



Issue #60 • Jan. 13, 2011

[“Two Pretenders,” by Marie Brennan](#)

[“Over a Narrow Sea,” by Camille Alexa](#)

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

TWO PRETENDERS

by Marie Brennan

He spends his days sitting at the window, like a maiden in some troubadour's tale. Watching the life of the fortress go by. The King is not in residence; the King, perhaps, does not want daily reminders of the prisoners who share his palace. Out from under the royal eye, the servants and soldiers move at a gentler pace, exchanging jokes in the courtyard, or resting for a moment in the warmth of summer's sun.

After a year of watching them, he is bored enough to fling himself to the paving-stones below—if only the window were large enough. And if only the shackles did not hold him back.

The alternative to boredom is remembrance. And that, he avoids at all costs.

A creak, as the door opens behind him. The prisoner does not bother to turn around. His dinner doesn't interest him—and if it isn't his dinner, if it's some minion of the King come to knife him in the back, well, there's no particular merit in being knifed in the front instead. He hears the expected clack of a bowl set upon the floor, and waits...but the door does not creak closed.

Nor does a blade free him from this Purgatory. No, that sort of work happens in the dead of night. That is when the would-be murderer comes to—

The prisoner jerks, as if to throw off the memory by force. *Not a memory. A dream. A mad fancy, and not a good one, at that.*

Moving shows him the scene behind: the bowl on the floor, and the open door. But the young man standing a few steps inside his cell isn't the usual guard. Something about him is familiar, and so the prisoner stops, very suddenly, staring at his face.

“Forgive me for disturbing you,” the young man says. The words come out by rote: whatever occupies his mind, it isn't apology. “Are—are you Perkin Warbeck?”

Hysterical laughter rises up in the prisoner's throat like vomit, and is choked down the same way. To be asked that, *now*, on the heels of insistent memory, and this young man's face like an echo—

“They tell me I am,” he says, before he can think better of it. Of course he's Perkin Warbeck. So his parents called him, and his life depends upon his agreement.

His life. Such as it is.

The young man says, “I brought you your food.”

Any man with eyes could see that. More rote words, as if this stranger is delaying—either his departure from the room, or his real purpose in coming. Warbeck merely waits, until the young man shifts uncomfortably and looks at the battered shoes on his feet. Then Warbeck asks, “Did you come to stare? See the pretender to England’s crown, only a farthing a look, but if you want to throw anything you’ll have to pay more—”

“No!” His cell is small; the young man’s denial rings sharply off the stone. “No,” he repeats, more softly. “I—I was once a prisoner here, too. I know how tedious it becomes. I wanted to offer my sympathy.”

Against his will, curiosity pricks through the apathy in which Warbeck has wrapped himself. The Tower of London is no place for ordinary captives. This is where the King keeps nobles, traitors—

—*his kin*—

He shoves the thought back again.

There’s something odd about the stranger’s face. A young man, yes, but *how* young? It’s difficult to say. Warbeck thought the fellow a few years his own junior; now he is not so sure. He might even be older. And familiar...yes, the look is there. The Yorkist look, calling to mind the long wars between the House of York and the House of Lancaster, before Henry Tudor came to settle them all, by marriage and the sword.

With that understanding comes a name. “You’re Lambert Simnel.”

The visitor ducks his head again. Warbeck fights down another urge to laugh. Two pretenders, meeting face-to-face at last. He takes some pride in the fact that his own rebellion got further; on the other hand, Simnel was crowned in Dublin, which was more than Warbeck ever achieved. Edward VI, they’d called that false King, because he was supposed to be the young Earl of Warwick. Cousin to the dethroned boy-King Edward V, who along with his brother the Duke of York was murdered—so they said—by King Richard. Here in this very Tower. A sordid and useful tale, for those who opposed Richard. Like Henry Tudor, who had succeeded him.

Warbeck has seen the young earl. Another prisoner, just like him, just like the murdered boy-King and his brother. Simnel’s supporters claimed *that* earl was the impostor, of course. The resemblance is a good one, allowing for the fact that Warwick is a simpleton, and Lambert Simnel is not. There’s intelligence behind those eyes, though it seems he’s learned to cast them down with a servant’s proper humility.

“Tell me, Simnel,” Warbeck says, lifting one of his shackles, “do you envy me? I may be chained here, but you’re chained to the spits in the King’s kitchen. His mercy to you may be worse than his cruelty to me.”

Simmel smiles faintly, unreadably. “King Henry understood that I was a mere boy, the puppet of those around me, and not to be blamed for their treason.”

A mere boy. Warbeck heard from one man that Simmel was ten at the time of the rebellion; another said he was sixteen. Seeing him now, Warbeck understands the confusion. Time grips every man the same—but not this one.

Simmel moves at last, easing the door almost shut before coming further into the room. The state of the door hardly matters. Warbeck is chained, and even if he weren't, there are guards between him and the stairs; and beyond them, the royal palace and fortress of the Tower of London. There will be no impromptu escapes, whether Simmel closes the door or not.

So Warbeck merely shifts aside, allowing his visitor access to the narrow slit of the window. It's a novelty, having companionship in his cell. He tries not to think about how it will feel when Simmel goes away and he is left here, alone once more, with nothing but false memories to occupy him.

The young man closes his eyes, appreciating the cool breeze across his face. It's a look Warbeck recognises: the attitude of the prisoner, slipping briefly into the dream of freedom. Yes, Simmel knows how it feels, as only a fellow captive can.

But the King granted him mercy. When was he ever here?

Before he can decide whether to ask or not, Simnel poses his own question. “What do you think he intends to do with you?”

Henry Tudor. The new King, as Warbeck keeps thinking of him, even though he’s been on the throne nearly fourteen years. Many people talk that way. There are men of forty who don’t remember a time when England’s crown was secure. Four usurpations, one King cut down in battle, and one dead either peacefully or by poison, depending on who tells the story. And more than a few rebellions. If Henry feels uncertain about the stability of his rule, no one can blame him.

“If I’m lucky? He’ll keep me here,” Warbeck says. “The value of displaying me on his progresses has declined, and then I escaped once, so now he *knows* he can’t trust me.” That escape still makes Warbeck’s mind itch, like grit in a shoe. Wondering if Henry let it happen. As an excuse to confine him more harshly.

Or because he believes the stories. But that would mean that Henry, too, is mad, just like one Perkin Warbeck.

It’s Simnel’s face that makes him think these things, bringing the memories up like water from a buried spring. Turning his mind to mud. Warbeck faces the room instead, going to the limit of his chains. “And there’s only one end for those a King cannot trust.”

“I won’t let him hurt you.”

The declaration hovers in the air, like an arrow in mid-flight. The instinctive answer of a protector—as if Simnel really were the elder of the two, and sheltering Warbeck against the shadow of the headsman’s axe. Warbeck has just a moment to anticipate the pain; then the arrow strikes home.

I won’t let him hurt you. Words he’s heard before—his memory insists upon it, against the evidence of his reason. Not just the words, but the place, the voice, the fear of death; the dam has broken, and all the things he dares not think of, all the things that cannot be, come flooding back to drown him.

He swore never to speak of it, not to anyone, but his tongue betrays him in an instant. Staring blindly into the dark corner of his cell, he murmurs, “Sometimes I think I’ve been here before. In my dreams...I have the strangest dreams.”

He pauses, fighting not to say more, and into that pause comes the young man’s quiet answer. “Dreams of this place. Not this cell—a proper chamber, with a proper bed, and servants, and no shackles. But a prison just the same.”

“And a cruel King. Like in the stories your nursemaid tells. He steals the crown, and locks away the two boys who stand in his path—”

“The boy-King of England,” the young man says, “and his little brother, a royal Duke.”

Slowly—more slowly than the roasting spits in the King’s kitchen—the prisoner turns back. The light through the window gilds one side of the young man’s face, and now his age truly is impossible to guess, but the prisoner knows. The one they call Lambert Simnel is older than he, however little it appears to be so.

And they share the same memories.

Strange enough memories, for two men like them, to think they’ve been here before. But that is the easy part, the *sane* part. He could have lived with such dreams, and scarcely been troubled. What comes next is such madness that he has buried it for fifteen years, so deeply it can only be uncovered by nightmares.

The man who is not Simnel smiles, without humour. “The tale goes on, doesn’t it? The children are afraid, so very afraid, that their uncle will murder them, in order to protect the crown he has taken. But a beautiful lady finds them, and soothes away their fright.”

Her face is indistinct, after all these years spent convincing himself it was never real. Perhaps she was beautiful; perhaps not. Her gentle voice, though, whispers in his mind, as if she stood even now at his shoulder. *Hush, little one; there is nothing to fear so long as you are with me....*

He remembers her promise all too well. And a boy trying to be a man, saying, *I won't let him hurt you.*

All of it so very like a tale. “The boy-King begs her to protect them. And late one night, when their uncle comes their chamber—”

The creak of the door; shoes touching down with exquisite care upon the floor, as if afraid of waking the stone itself. A muffled whimper: neither boy is asleep, and the little Duke is trying so hard not to cry. He mustn't be a child now; his brother has asked him to be strong. They have to be strong, because Mother isn't here, and neither is the lady who swore she would watch over them. But he is so afraid....

Then comes her voice, singing like the sun itself, until the chamber somehow glows without light. A voice that speaks of dainty sweets, and meadows in which to play, and lullabies when bedtime comes; of safety and warmth and freedom from care. His throat aches with sudden yearning. To be there—oh, to be *there* and not here, to go far, far away—

What must it have looked like, to his uncle and the knight who accompanied him? Did they see the boys go, see the creature that took them? He doesn't know. All he knows is this: one moment he was in that dark chamber, fearing his own death; the next, they both were with the lady, who promised they would never want for anything again.

It wasn't true. Safety and warmth and freedom from care—what they had was a child's dream of such things, and once a boy tries to be a man, he can't go back. The little Duke might have accepted it, but his brother, older and wiser, would not let him. And so that paradise was broken.

He whispers, "I got lost on the way back. I ended up in France."

Regret shadows his brother's face, showing the greater age he rightfully claims, and more besides. "Better that than staying...I was there three years, I think. It was three years here, at least. You see what it did to me. At times it was like she promised, but the rest...."

He doesn't have to explain. That adults might promise one thing but deliver another was a lesson these two learned at an early age.

A journey out of wonder, that ended with him stumbling down a narrow street in a town he later learned was Tournai. A couple who adopted him, and gave him a new name, because he could not remember his own; that was one of the things he lost on the way back, paying it to some hideous creature as fee for his passage. A new life, wherein he learned not to think about the things he did remember, until the day he went to Ireland and saw coins bearing a face he recognised. A face he had once called *Father*. It had that look, the Yorkist look, and

so did he; a few gentlemen saw that and decided to make use of it. They never knew—because he did not tell them—the terrible irony in their decision to declare him Richard, the long-lost Duke of York.

As if he hears that thought, the young man by the window smiles. Painfully. “I did not look old enough to be King Edward,” he says. “The three years I lost...over there. So they proclaimed me a different Edward instead. It was almost the same.”

The simpleton Earl of Warwick, locked away in the same prison they had escaped. Their tale fell apart in the end; the evil uncle did not die at the hand of the boy-King, returned in triumph from his flight out of this mortal world. Richard III fell instead at Bosworth, fighting another usurper. And by the time the lost young Edward came back, by the time the lost young Richard remembered his name, it was too late; that usurper was Henry VII, the first Tudor King, and the crown rested firmly on his head.

They had tried anyway. Both of them had. And this is where it left them: the boy-King turning spits of meat in Henry’s kitchens, and the little Duke once more in the Tower.

If this is the madness of Perkin Warbeck, at least he can take comfort in knowing that Lambert Simnel shares it, too.

I won't let him hurt you.

A declaration that never changes, no matter what has passed. His brother nods once, a swift movement, as if someone could be watching through the high, narrow window. “I can try,” he whispers. “You and Ned. But it will be dangerous.”

Escape. Maybe another rebellion. Coronation, either for him or Ned, Edward of Warwick, their poor simple cousin. Or perhaps for one Lambert Simnel, who looks enough like Ned to pass—so long as Henry cannot prove the lie by showing the earl in his possession.

For nearly forty years, men have torn at the crown of England like dogs fighting over a bone. Yorkists and Lancasters and a Tudor to bring the houses together, and much good has all that fighting done anyone. But his alternative is this: a cell, and chains, and the possibility of execution anyway. Right back where he began, but in less comfort. And this time there is no lady with a beautiful voice to offer him the dream of safety.

He wouldn't accept if she did. His brother is the only one he can trust.

A brief, fierce embrace, away from the window's gaze; the two cling to each other now not like boys but men, reunited after years and worlds apart. For all the rumours, all the stories of how Richard III murdered the princes in the Tower, and even their supposed impostures and bids for the throne,

nothing comes close to the truth—and nothing ever will. Only with each other can they be honest, in this fleeting moment of reunion.

It cannot last. The servant has stayed too long already; the guards will wonder what he is doing. They hold onto it as long as they can, Richard, Duke of York, and the deposed King Edward V of England; then they step apart and are Perkin Warbeck and Lambert Simnel once more.

Pretenders indeed. But not in the way that King Henry believes.

When the door is closed, and he is alone in the cell, he goes back to his seat at the window. But this time, he does not watch the servants and soldiers as they go about their work.

This time—for the first time in fifteen years—he permits himself to remember.

Copyright © 2011 Marie Brennan

[Read Comments on this Story](#) in the *BCS* Forums

Marie Brennan is the author of the Onyx Court series of London-based historical faerie fantasies: Midnight Never Come, In Ashes Lie, A Star Shall Fall, and the upcoming With.

Fate Conspire, which form the setting for both [“And Blow Them at the Moon”](#) in *BCS* #50 and “Two Pretenders.” Her story [“Driftwood.”](#) from *BCS* #14, also appears in the *BCS* anthology [The Best of BCS, Year One](#). She has published more than thirty short stories in venues such as [On Spec](#), [Intergalactic Medicine Show](#), and the acclaimed anthology series [Clockwork Phoenix](#). More information can be found on her website: www.swantower.com.

Support *BCS*

BCS on 

BCS on 

[Read more Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#)

OVER A NARROW SEA

by Camille Alexa

This is how I choose to remember it....

The night was a rousing success. I swept down the main staircase just before the twelfth hour's first strike on the great hall clock as my uncle proposed his toast to the infamous Warlord of Mekk and twelve hundred other guests. I'd dressed as my uncle ordered—in my best gown with its torturous collar digging into my neck, the tight-laced boots which hid my deformity, and that inane sash dangling from my left shoulder announcing my agecoming and my position as heir to the House of Toth. If I wore also a sharp knife strapped to my thigh and the glitter of rebellion in my eyes, well...there were no such orders for those. Those were all mine.

Also in this reality—the reality of my fabrication, which branched off horribly askew sometime just under what I can scarcely fathom was a mere hour ago—also in this reality, the enemy warlord's daughter Katte and I rendezvoused as planned at the twelfth hour's twelfth strike of the great hall clock. We met under the flowering vine which hung sweet and heavy like a fat python draped over the edge of the third

balcony in the main gardens. Twelve chimes of the clock, twelve hours of feasting ending twelve generations of war between Mekk and Toth, marking the first minute of official peace between our island kingdoms.

Kattie and I first hatched that plan at a failed truce parley when we were both twelve and sealed it with a sisterly kiss under that selfsame serpent of a vine—fat even then, and as heady with its perfume—and nurtured that plan across the narrow sea through smuggled letters and secreted messages for six years, and left our flight just an hour too late. Or a few years too late, or a few minutes: any would've sufficed to make good our escape, and in my imaginings, we have.

But that's merely how I *choose* to remember the evening, how I *indulge* in remembering it just these few moments while I catch my breath, wipe soot from my eyes, and rearrange my grip on the limp deadweight in my arms that is Katte's bleeding, unconscious body. In this more dire reality, with its flame-wrapped boulders the size of crofters' cottages lobbed by magicks over a narrow sea, the klaxon birds wail their panic from every turret. Smoke threatens to clog my nose and throat with poisonous stinging ash smelling strangely of mutton.

It's not mutton burning, of course; it's those unfortunates, all my uncle's counselors, champions, and guests trapped under the rubble of the fortress's great hall where it fell;

trapped in their dancing slippers and decorative feathers, their strands of polished amber and their golden torques under a mountain of ancient marble and carved ivory and a million shards of etched-mirror ceiling, and all of it ablaze.

The pang at thoughts of my uncle's death comes from my sense of outrage and not from deep personal grief; I used all that up on my parents, who died of green fever when I was six. I've shed tears for no one since. Not even for myself.

Fire licks at every corner of my vision past the smoke. I resist the urge to unlace the confining boots hiding my shame by my uncle's royal order. I ignore the point of my blade digging ungently into the soft flesh of my thigh. Taking a deep breath, I wedge myself under Katte's slumped body and drape her weight across my shoulders. Milkmaids smaller than myself carry half-grown calves in such a manner, and the goatherd carries his charges and he but seven years old. Beautiful, perfect Katte of Mekk is larger than I, though more in length than mass. I pretend the wet sticky warmth seeping into the fabric along my ribs isn't her blood as I stagger from under the scented vine into the garden proper.

The garden, too, is burning. Everything, burning. Trees crackle at their tops like children's party favors lit for Festival. Enormous plumes of red flowers, some large as my head and none smaller than my fist, ignite singly and in clusters along

the sweeping branches decorated for this momentous day of peace. Crimson petals are replaced by vermilion flames. White ash flutters through the air like benevolent snow, mild and soft.

My uncle's spies warned us the Mekklan warlord's son and his alchemists had perfected a magicked stone-burning reagent capable of igniting boulders, which when lobbed over the narrow sea dividing their isle from Toth could ignite other rock, which could ignite yet more, and more, and so could burn our famous fortress to the cliffs upon which it sits.

It seems our informants did not, at least in this, lie. Pillars topple from the last standing portions of the great hall's portico, flames gusting upward on drafts of their own heat. Soon the alchemists' fire will eat all the marble and stone of Toth's fortress palace, and all the grass and trees, and the sculleries and the stables and the spires, and the bones of my parents in the royal crypt. I suppose fire capable of eating rock doesn't stop; it must consume the very cliffs downward, downward until it reaches the sea.

I stumble from the last uneven flagstones of the palace gardens onto the stubbled wild grasses beyond the wall. Already my labored breathing burns in my chest as I lurch toward the narrow path leading down the cliffside.

Katte moans and tries to lift her head. "Sigra," she murmurs, my name made strange by her Mekklan accent.

“Hold fast, Katte,” I say between panting breaths. “I’ll take you to the healer witch. Hold on....”

Or perhaps I mumbled some other words of comfort, or said them only in my head, and all to escape my mouth between gritted teeth was a groan, or maybe a grim laugh. I have an unfortunate habit of laughing when distressed, even in the most dire circumstances: when I sliced my wrist to the bone during blade practice last summer, I’m told I laughed uproariously before fainting from loss of blood. At least I hadn’t had to witness my own ignoble trip to the apothecary in the head gardener’s wheeled barrow. My wrist still aches in damp weather, but I’ve managed all these years with worse.

It aches now, as do my feet and ankles still bound by these cursed boots. I’ll not reach the bottom of the cliff wearing such instruments of torture; made, of course, by order of the king. And tight, tight, tight, as though it’s not too late to force sinew and bone from keratin and hoof.

“Katte,” I say, crumpling to my knees, lowering her to the weedy reeds clinging to the cliff’s rim with more stubbornness than flourish. “We must climb down to the boat. Can you stand?”

“Sigra, I’m sorry.”

She murmurs my name once more before consciousness leaves her again. I smooth her damp hair from her cheek. Red

coagulating smears streak our clothes, her face, my hands. The gash in the side of her head glistens.

I slide my blade from its sheath to saw a strip from the hem of my tunic. Unlike the gown laid out for me this evening—the gown I never donned, the gown now buried under countless tons of ancient rock or burnt to cinders with the rest—it's roughspun, chosen for sturdiness and durability. With luck it'll prove absorbent, too.

Katte's eyelids flutter like moths under paper. She rouses, presses the roughspun to her skull cracked by falling rubble. I rip the lacing from my boots to tie the makeshift bandage in place, and when I'm satisfied it's the best I can do, I tug my feet free of the hated footwear and stand. With feral pleasure I fling the heavy, irregular boots over the edge of the cliff and imagine with satisfaction them tumbling, squarish, loose-tongued, and empty, end over end until their splash into the sea far below is swallowed by the crashing tide where it hurls itself against the rock.

Unfettered, my hooves find sturdy purchase on the pebbled ground as I bend to help Katte to her feet. She wobbles slightly and blanches, but stands firm.

I hug my only friend briefly but tight. We turn to watch the great Fortress of Toth burning with the raging alchemical blaze sent by Katte's brother, the warlord's son, using his terrible

magicked launching weapons from over the sea. What hate a man must hold to kill his father, his father's personal guard and closest advisors, a thousand of my uncle's guests, and a thousand more innocents—servants, cooks, stable boys. And me too, of course; as heir I should've been in the great hall at the twelfth chime of the twelfth hour, lifting my glass to peace.

I look away from the burning arches and spires and ramparts to study Katte, wondering if her brother's actions, her father's death cause her pain. But in the etched lines of her face I find no grief; I see only exhaustion and a set to her mouth I interpret as resignation. I know from her letters she's lived confined mainly in her tower, scarcely seeing her alchemist brother until the last year or so and her warmongering father almost never. She hardly knew them. Like me she has no other friends, and has led an unbearably lonely life before now.

"Can you make it to the bottom of the cliff?" I ask.

Her gaze lingers on the twisting flames, the massive column of smoke darkening the sky like an angry stormcloud sent by weather magicks. She turns, looks out across the water. The sea is grey, calmer past the turbulence of warring currents near the shore. She nods, though weakly.

We navigate the steep incline. Katte stumbles on unsteady feet, holding her bandaged head with one hand and gripping tight to my shoulder with the other, her steps increasingly

weaker as we go. I've grown to love her like a sister for her letters of courage, of support. I love her now for the look of grim determination in her eyes, the defiant set of her chin. The roughspun bandage and the front of her gown are drenched in red. The portions of her face not streaked with soot or blood are white as sunbleached bone.

My sharp hooves do well on the soft crumbling stone of the cliff path. I ignore the dozens of seabirds shrieking, diving at us as we pass their cliffside nests. When the birds see we have no interest in their eggs, they leave off their aerial attacks and satisfy themselves with perching just out of reach and cawing bitterly as we pass.

The water's edge where it kisses the cliff is deafening, violent. These kisses aren't the gentle pressings described in bardsong; here is a kiss of fury, of titanic strength, of the unending struggle for dominance between tide and stone and sea. Moored to the rocks in the sheltered cove at the bottom of the path lies our boat where I paid for it to be hidden. Paid with my dead mother's jewels. Paid enough for the little goatherd and his fisherman father to live like lords the rest of their lives.

Grasping Katte by the shoulders, I pull her close. Her velveteen gown is still redolent of jasmine from the gardens, the delicate scent surviving even the salt brine of the sea, the sharp tang of her blood.

“The healer witch’s island isn’t far,” I say into her ear, loud enough for her to hear above the water, the wind, the echo of crying seabirds wheeling high above us up the cliff. “I went there often as a child. I know the way.”

She nods, swallows hard, then shivers, sagging at the knees. I lean her against a sharp-edged boulder and unlash the small boat from its rocky mooring. No shore here; just one crag among many, thrusting from the swirling grey of roiling sea. Though it’s true I visited the healer witch as a child, I certainly never rowed myself there. I’ve never rowed anywhere but on the placid artificial lake of Toth’s ancient fortress moat; the one with geese and lilies, which in warmer seasons is smooth and unrippled as the great hall’s mirrored ceiling.

In our plans, Katte and I were both well and whole. We knew our escape route dangerous, but it seemed more an adventure then, on paper and in daydreams. She sags now against the boulder, her head lolling and her knuckles white, her gown splotched wetly red against the distinctive Mekklan gold velvet and brocade.

Katte’s brief resurgence of strength has been completely spent in our cliffside descent. I heft her across the short expanse of salt-dank stone, the spraying seawater masquerading as briny rain showering down to drench us. I

pray I don't drop her into the frothing waters as I lower her unresisting body into the boat.

Miraculously, my silent, undirected prayer is answered. My hooved feet nearly prove my undoing as I skitter on wet rock. I splash, ungainly and afraid, into the wooden bottom of the shallow boat, certain my hooves will punch through. Behind me the red-streaked green saltweed slime clinging to grey rock shows two furrowed grooves scraped clean by my sliding.

I swallow hard against the bilious fear lumping in my throat.

No sooner are we aboard than we're caught by vicious eddies near the cliff. Spinning, our little boat rides the crest of one wave only to be tossed into the trough of another. Water gathering in the bottom of our craft turns red, Katte's hem seeping as though her gown bleeds rather than her head.

I close my eyes against the motion as churning currents whirl us outward between rocks jutting like serpents' teeth. Clenching my jaw tight, I strain against the rudder. The wood shudders, jarring my bones, wanting to shear off and join the flotsam froth.

When we shoot unexpectedly into smoother waters, my grip on the rudder turns us completely around before I gain my bearings and fit the oars into their locks, desperate to keep us

from rejoining more violent currents. The roar of sea crashing against the cliff's base already seems distant and unrelated to our current circumstance. Pulling hard in the direction of the healer witch's island, I remind myself that every stroke takes me farther from the thick black column of smoke billowing up behind.

I laugh bleakly and grit my teeth. Ignoring the already-ache of underused muscles, the grinding of overtaxed ligament and bone, the bloody water washing across my unfettered ankles, I laugh and laugh, and row.

* * *

Rowing upon thrashing waves against swift brutal currents is nothing like rowing on a placid ancient moat, forever circling, watched by fat lazy swans paddling past chains of decorative lilies, petaled jewels tossed to float like buoyant necklaces.

Keeping Toth to my right, I row, ignoring the burning fortress on the cliffs above and the bleeding girl slumped in the boat below. My hooves look to be drowning in her blood, though I know it's just the seawater tinted unfortunate red. Her bandages are soaked through, the lacings from my hated boots dripping at their knots. When our small boat bumps against the rocky landing of the witch's cove, I nearly collapse beside my unconscious friend in exhaustion and relief.

Black gulls are our welcoming party. The great hulking birds glare at us from dark-marble eyes. Their feathers are the color of charred wood, their wings banded with iridescence which glints in the last rays of a setting sun redder than alchemists' fire.

Birds perched on every nearby surface watch me try to rouse Katte from the reddened water sloshing in the bottom of the boat. My shoulders burn from battling with sea and oars. My eyes sting, my vision swims, my head aches as though bound in tight leathers—some torture device similar to the straps my uncle's surgeons bound to my feet in an effort to change their ungainly form.

I drag Katte from the boat. Under my burden I stagger up the short path to the witch's smooth-stone cottage thatched with waterweed. The last sliver of red sun disappears as I totter the final steps. The gulls must still be watching in the dark, but I can no longer distinguish their black shapes from the deeper blackness beyond.

The cottage door opens to reveal a small hunched figure between me and a flickering hearthfire. I recognize the crooked shoulders and stilted angle of the head, the stiff outline of the woven gullfeather cape and hood.

“Sigra of Toth,” says the witch. “I’ve been expecting you.”

* * *

Serious healing magicks are deadly for such a lifesaving art.

I watch the healer witch rub Katte's unmoving form with herbs and pastes, chanting and mumbling. Heat flows from them both, hotter and hotter, until the cottage is stifling, unbearable. Flashes of light spark from the witch's hands so quickly, I'm left uncertain after each one if they've actually occurred, though I feel a tugging wrench at every pulse. Sometimes the sparks skitter across my skin, reach into my muscles and rummage through my gut. My body tingles at all my aches and bruises.

One particularly brilliant flash sends Katte's body arching upward from the cot, her long unbound hair spilling to the floor, her red lips parted in a scream without sound, her eyes wide open without seeing, her hands splay-fingered and pushing against nothing.

I utter the long, drawn-out scream she cannot as my knees buckle and I sink slowly, almost gently, to the hard cottage floor.

* * *

I lost consciousness; I realized this only after I woke propped by the fire, clothed in nothing but an unbleached sheet and quilted gullfeather shawl. The witch told me then in her

crooning voice my friend and I would probably live. *Of course I'll live*, I said to her, and she replied, *No 'of course' about it*.

And so now I sit, quiet, sipping the witch's brewed herb tea. I'd thought the windows dirty, covered in ash; but now I see it's black gulls clustered thickly on the stone sills. They occasionally scrabble for position up against the glass, their feathers flat-pressed swirling darkness. The windows, like much of the healer witch's furnishings, are extravagant for a wave-crushed rock in the middle of the windy sea midway between Toth and Mekk. I abruptly realize that Toth no longer exists, and that now the witch's cottage isle lies halfway between the seaside palace of a Mekklan murderer and a smoking hole on top of a cliff.

I sip from the smooth earthenware tumbler between my palms. The witch shuffles over, squats by my side. Without looking up from beneath her woven gullfeather hood, she takes one of my hooves in her hand and probes my ankle with strong bony fingers. It's been a long time since I've considered my feet, and longer yet since anyone has touched them without violence. Even the cobbler made my prison-shoes from drawings and measurements provided by myself at my uncle's order.

A brief resentment against both men flares in my chest before I remember they're dead. My resentment snuffs out like a tallow candle.

The witch raps on my hoof as though knocking at a small curved door. It makes a thick, slightly hollow sound. "Does it still pain you to walk, girl?" she asks, her crooked mouth and tongue turning the word *girl* into *gull*. The black gulls at her windows ruffle their feathers against the glass as though in response.

"No," I say.

She nods. "Good. When you were small I feared they might never harden enough for proper walking."

Uncertain how to respond, I remain silent. I gulp the last of my tea, the few floating twigs and dried flowers not clumped wetly to the bottom of my cup tasting bitter as I press them between my teeth. The witch takes the cup from my hands and peers inside, tilting it to read my fate in the dregs by the fire's glow.

I wonder if she even knows the fate of the ancient Fortress of Toth.

"Of course I know," she says as though I'd spoken aloud, her attention still fixed on the pattern of herbs clustered in my cup. "I saw years ago what would happen at the twelfth chime of the twelfth hour. Saw it in the tea leaves."

She has powerful magicks, the witch. She's lived on her gull-specked island as long as anyone can remember, assisting those who seek her aid, Tothic or Mekklan. She belongs to no one, owes allegiance to none. It's said even outlanders from beyond the ocean make the watery trek to beg her help and often reward her richly for her time.

When she glances up, her eyes catch the firelight at an oblique angle, making them glow from the depths of her gullfeather hood. "The tea leaves show bits of fate. Sometimes the future, sometimes the past. Know what I see now, girl?"

A chill enters my bones despite the warmth of the fire, the tightness of the cottage against the sea-driven wind. She slides the earthenware cup—empty but for the clustered remnants of my tea—between my hands. I look down.

"Remember when you were very small." The cadence of her voice is even, soothing. "Remember when you'd come to my house. Your guards waited in the boat. We'd drink tea, and I'd lull you with my words, ease the pain in your legs, your ankles, your back. Remember."

Staring into my cup, I feel something loosening inside myself, a knot I hadn't known resided in my chest—a distant, elusive feeling, yet familiar. I nod as though drowsing, despite feeling in some ways strangely alert, aware of minute details: the snap and hiss of the driftwood fire; the whuffle and scuff of

gull feet scrabbling on the windowsill; the heavy presence of Katte's broken body. Almost, I think I can hear the knitting of my friend's fractured skull, the remaking of her rent skin where her injuries run deepest.

In a sleepy voice I murmur, "I do. I remember drinking tea together. You always saved my cup, and peered into the leaves...."

She nods. My head dips in echo of her motion. Languor builds in my bones as the fire's heat suffuses my limbs, soothing away aches from rowing, from carrying Katte, from descending the sheer cliff to the fisherman's boat. Everything dissolves as I slip away from myself and into the world of the tea leaves.

The ebb and flow of waves wash across my drifting consciousness. The tea dregs swirl, though my hand hasn't moved. The leaves shift to show a chamber draped in Mekklan gold, the unmoving lump of a dead woman on a massive curtained bed. A young boy, hands held out stiff like clubs wrapped in white linen as though badly burnt, cradles a silent newborn infant. Boy and baby study one another with eyes equally wide, while a hunched form I recognize as the witch by her gullfeather cloak moves to obscure them from my view.

A sucking with the force of tidal pools drags me from the scene. It spirals downward as if through a waterspout. Off go

spinning the bandaged boy and his bundle, the healer witch and the dead woman.

I hand the teacup back with a shudder. “You were there, in Mekk,” I say. “The little boy...the warlord’s son? And the woman, his wife?”

“His wife, yes,” she says. “Poor little thing. Dead these eighteen years.”

Eighteen. My age, just like Katte’s.

“Mekk, the warlord’s wife, his son...so the baby was Katte,” I say, but the witch isn’t listening. Her eyes glaze over as she stares into my cup. Gulls flap and rustle against the glass, and the howling wind beyond the cottage grows suddenly louder.

Her eyes snap into focus. “He’s coming,” she says, “as promised by fate.”

“Who’s coming?” I ask.

Her eyes are crystal sharp, her voice still distant. “The warlord’s son,” she says. “Coming to reclaim his sister.”

* * *

I sit in helpless silence while the witch moves about her cottage. She stirs the ever-bubbling iron pot of aromatic tisane at the hearth, crooning to it. She raps her knuckles on the windowpane, much as she rapped on my hooved foot, and hisses when the gulls flap black wings for her attention. She shuffles several times to Katte and presses her wrist or the

beating pulse at the base of her throat. Once, she sticks out her bent tongue and licks the damp skin at Katte's temple. She frowns, as though my friend's flavor displeases her, and goes about her pattering and muttering once more. *Not safe yet, I hear in her mumbling. Not quite certain to live, though I drew as much life as I dared without killing the other one.*

I grab her wrist as she passes. "Help her," I say, looking into her eyes, small and beady like those of her island's soot-colored gulls. "Don't give her to the brother she barely knows. He's a murderer. He killed his own father, and my uncle, and all their advisors and personal guards; he would've killed his sister already but for chance."

"No such thing as chance," says the witch. "Everything is fated, including the end of a war without end: Mekk and Toth, Toth and Mekk."

I grasp at her hand. It lies in mine, curled like a bird's foot at rest. "You wield magicks," I say, sliding from my seat to the floor. On my knees I'm nearly level with her eyes. "Call on the waves! Make the ocean's power crush the warlord's ship against the serpent tooth rocks until nothing's left but splintered wood."

"My magicks don't find power in hate! I couldn't do as you ask. Wouldn't. Besides, no Toth *and* no Mekk?" She shakes her head. "A void begs to be filled. Without protection, without

leadership, the people of both isles would be at the mercy of the next outland invader from beyond the water. Or the next. Or the next.”

She gently slides her hand from mine. “No, girl. The warlord’s son is coming for his sister. I doubt a healer witch of modest abilities could stop him. Not even if she wished to; not even if she could somehow harness the powerful magicks of the sea.”

I swallow the hundred pleas and threats and desperate bargaining promises rising in my throat, and try to damp the pain of fear smoldering deep beneath my ribs.

* * *

Morning spills golden and beautiful over the rim of the ocean, marred only by the square wool sails and serpentine silhouette of a Mekklan warship moored at the rocks. A black column of smoke still billows from the distant cliffs of Toth to one side of the rising sun; the humpbacked isle of Mekk hulks to the other. And between where I stand with the witch and the line where sea meets shore, the warlord’s son and his twelve armed men wait on the sand, black gulls perched among pebbles on the ground like watching, feathered stones.

We near them. Up close, the warlord’s son is everything I expected: dark and handsome and cruel. “Witch,” he says, his

voice grinding like pestle against mortar, “I’ve come for my baby sister.”

The witch cocks her head sideways, bird-fashion. “She’s no baby now,” she says. “You gave her to me for safekeeping eighteen years ago. And if she’s had a recent brush with death, it’s more your fault than mine.”

I step forward. “Katte doesn’t want to go with you,” I say. “She’s never been happy in Mekk: imprisoned in her own home, ignored by you, treated cruelly by your father. She told me everything in what letters she could bribe servants to send.”

My voice quivers, but the tremor is slight. Perhaps he’ll not notice. I bury my fists in the folds of my skirt and command my knees to cease their unwelcome shaking. “When she’s healed,” I tell him, “we’ll leave the narrow sea. We’ll leave and never come back.”

His attention shifts to me, burns into me like his alchemists’ fire burning into the cliffs of Toth. “The war is done. I want my sister.” His expression is fierce when he turns it back on the witch. “I’ve come as promised, the day after my father’s death. You said it was fate; you said my sister would go home with me.”

“I foretold she’d be here,” says the witch, “and she is. I also said she’d go home. But I didn’t say it would be with you.”

Behind the warlord's son, the faces of his twelve men are grim and watchful. Unlike my uncle's guards, these Mekklan warriors keep beards, some forked or braided with small bells and trinkets which glitter in the rising sun. The sea for now is smooth as glass. Shading my eyes, I peer out at the column of alchemical smoke rising where the Fortress of Toth stood a thousand years.

The silent Mekklans shuffle, grip the pommels of their thick swords as the witch moves to take their leader's hand. But she ignores them. She turns his hand in her little birdclaw fingers. "Miraculous," she murmurs, bringing his palm close against her face. "Utterly astounding, for them to be so changed, and for you to live after such power has surged through you. The pain of hate-driven magicks must be indescribable."

He tugs from her grasp. "I told you I'd find a way to make my hands right," he says. "At my father's order I endured endless experiments, concoctions, magick treatments carried out while he went off warring. *Eighteen years, witch!*"

"Poor, poor little thing," croons the witch, her voice gentle. "Poor little boy, without anyone to love but a newborn baby facing a misery he well understood." She reaches to stroke his cheek. He flinches.

The witch shrugs and lets her hand drop. “It would take more hate than the girl has in her bones to survive the magicks you endured, so I’m afraid she’ll remain as she is, and for the better.”

“But I told you I’d come for her.” His voice rises, grinding against its own pain.

The witch nods. “Yes, you said you’d come. Any child who’d scheme with a witch at his dead mother’s birthing bed to pass his sister off as his enemy’s heir, to switch her with the perfect baby his father would accept when he returned from warring...a boy of seven capable of *that* would surely grow to be a man capable of anything.”

I stand stunned, mute, trying to make sense of their words clamoring in my skull: *...newborn baby who shared his affliction...pass his sister off as his enemy’s heir...I told you I’d come for her.*

The witch continues: “What surprises me is that the boy who held his newborn sister like a fragile and precious thing, who bargained for her safekeeping and her very life, would become the man who arranged her father’s death on the eve of peace.”

“*Father,*” says the warlord’s son in a strangled voice. “If you’d known him, you’d know he intended no peace. A month, a year, a week perhaps before he’d lead his warships back over

the narrow sea. Do you know the experiments, the tortures he ordered his alchemists and surgeons and magickers to perform during his absences to rid me of my deformity? And on my mother, in hopes her second child would be born perfect? It killed her!”

The healer witch nods. “I was there,” she says.

I recall my vision in the tea leaves: *sometimes the future, sometimes the past....*

My voice is mine again, words dredged from deep in my throat. “You were midwife at Katte’s birth.”

It’s not a question; I saw it in the leaves. It’s simply a thread of the tapestry shifting into place, the entire picture beginning to form at last.

She nods, her back to me, her gullfeather hood bobbing. “And at yours of course,” she says. “You were born just days apart.”

I know this, have always known. Everyone in both our kingdoms knows of Katte and myself: two girlchildren birthed in warring royal houses, one on each side of the narrow sea.

The healer witch turns. I’m startled to see tears streaking her creased cheeks. “One girlchild born to the house of Toth, perfect in feature and limb and every aspect,” she says. “So unlike the other born days before, with still-soft, crooked little hooves and a dark glower to her open eyes. That one never

cried, though the misshape of her feet pained her terribly. She didn't cry even when I lifted her from the ruined body of her dead mother and placed her in the arms of her brother, a boy of seven who cradled her between his own misshapen hands."

Astounded, disbelieving, I glance at the warlord's son. He wears no glove or gauntlet. His hands curl to fists. His perfect, pink-skinned hands.

"Then Katte...." I trail off, comprehension still ebbing and flowing in unpredictable waves, pieces of a broken mirror not quite reflecting the image of the whole.

"Katte is the heir of Toth," says the healer witch, raising her voice for all the Mekklans to hear. "Switched at birth with the youngest child of Mekk because an old woman who'd sworn never to take sides in a foolish, overlong war couldn't deny a headstrong boy's tearful plea to save his newborn sister from the same tortures he'd endured."

Her gaze hones to me alone, piercing me to my core. I grow still and wait for the witch to utter aloud the truth already slicing through my heart.

"You, Sigra of Toth, are second in line to the house of Mekk."

* * *

The world spins and my knees buckle as I bite back choking, bitter laughter. Fighting to keep upright, I turn and

stagger once more up the rocky path to the witch's cottage. This time the weight across my shoulders is even heavier than the last—heavy enough to crush me into the salted earth, to grind me into dust.

Gulls caw and flap their inky wings as I fling open the cottage door. Inside, I drop into the chair by Katte's cot and rest my head beside hers on the pillow. One thought clashing against another inside my skull, it's some moments before I notice the absolute quality of my friend's stillness. No pulse beats at the base of her throat. Her chest doesn't rise or fall. When I reach for her hand, her skin is damp, and cold as sea-drenched sand.

"Katte!" I cry, leaping to my feet. I chafe her hands between mine, bend to listen for her heart, hear nothing.

I rush to the door, tug it wide. Black gulls shriek and flutter upward like puffs of noisy smoke. The witch and the warlord's son come running at my call, clouds of flapping birds parting to let them to pass.

The witch mutters over Katte's body. I see now the faintest movement of her chest, the slight jump at the base of her throat. "She's not dead," I say, wanting the words to make it true.

The witch's crooked mouth is taut. "Not yet, but soon."

An unfamiliar wetness stings my eyes. Tears at last, after all these years of none.

All else forgotten, I drop to my knees. That's twice I've knelt at the healer witch's feet, and both times for Katte's sake. "Save her," I beg. "Please. She's the only friend I've ever known."

"I can't, girl," she says in her odd speech. "Serious healing magicks suck the life energies from one to transfer to another. Very dangerous to borrow so much health from a living being."

"Take mine!" I say. I struggle to my feet, my hooves clattering loudly on the bare planks of the cottage floor. I glance at Katte's pale face. The bandage across her wound seeps blackish red.

The healer witch shakes her head. "I did take from you," she says. "Last night. More than was safe."

The incredible heat, the powerful flashes of light, my loss of consciousness: my life energy, flowing into Katte, keeping her from death. "Take a little more," I plead. "Just enough to keep her alive."

"No. It's not a spigot with a tap. Once opened, the magick can release a trickle or a deluge. At its worst, you might as well try to turn off a waterfall. It's fortunate I didn't lose you both altogether."

I'd nearly forgotten the warlord's son, but now he speaks. "My men," he says, his voice the same gruff gravel as before. "Their loyalty is absolute; they'll risk their lives at my sister's behest. They're sworn to me...to us." His gaze shifts from the witch to me. "My sister is my only heir."

I don't comprehend the sister he speaks of is me until he meets my stare. Not Katte. Me.

The healer witch shakes her head. "Won't do," she says. "Duty is good and well, but it's not the base ingredient of healing magicks, the pivotal component which gives life, which makes life flow from one being to another."

What, then? I want to shout. *What magick power do you need to make my friend live?*

The warlord's son echoes my thought with words. "What's the base ingredient of healing magicks?" he asks.

"Love," says the witch.

Katte's body shudders, and I feel mine tremble in reply.

"I'll do it," I say.

The witch studies me, tilts her head and narrows her eyes. "It might work. She might live, though you might die."

I look at Katte on the narrow cot. Her pale cheeks glisten with a sheen of sweat, her hair swirls damply across her brow. I remember all those years of loneliness and loathing, with her smuggled letters like a rope cast to a drowning man.

I shift my gaze to the healer witch. “For her sake, I’ll risk death.”

The warlord’s son has never once glanced at Katte. Even now he doesn’t look at the witch, nor at his men who have begun to gather in the open doorway. His attention bores into me, past my skin, my flesh, the hollow middle of my self.

“No,” he says. “I will. For yours.”

* * *

And so it comes to this: the murderer of my uncle, the destroyer of the land of my childhood—*my brother*—for my sake removes his armor and his sword and lies beside my only friend on the stone floor of the witch’s hut. To save me from my love for her.

But no: it’s not his love for *me*. His powerful emotions are for some sister of his imagination; a sister not of reality but of private longings and childhood shame, and a thousand daydreams in which he was beloved in return by someone somewhere—if not by his cruel father or dead mother, then by the sister he saved as a child too small to save himself.

I’d thought the healing magicks powerful before, but now, watching the witch’s body go rigid as the white hot energies consume her from the inside, devouring her blood and muscle so she seems to shrink, eaten by the very force which will bring Katte back.... I realize what I witnessed before, what I felt as I

offered myself unknowing, was but a whisper of the healing power. Seeing my brother's body shrivel and darken, breathing the crisp scorched smell of hair and sweat and blood as he gives his life to prevent me from spending mine, I understand that the force drained from me was to this as the air-strokes of a moth's wings are to a raging tempest.

It's difficult to conceive of the warlord's son as a man capable of love. To think he loves me, who sees him still as my people's greatest enemy, is almost unbearable. And yet he risks sacrificing himself for the newborn sister he saved eighteen years ago; he has had no one else and so loves still that tiny baby, and with inconceivable fierceness. Me, he hardly knows any better than the true Toth heir he avoided all her life—a girl who didn't know even the secret of his hands.

This time I'm helpless, a mere bystander while the healer witch stands bowed with agony, making of herself a bridge between one life force and the next. The deluge open, the magicks flow; life energies spark like lightning, jumping, forking, rushing from the warlord's son into Katte, tempered by the witch. Afraid to help, afraid to touch, afraid almost to breathe, I watch Katte's chest rise and fall where before it had been still, her cheeks flush with color where there had been none, her eyelids flutter open as a heaving breath leaves my brother in a stuttering rush of air.

No blinding flash, no thunderclap marks the passing of one life or the return of another; the sparking lights and the pounding of my own blood in my ears simply fade to calm and silence.

The witch, released, staggers to the hearth and crumples, a ball of feathers and matted hair. I rush to her but she waves me away. “Too much,” she rasps, her hoarse voice scratchy like a gull’s caw, fading as she slides into exhausted sleep. “Too much. Couldn’t stop. He’s gone....”

She’s right. Across the room lies the burnt husk that was once my brother. His unmoving figure seems to occupy only half the space it had before, the presence and vigor drained from him like wine siphoned from an oaken cask. His open staring eyes lie sunken in the hollows of his skull, his face a shriveled rictus.

My head and heart rage each against the other, weighing the thousands of lives my brother took against the single one he saved—no, two lives: mine, and now Katte’s.

Katte rises, gripping the edge of her deathbed. Her features glow with health, her eyes bright, her lips red, her beauty more perfect and pronounced than ever. “Sigra?” she says, standing straight, holding out her arms. With tears welling in my eyes for the second time that day, I stumble into her embrace.

Letting go of Katte, I draw back, reach past her to tug the linen sheet from the bed and stoop to drape it across the warlord's son—my brother—to cover his splayed limbs, his now-hollow chest, his gaunt face.

The sound of metal sliding across metal freezes my blood as I stand and turn. The open doorway frames the faces of the Mekklan warriors, their polished leathers gleaming dully in the cottage gloom, their beards and trinkets and strange Mekklan scents overwhelming among the witch's herbs and linens and gullfeathers.

The metal scraping had been the sound of the foremost warrior sliding his sword from its sheath. My stomach churns with icewater even as fearful laughter bubbles in my chest. Will these strange, brutal men blame me for their leader's death? Will they blame Katte? The witch?

My neck tingles, preparing to be slit.

The man steps forward, all iron and leather and jangle. I move without thinking, shifting to stand in front of Katte. On the floor near my hooves I feel keenly the presence of the shrouded form of the dead heir of Mekk. Heat rises from the body: the heat of life and healing and love and death.

The warrior lifts his sword and my heart skips. "Warlord's daughter," he calls out, his voice as steely as the weapon slicing the air in a descending arc toward me. But he drops into a

kneel, and my heart resumes its beat when I see the sword he thrusts in my direction is aimed hilt-first. He meets my eyes briefly before bowing his head, his expression inexorable, inscrutable in the manner of his people. “Long live the heir to Mekk,” he says.

The eleven men behind him ripple, a wave of creaking leather and tarnished tinkling bells as they sink to their knees. *Long live the warlord’s daughter*, they rumble. *Long live the heir to Mekk*.

Mekk. A place I’ve never seen, never known, with a ruler and a history and a people I’ve been taught all my life to loathe and fear. All but one: Katte, a lonely outsider like myself, whose words of love sent from an enemy land across a narrow sea have kept me sane.

No, not from an enemy land. Those words may have come from the sister of my heart, but also from my true home; from a home I’ve not seen since birth—a home I now must learn to love and rule. Mekk.

* * *

This is how I choose to remember it....

My brother is alive and well. He’s strong, perhaps stronger than he was in life, and good—certainly better than the man who killed thousands and left an entire realm leaderless, with its counselors and champions and regent dead under the pile of

smoking rubble where once the mighty fortress of Toth stood for a thousand years.

And had that brother grown to be the man he might've been, the man he could've been, and I the sister by his side, what then? Might Toth still stand? Might it even now be united in friendship with the realm across the narrow sea?

Would that I could meet that man; would that I could know him, and be proud to call him brother.

But best of all is the childhood I construct for us, build for us like a castle in the sand on shore, as any child might. He's a dark-eyed boy of nine years old, now ten, now twelve; and I a little girl of two, of three, of five. This brother is also strong and good, his fused hand like a lump of hardened clay when he places it in mine and we run together on the beach, splashing, laughing—not the familiar bitter laughter I know so well, but the happy, singsong laughter of playing children....

This is merely how I *choose* to remember it, as I raise a hand to shield my eyes and peer out toward the ruined cliffs of Toth from the walls of Mekk; merely how I *indulge* in remembering it as Katte and I walk along the ancient salt-worn stones lapped by the same waters I've known all my life, though from the other side of the narrow sea.

And in my imaginings, it is so.

Copyright © 2011 Camille Alexa

[Read Comments on this Story](#) in the *BCS* Forums

When not on ten wooded acres near Austin, Texas, Camille Alexa lives in an Edwardian home in Portland, Oregon with an assortment of broken fossils, dried hops flowers, twisted willow branches, and other very pretty dead things. Her first book, Push of the Sky, received a starred review in Publishers Weekly and was a finalist for the 2010 Endeavour Award for outstanding speculative fiction by a Pacific Northwest author. Find more information and an updated bibliography at camillealexa.com.

Support *BCS*

BCS on 

BCS on 

[Read more Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#)

COVER ART

“Into the Unknown,” by Kerem Beyit



Kerem Beyit is a freelance artist born in Ankara, Turkey. He started drawing in his early childhood with the influence of comic books, and he trained himself from great fantasy artists like Frank Frazetta and Gerald Brom. He has won Master and Excellence Awards from Exposé 7, and his artwork has been used for covers of European editions of fantasy novels by Tad Williams and George R.R. Martin. Visit his website and gallery at www.theartofkerembeyit.com.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1046

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

Copyright © 2011 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.