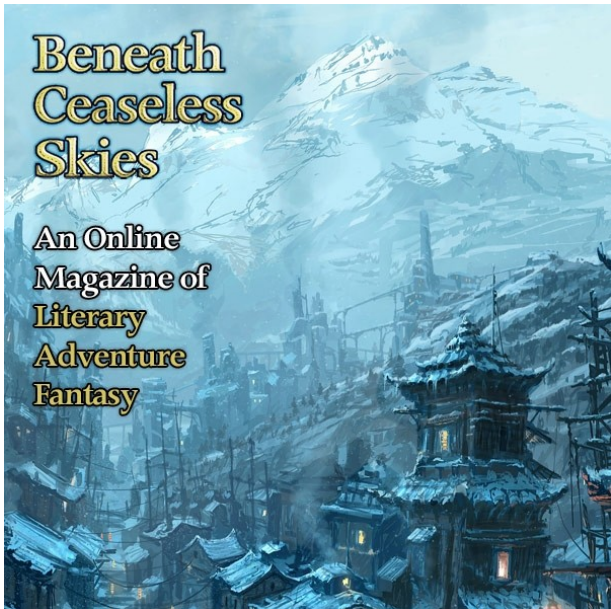


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GIZZARD STONES

by Garth Upshaw

A teeming throng of bigger, stronger goblins pushed me away from the feeding trough even as they cowered from the human guard. I bowed and shuffled with the others, sinking into the miasma of hungry fear that settled over us like a dank fog. The gibbous moon cast puddles of cold light across the causeway, the gate, the Fence. Maggot squeaked behind me, but I shut her up with a hiss.

“Queen’s largess,” the guard yelled. He brushed flies from his thigh and tipped the feeding cart. Table scraps, refuse, and the occasional veyra seed slurped into the long, rusty trough. I gripped the nail strung around my neck and tried to shoulder through the half-naked bodies in front of me.

The wall of goblins refused to budge, and I received an inadvertent elbow in the face. I rubbed my cheek and spared a sour look for the guard. He seemed bored, standing on the running board of the cart with his arms akimbo. A plastic visor hid his face. He smelled of cheap wine and sex. The cart horses snorted.

The eastern sky grew pink, hurting my eyes. A sated goblin pushed away from the trough, and I squeezed into his place. I

pulled Maggot next to me, and we rooted through the scant leavings. I fed on moldy cheese, stale bread crusts, and black, slimy lettuce.

“There’s no more veyá, Nail.” Maggot sagged against my side.

“Keep looking,” I whispered. We could survive without the tough, hard-shelled seeds for a time, but veyá deprivation would cause weakness and eventual death.

“Ha!” Maggot released a whiff of glee and pulled a round lump from inside a wet broadsheet. Other goblins eyed her prize, but she snapped her beak and filled the air with a back-off smell that kept them away.

“Eat it quick,” I said.

She engulfed the fist-sized seed with her beak and bit down hard. The seed snapped, and she spat a handful of shards into her palm. “Share?”

“Thanks.” I gulped the fragments, saving the largest for Grampa. A rich taste suffused my mouth, and for a moment I smelled waving grasses and warm, stagnant marsh water. A far cry from this dismal camp where generations of my ancestors had been born, lived, and died. My gizzard tightened, and the stones inside ground the seed to paste.

“We should head home.” Maggot looked at the lightning sky and winced.

I scooped a last handful of melon rinds and nodded. “Let’s go.” The compound was a half hour’s walk even if we hurried.

Our feet squelched along twisty, muddy trails towards the low end of Goblintown. Earthen walls rose around us, sheltering our eyes from the sky. Mud towers loomed at every intersection like giant, half-melted candles. The thrum of waterwheels reverberated through the ground. Far downriver, well past the Fence, the towers of the Queen’s castle poked like accusing fingers into the clouds.

“Queen’s Largess.” My voice was a pitch-perfect satire of the guard. Goblins are excellent mimics.

Maggot ignored my joke. “Let’s check the Fence.”

“There’s no time.” I shuffled faster. Maggot always hoped there’d be a morning when she’d find that a flaw in the Fence had revealed a passageway, that a flood had toppled a support pylon or that some creature had dug a tunnel.

Animals avoided the Fence. The pylons were sunk deep in the marshy soil and anchored in concrete. Queen’s men patrolled the perimeter night and day. We were penned in like cattle. I flicked a rock at a pigeon on a far roof, hoping for fresh meat. I’ve got a strong arm, but the bird was out of range.

“Ssst.” Maggot held up her hand. “Quiet.” She edged to the final corner by our house, back against a crumbling den wall. “Smell that?”

I took a deep breath, forcing air through the wide nostrils set over my beak. My stomach knotted. “Reivers.”

“And a gleaner.” Maggot’s hand found my elbow.

I was scared, but Maggot poked her head around the corner, so I did, too. A squad of black-armored reivers as tall as houses surrounded our warren. They held whips and chains, muskets, wicked spiked clubs, and crossbows. The Queen’s finest.

A burly pair of reivers slammed a pointed ram into the wet, earthen wall of our house. It punctured the mud with a terrible sucking sound like an arrow piercing a lung. They slid catches open and reversed direction. The side of our house ripped outward into the street, torn open by unfolded metal spikes on the tip of the ram.

The gleaner raised its serrated front legs into the sky like a praying mantis about to strike. Gears clicked and turned in its body, and I smelled machine oil mixed with acidic mantid blood.

Grampa huddled inside, exposed in the corner. Bark and Thorn crouched next to him covering their faces. The gleaner struck—one-two—and in less time that it took to draw a breath, Grampa and Thorn were trussed and thrown over the gleaner’s back like sacks of meal. Bark, the bravest of my littermates,

whimpered and dodged out of sight into the yard behind the house. The gleaner stepped forward and raised its legs.

Maggot leapt out of hiding. “No!”

The streets were empty of other goblins, though their fear lay thick over the neighborhood like a musty blanket. No Goblin had ever prevailed against the Queen’s men.

A reiver twisted his head towards us and grunted a sharp command. “Halt.”

“You fool.” I pulled Maggot’s arm. “Run.”

I turned and sprinted back the way we’d come, dragging Maggot into dark alleyways and slipping through open runnels of sewage. The wind shifted, and the harsh metal-and-blood smell of the reivers seared my nostrils.

“Hurry.” I squeezed under a low arch. The reivers fanned out, driving us away from the center of town, away from other goblins. Towards the Fence. We ran. Ran through tunnels, across barren gardens, through murky, overflowing ditches. We made time whenever we moved through water. Goblins can swim, and reivers in their heavy armor cannot. But any such gains were quickly lost.

I ran until my sides ached and my breath came rough and harsh. Maggot pounded on doors, hissed at shuttered windows, and pleaded to unseen goblins whose terror stink gave them away. They cowered in their huts, useless to help us.

We crossed a square, cobblestone street bright in the harsh daylight. My nail bounced on my chest, scraping my skin. The closed-up buildings offered no shelter. We turned a corner. The houses petered out as we got closer to the Fence, and soon we had no protection from the fiery sun. My skin popped and dried, pinpricks of pain a harbinger of worse to come.

The Fence itself seemed lightweight, deceptively insubstantial. Wooden pylons coated in creosote supported a network of dried sinew and bones. Goblin bones. They pulsed with sick, gut-wrenching magic. I swallowed bile. Marshy wetland extended through the Fence alongside the river, rising a bit and turning into solid ground farther downstream. The tin-roofed shacks of a human slum sent sharp reflections into my eyes.

I stopped, unable to push myself against the vile magic, but Maggot thrust her legs and leaped towards the Fence, screaming and clawing the air. Her determination and desperation threatened to overwhelm other more subtle odors. She landed on her outstretched arms, twisting them underneath her body, and lay frothing and retching on the ground.

I heard the heavy suck and pull of boots in mud. Reivers behind me. A jerky shape appeared above the last row of houses, and the gleaner moved into the open space, sniffing

and twitching its feathery antennae. A semi-circle of reivers blocked escape. Lights blinked on the gleaner's head. Flat, metallic, black eyes focused on Maggot.

I yelled. An inarticulate scream of rage. As the gleaner struck at Maggot, I threw the last fragment of veyra I'd had clutched in my hand. The seed hit the gleaner's left eye, and its claw ripped into the Fence rather than spearing Maggot's back.

Sparks showered from the rent, and the gleaner leaped backwards, screeching in pain and knocking reivers to the ground. The smell of rotten eggs and burnt metal made my eyes water, but the unnatural, stomach-churning nausea had vanished.

I scuttled forward, grabbed Maggot's ankle, and dove through the tear in the Fence. Muskets boomed and crossbow bolts flew by us. Reivers charged forward, but their boots mired in the thick muck.

I hunkered low, Maggot on my back, swimming where possible, scuttling behind bushes and twisty low trees when I couldn't swim. I made for the safety of the running water I could smell in front of me.

After pushing through one last tangle of ropy vines, I slipped into the wide river. I allowed myself a moment to savor what had happened. Exhilaration filled me. We had done what no other goblins in over two hundred years had ever managed:

escaped from Goblintown. I eased Maggot into the water. Her eyes fluttered. “Where—”

“Don’t talk.” A black, feathered shaft protruded from her back. My heart sank. I turned her over. A gory, metal arrowhead thrust out her side. Green blood stained the water, twisting downstream in ominous threads.

“I hurt, Nail. Bad.” She pressed her arm against her body. Distant reivers pounded up the causeway, blowing alerts on long, black horns. Maggot’s wound smelled like raw meat.

“You’ll be fine.” I cradled her in my arms and kicked downstream, away from the reivers. Sunlight beat on the water, searing spots into my eyes and blistering my scalp.

Maggot and I had always been close. We were the odd ones out. Skinnier, smarter. She could actually read! My arms felt heavy. Maggot stank. My gizzard stones weighed me down. Now we were the last of our brood.

Mum had died two winters ago from worms. Tooth and Pebble had been trampled. Dad had been taken for Questioning before I was born. Sparky had thrown himself into the Fence. Stick had succumbed to a nasty, dry cough.

We’d laid out the bodies when we got them, gathered family together, cut the corpses open, and doled out the gizzard stones one by one. We each swallowed our share, round

pebbles slipping down our throats. Then we sewed the bodies into sheets and buried them in swampy ground.

My gizzard felt full to bursting.

Wood-and-corrugated-tin houses on the far bank drifted past. An old man fished from a dock. A woman waded in the shallows washing clothes. Rusty boats were tied to posts up and down the shore. Smells of roasting meat, burning coal, horses packed in stalls, and the thousand other odors of a city oozed across the water. I stayed mid-current, beak poking out of the river, holding Maggot so she could breathe.

The current swept us past an abandoned factory. Residual leakage saturated the soil. Blackberry bushes covered the high bank. Red, new berries peeked from behind leaves like vigilant eyes. I kicked sideways and worked upstream along the shore. No human squatters had slept in the factory for days, maybe weeks. I could smell rat droppings and pigeon nests. Signs of food.

Maggot's breathing whispered in and out, high and fluttery. Her eyes stayed shut even as I pushed thorny vines aside and made landfall. The river had eaten the bank away, and a rocky overhang gave shelter. I dug mud from underneath the stone and made space for Maggot. Goblins are good diggers.

She lay on her side, opened her eyes, and winced. “Go on. I’ll join you later. When I feel better.” It seemed like she pushed each word out of her body with sheer willpower. The black fletching sticking out of her back quivered.

Part of me wanted to do just that. Leave. I wasn’t brave like Bark. Gleaners would roam the banks, poking their long claws everywhere. Reivers were even now surely on the river. I could swim downstream, elude pursuit, make my way to some foreign land more friendly to goblins. But I shook my head. “I’ll find you a healer. Maybe some veyá.”

She grimaced and closed her eyes. Water lapped at my feet. I gripped the arrowhead, thinking I could pull it through, but every touch made Maggot twitch with pain. I packed a cool womb of mud around us both and tried to think. Maggot would surely die if I did nothing. I grasped the arrow again.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. I pulled, and Maggot screamed as the arrow snagged and tore through her flesh. I mumbled encouragements as she writhed in my arms. Tears flowed from my eyes. I pressed my hands to her side and tried to stop the bleeding.

Bushes rustled on the bank above. I could smell a gleaner and smoky metal. I stilled every muscle in my body, hoping I’d concealed us well enough. A claw swept through the blackberries, exposing the overhang. A reiver stood in the prow

of a long, sleek boat not more than two body-lengths from me. Spells bubbled the water at the boat's stern. A rat squeaked in terror and dove into the river.

I held my breath. The reiver barked a command, and the boat turned and shot downstream. Blackberries covered the overhang once more.

* * *

When night fell, I dug myself out and repacked the mud around Maggot. She didn't wake, and her tiny chest barely moved with her breath. I dribbled water into her mouth and held her head until she swallowed. I had to find veyra seed. The strength it would give her was her only chance to heal.

I kicked off and swam to a rocky part of the shoreline where makeshift wooden stairs led to a ramshackle building. Firelight made a shimmering rectangle on the water. Animated conversations sounded from inside, and I could smell human men and women, drunk, sexually aroused, unafraid.

I scuttled upwards, grateful for the cool night sky above me, pausing for a moment on ground level to fill my nostrils with air before continuing to the roof. Goblins are good at scuttling. I chose an empty, dark room and slipped inside, making no more noise than a pigeon landing.

A pile of dirty clothes in the corner gave up an old shirt, redolent of its pork-eating owner, but long enough to cover me

down to the ground. I rolled up the sleeves and cinched my waist with a strip of curtain pull. A battered, floppy hat concealed my head, and a scarf completed the disguise. Maybe I could wander the night streets without raising an immediate alarm.

I followed the smell of steel weapons, magic, and desperation. I listened in doorways, at windows, and to conversations wafting on the wind. A tattered broadsheet blew past me and I snagged it with a foot. I'm no Maggot, but I could piece together the headlines: *Glory Close at Hand! War Nearly Won! Queen's Magic Saves the Day!*

All lies. Even goblins knew that.

Metal bins in back alleys yielded plentiful fare: stale bread, cheese with a sparse patina of green mold, a half-eaten steak. I cooed and lured a pigeon into reach. I gorged until my stomach bulged, and then squirreled the rest away for Maggot.

I skulked outside another riverfront bar, dank and unassuming as all the others. The ale smelled poisonous, spiked with rotted wood, but the clientèle drank heavily, seemingly unaware. Two fights broke out and were quelled with quick, rough violence by the burly-shouldered keep.

A hint of veyra seed on the breeze kept me close. I tried to tease it out from the stench of the bar but couldn't. Frustration made me squeak.

The door banged open, and orange lantern light spilled into the street. A middle-aged man stumbled backwards outside. He smelled of smoke and drink. I blinked. He yelled and shook his fist. Green flame sparked around his hand, and then he turned and threw up against the wall.

“Queen’s tits, Dontae,” thundered the barkeep from the doorway. “Go die somewhere else.”

Dontae wiped his mouth on a tattered sleeve of high-quality silk and lurched down the alleyway. Sickness rolled off him like a cloud, almost overwhelming the sharp, spicy scent of veyá.

I poked through his vomit, twitching my head to keep watch in all directions at once. Lowering my face, I breathed. Air swirled into my sinuses. Ale, rotten beef, scabrous potato, sickness. And veyá.

I scuttled across the roof, following. He threw up twice more, retching until blood dribbled from his mouth. At an intersection, he stopped and swayed back and forth.

Gathering all my courage, I slid to the ground and approached him. Pitching my words in an imitation of human tones, I spoke. “I need your help.” I wished Maggot were with me. Or Bark. Or anyone.

Dontae laughed and rubbed his face. “You’re up way past your bedtime, boy. Go home.”

I stood straighter, almost to his elbow. “You can help me.”
I removed my hat.

“A goblin.” Dontae touched my head with a soft, unbelieving finger. “A state secret appears in the middle of the street.” He laughed. “Is my research to have an answer at last?”

I ignored his rambling. “You smell of veyā.”

“Quiet.” Dontae glanced up and down the street, every motion exaggerated by drunkenness. “Veyā is illegal.”

I tipped my head back and stared Dontae right in the eyes. “Then why do you reek of it?” I didn’t know Dontae’s diet, but I was positive the seeds were too strong for human stomachs.

Dontae twisted his hands together. “Veyā is the source of magic. You wouldn’t understand.” Striking a pose, he continued. “I smuggled a seed from the Queen’s fields and now I have a small roof garden. My meals are seasoned with ground veyā.”

“Can you heal?”

Dontae stood tall. “I am a wizard scientist. Now come with me. I have questions for you.”

A terrible desperation sparked in my brain, and I felt free of worry for the first time in my life. What could possibly be worse than this? “No. You follow me.” Darting into the shadows, I led him towards Maggot and the factory. I held my

breath until I heard his footsteps behind me, and then let myself feel a glimmer of hope.

* * *

At the river, I waited until Dontae's stumbling progress brought him to the factory gates. I slid down the muddy bank, worrying that I was too late, that Dontae wouldn't be able to help, that reivers had discovered Maggot. Blackberry thorns tore at my clothes and ripped the scarf from around my neck.

I shoveled mud away from the hiding place, breathing in relief when I found Maggot's foot. I placed my arms under her body, heart lurching at how limp and cold she felt. I lifted her so wound wouldn't drag, and I slid her free. She felt lighter on my back, a bag of sticks inside her skin.

Dontae lolled on the edge of a crumbling loading dock. He stared at the bushes when I emerged from the blackberries, but clearly couldn't see through the darkness. I crept sideways until I could almost touch the shiny buttons on his jacket. "My littermate is hurt."

Dontae jumped and sputtered. "There you are. Do you have any idea—"

I brushed the rotten wood clean and set Maggot down. "See, there? The arrow wound?"

Dontae squinted and shook his head. "I can't see a bloody thing." He mumbled a string of harsh words. "*Ije. Freua. Gelf.*"

A flickering green light appeared at the tip of his right index finger. He grimaced and rubbed his side. “Magic hurts. But it’s impossible without the veyá.”

I nodded. “Heal her. Please.”

Dontae touched Maggot’s skin. He clucked his tongue, and then rested his ear on her chest. After a long moment, he raised his head. “I’m no expert on goblin physiology, but I think your friend is, uh, dead.” He wiped his hand on his shirt. The light went out.

My head hurt, and I couldn’t seem to breathe right. “Dead?”

Dontae shrugged. “Now can you come with me? I have a ton of questions. Goblins eat veyá, don’t they?”

I shrugged. A hot dry wind blew grit in my face. The boldness I’d used to order Dontae around earlier dribbled out of me like water from a cracked mug. A terrible bleakness filled my heart. After a long moment, I told Dontae I’d join him. It didn’t really matter. Maggot should be indoors. I needed to perform her last rituals. Dontae’s house was as good as anywhere.

I hefted my littermate, slinging her on my back once again. This time, I couldn’t deny the lifeless nature of the body. I trudged after Dontae, smelling ashes in the back of my throat.

* * *

Dontae lived in a walkup accessed by a flight of treacherous stairs tacked on the side of a decrepit warehouse. His single room stank of rotten food and dirty laundry. Piles of rocks spilled from boxes and packs. Pebbles were fixed in clamps over smoky burners or were ready to be crushed to dust in an enormous vice. Open books perched on shelves, their spines broken and their pages stained with mold.

Dontae snapped his fingers. "*Hiklor. Muhqken.*" A lantern flared and dimmed. "Welcome to my humble abode." He poured water from a covered pitcher into a bowl, splashed his face, and wiped himself with a grimy towel. "Have a seat anywhere." He stacked dirty plates into the sink, freeing space on a rickety stool.

I backed up to a thigh-high, lopsided table and lowered Maggot's body. "There are rituals to perform." I turned and straightened Maggot's legs, arranging her hands on her chest. Her skin felt dry and papery. I thought of all the times Maggot had made me laugh. How she'd shared food. The places we'd explored together. I felt more alone now than ever before.

Dontae fidgeted. "You won't make a mess, will you?"

My arms felt heavy, and every motion seemed to take forever. I folded a towel to get a clean corner and dipped it in the water. The coolness felt comforting on my hand, but my

heart stayed dry and desolate. I washed Maggot's body. Goblins keep dying.

Dontae mumbled under his breath but stayed still.

I closed my eyes and nostrils, sinking into myself. Breathed in through my mouth. Breathed out. I raised my nail in an outstretched hand and opened my eyes. The sharp metal gleamed.

The skin of Maggot's chest parted with a soft, wet slurp. The smell of fresh entrails oozed into the room. I eased my finger into Maggot's gizzard and removed a fistful of pebbles. The rocks were slimy and smooth, all sharp edges rubbed off long ago.

I plunged my hand in the water pitcher, letting the rocks dribble from between my fingers. Each stone told a story I could dimly sense. Some had been passed down for generations, rubbing and grinding together day after day. The last rock dropped from my hand with a tiny splash.

I reached into Maggot's body again. Dontae edged forward, avid eyes following my every move. "What are those?" His voice grated on my ears.

"Stay back." I squeezed the words out.

Maggot's body yielded another handful of gizzard stones. I washed them all and laid them one by one next to Maggot. Fourteen. Some big. Some small. Ones Maggot had found and

swallowed herself. Others discovered years ago by a parent, grandparent, or even more distant ancestor.

The rough wood of the table contrasted with the smoothness of the stones. I wished I had winding sheets, lavender. I would've liked to bury Maggot with all the proper rites.

I touched each of the gizzard stones. A dark red pebble felt warm and released a smell of cinnamon as I stroked. A pair of black stones laced with white quartz buzzed and sparked in my hands.

I kept returning to the biggest stone, a knuckle-sized monster I was hard-pressed to believe Maggot had swallowed. I tossed it in my palm. It felt heavy for its size. One of the old ones. Bright spots of blue flecked a tan base.

Dontae joggled my elbow. "Do you know what these are worth?" The stone fell to the floor.

"What?" I cringed, having forgotten Dontae was present.

He grabbed my arm. "Watch." Scooping the stone from the floor, he uttered a single word. "*Irejure.*"

Light flared from his hand. Blinding white light as pure as thought. I expected him to grimace, but he laughed and spoke again. The light grew brighter, outlining his whole body. The bones in my arm glowed where his hand gripped.

“These are wizard stones.” Dontae looked with naked hunger at Maggot’s body. “The Queen has the only supply. Used to have.” He raised his hand. “Expose the stone to air. Concentrate.” His voice took on a reverential quality. “*Kinsic. Fregar. Veldspo.*” Green smoke erupted from his fist and burned through the air. A dead plant in the corner burst into vibrant life, twisting and straining towards the ceiling. In seconds, new growth had filled the far side of the room.

Rage blossomed in my breast. Generations of anger consumed me. Goblins should never bow to humans again. I hit Dontae in the hand with the water pitcher. Maggot’s pebble flew from his fist. “Mine.” I scabbled on the floor. The plant’s growth slowed and stopped.

The sharp scent of Dontae’s aggression warned me, and I looked up just as the flat, black bottom of a frying pan descended towards my head. I rolled too late. The pan hit my skull with a solid clonk. The room spun around me. I gabbled like a fish, and then I passed out.

* * *

I jerked awake to find my arms bound behind my back and thick, scratchy hemp ropes wrapped around my body. The room wavered and blurred in my vision, and a thousand overwhelming smells assaulted me. My stomach churned, and I

had to swallow to keep from throwing up. A lump on my head pulsed with pain.

Dontae paced the floor, talking to a pair of hard-bitten men sitting on the couch. “I could teach you. With the stones, you won’t need veyā.”

“Why’d you get kicked out of school, again?” One of them, a bald man, cocked his head at Dontae. “I say sell the rocks, move south.”

The third man snorted. “Up the revolution, eh Gorm?” He rattled a pair of gizzard stones in his palm.

“Come off it, Erhon,” Gorm snarled. “Your motto is ‘look out for number one’. Don’t get all high and mighty on us.”

Erhon held a translucent amber stone up to the light and squinted. “I’ve always wanted to be a wizard.”

Dontae frowned. “Just to be clear, I left school. I wasn’t kicked out.”

Gorm raised his eyebrows. “Yeah?”

“I bugged out. The bitch sends wizards to the front lines almost as fast as they get killed there.” Dontae sniffed. “Now repeat after me. Softly. *Irejure*.” A gentle light bloomed at the tip of his finger. “Magic is easy, with the right guide.”

Erhon took a breath. “*Irejure*.” His pitch was off. A faint spark flashed and he jumped. “Ouch. Queen’s teeth, that hurt.”

Dontae frowned. “No, no. Focus on the stone. Listen. I speak the language of making and unmaking. Every syllable must be perfect, exact. *Irejure*.” Dontae’s whole hand blossomed with bright light.

Gorm stood up. “Children’s tricks. When a squad of Queen’s men is after me, I want to do more than shine pretty lights in their faces.”

Dontae pointed at the leftover remains of a meal. “*Hajig. Nuemousfros*.” A pair of reptilian legs sprouted from the sides of a half-eaten loaf of bread, and a green snout with rows of sharp fangs pushed from the front. The cat-sized creature writhed and twisted, and then fell off the shelf and scraped across the floor towards me. Ichor oozed from its back. “The spell works better with a full loaf.” Dontae gestured, and the animal snapped at Gorm.

“Queen’s ‘roids, Dontae.” Gorm stomped a booted foot and crushed the creature into pulp.

Erhon nodded his approval. “A few dozen of those’d give pause to a reiver.”

“Snappy little lizard things?” Gorm snorted. “I want to blow up buildings. Shoot fireballs from my fingers.”

Dontae sneered. “You’ve been reading too many stories. Magic’s not like that in the real world.”

“Can’t you fly?” Erhon looked as excited as a kid at a hanging.

“It’s not like birds fly. More like pushing against the earth.” Dontae rubbed his left knee. “I broke my leg once, landing.” He hunched over and straightened his arm downward. “*Wutrishd. Remisdc.*” He shot upwards and smashed into the ceiling. Bits of plaster rained down like snow.

Erhon squealed with delight. “Bravo. Bravo.”

Dontae fell to the floor with a crash. “Queen’s whiskers.”

Gorm pursed his lips. “Useful, I suppose. Have to practice a bit.”

The wind shifted, bringing a familiar blood-and-metal smell to my nose. “Reivers,” I whispered.

Gorm strode to me in two quick steps and lifted my body with one hand. “What’s that, goblin?”

I squinted at Gorm’s face. Crow’s feet wrinkled the skin next to his eyes. His front teeth were black and crooked. I sniffed again. “Reivers. A squad or more. And a pair of gleaners.”

“Queen’s cunt.” Erhon eased a curtain aside. “He’s right.”

Gorm threw me in the corner, grabbed a handful of Maggot’s gizzard stones, and burst out the door. The thrum of bowstrings sounded in chorus with musket shots, followed by a series of wet thumps and a single grunt. The smell of fresh

human blood tickled my nose. Heavy boots pounded up the stairs, and a reiver leaped through the doorway.

His spiked helmet glittered in the light, and he held a shining broadsword at chest level, a handspan from Dontae's heart. "On the floor. Now. Hands behind your back."

Erhon gibbered by the couch. Dontae brought his hands up. "Ire—"

The reiver lunged forward like he was skewering a chicken. The broadsword erupted from Dontae's back in a shower of blood. More reivers poured through the doorway.

A pair of black, steel-toed boots stopped a finger's breadth from my beak. "Hey, boss. Goblin jackpot."

* * *

Knobby, metal protrusions on the gleaner's side poked my beak with every step. The reivers had lashed me to its back with tough, smooth rope. I bounced and scraped with every mincing step the gleaner took. A gasoline engine chugged in its innards, releasing noxious exhaust. Its chitinous exoskeleton smelled of greasy wax and rotted flesh.

The ground moved beneath me. A squad of reivers kept pace with the gleaner, armor jingling as they jogged alongside. Their excitement tinged the air. Ordinary citizens pressed themselves into doorways and watched with wide eyes as we went by. My head throbbed with pain.

The cobblestones got smoother, and the smell of raw sewage receded. We passed through an enormous metal gate in a thick, stone wall. Armed guards stood at my left and right.

A reiver tapped the gleaner on the back of its left rear leg. The creature crouched, folding its insectile body low to the ground. A pair of rough, gloved hands untied the ropes securing me to the gleaner, lifted me off its slick back, and propped me on my feet.

Stone walls surrounded a cavernous building. Dusty sunlight poured through high, narrow openings. Stalls lined the walls. The smell of gleaners was strong and sour. Stable boys led the terrible creatures outside to an open courtyard or shoveled their pasty white droppings into barrows.

The reiver holding me cut the ropes from my ankles, and then pulled me close and slipped a heavy iron collar around my neck. He snicked a lock shut. The metal rattled against my collarbones, and a length of chain fell across my shoulder. The links stank of old blood and pain. He pushed my back. "Walk."

I took a step, but my legs had no strength. They tingled and shook beneath me. The sky seemed impossibly blue and bright. I felt hollowed out, lost.

I stumbled and would have fallen, but the reiver cinched his grip tight on the chain. "I said, walk." He yanked me along by the neck. The metal collar choked and rubbed. My hands

were still bound behind my back, and I strove with all the muscles in my legs to get space for a breath.

The reiver ducked through a low stone doorway, tugging me with him. A guard behind a slit in the wall called out. “Hey, Rejit. Cockfight tonight? The whole shift is going. Easy money.” A dismal, half-dead tree in a pot outside the door seemed to wave me a mournful goodbye.

Rejit grunted an affirmative and shoved me forward. I coughed. The corridor smelled of suffering and blood. Layer upon layer of agony laid down over decades. My mind refused to absorb the sheer volume of sensory torture, and my eyes ran thick with tears. The collar scraped my skin raw, and the tread of Rejit’s boots intoned “doom, doom, doom,” as he led me into darkness.

We trudged down a worn spiral staircase. Smoky torches blackened the walls with soot. The stones wept water, and rank growths speckled the ceiling like scabs on diseased skin.

Rejit greeted other guards, never losing his hold on me. We reached a long hallway where half a dozen torches cast meager puddles of light. A door stood open partway down the hall, and Rejit unclipped the chain from the collar around my neck and thrust me through. “Shit in the bucket if you know what’s good for you. The Queen won’t want her shoes soiled.”

The door slammed shut behind me. I sank to my knees, strength giving out, and sobbed in despair. Icy darkness consumed me. Over the constant scent of blood and fear, I could smell the shit-bucket, a pile of mouldering hay in the corner, and oily water. Vermin rustled.

My lot back in Goblintown hadn't been great by any measure, but right then it looked like a king's life of luxury. I had no idea how long I lay in the dark, tears running down my cheeks, wishing I'd never been born. There's no way to tell time underground. The smells never changed. The door didn't open. My gizzard knotted on emptiness, muscles grinding stones together.

I thought of Dontae and felt sorry for his death. Not that I liked him or thought he liked me—I wasn't so naive—but no one deserves to die so messily. Maggot and Bark didn't deserve to die, either. And Grampa. I missed them. Goblins aren't meant to be alone. I tried to summon some of the boldness I'd felt earlier. What would Bark do if he were here?

I tucked and scabbled with my foot, working one leg through the opening between my shackled arms. My shoulders stretched and popped, shooting pain through my body, but I struggled until my hands were no longer behind me. I attacked the ropes around my wrist with my beak. After what felt like

hours of effort, the knots gave way. I stripped the ropes off and rubbed life back into my tingling, shaking fingers.

The big floor slabs had been fitted together with less than a coin's width between them. The walls were made from a tough, edgy stone hacked into crude blocks, but the joints were smooth and tight. I used my nail to scrape at the largest crack I could feel, but couldn't fool myself that it made any difference.

The thick metal door blocked any hallway light from reaching me. I thought of Dontae again, trying to teach Erhon and Gorm. I wondered if the veyra seed in me would be enough. "*Irejure*," I whispered.

Light sparked and died on my finger, and a backlash hit me like the kick of a mule. I gasped, and more tears burst from my eyes. My body felt like it'd been sliced open and splayed inside out. My gizzard burned. I lay on my back and blinked spots away from my vision. When Dontae had said magic hurt, I'd had no idea how much.

I pressed my left hand to my chest. My gizzard flexed. I could feel the warm stones rubbing against each other underneath my skin. The nail resting in the little hollow under my sternum rose and fell with every breath.

I tried focusing on the stones. "*Irejure*." Agony exploded through me again. Searing pain that left me twitching and

jerking on the floor. The smell of my own fear washed over me. Goblins aren't brave.

But I gripped the nail in my right hand and tested the edge with the ball of my thumb. The skin of my chest parted ever so slightly, and a drop welled up. I filled my nose with the smell of my own blood, and then plunged the nail into my gizzard.

I screamed. A loud, high-pitched shriek tore from my throat and left me raw and panting. My chest felt like I'd been jabbed with a red-hot poker. I forced the nail down, making the hole even larger. A river of blood flooded over my skin, thick and hot.

I yanked the nail out. Sweat ran into my eyes. Waves of pain swept through me with every breath. Unclenching my fist, I let the nail drop to the floor. The string rubbed my neck under the metal collar. I tightened my gizzard, beak pressed shut against the torment of violated muscles.

A single stone oozed from my body, birthed into the dark horror of my cell. I dug the blood-drenched stone from my chest and held it towards the ceiling. "*Irejure.*" Light flared from my hand. Brilliant, white light that seared my vision and left me blinking.

* * *

Some long time later, I snapped awake to the scrape of metal on metal, and a wedge of light swept into my cell from

the hall. Rejit stepped through the doorway, black armor shining orange from the torch in his left hand.

A tall, pale woman followed him. “He’s injured. Rejit?” Her clothes smelled of mothballs and plastic wrap. She raised a long, bony hand. Rings decorated each finger, and on each ring a stone gleamed.

Rejit’s voice sounded like the roots of a mountain grinding boulders to dust. “He was whole when I placed him here, your majesty.”

“No matter.” The Queen’s long fingers fluttered. “Bring him along. I’d like to talk with him.”

I wasn’t ready. I never would be ready. But I had one chance, and I resolved to take it. I gripped the gizzard stone in my fist and closed the fingers of my other hand over the nail. Rejit turned, ever so slightly, and put the torch he carried in a wall bracket.

I took a deep breath, chest flaring bright pain, screwed my eyes shut, and spoke. “*Irejure.*” Light flared from my hands, blinding white against my closed eyelids. I scuttled forward, and tangled in the Queen’s dress. “*Irejure.*” Magic ran through me, sustaining me, centered on the stone in my fist.

The Queen grabbed my shoulder and started to speak. Rejit’s sword sliced through the air a handsbreadth from my ear. The Queen jerked. “You fool.” She lifted me in her hands. Bony

fingers pressed into my skin like claws. “That rat-sticker could have pierced the body royal.”

I thrust my nail into her eye.

She screamed and dropped me, clutching her hands to her face. I flashed the light again, and Rejit’s sword missed for a second time.

“*Wutrishd. Remisdc.*” I pushed my arms below me and my body shot towards the ceiling of the hallway.

“Kill him. Kill him,” the Queen screeched behind me. A fireball erupted from her finger and seared the air over my left shoulder. Blood dripped from her cheek.

I pushed again and slammed into the side of the stairway. Lightning sparked from the walls. Clean air filtered down from above. Rejit leaped over the Queen and came after me, sword raised high.

“*Wutrishd. Remisdc.*” I banged and bashed against the spiral walls but outdistanced the heavy sound of Rejit’s race up the stairs. My head throbbed, and my chest tore open even farther.

I rounded the last corner, but my heart dropped with despair. The door was shut and locked. Sunlight poked through cracks in the wood. I smelled gunpowder a split second before a bullet spanged from the wall behind me.

“*Irejure.*” I flashed light at the guard, blinding his eyes, and reached my magic towards the outside. I felt like a new sense had opened up inside of me. Like sight and smell, but different. I could feel the stone pressed in my fist, and I could feel it inside my head like an ember of power.

“*Kinsic. Fregar. Veldspo.*” Thick green smoke poured off my body and seeped through the door. I could sense the tree constrained in the pot outside. I was the tree. I concentrated, and new growth sprouted on every branch; thick, strong roots probed for cracks in the ceramic.

The guard shouted and pulled a bell rope, but a questing branch bollixed the mechanism. I laughed, and the pot shattered, spraying shards over the courtyard. I punched a branch through the door, and then pulled it back, ripping the wood frame apart.

I ducked through the hole just as Rejit appeared in the corridor behind me. He slashed and lopped for all he was worth, but I could grow the tree as fast as he could chop it down. Faster. I opened a narrow passageway in the thick growth ahead of me and scuttled through. I smelled green sap and pine. My heart leaped.

The courtyard looked like a madhouse. Gleaners shrieked and raked the air with their forelegs. Stable boys cowered under overturned barrows. I grew branches in every direction

and knocked holes in the walls. A squad of Queen's men fired ineffectual arrows and musket shot at the tree. Clouds scudded through a deep black sky above. It smelled of dawn. Soon. I didn't have much time.

I flashed my light at the Queen's men, and then pushed hard against the earth and stone of the courtyard. I sailed up and up into the sky like I'd been shot from a cannon. The air smelled fresh and clean. A seagull squawked.

The city spread below like a child's toy. I pushed and pushed again, leapfrogging through the courtyard and over the castle walls. Alarms rang; soldiers popped up on battlements and ran down streets after me.

At the apex of each leap, I could see the melted, lopsided towers of Goblintown far, far away. The sky lightened. My arms hurt, and my chest burned like fire. Each breath felt hard-won, and I started to lose hope. Everywhere I looked, Queen's men gathered. Gleaners clawed the air, and horses neighed.

I fell and rolled in an alley, pressing my hand against my chest to quell the bleeding. I felt woozy and light headed. Lumps and bruises covered my body. I almost gave up, but I thought of Maggot's death and all the Goblins still trapped behind the Fence. I had to get to Goblintown, teach others the magic locked inside us.

I staggered forward, leaning on a wall for support. Across one street and down another alley, my nostrils led me to a small shop with tables and chairs out front. A bakery. Green awnings flapped in the breeze.

I stared through plate glass windows at shelf upon shelf of bread loaves waiting for the day's trade. The door pushed open with a clatter, and I found myself inside, lurching across the cool tile floor.

A young woman, covered with flour, paper hat askew on her head, gasped when she saw me. "We're not open."

Blood dripped from between my fingers. "Run." I shooed her away and turned to the shelves. "*Hajig. Nuemousfros.*" I felt a stirring, twisting motion in the magic.

The woman batted a broom at me. "Go on. Get out of here."

A snout appeared in the closest loaf. Legs sprouted. I smelled reptilian hunger. The woman backed away, eyes darting from me to the creatures on the shelves. Claws scraped against metal as one, two, a dozen fanged and scaled horrors leaped to the floor. They eyed the woman, jaws clacking, but I held the door open behind me and jerked my head.

I filled their tiny brains with images of black-armored reivers and the smell of gleaners. They poured from the bakery like a great toothed river, frothing and snapping as they went.

The woman's eyes stayed wide open as I nodded and limped out the door. The creatures would buy me time, but I knew they were no real match for reivers and gleaners. I had to hurry.

Each step took my utmost will, and I reeled and staggered like a drunkard. The stone in my hand was losing force, so I dropped it. I squeezed my gizzard again, tears springing to my eyes, and dug another pebble from my chest. I smelled reivers behind me. "*Hiklor. Muhqken.*" Every lantern and torch in the neighborhood flared. Each one stabbed into my awareness like a pinprick in my brain.

"*Hiklor. Muhqken,*" I thrust at the flames with all my might. Lanterns exploded, spraying oil across curtains. Torches flared high, igniting walls and ceilings. Shouts and curses broke out all around me. I gathered the threads of my strength and pushed at the ground again.

I started a dozen more fires and set another pack of bread creatures ravaging behind me before I reached Goblintown. Guards lined the causeway and the Fence sparked and glowed. The marsh smelled poisoned from the effluvia of the city, but the warm, rich scent of natural rot and decay rose through the petroleum reek.

Queen's men saw me and raised crossbows. Muskets sparkled in the torch light. Smoke billowed from the city

behind me. The crackling of flames drowned out the guards' shouts.

I raised my hands. "*Kinsic. Fregar. Veldspo.*" Green smoke mixed with sparks and ashes from the fire. Marsh grass whipped and tangled on the causeway, grabbing reivers and pulling them off balance. Roots slipped into foundation seams, and the causeway itself groaned, listing sideways.

A bullet shattered wood a handspan from my head. I ducked and scuttled forward. "*Kinsic. Fregar. Veldspo.*" A stunted tree on a spit of solid land near the Fence stretched and grew long, straight branches. I raised my arms, pulling the magic through me, and focused on the gizzard stone.

Roots quested through soggy earth. A wooden pylon creaked. Fence bones shook, and a strange high wailing pierced the air.

Goblins gathered in the shelter of tumbledown walls. "*Kinsic! Fregar! Veldspo!*" I screamed. The earth itself humped up, and a Fence pylon shattered with a crack like a thunderbolt. Sinew and bones whipped back and forth, shredding into dust.

I could smell reivers and gleaners approaching from the city. Goblins stared at the torn and sparking Fence with fear and confusion in their eyes. "We're free," I yelled. "Free! Be brave!"

The miasma of goblin fear rose over the blood-and-metal smell of the reivers. I shook my fist at their cowering forms, and then turned to face the oncoming horde. Columns of black smoke poured skyward. Flames flickered on the wooden walls in front of me. A gleaner's head bobbed and jerked above the houses.

I heard a splash and turned. Bark sloshed into the marsh through the smoky ground where the Fence used to be. A line of goblins followed. Bark cocked his head. "You're bleeding."

"Bark. You escaped!" Relief at seeing my littermate whole and well washed through me. I started to speak, but my exertions had taken their toll. I collapsed onto the ground.

Bark scooped me up and slung me on his back. We melted into the swamp, staying low, using the black smoke and plant growth as cover. More and more goblins appeared in the water. I mumbled some harsh words with the last of my strength and sent fleshy vines writhing and searching for reivers. The causeway collapsed, and the cries of men and beasts filled the air.

Bark pushed a bush aside and we slipped into the cool river. Clouds covered the sun, protecting us from burning. I held on tight to Bark's back, and a glorious sense of hope filled me.

The balance of power had changed for good. Goblins weren't going to be cattle ever again. We'd create a marsh free of the Queen, free of humans entirely. I'd teach Bark and any other Goblin who wanted knowledge. Maybe we could learn to work together. The river slipped over a shoal of gravel, and light sparkled on a bed of amber pebbles.

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Garth Upshaw lives in Portland, Oregon, with his super-genius wife and three precocious children. When he's not breeding tarantulas, he rides his bike through the sleeting downpours. Besides Beneath Ceaseless Skies, his stories have appeared in Clarkesworld Magazine, Realms of Fantasy, and other magazines. He's hard at work on a novel set in the same world as "Gizzard Stones."

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SHATTERACH GATES

by Paul Daly

It has been three days since the second battalion marched out. Three days I have hobbled the battlements, gazing north along the Rendvale Road that snakes through the devastated peaks of the Shatterach. Three days, waiting for some sign to rise above the bullying trees that thrust out of the splintered rocks.

But nothing. They are gone to the same fate as the first battalion three days their prior. So I pace, and wait for the thunder to come again, and I try not to think of you, my darling, at least for a little while. I cannot be distracted.

Wolden walks with me, lending me his shoulder when the broken bones of my foot spike the flesh and grind out agony. The supply cart running over it saved my life; prevented me accompanying my men to the death I sent them to. It looked like an accident. I made sure of that.

“Cold,” Wolden says. Wolden is all that is left of my command. A hulking camp attendant, too slow to wield a sword. I wonder if he has enough wit to rue the manner of the birth that robbed him of the bearing of a man. “Cold.” His steam bellows into the pristine air that smells of tin and freezes the tongue.

Four months here, and winter has not left this distant hinge of land, even though in the city of Celestry, far to the south, the trees will already be in bud on Conquerors Row. Here the snow never melts and it is always night, and above the stars are fierce through the *tuerelva*, pulsing loops of color that crawl across the sky. There should be a roaring with this sky, but it is noiseless. A silent fire above a silent land. This is a land of the dead.

“Aye, Wolden,” I clap him on the shoulder, my gauntlet chiming on his shoulder plate, the embossed throne of the Bearer lined in starlight and the gloam of snow. “Let us go down. The thunder will not come tonight.” I do not know that. But I know it will make Wolden go easier, and I desire to spare him what I can.

Wolden leads me to the northernmost of the guard towers and we labor down the giant-hewn stairs into the cavernous room above the gates, in which our camp is set. The camp is abandoned. I have sent every soul north through the gates. The cook boys mewled for their mothers as the odd-sort pieces of mismatched Armour were strapped to their thin frames. The attendants went grim-faced, knowing they had not the sword-arms to survive a fight. Every man was needed for what lay ahead, I told them, to meet the terrible foe that had done for the first battalion. And it was true, in a fashion.

The tents stretch away, empty, clustered around the columns, shelter against the snow that drifts in through the gaps in the ceiling. This keep is ancient; a great wedge of stone between unassailable cliffs in a desolate land. None have lived this far north for two hundred years, and the Rendvale here is nothing more than ice-cracked dirt-pack. The keep has not been manned for decades. On our forays into the ranges we have found only scattered stones of what might have been old, old dwellings. Quiet reminders of the magic and arcanery that the Bearing of the Sun scoured from the land.

Shatterach Gates guards the road, but whom it guards, and what it guards them from, no scholar of the Sun can be certain.

But I am certain. There are other records, older, darker, not for the eyes of the devoted, which tell of this keep's purpose. These records are privy only to the house of Kal-sur, secured below our seat in the Coded Rooms. They tell that this keep is a warning in stone not to travel the road further north. And a ward, at great price, against the cold abomination which lies beyond.

“Safe here,” Wolden says, and I nod. He will not rest if I tell him otherwise. I have grown fond of him these last days. Someone you overlook in the hall of three thousand men, he makes for an agreeable alternative to solitude. He wanted to go with the battalions, of course, but he would have been a burden

to them and I needed someone to help me stay here, to ward. To help me wait for the reinforcements, I told the men. I *did* send messengers south. The men would have suspected, otherwise.

I wonder what news has filtered through to the Bearer. Hard riding would have gotten the messengers there yesterday, and hard riding is all there is on the Rendvale. Will you receive the news in your golden chamber, venerable Lord? Where unwilling maidens, wrenched from their lives, serve you?

Will *you* suspect, old man?

Wolden is shaking. This is all too much for him; the cold and the dark, and the loss of his fellows and his duties. A camp-hand was the closest he ever got to being a soldier. I hoped the men hadn't bullied him. I liked to think not. After all, wasn't my command, the proud house of Kal-sur, famed for its wisdom, for its compassion?

That will change. I am the last to shoulder the Kal-sur name. There will be no other. My darling wife...did not bear. The name will be preserved only in infamy.

"What's that?!" Wolden hisses, and I know the answer before he has finished asking.

Thunder. Louder this time, a rumbling that dislodges snow from the columns and shudders the tents, so it looks like the hall is being buffeted by winds.

“You said....” Wolden cannot finish, instead turning to look out the great window, panes long gone. Through the lintel of crafted roses lies the northward path of the Rendvale, winding between scree slopes. Light limns the mountains of the cruel, broken heart of the Shatterach range. It fires something in my own, and I wonder if the two hearts are not so very different.

Wolden sinks to his knees as the first rumble distinguishes itself, welling up the road like agony. It is not thunder, not anything like, but it is the best word I have.

A distant bolt of lightning, startling emerald green, launches skyward, answered by a volley of reprisals thrusting down into the earth. The crack of trees and the thump of spewing fountains of earth ride in on the thunder-howls, and the noise becomes exquisite as bolts ricochet from the heavens. The shafts strengthen and straighten, so it looks like a thousand mile-high pulsating spike between sky and mountain.

The thunder strengthens, stirred beyond a return to slumber.

And so, too, am I.

“We go,” I address Wolden formally, as if he is bearing witness. “The Army of the Sun, Might of Celestry, has held out at Shatterach Gates as long as able. The Bearer of Heavens can ask for nothing more from us.” As the Bearer directed, we had cleared the Rendvale of brigands and wolves and set up camp

in the ruined rose-windowed hall, whilst he and his adjutants weighed the cost of blood for a push into the Shatterach against the bounty of obsidian. The word came that I should send my men north, and so I did, knowing that I was sending them to their deaths. He is the Bearer, and his word is inviolate.

But the Craël is inviolate also.

The Craël. A debt of ancient blood and stinking earth. My skin heaps up on itself at the sound of its name, like I am calling it in my mind.

“Come!” I tell Wolden, sharply, to stir him from the floor where he groans and watches the columns of fire pulse and multiply. For a moment it is beautiful; like the *tuerelva* has brushed the earth. Underneath the thunder there is something like a drumbeat now, syncopated tremors that lift the tents, flapping the unsecured entrance hides.

I pull on his arm. “We must get the horses!” If he stays there I will never lift him.

He rises, his child’s face split into terror, eyes warring with his mouth. I push him and he is pliant. “Help me, Wolden,” I say and he scoops me up in his arm, taking the weight from my mangled foot. “We must go to the courtyard.”

Wolden nods, his tongue slack in his mouth. He can’t help glance to the window. “Don’t look,” I tell him. The light, like a perverted distillation of spring’s greenery, is washing through

the hall, the tents casting verdant shadows. It swells and falls, like the breath of diseased lungs.

The Craël is waking.

I have pieced together its nature from the fragments in our Coded Rooms. I know it was buried in the mountains, even as Celestry was merely huts in mud. A desecration forged of war.

And we have woken it with our scrabbling for obsidian for the Bearer's trade with the desert lands. The Kal-sur, keepers of knowledge, advised against trying for Shatterach Gates. The cost in lives would be too great; the Bearer of the Sun knows nothing of mountain lore. *I* advised against it, standing in the Spire before our Bearer, whilst my spies whispered to the court treasurers how much gold the desert traders would pay for the obsidian in the secret mines of the Kal-sur house north in the Shatterach ranges. The Bearer could not resist. He never could resist taking Kal-sur possessions.

Not that you were ever my *possession*, my darling.

The Bearer had nodded gravely, when I finished my plea that we keep from the cold, and rewarded my advice by appointing me the head of the expeditionary force. So predictable. He would not be defied. My appointment was a slight, no doubt, but the house of Kal-sur is no stranger to slights, dealt and suffered. Oh, my darling, your refusal of the Bearer's Right cost us so very dear. His Right from Heaven to

take whatever woman he desires. Why under heaven did he have to desire you?

How could he not? How could any man?

Wolden all but carries me back to the steps and we descend, leaping each drop. His arm is tight against my ribs but I bite my tongue. I will be thankful if I leave this place with only bruises and broken bones. On his last step he stumbles and we both sprawl out of the door into the main court-yard, the agony in my foot flaring as it slaps on the flagstones.

The Gates are open. We had hunted the fortress until we found the mechanism. We delved down into the cellars of black water and rats and floating spars of bone as long as a man. We hacked down the doors in the upper towers; teams of four men working day-long shifts to get through the ironwood logs that could have keeled ships.

We found it by accident in the end; two tall pilasters on either side of the gateway we had thought the worn statutes of kings, their heads accepting rope ratcheted with rings of notches we thought crowns. Two men was all it had taken to open them, such was the skill of the counter-balancing. Two men to open gates that stretched half the height of the Bearer's Spire. What masons these keep-builders must have been.

"We must close the gates!" I shout to Wolden. Outside it is difficult to hear, to think, over the pounding of the thunder-

growls. The light is fierce from up the Rendvale and I hold my hand to my eyes, able to see Wolden doing the same. “The rope!” I shout. “The rope!”

My voice sounds in the sudden silence, echoing around the chamber of the yard. Then the north-light blazes a final searing detonation, enough to sting my eyes into closing.

For a long moment, I know what it must be to be blind. In that span I am in an oubliette, far below the Bearer’s Spire, far below where my darling refused his mottled old man’s flesh and now lives a life scratching for rats in the dirt, to hold out for the moment her beloved husband will come for –

“NO!” I bound after Wolden as best my foot will let me. He is scrabbling on the floor, looking as if he would swim through the granite. “No!” I say to him. “Get up, we must close the gates.” If the Craël gets through this narrow wedge of the Shatterach Gates, all that remains before it is the long flat road to Celestry and nine hundred thousand souls. Whom it will consume, along with every living thing, down to the deepest hole.

“Gone,” Wolden says, and I realize he is crying. He looks up. Tears have cut lines through the dirt on his cheek.

“Not gone,” I say and he rises. “Not gone. Coming.” The Craël is *awake*.

I read of its fury in the sheaths of velum bound with ribbon and black wax in the Coded Rooms. A magic of revenge weaved into the earth by ritualists now long dead. It has slept whilst empires bloomed and burned. Until now.

As if to confirm, a new terror makes itself heard. This more dreadful than the thunder, in its quiet, determined way. A noise like a thousand branches drawn over gravel, like the rasping lungs of deep-desert veterans laboring up the Spire's dais to morning adorations. A rattling effort, the scrape of nails on glass, sword-edge on shield. The sound you think might spill into coughing and then cursing, dead words.

“Coming,” I repeat. I wonder what it will look like, when it arises, and I feel my feet slowing, wanting to root and have no more part in this.

I set Wolden to the western post and I hobble as best I can to the other. I feel like an insect as I scuttle past the opening of gates that allowed fifteen hundred men to march ten abreast and still make the column crossing the threshold look like a needle thrust into a scabbard.

I am almost across when I make the error of looking up the Rendvale. And I see the *thing* I have summoned.

The warmth, then swift coldness, of piss on my legs brings me back from the rolling horror oozing over the dirt-pack towards me. Still a league distant, it is monstrous. A grotesque

boil on the earth; a seething mass of tree spars and rocks that scalds the ice around it into steam. The way it moves! Questing forward, then rushing into the blackened space before it. Each thrust accompanied by boulders grinding, great snappings of century-old trunks as it heaves ahead.

Another noise counterpoints. A metallic chittering within the mass, like swords nicking each other in battle. The thing hoists itself up on its constituents of boulder and forest and muck. Tendrils of dirt flicker at its upmost. Like it is scenting the air.

It smells us.

Then it surges, rushes at us like a fetid landslide.

I fling myself forward, grabbing the robe and wrapping it around my wrists, and heave. “Pull, Wolden, pull!” My voice is hoarse from effort, and I thank the Sun’s path when Wolden finally understands and yanks down on his own rope. There is a moment of resistance – a strain I think that will pop my eyes, but then something gives and the gates shift, pivoting on themselves as silently as the writhing of the *tuerelva*.

I stumble backwards, Wolden edging towards me, both of us transfixed by the Craël, nearly upon us, framed by the shutting gates. So fast! The wall of sodden rock closes the last hundred yards. Cloying leaf rot and impatient earthen stench engulf me. I step back, in the shadow of the trembling cliff.

Something winks reflections of sky-glow at its tip. Metal.

I sink to my knees when I realize what it is.

Armour. Corpses of men mangled together, like they have been flung from the Spire one after another into a pile and the entire sinew-knotted pulp of flesh hoisted up. The bodies of my men.

Then the gates shut, with no more noise than a child slipping into sleep.

“Safe?” Wolden calls out, hugging the shadow of the gates as he staggers towards me, as if the greater darkness might offer him protection.

“Soon,” I say, gasping, hauling myself up by one of the horizontal sills that line the gate interiors. Every ten yards lengthways, at the height of kneeling man, is a deeper indentation; a rimmed bowl the size and depth of a barracks wash basin. The watchmen discussed them around their campfires, puzzling on their nature. I would have puzzled also, if not forewarned by my investigations in our Rooms. “Get the horses.”

Wolden scurries back, eyeing the gate. It has grown quiet. If the Craël is still moving, then it is capable of stealth. I realize it will be capable of many things I have not dared imagine, and the cold grips me harder.

I steady my breathing. I hear nothing but the sigh of snow shifting on the guard tower roofs. Then the whickering of the horses as Wolden brings them from their tethers outside the southern gateway, which stands tiny in comparison to its brother that guards the northern way.

“It cannot come in?” Wolden asks me, eyes wide.

I nod. “For the moment.”

He beams, like a child on Summersday, and I have to turn away from his happiness.

“Wolden, come to me.” He obliges, leaving the mounts. “You trust your commander?”

“Lord?”

“Of course you do.” I smile for him. “You understand a commander makes difficult decisions, in his duty?”

It is too much for him. His forehead creases ferociously. “I....”

I wave a hand. “Never mind. I need your help. You have been so very helpful to me, but I need one last thing.”

“Lord.” His smile is back. He is being *commanded*.

“Place your head in this bowl, here, in the gate.” He moves into it unquestioningly. “Yes. Head right in.”

He lays his hands on the gate to steady himself.

At his touch the Craël roars, shuddering the stone, and I imagine three thousand corpse voices in shrieking harmony.

Wolden's hands slap against the stone, but he does not rise. "Lord?" he shouts. "Lord!"

I lay a hand on his back, giving what comfort I can in human touch. And taking a portion in return.

Just as suddenly as it starts, the fury dies, and beyond the gates there comes a great wind, like before an avalanche. The stone cries out, the earth quaking beneath me as the gate absorbs the first slinging blow. Another whistling of wind, like breath being drawn, before a sickening crash shatters the top-most crenellations and sends spider-cracks dancing to the earth.

Wolden is holding on, hands gripping the bowl, shaking, and I find myself sorry that fate has denied him the life of a warrior. He would have been formidable. "Hold still, Wolden. You are brave!"

Another gut-rocking blow of the gates and I draw my eclipsed blade. Every man in the Kal-sur house carries such a blade, from the moment he has proved himself at the battle-dais. Did I ever prove myself to you, my darling? Did it give you something to hold on to, in the dark?

Suddenly I wish I could go back. I wish I could unknow the things I have come to know. But I am the house of Kal-sur, last of the lineage awarded for the crusade my grandsire's grandsire fought in the desolation of this Shatterach range, bringing the

light of the Sun to the harmless, black-haired woodsmen who shot birds with bows and slept in the grasses.

Another blow shakes us, causing me to hop onto my injured foot and call out, as if in imitation of the Craël. I grit my teeth and wait for the pain to subside to dull torture. I must do this. It is too late to step aside.

The Kal-sur house returned to Celestry from its conquest of the north with more than mere glory. My forefathers discovered a secret, a bundle of papers in a maddened hand, secreted in a half-tumbled tower overlooking a valley of stone. They revealed a mapping of wrath; the Craël, in the old language of the papers, buried under the slabs of the earth after a war in antiquity that laid waste to the mountains. A wrath we kept secret, in case our own purposes one day required it.

I touch Wolden on the temple in farewell, and I think he understands. He barks out a wretched cry, but the duty that burns pure in his simple soul pins him there. I lean in and shout into his ear. “Hold, Wolden. Hold!”

I raise the blade and murmur the eclipse’s blessing, to ensure the strike is true.

The papers told of the Craël and how to invoke it. They told of a fissure that looked for the world to be a mine of obsidian. In it dwelt a magic of retribution from a war long

since lost, powered by the sacrifice of blood. The papers told of these Gates also; a first and last defense against the Craël.

As it is powered by blood, so is it warded.

“I am...sorry,” I tell Wolden and plunge my blade down through his neck, blade queering on his spine as I yank it free, letting the blood splatter and splash into the rimmed alcove. So much. But what is the blood of one man over the three thousand I have already spilled?

And the thousands yet.

Wolden’s life runs through the channel, dripping through vents, racing down the sluices. I *am* sorry, for him, for what I have let myself become. For letting myself be choked by the suffocation of fear and the honor of the Sun’s law until eruption was the only choice. At least now, my darling, there are no more lies, and my intent will be plain for all.

The first drop touches the ground. The courtyard thrums and my vision crackles as powers surge up through the earth and link across the gates. I hover a hand over the stone and it *sings*. These Gates are bonded by blood.

The Craël pounds, but the stone is abutted by something stronger now.

Raging ascends to the heavens, the *tuerelva* finally given voice. Far above on the battlements the Craël beats down with arms of corpses, bodies striking the parapet and losing tenacity

with the whole, falling into the courtyard. Beaten flesh rains around me, mud and sinew, tree roots, limbs.

The impacts sound like the doors to heaven slamming shut.

Another mighty blow overhead and Armour rains down, the white iron of the Sun's warriors. Then a black and twisted helmet clatters in front of me. Foreign, amongst the bloodied metal of my men. I cannot stop myself reaching out to it and running my finger over the bossing, twisting the helmet around so I can imagine what kind of face there must have been there once.

To my horror, it is there still; leathery, desiccated, but preserved somehow in the cold of the Craël's keeping. It is not a man. A fanged, narrow, blind thing that speaks of ancient ruin. It was never a man. I am sure it never walked this world when men did. I know instinctively that it was its kind that forged this...*malice*.

I turn and run; my foot, no accident that day, now no more than an inconvenience. I vault onto the foaming horse. It is insane with the noise and fury. I haul it around, clipping it across the face, hard, and it bucks sideways and then seems to calm enough for a sliver of reasoning. I point it to the southern arch, tiny compared to the colossal stone driven into the mountains behind me.

I know the Gates will not hold. The blood of one man, however plentiful, is not sufficient. These gates are for the sacrifice of battalions, but they do not have to hold long. Just enough for me to get back to Celestry before the wave of hell-earth and death engulfs me on the Rendvale.

The Craël will follow me. It is attracted to life like moths to candles. I will ride as a solitary flame down the Rendvale, to ignite a much greater pyre. I must see Celestry again. Not to warn it. Not to save it.

To watch it die.

For that, the Bearer should be grateful. That, at least, is more dignity than he afforded you, my darling. Doubtless you *are* dead? That is the only hope I have left to believe in; that you are dead and your suffering at his hands is finished. The old tyrant taunted me for years with your uncertain fate and stripped the Kal-sur house to the bone as his revenge for your slight. And I endured it. Each day more paralyzed, cowed, pathetic.

No longer.

The Craël howls, filling the world. My neck wets from the blood summoned from my ears and I roar at my mount, the Craël bellowing behind me as we rear onto the road.

An end to all prayers. Save mine.

I ride for the domain of the Sun. And above, in the sky, the *tuereiva* burns.

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Paul Daly lives in Bristol, England, with his partner, two small children, and a job far from home. This combination means he is accustomed to writing in strange places, at strange times, in short bursts. Paul writes short SF/F fiction, thriller novels and is girding himself for his first full length work of fantasy.

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COVER ART

“Chinese Steampunk Village,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste has been an Art Director on Videogames and Cinematics for over seven years; he worked at Ubisoft on such licenses as Assassin’s Creed. He won a VES Award in 2006 for his work on Prince of Persia and the Two Thrones. He currently works as Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts Montreal. View his gallery at www.raphael-lacoste.com.

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