



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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[“Boat in Shadows, Crossing,” by Tori Truslow](#)

[“Misbegotten,” by Raphael Ordoñez](#)

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BOAT IN SHADOWS, CROSSING

by Tori Truslow

Come, let me whisper you a tale of the city where I was born, the Town Where Salt-Plums Grow. A summer tale: dark and succulent, with a bite of chill—the kind we love to tell on warm thick nights.

Picture that place, between the soul-swallowing land and the heart-stealing sea, where once a merchant prince carved himself fine pleasure-gardens out of the swamp. Picture dusk shivering the water; hear the night-bells blooming! Picture a broad waterway sinking into moth-thick twilight. On the bank red grasses murmur, and the sky is ruffled in patterns like lace or lizard-skin.

Hear the city shuffling its canal-streets, shifting its bridges. Just days until summer's heart, the Carnival of Crossing. Time, soon, to shed old lives for new. Clots of wilted blossom hang over house-barges, dripping down, making way for festival fruit. Nestled there, under the trees' shadows, is a carved red barge with fat yellow lanterns. Inside, a party of youths, all intent on astonishing each other with weird wild happenings.

One, in pretty robes and rueful laughter, told the rest how a sun-tree ghost followed him through the gardens all day, lithe and coldly shining, asking if he'd come live with her.

"I told her I already have a wife," he said. "And besides, I prefer my lovers warm."

The servant who sat with them laughed at that. A new boy, handsome and dark; good enough fun to invite to the gathering. "What a narrow view of love you've got, Cail," he said. "Why, only yesterday I saw the happy fruits of a love between living and dead."

The first's man's brother shook his head. "Don't encourage him, Bue."

"Ah, Jerrin, let the lad have a turn," said Cail. "And let him fill our cups as he does."

Bue poured their cups full to the brim, and served himself too, as none had forbidden him. Then, long fingers fidgeting with air, as if pulling words from the wine-scented lamplight, he spoke:

* * *

I always knew I'd get into the city, knew I'd not spend my life making fish traps in a swamp—though it was fixing a trap that got me here.

It's old living, in the mangroves; quiet living when the men lay down their whiskey-songs. I'd sit up by night between our

old walls, looking out to the shine of the city, listening for its bells, its beat. I thought of slipping off more than once, I can tell you; creeping upstream and finding all the dangers, all the temptations the drunks dribble about. But my thoughts were always interrupted by the house, the walls. Pa said those planks weren't special, just bits of old market-boats. But late at night they smelled of salt; muttered in tide-voices like souls chewed up by the sea. Their sighing kept me fixed, and their rhythm steered my weaving.

One midnight I was mending a split trap, and thinking: I wish I had a way to make them better than the rest, get my Pa more fish. Mutter-stutter went the walls, and I stuck my fingers through the thing's wicker mouth, grabbed hold of the death inside it—snagged like threads on the splinters—and wove it back into the sides. You follow me? Want, chase, take, I told it; swallow us a great fat catch. I made it fins and tail of palm, stones for eyes to see. And Pa took it next day and hung it in the water.

Now we'll see, I thought. But when Pa went to fetch it that evening, it wasn't full of a great fat catch. Can you guess what was inside? I must have been dreaming of city girls when I fixed it up, because—well!

Picture it: the trap tied to one house-pole by a long cord, and I'd patched it up with the hunger of dead things. Would

you have stayed in one place? Ha! Maybe it swam as far as it could, death woven through it like veins, gaping its mouth in hope of swallowing some life. Maybe a plump fish came by, shining and quick! Maybe they liked the look of each other, maybe they danced, spun and tumbled in the current and turned the water milky.

So when Pa pulled it up he saw its middle swollen full. But no fish inside, just a clutch of wicker beads rolling about—a bellyful of eggs! Pa didn't know what to make of *that*, so he left them in a bucket and went to pull up the rest of the traps. Well, Ma found the bucket, only by then they'd hatched: little basket-shoal with kicking tails and sucking mouths. That's what sent my folks off boasting about my talent, and that's what got me here.

So I should thank that fish-trap, really, though I won't say I'm not jealous it got all the fun that night.

* * *

So the servant finishes his tale. He tells it light, not as if it means anything much.

But I'll tell you a little more. Listen: down in the mangroves, just a few days before this story-telling night, a certain fisher pulled up wicker eggs that turned into wicker fish. He showed his wife the trap that bore them, shiny stones

tied onto it like eyes. She shook her head and turned to their daughter.

“It’s because you made it too lifelike,” she scolded, “and now something’s possessed it.”

“Oh, no,” the daughter said. “I made it more deathlike. So it’d suck fish to the same fate.”

And her parents thought, and conferred, and spoke to their cousins and their neighbors, who all agreed: a girl with such a talent could marry well.

One said he’d heard of a wealthy ice merchant from across the seas with an unmarried son, who needed someone with haunt-tricks to help their business—he had bought a ghostwood barge to use as a roving shop but couldn’t get it to go. Now, Bue’s parents cared for their daughter but not for ghostly fish-traps—and to be joined to a merchant family was a fine thought. So they asked her, as they sat down to supper, what she thought.

“But Ma, Pa, who’ll tend the traps?” Under her calm face, dismay tumbled with delight. The city, the city! But as a merchant’s wife?

“I can do that,” her mother said. “Just think! No more blistering your fingers with work, but sitting in a high chair and commanding a house! And there’d be money to send home.”

“So send me as a servant,” Bue said, ladling soup into their bowls. “I’ll earn you some coin, and I’d rather work with my hands than worry about accounts.”

“I’ve heard nothing good about rich boys and servant girls,” said her father.

Bue’s smile was not a delicate thing but a big rash grin when she said, “why should I be a girl?”

And her parents were not hard people. “Ah, is that how it is?” said Bue’s mother, who had seen her nodding at shrines to the double-god Kam. “It’s a week till Crossing, isn’t it?”

“Go as our son, then,” said her father. “If you find yourself happy, well enough. If you change your mind, come home for the Carnival, and we’ll send you back as our daughter.”

Have I confused you? Oh, to be telling this tale in my own tongue! They say a bad workman blames her tools, and maybe so, but your language throws up strange borders. Understand: to her parents, Bue was a daughter, but to herself? Neither “he’ nor “she’ is exactly right, and nor is any third word. But these are the words you understand, so I’ll do what I can with them.

Bue packed up her things: a pillow, spare shirt and trousers, her knife. She took the baby basket-fish, all tied on a string. The egg-bearing trap, she set quietly into the canal. Its spawn must have had a father—perhaps they’d wish to be

reunited. In the dark water it beat its tail; went swift through the sluggish current.

Then she sat and fixed traps. The weaving hurt her fingers; the walls were silent, the night slow.

Morning came from the city, beckoning, and she was ready. She kissed her parents, set out with their neighbor. Out, over the ever-widening web of canals. Past the spiry silver and gold temples of the stars and moon, out to the north of the city, where ancient pleasure-gardens draped themselves over the banks. Where the bronze trees rang and the flame trees reached up to the sky; where rich squares of land were joined by sly pivoting bridges. Where the tall houses were dark shining wood with trailing silk curtains; where barges carried not goods but learning. Where the women wore organza gowns and grew their hair long, and only men kept theirs short. A glistering, jeweled web of a new world.

Its waters and trees, bridges and boards all swelling with more ghosts than Bue could fathom.

* * *

But let's return to that night of skittish lamp-lit tales and see Bue savor the merchant-sons' laughter, play for their admiration. "How we laugh at boys like you, in the mangroves!" he said. "Pale and flimsy with riches, they say, but

not me—I think you’re very fine. Your father too, Cail, a wise man! I knew, from the moment I met him.” He went on:

* * *

Wise to buy a boat built from old wicked wood, when all the modern merchants go scrabbling after craft made with demons’ trickery; wound-up ghosts in engines they were never meant to haunt. What speed is worth owing a debt to *them*? No, give me natural haunting any day—but a ghosty boat with pretty carved fins won’t go if it doesn’t want to, and there’s my entrance: bundled off by my proud parents to earn some gold. Bad luck, the village must’ve thought me, weaving death in the night while they worked and slept. Bad luck and good riddance, said their eyes when I went. But I think ghosts are like dice: you can be lucky or unlucky with them, and I got lucky.

So I told this ice-seller—your good father, I mean—I can do anything you like with haunt-stuff, no problem. Boastful? If you like, but I believed it that morning, when the world and I stared at each other like new things. “Good,” said he, and showed me his boat. It was splendid, I said—didn’t ask where he’d got it from, or whether its eyeless grinning face unnerved him. “You’ll be well treated, boy, if you get this boat swimming by tomorrow—otherwise it’s back to whatever you were before.”

Well, I bided my time till dark, waited up for that deep kind of night that gets ghosts restless. We're heading toward that time now, and I'm sure the boat can hear us, so shush me if I crow too loud for beating it—it might swallow us all. Think it wouldn't? Listen to the games it played last night.

Under the brooding black I put my hands to its deck, which looked so smooth in day. It stuck me full of splinters. Too late, the thought squirmed in my brain: this is nothing like the fishes' ragged little deaths. Maybe my luck's run out.

The canal ran colder, the dark got me sharper, and I felt the thing twitch. Not the surface; something under, full of size and pain and yells turned to knotty wood. Who'd cross that? Only a night-mad fool clinging to the city he's only just won. Time to show what I'm made of, I thought, and spoke with a man's swagger: "I'm your commander now, you'll obey me."

The planks went warm, and wet, with a hollow gurgling noise that rose into a whisper. I hope you never get to hear that sound. It turned in my guts like a key; said I'd woken it.

"Good," said I. "You've work to do."

Then I saw that the sound came from mouths and mouths and mouths that had opened like wounds in the screens and railings, all toothed with thorns, and all with a voice like a twisted crowd jammed in a bottle with just one throat between them.

“I’ll swallow you up,” it said, “and suck the spirit from your bloody bones.”

“Ha!” said I; “I’ll jump overboard first, and I swim fast.”

And with a ring of mouths that drew close to me along the floor, it said: “I’ll eat you right where you cower.”

And, trailing mouths across the ceiling, it said: “I’ll catch you if you swim, too.”

“Oh, so you can catch anything?” I scoffed, and—

“Anything!” it grated with all its splintery mouths. Oh, I had it then.

“Well I say I can release a fish you can’t catch.” How it laughed! Didn’t it wake you in your big house-boat? It laughed like it knew I’d end up squeezed among the untold deaths in its gut, and asked if I was so ready to bet my life on that.

“I am, and a bet it is,” said I.

And so we made a deal: if it could catch my fish, it could eat me and whatever else it liked. If not, it would do as I bade. And it seemed to still be laughing, but the sky was lightening, though night’s hours hardly felt spent, and I saw that what I had taken for mouths were in fact just cracks in the red paint.

The merchant came. Time to test my luck! I tossed one little basket-fish over the side. In the water it turned lively and, feeling the furious thing behind it, shot away. The boat went after it with such a jerk that it broke its mooring, but it stopped

at the busy street corner, not knowing which way the canny thing had gone.

“Now, boat,” I whispered into its wood, proud as anything, “remember our bargain. Chase again if you catch its taste, or else go where I steer.” The merchant clapped his hands; I took my place by the monster’s tail, and away we went!

* * *

“You were so sure your creature would be fast enough?” said Jerrin.

“Child of fish and ghost,” said Bue. “What could be quicker?” He told them how easily the boat responded to him, tail-rudder beating in the water; how the people who lived on that canal came to the windows of their stilt-borne houses and waved, shouting “he’s done it at last!” He told how they wove this way and that, calling out their wares: frozen treats, chilled teas from across the seas. The dawn blazed, the water was calm, and the things the boat had said were easy to forget under the dancing shadows of the flame trees.

“Ah, enough,” said Jerrin, though the other boys looked glad of a chance to think of daylight. “We don’t want to hear about father’s work. Let me have my turn now.”

“You’d do well to listen,” scolded Cail. Jerrin frowned and poured another cup of their father’s wine down his throat.

“I’ve more mysteries,” promised Bue, who had tasted what it is to have an audience. “Listen: this is the best bit.”

* * *

Round another corner, we came to a wide water-square, where market boats mingled and the shoppers went needling between them in their canoes. They all turned to stare at us, knocking their boats’ noses into each other, as we moored ourselves at the square’s edge. We did good trade, selling sweets in icy syrup to curious customers; serving tea right at this table. If they saw the boat’s great big grin just under the water, they stayed quiet.

Just as we got set to go, I spied something in the water, and the boat sensed it too: flick of a palm-leaf tail. And we were off, so fast that the pots of tea leapt from the table and were on me like freezing rain and I was on the floor. The merchant didn’t topple like me but he yelled louder, shouting at me to stop it, but what could I do? I tried, pounding on the floor like a fool and saying no, no, not now! But I knew we’d go till the boat lost the fish—or caught it.

Well, it lost the trail in the end, and we found ourselves in a dark street with tall teak houses all leaning together over the water: rich-looking, but with something secret and starved and half-mad about them. Their jutting fronts stood on skinny stilts

with slimy ribbons wound around, little ghost shrines hanging like birdcages on chains from under box-windows.

We glided under a red glass bridge that hummed when shadowy folk walked on it, and beyond it the water was even darker and quieter, like dusk. It spooked us both; I think even the boat wanted to be out of there. But the way was too narrow to turn, so on we went to the end—and were stopped by a song. It fell from a high window in a high house with walls carved to look like rotted leaves; so thin I could see light shining through them.

And what a window! It had some haunt-charm on it: a frame carved with birds that beat their wings and dipped their wooden beaks in wooden flowers. And what a song! Its telling was nothing so strange, a maiden who comes to Salt-Plums chasing her sweetheart and gets snared by a demon, but the singing of it—

* * *

“That song!” cried Jerrin, wild-eyed. Bue reached for the slack thread of the story, but Jerrin blocked him again. “Do you remember it?”

A word about the ice merchant’s sons. You know how brothers are in stories. Everyone knew that Cail, born when his father had first arrived in the city and could afford to eat only plain rice, raised in uncertain years, was clever and dutiful.

Everyone knew Jerrin, born in his father's fine house-boat, raised without hunger or care, was lazy and stuffed with dreams. He loved indulgence, in smoking or gambling or falling in frequent hopeless love.

Even more, he loved words, long strings and bolts of them, more wonderful to him than things. There were words enough to be found in the city, perhaps too many, budding in its orchards and dancing on its spires. He could hardly look at the sun sequinning the canal without verses threatening to burst him open. But how dappled the city's song; how knotted its meter! He wrote calm water but knew the water might hide market-trash and murders and magic. He wrote angel-faced beauties but knew lovely faces might mask all manner of bodies. He wrote in a bold black hand but knew city ink had stories of its own.

Still he sat, with heat-fogged head, fighting the ghosts that flowed in his pen, late into the night. And once, this led to a strange adventure—listen to him tell it to the boys on the boat, now:

* * *

It was a year ago, on one of those nights when everything bloats, when I heard that song myself. I was sitting at a window in the house-boat, trying to pen something calm, something still, but outside I could see the fruit on the trees swelling

enormous in time with the tide. Too hot to write, or to think, I went to walk in the garden, under the glower of houses with their windows lit late.

The air, flat; pressed down by the sweltering belly of a long summer. I plucked a peach and bit; it burned my tongue with salt. A pair of lovers lay like stifled dead things in the old stone pavilion, and a barge, a barge stole past on the water, with shutters thrown wide against the heat, glittering voices and light out onto the deep rippling street. It was a learning-boat, and inside a scholar was reciting ancient verses, in perfect shape; sweet and spare.

I'll follow that boat, I thought, out of this cut-up windowy night and into whatever calm place of reflection it's bound for. So into its wake I slipped, in the lovers' cast-off coracle. The boat drew me up and down the waters, its wake so bright, but oh, night's streets—how they drift you astray.

I felt a thin breeze and lifted my face hungrily into it, and so I never noticed the city stirring until the way had diverged and a dark current was drawing me down a dark canal. There, spindly houses pressed together as if sharing a delicate secret, and in the gloom of that place I was caught in a net of black honey that oozed from a window above, and that honey was song.

I saw a house above me, with walls carved like worm-eaten flowers. And the window—it was no trick of the shadows—unpainted grain shifting like light, and wooden hummingbirds shifting in their sleep. And then the singer showed her face. Shining golden as the young moon, eyes black stars—oh, and this is pathetic praise, words cannot touch her. But how I burned.

I've long forgotten the purity of the poem that led me there, only the mess of the song that fell on me from her window—you know what I speak of, Bue, if your story's true! That song, oh, sing it!

* * *

So Bue sang:

'Who is there,

Boat in the shadows?

Be merchant, be pilgrim or thief?

Only your lover

That followed the lure

Of jasmine in your night-long hair

Come where it's secret

Over the river

My face a mask

My teeth are sharp'

And Jerrin replied:

‘Who is there,
Boat in the shadows?
Be soldier, be fisher or priest?
Only your lover
Unwinding the lure
Of jasmine in my night-long hair
Come where it’s secret
Over the river
My face a mask
My teeth are sharp’

“And her face, Bue, did you see her face?” cried Jerrin.
“Was it not perfect?”

“Like the moon rose in her room instead of the sky,” said
Bue.

“Like she was grown as a pearl in a shell—how bright, how cold!” Jerrin grasped the servant’s face and kissed him in joy. “Bue, you’ve saved me! I tried to call up, that night, but no words would come—I took myself home to write them, but nothing was good enough. I went back to find her, but you know how this city is, how it moves according to its own sour whims. I searched and searched and it was no good. Either she was a dream sent to madden me, or she’s Poetry itself and the jealous streets twist to keep us apart. But she’s no dream, you saw her—and surely our clever boat can find her again!”

Cail laughed. “And then what, Jerrin? Bring her home and settle down like an honest man? I know you, you’re too idle, too selfish to marry.”

“I would marry her!” said Jerrin. “Bue, you’ll help me, won’t you?”

Jerrin had grown fond of Bue from the first moment they’d spoken. Here was a boy with quick wit and a hunger for the world; despite their different circumstances, conversation came easily to them. Now here he was offering Bue a part in a wonderful romance, and yet Bue was silent.

“Besides,” continued Cail, “you’re incapable of uttering a word to her, you said so yourself.”

“That was a year ago! I have some words now; I’ve dreamed of her every night since last summer.”

“Keep dreaming,” said Cail. And so on. Kindled by Bue’s story, Jerrin grew more fire-hearted the more his brother taunted.

And Bue? Bue felt the helm of the story snatched away. Was this adventure over so soon; were girls at windows better suited to tangle with city-sons than swamp-daughters?

She had not told them the final scene of her story. On that dark street, the ice merchant had clapped Bue on the shoulder, told her to put on a bold voice and cry out their wares while he put his scattered goods back in order. So Bue did, and the

singer stopped her song, said she would try a bowl of ice-syrupy fruits. Her voice was as impossible as her face, gold ringing on glass.

She lowered down a basket with a shining ruby inside. “Is it enough?” she asked.

“Oh, more than enough!” said Bue, and sent up the bowl, cold sugared fruit sliced in thin ribbons. The woman’s black eyes glittered bright at the taste, and she threw another ruby down. “Keep that,” she said. “And bring me a bigger bowl next time.”

And heat rose in Bue’s chest like a summer tide.

But she said nothing of this to Jerrin, who, furious at his brother, declared he would win the girl before the week was out. “That’s an empty claim,” said Cail. “Make it a bet if you mean it. I say you won’t marry, and certainly not by Carnival-Night.”

“And I say I will, and a purse of gold says so too.”

“A purse of father’s gold? That’s no bet. How about your inheritance?”

“Are you mad?”

“No, child, you are, for thinking anyone would marry such a lazy fool.”

Well, drink and brother-baiting make a heady cocktail. Jerrin agreed to it quickly: his luck, he knew, had turned with Bue's coming.

"You'd better find out her name, then," said Cail, and laughed and laughed.

* * *

A city takes longer to dress for a festival than you or I, and no city loves to decorate itself more than the Town Where Salt-Plums Grow. There are days, as the season thickens, when the water-traffic and the shining air sound like a pulse, thrumming eager for the nights when the streets will deck themselves with painted faces, the buildings with bright lights. The trees bend over the water and try out new colors and scents. The island of Kam's temple sends out paths and channels like arms multiplying, beckoning people into itself, to come hear the tales of the double-god; to mark the nights until the Crossing.

The next day was one such, and Jerrin lay on the canal bank by his father's house-boat, with his head as night-bruised as his innards. The sky was all buzz and blossom, snarling through his thoughts. When the afternoon congealed to a sticky yellow, the shop returned from its rounds, drifting through the dusk like an old red ghost. He called out, and after securing the boat in place, Bue came to lie on the bank beside him.

“Nothing’s clear, this time of year,” Jerrin moaned. “It’s this heat that’s to blame for my rashness last night.”

“Changed your mind, then?” said Bue, who had brought Jerrin’s pipe, filled it, and taken a long taste before handing it over.

“No!” he cried. “I can’t lose her again. Say you’ll help me, Bue? You must know more of girls than I do—how would you win her?”

“Tell a dazzling story, write a pretty verse, make her laugh. And if I were you, make some modest remark about my father’s wealth.”

“Ah, I wish I had your manner.” As he said this, a wonderful idea struck him. “You’ll talk to her for me!”

“Oho, you’ll keep your fortune by getting another to do your courting for you? You’re a better businessman than your brother guesses.” Jerrin cuffed Bue lazily, and Bue took the pipe back. “So what’s my bribe?”

Jerrin pretended not to hear the last. “I’ll write the words, you’ll take them to her. A perfect romance, words over distances—speaking without speaking.”

“Are you going to talk to her when you’re married, or will I have to stick around to help you then, too?”

“You’ll do it,” said Jerrin, bored of joking. “Or I’ll have you sent back to your swamp, where you can practice your wit on the crabs.”

* * *

So Bue, with cautious hand, tried to steer the tale again. Through the gloaming, through the vapor-clogged air; trusting the boat to taste its way back.

Night stretched and breathed, spilling its people onto the bobbing sidewalks, shining its lanterns, slipping into the blood. The boat glided on streets Bue had never seen, but here a doorway, there a bridge, was familiar. And here was the corner to the old thin street—but when the boat tried to enter, its bow crunched against a bank of marshy ground jutting with mangrove-roots.

“That’s new,” Bue. “But you can get past it, can’t you?”

The boat made no response, only sat waiting as the tide crept up. Sampans wandered by, their occupants unconcerned by the changed land.

When the water was lapping over the banks, the boat pulled itself up by its fins and crawled, red paint flaking on the hard roots. The scraping of its hull sounded like bitter threats against Bue, but it still went, lashing its tail and chomping at the growth. Then they slid into the deep street beyond, where a warm breeze knocked the houses together so they chuckled

low. Song trailed on the water, reeling the boat to the wide-open window where Bue tilted up her face, mouth open as if to catch the sound on her tongue.

The song broke.

“Who’s there?”

“A poor beggar.”

“I’ve no coin.”

“Then spare me your name,” said Bue. “My master would worship you, if he only knew what to call you.”

A face appeared in the window, and all else fell into deeper shadow. “You! It’s late to be selling sweets, isn’t it?”

“That’s not what I’m here for.”

“But still to do business. This master of yours, does he let you sleep?”

“Never mind that. He wants you to know, O melodious moon, that he’s spent a year of sighs on you—won’t you repay him?”

A light laugh like breeze, shaking petal-flakes from the house’s wooden skin. “Sighs are a strange currency,” she said. “What can I do with them?”

“Oh,” said Bue, “he has a lifetime more to offer. He’s a poet, sweet lady, and a single one of his sighs beats ten of any other man’s. And *do* with them? Why, nothing at all, but won’t it be nice to know how worthy they are?”

This made the girl laugh again, but this laugh was better: sudden and belly-deep, an escaping thing, quickly bound up again. Leaves of house-wall showered and sank. “I’ll give you my name for that,” she said, lips of dusk-red rose, tiny teeth of pearl. “Though whether it’s really for your master is anyone’s guess. I’m Wyrisa.”

“I’m Bue.”

“And how did you come to steer a monster, Bue?”

“I know a few tricks with haunt-stuff.”

What was it that stirred on that shining face? Bue thought she could see the hollows under Wyrisa’s cheekbones, as if her golden skin was just a thin-stretched film. Such lovely skin.

And sharp and secret things lie under lovely pools.

Bue’s blood-beat said: away, away, get away. What was this place?

“Your street tried to stop me coming,” she said to Wyrisa. “It’s not like any street I’ve seen before.”

“What are other streets like, then?”

“Haven’t you seen them?”

The other laugh, the unpretty one, came again, but this time sour and thin.

“My room has no door,” she said. “There’s a song about it.” And she told Bue all she had to call a tale:

* * *

Door unborn, waits in the walls, blooms when love calls....

Why do they sing, these shining shadows? Why make the shapes they do? Ladies with bird-faces and velvety lizards, crawling toads with heads upon heads upon heads; instruments strung with star-white water, strummed by bone-fish with their spines—my only companions! They sing all night, lullabies left by my mother and father.

I heard the city's big as a world, and full of things to chew you from the spirit out. The songs won't tell me what gnawed up my family—if I had a family. Sad girls always do, in songs, but not the things that tempt and snare poor wanderers-by—which do I seem, to you?

Oh, but these walls sometimes sing of a man and woman who were slowly swallowed by something, who loved their girl so much that they wouldn't leave her in human hands—who can you trust? I think it's me they mean, so a girl I must be. Maybe I've some desire to snare, certainly to sing, never to gnaw on souls. But if the songs are true, who can live in the city without a spare face or two?

So they left me with shadows, and such a clever house to dwell, to keep me tight and safe and well! Wood from the boughs of a hundred trees; walls with a hundred haunt-gifts.

I used to think they'd come back—like one of the songs says:

Mother's gone to the forest
Hush-oh sleep,
Or the crow will eat your eyes
The snake your insides
Hush-oh sleep!
She will bring back lychees
From the demon's tree
To keep your cursed days sweet.
Hush-oh, sleep.

She never came. The lychees did, and other plump fruit to eat, every dawn on my table as if they grow in the night. Jewels, come like damp with the rains, and they rot if I don't scoop them up. My ceiling puts out new lamps in summer, and the window lets me show my lovely face. I've all I need in my little room, till the day love comes boating by and it buds me a door—oh, it must be nearly now—

* * *

She whispered so, Bue had to half-climb the ragged walls to hear, tip-toe on the boat's railings. Flakes fell from the house like ash; gold light shone through the cracks.

There was only the sound of houses clucking softly together under the heavy black breeze, as Wyrisa leaned out. The shadows in the carven window-frame came with her, as if

unwilling to let her face go; catching at her tumbling sky-black hair, blotching her taut cheeks.

Her lips tasted just like her songs—sweet and dark, cinnamon and plum.

“Do you know, you’re the only one who’s ever come back,” she whispered against Bue’s face. “The door’s a summer fruit, I’m sure.”

The shade shifted on her cheek, something with splaying toes and a twitch of a tail.

Bue tumbled to the boat-deck, stammered something about needing to get back.

“To your master?” Wyrisa said, looking down, window-framed once more, flawless and cold. “A fine mask to wear.”

“I’m not he!” Bue said, and slapped the boat, and fled.

Shadows thicker than the night stayed sticky on her skin.

* * *

Next day—one more day until Crossing—Jerrin found Bue sleeping on the deck. “Up, Bue! You should be cleaning the boat by now, but I won’t tell. Did you see her? What did she say?”

Bue stared at him, with the look of one who has woken from a deep, devouring dream and gulped down too much dawnlight.

“She didn’t say yes, she didn’t say no, spoke in riddles. Her room’s doorless; her people chewed up by the town long ago.”

This was wonderful news to Jerrin. “No door? Then she’s waiting for a brave lover to cut the way! Oh, perfection, we’ll go at once and free her!”

“Beauty so perfect is a sure sign of ghosts,” said Bue. “That house is rotten with death—what if she’s dead too? I won’t go back there.”

Now to Jerrin the day seemed to be turning sweet as a story—but ah, this is not his story. His father appeared then, commanding Bue to ready the shop; Jerrin to call at the docks. And so both lads spent the bright hours working, both hearts whirling. How tired their hands and heads were when night came, and they met again.

“Tomorrow, at first light,” promised Jerrin, and crawled to his rest.

Bue lay down on the shop floor, adrift on instant sleep despite the boat’s dark prickling. It spiked into Bue’s dreaming, Bue who walked as a prince through trees of snapping shadow, with the boat’s knotted ghosts for companions; all seeking release. They tugged him forwards, and Bue woke to feel the night sliding over his cheek.

Had he forgotten to secure the boat, or had it slipped away of its own accord? It went slow, predator-quiet. Bue went to

look over the bow. Late wanderers went by in needle-boats or drifted over bridges. Lights floated in the water, living pearls imported from the Night Isles, and centipedes from the same land twinkled over the knotty banks. The double-god Kam's faithful were out, lighting shrines by the high water or creeping with clay-filled hands to change the sex of any deity-figure they found. The streets and houses murmured all around, hazed by white smoldering trees, glowing branch-tips that trailed throat-burning fragrant smoke. They dropped ash on the boat as it swam below. Between the trees were shining plants, branches laden low, offering bottle-glossy fruit to pluck.

The humming air shaped itself into words: away, away, come away....

And Bue was awake and hungry. He pulled down fruits and opened them, and found oily pastes instead of pulp. Gold, white, green, red. He gazed into the black water and painted himself: eyes and cheeks of a proud queen, jaunty moustache of a questing prince.

The boat went on under the ashy air to a window adorned with sleeping birds. The house flickered, paper-thin against the lamplight beating within, shadows licking up the walls like a flowing tide. No face shone from the window; no song fell.

“Wyrisa?”

“You, again.” She came to the window, golden face almost translucent. “And with a new mask—what new games have you come here to play?”

“It’s nearly Crossing-day! My master’s coming in the morning, to cut a doorway and rescue you. You want to come with me, come see the city putting on its lights, or wait around for him?”

“If he’s not your invention, perhaps he’s my true love,” she sighed. “And the walls wear themselves thin to welcome him.”

“You truly think?”

She seemed almost transparent now, eyes huge in their sockets—Bue almost expected to see veins and the creases in her skull. “I think the door could be another monster’s maw, to gulp me down to my fate. I think I’d be a fool to wait dreaming for that. But then is my choice to be rescued by you instead? And who are you, with your smiling boat?”

“I’m not asking you to come away forever,” said Bue. “Just for the festival. But it’s true enough: you’ve no call to trust me.” Then he told her all: his girlhood, her boyhood, the boat’s bargain, Jerrin’s bet. “Last night I half-convincing myself that you’re a dead thing hungry for my soul, but that’s not it. Seems we’re both in a net—”

“Seems you got into yours yourself—”

“—but we can go, paint ourselves new! Look, the city’s growing festival fruits.” He held them up, ripe, split, oozing gold and silver paste. As if in answer, the decayed walls put out new shoots, thick and thorny.

“And my house is growing brambles to keep me in. If I climb out they’ll tear my face, and who’ll want me then?”

He swore he would—if she wanted him—and she pulled herself up to crouch on the windowsill, and took a wide look at the night, and jumped through the thickening stems. Bue fell as he tried to catch her, fell still-grinning to the deck. Oh, but don’t be so quick to grin with him—

Wyrisa looked at him, and her face was blotted with a mark like a lizard, petal-scales and claws of thorn, curling from jaw to forehead along the left curve of her skull.

“How do you like my real face?” she said, and finished her earlier song:

“Mother’s gone to the forest,
Hush-oh sleep,
Or the crow will eat your eyes
The snake your insides
Hush-oh sleep!
And she will bring you branches
From a ghost-fed tree,
To frame your cursed face sweet.

Hush-oh, sleep.

“Boughs from a hundred trees to make my room, a hundred haunt-gifts, and the best of all to make the window. A ghost so fixed on beauty that it cast faces on anyone who’d stand in its shade, lovelier than any living thing. That ghost’s pale shadow, you loved; not me.”

“But your eyes,” said Bue, looking at her, at the life that bloomed in place of those polished black stars. “They’re just like eyes!”

She laughed. “That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard said. And my bad-luck mark—aren’t you scared?”

“Haven’t I told you?” Bue said. “I’m lucky enough for two.”

Very well, then: be quick to grin with him, as you do for heroes full of luck and pluck. We could leave them there—only the moon was high and the night was big and the drums were calling over the waters. And so, let’s follow them.

“To the festival?”

“To the festival.” She jutted her face forward, and Bue painted her like a boy hero from a masked play, then pulled her up to the narrow sidewalk. “Go on,” he whispered to the boat. “Go celebrate however boats do.” Then they sidled around the corner to the next canal, where they saw the tail of a great crowd, boats and bank-walkers, winding into the thick of the city.

They followed the fattening crowd to a lantern-starred isle strewn with sand and straw, where Kam's tall shell-studded temple stood. The air was full of swelter and balm, the compound crammed with entertainers and market stalls. "What's this?" said Wyrisa, as Bue bought the hottest, sweetest, stickiest items from every stand to pile into her hands.

"This?" Bue looked to the great tent of white paper that stood, like a giant's lantern, at the heart of the temple courtyard. "It must be a shadow-show! Let's see it!"

"Not more shadows," said Wyrisa, but Bue tugged at her hand.

"These aren't your haunt-shadows. Just puppets and light."

"Ah!" cried Wyrisa as they ducked inside. "So bright!" She shied her eyes from the tent's core, not a wooden pole but a column of lamps like a dazzling fish-spine, going up, up, up to the slatted ceiling. All was still, the paper-wrapped space holding its breath.

Everyone in Salt-Plums knows the story played in that place, but I'll tell it to you, and forgive my words—poor shadows of shadows!—for not getting close to the wonder of it. First comes the colorful shade-parade of acrobatic tigers, serpents, bulls, peacocks, chased by the long-tongued

storyteller who calls to them to stop and see the tale: *The Wandering Lovers, or How Kam Married Theirself*.

“But where’s the puppeteer?” said Wyrisa.

Where indeed? There was only streaming light and no place for a puppet-man to hide, though all could hear his chanting. Musicians dangled their legs over the slats above, but the shadows could not be flung from up there. The dancing silhouettes seemed part of the tent-wall itself.

Were even temples now turning to haunt-tricks to awe the crowds? No, Bue thought, it must be Kam’s magic, holy and joyful!

Now the story unfolds: here is Kam the tiny god, performing small kindnesses where it can. Here, a princess who stepped out to see a little, only a little, of the world but fell so in love with walking that she could not stop. Here, a prince who fled his father, a wicked sorcerer-king. See them journeying from opposite directions, see them reach the Town Where Salt-Plums Grow, where instead of ever onwards, the wanderer is drawn ever inwards. Shadow-houses and filmy trees flicker and twist, light rippling like water between them.

See Kam the tiny god meet with a hundred little mishaps. It tries to help a fisherman but tumbles into the water. See the shadow-fish leap! Kam is pulled out by a fisher girl (our princess in disguise, of course); the god promises her a favor.

Oh! she gestures. See her thoughts: a man kept as a demon's slave (isn't he that same exiled prince?). The fisher girl would rescue him if she could leave her duties for just a day. So Kam splits itself in two: one half dons the princess's face and takes her place, the other puts on the prince's shape and stays with the demon while the lovers make their escape.

Now, with them safely away, prince-shaped Kam challenges the demon: who can produce the most astonishing thing from this locked cupboard? The demon brings forth a man who breaths out full-grown lions, lions with vines for manes, vines whose fruits burst into stars that float up to the sky. The god nods and takes its turn, opens the cupboard to reveal itself—theirself—split twice more into the shape of the new-married couple. The demon's mouth stretches so wide in surprise that it snaps back, envelops his body, and he's gone.

Now see Kam the great god, stooped double to fit on the walls, dancing the year round. For a season she is the princess with her fish-basket. For another, he is the runaway prince. And for the final season the pair united in one form, the god male and female.

And now it's the heart of summer, the day when Kam makes that crossing again, and all the revelers cross in turn. Perhaps just for the day—morning after, many will cross back to being sons or daughters, wives or husbands, but others will

stay. And there are those who don't call themselves men or women in any month, who dance along today's canal-banks with everyone else, dance in perfection.

For summer has come. And summer mingles all things.

* * *

See the lovers, new light on their gilded faces.

See the wide deep street, turned by the sun to burning silver.

Hear the drums, the bells, reverberating over the water. But hear, too, the low melody hiding in the air, hiding with teeth and tails in it. "My room," Wyrisa whispered. "It's somewhere near."

"Forget it," said Bue. "That ghost-eaten thing, it'll be dead by evening."

And so they stepped over the threshold of this day that stretched long and lovely as a shining lake before them.

But sharp and secret things lie under lovely pools.

See the thin house peering from a thin alley, dripping the dust of its walls to the muddy ground.

* * *

The procession wound all round the canals, faces flashing bright. Wyrisa and Bue followed on sidewalks and over bridges and, as the day ripened and burned off the shallowest streets, along the cracked mud and slime. A summer novelty, to walk

on the canal beds rather than skim above, among the year's inventory of lost and sunken things. They saw drowned toys, trinkets and animals' bones. They saw a stranded Carnival boat of young boys with painted ladies' faces, striking parody poses, all but one making themselves giddy laughing at each others' antics. The last of their number simply peered at her new reflection in a puddle and smiled; her friends didn't laugh at her.

They came to the Market Square, where the water was still deep, and saw a floating stage, where the mask-features of the dancers flashed from prince to princess to both to entirely other with each flick of their fans. They watched, delighted, from a platform under a heaped block of shophouses, swinging feet above the flower-starred water.

"My lullabies never told me there were so many other ways to be," Wyrisa said.

"Most days, there aren't. Kam's religion is young, but the way their story-chanters have it, there were once more than a hundred genders—you can tell from old stories, they say, whispered histories, and from the shape of our language—but the city merchant-princes boiled them down to two. All the rest get squeezed into this one festival. And we should squeeze them back out. Or, that's what some of Kam's followers say."

"Wear ourselves however we like, whatever the season?"

“Yes.”

“Well, get this face you’ve painted off me then, and let me do my own.”

So Bue wiped Wyrisa’s cheeks clear. Under her fingers, the lizard-mark was warm as any other skin, warm and still.

They said nothing, only saw each other brimming with light and shade both. And Bue did not see the thing that thrashed across the square: a rough-hewn canoe with a crocodile’s tail, and Jerrin scowling atop it, face unpainted, eyes searching the crowds.

But Jerrin saw Bue and stopped sharply under the platform. “What have you done with my boat?” he yelled up. “Where’s my bride?”

Bue looked at Wyrisa, who turned her face away. Of course, Jerrin could not recognize her without her window-face. What to say?

Before Bue could think up a story, Jerrin yanked her by the ankle to the churning craft. Hitting the wood and twisting to look back, Bue saw that the old rotted house had somehow crawled in among the jumbly tower of shops. There was a flash in its triumphant window: Wyrisa’s foot, glassy and golden, vanishing inside. Had it swallowed her up, or had she fled there?”

“Wait—!” Bue called.

The canoe shot away, ghost-fast.

* * *

Now, Wyrisa saw Bue snatched away, but all she could hear was wood creaking like sharp musical strings behind her: *eat your insides*, it rang. Had she ever thought she would escape that place? Oh, they had beaten it once. Oh, but it was so empty, so waiting.

She turned to face it, and the lizard-marked side of her face twitched cold. Then she went, as she had known all along she would, climbing into the waiting shell of her room, where old blue shadows lay on the floor like drifted ashes. Canal-light came through slack-mouthed gaps in the walls, dancing up over the beams. Pulse of silver. New season, new world, how strange and bright! How to snatch it back, and catch Bue again too?

Hush-oh, stay inside, the pooled shadows breathed. The shadows that had loved her. *Or the world will eat your heart*. The shadows that had told her she could be a girl or a ghost, nothing more.

Hide safe until it's time.

Disguise, came the thought. My love is fond of faces.

On her dressing table were pearl-tipped hairpins, bright brooches, tiny jeweled scissors. Wyrisa scooped them up, went to her window, drove the scissors under a carved bird's back,

and worked, how she worked! She used her long hard nails and sang to drown out the whimper of the walls as she filled her fingers with splinters, as she bled.

The wood under her hands pulsed and cried like a living thing, a murdered thing. She shook her head against her own tears, for the place that had cradled her; for the window that had given her the golden skin of the moon. Outside, below, the Carnival twirled on into the afternoon; bright masks as far as the eye could see. None saw her.

Wrench. Bleed. Carve. With a cry of savage joy, at last, she flung the bird into the air. And it flew! Lopsided and wooden, buoyed with purpose, it flew.

* * *

Have you ever waited alone for a lover as the light goes out of the world? It can make you sick, and how much more so when your blood is still running and your home cooling about you like a corpse? Wyrisa saw the street drying up and slowly lengthening, all the trees along its banks putting out clouds of tiny flowers to hide the retreating city in white. She heard the laughter and life of the day recede into the distance. But she waited.

And Bue came in the dark, as the tide began to trickle back. Swinging a bundle of dry white flowers, wearing thin wedding garlands.

“Why are you wearing those?” cried Wyrisa. “Where’s my bird?”

And this is what Bue told her:

* * *

Your bird! Afraid I’ve lost your bird—but I’m getting this all backwards. I’ll try to tell it right.

Will you come down? Ah, don’t look like that! I know it’s late, but did you think I’d find you quick? I had to get away from Jerrin first, and then everything was swallowed up in summer smoke and dust!

You should have seen his face, his fury! He whisked me off on that cursed crocodile-boat—I didn’t ask where he’d got *that* from—back to the gardens, raging at me all the way:

“Is this how you repay my friendship? I woke this morning and thought, where’s the boat gone?” he said “I feared for you at first, ha! What if the boat caught the fish-trap, I thought, what if it’s taken Bue off and eaten him?”

“Then other thoughts crept up on me—perhaps you’d given up your task, too scared to see it through, and you call yourself a haunt-smith! Where would you go? I went to your village, all the way, to all that mud and gloom! I’m looking for a lad called Bue, I said. Trap-maker, cocky, clever with death. Bue’s a girl, an old grumbly man said, my neighbor’s bad-luck daughter.

Someone scolded him then, for speaking ill of one of their own, and for naming someone's sex on Crossing-day.

“Well, I came back in a bleak haze, but my luck turned on the Market Square. I've got you, and *you* can be my wife, for I've still a bet to win.”

I felt what he meant about a haze. The air was all heat and haunting and bells and dreams and dead houses and the taste of smoke and splitting fruit. I was off floating, far from myself, had to get back, how to get back? I thought you'd abandoned me, and I still couldn't think of anything else.

Jerrin started up talking again, but I stared without hearing until he dashed canal-water in my face. “That's better,” he said, as my make-up dripped away. So angry, he was, but something lost about him too.

“You're a fool, Jerrin,” I said. “What kind of wife would I make for you?” But I knew I was stuck.

Then I saw we were going under low-leaning trees, and I managed to pull myself up on one. Then what? Walk all the way back? It was all I could do. Jerrin got up on the bank and came cursing after, and though I tried to lose him in the bundles of people walking by the water, he was never far behind.

But as I pushed through the crowd something flew down to me, a wooden bird, one half of it all pretty and polished, the

other cut rough. I knew just what it was. “Hop on my head,” I said, and it did, just as Jerrin caught up.

I sneaked a look at my reflection in the water and saw a face like a puppet’s, my hair in ripples, and the bird floating there like some mad new comb for fine merchant-women to envy. It made me shiver, my skin all glazed like that and eyes turned to coins. And more of a lady than I’d ever looked in my life—but then, I hardly looked like me at all.

Jerrin stopped and cried: “Oh! What goddess are you, come to walk the festival among us!”

“No,” said I, and it was the bird’s voice I spoke with. Had to fight in my throat to get my own voice through, and I spoke in my regular low tone: “I’m no goddess.” Oh, and he didn’t know if I was man or woman then, but I could see how he wanted me.

It was a fine idea of yours, but the bird’s ghostly little heart wasn’t so strong as when it was stuck in your window-frame, and its power flickered over me. So Jerrin chased, and saw my true face, and said he’d leave me be if I could help him find this strange new beauty he had seen. And Jerrin chased, and saw my mask, and claimed such love I’d have blushed if my cheeks weren’t false and frozen. I led him along until I couldn’t keep it up and fell over laughing. He tried to kiss me, and saw my face flickering, and oh, poor boy, he didn’t know what to do.”

“What are you?” he howled, and then shook his head and said, “no matter, just let me go and face my ruin.”

Well, I'd been cruel enough, and to one I'd called a friend. So I told him the whole thing, and made him a deal. After all, I figured his silly bet had given me a new shot at the world, even if he never meant it to. So I went with him to his brother, yes, wore the wedding garlands, even sang the promise-songs, in my ghost face. How the little bird struggled, to keep me frozen for long enough—but it did. And I made certain Jerrin knew it was the ghost he wed, and the bird knew it too, and ah, you should have heard it sing! But it was a broken thing, and I made him swear he'd burn its spirit free, eat salt-plums in its honor.

I left him a widower, but he kept his inheritance. If there's a thread of sense in him, he's learned his lesson.

I walked all the way here; no clever boat to carry me, no incense-trees to beckon, only my luck to feel the way. The city stretched itself out, streets dried to hot clay and grown so, so long, but I walked them.

And I could turn back around now and go home; I will if you tell me. But I'm no-one's wife, if you'll believe me. I'd be yours, your husband, your anything, but just come down out of there!

* * *

In anger Wyrisa came down, the anger of ruined fingers and long cold hours and marriage-games. Or perhaps it was boldness, the boldness of shaking off old faces. Or—and I think this is the truth—it was both.

They stood in the deepening street, and realized they knew where they were: they place where telling stories to each other was no longer enough.

What follows is their own affair.

* * *

Isn't that satisfactory? That's the way of the city—it doesn't tell complete tales, but you might find pieces of this one in fragments from other tellers' tongues. Like those who write accounts of all the strange fish you can find there, all their blessings and curses: the crowfish that scream at dawn in bedside jars, or the long leathery eels that were once men and should never be eaten by moonlight. And the most talked-of these days, the basket-fish: scales so very much like weave; hollow of meat and pebble-eyed. There's a tale told about how they came to be, woven with wood and death and boldness into a sort of life; empty as wishes, hungry as love.

They also speak of an alley-gliding monster, a red boat with fine latticed screens and grinning teeth, forever chasing basket-fish. And why not? Perhaps it wants the chance to become something new, too. Because that's the blessing those

basket-fish bring, as the stories have it—if you manage to catch one as they flash fleetly by.

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MISBEGOTTEN

by Raphael Ordoñez

Elerit posed as a girl whenever he wasn't working. His looks could go either way, and he liked to wander the carnival grounds without being pointed at by every heilot in Sand City. After all, he was paid by the hour. The industry serfs could gawk at him all they wanted to in Prodigy Alley.

He liked to rub shoulders with the marks, wander up and down the gas-lit aisles, in and out of cabarets and saloons, game booths and augury tents. Sometimes he would sit and watch the thrill rides and skill gauntlets whirling through the fervid air, mesmerized by the garish lights and the gyration of the blood-stained bludgeons and the tinny music that failed to drown out the scream of machinery.

But for him the main attraction was at the hub of the carnival, where Hex the Inexorable gave oracles through his shapely interpreter, Vera the Virgin. From a distance he would watch the maiden mediate between god and supplicant.

One night he actually found himself buying a ticket and getting in line. "Hex knows all but reveals little," said Vera when his turn came. "What do you wish to know?"

“Does love solace the lonely heart?” he asked.

Her eyes widened a little when she heard his voice. She put the question to the god, who began gesturing with his six jointed arms, rolling his enameled eyeballs in their sockets, and emitting puffs of steam. She observed his movements, then said, “Maybe.”

But Elerit had already vanished.

The next night he waited in line as before. Vera spotted him immediately; anticipated his turn. “Did you ever eat a day-old octopus?” he asked.

She watched the god’s response, then put her lips near Elerit’s ear and whispered, “Yes.”

He could smell her hair, feel the warmth of her body. She wore a white silk tunic and flowing black pants. He thought she looked very fine. “It must have been mighty small,” he said. Vera’s eyes danced. She turned away and asked for the next supplicant.

During his break on the third night he dressed exactly as she did and fixed his hair like hers. He went over and hid in the shadows. She was peering this way and that, looking for him. His heart gave a great thump. He shuddered with pain or delight and fled back to Prodigy Alley.

Vera came down his aisle later than night, pausing at each exhibit to listen to the recordings. When she reached his booth

she studied him from toes to head. Her eyes were gentle butterflies. They fluttered about his midriff, then flitted to his face, questioning. He gestured. She smiled and moved on to the next booth. She was soon out of sight.

When his shift was up he slipped into a gown of golden sea-silk and set out across the grounds. Anticipation sent electric tremors through his frame. "Life is good!" he sang to himself.

He was passing the shooting gallery when a gangly albino caught his eye. He froze. His desire shriveled like a salted slug. The man turned, pointed the toy crossbow at him, and let off a bolt. Then he winked and went back to his game.

Dread coiled and uncoiled in the pit of Elerit's stomach. He stood there in the revolving lights, wondering what he should do. It was just a coincidence, he told himself. He went on his way. His joy came back in a rush.

Soon he was crossing the space between the last line of booths and the boxcars. The shadows tittered at him. Cold fear poured down his back. He went and hid beside Vera's car and looked out. But there was no one in sight. Once again he put it out of his mind.

Vera glided across the lot a moment later. He stepped out as she passed. "Have you ever ridden a mechanical cheboth?" he asked.

“No,” she breathed, “never.” He pulled her close and kissed her. “You’re so beautiful,” she whispered, running her hand over his breast. He stroked the nape of her neck and her long, golden hair. “I could lose my place because of this,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “I’ll go away if you want me to.”

“I don’t want you to.” She bit the heel of his hand.

“Listen.”

“What? What is it?”

“I’m no heilot, you know.”

She drew back, looked into his eyes. “You mean...?”

“I’m a fugitive from the Asylum for the Misbegotten. There was an earthquake... many of us escaped....”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I’ve been so lonely.”

“Can I come inside?”

“If that’s the way you want it.”

“That’s the way I want it.”

They went inside.

* * *

Elerit stepped out of the car. It was a few hours past midnight. The sleeping carnival was a crushed insect huddled under the ghostly glow of the city. He went down the steps.

A clammy hand settled on his shoulder. Then a small, hairy fist drove into the side of his face. He staggered in a circle.

“Go easy, Micah,” a voice whispered.

“I know what I’m doing,” hissed Micah. Elerit started to spring. The next blow blacked him out.

* * *

When he came to he was stumbling toward the fence, held up by two men. The earth was like a lunar landscape under the magnesium torches.

“Hello, Brideon,” he said. “Hello, Micah. Let me go. I won’t give you any more trouble.”

“Walk on your own, then,” said Brideon, the albino. “We don’t care to hold hands with you too much ourselves.” He cautiously released Elerit. “Watch out there. The ground’s uneven.”

“Thanks,” said Elerit, touching his face. “I suppose I know what you fellows are after.”

“You double-crossed us,” put in Micah. “You may have planned the job, but we all shared the risk. But it’s not what we’re after. It’s what *he’s* after.” A grin cracked his swarthy face. He had an old man’s head on top of a doll’s body.

They slipped through a gap in the fence. It was like leaving an enchanted circle. A line of high-rise towers piled on a plateau of crushed masonry blocked the view to the west. Their ten thousand twinkling eyes looked unconcernedly over the trough of Sand City. Big blocks of tenement houses rose out of

a counterpane of quarries, railyards, warehouses, factories, saloons, shrines, and brothels. Smoldering kilns and firepits dotted the landscape. Solitary heilotim wandered the dusty streets.

“I may as well tell you,” said Elerit. “I don’t have it on me.”

“You can tell that to him,” said Brideon.

“You mean he’s here?”

“Prepare yourself, sweetheart.”

“Where is he?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said Micah.

Elerit followed his abductors over and under railroad tracks, through warehouse yards, around oil sumps. They approached a tenement block beneath the eaves of the metropolis. What appeared a solid prism gradually resolved into an array of towers built one against another and knit into a sort of hive. The air quivered over its crown.

Brideon and Micah led Elerit into the house and through the maze of windowless rooms and claustrophobic corridors. They eventually emerged into a quadrangle at the heart of the block, where a tiny stone temple stood on a patch of earth. The grating suspended over its roof was heaped so high with rubbish that it almost blocked out the scrap of sky at the mouth of the well.

The door opened at Micah's knock. He went inside for a moment, then peered out and jerked his head. Elerit and Brideon followed him in.

A figure was seated on a throne at the back, veiled and robed in white, with a retainer at either hand. The man on his right looked like a warrior, the man on his left like a fool. Tarnished light fell from tube-lamps hidden in the niches of forgotten gods.

"Zilla the Impaler," announced Micah, "the White Prince, the predestined God-Emperor of Enoch."

"And the King of Freaks and the Prize Specimen of the Asylum," Elerit muttered. They had all known one another as wards of the city-state.

"The whole world is an asylum now," said Brideon. "Under the new order, those it counts as misbegotten will be its judges." He and Micah withdrew.

The fool cut a pirouette. "You have a penchant for losing yourself where you can't be found, my dear!" he jeered. "But I knew where to look. Where do you hide a runcible spoon? Eh? Why, among runcible spoons, of course!" He had an elongated skull and a protruding mouth; his red, pointed tongue waved energetically as he spoke. His words seemed to trip over one another in their haste to leap from his face.

“I know what you want, Skeller,” said Elerit, “and you can have it. I’m cutting my ties. Zilla may have become a god since our time together, but I already have a religion.”

“But we want you, too!” protested Skeller. “We need you! You and that fine, subtle brain of yours.”

“You’re not in a position to strike bargains,” the warrior said. His zealous eyes gleamed in the murk.

“All the same, let’s not be too hasty, Stilerich,” said Skeller. “Tepid hearts don’t further our cause, do they? Eh? Do they, my sun and moon, my beauty?” This last was addressed to Zilla, who showed no sign of having heard. “No, no, no,” Skeller went on. “All’s well that ends well, I say. The principal thing is to get the, ah, the... item. After that, if our friend wishes to go his own way, why, I don’t see why he can’t.”

“I’ll get it for you, and I’ll be left alone after that,” said Elerit. “Is that a promise?”

“Yes, I’d say so, yes, that’s what I understood, absolutely. You and that, ah, that... young friend of yours.”

“What does she have to do with it?”

“Why, nothing, nothing at all. Ha ha! You know, while we’re at it, there’s something I’ve always wanted to ask you. Are you, I mean, can you, you know...? No, no, never mind. Where are my manners? He he! Let’s see. The item is near here, isn’t it? What’s a good deadline? Say, midnight tomorrow?”

“That’s fine.”

“Why don’t you take your old Asylum friends there for company?” He winked. “They can help you carry it.”

“Better get me some decent clothes,” Elerit said.

* * *

The train burrowed through heavy fog, driving north. Dawn was near.

Elerit watched the shrouded world fly by from the door of the car. The smell was insufferable otherwise. Chebothim strained their scaly necks through the barriers, blinking their small, round eyes as if in perpetual amazement.

Brideon came up beside him. “So it is in Sand City,” he said.

“Not exactly.”

“Then where the hell are we going?”

“Be patient. I have to see someone.”

The light increased. The train slowed and entered a switchyard. Elerit leaped out as it swerved, followed by his companions. They hid in a ditch while it passed, then set out across the tangle of tracks.

Brideon kept looking over his shoulder.

“Something the matter?” asked Elerit.

“Dah, he just forgets if he fed his pet maugrel,” said Micah.

They entered a junkyard, a wilderness of cast-off machinery and furniture. Micah and Brideon clung to their guide through the maze of ravines, practically blind in the fog. Furtive noises came from the crannies.

They dropped into a basin encircled by slopes of scrap iron. An earthen knoll rose from the center with a tarpapered shack on its crown. The yard was littered with bedframes, wheel hoops, boilers, clock gears, odds and ends, bits and pieces. A hand-painted sign read "Cunea's Curiosities."

"Wait here," said Elerit. He strode up and knocked on the door.

A woman thrust her head out. She was large-boned and meaty, with a bold, well-defined figure. Her breasts swung freely beneath her nightgown. Her face was attractive but a little brutal; her mouth was large and red. She had dark brown hair. "Hey, there, Baby," she said.

"Hey," said Elerit.

She looked over his shoulder. "Trouble?"

"Just entertaining a couple of old friends."

"I told you, didn't I?"

"You told me."

"Joining up again?"

"Not if I can help it. I cut a deal."

“You know what that’s worth, Baby. They’re never going to let you leave.”

“The key, Cunea. I need it.”

Cunea vanished, then reappeared. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” she said, handing it over.

“I’ll drop by on my way out and let you know how it went.”

“I don’t think I’ll be seeing you again, Elerit.”

“Then maybe we’ll meet in Sheol.”

He went back down to his companions. They made their way across the junkyard and crawled out through the back fence. A gravel embankment loomed up out of the fog. They climbed it and turned to the right, walking between the rails. The tracks veered to the left and straightened out, passing under the livid eaves of the moss-forest, heading for the crumbling foothills.

The forest had a presence that was monumental yet iterative, like an organ fugue, echoed on a smaller scale by the quincuncial skin of each scale-tree stem. The under-story was a particolored patchwork of lichen and moss gravid with mist-drops. Every leaf, every tendril, every parasol and spear looked as though sculpted from something precious. It was very quiet.

“What does he want with this thing, anyway?” asked Elerit.
“Have you ever found out?”

“You would know better than me,” said Brideon. “Why did you want it?”

Elerit shrugged his shoulders. “It’s hard to explain,” he said. “I’d always wanted it. You remember my old pursuits. This, this world of ours.... But you, you don’t worry about these things. Do you? You just do what you’re told.”

“We’re not philosophers,” said Micah. “Change is coming. We’re going to be the world’s judges.”

“And I’ll be one of the judged?”

“You’re already judged,” said Brideon.

They went on in silence. Their feet crunched on gravel. The trees dripped. The terrain rose and fell in gentle swells. Moss-rich boulders dotted the forest floor on either hand. Bars of sunlight began to press down like organ notes. Soon ragged tufts and patches of blue were visible through the wine-colored canopy.

In the afternoon they entered a valley. The tracks were heaped with drifts of leaves. The walls grew steeper with each bend, until the canyon finally terminated in a rock face. The rails continued up a tunnel.

“It’s in here,” Elerit explained. “The line dead-ends. They never finished the blasting.” He fished a lantern out of a nook and lit it, then led the way into the darkness.

His companions kept pressing ahead of him even though their shadows made them stumble. They passed an old handcar and rounded a bend. A crazy barricade covered with melodramatic warning signs blocked the way.

“What the hell,” said Micah.

“It’s just for show,” said Elerit, flourishing the key. He unlocked a hidden bolt and threw it back. The entire thing swung open in one piece. He was all atremble, but Brideon and Micah didn’t notice. They just pushed past him like cattle crowding into a slaughterhouse. He promptly closed the gate on them and locked it again.

They turned and regarded him through the bars. It dawned on them what had just happened. “Hey,” said Brideon. “Hey, you can’t do that!”

“We had an arrangement,” hissed Micah.

“As if I didn’t know what you were going to do once you got your hands on the goods,” said Elerit. “I’m not stupid. I know Zilla.”

“So you’re just going to leave us here,” said Micah, his eyes glittering with malice. He was handling something in his pocket.

“That’s the idea,” said Elerit.

“They’ll catch up with you,” Brideon said.

“I’ll have to take my chances. It’s worth too much to me to give up, anyway.”

Micah produced a little metal box. “Then here’s a present from the White Prince,” he said. “I’ll die easier knowing you got yours first.”

Brideon tried to stop him, but it was too late. A shadow leaped out of the box. Dread beat a death knell on Elerit’s heart. He stood rooted to the spot, powerless to flee. A pair of black hands encircled Micah’s neck. The little man’s eyes popped open so wide that they seemed about to drop out. The fingers squeezed right through his flesh as though he were made of clay, and his head thumped to the floor.

“No, not us,” whispered Brideon. “No, not us, not us.” A black hand reached across his brow and slid downward, wiping his face clean off. He started to put his hands up, but the thing wiped again, and he fell down by his partner.

Elerit felt a rush of arid wind as the daemon brushed past him. Released from his invisible bonds, he dashed after it, leaped onto the handcar, and began pumping. When he shot into the open air it was already far ahead. It was like a tall, black lemur, a living shadow crowned with two bifurcating branches. It turned and looked at him with eyes that were small and round and yellow. Then it was gone.

He came round the first bend and pulled the brake. Everything was still. The forest was watchful.

He jumped down and started to climb the wall of the valley, pushing his way through brakes of ferns to the mouth of a little grotto invisible from the tracks. There was a low-ceiled room at the back, green with moss except where patches of calcite glittered in the gloom. A cubical leather case sat in the middle of the floor. He took it and returned to the car.

The outward journey was mostly downhill. He covered in minutes what it had taken hours to traverse that morning. The fog was gone. The cathedral spaces had been transformed into a riot of color and hard-edged detail. There was no sign of the daemon.

Soon he emerged into sunlight. Everything was painfully visible. The smoggy skyline of the coast-long downtown faced him across the flats of Sand City. Hollow-eyed heilotim wandered the streets. Children ran naked, laying with one another or playing violent games. Huge dragonflies looped and dodged over the cesspools, gorging themselves on blowflies. Low down in the west, a fat airship crawled across the sky.

He braked the car at the back of the junkyard and retraced his steps to the shack, toting the case. He crept cautiously up the knoll. Everything seemed peaceful. Wind chimes sang in the breeze. Homemade whirligigs spun on their axles.

The door was ajar. He pushed his way into the small, square room furnished with a single table and chair, a cast-iron stove, and a metal trunk. The light filtered through a window of colored bottle bases. A doorway hung with a curtain of printed fabric led into the next room.

He thrust the curtain aside. Cunea lay on her mattress, her eyes wide open, her tongue sticking out. Her floral-print dress was sodden. The mattress was adrift in a dark, placid lake. It seemed impossible that a single body could have held so much liquid.

Elerit went and closed her eyes. He kissed her on the lips, pushing her tongue back in with his own. The inside of her mouth was still warm and moist. He rose and stepped back through the curtain. His legs were shaking and his chin was quivering.

A mass of crimson and gold caught his eye. He recognized his gown from the night before. It had been dipped in blood and was wadded up in the corner.

A shadow crossed the rippled panes. He seized the poker and struck out blindly. Stilerich fell in a heap at his feet. There was a long knife on the floor beside him.

Elerit squeezed out and went rummaging about the yard. A minute later he returned with a pair of manacles. The warrior

was still unconscious, so he dragged him down to the base of the knoll and chained him to an iron post.

For a long time he just stood there. The sun sank lower and lower. His mind cleared slowly. At last he shook himself and went back up to the shack. Burnished plates arranged on a rack gleamed like discs of molten gold. Beside them was a can of oil. He took it and went inside.

Cunea's face had sagged a little. He laid a dramach in her mouth and kissed her cold lips one last time. Then he doused her dress, the mattress, and the walls with oil. It ran down and mingled with the thickening blood. Next he soaked the gown and hung it up on a nail. About half the can remained, so he went outside and poured it down all four walls.

Stilerich had risen at last and was watching curiously. Elerit went around back, selected a file from a workbench, and thrust it into his tunic. He also laid hold of a sledgehammer. He could feel Stilerich's eyes on him when he returned to the front. The sun was close to setting. The sky was sea green. The rusty heads of the junk-hills were touched with orange flame.

He raised the hammer and brought it down with a clang. A shower of sparks flew out. The shack blossomed as he flung himself down the knoll. Hungry tongues licked up the walls and thrust their way inside. The pillar of fire sent a column of night into the greening vault.

The horizon swallowed the sun. The pyre grew sullen and tired as dusk began to close in. He walked down to Stilerich. For a moment they regarded one another in silence.

“You got back sooner than I expected,” said Stilerich.

“I had a car,” said Elerit.

“Who was she?”

“No one. My womb-mother.”

“I thought you’d always lived in the Asylum.”

“I found her after the earthquake. I’d like to know why you did it.”

“That should be obvious.”

“To pin it on me. But why? I don’t understand.”

“Zilla wanted to be able to have you picked up whenever he liked. As that prattler said last night, it’s you he really wants. The goods are the price he was willing to pay. But don’t worry, he’ll get you one way or another. He may discharge a follower now and then, but no one quits. You know that.”

“And Brideon and Micah?”

“They try to use the box on you? I see that they did. That was planned. They were becoming an embarrassment. He’s washing his hands of the Asylum’s dregs now.”

“I’m honored not to be counted among them,” Elerit said.

“Well, I guess I’ll be going.”

“What? You’re not going to leave me here, are you?”

“Don’t worry. You won’t starve. These heaps are swarming with maugrelim. She was fond of feeding them in the evening.”

Stilerich glanced around. “I’ll not beg for my life,” he said. “Do as you see fit. But don’t think you can escape. There’s no place to hide, neither heilot’s den nor hanging garden. The Inversion is coming. Soon *he* will ascend on high.”

Elerit tossed the file to the ground in answer. He went and retrieved the case and set out into the junkyard. The whine of sawing filled the air. He glanced one more time at the ring of fire on the hill. Then the deepening gloom received him into its bosom.

* * *

It was close to midnight when he slipped into the carnival. Everything was in an uproar. Hex was shut down.

He snuck over to Vera’s car and stood on a box to look in the window. There was no one inside.

A throat cleared. He fell off the box. “I’ve been waiting for you,” a voice said. It was Buzzy, one of the painted eunuchs.

“Buzzy!” hissed Elerit. “What’s going on?”

“You tell me. Vera uttered a true prophecy tonight. Most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. Said she couldn’t help it. Of course it pissed the supplicant off. He complained to Abner. Abner had the hymenist examine her. Then it all came out.

People saw you coming over here last night. You're in big trouble, kid. What the hell did you do to her?"

Elerit shivered. "Where is she?" he asked.

"I got a little berth nearby. Here." He handed Elerit a slip of paper and a key. "Listen. She was like a sister to us, you maugrel. You got her into this. You take care of her now. Or I'm personally going to induct you into our club, if that's even possible, which for all I know it isn't."

Elerit flushed. "Thanks," he muttered. "Be seeing you."

* * *

The address was for the tenement house he'd visited the night before. He reached it just as rain began to pour. It was a warm, drenching rain from the sea.

The cubicle was on a middle floor near the center. It took him a long time to find it. He had to ask the way several times. The heilotim were suspicious. They could tell he didn't belong there.

He let himself in. There was a kitchenette lit by a guttering tube-lamp, with a tiny bedroom beyond that. Vera was asleep on the pull-down bed.

He set the case on the counter and opened it. The leather fit snugly over a metal box. He opened that, too.

The orrery was more beautiful and delicate than he'd remembered, all gold and crystal and lapis lazuli. The

interlocking hyperspheres were slowly gyrating. Parts seemed to shimmer or shiver, as though they weren't entirely there. The crystals resonated audibly, hypnotically. He shut the case again.

He got a drink of rusty water from the tap and went into the bedroom. It was still raining. A gutter ran down the wall outside. The torrent's thunder was the voice of the elemental forces of the world.

Vera sat up in bed, wild-eyed. "What?" she demanded. "What is it?"

"Nothing," he said. "It's nothing. Go to sleep."

She settled back down. She was sleeping in the nude. Her clothes were on the floor. There was a hastily packed bag in one corner.

Elerit went into the toilet, stripped, and showered. He returned to the bedroom and slipped into her clothes. They fit him fairly well. Then he made up his face and fixed his hair the way she did. He looked in the mirror. The resemblance was striking. As a final touch, he sprayed himself with her perfume and breathed it in deeply.

There was a single square window. He went over and peered through it. The little temple was down below, beneath the rubbish-heaped grating. He saw Skeller and Zilla cross to

the labyrinth. He wanted to shout down to them, pretend to be Vera, but the window wouldn't open.

He looked at Vera. She was drooling in her sleep. For a long time he stood there, just watching her sleep, trying to treasure up the golden grains as they slipped one by one into oblivion. Then he slung her bag over his shoulder, went into the kitchenette, and took up the orrery. He left the apartment, locking the door behind him.

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