



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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FIRE IN THE HAZE

by Mishell Baker

The week the Haze Precinct burned, Neiu had been my lover for three years, and even she had never seen me during the day. My schedule was not so remarkable as it might have been in the city, since Ru is a nocturnal goddess and Seeresses on the whole do their work between sunset and sunrise. Even so, the singular strictness of my habits had drawn their share of gossip during the decade I had studied and taught at the Starlight Temple.

Neiu had learned not to trouble herself with knocking before sunset, but on the fifth of Silver that year, I refused to answer the door a full hour into twilight, and her patience snapped.

“You have someone in there, don’t you,” she said; I could hear her slap her palms against the antique elm wood that separated us. “Open this door or I will *disintegrate* it.”

Neiu tremendously overestimated her skill, but nothing good could come of an attempt to tamper with the architecture. As Starlight Temple was devoted to a goddess of chaos, it had not been built to any particular plan, and more than once in its

history minor attempts at renovation had caused entire wings to collapse.

“I’ll be there directly,” I said. “I’m having trouble with a spell.”

This was not precisely a lie. I stood in front of my full-length glass drenched in terror-sweat at the idea that the spell that had been protecting me for ten years had suddenly and without warning expired.

“Let me in,” Neiu said. “Let me help.”

I hardly heard her. My transformation had seemed late the evening before, but I had passed off the delay as a small error in the predicted time of sunset. Now there was no question that the spell was failing. There wasn’t so much as a sliver of sun above the horizon, and yet I remained *male*. The presence of a man at a Temple of Ru was not a mere inconvenience; it was a capital crime.

Tuo, why did you not warn me? After ten years the name was a war-wound, a faded ache that came and went with the weather.

The door opened. I snatched up my robe and held it against me, but it was too late. Neiu stared between my legs as though she could see through the heavy black silk.

“What was *that*?” she said.

“Surely you’ve seen one before.”

“Is this the spell you’re working on?” she said, aghast. “By the Void; you’re sweating like a stevedore.”

She closed the door behind her and came to me, grabbing my forearms and lifting them, robe and all. I shuddered as gesture triggered a vivid sense-memory: my standing at the wind-chilled edge of a canal, staring into the pale round eyes of a Child of Ru.

“That’s miraculous,” Neiu breathed. I looked down at the razor-straight part in her black hair. She was a full head shorter than I was; Tuo had changed as little as possible about me when he had shaped my female version. “How did you do it?” she said, prodding the organ in question. “Your whole frame is different; you *smell* different. En, it’s brilliant. And horrible. Make it stop.”

If only I could. I clung to the hope that if I drew out the conversation enough the situation might resolve itself. “I thought—you could try me this way,” I said.

Neiu looked at me as though she’d found a worm in a peach. “Oh, Void no. No, no, no. No.”

“What if I could give you a child?”

That gave her pause; talent was known to run in families. Only on the female side, said the Seeresses, and any boy who claimed otherwise was summarily executed. But I could read Neiu’s too-expressive face without need of telepathy: what if I

had discovered a way to cut the seeders out of the process altogether?

I hadn't, of course. The magic at work here was Tuo's, not mine, and it worked the wrong way round. I could feel it now, in fact, belatedly catapulting me into that nauseous moment of transitional nothingness that should have happened precisely at sunset.

Before Neiu could answer my intriguing speculation, I was a woman again, and she laughed in relief. She leaned in to brush my hair aside and kiss the smooth pulse of my throat, then tilted back her head to catch my earlobe between her teeth.

“Don't *ever* do that again.”

* * *

My lover was drowsy afterward, and I carefully insinuated my way back up the mattress to look into her face. Despite my earlier offer, Neiu was likely near the end of her childbearing years; the skimmed-milk skin beneath her eyes was touched with shadow. Her mercurial temperament was what had drawn me to her, but it had etched deeper lines around her mouth than a properly impassive woman should have. I kissed one of them, and she opened her eyes: the exact shade of ripe blueberries.

“I love you,” I said, still tasting the salt of her on my tongue.

She turned her head, petulant. “So you always say.”

Now was not the time for a reprise of this conversation. I rolled over and out of the bed, then squatted to open the trunk at the foot of it that held all the things I rarely used. I had to empty out half of the trunk’s contents before I located an old city dress, now ten years out of fashion. I removed it, gave it a shake, and draped it against me, watching the ash-gray cotton cling to subtle curves I would soon eliminate with undergarments.

Neiu pushed up onto her elbow. “You’re not thinking of leaving the temple?” she said, shocked, then just as abruptly delighted. “We should spend awhile at the lake; it’s the autumn festival now. Have you ever been? On one boat, these boys put on a puppet show that you would *swear* was one of the Whore’s illusions. They use wires as fine as silk—you’re going alone, aren’t you.” The last words were laced with frost.

“I have an errand I need to run. A dull errand.”

“I want to go,” she insisted. “I want to see *goblins*.”

The cheap cotton slipped through my fingers to the floor; I stooped to pick it up.

“En, you’re trembling.”

“I don’t like goblins.”

Neiu drew in a quick breath at my blasphemy. “Goblin” was the colloquial term for the children of Ru: quasi-immortal creatures, holy avatars of wit and chaos who only emerged from the water at night. They were the goddess’s children alone, not adulterated as humans were by the meddling of the Betrayer and the Whore.

One of those shapechanging fiends had been my first lover. Tuo had infiltrated and rearranged me in every imaginable way, and I still wasn’t entirely certain I’d survived it.

But I had to find him, because I had sold myself to him for a spell that now appeared to be fading.

“I’m going alone,” I told her, and she recognized my tone as final.

* * *

It took an hour to descend the mountain to the water taxi station at its base, another half hour for the boy to paddle me west across the dazzling lake. Barges and boats, some as many as four stories high, were decked with paper lanterns in autumn hues; the air was haphazardly pierced by the smoky hiss and profound, heart-stuttering crack of white Wou sky-paints. I wrapped my arms around myself and stared at the approaching Jiun-Shi city wall.

As we passed beneath Starlight Gate, I looked up at the thousand-year-old mosaic that the crushing city taxes went in

small part to maintain. It was said contemptuously of the citizens of Jiun-Shi that they traded bread for paint, but outsiders' sneers melted like candle wax the moment they penetrated the city's forbidding exterior and saw the beauty within.

On one side of the Starlight arch, the mosaic depicted the demigoddess of magic Alexira with upraised arms; opposite her stood Ru herself against an onyx backdrop of her own windblown hair, a single amethyst tear on her cheek. Both were depicted as women of the Empire with pearl-white skin, but I had visited Kyreth, and Alexira's living descendents were without exception brown as walnuts.

The great clock tower in the Mayor's Precinct began its melancholy toll. I counted out eleven bells as I alighted just inside the gate and joined the queue for another ride into the city. In three hours all the shops would close, the merchants would pack up their stalls, and the streets would be quiet for the remaining hours of the goblin watch. This was done out of concern for the goblins, a few of whom in ancient times had become so distracted by the pleasures of the city that they had forgotten to return to the water and had perished at sunrise, leaving only wrinkled, empty husks.

“To the Silver Fish teahouse,” I told the boy when my turn had come, and he helped me into the slender boat without a word, careful to touch only my cotton-clad forearm.

Anxiety writhed in my gut as the boat made its swift way west along the Lunar Canal, the main artery of the city. I wondered if anyone I had worked with at the Silver Fish would still be there. Likely not after ten years; third-shift turnover was high.

“Look,” said the taxi-boy proudly, pointing with the flat of his hand. “A goblin.”

Every hair on my body lifted, and I followed the boy’s gesture with my eyes.

The fog-gray creature was in its native form and sat perched on the eaves of a tailor’s shop, its knees bent to where its ears would have been if it had had them. Like all goblins, its features were so smooth and monochromatic that they were difficult to make out, tricking the eye into seeing only two dimensions. Its large pale eyes were fixed on the street below. Something about its air of wariness struck me as callow.

Tuo’s natural form had been as dark as the ink he used for his poems. A memory waylaid me: the chill wet tease of his writing brush as he traced elegant couplets on my thigh. I looked away from the roof, skin flushing hot.

* * *

The sameness of the Silver Fish after all the intervening years gave me a sense of vertigo. Pale blue papered walls, neat rows of cloth-draped tables, and the *smell*—a clean, almost medicinal mingling of tea, linseed oil, and fresh-cut lilies. I scanned the interior, pulse racing, but if Tuo was there he was not using the same human form he'd worn in my day. On a closer look at the teahouse the mist of nostalgia dispersed, and I began to suspect that my former employer's golden age had come and gone. The place should have had twice as many customers at this hour, and I spotted faint stains on one of the tablecloths.

The current shift manager was a handsome, thin-lipped young woman I didn't recognize, a bit older than I had been when I'd held her position. She looked up at me blandly as I approached her station, not recognizing me as a Seeress without my robe.

"How can I help you?" she said.

"I am—looking for Tuo."

She gave me a knowing smile. "Of course," she said. "Would you like a table by the window?"

The air grew thick in my lungs. "Do you expect him soon?"

The manager looked at me for a moment, her expression fading into something fashionably opaque. "You are visiting Jiun-Shi from elsewhere?"

“Yes,” I approximated.

She nodded, obviously filing me away into a different category. “Tuo doesn’t really come here,” she said gently, as to a child. “At least he hasn’t in the time I’ve worked here. Interesting story, though.”

“Tell it to me,” I said.

She glanced behind me, but there was no one else waiting. She gave a fluid shrug and leaned on her elbows. “They say he came here for centuries. He always took the form of a beautiful boy poet—quite a tempter of women, he was, and a destroyer of them, too. Until he met the Seeress Jal En, who was a hostess here at the time.”

No, I was a manager, like you, I did not say.

“We know they had a love affair; the owner says she saw them together on several occasions. But eventually En left her position here to join the Temple—”

I was fired, I did not say. *That crone fired me. Why is she of all people still alive?*

“—and after that Tuo was never seen again. Some say En murdered him. Some say he murdered her and took her shape, and that Seeress Jal En is not a Seeress at all but Tuo in disguise. Some say he still comes here, only in a different form and in secret. If you wait a moment, I can give you the very

table they say he used to sit at. Apparently he was peculiarly *regular*, for a goblin.”

“That’s all right,” I said, trying not to remember his tangled hair across that table, the gaunt lines of his face, the way his eyes took in every detail of me as though preparing for an examination. A perfect mimicry of human eyes, the same deep violet-blue as Neiu’s but a shade darker. “I have—another appointment.”

* * *

There is a local joke that does not translate well. It asks, what is the difference between gossip and fire? The answer is never spoken aloud; the joke is familiar enough to have become a rhetorical question.

It is difficult to understand the joke if you do not live in Jiun Shi, a city crowded with buildings of wood and thatch. It is impossible for an outsider to understand the superstitious, terrified care with which everyday cooking fire is treated—flames are seen as the minions of an angry god, yearning to escape and devour.

If by some rare, unthinkable negligence—almost without exception perpetrated by tourists— a fire should escape its enclosures on a dry day, all activity is suspended as a mass exodus ensues via the waterways. The winds are not strong inside the city walls, and so the cross-hatching of canals creates

an effective perimeter to what would otherwise be a city-wide holocaust. Once the fire-god has been sated, often many days later, the citizens of Jiun Shi return to the devastated precinct to search weeping through the ashes for the remains of what they left behind.

What is the difference between gossip and fire? Fire stops at the canal.

* * *

I returned to the Starlight Gate and made my way to the front of the queue. I asked a question of every taxi-boy who arrived at the station, waving a passenger ahead of me each time I was told no. At last I found the right boy—an old man, to be more accurate—and he gave me a long sober look before answering.

“Yes, I know the *Mirror*,” he said. “I know where it is. But it will cost you seven crescents. And that is if I leave you there.”

“Take me,” I said, and climbed into his boat. He shook his head slowly and then, after a moment’s prayerlike pause, began to row me toward the Children’s Causeway.

The shallow, man-made section of the lake north of the causeway was sparsely populated, and always had been, as it was consecrated to the Children of Ru. As my oarsman ducked to let us drift under the bridge at the center of the causeway,

the chill became too much for me, and I trembled until my muscles ached with it.

“It’s somewhere around here,” said the old man after a third of an hour. Every so often the sky-paints showed me a livid flicker of his face, time-etched and tired. “Or at least it was. But without him to tell me, I don’t know where you’d board.”

“Wait a moment,” I said. The Mistress of Shrouds had not named me the temple’s youngest Secondary for nothing. I rolled my eyes up toward the stars and swiped my fingertips across their whites, drawing tears. Catching them in my hand, I flung them with a flick of my wrist in the direction the old man had gestured, murmuring Kyrethian focus words under my breath. In mid-air the tears burned out of existence in a feeble flare of violet light.

“Seeress,” the old man breathed, and went to his knees in the boat.

Tuo’s work was fiendishly subtle, and even with the aid of my Sight it took a moment’s headache-inducing concentration to counter his Shroud, to approximate a vague unstable outline of the object from which my mind was being deflected.

I directed the old man to row closer, and eventually he bumped into the vessel. This broke the spell completely, and my heart with it.

The *Mirror* loomed above us, rocking subtly on the lake, two decaying stories of intricately embellished wood. Its blue paint was weather-abused, its hull worm-eaten; it showed every sign of having been forgotten. The ramp that had once been anchored to the lake bottom was missing; I had the old man row me to a place where I could get a good enough handhold to climb onto the lower deck.

“Wait here for me,” I said. “There’s another seven crescents in it for you.”

I walked a quarter of the way round the deck until I found the main entrance doors. I tried one and found it locked, but the other yielded to my touch with a dolorous groan. The interior was slightly better preserved than the outside; the murals Tuo had painted in the main lounge were lightly mildewed in places but not faded. The smell was hard to endure, though: a choking miasma of damp neglect. I scanned every corner for some sign of his presence but found nothing.

And yet everywhere I looked, my periphery supplied ghosts of him: lounging indolently on a couch, reaching up to add a final stroke to a poem, bowing over my hand. And there, of course, pausing at the foot of the narrow stairs to the grand bedchamber. Looking over his shoulder, a half smile adorning the human face he wore even when we were alone.

I had never been far behind.

Careful to soften my footfalls, I climbed the narrow stairs. They were not as thick with dust as I felt they ought to be. With each step my legs felt heavier, my hands colder. I reached the summit of the staircase and opened the door.

The room was empty, the windows open. Mildewed silk bed curtains writhed and sighed in the draft. And at last I found proof that he had not ceased to exist the moment I bid him farewell.

Sometime in the last decade, he had covered the walls of the bedchamber with fragmented images and dark erratic clouds of poetry. The longest wall represented the interior of the Silver Fish in muted colors. The remaining three walls were more abstract, but the eyes that stared back at me from atop an impenetrable explosion of text by the headboard were decidedly mine, black and heavy-browed with down-tilted corners that gave them a look of perpetual melancholy.

The poetry was a confusing mess, sometimes overwritten in new colors: epiphanic prophecies of insurrection layered coyly over heart-ripping threnodies to a peerless intimacy. Everything was honey and fire and nails raking flesh, and beneath it all, yawning in the negative space, the depthless ache of abandonment.

I approached the bed at the room's center and fell onto it, bunching the musty sheets between my fingers and giving in to

a wracking paroxysm of sobs. The subtle undercurrent of despair that had haunted me every day since I had left him became a sharp, savage need for nonexistence.

Throw stones, he had said. That had been the point of it all. Once I had made my mark at the Temple I was to reveal myself, sacrifice myself on the altar of change. Instead, I had grown comfortable. I had *loved*. I had played the Betrayer's part.

We no longer name the god of law and light. He abandoned his partner Ru, snuffed his honor in the honeyed quicksand of the Whore's lust, and through their sin the world was born. We were forbidden to even speak our creators' names, yet we could never be free of them. Again and again we acted out small plays of their betrayal, again and again the weakness of the human body ripped us away from the dignity of divine reason.

I, a Seeress, was meant to be an example for weaker women. But this was proof that I was no kind of woman at all. Worse was the realization that wrapped around my heart like a thorned vine: his spell had been crafted from the very beginning to force my hand. Tuo had predicted my betrayal before I had even made the promise.

* * *

At the Temple an hour before sunrise I felt Tuo's spell fade; the bindings beneath my robe loosened and my center of gravity shifted subtly. I was so accustomed to the transition that my stride did not even falter on the way back to my chamber. There in the dim light of my sputtering bedside lamp I stripped naked, then pulled on a rough sleeping gown, slid my feet into slippers. Drying my palms on the hemp fabric of the gown, I left my room and made my way down the hall to the High Seeress's suite.

High Seeress Tash Neru needed no magic to make her female, but she was as tall as I, and broader through the shoulders. Her silver hair had only a few streaks of black left in its under-layers, and her mouth was creased with radial wrinkles from a bad habit of lip-pursing. Between her brows, set in moonsilver, flesh, and bone, gleamed the magnificent indigo tearstone that served as the badge of her rank. Her expression when she answered my knock was fast on its way toward irritation.

"Jal," she said in her brittle voice, addressing me by my family name out of respect for my position as Secondary. It was not, of course, my true family name. "What brings you to me at this hour?"

I found that I was rooted to the spot and could not answer her question. High Seeress Tash had not always been kind to

me, but she had been fair, and the challenge of pleasing her had been a large factor in my rapid rise through the Temple ranks.

“I—must disclose something,” I faltered.

She blew an annoyed burst of air between her withered lips, then stepped back into her chamber with a curt beckoning gesture.

“I had best do this outside in the hall,” I said, and then pulled my gown off over my head.

“Have you lost your —” She stopped abruptly as I tossed the garment aside onto the stone floor. Her every muscle went rigid with shock. For a moment we two stood in silence, she still in her robes of office, I naked as a babe. I saw something like pain in her eyes before she closed them, inhaling through pinched nostrils.

“I am sorry,” I said, “for my dishonesty.”

At that her eyes flew open, now as flat as onyx tesserae. “You are sorry,” she repeated. “You are *sorry*, Jal En. Which of course is not your name.”

“It has been for seventeen years.”

“And before?”

“As far as my mother knows, her son drowned at eighteen. I would prefer she continue to think so.”

“Put your damned gown back on, boy. This is a Temple of Ru, not a hob-house.”

I did as she asked, feeling a shiver of hope at the brusqueness of her tone. It was the manner she used with dull initiates and recalcitrant cats, not criminals bound for the gallows. The familiarity of it made my eyes burn.

“My name may be a lie,” I said, “but my skills are not.” I struggled for composure, but the tears slipped past my lashes, hot on my cheeks. “Everyone at the Temple has seen them, including you, High Seeress.”

That look of pain flickered over her face again, and she stepped forward. She laid a soft hand on my cheek. “You really are a boy, aren’t you,” she said in a tender tone I had never heard her use. “And I an old fool for not having guessed. Am I the last to know?”

“The first,” I said. And instantly knew it for a mistake.

Her fingertips, wet with tears, touched my forehead, and she murmured two Kyrethian words that blew out my consciousness like a candle.

* * *

The Haze Precinct is bordered on the north and west by the city wall, and by canals on the south and east. The jail known as Har Pesh cowers against the northwest corner as though it expects a beating. I use the word “jail” only because

there is no more accurate translation. Though this is fiendishly difficult for outsiders to understand, the Empire of Ru has no organized justice system. Har Pesh is simply a holding facility where interrogations are conducted: by private citizens, businesses, or the Temple as often as by the government. Prisoners rarely stay for more than a day or two; by that point they either satisfy their interrogators and are released, or damn themselves and are led to the public gallows next door.

It was in this miserable place that High Seeress Tash released me from the spell she had cast upon me. I returned to consciousness to find myself lying at the bottom of an oubliette, smelling stale urine and staring up through a rectangular grating at two faces peering down from about thrice my height. It was difficult to tell who they were, as the light was scant and largely behind them. I was naked but for the chain harness that had been used to lower me; the aches in my body suggested I had not been lowered particularly gently.

“Good evening,” came Tash’s voice.

“I shall have to take your word for it.”

“I need to know how you’ve managed this deception, and how far the secret has spread. Lam Neiu claims not to have known, which is odd—are not the two of you lovers?”

“She thought I was a woman,” I said firmly. “I was under a spell that turned me female during the night, and I never let her see me during the day.”

“What I don’t understand is how you could have cast an illusion powerful enough to withstand—that level of scrutiny.”

“It was not an illusion. It was a shape change.”

I did not have to see her face to understand her silence. In all of recorded history, only three High Seeresses had ever acquired enough power to cast such a spell, and never for more than an hour. Even young goblins could not change their shape for the entirety of a night, which was why so many humans had mistaken Tuo for one of their own during his nights writing poetry at the Silver Fish.

“High Seeress,” I said. “Let me go. Whatever this brings, let it be. Are change and chaos not sacred?”

“Faith must be balanced with practicality. If you walk about as a man, casting spells, people will go mad. Someone will murder you.”

“But by then the truth will be known, the change set in motion.”

“I have no interest in *truth*, cast into the dirt for boys and beggars to feed on. Knowledge must be protected by those who know how best to use it.”

“You said you spoke with Neiu.” As the words left me, a cold stone settled into the pit of my stomach. “You interrogated her? Is she alive?”

“She is standing right here.” She gestured to the figure next to her.

“Neiu! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” came her voice, flat and stiff. “But I don’t believe any of this. You’re a woman, I know you are. You’re sowing chaos, and I can appreciate that. But she’ll kill you, En. Tell her. Let her in on whatever it is you’re doing.”

“I was born male, Neiu. I’m sorry. I ran away from the saltworks when I was eighteen.”

After a moment’s silence, she spoke again, softly. “High Seeress, can I speak with En alone?”

“As you wish. Find out what you can.”

I heard footsteps above me, and the closing of a door. Neiu fell to her knees and wrapped her hands around the bars of the grate. “I don’t care if you were born male,” she hissed. “You’re a woman now, and I love you. Don’t throw your life away. If you can change so completely, again and again, who is to say who you really are?”

I am, I thought, but did not say.

“Tell her you were born a woman, and you lied to test her faith. She would respect that.”

These were the words she spoke, but the words I heard were, *I so badly want you to be a woman that I will lie to myself, and to everyone else. Throw away half of yourself, and I will stand by you.*

“I made a promise,” I said, lowering my eyes to the darkness inside the pit. “I promised I would throw a stone into the lake.”

“You’re throwing your stone at the gallows! No one will even know why!”

“I made a promise,” I repeated stubbornly.

“To whom?” she asked me. “Who is worth dying for? And where is she now, while I plead for your life?”

I would not say his name, not here in this pit. “I do this for the glory of our Goddess.”

“You ungrateful hob!” she spat, clambering to her feet. “Rot, then! See if I mourn for you! I’ll laugh while you swing from the rope!” She turned and dashed out of view; I heard her footfalls and the slam of a heavy door. And then I was alone with my thoughts in the fetid darkness.

* * *

“—not possible,” were the next words I heard as the door opened above me. The voice was female, middle-aged, unfamiliar. “The walls can’t be climbed.”

“Tell us how it was done.” This voice was more familiar: High Seeress Tash, teeth gritted with anger. “Tell us or by the Goddess, I will drop you down the hole without the chain.”

A silence, and then the sharp sound of a hand striking flesh. More silence.

“Do it,” said Tash. A pair of hands began to lift the grate aside; there was a great sound of scuffling and struggling but no words.

“Who’s there?” I called. “Neiu?”

The silence that descended from above was suffocating. Then two words were spoken quietly by a third voice, soft but perhaps male: “Jal En.”

“Yes?” I said. “What is happening?”

Tash and the second woman—Har Pesh security staff of some kind—began to talk at once in breathless, rapid tones. Then Tash called down to me, her voice teetering hysterically. “How are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” I called up.

As if in answer, the grate was pulled aside, and a naked man with long unbound hair plummeted down nearly in free-fall, the chain attached to his harness given very little check by the winch above. When he landed face-first and the chain went slack, the hook slipped free, and the chain was wound up again.

I moved to him in concern, turning him over and stroking the hair away from his face.

My own face looked back at me, mouth swelling and smeared with blood. Gooseflesh rose on my arms, and I scrambled backward like a crab until I hit the wall. No human alive looked so much like me.

“Tuo?” I whispered.

“No,” the man said. He rolled to his side, leaning on his elbow, and spat blood. “I am Jal En.” Something was wrong with those eyes, something subtle. I had never noticed anything amiss in Tuo’s human forms; I was now less certain that this was he.

“What are you doing here?” I asked the creature.

“Having a bit of fun,” it whispered, and gave me a terrifying, red-toothed smile.

I looked up and found Tash and the other woman gazing down. Tash knelt with the grate in her hands but did not replace it.

“What is happening?” she called down. “Explain this!”

The goblin next to me sat bolt upright, eyes glittering feverishly. “A goblin!” it cried. “There is a goblin down here! It has taken my shape!”

Suppressing a startled laugh, I started to protest but then realized that would be idiotic. Instead, I sat in the same pose as

the goblin and said, “There is a goblin down here! It has taken my shape!”

Then both of us began to laugh.

Tash backed away from the grate. “Well,” she said to the other woman. “This is unusual to say the least. But Children of Ru cannot hold a human shape for very long. We will wait. Either the Child will revert to form or it will give up the game near sunrise.”

“I struck a goblin...” the other woman said in a quavering voice.

“Perhaps not,” said Tash. “It may be that the first Jal En was the Child, trying to destroy Jal’s reputation. There are stories that Jal angered a powerful Child years ago. This may all be some elaborate revenge.”

“But we know one of them is a goblin! Isn’t it blasphemy to keep it here?”

“Under the circumstances, temporarily detaining one mischievous Child of Ru will certainly be understood.”

* * *

The trouble was, the Children had only just begun their game. Soon another Jal En was found at the Silver Fish, then a fourth at the Temple. Then three more Jal Ens marched arm-in-arm to Har Pesh, singing, and turned themselves in. By

midnight the seven of us were huddled together at the bottom of the oubliette, all appearing equally bewildered.

With each passing hour the voices above my oubliette grew sharper, more tremulous, and once as the door opened I thought I heard the shouts of a crowd outside. Each time the jailor and Tash left, I tried to interrogate the goblins, but none of them would speak to me. Each time the pair returned, I tried to ask what was happening outside, but I was drowned out by the same questions from six other prisoners, and Tash and the jailor ignored all of us.

Not long after the Mayor's clock tolled a quarter to one, the two burst in arguing feverishly as they lowered an eighth Jal En down the oubliette.

"Nearly a hundred taxi boys are at the Starlight Gate," Tash was saying, "and they're threatening to storm the Temple if we don't free the Children. Word is starting to reach the stations here."

Jal En number eight was lowered gently, as numbers three through seven had been, and he looked around in well-feigned fear and confusion as the chain with the hook was retracted.

"Let's just free them all," said the jailor.

"One of them is guilty of a capital crime. The rest are perfectly capable of escaping on their own. I'll be back in the morning."

“You can’t leave me here alone!” said the jailor. “I don’t know the first thing about goblins!”

“As I said, the taxi boys’ revolt is spreading. If I wait much longer to cross the Lunar Canal, I’m afraid I’ll have to swim. Just stay inside the building. Don’t show your face outside; it’s better if the zealots don’t connect you with this.”

“I’m letting them go. I’m letting them all go!”

“Stop it. Listen to me. The Children of Ru can climb walls, walk on ceilings. They are down there because they choose to be. Relax, wait it out, and execute whichever one is left in the morning.”

The grate shuddered back into place, and they left us. Jal En number eight found an unoccupied portion of the floor to cower in. “Please,” he said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Why do you keep up the pretense when no one is here?” said the second, the one with the bloody mouth. For a moment I thought they were on the verge of breaking ranks, but then I realized the injured one was playing my part.

“It’s a good question, actually,” said a third, taking up the game. “Why would all of you do this for me? What is the point?”

I looked between the eight of them. “Is one of you Tuo?”

That silenced them. They all turned to look at me. Tense, still, waiting. For what?

“Tuo,” I said. “Is he here?”

“Do you think he would try to save you?” said the one with the bloody mouth, its tone contemptuous. “Do you think one brief human life matters so much?”

“Mine could have,” I said. “But now they plan to execute me before anyone knows what happened. Years of planning, pinched before it could bloom. Tuo would not want that.”

The one who had just questioned me let out a shuddering exhale, slumping as though exhausted. Its form melted like warm wax, and suddenly an unfamiliar slate-gray goblin sat in the man’s place.

I’m sorry, it said in my mind. Goblins did not have proper speech apparatus, but could touch another’s thoughts as casually as a human might touch a shoulder. *The pain made it harder. I can hold no longer.*

“It’s all right,” I said. “You should go. I never meant for you to help me, much less get hurt.”

I did it for him, not for you. In my mind, the creature’s contempt was even more palpable, but something in me sang like a skylark.

“For Tuo?” I cried. “Where is he?”

But the goblin wanted no more of me. It moved up the wall like water flowing in reverse, and apparently decided that

lifting the heavy grate was more difficult than reshaping its body to ooze between the bars.

I looked at the remaining copies of me, all imperfect in different ways. “You should all go,” I said. “You heard the High Seeress. She’s going to hold out until morning.”

“But I wonder,” one of them mused, “what state the city will be in by then?”

* * *

By the time the clock tolled three, four more of my cellmates had lost their shapes and fled. One was nearly as dark as Tuo, dark enough to make my heart skip, but its form was stockier, its tail shorter. None of them so much as glanced back at me as they climbed toward the light.

Three remained; they must have all been goblins of considerable age and experience to have held a form for more than four hours. I refused to dismiss the possibility that one of them might be Tuo, and I looked between them, trying to find some sign. But they had all copied me equally inexpertly. I was studying each of them once again when the door above opened loudly, and the jailor’s footsteps thudded toward the grate.

“Children of Ru!” she panted. “You must go now! They have set the precinct afire!”

“Are you going to release me, too?” one of them called up.

“No,” said the jailor, assuming it was me. “The building is stone; you’ll be safe. I’ll lower you down some food and water quickly. But the goblins need to get back to the water before the fire surrounds us.”

“You’re going to *leave me here?*” another of them said in a whining, panicked tone that I hoped sounded nothing like me.

“You’re to be executed,” the jailor said. “I can’t let you go; I’m sorry.”

The three goblins looked at one another, and some wordless communication must have passed between them, because two of them immediately shifted their forms and began to climb the walls. The third remained seated, leaning back against the wall, watching me. I stared back at him, looked into my own eyes from across the cell.

“Aren’t you going to go?” we said at the same time, in the exact same tone.

I stared at him, and he stared at me.

We both whispered, “Tuo.”

“Come on!” the jailor called down. “We don’t have much time!”

I’m staying, said Tuo’s voice in my mind. *Say it.*

“I’m staying,” he and I said at once.

“Begging your pardon, Child of Ru,” said the jailor, “but you will die if you stay down there.”

“Please go,” I begged Tuo, even as he begged me the same. “I’ll be safe down here. Go!”

“Stop it!” said the jailor, clearly beginning to panic. “Child of Ru, if I let you die, the mob will draw and quarter me! You have to come out. Please! The precinct is burning!” She began to weep, sinking to her knees by the grate. “Ah, Ru, what do I do? What do I do?”

Tell her to lower the chain.

“Lower the chain,” we said. “It seems we must leave together or not at all.”

“There’s no time for this,” sobbed the jailor, rising to her feet. “I’m sorry; Ru forgive me.” With that, she fled.

Bewildered and weeping myself now, I moved to Tuo to give him my hands and help him to his feet. He stood, exactly my height; my own eyes stared into mine. He did not let go of my hands, and when he saw my tears, his own eyes filled. For a moment I was shocked, until I realized he was only adjusting his disguise.

This was not the time nor place to say the things I most wanted to say.

“Don’t die down here, Tuo,” I whispered instead, still holding his hands. “It was a brilliant plan. But it’s over. I’ll be fine. You have to go.”

She left so that I would leave you. When she sees I am not giving in, she will return.

“You can’t be sure of that.”

Of course I can.

“Please, Tuo, go.”

You say this as you grip my hands more tightly.

I let them go and turned away, pacing toward the center of the cell and staring upward. He followed me and did the same. The dim light reflected off of the tears on his cheeks. My cheeks.

“Why are you doing this?” I whispered to him. “Have you not caused enough chaos?”

I would preserve your life a while longer.

“Why? Your kind aren’t capable of love. I’ve never been anything but a tool to you.”

Such disdain for tools! Small wonder that everything you build falls apart.

I struck him a brisk blow to the cheekbone. He neither avoided nor deflected it, but the relaxed, economical way he caught his balance afterward suggested that he had been expecting it. I resisted the urge to press my knuckles to my mouth, letting my hand fall to my side.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not looking at him.

Regret is wasteful.

Above, the door opened. I heard the jailor's footfalls and then the grinding sound of the heavy grate being moved aside.

* * *

The extent of the fire suggested that it had been set on purpose, by a crazed mob running through with torches. Even on the driest of days, a fire could not have spread through the precinct so quickly. The air was thick with smoke, and Tuo swooned the moment he exited the building. I tried to catch him, but he shifted form as he lost consciousness, slipping through my arms and the rough robe the jailor had given him and landing in a glossy black heap at my feet.

The jailor and I locked eyes. The game was over.

"I don't know who you are," she said, "or why the High Seeress wants you dead, but a Child of Ru has risked his life for you. I will row you out of here myself."

* * *

Once we were clear of the worst of the smoke, Tuo regained consciousness and sat up, as serene and unruffled as if I had not just been cradling his limp form in my arms. He shifted seemingly effortlessly into the form I had known ten years ago, the gaunt poet with tangled hair, and took the discarded robe I had laid across my lap, reaching up to pull it on over his head. I looked away from the flawlessly human flex and stretch of muscles under his pale skin.

At Tuo's quiet request, the jailor rowed us through Starlight Gate and to a dock outside the city wall, near the Children's Causeway. Tuo helped me up the slippery stairs, and the jailor gave the both of us a deep bow before rowing away.

Tuo walked to the end of the dock and paused there, gazing out over the water. I started to follow him, then stopped myself.

"Now that I've done what you needed," I called to him, "I suppose I'm allowed to die?"

He did not look at me. He spoke aloud in his flawless Jiun-Shi accent, but his voice was barely audible. "You are human. You will die whether I allow it or not."

"And it will make no difference to you."

He turned and devoured the distance between us, seizing my jaw in his hand and looming over me in a way that would have looked, from a distance, like a show of anger. But his eyes were as tranquil as the lake.

"Stop," he said, and brushed my lips with his, not quite a kiss. His grip on my jaw was punishingly tight, and I told myself that this was why I did not pull away. "You have so little time," he said, hovering over my mouth. "Why do you spend it this way? Why do you *all* spend it this way? You throw yourself, again and again, onto a knife I have never concealed."

“I’ve tasted passion,” I said, “ and I’ve come to feel I deserve it.”

“The woman at the Temple.” There was no heat in the statement; it was merely a clarification of fact.

“Yes. I’ll confess it was satisfying. There is too much of the Betrayer in me.”

He released me and stepped back, smiling a little. “The god of truth was false to Ru, but Ru is true to him.”

“What? What blasphemy is this?”

He arched a brow at me until I heard the absurdity of my own accusation.

“You imply that Ru is still loyal to the Betrayer,” I said. “But why would a goddess of change be constant?”

“There is nothing constant about loyalty,” said Tuo. “If your shadow stayed constant, you would lose it by living.”

“Who are you lecture on loyalty, when you’ve left a string of broken women behind you?”

“I did not break them. They broke themselves against me. Just as you are doing now.”

I looked into his eyes, trying to reframe his history in light of what he was telling me. Each of his women had left him, either by suicide or abandonment, unable to bear the sight of his blank loveless eyes. It was his lack of mourning that had made him seem disloyal, the way he had moved so swiftly each

time to a new lover. Each time except one. A current ran through me at the realization.

“Why was I different?” I asked him. “Why, when I left, did you not find another lover?”

He looked at me for such a long moment that I realized with a shock that I had actually confused him. At last he spoke, with the air of a man giving up on a particularly difficult riddle.

“When did you leave me?” he asked.

I must have looked at him, baffled, for twice as long. But then I understood how very differently the same tale had played out for him and for me. I was at the same time humiliated and chastened, angry and weak-kneed with futile tenderness. I gave a shaky laugh.

“I deserve a lover who doesn’t casually misplace me for a decade,” I said.

“I placed you quite deliberately.”

“It amounts to the same,” I said. “Your loyalty is—moving, but it isn’t enough.”

“Farewell then,” he said, and turned to gaze back out over the water.

I let out an animal cry of frustration and pushed him into the lake. He made no effort to stop me and disappeared beneath its surface with a great splash. I watched the water

rock itself back to sleep where he had fallen and waited to see if he would resurface, but he did not.

“Tuo,” I said to the water. “Come back.” But I knew he would not, for he had not done the leaving. “You know I won’t go back to her,” I said. “You know it’s you that I love.”

I couldn’t tell if he heard me. It didn’t matter. It was I who needed to hear it, as a woman needs to hear that her business is bankrupt, her house burned, her child stillborn. A woman or a man needs to hear these things, so that she can begin to assess the damage, shoulder the weight, and move forward.

I slipped off my robe, took a deep breath, and dived at a shallow angle into the lake. I hit bottom almost immediately. The waters there were not deep, but the cold was shocking. A chaos of bubbles burst from my startled mouth. I felt myself lose buoyancy as my lungs emptied, and I settled face first onto the soft lake bottom. For a moment all was dark and icy-still as I fought to keep my nose and mouth sealed against the mud.

Then I felt hands gently turning me over. I resisted the urge to open my eyes. A slippery palm, cold as the water around it, pressed against my mouth, fingers sealing my nostrils shut. I twitched and kicked, panicking as my body began to plead for air.

Do you want to live? It was Tuo’s voice, echoing in my mind as though he had just spoken.

I don't want to live alone.

Would you rather die with company?

My white-hot need for breath made the question intensely immediate and relevant. It also clarified my answer.

No, I said. No. Let me go.

What will you do?

I tried not to panic; it only made me need air more urgently. *I don't know. I will find a place to start again. I have years left.*

So few.

Enough. Let me go.

No. I felt him draw me against his small, cold body, twining his limbs around me, holding me down. I thrashed with terror at first, but even as I did so I understood that he did not mean to kill me, only to make me fight for life, value it. A profound, childlike trust melted through me, and I relaxed in his arms.

There, he said, and though I was fading from consciousness, I could almost swear that I felt him tremble.

Without warning his magic rearranged my skin and my bones and my flesh, shattering me and putting me back together. He was still there in my mind, but without words: watching, questioning, studying.

Only when he released me and I drew in a deep instinctive breath did I realize what he had done. I gasped the muddy lake water with as much relief as I would have drawn the night air. He had lent me his shape - I breathed as a child of Ru.

If you wish to travel, he said, *this is the fastest way*. He slipped his webbed fingers between mine, and I opened my eyes. The first thing I saw was his own eyes, white as winter suns and nearly blinding. Around him, what had once been suffocating blackness was now a soft gray world, low-ceilinged and infinitely broad, a world I saw as much through my skin as my eyes.

Tuo tugged me southward toward the wall, toward the Starlight Canal, which led through the city to the Weeping River. I could feel the immensity of the world's water at once, as though every distant shore reached out at once through that liquid web to beckon me.

I watched the movement of Tuo's strangely jointed legs and tail, and I mimicked him until I found my own rhythm. Then, as I sensed we were of one mind about our destination, I let go his hand. The two of us glided side by side through the water, heading for the sea.

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THE NIGHT BAZAAR FOR WOMEN BECOMING REPTILES

by Rachael K. Jones

In the desert, all the footprints lead into Oasis, and none lead out again. They come for water, and once they find it, no one returns to the endless sand. The city is a prison with bars of thirst and heat.

Outside the gates the reptiles roam: asps and cobras, great lazing skinks, tortoises who lie down to doze in the heat. Where they go as they pad and swish and claw their way through the sand, no one knows, save the women who look over the walls and feel the deep itching pressure in their bones, the weight of skin in need of sloughing.

* * *

Though Hester has sold asp eggs at the night bazaar for five years, she has never become a reptile herself, no matter what she tries.

She takes eggs wherever she finds them. She has eaten those of skinks and geckos. She has tasted sun-warmed iguana eggs. She has traced water-snake paths through Oasis and dug for their nests. She has braved the king cobra's sway and dart,

and devoured its offspring too. Once, she found an alligator egg, and poked a hole in the top and sucked out the insides. But no matter what she tries, Hester has never broken free and escaped the city like the other women do.

She even tried the asp eggs once, the ones that were her livelihood. It was the day after Marick the mango seller asked to take her as his sunside lover. Hester left home and dug asp eggs from the clay by the river. The sun spilled long red tongues across the sand, over the footprints always entering the city, never leaving, and Hester's skin itched all over, and her flesh grew hot and heavy, and she longed for cool sand sliding against her bare belly.

One, two, three eggs into her mouth, one sharp bite, and the clear, viscous glair ran down her throat. The shells were tougher than she expected. They tasted tart, like spoiled goat's milk. She waited for the change, but the sun crawled higher and nothing happened.

She has never told anyone about the day with the asp eggs. Not her mother the batik dyer, who spatters linen in hot running wax and crafts her famous purple cloth. Not Marick her sunside lover, who sells indigo cactus flowers and mango slices on a wooden tray. Not Shayna the butcher, her moonside lover, whose honey-gold verses roll from her tongue, smooth

and rounded as sand-polished pebbles. Hester hasn't told them, because they are why she longs to leave.

* * *

The night bazaar meets on a different street each week. Each morning before, at sunrise, Hester finds three blue chalk symbols sketched on the doorjamb behind the perfumed jasmine bush. Sometimes she sees a falcon, a crane beneath a full moon, and a viper climbing a triple-columned temple portico. This means *We assemble where the Street of Upholsterers intersects the Street of Priests, when the Crane rises*. Or it might be a hand holding an eye, a wavy river, and a kneeling woman, which would mean *Meet where Oasis runs to mud, and beware the police*. Hester memorizes the message and wipes off the chalk with her sleeve.

They meet in secret, because the night bazaar was outlawed when the emperor stepped down from her throne and became a snapping turtle. No one knew if she chose to change, or if a traitor had slipped her the eggs unawares. These days, vendors caught selling such goods moonside are made to drink poison sunside. Even possessing the eggs earns a speedy execution. But in Oasis, women at their wits' end have always eaten the eggs, and fled.

Hester packs the asp eggs in damp red clay and binds them, in sets of three. Any more would be a waste, and any less,

insufficient to cause the change. At the meeting point, booths have already popped up in the dark. Hester drapes her bamboo frame in purple and gold batik, fringed with the shiny onyx hair of some young customer who bought eggs long ago.

She lays out packets in three reed baskets and lights a lamp that burns tallow made from women's fat. At moonrise, Hester's chin lifts, and over vendors hawking their wares, she sings:

Eggs of the asp
collected riverside
in the new moon dark
Come, buy, and eat!

Opal-white eggs
cool as desert's night
against your belly
Come, buy, and eat!

The customers arrive, ghosts cut from darkness by moonlight's blade. They are no two alike. They are old and young. They are blind and deaf and whole of body. They have hats and sandals, sunburns and calluses. They come singing and weeping and completely silent. The vendors sing to them all, a cacophony and a tapestry. Hester's bones buzz from the

dissonance, her skin as a quivering lizard bolting from rock to rock.

On slow nights, Hester bargains for rare eggs, which she devours on the spot. They never work. *A waste of good coin*, the merchants say, clucking their tongues, but they take payment anyway. *Traders should not eat their wares*. Most vendors prosper from the illegal trade, but Hester barely makes ends meet because she spends so much on eggs. Shayna, her moonside lover, often teases her about her bad business sense.

Marick never asks what she does moonside. By this, Hester has come to fear him. He does not ask because he already knows.

* * *

Hester has to wait for sundown to pack for the next bazaar, since Marick won't leave for work before then. People often compliment her attentive sunside lover—how he won't leave her side until sunset requires it. When they are alone, he keeps his distance. He has not once touched her, not as a lover does. Perhaps he mistakes her distance for demure shyness, the way she lies still in bed, how she curls into herself during the midday nap.

Ever since they met, Hester has a recurring dream where her body is a golden pot with an amethyst lid and she an asp inside it. In the dream, Marick plays the oboe, charming her

out with music. She slithers to him, and he grabs her and devours her.

When she wakes, she feels hollow and hungry inside. Her mouth tastes sour, like the eggs that will not change her.

Truthfully, her shoulders relax when Marick leaves for moonside life, and she can go to the night bazaar. Hester wonders if Marick's moonside lover is any different from her. Perhaps he loves Marick better. Perhaps he likes mangoes. Perhaps Marick touches him. Perhaps he is less afraid than she is.

* * *

Hester's first customer that night wears a priest's robe tied all wrong, knotted at the shoulder like they do on the Street of Blacksmiths to keep their sleeves from the hot anvil. People often pretend to be another thing when they come to the night bazaar. The woman's fingers stroke a linen packet, thumb caressing the round bulges.

After payment, the woman unwraps the eggs and eats them. The moon glints on her teeth. Hester cannot hear the eggs burst above the din, but her insides quiver anyway.

The woman falls into a heap before Hester's booth. Her flesh splits open and she slithers out from her own breastbone, her shining black length cutting crescents in the sand. The

newborn asp slithers through the gutter, making westward toward the desert.

Hester drags the blacksmith's sloughed-off body behind her booth for later processing. There will be more before the night's end.

They seem so sure when they approach the booth, like they know it will work for them. They often stop to browse the other wares, but their eyes slide until their fingers find the asp eggs. They do not waver. Assurance steadies their voices. She used to ask them why, back when she first started selling. *Why the bazaar? Why tonight? Why this shape?*

“Because this body has grown too tight around me.”

“Because breathing weighs me down, and I am exhausted.”

“Because each night, I dream of walking into the desert and not returning.”

“Because each morning, I watch the merchants pass into the gates, and I want to scream, ‘Stay away!’”

At the night bazaar, they shed their skin and leave as asps and tortoises and crocodiles. They pass the gates unimpeded. They go out into the desert and erase the footprints leading inward.

* * *

The night Hester met Marick, the bazaar assembled where the Street of Cobblers bisected the Street of Zither Players.

Someone must have betrayed them. Perhaps a sharp-eyed officer traced the steady stream of determined lizards and serpents and tortoises scampering through the gutters and under the gates and out into the darkness. A cry cut through the selling-songs: *Run! Run!*

It had happened before. It was why the booths collapsed so easily. Hester grabbed her basket and yanked the batik down. The crowd surged toward the Street of Cobblers, pressed from the rear by police with battering sticks. The cloth sheet tangled in the bamboo bars, and Hester wrestled with it.

“Hester?” It was a young policeman, stick in hand. “The batik dyer’s daughter. I would know you anywhere.” She knew him too: Marick the mango seller. Now moonside, his crooked teeth became a cobra’s fangs. “Wait. I need to speak with you.”

His boot pinned the batik sheet to the cobblestone. Hester yanked harder, heart thudding against her ribs. *Poison*, she thought. *Bloated bodies at the wall*. The sheet ripped, and she fled into the crowd.

The next day, Marick arrived at her mother’s shop with six ripe mangoes wrapped in a tattered batik scrap, and a proposition.

To mark her as his sunside lover, he gave Hester a gold earring shaped like a pot set with an amethyst for a lid. It was heavy for its size.

Marick never mentioned that night at the bazaar. What happened moonside wasn't discussed sunside. She could not tell if the coercion was deliberate or accidental on his part.

It all amounted to the same for Hester. Marick's love was a prison. His smile tightened when she glanced out the window to check the sun's position. *Test me, and you shall learn my nature*, said that tightness. His gaze followed her everywhere. She always checked the doorjamb for the chalk signs before sunrise and erased them. Propriety forced him to stay away until dawn touched the rooftop.

When they were alone together, she mirrored his smile, and the woman who gathered asp eggs curled in on herself, deep down where no one could ever find her sunside. She dreamed and dreamed of being consumed, of escape.

* * *

Near moonset, as the crowd thins to a trickle and the reptiles depart, a hand rests on Hester's shoulder. "Never trust a woman who gathers asp eggs, for she may become one," Shayna whispers, breath warm and licorice-scented.

"They don't work for me, I'm afraid." Hester turns so Shayna's kiss falls on her cheek.

"You cannot become what you already are," she jokes. Shayna stops trying to steal kisses and counts the shedded bodies. Eight women lie bisected and cold: a good night.

Shayna's blades flick and twist, opening seams, probing apart joints. The hair goes to the weavers, the bones to the lemon tree growers and to the scribes, and the meat goes to the vulture breeders and the candlemakers.

The two women work quickly, distributing the haul to runners who buy for the sunside merchants. If any time remains, they slip off to Shayna's bower on the Street of Butchers for a few hours in the dark together before sunrise. Their infant son, too young for a name yet, sleeps in a basket nearby. He has hair like damp sand. "He gets it from his father," Shayna explains when Hester pets his soft head. Shayna talks about her sunside lover more than anyone Hester has ever met. It was especially tiresome during her pregnancy last year.

Hester rolls over in the hammock in the dark. "Shayna, have you ever wished to leave Oasis?"

Shayna turns, and the hammock sways. "I prefer not dying of thirst and exposure, thank you. I like my life here. I have my family, and business. Why?"

"Sometimes I wonder where the reptiles go. They say there is an ocean out there, beyond the desert."

Shayna yawns wide. "You spend too much time at the night bazaar. You should start a proper family. When are you going to give me a moonside baby of my own?"

“You sound like my mother.” With Marick and Shayna in her life, it is what everyone expects. Children thrive best with two mothers and a father. Hester only has one mother, though. Perhaps that is why she cannot become a reptile.

“You haven’t answered my question,” Shayna points out, stirring, and the baby wakes and cries.

Hester climbs from the hammock and rocks him until he calms. Outside, the dark sky is gray and heavy. Softly it starts to rain. Too late, she realizes her mistake. “Oh, damnation! It’s morning, Shayna.” She dresses and sprints out the door, through the rain, toward the Street of Dyers.

An oil lamp sits lit on the stoop when Hester gets home, and the door is ajar. Marick, home from his moonside life, curls in bed with his back toward the door. Hester listens to his breathing for ten heartbeats, slow and regular like wind in the olive tree branches. When she is sure he is asleep, she stows her basket of asp eggs beneath the bed and lies down beside him. Marick always smells like incense and cinnamon at dawn, the way Hester smells faintly of butcher’s blood. In this way, they bring their moonside lovers home with them. At sunrise, the scents make a family.

She dreams of Shayna and Marick and the unknown men who love them. Of her mother, alone by sunside, and Hester a child only half-mothered, now half-mother again to the

nameless baby with the damp sand hair. If only she had hatched from an egg. Reptiles needed no mothers or father. They birthed themselves and named themselves and no one kept them from the desert.

She is dreaming of the desert when she wakes in the evening, the day's heat slipping away. Marick isn't in bed, nor is he in the kitchen cutting up mangoes. It is only then she realizes: in her hurry to return from Shayna's home, she forgot to erase the chalk from the doorjamb. Marick's muddy footprints squat below that spot, the jasmine branches forced back, but he is already gone.

So is her bundle of asp eggs.

* * *

The moment Hester notices, she ransacks their home, searching for the missing eggs. She strips the bed and shakes out the linen sheets. She dumps the reed baskets piled by the door. She plunges both hands elbow deep into the refuse heap outside the window. Worms ooze around her knuckles.

Never in all this time has she left evidence of the night bazaar. Never so much as a glance toward the doorjamb and its tiny chalk symbols. Her bones quiver inside the bag of her skin. The sky is streaked angry red, and moonrise bears down with vicious weight. Marick could return at any time with the other policemen, with the poison.

Her fingers dig into her palms so hard they draw blood. It is against every rule for him to police her by day: against law, against custom, against decency. But poison makes no such distinctions, and if he found the eggs, she would have no defense. She could beg Shayna to hide her, but how would she explain it without exposing her sunside life?

Hester wraps her head in batik and hurries to the western wall, where the reptiles emerge in a thin, long line across the sands. Above them, bodies swing to and fro over the gates, dry and mummified by weather and time. It was always a major affair when they hung out a new one. Marick took Hester to watch once. He held her hand, and neither smiled.

If she could be that kind of creature. If she could cross the desert. If she could break free of the spidersilk bonds Oasis imposed, the thin invisible obligations tying woman to man to woman to child, a web which caught and snared.

Hester finds herself at home again, standing before the darkened door. Behind the jasmine bush, she finds the chalk symbols: a pot, an oboe, and an egg.

We gather in the alley on the Street of Midwives where the Emperor was born.

She considers going into the house, lying down in the dark, and waiting for Marick, but her feet are already drawing her back toward the night bazaar.

* * *

Hester's money buys her half a dozen crocodile eggs, two cobra eggs, and a large speckled monitor lizard egg still warm to the touch. She swallows them down and will not let her stomach vomit them up, no matter how much her guts twist. Her head buzzes like when she drinks too much palm wine. Her hands tingle as if the poison courses inside her veins already. She hurries from booth to booth, begging for more eggs, but her colleagues only cluck their tongues and offer her rose petal tea, or silken shawls, or cool hands to the forehead.

"I am not sick," Hester insists. "I need to buy more eggs." But they will not sell them to her.

At last she hunches behind her booth, shivering in the chill, waiting, hoping yet for transformation. She has no asp eggs to sell, so the customers pass her by, until at last one does not.

Despite his broad-brimmed veiled hat, Hester recognizes Marick, when he sets the missing eggs on the booth's counter. He smells like incense and cinnamon. "Do not try to run now. Not this time."

Fear twists her gut hard, and all the raw eggs roil in her stomach. She gags and vomits into the sand behind the booth. The slimy white glair pools with her bile, studded with chunks of undigested shell. Her last hope of transformation, absorbed

into the sand. The desert will take even this before it will take her. As her hope dribbles away, so does the fear. Hester laughs a short, sharp hyena bark.

“Everyone pretends to be something different at the night bazaar, Marick. What are you supposed to be?”

He hesitates, then twitches the veil up. Rose-colored moonlight bathes his face, a rare lunar eclipse. He looks small and fragile as a pressed flower, not at all like the man she has feared for five years.

He leans forward, voice low and secret. “I need to know how the eggs work. Is there a spell?”

Hester snorts. “You want our secrets before you betray me. You think you can ask, and I will tell you, as if this is not my bazaar and you are not a customer. As though the price is not my life.”

Marick shakes his head hard. “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong, Hester. Have the police found the night bazaar since we became lovers? Do you think that is a coincidence? Whatever I am, I am no traitor.”

It has the ring of truth to it, though she does not want to trust him. “What do you want from me? You take me for a lover and do not touch me. You follow me here and do not arrest me. You say you’ve been protecting me. What do you want?”

He casts his eyes toward the gutter, which is littered with tiny reptile prints. When he speaks, his voice is not a mango-seller's cries or a policeman's growl but trembling and weak, a flute cracked and leaking air. "I am done, trying to live in this body. It doesn't fit. Not with dayside lovers, or nightside lovers. Touches do not reach me. I wear my own flesh like a cloak, and I am alone inside. It isn't mine. Maybe I was supposed to be a reptile? A woman? Half a mother to complete some child? I do not know. I only know that if I don't shed this body, I will suffocate in it. Do you understand?"

He sounds just as sure as every woman who has come before. "You just eat them, Marick. There is no spell. The eggs don't work for men, though."

He shrugs, and the corner of his mouth lifts. "I will try, anyway. I don't know any other way." Marick unwraps the eggs and rubs off the clay. He cracks them one by one, sucks out their insides, chews and swallows the shells. Around his ankles, women skitter and slither westward on scaled claw and belly.

Hester waits for his disappointment, but instead he collapses before her booth. An asp springs from his breastbone, a fine golden-eyed creature damp from heart's-blood, and it joins the reptile exodus in the gutter. As she watches him go, a hollow place inside her rips open, as though the last of her hope has also left her and slithered into the desert.

Mechanically she drags his unwanted body behind the booth. It has been many years since this chore unsettled her, since a customer's discarded eyes fixed upon her face, but Marick was her dayside lover, the only one she had. For the first time since she joined the bazaar, a body becomes a corpse.

* * *

When Shayna sees Marick, she steadies her head between her hands. "Oh, Hester, what have you done? The law might turn a blind eye to the night bazaar as long as we're discreet, but it won't ignore a dead policeman."

"He isn't dead. He became an asp, Shayna!"

The two women slump together behind the booth while Hester confesses everything. "What did he do? Why did it work for him?"

Shayna jerks her chin toward the sky. "Eclipses are strange. Moonside and sunside join hands and pass. Perhaps the desert calls to its own."

Hester curls up tight and tries not to retch. No eggs for her, because she is already empty inside. She does not say, *Why won't it work for me?*

Shayna holds her at arm's length. "You think I don't know. You think I don't pay attention." She undoes Marick's earring, holds the matching golden pot to Hester's ear. "Tell me, lover,

what makes you so afraid? Afraid enough to piss away your profit on all those eggs? Scared enough to leave me too?"

"You are so happy here," Hester manages through hitching breath.

Shayna's eyebrows pinch together like when she is considering the best way to slice open a ribcage. "Maybe the eggs do not work for you because you do not need them. You're practically an asp already. You spend enough time among their nests."

Somehow, the thought comforts her. "And you, Shayna? What are you?"

Shayna's smile is all teeth. "I am a butcher, of course."

They drag Marick's shell into an alley. In the night bazaar's bustle, no one notices. Hester grabs the booth's batik fabric and drapes it over the ground. Shayna is a good butcher, well-practiced and quick, skilled at separating muscle from skin and meat from bone. The waxed batik absorbs the blood in brown-bordered swirls.

Shayna cuts, and Hester sorts the pieces. Hester lays Marick's heart in the pile for the vulture breeders. It is soft and round like a ripe mango on a plate, plum-red as an amethyst, tattered where the asp ripped through the flesh.

As the heart drips onto the batik, Hester sees maybe there is another path to freedom, one she never considered before

Marick transformed. How she could leave behind the mass of bodies—the heralds, the upholsterers, the weavers, the potmakers, the herbalists, the papyrus-rollers, the inksetters—all the close, warm mammalian musks, the raised voices, the songs and tambourines. How she could slip beneath the gates, slither into the desert, the sand burning her belly into hard scales; her tongue flickering, testing the air. Some irresistible pull inside knows exactly where lies the ocean she has never seen, beating on a far shore. Her flesh feels heavy and cumbersome, and she thinks she could shake it loose, leave it behind to mummify in the heat and sand.

If this other path will work for her.

Hester saves Marick's heart carefully, wrapped tight in stained batik until the blood no longer soaks through. They sell the meat and bones to the vendors, but the skin they burn at Shayna's bower on the Street of Butchers. Its wetness makes the fire smoke and sputter.

"I can hide you for tonight, but you'll have to leave tomorrow," Shayna says as they wash up at home. "We can slow down their investigation, but they will find you. There were witnesses. Someone will talk eventually."

"Yes, of course. I understand." Hester inhales Shayna's familiar licorice smell, and longing prickles down her back. If this path works for her, there will be no more sunside or

moonside, no lovers to fear and tend to and worry over. There will be no night bazaar, because in the desert, everyone is a reptile. Asps are asps by day or night.

* * *

Hester waits until Shayna sleeps before she draws her last gift in chalk on the doorjamb: two stones, a dead woman's eye, and an asp. *Find me at the wall where criminals are made to drink poison, and come alone.* Then she kisses her sleeping lover and their moonside baby, and she leaves.

At this hour, the night bazaar must be packing up. A few snakes and lizards skitter through the gutters. Hester follows them to the gouge in the sand where they have dug a hole beneath the wall. They slither and wriggle and just slip through. Overhead, ropes creak as the mummified corpses swing.

Before she can lose her courage, Hester unwraps Marick's heart, sliced into strips like a mango, her final hope on a wooden tray.

Hearts are eggs, she realized when Shayna slit open Marick's body and piled his organs on the stained batik. Hester wonders what will hatch from hers.

Hester eats it, piece by piece. If this fails, the police will find her. Her body will swing overhead with the rest, always within sight of the desert but never able to go there.

The heart slides into her belly, easier than glair, and settles in the empty space which once held fear. The quivering in her bones becomes a violent shudder. A change is coming, churning her like a sandstorm. She slips and twists inside her own flesh, full to the brim, a straining wineskin, a sated leech, an egg about to burst.

It does not hurt much, the hatching, the shedding. No worse than picking off a scab. When it is over, she slides free onto her segmented belly, the sand warm, the wind drying her damp newborn back. Her tongue tests the air, and tastes water far to the west, beyond the husk of her old body, through the gouge beneath the wall.

Over the wall the bodies swing and creak on their ropes, but they are only shells, and the poison rests between her teeth now, a gift for those she chooses to kiss. Oasis shrinks toy-like under her unblinking reptilian gaze. It is a nest, a golden pot with an amethyst lid, trapping asps until the music plays, but it cannot hold her anymore. All over the city, people pitch and turn inside themselves, sliding against the smooth walls of their prison, but only a few buck against the shell and break it.

But the desert is a city too, vaster than Oasis, and the reptiles are its people. Hester tastes them on the wind. Blood and incense, jasmine and mango, they call to her, all the ones who went before, the peasants and merchants, the old women

and the young, the Emperor and Marick all, now fully themselves, unchanging day or night. Their prints erase the footsteps trailing into Oasis. Their bodies are arrows which point to the sea. They are waiting for her. It is almost time to go.

Hester waits beside her cooling body until sunrise breaks upon the city. Oasis turns over in its old familiar rhythm. Moonside lovers kiss and part. Footsteps hurry from house to house, and chalk symbols are found and read and quickly erased. And then, for the first time sunside, Hester sees her: Shayna the moonside butcher, come to unseam her body.

Hester knows Shayna will sell the parts piece by piece, a last providence for her Oasis family. A family can live for a month on the price a human body would fetch. Her hair will go to the weavers, her bones to feed the lemon tree groves, her fat to fuel the lamps, everything given back to the city that bore her.

Except her heart.

Shayna saves it in the same scrap of bloodstained batik that once held Marick's. Hester hopes it will be enough.

But now, the part of her that cannot be bought or sold slips beneath the wall, tastes the distant water, and goes to find it.

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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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