



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online  
Magazine of  
Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy

Issue #122 • May 30, 2013

[“The Penitent,” by M. Bennardo](#)

[“Dreams of Peace,” by Dana Beehr](#)

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

## THE PENITENT

by M. Bennardo

No. 17596 woke in his cell in the pale glow of silent morning. He looked to the Eye of God above, the skylight which served as the cell's only window. The sunlight was dim and indirect. It was early yet.

The morning air was cool and earthy, and the cast iron bedstead dripped with chilly dew. No. 17596 closed his eyes again and slowly took the measure of his body and mind. There was the ever-present kink in his neck from the sagging straw pallet. There was the stiffness in his knees from the mildewed cold. There was the parched, hollow dryness of his gums and tongue.

But worst of all, there was the swirling fire in his fingertips.

No. 17596 swallowed and pressed his knuckles to his temples. He had hoped to wake and find that fire gone, but it had lasted through the night. He would ignore it as long as he could, until he could take it no more. That was all he could do.

His food was on the floor near the cell door, as always. It had been pushed through the slot while he slept. For four years

now, it had come this way—materializing only while he slept and never while he watched. Somehow, they knew. Somehow, they must have been watching him, though he couldn't see them. He couldn't even hear them—couldn't hear any human sound, only faint and uncertain echoes.

The food was hardtack biscuit and cold tea, meager strips of beef jerky, and boiled dry peas. Rarely, books would come with the food—books of prayers of contrition, or the lives of saints, or the philosophy of remorse.

Water came from the spigot in the wall, and waste went down the drain in the floor. At the back of the cell was a small door that led to a private exercise yard—a tiny plot of dirt and grass five feet by ten feet, surrounded by tall, unclimbable walls but open to the air above.

Out there, at times, he saw birds. The wicked bluejay, the nervous cardinal, the high wheeling patrol of the buzzard. Out there, he could feel the rain, the snow, the sun. Without that, he'd have lost his mind long ago.

No. 17596 crumbled and mashed the hardtack into the tea. He drank it greedily, cold though it was. It had a leathery sweetness that stood in sharp contrast to the salt and dryness of the rest of his food. That tea was precious to him—but how it made the fire rage all the more in his fingertips. How it made his eyes turn to the door—

The door. It was made from heavy slats of dark wood with wrought iron fittings. It was small, not even five feet high—built that way to force the prisoners to stoop humbly when they went through. But No. 17596 had only walked through that door once, four years ago. Since then, he had only seen it open three times—and each time was immediately followed by strong hands on his arms, a sack over his head, and violent dragging of his body.

He sidled up to the door, his fingers practically aflame. All he had to do was silently push on it—just to prove that it really was still locked. He could do that, and nobody would hear him, and nobody would punish him.

But he knew he would never do that.

This fire—it was hope, and it was delusion. When he found that the door was locked, it would give way to rage. He would rattle the door and howl, throwing his pallet and stool and his own body around his cell until the door did open—finally, at last, thank God!—and the strong arms pinioned his and the sack came down over his head. It had happened exactly that way three times before, and it would happen again now.

No. 17596 pressed his fingers against the door. He took a breath and pushed—waiting for that unforgiving return pressure, the iron lock and the wooden bar, the smashing of his hope and the rage that would follow.

But instead the door gave.

It swung silently on muffled hinges. No. 17596 gaped. It was true—the door had opened.

No. 17596 stepped back. He sat on his bed and looked at the door. No longer a door—now a doorway.

Beyond, for the first time, he could see the corridor outside—its bare flagstones, a wall across the way. A cold sweat broke out across his body, welling up out of his temples, his neck, shoulders, arms. He could barely gather the energy to stand, but he knew he had to.

Slowly, slowly, with agonizing steps, No. 17596 approached the open door. He looked down at his feet—one foot was now resting outside the bounds of the room he had lived in for the past four years. Even the air here was different now—cooler, fresher, faster-moving. It made the hairs rise on his neck.

No. 17596 grasped the door, his knuckles white. He could see down the corridor now. It ran down the length of the cell-block, dim and still, door after door after door, all leading into cells exactly like his own, until it terminated in a round guard room. There was a table and chairs in that distant guardroom, seemingly a thousand miles away.

But nobody was there. There was no sound except the pulse of blood in his own temples. Nobody was stirring. Nobody had seen the door open. Nobody but he.

No. 17596 pulled the door shut and went back to his cot. He laid down and curled into a tight ball, white fingers gripping and twisting the pallet as he trembled under the blanket.

\* \* \*

All day, No. 17596 waited for the cell door to open. He waited to be hauled away with the sack on his head. They would take him to the Pit—a sandy, dirty, pitch-black hole under one of the buildings in the main yard. It was close and stifling there. When it rained, the water poured into the hole. During his long years at the penitentiary, No. 17596 had been half-drowned, half-baked or half-frozen there more times than he cared to remember. Down there, it smelled like homicide and despair.

The Pit was punishment. The rest of the penitentiary might have been built on the principles of moral reformation, but the Pit was retribution plain and simple. Retribution for communicating with other prisoners, for making too much noise, for not cleaning one's cell, for sulking, for using a name instead of one's number.

All day, No. 17596 waited, but the guards never came.

Several times, he heard—or thought he heard—muffled footsteps outside his door, or the distant opening or closing of another cell—but nothing more.

That was how it always was. Everything in the prison was kept as quiet as possible. Even the guards wore rags wrapped around their feet to keep the soles of their shoes from ringing on the flagstones. Above all, the prisoners must not be reminded of the world outside their cells. Above all, the prisoners must not be disturbed in their term of penitence.

Repentance was the one thing expected of him here, but it was also the one thing they could not force him to feel.

\* \* \*

The next morning, his food was on the floor like always. As his eyes blinked open, No. 17596 saw that there was a book as well. Suddenly, he sprang to life. A book! Sinking back onto the pallet with it, he hungrily opened it to the first page.

No. 17596 read every word on the title page, searching for a date. The book had been published twelve years after he had been convicted. The author, at the time when he sat down to write this book, had lived twelve years longer in the outside world than No. 17956 had.

Surely, the author had absorbed something essential during that time. Surely, he had been changed in some way in those twelve years. Some unconscious essence of those years

must be in this book. No matter what the subject, no matter how dull or detached the author—this book must be different in some way than if the same person had written on the same subject twelve years earlier. And if No. 17596 read it closely enough, surely he must catch some hint of what that difference might be, and it would tell him—it would tell him—

No. 17596 let the book fall out of his hands. It would tell him what? It would tell him that the world went on—that somewhere, out there, men and women were carrying on their affairs while he sat alone in his cell, sentenced to ruminate in silence and isolation on crimes he had committed fourteen years ago.

What nonsense! Why search in dead pages for clues and hints about the outside? Perhaps even now he could step out and look for himself. He could see the world, see the people at their lives. The guards would drag him away to the Pit immediately, of course. But wouldn't it be worth it?

Without stopping to think further, No. 17596 stood. As he pressed the wood of the door, he had a moment of doubt, but it passed as soon as he felt it once more open under his hand.

How long had the door been unlocked? How long ago could he have pushed on it and walked free? Not free of the prison, of course—there could be no escaping the high walls of

the penitentiary. But free of his cell and free of this solitude he had borne for so long.

Stepping over the threshold, No. 17596 bowed his head to avoid the lintel. Looking down, he saw that one foot was over. Then he lifted the other and brought it out to its mate. He stood up straight. There he was—in the corridor. No. 17596 felt like laughing or shouting, but with a furtive glance around himself, he bit back his tongue.

The key was in the lock on the outside. It was curious—most days the guards had no reason to unlock his door. Food came in the slot, and nothing else went in or out except through pipes. Somehow the key had been forgotten there, but No. 17596 couldn't think how.

Shutting the door softly, No. 17596 crept into the corridor. At one end was the round guardroom he had seen the day before, still empty and abandoned. At the other was simply a blank wall. No one was in sight in either direction.

No. 17596 moved to one of the cells next to his. He opened the slot at the top of the door that the guards used to look into the cells and peered inside. Empty. That didn't surprise him. He had long suspected that when he had been put in complete isolation that they had left the cells on either side empty.

But moving down the cell-block, No. 17596 was surprised to find every cell was empty. He checked cell after cell, on both

sides of the corridor. There was no one in any of them. Had the guards gone so far as to put him in a cell-block entirely by himself? That seemed impossible. What could they possibly have feared to make them do that?

No. 17596 crept down the corridor further, his bare feet numb against the flagstones. Coming to the guard room, he paused. He flattened himself against the wall and peered inside. The room itself was certainly empty—but stepping inside would mean that he would be visible from the other cell-blocks that radiated out from it. If anybody were in any of those cell-blocks, they would see him.

Calling on his courage, No. 17596 dashed forward into the room and then spun around. Nothing. He pivoted more slowly, pausing to look carefully down each of the six cell-blocks that radiated from the room. Still nothing. He could see no guards anywhere.

Was this how it always was? Did they simply trust isolation and the habits of long years to keep the prisoners quiet and well-behaved, while the guards themselves only made occasional appearances? Or was there some emergency that had just now called them all away?

Yes, that might be it. There was a book on the table, laid face down as if its owner intended to come back. Likewise,

there was a napkin draped over a plate of cheese and a half-empty tankard of beer.

Everywhere that No. 17596 looked, he could see evidence of human activity only lately abandoned. How far did he dare to go? He peered down one of the other cell-blocks. To see another human, even if it were only a prisoner—yes, yes. Certainly, he must find and speak to somebody else.

It was a delirious thought, a forbidden dream. The warden and chaplain had used to visit him, before he was put in complete isolation. But now, he could barely even remember talking to himself, so long ago had he given that up.

But no sooner had No. 17596 started down the next cell-block when he heard quite clearly the clang of a gate ringing in the yard outside. At once, self-preservation seized him, and No. 17596 found himself creeping quickly and quietly down his own cell-block. Opening his cell door, he expected any moment to hear the cry of discovery. But nothing happened, and he slipped back inside, apparently unnoticed, his blood beating loud in his ears.

\* \* \*

The next day, No. 17596 didn't even so much as look at his food or the door to his cell when he woke. Instead, he crept out the portal in the back of his cell to his private exercise yard. Barely big enough to pace in, the yard was not much more than

a small rectangle of dirt surrounded by high walls. Except for the open sky above and the occasional snowflake drifting down, it might as well have been another cell.

Every prisoner had such a yard to allow them to exercise without exposing them to the temptation of communicating with other prisoners. But since No. 17596 was in absolute isolation, no guards ever entered his cell, the door to his yard was left always unlocked. It was perhaps the only advantage that came with this enforced solitude.

After the previous day's excursion, No. 17596 now knew that the yards next to his were never used. He had always suspected as much, but still he had furtively flung straws or stones over the walls in an attempt to communicate with his neighbors—or at least to make some impact on them, to make them aware of his existence. Likewise, he had meticulously examined his own yard's dirt floor for similar signs.

But now it seemed there had been none. The gravel and twigs he had collected and cherished had been blown in by storms or dropped by birds. He had wanted to believe, and so he had believed. No. 17596 angrily flung the entire collection up over the back wall and into the main yard. Now they were gone.

Almost before he knew what he was doing, he was back in his cell, pushing on the door once again. Unbelievably, it was

still unlocked. Growing bold in the familiarity of the situation, No. 17596 slipped lightly out into the corridor and made his way towards the guard room. Once more, he saw no one.

But just as he set foot inside the guard room, he heard the clang again. His heart stood in his mouth and he froze fast on the threshold.

Slowly, he rotated his head, taking in every block that radiated from the hub. The first was empty. And the second. And the third, the fourth, and the fifth. The sixth was the cell-block he had just come from. No. 17596 stole a glance over his shoulder back that way. Empty too.

The clang came again from the main yard. No. 17596 trembled, ready to sneak away in flight, when his eyes swept over the table in the guard room. He chilled as he saw the same book laying there, still face down. The same plate, covered by the same napkin. The same tankard of beer.

No. 17596 stepped forward, his chest tight. Looking into the tankard, he saw that the beer was thickly dotted with green mold. Lifting the corner of the napkin, he saw the cheese was cracked and dry, covered with its own white fungal rind. A newspaper lay nearby and No. 17596 picked it up, looking for the date.

No. 17596 had counted the years and even the weeks since he had been jailed. But to see the date in print, even one so

close to his own private reckoning, was devastating. He felt something surge up from inside of him, and before he could stop himself a cry had escaped from his lips.

It was a wordless, shapeless noise—a simple overflow of raw emotion into sound. But it was loud, and it echoed through the silence of the penitentiary. But suddenly No. 17596 didn't care. It would be better to be thrown in the Pit if it meant that he could see other people even for an instant. His balled fists shook on the ends of his trembling arms, and he bellowed as loud as he could again and again and again.

By the time the echoes faded down each of the six cell-blocks, No. 17596 knew that nobody was coming. He knew there was nobody in the cells, nobody in the guard rooms, nobody in the yard. He knew now that he was alone.

No. 17596 stumbled into the main yard in a daze. There, he could see the clanging gate, swinging desultorily in the wind. The dirt of the yard was covered by a delicate dusting of new-fallen snow, but nowhere was it broken by any footprint. Not even the outline of a cat's paw or bird's claw marred the powdery white covering.

Shielding his eyes from the open space around him, No. 17596 called again—more articulately now. “Ahoy!” he called, his voice cracked and weary, sounding strange after all this

time. “Ahoy, out there!” But again his voice merely echoed off the ramparts and towers of the prison yard.

No. 17596 shuffled to the main gate of the penitentiary and gripped the wrought iron latticework in his fingers. He clutched the gate as though hanging on for life, and gazed for the first time out the penitentiary door and to the streets of the city beyond. He could see houses, a stable, a public house. Nobody stirred in any of them.

Laundry hung stiffly from a clothesline outside one of the houses, frozen shirts and breeches flapping like cardboard in the cold wind. Every door was unlatched, every window unshuttered, and every chimney cold and without smoke. Not even the swallows stirred—nor the robins, nor chickadees, nor crows.

His head buzzing and his steps unsteady, No. 17596 at last pushed open the penitentiary gate and stepped out onto the bare street, smooth cobblestones worn from centuries of hoofbeats and footfalls and the rumbling iron-rimmed wheels of a hundred thousand carts.

He looked from side to side in blank amazement—the crossroads that ought to have been crowded with people stood now cold, still, and silent under the grey winter sky.

\* \* \*

All day, No. 17596 had wandered the barren streets. Nothing stirred anywhere except the wind and the sparsely falling snowflakes. Carts piled with rotting fruit, still in neat pyramidal piles; piers abandoned and empty of sailors and stevedores alike; out in the harbor, a few ships listing and groaning under half-set sails; and the silent church bells in every steeple, ringing not a note as the hours crawled by unmarked.

There were no bodies, no birds, no dogs fighting over scraps. No rats scuttling in empty pantries, no lines of ants carrying away the countless abandoned morsels of food. Whether the frogs still slept under the river ice and the wasps in their paper nests, waiting for the spring—he didn't know. But this winter world, at least, was vacant and silent of every man and beast.

Even now, No. 17596 couldn't think of himself by his own name. He couldn't shake the discipline and routine of the penitentiary, and as darkness fell he turned his feet back to the prison again. Here, at least, there were footprints in the snow—even if they were his own. And here at least, once he reached his own cell again, he was meant to be alone.

On his way back, in the failing light, the newspaper in the guardroom caught his eye. The date was close enough to his own reckoning—he had believed it should be two weeks later or

so. Perhaps he'd been wrong, or perhaps it was an old newspaper.

But it was also the latest date for which he had any evidence that anybody else was still in the prison, or the city—or the world. No. 17596 sat down and tried to focus his eyes, to read the headlines. Perhaps there was some explanation here.

No. 17596's eyes fell almost at once on an etching of a two-masted merchant ship. She was called the *Henrietta*, or so said the newspaper. Three months earlier, she had reached the city after crossing the ocean clipper route from the east.

She'd been found drifting silently, darkly, strangely, outside the harbor—sails set, heading true, cargo and effects in place, on a placid sea. But there was no sign of the people who had been aboard—captain, crew, and passengers—and no clue to their fate recorded in the log.

This had only been the beginning, it seemed. As No. 17596 read on, he found that two other ships had suffered similar fates while sailing the same route a week later. Then five more the week after that. Soon, ships on other routes were affected as well. Commerce across the ocean all but stopped.

The day before the date of the newspaper, lighthouses and lightships beyond the harbor had fallen dark. Any boats that went out to them did not return. Instead, they simply went dead—bobbing listlessly in the waters beyond the breakwall,

their decks intermittently visible to a spyglass through the shifting mists. And empty. All the men on them, somehow suddenly gone.

With trembling hands, No. 17596 set the newspaper aside. There was more, but he did not wish to read it. It was clear enough where the tale had been leading—if not how or why. Neither did No. 17596 understand why he had been spared.

His isolation, perhaps? Was this disappearing condition some social disease? Was it communicable, like leprosy? Someone, at the last moment, had put the key to his door. If they had succeeded before they too vanished, would he also have shared the same fate?

As No. 17596 re-entered his cell, he stumbled in the dark over his food tray. For a moment, he paid it no mind—then he froze.

What did it mean? His food had not stopped coming. If every resident of the city had disappeared two weeks ago, how could that be? Had he finally lost his mind after all?

No. 17596 bent down to pick up the scattered remnants of his food, putting them back on his tray and pushing the tray back out the slot into the corridor again. Yes, of course—he was mad. He had gone mad at last, alone in his cell. The world was full of people, the door to his cell was locked. All of this—his

secret excursions, the empty city, the tale of the *Henrietta*—it was all just a mad man's delusion.

Relief washed over No. 17596. There could be no other explanation. No other, at least, except that he was his own jailor. That he, in the dead of night, while he slept, rose and prepared his own food. That every night he played the somnambulist and then returned unknowing to his own cell to awake in the morning.

But such a solution was unbelievable. It would mean that he was free—but alone. That he could go wherever he liked in a world utterly depopulated. It would mean that his door really had been unlocked. It would mean that he really had been outside.

Slowly, with heart beating, No. 17596 patted down his shirt. While he had been out—no, while he had been fantasizing, while he had been having mad dreams!—he had picked up several biscuits and put them into his shirt. His hands patted down his body. Of course they wouldn't be there now. Of course—

No. 17596 froze. Standing, he ran to his exercise yard, flinging the biscuits over the wall—flinging everything over the wall, even his shirt. Then he went back to the cell door and pushed against it. It was locked of course—but no! It opened. No. 17596 removed the key from the lock and pulled the door

shut. Locking it from the inside, he threw the key over the wall of the exercise yard as well.

Then, No. 17596 sat down on his cot. He picked up the book that had come in with his food two days earlier. That was real enough—a kindly gift from his jailors—not a cruel trick on himself! No. 17596 opened the book and began to read. He would continue reading through the night, by whatever light he could find. He would not fall asleep.

He would not.

As many days and nights as it would take, he would stay awake. For if he fell asleep, then the tray must either come or not. If he were mad, the tray would come—pushed in by his jailors. If he were *not* mad, then it would not come—the now-locked door barring his own way out. And then, of course, there would be no more uncertainty.

One way or another, he would know.

And so No. 17596 read on and on, all through the night, until morning.

Copyright © 2013 M. Bennardo

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

*M. Bennardo's short stories can be found in Asimov's Science Fiction, Lightspeed, and Shimmer, as well as previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies. He is an editor of the Machine of Death series of anthologies; the second volume, This Is How You Die, will be published by GCP in July 2013. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio, but people anywhere can find him online at <http://www.mbennardo.com>.*

Support BCS

BCS on **facebook**

BCS on **twitter**

[Read more Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#)

## DREAMS OF PEACE

by Dana Beehr

The rift hung in the sky, and Chaladon walked onward.

The Land of the Lost was behind her; the Wastes of Steel, the Great Serpent River, the Tower of Shalott. She had set out from the last crèche of the Deep Dancers a young almost-girl, full of laughter and joy and strength, her friends Chaläestra and Chalira beside her. They had journeyed across the world together, secure in their friendship, back when everything was new. But Chaläestra had fallen after the Tower, and Chalira had turned aside in the Garden of Forking Paths. Only Chaladon remained, and in her journeying, she had passed from youth through the prime of life, and now stood on the cusp of middle age. Still she pressed onward: the Fire Veil wrapped around her, her zils in their pouch at her waist, her dance sword at her back. She was the last of the Deep Dancers—the last Deep Dancer—and she could no more turn aside than she could cease to breathe.

She pressed on, seeking the Edge of the World.

\* \* \*

She had left the deceptive Grasslands behind her; she journeyed now across an empty waste, so flat and devoid of life that she seemed the only living creature in existence. The rift in the sky pulsed like a gash, glaring down on her. And always behind her, at the Center, the vast Ever-storm raged. She and Chaläestra and Chalira had visited there, early in their pilgrimage; had gone as close as possible for the raging winds and flying debris, and had watched it slowly expanding outward: cliffs, houses, trees crumbling away. Cities, nations had been swallowed up in that Storm; someday, it would consume the world. The storm had been there since long before her birth. The rift in the sky, though: that was new.

She traveled on as the three moons ascended, leaping past the rift as a jumper might hurdle a ditch, rising to shed their cold light on the gray wastes. Just as she thought she could go no further, she came upon the outskirts of a town.

Or rather, it had been a town once; now it was broken and deserted, the skeletons of its former buildings a flat black against the looming sky. Two streets met in the center—shallow depressions in ashy soil, lined by dilapidated structures with gaping windows and collapsed roofs. Holes showed in their sides where boards were missing. The town might have been twenty years old or two hundred; this waste was so arid that the buildings might last forever. Faded signs showed that one

building had been a blacksmith shop; one a livery; one a tavern. A wagon lay in front of the livery, overturned, one of its wheels bent out of shape. The air was heavy with the dry, desert scent of dust and time.

The town was completely abandoned. There was no sign of people, not even bodies or bones. Chaladon had come across many such deserted villages in her travels. It seemed as if the world was a little emptier every year.

The building whose sign proclaimed it the *Grand Hotel* was still in fairly good condition, though a section of the veranda had collapsed and one side of the balcony had fallen in. There was a pump out back where Chaladon washed herself quickly and filled her waterskin with metallic, bitter-tasting water. She climbed the dusty stairs to the top floor and settled into a room containing a tattered mattress over rusty box springs. She set a simple ward on the door, then wrapped herself in the Fire Veil, laying her head on her bag. She was asleep within moments.

\* \* \*

She dreamed, as she did every night, of vast realms of space, endless, yawning reaches: a place where the land fell away and there was nothing beyond but the stars and a sense of a towering, ancient, *feminine* presence. Two eyes gazed at her

out of that abyss, opening themselves into her soul: huge, and dark, and summoning.

*Find me.* Though it was only a whisper, it set her soul ringing like a sonorous bell. *Find me, Chaladon. Chaladon the Ninth. Chaladon the Last. Find me there, at the edge of the world.*

How long since she had first dreamt this irrefusable call? It seemed to her that even as a child in the womb, that call had been there, that she had felt it the first moment she drew breath. Certainly she had sensed it when she and her friends had set off on their quest to stop the Ever-storm, at the dawn of the world; even then, she had felt it in her bones, this powerful onward summons. She could no more resist it than the tides of the Sea of Sands could resist the moons. Had the others felt it? She could not be sure, but she thought not. Not Chaläestra at least; Chalira, sometimes, she wondered.... but Chalira had turned aside. Only Chaladon continued on.

She slept wrapped in her veil, in that dead room in that dead building in that dead town, and dreamed of vast infinities.

\* \* \*

Two things woke her: sunlight against her eyelids, and a resounding *crash* that shook the entire room.

She started awake to find herself staring at a young woman—almost a girl—carrying a pile of wood. Two sticks had fallen

to the floor, and the girl began to babble apologies: “Oh, I’m sorry, ma’am—so clumsy—Mistress Etta always tells me I shouldn’t try to carry so much, but I hate to make two trips—”

Chaladon’s head was spinning. She stretched out one hand. “Enough.” She had not spoken in so long that she was almost afraid she had forgotten how. “Who—who *are* you? Where did you come from?” *My wards*, she thought, but—she could still feel them in her head, a pulsing net, perfect as she had laid them. This girl should not be here—*could* not be here.... And yet there she was.

“I’m sorry, ma’am—I’m Lia, Mistress Etta lets me work here for a few silver to help out at home—we live a few leagues out of town on a spread we registered a few years gone, and this is the proving year, Da says if we can—”

“*Stop!*” Chaladon ordered, and the girl fell silent. And into that silence came the babble of a thousand other sounds: voices laughing, talking, arguing, the muted clatter of dishes from the dining hall below, the tinkle of a piano, the rumble of wheels in the street, the neighing of horses....

*No. This cannot be—*

Chaladon got to her feet and went to the window. She threw the shutters wide, and sunlight swept into the room. Looking out, she saw an impossibility.

The town was vibrant with life. The once-barren streets were bustling: wagons rumbled past, carrying lumber, barrels, boxes; riders walked their horses, waving to passersby. Men and women stood in the doorways of their shops—the tanner’s, the tailor’s, the blacksmith’s—practicing their trades. The ruined buildings of the night before were gone; walls stood strong, roofs were firm, signs were freshly painted. As Chaladon watched, a woman dumped a bucket of slops from a second-story window, narrowly missing a drover who shook her fist and cursed. The rich, vivid aromas of livestock and dung drifted up to her from the street below.

A blank wall of something very like panic leapt across her mind. She spun to face the rest of the room. While she had been sleeping, a great change had come. The tarnished brass bedstead now shone brightly, freshly polished. The old mattress was decently covered with a faded but clean counterpane. Last night’s rickety nightstand with missing drawers now was whole, its wood gleaming mellowly, its drawers fitted with porcelain knobs. The washstand in the corner now sported a jug and bowl with a pattern of painted blue roses. In the distance, she could smell breakfast cooking, bacon and ham and fresh bread.

Chaladon looked away from this simple, well-kept room to the busy street outside. Yes, the traffic was *still* there.

And at the far end of the street, the lone and level waste stretched far into the distance.

She turned on the girl, who was staring at her, bewildered. “You. Girl. *Where is this?*”

The girl blinked. “Where? I don’t—”

“This *town!*” Chaladon had to restrain herself from shouting. Was she mad? Bewitched? Under a spell? “What is the name of this town?”

“I—we—we’re—” Chaladon wanted to grab the girl and *shake* the answers out of her. At last the girl stammered, “This is Senpost—seventh post on the Courier route. This is the—the realm of Ut. The High Speakers declared this land open for settlement, so—”

“And you, girl. Who are you?” *Ut, Ut*— The name was unfamiliar, but that meant nothing; she had left behind the lands she knew long ago.

“Well, I—I already told you, ma’am, begging your pardon. My name’s Lia. My family’s spread is a little ways out of town, like I said. Mistress Etta lets me work here to—”

“All right, *enough!*” None of this told her anything. Lia fell silent, wide-eyed and fearful. Chaladon raised one hand to forehead, closing her eyes; the ground seemed to rock under her feet.

*What is happening?*

When she opened her eyes, Lia was still watching her. With a curious gentleness, the girl said, “Mistress Etta’s got breakfast laid in the dining room, and it please you.”

“Breakfast,” she repeated; then, with more assurance, “Breakfast. Yes. I will be down momentarily.” There was a reassuring normality to the thought of simply *going down to breakfast....*

She was like to learn more that way than by simply standing there, amazed.

The girl seemed relieved too. “Yes, ma’am. If you know what you’d like, I can tell Mistress Etta—”

“No need. Just go.”

She practically had to shoo the girl out the door. Left alone, Chaladon examined the water jug. It had been cracked and bone-dry the night before; now it was unbroken, with beads of condensation forming on its thin ceramic walls. When she picked it up and tilted it, water sluiced out into the washbowl. Experimentally, Chaladon splashed some on her face. She did not, however, suddenly awaken into the world she had left.

She stood listening to the sounds drifting through the open window, her mind slowly ticking through the options. An illusion. She had traveled through time. A hallucination.... So far, she did not have enough information to confirm anything.

She wound the Fire Veil around herself again; then hooked her zil pouch to its place at her waist. Finally, she drew from her pack a flat, carved box—her jewelry case—and extracted a pendant: a bronze disk with a star ruby at the center, hanging from a chain of beads. She fastened it around her throat, so that the disk lay flat against her skin; then, placing her palm over it, went back to the window and looked out.

What she saw was neither surprising nor edifying. Everything in sight—people, animals, buildings—glowed with a faint aura, indicating the presence of magic.

But where had this magic come from? And what was it?

She slid her dance sword into its place at her back. There was only one way to find out: Take action. *Make* something happen. It was the driving force of her life.

*And the first step, she thought, is to go down to breakfast.*

\* \* \*

The rickety stairs from the night before now rose solid and sweeping. Last night's dimly seen traces of fabric revealed themselves to be a thick runner patterned in red and blue, probably from Farsa-Beyond-the-Dunes. Chaladon had been there once, so long ago that she could scarcely remember; it might have been years or centuries, for time ran differently out here than it did nearer the Center. That was one reason why

she and Chaläestra and Chalira had known, when they had set out from the crèche, that they would not be returning.

*Chalise must have known, too.* She remembered how their Linemistress had stood in the doorway, waving them off. Ostensibly in farewell; but looking back, it seemed as if Chalise had been barring the gate, as in the old tale about the seraph and the flaming sword.

Shaking off such thoughts, she studied her surroundings. The wreckage of the previous night was gone; the lobby shone. Maroon-upholstered armchairs stood under glazed windows, and a matching sofa facing a cast-iron potbellied stove formed a cozy nook across the room. The wood-paneled walls and pewter lamps gleamed, as did the counter facing the entrance. Through an archway was a sunlit dining room with linen-covered tables and a sideboard heavy with food. Several tables were occupied already: men and women in traveling garb sat alone or in small groups, taking breakfast. The air was rich with the scent of bacon, bread, and brewing cha, and Chaladon abruptly realized she was hungry; she had had nothing but hard bread and dried sausage for longer than she could remember.

“There you are, Lady Chaladon.”

Surprised, she turned to see an imposing, fleshy woman behind the counter, her hair piled high in imitation of the old Imperial style.

“Did you sleep well, my lady? Begging your pardon,” the woman added deferentially. “Not often we have a Deep Dancer like yourself here.”

This must be that Mistress Etta that Lia mentioned. *So. She knows who I am and apparently we’ve met, or at least she thinks so.* Chaladon covertly touched her pendant, seeing the same magical aura coming from Etta as well. Aloud, she said, “I slept quite well, Mistress Etta, thank you.”

Etta smiled in relief. “Was half worried after Lia come down here. She said you woke up a bit ornery-like. Then again, she’s a scatterbrain if ever there was one—I only took her on for her da needed the coin, though he’d never ask it—”

“Lia did quite satisfactorily,” she assured Etta.

“Well, glad to hear that, Lady. Breakfast’s laid through there, if you don’t mind—”

“Thank you,” said Chaladon, and went in through the archway.

The sideboard in the dining room was shining rosewood backed by a mirror. Chaladon was sure it hadn’t been there last night; she checked her reflection and was almost surprised to see her own angular blue eyes and bright blonde hair bound up

in a topknot. Everything else seemed so strange, so *jarring* that it was a relief to see that her appearance hadn't changed.

The food was plentiful—eggs with *calli*, cubed potatoes, thick slabs of ham and steak, breakfast rice, fruit. She filled a plate and retreated to a table under the windows, in a shaft of sunlight. In front of her sat a man and woman of middle years, both in sober traveling garb—but the cut of their clothing was a hundred years and more out of date.

Was she adrift in time? she wondered again. She knew such things were possible. She thought of the Clock of the Long Now, that great timepiece which regulated the passing of ages for all the world, and its ancient, inhuman guardians; cutting a man or a woman loose from the flow of time was well within their power. Or was this a town of spirits, perhaps? Or— A superstitious dread came over her. *What if I myself am dead and have not yet realized it?*

Suddenly a horrible sense of *disjunction* came over her—looking around the sunny dining room, she seemed to see with a strange doubled sight the wreckage beneath: a thick layer of dust, shattered tables lying on their sides, broken windows, gaping holes in the walls, the beautiful rosewood sideboard wrecked, with its doors hanging off and its mirror cracked—

*The mirror crack'd from side to side*, she thought, and shivered.

And Triune Goddess, the *people*— As that terrible unreality seized her, it seemed as if she were sitting in a room full of corpses that by some sorcery had been given a shallow semblance of life: going about their business, never noticing as their hair fell out and chunks of flesh dropped off and maggots bred in their bodies—

*Stop it!* She pinched herself, hard. *Concentrate on the here and now.* Chalise had always said the true weapon of the Deep Dancer was her disciplined mind.

Yes. The here and now. And part of the “here and now” was the plate of food before her.

She studied the eggs, spiced sausage, toasted bread and fruit closely; it all looked just as she would expect. It smelled right, too—leaning over it, she caught the scent of the herbed eggs, the light sweet scent of fruit, the rich aroma of spices and fat from the sausage. But what would happen when she tried to taste it?

*Will I bite down on empty air?.... Or worse?*

She regarded her plate with some unease. She knew the legend of the Deep Dancer Terashi, whose drummer Sarto had been carried off by Hel, the Queen of the Damned; to rescue him, Terashi had taken the Phantom Train to the other side, only to find that Sarto had partaken of the food Hel had offered

him and was bound to remain there forever. Could that happen to her?

It was time to find out, one way or the other. She loaded her fork with some potatoes and took a bite.

The roof did not fall in, nor did the world suddenly revert to the way it had been the night before. The potatoes were solid, not thin air; they felt and tasted... much like potatoes everywhere. Except—

No, she realized. They didn't really taste like potatoes at all. They didn't actually taste like *anything*—sawdust, perhaps, or cotton.

*Interesting.*

She held her pendant again and looked down at her plate. It was glowing with the same aura that surrounded everything else. Experimentally, she swallowed, and once again the world failed to change around her. She tried bits of meat, bread, fruit, and it was all the same: for all the taste, she might as well have been eating sand.

One strike against the “adrift in time” theory, at least. An illusion, then? But who was casting it?

“Would you like some cha, miss?”

Chaladon looked up in surprise to see the young girl from before hovering with a silver pot in her hand, watching her shyly.

“Lia? What are you doing here?”

“Mistress Etta, she tells me that when I’m done straightening the rooms, I’m to serve in the dining hall. And it please you, miss.” Lia offered a modest curtsy. “Cha?” Once more she held out the etched silver pot.

Somewhat bemused, Chaladon let Lia fill her cup, studying the girl. Lia was not tall, perhaps shorter than Chaladon herself. Her coloration was different from those of the Central Empire—not a surprise; the farther away from the Center, the more diverse the people seemed to be, almost as if the eternally raging Ever-storm had shattered the Nations in population as well as in body and flung the peoples outward. Lia was olive-complected, with long dark curls, so unlike Chaladon’s pin-straight, blonde hair.

Somewhere back in her heritage, Lia must have had a River Trader in the family tree, Chaladon thought, and felt a sharp, pang; from her brief time among those daring people, she carried memories both precious and bitter. Yet not pure River Trader, though—the tilt to those eyes bespoke a different lineage, one Chaladon could not quite make out; and the grace in her step was of a different type from that required by a pitching riverboat deck. And the River Traders were certainly long gone.

“Are you from around here?” she asked.

Again that quick curtsy. So many of these rural girls tried to emulate the true Imperial bow; still, Chaladon could tell the difference. Lia's, however, was very, very good. Chaladon suspected she'd be good at the dance, too. "Oh, yes, ma'am. Da owns a spread outside town. Corn and cows," she added with a small laugh. "Next year, if we can prove up—oh, but I'm sorry, Lady," she said, catching herself with some embarrassment. "I reckon I told you all this already."

"That's all right," Chaladon said, smiling. "It sounds lovely."

"Well, it ain't much but it's good enough for us, ma'am." She paused. "If'n you don't mind me asking...what'll you do today, my lady? It's not often we get someone...well, like *you* out here."

Her question recalled Chaladon to herself with a harsh jolt. She had no idea what her next course of action should be, or even if she should engage with the townspeople at all instead of trying to leave at the first opportunity. *Think*, she told herself. What would she do if she had just come to a normal town?

"I was hoping," she said slowly, "to speak to whomever is in charge. Your headman or headwoman."

"You'll be wanting Mayor Gemma, then. She lives at the west end of town. Proper house, with a porch and rails," she added, obviously impressed. "Real glass too, brought all the

way from the City itself. She'd probably want to see you anyway, since you're—" she flushed in embarrassment "—a Deep Dancer and all."

Chaladon could not help but smile. It was somehow impossible for her not to like Lia. "You know, Deep Dancers are human women, just like you."

"No, ma'am," Lia said. "We've never had no-one around these parts like you." She fidgeted awkwardly. "I ought to be going. Etta will get mad if I spend so long talking to one guest."

"Go then," Chaladon told her, and watched Lia move off. *Was I ever that young?* she thought. The girl's simple politeness, and the easy way in which she had spoken of her father and her town, charmed Chaladon, and made her muse wistfully about what it must have been like, to grow up here in such a simple place so far from the Center. The way she moved...if she had been born back in the Empire, a crèche would have taken her for certain. Challia, she mused. It had a nice ring to it. Or Teralia, Hellia, Sthalia... they'd have to change it for the line of Aldara. Aldella? Aldalia?

Her musings stopped abruptly. Of the five lines of the Deep Dancers, only the line of Chaladon was left... and she was the last of it.

Enough. *Keep moving*, she told herself. *What next?*

To speak to this Mayor Gemma, of course. She pushed back her chair and rose.

Now if only she could think what to tell her....

\* \* \*

Outside, the air was already beginning to fill with the promise of oncoming heat. Chaladon lingered on the veranda a moment, looking up at the sky, measuring the sun's position with her fingers. Two hours yet till noon.

She should have turned west, but this was the first chance she'd had to examine this town closely. Chaladon studied the people in the streets as they moved on about their business. They weren't Shades, at least. She had dealt with Shades before; some were intelligent, but the ones she had seen simply milled aimlessly, leaving no trace on the world around them, as filmy as an image on the daguerreotypes she had seen long ago. Watching the drovers stir up clouds of earth and shoo flies away from their livestock—breathing in the reek of cattle and horse dung—she had to admit that the inhabitants of the streets were all too real.

Or were they? For as she watched, she noticed something: none of them left town by the western road. Now and then, someone ventured to the west end of the main thoroughfare—past an ornate house with an iron railing, almost certainly the mayor's house—only to pause briefly, then turn around and

head back. It was so subtle that Chaladon might have missed it; but after she watched for perhaps two fingers against the sky, she was sure.

She glanced toward the eastern end of town and saw no such pattern there. Farmers bringing their crops into town; riders with bandanas around their necks, men and women out walking, all came and went freely.

Mystified, she stepped off the veranda into the street and headed west. Stranger still, the people she passed all seemed to recognize her; most nodded to her, and some greeted her with “Good day, ma’am.” Then, as she drew near the edge of town, she saw it: a barely perceptible shimmer, dancing in the air and blocking the entire road. She clasped her medallion again. The glow of magic stretched across the road. Much brighter than the background ambiance, it formed a visible barrier. She laid her fingertips against the shimmering air and felt a substance that yielded slightly before firming into solidity. She pushed harder, and it was as if she had touched the surface of a pool of water: spreading ripples formed around her fingers.

What was this?

She ran her hands over the transparent surface, wondering if she could push right through. She leaned on the membrane with all her weight and felt it stretch, but not enough. Someone had put this here. But why? And why only on this end? She

glanced back to the eastern edge of town, where the traffic came and went. *Is it to keep them in—or me?*

At last she stepped back from the barrier, recognizing that further effort to bypass it would be futile. Whoever made this spell had made it well. She tipped her head back, running her eyes along the barrier to the top, following it up into the sky....

And stopped, completely caught off guard by what she saw.

The Rift was gone.

Above, the sky stretched, an unbroken eggshell blue with the cotton fluffs of white clouds floating lazily past. Had it ever been so pure, so blue before, in all her wanderings? She could not remember. When had—?

No, she thought, it must have been that way since she awoke. She simply hadn't noticed, too distracted with the other changes. But if the Rift was gone....

What *did* it mean?

She didn't know. Hopefully, Mayor Gemma would.

\* \* \*

Gemma's door was opened by an elegant footman in a dark coat. He showed Chaladon into a parlor with another Farsa carpet in red and gold, as well as polished blackwood cabinets and a fireplace whose mantel held gilded pewter candlesticks. As with the hotel furnishings, it seemed—just for

a moment—that Chaladon could see devastation beneath: tattered carpet; splintered floorboards; shattered furniture; thick dust....

Then she blinked and it was gone.

“Lady Chaladon.” Mayor Gemma was a robust battleship of a woman with iron-gray hair arranged in a row of curls. “May I just say how honored we are to have a Deep Dancer in our little town?”

“You knew I was here?”

“But of course.” The mayor’s broad smile reminded Chaladon uncomfortably of the courtiers she had known when the Empire still stood. *I suppose politicians are the same the world over.* “Please, my lady, take a seat. *Edward!*” The footman appeared at once. “May I offer you some *cha*, miss? Direct from the Cha Plains—you won’t find finer, even in the City itself—”

“Yes, please.” Chaladon settled into a green upholstered chair. Mayor Gemma dismissed Edward with a nod.

“Of course I knew you were here, Lady Chaladon,” she continued. “Senpost is a small town, and news travels fast. Besides, Lia was all over town this morning gushing about the important guest staying under Mistress Etta’s roof. Triune bless her, when she gets thrilled with a secret, she can’t hardly keep it to herself.” Mayor Gemma smiled with amused

indulgence. Edward returned with a *cha* set, the liquid steaming in a blue-patterned pot, a sugar bowl next to it, and two cups with matching saucers. Graciously, Mayor Gemma poured for her and the sweet, spicy scent of fine *cha* filled the air. “I see you like the set.”

“I haven’t seen one like it since my time in the Empire.” Placing the cup and saucer on the edge of the low table between them, Chaladon subtly laid her fingertips on her pendant again. That same magical glow. Carefully, she took a sip. Like the food at breakfast, it was completely tasteless. Hot water, nothing more.

“Yes, Senpost has strong connections with the Central Empire. The realm of Ut has long been one of the Empire’s oldest allies, and the relationship has been good for both our lands.” Gemma sipped her own *cha*, steam wreathing her face.

*I’ve never heard of you before.* Chaladon studied the mayor over her cup.

“Senpost is the best stop on the Outer Courier Route; and in my younger days, I used to *ride* that route, so I know. It’s only been an incorporated town for four years, but the folk’re justly proud of what we’ve accomplished. We’re a friendly town looking to grow.” She cocked one eyebrow. “Which, after all, is why *you’re* here, Lady Chaladon.”

“I’m sorry?”

Mayor Gemma frowned uncertainly. "What you told Etta, last night, when you got in? That you'd reached the end of your wanderings—you wanted to settle down, found a new crèche? Several girls in this town'd make *excellent* Deep Dancers.... Etta's girl Lia for one. If you—"

"I'm sorry, but there's been a mistake." Chaladon was surprised at the twinge of muted longing that passed over her when Mayor Gemma mentioned founding a crèche: *stability*. It seemed she could see herself sleeping each night in the same bed; feel the joy of forming untrained students into full-fledged Deep Dancers; the relief that she would not be the last practitioner of her millennia-old art, that others would follow....

Lia *would* make a wonderful dancer. A powerful ache filled her. She saw Lia in full regalia, flowing through the movements of a pattern piece....

"I'm sorry," she repeated, when she had mastered herself. "But I did not come to this town to establish a crèche. I came because—" What to tell?

Mayor Gemma's face fell. "Oh. Well, I suppose Etta must have heard wrong." Then her expression brightened again. "But all the same, perhaps you'll consider it? The townsfolk would be thrilled to have a Deep Dancer settle here, specially the parents of little girls who want their daughters educated.... I'm

sure you know how rare it is to find learning out here. No offense, my lady, but—" Gemma paused. "You have the look of one who's been walking the roads for a long time. That kind of life wears on a body. Men and women, they need a place to call home. Senpost could be that place for you, ma'am. After all, this town needs you too. There's a space for you here, shaped to however you think you'd fit. It's a quiet, friendly town, the sort of town that's easy to settle into—

"—and *difficult to leave.*"

Chaladon started. She stared at Mayor Gemma, scrutinizing her, but the mayor seemed the same slick, cheerful, friendly politician as before.

"I'm—I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said that Senpost is a town you'll hate to leave, ma'am," Gemma answered, smiling.

*No. No, that's not what she said*— Again that feeling of *unreality* swept her. It seemed that beneath and behind Gemma's pleasant outward appearance, there lurked the dark outlines of something else—

Then Chaladon blinked and the impression was gone.

*Did I see it? Or....*

"I'm sure Senpost is a wonderful town," she said, trying to redirect the conversation, "but unfortunately, I cannot stay long. I am just passing through." *Just passing through;*

somehow, the words made her think of the barrier at the west end of town... and suddenly she knew what to say. "I'm here to look for magic or sorcerous phenomena; anything unexpected or unusual. Has anyone reported any strange happenings?"

"Well, that's a shame, ma'am.... Sorcery?" Gemma shrugged again. "Nothing like that around here. We don't have much truck with sorcery."

"Of course." *And yet this whole town reeks of magic.* Chaladon decided it was time to move a little further into the open. This too was a dance, in a way: a dance of evasion, of reveal and retreat. She took another sip of the strange, tasteless *cha*. "I asked because with my art I have in fact detected the presence of sorcery—extremely powerful sorcery—centered on this area. Any information you have would be helpful, even if it's no more than rumors." She considered, then added, "I have come on a commission from the Empress of the Center herself to investigate such things."

That was a lie; and even if it hadn't been, the Empire of the Center had fallen long ago. However, time ran more slowly out here; perhaps here the Center still stood and her assertion might carry some weight.

"Well, this is a surprise." Gemma looked confused. "I hadn't expected to have a woman on Imperial commission here. Of course I'll assist in any way I can." She frowned in

thought. “If you’re *really* looking for tales of myth and magic, best start with the claimholder of Twin Pine Ranch—that’d be Lia’s da, there. He was one of the first settlers in this area—he’s almost an unofficial historian, collecting old crones’ tales about Senpost, the outlying farms, that sort of thing. Yes,” she said, nodding decisively. “Tharin would be your man.”

Chaladon nearly dropped her cup. “I’m sorry. Did—did you say—”

“Tharin, ma’am,” said Mayor Gemma, looking at her in confusion. “Former River Trader, come out here from the Center some years ago. Stays out on his ranch, raises cattle, minds his own business. Quiet fellow; polite, well-respected.... Are you all right, Lady Chaladon?” Gemma leaned forward solicitously. “You don’t look so well.”

“No—No, I’m fine,” Chaladon said, though it was far from the truth; her heart lurched in her chest, and a shiver passed over her, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. *Could it be?* No—no, it couldn’t. *But still*— She saw Lia again in her mind’s eye—the tilt of her head, the shape of her hands and eyes, and something deep inside her, deeper than conscious thought, knew it for truth—perhaps had already known it the moment she first saw the girl.

But how? How was it possible? She thought of the hot, perfumed stillness of the Garden of Forking Paths, the flower-

bedecked arches, each of which led to a different life; of the Rift in the sky, and its progeny, the rents in the fabric of the world; of the Dreamforest, where all that one had dreamt might come to be. *Something like that, perhaps? But which? Have I— Can there—* Wild ideas raced through her head, bubbling and colliding with each other, each stranger than the last—

Abruptly, she took hold of herself, recalling where she was: seated on a sofa, holding a teacup, gazing into Mayor Gemma's kind, troubled face. "I think I may have had a little too much sun; that's all," she replied unsteadily.

"If you would like to lie down for a while—"

"No, that won't be necessary. Where can I find him, this— this Tharin?" Triune, the name felt so familiar on her lips....

"Farm's maybe half an hour's walk out of town along the road to the north. Just a few acres and head of cattle. Two pines standing on a hill and a house between 'em, with a barn and a shed. Can't miss it."

"Well, thank you, Mayor Gemma," Chaladon said. "I appreciate your help."

"Least I could do. Here, let me call the footman, he'll show you out. Best chance, Deep Dancer," Gemma added as Chaladon rose. "May you find what you're looking for."

\* \* \*

As Chaladon walked along the northern road, she tried to collect her thoughts by tallying what she had learned. It was depressingly little. A strange magic filled the area. There was a barrier to the west preventing further travel. The rift in the sky that had been steadily growing since Chalaëstra's actions at Shalott was gone. As to what it all meant, Chaladon had speculations but no answers. She watched the sky as the town fell further behind her, but it stayed smooth, blue and unbroken. Occasionally, she clasped her necklace; always, the same background shimmer of magic surrounded her.

And that meant... what? She did not know.

Tharin, Tharin.... Was it truly he, she wondered, or a stranger who simply bore his name? *A married stranger*. No, it had to be he; there was too much of him in Lia for it to be otherwise. *But why is he here? Why now?*

They had loved each other once, in the dawn of the world, when her quest had lain spread out unmapped before her and each morning shone bright with the promise of a new adventure. He had been a riverboat captain, newly confirmed among his people; she and her line-sisters had taken ship on his boat, the *Pretty Lady*, for the thousand-mile outward journey along the Great Serpent River.

*Triune Goddess, he was so beautiful*, she thought, remembering those vivid, impossibly blue eyes, the thick dark

curls that made a woman long to run her fingers through them. Ah, he had been young, and she had been young, and in those days they had made the promises that youth speaks to youth. Yet back then, Chaladon had still been naïve enough to believe that those promises might come true—had truly believed that she would return to him someday.

*I should have known better. Even then.*

The rot that would eventually doom the Empire had already been far advanced; the Great Serpent River was a hotbed of strife, with bandits and slavers raiding up and down its winding silver coils almost with impunity. They had only been a week ashore when the word came: the *Pretty Lady* had been attacked by slavers and its crew abducted, to be sold to the hill-dwelling wilders.

The news had shaken Chaladon to her core. Every fiber of her being had demanded that she turn back to rescue the man she loved.... Yet to do so would have been to miss the Winged Winds, the perpetually changing rivers of air streaming forever from the top of Windshorn Mountain, that would carry them on the next leg of their journey outward.

They had chosen to continue. No—*she* had, though the decision had ripped her heart from her chest. It was the first of the choices that would come to define her life.

And now, leagues and centuries from the place where she had left him standing on the docks at twilight, here he was again.

She wondered by what road he had come to this place, and if it was one they could have walked together. Perhaps... if she had gone back... perhaps then.... The thought ached, a deep, muted pain like the twinge of a broken bone long since healed. No, what was done was done, and she could not have chosen any differently, not then and not now. She had known, from the moment she and her companions had left the crèche, that there could be no turning back. This quest, this destiny, was her burden and she could not lay it down till it was finished.

She thought of Lia, and wondered briefly about Lia's mother—what she looked like, when Tharin and she had met, when they had wed. A flash of jealousy startled her, as strong as it was unexpected—not just of Tharin's wife, whomever she might be, but of Tharin himself. *He* had found a mate, a child, a life; whereas she had nothing but this endless, empty road.

She drew a breath, putting that jealousy aside; it would not serve her and was unworthy of her as well, for she could not have been the wife that Tharin deserved. *It is for the best*, she told herself. *It is*.

The heat of the day was starting to wear on her when she reached her destination: a house of weathered gray boards with

a porch and overhanging roof, surrounded by a small cluster of outbuildings: a barn and shed, and a smokehouse out back. The buildings were set back from the road and flanked by two spreading pines, at the top of a long, low, rise. A turnoff led to the single-story house; Chaladon started up the drive. She stepped up on to the porch and rapped at the door. Footsteps echoed within. Chaladon had a moment to wonder whether it would be Tharin or his wife who answered, and then the door opened.

\* \* \*

Any doubts of whether or not it was her Tharin were immediately silenced. It could be no other. The years had worn on him as they had on her, but she could still see the young man she had known in the older man before her; see the instant recognition in his eyes.

“Chaladon,” was all he said.

“Tharin.” His dark curls were threaded with silver and his fine features weathered from sun and wind and time. Chaladon could say no more; her heart was so full it choked her.

“Da, what is—” Lia stepped into the room from the inner door, then stopped short as she caught sight of Chaladon, a dishtowel hanging in her hands. “Lady Chaladon!” she cried. “I —”

Tharin held up one hand and Lia fell silent. He was watching Chaladon with a still, guarded expression that she remembered well—it was the way he looked whenever he was facing an unknown. It hurt a little, seeing that look directed at her now. “I had heard you were in town,” he said. “I wasn’t sure it was you. Or that it was best for us to meet again, in any case.” His voice held a muted reproach. “You said you would return.”

Lia was looking back and forth between them. “Da? I—”

“*Quiet, Lia,*” he said.

So many thoughts crowded her that all she could speak were inanities. “I thought you were dead.”

Tharin considered for a moment, then sighed. “Perhaps. It makes no difference. What’s done is done. Water under the keel, and it can’t be brought back.” He paused. “And you’re here now? But not to stay.” It was not a question.

Chaladon drew a breath, trying to steady herself, collect her thoughts. “But not to stay,” she confirmed quietly. “My quest is not yet finished—”

“Your quest. Yes.” Tharin sighed again, heavily. “I had only hoped.... It’s been a long time. For both of us—myself and Lia, I mean.”

“Lia. Yes.” Chaladon glanced over at Lia, who still stood frozen, watching with luminous eyes. She managed a smile, though it hurt a bit. “And her mother...?”

“Lia’s mother?” Tharin asked, and traded an unreadable glance with his daughter.

“Is she here? I would like to— That is, if it wouldn’t be too much bother, of course—”

Chaladon broke off. Tharin was staring at her strangely, his brow furrowed. Comprehension slowly dawned in his eyes, and as she looked from his expression to Lia’s eager face, suddenly, somehow, the knowledge hit her so hard she staggered.

“You don’t remember, do you,” Tharin said, each word careful and precise, as if he was tasting it for the first time. “You really don’t....”

He came to her and took her hands. His touch was the same—a gentle, warm strength—but Chaladon scarcely felt it. With delicate care, as if she were an invalid, he drew her forward.

“Chaladon,” he said, though it was not necessary. “This is your daughter, Lia.”

\* \* \*

*Daughter....*

She stared at Lia; the young woman’s eyes were fastened on her. *My daughter...?*

She knew it couldn’t be; she had never even been pregnant. Yet in that moment, it didn’t seem to matter. Ah,

Triune, now that she knew, she could see herself in the shape of Lia's hands, the curve of her lips, the tilt of her eyes... could see herself and Tharin both, blended together, in the face of the beautiful girl before her.

Lia's lips trembled. She turned wildly to Tharin. "Da, is she — Is Lady Chaladon—"

Tharin nodded, looking older still. Tears filled Lia's eyes. The girl took a step forward, then halted as if she were afraid.

Chaladon hesitated—Triune, she felt as uncertain as she had at her first presentation to the Empress—then tentatively held open her arms. Lia looked to her father. He reached out and gave her shoulder a rough, awkward squeeze.

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "Go ahead, Lia."

Slowly, half-distrustfully, Lia went to her, and Chaladon's arms closed involuntarily about her daughter.

"How did this happen?" she asked Tharin, still reeling. "How—"

"Maybe you'd better tell me what you *do* remember," he said, looking at her with concern.

"I—" But she couldn't; as she stood there, confronted with her lover, her daughter, Chaladon suddenly could not speak—could not bear to relate to them how she had turned her back on Tharin, abandoned him to the slavers. "No. I— You first. I

need to know how this—” *Miracle*, she might have said, gazing at Lia. “How this happened.”

Tharin nodded. Taking her hands again and speaking with a strange gentleness, as if to someone not quite in their right mind, he began. “It was a week or two after our parting—my barge, the *Pretty Lady*—you remember that, at least? The *Pretty Lady* was set upon by bandits. They overwhelmed us and took us prisoner. I thought we were going to die—and then you returned.”

There was such depth of feeling in his eyes that it broke Chaladon’s heart.

“Your path through the Winged Winds would not open again for another year and a half, you said. Despite that, you still returned.” Tharin laid a hand on her shoulder. Chaladon felt as if she could not breathe. “While we were—waiting—Lia was conceived.” He smiled at his daughter—*no*, our *daughter*—with quiet warmth. “When the year and a half was up, you and your friends moved on, leaving Lia with me. I didn’t want you to go, but I knew that you carried a charge more weighty than our love. And you promised to return.” He was silent a moment. “And now, here you are.”

“Here I am,” Chaladon murmured. She could scarcely speak. She thought of her memories, comparing them to

Tharin's tale, and was filled with a powerful, unaccustomed shame.

"And you're going to stay now, right?" Lia asked. "Mother? You're going to stay with us, and we—together we can—" She swallowed hard, looking as if she did not quite dare to believe.

"Lia...", Chaladon began, and then broke off. *What can I say to her?*

Tharin glanced over at Lia, and then back to her. He exhaled slowly. "Will you stay, Chaladon?" he asked her. "At least for a few days. Lia should get to know her mother, and I... I've thought about you, as well." He spoke with quiet dignity; yet his eyes said much more. "Stay with us, Chaladon, if not for me, then for your daughter. Please."

Lia's face was full of hope and fear; Tharin's expression hurt her heart. It seemed she had never wanted anything so much. *I will*, trembled on her lips. *Tharin, oh, Tharin, my daughter, I want...*

Instead, she drew a breath, and looked Tharin straight in the eye. "I can't." Her heart was heavy within her. "This *isn't* real."

And time stopped.

\* \* \*

Tharin and Lia both became completely still. Tharin was frozen in mid-gesture, reaching out to her; Lia's lips were

parted as if she was about to speak. Grains of dust floating in beams of sunlight halted, preserved as if in amber. No noises drifted from outside to break the perfect quiet. Chaladon had seen something like this once before, when she had faced the Guardians of the Clock of the Long Now; instinctively she freed her Fire Veil and rose onto her toes, prepared to face any threat.

She was casting about for the cause, when the door to the house banged open. “Well,” said a familiar voice, “I had thought that you would be willing to stay. Even knowing in your heart that it couldn’t be real. It seems I underestimated you.”

Mayor Gemma stood in the doorway. She showed no surprise at seeing Lia and Tharin frozen; she took them in with a single glance and dismissed them.

Chaladon clasped her Fire Veil tightly. “Who are you?”

Gemma ignored her question. “What finally caused you to reject it?”

The veil was warm in Chaladon’s hands. She twitched it a little, testing its weight and fall. “When Tharin appeared. I knew then, on some level, that I couldn’t stay, even if I didn’t want to admit it. Even if—” She drew a breath, then continued steadily, “Even if he’d managed to survive enslavement, the distance in time between then and now is too great. And Lia—”

Lia.... She swallowed. “I have never given birth. Lia was never mine.”

Gemma only nodded. “You did not consider that perhaps you had crossed into another world, where all had happened as Tharin told you?”

Chaladon let her eyes roam over Tharin, taking in every detail of his golden-hued skin, his vivid blue eyes, framed by long, almost feminine lashes, his blue-black curls. Those slender, sensitive hands, strangely fine despite the rough work he performed with them, strong shoulders, trim hips.... Her eyes went to Lia, seeing the blended features of the two of them in the beautiful girl before her.

“In any other world,” she said quietly, “I would never have left him.”

Gemma nodded again. “Ah. I *did* underestimate you, Deep Dancer. I had thought you would be content to remain.”

Chaladon wrenched her gaze away from her husband, her child. A surge of wild anger flared in her heart. Who *was* this creature who thought to torment her so? She took two turns of the Fire Veil around her hands, and pivoted to face the woman. “*What are you?*”

The trim, silver-haired woman studied her for a long moment, then her shoulders straightened; she shrugged as if casting off a cloak, and she *changed*.

Her form stretched upward, her weathered, aged face thinning; her silver hair lightened toward white and lengthened, descending about her like a curtain. Her fine clothing blurred to garments of flowing silver; her cheekbones flared and her eyes tilted, lightening to a crystal, inhuman blue. Within moments, no trace of the elderly mayor remained. Instead there stood before her a woman clad in silver: tall, almost elongated, with dead white skin, radiant shining eyes, pure white hair falling past her hips. Chaladon took a step back, gripping her veil more tightly; the new, strange woman turned those crystal eyes on Chaladon, and a thin smile edged her lips.

*“I have many names.”* Her voice was thin, dissonant, with eerie resonances and harmonies. It acted on the ear like an auditory razor, slicing through the air with a slender, gleaming, metallic sound. “I am known as Death of All Things. She of Dissolution. Lady of Snows. Ruler of the End. You may call me the White Queen. Welcome to my domain, Chaladon the Last.”

Chaladon wet her lips. “Very well, then, White Queen,” she said softly. Again, she twitched her veil, studying her new opponent. “It is good at last to learn with whom I am dealing.”

The White Queen’s lips parted, showing teeth in a smile like the edge of a knife. It looked artificial, as if she knew that humans smiled, but had not quite grasped the reason. Around

them, the dust motes hung perfectly still in the sparkling sunlight.

“You certainly have gone to a great deal of trouble to welcome me.” Chaladon indicated the house, Tharin, Lia. “Why?”

The White Queen tipped her head. “The one I serve wished me to greet you.”

“The one you *serve*?”

The strange woman blinked, sheathes of marble sliding down over those crystal blue eyes. “Perhaps you will meet her in time.”

Chaladon did not need to touch her pendant to know that this woman was magic; the aura around her was almost visible to the naked eye. She was the source of everything here... the town, everything. Whether a spell, or a thought projection, Chaladon could not say. The Fire Veil warmed in her hands; the sparkle of the golden threads woven into the fabric deepened. She could feel the thing stirring in her mind, beginning to come awake.

“Why? Why... *this*?” Her eyes went to Tharin. A warm, painful heat flared in her chest.

“Can you not guess, Chaladon the Last?” The words could have been taunting, had they not been utterly emotionless. “Your quest to stop the Ever-storm—the chaos at the center of

the world. You seek to defeat the End.” She paused. “In the early days, you and your friends posed no threat. You were young, naïve, untutored—and the dissolution was too far entrenched. And you did as much damage as you attempted to prevent. The Tower of Shalott; the Clock of the Long Now; the Clockwork Horse; the Phantom Train.... You spread destruction and chaos wherever you went.” Her eyes shifted, as if she were looking beyond the world to something else. Chaladon for the first time noticed the shadows clinging to her, like trailing cobwebs of darkness.

“It was much to our surprise when the two of you struck down the third at the Clock of the Long Now. When your remaining companion turned aside in the Garden of Forking Paths, we thought you would not continue. It seemed evident that you too must falter; that you would not succeed in undoing the damage the first Chaladon had done.”

Those crystal eyes remained remote, expressionless.

“We never thought you would come this far. Yet we are pleased at last to meet you.”

The White Queen did not smile; yet there was a hint of satisfaction in her voice. Chaladon herself was reeling.

“We are not cruel,” the White Queen went on. “We seek to give you happiness in your measure.” She gestured with a pure

white arm. “We offer you the life you would have had, if you had not chosen to follow your quest across the centuries.”

Chaladon stared at her. The Fire Veil seemed to burn. “I don’t understand,” she said... but she did. So well it frightened her.

“Rest here, Chaladon.” The White Queen’s voice fell like silvery spring rain. “Find peace here, with the mate of your heart. You can wed Tharin, and grow old together, like Bakkis and Phylam in the tales, transformed into twined saplings at the end of their lives. You can watch your daughter grow to womanhood and have children of her own. You can found a new crèche, see your art continue—and end your days surrounded by those who love you. Yes, you will have turned aside from your path—but this path was never your choice, was it? Chalise, your Linemistress, pushed you and Chalira and Chaläestra out into the world, dazzled you with dreams of glory before you even knew what you wanted.... Yet such dreams are the province of youth. Now you know what glory really is.”

“Empty....” Something was caught in Chaladon’s throat. Her eyes stung; she watched the frozen images of Tharin, of Lia, double and treble. “Lonely....”

“Lonely. Yes.” The White Queen sounded as if she had no knowledge of loneliness; somehow, that inhuman chill made her words bite deeper than compassion could have. “You have

traveled a hard road, Chaladon. Leave it for another, for whoever chooses to come after you. You have done your share, and more....”

Tharin stood, perfect and timeless, caught in a shaft of sunlight; Lia, her lips parted, one hand upraised. *My husband. My daughter....* Triune Goddess, she wanted.... “But it—This—” She had to clear her throat. “But this isn’t real. It wouldn’t be....”

“It is as real as you want it to be—as real as your dreams, as real as your longing. That you longed to stay was evident in every word you spoke to Tharin. It is evident now, in the way you watch him, though you know that he is an illusion. Follow your heart, for once in this life. Stay here, in this bright dream we have made for you, and at last, find happiness.”

Chaladon swallowed. “But I would know.... I would always know....”

“You would know what you allowed yourself to know, no more. If you decide to accept this dream, then in time it will become your reality. Stay here, and within a year, two, it will be the pain of your old life that seems like a dream. Go no further, Chaladon. Stay here. *Stay.*”

The words echoed like the tolling of a bell, calling forth an almost unbearable yearning. Tears filled her eyes as the White Queen’s voice caressed her.

Ah, Triune, illusion though it was, she *wanted* this, more than anything she had ever known. Was it not as the White Queen said, that if she accepted this, it would become her reality? *The love you feel for Tharin... **that** is real, and so **he** is real.* She watched Tharin and Lia blur and shimmer, sparkling apart into liquid drops of color. In that moment, she could see it all just as the White Queen had described it: all that would be hers if only she turned aside. Why should it be up to her? Hadn't she sacrificed enough?

What had this quest brought her but pain and grief? It was true, what the White Queen said—the destruction left in her wake. Did she really think she was bringing good and not evil into the world? After Shalott? After—?

*Is this what you felt, Chalira? In the Garden of Forking Paths?*

For an eternity, she hovered on the cusp of decision. The White Queen's eyes watched her, crystal blue and endlessly deep. Triune, she ached....

She drew a breath, gazing at Tharin and at Lia. She started to speak—

—then swung the Fire Veil up over her head.

It crackled to life in her hands, the quiescent presence within it leaping up hungrily, and became a sheet of flame. For

the first time, the White Queen showed emotion: she took a step back, uncertainty entering those crystal eyes.

“I *won't*.”

The Deep Dance flowed through Chaladon's body as the fabric flowed through the air: unfolding, blooming outward through her limbs until it met the power embedded in the Fire Veil. She swept it through a fluttering, flaming arc, and fire lashed out.

“Tharin is *dead*.” A lance of flames struck the man who should have been her husband, the man she'd loved, the man she'd left, and he burst apart into a thousand glistening shards.

“Challia *doesn't exist*.” Another lance, and the daughter she had never borne was reduced to a pile of fragments.

“All of this can *never be*.” The veil swept and roared around her, flames stoking flames, surging into a maelstrom. The power was flooding through her now, and as swiftly as fire, her own emotions flashed into rage. She wanted to burn it all, *all*—the town, the lying forms that were not her husband, not her daughter, the coolly hateful face of the White Queen. Chaläestra, for forcing her dance-sisters to kill her. Chalira, for leaving Chaladon alone to follow this cold and hateful road. Chalise, for sending the three of them out, *knowing* that they could never return. Chaladon the First, the founder of her line, for—so the legends said—challenging the Triune at dancing,

and thus loosing the Ever-storm on the world. Ah, her rage mounted higher and higher; the inferno roared in her ears. The house was gone, a mass of flames. Heat howled at her from all sides, clutching at her with greedy claws, but wrapped as she was in the heart of the dance, she felt none of it; nor did she feel the tears that blurred her vision. There was only the raw fury inside her.

“Never!” she raged, seeing only the flames themselves. “No.”

The flames climbed up, up, striking into the sky; and through the blaze, the barrier surrounding the town gradually became visible, called into existence by Chaladon’s will. Tongues of fire beat against the barrier; it shimmered, weakening. She could sense it, a solid wall, blocking her power—both that of the dance and that of the Fire Veil—and it fueled her wrath. She hurled her strength against it, smashing into it as waves smashed upon the shore. The barrier went with a deafening, rolling *roar* that seemed to shake the earth to its foundations, jarring Chaladon so that she missed a step.

And then, the fire was gone. Not even ashes were left.

\* \* \*

Chaladon reeled in sudden exhaustion. It was always the way, after a great exertion of power; one never felt the cost until the dance was over. She staggered, caught her balance

with the grace of long training. The Fire Veil subsided, once again simply a piece of fabric. Trembling, she tried to catch her breath.

Nothing beside remained. Around her, in every direction, the lone and level wastes stretched far away. There was not so much as a scrap of board or nail to prove that the town had ever existed: emptiness surrounded her—rocky soil, with tangles of scrub brush and wiregrass as the only break in the brown land between the boulders and stony outcroppings.

Above her, the rift in the sky loomed.

The Fire Veil hung, wilted, in her hands. As if in a dream, she wound it around herself again, knotting it at the back of her neck. Her eyes went over and over the vast barrens, searching for any sign, any trace of the life that had been there before.

*Did I dream it? Or... did I destroy it?* It would be fitting if she had. They had destroyed so much else.

The words of the White Queen echoed in her mind: *You spread destruction and chaos wherever you went.* She shivered, cold, under the scarred and screaming sky.

Perhaps... she should turn back.

But she could not. The world that she had known was long dead. Only the road ahead still lay open.

*Find me, Chaladon. Chaladon the Ninth. Chaladon the Last. Find me there, at the Edge of the World....*

Chaladon the Ninth, last of the Deep Dancers, woman out of time, took a long breath. She tightened her veil and checked the balance of her sword on her back. She saw that her pack lay at her sandaled feet; she picked it up and settled it across her shoulders. A glance at the sun showed her the direction. She positioned it on her right side, then swept her gaze one last time over the nothingness around her. The town... her husband... her daughter.... *Gone.*

Yet the quest remained.

She took a moment to clear her head, then set out: a long, firm, distance-eating stride that had carried her across miles and centuries.

*Onward.*

Copyright © 2013 Dana Beehr

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

*Dana Beehr has a degree in anthropology and has been writing since she was in high school. "Dreams of Peace" is her second published short story. She currently lives with her husband in Southern Michigan.*

Support *BCS*

*BCS* on **facebook**

*BCS* on **twitter**

[Read more \*Beneath Ceaseless Skies\*](#)

## COVER ART

“News from the Horizon,” by Tuomas Korpi



Tuomas Korpi is an illustrator, production designer, and matte painter from Finland. He has worked in the entertainment and advertising industry since 2005, including the last three years as an illustrator, designer, and visual director at Studio Piñata, a Helsinki-based animation and illustration studio. In his work he aims to combine the vivid impressionistic style and lighting with digital media and environment design. He likes to think of his personal works as frames from yet-to-be-made movies that leave the viewer space for their own imagination. See more of his work at [tuomaskorpi.com](http://tuomaskorpi.com).

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

ISSN: 1946-1076

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

Copyright © 2013 Firkin Press



This file is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 U.S. license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/). You may copy and share the file so long as you retain the attribution to the authors, but you may not sell it and you may not alter it or partition it or transcribe it.