



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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TOLD BY AN IDIOT

by K.J. Parker

Master Cork, the dealer in antiquities, called to see me.

He caught me at a bad moment. Even so, I'm always pleased to see him, though nearly everything he has to offer is rubbish. The same principle applies when you're panning for gold, though it's years since I did any of that. I told Nan to clear off the kitchen table. It's the only room in the house with decent light.

On this occasion he had a dragon's tooth, powdered mummy, the celebrated ring of King Solomon, the shin of Saint Sebastian, a tiny phial of King Herod's tears, a new kind of firework, a living mirror, a demon in a bottle, the smile of St John the Baptist miraculously imprinted on cheesecloth, and an object of indeterminate purpose taken from the coffin of the last Grail Knight, a moment before the entire skeleton dissolved into dust and blew away on the breeze. I picked it up, turned it over and looked at him. "What's it supposed to be?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said patiently. "I don't know a lot of things. It's the provenance that matters."

“For which I have your word of honour.”

“Of course.”

I put it down and picked up the dragon’s tooth. “How much?”

“Eight shillings.”

There’s a sort of inverse honesty about Master Cork that I find enormously appealing. A true crook would realise that a genuine dragon’s tooth would be worth eight pounds, or eighty, or eight hundred. But Master Cork—I know this for a fact, having spoken to some of his suppliers—has a system of pricing to which he adheres religiously; six times what he paid for it. That doesn’t actually prove conclusively that anything cheap he has for sale is fake, because he’s also very stupid, and he buys from stupid people; he could easily get hold of a genuine dragon’s tooth, and neither he nor his supplier would know what they’d got.

“Oops,” I said, as the tooth clattered on the slated floor. “Butterfingers.”

We both looked down. The tooth just lay there. I smiled and picked it up. He sighed, and put it away in its dear little sandalwood box. On another occasion I’d have offered him a shilling just for the box, which was two hundred years old and Greek. That’s the joy of dealing with Master Cork. He does have good things, sometimes.

“King Solomon’s ring,” I said.

He sat up straight and looked at me with his honest face.

“Ah yes.”

“You’re sure it’s the genuine article?”

“Absolutely.”

I picked it up. It was big, suggesting that King Solomon had fingers like parsnips. Gold, straw colour, about three parts fine. The enamel and incuse garnets reminded me of something; it took me a moment to place it and then I knew.

“How much?”

“Six pounds.”

You paid a pound, for this? I nearly said, but didn’t. “In what respects is it different from the King Solomon’s ring you offered me last month?”

“It’s the real one.”

“Or the month before that? Or that rather nice one you had last Michaelmas?”

“It’s the genuine article,” he said sadly. “Try it and see.”

Easy challenge to make, since there were no animals in the house. Well, rats and mice and fleas, presumably, because there always are. But who wants to talk to rats? “I think this is an old Saxon ring, dug up out of a burial mound, probably in Suffolk or Essex,” I said. “As such, it’s worth twice what you paid for it.”

A flicker of interest in his pale grey eyes; my lord Devereaux pays good money for anything Saxon. “Are you sure?”

“Well, no, obviously. Clearly I’m wrong. I mean, it looks Saxon to me, but it can’t be, can it? It’s King Solomon’s, I have your word of honour, so it’s much older and comes from Tyre or somewhere like that.” I shrugged. “Since it’s not Saxon, thirty shillings.”

He looked as though someone was squeezing his toes in a vise. “I don’t know.”

“Take it or leave it.”

“Two pounds. You said yourself it’s worth two pounds.”

“Ah, but I never pay full price.”

He sighed. “Two pounds,” he said, “and I’ll throw in the demon in the bottle.”

I knew perfectly well that I could get fifty shillings from my lord Devereaux. But what did I want with a demon in a bottle? Or, more likely, a bottle? On the other hand, ten shillings is a powerful amount of money, not that I needed it. Ah well. Sometimes I just like to make deals. “Done with you,” I said, and I spat into my hand and held it out for him to shake. Master Cork hates it when I do that, which of course is why I do it.

* * *

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. Not my words, incidentally; it's all I can remember of a play Master Allardyce tried to sell me, when he was just starting out in the business. I remember telling him; young man, comedy isn't your strong suit, try tragedy instead. I thought I'd mention that, to show you how perceptive I am, sometimes.

I guess the line stuck in my mind because it has a certain swing to it, and because it's *silly*. The salient feature of the theatre is that the actors don't make it up as they go along; or at least, not in my productions, if they ever want to work for me again. No; somebody writes the words, beforehand, carefully and deliberately; sometimes starting at the end and working backwards, sometimes getting to the end and then changing the whole of the first two acts, sometimes cutting out characters and deleting whole incidents, reshaping the plot and sequence of events because they don't like how it came out. That's not how human life works.

Nor do you get the staples of drama in real-life interactions of real people. You don't get foreshadowing, or sudden catastrophic reversals of fortune. People don't just drop dead of dramatic necessity (which, if the stage is to be believed, is the greatest mass epidemic of our time, responsible for more deaths than the plague and the bloody flux put together). You

don't get coups de theatre. You don't get melodrama, specially if you're a bachelor, like me. And most of all, you don't get the supernatural. There are no ghosts or devils in real life, and a significant dream usually means you've eaten toasted cheese at bedtime.

Master Allardyce was bitterly offended by my helpful remarks and stormed off in a huff. Two weeks later he was back with *Gyges Prince Of Lydia*, and we started making money together. Later I heard he'd sold his stack of unfinished comedies to some hack who worked for the Other Lot, across the river, and drank the proceeds in a week. In my opinion, the Other Lot were robbed.

* * *

I often eat toasted cheese at bedtime. Mind you, I'm Welsh. Some stereotypes are justified. And I have bad dreams, but they don't tend to come true. Nobody is writing my life. It's impromptu, ad lib, extemporised by the clown, told by an idiot. Therefore, presumably, it's comedy.

* * *

I was quite wrong, of course. I didn't get fifty shillings from Lord Devereaux. I got eighty. A man like my lord would take deep offence if you asked him to pay anything less than twice the true value; he'd assume you were implying he was a

cheapskate, and men have ended up dead in alleyways for less. Luckily I saw my mistake before I opened negotiations.

Four pounds, in good, unclipped gold coin. I didn't need the money, of course, but it came in very handy. I had plasterers to pay, and carpenters, and bricklayers and authors and purveyors of fine textiles. The theatre business pays well, very well, sometimes, but it's like the tides of the sea. Money can't come in unless it goes out first, which is why I see myself as a sort of financial estuary. Fifty shillings paid for all my outstanding maintenance, a new set of alcove curtains and *The Tragical History of King Henry II*, in five acts, with ghosts. I read it that evening, and very good it was too, though whether it would go down well with the customers was another matter entirely. We have a saying in our business; everybody loved it except the public. Still, sometimes, you just have to take a chance.

* * *

The world is, notoriously, full of old rubbish. Everywhere you turn there's junk, garbage, trash. Nearly everything you're likely to encounter as you pick your fastidious way across Life's midden is noisesome, offensive, and of no possible value to anyone. This generally useful rule of thumb doesn't only apply only to curiosities and treasures. Same goes for places, people, and experiences. The ratio does vary, it's true. Only about half

of the cheese offered for sale in Southwark market, for example, is actually poisonous enough to kill you, whereas ninety-nine out of every hundred plays presented to me for my consideration are a wicked waste of oak-apple gall and mashed-up rags.

But the world also teems with glorious, wonderful things, rich, gorgeous, and rare. The ludicrous, infuriating, utterly delightful paradox is that the good things are invariably to be found in among the rubbish, all jumbled up in a heap. You need the discerning eye. An uncut diamond is just a pebble, gold is just sand in a riverbed, and nearly all the pebbles and sand in the world are pebbles and sand. You need the eye. I'm lucky, I have it. God knows how many tens of thousands of carters and shepherds waded through that particular ford, three miles from where I was born, in Godforsaken west Wales, and never knew they were squelching through wealth and opportunity. I saw a tiny sparkle in the dried mud lodged between the welts of my boot-sole. In my time in London, forty-six men have gone bankrupt trying to run a theatre. I glance at a few lines on a page, and I know.

I'm not, it goes without saying, the only one. I met a German once, a very learned man, who'd spent his life in the silver mines of Joachimsthal. He knew exactly what to look for—he told me, but I've long since forgotten—the telltale signs of

a silver deposit. I met him in an inn near Carnarvon. He'd been tramping the hills and valleys for months, looking for the signs, and never found a damn thing. He knew exactly what to look for, but it simply wasn't there. Or take my lord Devereaux. He knows what to look for as well as any man living, and he spends his life examining the wares of merchants in dockside taverns, prowling through country auctions, soiling his small, delicate fingers pawing about in the packs of peddlars and gypsies, and all he ever finds is junk, trash, garbage, rubbish. His treasures, of which he has many, have all come from wise, expensive dealers who know precisely what they've got and how much it's worth. I, on the other hand, find gold in dirt, commercially viable poetry in Cheapside, and genuine Saxon rings among the wares of Master Cork, quite possibly the last places on earth anyone would think of looking. The truth is, valuable rarities are rare because there aren't many of them; you could spend a lifetime knowing what to look for and only find sand, sharks' teeth, and doggerel. Not me. And that's not skill, knowledge, or discernment. That's just luck.

* * *

Talking of old rubbish, I decided against *The Tragical History of Henry II*. It was a fine play, with a good, strong lead and plenty of scope for Master Ackerton to pull horrible faces at the standing customers, but I knew it wasn't for me.

Nobody's fault, except possibly the House of Plantagenet; they would insist on naming their eldest sons Henry, over and over again, and unless you're a scholar or an antiquary, you can't help getting them muddled up. The average playgoer can't be expected to remember whether the play he saw last month was Henry the Fifth, Henry the First, Henry the Third part two, Henry the Seventh part one or Henry the Sixth part three. Rather than risk seeing the same play twice, he's going to keep his twopence in his purse and wait for *The Tragical History of King Stephen*.

Instead, I took a walk along the riverbank, calling in at a number of rather unpleasant inns and taverns until I flushed out Master Allardyce. I found him in the courtyard of the *White Bear*, sitting on the mounting-block with his head in his hands and last night's dinner on his shirt-front. Recently someone had punched him quite hard in the face; his lip was swollen and his cheek was the colour of fresh liver. I walked up behind him quite quietly and tapped him on the shoulder. He rose like a pheasant, then sat down again like a dirty shirt dropped into a linen-basket.

"Tristram and Yseult," I said.

"Go away." He massaged his temples with thumb and forefinger. I had no sympathy.

“It’s practically finished,” I said. “You just need to fix the third act and put in some stuff for the clowns. And then you’ll get paid. Won’t that be nice?”

He shook his head, a gesture that he clearly regretted. “It’s not right,” he said. “It needs tearing up and starting again from scratch. Bloody thing,” he added bitterly. He hates his own work. I think he blames it for his misfortunes.

“Now listen,” I said. “It’s a perfectly good working play, and it’ll pack ‘em in, trust me, I know ever so much more about this business than you do. The longer you fiddle with it, the worse it’ll get. For once in your life, finish something. You’ll feel ever so much better, and I’ll give you fifteen beautiful shillings. All you have to do is fix the third act and write a few jokes. It’ll take you half an hour. Best of all, you’ll make me happy. You like me, I’m you’re only friend. Well?”

He closed his red eyes. “It’s rubbish,” he said. “There was so much I wanted to say, and it’s all got lost and watered down. Now, it’s just a bunch of idiots strutting up and down and shouting.”

“Yes,” I said. “Which is what the customers like. The sole justification of a writer is writing stuff that people want to see. Otherwise, what the hell are you people good for?”

So much for Master Allardyce. I’d known him five years, and I accepted that he had the potential to write the greatest

play ever; a play so good that if God were to summon Mankind before the bar of Heaven and demand to know one good reason why He shouldn't send a second flood and drown the lot of us, all we'd have to do is hand Him the manuscript and there'd be no case to answer. I knew that, in order to write this play, Master Allardyce needed to drink himself stupid, get beaten up twice a week, and generally mash himself down into a cheese, like the cider-makers do, before he could ferment and distil his very essence into words on a page. But I have a business to run, and I need crowd-pleasers. Master Allardyce's monument-more-enduring-than-bronze would just have to wait until I retired. Accordingly, I gave him no peace.

A good morning's work, and all done before ten o'clock. I walked back to Shoe Lane and sat in my chair for a while, until the fidgets got me and I couldn't sit still a moment longer.

At times like that, I really miss manual labour. The way I see it, Man was built to tire himself out; unless he's good and weary, he can't rest, and unless he rests, he gets all used up. When I was a boy, there was always work to be done—the trick was keeping out of its way as long as possible, and to that end I had a number of subtle hiding-places, in the hayloft, under the floorboards in the barn, a sort of roofed-over priest's hole I'd carefully tunnelled out in the tangled heart of the raspberry canes. These days I have a study with a beautiful chair and

books and a Nuremberg clock and a Dutch painting of the Annunciation, but I can't keep still for five minutes.

The bottle with the demon in it was in the woodshed, where I'd put it after Master Cork went away. I didn't really like leaving it in the kitchen, because Nan is a great knocker-over of unconsidered trifles, and although it was almost certain there was nothing inside the bottle except stale air—I picked it up and looked at it. A glass bottle, worth about sixpence; green, the colour of pine needles, but not Venetian; not old, because the glass wasn't noticeably thicker at the bottom than the top. It was stopped with a cork covered in beeswax, and the wax was quite fresh. I ask you.

* * *

(Now, then. When I was a boy, I was always finding things. I've mentioned my ridiculously overgenerous allotment of luck already—when you get to know me, you'll discover that I refer to it all the time, to the point where my friends pre-emptively change the subject—and many of the things I found were indeed rich and rare. I found an old clay pot full of silver coins; except that they weren't silver, it was just a very thin wash over black, crumbly copper, as we found out when we tried to melt them down on the blacksmith's forge. I found the tomb of an elf once; he was buried under a long, flat slab, and for a moment I saw him, a very tall man in a green tunic, with a bow

and arrows beside him, and then he crumbled into dust before my eyes, just like Master Cork's Grail Knight. And I found a message in a bottle.

It was the bottle I noticed; a green knob sticking up out of the sand at low tide, too regular to be a pebble. I scabbled it out, and to my joy it was complete and unbroken, worth sixpence of anybody's money, therefore fourpence to me, because the man in the market I sold things to always assumed I'd stolen them, even when hadn't. Fourpence was more than my father earned in a day, and he was a skilled man, a wheelwright. And then I noticed that there was something inside the bottle; a scrap of something, like a dead leaf, but thicker.

This was after I found the dead elf, and I'd learned my lesson. Everybody said that the elf turned to dust because that's what elves do, being magical. I figured that when something's been kept preserved for a very long time in a sealed place, suddenly exposing it to the air did it no good at all. Basically the same reason why you should eat potted meat quickly, once you've opened the jar. Accordingly, I didn't open my bottle to find out what was inside. Instead, I took it to the priest, who was a wise man and knew many things. Actually, he wasn't. He was the wisest man in our part of the country and knew more than anybody else. That's not quite the same thing.

Anyway, he opened the bottle, and the scrap of something didn't immediately turn to dust, so he was either wise or lucky (and my entire life is a monument to the slightness of the difference between those two). He spread the scrap out on his kitchen table, and I saw it was parchment, with writing on it.

What does it say?, I asked him. He looked at me. He knew I couldn't read, because he'd tried to teach me. I don't know, he said. Here, look for yourself.

I looked. Meaningless.

He said he thought it was probably Greek, because they use different letters; and if so, it was possible that the bottle had drifted all the way from Constantinople. Possibly, he said, it was some incredibly valuable piece of knowledge, so rare and precious that it had to be preserved at all costs, so that when the Turks came with their great cannon and blew down the walls, some monk or clerk had written his great secret on a bit of parchment, thrust it into a bottle and thrown it from his window into the sea, just before the door of his cell burst open and the Turks rushed in and killed him. But the bottle and the secret floated away, safe and preserved, like pickled cabbage, and bobbed around in the wild, soft sea for a hundred years, until eventually it washed up on the west coast of Wales, on a day when a sharp-eyed boy just happened to be passing—

He talked like that; I think it's from him that I picked up my ear for poetry, or at least for the mighty line, the sonorous phrase that sounds fine and doesn't mean very much. In any event, he gave me back the bottle but kept the scrap of writing to show to his bishop, who was a very learned clerk and could read Greek, and who would be able to tell whether it really was a great and wonderful secret or just some nonsense. I was happy enough with that; I'd pleased my friend the priest, and I got my fourpence for the bottle, and I thought nothing more of it for a very long time.

But when I'd made my first big score and was suddenly taken rich, I went back home to show off, like you do, and when I called to see the priest they told me he was dead; died in Cirencester, of the plague, and there was a new priest now, if I wanted to see him about anything. I felt sorry for my friend, and vexed that I couldn't ask him what the scrap of writing had turned out to be, but I guessed it was just luck—bad in his case, just as mine is nearly always good, two sides of one coin, which is almost certainly a plated fake, thin silver back and front and base old copper in the middle.)

* * *

My mother was always bottling things, putting them up in jars, preserving. She told me, it's very important to seal the jar well, to keep the air out, or otherwise it'll spoil.

Whoever sold Master Cork the bottled demon obviously knew that; hence the thick dollop of beeswax. A demon is bad enough, but a spoilt demon doesn't bear thinking about. A sealed empty bottle, however, is a dose of perfectly preserved nothing. I pared away the wax with my knife and drew the cork.

* * *

Master Morley, the one who came to a bad end not so long ago, once tried to sell me a play about demons. The lead was a famous German doctor who sells his soul to the devil—a fine hook for a play, but he didn't make very good use of it, and two thirds of it was just clowning, which is why I turned him down. He sold it elsewhere and it didn't do too badly, which only goes to show that I'm not infallible. Ah well.

The doctor in the play was based on one John Faustus, who really lived, about seventy years ago, in Wittemberg. I used to have a book written by him, in his own handwriting; it's in Latin, which I came to late in life, and there are large parts of it I couldn't make head or tail of, but as far as I can tell it's a book about summoning, controlling, and dealing with demons. If I'd known that at the time, I wouldn't have bought it, because something like that can get you in a lot of trouble. Once I'd found out, though, I couldn't bring myself to put it on the fire, it being so old and wise and full of secrets. In the end, I sold it at a loss to my lord Rawley, who likes that sort of thing and can

get away with murder. He, so they say, regularly summons demons, and sends them out to bend the winds or fetch him gold from the Antipodes. I'm not entirely sure I believe that, because a man with that sort of power wouldn't ever be short of money, as my lord so frequently is. I never heard anyone say he keeps his demons in bottles, which raises the question. Where *does* he keep them?

* * *

He rose up out of the bottle like smoke from a chimney on a still day.

Let me take a moment to describe what I saw. I don't have Master Allardyce's way with words; I'm essentially a practical man, mundane but observant with a good eye for detail, I'd make a much better witness in a court of law than messrs Allardyce or Morley, though they'd probably get a round of applause from the jury when they'd finished testifying. I saw a sort of plume of dark grey—not really like smoke, because it was gritty and shiny; imagine a column of finely-powdered charcoal rearing up at you out of a bottle. The top of the column spread and billowed out, first into a ball and then into the shape of a man's head and shoulders, which gradually refined itself, as though an invisible sculptor was working it with his thumbs and fingers, into a recognisable face.

You've been to the Abbey, obviously, and seen the carved grey stone kings and saints; and you'll have noticed that one or two of them still bear the paint that once decorated all of them. You'll appreciate, therefore, the enormous difference between a face with skin-coloured skin and hair-coloured hair, and exactly the same shape in dull grey stone. The painted face is immediately recognisable as human—it may not be a very good likeness, it may have a silly expression and its eyes may be far too close together, but it's unmistakably human. The stone face is far more remote, grander, more abstract. It's patently artificial, a thing made by one man to represent another, but with interpretation, quite possibly allegory and ulterior meaning. A statue of King John in white marble stands for cunning, cruelty, weakness, deception. Slap a bit of paint on it and you get a pink man with a foolish expression. Well; the face that gradually took shape in front of me stayed basalt grey—read into that what you will. I think that was probably the point.

To be precise, however; he had a long, thin nose; high cheekbones and a high forehead; small ears; small, full lips; I would say rather a weak chin; completely bald, which suggests to me that the Devil can't do hair and knows his limitations. The eyes were—well, perfectly executed, let's say, with heavy eyelids and eyeballs that moved in their sockets, but completely

blank, so that I wondered if he could see out of them. I still don't know; maybe he used a completely different set of senses, or maybe someone was doing his seeing for him and whispering the results in his ear. His neck was long and thin, and his shoulders were slim to the point of being skinny, except that his bones didn't stick out particularly. On a girl it would've been attractive. His arms, when they developed, were similarly thin and soft (I imagine they'd have been soft to the touch, is what I mean), and his fingers were long and delicate, suggesting he'd never done a day's work in his life. He blinked a lot, I remember, but otherwise kept very still.

"Hello," I said.

He smiled. He had a nice smile. "Hello," he replied.

Whatsisname, the fellow who had such a bit hit with Falstaff and Poins a year or so back and then sort of faded away, has a character who reckons he can call spirits from the vasty deep; he's quite cocky about it, and gets most upset when nobody seems to believe him. I can understand why. It's rather an extraordinary feeling, the first time you do it. "Who are you?" I said.

He shrugged, perfectly conveying the information that I'd asked a very bad question, but I wasn't expected to know any better and so he forgave me. I tried again. "Have you been in the bottle very long?"

He put his head on one side and thought for a moment. Rather, he acted thought; I wouldn't have given him a job. "Fourteen weeks, six days, nine hours, twenty-seven minutes. Why?"

I shrugged. "Was it uncomfortable in there?"

"No, not particularly."

"How did you come to be in a bottle in the first place?"

He blinked at me. Another tactless question. I don't know why, but I found that slightly irritating. In fact, I wasn't sure I liked him very much. "What do you do?" I asked. "I mean, what are you good for?"

He grinned. "Nothing."

"Nothing shall come of nothing, speak again. If I ask you to do things for me, will you obey?"

He frowned. "That depends," he said.

Ah, I thought. Best to tread carefully from now on. "If I ask you to, will you go back in the bottle?"

"If you ask it of me, yes."

The way he said it put me on notice. I've had quite a bit to do with lawyers, worse luck. They have a special relationship with language; absolute precision. "You can go back in the bottle if you like," I said. "Or you can stay floating there, it's all the same to me." You please yourself, I nearly said, but luckily

thought better of it. Nothing that could possibly be construed as a command or an instruction. “Are you an evil spirit?”

His head went on one side again. “There’s nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so,” he said. I raised an eyebrow. If he was a demon, was he allowed to say things like that? “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Then you aren’t an evil spirit.”

“No.”

“Are you lying?”

“No.” He smiled. “But please bear in mind that oftentimes, to win you to your harm, the instruments of darkness tell you truths. That said, I am not of myself evil.” He looked round, and saw a knife lying on my desk, where I’d been sharpening pens. “Neither is that,” he said. “If you see what I mean.”

I nodded. “Two hundred years ago, when a man was stabbed in a quarrel, the judge would condemn the knife to be legally killed, by breaking or drowning in a well, because it was guilty of murder. I think we’ve moved on a bit since then, though sometimes I wonder. Tell me, do you strike bargains with people?”

He blinked. “Yes.”

“Are you expensive?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll bet you are. As luck would have it, however, I have everything I need or could possibly want, so I don’t think you’ve got anything to offer me. Therefore—”

He blinked again. “Except King Solomon’s ring.”

“Excuse me?”

“And a dragon’s tooth, and a living mirror, and the perfectly preserved smile of John the Baptist.”

I laughed. It was forced, like seakale in March. “Who says I want—?”

“You’d have bought them if they were genuine.”

“There’s wanting and wanting,” I said. “True, there are certain things I wouldn’t mind having, quite a lot of them if the truth be told. But not enough to sell my soul for.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth.”

Not even with three-foot tongs. “The difference,” I said carefully, “is between *want* and *would like to have*. *Want* implies a certain degree of need, as in the lack of that certain thing being in some sense harmful. *Want* as a synonym for *lack*. I can conceive of nothing the lack of which leaves me incomplete or unfulfilled. And certainly not the smile of John the Baptist.”

He shrugged. “You started it,” he said. “You opened the bottle.”

“Utterly convinced there was nothing inside it.”

“You bought me.”

I shook my head. “I bought a Saxon ring. You were thrown in as a makeweight, and not by my suggestion. I didn’t object to getting you, but there was no conscious volition on my part.”

He put his head on one side, then shrugged. “Fine,” he said. “In that case, we have nothing to offer each other. Could I trouble you to smear a bit of wax round my cork when I’m back inside? It helps keep the damp out.”

“Of course,” I said.

He acknowledged that with a slight dip of his head. “Are you sure there’s nothing you need?”

“Positive.”

“You’re complete and perfect in every way.”

“I suppose I am, yes.” I smiled. “The Lord is my shepherd, therefore shall I lack nothing. It’s the fine dividing line between need and greed, you see.”

“Or you’re too cheap to pay the price.”

I breathed out through my nose. “You ought to meet my lord Devereaux,” I said. “There’s a man who wants for nothing, but if he takes a fancy to something, he’s simply got to have it, though the heavens fall. You’d get on well with him.”

He laughed. “His sort are two a penny. I’m only interested in rarities. Good day to you.”

He went back into the bottle—well, the way he came out, only in reverse. As soon as I felt it was safe, I jammed the cork in, then dripped the candle over it until it was an engorged, splodgy mess. Then I sat back in my chair, trying to persuade myself that I hadn't seen any of that, and none of it had actually happened.

* * *

“The likeliest explanation is that it didn't,” said Master Decker. “I think what happened was, you fell asleep in your chair after too much sherris sack, morbidly dwelling on how you were offered *Doctor Faustus* and turned it down. I can see how something like that could eat away at a man's mind.”

Master Decker fancies himself as a bit of a scholar. He studied at Cambridge, Paris, and Wittenberg, though I imagine they were glad to see the back of him. He's rich and wildly extravagant. His father made a fortune in the fullering business, emptying piss-pots right across London in Queen Mary's time.

“I know what I saw,” I said. “What you've got to tell me is, what do I do now?”

He poured himself a drink. “What do you want to do?”

“I don't know. Should I throw the bottle in the river?”

I don't think he liked my wine. He sort of nibbled at it and put the cup down. “King Polycrates of Samos was the richest

man in the world,” he said, fixing his eyes on a point about a foot over my head. “Aware that his good fortune made him a likely target for the jealous resentment of Heaven, he took his most valued possession, a gold ring that had belonged to his father, and threw it in the sea. Two weeks later, a fisherman caught a particularly fine turbot, so fine that he couldn’t bring himself to sell it, but instead took it to the palace as a gift fit for a king. When they opened the fish, they found Polycrates’ ring in its belly. The very next day, the king took sick and died. Moral; it’s not that easy.”

I frowned. “All right, I’ll send for a priest. Presumably they’ve got established procedures—”

Master Decker grinned at me. “That would be an interesting conversation,” he said. “Excuse me, reverend father, I bought a devil in a bottle but I don’t want it any more.’ If you want to get yourself burnt alive, there are easier ways, and ones that don’t reflect quite so badly on your friends.”

He had a point, of course. “A display of sincere repentance —”

“You could try that, I suppose.” He scratched his ear. “Though what you’ve got to repent of, I’m really not sure. I mean, you haven’t done anything wrong. Repentance when you haven’t actually sinned cannot be sincere, and insincere repentance is vanity and a sin in itself.”

He gets on my nerves sometimes. “So what are you suggesting? I should just put the bottle on a high shelf and try and forget about it?”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” he said gently, “because I can’t think of anything intelligent or sensible to offer you. Just because I can see the glaring errors in your ideas doesn’t necessarily mean I’ve got any better ones. But yes, I suppose that would do as well as anything else. We pray, *lead us not into temptation*, but it’s a request, not an order. And that fact that we ask Him not to do it suggests that He’s capable of it, and from time to time He does. I’m guessing that the point of this exercise is for you to sit staring at that bottle for a year or so and not open it.” He spread his hands in a rather silly gesture. “That’s just my guess. I could be wrong. I never even took holy orders, so what do I know?”

“Do you think I imagined the whole thing?”

He nodded. “That would seem to be the most logical explanation,” he said. “But who knows? There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Helpful as ever.

* * *

Later that evening, a boy hammered on the door. His face was black with soot, and he stank of smoke.

“Come quickly,” he said. “The theatre’s on fire.”

I walked rather than ran. If you think about the design of a theatre, it's really just a short chimney. Sure enough, by the time I got there, it was a quarter acre of fallen timbers and ashes. I stood for a while gazing at the mess, and then it started to rain. A bit late, but at least it would damp down the cinders and keep it from burning down half the city.

I regard myself as a moderately sensible man, which is why my bow has so many strings to it you'd be forgiven for mistaking it for a harp. Besides; in a good year, the theatre makes money, in a bad year it loses everything it made the previous season. I could afford the loss of that particular asset; in fact, in the long term I'd be better off without it. More of a hobby than a business, really, or so I told myself, over and over again, as I stared at my bedroom rafters.

It won't end there, I told myself. This is just the first act.

If my life was a play, I wouldn't buy it. Who on earth would want to watch such a load of old rubbish?

* * *

Master Allardyce came to see me.

"You're going to love it," he said. "It's the best thing I've ever done. It's the play I was born to write. You know how sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night and ask yourself, what's the point, why does anyone bother, why do we put ourselves through all this misery and aggravation? Well,

now I know. *This* is why. You've got to read it. The first scene starts off with—"

I stuck a bread roll in his mouth. He stared at me for a moment, then took it out. "What?" he said.

"You haven't been following the news, have you? My theatre burned down."

He looked at me as though I was talking Portuguese. "What?"

"Burnt to the ground. Nothing left but ash and rubbish. Sorry."

He frowned, like a reasonable man struggling to keep his temper. "Well, when's it going to be rebuilt?"

"It isn't. I can't afford it. I'm out of the play business. Sorry."

He didn't say, 'don't be stupid', but his eyes did it for him. "For how long?"

"For good. Permanently. You're talking to the wrong man. I can't help you. Sorry."

He breathed in slowly through his nose. "But you've always been so—I mean, you keep badgering me to write stuff, if it wasn't for you I'd have packed it all in years ago and gone back to the brickyard. You can't just *give up*."

I shrugged. "Yes I can. If the truth be told, I never made any money at it anyway. I've been subsidising the Muses in this

pig-ignorant town for eleven years, and now I can't afford it any more. I'm sure you'll find someone else. You really are a very talented writer, on your day, though you really do need to think about the audience a bit more. And cut down on the classical allusions, if I were you. All that stuff went out with Hieronimo."

Now he was staring at me. "Don't you even want to read it?"

"Not particularly," I said. "After all, like I just told you, I'm not in the business any more."

"But it's *fantastic*. It'll change the whole way you see the world."

"In that case, definitely not. I'm quite happy with the way things are, thank you very much."

"You could borrow a theatre."

He obviously had no idea. "No," I said.

"At least let me tell you the story. It's brilliant. There's this rich man, or he might be a duke or a prince or possibly a scholar, though we'd have to be careful about blasphemy if he's a cleric, anyway, there's this rich, powerful man, and the Devil comes to him and says, are you happy? And the man says—"

"Let me stop you there," I said. "Kit Morley—"

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” he said irritably. “The man says, yes, I’m perfectly happy, I have everything I could possibly want. And the Devil says—”

“Besides,” I went on firmly, “devils and damnation and demons in bottles are completely used up and worn out, they’re last year’s shoes, you couldn’t get an audience in Cheshire, let alone in Town. Look, why don’t you go and see Pip Anslow? Stick in a girl dressed as a boy and a funny dog, he’ll bite your hand off. Nice man, Pip.”

He looked at me. “Demons in bottles?” he said.

* * *

I have many strings to my bow. Strings break.

Take, for example, the barque *Alexander*, carrying sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine from Venice. I owned a third of her. I like to think that the third I owned wasn’t the bit that was riddled with teredo beetles, and therefore it wasn’t my fault. Sank, with all hands, somewhere off the coast of Gascony, on a clear blue day with just the usual amount of wind, taking with her a quarter of my value. My heart bleeds for the sailors and their widows, mothers and orphan children—I’m sincere about that, because my uncle was a sailor, and of his bones are coral made, and the misery it caused in our family isn’t something I’m ever likely to forget. I winced and cursed and felt quite sick for a while for my money,

but only until I realised how trivial my loss was compared to theirs, and how lucky I was, and how wise my uncle had been not to take me with him when I begged to go. So much to be grateful for.

There was also, I have to say, something of a feeling of this-isn't-really-happening, even though it palpably was; as witness the rain-sodden cinders in Southwark, or the sworn deposition of the master of the *Tiger*, who watched the *Alexander* go down with his own eyes. Even so; it felt too structured, if you see what I mean, too dramatically necessary. If it was the plot of some play, I'd approve—you can never make anything too obvious for the average theatregoer, I always say—and therefore, since it wasn't a play, it felt all wrong.

I'm a businessman, after all. My destiny is controlled by wars, shortages, droughts, famines, mild winters, royal marriages, good harvests, pirates, excessive rainfall, outbreaks of plague, the exchange rate of the ducat against the livre Tournois on the Rialto, and the latest fashions in characterisation, ruffs, and blank verse; not by malevolent influences in bottles. Not that I'm an atheist or anything like that, perish the thought. But I don't feel the need for absolute or monolithic evil, Evil as a name in a cast-list, Evil as chorus or protagonist (*enter Evil left, bearing a candle*), in order to

make sense of the world. I think a million small buggerations make up what looks to the casual, distant observer like Evil, the way a swarm is made up of a million small, individual bees. And all the world is not a stage, and all the men and women are most definitely not merely players; God isn't a playwright, there is no audience, and most of all, there is no moral. Trust me. I know about these things.

* * *

So, naturally, I went looking for Master Cork.

He lodges—I don't know why I find this so surprising, but I do—with a respectable glovemaker and his family in Blackfriars. I suppose it's my assumptions showing through—I assume all his wares are fakes and cheats, apart from the few that are accidentally honest, like the Saxon ring; therefore I assume that he would live among thieves, gulls, whores and coney-catchers, in some ghastly hovel with bloodsoaked rushes on the floor. Typecasting. Master Cork, on the other hand, thinks of himself as a basically honest merchant and so chooses his address accordingly.

“Let go of me,” he said, with an effort. “I can't breathe.”

I felt mildly ashamed. I have to say, in spite of everything I'm still rather more Welsh than I care to admit. Also, if a man can't breathe, he can't tell you things.

“I’m sorry,” I said, letting go of his throat and twisting his left arm behind his back until I heard the joints creak. “Let’s start again. Where did you get the demon in the bottle?”

“What? Oh, that.”

“Yes, that. Who did you buy it from?”

You can tell when a man’s used to being beaten up. He knows when to go limp. Comes with practice; I’m sure it’d all come back to me if I needed it to, like swimming or milking a cow. “Nobody,” he said.

I sighed. “Loyalty is admirable,” I said, “but I do really need to know.”

He screamed. They’d have heard it downstairs, sitting round the table for family prayers. If my lodger screamed like that, I’d come running. “I didn’t buy it from anybody,” he said. “Really and truly. It’s just a bottle. I washed it out, put a new cork in and sealed it with wax. It’s a fake.”

I was so taken aback I nearly let go of him. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying, I’m confessing. It’s a fake.”

“It can’t be.”

“It is. And I’ll give you your money back, I promise, just please let go of my arm.”

“I didn’t give you any money,” I reminded him. “Where did you get the bottle?”

“I don’t know, do I? Westminster,” he amended, as I applied a little more pressure. “I fished it out of the mud. All right?”

That didn’t sound right. Scrambling about in the mud on the banks of the Thames for flotsam is a recognised profession, if a little overcrowded, but Master Cork didn’t strike me as the type. “You bought it from a mudlark,” I amended.

“What? Yes, maybe. I can’t remember. Really I can’t remember,” he whispered; you know when it really hurts, because they go all quiet. I slacked off a bit. You can’t lie when you’re in that much pain. You simply haven’t got the mental energy to be inventive. “You bought it,” I repeated.

But he shook his head, much to my amazement. “No, I remember it now. I was walking up from the ferry, and I saw it, sticking out. I wrapped my handkerchief around my hand and pulled it out. It’s a nice bottle.”

You don’t contradict a statement that made the pain stop, not unless you’re perfectly sincere. “Was there anything inside it?”

“Mud.”

“Anything else? A scrap of paper?”

“No. It was full up with mud, so I washed it out. That’s all. I promise.”

I sighed and let him go. He sprang away from me across the room, bounced off the wall like a tennis-ball, fumbled under a pile of dirty washing and pulled out a dagger, which he wagged about at me as though the handle was red-hot. I ignored it. “One more time,” I said. “Feel free to tell the truth, if you haven’t already done so. You found the bottle in the mud, at Westminster, near the ferry.”

“Get out,” he said. “And don’t come back. This is my *home*.”

The way he said it made me feel bad. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll go now. If you remember anything else about it, anything at all—”

“Get out.”

I shrugged. I had a feeling I’d lost a friend. I turned—a calculated risk, but not much of one—and reached for the door-latch. Then I stopped. “That’s rather nice,” I said. “What is it?”

“Go away.”

I picked it up. “Florentine leather,” I said. “How much do you want for it?”

“Three shillings.”

“Give you a shilling for it.”

“Two and sixpence.”

I put the money down on the table and closed the door behind me.

* * *

When I got home, there was a letter for me. Its contents came as no surprise.

I'd put the bottle in the woodshed, buried under a pile of green logs. I took it to my study and pulled the cork. Nothing happened.

I frowned. "Are you in there?" I said aloud, and felt rather foolish. Then I took the bottle and threw it in the river.

* * *

I owned the freehold of the Southwark house; I'd swapped it with my lord Devereaux for a copy of the Book of Job, in Job's own handwriting, with tear-stains, and the sword of Alexander the Great. Freehold property doesn't come up very often in that part of town. The sale proceeds very nearly cleared my debts. My lord Burley bought my collection, which covered the rest. I walked out of his house owning one pair of shoes, cork-heeled, very good condition; paned round hose over cannons, a linen silk doublet, linen shirt and capotain hat, and three shillings and fourpence in money. I looked no poorer than I had forty-eight hours earlier, which only goes to show.

As I saw it, I had two options, both of which involved walking. One; I could walk to Wales, to my home, where I still had family. They would not be pleased to see me. They would probably put up with me for a little while, if I was prepared to

make myself useful around the farm. After that; well. People have always outnumbered opportunities in Wales, by a factor of about twenty thousand to one. That's why I came to London, where the ratio is much kinder, three or four thousand. Or, option two, I could walk as far as the river.

There were arguments on both sides. On the one hand, the Almighty has fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter. On the other, there was no chance those shoes were going to last me all the way to Penygavont. I weighed up the merits of both sides, and figured that I was clearly in the Almighty's bad book already, so one more faux pas wouldn't really matter.

In the end, I compromised. The Thames, after all, is a long river, and it rises near Cirencester, which is the direction I'd be going anyway. I set off walking; and just this side of Greenwich I stopped and did what you'd have done, being so much more sensible and level-headed than I was at that moment; I sold my cork-heeled shoes and with the proceeds bought two pair of clogs, a buff coat, and a wool blanket. Not that I'd committed myself either way, you understand. But if I'd gone much further, I'd have ruined the shoes and nobody would've bought them.

* * *

Master Allardyce once started to write a play about a man who couldn't make up his mind. There were some good lines in

it, but I told him, the audience aren't going to be interested in someone like that, they'll have no patience with him. Indecision isn't a heroic virtue, nor is prevarication, so I prefer to call it keeping my options open. Which I did, all the way to Marlow.

Don't know if you've been there; it's all right, I suppose, if you have a horse to ride and money to stay in inns. It's not much of a place if you're footsore and hungry; the same goes, I imagine, for Venice, Constantinople, or the gorgeous cities of Cathay. In Marlow I spent my last farthing on a loaf of stale bread—it's so much cheaper stale, and toasted on a bit of twig over a roadside fire, you don't really notice the difference—and took that as a sign that I really ought to stop wavering and come to some sort of a decision.

About three miles out of Marlow there's a bridge. Nothing special, but you could jump off it if you were so inclined, or if it's raining you can sit under it and not get wet, for free. Now a buff coat is a fine thing, very warm and proof against brambles, but once it's sodden with rain it stays sodden for days, unless you dry it over a fire, in which case it turns stiff as a board and you can stand it up on its own, like a suit of armour. True, there comes a point when you no longer notice how wet you are, and a man in a bath (or a river) is perfectly comfortable and he's wet all over. But suffice to say I'd had about enough. I ducked

under the bridge, and I wasn't overjoyed to find that I had company.

"There you are," he said. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

I didn't recognise him at first with his face pink, but the voice was unmistakable. "For crying out loud," I said, and started to back away into the rain.

"Don't be like that," he said. "Sit down. I'll light a fire."

"Under a wooden bridge. How sensible."

He sighed patiently. There was a green flare, and a smell of brimstone. I have to confess, my curiosity was piqued. As you may have gathered, I can't resist a curiosity. "How did you do that?" I asked.

"In hell," he replied, "there's one material fire, and yet it shall not burn all men alike." He grinned. "Allardyce, *Duchess of Cremona*."

I sat down. "Which he never finished," I pointed out. "Pity, it would've been a good play. You know Master Allardyce, then."

He nodded. "Oh yes. Sold his soul for a mighty line. Stupid thing to do, he hasn't written anything worth a damn since." He grinned. "Worth a damn. Unintentional, I assure you."

I shivered. Like poor old Morley's Faustus, three acts of fatuous clowning. "So that's hell fire, is it? Interesting."

He nodded. “The genuine article,” he said.

I reached out. It was certainly warm enough. “No smoke.”
“Some of us have to work there.”

It was good to be warm again. “So that’s what I’ve got in store for me, is it? Better get used to it, I suppose.”

“You?” He gave me a pained look. “Hardly. No, feast your eyes on it while you can. You’ll never see it again. Not unless you’re very wicked hereafter, which is unlikely.”

I frowned. “But I thought—”

“You were led into temptation. You were strong. I am content, you said.”

“But I thought,” I repeated, “I’d committed the sin of pride. Hence one burnt theatre, one wrecked ship, my tannery and my ropewalk closed down by the plague—”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“My three farms on the Pembrokeshire coast washed into the sea,” I pointed out. “Give me some credit. That’s divine retribution.”

He gave me a look that made me feel four inches tall. “Don’t be silly,” he said. “All right, here.” From inside his coat he pulled out a roll of parchment. I recognised it at once. “Where did you get that?”

“What? Oh, from my lord Devereaux’s sale. Didn’t you hear? Attainted for treason, his goods sold off at auction. I got this very cheap. Of course, it’s not genuine.”

The book of Job, in Job’s own handwriting. “Of course it isn’t,” I said. “For a start, it’s in Latin.”

He nodded, and put it down on the ground. “The damned,” he said, “lead happy, prosperous lives, unless they’re idiots like Master Allardyce, who doesn’t know what he wants. They screw the poor, steal, utter false coin, forge their rich uncles’ wills and murder them; outward prosperity is no reliable indication of moral virtue. Or they want what they’re not supposed to have, and get it. This doesn’t make them unhappy. Usually, quite the reverse. The man who loses everything at one fell swoop, on the other hand—” He nodded at the book. “A signal honour. Many are called, but few are comprehensively dumped on. I really only wanted to tell you you’d won.”

I could have strangled him. “Is that right?”

“If right means correct, yes. If right means fair or just, I’d have to refer that to my superiors. I don’t have input,” he explained. “I just do as I’m told.”

It was a long time before I felt like saying anything. “In the book,” I said, “Job gets it all back again in the end.”

“Quite. However, it’s a moral exemplar, not a template. You can’t rely on it, is what I’m saying.”

I sighed. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” I said. “I was led into temptation.”

“You were.”

“I said, no thanks, I have everything I could possibly want. I passed the test.”

“Confirmed.”

“Fine. So everything was taken from me, and here I am under a bridge, no money, half a stale loaf, and you for company.”

“There’s no need to be nasty,” he said. “I thought you’d be pleased.”

Our exits and our entrances. “Delighted,” I said. “When I die of hunger or cold or rheumatic of the lungs, I’ll go straight to heaven. Isn’t that nice.”

“Well, yes,” he said. “That’s the point.”

I shook my head. You know that distinct muzziness when you’ve got a cold coming. “I take it you’re familiar with scripture.”

“Of course.”

“Of course you are. In that case, please be so good as to explain the book of Job to me. As a favour. If you’ve got two minutes.”

He looked puzzled. “It’s really quite straightforward,” he said. “God tests His servant. The servant passes the test. Everybody wins. That’s it.”

I might have known. After all, I’ve spent a big slab of my working life with audiences. “That’s not the point,” I said. “The point is presently winging its way over your head like a flock of geese. Really, don’t you get it?”

“Get what?”

“Fine.” I leaned back against the floorboards of the bridge. “Job complains to God. *Why are you doing this to me?* Remember?”

“Of course.”

“God says, where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? Which is a weak and ambivalent answer, but I assume what He’s saying is, puny mortal, you can’t begin to understand the mysteries of My providence, so don’t even bother trying. Essentially correct?”

He shrugged. “More or less.”

“Fine. Now try and look at it the way I do, as if it was a play I was thinking about putting on at the theatre. God says all that to Job, yes? But, a few scenes earlier, we saw it all for ourselves. We saw Satan leading God into temptation; bet you your faithful servant will crumple up like a dead leaf, he says, and God falls for it like a ton of bricks. He tortures this good, pious

man—kills his sons, brings him out all over in boils, for crying out loud—and why? Because the tempter tempted Him, and the tempter won. And what’s His excuse? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth? Which,” I added bitterly, “is *garbage*—”

He was shocked. “Steady on,” he said.

“Yes, but it is. How dare He say His divine plan is ineffable and too sublime for mortal brains, when we’ve just seen it for ourselves? And it’s not even a plan, it’s God being made a monkey of by the Devil.” I shook my head, rather ostentatiously. “Take away the fool, gentlemen. They’d boo it off the stage in Southwark.”

He was looking at me, but I couldn’t help that. “Fine,” he said. “You may just have a point, though I’m not saying you do, I’m just—”

“Saying?”

He nodded. “But I still don’t see the difficulty. You’ve achieved salvation. What more could you possibly want?”

I smiled. “You mean, I should be content. As I was before all this started.”

You know when you’re playing chess, and you think you’re doing rather well, and then your opponent says, Checkmate, and you look, and he’s right. He stared at me. “So?”

“Ask me what I want.”

“All right. What do you—?”

“I want it all back,” I said. “I want my theatre and my ship and my businesses and my farms. And if God isn’t inclined to give them to me, I’m asking you. Your lot.”

He was horrified. “You can’t,” he said.

“Why not?”

“There would have to be a price.”

I laughed out loud. I’d had a hunch for some time, and now was the time to see if I was right. I stuck my hand into the heart of the fire and held it there.

He was gawping at me as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Of course not. I can spot a fake a mile off.”

“But it’s—”

“Just stage fire. Like stage blood, or the fake daggers that retract when you stab someone.” My fingers weren’t even warm. “My stuff,” I said. “Do I get it back, or not?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Yes, please.”

* * *

And it was so. Just like that. Magic.

When he vanished into thin air, I fished an ember out of the root of the fire, wrapped it in moss and tucked it into the heel of one of my spare clogs. It was still faintly smouldering

when I got back to London. I called to see my lord Devereaux, newly released from the Tower, with a full pardon. In this shoe, I told him, I have an ember of genuine authentic hell-fire. How much do you want for it? he asked.

With the proceeds, I rebuilt my theatre. Master Allardyce's play—well, you don't need me to tell you, you'll have been to see it, six or seven times, like everybody else in London. Within six months, I was better off than I'd ever been. And now? I'm content. I have everything I could possibly want. I mean it.

* * *

When I was a boy, I found a message in a bottle. Last week, Master Cork came to see me. "You'll like this," he said.

"Really?" I said. "What is it?"

He showed me a tiny scrap of parchment. "This is Merlin's handwriting," he said. "It was found in a bottle by a boy on a beach in Wales, a hundred years ago. Great scholars of the church tried to decipher it, but none of them was wise or good enough, and they failed. In frustration, they threw it away. But only last week, it turned up in a sack of old scraps on its way to the paper-mill, and by some miracle I was there and recognised it for what it was. And now it can be yours," he added, "for a mere five pounds."

Sometimes you don't argue, even when you know you could get it for less. When I'd got rid of him, I spread it out on

my desk. It kept trying to curl up at the corners. The writing, as I'd guessed some time ago, was just ordinary Welsh, which none of the learned, high-born Fathers could read. All it said was—

The plague is carried by the fleas that infest rats.

Which is just the sort of thing you'd expect Merlin to know; that wise, humane, practical pagan Welshman. Was it genuine? I think so. My poor old friend the priest died of the plague, remember.

My mother used to preserve things in bottles. Properly sealed, they keep good indefinitely.

I walked down to Westminster and squelched through the sticky black mud until I found what I was looking for. It was there, sure enough; a bottle, its green head sticking up out of the loathsome glop. I knelt down and washed it out, then popped the scrap of parchment into it, shoved in the cork I'd had the forethought to bring with me, and threw the bottle out as far as I could make it go.

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K.J. Parker is the author of the best-selling 'Engineer' trilogy (Devices and Desires, Evil for Evil, The Escapement) as well as the previous 'Fencer' (The Colours in the Steel, The Belly of the Bow, The Proof House) and 'Scavenger' (Shadow, Pattern, Memory) trilogies, and has twice won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novella. K.J. Parker also writes under the name Tom Holt.

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THE THREE DANCERS OF GIZARI

by Tamara Vardomskaya

“And for the main ballroom,” Nahemiah Froll said, tossing the latest issue of *Arts Today* in our direction as she paced heavily over the mosaic floor, “I want that piece that Estorges made for Hestland’s Public Opera. The Three Dancers of Gizari.”

I tried to forget that I knew to the penny how much that thousand-year-old mosaic she was stomping on had cost (1,023,048.18 thalers sterling, not counting shipping it across the sea and all the wrangling with the insurer), something Nahemiah had not cared to know when she ordered it for her architect and curator, Izida Charteret, to fit into her palace.

Izida now stood near me, half-lit by a rose window of her own design. We both knew exactly what Nahemiah was talking about, as she expected us to. But this time, for this sculpture out of all the paintings and sculptures and transfigurations and works of magic described in *Arts Today*, I did not trust myself to reply. Let Izida, the artist, the aristocrat, comment.

“The one that the Public Opera then rejected as obscene? If you want to branch out into modern artists at last, Chief, why

not Tammen? He's all the rage right now. If..." she paused, "what you desire is fine female nudes that emanate sensuality."

I had never understood how Izida, older and university-educated, could so blindly fail to anticipate the effect of her words. Or perhaps my time in the theater looking at faces gave me the advantage there. Or perhaps it was that unlike her I had been born and raised an underling, always watching the subtle signs of my lady's displeasure—such as knowing that using "my lady" instead of "Chief" to her would be grounds for dismissal. Especially when the veins in Nahemiah's forehead just below her ornate cloche hat (40ts.; the imitations on the street went for 3.50) bulged as they did now.

"You look at Tammen's paintings, sculptures, transformations," Nahemiah said in that ice-cold tone that masked white-hot rage, "and you see *men* doing things and women—looking bored. Nude, clothed, all his women have no expression on their faces at all, and any sensuality of theirs hasn't a hen's tooth of true emotion behind it. And men hail him as a genius! You know why the men at the Public Opera rejected Estorges? Because he dared show women looking happy, unabashedly, unashamedly happy!"

She opened *Arts Today* with a sudden movement; the spine had clearly been broken at the spread with the dynamic-captures of the "obscene" sculpture. That was striking: all of

the newspapers from her chains that Nahemiah read every day, she sent back in pristine condition, only their content copied to her formidable brain. But then, *Arts Today* was not yet in her chain, even as she bought a profiled work after nearly every issue.

“I got you to show these men what women can do”—she pointed at Izida, though not at me—“and I will now get these men to see and feel women being happy.”

I sighed and silently began making notes. Costs of journey to Halispell (32ts. by ship, then between 0.25 and 0.5 ducats by train), ship schedules, Nahemiah’s contacts, or rather, mine. My Chief wanted the Three Dancers of Gizari. All through the years of building and rebuilding the elaborate palace we now stood in, Izida, and later I, had done what the Chief wished.

The flare of Izida’s nostrils now showed a skeptical distaste. I had seen it many times in front of a design that she wasn’t pleased with, whether drawn by another’s hand or her own. It had always made me yearn to do all I could to change her expression, that nose and cheekbone doing more than any of Nahemiah’s shouts.

But, looking at the spread in *Arts Today*, I instead found myself gripped by the energy in the women’s expressions, indeed by their unabashed joy. Joy that I had never seen in Izida or Nahemiah, for all the beauty one had wrought and the

other had bought. Joy that I would never feel from any allatir sculpture adorning Nahemiah's collection, acquired by me but not meant for me.

As always, it would be Nahemiah's thalers sterling that I would count out on green-edged checks and assignation notes to pay for the sculpture, and it would be Nahemiah's palace home, amid mosaics and paintings and tapestries, that it would stand in.

But it was I, Bethenica Morning, Nahemiah's financial manager, who truly wanted it.

* * *

Nahemiah Froll. People have called her mightier than queens. To some, a visionary, a builder, a challenger to the aristocracy, a new baroness of modern print. To some, an art connoisseur, collector, and patroness of peerless taste. To others, a tyrannical despot, who had built her newspaper empire by simply buying up newspapers that dared publish criticism of her. To others, a whim-driven bitch, who tore down million-thaler creations because she didn't like them today, and threw away friends, entertaining guests, lovers just as easily.

If they asked me to describe her, I would simply say that if her fancies were volatile because she loved the process of

change and creation, she always paid my 30ts. a week fully and on time.

* * *

Just before I headed for the motor-car to take me to the ship headed across the strait, I went to see Izida, up in her naturally tasteful apartment. The drapes of pure white velvet, the carpets also; her paintings, and those of artists she admired—most of them from Halispell, most of them men—provided the only color. No sculptures.

Simplicity and elegance, she would say, saving the intricacy for my Chief. As if a bleaching in color could hide that the materials (20ts. a yard) were still fit for the Count of Schellerbide's daughter she once was.

Twenty years ago, she'd had enough of the Count not understanding that his daughter's passion and genius lay not in governing estates or bride-market balls with eligible noblemen, but in turning designs to stone and wood and gardens. No occupation for a lady, the Count had said. But in Tavalland, by Hestland's standards still the wild colonies half a century after the Independence Act, titles meant nothing, and so his heiress had bolted there, finished her schooling and found Nahemiah Froll's patronage, and stopped being a lady. Or claimed to. Her taste in drapes, her high speech, her refined yet thoughtless

manner, her unconscious expectation of obedience, all told otherwise to me.

She had never carved allatir stone, never tried to make art that swayed emotions directly rather than merely through the eyes. But Nahemiah had set an allatir statue on the landing leading to her suite. An elegant panther (485ts.).

As always, I silently cringed passing by the panther emanating luxury. Thoughts floated up in my mind. *You are important*, they assured me. *You are wealthy. You are worth it all.*

You are worth thirty thalers a week, I retorted. *Stop lying to yourself.* I hastened my step, then had to pause before entering Izida's suite so she would not note my rapid heartbeat.

"Just so you know," I said, "I depart."

"Find out the prices on Tammen paintings, while you are there," she said without looking up from her drafting table. "The Chief can still change her mind. As she is wont to do."

As usual, she would not ask me for news about any family or friends in Halispell, not about the fine townhouse where she had spent her childhood winters. The Count had never forgiven her, naming a distant male cousin as heir but seemingly keeping himself alive and hearty by the blaze of anger at his disowned daughter. She in turn never mentioned his name, not even in our most intimate hours.

“I will. Goodbye, Izida.” I knew not to expect her to soften, to show more of her secrets to me than I learned from servants’ gossip. She had everything I lacked, and so our inequality was only right and proper.

Estorges’s art was the first I’d seen, in seven years working here, that outshone hers in my mind.

* * *

The village of my childhood lay down by the sea, below the hill where Nahemiah’s palace was then just rising from the ground. My own father had sold fish and squid for the tables in Nahemiah’s builders’ camp, and had not possessed much beyond a hut and a stove (worth maybe 10ts. on a good day) to disinherit me of when I ran away at seventeen with a traveling theater. Of my inheritance, I took only his family name, Morning, refusing out of perverse honesty to assume a better one. If Nahemiah Froll could rise from a prospector’s daughter, so could I, I had thought then, not realizing how much lay in the Froll married name, or in her father’s silver vein that she inherited—what cost there is to overcoming a name.

The stage, its painted sets and lights and music and drama, seemed my passion, but I soon learned I had little acting talent beyond “third citywoman from left.” Instead, almost unconsciously at first and not thinking that my knack for numbers and details was anything special, I fell into being the

one who actually knew what was going on. From painting sets and stitching costumes, I became stage manager, remembering all the director's changing whims during rehearsal, and all the cues for the actors and stagehands and lighting hands that they couldn't remember themselves, and where in the script we were. I was the woman they went to, the small but mighty household god behind the footlights. None of the theatrical people had any idea how the cost of breakfast that day or of thread to mend the curtains fitted into their budget. I turned their finances around and made them the most successful traveling company in all of western Tavalland, such that in five years they—or rather, I, for I was the one negotiating and writing the checks, although I was only twenty-two and had never set foot in a university—were able to purchase a permanent theater (3,215 thalers, with 1,000 down and the rest amortized over ten years, plus 1,823.45 adding up in repairs and renovations) in Dies Incanti, the largest city on the western coast.

Six other theater companies and two Dies Incanti newspapers approached me discreetly in the next year trying to purchase my skills as a treasurer. It was after I rebuffed the second newspaper that its owner, Nahemiah Froll, arrived at my office herself.

And the price she named, 20ts. a week with room and board and raises yearly, was one I was willing to sell myself for. Or rather, not for the money itself, but for the chance to be part of a theater far grander than any in Dies Incanti, of a drama greater and more real than any theater could give, and where, again, I was the god behind the footlights, knowing all the cues. Nahemiah was the producer, Izida was the director, but no director can do without a stage manager. I could live my life surrounded by mosaics and music, sunken pools and thoroughbred horses, dynamic-picture stars and poet laureates, enjoying almost all the comforts my Chief's heart desired, no matter that not a penny I was counting was my own.

And walking among Nahemiah's allatir statues, I thought, would give me pure joy and passion in a way that the theater could not, with all of its empathetic trickery drawn from stories not about my class of people. At least the sculptures did not lie.

Except that I learned that if they spoke truth, it was not to me.

* * *

To the music of the rattling train and the engineer's whistle, both so subtly different in rhythm and pitch from the Tavalland rail, I arrived at the Halispell Central Station with its famous mosaic walls and ceiling. Nahemiah had never been

interested in Queen Ethelburga-style mosaics, so I did not know their price. The train journey in first class had cost three eighths of a ducat (nearly 12ts.), and the cup of tea and piece of orange flan I had purchased, an additional three pennies. In Tavalland they would have cost half that. But my Chief allowed me to draw on expenses, if I were not extravagant in my mission—which was to follow two farwrites to Estorges's lodgings in the Artisans' Quarter, these days crowded with painters, writers, and musicians rather than artisans' guilds. And to return with the money exchanged and the sculpture wrapped in felt for shipping across the sea.

In my purse lay Nahemiah's check, the amount left blank. *Start with five hundred thalers*, she had said. *That is a good price he should be grateful for.*

And what is your ceiling? I had asked.

We won't need it.

I need a ceiling, Chief. For my peace of mind. I had written the numbers on a check for that mosaic now in the great hall, all seven digits of them to the left of the decimal. My hands had shaken.

What is the most I am willing to bid to get the Three Dancers of Gizari before I give up? Before I give up? Her mouth seemed to taste the phrase like a sample of an unfamiliar dish. *It's not a thousand years old. If he asks for*

ten thousand, farwrite to me first. I have my aeroplane ready to fly to bargain myself. But... She left the consequences for me unsaid. Flying the aeroplane itself from Palace Froll to Halispell would cost nearly 500ts. in itself, and that was if the aerodrome authorities were lenient on paperwork.

I once again inhaled the scents of inland Halispell, the smells of their beloved cured ham and sharp cheeses replacing western Tavalland's fish and sea-scent, lemon blossom and myrtle replacing the northern island's pear orchards and pines. And the dust, the road dust and motor-car fuel everywhere the same, whether one paid in ducats or thalers or was ruled by Queen or President.

The cab (11 pennies) left me at the porch of the Estorges Atelier, and the maid took my card. "Miss Morning? An unusual name."

I had heard that before, though rarely from servants, but Halispell servants may think themselves so much above even the rich from the colonies that they presume to draw attention to low-class family names. I did not dignify her insult with a reply. With my own saved liquid net worth of 1211.37ts. with interest at 4.5%, I could afford to hire and fire her, no matter her pay.

I wondered, looking at the simple and worn if well-cared furnishings in the front room, how much its rent was. If

Nahemiah were to buy a town house in Halispell, it would not be in the Artisans' Quarter, so I did not know the going prices.

Then I stepped through the door of the studio, and all thoughts of this flew out of my head. Before me were three graceful women, nude, one stocky, one slender, one curvaceous, three shapes as different as women come in, arms outstretched and embracing, the two raising the central dancer up by her naked hips even themselves rising on their toes as if the earth could barely hold them. The Three Dancers of Gizari. The right one seemed to give me a welcoming wink. *Join in the dance!*

Joy they radiated, but more than that another feeling I had so rarely felt before that for a few minutes I couldn't even place it, but I felt nearly faint with desire for these women.

I made myself look around—at the preparatory maquette studies of their heads, a dozen identical ones looking at me with that joyful smile; at the hands of clay and plaster and limestone that seemed lopped off in the middle of their greatest delight; at the other mockups of nudes and elephants and men for other projects. A block of raw allatir lay in the corner, squat and white; even though I knew that uncarved allatir was very limited in power, I dared not approach closer, in case this block was the kind emanating primal fear rather than primal safety. Fear-inducing allatir stones had been used for arrowheads by

ancient armies, I'd heard, before they were superseded as even the warriors themselves found them too draining to carry, and artists took to them to make works draining in other ways.

I barely noticed the man, shorter and younger than he'd seemed in Arts Today's pictures. Possibly used to visitors' reactions, he stepped right in front of me.

"I am Nouet Estorges, madam. You are the... *emissary* of Nahemiah Froll?" Politeness slid into sarcasm on that word.

"Yes." With an effort of will, I got my breath back. "She wishes to buy this. For..." For perhaps the first time in my life I hesitated at recalling a number, and the sum, astronomical compared to my own pay, seemed absurdly low in the light of the dancers' smiles. "Five hundred thalers."

I caught myself at once that I had broken all rules of bargaining by going straight to the point, not getting him into conversation, asking him about his studio, his work, his family. What had gone over me? What was the sculpture emanating?

He stepped back three careful steps, and I realized that he was himself getting out of the dancers' aura. Prudently, though my heart clenched at this, I followed.

"Well, I am very sorry," and he did not sound sorry at all, "but she can't."

Hastily, too hastily, I named higher numbers, in much larger increments than I normally would. He just shook his

head at each, a smirk on his face. One thousand. Two thousand.

It dawned on me that he enjoyed watching me squirm; a proud competent woman but to him just Nahemiah's commoner puppet, below his own housemaid. Watching me beg, and him saying no.

"Ten thousand!" I spat out the words intentionally in the heaviest Tavalland accent that the theater had eradicated in me twelve years before. "Ten thousand thalers for your measly sculpture that the Opera rejected!"

"Does Nahemiah Froll, the richest woman on earth"—he laughed—"really think that she can buy me?"

My shout sank back down my throat as I blinked. "Of course she does," came out, stupidly.

"Well, let her learn I'm not selling this piece, of all pieces, to the highest bidder. After I got your farwrite, I arranged for another buyer.

"And don't ask me what his price is so Nahemiah can top it. I don't need money, and it won't help her here."

My fingers searched in my pocket blindly for something to hold onto and found a forgotten Tavalland penny, small and almost worthless here.

* * *

FARWRITING OFFICE, HALISPELL, HESTLAND

BETHENICA MORNING TO NAHEMIAH FROLL, PALACE
FROLL, TAVALLAND

ESTORGES SELLING DANCERS TO SCHELLERBIDE STOP
DELIVERY NEXT WEEK STOP
SORRY STOP
BETHENICA.

Cost: 0.96ts.

* * *

One hour later:

IZIDA CHARTERET, PALACE FROLL, TAVALLAND
TO BETHENICA MORNING, HALISPELL, HESTLAND

BASTARD STOP
FLYING OVER TOMORROW STOP
WILL FIGHT SCHELLERBIDE IF NECESSARY STOP
IZIDA.

Izida had been against Estorges's art, arguing for Tammen all along. She never saw in that sculpture what Nahemiah had seen, and would not feel in it what I had felt. Now, I knew, and Estorges knew, he had found the one price that would move Izida to Nahemiah's desire.

* * *

As soon as reasonable visiting hours began the next morning I was back ringing the bell of Estorges's studio door. I had walked, carefully trying to keep the street dust from my low leather shoes, but I would not indulge in another cab ride. Not when I was not certain if I would have my job once my Chief's flight landed, Izida with her.

The street looked normal that morning rather than the way the afternoon light had painted it the day before. No, not the afternoon light—the fact that, since leaving Estorges's studio, I had forgotten to ponder the price of anything I saw.

The maid allowed me in, seemingly to both her own surprise and Estorges's. "Nahemiah Froll's emissary wishes to try to persuade me again?" he said, now in his smock and work gloves snowy with allatir dust, chisel still in his right hand, chewing his moustache.

"No," I said. "Bethenica Morning wishes to see you. And not you, but the sculpture."

He froze as still as his allatir dancers. "The sculpture."

Just then I sneezed from the dust. Eyes watering, I fumbled for my handkerchief. With equal awkwardness, he offered his own from his pocket, only to realize that it was already smudged with dust and dirtier than mine.

We couldn't help it. We both burst out laughing, and for a few happy seconds I noticed our poses echoing those of the

dancers above us. Was that what they were laughing about, the ridiculousness of life?

No, it must be something deeper. I thought of the cool-eyed women of Tammen's paintings, of the still, expressionless nudes of antiquity. To work in allatir required exquisitely refined empathy. "How did you do it? Capture women looking so ...at ease?"

"Capture?" He stepped over to put his hand on my shoulder, looking at his sculpture as if for the first time. "I didn't capture it. Nor did I buy it, as Nahemiah Froll would"—he made a face at me, almost joking. "It was given me freely."

"What were your models feeling?" I said. When was the last time such a look had transformed my own face? I tried to shape my face, still warm from ironic hilarity, into an imitation of that radiant smile.

As my theater proved to me, I am a bad actress. But Estorges's gaze seemed to want to break down every inch of my face into planes and facets, to trap it in allatir stone forever. He took off one of his gloves and with his finger traced the line of my hand, from wrist to fingertips. I hadn't even noticed what my hands were doing. His hands would have shredded and shattered stone, but his touch was remarkably gentle.

"I just asked them to think of a moment of delight. Doubtless it was different for every woman."

What was Nahemiah's delight? Izida's? What would they look like, lit like this?

"I think that if I were your model," I said, trying to control, to appraise the feelings in my heart and set a fair price for them out of my own coin, "I would think of being here now. With the dancers." And even before he spoke, I realized what it was they emanated, and why it drew me so much.

And his face transformed too.

* * *

We must have talked for an hour or more, forgetting the time. His mother had been a lapidary in Halispell, teaching her son from childhood to cut gems and appraise them. He himself had been a boy soprano in the Halispell Boys Choir, until his voice broke and he, broken himself, changed to another art. I told of the theater and my own disappointment on realizing that I could not act. Of how I had always been able to remember how many fish my father had gotten, when and for what prices, to advise him on his strategy.

"What were your mother and sister like?" Estorges asked. In twelve years, this was the first time anyone had ever asked me that question—conversations about my family, even with Nahemiah, always started and ended with my father.

I was sitting on the end of the bench by the dancers, basking in their gift to me. I took a light breath, knowing that I

did not have to worry about selecting my words, that what I said would be right.

Just then the girl—not a maid, he'd told me, but his cousin who had a studio of her own for watercoloring prints in another room of the house—knocked again. “Er, Nouet,” she stuttered, all of her hauteur gone. “Madame Nahemiah Froll, and Lady, er, Miss Izida Charteret.”

As I sprang from the bench, he bent over and picked up a small object near my foot.

“A Tavalland thaler penny,” he held it up to me with a teasing smile, brushing off the stone dust to make it shine. “Are you counting them? Do you want it?”

It must have fallen out when I took out my pocket-handkerchief. Normally, I would want it. Even after I became a fashionable professional woman I had a trick to pretend to drop my gloves just so I could pick up a penny lying in the street. A penny meant candy at the soda shop. A penny meant costume thread. A penny meant a ribbon or pair of shoelaces that would make my shoes look newer. A penny meant one less penny I had to work for.

But an accountant counted pennies, not an artist. And right now, an accountant, a woman who failed at the arts but was left counting the artists' pennies, was the farthest from how I felt sitting by those dancers.

“Keep it,” I said. It was only one-fourth of a Hestland penny. “Consider it payment for services rendered.”

And then Izida and Nahemiah came in.

The greetings and formalities, during which both Izida’s and Nahemiah’s eyes kept drifting to the sculpture. Then Nahemiah spoke.

“I will take you as a guest to my palace in Tavalland. For two nights, and a full day. You will return on my aeroplane the day after tomorrow.”

1500 thalers, I thought. I went to stand beside Izida, just the accountant again.

“You expect to buy me with a three-day holiday?” Estorges asked, arms crossed.

“I expect to overwrite your yellow-press bar-gossip prejudices about me. I want you to learn for yourself who I am. And why I want that piece.”

Guests would beg and wait for years for an invitation to her palace six months hence, not that very day. I would have been more surprised if she had groveled on the floor and kissed his foot. Or rather, the foot of the Three Dancers.

“Nouet,” Izida said, for the first time using his first name that I had not dared to use, “I think you will appreciate the art that *I’ve* worked so hard to collect.” *I and not my father*, she left unsaid.

And that was something that I, Bethenica the penny-counter, could not offer him at all.

“Will you?” Nahemiah was gentler than I had ever heard her. “My aeroplane is waiting on the aerodrome just outside the city. We will take a first-class cab.”

Nouet Estorges said slowly, “Give me two hours.”

“To pack?”

“To speak to my solicitor.”

* * *

On the grounds of Palace Froll there are seven glittering fountains, each in the style of a different era, costing from 250 to 1300 thalers sterling to carve out of marble and rig the pipes. There is a tunnel system, dug at the expense of 300 thalers per foot, excavated and reinforced with marble; lining the tunnel are fifty statues of ancient gods, carved on commission at a cost of 300ts. each; it cost an additional 50ts. per statue in labor to lower them via block and tackle and set them up. The pride of the stables was Wings On Water, the championship racing stallion bought for 7300ts. plus transport, commanding 200ts. as a stud fee, a beautiful horse dancing on springy legs with his mane rippling in the wind, not knowing how much he had cost.

But my favorite place is the pear orchard that had been on that hill long before Nahemiah's father had bought the property. They were low-grade green pears of the half-feral

unnamed variety that grew everywhere along the coast, but that was the only place on the grounds that I did not know the price of, that never had a price, that never cost anything but only gave.

So I hid there while Izida guided Estorges around the grand rooms with the mosaic floors and the fan-vaulted ceilings she had designed herself, around the galleries and the tunnels. Up into the bell tower built just because Nahemiah had seen a Caltavan bell tower when she was a little girl and had fallen in love with it, and so Izida had done one for her. Izida did. Not me.

After an afternoon and an evening and a breakfast where he kept sighing in awe at Izida's handiwork, at Nahemiah's taste, I fled to the pear orchard. I had no place on that tour. I was not an artist. I was just the woman who counted the artists' money and kept them from bankrupting themselves, and as a courtesy, got to talk to them for a while.

I was a village girl who had climbed pear trees (mindful of the thorns) where no one could find me and make me gut and scale fish, and had sat in them, crunching on the sour woody fruit, and dreamed of running away with the theater and becoming an actress, with a mink coat and my name in lights and dazzlingly handsome men and women I had seen on silver screens pouring me champagne, and me never having to think,

for an entire night, how much any of this cost. That was what wealth was, really—to be able to buy something without ever *worrying*, because you have people to do that for you.

I never got that. I only grew old enough to know that my dress had cost 20ts. out of my own wages and I could not afford to tear it on the thorns climbing the pear trees. So I sat under the tree on a spread towel, leafing through the broken-spined *Arts Today* handed down from Nahemiah, returning again and again to the Three Dancers of Gizari.

“Is this where you escape to?” he asked, and I dropped the magazine face down, wrinkling the page against the grass.

He was dressed in tennis costume; Izida, or Nahemiah herself, must have challenged him to a tennis match. His forehead beaded perspiration, as marble or allatir cannot.

“It’s private,” I said noncommittally.

“It also seems to be the only place on these entire grounds that is not proudly stamped as Nahemiah-Froll-owned, Izida-Charteret-made.”

“It’s within her property line. Her father paid for it.”

“All she has, she has relied on others to get for her,” he said, leaning towards me, “and she rations it out to those who are already rich and fortunate, just like the Count of Schellerbide. Except she favors women more. Yes, everyone in

the art world knows that she takes women to her bed, not men. Have you ever slept there?”

“No,” I said honestly. “Never. I do not sleep with people who pay me.” Izida never paid me.

“Because it puts a whore-price on your body? Yet you skulk here like an abandoned lover.”

I realized that he was holding my hand, and I pulled it out of his grasp, even though half of me was very reluctant. Nahemiah rationed things out to *me*, who was neither rich nor fortunate, but no force could make me admit that aspect of me to him. “Because there are other things that women desire than being wedded and bedded,” I said tartly. “And you of all men should have understood that if to craft that allatir you needed your models’ moment of delight. Nahemiah wants to make the world see women’s joy, as do you. Why don’t you see that?”

“The world—of people I did not intend this statue for. We lock a piece of our soul in our art, and we gift it to kindred souls, not to the largest pile of thalers or ducats. You deserve that sculpture more than she does, or that silver-spoon-gobbling Izida or her stubborn old man, for you can feel the difference when it raises you to a wealth where money doesn’t matter.”

I found tears in my eyes. He knew my station, and he valued me despite it, or for it. But he mistook my expression.

“Think again on your delight at the foot of the sculpture, Bethenica,” he breathed. “Here, it makes you more beautiful than any stone art.”

And he kissed me.

And I responded.

And then we did more, in the tall grass.

* * *

The Three Dancers of Gizari was rejected from the Public Opera for indecency because they were naked and yet emanated not just joy but sufficiency. They had enough. They did not fear their lack. They wanted to give, not count or be counted.

And if his seduction had in it something hard and cold as marble, flat as a projection screen, I did not notice it until later. Because after all, it was not him that I truly wanted but the work of his hands.

* * *

“The aeroplane has radioed a flight path for a 10:20 departure to take you back to Halispell,” Nahemiah said, setting down her breakfast spoon.

Nouet had been silent all through the simple elegant breakfast of exquisite coffee and flaky biscuits (5ts. it would be, in some prestigious cafe and worth it, too), served at the small table of teacup-delicate porcelain in the southern corner of the

Great Hall. Nahemiah and Izida chatted about upcoming exhibitions, about Tammen's work, about everything but the blank dais at the other end of the Great Hall braced for the weight of the Three Dancers of Gizari.

I was silent too. I had forgotten to add the fresh cream and sugar to my coffee, as I sipped without tasting it.

"Very well," said Nouet. "I thank you very much for your hospitality. Your art collection took great skill and great taste, and," his voice went just a bit dry, "a lot of money."

He rose from the table. But even he stopped when Nahemiah spoke, just as she assumed he would.

"So am I outbidding the Count of Schellerbide?"

Tick, went the great clock (214.23ts., plus 12ts. a visit for the only man in Tavalland skilled enough to tune it once a month). Indeed, it was so quiet that I could hear the ten-foot grand piano, custom-made at 2286.45ts., softly echo in resonance with it.

"I chose to alter the deal with the Count of Schellerbide, for the appropriate price," Nouet said, so casually that the clock counted a few more ticks before victory registered on Nahemiah's face. Only Izida was biting her lips as she leaned forward; she still knew her father better than anyone, and she felt something was wrong. But Nouet ignored this and said smoothly, "I have the papers ready for Bethenica to review."

Out of his briefcase resting by his chair leg, he drew a leather portfolio and handed it to me.

It contained a contract, opened to the back where his signature already filled in one of the blanks. The ink was dry, I noticed subconsciously, having seen enough wet-ink signatures. There was the name of the solicitor. In wet ink was today's date, and the name, with a blank beneath it for the signature. Bethenica Morning. No space for Nahemiah Froll.

He had palmed me a pen as well. "Sign it," he mouthed, his eyes meeting mine the same way they had in the pear orchard.

I flipped angrily to the first page. "Do you think me such a fool as to not read contracts I sign?" I was about to snap, and then I bit it back.

Because this was not a bill of sale.

It was a bill of lease. The sculpture known as the Three Dancers of Gizari, allatir stone, emanation: contentment, dynamic-captures from all angles included on p. 4, was the property of Nouet Estorges under contract to the Public Opera, transferring possession, but not ownership. The possessor could display the work wherever she wished, but had no right to resell it without the permission of Nouet Estorges.

The possessor was Bethenica Morning. The leasing fee was one Tavalland penny. One Tavalland penny—and my body, unmentioned by the solicitor who had drawn this up in the

missing two hours from two days ago. But I had no doubt that yesterday's seduction was part of the contract, part of the offset price.

The empathy it takes to carve allatir—how well he saw through us. He'd lied to everyone, including me, in the aim of humiliating Nahemiah—yet he also offered me my heart's desire. With my signature, the Three Dancers of Gizari would be mine. Not Nahemiah's, not ever again. Once again I was the stage manager, the little god behind the footlights, the only one, other than the author, who actually has the script.

“But,” I whispered, “the Count of Schellerbide...” Nahemiah, my Chief, was waiting for me to handle the cues as I always did, before passing it to her and letting her have the credit. Izida was waiting for me to ensure that she got her art. I had always been but the executor of her desires.

“I lied,” he replied casually. “Do you really think the old man could appreciate this? I just knew what rival would shatter Nahemiah and Izida the most. Until I saw an even better one.

“Come with me to Halispell, Bethenica. You need the Dancers, not her. Not this.”

I had 1211.37ts. to my name, with interest at 4.5%, standing between thirty thalers a week and two women, and the offer of carved-stone contentment beyond wealth.

He had not put in my place of residence as Palace Froll, Tavalland. He knew that the moment I signed this, it would not be true. If he had guessed my price.

My pen hovered over the signature blank and dripped one single black drop.

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Tamara Vardomsкая is a Canadian writer and a graduate of the 2014 Clarion Writers' Workshop. Besides Beneath Ceaseless Skies, her fiction has also appeared on Tor.com. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D in theoretical linguistics at the University of Chicago.

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COVER ART

“Plains of Another World,” by Leon Tukker



Leon Tukker is a student based in the Netherlands, self-taught in 3D software and digital painting. After graduating a game design course, he plans to start freelancing or join a company. He has always been a big fan of fantasy and science fiction, and most of his paintings are about those subjects. He has a fascination for all natural things on earth that have an alien feel about them. See more of his artwork in his gallery on [deviantArt.com](https://www.deviantart.com/leon_tukker).

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