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## STITCHED WINGS

by Beth Cato

Madeline fled from her new governess and into the shadowy strangeness of the garden. Strange, this garden, because she and Mother had scarcely been in that house for a week, and more so because Mother had expressly forbidden her from that part of the property. That made the garden the ideal hiding spot.

After their months in the desert hinterlands of Drell, the greenery of the stone-walled paradise delighted Madeline. Panting, she paused on the coarsely-laid brick path and breathed in the muskiness of lichen-laden branches. Something about such places always made her feel indescribably alive; Mother seemed to react similarly within her laboratory, surrounded by oil cans and metal detritus.

“Gertrude! Where are you, child?”

The voice carried over a great distance, but Madeline bolted forward. She needed to hide from Miss Shelly, and fast.

She crawled between grasping shrubberies, wiggling on her knees without care for skirts or lace. There, within a tiny

cathedral of boxwood branches and desiccated leaves, she spied the fairy in the cage.

The fairy sat, twiggy legs akimbo. His tunic shirt and trousers seemed woven of moss, the intense green almost camouflaging him against the grass flattened by the cage. With one hand he wielded what appeared to be a whisker or quill, and with the other he held together a tidy stack of overlapped leaves.

“Hello!” A real fairy, in her garden! Madeline’s filthy skirts rustled as she sat. “What are you doing?”

“Makin’ me wings for fall.” He didn’t look up. “Us lot, we make wings with what we ‘ave.”

“Who set the trap? Is it meant for fairies?”

“Haven’t a clue who put the blimey thing here, but here it is, eh?” He lied. He knew. The awareness tasted like pickled onions—oh, how she hated pickled onions.

“I can let you out.” She needed to let him out. Cages reminded her of Father, in his box.

The fairy met her eye then, gaze baleful. “I’m just idling for a while, minding me own business.” More lies, with a hint of garlic.

He tested the hold of his spider-silk thread. The newly-sewn wing featured an array of small leaves in a dozen shades of orange and vermilion. His sort of sewing looked interesting

—not at all like the drudgery Miss Shelly expected of Madeline, forcing her to sit with feet rooted to the rug as she stitched the hours away as a proper girl should.

Madeline had no intention of being proper. Mother had taught her that much, even as Mother expected domestication from her.

Madeline sat back, frowning. “What’s your name?”

“Snuggleweed Rothchild the Third.” He stitched another leaf into place.

“You’re lying.” The stench of his words made her stomach roil, though his untruths were nowhere near Mother’s grand scale.

“That’s the smartest thing you’ve said yet, it is. And what’s your name, then, eh?” He met her eyes then, so briefly, and they pierced her in a way that made her shudder.

Names had power, Mother had said, which was why Madeline was not allowed to use her true name wherever they lived. With a name, they could be discovered by reeves, or soldiers, or worst of all, bank investigators.

“Gertrude,” said Madeline, and tasted the foulness of her own lie on her tongue. Gertrude, her new name in this new place.

“Gertrude.” The fairy chortled. “You lie like a fairy, you do. Mightily impressive for a human child of your age.”

She pondered him for a moment. “Fairies lie a lot?”

“Course not.” He tied off the thread.

The sourness of his words lingered. She lifted the gate of the trap. “I don’t want you to lie to me anymore.”

He scowled at her most fiercely. “Well, now you dunnit. You done me a kindness and now I’m in your debt. If you’d left me alone to do me spot o’ sewing, life woulda been much simpler.”

“I couldn’t just leave you like that. You could’ve starved to death.” Madeline shuffled back to give him space.

He shuddered. “Even worse, a life debt. Damned and double damned.” He ambled to freedom, and a peculiar smell grew stronger—that of fresh-cut grass, mouth-watering cheese, and dusty cat.

The fairy stood only two of her hands-spans tall, his body emaciated in the way of a deep winter twig. “I mighta lived. The queen coulda saved me. She could bust through that iron, maybe. Iron’s tough on fairy magic, even hers, and she’s the most powerful thing in this whole forest, she is.”

Magic! Mother had recently muttered about magic as she studied her blueprints. Madeline clasped her hands. “Do you use magic to make your wings?”

“To attach’em, sure. We gotta stitch wings each season, as magic fades after a time.”

He held up his new wing. Bending his gangly arm in an impossible way, he angled the wing to rest at the top of his shoulder blade. That bizarre smell of him increased, as strong as the aether and butane in Mother's laboratory. A few twitches and the fairy stood straight. The wing had attached, even through his mossy shirt.

"Amazing!" she breathed. He did look a little smug at that. "And your queen can do much more?"

"Most assuredly. Glow like the sun, she can, though not much call for that sorta ting."

"Does she lie, too?"

"Best liar o' anyone." His truth was sweet as nectar.

"Ger-trude!" The two syllables belted out, off-key and far too close. Madeline and the fairy cringed.

"It's Miss Shelly!" Madeline looked around, keenly aware of the brightness of her red dress and the patchwork cover of the autumn foliage. "I'll have to talk to you more later."

"As you will," he said, though didn't seem entirely displeased. "Crawl straight on, huggin' the wall like them vines, 'n she won't see you. I best go deeper in the woods, avoid more temp-pa-ta-tion from these cages."

"Why? What's the bait?" she asked, angling her head around.

“Sugar cakes.” He sighed his delight. “Bait like that, ‘m bound to be caught ‘gain.”

Madeline could well understand that. “G’bye, Sir Fairy!” She choked back a yelp as the nearby garden gate creaked and footsteps crunched on dry leaves.

“Sir!” The fairy’s voice was faint, but delighted. “You honor a nobody like me, little liar-who’s-not-lying.”

She wormed her way through the jasmine as she faintly heard him say, “And jess so you know, the name’s Rowan.”

Truth.

#

Rowan hadn’t been lying when he said his queen was the best liar of all, but Madeline knew that was only because he hadn’t met her mother.

Madeline sat at the big long dining table. Glass windows poured ruddy sunlight into the room, like pomegranate juice from a pitcher. An old servant shuffled to bring out food from the kitchen. Beside Madeline, Miss Shelly sat rigid as stone, napkin tucked over her lap just so.

Across from Madeline, Mother’s place was set, food steaming in wait, as always.

At the head of the table sat the biggest lie of all: Father’s seat. Food awaited him, as it had every night as long as

Madeline could remember, even though he had eaten nothing in over five years.

When she was younger, she had believed the lie and thought Father would whirl through the door at any moment, smelling of horse and dusty roads, and his saber rattling at his side. She still recalled his fervent love when he looked her in the eye—she could taste it, sweet as sugar cakes—and the potent foulness when he walked towards the door so often and said to Mother, “I’ll see you soon, my love.”

Lie, and lie. The former was the realism that came with being a soldier, as he was most always away; the latter, because Madeline knew the love that made him return home from each campaign was for her and her alone.

But Mother’s love for him was true and absolute. She was absolute in everything she did.

“Ah, dinner!” Mother entered the room, demure in a clean frock. Gloves covered the permanent stains of oil within the creases of her hands, and the two stubby fingers from an explosion last year. “Good evening, everyone.”

Mother’s chipper mood was a shock, nearly as much a shock as the elbow that jabbed into Madeline’s ribs. She lurched to her feet at Miss Shelly’s prompt. “Mother,” she said, curtsying, and Miss Shelly stood and did likewise.

“Gertrude, my darling.” Mother stepped close enough to plant a fleeting kiss on her cheek. By habit, Madeline did not cringe from the fog of falsehoods that clothed Mother. Indeed, her very clothing was false. Mother could play the part of a proper lady better than any actress on stage, but she was neither. She was a scientist and a thief, and Madeline was not sure where one ended and the other began.

She had, from a tender age, understood there were certain things not done by proper ladies.

Proper ladies did not give false names to everyone they met, and different names in different places. They did not enter strangers’ houses and leave with new jewels, which were then exchanged for jingling bags of coins. Ladies did not choose which households to rent by the ability to adapt chambers into laboratories—in the case of their current abode, a ballroom—nor did they often set such households afire or create other disturbances that required fleeing in the night. And foremost, ladies did not keep their dead husbands hard-packed in salt like barreled cod, and continue to haul their pickled life-mate by dirigible from city to city for five years.

Madeline remembered the day the soldiers came with their giant metal box. She had spied on them through a cracked door; watched Mother nod, stoic as always. After the soldiers left, Mother rested one hand on the casket, so briefly, and went

straight to her drafting table to begin the first of her many efforts to resurrect Father.

Even tasting the truth as she did, part of Madeline needed that lie, that sliver of hope, that Father would return. Love for him was the one thing she and Mother shared.

Mother's gloved hand caressed the back of Father's chair and she moved to sit opposite of Madeline. "Have you had a good day, my dear?"

"Yes, Mother." She tasted fermenting crabapples in the lie of Mother's love, and her own feigned obedience.

"She is doing well in her lessons?"

"Oh yes," gushed Miss Shelly. "She's such a bright child."

Madeline and the governess smiled at each other with the pleasantness of roving tomcats making an acquaintance.

"Good. My husband will be displeased if she's behind in her lessons." Mother began eating.

Everything Madeline did—her lessons, her etiquette training—all of it was a show for Father. She had realized this a few years before, around age seven, after an incident at a past residence. The staff abandoned them, and Madeline survived alone for a week and ate the pantry bare. Mother finally emerged from her locked laboratory and berated Madeline for not being clean—"What would your father say, if he saw you like this!"

Madeline stared at Father's chair as she chewed and wondered what he would say, about that and so many other things.

"I believe the master of the house will not be with us tonight, so you may go ahead and remove his plate," said Mother, motioning to the old man. "Perhaps tomorrow he'll return." Promise brought a rosy haze to her cheeks.

Something had happened in the laboratory today.

Madeline could not remember Mother being so happy since right before they had left the hinterlands—and then they had fled the city in the dark of night. Absolute dark, as the steam systems died, casting the streets into blackness that had rivaled Mother's ferocious mood. As their little airship rose, it was hard to discern the horizon between two spans of darkness.

"Madam?" The cook stood in the doorway, fidgeting. "I gots more made for you. Sweetened them up, I did."

"Very well. Bring them out," said Mother.

Madeline smelled the sugar cakes before she saw them. So sweet and citrusy, they brightened the very air. The tops of the little discs sparkled in the evening light.

Mother keenly inspected them, then took a precise, dainty nibble. "The sweetness could be tweaked," she said, one hand

up to cover her mouth as she chewed. “Just a slight adjustment.”

“Yes, Madam.”

Why would a scientist like Mother want to capture fairies? She spoke of magic sometimes, true, but her talent was in machines.

“That reminds me.” Mother pushed away her still-mounded plate and stood. “I do believe I’ll walk in the garden.” She practically skipped as she left.

#

A harsh doorbell resounded again and again from downstairs. Madeline placidly continued her stitchery, her posture perfect in the leather library chair. Finally Miss Shelly could take the obnoxious sound no more.

“Gertrude!” she snapped. “Continue your work. Where are those servants?”

Miss Shelly bustled off and closed the door behind her. Madeline lurched to her feet at the distinct click of the lock. The governess had locked her in! The nerve!

Through the floor, Madeline detected shudders and whirs. Mother was at work in her laboratory directly below, and had been all morning. Madeline could only hope to be so enterprising.

She tucked her needle into the canvas and looked to the rainbow-hued shelves around her. She could easily read away the hours, but she had no desire to read in captivity—she would be like Rowan, stitching his new wing within his cage. At the thought of the fairy, she dashed to the window.

The second story view showed several trees and the garden gate. She swung the pane outward. The peculiar magical smell of him tickled her nose, and she smiled.

“Rowan!” she hissed.

“What you goin’ on about?”

It took her a moment to spy him, small and green-garbed as he was, perched atop a bush just below.

“Can you help me get out?”

“Mischievous is a specialty of mine, ‘tis true. Just jump down and I’ll catch you, and bring that spot o’ sewing in your hand so we can take a gander.”

“You’ll catch me?” The words confused Madeline, as they rang true. “How can you catch me? You’re not even as tall as my arm!”

Rowan sighed. “You’ll not come by harm, not from me. I’ll keep you good ‘n safe. This I vow, ‘n folks like me don’t take vows lightly, y’should know.”

That truth shivered in its might.

Still, her heart twittered against her breastbone as she climbed onto the sill. She took two deep breaths, squinted her eyes shut, and jumped, barely swallowing a shriek as she fell.

Sticks cupped beneath her legs and grabbed her, sure and strong. Madeline opened her eyes and gasped. Rowan was as tall as any grown man, his arms wrapped around her.

“How?!” she asked as he set her down on the grass. As soon as the warmth of his contact withdrew, he shrank down to normal size and scampered toward the bushes where they had met.

“Sizes ‘n shapes can be lies same as anything, and like most lies, can’t hold up for long. Come along now, girly-girl.”

She brushed aside bared twigs as she crawled. “If you could get big, why didn’t you break out of your cage that way?”

“Tut! That’s iron. Binds magic within. Speaking of which, wadn’t being exactly phil-ann-thropic when I brought you down.” He pointed ahead to where the trap had again been laid, complete with a sugar cake. “See that? Stick me big-human-sized hand in there, and it’d box me magic right up. ‘Fraid to know what’d happen ta the rest of me. There’s a few more cages ‘bout the garden now, ‘n all. And a few missing fairy kin, dare say.”

“Oh.” She sucked in a breath. “I know where they are. Mother’s setting the traps.”

“Well, she can keep me cousin Dandelion. He’s a twitter-twit, through and through. Here. Lemme see that stitchery you gots going while you fetch ‘ere that cake.”

She had almost forgotten about the sampler in her hand. She gave it to him, then disabled the trap and reached inside. The tiny cake was still soft, the dome crusted with turbinado sugar and candied bits of orange. Her mouth watered, but she offered it to Rowan.

“Split it as y’ will.” He unfurled the sampler on the grass between them. Madeline tore the cake in half, and Rowan nodded as he accepted his share.

The sampler was a twelve by twelve canvas, intended to be proof of her proper training as a young lady. Miss Shelly might be aggravating, but she did know how to sew, and her shrewd eye had honed Madeline’s skill—well, prevented laziness, in any case. The sampler had been started only a few days before, but Madeline had accomplished an important bit: her name.

“My oh my, yes, I sensed the potency of this un from down here.” Rowan traced a knobby finger along the “G” of Gertrude. “Lies are magnificent, knotty things, and this is a beaut. You must be havin’ some fairy in yer blood, way back.”

Madeline’s tongue worked at a bit of candied fruit stuck between her teeth. “That doesn’t make sense! People lie all the time, and they can’t all carry fairy blood. My mother....”

“Oh, there’s lies ‘n then there’s lies. It’s how it’s done, bein’ aware of the words and still saying ‘em. Some folks, they say a thing often enough ‘n it become true to them, but not us fairies. Lies are Things.”

“Do lies have a flavor to you?”

Rowan grinned, all gap-toothed. “Sweet as that cake.”

“Oh. Lies taste bad to me, hearing or saying them.”

“Sounds like some fickle human corruption of somethin’ pleasant, it does. Fae blood’s way back, but there, I’d bet me wings on it.” Sure enough, he did have two full wings now, radiant in autumn glory.

“Ger-trude!” The syllables belted out from above, followed by a roar of rage.

“Does that mean I could stitch wings, too?” Madeline whispered.

Rowan tapped his chin. “I truly don’t know that, girly-girl. It takes a lot of magic, doin’ that kind of thing, even if you’re fine with needle ‘n thread. ‘N what would you do with wings, eh? Big as you are?”

She averted her eyes, suddenly shy. “I don’t know. Go away?” She grabbed a handful of dry leaves.

“Even when birds fly south, they know where ‘bout they’re goin’.”

Madeline thought of the crazed moves with Mother, the rented houses, the midnight rides by wagon and dirigible, the names she had accumulated like dust after a hinterland windstorm. “Maybe I don’t need to know where I’m going. Maybe I just want to go.”

“Maybe.” He squinted at her. “So why’d you let me outta that cage? And don’t jess say you’re bein’ nice ‘n all.”

The suddenness of the question caught her off guard. “I—I had to. You didn’t belong in a box. No one does.” Not even Father, though she could never say that aloud. Mother’s work had to come to some purpose, surely.

Rowan studied her for a long moment. “What’ll it take to free you from yer cage then, eh?”

“I’m not in a cage! I’m here right now, aren’t I?” The words, the thought, tasted as smooth as satined cream. She escaped Miss Shelly most whenever she pleased. How could Rowan even think otherwise?

The fairy’s next words were so soft, the chilly breeze almost stole them away. “Told yourself that plenty, eh? Even caged birds ‘ave space t’ stretch their wings, little liar.”

Madeline clenched her hand. Leaves crunched and crumbled in her grasp.

#

The next day, the estate emanated with heated sugar. Breakfast and lunch had been simple fare, as the cook was under orders to make sugar cakes all morning long—dozens of them. Hours later, the scent lingered even in the second floor library, where Miss Shelly drilled Madeline on numbers, letters, and how to walk with a dainty point to her toes. Below, ruckus radiated from the laboratory.

Madeline hadn't seen Mother since dinner two days before. If Mother had chosen to sleep or leave her laboratory, Madeline certainly would have seized the opportunity to sneak inside the repurposed ballroom. But Mother was in the full sway of her mania, and food and sleep meant nothing.

The busywork with Miss Shelly was good, in a way. It kept Madeline's dread to a tepid burble in her stomach.

Whenever Mother arrived at this point, everything always went wrong. Cities fell strangely dark. The house would burn. It meant long days bobbing on the wind, Father's coffin rattling within its tethers along with Mother's laboratory equipment.

The thought of leaving this place—and Rowan—brought tears to her eyes.

Something flashed by the window. Miss Shelly had opened the pane to let the sweet smell vent, and now Rowan perched on the sill.

Madeline forced her gaze to her verses on pistils and anthers. The peculiar odor of Rowan grew stronger as he flew closer.

“The queen is missing,” he whispered, distress quivering in each word.

She sucked in a sharp breath. The fairy queen was the most powerful thing in the forest. Rowan had said so.

The floor rumbled underfoot as machinery clunked and groaned and whirred. Always, always, it was about Mother and her machines, about Father’s dinner plate set and waiting each night.

“Please. ‘Elp me.”

The agony in his voice was what did it. Madeline closed her book and set it on the side table alongside her sampler and sewing kit.

“I need to talk to Mother,” Madeline said to Miss Shelly. It felt strange and refreshing to speak such an outright truth. “She’s doing something below, something very wrong.”

“She is a busy woman and not to be disturbed. Now—” Miss Shelly’s jaw fell slack. “Oh goodness. What is that... thing?” She froze, staring at Rowan.

Madeline cast him a quick look. “That’s my best friend. Just wait here for me, please. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Miss Shelly shrank back in her chair, and Madeline turned and

walked from the room, empowered by honesty and rebellion together.

“Think the queen’s below with all that thrumming and whats-its?” asked Rowan and he fluttered into the hall ahead of her. “Smells of metal, even from outside, it does.”

“Yes. In Mother’s laboratory.” A place Madeline had not yet entered in this house. Fear quivered through her, just as vibrations quaked through the stairs.

“Queen needs a whole forest to let ‘er magic breathe! Girly-girl, this is what’s what. I’d gone mad, bound up with me magic in that iron cage for more’n a day, popped like a mosquito in a bonfire. Queen’s got a thousand times more power ‘an me.”

She looked to him. “I’ll get her out.”

Rowan said nothing, but for a moment, the magic of his palpable faith squeezed her like a hug. She hadn’t known such a feeling since Father died.

Madeline yanked on the double doors to the laboratory. Even with her full body weight pulling, they didn’t budge. She looked to Rowan.

“Iron bolts inside, nasty stuff.”

“The wall,” she said. “It’s wood and wallpaper, isn’t it?”

“The metal’s raised such a stink that I couldn’t tell! Wood, I can work with, aye.” He raised his hands. Starting at the

baseboard, the wall tore like parchment and stopped at the same height as Madeline's tunnel through the brambles.

The noise worsened, the smell of oils and strangeness smarting at her nose. She dropped to her knees and crawled through, and saw Mother.

Here, the mist of deception evaporated from Mother's skin. She was utterly herself, surrounded by gaskets and gears, her black hair coiled so as not to snare, her brown dungarees happily layered in stains of various coloration. The vast room shuddered in cacophony, the racket made visible in the sifting of ceiling plaster and belches of steam.

Father's tomb rested nearest to the door. A habit, no doubt, from their quick exits from so many previous laboratories. He was fully encased, with pipes and tubes connecting him to the larger apparatus.

And now, Madeline could smell magic.

The potency was fiercer than Rowan's peculiar scent: a mixture of jasmine and garlic, horse sweat-soaked leather and the first rain of spring. Particulates gushed from vents in vivid hues of violet and green, shifting by the second like ornate stained glass rendered to powder against the light.

"She can't be contained!" Rowan's voice was scarcely a whisper against the din. He flew at a metal tank, but his leaf-

and-web wings were buffeted backward by the awesome power that radiated from within.

“Madeline!”

Madeline flinched at the rare sound of her true name from Mother’s lips. She took a step back, expecting Mother to fly at her, enraged at her presence. Instead, Mother glowed and spun in place like a girl gifted with a pony.

“This is it! I finally have a functional resurrection apparatus. Not even the steam generators in the capital created adequate power, but a fairy queen...! It’s the perfect meld of science and magic.”

The vibrations intensified. Cracks lined the marble floor. A fog of powdered plaster burned Madeline’s eyes. Gears clanked with the violence of a locomotive engine on the tracks.

Mother clasped her hands. Her voice was like a tinny whisper against the roar of machinery. “We’ll have your father to dinner tonight, Madeline. Miss Shelly must curl your hair and press your best dress!”

“No!” Madeline shouted. “He’s dead! He’s dead! He’s been dead five years!”

The joy on Mother’s face didn’t shift. She was oblivious, as always. Raw power stewed and swirled, and Madeline’s lungs struggled against its weight and the heady scent of a hundred muddled things. The walls wiggled like an army of worms.

Yes, Mother had discovered a source of power. Too much. Mother couldn't sense it, not like Madeline, not like Rowan.

No fairy queen could be contained in an iron tank of that size, of any size.

Rowan flew at Madeline, his arms wide. Metal pinged and steam whistled. Bolts zinged free of a tank, the discordant symphony rising to a crescendo. Terrible tension quivered in the air as everything turned hot and cold at once.

Rowan grew to full human size, then more, his body seeming to expand like a sheet held to a gale. His bright colors dimmed as his essence poured out, thinning his body to translucent, and she tried to shout "Rowan, no! No!" but the cocoon of his power constrained any sound and suffocated her with its overbearing scent.

*"Your vow to help me 'n the queen was good 'n true, and my vow to you stands jess as solid. I'm keeping you safe, Madeline-who-is-most-assuredly-not-a-Gertrude."*

She didn't see his lips move, but she felt the words like needle pricks against her heart. Magic woven into the truths of a vow and a name.

Everything beyond turned red and black and pink, an explosion of color. A roar filled her ears and dissipated with a slight pop.

“Rowan?” Her whisper echoed in the vacuum. The house was gone.

Above spanned the cold grey autumn sky. No fire, no smoke. Rain filtered down, a rain of leaves in shades of brown with blackened specks. No, not leaves—books from the library. Shredded pages twirled and danced their way to earth. Not a foot away, her sampler sprawled out. The canvas looked splashed by yellow and blue dyes, but it was there, needle and thread still tucked to one side in wait of another dreaded session with Miss Shelly.

Of Mother’s great machine, twisted pipes and mottled tanks remained, but Father’s casket—the focus of that awesome power—was gone. Only two wheels and part of the brake system huddled there.

“Mother?” There was no answer, but that was so like her. A red blotch marked where Mother had stood.

Madeline knew she should cry—she had cried for Father late at night, so many times—but instead she blinked, dry-eyed, until she thought of Miss Shelly and the servants. Miss Shelly—Miss Shelly would have been standing in the library just above, waiting for her. Madeline had promised she’d be back, and she meant it. She glanced up at the grey sky as tears slipped down her cheeks.

“Rowan?” she called again, looking around. She spied a miniature mossy leg sticking from beneath a growing mound of paper.

She unburied him and touched his shoulder. His wings were gone—shredded to mere nubs. There was no need to check for a heartbeat or breath; she knew he was dead. He had given everything to keep her alive; his debt filled in full.

She blinked and breathed in the last wafts of magic as she sat on the crackled marble of the ballroom floor. Pages twirled downward like falling leaves.

Without his wings, Rowan looked incomplete. He needed to look true, and then she could take him within the forest—whatever remained of it—and lay him to rest.

Madeline reached for her needle and thread, fingers quaking, and cradled Rowan against one knee.

She plucked drifting vellum from the air. Just as Rowan had in his cage, she would use what she had. These wings would be stitched of abbreviated words and shredded rhymes. And when his wings were done, she would stitch her own.

Whether they worked by magic or not, it mattered little. One way or another, she would fly from this place.

That was truth.

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*Beth Cato's debut steampunk novel will be released by HarperCollins Voyager in late 2014. Her short fiction can be found in [InterGalactic Medicine Show](#), [Nature](#), and many other magazines. Follow her at [www.BethCato.com](http://www.BethCato.com) and on Twitter at @BethCato.*

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## WHISTLER'S GROVE

by A.E. Decker

One of the four of us shall die today. If all goes as intended, it will be me.

Die, here, today. I paint the words across the landscape of my mind and they evaporate, leaving not a trace behind.

“Could one of these be Hangman’s Tree?” asks Arrel.

I open my eyes. Arrel stands a distance away, shielding his face with one hand. Pale sepia sky, and earth the color of rot. My breath fans out in wisps of white mist, and my toes, cold as stones, ache inside my soft boots. There’s no marker at the boundary into Whistler’s Grove, but we knew when we crossed it all the same.

A few feet from Arrel, Tam grimaces at the seemingly endless sweep of black leafless trees, all sprouting from hillocks spaced a couple hundred feet apart. “Any of them would do for hanging, in a pinch.”

Celina turns a look of quiet reproach on him then moves to Arrel’s side, curling her hand around his. “The records say it’s the tallest tree in the grove. One branch crooks at a perfect angle.”

“As if beckoning,” quips Tam.

We resume our journey. The icy light pouring down from all reaches of the sky hurts my eyes. A layer of coarse, bleached stuff, like shards of broken seashells, covers the ground, crunching beneath the others’ tread. My own footfall is silent; my breathing, less so. Once, I have to stop, overwhelmed by a fit of coughing. Wiping my mouth, I examine the back of my wrist for flecks of blood.

I did not notice Celina drop back, but she’s here, at my side, her braids wound in a golden coronet about her head. “How are you holding up, Miro?” she asks. She smells of clean water and crushed grass. I envision reaching out and tracing the silken arch of her lower lip with the pad of my thumb. And what might happen then?

“Miro?” she repeats. Tam glances over his shoulder. His smile is meant to be encouraging, I believe. Arrel’s pace never slackens.

I do not reach, and the vision dissipates. Drawing a painful breath, I nod. Celina walks beside me a minute then squeezes my shoulder and quickens her step to rejoin Arrel.

The poison eating away at my innards laid me low some days ago. My companions broke off our journey to allow me to rest at an inn. I do have value. I cannot be allowed to expire before my life is used to purchase our lord’s victory.

I recall between periods of aching, bleary sleep Celina tending to me. She would come to my sickroom, tap-tap up the stairs, the floor creaking under her light step, to bathe my temples with cool water, hold spoonfuls of broth to my lips, open the shuttered windows to let in fresh air. She spent hours by my bedside, stroking my arm, smoothing my sheets, humming. My life is needed to purchase our lord's victory. But this, I think, is called kindness.

Arrel came too, the same hour every morning. After inquiring about my health, he'd spend the remainder of the day practicing in the yard or standing on the small rise to the east, fingers clenched on his sword's hilt. Tam also visited, twice, drunk on both occasions. He sang cheerful filthy songs and tried to get me to play cards, until Arrel barred him from my room.

I don't know how to play cards.

Tam's singing now. "*I promised to love you then, my dear, And I'll be loving you still, When all the seas pour out of the skies, and fishes walk out of the hills.*" He has a fine voice, a baritone rich as warm wine. Martial stride; dark hair flowing over the shoulders of his deep blue uniform—it's easy to see the soldier he once was, before excess drink spiderwebbed red lines across his nose and set off a faint trembling of his hands.

A glance from Arrel. "Quiet."

I appreciate the singing, myself. It's an act of defiance to the silence that hangs over the grove like a blade poised to fall. "There's no harm in it," says Celina, but Arrel's gaze sharpens and Tam hushes. Right on the edge between song and silence, I hear a laugh, soft as a breath—I hear it, but there's no one behind me, and I refuse to look. The back of my neck starts aching. Air hisses between my teeth when I rub it. One spot, easily covered with two fingertips, is hot; tender as if new-bruised.

We weave our way between the soft mounded hills, watched over by skeletal black trees. The shadows they cast are sharp enough to cut your finger on. Cold light flashes off the bits of armor my companions wear; useless here. Mere steel will not deter the Whistler if you are chosen. My own garb is in shades of dull green and charcoal gray, supple, barely whispering against me as I move. I've lost weight, and had little flesh to spare to begin with.

A round white knob—bone or stone; I do not care to examine it—turns under my foot. I recapture my balance easily. Once, I never would have lost it. The line of Arrel's jaw tightens. Noble fellow; he can hardly bear my presence. He is the sunlit warrior; I, the knife in the darkness. I am an evil necessity. For our lord I have spied, I have lied, and I have killed. Since a poisoned dart pierced my side during the last

raid, I have measured my life in breaths. The war—there has always been war—goes badly. I can be of one last use to him.

“There.” Arrel raises a finger and we halt, our eyes following its point to the shape outlined against the sky like a corpse in its shroud. It’s not height that distinguishes Hangman’s Tree so much as the one branch that juts out of its trunk, growing smooth and straight for maybe twenty feet before bending at a perfect right angle and ending in a cluster of smaller branches that clutch at the sky. A drowning man’s arm.

“We’ve reached the Whistler’s domain,” says Arrel, and there’s a tremor of excitement in his voice. I know it is excitement, not fear; his blue eyes brighten and the corners of his lips lift fractionally. “Keep alert,” he adds. “We might hear him any time now.” And he marches onwards, closing the distance between us and Hangman’s Tree and that long, straight branch that bends so abruptly.

Celina doesn’t follow at once. She lingers, eyes on me. Dark shadows hollow her cheeks. I don’t remember them being there three weeks ago. “How are you faring?” she asks. Inadequate, unnecessary, and she must realize it, for she drops her head, wincing. Better, however, than voicing the “you poor thing” I sense lurking behind her sad query.

I turn up my palms. What is there to say? It is time for me to make the final payment on the debt I owe my lord. How I accrued this debt, I cannot say. My mother—I recall her as a raised voice, the back of a hand, strands of sweat-damp hair falling over flushed cheeks—sold me to the Shadow Walkers two decades ago. They fed me, clothed me, trained me, and I suppose I owe them for that. When I turned seventeen, my lord purchased my services, and I have that price to repay as well. At least when the Whistler takes me, all the debts of my life will be cast off. The debts of living.

Celina attempts to smile and almost succeeds. Turning, she follows Arrel, her step heavy. Tam walks a little apart from them, a hot color burning his skin. I trail after. *You poor thing*, I mouth to myself.

The air grows thicker as we climb the hill to Hangman's Tree, becoming the exact temperature of flesh, as if we are pushing through a crush of intangible bodies to reach it. An odor rises from the ground; dusty, like a room of old books, but also sour, organic. Beneath that a sweetness, akin to dried flowers preserved in a pot of oil. Taking a breath, I roll it around my mouth. The taste of stale honey coats my tongue.

Hangman's Tree rises, without weeds or ceremony, straight up from the whitish shards littering the ground. If the four of us linked hands, we could encircle its trunk. Its deeply

corrugated bark is black as scorched earth. The angled branch's shadow soaks into me, and I gasp; for a second I'm drowning. Tam squats, running a finger over a smooth stone the size of a skull lying at the tree's foot.

Then we hear it. A clear whistle, no tune you could remember or repeat, but light and cheerful. My heart clenches. No records say what the Whistler looks like. The rumors—always whispered—speak of demon horns, yellowed bones, a billowing cloak, and pits of fire where the eyes should be, but this is the whistle of a contented farmboy heading to market. Thatch-colored hair and apple cheeks. Perhaps carrying an axe.

Arrel lets out an exclamation; joy or surprise, this time I cannot tell. All the blood drains from Tam's face, leaving him paler than the rubble littering the ground. Celina looks to the sky, and I tug at one of the gold hoops adorning my right ear. I drop my arm when I realize what I'm doing; I should not be nervous.

"He's here," says Arrel, taking Celina's hand. Her fingers curl limply in his palm. I don't think he notices. "Now, Celina, Tam, concentrate. Focus on the question. How may our lord achieve victory?"

I am not included in this exercise. The Whistler only answers the question of the person most determined to know the reply. If they all ask and I stand here with no questions, no

desires at all, my life will be the one the Whistler takes in payment.

Their eyes close. Celina's find my face before they close. Only then, when I can no longer see her fern-green irises, do I close mine as well. *A good last vision*, I tell myself, and it almost sounds true.

Die. Here, now. I paint the words across the landscape of my mind, and this time, instead of evaporating, and in spite of all the orders I've been given, they shape themselves into a question.

If my life was never my own... can I truly have lived?

A whistled note blows past my ear, shocking in its coldness. I shudder, expecting to—what? Be rent asunder? Swallowed? Ash and fire builds in my lungs, the herald of another coughing fit. But the note fades and I am whole. Disbelief pops open my eyes.

Celina is gone.

Celina is *gone*; the word is a stone, dropped into a well, gathering weight as it falls. She is gone; she should not, cannot, be gone. This is a fact so obvious that Arrel and Tam join me in wide-eyed search of our surroundings for her. I can almost see her; her image lingers in the air between us. We *will* her to be present. Still she does not appear.

She is gone. The word finally strikes bottom and I reel under the impact. That question—that stupid, insistent, nonsensical, useless question of mine—has it killed her?

“No,” says Arrel, an outburst, quickly stifled. His face tightens into a mask. A drop of red trickles down his chin; he’s bitten his lip. He scrubs a sleeve across it, smearing it over the corner of his mouth. “She was aware of the risks,” he says, although neither of us has protested. Tam sways on his feet, skin almost transparent. I suspect I am just as faint. Arrel’s empty hand folds about itself. Rubbing his fingers together, he adds, “Our lord will reimburse her family for her sacrifice.”

Despite the stone in my chest I wonder: if my mother were alive, would our lord offer her restitution had I been taken, as planned? Not likely, although I’m certain she would’ve accepted it, weeping greedy tears of joy.

Because we must, we turn back to Hangman’s Tree. Something has changed. A piece of yellow parchment flutters, pinned under the skull-sized rock. Arrel’s hand shakes only slightly as he moves it aside. The smell of desiccated skin rolls off the parchment. Shaking a little harder, Arrel’s hand plucks it up and lifts it to his eyes. Words flow across its surface, spidery and reddish-brown. Blood makes for poor ink. It separates and runs. Blots of watery serum blur some of the letters.

My stomach boils. I itch to snatch the parchment away. But—*run, run*, screams my brain. *Once he begins to read, it's done. Either you're the one who killed Celina or you'll never find out if what you've known as life is all there is. Which would you find harder to bear?*

That life was all I was allowed. It is all I am. My palm presses the welt on my side, still hot and seeping beneath layers of soft gray cloth. Standing silent, I wait.

Arrel reads. His fingers slowly curl, digging into the parchment. Two burning spots of red appear, high on his cheeks. I've killed Celina. I throw back my shoulders and lift my chin. My heart thrums in my chest like a bird trapped between two cupped hands.

But it's Tam he spins to confront. "What have you done?" Arrel demands, shaking the crumpled parchment at him.

Tam licks cracked lips. No living man should be so pale. "Give it to me," he begs, reaching out. "It tells what happened to her, doesn't it?"

To me, "her" is Celina. But of course that's impossible, and Tam's next words belie the thought.

"Bethany's body was never found after the siege of Bellmar," he says, attempting to seize the parchment that Arrel, taller, holds out of reach. "She may have escaped. She may

have been taken captive. She may be alive. Please!” He’s almost sobbing. The hunger in his voice could starve a city.

*I promised to love you then, my dear, and I’ll be loving you still...* not just a song, then.

“Celina lost her life for this nonsense!” Arrel shouts. And there, over his head, he tears the parchment in half. Tam’s scream echoes the equally awful cry of the paper as it is rent, twin souls in agony. He dives at Arrel.

The heat and pressure building in my chest burst free. The washed-out sky and black indifferent trees blur as I cough out the fire within me. Sweat frosts my skin. An eternity of near-suffocation ends with a gasp that feels as if I’m drawing in a lungful of broken glass. I’m shivering on my hands and knees, a bitter salt taste in my mouth. Blood soaks the bleached earth. Only a few flecks come from my lungs. The rest well up between Tam’s fingers, clasped over his own throat. Arrel stands before him, panting, a knife held loosely in one hand. Its point drips red onto the earth.

A few feet from the skull-sized rock, the two halves of parchment lie crumpled and forgotten. Crawling over to them, I piece them together. The words are still legible.

Tam’s hands slowly fall away from his neck, revealing a gaping hole. A red bubble pushes out of it; swells, bursts. Then he sags to the ground, gently, as if he’s decided to nap.

Arrel runs his free hand down his face. “Damn,” he chokes.

I force my legs to carry me the short distance to where Tam lies. The grove sways. I place the torn parchment in Tam’s jacket and crouch beside him. “She lives,” I whisper.

His lips stretch in a smile. Then he too is gone.

Arrel glances left, right. The blood smear on his face grins. Absently, he wipes his knife on his trousers. “All is not lost,” he says.

I close Tam’s eyes, then let my head sink onto my knees.

“Come, Miro.” Arrel seizes my arm, shocking a yelp out of me. His talon-like grip hauls me upright.

Tam’s question was answered, not Arrel’s. Celina’s life was taken, not mine. A bargain can still be made with the Whistler. Only now do I realize that this was planned all along. Tam as a reserve, in case the first question went astray. A fine soldier once, discarded when he broke. Like me.

“He loved her,” I say. Arrel’s grip on my arm does not slacken. He hauls me across the slope, and I allow myself to be dragged, my ankles scraping over shards of bone. Yes, I can say they are bones now; knobby lumps of old vertebrae, scraps of ribs angled like knives. His footsteps crunch over the earth, kicking up ossified fragments that strike my face and collect in my hair.

“And you loved *her*,” I say, now meaning Celina, which he would know if he would only stop for a moment; think, do anything other than drag me around Hangman’s Tree like a lump of bait. We pass into its shadow. The right-angled branch thrusts towards the sky.

They loved. They lived. Kind Celina, and Bethany—a pretty name—whom Tam so adored. Gone now, both of them—for I lied when I whispered to Tam.

Arrel’s not listening. “Where are you, damn you?” he says, gaze flicking about the grove. The veins in my bicep throb against his clenched fingers.

Once, on our journey, we passed a bush covered in a million blue flowers shaped like stars. Their scent, lavender and honeysuckle mingled, soothed the tightness in my chest. First I, then Tam, then Celina, stopped to admire. We stroked the soap-soft petals and the fragrance clung to our skin.

Arrel strode ahead, never looking back. Leaving us all behind, as he will leave us all in Whistler’s Grove. And I may not understand cards or kindness, but this seems wrong. The man who did not look back should not be the one to go on.

He’s still scanning the horizon when the whistle reaches my ears. I have an instant before he hears it too. An instant before I’m gone as well, the debts of my owned life repaid.

The whistle comes again. A simple country tune, unmemorable but full of good cheer. This time Arrel hears it. His face clears. His lips part.

There's blood in my mouth. Cinders in my lungs. And in my mind, a way to forfeit on my debt. Closing my eyes, I ask a question.

Perhaps a slight gust of wind ruffles my hair. The pressure on my bicep vanishes. I wait, counting to no particular number in my head. My fingertips prickle as blood flows back into my arm.

Finally I open my eyes. Arrel, of course, is gone. His disappearance leaves behind a smaller vacancy than Celina's. A sense of her still remains, framed in the crooked shadow cast by the arm of Hangman's Tree. Tam lies where he fell, still smiling, his deep blue uniform a note of defiance against the pallid earth. There's no way to bury him. Time, I suppose, will gradually take him apart, fade him into the landscape.

Going to the tree, I take the new sheet of parchment from beneath the skull-sized rock. I read it once for the substance, a second to memorize, then fold it and tuck it into my sleeve. When I no longer need the information it contains, I shall burn it, and that must serve as Arrel's funeral.

Still I linger, running the pad of my thumb over my lips. If I had reached out to her... what might have happened? But we

never get back the chances we let slip by. They too fall into that well from which nothing rises. When I look up again, the sense of Celina's presence has evaporated, leaving not a trace behind.

I turn my back on Hangman's Tree. My footsteps flow silently over the bone-strewn ground, but my breath rasps in my chest. Once I stop to cough into a hand. No matter; if all goes as intended, the poison won't trouble me much longer.

Inside my sleeve, the parchment rustles, as if laughing quietly to itself.

Pale sepia sky, and earth the color of rot. There's no marker at the boundary out of Whistler's Grove, but I know when I cross it just the same. I look to the west, where my lord waits, preparing his forces for news of our journey.

Then I face east.

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*A.E. Decker, a former ESL tutor, attended the Odyssey Writers' Workshop in 2008. Her work has appeared in World Weaver Press's Specter Spectacular anthology, Fireside Magazine, and the Australian anthology In-Fabula Divino.*

*“Dee” currently lives in Pennsylvania. Like all writers, she is owned by two cats.*

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## COVER ART

“Ruins,” by Stefan Meisl



German native Stefan Meisl studied art at the University of Passau, where he went on to become a teacher. Beginning in 2006, Stefan became a freelance painter and a graphic artist. Stefan is a member of the German Professional Artists Association and has had numerous exhibitions in both Germany and abroad. In 2008, Stefan had received the Award for Young Artists of the Free State of Bavaria. View more of his artwork at his gallery on [deviantArt.com](http://deviantArt.com).

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