



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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## THE YEAR OF SILENT BIRDS

by Siobhan Carroll

Sometimes the dead come back.

I returned on a dark night, a winter's night, so cold that birds toppled lifeless from the trees. I saw their round gray shapes crusted with frost and thought they were stones placed to mark my way. Then one fell in a shower of snow, so close it grazed my arm. The bird had huddled into itself for warmth, poor thing, and died as it tried to sleep.

I paused. There was something about the bird that distressed me, but I was pushed onwards. *Here*, whispered the summoning, and I stumbled forward obediently, taking care not to step on the small gray shapes hardening under the drifting snow.

When I reached the bridge I began to remember. I had seen this bridge before, in happier days. I had jumped off it into warm water. I remembered children laughing and the darting shadows of minnows under our hands. I looked to the wall and saw it was still there, but the crumbling tower I'd hidden in during hunting games no longer stood against the moon.

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I wanted to pause here too, but the summoning dragged me forward. Like a red-hot hook in my skull: *Here*.

I stumbled through the open forest gate, shielding my eyes from the glare. An ice patch crunched under my foot, and one of the weavers' windows filled with firelight as someone pulled the winterscreen aside and peered out. But no one emerged from the cottages. No one called my name.

The summoning pulled me past the strange houses of the village, up the slag path to the keep. When I saw the old door, my silent heart seemed to leap within me. *Home*.

My fingers could not recall how to form a fist, so I slapped the door with my hand. For a long time, nobody answered. But I had the unwearingly patience of the dead. In the end, somebody came.

The servant who answered the door was a stranger. Her eyes took me in—my straggling hair, my wet shroud, the snow clinging to my bare feet—and went very wide.

“Aider!” Her voice was high and unnatural in my ears. “There’s someone—”

I pushed past her, into the warmth of the kitchen. A dog I didn’t know bristled at my entrance, then backed away, whimpering. Something was wrong. Katow had always slept here, by the fire.

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“By the Flame, woman, what have you opened the door for?” A large man had entered the room. “Do you want the house to die of cold?” He looked at me and his face went an odd color.

“By...” The man made a noise, and shook his head. “Lady Rehlite... is it you?”

At his words, I knew him. Aider, the stable boy, thin as a whip, riding the bay mare. And I remembered when I’d last seen him, bringing a posy of willowsweet to my sickbed.

A strange feeling came over me. I sat down on the cook’s wooden stool. Water was pooling under me as the snow melted.

*Here*, whispered the summoning. Then it vanished as swiftly as it had appeared.

I looked up at Aider, so much older than I remembered him, his face browned and lined by sun.

“Yes,” I told him. My voice was rusty with disuse; at the sound, the woman started and the dog yelped with fear. “It’s me. Tell them I’ve come back.”

\* \* \*

“But why is she here?”

The kitchen buzzed with noise—people talking in low voices, guards shuffling, keep children whispering to each other as they poked their heads through the doorway. I looked for my father and mother but didn’t see them. The village

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Craftsman wiped nervously at the ice still melting on his shoulders.

“The dead... sometimes do come back, m'lady,” he said. “The cold winter and the Red Star’s crossing are signs of general evil... But only the dead know why they come.”

The young woman in the nightdress—the one who would not look at me—frowned. A young man with a carefully clipped beard leaned forward and murmured in her ear. The ghost of my living self noted the intimacy of this act—her husband? But he wore a collar and had the coloring of a northerner. He could not be a lord.

The jumble of bright snagging details tired me. I dropped my gaze to the water pooling underfoot, the old, slow dream of stone.

“Sister.”

The word yanked me back to them. The woman was looking at me now, her face vivid and afraid. She had my mother’s eyes.

“Leave,” the collared man said over his shoulder. The servants and the old Craftsman and the villagers shuffled out, Aider darting one last look in my direction.

The woman stepped forward. She placed a tentative hand on my arm. Her fingers burned.

“Sister,” she said. “Why are you here?”

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Inside me was a white vapor. The sense of certainty that had dragged me out of my mountain tomb was gone; it had evaporated the moment I sat down. I searched for the thing I could remember; the thing I knew to be true.

“I was summoned.”

The collared man let out a hiss of breath. My sister clutched the back of her neck with her hands. Her name leapt into my mind—Fehle—and I remembered a young girl kneeling on flagstones, pulling up the tufted grass that had pushed its way up through the cracks. But the Fehle who looked down at me now was a young woman, a year or so older than me.

“You,” Fehle said. The muscles in her jaw clenched tight and hard. “We didn’t ask for *you*.”

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“So, this is your sister.” The old woman spoke with a Sula accent. Despite the hour, her hair was braided, and she wore a green sitting-dress with a silver broach at its collar. I shook my head, trying to clear it of the details my ghost kept whispering in my ear.

Fehle nodded, twisting her own disheveled hair between her fingers. “The Lady Rehlite. We don’t know why—”

“The Lady Rehlite,” The woman’s hard eyes flicked to me. “I’ve heard of you.” She paused, one of those venomous pauses my old self remembered from Court. But its meaning passed

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me by. “I have heard of the Mountain dead before,” she observed. “But I thought it mere legend. You are the first I’ve ever seen.”

“We think she’s come about Lord Gaven,” my sister said. “We think there’s something wrong.”

“Do you.” Death itself was not colder than the Lady Dal’s words. The room—my father’s old council room—glared bright with an angry, watchful silence.

Fehle looked towards the collared man standing politely against the wall. The man—he must be her Steward—kept his face studiously blank.

“Is this true,” the Lady Dal said softly to me. “Have you come to aid my son against his enemies?”

I groped for the memories I must have had when I climbed the granite stairs of my crypt. Nothing. Dredging up some words from the language of the living, I said: “I have come to serve my house.”

“Your house.” She stared at Fehle. “I thank the Flame my son has married into such a *dutiful* family.”

“My lady,” the Steward said, shifting his weight. “I believe —”

There was a muffled shout behind him. A thunderous banging. The heads of the living jerked upwards, looking

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towards the sound with a speed that unnerved me. Had I ever moved like that?

“See who it is.” Lady Dal splayed her wrinkled hands on my father’s table as though the wood was strong enough to bear her up through whatever came next.

The Steward returned with powdered snow melting into dark patches on his haesen.

“A letter.” He handed the rolled fabric to Fehle, who stared at it as though she’d been handed a snake.

“That’s a Court tie.” Lady Dal’s voice was edged. “Open it.”

Fehle managed little more than an unfolding when she gasped. The maid hovering in the doorway raised her hand to her mouth. A dead girl’s anger flashed through me like lightning. *Doesn’t Fehle know better than to weep in front of servants?*

“Give that to me.” Lady Dal unfolded the letter with trembling fingers. Above her, time congealed on the ceiling. I wondered if the living could see it—the sudden reformation of history. *This is why I’ve come*, I thought. *This*.

“Lord Gaven’s enemies have prevailed,” Lady Dal said. “My son has been sentenced for treason.” Her face had the same blank look my father’s had worn when Baylen died.

Fehle lifted her head. “What about Brau?”

“There’s no mention of him.”

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The silence that surrounded us now was not the silence of snow. It was the shocking absence of noise.

“I want Brau back,” Fehle said, her voice rising. “We need to get my son back.”

“And Lord Gaven,” Lady Dal said. “Your husband. *My* son. We must get him back too. You must go and plead for them. A *loving* wife’s plea for mercy. That’s all that can save them now.”

Fehle shrank back in her chair.

The Steward said, “But, my lady—If they should accuse her too, then Gray Tower will be lost. Lady Fehle holds the title,” he added as Dal glared at him. “If she is accused, all that remains may be lost.”

His words brought the brutal reality of the treason taint into the room. It wasn’t just that Lord Gaven stood accused, or that his son’s fate remained unknown. The abyss yawned under my family’s feet.

“I will go,” I said, simply. The time seemed right to say it. I kept my eyes on the possibilities that formed and reformed on the walls. “I will go and plead for Lord Gaven. I will go reclaim your son.”

“Lady Rehlite...” The Steward struggled to find words. “Will they meet with you?”

“Not with me. With my sister. I will go in her place.”

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Across the table, Fehle looked at me with glistening eyes. Relief showed on her face, and something else, too. Not gratitude. Definitely not that.

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“Why didn’t Father come?” Fehle said when we were alone. “I did everything right. I poured the wine. I petitioned his tomb.”

I shook my head. I had no memory of the discussions that had taken place in the land of the dead. It was tradition, I knew—the border between life and death was not lightly crossed. But I was not used to knowing so little, and the absent memories gaped unnervingly in my mind.

“He could have fought,” Fehle muttered. “He could have raised the marches. Now we’ll have nothing to fall back on if the army comes.”

*Even the mountain-folk do not like to follow the dead*, my old self would have said. But Fehle was already looking away from me, from the necklaces her servants had spread out before us, watching the door of the space she called The Green Room.

Once this had been my brother Baylen’s room. Once I’d stood here, looking down on Baylen’s body while my mother sobbed. And while grief had clutched me hard in that moment,

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looking down at him, a sudden, dizzying thought had crossed my mind: “*Now I am heir.*”

And so I had been, for a twelvenight, before the plague took me too.

Now my younger sister was heir. Had been heir. And she had married the man who was now lord of my father’s land, and she had borne him children, all while I was lying in the dark.

My thoughts were strange. I pushed aside a string of pearls, searching for something to talk about.

“You gave your children mountain names.” I’d met Fehle’s second son in the family assembly that morning—a sleepy, puzzled child who’d screwed up his face when I was introduced to him. “Brau. Hale.”

“Well. You know what the simplefolk say.”

I nodded. The simplefolk had always whispered against my father for giving us Dahlen names. Nurse had said that such names might please the Court but would not please the spirits. Perhaps she had been right.

“Father never did make peace with your deaths,” Fehle mused. “You and Baylen.” When I glanced at her, she added, “all your training, all his plans—and for what? The plague came and carried you two off, and the king’s second mistress as well—do you remember her? I suppose you must.” She laughed, a

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pretty sound, like a glass breaking. “Poor father. All alone, and his enemies whispering against him—”

“What did they say?” The words escaped before I realized my lips were moving.

If Fehle was surprised by my sudden interest, she didn’t show it. “You mean you don’t know? I suppose if you’ve forgotten whatever you knew in the dead lands... Well, *I* wouldn’t know, would I? I only heard rumors.”

“What did they say?”

“I have no idea.” Fehle smoothed out her woolen dress and smiled at the floor. “Father never told me anything, remember?”

A ghost-halo of anger burned in my chest. I reached down into the comforting thrum of stone underfoot and steadied myself inside it.

“I suppose it must have been hard with Baylen and me gone,” I said, measuring my words. “What happened?”

Fehle held a diamond pin to her temple and turned towards the mirror. “Oh,” she said vaguely. “Father married Terren off that autumn, and me off the next summer. He wanted more heirs, I suppose. Or allies? Maybe both.” She discarded the pin and fished through the jewelry box, magpie fingers snatching up color.

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“Both of you? So quickly?” Father had always spoken of getting the best matches he could for his children. Just that summer he’d politely deflected Lord TARTH’s request for my hand while I sat by the Queen’s fountain, watching old TARTH pull at his beard.

I thought then of a different day, of a tiny box of ivory cradled in the palm of my hand. No.

“Fehle,” I said. “If there’s something I should know, you need to tell me. When I go to Court—I’ve been gone all this time—I need to know what happened.”

Fehle glanced at me—a ferret-dark slip of eyes. “You’re posing as me, sister,” she said sweetly. “Remember? You’re not expected to *know* anything.”

A rap at the door. Fehle’s bearded Steward entered, his eyes lowered and respectful. “Lady Rehlite?” he said. “We’re ready to depart.”

“There you go.” Fehle closed the lid of the box with a decisive snap. “Steward Rogan will tell you everything you need to know.”

But as we watched the servants carry the bundle of clothing and jewelry towards the door, she caught me by the crook of my elbow. The shock of living flesh flared up my arm.

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“Do you know, Rey,” she said, “nobody else died of plague that year. Not in the mountains. Nobody but you and Baylen. Why do you think that was?”

There was a sour, acrid taste in my mouth. I thought desperately of my sick-bed, the cloying smell of willow-sweet in the air.

Something moved across Fehle’s face, like a shadow underwater. “Be careful at Court, Rey.” She leaned forward and kissed me lightly on the cheek. But when she stood back, she was a stranger again. Her face gleamed like an ivory box: serene, polished, and perfectly closed.

\* \* \*

On the fourth night of our journey, Rogan, tiring of the sullen guards and the maid’s apprehensive silence, took advantage of a wider stretch of path to join me. His horse whickered and tried to shy away from my presence.

“When were you last in the city?” he asked.

*When I was alive, obviously,* my former self would have said in a cutting tone.

“The year that followed that of the New Peace,” I said. “I never learned what they named it.”

“That would be the Year of Golden Sails, for the trade fleet that arrived that autumn from the Ribbon Sea. Much has changed since then.” Rogan sounded relieved to have

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something to tell me about. I suspected that he was used to playing this role for my sister.

As he listed the lords who had fallen in and out of the king's favor since my death, I allowed my mind to drift back to that gleaming summer. I remembered the giddy excitement of the day I dared Salef to climb the Iron Tower, in my strange pride, knowing that he was climbing its fearsome trellis because *I* was watching; that he, and Lord Hegart, and the other young lords were trying to impress *me*.

A name caught my attention. "Lord Darren is still at Court?" I almost said "Lord Darren is still alive?"—though of course we could not all be dead.

"He is on the council of judges."

I nodded, absorbing this information. Darren, with his careful courtier's tongue. Darren, his boot thudding into the side of the stable boy who'd slighted him—how I couldn't even remember. Darren, nights later in the Vault of Words, his cruel smile easing into a dangerous blankness: "*Is there anyone there?*"

"No," I'd said. I'd thought he'd believed me.

"We should go carefully with Lord Darren," Rogan said. As if remembering something, he added, "I hear he showed you favor once, but m'lady, he has changed. He is a dangerous man now."

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“He was a dangerous man then.” My mare laid her ears back at the sound of my voice and tossed her head. She quelled when I laid a hand on her side, but not because I had calmed her.

Darren was still alive. And Baylen and I—and Vara, the king’s second mistress, who was to owe us favors—we were all dead. I thought again of my sick-room, the sour taste in my mouth, the steady stream of Craftsmen with their glass vials and expressions of concern. Had any been visiting from Court?

“Come,” I told my mare in the pitiless tones of the dead. Digging in my heels, I urged her down the rain-pitted path, towards Darren and other things I neither wanted to think of nor remember.

\* \* \*

When the walls of Alasu rose in the distance, the maid, Harmony, gaped. Truly, the Summer City was a grand sight: its stone walls shone like a sunset lake; beyond those red-gold walls, the Iron Tower reared like a thorn in the eye of a god.

“We must go to the Resting House first,” Rogan said, “to make ready for your petition.”

*We must disguise you*, he meant. I pulled Fehle’s purple shawl tightly across my face.

At the Noble’s Gate, Rogan displayed my sister’s seal. I kept my head bowed until the rotten perfume of the Kettle

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Road had completely enveloped us. The oppressive warmth of the lowlands' air intensified as we descended into the city. It slid into the hollows of my bones and itched there.

"You remember what we talked about," Rogan said to Harmony. "You must prepare your lady's face-powder carefully. All eyes will be on us."

The maid, too nervous to speak, hunched down in her saddle. I clutched my sister's shawl tighter, trying to focus on the street ahead.

Pieces of the city loomed at me like shapes in a fever-dream. I recognized nothing: not the painted store signs, not the dried strings of orange fruit dangling from poles, not the merchants, many of whom were light-skinned and gabbered in tongues I didn't know. There were more people than I remembered, and they were all loudly, aggressively, alive.

As we passed the high wall that bordered the Iron Tower, dizziness clawed at me. Perhaps it was merely the nearness of iron, which screamed against the mountain-magic in my bones; or perhaps it was the memory of Asilt forcing her sweat-stained locks beneath her deathcap.

"Have there been many executions at the tower?" I asked. "In your time at Court?"

Something flickered in Rogan's eyes. "Only a few. The king is merciful."

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“The year my family was last here,” I said. “The Year of Golden Sails—there were some that year. Do you remember their names?”

“None of noble blood, my lady,” he said, flashing me a warning look. “Save the Lady Asilt, and her lovers.”

Lady Asilt, I noted. Not Queen Asilt. I nodded, sagely, my mouth dry.

“Abominable woman,” I said. (*You have it, Rey. It looks much better on you.*) “How many were they again?”

“Eleven. Including the Farrow of the West, and old Lord Tarth, who had been highly favored by the king.”

Something seized in my throat. Eleven. Including Tarth, who’d asked for my hand by the fountain; Tarth, who had always been a good ally for us. There should have been only four: *Queen Asilt, the Farrow, Lord Harn, and the singer*, Father had said, counting off their lives on his fingers.

“Lord Darren, whom we will meet tomorrow, was instrumental in exposing that treason.” The part of me that wasn’t frozen admired the blandness with which Steward Rogan said this, as though he were just making conversation. “He has always been a great lover of justice.”

“I remember hearing as much.” The numbness spreading in my chest was not the comforting numbness of snow. I

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remembered Darren, his eyes wide with what, to him, seemed like sincerity, professing his love for me.

*“Whatever your family wishes, I’ll do,”* he’d said, and kissed the fingertips of my glove. And I’d smiled, not sure if I should believe him, knowing I had to smile anyway, because it had become dangerous not to.

*Oh*, I realized. Like a traveler standing before a southern tile-picture, suddenly seeing the fragments resolve into clarity.

*Oh*. I was glad, suddenly, of the prickling wool shawl that hid my face. I wished I could bring it with me into the petition hall, but such coverings were not allowed there.

Tomorrow I would have to kneel before Darren, bare-faced, and pretend to be all these things I was not: my sister; a living woman; an innocent trusting in his mercy. As though we had not plotted together all those years ago. As though he had not sent me to my grave.

\* \* \*

Our petition was heard at the Dunner’s Hall, in the Hour of Bells. Four lords and two scribes were in attendance. I recognized Lord Eckledge, who looked like a thinner version of his father, and Lord Kar, who’d gone falconing with us in the Bright Hills. I didn’t see Lord Darren, and my heart lifted.

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“My lords,” Rogan said. “The Lady Fehle ap Etrek comes before you to plead the king’s mercy.” This was my cue to kneel. Once this would have been hard for me, but my bristling pride was a memory now. I lowered myself to the floor. The stone reached up to meet me, its thoughts slow and quiet.

“She begs mercy for her husband,” the Steward continued, “and for her child.”

“Lord Gaven is an accused traitor,” drawled a lord who I didn’t recognize. “The child-lord Brau is the son of a traitor. Need we hear more?”

“My lord,” Rogan said smoothly, “whatever Lord Gaven’s sins might be, his son is a scion of House Etrek, which has long served the Summerlands loyally.”

I frowned at his willingness to concede Lord Gaven’s guilt. That should have been a sticking point.

“My lords, this is true,” Lord Kar said, with the haste of someone who’s been dug in the ribs. “I knew this lady’s father. He was ever a good servant to our king.”

Lord Kar had not known my father well; indeed, he’d a reputation for not knowing much at all. Plied with enough wine, he would testify to anything, which is why my father had taken him out falconing in the first place.

“Indeed,” another lord said, “few of the northern lords have shown such loyalty.”

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Lord Eckledge drew his lanky frame up against his chair. “Lord Kar,” he said incredulously, “you remembered this lady’s father very differently when you were in your cups at Midwinter. But no matter. The fact remains, we speak of an accused traitor and his son.”

“Perhaps,” the third lord said, “we should appeal for a fifth judge to join us, given that we seem to be divided.”

“Seconded,” Kar said before Eckledge could protest.

Rogan’s face was opaque. If he’d arranged this, he’d done it well. Eckledge and his sour-faced companion sat back, baffled, while the second scrivener flurried out of the hall. Even before his footsteps returned, I felt cold. I understood, now, who the fifth judge would be.

“Lord Darren,” the scrivener announced, leading my old companion into the hall.

Darren’s hair had gone steel gray, and the years had chiseled away the false softness from his face. Eckledge sucked at his cheeks when he saw him, but said nothing.

“Where does the case stand?” Darren asked once the obligatory greetings had been exchanged.

“The Lady Fehle petitions for mercy,” the third judge said. “It was suggested that something might be done for the boy.”

“A scion of House Etrell,” Darren said. “Of course.” He tapped the golden arm of his chair.

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“I knew this lady’s father well,” Kar mumbled. If he was supposed to use a different line this time, he obviously couldn’t recall it. “He was a good servant to our king.”

“Perhaps a wardship could be found for the boy,” Darren said, “in the home of a good family, close to Court, so that the king can monitor his upbringing.”

I could see the game-pieces in motion: next would be the suggestion of a lord to act as Guardian, a man in Darren’s fealty. When Lord Gaven was executed—his fate had obviously already been decided—Darren would hold the heir to the mountains.

Rogan, standing to my right, seemed at ease. And perhaps Fehle would not object to this outcome. She did not seem overly fond of her husband, and her son would live under Darren’s protection. All I had to do was let Darren’s plan—or the Steward’s plan, whichever it was—play out. We could return home with Brau’s life secure and the reputation of House Etrell intact.

I thought of an ivory box carried lightly across a summer garden.

“Forgive me, my lords,” I said. At the sound of my voice, the bird hopping in its wooden singing-cage stiffened and stared at me with a beady black eye. “The child-lord Brau must

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be returned to his family. The mountains will recognize no heir who grows up so far from its soil.” *And its magic.*

Eckledge looked pale and frozen. Lord Darren studied me with an expression I am sure he’d never worn before.

“As for... my husband,” I continued, “Surely you would not risk our king’s displeasure by failing to consider what mercy you might show.”

“My lords.” The third lord looked confused. Something about my voice unsettled him, but he wasn’t sure what. “What—what this lady asks is... most extraordinary. Perhaps...”

“No,” Darren said, firmly. “No mercy for Lord Gaven. And as for his son—” His eyes flashed. “In view of the *historic* loyalty of the Etrek, he will be made a ward of a southern house.”

Eckledge was glancing from Darren to me to Rogan. He rested his hands on the top of his thighs, waiting to see how this would play out.

“My lords,” I countered, emphasizing my words with the chilling accent of the dead. “By the old laws, I have the right to wait to present my petition to the king. I invoke that right now.”

Bowing my head, I folded myself forward into the terrible silence that followed.

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The law says that a petitioner can wait to see the sovereign. But in the Year of Thorns, a clever High Steward had ruled that food and drink could not be brought into the petition halls. So most vigils do not last long.

But the dead have no need of food and drink. For six days, I waited in Dunner's Hall, unmoving. The crowds flowed uneasily around me. The stones of the palace watched us, patient, incurious.

"Lord Gaven is being moved," Rogan said on the sixth day. He had come to see me regularly, a man who always seemed to be at the front of a tide of people, bringing me news and adding credibility to the rumors that people were smuggling me food.

I'd expected him to disappear in the wake of my performance before the lords. Instead, he seemed to have accepted my intervention. Either he was more adaptable than I'd anticipated, or more loyal to my sister. Or both.

"Where to?"

"I don't know. Which means something is happening. But Brau is still with Silon. For the moment, he looks safe."

"Any word from the council?" The faces lining the judge's table changed each day. They all avoided looking at me.

"Officially, no," Rogan said. "But the goldlords have approached them requesting a resolution. There is a rumor, you see, that the goldlords bribed the council to turn down

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your petition. Lord Xana's city-house was torched by a mob the other day. The others fear their houses will be next."

"A mob?"

"This city has no love for tax-collectors. Particularly foreign ones. Lady Fehle, on the other hand, is becoming popular. Yesterday, one of the Grand Craftsmen mentioned you in his sermon as an example of piety."

"That must have been expensive."

"Money well spent. I hear another Craftsman preached the same today. Him, we didn't pay."

There was a stir near the far entrance. A red-collared scrivener elbowed his way through the line of merchants and made his way over to the judges. He passed a rolled parchment to Lord Yarrow, the sour-faced lord from my own petition hearing.

Yarrow unrolled it. His eyes slipped to me, then back again. He murmured something to the lord to his right, rose, and hurried out of the hall, a wave of whispers spreading in his wake.

"I'll return," Rogan said, and followed him at a courtier's pace. A clever man, the Steward. I could see why my sister liked him. I had no wish to see such things.

This left me alone again, stranded on the island of space that always opened up around me. Pretending to pray, I folded

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myself down against the hard red flagstones. Kin to kin we reached for each other: the numbness of stone, the indifferent flesh of the dead.

I wanted information. The palace had it, though not necessarily the information I sought. It knew Lord Darren the way a giant knows an ant tracking across its skin. Its flagstones carried him through the diamond courtyard, where he talked to a heavy-footed man about a bribe. The Steward, his tough mountain soles scuffing tiles, trailed Yarrow into the dusty passage between the Iron Gate and the Crescent Plaza.

Frustrated, I reached down into the bones of the palace, searching for something I could use.

I could feel the silent, uncremated valley-dead down there, sleeping in heathen tombs and murdered hollows. Fragments of their dreams knifed into me: the awful sound Lord Finit's niece had made as she was dragged through the hallways by her powdered hair; a banquet at which mechanical birds hatched singing from silver eggs.

From time to time I snagged an image that seemed familiar. The beggar woman whose bones lay corroding in the sewer remembered Darren's face. He'd hit her with his fists at first, then something sharp and hard—a brick, she thought. If she could turn her head she might be able to see it, leaning

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against the remains of her ribcage. It had become a companion to her over the years. An old friend.

I dropped this memory quickly. ‘*Nobody cares about them,*’ Darren had explained to me once, when I’d confronted him about the stable boy. His voice had been droll and amused. What I needed was a crime the powerful would care about. Something Darren wouldn’t want revealed.

I pulled my mind out of the stones, my body saturated with the weight of old crimes. Their ugliness made me feel miserable, almost as though I were alive again.

I longed for the clean nothingness of snow.

\* \* \*

A tremor ran through the skin of the palace, a shiver only the dead could feel.

I bent my mind to it. Not here, but across the city, in the triangle courtyard of the Iron Tower, a familiar name had just gasped itself into the dark.

I laid my cheek on the cold flagstone and tried to reach for him, but the wisp that had been Lord Gaven eluded me. I reached, and touched only the hard, iron darkness of tower.

Hours later, Rogan arrived, looking pale and drawn. If he’d facilitated Gaven’s death, it did not sit easily with him. A good sign for Fehle, I thought. Or maybe a bad one. In the world of the Court, it was hard to be sure.

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“I have bad news,” he said. “Lord Gaven...”

“Is dead. I know.” If the stones of the palace hadn’t told me, the changing faces of the petitioners would have. They looked at me with pity. Some muttered angrily to each other. If we were going to act, it should be soon, while the feelings of the cityfolk ran high in Fehle’s favor.

“Brau has been moved to the tower.” Rogan shook his head. “At Lord Darren’s request—he claims new information has come to light regarding Lord Gaven’s treason.”

“Increasing the stakes,” I observed. Darren’s message was clear: either he would have Brau or no one would. “Send a scrivener to him, requesting an interview. And bribe that Grand Craftsman of yours to prophesize doom if Brau is killed. Say a curse has been laid on the city, because of its judges’ hard-heartedness. And so on.”

“And so on,” Rogan agreed. He looked at me warily. “My lady, I must caution you. Your family’s fate hangs in the balance. Remember what it is you are living for.”

A clever man, the Steward. “I will,” I replied, in a tone as bitter-cold as the night I’d returned from my tomb.

*What I was living for*, I thought as he departed. It was the same thing I’d always lived for: to serve as my family’s tool at Court. Then, my father had moved me on his game-board.

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Perhaps he still did: the dead had sent me back, after all, and the dead play their own game.

Perhaps my decision to speak out in the petition hearing had really been my father's. Or, perhaps it had been entirely mine, and in speaking I'd precipitated Lord Gaven's death. Both possibilities unnerved me.

*The living also play a game*, I thought, watching Rogan's shadow shrink and dissolve into the door-light. *And those like me, who occupy the space between? Whose game do we play?*

The stones of the palace whispered to me: Lord Darren is coming. I coiled myself into myself and waited.

\* \* \*

The worst thing I ever did was carry an ivory box to a fountain. It was tiny, no bigger than a sparrow's egg, and when I leaned forward to admire the pool's circling copperfish, I slid it into the gap between two loose bricks. Baylen made one of his awkward jokes, and I laughed—a genuine laugh, because I was relieved to be rid of the token, and because I hoped never to think of it again.

But I have. I have thought about how I stretched my face in fake smiles as I walked the long corridors from the queen's apartments; how I told myself (the pebble-weight of the box in my hand) that this was just another task, that it didn't mean anything; that it probably had nothing to do with Queen Asilt,

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who was young and kind and who just that day had given me a wooden charm bracelet—*"You have it, Rey. It looks much better on you."* It wasn't worth thinking about. Besides, I had a duty to perform. And my family was counting on me.

Two loose bricks: one red, one yellow. The perfect place to hide a token, send a note of affection, or plant a lie. Asilt's box clicked against them as I slid it in.

Perhaps that wasn't the choice that killed me. Perhaps that moment had come later, in the Vault of Words, when I'd turned to Darren with a lie on my lips, and seen his face, and told it anyway.

Still. If I had to name my worst crime, that would be it: the moment I cradled that lovely box in my palm and told myself it didn't mean anything.

The living can lie to themselves more easily than the dead. But even then, deep down, I knew, I knew, I knew.

\* \* \*

Darren was watching me. He was uncannily quiet. I wouldn't have known he was there had the stones not murmured his arrival. He'd timed it well: the petitions were done for the day; and the roar of laughter from the merchants at the door meant no one would overhear us.

"Lady Fehle," he said. "Is your Steward here? He begged an interview."

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Had I truly been a country lady half-mad with grief, this would have unbalanced me further. A married woman cannot speak to men of her own class; her Steward must speak for her. But Rogan was deliberately absent; he knew I might not want an audience for this interview.

“Greetings to you, Lord Darren.” I hoped my voice raised the hair on his arms; I hope it rushed on him like a winter wind. “I hear Lord Gaven has been executed. I hear Lord Brau has been taken to the tower.”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Darren’s head tilt. No more talk of “son” or “husband.” The game was changing on him.

“I think these orders came from you,” I said. “Am I right?”

“My dear Lady Fehle,” he said. “I am but a servant of the king’s will.”

“So modest, Lord Darren.” The ghost of my living self danced on my tongue. “I’ve heard so many things about you, but no one ever mentioned your modesty. Perhaps they were being polite. It’s an ugly virtue.”

Darren shifted his weight, considering. Eventually he said, “You have a proposal for me?”

I counted that as a minor victory: I’d intrigued him enough to make him move first.

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Now I turned towards him. Despite my anger, the familiarity of his face was a shock to me.

“A petition,” I corrected, “for the king. Brau, to be returned unharmed to his family. And Gaven’s body, returned so that we may bury him in the mountain way.”

This, I thought, would be what my father wanted, what the dead wanted. To have a family member killed was no great matter, but to lose their body to a traitor’s interment in the Iron Tower—that would be a loss indeed.

Darren pursed his lips, pretending to think. “Or?”

“Or.” I smiled. If I’d had a living heart it would have been thudding furiously. “Or I go before the people of this city and testify to your crimes. Your hand in the execution of Queen Asilt, for example. Our present king was rather fond of her.”

Darren laughed; a long, low sound that unspooled too easily from his chest. “My lady,” he said, his eyebrows raised, “That would hardly help your case. Your own kin were far too... involved.”

“The dead care little for their reputations,” I said softly, “and the living are fond of vengeance. Your enemies will pay a great deal for my secrets.”

“Your secrets, assuming you have any, are worth nothing without proof. So tell me, Lady Fehle, what incriminating letters did your father leave in your hands?”

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When I said nothing, he cocked his head to one side. “No letters? Of course not.” His tone became kindly. “He spoke of you sometimes, you know. A foolish child, dull and unpromising. He rather wondered if you were his. Now that would be an interesting rumor to revisit, wouldn’t it? If we’re in the business of digging up old rumors.”

If I had been Fehle, I think Darren’s words would have gashed me open. As it was, I glared at him, feeling an almost-living fury simmer under my skin. I’d forgotten how good he was at this: cruelty, veiled threats, and lies, confidently delivered.

“Your father wouldn’t have trusted *you* with his secrets.”

He paused, baiting me. I said nothing.

Hiding his disappointment, Darren continued: “And even if you have some scrap you think is evidence, what of it? Your papers will be declared forged, and you will land in a madhouse if you aren’t careful.”

“I am touched by your concern. But I think they will believe me.”

The silence between us was blade-sharp. I could feel Darren balancing on the edge of it, deciding whether or not to call my bluff. Lord Gaven was dead, and there were other ways of exerting control over my house than holding Brau. But Darren was a man who liked his victories absolute.

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“The wife of an executed traitor? I think not,” he said. “No lord will take your accusations seriously.”

“That might be true,” I mused, “if I were the Lady Fehle.”

There is a certain satisfaction in springing a trap, Darren used to say. Seeing the look that crossed his face, I almost understood what he’d meant.

But Darren was not a man given to remorse, or fear. Ashen-faced, he rearranged himself.

“Ah,” he said, his color returning. “Lady Rehlite. I must apologize for not recognizing you. Death has not favored you, my dear. Not at all.” The thin, cruel smile returned to his lips and perched there like a wary bird. “So, the mountain legends are true, then. Interesting.”

My sense of satisfaction was fading. I plunged ahead: “You know exactly what I can reveal,” I warned him. “And I will.”

“You always did care too much, Rey,” Darren said, “about what people think. It’s what they do that matters.

“Let’s say,” he continued, “that you tell them everything. I have power— swords, land, coin, and knives at the chamberlords’ backs. And power, my dear, counts more than all the moral indignation in the land.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

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“Yes,” he said. “I can.” He leaned forward. “Now,” he said, “I am going to give *you* an ultimatum. Renounce your petition, or I kill the boy.”

“Kill the boy and the dead will make you pay for it.” The lie sprang easily to my tongue; my living self would have been proud.

Darren’s eyes flickered, but he did not turn away. “You will be gone,” he said, “by midnight.” He bowed his head respectfully, as one would to a lady one had just met. Then he strode away, his pace hard and measured, the tip of his sword almost catching against one of the green-cloaked scribes hovering nearby.

\* \* \*

Panic comes at odd moments. The night following Asilt’s execution, for example; I hadn’t panicked then. Husked-out from my testimony, I’d watched Darren and Baylen argue as though they were strangers on a far-off shore. And when I turned my head, when I saw the frozen form of the scrivener’s apprentice hiding in the shadow of the bookcase, I hadn’t felt anything. I’d raised my finger to him—*hush*—and turned back to see Darren, his face gone still and hard. “*Is there anyone there?*”

“No.” The lie had slipped off my tongue the way an ivory box can slide into a wall. With lethal ease.

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It was only as we were leaving the city that the panic had hit me, raw-mouthed and scrabbling. *I may have killed us all, I'd thought, remembering the apprentice's bloodless face. If that boy tells anyone what he overheard. Or if Darren finds out.*

The panic that clutched me now was similar. My gamble had not paid off, and now Darren knew. He knew.

Recklessly I plunged myself into the maze of stone. Where was Darren? Footsteps across flagstones. He hurried towards the House of Flame, and I could feel the young crimsons scurrying out of his way as he approached.

The Craftsmen. Of course.

Alarm pushed me off the floor. I raised an awkward arm to signal one of the scribes. "Send word to my Steward," I said, "I need to speak to him." The man nodded; anything to get away from my voice.

Alone again, I cast my thoughts through stone, to the palace's walls and the city's bustling streets. I searched for Brau but couldn't find him. I strained to reach past the city gates, down the faint roads to the cold underlands of the mountain dead. But the valley was thick around me. I couldn't even feel the mountains, let alone touch the barrier that separated me from the deadlands.

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I curled back, exhausted. If I was undone, what would become of Brau? I needed allies.

Again I pushed myself against the iron wall that entombed Lord Gaven. *Are you there? Listen to me.*

*Perhaps, I thought wildly, if I spoke to him in the language of the dead.*

I turned inwards, plunging deeper than I had yet gone into my unmemory. I grasped at the edges of a word. My mouth shaped its jagged consonant, but the word itself rebelled. Its barbed vowels stuck in my throat. Nothing dead wishes to be dragged into the world of the living. Exhausted, I let it go.

*The Steward, I thought, the valley air pressing down on me. Rogan will have to save the boy.*

I let my breath out and was surprised at the warm liquid that ran from my mouth. I touched my fingers to it—the pain of the half-spoken word still throbbed my mouth—and I saw scarlet. Quickly I pressed my hand to my chest—but I had no heartbeat.

Confusion filled me. Had the word punished me by making me feel as the living felt? Or had it temporarily brought me back into alignment with the world?

I had to let my hand drop. The servants were staring.

\* \* \*

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Darren did not wait until midnight. My father would have approved: “Strike early,” he always said as he moved his red sword-piece across the board. “Strike last.”

In the Hour of Stars, Lord Darren’s crimson priests came for me. Their incense burners clanked heavily on brass chains, filling the halls with thick sweet smoke. I laid hold of my defenses—the ropes of thought and memory I’d stretched around the bones of the palace—and pulled them taut.

“With the Flame,” a crimson said, “we drive forth the dark.”

“With the Flame,” another said, “we purify this place.”

Before, it had not hurt to think of the Flame. Now it did, and each word these men spoke was like a torch casually tossed in my direction.

“With the Flame, we drive forth unquiet spirits.”

I could feel the dark core that filled my bones diminishing. My skin was damp with sweat or snow melt. I slipped, then caught hold of the palace, and I clung tighter.

“With the Flame”—they were very near now—“we bid you leave.”

Almost I felt myself come undone. But I was not some unquiet spirit to be kicked like a beggar from their door. I was the Lady Rehlite, and I would not move.

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**“You see,”** I gasped, rising to my feet. The language of the dead filled my mouth with blood and foam, but I spat the words anyway. **“You see what they are doing to me? To one of your own.”** I stretched my hands out to the valley’s sleeping dead, to the old queens in their mausoleums, to the beggars whose powdered bones filled the cracks between stones. To poor murdered Asilt, buried under an anonymous floor, and her harmless minstrels, and the other unlucky souls who’d gotten in the way of my family’s ambition. **“Help me.”**

I wasn’t sure that the dead would listen. But they did.

They rose.

The screaming—one of the priests had started as soon as I spoke—soon echoed from all parts of the palace. Shadows were crawling up the walls. Vapor condensed into half-forgotten shapes. Hallways echoed with the slow tread of corpses intact enough to move.

Darren might not fear the return of his secrets, but not everyone was like him. In every dwelling, some old, angry past was breathing up from a sewer, or unwinding itself from a grave-sheet.

In the distance, the howls of dogs edged up until they broke in pain. The cage that hung by the judge’s table rattled as the songbird smashed itself against the bars.

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**“You will hear us.”** The rage of the dead flooded the mouths of the living and choked them with its silence.

I swayed in the middle of the storm. A dead Craftsman in ancient robes crouched over one of Darren’s crimson priests, whispering. Another one of crimsons sobbed as he crawled away on his belly.

I looked for Asilt, to see if she had come. There was much I wanted to say to her; apologies I wanted to make. But she had not come. Of course she would not come.

At the far entrance I saw Darren stagger and fall in a writhing tangle of clothes.

I walked over to him, each step lancing with wrongness. My heart gave a shuddering beat, an ugly sensation after all this time.

Darren was clawing at his throat, caged-wolf eyes glittering hate.

“Do you concede?” I mouthed in the words of the living.

He tried not to. I could see the muscles straining in his neck as he gulped air that no longer seemed to fill his lungs. I could see the battle between anger and terror on his face, but in the end, even Darren wanted to live.

He nodded.

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**“He will listen,”** I whispered to the dead. Warm air rushed back into the room, and with it the sounds of living people crying and muttering prayers.

I closed my eyes. I felt very weak now, very thin. I did not need to see to know that the dead had left me. I was once again alone.

\* \* \*

The living speak of victories as though they were entirely good things. The dead know better.

As I passed through the Hall of Song I saw the gilded bars of the aviaries tufted with bloody feathers. On their cold metal floors the songbirds lay in tattered heaps.

I had expected the king to look different than I remembered, but no. He wore the same flickering nervous look he'd worn as a prince. I expected that glance to dart my way. Instead he eyed the White Council, and Lord Darren, and seemed not to notice the rustle of whispers that followed me into the hall.

“The Lady Fehle,” the Gatewoman said, and the prince nodded. I knelt and waited for my petition to be read. As the familiar words rang out, I could feel Darren's eyes burning into my back. He was not a man who liked to lose.

“And so,” the scrivener said, “she begs for the return of her husband's body, and for the custody of her son.” For the first

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time, the king looked at me. But I saw no sign of recognition on his face. Lord Darren had told him nothing.

“Of course,” the king said, and turned his head as though finished. One of the White Lords coughed and murmured something. The king nodded and swung his tired gaze back towards me.

In that moment, I recognized his expression - it was the same look I'd seen in my horse's eyes as I drove her down the mountain road. The king was afraid, but not of the dead.

My dull skin chilled as I became aware of the machinery of plots around me: Lord Darren, angry but silent; the cluster of courtiers, some whispering about the strange omens of the previous night; some studying me, some conspicuously absent. And in the center of it all, the king, his face haunted by whatever the dead had told him yesterday.

The king licked his lips - a nervous habit. He said, “For the sake of your family, I think it right to return the young lord to his lands. I will recommend him to the education of Steward Rogan, whose loyalty is well known to us.”

Murmurs rose from Rogan's end of the hall: whispers of congratulations, no doubt, and the odd, sharp intake of breath from those who saw a decisive move by some hidden political players. I resisted the urge to turn towards him, to try to read the truth on his face.

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The King's gaze met mine. Panic swam in his eyes; he saw the jaws of a plot closing around him, but what could he do?

I nodded to him: *I know, I wanted to say. The living like to pretend they have choices, but usually, they don't. And neither do the dead.*

But of course I could say nothing. The king's gaze passed from mine to his plotting counselors.

"As to the body of the...traitor." The king swallowed, and I knew he knew Lord Gaven had been no traitor to him. Indeed, the man had probably died because of his loyalty. "Lord Darren has, out of his fond memories for your late sister, requested that your family's shame be consigned to the Flame. The body has already been burned."

Across the hall, Lord Darren's eyes flashed malice. The king shifted back in his throne, puzzled, no doubt, by Darren's sudden insistence on an honorable burning for a man he had almost certainly schemed to kill.

I bowed my head in gratitude, seething with a fury so hot I felt almost alive.

\* \* \*

"So Lord Gaven is dead," I said to the Steward when we were alone, "and you get his wife and his lands."

Rogan lowered his head and glanced towards the room where Harmony was packing my sister's trunk. "Lord Brau will

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inherit his father's lands," he said quietly. "I will merely see to his education."

"The boy had best meet with no accidents."

"Would it matter if he did? Whether it's my child or Gaven's, there will always be an Etrek at the Keep."

He was right, I knew. Providing that an Etrek held our lands, my family cared little whose child lived long enough to inherit.

"It would matter to *me*," I snapped. I sounded like a child, I thought. I sounded like Fehle.

The Steward must have thought so too. "I do love your sister, you know," he said. "Lord Gaven was a beast to her. You weren't there. You didn't see how it was."

I shook my head. "And will Lord Darren promote you when this King dies?"

"Perhaps the King will have a long life," the Steward said. "If he pursues his interests." He shrugged. "As for myself, if Darren doesn't promote me, others will. The mountains must be held, and I am liked by both the mountain and the city folk."

"You have worked hard to be liked."

"I have worked hard to be useful," he corrected. He sighed and gestured to the door. "I must go," he said, "and collect the young lord from the tower.

"Am I not to see my nephew, then?"

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“And risk him wailing that you are not his mother? No. And,” he admitted, “others think it best that the lord travel back to the Keep in more trusted company.”

“He and I must not talk of his late father, I suppose.”

“Yes.” He paused. “I won’t have you poisoning his mind against me. I like the boy, and it would be better for everyone if there’s no strife between us.”

“I understand,” I said bitterly.

“I know you do.” He picked up his coat from the chair on which he’d hung it. A blue wool coat, worn at the elbows from accounts. Rogan was a man who preferred hard work to luxury.

He paused at the door. “I am sorry not to have known you when you were alive, Lady Rehlite.” He touched his forehead in a sign of respect, then walked out.

\* \* \*

At the Spice Gate a man came to greet me. He pulled a heavily-loaded mule behind him; it tossed its head and eyed me warily.

“Lady Fehle,” he called. “If we could speak?”

A broken wall disrupted the steady stream of the crowd. I followed him to the side where the winter sun pooled in crisp white patches.

“My lady,” the man said quietly. “I know you do not remember me, but I remember you. From before.” He kept his

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head lowered like someone used to standing in the presence of superiors. A memory tugged at me—a flash, like a glimpse of red in a crowd.

“You’re a scrivener,” I said. I recalled him now—the green-cloaked man standing at the back of the hall when Darren had come to threaten me. I remembered the look he’d given me.

“You saw me in the Vault of Words, when I was just a boy.” The man gave an odd half-laugh. “I remembered you.”

Now the pieces fell into place. “Yes,” I said. “The apprentice.” *Is there anyone there?*

“It is true, my lady, that you wanted Lord Gaven’s bones?”

“Yes,” I said. “But they’ve been destroyed.” Lord Darren, determined always to inflict damage, had seen to that.

“No, my lady.” He put his hand to the large cloth bundle on the mule’s back, and eyed me apologetically. “Lord Darren gave us the order to take the lord’s remains to the Hall of Flame. But one burned body looks very much like another, you know.”

“Lord Gaven’s body?”

The man grimaced slightly and eyed the bundle. “It will travel well enough for a week, I’m told.” A quick glance to the side, and he offered me the rope. “With thanks, my lady.” He bowed again, slightly.

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I watched him go, the rope rough in my hands. I had not expected such kindness from the living.

\* \* \*

“You’re back then,” my sister said. Her eyes moved from me to her son and back again. She ruffled his hair. My silent nephew did not look pleased.

“Your husband’s bones are being prepared,” I said. “I’m told they will lay him out tonight.” Lord Gaven’s bones would lie for two days on the hearthstone, so that his spirit could memorize the place to which it should return if summoned.

Fehle’s forehead wrinkled, and then she turned towards Rogan. “We will have to celebrate,” she said, “my son’s safe return.”

“Of course,” someone said. In the hallway, one of Lord Gaven’s women was weeping.

My young nephew studied me warily. Rogan, no doubt, had explained who I was. As I’d entered the hall I’d seen Brau darting looks at me. But he was an obedient boy. He’d not said a word.

Fehle’s hands tightened on her son’s shoulders as I approached. Her gaze, for once, was fierce. She glared at me, defying me to ask her how much she knew of her husband’s fate.

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But I was tired of the plots of the living. I looked down at Brau, who stared up at me with a Southerner's hazel eyes.

"Keep yourself well, nephew," I said. "If you ever need help, you can ask for me at the black slope where the dead lie sleeping." The boy looked ashen; I did not think he'd be eager to do any such thing. But the offer had been made.

\* \* \*

Outside the winter air was crisp. I began walking towards the village, old snow crunching underfoot.

I paused at the cart-road. From here I might go anywhere: the Port of Asp, or south, towards the grand desert. The magic that held my form together would fall apart eventually, but until it did, I might walk very far indeed.

I wasn't sure what waited for me in the land of the dead. My family, of course. And consequences. Whatever the dead's plan had been, I knew I hadn't followed it.

I took a long, last look at the road. Another woman might take it, and walk far away from duty, into another world entirely.

But I was not that woman. I was the Lady Rehlite, the woman who walked back into the forest in a winter so cold it swallowed sound, in a year whose name I have never learned.

This time, no one watched me pass.

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## ENGINESONG

by Nathaniel Lee

I missed all the excitement the day the trains walked away. Just up and stomped away on great metal feet, to hear Eddie Hartford tell it.

“Trains ain’t got legs,” I told him. I had a pair of jackrabbits dripping on my belt, my hunting rifle on my shoulder, and a powerful thirst tickling my throat, so might be it came out harsher than it ought. Young Edward was always a sensitive soul, though, least when it came to slights against his manhood.

“What do you know, Bose? You wasn’t here. I’m telling you they *walked* away, and I dare you to find a man who’ll say different.” He tossed his head, hair flashing like copper, looking more like his mother than ever.

The town seemed in an awful tizzy, that was certain. I could see little knots of folks here and there, whispering rushed and dark like the ghost of a river. I could also see the marks in the dust, enormous circles pressed in the ground, as if God had dropped His pocket change. They were six, maybe eight inches deep, even in the hard-packed dirt along the thoroughfare. If I

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was to speculate on what a train's footsteps might look like, I'd probably have speculated something near enough to that for spitting.

And Eddie's an honest kid, for all his temper. He'd no reason to lie, nor I to doubt he was telling the best truth he could. But I was parched, peckish, and pugnacious, as Pop used to say afore he caught the train to Santa Fe and left me and Ginny to mind what I somewhat ironically call "the homestead," and I didn't feel like giving Eddie the satisfaction.

"Reckon I'll find a man and ask him, now you mention it," I said. "Get inside out of the sun, kid. I think you got a touch of heatstroke."

"Kid!?" Eddie shouted as I walked away. "You got all of nineteen months on me, Ambrose Jedediah Tooms, and you're shorter'n me for all that. Kid! You come back here and say that to my face."

I waved a hand. "I'd only be addressin' your chin, Eddie, as you so kindly pointed out." I didn't push things; I'd already taken my cheap shot. Eddie's got the pale skin to match his red hair; he can't take the sun and knows it.

Nothing irritates like the truth. That's another of Pop's little sayings.

The saloon was dark, even with the late afternoon sun blaring in like trumpets, and it smelled like mildew and liquor.

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I stepped to the side to let my eyes adjust—a man stands in profile in a doorway with a rifle in his hands and folks tend to get ideas.

Vic was behind the bar, one hand under the counter. I nodded to him, and he pulled it back up, empty. I maneuvered past the tables. The place was pretty crowded for the afternoon; most folks usually liked to work as long as the sun was in the sky.

“Evenin’, Bose,” said Vic. “I ain’t seen you in here since....” He trailed off, likely realizing a little late that it might be impolitic to bring up memories of me dragging Pop a mile and a half down the road to keep him out of the sleep-it-off cell at the Sheriff’s office. “You, uh, havin’ a drink?”

I tried not to grimace. “Today might be the day to start, if what I’m hearing is anything like what happened.”

“Trains’re gone,” Pete Rawlins piped up from the next stool over. I smelled the whiskey on his breath ten feet away. “Gone, and they ain’t coming back.”

“It’s the end,” Jesse moaned beside him. He’d have gotten a head start on the drinking, I’d wager. “It’s the end of everything.”

“It might be the end of Dead Mule, but I’m pretty sure the rest of the country’ll carry on without us,” I said. My throat was dry, and the thirst was on me good. “Depending on how

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widespread the troubles are, I mean. Anyone here not too drunk or crazy to help me figure out what's happening? Eddie said the trains *walked* away.”

“They did,” said Vic. He was wiping the bar down, polishing the wood in a little circle, around and around and around. “Just stood up and walked. Like they was waiting for the chance. Like they'd just decided something. They had feet like barrel lids and eyes like searchlights, but they never looked back.”

“They didn't even say goodbye,” Jesse said. The saloon erupted into a dozen voices babbling, arguing, shouting each other down and crying for what they'd lost.

“There's a town hall meeting tomorrow,” Vic told me, leaning over the bar and raising his voice. “Once everyone's dried out a bit—had some time to think it over.”

“We're all doomed!” Jesse shrieked. Pete slapped him on the back of the head, and he fell face-first onto the bar, where he just lay, wheezing and sobbing.

I had to leave before I did something stupid, like throw a punch or ask Vic to pour me a double. Same end, different routes.

I needed to get home. I needed to talk to Ginny.

\* \* \*

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They say Dead Mule was founded because Augustus Felicitations Smith, who was trying to get to Santa Fe, was thrown to the ground when his last best mule fell stone dead beneath him, then hit his head on a rock, and found silver when he rubbed the bump on his noggin. The mine was more of an excuse than a reason, and it never did show many signs of life before it finally petered out a generation later.

By then, though, the trains had come. Tracks reached across the land like lovers' hands straining to touch through a window, and where the trains went, there followed the need for coal and water and maybe just a chance to stretch your legs for a minute or two; merciful Lord, don't that bouncing ever stop? Dead Mule was what they called a jerkwater town, a place where the trains only stopped to pull some water into gaping thirsty maws before heading on their way. It was crumbs from a table of untold savory delights, but a man can learn to live on crumbs if crumbs is what he has.

Now, it seemed, someone was looking to take the town's crumbs away, too. I confess, I couldn't quite nail down how to feel about that.

\* \* \*

"It don't make sense, Ginny," I told my sister. It was dark out, now, and we were burning some of the last of our candles, trying to figure things out, to make sense of the day.

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I'd been out to see the footprints, which were like someone had stamped a table into the sand. They led off into the desert, leaving a trail in the scrub almost wide enough to drive a cart along. Not that anyone was of a mind to do it, not with dark coming on and most of the men half-pickled. I thought I heard a steam whistle calling from out in the chaparral, wailing in the twilight like a coyote. "Who would make a train with feet?"

"Maybe they weren't built that way," said Virginia, tossing her hair over her shoulders. She'd got a touch of red in it from somewhere in our tangled family tree. "Maybe they weren't built at all."

"Someone's got to build trains," I told her.

"How do you know?" She raised an eyebrow at me and passed me a needle and thread. "Here, help with the darning as long as we're going to use the light."

"Because trains are made things. Humans built 'em all."

"You ever seen a train being built? You ever looked inside to see how they're put together? Love is a made thing, too, and fashion, and cities and towns, but show me the man who can control any of those things to his liking."

I caught her sly smile. She was baiting me on. The poor fellow who'd someday make her a husband wouldn't know what side to butter his bread on most days, I figure. "Ginny, this is serious!"

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She giggled. “You didn’t see them go a galumphing off on those silly turkey legs of theirs.”

I shook my head, smiling despite myself. “I mean it, girl. We’re barely hanging on. If the town dries up under us, we’re sunk. We starve here, or....”

“The city.”

“The city’d eat us both alive. We’re not cut out for it.” I leapt up, the candleflames seeming to run after me in the way they flickered. “I can’t live in stone and brick, and you....” I had an image then, like a vision, except instead of seeing the saints and angels, I saw Ginny bone-thin and hard-eyed, sewing some stranger’s pants for pennies in a room that was too poor even for a window. There was a knowing in her eyes, in the Ginny-That-Might-Be, and it burned me to see it. “What skills do we have that they’d need in a city?”

“You’ll figure something out,” Ginny said. “You always do.”

“Yeah,” I said. I leaned against the window. The moon shone down like the headlamp of a night train, rushing on. That’s the tricky thing about trains at night; you can’t tell how fast they’re coming till they’re there.

\* \* \*

The town hall went about as well as I’d imagined, which is to say we all managed to get out of the bar with only a few injuries, and those mostly to pride.

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After all the shouting was over, the upshot was that Mayor Gittelthwait had called for volunteers for a posse to hunt the trains down and bring them back. The posse was to use reason if possible and force if not, and it would be supplied with firearms and rope for this latter purpose, though what good a lead bullet and frayed hemp was supposed to do against three thousand horsepower was left unstated. It was quite possibly the stupidest, most poorly planned, least likely idea I had ever heard.

Mine was the first hand in the air.

To be honest, I didn't know what else to do. It was either hare off into the desert on a wild goose hunt or go home and stare at the walls. At least the first option would keep my hands occupied. I'll admit I was a mite curious to see the trains, too; I was one of a largish minority that hadn't witnessed "The Event," as Mayor Gittelthwait called it, with capital letters and a good long pause in front.

We rode out the next morning, me with my rifle and Pa's shotgun slung alongside the saddle of my borrowed horse; Jesse and Pete Rawlins, both blinking like unearthed moles as the morning light smacked head-on into their hangovers; John Magaraw the smith, a quiet Swede who got on better with horses than people; Mayor Gittelthwait, as the representative

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of the Law; and little big-mouthed Eddie Douglas Hartford, whom I still suspect came along mostly to show me up.

The tracks were easy enough to follow at first, even two days old and in the sand. The weight of all that metal crashing down. They say a man hit by a train never has time to feel it, mass and speed multiplying to the devil's own mathematics. Wasn't much talking among the party, between Jesse and Pete nursing their heads and taking secret sips out of their personal canteens, and Eddie glaring daggers at my back—and at my front too, when I took a mind to look his way. Magaraw never had more than two words to string together at a time, and poor Mayor Gittelthwait looked like to drop dead of apoplectic dyspepsia.

“Nice day for hunting,” I said to him, juggling myself a titch awkward-like on an unfamiliar horse. “Might catch us a nice supper, even if we don't find no trains.”

“Doomed,” said Mayor Gittelthwait.

“I'll allow there's that possibility, too.”

“Town, doomed. Farms, doomed. Me. Everyone. All doomed.”

“It's a judgment!” Pete slurred, already halfway to rip-roaring again. I'll give the man this much: what he set his mind to do, he did with a will.

“A judgment on what?” I shouted back.

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“Hubris,” Eddie snapped.

“Doom,” said Mayor Gittelthwait.

I dropped my speed a bit and in due course came alongside Jesse and Magaraw.

“How far d’you reckon they walked?” I asked.

Magaraw shrugged.

“As far as they could, if they have any sense,” Jesse said.

“Who wouldn’t, if they was stuck in Dead Mule?”

“It’s not so bad as that, is it?”

“Hell, ask your pappy, Bose. I’d wager he’s *still* walking.”

Jesse lurched forward, coughing and snorting. After a minute, I realized he was laughing.

In defense of my quickness of wit, it wasn’t particularly funny.

Jesse cottoned on to my mood eventually, though I’m fairly sure Magaraw gave him a quiet kick to catch his attention first.

“Sorry, Bose. No harm meant.” He licked his lips, his eyes like too-small marbles in wooden cups. “Hey, you want a nip?” He held out his canteen. I could smell the alcohol evaporating from where I sat my horse. I swallowed hard.

“Guess I’ll scout ahead a ways,” I said. “See if I can’t get us a rabbit, too, or at least a snake.”

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I spurred my horse and tried not to cough on the dust it kicked up.

\* \* \*

It turned out to be snakes, but snakemeat's not bad if you've got the knack of cooking it, and almost anything's better than trail food. It wasn't the coziest campfire I've ever sat around, but at least it wasn't the pack of starveling coyotes I'd been afraid of. The trail had run out once we hit the wilderness proper, a confusion of mashed-down circular prints all muddled over each other, and then nothing.

"Maybe they learned to fly, too!" Pete had joked. No one but Jesse had laughed.

Me, I'd seen the scrub pulled out by the roots and the dirt scratched in rough lines, and I'd come up with my own guess, which was almost worse: the trains had learned to cover their tracks.

They knew we were after them.

Shared misfortune draws folks together, at least to start with. The last of Pete and Jesse's liquor did the rest, though not for me. Never for me.

"No, but I mean it," Eddie was telling me, teary-eyed. "I know I give you a hard time, and I won't say it's jealousy, but you... you've got so much freedom. I wish sometimes I lived with... but it's, it, it can't really be. And Ginny, I mean—" He

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coughed, hiccupped, and shook his head. “You understand what I’m saying?”

“Sure, Eddie,” I said. Pete was snoring. Mayor Gittelthwait was watching the fire and looked almost calm, unless you peered close at his hands and saw the knuckles white and creaking. Jesse was cheating Magaraw at some sort of dice game.

I stood. “I’ll go bury the leavings. Don’t want coyotes sniffing around.” I didn’t think to take a gun with me. Not sure how things might have turned out, if I had.

Didn’t go too far initially. Kept the fire in sight while I scraped a hole and tossed the bones and offal in. Did some business of my own while I was out there.

Then.... I won’t say something called to me, but I got an itch along the back of my head and suddenly thought how pretty the night was, with the sky big and dark and empty and slammed down like a bowl on the endless flat prairie. I had my bearings with the stars, and really we were hardly out of my backyard just yet. I went for a walk. To clear my head, as they say.

Pa wasn’t what you might call a great provider while he was with us. Too drunk to work half the time, and shaky with the lack of it when he wasn’t. I used to walk the wilderness with the ghost of a living man stalking behind me, every step.

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Sometimes I thought about not turning around—I had the wiles to survive on my own—but Ginny always drew me back. I thought of her as a lodestone, as an anchor in my worse moments.

It wasn't really about Ginny, though. It was about Pa. It was about what Pa'd done to Ginny by leaving, and what I meant to do different.

A child inherits a lot of things from his father; all mine left me was his reputation. People who see you born tend not to notice when you become your own person. I'd spent years proving I wasn't my father, working myself near to death to do it, until I realized that no one but me thought that was anything worth mentioning. Kept on working, though; I'd kind of got in the habit. It was just a lot easier without a ghost standing over my shoulder.

Now I was out in the wilds, hunting runaways. Who said I had to bring them back, though? A train knows where it's supposed to go, after all. A train, if it doesn't follow the tracks, well, that bespeaks a certain deliberate nature to the decisions that led up to that choice, don't it?

If the trains could up and leave, why couldn't a man? Why couldn't all of us just get off of our rails and go where we pleased? What distinguishes a man who only does exactly what his circumstances demand, who follows the lines and hauls his

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load and never even looks up at the big sky overhead? The preacher'll talk your ear off about the virtue in honest toil, but you'll notice he won't be naming the names of any heroes crowned in laurels for working their asses off and not complaining.

I felt a tickle in my throat. I realized I was awfully thirsty. Then I realized I couldn't see the fire.

Then the lights went on, and I saw the train.

You wouldn't think a train could be so quiet. I'd have expected those feet to shake the earth when they moved, but here it was, looming up overhead, the big light at the front of it pointing down at me, pinning me in a circle of white light and turning the rest of the night to ink. It didn't have a face, not really, but I saw the anger in every rigid beam and trembling wheel.

I lifted my hands to show they were empty.

The train lifted one foot, just a bit. I could see something black and spattered crusting the edges: blood. Tufts of fur still clung to it. They'd learned how to kill.

The light slid away from me, toward the camp. The foot started to swing forward.

"Wait," I said.

The train hesitated.

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“It’s all right,” I told it. “I understand.” I lowered my hands, bowed my head. “A man can only take so much,” I said. I don’t know if the train heard me.

When I looked up, it was gone. I never heard it. It didn’t even say goodbye.

Something hit me from behind, and I shouted and kicked.

“Holy damn, I’m glad I found you,” a voice, muffled, said into my shoulder. “I swear to God a train’s after me. I can hear it chug-chug-chugging along....”

“Eddie.”

“I don’t know what I’d do if you was dead. What’d I tell Ginny?”

“I reckon you got a lot of things to tell Ginny,” I said. “I’ll need you to be ready to help her, if she asks.”

“What? Why?” Eddie looked startled, boozy sweat on his forehead.

“I’ll tell you when we get back to town.”

\* \* \*

The hunt wasn’t a success. But it wasn’t the end of Dead Mule. I explained it to Eddie and them on the ride back, but I don’t think they understood me.

A man can make a choice, though. If the trains can, I mean.

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When we got back, I hugged Ginny goodbye and reminded her where I kept the ammo and our few saved dollars. Then I took a long drink from the water tower and stepped onto the tracks. If a train can walk like a man, then a man can haul like a train. If he wants to. If he works at it.

I burn coal. I belch smoke. I am plated in iron, and I will work as hard as I have to. I take a little longer to get up to speed, and I do work up a powerful thirst, but the tracks show me where to go. It's hard, but it ain't difficult, if you follow.

Sometimes I wonder about them trains, where they got to and what they did there. I wonder if they kept their legs for walking free or if they built their own tracks, somewhere far away, in a land where coal grows on trees, where you're never too far from a cold draft of water, and you only carry what you choose to. It helps if you've chosen it.

At night, when I'm rolling across the empty plain, I can't see the sky. My neck's gotten awful stiff, and it hurts to know the stars are still there, where I can't see them.

When it all gets too much, I crack my jaw and scream my whistle into the dark. Sometimes I fancy I hear someone whistling back across the plains, but I won't ever know for sure it isn't an echo.

I can't leave the tracks. Not anymore.

Who would take my place if I did?

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*Nathaniel Lee has an English degree and thus considers himself basically unemployable if he ever loses his current (unrelated) position. His short fiction has appeared in venues such as Penumbra, Escape Pod, Pseudopod, Flash Fiction Online, and Toasted Cake. His self-described sappy little story “The Alchemist’s Children” is in Alex Shvartsman’s Unidentified Funny Objects anthology.*

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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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