



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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STEADY ON HER FEET

by K.J. Kabza

The day before her sister Molly's birthday, Holliday noticed the new shop in Watchmaker Alley.

Its display windows held no watches—nor tiny ballerinas that danced at the twist of a key, nor birds that sang when you pumped their tails, nor instruments that played themselves. Indeed, the windows were bare entirely, save for two large placards that read as follows:

Fond of Drink? Weak for Sweets? Lusty for Ladies?

OR PERHAPS you are

Slothful? Gullible? Deceitful? Mewling? Dull?

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE

Energized! Committed! Upright! A Moral Champion!

In Full Possession of Your SELF and Your FACULTIES!

THEN

RECEIVE DR. SVARTLEBARRT'S SURGICAL

AUGMENTATION

OF THE CHARACTER

Dr. Svartlebarrt, a Most Distinguished Gentleman from Lands Afar, has teamed with Dr. Mortleaus, a Brilliant Local

Surgeon of Impeccable Family History, to provide Character Prostheses for Those In Need. Much as a Man who is missing a Leg can gain ambulatory Benefit from the application of a False Appendage, a Person who is missing Key Components of His or Her Character can make up the Difference and radically Improve, even Overcome Entirely (!) a Host of Moral Deficiencies with SVARTLEBARRT'S SURGICAL AUGMENTATION.

—Only the Finest and Most Advanced Micro-Clockwork, DESIGNED and PERFECTED by Dr. Svartlebarrrt himself, is

used to create our Prostheses

—Our Happy Customers include Statesmen, Businessmen, Dignitaries, Tradesmen, &c.

—Come inside for a Consultation and ASK how YOU CAN BENEFIT

SVARTLEBARRT'S SURGICAL AUGMENTATION OF THE CHARACTER:

SUITABLE FOR EVERYONE!

Holliday struggled through the display's difficult words, her lips moving soundlessly. The public schoolhouses of the great city of Runsdawn were free, but that didn't mean the marms took kindly to a girl like Holliday turning up. Many a time had she demanded a reading lesson at a schoolroom threshold, a salvaged and waterlogged book in her hands, while

the sour-mouthed marm planted herself between Holliday's bare feet and the giggling froth of pink, beribboned school children beyond.

“Well?”

Holliday started. A boy, perhaps 10 years old, had opened the door from within and stuck his head outside. “Well, what?”

“Aren't you coming in?”

Holliday tightened her grip on a small clock she held in her hands—not because she thought the boy would take it, even though it was prime salvage, but to remind herself that she hadn't time to waste gaping at marvels today. The Arto Road Market was only two blocks down. “I'm sorry. I haven't any money.”

“Today's consultations are free,” said the boy.

Holliday hesitated. According to the grown-ups in her family, there was an awful lot wrong with Holliday's character. And being examined by a doctor was supposed to be good for you. “Well... all right. If it won't take long.”

The boy led her inside. The interior was as barren as the display windows. Plain wooden chairs and a plain wooden bench sat arranged around a low, plain wooden table with a pan of sawdust beneath. The floor had no carpets. There was a glass vase upon the table, but instead of flowers, it held cat's eye marbles.

“What lovely marbles,” said Holliday, trying to be polite.

The boy grinned. “Those aren’t marbles.”

Holliday saw more of them in identical vases in the cubbies across the back wall of the shop, up behind a wooden counter. “Then what are they?”

A linen curtain behind the counter flapped aside. A handsome man, his face made cold by the severe cut of his clothing, strode into the room. “What is that *thing* doing in my shop, Nevinn?”

Holliday clutched the clock to her chest and braced herself for a fight.

“I—sir?” said the boy. “She’s here for a free consultation...?”

“She’s tracking in the filth of the Marmouth River, is what she’s doing,” said the fellow. His hair and eyes were dark, and when he peered at Holliday, he reminded her of a hawk. “Don’t you have eyes? We don’t serve the likes of *her*.”

Holliday squeezed her salvage, the casing of the clock digging into her palms. “With your pardon,” she said carefully, “not all of us mudlarkers are like you think.”

His eyebrows leapt in disbelief. “So you have proper society in your sewer pipes, then? Or perhaps you have schemes to live in real houses someday, and eat your river rats with little pewter forks and little pewter knives?”

Holliday's face grew hot. "I go to the schoolhouse, same as anyone here in the up-there, and the marms give us history lessons. I know all about revolutions and what like. And guess what? We all *will* live in real houses someday. One of Runsdawn's mudlarkers will get too angry, and they'll start everything, and you and everyone else in the up-there will be sorry."

The man laughed. "A river-dog who attends lessons! Well, I never. Fancy yourself the great philosopher of this someday-revolution, do you? Hasn't anyone ever told you that a bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing?"

"What's all this, Mortleaus?" The linen curtain pulled aside again and a second gentleman waddled into the room. He was old, and very fat, with an untamed beard the color of the Marmouth's ice in winter. His right eye rolled in milky blindness.

"A mudlarker," said the handsome fellow, who must've been Dr. Mortleaus, "supposedly here for a consultation."

"Mmm," said the other, who must've been Dr. Svartlebarrt. He squinted at Holliday through his good eye. "Well, it gives us something to do, then, doesn't it?"

Dr. Mortleaus grumbled.

The boy, Nevinn, darted into the back. Dr. Mortleaus pushed the vase of not-marbles to the edge of the table and

smacked the surface. “Have a seat, then, Miss Revolutionary,” he said to Holliday. “What’ve you got there?”

“A clock,” said Holliday, pulling it to her chest again. “It’s river salvage. I was on my way to Arto Road to trade it. My sister Molly turns six tomorrow, and she should have some licorice as a present.”

Their faces cracked in surprise. Holliday fell silent. Nobody, not even learned doctors, deserved to know more about poor Molly. She was a fragile, obedient little girl, and it broke Holliday’s heart to never see her smile. Molly’s favorite game was to draw pictures in the river mud with sticks—very good pictures, too, of strange monsters and funny people, and fish the size of boats. The pipes and tides of the Marmouth ate such gentle dreamers alive, and if this was the nature of Molly’s soul, she would not survive long without kindness and a fierce protector. The rest of their family could provide neither. The duty fell to Holliday, and it was a solemn task she would not have parted for, not for all the world.

Nevinn returned with a doctor’s bag that he handed to Dr. Svartlebarrt. The old man opened it and removed a case, which in turn contained twenty thimble-like things with fine, stiff wires attached to their bottoms. Dr. Svartlebarrt slid half of them onto his fingers while Dr. Mortleaus did the same with the rest. “Dr. Mortleaus and I are going to ask you a series of

questions while we examine you.” He wiggled his capped fingers. “Ready?”

The examination was not what Holliday expected. Instead of touching her, they floated their hands in space about her person, as a puss uses its whiskers to suss out shapes, and they asked the queerest questions. Could she please relate her happiest memory? Her saddest? What had she dreamed about last night? What was her favorite food? Had she ever kissed a boy? How did she react to stray dogs? What was she most afraid of?

“Hum,” Dr. Mortleaus finally said. He frowned, lowered his hands, and removed his devices. “Well.”

“Indeed!” said Dr. Svartlebarrt.

“Am I sick?” Holliday asked.

Dr. Svartlebarrt removed his own objects. “No no, child. Dear me—young woman. How old are you?”

“13.”

“Well.” Dr. Svartlebarrt put away the case. “I am delighted—shocked, really—to report that your character is in thoroughly excellent condition. Of course, there is always room for improvement, but isn’t that true of us all? In your case, had you the financial means, I would suggest a minor prosthesis for your temper. You have a great deal of anger, and your character

is not *quite* strong enough to harness it completely. But other than that—”

“I’m sorry,” cut in Dr. Mortleaus, “but these results don’t make any sense. She’s too kind, conscientious, and intelligent. She can’t possibly be a born mudlark.”

“But I am,” said Holliday. “My uncles were all there when Mamma had me. They can say so.”

“Is your mamma a born mudlark, too?” asked Dr. Mortleaus. “Did she belong to a good family before running off to the sewers?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about your papa?”

“Mudlarks don’t have those. We just have uncles.”

Dr. Mortleaus gave her a funny look.

“Now is not the time to fuss about her pedigree or degenerate family life,” said Dr. Svartlebarrt. “We barely know her, don’t we?” He turned to her. “Listen, my dear... what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t. It’s Holliday.”

“Well, Holliday,” said Dr. Svartlebarrt. “How would you like to help out in our shop?”

Dr. Mortleaus’ eyes bulged. “Bart—”

“You may come in whenever you have a little time, so that you may take care of whatever small tasks are on hand,” said

Dr. Svartlebarrt. “Changing the sawdust after surgery, sweeping the floor, things like that. This will free up Nevinn to better focus on his apprenticeship.”

“You mean...” Holliday could barely speak. “You mean, do I want... a job? That pays money?”

“No,” said Dr. Mortleaus. “Absolutely not.”

“Yes,” said Dr. Svartlebarrt. “That is exactly what I mean.”

“But Bart, look at her, for Smoke’s sake! She stinks, she’s wearing rags, her hair is a pigeon’s nest, her feet are black—”

“So what?” said Dr. Svartlebarrt. “We’ll give her some nicer rags. And a membership to the bath house up the street, where she may bathe and keep her work clothes.”

“This is ridiculous!”

Dr. Svartlebarrt’s voice turned soft, but it was a dangerous softness—the softness of Marmouth mud, covering a sinkhole that goes down and down. “To what exactly are you objecting, Mortleaus?”

Dr. Mortleaus fell silent.

“We’ve examined her character. We have seen that it’s excellent.” Dr. Svartlebarrt’s good eye glared. “Unusually, compellingly, *valuably* excellent.”

Dr. Mortleaus’ face changed in some subtle way.

“Should I go now...?” Holliday asked.

“Nevinn,” said Dr. Mortleaus. “Take her to Arto Road. Let her attend to her clock business and buy her some better rags.” To Holliday, he said, “Welcome to our staff.”

* * *

Holliday had never had an occupation that paid wages. All she had known was mudlarking alongside the dangerous rhythms of the Marmouth—its fickle tides, so close to the estuary; its disease-carrying refuse; its few surprises half-buried in gravel sandbars. To have tasks to do that did not involve digging in mud or carrying a sack was quite glamorous, and for many days, Holliday was hard put to hide her excitement.

The rules were so different, working in a shop. Instead of clawing through filth, Holliday ran rags over the furniture and floor to keep the shop clear of it, and instead of keeping a sharp eye out for things in the muck that didn't belong, all Holliday had to watch for was the marble-like things. If she found a stray one outside of a vase, she was to give it to Dr. Svartlebarrt personally—and never, ever, ever put it back into a vessel. If she did this, they would beat her and throw her out. Did she understand?

“Yes,” Holliday said. “But what are they? The marbles?”

Dr. Svartlebarrt raised a bushy eyebrow. “Those are my micro-clockwork augmentations, suspended in air-resistant,

haemo-reactive, aqueous solids. And I am the only one qualified to distinguish them from each other, and Dr. Mortleaus and I are the only ones who know which vessel contains what type. So I will thank you not to disturb them. Can you imagine what would happen were Dr. Mortleaus to accidentally augment a violent man not with self-control, but with an overabundance of courage?” Dr. Svartlebarrt shook his head with a stentorian wheeze. “Such unbalanced personalities are the forces that disrupt the world, child. And we are here to keep our beloved world steady on her feet.”

The most exciting task was assisting with surgery. While Nevinn tied the patient to the table, Dr. Svartlebarrt prepared the ether, and Dr. Mortleaus inspected his instruments and said encouraging things to whatever nervous soul lay sweating on the wood, Holliday was tasked with fetching them anything they might need as they worked—a glass of water, a certain tool, a handkerchief. If they needed nothing, which was usually, she was permitted to stand and watch. All Runsdow mudlarkers, whether by birth or choice, have strong stomachs, and Holliday was not perturbed in the least by the calmness with which Dr. Mortleaus sliced and stitched flesh.

And what fascinating lessons he gave Nevinn as he worked. “The incision need not be deep—the augmentation, recognizing where it is most needed, will burrow home

gradually over time, repairing the tissue in its wake. So to conquer timidity, you must merely place the augmentation below the skin but somewhere above the spleen, like so... to bolster energy, you must find a place with much phlegm, such as the sinus cavity... for strength, what you want is proximity to the stomach. The process begins upon contact with blood and body temperature, at which point the aqueous solid encasing the augment begins to dissolve, at a rate dependant upon the patient's age. The lump will disappear within one to three weeks, indicating that the aqueous solid has fully dissolved."

Willing but thick-headed Nevinn required much repetition. Holliday required but a glance at the back wall, to note which glass vase was missing from the cubbies when Dr. Mortleaus delivered each lecture during each procedure. For a mind accustomed to noting the placement of dozens of different piles of wreckage with each turn of the tide, creating a mental map of the vases was easy. And for a pair of eyes trained to scan millions of stones for bits of shipwrecked gold, discerning the subtle differences between the augmentations was even easier.

But there was one group of augments whose purpose Holliday couldn't deduce: the group in the vase that was left on the table as decoration, outside of surgical hours. She daren't ask, for fear of revealing what she shouldn't know about the

micro-clockwork already, and nobody offered. Nevinn caught her looking at it and began to make up silly stories. “Those aren’t augmentations that get put in—those are things they’ve secretly taken *out*. They kidnap poor people, like you, and they cut out all the good parts, and they sell them to the very rich. Didn’t you know?”

The thought frightened her—that someday, without warning, kind Dr. Svartlebart might tie her down and cut her open, and rip all her courage and compassion away, leaving Molly with no one to protect her.

So Holliday said, “I think they knocked you out one night and used those burrowing machines to take out your brain, piece by piece, and that’s why you say such stupid things.”

That finally shut him up.

* * *

Holliday was careful with her secret employment. Mostly.

She kept her hours at the shop irregular, and she always changed back into her Marmouth clothes at the bath house, and she let her furious mamma and jeering uncles assume that she was sneaking away to frolic with boys. “If’n you’re old enough now to let some pimpled sot shoot a baby into your belly, why not let one of us?” this or that uncle would joke, and Mamma would screech and hit them, and they’d laugh.

Holliday was even careful with the coin she earned. Some of it she stuffed into Fairy, Molly's ragdoll and favorite toy, through a burst seam in Fairy's bottom. A little, Holliday sprinkled throughout the family's sewer pipe—a slipcrown here, a halfmark there; enough to be the plausible result of a trip to the market that someone had forgotten about, but not so much as to raise suspicion.

But in the end, it was Molly that undid her. The rest of Holliday's coin went to her, secretly and in roundabout ways—in the form of apples, pork buns, peppermint candy, toffee, a less-worn dress, a sturdier sack for carrying salvage, a tiny hat for Fairy. Gentle Molly never questioned these gifts. She only stared at them with round, startled eyes, and then smiled—so sweetly and brightly, Holliday's throat ached ever harder each time.

Their drunken uncles didn't notice the gifts either, but sharp-eyed Mamma did.

“And what's this, then?” Mamma demanded one night.

The tide was high, and the Marmouth's oily waters lapped at the lip of their great pipe. A smoky fire sputtered in the back, where a pot of stray dog stew bubbled unattended. Mid-way through the pipe, Holliday's uncles passed a bottle and sang, in between declarations that Holliday should take a swig and invent a verse or two, because she was old enough now.

Holliday felt strangely proud, but Mamma didn't like that at all. It made her angry. Then again, Mamma was always angry when Holliday's uncles drank and laughed, as if a good time were the one thing in this hard world that Mamma couldn't abide.

"It's just a little sip n' song, Benevolence love," said Uncle Tails.

"I wasn't talking to *you*," Mamma spat. She pointed at Molly. "I was talking to *her*."

Holliday's good feeling vanished. She pushed away from her uncles. Molly crouched at Mamma's feet, obviously interrupted mid-game. One of her little hands held Fairy; the other, a tiny wooden horse.

"She's going for a ride," said Molly.

"What is that?" Mamma demanded again. Her voice cracked. "Where did you get it?"

The singing trailed off. "What she got up there, a dead kitten?" asked Uncle Tails. "Just have 'er add it to the stew."

"That toy!" Mamma cried, her voice growing louder. "That horse."

"I," said Molly. She looked around, bewildered. "Holliday gave it."

"My arse," Mamma shouted. She grabbed Molly's wrist and wrenched. Molly cried out, dropping the horse to the floor

of the pipe. “It ain’t broke and it’s all clean. That’s no salvage, you poor little liar. It’s *thieved*.”

Every uncle fell silent now. Uncle Jagged sucked in a stern breath.

“No, it weren’t!” cried Molly. “Let me go! You’re hurting me, Mamma!”

“Mamma, stop,” begged Holliday. Terrible heat flooded her heart. “I got it for her, and I did it honest. I did.”

Mamma ignored her. “You’re big enough by now to know better,” she sobbed at Molly, “so you did it on purpose—don’t tell me you didn’t.” “Decided you’re good for what the Marmouth gives you freely, is that it? You poor little fool. Paying for thieves’ wares is the same as thieving direct!”

Holliday grabbed her mother’s other arm. “It weren’t bought from no thief! It was got fair. I traded salvage and got coin, and I bought it for Molly new.”

Mamma released Molly, whirled, and shoved Holliday. Holliday flew backward to the opposite wall, falling against her shoulder. Fireworks of pain arced over her back. “*New?*” Mamma screeched. “You didn’t never. I didn’t raise no powder-faced, fat-pursed princesses who chase whatever fancy, toity, dainty what-you-please they want, and think to have everything *new!*”

“It’s not like that,” Holliday gasped. Below the pain, a quaking, simmering anger rose. “I’m not a... I just had... she’s only...”

“And this,” cried Mamma, tearing the new hat off of Fairy’s head. “And this.” She ripped the hem of Molly’s new dress. “Think I don’t got eyes? Think I don’t know you’re turning into some criminal’s yap-dog, going after the little thievings what get sold off?”

“You know what they do to them that keep stolen things, in the up-there,” said Uncle Jagged darkly. “Same as what we honest people do down here, poppet. We cuts off their hands what they paid with.”

Holliday forced herself up. She staggered to Molly, but Mamma shoved her down again with a bony hip. Tears pulled muddy streaks down Mamma’s face, the Marmouth in twin miniature. “Find them bandages, Spade. And Crabrock—give us your knife.”

Uncle Crabrock pulled out his knife. Molly screamed.

Holliday launched herself at Mamma, catching her legs and making her fall. Mamma cursed, and Holliday shoved away, grabbed Molly, and rolled around her, tight tight tight. “No!” Holliday ordered.

“You little banshee!” Mamma howled back, and her lean, hard hands fell upon her, prying and pinching, pulling at clothes and tearing already-frayed cloth. “Get off!”

Mamma’s pinching hands found Fairy. Molly wailed and refused to let go. Like an infant torn apart by wild dogs, poor Fairy split into pieces.

From within the remains, a pile of glinting, ringing coins fell to the floor of the pipe.

Mamma froze in shock. The uncles froze in wonder and greed.

With Molly weeping in her arms, Holliday rolled off the edge of the pipe and splashed into the oily Marmouth.

“And don’t you come back!” shouted Uncle Jagged, but Holliday and Molly were already paddling back around to the Marmouth’s confining walls, where a rusting line of rungs embedded in the stone could lead them into the yawning world of the up-there.

There was only one place Holliday knew of to take her.

* * *

She banged upon the door with both fists. “Doctor Svartlebarrr! Doctor Svartlebarrr!”

On the floor above the shop, light scratched between the slats of a shuttered window. Molly kept weeping. Holliday pounded harder. “Doctor Svartle—”

“Grave take you, you flea-wit,” said Dr. Mortleaus as he shoved open the shutters and leaned out over the street. He squinted down, blinking sleep from his eyes, his night-dress trembling in the breeze. “Don’t you know what hour it is?”

“You’ve got to let us in!”

“Quiet!” hissed Dr. Mortleaus. One building over, a second light flared behind a pair of shutters as some other disturbed shopkeeper lost his patience and readied a harsh word. “Are you trying to wake the neighborhood?” He looked over one shoulder. “Ah, Nevinn, you’re up. Good. Let her in before she brings the constabulary on our heads.”

Nevinn opened the door and Molly pressed her sobbing face into Holliday’s shoulder. Holliday set her jaw and pulled Molly inside. “Who’s that?” asked Nevinn.

“Good Heavens,” said Dr. Svartlebarrt, emerging from the back. He pulled a waist-coast over his shirt, one tail of which he’d failed to tuck in. Dr. Mortleaus, looking similar, was right on his heels. “Whatever is the matter?”

Holliday blurted out the events of the evening in a disjointed rush. Dr. Svartlebarrt ordered Nevinn to fetch the girls a glass of cordial, to calm their nerves, and Dr. Mortleaus didn’t even grumble about the filth of the Marmouth when the sisters sat down upon the bench.

“There now,” said Dr. Mortleaus gruffly, as Holliday passed the half-drunk glass of cordial to Molly. “That should help.”

Molly sipped from the glass between hiccups. “Where are we? I want Fairy.”

Holliday pulled her close. “We’re in the up-there. We’re with good people, my friends. I earn wages here. That’s where I’ve been getting the coin for your presents. It’s all fine, Moll. It’s fine.” Holliday looked up at the men, her eyes hardening. “Examine her. Give her a job.”

Dr. Mortleaus raised an eyebrow.

“She’s got no other way to take care of herself now. My wages alone here won’t be enough.”

“That is not our responsibility.”

“Morty,” said Dr. Svartlebarrrt. “She’s upset. You cannot expect politesse from the desperate.” To Holliday, he said, “Please calm yourself. We can examine your sister, certainly—she’s already here, so why not?—but we can’t make any promises. Nevinn? My bag?”

Holliday coaxed Molly to sit on the table. While Molly sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve, the doctors plucked the air about her with their enhanced fingertips, murmuring questions and nodding at Molly’s answers. Around them,

Nevinn gathered and lit lamps until the room felt almost cheery.

At the conclusion of the examination, the doctors exchanged a long look. They removed their devices in silence. “Well?” asked Holliday, past a knot in her throat.

Dr. Svartlebarrt shook his head. “I’m sorry, Holliday.”

“Your sister is obedient, trustworthy, and creative,” said Dr. Mortleaus, “but she is also too shy, fearful, and unconfident. Employment in a shop would not suit her.”

Holliday’s eyes prickled. She squeezed her sister’s hand. “Dr. Svartlebarrt, you’ve *got* to give her a job. You’ve *got* to. Or —” Holliday looked around, blinking away tears. “If not—if not a job—maybe you could make her so she, so she’ll be better—” Her eyes fell upon the cubbies of vases behind the counter.

Dr. Mortleaus followed her gaze. With surprising gentleness, he said, “No, child. Our wares are far too expensive. Dr. Svartlebarrt’s operation cannot afford that kind of charity.”

Molly began to cry again. “I want Fairy.”

“Hush, Molly.”

“I want Fairy. I want Mamma.”

“Hush, Moll, I’m trying to think!”

“I want Mamma and I want to go home.”

“We can’t go back home, Moll. Not ever. They’ll hurt you.”

“Fairy,” Molly cried, wringing her tiny hands. “Fairy.”

“Smoke me alive, but I can’t watch this,” said Dr. Mortleaus. “Bart, can’t we—”

Dr. Svartlebarrt held up a finger.

He turned to Holliday. “Young lady. There is... maybe... one thing we can do.”

“*Hush*, Moll. What is it?”

As one, the doctors turned to the mysterious vase on the table and regarded it in silence.

A chill, icy as a river breeze, swept up Holliday’s back.

Dr. Svartlebarrt pulled out a marble and rolled it between his meaty fingers. “This,” he said.

Holliday pulled Molly close. “What is it?”

“It’s for the best, actually, that you arrived in the middle of the night,” said Dr. Svartlebarrt. “When it comes to application of this particular type of treatment, the importance of discretion cannot be overstated. And if we act before dawn, there’s no chance of anyone interrupting.”

“Act how? And interrupt what?”

Dr. Svartlebarrt replaced the marble. He didn’t answer.

Molly wiped her nose. “I’m thirsty,” she said. Nevinn disappeared into the back. He returned with a tray, upon which sat a glass of water.

And surgical tools.

“No,” said Holliday. She pulled Molly off the table. “If you don’t tell me what it does, I won’t let you put it inside of her.”

Dr. Mortleaus looked down at his shoes.

“Child,” said Dr. Svartlebarrt, gently. “You have to trust us.”

“Why won’t you tell me?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Do you think I’m too stupid to understand it?”

“Hardly,” said Dr. Svartlebarrt. “But it’s a trade secret.”

“What’ll it do to her?”

“You wanted us to make her better, didn’t you? Well, this will serve that purpose.”

“How will it do that?”

Dr. Svartlebarrt’s voice dropped into that dangerous, Marmouth-mud softness. “Young lady. Do you want our assistance—or not?”

Holliday squeezed Molly’s hand. Molly, who was too shy and too fearful—who would get attacked by street dogs, assaulted by older children, spit upon by the wealthy, harassed by commoners, ignored by tradesman, and harmed by her own blood. As she was, no place on this earth was safe for her.

Holliday couldn’t say no.

Dr. Svartlebarrt read her eyes. “Well then,” he said. “Morty, let’s go wash up for surgery. You too, Nevinn.”

They left the sisters alone in the front of the shop.

Molly sniffed. “If we can’t go home, where will we go?”

“I dunno.” Holliday’s eyes darted around the room. “I’ll think of something.” Maybe Dr. Svartlebarrt would at least let them sleep behind the counter at night, so they wouldn’t have to fight for a doorway out in the street?

Molly sniffed again. She touched the vase on the table. “Can I play with the marbles?”

“Those aren’t marbles,” said Holliday. “They’re—”

She stopped.

Listened.

She heard no footsteps. She had time. Holliday jumped up and scurried back behind the counter, to the wall of cubbies and vessels. What might Molly need? Bravery. Confidence. Aggression. Resilience. Heroism. Scheming intelligence. Maybe even anger. Holliday swept up vase after vase, taking an augment from each. She couldn’t know what the vase on the table contained, but this way—this way—

Somewhere, a footstep creaked. Holliday darted back to the table. From that final vase, she removed and pocketed seven augments; into that final vase, she placed the seven augments she had just stolen, in an even layer over the top. Surely, Dr. Mortleaus would reach in and happen to select one

of these useful seven. They'd wind up helping Molly in a way that Holliday trusted whether they had intended to or not.

The curtain to the back flapped aside. Nevinn and the pair of doctors entered, freshly scrubbed, shirts tucked in, sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

Their eyes gleamed like those of rats.

Holliday clung to Molly's hand, murmuring over and over *It's all right, it's all right, they're going to make you feel better* until she believed it herself. She relaxed a bare fraction when Nevinn pulled the cloth ties from a bag, but Dr. Mortleaus said, "No, we shan't need to tie her down."

Ever-obedient Molly lay back on the table when Holliday told her to. She inhaled ether from Dr. Svartlebarrt's little cup, and her tiny hand relaxed within Holliday's grip.

"It's all right," whispered Holliday one final time, as she stroked Molly's slender wrist with a thumb.

Then brutish hands fell upon her.

Holliday squealed. Dr. Svartlebarrt pinned her back against the table as Nevinn grabbed her legs. "What are you doing? Stop it! Let me go!" She kicked Nevinn away, but Dr. Svartlebarrt heaved her up beside her unconscious sister, and ah, it was no wonder they hadn't tied Molly down. They needed the strips of cloth to restrain *her*.

"What are you doing?" Holliday screamed.

Cloth jammed into her mouth. She roared and bit around the gag, but to no effect. The hoary face of Dr. Svartlebarrt, shadows digging deep into his wrinkles, loomed above her.

“Pity,” he said. “You were such a help in the shop. Ah well. We shall simply hold a free consultation day to lure someone else.”

Holliday’s fury soared. She kicked within her bonds, uselessly, while Molly lay beside her, as limp and as foolishly trusting as a kitten placed into a drowning sack. “It’s such a rare opportunity for us to have the chance to experiment upon siblings, you see,” said Dr. Svartlebarrt. “And when something good falls into your lap like this, you must take advantage of it.”

Nevinn shoved his hand into the final vase and pulled out a whole handful of augments. His grin crackled with glee. “We’re upping the dose this time, right?”

Holliday’s most vengeful roar was but a murmur within linen.

One of Dr. Svartlebarrt’s massive hands gripped her jaw, forcing her head to be still. Dr. Mortleaus stood over her, a scalpel cocked in his clever fingers, his handsome face near-melted with sadness.

The lamplight traced a fat, red scar along the underside of his bare wrist.

He nodded at the scar. “I’m sorry, child,” he said softly. “But I am Dr. Svartlebarrt’s right-hand man. And his previous surgeon, before his mysterious disappearance, inserted into me a double augment for obedience.”

Dr. Svartlebarrt’s other hand, the ether mask cupped within, came down upon Holliday’s face, and all sank into hazy darkness.

* * *

Floating.

Floating.

Heat.

Floating. Something strange. A rush, in fact—a great infusion of fire and brightness, some titanic frisson of feeling that did not make sense. Bravery. Confidence. Aggression. Resilience. Heroism. Scheming intelligence.

Anger.

So much anger.

* * *

When Holliday opened her eyes—

Her shirt was torn. A bandage lay over her heart. Only bravery was supposed to be inserted there. Holliday did not know, but oh, pray tell, great Dr. Svartlebarrt, what happens when many different augments are inserted together into the wrong place? Who knows? Do *you*?

Nevinn had undone her bonds. “Hey,” he said. “Holliday’s awake. You said they wouldn’t wake ‘til—”

Holliday was a bird, a tide, a wind. She was off the table and moving, the final vase flying from her fingers, shattering over the floor and spilling augments, augments everywhere. People slid and crashed. Dr. Mortleaus lay on the hardwood, moaning and gripping one knee; Nevinn hid behind the counter like a coward, and Dr. Svartlebarrt—why, he lay under Holliday, wailing, as her suddenly clever hands bound him up.

“Mortleaus, you damnable buffoon! You’ve put the wrong —”

“But you *saw* me!” His words were sobs. “You *saw* me draw from the vase!”

“Then how do you explain—”

It was Dr. Svartlebarrt’s turn to wear the gag, now. And Nevinn’s turn to be dragged out from behind the counter, mewling. And his turn to be tied up, too.

Dr. Mortleaus, still crippled, pleaded where he lay. “I’m sorry. Oh child, forgive me. Forgive us all.”

No.

On the table, Molly still lolled. “Take them out.”

“I can’t,” cried Dr. Mortleaus. “She’s too young. They’ve already begun to dissolve.”

Below the bandage on Molly's chest, a ghostly blue light arose.

All the vases, now, came smashing down below Holliday's hands. The floor sparkled with lamplight, glass, rolling augments, drops of blood and crazed spittle—hers? Molly's? mewling Nevinn's?—while Dr. Mortleaus screamed out some apology or doomed bargain.

On the table, Molly moaned, a split, overlapping sound no human throat should be capable of making. Her eyes opened into radiant slits.

Holliday picked up a scalpel, still wet with Molly's blood, and faced her captors. Simple incisions, simple stitches. Simple to tell all these scattered augments apart. Not so simple to tell whether there was much ether left in the canister, but you didn't need ether, not really. You just needed one person who was angry enough to start cutting. And cutting. And cutting.

Every revolution started that way.

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KJ Kabza has sold over 50 stories to venues such as F&SF,

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A SCREECH OF GULLS

by Alyc Helms

Tutti loves only three things in this world, and he loves them well: his birds, his liquor, and Gemma, the junkmonger who keeps the stall next to his barrel.

First are his gulls, soot grey and always squabbling:

“Snailshell, Bottlemouth, Driftwood.” Each one is named for a bit of flotsam he keeps looped at the end of its lead. That way, when he sells one and catches another to take its place, it’s as though he never lost it.

“Pipestem, Thimble, Button.” Each morning when he wakes in his little niche under the docks, he names them. Names them again as he climbs topside and heads to the wharf market. Naming is easier than counting when they’re all making a fuss straining against the ratty leads of twine tied about their knobby legs and pecking at Tutti, each other, and any burleyman unfortunate enough to be carrying food.

“Rattle, Milkring, Caul.” The names are all remnants from a time before Tutti lived under the docks, before he sold caught birds at Benechiaro’s merport to indebted sailors on shore

leave, and to the whores who serviced them, and to the thieves who shadowed them.

“Gearthooth, Lampkey, Copper-rose.” He arrives at his spot, climbs up on his barrel. The wood is mostly rotted, but tar and salt have hardened it forever into place. The birds settle, and Copper-rose lands at his feet. She’s grown fat and almost docile, thanks to Piero, the fishmonger on the other side of Tutti’s barrel, who lets the birds eat whatever no one else will.

Copper-rose is Tutti’s favorite, and he holds her until last on the few days when it looks like he might sell all his birds. He sleeps with her tucked under his arm, a warm, plump and only sometimes restless pillow.

He used to have other birds. Fancier birds: Goldring and Tippet, Crystalmoon and Lacecap, but they’re all gone, the birds and their namesakes both, sold for home-distilled rapacci sweetened with teled liqueur.

“Snailshell, Bottlemouth, Driftwood—”

“They’re all still there, you toothless sot.” A heel of bread catches Tutti in the forehead. Crumbs fall in his eyes. He snatches it up before Copper-rose or one of the others can get at it. Even then, he has to bat his birds back from pecking at the hearth-blackened heel.

He grins his thanks at Gemma, his third love. “And some beer to soften it?”

She hands him a clay mug before he's finished asking. Poorly fired. He can taste the earth in it still. He dunks the heel and leaves it to soak so it will be soft enough for gumming.

"I want that one this time." She points at the dirty cloud of birds that have been set to flight by his waving about. He doesn't look up. Looking up is a dangerous prospect when you've a flock of birds leashed to your belt. He doesn't have to look. What other bird would she point to except the plump Copper-rose?

"If I sell all the others." An empty promise, that. On bad days, he sells nothing, and she gets Snailshell for her bread crusts and beer. Even on his best days, when the storms delay the merships from Al Azshar and the aeroships crossing the Altimar, Gemma only gets Caul or Geartooth.

"That's what you always say."

"We'll see. We'll see." Tutti settles on his barrel, tests his bread to see if it's soft enough yet for eating. Gemma might have argued, but a man sidles up to her stall wearing the cap and arm badge of a bo'sun and asking after the worn sextants she has spent so many hours piecing back together. Tutti watches Gemma's round face grow redder as the aquan tests each instrument and finds it wanting. She simpers and tries to cozen him, but Gemma's only real beauty is youth, the kind of beauty that only the old can appreciate.

She flicks her thumb at the bo'sun's back when he leaves for other parts of the Piazza without buying. A lost sale is a poor way to start the day.

“I'll trade you Copper-rose for one of those fine sex-things.”

“Sextants, you old lecher. And no deal. As if Mercha Renata would let me accept one of your nasty birds in place of coin.” But Gemma's frown curves into a smile, and when the sun is high she gives him a softer bit of bread from the middle of her loaf.

* * *

And so the day goes. Gemma ignores Tutti when there are customers and throws amiable insults at him when the market slows in the midday heat. The birds take flight and strain against their leads whenever a buyer wanders too close. They shit on Tutti, and the sun bakes the shit into his layers of stained linen and wool. When it dries, he flicks it off. Piero the fishmonger dumps a bucket of offal too far gone to save even with lye, and Tutti's birds feast and shit some more.

One by one, he sells them. Snailshell goes to a handful of grubby children in exchange for a half-sack of bitter wine. The oldest is not even as tall as Tutti's barrel, but they're smart enough to know the early birds go the cheapest. Bottlemouth and Driftwood are taken by the wife who runs one of the

dockside brothels. A common customer, she pays with teled liqueur instead of coin, and Tutti passes the afternoon in a haze of goodwill and pleasant visions. He can't bring himself to care who takes Pipestem, Thimble, or Button. When he sobers he finds a few corroded ramiras in his pocket that weren't there before, so he must have driven a bargain despite being lost in the teled.

The sun is setting across the bay and the market is closing before the sailors on shore leave can get drunk enough to cause trouble. Tutti picks out Rattle's lead and goes looking for the lovely Gemma.

She is in the shadows at the back of her stall, brow to brow with a strange man, whispering. Tutti catches a glimpse of the bluesheen glow of terrazzi scars buried under the skin of the man's forearm, but before he can escape, Rattle squawks and Gemma notices him.

So does the man. "Who's this?"

Tutti backs up a step at that growl. The man's eyes are black pupil and little else. When he turns, Tutti can see more blue glowing scars on his cheek and neck, fresher than the ones scoring his arms. A few drops of teled liqueur can make a hard day pleasantly hazy, but raw teled rubbed into scored flesh as the terrazzi liked to do, that brought ongoing madness. Tutti

retreats another step, the birds on their leads taking wing, tugging him to flee.

“It’s nobody, Nico. Just an old beggar.” Gemma claws at the man’s arm, trying to regain his attention.

“He heard us.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“I didn’t hear nothing,” Tutti says, holding his place like he would with a mad dog. “I just came to give Gemma her bird.”

Rattle squawks again and struggles against Tutti’s grip. Perhaps Tutti could throw Rattle at the man, but the bird is still on its lead, and no matter how spry Tutti is, he’s no match for an angry *‘razzo*.

The man leans against the post that supports the stall’s canvas shade and crosses his arms. “Well, give it to her, then.”

“Nico, leave him alone. Tutti, go away.”

The man—Nico—grabs Gemma’s wrist. The scars on his arms are so depleted that they’re more ropes of skin than glow. “Gemma, don’t you want your bird?”

Tutti traps the restless Rattle under his arm and fumbles with the lead. The surly gull nips at his side, but Tutti hardly feels it through his layers. He wraps the lead around his waist with the other empty ones, tucking the worn gourd rattle in place, and holds the bird out for Gemma.

Nico snatches it. Tutti had been expecting that. But then he wrenches the gull's neck, cutting it off mid-squawk. The bird goes limp and the rest of the flock goes wild, straining hard at their leashes. Tutti stands unmoved.

He knows what people do with his gulls, but that's away and elsewhere. As long as he doesn't see it, he can pretend.

Gemma hiccups on a sob. "Nico, you didn't have to—"

"Shut up. You were going to kill it and eat it. I've saved you the trouble." He throws the carcass at her, and she flinches. He grabs her chin. The press of his fingers distorts her face. "Why tears for a feathered rat? Why, and none for your dear Nico and his problems? Now give me the lamp keys, all the ones you've got, and I'll be on my way."

"I can't. Mercha Renata checks all the inventories. She'll notice even one key missing. For all of them, she'll have me transported to the mines."

"I'll make you wish for the mines if you don't get that lamp open for me. There's a fortune of teled locked up inside."

"There's no guarantee any of the keys will open it."

"Then I'll... I'll smash the thing."

Hardly likely. The teled lamps throughout Benechiario are made to withstand looting. Nico must know this. Must have tried. Everyone has at least once. His nails dig further into Gemma's cheek. She twists away as far as his grip will let her.

Whimpers stick in her throat, sounding like Tutti's gulls when he first catches them.

"I can open it," Tutti says, because he hates hearing those helpless sounds from Gemma.

Nico's grip relaxes. "What's an old birdman know about the lamp mechanisms?"

Tutti wishes his birds wouldn't make such a ruckus. Fresh shit drips in a mottled stream off his shoulder. He straightens and tries to look legitimate. "M'wife. She was a Maestra. Just a repair engineer, but I helped her in the shop. Learned a thing or two. I could open a lamp."

"Wife? What woman would take you, shitman?"

Tutti flinches. He's never understood it either, but that had been Marija's way. She never saw broken things. Only things waiting to be fixed.

He shrugs. Looks at his birds. "I can open it. Leave Gemma alone, and I will."

"We'll see." Nico releases Gemma and pulls a knife. Tutti falls back, but Nico only grabs the leads tied to Tutti's belt. He saws at the twine.

"What are you—"

"In case we get hungry while you work. Come on, Gemma. Your Inamorato has offered to save you." Nico ducks out of the

stall, dragging the hopping, flapping, shrieking flock behind him.

“Me? But... the stall...”

Nico raises his fist, knife still in hand. “Leave it.”

With another stifled sob, Gemma trails after him. Tutti hurries behind, hoping that Milkring, Caul, Geartooth—all of them—drown Nico in a rain of shit.

* * *

Nico leads them through the Piazza della Cosca, where the bordellos and tavernas are only just opening their doors for the evening, and down side streets into the slums of L'Scuro. The flickering yellow glow of fish oil lamps replaces the steady blue sheen of the teled lamps that still light the main piazzas and the heights of the city.

Most of the traffic in L'Scuro is of the scurrying sort—people and rats both. The people make way for the glow-scarred Nico and only cast glances at the soot grey cloud following him like an agitated aerostat. Gemma hugs her arms close about her body and keeps her eyes on her toes. Tutti fusses with the severed ends of twine still tied to his belt, fraying them more with his fretting.

“Where are we going?” He had assumed that whatever lamp Nico wanted was up in the heights, protected by the household guards of the Grandé Familias. A terrazzo, a

junkmonger, and a birdman have no business up there. They would be stopped before they ever reached Nico's prize.

But L'Scuro is home to the worst sorts in the city: terrazzo gangs dealing cut teldesca, drunken Rietto who will slit your throat to drink your blood if they think it has wine in it, and broken Schiavo miners hacking up their deaths in globs of bloody phlegm.

“San Breccia. Their eternal lamp is always lit.”

For all that he might seem sane for a 'razzo, Nico is clearly lost to the dream. Tutti stops, then hurries along again when Nico doesn't.

“The Fidei are always on guard. How do you expect me to open the lamp with them about?”

“Guess I'll just have to make a distraction for you.”

The alleyway opens onto a dank piazza paved with cracked flagstones. It has been swept clean of trash, but the buildings around the square sag on their foundations, with only tattered curtains to cover their windows and doorways.

San Breccia di Argenta seems grand only in comparison to the neighboring buildings. Her once-pale sandstone walls are streaked dark with soot. Rain has pitted her face and the columns of her portico, leaving rust-stained streaks and pocked hollows filled with moss-slime water. A shuffling line of human refuse trails down her steps and into the piazza: desperate

miners, feckless Rietto, twitching ‘razzi, all manner of flotsam with no more value to the world than the junk dangling from Tutti’s leads. But at Breccia, such things don’t matter. The line will be fed until the soup and bread runs out. The light of her eternal lamp pierces the gloaming. Tutti stares at it until he sees blue even when he blinks.

“We can’t do this.” He looks to Gemma for help, but she shakes her head and pulls back into the arch of a doorway. “We shouldn’t do this.”

“Clamp your gums, old man. Gemma.” Tutti’s birds are tired. They flap-skip along as Nico drags Gemma out of the shadows and thrusts the leads at her. She takes them, and won’t meet Tutti’s eyes. “Wait til I’m done, then go for the lamp.”

Tutti waits for Nico to disappear into the breadline, casts a glance back at his birds now safe in Gemma’s grasp. He counts to summon courage: *Milkring, Caul, Geartooth*—

Copper-rose launches up and dives at him, interrupting his litany. She passes close enough that her wingtips brush his cheek. He holds his hand against that feather touch. Glances again at Nico insinuating himself among the starving supplicants.

“Let’s run,” Tutti whispers to Gemma. “You have my birds. He’s halfway across the piazza. We can get away now.”

She wraps her hand around the leads, pulling a few of the grounded birds off-balance and setting them all to flapping again. “We can’t. He’ll come find me at the stall, or at home. You have to get him the teled. You said you could get it.”

“It’s the sannos. We can’t steal from the sannos.” Tutti doesn’t so much care about divine retribution, but heresy, the Patriate’s justice, a watery grave tithed to the Mer; any one is reason enough to be afraid.

He reaches for the leads bunched around Gemma’s fist. She holds them up and away. “The sannos won’t stop Nico from beating us both if you fail. You have to do it, or... or I’ll let them go.” She jerks the leads. The gulls squawk and flounder. “They’ll fly, and you’ll have to get new ones, and new buttons and driftwood and other trash to name them by.”

The hardness of her expression makes her ugly, uglier than Nico’s digging fingers had. Tutti clamps his gums together so hard he tastes blood. He bites down so the tightness gripping his chest and throat won’t escape in a sad wail. He’d hoped to die before he saw her turn ugly. It isn’t fair, how the world shatters everything beautiful and leaves him only with useless bits that he can’t piece back together. He reaches out, trying to fix what has already been broken.

Gemma mistakes him, jerks the leads away from his hand. Copper-rose, his plump Copper-rose, pecks at Gemma's ankle and earns herself a kick.

"I'll do it," Tutti says before Gemma can do more harm. "I just need Lampkey."

"You don't need a bird to get the teled."

"No, you drooling sow. I need the lampkey." He snatches up the bird and struggles to untie its namesake from the lead, hard to manage when tears blur his vision and his hands are shaking from lack of drink. The lampkey looks no different from a hundred like it, but the Maestri had many lamps to refuel throughout the city. Silly to carry a whole ring when a master key could be made.

A shout erupts from the soup line. One man tackles another and they roll across the stones of the piazza. Fidei in plain woolen robes rush down the steps to quell the fight, but the commotion has already set off the terrazzi in the line. Howls and dream-gibberish echo through the piazza, and then more shouts as desperation and impatience become blows.

"Wait here." Tutti darts past the fighting, but Gemma ignores him and follows, dragging his weary birds along. He sends them a worried glance. They'll be crushed if the fighting becomes a riot. He has to open the lamp casement quickly so

he can take Copper-rose and Lampkey and the rest and return home to his little squat under the docks.

Up close, the face of San Breccia is as hard and ugly as Gemma's. The lamp that shines through the gloom is crusted with corrosion where the brass fittings come together.

Already the Fidei are calming the unruly crowd. Their Benedotto has emerged onto the portico. Stern as any disapproving father, he tells them there will be no food for any man or woman with blood on their knuckles. The threat is real enough to stifle the crowd's unrest. Nico's distraction hasn't been much of a distraction at all.

Doesn't matter. Nobody's paying attention to a shit-covered birdman. Tutti fits the key to the base of the lamp, jiggles it when it grates against the corrosion inside the keyhole. It won't go in all the way. He slams his palm against it, and only cuts himself for his effort. It has to go in. Has to. He needs to rescue his birds, and this key is the only key.

"It isn't working," Gemma hisses.

"I know." He grips the key, yanking to remove it, to try again, but his pounding has been enough to make it stick fast, and now his hands are wet with sweat and blood. They are trembling. His whole body is trembling. Useless. So useless. Everything is useless.

“Is it open? Did you get it?” Nico comes up from behind. His scars shine more blue in the light of the lamp. He is trembling as well, and his gaze flicks around, following shadows.

“I... I can't.” Tutti runs his sleeve over his face, smearing snot and tears and blood along its length. “It's stuck.”

“Useless old shit.” Nico pounds at the key. He twists it, and with a faint crack, the bow breaks away, leaving the blade stuck in the keyhole. Nico tosses the broken key aside and slams his fist into the lamp with an animal roar.

The key bow skitters across the pavement. Tutti dives after it. His key. Marija's key. Broken now more than ever, but it's still a piece of her.

“Here now, what are you about?”

The three conspirators freeze as two of the white-robed Fidei approach. Gemma breaks first, fleeing with a trail of squawking stumbling seabirds fluttering behind her. Tutti snatches up the broken key and races after her, Nico close behind.

They don't flee far. One of the birds—Milkring—gets tangled up in its own lead, and Gemma pauses to free it.

“Give them to me. Give them all to me.” Tutti grabs the leads, yanks them from Gemma's grip hard enough to knock her off balance into the refuse lining the alley. He's got his

birds back. Finally. He's looking around to count them and make sure when Nico snatches up Milkkring from its tangle.

"You stupid shit. You stupid, lying shit. You said you could get the teled. Now you've made it worse. They'll call a maestro down to fit it with a new lock. They'll be on their guard." He swings Milkkring around in an arc above his head and then down. The shrieking bird smashes into the cobbles and goes still.

Nico grabs Geartooth and Caul, one in each hand. Even though Tutti tightens his grip, the leads yank away, leaving a searing heat across his bloody palm.

"No," he begs. "No."

Whirl and slam. Both birds go still. "What was that? No? No? I say yes. Yes you did. Waste of blood and breath and bone, you're no different than these feathered rats of yours. At least they're good for eating."

Tutti releases the leads, tries to shoo away the last two birds. Lampkey hops and hops and flies right at Nico. Nico smacks Lampkey down to the cobbles and crushes its head with his boot.

Copper-rose huddles against Tutti's foot. He scoops her up and holds her with arms that feel too thin and weak for any sort of protection.

“Help,” he whispers to Gemma, but she picks herself up from the gutter and backs away. Giving Tutti a shake of her head, she turns and runs.

“I’ll deal with her.” Nico kicks aside the dead body of a bird. A tiny, gap-toothed cog skitters along the cobbles after it. “But you. You’ve got a sweetheart. Plump little armful. Does Gemma know? I figured she was your Inamorata.”

“I’m sorry. I tried. Just leave us alone.”

“And what? Go beg for food at San Breccia? But you’ve got a meal fit for the Principe, right there in your arms. Come and share with your friend Nico.”

Copper-rose screeches when Nico pulls her from Tutti’s arms, and so does Tutti. He flails for her, but too late. One twist, and she goes limp. Tutti falls to his knees, each breath coming out in a high, toneless kean.

Nico lifts the limp bird, sniffs, and drops her before Tutti with a sneer. “I changed my mind. I’d rather eat garbage.”

He kicks another bird carcass aside and stalks away, leaving Tutti alone amid grey feathered bodies and slack leads.

* * *

Gemma isn’t at the market the next day. The stall is closed, the junk taken—by looters, by mercha Renata, Tutti doesn’t know. There is no bread for Tutti, burned or not, and no beer. Piero slops out entrails for the gulls, but Tutti has no gulls. He

sits on his barrel, naming his empty lengths of twine according to the scraps of memory knotted into them.

Snailshell, Bottlemouth, Driftwood. Bits of beauty he has found along the shore, under the wharf. Old and broken and salt-worn. The bag-and-bone men passed them by as trash, but not Tutti. Tutti saw their beauty.

Marija would have liked them. Would have woven them into a windchime to hang above the lintel.

Pipestem, Thimble, Button. The wooden stem has a hole worn through it where Tutti chewed and chewed as he worked, back when he had work, and a workshop, and cured redleaf to pack the pipe with. The thimble and the button, he can recall when he had boxes full of them, when rolling tin thimbles were a threat to bare feet and buttons were things to be flicked at Marija to get her attention when his own mending work threatened to send him cross-eyed.

Tutti's hands shake at the next group. *Rattle, Milkring. Caul.* He stares out to sea for a long time, letting the sun dry the salt tracks to his cheeks.

Geartooth, Key-bow. Copper-rose. He pauses on the last bit of trash. He keeps the copper polished, but corrosion has crept in between the twisted wires, grey-green edging the worn petals. He can't recall when he gave the cheap pin to Marija. It isn't the fanciest piece she ever owned, or her favorite. It's just

the piece he couldn't sell to pay for debts or drink. The backing pin is long gone, the stem and petals are bent and scratched in places. Tutti looks at the paltry collection tangled in his lap. Junk. It is all junk.

Some broken things can't be fixed. Some lost things can't be replaced.

He touches each in turn, naming them. Remembering. It is all he has left.

Gathering up the frayed lengths of twine, Tutti heads down to the shore to catch himself a new screech of gulls.

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COVER ART

“Floating Town,” by Takeshi Oga



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