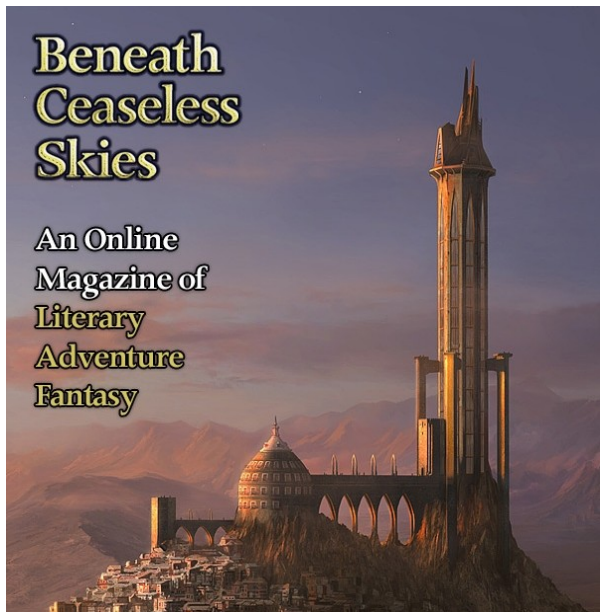


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online  
Magazine of  
Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy



Issue #47 • July 15, 2010

[“The Territorialist,” by Yoon Ha Lee](#)

[“Throwing Stones,” by Mishell Baker](#)

For more stories and Audio Fiction Podcasts, visit  
<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

## THE TERRITORIALIST

by Yoon Ha Lee

Jeris was feeding the gargoyles when the bone-map rattled. “Captain,” one of the guards said, “I think you ought to see this.”

“Hold on,” Jeris said as a gargoyle lapped at his hand. He tried not to wince at the rough tongue. Nobody liked the gargoyles. They were ugly, awkward and, frankly, not very useful as the city guard’s spies. But Jeris felt obligated to treat them well.

The gargoyles shuffled off. Jeris winced again and went into the guardhouse, toward his office. A bone-map of the city of Spine rattled in its frame. His lieutenant, Wrack, was peering at the map. “It looks like Circle Circle Six has gone rogue, sir,” she said.

Jeris approached the map to study it more closely. It snapped at him. One of the finger-bones broke free of its wiring and barely missed his ear. He would have to talk to an ossuarist about fixing the map. “Wonderful,” he said. “I thought Circle Circle Six had been too quiet the last couple of months.”

“How large a squad do you want on this, Captain?” Wrack asked. She stepped back from the bones.

“Small to start,” he said, “twenty or so.” Jeris headed for the arsenal in the back of his office. “Prepare the scouts. We have some people to bully.”

\* \* \*

To reach Circle Circle Six, they had to pass through two territories. The first was called Twin Six for its twin territorialists.

“Just the one extra gun today, sir?” asked Merigon, Jeris’s second lieutenant, as they passed through a tunnel. It stank of piss and dynasties of rats and mold. The guards holding the lamps looked as though they would rather not see what they were walking through.

“One’s enough if it’s the right one,” Jeris said. Merigon believed in finesse. He carried his issued sword and pistol and a slim dagger. Jeris believed in firepower. Today he had brought the master gun.

“Coming up on the Trefoil, sir,” said the guard at point, Catrera. “The same two—” Her voice stilled. “They’re not watching us, sir.”

The fortress, viewed from above, resembled the knot of that name. From below, it looked like a coil of snakes. The

sentries at the walls were looking up, not down. Jeris couldn't see anything in the sky but some drab clouds.

They approached the entrance. The single watchman had a man's face, but sea-colored light glowed from the joints of his archaic plate armor.

"Captain Jeris, to see the honored territorialists Karoc and Piaroc," Jeris said. Given the watchman's sky-tilted head, he wasn't sure he was going to get a response.

"Piaroc is available," the guard said flatly.

Merigon raised his eyebrows at Jeris. They both knew that the twins always appeared together.

Jeris shrugged. The twins made him uneasy, but they held their territory under tight control, and that made his job easier.

"The door will open," the watchman added. It already had.

Jeris knew the protocols. He led the squad through and entered the parlor. The other guards clattered into the hallway behind him.

Snake-shaped candles lit the parlor. Piaroc, or possibly Karoc, perched on a stool. She wore clothes more suited to a child, with ribbons and bright buttons. A small, sad-faced fish swam in circles within a tank of luminous water.

"Captain," Piaroc said. Jeris had stopped insisting that she use his name when he realized that she and Karoc never

remembered the names of any of the ward's captains, such as that of his predecessor, Terco. "Why are you here?" she asked.

Jeris said, "If you don't know, then you don't deserve to hold the Trefoil."

Piaroc laughed. "Circle Circle Six, is it?" Her voice was light and a little too rapid.

"Tell me what you know," Jeris said.

Her eyes widened. All the candles in the room flared. The room smelled of flowers with an undertone of soot. "You wouldn't be a captain if you thought we could omit the bargaining," Piaroc said. "We don't trade our own, Captain."

Jeris tensed. "A rogue territorialist?" Circle Circle Six, nominally protected by its more prominent neighbors, had one of the highest turnover rates for territorialists. If it had just been a change of regime, Jeris would have sat back to see how long the newcomer lasted. But the bone-map's reaction had been a clear warning that he would have to intervene.

"You need better spies," Piaroc said. "Disturbances have already come out of Circle Circle Six. We must deal with the circumstances—"

There was a tiny click. The door behind him had closed. Jeris's hand moved without thought. He pointed his pistol at Piaroc.

"—whatever their cause."

Jeris's shoulderblades tickled. He listened for Merigon, for Catrera, for anyone, for scream or sob or curse. Nothing.

"Piaroc," Jeris said, "it doesn't matter what you do to separate me from my squad. We're all guards."

Piaroc unfolded from the stool and paced. Jeris's pistol tracked her heart. "There are no explanations but power," she said. "There are no reasons but power. There are—"

"Spare me," Jeris said. He swung around and shot the fishbowl. It shattered. All the candles plunged into darkness, and the room filled with water.

Piaroc swam as lithely as a fish. No, Piaroc *was* a fish, grown into a full, pointed set of teeth and dragging blood through the water.

The fishbowl had been Piaroc's first skin. There had to be another, one that would restore her shape and leave her stripped of magic.

Jeris, who had grown up by the river, swam well. He would never have risked the fishbowl otherwise. But he needed to breathe. He rolled away from Piaroc's first pass and felt the fish's backwash. He drew his dagger, cursing the slowness of motion underwater, when the door opened and water flooded out. The fish became woman-shaped again.

The people standing at the doorway, crossbows trained on him, were not his. They had no skin. Rather, they were wrapped in paper over red-streaked bones.

Behind him, Piaroc said, “You break things too readily, Captain.”

“Anything to buy time,” Jeris said. He was dripping. So was his gun. So was his sword. But not with blood, not yet.

“Nobody ever buys time,” Piaroc said with delicate scorn. “We bribe it, but no one buys it.”

“Territorialists,” Jeris said. “It’s a wonder more of you don’t go mad.”

“And you think we don’t?”

“This is about Karoc, isn’t it?”

Her eyes flickered. “I’m sorry, Captain,” she said. She sounded sincere. “But he’s gone and I need him back, and to get him back I need to deliver your bones.”

Jeris noticed that, unlike him, she was now dry. The candles, however, had not relit themselves. He jerked his head toward the crossbowmen. “Deliver my bones, to whom?” Was the new territorialist holding Karoc hostage in exchange for Jeris’s life?

“Only rogues use other territorialists as hostages,” said Piaroc. “We know how the boundaries work. Only rogues use

captains as hostages. What do captains do when they go rogue?”

Warned by something in her voice, Jeris whirled and fired three times. A crossbow bolt whizzed past his shoulder; another grazed his side.

Two of the crossbowmen were down. The third vanished from sight as the swordsmen behind them stepped across the threshold. Jeris rolled and came up in a crouch. He had one more bullet; it was that kind of pistol. The swordsmen froze.

“You know what happens when I fire the fifth bullet,” Jeris said. “I’m surprised you let me get this far in the clip.” Piaroc’s rapid drying had given him the notion that the water-skin was, as Wrack would have said, metaphysically dry.

“You forgot something,” Piaroc said from behind Jeris. She sounded resigned.

“Enlighten me,” he said, and shot her over his shoulder.

The fifth bullet activated the previous four. Five was not a number to take lightly. The room was awash in light. The candles melted. Shards of glass formed patches of glaze on the floor, and a phantom fish swam across the wall. The four people he had shot, if they hadn’t been dead before, certainly were now.

“I don’t mind having to exorcise a few ghosts at the end of this,” Jeris said, “if it means I figure out what’s going on faster.”

Back in his office, the bones would be rattling twice as fast. He hoped it didn’t alarm the guard on watch too much.

The ghosts’ mouths opened and unopened. They couldn’t respond. He would rather have interrogated them. Ghosts were always a distraction. Still, it beat dying.

The crossbowmen slumped. More ghosts awaited outside the doorway. Merigon stared at Jeris with misty eyes, his grip loose on the dagger he had valued so much. Catrera’s hair was unbound in her ghostform.

Oh, we pay for time, Jeris thought at the doll-figure of Piaroc’s ghost. It was time for someone else to share the payment with them.

\* \* \*

Making a rendezvous while trailing ghosts both hostile and friendly was distressing. No one trusted a man who relied on the fifth-bullet effect. There were many ways to invite death into someone’s heart. The indiscriminate use of bullet-keyed dead to kill others not only resulted in local consequences, like the ghosts, but a rip-chain of effects that picked the wrong moment to come calling.

From here on out, he had to work fast.

Wrack had seen him—them—coming from a long way off. Even she was taken aback. “Sir, what—” She stopped.

“The Trefoil is unoccupied,” Jeris said. His voice sounded cold and drained, even to himself. “We won’t have to worry about its next territorialist for a while.”

Wrack took that in. “We’d better hurry, sir. The Mad Mouth let slip that Circle Circle Six is on its way to becoming a sinkhole.”

That must be the other reason that Wrack’s squadron looked pale and grim. One of her guards, pole-thin Escan, was smoking a noxious cigar, against regulations. Jeris and Wrack didn’t see fit to remark on it.

“Let’s move out,” Jeris said. Wrack nodded at Escan, who took point. He spat out his cigar and left it smoldering behind him. One of the veterans stomped it out with no more notice than he would have given a cockroach

A few perfunctory stones were tossed at the squadron, and duly avoided. A bird pecked at the carcass of a gargoyle on a dilapidated rooftop. Jeris shook his head. The gargoyle breeders were always three steps behind, too.

The Avenue, which served as neutral ground for anyone cocky enough to trust the neutrals, was one of Jeris’s favorite beats. As a first-year guard, he had started out here. He knew the corners and drainage pipes like the calluses on his feet.

During those days, he had almost bled to death twice. The troubles on the Avenue recognized him as one of their own.

The ghosts he trailed reminded him how narrow the Avenue was. Ghosts had a tendency to swallow the incidental noises in their vicinity—Jeris heard that some concert halls retained them for this purpose—and if not for gape-throated Merigon’s vigilance, their own dead ready with ghost-weapons, the original corpse-ghosts would have dragged them into a trap.

Birds were gathering, and not for the desiccated gargoyle. Their wingbeats passed unnoticed at first. Jeris had a habit of checking the sky, though. Anything that could survive the roofworld’s vicious ecology made a nasty surprise for those below. Jeris snapped, “Crossbows.”

All at once, the bolts thwapped upward. A dozen birds fell or were knocked aside, staggering in flight.

“Cover,” Wrack suggested.

The light in the alley was rapidly diminishing. The unnatural flock coalesced into a deadlier shape.

They ran, hugging the walls of the buildings on either side. Someone from the rear said, “We’re going to be too late.”

“The least you can do is act like you don’t believe it,” Jeris said. “Formation!”

There was no more flock. The wingbeats had become those of a single monstrous raptor, its plumage variegated and its eyes bright as fire. Its shriek split the sky. Then it dived, talons outstretched.

Nothing that size should have fit into the alley. This bird did. At its plunge, all the windows went dark, as if sunlight and lamps alike had shuddered lightless. The ghosts wavered, becoming more translucent in the wind of its descent.

Jeris was separated from Wrack. This suited them fine. They worked better with a bit of distance. “Decouple the bones,” he said, and drew his sword.

Fighting a creature formed by the corrupting influence of a sinkhole took some adjustment. Soft tissue, organs, nerves—these meant nothing. The bones were the crucial target. Break them apart and the construct would dissipate.

Their instincts did not retool themselves as easily. One guard stabbed the bird’s giant, staring eye. The pupil dilated, but the bird’s head reared up, and the sword, corroded by flame, whipped over the rooftop. Jeris pried loose one joint of the trapped wing, barely withdrawing his bent swordpoint before the wing flexed, constrained but not powerless. All the windows broke, their shards feather-shaped. Several doors fell from their hinges. One building began to collapse in dust

around its steel frame. Several of the guards pelted away. One was knocked down by a falling railing and did not get up.

Ghosts crowded Jeris's field of vision. He moved by sound rather than relying on sight. Time to find a better vantage point.

"Up!" he shouted, trusting someone would hear him and be in a position to heed the order. He finally knew why they were required to carry wire spools.

Jeris backed into one of the gaping doorways and located the stairs. He heard no one behind him as he pelted up them, two steps at a time. The ghosts of Merigon and Catrera led him up a story beyond the one he would have chosen. All right, he thought, this is not the time to be particular.

The bird, viewed from the window in glimpses, looked vaster than before. One of its wings was half-gone. Its cries were punctuated by gunshots. The bird's thrashing had become less purposeful, although damaging all the same, and more frantic. He had to dissipate it before its death throes brought down the Avenue. That might crush its bones, but by then it would be too late for everyone else.

Maybe it was already too late. Jeris's crowd of ghosts argued for it. The least you can do, he had said. And they had done it.

Dismemberment. Jeris loaded a new clip. Test the waters, he decided, and fired at the juncture of wing and torso. Three other gunshots flared in response. Holes appeared in the bird, bloodless and feather-tarred. He marked the guns' positions, cursing his occluded vision. Too bad they had yet to develop a lens that would filter out ghosts.

Jeris replaced his pistol, working swiftly rather than hastily. He brought out his dart-shooter with its preloaded spool. Its tolerance for error was low, but he didn't see much choice. All of this sounded easier to pull off when you were watching a demonstration prepared by engineers whose idea of urgent was sometime next year.

Jeris pulled the trigger. A streak of ruddy light shot out to cross the bird's convulsing flanks. Three others joined it. The dart-shooter kicked in his hand, then snapped loose of tension with a single red spark.

With the last trigger point in place, the light flared into lines of taut wire, slicing through the entangled bird. Jeris sprinted for the stairs. He felt, more than heard, the shockwave of the bird's death explode outward. The building shuddered, then held. We need better architects in this ward, Jeris thought between breaths.

Wrack, her face taut, greeted him at the base of the stairs.

Jeris stared out at the street. The small corpses of birds—in some cases, barely recognizable pieces of birds—were interspersed with rubble and immense chunks of bone with the moist marrow exposed. The ghosts trailing Jeris had fractured under the birdform's weight. They flickered in and out, but it was better than having them crowd his entire field of vision.

Jeris said, "We should haul these off to an ossuarist, but some entrepreneur will handle that." His own guards lay among the dead, some of them scarcely recognizable themselves, and all he could wonder about was the number of birds, all those birds.

"Feel lucky it didn't fly away and live to nest," Wrack said.

The survivors straggled toward the dubious shelter of his building. Its own tenants had either fled or were wise enough not to show up and protest.

"Roll call," Wrack said.

They had lost a quarter of a squadron, some of them promising candidates for advancement. Jeris felt grimmer by the moment.

"I haven't seen that many ambushes since our last foray into Six Spiders," Jeris said. "It's too bad this territorialist isn't working for *us*."

Wrack muttered, "They never do."

“Well,” Vertu said from the rear, “there was that time the Bramble Technician tangled up the mob we were trying to disperse.”

“We don’t want them to garrote the crowd in the process,” Wrack said.

They looked at the wreckage that was all that remained of the Avenue.

“On the bright side,” said a guard being bandaged around both arms, “there will be plenty of souvenir hunters once everyone comes out of hiding.”

“We’re not ready to come out of hiding,” Vertu said.

Wrack glanced at Jeris. “Reinforcements, sir?”

He picked up the doubt in her voice. “Not yet,” he said. “Who knows if another emergency will come up? And Lieutenant Sesten will need *someone* to work with.”

“She could always plunder your arsenal,” Wrack said.

Jeris decided that she was being facetious. “She’d have to fight the weapons themselves.”

Jeris dispatched a runner to their headquarters. An hour later, those too injured to walk or wield a weapon were sent back on stretchers with a nominal escort. Later, he hoped, they would have the opportunity to retrieve and cremate their dead.

“All right,” Jeris said. “Let’s move on out.” Most of those remaining looked pale, determined, or both. He, too, would be

glad to escape the smell of the newly dead, and the strange, sharp, dusty odor that always accompanied the city's outbreaks.

They picked their way over the debris. Jeris blinked at the ghosts and thought, they're mine, of my own making. If the ghosts faded away, it was up to him to bring them back. The thought sobered him.

\* \* \*

The next territory was Six Bells, although some histories referred to it as Six Bridges. Jeris assumed the name had fallen into disuse when a lieutenant destroyed two of the bridges, which had never been rebuilt.

At their approach to the White Bridge, a chord reverberated through the air. Jeris could have sworn he saw the bridge vibrating in sympathy. It stood tall, its immense supports contrasting with the filigreed fineness of its aboveground latticework. Wrack claimed to have run the figures on the structure, but refused to say how they added up. That told Jeris all he wanted to know.

"The Horologer's expecting us," Wrack said.

"When do you think he expects us?" said Vertu, whose relationship with clocks and deadlines was tenuous.

"Whenever we arrive," Jeris said. He was the first to step onto the bridge.

Color washed away. On the White Bridge, people became outlines of themselves. Jeris had occasion to wonder if they became likewise light of weight, or more easily punctured. Their staggered footsteps sounded no less solid than usual and set up a low, ominous thrum. His own felt the way they always did.

The smell of the river was ameliorated by the White Bridge's influence: clean, light, like certain spring fruits. They marched past several people standing politely to the side, and a woman pulling a cart filled with patterned umbrellas.

The return of form and color would have reassured him had it not been for the sudden abundance of clouds, thick and dark. There weren't enough smokestacks in the city to account for them, either.

Jeris asked, "Did we have any localized weather warnings?" He had checked them this morning as part of his routine but didn't remember anything dire.

No one remembered any such warning. "We're being tracked," said Rogen, who was gamely keeping up with them despite a splinted leg. "And not just by things from the sky."

The river's gurgling was interrupted by a splash. The spray misted across their faces. Jeris hoped it wasn't toxic. They drew weapons. Things that spawned in the river had a habit of growing teeth.

Afterward, if Jeris had had to describe the creature to an ossuarist, he would have said it was a jawbone attached to a vestigial skull, with sutures but no holes for eyes and no nasal cavity, and a whippy, spiked spine that clattered as it flung itself out of the water. Over one too many drinks, he would have gestured to indicate its teeth and swiftness, knocking over his drink in the process. To himself, in the depths of his dreams, he admitted that it came as a white blur, with no more dimension than thread.

Jeris barked something to the effect that this one didn't look like a sinkhole construct. Which was probably true, but irrelevant. The thing was all bone and glistening sinew, and it didn't like them. In the first heart-stop moments, Jeris noticed that no more people stood on the bridge.

He had his sword out and swinging without pause to choose a weapon. Wrack had flanked the boneworm, insofar as one could flank something that moved in ever-shifting curves. Her crossbowmen had followed her lead.

That incongruously small head with its incongruously long teeth moved more slowly than the rest of the boneworm. It seemed as if the two danced separate dances, perceived separate fights. "A graft!" someone yelled at the same time that Jeris did.

Seeing the dances was different from adapting to them. When the head lunged for him, Jeris stabbed the juncture where jaw met skull. He barely threw himself aside before his arm would have been bitten off. To his side, a guard hissed and clutched her side.

More attrition. He was down three guards. Water splashed into the air. Under a less ominous sky, it might have made a rainbow. Coughing and sputtering followed, although Jeris didn't dare check to see who had been swept into the river. Not all the guards could swim.

A clitter-clatter-clink came from the lonely streets before them. A cat yowled as it streaked past. Knee-high clockwork soldiers, all painted in white uniforms and pale red trim, marched in formation toward the riverbank.

Jeris swore as he pulled one of the guards out of the path of the boneworm's spines. They were surrounded. Given the boneworm's origins, he wasn't going to ask anyone to dive into the river to escape.

A voice like the chirring of crickets rose up from the clockwork soldiers: "We will dismember it. Run!" They advanced on the boneworm.

"Do it!" Jeris barked. Wrack repeated the order when some of the guards hesitated, staring at the spectacle. The clockwork soldiers had begun to climb the boneworm, white-

red seething up the bones like eager mouths. Jeris shuddered and sprinted faster, past the bridge and into territory he hoped was safe.

The soldiers' voice swelled behind them, speaking a language none of them recognized. How could mechanical devices have a voice?

It came to him that the voice was merely an outgrowth of the Horologer's skills as an artificer. Spine had its summers and its seasonal insects. In some parts of the ward, musicians trained troupes of them to sing eerie, high-pitched chorales. The clockwork soldiers must, like crickets, be able to produce sound by friction, and in concert, to simulate a voice.

They slowed down when they reached Six Bells' market square, a good while after the river and boneworm were out of sight. Jeris was glad to see that his eyes hadn't fooled him: various guards, including himself, were rank with sweat and river water, and two of them had unpleasant wounds, but they had left no one behind.

The Brass Bank overlooked the market square. As far as Jeris had ever determined, not a single object or ornament of brass was to be found in or on the bank. The bank's imposing, severe style informed the appearances of those who ventured near it. Among the men and women in brocade, velvet-hooded falcons and songbirds in gilt cages, the guards would have

looked shabby no matter what. With the stink of exhaustion and battle clinging to them, not to mention the fact that their uniforms had come from a bad dye lot and were starting to lose color, they looked even worse.

The Brass Bank also housed one of the territory's bells, which had a massive baritone toll that had been known to cause people to stutter for days while their teeth settled. He hoped it didn't ring.

"Captain," a woman said to him, "could you take your squadron elsewhere?"

The woman was half a head taller than Jeris, or he would have glared at her. "We'll go elsewhere when we damned well please," he said. "Your patrons are going to have to wait."

"That's not the issue," the woman said, although her expression suggested otherwise. "It's the possibility of property damage that concerns our organization." She smiled coolly and turned on her heel before anyone could get in a retort.

"Well," Vertu said, "she's not wrong."

"You'd think the financier would give more of a damn about the rogue who's instigating all this," Wrack said. She uncapped her canteen and took a measured sip.

"We're here," Jeris said, "and the rogue isn't. Which is a problem. But first we need to pay a call on the Horologer to give him our regards."

“Is that wise, sir?” Yared asked. Yared came from a family of minor artificers. After an unexplained incident, the family had abandoned the trade. “No one rescues us without expecting something in return.”

“We don’t have much choice,” Wrack said. “I don’t fancy facing those clockwork soldiers, myself.”

“I don’t fancy facing their larger brothers,” Jeris said. They were sure to exist. “Only one way to find out.”

“The Clocktower, then,” Wrack said.

“The Clocktower.”

The crowd in the market square had discreetly started to melt away since their arrival. This should have reassured Jeris that they had a grain of good sense but instead irritated him.

Wrack, who didn’t have to be notably observant to guess his mood, cocked her head. “Should I be the one to knock?”

“By all means.”

They followed the last known route to the Clocktower, which involved too many corners and sun-shaded streets. Jeris had always hated the proliferation of tall buildings.

“They should install gaslights,” he said after they flushed out an adventurous urchin who had crossed their path.

“Tried,” Vertu said. “Then the pipes blew at the juncture on Suicide Twenty-Eight”—crossroads had their own nomenclature—”and they decided to hold off.”

“You have family here,” Jeris said, remembering. Vertu’s sisters and brothers, all younger, stopped by periodically with baskets of pastries and newly polished needles.

“The guard’s home now,” Vertu said. He looked like he preferred to believe it, in this place of shadows.

“Nowhere’s home,” someone said glumly as the Clocktower loomed above them.

“Let’s not get maudlin,” Wrack said.

Mechanical birds stirred from their positions about the belfry, performing a grotesque dance of welcome or warning.

By fiat, the buildings around the Clocktower were a few stories shorter. They did nothing to block off a visitor’s view of the soaring structure and the handsome stained-glass windows. As a corollary, the Clocktower commanded its surroundings. Jeris had seen worse defensive setups. If the Horologer had more of those wind-up soldiers, he also had a way to handle the narrowest alleys and the grimmest sewer pipes. The thought made Jeris twitch.

Just as they crossed the street, with its oblivious rooftop starlings, the bell tolled. It had a high, pure tone, the kind that would wake you up in wonder before you realized that you’d shrugged off your sleep. Other bells called out to each other in an arpeggio. Jeris could have sworn it was a different chord

from the one he had heard the last time, even from the same bells.

“I guess he really expects us,” Wrack said.

“Because we’ve been so inconspicuous,” Jeris said dryly.

Wrack went straight for the double doors, but they opened before she had a chance to knock. A man and a woman, hands stiffly bandaged, bowed in unison. Jeris hated that. He never got over expecting the greeters to be automata of some sort, with painted smiles.

“Sir guards,” said the man.

“Captain,” said the woman.

I *am* a guard, Jeris thought.

“The Horologer apologizes for the hour,” said the woman.

“He invites you to dine with him,” said the man.

“Down the hall and the second door on the right,” said the woman.

Nonplussed, the guards looked at the man.

The man spread his hands. “That’s all, sir guards.”

“It would be out of character for him to poison us, right?” Yared asked loudly.

“That’s assuming someone else hasn’t bribed a junior cook,” Jeris said.

“We might as well die with our stomachs full,” Wrack said.

The others laughed politely.

Jeris looked back and forth between the walls, which were painted a soothing shade of green. “Indeed.”

The directions, at least, were easy enough to follow. Beyond these walls, Jeris imagined, men and women in drab clothes, and perhaps their children, labored at shaping wire or grinding gears or fitting together components passed down hand to hand. He supposed his existence would seem just as appalling and alien to them. On his first visit, under Captain Terco, the Horologer had offered them a tour of the workshops. The captain had refused. Jeris wondered who had been hiding what.

Two more greeters, both men, awaited them at the second door, after a walk that dragged out due to the guards’ predilection for jumping at every new noise. Wordlessly, the men opened the door.

The aroma of roasted meat was suddenly strong. Jeris’s mouth watered. The individual servings lay in neat metal trays on a long table. Instead of chairs, there were benches. The food itself was unpretentiously presented. It still smelled tempting.

“Well, this is better courtesy,” Wrack said. She took a seat at one end of the table. Jeris took the opposite corner.

The guards’ muttered conversation as they waited had a definite tinge of approval. Some of them licked their lips unselfconsciously, while others folded their hands in an

imitation of upper-class manners. Armain, who had spent several of her early years as a pickpocket, had fished out an unpleasant strip of dried meat and was gnawing it without any sign of noticing her seatmates' wrinkled noses.

A chime sounded. The Horologer appeared in the doorway. "Please, eat," he said. He was a stout, balding man with nimble hands. Jeris looked at him and remembered the clockwork soldiers beginning to dismember the boneworm.

Vertu shifted aside for the Horologer without comment. His gaze shifted back and forth.

Jeris dipped the flatbread into the stew or sauce or whatever it was, and bit in. Pleasantly savory. Armain, never wasteful, had taken to dipping the dried meat into her stew. Jeris shuddered and tried not to watch her.

They ate quietly. Casual conversations about the cost of good boots or the best place to find dumplings because awkward. Jeris paid attention to who sat where, a subject of perennial fascination. Junior officers and guards segregated themselves. People avoided Wrack and made no attempt to hide it, which she accepted with her usual bland disdain. Armain they regarded as a little sister. She flitted over to whoever had last spoken with her, especially if they offered her leftovers that no one else would touch. Here, the injured sat between those more able-bodied, though everyone was moving

stiffly. Yared hunched over his tray, isolating himself from the others.

The Horologer did no more than exchange pleasantries until the last guard had finished. “Amenities are the next door down,” he said, precipitating a rapid ordering based partly on seniority and partly on last night’s gambling.

When Jeris returned, the trays were already being removed. The Horologer was almost done clearing the cups onto a cart to be taken away, something Jeris hadn’t expected him to do himself. Jeris raised his eyebrows.

“I’d like to speak with you privately,” the Horologer said. He looked unimposing, but there was nothing deferential about his manner.

Jeris’s hackles rose. “I’m bringing my lieutenant.”

“Alone would be better.”

Wrack’s face was carefully expressionless.

“My lieutenant is eminently qualified,” he said.

“I ask that you trust my reasons,” the Horologer said.

There was something to be said for leaving Wrack in charge of the uneasy guards. On the other hand, he couldn’t think of any good reason the Horologer would suggest that anyone but Wrack accompany him.

Jeris nodded toward Yared, who was best able to pick out any peculiar mechanical details that might warn them of

trouble. “You too,” he said to Wrack. They rose as one to stand by him.

The Horologer’s mouth pursed, but he accepted the decision. A pair of servants had arrived to serve tea, which the guards regarded regretfully.

Leaving the guards behind, they went up a flight of stairs whose railings featured ornaments of cast bronze. Jeris had seen similar flower-and-bone motifs in the houses of ossuarists and pharmacists. Most of the Clocktower’s interior was sparsely furnished, the plainness showcasing the clocks mounted at regular intervals on the walls. At one point Jeris spotted an hourglass, automatically rotated at the proper time by another device. “It detects the shifting center of mass,” the Horologer said offhandedly. “There’s no sense in having a clock run a clock.”

To Jeris’s relief, in case of emergency escape through a window, they didn’t ascend any further. Instead, the Horologer led them to a room with a balcony overlooking the central square. The light washed everything in unnaturally rosy tones, and a breeze blew through without bringing anything more unsavory than a moment’s dust, which Jeris blinked away.

The chairs were the overstuffed kind that caused you to lose all will to get up for the next five hours. The Horologer

remained standing, hands folded behind his back, so they stood, too. Yared was sagging, despite his brave expression.

“There’s a traitor among you,” the Horologer said.

“There always is,” Jeris said. Then the words penetrated, although his response would have been the same. His skin prickled. “Who?” Did the Horologer mean to accuse Wrack of treachery?

“I don’t have that information,” he said heavily, “but I believe it is accurate.”

Jeris shook his head. “Without details, there’s not much I can do.”

“I am certain that a guard is working with the rogue territorialist,” he said.

The only guards who should be in Circle Circle Six belonged to the Sunken Squad, and that was because they were unable to leave, thanks to an agreement that Captain Terco had made with the territorialist at the time. Some of the best guards, including Kel, had been ruined by that decision. “I see,” Jeris said carefully. “I’ll remember that.” He couldn’t blame the Horologer for his alarm, given this territory’s adjacency to Circle Circle Six.

“Sir captain,” the Horologer said, then stopped. “Do not say, when you return, that you had no warning.”

When, Jeris thought, hardly reassured. “Is there anything else you have to share?”

“Aside from the phenomena that have tracked you?” The Horologer sighed. “Certain of my most sensitive clocks and mechanisms have begun to diverge from their synchronicity. This may not seem a great matter to you—”

Did I say anything? thought Jeris, who had his own appreciation for precision.

“—but it limits, for instance, the effectiveness of some of my defenses. The soldiers you saw before will have dissolved into a motley mob of toys by now.” He sighed again. “More dramatically, I believe that the rogue territory is generating a nest about its center. If it is allowed to wall itself from conventional interference—”

“We may have no choice but to quarantine it until we can get reinforcements,” Jeris said.

“The paperwork alone could take months,” Wrack said. “Anything else?”

“Last night, so far as I know, Kemurin was still standing watch at the wheel,” the Horologer said.

Jeris nodded. His predecessor had dismissed this as local superstition. So long as the great waterwheel of Circle Circle Six lay still, the belief went, the territory would remain

quiescent. The waterwheel was another enigma, having been built nowhere near any source of running water.

“There have been reports of walking skeletons,” the Horologer said, “but if anyone has ventured close enough to confirm this, they haven’t returned or they’re staying quiet. On the other hand, no raids have taken place in Six Bells, so it’s hard to say.”

Skeletons. Jeris winced. Wrack’s mouth tightened a fraction. He had read the compilation of ossuarists’ reports in the wake of Circle Circle Six’s formation. Even allowing for the scavengers, over half the corpses had gone unaccounted for. Somewhere were bones that had not been cremated to a near equivalent of powder, or reconfigured by ossuarists into less dangerous, more controllable combinations, or carted out of Spine entirely. Higher authorities sometimes insisted on exporting bones they considered susceptible to arcane influence, though their criteria were erratic. You could only do so much against the greedy market for that sort of power.

“Yes,” the Horologer said. “I fear that there have only been minor excursions from Circle Circle Six, relatively speaking, because the rogue territorialist plans for the territory itself to walk.”

They pondered that unhappily.

“That’s all,” the Horologer added.

“Thank you for the warning,” Jeris said. “If we may take our leave—?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” The Horologer slumped into a chair and did not look up as they let themselves out.

\* \* \*

The guards were disinclined to question the Horologer’s motives too long. Such speculations were best shared over a fourth mug of beer on a lazy night.

Jeris had no such luxury. “I wonder what he really wanted,” he said.

“He might have been sincere,” Wrack said. “What bothers me is that we’re getting such vague warnings.”

Jeris looked up at the Six Bridgers peering down at them from their neat balconies and polished windows. “We’re going to end up trying the latest breed of gargoyles as spies,” he said. “Again.” The creatures were far from appealing in habit or appearance, but almost everyone felt wretched when one crawled or limped back broken to expire on the roof of headquarters. That, or resented having to dispose of another unwanted corpse.

They reached the Bridge of Lanterns. All seemed normal at first, but after several steps, Jeris spun to look behind him. Wrack and Armain were on the bridge with him, but the other

end receded into a blur, and the rest of the squad was nowhere to be seen.

“We’ve been swallowed by a trap,” Armain said in awe. It was not the awe of joy or wonder. She had already cocked her crossbow.

The songbird lanterns and steel girders had been replaced by a newborn maze of flesh and metal and concrete, veins red-blue and embedded in the angled structural supports. Within it, ice-colored light illuminated nothing at all. The only shadows were those cast by the sun.

Jeris had his gun cocked but only tenuously aimed. He blinked. When he opened his eyes, he could see that cold light outlining the bones in his hands, the knobby joints in his finger and wrists. Wrack and Armain were likewise rendered as skeletal forms clothed in a thin sheath of flesh.

The ghosts, meanwhile, had gained in clarity. They stood out like splashes of paint on an otherwise white canvas. They moved along the nowhere walls, constrained by laws that Jeris dimly recognized from his nightmares.

Jeris had a sudden vision of putting the maze to the sword, each arc bright and dark and precise, taking apart every damned branch and fork and the floor, too, if he had to. He knew how to destroy things. It was part of the job.

He had a counterfantasy of the city schisming territory by territory, ward by ward, cracks in the foundations and fire from above. Nothing more to guard; nothing more to break.

He wanted it so badly he could taste it against his teeth. But it wasn't what he was.

"That's the fork in the maze," Jeris said. "Our choice to destroy or not. We may carry weapons, but our mission is to preserve the city."

Wrack lowered her sword. "All right, sir. I haven't gotten this far by refusing to trust your judgment."

"Sir," Armain said, and waited with them.

The maze rewarded their judgment with something else. Jeris was stunned by an explosion of smells. Flowers in springtime. The miasma of sewers clogged more by blood than shit. The back of a woman's neck and coils of perfumed hair.

Someone screamed raggedly. It didn't sound like a voice. Metal scraping against rusted metal, maybe.

The only reason it took Jeris so long to realize who had been attacked was that he had never expected such a sound to come from his lieutenant. Her face was locked rigid by shock or horror. Incredibly, her voice was now a chorus.

Armain lunged toward Wrack and shook her with her free hand. "Sir!" she shouted into the other woman's face. She looked desperately at Jeris.

“Hold her,” he said back.

The maze was cracking under the assault of that scream. In the cracks, Jeris saw faces: the ghosts in pale, shredded fragments, and the rest of the squad; kaleidoscope glimpses, or a butcher’s. It was impossible to think when your skull was vibrating off-pitch.

While Armain restrained Wrack, Jeris watched the fissure. One of these had to be the way out; mazes always had a way to escape. He would have given anything to leap toward the familiar faces, the air and sullen light and streets that stayed streets.

He looked for something that was the least like a crack, a way straight ahead rather than another road branching off, or the uninviting jaws of a doorway septic with broken magic. He remembered an orchestral performance he had attended before joining the guard, the way all the musicians could be moving in different ways with their instruments yet emerge with music in one unified voice.

Voice. Wrack was the key. “Sing in unison, dammit!” he yelled at her.

Wrack was white, shaking, utterly unlike herself. But the scream abated for a second.

“Close your ears if you can,” Jeris told Armain.

Wrack's voice changed, ground-thrumming bass and keening whistle all hitting the same note. Jeris and Armain staggered.

It was not so bad as he had feared. Jeris, wiping water from his eyes, discovered he wasn't bleeding from the nose or ears as he had expected. Armain was slower to come to a similar conclusion. It took both of them longer to realize that the maze had cleared around them. They were surrounded by a floating mist. But Jeris didn't relax. The wind blowing the mist away smelled of sleepless nights and back-alley murders, which wouldn't have been unusual had it not brought a literal darkness with it.

"Lamps," Jeris said before the darkness had any more opportunity to spread. Through a patch overhead, he could see the night sky with a slice of moon in the wrong phase.

"Past or future?" Wrack asked hoarsely. She had already gotten out her lamp and strapped it to her wrist. It shone there like an eye, its shadows spidered by the movements of her hand.

Armain understood immediately what Wrack was asking. "I thought future glimpses were impossible."

"It's not an oracle," Jeris said. "It's a past glimpse. Look at the moon's surface. It's missing the crater from the Aetherist's

last rocket. And what would a future moon show us? More craters?”

“Might encourage more alchemists,” Armain said, fascinated.

The thought of Armain tangled up with alchemists worried him. They were now fully enveloped by night. It made him wonder how long this had been going on in Circle Circle Six.

What kind of influence did the rogue have over the territory?

“Our maps of the territory are outdated,” Wrack said.

“That’s no surprise,” Jeris said. He didn’t look at Armain. She was young enough to have some illusions left about the guards’ resources. “Besides,” he added, “the maze probably altered the local region.” He kicked at the street. It raised dust that formed hapless grimacing faces, then settled on his feet. He resisted the urge to wipe them.

“Well,” Wrack said, “there’s probably an easy way to go where we need to go.”

“Which is?”

“Toward the most danger.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” He shook his head. “There’s no telling what this rogue has set up as his nexus. Or citadel. Or how many allies he has, insofar as territorialists ever have allies. Let’s get moving. Anyone see a doorway?”

Armain, with her guttersnipe's eye for shelter, pointed.

It wasn't much of a doorway. Even the rune in charcoal on the lintel looked like it had been scribbled by someone who had had too much ale. Jeris thumped the door. "There had better be someone alive and talkative in there," he said loudly.

For a wonder, the door swung open. Two women answered the door. One wielded a sword, the other a crossbow. "Oh," said the one with the sword, "you're guards. No one else would carry around ghosts like that. I expect you're not here for tea, then." The other woman didn't lower her weapon.

"You had word?" Jeris said, distrusting their relative lack of hostility.

The woman with the crossbow smiled sardonically. "Former guards. We served in the Sunken Squad."

Armain breathed a curse. Wrack raised an eyebrow. Captain Terco had assigned Circle Circle Six's territorialist a permanent detail. What he hadn't anticipated was that said territorialist would grow fond of them. It wasn't clear what she had done, but at the end of it, the Sunken Squad was trapped. Jeris wasn't convinced the pension was sufficient compensation.

"And you haven't shot us because...?" Jeris asked.

The woman's lips curled back in an all-too-amused grin. "You're the captain now, aren't you? Run too ragged to pay us a visit until now. You know how to survive. I like that."

"You'd better stop liking me real soon," Jeris said. "Care to come along?"

"Nerica can't," said the woman with the sword.

Jeris and the others fell silent.

"We'll do what we can from here," Nerica said. Her crossbow remained unwavering. "I have good aim and better range."

He believed her. So did his shoulderblades. "Any further report?"

Nerica looked at the other woman, who shrugged. "Sort it out and do it fast, or your maps will be completely useless. Keep an eye out for the rest of the Sunken Squad. Three others are still alive: Igreth, Fanilon, and Kel."

"Kel?" Jeris said. "I had no idea. Thought she had figured out a suitably secretive way to off herself out of sheer spite."

"Maybe she had other plans," said the woman with the sword.

"We all had other plans," Nerica said. She vanished for a moment, then reappeared with a handful of feathers. "Yes," she said in response to Armain's bright eyes, "messenger wings. In

case you need to call for help. I think they ought to be able to leave Circle Circle Six if they come from someone else's hand."

In response to Armain's silent plea, Jeris gave her one of the messenger wings, reserving the others for himself. They were still keyed to guard headquarters. He was impressed with the artificer who had made them, if the homing compasses remained so true after Captain Terco's death.

"So I send this out if—?" Armain said.

The others looked at her pityingly. "If you have to ask," Wrack said, "you'd better have sent it off already. Especially if the captain and I are down."

"Point me in a direction," Jeris said to Nerica and her partner.

Nerica pointed with her crossbow.

It was good enough. "Get the bastard and keep him alive for me!" the woman with the sword called after them.

"Now those," Jeris said appreciatively, "are guards."

"You didn't approve of Captain Terco?" Wrack said.

"Does it matter? He's dead and I'm still cleaning up after him."

She got the point and smiled blandly at him. He gritted his teeth.

\* \* \*

They continued forward, collecting an entourage of small whirring insects and swirling mist. Jeris had the discomfiting feeling that, if they stopped too long in any one place, the mist would turn the landscape into a swamp. At one point Armain said, “The sky’s full of stars,” and Wrack said, “Or eyes,” which shut everyone up for several blocks.

It was disappointing how ordinary everything else was. No matter how many disasters he weathered, Jeris found pockets of normalcy a little shocking, as though everything was obliged to crash into ruin at once. Children and their dogs came running up to them from a tilted carousel, calling out good-luck rhymes that Jeris remembered from his own childhood. He lifted his sword in salute, and they gaped, as though they had imagined him to be a passing figment, insensate. The eyes of the carousel’s horses and swans flicked open to stare at him with a hot, fierce protectiveness. He approved.

“Where are their families?” Armain asked, not without wistfulness. She wasn’t sure what had happened to her own.

Wrack shrugged. “They’re no worse off than we are at the moment.”

They reached the stairs leading to the great amphitheater at the heart of Circle Circle Six. “Every step’s a potential maze,” Jeris said. “Except the maze wants us, and we’re coming where it wants us.”

“Our footsteps aren’t echoing,” Armain said. She whipped about and deflected a throwing knife with her sword. It spun end over end. She caught it and flung it back with her off hand. Its target made a low, scraping sound and fell back. The insects around Armain buzzed more loudly, then set off toward the fallen whatever-it-was.

It became apparent that the small stinging attacks, from creatures that normally lived in furtive ecologies, were intended to herd them up the stairs. Jeris’s arm ached. In fact, every muscle ached, including his eyes, from having to be alert to every angle at once. Wrack’s face was gray, and Armain made little huffing sounds between every other swordstroke.

“All right,” Jeris said, “run!”

It seemed to him that the spiraling steps grew closer and closer, shorter and shorter, to accommodate their strides. He glanced over the edge and was rewarded by a dizzying sprawl of curves, not the neat spiral he had believed he was ascending. His feet kicked loose a stone with half the force of a squalling child. It fell, screaming.

They stopped at the ruins of a gate, tall and eerily bright under the starry sky they had brought with them. Streaks of mist swirled around them. Now the mist smelled of perfume and starved decay. They looked up. All around them were the stairs, and all across the stairs were silhouetted figures with

jewels for eyes and lanterns for mouths. Jeris blinked and they were gone, leaving a hot wind that tasted of cinders.

“We came *down*,” Armain said.

“That’s why it’s called a sinkhole,” Wrack said.

“I didn’t think it was that literal.”

The gate furled and unfurled like a banner of living iron. “I suppose this is our invitation,” Jeris said.

The gates opened with a snap. The sky above them tore into shreds of night and day.

“Forward,” Armain said. It wasn’t a question.

Jeris nodded.

The mists peeled away from them to cling to the sides of the gate like stiffened fingers. Jeris heard someone breathing too rapidly: himself. He forced himself to focus on the footing. If he stopped moving, he would never get up again.

A guard regiment awaited them at the other side of the gate. The light in their eyes was like ice water, cold and perilous. Each was deformed: a woman with wings where her ears should have been, a man with scaly skin, others with boots slit to accommodate claws. But their stances and formation, their pristine uniforms, were unmistakably those of the guard. Next to them, Jeris felt like a grubby interloper.

Wrack's glance, concerned without being anxious, steadied him. "I don't recognize you," Jeris said, "as guards or otherwise. Stand back before you get in our way."

Armain's eyes showed white, but her sword was steady. The ghosts drifted closer to her.

In answer to Jeris's words, the false guard split down the middle and pivoted in halves to face each other across the divide, beautifully precise. Jeris would have admired it if he had had any patience for parade maneuvers. Behind the false guard stood a mirror held up by a tangle of roses. At the mirror's base was Karoc's head, with incongruously bright satin ribbons in his hair. So Piaroc attacked us for nothing, Jeris thought.

A woman stepped out of the mirror. It was Kel.

"Where are Igreth and Fanilon?" Jeris demanded. He wished the ossuarist's alarm had given him some notion that he'd be dealing so much with the Sunken Squad today.

"How should I know, Captain? I thought you would have collected them by now," she said.

"Collected," Jeris repeated in disgust. "You think I'd go around interfering with you when you've served your duty? Was it you who killed off the previous territorialist?"

Jeris was gratefully aware of Wrack and Armain with their guns out now, and less gratefully aware of being outnumbered again.

Kel said, with absolute disdain, “I didn’t figure Terco would be succeeded by someone so slow-witted. What do you think the point of this is? Terco had the right idea. This place needs a permanent guard presence.”

“Should I point out the obvious?” Jeris said.

“Sir,” Armain said nervously.

“Shut up,” Wrack said.

“Listen,” Kel said. “You’ve seen the disruption this place can cause when it’s allowed to grow in power, unchecked. Imagine if we could source our strength from here. We’d never have to worry about the Horologer’s tick-tock plans or the twins’ duplicity again.” She glanced at Karoc’s head. “Of course, the latter isn’t an issue anymore.”

“No,” Jeris said. “We’d have to worry about ourselves.”

Kel gestured to either side. “Such a small mind, Captain.”

“It’s not that,” Jeris said, gazing at the ghosts with their driftwood faces. He had his own squad of shadows. “Truly, Kel. Everyone said you were one of the best. And you’re still alive—why now?”

Kel’s regiment stared at him with eyes like ash.

Jeris flung his sword at Kel and cocked his master gun for the first time in years.

“That’s not what I think it is,” Kel said, sounding alarmed for the first time. “How did you—?”

“Compression,” Jeris said. Most of the master gun’s substance was kept in his weapons safe. The longer it spent away from its substance, the more unstable it became. This, however, had seemed an appropriate occasion for it. He wished he hadn’t been right.

“What did you think Terco’s intentions were, Captain?” Now Kel was laughing. “Did you think he fostered goodwill with the old territorialist out of friendship? Did you think he was being blackmailed? This was planned, if only you’d been paying attention.”

“I’m here now,” Jeris said, “and I don’t want any part of this.” He couldn’t imagine why Kel would accept a fate as a clockwork piece, for that matter.

Or maybe he could. He met the woman’s eyes for a forever moment, seeing in them battles lost and lost and lost, the parade of false smiles and frustrated dreams, tarnished honor and rusted hope. Maybe it was easier to stop thinking. Kel was following her captain, dead or not.

The crowd of ghosts that accompanied Jeris—how was that different?

I have to make myself different, he thought.

“I can but follow orders,” Kel said. “Are you with me, Captain?”

“Never,” Jeris said, knowing he would always wonder what would have happened if he had answered differently.

Kel’s mouth twisted in regret. “So you’re a failure. Too bad.” She stepped aside, and they saw.

“Sir?” Armain asked. Her voice shook only slightly.

“Terco,” Jeris breathed. The floor of the pit was angled toward them, and there was a hole from which a noxious wind exhaled and inhaled. Across the pit was built a frame of blood-drenched wood and nails incompletely hammered in. Across the frame, writhing and grinning, was a skeleton held together with wires of bright metal. Its skull jerked from side to side. The eyes, lidless and inhuman, were nevertheless Terco’s eyes.

“Death wasn’t good enough, was it?” Wrack said. Mid-sentence, she fired at the skeleton. It twisted. The bullet passed between two cracked ribs, making no sound as the darkness enveloped it.

Kel and her guards stirred. “It’s a pity,” she said. “I thought you had—”

Jeris had better things to do than to continue to indulge Kel’s starvation for conversation. “Armain!” he called out. A blur streaked past his peripheral vision as the messenger

feather unfurled and went aloft in search of guard headquarters.

Wrack, never one to waste bullets, shot at Kel this time. Kel made no attempt to dodge or wrest the gun from her. A hole opened in Kel's chest, then widened, showing not the red of flesh and blood but a seething, swirling darkness. Kel laughed and drew her sword.

Why doesn't she have a gun? Jeris thought as he aimed the master gun. "Go!" he said. Wrack, who had some notion of what to expect, pelted away from him. Armain was slower, but he trusted her swift feet would serve her well.

Jeris pulled the trigger. It depressed with a leaden click. For a second nothing happened, and he thought, I am going to feed that gunsmith to the next batch of gargoyles.

Then the world went bright and dark as every gun in his vault at headquarters went off at once, channeling its firepower through the master gun. If this doesn't do it, nothing will, he thought, dropping the gun, and brought up his sword.

The ghosts remained eerily intact amid the stinging smoke and dust. Jeris reckoned he was lucky his face only stung and hadn't been blown off entirely. The ghosts, for their part, had engaged in a battle of shadows against Kel's remaining guards. Kel herself was scarcely recognizable, the distorted silhouette of a woman with a swelling vortex for a torso.

“Captain!” he heard through the ringing in his ears. Whether it was Wrack or Armain, he could not have said. “Dodge!”

He flung himself to the ground. A crossbow bolt whistled past him to lodge itself in Kel’s right arm, pinning her to Terco’s skeleton. Another bolt followed, this time for the left arm. Jeris got up and recovered his sword. He started for the skeleton, then reconsidered. Did he want to leave the sink open so it could drag the territory’s reality into increasing madness?

He had spent too long thinking. A blow struck him from behind. He only righted himself by scrabbling at a block of rubble. His hand left streaks of blood. He stabbed upward, meeting flesh, then pulled his sword free with a sucking sound to chop at the limb of the guard behind him.

Wrack was the first to return to his side. “Gargoyles,” she said.

Indeed, above the stairs, gargoyles were flocking. Jeris sighed, expecting they would crumble into corpses in short order. But they circled rather than landing. For once he found their presence reassuring, in case another bird-construct manifested.

“Hold the others off,” Jeris said. Armain, who had caught up with Wrack, half-saluted with her sword before taking her place at Jeris’s back.

He had to seal the sink until a reliable replacement territorialist could be found. He sheathed his sword and grabbed the wires, pulling them toward each other. His hands went numb. He snarled and kept twisting the wires together. The skeleton folded in upon itself with appalling ease, and Kel's form seeped through the spaces between bones as though she had turned into some liquid.

Jeris was no ossuarist. But he was a guard who lived in Spine, and he knew how certain things worked. He couldn't hold this shut indefinitely, unless—

“Cut off my hand,” he said to Wrack.

She twisted to look at him. She understood.

“No!” Armain cried. “Look!”

The gargoyles plummeted in one great flock, croaking and hissing. Jeris let go. They perched along the edges of the sink, holding the wires fast with their talons. One by one they turned gray, sealing themselves in place. Only their glittering eyes gave any indication that they were still alive, in their fashion. Jeris's own hands were stained gray and black, with the bones showing through in ivory-gold flashes.

There were few guards remaining, his ghosts or Kel's. They had both stood down. Jeris did not grudge them this. “Go,” he said, because it was all he could think to say. “Find places to rest, and we'll say the rites for you.”

Both sets of guards saluted him before disappearing in wisps of smoke and mist. Jeris didn't like the implications, but he accepted them.

"Sir," Wrack said, "you're about to fall down."

No, he thought, the world's rising again. Indeed, the stairs were inverting themselves, and they were at the top, back in the territory proper. "Come on," he said. "We have to meet the new territorialists."

Two former guards, with good aim and better range—he could do worse. They could, too.

Copyright © 2010 Yoon Ha Lee

[Comment on this Story](#) in the BCS Forums

*Yoon Ha Lee's short fiction has appeared in [The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction](#) and [Clarkesworld Magazine](#). She is also the author of "[Architectural Constants](#)," in [BCS #2](#) and [Audio Fiction Podcast BCS 001](#) and "[The Pirate Captain's Daughter](#)" in [BCS #27](#). She currently lives in Pasadena, California with her husband and daughter.*

**Beneath  
Ceaseless  
Skies**

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

## THROWING STONES

by Mishell Baker

In the city of Jiun-Shi the third shift was known as the goblin watch, but some of us were not very watchful. I, for one, was so absorbed in the daily details of living a lie that it took me three months to learn that one of the regulars at the Silver Fish Teahouse was a goblin. By the time our paths collided three years later, I had been promoted to third-shift manager, and my lie had been promoted to widely established fact.

Often during my shift I furtively watched him where he sat in his guise as a human poet and scribe-for-hire. Sometimes he was alone, his narrow shoulders slumped over a crisp rectangle of paper, his fine writing brush held in his gaunt left hand. Usually there were women at his table asserting their dominance, half-offended and half-fascinated that a man would bother to educate himself so thoroughly. To their credit, he looked the part of that second-class citizen of the Empire of Ru, the human male. But I—a liar smug in my knowledge of another's truth—pitied those women who approached him in ignorance and waded in out of their depth.

He always remained tranquil, even as suitors playfully mocked him and threaded their fingers through his bird's-nest hair. His sharp indigo eyes were always open, even when a woman leaned in to kiss his mouth. He never corrected those who treated him as a common plaything, but without fail a more experienced patron would whisper the secret into her sister's ear just slightly too late to keep the poor woman from becoming infatuated.

It was heartbreaking each time to watch the goblin's latest lover realize that his facial expressions, his exquisite manners, even his soul-stirring poetry came not from the heart—as a goblin he did not have one—but from a detailed study of the human race and its peculiar passions. Most limped on with their lives thereafter, never returning to the teahouse, but a few stopped eating, stopped sleeping, died of starvation or some simple fever. Two had killed themselves, one with poison, one, more appropriately, by drowning.

The name the poet used was Tuo, a common name in Jiun-Shi, almost comically so. He may as well have named himself “perfectly ordinary man” and had done with it. This along with his absurd hair amused me and kept me from having the fearful reverence I ought to have had for a creature possibly thousands of years old. Younger goblins could not achieve such a perfect human shape, particularly not for the entire night, but

despite Tuo's obvious power and experience, I declined to be intimidated.

I had long made note of what wearied and offended the great among our guests—the Seeresses in particular—so that I might never repeat those mistakes. But a goblin, oh, that was another thing altogether. How would one even begin? Goblins were known to dart in and out of human society wreaking recreational havoc during the night, but as children of the goddess Ru and creatures of Her divine chaos, things such as consistency and loyalty were antithetical to them. And yet the Silver Fish had hosted Tuo for as far back as anyone could trace history.

Given the reputation of goblins in general and Tuo in particular, I had decided it was best to simply avoid him, until I realized that he might be the very being who could solve the dilemma that circumscribed my existence.

The great are accustomed to having favors asked of them, and are on guard for it. I dismissed a hundred clever ways of attracting his notice, of fascinating him, and then one night I managed it quite by accident. At the time my attentions were entirely focused on the Mistress of Visions, who had come down from the Starlight Temple to grace us with her black-robed presence. I was preoccupied with trying to find out more about the Temple entrance examinations without drawing

undue attention to myself, but when I turned away from her table I found Tuo staring at me. Instantly the Seeress was forgotten. I schooled my expression into something attentive and curious but unconcerned, a near-exact mirror of his.

He was alone for the moment, his idle brush resting across his teacup. He crooked a finger at me: a gentle, persuasive gesture. Curling my hands into my skirt just enough to clear the hem from the floor, I glided over to his table and dropped a fluid half-curtsey, grateful that my high collar concealed my pulse.

“Is there something I can do for you?” I asked politely.

At the sound of my voice, he leaned forward, as though catching nuances. His eyes skimmed over my face and body with neither furtiveness nor audacity. “Please sit,” he said, gesturing to the chair on the other side of the small tabletop. He continued to watch my movements as I sat, then leaned his jaw into the palm of his hand and looked at me from a canted angle. A smile appeared on his lips, but his eyes remained unchanged, neither warm nor cool.

“To what do I owe the honor of your attention?” I said, returning his smile politely. This close I could smell him, an odd mixture of ink and lakewater overlaid with a cheap spicy oil that one of the tea-boys might have worn.

“Kinship,” he said. He reached for his writing brush but did not resume his work, just held it poised as he continued to watch me. “I had not thought to find another like myself, here.”

That caught me by surprise. “You think I am a Daughter of Ru?” His kind objected to the term “goblin.”

“You are a daughter of no one,” he replied.

Now it was I who leaned forward, latching my gaze fiercely onto his for a moment. I had suspected that he might see the truth of me, which was one reason I had avoided him. Affecting restrained indignation, I lowered my voice. “I would request that you be careful of what you say, and how loudly you say it.”

“While I’m aware of the reputation that my kind have made for themselves among yours,” he said, “I am not here to pull the threads of your life and watch them unravel. I am simply here to observe, and learn what I can.”

“And what do you expect to learn from me?”

Instead of answering, he reached across the table and took my hand. The gesture shocked me so much I pulled back, but not before the soft coolness of his palm sent a shudder through my spine. My discomfort caused something so lovely and transformative to happen to his face that it might have been taken for a sudden infatuation, but I had observed too many scholars not to recognize an academic epiphany.

“Let us retire to an upper room,” he said, “so that we may speak with more privacy.”

“The others will think....”

“...that their manager is a courageous and fortunate woman,” he finished. From any other lips it would have been arrogance; from his it was arid, unembellished fact.

I led Tuo to the back stairway, conscious of the shocked gazes of my coworkers. The tea-boys had long ago learned not to so much as brush their fingertips over my sleeve.

\* \* \*

I unlocked one of the larger rooms and swept by the silk-curtained bed out onto the balcony, where I settled carefully into a lacquered chair. He locked the door behind us.

It was past midnight, but many of the shopkeepers' stalls were still open. The lantern-lit streets were washed with the tides of their chatter and the smells of spiced fox and yellow rice. Tuo seated himself in the chair next to me, but his gaze floated past the activity in the street and settled on the narrow Lunar Canal, where two six-passenger water taxis carefully passed one another on their ways west and east.

“How long have you been disguised?” he asked me, just when I thought he had forgotten I was there.

“Seven years,” I said. He had not yet specified the nature of my disguise, and I knew enough of goblins not to volunteer the whole truth myself.

“Why?” His tone was insistent but touched with a perfect facsimile of sympathy.

“My hope,” I said carefully, “is to earn enough money to take the Temple examination and become a Seeress.”

He turned his eyes to me then; in the dim light they appeared bottomless. “I thought only females of your kind were touched by the Goddess.”

I felt muscles loosen that I had not realized were knotted. “So the High Seeresses say. My older brother claimed to have the Sight and was executed for blasphemy.”

“And yet you believe the same of yourself? Why?”

I shrugged. “I could name a hundred small things. I draw my hand back just before someone spills her tea. I make people look away from me if I wish not to be seen. Simple tricks of the untrained. But at heart it is a certainty, as present and constant as my sense of smell or hearing.”

“Does your family know?”

I shook my head. “I was told that my mother is a tertiary to the Mistress of Shrouds here; I haven’t seen her since they cut my cord. My father is still toiling away in the saltworks, if he lives.”

“Has anyone seen the truth of you?”

“Even a Seeress does not often probe past surfaces that appear as expected. Nor a Son of Ru, if you’ll forgive me; I have worked your preferred shift for over three years.”

Relentlessly impenetrable, Tuo did not acknowledge my implied question. “Will there be a physical examination when you apply at the Temple?”

“I don’t know. For now it’s irrelevant, as I do not have the money I need. When the time comes, my hope is that I will have a chance to demonstrate my talent conclusively before I am executed.”

“What would be the purpose of that?”

“To throw a stone into the pond, as it were. Perhaps open the way for other men, if the ripples I make are large enough.”

“Self-sacrifice,” said Tuo thoughtfully. “A concept that has always eluded me. Social change, on the other hand, I find both necessary and pleasing.”

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes falling half-closed in thought. “What intrigues me most about the Empire,” he said, “is that despite its alleged devotion to a goddess of chaos, its structures and hierarchies have remained crystalline for centuries.” He paused, and then the corners of his mouth lifted in a tepid smile. “It occurs to me that perhaps I could be of assistance to you.”

“The thought had crossed my mind.” I considered asking what he desired in return, then reminded myself that a goblin offered what it pleased him to offer and took what it pleased him to take, heedless of fair play on either side.

“I have been looking for someone that I trust to carry out an experiment,” he said.

“And you trust me?”

“I trust anyone whose secrets have not stained my writing brush,” he said, shifting his gaze back out to the water.

“Do you remember Liru?” he said, surprising me with the jarring change of subject. “Niam Liru.”

“Ah... yes,” I said, blinking away the image of her drowned, bloated body. “A regular here, four or five years ago? Worked for the Canal Bureau.”

“You are courteous not to mention her end. But I think of her every day, and others like her, dead before their time.”

I turned to study his gaunt, strangely-made face, not certain if I should believe what I was hearing. To my knowledge, goblins were not capable of remorse.

He either did not notice or did not mind my scrutiny. “I came here once or twice as a woman,” he went on, “to see if it would help me understand. The tea-boys I dallied with did not come to the same ends. I am not certain I understand why.”

“Boys are raised with very different expectations,” I said.

He looked back at me then, his eyes reflecting lamplight. “What do women expect?”

“To matter.”

From his silence, I might as well have been speaking a foreign tongue. In another dizzying change of subject, which I began to expect might be commonplace with him, he asked, “May I see your true form?”

“I am not a shapechanger,” I said. “I only dress to hide my shape.”

“I understand,” he said. “But I would like to see you as you were made.”

“And I you,” I said, as a gentle way of refusing his request. In the untold centuries since Tuo had begun visiting Jiun-Shi, not a single person had ever seen him without his veneer of humanity.

“It seems a ‘fair exchange,’” he replied immediately.

I took a moment to conceal my shock. “Not here,” I said at last. “I can’t take the risk some drunken merchant or magistrate might blunder in. But I do not work tomorrow night. I could meet you at the fourth bell, at the Lunar Gate, under the wall. The taxis retire at two bells; there will be no one there.”

“I will do my best to be punctual,” he said.

\* \* \*

The wind the following night was robust enough to make me stagger; it tore snakes of black hair loose from carefully placed pins and thrashed my dress against my bones until the silk cut like broken glass.

I followed the Lunar Canal to the westernmost edge of the city, where it flowed beneath a vine-streaked arch in the gray stone wall. There was just enough of a lip along the edge of the canal to allow a slight person such as myself to edge her way carefully beneath the archway and sidestep along it out it toward the moat. I found my way to the deepest shadows beneath the wall, flattened my back against chill stone, and waited.

I stared down into the water, imagining for a moment I could see beneath its oily black surface, catch glimpses of the pale yellowed bones of those who had come to end their despair or to meet in secret with a betrayer. The thought crossed my mind, not for the first time, that Tuo intended me harm, but I dismissed it as vanity. Then my mind's pendulum lurched in the other direction, and I wondered if he would forget to meet me.

No sooner had the humiliating possibility occurred to me than I saw a disturbance in the canal, near a rotting wooden ladder so darkened with algae I had not noticed it. It was propped on the far edge of the canal on the city side of the wall.

The surface of the water wrinkled and shuddered, and something moved just beneath, something invisible and preternaturally quick. A qualm seized me, and I pressed my spine harder against stone, fighting the urge to turn my face away. I forced myself to hold still, to keep my eyes on the ladder.

The creature that slithered its way up the rungs was only roughly similar to a human in shape. It was smaller than I expected, and covered in slick, froglike skin. I could make out few details in the light of the half-moon, only that the dark hands were webbed, the head spherical and grotesquely smooth, as I had seen depicted in drawings of goblins before.

As it climbed up onto the lip of the canal I saw that it had an articulate, wormlike tail, and that its hind legs bent in two places like an animal's. Its locomotion was somehow disorienting; it seemed to pour across the stone like a shadow from a moving light source. As it made its way under the wall, I suddenly found myself intensely grateful for the twenty feet of water that separated us.

"Tuo?" I said softly.

*I cannot speak to you aloud. I have no tongue.* His words hovered in my consciousness as though they had recently been uttered.

Stiffly, not wanting to linger on formalities, I began to disrobe. “Can you see in the dark?”

*Of course. But I had not realized there would be such wind. Won't you be chilled?*

“You may leave your pretense of concern behind with the rest of your disguise,” I said, working irritably at the tiny buttons embedded in the dark silk. I bit my tongue, then. I needed Tuo to be kindly disposed toward me; what I needed from him no one else in the city could give.

Even after I shrugged off the outer layer that covered me from neck to ankles, I was still not recognizable as male. The fashion was to use undergarments to create an androgynous, columnar shape. Removing the armor of these undergarments was something I had only ever done in a windowless room behind at least three sturdy locks. It had been years since I had felt wind on my skin, and as I peeled away the bindings from my chest I began to tremble.

*May I examine you more closely?*

“If you need to,” I said between chattering teeth. I realized I had nowhere to put my clothes. I held them to my now-naked belly as he dived into the water, scarcely disturbing its surface and then emerging just to my right. As I was wondering how he would climb the three feet of stone between the water and the lip of the canal, he simply flowed up the sheer surface like ink

into a brush. I wondered about the ladder, before. Had he acquired human habits? Or had he been trying not to unsettle me?

His smooth dark head reached only to my shoulder, and I was not particularly tall. He looked up at me with large, featureless, dusky eyes; if he had pupils of any kind I was unable to see them in the dim light.

*I am going to touch you*, he warned me.

I stiffened a fraction of a second before he laid a hand under each of my elbows. His skin was wet and impossibly cold as he lifted my arms and the clothes bundled in them so that he could stare unrepentantly between my legs.

*Do you find it ugly?* he asked me. *Distasteful?*

“I suppose. I hadn’t really thought of it,” I said. My teeth were chattering so fiercely that I could barely get the words out. “I don’t know how I would feel about it if it weren’t a death sentence.”

*Your skin is smoother than what I wear in your shape.* He stroked a palm down the center of my chest. The contact was oily and frictionless, my visceral response humiliatingly visible.

“I would prefer that you not touch me.”

*Would this make you more comfortable?*

Before my eyes, he shifted, making me feel as though I had pitched over the edge of an abyss. I had to lean back against the wall to keep my footing.

A young woman stood before me, as unclothed as I. Her hair was a tangled mess, her mouth parted slightly, her pale skin covered with gooseflesh. The illusion was so real, so insistent to my senses, that my knees buckled in shock and I sank onto them. She knelt too, slipping her arms around me. My own arms were still full of clothing, and I told myself this was why I did not pull away. She kissed my mouth even as her small silken hands investigated me in a decidedly dispassionate manner.

*So interesting.*

My eyes opened wide at that; I had not realized that I had closed them. Hers were open too, inches from mine, and their emptiness swallowed me. Before I even knew what I intended, I gave her a fierce shove toward the water. She had no time to simulate an emotion as she toppled backward into the canal.

I hugged the bundle of clothing to my body and fled.

\* \* \*

I slept in fitful bursts throughout the following day, haunted by oblique, mythic nightmares that did nothing to address my real terror. A sleep like a black tide fell over me in the early evening, and I woke hours later, groggy and perilously

close to being late for my shift. I dressed and hurriedly scraped sparse stubble from my chin and upper lip before rushing out into the dark street and waving down a water taxi.

When I arrived at the teahouse, no sooner had I disembarked than I felt a familiar presence in my thoughts.

*Do not come inside. Someone saw you running naked through the streets last night. Rumors abound.*

I cursed aloud, looking for Tuo but not finding him. I ducked into the alley beside the Silver Fish and hoped he would find me.

In a few moments, a black cat bumped against my legs. *I can change you, if you like.* If Tuo held any ill will toward me for the way I had treated him the night before, it did not reveal itself through his speech nor the animal's body language.

“Into what?”

*Female. In case they should search you.*

A shiver ran through me. So casually, he offered what I had spent weeks pondering how to ask. The cat began to purr, and I felt the scrape of a fang on my bare ankle as it rubbed its head under the hem of my skirt.

“If you can do that,” I said tensely, “then be quick about it! I'm late.”

*It may feel unpleasant at first,* he said.

I was about to demand that he get on with it when I suddenly felt the world tilt like a boat in a storm. This time I was not staring into the abyss, I was plunging into it headfirst. I would have cried out, if I'd had any connection whatsoever to my physical form.

And then I stood, in the same clothes and the same hair, feeling utterly reassembled. I wrapped my arms around myself, disconcerted by the fluid way my skin shifted over my muscles. As I took a step back, my hips threw me slightly off balance, and I steadied myself against the shingled wall.

*I made you as similar as could be. It will last the night, but the rays of the sun will dispel it.*

“I appreciate your skill,” I said. My voice, too, was the same. “I owe you my job, if not my life. Although I know it is not your tradition, I must repay you somehow.”

*Meet me at the Starlight Gate after sundown, on your next night off,* he said. It was hard to tell if he meant that this would settle my debt.

\* \* \*

It was with almost savage delight that I undressed in a back room for the canny old crone who owned the Silver Fish. Her eyes and hands were corpse-cold, but the rumors died at her word, and that was that. When I returned to my natural form in the morning I felt a new distaste for it, and the three

days that intervened between that disappointing dawn and my night off were an agony of subdued anxiety.

To the east of the city lay Starlight Lake, a manmade reservoir fed by the many small streams that cascaded down out of the mountains. From the lake, the broad Starlight Canal entered Jiun-Shi through a mosaic-encrusted tunnel—the “Gate” to which Tuo had referred—then cut a curving path roughly northwest through the city. The many shipping boats that used this artery to carry their wares out of the city would then find their meandering way west to the Weeping River and eventually to the sea.

The Lake itself was a watery pleasure-park, populated with floating restaurants, brothels, entertainment acts and gardens that were open at all hours. In seven years, I had not once visited it; every Scale I earned was hoarded at the Fox-Lunar Bank.

I received more than a few odd looks as I stood at the Starlight Gate watching the sky turn from red to violet, ignoring taxi after taxi and waving others ahead of me. It was a peculiar place to wait, and I wondered why Tuo had chosen it, until the lingering glow of twilight began to fade and I saw him approaching along the avenue. He was dressed for a night of revelry, trousers of blue-gray silk hugging his slender legs, his

boots polished to a high sheen. As he approached, greeting me with an unabashedly florid lovers' bow, my palms grew damp.

"Adored mistress," he said, adopting the submissive form of address that the tea-boys used, "I am ready to serve your whim until dawn stirs behind the mountains."

I did not know how to respond, particularly with crowds of people elbowing their way past me onto the latest boat, and so I simply let him approach and take a handful of my skirt. I escorted him thus onto the taxi, keenly uncomfortable. I ought to have been contented to play along, given that I had spent a third of my life as an impostor, but something about the slight tug at my skirt as we moved to the rail set my teeth on edge. I could not shake the feeling he was mocking me.

*Our stop is the last one,* he said to me. *A boat called The Mirror. It is mine, and tonight it is empty.*

The other passengers disembarked by the dozen at the restaurants, in pairs to the gardens, a handful of women at each brothel, until Tuo and I were alone. The taxi's oarsman steered us then to what appeared to be an empty section of the lake, whereupon Tuo released my skirt, stepped off of the taxi, and instead of plunging into the water as I expected, disappeared into thin air.

I hesitated for a moment until I saw his arm reappear as though reaching to help me disembark. Only then could I see

the rest of him, standing on a ramp leading to a magnificent two-story pleasure-boat whose existence my eyes had refused to acknowledge. Seeresses were known for weaving Shrouds to trick the eye, but never of this size or profundity. Wondering if this ostentatious display of power was deliberate, I allowed Tuo to take my hand and carefully stepped onto *The Mirror*.

The craft's ambiance was a testament to centuries of obsession with the human race. Nearly every available surface was painted with fashionably austere illustrations of the Empire's history, with no particular regard to chronology. Every blank space in the scenes was littered with his poetry, like swarms of black insects. On our way to our unnamed destination aboard the boat, we passed through a ballroom dominated by a monochromatic mural that depicted in loving, almost pornographic detail the bloody sacking of Huo-Ru.

A bamboo staircase led to the upper level, which was largely open to the chill air that moved across the moonlit lake. There was one area closed off by undulating blue curtains, and it was here that he led me, parting the silk so that I might pass through ahead of him.

Behind the curtain was a tremendous bed. I recoiled so violently that I backed into him, only to turn and find myself face to face with the fetching young woman who had kissed me the night before, draped now in charcoal-colored silk.

“No,” I said.

“I need to understand,” she said, slipping her gown slowly from milky shoulders. The gown was only for effect, to tease me with the revelation of flesh, and it dissipated like smoke.

I tried to remind myself that the body was just as ephemeral, but I could not tear my eyes away from her imperfect breasts, puckering in the cold, or the soft dark line leading down from her navel. Tuo had seen, touched, smelled enough women to make the illusion achingly real in its untidiness.

“No,” I said again. The rest of my vocabulary seemed to have dried up.

“Why?” Tuo asked.

I could not conjure up, much less articulate, a logical reason, and I did not feel equal to the task of trying to explain terror and confusion to a goblin. Despite my years living as a woman, I had been raised properly as a boy whose only purpose was to produce more girls, and so I let the phantom woman begin undressing me. In some distant part of my mind I noted the irony of my very male submissiveness as my very female clothing fell to the floor piece by piece.

“Why?” I managed to ask, when she let me up for breath between liquid kisses.

“I need to understand,” she repeated.

After that there were no more words. She was as silent as death, her eyes fastened intently on my face as she transformed me subtly into something else, something primal, a beast who existed only to bear her weight and disappear into her. She drew back the bowstring of my frustration and solitude until I thought the flimsy composite of man and woman that made up my soul would splinter under the strain.

But once that arrow had loosed, the world became hazy and splended, and I had never known anything more perfect than her small form sheltering my chest and belly from the moist draft off of the lake. I held her to me, closing eyes that stung with salt.

“What happens now?” I said when I could speak again.

She laid her palm on the center of my chest, and the bed seemed to fold and shudder beneath me as my flesh rounded and softened on either side of her hand. I squeezed my eyes shut. When I opened them, Tuo was as I had always seen him at the Silver Fish. His hand was gentle, almost pleading, as it cradled the breast he had made.

“Now,” he said, “It is your turn.”

\* \* \*

I became careless at work over the following days, perhaps because I was still adjusting to the transformation that now happened nightly, even in Tuo’s absence.

The body was my own, and not my own. It was no mere trick for others' eyes; my very joints seemed strung together more loosely, and my breasts ached under the tight bindings I had always worn. By the end of each night I had nearly adjusted, only to be wrenched back to my natural form at the first whisper of dawn.

I broke two teacups in a single week, and at the end of the night my tallies never seemed to add up. Tuo came most nights, but he hunched over his work, waving off the women who tried to start conversation with him. I wondered if this was an attempt at loyalty, but I could never get him to meet my eye. On my nights off, without advance arrangement, we always appeared at the Starlight Gate just after sunset and boarded the same taxi.

For two weeks, not a word was said between us. But soon my contentment in the absence of explanation began to vex me as tellingly masculine, and I made a concerted effort to ask more questions. Once I began the exercise, I found that his answers only caused my questions to multiply, and my curiosity became a very real thing.

\* \* \*

By the fourth week of our affair, my fear had evaporated, leaving giddy disbelief. None of his other lovers had lasted this long.

“Paper might be better,” I said, burying my eyes in the crook of my elbow as his writing brush traced intricate wet shapes along the inside of my thigh.

“This poem is only for you to see,” he said.

“Do you do this for all your women?”

“Only you,” he said. Too smoothly.

Feeling sudden self-loathing for my moment of forgetfulness, I sat up. “I am your experiment. You want to see if I will despair and die.”

“Yes,” he said evenly, without pausing in his writing. The text was something about masonry and lotus blossoms. His wrist was in the way.

“You think my having seen your true form will protect me against illusions.”

“Perceptive,” he said, finishing the symbol for longing.

“Or is it because I am a man, beneath, raised with the expectations of a man, accustomed to being unimportant?”

“That is also an excellent observation.”

“But which, if either, is true? Or is it both? And of all the people you have met over hundreds of years...” I couldn’t say the rest; it was too plaintive, too self-effacing, too *male*.

He stopped then, and looked up at me, and for a long moment I thought he was prepared to answer all of my questions, both spoken and unspoken.

Instead, he simply interlaced his fingers with mine, drawing my hand closer to him so that he could write on the inside of my wrist. “For centuries,” he said, “your Empire has been a lake so still your people could look into it to count the stars.”

I waited for more. He released my hand, and I turned over my wrist to look at the two characters written there. *Throw stones.*

I stared at the black ink on my blue-veined skin. “You’re not here to unravel my life,” I said. “You’re here to unravel the Empire.”

“Incisive,” he said.

\* \* \*

Though he may not have intended to unravel my life, the divine chaos he channeled had a way of leaking into everything that touched him, whether he willed it or not.

I became more and more reckless, less attentive to customers. Six weeks into our affair, such a shocking discrepancy occurred in my nightly figures that I was formally accused of stealing and dismissed from service. This catastrophic event ought to have sent me into a panic, but I reacted with almost goblinlike calm, meeting Tuo the next night and telling him what had happened once we were hidden away on *The Mirror*.

“Perhaps it is time, then, that you apply for testing at the Temple,” he suggested as he began to undress me.

“I’ve only half the fee saved.”

“I can provide the other half.”

I stopped his hands. He gazed back at me with an amiable, attentive expression, and I kissed the coolness of his palm. “I understand the reason for your generosity,” I said, “but I do want to know why—if you have those sorts of resources—you didn’t send me to the Temple before now.”

His eyes drifted upward, the way they often did when he sat at a table with the handle of his writing brush playing over his lips.

“Am I to assume that your more personal experiment is not finished?” I said. “If you need more time, perhaps I could stay here on your boat until it is complete.” Something about the idea made warmth seep into my bones despite the breeze off the lake.

“I have the answer I sought,” he said. “You told it to me at the start, though I did not understand at first. I think I came to understand after our first night together.”

“Then why am I still here?”

His narrow shoulders lifted briefly. “What other company can I keep?”

It had not occurred to me until that moment just how much his studies must have separated him from his people. I looked at his odd, hollowed face, and felt a heaviness in my chest and throat as I touched it with my fingertips. He appeared to need shaving, so scrupulous was he in his attention to detail.

“I want to see you,” I said.

I expected resistance, but he said nothing, shrinking and melting into his natural form.

I drew him against me, an ugly wet creature not meant to be long out of water. When I pulled back after a moment, he gazed up at me with blank round eyes. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to the slick skin of his forehead; it tasted of salt and fish and something acrid I could not identify. The immediacy and honesty of it hit me like a gust of dry wind blowing fog from water.

I spoke slowly, carefully. “While I appreciate that you have enjoyed our time together, and while I have enjoyed it myself—if you have the money to send me to the Temple, then it is in both our interests that you do so.”

Tuo looked at me for a long time. I would like to say that I did not search his alien eyes for some sign of anguish. I would like to say that I searched and found it. I would like to say that

he was right about me, that I was unique, that I was the one person he could touch without destroying.

\* \* \*

The examination was held at night, and even the High Seeress could not see through Tuo's profound magic. I was treated just like the others, be they laborer's daughter or cousin to the Empress. The Temple primaries peered into our minds, induced horrifying visions of disasters we would cause, interviewed us via direct mental communication while holding us underwater. Of the twenty who applied, ten were sent back to the city. I placed seventh of those who passed.

I waited for a rush of triumph that did not come. There was only a cot in a tiny room, a drab black robe just like the others, and a nightly grind of lectures and testing and casual verbal abuse. The Mistress of Astrology despised me for my ineptitude; the Mistress of Shrouds despised me for my talent. My mother had long since been promoted and transferred to Snowfeather Temple in Huo-Ru. I evaded friendly overtures from my fellow students, and the overtures were eventually withdrawn.

I tried to remind myself that I was living a grand and dangerous adventure, but the nights slipped by like the beads of an abacus, each like the other, counting time.

Just before dawn each morning, before my illusion was dispelled, I locked the door to my west-facing room. I slept each day until afternoon, and then I would rise, the only man on the mountain. No one thought to disturb me. Behind a locked door I practiced my runes, or meditated, or read about the ancient tapestry of history whose loose thread I now held between my fingertips.

When rusty sunlight began to slant through my window and cast its shape onto the stony floor I would pull my chair over to the sill and gaze out, waiting for the last rays to fade so that I would be free to roam the halls of the Temple. But my eyes always went to the water, gazing at its spangled surface, meditating on its depths.

Sometimes, in these quiet moments, it would occur to me that I had forgotten to eat the night before, and I would reach for my writing brush and paint two symbols on the inside of my wrist, to remind myself not to repeat this mistake.

I owed him a debt, though he would never see it in those terms. And so I would watch the nights slip by, smooth as glass, until I rose to a height worth throwing from. I would live long enough to matter, even if it no longer mattered to me.

Copyright © 2010 Mishell Baker

[Comment on this Story](#) in the BCS Forums

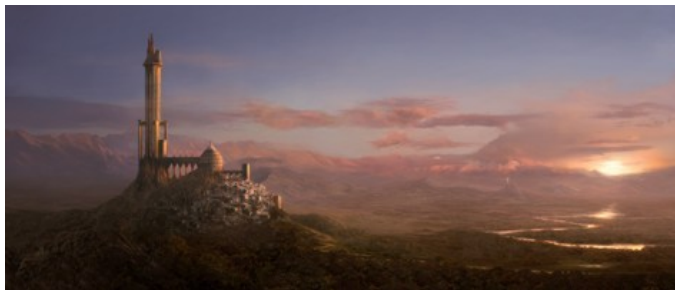
*Mishell Baker is a graduate of the 2009 Clarion Workshop and now serves as Communications Director for the Clarion Foundation. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband, the obligatory cats, and a new baby (who attended Clarion in utero). She is currently at work on a novel set in the early history of the world that is featured in “Throwing Stones.”*

Beneath  
Ceaseless  
Skies

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

## COVER ART

“Spring Sunset,” by Andreas Rocha



Andreas Rocha lives in Lisbon, Portugal, with his wife. He studied architecture, but after college his main occupation veered from architecture towards digital painting, something he had done during college as a hobby. He has been working freelance for three years now, doing conceptual and finished illustrations, matte paintings, and 3D architectural visualizations. See more of his work, including a movie version of “Spring Sunset,” at [www.andreasrocha.com](http://www.andreasrocha.com).

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

ISSN: 1946-1046

Published by Firkin Press,  
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

Copyright © 2010 Firkin Press



This file is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 U.S. license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/). You may copy and share the file so long as you retain the attribution to the authors, but you may not sell it and you may not alter it or partition it or transcribe it.