



Issue #141 • Feb. 20, 2014

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## THE DAYS WHEN PAPA TAKES ME TO WAR

by Rahul Kanakia

The soft buzz of a distant plane silences the cardroom. Although we've heard no cries of alarm, the men cock their heads and prepare themselves to die: according to Papa, war makes death come quickly and for no reason and that is why soldiers are scared all the time. That seems sad to me. Soldiers should be happy to die for their queen.

After the plane goes away, conversation revs up and then sputters silent like the motor of Papa's jeep. Then it revs again and the words catch and fast chatter fills the cardroom. I am in a world of frenzied giants: humans in muddy uniforms, with hairy faces and rifles that never leave their sides. Though they are male, they are clearly more like soldiers than drones.

In my world, I am the giant. No one down under the ground is bigger than me—no one except Papa. But here I am nothing, just a half-grown girl in a woolen dress. A few of the human queens have tried to touch me and sing to me, but I've pulled away. I know who my queen is, and I will not let a rival coat me with her musk.

Mama is all-powerful. Even in this impossibly distant place, I can sometimes catch the faintest wisp of her smell.

Papa downs the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. When he slams the glass onto the table, a cheer goes up from the men who surround us. Papa looks healthier than he usually does. His face is flushed red and his movements lack their usual herky-jerkiness. A line of ants crawls out of his ear and makes its slow way down, through the line of his big, bushy beard and under his shirt.

I stand up high on the tips of my toes and whisper to them, in our language, “No, don’t come outside. Not here. Papa needs to look good for his people.”

Most of them break and scurry back into his ear. But one ant says, “Princess, the tunnels within this man are clogged up and overflowing. Millions starve in the legs while, to the north, backed-up food rots away at the peripheries of the intestines. We simply thought to make an end run around the—”

I crush the dissenting worker between two fingers. Papa laughs and says, “What are you picking at, Olivia?” He transfers his cards from one hand to the other and then puts it around me. When Papa moves, the men around us shift their stances. They want to see him play, but I can tell that they fear being touched by him. This is wise. If they fall any further

under his sway, his musk will coat them and their fellow workers will no longer recognize them.

“I want to go home, Papa,” I say.

He laughs. “Don’t worry,” he says. “We’ll be home soon. I just came to see whether we’ve whipped those Krauts yet.”

Then he is distracted by a soldier who darts out of the crowd with a dirty copy of a book that Papa wrote after fighting in a different war: one that happened a long time ago. Papa slaps the soldier on the back and signs the front of the book.

Ever since I can remember, Papa has told me about the war that is currently raging amongst his people. But whenever I heard him say that he *needed* to go outside and find out what was happening to his boys, I thought he needed to find it out in the same impossible way that I needed to find out how deep the tunnels went or what made food taste so good after it was regurgitated. But no. He meant something different. He always does.

Mama tried to tell him that he belongs to us now, and that our people do not have a side; for thousands of lifetimes, we’ve kept ourselves aloof from mankind’s horrible wars. But then Papa told Mama that if a bad man named Hitler was allowed to beat Papa’s side, then it wouldn’t be long before Hitler filled the world with a poison gas that would choke up and destroy all of our people.

I did not want to come, but Mama forced me to. She said that the ants inside Papa would refuse to work unless a member of the royal family was there to guide them.

He gathers me forward with his arm and catches the eyes of the soldiers. They all love him. Papa is a journalist, but everyone wishes that he was a soldier.

“My darling girl,” Papa says. “Olivia’s just eleven....” The soldiers chuckle at the joke that they do not know is a joke. Actually, I was hatched eleven weeks ago.

“God, she’s no bigger than my nine year old,” says one of the soldiers.

Papa shakes his head. “Her mother was... she was a singer.” He gives them a faraway smile. “I met her before the war. But not much call for singing nowadays. And what with the shortages... things haven’t been too easy for Olivia. Her mother... well, we all have to go down under the ground eventually.” I feel the humor almost shaking loose inside him.

“Mama enjoys being underground,” I say. “But Papa hates it.”

One of the soldiers looks down at me with wet eyes. His hand twitches towards me and then goes still.

Papa claps a hand onto my shoulder. “But now that Olivia’s come into my care, I’m gonna make sure she gets fed up right.”

“When your convoy didn’t return, we thought you must be dead,” says the oldest soldier at the table. “The newspapers even published your obit.”

Papa’s face loses its smile. “The Krauts hit the convoy. One of our boys held out for three hours, sniping them from under the truck, but it wasn’t enough. I took three bullets, and limped off into the fields to die.. Eventually, I collapsed in a vineyard and let my blood mingle with the soil. But the woman who owned the winery stumbled upon my body and cared for me. I spent the spring and summer hiding in the cave where she used to age her champagne. I shouldn’t have survived that day.”

His body still wants to die. It is only kept alive by a million ants laboring inside him. When he gesticulates, I can see the flash of black under his shirt where the scurrying mass of ants is working to keep his wounds closed and his blood flowing.

“We’re closing on Paris right now,” another soldier says. “Are you going to join the push? I hear it’s getting pretty hairy.”

Papa is silent for a long moment, then shakes his head. “I have things that need to be taken care of.” He glances down at me.

Laughter erupts around the table. I shut my eyes tightly. The musk of fear and excitement and anger momentarily overwhelms me. Papa’s people have marked this place—this

whole surface world—again and again and again with scents that scream, “No! Do not come here!” And yet... here we are.

I feel a presence off and to the side. A woman in an apron is jabbering at me in a language that I do not understand. I shake my head and hope she will go away, but she speaks softly and slowly and gestures with her hands. She crouches down low but does not approach me or try to cover me with her musk.

She points over to the staircase, where two children sit. They smile at me. So, this woman is a queen. She blows her face up wide and makes an outsized chewing motion. I think she is asking me about food.

I murmur, “Sugar...” even though I know that she will laugh and refuse, like all the other queens.

But she smiles and goes off to a place at the far end of the room, where dozens of men crowd together and stamp their feet and wave their arms. When she returns, she’s holding a little tray of sugar. I bring it up to my face and carefully sample it with my tongue.

She kneels a few feet from me and says things in a quick, low tone that is almost like a song.

The soldiers are still laughing with my father. He is tense and motionless.

The older soldier says, “It’s okay. The war’s almost over; it’ll go through to the end even without you, Ernest.”

“Olivia!” Papa shouts. “What’re you doing?”

I startle. Sugar spills down my fingers.

The woman stands up and is about to say something to Papa, but then the room falls silent. Outside, there is shouting. Then we hear the whine of a falling bomb. The room erupts. Men jump, men fall. The woman turns and knocks me down with a sweep of her arm. Then she is on top of me. I struggle to get out from under her. She is coating me with her scent!

But there is something so beguiling about it. It is clean and pure and certain. It tells me that I am safe. I try to struggle free—it’s my duty—but I cannot escape. And then, as the whine gets louder, her pores unload all their pent-up fear.

\* \* \*

Mama is as long as my leg: she is the largest queen that has ever existed. Her backside groans with the billions and billions of eggs that are constantly growing inside her. Her legs are like bayonets that are coated in velvet. Her eyes are as wide as the bottom of the wine bottle that Papa drinks from. Her belly is thick and hard and jangly as a soldier’s pack. And her mandibles are like two scythes. Once, when a man wandered into our cave, I saw those mandibles chop off his leg at the knee and then sever his screaming head.



Papa sits at the edge of the cave with his shirt open. He holds a loaf of bread in one hand and tears off hunks of it with his teeth. Ants scramble over each other to reach the fallen crumbs. Millions upon millions of ants cover every inch of him, right up to and including his eyes. They push the blood through his body and remove the waste from his bullet-stricken gut. There are no complaints. Mama's thick body vibrates with the multi-faceted tone of command that contains a strain of song for each and every worker. She drags herself through the groove that her belly has worn in the dirt floor and delicately thrusts her legs into the wall around Papa, so she is resting right on top of him. Her mandibles caress Papa's cheek.

The cave is dark and Papa can see nothing.

He sighs. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of that song. When I first woke up in here, I was lying on the dirt and it was dark and I was bleeding, but that song told me that I was in the right place. When are you going to teach Olivia to sing like that?"

"She will grow into her song." Mama speaks without interrupting her song. Papa can only hear a fraction of it. It pours into me until I think I am on the verge of overflowing. But... today there is a part of me that it cannot reach.

"I don't understand why the Krauts had to kill that queen," I say.

“Careful,” Papa says. “‘Kraut’ is fine when we’re alone. But you’re supposed to’ve grown up around here. They’ll expect you to say ‘Bosche.’”

“But she was so kind to me! And she wasn’t dangerous; she barely marked me at all. I don’t think she had even one single bit of territory.”

“They’re monsters,” Papa says. “They’ll kill everyone they can’t enslave.”

“But... they won’t win, will they?”

“Maybe...” Papa says. “I don’t know. I heard some disturbing talk. Our generals don’t know what the hell they’re doing. Sometimes they’re timid and sometimes they’re reckless. We’re getting dangerously overextended. And each of their mistakes kills thousands of our boys.”

“Well, if it’s just soldiers, then that’s fine,” I say. I’m relieved. “Dying is what soldiers are for.” Underneath me, the carpet of ants shifts slightly, but Mama soothes them with a change in her tone. She starts singing of the new territories they’ll open up with their deaths.

Mama says, “You’ve seen enough, then? I need you here. The next group of princesses will hatch all too soon. You must teach them.”

“Dammit, I saw a woman die today!” Papa says.

His hand gropes around in the mass of ants by his side. He grabs a dusty green-glass bottle and unstoppers it. When he tilts back his neck to drink, he reveals a patch of white on his throat that rises and falls with the guzzling motions.

“Can’t we help them, Mama?” I say. “The Krauts don’t just kill soldiers; they kill everyone.”

The song changes and the ants boil over amongst themselves and I think she is about to fill me with anger and self-loathing. But instead she says, “It’s good that you care for your Papa’s people. Someday, they too will bow down to you.”

Mama is the largest queen that has ever existed. But someday she will surrender that title to me.

I am ravenously hungry. I hold out my hands and a stream of ants crawl into it. Each one deposits a little speck of sugar. When I bow my head down to lick up the sugar, I hear the murmur of the workers:

“...carried this for a hundred thousand lengths...”

“...almost walked into a poisonous spray...”

“...didn’t take even a bite of it for myself...”

I whisper down to them, “Thank you...” and they convulse with unexpected ecstasies. I lick up all the sugar, but I am still hungry.

\* \* \*

It is only another week before we leave the cave again, but I've become much bigger: my human clothes barely fit. After we drive to town, Papa tries to talk to the generals and tell them what they are doing wrong. Wherever we go, he is treated like a queen, but somehow he cannot seem to speak to the person he wants.

Then, a calamity.

Papa runs out of wine. Because the enemy destroyed the last supply train, none of the soldiers have any wine to share, so we drive ahead, into the area that our boys have not yet taken back from the other side.

To Papa, one side is the enemy, even though both sides love his books.

I thought the enemy's countryside would be filled with poison gas and ten-foot Krauts who danced on the torn-up bodies of innocent queens. But that is not the case. The other side is just like our own: huge ruts in the road, craters in open fields, collapsed houses, the charred wreckage of tanks and trucks. We drive through three villages before Papa decides to stop. He walks up to several houses and holds low conversations with their inhabitants before he finally emerges with a crate that is full of clinking bottles.

On the way back, our jeep gets stuck in the mud.

Papa leans on the back of the jeep and makes grunting noises while I hold the wheel and press down on the pedal when he tells me to. Finally, I get down and wander around back.

The ants inside him poke out from the edges of his eyes and scream to me, “Please end this torture! We need to rest! We need—”

I silence them with a snatch of song. I’m not as skilled as my mother. In her presence, they’d never even think to complain.

He says, “Guess we’ll have to head back on foot. Doesn’t matter. This is a wonderful day.”

“Why don’t you just push it?” I say.

Papa laughs. “Isn’t it good to be out of that damn cave?” he says.

I flex my toes and dig the tips of my shoes into a less-muddy part of the ground. Then I put my hand on the bumper and push the jeep forward.

When I look at Papa, he’s stopped laughing. He’s not moving. “How long have you been able to do that?” he says.

“Do what?” I say.

He shakes his head three times and then, suddenly, he’s scooped me up off the ground and into the basket of his arms. He bounces me up and down a few times. I giggle.

“You’re a tiny little thing,” he says. “I bet I could toss you right up into that tree.”

“No!” I say, and suddenly I am not sure whether or not he’ll do it. Papa has told me enough stories to make me realize that he is capable of doing anything.

He bounces me once, then twice, and then his arms go limp. I drop down onto the ground and roll in the mud and hit my shoulder, with a slight crunching sound, against the bumper of the truck.

I slip around in the mud, trying to stand. Then I hear a squelch. Papa is on his knees. He’s striped with thin black lines of ants. They are spilling from his eyes and ears and nose and from the eternally open wounds beneath his clothes. The blackness pools at his feet.

On my hands and knees, I scramble to his side. His eyes are rolled upwards so I can only see the whites. Air is escaping from him, but he cannot say a word. I put my head down amongst the milling ants. Millions of voices whisper upwards. The ants are holding some sort of mass meeting:

“...have to select our own leaders...”

“...free of that death trap...”

“Wasn’t so bad in the stomach...”

“What are you doing! We have to go back! He’ll die!”

“No! No more leaders... no more slavery... a free people should make decisions by consensus....”

“The queen will be oh so angry!”

“...his muscles are crowded with tens of thousands of dead workers. Can barely move amidst all the corpses.... “

“I smell another queen nearby. We can ask her if she’ll take us in....”

I scoop up a muddy handful of ants and lift them to my face. I fill my lungs and sing at them, “No! What are you doing! Get back inside of him!”

Down around my knees, the puddle of ants tenses up and then shimmers. A few of them crawl up onto me and start biting me. Others run off and escape into the ground. And some straggle back up into Papa. I try to sing louder, truer, and more beautifully. I try to put out enough song to capture each and every one of the traitors. But so many of them escape.

Still, it is enough remain. Papa’s eyelids finally close. His chest starts to rise and fall. He gasps and spits out the mud that flecks his lips. But he does not speak.

My shoulder emits another crack when I pick him up, but I manage to deposit him in the back of the jeep, amongst his bottles of wine. I cover him with a tarp, and sit there with his muddy body for hours. Cold creeps down into me from the hole in my shoulder. I’m caked with mud that flakes away into dirt

as it dries. I do not know how to drive the jeep and I'm not sure I can carry him all the way home. Where is home? We are so far away that I can't even smell a hint of Mama.

A truckful of the enemy approaches. I duck down low under the edge of the tarp. If they knew who we were, then they would certainly kill us. Now I understand why the enemy is so murderous; they kill every other queen so that their soldiers cannot betray them and join another nest.

For a moment, I think that the soldiers are stopping, but then they jabber at each other in their language and their truck speeds up.

Every so often, an ant straggles out of Papa and tries to justify itself: "We are so sorry. His movements demanded so much work from us. And we were so hungry and exhausted. And then everyone just started moving at the same time. But we came back! We repented!"

I want to crush the ambassadors, but instead I smile at them and tell them that I love them and believe them and forgive them. For now, I need them. But when I get home, I will tell Mama to destroy every last one of the traitors.

Guns go off in the distance. Trucks fly past on the road. The air is full of yelling. I tremble. I am not like Mama. I do not have deadly mandibles with which to fight off the Krauts. Why did Mama bring me into this world? She says that someday I'll



be a queen of men, but no human being has ever paid the slightest attention to my orders.

Then Papa stirs. He sits up and rests his back against the side of the jeep. “Has it been long?” he says.

“I don’t know,” I say. “It’s dark now.”

He puts an arm around my shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he says.

Then the air hisses through his teeth. His fingers are probing my shoulder. “What’s this?” he says. He’s poking the caved-in place in my shoulder.

“Nothing,” I say. “My skin broke open a bit when I fell.”

“But... you look so normal...” he whispers. He lifts up the sleeve of my shirt. I crane my neck to look at the wound. The pale skin flaps loosely to reveal a dark black carapace underneath. The patch of carapace is dented and has several cracks. It is the first time I’ve ever thought about what was inside me. The sight makes me happy. Beneath the skin, I am just like Mama.

Then I see Papa’s face. His eyebrows are wide open and the skin on his forehead is creased. “But... it will heal, won’t it?” he says.

I cover the hole with my sleeve. “It doesn’t hurt,” I say.

“I thought... but you’re so strong....”

On the road, a truck kicks up mud and then pulls to a stop. Men charge out towards us. They are holding rifles. I hiss and I prepare to jump at them. But then the lead soldier skids to a stop.

“Shit,” he says. “It’s Papa!”

Papa stands up. He’s smiling and holding a bottle of wine. “Took you boys long enough to get here,” he says.

The soldier laughs. Soon we’re surrounded by soldiers. A few of them clamber into the jeep and Papa drives us all back into town. The drive is full of shouting and laughter, especially when Papa yells for me to climb into the driver’s seat and take the wheel. The soldiers cheer as the jeep lurches forward. For the first time, I realize that these soldiers are my boys too.

\* \* \*

In our cave, Papa says, “You should’ve seen those Krauts squatting in their stolen farmhouses, slaughtering livestock and eating seedgrain. Well... our boys gave them what they deserved.”

Mama’s only response is a slight change in the tones of her song. Papa cannot see how the entire floor of the cave is moving or hear how the air is alive with screams. Mama has called her entire kingdom—billions upon billions of ants—up into the cave to witness the execution of the traitors. Tens of

thousands of ants are cut open and left to die on a slight hillock at the front of the cave.

Papa, his body refreshed by an inflow of fresh ants, is rocking his body from side to side and beating the ground with his fist. “But our boys were something. They were wonderful. Ragged, but still fighting.”

After a long moment, the screaming falls silent. The onlookers flow over the corpses of the traitors and then scurry back down into their tunnels. On their backs, they carry a chipped pewter bowl. Thousands of ants climb up to the lip of the bowl and regurgitate tiny drops of liquid into it. Finally, it hits Papa’s knee.

“What the hell is this?” Papa grabs the bowl and dips a finger into it. “Some kind of pudding?”

Mama says, “Our foraging parties are having difficulty finding more human food for you.”

“The fucking Krauts have laid waste to the countryside.”

Mama says, “But I remember stories from my mother. She says that she once fed a guest with our own food for quite awhile.”

Papa pushes the food away. Ants scramble into it and begin devouring the food, but they’re arrested by a trill of song from Mama. “Two thirds of the houses were empty,” Papa says. “Their owners are probably starving in some labor camp.”

Mama lifts up her body and dances through the darkness. She plops herself right on top of Papa, and says, “Why do you dwell on your peoples’ disintegration? In here, there’s no war. Don’t leave again. If you stay, I will keep you safe.”

Papa tries to squirm out from under her.

“You can’t understand,” Papa says. “Life is too simple in here. You know from birth exactly what you’ve got to do. You don’t need art or literature or courage or justice. But out there, people are free to do beautiful and terrible things.”

“Someday we will have automobiles,” Mama says. “Our daughters will learn the song that your people need to hear. And then they will bring us automobiles. And wine. And typing machines.”

“The only song that we understand is the song of freedom,” Papa says.

Mama clacks her mandibles; they barely miss Papa’s face. He puts an arm on her back and slowly strokes her carapace. “There, there,” he says.

“Stay here,” she says. “Soon enough, the rest of your daughters will hatch. They will need you.”

“Our boys are so tired and thin,” Papa says. “I worry about them. Our generals don’t know shit.”

Mama's eyes are just a finger's length from Papa's. Her mandibles span his head. Another clack and he will be headless. Papa's unseeing eyes stare right through her.

His face twists. "You really want me to eat this bug-ridden mush? I can't even *see*, dammit."

I call out, "There's a lamp in the jeep. I can go get it, Papa!"

"Olivia's in here? Why would you start in on me when she's here?"

Papa picks up Mama by the waist and deposits her on the ground. Then he's scrambling for his pack. "I need to go back out there," Papa says. "Someone has to bear witness to all that madness and folly."

"Take Olivia," Mama says.

Papa is silent for a moment. I know he is thinking about my shoulder. He made me promise not to mention it to Mama.

"A war is no place for a child," Papa says. "Let her stay here and sing with you."

"She needs to *make* her own place," Mama says. "I drove out my sisters, because I knew there was not room enough for all of us. Now I am larger than any queen that has ever existed. And there is not room enough for me. Olivia is larger still. You must teach her the songs that your people need to hear."

Papa slams a fist against the wall of the cave. The hand is swallowed up by the ants, and makes only a soft thud when it

hits. “That doesn’t... that’s not possible! She will *never* lead real men. She’ll get chewed up and destroyed out there.”

“My workers sometimes begin to think they are special, too,” Mama says. “They drag their feet and cry out for freedom and trumpet their dignity. And then I sing to them, and they forget everything but my voice.”

Papa is groping his way out of the cave. I follow along just behind him. As we turn a corner, light floods around us and I see him transform. He stands up straight and stops crawling along, open-mouthed, slack and hesitant. He’s tall and strong now. Why can’t Mama see how the darkness saps him of his strength?

I run forward and hug him.

“Are you leaving us?” I say.

“You’ll do fine without me,” Papa says. “Your mother, well she... I’ll always be grateful to her. She saved my life. But I can’t spend the rest of my life in a cave.”

“At least let me come with you!”

“You’ll have your sisters soon. They’ll be more to you than I could ever be....”

He throws his pack into the back of the jeep and climbs in. He’s about to drive away forever! I trill a tiny snatch of song, and, suddenly, his knee spasms. I rush forward to catch him as

he falls. In his knee, the ants sigh out relief at the momentary cessation of work.

“You’re still weak,” I say.

“Dammit, when will these wounds heal?”

He suffers me to lift him into the front seat of the jeep and says nothing when I climb up next to him.

\* \* \*

We spend an entire night digging our way towards the basement of a farmhouse that the enemy has turned into a command center. Papa spells me sometimes, using a spade and a shovel to dig. But I sing some of the local ants away from their queen. They assist me, working constantly. And my flying fingers move more dirt than all the rest of them combined. My shoulder cracks sometimes, until I strap up the wound with tight bandages. Finally, I open the tiniest hole in the through the mortar of the basement and Papa sits there in the dirt and listens to the conversations of the enemy general.

On the way back, we see a sentry and Papa’s face goes very still. He makes many hand motions to me. I think we are supposed to try to sneak around behind the sentry. But instead I weave a complex song and ants boil up out of the ground and invade the man. He falls down, twitching, while Papa whispers, “Dammit, that wasn’t necessary.”

I sing out to the ants and they begin to take control of the man's muscles. He rises up. The man shouts some words that I cannot understand, but then my ants clamp down on his throat.

Papa's eyes are wide. He looks at the Kraut as if he is me, and then he looks at me as if I am the Kraut.

"It's okay," I say to Papa. "His body is ours now."

The sentry walks with us through enemy territory. His eyes dart from side to side, but the rest of him moves with sure-footed confidence: the ants inside him know this territory better than he ever could.

When we are far enough from the camp, I withdraw the ants and leave him collapsed on the ground.

"You can shoot him now!" I say to Papa.

"Is he still alive?" Papa says.

"I don't know... Mama usually chops off their heads right afterwards. But I can't do that. I don't have the mandibles."

"That was... you enslaved him."

"He's the enemy." Is Papa confused? This has been a very tiring week.

"You can't do that again."

I know that Papa just doesn't understand me, but he won't listen to anything I say. Instead, he keeps muttering about



enslavement until I finally promise him that I won't use the bodies of any more Krauts.

When we get back to town, he barges into the military headquarters and yells at a general. He files reports with his newspaper, but the generals say that the reports contain secrets, so Papa's stories never appear in the paper. He screams into many telephones. Papa tells the generals where to strike, but they won't listen.

He pools the liquor rations of a whole battalion of officers and throws a party. It lasts for three days, although Papa and I are the only ones who stay the entire time. During the party, he loudly yells his recommended strategies to anyone who will listen. And, just as loudly, he berates the generals for their cowardice and stupidity.

At one point, a lady journalist sits on his lap and one of the soldiers tries to guide me up to my room. But I shake free of his hand and move closer.

The journalist says, "I hear you found a girl that you didn't even know you had."

"Her mother's a real monster," Papa says. "But... she had something. A kind of fire to her...."

"And will you go back to her?"

This other queen is getting her smell all over Papa. I am not sure that Mama will want him back after this.

Papa maneuvers the journalist off of his lap and onto a nearby chair. “You know... I didn’t think so,” he says. “But... there are more kids that need looking after. I bet they’d be something really special, those kids... if they could just be guided properly....” And then he looks at me in a way that I do not like. He tries to smile, but the smile is lop-sided.

The next morning, while he is sick from liquor, he hears that the generals want to imprison him, so we escape back to the cave.

“Not a moment too soon,” Papa says. “You’re getting too old to be around so many men.”

We’ve been outside for a month, and I’ve changed tremendously. For weeks, I’d felt a strange pressure inside my skin. The pain, at times, grew intense. But then, one night, I dreamed that I was being sawed in half by a giant Kraut, and then I woke up to find my bed covered in viscera and broken bits of carapace. I felt my shoulder; it was renewed. My body felt strange. None of my clothes fit. My new carapace was six inches taller, had hair in new places, and the chest of a human queen. The carapace sat unsteadily on me; when I got out of the bed, I had to grip a chair to keep from toppling over.

I didn’t want Papa to see the disgusting gore on the bed, so I forced myself into my old clothes and wrapped up the

bedsheets and left the inn—luckily, it was still dark—to deposit the soiled load deep in the forest.

In the morning, all Papa said was, “Hmm. We’ll have to get you some new clothes.”

But when we reach the cave, I know that the nest has noticed the changes in me. The ants rustle as I approach, and they stay away from me. When a few of the ants from inside Papa run down to rejoin their former fellows, they’re butted and buffeted away as if they’d become part of a rival nest.

The place *smells* different. Disgusting. Foreign. Before, it just smelled like home. What’s gone wrong with my senses?

When we round a corner, we come upon Mama. Her head is flush with a barrel that she is shoving forward with her massive body. The barrel rides on a thick carpet of ants. Shockingly, despite the song trilling from Mama, I hear a few wisps of protest from the ants:

“Please... it’s crushing me....”

“We’ll go back to work... just a moment of rest....”

As I come closer to Mama, my skin goes cold and all the tiny hairs of my body stand up. A sour taste hits the back of my mouth. Something about her repulses me.

She turns away and leaves the ants to move the barrel on their backs. “So, you’ve become a queen,” she says.

“I... I suppose.” I do not feel like a queen.

Papa is tromping forward. He throws his pack on the ground in his own corner and is surprised to not hear it thump. He reaches out a hand and touches a mattress. “My god...” he says. He sits on the mattress and reaches for the almost-empty bottle of liquor that he left behind. When he pulls it up, the bottle is brand-new.

“What have you...?” he says.

He cannot see that the cave is stacked high with barrels of wine and pallets of cans and boxes of army rations. He takes a swig from the bottle and then pulls the blanket up around him. When he tries to lie down, his head bangs against a typewriter.

“Was it very awful out there?” Mama says.

I think I see the hint of a smile on Papa’s face, but then his expression becomes very grave. “The damn fools,” he says. “They’re leading our boys into the slaughterhouse. They’re throwing away lives by the hundreds of thousands and no one can stop them.”

As Papa expounds on the generals’ idiocy, Mama turns her eyes to me. I never before realized how hard and dry and cold they could be. So different from my and Papa’s soft, liquid eyes. “How long will you be staying?” she whispers to me.

I settle down near the entrance, as far from her as I can possibly sit.

I am the largest queen that has ever existed.

\* \* \*

Even before the first frost, I can see that Mother is slowing down. Still, she keeps acting recklessly. Before, she went months without ever leaving cave. Now, she goes out every day in order to forage for more food for Papa.

While she is gone, I am terrified by the grumblings of the ants:

“When the rest of the eggs hatch, we’ll have to work even harder....”

“...it’s the human, he’s the one who’s seduced her...”

“The other one is to blame as well... she eats so much...”

I cannot sing loud enough to quiet them.

Papa spends more time in his cot, drinking and telling stories to the darkness. Sometimes he likes to look at the almost-hatched eggs of my sisters and talk about the things that he’ll show them and the world that they’ll create: a kinder and more beautiful world. I think he has almost started to believe in Mama’s vision.

In the mornings, he hunches over the typewriter and operates it with much cursing and banging and complaining about the darkness. Whenever he finishes a page, he quickly stows it away in his pack without letting me see it.

Sometimes he gets geared up to go out, but Mother always arranges for his blind gropings to encounter an unopened bottle before he can leave.

Finally, Papa says, “Dammit. You’ll have to do for now. People are dying out there, and I know that we can do something about it.”

I am thrilled at the thought of leaving. Since we came back, the cave has only gotten more colder and darker. I wonder how Papa—who’s seen so much more of the world than I have—can stand it for even a second. We leave while Mama is out.

Papa leads me along a side road. He’s in fine spirits. He even lets me drive the jeep. He wants to eavesdrop on their movements again, so he can pass the intelligence to the generals. But as we spy on an enemy convoy that’s stopped nearby, I realize something:

“The generals won’t act on our information,” I say. “They never act on it. It’s up to us to win this war for them.”

Unless I act, the Krauts will destroy the entire world. The weight of it makes my legs twitch. I finally understand what it means to be a queen.

So I sing out and ants climb one of the enemy trucks and into the body of the driver. His mouth opens in horror as his body stamps onto the accelerator and runs over some of the soldiers milling in front of him. They shout and try to get out of

the way, but the truck is too big and too fast. It collides with another truck and they both topple. The enemy is running everywhere, wildly. My Kraut screams apologetics as his hand pulls out his gun and starts shooting his former comrades. My ants go inside a few more of the Krauts and they begin to fire as well. Soon enough, everyone is dead.

“Come on, Papa!” I say. “I know how to do it now! We can go and destroy their general!”

“My God,” he says. “What the hell are you doing? Those men were screaming for mercy.”

“Hurry, we need to move quickly,” I rush across the road. I grab up a gun, just because it seems right to hold one. Papa was wrong. Soon enough, I’ll fulfill both Mama’s vision and Papa’s. I’ll rule over men, and I’ll end the war. Everything will be unified in me!

Papa just barely scrambles into the jeep before I push the accelerator and speed us off towards their headquarters. All the way there, he remonstrates with me and tells me that men are supposed to be free and that I cannot treat them like that and that I am no better than they are. I know that he just doesn’t understand, but there is no time to explain it to him right now.

Before nightfall, I’ve destroyed the village that the enemy had occupied. It takes an hour, since there are so many soldiers to invade and so many soldiers to kill. Mostly, they do not

realize that I am there. But at one point a grenade explodes, and knocks me around, opening up a hole in my hip. I bind it up as best I'm able, but I know that I'll have to be more careful in the future.

Eventually, Papa falls silent, and just watches me. I keep waiting for him to smile and tell me that I am doing well, but he says nothing.

Once the headquarters is destroyed, I want to keep going. I am not tired. I am well capable of fighting my way from unit to unit, until I eventually reach Hitler himself. Once I kill Hitler, all the soldiers will be leaderless and can then be captured using the same kind of songs that Hitler used.

But then Papa stumbles and I realize that he is tired. I catch him and try to make him lean on me, but he shakes me off. Once in the jeep, I drive us back towards the cave.

I say, "The enemy won't soon forget today."

"You... you're... you're taking away their freedom. This is against all the rules of war...."

I tell him that these Krauts have no freedom. They are just soldiers; they can obey one queen or they can obey another queen. They can die for one master or they can die for another master. I know now that for human beings, the identity of the queen is not as straightforward as for ants. The queen is not always a large female. Many times, the queen is a man.



Sometimes I think that Papa is a queen, too. But the point is that it's no tragedy if soldiers die, because they have no power to do or create any of the beautiful things that are so prized by Papa and me. The only tragedy is when queens die.

I know that Papa realizes this instinctively, or he wouldn't be so worried all the time about "the generals" and how they're wasting our soldiers. Wasting your own soldiers is wrong, just like wasting food is wrong. But wasting enemy soldiers is not wrong.

The Krauts are evil because they needlessly and recklessly kill queens, and our boys are good because they rescue queens.

He tries to tell me that I am wrong wrong wrong about how humankind works. He tries to tell me that all human beings have dignity and deserve to be free. It sound so much like the bleatings of the lowly ant workers that I am tempted to laugh.

I am driving fast, now, and Papa's shouted words are carried away by the wind. I laugh. He reaches out and tries to grab hold of the wheel. The jeep swerves and skids in the mud. I hurriedly sing a few chords of song and his hand falls limp. After I regain control of the jeep, it is a few moments before I realize that Papa is slumped over. I tell the ants inside him to go back to work everywhere except his throat and the muscles of his arms and legs. The silence is not bad. I finally have a

moment to enjoy my triumph. The cool blue air of the forest fills my entire body.

Once we reach the cave, I restore full function to his body. He climbs out. I stay up in the jeep. He looks at me for a long while. And then he turns away. When I drive off, I'm scared to be alone, but I'm also almost glad to leave him. Today, his presence was a burden.

\* \* \*

I rampage freely. I shadow our boys as they move forward, and stories begin to circulate about mass defections and rebellions amongst the Krauts: entire companies that fell to infighting and wiped themselves out. I learn that my hands can easily break a man's back or neck. As the fighting grows more desperate, I often find myself in close combat with the enemy. I acquire more holes in my body, and sometimes I feel like I am held together more by gauze and glue than by skin and chitin.

The soldiers call out for me to lie with them, but I ignore them. I am aging too rapidly. I do not have much longer to live, and I know that the generals are too incompetent to finish this war on their own. I must concentrate on destroying the enemy before I die.

For a time, I feel like I have failed my mother. I haven't learned the songs that humans need to hear: although my ants

can control their bodies, I've made no progress with their minds.

I will never become mankind's queen.

But then I remember my sisters. Once I protect them from the scourge of Hitler, they will have all the time in the world to learn the right songs. And... well... perhaps it's not too much to hope that some of those songs will be about me.

It is April and I am resting in my room at the inn. I need more rest now than I once did: I am already carrying more than a few strands of gray hair.

There is a furious banging on my door. When I open it, Papa flows into the room.

"Had a devil of a time finding you..." he says.

But his voice is overshadowed by the chorus of ants, "We brought him to you, my queen! The traitors said to kill him, but we knew you'd want him!"

Papa staggers back and forth across my room and rages at me in his usual pedantic way, but the chorus of ants helps me to piece together what happened.

Mama had a difficult winter: sensing herself growing old, she insisted on taking foraging parties out into the snow so that there'd be enough food for Papa and the newly hatched princesses. But food for the ant soldiers ran low. They started to look enviously at the supplies heaped up in the cave.

Eventually, when Mama was gone, they broke free from her song and gorged themselves on the supplies. When Mama returned, she tried to ensnare them with her song, but the revelry and anger and hunger proved too strong, and they rebelled openly. They swarmed her and the princesses and bit them relentlessly. Papa was out, puttering through the woods, but, before she died, Mama managed to drag herself out and warn him. Inside him, a loyalist faction asserted control and expelled the rebels from his body. The loyalists held him together while searched the battlefields of Europe for signs of me.

Finally, I'm able to understand his ramblings. "She's dead. Our girls are dead. I still don't quite understand what hit them. It was some sort of disease, I think. I knew that we were creating something unholy... but... god... why did *you* have to be the one to survive?"

He throws a map case onto my table.

"Read it," he says.

The case is full of papers. They're muddy and disheveled and even the very first page is full of errors—the pages were clearly composed in the dark. While I sit down to read, Papa roots through my room until he finds a bottle of wine that had been delivered by one of my admirers.

In Papa's book, a wounded soldier is rescued by a young prince and nursed to health in an isolated mountain village. The prince brings the soldier right into his home: the country is ruled by an impoverished line of kings who live in a decrepit manor. There, the cultured and widely traveled soldier befriends the King and starts to tutor the prince and his brothers.

Meanwhile, the war rages down in the valley. The soldier's army is annihilated just outside the borders of the kingdom. In order to preserve the neutrality of his country, the King orders that, from now on, all escaped soldiers should be detained. A former comrade escapes from the roundups and knocks on the soldier's door, but, after much soul-searching, the soldier decides that he cannot break the neutrality of his new home: he turns his comrade over to the authorities.

The prince loves his tutor, but he also loves guns and loud cars and crisp black uniforms. The tutor tries to teach the prince about freedom and respect, but the prince insists on assembling the villagers into a brigade of conscript soldiers whom he drills mercilessly, even as their crops rot. When the tutor protests, the prince just says that he wants his country to be prepared to fight. The tutor, though, knows that this is absurd. This tiny country could never stand up to any major power in a fight.

Finally, after many arguments, the prince summons the tutor and says that the tutor has convinced him. He takes the tutor out for a drive. Even though it is a day for scheduled military drills, the fields are filled with workers. But then the tutor sees the brigade assembled up front. He is confused. If the workers are undertaking a drill, then who is working the fields? He jumps out of the car and runs to the nearest worker. It's the tutor's comrade. He's been hobbled and put to work as slave labor.

The tutor is horrified. On the drive back, while the prince is gunning the mountainous turns at high speeds, the tutor argues with the prince and finally grabs the wheel of the car. The vehicle goes spinning over the edge of the cliff, with the prince inside of it. The tutor, who's managed to jump free of the car, starts to walk back to the manor. He hopes he can do a better job with the prince's younger brothers... but he can't stop remembering the wide-eyed look on the prince's face: while the car spun out of control, the prince had lifted his hands and surrendered the wheel to the tutor... up to the very last moment, he'd trusted his tutor with his life.

"But I'm not neutral," I say. "I am winning the war. I am beating the Krauts."

He nods sadly. "You've become worse than them."

"I'm not like this prince," I say. "I never trusted you."

Then there's another knock on the door. It slips open. A little girl stands in the doorway and says, "Papa, you were gone so long...."

He rushes forward and picks her up. I move towards them, but he turns around to shield her from me. "Let's put you back to bed, Bernadette," he says.

"Who is that?" she says.

"She's no one," Papa murmurs.

I come close and the ants inside of him say, "Oh yes! The queen is here! She'll reward us for our loyalty!"

I sing to them, "This girl is your queen now. Obey her. Take care of her. Guide her."

Papa's hair is still dark. He's so young. He will outlive me, and this girl, and her daughters, and on and on and on. He'll be able to fill thirty generations of us with lies about me. I want to snap his neck.

But I don't. He still has a function: this little princess will need him.

I silently forgive him for his cruel caricature. This softhearted little boy isn't responsible for his actions. I'd thought he was a queen, but he turned out to be just another soldier.

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## PILGRIMS

by Ann Chatham

I found the dead man a few hours before sunset, rolled roughly out of the narrow path I had been following. If it hadn't been for the drag marks and the dark stain in the dirt, I might not have seen him at all; the shadows were lengthening and whoever had left him there had set him in a low spot and tossed a broken branch over him. I didn't want to stop; I'd been hoping to catch at least a squirrel for my dinner, and though I was out of arrows, I'd still a sling and a pocket full of stones. But the living have a duty to the dead, or so I'd been taught.

The man had been rich once; he was tall and had a plumpness to him that wasn't just the bloat of death. Whoever had left him there had taken everything but his undertunic and braes, and likely they would have taken those too for the fine linen if his death hadn't left them so shredded and stained. I had seen a battlefield before, and so I was not sick, but something sat cramped at the back of my throat all the while that I blunted my knife and my finger-ends scraping rocks and soil enough to cover him.

I'd no coin left me for the burial gift, but I wrapped his linens as shroud-like as I could and pulled off the last of my rings to rest on his swollen tongue. When the body was covered, I sang the rites and blessed the space of ground with my own blood—a little more than I had intended, on account of the dulled knifeblade. The people in Kemnwater had called me a saint once, and sac religious though it was, my own not-yet-relics were the most I had to sanctify the ground. At least I knew what to sing over a proper burial.

I slept cold and hungry, and my ringless fingers felt nearly as light and strange as my head had when my braids had fallen twisted at my feet like a pair of coiled snakes, severed from my head and theirs. There'd been too much change of late, and a supper of winter-cold water and the last of my dried fish didn't help that.

I was two more days walking before I met another soul, and fortunate indeed that it wasn't brigands, since even the scrub trees had given out, leaving nothing but the scattered boulders to give any kind of cover or shelter. I'd been remembering the stories the Northerners told about outlaws and about the walking dead, especially after finding the dead man, but the horseman who caught up to me along the path was dressed like a knight, in good furs and fine wool.

He drew rein some paces away from me and bowed from his horse, as gallant as a young courtier, though neither of us were young and there was none but me to admire his fine airs. When he spoke, it was with a practiced voice and words that would have sounded well in some troubadour's tale: "I bid you greetings, fair madam; I am a knight in sore need, for I travel under a geas that I must do a great service for the first living soul whom I meet. Please grant that I may be of use to you in this land of God's forgetting."

I stared at him, feeling the dirt of travel and the coarse fabric of the borrowed peasant's wools against my skin at wrist and neck. Briefly, I thought of asking what hell he'd sprung from, but it came to me that I didn't really care to know. He was either a madman, cursed, or some revenant of a knight out of a tale, and whatever the case there was little I could do if he changed the face he showed me. "Have you any food, or wine?" I asked.

He had. It was fast-day fare, suitable for travel, but it tasted as fine as the First Food must have done in the beginning of the world. When we had eaten, he tried to put me up on his horse behind him, but I said that I walked for a penance, and so he walked beside me, leading the beast.

“There are kinder roads that lead to the graves of the saints, fair lady,” he said to me, after the third time I had stumbled over the rough ground.

“There are,” I agreed.

There was a little silence when I said nothing further, and he glanced back at the empty way behind us. “May I ask what shrine you seek, lady, that I may escort you there over better roads?”

I felt my brow draw down and my teeth begin to clench, but it was the village priest’s voice I was hearing, and the elders from the abbey, who thought a woman good for little but bearing and weaving and gathering the cut sheaves at harvest. If this man thought to protect me, at least he had said no word about women being unsuited to the service of the Lord. And truth be told, I was even more poorly provided for the barren lands than I had thought, and had been wondering for some days if I would reach my destination at all. I did not so much mind the thought of dying out here, but it would have been a waste.

“I am not seeking the shrine of any saint who died in the God’s wars,” I told him, minding my feet so that I would not have to look up. “I seek the root of the Tree that the Lord cut down to end His war, that I may build a shrine at its heart, and

burn an offering there.” He did not need to know about my village or my daughter.

The knight stopped, between one step and the next, and I walked a little further before turning back to see him standing with his foot still raised. I waited, and after a moment he finished his step, and the horse bumped his shoulder with an impatient nose.

“If that be the case, fair lady,” my protector said at last, “then your way lies farther to the north.”

We changed the direction of our steps.

I began to feel that I had not paid enough attention to romances and mummers’ tales, for my companion did not act in ways of ordinary men. I thought perhaps I remembered hearing it was unwise to question mages and the creatures that lived by the rules of magic, lest you break some unspoken part of the compact between the two of you and turn their help to hindrance. Surely there were stories enough of the lives of the early Saints that told of strange rewards for stranger customs, though I was not about to compare myself to those great heroes of the war-torn days. Whatever the case, I didn’t quite like to question my companion about why he was here and helping me, and he seemed content to travel as silently as his horse.

Watching him sidelong through the chin-length brush of my cropped hair, I began to feel as if he should look familiar to

me; something about the look of his jawbones or the shadows beneath his eyes. His skin was dark enough that he probably had some southern blood, though his hair didn't have the inky curls of the men of the Empire or the Churchlands. I thought of the faces I'd seen in the great halls at Caerleon and Newmarket on feast days and the church Knights who had stayed at the Abbey three winters ago, but I could not place him in that multitude.

As the sun sank, we stopped, and it seemed he had enough sorcery to start a fire and knew what of the scrubby plants in the waste about us would burn well enough to heat a little wine. He looked up at me as he handed me the clay cup he'd pulled from the horse's pack, and with the fire casting light and shadows across his face I finally placed him. It was fortunate I had not yet stretched out my hand, as I would have dropped the cup; his was the face of the man I had buried.

"What are you?" I whispered, stepping back out of arm's reach, though there was still nothing I could do if he meant to hurt me in this empty place. It was one matter to speculate about ghostly knights, but another entirely to meet a man you had put into the ground yourself not a sennight before.

He watched me calmly, his hand still held out to offer me the cup. "As I told you, lady, I am a knight under geas."

"But you were dead. I buried you."

“Indeed, and for that I thank you. Now I am in your debt, and it is my fate to repay you before I finish my journey out of the mortal world.”

That almost made sense, which was more than I could say of most of the live men of my acquaintance. I considered for another moment, but fate or no, nothing had changed; we were still alone in the middle of the Godless lands. I moved back toward the fire and took the cup from him. The wine was warm enough to scorch my tongue, but it took the edge off the chill that had begun to cut into my bones. I sat near as I might to the little fire and tried my best not to shiver, now that I had ceased to move. The dead knight gave me more food and pulled a cloak from one of the saddle packs to put over my shoulders.

I did not ask how great a debt my scanty burial had accrued, but when he had tended to his horse and returned to the fire, I did ask how he had died.

He added more bracken to the flames, and I huddled in his cloak and my own, watching him and trying not to shiver. I did not want him to think I was afraid of him.

“I was set upon by brigands,” he said, “that haunt the outer borders of these God-forgotten lands, as I believe you have guessed, though why I was wandering there alone and without my proper arms is a longer tale than the darkness. You must sleep, fair lady, but I will tell it to you in the morning, if you

would have me do so. For now, I will watch, and keep the fire burning.” He led his horse over to lie at my back, and whatever unearthliness he might have about him, the horse felt mortal to the touch and smelled it to the nose, and between its great animal heat and the warmth of the fire I slept as sound as a child in bed between her sisters.

By the time it was light again, and I had asked him to turn his back while I crouched in the dubious shelter of a knee-high rock to relieve myself, I began to regret my question. It was no real business of mine what history had led to his death, and I was afraid it would open the way to his asking about my own past. But when I returned to the fire he held out another small cup of warmed wine to me and said nothing.

The land we walked across was empty except for the rocks and the bracken. There was nothing to see but colors of dust and stone all the way to the blowing clouds and the distant mountains. We went towards those mountains, farther into the heart of the wastelands, but I looked mostly at my feet to keep the rising sun from shining into my eyes.

After a time, the knight began his tale, a little abruptly: “My father arranged that I marry for the sake of an estate that bordered our own, for both I and the lady he chose were our parents’ sole surviving heirs. I was not unwilling, though perhaps I should have been, as the lady had no great care for



me, nor I for either her or the wealth of her lands. But many men marry without love, and our fathers made an agreement they thought well for both of us.”

I thought of the agreements my own father had come to, disposing of me and of my sisters as he thought best; some of those had gone better than others, and mine was not the worst lot among us. Many men might choose to marry without love, but it was a rare woman who could choose to marry for it, if she were offered the choice at all.

“What my lady wife kept to herself was that she had already been married in secret and borne a child to another man, who had left her for a war and not returned. How her father did not know of this I cannot say, but while she felt it her duty to give me an heir, she took no pleasure in my touch or my company. In the end, I went myself to fight in other men’s wars, in search of glory where I might not have to meet my lady wife’s sad eyes at table.

“It was well enough for a time; I am skilled at killing men in battle, and for many years I was lucky as well. But as the saints have said, all luck runs out and there is no true trust but in the Lord; the day came that I was captured. In the high stone room where they imprisoned me was another knight: a man who had been there seven years, and from whom I learned the history of my lady wife, for it was he who had first married her.

“In time, my comrades ransomed me, but I asked that the other man go in my place, that he might return to the wife who was more his than mine, for I had wronged both of them. Our captors agreed gladly, as they had no wish to see me return to the field of combat, and the knight departed with promises to ransom me as well. Three months had not passed before a foreign army besieged the keep where I was imprisoned, and when their war engines began to destroy the walls and rafters I was able to escape.”

In the middle of the godless lands, it was hard to imagine the feel of a tower under siege, but the stone walls of a locked room were as clear in my mind as if they had been around me instead of the vast expanse of emptiness. It was only a different sort of wall, though it didn't keep the wind out. Despite the wind, I was still grateful for the barrier between myself and the places I had left, though I guessed that he had not been.

“Were you killed on the road home, then?” I asked, wondering how long ago these things he spoke of had occurred.

He shook his head. “Nay, lady, I swore then never to return to my home. I have been on pilgrimage these twelve years, praying at the deathplaces of the Saints that I might yet undo the wrongs I have done unto others. Two months ago I came to a pool sacred to Saint Mathild, the child-witch, and there I dreamt that a black-haired girl child came to

me and bade me throw my sword and lance into her pool as I had thrown away my life for the folly of others.”

My breath stopped a moment. Two months and seven days ago, I had left my braids on the altar of Saint Mathild that my daughter had kept in secret before her arrest.

“When I had sworn to do so, she bade me go into the Godless lands and find a pilgrim whose need the saints could not answer, that I might help what she could not.”

My foot hit a rock and I stumbled, flinching away from the hand he reached to steady me. The Saint had sent him to me and thus to his death. My ankle twisted painfully on the next step and I fell, awkward as a child just begun to walk.

There was a moment of stillness as I caught myself on my hands, my face close as a lover to the dirt, rocks digging sharply into my palms. I wondered if the child Saint were playing with us: setting our lives into a romance for her own entertainment, or for that of the Lord and his Armies. But then the revenant knight was kneeling beside me, respectful as always, and I shook my head at the doubts, for they were unworthy of all of us.

Instead, I sat up and tended to my ankle. It was twisted but not broken, and not so hurt that I could not pull enough heat from the pale sun to mend it. When I stood it was sore,

and my head spun a little with the dizziness that comes of healing within my own body, but I could walk again.

“You are a sorceress.”

I shook my head. “A healer only.” It had always saved me, that lie; a woman who followed Saint Edreth might practice her art outside of the stone anchorite’s cell, which my father had not allowed me. I had always had talent enough for healing; if I could do other things as well, it mattered little when I chose not to do them.

The stony waste and the pale sun seemed to reproach me, and I added, “My daughter inherited the power, but not the direction of it. Our Abbot had her arrested for lay practice of sorcery not five days after my husband was put in his tomb. She burned herself rather than take the cell behind the altar.” I did not say that she had also burned our little church and half the village, or how long I spent tending those wounded or dying before I followed the promise I had made when I cut my braids. Perhaps my tale was no more strange than his; we had each been turned from the lives our fathers had given us by the passions of others.

After that, there was little enough to say, though when the windy silence became too much, one or the other of us might begin a hymn.

We were another ten days walking, and the miraculous food in the knight's saddlebags had begun to run low before we came in sight of our destination. By then, even the bracken had run out, leaving us with no fire and the horse with as little to eat as we. It, I pitied.

It was half a day's journey between when we could tell our destination from the mountains behind it and when we reached the base. The stump of the Tree stood taller than my head above the plain, blackened as if by some poison meant to keep it from regrowth. Half again as broad as the stump's height, the tree itself lay to the side, trunk and branches still as crisply formed as if it had just been felled, though there was no sign of leaves.

I reached out to touch the splinters of what had once been living wood, but under my hand they felt as empty of life as the burnt-out stones of our church.

"What will you do here, lady?" asked the knight, breaking half a morning's silence.

I glanced back at him, but his face held no more expression than the empty landscape. "Make a shrine," I said, turning to the stump above me. "Will you raise me up?"

He did, cupping hands for me to set my foot, and lifting smoothly until I might grab the jagged splinters where the tree had broken and scramble up. I wished my body twenty years

younger, but it served me well enough, and I did not stumble as I stood and looked down at the Tree whose fruit had given my ancestors the magic that the church now cursed us for. The axe that felled it must have been wielded by the Lord Himself, for no mortal could have made the strokes of such a blade, but though the line of splinters at the tree's center stood as high as my waist and beyond it the stump fell away sharply, the side where I stood sloped only gently. I pulled out the pale chalks I had brought and mouthed a brief prayer that they might mark the darkened surface. A foolish thought; no saint could intercede in this place.

“Do you know much of theology?” I asked, suddenly reluctant to begin.

“Only twenty years of lay sermons on pilgrimage, lady. I have never read the writings of the Church Fathers.”

Whereas I, wishing for an anchorite's place where I might light a church with the glow of the heavens, kinder than my daughter's fire, had read all the doctrine and theology that I had been able to buy or borrow and had corresponded with scribes in my husband's name for passages of what I might not see myself. The revenant knight stood still as a guard, his face turned up to watch me, no more holy than my husband had been, for all his guilty piety.

“The Learned Theonikias writes of an ancient treatise in which it is said that in the days when men might pray to the Lord directly, those of the Defiant’s line chose to pray to the Tree, as a god with sympathy towards those who had inherited his sorcery. We know that the Wars of the Holy Book ended in sacrifice, but what that sacrifice was is lost to mortal knowing.”

He nodded, unmoved by the impiety of the ancients. “I have traveled with monks of the Lost Orders.” If the Lost brother who had once written to me was any example of his brethren, the knight would have been well introduced to the ideals of Ineffable Sacrifice. My own views had always been more tied to the world I could sense; what use was it to sacrifice a thing that none could understand enough to value? The abbot would have said this was a woman’s subtlety, but I held dearer the loss of books and magic than that of some earthly romance with a handsome lover who had never appeared.

“What if,” and I swallowed, awkward with words I had never dared to speak, “as the Defiant destroyed half the world to separate us from the Lord, so did the Lord sacrifice a god in the Tree to keep His enemies from gaining the greater sorceries?” The works of the Saints had been beyond us for centuries, as what magic was left in our blood grew thinner

from one generation to the next; the church only weakened it further by their bans.

He was silent, and I looked down again, wondering if he understood, but he was watching his hands. When he looked up, his eyes were wet. “Saint Mathild sent me to you, lady. Once from an endless task I had taken out of pride and shame, and once from beyond death. I trust in her, and in the Lord, that they would not have sent me to aid you had you not been meant to undo some part of the harm the Great Wars left in the world.” He held out his hands, strong and empty. “What may I do?”

We made the Tree into a shrine, I with my chinks and he carving at the brittle bark with a knife, writing the holy words of Saint Mathild, of Saint Edreth, and of the Lord. It was not beautiful, but we each had our reasons for knowing the scriptures of holy places, and as the Church Fathers have written, the words are the blessing.

When the light failed, we ate a little and gave the last of the fodder to the horse, which had stayed, dog-faithful, by its gear. I prayed that whatever god looked after horses might look after it if the Lord and the Saints could not, but short of driving the beast away from us with rocks, there was nothing more I could do for it. Instead, I shut my eyes and tried to fill my thoughts with piety, waiting for moonrise.



When the moon hung three fingers above the horizon I stood, my heart as certain of what I did as it had been when I watched my daughter's pyre. Her fire had not reached even the abbot, but mine would reach the Heavens.

This time the cut across my palm was deep by intent, and I pulled the moon's silver into the dark line I drew about the shrine we had made, blessing words and ground, and laying to rest the Tree with the same songs I had sung over the revenant knight. May the peace of the heavens be with you. May your mortal vessel be released to the earth as your soul is to that beyond. May that which you leave behind pass to those who come after you.

My hand began to burn as oil touched by a match, and I felt as though all that I had drawn from the sun over my lifetime flowed out of me again in the shape of my daughter's fire. It spilled out, fire and blood, in a blaze that should have drowned out the moonlight, but the silver light that I had snared shone just as bright. And then the Tree caught, and we were all but sparks to the heartwood of the Tree from which all mortal magic had once come.

My own flame began to flicker, and the knight steadied me as I swayed.

Someone stood on the stump we had blessed, a dark shape at the edge of the fire who knelt and held out a small hand. I

heard a child's voice, the words as clear over the fire's thundering as if we stood in a quiet room.

“Come, Magda. You have fulfilled your vow.”

“But the magic—” I whispered, not certain even a saint could hear me.

“It is released. It will fall with the rains and come back to the land; magic was never meant to belong only to the church.” I thought perhaps she smiled, though how I could know that I had no idea.

“Come, Magda,” she said again, and the knight held out his arm, courtly and strong. He had passed once beyond the world already, and now he escorted me through the fire and beyond it to where the saints awaited us.

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*When not getting distracted by other people's books or the internet, Ann Chatham mostly makes things. (Worlds, wildlife gardens, clothing, dinner...) In real life she shares a small house near Baltimore with her husband, their cat, and his*

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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).

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

ISSN: 1946-1076

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

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