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THE LIMITLESS PERSPECTIVE OF MASTER
PEEK, OR, THE LUMINESCENCE OF
DEBAUCHERY

by Catherynne M. Valente

When my father, a glassblower of some modest fame, lay gasping on his deathbed, he offered, between bloody wheezings, a choice of inheritance to his three children: a chest of Greek pearls, a hectare of French land, or an iron punty. Impute no virtue to my performance in this little scene! I, being the youngest, chose last, which is to say I did not choose at all. The elder of us, my brother Prospero, seized the chest straightaway, having love in his heart for nothing but jewels and gold, the earth's least interesting movements of the bowel which so excite, in turn, the innards of man. Pomposo, next of my blood, took up the deed of land, for he always fancied himself a lord, even in our childhood games, wherein he sold me in marriage to the fish in the lake, the grove of poplar trees, the sturdy stone wall, our father's kiln and pools of molten glass, even the sun and the moon and the constellation of Taurus. The iron punty was left to me, my father's only daughter, who could least wield it to any profit, being a girl and

therefore no fit beast for commerce. All things settled to two-thirds satisfaction, our father bolted upright in his bed, cried out: *Go I hence to God!* then promptly fell back, perished, and proceeded directly to Hell.

The old man had hardly begun his long cuddle with the wormy ground before Prospero be-shipped himself with a galleon and sailed for the Dutch East Indies in search of a blacker, more fragrant pearl to spice his breakfast and his greed whilst Pomposo wifed himself a butter-haired miller's daughter, planting his seed in both France and her with a quickness. And thus was I left, Perpetua alone and loudly complaining, in the quiet dark of my father's glassworks, with no one willing to buy from my delicate and feminine hand, no matter how fine the goblet on the end of that long iron punty.

The solution seemed to me obvious. Henceforward, quite simply, I should never be a girl again. This marvelous transformation would require neither a witch's spell nor an alchemist's potion. From birth I possessed certain talents that would come to circumscribe my destiny, though I cursed them mightily until their use came clear: a deep and commanding voice, a masterful height, and a virile hirsuteness, owing to a certain unmentionable rootstock of our ancient family. Served as a refreshingly exotic accompaniment to these, some few of us are also born with one eye as good as any wrought by God,

and one withered, hardened to little more than a misshapen pearl notched within a smooth and featureless socket, an affliction which, even if all else could be made fair between us, my brothers did not inherit, so curse them forever, say I. No surprise that no one wanted to marry the glassblower's giant hairy one-eyed daughter!

Yet now my defects would bring to me, not a husband, but the world entire. I had only to cut my hair with my father's shears, bind my breasts with my mother's bridal veil, clothe myself in my brothers' coats and hose, blow a glass bubble into a false eye, and think nothing more of Perpetua forever. My womandectomy caused me neither trouble nor grief—I wholeheartedly recommend it to everyone! But, since such a heroic act of theatre could hardly be accomplished in the place of my birth, I also traded two windows for a cart and an elderly but good-humored plough-horse, packed up tools and bread and slabs of unworked glass, and departed that time and place forever. London, after all, does not care one whit who you were. Or who you are. Or who you will become. Frankly, she barely cares for herself, and certainly cannot be bothered with your tawdry backstage changes of costume and comedies of mistaken identity.

That was long ago. So long that to say the numbers aloud would be an act of pure nihilism. Oh, but I am old, good sir, old

as ale and twice as bitter, though I do not look it and never shall, so far as I can tell. I was old when you were weaned, squalling and farting, and I shall be old when your grandchildren annoy you with their hideous fashions and worse manners. Kings and queens and armadas and plagues have come and gone in my sight, ridiculous wars flowered and pruned, my brothers died, the scales balanced at last, for having not the malformed and singular eye, neither did they have the longevity that is our better inheritance, fashions swung from opulence to piousness and back to the ornate flamboyance that is their favored resting state once more.

And thus come I, Master Cornelius Peek, Glassmaker to the Rich and Redolent, only slightly dented, to the age which was the mate to my soul as glove to glove or slipper to slipper. Such an age exists for every man, but only a lucky few chance to be born alongside theirs. For myself, no more perfect era can ever grace the hourglass than the one that began in the Year of Our Lord 1660, in the festering scrotum of London, at the commencement of the long and groaning orgy of Charles II's pretty, witty reign.

If you would know me, know my house. She is a slim, graceful affair built in a fashion somewhat later than the latest, much of brick and marble and, naturally, glass, three stories high, with the top two being the quarters I share with my

servants, the maid-of-all-work Mrs. Matterfact and my valet, Mr. Suchandsuch (German, I believe, but I do respect the privacy of all persons), and my wigs, my wardrobe, and my lady wife, when I am in possession of such a creature, an occurrence more common and without complaint than you might assume, (of which *much* more, *much* later). I designed the edifice myself, with an eye to every detail, from the silver door-knocker carved in the image of a single, kindly eye whose eyelid must be whacked vigorously against the iris to gain ingress, to the several concealed chambers and passageways for my sole and secret use, all of which open at the pulling of a sconce or the adjusting of an oil painting, that sort of thing, to the smallest of rose motifs stenciled upon the wallpaper.

The land whereupon my lady house sits, however, represents a happy accident of real estate investment, as I purchased it a small eternity before the Earl of Bedford seized upon the desire to make of Covent Garden a stylish district for stylish people, and the Earl was forced to make significant accommodations and gratifications on my account. I am always delighted by accommodations and gratifications, particularly when they are forced, and most especially when they are on my account.

The lower floor, which opens most attractively onto the newly-christened and newly-worthwhile Drury Lane, serves as

my showroom, and in through my tasteful door flow all the nobly whelped and ignobly wealthied and blind (both from birth and from happenstance, I do not discriminate) and wounded and syphilitic of England, along with not a few who made the journey from France, Italy, Denmark, even the Rus, to receive my peculiar attentions. With the most exquisite consideration, I appointed the walls of my little salon with ultramarine watered silk and discreet, gold-framed portraits of my most distinguished customers. In the northwest corner, you will find what I humbly allege to be the single most comfortable chair in all of Christendom, reclined at an, at first glance, radical angle, that nevertheless offers an extraordinary serenity of ease, stuffed with Arabian horsehair and Spanish barley, sheathed in supple leather the color of a rose just as the last sunlight vanishes behind the mountains. In the northeast corner, you will find, should you but recognize it, my father's pitted and pitiful iron punty, braced above the hearth with all the honor the gentry grant to their tawdry ancestral swords. The ceiling boasts a fine fresco depicting that drunken uncle of Greek Literature, the Cyclops, trudging through a field of poppies and wheat with a ram under each arm, and the floor bears up beneath a deep blanket of choice carpets woven by divinely inspired and contented Safavids, so thick no cheeky draught even imagines it might invade my realm, and all four

walls, from baseboard to the height of a man, are outfitted with a series of splendid drawers, in alternating gold and silver designs, presenting to the hands of my supplicants faceted knobs of sapphire, emerald, onyx, amethyst, and jasper. These drawers contain my treasures, my masterpieces, the objects of power with which I line my pockets and sauce my goose. Open one, any one, every one, and all will be revealed on plush velvet cushions, for there rest hundreds upon hundreds of the most beautiful eyes ever to open or close upon this fallen earth.

No fingers as discerning as mine could ever be content with the glazier's endless workaday drudge through plate windows and wine bottles, vases and spectacles and spyglasses, hoping against hope for the occasional excitement of a goblet or a string of beads that might, if you did not look too closely, resemble, in the dark, real pearls. No, no, a thousand, *million* times no! Not for me that life of scarred knuckles whipped by white-molten strands of stray glass, of unbearable heat and even more unbearable contempt oozing from those very ones who needed me to keep the rain out of their parlors and their spirits off the table linen.

I will tell you how I made this daring escape from a life of silicate squalor, and trust you, as I suppose I already have done, to keep my secrets—for what is the worth of a secret if

you never spill it? My deliverance came courtesy of a pot of pepper, a disfigured milkmaid, and the Dogaressa of Venice.

It would seem that my brothers were not quite so malevolently egomaniacal as they seemed on that distant, never-to-be-forgotten day when our father drooled his last. One of them was not, at least. Having vanished neatly into London and established myself, albeit in an appallingly meager situation consisting of little more than a single kiln stashed in the best beloved piss-corner of the Arsegate, marvering paltry, poignant cups against the stone steps of a whorehouse, sleeping between two rather unpleasantly amorous cows in a cheesemaker's barn, I was neither happy nor quite wretched, for at least I had made a start. At least I was in the arms of the reeking city. At least I had escaped the trap laid by pearls and hectares and absconding brothers.

And then, as these things happen, one day, not different in any quality or deed from any other day, I received a parcel from an exhausted-looking young man dressed in the Florentine style. I remember him as well as my supper Thursday last—the supper was pigeon pie and fried eels with claret; the lad, a terrifically handsome black-haired trifle who went by the rather lofty name of Plutarch—and after wiping the road from his eyes and washing it from his throat with ale that hardly

deserved the name, he presented me with a most curious item: a fat silver pot, inlaid with a lapis lazuli ship at full sail.

Inside found I a treasure beyond the sweat-drenched dreams of upwardly mobile men, which is to say, a handful of peppercorns and beans of vanil, those exotic, black and fragrant jewels for which the gluttonous world crosses itself three times in thanks. Plutarch explained, at some length, that my brother Prospero now dwelt permanently in the East Indies where he had massed a fabulous fortune, and wished to assure himself that his sister, the sweet, homely maid he abandoned, could make herself a good marriage after all. I begged the poor boy not to use any of those treacherous words again in my or anyone's hearing: not *marriage*, not *maid*, and most of all not *sister*. Please and thank you for the pepper, on your way, tell no one my name nor how you found me and how did you find me by God and the Devil himself—no, don't tell me, I shall locate this lost relative and deliver the goods to her with haste, though I could perhaps be persuaded to pass the night reading a bit of Plutarch before rustling up the wastrel in question, but, hold fast, my darling, I must insist you submit to my peculiar tastes and maintain both our clothing and cover of darkness throughout; I find it sharpens the pleasure of the thing, this is my, shall we say, *firm* requirement, and no argument shall move me.

Thus did I find myself a reasonably rich and well-read man. And that might have made a pleasant and satisfying enough end of it, if not for the milkmaid.

For, as these things happen, one day not long after, not different in any hour or act than any other day, a second parcel appeared upon my, now much finer, though not nearly so fine as my present, doorstep. Her name was Perdita, she was in possession of a complexion as pure as that of a white calf on the day of its birth, hair as red as a fresh wound, an almost offensively pregnant belly, and to crown off her beauty, it must be mentioned, both her eyes had been gouged from her pretty skull by means of, I was shortly to learn, a pair of puritanical ravens.

It would seem that my other brother, Pomposo—you remember him, yes? Paying attention, are we?—was still in the habit of marrying unsuspecting girls off to trees and fish and stones, provided that the trees were his encircling arms, the fish his ardent tongue, and the stones those terribly personal, perceptive, and pendulous seed-vaults of his ardor, and poor, luckless Perdita had taken *quite* the turn round the park. Perhaps we are not so divided by our shared blood as all that, Pomposo! Hats off, my good man, and everything else, too. Well, the delectably lovely and lamentable maid in question found herself afflicted both by Little Lord Pomposo and by that

peculiar misfortune which bonds all men as one and makes them brothers: she had a bad father.

Perdita told me of her predicament over my generous table. She spoke with more haste than precision, tearing out morsels of Mrs. Matterfact's incomparable baked capon in almond sauce with her grubby fingers and fumbling it into that plump face whilst she rummaged amongst her French pockets for English words to close in her tale like a green and garnishing parsley. As far as I could gather, her cowerding father had, in his youth, contracted the disease of religion, a most severe and acute strain. He took the local clergyman's daughter to wife, promptly locked her in his granary to keep her safe from both sin and any amusement at all, and removed a child from her every year or so until she perished from, presumably, the piercing shame of having tripped and fallen into one of the more tiresome fairy tales.

Perdita's father occupied the time he might have spent *not* slowly murdering his wife upon his one and only hobby: the keeping of birds of prey. Now, one cannot fault the man for that! But he loved no falcons nor hawks nor eagles, only a matched pair of black-hearted ravens he called by the names of Praisegod and Feargod (there really can be no accounting for, or excusing of, the tastes of Papists) which he had trained from the egg to hunt down the smallest traces of wickedness upon

his estate and among his children. For this unlikely genius had taught his birds, painstakingly, to detect the delicate and complex scents of sexual congress, and the corvids twain became so adept that they were known to arrive at many a village window only moments after the culmination of the act.

Now you have taken up all the pieces of this none-too-sophisticated puzzle and can no doubt assume the rest. My brother conquered Perdita's virtue with ease, for no such dour and draconian devoutness can raise much else but libertines, a fact which may yet save us from the vicious fate of a world redeemed, and put my niece (for indeed it proved to be a niece) in her with little enough care for anything but the trees and the fish and the stones of his own bucolic life. No sooner than he had rolled off of her but Praisegod and Feargod arrived, screeching to wake the glorious dead, the scent of coupling maddening their black brains, and devoured Perdita's eyeballs in a hideous orgy of gore and terribly poor parenting. Pomposo, ever steadfast and humbly responsible for his own affairs, sent his distress directly to me and, I imagine, poured a brimming glass of wine with which to toast himself.

"My dear lady," said I, gently prying a joint of Mrs. Matterfact's brandied mutton from her fist, hoping to preserve at least something for myself, "I cannot imagine what you or my good brother mean *me* to do with a child. I am a bachelor, I

wish devoutly to remain so, and my bachelorhood is only redoubled by my regrettable feelings toward children, which mirror the drunkard's for a mug of clear water: well enough and wholesome for most, he supposes, but what can one *do* with one? But I am not pitiless. That, I am not, my dear. You may, of course, remain here until the child... occurs, and we shall endeavor to locate some suitable position in town for one of your talents."

Ah, but I had played my hand and missed the trick! "You misunderstand, *monsieur*," protested the comely Perdita. "Mister Pompy didn't send me to you for your *hospitalité*. He said in London he had a brother who could make me eyes twice as pretty as they ever were and would only charge me the favor of not squeezing out my babe on his parlor floor."

Even a thousand miles distant, my skinflint family could put the screws to me, turn them tight, and have themselves a nice giggle at my groans. But at least the old boy guessed my game of trousers and did not give me up, even to his paramour.

"They was green," the milkmaid whispered, and the ruination of her eye sockets bled in place of weeping. "Like clover."

Oh, very well! I am not a *monster*. In any event, I wasn't then. At least the commission was an interesting enough challenge to my lately listless and undernourished intellect. So

it came to pass that over the weeks remaining until the parturition of Perdita, I fashioned, out of crystal and ebony and chips of fine jade, twin organs of sight not the equal of mortal orbs but by far their superior, in clarity, in beauty, even in soulfulness. If you ask me how I accomplished it, I shall show you the door, for I am still a tradesman, however exalted, and tradesmen tell no tales. I sewed the spheres myself with thread of gold into her fair face, an operation which sounds elegant and difficult in the telling, but in the doing required rather more gin, profanity, and blows to the chin than any window did. When I had finished, she appeared, not healed, but more than healed—sublimated, rarefied, elevated above the ranks of human women with their filmy, vitreous eyes that could merely *see*.

I have heard good report that, under another name, and with her daughter quite grown and well-wed, Perdita now sits upon the throne of the Netherlands, her peerless eyes having captivated the heart of a certain prince before anyone could tie a rock round her feet and drop her into a canal. Well done, say all us graspers down here, reaching up toward Heaven's sewers with a thousand million hands, well done.

Now, we arrive at the hairpin turn in the road of both my fortunes and my life, the skew of the thing, where the carriage of our tale may so easily overturn and send us flying into mud

and thorns unknown. Brace your constitution and your credulity, for I am of a mind to whip the horses and take the bend at speed!

It is simply not possible to excel so surpassingly as I have done and remain anonymous. God in his perversity grants anonymity to the gifted and the industrious in equal and heartless measure, but never to the *splendid*. Word of the girl with the unearthly, alien, celestial eyes spread like a plague of delight in every direction, floating down the river, sweeping through the Continent, stowing away on ships at sea, until it arrived, much adorned with my Lady Rumor's laurels, at the *palazzo* of the Doge in darling, dripping Venice.

Now, the Doge at that time had caused himself, God knows why or by dint of what wager, to be married to a woman by the name of Samaritiana. Do not allow yourselves to be duped by that name, you trusting fools! Samaritiana would not even stop along the side of the road to Hell to wrinkle her nose at the carcass of Our Lord Jesus Christ, though it save her immortal soul, unless He told her she was beautiful first. Oh, 'tis easy enough to hate a vain woman with warts and liver spots, to scorn her milk baths and philtres and exsanguinated Hungarian virgins, to mock her desperation to preserve a youth and beauty that was never much more enticing than the local sheep in the first place, but one had to look elsewhere for

reasons to hate Samaritiana, for she truly was the singular beauty of her age. Black of hair, eye, and ambition was she, pale as a maiden drowned, buxom as Ceres (though she had yet no issue), intoxicating as the breath of Bacchus. Fortunately, my lady thoughtfully provided a bounty of other pantries in which to find that meat of hatred fit for the fires of any heart.

She was, quite simply, the worst person.

I do not mean by this to call the Dogaressa a murderess, nor an apostate, nor a despot, nor an embezzler, nor even a whore, for whores, at least, are kindly and useful, murderers must have some measure of cleverness if they mean to get away with it, apostates make for *tremendous* company at parties, despots have a positively devastating charisma, and, I am assured by the highest authority, which is to say, Lord Aphorism and his Merry Band of Proverbials, that there is some honor amongst thieves. No, Samaritiana was merely humorless, witless, provincial, petty, small of mind, parched of imagination, stingy of wallet and affection, morally conservative, and incapable, to the last drop of her ruby blood, of admitting that she did not know everything in all the starry spheres and wheeling orbits of existence, and this whilst believing herself to possess all of these that are virtues and eschew all that are sins. Can you envisage a more wretched and unloveable beast?

I married her, naturally.

The Dogaressa came to me in a black resin mask and emerald hooded cloak when the plague had only lately checked into its waterfront rooms, sent for a litter, and commenced seeing the sights of Venice with its traveling hat and trusted map.

Oh, no, no, you misapprehend my phraseology. Not *that* plague. Not that grave and gorgeous darkling shadow that falls over Europe once a century and reminds us that what dwells within our bodies is not a soul but a stinking ruin of fluid and marrow and bile. The *other* plague, the one that sneaks on nimbly putrefying feet from bedroom to bedroom, from dockside to dinner party, from brothel to marital bower, leaving chancres like kisses too long remembered. Yes, we would have to wait years yet before Baron von Bubœ mounted his much-anticipated revival on the stage, but never you fear, Dame Syphilis was dancing down the dawn, and in those days, her viols never stopped nor slowed.

That mysterious, morbid, high-monstrous and tangerine-scented creature called Samaritana darkened my door one evening in April, bid me draw close all my curtains, light only a modest lantern upon a pretty lacquered table inlaid with mother of pearl which I still possess to this day, and stand some distance away while she removed her onyx mask to reveal

a face of such surpassing radiance, such unparalleled winsomeness, that even the absence of the left eye, and the mass of scars and weals that had long since replaced it, could do no more than render her enchanting rather than perfect.

It would seem that the Dogaressa danced with the Dame some years past. Her husband, the Doge, brought her to the ball, she claimed, having learned the steps from his underaged Neapolitan mistress, though, as I became much acquainted with the lady in later years, I rather suspect she found her own way, arrived first, wore through three pairs of shoes, departed last, and ate all the cakes on the sideboard. But, as is far too often the case in this life ironical, that mean and miserly soul found itself in receipt of, not only the beauty of a better woman, but the good fortune of a better man. She contracted a high fever owing to her insistence upon hosting the Christmas feast out of doors that year, so that the gathered nobility could see how lovely she looked with a high winter's blush on her cheeks, and this fever seemed to have driven, by some idiot insensate alchemy, the Dame from the halls of Samaritiana forever, leaving only her eye ravaged and boiled away by the waltz.

All was well in the world, then, save that she could not show herself in public without derision and her husband still rotted on his throne with a golden nose hung on his mouldering face like a door knocker, but she had not come for

his sake, nor would she ever dream of fancying that it was possible to ask a boon of that oft-rumored wizard hiding in the sty of London for any single soul on earth other than herself.

“I have heard that you can make a new eye,” said she, in dulcet tones she did not deserve the ability to produce.

I could.

“Better than the old, brighter, of any color or shape?”

I could.

She licked her lily lips. “And install it so well none would suspect the exchange?”

Perhaps not quite, not *entirely* so well, but it never behooves one to admit weakness to a one-eyed queen.

“You have already done me this service,” said she to me, loftily, never asking once, only demanding, presuming, crushing all resistance, not to mention dignity, custom, the basest element of courtesy, beneath her silver-tooled heel. She waved her hand as though the motion of her fingers could destroy all protestation. The light of my lantern caught on a ring of peridot and tourmaline entwined into the shape of a rather maudlin-looking crocodile gnawing upon its own tail, for she claimed some murky Egyptian blood in the dregs of her familial cup, as though such little droplets could mark her as exceptional, when every dockside lady secretly fancies herself a Cleopatra of the Thames.

“Produce the results upon the morrow! I will pay you nothing, of course. A Dogaressa does not stoop to exchange currency for goods. But when two eyes look out from beneath my brow once more, I will present you with a gift, for no particular reason other than that I wish to bestow it.”

“And if I do not like your gift, *Clarissima*?”

Puzzlement contorted her exquisitely Cyclopean visage, causing a most unwelcome familial pang within my breast. “I do not take your meaning, Master Peek. How could such a thing possibly occur?”

There is, it seems, a glittering point beyond which egotism achieves such purity that it becomes innocence, and that was the country in which Samaritiana lived. In truth, had she revealed her gift to me then, or even promised payment in the usual manner, I might have refused her, just to experience the novel emotion of rejecting royalty—for I am interested in nothing so much as novelty, not love nor death nor glass nor gold. Something new! Something new! My kingdom for something new! But she caught me, the perfumed spider, wholly without knowing what she’d done. I did indeed take up her commission, and though you may conclude in advance that this recounting of the job will proceed according to the pattern of the last, I shall be disappointed if you do, for I have already told you most vividly that herein lies the skew of my tale.

For the sake of the beautiful Dogaressa, I took up my father's battered old pipe and punty. I cannot now say why; for a certainty I owned better instruments by far, and had not touched the things in eons except to brush them daintily with a daily sneer. Perhaps a paroxysm of sentimentality seized me; perhaps I despised her too much even then to waste my finer appliances on her pox-punched face, in any event, I cannot even say positively that the result blossomed forth from the tools and not some other cause, and I fear to question it now. I sank into the rhythm of my father and grandfather and his before him: the dollop of liquid glass, the greatbreath of my own lungs expelled through the long, black pipe, the sweet pressure and rolling of the globule against the smooth marver stone, the uncommon light known only to workers of glass, that strange slick of marmalade-light afire within crystal that would soon ride a woman's skull all the way through the days of her life and down into her tomb.

The work was done; I fashioned two, an exquisitely matched pair, in case the other organ required replacement in the unseen feverish future. Samaritiana, in, so far as I may know or tell, the sole creative decision of her existence, chose not one color for the iris but all of them, dozens of infinitesimal shards chipped from every jewel in my inventory: sapphire, jade, emerald, jasper, onyx, amethyst, ruby, topaz. The effect

was a carnival wheel of deep, unsettling fascination, and when I sewed it into her flesh with my golden thread she did not wail or struggle but only sighed, as though lost in the act of love, and, though her faults were called Legion, they were as yet unknown to me, thus, as my needle entered her, so too did my fatal softening begin.

The Dogaressa departed with her stitching still fresh, leaving in her wake but three souvenirs of our intimate surgery: one gift she intended, one she did not, and her damnable scent, which neither Mrs. Matterfact nor Mr. Suchandsuch, no matter how they scrubbed and strove, could remove from the premises. I daresay, even this very night, should you venture to my old house on the High Street and press your nose to its sturdy bones, still yet you would snatch a whiff of tangerine and strangling ivy from the foundation stones.

The gift she intended to leave was a lock of her raven hair, the skinflint bitch. The other, I did not perceive until some weeks later, when I adjourned to my smoking room with a bottle of brandy, a packet of snuff, and a rare contemplative mood which I intended to spend upon a rich, unfiltered melancholy as sweet as any Madeira—for it is a fact globally acknowledged that idle melancholy, like good wine, is the exclusive purview of the wealthy. To aid in my melancholy, I fingered in one hand the mate to the Dogaressa's harlequin eye,

rubbing my thumb over that strange, motley iris, marveling at the milky sheen of the sclera, admiring, unrepentant Narcissus that I am, my own skill and artistry. I removed my own, ordinary, unguessable, nearly flawless glass eye and held up the other to my empty socket like a spyglass, and a most thoroughly stupendous metamorphosis transpired: I could see through the jeweled lens of that artificial eye! Truly see, without cloud or glare or halo—ah, but *what* I saw was not the walls of my own smoking room, so tastefully lined with matching books chosen to neither excite nor bore any guest to extremes, but the long peach-cream and gold hall of *the palazzo of the Doge in far-distant Venice!* The chequered black and white marble floors flowed forth in my vision like a houndstooth river; the full and unforgiving moon streamed glaucous through tall slim windows; painted ceilings soared overhead, inlaid with pearl and carnelian and ever-so-slightly greyed with the smoke of a hundred thousand candles burnt over peerless years in that grand corridor. Women and men swept slowly up and down the squares like boats upon some fairy canal, swathed in gowns of viridescent green cross-hatched with silver and rose, armored in bodices of whalebone and opal, be-sailed in lacy gauze spun by Clotho herself upon the wheel of destiny, cloaked and hooded in vermillion damask, in aquamarine, in citron and puce, their clothing each so

splendid I could scarce tell the maids from the swains—and thus looked I upon a personal paradise heretofore undreamt of.

But there were worms in paradise, for each and every beauty in the Doge's palace was rotting in their finery like the fruit of sun-spoiled melons within their shells. Their flesh putrefied and dripped from their bones and what remained turned hideous, sickening colors, choleric, livid, cyanic, hoary, a moldering patina of death whose effusions stained those bodices black. Some stumbled noseless, others having replaced that appendage with nostrils of gold and silver and crystal and porcelain, and others, all hope lost, sunk their visages into masks, though they could not hide their chanced hands, the bleeding sores of their bosoms, the undead tatters of their throats.

Yet still they laughed, and spoke animatedly, one to the other, and blushed in virtuous fashion beneath their putridity. Such is the dance of the Dame, who enters through the essential act of life, yet leaves you thinking, breathing, walking whilst the depredations of the grave transact upon your still-sensate flesh, making of this world a single noisy tomb.

My breath would not obey me; my heart ricocheted amongst my ribs like a cannon misfired. Was it truly Italy I saw bounded in the tiny planet of a glass eye? Had I stumbled into a drunken sleep or gone mad so swiftly no asylum could hope to

catch me? I shot to my feet, mashing the eye deeper into my socket until stars spattered my sight—closer, look closer! Could I hear as well? Smell? Taste the tallowed air of that far-off moonlit court?

I could not. I could not hear their footsteps nor inhale their perfume nor feel the fuzzed reek of the mildewed canals on my tongue nor move of my own volition. I apprehended a new truth, that even the impossible possesses laws of its own, and those unbendable. I could only observe. Observe—while my vision lurched forward, advancing quickly, rocking gently as with a woman's sinuous gait. Graceful, slender arms extended as though from my own body, opening with infinite elegance to embrace a man whose head was that of a Titan cast down brutally into the pit of Tartarus, so wracked with growths and intuberances and pulsating polyps that the plates of his skull had cracked beneath the intolerable weight and shifted into a new pate so monstrous it could no longer bear the Doge's crown, which hung pitifully instead from a ribbon slung round his grotesque neck. Those matchless arms which were not my own enfolded this hapless creature and, encircling the middle finger of the hand belonging to the right arm, I saw with my altered vision the twisted peridot and tourmaline crocodile ring of the Dogaressa Samaritiana.

I cast the glass eye away from me, sickened, thrilled, inflamed, ensorcelled, the fire in my midnight hearth as nothing beside the conflagration of curiosity, horror, and the beginnings of power that crackled within my brain-pan. In that first moment, standing among my books and my brandy drenched in the sweat of a new universe, an instinct, a whisper of Truth Profound, permeated my spirit like smoke exhaled, and, I confess to you now, all these many years hence, still I enshrine it as an article of faith, for it was with *breath* that God animated the dumb mud of Adam, *breath* that woke Pandora from stone, *breath* that demarcates the living and the dead, *breath* with which we speak and cry out and divide ourselves from the idiot kingdom of animals, and *breath*, by all the blasted saints and angels, with which the glassblower shapes his glass! The living breath of Cornelius Peek yet permeates every insignificant atom of his works; each object broken from his punty, be it window or goblet or cask or eye, hides the sacred exhalations of his spirit co-mingled with the crystal, and it is this, it is *this*, I tell you, that connects the jeweled eye of the Dogaresa with the jeweled eye in my hand! *I* dwell in the glass, it cannot dispense with me any further than it can dispense with translucency or mass, and therefore it carries the shard of Cornelius whithersoever it wanders.

Let us dispense with a few obnoxious but inevitable inquiries into the practicality of the matter, so that we may move along past the skew. How could this mystic connection have escaped my notice till now? It is only sensical: Perdita vanished away to the Netherlands with both marvelous eyes, and no window nor goblet nor cask is, in its inborn nature, that organ of sight which opens onto the infinite pit of the human soul. Would any eye manufactured in the same fashion result in such remote visions? They would indeed, my credulous friend. Does every glassblower possess the ability to produce such objects, should he but retain one eye whilst selling the other at a fair price? Ah, here I must admit my deficiency as a philosopher, for which I apologize most obsequiously. It cannot be breath alone, for I made subtle overtures toward the gentleman of the glassmen's guild and I can say with a solemn certainty that none but Master Peek can perform this alchemy of sclera and pupil. Why should it be so? Perhaps I am a wizard, perhaps a saint, perhaps a demiurge, perhaps the Messiah returned at last, perhaps it owes only to that peculiar rootstock of my family which grants me my height, my baritone, the hairiness of my body. Grandfather Polyphemus's last gift, lobbed down the ancestral highway, bashing horses as it comes. I am a man of art, not science. I ask why Mrs.

Matterfact has not yet laid out my supper oftener than I ask after the workings of the uncluttered cosmos.

Thus did I enter the business of optometry.

When you have placed a mad rainbow jewel in the skull of a Dogaressa as though she were nothing but a golden ring, a jewel which drove the rotting men of Venice insane with the desire to tie her to a bridge-post and stare transported into the motley swirling colors of the eye of God, lately fallen to earth, they began to say, somewhere in Sicily, advertisement serves little purpose. I opened my door and received the flood. It is positively *trivial* to lose an eye in this wicked world, did you know? I accepted them warmly, with a bow and a kerchief fluttered to the mouth in acute compassion, a permanently sympathetic expression penciled onto my lips in primrose paint—for that moth-eaten scab Cromwell was finally in the grave, where everything is just as colorless and abstemious and black as he always wished it to be, so full of piss and vitriol that it poisoned him to the gills, and Our Chuck, the Merry Monarch, was dancing on his bones.

Fashion, ever my God and my mother, took pity upon her poor supplicant and caused a great miracle to take place for my sake—the world donned a dandy wig whilst I doffed my own, sporting my secret womanly hair as long and curled as any lord, soaking my face in the most masculine of pale powders,

rouges, lacquers, and creams, encasing my figure, such as it ever was, in lime and coral brocade trimmed in frosty silver, concealing my gait with an ivory cane and foxfurred slippers, and rejoicing in the knowledge that, of all the men in London, I suddenly possessed the lowest voice of them all. So hidden, so revealed, I took all the one-eyed world into my parlor: the cancerous, the war-wounded, the horse-kicked, the husband-beaten, the inquisitor-inquisited, the lightning-struck, the unfortunately-born, the pox-blighted, and yes, the Dame's erstwhile lovers, for she had made her way to our shores and had begun her ancient gambols in sight of St. Paul's. And for each of these unfortunate angels of the ocular, I fashioned a second eye in secret, unknown entirely to my custom, twin to the one that repaired their befouled faces, with which I adjourned night by night to a series of successive smoking rooms, growing grander and finer with each year, holding those orbs to the light and looking unseen upon every city in Christendom, along with several in the Orient and one in the New World, though it could hardly be called a city, if I am to be honest. And Venice, always Venice, the first eye and only, *her* eye, gazing out on the water, the moonlight, the dead.

In this fashion, I came to know that the Doge had died, succumbed to the unbearable weight of his own head, long before Samaritiana appeared on my night-bestrewn doorstep,

the saffron gown she wore in the moonlight, and every other in her trunk, torn violently, soaked with bodily fluids, rent by the overgrown nails of the frenzied rotting horde who had chased her from the *palazzo* through every desperate alleyway and canal of the city, across Switzerland and France, in their anguished longing to touch the Eye of God, still sewn into the ex-Dogaressa's skull, to touch it but once and be healed forever.

But of course I aided the friendless and abandoned Good Samaritiana as she wept beside her monstrous road. Oh, *Clarissima*, how dreadful, how unspeakable, how worthy of Mr. Pepys' vigilant pen! I shall have to make introductions when you are quite well again. I sent at once for a fine dressmaker of my acquaintance to construct a suitable costume for the lady and save her from the immodesty of those ragged silken remnants of her former life with which, even then, she attempted to cover her body with little enough success that, before the dressmaker could so much as cross the river, I learned something quite unexpected concerning the biography of Samaritiana, former queen of Venice.

She was quite male. Undeniably, conspicuously, astonishingly, fascinatingly so.

I called up to Mrs. Matterfact for cold oxtongue, a saucer of pineapple, and oysters stewed in Armagnac, down to Mr. Suchandsuch for carafes of hot claret mulled via the latest

methods, and listened to the wondrous chimera in my parlor tell of how that famous Egyptian blood was not in the least of the Nile but of the Tiber, on whose Ostian banks a penniless but beautiful boy had been born in secret to one of the Pope's mistresses and left to perish among the reed-gatherers and the amber-collectors and the diggers of molluscs.

But perish the lad did not, for even a grass-picker is thoroughly loused with the nits of compassion, and the women passed the babe one to the other and back again, like a cup of wine that drank, instead, from them. Now, it is well known to anyone with a single sopping slice of sense that the Pope's enemies are rather like weevils, ever industrious, ever multiplying, ever rapacious, starving for the chaff of scandal with which to choke the Holy Father and watch him writhe. They roved over the city, overturning the very foundational stones of ancient Rome in search of the Infallible Bastards, in order, not to kill them like Herod, but to bring them before the Cardinals and etch their little faces upon the stained glass windows as evidence of sin. My little minx, having already long, lustrous hair and androgyne features more like to a seraph than a by-blow son, found it at first advantageous to effect the manners and dress of a girl, and then, when the danger had passed, more than that, agreeable, even preferable to her former existence. Having become a maid to save her life, she

remained one in order to enjoy it. Owing to the meager diet of the Tiber's tiniest fish, little Samaritiana never grew so tall nor so stout as other boys, she remained curiously hairless, and though she escaped the castrato's fate, her voice never dipped beneath the pleasing alto with which she now spoke, nor did her organ of masculinity ever aspire to outdo the average Grecian statue, and so, when the Doge visited Ostia after the death of his first wife, he saw nothing unusual walking by the river except for the most beautiful woman in the Occident, balancing a basket of rushes on her hip with a few nuggets of amber rolling within the weave.

"But surely, *Clarissima*," mused I, savoring the tart song of pineapple upon my tongue, "a bridegroom, however ardent, cannot be so easily duped as a vengeful Cardinal! Your deception cannot have survived the wedding bower!"

"It did not survive the engagement, my dear Master Peek," Samaritiana replied without a wisp of blush upon her remarkable cheek. "Oh, mistake me not, I do so love to lie—I see no more purpose in pretending to be virtuous in your presence than I saw in pretending to be fertile in his. But there could be no delight in a deception so deep and vast. It would impair true marriage between us. I revealed myself at Pentecost, allowing him in the intensity of his ardor to unfasten my stays and loose my ribbons until I stood clad only in

honesty before His Serenity and awaited what I presumed to be my doom and my death. But only kisses fell upon me in that moment, for the Doge had long suppressed his inborn nature, and suffered already to get upon his departed wife the heirs he owed to the canals, and though my masquerade, you will agree, outshines the impeccable, he would later say, on the night of which you so confidently speak, that some sinew of his heart must always have known, since first he beheld me with my basket of amber and sorrow.”

I did not exchange trust for trust that night among the oysters and the oxtongue. I have a viciously refined sense of theatre, after all. I made her wait, feigning religion, indigestion, the vicissitudes of work, gout, even virginity, until our wedding night, whereupon I allowed Samaritana, in the intensity of her ardor, to unfasten my stays and loose my ribbons until at last all that stood between us was the tattered ruin of my mother’s ancient bridal veil, and then, not even that.

“Goodness, you don’t expect me to be surprised, do you?” laughed the ex-Dogaressa, the monster, the braying centaur, the miserly lamia who would not give me the satisfaction of scandalizing her! That eve, and only that eve, under the stars painted upon my ceiling, I applied all my cruellest and most unfair arts to compel my wife to admit, as a wedding present, that she had *not* known, she had never known, never even

suspected, loved me as a man just as I loved her as a woman, and was besides a brutal little liar who deserved a lifetime of the most delectable punishment. We exchanged whispered, apocryphal, long-atrophied names beneath the coverlet: *Perpetua. Proteo.*

Samaritiana treated me deplorably, broke my heart and my bank, laughed when she ought to have wept, drove Mrs. Matterfact to utter disintegration, kept lovers, schemed with minor nobles. We were just ferociously happy. Are you surprised? I, too, am humorless, witless, provincial, petty, small of mind, parched of imagination, stingy of wallet and affection, a liar and a cad. He was like me. I was like her. I had, after all, seen as she saw, from the very angle of her waking vision, which in some circles might be the definition of divine love. I have had wives before and will have again, far cleverer and braver and wilder than my Clarissima, but none I treasured half so well, nor came so near to telling the secret of my smoking room, of the chests full of eyes hidden beneath the floorboards. Samaritiana had her lovers; I had my eyes, the voyeur's stealthy, soft and pregnant hours, a criminal sensorium I could not quit nor wished to. Yet still I would not share, I held it back from her, out of her reach, beyond her ken.

The plague took her in the spring. The Baron, not the Dame. The plague of long masks and onions and bodies

stacked like fresh-laid bricks. I buried her in glass, in my incandescent fury at the kiln, for where else can a man lose his whole being but in a wife or in work? These are the twin barrels in which we drown ourselves forever.

It soon came to pass that wonderful eyes of Cornelius Peek were in such demand that the possession of one could catapult the owner into society, if only he could keep his head about him once he landed, and this was reason enough that, men being men and ambition being forever the most demanding of bedfellows, it became much the fashion in those years to sacrifice one eye to the teeth-grinding god of social mobility and replace it with something far more useful than depth perception. Natural colors fell by the wayside—they wanted an angel's eye, now, a demon's, a dryad's, a goblin's, more alien, more inhuman, less windows to the soul than windows to debauched and lawless Edens, and I, your servant, sir, a window-maker once more. I cannot say I approved of this self-deformation, but I certainly profited by the sudden proliferation of English Cyclopes, most especially by their dispersal through the halls of power, carrying the breath of Peek with them into every shadowy corner of the privileged and the perverse.

I strung their eyes on silver thread and lay in a torpor like unto the opium addict upon the lilac damask of my smoking

room couch, draping them round and round my body like a strand of numberless pearls, lifting each crystal gem in turn to gaze upon Paris, Edinburgh, Madrid, Muscovy, Constantinople, Zurich—and Venice, always Venice, returning again and again, though I knew I would not find what I sought along those rippling canals traveled by the living dead. It became my obsession, this invasion of perspective, this theft of privacy, the luxurious passivity of the thing, watching without participating as the lives of others fluttered by like so many scarlet leaves, compelled to witness, but not to interfere, even if I wished to, even if I had liked the young Earl well enough when I installed his pigment-less diamond eye and longed to parry the assassin's blade when I saw it flash in the Austrian sunset. I saw, with tremulous breath, as God saw, forced unwilling to allow the race of man to damn or redeem itself in a noxious fume of free will, forbidden by laws unwritten not to lift one hand, even if the baker's boy had laughed when I offered him a big red eye or a cat-slit pupil or a shark's unbroken onyx hue, any sort, free of charge, even the costliest, the most debonair, in honor of my late wife Samaritiana who in another lifetime paid me in hair, not because she would wish me to be generous but because she would mock me to the rafters and howl hazard down to Hell, begging the Devil to take me now rather than let one more pauper rob her purse, even if I saw, now, through his

eye, saw the maidservant burning, burning in the bakery on Pudding Lane, burning and screaming in the midnight wind, and then the terrible, impossible leap of the flames to the adjoining houses, an orange tongue lasciviously working in the dark, not to lift one hand as what I saw in the glass eye and what I saw in the flesh became one, fusing and melding at last, reality and unreality, the sight I owned and the sight I stole, the conflagration devouring the city, the gardens, and my house around me, my lovely watered ultramarine silk, my supremely comfortable chair stuffed with Arabian horsehair, my darling gold and silver drawers, as I lay still and let it come for me and thee and all.

I did not *die*, for heaven's sake. Perish the thought! Death is terrifically *gauche*, don't you know, I should never be caught wearing it in public. I simply did not get *up*. Irony being the Lord of All Things, the smoking room survived the blaze and I inside it; though the rafters smoked and blackened and the walls swelled with heat like the head of a Doge, the secret chambers honeycombing the place contained the inferno, they did not stove in nor fall, save for one shelf of books, the bloody Romans, of all things, which, in toppling, quite snapped both my shinbones beneath a ponderous copy of Plutarch. Mrs. Matterfact and Mr. Suchandsuch fought valiantly and gave up only the better part of the roof, though we lost my lovely

showroom, a tragedy from which I shall never fully recover, I assure you. And for a long while, I remained where the fire found me, on the long damask couch in my smoking room, wrapped in lengths of eyes like Odysseus lashed to the mast and listening to all the sirens' mating bleats, still lifting each in turn and fixing it to my empty socket, one after the other after the other, and thus I stayed for years, years beyond years, beyond Matterfact and Suchandsuch and their replacements, beyond the intolerable plebians outside who wanted only humble, honest brown and blue eyes again, their own mortal eyes, having seen too much of wildness. And what, pray tell, did I do with my impossible sight, with my impossible span of time?

Why, I became the greatest spy the world has ever known. Would you have done otherwise?

Oh, I have sold crowns to kings and kings to executioners, positions to the enemy and ships to the storm, murderers to the avenging and perversities to the puritanical, I have caused ingenious devices to be built in England before the paint in Krakow finished drying, rescued aristocrats from the mob and mobs from the aristocracy by turns, bought and traded and brokered half of Europe to the other half and back again, dashed more sailors against the rocks than my promethean progenitor could have done in the throes of his most orgiastic

fever-dream. I have smote the ground and summoned up wars from the deeps and I have called down the heavens to end them, all without moving one whisper from my house on Drury Lane, even as the laborers rebuilt it around me, even as the rains came, even as the lane around it became a writhing slum, a whore's racetrack, a nursery rhyme.

Look around you and look well: this is the world I made. Isn't it charming? Isn't it terrible and exquisite and debased and tastefully appointed according to the very latest of styles? I have seen to every detail, every flourish—think nothing of it, it has been my great honor.

But the time has come to rouse myself, for my eyes have begun to grow dark, and of late I spy muchly upon the damp and wormy earth, for who would not beg to be buried with their precious Peek eye, bauble of a bygone—and better—age? No one, not even the baker's boy. The workshop of Master Cornelius Peek will open doors once more, for I have centuries sprawled at my feet like Christmas tinsel, and I would not advance upon them blind. I have heard the strange mournful bovine lowing of what I am assured are called the *proletariat* outside my window, the clack and clatter of progress to whose rhythm all men must waltz. There is much work to be done if I do not wish to have the next century decorated by some other, coarser, less splendid hand. I shall curl my hair and don the

lime and coral coat, crack the ivory cane against the stones once more, and if the fashions have sped beyond me, so be it, I care nothing, I will stand for the best of us, for in the end, the world will always belong to dandies, who alone see the filigree upon the glass that is God's signature upon his work.

After all, it is positively *trivial* to lose an eye in this midden of modernity, this precarious, perilous world, don't you agree?

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Catherynne M. Valente is the New York Times bestselling author of over two dozen works of fiction and poetry, including Palimpsest, the Orphan's Tales series, Deathless, Radiance, and the crowdfunded phenomenon The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Own Making. Her poetry and short fiction can be found online and in print in such journals as Clarkesworld, Fantasy Magazine, Electric Velocipede, Lightspeed, and Subterranean Online, as well as in anthologies such as Interfictions, Salon Fantastique, Paper Cities, Steampunk Reloaded, and featured in numerous Year's Best collections. She is the winner of the Andre Norton,

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THE JUDGMENT OF GODS AND MONSTERS

by Kameron Hurley

The most monstrous of the collaborators were put on trial, found guilty, and condemned to death in their absence, as it had been done for centuries. As it would be done for centuries more.

The Justice Commission saved the worst of the collaborators for last. Already, the day had been long, with sessions beginning well before the first rising of the sun. The room had warmed and cooled with successive rotations of the bloated orange star riding high in the sky, and the assembled spectators had pulled on smoked glasses or jackets as appropriate with the shifting heat and light. Eight sunrises into a ten-rotation day, the six judges on the great stone dais at the center of the court theater were slumped and weary. But the prosecutors still came, an endless stream of them, enough to condemn today's five hundred named collaborators.

Finally, the last prosecutor of the session rose from her seat, the folds of her munificent violet robe shifting like ripples of storm cloud, and said, "Now we come to Elodiz Ta Muvad,

former navy officer and one-time harbor master for the city of Cerize.”

She paused, and the crowd in the public boxes that ringed the great court theater leaned forward. Many had waited throughout the day’s rotations just to have a good seat for this condemnation.

She continued, “Ta Muvad has been tried by the Justice Commission and found guilty of the following crimes.”

Once more she paused for effect, and the silence stretched; the result of hundreds of held breaths. The crowd had heard of Ta Muvad only recently, his crimes exposed by a family member. Had he really been the worst of the collaborators during the war, this man they knew as one of the great heroes of their city, the benevolent master of commerce for their rich harbor, the man who sponsored the educations of dozens of poor youth and gave generously of his wealth each year, paying four times that required in religious tax to city’s patron god, Savazan? Surely it could not be. It was an impossibility. They had heard wrong.

The prosecutor began her recitation: “Ritual cannibalization with the intent to call nefarious magics aligned with the Enemy’s purpose. The mass killing of over forty infants in the Mosov hospital, their bodies delivered to the Enemy to power the sentient machines that killed tens of

thousands of our soldiers in Fuzil. The facilitation of murder in the death of fifty-seven mentally unsound patients of the Sazid Retreat with the intent to revive them through dark magics for insurrection against the home state. The capture, abuse, and sale of three thousand young people over the course of forty years for conscription in the Enemy's army. Identifying and aiding in the murder of General Ozian Te Soliviar and her family during the ceasefire he conspired with the enemy to negotiate for just this purpose, removing her from the field to her less secure family estate. Aiding and abetting the Enemy with information leading to the deaths of ten thousand soldiers on the fields of Gavozia, and forty thousand more burned alive at the front near Hovash. Channeling city funds collected via the harbor tax to the Enemy and Enemy agents. Facilitating the theft and shipment of weapons from Cerize harbor to Enemy weapons caches."

The prosecutor shuffled the green billets in her hands. "There are another three pages, your worships."

"Continue," the Senior Judge said.

And so the prosecutor did, until even the eager crowd began to become restless and uncomfortable. One of these was a young reporter from the *Cerize Standard*, the first of the free media to capture and record the opening of the Justice Commission sessions. A copper recording device was affixed to

his shirt like an oversized metallic boutonniere. The device smoked occasionally, and for the last three rotations of the sun he had expected it to set him on fire. But it continued to whirl away without issue, and he was glad of it now, because the exhaustive list of Ta Muvard's crimes was so long as to be unbelievable. The absurdity of it, that a single man had committed so many crimes over forty years, was the sort of story that a fictioneer would never have had the audacity to dream up.

Beside him sat a meaty, squinty-eyed woman with a wide rump that pressed comfortingly into his, a closeness among strangers that would have been impossible a decade before. She wore the red-and-black linen suit of a Justicar. She was the only Justicar in the building, at least the only one on duty, and he thought it odd that she was here to listen to a list of crimes instead of out there capturing men like Ta Muvard, as was her sworn duty. Her fingers absently caressed the edges of the hat resting on her left knee. Her face was impassive as the prosecutor rattled out the charges, and the reporter thought that curious, too, because Ta Muvard's crimes were truly the most stomach-churning he had yet to hear in this court theater since he had taken this beat six months before. Of course, Justicars had been bringing collaborators to trial since the end of the war five years ago, so there was the potential, certainly,

that she had seen worse. But if so, the public would have heard of it. Wouldn't they?

Finally, the prosecutor below finished her long sermon of horror. The reporter found that he had blanked out the last few paragraphs, letting his mind wander. Well, that's what the recording was for. He couldn't remember everything.

Senior Judge Corvoran rose from her seat at the end of the table of Judgment. The reporter leaned in to get a better recording. People loved Corvoran, as she was the only commoner to be given a seat on the Commission.

Corvoran said, "We, the Thirty-second Justice Commission of the Sixth Age, do hereby find the citizens on trial today guilty of their crimes. We legally condemn them to be labeled collaborators henceforth. The sentence for their crimes is heretical death. This sentence may be commuted to consecrated death only if they agree to appear before this court within ninety days' time and provide full written and spoken confessions of their crimes, willingly and without duress. Those who do flee from the Justicars who serve their warrants, or who refuse to cooperate with the Justice Commission hearings, will be buried alive, their names expunged from all historical record, and a list of their crimes engraved on their tombs for all the gods to see here and in the afterlife. It being so ordained,

we arraign this hearing. The Commission shall recommence after the Maliter holiday season.”

The other judges rose and bowed to the crowded theater of justice. At that, the assembled citizens finally began to mutter and shuffle, searching for belongings or making quick exits in search of the lavatories.

The reporter stretched his legs and turned to the Justicar beside him as she, too, shuffled to her feet.

“I admire what you do,” the reporter said to her, “bringing monsters like that to justice. “Someone so vile...” He shook his head. “It’s incredible no one knew of his crimes before the Commission convened. Had you heard of him before today?” He fiddled with his recording device. It was smoking silently again.

“I have,” she said, pulling on her broad black hat. “He’s my father.”

* * *

Darkness came up from the south forty years ago. I wasn’t alive then, but I heard about it, of course. They were the stories I learned around the warm hearth on a cold night as my mothers mended fishing nets and baked bread and cobbled shoes. None of us were fighters then. Even the community guardians we appointed were trained in little but the art of restraining a drunk widower or mischievous teenager bent on

stealing chickens for sport. The Enemy, the darkness, brought with them war machines steeped in magic, already well-oiled with the blood of countries they had destroyed before they reached ours. The young people back then thought they could halt the encroaching armies with the words and gifts and fine speeches they had been taught in school for quelling personal arguments and community disputes. But the elders knew better. The elders knew we had faced the Enemy before, and knew the only way to fight monsters was to become monsters ourselves. There was a guidebook for it. The plan was all laid out. It was the only way we could survive.

The darkness was an old evil, one we had purged from time immemorial, as predictable as the rotation of the heavenly bodies. They came every two hundred and twenty-eight years, their emergence perfectly timed with the aphelion of the ever-present winking green star in our sky called the Mote. We had fought them so many times that we had a strict protocol for the aftermath of that conflict. When the Great War was over, we were to appoint Justicars to hunt down what remained of the Enemy's machines and black magics and the monstrous people who had collaborated with them and we were to expunge them from the face of the world. Then the guidebooks and the records would be shut up again, until they were needed during the next cycle. Until we began it all again.

I fought in the war. I commanded in it like a good woman from a decent family, because I was a Ahgazin Te Muvad and my father was the harbor master of Ceriz, Elodiz Ta Muvad. He called me Zin, and his friends called him Diz, and we had a reputation to uphold, which we both did, right up until the end.

When the war was over I didn't know what to do with myself. I was twenty-nine, and the war had been going on longer than I'd been alive. Most women I know drank away their memories at liquor theaters or took cushy family jobs that would never fire them, even if they came to work drunk or burned down their own family factories. And they did. Burn down factories and drink, I mean. They did it again and again, and the media nodded sagely about it and put up tinny little recordings on the tabletop displays at every restaurant and bodega as if these were all unfortunate, unrelated incidents. But our cultural psychosis was real. We were broken people, twisted foully by war, and if we were lucky, maybe, our grandchildren might be whole enough to build something better.

This is why my task, and the task of our children, was now this: to obliterate the machinery of the war. Including the people who ran it.

People like my father.

Only in destroying everything evil could we become the peaceful people we'd once been. It was in the guidebook. It was part of the protocol.

You have to believe in the protocol, because in the aftermath of a war that breaks you down like it has us, it's the only faith you can still muster up at all.

* * *

Zin sat up at the counter of the bodega across from the god Savazan's shrine, drinking tea and brooding, when she saw her own face pop up on the news display in the tabletop. She almost choked on her drink.

Her partner, Merriz, cackled when he saw the image of her sitting in the courtroom with her hat on her knee, frowning out at the room. "That's you!" he crowed. "I can't believe some kid had the audacity to record you. At your own father's trial!"

"He didn't know who I was," Zin said.

Merriz watched the report intently. Zin frowned at it. Did she really look so lean, still? All her friends had gotten fat at the end of the war as the harbors opened up and the government encouraged the overproduction of starches. Zin couldn't go anywhere without confronting something concocted from some glutinous mess of sticky dough, but she didn't have the stomach for it. She had always been meaty, but tastes ran more toward fat now, and to many onlookers she probably appeared

like she was stuck in the past. Maybe it's all the running after monsters, she thought grimly, and watched the reporter vomit her family's shame all over the newsfeeds again.

"You're Justicars?" the girl behind the counter asked.

Zin raised her head from the recording. Clearly the girl wasn't paying attention to it. Her gaze was fixed on pretty little Merriz. Zin didn't blame her. He was foppishly charming on first glance; a petite, wiry little man who was also the best grappling opponent she had ever met. Once he got you to the ground, the fight was all but over.

Zin suspected the girl was interested in a different sort of grappling. She would be supremely disappointed.

"We are," Merriz said, practically preening. He touched the brim of his black hat resting on the counter beside him. He nodded at the new report, which had moved on to a lengthy speech about the last time Elodiz Ta Movard had appeared in public, six years ago, just before the end of the war. No one had seen him since. Not even Zin. The report replayed his final speech. Before he disappeared that day, she had seen him at the house. She was already on leave then, as the armies were already being recalled. The last of the Enemy were all but routed from their holdouts. She and her father had argued about something petty—dirty dishes, a stained tablecloth—and he had stormed from the house, calling her soft and

irresponsible. An irony, of course, considering what she and the rest of the world had come to learn about him since.

The girl leaned toward Merriz, letting the long hank of her dyed blue hair fall over her shoulder. “I’ve always wondered,” she said, “why do people like you become Justicars?”

“I want to know what convinces a man to betray his own principles,” Merriz said. He moved his fingers from the brim of the hat to the counter, a breath from the girl’s forearm. Touching strangers without permission was still frowned upon; there were still errant magical plagues and curses jumping person to person, but the danger had only added another level of intrigue to flirting. “What makes a man a monster?” Merriz said, and he lowered his voice conspiratorially when he said, ‘monster.’ “So many of us fought bravely, in accordance with the laws and principals of war. What makes men like him?”

Zin snorted at that but said nothing. The girl cocked her head at Zin, though, and asked, with a hint of contempt, “Why do *you* do it then?”

“I don’t need to know why they do what they do,” Zin said. She wiped away the tea she’d dribbled on the table. “The reasons are all the same. Power. Greed. A belief that one is above the law. That one *is* law. Belief that one is somehow special, more equal than others. It’s people with no empathy, no understanding that human beings are sentient creatures,

not things. I see these people every day exploiting workers, bullying lovers, nattering on about refugees squatting on their land. It's an easy step to the right, once you cease to acknowledge the humanity of others, to become a monster. That's all it is. A half step."

"Then why?" the girl persisted, and Zin sighed, because she realized now as the girl's body shifted toward hers, that the girl's interest in Merriz had been a feint.

Merriz rolled his eyes. "Here it comes," he said.

"I do it because I want *justice*," Zin said, and finished her tea. She set the empty cup down in its saucer with a clatter and pulled on her hat.

Merriz sighed and slumped from his seat, waving his hat at the table girl. "Off we go to catch another collaborator," he said. "Soon we'll have condemned so many there won't be an old wretch left in Fravesa."

"I suspect that's the point," Zin said, and held open the door for him.

They got three paces into the street, into the looming shadow of the great status of Savazan, Merriz still limply waving his hat at the counter girl, when the whuffing-thud of weapons fire compressed the air and shattered the glass storefront behind them.

Merriz hit the ground first, his reflexes better than Zin's. She slid to the cobbled pavement right after him. Her hat landed an arm's length away, its cap tangled with spidery snarls of bone fungus released from the weapon shells. She grimaced. She had very much liked that hat.

Two more shots. Then footsteps scraping the stones.

Zin peered under the row of tricycles between them and the trolley tracks and saw the shooters approaching. Two at least, possibly three.

Merriz pulled his sidearm. Hers was already out. "Your family or mine?" he asked.

She shouldn't have gone to the trial, or talked to that stupid reporter, even for a second. Her father would know, now, that it was her who had his file. It was her who had been called upon to bring him in. She wouldn't have shown up at the trial otherwise, and he knew it.

"Two bits to the one whose family it *isn't*," she said, and rolled up to get a look at them.

* * *

My childhood was normal, which no one wants to hear, because no one wants to believe they could live with a collaborator, but it's true. Elodiz was the senior father in the house, and I suppose that gave him a bit more authority, but it also meant we saw him less. Senior family members tended to

work more, and he and my two senior mothers were rarely home. Growing up, my relationship with him, and my understanding of what it was he did, was informed by the media as much as it was my mothers' and other fathers' stories of him. He was a figure of legend even in his own household. A former navy general, a hero. I tell you this so you'll hear the same stories I did. So you know I couldn't have known what others say we all must have known.

I went into the army with my sisters and most of my brothers. The war took a turn for the worst when I was fifteen, so I joined up early with my older sister Savoir, and the whole household was proud of us. Elodiz sent me a singing boy to congratulate me. I remember because his dance was so ridiculous and his voice was very poor, and that was why I recognized Merriz when I met him again a decade later when he introduced himself as the other Justicar assigned to case folder 446. I burst out laughing when I saw him, because I knew his voice right away. I still haven't told him why I laughed, but when he gets drunk and sings along to war ballads, I have to excuse myself because I can't contain my mirth.

Elodiz always said that when one was a public figure, the person you had to be in front of the tinny recorders and ever-smiling politicians could not be the same as the one you were at

home. It was, he said, an impossibility, like a fish trying to survive on land without water. One had to make accommodations. When I was a child I pictured this as something like a fish in a bowl carried around on a cart driven by speckled deer like the ones our neighbors used for the ritualized furrowing of the fields during the fertility festival. But politics was not as easy as that. It wasn't just a fish wearing a bowl on its head.

If you want to live in the same tree as a family of snakes, you have to become a snake.

* * *

Three shooters, all dressed in black and tan linen like scholars. But the long black curves of the weapons they carried at their sides were anything but scholarly.

Zin scanned for civilians, because she wasn't permitted to shoot within sight of any of them, not even in self-defense, and then it would be up to Merriz to take these three down with some cunning combination of flash-bangs and grappling. People had scattered in the streets at the sound of the shots, most of them worshippers at the Savazan shrine, but they hadn't retreated inside. Zin saw two men cowering in the trolley stop thirty paces up, their arms full of lilac blooms to offer at Savazan's feet. She holstered her gun, took cover, and pulled her truncheon.

Merriz rolled next to her.

“They’re ugly,” Zin said. “Most certainly your family.”

“Civs?” he said.

She nodded. “No guns.”

He smirked. “You get funny when you can’t use a gun.” He slipped brass knuckles onto both fists and crouched low into a boxer’s walk, moving fast and low.

Zin followed. She was bigger than him, not as nimble, and kept her truncheon out, stun on. He leapt and drove his weaponized fist into the first shooter’s face as she rounded the bank of bikes. The hit was so powerful that Zin heard the bones of the woman’s face crunch. She toppled like a tree.

Zin caught the woman’s weapon and threw it hard at the other woman behind her opponent. The weapon had been designed for just that purpose; a magic-imbued Enemy weapon that morphed its shape and function depending on the purpose intended by its user.

Merriz leapt off the one with the crushed face and pounced the third one. He hit her hard enough that Zin saw her jaw dislodge from its socket. It went one way, her face another. She fell.

Zin grabbed the one she’d stunned before Merriz could take her out. Zin smacked her with her truncheon, sending a

stunning zap through her body that left her limp. Zin straddled her.

“Who sent you?” Zin said.

The woman’s eyes rolled in her sockets. Zin thought to zap her again, but once was usually enough to stir up the truth.

Merriz came up behind her. He wasn’t even breathing hard. “It work?” he said.

“Give it a minute,” she said. The truncheon was another Enemy weapon, one she and the other Justicars would have to give up, eventually. But not today. It encouraged truthful answers.

“You hear her?” Merriz said to the woman.

The woman blinked slowly, like she’d gone dumb.

Zin hoped she hadn’t fried her senses. She had done that before, too. “Who told you to shoot at us?” Zin said.

“Your senior father,” the woman said.

Merriz snorted and held out his hand.

Zin tucked into her tunic pocket and pulled out a quarter bit coin. Tossed it to him.

“You said two bits,” he said. “You’re short.”

“So are you,” she said.

Zin pressed the warm truncheon against the woman’s face.

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know. Got the job from his secretary.”

“I heard he was in town,” Zin said. In truth, she had not. They had just started a preliminary search for him and a dozen others due for processing. But sometimes letting a witness think they were commiserating with you over shared secret knowledge got them to open up easier than the truncheon. And she wanted to make it easier on this woman before she had to kill her or bring her in. Pity had always made her soft, but no less effective. Sometimes pity and compassion got better results. She had seen torture get a lot of misinformation spilled all over the floor, and little else. “We were on our way to pick him up.”

“Yes,” the woman said. She blinked furiously. “I think... yes, the hotel.”

“The hotel, yes,” Zin said.

“Just ask her,” Merriz said.

“Hush,” Zin said. He had never liked her methods. But she didn’t always like his either.

“Shiny grim façade,” the woman said, and smiled. “All those skulls.” Then her eyes came back into focus, and Zin saw that she was back, fully present.

“Get the fuck off me,” the woman said.

“I’m a Justicar,” Zin said. “Admit your crimes and I might.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“You know what happens if you don’t admit your crimes?”

“I know,” she said. “Do it.” And she jutted her chin forward, defiant.

“You want to die?”

“I know what you are,” she said. “I know you’re trying to erase everything.”

“We’re not erasing anything,” Zin said. “This is about truth and justice.”

“You’re erasing everything,” she said. “You’re turning heroes into monsters.”

“It’s not like that,” she said. “You have no idea what we do.”

“Do it,” the woman said. “I know the protocol. You’ll do me eventually. You’ll kill all of us.”

Zin shook her head, but an image rose up in her mind, one she had tamped down since first reading the protocol, of her own people walking into the big cremation ovens, drinking red phials of liquid, breaking apart into a thousand starry pieces. “That’s for the court.”

Merriz looked disappointed, but he went to the emergency tube box at the end of the block and pushed the button for the guardia. The numbered pneumatic tube *fwumped* out to the station. Zin and Merriz restrained both of the conscious

shooters. But one couldn't be roused; her jaw was clearly broken, almost comically askew.

"Should have called paramedics too," Zin said.

Merriz shrugged. "They usually send some."

The guardia arrived in their green-striped suits and loaded all three women into the back. Zin filled out her report and reminded them to get a medic.

The man who took her thumbprint on his report frowned at it. "They're violence offenders, though, right?"

"Yes, but -"

"Well, you know what happens to them."

"That's for the court."

The man huffed out something like a laugh. "Sure," he said. "Once you sign this, you know what the sentence is. Think it's different because the court says it?" He shook his head. "I don't understand why you don't just kill these people."

"Because we're not animals," Zin said. "You let that woman die and it's you they'll ask to step into an oven."

Merriz came up beside her and tugged at her sleeve. "Hey now, let's go. We've done our jobs."

She turned abruptly away. It didn't feel like she'd done her job. It felt like she was still on the field, calling a bullet justice.

They stepped up into the tricycle lane, narrowly missing a gaggle of students headed to the campus common.

“So much for hotels,” Merriz said, picking at the flecks of blood on his sleeves. “You could have scared her more, at least. She’d have talked.”

“Torture doesn’t work,” Zin said. “Besides, there wasn’t any need.” She rubbed her face, wondering if she could rub the whole thing off and become someone else, someone with some greater purpose, and a longer future. “I know what hotel it is.”

* * *

The first time I did something I knew I shouldn’t have was when I fed the baby lake fowl without permission. Lake fowl have a very particular life cycle, and interrupting it can cause chaos. I was exploring the garden shed down by the pond on our family plot. It was unlocked and the food bin was open. So I just took out a handful of food and threw it out onto the lake.

It turns out that fattening up lake fowl doesn’t take much time at all, and after a couple of days of that protein-rich food, all the babies had grown into full adults, two weeks earlier than they would have just eating wild foliage. When the whales in our pond came up to feed on them the same way they did every year, there were no baby fowl in the lake, and our whales starved. I remember seeing their big bloated white bodies floating in the lake, like dead gods. I cried and cried, but I never told anyone what I’d done. The groundskeeper was fired for keeping the shed unlocked; my parents assumed some

outsider had come in and tampered with our fowl to sabotage the whales. It was not unheard of. The whales were sacred creatures, the god Savazan's favorite animal, and doing injury to them was a grave crime.

Elodiz liked a lot of hotels in Ceriz, especially the ones on the water, because he could watch the lake fowl spawning. Spring was a busy time at the waterfront, and for three weeks every year, all water traffic ceased in order to accommodate them. The lake fowl courted, mated, and laid their eggs at the bottom of the lake. Two weeks later—so long as they weren't overfed by overzealous children - the slimy, squawking larva emerged, halfway between gory amphibian and arrogant fowl. They grew quickly and took flight just a week later, but the arrival of the whales was the real spectacle. The whales hibernated the whole year long at the bottom of lakes. They came up for a single week and gorged themselves fat to sustain themselves for another year of hibernation. The whales were tremendous things, each the length of a trolley, with great feathered frills around their wedged heads. In the spring the harbor was full of the sounds of their chattering language, a series of whistles, pops, and water thumping with the front two of their eight flippers.

They were fully sentient animals, eerily so. When a few citizens occasionally gabbled about why we stopped traffic in a

lake with whales in it every year, the city elders reminded them that the whales had been here longer than we had, and the alternative to allowing them three weeks of time to feed and breed was to murder them all, and then what would we be then? We would be no better than our own Enemy.

One season I met with Elodiz at one of the hotels, a grand old pre-war building with fanciful leering faces on the façade. The faces were meant to be jolly, I think, but the art style of the time depicted people with bony features and starved bodies. There were few portraits that did not emphasize the bones of the skull beneath, painting all skin as slightly translucent.

He and I stood out on the balcony watching the fish while two of my sisters bickered over the breakfast cart in the room behind us. Sometimes Elodiz would take a few of us out with him on business like this, so each of his children got to spend time with him and meet the various magistrates and politically powerful people who we might need to make an impression on later in life.

I was only ten at the time, though, so I saw these ventures as little more than great fun. An excuse to eat rich food from a hotel cart and spend time with my senior father.

We watched the whales on the beach below. They were clever, those whales. Though they ate many of the larval fowl, most often they used the larva to bait the much larger adults.

The whales would slide up onto the shore and deposit an injured baby lake fowl there, and six or seven adults would swoop and circle and crowd in to defend it, and then the whale would slide back up onto the beach and swallow one of the adults whole.

This seems, in retrospect, to be a strange pastime for our people, to watch this dance of death and rebirth every year at the lake. But Elodiz said he found it very cathartic.

“What’s happening in the lake below is just like our lives with the Enemy,” he had said, “only time is compressed. It’s like watching the whole cycle speeded up.”

“But the whales aren’t evil,” I told him, already firm in my sense of fairness and justice at that age. “They’re just doing what they need to do to survive.”

“Yes, they are,” Elodiz said, and he reached down and smoothed my hair and crossed my forehead for luck. “Sometimes we must do terrible things just to survive, Ahgazin.”

I remembered that day well.

I also remembered the grim, skeletal façade of the hotel.

* * *

Zin hesitated on the steps of the Hotel Savazan, struck by how the bony, grimacing figures leering at her from its exterior looked both more and less terrifying than they had when she

was ten. Merriz was already at the door, his hand on a handle carved to look like a femur. Zin had taken her fair share of anatomy classes during basic training—it was supposed to make the soldiers more effective killers—and found that she could name the types of bones decorating the archway, too: metatarsals, fibula, patella, two sacrums, a coccyx....

“This the right one?” Merriz said. He wore smoked glasses now, though the day was so overcast that the sky hardly seemed to change during the sun’s multiple rotations. The black dust of the winter season had blown in a few hours before, two weeks ahead of usual. Zin expected to see a lot of angry farmers in the news on the counter display at dinner.

“It’s the right one,” she said. “Let me go around to the other side. As soon as you ask for him at the front, he’ll bolt.”

“They can’t legally announce our presence,” he said.

She raised her brows. “Elodiz is very convincing. He’s known the people who run all these hotels for years. Why do you think nobody’s turned him in yet?”

“I won’t know what room he’s in unless I ask,” he said.

“I might know,” she said. “Let’s try meeting up there first. Highest floor, center room facing the lake. It’s his preferred room. If he isn’t there, we ask, and have a brawl just like you want.”

“I don’t *always* want a brawl.”

She made a noncommittal grunt and waved at him. She went around the back of the hotel and through the lush gardens. The great bountiful faces of the blue margonias were already drooping. Soon they would wither and become clotted with fungi. Most gardens became fungal havens during the winter season; dying flora, darker skies, and the invisible but radiant heat of the winter star made conditions perfect for them.

Zin pulled off her red coat and left it on the banister. Without the coat, she looked slightly less like a Justicar. She couldn't imagine anyone would recognize her—Elodiz was the senior father of a household with two dozen children, and none of them had become politically powerful. Elodiz had wanted to make them all into well-connected politicians, but most, like Zin, found they preferred community organizing and military service to politics.

Zin came to the end of the hall on the third floor. Merriz was already waiting at the other end. They met each other at the door emblazoned with a black tulip. Her father's preferred room.

Merriz, too, had taken off his jacket.

"You knock," Zin said, taking out her truncheon.

"You think he'll fight? He's a politician. They never fight."

"Just being cautious," she said. "He may not even be here."

Merriz snorted. How arrogant, she thought as Merriz raised his hand, that Elodiz would have hidden here in plain sight, confident that the many people he had befriended over the years would continue to shield a man who committed some of the war's greatest crimes.

The door opened immediately, so fast Zin flinched, instinctively bringing up her truncheon.

A young woman stood at the door. "Oh, it's you," she said. "He's been expecting you."

Merriz raised a brow at Zin and smirked, his usual "I told you so" look. He strode in ahead of her. Zin kept her truncheon out.

They followed the young woman into the large suite. Windows overlooking the lake made up the whole rear wall. She saw Elodiz's familiar portly form there at the glass, his hands clasped behind his back. He wore a plain white robe and yellow linen jacket.

He turned and smiled when he saw them. He looked much the same as he had during their last argument. Zin found it oddly unsettling. It was as if she had gone back in time, obliterating the last decade comprised of the final horrible push of the war and routing of the Enemy and the subsequent institution of the post-war protocol and Justice Commission.

She pushed back her sense of dissonance and flicked her truncheon. “Elodiz Ta Muvad—” she began.

“Oh, save all of that rhetoric,” he said, waving at her. “I know what you’re here for. What baffles me is why my own daughter took this case.”

“Not my choice,” she said. “Your name was in the file we were assigned. You were just one of the easier ones to find.”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” he said. “When justice is done, we’ll have condemned fully ten percent of our own people.”

“Yes, well—” Zin said.

“You know who they move to next,” he said.

“I’ve read the post-conflict protocol, yes.” She walked forward, gesturing for Merriz to pull out his restraints. Merriz took out the long curl of the stretchy bands.

“And still you came for me, even knowing your own end,” Elodiz said. He did not present his hands to her, though she was now within four paces of him.

Zin hesitated. What was he playing at? “Clearly you expected me to be,” she said, “or you would have run further.”

“Your Worship—” the young woman said, and Zin winced.

Elodiz waved a hand. “You go on, Jivoz,” he said. “I won’t have need of you. Thank you for your service.”

The young woman burst into tears.

“It’s all right now,” Elodiz said. “Come, this is the way of things.”

She nodded and left the room.

Merriz looked over the top of his glasses at Zin and cocked his head at Elodiz.

Zin began again, “Elodiz Ta Muvad, the Justice Commission has found you guilty of collaboration with the enemy. You have the right to hear these charges in full on remanding yourself to custody today. Though your sentence is heretical death, this sentence may be commuted if you give a full confession of—”

Elodiz snorted. “Who dares judge a god?”

“You’re not a god,” Zin said. “You’re a human being. And we are judged by the communities that make our lives possible. The communities that feed and clothe us and care for us—”

“It was not the community that did that,” he said. “It was me. I clothed you. I fed you. And the things I did ensured you are alive now to condemn me.”

Zin said, “And how would you have cared for us, without mastering a harbor built by public funds and free hands? How would you have reached our home without the roads built by civil servants and squabbling politicians? The freedom you sought by sacrificing the lives of others was not freedom at all. You sought power. There is no other name for it.”

“You are self-righteous. You get that from your near-mother Caroliz, or perhaps your mother Mashiva, or your fallen mother Lizatia.”

“No,” Zin said, “I got that from *you*.”

Merriz stepped between them. “I’m sure you can both catch up back at the repository,” he said. “Family stuff, I know. You haven’t seen each other in a while. But let’s just get you downstairs, call a trolley and—”

“You know the protocol, Elodiz,” Zin said. She tucked her truncheon into her belt and jerked the restraints from Merriz’s hands just as Elodiz turned and walked out onto the balcony. Zin sighed. “Father, please—”

Just as she stepped up beside him, Elodiz took her by the back of the neck and propelled her to the edge of the balcony. Zin pin-wheeled her arms, dropping the restraints. He was her father, still, even now, and she was transported back to her girlhood, when her father was always right. Her gut clenched, and she found herself paralyzed with guilt for a full breath.

He shoved her head toward the lake, “Look out there!” he said. “We never overfeed those lake fowl. The whales come back every year, because we say we must preserve the process. But what is that process but another circle of life and death? Why don’t we take control of it, Zin? Why don’t we change it? They come and they go, every year, just like the Enemy. But

always with them, and with our Enemy, we follow the same protocol. We enable the same cycle. We could be *gods*, and instead we condemn ourselves each cycle. We condemn ourselves to be monsters.”

She could have broken his grip. He was an old man, a politician, and she was a soldier. But she endured him, because he was her father. “We are not gods,” she said.

Merriz’s fist was fast. Zin heard the crunch as his punch met her father’s rib cage. Elodiz huffed out a cry and crumpled.

“For fucks’ sake,” Merriz said. “Did you forget who you were?”

Zin stared at the old man moaning on the ground between them. “No,” she said. “I know who I am.” She raised her gaze to Merriz. “Do you, Merriz? Do you know what we are?”

* * *

Many question the work of the Justice Commission. When wars end, collective amnesia is common in other countries. People forget the things that they did during war, and they puff themselves up like paragons of virtue, as if acts committed during war were somehow only committed by the aberrant, by the one percent of people believed to be truly monstrous. These sociopaths are far less common than many believe. Wars are not fought by sociopaths, they are fought by ordinary people. That’s what’s so frightening about them.

The Justice Commission was created as part of the post-war protocol formed in the Second Age. After the Enemy had been turned back, everyone who had participated in the war had to make a public accounting of their crimes. Silence and forgetting would only deny the experiences of victims, deepening their trauma, and contribute to the mass delusion that the atrocities we committed during our wars were only perpetrated by a few. And, of course, if we forgot what we did, what we were capable of doing, to win the war each turn, then we would not be able to summon that horror within ourselves to fight again the next time. We could not forget how to make war, because in another two hundred years, we would need to unseal these records again, and remember.

In truth, when the war first started, only ten percent of our troops would actually fire on the Enemy. Oh, they might light off cannons from a distance, or catapult great gobs of burning pitch at ships, but when it came to shooting a weapon—dead or fungal—they found they could not aim and fire at another human being when they could make out that person's face.

You must train people to kill. And we did. Breaking open the records from the four Ages of uprisings before us helped. We saw what we had done. We knew what was possible.

Other countries ask why we don't keep our people trained for fighting between wars, but the truth is we are a peaceful

country, and you cannot build a peaceful country when half of its resources are dedicated to war. A country with an army will use it. You cannot train soldiers to deal out death and expect them to stop when they come home. When you train people to enjoy killing, they will kill, and they will look for ways to kill, and ways to abuse that power, even when they come home. They will disrupt any attempt at peace.

People trained in war will bring the war home.

I learned this from parents. I learned this at school. I learned it even in basic training: a country of killers was not a country at all but a war machine, a snake always eating its own tail. But it was not until a woman raised her hand during philosophy class the second week of basic training and asked the implicit question behind that knowledge that I considered what that meant.

“If soldiers who have killed can never go home and create a peaceful society,” she said, “what happens to all of *us* after the war?”

The instructor did not hesitate. “Our fates are sealed when the Commission disbands,” she said. “The protocol has clear instructions on what’s to be done with those who fought.”

* * *

The great court theater was packed to bursting. Children had scrambled up onto the roof and were peering down around

the edges of the great glass dome. The whirring of copper recording devices was a constant whine, noxious and distracting.

Zin and Merriz, as the Justicars who had brought in the man on trial, sat just behind the prosecutor's table. Merriz was chewing a gob of sap, which Zin would have found more insufferable if she could actually hear him chomping on it above the din of the recorders.

When they brought Elodiz into the court theater, a murmur rolled through the crowd. He stood in the raised box of the condemned.

The prosecutor rose from her seat and read his four pages worth of crimes aloud to the court. "Do you admit to these crimes?" she asked.

"Of course," Elodiz said. "That's what we're all here for, isn't it?"

The prosecutor continued, "And on whose order did you commit these crimes?"

"First Premier Torozina's," he said.

"That would be the former First Premier Torozina," the prosecutor said. "The leader of this country."

"Yes."

"And why would our country's highest elected office ask you to commit these crimes?"

“They were necessary to win the war.”

“How so?”

Elodiz grimaced. “How so? How do you think we turn them back every two hundred years? You think you can turn a country of pacifists into soldiers suddenly, after two centuries of peace? Soldiers must be inspired, prosecutor.”

“So you undertook these acts of barbarism to... inspire people?”

“No country wants war,” Elodiz said. “Why should some idiot commoner risk her life at the front when she can live out her life on her farm baking bread and fucking her husbands? It’s natural not to want war. No one wants it. We all understand that, do we not? But it is those who lead countries who shape these policies, and it is always an easy thing to drag people along, no matter if it’s a pacifist or tyranny. The people can always be led about by the nose. It’s easy. Just tell them they’re being attacked by a grievous evil, by some nefarious, cannibalistic monster of a threat. Denounce the peacemakers for their lack of spine. Tell those on the fence that it is these pacifists who are putting us in real danger. Say they are endangering our freedom, and ultimately, our very existence. It works the same in every country, in every age.”

The prosecutor nodded. “If you understood that these actions would condemn you by the laws of our country, why did you undertake them?”

“I knew when this began that I would either go down as our history’s greatest hero, or its greatest villain,” Elodiz said.

Zin snorted.

Elodiz’s gaze moved to her. He jabbed at finger at Zin. “You think you’re better? You shoot people in the street for ‘war crimes.’ Crimes they committed at the behest of the state that resulted in the end of this war and the crushing of our enemies. You aren’t any better than me. You’re worse, in fact, because you don’t even know what you’re doing. You don’t even have the self-awareness to know what’s going on. But they will pin a medal to your chest right up until they ask you to murder yourself. And I’ll die a collaborator. Is it worth it?”

“Was it worth it for *you*?” Zin said.

Judge Corvoran banged her gavel.

“Yes!” Elodiz said. “I would do it all again. I would kill every one of them to see this country great again.”

“Your worships...” the prosecutor began.

Judge Corovan raised her hand. “It’s all right,” she said. She sighed. “Ta Muvad, the state understands that there were crimes that had to be committed during times of war. Great crimes which were indeed sanctioned by the state. But crimes

done in service for any cause are still crimes in this court. Crimes committed in war must be—”

“This is a circus,” Elodiz said. “This is not justice—”

“I’m afraid it is our justice,” Corovan said. “You understood when you committed these acts that there would be a reckoning. Do you have his paperwork, prosecutor?”

“I do.” The prosecutor handed Corovan one of her green files.

Corovan pulled a thin government-caliber slide from the sheaf. “Is this your signature and hand print, Ta Muvad?”

“It is,” Elodiz said. His face was still angry, but his tone was lower.

“And do you remember what you signed here?”

Elodiz said nothing.

“I will read it aloud to the court,” Corovan said. “In the interests of full transparency. This is the first case where a senior official disputes the charges.” She read aloud, “I, the undersigned, agree that the War Office will commission me for certain crimes which will aid and abet the ending of the current conflict with the Enemy. In engaging in these duties for the state, I understand that on the cessation of hostilities, I may be considered a collaborator and put on trial for crimes against my country. I understand that committing violence against another human beings remains illegal in our state, and I expect

to be prosecuted for these crimes to the fullest extent of the law at war's end."

"Does that sound right?" Corovan said.

Elodiz nodded.

Corovan held up the page. "We are each called to a singular purpose when faced with an enemy greater than ourselves. But that does not mean that we can sacrifice our humanity. Do you have any regrets to air in this court?"

"Yes," Elodiz said, "Just one." He gazed at Zin again. "I regret only that I have built a world where my daughter will be a hero, and have a medal pinned to her chest... but I will not live long enough to see it."

Judge Corovan raised her gavel.

"And—" Elodiz said, holding up a hand. "I regret that when she marches into the ovens, of her own volition, her chest covered in medals, that I will not live to hear her say I was right."

The gavel came down. The Judge read his sentence. A sanctified death. It was something.

As they escorted Elodiz from the room, he looked back once at Zin. She kept her face neutral, knowing how many recording devices were trained on her impassive face.

Then it was over.

The crowd stood. A few reporters tried to ask her questions. She rebuffed them. Zin and Merriz sat still beside one another for some minutes while the theater cleared out. Then, finally, Merriz pulled on his hat. “Well, that was something,” he said.

Zin sat motionless. “I didn’t know they asked him to do it,” she said.

“Hey,” Merriz said, “it doesn’t matter *why* someone does something, does it? You said you didn’t care why. You want justice? Well, that’s what it looks like.”

“And we’re next.”

“I read the protocol too,” he said. “I can sing it in my sleep. If you believe in a peaceful country, if you believe that’s really what we were before the war, well, peaceful places don’t have monsters, Zin. We’re building a world that’s got no place for us. Best enjoy the time we’ve got.”

Zin imagined it just as her father had said, her standing up in court the way he was now, and agreeing that she had indeed shot collaborators and punched women in the face, and tortured people, her own people and the Enemy, at the behest of the state, and then she would have to straighten her spine and walk of her own volition to her own fiery death.

In the end, no one could kill her or Merriz or any of the other Justicars. They had to die by their own hand, of their own

volition. And what they would leave behind was their children and their grandchildren, to create a society run by human beings who had never known war, and had never committed violence. They would sacrifice themselves at Savazan's feet to build a peaceful world for another two hundred years, until they did it all over again. Peace was the one thing she believed in. The one thing she would kill for, and the one thing that she would ultimately die for.

It was in the protocol.

Merriz tapped her hat. "Come now," he said. "We have seven hundred and thirty more names in case file 446. Who will bring them to justice, if not us?"

Zin pulled on her hat. "I'm fond of justice," she said, and resolved to eat more glutinous treats, because her time was short, and the price of peace was high.

She and Merriz walked out into the grimy dusk of the latest rotation of the sun, and if Zin squinted, she could almost see the stars.

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Kameron Hurley is the author of The Mirror Empire, Empire Ascendant, and the God's War Trilogy. She has won the Hugo Award, Kitschy Award, and Sydney J. Bounds Award for Best Newcomer; she has also been a finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, Nebula Award, Locus Award, BFS Award, the Gemmell Morningstar Award, and the BSFA Award for Best Novel. Her short fiction has appeared in Popular Science Magazine, Lightspeed Magazine, Year's Best SF, The Lowest Heaven, and Meeting Infinity. Her nonfiction has been featured in The Atlantic, Locus Magazine, and the upcoming collection The Geek Feminist Revolution.

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SHADOW'S WEAVE

by Yoon Ha Lee

When Tamalat heard the crunching in the snow behind her, she knew who had followed her to the funerary tower. *So close*, she thought, but there was no help for it. “I thought an ex-engineer would be better at following directions,” she said, turning around. She knew better than to leave her back exposed.

Brio’s pale skin was all too visible in the ruddy light of sunset. His shadow was missing. Tamalat didn’t flinch from its absence; long practice. Of course, that was why she had come here.

To Tamalat’s aggravation, Brio smiled at her. “You made me curious,” he said.

Tamalat glared at him, although she was more annoyed at herself than at him. What had she expected? That he’d take a letter asking him to stay cooped up in a guesthouse—even a letter from her—at face value?

“Besides,” he added, “I was worried about you.”

“Please,” she said, “I’m not the one in danger.” They’d almost escaped being stoned near the border, despite traveling

at night whenever possible. As nations went, Soreive was distressingly civilized, which meant that settlements were well-supplied with street lights. Tamalat had almost considered hiring a palanquin for Brio, on the grounds that no one would suspect that the person inside had no shadow, except he would have been singularly unconvincing as a merchant or courtesan. Besides, if they had had that kind of money, they would have been able to settle somewhere in the mountains, instead of eking out a dubious existence as mercenaries.

He wasn't looking at her but at the tower silhouetted before them, made of pale stone that sheened red-gold in the dwindling light. "This is why you're desecrating holy ground?" he asked.

"I didn't know you were religious."

"I'm not, but if we're caught here—"

The door creaked open. A plump woman with skin almost as dark as Tamalat's watched them from the entrance. Her red robes, with their amethyst beads, indicated that she belonged to Soreive's religious caste. "It's a little late for that," she said in the trade tongue that Brio and Tamalat had been conversing in. Despite a tendency to prolong the vowels, her accent was very good.

Tamalat performed a deep salaam. Brio remained standing, hands near the hilts of his knives. Tamalat

considered yanking him down with her, but that wouldn't impress the priest favorably either.

"Priest," Tamalat said in the local language, lifting her head enough to peer at the other woman, "we apologize for this intrusion—"

The priest waved a hand. "It's a lonely duty," she said, "and it's cold out. Come in so I can talk to you properly."

Tamalat had her suspicions, considering that she hadn't spotted any temple guards. The story went that Soreive's priests weren't permitted weapons because they'd developed a habit of military coups at some point early in the current dynasty. Now they were known for their skill at unarmed combat.

Brio must have been having similar thoughts. He didn't look relaxed in the slightest. "I'd rather not," he said.

This would have been much easier if he had stayed at the guesthouse as Tamalat had instructed.

The priest's smile showed well-kept teeth. "This is holy ground for a reason. I stand between you and the spirits of the dead. People do die where you come from, don't they?" Her gaze lingered where Brio kept one of his better-concealed daggers.

Tamalata cleared her throat. She had come here for help; she didn't want to antagonize the priest. The hard part would be making Brio behave. "We'll come."

Brio's pause was very slight. Then: "As you like."

The priest led them inside and up the stairs. Lights flew from the cool nowhere darkness to accompany them, floating at shoulder height. Tamalata imagined that she saw butterfly zigzags and drifting leaves in the afterimages that flickered before her vision.

"Spirits?" she asked.

"Yes," the priest said.

Brio appalled Tamalata by poking at one of the lights. It shied.

The priest stopped abruptly. "They're wary of you, given your condition," she said. "I wouldn't try their patience if I were you." She turned and looked Tamalata up and down. "He's why you're here, I presume. How did you make it this far?"

"We traveled by night," Tamalata said, "or off the roads."

Brio, moved by some calculation of his own, had drawn one of his daggers. Tamalata slapped it out of his hand. He let her. The dagger clattered partway down the stairs, and lights flurried around it.

Unperturbed, the priest said, "Is it usual for lovers to quarrel like this, where you come from?"

Brio fetched his dagger, taking advantage of the spirits' reluctance to approach him. Tamalat stared at him until he sheathed it. "We're not lovers," Brio said evenly.

And we won't be, Tamalat thought, *unless I can restore your shadow.* She knew better than to sleep with him in his current state.

They reached the second-topmost floor without further incident and stepped through an archway carved with birds: storks and pheasants, stormbirds and phoenixes, and others that Tamalat was sure had never shared a habitat with each other. Brio was identifying all of them in a rapid undertone. He looked up and said, "No chickens?"

"Chickens don't fly very well," the priest said, her tone suggesting that she had fielded stupider questions in her time. "Why decorate a place dedicated to ascending spirits with a bird that doesn't ascend?"

The lights danced around them, illuminating the outermost chamber in a swirl of spirals. Thankfully, it was warm inside. The priest took off her slippers and bowed to a fossilized bird's skull in an alcove behind a pane of cloudy glass.

Ever pragmatic, Tamalat bowed as well. She didn't know that the local gods were real, but she didn't know that they weren't, either. After a noticeable pause, Brio followed suit.

“You respect few things,” the priest said to Brio. “Why do you heed this woman?”

‘Heed’ was a strong word. Brio smiled, then said, “Because she’d kill me otherwise. I respect *that*.”

“Because of what you asked me two years ago,” Tamalat said. To be his shadow.

He blinked. “There’s no functional difference.”

“So,” the priest said after the silence grew awkward, “tell me why you were trespassing on holy ground.”

Tamatat would have preferred to have had this conversation without Brio present, but there was no help for it. “You know of the nature of souls—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Brio drew his dagger again and lunged. Tamalat, who had anticipated this, sidestepped. The dagger whistled by her by a hand’s breadth.

A horde of lights swooped into Brio’s eyes with suspicious enthusiasm. He hissed and stabbed again, this time missing Tamalat because he was blinded. Tamalat throttled him, no small feat when he was thrashing around so much, and waited the interminable fifteen seconds until he dropped. She made no attempt to soften his fall.

The priest hadn’t twitched at this demonstration of violence. “Remind me not to irritate either of you,” she said.

“My apologies,” Tamalat said. “I came here to restore his shadow. I’d intended to meet you alone, but he tracked me here.”

The priest arched an eyebrow. “He doesn’t seem to like the idea.”

“Why should he?” Tamalat said bitterly. “From his point of view, nothing’s wrong.”

“You clearly disagree.”

“If all I wanted in a companion was an erratic killer,” Tamalat said, “I could partner myself with any bandit.”

“Yet you stay with him.”

Tamalat studied Brio. He wasn’t going to thank her when he woke up. She didn’t feel the least bit sorry. “He was a better man once,” she said. She remembered the war; remembered the snow churned to red slush, the arguments between Brio and his brother the commandant. “He left his shadow behind when he went into exile, thinking to start anew. It didn’t work the way he intended.”

“Or maybe it worked too well,” the priest said. “It sounds like he found what he sought. Why not cut yourself free of him?”

“No!” The word came out more emphatically than Tamalat had intended.

“Even though he tried to kill you?”

“If I can restore his shadow,” Tamalat said, “that won’t happen again.” That probably wasn’t true. Brio’s reflexes had always been chancy for those around him. But the priest didn’t need to know that detail. “If—”

“There’s a way.”

Tamalat inhaled sharply. She would not beg, not yet.

“Let me see your hands.”

Puzzled, Tamalat peeled her mittens off and held her hands out for the priest’s inspection.

“Not a weaver of cloth, but a wielder of knives,” the priest said, lightly touching Tamalat’s calluses. “Were you born a warrior?”

Her birthplace didn’t have castes, but she understood the question. “I come from a family of scholars,” she said. “They didn’t approve of my chosen profession.” No need to give the priest the long version.

“You’ve never knitted, then.”

She had seen women and men knitting in Soreive and in Brio’s old homeland, Khenar. Aside from considering the potential value of the needles as emergency weapons, she had never thought much about it. “No,” she said.

“You will learn,” the priest said. “I’d suggest weaving, except it’s less portable.”

“Forgive me,” Tamalat said, “but I’m not sure I see—”

“You will need to bind his shadow to you,” the priest said with great patience, “and then you will need to chain it to him. Surely they speak of such things where you come from?”

Tamalat shook her head. “No one in Khenar had any idea. They know how to sever shadows, but not how to stitch them back.” She took a deep breath. “What offering can I make?”

The priest laughed dryly. “I’m not doing this for your sake, or for your not-a-lover’s sake. I’m doing this because that man on the floor is a disruption. If you get what you want, I trust the two of you will leave Soreive and find a living somewhere else?”

Tamalat didn’t have any fondness for Soreive’s chilly climate, and besides, the spirits would report on her if she attempted to stay. Even so— “Killing him wouldn’t solve your problem?”

“It would only aggravate matters,” the priest said. “Haven’t you ever encountered the hungry dead?”

Tamalat bit back her skeptical retort. She had grown up with tales of flesh-eating ghouls, who arose when the dead were improperly buried, but had stopped believing in them years ago. Dead was dead, whether you disposed of the corpse in a ditch or in a pyre or on a funerary tower where the birds picked the bones clean. It would be impolitic to say so, however.

The priest’s quirked mouth suggested that she knew what Tamalat was thinking.

“What should I do with him?” Tamalat asked, pointing at Brio with her toe.

“We have cells in the tower’s basement,” the priest said. “He can stay in one of those.” Her smile flashed. She raised her voice: “Maschke!”

A skinny acolyte hurried up the stairs and ducked her head.

“Assist this woman in taking the man down to a cell,” the priest said.

“Do you have chains as well?” Tamalat said, thinking that Brio wasn’t going to take kindly to being confined.

“Of course we do.”

Tamalat decided she wasn’t going to ask.

Together, Tamalat and Maschke hauled Brio downstairs. Despite the mention of chains, the cell wasn’t the dank oubliette she had expected. Instead, it smelled of sweet herbs, and looked surprisingly like— “What are these cells normally used for?” she asked.

Maschke said, in a placid voice, “Cleansing of the mind.”

Meditation, then. “Why is there a lock on the door?”

A creaky voice came from the adjacent cell: “Why, stranger, it is to help novices show their dedication.”

Tamalat suppressed a shudder. “There’s no lock upon *your* door.”

“I am beyond the need for external restraints, stranger.”

Tamalata and Maschke dragged Brio into the designated cell. Fetters were attached to the wall. Maschke locked Brio’s right leg in. Tamalata pulled him onto the prayer mat, not that it would make him much more comfortable when he regained consciousness, and disarmed him. There were two more daggers on his person than she had reckoned on.

“All right,” Tamalata said, “where do I begin learning knitting?”

* * *

For the third time this hour, Tamalata dropped stitches. Cursing in her native tongue, she picked at the yarn with her fingertips, trying to coax it through the correct loop. There had to be a better tool for this.

From the meditation cell, Brio laughed. “I never thought such a simple task would give you so much trouble,” he said.

“You try it.”

“I used to knit sweaters for my little brother,” he said, something she’d never known about him. “Of course, he had a distressing tendency to outgrow them whenever I wasn’t looking at him.”

She peered through the door and saw Brio’s dark figure, ringed by watchful spirits. His beard disturbed her more than

she wanted to admit. Brio had always been meticulously clean-shaven, given the choice, but she didn't trust him with a razor.

"Yes," he said, "needles to stab with and yarn to strangle with."

She was sure he couldn't pick the lock from inside with knitting tools, but he was right; she didn't want weapons in his hands, even dubious weapons. All right: knit two together, increase... she squinted at the earlier stitches in the row, hoping for a reminder as to what to do next. Remembering the pattern would be easier if she didn't have to deal with Brio's mockery. But the priest had told her that in order to restore Brio's shadow, she would have to knit him a shirt in his presence, remembering all the things that he was and had been.

So she remembered: she remembered racing him on horseback outside the walls of desert Harufa, and sharing yogurt mixed with honey and sticky pitted dates. She remembered him patiently showing her how to use chopsticks even as she dropped food again and again. The paper animals he used to fold for her. Fighting bandits outside the Moving Cities and losing their horses. Sleeping side by side in a tent, hands touching, as rain pattered outside.

"Are you dropping stitches again?" Brio asked.

She scowled at the door. She was starting to think that the lock was more to keep her from losing her temper and stabbing Brio than to keep Brio from escaping. “Ouch,” she said involuntarily as she jabbed herself in the hand with the tip of a needle.

Even knowing it was a mistake, even knowing the answer, she demanded, “Why are you opposed to this?”

“Really, Tamalat”—he lingered on her name, and her fingers clenched on the needles—“I thought you could guess. I have no desire to be what I was—” His voice shifted, became quiet and remote. “A revolutionary too cowardly to save his homeland, and too timid to approach the woman he loved.”

Her eyes stung.

His voice changed again, once more bright, cruel, careless. “If that’s what you want—”

She flung her knitting at him. It hit the door with a clatter of needles. The ball of yarn rolled out of her lap and onto the floor. Then, for good measure, she stalked over to the door and kicked it, hard.

“Your antics are good for testing my discipline,” the adjacent cell’s inhabitant said. Even so, she sounded perturbed.

“I’m glad I’m entertaining so many people today,” Tamalat said through gritted teeth. She snatched up her knitting,

pathetic few rows though it was, and returned to her chair. *I will not listen to him. I will not listen to him.*

For the rest of the evening, perhaps sensing her resolve, Brio said nothing, and that disturbed her more.

* * *

The priest came down the stairs, bearing a bird's skull of outrageous size. "How is your knitting going?" she asked, eyeing the basket next to Tamalat's chair. It contained balls of black yarn—a shirt for a former magistrate's shadow could have been no other color—and extra needles, shears, and strands of undyed yarn to use as markers.

Tamalat mouthed, "Almost," as her needles clicked. She was nearly done binding off.

Brio said, "She might even have learned to stop dropping stitches."

"Trust me," the priest said, "*everyone* drops stitches from time to time. Do you knit?"

"Not in a long time."

Tamalat huffed. "Don't encourage him." Last stitch. Her hands trembled. She knotted the yarn and snipped off the end. She ran her fingers over the shirt. It was plain (and not a little lumpy), with none of the cables or lacework or intarsia that the priest had shown her examples of. Its heft pleased her.

"I am not putting that on," Brio said.

“You assume you’re getting a choice,” Tamalat snapped.

Lights swarmed around Brio’s head. He stood absolutely still, nostrils flaring.

“Quickly is better,” the priest said. She set the skull down, unlocked the door with deft hands, then stood just out of Brio’s reach. “Go!”

Brio lunged blindly at Tamalat. She tripped him, then grappled with him in a confusion of limbs. It took a while for her to force the shirt over his head, and she was afraid that he would tear it in his struggles, but she managed it at last. He went limp.

Anxiously, she checked the floor, the walls of the cell: no shadow.

Brio’s eyes opened. He grabbed her ankle. Tamalat swore and stomped on his hand, then jumped back out of reach.

“I owe you twofold,” he said. He pulled himself up to a crouch and plucked at the shirt. It hung loosely on his frame: he had lost more weight than she had thought.

Still no shadow. “What did I do wrong?” Tamalat demanded of the world at large.

The priest shrugged. “That’s not something I can help you with,” she said regretfully. “Maybe it doesn’t work for foreigners.”

“I will have to keep searching, then,” Tamalat said, disheartened. She kept a wary eye on Brio.

The priest cocked an eyebrow at her. “You’d trust him to follow you?”

“I beg your indulgence, holy one,” Tamalat said. “Do you have spare manacles?”

“Manacles and supplies for your journey,” the priest said, in a tone that implied that she was ready to be rid of them both, “and directions to the nearest trade-town.”

“I’ll find the death in your veins and set it free,” Brio promised Tamalat.

“Then you’ll have to live with that beard a little longer,” Tamalat said. “There’s no way I’m giving you a razor.” She had hoped—but there was no use dwelling on her failure. How could she have expected the solution to come so easily?

* * *

Tamalat bid farewell to the priest on a cold, clear morning. “You should hurry to the next town,” the priest warned them. “It’s blizzard season, and you don’t want to be caught on the road when one comes by. Once you get there, you should probably stay until the weather eases.”

Tamalat remembered the last blizzard she had been in, when Brio’s shadow had led her to safety at a shrine. How

ironic that she had spent years shying from the shadow when now she was doing her best to restore it.

Brio's hands were chained together behind him, and his legs were shackled together as well. Tamalat still had a black eye where he had hit her in an attempt to escape. If not for the spirits' intervention, it would have gone worse.

They made slow progress in the direction the priest had indicated. For the first hour, several lights had guided them. All too soon, however, they reached the boundary of the sanctified grounds, and the lights departed.

"What are you going to try next?" Brio said. "Embroidery? Leather-working? Sandcastles?"

"Whatever it takes." The fact that Brio hadn't attacked her again bothered her. It was only a matter of time.

"Maybe there's no solution to your problem."

"That can't be true." Nevertheless, her heart clenched.

Brio must have heard her misgivings in her voice, for he laughed. "Set me loose, beloved," he said, "and stop worrying about souls and shadows."

"Call me that again," Tamalat said, "and I'll leave you for the scavengers."

"I know more about surviving winter weather than you do."

"Even while chained?"

“I’ll find a way out,” he said coolly.

Tamalata kept silent.

For the next several days, Brio spoke and spoke in a low, relentless voice. He questioned her loyalty to a dead man, as though his shadow belonged to someone else entirely. He promised torments and delights, sometimes in the same breath; Tamalata wasn’t certain he could tell the difference anymore.

“I’ll gird you in flayed skins and robe you in cobwebs,” he was saying when Tamalata heard a crackling in the brush.

She had allowed them to be caught on lower ground. “Keep speaking,” she whispered to Brio. “We’ve attracted someone.” The only wonder was that it hadn’t happened earlier, given their abysmally slow pace.

Brio stopped dead and said, “I can’t defend myself while I’m chained up.”

She only hesitated for a second. It would be embarrassing to lose Brio to bandits because she thought she couldn’t handle him. She unlocked both sets of chains. Then she backed away and tossed a dagger to him. He caught it.

Tamalata brought out her own weighted cords. Fighting while encumbered with their supplies was going to be awkward.

Five bandits rushed down the slope, churning up snow. They split up, three to face Brio and two to face her.

Tamalat tangled one sword in her cords, yanked it out of the bandit's hands, and swung it at the other bandit. He flinched from the rusted metal. It didn't take her long to disarm the second. No one in Soreive, as far as she could tell, had any familiarity with her chosen weapon. The two disarmed bandits looked at each other, then fled. Tamalat glanced at Brio and saw that he was in trouble.

Brio was skilled at knife-fighting, to say nothing of his history as a soldier-brat, but the past months' ordeal had made him unsteady on his feet, and the bandits' swords had greater reach. Tamalat moved in to reinforce him. He fell back to snatch up one of the dropped swords.

One of the bandits yelled something in an affronted tone. Tamalat couldn't understand his dialect, but no matter. She snapped the cord forward and struck the man viciously just above the ear. He staggered. Brio ran him through, then pulled the sword out in a spurt of blood. No taunts, no threats, just killing. Tamalat approved.

The two remaining bandits faltered, then ran back up the slope after their fellows.

Cautiously, Tamalat approached Brio. He whirled and brought his sword up. Tamalat let her spinning cords shield her from the blade.

“I can’t let you live,” Brio said, circling her warily.

Tamalat turned so she continued to face him. “You always did like to dance the dance,” she said, hoping to distract him.

No luck. He launched into a flurry of attacks, driving her back. *He’s serious*, Tamalat thought blankly. He was trying to kill her.

She had to fight back, even if she was sure he would wear himself out soon. Her loyalty had limits. She wasn’t about to let him kill her just to make a point. She let the weights whip around the pivot of her hand and swing toward Brio’s head.

His eyes were curiously bright. He dropped the sword and stood unmoving.

It almost took a moment too long for Tamalat to realize what his game was. She jerked the cord to change its trajectory. Even so, the weight clipped Brio on the shoulder. He didn’t flinch, although it had to hurt.

Tamalat wrapped the cords around her wrist. “Are you *trying* to get yourself killed?” she demanded.

She regretted the words the moment they passed her lips. From the look in his eyes, that was exactly what he was trying to accomplish. “Your soul,” she said in sudden understanding.

Brio inclined his head.

“How long—”

“As soon as you put that shirt on me.”

In other words, this whole time he had pretended his soul was still absent, all to provoke her into killing him. “But your shadow—?”

“You restored my connection to the shadow,” Brio said, “but it won’t leave Khenar.”

“Why not just kill yourself the normal way like a regular person?”

“I didn’t want you to have any regrets.”

Tamalat growled. “The priest knew this, didn’t she?”

“She probably guessed.”

Tamalat scooped up a handful of snow and stuffed it down the back of his shirt. Brio yelped and aimed a punch at her. She dodged that and entangled his legs with her own. They went down together. Brio sputtered. Tamalat made sure she wound up on top. She had no desire to catch pneumonia from rolling around in the snow.

Brio coughed. “I can’t say I didn’t—oof—deserve this.”

Tamalat looked down at him. “I think I’m going to shave you.”

“For gods’ sake, Tamalat, I can do that myself.”

“And give you an opportunity to slit your throat? I think not.” Tamalat drew her sharpest dagger and smiled at him.

Brio rolled his eyes. “Get on with it.”

Tamalat took a fiendish pleasure in the task. It was deeply satisfying to get rid of all that bristle, and she only nicked him twice. “There,” she said, brushing the beard’s remnants away. “You look almost human again.”

“If you’re done, you can get off now,” Brio said. “I smell snow coming, and we want to build some kind of shelter before the storm comes in.”

At least he was talking like a sane person now. “Build a shelter of what?” She eased off him. There weren’t many trees around here.

“Snow,” he said, growing more enthusiastic. He got up and brushed the snow off his clothes.

All right, maybe not so sane. “Snow?” Tamalat said. “How does snow keep you warm?”

“It’s just as insulating as anything else,” he said. “There’s a perfectly good hillside here. We could build an igloo.”

“A *what?*”

“It’s a—”

“Oh, I remember what it *is*,” Tamalat said crushingly. “This is from that dreadful book you read back in Tenuyat, isn’t it?”

“The principle’s perfectly—”

“The one that claimed there was a land where sheep grew from bushes? And that Harufai raiders ride *giant ants*?”

“It was probably an honest mistake.”

“Or the work of an inspired fabulist!” She flung her hands up. “What, someone mistook a camel for a giant ant? I don’t think so.”

Brio said, “We should at least try the igloo. The alternative is freezing out here.”

She groaned, but if he was thinking about survival that meant he wasn’t thinking about suicide, so she might as well play along. “Have you ever seen anyone build one?”

“No, but it’s a work of engineering. It should be possible to figure it out from the book’s directions and general principles.”

“All right,” Tamalat said, on the grounds that if she was involved, she could prevent Brio from burying himself in snow.

Brio spent the next half-hour muttering to himself as he searched for a suitable quarry of hard-packed snow. Then he spent another half-hour deciding where to site the igloo. Tamalat traipsed in his wake, shivering.

“I don’t suppose you keep an ice saw about your person?” Brio asked.

Tamalat gave him a look.

“It was worth finding out.” He tapped his fingers against his side, staring into the gray-ridden sky. “If I understand that book correctly, we’ll have to set the blocks at an angle—”

She had to pick the soldier-brat who’d been raised by army engineers. “What blocks?”

“The blocks we don’t have an ice saw to carve out of the snow,” Brio said. “I’d rather not ruin your daggers doing this, and we only have one miserable sword between the two of us. I might as well do the hacking. Meanwhile, you can start clearing out the igloo site. Remember that the entrance has to be lower than everything else.”

“Why?”

“Insulation.” In a burst of exasperation, he said, “I’m not going to let you stand here and freeze to death because you’re skeptical.”

Tamalat began clearing snow. If nothing else, the exertion would keep her warm, as long as she didn’t sweat too much. “I’m not skeptical out of caprice,” she protested. “If I were following instructions from some book that also happened to mention that there are three-headed people in Khenar, wouldn’t you object?”

“That would be absurd,” Brio said. “How would the body know which head’s desires to obey?”

He was missing the point.

“How much of the igloo’s construction principles do you remember?”

She scoffed. “I’m not the former engineer, and I don’t bother remembering things that are clearly absurd.”

“You’d put an igloo in the same category as giant ants?” Brio sighed. “All right. Look: if we’re only building for two, one of us will have to stand in the center and set the blocks properly, forming a dome. The other person is going to be on the outside lifting the blocks into place.”

“That had better be me,” Tamalat said. Brio looked thin and tired. She didn’t want him falling over. Besides, he was the one who understood how this igloo was supposed to work. If it did.

“All right.”

Tamalat resumed clearing snow. Brio hacked gamely at the snow, which was so hard it was almost ice.

“Let me take a turn,” Tamalat said.

“It’s not—”

“Brio, give me the sword.”

He handed it over.

Chopping packed snow was as tedious as Tamalat had expected it to be. She was developing blisters on her hands. It made her wonder if Brio had similar blisters, except he would never admit it. Besides, it didn’t change their situation. As

absurd as it was, the igloo might be their best hope of surviving the coming storm. Already the rising wind stung her face.

At last, after switching off several more times, they had what Brio deemed to be enough blocks. “It’ll be approximately a half-sphere,” Brio said, “so the surface area—”

“I’ll trust that you did the calculations correctly in your head,” she said.

They worked on the first layer of blocks together, making sure to place them so they leaned inward, forming the basis of the dome’s curvature. Then Brio stepped inside so he could position the blocks as Tamalat brought them to him.

“I hope you appreciate being sheltered from the wind,” Tamalat said to him, somewhat later.

Brio said, “Do you want to trade places?” The igloo’s wall was now thigh-height.

“And have you knock a hole in what we’ve built so far? I’d rather not.” Curiously, she was developing an attachment to the igloo. Maybe the idea wasn’t as peculiar as she’d thought. There was something attractive about using the very snow as a weapon against the cold.

Soon the wall was over his head. “Here’s the tricky part,” Brio said, his voice muffled by the igloo’s blocks. “We’re almost done, but we’re going to need a cap piece at the very top.”

She saw the problem. It would have to fit exactly.

“You’ll have to cut one of the blocks down to fit, and lift it over the wall to me,” he said. Obviously he couldn’t do it from within. “Make sure you don’t lean too far—”

“You make sure you don’t drop it.” Tamalat huffed and studied the igloo again. Leaning over the wall to put blocks in place was already awkward. The cap piece would be the most difficult.

Her blisters made the task of cutting agonizing. She couldn’t wait for the ordeal to be over with. She was trembling with exhaustion by the time she reached over the igloo with the cap piece, praying to all the gods she knew that she wouldn’t fall through and ruin their work. Brio reached up from underneath and guided the piece down.

“You can let go now,” Brio said. “We did it.”

The sky was dark; the half-moon cast a pearly sheen over the snow. Tamalat passed Brio the supplies through the entrance under the wall and waited impatiently while he set up the sleeping bags.

“Come on in,” Brio finally called from inside.

Tamalat tapped the block above the entrance. It held. Then she stepped down, ducked her head, and wriggled into the igloo. “It isn’t as cold,” she said.

Brio propped himself up on one elbow to smile sardonically at her. “Amazing what a difference it makes to get out of the wind.”

“I hadn’t expected there to be any light at all.”

“Snow isn’t opaque.”

“I mean, not that filtered moonlight is precisely bright. I suppose we should eat some of that dreadful barley hardtack?”

“If I’d known you hated it so, I would have bought more dried meat.”

“Someday,” Tamalat said, “we are going to stay somewhere with decent food. Soreive suffers from an excess of ascetics.” She frowned. “You’re shivering.”

“It’ll pass,” he said.

Tamalat cupped his hands in hers. “You know, your stoicism isn’t impressing anyone.” She kissed his fingertips.

Brio didn’t snatch his hands away. Instead, he went utterly still. “You must be tired—”

She looked at the roof. “Spare me. Do you want this or do you not?” At his hesitation, she added, “There’s one correct answer.”

Now he sounded amused: “What is this, an exam?”

“We aren’t playing a game of riddles,” she said, wondering how much instruction she was going to have to give him. She was sure he had been deprived as long as she had, but did men

really forget how to play this particular game? “You’re supposed to—”

Brio kissed her on the mouth. And spent the next hours convincing her that he had not, in fact, forgotten, even as she convinced him that she wasn’t tired while the night enfolded them both in its shadow.

for Helen Keeble

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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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LAWS OF NIGHT AND SILK

by Seth Dickinson

Kavian can pretend this girl is her daughter through drought and deluge, but the truth is the truth: Irasht is a weapon, and never any more.

It hurts enough to break even the charcoal heart of Kavian Catamount, and so she does a forbidden thing—she puts her arms around the girl Irasht who is not her daughter, kisses her brow, and whispers:

“I will protect you. Go.”

Then Kavian pushes Irasht onto the stone above the battle.

In the valley beneath them the Cteri, the people of the dams, the people of Kavian’s blood and heart, stand against the invader. The Efficcate comes baying to drain five centuries of civilization into their own arid land.

So the word has come from Kavian’s masters, from the Paik Rede and warlord Absu:

You have had time enough to tame her. Go to the battle. Use the abnarch girl, the girl who is not your daughter.

Destroy the Efficcate army.

Kavian cries the challenge.

“Men of the Efficcate! Men of the owl!” Her wizardry carries the bellow down the valley, across the river, to shatter and rebound from the hills. “I am Kavian Catamount, sorcerer of the Paik Rede! I like to warm my hands on your brothers’ burning corpses!”

Fifty thousand enemy spearmen shudder in fear. They know her name.

But the battle today does not ride on Kavian’s fire.

The girl Irasht (who is not her daughter) stares at the battle-plain, wide-eyed, afraid, and puts her hands up to her ears. Kavian seizes her wrists, to keep her from blocking out the sound of war. Irasht claws and spits but does not cry.

Over Irasht’s hissing frenzy Kavian roars: “My hands are *cold* today!”

She hears the cry go up in the Efficcate ranks, a word in their liquid tongue that means: *abnarch*, *abnarch*, *she has brought an abnarch*. And she sees their eyes on her, their faces lifted in horror and revulsion, at the girl Irasht, at what has been done to her.

You poor bastards, she thinks. I know exactly how you feel.

* * *

Kavian has been in pain for a very long time. There’s the pain she wears like a courting coat, a ballroom ensemble—the

battle hurt that makes her growl and put her head down, determined to go on.

And there's the other pain. The kind she lets out when drunk, hoping it'll drown. The pain she reaches for when she tries to play the erhu (this requires her to be drunk, too). It's a nameless pain, a sealed pain, catacombed in the low dark and growing strong.

The night she met Irasht, the night she went down into the catacombs to decant her daughter: that night belonged to the second pain.

In the Paik Rede's summit halls, past the ceremonial pool where the herons fish, catacomb doors bear an inscription:

We make silk from the baby moth. We unspool all that it might become. This is a crime.

Silk is still beautiful. Silk is still necessary.

This is how an abnarch is made. This is the torment to which Kavian gave up her first and only born.

The wizards of the Paik Rede, dam-makers, high rulers of isu-Cter, seal a few of their infants into stone cells. They grow there, fed and watered by silent magic, for fifteen years. Alone. Untaught. Touched by no one.

And on nights like these their parents decant them for the war.

“Kavian. Stop.”

Warlord Absu wears black beneath a mantle of red, the colors of flesh and war. For a decade she has led the defense of the highlands. For a decade before that—well: Kavian was not born with sisters, but she has one. This loyalty is burnt into her. Absu is the pole where Kavian’s needle points.

“Lord of hosts,” Kavian murmurs. She’s nervous tonight, so she bows deep.

The warlord considers her in brief, silent reserve. “Tonight we will bind you to a terrible duty. The two mature abnarchs are our only hope.” Her eyes! Kavian remembers their ferocity, but never *remembers* it. She is so intent: “You’re our finest. But one error could destroy us.”

“I will not be soft with her.” So much rides on the abnarch’s handler: victory, or cataclysm.

Absu’s golden eyes hold hers. “The war makes demands of us, and we serve. Remember that duty, when you want to grieve.” Her expression opens in the space between two blinks—a window of pain, or compassion. “What did you name her?”

“Heurian,” Kavian says.

A grave nod. Absu’s face is a map of battles past, and her eyes are a compass to all those yet to come. “A good name. Go.”

And then, as Kavian pushes against the granite doors, as the mechanisms of gear and counterweight begin to open, Absu warns her.

“You will find Fereyd Japur in the catacombs. He went ahead of you.”

Fereyd. The scar man, the plucked flower. Her only rival. Why send him ahead? Why is *he* in the dark with her buried daughter?

Kavian tries to breathe out her tension but it is a skittish frightened breed and it will not go.

* * *

She goes down into the catacombs where eight children wait in the empty dark for their appointed day. Where her daughter waits to be reborn and used.

Magic is bound by the laws a wizard carries. Day and night, air and gravity, the right place of highborn and low. The lay of words in language. The turn of the stars above high isuter, the only civilization that has ever endured. All these are laws a wizard may know.

This is why the upstart Efficite produces so many wizards: it fills its children with the mantras of *fraternity* and *republic*. Their minds are limited, predictable—but like small gears, together they make a machine. This is why the Cteri wizards walk the world as heroes, noble-blooded and rare.

There are other ways to make a wizard. A child raised in a stone cell knows no laws. Only the dark.

Fereyd Japur waits for her in white silk ghostly beneath the false starlight of the gem-starred roof. He is tall and beautiful and his eyes are like a field surgery.

He was not always a great wizard. Not until he gave himself to the enemy, to be tortured, to learn the truest laws of pain.

“Why are you here?” Kavian asks.

Fereyd Japur’s eyes burn old and sharp and clot-dark in a young brown-bronze face. Whispers say that the thing he did to buy his power killed him. Left him a corpse frozen in his first virility. The whispers are wrong, but Kavian still remembers them. He’s a popular companion for those who want to claim dangerous taste.

“You don’t know,” he says, and then, “She didn’t tell you. Absu didn’t tell you.”

Oh.

Kavian understands at once, and she steps forward, because if she doesn’t, she’ll run.

“They’ve given her to *you*,” she husks. “Heurian. My daughter.”

“And mine to you.”

“*What?*”

“My daughter Irasht.” An awful crack opens in his face, a rivening Kavian could recognize as grief, if she believed he was

human, or as rage, if she were wiser. “The warlord prefers to spare us from attachment to our charges. So I will have your daughter as my abnarch. And you will have mine.”

She wants to weep: she will never know her daughter. She wants to cry out in shameful joy, she will never *have* to know her daughter, and that thought is *cowardice*.

Kavian says the rudest thing she can manage. “You never told me you fathered.” Women have bragged of having him, even made a sport of it—he is beautiful, and his lowborn status makes him scandalous, coercible, pliant. But Cteri women don’t conceive without intent. Who—?

His full lips draw down to one narrow line. The fissure in him has not closed: grief and hate cover him like gore. “The mother wanted a wizard’s blood to water her seed. The child was meant for the catacombs. That was all.”

“You did this to hurt me.” Her anger’s speaking for her, but she has no hope for any kind of victory here and so she lets it speak. “You knew this would happen, didn’t you? Fifteen years ago you *planned* this? You made a child to be given to me, so that you could take my daughter, so that you could say, at last, *I have something Kavian Catamount wanted?*”

He lashes out at her. The word he speaks would kill any lesser wizard, the third-best or the fourth or maybe even

Fereyd Second-Best himself. But Kavian turns it aside without thought, an abject instant *no*. He must have known she would.

“You have *everything* I wanted,” he hisses, and it feels as if she can see through the dusk of his skin and the white of his bone into the venom of his marrow, into the pain he learned beneath the enemy knife.

She turns away.

They unseal the cells and decant their children.

The girl Irasht, daughter of Fereyd Japur, waits wide-eyed and trembling in the center of her cell. When Kavian comes close she rises up on narrow legs and begins to make soft noises with her lips: *ah, ah, ah*.

She doesn't know what a person is. She's never seen one before.

By the time Kavian has coaxed the girl into a trembling bird-legged walk, Fereyd Japur has taken Heurian and gone. The closest Kavian comes to her daughter is the sound of footsteps, receding.

Kavian protests to Absu, bursting into the war council, scattering the tiny carved owls that mark the enemy on the map and raging for her daughter Heurian.

But the Warlord says: “Without your two abnarchs on the front, they will break us this summer. They will open our reservoirs, take our men for their fraternity, and use our silk to

wipe the ass of their upstart empire. You are a soldier first. Look to your charge, Kavian.”

So: a night that belonged to the second kind of pain.

* * *

Go to the front. Train your abnarch on the march. Summer is upon us, and the enemy moves on the dams.

Kavian curses Absu’s madness—*train her on the march?* Irasht could go catatonic, overwhelmed by the sweep and stink of the world beyond her cell. She could lash out in abnegation and blot herself and Kavian and their retinue and a mile of Cteri highlands into nothing.

But Kavian’s known Absu since childhood, and for all the rage she’s hurled at those golden eyes she has never known them to measure a war wrong.

She finds she cannot sleep until she snaps something: a branch, a lyre-string. Sometimes it takes a few.

Every time she looks on Irasht, teetering around in tentative awe like a hatchling fallen from a nest, she thinks: *where is my daughter?* She thinks: *I could go to that lowborn boy and take Heurian back. He could not stop me.* But she cannot go against Absu and the Paik Rede. Cannot defy the ruthless will that keeps isu-Cter safe.

So she hardens her heart and begins the training.

“Hssh,” she murmurs—Irasht freezes when touched, and must be soothed. “Hssh.” She draws a cold bath while the abnarch girl watches the motion of the water, rapt. When Kavian lowers her down into the ice cold, arms around her tiny neck and knocking knees, she reacts with only a soft ‘oh’. From then on the temperature doesn’t seem to trouble her, even when Kavian leans her back to wash her knotted hair. She sculls the water in small troubled circles and stares. Kavian thinks she is trying to reconcile two things: the sight of the water rippling around her palm, and the feeling of it on her hand. Whether she succeeds, Kavian cannot tell.

Irasht is at the peak of her power as an abnarch. All the logic she learns will confine her. When she sees the difference between sunrise and sunset she will diminish. When she understands that the chattering shapes around her are people like herself, she will be a lesser weapon. So Kavian keeps to the strict discipline of the handler. No language. Simple food. Strict isolation, when possible.

But for Irasht to be useful, she must learn to trust her handler. (Or dread and fear her handler, Fereyd Japur would remind her. Or that.) So Kavian reaches out to her—touch, meaningless sound, small acts of compassion. Holds her when the world becomes too much and she retreats to clawing frenzy.

Irasht is a burnt stump of a person, like a stubborn coal pulled from a fire pit. She stares overmuch and needs housetraining like a stray dog. To Kavian's frustration and shame—*this is what I am reduced to?*—she finds that Irasht cannot chew. So she crumbles the girl's food by hand.

This would be easier, all in all, if Kavian could think of her only as a weapon.

But in the villages and terrace farms along the path to war she sees Irasht do things that take a chisel to her heart. When Irasht finds doors she goes to them and waits patiently, hoping, Kavian imagines, that someone will invite her in.

When it grows too dark in their tent Irasht panics, tangling herself in her bedding. Kavian is moved: Irasht fears going back to the dark. Somehow this is a comfort. It makes Kavian feel she has done a good thing, bringing her out into the light.

She takes Irasht out to see her first stars, and holds the girl, rocking her, thinking: we did this. We made her this way.

No. The *war* did this. The war makes demands.

In the Efficata they make wizards in vast numbers. Bake them like loaves of bread. Kavian knows this because she's slaughtered them by the dozens. All they can do is make little shields and throw little sparks—the laws of their society leave no room for heroism, and Kavian suspects the quality of their blood gives rise to no heroes.

But there are so many. And they are winning.

And this is *not* her daughter.

* * *

They pass through everything that will be lost if they fail. The terraced farms and waterfall mills of the highlands. The gulls that circle library-ships on reservoirs raised by wizards of centuries past.

For all remembered history, isu-Cter has been the still eye at the heart of the world. Kavian still believes with patriot fire that, for all its faults, high green isu-Cter must stand.

Fereyd Japur travels with her. It's distasteful company but a military necessity. She tells herself it's good to be close to Heurian. She's lying. Fereyd keeps his abnarch to himself, and the space between Kavian and Heurian feels like forever, as wide as grief and deep as duty.

As they come down from the highlands towards the dams and the war-front, he walks into her tent to take a meal and brag. "Heurian is active. Ready to be used. When I give her an image, she changes the world to match it."

Kavian sets her cup down with soft care. She has not even begun to push Irasht towards useful magic. "Oh?"

"You think I'm lying."

"No," Kavian says. The firelight makes Fereyd's beauty almost painful, a scrimshaw thing, etched into his face by acid

and tint, worked into his bones by years of hungry eyes. She touches the edge of hate and it feels hot and slick as a knife coming out. “I believe you.”

“And Irasht?” The kohl on his eyelids turns his blink into a mechanism of dark stone. “Is my daughter ready for the war?”

Kavian lifts her chin. “I will need more time.”

Fereyd watches her across the fire. It might be something in his face, or the set of his muscled farmer’s shoulders, or the way he holds himself so *properly* as if to remind her she is higher born—it might be one of these things that screams of mockery. Or it might only be her imagination.

But Kavian breaks the silence with a hiss: “What did you do to her?”

Fereyd Japur looks away.

“What method?” Kavian insists, leaning across the fire. The heat is harsh but her arms are a cage for it and the pain only makes her angrier. “How did you reach her so quickly? Was it some secret of knives? What did you *do*?”

“I did what I’ve always done. I obeyed my orders.” The softness in his voice, the tilt of his eyes—for a moment he could be the boy of impossible talent Absu plucked out of the laborers’ quarter. But the rage returns. “Heurian will be ready when the enemy comes. Why are you angry? What more would you ask of me?”

She waits there, hunched across the fire like her namesake, and he sits in quiet deference, trembling with a need to flee or yield or kill (she does not like to guess at his thoughts).

Shadows move across the inside of the tent.

From the sleeping-tent Irasht begins to howl. When Kavian rises to go to her she catches Fereyd's eyes and sees something shattering under that howl, something long ago broken, something still coming apart.

"Keep my daughter safe," she says. More than anything else she could say, she thinks it will hurt him most.

* * *

Irasht takes up collecting. She does not much care for the idea of property, but after silent rebukes from Kavian, she focuses her needs on waterskins. Soon she learns to show anger by pouring water on the earth.

Kavian laughs in delight, and then sobers. The girl is ready for a test.

On the riverbank, she finds three small stones to show Irasht. The abnarch perches, head cocked, and waits for Kavian's command.

Kavian waggles her fingers. This is the counting game. Count three stones, Irasht.

Three, Irasht indicates: three fingers.

Kavian holds up four.

Three, Irasht insists, brow furrowed. She waves her raised fingers and makes a high chirp. Three, three. There are three stones.

Kavian answers with stillness: four fingers. Four stones.

Irasht's eyes narrow in bafflement.

And a small weight moves in Kavian's palm. A fourth stone, conjured from nothing. Irasht's abnarchy at work. Faced with a gap between reality as it is and reality as Kavian says it must be, Irasht has rectified the discrepancy.

Kavian hugs Irasht tenderly, kisses her gently on the brow, and conjures her an air-picture of the night sky, crowded with stars. It makes Irasht tremble in joy, to see those lights in the dark.

* * *

The war begins again. Twenty thousand Efficat spearmen and four hundred wizards under the stripling Adju-ai Casvan march on a southern dam.

Word comes by rider from Warlord Absu:

I have judged your reports. Fereyd Japur will use Heurian against the enemy. Kavian, your abnarch is unready. Keep her safe.

She sees it happen. Sees all this:

Fereyd carrying Heurian (she is a small dark shape, limp—but her hair moves in the wind off the reservoir) across the

bridge beneath the dam. Fereyd raising his arms to the sky. The two armies beneath him looking up in awe as he draws against the dusk an image of the Efficite soldiers broken into bone.

Then he puts his hands over Heurian's ears.

Through her own art of sorcery Kavian hears the shriek he puts into her daughter's mind, a shriek like a nightmare cracking. Horrible enough to make the screams of battle sound less than a lullaby.

Kavian, unable to protect her daughter, breaks a tree in half with a killing word.

The noise Heurian makes is so low and awful that it stirs snow to avalanche when it strikes the distant mountains. When that sound rolls over the first rank of the Efficite army their wizards' shields flare with lightning.

Whatever gets through is enough. Men fall, drowning on ash and water, on the mud that suddenly grows to fill their lungs. Adju-ai Casvan, shielded by his elite cadre, survives to pull his decimated forces out—fleeing west, chased by the sound of Cteri soldiers beating their shields and crying: *the water washes out the filth!*

On the bridge beneath the dam, Fereyd Japur lifts the fallen girl. She puts her arms around his neck and tries to hide against him.

The battle is won. Heurian functions. All it takes is bone in the sky and a scream in her skull.

When Kavian goes to the center of the camp and asks to see her daughter, Fereyd Japur looks at her with cold contempt. “You saw her today,” he says. “You saw everything you need to see. She is a weapon.”

Warlord Absu writes:

Fereyd Japur has field command. Defeat all Efficatite incursions you encounter. Use the abnarch until no longer practical.

Kavian, you must bring your charge to the same standard.

* * *

Campaign season rolls down in rain and thunder and blood. The Efficatite’s wizards try ingenious new defenses. Under Fereyd Japur’s guidance, Heurian breaks them. The Cteri win again and again and soon their defensive stand becomes a counterattack.

Kavian pursues her own method with stubborn, desperate resolve. Fereyd’s technique—an image to achieve, a goad to drive the abnarch to fear and terror, the promise of relief—is direct. Crude. She has a more elegant solution.

One symbol: the dark. The empty black of Irasht’s childhood. *Bad.*

And another—she should have chosen something else, something less fragile, less desperate, but Irasht responds more strongly to the promise of love than anything else—

A starry sky, like the sky that covered them when Kavian held her and kept her from the dark. The only goodness Irasht knows.

Some of the soldiers in Kavian's retinue pool their talents to make Irasht a set of dolls. She plays with them in silence, and Kavian watches, wondering how much of a person is still left in her, and how much has withered away. How much waits, stunted, for some healing rain to fall.

The abnarch technique came from legends of ancient ascetic kings. Transcendent and serene, they locked themselves away, to forget the laws that chained them. They chose confinement.

What would Irasht choose, if given a choice? Does she know *how* to choose?

Kavian shakes her head and gets to her feet. The philosophy must wait. Irasht needs to be made ready. Until then, Fereyd Japur doesn't even need to taunt her. His abnarch carries the nation's hope while hers plays with toys.

She comes upon him in the night after a victory. It is too dark to see his face but through the smoke of a joyful camp she

smells wine. “Kavian,” he rasps. “Kavian Hypocrite. Come. Sit with me.”

She crouches across from him. Makes no light to lift the shadows. “Have a care.” It comes out a threat, a purr.

“You are gentle to my daughter.” He raises something and she opens her mouth to defend herself, but, no, it is only a cup. “My traitor heart is grateful.”

“I will make her ready yet.”

His eyes flash white in the dark. “Mercy to a broken thing? Too late, Kavian. Years too late.”

“The war broke her.” That desperate mantra. “Not us.”

“Did Absu tell you that? No, no—it is our choice. The Paik Rede *chooses* to sacrifice its children. We choose to bury them.” A wet sound, like gathered spit, like a sob choked. “Is it not said—*the mother has the child for nine months, and the father for nine years?* They took that from me. They made my choice, and took Irasht.”

“Treason...” she whispers. But she cannot put any heat in it. Her honor hates to see a man so beautiful brought so low.

He rises unsteadily and she uncoils to match him. “You are the traitor. Your mercy to Irasht is the real treachery. She died when Absu put her in those cells. What came out was a weapon. And now you are too weak to use her—as if you could protect her in place of Heurian. Is that your secret, Kavian

Catamount? Do you want a warm doll to hold in place of your daughter?”

“Absu?” Kavian lifts a hand to ward off sudden light. They are launching fireworks from the mountainside. “Absu was Irasht’s mother?”

Fereyd Japur lowers his face to her in the red glare. His skin looks kiln-fired. “She loved me.”

It makes sense. Fereyd Japur is common-born: powerful blood without the politics of a highborn father. No mind as apt as Absu’s could pass up the chance to make an abnarch weapon without another parent of good blood to fight the entombment.

Kavian cannot believe there was any love.

He must see the thought in her eyes. “She did,” he croaks. There are tears in him, but his rage and his pride and his obvious, agonizing need to be more than *just a man* hold them back. “She did. She *did*. You think I invented it? A tourniquet for a broken heart? Damn you. Damn you.”

Kavian watches him stumble away. It is pity she feels, old and strange.

* * *

The Efficace outflanks the Cteri counterattack and marches on the dams at Tan Afsh. Absu orders Fereyd Japur and Heurian to remain with the main thrust and sends Kavian and Irasht to save Tan Afsh.

Kavian is not ready. So much rides on Irasht, and Fereyd Japur's words still ring in her: *you are too weak to use her!*

She wants to save isu-Cter. This is what she's always fought for. Yet she can't believe that the girl she holds and soothes in the night is *only* a weapon.

And she wants to believe, now, that what they have done to their daughters can somehow be undone.

But she pushes Irasht out onto the stone above the battle and shows her the sign for *wrong* alongside the stone-eyed owl banner of the Efficcate. It is not Fereyd Japur's method—an image that demands to be real. All she says to Irasht is: *this is wrong, this army*. The rest she leaves to the girl.

Irasht makes a raw noise deep in her throat, as if she is trying to vomit up everything that has ever hurt her. For one instant she burns so bright with will that Kavian cries out in pain.

In the valley beneath them, in the space of a single eyeblink, the Efficcate army vanishes. Fifty-five thousand scoured from the sight of God. Even their bootprints.

There are no survivors. It is the most powerful exercise of magic in Cteri history.

After the battle Kavian casts aside all laws of language and isolation, holds Irasht, and whispers love until the girl stops

clawing at her own skin. Irasht has learned a few words. She can say:

No more. No more. No more.

A little more, Kavian promises. I'll protect you. Just fight a little more.

Irasht clings to her in silent need, and with a wizard's ken Kavian knows she will not survive many more battles. Knows that she would prefer to erase herself and end the pain.

Word comes from the Cteri spearhead at Cadpur, Fereyd's army, her daughter's army: *we have met the main body of the Efficata invasion force. There are more men than ants upon the earth. More wizards than stars in the sky. Qad-ai Vista leads them. Make haste to join us, Kavian.*

And then an order from the warlord Absu:

We cannot risk both abnarchs in one day.

Fereyd Jaypur. Your weapon is battle-tested. You will defeat the enemy at Cadpur. Attack now.

By the time Kavian reaches the front, the battle's already over. The Efficata army has withdrawn with extraordinary casualties. Fereyd Japur killed Qad-ai Vista's elite cadre and nearly claimed the brother-general himself.

The price was small, as the reckoning goes.

Kavian's daughter Heurian is dead.

* * *

She leaves Irasht with her dolls and a retinue guard and goes down into the sleeping camp, to find the man who lost her girl.

Fereyd's tent has no guards. Kavian ties the privacy screen behind her, lace by lace. Everything inside is silk. Fereyd Second-Best travels like the highborn he never was.

"I prepared tea," he says. The candles he has set out around him light him from below. Braided hair, proud chin, empty eyes. An iron chain ornament around his neck, another around his left wrist. Silver on his bare ankle.

She sits across from him on the cushions. The arrangement of the tea service is *exact*. He's measured the angles with a courtier's geometry pin.

She sets her hands before her knees, palms down. "My daughter."

One tremor in his jaw. "I asked too much of her."

"So," she says, each word a soft considered point, like a blow, a kiss, "I had concluded."

"She struck three times. Made their flesh into earth, and then air, and then water. Their wizards tried to kill her and I held them back. I was distracted. But after her third blow—" He sits with stiff formality and pauses, once, to breathe into his cupped hands. "It was too much. She had done so much and the world wasn't better and she, ah, she had to go. She made

herself into water along with all the soldiers she killed, and flowed into the earth. I tried to—I tore down a banner and I tried to—to sop her up—”

His mouth opens in rictus and he makes a terrible sound that cannot be a laugh, is not gentle enough to be a sob.

Kavian moves the tea set aside, piece by piece, and takes him in her arms.

“I killed your daughter,” he says into her shoulder. “I killed her.” He puts his hands against her shoulders and tries to force her away. “I killed her. I killed her.”

“Fereyd.” She will not let him go. “You can grieve. I will not mark you weak.”

“You will. You always do.” The plural *you*.

She takes his face between the palms of her hands and ohhhh her muscles have not forgotten how to twist, to snap, to hear the bone go and feel the last breath rush out. He killed Heurian. He killed—

She will not do it.

“You have every right to grieve,” she says, though some part of her resents each word. “You have given more than anyone. Today you did what you have always done. Paid too high a price.”

“It was your price too. She was your blood.”

She doesn’t answer that. Doesn’t know how.

“I loved her like my own,” he says, and lets himself begin to sob.

They speak a little. Mostly not. After a while, moved by the fey mood that comes after deep grief, by the closeness of him, by months of watching him on the march, Kavian takes his chin and kisses him.

“No,” he says, turning away. “No. Not you as well. Enough.”

“I don’t make prizes of men.” She regrets this even as she says it. It’s not the right assurance.

“You think it’s the only way I know how to speak.” He laughs with sudden snapping cold. “I win the greatest victory of our time. I lose your daughter—and mine, and mine—to buy our triumph.” A pause while he gathers himself. She respects it. “And here I am, in my own tent, still Fereyd Second-Best. Still the *beauty*.”

“Fereyd,” she whispers. “I’m sorry. I wanted distraction. It was wrong.”

He draws away to make a fiercely focused inspection of the tea ceremony, the cushions. “You highborn always forget this: when you break someone, they *stay* broken. You cannot ask a broken thing to right itself. You cannot ask that, and then laugh at it for falling.”

She's found some strange kind of comfort here, holding him. So she says this, against her pride, as the only thanks she can manage:

"Now you have seen me broken too."

"I haven't." The truth of pain is in his voice, beneath the grief. "Not yet."

It hurts, but it is true. She never knew her daughter as he did.

She gets up to go but pauses by the screen, uncertain, and when she looks back she catches on the care of his makeup and the suggestion of his body beneath his garments. She hesitates. He speaks.

"Come back." He says this like it's ripped itself from him. "I want to help you. I want to be what you need."

"Fereyd..." she says, warning him, warning herself.

"I want to be something for someone," he says, eyes fierce: and she cannot deny him that.

What happens between them isn't all grief. He's been watching her too—he admits that, though not in words. Her pride likes this.

When she's done with him he touches her shoulder and says:

"I will always do my duty, no matter how it hurts. But you—you are not yet so utterly bound."

She touches his lips in gratitude. The pain is worse than ever. But it runs clear. It feels true.

* * *

Kavian leads the army through the Cadpur pass into Efficcate land, and there on a plain of thin grass and red stone they meet Qad-ai Vista at the head of another numberless host.

This time the brother-general asks for parley.

She meets him in the empty space between the armies. Qad-ai is a tall man, ugly, weary, and he speaks accented Cteri in bald uncomplicated phrases. "We will not seize your water this year," he says. "We ask truce. Next year, or the year after that, we will come again. This year we will go thirsty."

She spits between his legs. "There. Water."

"We will eat you." There's more sadness than anger in his voice. "You understand that, don't you? You buy your proud centuries by visiting atrocity on your own children. You stand on a mountain of chains. Soon they will swallow you."

She chews blood from her cheek and spits that on the sand too. "I'll see you next year."

He squints at her with pragmatic distaste. "Not too late to use the other girl. The one you still have left. Worth her life to kill us, isn't it?"

She says to him what she cannot speak to her own: "She is worth more to me than this victory."

* * *

What she does next is not her duty: not what Fereyd Japur could ever do. But it *must* be done. Not the easy rebellion of the sanctimonious, Kavian roaring home to say, *give up the abnarchs, give up the war!* Not that. Because that would be Kavian's choice, Kavian's anger, and Kavian is not the wounded woman here.

What she does she does for Irasht.

It has to happen now, while the hurt is fierce in her, while Irasht's power still permits it—before she learns too many laws, like *it will always hurt*, like *Kavian will never leave me*.

But the journey home to isu-Cter nearly breaks her determination. The shining reservoirs and the waterfall-terraces glistening in summer gold. The lowborn turning out to cheer.

Kavian has spent two decades fighting for this nation, with her fists and voice and womb.

But when she reaches the summit, she revolts.

The Paik Rede turn out in force to stop her, once they realize her intent. "I am coming to give Irasht a choice," Kavian tells them. "That is all I ask. A choice for all of them."

"She cannot choose," the Paik Rede answers, all of them together, and their speech roars like spring sluiceways.

So Kavian fights. She fights with all her art. She sings a song of rebellion, and at her call the air revolts against the wind, the stone rises up against the earth, she cries out as a hero with a cause and the brave world answers her so that she climbs the steps in a whirlwind of fire and black burnt stone that reaches up to the clouds.

“This is the way things go!” the sorcerers of the Paik Rede reply, and they are as the avalanche, as the river going to the sea. This is how things are. Inevitable.

The wrath of their confrontation breaks the monoliths that line the Summit Steps, and in the end Kavian finds herself at a screaming standstill.

“The abnarch!” she cries. “I will set the abnarch loose!”

They must believe her, for they retreat.

Kavian walks into the chamber of the ceremonial pool and the great stone doors to the catacombs, Irasht hopping at her heels, agitated and nervous, chattering in her high-pitched monotone.

At the catacomb doors the warlord Absu stands with Fereyd Japur at her side. “Kavian. Stop.”

Kavian crosses the floor, hobnailed boots hammering on stone and gem. Headed for Absu, and the doors, and the children in the dark.

She won't stop.

“I know why you’re here.” Absu’s voice says: *this is true. I do understand. I do.* “These are our beloved children. They deserve better than darkness and suffering to buy another year of war. But we make this bargain every day, Kavian.”

Kavian arranges her wards. Beckons to Irasht—come, come. They circle the ceremonial pool. The herons watch them.

Absu takes a step forward. “The worker suffers in his labor. The lowborn die on the battlefield. But we give them laws and reservoirs, and we keep the Efficcate back. That is the bargain: they suffer, so that we may rule. Does it sound callous, put that way?”

Kavian cannot check her tongue: “Not as callous as it looks written on those doors.” *Silk is still beautiful. Silk is still necessary.*

Fereyd Japur’s shoulders twitch at that. But Absu doesn’t stop. “If isu-Cter falls, the world loses its center. Chaos reigns. So I must take the awful bargains upon myself. I have been ruthless for you, Kavian. Will you turn your abnarch on me for that?”

Kavian does not have to answer. She was not born with a sister, but she has one. And she knows Absu understands:

This is not the Efficcate, devoted to common fraternal good. In green isu-Cter, ruled by the blood and will of the highborn, one woman’s pain and wrath and love is argument enough.

Fereyd Japur steps forward. “Lord of hosts.” The pain in his eyes when he looks at Absu is the sharpest and most beautiful thing Kavian has ever seen. “This is Kavian Catamount, who gave her blood to the dark. We are bound to her by duty and gratitude. I beg you. Let her pass.”

Absu looks to him with slow regard. The shadow of the weight of a nation moves across her.

Kavian thinks she’s ready to battle her sister Absu to the death. It would be a contest of equals, a duel worthy of legend. The respect between them would permit it.

But she knows that Fereyd Japur would come to Absu’s defense. Or to hers.

She cannot bear to force that choice on him.

Perhaps Absu weighs her duty against the loyalties of her heart. Maybe she looks on Kavian and the abnarch behind her, Irasht her daughter, with eyes that have never mismeasured a war: and she decides she can’t win. Maybe she’s secretly glad that someone has come to do what she cannot ever permit herself.

Whatever the reason, Warlord Absu lowers her head and stands aside.

Kavian goes forward with Irasht to stand before the catacomb door. “It’s your choice,” she whispers, stroking the girl’s hair. “All the other Irashts are waiting down in the dark.

And you could be their Kavian, if you let them out. Do you understand? You could let them out of the dark. Do you want to let them out?"

Irasht's brow furrows. She doesn't understand. Fereyd Japur watches in expressionless agony as Kavian struggles to make it clear. At last she resorts to signs: *bad*, the dark empty square, and *good*, the sky full of stars. And an image in the air, the doors opening, the children decanting from the celled dark to live hard lives of broken speech and brutal nightmare and, maybe, in the end, hope.

Is this good, Irasht? Do you wish you'd had this life instead? *Can* you wish you'd had this life instead?

Or would it have been better if we'd left you in the dark forever?

It's an impossible question. No one could answer it. Do you wish you could have been some other way? Some way you've never known or even been taught *how* to know?

Kavian wants to beg: Please choose. Please be *able* to choose. You can leave them, if you must, or let them out, though we may all perish for it, if they awaken as abnarchs and turn on us.

Just show me you can choose.

Irasht reaches out to the little sign for *good*, the crowded sky, and then draws Kavian down to her. Kisses her brow.

“Kavian,” she says, and strokes the stars, to put them with her name: “Kavian.”

Kavian is good.

“Please.” Kavian tries to aim the abnarch girl back towards the door. “Please decide. Do you want to let them out? Do you wish you’d been let out? You can choose. You can choose.” Behind her she can feel Fereyd Japur, watching, and Absu at his side, one hand on his shoulder, to quiet him or to give him strength.

But Irasht touches the stars again, as if they are all she can see, and then Kavian’s cheek, and then her own brow.

You are good. We are good.

No, Kavian wants to say. No, no, we are so far from that. We did this to you and so we are not good. But she came here to listen to Irasht’s choice. Not her own.

In the ceremonial pool a heron spears a fish.

They wait, Kavian and Fereyd Japur and the warlord Absu, for the child of the dark to make a judgment.

But she will not. Irasht cannot choose. She will stand here forever, hoping for Kavian’s command. Kavian thinks Absu knows this but won’t say it, out of mercy.

Irasht looks up at the door, patient, perched like a little bird. She looks up at the great doors and she waits.

Fereyd Japur said, *you highborn always forget this: when you break someone, they stay broken. You cannot ask a broken thing to right itself.* They put Irasht into a cell and starved her even of this choice. And Kavian shouldn't say *they*, for Kavian did this, didn't she, and now in her cowardice she wants this child to choose, and lift the guilt from herself. But the child cannot choose.

Irasht looks up at the door, patient. She waits.

"Kavian..." Fereyd Japur says, with the most rigid and agonized formality.

And then Kavian shouts in hope, because she remembers Irasht's strange habit on the march. When Irasht finds a door she goes up to it, and waits patiently, hoping, Kavian imagines, that someone will invite her in.

"Irasht," she whispers, kneeling, for Irasht is not a weapon but a person to be loved and taught, and if she cannot make the choice, let a mother give her guidance. "Do you see?"

She shows Irasht an image in the air, and it is only themselves, kneeling before the great door.

And then she turns the image, so that Irasht can see the other side. The children below, in the dark. And now Irasht is *inside* the door, and the children in the dark are the ones waiting for her to invite them in.

Irasht tilts her head.

“Ah,” she chirps. “Ah.”

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COVER ART

“High Above the Savannah,” by Martin Ende



Martin Ende is a self-taught artist from Germany who began in pencil drawings and moved to digital mediums in 2011. He worked as a concept artist in small game projects such as Liberico from Enraged Entertainment, as well as doing illustrations for some tank restoration projects. View more of his art at maddendd.deviantart.com and www.mad-and-nice.de.

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