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FOXFIRE, FOXFIRE

by Yoon Ha Lee

If I'd listened to the tiger-sage's warning all those years ago, I wouldn't be trapped in the city of Samdae during the evacuation. Old buildings and new had suffered during the artillery battle, and I could hear the occasional wailing of sirens. Even at this hour, families led hunched grandmothers and grandfathers away from their old homes, or searched abandoned homes in the hopes of finding small treasures: salt, rags, dried peppers. As I picked my way through the streets tonight, I saw the flower-shaped roof tiles for which Samdae was known, broken and scattered beneath my feet. Faraway, blued by distance, lights guttered from those skyscrapers still standing, dating to the peninsula's push to modernization. It had not done anything to prevent the civil war.

I had weighed the merits of tonight's hunt. Better to return to fox-form, surely, and slip back to the countryside; abandon the purpose that had brought me to Samdae all those years ago. But I only needed one more kill to become fully human. And I didn't want to off some struggling shopkeeper or midwife. For

one thing, I had no grudge against them. For another, I had no need of their particular skills.

No; I wandered the Lantern District in search of a soldier. Soldiers were easy enough to find, but I wanted a nice strapping specimen. At the moment I was posing as a prostitute, the only part of this whole affair my mother would have approved of. Certain human professions were better-suited to foxes than others, she had liked to say. My mother had always been an old-fashioned fox.

“Baekdo,” she had said when I was young, “why can’t you be satisfied with chickens and mice? You think you’ll be able to stop with sweet bean cakes, but the next thing you know, it will be shrimp crackers and chocolate-dipped biscuits, and after that you’ll take off your beautiful fur to walk around in things with buttons and pockets and rubber soles. And then one of the humans will fall in love with you and discover your secret, and you’ll end up like your Great-Aunt Seonghwa, as a bunch of oracle bones in some shaman’s purse.”

Foxes are just as bad at listening to their mothers as humans are. My mother had died before the war broke out. I had brought her no funeral-offerings. My relatives would have been shocked by that idea, and my mother, a traditionalist, would have wanted to be left to the carrion-eaters.

I had loved the Lantern District for a long time. I had taken my first kill there, a lucky one really. I'd crept into a courtesan's apartment, half-drunk on the smells of quince tea and lilac perfume. At the time I had no way of telling a beautiful human from an ugly one—I later learned that she had been a celebrated beauty—but her layered red and orange silks had reminded me of autumn in the forest.

Tonight I wore that courtesan's visage. Samdae's remaining soldiers grew bolder and bolder with the breakdown in local government, so only those very desperate or stubborn continued to ply their trade. I wasn't worried on my own behalf, of course. After ninety-nine kills, I knew how to take care of myself.

There. I spotted a promising prospect lingering at the corner, chatting up a cigarette-seller. He was tall, not too old, with a good physique. He was in uniform, with the red armband that indicated that he supported the revolutionaries. Small surprise; everyone who remained in Samdae made a show of supporting the revolutionaries. Many of the loyalists had fled overseas, hoping to raise support from the foreign powers. I wished them luck. The loyalists were themselves divided between those who supported the queen's old line and those who wished to install a parliament in place of the Abalone Throne. Fascinating, but not my concern tonight.

I was sauntering toward the delicious-looking soldier when I heard the cataphract's footsteps. A Jangmi 2-7, judging from the characteristic whine of the servos. Even if I hadn't heard it coming—and who couldn't?—the stirring of the small gods of earth and stone would have alerted me to its approach. They muttered distractingly. My ears would have flattened against my skull if they could have.

Superstitious people called the cataphracts ogres, because of their enormous bipedal frames. Some patriots disliked them because they had to be imported from overseas. Our nation didn't have the ability to manufacture them, a secret that the foreigners guarded jealously.

This one was crashing through the street. People fled. No one wanted to be around if a firefight broke out, especially with the armaments a typical cataphract was equipped with. It was five times taller than a human, with a stride that would have cratered the street with every step, all that mass crashing down onto surprisingly little feet if not for the bargains the manufacturers had made with the small gods of earth and stone.

What was a lone cataphract doing in this part of the city? A scout? A deserter? But what deserter in their right mind would bring something as easy to track as a cataphract with them?

Not my business. Alas, my delicious-looking soldier had vanished along with everyone else. And my bones were starting to hurt in the particular way that indicated that I had sustained human-shape too long.

On the other hand, while the cataphract's great strides made it faster than I was in this shape, distances had a way of accommodating themselves to a fox's desires. A dangerous idea took shape in my head. Why settle for a common soldier when I could have a cataphract pilot, one of the elites?

I ducked around a corner into the mouth of an alley, then kicked off my slippers, the only part of my dress that weren't spun from fox-magic. (Magical garments never lasted beyond a seduction. My mother had remarked that this was the fate of all human clothes anyway.) I loved those slippers, which I had purloined from a rich merchant's daughter, and it pained me to leave them behind. But I could get another pair of slippers later.

Anyone watching the transformation would only have seen a blaze of coalescing red, like fire and frost swirled together, before my bones resettled into their native shape. Their ache eased. The night-smells of the city sharpened: alcohol, smoke, piss, the occasional odd whiff of stew. I turned around nine times—nine is a number sacred to foxes—and ran through the city's mazed streets.

The Lantern District receded behind me. I emerged amid rubble and the stink of explosive residue. The riots earlier in the year had not treated the Butterfly District kindly. The wealthier families had lived here. Looters had made short work of their possessions. I had taken advantage of the chaos as well, squirreling away everything from medicines to salt in small caches; after all, once I became human, I would need provisions for the journey to one of the safer cities to the south.

It didn't take long to locate the cataphract. Its pilot had parked it next to a statue, hunched down as if that would make it less conspicuous. Up close, I now saw why the pilot had fled—whatever it was they were fleeing. Despite the cataphract's menacing form, its left arm dangled oddly. It looked like someone had shot up the autocannon, and the cataphract's armor was decorated by blast marks. While I was no expert, I was amazed the thing still functioned.

The statue, one of the few treasures of the district to escape damage, depicted a courtesan who had killed an invading general a few centuries ago by clasping her arms around him and jumping off a cliff with him. My mother had remarked that if the courtesan had had proper teeth, she could have torn out the general's throat and lived for her trouble. Fox patriotism was not much impressed by martyrs. I liked the story, though.

I crouched in the shadows, sniffing the air. The metal reek of the cataphract overpowered everything. The small gods of earth and stone shifted and rumbled. Still, I detected blood, and sweat, as well as the particular unappetizing smell of what the humans called Brick Rations, because they were about as digestible. Human blood, human sweat, human food.

A smarter fox would have left the situation alone. While dodging the cataphract would be easy, cataphract pilots carried sidearms. For all I knew, this one would welcome fox soup as an alternative to Brick Rations.

While cataphract-piloting didn't strike me as a particularly useful skill, the pilots were all trained in the more ordinary arts of soldiering. Good enough for me.

I drew in my breath and took on human-shape. The small gods hissed their laughter. This time, when the pain receded, I was wrapped in a dress of green silk and a lavender sash embroidered with peonies. My hair was piled atop my head and held in place by heavy hairpins. The whole getup would have looked fashionable four generations ago, which I knew not because I had been alive then (although foxes could be long-lived when they chose) but because I used to amuse myself looking through Great-Aunt Seonghwa's collection of books on the history of fashion.

I'd hoped for something more practical, but my control of the magic had slipped. I would have to make the best of it. A pity the magic had not provided me with shoes, even ugly ones. I thought of the slippers I had discarded, and I sighed.

Carefully, I stepped through the street, pulse beating more rapidly as I contemplated my prey. A pebble dug into my foot, but I paid it no heed. I had endured worse, and my blood was up.

Even in human-shape, I had an excellent sense of smell. I had no difficulty tracking the pilot. Only one; I wondered what had happened to her copilot. The pilot lay on her side in the lee of a chunk of rubble, apparently asleep. The remains of a Brick Ration's wrapper had been tossed to the side. She had downed all of it, which impressed me. But then, I'd heard that piloting was hungry work.

I crouched and contemplated the pilot, taut with anticipation. At this distance, she reeked worse than her machine. She had taken off her helmet, which she hugged to her chest. Her black hair, cropped close, was mussed and stringy, and the bones of her face stood out too prominently beneath the sweat-streaked, dirty skin.

She'd also taken off her suit, for which I didn't blame her. Cataphracts built up heat—the gods of fire, being fickle, did an indifferent job of masking their infrared signatures—and the

suits were designed to cool the pilot, not to act as armor or protect them against the chilly autumn winds. She'd wrapped a thermal blanket around herself. I eyed it critically: effective, but ugly.

No matter what shape I took, I had a weapon; there is no such thing as an unarmed fox. I wondered what the magic had provided me with today. I could feel the weight of a knife hanging from my inner sash, and I reached in to draw it out. The elaborate gilt handle and the tassel hanging from the pommel pleased me, although what really mattered was the blade.

I leaned down to slit the pilot's throat—except her eyes opened and she rolled, casting the helmet aside. I scrambled backwards, but her reflexes were faster, a novelty. She grabbed my wrist, knocking the knife out of my hand with a clatter, and forced me down.

“Well-dressed for a looter,” the pilot said into my ear. “But then, I suppose that goes with the territory.”

I had no interest in being lectured before my inevitable addition to a makeshift stewpot. I released human-shape in a flutter of evanescent silks, hoping to wriggle out of her grip.

No such luck. Almost as if she'd anticipated the change, she closed her hands around my neck. I snapped and clawed, to no effect. I had to get free before she choked the life out of me.

“*Gumiho*,” the pilot breathed. Nine-tailed fox. “I thought all your kind were gone.”

My attempt at a growl came out as a sad wheeze.

“Sorry, fox,” the pilot said, not sounding sorry in the least.

I scrabbled wildly at the air, only half paying attention to her words.

“But I bet you can speak,” she went on as I choked out a whine. “Which means you’re just as likely to snitch to my pursuers as something fully human.”

She was saying something more about her pursuers, still in that cheerful conversational voice, when I finally passed out.

* * *

I woke trussed up as neatly as a rabbit for the pot. The air was full of the strange curdled-sweet smell of coolant, the metal reek of cataphract, the pilot’s particular stink. My throat hurt and my legs ached, but at least I wasn’t dead.

I opened my eyes and looked around at the inside of the cockpit. The blinking lights and hectic status graphs meant nothing to me. I wished I’d eaten an engineer along the way, even though the control systems were undoubtedly different for different cataphract models. I’d been tied to the copilot’s seat. Cataphracts could be piloted solo if necessary, but I still wondered if the copilot had died in battle, or deserted, or something else entirely.

The cockpit was uncomfortably warm. I worked my jaw but couldn't get a good purchase on the bindings. Worse, I'd lost the knife. If I couldn't use my teeth to get out of this fix—

“Awake?” the pilot said. “Sorry about that, but I've heard stories of your kind.”

Great, I had to get a victim who had paid attention to grandmothers'-tales of fox spirits. Except now, I supposed, *I* was the victim. I stared into the pilot's dark eyes.

“Don't give me that,” the pilot said. “I know you understand me, and I know you can speak.”

Not with my muzzle tied shut, I can't, I thought.

As if she'd heard me, she leaned over and sawed through the bonds on my muzzle with a combat knife. I snapped at the knife, which was stupid of me. It sliced my gums. The familiar tang of blood filled my mouth.

“You may as well call me Jong,” the pilot said. “It's not my real name, but my mother used to call me that, after the child and the bell in the old story. What shall I call you?”

I had no idea what story she was talking about. However, given the number of folktales living in small crannies of the peninsula, this wasn't surprising. “I'm a fox,” I said. “Do you need a name for me beyond that?” It wasn't as though we planned on becoming friends.

Jong strapped herself in properly. “Well, you should be grateful you’re tied in good and tight,” she said as she manipulated the controls: here a lever, there a button, provoking balletic changes in the lights. “The straps weren’t designed with a fox in mind. I’d hate for you to get splattered all over the cockpit when we make a run for it.”

“So kind of you,” I said dryly. *Sorry*, I thought to my mother’s ghost. *I should have listened to you all those years ago*. Still, Jong hadn’t eaten me yet, so there was hope.

“Oh, kindness has nothing to do with it.” The cataphract straightened with a hiss of servos. “I can’t talk to the gods of mountain and forest, but I bet you can. It’s in all the stories. And the mountains are where I have to go if I’m going to escape.”

Silly me. I would have assumed that a cataphract pilot would be some technocrat who’d disdain the old folktales. I had to go after one who knew enough of the lore to be dangerous. “Something could be arranged, yes,” I said. Even as a kit my mother had warned me against trusting too much in gods of any kind, but Jong didn’t need to know that.

“We’ll work it out as we go,” she said distantly. She wasn’t looking at me anymore.

I considered worrying at the bonds with my teeth, even though the synthetic fibers would taste foul, but just then the

cataphract shuddered awake and took a step. I choked back a yip. Jong's eyes had an eerie golden sheen that lit up their normal brown; side-effect of the neural interface, I'd heard, but I'd never seen the effect up close before. If I disrupted the connection now, who knew what would happen? I wasn't so desperate that I wanted the cataphract to crash into uselessness, leaving me tied up inside it while unknown hostiles hunted us. Inwardly, I cursed Jong for getting me involved; cursed myself for getting too ambitious. But recriminations wouldn't help now.

For the first hour, I stayed silent, observing Jong in the hopes of learning the secrets of the cataphract's operation the old-fashioned way. Unfortunately, the closest thing to a cataphract pilot I'd ever eaten had been a radio operator. Not good enough. No wonder Great-Aunt Seonghwa had emphasized the value of a proper education, even if I had dismissed her words at the time. (One of her first victims had been a university student, albeit one studying classical literature rather than engineering. Back then, you could get a comfortable government post by reciting maxims from *The Twenty-Three Principles of Virtuous Administration* and tossing off the occasional moon-poem.) The ability to instantly absorb someone's skills by ingesting their liver had made me lazy.

“Why are they after you?” I asked, on the grounds that the more information I could extract from Jong, the better. “And who are they, anyway?”

She adjusted a dial; one of the monitors showed a mass of shapes like tangled thread. “Why are they after anyone?”

Not stupid enough to tell a stranger, then. I couldn’t fault her. “How do I know you won’t use me, then shoot me?”

“You don’t. But I’ll let you go after I get away.”

Unsatisfying, as responses went. “Assuming you get away.”

“I have to.” For the first time, Jong’s cheerfulness faltered.

“Maybe we can bargain,” I said.

Jong didn’t respond for a while, but we’d entered a defile and she was presumably caught up making sure we didn’t tumble over some ledge and into the stony depths. I had difficulty interpreting what I saw. For one thing, I wasn’t used to a vantage point this high up. For another, I couldn’t navigate by scent from within the cockpit, although I was already starting to become inured to the mixed smells of grubby human and metal.

“What bargain can you offer?” Jong said when she’d parked us in a cranny just deep enough in the defile that the cataphract wouldn’t be obvious except from straight above.

I wondered if we had aerial pursuit to worry about as well. Surely I’d hear any helicopters, now that the cataphract had

powered down? I knew better than to rely on the small gods of wind and storm for warning; they were almost as fickle as fire.

Jong's breathing became unsteady as she squinted at a scatterfall of glowing dots. She swore under her breath in one of the country dialects that I could understand only with difficulty. "We'll have to hope that they're spreading themselves too thin to figure out which way we've gone," she said in a low voice, as though people could hear her from inside the cockpit. "We'll continue once I'm sure I can move without lighting up their scanners."

Carefully, I said, "What if I swear on the spirits of my ancestors to lead you where you need to go, with the aid of the small gods to mask your infrared signature?" This was a guess on my part, but she didn't correct me, so I assumed it was close enough. "Will you unbind me, at least?"

"I didn't think foxes worshiped ancestors," Jong said, eyeing me skeptically. She fished a Brick Ration out of a compartment and unwrapped it with quick, efficient motions.

My mouth watered despite the awful smell. I hadn't eaten in a while. "Foxes are foxes, not gods," I said. "What good is worship to a fox? But I remember how my mother cared for me, and my other relatives. Their memory means a lot to me."

Jong was already shaking her head. A crumb of the Brick Ration fell onto her knee. She picked it up, regarded it contemplatively, then popped it into her mouth.

A ration only questionably formulated to sustain humans probably wouldn't do me much good in fox-form, but it was difficult not to resent my captor for not sharing, irrational as the sentiment was.

"I need a real guarantee that you'll be helpful, not a fox-guarantee," Jong said.

"That's difficult, considering that I'm a fox."

"I don't think so." Jong smiled, teeth gleaming oddly in the cockpit's deadened lights. Her face resembled a war-mask from the old days of the Abalone Throne. "Swear on the blood of the tiger-sages."

My heart stuttered within me. "There are no tiger-sages left," I said. It might even have been true.

Jong's smile widened. "I'll take that chance."

* * *

When I was a young fox, almost adult, and therefore old enough to get into the bad kind of trouble, my mother took me to visit a tiger-sage.

Until then, I had thought all the tiger-sages had left the peninsula. Sometimes the humans had hunted them, and more rarely they sought the tigers' advice, although a tiger's advice

always has a bite in it. I'd once heard of hunters bringing down an older tiger in a nearby village, and I'd asked my mother if that had been a sage. She had only snorted and said that a real sage wouldn't go down so easily.

Tiger-sages could die. That much I knew. But their deaths had nothing to do with shotguns or nets or poisoned ox carcasses. A tiger-sage had to be slain with a sword set with mirror-jewels or arrows fletched with feathers stolen from nesting firebirds. A tiger-sage had to be sung to death in a game of riddles during typhoon season, or tricked into sleep after a long game of *baduk*—the famously subtle strategy game played upon a board of nineteen-by-nineteen intersecting lines, with black stones and white. A tiger-sage had to consent to perish.

We traveled for days, because even a fox's ability to slice through distance dwindled before a tiger-sage's defenses. My mother was nervous than I'd ever seen her. I, too stupid to know better, was excited by the excursion.

At last we approached the tiger-sage's cave, high upon a mountain, where the trees grew sideways and small bright flowers flourished in the thin soil. Everything smelled hard and sharp, as though we lingered dangerously close to the boundary between *always* and *never*. The cave had once served as a shrine for some human sage. A gilded statue dominated the

mouth of the cave, lovingly polished. It depicted a woman sitting cross-legged, one palm held out and cupping a massive pearl, the other resting on her knee. The skull of some massive tusked beast rested next to the statue. The yellowing bone had been scored by claw-marks.

The tiger-sage emerged from the cave slowly, sinuously, like smoke from a hidden fire. Her fur was chilly white except for the night-black stripes. She was supposed to be the last of the tiger-sages. One by one they had departed for other lands, or so the fox-stories went. Whether this one remained out of stubbornness, or amusement at human antics, or sheer apathy, my mother hadn't been able to say. It didn't matter. It was not for a fox to understand the motivations of a sage.

"Foxes," the tiger rumbled, her amber eyes regarding us with disinterest. "It is too bad you are no good for oracle bones. Fox bones always lie. The least you could have done was bring some incense. I ran out of the good stuff two months ago."

My mother's ears twitched, but she said only, "Venerable sage, I am here to beg your counsel on my son's behalf."

I crouched and tried to look appropriately humble, having never heard my mother speak like this before.

The tiger yawned hugely. "You've been spending too much time with humans if you're trying to fit all those flowery words in your mouth. Just say it straight out."

Normally my mother would have said something deprecating—I'd grown up listening to her arguing with Great-Aunt Seonghwa about the benefits of human culture—but she had other things on her mind. That, or the tiger's impressive display of sharp teeth reminded her that to a tiger, everything is prey. "My son hungers after human-shape," my mother said. "I have tried to persuade him otherwise, but a mother's words only go so far. Perhaps you would be willing to give him some guidance?"

The tiger caught my eye and smiled tiger-fashion. I had a moment to wonder how many bites it would take for me to end up in her belly. She reared up, or perhaps it was that she straightened. For several stinging moments, I could not focus my vision on her, as though her entire outline was evanescing.

Then a woman stood where the tiger had been, or something like a woman, except for the amber eyes and the sharp-toothed smile. Her hair was black frosted with white and silver. Robes of silk flowed from her shoulders, layered in mountain colors: dawn-pink and ice-white and pale-gray with a sash of deepest green. At the time I did not yet understand beauty. Years later, remembering, I would realize that she had mimicked the form of the last legitimate queen. (Tigers have never been known for modesty.)

“How much do you know of the traditional bargain, little fox?” the tiger-woman asked. Her voice was very little changed.

I did not like being called little, but I had enough sense not to pick a fight with a tiger over one petty adjective. Especially since the tiger was, in any shape, larger than I was. “I have to kill one hundred humans to become human,” I said. “I understand the risk.”

The tiger-woman made an impatient noise. “I should have known better than to expect enlightenment from a fox.”

My mother held her peace.

“People say I am the last of the tiger-sages,” the tiger-woman said. “Do you know why?”

“I had thought you were all gone,” I said, since I saw no reason not to be honest. “Are you the last one?”

The tiger-woman laughed. “Almost the last one, perhaps.” The silk robes blurred, and then she coiled before us in her native shape again. “I killed more than a hundred humans, in my time. Never do anything by halves, if you’re going to do it. But human-shape bored me after a while, and I yearned for my old clothing of stripes and teeth and claws.”

“So?” I said, whiskers twitching.

“So I killed and ate a hundred tiger-sages from my own lineage, to become a tiger again.”

My mother was tense, silent. My eyes had gone wide.

The tiger looked at me intently. “If the kit is serious about this—and I can smell it on him, that taint is unmistakable—I have some words for him.”

I stared at the tiger, transfixed. It could have pounced on me in that moment and I wouldn’t have moved. My mother made a low half-growl in the back of her throat.

“Becoming human has nothing to do with flat faces and weak noses and walking on two legs,” the tiger said. “That’s what your people always get wrong. It’s the hunger for gossip and bedroom entanglements and un-fox-ish loyalties; it’s about having a human heart. I, of course, don’t care one whit about such matters, so I will never be trapped in human-shape. But for reasons I have never fathomed, foxes always lose themselves in their new faces.”

“We appreciate the advice,” my mother said, tail thumping against the ground. “I will steal you some incense.” I could tell she was desperate to leave.

The tiger waved a paw, not entirely benevolently. “Don’t trouble yourself on my account, little vixen. And tell your aunt I warned her, assuming you get the chance.”

Two weeks after that visit, I heard of Great-Aunt Seonghwa’s unfortunate demise. It was not enough to deter me from the path I had chosen.

* * *

“Come on, fox,” Jong said. “If your offer is sincere, you have nothing to fear from a mythical tiger.”

I refrained from snapping that ‘mythical’ tigers were the most frightening of all. Ordinary tigers were bad enough. Now that I was old enough to appreciate how dangerous tiger-sages were, I preferred not to bring myself to one’s attention. But remaining tied up like this wasn’t appealing, either. And who knew how much time I had to extract myself from this situation?

“I swear on the blood of the tiger-sages,” I said, “that I will keep my bargain with you. No fox tricks.” I could almost hear the tiger-sage’s cynical laughter in my head, but I hoped it was my imagination.

Jong didn’t waste time making additional threats. She unbuckled herself and leaned over me to undo my bonds. I admired her deft hands. *Those could have been mine*, I thought hungrily; but I had promised. While a fox’s word might not be worth much, I had no desire to become the prey of an offended tiger. Tiger-sages took oaths quite seriously when they cared to.

My limbs ached, and it still hurt when I swallowed or talked. Small pains, however, and the pleasure of being able to move again made up for them. “Thank you,” I said.

“I advise being human if you can manage it,” Jong said. I choked back a snort. “The seat will be more comfortable for you.”

I couldn't argue the point. Despite the pain, I was able to focus enough to summon the change-magic. Magic had its own sense of humor, as always. Instead of outdated court dress, it presented me in street-sweeper's clothes, right down to the hat. As if a hat did anything but make me look ridiculous, especially inside a cataphract.

To her credit, Jong didn't burst out laughing. I might have tried for her throat if she had, short-tempered as I was. “We need to”—yawn—“keep moving. But the pursuers are too close. Convince the small gods to conceal us from their scan, and we'll keep going until we find shelter enough to rest for real.”

Jong's faith in my ability to convince the small gods to do me favors was very touching. I had promised, however, which meant I had to do my best. “You're in luck,” I said; if she heard the irony in my voice, she didn't react to it. “The small gods are hungry tonight.”

Feeding gods was tricky business. I had learned most of what I knew from Great-Aunt Seonghwa. My mother had disdained such magic herself, saying that she would trust her own fine coat for camouflage instead of relying on gods, to say nothing of all the mundane stratagems she had learned from

her own mother. For my part, I was not too proud to do what I had to in order to survive.

The large gods of the Celestial Order, who guided the procession of stars, responded to human blandishments: incense (I often wondered if the tiger I had met lit incense to the golden statue, or if it was for her own pleasure), or offerings of roast duck and tangerines, or bolts of silk embroidered with gold thread. The most powerful of the large gods demanded rituals and chants. Having never been bold enough to eat a shaman or magician, I didn't know how that worked. (I remained mindful of Great-Aunt Seonghwa's fate.) Fortunately, the small gods did not require such sophistication.

"Can you spare any part of this machine?" I asked Jong.

Her mouth compressed. Still, she didn't argue. She retrieved a screwdriver and undid one of the panels, joystick and all, although she pocketed the screws. "It's not like the busted arm's good for anything anymore," she said. The exposed wires and pipes of coolant looked like exposed veins. She grimaced, then fiddled with the wires' connectors until they had all been undone. "Will this do?"

I doubted the small gods knew more about cataphract engineering than I did. "Yes," I said, with more confidence than I felt, and took the panel from her. I pressed my right hand

against the underside of the panel, flinching in spite of myself from the metal's unfriendly warmth.

This is my offering, I said in the language of forest and mountain, which even city foxes spoke; and my mother, as a very proper fox, had raised me in the forest. *Earth and stone and—*

Jong's curse broke my concentration, although the singing tension in the air told me that the small gods already pressed close to us, reaching, reaching.

"What is it?" I said.

"We'll have to fight," Jong said. "Buckle in."

I had to let go of the panel to do so. I had just figured out the straps—the cataphract's were more complicated than the safety restraints found in automobiles—and the panel clanked onto the cockpit's floor as the cataphract rumbled awake. The small gods skittered and howled, demanding their tribute. I was fox enough to hear them, even if Jong showed no sign of noticing anything.

The lights in the cockpit blazed up in a glory of colors. The glow sheened in Jong's tousled hair and reflected in her eyes, etched deep shadows around her mouth. The servos whirred; I could have sworn the entire cataphract creaked and moaned as it woke.

I scooped up the panel. Its edges bit into my palms. “How many?” I asked, then wondered if I should be distracting Jong when we were entering combat.

“Five,” she said. “Whatever you’re doing, finish it fast.”

The machine lurched out of the crevice where we’d been hiding, then broke into its version of a run. My stomach dropped. Worse than the jolting gait was the fact that I kept bracing for the impact of those heavy metal feet against the earth. I kept expecting the cataphract to sink hip-deep. Even though the gods of earth and stone cushioned each stride, acting as shock-absorbers, the discrepancy between what I expected and what happened upset my sense of the world’s equilibrium.

The control systems made noises that had only shrillness to recommend them. I left their interpretation to Jong and returned my attention to the small gods. From the way the air in the cockpit eddied and swirled, I could tell they were growing impatient. Earth and stone were allied to metal, after all, and metal, especially when summoned on behalf of a weapon, had its volatile side.

The magic had provided me not with a knife this time but with a hat pin. I retrieved it and jabbed my palm with the pointy end. Blood welled up. I smeared it onto the cataphract’s joystick. *Get us out of here*, I said to the small gods. Not

eloquent, but I didn't have time to come up with anything better.

The world tilted askew, pale and dark and fractured. Jong might have said something. I couldn't understand any of it. Then everything righted itself again.

More, the small gods said in voices like shuddering bone.

I whispered stories to them, still speaking in the language of forest and mountain, which had no words except the evocation of the smell of fallen pine needles on an autumn morning, or loam worked over by the worms, or rain filling paw prints left in the mud. I was still fox enough for this to suffice.

"What in the name of the blistering gods?" Jong demanded. Now even she could hear the clanging of distant bells. Music was one of the human innovations that the small gods had grown fond of.

"They're building mazes," I said. "They'll mask our path. *Go!*"

Her eyes met mine for a moment, hot and incredulous. Then she nodded and jerked a lever forward, activating the walk cycle. The cataphract juddered. The targeting screen flashed red as it locked on an erratically moving figure: another cataphract. She pressed a trigger.

I hunched down in my seat at the racket the autocannon made as it fired four shots in rapid succession, like a damned

smith's hammer upon the world's last anvil. The small gods rumbled their approval. I forced myself to watch the targeting screen. For a moment I thought Jong had missed. Then the figure toppled sideways.

"Legged them," Jong said with vicious satisfaction. "Don't care about honor or kill counts, it's good enough to cripple them so we can keep running."

We endured several hits ourselves. While the small gods could confuse the enemies' sensors, the fact remained that the cataphract relied on its metal armor to protect its inner mechanisms. The impacts rattled me from teeth to marrow. I was impressed that *we* hadn't gone tumbling down.

And when had I started thinking of us as "we," anyway?

"We're doomed," I said involuntarily when something hit the cataphract's upper left torso—by the I'd figured out the basics of a few of the status readouts—and the whole cockpit trembled.

Jong's grin flickered sideways at me. "Don't be a pessimist, fox," she said, breathless. "You ever hear of damage distribution?"

"Damage what?"

"I'll explain it to you if we—" A shrill beep captured her attention. "Whoops, better deal with this first."

"How many are left?"

“Three.”

There had been five to begin with. I hadn't even noticed the second one going down.

“If only I weren't out of coolant, I'd—” Jong muttered some other incomprehensible thing after that.

In the helter-skelter swirl of blinking lights and god-whispers, Jong herself was transfigured. Not beautiful in the way of a court blossom but in the way of a gun: honed toward a single purpose. I knew then that I was doomed in another manner entirely. No romance between a fox and a human ever ended well. What could I do, after all? Persuade her to abandon her cataphract and run away with me into the forest, where I would feed her rabbits and squirrels? No; I would help her escape, then go my separate way.

Every time an alert sounded, every time a vibration thundered through the cataphract's frame, I shivered. My tongue was bitten almost to bleeding. I could not remember the last time I had been this frightened.

You were right, Mother, I wanted to say. Better a small life in the woods, diminished though they were from the days before the great cities with their ugly high-rises, than the gnawing hunger that had driven me toward the humans and their beautiful clothes, their delicious shrimp crackers, their games of dice and *yut* and *baduk*. For the first time I

understood that, as tempting as these things were, they came with a price: I could not obtain them without also entangling myself with human hearts, human quarrels, human loyalties.

A flicker at the edge of one of the screens caught my eye. “Behind us, to the right!” I said.

Jong made a complicated hooking motion with the joystick and the cataphract bent low. My vision swam. “Thank you,” she said.

“Tell me you have some plan beyond ‘keep running until everyone runs out of fuel,’” I said.

She chuckled. “You don’t know thing one about how a cataphract works, do you? Nuclear core. Fuel isn’t the issue.”

I ignored that. Nuclear physics was not typically a fox specialty, although my mother had allowed that astrology was all right. “Why do they want you so badly?”

I had not expected Jong to answer me. But she said, “There’s no more point keeping it a secret. I deserted.”

“Why?” A *boom* just ahead of us made me clutch the armrests as we tilted dangerously.

“I had a falling out with my commander,” Jong said. Her voice was so tranquil that we might have been sitting side by side on a porch, sipping rice wine. Her hands moved; moved again. A roaring of fire, far off. “Just two left. In any case, my commander liked power. Our squad was sworn to protect the

interim government, not—not to play games with the nation’s politics.” She drew a deep breath. “I don’t suppose any of this makes sense to you.”

“Why are you telling me now?” I said.

“Because you might die here with me, and it’s not as if you can give away our location any *more*. They know who I am. It only seems fair.”

Typically human reasoning, but I appreciated the sentiment. “What good does deserting do you?” I supposed she might know state secrets, at that. But who was she deserting *to*?

“I just need to get to—” She shook her head. “If I can get to refuge, especially with this machine more or less intact, I have information the loyalists can make use of.” She was scrutinizing the infrared scan as she spoke.

“The Abalone Throne means that much to you?”

Another alert went off. Jong shut it down. “I’m going to bust a limb at this rate,” she said. “The Throne? No. It’s outlived its usefulness.”

“You’re a parliamentarian, then.”

“Yes.”

This matter of monarchies and parliaments and factions was properly none of my business. All I had to do was keep my end of the bargain, and I could leave behind this vexing,

heartbreaking woman and her passion for something as abstract as *government*.

Jong was about to add something to that when it happened. Afterwards I was only able to piece together fragments that didn't fit together, like shards of a mirror dropped into a lake. A concussive blast. Being flung backwards, then sideways. A sudden, sharp pain in my side. (I'd broken a couple ribs, in spite of the restraints. But without them, the injuries would have been worse.) Jong's sharp cry, truncated. The stink of panic.

The cataphract had stopped moving. The small gods roared. I moved my head; pain stabbed all the way through the back of my skull. "Jong?" I croaked.

Jong was breathing shallowly. Blood poured thickly from the cut on her face. I saw what had happened: the panel had flown out of my hands and struck her edge-on. The small gods had taken their payment, all right; mine hadn't been enough. If only I had foreseen this—

"Fox," Jong said in a weak voice.

Lights blinked on-off, on-off, in a crazed quilt. The cockpit looked like someone had upended a bucket full of unlucky constellations into it. "Jong," I said. "Jong, are you all right?"

"My mission," she said. Her eyes were too wide, shocky, the red-and-amber of the status lights pooling in the enormous

pupils. I could smell the death on her, hear the frantic pounding of her heart as her body destroyed itself. Internal bleeding, and a lot of it. “Fox, you have to finish my mission. Unless you’re also a physician?”

“Shh,” I said. “Shh.” I had avoided eating people in the medical professions not out of a sense of ethics but because, in the older days, physicians tended to have a solid grounding in the kinds of magics that threatened shape-changing foxes.

“I got one of them,” she said. Her voice sounded more and more thready. “That leaves one, and of course they’ll have called for reinforcements. If they have anyone else to spare. You have to—”

I could have howled my frustration. “I’ll carry you.”

Under other circumstances, that grimace would have been a laugh. “I’m dying, fox, do you think I can’t tell?”

“I don’t know the things you know,” I said desperately. “Even if this metal monstrosity of yours can still run, I can’t pilot it for you.” It was getting hard to breathe; a foul, stinging vapor was leaking into the cockpit. I hoped it wasn’t toxic.

“Then there’s no hope,” she whispered.

“Wait,” I said, remembering; hating myself. “There’s a way.”

The sudden flare of hope in Jong’s eyes cut me.

“I can eat you,” I said. “I can take the things you know with me, and seek your friends. But it might be better simply to die.”

“Do it,” she said. “And hurry. I assume it doesn’t do you any good to eat a corpse, or your kind would have a reputation as grave-thieves.”

I didn’t squander time on apologies. I had already unbuckled the harness, despite the pain of the broken ribs. I flowed back into fox-shape, and I tore out her throat so she wouldn’t suffer as I devoured her liver.

* * *

The smoke in the cockpit thickened, thinned. When it was gone, a pale tiger watched me from the rear of the cockpit. It seemed impossible that she could fit; but the shadows stretched out into an infinite vast space to accommodate her, and she did. I recognized her. In a hundred stolen lifetimes I would never fail to recognize her.

Shivering, human, mouth full of blood-tang, I looked down. The magic had given me one last gift: I wore a cataphract pilot’s suit in fox colors, russet and black. Then I met the tiger’s gaze.

I had broken the oath I had sworn upon the tiger-sage’s blood. Of course she came to hunt me.

“I had to do it,” I said, and stumbled to my feet, prepared to fight. I did not expect to last long against a tiger-sage, but for Jong’s sake I had to try.

“There’s no ‘have to’ about anything,” the tiger said lazily. “Every death is a choice, little not-a-fox. At any step you could have turned aside. Now—” She fell silent.

I snatched up Jong’s knife. Now that I no longer had sharp teeth and claws, it would have to do.

“Don’t bother with that,” the tiger said. *She* had all her teeth, and wasn’t shy about displaying them in a ferocious grin. “No curse I could pronounce on you is more fitting than the one you have chosen for yourself.”

“It’s not a curse,” I said quietly.

“I’ll come back in nine years’ time,” the tiger said, “and we can discuss it then. Good luck with your one-person revolution.”

“I needn’t fight it alone,” I said. “This is your home, too.”

The tiger seemed to consider it. “Not a bad thought,” she said, “but maps and boundaries and nationalism are for humans, not for tigers.”

“If you change your mind,” I said, “I’m sure you can find me, in nine years’ time or otherwise.”

“Indeed,” the tiger said. “Farewell, little not-a-fox.”

“Thank you,” I said, but she was gone already.

I secured Jong's ruined body in the copilot's seat I had vacated, so it wouldn't flop about during maneuvers, and strapped myself in. The cataphract was damaged, but not so badly damaged that I still couldn't make a run for it. It was time to finish Jong's mission.

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Yoon Ha Lee's short fiction has appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Clarkesworld Magazine, and multiple times previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, including "The Bonedrake's Penance" in BCS Science-Fantasy Month 2. His first novel, Ninefox Gambit, is forthcoming from Solaris Books in June 2016. He lives in Louisiana with his family and an extremely lazy cat, and has not yet been eaten by gators. Visit him online at www.yoonhalee.com.

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CALL AND ANSWER, PLANT AND HARVEST

by Cat Rambo

Cathay is a Chaos Mage and doesn't care who knows it. Fear and envy are fine emotions to set someone spinning into a roil, and Cathay can sip from that cup as easily as any other, wandering through a crowd and watching people edge away.

She dresses sometimes in blue and other times in green or silver or any other color except black. Today her sleeves are sewn with opals and moonstones and within their glimmer here and there on the left sleeve, glitters another precious stone, set in no particular order, random as the stars. Her skirt and bodice are aluminum fish-scales, armored though she expects no fight. Her only weapon is her own considerable wit.

Cathay stumbled into Serendib through a one-time doorway, like so many others. She was walking in a tulgey wood one moment. Then her foot came down and she was in a city. It made her laugh with delight, the unpredictability of it all.

She soon learned that she had come to the best possible place for a Chaos mage, the city of Serendib, made up of odd pockets and uncomfortable niches from other dimensions, a

collision of cultures and technologies and economies like no other anywhere.

When she arrived in the city, she had three seeds, a dusting of lint, and a peppermint candy in her pocket. She found an empty lot, precisely between a street where water magic ruled, in constant collision with the road made of fire and iron, so daily fierce sheets of steam arose, driving the delicate indoors and hissing furiously so it sounded as though a swarm of serpents was battling.

She popped the mint in her mouth despite its linty covering and dug a hole with her little finger, and then one with her thumb, and a third by staring at the dirt until it moved. Into each she dropped a seed, and covered it up, and sat down to wait, sucking on the candy and listening to the steam's whispers.

It was not long till the first inquisitive sprout poked through the dirt, followed by a second, delicate frills of tender green uncurling like butterfly's tongues.

Cathay waited for the third, but it was, by all appearances, still sulking underground. She shrugged; two were enough for now.

The vines that sprouted grew up and around and alongside each other, looping and re-looping till finally a house stood there, of middling size, and with many doors and few windows.

And there she lived. It was as good a place as any other, with pigeons and pixies murmuring in the roof gutters, with the steam-nourished ferns and fungi of the yard outside, with the city sky that roiled with auroras some days and zeppelins flitting among clouds on others and drift of snow or feathers on still others and—rare and precious—sometimes shone with an Easter egg pastel in blue or pink or green.

* * *

Today the air in this neighborhood is crisp with cold brine, although the actual sea the wind has blown over is parsecs away, in dimensions far from this one. Cathay comes through the fishmarket and admires the coiled heaps of octopi, whorled like a fruit-bat's ear and the shimmering piles of sardines, the squat tubs of flaky lumps of pickled herring, and the vast thirty-foot shark that hangs suspended head-down from a vast gibbet.

As she passes, the shark twitches and snaps the left hand off the fishmonger measuring it, but that is all the Chaos that she sows this morning, for she is in a good mood, and her destination is the Gilded Cock, a gaming house where they play with a fresh pack of paper cards each hand and gamble chips of latticed disks of mother-of-pearl, light as dried fish-scales.

There the air smolders with the steam from fish-tea, and the game-players in the backroom are stoned and slack-eyed on sour smoke.

Though the neighborhood is from a city in another world, as often happens in Serendib, the clientele are a mix drawn from all over the city's many corners. Back in that city, the neighborhood will have acquired a reputation as an odd one, an eerie one, where anything can happen. Sometimes boarded up, or guarded, or isolated with fences made of fire or glittering flakes of nannites or demonic bile.

Among the crowd, Cathay sees a smooth shoulder, a fall of rainbow hair, eyes of earth and amber. Mariposa.

Mariposa.

* * *

"You love to gamble, they say." Mariposa leans on a windowsill. Cathay mirrors her position in another window for a second, then breaks the symmetry, shifting forward to cross one foot over the other.

"I do."

Mariposa's lips purse, her eyes squint. They hold a line of green in certain lights and moods, and right now that green thread shimmers, seems to wiggle like a seeking root.

"Come and prove it."

* * *

“The object is to secure the jewel held in magnetic suspension in the center. Whoever gets it and returns to their starting platform is the victor. For the loser, there are two ways to opt to pay the penalty: through an electrical stimulation directly of the nerves or to be flogged with thorn branches, then healed through regrowth on the cellular level, which leaves no scars,” the assistant explains. “If the gem falls out of the arena, both lose.”

Cathay studies the silver cage, thirty feet across, that hangs over a pit of fire. Highbacked arena stands surround it. Faces press forward, shouting, booing, cheering the two lizard people wrestling in the cage, shaking it back and forth.

This is a high-tech quarter. It shows in the decor’s brushed duralite and plasteel lanterns. In the trays that the slim-hipped servers carry back and forth: long crystal rods, and flasks filled with layers of colored liquid, and hallucinogenic pyramids colored grape and tangerine and lemon.

“Such healing has been known to take its toll on the body,” Mariposa says from the sidelines where she watches.

Cathay glances at her. “You would prefer I take the penalty in lashes?”

“I would prefer you win.”

“Very well,” Cathay says.

* * *

No one can be graceful clambering into a hanging cage and onto a tiny platform, but Cathay consoles herself that the figure opposite her does it even more awkwardly. She studies it with bodily and psychic sight. A construct, earth-magic mixed with a touch of circuitry, strong but predictable.

Once in place it stares stolidly ahead. Its eyes roll, granite balls in rough-hewn sockets, its fingers like a blacksmith's implements.

The crowd murmurs and hoots and chatters and calls out a thousand things.

The first chime sounds. On the third they are free to move.

The golem is dead still. Cathay inhales and sees a constellation of moves shimmering in the aftermath of the second chime.

Now.

As the third note enters the air, she's already in motion, riding the edge of the rules in a way she's always been prone to, seeing the corruscating possibilities around her, flexing like origami.

The golem moves forward and rather than match its pattern, she goes sideways.

The cage shifts, tilting in unison with the crowd's scream.

The stony feet grind on the metal surface, sliding, sparks sizzling in its wake. It hits the bars with a crash and the silver lengths go helplessly awry, spilling it out.

At the last moment, its hand closes like a shark's jaws on the edge of the floor, clamps irrevocably closed.

The wild swing goes lurches further.

Cathay doesn't care. She hasn't even paused to look to see what's happened, but has seized the gem. The jerk sends her in the opposite direction from her starting perch, though. She executes a few wild stork steps before falling on her ass, though with fist still firmly clenched around the gem.

Patterns sparkle spin dance in the air. They used to dizzy her to the point of blindness but now she knows them, knows how to dance in the spaces between them, tweak them to her own unpredictable desires.

The golem's other hand comes up, latches onto the floor itself, fingers digging into the metal, which groans as it gives way.

Cathay could gawp like the rest of the crowd. She's tempted to in fact, because something that dense shouldn't be able to move that fast but on the other hand it *is* moving that fast. So she goes hand over hand along the bars, since the cage is nearly entirely on its edge.

Seeing what she is doing, the golem also moves sideways, setting things further atilt, making the bars judder and shudder in Cathay's hands. She tries to move faster, going in a long arc that almost goes awry at an unexpected thud when the golem's fist goes entirely through the metal of the floor.

It reaches for her ankle and the crowd's screams go up in volume as though they'd been next door all this time and the door had just opened, yelling for blood...

...and Cathay's foot twists to land on top of the golem's head and then leap forward for the perch impossibly far away, body somersaulting, twisting as her hand shoots out and slams the gem down into its holder.

Breathing hard, heart like a trapped bird in her throat, Cathay bares her teeth at Mariposa in a grin.

* * *

The bus is striped aluminum and has three segments, like a silver snake. Its seats are pushed in blue and white with a pattern of ducks. The wires overhead clash and sing and shoot out sparks that surround the bus as it lumbers into motion.

Cathay says, "Where are we bound?"

"This is the #72 bus. Where do you think we are bound?"

There is only one stop of note on that route.

"We go to play rigoletto at the Gates of Dawn."

Mariposa nods.

“Having had me risk pain, you now wish me to gamble with permanent exile?”

“Would you miss the city if such a fate came to you?” Mariposa asks. “Knowing you would no longer walk its streets, even after you died?”

Cathay shrugs. “There is Chaos everywhere. To be attached to a certain place is to display a certain predictability that I am, by nature, not disposed toward.”

“Yet you have lingered here for over a decade now.”

As they disembark the bus, Cathay searches for that green thread of interest in Mariposa’s eyes, but the sky overhead is unobliging in its pink and amber clouds, marshmallow fluffy, a light almost cloying in its sweetness.

The glass-marbled plaza before the gates murmurs with spans of pigeons in the early light, pecking at the handfuls of grain scattered by families waiting to say goodbye to loved ones.

Serendib is an exacting mistress. It has many exiles, forced out by politics, or illness, or curse, or any range of things including random chance.

“It is as good a place as any other,” she says, her voice as low as the pigeons’ chatter.

* * *

The rigoletto players gather in a crowd by themselves, within reach of the gates.

They dress richly, flaunt their wealth, so everyone will know they come here for the gamble, not what they stand to win, but the truth is, immense fortunes have been made this way. They wear great hats of velvet dyed in jewel-tones with feathers to match; only two hatmakers in Serendib make these hats, and both dress their children in first-water jewels from their profits. The lace hems of their sleeves drag in the dust.

They murmur among themselves as Cathay, virtually naked by their standards, steps up. But it is not unheard of for someone to come to play the game without the preamble of assembling the requisite wardrobe.

As long as they can prove they have an estate to gamble. For the loser of the game must depart through those tall gates, pearly as legended others, and never return to the city.

Cathay walks up and down the line, hands clasped lightly behind her back, as though inspecting a rank of troops. She glances back at Mariposa. There are a few feckless youths among the crowd, who look easy to defeat. But that's not a victory worth evoking the green glimmer in Mariposa's eyes, Cathay suspects.

But there is no point in picking out the fiercest to fall against.

She is a Chaos mage, after all. So she closes her eyes, spins like a dervish, and stops, finger outpointed. She opens her eyes, hoping she has managed to point at the crowd and not some foolish thing like a pigeon or statue.

But a line could be drawn along her finger, exiting the tip, and lodge solidly in a man's chest. He is a sea captain, and dragon tattoos course along his brawny arms, circle the bald scalp revealed when he doffs his vermilion hat in acknowledgement.

They step to the side.

* * *

They match coins to see who will go first. Cathay wins. She knows that is not necessarily an advantage.

Her opponent is water magic, changeable and fickle. He may well have artifacts of power garnered during voyages. Those who sail or fly or wander with Serendib as home port range shores farther than her ken, even out to the great Darks where the gods dwell.

She sees no jewelry about him other than the gold hoop, a bit of wire really, twisted through his left ear. She would think it nothing but the left side is the heart side, and all enchantments are laid on that side of the body.

The predictable move would be fire, but she is a Chaos Mage. Therefore she laughs and uses fire after all. Being

predictable is a choice like any other and one most people think a Chaos Mage will not engage in. Her curse has wings of fire, its beak steeped in anger and envy.

She has out-subtled herself. He is ready with a swarm of water-winged fish that swoop through the air like a murmuration of swallows, tearing her creature apart before they wheel and dive down towards her.

Her left sleeve sweeps up over her head. Gems glitter and spark, a shark of scintillations that eats the fish like the dark eating light, an eclipse of movement beautiful because it is deadly as well as graceful.

Less traditional than his fish would imply, he buffets her with waves of force pulled from the tides.

She slips aside again and again like a matador eluding a vast, cloudy bull.

When he pauses, straining to see her in the watery mist, she appears behind him and strings a necklace of scorpion green curses around his neck while plucking the earring from his ear.

He falls to the ground, choking. Cathay pockets the loop and walks back to Mariposa.

“There,” she says, voice light as a pigeon’s feather. “Safe to dwell in my little house in Serendib for yet another day.”

* * *

Mariposa's smile is crooked and full of some untold joke. Her face comes close to Cathay's. They search each other's eyes.

Mariposa's lids droop. She leans forward—and Cathay pulls away as though by counterweight, snatching her breath as though startled by the involuntary action of the move.

Mariposa's lips purse.

“Games of chance,” she says. “Risking pain, risking home and fortune.”

“And what is left beyond that?” Cathay says. Her voice is half-challenging.

“For the person who would risk everything?” Mariposa says.

They both know what she means.

* * *

The pit is in the very center of Serendib. There are thousands of legends about it. It is covered with a simple open pavilion carved of sandstone, beige but of a remarkable fine grain. It has never weathered. There are no markings.

In the center of the pavilion a squat, eight-armed creature sits beside the pit, which is some ten feet across.

For a fee, this creature will lower a basket holding the payee into the pit for a certain depth, and then let it hang there for a quarter of an hour, and then draw it back up.

Three small creatures play flutes in the corner of the pavilion, and do so in shifts, so there is always a thin music in the air.

No one knows what happens during that quarter of an hour. Nine out of ten so lowered return dead. Some have peaceful faces or even smiles. Others have a froth of fear on their mouths, or have clawed their own eyes out, or tore their veins open on the basket's rim. Some are transformed, into robots or statues or pillars of salt.

A few vanish from the basket.

A few, though, a handful, return better than unscathed, touched with golden luck or new and unknown powers or enlightened beyond all comprehension.

Cathay stands peering over the edge.

"It seems very deep indeed," she observes, her tone mild.

"Is the gamble too large?" Mariposa asks.

Cathay shrugs, counting coins to the creature. This is all part of the universe's randomness. If she's lucky, Cathay can ride it like a dragon. Come out with the ability to talk to animals or angels. Shoot flames from her fingertips.

If she's not...

Well, that will be a different matter.

* * *

The basket goes down. The creatures pipe. Mariposa sits cross-legged on the ground and the green in her eyes threatens to overcome the rest. Her fingers wind around each other, anxious.

The sky flickers cobalt and amber and lightning. After a little while it rains. The rain stops and a rainbow appears before sparkling clouds obscure it. (All normal for Serendib weather. The city is where many sayings about weather began.)

Eight arms haul the basket up, scraping against the sandstone.

Cathay sits in the basket. Tears streak her face but she seems otherwise unscathed.

She leaps from the basket with a touch of impatience and strides over to Mariposa. "Well?"

"You have gambled and won," Mariposa says, rising.

She slides a hand along the front of Cathay's armored vest, careful not to cut herself on the metal scales.

"Three times," Cathay says, looking down into her face.

"Then you have gambled and won something from me," Mariposa says after a long moment. She tilts her mouth upward to make the prize clear.

Cathay stands, looking down, eyes neutral and wary and wistful. Mariposa's fingers flex on the metal scales.

Cathay shakes her head.

“You have won,” she says regretfully, and releases her. “There is a risk that frightens me too far, and it lies in your eyes.”

Cathay walks away, out of the pavilion, and the piping, and the eight-armed creature who has been observing all this interchange.

Mariposa stands looking after her and the thwarted green of her eyes is that of a seed left long underground and only recently come to the sun.

To seek its fortune.

To seek the one who planted it so long ago.

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Nebula and World Fantasy Award-nominated writer/editor Cat Rambo lives, writes, and teaches atop a hill in West Seattle. Her over two-hundred fiction publications include stories in Asimov's, Clarkesworld, and two previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies. Her most recent novel is Beasts of Tabat, with sequel Hearts of Tabat appearing in 2016. She is the current President of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers

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THE RIGHT BRIGHT COURIER

by Anaea Lay

The sensor feeds of our approach washed over me as I sat in *Shalott's* cocoon, guiding her with my breath and thought and anticipation. The ether roads between worlds were long and we both bore the scars of our journeys. She furled her sails and pulled them tight to her hull, then turned on her side and beached herself upon the shores. Trails of nebula dust scattered in our wake, rippling out in a cascade of color and radiation that sparkled in the depths of our shared vision. We had arrived. But she did not withdraw the cocoon. Her warm, humid breath encased me, clutching me tight.

“You will not come back to me,” she whispered in my ear.

“I will.”

“You won’t,” she insisted. But in the same breath, the threads of the cocoon parted and she let me go.

I let my fingers slide along the smooth, leathery walls of her interior as I moved along her deck, then found the hatch. I paused long enough to press my lips to the center of the old flap, an apology for my impending necessity. We’d been so long in space, sailing to this shore, that the flesh of the hatch had

had time to heal, so I had to cut it open anew. But I am an expert sailor and comfortable with the handling of a ship. My strokes were confident and smooth, and in a instant the flap was free once more.

A moment's hesitation—there was so much I wanted to reassure her of—and then I was through the hatch and into the clear night air of the shores outside the Palace of Abandoned Dreams. A Bright Courier never looks back, never regrets, but when I crested the bank I turned to her. Her scales were gray and shimmering under the golden light of the double moons, her sails reflecting the ether-glow we sailed upon to travel between planets. I'd sacrificed a valve of my heart, a length of my gut, and an impossible desire, all to have her grown for me. From me. It wasn't looking back, that last glance. You can't look back at your present self.

The palace gates parted before me without a touch. They knew what I was, why I was there, and they did not test me. They creaked and groaned on their hinges with long disuse. Many come to collect the package from the Palace of Abandoned Dreams, but no true Courier has trod this ground. Until me.

Beyond the gates is a simple stone fountain, the water shallow and clear in its basin, ether-smoke rising purple and green where the minnows disrupt it. My first test waits for me

there. Ghost images of Artie and Gwen, perched on the edge of the fountain. Artie has leaned over the edge, sucked in the ether-smoke, and exhaled it as smoke rings. Gwen laughs and claps her hands before, as one, they turn to me.

“Your road is too long,” Gwen says.

Artie reaches for me. “Stay with us.”

I don’t answer them. I will not give ghosts the answer I couldn’t give flesh before me. I walk on.

“Wait!” Gwen calls. “At least watch my trick.”

I know without looking that her hands are grasping the smoke, shaping the ephemeral substance of the ether with her gentle touch until a rainbow falls from her hands to pierce the surface of the water. I know because I saw Gwen and her clever hands do that a hundred, a thousand times before I left. Because I’d give another valve of my heart to see it again. But I am a Bright Courier, and I do not look back.

Nevertheless, their laughter follows me as I press on.

The sky above me roils in purple and orange, a tapestry of eternal sunset that blocks the stars and hides the roads through the ether. It twists and shifts above me, never stable, never satisfied, and I feel I know it. This was a place made for me, for my kind, and I love it for that. It is a trap laid for me, designed for me, and I want to hate it. I will, I think, before the end.

The path from the gate of the Palace of Abandoned Dreams is paved with mother of pearl. It shimmers under that angry sky, glows in the eternal moonlight. My shadow falls over it and the world around me grows dimmer for it. And from that shadow, my second test is born. The shadow turns into night on another world, a clear sky glimmering with stars and the golden ether-roads that I sailed with *Shalott*. I recognize that foreign night, that distant world. And as I do, she's there before me, Gwen with her gentle curves and maniac's grin. Gwen with the clever hands, pulling ether-smoke from the puddles to shape ephemeral skylines and landscapes for passersby to admire.

"Have you ever felt the substance of the ether in space?" I asked her that night, genuinely curious what she might craft with the full substance.

This time I said nothing. That night we had talked, and I'd promised to introduce her to *Shalott*, to push off into the ether, to let her reach out into space and shape the substance of the universe how she would. And she, in turn, asked me whether I had rooms, whether I'd join her in hers, whether I'd like to meet her particular friend. It had been so good, so perfect, the first time I'd seen this. Now I walked on, my heels clicking against the mother of pearl paving my path, my teeth clenching against the ache of giving them up again, the pain of sacrificing

their temporary solace to answer my true calling as Bright Courier. We were perfect, the three of us, but I must complete my quest.

The Bright Couriers were founded two centuries ago to answer the challenge posed by the Palace of Abandoned Dreams. They do not recruit. They do not train. Their initiates find them by accident, wandering rootless and unattached until they stumble into a Courier temple. They must have hopes, desires, longings, but they may not have attachments. They must sacrifice, but it should not be painful. Initiates are tested, and when they pass, they give up the elements of themselves they want to imbue their ship and with those elements, their ship is grown. With that they create their first, their only attachment, because an anchor to their ship is a tie to themselves, and Couriers without attachments to themselves cannot be trusted. The ether is deep, and space is wide. The truly unattached will never find their way.

All I ever wanted was a quest. I wandered, hopeless and despairing, until I found the Bright Couriers. Until they told me of the Palace and gave me what I needed.

I am the fifteenth Bright Courier to land on these shores and walk this path.

Artie sits with a tea set on the steps to the Palace, alone, waiting for me.

“Stop a moment,” he says. “I know you’ll go on, but you owe me this much. We loved you, and you left us. Help me understand why.”

“I can’t,” I say. I continue walking, my eyes forward. But my steps slow. They slow, but they do not stop.

“You can,” Artie says, tears clouding his eyes. “Please.”

My fingers brush his cheek as I pass him by. Stubble and soft skin. They curl through his hair, and my steps are glacial. “I loved you, too,” I whisper. Then I climb the steps, and Artie is behind me, where I will not look.

Gwen kept her promise to me, that night we first met, and she took me home to her rooms and her loves. She and Artie were artists, sculptors, creators. Their walls were covered with cases where they’d trapped ether-smoke, teased it and shaped it and rendered it beautiful, then frozen it and captured it for eternity. There was no furniture in their main room, but at the center was a display with their masterpiece. I looked into it, the globe floating in the center, surrounded by a roiling orange sky, and felt the remaining valves of my heart flutter.

“I know this place,” I said, my voice a hoarse whisper.

Artie emerged from the depths of their rooms and stood beside me. “It’s not a real place,” he said. “Just a toy I made. And then Gwen. She came to me, and we made it better.”

“No. Every Courier knows this world,” I said.

“It’s just a dream,” Gwen said, taking her place at my other side. “A fantasy. A perfect place, kept safe in its glass container. We’ll change it again when we’re bored of it.”

I walked around the display; found the landmass on the equator with the shallow shores, gentle and tied to the ether-roads. Pointed to the gates, the path paved in mother of pearl, the Palace with its wide steps. And inside, the hall, the box, the challenge presented to every Bright Courier. I’d known since I’d learned of it that I’d prove myself someday, that I would be the one to answer the challenge presented by the Palace of Abandoned Dreams. But I’d never before contemplated the question of *when*.

We made love, the three of us, our bodies stretching and clinging and melting on top of the glass case. After, as sweat cooled on our skin/etc, Gwen and Artie covered us in beauty. She, with her clever hands, teased ether-smoke from the salty droplets; he caressed my shoulder with his tongue then blew out the ether smoke as rings and clouds. We became constellations in a vibrant sky, and in that moment I wasn’t myself, or a Courier, or even a piece of the *Shalott*. I was part of them. I was perfect. And I was happy.

There is no maze inside the Palace. Just one grand room, its ceiling vaulted and covered in glass that shows the sky roiling overhead. In the center of that room is a small table,

and on that table is the package. The Palace is large, but the distance from its entrance to the table is not so large even as the distance from the gate to the steps, let alone the length of the ether-roads from the shore to all the places you were before. The air is cool, comfortable, and the eternal moonlight reveals the last stretch of the path.

It is silent inside the Palace of Abandoned Dreams. Your footsteps don't echo. They don't make a sound. You cannot disturb the silence of that place because it is ancient and eternal and you, small as you are, are nothing inside of it. Gods may float in the roiling clouds of the sky above, losing themselves in the moment and each other, but, inside the Palace, that is nothing. I am nothing. Just a Bright Courier, the first who will succeed, because I left them without word or warning and I've never looked back.

Gwen kept her promise, and I kept mine. No other had ever touched the *Shalott*, but I taught Gwen's clever hands to find the flap of her hatch and pull it aside. Only I had ever shared her breath, until Artie sucked it in, pulled ether-smoke from the humidity, released it as a golden blossom that shimmered, then faded.

"You are here with me," *Shalott* whispered in my ear.

"These are my friends," I told her, one hand on the flesh of her wall, the other clasping Gwen's shoulder.

“Hello, Shalott,” Artie said.

“It’s good to have you here,” my ship whispered to me. Then she unfurled her sails and slipped onto the ether-roads. The planet fell behind us and space stretched out before. All three of us fell into the *Shalott’s* cocoon, and with the full depth of the true ether surrounding her hull, we built castles in the clouds.

We completed an orbit of Gwen and Artie’s world, then followed the ether-road back to their shore. My ship clung to us when we tried to peel away, but we were firm. That night, in their rooms, Gwen and Artie collapsed together, but I couldn’t sleep. Instead I paced the edges of the main room, obsessed with the display at the center, overcome with the perfect mystery that the Palace of Abandoned Dreams should come to be fashioned here.

And then I saw it, the tiniest sliver of a crack along the top edge. The glass was broken, and soon the ether smoke would escape. Gwen and Artie’s perfect world couldn’t bear up under the weight of its new constellations. Our weight. In that moment I recognized what was happening. This was my first test, and I was dangerously close to failure. I fled without another thought.

I open the box at the center of the Palace with steady hands. The hinges make no noise as I raise the lid. This box

which has been here for ages looks fresh, perfect. I hold my breath with the lid open, brace myself, then look inside. The sides and bottom are lined in claret velvet, rich against the ornately jeweled chalice resting therein.

“What is this?” I ask aloud, the first sound since I entered.

“It is the package,” a voice echoes back. It is my ship’s voice, and Artie’s, and Gwen’s. My own voice, answering my own question.

I slam the lid shut. “I don’t understand.”

“You are not the one,” the voice answers. “You’ve carried them with you, brought your dreams to me, and you will rest here, nurturing me on them for eternity.”

“No,” I insist. “I’m the one. I gave up everything. I passed the tests. I will deliver your package!”

“But you can’t,” the voice answers, lush and loving and all too familiar. “This place is nothing without the package. If you were willing to shatter paradise, you would not have fled. You would have turned back.”

I turn and run, footsteps making a silent patter across the floor. The doors to the palace are closed, a flap grown over and I with no means of slicing it open again. I bang my fists bloody against them, scream for *Shalott*, for Artie, for Gwen. The walls close in around me, the palace shrinking until it is snug as a cocoon. “But I’m the one! I’ll answer the challenge.”

“Oh, little dreamer,” the voice answers. “Some challenges are not there to be answered. My shores have no tests, only warnings.”

I never looked back.

I severed my attachments.

I... I severed all my attachments.

The truly unattached will never find their way.

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COVER ART

“Research Lab,” by Sung Choi



Sung Choi is a concept artist who specializes in world design and illustration for the entertainment industry. Born and raised in South Korea, he later moved to Los Angeles and attended Otis College of Art and Design where he majored in digital media. He studied environment design and has been broadening his visual library by going outside and studying nature. Throughout his challenges, Sung has focused on simplifying the subject and creating readable and compelling designs. View more of his work at www.sung-choi.com.

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