



Issue #209, Eighth Anniversary Double-  
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## THE BOY WHO WOULD NOT BE ENCHANTED

by A.M. Dellamonica

The first time I stowed away on *Nightjar*, I was twelve.

She sailed into my beautiful city of Cindria, a swift cutter with pearly sails, dwarfed by the great ships of the trading fleet and the pleasure craft of our courtiers. Smaller, neater in aspect, without ornamentation, she slipped into port by night, like a doctor calling on a rich man who'd caught something embarrassing.

Aboard her were the woman they called The Hag, accompanied as always by *Nightjar's* captain, Garland Parrish. The two of them visited our island's ruler, our Conto, bringing with them a whiff of faraway lands and espionage, government plots and excitement.

Irresistible, no? I'd had it in mind since childhood—sail away with them, just once, and catch a glimpse of adventure. So I offered to help my cousin Franceso take a delivery of sausage out to the crew, then lost myself in the hold when he was haggling with the cook.

I hadn't counted on being a bad sailor.

Garland found me belowdecks the first night, heaving into a barrel. He didn't say anything, just hitched himself onto another a nearby trunk. He waited until the sickness passed, then passed me a flask of water sweetened with mint.

"Well," I said, determined to make the best of it, though in truth I was crushed he'd seen me in such a state. I wasn't in love with Garland—I knew well he was too old for me and inclined to women—but he had a face so infernally bewitching that you had to care for his good opinion. "The weather must be very bad, no?"

"No," he said, with a kind smile.

"Are you going to take me back?"

"You know, Tonio, when I was growing up on Issle Morta, there was a—"

"Teeth!" I protested. "You wouldn't parable at a man who's just sacrificed his dignity to the sea?"

"Consider it your fare," he said.

"Could I not merely work for you?"

"Oh, yes," he said, untroubled. "You might audit our books —"

"I keep accounts at home."

"—and teach me to speak Erinthian. Now, one of the monks had a turtle he kept as a pet. It had fallen prey to something, probably a specter, when it was young; its flippers

had been badly gnawed. It swam poorly and on land... well. Moss grew faster, we used to say. But Brother Cray kept a pond for it, and built a ramp of stones so it could get in and out to sun itself.

“Every dawn Veracity—the turtle’s name was Veracity—”

“What else would a monk name a turtle?”

“Later in life, he had one named Doom.”

“The question was rhetorical, Garland.”

“Veracity would drag itself out of the pond, up the ramp, across the herb garden, to the lane at the edge of the pond. He’d set himself up in a wagon-wheel rut, even though the sunlight there was no better than at the pond. Brother Cray, who was very old by that time, and had few duties, would watch the lane. Whenever someone drove by, he would run out of the cottage to the lane, and if he could direct the wagon around the turtle, he would, and if the cart was too big he’d lift Veracity and haul him back to the pond, and then he’d apologize—”

“To the cart driver?”

“To the turtle. He’d get perhaps two hours of peace before the turtle made it back out there.”

By this time, I was wondering if there wasn’t something more in my stomach to bring up, just to make him pause. It was the monks’ fault, this habit of sermonizing. The folk of

Issle Morta serve the dead, mostly, who can't interrupt their monologues or beg for mercy.

“I asked Brother Cray if he wasn't afraid one day he'd miss a cart, and lose Veracity, and he said he was. I offered to fence his garden, so the turtle couldn't escape.”

“He replied, ‘If Veracity seeks the road, who are we to stop him?’”

I gave it three breaths, to make sure he'd finished, and then pushed myself upright. “This would be your way of saying you aren't going to ship me straight home.”

He held out a hand. “You can stay in a guest cabin until your stomach settles. Bring the barrel with you.”

\* \* \*

Garland in those days was too young by any sensible measure to be a ship's captain, and were he in the Fleet proper he'd have been a lieutenant at best, but *Nightjar* belonged to the one we Erinthians call The Hag, an eccentric spy named Gale Feliachild. She was old enough to be a grandmother—so said her iron hair and seawashed skin—and she dressed as plainly as a servant. Everything about her deflected notice. Her manners were quiet, and she tended to listen much and say little. But there was magic at work there, too. It was hard to fix your mind on her, and in the eye-catching company of her Captain, she might have been invisible. They could have made

a great go of picking pockets, the two of them: he could have stood in the middle of a crowded square, attracting everyone, while she robbed the city blind.

Even her crew seemed only half-aware of her presence aboard ship, deferring to Garland as though he ruled them absolutely.

She'd been magically inscribed so that she was hard to notice, and then cultivated the gift further. But instead of thieving, she'd taken to espionage.

She found me in the galley that morning, still quaffing Garland's mint-water and groaning my way through their bookkeeper's ledgers. "Did you leave a note for your mother?" she said. When I nodded she added, "You deserve to be put off in a lifeboat. You know that, don't you?"

I hung my head and attempted to look penitent. She slammed the door on her way out.

I applied myself to settling my gut—which took a humiliating number of days—learning a little about sea-craft, and having a prowl through the ship's books. Garland had been right to suspect a little pocket-lining on the part of their provisioner. As the son of shopkeepers, I was better equipped than he to find the proof.

"What'll you do?" I asked.

“Fire her,” he said. He was speaking in Erinthian, I the language of the Fleet, giving us both needed practice.

“No parables to reform a thief?”

He shook his head with obvious regret. “If she’ll steal, she’ll sell secrets.”

It made sense. “Speaking of secrets, may I know where we’re bound?”

“Verdanii,” he told me.

My heart skipped. “Kir Feliachild’s nation?”

“She’s been summoned home.”

“Might that cheer her up?”

“Pardon?”

“She seems out of sorts,” I said, and Garland looked more puzzled. “Ah! You’re saying it’s being sent for that’s upset her?”

“You’re a runaway yourself now,” he said. “The first thing you said was ‘don’t make me go home’, wasn’t it?”

“Only because I have no tales to share! The best thing about being on an adventure is the prospect of returning and telling all.”

“That’s the best thing, is it?”

I pretended not to notice his amusement. “Already I’ve written three pages to send *amia madre*, and all I’ve seen is the bottom of a bucket and your poor form at inventory.”



He broke out one of those dazzling grins. “You’re a lucky man, Tonio.”

“Surely, Kir, you long to return to Issle Morta?” But as soon as I said it, it seemed a ridiculous proposition. What would Garland do with himself in a graveyard?

“No, Tonio,” he replied. “But I can’t wait to see Verdanii.”

\* \* \*

Everyone has heard of the great city of Moscasipay. She lies off the Verdanni shore, her thousand towers erected on a range of sea mounts, built on platforms that raise the buildings above the reach of the tides. They’re strung together by bridges, those great towers, and enchanted to withstand winter storms.

The beach beyond Moscasipay is set aside for wild horses—the Verdanii are mad for their mustangs—and ceremonies. Beyond the shore are grain fields that feed that nation and many another. The Verdanii give a quarter of each harvest to the Fleet and another quarter to lesser nations in need.

The great Prahay lighthouse towers above the harbor. It is a ceramic sculpture of a young man clad in bearskins, facing east and raising aloft the carved and glowing sphere that serves as a marker to the ships in Northwater. His feet rest astride a four-faced clock—the Worldclock, they call it—which beats the hour in the chamber below the light.

I had seen a wood-cut of the Moscasipay harbor once, and there is a painting of the lighthouse in one of my cousin's shops. Neither picture prepared me for the size of that porcelain man, for the shock of meeting his glazed, lake-blue eyes and feeling the Worldclock beneath him, the resonant tick-tock-tick blanketed in the normal sound of sea and wind, a rhythm, not really heard, that nevertheless came up through the timbers of *Nightjar* and seemed to find fault with the speed of my pulse.

\* \* \*

*Dearest Mama,*

*The relations who have summoned Kir Gale have apparently done so with no more object than to treat her rudely: there was no great homecoming, nobody even to meet her. We tied up near the tower where her family resides, like a mailship, and then rode a climbing box up to the twentieth story of the structure. Yes, twenty! I think you'd find the height appalling and unnatural. It is like standing in the sky: I see Northwater stretching so far that at times I almost imagine I will catch sight of their nearest neighbor—which the charts say is Murdocco—or perhaps even a glimpse of the great nation of Sylvanna, far to the south.*

*Gale's kin seemed almost surprised to see her, and offered us rooms with an air of having been inconvenienced. It's the*

*spell, of course, which Garland tells me was written because of a prophecy laid upon Gale as an infant. Their soothsayers predicted she was, one day, to be abruptly slain. Her family held her out of heart's reach, and now that she's lived to a perfectly reasonable age, they're ashamed of themselves. As they should be! But it's too late now—the walls are built, and the regret only mortars them. She puts a decent face on it, but I have never seen our Hag so uncomfortable.*

*The young women are, naturally, delighted by the sight of Garland and have set about trying to find out if he has any interest in them, asking his opinion on all manner of sailing issues, natural history, and begging him to help him practice their Fleetspeak. He's fortunate his skin is so dark: I expect he's had a fiery burn on his cheeks from the moment we made landfall. There's no great sense of modesty, among the women or the men either, and one of the girls is a bit free with her remarks and hands. We are sharing a room, he and I, to keep their nighttime invasions at bay. I suppose this means I have been promoted from auditor to guard dog.*

*I see now why the two of them seem so at home in Cindria, where the Hag can bask in Conto's affection or disappear into the crowds, as she chooses, and Garland is lost among all of those who come to our spas and beauty scribes*

*to purchase, via magic, what birth bestowed upon him so exuberantly, and for free.*

\* \* \*

Kir Gale wasn't one to sit around having starchy tea parties with her kin and waiting for them to reconcile themselves to her arrival. She gave it an afternoon and then, with a "Come on, my boys!" she took us to a great endless market on the tower roofs. There I bought scarves for my sisters and whistles for their children. Garland got a book on natural history.

Next morning, Gale decided we'd take a ferry to the Verdan shore and hike inland. We loaded up a satchel each, borrowed the smarter of the family dogs, and managed to shed one of the two persistent girls on Garland's tail. Thus provisioned, we made dawn landfall on a gritty salt marsh.

It was the first time I'd been on solid ground for weeks, but my body didn't seem to know it; some part of me kept up a pendular, side-to-side slosh. I stared at the first wisps of morning sunlight as they merged with the light of Prahay, saw the shallows of the sea steaming against the sand. Northwater is gray, even by day; our own Cauldron is so much bluer. I wondered how water could wear such different clothes when the rising sun above them looked just the same.

The three of us roamed the beach, turning over the stones, enjoying the brisk air.

“Tonio, here.” Gale bent, scooping up a piece of driftwood clad in swirls of seashell. When I took it, the weight surprised me; it had petrified.

“Is this wandstone?”

“Yes. It only wants polishing.”

I said. “You should give this to Garland.”

She held up another chunk, grinning. “Plenty for everyone.”

“The Verdan beaches are littered with good luck,” I said. “Is that what the saying means?”

“Very literal, isn’t it?” She shed her jacket abruptly, turning her face into the chilly wind.

“You’re sweating, Kir,” I said. “Are you unwell?”

“Just hot, Tonio,” she said. “It’ll pass.”

“You’ve taken the fire to your belly; it’s happening to my aunt.” I gave this statement a casual air, as though I understood the mystery of women. In fact, I’d gotten slapped twice before I gave up asking.

“It’s why we’re here: I’m croning, and my family’s caught out because they never thought I’d live this long. They owe me gifts and a tattoo and a new name too. The embarrassment is almost more than they can bear.”

“Failing to die is your revenge for their neglect?”

“Don’t be operatic, child,” she said, wiping her soaked brow and grinning. “It would be petty if I thought it served them right. Our Captain would disapprove, were I so small-minded.”

Garland had been entirely captivated by a mare who’d taken it into her head to show him her new colt, but Gale had raised her voice, and indeed he stiffened, ever so slightly, into that monkish expression of his. “Surely the reason they forgot is the spell that—”

“Oh, don’t you dare make excuses for them,” Gale said. “I’ll take you home and we’ll see how *that* goes.”

He coughed out a polite laugh, not finding it funny at all. The mare tossed her head.

*Runaways*, I thought. I suppose I’d thought he hadn’t meant it. But I was very young then, and had seen nothing of the world. Now that I am seventeen and fit the breeches I’d aspired to, five years ago, I understand it better.

Gale turned inland, hitching her pack. “Come on, my boys. Wonders yet to see.”

We caught a train—a train!—inland, up the hill from the beach. A mere two hours aboard brought us to a new kind of sea, long waves crowned in the brightest, most yellow flowers I’ve seen, and they extended...

I have never seen so much land at a stretch, unbroken by tree or mountain. I'd spent my life between the slopes of our great volcano and the shores of the Cauldron. Cindria's farms are contained and terraced. We grow grapes and olives and figs on little hedge-bound scraps of soil.

But this! I looked on those fields, flags and streams of grain and canola, and thought that nobody from Erinth would ever believe me. I couldn't describe the vast expanse of Verdanii in any way that made sense. Despite all the songs and poems about exactly this, I couldn't possibly express it and not be thought a liar.

I smiled so hard, so long, my cheeks ached. I cursed once or twice, joyously, as new wonders caught me off-guard. I added three pages and a very poor sketch to my letter home, and resolved to become at least a decent artist.

We pulled into an unmanned station at the edge of a flower-strewn meadow.

The Feliachild girl-cousin stirred. "Are we going back now?"

"Forward," Gale said. "Always forward."

The girl threw a regretful look at Garland, who'd paid her no attention, instead spending much of the ride comparing everything we saw through the window with the bird and plant diagrams in his new book. Now he stood, giving her a Fleet-

perfect formal bow. “I’m going back,” she announced, not hiding the disappointment in her voice.

“See you at Stadia, then,” Gale said, springing down to the station platform. Garland and I followed. The dog, after a brief struggle, joined us as the girl rode off.

“It seems as though we’re fleeing something,” Garland said.

“On the contrary. We’re riding out to force the battle,” Gale said.

“It’s a birthday party, not a war.”

“Tonio’s tendency to inflate everything to a tragicomedy has rubbed off on me.”

We ate a cheery meal there at the station: preserved fish spread on firm chewy cakes and then the same cakes spread with the jelly of a tangy red berry, for dessert. Gale had packed wine from aboardship—just for me, I think—and a flask of water with an oddly pleasant flavor, as of grass or tarragon.

Then we set out across the meadow, picking flowers and marveling at the profusion of birds and small rodents.

“I’m afraid there’s no great spy plot here to entertain you, Tonio,” she said.

“You read my thought, Kir. I’d been wondering if you brought us out here seeking trouble.”



“Call me Gale.” She patted the dog. “I’m hoping we might see a grizzle bear, or if we’re very lucky, one of the island’s great cats. That’d be worth the trip, wouldn’t it, assuming you didn’t get eaten?”

The biggest creature native to Erinth being a porpoise-sized deer timid as a wraith, I shivered even though I knew she was teasing.

\* \* \*

Late that night, someone came for Garland.

It was no amorous girl this time—these were soldiers, fleet of foot and almost silent, and they might have got in and out of our camp with just him if I hadn’t been outside the tent, watering the grass.

One got a hand over my mouth before I could shout. I kicked and fought and tried to raise an alarm, but we were outnumbered and surprised. The Feliachild dog, that traitor, had failed to warn us.

It was an honorable defeat, I suppose, which wasn’t much consolation when they wrapped me like laundry and bore me off on horseback. Maybe an hour later, they dumped me out of my sack, barelegged, cold, and in my nightshirt.

They’d only taken us men, not Gale.

Garland had given them a better fight than I. His lips, which had inspired insipid poetry from swoony girls and boys

on more than a dozen islands, had a puffed, comical look to them and there was a long scrape on his left arm: he'd been ground into the dirt when the soldiers took him down. His hands were bound, as were mine, but as he tumbled out of the sack and gained his feet, one of our captors gave him a scornful look and tugged on the rope. He opened his hands, letting it fall.

*He untied himself on the way, I deduced, then wound the rope around his wrists, hoping they wouldn't notice he was free.*

Me, I'd wasted the journey wondering if the dark things said about the Verdanii were true, whether they might really revert to their ancient origins and sacrifice young virgins. I was certain Garland had never mastered his shyness and lain with a woman... come to that, I hadn't known anyone's touch either.

I made a resolution—three, really. Lose my innocence, get Garland to teach me that escape trick and, finally, try it out if I ever ended up in this situation again.

*First, we must survive this, I reminded myself.*

Lights from high above speared down, lighthouse-bright, bathing us in a high-summer glow. Where were we?

Some kind of ruin, I decided, a gigantic oval-shaped amphitheater, rising to the sky and yet open to it. The floor was planted with crops, wheat in varying stages of growth, the beds

forming stripes: some seedlings, some half-grown, some gold and ready for harvest. Hard bench seats made of a gray, grainy marble encircled the field, rising up, up. Some of these were home to a forest of plants, pine saplings with their root balls caught in sacks, potted clover and strawberries mounded around small apiaries, onions, turnips, and sugar beets in big grass-woven baskets.

These weren't crops; they were temple plants.

*Teeth! We are going to be sacrificed!*

Had Gale been there, I'm sure she would have replied, "Don't be operatic."

But the imagined reproof didn't change the fact that we were indeed, in the presence of the Allmother herself.

\* \* \*

Few would argue but that Verdanii is the most powerful of the great nations, and everybody knows, much as they pretend to be a nation of citizen democrats, that the Allmother is the heart and soul of that mighty and often arrogant isle.

To have seen her in the flesh, me, a twelve-year-old from across the sea—it's so fantastical that I rarely brag of it. Only my mother believes me.

Her head was round and bald and capped in dandelion fluff, a thick slurr of white seed-bearing parasols that whirled off her in every twist of breeze. She was tall, broad-shouldered,

generous of hip and bosom, and she moved like a strongman or wrestler. She smelled, ever so slightly, of milk. She bore a harvest-scythe and a small sack of grain in her big hands, and her face carried so much age that the years thrummed around her like the low boom of an elephant drum. My breath caught, to see life in the eyes of one so frighteningly old. It made my chest hurt.

She weighed and dismissed me with a glance, closing on Garland with brisk steps. She tipped up his chin with the scythe—testing his nerve, I thought—and gave him the sort of looking-over you might expect of a buyer in a slave market.

When she'd done, and before she could speak, he bowed, in the manner of an officer of the Fleet. "It would seem superfluous, at this point, to introduce ourselves."

"Wasted breath," she agreed. Her voice shivered the wheat field.

"I'll say, then, that if you'd invited me in some other manner, I would have willingly come."

She laughed. "Yes, I'm rude and you think ill of me."

"Kidnapping was an unnecessary show of strength—"

"You're a Flailer, aren't you, cub? Your people were ever judgmental."

"I have," Garland said pointedly, "No people."

“None but my great-daughter and the company of her ship, is that so?”

A faint, almost delicate shrug. He always did get prissy when he was offended.

“You’re not in Gale’s bed, only her pilot-house.”

This was half a question, and it got her nothing. The silence ran so deep it might have carved ditches into the earth between us.

Garland couldn’t wait her out. Who could? She had centuries. “May we know why we’re here?”

The Allmother took a seat on one of the hard benches. “I would know your future, Kir Parrish.”

“My future is your future.”

Death, he meant.

“Spoken like a true Flailer. I would examine how your path merges with Gale Feliachild’s. I’ll understand this tie you’ve formed so fast, the two of you—”

“—and decide if it should be untangled?”

She wrinkled her old brow and didn’t deny it.

“I’m sorry,” said Garland. “I cannot oblige you.”

I’ve made it sound like the three of us were having a cozy and intimate audience, but there were dozens of Verdanii about as this conversation took place. Nobody sees the Allmother without there being guards present, and there were gardeners

and scribes and presumably magicians, too. Even as I jolted with shock—*Garland, you fool, you've just said no to the Allmother!*—all those others overheard him too. They didn't share my faint sense of admiration at his brashness. The mood within the amphitheater took on a distinctly stormy air. One of the guards moved, as if fighting an urge to cuff him.

“Perhaps,” the Allmother said, “You'd care to reconsider before refusing me.”

“You misunderstand—I cannot do as you ask. I cannot be enchanted, for my middle name is lost.” Garland had regained his footing; worse, he'd fallen into parable mode. “My mother, as you may have heard, is a prisoner on Issle Morta, kept there under the Hostage Concession granted that to that nation when the Fleet Compact was signed in—”

“Would you read me the history of a Compact I helped to write?”

“Quite right; I apologize.”

*Teeth*, I thought, *he's amused now*. The old lady was running her thumb along the blade of her scythe.

Garland would not be stopped. “My father came to join the monastery of the dead from the nation of Gerd. Among his people, the tradition is for a father and mother to each secretly choose one name for an unborn child, to reveal those names to each other only if need arises, or when the child is grown. But

about a month before my birth, my father was obliged to leave Issle Morta, for—”

The Allmother let out a cough that was nearly a growl. A few dandelion seeds shivered free of her scalp and swirled skyward.

“—for reasons that don’t bear going into at this time,” Garland said, a little hastily. “He never returned.”

The Allmother, to my relief, released the scythe. “Then you have no middle name.”

“I do,” he said. “I was named according to the formal customs of the island of my birth and the nations of both parents. Nobody knows my Gerdian paternate name, is all, and I cannot give it to you. You, therefore, can lay no intention on me.”

She pulled her lips back in a parody of a smile. “Then someone else will have to bear it.”

Garland saw her meaning before I did, but the guards were ready. They caught him as he lunged for the door.

“Tonio, run!”

Too late, of course. They pried my mouth open while Garland wrestled, tried to reason with them and, finally, pleaded. The old lady spooned a morsel of something—barley, I think—into my mouth. When I spat it back at them, they caught the pieces on a piece of bamboo cut into a jigsaw puzzle

piece. This they gave to a spellscribe, who wrote my full name at the top in grass-green ink.

As the sky clamored with thunder and warm rain began to pour over the temple plants, they set to writing out a spell.

\* \* \*

“I’m sorry, Tonio,” Garland said. They’d driven us back to our camp in a covered carriage, with orders from the Allmother to present ourselves for Gale’s banquet that evening.

“It wasn’t your fault.” In truth, I was troubled. The jigsaw piece bearing my name was one of many, it turned out—there was one inscribed for the ship, *Nightjar*, and one with Gale’s name too. Another bore the true name of our Conto of Erinth. I feared it might be treason for me even to know that one.

Other pieces of the puzzle named strangers, though I assume they too were connected to Gale and Garland. Fitted together, they made no picture, just a scribbled patchwork with jigsaw gaps. When they finished they sent us away; as we left, the Allmother had been peering through the holes.

“They’re using the puzzle to assemble an image of your future, I suppose,” I said. “Looking at the places where our days overlap?”

“What they learn will be a guess, at best.” He was angry—at the Verdanii for scribing me, at himself for having failed to fight off her entire guard, maybe at the sky for having the



temerity to drop water on us. “She must have sent people to Erinth to investigate those close to Gale... it’s how she knew your name.”

“Don’t trouble yourself on my account, Garland,” I said. “The Allmother owes me a debt now. I’ll turn it to my profit in time.”

A thin smile: I wasn’t fooling him.

“Meantime, perhaps you can explain croning to me.”

“In Erinthian or Fleet?” But he reached for his new book, opening it to a detailed picture of a female bear’s innards. Patiently he began to spell out what he knew of the mysteries of women.

We returned before dawn, to find Gale in a fine stew over our abduction. “I never thought they’d take a poke at you,” she said to Garland.

He filled her in and she let out a long growl. “Mumma never could leave the future alone—it’s her only flaw. ‘Tonio, I’ll make it up to you someday.’”

“Better and better,” I said. “I’ll own the nation of Verdanii and your ship before this is all over. Now. Wasn’t I promised a sight of a grizzle bear?”

What was I to do, leave them to suffocate me with their guilt?

“Better than that, perhaps.” I saw her decide to regain her good spirits, leading us out to a trailhead that led over the undulating fields of shadow. As dawn neared, the rain lessened and then stopped entirely, and the sun slivered up over the fields, splashing red and tangerine across the thinning clouds to the east.

“Teeth! I can’t smell the sea,” I said suddenly, unsure if I was panicking or simply amazed.

She drew in a big breath. “Fields after rain,” she said. “Wet dirt and drying plants. Less romantic if I put it that way, I suppose. Ah!”

The trail undulated close to the thread of the stream we’d been following, and within the loop were three trees, bent over the water like women washing their hair. As we came closer, I saw that they had been pruned so, gently shaped to evoke faces, bodies, and trailing sweeps of greenery that just touched the pond. Then my breath caught—

*The banks of the stream are covered in diamonds*, I thought, but even the Verdanii nation isn’t as bounteous as that.

“A chrysalis?” Garland said, bending to catch one as it caught a breath of wind and drifted to our feet. He was right—it was a little abandoned case, like white glass, and it caught the light marvelously. There were thousands of them, tens of

thousands, covering the shores and the water too, all bright and so fragile that the next shiver of air tore the one in Garland's palm.

"Watch," Gale said, sweeping a hand out to the canola growing around us. The fat peach of the sun cleared the horizon an instant later, mellowing, bathing everything in hot early-summer light, and I heard an odd whispering sound which turned out to be the tapping of a million footsteps on plant stems.

The creatures that had been inside the cases were long of body and faintly moist-looking as they first climbed into the dawn. They climbed atop the numberless spears of wheat; they emerged on the eastern side of the willow women; they scaled our legs without fear. Each one seemed to be dragging the remains of their chrysalis, some little scrap of skin atop their backs.

As the pond steamed and the air warmed, they curled and uncurled their long bodies. The fleshy scraps unfurled into wings, four of them, transparent but for four red spots at the tips.

"Dragonflies?"

"If the winter's mild, they hatch the week of my birthday," Gale said.

One crawled onto my hand, and I raised it slowly before my face, keeping the creature in the sun, breathing shallowly so I wouldn't disturb it, watching its rebirth from this most-intimate distance. The bloody, faceted orbs of its eyes seemed to look into mine as it shook the new wings with a chatter that was echoed a thousand times, once for every spear of all the crops growing around me. Chatter-chatter-chatter.

“One,” Gale whispered. “Two.”

Chatter-chatter.

“Three.” She mouthed it but did not speak, and suddenly they were in the air, a million living needles of ruby-dotted glass, winking and glinting in the morning sunlight, spreading up and out and then, as they gained distance from each other, seeming to vanish into the sky. They left the air yellowed with a light dusting of pollen grains, picked up on the plants but dropped as they flew.

“Tell your mothers that, boys,” Gale said, and I fought off a wish to clasp her around the waist, like a child embracing someone who'd brought him a puppy.

We continued on foot for the rest of the day and saw many things: a small pack of reddish hunting dogs, much like the foxes of Erinth, a scattering of the fat brown rodents they hunted, hawks aplenty—but no vultures, which seemed a peculiar deficit—and a big brown deer with horns like a fan. No

grizzle bears. I wasn't truly disappointed, though I suspected Garland, whose mood remained sulky, might have liked to come nose to nose with some monster he could wrestle.

The trail took us back 'round to the Allmother's great, strange temple. From outside, it was even more imposing, like a big bowl sitting on the flat earth. Its entrances were big square maws, too evenly formed to be natural caves.

"The Verdanii people conquered this land generations ago," Gale said. "The invaders intermarried with the... well, my people call them primitives."

"Primitives," Garland said, "Yet they built this?"

"They did build marvels," she said. "But even their stories claim this has always been here. Stadia, they call it and we haven't worked out how old it is. It's tricky, because it's been repaired so often, and usually using magic. But there are physics who believe it is the oldest building in all the civilized world."

"And we've returned here because..."

"I can't avoid my birthday party forever, can I?" she said. "Besides, don't you want to know what Mumma found out about the future?"

Neither of them looked especially curious, these two who could take such naked delight in watching dragonflies.

\* \* \*

My father says you mustn't damn an entire people unless you've lived among them for at least a month, but it took a day for me to verify that Verdanii wine is as poor as everyone claims. It kicks but does not seduce, burns but does not spark. Much has been made of their ale, but I think that's simply an attempt to be kind. I took one whiff of the red they'd set out to fête Kir Gale and decided that either they secretly hated her or it was a ritual trial to be endured. Setting it aside, I decided to restrict myself to their grass-flavored waters.

So, alas, I cannot blame drunkenness for my decision to steal back the green-scribed magical puzzle piece with my name on it.

It was a gathering of thousands, with perhaps three women to every man present. They were turned out in their most colorful clothes and decorated with long ropes of shell and turquoise, tigers eye, even necklaces of wandstone.

Garland I were marked as outsiders by our plainer dress and left on the fringes because neither of us spoke Verdanii. We kept to the edges as everyone did their best to make much of Gale.

“The fair-skinned, larger people bear the stamp of the invading sailors Gale mentioned,” Garland said quietly. “Those with darker coloring would be closer in heritage to the tribesmen they vanquished.”

“So many people!” Almost as many—I imagined—as the field of dragonflies. I suppose our Conto had such gatherings, but as a son of shopkeepers, I had never been to one.

Because of the spell that made Gale inconspicuous, and because she herself preferred not to be the center of attention, I could see people all but forgetting why they were there, forgetting, then shaking themselves as they forced their attention back to the guest of honor.

I kept my eyes open for the scribe who had written the spell upon me. When she appeared, slipping through a door on a higher level of Stadia, I excused myself from the hubbub and had a go at creeping into what I hoped were her offices. It might not have worked, but the woman on guard in that quarter was staring at Garland.

Bravado got me through the door and luck followed me inside—there could have been a dozen people on the other side of it, after all, a possibility that only occurred to me *after* I’d slipped through. But the Allmother was calling for the attention of the massive crowd, her voice rising above all those others.

The arrogance of the Verdanii! They were so secure in their power, they hadn’t locked up the puzzle. It was mounted in a wooden frame, an interlocked picture, scribbled with all those texts, little bits of our futures, meant to shine light on the ‘problem’ of Garland and Gale. Stolen names—I saw again the

Conto's piece, inscribed with silver, and was offended on behalf of my nation. I saw a scrap of *Nightjar's* sail, scribed with the full name of the ship, her public registration and secret name too. I recognized the name of that vessel's previous captain, Roysl Sloom, and about six different Feliachilds.

My own small piece of the puzzle was near one of the gaps. Beyond it, instead of a view of the wall, was the velvet black of a moonless sky.

I'd conceived this plan in haste and assured myself it wouldn't work—that I'd be caught at the door. *Then* I'd promised myself that I'd simply snatch my own piece and move on without looking further. I was committing an act of sabotage, but my name had been stolen—I'd been wronged. The law would certainly favor me.

Now here I was, and I'd told myself I wouldn't peer through the missing puzzle pieces into Garland's future. But what would you do?

I fitted my eye to the gap.

I saw a man, first, with familiar lambs-wool hair and a long, plain face. He was writing on an egg-shaped piece of granite, setting the stone at the feet of a hollow-eyed statue, a carving even more terrible than the lava-burned bodies of the Erinthian catacombs. I saw where the statue stood and the turtle clambering at its base and I knew the place. I had never



been there, but I knew exactly where that egg-shaped stone lay, and I suspected I knew what had been painted on it, too.

*Damn you and your stories, Garland!*

Next there were women, a long series of faces, one of them my elder sister Faria who was so very taken with Garland, and from this I deduced that these were all the girls who'd never broken through his reserve.

The women became drops of oil, the oil became blood, and the blood rained over a hammer. I tried to pull away, suddenly glad to have seen something something I hadn't the wisdom to interpret.

A crack, of eggshell, felt more than heard. The image I saw next was of two strangers—outlanders, we sometimes called them—in peculiar garb, skintight black raiment, masked, with the breathing reeds used by divers who hadn't been turned to mermaids. The masks obscured their faces and yet there was something about the man's eyes that made my heart bounce, a little.

I saw Stadia, this strange building, at the heart of a city so vast and glassy and impossible it made even the great Verdanii capital seem a filthy hump of cottages.

“Thank you for joining me.”

A voice, *the* voice. I tore my face from the hole in the puzzle. But the Allmother's words were muffled.

I like to think I'm not a complete fool—I had taken the precaution of identifying a hiding place within the room. Two enormous rolled rugs leaned against one wall, and now I scabbled behind them.

From the lack of answer as she came through the door, I guessed that she was addressing Garland.

“You know how all this began, stripling?”

“You learned, at her birth, that Gale was to be murdered. You've been trying to prevent it ever since.”

“We've been successful so far.”

“She's lived longer than you expected,” he said, tone neutral.

“You continue to judge me.”

“No,” Garland said. “I'm as guilty as you of trying to hold Gale's death at bay.”

“What if you could hold it off indefinitely?”

Long, long pause. “Go on.”

“Would you hear our gleanings?”

“You'll steal Tonio's name—all these identities—” I peeked around the edge of the rug in time to see the elegant curl of his hand, indicating the puzzle. “And then ask my permission to reveal all?”

“More of those people than you guess gave up their names willingly.”

“Let’s not pretend you wouldn’t have taken them, if you’d had to. Or that you won’t insist on my hearing this.”

To my surprise, she laughed. “You, to my surprise, have it in you to push that far-off murder further away. You might hold it off altogether.”

“Is that so?”

“You’ve never been in love, Garland Parrish.”

*Of course*, I thought, with a strange sense of satisfaction. Love had to come into it somewhere, didn’t it?

*Operatic*. That’s what Gale would have said, were she there.

“No,” Garland said, easily, and I thought of what I’d seen in the puzzle, my sister Faria and all those lovesick and luststruck girls.

“Don’t believe in it, perhaps? A gentleman as self-controlled as you, you must resist being swept away—”

“What does the future hold?” he interrupted. Interrupted the Allmother!

“Gale Feliachild remains safe as long as your heart is untouched,” the Allmother said.

“Untouched,” Garland repeated. It was the only time I’d ever seen him look bitter.

“The obvious thing to do, it seems to be, would be to harden you.”

“I’m not sure that’s a matter of will.”

“I speak of enchantment,” the Allmother said.

“I have no middle name,” Garland reminded her.

“I know where your name can be found.” She handed him a folded scrap of paper.

He did not look at the page, instead holding her gaze.

“Think, Parrish,” the Allmother said. “If you were wounded tomorrow, you could not be healed.”

He shrugged, as if this were of no consequence.

“You might amend your ridiculous good looks. Am I wrong in thinking they’ve been an inconvenience to you?”

“I could do that myself, with a knife or a hot poker.”

“How dramatic you foreign men are,” she said, sounding so much like Gale that I almost laughed.

“Time and the weather will have their way with my face,” Garland said. “And you have it in your power now to inscribe me, whether I wish it or not.”

“I’m not that much of a tyrant,” she said.

“You mean that Gale would never forgive you.”

“Is it so strange to you that my children are dear to me?”

“No.” Garland circled the room. He let his free hand brush the puzzle, then struck it, scattering its pieces to the floor. Bending, he pinched up the scrap of *Nightjar*’s sail. The green piece, with my name, he flicked under the rolled rugs, so it

etched against my hand. “But I can’t help thinking you must have other reasons. Do you examine the future of every newborn girl, as you did Gale’s?”

The puzzle piece was warm in my palm, the temperature of flesh or blood.

“I do not.”

“What do you want of her? Merely that she should live as long as possible?”

She waved off his question. “We’re speaking of you, boy. Consider: love is a net. It binds, yes, but it cuts too. Gale could be saved, and you would be armored against so many things: betrayal, loss, the ache of wanting someone who may not return your passion. Maybe you can’t understand that, but—”

“I know what it is to be discarded,” he said softly.

“Ah, yes, you were drummed out of the Fleet. How could I forget?”

“I doubt you forget much.”

“You were raised to believe in self-sacrifice, weren’t you? Gale is important to the Fleet, to the long Peace.”

He was like a dog with a bone. “You couldn’t have known that when she was an infant.”

“My intentions for her are none of your affair.”

“You’ve made them my business,” he said.

The Allmother threw back her head and bellowed laughter. “You’re bold. If nothing else, I see why she likes you. Well, then —I would have Gale live as long as I have.”

“You seek a replacement?”

“There’s something you should be able to appreciate, Flailer! I am trying to discover my own eventual end.”

“Rather than letting it find you.”

“This plan serves the greater good. All you need do is consent.”

Garland turned away from her, moving so he was placed between us, and met my eye.

*Consent? To never loving anyone?* I shook my head, thinking that Flailers probably didn’t believe in love. It was something he’d give up without a thought.

*No*, I mouthed at him. *No!*

“I think...” and now Garland finally spoke with what seemed like caution or respect, or perhaps just that excess of thoughtfulness that tended to catch people off-guard in someone so young. “I think what you propose might make me into something quite terrible.”

“You’d be young, talented, attractive... and untouchable. Such a man might go far.”

“But not, I think, in the direction you intend.” He spoke gently, and there was a hint of regret in his tone.

“Judging me again, stripling?”

“It’s my nature.”

She was one of those who spoke more quietly when angry, her voice pulling thin as a cord. “I seek to protect Gale.”

“From what?” He was determined to infuriate her, it seemed. “All her life, you’ve kept your distance. All of you, holding back, made her yearn to leave. You made her beneath notice, so she became a spy. Thus she became a target. Have you considered how this latest gambit of yours might go wrong?”

I wondered, briefly, if she’d bring someone in to have him slapped or if she’d do it herself.

All she said was: “You’re more monkish than you admit.”

“I suppose you’re right about that.”

“Will you consent? Name your price, and if it falls within my reach—”

Part of him wanted to, I saw it. Part of him feared the pain of entanglement that she spoke of. Of another rejection. And maybe another part was fascinated by the idea of being so free. It must be a heavy load, I thought, being so morally upright all the time. But...

“No,” Garland said, finally. “A person who is so hardened cannot be a fit companion for anyone.”

“Let Gale find companionship among her peers, stripling. Your purpose is to transport and protect her.”

“Mule and guard dog,” he said, his voice mild.

“If you like,” the Allmother replied.

“I won’t do it.”

She spent a breath weighing him, feeling the finality of his answer, contemplating her own. “Your answer comes double weighted. Consider: someone might assassinate her simply by laying a love spell on you.”

He stretched out a hand, setting the scrap of paper and *Nightjar*’s puzzle piece, together, into the nearest torch and holding them as they burned. “If so, it will be you who gave them the way to find my name.”

All around the room, the puzzle sparked and smouldered. I dropped my piece and barely smothered a cry of surprise as my fingertips scorched.

Paper, board, and linen, the pieces smoked and turned to cinders, filling the spellscribe’s chamber with a smell of snuffed candles and burned paper.

“Get out,” the old, old woman said at length. “Both of you.”

\* \* \*

We rowed back to *Nightjar* the next day, in a wide-bottomed dugout filled with well-wishers’ presents: bolts of



silk, casks of the beaded ropes, pots, jars of pickles, and barrels of bad wine.

I had thought Kir Gale's new tattoo would be some little thing—a rock or tree, a flower. Perhaps a depiction of wind, as befitted her name, or one of the mustangs. Instead, it covered her entire left shoulder with an elegant line-drawing of the same hammer I'd seen in the magical puzzle. I'd seen it in carpentry shops; its purpose was to smooth out rough bits of wood.

“My crone name is Adze,” Gale told me. Blood had run down her arm and she had not wiped it; letting it flake away must be part of the whole ritual. “I couldn't convince Mumma to name me the Hag, as your people have.”

“Do you mind?” I wasn't sure, as I asked it, if I meant her new name or the one we Erinthians had hung on her.

She shook her head. “It's apt, Tonio. I've always considered myself a tool of the state. The idea of chiseling away churls in the long Peace—I suppose I'm honored.”

“And if chiseling gets you killed one day?”

“Should I live forever, child?” She reached out with her unbloodied arm, pulling me against her side as one might a nephew. Her hip was bony, but her flesh was warm.

Garland was fifty feet behind us in another rowboat full of gifts, this one so heavily laden he'd ended up perching atop one of the piles, just to balance the load for the rowers.

"Did he tell you what the Allmother wanted?" I murmured. She nodded.

"What would you have done, if he'd consented?"

"Tried to fix it."

"If you failed?"

Her mouth bunched, as if she'd eaten something sour. "Put him aside."

"Truly, Kir?"

"He's monstrous enough as it is." I must have looked baffled, because she explained: "Parrish was spoiled by nature. He's good at whatever he turns his hand to. You can't make someone like that invulnerable, too."

A wave rocked our craft, and Garland was obliged to leap to his feet atop the pile of gifts, waving both arms, like a baby bird who'd wobbled out onto a branch too weak to bear its weight, to keep from pitching over into Moscasipay Harbor.

"He is graceful," I said, in the tone of one making a great concession.

She giggled. "He's a gazelle."

Garland recovered his balance, and commenced fishing over the side for some trinket he'd kicked loose while he was flapping.

“Let it sink,” Gale called, but he affected to not hear, scrabbling in the salt water and finally coming up with a sodden cotton scarf. Orange dye ran all over his hands, bleeding into the sea. “Just drop it, Garland.”

He shook his head, smiling, as he wrung it out.

“Are you ready to go home, Tonio?” Gale asked me. “Had enough adventures to tell your family and friends?”

“For now,” I said.

We had reached the ship. The mate threw down netting and we clambered aboard *Nightjar* together, Gale and I. As I stepped onto her boards, the deck shifted underfoot. My stomach turned once and settled. From that day, I knew, I would never be seasick again.

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## THE WIND SHALL BLOW

by Gregory Norman Bossert

“Where shall we our breakfast take?” Regan sang softly, one of the old sad songs of the Scottish Borderlands that were her adopted home. Three years and she was still learning variants, every one sad and heavy with history. The wrong words to the wrong townsfolk could mean a fight or worse, in this time of war. And the blame was certain to be on herself, who had come from across the Irish Sea to take one of those townsfolk as her own and whose gift with song was foreign and fey.

Breakfast had been hours ago, porridge and small beer well before dawn, after a night of howling wind. Thomas had gone up the hill then, to bring in one cart of wood for George Brewer and another for the blacksmith’s boys, and Domhnall had gone with him to tend the pony. The two of them were asleep now in the old chair by the fire, Thomas’s great tangle of dark hair side by side with Domhnall’s little crown of golden, which always lay smooth.

The desire to spread her own raven hair over them like wings, to lie there in their peace, took Regan sudden and sharp,

like a chill. But the chair, though old and worn to comfort, was so not large, and *her* work was just beginning for the day. She slipped her cloak from the hook by the door, instead, and sang from the song she'd sung to Thomas two days before they were married, two days after the wind had last howled so.

Now, ye maun go wi me,' she said,  
‘True Thomas, ye maun go wi me,  
And ye maun serve me seven years,  
Thro weal or woe, as may chance to be.

She shivered, from the draft from the door and the desire to stay, and from the power that flowed dark and deep in her when she sang the old songs. For a moment it was too much, the thought of facing the town, George Brewer with his bright hair and brighter hate, the restless wind, and the rumor of war rushing up from the South. But the hour was getting late, and staying the day in the chair was not a choice. She counted herself off like a song, *beat-two-three*, pulled her hood over her hair—little proof it was against the cold mist, the cold glare of townfolk—and slipped away out the door.

\* \* \*

“Where shall we our breakfast take?” Regan heard as she hung her cloak over the bar rail. Her lips startled up like wings at that echo of her earlier self, settled as quickly downward.

The voice was a smooth, ambiguous tenor; it drifted through the hubbub in the inn like smoke.

“Why, wherever it’s for the taking,” came the reply in a voice cracked with mirth.

Regan stood on her toes to look over the crowd for the source of those voices. The room was thick with peat smoke and damp wool-clad drinkers, the shutters mostly closed against the dim October drizzle, the floor treacherous with packs and bundles and leather-sheathed swords.

The last thing she needed right now was competition, some bard down from the Highlands or minstrel up from London with new songs and stories, not with the disapproving wives of Crichehope crossing themselves at the sight of her. Proprietor Andrew had stuck by her so far. But if Andrew had another singer with voice and songs enough—and lacking her own tattered reputation—then she had no doubt he’d take it. Andrew was a pragmatist, as befits an innkeep in troubled times.

Regan slipped behind the bar and down the other end, where Andrew leaned in conversation with Marta and the blacksmith’s boys. Andrew made a show of looking from her to the spot by the hearth where she sang; ‘you’re late,’ that look meant. She returned a cheery “good *morning*” and a smile for Marta. The barmaid came from a Covenanter family, dour folk

who crossed the street with a backwards glare when they met Regan, but here at the Inn they shared a cautious amusement at Andrew's clumsy curmudgeonry.

Regan slid herself past Andrew to the corner of the bar, for a view of the fire and what were surely the sources of the strange voices: two figures like engravings, all black and white and long thin lines. One had long straight hair bound back with leather, the other was all angles and ragged edges, both of them pale and smooth of face.

Marta followed her look a shake of her head and a finger crossing her chest. "Weird ones, those two. Howled in with the wind last night."

One of the blacksmith's boys, Regan could never remember which was which, looked over his shoulder and smirked at Regan. "Could be your brothers, eh? The magpie's got a clan, at last."

'Magpie' was not the foulest name she had in town, but perhaps the cruelest. Stealer of gold, raider of nests.

"Or her sisters. Too pale they are for honest men's work," said Andrew. But he said it quietly, with an eye to the strangers' swords—long as a Highlander's, with basket hilts and wicked curves—and the brace of pistols on the table.

"George Brewer said they rode in from the south. English spies, most like," said one of the blacksmiths.



“No spy’s going far looking like that,” his brother replied, “less they’re spying in a graveyard. Irish, I’d say,” with a look at Regan, “mercenaries, after the bounty on the moss-troopers. Corpse pickers, that lot, and drawn to the wars.”

“Savages from the Indies, across the sea,” said Marta, “and pagan as a Highlander, mark my word.” There was a chuckle at that all round.

“Whatever else they might be,” said Regan, “they’re showing silver.” The group looked over as one, and indeed, one of the two men by the fire, the spikey one, was tapping a coin on the table, an eyebrow raised between ragged hair and a ragged grin. Marta grimaced and wiped her hands on her apron, pushed past the blacksmiths towards the strangers.

Andrew harrumphed and went to answer a call from the other end of the bar, but not before giving Regan a look and a raise of his chin, as if she had been the one standing around gossiping. Time for work, then, and anyway she had no desire to talk further with the blacksmith’s boys. Those two were no church-going Covenanters, to be sure, but no friends to her, either. They were friends of George Brewer, rather, and Regan checked the crowd again for Brewer’s bright hair.

She worked her way to the far side of the hearth, around Marta and the strangers and up the step where a heavy post formed a nook against the side of the fireplace. The great room

was full and then some, for all it filled the entire lower floor of the inn excepting the bar and a small room in the corner where gentlefolk could dine undisturbed. The Laird's bastle house, it had been, before they'd built the tower up the hill.

There were no lairds or gentlefolk in view now as she looked out across the crowd in the gloom considering her first song. A group of somber-dressed Covenanters, talking low, with stares across at a pair of Highlanders who were steadfastly ignoring them, and in between, a table of merchants, English by their dress and nervous manner. Near the door was a ragtag band in brigandine and Border check; moss-troopers, most likely, soldiers gone bandit and uneasy indoors, even in this isolated and unallied town. Most worrisome were the two large groups in the center: Kerrs and Scotts, old Reiver families and as like to be feuding as not. Quiet songs, then, and sad. She'd keep them shaking their heads and sighing over their ales and whiskies until the locals staggered in, who might look askance at Regan on the street but knew all her songs and would sing along, raucous and sloppy, likely to start a fight but not one that would end in steel and blood.

She glanced across the hearth at the two dark strangers. They'd gotten their breakfast, ale and a pie of some sort. They were both looking up at her with expectant expressions. She blinked, and as fast as that, one of them, the one with long

straight hair bound back with leather, flipped out a dirk and stabbed the pie. He pulled out a turnip like a fat eyeball and popped it into his mouth. The fire flared up then, and she shut her eyes against the gleam and heat, and cleared her throat. It was a quiet sound, but it cut across the room like a bell, and when she opened her eyes again the crowd had settled and were looking her way.

“The Three Ravens”, then. The song had been circling her thoughts all day, even before the two strangers had quoted its line about breakfast. And the local version was suitably solemn, all loyalty and lamentation.

But with the strangers’ twin images still fire-seared and floating in her vision, it was an older darker version that welled up out of the darkness inside, spilled out before she could breath it back in. “The Twa Corbies”, a cold wind and betrayal, not three ravens but two:

As I was walking all alane,  
I heard twa corbies making a mane;  
The tane unto the t’other say  
‘Where sall we gang and dine today?’

The song wove its way through the room, a story well familiar these days: a soldier newly slain in a field, his hound and hawk and lady all flown to other pursuits and leaving him as breakfast for the corbies—ravens, that was, carrion crows:

‘Many a one for him makes mane,  
But nane sall ken where he is gane;  
O’er his white bones, when they are bare,  
The wind shall blow, for evermair.’

She sang those last lines with a fierce, forlorn glee. The ballads took her that way, wherever they would, be they sad or glad. It was that blinding, unearthly intensity in her singing, her ability to sway thoughts and glances, that was the reason the townfolk looked sideways and crossed themselves or made the old warding signs. Part of the reason.

It surely worked, though. While she sang, the crowded room was quiet, through her gift the audience made into unlikely brothers. Men, she thought, are so sentimental. She decided on “Lord Randall” next; throw in a grieving mother and they’ll be crying on each other’s shoulders. But as she tapped a rhythm against her thigh and took in a long breath, something flashed white in the corner of her eye. The two strangers by the fire were looking up at her over raised mugs, and each with a wicked grin. She almost lost the start of the song under that regard; when the words did come to her, they came like an uneasy wind and blew through the remainder of the morning.

\* \* \*

Midafternoon, Willie Dickson wandered in with his smallpipes and Regan finally got a break. The group of Covenanters had left, their places taken by locals, and the Highlanders had settled back in their chairs and switched from ale to whisky. The blacksmith's boys had sat down with the Kerrs and were taking turns at some long, loud story that had rumbled underneath her last couple of songs. Andrew had brought them all a round of ale on the house, and likewise for the Scotts, with a speech about old friends welcome round his fire, but he set the mugs at the far ends of each table, and kicked one of the blacksmith's boys chairs around the corner lest he lean back and bump into a Scott. That bore watching, it did. She'd picked her songs carefully as the crowd had grown more rowdy, for fear of trodding on some old grievance.

Four hundred years and more the Reiver families had clashed through these hills until the feuds piled like peat and smoldered. The Debatable Lands, they called it, on either side of the Border and on neither side of the intermittent war between Scotland and England. Not the Dike nor the hangman had been able to settle it, not since the Romans had built their wall against the unconquerable North. When James went south to take the throne of England, the Border became an embarrassment; he'd abolished the Border Law and shipped the worst of the Reivers to Ulster, across the sea, where they'd

driven Regan's folks from their farms and villages. But the old families remained, deep in the hills, and met each other in places like Crichehope that weren't on the maps in Edinburgh or London.

And now what fragile peace James had built, James's son had let collapse. King Charles had fled London and Parliament and brought the war north again.

That was the conversation around the bar: the whereabouts of the King, and which way the fighting might fall, and would it fall on Crickehope. Most thought it a matter not of 'if' but 'when'.

Young Niall was down from the Tower House for a dram and a pipe and a piece of his mind. He was seventy if he was a day—Old Niall had been laid under in the days of James—and was bemoaning the commotion up the hill.

"The Laird's brought all the Camerons in for safety, that are his cousins down by Sanquhar, and they've been through all the firewood we'd laid in, and half the whisky."

"If so, they're pickled through," said Andrew, who'd sold the whisky casks up hill and knew how much they had in the cellars, "and you can burn *them* instead this winter."

Young Niall puffed a dismissive ring of smoke around his pipestem and continued, "And all of us half worn through with the carrying and the climbing. He's put back the ladder up the

pele tower, and set a watch, and last night he kept the view himself, and sent for a mug of mulled wine in the wee hours. It's dire work, I tell you, and dire times. Andrew, would you nae fetch us another dram?"

Andrew took the proffered glass, though he rolled his eyes and muttered "dire work" as he turned to the cask.

Young Niall squinted at Regan through the pipe smoke. "It's the magpie, is it? Not flown back to Ulster yet, has she?" He reached over and pinched George Brewer. Regan hadn't seen Brewer there half-shrouded in the pipesmoke—of all the townfolk, the one she worked hardest to avoid—and now that she did, she tried to back away into the crowd. But Niall had his thin cold fingers around her arm.

"It's 'one for sorrow'," Niall said, and "Ware your gold, lads."

George rubbed his arm and glowered at Regan.

"And what gold would that be, with the likes of you?" asked Marta, pushing past with half a dozen mugs in each hand.

Niall just harrumphed, but George frowned down into his ale like it had gone off; his bright, improbable hair over his eyes, and said "Oh, she's got her gold enough, and lined her nest wi' it."

Regan shook Niall's hand off and turned away, straight into the grin of the spiky-haired stranger. He had gotten a third chair, somehow, out of the press, and made a bow over it, mocking. Or maybe that was her mood; the anger came on her, as dark and cold and quick to shift as a bird's eye, and that was another part of her trouble with the townfolk.

The other stranger looked up under the loop of his long hair and said, "Come, sit. Three is a better number."

There was no choice, really. She had had no desire to turn back to the bar where George Brewer stood glowering, or force her way through the crowd grown boisterous with the playing of the pipes. But she stood for a minute and watched the shapes form and unform in the fire before sitting, just to make a point.

"Is it?" the spiky one said, dropping into his own seat, tipping back against the wall. He looked at her, dark, dark eyes, and she blinked back, confused, but he continued, "Three's better? What's wrong with two?" The silver coin was back in his hand, spun between long, light fingers. "Two is easy. Two sides. Heads or tails, black or white, up hill or down. Balance," he concluded, the coin perched on a finger tip.

"Two is disagreement," said the other in his soft, smoky voice.

"It is not!"



“And disagreement is strife, and strife is steel and sad songs.” That with a small smile at Regan, who was only half sat and uneasy in her chair.

“*She* agrees with me,” said the spiky one.

Regan looked back and forth between them, an inadvertent shake of her head, and said, “I do?”

“She does,” said the smoky one, not quite a question.

“For sure she does, and the proof from her own lips,” replied the spiky one.

“Ah, the song, you mean,” with a thoughtful nod.

“Aye, the song.”

“I rather think that supports my point, not yours.”

“When exactly,” Regan cut in, a bit sharply, “did I get involved at all in your argument?”

“The two of us were never arguing,” protested the spiky one, but the other sat back to give Regan a long look.

“When you sang the Two Ravens, instead of the Three. Very different songs, are they not? For all that they start the same.”

“With breakfast, which is a fine place to start,” added the other.

“The Twa Corbies, after all, ends in betrayal, unloyal companions, no rest for an abandoned soul. Unsettling thoughts for this lot,” with a gesture at the room, “who are as

like to end as bones amongst the heath as not. Whereas the version with three ravens, his companions are faithful—”

“God send euery gentleman, Such haukes, such hounds, and such a loved one,” sang the other, low and rough.

“And the knight is laid to rest, a good end in these times, a peaceful end.”

“But no breakfast,” said the spiky one, with a theatrical shake of his head.

Regan looked down, fingered the gouges in the table top, and finally said, “I’m not sure I see a peaceful end anywhere here,” with a flick of her fingers that could mean the Inn, the town, the countryside, or just the scratches in the wood.

“The patterns come and go, like shapes in the flames.”

“Shapely shapes, at that,” said the spiky one, looking more at Regan than the fire behind her.

“The trick is to find the pattern you want and not let go of it.”

“I can’t...” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Who *are* you?”

“Not really the point, is it?” said the spiky one.

“It’s exactly the point,” said the smoky one.

“Ah, well then. Pick a name, any name,” the spiky one said to Regan, and set the coin spinning on the table.

She snorted in exasperation. “Daft, is what you are.”

“Deft,” he countered and caught the coin under a finger.

“Rogue,” said the other.

“Reiver.”

“Joker.”

“Thief.”

“Thought.”

“Memory.”

“Hell and damnation,” Regan said, temper flaring.

“Hardly the names I’d like carved on my tombstone,” said the spiky one.

“That’s what you get from *twos*,” said the other.

The spiky one shrugged and waved the coin at Marta, with a gesture towards his mug and another towards the empty space in front of Regan.

“What shall we call *her*, then?”

“My name is Regan,” she said.

“Queen, that is, in the Gaelic.”

“No queen,” she said. “Born in a village, came across the sea to another.”

“And yet, you hold this room in thrall with no more than your voice,” the smoky one said.

“‘Mor Rigan’, then, the phantom queen,” said the spiky one.

“Ah, ah, the Morrigan is not a name to take lightly, not where I come from,” Regan said, with a chill. “Cruel spirits of the battlefield, she and her two sisters.”

“And that’s the two of us, Badb and Macha, then. Are we to be sisters, now? A fine family, indeed.”

The chill had settled down in her spine at this talk of that grim clan of carrion spirits. She tried to push back from the table, but the table of Scotts had shifted closer to the fire and her chair was blocked in.

“You brought ‘Regan’ with you from Ulster, but it sounds like the folks here had their own name waiting for you,” said the smoky one. “‘Magpie’, is what I heard.”

“A proud bird, the Magpie, and a smart, kin to the Crow and Raven,” the spiky one protested but scratched his fingers through his jagged crown of hair with a grimace. “Though, what country is where they say the Magpie carries a drop of Satan’s blood under her tongue, and cries mischief?”

“Scotland,” said the other.

“Ah. Odd choice, then. No wonder she thinks Hell and Damnation fit names for us.”

“‘Daft’ is what she called you.”

“I no more chose what they call me than what you call yourselves,” Regan flashed, and dug her nails into the wood. “What do you *want*?”

“A guarantee of breakfasts,” said the spiky one; Daft it was, then. And the smoky one, Deft she’d call him, gently moved the pistols out of her reach, but that was to make room for Marta and three fresh mugs of ale. Marta looked down, with her mouth pursed like her churchy cousins. She was looking at Regan’s fingers on the table, and at the gold ring on her left hand. Regan raised her hands helplessly and opened her mouth, but Marta had already turned her back.

There was a tug on her hand, then, and when she turned back Deft had her wedding ring between his fingers.

“Told you he was a thief,” said Daft.

“That makes the three of us, then,” said Deft, “and here’s proof that the Magpie’s taken the greater prize.”

“Do *not* call me that,” Regan said, and snatched the ring back. “If it’s thieves you want, the town is thick with them. And I *never* stole this ring.”

“Well, then, what gold is it, that yon drunkard says ‘lines your nest?’” asked Daft, with a nod toward George Brewer, who was glaring at them from the bar. “I have somewhat of an interest, you see. Gold’s as good as breakfasts, or comes to the same.”

Deft reached out again and she curled her fingers into a fist, but he plucked at her sleeve and raised up his pinched

fingers. A glint hung and curled in the firelight, a golden hair. Domhnall's.

Daft grunted. "So the magpie's got a chick. No breakfasts to be taken there."

"But breakfasts given, and stories told at bedtime."

"My son," she said, and her heart flitted in her chest.

The hair shone in Deft's fingers. "Gold for your nest, indeed. Your husband must be fair as an angel, to have so overcome your own dark."

"Or we've had a cuckoo laying amongst the corbies," Daft said.

"No, Domhnall's not my..." She tried to get up again, to run or strike she wasn't sure, but somehow the table leg had gotten on her skirt, and there was a solid wall of shoulder behind her, sweaty and oblivious. "What do you want of me?" she asked again.

"To make a choice," Deft said. "Pick a pattern and hold it."

"Life and loves," Daft said, merrily, "or war and pieces."

"Two ravens or three."

"You're mad," she said. "That's just a *song*. When it's over, it's all back to chaos. It doesn't change anything. Your shapes in the fire there, you can't hold onto them. As soon as you see them, they're gone."

“Are you sure? Sometimes the chaos is attracted to patterns. Strange ones, to be sure, but that’s ever true of attractions.”

Daft chuckled and ran his tongue over his teeth.

“The world will rant and rage, uncontrolled,” Deft said, leaning in, and behind him the fire gusted suddenly, a storm of smoke and ash billowing into the room and a round of cursing from the table of Scotts. “And there’s no predicting it, but sometimes it gets drawn up into a new shape and for a while it stays there, sure as if you’d done it yourself.” He pulled Domhnall’s hair taut between his fingers, like he was shaping a pot on the wheel, and behind him the fire *snapped* back into the hearth, calm as could be. “You can’t predict those patterns, not with a lifetime’s learning, but sometimes you can—what’s the right word?”

“Seduce,” said Daft.

“*Suggest* one. Not any one, perhaps, but one chosen aptly.”

The chill blew through Regan’s heart, now, which stopped flitting and settled low in her chest. “Why are you telling me this?”

“What’s your son’s name?” he asked, and set the hair floating in the air; it spun a second, then whirled around her head and into the hearth.

“Domhnall,” she said, faintly, her eyes filled with the fire.

“And his mother’s?”

Her heart reached bottom, and stopped. “Caitlin. Caitlin Brewer.”

“And did this Caitlin abandon her egg and fly, like the cuckoo?” asked Daft. “Not a bad strategy, that, if you don’t mind skipping breakfast.”

“No, she’s gone. I mean, she died.”

“And the father, then, he fell in love with you. No surprise in that,” said Deft, and ran a pale finger through the fall of her black hair. “If the thought of the light brings pain, then there’s comfort in the dark. In this very room, it could have been, you picking one of your Border songs of fairy queens and escape under the hill—”

“Thomas Rhymer, he was a Border lad, a few centuries back” Daft said. “Hoo, you want *daft*, you talk to him.”

“—and all his turmoil drawn into that song, that he’d never really listened to before, and into the singer,” Deft said.

‘I didn’t know what I was doing’, Regan wanted to say, but that wasn’t true. “I just wanted to ease his grief,” she said instead, but that ‘just’ wasn’t true, either.

“In this room here?” Daft asked. “You sang to him, and you with the old songs and the old power? With the whole town here and listening?”

“Yes,” she said, but too quiet to carry.



“Hell and damnation,” Daft said, and ruffled his hair. “And was this before or after this Caitlin took her leave?”

Regan shoved the table forward an inch, enough to free her skirt, and the shoulder behind her twisted and leaned away with a grunt. She stood and looked from one to the other, half blind with shame and regret, but their black eyes cut through the darkness, tilted and patient: a pair of crows in a tree, waiting. “Two days after she died,” she said. “The day they put her in the ground.”

She turned and pushed toward the bar, stepping over and on boots, shoved someone out of the way—George Brewer, it was, by the cursing—and under the bar and away.

The far end of the bar was blocked by Andrew. “If you’re done talking with your bonnie friends there, you might want to get back to the singing.”

She waved her hand out at the room. “Willie’s still playing...” she started to say, but Willie was not. He had paused, for a sip or two no doubt, and into the sudden silence two voices rang out, one low and smokey and one croaking a rough sort of harmony.

The song was ‘Wicked Wat’, or ‘The Rough Wooing’, the story of Sir Walter Scott, one of many of that name, to be sure, but this one had been born of a Kerr mother and cut down by a Kerr cousin. Not a song to sing in public, not in this tavern or

anywhere in the Borderlands where Scotts and Kerrs sat by one another. Not now, with war so close to howling down out of the hills.

One of the Scotts began to sing with the strangers, off key and slurred tempo, and Willie, damn him for a fool, joined in on the pipes. Then the whole table of Scotts joined in on those last verses, of an ambush on the streets of Edinburgh:

Strike! Ain strike for they father's sake,  
John Colden knowes ha' cried,  
An when they found Scott yet abreath,  
They up and stabbed him 'til he died."

Willie faltered, and came to a stop. Regan counted the silence, *beat-two-three*, and then there was a roar and the scrape of swords drawn, and the flash of steel through the smoke.

Regan ducked down behind the bar next to Andrew. They glanced towards the front door, but it was blocked, people pushing in from the street to see the fight, or join it.

"The courtyard," Andrew hissed, "and out through the stables." So they turned and scooted back down the bar. There was a heavy *thud* above their heads, ghillies and hose and bare knees, one of the Highlanders. He dropped down and hefted a cask of whisky that must have weighed as much as Regan.

"Hey!" said Andrew, and tackled him at the knees.

Regan wiggled past, got her feet under her and went for the back door but it slammed open as she reached out, a band of moss-troopers in from the courtyard with weapons in their hands and murder in their eyes. She ducked down again and back into the room. There was a tunnel of sorts, where chairs and benches had been shoved back against the bar, and she crawled half the length of the room before she put the heel of her hand in a pool of something warm and slick. Blood, it was, and she landed face first into it.

Her head bounced off the floor and then she hung there, a few inches above the planks and baffled for a moment. Someone had a good handful of her hair and was pulling her up with it, until she wobbled on her knees, neck bent back. It was George Brewer, with a wild look in his eyes, eyes she rarely looked into, because they were Caitlin's eyes and Domhnall her son's. The blood she'd slipped in was his; he had a long gash along his ribs, his free arm clamped against it, and a knife held loosely in that hand.

"Did ye do this, too, witch? Was taking my sister not enough for ye?" he grated. "You and your fey friends, have you spelled the war down on us?" He stabbed towards her face, with an awkward twist of his body. She couldn't pull back with his grip on her hair, so she leaned in and butted his ribs with her head. He grunted, and the knife bounced off her back and

to the floor. George curled over his ribs, and brought his knee up hard into her breast. They both gasped for air.

“Hellfire,” he said, and then looked up. “Aye, aye, fire’s for witches.” He stepped forward, straight through the fight, dragging Regan by her hair. She kicked and grabbed out blindly but all she could catch were legs and cloaks, which pulled themselves away or kicked back.

The fight roared and billowed around them but somehow parted before George and his purpose, and swirled in again after him, a few long strides to cross the room and then he hauled her to her knees again, right on the hearth. She pulled a foot up but he kicked it out again. Her boot slid into the fire. She watched as it started to smoke.

He put a bloody hand under her chin and turned her face up to his. “I’ll start ye burning here, and your friend the Devil will take up the job in his turn. Have no fear. I’ll be down to check on ye soon enough.”

She kicked again, setting up a cloud of sparks, but he had both hands in her hair now and a boot in the center of her back. She slid forward, nothing but the fireplace and flames before her. The smoke had made great black wings against the stones, she saw, and the flames the gold of Domhnall’s hair, who *had* been her son, by choice, if just for a while. There was no shape she could see that wasn’t fire and pain, but some were brighter

and more furious than others. She chose a pattern, shut her eyes so it burned bright against her closed lids, and *held*.

There was a vast roar, the flames streaming all around her, howling *through* her like her songs with a mad music and the sense of old words on the edge of hearing. She shook as if she would fly up the chimney, like a spark, and free of all of this, blown in the wind for ever more. To leave Thomas and Domhnall—a sorrow that burned beyond any flame—but to leave them in peace.

The hands in her hair fumbled and let go. The pattern behind her eyes flared up and away, leaving her in darkness and silence.

Regan opened her eyes. She was no longer in the hearth. She hung in the air before it, and no hands holding her this time, nothing but her need and anger and desire. Her *choice*.

Two tall figures stood beside her, black boots and breeches, long black hair and short, each with a pistol ready. George Brewer had backed up several steps, with a hand on his chest and a look of startled comprehension in those eyes. He opened his mouth, and shook his head once, and fell. As did Regan, a drop to the hearthstones that took her breath, the magic not fled but waiting, like a beat of silence in a song.

There was a cry from somewhere, and a thud, and the fight began to swirl across the room again but left a space before the

hearth, mindful of the pistols. Hands slipped under Regan's arms and dragged her to her feet.

"Damnation," Regan said and blinked soot from her eyes.

"Magpie," Daft replied with a mocking bow, and dusted his hands. "Though you're all Crow now."

She rubbed her cheek, stared at her hand; blackened she was, head to toe, but not burnt. She looked down at George's body, curled on the floor, put her hand to her mouth and tasted ash.

"You shot him," she said.

Daft shook his head. "The song you sang him was more than his heart could hold."

"Not your fault his heart was so small," Daft added.

Regan clasped her other hand over the first, as if to stop herself from screaming, slid her hands up to slip her hair from her face instead. "He was wrong about Caitlin, you know," she said. "Maybe I took Thomas to my bed with a song, but I never took Caitlin to her grave with one. Her death was her own. It was her heart, as well, nor was hers a small one. And if I could have given her back to her son and her husband, I would have, no matter the cost."

"You might have at that," said Daft, with a crack in his voice like glee. "Some folks *do* come back, you know, from under the hill."

“But those songs tend to end badly,” said Deft.

“And this one, how does it end?” asked Regan. “Was he right about the other thing? *Have* I brought the war down here? The Morrigan and her sisters, they flew in like Ravens after the battle to take their fill, but in the old stories they *started* those battles, sat on men’s shoulders and sang them songs of glory until they flung themselves into bloody ruin.”

Daft shrugged. “A bird’s gotta eat,” he said.

Deft looked out across the room. The Kerrs and Scotts were still at it, fist and blade. Andrew was by the door with a long strip of tartan in his hands and a stunned look on his face. But other faces were turned to the three of them where they stood in the hearth, and the looks on those faces were not far from that on George Brewer’s corpse.

“The war *will* come down,” Deft said, “but not necessarily here.”

Daft sniffed and spat black into the hearth. “Looks to me like it’s here already.”

“It could be led elsewhere,” Deft said, gently.

Regan felt her old anger howling up. “Then there must be some way out of here. The two of you, you crows, you friends of the dark sisters, you with your sight. Oh, don’t you tell me you don’t know what will happen.”

Deft looked at the crowd, which had grown closer, and more quiet. He tucked his pistol into his belt but left his hand on it. With his other hand, he gestured toward the back door. “Sometimes the pattern’s there to see in the flames,” he said gently, “and sometimes...”

No, it wasn’t anger rising inside her. It was sorrow and understanding and something bright and swirling, like sight, like song. “Sometimes you have to *suggest* one,” she finished.

“A matter of choice,” agreed Deft.

“Breakfast or not,” said Daft.

“A song of Two Ravens,” said Regan, who’d escaped the burning but not the pain, “or Three.”

\* \* \*

They stopped one time, on the edge of town. Night had come, with a wind and clouds overhead, and the only light that might reveal them shone from the watchtower up the hill. They’d gone around it, leading the horses. They had one for her, a spare or so they said, a courser as lean and dark as they.

Regan slipped into the house and took a few useful things, needles and thread, a knife, her heavy boots. She would have left in their place a note, but she could think of no words that could explain her choice or the stories he’d hear in the morning. So she softly sang from that song she’d sung to him those years ago:



‘O no, O no, Thomas,’ she says,  
‘O no, O no, that can never be,  
For I’m but a lady of an unco land,  
Comd out a hunting, as ye may see.

Then she left a kiss on his cheek, and on Domhnall’s, dark with soot and swept up like wings.

She shut the door quietly, and slipped her things into a pack, and stepped up into the saddle. A wind was blowing up from the south; it swept over Crichehope and shook the roses by the door, that had been hers, and caught up her cloak in great wild flaps. Regan counted them off, *beat-two-three*, and then they wheeled around and away.

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## THE BOOK OF HOW TO LIVE

by Rose Lemberg

The air in Artifice Department Workshop B hung still and motionless, heavy with smells of metal and parchment. Efronia tucked the heavy covers around the metalcutting machines and returned the measuring sheets into their cases for the night.

She was always the last to leave. Professor Baltas himself had gone home around noon, and his graduate students and other apprentices trickled out with the sunset. They left light behind them—garlands of candlebulbs strung beneath the ceiling, those magic-filled globes that blinked down at Efronia with all the indifference afforded to magicless commoners by those who held power.

She was just such a commoner. A peasant. But she knew her work, and she worked hard. That would be enough.

Efronia pulled two large, faded handkerchiefs out of the pocket of her skirt. With slow and careful motions, she wiped the machine oil off her hands with one, then folded the soiled fabric inside the other to protect the material of the skirt. She would wash the squares of fabric at home and hang them to dry on a clothesline strung across her room, as she did every night.

A runner had come to the department three days ago, to seek her out in person. Her water pump invention had attracted a buyer who wanted a machine that was completely mechanical. She had gone straight to Baltas with the news. Certainly this was evidence enough that she could, even without magic, hold her own amidst the other artificers in the department, all of them named strong. He told her that he'd already arranged a faculty meeting to discuss her petition to be granted full student status.

Efronia allowed herself to be hopeful—after all, they had admitted her. And her inventions worked. The lubrication-dispensing machine measured out just the right amounts of oil without the need for magical recalibrations; her other mechanical improvements in the workshop made experiment setup so much easier it was almost unnoticeable now. Certainly the artificers here needed her and valued her work.

She picked her trekking staff from where it leaned behind the door and stepped out into the chilly dark front steps of the building. Behind her, the deepname-powered door swung shut and locked itself, having sensed that she was the last to leave.

Efronia straightened the shawl on her shoulders—not underbelly goatwool but sturdy enough to be serviceable—and walked out of the Artifice courtyard onto the main university avenue. On campus rooftops, deepname-powered

weathervanes turned in the strong wind, but no sound passed through the veil that the scholars maintained against the nuisance of rattling.

On a corner to her left, the small after-hours university tearoom held a few students talking quietly and drinking brandied tea on a veranda under a garland of small, multicolored candlebulb lights. She recognized two of Baltas's student-artificers and a few others from a neighboring workshop. She lifted her hand in greeting, but they ignored her. Perhaps they did not recognize her in the dark. She did not have deepnames to send a small light to illuminate her face. Efronia wondered whether to move closer for a greeting, but she was not sure. People were always so difficult to interpret. Perhaps they wanted to be left alone.

She straightened her shoulders as she walked down to the gateway arch and through it, out into the nighttime city illuminated by great candlebulb lanterns. The maples and the horse chestnuts, captive in their rings of stone, rustled in the darkness, their leaves shivering with the chill.

Efronia was no stranger to wind and cold. She had once trekked through forests wilder by far than the capital, all the way across the country—from her native Vūcha down to Dugomá, on foot, with no more wealth than the models of her inventions wrapped in a carrier bag. The city streets did not

scare her. At night, an occasional drunk loitering beneath a deepname-powered lantern would whistle or shriek after her; sometimes there'd be robbers, of a particularly desperate kind. She ignored the rare propositions and the all too frequent derisive calls, ignored everything except direct violence. For that occasion, her trekking staff concealed prongs she'd built into the wood before leaving home, prongs that popped out at a twist of a lever. She judged it faster than deepnames, and just as effective.

Deepnames were a rarity up north, in peasant lands beyond the Vūcha river. In Efronia's native village of Luka, nobody had had deepnames for generations. Efronia had learned her letters from an itinerant named strong, a Vūchani from another village who had once traveled down to the capital to be educated at the university. As a girl, she had always imagined all named strong to be like her Gorima—kindly and generous older women wrapped in white shawls of underbelly goatwool over simple dresses. Comfortable but not rich, wise but not overbearing, ready to teach and make. She wanted to be one of them, yes, even without deepnames. Despite Gorima's warning, she did not believe their absence would be a hindrance to her.

She'd been wrong. In Dugomá, at the university, being a simple was more than a mere hindrance. One had to be a

named strong to be admitted as a student, and most of those named strong were nobles. She wanted to chart this, collect information, numbers—how many nobles had deepnames, how many commoners? They said here that mind’s power aligned naturally with nobility, but Efronia suspected it was otherwise, that nobles were bred for power, rather like mountain goats for wool.

There was more. Deepnames were taken in early adolescence, and magical nametaking was dangerous. Noble children went into it prepared, schooled, while commoner children were left to burn out and die without instruction. And those who escaped such fate and took power? Well, they’d be admitted to the university, educated, and married off to a noble. Bred into the stock.

She needed to chart this, write it down, track it for a few generations if she wanted to show anything. And she wanted to know, to be sure of her knowledge. But Bird forbid she’d mention this to Baltas.

*I am grateful, her mind supplied. They admitted me.*

*A contrary voice responded, Not as a student. As a workshop worker. As a servant, to sweep floors and dust gears and keep out of sight until called.*

In Efronia’s mind, the contrary voice sometimes took the shape of a bear, one of the two she’d killed during her long trek

south. The voice did not disturb her. She considered it, weighed it like any other danger, be it long-familiar or new. Rash motions—and emotions—only scared a bear, enraged it into attacking. Bears, like inventions, required her patience.

Which was why she did not halt when she heard, from an alleyway to the west, a sound of approaching feet. Robbers, drunks, idle party-goers on a dare? She kept walking, unafraid but alert, trusting her hearing to supply answers.

No less than two people. Coming towards her, not quite running, but in a hurry.

Efronia neither sped up nor slowed, but her grip on her staff tightened.

“Wait! Please wait!” somebody called.

Efronia’s steps came slowly to a halt. Turning towards the source of the sound, she planted her feet wide, distributing the weight around her core. Back at home, her strength and bulk had been praised as a marital asset. In the city they made her an unpopular target for lechers and suitors alike. But Efronia had not been much swayed by others’ opinions on what was so obviously hers alone—her body. Its utility heartened her. It had served her well in forests, fields, and roads; and then in work and even altercations in the city. Her thumb poised to press the lever to expel the prongs Efronia waited for the strangers to approach.



The first to reach her was a man. With the nearest deepname lantern half a dozen houses away, it was hard to make out his features. He stopped a few feet away, wary of her staff. A city man, not too young, with a serious face and unfashionably short dark hair. He wore a red shirt, vivid even in this light. The second figure was shorter than Efronia by half a head and slender, with hair and most of their face hidden under a scarf.

“Forgive the intrusion, please, Artificer.” A woman’s voice. Her vowels were short, capital-style, but strangely round. Unfamiliar. “But we need to talk to you.”

“You might not recognize me, Artificer,” the man said, “but you saw me at the university a few days ago. I am the one who brought the letter.”

No, she did not recognize him. Faces were always difficult to remember, and his was shrouded now in darkness. She’d been too preoccupied with the contents of the letter, the offer to purchase her pump, to pay attention to the messenger.

“I am not yet an artificer.” Efronia spoke slowly. “Until the department chooses to formally accept me, I have no title.”

“Not so,” a third voice said.

Out of the darkness a light swam, held up in the hand of the speaker. The light, caught in a large glass bulb-like lantern, was not a candlebulb. It did not look magical at all—the flame,

small and clear, burned on a wick that protruded from an opaque rounded part at the bottom of the contraption—copper or ceramic, she could not tell.

“What use does the department’s recognition have for you?” Only when the lantern’s wielder spoke did Efronia remember to look up. A woman’s long and elegant face, her thick and curly hair pinned out of the way with a circlet of bronze fish that glimmered with the flame. And oh, such eyes. Dark and deep wells in which the lantern’s light was reflected like stars that fell into water; and there it was contained.

Momentarily taken aback by an unfamiliar emotion, Efronia grit her teeth and held her ground. “I came to study at the university. To become an artificer.”

“I am sorry. The named strong at the university judge everything by magic, whether or not it is relevant. What is it to you, Efronia Lukano? You are an artificer because your inventions work. Work is the measure of everything. It is through work that we will learn how to live.”

The speaker’s words, like the first woman’s, had an unfamiliar roundness to them. Her skin, this close, looked darker than the man’s, darker even than Efronia’s own. Efronia thought back on the peoples she had met while traveling, but nothing came to mind. It did not matter. People were people, and people everywhere were hard for her to read.

She said, “You come to the department, you chase me in the streets at night.” *You know my name, and have not told me yours.* “Your need for a water pump must be dire.”

“It’s you we’re after, not the pump so much,” the lantern-woman said, “Although we will pay what we promised.”

“We took an interest ever since we’ve heard that the department accepted a simple,” said the man, “though we were sorry to hear that they have not given you student status.”

“Well.” It was true that the department had not yet made her a student, but they were considering her—a magicless simple, an exception among the sea of named strong. That in itself was worth her patience.

“We thought you would be more upset,” said the lantern-woman.

“No.” She was not upset. Even if she was, such emotions were unhelpful when there was nothing to be done. “I will wait and see what happens.”

“It is your choice. But if you reconsider, you should join us, work with us. We do not wait for the strong to illuminate us. We carry our own light with us. Even if it is not as large or as bright yet, one day every person, simple and strong alike, will benefit from that light.”

The little speech sounded odd to Efronia's ears, as if rehearsed, or written rather than spoken. That's what the artificers at the department sometimes said about her, too.

She wanted to think about this, and about these words, but it would have to wait. "You want me to join you, but I have no idea who you are."

The lantern-carrier waved her hand at the man, who spoke. "Name's Zubrano."

She nodded next at the small woman with the scarf, who glared back and frowned. For a long while it seemed that nothing would be said, but she did speak at last. "I am Zilpit-nai-Meronit." Even though she did not unveil her face, in the light of the lantern Efronia could see that she, too, was brown-skinned.

The lantern-carrier spoke last. "I am Zilpit-nai-Rinah. If you want to contact us, look for Zubrano at the chair workshop down Third Furnituremakers' Street in the Artisans' Row." The woman inclined her head, and the links in the bronze fish circlet clanged and shimmered. Efronia should have been annoyed, but she wasn't. The workmanship was apparent in the piece, intricate and precise, whimsical beyond anything Efronia would create, but as precise. She trusted this work the way she did not trust the lantern.

The three turned away, but Efronia couldn't resist calling after. "What fuels your lamp?"

"Join us, and we'll talk."

*Eh.* Efronia watched the strange trio disappear into the alleyway, then resumed her measured walk home. The ceramic contraption at the bottom of the lamp must have contained a type of fuel that fed the wick and maintained the flame. Bog oil? No, too far from the source and thus pricey, and besides, prone to explosions. Peat would smoke. Bear lard they did not have here in the south...

She reached the tenement building, unlocked the door with her key, stepped over the drunk that lay across the narrow vestibule. She began to climb the stairs. Zilpit-nai-Rinah the lantern-carrier had walked slowly, careful not to extinguish the small flame. The other two had run. And yet the three had reached Efronia almost together. Zilpit-nai-Rinah must have lit the lantern just before the others caught up with her.

Efronia finished her climb—three flights of stairs—and unlocked the door to the apartment she shared with three other women, all of whom worked as janitors on campus. The stipend Baltas paid her would suffice for a small apartment of her own, but she was content to rent a shared apartment, as long as one room was hers alone. It was cheaper, and the leftover money bought scrap metal and tools for experiments.

Efronia's flatmates were asleep already—she heard snoring from the room they shared. Too engrossed in her thoughts to seek out food, she opened the door to her room, barely big enough for a single bed and a small storage chest.

How had Zilpit-nai-Rinah lit the lantern? No time to rub sticks or use another source of friction. And Efronia did not remember hearing the sound of flint against steel, a method for those here without magic. Nor did Zilpit-nai-Rinah appear to carry a tinderbox.

Efronia retrieved her own tinderbox from the chest and lit a small tallow candle. In its light, she crouched down by the pail of water she'd prepared in the morning. She doled out a small portion into a second, empty pail with a brass ladle and unraveled her kerchiefs to wash. Later she'd have to use the tenement bathroom, the one at the bottom of the stairs, and she needed to leave enough water to wash before sleep. But now she just wanted to think, in the quiet near-darkness of this space that was her own. The familiar motions of washing provided the calm she needed.

Perhaps Zilpit-nai-Rinah carried a tinderbox under her scarf.

Or perhaps one of them was a named strong, and that one had ignited the lantern; if so, it all had been just for show.

What did they want with her? Who were Zilpit-nai-Rinah and Zilpit-nai-Meronit? They shared part of a name—did that mark them as relatives? Which one of the three was the named strong? Without magic, she could not tell. Perhaps she'd been wrong.

Efronia found no answers even as later she lay on her back in the bed. She'd walked for three months to study at the university, and so she would be patient now, and wait for the faculty vote. Professor Baltas would come through. She needed no strangers.

*We make our own light, Zilpit-nai-Rinah had said, no matter how small.* But the lantern she had carried needed improvement. Unlike the circlet. Lots of fine hammering had gone into that piece.

Zilpit-nai-Rinah's eyes swam in her vision, their reflected sparkle bringing up in her a feeling of floating—then falling, falling deep into a hole in the ground. From that well, the second bear she'd killed spoke up. It was the bear the country nobles had tortured with deepnames until it had gone insane for their entertainment.

The bear spoke with the voice of Baltas.

*Like a candlebulb in a dark room, the magical disciplines illuminate the world.*

\* \* \*

When she judged Efronia to be out of sight, Zilpit-nai-Rinah opened the glass door of the lantern, then licked her thumb and forefinger. She extinguished the wick, grateful for the affirming realness of the flame between her fingers, and for the dying of it. By her side, Zilpit-nai-Meronit hissed disapproval. Zubrano, used to much riskier sights, only shrugged.

It had been a mistake, the lantern. But she'd wanted... what did she want? To make an impression? To provide the right symbol to match her words? What would that do? She'd wanted to convince this simple artificer, to impress her, perhaps, the way she could never impress her own lovers. But Efronia's eyes on the contraption held doubt, and not all that much curiosity. She had seemed to listen to her words, though, for all they were heavy, rehearsed and difficult to hold in this language not native to her. Locked in the quarter, she did not have much opportunity to practice speaking Lainish; reading and writing were much easier.

Zilpit-nai-Rinah sighed, but any discussion with the others would have to wait until safety. The three of them walked quickly and quietly, concealed under the cloak of darkness, down the alleyways off the Old University road. For the two Khana women, being discovered illegally outside the quarter would mean imprisonment. They'd taken to the streets before,



trusting the night to conceal their secrets, but after the overly noisy and probably fruitless encounter with Efronia, they wouldn't want to take further risks.

The night filled the shadowy alleyways with stray sounds and disturbances—rats dashing underfoot, the flapping laundry on lines stretched high across courtyards, an occasional scream of unquiet sleepers, and the wail of teething babies. And yet, compared to the Khana quarter, the outer city was quiet. To Zilpit-nai-Rinah it seemed that in the richer neighborhoods by the university, these people were afraid to stir from their houses at night—unwilling to wander in the darkness for fear of being robbed, or worse, subjected to the sights and smells of poorer neighborhoods to the south. But in the Khana quarter at this time, like at any time, restless grandmothers would be carrying pots of scalding tea and trays of fishcakes over to their neighbors; the main trading square and the garden courtyards would be full of girls, newly come to their deepnames, practicing magic with many a gossip and giggle; an occasional whistle or scrape would escape from the underground workshops where women, in secret from the men, labored on works of artifice forbidden to them by the holy law of the Khana. And from beyond the white walls of the men's inner quarter, snippets of prayer and truncated sounds of the four

holy instruments would drift out as the scholars were readying to sing forth the dawn.

But in the Lainish outer city, no such camaraderie was available. The only amicable sounds she heard involved Zubrano's breathing, pointed sighs from Zilpit-nai-Meronit, and the faint clanging of her own fish circlet. It had been misguided to flaunt such treasures, Zilpit-nai-Meronit had said, but she disagreed. What was the point of undercover artifice if one could not also make jewelry, and what was the point of jewelry if one could not wear it? Nonsense. Efronia had seemed interested in it—more so than the stupid lantern, in the end. She wished now they could talk about work, talk about anything, really.

Of her oreg, only Zilpit-nai-Meronit had chosen to accompany her tonight, and that reluctantly. She, Zilpit-nai-Rinah, was considered junior to the other three women for no other reason than lack of magic. It did not hurt when she'd been asked to join the oreg. She'd been grateful, proud. By now it was an old and gnarled and bitter thing.

*We used to be in love once*, she thought. She was quite sure that out of her three erstwhile lovers, only Zilpit-nai-Meronit was still fond. She came with her outside the quarter, taught Lainish commoner children in secret despite prohibitions for commoners to be instructed in magic—was

that why they still cared about each other? The work? Zilpitnai-Meronit said nothing now, her scarf drawn firmly over her face.

Silently they passed the two streets that led to Artisans' Row—without arguing this time whether Zubrano should take his leave here. Still together, the three walked down the twisted alleyways that brought them closer to the outer stone wall of the quarter. At any hour now, the giant man-like automata constructed by the scholars would circle the wall. With their white metal bodies covered thickly with the seedlike letters of Birdseed writ, these guardians kept the dangers out. But the Khana people too would remain locked inside—until some miracle would convince the royal government to reopen the doors of the quarter and allow its women to renew their trade routes beyond the city.

The three did not seek the main entrance, used now only by the Lainish who came here each week to trade food for baubles, for jewels and mechanical toys. A pale semblance of previous markets when Khana-traded goods entered the city from the south, the Khana market was closed today—and with it, the gate. The three stopped instead by the now-familiar nondescript wall of an abandoned shop, its stained and dirty for-rent sign remembered rather than visible, this part of the city not rich enough for deepname lanterns. A rickety wrought

iron grating, barely waist-high, separated the tiny courtyard from the street.

“You two should lay low,” said Zubrano, “I don’t trust the Vuchani to keep quiet.”

“I don’t think she’ll report us,” Zilpit-nai-Rinah said.

“You assume too much. You thought she’d be upset. You thought she’d join us.”

Zilpit-nai-Meronit nodded vigorously in agreement. “You trust too easily. Another simple artificer! You thought she’d be ecstatic at the invitation.”

Zilpit-nai-Rinah felt a kind of a burning in her gut, a hurt that came from feeling like a child chastised by her keeper for being naïve. She retorted, “Efronia might yet join us. She just did not strike me as a quick-moving type.”

“Nah. She was taken aback by the sight of two Khana,” Zilpit-nai-Meronit said bitterly. “Zubrano’s right, we’d be lucky if she won’t report us.”

Zilpit-nai-Rinah shrugged. “Very well. We lay low and continue our work.”

“Think about my proposal to establish a half-way meeting place,” said Zubrano.

“Impossible,” said Zilpit-nai-Meronit.

“A middle ground is needed,” he insisted, “My people aren’t welcome among yours.”

“Your people locked mine away in the quarter!” Zilpit-nai-Meronit’s voice rang startlingly loud in the darkness. Somewhere above, a stray cat yelped.

“Hush,” said Zilpit-nai-Rinah. “We will consider.”

Zubrano said nothing. Zilpit-nai-Rinah jumped over the rickety grate, unlocked it from inside, and motioned for Zilpit-nai-Meronit to follow. He stood guard as the two Zilpit oreg-mates, or erugot, unlocked the door to the abandoned shop and entered its cobwebbed premises.

As soon as the darkness enveloped them, Zilpit-nai-Meronit waved a hand and released a tiny candlebulb.

“The lantern...” Zilpit-nai-Rinah said, well aware of how weak her voice sounded.

“No,” said her lover, firm again in her own domain, or close enough to it. “Your flame is unreliable. Nobody will see us here.”

They had spoken in Lainish for Zubrano’s sake, but now that they’d switched to their native Khanishti, it brought Zilpit-nai-Rinah little solace. Shame flooded her. The lantern, an invention that would impress Efronia and convince her to join them—she’d worked on the prototype for a month, but it needed more work. Deepname ignition had been a shortcut. She’d argued against it, but Zilpit-nai-Meronit would not

comply; she lit the lantern with her deepnames, so quickly. There was no time to argue then.

*You help me out when I don't need it. Because I am simple, and thus, for you, like a child. How can you love a lover like a child? What does that even mean?*

Always, for the others, her work had been too unreliable. Too unreliable because it did not have deepnames.

But for Efronia, having deepnames would not be a shortcut. It'd be a lie. A lie that corroded and twisted her words and her purpose.

The lantern, still swung from her clutched fist, dark and heavy and without a light. *Though our flame is small*, she'd said. But now there was no flame at all.

She swallowed a lump in her throat, then followed Zilpit-nai-Meronit through the dusty shop space to the circular stairs that led to an even dustier workshop below. It was large enough for—for anything she'd want to do, really, though the smells of decay and rat poison threatened to overwhelm her. Zilpit-nai-Meronit led the way out of the shop and into the catacombs, through secret doors used long ago by the city Lainish to trade secretly with the Khana in avoidance of royal taxes.

An hour later the two Zilpit erugot emerged, begrimed, sneezing, and lavishly decorated with cobwebs, inside the walls

of the quarter. Shaking with exhaustion and waving away the curiosity of women undaunted by the late hour, Zilpit-nai-Rinah and Zilpit-nai-Meronit found the stair that led home and climbed up to the rooms of their oreg.

Zilpit-nai-Gedulyah was probably asleep, but Zilpit-nai-Mor, the strongest of them and oreg leader, sat upon madder-dyed cushions in the kitchen. She balanced a bowl of nutmeg-millet dough on one knee and mixed it ferociously, teeth clenched—not exactly a picture of welcome. Above Zilpit-nai-Mor, a complicated structure of magical light—likely drawn from all three of her deepnames—reflected her anger in lightning flashes of red. Her face twisted as she looked—not at Zilpit-nai-Rinah but at the darkened lantern in her hand.

“Don’t tell me,” said Zilpit-nai-Mor. “Running around with Bird-eaters again.” Though she was accusing them of socializing with non-Khana, she did not also say *with men*, one could hope because the thought of such atrocity had not occurred to her.

“Our work is needed,” said Zilpit-nai-Meronit, “if the quarter is ever to be reopened.”

“I...” said Zilpit-nai-Rinah, but the leader of their oreg ignored her.

“Show me one millet grain of evidence that the Lainish care for the Khana. Have you forgotten the story of our grandmothers at the university?”

“We are working towards—” began Zilpit-nai-Rinah.

“The outsiders might cooperate now, but they’ll only trick us, rob us of our discoveries, and lock us away again. We’ve seen it countless times before.”

She tried again. “We must work with the Lainish if we—”

Zilpit-nai-Mor stared straight at her for a change. “I am not talking to *you*.”

She looked at Zilpit-nai-Meronit, looking for—hoping for—support, some kind of acknowledgment, but the shorter woman only shrugged apologetically, as if saying, “*What can I do? She is the oreg elder,*” words she’d said to her all too often before.

“Fine.” Zilpit-nai-Rinah walked out of the kitchen; not too fast—goddess fend if she’d show agitation.

In the sideroom, the fourth Zilpit erugah, Zilpit-nai-Gedulyah, slept soundly on a rug bedroll. The rugs, commonplace in the days of their grandmothers before outside trade was forbidden, were rare and worn now. Careful not to make noise, Zilpit-nai-Rinah sat down by the door and opened a small trading chest, from which she extracted a tinderbox.



“She has perverted you.” The voice of Zilpit-nai-Mor, speaking to Zilpit-nai-Meronit. “You run after her, endangering all of us for nothing.”

“She is a genius.”

“She is a *simple*. A simple is not supposed to dash about stirring trouble, I don’t care how smart she is. She is like a child. A child whose time has come to grow up. She could sell her jewelry profitably and enrich our oreg.”

“She believes that her work is more important than any jewelry she could make.” The words sounded hesitant, cold, as if her lover was unconvinced.

“What work?” Zilpit-nai-Mor snarled. “Artifice without magic? Phah! Cooking without fire. Stitching without a needle! What’s so grand about creating unnecessary work? She’s only jealous of our deepnames...”

Bird peck it. Zilpit-nai-Rinah hit steel against tinder, harder than she’d intended. Still asleep, Zilpit-nai-Gedulyah turned and moaned but did not wake. Her lantern, unreliable and imperfect though it was, would provide enough light for her purpose. In the kitchen, the voices droned on.

She pulled out her leatherbound notebook, the one traded from Zubrano for a carved fish armband. From the same storage chest she extracted a pen, her own clever mechanical design that allowed ink to be stored in a small cartridge

equipped with a pumping mechanism. She'd used her jeweler's tools to construct it—more useful than jewelry perhaps, though she had no intention of selling it at market.

She ruffled through the pages already filled in her sure, florid handwriting. She wanted to write in it, but something nagged at her, something important. Efronia. The wide, solid woman in her faded blue shawl, one big hand sure on her staff. Immovable—but her eyes, her eyes took in and considered. Zilpit-nai-Rinah wanted to see her again.

What was this? Some kind of a sign, a rebirth of that blooming and blistering thing in her chest, forgotten for years with the other erugot? The physical faded with that feeling, and that had been a relief to her. She would not be comfortable now, even if she weren't bound to the others. She needed—needed space from that intensity, a space to figure out what she wanted. Yet, she felt for the Vuchani woman, Efronia, something she'd never felt for the others, a kind of kinship. An equality. Its heart was in the work.

She tore a sheet out of the notebook, then hesitated, unsure what to write. She could talk about principles with ease, and she could talk about work; often, the two were one and the same. It felt odd, self-indulgent, to say what she wanted. At last she took a deep breath, as if plunging into the water of the

ritual bath, scribbled a hasty note, then sealed it. Zubrano would carry it to Efronia in the morning.

She pushed the envelope away with vehemence. Time to stop thinking about this now.

It did not work.

Efronia had not been real to her before. Just a story. A story of a simple, a peasant woman who had walked down from Vucha—how far away was that?—brazenly into the university, as if she expected to be considered an equal. The story seemed incongruous to her before, but now she could imagine it. And why not, after all—why not, if one's work was so brilliant, one's hands so deft, one's eyes so keen—why wouldn't she expect to be accepted? Efronia did not wait for the strong to help her. She was a simple and she made things that worked. If only more people would do this...

Resolutely, Zilpit-nai-Rinah pressed a lever to expel fresh ink onto the nib. She could not stop thinking about Efronia, but thinking about Efronia made the work clearer now. Her thoughts, too often silenced here in the oreg, ignored as childish by the other Khana strong, spilled onto the page like the blows of her jeweler's hammer.

*The simple everywhere overrely on the deepname magic of the strong, despairing of their own work before it has begun. And yet, I have witnessed many times the possibility in*

*magicless artifice. The humblest of city dwellers, those who lack money to seek out strong builders, fortify their homes with clay and tar, and construct levers and pulleys to transport raw materials. In the north, peasants use bog oil to cause explosions that split rock into smaller pieces suitable for construction. Water pumps, lanterns, self-filling pens, danger-free internal heating—what else could become possible if only simple artificers applied themselves? In magicless artifice our equality will become apparent, undivided by accidents of magic or birth. Lainish and Khana, Vuchani and Taina alike—yes, even the people beyond the borders of our country would benefit from this endeavor.*

Zilpit-nai-Rinah pressed on the lever again to replenish the ink and began to translate her Khanishti text into Lainish. Even if Efronia would refuse to read this, she had to believe that people would read her work, both here and in the greater city—that they would read it in both languages. Perhaps, down the road, in other languages of Laina, too, the ones she did not know.

\* \* \*

Even in the mornings, when Workshop B filled with hustle and talk, Efronia would often find herself working alone or on the fringes of teams and learning groups. She did not mind. Small talk with others distracted from work, and as for learning

groups, she'd be assigned to one as soon as her student status was approved. This morning though, Efronia felt her measure of aloneness more keenly than usual. People seemed to avoid her; the movements of their bodies and heads all turned away. The workers' gazes, too often tiringly intent to meet hers, slid sideways and off her face.

She thought she must be imagining it. Had yesterday's meeting rattled her?

Eh. She was at a university. There'd be a way to find out more about Zilpit-nai-Rinah and her people, and surely Baltas would not begrudge her an hour spent on this, for all the extra hours she had worked.

Efronia circled the workshop in search of the professor. He was there just a moment ago, had watched the crane-lifting process here, had just adjusted levers there, but she always seemed a moment behind. Finally she found him in front of a large machine, a carp transport, one of the infamous and old fish-shaped vehicles built at the department generations ago, now cocooned in deepname lights for repairs.

So intent on the work he was that he did not turn to face her. His right shoulder twitched. "Ah, Efronia..."

"I'm taking a break," she said. "I hope it's all right. I'll stay later tonight." She always stayed later.

"That'd be just fine." Baltas did not turn.

“I’ll be back within the hour.”

“Good.” His shoulder twitched again.

She was paying too much attention to this detail. Then why did she have an impression that she’d inadvertently cornered him, that there’d been relief in his voice when she said she’d be taking a break, as if he’d expected something else. She must have been imagining it. What reason did the professor have to be wary of her, or she of him? People were not like bears.

Perplexed, Efronia tied the shawl around her shoulders and went out of the workshop. Down University Avenue she walked and towards an old-fashioned building with walls of black tile, each sculpted in a different species of Laina’s birds and lacquered to a glimmer. The central library. In the mid-morning sun, the walls reflected just a hint of a ruddy undercolor that would come out more distinctly at sunset.

She did not have reason to come here often. The department had its own small library, which served the needs of artificers eager for model drawings and measurements rather than words.

Behind the entrance counter, the librarian—a willowy older woman Efronia had never met before—smiled up to her; but in a moment the woman’s smile shaped itself into a scowl, and her blue eyes lost all trace of warmth. “Yes?”

“I am looking for information about a kind of people,” Efronia said, “darker brown skin and curly hair, artificers, perhaps living here in the city?”

“The Khana.” The woman nodded in thoughtful recognition, but then caught herself. “The library is not open to menial workers.”

“I’ve been here before, even earlier this month, to read materials about artifice from my own native Vūcha. The librarians had no problems—I am from the artifice department...”

“You cannot possibly be a student.” The librarian waved in the direction of Efronia’s head, where no latent deepnames coiled.

“I am waiting for my student status to be confirmed. My name should be in the roster.”

But when the librarian brought out the leather-clad book of special authorizations, Efronia’s name was not to be found there. The woman would not budge. “If there is a mistake, please petition with your department.”

Walking back towards Artifice, Efronia wondered whether Baltas’s avoidance of her had to do with her change in library privileges. She’d ask him. It wasn’t a big deal for her, since the departmental library supplied all the information she needed for work. Today’s trip had nothing to do with her work.

And work now waited for her, but she felt oddly reluctant to return to the workshop so soon. Perhaps the departmental librarian would be able to tell her something about these—these *Khana*. Her thoughts circled back to Zilpit-nai-Rinah, but not in any straightforward fashion. She remembered the lantern light reflecting off the tiny brass fish in the circlet, the ringlets of hair spilling around it. Such fine hammering. If—

What were those thoughts? She did not understand their origin, nor the feeling they engendered; a kind of sweet pain under her tongue. She was curious. That was all. Efronia frowned and squeezed her hand around the handle of her staff, except that it wasn't there—she'd left it at the workshop by the entrance, like she did every day.

Back at the departmental building, Efronia avoided the workshop entirely and made her way to the library on the second floor. It was a cozy room with four utilitarian reading desks of polished walnut, large enough to hold drafts and constructing schemes. Unlike the Central Library, where people worked in shifts, the Artifice Department had only one librarian, Igala, a middle-aged and cheerful Taina kinswoman with traditional braided and bell-studded hair. The tiny silver bells had been declapped, and they moved near-silently among the librarian's bleached ashen locks. Behind Igala's counter,



Efronia saw the stacks, with their familiar rows of bookshelves and scroll cubbies.

“How can I help you?” Igala’s smile seemed genuine.

“I...” She opened her mouth to explain about the librarian at Central, the roster, but stopped herself. The Artifice librarian had always been helpful to her, student status notwithstanding. Igala had asked her a question to which there existed a straightforward answer. Efronia’s complaints and suspicions were irrelevant.

“I am looking for information about the Khana.”

“Ah, of course,” Igala said. “I heard Baltas is working on the carp transport again. Neat old things, these fish. Too bad no more are made.” The librarian walked off deep into the stacks where Efronia could not see her but soon returned to the counter with a small pile of books. “Here. I got you a draftbook, but not for the carp. Baltas checked that out last night.”

Efronia retreated with the stack to one of the tables. Here was a draftbook of a simga fish transport, complete with measurement numbers and deepname charts for activation and maintenance. Resolutely she pushed the fascinating draftbook aside and settled down instead with the volume titled *The Brief History of the Khana at the Artifice Department*.

An hour later she’d learned what she needed to know. About fifty years ago the department had chosen to allow eight

Khana to leave their quarter and be admitted to the university. All eight of them were women, and all were exceedingly strong —two of the eight held three deepnames and the others two deepnames each. It was this incredible power that had swayed the department to grant admission to Peninah and Ketri, only a week or so after the quarter was locked by royal decrees. The names Peninah and Ketri, the book explained, belonged to the oregs, the traditional trading groups into which women entered to become lovers and workers together. A group of three or four women would take the name of their strongest and distinguished between themselves through the names of their grandmothers.

The presence of the Peninah and Ketri *erugot* at the department had been short-lived. They stayed long enough to make and partially document the fish transport, about a dozen vehicles of various shapes that moved without the need for horse or donkey. And almost immediately after the construction of these automata was completed, university governance passed a resolution rescinding the women's admission. The eight were ordered imprisoned for defying royal decrees for the confinement of the Khana in the quarter, as well as their own custom that prohibited Khana women from practicing artifice. The department, of course, continued to service the vehicles. For the last fifty years they'd been used for

speedy deliveries of deans and especially important parcels to their destinations.

The eight Khana women had been stripped of their inventions and carted off to some dungeon, their further fate undocumented in the *Brief History*. Presumably in the interests of brevity.

Efronia squeezed her empty fist again, then breathed the unexpected anger out. She had learned much. There was a Khana quarter somewhere in the city. The two Zilpit were lovers—erugot—outside of the quarter, illegally, to speak to her. She struggled with strange feelings again. Elation. Disappointment. Concern. Had she endangered them by asking these librarians questions?

She had to speak to Zilpit-nai-Rinah again.

And say what? *You said I could work and learn with you. I have no interest in fish outside of fishing, which is often calming to me, especially when nobody is around...*

She took a breath. No, it she wouldn't want to babble at Zilpit-nai-Rinah. Let's try again...

*I know you have a lover, maybe more than one...*

Entirely taken aback by her thoughts now, Efronia walked carefully, doing her best not to think anymore.

She returned to the workshop just barely in the timeframe she'd promised the professor. She was not sure she could have

a conversation with him now. Perhaps it could wait. Certainly he seemed in no hurry to share words with her, and she did not need to consult the Central Library anymore.

No. She had to face this. Had to have this conversation today, now, as she'd planned. Her confused thoughts about Zilpit-nai-Rinah were irrelevant to this. Postponing the conversation with Baltas would serve no purpose.

Efronia wasn't sure if it was fear or the rush of anticipation or something else that squeezed her throat as she knocked on the door of his office, prepared to turn around and look for him elsewhere in the workshop.

Surprisingly, he answered. "Come in!"

She did. He threw a startled, furtive look upon her, then started rummaging through papers on his desk. "What is this about?"

"I went to the Central Library," she said, "to research a topic. Only my name was not on the roster like before. If I could ask you to petition so that I would once again be allowed to use the library until my student status is clarified..."

Baltas cleared his throat and sat straighter in his chair. "About that."

"Yes?"

"The faculty met to discuss your application. It was denied."

Efronia stepped back, not quite able to contain the shock she felt. *How, denied...*

Baltas's fingers fidgeted over the desk as he looked somewhere beyond her.

She had to speak. What to say? Was this some kind of a joke? Was this final? She opened and closed her mouth, as the silences and glances and his avoidance fell finally into position.

Baltas said, in a strangely brisk, strained fashion, "Moreover, it was voted to no longer allow you to audit lectures. The good news is that you can stay on as a worker."

"Good news?" She echoed, unable to speak more. Denied? No more classes? How could this be good news? Efronia's hands curled into fists.

He nodded, still not looking at her. "You'll be able to stay on, with me. I know how difficult such work is to find, for a simple. I at least have always taken you seriously, even though you are limited in this fashion."

"Limited?" She cried, still not quite able to speak. "But my inventions *work*—"

"Your *inventions*?" Baltas rose up in his chair, his furtiveness and hesitation suddenly gone. He seemed angry now. *Was* he angry? Why was *he* angry? People were so difficult to understand, especially now, while her mind churned with the shock of his words.

As if in response to her thoughts, Baltas's three deepnames reared up above his head and combined into a protective structure of light that spilled down his shoulders and torso. "Your inventions are a laborious imitation of what a named strong achieves in a heartbeat. You are clever, but my colleagues pointed out that I have given you too much leeway. They are right, I see that now. Your inventions are nothing special. A child's play compared to the work of the named strong. I told you to take a deepname, over and over I told you, but you didn't. You couldn't, or you didn't. Perhaps to shame me. I wouldn't have been made a laughingstock in faculty meetings, either!" He slammed his hand against the desk. "Like a candlebulb in a dark room, the magical disciplines illuminate the world.' Do you know why I keep repeating this proverb to you? One cannot light a candlebulb without a deepname. Without a deepname, you can never become an artificer."

She understood his anger now. He had been cornered. His colleagues had shamed him, because he took her in. Ridiculed him for defending her. He could not stand against them, so it had to be all her fault. He had engaged his deepnames, ready to strike at at her, to hurt her worse than he'd already done.

She saw it now. He could not lash out at the other professors. They were all named strong. Colleagues. Their

acceptance and goodwill meant much. She, she was only a menial worker now.

If he lashed out, it would be at her.

Perhaps people were like bears, after all.

Her hands shook, but showing fear would be dangerous now. She breathed in deep, then squared her shoulders. Spoke in a level tone. “When was this decision reached?”

“Last morning. You do not understand how hard I fought for you, to stay here as a worker. You should be grateful. Your pay won’t even be reduced.”

As always in moments of great danger, she felt her body fill with an enormous sense of calm, immovable and hard as a mountain.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He sat down, looking relieved. “If you could wipe the carp vehicle down, and oil the cogs...”

Efronia nodded and exited the office. The students paid her no attention. The decision has been reached, establishing her with a finality as a menial worker unable to ever achieve student status, and thus outside their social circle.

Their snubbing served her well. From under a desk she extracted her shoulder bag, the one she’d sewn from baby carriers and used to carry her inventions from Vūcha to the capital. With slow and deliberate motions she wrapped the

pump prototype and a few unfinished others into it, along with the wrenches and a handsaw she'd purchased with her own money.

The oil-dispensing mechanism was too bulky to take with her. She fought the urge to unscrew a few cogs and put them neatly away into the appropriate cog jars, for the named strong to figure out if they wanted her nothing-but-a-child's-play of an invention to work again. But they did pay her for her work, and she could not be moved to such games.

The faculty had met yesterday morning, and today her name had already been taken off the library roster.

Yesterday morning.

Bird peck it, but she was a fool. Zubrano and the two Zilpit erugot had found her last night. *We thought you would be more upset*, they'd said. They thought she'd already known, but Baltas had been too embarrassed to tell her until she'd cornered him. If not for that, how much longer would he have dawdled?

She hadn't been upset then, but only because she didn't know yet. Was not important enough to be told. No. Old Baltas had chickened out. He'd told her clearly when she first arrived to Dugomá that he would fight for her to be admitted on the strength of her inventions alone. But he had been made a laughingstock by his colleagues, and so he had changed his



mind. She had no magical ability. She had told him so when she arrived. But now he said it was all her fault that she could not be a student.

Not an artificer. Just a menial worker, forever. She'd keep coming up with inventions, and Baltas would use them, just as the artificers at the department continued to use the fish transport long after its inventors had been jailed and gone. *Be grateful he did not threaten to jail you, Efronia.*

'Upset' was an entirely inadequate word to describe how she felt now.

*Zilpit-nai-Rinah, I like your words better. I'll use your words instead.*

*I am an artificer.*

*I am an artificer because my inventions work.*

Hands twitching for the weight of it, Efronia retrieved her staff from behind the workshop door and walked out. Somebody else would have to sweep here tonight, and oil the cogs for Professor Baltas.

\* \* \*

Morning came all too soon for Zilpit-nai-Rinah. Still groggy from last night's writing, she turned this way and that on the faded rug bed in a vain attempt to escape the persistent rays of sunlight. Someone had solicitously unlocked the carved-fish shutters. The side room she'd shared last night with the

sleeping Zilpit-nai-Gedulyah stood empty, but a buzz of angry and excited voices reached her irritated ears. It came from the oreg's cooking room.

Whatever it was, she was not ready.

The sun had climbed, she noticed, too high for it to be morning; no, it was noon, and the sounds she'd heard were of people arguing over a shared midday meal. Zilpit-nai-Rinah felt no hunger, but a growing sense of unease propelled her to make a quick job of morning ablutions. She donned only the barest amount of jewelry but wound the fish circlet back onto her curls after a perfunctory brushing. The circlet reminded her of her first name, the one her grandmothers had given her in hopes of future greatness. Atarah. An adornment. A crown. In her oreg, she did not much feel like a crown—a wayward junior member, a nameless simple who would remain forever under the protection and guidance of her magically talented erugot. Zilpit-nai-Mor thought she was jealous of their magic, but what Zilpit-nai-Rinah wanted was different—the freedom to work and to be judged for her work, regardless of deepnames.

She sighed and walked out into the cooking room. The many women who sat on embroidered brown cushions fell silent. Not only her whole oreg was there, but others as well—older women from mother and aunt oregs, and even the wizened matriarch Mor-nai-Nurit, the oreg-leader's

grandmother, who could no longer hear without the aid of her deepnames. Some of the women looked up at Zilpit-nai-Rinah with wariness, but most averted their gazes or pretended she did not exist. Only Zilpit-nai-Meronit, dressed unfashionably in matching light blue sharovar and tunic, greeted her with a kiss to clasped hands.

“Sorry for interrupting,” Zilpit-nai-Rinah said. “I’ll be on my way.”

Her gaze lingered on Zilpit-nai-Meronit in blue, the one who’d accompanied her to the city last night, for all they had quarreled. She wanted to talk to her alone, a long conversation—about work, about them—perhaps something of their closeness could be salvaged. And Zilpit-nai-Meronit looked at her now. She looked... apologetic, wary. Not a good time for a long conversation with her, in this gathering.

“I’ll be on my way,” she repeated.

“We are talking about you,” said Zilpit-nai-Mor. “It is high time that you were brought to your senses.”

Mor-nai-Nurit, the matriarch, waved her hand, and her three deepnames, as powerful as those of her granddaughter, reared up and wound around her head. Zilpit-nai-Rinah, having seen this before, suspected the matriarch’s magic was more than a hearing aid—it lent persuasion and authority to the sound of the old woman’s speech. “Running around with

non-Khana must stop,” she said. “It endangers all of us. You will be seized and imprisoned, and then they will come here to fine us and close what little trade we have left.”

Zilpit-nai-Rinah had heard this argument countless times before. It fell smooth from many lips, but it was not a good one. “The Lainish are smarter than that,” she replied. “They want to keep us frightened. They know that as long as we Khana are frightened but not starved enough to rebel, we will remain complacent—struggling, but out of sight, and not a threat. We’re better off being vocal, being seen—”

“You are better off keeping silent and not being seen,” said a mother from the Gedulyah oreg.

The others spoke up together, aunts and mothers and grandmothers and the younger erugot, their voices blending and rising.

“The place of the simple is not to make rules, it is to support her strong erugot!”

“A disgrace—”

“—with men, Bird forfend—”

“—exactly this, to support her strong erugot in their endeavors—”

“—with non-Khana *men*! What was she *thinking*? To top it off, underground artifice—”

Zilpit-nai-Rinah said, “There’s nothing wrong with underground artifice, we need—”

“—with *men!*”

“—a good for nothing, nameless—”

“—artifice which serves no purpose other than her pride—”

“—with *non-Khana* men!!— “

They must mean Zubrano. How did they know about Zubrano? Zilpit-nai-Meronit must have told, must have— No wonder she looked guilty—

It did not matter. It did not matter.

She stoppered her ears with both hands and shouted, “MY WORK HAS A PURPOSE AND MY INVENTIONS MATTER!”

Without getting up from her cushions, Mor-nai-Nurit reached out and patted Zilpit-nai-Rinah’s leg where she towered standing above her seated kin. “Like a child who imitates in hopes of attaining power, your inventions are nothing but echoes of work that is done with deepnames. And like an unruly teenager who whines but relies on her elders for clothing and food, so must you too learn humility, or be cast out from the protection of your elders.”

“You,” she snarled, at all of them, at the world. “All you know is your deepnames!” She looked around, trying to recall which members of these oregs were simple, remembering quite a few—but none of them seemed to be present. “Only one in a

dozen among the Lainish is a named strong, but among us here that number is higher. Is it five out of a dozen? Six? We are strong in magic, but those lacking it suffer an even greater estrangement than the non-Khana, among whom deepnames are rare! Magicless artifice is not a whimsy, not a purposeless play of a lost child—it is a necessity, a work that will show us how to live, together, equally appreciated for our gifts—”

But the last of her words were drowned in voices of the assembled. “—listening to this nonsense—” “with MEN!— “ “A disappointment to her grandmothers—”

She shouted again, scratching her throat raw and not caring. “My grandmothers taught me! They taught me to make these works of sawn and chiseled metal you admire so, the jewelry you’ve all bought from me—they taught me that each woman, strong or simple, must be measured by her work—” She breathed in, gulping, knowing this moment for an ending. These words. Those gestures. These decisions.

“I choose the work that chooses me. I choose to leave the oreg that disdains me for my work! I am not a disappointment to my grandmothers. I am the adornment of my grandmothers, I am the crown, I am the vehicle for the work that is done no matter how you belittle it! I am Atarah-nai-Rinah!”

Not waiting for response, she turned around and back into the side room. There she snatched her purse and began to stuff

it with drafts, notebooks, the letter she'd written last night to Efronia.

Zilpit-nai-Meronit followed on her heels.

“What are you doing?”

“Leaving.”

“You have left the oreg—left me—”

She shook her head. So there was something here after all, a remnant, a pain, of past love. She wanted to tug at this. But she could not stay. “I am going. You can come with me.”

Zilpit-nai-Meronit shook her head. “You should have talked to me first.”

She grit her teeth. “Maybe you should have talked to me first before telling them about Zubrano.”

“I am tired of Zubrano! I am tired of running around with non-Khana, hiding from family—”

Atarah said, taken aback, “I thought you wanted this work, I thought you went because you cared...”

“I cared! I cared about you, I went with you because of you. And now you're leaving me, leaving the oreg—”

“It's not because of you. The work...”

“Pluck the work!” Zilpit-nai-Meronit turned around and ran back into the cooking room.

Atarah stormed out the sideroom, clutching her notebook-stuffed purse. If she stopped, she would crumple. She would

roll into a ball and cry, for hours, forever, until they found her and brought her back like a sick child, and fussed and fed her, and spoke over her.

No.

She walked briskly through curtained passages, through corridors that led her out of the Zilpit quarters into the rooms of an adjacent oreg, and from there to the next. Women young and old watched her progress with shocked eyes but made no attempt to grab or detain her. In one of the rooms—she lost track of which oreg—she saw a simple rope ladder leading down into the streets, and took it.

Running, then pacing on the cobblestones shadowed by the overhang of buildings, it suddenly struck her how much she resembled those few men, those erstwhile scholars who for reasons unknown to the women would sometimes abandon the sanctity of the inner quarter. Leaving forever they ran, tearing the veils off their faces as they did so, pursued by derisive catcalls of grandmothers through the women's inner quarter and out of the quarter's gate, into the unholy outer city of the Bird-eaters, the non-Khana. She, too, was tearing off—not her veils, but the untruth that was her oreg, her belonging to it. Among her grandmothers only the elder had had a deepname. The Rinah oreg might have been poor in magic, but it was rich in companionship, laughter, invention—and she, Atarah, she



and her inventions had paved a way for her to join the Zilpit oreg. But that belonging had come at a price. The price she'd had to pay was herself.

Atarah—the name still felt odd in her mouth, even though it had been hers before she was Zilpit—Atarah found the entrance to the catacombs which Zilpit-nai-Meronit had shown her when they started first to venture out. With great difficulty she lit the lantern—thank Bird she had not removed it from her purse last night. The supplies of purified white malud oil were beginning to run low, but they would suffice for now. Through well-cobwebbed catacombs Atarah moved until she reached the large room under the abandoned shop. Here, she set the lantern down. Gulping through tears, she began to take her bearings.

She'd need a broom and rags. A bucket. Paint and brushes. Scrap metal and tools. She'd need more light. A bedroll to sleep on. She'd need her jewelry-making tools. She'd need a way to trade her work for food, without alerting the government.

*I have shown myself what needs to be done. I am not afraid of the work. I welcome the work.*

She took a shawl off her shoulders and began kicking off cobwebs from the walls, feeling heavy-hearted and afraid despite the inner bravado. She'd hoped Zilpit-nai-Meronit would join her, but she had not. And now Zilpit-nai-Meronit

said she did not care about the work, that she was tired—as if this work to better simple lives was child’s play, to be put aside when one grew tired. Perhaps a named strong had that luxury. A simple never did.

Some time later she thought, *Why in Bird’s many shapes would I want to do this alone? For whom?*

*This is a work for many.*

She’d been so hurt, she’d run without pausing to think. This place, this was the half-way point Zubrano talked about. A place for Khana and Lainish simple to meet and work together. But now she was here alone.

She should have stayed longer in the quarter, talked to family and friends who had no deepnames, those who needed this work the most. Did she plan on doing everything alone, claiming the totality of nameless artifice for herself, triumphantly saving them from cold and privation all on her own? What would that serve? What kind of an example would that set for the future sisterhood she’d hoped to build?

*If the work is to benefit many, then it belongs to many, and many must engage in it.*

Already the work was teaching her—about herself, her pride, her needs.

She would need to go back to the quarter, to speak to the magicless artificers she had worked with, and other simple

Khana—her allies. The named strong in her family were not allies.

She needed to post Efronia's letter. She had to let Zubrano know.

The work was teaching her how to live.

\* \* \*

In the sluggish mid-afternoon warmth, the narrow streets of Artificers' Row bustled around Efronia. Porters and apprentices darted from shop to shop. Dazed by the riot of color and movement, shoppers turned their heads around in search of bargains. The Third Furnituremakers' Street, just like the other two, was crowded with woodworking shops and saturated with smells of newly polished wood, beeswax, and resins. Crudely carved chests and commodes crowded the street, while lighter and more intricate work peeked from the depths of the shops. A child of about twelve ran past, clutching to his chest a three-legged stool inlaid with abalone. A thief, perhaps. Efronia could have easily tripped him with her staff, but she desisted with a shrug.

She'd received a letter last night, a little green envelope delivered at her quarters. It contained a small note, written in an unfamiliar florid hand. "I hope you changed your mind about the work. Even if you didn't, I want to see you. Zilpit-nai-

Rinah.” That name was crossed out, and below it, in different ink: “now Atarah.” And on the reverse, “3<sup>rd</sup> Furnituremakers.”

The note had troubled her. Not the change of name—that was Atarah’s choice—but what it implied. What could it imply? Efronia listed the possibilities in her mind. She knew that Zilpit was a name of her oreg. She’d had lovers. Did she still have them now?

Maybe not.

Did it matter?

Yes, it did, especially so close to, “I want to see you.”

Efronia, too, wanted to see her. Beyond that lay a murkier feeling. She had never wanted the physical, what most other people seemed to want. This feature of who she was had never concerned her before, because it had not mattered before.

She examined the feeling in herself, turned it this way and that. She wanted—not that. Maybe something small. To touch Atarah’s hand? To sit together, side by side, as they worked on the lamp prototype?

Yes. That would be good. Work was good. It was comforting to think about the work.

She’d find Zubrano first, she had decided, and he would lead her to Zilpit-nai-Rinah—to Atarah. But finding Zubrano proved harder than Efronia had envisioned. She had asked in different shops, but the name produced no reaction. Even

finding a person to whom to pose her question had been hard—some shopkeepers lost interest in helping when they saw she wasn't a client, others appeared too busy to pay attention. At one shop, the woodworker mocked her accent by drawing out the vowels in mimicry of Vūchani speech: “Where wouuuuuuld you fiiiiiind Zubraaaaaaano,” to snickers of laughter from the apprentices.

Efronia did not respond to the baiting—but on the street once again, she felt suddenly overwhelmed. Too many people. New people, with their talk and buzz and mockery. Walking away from the department she'd felt resolute and solid, but now her knees began to shake. She did not question her decision. It was the right decision. But.

Efronia gripped her staff, an immovable axis in a tilting world. Her surroundings blended into a colorful whirligig, from which sounds and lights emerged like prickles of long, thin needles, only to withdraw again.

There was a sharp tug on her bag. The weight of the water pump shifting inside it jolted Efronia into action. She grabbed without thinking. Her left hand locked in a vise around someone's shoulder. Still holding her staff in her right, she pressed her assailant close to her body and locked her staff across his chest. The would-be thief was a young man, no older

than fifteen, who kicked and screamed but could not escape her grip. She knocked the knife from his hand.

“Aunt! Auntie! Let me go! Let me go!” His head was level with hers. When he attempted to head-butt her, she shifted her left hand onto his neck.

He stilled at once, heartbeat a frightened bird against her grip.

“Everybody needs my water pump,” she said, close to his ear. “They come with proposals. They run after me at night. They try to steal it on the Bird-plucking street.” She tightened her grip, crushing the boy even closer to her. Once again she felt strong, immovable. Focused. A press on the lever of her staff released its side-blades. Around them, a crowd was beginning to gather.

Efronia had never favored public displays. So why was she doing this? She shouted, “They chase and chase after me, but when I am coming to sell, the buyers are nowhere to be found, but there are plenty of thieves! Where in Bird’s guano-crusty feathers is Zubrano?”

She was angry.

Angry at Baltas. At the other university artificers as well, but especially at Baltas. He’d taken her seriously when she’d arrived, praised her inventions, gave her a position higher-paying than that of uneducated menial workers. By the end he

pretended that nothing like that ever happened, that student status for a simple was an impossibility, some nonsense only an ignorant country person like her would consider. A country person who looked different enough from city Lainish to draw glances, whose long vowels inspired derision, but whose work inspired nothing at all. If she could not find Zubrano—

“I’m here, I’m here!” A Lainishman shouldered through the crowd. She did not recognize the face, but the red shirt was familiar from last night. “Efronia, thank you for coming, let me take you to the shop...”

She pushed the thief away from her. He scrambled and ran, while onlookers attempted to grab and trip him. She did not care to watch but turned around to examine her carrier bag. Its bottom had been sliced but not wide enough for the pump bundle to fall out. Zubrano offered help, which she waved aside; repositioning the bag under her left arm, she followed him to a side alley and a small woodworking workshop. Only the proprietor was here—a heavysset Lainishwoman with a no-nonsense face, who nodded firmly at Efronia but said nothing.

Zubrano started to speak, but three other people walked into the workshop—a young woman and two men, all of whom began to speak at once. “Too dangerous—” “Those displays—” “What if the royal government—”

The proprietor said, “Yes, little brother, we need to discuss this. You keep endangering us all by bringing—”

“Quiet!” said Zubrano. “I want you to meet Efronia.” And to her, “My sister owns the shop. I am glad you could find a chance to come here from the university. I know you do not have much leisure...”

“Leisure?” She laughed bitterly. “I quit.”

“You quit?” said one of the men. “Why?”

“They say now there’s no place for a simple except as a menial worker.”

The man nodded.

She turned to Zubrano. “You knew that yesterday. I did not. Baltas was too afraid to tell me.”

“Oh. This did not even occur to me. You seemed not to care...” He shook his head slowly, in wonder. “In any case, welcome.” And to the others, “Do we trust her?”

The people exchanged glances.

“Trust me in what?” Efronia said. “You told me I should work and learn with you. Here I am, a simple and an artificer.” The word lay strange on her tongue, but she continued, resolutely, to claim it. “Zilpit-nai-Rinah said work is the measure of everything. Then measure me by my work. My artifice can benefit many others, and especially people who cannot rely on magic.”



The people in the workshop looked at each other and nodded agreement. It felt like Zilpit-nai-Rinah's words were valued, here.

Zubrano said, "You know me already. I talk to people about this work, and I make furniture."

The young woman said, "I am Rada. I am a laundress. I talk to people about this work, and I talk especially to women. Women with deepnames are equal to men in power and influence, but simple women are not so lucky."

One of the men said, "I am Zhivin. I work as a servant at the palace." He winked, as if to convey some meaning, but Efronia was not sure what he meant.

The last—a short but burly man who appeared older than the others—said only, "Yanek."

*Laundry? Furniture? I thought you people were artifice...*

She turned from one to another. "What are you talking about? What *is* your work?"

"Our work is change," said Rada. "Our work is for a world in which simple are not dependent on the strong. A world in which every room is warm in winter—be it by magic or better yet, by mechanics. A world where nobody lacks for water."

"A world in which the Khana quarter is open, and those who wish to come and go can do so," said Zubrano. "A world in

which every child receives education, independent of magic or means.”

“A world in which the simple are more than servants to the strong,” said Zhivin, the one who said he worked at the palace.

“Yes... But such a world...” Efronia’s head churned with new thoughts and ideas. “It will never happen. The named strong at the university will never allow it.”

Rada laughed without mirth. “At the university? The university is nothing but a voluntary Khana quarter for the named strong who deem themselves too smart for simple folk, and so they wall themselves away. The problem is not with the university.”

“You mean the government,” said Efronia slowly. “The royal government will never allow it.”

The burly man, Yanek, had remained silent throughout this exchange. But now he spat, like a lumberjack readying to cut down an old tree, then spoke. “We do not plan to ask for permission.”

“People have asked,” said Rada.

Yanek frowned.

Zhivin said, “At the palace, I have discovered many such petitions. Our people have petitioned again and again, to open a school for commoners, to improve heating and water supply

to poor neighborhoods, to open the Khana quarter again. People keep asking and waiting, asking and waiting.”

“I see,” Efronia said. She did. Lodging petitions was traditional in Laina, but such petitioning afforded the nobles the time to stall, to ignore, to lose documents, to dismiss—and perhaps to briefly discuss, to assuage any contrary feelings a strong in power might have, and then dismiss. What came after such petitions? Silence, or...

This would be a dangerous endeavor.

“Why do you need me?” All this talk was well and fine, but these people would need to want and value her work if she was to join them.

Zubrano said, “Our need for artifice is great. Zilpit-nai-Rinah said she would like to work with you, to create artifice without magic. It is how we can best resist the named strong.”

Efronia nodded. Yes. She wanted to see Zilpit-nai-Rinah again.

His sister the proprietor said, “Not in this shop. As I was trying to tell you, talk is spreading. Too many people—and after today’s little show, especially if you bring Khana here—”

“Don’t worry,” said Zubrano. “I’ve long been dreaming of opening my own shop. I think we would sell... chairs.”

Zhivin grinned. “There’s always an acute need for chairs at the palace.”

“Is that so? Then I know just the place for my new shop. Are you coming?” Zubrano said to Efronia.

An unfamiliar emotion tugged the muscles of her mouth upwards into a smile. It felt strange to her, how her face contorted with it, for she rarely before had a reason to smile. But Zilpit-nai-Rinah had sent her a letter, had asked for her. It meant—

This feeling in her chest, it meant something. Something new.

She gripped her staff and adjusted her hold on the carrier bag. “Lead the way.”

\* \* \*

Since last night, Atarah-nai-Rinah had gone back to the quarter and returned with three helpers, each carrying bundles and bags full of tools. Multiple hands made an easier work of clearing away the grime and dust; one of the women spoke of having established, years ago, a new underground workshop with her erugot, but of course there the bulk of the work had been done by magic. Here the women used no magic, only brooms and mops and simple tools. A small mechanical cistern supplied enough water for cleanup.

Atarah wished again and again for Efronia’s invention. Could they improve it together? Could such a thing be extended to bring water to poor neighborhoods, even to irrigate the fields

in times of draught? Together, they could do so much. Bring warmth and illumination to all. Reinvent the infamous fish transport, only without magic... Her mind supplied blasphemous pictures in which, discarding the Khana prohibition against eating and depicting animals more complex than fish, the new artificers would construct vehicles gloriously shaped into birds and snow tigers and even the mythical, almost-forgotten razu beast... To make anything at all, they'd need a furnace and people skilled in smithing, and woodworkers skilled in making—well, a work surface and chairs, for starters.

As if in response to her thoughts, a rattle of descending feet was heard from above. In a short while, the door to the workshop swung open to admit Zubrano, and one other.

“Good to see you already busy,” he said. “I brought you a guest, as well as some other people interested in the fine art of chairs.”

Slowly Efronia walked forward, and Atarah did the same, until they stood face to face, at loss for words, each trying to suppress a smile.

Atarah said, “I used malud oil purified with clay,” at the same time as Efronia said, “I’ve been thinking how to improve your lantern.”

They grinned fully now, but then fell silent again.

“I’m sorry you’ve only seen only the lantern,” said Atarah, “it’s one of my least successful inventions.” “I’ll show you everything once the workshop is set up.”

“Can I help? I brought the pump, and other things...”

“Of course.”

It was easier to work than to talk.

They finished the cleanup and, under Zubrano’s direction, began assembling a workbench and desks. More Khana women kept trickling in, including two of Atarah’s own Rinah grandmothers, both metalsmiths. With a pair of younger helpers, the grandmothers began rolling out sheet metal for the new furnace.

“We need a source of fuel to reliably replace the power of deepnames,” Efronia said.

Atarah had been thinking about this all day. “I have tried various things. I believe we will need to do more than replace. We’ll need to invent our own way of doing things, a much more flexible way. The mind of a named strong relies on its own power. This is where our potential advantage lies. A person’s mind can hold no more than three deepnames, and is moreover limited by the laws of magical geometry. We will rely instead on forces found in nature, whose power is unlimited and varied.”

Efronia nodded vigorously. “I’m eager to explore the uses of bog oil. And I’ve never used malud oil before...”

“Riverwater can be used to turn a wheel, and so can wind, though not as reliably,” Atarah said. “And there are wilder things. I’ve been thinking about lightning...”

“Hah. I’ll make a list.”

Later, when Zubrano and most of the Khana artificers left for the night, Atarah sat down with her notebook and pen. Efronia, having judiciously lit a few tallow candles, sat down by her side and began to tinker with the malud lantern. “I’m going to see if I can make it easy to light when you’re walking.”

She nodded. “Use my jewelry-making tools.”

The candles and the lantern weren’t as bright as a candlebulb, but they served well enough to illuminate a page. There wasn’t enough light yet, or enough workers. The government knew nothing of their plans, and so they weren’t yet in danger. All this would change, she knew, as change would come for all things that grow. She opened the notebook and pushed the lever of the pen.

*We cannot continue to live like before. Separated from each other by walls and words, set against each other by those who fear our common strength, we stand divided. The Lainish named strong withhold their help from those who had been deemed unworthy—people of lowly birth, or the poor, or*

*the Khana, or those lacking deepnames. The Khana strong may grudgingly help the Khana simple, but they aren't eager to share their power with outsiders, for fear of violence.*

*The work unites those divided by birth and talent, Atarah wrote. The work creates a place for us to come together in a wordless understanding. Where our people have been divided by language and customs, they would be united by work. Then let us trust in this work, and in the sisterhood it will create, to teach us how to live.*

In this uncertain light, Efronia's body loomed bulky and solid. She smelled of sweat and grime and refined malud oil. Atarah wondered how she herself smelled, and whether it mattered.

"What are you working on?" Efronia asked.

"A book."

This was interesting. Books had been never Efronia's ambition, but she wanted to know more about Atarah's work, whatever shape it took. "Do you have a title yet?"

Atarah smiled. "I think I'll call it *How to Live*."

"I want to read it."

"You will, of course," Atarah said. "You will."

The room was large enough to spread comfortably, but here they both were, as close as possible without fully touching. This would suffice, for now.



She continued to write.”

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*Rose Lemberg is a queer immigrant from Eastern Europe. Their work has appeared in Strange Horizons, Interfictions, Uncanny, Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology, and multiple times previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, among other venues. Rose co-edits Stone Telling, a magazine of boundary-crossing poetry, with Shweta Narayan. They have edited Here, We Cross, an anthology of queer and genderfluid speculative poetry from Stone Telling (Stone Bird Press), and The Moment of Change, an anthology of feminist speculative poetry (Aqueduct Press). They are currently editing a new fiction anthology, An Alphabet of Embers. You can find Rose at [roselemborg.net](http://roselemborg.net) and @roselemborg, including links to their page on Patreon, where they post about Birdverse, the world in which their BCS stories and others take place.*

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## A COURTSHIP OF BEASTS

by Michael Anthony Ashley

The rich man's son had been made strong. He had been gifted mysteries by sages, the poetry of reason from doubters, from scribes the violence of letters, from delvers the secrets of spice, earth, and gem, from builders the reach of man for the seven skies. He had been given vigor in his flesh as steered through campaign and hunt, and shown ecstasy by the mistresses of gauzes, pillows, and sigh. And he sat now upon his bench in his father's house, among the wealth of his birthright, and knew the ache of a man impoverished.

His mother was inspecting casks of purple, in flock with his sisters at his left. His father was sharing coffees and locusts in delicate cucumber jelly, debating strategy with high merchants at his right.

Shams, for that was his name, great star of his father's life, drew on smoke of the flavor of lemon and struggled with the ache inside him, until at last he suspected its name.

"I am ready to find my form," he declared to his father's household.

All discussion ceased. There arose cheers of celebration.

“My son, you fill my heart!” said Bab, showing his great many teeth.

“A day of days!” said Mam with tears steaming upon her violet-scaled cheeks.

Shams grinned under the kisses of his sisters and the counsel of his father’s peers. “See the oceans,” said the high merchants. “Battle evil. Lead armies. Lift the poor. Build many fortunes. Know love.” Yes, said Shams. He would have it all.

And Shams the Traveler, as he made himself known, set out to flourish his strength in the world.

He chose his favorite mares and his favorite slaves and rode in the wagon house to the valleys of Sabz, where he scaled the three holy peaks and learned to dance with Sabz’i women, and hunted striped mice for their tiny medicinal teeth before returning to his father’s house richer, stronger, knowing more.

Then it was in Naranj where he fired arrows at highwaymen from a priest’s chariot and kissed the fingers of many daughters, where he took ship to Azania and saw a storm like a funnel snatch whales from the bowel of the sea. Across the water he bought and sold treasures, sought many a silken bed, watched a whipping war from a throne on the back of an elephant, tasted a fruit called *ndoto* that put a fire on his tongue for two days and three nights. And he returned to his father’s house richer, stronger, knowing more.

With each adventure his hunger for the world grew in terrible pangs until it was a fire inside him, as was fit for a son of merchant ambition. And by each adventure the fire grew hotter, and his lovers perspired heavily in his embrace, and his flesh smoked in the cold rains of autumn. But he learned pains of the heart, too, and saw desires lost, and plates of armor grew from his spine—tapered but sturdy like his father's, colored a milk-and-sea jade like his mother's. All saw then what form of man he would be. Shams the Simmering, he became known wherever he went.

And too—now that his manly aspect was growing, his heat so easily felt, his plates so beautifully erected—Shams the Simmering became the desire of many a household. Feasted and courted, he met bachelor women whose blooms were felted antennae, scales of brilliant color, whiskers or horns or looping ears. In Noghre, girls remained their entire lives in the flesh to which they were born, and this was as displeasurable to Shams as pigmy cats stunted in their vases. By occasion he would meet an old *malika*, a woman whose form had grown queenly over the years, her body entire made sinuous or powerful or fleet beyond ordinary quality. She would watch with loft as Shams moved among the younger women. Never had he come within an arm's reach, but even at a distance the *malika* were a symbol to him of what could be. It was by the

malika that he judged the bachelor women. It was the by the malika that all fell short.

\* \* \*

There came a day when Shams was standing in the weeds of a ruined city, using his mare's saddle as a tablet, swatting at the mosquitoes while he sketched on parchment. He was sketching, with a black that stained his fingers but that he loved, a minaret which had in centuries sagged against the faceted *muqarnas* of the roof of the Great Bedeguar, and how the thrust of the minaret and the stout roundness of the mausoleum were merged in a nest of bone-smelling dust and adobe and tiles that were broken but that still, here and here, wore slivers of colored glaze. He was a part of a haunting—this was what his hosts had named it—he and the three lords of the Cinnabar Sea, brothers who sat their own horses awaiting his whimsy. They were haunting the carcass of the ruined city Ghaveyi. And in how the vines grew in their inspections of the pillars and bloomed their flowers of honeyed purple, and how the grasses marked the cracks and the birds strutted fluting among the grasses, and how the sun shone through the monuments in beams broken by the broken stone, Shams was taken with hunger for every image, overwhelmed with the need to capture as many as his fingers could draft. He was preparing sand to scatter across the ink when one of the brother lords

gave a shout. All followed his pointing arm, and there in that moment Shams lost his heart.

She came loping through the tumbledown mouth of the ruined library, her hair waving in the shade then sun then shade beneath the archways, the leaning almost-archways that Shams had sketched not one hour ago. He had an impression of her—hungry pouncing legs and a thrust tail and flashing teeth, flashing smile, flashing eyes, and the widest smile in all the world—and then she was past them and gone.

The brothers, already mounted, wasted no time setting off after.

“Did you *see* her?” cried Jamshid. “What woman is that?”

“Let us ask!” sang Sardar.

Shams was in his stirrups and after them in an instant, his flame stirring in the heat inside. He urged the mare over fallen pillars and across wild lawns, the animal kicking gravel in spray behind them. Babak was in the lead then Sardar then Jamshid. But Shams was on Jamshid’s heels and with a spurt passed him. And after it was Sardar who was in front, now at left, now behind. And here it was Shams and Babak neck to neck, both high in their stirrups, their mounts shy in the terrain and the mare beneath Shams foaming prematurely from the heat of the fire in his skin.

The malika saw them now. And that was what she was. A malika, queenly and in her form. And no older than he. She would turn her head showing the delicacy of one eye and her cheek, and she would sprint up a stairway to nowhere and leap from its top and alight among the stones to look again to see if they had followed, and when she saw them follow it was that widest smile again.

Shams himself was smiling, and when his mount overheated and began to flag and Babak to pull ahead whooping, Shams the Simmering did not give a thought to sucking fast water from his skin and standing in his saddle and leaning over his mare's neck and taking a great breath and hissing, hard and with a sharp whistle, steam in two jets from his nose. His mare, trained, kept her gait. Babak's horse, unaccustomed, did not. He saw Babak fighting at the reins in the weeds in the receding distance over his shoulder, and ahead there was the large sound of the malika laughing.

Alone in the chase now he followed her through the city and from it, along the ancient road to the Court of Heroes.

She slowed her pace on the plaza, paused, choosing, and leapt upon an empty plinth. She reclined there, the thick brown tip of her tail stirring in the afternoon air.

Shams dismounted heavy winded and steaming. He could smell her with his heavy breaths, like the linger of a kiss in his



beard. He was a moment with the scent, watching her and she watching him. Then, “A subtle pose,” he said.

“By the heavens, I hope it so,” she said looking about herself. “I thought to rest here hidden from the attentions of strange men who chase me. But I had wondered if I was subtle enough.”

“Ah, I am sorry. By subtle I, I spoke with irony. As a jest. You are, I say with respect, of a fineness to steal the eye, and with your form and the podium I meant only—”

She inclined her chin, her teeth white in the richness of her dark face. “I understood it, chaser.”

He tugged at his chin, laughing at himself. “Understood and shared in it, would seem. Now we have irony between us.”

“Irony but no names.”

“I am Chaser, as you said. And you are Fineness, as I said.”

She turned her eyes downward like a girl, and a shyness was there nakedly. “Thank you.”

It stopped him, the gratitude. The sincerity took him in his heart. He bowed. “I am Shams of Tarazet, called Shams the Simmering.”

She stood, arching her back, and dipped her head so that her eyes were level with his. Shams felt aswim in brown. “I am Kaafaha of the Fers.”

“May I walk with you, Kaafaha of the Fers?”

She gave him the widest smile. “You may run.”

She leapt from the plinth and set off with her four great springing legs and her hair telling of the wind, Kaafaha—malika Kaafaha—and Shams was with her.

\* \* \*

The hunger in Shams became all for her, a hunger to touch her, to show her who he was and what he’d seen, to know her smells and her murmurs. He gave up his horse two days after their meeting and on foot forded thick wildernesses and forests, pressing hard at her side with his flame all for her, and his hunger (and hers, for she admitted it readily) bubbling in questions.

“How have you found your form so young?” This after she swatted down a leaping goat for their supper.

“I have always known my heart,” she said, stopping to lick her claws clean of the blood. “Where have you travelled that you love?”

“The Murra jar fields. I say it without hesitation. There are infinite picklings, buried for decades in the earth. I was seven days eating and never tasted the same flavor twice. Why do you run?”

“There is too much to see to walk. Why do you chase?”

“I always dreamed of you, I think. I didn’t know it, but it was you. Your strength. Your skill. Do you cook well?”

“Terribly. The goat is in your hands, Shams the Simmer Pot. What form will you be, would you be?”

“I can’t know that. We can’t all be as complete as you.”

“But I’m not finished.”

“Aren’t you?”

“No. Did you think—?”

Shams looked at her. They reclined upon a hill. Beneath them, across a field of wind-touched heather, lay the pinprick lights of a market town in twilight. “What more is there for you to be?”

“Oh, much and more! I never think of it, there is so much. I move where my heart wishes, and I become what it is I am. Do you think of it?”

He lay his head against the fur of her belly, thinking to the sound of her claws kneading the warm earth beside the fire where the goat cooked. “Always. I never cease. Not ever.”

“Always and nevers and evers. We are an eternal pair.”

“We have eternity between us.”

“And irony. And names. Shams the Speculating.” She pressed at the plates in his spine, and he felt pleasure like a chill.

He reached his fingers to her neck. “May I kiss you here?”

“Not yet.”

“I will make you my wife.”

“Not yet.”

“I love you.”

She lifted his face to her with the strength and silence of her limbs. “Not yet.”

\* \* \*

Four days later, he gained the courage to ask her.

“There are many comfortable rooms for you to choose,” he was saying, “and there are gardens. In truth a garden, but it is very large. And there are two kitchens and always there is something delicious to smell and the slaves use fragrant soaps on the walls and floors and that smells very nice too. It is on a hill and there are views of the river in the autumn but in the spring, it is spring now, the ironwoods are too thick. But the ironwoods are nice to see even if they hide the river.”

They had left a resting house and were on a road north in the dew of the morning, Kaafaha at his side, moving slowly for once as she listened.

She stopped altogether. “You wish me to see your home? To meet your family?”

“It would please me greatly. Will you come?”

“Of course I will come! How beautiful of you to ask. How very beautiful.” She danced gently with him in the road, then demanded that they go right then and to know which way.

Shams took her south and east and she listened to him tell of his father's house like a child listening at a knee. She loved the story of the lilies and the turtles and made kind fun of how he'd cried beside the overturned shells. She asked about and memorized his sister's names and admitted nervousness, this pouncing malika nervous!, that she would soon be meeting his mother.

She loved old things, tombs and monuments and fallen places, ancient things that wore their stories with the dust, and so they were delayed seeing Zara's Wall in Sormayi and the glass windows of the Fane over Banafsh. But they pressed onward at her high pace, and they were in his country before the heat turned, the atmosphere growing as a comfort to him, the land as familiar as a face. He did not stop in Tarazet Town. He could not wait, eagerness pumping through the heat of his heart, and instead he led Kaafaha along the river and up the hill to home.

They entered the gates, the ironwork ajar, the gates stubborn against the breeze with their familiar creaking, and it was the old path with the old terraces and the lemon tree he'd never fallen from and slaves working in the garden and at the laundry. Shams waved them to quiet, as was his custom, his favorite thing the delighted surprise on his family's faces when he returned. Kaafaha seemed to devour everything with her

eyes as they climbed the terraces, her body pressed close to his. They stopped beneath the iwan and washed each other's feet. Then, on slippers, Shams led her into the study, where it was a roomful of women whom he loved.

The cries smote his heart. His sisters fell on him like rains and his mother made her own storm with her weeping. Kisses and kisses and kisses, questions and tugs, clucks at his weight. When he could he pulled free, and for the inquisitive gazes he swept his arm.

“This is Kaafaha of the Fers,” he said to their tears, “whom I am slave to in love.”

He had dreamed for days of the meeting—how his mother would look at her and appraise, how the girls would react to his love the malika.

“We are pleased to meet you,” said Mam very correctly. His sisters only stared.

Shams saw the disappointment beneath Kaafaha's expression, saw discomfort in her neck even as she kept her posture and her smile.

But Shams felt his instinct turn in him. “What is wrong?” he asked his mother.

She opened her mouth and closed it. And he felt it then, the wrongness in the house. Wrong sounds. Wrong smells. Where was the coffee in the air? Where were the walnut shells

in the rugs that his mother hated? Where was the sound of debate and bargaining?

Where was his father? “Where is Bab?”

The tears still more, and he saw them then for what they were.

“Tell me,” he said, demanding now.

And they told him.

\* \* \*

Familiarity is a miracle. Suffer a strange time in a strange room among strange faces, the twist of misgiving, an unhappiness that feels like threat but is of a wickeder gloom for its causelessness. And visit that strange room twice and thrice and again, converse with or near those faces in this day and that. And the strange is by repetition transmuted into the comfortable, by the alchemy of time made as invisible as a well-worn divan. Familiarity is magic.

Shams, it seemed, was not deserving of such enchantment. This morning he washed his hands and face and he found in the west kitchen a fresh stew upon a platter beside the sharp-smelling herbs in their cold tea, the platter already assembled with the care of an offering. He carried it through the quiet of the house to the room, to the doorway that stood waiting for him, and here he stood working courage through his jaw. He

pushed inside with his shoulder. He pushed inside to the fog of his father's urine.

Kaafaha was there beside the bed reading from the Tales of Behrouz. “Be merciful, O Shining King,” she was reciting, “and thrust thine blade through this evil heart.’ And great Fahd took up his sword and grasped his brother by the neck, and Fahd held the blade between them. ‘We are of the same womb, even the same flesh. What steel would pierce your breast would pierce mine the same.’ And the brothers wept together.”

Kaafaha stopped. She smiled as Shams came near. “He is awake.”

Shams stood at the bedside opposite her, and it was just as it had been the first time. Time was not easing this. There was no magic. His father's palsy had left nothing familiar. The great size was gone, the many teeth now yellowing in a slack mouth, the scales shedding, the plates made brittle and loose in a back of breathing rib bones. His paralyzed father lay on one side facing Kaafaha, and together she and Shams turned him as the physician had instructed, and in the turning Shams saw the abscess like a bad plum beneath the skin at the base of the neck. The physician had drained and drained, but there was no easing. Always the swelling came back. An infection of the blood, said one sage. Of the bone, said another. A parasite,



guessed a third, though very soon there was not hope enough even for sincere guesses.

And now it was constantly turn, feed, rags of feces, rags in urine, bathe and feed and turn, massage the limbs twice daily. Shams and his mother and his sisters would not allow the servants to do this. Even in grief was their family honor strong, pride a favorable crutch.

Struck down by we-do-not-know, and suffering in a useless body until we-know-not-when, that was what had become of the father of Shams. It was bright eyes watching Shams now, like gems in a corpse's sockets.

Shams shivered. He forced himself to kiss the brow and to stay and to minister and to tell his father of the news of the markets, to tell his father's eyes of the news while the white-bearded face lay slacked in strangeness.

Before noon his sister came, and Shams left the room behind.

"I will be leaving soon," said Kaafaha, walking with him.

"I know it. I am an ache all over for missing you, even now."

She pressed her body to his as they walked the outer hall, the sun drifting their shadows across the floor in a dance repeated every window. "It won't be so long," she told him. "I

will be here again before the feast of Tiregan. And I will send word to you from every post. I will drown you in letters.”

“Better touches. Better kisses.”

“Kisses are the surface of my lips, but my words are their substance. They are more of me.”

“I prefer then words with breath to feel on my cheek.”

“It cannot always be breaths and cheeks.”

“Can’t it?”

“You’d have me suffocate.”

“I’d have you.”

“You’d have me until there was nothing left. What would you save for a later time?”

He turned her where their stroll had taken them, out in a private place in the garden, and put his arms around her. “I do not trust in any lateness of time. Not anymore. Grasp and tightly and here and now, this is the way I have graduated to. Be my wife. Be here with me.”

“Not yet,” she said.

“And what else! Heaven and all goodness, but you do have a litany. My heart is yours, yours mine. What *yet* is there?”

She stepped free of his arms and sat, her four great feet neatly together, her tail curling around them. She looked at him seriously. “Your bab suffering and helpless, I see how this has cut you, and your cut is my wound. But you know that we

cannot lurch forward, fearing ruin in ambush behind every minute. We cannot go fearing.”

“No, no, I would not have that. But I feel these days that time is hard about us like a cage, and the weight of it is as real as iron stripes. I am *heavy*. And soon you will be gone.”

She gathered him to her and kissed him. “I have something to show you,” she said, and led Shams from the garden. The house shared the hilltop with a shaggy grove of cedars that were blowing with hisses right then in the wind. Kaafaha wove through the trunks and Shams followed, nervous at his heat amidst the wood. But the branches still wore their spring wetness, and aside from the odd sizzle against his neck all was peaceful.

She padded steadily with her strong legs. Shams himself kept his eyes down at the poor terrain, and when he looked again he saw her gift.

“Oh, my Kaafaha,” he said. “Oh, what have you done?” Was she a sorceress, to transport his mind so quickly? Sorrow was fleeing miles away as he circled the clearing where she had been working. She had used his sketches, that much he could see. The minaret in reality had not penetrated the Great Bedeguar so deeply, but he had made their collision more dramatic in his ink to signify the violence he’d felt by their ruin. She had recreated it perfectly.

“What did you use?” he asked her. “Limestone?”

“Serpentine.”

It was remarkable, the detail, the Ghaveyi ruins sculpted in miniature. In truth just a portion of the city was captured. That part where they'd met. Shams crouched beside the tiny archways and peered where the sunlight that slanted through the cedar trees fell in gleams to light her work. There was the library, and the stone hero fallen across the road. And oh, by his life, she'd somehow etched songs in the delicate fiction.

Ghosts remember love in nitred doors, diptychs and dusts,  
And leave aching inks for their lores, diptychs and dusts.

Taproots of today's confessions were born in the earth  
Beneath green air, below roads, before diptychs and dusts.

The river swallowed the city south in trails of tales.  
Eddying faded songs, its torrents bore diptychs and dusts

The winters rimed wine in crusts along the balustrades  
And hanged, with ornamental hoars, diptychs and dusts.

A wrinkled sundown lay pooled in leighs of ash tree  
samara,

Its light speared by clouds of war, diptychs and dusts.

“You are impossible,” he said in a small breath. “A marvel.”

“It is not finished. I have gained permission from your mother,” she said with triumph, “and I will return and add to it. And return. And return. No matter how far you travel, or I, or we together, we can have this place for our own.”

The fire inside Shams was turning, filling him with a bursting hot hunger, and he would have gulped down every leaf and every tree, the stones and earth, the home and the hill and world for his want of her. “Stay,” he said, and the low branches blackened and curled by his breath. “Stay. Stay. Stay.” The light in the wood began to waver in his heat. She sat with him, sweating but unmoved, and she let him hold her and she let him kiss her, and no more. His hunger remained inside.

He slept that night upon a stone jetty beside the river, that his hunger start no fires. He slept like a flame itching in the hearth.

He was late when he returned. She was gone when he returned. He read her letter from three paces without touching it lest it burn, and he ate four quartered chickens and drank seven ewers of tea and drank five more ewers before he was quenched enough to enter his father’s room.

The next night it was several sides of beef flesh and the house’s entire store of cider—peach, apple, and pear.

And it was three mounds of squashes the morning after.

And then it was a custom, no less than nine baskets of vegetables every day, twenty fishes or fowl or nine cuts of rich meat every third. Of the pitchers he could not count.

By the end of the month he had a new name in the rumors of the town. What burned through nutriment with such fervor could scarce be called simmering. No, the son of the rich man on the hill, who had travelled but was home now, loving slave to his father's health, that young man was known very quickly as Shams the Consuming.

\* \* \*

When she returned just days before the feast of Tiregan, she had feathers in her hair.

Rather, as she came close and thrust her face in his neck, better said her hair was becoming feathers. They lay across her shoulders, blue and gray pinions soft against his palm.

“Do you like them?” she asked in their embrace. “I was above the Noghre'i River in chase after an outlaw. I caught him! The people made me a daughter of their town and we feasted, and the old men danced for us. And when it was finished, after I'd slept, I felt the first one tickling my back. Do you like them?” she asked.

“I've never touched a more perfect thing,” said Shams the Consuming. The feathers' softness was a brush upon his

knuckles, but when he pressed he felt the steeltrap strength in their spines.

Later he demonstrated his new appetite at dinner, and that night he showed her how they could play in the river steam that his heat brought hovering up like ghostly mushrooms.

Every day she carried his sketches to the cedars and added to their sculpted city ruin. Every day Shams sat and spoke to the fierce light in his father's eyes, and every day she was with him.

She was with him for just above a half-month and then she was gone again, north and east over the mountains this time.

She returned in the late summer then left again, and returned and was gone.

“Come with me,” she would say on their walks.

“Not yet,” he would say, thinking of his father's eyes, wondering at his father's thoughts.

“Stay with me,” he would say in his father's room.

“Not yet,” she would say, stronger every time.

Visit by visit their little ruined city grew. Visit by visit the feathers became her hair until all from breast to crown was plume. Her widest smile became wider. Her mouth became polished and sharp by the mold of passion and experience. Her voice came from the deep rumbling of her furred body or from the pure clear sharpness of her feathered throat, or from one to

the other in mid speech, purring then keening, and her gaze grew large, sharp as swordpoint, the brown of her eyes a liquid gold.

“Do you like it?” she said with every new change.

“It is perfection,” he said, harder every time.

\* \* \*

It was after his friends the Cinnabar lords made their visit that Shams knew to build the temple.

The hill was in the crisp of autumn when he could sit at the gates and see the riot of fallen leaves slide their way west along the river top. Mam and Fairuzah and Gol, his first and third sisters, had taken charge of the businesses. Atefeh and Shahrzad and Mahin were off in the world finding their form. The doctor was coming every day and telling them to prepare. And Shams the Consuming thought it would be bitterly unpoetic for his father to die in the dying season.

Thus it was into a quiet household that the brother lords Babak and Sardar and Jamshid came riding. They arrived in three wagons, and each dismounted with a flourish and a smile and a sweep of his arm to introduce his bride.

“Zahra of Zabool,” said the youngest brother, speaking of the tall horned woman who saluted in a soldier’s way.

“Mojgan of Mashhad,” said the second brother, this of the even taller woman whose hair rose in waving spires like



seaweed. She swept a foamy gown and bent to kiss Shams upon his cheek, and he pulled away courteously that she might not burn herself.

“Arza of Ardabil,” said the eldest brother, whose wife bowed with a splay of very long and delicate fingers.

Supper was ready on the low table in the garden. All was laid in the traditional way, as his father would have done. The heavy dishes, the eight types of kebab and the pomegranate stew with fish balls, these were set in the center. Outward went the small dishes, the stir-fried pumpkin on its salad, the sliced deep-green *kuku* with onions and saffron cooked into the eggs, the roasted tomatoes cut into suns. For desserts they had bowls of peaches and sour cherries and a confection made from pistachios and the sticky dew from the anus of the insect called *gaz*.

“Where is that famous woman?” Babak the eldest finally asked.

Shams made a smile. “She is travelling. It is one of her great joys, haunting the old places of the world, as you three once did.”

“And continue to do,” said Jamshid the youngest. “From here, in fact, we turn our teams for the Golzar valleys. We have heard rumor of hidden caskets in the catacombs there. It

makes the now feel large and full, pushing around in the past, does it not?”

“I have heard she was seen in Qom,” said Sardar the middle brother, “running with the panthers across the sands.”

Jamshid raised his brows. “Qom’i panthers? She can run so fast?”

“It may have been another woman,” said Shams.

“With your love of travel, do you plan to marry here or abroad?” asked the lady Arza of Ardabil.

Shams finished his cup of wine. “There is some debate about that.”

Arza looked to her husband Babak and again to Shams and smiled.

“Well,” said Sardar, and he looked at Mojgan of Mashhad.

“Well,” she said. “We will honor the day, when it comes.”

“Indeed,” said Babak.

“Yes, yes,” said Jamshid.

Shams afterward drank too much wine.

It was in the haze of the evening after his guests had retired, while Shams walked the hill eating the remains of supper from a sack, holding the meats and fruits in his mouth until they sizzled before he swallowed them down, that the vision of the temple swam up in his mind. It came whole and abrupt and shining. And he knew how wrong he had been.

But now!, ah now he saw his way. He spent that night entire in the cedar grove with his face to the ground in survey or pacing possible foundations. At dawn he returned to break his fast and wish his guests farewell, and then took up his paper and ink and was again among the trees with his fingers stained black.

He negotiated with his mother for funds and before seven days had dispatched some fifty letters—commissioning workers, drafters, builders, submitting offers for payment and rejecting counter offers and negotiating in ways that would have made his father proud.

He bought stones from the fallen Eternal Towers, tiles of fine glaze from the private mosque of ancient Queen Yasmin. He bought the Fane over Banafsh outright and ordered it transported piece by piece and waged a small war with the caretaker abbot for seven of the famed glass windows. Beams, censers, *mimbar*, rugs, caskets, urns from the Nzingas' sarcophagi, great stone reliefs from the Yaunas, the bath from the ruined seraglio in Isfahan, he gathered them in his family's storehouses and erected new storehouses when those old were filled.

Kaafaha returned thrice during his work, and it was with intense curiosity that she would watch and wonder at the activity hidden within their grove.

“Leave off your carvings this visit,” he would say with belly-felt smiles. “Soon, you will know, my fineness. Very soon.”

His father survived the autumn and the winter, the fierce light in his eyes never fading, and Shams took this as inspiration.

He finished in the spring, and the auspices of this were not lost on him.

She was due to return from her latest travel on a day just following a shower, when the sun was spears of light from a still-clouded sky. It was the custom for Shams to meet her at his gates, but here instead he dressed himself in the trousers he'd ordered made for the occasion—those and the jacket, with the seams cut for his plates, made of glossed fabrics to withstand his heat—and he set off to await her in the grove, leaving word for her with the slaves.

When he watched his creation in the sunlight, and when he walked through its rooms, it was difficult to remember the madness he'd suffered in raising it. Twice he had believed it impossible and quit with swells of terrible heat, only to awake the next day convinced of the effort's rightness, and beauty, and necessity. And that was the heart. Here was a thing, finally, that proved his strength and mind. Here was a gift for a malika.

Shams was strolling the entryway, lost inside his thoughts, when he heard a commotion from the house. He stepped quickly from the temple into the clearing in the grove. The cedars were thinner for the many he'd felled, and he could see the slaves on the terraces standing with their faces to the sky, hands above their eyes. He heard shouting.

Shams the Consuming felt a twist in his belly. What was this now? His instinct was to look first at the gates, and there he saw nothing, then higher to the house and nothing of his mother or his sisters. Only after he had searched for his loves did he follow the gazes skyward. And Shams lost his heart.

She came from the west so that her shadow sped across the clearing, and then she was in view, and Shams had only a moment to understand before she landed in a whirl of dust and leaf and wind, her tail out stiffly, her rear feet grasping the turf, her claws in front poised in the air before dropping down for purchase.

Shams watched her four heavy legs slow from a lope to a walk, even as she took in his gift with her eyes.

“Oh, my chaser,” she said in her purred way. “Oh, what have you done.”

There had been words, Shams swore—much he had prepared to say. In their place, though now, was only the silence of ideas greater than words. The silence of emotion

larger than the body. Shams could say nothing and could think nothing. Could only stare at Kaafaha of the Fers, his dear malika, and her wings.

\* \* \*

There were the balconies and the portico and the muqernas up high, and the domed tower that was the Tomb Tower of Hermits with the ancient bell inside. Kaafaha danced the grove and praised them all, laughing, exclaiming, shedding tears along her hooked polished mouth. And Shams followed.

The entryway was a mosaic floor tiled with artifacts from a dozen fallen temples and mosques, and it was high-beamed ceilings lit by lamps from seven different crypts. Kaafaha turned a circling amble inside the entryway. And Shams followed.

The baths, the kitchen, the library with scrolls in dead tongues, the courtyard where nestled her unfinished carving of their city ruin, Kaafaha ran one to the next without rhyme or pattern, dashing as she would. And Shams followed.

At last she raced along a passageway, missing entirely an alcove where sat the plinth from Ghaveyi where first they had exchanged words, which would have been the culmination of their tour through the temple if the intention of Shams had been allowed, if they were not now speeding through his work without a care.

“Won’t you be still!” he snapped, his voice echoing among the pillars.

In the silence she returned to him. “I am sorry, my chaser. But this beautiful thing you have made... I cannot help myself.”

“No,” he said, “you help yourself too much.”

“Have I misunderstood?”

“I had a plan. I had intention that was, as is our apparent custom, made blot by your own.”

She reached for him. “My apologies, my love. Please, I will behave.”

He pulled away from her. “Have you heard jesting in my voice? Then I have failed, and I say this now with every sincerity in my fiber: you move *too much*. If the wind makes a turn, then naught is possible but that you flit to see where it leads. If a speck falls upon your left thigh, you inspect at the expense of your right. You hear nothing but your own yearning. You see nothing but shades from the colors of your last dream. Why will you not be still?”

She watched him with her head cocked aside, her newly golden eyes seeming aware of his every bone. “You are not speaking only of today,” she said.

“Do you love me?”

“More than I have ever loved a soul.”

“Then why won’t you be where I need you to be?”

“Where I would be is element to who I am, and I cannot be less than she.”

“And who are you?”

“Your fineness, as you are my chaser.”

“It is not fineness to abandon your beloved for adventure, for ambition. And I have not chased you in some time.”

“Nor chased anything. But I had hoped that after—”

“You hoped my father would die. And then you would have me for your play.”

“No! By my life, no! I only wished to give you your time, however long it may be.”

Shams was pacing, the heat was pouring from his skin, from his plates, from his nose. “You ran so fast, that long ago, and I loved you for it. My fleet malika. But you could never stop, never slow, never let me catch you up. And now wings.”

“Do you like them?” she asked.

“No. No, they do *not* please me. You say you love me, but everything you become takes you further from me. You are violence. You are flight. You are filled with animal groaning and know none of human compassions. And here is the truth. You are a beast.”

She reared then, and the emotion came from her throat in a keen. Her raptor’s eyes were wide. Her sharp mouth was wide. “Your slow weakness is not *my* curse,” she declared, her



voice whipping. “Would you run at my speed? Push faster! Would you fly as I fly? Climb the mountains I have climbed, taste the airs I have swallowed. I love you, the chaser. Not this brood hen you would be. And no matter how pretty the framing, I see your coop for what it is.”

She flapped her great wings thrice, lifting from the carefully laid floor, and Shams saw what she was about. He dashed, crying, “Here! Fleeing again!” He made the doorway before she and ran onto the portico and closed the doors behind him. “Be still,” he cried through the great arabesqued wood, “and listen.”

The doors pushed at him, but he held them fast with his own strength, and the elation at his strength churned the fire so that his hands smoked on the wood and marked it with black prints. And even then he underestimated his malika.

The blow that took the doors from their hinges took with it Shams from his feet, and he and the antique wood went scattering along the stones into the brush of the cedar grove. She alighted not far from him, swishing her tail and growling low in her furred belly. She began to speak, perhaps to make a peace, perhaps to mock. But the fire in Shams was an agony, such a pressure filling him, stretching him, that he opened his mouth and he belched the fire at her. He felt the flames roaring

between his teeth and watched them stab in orange for her breast.

Her wings were already high. She snapped them down and together, and with a thump the wind struck Shams with force. He fell again, his fire snuffed, and when he looked she was already above the trees and climbing in strokes for the sky.

“Gone again!” cried Shams. He climbed to his feet and spat his new fire at the temple. He took great breaths and spewed until the stones glowed red. He stalked in circuits around its walls until the windows melted and popped. He circled and circled, his mouth open wide and fire pouring forth, as the blue tiles melted and the beams inside caught. The cedars of the grove were burning, and Shams was surrounded in flame when the temple collapsed on itself and covered him in ash, the black plume of ruin rising to the sky.

He never saw which way she'd flown.

\* \* \*

A man may believe he has outgrown childish habits. He may lay them down and pile atop them new etiquettes, new styles, stack the shape of manhood high and well and neatly. But there come times when paths are rough, and those stacks of styles are knocked aside, and what remains are the old childish habits, low and musty and warm.

Shams slept in his own quarters and ate in the garden, but all other hours he was a boy in his father's room. He would talk at times and sit silently at times, and his father would watch with those gem-fierce eyes.

His father was by now himself slight as a child when Shams turned him, the crumbling body as ever a strangeness beneath those familiar eyes.

Shams had just arranged his father and was standing at the bedside washing the face with a cloth, his own fire once more a bare simmer. He did not hear the door open, and it was with a small start that he felt his mother draw near.

“He is strong,” said Shams.

“He is angry,” said his mother.

“At his illness.”

“No, child. With you.”

It was a wound, and Shams looked at her with his hurt nakedly. “You say that because you are angry with me.”

“I? Child, I am only sad.”

“Have you told him? Of the fire?”

“He knows. But his anger is much older than that. Have you not noticed the rage in his eyes? Have you not noticed the way he looks upon you?”

She was wrong. “That is the light of his strength. I have seen it since first I returned home.”

“It ignited when first you came home. That light is only for you, child. It does not flash for me, or your sisters, and did not for Kaafaha when she was in your favor. You came to this room in love, but it was by fear you continued, and by fear you remain in this house instead of putting to passion the gifts we have given you. You displease him, for your cowardice.”

“You cannot know that.”

“I know my husband.”

Shams watched his father watching, and Shams felt a coldness in his face. “He needs me.”

She did not speak harshly because she knew, as he did, that she did not have the need. The words themselves cut.

“My husband is no man’s excuse.” And she bowed to Shams as she would a caller, and she walked away.

\* \* \*

Shams chose to leave on a day of rain. He stood in his travel clothes at the gates, being washed by the shower, and he ducked under the curtains of the parasols to kiss Gol and Fairuzah goodbye.

Last was his mother.

“Read my letters to him,” said Shams. “And try to get word to me when the day comes.”

She promised. “Do you know how to find her?” she asked.

“She is of the Fers. Her mother is named Banu, and her father... I have forgotten. I have not been a good man, Mam.”

“You have time,” she said.

“Tell Mahin and Atefeh and Shahrzad I miss them,” he called on his way down the hill.

He picked up the pace of his walk after he crossed the river. By the time the hill was out of view he was running. He kept his face to the sky, reckless in the wet, and he thought of her flying, and he dreamed by hope of his own wings, to chase her.

And the rain on his face began to steam.

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## COVER ART

“Ambush,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste is a Senior Art Director on videogames and cinematics. He was the Art Director at Ubisoft on such titles as *Prince of Persia* and *Assassin's Creed*, winning a VES Award in February 2006. Wanting to challenge himself in the film industry, Raphael worked as a Matte Painter and Senior Concept Artist on such feature films as *Terminator: Salvation*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Death Race*, and *Repo Men*, then returned to the game industry as a Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts and Ubisoft. His cover art has been featured in *BCS* twice before, including "Knight's Journey" in

*BCS #100*. In October 2016, he will release *Worlds*, a limited-edition book of his artwork from iamag.co. View his gallery at [www.raphael-lacoste.com](http://www.raphael-lacoste.com).



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