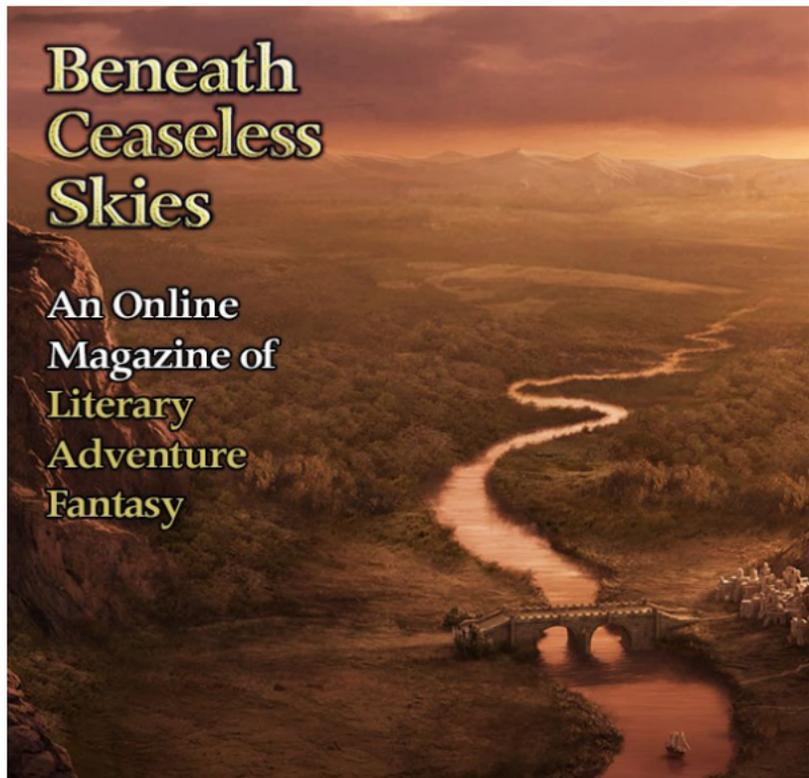


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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Magazine of  
Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy



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## THE BLACK VEIL

by M. Bennardo

Constant Sterry rode almost doubled over the neck of his horse, his fists clutching leather reins and his cheek continually brushed by the feather-touch of the mane. Slowly and steadily the horse bore him through the woods, for the pain in Constant's gut grew insupportable with the jostling of anything more than a walk.

With eyes fixed on the thin trail below, Constant watched the scarlet key-shaped leaves of the oaks of Salem Town grow less frequent as he threaded west into the deepening wilderness. In their place, the yellow and orange cast-offs of beeches and maples now drifted silently down from the canopy above. They covered the trail and the ground alike and clung even to the horse's haunches. So thick did the trees knit together here that even the afternoon sun grew dark, and the feverish sweat on Constant's brow chilled.

But there, where the leaf litter parted to show clear spaces of mud on the trail, were stamped the cloven-hoofed footprints of the dancing Devil. There and there, sharply cut in the mud they went—an endless track of merry split-shoed steps

preceding Constant Sterry on his way, leading the one-time judge of the Court of Oyer and Terminer in the Province of Massachusetts Bay to what he knew must be his deathbed.

\* \* \*

As night fell, Constant Sterry reached the isolated cabin that marked the end of his journey. Little more than a shack of a one room, it crouched in the shadows of the forest, a thin spire of smoke the only evidence that it was not already derelict.

Once in earshot, Constant gripped his belly and tried to call out. But no sound would come—only agony instead. Then rising now as high he could in his saddle, Constant filled his lungs again—

But there, already, on the threshold of the cabin, stood a figure in a black frockcoat and cape, silently arranging the folds of a black veil underneath its wide hat.

As Constant slipped exhausted from his saddle, the last he saw was that same figure approaching, outstretched hands sheathed in thin black gloves with lacework as fine as any to be found.

\* \* \*

Constant woke in bed, bathed in sweat, a bandage laid carelessly across his bare chest. He'd been taken inside, and he

watched with strange fascination as the black-veiled figure knelt over him.

The bandage was snatched from his chest—the linen already soaked to vermillion—and another put in its place, held tight by black-gloved fingers. But Constant had seen the four parallel lines of red that ran from his shoulder to his breast, like the claw marks of a lion.

He rolled his head towards the Black Veil. “The Devil knows I am near death, and soon to be out of his power. He will have no permission to harry me in Heaven.”

Then Constant coughed violently, his mouth filling with bloody slime as something sawed at his gut. The bedclothes knotted in his hands, his own sharp nails leaving crescents of red where his fists closed.

As the fit subsided, Constant looked again at the figure whom he had sought. He saw the shrouded face, the covered hands, the heavy frockcoat. None knew whence the Black Veil had come, nor why it never suffered anyone to see even an inch of its bare skin. But for a moment, Constant imagined he saw through the garments that cloaked its body and face and thought there must be thorn pricks on its brow and nail holes on its palms.

The pain returned, and Constant doubled. “Do not abandon me now, Christ,” he wheezed—and the veil of insensibility descended upon him.

\* \* \*

“I wish,” murmured Constant Sterry as he swam half in fever, “it had been my lot to play the part you play. Salve to the dying, angel of mercy to those in pain.”

The Black Veil said nothing and instead put a cool cloth to Constant’s brow. Many in Massachusetts believed the Black Veil had been a minister once and had fled to this wilderness hermitage to serve out some self-imposed penance in silence and solitude, hidden completely from the eyes of men.

“But it was not to me to play such a role,” continued Constant. “A warrior for Christ I have been instead, and five witches I sent to be hanged on the testimony of the afflicted. So it is that five devils assail me now.” He closed his eyes and tried to will the pain away. “Always is it thus with exorcists. Always do they suffer at death.”

The Black Veil lifted the cloth and plunged it in a bowl of water, refreshing its coolness and laying it again on Constant’s burning brow.

“For six months, the devil of disease has probed my belly and filled it with hot coals,” said Constant. “But for six years, the devil of deceit has turned public sympathy toward those

witches—until even the ministers and governors, who had been the first to urge the proceedings on, have all but condemned we who they asked to sit in judgment.”

The Black Veil made no sign that it heard or understood, and instead raised a bowl of warm broth to Constant’s lips and held it while he drank.

“The devil of faithlessness has left me bereft of friends. And now this devil made manifest—this physical spirit of the invisible world—” Here, Constant broke off, and his fingers clutched as he nervously picked and worried at his own shoulder and cheek. “It is terrible to know that the Lord has given the Devil permission to rake me thus—to lay his talons upon me bodily—”

Again, Constant stopped with a ragged gasp, and the gentle hand of the Black Veil reached out to straighten his clawing fingers.

“And the fifth,” said Constant Sterry, suddenly exhausted. “The worst of all. The fifth—it is the devil of doubt.”

\* \* \*

Later, in the midst of a dark night, Constant Sterry woke with a start. The Black Veil nodded at the bedside, a forgotten taper sputtering dimly and a psalter spread open across its knees.

Constant's eyes regarded the slumbering figure in a half-panic, dark doubts now clouding his mind. Was it Christ in fact who sat there next to him? Those clasped black gloves—could they hide a woman's hands? That falling black veil—could it hide a woman's throat? A throat bruised and abraded by the rough hemp of the hangman's noose?

Constant recalled now the bitter ravings of Agnes Easton, just seventeen, who had never confessed, never recanted, and who had spat viciously at him even from the platform of the gallows. Were the Black Veil's lips her lips—blue and blood-specked? Was its tongue her tongue—black, swollen, and silent? Were its eyes her eyes—wormy and hollow from the loam of the unmarked, unholy grave?

Having lost his friends and been made the butt of accusations of zealotry, Constant had come here to die alone in the company of one whom he thought a holy man. But had it all been but another trick of the Devil? Had he been tricked into delivering himself into the very hands of the foe, where doubt and temptation might plague him even in the last moments of his life?

Slowly and with shivering hand, Constant reached up to throw back the veil that covered the sleeping figure's face. He knew he had not many hours left to live, so weak and exhausted had he become—but at least he would look upon its face. At

least he would know the truth, and at last he would learn whether this doubt and suffering had been laid on him by the Devil, or whether he really had erred in the eyes of Christ—

But the figure woke—and shook its head, and gently put off the grasping fingers, and moved itself away.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Constant Sterry felt death gather in his stomach. He felt the coldness spreading down his legs and arms as his breathing slowed and weakened. Had the black veil been placed between his fingers now, he no longer had even the strength to tear it away.

Instead, he whispered, as the Black Veil looked down over him.

“Judge me,” he said. So much more he could not say, but he tried to plead through his dimming eyes. For he felt no succoring hand of God, and he saw no pearly light. He only felt the creeping coldness—of death, of doubt, of fear.

On the cusp of oblivion, Constant Sterry was alone.

Then a gloved hand pressed against his brow, the pattern of the dainty fabric heavy on burning nerves. Bending low, the Black Veil took mercy and comforted him.

*Die easy,* said the hand upon his brow—not in words, but in its contact. *I'm with you now, until the end.*

Constant struggled to raise his fluttering eyelids. Who? Who was with him? He felt he had but a moment left to him to repent—if repentance were right! If this crushing doubt were not another trick of the Devil's to frighten him into renouncing the work of God.

If only he could know! If only certainty were his again—the certainty he had felt as he had doomed those five witches to the gallows!

Constant Sterry worked his lips, but he could ask and plead no more. One answer more he had needed, one answer more to unravel the riddle of his life and deeds, of whether he had been right or wrong.

\* \* \*

But somehow, the Black Veil seemed to understand. It seemed to know what question was wanted, and what answer was needed. *Who is it now that comforts me?* was the question. *Who tells me not to repent my work? Art thou Christ, or lying Devil?*

And there, before the clouding eyes of Constant Sterry, the Black Veil gave the answer true, lifting the folds that hid its face, and showing who it was.

The breath caught in Constant's throat, and his dry mouth popped open. His heart raced weakly under his ribs as he struggled to understand. The blanket slipped down to the floor,

but Constant felt neither the rough sliding of the wool nor the cold air of the shack.

*Just a man!* cried the ice that crept around his heart. *Just a man like any other!*

“But what does it mean?” asked Constant Sterry, finding his voice at last by sheer strength of will. “Was I right, or was I wrong?” But the Black Veil could only cover its face again and sadly shake its head.

Then consciousness slipped. Constant Sterry’s lips parted, but only a bleat of despair escaped—and then his lips were still.

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## NOW IX, HE WAS A LOVER

by Hannah Strom-Martin

The dead Sultana was denied Pilara's Temple and burned in the palace courtyard, with only a minor wazir to see her off. That same morning, in a lower part of the city, Feride the Merchant struck his wife, Ela.

They said, Ela told Yonca that bright, cruel morning, that the Pasha had not strangled his Sultana but hired a foreign wizard to kill her. The poor girl had died in her bath, wrung and torn by magic while her elven lover screamed.

"An *elf*," Ela repeated, as if Yonca didn't know. The gossip had been hung up with the laundry for a week. "An elf pleased her in the royal harem."

"Ari Pasha was so angry he never even offered her the cord." Yonca shook her head and moved the shutter of her loom. Ela had been thinking how unfair it was that her youngest sister could be both so lovely and so worldly, when Feride slapped her across the jaw.

Neither woman had noted his return. Feride traded goods along the Caravan Road and, at last report, had still been wending his way back from Kismé. He was a sturdy man but

light on his feet, and Ela heard him coming only a moment before she found herself sprawled on the floor.

As she scrambled up she looked at him—this husband, this man she'd lived with for twenty years—and wondered, nonsensically, if *he* were a wizard, magically shed of his disguise as the father of her children.

“Filth!” Feride said. Sand bleached his forehead. He smelled of sheep and dust and exhaustion. “They’re telling these tales all over the city! Now I must hear my wife speaking them too!”

He ordered Yonca out of the house (“A bad influence! Stupid cow!”), and it was not until many hours later as Ela circled him for the ritual of cleansing that the world finally settled again.

“I’m sorry,” he said, shame-faced as she chanted. The children tip-toed past the doorway, convinced he’d taken on ifrits on the road. Smoke wreathed his head and swirled near his nostrils, but he was softening back into a man. “It’s just that the story is so *foul*. To hear you speak it feels like madness.”

“I am sorry, husband. It... passes a day.”

“It is a sin,” Feride said, “to lie with the Accursed. Yah forbids such things even to be thought of.”

Her wrist felt fragile as he gripped it. Her jaw throbbed. Her teeth had cut her tongue.

Ela, the wife of Feride the Merchant, nodded.

“A sin,” she agreed, as she dabbed the smut from his brow.

\* \* \*

“You ought to get back at him,” Yonca said. It was three days later and they were at their looms. Out in the courtyard the orange tree had flowered, and the youngest children gathered blossoms to strew in the fountain. Stray ghosts of heat rose from the grass. A morning just like any other.

Ela nodded mechanically. The loom clicked: a new blanket for her bed. Feride had got the wool from Kismé and it was pink: the color of a swollen tongue.

“I get Mahmud back all the time,” Yonca said. When Ela looked at her she pursed her lips. “Oh come now, it’s not as if he *finds out*. Besides: we’re women. What are we to do?” She paused. “The Sultana had the right of it.”

Ela was the story-teller in the house. She supposed that was why the dead Sultana fascinated her. Antara Caras, her name had been; her death like something from the ancient tales. Ela could imagine her loneliness. Her youngness. Her marriage to the Pasha with his dark brow and battle scars. Yet as Yonca began to expound upon her plan, Ela could not, at first, understand what she was saying.

“Elves?” she said, at last, wearied.

“For massage,” Yonca said. “There are special houses.”

Ela turned, afraid Feride might be standing behind her. Her sense of fear had swollen too. They'd raised five children, remembered each other's birthdays, done their chores together and gone to temple. She'd laughed with him, once, over a sacrificial dove: escaped through a window before they could kill it. Yet there was also another Feride: who came home angry, who sometimes hit. He seemed to hate her stories the most. Did he think telling one meant wanting to live in one?

*Well maybe that's right, she thought. Maybe it is.* And as Yonca talked she began to listen.

*Has he worked too hard? Grown too old? Does he love me? Did he ever love me?* The loom clicked faster. She wasn't sure he had. Love was another story they had not shared.

\* \* \*

The next time Feride went away—to Pench to buy up opals from the Red Desert—Ela and Yonca set out for the elf-house.

They went in the morning as if going to market. They wore their usual finery at first but, when they were away from their own district they donned darker vesh and wrapped woolen yashmak up to their eyes.

“Hot,” Yonca said, and indeed, dust was swirling, “but it will be worth it my dear. You'll see.”

Ela followed her towards the Perfume District, which lay behind gold gates in the northern part of the city. The familiar

mélange of her own district's market became the sizzle of onions and the reek of wine. The sounds of bells as the temples opened faded into a squabbling of human voices. Only the palace stayed the same. As they wound their way through Perfume's slave bazaar and into a labyrinth of storied buildings and wine sinks, the white walls and golden dome tracked them like a moon, rearing forever over their heads.

*It looks so quiet*, Ela thought. But it wasn't. New rumors had grown. The palace, if you cut it open, would gush with the blood of the Sultana's children.

The elf-house lay in a quiet pink square whose buildings leaned inward over a fountain. Dust blew from the empty basin and reminded Ela how thirsty she was. Inside the elf-house, water waited by the door—a cool bowl just like in a respectable house. But when the fat proprietress—unexpectedly mortal—seated them in a salon Ela knew respectable wasn't in it. There was too much velvet, and a distinct tang of opium and wine in a silver pitcher though it wasn't past noon. She almost jumped up and fled, but Yonca unwound her yashmak as if she lived there and persuaded Ela to take a drink. Sweet and pleasant, the wine cooled her tongue and numbed the knot Feride had left. When she realized how much it had been throbbing, she pushed herself decisively against the cushions.

Presently the mortal woman returned. The bath chambers were ready, would they like to come? Ela followed down a dim red hallway and wondered vaguely if it led to Ix's Hell. Elves had yet to appear in the elf-house. Would they be like the ones other families kept, or would their ears be more like horns?

"It's all right," Yonca said, as Ela clutched her yashmak. "We're not like to meet anyone we know. Even if we did, what could they say? To incriminate us would incriminate them."

"Of course," Ela said. But her head kept whirling. *Yah forbids such things even to be thought of.* She waited until the proprietress left them in the disrobing chamber before she let her face be shown.

When the sisters were stripped and snuggled in towels, the proprietress returned to show them their elves. The meeting took place in the steaming Hot Room. Yonca went one way and Ela another. Water gurgled in the deep pools. She was alone when she met the Poet for the first time.

"Why do you call him that?" she'd asked the proprietress.

"A joke," the woman said. "He hardly speaks."

Indeed, he did not speak now. He loomed, instead, out of the steam, an oiled lovely thing as all elves were lovely, and dark in the way of the Red Desert. Ela felt a sudden stirring of desire immediately followed by guilt, for Feride had gone that way. That her elf came from that region seemed a form of

judgment but, though she was Yah-fearing, she brushed concern aside. She'd once seen her youngest daughter fall from the orange tree. She'd turned towards her in the instant before the slip. There was a point as an event unfolded when its conclusion became inevitable. She'd run that day to save her daughter. She didn't run now. The impact had come.

The elf—the Poet—had deep, solemn eyes. He was so well made and different from Feride that fear pinned Ela to the spot. He wasn't a man but an avalanche. Not a being but a story.

“Here,” she said, suddenly reckless. She took off the towel and approached the hot slab. Steam seemed to roar around her and, sitting, she began, unexpectedly, to cry.

The Poet watched this for a moment and then, not speaking, approached the slab. Briefly, she thought something illicit would happen. She was now naked and he wore only a dhoti. Yonca had explained the protocol: nothing happened in the elf-house that wasn't paid for. As wives they did not have enough money to sin before Yah in any significant way. Still, Ela knew many women had had the Poet. Perhaps the proprietress had made a mistake?

But the Poet only paused and held her eye. He inclined his head to indicate her bruise.

“Oh,” Ela said. “Yes, this.” She touched it.

“Lay down, effendi,” the Poet said.

Having heard so much about his silence, Ela was shocked to hear him speak. She did as he said and lay face down on the stone. He spread her towel over her flanks and then touched her shoulders. She stiffened at first. Her recklessness had cooled. She feared Yah’s decree that women should honor their husbands. Slowly, though, the strain went out of her. The bench and his hands were solid and warm. There seemed a kind of care in them or, at the very least, a pride. She lay for an hour and let him tend her, and then slept a little as she had not slept in years.

When it was over and he rose to go, she noted the great scars on his back. She remembered that later, waking at home with the night all around her in her empty bed.

In the days that followed, she did not forget him.

\* \* \*

Her back. Her neck. The webs of her fingers. She thought of them—where he’d touched her—as she sat at her loom.

Her hips where she’d rested so many children. The small, painful place at the base of her spine.

Out in the courtyard the children moved slowly. Spring crept into summer. The city baked.

The knot where she always bent over her sewing. The spidery pinch between finger and thumb.

Feride came home with a small opal necklace. Dust steamed off him. He called for a drink.

Her jaw, her arms (who knew how they stiffened!), her shoulders that had carried her children and goods.

She drifted through each day, listless. The children wanted bowls to float lotus for monsoon. On the first muggy day, as the sky gathered closer, she sat with her youngest three boys at her feet. When Yah's thunder called to announce the new season, they ran shrieking to the fountain, their arms laden with flowers.

*The death of the old season. The rebirth of the new.*

A cool wind came and lifted her veils. When the lightning stabbed towards the heart of the city, forking and electric beyond the white garden walls, Ela stopped clutching and let her hair blow and the rain dropped like tears on the hot ground beneath her.

Her back. Her neck. Her hips. Her heart.

"You are a poet," Ela whispered.

\* \* \*

Feride left again at the end of the season, and Ela invited her sister for tea.

"The elf-house?" Yonca asked. She kept her voice down. Her big blue eyes were less sunny than they'd been. "You *did* see what happened on the palace hill?"

Ela nodded. The hill loomed above her each morning, a treeless red slope arching over the market. Two days past a strange shape had risen upon it: ragged and thin, twisting in the wind. “Merrid effendi is only one man. He’s not thought of kindly for what he did to her.” She did not add that Merrid was a man she knew—just a humble baker, until this shocking business with his wife.

“It’s not *what* he did but *why* he did it. Oh, Ela, I never should have encouraged you....”

“I’m not thinking of rutting, if that’s what you fear.”

“I don’t. But—Yah and Pilara! I can’t believe I must lecture you! Small vengeance is one thing. We belong to our *men!*”

“Our men who hit us?” Ela asked.

Her back. Her neck. He’d been so gentle.

“Our men who can kill us,” Yonca said.

\* \* \*

Ela knew that Yonca was right. She knew it even as she donned her yashmak. The palace-moon followed her across the city as it had the first time she’d gone to the elf-house.

And so too, while the palace hill remained visible, did the crucified form of Merrid effendi’s wife who, rumor insisted, had shown kindness to elves.

\* \* \*

The proprietress was slow to answer Ela's knock and suspicious until she recognized her. When she realized Ela meant to spend money her caution faded in the light of her smile.

Ela handed her the coins. She had stolen them, one every week, from Feride's savings box. She asked, shyly, after the Poet and was ushered again to the room of sweet steam.

Part of her expected to be underwhelmed. Surely the man she recalled had been inflated by daydreams. But no. If anything, she had forgotten how tall he was. How distinctly elven with his winglike ears. As often happened, they'd shaved his head to accentuate them. His bald scalp gleamed—somehow mischievous—when matched to the glint in his tilted eyes.

*He can't be so mischievous*, she thought. Though he faced her, she still remembered his scars. Eight wheals: pale and knotted. Eight strokes for Yah's eight arms. Standard punishment for a slave, for stealing or lateness or speaking out of turn. The Poet didn't speak though. Only smiled. She touched the place her bruise had been.

"Do you remember me?" she wanted to ask. Yet he gave no sign of recognition. It came to her how many women he'd tended. How many bored Yoncas and silly young wives. All

they had to do was lie on the slab. He must stand, work at them, dig in with his hands.

*I am no one to him*, she realized. He'd not have spoken to her save for tears and a bruise.

When he touched her, though, it was the same. *Pride, then. He takes pride in his work.* She lost herself to the rhythm of it, of back and neck and hips and heart. His oiled hands slid over her and the world knew only the sound of steam.

“Thank you,” she said when it was over. He nodded, and this seemed genuine.

“I’m Ela,” she said. “The wife of Feride.” Too late it occurred to her how stupid she was. What if he told someone? But then, he was the Poet. He spoke very little. Even now: just her name.

“Elaferide.” He made the names run together, entwined as closely as the ones who bore them. Ela’s face heated. She turned away.

When the heat drained down from head to heart, she decided that she would buy him a gift.

\* \* \*

Feride still tarried in the Pasturelands where the Sanjiib roamed with their fringe-bridled camels. He’d left her money for what she needed—milk and mangoes, flour and ghee—but what she needed now was a token. She made up a clever lie for

Yonca so the girls would have someone to mind them, then delved to the heart of the Temple District where Pilara's manse drank the sunlight of noon.

What would an elf with strong hands desire? What did elves give in the way of thanks? She pondered this as she roamed the low tents with their colored awnings and strange vendors. Her own home lay in a low quadrant of Temple, closer to Yah's house with its gilded minarets. Pilara, Yah's wife, had a different dwelling, and Feride said she must go there sparingly. This had less to do, Ela thought, with the temple's engravings than with the proliferation of loose-robed women eager to perform the acts depicted. Even in her most anonymous vesh, Ela shied away from such lost souls—although, as she had not done before, she noticed how many of them were elves.

In a purple tent that smelled of anise she found a tiny vial of oil. Essence of rose, the vendor said. The Poet could have held four in one hand. The vendor tied a red string around the vial and held the tent flap as Ela exited into the hazy afternoon.

The air felt rich and thick and queer. At first she thought the street hawkers were roasting lambs. But people rushed past her towards the center of the market—or else away, even faster, towards its edge—and the clouds blowing towards her on hot updrafts of wind were an odd yellow-brown and uncommonly pungent. A sick feeling came over her as if she'd eaten too

much, but the crowd swept her up and she went unresisting. By the time they bore her away from the tents to the white, glaring square before Pilara's temple, Ela knew what waited yet she couldn't break free. Other wives and children and merchants and slaves pressed against her, jostling like goats herded into a pen. Above them, running smoke in long pennant-like streamers, were two burning bodies hung naked on poles.

A sigh of revulsion and wonder sounded as if all the mouths in the crowd had drawn breath. Beneath the bodies merchant men danced and triumphant fists punched from the sleeves of their robes. They acted like warriors lordling over an enemy, yet the enemy could not have fought them much.

Heavy chains bound the wrists of one of the bodies. Before she dropped her head, sick and dizzy to her shoulder, Ela glimpsed his ears, pointed like spires to the sky.

\* \* \*

Word of what had happened spread through the city. An ugly feeling lingered in the streets long after the smell of burning dissipated.

Feride remained in the Pasturelands. His messages home spoke of sandstorms and deals in saffron and elephant hide. Ela waited for him. Waited for the streets to calm. When neither thing happened she invited Yonca over and claimed an errand on the other side of Temple.

“*Thread?*” Yonca asked. She hadn’t forgotten their last conversation. In the kitchen, Ela’s eldest girl, Masha, wore her aunt’s exact worry lines like a low slung crown as she rolled out the dough for the evening bread.

“I won’t be long,” Ela said. “The children need watching.” She pulled a faded vesh around her and ducked out into the last shreds of the afternoon.

At the elf house she offered another stolen coin but had to wait an hour for the Poet. Rumors of riot and a small faction of rebels sprung up to revenge themselves on their mortal masters had not put the elf-house out of business. If anything, it had given spice to its revels. Ela kept her face hidden as a Penchian merchant passed, his quilted arms looped about the waists of two elf girls. The three of them were reeling and bobbing with drink and nodding good-naturedly to the other patrons: a merchant still wearing his riding veil, another Penchian with the peaked slippers of a cameleer, a woman as tall and dark as a tribesman with enough wealth draped upon her to buy the brothel outright. From within the throbbing walls of the establishment Ela heard keen cries of pleasure. In an ill-lit corner a girl played on a dulcimer and sang nonsense in a clear sweet voice:

Now Ix, he was a lover, as most deceivers are  
He fastened on Pilara: her voice to him a star.

He brought to her a letter, he brought to her a poem.

He said “You are my only. From you I’ll never roam.

“From Yah I shall release you: that husband you know well.

“And make you, dear Pilara, my lovely queen of Hell.”

Ela tried not to listen to the blasphemy—as all songs must be which exalted Ix. Still a part of her had always liked the story. Because Pilara agreed to be Ix’s wife once a year, venturing into his Hell with her torch, Ix had ceased to wage war on the other gods and granted mercy to souls caught between worlds. All statues of Pilara depicted the torch resting in her eighth and final hand.

“Effendi.” The proprietress’s soft voice disturbed her. “We are ready for you now.”

Another woman was leaving, her arms stretching languorously, when Ela came before the Poet again. He emerged before her through a gust of steam like a living carving from Pilara’s temple.

“Elaferide,” he said, softly. The proprietress was nowhere around.

Ela swallowed and palmed the vial. She thought she could smell it: the ghost of a rose.

“Poet,” she said. Steam dampened her hair. Despite curtains of moisture she felt parched. *You remember*, she

thought. Yes, he did. There was recognition in his face—and sadness. *He's heard of his kindred. Of the elves burning.*

“I brought you something,” she said. Meekly now, she proffered the vial. You could not make up for lost lives with oil. Not heal whip scars, or scars of the heart. “Do patrons ever give you gifts?”

“Some do.”

“Then...here. Will they let you have it?”

“I can always have what they cannot see.”

They regarded each other through the steam.

“Would you like to lay down, Elaferide?”

“No,” Ela said. “But I think you should.”

\* \* \*

His back. His neck. The webs of his fingers. The broad stretch of palm that had soothed her hurts. She tried to remember the things he had done and to give them back to him in turn.

The base of his skull where he bent his head. The rippled wounds where the lash had fallen. He shuddered as her hands ran over him—then grabbed her, pulled her into his arms.

As they made slow love, a girl was singing of Yah and Pilara and of the birth of legends.

\* \* \*

“By Yah, will she do the whole epic in doggerel?” the Poet said when they lay at rest. His room was small and windowless, little more than an alcove with a sleep-ledge and a door. On the other side of the wall was the bathhouse. The singer could be heard there, entertaining customers.

“You know our songs?” Ela asked.

“All men know Ix.”

They listened as the tale went on: Yah blinded Ix for loving Pilara, Ix vanished into the earth and yet still worked his will upon men.

“She has it all wrong,” the Poet grumbled. “She makes it sound as if Ix deserved his fate.”

“Didn’t he? Lusting for Yah’s wife?”

“Oh, is lust now such a crime?”

Ela laughed. “There are worse things.” She was thinking of her city, which smelled and acted stranger every day. She hugged the Poet and then said like a confession: “They are calling the rebels ‘Ix’s eyes.’”

“Because they live under the hill,” the Poet muttered. “And yet there are so many elves atop it.”

“Would you... do you ever think of joining them?”

“The rebels or the dead?” He sighed. “I do not think so. Their cause is righteous but they traffic with strange things. The palace hill is very old and has drunk more blood than the

desert drinks rainfall. Things *happen* to places like that. And to anyone who stays there.”

“Things?”

“Magic things. Blood alchemy. There were places in my land—old battlegrounds of the tribes—where even the strongest shaman would not go lest he be tempted and lose his way.”

Ela shuddered. Feride had brought back similar tales—but just then she was encouraged by the Poet’s mention of home.

“What were you before?” she asked.

“Many things. Now I am the Poet.”

“Did you perform magic?”

“I was setting a leg when the slavers came. They said I was pretty. They wanted my hands.”

*I want your hands*, Ela thought. He must have sensed it for he smiled. *Does that make me a slaver?* She had bought him, after all.

She sat up, disturbed. She’d touched his scars. Men had done things to him beyond imagination.

“Do you have a plan?” she asked. “To go home?”

“I would not speak of such things with you.”

“Why not?”

“It is dangerous, Elaferide. Who are we, after all? A slave? A woman? I would not involve you.”

“As I’ve involved you? Buying your pleasure?”

“Ela.” He sat. “This is not why you come here.”

“But, you’re saying—you said I’ve put you in danger.”

The Poet brushed back her curtain of hair. “Yes,” he said.  
“You have.”

\* \* \*

On the way through the streets: another corpse. It had no color any more. She could make out its tongue curdled and shrunken. Its lips skinned back. A dying scream.

The heat beat down. *What am I doing?*

She came home to find Feride’s camels in the courtyard.

“ELA!”

The first slap sent the world reeling.

Yonca screamed. Masha was crying. Her son, Issiah, hung back afraid.

“You’ve been out in the streets!” Feride raged. He would beat her to death to keep her from harm.

“No,” Ela said. “Wait. Stop!” She’d not been idle in deception. She fumbled in the ragged pockets of her robe. Thread. Golden thread. To sew up a shirt. The pretty one he was never around to wear.

*How long have I hated you?* she thought as he struck her.  
*Is it because you aren’t here or because you are?*

“For you!” she gasped as he picked her up. On another street something was burning, and the courtyard walls flickered pink with light.

“What’s this?” Feride snatched the thread from her. “What madness, Ela! Going out in this hell!”

“I’ve been trapped!” Ela said. She pushed him away. Issiah caught her, stepped tentatively to the fore. *I don’t know you either*, Ela thought. But he held her gently and spoke to Feride.

“Please, father. Mother is just careless. She was restless, weren’t you? And she knows the streets.”

“Why is she dressed like a bundle woman? A respectable woman would be inside.”

“It is smoky,” Ela said. “A good vesh would be ruined.”

“It is smoky because there are elves about! They’re burning the city—may they rot for it!”

“They *are* rotting, husband. On the hill.”

The ugly words seemed to appease him.

“They are.” Suddenly he was holding her, trembling, his shirtfront damp and cool on her cheek. “I will kill them if they harm you. Please, Ela. Please! Don’t go outside! Don’t let them see!”

“Come in, husband. It’s too hot here.”

Inside, she began the ritual. As she chanted and rubbed at him with towels, the vapors off the basin of heated water and

the delicate tang of holy incense mingled with the haze creeping through the window.

*Yah bless our home and bless my husband. Anoint him and banish all unclean spirits.*

Feride relaxed as she touched each point: his neck, his shoulders, his hips, his feet.

Everything but his heart.

\* \* \*

The riots and hangings and crucifixions did not cease. Feride joined a citizen's militia and followed the city's halberdiers on raids. Ela did not see Yonca for a month. Wives were meant to sit by their fountains in the safe inner courtyards where no faey would go. There were said to be more rebels gathered in caves but, just like ifrits, they eluded capture.

"Scatter like rats," Feride said. He wore a permanent mask of soot. The air had grown so hot and foul that swarms of people were leaving the city.

One afternoon, the smoke was thicker: a great boiling blackness from the direction of Perfume. Ela paced after the children were in bed while Masha and Issiah watched her anxiously. Gods, had the Perfume District burned down? Would the Poet have been able to escape?

*If the elf-house burned I may never see him again.* It shocked her how a single afternoon could change you, a single touch kindle you like embers on straw.

She didn't sleep as the smoke faded. In the morning Feride came home, weary and smug. Before he even spoke she knew it. Love gave her unworldly sight.

"A brothel," Feride yawned, triumphant. "A place where mortals purchase unclean flesh." Ela washed his own flesh—hardly pristine: freckles of blood and ash coating his arms. She bit back the words that so wanted out. *A tall elf, and dark. Did you see him?* She pretended she was some tongue-less thing, as dry as the dead man she'd found in the street. Perhaps it was better to be dead. The living had to be as crafty as gods.

Feride slept an entire day—a man undone by a festival feast. Ela fluttered about the house but could not depart lest he wake and wonder. Then a knock came on the door. The halberdiers roused him. He left again.

Ela sent a servant for Yonca. Then she returned to the elf-house once more.

She went at noon when the boldest wives were hurrying back from the dying markets. Black grease marred the bright walls of Perfume: smutted coral, smutted rose. The buildings wept as the first rains came like tears upon a grimy face. *I'm mad!* Ela thought. *Mad. Mad!* But she had to know.

She found the brothel charred to black, its windows staring sightlessly into the rain. Unlike most of Perfume's houses it had been stone, but everything else around it had burned.

To the drip from a single tattered awning Ela knocked upon its door. The portal was miraculously intact. Still, no one came to answer.

Anxiety coiled: a grey worm in her throat. It was naked here. Too open and flat. She almost left, then had an idea. She reached for the belt beneath her vesh.

"What do you want?" the proprietress rasped when Ela shook her coin purse near the door. Clawed hands *grabbed*—first the purse, then her—and pulled her into a hall that stank of charcoal and opium.

"You might have noticed: *we aren't open.*" The proprietress slumped against a wall. The tapestries and hangings had all been stolen or lay in singed heaps on the floor. The welcome bowl had been overturned. Men's footprints made tracks through the ash. "You again," the proprietress mused. "Which one of us, I wonder, is the more touched?"

Ela unwound her yashmak and slipped her vesh off over her head. Clothes and a carpet lay rolled in the corner. A fine trunk with its gilded edges flaking.

"You're leaving," Ela said.

“Everyone is. Especially those in *my* trade. You’ll get your hands nailed if the halberdiers catch you—and anyway, they’ve hauled off my property.”

“The Poet,” Ela said. “Did they—?”

“That one? He’s here.” Her eyes grew shrewd. “You like him, don’t you? You’re an elf friend, like that cursed Sultana. Well, elf-friend, I wish you Yah’s luck. You’ll need it to love a beast like him.”

“He’s a man,” Ela said. “What are you?”

Stained teeth grinned. “Realistic. On this side of Ix’s Hell, you’re either owned or the owner.” Ela flinched as the proprietress lunged—but it was only to pick up her tatty possessions. In a moment, the elf-house door swung shut and closed Ela in its lightless hall.

She felt her way along furred walls where once-fine papering had bubbled and peeled. Robbed of their hangings, the rooms were catacomb. In the red salon she found the Poet.

“I told you to get out!” the Poet said. He held a parang—wide and curved—in his hand. Yah only knew where he’d gotten it. Ela jumped back as he whirled on her.

“Gods, Ela!” he said. She rushed to him, under the arm with the sword until he held her.

“I didn’t know—”

“I thought you might—” Their words ran together. They slipped to the floor. Hands and breath and clothes and skin, and which were Ela’s and which were his? She shuddered, crying, after the fact, feeling as if she’d taken her first breath in months. It was only when he kissed her to silence that she noticed the dead girl on a burned couch.

A candle wavered by the girl’s head. *A death candle*, Ela thought. The Poet had performed Pilara’s ritual. He moved now to the girl, protectively. She had taken a bloody wound to the stomach.

“We were cleaned out by halberdiers,” he murmured. “I tried to take her away from them, but there were too many and I finally ran. I hid in a closet with that idiot woman. I could hear them screaming. Dying all night....” He rubbed a hand over his scalp. “There was no one left when we came out this morning. The men went crashing through the rooms and took everything. I was going to get that poor girl out. I’d saved to bribe some merchants....” He trailed off. “There was no way to tell you. I wanted to....”

“But you only realized it now.”

He gave a small laugh of surprise and torment. “They teach you to keep yourself apart. They own you until you can barely feel. I didn’t know how well I had learned their lesson until I felt it slipping away.”

“Nor I,” Ela said. She moved to kiss him—and felt the warm spread of blood down his side.

“No!” she said, flinching back. The blade had caught him just below the breast. Even in the dimness she could see the slash, bleeding darkly through the bandage he’d cinched around it.

“It’s deep,” he said sadly, gently, touching her.

“I can heal you!” Ela gasped. She pulled on his arm. “I have medicines—thread to suture you. At my house.”

“This is no time to be seen with an elf.” The sound of breaking bottles echoed him. “I will die before I allow you to be caught by the patrols.”

“No,” Ela said. “You must come with me. You escape them by living, not by dying!” She thought a moment, tugging on his arm. It was like trying to get a mountain to move. What could a woman say to a mountain? What words could crumble men or stones? “If you won’t come with me I’ll go myself,” she threatened him. “I’ll go and bring my medicines back to you.”

When she turned to go he caught at her, already slower than before.

“Your husband, Ela! Think for a moment! Even if we miss the patrols, what will you tell him?”

“My husband is *with* the patrols,” she said. “He will not be home. You have no excuses.”

The Poet's resistance melted at that, turned to bemusement and a somber kind of mirth. He laughed softly in the candlelight that wavered near the dead girl's head.

"You've thought of everything, Elaferide."

"Not everything, no. I've not thought enough."

\* \* \*

All the shops were closed and the markets shuttered as Ela and the Poet ventured into the streets. The Poet wore Ela's yashmak to cover his ears and concealed his parang beneath a patron's singed robe.

The halberdiers were out in force, and the two of them kept to winding back alleys. Awful sounds stirred around them: the tramp of feet, the screams of the wounded. Mist, debris and bodies lay thickly. Candles floated in puddles near some of the fallen.

"I'll give you money to get out," Ela said. "Do you think a merchant will still take you?"

"For a price." The Poet stepped over a bundle that might have been clothes and might have been a man. "Will you come with me, Ela?" he asked suddenly. "When this is done, will you follow me out?"

Ela felt the question settle on her breastbone like a small bird roosting in a pomegranate tree.

*Come with you. Leave Feride.* She wanted it so much it hurt.

“I’ve endangered enough people,” she said, slowly. “I have children. Feride should not be their only parent.”

The Poet nodded, grim and sad but accepting, and pressed close against a wall as halberdiers appeared.

“We may not live to see the end of this city,” he said as the men filed past the mouth of the alley. He and Ela huddled, aching, in the rain, willing the patrol to pass them by.

“You must live,” Ela whispered. “Get out. Go home. Forget this hell, forget it all.” She was weeping but she meant it. She needed him free. And perhaps, someday....

“I may leave this city,” the Poet said. “But Ela... I will not forget it.”

\* \* \*

It was the holy day and her house was quiet. A few servants roamed the drizzling courtyard.

“Inside,” Ela ordered, weary and angry. “Wait in the pantry until I say.”

The men bowed uncertainly—she was never cross—but she was their mistress and they must obey.

*They may speak to Feride,* her mind warned. She felt less afraid that she might have before. Feride, with his killing,

would come home too late. She waited a moment before ushering the Poet into the courtyard.

“I’ll be swift,” she said. “Keep to the shadows.” She directed him to the cypress tree that grew near her door.

In the kitchen, Yonca and Masha raised their heads. A few of the servants lingered, in doubt of Ela’s authority.

“I told you to go,” Ela said. And Yonca, the good sister, rose to chide them.

“Do what she says,” Yonca ordered. But when they’d gone she grew concerned.

“What is it, Ela? You look pale.”

“Not as pale as some.”

She moved down the hall. Feride’s chest still sat under their bed. Ela opened it and removed a handful of coins.

*He’ll know*, her mind insisted. She didn’t care. She owed the Poet more than a chest of gold. She moved next to her medicine chest, bundling needles and thread in a handful of gauze. This done, she turned to where room opened outward, its arches framing the garden court. The fountain splashed its silvery notes. The air was fresh with rain and oranges. It could have been *their* house, she thought, their garden, in some other, kinder world.

The jingle of bridles disturbed the silence.

Voices sounded in the courtyard.

Back down the hall and back through the house, past Yonca and Masha, and the servants, and her boys. The whole of her household had come running.

Feride was in the courtyard with the halberdiers.

“What’s this then?” one of them said. They’d cornered the Poet near the tree. A curving parang leveled at this throat. Save for Feride, they were all mounted.

“Who are you!” Feride demanded. “Where are my servants! What are you *doing* here?”

“Husband.” Ela stepped outside. She heard Yonca gasp as she recognized the Poet. Even with Ela’s vesh around his head he was too tall, too lovely, to be anything but an elf.

Feride’s face, hard and weary, was as dirty and bloodstained as his clothes. The halberdiers, too, had a harried look, as though every hour had been a siege. Hardship lent them ugly humor. More than one snickered as Ela appeared.

“You let your women go unveiled, Feride? No wonder there’s Accursed sneaking around.”

“I do no such thing, effendi,” Feride swore. He seized Ela. “Get back inside!”

A hollow sort of calm had come over her, containing her fear as a glass might a butterfly. She could feel the panic beating within, yet her only thought was to get the Poet from

the courtyard. “Husband,” she said, “this is Henai effendi’s servant. You must let him go about his day.”

Ignoring both halberdiers and husband she moved towards the Poet as if he belonged.

“You must thank Henai for his concern,” she said. Her voice covered the clinking of gold.

“*Ela...*,” the Poet mouthed. His eyes were fearful. But Ela only smiled and slipped the bundle into his hand.

*Go, she thought. Take it and go. Go before they think too much.*

The Poet seemed about to obey—but then, for an instant, he hesitated.

Ela, stepping back from him, heard a coin drop.

Gold gleamed on rainy paving stones. The needle for his wound tumbled after. It rang delicately as it hit—as softly as a dancer’s bells.

“Thief!” came the cry. Parangs were lowered.

“No!”

Ela’s voice cut through the silence. Even as she spoke she knew she’d revealed too much. Feride’s expression sharpened with sudden understanding. She rushed to him anyway.

“Husband!” she pleaded. “This man is a servant! You cannot kill the property of a friend!”

Feride's face might have been a statue's. She felt her arm grasped, her legs *bend*. Through the rain she read his hatred and knew, in some way, he had hated her all along. "A servant?" he said. "Is he really? He won't mind then, if I chastise my wife."

"Wait—" Ela said. But his fist struck her. Everything seemed to happen at once.

"Ela!" In the rain—his tall shape turning. Above her: Feride, hearing her name. When their eyes met she could hide no longer.

She cried out for the Poet to run.

He did. But not towards the gate. As the men jabbed at him he drew his parang.

"Ela!" Feride's fist fell again. The world exploded. The Poet moved. He met the halberdiers in the courtyard, and there he turned to poetry.

There followed a horrible clash of blades. Ela's children screamed. Feride's fists and tears fell. The world was flooded with salt and thick rain, and blood welled in her mouth with a taste like poison.

Feride dragged her across the paving stones. From where he threw her down she saw the battle blaze. The Poet, slashing, tried to reach her. But runners were sent. His movements grew

slow. The number of men in the courtyard increased. They surrounded the Poet, cutting him down.

Ela could not move by then. She felt Yonca and Masha bundle her indoors.

“What shall we do?” a halberdier asked. The Poet cursed them with a voice like thunder.

*They caught him.* She tried to move and failed.

“Put out his eyes,” Feride said.

\* \* \*

Her hands that had touched him. Her heart that had loved. These must be punished upon the cross.

She did not speak when the nails shot through her. Her blood, they could have, or her tears—not her words.

Her hair he had touched grew brittle against her cheek. Pain distilled her down to more pain.

*Now Ix, he was a lover...* the fever-damp wind sighed. Strange ghosts haunted her. Songs and faces. Strange shapes grew like trees on the high red hill. She did not know where the Poet was.

In long and thirsty dreams she searched—bored into the earth with her torch raised high. It was dark but a glow pulsed softly ahead: angry and tempered, waiting to rage. *Things happen to places like that*, someone whispered. Elves moved with her, in the earth. They carried a bleeding figure with them.

“Put out his eyes,” Feride had said. But when she found him, he could see.

Long after she had given up her mind, she felt the torment shift beneath her. The cruel wood she’d come to know as her spine snapped as she was lowered to the earth. A terrible pressure loosed her wrists. With great relief she knew she was dying. A light pulsed as she reached towards it and embraced Him who eased her way.

He looked familiar. He’d been far sleeker. Now He was scarred and terrible as a god.

“Oh Ela,” he said. “I would have come sooner.”

He held her. His eyes—their empty sockets—*saw*.

“Ix,” she said. “They call us devils...”

“So we are, my love. So we are. To them.”

There were others surrounding him. Dark, pointed shapes. Devils? Elves? Perhaps it depended. The light they carried was a single torch that seethed against the wind and rain.

“I will avenge you,” the Poet said in the rich lovely voice they had tried to take. “There are tunnels, Ela. That’s why they’ve never found us. Tunnels to the heart of the palace hill.”

“We’ll cut that heart out,” someone said. “For Satya.”

“For Merrid’s wife.”

“For all who have died.”

“Yes,” the Poet said. “And for my Elaferide.” He held her and pressed his cheek to her hand.

Ela wanted to speak. She wanted to tell him: No. Hearts are precious. Don’t cut yours out.

But it was too late. The world grew darker. She was too tired to struggle anymore.

Ela rested her head on the Poet’s chest, in the circle of rebels and the cries of revenge, and she kept her own eyes fixed on his until at last the torch he held went out.

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*Hannah Strom-Martin’s fiction has appeared in Realms of Fantasy Magazine, OnSpec, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, and the anthology Amazons: Sexy Tales of Strong Women. Together with Erin Underwood, she is the co-editor of The Pop Fic Review and the recent anthology Futuredaze: A Collection of YA Science Fiction. She lives in California with her husband and the obligatory herd of cats-with-fantasy-names.*

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## COVER ART

“TheVillage,” by Sergio Diaz



Sergio Diaz lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He has studied with artists such as Eduardo Labombarda, Marcelo Maccarrone, and Ariel Olivetti, and has worked for Bridger Conway Agency and Gizmo studio. He currently freelances for several studios and agencies whose clients include Coca-Cola, Ford, Nestlé, Panvel, Nissan, Royal, Honda, Arcor, The Radical Company, and Clarin. View more of his work at [www.sergiodiaz.com.ar](http://www.sergiodiaz.com.ar).

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