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A SERPENT IN THE GEARS

by Margaret Ronald

We unearthed the serpent's corpse just before the *Regina* reached the first gun emplacement, ten thousand feet higher than the dirigible should have been and at least half a day out of our chosen path. The *Regina's* captain grumbled about "sightseeing" expeditions, but she agreed to let us send up a dinghy to follow the reports from villagers on the border.

The serpent had crashed halfway up one of the snowcapped peaks that made all nearby terrain but the Sterling Pass impassable, and its desiccated carcass had only been revealed by the spring thaw. "Thaw, my arse," Colonel Dieterich muttered as we disembarked from the gently bobbing dinghy. "It's cold enough to freeze a thaumaturge's tits off."

"The villagers said that this is the first time it's been warm enough to spend more than an hour on the slopes, sir," I said, and draped his greatcoat around his shoulders, avoiding the creaking points of his poorly-fastened andropter. "For them I suppose that would constitute a thaw."

"For them having ten toes is a novelty." He snorted his pipe into a greater glow, then noticed the coat. "Ah. Thank you,

Charles. Come on; let's go see what the barbaric snows have brought us."

The doctors Brackett and Crumworth were already wandering over the carcass, pointing and exclaiming. All of the Royal Society party (excluding Professora Lundqvist, who because of her condition could not leave the *Regina*) were in better spirits now than they had been for weeks, and I began to understand the captain's decision to send us up here. Unusual as the moment of domestic accord was, though, it paled in comparison to the serpent.

The thing had the general shape of a Hyborean flying serpent, though it was at least twenty times the length of most specimens. It stretched out at least fifty feet, probably more, since the sinuous curves of the carcass obscured its true dimensions. It had no limbs to speak of, though one of the anatomists waved excitedly at shattered fins and shouted for us to come see. "Yes, yes, fins, any idiot can see that," grumbled Dieterich. "Of course it had to have fins, how else could it steer? What interests me more are these."

He nudged a pile of detritus with the end of his cane. Rotten wood gave under the pressure: old casks, long since broached. "Cargo, sir?" I said, hoping the possibility of commerce into Aaris might distract him from the carcass. "We may be able to figure out what they held."

“Bugger the casks, Charles. No, look at the bones.” He knelt, cursing the snow and the idiocy of interesting specimens to be found at such a damnfool altitude, and tugged a few dirty-white disks free of ice and mummified flesh. “If these weren’t obviously bones, I’d swear they were gears.”

“I don’t see how—” I began uneasily, but a shout further down the hillside drew his attention. Crumworth had found what would prove to be a delicate ratchet-and-flywheel system, hooked into the beast’s spinal column. Abruptly the scientists shifted from a state of mild interest to feverish study, each producing more evidence from the carcass.

Made, some said, pointing to the clearly clockwork aspects of the skeleton. Born, said others, pointing to the harness and the undeniable organic nature of the carcass itself (the anatomist raising his voice the most on this subject). Myself, I considered the question irrelevant: the point was not whether the serpent had been hatched or constructed, but to what use it had been put and, more importantly, why it was here, on this side of the mountains from Aaris, outside the realm where it could conceivably have thrived.

It appeared to have carried a crew, though none of their remains were evident, and I could only assume they had survived the crash. I wondered whether they would have returned home over the mountains, or descended into the

greater world—and if the latter, whether they would in time come home again. The thought was less comforting than I once had found it. I nudged a toothed segment with my foot and watched it tumble across the ice.

“What does your valet think, Dieterich?” one of the party called. “Since he’s taking his time looking at it.”

Dieterich paused. “Well, Charles? What do you think? Made or born?”

For a moment I considered answering “both” and confounding the lot of them, but such was neither the place of a valet nor for a man in my current situation. “I think,” I said after a moment, “that there is a very dark cloud two points west of us. I suggest we return to the *Regina* before a storm acquaints us with how this creature died.”

There was less argument after that, though Doctor Brackett and the anatomist insisted on bringing so many bones with us that the dinghy sagged dangerously. The results were presented over supper, and a detailed report made to Professora Lundqvist.

The Professora, of course, could not show emotion, but her tank bubbled in an agitated fashion, and her cortex bobbed within it. “I believe perhaps we have left the Sterling Pass closed for too long,” she said at last, the phonograph flattening her voice into dry fact.

I privately agreed.

* * *

In the morning, Professora Lundqvist insisted on taking the bones to the captain, and borrowed me for the purpose. I piled the serpent's jawbone on her tank, secured the lesser fangs to her braking mechanism, and accompanied her up to the lift. Lundqvist, lacking either an andropter or the torso around which to fasten one, could not venture to the open decks, and thus we were limited to the helm room.

We found the captain, a small blonde woman with the gait of a bear and the voice of an affronted Valkyrie, pulling lens after lens from the consoles and giving orders to the helmsman-automaton. "Captain, if I might have a word," the Professora said.

"We don't have time for more of your eggheads' interpersonal crises," the captain said without turning around. "I chose my crew carefully to avoid such disagreements; it's not my fault you didn't take the same care."

"It's not about that," the Professora said with a hint of asperity. "Charles, show her, please."

I hefted the jawbone and presented it to the captain. She glanced at it. "Hyborean air serpent. I've seen a few."

"Of this size?"

“Not much smaller. You can put that down, man; I’m not in any need of it.” I did so and, perceiving I was so much furniture in this situation, edged closer to the lenses, trying to catch a glimpse of the pass below.

“The serpent appeared to be domesticated,” Lundqvist insisted. “And there were gears among its bones, gears that may have grown there. As if it were some sort of hybrid.”

The captain shrugged. “There’re ‘naut tales of serpents broke to harness and pirates said to use them to attack ships like the *Regina*. As for the gears.” She turned and favored us both with one of her slow, vicious smiles that the crew so dreaded. “I expect that if we were to crash and the Aariscians to find *your* body, Professora, they’d be puzzling over whether you were some hybrid of glass and brains and formaldehyde.”

“It’s *not* formaldehyde,” Lundqvist sniffed.

“And I’m not speaking hypothetically.” The captain pointed to a lens behind the helmsman. A gray cliff face, cut into deep letters of ten different scripts, receded from our view. “We’ve just passed the graven warning.”

I peered at the bow lenses, trying to get a better look at the warning itself. When I was a child, I’d heard stories (all disdained by my teachers) that the warning had been inscribed into the side of the mountains by an automaton the size of a house, etching the words with a gaze of fire. When I was older,

my age-mates and I played at being the team engineered solely for the job of incising those letters, hanging from convenient walls and making what we thought were appropriate rock-shattering noises to match. After such tales, small wonder that my first view of the warning, some twenty years ago, had been so disappointing. Yet I could still recite by heart its prohibition against entering the valley.

The lenses, however, showed no sign of it. Instead, most displayed the same sight: a confection like matching wedding cakes on the mountainsides flanking the pass, the consequences for those who defied the graven warning. Thousands of snub spouts pointed towards us, ranging from full cannon-bore to rifle-bore, the latter too small to see even with the ship's lenses. My eyes itched to adjust, and I felt a pang just under the straps of my andropter harness, where most men had hearts.

“Ah,” said Lundqvist. “Well, it seems my timing is to its usual standard. I'll leave you to your evasive maneuvers—”

The first of the large guns swung to bear on the *Regina*. Excellent work, I acknowledged with a smaller pang; the automated emplacements were more reliable than most human sentries. “Climb, damn you, climb,” the captain snarled at the helmsman. “We should already be at twice estimated safe distance.”

“—although I do hope you will keep our discovery in mind. Come, Charles.”

“Oh, yes,” the captain said over her shoulder. “I will most certainly keep the possibility of attack by serpent-riding air pirates in mind.”

Jawbone slung over my shoulder, I accompanied the Professora back towards the lift. “Charming lass, our captain,” she said. “Had I both a body and Sapphic inclinations, I do believe I’d be infatuated.”

I glanced at her, trying to hide my smile. Full-bodied people often expressed surprise that acorporeals or otherwise mechanically-augmented persons could harbor such desires. I, of course, had no such false impression, but preferred to maintain the illusion of one. “If you say so, Professora.”

She laughed, a curious sound coming from her phonograph. “I do say so. Don’t be a stick about it. Why—”

A concussion like the heavens’ own timpani shook through the ship, followed by a sudden lurch to the right. The Professora’s tank slammed first against a bulkhead, then, as the ship listed deeply, began to roll down the hall towards the empty lift shaft. The first impact had damaged her brakes, I realized, and now she faced the predicament of a glass tank plus high speed.

I did not think. Dropping the serpent's jawbone, I ran past the Professora and flung myself across the entry to the lift. I was fortunate in that the ship's tilt eased just before she struck me, and so I was not mown down completely. Instead I had to shift from blocking her passage to hauling on the tank's fittings as the ship reversed its pitch and the Professora threatened to slide back down the way we'd come.

A second concussion rumbled below us, this one more distant, and from down the hall I heard the captain's cursing take on a note of relief. For a brief and disorienting moment, I felt almost as if I'd seen a childhood hero fall; those guns were supposed to be perfect, impassable, and yet we'd sailed by. That their perfection would have meant my death was almost a secondary concern. I caught my breath, shaken by this strange mental dissonance.

"Thank you, Charles," Professora Lundqvist said at last. "I see why Dieterich prizes your services."

"I am rarely called upon to do this for him," I pointed out. "Shall I call the lift?"

At that point, the lift's motor started. It rose to reveal Colonel Dieterich. "Good God, Lundqvist, what happened? Are you quite done molesting my valet?"

Lundqvist chuckled. "Quite. Do give me a hand, Dieterich; I'm going to need some repairs."

* * *

Dinner that evening was hardly a silent affair, as we had reached the second of the three gun emplacements, and the constant barrage made the experience rather like dining in a tin drum during a hailstorm. As a result of the damage to her brakes, Professora Lundqvist's tank was now strapped to the closest bulkhead like a piece of luggage, which put her in a foul temper.

Unfortunately, every academic gathering, regardless of size, always has at least one member who is tone-deaf to the general mood of the evening, and tonight it was one of the anatomists. He had a theory, and a well-thought-out one it was, that a serpent of the kind we'd found could be grown in a thaumatically-infused tank—one similar to the Professora's, in fact. (The comparison amused only Colonel Dieterich, who teased Lundqvist about her stature as a Lamia of science.)

By the time I came to offer coffee and dessert, this anatomist had reached the point where, if our projector had not been packed, he would have been demanding to show slides. I paused at the door, reluctant to be even an accessory to such a discussion, but it was clear that the rest of the party was humoring him. Either encouraged or maddened by the lack of response, the anatomist continued his tirade as I poured, his voice rising to near-hysteria as he argued that what could be

created for a serpent could be replicated on both larger and smaller scales, down to minuscule creatures and up to gargantua. Raising his cup, he predicted an Aariscian landscape of clockwork serpents, clockwork horses, clockwork cats and dogs, all living in a golden harmony devoid of human interference. I held my tongue.

“Oh, for the love of God,” Crumworth finally burst out. “Has no one taught this idiot basic thaumic theory?”

“It could happen,” insisted the anatomist. “Aaris does have the thaumic reservoirs; the ones on the pass, the ones in the Mittelgeist valley—”

“It doesn’t work that way.” Doctor Brackett stirred cream into her coffee until it turned beige. “Yes, there are the reservoirs under the gun emplacements and elsewhere. But they’re the wrong kind. You couldn’t use them to power something like an air serpent.”

All very sound science, of course, and the Mobility/Sufficiency Paradox was the basis of at least one Society lecture. I turned away to hide my smile, and caught a glimpse of Dieterich deliberately tapping his pipe with the careful concentration that meant he was thinking about something else.

“It’s like the difference between a geothermic station and a boiler,” Crumworth went on. “One’s much more powerful than

the other, but it's no good if you're too far away from the steam for it to power anything."

One of the Terranocla astronomers at the far end of the table nodded. "Is why no one give a shit about Aaris."

Several members of the party immediately busied themselves with their coffee. It didn't take much to guess why, and as the person who'd handled most correspondence on this expedition, I didn't have to guess. After all, no one noticed a valet, especially not if he was there to take care of simple administrative tasks as well, and if some codes were childishly easy to crack, that was hardly my fault.

While the Royal Society's ostensible reason for the expedition was to offer the hand of friendship and scientific inquiry to their poor isolated cousins, any idiot could see that it was also to assay whether air power could bypass the gun emplacements. Thaumic reservoirs might be useless for certain engineering methods, but that hardly made them worthless, as the Royal Society well knew.

At least half of the party were spies (Brackett and Crumworth in particular, each from a rival faction in the same country, which explained their mutual antagonism and attraction), and I had suspicions about the other half. To take the most cynical view, the ship was like any other diplomatic mission in that absolutely no one was as they seemed.

I knew the captain had signed on as much for the adventure as for the money, and I believed the same was true for much of the crew. After all, the forgotten land of Aaris—forgotten mainly because just after the first isolation guns were erected, the Great Southern rail line obviated the need to even come near the Sterling Pass—was a story even jaded ‘nauts revered. Most of the crew would have signed on in hopes of trading on this story for a month.

As if perceiving my thoughts, Dieterich glanced up and met my gaze, and the trace of a smile creased the corners of his eyes. Yes, he was an exception to that. As was the Professora, though all of us had our reasons for being here—Dieterich for the Society, Lundqvist for the prestige, the spies for their countries, the non-spies for curiosity. As for me, I’d been valet to Dieterich for ten years, in general service for ten before that, and I was homesick.

The sound of guns below us faded into the distance, as if the lull in our conversation had reached them as well. Two down, one to go, I counted. That was if the landscape hadn’t changed, if my memories of the pass still held true.

The anatomist cleared his throat. “A serpent could—”
“Oh, do shut up, Klaus,” Lundqvist snapped.

* * *

What happened the day after was pretty much inescapably my fault, in both the immediately personal and the greater sense. We had passed the third emplacement in the very early hours, and while that had been a near thing—scuttlebutt had it that the charts had been wrong, and only the helmsman's reflexes had saved us—the mood today was light, and the general consensus that we would clear the pass by noon.

I served breakfast to those of the party who were awake by eight (Dieterich, one of the astronomers, and the immobile, sulking Professor), then made my way up to the observation deck, where I had no business being. It was not the safest place, even with the security of an andropter across my shoulders, but I hoped to catch a glimpse of Aaris before our mission began in earnest. The thaumaturges whose duty it was to keep the *Regina* airborne were changing shift, each moving into his or her mudra in what an ignorant man might have called clockwork regularity. I exchanged nods with those leaving their shifts and headed for the open-air viewing at the bow.

The morning sun cast our shadow over the mountain slopes so that it seemed to leap ahead of us like a playful dog. A dozen ornamental lenses along the lower railing showed the landscape in picturesque facets. I risked adjusting my eyes to see ahead.

Something twinkled on the high peaks that marked the last mountains of the Sterling Pass, and I focused on it just as the captain's voice roared from the speaking tube. I had enough time to think *Ah, so they did get my report on the Society's air capabilities* before I realized that the guns had already fired.

The next few minutes were a confusion of pain and shrapnel. I was later to learn that the captain's quick thinking had kept the *Regina's* dirigible sacs from being punctured, but at a loss of both the observation deck and the forward hold. What struck me at the time, though, was a chunk of werglass from the lenses, followed by a broken segment of railing that pinned me to the deck. Splinters ground under my fingers as I scabbled at the planks, first to keep from falling through the wreckage, then out of sheer agony as the railing dug deeper. A detachment borne partly of my nature and partly of my years of service told me that there had been substantial but not crippling damage to my internals, and that the low insistent sound I heard was not mechanical but one of the thaumaturges sobbing quietly as she attempted to keep the *Regina* aloft.

There are times when detachment is not a virtue.

With a rattling gasp, I reached down and pulled the railing from my side. Only blood followed it, and I yanked the remnants of my coat over the gap in a futile effort to hide the wound.

The hatches from belowdecks slammed open. “Charles? Where’s Charles?” roared Dieterich, and I flattened myself against the boards, hoping to remain unnoticed. “There you are, man! A stretcher, quickly!”

In short order I was bundled onto a stretcher and carried down to the lab, where Dieterich had me placed on the central table and my andropter unstrapped. The Society party’s pleas to have me taken to the ship’s sawbones were refuted with the quite accurate observation that he already had enough patients, and that furthermore no one was going to lay hands on Dieterich’s valet but Dieterich himself. Crumworth and Brackett exchanged glances at this, coming as usual to the wrong conclusion.

Dieterich ordered everyone out, then turned on Professora Lundqvist, who observed the whole enterprise from her place by the door. “And you, too, madam!”

“It will take you a full half hour to attach me to a more convenient bulkhead,” she retorted. “Besides, I have more medical experience than you.”

Dieterich muttered something about idiot disembodied brains thinking they knew everything, but he let her remain. “Hang on, Charles,” he said. “We’ll soon have you right as rain —”

He paused, staring at the open wound in my side. I closed my eyes and cursed myself for ever having the idiot sense to join this expedition.

“Lundqvist,” Dieterich said softly, “your phonograph, please.”

The Professora acquiesced by extending the horn of her phonograph to the lock on the door and emitting a blast like an air-horn. Cries of dismay followed, and Dieterich kicked the door as he went to pull on sterile gloves. “No eavesdropping, you half-witted adjuncts!”

He returned to my side and with a set of long tweezers removed one of the many separate pains from my side. “Well,” he said in a voice that barely carried to my ears, “do we need to discuss this?” And he held up the bloodied escapement that he had extracted.

I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. “I don’t think so, sir,” I finally managed. “I expect you can infer the meaning of clockwork in your valet.”

Dieterich reached for his pipe, realized he didn’t have it, and whuffed through his mustache instead. “That’s loyalty for you, eh, Lundqvist?” he said over his shoulder. “Man even ascribes this discovery to me. Very flattering.”

“I suspected a while ago,” Lundqvist said quietly, turning her phonograph to face us. “When this expedition was first floated.”

“Eight months past? Pah, woman, you only told me three weeks ago.”

I stared at her. “How?” I choked, realizing a second later that I’d just confirmed her suspicions.

“Your transmissions to Aaris. I monitor the radio transmissions from the Society—never mind why, Dieterich, suffice it to say that I had reason—and after some time I noticed your additions. Very well encrypted, by the way; I’m still impressed.”

The thought came to mind that had I been only a little slower yesterday, I might have been rid of one of those who knew my secret. But the Professora, as usual, gave no indication of what she was thinking, and Dieterich only set the escapement in a sterile tray and began a search for the anesthetic. “Merged,” I said at last. “In Aaris we’re called merged citizens.”

“Citizens, hm? Looks like the sociology department’s theory about rank anarchism in Aaris had some foundation.” Dieterich extracted another chunk of shrapnel, this one three-fourths of a gear from my recording array, nestled just below

what passed for my ribs. “Charles, if I describe what I’m seeing here, can you tell me how to repair you?”

“No. I mean, yes, I can, but—” I stopped, the full explanation of merged versus autonomous citizenry and the Aaris monarchic system trembling on my tongue. Had silence really been so intolerable these last years, so much that the first opportunity made me liable to spill all I knew? “If you extract the broken bits and stitch me up, I should be fine,” I told him.

The *Regina* lurched beneath us. Dieterich caught the side of the table and cursed. “You’re self-repairing?” he asked as he righted himself, the tone of fascinated inquiry one I knew well.

I couldn’t say I was happy about being the focus of that interest. “No, I heal up. There’s a difference. Sir.”

“Thaumic reserves,” the Professora murmured. “Infused throughout living tissue—I did wonder, when I heard about the serpent, whether it was possible. We may have to revise our definition of thaumic self-sufficiency. Dieterich, you’ve missed a piece.”

“I haven’t missed it; I was just about to get it.” Carefully, with hands more accustomed to steam engines, Dieterich pulled the last damaged scrap from underneath my internal cage and began sealing the wound with hemostatic staples. Each felt like a dull thump against my side, muffled by the anesthetic. “Springs, even... do you know, Charles, if word gets

out that I have a clockwork valet, I'm never going to live it down."

"I suspect I won't either, sir." I took the pad of gauze he handed me and pressed it into place while he unwound a length of burdock-bandage. The pain eased to a dull ache. "What will you tell the captain?"

"Nothing, I expect," Lundqvist said, and Dieterich grunted assent. "What did your Aariscian counterparts ask you to do on this voyage, Charles? From our continued existence, I presume your purpose here wasn't sabotage."

I closed my eyes again, then gritted my teeth and attempted to sit up. Dieterich had done a good job—as well he should, being an engineer of automata on a grander scale—and the edges no longer grated, though it was a toss-up whether I'd have recording capabilities again. *One more rivet in the vault of my espionage career*, I thought, and here was the last: "They didn't tell me anything," I croaked, eluding Dieterich's offer of help. "They haven't told me anything for fourteen years."

And there it was, the reason I'd come with Dieterich on this expedition when it would have been so easy to cry off: not just duty, not just homesickness, but the need to know what had happened in my absence. I covered my face, hiding how my eyes adjusted and re-adjusted, the lenses carrying away any

trace of oily tears. I did not normally hide emotion, but I could at least hide this mechanical, Merged response.

The *Regina* shuddered again, followed by a screech that sent shivers up to my medulla. Dieterich glanced upwards, pity temporarily forgotten. “That wasn’t a gun.” He stripped off his gloves. “Lundqvist, keep an eye on him.”

“And how am I to do that?” Lundqvist asked as he unbarred the door and ran out. “Charles? Charles, do not go up there, you are not fit to be on your feet—”

I might not be fit, but both my employer and my home were now up there. I yanked Dieterich’s greatcoat on over my bandages and followed.

We had passed the last of the guns, truly the last this time, and the sunlight on the decks burned clear and free of dust. Just past the bow of the *Regina*, I caught a glimpse of Aaris’ green valleys.

Between it and us hovered a knot of silver, endlessly twisting. *Serpents*, I thought first, and then as the red-cloaked riders on each came clear, *Merged serpents*.

I had been a fool to think that the fourth set of guns would be the only addition to Aaris’ defenses.

“Come no farther.” A serpent glided closer with the motion of a water-snake, and its rider turned in place to address us through a megaphone. “None may enter the Aaris Valley on

pain of death.” Familiar words—the same that had been cut into the stone at the far end of the pass, to proclaim Aaris’ isolation to the world. The same that I had memorized as a Merged child. Here they were spoken, recited in a voice that bounced off the mountains.

“We are a peaceful mission!” Dieterich yelled back, then cursed and repeated his words into the captain’s annunciator.

The captain stalked past him to a locker by the helm. “You’d do better arguing with the graven warning,” she muttered.

And indeed, the response was much the same as the cliff face would give: silent, anticipatory, the perpetual knotwork of the serpents writing a sigil of forbidding in the air. “Turn back now, or you will die,” the spokesman finished. I focused, and focused again, trying to see his face.

Dieterich glanced at the captain. “If I tell you to turn back —”

“Can’t. Not without going straight through them. The *Regina*’s got a shitty turning radius.” The captain yanked her annunciator from his hands. “We demand safe passage!”

The rider did not answer, but raised one hand, and the pattern unraveled toward us. True to their nature, the serpents did not attack the dirigible sacs, but went for the shinier, more attractive target below: the ship itself. A gleaming gray ribbon

spun past the remains of the observation deck, taking a substantial bite out of the woodwork and doing much greater damage with a last flail of its body in passing.

“Small arms! Small arms!” The captain produced a crank-gun from the locker and took aim at the closest serpent. She tossed a second gun to Dieterich, who cursed the air blue but took it, leveling it at the rider instead. A second serpent undulated up to the very decks of the ship, knocking several ‘nauts aside in its wake. Those who could handle a weapon ran to the lockers; I lurched out of the way, landed heavily on my wounded side, and cried out.

At the rail, Dieterich turned—and the last flick of the serpent’s tail lashed out and knocked him over the railing.

There was no outcry; the chaos was too great, and Dieterich not the only one to go over the side. The snap of andropters opening added a new, percussive voice to the tumult.

I will not explain my actions then; certainly I knew that Dieterich’s andropter was in good condition, as I had tended to it only that morning. Nor did I have any fear for him in particular. Nor was I so foolish as to forget that my own andropter was back in the lab with Lundqvist, and so any slip on my part inevitably meant a fall that would not just kill me but reduce me to a splash on the rocks below. Still, some

remnant of instinct propelled me forward despite better sense and burgeoning pain, and I ran to the railing.

The serpent whose rider Dieterich had pulverized writhed near the bow, devoid of instructions and therefore meaning. I leapt onto the railing, crouched briefly to secure my balance, and flung myself at the beast, trusting in my Merged brain to calculate the proper angle.

I caught the first set of fins and was dragged alongside the ship, long enough for me to force a hand into the soft tissue behind the fin and fumble about, searching for the controls that had to be there. Merged pack animals had always had secondary controls near their braincases; surely this part of the design would not have changed.

It had not. With one hand “plugged” into the serpent’s controls and one clinging to its fin, I wrenched the beast away from its attack on the *Regina* and followed the sound of Dieterich swearing at his andropter. It had opened enough to keep him from plummeting to his death but had the unfortunate side effect of wafting him directly toward the mouth of another serpent.

I wrenched my serpent into a helical dive, wrapped my legs around the closest fin, and stretched my arm out as we coasted past. My serpent smashed through the silk and framework of Dieterich’s andropter, and I caught Dieterich

himself by the harness as the jolt briefly tossed him aside. My arm went numb with the shock, and the staples holding my wound shut tore apart, but it was enough: I used Dieterich's momentum to swing him aboard, onto the serpent's flat head and out of danger.

Dieterich stared blankly at the sky for a moment, apparently having difficulty understanding that he was still alive. "Good show, Charles!" he croaked after a moment. "Very good show. You've got a knack for this."

I kept hold of his harness and didn't answer. One slip, I thought, one simple yank on the harness and I'd have disposed of half of the people who knew my Aariscian nature. And the only other led a fragile existence in an easily-broken tank....

It didn't matter. Or it would have mattered, in another world, one where I was actually the spy I'd been built to be. I clung to the serpent's head and whispered to it as I worked the controls, blood seeping through the bandage and slicking my side. "Forward. Take me to Aaris. Please."

Pleading, as the captain had said, had no effect, but direction was easy enough to communicate and the serpent's reflexes simple to control. We veered away from the knot of gunfire and scales and out of the smoke, toward the valley. None of the other serpents followed. Dieterich, still pinned in place by the remnants of his andropter, craned his neck

around. “What is it? The battle’s over there—damn it, Charles, I did say I’d keep a secret. You know I’m a man of my word, now take me back!”

I barely heard him. Below me were the green fields of Aaris as I remembered them, the mesh of white roads stretching from the Mittelgeist hills into the fragments of arable land that were so assiduously tended, the clutter of houses, even the sheen of Lake Varno where I was born, where I was decanted, where I swore citizenship....

The serpent’s hide below me rippled, and I followed it with a shiver of my own. No. Not as I remembered. The roads, long irregular from necessity, had been smoothed out into a patterned web, and the hills and rivers that had blocked them smoothed away into similarly perfect shapes. I adjusted my eyes again and again, as if a more magnified landscape would show not just what had happened but why. Nothing but the same iterated regularity; nothing of what I remembered as home.

I shook my head and shifted my eyes back to their normal state, then leaned back, trying to take in the whole valley. My breath caught with a crackle.

It was as if I gazed upon a great green clock, a hybrid land that was not just land nor automata but both. Every part of the landscape bore a design I knew from study of my own inner

workings. The slow motion of it—even the patterns of glaciers sliding down the mountains—communicated a vast unfathomable purpose. A purpose of which I was no longer a part.

And in the fields and villages and kennels and stalls, eyes all like mine, adjusting as they looked up, lenses shifting to see one of their own above them. No full automata. No full humans. Only the same Merged calm on every visage.

I shuddered, viscerally aware of the hole in my side, of the mess of blood and bandages so at odds with the careful, clean lines of this new Aaris. “Home,” I whispered. “Home. Please.”

The serpent, either wiser than I or interpreting the indecision of my hands, curved into a wide arc. I heard Dieterich gasp as we turned away, but I did not turn to see his reaction. Instead I gazed ahead, to where the *Regina*, spilling smoke and the telltale glitter of lost thaumic power, was limping away back down the pass. Its decks were a flutter of rescued andropters and wreckage, but though the mass of serpents parted to let their brother through, it did not fire upon us as I guided my serpent back to it.

* * *

For the first time in twenty years, I did not have to make the tea. Dieterich brought a tray down to the remains of the observation deck, where the Professora and I sat in silent

contemplation of the receding Sterling Pass. Below us guns boomed, unaware that they had failed in their work of keeping us out but that their greater mission had succeeded. I got up from my place on the deck (the benches having been used for temporary hull patches), but Dieterich waved me back to my seat.

He poured two cups, then tipped the contents of a third into the Professor's nutrient filter. She murmured thanks, and I took the offered cup gratefully.

"You needn't worry," Dieterich said after a moment, "about the, hmm, shrapnel I extracted. I disposed of it among the bits we took from that first dratted serpent's carcass."

One set of gears in among the other. Fitting. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome. Don't let that sort of thing happen again, hm?" He gave me a searching look, but whatever doubts he'd harbored had been erased when I brought us both back to the Regina's splintered decks. "Good man," he said, drained his tea, and returned to the depths of the ship.

I took a sip of my tea. He'd made it well. "How much time do you think we have?" Lundqvist asked softly.

I attempted a shrug, winced, and settled for shaking my head. "There's no indication that Aaris intends to undo their isolation. They may be content to stay in the valley."

“You weren’t,” she pointed out.

“No.” I gazed back into the smoky pass, thinking of the great clockwork of the valley, the machine that it ran, of serpents on the wrong side of the mountains, and lensed eyes looking back at me. “Ten years, perhaps. Five if we’re unlucky.”

The Professora was silent, though the constant hiss from her phonograph resembled a slow exhalation. “Well. We’ll just have to hope we’re lucky.”

Five years. I’d been in service for twenty; perhaps a different service was needed for the coming five. I got to my feet, glanced behind me at the pass, and began setting the cups back on the tea-tray.

“Yes. We’ll hope,” I said. “More tea?”

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Margaret Ronald’s short fiction has appeared in such venues as Fantasy Magazine, Strange Horizons, Realms of Fantasy, Baen’s Universe, and Clarkesworld Magazine. She is also the author of “Dragon’s-Eyes” in BCS #9 and BCS Audio Fiction Podcast #7. Wild Hunt, the second novel in her urban fantasy

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**Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies**

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BELLWETHER

by A.C. Smart

It must have been in the dark after moonset that he came up the old trade road. This was in the first year the Cumbery's waters didn't recede, in the last moon of Glaive Alzarin's reign, so even in late summer the road and river were one. I don't know why he gave no direction as his horse wandered ashore and stopped to crop a mouthful of redstem, just downstream from the boulder where we of Shallowford dipped our water.

He'd come a great distance in a short time. Perhaps he was asleep in the saddle, awakening when his horse stopped moving. His steed likely tore another mouthful or two as he gazed about. He might have let the horse continue grazing had he not seen the stair leading to the terraces high on the stony slopes, above the level of the spring melt waters. But his task was no less than regicide, and those who would prevent him hunted his trail. Even so mean a village as Shallowford was too great a risk. Without ever setting boot to soil, he turned his steed back onto the flooded trade road. It was four leagues before he permitted his horse grazing, and himself a brief rest, before continuing upstream. At no other place did he come ashore. But I didn't know that 'til later, when it was too late.

* * *

It's the young girls who are sent for water in the mornings, young and impressionable with their heads full of myth and romance. They passed the story first, to their friends and grannys, that the q'elpie had come out of the river in his form as a horse and that maids must be especially careful after dark. By the time the prints came to the attention of more prosaic heads, no one was listening.

Mind you, Niddy-noddy, my beloved sister, was no wiser than a girl her age ought to be. Had she not been tending our flock, she'd have been whispering and giggling with the others.

Trilla was supposed to have been with the flock, too. But, as usual, by mid-day she'd found pretext to hang about the village. I saw her sashaying disdainfully past a couple lads too young to tend the summer flocks. But she put an extra twist in her tail as she passed Shear, who was four times their age and married to her aunt.

The old lecher ducked out of sight when he realized I'd seen him watching.

She wasn't showing, yet, and still had hopes of snaring a husband before her condition became general knowledge. Unfortunately, any viable candidates had spent four moons on the high slopes with the sheep and wouldn't be back 'til the shearing, yet a moon away. But no one in Shallowford works or

travels in the middle of the day, so Trilla had all the excuse she needed to linger and hear the tales. And the news.

I arrived in the dusty shade near the trunk of the one sprawling oak of which our village could boast, to find my usual spot taken by a stranger. The women of Trilla's family watched me sidelong from crafty eyes. I sat instead where Niddy would have, had she been present, delved into my sewing basket, and began to stitch together the pieces of a chemise that would be part of Niddy's trousseau.

It is an humble art, the craft of Shallowford, but one into which all the village women are indoctrinated early. We who were gathered under the oak represented Arany Weaver in her many faces: some of us carded, some spun, and some knitted.

The stranger, after a start when she glimpsed the scarring that pulled at the left side of my face, proved too polite to stare. I sewed, as Trilla's mother twined the stranger's hands with crude, lumpy yarn, and wondered how I might warn the woman off her new friends.

"Think of it!" gushed Trilla. "All the way from Mirze Vale, and with a babe in arms. On foot no less!"

"Of course on foot," sniped her aunt. "What other way is there to cross the highlands?"

"And Lord Marshal Dirk injured by an assassin!" Trilla's mother put in, as if her sister hadn't spoken. "How badly?"

“Bad enough that Duke Cudgel feels free to take up his old ways.”

We all paused in our labors and looked on the swaddled babe at her thigh, its misty blue eyes following the play of light and shadow among the leaves. Blue eyes were unusual, except among the nobility, and the Red Duke’s favorite prey. Had the poor thing been born before the Lord Marshal returned to take command of the Mirze campaign last spring, the child would already have been dead.

If Lord Marshal Dirk didn’t recover, this woman and her child would not be the last to cast themselves into the wilds in hope of finding a life beyond the Red Duke’s reach. King Glaive the Usurper found that sadist’s talents useful enough to overlook his excesses.

The Mirze valley seemed suddenly too near, the events of the wide world reaching out to disrupt lives even here in remote Shallowford. A breeze whispered through the leaves overhead as we contemplated the horrors possibly being visited upon our neighbors...yet again. My own parents had not dared risk the Red Duke’s indulgences, and we fled when my sister was born.

All were silent but Trilla, on whom those tales must have made little impression.

“What stories do they tell of Havoc?” she inquired instead, all ingenuous innocence, her eyes on the wool she carded.

“He’s betrothed,” said the woman, her tired face at last showing signs of animation. Every woman leaned forward to hear.

I continued stitching. What did some exotic foreign mercenary have to do with me? Or did any man, for that matter?

“Betrothed.” The woman smiled secretively. “But we think he doesn’t know it!”

“Doesn’t know?” exclaimed several voices at once. “How can that be?”

“It’s the ribbons,” she explained. “Every eligible woman on either side of the river has hung out a ribbon for him. The trees were bright as springtime! The one he plucked was hard by the convent gate, where he’d delivered a woman his band rescued. One of his men was wounded, and he took the ribbon to staunch the wound.”

Gasps and cries of sympathetic dismay for the poor nun or novice swelled the sigh of the breeze. The woman nodded. “No true suitor would so demean a lass’s favor. It’s one reason we believe he doesn’t understand. Too, he replaced it, with a fine silk one.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Trilla’s aunt, her lips pursed in disapproval. “What’s done is done.”

The stranger-woman agreed. “The trees have been bare of ribbons this past moon. Whether he realizes it or not, the women of Mirze Vale know he’s no longer to be had.”

“But surely that’s not entirely true,” Trilla protested. “Surely many a Mirze maid has known his company!”

“He’s no q’elpie, not our Havoc,” she asserted. “He treats every woman, be she granny or swine girl, as if she were a lady to the manor born. But I hear you’ve a q’elpie of your own, hereabouts.” She smiled indulgently at Trilla.

“Tell us what they say about the q’elpie in Mirze Vale!” Trilla demanded, her eyes alight and her face flushed with passion.

Struck by a sudden suspicion, I gave her a startled glance before pulling my gaze back to my handiwork. Could she have engineered the footprints to excuse herself, once her condition became known? But, no. They actually were hoof prints, and no one in Shallowford had a horse.

She’d use them, though, I knew.

The woman chuckled, a rusty sound, long unused. “The q’elpie, he comes out of the river, sometimes as a horse and sometimes as a man. He preys on young maids, and only the

fairest are spared his knife. Isn't that what you and your friends have been telling yourselves all morning?" she teased.

I fought a smile that would have twisted my scars, and I won. Few of the others made the attempt, and the laughter pattered multi-toned.

Trilla's face reddened at the mocking edge to the laughter. "It was the q'elpie!" she burst out. "You'll see. You'll be sorry you laughed, then!" She threw her carding combs onto the dusty earth and stalked away, finally to rejoin Niddy on the rocky slopes of the low pasture.

Her aunt tutted annoyance. Her mother picked up the combs and tried to knock most of the dirt out of their wool mat. Neither offered a word of reproof.

Finished with sewing the chemise together, I brought out one of the cuffs I'd prepared and basted it to the end of a sleeve. I heard the stranger-woman's gasp, and she leaned over to examine the gleaming flow of patterns on the cuff.

"Such skill!" she breathed. "I'd swear the king himself has no finer!"

"It won her a husband once," Trilla's aunt snarled. "But even that won't be enough to get her another."

I kept my face impassive; let the loose hair blow around my face. No other woman my age wore her hair so, for all were married and their hair plaited in braids. I knew the harridan to

be right in that, at least. No man would have me, not with my features so twisted by scarring. It was a struggle even to speak clearly. But for all that had been taken from me, I knew my fingers to be a blessing of my goddess. So long as I could embroider, and so long as traders passed through on their way from Bitternsdock to Rose Hill town, my sister and I could have lived on my earnings.

But, at the end of shearing, Niddy would wed March. We would no longer have to rely solely on my work. What's more, March was kind and would not turn me out in my dotage. My life stretched before me, uneventful but secure. It was more than I'd dared hope for in the seasons immediately following the fire.

By the time I'd finished attaching the cuffs, it was time to take Niddy her meal. The potted mutton had been simmering all day. The fragrance made my mouth water, and the chunks of meat broke apart as I ladled the stew into a lidded earthenware dish for the journey. I added loaves of fresh-made bread to the basket, along with ripe cheese and tart, new apples for the morning and noontide.

It was a difficult trek to the summer pasture, and at the end I was glad to sit with my sister in a browning meadow, heavy russet seed-heads bowing their grass-straws in a cooling breeze. Not so welcome was Trilla's presence. As usual, she

insinuated herself into our mealtime so ingenuously that it would have made us feel rude to request time to ourselves. But this time I thought Niddy and I could enjoy a visit without Trilla dominating the conversation.

Sure enough, when I removed the lid and the scent of savory mutton stew wafted out, Trilla lurched to her feet and dashed away.

“That was unkind, Bell,” Niddy chid me gently, her pale crimson eyes peering at me from beneath the wide hat brim that prevented her petal-white cheeks from peeling in the sun. That and hair the color of spider silk marked her a moonchild, one of Arany’s own. Moonchildren are rare, but purely of the old blood and with no taint from the pale-skinned invaders. “I understand her trying to share our meal. You are a far better cook than her mother or aunt.”

“And I would not begrudge her a portion of the food,” I agreed, “if she ever reciprocated. But it will be nice to have a visit that isn’t spoiled by her gossip and petulance.”

“Well, there is that,” Niddy agreed, accepting her bowl of stew.

“She’s more than two moons along, now,” I said, nodding to where Trilla was wiping her mouth on her sleeve after retching into the grass. “What is she going to do?”

“I caught her boiling mistletoe in my kettle, last night. It was far too strong, strong enough to have killed her twice over. I offered to go to her aunt about the right dose to abort without risking the life of a mother our age; even offered to claim it was for my own use. She ranted and cursed me, but threw out the potion. Now she claims she has a plan, and is all sweetness and sunshine.”

“Mood swings.” I sighed, passing her a fistful of loaf to go with her stew. “You watch her. We don’t want her doing herself harm over this misstep.”

“I am.” She smiled, sadly.

But the early dusk was too lovely to be lost to melancholy. Faint in the daylight sky, Arany’s egg sack trailed the sun, near full. By the next full it would be time to bring in our little flock for shearing before moving them to winter pasturage on the terraced slopes between the deep winter snowdrifts and spring floods. For now we sat in the sun, serenaded by the shrill of locusts and the conversational ‘baa’ of sheep. We scooped seasoned mutton with pieces of bread, washed it down with clear spring water, and pitched stones, awarding ourselves points for landing them on the low ridge of collected rocks that would grow to become a new terrace in her great-grandchildren’s time. We talked as we ate, sharing pleasure in

her coming nuptials, and I left with time enough to negotiate the treacherous, stony path home before dark.

The following midmorning, Trilla arrived in the village wailing that my Niddy was dead.

* * *

Caring for Niddy-Noddy was what had kept me going, two years before, when the fire that destroyed our parents and their cottage took my husband as well. With Niddy now lost, nothing else mattered. I was too empty to mourn properly: no tears, no wailing, no wild curses at fate...or at Trilla, which would have been more to the point. I scooped ash from the hearth and combed it through my hair, smearing my face in the process.

“Such a tragedy,” Trilla twittered behind me as they arranged my sister’s corpse on the table my late husband had made. “And her wedding but a moon off. She said Bell had the trousseau nearly finished.”

“Shame for it to go to waste,” her aunt said through habitually pursed lips. “You were her best friend. Best you use it. Arany Weaver knows Bellwether won’t have need of it. Not with that face.”

“Poor Bell,” said Trilla’s mother, just as if I weren’t present to hear. “No point her living in this big cottage all alone. She’ll have to come live with us, now.”

“In the sheep shed!” muttered the aunt.

Trilla's mother hushed her, but I knew it was no less than the truth.

“March will be needing a bride,” the aunt said, speculatively. “With this cottage vacant, and Trilla inheriting Niddy's trousseau, perhaps he'd be content to wed after shearing as planned. After all, our Trilla is proven the prettiest girl in the village.”

I couldn't listen to any more.

As her only remaining female relative, her only remaining kin, I should have stayed to help wash Niddy for the laying out. Instead I took the gown I'd been embroidering nightly for the last year, the gown meant for Niddy's wedding which instead would now shroud her pyre, and went down to the river. At the water's edge, on a fallen boulder, I spread the skirts of the gown and made my finishing touches in the light of day. The patterns spilled in a pale onionskin shimmer down the rosy bodice and rippling skirt, much like the fall of Niddy's hair it was meant to represent. Niddy was a moon-child, beloved of the Weaver, and Arany's near-full egg sack rode the sky above me, barely visible in the sunlight. My eyes burned, dry and staring, and my chest echoed, hollow, as I worked. Every silent stitch was a prayer and offering to my goddess, a plea for justice.

It was well past mid-day, with the sun glaring down to cast shards off the water. The skirts were done, and the bodice nigh finished, when I heard what I hadn't admitted to myself I'd been waiting for: the churning of water downstream.

Around the spur of mountainside that made the river and its drowned road the only course of travel in that direction, a horse and rider appeared. He was young, perhaps no older than myself, grim and tired and determined. I knew those emotions all too well.

Please, oh mother goddess of weavers! Let this man not be who killed my Niddy!

He wore a cloak of crimson such as I'd never seen before, such as a king might wear. Though the rich madder of Niddy's gown was as fine as anything we in Shallowford knew how to make, it could not compare with the red of that cloak.

But the sound of churning water was more than any single horse could have made, and within moments the rest of his company came into view. Hard men all, and garbed for war, they wore the raven, sigil of Cumbera.

Soldiers.

For the first time I doubted. For the first time I reconsidered Trilla's innocence. The Red Duke wasn't alone in enjoying the impunity to prey on the common folk, since King

Saber's family had been slaughtered and his brother Glaive stole the throne.

Though my hands shook with fine tremors, I continued to lace my needle through the rosy spill of cloth. It was the last pattern, mirror to one already completed on the other side of the mid-line. By the time I tied off the thread and cut it, using the little crescent knife that is the symbol of those dedicated to Arany Weaver, he'd pulled up beside my rock and was waiting.

Sweat-slick and drooping, even fetlock-deep in water, the horses seemed only too glad of the rest. So did the men.

The leader's eyes were hazel, but his hair the rich brown of new-tilled loam. His face was not weathered as dark as I would have expected. But then, he was a nobleman's son, of the line of the pale invaders, and perhaps had not been a soldier long. If that were the case, he'd experienced a lot in his short career. His eyes were old.

I looked him in the eye, careless that my hair had fallen back from my face until his gaze sought the scarring. But I kept my chin up, and his expression didn't change.

"My sister's shroud," I told him, smoothing the bodice to display my work. "Will it do her honor, my lord?"

"It will," he said gravely, examining the embroidery with a critical eye.

"Did you kill her?"

He stared, shocked, and I heard muttering among his men.

“I did not.”

I believed him.

“Trilla says it was the river lord of legend, who came out of the water in horse-form before dawn yesterday.”

This brought even more consternation.

“Havoc’s killed a woman?” blurted one of the men. They cast surreptitious glances at one another, and shifted in their saddles. My gaze returned to their leader in time to see disbelief cross his face before being masked by professional interest.

“This Trilla saw the horse and its rider?”

“Nay, my lord. But we all saw the prints on the shore.”

“These prints were left before dawn, yesterday?” he pursued. “When was your sister murdered?”

“This morning, before dawn.”

And the men relaxed. I could see them exhaling, settling back into their saddles. Though Havoc was their enemy, none of them wanted this crime accounted his. He killed torturers, rapists, the truly deserving. Not women, nor children. Not innocents.

Another young man, the only other noble, was shaking his head. “If Havoc passed through here night before last, he’ll be in Bitternsdock by now.”

“Headed for Ravenhorst,” one of the soldiers muttered. “Wants an audience with the king.”

He was elbowed to silence by his neighbors.

Why would the Roenish mercenary be riding, alone and hunted by Cumberan soldiers, seeking Cumbera’s king?

Oh.

Havoc killed torturers, rapists, the truly deserving. From the tales told even before Glaive Alzarin murdered his brother’s family and took the throne, this described our new king quite well.

At my gasp the leader shifted his perusal from his men to my face, his expression weary and troubled. When no one had anything further to say, he gazed upriver a moment and gave a sigh. “I suppose we’d best have a look, since we’re here. Where are the prints?”

I gathered the finished gown and folded it into my basket, then led the way to the now faded prints. The entire village had been to see them but had taken care not to step in their immediate vicinity.

A grizzled veteran dismounted, to examine the tracks more closely. A finger flicked out to shift a leaf, then traced an odd mark that some of the other prints did not have. “Henders’ horse,” he said. “See how the hind feet have been re-shod, while the front still sport their Mydicean shoes? It was Havoc,

all right, Captain, and a day-and-a-half ago as the lass says. He's long gone from these parts."

"How can you know he didn't kill my sister?" I demanded. These strangers were my only chance to see justice done.

The leader, apparently a captain in rank, must have read it in my face. I was desperate. He glanced down at the tracks, then thoughtfully up the river.

"If he's that far ahead, we won't catch him," said the veteran.

"No. But we have to try," said the captain. "On the other hand, if he's had some part in this killing, we might learn something of use. And the horses won't last much longer without a rest. Lead on," he said to me, and I was more than happy to oblige.

Half the company stayed with the horses. The rest, a score in number and more able-bodied men than all the village of Shallowford could have mustered, accompanied their leader.

My cottage was at the far end of the village terrace. We collected a train on the way through. At the lintel, two of the men pushed through ahead of us. Two more followed. The rest surrounded the cottage, glowering and alert despite the fatigue I'd seen back at the river.

For all the villagers who followed us, not one thought to run ahead and warn Trilla's kinswomen. Those worthies fled in

alarm, to the corner farthest from the door, as the strangers with me invaded my home, which the women had already considered theirs.

Niddy's pale corpse lay naked on the table. Her eyes, the blush-pink of dog rose petals, were held shut by river-worn pebbles rather than the coins I'd placed before I left. They'd washed the blood from her throat, shoulder, and gleaming, spider-silk hair, but not bothered with more. The dress that should have graced the corpse, Niddy's best, was on Trilla. Though it shamed me that my sister's body was shown such dishonor before strangers, it didn't hurt as it might have. If justice prevailed, and I trusted the agent my goddess had sent to see it done, that dress would be all the benefit Trilla's treachery brought her.

Besides, I had a better one for Niddy.

While two of the men stood guard at the door, two joined their leader in a thorough examination of Niddy's corpse. Several small stab wounds and a gash, below her left ear, were the only flaws they found.

"No defensive wounds," murmured the grizzled sergeant. "Whoever attacked her did so without warning, and she bled out quickly."

"But not before she got hold of her attacker's hair," the captain said. Her right fist, when he pried it open, held a

number of long strands that glowed red-gold in the firelight. While it was a rare shade for the dark-complexioned Old Blood, several people in Shallowford could boast that shade of locks. But only women wore it so long and, of the women, only Trilla was yet unwed and thus wore it loose.

Proof! But would it be enough?

Surely the leader had recognized the similarity. He was watching Trilla and her kinswomen as he removed a gauntlet and tucked the strands inside. But he said nothing, so I could not be certain.

The tools of my goddess continued to work. I kept silent, burying my fears with my rage, deep in my soul.

When the examination was completed, I shook out the newly finished gown and slipped Niddy's feet and legs into it. The men helped lift her torso, and she was soon clothed for the pyre in her best, as is right. By then Trilla was snarling with envy, but the dress was safe. No one in Shallowford would have worn clothing taken off a corpse.

The men herded Trilla and her kinswomen outside, and the captain held the door for me as I followed. By then the entire village was in attendance, all who were not out tending sheep, and I fought the urge to duck my head and let the hair fall over my face. It was boldness that had won me this chance, and a show of submission at this point might undo all.

The leader paused in full view of the village folk, took his time removing the second gauntlet and tucking the pair of them in his belt as he gazed from face to face. Or maybe it was from head to head. I saw his gaze linger on each of the handful that had hair the shade of that taken from Niddy's fist.

"A girl has been murdered," he announced at last. He didn't shout, but pitched his voice to carry. "Convenient as it would be to lay the crime on the hands of the visitor you had two nights ago, or on some creature of myth, neither is the case. The murderer is among you, one of your own. Tell me how the girl's body was found."

And all eyes turned to Trilla, who for once didn't relish the attention.

"It was you who found her?" the captain asked. "Tell us."

Trilla looked to her grandmother, she who'd brought up the tale of the river horse, but the beldame was silent. "We was tending the sheep," Trilla began. "Niddy and I. On the nor'west slope three leagues hence. We'd just shifted pasture and would stay there 'til shearing. They's a stone hut for shelter an' a couple of bunks, one by the door and the other across the way. I had the one by the door. Woke up during the night and had to go outside. Sheep was nervous, so I had to scout about; see what had them stirred up. After a bit they calmed, and I went

back inside. Niddy never moved. Wasn't 'til morning I saw she were dead."

The story had changed. Previously she hadn't mentioned anything about a disturbance among the sheep or a trip outside. I opened my mouth to say as much, but the captain's hand settled on my shoulder in a quelling gesture and I subsided.

"The young woman was killed with a small knife, a curved blade no longer than a thumb knuckle," he announced, and the council of crones gasped in unison. Trilla's grandmother eyed her as if she were something spineless and slimy that had crawled from under a dung heap, and shifted a pace away. Trilla glared at her, bewildered and resentful. Trilla's mother hissed at the old woman like a wildcat interrupted at the carcass of a new-killed lamb.

The captain watched this exchange without a word. The entire village watched. When at length it became clear nothing further would be revealed in that quarter, he turned to me.

"You have such a knife," he said. "Can you tell me its significance?"

Now the eyes of the entire village were on me, and those of the crones were hostile, indeed. I couldn't betray the secrets of our rite to any man, least of all an outsider. On the other hand, if I refused to tell anything, he might leave.

“I cannot, my lord. Only that every woman in Shallowford has such a knife.”

“Every woman? Down to what age?”

“It varies, my lord. Tanner’s youngest received hers harvest last, whereas Trilla didn’t receive hers until this spring.” And I let my head tip forward, let the hair fall before my face in shame. Tanner’s youngest had another two summers to go ‘til she was old enough to wed. Trilla was of age when she was dedicated to Arany Weaver, but had been taking herbs to put off her moons. The disparity in age might not be significant to the captain, but too many of the village men might well guess.

“That isn’t helpful,” he growled at me. I kept my face averted. After a period of silence he asked, “Are they used for eating?” But I was saved from response by a chorus of outraged breaths. “Apparently not.”

“They are a sacred trust,” I said, face canted toward the ground, ignoring the crones who were hissing like a nest of vipers. “They may touch neither flesh nor blood.” And that was more than even the village men knew of the rite. I had betrayed my patron goddess, and now the council was silent in their judgment.

But he was looking at me again. Ashamed, I continued to stare down at the track, at the dung trodden to dust by the hard

little hooves of the sheep, and kept the hair hanging in front of my face to hide the scarring and my shame.

His hand entered my sight, caught my chin and lifted, held it as his other hand swept the hair aside and tucked it behind an ear. “Don’t hide your pride,” he said. “It makes you beautiful.”

In shock, I stared into his eyes. No one had seen anything of beauty in me since the fire: the fire that destroyed my parents’ cottage in the dark hours before dawn, branding my face and body as I dragged my little sister to safety; the fire that took my husband as he tried to rescue my parents...as the rest of the village stood by and watched.

I could still hear the screams.

The captain released my chin and turned to the watching villagers. “Have boards and trestles brought,” he said.

I kept my eyes averted from my neighbors as his will was done. My sin was great. I would not be able to face the women of the rite again, and my future in Shallowford was more bleak now even than it had been this morning. But I kept my chin high and did not hide my scars. As I waited, the planks were lined end-to-end, forming a long, narrow table near the sheep pens.

“All of the women who carry one of these knives will line up on the river side of the table,” the captain announced. “Any

such who be too aged or infirm to have made the trek to the pasture and back in the night, will stand on the side opposite.”

Those of us who were suspect were then directed to lay our knives on the table. What this might prove I couldn't have guessed. I heard murmurs of bewilderment and discontent from both sides, so I was not alone in this. The murmurs stilled, however, when he commanded it.

We waited.

Nothing happened.

And then the first of the flies arrived.

This seemed natural enough, near as we were to the sheep pens. But while a few landed here and there on the table before moving on, one landed directly on Trilla's knife. And stayed. Then another joined it, and another.

“She didn't clean it well enough,” he said. “They can still sense the blood.”

“No!” Trilla shrieked, backing away. But her neighbors clearly had little doubt. They moved aside from her, with looks ranging from distaste to outright horror.

“Then, too, there is the hair we found tangled in her victim's fist,” he said, drawing the folded gauntlets from his belt. He produced the strands from therein and laid them on the table.

Trilla bolted, but the strangers had expected that. In moments she was held between two of them, who pinioned her arms and affected not to notice her struggles.

“But why?” asked her bewildered father, and I pitied him. He was a good man, and probably trapped by his wife in much the same manner Trilla’d thought to trap March.

“Because Shear can’t claim her child, having a wife already,” I said, and could have said no more.

“You told!” shrieked Trilla. “You told! You told! How dare you!” And she made to lunge for me. Her guards stood like monoliths, and she managed only to writhe as she shrieked imprecations. The three of them now stood alone in a wide clearing in the silently watchful crowd.

Trilla’s aunt shrilled just as loudly, but her target was her husband. He backed away, panicked, before bolting around the corner of a barn with his wife in pursuit

“Her child, at least, is innocent. She can’t be hanged,” observed the captain, ignoring the marital spat. The villagers only shuffled and looked to one-another.

“She wouldn’t, anyway,” I said, keeping my chin up but avoiding anyone’s gaze, as I retrieved my knife. “Anyone who does something unforgivable is banished.”

Like me, I realized, and the world swayed beneath my feet.

“Very well, then. She’ll leave with us.” His voice sounded mildly exasperated. “Let her family prepare a pack for her, no more than she can carry. We ride as soon as we’ve eaten.”

I didn’t look at him or anyone else, but turned and made my way to my cottage. Trilla and her mother screamed curses at me as I went, but once the door closed I could no longer make out by whom they were damning me or to what torments. Niddy lay as I had last seen her, and the weak triumph of seeing justice done washed away in a wave of grief.

The pack my husband used to take with him when herding the culls to market at Rose Hill town hung from its peg as it had these two years past. What would I need to survive? What could I not leave behind? The cottage was full of things I didn’t want to leave. I packed essentials first: dry food that would keep, and what little coin we had. The freshwater pearl pendant that was the only piece of jewelry our family could boast of, I tied around my neck inside my bodice. I buckled my husband’s belt about my waist, shifting the sheath and its worn but serviceable dagger, until they hung out of my way.

I added to the pack my best dress and other items of apparel, along with my newest pair of shoes. I put on my second best dress, as it would last longest for working in, and the boots my husband had given me as a wedding gift. My needles and embroidery thread I folded into my finest linen

and tucked into the pack. What space remained I filled with my best work, items from Niddy's trousseau. These I would sell to live on, and to purchase further materials.

And that was it. I settled the pack's weight on my back and knew that, while I could carry it all day without faltering, I would not be able to do so and keep up with the horses. But I must be prepared to make a new life on my own.

With the pack resting beside the door, I piled the blankets from the beds into the open trunks I'd taken the clothes out of, shoving the lot under Niddy's table. One straw mattress followed, while the other I threw across the door. I drew a line in oil along the walls and over to Niddy's pyre, and lay the oilskin up-ended among the blankets. Then I stirred up the coals, lighted a brand, and went to stand in the entry for one last look.

When I tossed the brand into the oily blankets, the yellow flames lit the madder of Niddy's gown, glinting off the sun-gold of her locks and my embroidery. Before her gown could catch fire I snatched up my pack, swept outside, and closed the door behind me. The cottage was far enough from any other to pose no danger of the fire spreading.

Half the troop was already in the saddle when I reached the river. Their leader mounted with the ease of a cat flowing onto a favored perch, and looked down at me. I gazed up,

heedless of the heavy hooves dancing near my booted toes, trying to memorize his face, for I knew I would never see him again. He returned my gaze, solemn and tired...and then he leaned down and offered me his hand.

He took the heavy pack first, tossing it with one hand to a soldier who added it to the load of a packhorse. Then he leaned down again. In his eyes I saw respect and admiration, emotions I'd never expected to see directed at me again. I accepted his hand and was lifted up to sit sideways across the horse, at his back.

Far overhead and two furlongs distant, the hungry flames burst through the thatch roof with a roar, and he wheeled his steed to see. A glance at my face must have told him all he needed to know, for he asked no questions.

He looked over his men to see that all were mounted. With a weeping Trilla up behind one, and with a wave of his hand, we resumed their interrupted journey up the river.

* * *

By the time we reached Ravenhorst, the damage was done. With the aid of the servants, we took the keep from yet another usurper and presented it to the rightful king. Dirk Alzarin, formerly the Lord Marshal, never forgave Havoc for giving him the throne. But he rewarded my lord, the captain, for his loyal service with lands forfeited by traitors. In time I became

personal maid to a duchess, a brave lady who does not mind that her husband gives his admiration to a peasant.

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A.C. Smart is the co-author, with Quinn Braver, of “Hell Hath No Furies” in L. Marie Wood’s anthology Hell Hath No Fury, “Witch” in David Bain’s anthology Modern Mage, Ancient Magic, and “[Havoc](#)” in BCS #19, which is set in the same world as “Bellwether.” A sometime teacher, she writes to prevent being over-whelmed by reality. Two cats allow her to cohabit with them; they come when called and are generally more obedient than students.

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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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