

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE GARDEN OF ENDING

by K.J. Kabza

Within the innermost walls of The-City-of-First-and-All-Light, walls as thick as the heart of the world (or thicker); at the center of that sole metropolis nestled inside game-rich forests where only the high-born may hunt—

Within those innermost walls, my dear little fool, you may think that the capital goes on and on, stuffed with feathers and tea ceremonies and wealthy people bowing, but none of that is so.

What lies within are gardens. And within those gardens, she walks.

Neither prophet nor priest, neither sacrifice nor student, she is nonetheless all. She is She-Who-Is-Everyone-Within-Herself, or, more colloquially to those secret-sworn to serve her, Everyone.

Everyone moves from garden to garden, in accordance with our national state of affairs—as she always has, as it has been decreed that she always must. When The-Land-of-The-Sunlit-People wishes to go to war, for example, Everyone must enter the Garden of War. That garden is a narrow, winding

place full of thorns and stones and cruel sculptures made from the fused scimitars of the dead, and Everyone must meditate and find beauty and meaning in a place of such brutish sensibilities. And, on the first day of winter, she must enter the Garden of Winter, where we have planted the corpses of trees into the earth, so she can contemplate the natural grace of their denuded bones. Each garden is enclosed by thin, high walls that she cannot climb; each garden is carefully designed. We provide whatever she needs to feel the proper feelings associated with each state. No leaf or blossom's placement is beneath our notice.

There are many gardens, you must understand. There is a Garden of Sadness for national days of mourning, where dark rocks loom on the shorelines of the pond and the willow trees weep in the wind. There is a Garden of Birth, where Everyone may joyfully meditate, amidst flowers of all colors, on days when healthy children are born to the high houses. And there are the many every-day gardens: the Garden of Serenity, the Garden of Contemplation, the Garden of Dutiful Reflection, the Garden of Harmony. Each one contains a little hut, made of rock or brick or wood, in whatever style is proper; each hut has a hearth and a chair and a bed, where Everyone may stay warm and watched as she sleeps. Acolytes are stationed in the day's garden with her. She is bathed and clothed and fed, with the

appropriate soaps, fabrics, and meals. When the last Everyone was a child, I remember, they often brought in other high-born children to play with her. They caught grasshoppers together, and they plucked berries until the wine-dark juices stained their frocks, and they played clapping games and sang.

You must understand. She is not unloved.

But what she does not know, and what you do not know either, is that old, forgotten gardens are growing all around her. The heart of The-City-of-First-and-All-Light is vast. There are a hundred gardens or more that Everyone has never set foot in. Gardens that we've never been told to tend. Gardens that choke under the weight of weeds, and gardens that creep over their thin high walls, bleeding into each other, making the world unsafe.

You might wonder what these gardens used to be.

You might wonder, when considering their sheer number, what feelings and states of being we have all forgotten.

You might be tempted to ask me, but if you do, I promise that you'll be disappointed. I can decipher the creepers of madness no better than you can.

Instead, you'll have to ask the current Everyone. The-Enclosures-of-All-That-There-Is are the only world she's ever been permitted to see, and she is the only native speaker of their visual tongue. The rest of us are but clumsy interpreters

with our shovels and shears, chipping crude runic marks in the gathering dark.

But now we come to my terrible story, and the reason I began telling you about the secret heart of the capital in the first place: I once saw Everyone enter, by accident, a garden without a name.

She was in one of the empty, mown corridors that connects many gardens, passing door after door—we unlock them and lead her through each, as the need arises—and there was one door that had blown ajar. It was very old. The lock had been rusted shut for as long as I could remember. We'd all forgotten it was there.

But the lock had finally crumbled, and the door had fallen open, and the nothing-garden beyond was revealed to her sacred eyes. Doors are only left open for her when they lead to every-day gardens that she can freely enter and exit, so she, poor innocent lamb, saw the newly open door and naively entered.

The garden was tiny. Cruel brambles obscured the walls. In its exact center grew a single orange tree, never trimmed, a woolly and overgrown monster. Rotten fruit lay below it, stinking and bejeweled with flies.

Everyone stopped in front of the tree, staring at its asymmetrical horror.

Then she cried.

And cried.

I am not permitted to touch or speak with She-Who-Is-Everyone-Within-Herself—only the acolytes and select attendants are allowed that honor—so I rose from my vantage point on the top of the wall and ran along it to find someone who could.

By the time the acolytes and I returned, Everyone was gone.

We tracked her by her cries. She had fled from the nothing-garden and was fleeing still, running like a maddened hen from garden to garden, as if seeking a way out.

“It’s ending,” she sobbed. She finally collapsed at the edge of the pond in the Garden of Dutiful Reflection. “I can see it. It’s all ending.”

Acolytes and attendants caught up with her. She wailed doom and death while they tried in vain to soothe her with a soft shawl, a bowl of honeyed dates, a calming song on a bone flute. She batted them away. The situation was shameful. She was not reflecting at all, let alone in a dutiful manner.

Increasingly uneasy, I lay belly-down along the top of my wall and clung to it with my hands and knees, the way a tamarin clings in fear to its mother when the jaguar sings.

* * *

We fashioned a new door and frame. We replaced the broken lock. Once again, the tiny nothing-garden was forever barricaded and forgotten.

Except by me.

What if (my vainglorious thinking went) we cleaned it up? What if I (and who better than I, for I had witnessed the original calamity) ripped down the wall-concealing thickets, and scooped up the rotten fruit, and trimmed the orange tree (not that any pair of shears wielded by a single soul could snip those old, low branches—I'd just work around them and do my best) into a pleasing shape, and thereby made the tiny space gentle? What if I could free Everyone from her nightmares (which now made her cry aloud so in the nights)? What if she could return to this once terrible space and smile?

What if I could thereby help her elevate us all to someplace new?

And anyway, we already had a Garden of Nightmares. It was foul and wet and full of carnivorous plants, and made everyone shudder as it was.

* * *

As you must have guessed by now, I did all those things—I tore out the thicket, cleaned up the ground, and trimmed the tree. I planted new grass. The little nothing-garden was my peculiar obsession, to the point where the others, so dogged in

their determination to pretend that Everyone's disastrous entry into it had never happened, grew uncomfortable. Whenever they saw me approach along a corridor, filthy and dragging a canvas full of uprooted brambles, their eyebrows went up and their voices went down.

But gradually, the nothing-garden bent to my will. The enclosure became beautiful. The short grass sparkled with dew, the orange tree thrived, and the flies disappeared.

I unlocked the new lock. I opened the new door.

She-Who-Is-Everyone-Within-Herself refused to go anywhere near it.

Of course. Why would she approach such a frightful place again? How to persuade her, without words, that it was different now?

At night, I crouched on the roof of whatever hut she slept in, listening to Everyone's weeping. "It's all locked up now," her nightly attendant soothed. "Locked up nice and tight."

"I dreamed it wasn't," Everyone sobbed. "I dreamed the door was open, and I went in again, and inside—"

"Hush now."

"I'm going to go back." But she made it sound like a confessed fear, like an edict that her feet would have to obey. "Aren't I?"

“Nonsense. You can’t be told to go to a garden if it doesn’t have a name, now, can you?”

“Maybe not,” Everyone mumbled. “Maybe not.”

I heard the ropes below her mattress creak as she turned over. Then silence.

I dropped to the ground outside the window. I tapped softly on the shutters.

The attendant opened them, but her face soured when she saw me. “What do *you* want, gargoyle?”

“That garden is safe now,” I whispered. “We cleaned it up. If Everyone goes back to see it, perhaps—”

The attendant made a different face. To those of her station, the gardeners are nothing but pigeons, fouling the world below us with our waste. “Perhaps what? Did She-Who-Lights-the-Way-Across-the-World approve the new garden?” At my hesitation, the attendant’s face tightened into a sneer. “Does the new garden have a name?”

Her churlishness roused mine. “Yes. It’s the Garden of Don’t-Be-a-Peacock. We put a lot of effort into restoring it. The least you could do—”

“We,” the attendant hissed. “What’s this ‘we’? I know all about your pet project. The other gargoyles gossip. I won’t have Everyone risk the entire kingdom by entering a nameless

garden.” She spat. “Certainly not for the sake of a gargoyle’s pride.”

A retort rose to my tongue, but behind the attendant’s back, Everyone’s eyes glittered in the low light of the hearth.

She was awake. Listening.

“If Everyone chooses to attempt entry into that garden,” I said, carefully, “she will find the door unlocked.”

“Well, she won’t ever choose such a thing,” said the attendant, “because of all the—”

But I didn’t hear what she said. I turned and ran across the Garden of Quiet, scaled a wall, and left She-Who-Is-Everyone-Within-Herself to contemplate her choice.

* * *

The following dawn, the All-Knowing-Messenger entered The-Enclosures-of-All-That-There-Is, trod its high-walled paths, and reached the Garden of Quiet with the day’s instructions: Everyone was to think today’s proscribed thoughts in the Garden of Plenty, a space with many fountains and fruit trees.

When she awoke and received this news, Everyone bowed as always. “It is my pleasure to do so. I have spent many a happy hour there with fruit arranged upon my lap, inhaling the sweet scent of it.” To the day’s acolytes who had arrived with the All-Knowing-Messenger, Everyone said, “Go on ahead of

me and pluck from the garden's trees one of each fruit: the most perfect specimen of each. I want every offering in my gardens represented."

One acolyte said, "But Thee-Who-Is-Everyone-Within-Myself... there are some trees that do not grow in the Garden of Plenty that yet grow in Enclosure gardens elsewhere."

"Ah yes," said Everyone. "You are right. Well, I will gather those fruits myself."

A shiver of excitement hummed within my breast.

More bows were exchanged. More formal words were uttered. While the acolytes left to gather fruit and prepare for Everyone's arrival in the day's sanctioned garden, Everyone herself, left unattended, bowed to the empty Garden of Quiet. And exited.

I shadowed her confident steps from above. I watched them grow cautious, when she neared that door-lined corridor that she feared so much.

On its threshold, she paused.

With pounding heart, I walked the walls ahead of her, aware of her intrigued eyes on my back. Perhaps I couldn't speak to her, but there was no law against her looking at me, should she choose.

I reached the tiny, cleaned-up garden. I leaped over its doorway, then turned and straddled the wall. I gripped with my

knees, leaned forward, placed both hands on the top of the unlocked door, and pulled.

The door lay open in invitation. I urged her with my eyes.

Everyone inhaled. Squared her shoulders. Moved forward.

I scrutinized her face as she entered the nameless garden, my hands clamping on the hard edges of the door. She stopped at the threshold, cringing, and I felt as though a pair of shears had plunged between my ribs. I had tried so hard. *What?* I yearned to shout. What frightful thing do you see in this place, you with your eyes attuned to the mysteries?

She began to cry again: large, silent tears. She approached the bristling trunk, laying her hands on the lowest branch. “You poor gardener,” she said, not looking my way.

I still didn’t understand. Not even then.

“I’ve always wanted to,” she said. “You must’ve known that. And that’s why you did this for me—isn’t it?”

And then she climbed.

My horror rose with her. She was climbing. The orange tree, long untrimmed, far too tall, was taking She-Who-Is-Everyone-Within-Herself to the ultimate place she could not go.

Above a wall.

All the ruined gardens. All the madness. All the horrible, nameless things we’d tried to lock away from her, and all the

ordered gardens, all at once, and the distant walls of The-City-of-First-and-All-Light, with its chaos and greed and noisy minutiae, and all the things that would forever ruin the purity of her purpose—if she saw them—then she’d—why, then she’d

—

I had no idea.

I crammed my hands against my mouth to prevent me from crying out to her. Even now, I must not speak. Especially now.

Everyone reached the crown. She could climb no higher on the orange tree’s slender branches. Sputtering to keep leaves from her mouth, she braced her feet and pushed aside a curtain of green.

Seeing.

She grew still. Inhaled. Her head swung in a long, careful survey, taking everything in.

Then Everyone wiped her eyes with a wrist.

“You must’ve seen me,” she said softly. “In those moments, when I could no longer mask my unhappiness. And I—this is—” The yearning pinched her voice. “Are those they? All the places in the stories they’ve told me? I...” More tears fell. “I want to see them more than ever.”

My throat ached.

Had I seen her? Of course I had. How could I have failed to? I had seen the one who had come before, too, and I had heard stories of my own, stories the gardeners tell. The ones that say it always ends like this. Every unlucky, high-born babe who is ever chosen to be birthed into this place by decree—every one of them grows up weeping and hungry for something they cannot name. Until they can. And we hear them. And we know that their purity of purpose has been lost.

And once that happens, we must act. We must take her to one final garden. The garden without a hut. The garden with a wooden platform instead, with its posts and crossbeam and grooves for a hangman's rope.

But things were different, now. I had seen her. I had readied the orange tree. I had prepared this garden, with its ladder of branches, and everyone knew it.

It wouldn't be only Everyone who would become undone.

What can I say? I had a choice to make, too. And you know what I chose.

"Everyone," I said, in violation of my silence and the law.

She turned those teary eyes to me.

"Will you jump and run atop the walls behind me?" I asked. "I know a way out. And we don't have much time."

* * *

It is also worth adding: that tiny garden in *The Enclosures-of-All-That-There-Is* is the only garden that has more than one name.

The last I heard, *She-Who-Lights-the-Way-Across-the-World* was calling it, “The Garden of The Lost.” The current *She-Who-Is-Everyone-Within-Herself*, who is about your age by now, sits under its trunk—which has had all of its lower branches sawed off by pairs of big strong men—and meditates about people who have gone missing. They say she associates the taste of oranges with sorrow. They say oranges are only eaten in the capital now during periods of remembrance.

I prefer to call the place “The Garden of The-Ladder-to-What-Lies-Beyond.” It is accurate, if not poetic. But, gargoyles aren’t given to poetry.

And your mother calls the garden something else again.

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K.J. Kabza has sold over fifty stories to venues such as F&SF, Nature, Daily Science Fiction, AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review, Buzzy Mag, and many more. He’s been

anthologized in *The Best Horror of the Year Vol. 6* (Night Shade Books), *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror 2014* (Prime Books), and [The Best of Beneath Ceaseless Skies Year Two](#). For updates on forthcoming releases and links to free fiction, you can follow him on Twitter @KJKabza and peruse www.kjkabza.com.

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DEARLY DEPARTED

by Kelly Stewart

I. Denial

Perdita left the library and crossed the corridor, floorboards creaking inquisitively under her feet. The third storey smelled of dust and warmth and, today, rain. In the trophy room, Perdita took down Grandfather Mandrake's shotgun and revolver from the wall and strapped them to her person. She lashed a leather bag full of ammunition and other supplies to her hip.

She passed the framed paintings in Grandmother Patricia's skilled hand on her way down the stairs, past the second storey, which smelled of lavender and woodsmoke, to the ground floor, which smelled of baked bread and ginger and the fruit and berries Perdita used to make preserves. The shelves along the corridor outside the dining room were rainbows of preserved fruit, glistening in their glass jars. Perdita thought she might have some blackberry jam on toasted bread when she returned from the graveyard.

She threw a waxed cloak about herself to protect the mechanisms of her firearms as well as her dress: the indigo one

with the black lace as fine as cobwebs, given to her by Grandmother Anne. She snapped the hood over her head and stepped out into the rain to tend to her duty.

* * *

II. Demand

Perdita locked the black wrought iron gate behind her and descended the hill. All was silence except for the rain pattering on her hood and the comforting flap-flap of wings as Gruma followed from the treetops.

She thought she imagined the ringing at first.

The crossroads marker was dim through the veil of mist rising off the grass. As she drew closer, there could be no mistake where the sound was coming from.

The crossroads marker was a pillar of stone, rounded off at the top, eroded smooth by rain and wind. It sat in a moat of untouched grass, ringed by a trodden path that spoked off in four directions: one to the House on the Hill, one to the graveyard, and one each to the east and west. A hole carved through the pillar contained a small brass bell etched with symbols sacred to the formarch Xyvati. The bell was meant to be rung by passing travelers to ensure the formarch's blessing and a safe journey. Markers at other crossroads were frequently vandalized and the sacred brass bells stolen. The

marker by the House on the Hill remained whole, though largely neglected.

The bell rang of its own accord, with the frequency of a heartbeat. Perdita reached into the hole as she passed and gave the bell a smart tap with her fingertips. The bell chimed strongly from that buffet but ceased to ring on its own after that. Perdita pressed on.

The path to the graveyard passed between two outcrops of limestone, about twelve feet high. Rain darkened the layered stone and the moss and lichen that crept along its face. Saplings growing in the cracks caught the drops with their outstretched limbs, their leaves and Perdita's eyes matched in color.

The outcrops came to an abrupt halt, quarried away to make room and headstones. The cold, cobbled maze was ringed by trees with shaggy red bark. The rain had tapered off to a drizzle.

Gruma's wings beat overhead. He sailed over the headstones, then suddenly dove in between them with a long, low croak of warning.

A slew jolted into the air, like a puppet whose strings had been yanked. The individual spirits that made up the slew, shimmering like squares of silver foil, jostled into one another,

and its vaguely human shape appeared to ripple. The slew wailed in a hundred choked voices.

And there was someone inside it.

Perdita gripped Grandfather Mandrake's shotgun and closed in on the slew with a cautious but unfaltering step. Whoever had been caught by it was still struggling, much to Perdita's admiring surprise. She could see the dark red striae pulsing in its almost-body where it clung to the victim, leeching the lifeblood away in what she knew to be painful sips.

"Try to stay calm," Perdita called to the person, if they could hear her over the blood that was undoubtedly roaring in their ears. "Struggling will make it grip tighter."

Her aim didn't matter in this situation: the slew could be hit anywhere and the victim would be unharmed by the mellifer shot. The pellets would turn to jelly when they touched human skin and roll off harmlessly.

The shotgun cracked like lightning, and the neck of the slew exploded in a flash of light. Golden beads cascaded from the gaping hole in the spirits' formation and tinkled like shattered glass against the stones.

Perdita took aim again and blasted another hole in the slew. The soft smell of beeswax filled the air. The spirits began to lose their adhesiveness to one another. Their humanoid form wavered and collapsed. The victim tumbled over their failing

composition and slumped to the ground. The spirits darted away in every direction, like silver moths.

The victim thrashed their arms and legs, tangled up in their cloak. Perdita shouldered her shotgun and helped them get free. Perdita observed that the victim was a man of a youngish age. He tried to sit up and immediately slumped down again.

“You may be dizzy yet,” Perdita warned.

The man lay on his back. Perdita could see his face now. Full lips, a smoothly curving nose. There was a faded quality about his linen-colored skin, as though it had once been bronze, full of fire and sunlight but had turned ashen. His longish mop of hair was pure white. He had surely run into something terrible long before his encounter with the slew.

His chest heaved with exertion. He raised one shaking arm and pulled back the embroidered silk sleeve. A webwork of veins was visible close to his skin, dotted by several red pinpricks.

“You seem to know about them,” he wheezed. “Anything I need to be concerned about?”

“No,” said Perdita. “The traces of the slew’s siphoning will fade soon, and you should regain your strength before the sun sets.”

He let his arm drop heavily to his chest. "I owe you my life. I'm sorry to say it's not worth much."

After a few deep breaths, the man was able to lift himself into a sitting position and stay there. Between his struggles with the slew and his quick recovery, he was a hardy one indeed.

His hand touched a pile of the spent shot. He rolled one of the golden beads in his fingers until it rarefied into a globule of golden jelly. "This is expensive."

"It's easy enough to make," Perdita said. She began tapping the beads one by one with her fingertips and muttering under her breath.

"What are you doing?" inquired the stranger.

"Nine... ten... eleven... Hm?"

Perdita sprang to her feet and shook the grit from the hem of her dress.

"Since your state has improved," she said curtly, hoping her hood obscured the prickling she felt spreading across her cheeks, "you will be able to leave presently."

She offered her hand.

The stranger placed his hand in hers. His nails were charcoal black and strangely rough.

"And why would I want to do that?" he grunted as Perdita dragged him to his feet.

“Because graveyards are dangerous places,” Perdita said. “I don’t like coming here. This is where my grandparents are buried.”

“I’m sorry for your loss—”

“Not to mention it’s raining, and worst of all, I was obliged to leave the house.”

The stranger raised an eyebrow. “I take it you don’t get out much.”

“That is none of your business. Please leave.”

The stranger crossed his arms. “No.”

“Out! Out!” Gruma bawled.

The stranger’s defiant stance unknotted in surprise. “Friend of yours?” he asked Perdita.

“Gruma has always been with me,” said Perdita. “Ever since I arrived on the doorstep of the House on the Hill as a baby.”

The stranger narrowed his eyes: a muddy, ruddy sort of brown. “I see.”

Perdita stepped to the side of the path. “Shall we?”

“Wait.” The stranger threw up his hands. His smile was crooked. “I assure you I have a very good reason for being here.”

“Which is?”

“A graveworm.”

A chill spread across Perdita's shoulders. "You should have said so sooner," she said.

She nudged past the stranger to make her way down the path. She heard the snap of his cloak and his footfalls behind her.

"It's my good luck that you've come," said the stranger. "I wouldn't have known where to begin looking. My name is Sinclair."

"I'm Perdita."

A large slab of marble was set into the earth at the south end of the graveyard. The trees gathered around it were bent forward, a semicircle of hirsute mourners. At the center of the slab stood a thick headstone. The inscription ran:

Dreaming of a place that never was,
Approach with fury against the dusk;
Exchange the present for a past that was
And despair in a future that may be;

Emerge onto a plane blinding-bright with dawn.

Perdita stopped to pick up the earthworms that were squirming their way over the marble slab and plop them in the grass.

Sinclair made a noise in his throat. "Must you?"

"Of course I must," said Perdita. "The little darlings might get hurt."

“Darlings, indeed,” Sinclair grumbled.

With the earthworms taken care of, Perdita picked up a flat, rusted metal rod standing by a tree and used it as a lever under the headstone. The headstone tipped backwards on hidden hinges. Pillbugs, millipedes and various other many-legged squatters scurried away from the light, down into the newly revealed depths. A staircase carved of stone, grimy with moss and dirt, faded into the murk.

Sinclair frowned almost comically into the steep, narrow recess.

“Since the graveyard is my responsibility, don’t risk yourself on its behalf,” said Perdita. “I’ve exterminated gravewyrms before.”

“None like this, I’d wager,” said Sinclair. He spread his hands apart, perhaps indicating size. “I’ve been following the trail of blight. Huge swaths of land have been devastated.”

Perdita plucked a lantern from the branch of a tree. The old handle squawked as it swung in her grip. “If it’s as terrible as you say, that’s all the more reason to let me take care of it.”

Sinclair raised his chin and flashed his crooked smile. “I’m a stubborn man, Perdita.” He extended his hand in a sweeping gesture. “Ladies first.”

Perdita rolled her eyes and shoulders in surrender. “As you wish.”

Gruma gave a woeful caw as Perdita was swallowed up by the dark of the crypt, Sinclair close behind her.

* * *

III. Deal

The narrow passage was just high enough to admit Sinclair. Perdita lit the oil in the lantern from a chert wheel in her leather bag. An arc of light illuminated the moldering stones. The passage crept deeper underground by inclines, paved roughly to offer purchase. The stones remained rough over time because they were so seldom trodden, though colonies of living slime made the way treacherous.

“I saw the House on the Hill from the crossroads,” said Sinclair. “Do you live by yourself in a place that big?”

“If ‘by yourself’ means ‘without people’, then yes,” said Perdita. “I have Gruma, and the goats who keep the lawn short and give excellent milk.”

“Are you not lonely?”

The “no” hung on Perdita’s lips but didn’t quite fall. She reflected a moment before coaxing the word out slowly. “No... I have Grandfather Graham’s books and I tend to Grandmother Constance’s garden. I practice with Grandfather Mandrake’s firearms, and of course the house and the grounds always need tending.”

“That’s not being not lonely, that’s being busy,” Sinclair pointed out. “There’s a difference.”

“You claim to know me better than I know myself?” Perdita said more loudly than necessary.

“That was not my intention. I apologize.”

Sinclair’s last word echoed in a large chamber. Just outside the lantern’s arc of light, the darkness seemed to writhe and chuckle with viscid mischief.

Perdita set the lantern on the floor and positioned the shotgun under her arm. “Keep your voice down, and your thoughts in the present.”

She reached into the leather bag and pulled out a vial of coarse salt which she knew to be bright red in color. She heaved the vial into a corner of the chamber. A tinkling of glass; the salt scattered.

The salt was a beacon to the writhing things. They came squelching and squeaking from every dark crevice, even overhead. Sinclair barely suppressed a disgusted noise. Perdita was glad to hear the slink of steel and the cocking of a revolver.

The writhing consolidated in the dark corner where the salts had been scattered. Perdita took aim.

“It’s always a shame to have to exterminate them,” Perdita whispered. “I find them quite charming.”

“At this point, I’m not surprised.”

Perdita fired. The dark corner erupted in a golden explosion. Spherical slugs with enormous black eyeballs and translucent skin appeared in that brief moment, squealing and squelching as the specialized shot dissolved their hollow bodies.

Sinclair's revolver flashed next to Perdita. The smaller golden explosions were mellifer bullets. Perdita and Sinclair fired off rounds into the quivering mass of jelly as each creature climbed over its fellows to try and devour the salts.

The shrieking of the slugs tapered off, and the squelching resolved into the crevices at the far side of the room. Grandfather Mandrake had told Perdita that the mnemowars would scatter when enough of them had been dissolved by the mellifer shot. She recalled their shooting lessons, Grandfather Mandrake's soldier's nerves always steely and cool...

Before Perdita could push the memory down, a mnemowar dropped from the ceiling. First, the touch of cool, sweaty membrane, then a wash of prickling pain that seemed to burn and freeze at the same time.

Perdita grasped at rubbery jelly-flesh and felt Sinclair's hands join hers. The prickling sensation was ripped away. Sinclair tore the creature near in twain with his heavy dagger and heaved it to the floor with a squelch. The mnemowar's

body swelled around the wound, then wetly burst into a puddle of viscous suds.

“Thank you,” Perdita said.

She touched her cheek, her neck. The skin was hot, a little rough and tender. Her ear hummed. The rash would subside in a day or two. A bit of ointment would soothe the prickling. What hurt more was the damage to her precious memory: Grandfather Mandrake’s stern old face and the gruff pat of his hand on her shoulder when she hit the target—the image seemed ragged around the ages, faded.

I’ll stop. Perdita projected her thoughts to the dead, to their gods, to the stars in the sky. Is this punishment for destroying the gravecreatures—taking my memories? I’ll stop. The graveyard might become overrun, but without my memories, I have nothing. I’ll stop...

“You alright?” asked Sinclair.

Perdita remembered to breathe. “Yes. I was careless. I began to remember something. The mnemowar didn’t eat the whole memory, but it’s a bit...chewed.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Sinclair. “Maybe you can piece it back together?”

“I will certainly try.” Perdita reloaded her shotgun. “Let’s move forward.”

* * *

IV. Despair

Lantern-light waded through a darkness almost palpable, swamp-like.

“What about you?” Perdita said. “What’s your story?”

“I was a tar with the Transmeridian Company,” said Sinclair. “Now I hunt gravewyrms.”

“That’s quite the transition,” said Perdita. “I’ve never seen the ocean. Do you miss it?”

“Terribly. That is, I miss loving it. There is nothing quite like the ocean completely surrounding you, girding you in with pillowy waves that might buoy you up or swallow you whole.”

“How do you mean,” Perdita said, “you miss loving the ocean?”

“Sailing was the one thing that gave me joy above all others,” said Sinclair. “Now I can’t even think of the ocean without a creeping terror quivering my innards. I’m sea-sick, you might say.”

“What made you sea-sick?”

“I made a gamble I couldn’t win.”

Perdita waited for Sinclair to continue, but instead she felt his hand touch her shoulder.

“Do you hear that?” he said.

Perdita met Sinclair’s eyes as they listened to the distant din of arrhythmic clicking.

Perdita finally blinked. “We’re not deep enough underground.”

“I know.”

Perdita readied her shotgun. “It’s not too late to turn back.”

“This is what I do, remember?” answered Sinclair. He held his revolver and dagger at the ready.

They descended the last incline and entered the second chamber.

The air was full of the chitinous clicking. Blue embers danced in dark corners, on the ceiling. As Perdita set down the lantern, unseen things scuttled away from the light.

“How many do you suppose there are?” Perdita wondered.

“Any number is too many,” said Sinclair.

“I have no bait for these ones.”

“May your aim be true.”

Perdita aimed for one dark, writhing corner. A bang, a flash, the smell of beeswax. Each ember was revealed to burn like a single eye inside the black, ox skull-like head of a nymphal gravewyrm.

Skulls and segmented bodies shattered. The gravewyrms scattered, scuttling away on their dozens of legs.

Not as many perished as Perdita would have liked. She had glimpsed some of the shot buried in the gravewyrms' exoskeletons. This brood was tougher than average.

Sinclair fired at individual embers. Some of the gravewyrms were blown to pieces. Others continued to move with bullets crumpled against their bodies.

Seeing that the concentrated impact of the bullets was having a greater effect, Perdita took up her own revolver. The ember-eyes provided convenient targets.

The bravest of the brood scuttled towards the light. Perdita and Sinclair dodged horns and fangs, sidestepped falling horrors and crushed brittlely armored bodies underfoot. Sinclair stabbed at the polluting flesh between plates of chitin, even cut gravewyrms out of the air when they launched themselves out of the darkness.

The scuttling embers began to retreat. Perdita's eyes scanned the chamber, saw the glint of an ember behind Sinclair. He was reloading his revolver. The nymphal graveworm sprang, but Perdita's mellifer bullet exploded between its horns. The graveworm wheeled in the air and skittered to the floor.

Sinclair saluted with his revolver. "Much obliged. Did we win?"

“It looks like the rest have fled,” said Perdita after a swift inspection of the chamber. “Their exoskeletons are hard for nymphs.”

“A trait they inherited from their mother,” said Sinclair.

Then, his head nodded like he was falling asleep. “If you’ll excuse me,” he gasped, “I’m going to sit down.”

He sank to the floor, grasping at the rough stones to steady himself.

Perdita crouched down and rolled up Sinclair’s stained, tattered sleeve. There were fresher wounds streaking his arm on top of the nearly-healed wounds inflicted by the slew.

“You’ve been bitten.”

“One grazed me. I’ll be alright.”

“You will not,” said Perdita. She opened the bag at her hip. “The graveworm’s venom is vicious and quick. If you don’t take the anti-venom, you will die.”

“I can’t.” He threw his hand in the air to halt her.

“Can’t take—?”

“Can’t die.”

White hair. The ocean. A gamble he could not win.

“Lady Death,” Perdita whispered.

“Captain Ruby,” said Sinclair, “as some sailors call her. Crimson hat and coat, ruby-red lips in a death-pale face.”

Sweat beaded on his forehead. Perdita caught him before he fell back. She got his arm around her shoulder and sat him up against the nearest wall. He let his head fall back, and he licked his lips.

“The wind was dead,” he wheezed. “The sun was all-consuming. Any man who hadn’t died of exposure died of thirst or else threw himself overboard in a fit of madness. Her phantom ship appeared through the blanching heat. She boarded our vessel and challenged me to a game of dice. We agreed that if I won, the other sailors’ souls would go free and I would live. If she won, all of our souls would belong to her.”

“And yet, here you are.”

“I rolled doubles,” said Sinclair. “She won all the sailors’ souls, and mine. I won living death and a new job. I remember her turning my soul over and over in her fingers like a meditation ball. The grin never left her face. She told me to go kill gravewyrms, because they’re loyal to her rival. The next morning, she was gone. My jet-black hair, a gift from my dear mother, had turned chalk-white.”

“How did you finally get to dry land?”

“The wind picked up and the ship drifted back into the waters of a busy trade route. I was picked up by a merchant clipper and taken to shore. I was sick all the time I was at sea. I felt better when I set foot on dry land. In fact, I felt

extraordinarily healthy for someone who is the next thing to dead. If I was ever injured, my wounds would heal at an alarming rate.

“I tried sailing just once more. I became ill and feverish all over again. The ocean rejects me, because I’m all wrong.”

Perdita watched his face in the warm oasis of the lantern light. “How lonely.”

He smiled his crooked smile, though it was sad. “Very lonely.”

“It’s like my Grandfather Herbert always said, Misery loves company.” Perdita extended her hand.

Sinclair nodded and gripped her hand tightly.

“Well, now that we’re sharing our loneliness, we’re going to need to share our problems,” said Perdita. “My ammunition is not going to be enough against the graveworm dam. If we go back, I might be able to put something together. A piercing round.”

Sinclair shook his head. “There’s no time. Judging by the size of those graveworm nymphs, they’ve been hatched for three weeks. A new brood may be on the way.”

Grandmother Constance had once said that female graveworms could procreate by themselves, but all their progeny would be female. A mixed blessing: on the one hand,

no larger, more aggressive males; on the other hand, even a single graveworm could cause an infestation.

“Their dam must be destroyed, then,” said Perdita. “But if I can’t kill her...”

Sinclair wiped the blade of his dagger on his cloak. He tore open the front of his vest and his shirt, baring a scarred chest of linen brown. Perdita winced as he cut a straight gash beneath his ribs.

“What in the world are you doing?”

Perdita’s stomach crawled as Sinclair reached inside his own body. He slid his hand under his ribs, his face contorting with pain and concentration.

“It was not enough to take my soul and estrange me from the ocean,” grunted Sinclair. “Captain Ruby thought it would be great sport to torment me in my eternal unlife. But, I do get something useful in exchange for the constant irritation.”

Sinclair choked in relief and he withdrew his hand from the gash. In his black-nailed, blood-stained fingertips was a small stone swirled with pearlescent white and red.

“A corost,” puffed Sinclair. “It will pierce just about anything, in spite of its shape. Surefire way to kill a graveworm. Even this one.”

Perdita took the pearl and rubbed it with her thumb. The red and white swirled on the pearl’s surface at her touch.

“I was going to use it myself,” said Sinclair. He pressed his shirt against the gash under his ribs. The wound bled disturbingly little. “I have nothing to lose. No sense risking your life.”

“I’ve taken that risk before,” said Perdita.

She opened her leather bag. She lit a candle and pressed the wax into the stones next to Sinclair and placed a vial of purple fluid and a soft cloth in his hands.

“At the very least, rub your wounds with this. It will disinfect them and numb the pain. Forget about me and focus on recovering.” She slipped the pearl into an empty chamber of her revolver.

“I will focus on recovering and you,” said Sinclair. “Good luck will follow you that way.”

* * *

V. Deference

Perdita descended through the passage slowly, choosing her steps with great care. The air was heavy with stagnant moisture, and the sloping floors were perilous with slippery ooze. Mushrooms huddled in damp corners, ghostly and sullen. The darkness here was thick and ink-like and devoured the lantern light and the sound of her footsteps.

The air was cut by the thread of a draft whistling through an arched portal. The draft carried the sting of ashes and the sour grey stench of burnt refuse.

Strangely, the darkness seemed held back at the threshold to the chamber. Inside, irregular patches of white fur-like mold dimly luminesced.

Ash covered everything. It lay heaped in piles in the corners of the chamber. It overflowed the reservoir, thirty feet long and wide, and as many deep.

The reservoir should have been filled with water, shared with an underground river. The fish of that river ferried spirits to the afterlife. Somewhere, somehow, the tunnel to the river must have gotten blocked and the water dried up. No fish to ferry the dead away, and no pure water to cleanse the space, had created the perfect conditions for the graveworm to thrive and reproduce, sheltered and nourished in its nest of collected ashes.

Perdita would need help repairing the reservoir, but the graveworm needed to be exterminated first.

The ashes filling the reservoir began to tremble and tumble from the heap. Perdita watched the void beyond the grate that separated the reservoir from the tunnel that fed it.

The light began shifting. Perdita averted her eyes for only a moment, and gasped. She quickly stepped off a carpet of white

mold that was moving across the floor like a shadow. Perdita's throat tightened when she saw the shape the mold took: the silhouette of a person, reposed in a sickly, etherized state. Perdita dared a look around the chamber. All the irregular patches of mold drifted across the floor, the walls, the ceiling, like corpses floating on a river.

Perdita steadied herself and aimed her unwavering focus on the graveworm, lingering just out of sight. Then, the bruise-colored flame leapt to life behind the grate, bobbed and wandered in and out of view, shifting from eye socket to eye socket. There came a roar, muted in the air but shuddering in the stones under Perdita's feet, a noise like rusted hinges and the throes of the dying.

The heap of ashes swelled and then sank. The graveworm was evidently too large to pass through the grate, but it could still reach out its legs, armored talons covered in fishhook-sized barbs. Drifting mold passed above the grate, and the dull light glinted off the adamantine black chitin guarding the graveworm's flame.

Perdita raised the revolver. Took aim.

A clap as from lightning.

A burst of bloody light flashed behind the grate. Perdita heard the chitin shatter. The air smelled of salt.

A short, sharp hiss of rusted hinges. The flame flagged and faded.

Many-jointed legs erupted from the ashes and snatched Perdita where she stood. Barbs cut into her clothing, into her skin. She inhaled sharply and tensed. The graveworm was dying. Its grip would not last.

Graveworms bled when they died, but not with the ichor of the living.

Perdita's eyes and brain were flooded with gloom like liquid lead, rippling like deep waters, choking her. The graveworm's grasp was suddenly inescapable.

Who would tend the gardens? Who would care for the goats? Who would keep the House on the Hill clean, everything in its proper place, everything preserved, forever like it was when things were good?

The good of the past needed to be preserved, because the future was hazy, overcast, cold, empty.

Perdita struggled in the graveworm's barbed embrace. She tore deeper wounds with every movement, snaring herself ever faster in the graveworm's power.

The past was all she had. Who would preserve it?

Struggling will make it grip tighter.

Perdita expelled the graveworm's leaden lifeblood from her lungs and let her shoulders fall. She slackened her grip on

the revolver and let the color return to her knuckles. She stilled the spasms in her muscles, let the pain be, accepted it.

The graveworm's legs resolved into wet ashes, peeled off like mud, and crumbled to the floor.

The gloom sank, drained out of her skull, out of the chamber. Perdita's vision no longer swam with muddy darkness, and her breath came free and easy. The mold-forms had ceased to move, though they still resembled numbed figures. They, too, would need help.

Perdita found Sinclair back in the second chamber, standing but leaning on the wall for support, bent forward and breathing deeply. He had disinfected his wounds, and now Perdita tended to her own from the vial of purple fluid.

She took Sinclair's arm over her shoulders and helped him back up through the passages of the crypt and toward daylight.

Rain poured down through the entrance to the crypt. The water drained away through channels built into the sides of the passage. They splashed up the stairs.

Gruma croaked frantically and scrabbled and hopped out from where he had been taking shelter under the trees. The slate grey sky flashed to life, and the thunder roared a moment later.

"And here I was expecting a rainbow," said Sinclair.

"Think of the thunder as a cheer," said Perdita.

Perdita extinguished the lantern and left it where it might dry when the sun reemerged. Gruma stood at Perdita's feet until she opened her cloak for him. He swooped up to her arm and huddled close as she wrapped the cloak about them both.

"You should stay in the House on the Hill until the storm passes," said Perdita to Sinclair.

"As long as I'm not disturbing anything," said Sinclair.

"No. You wouldn't be."

The path through the limestone vale was furrowed with running rainwater.

"I will need to spend some time repairing the damage done by the graveworm," said Perdita.

"I would be glad to help," said Sinclair. "If I may ask, what do you plan to do after that?"

"If it would be little imposition," said Perdita, "would you object to company during your travels?"

Sinclair's crooked smile again. "Only if the company of a dead man is not objectionable to you. But what of the house?"

"I will return to it," said Perdita, "every so often. The past has shaped me, and I, in turn, will shape the future."

"Wise words," said Sinclair. "It was difficult to see much of a path ahead of me before. Perhaps your trailblazing will be contagious."

At the crossroads, Perdita rang Xyvati's bell to bless the travelers passing by.

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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.

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