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THE SUFFERING GALLERY

by Matthew Kressel

Beyond the wastes of the Jeen, where the white sands breathe in irregular tides, a cleft splits the desert in two. The chasm descends to the center of the earth, perhaps deeper, and many demons make their despicable homes in nooks in the cliff face. Down its vastness, daylight vanishes behind mountains of stone, replaced by torchlight from parapets or ghastly radiances spilling from caverns.

In one such cavern lived the demon Atleiu. Her home blazed with corrupted light, as if splendor itself had died. Living metalwork squirmed from angled walls, columns dripped orange syrup into stone pools, and gold, everywhere there was gold.

Atleiu, a serpentine beast with a hairy insectoid head, sat on her radiant throne, her long black tail trailing away like a river of oil. Beside her writhed Mielbok, the Billion-Toothed Maggot, his two pink eyes rheumy with pus.

“You’re an artist, my Lady,” Mielbok said.

“Is there any other kind of demon?” Atleiu said.

“Oh, yes. Have you visited the ice-caves of Roi where the single-horned Jarwhal dwell? Those demons could freeze a continent with their breath, but instead they mesmerize themselves with their crystal creations. No, you’re truly an artist, my Lady.”

“You flatter me today, Mielbok. What is it that you seek?”

“Well, there’s *one* thing. Your latest prize...when you’re done tormenting it, may I eat its mind? The taste of one who’s gone mad from suffering is a delicacy beyond compare.”

“And the taste of one who *suffers* is my only source of sustenance. You speak of artistry, Mielbok, but you’d have me destroy my greatest creation—”

“No, not until—”

“Mielbok! I’ll keep this one alive long past its paltry life span, savoring its agony until the stars begin to fade.”

Mielbok blinked twice, and his endless circles of teeth jiggled nervously. “As you wish, my Lady. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“Mielbok, you mock the Jarwhal, but you’re twice as pathetic. Look how you hover about me, hungering for what’s mine. Find your own souls to torment!”

“I’m by nature a parasite, my Lady. If not at your heels, then someone else’s.”

Lit by the corrupted glow of the cavern, a tented palanquin floated before the entrance to the cave, bobbing in the warm air. A wizened old man with a long beard and haunted eyes threw the palanquin's door open and strode onto the stone floor.

"I seek consort with the demon Atleiu!" the man shouted.

Atleiu studied this brazen figure. Human, but not of the rabble that filled the world with their self-righteous stench. And though his brown robes were those of the desert-roaming paupers, in his hand he held a purple Rubric orb, a magical token worth the price of a city.

"Who dares speak my forbidden name?" Atleiu said, and the mountains shook.

"I am Delmar Tivgee of the Quog Bedu," the man said. "You have my son, Pieter, and I have come to reclaim him!"

Atleiu laughed, the sound of asps hissing. Mielbok joined her, coughing up a bit of brain he had swallowed earlier.

"How brave of you, little man," Atleiu said, licking her lips. "How you've ached and longed for this day of redemption. Such a pity it shall all be for naught."

Delmar raised the Rubric orb in his fist. "You are hasty!" He chanted in an ancient tongue and the orb glowed like a sun. "Die demon!" he said as he heaved the orb at Atleiu.

Atleiu caught the orb in her clawed hand. She turned it over, studying its brilliance. But she grew quickly bored and crushed it to powder; its light winked out.

Color fled Delmar's face as fast as it had the orb. He stood silent and trembling. Mielbok peeked out from behind the stone pedestal where he had fled.

"I'm impressed, Delmar Tivgee. How much wealth did it take to acquire that Rubric orb? How much study to learn its ancient tongue? You're not an ordinary man, Delmar.

"Now I understand the power of my prize. I've captured the son of a mage. No wonder his suffering is so profound! Having studied the magic arts, he believed himself invincible. I've proved otherwise, haven't I? Truth is a hard thing to bear, especially among the young."

"But, the orb...h—how...?" The man threw whispers into the stale air, the life in his eyes shattered with the orb.

"I am older than your Rubric orb," Atleiu said. "Older than the ashen wastes of the Jeen. I was ancient when the river that carved this chasm was but a trickle on volcanic mud. I know things that if spoken would destroy your mind. Come back, Delmar Tivgee, when you possess a real challenge. Until that time, your son awaits."

Delmar stumbled backwards onto his palanquin, and the vessel drifted up and away into the shadows.

Mielbok resumed his place at Atleiu's side.

"You're a coward, Mielbok. A pitiable excuse for a demon."

"Pardon me, my Lady, but I'm not as wise or as strong as you. The orb would have destroyed me."

"Nevertheless."

"Tell me, my Lady, why did you allow that human to flee? Shouldn't you have bound him in suffering as you have his son? Or killed him outright for challenging you?"

"My reasons are twofold. First, Delmar is a man of power among his nomad people. Word of his failure will spread my renown as an indomitable foe."

"Delicious!" Mielbok said, smacking his lips. "Their bards will spread his tale of woe with every barter and trade."

"And second," she continued, "when I tell the boy of his father's failure, he'll suffer incalculable torments. I'll feast on his agony! The father will return. And again, he'll fail. With each defeat their suffering will grow, as will my pleasure. And when I tire of this game, I'll hang the father beside the son and savor their agony until the end of time."

"Magnificent! You're a genius, my Lady!"

"And you're a fool, Mielbok! Now, come, I've a tragedy to tell a boy. We're going to feast well tonight!"

"Well," Mielbok said, "you are."

* * *

In the hindmost chamber of Atleiu's lair, a thousand bodies suffered abominations. Prisoners hung on the walls and high ceilings, outstretched arms and ankles bound with knotted snakes of liquid gold. By natural means these souls would have died eons ago were it not for the amber jelly pumped into their veins to daily rejuvenate them.

There were many species here, though most were human, the animal with the greatest capacity for suffering. Nearly all of her prisoners had gone mad—Mielbok savored the smell of their unhinged minds—but a few still clung to the thinning thread of sanity. Atleiu kept the sane ones near, feasting on their torments as they wrestled nightly with madness.

The prisoners begged for mercy—promised friends, wives, children, or their very souls in exchange for release. But Atleiu ignored their muffled pleas as she and Mielbok approached her prized trophy, the boy Pieter.

Like the others, Pieter's ankles and arms were bound in gold. Atleiu had placed him upright on a pedestal in the center of the vaulted chamber. She flayed his limbs with pendulous flicks of her fingernail. His shredded muscles bled into deep pools set about the pedestal's base. The boy shrieked and shuddered and lost consciousness. When he awoke, she told him the story of his father's failure.

The boy sobbed and dropped his head. Atleiu swallowed his agony and quivered with ecstasy.

Weakly, the boy said, “You underestimate...my father. He will...destroy you.”

“I savor your optimism,” Atleiu said. “Each time your hopes are defeated, your suffering grows. Your pain is ambrosial.”

“Then...I...shall not suffer...for your sake.”

“I think you’ll find, Pieter, son of Delmar, that it will be more difficult than you can possibly imagine. Do you see that wretched thing up there?”

She pointed with one bleak finger toward an apse in the ceiling where a withered human moaned.

“Sixty-five thousand years ago that soul crossed me. He’s been hanging there since. When you cling to your hope for redemption, think of him.”

The boy shuddered and passed out again, and the amber jelly began its dark work of repairing his body.

Atleiu, sated, left the drooping boy.

Mielbok slithered after her. “As I said, my Lady, you’re an artist!”

Sleepily, she said, “Perhaps I am.”

“There is one thing, however.”

“What do you want, Mielbok?” She yawned, her breath a small holocaust.

“You’ve feasted well, but I drool for a broken mind.”

“Good for you.”

“Please! I’m hungry, my Lady!”

“Then find something to eat, pus-brain! The city of Ghru is one day’s journey away. Surely you can find a mad beggar there to feast upon.”

“But I’m weak with hunger. And you have so many mad minds here. Would you miss but one?”

“Mielbok, you pathetic thing!” She pointed to a tawny-skinned woman pinned to the wall. “Take that one. She’s been insane for ages, and her suffering no longer sates me.”

“Of course, my Lady! You’re a most gracious host!”

“This is the last, Mielbok. Never again.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“And don’t leave a mess.”

“Yes, yes!”

“Now get out of my sight, worm!”

Mielbok approached the bound woman and raised his fore-section off the ground to sniff about her head. The woman stared back in terror, whispering nonsense. He bit into her skull.

“Thank you!” the woman said. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

Mielbok engulfed her head, and her muted thanks buzzed through his translucent flesh. She fell silent as he bit off her head at the neck.

Meanwhile Atleiu had spread herself on a granite plinth and fallen asleep. Her snores were like the cries of lost souls in the desert.

“Mielbok...*Mielbok!*” the boy said.

Mielbok swallowed the last of the woman—her hand—and licked ichor from his lips.

“Miel...bok!”

“Be quiet!” Mielbok said. “You’ll wake the Lady, and she’ll make you suffer again!”

“She sleeps...,” the boy said, “...for ages. She’ll not wake.”

“Such is her way. What’s it to you?”

“She inflicts pain...to her victims. I am one. But what are you?”

Mielbok blinked several times. He inched closer to the boy. “Do you question me, Mielbok, the Billion-Toothed Maggot?” He raised himself and exhaled foul breath into the boy’s face.

“No! You’re a great demon, no doubt,” Pieter said, blinking away tears from Mielbok’s hot breath. “Of much renown. So

why...do you let her torment you as she torments her prisoners? You deserve better...O great worm.”

Mielbok paused a beat. “You want me to eat you, huh? To end your misery too?”

“No. I want to end yours.”

Mielbok stared at the boy. “I’m Mielbok the White Worm! Mielbok the Foul! Mielbok the Eater of Minds! What can you do for me, human? Quiet yourself, before you wake the Lady. She’ll make a mockery of you!”

“She’ll sleep for days, Mielbok. But I’m here. I can help you. You just have to listen.”

“You don’t understand,” Mielbok said. “To me, you’re just food not yet ripe. A fruit just waiting to be plucked!”

Mielbok moved to the exit of the chamber, but before he left he paused by the entrance to glance back at the bound boy.

* * *

The sun didn’t reach this far down the chasm, and time moves strangely in perennial shadows. Days or years might have passed before the wizened man returned on his floating palanquin. He stepped onto the stone floor and raised his palms to the ceiling. He shouted angry words towards the heavens. The air swirled with summoned winds, and lightning forked from his fingers. Two black spheres appeared beside

him. Smoke roiled about them. The spheres inflated into oval portals, beyond which lay a desert under a spray of stars.

Warriors rushed through the gates, men and women with flashing scimitars and arrows of fire. Mielbok leaped behind a stone as a fireball hurtled through one gate and crashed against the wall above his head. It exploded into cinders.

Atleiu sat on her pedestal and watched calmly as Delmar the mage chanted spells. The soldiers' bodies glistened and throbbed with magic. Sweaty swordsmen stepped up to the throne, and she severed them with one flick of her fingernail. Flaming arrows arced through the air, but reversed course an instant before striking her and impaled the breastplates of the archers who had fired them.

As more warriors entered the chamber, another fireball leaped from the portal. Atleiu raised her hand and it froze in mid-flight. She caressed the flaming ball as a fortune-teller might, cooking it until it was white hot and blinding. She heaved it back through the portal, and everything in its path was incinerated. The desert exploded as the fireball struck a catapult, but the sound abruptly stopped as the portal collapsed.

Atleiu opened her palms to the sky, and a hundred sharpened spikes sprung from the floor, skewering the

warriors. Those who had not yet come through the second gate saw the ensuing horror and retreated.

The air swirled with ash and smoke, and the portal sparked with lingering magic. Dead soldiers littered the floor. The dying lay moaning on spikes. The battle, from start to finish, had lasted less than a minute.

Delmar stood in the center of the carnage. His hands fell to his sides. On the other side of the portal, warriors sprinted away into the desert night.

“All this death for one boy?” Atleiu said. “Is his small life worth all this? How many of those warriors had families, children, futures, Delmar? You robbed them of that for your selfish reasons.”

“You! *You* robbed them! I carry no blame.”

“Oh, but you do. They did this for you, Delmar, and your son.”

“They are...they *were* of my tribe. To the Quog Bedu, every member is family. They died for me, as I would have for them.”

Atleiu gestured to the open portal where voices cried and fires burned. “I doubt very much they would die for you again.”

Delmar stumbled backwards. “You will not win. I will defeat you.”

“No, you won’t.”

He retreated to his palanquin. “I will return.”

“I hunger for it.”

The portal snapped closed as the palanquin floated away.

Atleiu, eager to convey this latest failure to the boy, retreated to her suffering gallery. Mielbok crawled out from his hiding place to follow her.

“You make a brave demon,” she said to Mielbok. “So bold and adventuresome!”

“I’m still learning, my Lady. One day I shall be as powerful as you.”

“Ha! No wonder you’ve been named the Billion-Toothed! You speak nonsense and lies!”

“The moniker is not a metaphor, my Lady.”

“Shut up, Mielbok.”

Atleiu told her story to Pieter, exaggerating the most gruesome aspects for savory effect.

“All this death,” she said. “Because of you.”

“Yes,” the boy said, hanging his head. “It’s my fault. I snuck away from the caravan...to hunt for jewels...in the night sands. I disobeyed my father.”

“And now look how many people have died in your name.”

“Too many.” When his sobs stopped he said, “Why...why do you bring such suffering into the world?”

“It is my nature.”

“It is vile.”

“But it’s your nature too!”

“Never!” Pieter said. “I’m nothing like you.”

“Aren’t you? Everything that lives causes another to suffer. How many animals have you slaughtered? A hundred, a thousand? And as the son of a mage, you know that plants feel just as much as animals, perhaps more.”

“That’s not the same. Food is a necessity. Without it, we’d —”

“Die? Then we are the same. I eat to live. As a Bedu, you’ve used camels to carry burdens, milked them to sustain your desert journeys, and when food ran scarce, you slaughtered them for meat. Do they not suffer for you?”

“But an animal, it doesn’t have the same capacity to suffer as a human.”

“Absolutely correct,” she said. “Which brings us full circle, doesn’t it?”

The boy turned away from her. “My father will come,” he said. “He’ll save me.”

“Good! Keep hoping! I’ll milk your cycles of hope and despair like you milked your camels. Now, sleep beckons me!”

And she did sleep, for a small age.

* * *

After many years, Delmar returned. His beard had grown, his skin had wrinkled and turned gray, and his eyes had

vanished. In their place were sunken hollows that glowed with hoary light.

Atleiu leaned on her throne, while Mielbok rose up and shouted, “Do you dare challenge my Lady again, human?”

Delmar stepped forward and fell to his knees. “No...no, I don’t.”

Mielbok glanced at Atleiu, but she remained placid.

“Then why are you here?” Mielbok said.

“I’ve traveled the onyx wastes of the Jeen,” Delmar said, “and spoken to the destroyers of cities, the no-things that dwell in the most barren of deserts. They wouldn’t help me, for what can you give creatures that savor emptiness alone? I crafted a merkabah chariot and rode its pyramidal shell beyond this sphere to the icy rocks that drift in the blackness of space. The tentacled Ygg that dwell there are older than this Earth, and I gave them my eyes in return for their favor. But they tricked me, and cast me, blind and stumbling, out of their kingdom. I found my way home by following the warmth of the Earth against the night.

“I sought out Karad and its city of black giraffes. The avatar of the goddess Mollai dwells in Karad’s perfumed gardens. I waited years for an audience with that bejeweled divinity. Oh, the unbreakable word of Mollai! She told me that I should give up hope, that I would never see my son freed.

“I have traveled the four corners of this Earth and beyond, drowned myself in drink, gone blind, touched madness, and have not found a way to defeat you. So I’ve come for your mercy. Allow me to take the place of my son. Surely you can see that my capacity for suffering is greater than his, for I have endured so much pain.”

At this Atleiu finally spoke. “Your offer is flawed. You’re a man of power and wisdom. You can mitigate your suffering in ways the boy cannot. No, you’re not a worthy replacement.”

“Please. Is there something...*anything* that is?”

“Another soul, perhaps.”

Delmar stared. “Another?”

“Someone who is capable of greater suffering than your son.”

Delmar lapsed into a trance, contemplating. A moment later he threw his hands to his face. “Look at me! For a moment I considered your proposition! To willingly inflict suffering on another human being for my own selfish relief! What a monster I’ve become! A drunkard and a beast! As low as you!” Delmar sobbed into his hands.

Atleiu sat up in her chair. “No,” she said. “You haven’t *become* anything. You’ve always been like this. It just took my cajoling to help you see. Pity that you had to go blind before

you could glimpse the truth. Now cry, Delmar! Mourn the longed-for self that will never be! Your sorrow is my joy.”

Delmar wiped the tears from his face, hardened his jaw, and rose to his feet. “No! No, I’ll not give you the satisfaction. I am what I make myself.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I must.”

“And look at what you’ve become, wretched, blind, groveling at my feet.”

Delmar trembled. “You play with words. This sick game must end. This will be my last visit.”

“If you so wish,” Atleiu said.

“I wish to see my son. To say goodbye.”

Atleiu rose. “I think that would please us both.” She gestured to Delmar, who preceded her into the rear chamber.

Mielbok followed them, whispering to Atleiu, “My Lady, do you remember what you said? About his last time—”

“Shut up, maggot!”

They entered into the cavernous rear chamber, with its unholy glow, its cacophony of mourning. When Delmar saw his son displayed in the center of the chamber he howled like a felled wolf. The prisoners turned their eyes towards him. Many laughed.

The boy lifted his head. “Father? Is that you?”

“Pieter, my son... Oh, Goddess Mollai! Why have you abided this horror?”

“Father...what happened to your eyes?”

“Never mind, son. I can sense you by other means.”

“I knew you’d come back.”

“Pieter, forgive me. You don’t deserve this.”

“But I did...I wandered away...I disobeyed you...I was hunting for jewels. I saw a strange snake in the sand...I followed it. It led me across a dune...and when I looked up...there was a black demon under the moon.”

“Pieter, my son, it wasn’t your fault. It was mine. I was drunk. I should have been watching you. Oh Mollai, how many nights did I poison my soul with the fruit of the palm?”

“Father, please...enough talk. Are you here to save me?”

“Mollai, forgive me. Yes, I’m here to save you. I love you, Pieter.” Delmar reached into his pocket and snapped his hand toward the boy. Metallic snowflakes hurtled toward Pieter, but an instant before they struck the boy, they froze.

“No!” Delmar shrieked. The boy gasped.

Atleiu stepped between father and son. “With your sight also went your wisdom,” she said. “Your motives are transparent, Delmar. Nothing will stop him from suffering at my hands.”

The metallic snowflakes clinked to the floor, and Atleiu smashed them with her tail.

“Father?” Pieter said. “Father....”

Delmar fell to his knees and dropped his head. “Oh, forgive me, son...forgive me....”

Atleiu raised her arms. Liquid gold snaked out from the walls and coiled around Delmar’s hands and feet. The mage offered no resistance as the snakes pulled him against the wall. Soon he was bound like all the others.

“Father!”

“Oh Mollai, oh Mollai, oh Mollai....”

Atleiu spasmed and squeaked with joy.

* * *

Atleiu stumbled drunkenly towards her plinth. “What a stupendous feast! Better than any in a thousand years! Mielbok, the taste of unmitigated sorrow! Such a delight! Can you imagine?”

“I’m glad you’re sated, my Lady.”

“You’re a fool, Mielbok,” she said. “You nearly spoiled my greatest meal by speaking out of turn! Keep your putrid mouth shut, or next time I’ll kill you.”

Mielbok bowed his head. “Of course, my Lady.”

“Mielbok, you look odd. Your skin has turned brown. Are you sick?”

“No, my Lady. Just very, very hungry. Soon I will—”

“You insipid worm! You can’t have one of mine! I told you, I’m done helping you. Now be gone!” She climbed onto to her plinth and was quickly snoring.

But Mielbok, enlivened by the encounter with the mage, browsed Atleiu’s suffering gallery, sniffing heads and imagining what each particular form of derangement tasted like. Yellow drool spilled from his lips onto their tattered scalps.

He overheard the boy and father speaking.

“I’m sorry, son...I just wanted to end your misery!”

“You’ve apologized many times, Father. Please stop. I forgive you.”

“I have failed you, Pieter. I’m sorry.”

“Enough, Father! It will never be. We get what we deserve.”

“Deserve? *You* do not deserve this.”

“But don’t we? For all the suffering we’ve inflicted? The cities the Quog Bedu conquered, back in the ancient days. Did our ancestors not slaughter so that we could live? And the countless animals we’ve killed for food and clothing and shelter. How many things died for us?”

“We live according to our nature,” Delmar said.

“Which is as vile as this demon that binds us.”

“Neither vile, nor saintly. Do you remember when you found that man from Gelecek, lost and thirsty in the desert. What did you do?”

“I gave him water and shade.”

“You have compassion. That’s your nature. This beast, Atleiu, she’d leave that man to die. That is *her* nature.”

Pieter moaned. “It’s abhorrent.”

“No more than the buzzard that eats a carcass or the beetle that feasts on dung. That is their nature.”

“She’s worse than a dung beetle, Father!”

“In the great canvas of life she’s the same. She’s but a stroke of darkness. With the dark, the light shines more brightly.”

“Your metaphor is flawed, Father! A vulture is a stupid vulgar bird. A beetle has the brain of a mustard seed. But Atleiu is intelligent, conscious. She can *choose!*”

“She may stumble within her walls, but ultimately she is bound by her nature, as we are bound by her.”

“And us, Father? What are we in this grand canvas?”

“Me? I’m a failed wizard.... A drunkard. And you, you’re the victim of my stupidity.”

“I refuse to accept that! I *choose* to be more than just a victim!”

“You’re strong, Pieter. Stronger even than I’d hoped. But you must remember that nature is larger than us all.... It’s a force by which even the greatest wizard may fall.”

“You sadden me, Father.”

“Such is my legacy.”

“Sleep now, Father,” the boy said. “Rest. This is the least of her torments.”

Mielbok overheard the entire conversation, and brooded on their words for a long time. But he could wait no longer, and slid off into a corner.

* * *

Atleiu awoke from an epic sleep and groggily called out for her companion. “Mielbok! Mielbok, where are you? I must tell you about my dream! I visited the dead cities that float within the gray mindspace of the thinking-kind! There was a human girl there. Her name was—”

The air was pungent and sour. “Something is different,” she said, sniffing. “There is—” she sniffed again— “a weight to the air. My steps are slowed....”

She traced the smell to a corner. Against the wall was a large brown sac, ribbed like the carcass of a felled beast. Milky goo dripped from a large wound, as if something had burst from the inside. One of Atleiu’s prisoners, still bound in its

golden threads, was headless beside it. Dried blood garlanded the severed neck.

“What’s this?” she shouted. “Who defiles my chamber? Mielbok, you worm, is this your work?” She followed the trail of milky goo and found three more headless bodies nearby. “I promise, my little companion, I won’t kill you if it is!”

Something crunched and crackled behind a stone pedestal. She moved closer to investigate. Behind it crawled a giant, hairy insect with cloudy pink eyes and wings that shimmered green with oiled rainbows. Its body was as white as pus. “Hungry...so hungry...,” the insect moaned.

The insect gnawed on a human on the floor, its feet and hands missing; they were still bound to the wall beside it.

“Welcome!” the fly said, “to *my* feast!”

“Mielbok, is that you?” Atleiu said. “You’ve morphed from one repugnant shape to another!”

“Yes, Atleiu, it is me, Mielbok, the Billion-Toothed Maggot!”

Atleiu laughed, the sound of ancient walls toppling. “Your words were always larger than your bite, Mielbok. You’re not a maggot anymore, but a hairy fly. I lied to you, Mielbok. I *am* going to kill you!”

She whipped her tail around, and it sliced through Mielbok's new body, pinning him to the human beneath. He squealed as yellow-white pus spilled from the wound.

"Did you think you could devour my prizes and buzz away unharmed? Nothing gets past me, Mielbok. You were always such a fool, a pitiable excuse for a demon."

Mielbok's tiny lips whispered, "I was...an ignorant child. But...I have grown."

"You won't be *growing* anymore." She thrust her tail in deeper, splitting him in two. The halves tumbled away. Mielbok the fly sighed and went still.

The chamber was silent. "At last! Peace!" she shouted. "No more whining! No more begging! No more epic feats of cowardice!"

Pleased with herself, she moved towards Pieter, feeling hungry, but also weak. Liquid splattered on her forehead. She smelled blood and looked up. Above her, something clicked softly, like lips smacking. A body quivered in its bonds.

"What is it, Bethelda? Do you mourn the loss of the little white worm?"

The woman's chest burst open. A pink muscle squirmed inside. No—not a muscle. A worm, with pink eyes.

A maggot.

“Oh, you devious little demon!” she said. “I’ll not abide you twice.”

A second chest exploded. A maggot wiggled inside of it too. A third and a fourth followed, then dozens every second. Out from each of a hundred bodies crawled a white, newly hatched maggot, with pink eyes.

“Life!” the maggots said; it was Mielbok’s voice, multiplied a thousand-fold. “Rebirth!” The buzzing voices knocked dust and stones from the ceiling. “We were hungry. But you would not feed us! You devour suffering. That is your nature. But we are a parasite, and this is ours!”

Atleiu’s glance darted around the chamber as more maggots hatched from chests and torsos. The white worms crawled up to the heads of their hosts and swallowed them.

“My gallery!” she said. “Mielbok, no matter your number, I’ll destroy every one of you!” She lifted her hands, and made elaborate gestures. The wind rose up and quickly died.

“You gain power from suffering,” Mielbok said, a thousand mouths dripping food. “But their suffering is ending. We are devouring them.”

“No, impossible!” Atleiu screeched, waving her hands, attempting magic. “You’re a pathetic little worm!”

“No, we are Mielbok, the Billion-Toothed Maggot. Our name is not a metaphor!”

Atleiu speared one maggot with her sharpened finger. It squealed and died. A dozen more leaped onto her body and chomped into her flesh. She screamed and flailed, and, screeching, ran from the chamber.

The maggots ate quickly, swallowing their hosts in seconds. Only seven humans remained. Without Atleiu's power, the liquid gold binding them splattered to the floor and evaporated. Pieter tumbled free. He crawled toward his father, who was face down on the floor in a growing pool of blood.

Pieter turned him over. There was a hole in his stomach the size of a watermelon. The maggot within had gone elsewhere. Delmar's breath was shallow and quick.

"Father!" Pieter said.

"My magic has failed. I can't see! I can't see!"

"Father, I'm here."

"Oh, Mollai, grant me mercy!"

"I'll not leave you, Father."

"'Give up hope!' Mollai said to me. 'You shall never rescue your son.' She was right! I've failed him! I'm a failure! A drunkard! Oh, Mollai, kill me!"

"No, you are more! To me, you were always more!"

More maggots wormed their way up to Delmar. "So hungry," they said. "We must eat the deranged wizard!"

Pieter cried, "Then eat me too!"

“No, you’re too sane,” the maggots said. “Your mind is not yet ripe. Move away.”

Pieter struggled, but the maggots overwhelmed him and devoured his father. Someone put their hand on Pieter’s shoulder, and the boy spun around. A haggard woman, hair ratty, scars across her naked body, stood before him. Behind her, five humans, the last of the sane, were crawling out of the chamber. “Come!” the woman said. “Before Atleiu returns!”

Pieter stood. “Not yet!”

He ran into her throne room, but the chamber was empty, save for a trail of oily blood that led into an adjacent chamber. He found Atleiu hiding in a corner behind tall red curtains. Shrunken to half her previous size, her wounds leaked blood onto the floor. She shivered and moaned as gnats nipped at her head and three maggots clung to her bleeding tail.

Pieter lifted a large stone. His arms were weak and his body shook as he hefted it above the demon’s head. “This is for my father!”

“Stop!” the maggots said. “Move that stone and you’ll die!”

The boy swung as the maggots leaped for him. He teetered and fell, and the stone crashed to the floor, missing Atleiu’s head by inches.

The boy cried, “No!”

The maggots climbed onto his chest. “She must live. She lives off of suffering, just as we live off madness. We are a parasite. Without her, we are nothing.”

“She deserves to die!”

“No,” Mielbok said. “She’s a product of her nature.”

“No! Nature fashions us, but it doesn’t control us! In every moment we choose what we are, what we will be!”

“How true! So you’d better run, Pieter, before I choose to eat you, regardless of how foul you will taste.”

Pieter struggled to his feet. “One day, I’ll return to kill her.”

“Such a waste, if that is *your* choice.”

The boy, bawling, fled the chamber.

Atleiu crawled from her hiding place. “Mielbok! I should thank you for saving me!” She wiped herself. “It seems you’re a worthy demon after all.”

A thousand maggots entered the room to surround her. In unison they said, “We’re hungry, my Lady, so very, very hungry.”

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Matthew Kressel's fiction has or will appear in Clarkesworld Magazine, Interzone, Electric Velocipede, Apex Magazine, and the anthologies Naked City, The People of the Book, Hatter Bones, Steam-Powered: Lesbian Steampunk Tales, and other markets. He edits the speculative fiction and poetry magazine Sybil's Garage, and alongside Ellen Datlow he runs the KGB Fantastic Fiction reading series in New York. His website is www.matthewkressel.net.

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A BOUNTY SPLIT THREE WAYS

by Peter Kovic

ONE

L'Acoste and I were dry, as long as we stayed under the trees. Then the wind picked up and the rain came at us sideways.

We sheltered in the vine-covered remains of a castle. Every surface was jagged or dripping or alive with lowly green things. We built the best fire we could to dry our cloaks. I shivered and wiped my wet nose on a wet sleeve. I thought of Jenny.

By afternoon the rain stopped. By sunset the trees had dwindled away. We came to a cliff, and my understanding of the world turned upside-down. There were boats in the sky.

I laughed. They couldn't be real. Two longboats and a sailboat, no different from those I had seen come through the mudplains since I was a child. They floated thirty yards over the void, roped and staked to the cliff like kites. They had to be a painting, like the ones that used to hang in the Baron's house. But I could see the boats shift in the high winds off the cliffside, their cloth sails buckling and snapping. Real. I was speechless as men went up and down the ropes like ants. They loaded

wine casks from a two-horse wagon that had passed us earlier that day.

L'Acoste spoke to the sailors in a tongue I had never heard before. One of the sailors asked me, in a heavy accent, if I were a supporter of Jeunet or Dufay. I could tell he didn't really care. He barely paused from his loading long enough to hear my muttered allegiance to Jeunet. When L'Acoste came back to me he pointed and said, "I got us on this boat."

He tightened his belt and his pack before scaling the rope upside-down, across the void, as the sailors did. They asked if I wanted my leg tied to the rope. I said yes. I followed him across, slower. My ax and bow dangled beneath me. Arrows rattled in my closed quiver. Jenny. Don't look down. Keep going, hand-over-hand. Then I felt L'Acoste's grip on my shoulders, helping me onto the deck of the sailboat.

We found a place ondeck to stay out of the way. The boat sailed into the night, and the quilt of farms and forests below gave way to icy black nothing. Lonelier than the black sky, broken only by stars reflected in a lake or stream. The wood of the boat's railing felt no different than the wood of my hut or my plow. I asked L'Acoste how this was possible. He was going over the map by the light of the sailboat's torches.

"I talked to the crew and the other sailors we saw on the cliff," he said, as if that's what I asked him. "They been waiting

days on that cliff for a late shipment. The only fancypants crew they seen come through got on a big purewhite skyboat going east.”

“Do you think that’s our old man?”

“I reckon so. If he’s going east, he’s going to Triaplak or Salazar. Either way he’s gotta stop at a little place called Lupp. This boat right here takes supplies to Lupp.”

They gave us a corner belowdeck to sleep on our cloaks and listen to wine casks rattle. The planks of the floor made a sorry bed. My pack made a sorry pillow.

“This’s nothing like what me and Jenny are gonna have when I get home,” I said.

“Is that so.” L’Acoste wound a worn brass pocketwatch. He had a way of speaking that held no insult but no interest either. Like a flat procession of words that had nothing to do with what his hands or his mind was doing.

“Good-looking watch,” I said.

“My father’s.” He put the watch away and started on his bedding. “So who’s she? Some girl you deflowered back on the farm?”

I shook my head. There had been times, alone together while her father snored cavernously in the next room, asleep in the only real bed in the mudplains, when we had come close to

it. When the push-swell had started in our bellies. We had resisted and I never regretted it.

“What do you farmers grow?”

“Mudsoy.”

“Sounds awful.”

“It’s cheap magic. Every potion that’s less than five rupees has mudsoy in it. Every cheap charm’s smeared with it. Probably some in your glow-bulb. You’ll never go broke growing it, but it’s so easy to grow that you’ll never have a fortune. The laziest drunk in the mudplains has a patch that keeps him in drink. And Jenny’s father, who has five more acres than any of the other farmers, can only afford a few nice things.”

“I don’t understand farming. What do you farmers call nice things?”

“Twice a year a caravan of four or five elephants comes to the edge of the mudplains. We buy things like wine, dried meat, salt, books, pottery, quills, bedding.”

“I know them caravans. They always got someone with his hat upside-down for money. A piper or a strummer. Or someone who can do poetry or preach real good.”

After I lay down with my boots off I wasn’t sure if I was talking or dreaming. Sometime in the night L’Acoste was invited by a sailor to play poker. I stayed with my story, either

telling him or telling myself or just going over it in my mind. My back to the cold, hard wood. My mind on Jenny.

I knew a way inside the Baron's house. It was his winterhouse because it never snows on the mudplains. I asked if she wanted to go inside. The other boys had told me about the sidedoor to the formal pantry that never locked right.

I asked her because I wanted her to think I was strong, dangerous. She said yes and I was surprised. I started to feel something tangible in the air between us. Instead of being tough I opened doors and helped her through windows. Silver-grey sunlight came through the drapes. Musty. Everything had a whitesheet over it—every sofa, table, and divan, with the shapes of snowglobes and ashtrays coming through. She said that, if she had just one house like this, with a quarter of its nice things, it would be enough. She would never leave it. I nodded.

I kept making the long walk from my hut to hers. Every walk in the mudplains is longer because your feet sink. You carry your shoes or they get left in the mud.

We talked about the faces of her father and my parents, and she wondered how the men and women in the portraits throughout the Baron's house stayed so smooth. And we knew—even though she was the prettiest girl in the mudplains, with

red lips, tiny feet, and giant eyes—we knew one day she would be as hard and gnarled as my mother.

L'Acoste was telling me to wake up and get my bow. His sword and pack were gone. His eyes were unfocused and his breath smelled of something from one of the casks.

“I lost everything,” he said.

“What?!”

“Sword, map, rupees, the bulb! You got to get it back!”

“We can't find him without the glow-bulb!”

“You're gonna get it all back.”

In a daze of sleep and cold-achy muscles we went ondeck. It was here that he expected me to put an arrow through a playing card from a distance of bow-to-mast.

“Why?”

“Because it's a wager, son! I told them all you farmboys can shoot anything off of anything else!”

“Why would you—?”

“To get back everything I lost at cards! That sword's been in my family for two centuries and you ain't gonna let me down.”

Every torch was burning. Sailors lined the railings, barefoot and dirty, boys to old men, with rough clothes and sun-wrinkled skin and knotty fingers and toes. One stepped from the rest and held up the ace of spades in front of the mast.

No one moved, no one did nothing. Couldn't see no stars for all the torchlight.

"Aren't they gonna nail it to the mast?" I asked.

"Guy over there's just gonna hold it." L'Acoste was so shaky on his feet he nearly fell against me.

I nocked an arrow. I closed my eyes. Jenny. I loosed after barely taking aim. Find out right away or give up. How I've always made decisions.

The sailors cheered. Everyone wanted to shake my hand. Someone shouted something and the rest agreed. L'Acoste said they would leave the ace pinned to the mast for as long as it would stay. He didn't look drunk at all.

If we lost the glow-bulb there would be no way to track Silas. My whole life had collapsed onto that moment, like a thousand roads leading to a buttonhole. Every time I took an ax to a tree, every time I used a knife to whittle a shaft. Every time I practiced my aim. Every hunt. I wish Jenny had been there.

* * *

TWO

Floating wood comes from floating trees. A floating tree starts as a seed in the sky but needs no soil. It takes air, sun, and rain and turns them into leaves and branches. It doesn't need roots either. It only grows more leaves and branches, until a full-grown floating oak is like an uneven ball of leaves. You

see them in the sky, sometimes alone, sometimes in forests. I asked L'Acoste, are they the work of nature or some wizard so long ago that he had been forgotten? His response was "who knows these things." Not a question.

Lupp is a waystation built around such a forest, for planting and growing and harvesting. The station is little more than a circular bridge surrounding the forest, crowded with skyships and skyboats, home to ramshackle huts and houses. A purewhite boat is remarkable to Lupp's dirty inhabitants. Everyone who had seen it pointed in the same direction: Triaplak.

We knew how tricky our man Silas could be. Maybe he sent his skyboat in one direction while he went in another. In an unsteady three-walled shack we found an overburdened little clerk with a small golden portal. He asked if we supported Jeunet or Dufay, then without looking at us or waiting for an answer announced that tickets were forty rupees. L'Acoste showed the clerk the same tattered "wanted" poster he had been carrying when I met him.

"Not here," the clerk whispered, suddenly attentive. He took us to the portal. Up close it was even shabbier. Like someone kicked the strings out of a cheap harp and called it a magic portal. He muttered in bad Latin, turned a few dials, and

had to crouch to walk through. There was a flash of light and the clerk was gone.

“I haven’t ever done this before,” I said.

L’Acoste pushed me through.

Disoriented. Lupp was gone. The sunlit sky and the floating trees were gone. Above me was only starless blackness. Fifty feet below was a sea of molten rock, simmering. I wanted to throw up.

By the time I felt steady on my feet again they were already discussing what Silas and his fool had been doing. No, declared the clerk, they had not paid to go through the portal, but they had paid him ten rupees to look at the portal.

“Like you might pay a stableboy to look at a nobleman’s horse,” the clerk added.

We stood on an elevated stone bridge that ran about fifty yards, connecting nothing to nothing. At each end there were portals similar to the cheap one in the clerk’s shack in Lupp. They were stone instead of brass and built into the bridge itself. The void and the molten rock stretched in every direction without horizon, with no change and nothing else in sight. The clerk kept talking.

“It was strange. I was glad when they left.”

“Did they say anything?”

“Wasn’t no language I ever heard before.”

L'Acoste gave him a handful of coins and a friendly slap on the arm. "This portal don't go to Triaplak by any chance?"

The clerk shook his head. "They've only got them big portals in Triaplak," he said. "Six, seven people wide."

Another trip through the portal and I threw up. L'Acoste said the next time we went through I'd be fine.

Back in Lupp the only way to Triaplak was a longboat transporting grain and dried meat. We mechanically proclaimed our preference for Jeunet over Dufay to its mean-looking, eight-fingered skipper. He didn't take passengers, he explained, but he had a different offer.

His rowers were not his crew. They were men so poor and desperate to get to Triaplak to find work that they would row him and his cargo for no wages. He had new rowers on every voyage. He gave us an evil, toothy grin before showing us to a bench and an oar. We spat on our hands. As the drum began to beat we soon learned the motions and the songs of the rowers.

We kept rowing as he ladled gruel into our mouths, and we kept rowing in the rain. We kept rowing even as boys and old men fainted and were whipped awake. Thunder drowned our song. The sky went blurry. Jenny. My grip on the rain-wet oar started to slip. I fell against L'Acoste and he elbowed me back up.

“Tell me more about that girl of yours, farmboy!” he urged.
“Anything to keep yourself awake.”

“I’ll tell you about the last time I was so tired.”

A day like any other in the mudplains. Backaches and dirty fingernails.

I walked her home. I asked if she would ever leave the mudplains with me. That made her sober. She blurted out how everything we needed was here if we just had a little more of it.

I looked in her huge eyes and together we saw the future we wished we could have:

Finery for Sundays and feast days, furs for the winter. We saw ourselves reading book after book to each other. Turning pages with clean fingernails. I get up and check the fire—no, I don’t, because we have someone to do that for us. Then the hired woman goes into the next room and seasons the stew. Next to a shelf of spice jars from far away.

Morning comes, after a night in a real bed. Jenny and I survey our land from the longest woodplank walkways in the mudplains. A walkway from the house to the outbuilding. Or even a walkway to a separate hut for the servants, with its own kitchen. We walk with our shoes on and our feet dry.

When the caravans come other farmers ask to see and smell and try on things they’ll never buy. Things destined to

be sold in better places farther on. But when Jenny and I look at the paintings and leaf through the books—and sample meat and far-off produce—and try on jewels and look in mirrors—and sit in chairs and sofas brought down from the elephant’s back—Jenny and I do not hang our heads and shuffle away. We buy what we want. Toss a rupee in the musician’s upside-down hat.

There was nothing out in the world, she insisted, but the potential for suffering. Her mother had died serving the king’s army when she was a baby. It’s all here, as long as the caravans keep coming. You weren’t serious, she urged, were you? You just hadn’t thought it through, that’s all. You hadn’t thought about how good things could be right here.

But no one could have what we wanted by growing mudsoy. It was simple math. No one person or couple or family could plant, tend, grow, harvest, and bring to market enough mudsoy to get all that. It would take the land of a dozen families. It would take half the mudplains.

We said good night.

I was dozing. L’Acoste nudged me awake.

Everyone knew about the wizard in the forest on the edge of the mudplain. The long figure, darker than night, passing from behind one tree to another. The low lights and sounds that came from the woods on pagan holy days. His was the

empty hut every child found once but could never find again. He was blamed if a person or animal disappeared. He was the insult and the dare boys made to each other. If we went into his part of the woods at all it was only during the day.

I called out for him by all the names I had heard were his. I went to sleep on the ground under the trees. I awoke in the dark and my body told me there should have been daylight. I walked and I slept and I walked and I slept. Like the forest was getting larger and the night was getting longer. As if everyone lies about how long the night really is. As if darkness really rules the world. As if we keep ourselves from going mad only by pretending that the night is only as long as the day.

“Did you find him?”

“I’ve grown magic soy my whole life,” I told L’Acoste. “I know people use magic everywhere. But this was the first time magic became real.”

“What happened?”

“Like I was dreaming. I accepted, calm and without question, the insane. The forest was gone. The ceilings in his house were low. Everything was purple, reddish. Satin pillows, candles. I never knew such silence. Even alone in church, in the dead of winter, you hear birds outside.”

I turned around. He was behind me. Like a pile of sticks and mud and dead leaves that you might mistake for a man until you look longer.

“We made a bargain. And I went along with it because no one argues in a dream.”

“I know what you need,” he said.

“Do you?”

“I have watched the people of the mudplains. I know what you need better than you do. I will give you land to grow mudsoy.”

“I already have land.”

“In my land, the sun moves twice as fast and the seasons change twice as often. Seed yields twice as much. The crop grows twice as high. Ten of my acres is eighty of yours. And I will give you twenty acres.”

“Show me.”

“A field, like he said. Twenty acres, ringed by a high stone ledge, covered by vines I had never seen before. We sat there for twelve hours next to a sundial. You do things like that in dreams. And we watched the sun rise, set, and rise again. We made a bargain. Twenty acres for two hundred rupees. When I told him I didn’t have ten rupees he said I had a month to pay him.”

“Collateral?”

“In the event of nonpayment,” the wizard had said. “I will take something from you. It will not be a life or a soul.”

“I knew he was playing with me. The math didn’t make sense. But it was what I wanted and you don’t argue in a dream. He gave me a key and I woke up. He was gone, the house was gone. The field was mine. I can put his key in the lock to any door, in my hut or the church or the Baron’s winterhouse, and when I open the door, his field will be on the other side.”

This was the only time L’Acoste ever appeared impressed with anything.

“Did the field work?” he asked. “I don’t understand farming.”

“I work my father’s land during the day and the wizard’s land at night. Planting, tending, keeping a journal. In two weeks there was a month of growth. The fertility’s amazing. Like every single seed’s sprouting. Ten years of this and me and Jenny are gonna be the richest couple in the mudplains.”

* * *

THREE

Mercifully we were allowed to sleep on our benches. No one talked. We shivered in our cloaks. The man with the whip was going to wake us before sun-up. I dreamed of Jenny.

We woke sore and put our backs into the oars and rowed in what I thought was predawn darkness. But there was never a dawn, just endless, starless brown sky, over brown, dead land that caught nameless light from nowhere. We rowed and rowed. We ate from ladles again and took turns at the chamberpot. Still no sun.

Then I knew why morning never came. Triaplak and its countryside are forever under a night of black-brown clouds, belched forth by smokestack after smokestack hundreds of stories high, produced by factories that churn out swords and axels and ploughs and machines the likes of which no one from the mudplains has ever seen. Only an irritating coppery dimness seeps from above.

Towers and smokestacks were close and lopsided. Like tombstones in a forgotten graveyard, where the ground has sunk and risen and roots have broken through. No sooner had we tossed anchor to men waiting on a rooftop than the copper sky let forth a stinging, humid rain.

Soon we were in a maze of uneven cobblestone streets and alleys, either cluttered with carriages and carts and masses of joyless bodies in motion, or shockingly deserted. Every street and every building was haphazardly built upon another of a different stone and era. Windows and doors were at the wrong heights and cut off mid-chest. When we blew our noses what

came out was black. No one wanted to know if we were loyal to Jeunet.

Everyone we asked had seen a purewhite skyboat. Some had seen it as recently as two days before. But no one could say where and no one had seen it leave the city. The pinnacle of every tower, smokestack, and foundry was clogged with dirty skyboats and dirigibles. Maybe our old man had painted his boat. Or it was dirty. Maybe every skyboat in Triaplak is white underneath. Maybe every surface in Triaplak is white underneath.

We took turns looking through the glow-bulb, following the footprints left by Silas's fool. He had left his green-black footprints, handprints, burnt shadows, throughout the city. Anyone with magic in him leaves a trace of some kind in his unique combination of colors.

Past steaming sewer grates. Past overloaded tenements that stank so bad we pulled our cloaks over our faces. Past factories that sounded like the collision of metal giants. The search knew no time because the sky betrayed no time. Torches burned everywhere. If it was day the copper light was the sun. If it was night the clouds reflected the torches.

We slept cloak-wrapped in alleys. We crossed the same squares and the same bridges over slow black water. The same

dead-withered trees, waiting for someone to reduce their sticks to firewood or kindling or dust.

Hot, vibrant footprints eventually led us to a crumbling monastery. All the signs went in and none of them came out. Two dozen crafty men could be hiding in there right now. My heart was going fast. I was going to find out if I could kill or not. You never learn a thing like that staring at a fire in the mudplains.

We cleared the monastery in the military style L'Acoste had taught me. I covered him with my bow from the window of an abandoned factory across the street while he swept the grounds, his broadsword out. He cleared fallen sheds and an overgrown vineyard. At any moment, the crew of the purewhite skyship could jump out. L'Acoste could be charged from ten sides by men turned to black shapes by the copper light. It was my duty to put them down.

Clear. He traded his sword for a crossbow and covered me to the chapel. I went in, my ax ready. A sagging altarpiece. No vestry or other doors. A handful of monks in prayer. No one rushed me. No one even turned. A moment later L'Acoste was next to me.

The monks were indifferent, trancelike. Like everyone in this dirty place. One-by-one he showed them the "wanted" poster. One-by-one they shook their heads like sleepwalkers.

That left the cells. L'Acoste crossed himself with holy water before we left.

We leapfrogged to the entrance of the cells, drew our close-quarters weapons, and went in. We kicked open every door. Some of them collapsed. L'Acoste looked through the glow-bulb. We were close. One cell left.

My heart sank. Our fool was hanging by the neck from a rafter.

Younger than I thought he'd be. Maybe younger than me. Just a boy in a purple robe. His pointy hat was on the floor beneath him. L'Acoste sheathed his sword. His mood changed with frightening suddenness.

"We're done." He spoke with frantic casualness before storming out. "Silas found out we were after him and he killed his own fool just to keep us off his tail. He's long gone now."

I caught up with him at the gate of the monastery.

"What are you talking about?"

"We're finished!" he shouted. "I been doing this near ten years. Our man Silas came to Triaplak for one reason only: to get rid of us. When they know you're after them and they ditch you in a place like this, you don't find them again! He didn't meet nobody, didn't talk to nobody, didn't leave us no clues. We might as well start looking for someone new."

He pushed the “wanted” poster into my hands. “If you want this, it’s yours. I reckon I saw some more posters a few blocks back. Some of them worth a thousand rupees. Reckon I saw me a brothel, too.”

He tried to move but I got in his way. “We can’t give up!”

“Don’t argue with me.” His hands were shaking. He was still keyed up for a fight that hadn’t happened. I should have listened but I was too scared to keep my mouth shut.

“All you noblemen who play at being poor are the same! Quitters and cowards!”

Yelling was my mistake. Pushing his chest and insulting him were bigger mistakes. He had me by the wrists. I was in the dirt at his feet in about three seconds.

“Every time I go through a door I have to say to myself, this life, this chase, this could be the last time I ever do it!” he shouted back. “I don’t need you asking all your questions and getting underfoot and then saying I’m a coward. I am Le Chevalier Baptiste Kamille L’A-fucking-Coste. You’re a goddamn farmboy.”

I lashed out at him from the ground. He stepped back with a hand on the hilt of his sword. I was beaten.

“You don’t understand!” I blurted. “He took her! When I couldn’t pay the wizard he took her away from me!”

“Why couldn’t you pay him?”

“Even before I agreed to his bargain, I knew that his field wouldn’t produce two hundred rupees in a month! Maybe not even in a year!”

He narrowed his gaze.

Everything from the winterhouse was in a bonfire on the lawn. I ranted and shouted and tried to break through the line of soldiers. If only I could pull something, anything, out of the fire. It would solve all my problems. They pushed me back, back, back, and finally hit me in the stomach with a club. Face in the mud while the fire kept burning. Only then did I see the limp shapes in torn finery, hanging from a tree. In the shadow-flickering firelight I had no way of knowing if they were servants, family members, or the Baron himself.

“You were gonna steal something from the Baron,” said L’Acoste. “You were gonna break into his winterhouse again and take something worth two hundred rupees and give it to your local wizard.”

The morning after found half the farmers leaving muddy footprints inside the winterhouse. Every snowglobe, painting, and chair had been burned on the lawn. Even the wallpaper had been torn down. I hadn’t slept. I might have cried. Later that day Jenny’s father came asking for her. I spent days in the woods calling her name. I sought her every morning in the fields.

“I figured a couple ashtrays or a clock or something would cover the cost,” I blubbered. “I could take them and no one would miss—”

“You had no way of knowing that Baron Dufay had fallen out of favor with the crown. You had no idea Viscount Jeunet was tearing across the countryside, knocking down everything with the word ‘Dufay’ on it.”

He had appeared above me in my own straw bed, his feet on either side of me, staring down from his twigs and branches.

“I’ll bring you the rupees.”

“That’s not enough,” he had boomed. “You have wasted my time. Now you must bring me the head of Silas Rathke before you can get her back.”

“Who’s Silas Rathke?”

“He is a traitor.”

“Even I knew about Dufay and Jeunet,” declared L’Acoste. “But not you. You’re just a skinny peasant.”

“He took her.”

L’Acoste looked me over. “That’s your problem.”

He gave a nasty look to a gawking passerby before pushing open the rusted steel door to the abandoned factory.

* * *

FOUR

I sat in the dirt and felt sorry for myself.

Then I felt sorry for the boy we left hanging in the monastery. He had his own saga of betrayal and heartbreak that we had pieced together along the way, his guild stripping him of his magic when he ran afoul of a mean-tempered nobleman. His story was silly when we learned it. It was sad now. If he had never been disgraced he would have never ended up with someone like Silas Rathke. At least the monks would bury him.

I raced after L'Acoste. Up the spider-webbed staircase and into the dusty open space of the second floor where we'd left our things before the attack.

"Silas didn't just kill his fool to keep us from following him!" I said. L'Acoste was packing his gear and hardly listening. "He killed the fool to keep him from telling us something."

"Possible."

"Wasn't the fool a teleporter, specializing in portals?"

"That power was stripped from him years ago when he got kicked out of his guild. Old news." He finished packing and stopped to wind his pocketwatch.

"Everyone we talk to in Triaplak has seen a purewhite skyboat, but no one has seen it leave!"

He stopped in mid-wind. He looked up at me.

It took three days of searching and asking questions before we were standing in a vast, shadowy warehouse. At one end was a magic portal suitable for transporting six or seven people at once. A fat, bearded conjurer produced each of us a stein of beer from empty hands before explaining his apparatus. By this time we both had constant headaches from straining our eyes in the permanent dim.

“As you probably know,” the conjurer said, still as pompous as when we’d first met him two hours earlier in a pub. “You can only travel between portals of equal size. Small portals are inexpensive and easy to transport. The smaller the portal, the shorter the jump. Some portals are so small they can only jump to the next closest portal, which as a man like yourself is aware—” He looked over L’Acoste’s sword and grubby armor. “—has proven invaluable in siege warfare. Over here we have a mega-optomagnascope, normally used to show an enlarged view of distant—”

L’Acoste cleared his throat loudly, brought up something, then swallowed it back down. Undaunted, the conjurer strolled us past what appeared to be a misshapen telescope pointed directly at the portal. He moved on to the next topic of what felt like a speech he had rehearsed many times alone.

“Large portals, on the other hand, are rare, and can move objects over great distances. They are of enormous expense.

That is, until the mystery man in your ‘wanted’ poster explained something to me.”

Dominating the warehouse was an enormous mirror, stretching floor to ceiling, well over a hundred feet high. In it, the portal from the opposite side of the warehouse was magnified to monstrous proportions by the conjurer’s bizarre telescope. Big enough to push a purewhite skyboat through.

“Ingenious, although I’m sure I would have thought of it eventually,” said the fat conjurer. “We opened the giant doors and his men pulled in his skyship by the guy-wires. A smelly crew, who answered only to their captain in a tongue that has never been uttered in Triaplak.”

He faced us. “Two hundred rupees to follow them,” he announced.

L’Acoste nodded and handed over his beer stein. He pretended to reach inside his pack before punching the conjurer in the face. A plush armchair ran from a dark corner of the warehouse and caught him before he could hit the floor.

The giant mirror shattered and reformed as we leapt through it. We were running, weapons out, across another stone bridge, beneath another black void, across another limitless sea of lava. Waiting for us at the far end was a tremendous stone arch. Real, not a reflection. We raced through it, jumping unknown hundreds or thousands of miles.

Thunder. Cold. Damp. Not thunder. A waterfall. Echoing in a cave.

Behind a waterfall so vast that sunlight barely got through it. I followed L'Acoste through a break in the torrent of water and into piercing sunlight.

The pit must have been half-a-mile across and miles deep. Water fell on all sides, waterfalls leading to waterfalls leading to waterfalls, from unknown miles above, leading unknown miles below. From our ledge, mist obscured both the basin and the source of the water. All sides were overgrown to bursting with the kind of jungle vegetation I had only seen sketched in books.

The purewhite skyboat sat still in the air, out in the pit, fifty feet above us. It was built from the fronts, backs, masts, and middles of a half-dozen skyboats, connected by an untrustworthy web of gangplanks, cables, and ropes. There was no front or back, and each salvaged piece shifted in the wind, as if it wanted to go lazily in a different direction than the others.

“Higher ground,” ordered L'Acoste. He hastily replaced the standard quarrel from his crossbow with a grappling hook attached to the length of rope from his pack. “Signal to me once you command a view of the ship. Hold your arrows until I'm aboard.”

The ledge led to a path. From the path I could see a rotting network of wooden walkways, ladders, and stairs, overgrown and tangled but still usable.

I was going to kill people. I would be putting arrows not into game or wolves but into Silas's mysterious crew. If I didn't, they would overwhelm L'Acoste before he could get to our old man. Jenny.

The thought of arrows coming at me didn't upset me. Putting down one of my own species is what troubled me.

In position. I knelt amidst the greens and looked over the ship and its crew. No expressions from this distance. That would make it easier. No one moved. I would be able to drop three, maybe four before they went for cover.

I signaled. L'Acoste snagged the dangling anchor with his grappling hook. Hand-over-hand. First the rope, then the anchor. His broadsword on his back and a knife in his teeth. The crew still wasn't moving. I blinked and strained my eyes.

L'Acoste vanished for a moment as he climbed onboard. Then he was in broad daylight, ondeck in the open, with his sword in front of him. I was too stunned by his carelessness to even nock an arrow. He walked right up to one of Silas's crew and nudged him with the end of his broadsword. The sailor collapsed. The crew was dead.

I barely saw the arrow before it went into L'Acoste's leg. He threw himself onto the deck and crawled behind the helmsman's wheel. Another arrow followed and stuck in the purewhite wood. The crew was dead but there was someone in the pit, in the jungle. A trap. I nocked. My eyes and head flew from side-to-side. He was where I was, not where L'Acoste was.

Stillness. I didn't know where to loose my arrows. The shafts had come too fast for me to hone in on the shooter. And the archer wouldn't loose again while L'Acoste was behind cover.

Heartbeat, heartbeat. Don't hold your breath, I told myself.

L'Acoste knew what he had to do. He sprang up and promptly went down again, another arrow in him.

This time I saw. The archer was on my side. He had an almost identical vantage point a little above me.

I rose with an arrow nocked and Silas saw me. Closer than wolves I had put down. He drew another arrow, faster than anyone I'd ever seen. We loosed on each other. This time his aim was not true.

He staggered into the open, nearer the pit, half an arrow sticking out of his chest. He still had his bow in one hand. Already a fresh arrow in the other. I nocked and loosed again. Aim for the torso. He went down. Out of sight. Towards the pit.

The head. The local wizard wanted his head.

I dropped my bow and tripped on it while going for my ax. I pushed and hacked a way through the undergrowth.

Into the clearing he'd been using as a vantage. Blood on the ground. Bow, scattered arrows. A huge branch jutted from the cliff beneath it. I ran to the edge and looked over. Silas was hanging from the branch by one hand. Nothing below him for two hundred feet. I got on my belly and reached out.

He looked at me. He didn't move. Just as old, mean, and leathery as he looked in his "wanted" poster. I had to shout over the waterfalls.

"Give me your other hand!"

I looked in his watery old eyes and knew there was no killing now. No way I could take his head off. I would bring him back to the local wizard in chains and let them settle their differences or kill each other or parade the other's head on a pike through the mudplains if they wanted to. I wasn't going to take off his head.

He reached out. We clasped wrists. Slick with blood. He seemed to lose interest. I found I was saying "No!" over and over until I realized I needed that strength. I dug my knees into the ground and pulled. By the time his belly was on the ledge, he was dead.

* * *

FIVE

L'Acoste's breastplate had stopped the second arrow but there was still the arrow in his leg. We figured out what had happened to Silas and his crew while dressing the wound. The crew was dead and had always been dead, reanimated by the fool and obedient only to whatever far-off language the fat conjurer with the mirror had heard but not understood. After the fool's death, it was only a matter of time before the crew followed him to the grave. Silas must have thought they would keep going indefinitely.

Then the head. L'Acoste looked at Silas, still where I had left him by my broken bow. He looked at my ax.

"Four hundred rupees for each of us right there," he said.

"I told you before. I just need the head."

"You want I should do it?"

Now the reservations were gone. Silas was dead. I had killed him. No morals or rules had changed. Finality, is all. What was left was meat. No different than pigs I had butchered. Or wolves I had skinned.

I said, "I'll do it."

The soot-caked palace of the viceroy was surrounded by shacks, leaning towers, libraries, and offices, all devoted to the bureaucracy that ran Triaplak on behalf of the crown. Griffins

patrolled the grounds, stretching, licking themselves, leaving pawprints in the soot.

In one of those shadowy rooms, L'Acoste collected the bounty from a wind-up clockwork automaton that was like a man made of springs and pendulums. It signed forms and gave him precisely eight hundred rupees. When I explained that I needed to keep the head, I was diverted to a human official in a different dank, sooty room. Unimpressed, much in the style of Triaplakians, she branded the head so that I couldn't collect the bounty again anywhere else and gave me a new jar to transport it.

I spent the first of the bounty getting a doctor. He said L'Acoste had fever but with rest he stood an even chance of recovery. I left him on a cot in a den full of coughing paupers, in the care of overworked nuns. He was violently cheerful, despite being colorless and sweaty. I urged him to pay for a room with clean sheets.

"I had enough clean sheets and shiny chamberpots growing up," he said. "Besides, I got it all planned out. Take a look."

With shaking hands he showed me a "wanted" poster even older and more tattered than Silas's. On the back was a scribbled budget. He wanted new armor, rope, food and supplies, a short-legged warhorse, a pack mule, a new

eyepatch, more quarrels for his crossbow, and about a half-dozen other words that I didn't know. He was set to spend about three hundred and fifty rupees. He was still prepared to give me half the bounty.

“Why not quit while you're still alive?” I said. “Get some land and servants. Live off that. Free of hardship.”

He squinted at me with feverish clarity. “That's where you're wrong, farmboy,” he said. “A man may have all the liberties in the world, but if he lives for nothing more than ease he's not free. He's a slave to his stomach, undeserving of being called a rational being. It's only when he gives himself to something larger that he can be free.”

An odd thing for L'Acoste to say. Aside from polite curiosity about mudsoy and brothels, I had never heard him breathe a word about anything other than the next step in the manhunt. He ate what was good for the chase and slept when the chase needed it. Even his loss at cards seemed now like a rite of passage for me and my bow. I couldn't imagine his proposed brothel trip being any more passionate than kicking over a bucket that had been left by mistake in the rain.

Was the fever a mirror through time and space? Reaching back to a childhood of clean sheets, reflecting into the present the words of a wig-wearing philosopher or blackclad Jesuit? Who knows these things.

“I’ll be fine. Get going,” he told me, and I looked back at him one last time from the door. With feverish, impish delight, he alternated between winding his pocketwatch and examining a handkerchief filled with black stuff he blew out of his nose. But there was something about the way he was blinking too fast that made me think I’d never see him again.

It took weeks to get from Triaplak to the mudplains. At sundown I entered the forest, not stopping at my hut or even to look for my parents. I collapsed under the trees. I was awake long enough to make sure the jar didn’t tip over. Wild dreams of the sky opening and shutting.

When I awoke at midnight, the jar was gone and Jenny was there. I took her small body in my arms. We wept.

We said goodnight on her father’s doorstep. The torches at my parents’ hut were still burning. She kissed me long on the cheek while I stared at the orange flames.

“What is it?” she said.

“I thought it was farther from your hut to mine.”

“It’s always been that far.”

That night there was no place more comfortable than my bed of straw.

Time wore on. The local wizard’s field was still as fecund as before but I was lazy in tending it. That season’s crop wasn’t going to be any better or worse than any other field in the

mudplain. My fault. I couldn't blame the wizard. Maybe next season I would work harder, I said to myself. I made myself think of books, smooth skin, and fresh meat every night, but only when I remembered to.

One morning there were three horses and two riders outside my hut. They wore chainmail and kept their hair in ropy braids down their backs. The woman had nine fingers and the man's arm was in a sling. The hard skin of their faces made me think of a field too rocky to farm.

"We heard tell of a farmer who knows how to use a bow," said the man. "And we got a bounty that can split three ways."

"Is that horse for me?"

He nodded.

"I know what you need," the local wizard had said, "better than you do."

I got Silas's bow from where I'd been keeping it over the door.

Good-bye Jenny. Everything that was once mine is now yours.

Now I knew why the wizard took from me what he did. He knew what I needed.

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Peter Kovic is always writing stories, recording songs, or fiddling with video cameras. “A Bounty Split Three Ways” is his first published story. He is currently at work on a novel that combines it with a half-dozen loosely-connected short stories set in the same world. He can be found near Houston, Texas, jotting ideas in notebooks, but his online home is www.InsertLogoProductions.com.

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COVER ART

“Fantasy Gate,” by Wolfgang Wachelhofer



Wolfgang Wachelhofer is an Austrian graphic artist and web designer who has a deep passion for surreal art. Most of his inspiration comes from the rich and colorful cultures of Brazil, where he lived for four years. He has done a lot of work for various clients for which he has earned a high reputation for his uniqueness. View more of his art in his [online galleries](#).

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