I may be their one perfect morsel, chokolat on the tongue.

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KRAKEN'S HONOR

by S.A. Bolich

I suppose there are worse ways to start a day than drowning, but standing on the splintered prow of the *Ice Queen* with the icy sea breaking green over the dwindling deck, I really could not think of one. The world had shrunk to a broken wedge of wood stuck fast on the rocks half a bowshot from shore. Not so far, were it not for the kraken lolling at ease in the shallows, watching the *Queen* breaking up with a nasty gleam in its golden eyes.

A cold death or a sharp one. Fine lot of choices for a winter morning.

“The beast looks hungry!” Halvak shouted over the frosted wind driving in our faces.

“The beast looks amused,” I said. It rankled, to end in a monster’s belly like some slaughtered bullock too stupid to avoid its fate.

Another wave smashed over the *Queen’s* figurehead, all but washing us both away. Halvak grabbed my arm; I clawed for the remains of the ship’s rail and clung hard, keeping us from the depths for another moment or two. Something snapped sharply underfoot and Halvak yelped as the deck tilted again.

“If ever you intended to discover if the gods have not all died, my prince, now would be a good time!” he shouted.

“And what if they’re still angry? I’ll take my chances with the sea!”

The sea had its own ideas. A wave shattered to spray across the bow. The spray froze where it struck, splintering apart again in glittering shards that fell and broke like crystal knives with every trembling passage of a wave. Deck and rail shone like the Isles of the Dead in all the legends, which told me a thing or two about how legends begin.

“I’ll not be part of this one,” I muttered, and hauled Halvak up beside me. He looked a sight, did my bard, with his green finery draggled and splotched and his black beard full of ice, but his blue eyes were steady on mine.

“You’ve a plan, my lord?” he said, so calm that my soul cringed from his certainty. Reputation is an evil thing, especially when it is your own.

“I’ve a hope,” I told him, and pointed at the kraken.

He gazed an instant with only the sound of the crashing sea to fill the silence. “This should be a tale worth telling,” he said finally.

A great wave smashed over the figurehead and carried it away, the Ice Queen herself gone to a cold and lonely grave. I twisted a hand in Halvak’s cloak and caught him close, eyeing a

rock a fathom away. Halvak clutched at the remains of the rail, suddenly shy as a maiden.

“My lord!” he shouted over the wind, and fear edged his voice for the first time since we fled Westervar together ahead of the Night Maidens. “I think I should tell you—I cannot swim!”

I hauled him up against my side. “What makes you think I can?”

His hand clutched convulsively at my cloak as I launched us over the heaving gap, and then we landed sprawling on a great, slippery stone sheathed in ice and cold as a Night Maiden’s heart. I started to slide toward the sea; Halvak’s hand caught me back, pinning me to the rock with scant regard for royal bruises. Kicking and scrambling, we crawled up to a sea-carved hollow at the top, above the crash of the waves. We rested there, shivering and soaked and battered by icy needles driven down from the north with all the vicious intent my uncle could put into them. I heard a sound I could not at first believe and stared wildly into the wind, certain it was my uncle’s laughter I heard. Then I peered at Halvak. He was lying there on his belly with his face tilted up to the dirty gray sky and a great grin cracking his face apart, giggling like a demented child.

“You’re mad!” I shouted at him.

He sat up, scrabbling for a handhold on the ice, and made me a mocking bow from the waist. “No madder than my lord.” Then his gaze slid toward the shore and his voice turned urgent. “Up, Faeryk. If you’ve not broken your father’s sword landing on this rock, I’ve a mind you’re going to need it.”

The kraken had bestirred itself from the shallows. Its great horned head lifted. Nostrils each the width of my shoulders fluttered and sniffed the salt wind. Great fangs as long as my arm gleamed dully in the storm light and a hundred writhing limbs stirred idly in a queasy tangle like a nest of snakes.

I crawled to my feet, balancing precariously on the ice, sodden and dripping and numb from the frozen roots of my hair to my waterlogged boots. I left my father’s sword in the sheath. Even were my hands not too stiff and cold to wield it, it could do little but add to the kraken’s amusement should I brandish it in the monster’s face.

The kraken glided closer, ignoring wind and sea and the snow lashing at great golden eyes. It cocked its head, curious as a cat, wondering, perhaps, why we stood like tethered sheep awaiting our doom. Gradually it slowed, and hope all but choked me.

Halvak stood rigid by my side, his harp quiet in its case on his shoulder. Son of a hundred bards, he could have stayed and harped for my uncle and commanded his own castle, but here

he stood on the remains of an oath and a principle long forgotten in Westervar. Honor. For that, and because that jewel of a voice should not end in a kraken's belly, I looked up into the gold, slitted eyes peering down at me and began to fight for a kingdom I no longer wanted.

The kraken watched us from the safety of a four-fathom gap, craning its horned head back and forth. It seemed content to wait; already the sea had claimed the remains of the *Ice Queen*. We, however, would freeze to death before the creature ran out of patience, so I shouted, "Hoy! Lord of the Waves! What do you here in this cove, scavenging wreckage like a pirate?"

Halvak sucked in a strangled breath beside me. The kraken reared up, peering down its snout in high offense. It hissed, a blast that ruffled our sodden cloaks and all but blew us off the rock. It smelled of rotting fish and worse things I did not want to know about, but blessings of the gods, at least it was warm.

"I expected better of the Wave King," I said. "Are you old, or crippled, that you lurk here in the shallows? Or are you just too lazy to hunt anymore, begging scraps from the rocks?"

"Are you mad?" Halvak said through his teeth, his voice thin and strained over the berserker shriek of the wind.

"A quick end might be a blessing. Hush."

The kraken hissed again. A limb a bowshot away broke the surface of the bay, shivering out of the water to snatch a bit of floating wreckage from a wave. The kraken shoved it at us, and I saw the staring face of the *Ice Queen's* figurehead with her long carved hair and her painted blue eyes. The beast set it on the rock beside us and Halvak turned his head slowly to stare at me, a hundred questions in his eyes.

“Did you bring the ship to grief, O King?” I asked the kraken. “Are you sunk to the level of Westervar, to attack from the shadows travelers who never harmed you?”

“Ah,” Halvak breathed beside me.

Slowly I drew the sword of my fathers and held it up, point down between my hands. The blade gleamed like ice and fire even in the dull light, crafted so long ago that the knowledge gone into its making had long been lost. To men, at least. The wave lords might still know its secrets. Surely they knew what it was. Who it belonged to.

The kraken's head sank slowly until its eye hovered level with my own. “Will you redeem the honor of the sea, as I intend to redeem the honor of Westervar?” I did not shout; I would have wagered all that I no longer owned that it could hear me well even through the wind and the crash of the waves.

The golden eye blinked. I fought the hard shivers threatening to set me shaking like a frightened child and waited

to see if the legends were true, if the kraken still sought to set right an ancient wrong, if honor still existed anywhere in the world my uncle ruled.

The kraken's head sank farther until its chin rested on the waves and its great topknot hovered level with our feet. Its long, snaky spine wandered toward shore, a road of sorts, did we but dare to take it. Tentatively I touched the spiraling, curved horn rising taller than I was, and felt a shiver go through the great beast. Then I stepped between its horns onto the ridged neck, and started to walk.

"I knew there would be a tale worth telling," Halvak said contentedly behind me.

* * *

We grew warmer trying to start a fire of driftwood and dead limbs from the trees above the cove than we did for a long time standing there beside the fire itself. The kraken lay quiet in the bay, watching us, its eyes barely above the dance of the incoming waves. Halvak stared at it, enchanted, his hands too cold yet to harp, but I could see the song forming in his head.

"How did you know what to say to it?" He held his fingers out to the spindly fire fighting valiantly against the wind gusting through our scant shelter of tumbled rocks.

"You a bard, and you do not know that tale?" I mocked him.

Blue eyes narrowed. “I think this is a king’s tale, meant for princely ears.”

“Aye,” I said slowly. Strange, how strictures laid in youth can bind even into manhood. I can see my father yet, with the locked book in his hands, turning from the window toward the kinder lamplight, looking gray and sad with the knowledge he must pass on to his only son and heir. “A king’s tale. A tale of two kingdoms, one of earth, one of sea, and two monarchs who lost their honor together, and have sought ever since to redeem it.”

Halvak’s black eyebrow shot up. “Then there is a curse!”

“A curse? No. But ill luck follows a house that stoops to murder, and ten thousand generations will never wash it away.”

Halvak frowned a little. “But you said you were going to redeem the honor of Westervar. And the kraken—it seems as obsessed with honor as you are. If you cannot wash away blood, how—?”

Like a good bard, he let the question dangle, waiting patiently with the fire swirling and smoking and the wind spitting ice: pure petulance now that it no longer had a viable chance at killing us. *Rot in your tower, Uncle, you missed us.*

I looked at Halvak. “You know how Kenlav my ancestor went mad in the Ice Tower and was killed by his own son.

You've sung that tale often enough on a winter night."

Halvak nodded, his hand moving restlessly across his thigh as though fingering the strings of his harp. "Aye, a grand, shivery tale it is. But just a tale, I thought."

"The part about him drinking the blood of a hundred maidens, aye, that's a tale. The part about him murdering a hundred men—that wasn't. A hundred men and two, all in the mad conviction that one of them was the true father of his son, that his queen had betrayed him. And she had, but not with any mortal man. Poor king. His changeling son had eyes the color of the sea on a winter morning and hair pale as northern lights dancing over the ice. Kenlav knew the instant he laid eyes on the boy in his cradle it was no son of his. But he slew a hundred men and still his queen would not betray her lover."

I shoved the fire together with my toe and tossed more wood on. Sparks and flame swirled up, startling Halvak into taking a step back. I would not, angry enough to defy the flames. A woman's treachery had cursed my house; a woman's misplaced love had sunk a king's honor into a pit of blood. What other bitter knowledge lurked in that book now in my uncle's hands? I knew there were tales my father had been reluctant to lay upon a boy, and now it was too late. Only Noal my uncle knew what slept behind the locks of that book now. In three years he had surely discovered how to open it.

“Who was he?” Halvak said, but he had guessed already. His eyes were on the kraken.

“The Sea King himself.” I heard the bitterness in my own voice. “My father said we should not hold the sea’s children to the standards of men, that they have their own ways, their own honor, but how can I not, when the sea comes to visit and takes a mortal shape? This—” I raked a hand through the fair, salt-caked hair straggling around my shoulders. “—is the legacy of that creature in the bay or one of its royal kin. And this.”

I drew my father’s sword again, now mine, the sword of the kings of Westervar, and touched the pale blade. Color shimmered and flared, a cascade of light like the fey, dancing colors of the northern skies. From high overhead a low keening that was not the wind moaned down through the clouds, trailing away out to sea. It left behind a deep shivering in the bones, a resonance as though the world were simply a great harp string that the sword had somehow set aquiver. I saw Halvak’s hand twitch, the harper in him itching to capture that note.

The gods forbend that he should. It would rip the life from him and still his voice forever, and that I could never bear.

I stilled the rippling colors and sheathed the ancient blade before it woke the gods it had betrayed so long ago. I heard Halvak’s breath go out in a soft sigh and looked at him across

the fire. Those clear blue eyes stared into the flames and all the poetry of his ancestors lay in his face. I knew what he would say before he said it.

“That your uncle could not command the sword is a sign, Faer. It let your father hold it, but he never woke it in all his long life, yet you can with the merest touch. No wonder Noal fears you.”

“I would gift him the Ice Tower and all of Westervar if it would give me one more day of my father’s company.”

I heard the sudden deep note in my own voice and looked away. The kraken still watched us—me—with an unblinking regard so intent the hair crept on my neck. Here was a patient beast, a beast that wanted ...what? A hundred generations of men it had waited, haunting the northern seas, singing its eerie song to the winter nights under the fey colors of frozen skies—for what? Mourning a dead love? Repenting an adventure that had turned out badly? What did the sea people cherish? Invoking honor had been the wildest clutch at a crumbling ledge of hope. Yet Halvak was right. Honor seemed to be the key. So. What did the sea king know of that most elusive quality?

Halvak tossed more wood on the fire and settled onto his heels, looking up at me. The gale was dying at last, its spite passing inland. His black hair no longer whipped in his face but

trailed in crusted tangles over his shoulders, making him look far older than his twenty-six years. Born on the same day, we were, sons of clans twined together for centuries. To every king his bard, but not every partnering led to tales sung by those who came after. Was that what bound us together, Halvak and I, that the heir to Westervar and the heir to the Sweetsinger clan had arrived in this world almost in the same hour? Father used to remark on it; he said only great kings were given bards to sing their deeds from the cradle. Then his eyes would slide to the empty place at his own shoulder, where ancient Rori had long ago declined to twiddles and aimless wanderings of fingers over the strings. Still, he never moved to set the old man aside. A keeper and a teacher and the kindest man that ever I knew, my father, but he knew that the wild magic of Rykaverk, Wavetamer, the ice blade, was never for him.

That was for me, and a cursed gift it was.

Halvak held his hands to the flames and said, “The kraken waits. For what?”

Reluctance laid a weight around my heart, for that answer I did not want to give. To go home to Westervar, to face the Night Maidens summoned from the sea ice by my uncle, to set hand and body to the grinding task of restoring an entire kingdom to its honor—my soul shrank from it. The light had left Westervar when my father fell from the highest pinnacle

into the sea, and only greed and the madness of a long-brooded grudge lived there now. Thieves, other kings called us, we who must live on the spoils of what we could snatch from the sea, for no civilized land would trade with us. Sullenness and despair ruled Westervar, and what hope had I of wresting my people from the slim path of pride laid before them by my uncle, who at least was an effective pirate, and fed them through the endless winters on the grain from plundered ships?

I avoided the kraken's fixed golden gaze. "It hopes I have a plan," I muttered.

Halvak grinned. "You always have a plan."

"Which doubtless explains why we're stranded on this beach shivering a thousand leagues from anywhere."

"You exaggerate, my lord. It cannot be more than nine hundred leagues from anywhere."

Despite everything I felt myself smiling. "Eight hundred and ninety-nine farther than I am willing to walk. What odds, do you think, of another ship passing?"

Halvak eyed the kraken in the bay. "Not every ship's captain is a fool, alas."

"No." I found my fingertip idly tracing Wavetamer's embroidered sheath, and snatched my hand away. "Perhaps the kraken will give us a ride."

Halvak coughed politely. “Ah. To where?”

Slowly I let the breath out of my lungs, unable to dodge the conclusion any longer. “Home. It began there. It must end there.”

Out in the bay, a sudden froth and splashing churned the incoming waves to foam and then settled. Halvak’s eyes lingered on the racing crests a moment, then he nodded and flashed me his grin. “I’ve a yearning to see that tale in the making.”

“A thousand-year tale?” Every harper’s dream.

He nodded, the longing rooted deep in him for the immortality of songs that never faded from the memories of men. “And a thousand-year king to sing them about.”

“I will settle for one, if it brings down the Ice Tower and my uncle with it.”

His lips parted and his eyes dropped; he looked troubled and uneasy for a breath, as though I had called some doom onto this beach where a kraken lay witness. Had I? In that moment I did not care. If I lived only one minute past Noal’s death it would be worth the cost. For my father I would redeem the shards of honor he had kept to pass to me; salvage in blood the last noble impulses of a great house. And give a gift to the only friend I had.

I stood up and started down the beach.

* * *

I have not poetry enough to describe that journey. Nestled between the kraken's spiraling horns with the great golden eyes shining below our feet like lamps set to cut the fog, we rode the sea, gliding north through mornings like beaten silver and evenings like gilded frost. The sky sparkled in crystal brilliance overhead, a roof of glass coated with ice, pale and shining with the mazy dance of the sea. Floating bergs gleamed in pale splendor, fortresses of ice towering over us as we wound our way between them. At night the lights guided us home: the wavering, undead fingers of the gods trapped at the top of the world, reaching forlornly for the sky denied them by the sword at my hip. I found my fingers playing more and more with Wavetamer's sheath, tracing the runes embroidered there, echo of those etched on the ice blade itself.

For Earth. For Sea. For Sky.

The hope of the three realms had been forged into this blade, hope denied for all the ages of the world. I knew a tale even older than the curse of my house that spoke of freeing the gods. It said that only the blood of the sea could break their prison. Had my kraken-bred ancestors taken that phrase literally? Even my bookish father could not tell what it meant. All he knew—all anyone knew—was that the gods still slept entombed at the top of the world while the sword of their doom

slept fitfully in the Ice Tower through all the long ages. Was it courage that failed my ancestors, that they could not free the gods? Or ...*would* not, to diminish the world of men?

I had plenty of time to ponder that forever-unsolved mystery while the sea slid past, bowing silently at the passage of its king. Halvak sat and played softly to the sky and the sea and the kraken, untroubled by the writhing of great limbs around his ears as the beast propelled itself along or snatched idly at passing birds and fish, which it fed to us. I confess that hunger alone accepted that fare, but having set our faces to the north, it seemed pointless to arrive too weakened to accomplish anything. So we learned the lesson of survival.

On a night when the sky blazed and trembled with colors twining into a dance of ghosts across the northern rim, we came at last in sight of the Ice Tower rising sheer from its cliff above the sea. It glittered even in the dark, catching color from the sky, now green, now sapphire blue, now rose and gold and purple and white. I looked at it with loathing. Halvak sighed and put away his harp. The kraken twitched its great ear in disappointment and slowed to a rocking halt beyond the surf rolling over to crash against the headland.

“Now what?” Halvak drew his cloak closer.

“Now we discover the price of honor.”

I touched the kraken's ear and saw its eye roll up toward me. "Set us ashore in the bay to the west and I account your part well played, grandfather."

The kraken snorted, blowing froth and foam across the surface of the sea in a small gale. Its ears flattened like those of a cranky horse, and I wondered how I had offended it. Did it deny our kinship? Legend said the kraken had no hearts, and so could not love. What was left? Did I demean its pride with our shared blood?

Angry myself suddenly, for the kraken had begun this long doom, I ignored its pique and pointed to the west, where the waves ran smoothly into shore past a natural breakwater sheltering a dozen small ships. My uncle's pirate fleet, without which Westervar would starve.

"If you grow bored, grandfather, you can break those ships to splinters for me."

Halvak's head whipped around toward me. "But—" Then he nodded, though the blaze of ghost light betrayed a sad cast around his mouth. "No half measures," he said quietly.

"A man can only embrace the future if there is no safe past to return to."

The kraken snorted again and angled westward, gliding past the breakwater in the dim and dire hour past the turn of the night. Halvak and I set foot on the shore of Westervar

without so much as wetting our boots. When I turned to thank the kraken, it had already submerged. Only a widening ripple on the gentle waves showed its progress toward the nearest ship.

I resolutely turned my back. The village huddling at the foot of the cliffs slept quiet and dark under a blanket of snow, so still that it seemed some spell must have silenced even the dogs. We stalked like ghosts down the pebbled street, and only the fitful smoke from the chimneys told us we did not traverse a village of the dead.

Stars colder than the north wind whipping our cloaks peered faintly through the waterfall of color washing the north. Beside me, Halvak hummed a snatch of song, for courage, I guessed, and then fell silent, looking up at the tower looming on the headland. There my uncle would be, brooding in guilty fury, wondering where the nephew he had dispossessed wandered in his exile. Wavetamer's power ran in his blood as it ran in mine, but not enough. Not enough to claim the sword and force it to his will. Only enough to bend the will of men to his bidding.

Had he pushed my father off the tower himself, or bade someone do it for him?

I felt the anger stirring in me again, the fatal rage that had betrayed me that night. Fury had given my uncle his opening; I

fought it now but it shivered in a tight coil deep inside. Almost I handed Wavetamer to Halvak, for what anger might draw from the blade I could not tell. Then I mastered the notion, for what else had I come for? Noal had certainly not shrunk from shedding kin blood. Dishonor required a blood sacrifice and his I would take joy in spilling. In that moment I could not recall my father's gentle hand, only the consuming pain of seeing his broken body brought back to the hall. I started up the cliff trail, scarcely seeing the treacherous rocks or the tortuous twists of the path. My father had come pale as ice from the sea, and as cold. Where was the kraken then, his blood and his kin? Why had it not saved him, that child of the waves? Why had fate brought the beast to me and not to him?

What did a kraken know of honor after all?

Faint screams reached my ear. I looked back from the top of the cliff. Only floating timbers littered the quiet waters of the harbor now. I winced and crept on, crouching, for the Night Maidens would be about, guarding my uncle's stolen tower. Halvak stole along behind me, faithful as a shadow. As the pale bar of the tower loomed over us, I stopped suddenly, moved by a sudden twist of fear winding through my guts.

"Stay here," I whispered to him. "This is my task."

"No! I would die of shame to let you walk in there alone."

“Will you refuse the command of your king?” I asked him gently.

“A king uncrowned. *Prince* Faeryk I have followed all my life. I’ll not change now.”

“You have no sword. It is folly, man.”

A grin tugged at his mouth. His face, illuminated by the mad lights overhead, took on a gay stubbornness I knew too well. “And walking alone into the Ice Tower is not? My lord, you have a fine sense of the absurd.”

“Madman.” In desperation I set him the one task I knew he could not refuse, the one that might preserve his life and give me my one chance, thin as a sword blade though it was.

“Hal, listen. I cannot battle my uncle and the Night Maidens together. If ever there was a harper worth the name in your line, now is the time to call up that blood, for both our lives. Play, my friend, and cast a spell like no other in the history of the world.”

He sobered, looking at me with those ice-blue eyes narrowed and considering. “It is a tale, Faer, that music can melt the hearts of the Maidens.”

“At the least it’s a diversion, and the life of a harper is still sacrosanct even in this cursed land.”

“As the life of its prince is not.” But I saw the challenge take hold and root itself under his instinctive urge to follow at

my heels. He looked up at the cold spires of stone set in a circle around the base of the tower, the Ring of Adamant beyond which the Maidens ruled, and nodded sharply. Without warning he caught my shoulders and gave me a brief, fierce hug.

“If you die, I will never harp again.” His voice was light, but under the smile I knew he meant it. The night blurred in my sight; I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat and turned away.

Behind me, I heard him clambering lightly up one of the spires. A moment later, as I slipped into the deep shadow of the Tower itself, a thin, wandering note wavered into the sky, so exactly reminiscent of the lights still drifting aimlessly up from the horizon that a queer thrill shot through me. I felt the tug of the harp like a hook in my soul; it took a deal of will to not look back. As the song began to strengthen, pouring out rich and strong into the night, I slid around the base of the tower into the shelter of one of the pale stone ribs soaring up its side.

Just in time. A shadow blacker than the southern sky moved in the corner of my sight. I froze, my heart thumping anxiously. The Maiden paused, a shape spun of shadows and black ambition, her ear perhaps caught by the living heartbeat a scant two paces from her. Memories froze me in place, of hands colder than the pack ice touching me, drawing the life

from bone and sinew, delivering me helpless to my uncle. Then a drift of Halvak's song shimmered past on the breeze, and her head turned as though drawn by a cord. She moved away, swift as a fish in the sea, silent as the darkness.

Play, Hal, and don't break the spell, I begged of him. While he played, he stood a chance.

I reached the tall entrance to the Tower and halted, taken aback. Where an unbarred opening had stood for all the millennia since the tower was built, an iron door now barred my way, tight shut against the night. This was the south side of the Tower; no light spilled from the northern sky to illuminate this visible symbol of my uncle's fear. I touched my hand to it and found it cold, dead, unlike the cold that forever breathed off the glassy stone of the Tower itself. Here was a thing no ancestor of mine had shaped, and I knew it would not answer to me.

Harp notes showered down around the tower, and then I heard Halvak's voice, his crystal-pure tenor that could melt stone. *Hal, what are you doing?* I wondered breathlessly, for he would wake every guard in the place. In desperation I drew Wavetamer; in its shimmering light I saw a door with no lock, bound so fast to the stone around it that not a glimmer of any torch flaring inside seeped around its edges. I wavered an

instant in uncertainty. Halvak would be so disappointed: Prince Faeryk of the nimble wit caught short.

Without warning Wavetamer flared in my hand. Light cascaded down the blade and dripped in brilliant beads off the tip. I nearly dropped it, then took a tighter grip, my eyes dazzled by the sudden flare. Then I realized the light was still growing. Startled, I jerked the blade up and found it pulsing with all the colors still painting the northern sky. Harp song whispered down the night wind. All at once the sword answered, a deep, quiet note that hummed down my bones and into the door.

The iron shattered like brittle ice, cascading into a prickly heap at my feet. As I stood dumbfounded among the shards, a high, thin wail lifted on my left. Halvak's song wavered, then resumed, but I heard a change in it, a desperate quality that drove my legs up the single step and through the opening. The wrath I had tamed earlier returned, bursting out of its cage to slow time to a crawl and encase my mind in ice, numbing me to all but a single purpose.

Find Noal. My uncle. My father's brother. My enemy.

I raged up the winding steps, past closed doors and torches burning low in the ebb tide of the night. Either the guards had fled or they slept sound at their posts, for not one poked his head out to see who was singing in the middle of a winter night.

Faintly I could hear Halvak's song, wild and deep, throbbing on the air with the voice of night itself, calling to the frozen hearts of the Maidens. Abominations they were: ice made animate, quick with captured wind with seawater for blood, horrors born of my uncle's fears. Was there in them any shard of feeling to respond, or were they only studying the base of the spire, deciding how best to attack? They would try to capture first, I was sure, to take their prize to Noal, but they had little imagination. If Halvak failed to cooperate, they would take more determined measures. A Maiden's fist against a man's skull left only ruin in its wake.

I came to the last door. Wavetamer rippled in my hand, quiet now but far from sleepy. I hesitated, then stepped to one side into the shelter of the wall and touched the blade to the door. As the wood splintered, a spear of night shot through the dissolving barrier and shattered against the opposite wall in a spray of inky darkness across the pale stone. Before Noal could arm himself again I rolled through the door and came up into a crouch with Wavetamer casting a wild, weird light into the absolute dark of my uncle's lair.

Three years had not been kind to him. He cowered against the far wall, hollow-eyed and haggard, his eyes locked on Wavetamer with the fascinated horror of a man facing a poisonous serpent.

Wavetamer sank a little in my hand. Noal seized his chance, facing retribution with the same self-serving concentration he brought to everything else. Now that the moment was upon him, he snatched at weapons long laid by. His sword was so black I barely saw a faint gleam before it swooped out of the night and struck Wavetamer from my hand. Instantly cold numbed my arm to the shoulder. I backed away, my arm dangling useless at my side.

His laughter cackled out of the darkness that had stolen his face again. “You can’t use the sword either.” I heard the incredulity in his voice as the specter that had haunted him these three years shriveled and died. “All this time—”

He pointed the sable blade at me. The numbness spread from my arm to my shoulder and down toward my heart. It cooled the rage, stole the anger; into its place crept crippling grief for the absence of the man who should occupy this room. Gone, his life stolen for a brittle kingdom at the top of the world whose only hope lay in the swirling lights no man could touch.

Wavetamer glimmered on the floor, a ripple of color fading to a quiet gleam without my hand upon it. Only the muted quiver of song still resonated in the blade, a whisper at the core of my bones, but withering. Halvak’s voice came fitfully on the breeze, strained and thin. The Maidens must be pressing hard

at the base of his refuge, and suddenly I saw the folly in leaving him there alone. Fate had cast us together. What right had I to set my fears above the woven strands of our lives? If he died out there, I had killed him.

I sank to one knee, gasping. Noal laughed. “So easy,” he marveled.

All at once a wild, keening shriek outside shattered the night, screaming of attack.

“NO!”

Terror broke Noal’s spell. I snatched up Wavetamer with my left hand. It flared as though I had tossed oil onto flame, a sunburst of color. The shutters on the windows fell to dust and the ghost light poured in along with Halvak’s song. Song? There are not words to describe what Halvak had made. The wild, puissant magic of his house twined voice and harp into a thing new and half-alive, transcending the limitations of either. I heard the song reaching, straining for the deep, impossible note that would break bone and living stone.

I thrust Wavetamer toward the window and the flaming lights. My uncle stumbled backward toward the rumpled bed as the black blade fell keening to the floor and shattered. Quite suddenly I could breathe again, the numbing cold receding, but none of it mattered if Halvak died, if his song made him immortal and stole the only thing left to me.

Wavetamer flamed like a beacon. Beyond the window, the ghost light dancing on the horizon suddenly spun into a knot and shot toward me, a long streak like a comet racing toward the Ice Tower. Toward Wavetamer. I heard the sky groan under the weight of it, a ripple of sound that seemed to snatch the music from Halvak's harp strings and wind it around the blade now blazing so bright it left no shadow in the room for Noal to hide in.

Halvak's voice shivered to silence.

The last note of the song twined into rock and sky and stone, threatening to shatter the very Tower. Noal's face twisted in pain, terror, realization of imminent doom. I ignored him; if he died it was incidental and I no longer cared. I had no anger left for wrongs that could never be righted, only a consuming need to pull that note back from the brink of eternity. For that I would wake even the gods.

I caught Wavetamer's blade in my numb right hand and slid my palm down the edge, slicing it to the bone. With all the will I could summon I called that note back, captured it, bound it in the blood of Wavetamer's rightful master. The sword belled and flamed so bright even I could not look at it, but I cared not if it blinded me if only the song bound itself to me and not to Halvak.

I saw my uncle clutch at his heart and sink toward the floor, but felt only despair as the note spun on and on. It drove deep into my bones but still refused either to quiet or to swell into a greater chorus of gods waking to Wavetamer's call. Was my blood too tainted with the sins of my house? Were the gods dead after all? Or was this their vengeance on the mortals who had betrayed them? Ah, what good to release the gods if they turned out colder than the ice?

“Your blood is not enough.”

A clear voice cut clean as snow through the driving moan of the power wrapping itself around Wavetamer's blade. Out of the dazzle stepped a man: slim, ageless, with hair pale as a silver morning at sea and eyes the clear gold of the rising sun. He caught the tip of the shimmering sword between his palms and looked at me through the maelstrom of color.

“For this did I seek a mortal mate,” he said, and snatched the sword cleanly into his chest.

“Grandfather,” I whispered, as the bright blood burst over his pale skin. Blood green as a summer sea in the heaving shadows of the headlands steamed in the chill blast through the windows. He slid to his knees, breaking the deadly kiss of the blade. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful, calm. As he started to pitch toward the floor I dropped Wavetamer and caught him, cradling him in the crook of my good arm.

“Why?”

His eyes opened, wandering over my face. “The true shame of your house was never that I sired one of its sons. *Pride* was the sin of your ancestors, as it was mine. Together we conspired to bind the gods, to give dominion of earth to man and of the sea to me and mine. We left only the sky to them, but denied them its freedom. Only together could our houses undo the wrong.”

“Why did you not just let my ancestor kill you along with the innocents he murdered?”

His eyelids drifted shut again. “Anger forges chains. Only love can break them.”

My throat tightened until I could barely speak. “And so you sired a mortal son to feel what you could not.”

He did not answer. The impossible hooping note eased into a dying rhythm, a slow thumping that faded bit by bit from my ear, slowed still again ...vanished. The kraken lay still. The blood of the sea flowed slowly over my hands and painted the cold stone of the floor. I laid him down and staggered up, and only then heard the whisper of music swirling gently around the Ice Tower. I caught my breath and spun toward the door, and there stood Halvak looking bewildered. His hands held his harp but its strings were still. With a start I realized the music came from Wavetamer.

“There are giants walking,” he said, wonder in his face. “Look, Faer. Look to the north.”

Unsteadily I turned and looked out the window. There, hulking along the horizon, stepped impossible shapes of light in colors my eyes did not recognize. Gravely they danced, hand in hand, celebrating their return to a world that had denied them in selfish arrogance for ages long passed out of time. My eyes blurred.

“You caught my song,” Halvak whispered, coming to stand beside me. “Bound it to Wavetamer. How?”

“We were what he waited for.” I knelt and touched the kraken’s still face. “A generation where the kraken blood ran as strong as the mortal’s, and more than duty bonded king and bard.” I thought of my father, matched with an ancient harper thirty years his senior, at cross purposes half the time, the other half mired in the shadow of a weakening gift the old bard had been reluctant to abdicate to someone younger. “Perhaps the gods foresaw their fate when they forged Wavetamer. They were wise to split its power.”

Halvak’s eyes widened to pale blue moons. Slowly he knelt beside me, looking down at the kraken. “The song....”

“And the blade.”

Wavetamer sang quietly to itself there on the floor, flickering and flaring like the dance of light on the northern ice.

A thousand years from now men would still know Halvak's song.

“What does one *do* with gods?” I wondered aloud.

Halvak's eyes caught the swirl of light, trusting as a child's. “I know not, my king, but it will surely be a grand tale.”

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S.A. Bolich lives in Washington State. She holds a degree in history and spent many years running around Europe as an Army intelligence officer, which comes out in her work in interesting ways. Recent sales include fantasy and science fiction stories to On Spec, Damnation Books, Pangaea, and Science Fiction Trails, among others, with an Honorable Mention from Writers of the Future as well. You can read excerpts from works in progress and join her blog, Words From Thin Air, on her website at www.sabolich.info.

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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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