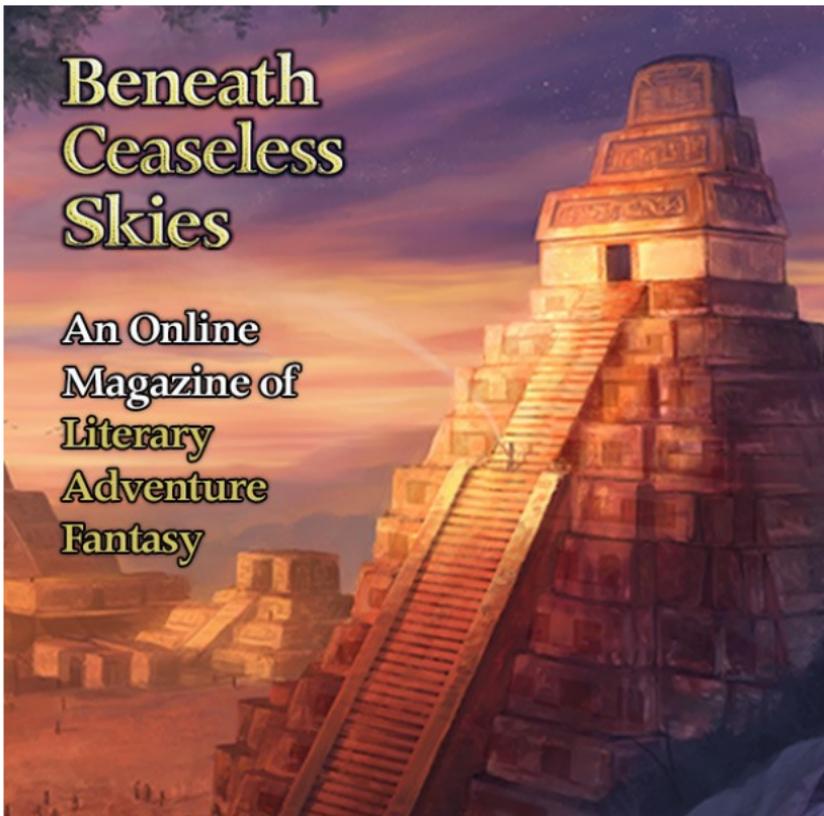


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THE LEAVES UPON HER FALLING LIGHT

by Gregory Norman Bossert

[The hart] hath more wit and malice to save itself than any other beast or man. The Master of Game, Edward of Langley, 2nd Duke of York

She give us a penny to bury the wren. Traditional Song

A little before dawn I make five little cages of white bone tied with ribbon and strewn with marjoram and rue, and with the setting of the moon a bird of my remembrance flies in the window to land on the edge of my hand. She's a wren, frail and faded as she has come the furthest.

"Hey, Jenny Jenny," I sing to her, and feed her crumbs soaked in a little blood and honey and then a plump green spider I have been keeping in the windowframe. The windows of the tower face east and west and the moonlight streams in one and out the other, leaves an orange glow across us like a promise of fire. The fire in the hearth is burnt to coals. The nest with its one small egg has sat by the fire all night. Now I place the nest on the table between the cages, where the stories will

better nurture the egg than the little heat left in the hearth. I whisper to the egg, "Tallys, I am called."

The wren sits on my shoulder a spell, the bramble of my hair another sort of nest around her. When her gaze brightens and her heart calms, I set her in her cage in front of the nest with its egg and bid her recall.

* * *

What the wren says to the egg:

The boy was fair, like a spot of sunshine in the clearing, though the trees' grasp was so wide and green that no sun slipped through them. In age and size he was much like the lyme-hound that lead him, though what was a wise nine years and a great size in a hound was young and undergrown for a boy so deep in the forest.

He had fought without success to keep the lymer from dragging him deeper into the trees for all the morning I had flown after him, and now that the hound had stopped the boy fought to get him started again. The hound was unmoved by his tugging, no matter if the boy tried to lead him on or back. It was clear by the way the boy's eyes, as wide and blue as the hidden sky, turned from oak to ash to moss-strewn deadfall that he would not know which way to lead the hound if it had been so willing.

For all his searching, he had not seen me flitting from branch to branch above him, nor any other of the eyes that watched in the wood. And even the hound, who knew a stag was just ahead, huge and unseen in the green shadows, did not see the girl until she stepped out from a low-spread hawthorn into the clearing. It shook its head in silent surprise and backed against the boy. I sang my welcome to her.

She seemed of an age with him, though where he was pale, sunlight on stone under open skies, she was every dark shade of the forest, green on brown, brambled hair and eyes like oak leaves. She seemed a girl, though she might have been brambles and oak leaves not long before.

The boy staggered a little as the hound leaned into him and squinted at the girl as if trying to pick her out against the background of forest. His lips pursed as if to frame a question, and stuck like that. The girl stared back, head at an angle, very still.

“An odd end for a hunt,” the girl finally said, in a voice that fluttered like laughter or song.

The hound shook its head again at that, ears flapping against the boy’s leg. The boy put hand on the hound’s head, steadying the both of them, and frowned.

“The hunt is tomorrow,” he said. “This is but the quest, nor the end, not until we find a hart, a stag in his harbouring.”

The girl said, “There are many sorts of hunts, and many sorts hunted.”

The boy’s frown deepened. “Maybe for farmers.” He squinted at her again. “Or poachers. But the noble man hunts *par force*, with hound and horse, and hunts the most noble prey, buck and boar and hart.” His thin voice had strained downward, as if reciting someone older and more bold. “I seek a hart as it is king of the wild, the hunting of which is a king’s pleasure. It hath a bone in its heart that bringeth great comfort.”

“And you a king?” the girl asked, her voice that much closer to laughter.

“I am Hugh, son of Edwin King of the Three Kingdoms,” the boy said, and then in his own light voice, “The king is... sick. I am staying with my uncle Gérard, who is Duke of the Arden and Master of Game and Regent in my father’s name.”

“You can call me Tallys,” the girl said, as if the boy had asked. “I hear the Duke your uncle is wise and careful of the wildwood in your father’s name, Hugh son of Edwin King.”

The girl walked toward the boy, and a little to the side. The hound lowered its head, its flank so heavy against the boy’s knees that he could only turn his head to track her.

“I hear the Duke’s son is otherwise,” she said. “I hear he has no respect for the wild things, no proper fear of the deep places.”

“Respect?” the boy spluttered. “My cousin Edouard has no fear of anything. *You* should not speak of him.”

The girl was at his side now and leaned over the wide brown bulk of the hound, who kept its head down, its gaze on the shadows ahead. “I hear he pulls the wings from birds,” she said softly.

The boy looked down and away. “He shows me the use of sling and snare. He’s been on the hunt, as well. He tells stories, things my Uncle’s lessons leave out.”

“I like stories,” the girl said. “Do you know the story of how the wren became queen of the birds?” She raised one small brown hand and I flew down to land on her palm. The boy’s eyes went round; the hound huffed and would not look up. “The birds had a contest to see who could fly most high and thus be rightful ruler. There were many birds more fleet or mighty than the wren, but none more bright or bold. She hid under the eagle’s wing and waited.”

I tucked my head under my own wing, and the girl closed her fingers around me.

“And the eagle flew up higher than any who had gone before, and when she felt his breath grow thin and his heart falter, she sprang out and up.”

Her fingers flew open and I leapt up and around her and the boy to land in the branches overhead.

“And so she flew the highest, and all the birds acknowledged her queen.”

“She cheated,” the boy protested, squinting up at me. I dropped to a lower branch and caught a harvestman; one of its legs spiraled down to land in the boy’s hair.

“She won,” the girl said. “How came your father to be king? How will you?” But before the boy could splutter an answer, she said, “Tell me one of your stories of the hunt.”

“They’re Edouard’s stories,” he said.

“Choose it, tell it,” she said, “then it will be yours.”

“I... he told me of the Unmaking, after the hart is slain, how my uncle butchers it cut by cut from the outermost limbs to the center with a special sword, all the meat cut away and handed out to everyone who helped with the hunt according to rank and effort, and they put the head on a pole and then the, uh, awfuls—”

“Offal,” she said.

“That, wrapped in the skin, for the dogs. It’s a noble art, the ritual of the Unmaking, that’s what my uncle says. But I’m not sure I want to see...”

The hound shook its head again as if in agreement, though its eyes were on the darkness that was the stag in the trees.

“Seeing can be difficult,” the girl said. She slipped around to the boy’s other side, her right hand on his right shoulder. “Dangerous.” She raised her left hand before them: a glimmering like light on water. I fluttered from my branch to the thicket of her hair, hopped down to her shoulder between them to watch. “But sight is a gift.”

The boy would have backed away, then, but for the hound on one side and she on the other with her arm about him. The light from her hand flickered on our faces. “What glamour is this?” he said.

“A glass,” the girl said with her reflection. “A mirror.”

I could feel the boy tremble. “Mirrors are brass with tin over. My father has a silver one. He has a glass, too, a cup for wine. It is very old and the making of it is lost. I am not allowed to go near it lest I break it. One time I was playing in the hall and knocked the high table and the glass tipped but did not break. Father, he... ah, he was very angry. That was before he got sick,” he finished, quietly.

“This mirror is glass, and very old as well, though the making of it is not lost, not to me. See the wren reflected? If the wren is a story of the past, then what of her reflection? Here, you can hold it if you like.

“No, Tallys, no, it will break,” the boy said, and tried to pull from her grip but her arm, her shoulder where I perched, were like the roots of trees that can break stone. He pushed at the arm that held the mirror and his soft white hand slipped along her smooth brown until his fingers brushed the glass and then he froze with a little gasp, and the girl laughed like birds leaping into the sky and the stag under the trees lifted its head antlers like the high branches and the hound howled, once, like a trumpet.

I hopped from her shoulder to his to see what he saw. What that was is not my tale to tell. But through his velvet and linen and his soft skin and the fragile wing of his collarbone, I felt his heart shudder thrice and fall as still as the woods.

“Oh,” the girl said, and the mirror cracked under the boy’s fingers, shattered and rained down in shards to lose itself in the leaves. “Oh,” the girl said, and the boy’s heart started again, as light and fast as mine, and his knees failed and I took wing as he slid from her grasp. “Oh,” she said, to the boy heaped on the ground and the hound who looked up for the first time, ears back and teeth bright in the dim light, or was she speaking to

me and the stag, to herself? “Is this his story after all?” the girl asked, but if there was an answer I did not wait for it, as I had a long way to fly.

* * *

“A long way it was, Jenny Wren,” I say. “That place in the woods is overgrown now, and if any shards of the mirror remain they are buried under years of leaf gone to earth.”

I lean over the nest that is a weave of my hair and breathe on the egg, the scent of warm bark and soil in the sun.

“Would it have been better if the making of such things *had* been lost?” I ask. “Though how can I forget, with such as you to remind me?”

The wren gives me a look that, tiny though her eye, is regal and a bit judgmental; then she sings her song, startlingly loud.

“Hush, hush. They will find me soon enough. No need to make their way easy.”

The wren looks somewhat mollified and sets to preening herself. I go to the east window and look out. The last of the moon behind me awakes a green light from the woods, throws the black shadow of my tower against it. The slivered moonlight beats against my back through the opposite window. I mistake my own shadow in the mist for a blackbird fleeing and almost cry after it. A trill like laughter behind me, and I

turn to find the blackbird in the other window, orange-rimmed eye like a promise of the sun's soon rising.

He does not come at first to my raised hand.

“So then, Merle, you bird of my recollection, where did I put those berries?” I ask, and find them in a bag on the mantle, crimson holly and dark ivy and pale mistletoe. The blackbird flies to me then, for that handful of fruit that would be death to most. “But not the likes of us, Merle my dear,” I say, as he downs one last bright berry and carefully cleans his bill on my sleeve.

“Are you ready, then?” I ask.

He dips his head, cocks an eye at the nest with its egg, and begins.

* * *

What the blackbird says to the egg:

In the night, in the forest where the river turns south and seaward and the road clings close to its banks to avoid the darkest of the trees, there was a fire. Around that fire was a group of young people bright with the colors and chatter of their kind. And around them wagons and tents and horses and dogs, and so they made a home out of the wild. So they thought, and did not see me though I walked around their feet.

These young people were not arrayed as the folk who work the woods, the wardens and poachers, pig herders and charcoal

burners. Nor wore they velvets or silks of the lordly that hunt here. Somewhere between, then; simple folk made bold by the colors of the powerful on their coats and sleeves, granted some grace through their servitude to the mighty. So they thought, though I walked the edge of their circle unnoticed.

A newcomer joined that circle, then, a youth with bright eyes and wide delicate cheekbones under cropped brown hair, any colors covered by a cloak of green so deep it was black in the firelight. One of those there made a spot for the newcomer on a log, with a half-mocking, half-cautious, “A seat for my lord.”

The youth laughed, a light trilling tenor, and said, “No lord, I. You can call me Tallys.”

Introductions went round the fire. Someone asked, “Are you with the King’s household or the Marchionesses?” Tallys had turned the other way, though, was saying, “Such a beautiful song just now. A blackbird, I think.”

“That was me, a song we sing when the boats return from sea,” said one. “No, it was my song from High Castle, ‘Sun on Stone’ it’s called.” “In the Duke’s court we call it ‘Boy and Bird’.” “And the girls sing it best.” So they said, laughing, in the space after my song.

A girl in the grey and teal of the Seaward Marches leaned forward to catch a better glimpse of Tallys’s hard shoulders and

trim thighs, and said, “We were asking about the tale of the King’s lost hunt. Perhaps you could tell it?”

Tallys gave her a slow small smile, and the girl flushed, fell silent and confused. A coachman in the blue and gold of the King took up the tale instead.

“By mid-afternoon Regent Duke Gérard saw his son Edouard eating cherries and King Hugh, who was of course Prince Hugh then, nowhere to be seen. And when the Duke questioned his son it emerged that he had last seen the Prince some hours before noon, leading a lyme-hound.”

“Old Beauregard, that was,” a huntsman in the quartered red and blue of the Duchy said. “He died just last year, at the age of fifteen, ancient that is for a hound, and his passing was mourned like a member of the household, with the banners lowered and a proper burial.”

“Well, the old Duke had some stern words for young Duke Edouard, and all the hunt was roused and sent out into the woods in search of the missing Prince. All the rest of that day we searched, and after dark we went out again with lanterns and torches. Eerie it is, under these trees, when you are on your own and the eyes of the wild things glow orange back at you.”

“Indeed, I remember that dark night well,” someone said, and “I as well,” said others. I trilled a mocking call at that, these brave woodsmen who hadn’t marked my own orange-

rimmed eye at their very feet, and Tallys smiled into the fire and whistled back.

“We didn’t find him until the next morning, would not have found him at all, perhaps, if his hound had not set up a cry. Asleep, Prince Hugh was, curled up in a small clearing deep in the forest. The hound stood over him, had stood there all night, I wager, keeping watch over him.”

“Old Beauregard,” the huntsman said again, proudly.

“When Prince Hugh was awoken, he cried out, ‘It is broken!’ But when the Duke asked him what had broken, the Prince had no recollection of having spoken those words or what they might have meant. He remembered nothing, in fact, since the morning before, though he said he had dreamed of a hart, a great stag with antlers like trees and a wren perched between them, singing a song with human words, though he could not remember their meaning.”

The people around the fire gasped and gossiped over that, though most had heard the tale before.

“Quite a story,” Tallys said. “Fit for the making of a King.”

“But listen, the story’s not done,” the teller said. Tallys looked somewhat uneasy at that. I whistled my amusement again, and Tallys frowned askance at me.

“All around where the Prince lay, from the edge of the clearing to no more than the length of an arm—”

“Or a hound,” the huntsman said.

“Yes, or a hound, from the Prince, the ground had been torn by the hooves of a hart, a great stag. From its track the greatest seen in those woods or any other said the old Duke, who would know.”

Everyone dutifully gasped again.

“They said that ever since then Prince Hugh, that is King Hugh, his sleep is troubled by dreams of the wild wood so vivid and strange that he sometimes stays awake all night lest he suffer them.”

“Well, he sleeps now and it is those who would wake him that would, I fear, suffer,” said a soft voice outside the circle of firelight.

The young woman who had spoken came into the circle. She was wrapped in teal, trimmed with grey silk like seafoam. I saw the sea once where the woods run down to meet it and remember the way the waves broke against the shore, older and more stubborn, I thought then, than the oldest trees in the forest. Young though this girl was, she had some of that old stubbornness in her grey eyes.

“Lady Meriel,” some said, and “Marchioness, your pardon,” said others, all rising to their feet. All but Tallys, that is, who pulled the dark cloak a bit tighter and glanced up, eyes catching the fire.

“I mean no offense, Lady,” the storyteller said.

“Oh sit, sit,” Lady Meriel said, and did so herself, on a log, so that all were forced to sit as well or loom over her. “I’ve heard the story before, and from the King himself, when we were children together and our courtship more play than passion. The tale, and these woods, are as much a part of him as his high castle, or as the sea is to me. And the wren is, of course, King of the birds, so it was a fit dream.”

I saw Tallys mouth, “Queen of the birds.”

“Not that a King needs a story for his making,” Lady Meriel said, with a sharp look to Tallys. “That is his right by birth and blood.”

Tallys’s head lowered in what could have been acquiescence. Lady Meriel frowned a little, brows dipping like the wings of a gull; stubborn as well are gulls, when it comes to what they consider theirs. But then she smiled around at the gathering, and her smile was gracious enough.

“But stories and dreams are the stuff of childhood, and even a Prince and King-to-be is first and foremost a boy. We grow out of these things, do we not, and laugh fondly at them afterwards,” she said.

All but a child herself, I thought, but the others laughed and nodded, all except Tallys.

“And if the King lies awake some nights, well, I’m sure his royal responsibilities, which he will take up in full from the Regent upon our marriage, weigh on his thoughts, as befits a King. I will be blessed to be able to share that burden with him when we are wed.”

There was a cheer at that, though quickly hushed, with a few nervous glances in the direction of the King’s tent.

“But look, here we are assembled, the night is young and the flames still bright,” Lady Meriel said. “Let’s have another story, though perhaps one more cheerful and more fit for a common campfire. You, young sir so dark and quiet;” this addressed to Tallys. “What tales have you?”

Tallys leaned forward and gave Lady Meriel a glance that glittered with the fire and looked about to answer. That answer, I feared, would be a tale not to the Lady’s liking, so I stepped into the circle and sang.

“Oh, a blackbird,” Lady Meriel said. “Begone, you, back into the night, lest you trouble the King with your song.”

Tallys raised an eyebrow at my interruption and said, “I knew a Queen who had three blackbirds. Their song was so lovely it would ease the living to sleep, the dying gladly to their death, and the dead again to waking. The Duke of the duchy by the sea promised the hand of his daughter to any who would bring him these birds. But every man who attempted the theft,

knight and knave alike, succumbed to the birds' song, until all the couches and chairs of the Queen's tower were filled with their sleeping bodies, and the Queen was forced to stack them in her bookshelves and hang them from the walls like tapestries.

There was laughter around the circle. Lady Meriel gave Tallys a smile sharp as glass and asked, "What Queen was this, that you knew, young sir?"

Tallys said, "Ah, it was long ago. Just a tale now, that a little bird told me." I bowed at that, to more laughter. "The Duke's daughter grew weary of this stream of hopefully covetous men and envious of the Queen's power. So she filled her ears with goosedown and went to the Queen's tower in the woods and climbed over and under and around the sleeping men to the top of the tower and wrapped the birds in her skirts to take them for herself. But a willful wind came through the windows and blew the goosedown from her ears. The first bird sang, and the Duke's daughter fell asleep on the spot and tumbled from the tower to the ground far below. The Queen found her broken amongst the branches, still asleep, tossed and twisted in her pain like a nightmare. The Queen wept to see such suffering. The second bird saw this and sang his song, and the young woman sighed and settled with a smile to her death."

The listeners muttered in dismay. I gave a warning call but Tallys continued.

“The Queen lifted the Duke’s daughter in her arms and carried her to the river and set her body in, that it might float back to the Duchy by the sea. But at the touch of the water the third bird, that was still tangled in the young woman’s skirts, sang out a song so gentle and joyous that the woman awoke to life again. She laughed with delight to see the sky above her and the river beneath her, the birds flying circles around her, and most of all the Queen’s beautiful face before her. And the Queen laughed to hear her laugh and the blackbirds wove their song through the laughter and they returned to live in the Queen’s tower in the woods for all their days. The Duke’s daughter did awake the sleeping men and sent them home, as her hand was not the Duke’s to promise, and regardless she wanted the shelves for her books.

There was laughter and applause from some around the fire, but others took their cue from Lady Meriel’s thoughtful frown.

“I should have bound the birds’ beaks with string,” Lady Meriel said.

“I should have wrung their necks and rid the world of their mischief,” said the man who strode out of the darkness, all in red like the fire.

The crowd leapt to their feet again.

“Duke Edouard,” Lady Meriel said. “You’ve just missed a most interesting tale.”

“I heard enough to be interested in the teller. I would tell him in turn a lesson on respect for Dukes and Queens.”

The Duke’s fire-blinded eyes had not yet found Tallys, who looked to answer yet again. I sang my song, right at the Duke’s feet I was, and Tallys stopped and nodded, stepped back out of the light.

The Duke nearly caught me with a kick. I flew up and once around the circle, singing to make a point of it, then a wider circle around a tent where a young King bit his fingers to stay from sleep, and another, around a slim figure scattered to deepest green and dark earth under the trees, and once more around the fire where a girl stubborn as a Queen said, “We are well rid of such wild things,” and all there chorused their assent. So they thought, though my circles were not yet done.

* * *

“They are done now, my Merle,” I say. The blackbird will not go straight into his cage; he bows his head to the wren and walks a circle around the nest. But then a shrieking comes from one window and, so fast, the other, and the blackbird steps quickly between the bones to the safety of the cage.

“Safety? So you think,” I say to him, and hold up my hand. A rush of wind over feather and a shape shoots up from below the windowledge, wings flared to land on my wrist as gentle as any songbird. Though not as light; no small bird like her mate is the female sparrowhawk, and more like to make a meal of the blackbird than the wren.

But the sparrowhawk pays no notice to the blackbird. She makes a courtesy to the wren, studies the egg in its nest a moment, marks me with her avid unblinking stare as I roust out her prize.

In the window blunders a bat, mistaking the tower room for the safety of a cave, perhaps, and the hawk steps up into the air, effortless, and down again to drive the bat against the table by the nest. The blackbird watches with interest and some relief as the hawk unmakes the bat to meat and bone.

Sated, then, and sleepy, this bird of my reminding, she stands by the nest with its egg and tells her tale.

* * *

What the sparrowhawk says to the egg:

In and down, I gyred. Under a peregrine who pealed once, to remind me she could take me for my impertinence. Over the upheld wrists of stout lords and bright ladies, a-horse in the field that edged up against the forest. By wide-spaced elms and beeches, where servants and churls sat and gossiped over their

labors. Through a flock of finches, indignant shadows reeling, scattered and scolding once I had passed. To a stop, on an arm slim but sturdy as any oak. Another of the laboring women in shape and dress, but of no earthly eye.

“Bold my Shae, Shae my beauty, find another perch,” She said. “You’re much too fierce for these folk I go to meet.”

She was no less fierce, to my sight, but my sight is too clear for the glamour in which She conceals herself.

To a high-branched elm, then, and down to a hawthorn to hide amongst the white blooms and one yellow, that was a butterfly left pierced on a thorn by a shrike.

Below my branch two women worked, needle and knife, and up to them She came and sat down among them.

“Well-a-day,” one woman said. “I’m Bea and this is Agnes, both of High Castle and here at the King’s service.”

“Tallys,” She said, “of here.” She waved a hand toward the woods. “At no service but my own this fine day.”

“A fine day, to be sure, for walking in the woods or riding the fields,” Agnes said with a sniff. “But a busy one for those of us set to sewing with no proper tools or table for it.”

Agnes was carefully unpicking the threads that held a coat-of-arms to a gentleman’s tabard, while Bea was sewing a sigil to a banner. There was a scattering of discarded embroidery about the two, some of which She smoothed across Her lap.

Pictures such as men make; some a gold tower on a blue field, some an eagle at wing, some a stag's head with a bird between its antlers.

"It's like a story," She said, "or a Book of Days."

"A story of days wasted," Agnes grumbled. "First King Hugh says he wants an eagle instead of the arms of High Castle, though the gold tower was good enough for old King Edwin."

"At least it was a gold eagle on blue, and so we could reuse the thread," Bea said mildly.

"And then it was the stag and bird, for the anniversary of his marrying Queen Meriel, he says, though I'm sure she'd've rathered a palace or some such." Agnes snorted. "Which of the two was the stag, and which the sparrow, was the jape down the inn for all the Spring."

"It's a wren," She said quietly.

"Hush, now, Agnes. Himself's just over there, ain't he?" Bea said, with a nod.

Forward She leaned to look to the field beyond the tree. "Hugh is here?" She asked.

"*King* Hugh," Bea said primly. "On the white gelding there, with the Queen and Duke Edouard. And best the two of you ain't heard being disrespectful by the Duke, I tell you."

The man on the horse like a robin on a twig, plump and placid. At his right his mate in seagreen and at his left his kin in red and both with a sharp enough eye.

“Has he grown so fat in his high castle?” She asked.

The two women laughed, Bea with an anxious glance toward the field.

“Pillows,” Agnes said. “It’s pillows, ain’t it, tied all about him.”

“The King has fits,” Bea whispered, “and thinks he’s made of glass, so they say. He goes about padded lest he trip and shatter.”

“And calls the hunt but will not enter the forest, so his house and all the gathered nobles drink and trample the fields instead.”

“And changes his coat of arms yet again,” Bea said, and raised the banner she was sewing. “To a wildwoman, yet, and what will they have to say at the inn about *that*, I ask you?” Green eyes on a bramble of brown, the banner was, and She gazed into it like it was Her mirror, then away with a frown. I felt a disquiet, as if the wind had turned before a storm. Narrowed my vision, a blood-dimmed focus on the field beyond.

“Wildman, ain’t it, with a beard?” Agnes said.

“No, see it’s her hair.” The two woman turned the banner about, chattering.

Motion in that field, those on horseback turning this way, servants and soldiers scurrying amongst them. Ahead of them a man on foot in the red of Duke Eduoard’s household.

“They come,” She said and rose ready to stand beneath me. Such was her tension that I would have dropped to her shoulder had she not raised a hand to stay me.

The two women scrambled to their feet as the man approached.

“The Duke asks after the King’s new banner,” he said.

“It’s ready, ain’t it?” said Agnes.

Bea held it up, with a more gracious, “As best we could do out here.”

“As long as it gets us moving again, it’s a bloody work of art,” the Duke’s man said. Over his shoulder he looked and added, “Here the Duke comes, and the King and Queen themselves. Give it here, and keep your mouths shut, eh? The King’s mood is changeable this morning.”

“Do tell,” Agnes said, earning an elbow from Bea.

The Duke’s man took the banner and turned to greet the riders. The gathered nobles, sensing some entertainment, had followed the King’s party to flock around the tree like crows about a carcass. The horses, as bored as their riders and

unsettled by the same disquiet as were She and I, jostled amongst themselves and threatened the feet of those who walked.

The King's horse stopped somewhat ahead of the others, of its own accord, it seemed, as the King was looking down distractedly, prodding the cushions strapped around him with a uncertain frown.

The Duke's man, conscious of the audience, bowed low. "Your Majesties, King Hugh and Queen Meriel, your Grace Duke Edouard, my Ladies and Gentlemen, at his Majesty's command, the sign of the Wise Woman of the Woods."

He unfurled the banner with a flourish and held it up in front of him. The King's horse, startled, took a step backwards into the Queen's, which nipped at its flank.

The King looked up, eyes wide on a head made small by his padded bulk, and saw the embroidered head before him. He went very still on his jittering horse. "The wren. My queen," he said, very quietly.

"The what, my dear?" Queen Meriel asked, pulling at her reins, caught between her horse's ill-temper and the press of the crowd.

The King showed no sign of having heard her. His focus was on the banner, an unblinking gaze that acknowledged nothing but its target, a mirror of my own expression, of Hers.

Then he stood in his stirrups, pulled his sword with surprising grace, and shouted, “The enemy is upon us! Strike! To me and strike!” He swung, slicing the banner in two, taking the Duke’s man’s ear and burying the sword in the man’s shoulder.

The Duke’s man fell back against Bea. The King’s sword pulled free, tracing an arc of blood across the women below me, the white blossoms around me. In me the smell of blood awoke the chill unmoving fury of the hunt.

The Duke’s man had made no sound, but Agnes gave a shriek as sharp as mine and stepped over the fallen man, arms raised.

“Betrayed! To me and strike!” the King cried and swung again, a blow that would have cleaved the woman’s head if her arm had not deflected the blow at the cost of fingers and flesh.

Queen Meriel had gotten her horse alongside the King’s left; she stopped and stared in incomprehension. Duke Eduoard, who had leaned in his saddle to avoid the King’s first wild swing, continued the motion to slip to the ground. He ducked under his horse’s head, drew his sword in time to catch the King’s next blow, which would otherwise have struck down Agnes where she stood over the Duke’s man, the ruin of her hand still raised as if to shield them.

Duke Eduoard struck again at the King's sword, attempting perhaps to disarm him. One of the King's huntsmen shouldered past the horses at that moment and seeing the carnage and the Duke's blade, shouted, "The King is betrayed!" The huntsman bore one of the long ceremonial knives used in the Unmaking of the stag at the end of the hunt, and raised it against the Duke. The Duke turned to block the blow one-handed, the bright brittle steel of the hunter's knife shattering. He shoved the huntsman down under the hooves of the horses, which were already maddened by the blood, stamping fear or aggression in accordance to their breeding. Over went a lady of the Queen's household with a screech, as guards in the King's service or the Duke's shoved forward with weapons ready.

Queen Meriel had leaned to grab the padding around the King's torso, was with a determined grimace attempting to pull him from his horse. The King turned and would have struck her had he not fumbled his grip on his sword. The King's motion, and a sideways step of the Queen's nervous mount, tumbled her out of her saddle and under the hooves.

The King, oblivious to the Queen's peril, looked around and saw Her then, where she stood over Bea's attempt to bind Agnes's hand with scraps of the banner. Amidst the anarchy, the King's gaze regained its focus. "What glamour is this," he said and lifted the sword over Her.

Two beats of my wings, sending white blood-spattered blossoms spiraling, and my talons were in the flesh of his face. As he beat at me with the pommel of his sword She reached up and, succeeding where the Queen had failed, pulled him from his horse.

“I shatter, I shatter!” he cried as he fell. Down with him I fluttered, one claw caught in his cheekbone.

The King did not shatter. He rolled in his absurd padding to land half atop the Queen. He turned his head to look past me up at Her. “Tallys,” he whispered, “it is broken,” and then his eyes unfocused and his face fell slack.

To Her shoulder I leapt as She leaned to take the sword from the King’s limp hand. But Queen Meriel, pinned under the King’s padded bulk, grabbed Her wrist. She allowed the Queen to pull her close.

“He calls you the name of the Wild Woman of his nightmares,” the Queen said. The wings of her brows lowered, and I hissed into that threat. “And almost I think I know your face. Nor just from that evil banner.”

“The banner is no doing of mine,” She said, “nor any of this mortal madness.” Shaking the Queen’s grip, She stood, and looked back at Bea, who cradled two bodies under white hawthorn blossoms.

“And anyway, the banner is unmade,” She said.

“Would that you were,” the Queen said. Her one hand found the King’s sword, and she pushed him off with the other.

I would have struck at those gull brows, but that She raised her arm again.

Up instead, I went. Back She stepped under the hawthorn, pulling Her glamour about her, fading into the wood. The Queen rose, sword in hand and eyes gone wild in confusion. Around the tree I flew, as Queen Meriel, already doubting what she had seen, knelt again to the foolish fallen King and cried for aid. Over the baffled brawling crowd, as Duke Eduoard fought unleashed anarchy. Under branches, as Bea spread a blue and gold coat gone red with blood and silver with tears over Agnes’s silent upturned face. Up and out, wider and wider, She slipping under the trees and I over, our differing paths to the tower at the heart of the woods.

* * *

The sparrowhawk tears at the ribs of the bat but will not eat more. She raises her head and the blackbird steps to the far side of his cage and grumbles at me.

“It’s not you of which she thinks, my bright-eyed Merle,” I tell him. “It’s a fat foolish robin she’d take.” I hold out my arm and the sparrowhawk steps up, her grip sharp and steady and so too the look she gives me.

“But I have no robin for you, not now,” I say, and set her into her cage. “It is no longer the season.” The sparrowhawk closes her eyes, and the blackbird shakes out his feathers in relief and trills his wry song. But the wren answers with her own clarion song, no less lovely but loud, so loud for such a small shape, and the blackbird bows his head and falls silent.

“Ah, Jenny Wren, grant me a moment or two before this next reminding.” I pace a circle around my tower room. The moon’s light is flown from the west window, but the forest has its own green light for the likes of us, and a smudge in the east window promises dawn. I tidy what is left of the bat, spool some loose thread, find an errant holly berry like a drop of blood on the mantle and feed it to the blackbird. I straighten the nest on the table with its one tiny egg, touch the egg with one finger to feel the quivering life inside. There is one more story yet to come; it is not yet time to wake it.

“Not yet,” I sigh. “But soon enough.”

The sparrowhawk opens her eye as if in response; she’s looking not at me but to the east window. I sigh again and straighten my skirts, rummage amongst the loose pages and stray feathers on the side table for the carved wooden box. Its contents stir sleepily, beetles as bright as gems. I can hear the jackdaw approaching, the uneven rhythm of its wings and a chortling as if it rehearsed its tale.

“Now,” it says from the window ledge, before I bid it speak.
“Quick, now, here, now.”

“Always,” I say. “Always here.”

I put the box on the table by the nest and the jackdaw jumps across to eat its fill, first turning each new beetle about to admire its gleam before swallowing. It lays the brightest at the feet of the wren and bows as she takes it in several dainty bites, steps wide around the sparrowhawk’s cage though her eyes are closed again, mutters something that sets the blackbird cackling. Then it stares up at me and I stare down at it. Black, all black it is, like a shadow on the table, lacking even the blackbird’s orange trim. Though in daylight its eye would be my own green, and daylight would come soon enough. Just one moment more, I think.

“Now,” it says again. It will not look at the nest with its egg. It looks to me instead.

I lower my head and bid it speak.

* * *

What the jackdaw says to Tallys:

All in others’ feathers we were, entering the King’s charivari. I wore oriole and yellowhammer, a crown of goldfinch and a trail of blue peacock with eyes like suns. And you wore my own black, a sleek fall of feathers from shoulder to heel, a backwards sweep from cheek and brow like wings,

neither a lords' soft hat or a ladies' high-peaked veil, your eyes like oak-green glass and near as bright as mine. A fine disguise it would have been had you not given your name as Tallys at the entry to the tent. But such are mortal folk, that they confuse their own fancy with true nature and welcome the Lady of the Wood into their masquerade.

The tent inside was decorated as a clearing in the forest at night. Garlanded posts formed a gallery around the outer edge, with carved benches below and platforms for musicians among faux branches. In the center were vats of wine styled as ponds in which floated fish of gold and lilies of silver, piled high with fruit and surrounded by roasts of boar and buck, hare and fowl, all posed as if drinking, and the flesh of one great hart laid out on its own skin with its head on a stake overlooking. The musicians sent competing tunes to flirt and fight in the air overhead, which was thick with the scent of cut branches and burnt meat. A single chandelier hung like the Moon.

“An sad end for a hunt,” you said, stopping by the hart.

“A fine *currée* for curs,” said I.

“Hush, now, or the Queen will bind your beak with string,” you said.

“More like to wring your neck,” said I.

“I must abide your presence, bird of my recalling, but I could bid your voice fly elsewhere,” you said.

“They say the swan squawks when the jackdaw is silent,” said I. “Look, those ladies there think you talk to yourself, and laugh behind their hands. Let us go speak to them and show how well trained the two of us are, we wild things in the guise of the courtly.”

“And the court in the seeming of the wild. There is a balance to things, which this King threatens.

“The balance is broken these thirty years, and was it he who broke it?” said I, and set the ladies talking behind their hands again. You raised your hand then and I said no more for a while.

The ladies took your gesture as directed to them and approached. They were arrayed as animals of the forest: gowns of fur or feather, hair shaped to ear and antler, masks with eyes of hawk and hart. A Hare swept her hand in a courtesy and said, “We have a wager that you can settle, if the bird on your shoulder is a peacock or a common hen?”

A Quail with a bobbing plume of ruby said, “Was the wager on the bird? I thought it on the shoulder.” Their laughter fluttered up to fret the musicians at their playing.

You stroked my head with a finger, a thumb hooked firmly under my beak, and said, “Who’s to say which feathers are more rightful, those acquired by birth or those acquired by choice? Strip enough away and then who can judge?”

The Hare waggled its tall veiled ears. “Strip away, then, Jack or Jill Daw, for I assure you I have excellent judgment.”

Laughter flew again about their false faces.

“Come, this is a rough music,” said a new voice. It was the Sea: a hem of leaping fish, waves of seagreen silk and silver thread that rose to a spray of veil about a great nautilus of hair. The mask was scaled with mother of pearl and topped with sweeping gull wings of pearl. “We are here to delight the King with the harmony of nature, not the babbling of beasts.”

The group swirled in a murmur of courtesies. The Hare, as bold and foolish as her chosen guise and the worse for wine, said, “Beg pardon, you Majesty, but we saw these two cowlings and thought they intended the little murder.” This said with a shake of her furry tail.

The Sea joined in the laughter, briefly, and then said, “Let us enjoy the peace of this garden awhile, before falls the apple of the King’s diversion. And let us be wary of drinking too deeply from the pool, lest we fall in.” This last to the Hare, who caught the Sea’s warning tune and wisely had no answering chorus.

The crowd dispersed in twos and threes to explore the false clearing. The Sea turned to us and said, “My dark-feathered friends, would you join me for a stroll?”

You nodded, not quite a bow. I had to duck to avoid the feathers of your cheeks sweeping up, and again as they came down.

“A clever bird,” the Sea said. “As are all the crow family, despite their mischief. I thought I heard it speak as you entered the tent.”

“It has a gift for mimicry,” you said. “But the tales say the jackdaw, vain as it is, knows when to keep its silence.”

“She give us a penny to bury the wren,” said I.

The Sea’s gull brows tilted toward me. “I remember, now, the fable of the bird that dressed itself in fine cast-off feathers when the birds contested who would be King.” The Sea gestured toward a bench under the false branches, carved like a fallen log and strewn with pillows like moss. “Here, now, sit with me, if you please.”

“Always,” you said.

“Yes, of course it was the jackdaw,” the Sea continued. “My mistake, but for a moment, I thought it was the blackbird.”

You shrugged. I flapped once to keep my balance, and you smoothed me still with a hand, swept the other to take in the tent. “It’s hard to judge a bird’s true nature in this false light.”

“Or by fire,” the Sea said. “I thought I heard *you* speak as well, as you entered. I thought I heard you give a name not wise nor welcome here.”

You shrugged again. “My mistake, but for a moment, I thought it was the King had welcomed the Wild into this tent.”

The Sea made a noise like foam on rocks.

“A gift for mimicry,” I said, to both you and her.

“As for wisdom,” you said, “that’s also hard to judge in by false light. You might see more clearly under true trees.”

“True?” the Sea said, quiet and cold, and took off her mask. Queen Meriel’s eyes were no less hard than were the Seas’s pearls. “You say ‘true’ to me, you whose every appearance is one seeming or another? Come, if you want judgment, take off that mask and show me your true face.”

“If you are so certain it is a mask,” you said, “take it off me yourself.”

Queen Meriel reached her hand up, paused, her grey eyes reflecting your green, ran a finger along one long cheek feather then down to the tiny pinfeathers of your wrist. She held her hand out before me and I stepped up.

“Its like those fables and firelight tales,” Queen Meriel said to me, in a voice both sad and wondering. “The King is taken by the Wild and the Wild will not give him leave to come home.”

You sighed then, that close to human you were there and then, for all your feathers. “The Wild does not take or give,” you said, “it just *is*. If you had stayed by your ocean instead of coming here and looked each day on its waves dancing with the

light and dreamt each night of its deep dark wonders until its ceaseless changing peace filled all your heart and you threw yourself in out of love, let it fill you, let yourself become part of it forever, tell me, if you did that, would those you left behind judge the ocean?

The Queen's hand trembled under me.

But then you said, "No doing of mine."

The Queen's hand grew very still. She and I together said, recalling, "Nor any of this mortal madness."

"Oh yes," the Queen said, and her fingers closed about my legs. "Maybe those I left behind would not judge, but I would. As I sank and drowned, I would speak my judgment with my last breath, not because the ocean was responsible, but because it *refused to be*. And so the King speaks, every night in his sleep, when and if it comes. In his fits he says 'It is broken', but in his dreams he says, "No, Tallys, no, it will break'. 'No,' he said, and whose doing, then, was the breaking?"

She shook me by the legs as if to demonstrate that last word. I kept my beak shut despite the pain. Now was my time to be silent and listen and remember.

"I had to know what manner of King he would be toward all the wild places," you said. "You speak of responsibility. I am responsible to that in my care."

The Queen fury was as quiet and certain as the tide. “And so am I to those in mine,” she said. “These people so far from my sea, not my responsibility by birth but by choice. Ah, choice, choice. Would you hear how I would chose?” Her grip was about my body now, and very strong. “It is this. If you will not give the King back to us whole, then *take him entirely*, before his descent drowns us all as well. Look how your Wild undoes us.”

The Queen’s gesture took in the masqueraded court, the sad mockery of the hunt. At that moment a group of men leapt into the false meadow. They were dressed as Wildmen in fur of dyed flax and cloaks of vine and branch, masks of leaf and bark. The men were linked by silver chains that jangled as they capered. They howled like baying hounds, and on that cue the musicians took up a rough ancient tune.

One of the Wildmen shouted, “You creatures, you crawlers and creepers, rattle your bones in fear! The hunt is upon you!”

The Queen stopped, mid-gesture, fingers tightening about my wings. You leaned forward to better see, a scent on you like the promise of lightening cutting the thick air.

“That is the King’s voice,” Queen Meriel said.

You put your hand on the Queen’s arm and her grip on me lessened somewhat. “No,” you said, and the Queen gave you a fierce look; if you had continued, “No doing of mine,” I am

certain she would have crushed me. “No, not the King’s voice. It is his person, but the voice is the voice of his madness.”

The King and his band were spinning around the tent, rattling their chains to the music, spitting wine and curses. “You dung dwellers, you filthy fur, do you know us? Do you dare guess?” they shouted.

“Our fabulous King,” the foolish Hare cried, laughing and clapping, and got a face full of wine in reply.

“No no no!” the dancers shouted in time to the music. “No Kings in the wild, they’ve all been betrayed, the Queen’s in the branches and the hart is Unmade.”

The Queen took your hand off her arm, put her face close to ours. “Madness is his voice, the only voice you’ve left him,” she said. She put me back on your shoulder with a care which said much about her, gathered her skirts and stood.

The Queen had only taken a step, though, and you had only just started to rise, when Duke Eduoard stepped out from under the far gallery, his face as red as if he wore a mask of blood. “Enough,” he growled. “Have some respect for the Kingship, if not for the King. Which one of you fools is he?”

“Which one, which one?” the dancers sang.

The Duke clutched at one of the dancers, got a handful of flaxen fur and a splattering of wine. “Enough of this darkness. Bring me a light!” Not waiting for a response, he grabbed a

stake on which was mounted a roasted goose, ripe with fat, and shoved it into the hanging candle Moon. The bird flared and caught fire. The Duke caught a pair of dancers by the chain between them, shoved the dim dripping torch in one face and then the other. “The King,” he demanded. “Which of you is the King?”

You went to leaf and glamour beneath me, were suddenly beside the Queen without taking a step. “The flames,” you said, “and those costumes”. The Queen echoed the Duke’s curse, lifted the waves of her skirt and ran.

She had not yet reached the center when a rivulet of flame ran down the stake and over the Duke’s fingers. He cursed and dropped the torch at the feet of the closest Wildman, a splash of fat and fire, and before the Queen’s heart could beat twice or mine a dozen times—as yours beats not at all—the man’s flax fur and cloak of pine boughs was all aflame.

There was a strange silence, like that moment after thunder when all the birds go still, just the crackle of the flame and a splashing as the Queen ran straight through the pool of wine. And then the burning man howled, and the creatured court under the gallery took up his cry in panic. The Duke, cradling his hand, stumbled back to fall into the roasted hart. The musicians, unable to see down through the false canopy of leaves, played louder.

The Wildmen tried to flee the fire but their effort simply wrapped the chains between them tighter. In the few steps it took the Queen to reach them, they were all alight, and the leaves of the 'branches' overhead were starting to smoke.

“Which of you is the King?” Queen Meriel shouted. She pulled one of the men into the pool of wine by the silver chain, though her skin sizzled where it touched the metal, and tore at his mask. The face was twisted unrecognizable by the pain, the hair unburnt but black, one of the King's knights.

Again you were beside the Queen, knee deep in wine. “Hugh,” you said, and I flew through the swirling flame and smoke to circle the one Wildman who burned in silence, curled on the ground in the center of the madness.

Queen Meriel stepped from the pool, under one chain and over another, reached for the King, but the flames, though low, were fierce. She looked about, saw the hart's skin and tried to pull it over the king, but the Duke was still sprawled across it. She knelt, instead, and smothered the King in the sea of her skirts. The wine-soaked silk hissed, a cloud of steam and smoke around us, not enough to hide the last desperate agony of the Wildmen as their flesh began to fall from the bone.

The King muttered something to Queen Meriel, only his face visible in the pool of the Queen's skirts, one embroidered fish draped over a miraculously unburnt brow.

The Queen put a hand on that brow. “Broken,” she said, agreeing. She looked up. From her expression she was looking not for aid but for you. She saw me instead and raised her hand, and despite her expression I flew to her. We crows are well used to ruin and take no sides.

“Tell her,” Queen Meriel said, “if she does not take this Wild from us, then I shall come take the Wild from her. *Par force*, as they say. Men may hunt for pleasure, but not I. Tell her.”

And so I have.

* * *

“And so you have,” I say. I offer my hand and the jackdaw steps up. I hold it to my cheek, feel the feathers that I have worn myself, at once soft and sharp, and whisper, “When the time comes, tell her that I do not hunt, for pleasure or otherwise. I *am* the hunt, for ever and ever.”

The jackdaw will not look at me, but it has no choice but to remember. I put it in its cage. The other birds look up; even the sparrowhawk opens its eyes. I expect the wren’s song, too clear and loud, but it is the jackdaw that speaks. “What name will you give it, this last bird? You never gave me a name.”

I turn away, somehow tangle myself in another loose thread from the loom, blindly tug until it snaps and falls to the floor.

“I never give or take,” I say, unwrapping the end of the thread from around my legs, not looking up. “And names make no difference to the likes of us. Choose one yourself, if you must.”

There is silence. I pick up the nest. The egg is so small.

“Tallys,” the jackdaw says. I do not look up. “Now,” it says.

I do not look up, but I nod, and touch the egg with a fingertip, and it shakes and cracks from side to side, the tiny shape inside unfolding. The goldfinch trembles and opens its eyes against what little light there is.

“Who am I to tell my own story?” I ask. The jackdaw is silent, all the birds are silent.

I cup the goldfinch between my hands and hold it to my chest, a hundred tiny heartbeats against my silence as the goldfinch grows to fill the cage of my fingers. Even full-grown the bird is tiny, almost as small as the wren, a bright red mask slashed with black and gold stripes across her wings. I keep her to my chest with one hand, singing little nothings, while I feel with the other on the mantle for the prick of thistle that is the goldfinch’s fate to eat. And eat she does, her first meal, perhaps her last, plucking the tiny seeds from the between the thorns. And then I set her in her cage and bid her listen.

* * *

What Tallys says to the goldfinch:

You had a sister.

She hatched in that same nest by the fire yesterday, a little before dawn. She fed from that same thistle, and when she was strong enough I sent out past the forest to where the King's high castle sits stone on stone. She found the King where he lay in his bed, recovering from his burns if not from his despair, and sang him a song that I taught her, notes that drift, falling light like leaves in green shade, a song of the peace those leaves find as they pass to cool soil and lose themselves in the roots of the tall trees.

The King heard that song in his dreams, and those dreams for once did not end in fear but in a gentle waking, and after a while he sat up in his bed and saw your sister in his window and said, "Yes, yes, I see."

All this your sister told me when she found me in the forest, and not long after, the King came following her song.

His hair had been burnt away; a fringe had grown back, but only in spots. One arm hung in heavy bandages and ended too soon, where the red-hot chains had taken fingers. There was a scar across his cheekbone where the sparrowhawk had held him that bloody day under the hawthorn. But his eyes held the same blue that they had as a boy, like a sliver of sky that had lost itself. He stared at me with those eyes for a long time.

"An odd end for a hunt," he said, finally.

My laugh was almost not bitter in my mouth. “This is but the quest,’ you said when last you were here.”

“The quest is done,” the King said, “when one finds a hart in its harbouring. And I did find the hart back then, did I not?”

“So you did, Hugh.”

“Tallys,” he said, “when my Uncle found me asleep the next morning, with the marks of a great stag all around me, did you set that stag against me, or to protect me against the Wild?”

“What do you think, Hugh son of Edwin King?”

He stared again for a while, until the goldfinch, your sister, flew up in a circle about him and landed on his shoulder. He raised his good hand and she jumped down to it. He gently shut his fingers about her, a little cage of bone. “I think you *are* the Wild. And in my dreams—dreams are a sort of mirror, aren’t they?”

“Yes, Hugh.”

“In my dreams sometimes you turn into a bird and sometimes into the stag. Did you protect me from yourself, then?”

This laugh was wholly bitter. “No, Hugh King of the Three Kingdoms. No, I did not.”

There had been horns in the distance ever since Hugh had entered the trees, and now those horns grew close enough for

the king to hear. He lifted his head and listened. "That is my cousin Eduoard," he said.

I nodded. "I hear he comes this way, on horse with a few men besides."

"Hunting me," the King said.

I nodded again.

"I would rather not be found this time," the King said and though his voice was still calm, his shoulders began to shake.

"I can make the way hard, so that they must leave the horses and come through the trees on foot, but your cousin the Duke knows the woods too well not to track you here."

"Then take me from here. In the stories, the Queen of the Wild has a tower at the heart of the woods."

"The Wild has no queen, Hugh, it just is. And if there is a tower at its heart, your cousin the Duke would find it as well, soon enough."

I tilted my head to listen, the rattle of leaves and the distant cry of birds, and said, "Nor is your cousin the only one who comes."

"Meriel," he said.

"With many men, and torches."

The King was shaking too badly to stand, now. He lowered himself to the ground. "This is as far as I can go," he said to the goldfinch, your sister, still caged in his fingers. "Now its your

time to fly higher.” He raised his hand and opened his fingers. But your sister sat still.

“She’s not a wren, she’s a goldfinch,” I said. I sat down next to him and held out my hand, but your sister would not come to me.

“And what story has the goldfinch?” the King asked.

“Penance,” I said. “She pays penance amongst thistle and thorn.”

“Penance for what?”

“In the stories, for knowing too much of the future. But was that her story after all?”

“It’s mine now,” Hugh said, and closed her fingers gently about her again. We waited then, for a while, in the cool leaf light, as birds followed their own stories overhead and other creatures rustled over leaves or under soil, a small moment of peace then, as small as the goldfinch your sister. That glamour I cannot escape, that mortal seeming that mortals see in which I have no more choice than does the mirror over its reflected form, for a short while it drifted and dappled into leaf light and Hugh saw me as I am.

Finally he sighed, and said, “And the story of the hart?”

“The hart hath a bone in its heart that bringeth great comfort.”

“Yes, that,” the King said. “Tallys, is it true?”

“If it were,” I said, “the only way to find it would be a terrible Unmaking.”

Duke Eduoard stepped into the clearing, with a few men on either side, swords drawn. “The Unmaking is a noble art,” the Duke said. “The ritual honors the hunters and the hunted. It is a matter of respect.” He drew his own sword and spat, a wet splatter off the King’s ruined scalp and into my face. “The two of you we will chop into pieces that even the dogs will disdain to take. There is no hound to stand guard over you this time, Hugh, only this witch that has taken your wits.”

I laughed, and this time there was no bitterness, but a great deal of sorrow. “Do you mortal folk never listen? I do not take nor give. I just am. And just now, I am behind you.”

The hart came from the trees at such a speed that even a hawk would have marvelled and tossed the two men to the right of the Duke into the air. They flew like birds for a space, but did not land as well. The hart reared and came down on the men to the left, who fell under his hooves without time to shout their surprise.

The Duke did not shout, in surprise or otherwise. He leapt over the King and buried his hand in my hair, grunting as the thorns and brambles bit his palm, and dragged me to my feet.

The stag stopped behind the King. So great he was that, even though Hugh had regained his feet, the stag looked over the King's head at us.

The Duke held his sword to my throat. "Call the beast off, witch, and your death will be a swift one," he growled in my ear. "Otherwise, I promise you we shall be a long while at it, and you will well understand the art of the Unmaking before I am through."

I laughed one last time, in the Duke's arms. "What you call an art and think your own is *my* story, an endless circle of Making and Unmaking, and was so when men first came to these woods and learned it from me."

And the stag laughed with me, a bellow that shook the trees, and he stepped past the King. The Duke swore and raised his sword above his head. But as he struck at the stag, and as the stag lowered its great antlers to catch that blow, the King pushed his way between them.

"No," the King said, and knocked me out of the Duke's grasp, his ruined arm raised to catch the Duke's sword. I would have laughed at the way time mirrored itself, but I was done laughing. I fell to the ground, and over me there was a great noise, a meeting of metal and horn, flesh and feather and blood and bone.

Queen Meriel found me there, some time later, bringing dogs and men and torches. The King lay curled in the center of the clearing, his head in my lap. All around us, from the edge of the clearing to no more than the length of an arm away, the stag had torn the earth, mingling his blood and that of the Duke. What else was left of the Duke and his men lay scattered, and if the dogs disdained to take the pieces, the leaves would cover them soon enough.

“Meriel, is that you?” The King asked. His sight had gone some while before, along with too much blood. His voice was measured in shorter and shorter breaths. “I did not shatter after all, it wasn’t me, broken, it was a mirror, of glass, and a girl. I remember.”

“Do you now?” I asked.

“I remember, or maybe it was the bird.” Hugh somehow opened the fingers of his remaining hand, though the bones were splintered and bare. The goldfinch, your sister, lay broken in his palm but he could not see. “Meriel, do you know the story of how the wren became queen of the birds?”

“Yes,” the Queen said.

“Yes,” the King agreed, and died.

Meriel sat down next to me, and shifted the King’s head from my lap to hers.

“This was not the taking I meant, when I spoke with you at the King’s charivari,” she said, in a calm voice.

“No,” I said.

“Will you not tell me that this is no doing of yours, nor any of our mortal madness? Will you tell me I should not judge?”

“No,” I said.

“Will you not remind me that you do not take nor give?”

“No,” I said.

“Well, I do take and give,” the Queen said, still quiet, the quiet of slow tides and sunlight stone, as old and wild as my trees. “And I give you this, an evening and night to make what peace you can, while I lay the King to his. And with the dawn I shall come to take you. You are too much for us, too wild, too much a promise of wonder.”

She looked up at me. “And if you hide within your glammers, I’ll take the trees and all that shelter under them, by fire and steel, every last one of them.”

“I shall wait for you at dawn. There is a tower at the heart of the woods—”

“Yes,” Queen Meriel said. “I remember the story.”

* * *

I open all the cages then, and the goldfinch steps up into my palm. “And will you remember, bird of my revival, what I

have told you, and the stories of your brothers and sisters here?”

She shakes her wings loose and sings her consent.

“Then fly, until you find another woods and another tower, or if there is no tower, then find a child alone in the woods and tell her this tale, and with luck and time she will build a new tower and you will live there with her in the woods for all your days.”

I take the goldfinch to the window and kiss her head and open my fingers. And unlike her sister she springs up and out, into the air and away from the tower. There’s an uneven flapping and the jackdaw flings itself past me. “Tallys,” it cries. Whether it meant me or the goldfinch I do not know. It is all one to me.

“The rest of you may go as well,” I say, but they do not. The sparrowhawk preens a feather smooth and shuts her eyes again. The wren comes to my hand and sings her song. The blackbird paces a circle around my feet. “I do not know the song, so lovely it would ease the living gladly to their death and set the dead to waking,” he says, apologetically.

“It was just a story that I made,” I say.

We watch the goldfinch fly in the dim red light, the jackdaw like a shadow by her side. But this is the west window,

not the east, and this glow is not the dawn but torches under the trees, coming closer.

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Gregory Norman Bossert is an author, filmmaker, and musician, currently based just over the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. He started writing in 2009, attended the Clarion Writer's Workshop in 2010, and has had over a dozen stories appear in venues such as Asimov's Science Fiction. His story "[The Telling](#)" in BCS #109 won the 2013 World Fantasy Award, and he was a finalist for the 2014 Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. When not writing, he works as a layout artist for Industrial Light & Magic, wrangling spaceships and monsters. More information on his writing, films, and music is available at SuddenSound.com and on his blog GregoryNormanBossert.com.

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THE RUGMAKER'S LOVERS

by Brynn MacNab

The rugmaker built her own house, and because she was not a carpenter or a bricklayer or a stonemason, her house was unlike any other. For seven days she worked her loom on the empty plot of land, and she slept beside it at night. When it rained she covered the loom with her own blankets, said a charm over them, and let herself be soaked. When the weather was fine she hummed with the songbirds and wove their good cheer into her home.

On the third day her cousin, whom she had hired to bring her loom and herself across six villages in his cart, sent his wife to ask after the rugmaker's health. The rugmaker said that she was well and lacked for nothing. Her visitor looked doubtfully around at the loom and the stone-encircled fire pit and the few piled blankets. When she returned home, she told her husband exactly what the rugmaker had said and left out her own opinions. But she told the other good women of the village what a strange family she had married into, and afterward they found many unavoidable reasons to pass the rugmaker's new-

bought holding and cast a glance at her, and she wove their curiosity into her walls.

For the seven days following, the rugmaker slept all day and wove all night. When the king's riders passed on their great birds between her and the moon, she sang a prayer for renown and another for peace. When she caught sight or sound of an owl or fox hunting she whispered, "Thou and I, thou and I," so to secure the comradely goodwill of all things working like herself through the night.

On the third night a man crept out of the forest to sit beside the red ashes of the rugmaker's fire.

"I am a terrible outlaw," he told her as she worked. "I have killed a great lord, and I once stole a bracelet that was to be given to the queen herself."

The rugmaker listened to his talk and said not a word against him or his stories. She knew better than to shame a terrible outlaw with the village gossip (told by her cousin on the long and jouncing ride from home) that held him responsible for no worse than the theft of another man's ox. And so for the rest of that week she had from him many wonderful accounts of his wicked bravery, and she wove these into her house as well.

For the seven days after that the rugmaker wove dawns and sunsets into her house, and the rest of the time she slept,

and prayed, and pulled up grass and weeds, and stamped down a good earthen floor for her home. And little transpired during this time except for seven sunrises and sunsets, which are all the magic needed to make a thing that can endure.

In the last sunrise at the end of the three weeks' work, the rugmaker cut the cloth from her loom and left it flat and folded on her strong earth floor while she went to find the village priest. "Come bless my house," she said, "so that it will stand."

The priest went with her to look at her handiwork and her land. He was a man of not very much faith, so he said, "Perhaps if you put a wooden frame under it, it will be a good house."

"No," said the rugmaker. "It is not to be made of wood; if I were a furniture maker you would be right. But I only want a simple rugmaker's house. Surely God can give me that."

"Perhaps you had better see the wise woman," said the priest.

"It is not wisdom I want, but miracles," said the rugmaker. To herself she added, 'A priest should be ashamed to give away God's work to sinners.' But she followed his instructions to the wise woman's house.

The wise woman was much older than the rugmaker, and her house was a clutter of things that seemed to have no use—ridiculous constructions and broken things left unmended. (The rugmaker thought that she would never keep her own

house so carelessly.) The wise woman gave her a cup of tea and told her not to blame the priest too much. “If he did all he should, I would have no living. And leaving a living for others is also something a Christian should do. Not many people will pay for wisdom.”

When the rugmaker had finished her tea, she took the wise woman to her home. The wise woman picked up the cloth in her hands and complimented the rugmaker’s craftsmanship and her hours of work. “A woman should make her own house,” she said. “It is a good beginning for a life.” Then she spoke to the earth, and the wind, and the sky, and the cloth, and when she let it go the rugmaker’s house unfurled to stand as solid as any other. The rugmaker took her last coins from her shoe and gave them to the wise woman. Then she went inside and began to weave the rugs that she would sell.

The next day the priest came and blessed the rugmaker’s house, and commissioned a new aisle rug for the church. He was a good man, if timid, and he feared that the rugmaker would have too few customers in such a humble village. He wanted her to have a little money to start on something else—planting a garden, or raising a flock of chickens, or catching a man—if the need came for that.

The rugmaker did plant a garden, and she bought chickens too, but she did not want for work. Whenever a fine lady passed

near the village on her way between larger, more important places, the curiosity of the village women that the rugmaker had woven into her house called to the curiosity of the traveler. Whenever a young and ambitious nobleman rode by on his horse (for the village lay beside a broad thoroughfare and road of the kingdom), the outlaw's bold and exciting stories drew him to look more closely. Whenever a well-off pilgrim, the sins brought on by his riches well forgiven, passed by light-hearted on the way to his home, the priest's blessing caught at his baptized fancy. And because the rugmaker had made friends of distant horizons, of night-sneaking things that knew more than they should, and of hard work, she always had a rug that suited her caller's taste.

One day a warrior came walking alone on the road beside the rugmaker's village. As evening drew on he spied the rugmaker's odd house and thought, 'Here, surely, is someone who will take in a stranger.'

The rugmaker gave the warrior a good thick stew for his supper and told him to go to the priest, who would let him sleep in the church. She noticed the breadth of his shoulders, the banked fire in his eyes, the softened thunder rumble of his voice. 'If only,' she said to herself, 'he were not a fighting man. If only such a man could stand by my side someday.' Then she

resolved to put it from her mind. A woman who prayed every Sunday for peace could not marry a man who killed.

The warrior did as he was told, and the priest let him into the church and gave him a blanket. He slept the night on the thick aisle rug, and in the morning he went back to the rugmaker's house. She gave him bread and bacon to break his fast and bid him to remember, when he went to war, the kindness of women and to deal gently with them when he could.

"I will do as you ask," he said. But he went on, seeming troubled, "I slept on the rug you wove for the church, and I had dreams which I cannot remember, except that their strangeness surpassed anything I have seen."

'And little wonder,' the rugmaker thought, 'when a man of the sword sleeps in the house of God.' But she kept her own counsel.

"When I awoke I felt rested and well in body, but I wept for the life I had set out to live, without that strangeness in it. If I return from this war in honor, would you...will you be my wife? My father is old, and I am his only son. I will have land and cattle, and you can ride a lady's horse and rest your hands from all labor but your weaving. Or if you think it better I will give up my inheritance and live here with you, and work for some man born below me, and never think it hard."

The warrior felt pleased with himself, for he had never given such a fine speech before, but he watched the rugmaker carefully, because he had never meant anything so surely.

Now the rugmaker was used to listening and serving, but she was not used to being expected to reply to a man except when the question concerned the price of her handiwork. So she cut more food for the warrior and imagined what her friend the wise woman would say. She sat down again at her loom before she replied, "I am a humble woman, and you have paid me a higher compliment than I deserve. Surely it was not the work of my hands but the presence of God in his church that disturbed your dreams. If you are afraid to lose that, do not go to this war, but go home and confess to your priest and ask him to take you into the brotherhood. That way you will follow God in whatever strange paths He may choose for you, and you will never be without what you have felt."

The warrior told her not to be too modest. He had gone to church since he was a child. He had been baptized. Surely he would have felt the presence of God before now, if it was God's presence he lacked.

But the rugmaker refused to await his return or give him any promise, so at last, discontented, he went on his way.

The rugmaker worked all day.

She finished a rug commissioned by an old lord for the room of his young bride. Into it she put the comfort she had learned from her mother, the strength that the warrior had made her discover to refuse his worship, and a little of the outlaw's dreaming.

She worked in her garden, pulling up the weeds that would stifle her vegetables and keep them from the sun. Some of the weeds were ugly and some were beautiful, bright and beflowered, but none of them could feed an honest Christian and help her live.

Then she fed her hens and herself and swept out her small woven house with its neat dirt floor and went to see the wise woman.

She brought a fresh tomato and two eggs, because the wise woman was her friend. But she was one of the few who would pay what was right for good counsel, so she brought money as well.

The wise woman listened to the rugmaker's story, working all the time to mend a broken rocking chair. She was always taking in the maimed items of the village; the work seemed to help her to think, and if she could fix them she earned extra food or firewood.

The rugmaker thought of how lucky she was to have such an understanding and helpful friend, and repented of her

dismay the first time she had seen the cluttered mess of a house the wise woman kept. ‘There are many different ways of living well,’ she said to herself, ‘whether as a timid priest or a disorganized adviser. Perhaps I should have been slower to judge. Perhaps I should not have turned the warrior away so quickly. After all, he would not have been a warrior any longer when he returned to me.’

But the wise woman said, “You did rightly. A woman must not stand between a man and his God, even if it puts her in the sky. If once you stand between a man and God, you can never look at them both together. How can you choose on whom you will turn your back?”

The rugmaker went home comforted, for at least she could think of God and the warrior at once, and if ever he returned she could be both happy and at peace.

On Sunday she prayed for his soul. She did not pray that he would come back to her. Nor did she ask God to send her a man of peace but like the warrior in other ways. She wished she could ask the wise woman if it were permissible to pray for such things, but she felt too ashamed of her silly requests, so she kept quiet about them.

Seasons passed, and the world grew and shrank and gained and lost. The rugmaker watched the changes in her

garden, among her chickens, and in the faces of her neighbors. But her life stayed much the same.

Then one day a man with a mandolin came to the village. He had traveled many miles and many days, playing for his supper and for the right to sit beside other men's fires and to sleep, when he was lucky, beneath other people's blankets. He loved the life of the road, because it meant that he could spend so many hours with his music. He loved his mandolin as he had not had the time or patience to love any human person.

And yet, as time passed, the musician had begun to feel himself grow old. On unlucky nights, when he slept outdoors, he lay awake longer than he would like and woke too often, and in the morning the stiffness hung about him too long. He began to wish to sit beside a fire he had the mastery of, to keep his own stock of blankets and be ever as warm as he desired.

He began to watch, also, the couples who listened to his music, and although before he had bedded women in a wandering man's lying way, he began to think on constancy. How nice it might be if someone cared to hear his songs more than once, if someone else knew his own-made tunes. How nice it would feel, after all this time, not to play always what others asked of him, not always to curry favor in hope of a drink or a coin.

Thinking so, he came to the rugmaker's village and played in their new tavern his songs along with other men's songs, which were always more popular than his own. He had a fine fair voice and a quick and accurate hand, and love besides, which could change both those talents into something mystical. But this night, discontented even after earning dinner and bed (to which he promised to return), he went out into the streets to sing his own songs only under the moon, walking slowly where his feet led him.

Perhaps the rugmaker's prayers for peace drew his weary soul, or perhaps it was only the sight of the pretty cloth house that stopped him there.

The rugmaker heard him singing and playing, and her weaving changed to follow the rhythm of his song. When he stopped, she stopped, and when he came to her door she stood and went to him.

They stood in her doorway, looking at each other. The rugmaker was not beautiful, but it could be that the musician favored her more because of it, for she had the peace of plain living in every feature, and everything about herself and her home spoke of simple work and a stable life. The musician, in his turn, had long hands and a wide mouth and the gentlest touch of any man walking. He took her hand. "I have been

roaming for years,” he said. “I am a wanderer and a fool, and I have no true love and no place to call mine.”

She said, “If you will play for me you’ll never want for a roof over your head, though it be a cloth roof only. If you’ll play always for me, I will weave for you and we will have food and warmth aplenty, and never be alone. I am a good rugmaker. Many wealthy people have bought my wares.”

“I am a layabout and a song-maker,” he warned her. “I cannot promise to work hard for you, or to support you as a husband should.”

“No. I believe you. But if you will play for me always, if you will play me all your songs, I will be content.”

So the musician never returned to the bed he had been promised but slept the night in the rugmaker’s house. In the morning the priest agreed to marry them that very day, lest they fall into sin.

They lived happily, according to the agreement they had made. The rugmaker’s weaving grew even more beautiful, with her husband’s music in it.

The wise woman visited them once. “Life is full of surprises,” she said, which was rather inane, given her profession. “Now aren’t you glad you never let that warrior settle with you?” But her smile held craftiness and a true question.

The rugmaker thought of the music that filled her home every day, the work her husband's presence had enabled her to make. "I am content," she said, pushing aside the memories that threatened her certainty.

The musician continued to play, softly, as they talked. He looked at neither of the women, as if he did not hear.

"Well, it's enough," the wise woman replied. "Contentment is a rare and enviable state."

The rugmaker's lips twitched of their own accord, itched to speak her mind, to ask the wise woman what right she had to come and make the rugmaker doubt herself now, while when it mattered no one had been surer that the rugmaker had done well to send the warrior away.

While the two women sat watching each other over their tea, the musician stood and left them to go and play in the tavern. Drinking men always liked him, for he knew all the old songs.

"You've grown unpleasant in your old age," said the rugmaker when he had gone.

"You've grown foolish in yours. I remain the same."

"I've a right to a little company, and it's time I had someone to take care of. It's not good for a person to be alone."

“If you wanted a stray, you could have taken in a dog.” She stood. “I won’t say trouble will come of it. But it’s for you now to see that it doesn’t.”

And for a while no trouble came, no real trouble, though an unease lay in the house for days after the wise woman’s visit, until the music drove it out.

The wise woman did not return, and the rugmaker began to avoid visiting her either, although she didn’t bring the subject up again.

Something sat in the rugmaker’s belly, small and solid and chill, and within a little time her husband’s songs ceased to warm it.

For his own part, the musician spent more and more evenings at the tavern, and made friends of unreserved people who never stared past him, as his wife did, with that placid, unreadable look that he knew shouldn’t break his heart.

And one autumn evening, when the rugmaker stood alone in her doorway to watch leaves dancing in the twilight, a man came walking up the path to her.

His strut had changed to a limp and his face had seen hard weather, but she knew him.

“No,” she said into his warm smile. “It isn’t.”

“I’ve come back,” he said. He put his hand on her arm and guided her indoors. She stood in the middle of the floor, not

moving to sit, to offer him food or drink. “I have changed my ways. I spoke to a priest. But I am not taking up holy orders. I had to come back to you.”

She put a hand over her mouth and another over her heart and quieted her breathing against the anguish she felt.

He stared around the little house, like a man sent home from the gallows. “It’s just as I remember it. And you are just the same.”

“I’ve changed. So has the house.” And she tilted her head toward the second chair by the fire, her husband’s seat.

The warrior smiled at her still, uncomprehending. “Not so much.”

“I told you not to come back. You might have died in the war. You might have...”

His lips faltered. “That’s true. But I didn’t.”

The rugmaker turned away, beginning to crumple, and he came and lifted her in his arms and rested her head on his shoulder as she sobbed out the whole story. The wedding, the marriage, the wise woman, and the fear she had learned too late and kept deep and unspoken, the fear of his return.

When she quieted he led her to sit on the edge of her bed. “It’s all right, my love,” he said. And she wept again. “You saved me from a wretched life,” he told her. “It’s more than I could

have asked for. I will live in the village and be a neighbor to you, if I cannot be the man of your house.”

And so it was.

Night after night he came to her, as soon as her husband left for the tavern. They would sit, fireside, and tell stories of all the years they had not shared. Now and then he would lay his fingertips against her forearm or the back of her hand, and when they said goodnight he'd kiss her palm. And with each touch she felt the chill knot in her belly begin to unravel.

As time went on they left the tales of his conversion and her marriage far behind them, and spoke instead of childhood, and referred no longer to her husband or to God.

And his good-bye kiss moved from her palm to her cheek, and thence to her lips, and all her righteousness and worry melted away together, and he shed his weapons and his boots, and they abandoned the slatted rocking chairs for her soft, high-piled bed.

Until at last, one spring night even the warrior forgot his wariness, and they slept.

The musician strolled home humming a new melody, abuzz with the praises of strangers and friends. He took two steps into the house before he knew what was wrong. For three breaths he listened to the other man's snore.

Then a fire roared in his head, his heart, his belly. Shaking, he came to the broadsword discarded beside his own hearth. He lifted it, given strength by his rage, and with a strangled cry he swung.

The rugmaker woke to the cry, and the warrior by instinct rolled to the floor as the blade descended and bit into her side. She shrieked.

She sat up, in blood and pain, to see her husband backing away, already retching. He put up his hands in defense or surrender as the warrior sprang toward him. She heard the crunch of bones, and then the screaming. The warrior twisted the musician's hands in his own and broke one by one the delicate fingers.

With a wail, the rugmaker threw herself, bleeding, between them. Her husband collapsed onto the floor. "How could you? How could you?" she cried. The warrior met her gaze and fled into the night.

Willing herself not to faint from the pain, the rugmaker crawled to stanch her wound with her own woven wall.

She felt a fire in her side and saw the wound beginning to mend. Then she remembered the priest's blessing, and she curled against the wall and wept with shame.

Before long her own weeping abated enough for her to hear the musician moaning over his hands. She stood, gritting

her teeth, bound up her fragile belly, dressed gingerly, and went out to seek the village physician.

When she had found him, she sent him ahead toward her home and shuffled on behind.

The warrior stepped from shadows into her path, but she only moved around him. "I had to protect you," he said.

And she said, "That wasn't protection. You know what that was."

He let her go.

The musician's hands healed, slowly, in the usual way. The rugmaker put his rocking chair out in the dooryard, and he sat in the sun for weeks, cradling his hands in his lap like two broken birds too beloved to bury.

Her side healed into a puckered red weal.

Neither of them spoke apology or accusation, and neither ever saw the warrior again.

When the wind grew winter-cold, she brought her husband's chair in by the fire and put the mandolin into his hands. "Play for me. You said you would play for me always."

And she wove their fortunes through the dark of the year, and through the years afterward, to his slow and lonely melodies.

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Brynn MacNab has been reading speculative fiction since before she knew there was any other kind, and writing it for almost as long. You can find links to more of her published work at brynnmacnab.blogspot.com.

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COVER ART

“Golden Age,” by Juan Carlos Barquet



Juan Carlos Barquet is an artist from Mexico City. He has done illustrations for books, album covers and tabletop games for clients such as Fantasy Flight Games; concept art and matte paintings for short films supervised by DreamWorks Animation and ILM, and exhibitions at Art Takes Times Square (New York, 2013), Parallax Art Fair (London, 2012), Euskal Exhibition Center (Bilbao, 2012) and more. View more of his work at jcbarquet.com.

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