



Issue #94 • May 3, 2012

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TO GO HOME TO LEAL

by Susan Forest

A squall brought early dusk to the harbor at Discort. Merchant schooners and fishing boats lay at anchor within the breakwater, buffeted by the sharp gusts, rigging singing. Fish guts and salt scented the spray whipped against the docks. On the quay, warehouses and sailors' pubs were shuttered against the rain.

Kaul hunched his back to the wind and wound his way up a mud lane to a crisscross of alleys lined with shanties. Rain drenched his worn sweater and plastered his hair and beard to his face. A bit of warmth out of the rain would be welcome, and a bowl of gruel. Even his father to talk to, if he wasn't too drunk. By the demons, Kaul wished there was a way to keep Dagh from counting the poor coins in his purse.

Home. He ducked into the hovel huddled in the lee of a stone wall. Within, a fire sputtered on the grate, spilling spasms of light and warmth onto the furnishings; two straw mats, a table and two chairs, and Dagh's old sea chest from Leal.

His father stirred a small pot of gruel over the fire. The stump of his right hand, puckered with wrinkled white scars at the wrist, rested on his leg. "So. You're back." Dagh drained his tin mug of rum. "Where you been all the day?"

Kaul turned from the cook fire to strip off his clothes and pull half-dried breeches and a shirt from a peg. He didn't like watching Dagh drink. "Hauling. Bolts of silk. Limes. Tea."

"Don't you never mind what you're hauling as long as you get wages. You get wages this time?"

"Yeh."

"Demons, I never knew a boy as stupid as you. Hauling sacks of grain last month for no wages."

Kaul tossed his purse on the table. "I got wages." He dipped his finger into the hot gruel.

Dagh rapped Kaul's knuckle with the back of his spoon and he snatched his hand back. "That's mine. You cook your own."

Kaul sucked his knuckle. With the rum, he could never tell if his father would tussle with him as if he was still a boy, or smack him like a brawler in a tavern. He reached for the purse. "I'll put the money in the jar."

"Not so fast!" Dagh's stump pinned his fingers.

Kaul withdrew, a sick feeling creeping into his stomach.

Deftly, Dagh opened the purse with his teeth and his left hand, and poured the coins on the table. "Four coppers?" His

face flushed. “You call that wages? It doesn’t pay for the food you eat! I got more than that just for mending a broken gate, back in Leal.”

But they weren’t in Leal. “Three lads were turned away. Didn’t get work at all.”

Dagh slapped him across the face. “I know fair pay. You been to the tavern to give money to a wench. Haven’t you?”

Kaul hung his head, staring at the calluses on his fingers. “Yes.”

Dagh sighed. “Ah, get on with you.” He poked Kaul with his stump and nodded at the pot. “Have some food. Go. You’re just a thick-witted fool is all.”

Kaul stepped through the flap they used as a door and dipped a cup into the rain barrel. He wasn’t a fool. The shells had been against him, was all.

Dagh chuckled and shook his head. “That last one. That merchant’s daughter.” He scooped the coins into his pocket. “You’re a piece of work, aren’t you? You! Thinking that fine little filly would look at a lout like you!”

“She liked me.” Kaul drank his water and spooned gruel into a bowl.

“Because you grew some muscle from hauling ballast?” Dagh snorted as he pulled his gruel from the grate and sat at the table to eat. “Now, this one. Ugly, too.”

“She’s not ugly.”

“Is that back talk, lad?”

Kaul ducked his head. “No.” His shoulders ached and bed beckoned.

Dagh’s black-dyed hat and sweater lay on his pallet.

“You working tonight?”

Dagh grunted. “Someone’s got to bring in money.”

Kaul shuffled to the table with his porridge and cup. “Shouldn’t work when you been drinking.”

For an instant Dagh stared at him beneath eyes wide with surprise. “You scummy rat. Who do you think you are, to tell me what to do?”

Kaul fixed his eyes on the table just beyond his gruel.

“You think you’re smarter than me? Huh?” Dagh slammed his pot on the table.

Kaul waited, motionless, knuckles white.

“I’ll bet you wish I was dead. Do you, boy? Huh?”

“No.”

“Do you?”

“No.”

Rain beat on the roof and dripped onto the cobbled floor.

Dagh plopped down and poured the last of his rum into his cup. The smell of it reeked from his pores, sickly sweet.

“I want to come.”

“You?” Dagh spooned porridge into his mouth.

“You let me come last time.” Someone had to watch out. Dagh didn’t run as fast, wasn’t as alert, after the rum.

“That was a mistake.”

“I gave you a leg-up over the wall.” Maybe Kaul could earn the money he should’ve brought home in wages.

“Hmmmph.” Dagh drained his mug.

“I could be a lookout.” Kaul flicked his gaze up hopefully.

Dagh’s features softened. “You don’t want to be a thief. You see this?” He held up his stump. “That’s what you get in my line of work. You want to lose your hand?”

“I’ve got quick hands. I’ve been playing the shell game. I win almost all my wagers.”

“Win? Oh, that’s good. You bring home four coppers for a day’s wages. That’s what happens when you think you’re clever enough to win at shells. You’re daft, lad.”

Kaul hunched over his supper.

“You’re young. You should be doing something with your life. My brother, Hauken? He had sense. Stayed on the farm.”

“I know, you told me.”

“Didn’t go off looking for riches in the city, like me. This city was the death of your mother.” Dagh stood and pulled his dark sweater over his shirt. “But you never listen. How many

times have I told you, get out of here? Huh? Go to your uncle in Leal. But do you listen?"

"I don't know Hauken."

Dagh put on his hat. "He's got it good in Leal. Hard work. That's what makes a man. Not these city streets full of pickpockets and rum and plague. I'd go, myself, but how do I get on a King's ship with this?" He held up his stump. "I'm branded, now, lad. They don't let thieves into Leal."

Kaul stood. "I want to stay here. With you."

"Ahh! You daft boy!" He grabbed Kaul around the neck and jabbed him in the gut. Kaul laughed and blocked the stump with his forearm, grappling his father around the waist. He was taller than Dagh now, but his father outweighed him and in a moment Kaul was tripped onto his back.

Dagh helped him to his feet with his good hand. "I said you're a stupid lad and you are. All right, you can be the lookout. But stay out of the way."

Kaul grabbed his wet sweater and pulled it on.

Dagh clutched him by the shoulder and pulled him close. "And if I say run, you run, hear?" he said. "And don't stop. Not for nothing." He pushed him away. "You big oaf."

Kaul pulled on his hat and they made their way through the deserted streets. Rain, slowed now to a steady thrum, kept even the King's Men behind shutters. They made their way by

back streets up the escarpment to the district where larger houses stood looking out over walls of stone, to the sea. Here, they took more care, watching for private guards as well as the King's Men.

Dagh led the way to a servants' lane beneath sodden trees, to where the courtyard wall of a large house had fallen into disrepair. With Kaul's help, Dagh scrambled over the wall. Kaul cast about for large stones from the ruin and, climbing into the garden, created a step for Dagh to use on his return. Then he scrambled over the wall and waited on the lower limb of a tree.

He listened. There was no light. The wall and house were merely lesser darkneses in the inky night. He strained his ears, but the patter of rain on stone, on gravel, on leaves, masked any sound that might signal a guard's approach. In his mind, he followed Dagh's progress. Climbing to a balcony or shuttered window? Finding a room darkened and empty, or pregnant with a sleeping form? And where in such a huge house would he look for gold? Would he tread open corridors to reach a more likely room?

Running feet caught Kaul's attention before he saw the black bulk appear out of the gloom. He scrambled from his perch and boosted himself onto the wall, reaching a hand down to Dagh. Dagh grasped him firmly and he pulled, catapulting both of them into the bushes. Dagh shoved something long and

hard into his hand and Kaul pushed it beneath the cord that held his breeches. “Run,” Dagh said. “Split up.” Dagh disappeared down the servant’s lane and Kaul ran in the opposite direction. In a moment he heard shouts and the sounds of many feet in pursuit.

He ran up the alley. He crossed a street to another servants’ road. He dodged, twisting through the maze of streets and lanes, exhilarated with the chase. The sound of his own footsteps, soft and sure on the cobbles, gravel and hard-packed dirt, filled his ears and he ran on, unknowing if others followed.

By a torrent of rainwater gushing from a sewer, he crawled beneath a clump of bushes. He sat in the mud, listened, tried to hear the sound of hunters over the noise of the water, the rasping of his breath, the beating of his heart.

He imagined sudden arms pulling him roughly to his feet, his own wild struggles, grasping at—a branch—anything to use for a weapon. There was the thing Dagh had given him, digging into his belly. He pulled it from his belt and caressed its smooth surface. A candlestick. Gold, perhaps? Or silver? Even brass would fetch more than a month’s wages, if Dagh had its mate. They could eat meat, even buy one of the limes he had hauled today from the foreign schooner.

He pushed the candlestick back beneath his drawstring of his breeches and listened. Nothing but raindrops pattering on

leaves. Carefully, he withdrew himself from his hiding place and looked up the street. No sound, no motion. He made his way back down the escarpment, back to the hovel.

The fire was out. Kaul did not need to light the candle to know that the place was empty. He wrapped the candlestick in a shirt and pushed it under the straw of his pallet. He returned to the lane. A drunken beggar was making his way up from one of the pubs by the sea. Kaul reckoned it was not yet midnight.

He peered through the rain, up the hill toward the wealthy district, down the hill toward the harbor. The faint sounds of merrymaking drifted from the quay. Kaul turned his footsteps downhill.

The noise of the crowd grew as he approached the docks; calls and cheering. He rounded a corner and saw a group of twenty or so gathered outside the King's Men's post. Onlookers from the nearby pubs drifted out of the warmth of their common rooms to see what was going on. Kaul's stomach heaved as he made his way through the throng.

The King's Men had Dagh. One brandished a silver candlestick, while two others held the old man's arms as he wrenched himself this way and that, shrieking for mercy. The pronouncements of the captain were drowned by the goading of the crowd, but his actions were clear. It took three men to hold Dagh's left arm on the block. One soldier brought out a

broad-bladed axe and Dagh's struggles renewed. The axe-man bent over him, giving instructions, but Dagh's eyes rolled and he screamed. The axe-man seemed to shrug; then, raising his weapon, he brought it down, once, with a sickening crunch. Dagh's hand came free and bounced to the ground. Dagh shrieked again, then collapsed, the other two guards falling on him in surprise. Blood spurted over the onlookers.

The men lifted Dagh and carried him into the guard post. The throng surged forward to see, blocking Kaul's view. Kaul heard the sizzle, smelled the stench of burning flesh. The scream of pain rose over the shouts of the crowd.

Afterward, Kaul felt a strange lightness, as though he were not standing in the street, not looking down on his father's broken body, not the recipient of smirks and looks of pity as the others brushed past him, returning to taverns or inns or their own dry beds, relieved it was not them; not them, this time.

As from a distance, he saw himself bend down, look at the half-closed eyes, slide his hands carefully beneath his father's shoulders and hips, look into that terrible face for permission and, finding nothing, heave him up like a sack of grain to his shoulder, and stagger to his feet. The street flowed past him, smeared into a blur of rain. The only reality was the warmth of that great weight on his shoulder.

Kaul brought Dagh home and laid him on his pallet. Dagh cradled his left arm, the fresh stump leaking slightly where rawness showed in cracks between patches of blackened skin. The blood and vomit on Dagh's clothes had hardened, and he was shivering.

Kaul built a fire. He stripped away Dagh's clothes, cringing when a clumsy movement brought a recoil of pain from his father. He wrapped him in blankets and watched him. Dagh lay unmoving, unspeaking, unseeing.

In the following days, Kaul lowered his head whenever he spotted a King's Man in the street, but they seemed no more suspicious of him than any of the nameless rabble. Thieves and pickpockets sank into the shantytowns like stones in quicksand, and plunder did not resurface.

Rather than lessening, Dagh's pain grew. Kaul didn't have the kind of money a wizard would charge to mend the wound, not without selling the candlestick. And, beneath his thoughts, Kaul knew the injury was not the source of his father's pain. But Dagh's moans pushed Kaul's thoughts onto spiral paths. What if? What if he hadn't asked to come that night? What if he hadn't squandered his money? What if....

He counted out the coppers and bought rum for the pain, and watched as his father became agitated, and ranted, and made great plans, and wept. His heart clung to his father's grief

through every change of mood, waiting for the tussling matches to return. But it was as though Dagh had forgotten. And when the rum ran out, Kaul bought more, and stayed by his father's side through the grief again; and again.

He worked until he was sick of the smell of fish. He brought home money to have it flung from his hands. He cleaned the vomit and the filth. Each day, Dagh sat in the street with his two stumps laid out in front of him and a hat at his feet, raving on about Leal and the good life and Hauken's farm. The rains of winter turned cold and flurries of snow came. Dagh began to cough and become thin like so many who lived in the alleys behind the quay.

One morning before the sun rose, Kaul lay on his mat, the incessant, circular logic of his thoughts in abeyance. His eyes rested on Dagh, asleep at last, face drawn and gray in the light of the fire. There was something different about him. A repose. A peacefulness Kaul had never seen.

The warmth of his blankets, the silence of the snow, the languor of sleep—Kaul clung to the moment, held the chaos and belittling at bay for just a few minutes. If only Dagh could rest as other men did; as he did now, in sleep.

Leal.

Kaul rose to his elbow. That was it—

Dagh needed to go home. To Leal.

Kaul ate his breakfast, his mind racing. He'd always known that the wounded arms were not the problem; healing them would never be enough. It was his father's spirit that sickened here, in the city. His father had been dying ever since he left Leal. Now, Kaul was drawn to that face, its frown for the time being erased. Kaul would bring his father home. There was a way.

The arrangements did not take long. The silver candlestick brought Kaul more money than he'd ever seen in one place, though he knew it was a scrap of the thing's worth. It was enough. He found a wizard and booked passage on a schooner bound down the coast.

The wizard, Gallinule, arrived at the appointed hour.

It had been snowing for two days and flakes swirled in the dark as the wizard entered the hovel. Dagh sat at the table, having drunk enough rum to be incoherent. Kaul rose from his pallet, his hands cold now that the moment had come.

Dagh lifted his head. "What's he doing here?"

Gallinule stepped beneath the lintel, his large frame filling the hovel. "Your father does not know of our contract?"

"He knows. He just forgets." Kaul knelt by the table. "Dagh. Remember? What you told me to do?"

Dagh waved his arm belligerently in Kaul's direction. "You spent money on a wizard? You idiot! He can do nothing!"

“Remember Leal? Dagh? You wanted to go to Leal to see your brother?”

“I can’t go to Leal!” Dagh said. He held up his arms. “You see these, boy? See them?”

“Gallinule is going to help us.”

“He can’t give me back my hands!” He looked at the stumps and began to weep. “Fool! Fool of a boy! Why did I ever take you with me?” His lip trembled and the tears coursed down his cheeks.

Kaul turned to where Gallinule unpacked his sack and caught the wizard’s glance of pity. Gallinule set a black candle on the floor and lit it, then extinguished all other light from the hovel. “How will you get him to the wharf?”

Kaul stuffed one of the pallets into Dagh’s old sea chest and took it outside. “I have a box,” he said quietly. “The harbor is down hill. I can skid it.”

Gallinule lifted his sorrowful eyes from his work. “I have a mule and a cart. I will help you.”

Kaul nodded his thanks.

The wizard emptied a powder into Dagh’s mug. “Drink this,” he said to the old man. “It will keep your body safe on its journey.”

Dagh looked as though he would protest, but the wizard’s gaze commanded him to obey and he swallowed the potion.

Gallinule pulled a rooster from his sack. “We begin.” He slit the rooster’s throat and, within the confines of the small space, painted a circle of blood on the floor around the candle and around Dagh’s chair. “You will be safe as long as you remain outside the circle,” he said to Kaul.

Kaul listened as Gallinule wove his spell, chanting the ancient words to bring forth the power of the demon from its place among the stars. The wizard worked his way around the circle, his hands threading together the symbols of the seven spheres of the universe, opening the doors between earth and the chosen demon’s realm. He coaxed the creature with words and promises in a language Kaul had never heard.

A cloud formed above the candle; a nebulous sphere that shifted and darkened as Gallinule chanted. Within the orb, a being appeared which gained in substance and grew until it filled the protective circle, rearing its head to the ceiling of the hovel. The creature coalesced into the form of a misshapen man. A huge phallus hung beneath its round belly; its body was clothed in boils and long hair, and horns sprouted from its forehead. Eyes like embers gloated fiercely over the small room and hesitated on Kaul, filling him with terror.

“Gozhob!” Gallinule stepped behind Dagh, drawing the creature’s attention to the old man. “Here is your purpose. Here is your reward.” Gallinule brought his hands down on

either side of Dagh, who blinked stupidly at the creature. “Take this one’s life force, and hold it as I command. Spew it forth again into this man’s body when you are bid.”

Kaul watched as the creature’s eyes rolled cunningly around the room. The eyes came to rest at last on Dagh, and it growled assent.

“This one,” Gallinule pointed to Kaul, “will summon you in three days’ time. He will speak the ritual words over the body. You will release the spirit when he bids you to do so.”

The demon grew darker at these words, but Gallinule raised his hands. “Obey me. Fulfill your oath!”

Gozhob’s form swirled within its sphere and its eyes burned. It reached out toward Dagh, and the old man lifted a little from his seat, clutched useless wrists to his chest and slumped forward into Gallinule’s steadying hand. The demon swelled and darkened, then dissolved into nothingness. The candle spluttered and went out.

“Light another candle,” Gallinule said. “There is nothing to fear. You may step into the circle. Gozhob is gone.”

Kaul did as he was bid. A sudden dread clutched him as he saw Dagh lying in the wizard’s arms, his sallow skin translucent, mouth slack, eyes blank. “He’s dead!”

“Hush,” Gallinule said. “He is not dead. As you contracted, his spirit is carried in the demon. The physic he drank will keep

his body safe for three days. Gozhob will wait until sunset of the third day for you to reclaim your father's soul."

Kaul's back and hands felt cold. He knelt beside his father. "He looks... so...."

"No one, not even the King's own physician, will detect life in him. It is as we agreed. Gozhob will return his spirit when you command him with the words 'nur tyem, setaf tiris.' Remember these words."

Kaul repeated the words silently, and nodded.

"Good. And remember, do not let the spell fool you. You have until the sun has set on the third day."

Kaul touched his father's limp hand. His intellect told him that Gallinule spoke the truth, that this was their agreement, but his heart pounded and his eyes burned, unbelieving.

Gallinule laid Dagh on the ground. "And now, my fee."

Kaul groped for the bag of coins and paid the wizard.

Gallinule put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You have your sailing papers? Enough money?"

With difficulty, Kaul pulled his gaze from the limp form of his father. He counted the silver remaining. "Yes... enough."

"And when does your ship sail?" he asked gently.

"With the morning tide."

"Then you'd best get him aboard. Where is your box?"

Kaul pulled himself to his feet and with great weariness, brought the coffin into the hovel. Gallinule helped him lay the body within, packing straw from the second pallet for cushioning. Kaul winced with each blow as Gallinule nailed the lid shut.

At the wharf, Gallinule bid Kaul goodbye. The clouds dispersed like a blanket rolling away, exposing the harbor to the sharp cold. Frost edged the ship in the moonlight and silvered the ropes. "May you sail on to good fortune," the wizard said.

* * *

It was still dark when the tide turned and the schooner lifted her sails to glide from the calm waters of the harbor into the winter chop of the sea. Wind and waves tossed the vessel like a cork, and rain and sleet drove Kaul below where he hung in a hammock and retched into a bucket. Yet it was not sea sickness alone that caused his stomach to churn. Like a moth circling a candle, his mind returned again and again to images of his father waking inside the coffin in confusion and terror, of the deck hands prying the lid away and discovering the deception, of a noose lowering around his neck.

Day passed, and night, and still the schooner sailed through the storms. The second day dawned. Gray waves and

gray sky passed with stubborn sameness until he could no longer see them in the dark.

The third day. At mid-afternoon, the schooner dropped anchor in a bay near a village nestled into the arms of a low hill. The crew lowered a longboat from the ship with the boxes and crates that were to end their voyage in Leal. Kaul sat next to the coffin with his back against the old sea chest. A feeling of emptiness, of hollowness pressed on his stomach.

Two of the King's Men strolled down the beach as the longboat approached. "You coming to Leal?" one shouted into the wind, wading into the waves to pull the boat up onto the sand. He wore a good-natured smile that reminded Kaul of someone he'd seen before.

Kaul fumbled out of the boat. "Yes." The word croaked out from a dry throat. "Yes," he said again.

The soldier with silver in his beard nodded, and the men pulled the boat ashore with a mighty heave. The crew slung boxes out of the boat and Kaul pulled his aside. Two children stared at him, their play among the bits of driftwood arrested. The older of the King's Men oversaw the grocer and the ironmonger as they checked the manifest, while the other soldier, the one with the bright blue eyes and the wide mouth, ambled over to Kaul. "People don't often come to Leal," he said. "What's your business?"

The knots in Kaul's stomach tightened. He kept his eyes at the King's Man's feet. "I've come to find my uncle. My father died. I'm bringing him home." He bent and opened the chest for the King's Man to inspect, then stood back meekly.

The man took a cursory look in the chest then pointed to the coffin. "This is your father?"

"Yes—please don't open it. He's been dead... three days on the ship, and two before that." He couldn't let the King's Man see Dagh's stumps.

"I'm sorry."

Kaul nodded, his eyes firmly directed to the sand.

The older soldier handed the manifest to the mate. "Not plague, now—" He marched up the beach as the grocer and the ironmonger hurriedly tugged at their supplies, alarm written on their faces.

"No, no. He's old, that's all."

The older King's Man called over his shoulder to the mate. "Bring a crowbar!"

Kaul's breath burned in his throat. "Please," he whispered.

"What?"

"Don't... hurt him."

"He's dead," the older soldier said.

"Yes. Of course. That's right," Kaul said. "He is."

The mate brought a crowbar. Kaul shoved his hands under his armpits as the two bent over the box. His breath came in short puffs that misted the air.

The nails were pulled from their sockets with a rending sound.

“What’s this?”

The lid clattered to the pier and the soldiers gagged at the release of the stench. Illusion, Kaul told himself. Illusion —

“He’s a thief,” the mate said. “He’s been caught.”

“Twice,” the younger King’s Man said. “Leal has a law about thieves.”

“But he’s dead,” Kaul said. “He can’t rob anyone now.”

The mate leaned on the crowbar and looked at Kaul. “Maybe you’re a thief, then.”

Kaul held out his hands. “I’m not. Look. I’m a dock hand.”

The younger King’s Man studied Dagh’s face in puzzlement.

The older soldier covered his mouth and nose with a handkerchief and leaned over the coffin to listen to Dagh’s chest. He poked him and lifted an eyelid. “He’s dead, all right.”

“Please.”

The King’s Man straightened. “Let him go.”

The mate shrugged and hammered the lid into place and took his crowbar back to the boat. Kaul hugged his hands

beneath his armpits, lest the soldiers see relief visibly wash over him. Only a few minutes, an hour, and he would find a secluded place. Chant the words before sunset —

“Who’s your uncle, then?” the younger King’s Man asked.

“His name is Hauken.” Kaul breathed again and reached for his sea chest. “He has a farm—”

“Hauken!” The King’s Man said in surprise.

Kaul’s hand froze in mid-gesture.

“Your uncle?” the man cried. “Then we are cousins! Hauken is my father.”

“Your father?”

“Yes! Our farm’s just up the road. I live there with him—and my mother, and my brother and four sisters.”

Kaul stared. Yes, the smile was familiar, though Dagh had not smiled that way since... Kaul couldn’t remember. When Mama was alive. And the way this man punched the air to emphasize a point, and the way he tossed the hair from his eyes

—
“My name’s Airn.”

“I’m....” Kaul took in the village all over again—the beach, the ocean, the rocky headland. This was his family’s home.

Family.

He flinched at the knot that gripped his throat. “I’m Kaul.”

Airn's gaze moved from Kaul to the coffin. The silence of gulls and breakers and the men pushing the longboat into the surf hung between them. Thief.

"I promised Dagh I would bring him to Leal. To—" He had to finish. "To bury him."

"But—"

Kaul managed a brief glance at Airn's stricken face. "Don't worry. I won't come to your farm. Once I've earned passage, I'll go back to Discort. You don't have to tell Hauken. About Dagh."

Airn's eyes flicked to the other King's Man. "No," he said. "Dagh was my father's brother. He'll be buried in the town graveyard, with the rest of our family."

What?

"My father will want to know."

The older King's Man nodded. "I'll find you a horse and cart." He walked up the beach toward the village.

No, this was all wrong—

Airn smiled again, this time—what? Sorrowfully? Pityingly? "And you are my cousin. You must come to the farm. My father will want you to join us."

"But Dagh—" The words tumbled from Kaul's lips before he could stop them. "He's a thief—he *was* a thief. You're a King's Man—"

Airn put his arm around Kaul's shoulders and shrugged. "I'm sure... there were circumstances."

Circumstances, yes! Life in Discort was hard. Kaul knew that. Dagh wasn't bad. He wasn't. Anyone in those circumstances would have done what Dagh had done. Survive, any way he could.

Anyone.

The King's Man brought the horse and cart, and they loaded the chest and coffin. As they bumped over the frozen ruts, Airn recounted his family's story, but Kaul couldn't fix on the words.

This wasn't the plan. He was supposed to find a quiet spot in the forest and summon Gozhob to restore Dagh's soul before anyone discovered them. He hadn't intended to look for Hauken at all.

Now, his cousin—*his cousin the King's Man*—knew Dagh was a thief. And, thought he was dead. How could Kaul explain Dagh's return to life now? And what would happen to Dagh, after all, if Kaul brought him back now? A life in prison? The gallows? And what would Airn say when he found out that Kaul had lied to him?

It had all gone wrong when Airn met him on the beach.

But... a cousin. The offer of a home. Kaul shook his head. A cousin!

Airn turned the horse through a gap in the hedgerow into a snowy lane. Fields, cut into odd shapes by fences of stone, fell away over rolling hills to the forest in the distance. Just ahead, a group of buildings on the edge of an orchard clustered around a well. Smoke rose from the chimney of a comfortably rambling house.

A man—Kaul could have sworn that it was Dagh, by his gait—strode from the barn, coiling rope over one shoulder. He stopped when he saw the wagon. A small boy at the well stared for a moment, then ran into the house calling, “Mama! Mama!”

Airn jumped to the ground. “Father! Look who’s come! Your nephew, Dagh’s boy. His name is Kaul.”

Kaul slid across the wagon seat and let himself down. A woman hastily pulling a thick shawl over her shoulders hurried from the house, followed by the boy and four wide-eyed girls.

Hauken’s coiling slowed, his face a mask of wonder. “Dagh?”

Kaul hung back, looking to Airn for a sign.

“My nephew?” Hauken dropped the rope in the snow and spread his arms wide, peering into Kaul’s face in amazement. He gathered Kaul in his arms and held him close for a heartbeat, then pushed him back to look into his face. “Kaul?”

Kaul nodded.

Hauken's eyes brightened and his throat worked. "I had a letter. Once. Remember, Airn? We got the priest to read it to us?" He fixed his gaze on Kaul's, drinking in his every feature. "Dagh said he had a son." He nodded in confirmation. "Boy, you look so like your mother." His lips pressed closed and trembled, eyes fierce with remembrance.

Kaul pricked with hot shivers. His uncle's frame was small, like Dagh's, with short legs and powerful shoulders and arms, and his skin had the same leathery look from sun and wind. But his face was fuller, his hair thick and fair, his nose straighter.

Moisture glistened in his eyes as he smiled in a way that made Kaul want to curl in his arms and feel strong hands on his back. Kaul ducked his head, inviting forgiveness, and was rewarded with another close hug.

"Now, now," the woman said, prying Hauken's arms from him to give her own hug. "Another son of the family! Such a blessing!" The girls and little boy crowded around in excitement.

Hauken sniffed and looked over the wagon. "And Dagh?"

"My father. He's...." Kaul hung his head. How could he keep repeating the lie?

"Kaul brought Dagh to be buried in the town graveyard." Airn looked at Kaul with a slight nod that said 'tell him.'

“My father—” Kaul stopped, and all eyes were on him, open, expectant. “My father had a hard life,” he said.

Airn nodded again, a prompt.

“He—he died a thief.”

There. It was out. Kaul hung his head in the shocked silence.

“Well,” Mother said.

The late afternoon wind chilled.

“Hauken.” Mother’s voice was a whisper on the breeze. “The boy must come in and have dinner. He’s thin as a chick.”

Hauken nodded and put an arm around Kaul’s shoulder, leading him to the house. “Forgive me.” His voice strained to speak against his grief.

Forgive Hauken? After all the lies Kaul had told?

“I can’t think of Dagh, except the way I saw him last. Twenty years ago, hauling that sea chest up the gangplank on that big ship. He had plans, Kaul. Confidence. The whole world was too small for him. He and your mother were going to Discort to make their fortune.” He stopped at the door to the house. “Whatever happened along the way... well, I don’t know about that. He’s still my brother. You’re my son now.”

Kaul shook with the responsibility.

“Come in, then, and eat. Airn will bring your chest as soon as we’ve laid Dagh in the barn.”

The girls crowded him inside, giggling until Mother set them to supper chores. The smell of savory meat and the warmth of cook fire and candle light surrounded him.

“I’ll hang your coat on the peg,” a little girl said.

Through the window, Kaul watched as Airn and Hauken pulled the coffin from the wagon. The sun touched the horizon.

“Here’s a basin of hot water.” The oldest girl dimpled a smile and set the steaming bowl before him.

Minutes remained. Airn and Hauken strained under the coffin’s weight. Gozhob awaited the consummation of the soul he carried. Nur tyem, setaf tiris. He only had to run from the house, open the lid, and cry out the words and his father would be alive.

“Girls. Put the chicken on the table.”

The sun was a burning semi-circle resting on the hill.

He was a thief, already, for using the money from the candlestick. He was a liar for saying Dagh was dead. If the sun set without the words spoken, he would be a murderer as well.

“Pour the ale. Put the gravy in the pitcher.”

Kaul could not move his feet.

The sun disappeared behind the hill.

The sounds of plates clinking, chairs pulled out. A giggle.

If he ran to the top of the hill, now, just now, would the sun still be shining over the sea? Kaul stared through the window at the empty farmyard.

Dead.

Dagh was dead.

Kaul pounded his fist into his chest. Tears of fear and relief and betrayal and grief streamed down his face. Dagh was saved from the gallows, wasn't he? Saved from prison? From the censure of the village and the disappointment of his family?

Yes. Safe. In the fiery belly of a demon.

Hands touched his shoulders. "Weep, child." Mother's voice. "Tears will cleanse you. Let them come."

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Co-winner of the inaugural Galaxy Project (with her novella, "Lucy," Rosetta Books, 2011), juried by Robert Silverberg, David Drake, and Barry Malzberg, Susan Forest is a writer of science fiction, fantasy and horror. She is a member of SFWA and SF Canada, and works as a fiction editor for Edge Publishers. Her recent sales include "The Most Invasive

Species” and “Rent in Space,” to *Analog*. Her YA novel, *The Dragon Prince*, was awarded the Children’s Circle Book Choice Award, and her story “Turning It Off” in *Analog* is a Finalist for the 2012 Prix Aurora Awards for the best Canadian F/SF. You can check out her website at www.speculative-fiction.ca.

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A MARBLE FOR THE DROWNING RIVER

by Ann Chatham

The drowned girl wasn't there when I went down to the dock after lessons. My sister says she doesn't like it when the light is bright out, but I've seen her laughing in the weeds when the sun comes out after a rainstorm. Sometimes it's hard to tell when my sister doesn't really know the things she says, or when she makes them up.

Anyway, it was bright except for the mist, which made it brighter, and I'd brought the drowned girl a gray marble I'd stolen out of Talla's school box, but she wasn't there so I could give it to her. So I was sitting at the edge of the dock with my toes just brushing the dark water when the boat appeared like a ghost out of the mist.

I almost jumped up and ran away before I saw it was only a low canoe, and not my uncle's boat, or someone else who'd yell at me for sitting on the dock in school clothes. Instead, the boat came skulking along the bank of the river, with a girl a little older than my sister pushing it along with nothing but a long pole. I'd never seen anyone do that before, but it's what they say smugglers do, when they need to come in silent

someplace too thicketty for oars. She was pretty good at handling the craft, too, and when she got closer I could see a bunch of sacks packed in the hull that could have been full of upland herbs or bird bones. Then a little closer and I saw there was a man lying in the bottom of the boat, big like ballast and not moving, and I wished I weren't still sitting there in my pale linen tunic that showed up against the dark wood and water.

The girl didn't look too happy to see me, either, but she didn't say so. "Whose dock is this, boy?" she asked me, her voice soft like a nightbird on the water.

"Jonwaterman built it," I said, and looked down at the man in her boat. Close to, I couldn't even tell if he were breathing. "Is he dead?"

She shook her head, slinging a dark pigtail over her shoulder crossly. "Still makes too much trouble for that."

The drowned girl had taught me that being dead didn't stop everyone making trouble, but maybe she didn't know different. "What's wrong with him, then?"

"A witch upriver put his soul in a jar. What's wrong with you for asking?" She jabbed at a knot of reeds with her pole, sending the prow of her boat sliding under the dock an arm's length from my feet.

An alligator bellowed somewhere out of sight, and we both jumped. I thought about asking if people could really do that,

put someone's soul in a jar, but I knew the kind of look my sister would have given me for asking something like that, so I didn't. I didn't ask if she were a smuggler, either. "You come to trade?" I asked, instead, kicking one leg back and forth, casual-like.

"Not unless you're giving out moonlight 'n' diamonds." She put out a foot and stopped the boat against the dock before she ran into it. "You know a woman 'round here called Jeannielee? She used to lay cards, when she was younger. Maybe still does."

My feet stopped swinging. "No."

"But you know something." She crossed her arms and looked down at me, one foot still propped on the dock, the pole tucked under her elbow, looking very grown-up.

"I know someone called Jeannielee," I admitted, "but she's dead. Still lays cards, though." It was why I'd stolen the marble for her, after all. The girl didn't look like she believed me, but that wasn't my sorrow. "What did you want her for, anyway?"

She tried to shrug like she didn't care too much, but her pole must have caught on something and she staggered and sat back down on one of the sacks in the boat instead. I was sorry when it didn't snap like bird bones, but maybe she'd put those in another sack, out of the way. "Nothing."

Behind her a hand the bluey-gray color of deep swamp mud gripped the side of the canoe, and I grinned, watching.

“If all you wanted was nothing, Jolee, it’s a pity I came out to see you, don’t you think?” The drowned girl has a voice like the river flowing, but you can always hear what she says. I think it’s some kind of magic.

The Jolee girl scrambled around like someone had pitched a rock at her, tangling her feet in the sacks and nearly kicking the big man in the head. “What happened to you?” she asked, staring at the drowned girl with her mouth open. I could tell she recognized her from before, even with the gray-clay skin and pond weed hair. That would be something to tell my sister, who thought the drowned girl was some kind of river spirit and never was alive to begin with.

The drowned girl smiled, and Jolee flinched away from her black teeth and alligator eyes. “You telling me you don’t remember?” She pulled the end of the canoe down a little way, looking into it, and reached out a long arm to poke at the man in the bottom. “Your mother not looking after him, anymore?”

“My mother’s dead, Jea. Some silk-coat from one of the city houses did for her two seasons back, and now I’ve grown up enough, Sanga’s taken an interest. She thinks I’ll go work for her now she’s got him in a jar, all hostage.”

The alligator eyes opened wide, staring at her, and I didn’t dare move in case they noticed and made me leave. The silk-

coats didn't come this far downriver, but we knew about witch's squabbles sometimes. This was better than smuggling, even.

"You've got some trouble for yourself, then," the drowned girl said, all quiet-like.

"You think I would have come looking for you over any less?" asked Jolee, staring right back like the drowned girl didn't scare her, one hand on her waist with the elbow cocked out and the other on the pole, so tight her knuckles showed pale. "I know you hated my mother, but I thought maybe you'd still care what happened to him. And I couldn't just leave him for Sanga, could I?"

It was very quiet for a little, and then a bug landed on the back of my hand and I jumped. The drowned girl looked at me, and then back to Jolee, who hadn't moved. "Some could have. How old are you, girl? Fifteen?"

"Sixteen last month," said Jolee, her mouth crunkling up like she was cross to admit it.

The drowned girl nodded slowly, and her eyes flicked over to look at me again for some reason. I held my breath until she looked away, and I felt the round shape of the marble press into my hand. "I've been in this river ten years, then, wondering if your mother, or Sanga, or any of the others would ever come downriver. And now it's nothing but a half-trained

girl looking for help. I'd been saving up to hate you, but I wasn't any older than you when I washed up here."

Jolee didn't say anything, but she got an expression on her face like she wanted to ask, "So are you going to help me or not?" but knew better than to open her mouth, and the drowned girl laughed at her.

"So, Jolee-girl who I won't hate, what did you bring with you to tempt your mother's rival into helping you? Or did you think that big soulless lump in the bottom of your boat would be enough for me?" She grinned the way my sister grinned when she told me I'd got in trouble for something, and looked up at Jolee with her arms crossed over the stern point of the boat, dragging it down a little more.

Jolee hadn't left off scowling, and I started to feel bad for her. Nobody'd ever said the drowned girl was nice, though she's never been mean to me. "I brought food and clothing and the bits of my mother's chest that didn't go with her. I don't guess somebody dead is going to want all that, but I don't know what you want instead."

"I have a marble," I said. They both stared at me, so I went on, "It's cracked glass, and gray like—" this was the important part, how you described things, and I'd been working on this one all day— "the mist on the river at dawn, lying low under the white roots of a ghost-tree, with a secret hidden in its heart. I

was going to trade it for a question to ask the cards, but she can have it if she doesn't have anything else."

Neither girl said anything, so I went on, "only, if there are bird bones, can I have one of them?"

"Bird bones?" asked Jolee, like I'd just said I wanted to eat river mud, so I guessed she didn't have any.

"My sister says real smugglers trade bird bones to the witches upriver, and they burn them to make magic."

She blinked at me. "Maybe the silk-coats do. Only thing I've ever done with bird bones is eat the meat off them."

The drowned girl hadn't left off staring at me. "Why are you helping her?" she asked.

I shrugged. "You were being mean. And I wanted to see some real magic. If you take my marble, you can't tell me I'm not allowed to watch."

"I can," she said. "But I won't. Does that sit steady with you, Jolee-girl? You'll owe a debt to the living instead of the drowning river, and I'm betting you'll find that easier to pay."

Jolee looked from her to me and back again, and she muttered something that might have been "bird bones" under her breath, but she nodded.

I held out my hand with the marble in it, and the drowned girl reached out her long fingers and lifted it gently out of my palm, not even touching me with one of her fingernails. She

rolled it in her hand for a moment, looking into the misty shadows in the glass, and then swallowed it, grinning almost like she was still human.

“If you want to see magic, boy, come back here in the midnight. Now, your people are looking for you.” Then she slipped back under the water and dragged the canoe upstream into the marshweeds, with Jolee sitting there wide-eyed, staring at the water as her pole caught on things and pulled loose.

* * *

I hid one of the winter blankets, rolled-up, where I should have been sleeping and slipped out to go to the outhouse. After that, I just kept going around the back. The hardest part was not being afraid in the shadows under the trees, but I didn't jump or scream or anything.

When I got down near the river there was a kind of glow, like the moon was shining out of the reeds, so I knew where to go. There was a gap in the reeds I didn't remember seeing before; my sister would have said it was just the different light, but I thought it was part of the magic. Beyond that, somebody'd laid a plank path down to the edge of the water.

The drowned girl was floating there in the middle of a clear pool just under the surface of the water, as still as if she'd been fresh drowned, except it was her what was glowing as

bright and pale as summer sky. The canoe was wedged half-way into the reeds next to the last plank, and Jolee sat in it next to the man who wasn't dead, looking cross. She looked up when she heard me, and frowned harder, but I didn't pay her any mind. This was real magic, and I thought I could see the light shifting the same way the marble had been cracked, so maybe I'd helped make it.

We sat there for a long time, and the sounds of the river got very loud but nothing moved except the drowned girl's hair in a little bit of current, and maybe me, smacking a mosquito. I think Jolee must have had a charm against things biting her, because she didn't even twitch. Then the moon came up over the reeds a little, and then a little more, and the circle it made in the water moved towards the drowned girl, and maybe she moved towards it.

There was a big splash, and I opened my eyes and tried not to fall off the end of the plank where I'd been sitting. I didn't even remember closing them, but the moon was at the center of the pool and Jolee had just rolled the big man out of her canoe and into the water.

I couldn't tell how she'd done it without capsizing, but maybe it was the drowned girl that held the canoe steady as a rock, the same way as she was holding the big man's head up, with his face just out of the water. I hoped her magic kept away

the leeches, because otherwise he was in for a nasty surprise if he got his soul back and started caring. I knew what happened when you went swimming in the slow bits of the river, and it was even worse if you held still too long.

The drowned girl was singing. It came up through the sound of the river, and I couldn't tell what the words meant, but somehow I knew she was singing about sunlight in winter and staying up late to hear the best stories told and the bird that built a nest right outside my window so I could watch its eggs hatch. Even Jolee stopped frowning so much.

Then the singing started to say, "Come here." I would have, too, but I could tell it wasn't talking to me. The drowned girl was calling the man's soul, saying, "Come back to me. See all these good things? You want to be close to them, so come here."

The glowy light started to swirl around the man, too, until his skin looked as gray-blue as the drowned girl's. Then it was like the drowned girl's song came up out of his chest right between the rib-bones, only it was more of the light, and it stretched out in a line heading upriver farther than I could see. For a little bit it was the same bluey moonlight glow, swirling like water in a rapids, and then the part that flowed away started to turn red like a bloodstain, spreading back from upriver down towards the man.

The red bit got all the way to him, and the man gasped and twitched all over, like a dead chicken, only bigger. Jolee made a noise, and then behind the red light, there was a big black shadow, flying like an owl the size of half the sky, and the drowned girl grinned like she'd got oranges for her birthday, and kept on singing.

“Sanga,” she sang, “Come bring me that jar you have, so I can put your heart in it.”

The big shadow came close, and now it was somebody in a raggedy black cloak that looked like a vulture's wings, hovering over the water like a dragonfly. “Jeannielee Waterwitch, we killed you years ago. You have no business to be meddling in my spells.” Sanga's voice was croaky like a vulture, too, but even mad she said her words prettier than anybody I knew.

The drowned girl was still grinning, but she stopped singing, and the light around the man faded out. She gave him a shove towards Jolee, who grabbed his head up quick to keep it out of the water. “I'm not meddling,” she told Sanga. “A price got paid the river to give a man his soul back. Wasn't my lookout who was keeping it.”

“You know the girl who asked for it, and you know full well, or should do, that I was her mother's heir, and thus the girl and her stepfather both are mine until she proves strong enough to claim her share and independence. Your poor

attempt to reclaim a man who preferred another woman when you were alive is no justification for flaunting the laws of custom and magic.”

The drowned girl laughed and shook her head in the water until her hair moved like a nest of snakes. “I’d say the girl’s proved independent enough when she can boat three days downstream without you coming looking for her. But you’ve the wrong fin here; it was the boy-child who bought this magic from me, and the drowning river’s got no need for lovers.” Her arm came out of the water and grabbed Sanga’s ankle. “The drowning river wants revenge.”

Sanga’s cloak-wings flapped like crazy and she kicked with her other foot, but she couldn’t keep the drowned girl from pulling her slowly down. “Come here, boy!” she said, like she thought I’d listen to her.

The drowned girl laughed again, and pulled a little harder until Sanga’s foot touched the water and went under. “I pulled that boy out of the river when he wasn’t old enough to walk, and gave his breath back. Saved his sister a beating, too, and whatever she would’ve felt for letting him fall in. That boy’s the living river, and he won’t listen to anybody ‘less he wants to.”

The cloak-wings had got wet at the ends, and they weren’t flapping so much now. The drowned girl kept pulling, and I wondered if she was going to kill her. I hadn’t seen anybody get

drowned before, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to. I didn't stop watching the magic, though.

Beside me, Jolee's step-pa had woken up some, and he splashed me as Jolee pulled him into her boat. They still didn't turn it over, but this time it rocked and sent ripples towards the water where the drowned girl was still dragging Sanga down. She was up to her waist now, and the glowing light made weird ripples around the edges of her, under the water.

Anybody else would have started screaming, but I think Sanga was too proud. She just made a thin cawing noise, sort of like a bird, before the water closed over her head, and the light stopped shining from the drowned girl and went all around her instead.

I was afraid to say anything, but my mouth said, "please don't kill her" without making any sound, and it was right after that the drowned girl let go. Sanga shot up out of the water like the cork from a good cider bottle, only she wasn't a woman in a big black wing cloak anymore. Instead the thing that flew off over the rushes was a big black waterbird, sort of like a heron, only darker, and it made the same thin cawing noise that wasn't a scream over and over until it got too far away to hear.

The drowned girl came back up, and it was harder to see with just the moonlight, but I could tell she was smiling. "Bird bones," she said to me, and I smiled back. "If the silk-coats do

want them, think what they'll pay for a bird nobody's ever seen before." So that was all right.

"Can you teach me how to do that?" I asked. "The glowy magic, at least?" I didn't think she was going to teach me to turn people into birds anytime soon.

"No," said the drowned girl. "Drowning river's ways won't work for a little live boy. But Jolee can, and she owes you."

I looked at Jolee, and she shrugged, holding close to her step-pa.

"Well," he said in a slow deep voice, "we may as well wash up here as anywhere, if there's work. Nothing for us back upriver, anyway."

I nodded; there was always work. And maybe, once Jolee'd taught me about making glowy magic, we could find out how to turn people into birds on our own. Just in case we ever met somebody else who needed it.

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When not getting distracted by other people's books or the internet, Ann Chatham mostly makes things. (Worlds, wildlife

gardens, clothing, dinner....) In real life she shares a small house near Baltimore with her husband, their cat, and his turtle. On the internet, something about her can be found at www.thanate.com.

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COVER ART

“Remember,” by Zsófia Tuska



Zsófia Tuska is a Hungarian graphic designer and art student, specializing in concept arts, photomanipulations, and advertisements. Her favorite themes are the legends, mythology (especially the Celtic and Norse mythology), and fantasy/science fiction. She is freelancer but is interesting in

work in a studio or ad agency. View more of her artwork at DeviantArt.com.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1046

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

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