



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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LETTERS OF FIRE

by Margaret Ronald

They burned his master's body at dawn. It was a far graver ceremony than Marten had expected: none of the howling mobs that Jana had predicted, no pointed mutilation of the body, not even a grand speech from the Bull lamenting the necessity of this death. Marten picked his way through the churned-up mud that surrounded the stone marker—another surprise; he'd expected a pauper's grave at best. He leaned in as if to speak through the stone, then, as the bulky sack on his shoulder shifted, straightened up. "I'm glad you're dead," he said, louder than the whisper he'd intended. "I'm glad."

It was worse than disloyal to say it; it was shortsighted, forgetting the good side of his master to curse the bad. "I saved the books," he added, as if he could apologize to the good memories alone. "Couldn't save the elixir. Jana..." He paused, hearing yet again the endless admonishments to stay away from the distillation equipment and if you can't be careful then let Jana handle it!

Which she had, and so proved herself the better apprentice. In the end she'd escaped with the distillation

equipment—saving him in the process, since the Bull’s men were so startled by her sudden disappearance that they didn’t look twice at the little cupboard where Marten had taken refuge.

Overlooked, again. Even if it was to his advantage, he couldn’t help the bitter pulse at the back of his throat. Once again, the world had ended around him, and this time there would be no one to pick him up out of the wreckage.

He tugged the sack of books into place, automatically adjusting the flap so that the light rain wouldn’t soak through as it already had his clothes. “I’m glad it’s over,” he went on, raising his voice. “You were right, I was a rotten apprentice, but you were a rotten master.”

The letters of his master’s name flickered, then darkened further as the shadow behind him rose up. He yelped and spun around, the familiar apologies leaping to his lips even though he knew his master was dead, dead and burned.

The man at the far end of the grave was as tall as his master but leaner, and—worse—he wore a dull red uniform marked with the Bull’s insignia. *I should have kept my voice low, should have come after midnight, should have escaped like Jana.* He took another step back and tripped over the stone marker, dragging the sack around as he fell.

The soldier caught the sack and used it to pull Marten upright. “Your master?” he rumbled, his voice like the groan of the war machines he no doubt piloted. “I didn’t know Cathacaris had an apprentice.”

“He—I—” Marten tried to yank the books away, but the soldier held them fast.

Scarred hands pried back the flap, taking the same care Marten had to keep the rain out. “These are Cathacaris’ books?”

“No,” Marten said. “They’re mine.”

That earned him a silent, thoughtful gaze from the soldier. The man was as unemotional as the great engines that now surrounded the city. “By rights,” he said, scratching at his short gray beard, “you should be executed and burned.”

Marten took a deep breath, seeing in his mind’s eye the pyre, the silently watching citizens. “Fine,” he said, letting out a long breath. “Burn me, then. But leave the books alone.”

The man blinked, gazed at him in silence a moment, then slung the bag over his shoulder. “Come on.”

“What—” Marten stumbled back, but too late; the soldier had him by the arm, nearly dragging him off his feet.

The Bull’s man marched him out of the graveyard, past the Golden Square, past the remnants of the palace, all the way to the Lilygreen Slums, where the Bull’s men had set up their

camp. Mechanical towers loomed from either side of the streets, some with Lilygreen children playing on them, heedless of the power behind the great gun barrels. Marten stared as they passed—he had heard the tread of the machines, even seen them from a distance, but never up close. Here they were less the implacable monsters Jana had described; more haphazard, pieces of scrap held in place with tarnishing bands of brass; something more to marvel at than fear.

But then, he wasn't seeing them in action. What had they looked like when they shot his master out of the sky? What were they when arrayed against a single man—a man infused with the elixir, a man capable of flight and destruction and all the things his master had accomplished, but still only one man?

More men in red bearing the insignia of a crowned bull stood at attention, saluting the soldier as they passed. A Lilygreen toddler imitated the salute gravely.

"Please," Marten managed, "I'll let the Bull kill me in person if that's what it takes, just don't burn the books, please." *Craven*, Jana's voice said in the back of his head, and he flinched.

"Quiet." The Bull's man turned a corner, approaching the plaza that marked the edge of Lilygreen, and the edge of the city proper, if it came to that. Two more machines flanked a

still-smoking hole in the city wall, hunched over as if regretting the damage they'd done. A separate line of tents stood before them, too high and unwieldy to match the other soldiers' barracks. Here the soldier stopped and ran one hand through his hair, smoothing it to some form of neatness. "Gerda!" he called. "Are you awake?"

For answer, a dull boom shook the closest tent. Something inside clattered to the ground, rocking back and forth with a noise like a dropped tin plate. A gloved hand dragged back the tent flap to reveal a faceless black thing with a single bar of reflected red across its eyes. Marten gave a startled cry and tried to pull free. *He's not even going to bother with the Bull, he's going to feed me straight to the machines—*

The creature raised a hand to its face and flipped it back—a mask, he realized, a mask with a glass strip instead of eyes. The heavy-jawed, scarred woman underneath gave him a puzzled glance, then turned her gaze to the Bull's soldier. "Fittings on the Tallstrider unit are busted. It won't be ready to travel for another two weeks at the very least. Bright side is, that'll be enough time to set up the communal defense here, so it's not like we're in a rush."

"I'll pass it along." He pushed Marten forward. "I've got a recruit for you."

“*What?*” Marten stared at him, unable to believe he’d heard correctly.

Gerda ignored him. “I thought we were just training the locals. Not actively recruiting.”

“This is different. He’s Cathacaris’ apprentice.”

At that she looked up, searching the soldier’s face. “Roon, you’re treading a dangerous line.”

“Too much has been lost, Gerda.”

“No!” Marten jerked away, and this time Roon let him go. “I can’t—I’m not a soldier, and I’m certainly not one of *your* soldiers!” He might not have any loyalty to his home left—his master had beaten that out of him, claiming that an alchemage owed fealty only to his knowledge—but to be put on the front lines, cannon fodder for the war machines—

“It’s us or the pyre, and you’re too young for that.” Gerda paused. “I take that back. We’ve fought plenty of younger alchemages, but it still doesn’t sit well with me when they go down.”

“I’d rather not see him go the same way,” Roon said, still speaking to Gerda rather than Marten. “Too much has been lost,” he repeated, and held out the books as if they were made of spun glass.

“On that we’ll agree.” She stripped off her gloves, took the books, and offered a hand to Marten. “Welcome to the Wrights’ Division, apprentice. You’re safe with us.”

Marten hesitated. This life, ground under the heel of the Bull’s soldiery, or the pyre... but he was a coward, and the books, the books.... He sagged and took Gerda’s hand, nodding. *Just till I can escape.*

Roon nodded, then quickly planted a kiss on her smoke-stained cheek before turning and walking back into the rain. Marten stared after him, then flinched as Gerda clapped his shoulder. “Don’t cower, lad; you’re too tall for it. Come on; you can have the center cot.”

* * *

A blare from a trumpet woke him at dawn, and Marten scrambled to his feet, schooling his body to absolute stillness and waiting for the first words from his master, the ones that would indicate whether today would be bearable or one of the *other* days.

It took him a moment to remember that his master was dead and there would be no more *other* days. Not now, nor ever again. The thought left him strangely light, and he stared at the end of the tent, the world—the Bull’s camp—coming into focus around him.

Around him, the other cots gave up their inhabitants, Gerda among them. A short girl with her hair in stubby brown pigtails regarded him with puzzled fascination. “Have we got a new one already?”

“Looks like he’s mastered reveille,” a balding man in a far cot muttered. “Good lad, just so long as you don’t overdo it. Where’s he from? Fourteenth div?”

Marten drew breath, ready to lie, apologize, anything to avoid the blow that must be coming, but Gerda’s hand clamped down on his shoulder. “He’s a local,” she said, in the same casual tone she’d used the night before. “He’ll have time to go through basic later; for now he’s taking on Wright duties.” The balding man made a rude noise, but the look he gave Marten was friendly enough.

“You’ll love it here,” the girl said, pulling on a jacket that Marten slowly recognized as a brown version of the Bull’s red uniforms. “Wait—he’s not going to be piloting Tallstrider, is he? That’s my job!”

“If he were, Vrit, then you’d just have to deal with it.” She handed Marten a stack of brown clothes and pretended not to notice when he cringed away at the sudden movement. “Go on and change.”

Over breakfast—hard biscuit and limewater, out in the plaza with the rest of the Bull’s troops—Gerda brought him a

little to one side and set the stack of books in front of him. “I looked at these last night. Alchemage stuff. Your master’s?”

“No. Mine,” he said, talking more to his biscuit than to her. Eye contact was one of the things that could set his master off—or lack of it, some days, and he never knew which day it was till the first blow fell. He’d only really been comfortable meeting Jana’s eyes, because she’d been through the same.

“*Your work?*”

He nodded and swallowed a dry hulk of biscuit. “It’s not like they matter,” he managed in a burst of defiance that surprised even himself. “There’s no one in five countries who can use them.”

That was all due to the Bull. Every country he conquered had been given one unchangeable ultimatum: all alchemages were to be executed. His master had railed against the purge, calling it one moment the act of a desperate man, a petty king’s last lash, and the next the scourge of true knowledge. *You may be all that’s left, my apprentices, and therefore you must uphold the tradition of our magic. We are here to write our names on the world in letters of fire. Anything less is a betrayal of all we are.*

“Maybe not,” Gerda said slowly. “I sure as hell can’t make sense out of the first half. Roon is right about so much being lost; without the alchemages to translate, most of their records

are undecipherable. But this,” she opened the top book to the later pages, “this looks like an experiment log.”

Marten gazed at the cramped columns of numbers, the rudimentary sketches, the marginal notes, all in his own handwriting. His master had mocked him for it, pointing him instead toward the theories that filled the first half of the book, the philosophy of speiric power. *Letters of grease pencil? How like you, Marten. Now recite your lesson again, or you know what will happen.* And Jana had looked on, sorrowful and patient.

He really hoped she'd gotten away.

“I wrote those parts,” he said finally, crumbling the last of the biscuit into powder. “I thought if I had some idea about what the elixir did, if I knew what effect it had, I'd be able to control it when the time came.” *Control*, his master had said, *control is the essence of the true alchemage.*

“Repeatable experiments,” Gerda mused. “I can appreciate that.” She took a long sip of her limewater, making the face that all of the Bull's soldiers did when drinking the stuff. None of them had a taste for sour food, it seemed. “Well, I wasn't sure what good you'll be to us in the Wrights, but at least we're working with the same stuff.”

Marten looked up, then away, unsure what she meant.

“You didn’t know? The raw material you use to make your ‘elixir’—that’s thaumic ore. It’s what we use to power the automatons. Technically, we’re doing the same thing you do, only we’re using machines instead of minds, and so the outcome’s more predictable. And machines are less likely to go crazy on you.”

“Or turn a house inside out,” he said, thinking of the times his master lost his temper while using the elixir—the buildings reduced to ash, the people picked up and dropped from twenty feet up. And then there were the Melay Hills, and the village of Highfont....

“Exactly. We may not have all the powers the alchemages did, but we’re a lot more dependable. And that, it turns out, is what wins the war.” She hesitated, as if remembering who she was talking to, but let the point stand. “So we might have some use for you. Just have to figure out what.”

“Well,” he said, trying to gauge whether she’d cuff him, “you’re probably not going to feed me to your war machines—”

Gerda burst out laughing. “Do people really say that?”

“No.” He paused, thinking of Jana. “Mostly not.”

“Good God, lad, no wonder you’ve been pissing your boots. No, we’re not feeding you to anything. Though you could do with some feeding, as skinny as a heron you are,” she added, and snagged a second biscuit from a passing Wright. “But

we've got no call for talk about 'elixir,' 'grand speiric theory,' or even 'magic,' come to that. It's ore distillation, practical thaumics, and motile impetus, or just making the damn things move if you're in a hurry. Got it?"

He was silent a moment. *Just a new language to learn. And my master always said I was good with languages... the one thing I was better at than Jana. Not that it mattered.* And they couldn't keep the books away from him forever. All he had to do was stay hidden until he could flee.

It occurred to him that staying with the army might not be as bad as the days with his master. He quashed the thought not nearly fast enough. "I think so."

"Right." She unrolled a length of padded cloth. "Starting from basics, then. *This is a wrench.*"

* * *

The days were not bad, on the whole, not for someone as used to his master's routine as he'd been. True to his impression, there were no more *other* days, now with his master gone. That didn't make it easy. For now—and, as far as he could tell, for the foreseeable future—he was excused from the weapons drill by Roon's order, but the rest of the Wrights' Division had their own drills, joining the others for a hundred laps around the square (even when one of the war machines had settled in their path, providing an obstacle to be climbed,

until one of the Wrights complained, and then just something to detour around) and keeping to their schedule. Roon even came to check on him several times, sometimes bringing an extra ration or a spare flask of the cold tea the Bull's soldiers preferred to limewater.

There was no sign of the army's leader, the king, the conqueror Bull seeking to eradicate all traces of Marten's master. Which meant Jana might still be free. So he hoped.

As for his own freedom, there didn't seem to be much chance to get away—for all that the Wrights treated him well, this was an army. The few times he did plan to leave, Gerda had some reason to keep the books with her for the day.

But for all that, none of the Wrights seemed to suspect that he was an alchemage's apprentice. They treated him as they might any new recruit. They were not what he'd expected when he imagined the faceless soldiers of the Bull: there was Leith, the bald man who piloted the squat treaded automaton called Badger (even though it looked more like a toad) and who was therefore in charge of its care, and Barre, his younger brother, who kept track of the ore and monitored which machines used what. Kutla complained incessantly about the poor fittings, Tannz had been called up in front of Gerda twice in the last week for running a rigged dice game against the locals (that had been a shock, to realize he was thinking of his former

countrymen as “the locals”), and the oldest, Cena, decided Marten needed socks and added some to her incessant knitting.

And there was Vrit, the youngest at barely fourteen, whose enthusiasm for piloting the Tallstrider machine was almost as disturbing as her age. It was as far from Badger’s trundling armory as it was possible to get: six long, jointed legs rose to a single turret, from which Vrit aimed a gun nearly as wide around as her waist and chattered amiably about combat capabilities on varying terrain.

They accepted him. And, to his dismay, he came close to accepting them. What comfort was here was not the comfort of shared pain that had been between him and Jana, but something else entirely.

He wasn’t sure if he liked it. But he was getting better at it, and the driving urge to escape faded a little, buried under long hours of training body and mind.

Gerda, perhaps because she was the only one who knew his secret, took on his training personally. The mechanics of it—metal and brass, leather fittings that gave out far too easily but needed the flexibility—were like the distillation equipment writ large, and Marten approached them with the same dread. But nothing shattered under his touch here, even if he couldn’t quite grasp the purpose of anything.

For the better part of two weeks, he muddled through, obediently using the tools Gerda gave him in the way she directed, not quite understanding how what he did contributed to the great machines. Until one morning, when he held the tools as Gerda finished up repairs on the fittings that held Badger's armor plates together. She unscrewed a panel set just underneath Badger's long gun, and the arrangement of gears and cables suddenly struck a spark off of his memory.

"Gerda," he said, handing her a five-eighths Beaton (another part of the language he was slowly learning), "this part of the machine—this is what makes it walk, right?"

"You're catching on." Gerda twisted a gear into place, then squinted at it. "You couldn't build something like this using coal for power. Well, you could, but it wouldn't move—the weight of coal you'd need to run it would be crippling." She scratched at her scar. "That's why there are so few Wrights, compared to your basic Terranoctan engineer. Thaumatic engineering isn't the same as basic engineering at all. It's confusing."

"No," he said, tracing the cable from the—engine—to the cannon and back, remembering his master's drawings, the illustration of speiric theory. "No, it makes perfect sense."

Gerda flicked a glance at him. "Really, now?"

“Yes. It’s basic theory—the speiric power is inverted from compulsion to repulsion and thus provides both combustion and motion, but instead of a conscious control you’ve got the regulator *here*.” The words—his master’s words, the jargon of a life lived in theory—felt both familiar and strange in his mouth. “I’m not sure how that converts, given that the directive force is inanimate rather than mentally focused, but at the very least it explains how they’re capable of altering course so smoothly. And the preservation impulse, that’s a given after a certain amount of speiric infusion....”

Abruptly he realized Gerda was watching him, the five-eighths Beaton dangling from her hand. “Maybe you are better suited for this division than I’d thought,” she said, a crooked grin rising. “Now give me a hand with this.”

After dinner—this time hesitantly joining in the conversation about “practical thaumics”—he begged one of the books from Gerda and returned to his cot. Yes, there was his master’s description of how one could use the power given by the elixir to move objects without touching them, the “ethereal force” that wasn’t so different from Gerda’s “motile impetus.” He turned the page, one world slowly layering over the other.

“What are you reading?” Vrit bounced on the cot next to him.

“My master’s books,” he said without thinking, then paused.

She leaned over his shoulder like a kitten seeking attention. “What happened here?” she asked, pointing to the torn paper where pages had been ripped out. “Someone wanted to keep secrets?”

Marten swallowed. “Not quite,” he said. Vrit glanced at him, then dropped to the ground in front of him and waited, eyes wide, like a storyteller’s audience. “I was supposed to memorize the whole book,” he went on, not quite sure why he was telling her this. “Only I didn’t. Not well enough, anyway. I couldn’t recite it on cue, so my master, he...”

If you can’t be bothered to keep them in your head, maybe you’ll keep them in your gut.

“He tore out the pages and made me eat them,” Marten finished, closing the book and looking away from Vrit. “He didn’t do it to be cruel. It was just... just one of his days.” He glanced at Vrit and tried to smile. “And it might have worked, after all; I can still remember the pages.” They’d been on the theory of flight, his master’s specialty—although he’d refused to call it that, always correcting Marten. *Repulsion of the earth, not flight, can’t you keep that in your empty skull?*

Vrit was silent a long moment. “Couldn’t you go to your parents? Mine told me that if anything went wrong, to come

back home. That was before Gerda said it was safer for me to join the Wrights than run around loose, but you know what I mean.”

“Can’t. My master was the only family I had.” He’d been chosen out of the wreckage of the Melay Hills disaster, the alchemagical battle that had turned Highfont into glass. If he tried, he could just barely remember the explosions, the sound of trees catching fire one after another... but what he mostly remembered was his master, kinder in those days, taking him into his home, where another child—this one from the Lilygreen slums—had been senior by only a few months. “But that’s over now.”

He tried to remember his master, the quiet evenings spent in study, the low voice instructing him and Jana in what it was to be an alchemage, how every person blessed enough to craft and use the elixir had a duty to write their names on the world. But instead, all that came to mind were the *other* days, the irrational days, the days with smashed equipment and rages that had nothing to do with the elixir (or, if they did, came from years of use rather than one dose), the taste of ink in his mouth and the need to stay still, quiet, overlooked.

“Will you come up in Tallstrider with me?” Vrit smiled hesitantly at him. “I mean, once we get it working? Tallstrider always makes me feel better.”

Marten caught his breath and stared at her, startled out of his memories. *This girl has fought in two campaigns*, he told himself, staring at her innocent face. *She might even have fired the shot that downed my master. But she feels better at the helm of an engine of destruction.*

If that was normal among the Wrights—if this casual acceptance of bloodshed was what resulted from time with them—then he had to get away.

“Thank you,” he said finally, swallowing down his first response. “I think I’d like that.”

Vrit blinked, turned pink, and nodded before running off. He closed the book, his hands not quite shaking.

* * *

The next morning orders came for the army to move out—to go back to the Bull’s home country, now that the treaties had been signed and the mutual defense agreed on and every alchemage executed. Marten packed up his kit with the rest, watching for the patterns, for a chance to leave.

Two days on the road convinced him that there would be no better time. The Wrights were too busy either piloting or monitoring the machines (except for Vrit, who romped around in Tallstrider like some huge and deadly wind-up toy), and the other soldiers had their hands full following each other. Roon, too, seemed preoccupied with something else and only stopped

by to see Gerda, their liaison an open secret among the Wrights.

On the third day, as they passed the Melay Hills and the patchwork of glass from that long-ago battle, Marten snuck into the Wrights' supply wagon. Roon had come to visit Gerda, this time looking tired and worn, and the two of them walked alongside, talking quietly together. It was easy enough to steal the books, disguising them with a small crate of tools, and bring the lot over to Vrit, who for a change was on foot. "Hey," he said, setting down the crate and slinging the bag of books over his shoulder. "You said something about taking me up in Tallstrider?"

Vrit's face lit up. "Sure! Come on!" She scrambled up one of the automaton's six long legs and let down a ladder. "Leith, I'm going to test Tallstrider's soft-terrain gait, okay?" she called, and Leith nodded from his position behind Badger's long-barrel gun.

Marten followed her up into a tiny steering chamber, open at the top and barely large enough to hold two people, just above the rotating gunnery. Vrit settled in, pointing out the different armaments as if they were actors in a show. "Which way?" she asked finally. "That way looks interesting."

That way was Highfont, and the Melay Hills. "No," he said. "How about the other direction—behind that ridge?"

“Sure!” She moved a series of levers, and the great machine rocked forward, moving step by slow step off the road toward the little fingerling lakes that riddled this part of the border. Marten held on to the tiny steering chamber and watched as the column of the army receded.

“You know,” Vrit said after a while, watching her path, “I’m really glad you’re in the Wrights. I mean, I thought you’d be a washout, but you got the theory well, and Gerda says you could be great. And it’s nice to have someone closer to my age. If you could only get the practice—”

Marten glanced back. Yes, they were well out of sight of the army, hidden behind a narrow but steep ridge, and ahead of him the landscape disintegrated into the patchwork terrain of his first home. This would do. He shook out his black coat and slid one arm into it, then the other. “Vrit, can you stop here?”

“What? Sure, I—” She stopped, looking over her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

Marten straightened the apprentice’s coat. It didn’t quite fit over the uniform, but it hid enough, and it felt like... well, like putting on a costume. “I’m leaving,” he said, speaking quickly to keep from thinking too hard about that. “I’m sorry, but this isn’t my place.”

She turned to face him, disbelieving, very much the child she'd once been. "You're deserting?"

"It's not deserting if you didn't have a choice about joining!"

"Says you." But she didn't turn the helm back toward the main army. "I thought you liked it here with us," she muttered, obviously trying very hard to keep it from being a whine. "You could have been good with the Wrights."

I'm not a Wright, he wanted to say, but that drew the next question: he wasn't an apprentice, he wasn't an Wright, so what was he?

Overlooked. Or at least he could hope for it.

"I mean, I know we're all kind of strange—Barre talks more to Badger than to real people, and Cena gets panicked if she does things out of order, and Gerda's okay only because she's been here from the start, and I'm, I'm a little funny about Tallstrider—but that shouldn't matter! You could have been good, Marten!"

"I'm sorry," he said again, and Vrit just shook her head. He climbed out of the steering chamber and slid down Tallstrider's leg to the ground, then turned his back on the automaton and started walking.

When the first blast came, he ducked and flung himself to the ground, expecting a second shell to burst over him. But it

hadn't been directed at him—Vrit hadn't fired, only walked the other way. He stared after the retreating automaton, then at the ridge as a gout of smoke rose up beyond it, riddled with gold sparks. An accident? But no, that hadn't sounded like munitions. It had sounded... familiar.

He squinted at the smoke, and sure enough, it had the telltale flare of blue at its edges. *Repeat the lesson, Marten: combustion created through speiric usage, without fuel, results in the indigo spectrum, repeat it damn you!*

To his right, Tallstrider was moving as quickly as possible over the soft ground, which wasn't very fast. He scrambled up the ridge instead, half believing he was imagining it.

The army was no longer the orderly procession he'd left. A wall of flame barred the way of the troops at the head of the column, keeping them from the Wrights' Division in the rear. Soldiers ran for cover or for the war machines, but new fire blossomed where they paused, chasing them away from safety.

And in the center of it, Jana stood, black coat flapping in a breeze that surrounded her alone.

At the far end of the column, the Bull's royal carriage remained untouched, surrounded by its guards. The explosions had gone up from the automata instead. Two of the machines lay broken in a jagged pit as wide as the road, and a third—Badger—spun uselessly in the mud, but her attention wasn't

there. It was on the Wrights' wagon, instead, and the cluster of soldiers around it.

Marten began to run, stumbling down the side of the hill, passing Tallstrider as it floundered on the marshy ground, its jointed legs clawing for purchase in the mud. "Get under cover," he called as he passed, and Vrit peered over the edge. "Trust me, just stay out of her way and you'll be fine!"

Vrit stared at him in mixed anger and disbelief, but he turned before she could speak. "Jana!" he called, running across the wrecked road. "Jana!"

She didn't hear him, not right away. Instead, she changed her stance, took second position (*for the focusing of your mind*, his master's voice whispered in his ears, *not like you'd know anything about that, boy*), and the Wrights' wagon exploded. Burning scrap rained down around her, and two figures—Gerda and Roon—scrambled out of the wreckage, only to collapse a few steps away. Roon's left arm was a mass of blood and the forge hammer in his right too heavy to swing one-handed, but he rose to stand in front of Gerda, facing Jana like a child facing an avalanche. Jana advanced on him, her eyes brilliant and furious.

Without quite thinking, Marten ran between them. "Jana, wait! Here I am!"

The air around her stank of the peeled-willow scent of elixir, just different enough from the thaumic distillation that he wanted to sneeze. Too late, he realized he was still wearing the Bull's uniform, under the black coat of his apprenticeship. But she blinked, focusing on him. "Marten?"

"Yes!" He laughed, giddy with relief. "Jana, I knew you'd make it—I didn't ever think—Jana, you came back for me!"

Jana hesitated, and for a moment he saw a very familiar expression—the same long-suffering look she would give him when the equipment broke *again* or when he'd botch the lesson *again*. Sympathy for him, for the boy who could never quite intuitively grasp what she and their master knew, for the charity case left over from Highfont. The reminder of what she could have been, had their master not taken her in.

"You didn't, did you," he said, the relief transmuting to bitterness. "You didn't come back for me." But she was alive, and they were both here. That had to be enough, right?

"I didn't," she agreed, and the momentary shame on her face burned away as she looked past him, her mood shifting as quickly as their master's ever had. "I came for *him*. For the Bull."

Marten glanced over his shoulder at Roon, and the little details finally fell into place. No wonder Gerda hadn't disagreed with Roon's orders; no wonder Marten's presence

had gone unquestioned, and the troops hadn't looked further for an apprentice. Roon—the Bull—didn't take his eyes off Jana, but he acknowledged Marten with a nod.

Marten stared at him, trying to reconcile this weary, silent man with the ruthless conqueror who had subjugated five countries, who had given each ruler one chance at the treaties and if that was refused had executed them and moved on to the next in line, who had ordered every alchemage slaughtered....

No. Not every one.

The last alchemage smiled at him, from murderous to friendly in a blink. "But you *are* here, Marten, and oh, it's good to see you. You and I are all that's left. We can take it all back—you'll finally write your name on the world!"

Gerda still hadn't moved, and in memory he tasted limewater and heard reveille. "They're leaving," he said quietly, then turned back to Jana. "Jana, they're leaving. We can just let them go—"

"Let them go?" She shifted position—second to first—and he ducked away from the ripple of flame that surrounded her. "Let the Bull go? He killed our master!"

"And our master killed my family," Marten said. "And many others. Yours, maybe—you never said." She looked away, perhaps back toward the city and Lilygreen. "We have to let it end, Jana."

The wind around her flattened, throwing up dust, and around them Marten heard the clatter of soldiers readying their rifles. But she was still too strong—maybe not as strong as their master had been, but strong enough to shatter a circle of firearms.

She raised her chin. “Don’t you have any pride? You can’t leave our master unspoken for. You can’t just ignore all we learned, you can’t go back to being a useless, powerless lump —”

“You remember our master!” Marten cried. “He was just as bad to you. You remember, please say you remember.” She hesitated, and Marten took a step forward. “And you—you took the elixir yourself—”

Jana jerked back, the air around her going cold and salty. “I have it under control, Marten.”

He gazed at the shattered road, the burning wagons, Gerda lying in Roon’s shadow and the broken automatons fumbling at the edges of the crater. Even Tallstrider seemed crippled as it lurched past the ridge, mud gumming its legs up to the second joint, Vrit’s swearing a piccolo note above the grinding of its gears. *Control is the essence of the true alchemage*, his master had said. *Everything I have done, I have done on purpose*. “If that’s true,” he said slowly, “then that’s another reason not to go with you.”

Jana's eyes narrowed, and she shifted, taking a stance he didn't recognize. Marten ducked, but too late, and a spiral of fire washed over him. He fell back, rolling onto the books, beating out the flames with both hands.

With a cry like a hunting bird, Jana leaped into the air—and paused there, skimming easily away from the shots fired in her direction. She paused, hovering twenty feet above the broken Badger, surveying the ground like their master surveying an inadequately prepared distillation coil.

Flight, Marten thought, remembering the pages he'd memorized so poorly, the taste of parchment in his mouth. *The theory behind our flight is entirely different from the flight of birds, which is a mere skimming on the air. The true master uses speiric elixir to perceive the pull of the earth and repel from it, as if one were a magnet wrong-point-down, pushing away....*

Jana drew one hand back, a brilliant glow gathering around it, and Roon backed up another step. Gerda finally stirred, her brows drawing together as if someone had just presented her with another problem for the converter engine.

Repulsion from the earth is simple enough in theory—you hear that, Marten, simple enough even for you!—but practice is different. Simply maintaining a direct distance is dependent on the terrain remaining the same, and a sudden change in

terrain composition can throw off even the most seasoned alchemage.

Without quite thinking, Marten dropped the books and ran for Badger—not for its controls, but for its long gun. As Jana raised both hands from first to second stance, he flung himself at the cannon. The automaton creaked and shuddered, but the gun still swung on its mount, and his weight dragged it around. Around, and below Jana’s path of flight, sweeping below her feet like a jumprope.

Jana yelled as the terrain below her shifted, jolting her carefully-maintained repulsion and throwing her flight off kilter. The fire in her hands sparked and flared—another loss of control—and her yell turned to a shriek. Marten let go of the cannon and turned with some half-formed thought of maybe catching her, but just then the grinding noise of gears behind him finally sparked into a roar of thaumic engines. Tallstrider reared, taking aim.

The first shot winged Jana; the second, a concussive shell, missed but not by far enough. She staggered in the air, her path dipping as her concentration broke. Furious, she spat first at the Bull, then at Marten, and turned in mid-air, retreating faster than a swallow.

Too slow.

“No,” Marten breathed, but too soft, too overlooked, as Vrit fired again. The black dot that Jana had become jerked in the air, then descended, a slow arc into the Melay Hills, too fast for any kind of soft landing. He watched that spot even as the first soldiers began to raise their heads, as Vrit scrambled out of Tallstrider and ran to Gerda, as the remnants of the Wrights began to realize that they were alive after all.

Abruptly, he realized he was sitting on the ground, Badger’s cannon behind him, the first stings from his burns finally starting to make themselves known. But if he was wounded, Jana was wounded worse, and this time they wouldn’t be able to take care of each other. She was alone out there—and in the Melay Hills, there were few sources of clean water and fewer places to find food. And no elixir, or ore, or whatever you wanted to call it, anywhere.

As if guessing his thoughts, Roon—the Bull—knelt next to him. “She’ll die there,” Roon said, and if there was regret in his voice Marten could not hear it.

Marten shook his head. “No, she won’t. Her name won’t.” He glanced at him, seeing for the first time the king, the conqueror, as well as the soldier who’d spared him. “You may have some trouble from those hills for some time to come.” *Rebels, anyone wanting to fight against the Bull, they’ll remember her. She’ll be called the last of the alchemages.*

Roon gazed at the hills, looking with the same eyes that had perceived treaties contingent on the extermination of alchemages, that had seen the potential in elixir if it could be made dependable, that had noticed an apprentice and made of him a soldier. “Yes.”

* * *

The army, as armies were wont to do, moved on. Marten spent half of the day in the medic’s wagon, stifling a curse every time they went over a bump, and finally got out and walked alongside. None of the other Wrights had come to talk to him, nor had Roon (who had retreated to the decoy wagon out of necessity), but he did notice that the jacket the medics returned to him was the brown Bull’s uniform, not the black coat he’d worn to run away in.

Instead of joining the Wrights in the mess tent, he settled by the fire and, after a moment, pulled out Cathacaris’ books. For a long time he sat with his hands over the torn signatures, the pages ripped out, then took a grease pencil from his kit and turned to the end of the book.

After a little while, he became aware of someone standing over him. “Hey,” Vrit said, twisting her hands. Then before he could answer, she darted in to press a clumsy kiss against his cheek. “Bye!” she called over her shoulder, running off to

Tallstrider. Marten stared after her, then shook his head and turned the page.

Across the camp, Gerda emerged from the Bull's tent, followed by Roon. She said something to him, touching two fingers to his arm, then in full view of the army kissed him, the King, the conqueror Bull. The two parted, and Gerda made her way over to the Wrights' tent, changing her course when she saw Marten. "Well done," she said. "You may not think so now, but—well done."

He didn't look up immediately. "Is his name really Roon?" he asked finally.

"Maybe. I never bothered with any other." She gazed at him a moment, and he wondered whether she had heard what Jana said to him, or—more likely—if Roon had told her. "It's not the names that matter. Just the work."

"My master taught otherwise," he said, not looking up. "But now he's a name on a stone, and this—" he tapped the book, touched the others in the sack, "— these are what will remain of him."

She was silent a moment. "And what of you?"

"And of me," he agreed, knowing he was answering a different question than she'd asked. *And of Jana, no matter how long the rebellion in the hills holds her name.* Letters of fire... but he'd always written other letters, and they were the

ones that mattered. “I was thinking,” he added, turning to the pages at the end, the ones he’d marked up, “Cathacaris made us learn the theory of flight... some of it looks like it could be adapted to your motile impetus practice.”

She examined his sketches, singed brows drawn together. “Flying machines?”

“Tell me it’ll never work.”

Gerda smiled. “Prove that it will.”

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Margaret Ronald’s fiction has appeared in such venues as Fantasy Magazine, Strange Horizons, Realms of Fantasy, and Clarkesworld Magazine. She is the author of “Dragon’s-Eyes” in BCS #9 and BCS Audio Fiction Podcast #7, and “A Serpent in the Gears” in BCS #34, set in the same world as “Recapitulation in Steam” and “Letters of Fire. Soul Hunt, the third novel in her urban fantasy series and the sequel to Spiral Hunt, and Wild Hunt, will be released by Eos Books in early 2011. Originally from rural Indiana, she now lives

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COLD IRON AND GREEN VINES

by Wendy N. Wagner

I crumbled to my knees on the front steps of the church as the hinkypunks closed in on Danny O'Neil. In the twilight of the village square, their bodies were like whirling balls of smoke and light, each one's single foot hopping almost too quickly for me to see. They had brought the smell of the bog with them, thick as sludge and duckweed.

I clung to the wrought iron railing balled tight in my fist, but my fingertips had gone numb a long time ago. Not that the iron was much proof against enchantment. I could hear the jangle of Danny's anklet as he whirled in time to the bog spirits' dance, testimony that iron could bend magic but nothing could break it.

But magic can be bound, something whispered inside me. I thought of vines creeping across a stretch of mud, piecing together bits of land in the slime-slick marsh. For an instant, I thought I might be able to do it, might be able to reach into the hidden depths of myself and call upon my own green magic. I could almost touch its warm glow. But something inside me flinched away.

Then Danny O'Neil's anklet jingled in the darkness beyond the village square, following the balls of light toward the bog. I couldn't pull myself free of the cold iron railing to run after him.

My mother wouldn't have been afraid.

Behind me, the church door groaned and lamplight spilled out onto the stairs. "Miss Yaricka, I've been worried sick." Father Doogan's wheels creaked over the flagstones as he rolled toward me. His joint-oil smelled strong as he leaned down to pat me with a dry wicker hand. "Come inside, dear."

"But Danny O'Neil-" I shook my head and tears flew off my cheeks like tiny guilty birds.

Father Doogan leaned out over the railing, his inner steamworks chuffing as he caught a sound in the distance. "Oh dear."

Somewhere out in the darkness, something splashed. I choked off a sob.

"Oh, child, don't cry." His voice trembled. "This is *my* fault. I didn't send for the sooleybooley men soon enough. There are so many parishioners ready to pass on to a wicker body; it's just too bad the mountain passes closed so early this year."

"I could have helped him. I *should* have helped him."

“And when you’re ready, you will. When you’re older. Now you should come inside and have some dinner.”

I wiped my cheek on my shoulder. “Father Doogan?”

“Yes, child?”

“I’m frozen to the stair rail.”

He gave his chest plate a sharp rap to open it and leaned over my pale frost-twined fingers. “Oh, Yaricka, you do miss your mother.”

His steamworks glowed berry-red inside him and heat roared out on my hands. It wouldn’t be so bad to take a wicker body. They must never feel cold. I thought of my mother, facing the cold Wild winds out by the ward-walls.

“I do, Father.” I might have cried a little, but any tears dried in the heat of his steam engine. “She would have reminded me to wear my gloves.”

* * *

A crowd packed the village square the next morning, wicker grandfathers and grannies creaking and steaming in the chill air and children organizing games around the winter-stilled fountain. The younger women, still able-bodied and clinking with stacked iron anklets, made little knots of chit-chat, their babies clinging like burrs to the bottoms of their skirts. The Council of Elders was meeting in the church to discuss Danny O’Neil’s disappearance.

I didn't know where to stand. Fourteen was too old to play in the dry fountain and not old enough to talk about babies. I belonged in the church. After all, it was my home now. I nudged a russet-colored leaf with my boot toe and scowled at its crunch.

"You look like you could use a second breakfast."

I spun toward the rough voice. "Mother Hawthorne!"

Mother Hawthorne offered me a muffin, brown and spicy enough to prick my nose. I sniffed it long and deep before biting into it. It smelled just like my mother's best muffin recipe, and it was still hot. "Thanks," I mumbled, mouth full.

She settled against the nearest tree trunk, studying the closed church doors on the other side of the square. "Are you ready to go into the bog this morning? I imagine they'll cancel lessons."

"You really think so?"

She rubbed her knee, making a face. There was no one else living in Oakridge who'd kept their own body as long as Mother Hawthorne. Her ankles were huge with iron anklets and charms. "I'm sure of it. Iron's too valuable to let it sink to the bottom of the bog. And with the enchantstorms hitting the mountains so early, spring thaw is bound to be bad. We'll need every ounce of iron we got."

I took an extra big bite of muffin. I didn't want to talk about spring.

Mother Hawthorne mused on. "You'll want to find another anklet yourself. You're getting of an age to worry about hinkypunks. Myself, I could use another anklet—but I'm not eager to find Danny's."

The thought of finding Danny O'Neil's cold white leg somewhere in the mud and trying to work the anklet off it made the muffin lose its flavor in my mouth. "Me neither," I whispered.

She found another muffin in her pocket and bit into it. She had one gold tooth, bright as trouble. I wondered if Angus Cooper had cast it for her on his anvil, or if she'd had it made on one of her travels. But most people outside of Oakridge didn't bother replacing teeth; they all went wicker-and-cogwork as young as they could.

She caught me staring. "You got a question?"

I didn't want to ask, but I had to know. "Why do you still have your own body?"

She looked at me hard. "You ever touch a piece of velvet before?" She didn't wait for me to nod. "You think those wicker-men can feel velvet with those fake fingers of theirs? You like the idea of being stuck to the pavement the rest of your life 'cause your feet won't roll anyplace with rocks or mud?"

She shook her head. “I’d rather risk the bog than give up living a real life, no matter what the sooleybooley men tell you.”

The church doors sprang open and the Council of Elders came out, most of them creaking in steam-powered steel-and-rattan bodies. The whole village jangled and creaked as it hurried toward them.

Mother Hawthorne patted my shoulder. “I’m going out to the bog. I’ve got traps to tend. And at my age any head start I can get is a good one. If I find Danny’s anklet, I’ll save it for you.”

I didn’t follow her. After last night, I knew I needed to go out to the oak grove before I did anything else.

I cut north up Main Street, the houses and shops all silent with their folks gathered in the village square. I wanted to hurry, though. I didn’t want to hold up my trip to the bog too long—soon it would be full of people working and whistling, their faces friendly but their eyes probing my back. Ever since Father Doogan took me in, people had been watching for signs that I had my mother’s powers. I rubbed my hands together and stuffed them in my pants’ pockets. They still felt cold this morning.

And I really didn’t want to look at Angus Cooper’s smithy as I passed. I knew the ward signs around the entrance were faded and scuffed. They’d need to be refreshed before spring

thaw, and it would probably be better to paint them before the snows began to fall. More of the work my mother had left for me.

But the orange flames of Angus's forge called my eyes. My feet stopped moving and I was looking straight at the huge hearth, Angus and his apprentice adjusting the bellows in the ruddy light. The half-finished tattoo on Angus's back, the bare outlines of ward sigils, stood out like a garden plot left unplanted.

The green magic inside me roiled.

Clutching my belly, I broke into a run. I couldn't stand the sight of those uncolored ward sigils, no protection at all. The thought of Angus Cooper facing spring thaw with that half-made mess of magic on his skin hurt as bad as the energies twitching loose in my body. It drove my legs faster, faster, blurring the houses as I reached the end of our town.

The magic settled itself a little and I slowed to a walk. Here at the edge of warded civilization, the houses clumped more tightly, backs to the ward-walls, shrinking side-yards squeezing the gardens forward until the kale lapped over the street's cobblestones. This close to the Wild, winter's storms battered these cottages with waves of glamour that the outer ward-walls only weakened. It took a lot of iron to keep people inside safe on those nights.

Already the wind felt stiffer. It tugged at my hair where my hat and collar didn't meet, and its touch on my neck burned. Tomorrow might only be Yule, but the air smelled like midwinter. I passed the last of the cottages, and I was alone with only my goosebumps.

Ahead of me, the oak grove moved in the wind. The trees butted right up to the great brick and iron walls that held back the Wild.

My footsteps slowed. I hadn't come out here since last Yule, when I helped mother repaint the sigils on the ward-walls. She hadn't been herself when we'd cut through the oak grove. Her eyes glowed chartreuse and her hair stood on end. I hadn't understood that it meant she'd been called. That the last and greatest of the green-binder's power was growing inside her. I just knew it was Yule and it was time to paint the ward-walls and bake spiced muffins.

My shoulders shook as I reached the smallest of the guardian oaks, but I blinked away my tears. Mama always hated it when I cried.

I set my fingers against the gray bark, finer and smoother than the other oaks. This tree was young, its body slim and supple. It would be years before its limbs stretched out over the top of the wall, branches softening the cruel north winds as they carried their load of enchantment. The older trees groaned

as the wind rubbed their great branches together, and green power flickered along their twigs.

“I miss you, Mama,” I breathed. I pressed my cheek against the trunk. “And I’m changing. I don’t know what to do.”

The tree’s leaves rustled over my head, almost like words.

“I don’t know how to be a green-binder. I didn’t think I had the magic inside me, and now that I do, I don’t know how to get it out. Danny O’Neil’s dead because of it.”

Outside the ward-walls something nameless sang in a thin falsetto that made the hair rise on my neck. The old oak trees grumbled as the wind sawed at their branches. And the young oak said nothing. I hugged it tight.

* * *

After that, there was no place to go except back through the village to the bog. There were lots of folks out today, fishing and harvesting bog-berries, the last press of outdoor work before the snows fell. Oakridge went quiet in the winter. It was safer to stay inside with the iron bolt slammed home.

A fisherman waved at me, and Gina Wells offered me a handful of bog-berries from her collecting basket. When she smiled, she showed rust-stained teeth. An iron-eater. Some said it helped, but I couldn’t imagine what it must taste like. Like a mouth full of blood, or fear. There was enough to be scared of without tasting it all the time.

I walked on. Further out, boys probed black pools with sticks, looking for Danny O'Neil and his iron anklet. I waved at a couple but kept walking. I didn't want to find Danny, and I had someplace I needed to go.

I passed the last of the white sticks that marked dry ground and followed memory deeper into the swamp. The birds gabbled to themselves, unconcerned by my presence. On either side, pools bubbled and hummed with gases and creatures, but ahead were solid hummocks of marsh grass. Anyone else would have carried a stick to test the ground, but I knew the right places to put my feet. All of the marsh was outlined inside me, down in that strange green power I wasn't sure how to tap.

Then I came to my plank bridge, algae-slick but still strong. A deep pool separated my little island from the rest of the marsh, and as I crossed over to the rocky nubbin, I felt a weight leave me, like taking off my iron anklet before a bath. I sank onto the ground and looked up at the cap of willow branches. The scent of mud hung over everything.

I closed my eyes and breathed it in. When newcomers arrived in Oakridge, they complained about the mud smell, but to me, it was the smell of home. Even after soaking in the tub, I could still smell the sludge-scent on my skin. It reminded me of growing things and birdsong and frogs calling in the night.

I focused my mind on the growing things.

Things were always growing in the bog. Only winter could slow the encroachment of tree roots and vines and duckweed and algae, and this far from the mountains, winter only lasted two cold months. I could feel the willows' awareness of the cooling days, their crankiness snaking through the thin soil along the threads of their roots.

The sound of leaves on leaves called my mind away from the willows and out to the vines, which were always impatient for attention. "I'm listening," I murmured. And they sprang up, straining their tendrils to my fingers, twisting around my wrists, rubbing against my skin. They had a lot to say. The hinkypunks had kept them up all night, singing and dancing. The crows had fed this morning, and their shit stung the newest leaves. Darkness was coming too early.

I still had the scar on my wrist from my first trip to the island. I'd been so scared, and I'd struggled so hard. Now I understood that the vines hadn't meant to frighten me. They were just so excited by the green inside me they had to reach out to me. But their juices had caused an infection. The mark was ugly and puckered and I kept it covered with long sleeves or a bracelet. I wasn't ready for anyone to ask about it.

I sat up slowly enough to let the vines slip loose of my arms and pile themselves across my toes. They were sensitive

plants, quick to pick up on moods and reach out to those needing care. Like duckweed, they were the explorers of the bog, the first plants to cross any dry surface, and the most eager for spring thaw.

When spring thaw came, the bog was renewed. After the long months of enchantstorms loaded with glamour-dust, spring run-off sent streams of wild magic flooding into the marshland. The bog's boundless growth fed on sunlight and water, but it was magic that stirred it into the frenzied bounty Oakridge depended upon. Bog-berries couldn't grow without the power of enchantment. Marsh sharks wouldn't breed without the stirrings of glamour.

And of course, there were no hinkypunks without magic.

I worked my lip between my teeth. There was balance in the bog that I was just beginning to understand. My mother had understood it; Mother Hawthorne too, though she had no more magical power than one of her spiced muffins. Maybe being a green-binder was as much a matter of paying attention as it was painting ward-signs and speaking to plants.

I rubbed my eyes, still dry after crying in the oak grove. The vines rubbed against my ankles. "I could have saved Danny O'Neil."

The vines withdrew from my feet. But when I stood up, I saw a fine iron chain half-buried in the leaves, warm from pressing against my backside. The clasp was twisted and rusty.

* * *

I ran all the way back to the village, my feet slipping from the path and skidding on the slime. If I'd been anyone else, the black pools would have claimed me. But I could feel weeds and lilies pushing me back onto the path, and the trees bent their boughs close as if offering steady hands.

Through the village square, past the smithy; it didn't matter who stared. My hair tumbled loose of my cap and half-blinded me, the strands twisting like young vines. I skidded into the oak grove, Danny O'Neil's eight ounces of cold iron closed tight in my fingers.

"Why?" I panted. "What does it mean? What happened to Danny?"

The trees did not even groan.

I knelt beside the thin, young oak. "Why did you have to become a tree, Mama? I can't ask you anything."

I shut my eyes and tried to imagine how any of it happened. How Danny O'Neal had let his anklet get rusty and worn out. How the sooleybooley men trapped a man's soul inside a rattan shell. How my mother had gone out to the oak

grove and drawn a cover of earth over her body, stretching it up into the shape of a sapling.

I opened my eyes, and my hands were glowing. I stared at them, hardly breathing as tracings of cool fire and green swamp-slime moved beneath my skin. The trees around me lit up with the same phosphorescence. Green ball lightning rolled from branch to branch.

Something brighter and whiter than the fire inside my skin glowed against the dead leaves. I just stared at it. An acorn made of light.

Go on, something inside me urged, something like the voice of the vines and the willows. I hesitated. Once I picked it up, there would be no turning back. I'd be able to control the magic inside me, but some day, it would call me here to stay.

I glanced up at the oak sapling and wished it would say something. But of all the plants and creatures whispering inside me, only the oak trees were silent. They just watched me, glowing.

My fingers shook as I stretched them toward the acorn.

I squeezed it and a crack darkened its surface, a crack that spread until the hard shell split in two pieces and the brilliant nut sat in my palm. Its light thrummed to same rhythm as the pulse in my veins, a tempo matched by the throbbing light in

the trees and the vibrations I could feel in the earth beneath me.

Beside me, the oak sapling began to radiate a strange warmth. I thought of Father Doogan's steamworks glowing red in the night air, but this warmth was kinder. It could never burn me or dry my knuckles. It was the tender heat of a compost pile, warm enough to steam on a fall morning but never scorching. It was like my mother's arms around me in the middle of the night, easing me out of a bad dream.

The warmth seeped into me, pushing out the cold that had settled during the night as I crouched on the church steps. My heart fluttered and then slowed. There was no reason to cling to cold iron any longer.

I popped the acorn into my mouth. Its living heat burned all the way down my throat, until it settled in a tiny lump someplace beneath my breastbone.

The glowing beneath my skin and in the trees faded. I sagged against the young oak's trunk, suddenly tired, but smiling. "Tomorrow's Yule, Mama. I'll have to help at the bonfire. And it's cold enough, it might just snow."

A twig fell down from above and landed in my lap. I picked it up and studied the whorls of lichen. Its bark was rough against my skin, a wordless reminder to wear gloves.

* * *

Sunset stained the sky when I finally finished painting Angus Cooper's smithy. I was stiff and sweating as I washed my brushes in water from his pump and scrubbed the soot off my face.

"You better hurry, Miss Yaricka," Angus reminded me. "Bonfire should start any minute."

I jammed the brushes in my pocket and grabbed my jacket. "I'll be there as soon as I can. Don't let them start without me!" My feet skidded on the flagstones in front of his door.

"Wait." His stack of anklets clattered as he hurried to catch up to me. "You forgot this." He folded Danny's anklet, clasp repaired, in my hand. "You really going to come back and finish my tattoo?"

The anklet was still warm from the forge. "Would your green-binder lie?"

He was still grinning as I turned to run back to the cottage. I'd readied my supplies for the bonfire this morning, although it had felt strange at first to work inside the house where I'd been born. I hadn't set foot inside it since my mother had tacked a note on the front door and walked up to the oak grove.

I snatched a knapsack and joined the stream of people headed for the village square. We all hurried. No one wanted to be late for the Yule celebration.

Father Doogan stood beside the fountain, the fine fibers of his face stained purple by the dying light. Despite the cold weather, someone had turned on the water in the fountain for the night. It eased the minds of the wicker-skinned. Their bodies might be mostly steel cogs and copper piping, but their rattan skins were still flammable.

Father Doogan raised a torch above his head. “Let us celebrate the season of Yule!”

He laid the torch against a lump of pitch on the top of the wood pile. Fire sprang to life with a crackle. People cheered.

Then I stepped forward.

The cheers faded.

It wasn't easy to drag my big knapsack up to the fire's edge, but I did, and when I stood beside it, I felt every eye fixed upon me. I knew they were taking my measure. Probing me for weaknesses. They did it the way my mother had probed the wards on the ancient walls or the way a berry-picker tested every step she took out in the bog. I swallowed, and my mouth tasted of iron.

But just for a second. The heat in my breastbone told me I was ready.

“Every winter we stay inside our houses and keep our doors bolted. It's a reminder of what life is like beyond our walls. It's a reminder of how lucky we are to live in the bog.”

I opened my pack and removed one of the branches I'd collected in the oak grove. I held it before me and willed it to give off a little of that green gleaming I'd seen in the wood yesterday. People gasped. It was the sign of a green-binder, calling cold light from wood.

I tossed the branch onto the wood pile and watched fire finger its edges. Beneath the packed soil of the village square, tree roots were trembling with excitement. In the darkness, I could feel the hinkypunks, listening hard beyond the last path markers.

“Tomorrow is the first day of winter. Tonight is Yule. It's a night for giving gifts and sharing blessings. So here is my gift. Merry Yule, everyone!”

The oak branch caught fire. I threw the other branches and twigs in too, even the twig my mother had dropped on my lap. They were all the gifts of the green-binders, the ones who'd given up their flesh-bodies to take their places as guardians. Their shed limbs sent up sparks of red, white and lichen-green.

In the back of the square someone began to sing in a clear soprano voice, and Father Doogan's baritone joined in, then another voice and another. The old harmonies joined and rose with the sparks. All around me, people swayed and sang, and the feeling of Yuletide sank into my bones.

Then the pale lights filed out of the bog's darkness, their voices joining in descant. Tonight the hinkypunks did not dance. They carried too many gifts to leap and dive. On their shoulders they bore baskets heaped with wild rice and bog-berries, platters stacked with fish and eels. They circled the villagers with slow, tentative hops.

Then Evelyn O'Neil held out her arms, and a hinkypunk approached her, its light brightening with every tentative jump. She lowered her face into its cloud of silver smoke and light, and her eyes were bright with tears of love.

My own eyes filled with a different kind of tears. "Happy Yuletide, Danny," I whispered. I hadn't known how to save him, but I could call up his spirit from its new home in the marsh.

Other families accepted gifts from their bog-lost, stirring their lights with wondering fingers, crying into bundles of sweet marsh-grass, exchanging sprigs of mistletoe. The hinkypunks' pile of offerings grew beside the fire, and Father Doogan began organizing men into carrying brigades. It would all go into the church to share, the same as last year and all the other years the green-binders had welcomed the hinkypunks.

That was how the balance was built, I realized. Spirits and green-binders and ordinary men and women, strung along a beam of magic, wound tight by duckweed and windstorms. It

was iron that threw things out of alignment. The sooleybooley men had only worsened things when they gave us steam-powered bodies that magic couldn't touch. I'd have my work cut out for me, trying to balance out their iron's cold stillness with my green vines.

Mother Hawthorne came beside me and put her arm around my shoulders. She smelled of peat smoke and willow leaves. Like the bog.

I kissed her wrinkled cheek. "I have a Yule present for you." I held out the anklet.

In the light of the fire I saw her smile. "You don't need it, do you?"

I shook my head. I wasn't afraid of enchantment any longer. I could dance with the hinkypunks all night and never lose my way in the swamp, not with the green magic lodged inside my ribs. That was a gift I had to give myself.

Angus Cooper brought out his fiddle and struck up a jig, and Evelyn O'Neil was the first to start dancing. The marsh spirits and villagers—both the flesh-bodied and wicker—clapped their hands and whirled and dove. Tomorrow, I knew, it would snow.

But tonight, the flames and the dancing made the village square as warm as a midsummer's evening. I threw off my jacket and began to dance.

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Wendy N. Wagner grew up between a swamp and a cemetery, coloring her viewpoint forever. Her short fiction and poetry has appeared in Abyss & Apex, Crossed Genres, and the anthologies The Way of the Wizard and Rigor Amortis. She is also the Assistant Editor of Fantasy Magazine. She makes her home in Portland, Oregon, and blogs about words, food, and all things creepy at <http://operabuffo.blogspot.com>.

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COVER ART

“Fly High,” by Tina Marie Lane



Tina Marie Lane is a Environment Designer and 3D Artist with eleven years of professional experience in designing architecture and retail environments. Her freelance work delves into these areas as well as fantasy environments for games and literature. Recently her work has appeared in 3D Artist Magazine and can also be found at her website www.toyrocket3d.com. She fashions her worlds, both real and imagined, from Dallas, Texas.

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