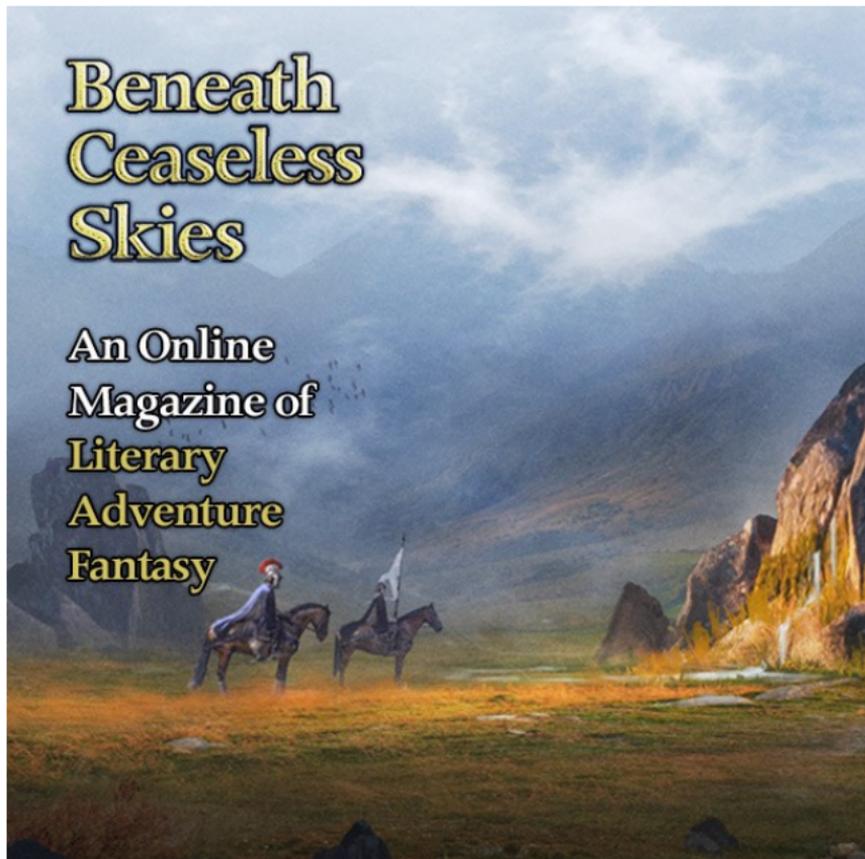


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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GRAVITY'S EXILE

by Grace Seybold

Jeone Serrica, clinging one-handed to the piton embedded in the basalt above her head, whirled and kicked out with her left foot. The toe of her clawed sandal thunked solidly into the lizard's lower limb. Ichor gushed over her foot, blue-green and cold. The lizard hissed, its leg jerking wildly, and Jeone yanked her foot free before the spasm could pull her loose from her handhold.

With her other hand she fumbled in her belt for a weapon. Her dagger was gone, her hammer too precious, her few remaining poison darts no use against a reptile. The lizard, as long as she was tall but far more agile, watched her cautiously from a few arm-lengths away, its lidless eyes flicking back and forth. Jeone wondered if it was intelligent. She'd seen other kinds of lizards in other places, long ago and far above, that had been trained to carry burdens and follow orders. Could she bluff it?

Keeping her eyes locked with the lizard's, she bent her knee carefully and untied her dripping sandal, working the knots loose one-handed with the ease of long practice. The

thumb-thick spike on the sandal's tip, invaluable for driving footholds into soft rock or dirt, was probably not long enough to do any real damage to the beast, unless she managed to strike throat or eye. But if its sluggish brain was smart enough to recognize that this was what had just caused it pain—

“Hyahh!” Jeone brandished the sandal in the air, stretching as far toward the lizard as her handhold allowed. “Have some more of this, why don't you? Hah!”

The lizard skittered back a few more steps. Encouraged, Jeone swung her right foot forward, wedging it securely into a crack in the rock, and then in the same motion let go the piton and caught the top edge of the crack with her right hand as her momentum carried her forward and down. The movement jarred her shoulder badly and she nearly lost her grip, but she managed to hold on, still upright and half a body-length closer to the lizard. She waved the sandal again. Bluish drops described a sparkling arc in the air, lit from below by a sudden shaft of sunlight. One struck the lizard's muzzle and it flinched. “Yah! I'm coming for you! Taste your own blood, monster!” Jeone looked for another handhold, envying the creature its sure-footed grace. Even her many years of climbing down the worldwall couldn't compare to its suckered feet and cliff-dwelling instincts. But if it didn't realize how overmatched she was—

The lizard opened its mouth wide, displaying needle-sharp fangs beaded with venom. Jeone bared her own teeth in return, grinning fiercely. Blood pounded in her ears, and she felt its pulse in her fingertips where they dug into the stone.

Woman and monster hung motionless against the rockface for an endless moment, eyes locked together. Then, abruptly, the lizard clacked its teeth shut, spun on two feet, and skittered away. Despite its dragging rear leg it was unnervingly fast, and in a few heartbeats it had disappeared around a knob of rock and was gone.

Jeone let out a long, shuddering breath, the exhilaration of the fight draining away all at once. With exaggerated care, she tucked the sandal into her belt and pulled herself into a more secure two-handed hold, resting her cheek against the cool stone. Her skin was beaded with sweat. The sun was coming up out of the downclouds now, the day well started. She should get moving, retrieve her pitons and hammock and whatever of her worldly goods the lizard's sudden attack hadn't scattered into the cloudy void. Jeone smiled bitterly, picturing some far-down kingdom surprised by a sudden rain of camping equipment. It was the sort of thing that just happened every so often, no matter where on the worldwall you lived: rains of tools, fish, bodies, stranger things. One day Jeone herself would no doubt

run out of luck, and her falling body would startle someone far below—

She shook her head, dispelling such dark thoughts. They came every so often, and then passed like clouds. It was a clear dry day, a good travelling day, and she was alive, improbably as that was after so many years and battles: still alive, and still climbing. With a grin that was pure delight in sun and life and movement, Jeone reached for her next handhold and resumed her long climb.

* * *

The sun was evening-high, disappearing into the upper clouds and turning them apricot and apple-gold, when Jeone first saw a sign of civilization: a metal hook driven into the stone, and rust streaks below it where something had been attached, a pulley assemblage perhaps. Looking down, she could make out chisel marks in the rockface starting a body-length below, where handholds had been crudely chipped out to make climbing to this point easier. She guessed this must be the upper bound of someone's territory, and studying the hook with a practiced eye, she judged that it had been cleaned less than a season ago. There were people nearby, people well-off enough to own metal and settled enough to leave fixtures in place and maintain them. Jeone smiled. Food, new gear, a solid surface to sleep on. It wasn't that she couldn't survive in the

wilderness, even with half her belongings scattered and gone—she'd lived on the rockface with nothing but a knife, more than once in her wandering life, but she was tired and wanted rest.

She followed the handholds down, keeping a wary eye out between her feet for movement, in case the locals were unfriendly. Though if they were halfway competent, she wouldn't see an attack coming. An attacker from above always had gravity's advantage, so most towns oriented their defenses that way. Jeone had helped more than one place set up such defenses: overhangs to conceal defenders, false footholds to crumble under an enemy's weight, unexpected sheer drops and narrow chimneys to force attackers to pause or descend singly, while locals with harpoons and nets struck from concealment. She knew that kind of warfare well.

The best thing she could do was to approach openly, without subterfuge, and try to look like she was no threat—which, given her current bedraggled and weaponless state, should be easy.

The carved-out path became clearer as she descended. At one point there was a head-sized niche beside the trail with a crude clay figurine in it, a winged human adorned with freshly cut garlands of orange moss: a local deity, Jeone decided, and gave it a wide berth. Past that point the hand- and footholds

were closer together, so that even a child might have used them, and they deepened until the path was almost a ladder.

Then it curved downward around an outcropping of rock, such a blatantly obvious place for an ambush that Jeone almost laughed aloud. Someone had built it to convey a message, clearly. She shrugged, and tilting her head back, began to sing as she descended. The song was one she'd learned among the Ataliia, in a tongue no-one spoke for miles above even there. Jeone, though gifted at languages, had forgotten most of the rest of that one, but she liked the tune.

Memory is the clinging mist
And time is the falling water
Downward falls the water always
But in the mist season the clouds return
Oh my soul, drift upward like the clouds
Be tranquil oh my soul...

The path widened under Jeone's hands and feet and ended in a level ledge, and she looked down in the last light of the sun over a scene of pastoral calm. Carved terraces spread out below her, thickly planted with vines, and fruit trees slanted outward into the sky, some hung with nets and platforms. Figures moved among them, from grey-headed oldsters to children young enough to still be on tethers, busy at evening tasks. A little girl scattered seeds along a narrow porch and whistled,

calling a flock of red-brown fowl to their roost. Three women, one heavily pregnant, gathered red melons into sacks slung over their shoulders, clambering gracefully from one terrace to another despite their burdens. Cooking smoke drifted from the mouths of caves. A baby cried, somewhere, and was hushed. At the opening of one entrance into the rock, an old woman sat carving a branch, curls of wood fluttering into the sky below.

Jeone frowned, breaking off her song. Where were all the men?

“Stranger!” someone called, part hail and part warning. Heads turned upward, stillness spreading in an expanding ripple.

“Be welcome, stranger,” a clear high voice said beside her ear, and Jeone jumped, nearly losing her footing. Glad of the width of the ledge, she turned her head. A cunningly hidden crack in the rock beside her now framed a lean young woman holding a wickedly barbed harpoon in both her hands. “If you come in peace, be welcome to Shasten Dhu.”

* * *

Jeone examined her cleaned sandal with satisfaction, turning it this way and that in the yellow glow of the lantern. The lamplight gleamed on polished brass and dark brown wood and glittered in the quartz embedded in the walls of the village’s guest quarters. Shasten Dhu might not have visitors

often, Jeone thought, but it certainly knew how to house them. More or less.

Her two hosts—guards?—watched her curiously. Amlle, who Jeone guessed was barely two years a woman, still clutched her harpoon in one hand. Everything she said was perfectly pleasant, but she seemed to stand on a knife-edge of vigilance. Her companion, Dormet, was the pregnant woman Jeone had seen before. A more unlikely guard was hard to imagine. But in her too there was a wariness, one that Jeone didn't think could be accounted for by the mere presence of one unarmed stranger.

Quite a bit about the way she'd been brought here had been odd, really. Once Amlle had ascertained that Jeone was alone, she had hustled her under shelter with extraordinary haste, claiming a danger of predatory dusk-flying bats. No-one, she'd said, went out at night. It was entirely plausible, and yet to Jeone it had sounded suspiciously glib.

As she'd passed through the outer level of the village, Jeone had tried to spot the source of the oddness that troubled her. No men, that was the obvious thing, but she didn't think it was just that. She'd been to other communities where men and women lived apart, whether for part of the year or for always, but they hadn't felt like this. Out of long habit, she didn't ask; a nosy stranger was one less easily trusted.

Otherwise Shasten Dhu looked like a hundred other villages. Amle led her down the ladder-path past terraces of sun crops and folded water traps, past the openings of home caves where cookfires smoked and larger caverns that might be storage or gathering places, workshops, or farms for shade crops of mushrooms and lichen. It was all very placid and ordinary, and yet Jeone couldn't help but feel that something was very, very wrong.

There'd been a brief argument at the entrance to this cavern, between Amle and a hard-faced older woman who also carried a harpoon (hers, unlike Amle's, gouged and stained with use). They spoke in fierce whispers but with frequent gestures at Jeone and at the sky. She tried not to appear too interested. Eventually, the woman waved Jeone and Amle on, and they entered a long cave with rooms branching off to either side. Dormet brought food and washing-water, and the two stayed with Jeone as she cleaned herself and ate.

That too was strange, Jeone thought, as she tested her sandal's thongs. No-one else had come in. Normally there would be a stream of villagers finding reasons to come and see the stranger, eager for tales and news from up the worldwall. Children, if no-one else. She hadn't so much as heard movement in the corridor outside. Everyone had watched her curiously as she passed through the village, whispering to each

other. She'd caught snatches of their conversations, "the stranger" and "the boundaries" and "the sky." Some of the children were whistling to each other in what Jeone thought must be a private language; she'd been to other places that used whistle-talk or drum-codes or the like, to convey secrets. All that was normal; but no-one had followed her inside, and that, she thought, was very odd.

Satisfied with her footwear, Jeone smiled at Dormet, who returned the smile uneasily, and sat back down to lay out her gear. Hammer and precious steel pitons, too few. Braided rope, spun from the wool of Thuino's goats—absurd and ornery creatures, Jeone remembered with a smile, but worth the keeping. Waterskin and wooden eating bowl. Red-striped darts in their bird-bone case, too few again; she could carve more easily enough, but she had no more poison. If those giant lizards were a usual nuisance here, the people probably hunted them, and perhaps she could trade for venom here.

Her dart-thrower was gone, though, and the pouch of medicines she'd carried so carefully from Adar Hol. Along with her knife, her whetstone, her firestarting kit, her lucky dragon's tooth (Becoul had sworn it was a dragon's tooth, anyway), her mist-season clothing, her blood sponges, and her carved spoon. She had three fathoms of waxed linen cord left of her coil. One mitten had turned up, snagged on the rockface, but not its

mate. And of course the clothes she'd slept in and was still wearing, sleeveless vest and knee-length breeches, wide belt and tablet-woven knee and elbow bands, and the cunningly made hammock that folded itself into a backpack. All in all, Jeone decided, it was a poor haul, but after all she'd left home with less, and she'd fled the caves of Hisperaan with nothing, and she would make do.

Dormet began to stack the food dishes. Amlle was gazing at Jeone's meager possessions as though they represented all the treasures of the deep world. Wanderlust, Jeone thought. It was a disease of the young everywhere. Had she ever been that young?

"Stay," she said to Dormet, as the pregnant woman started to leave. "I have questions, and you must as well—"

"Oh, yes!" Amlle said eagerly; then, crestfallen, "But we can't, we really can't, they're gathering soon and we have to—" Dormet kicked her ankle, not bothering to be subtle. "We have to go," Amlle finished lamely. "Stay here and don't leave. Please."

"Dangerous bats?" Jeone inquired.

"Um. Yes." Amlle cast a pleading look at Dormet, who shook her head firmly. "Listen, tomorrow, all right? I'll—we'll talk tomorrow. This is just—you haven't chosen a good time to come here, and—"

“Amlle,” Dormet said, and jerked her head at the doorway. With an apologetic half-smile and a final “Just stay here!” Amlle followed her companion out of the room.

Alone now, Jeone repacked her gear, including the several pieces of cheese and melon she’d tipped discreetly into her lap during her meal, and the stubby fruit knife she’d tucked into her shorts while passing Dormet the dishes. It would need to be sharpened, but nonetheless she felt better with a weapon, however inadequate. After all, she’d been warned that wandering about was dangerous, and since that was exactly what she now planned to do—

Jeone shouldered her backpack and tied her sandals at her waist; the toe spikes were handy for climbing but she could move more quietly barefoot in these caves. She padded to the room’s entrance, which was merely closed with a heavy leather drape, the blotchy skin of some unknown beast. Clearly she wasn’t exactly a prisoner here. Either they thought she really would stay put, or they wanted her to wander so they could punish her for trespassing—but that seemed unnecessarily devious when she was in their midst already.

She listened carefully. Silence.

Beyond the curtain the corridor was clear. It was an old space, long-settled: floor smoothed by countless footsteps, ceiling darkly burnished with old soot and smoke. Some local

variety of glowmoss, orange-red, clung in well-trimmed strips to the wall between each pair of rooms. All closed with drapes, all silent, twelve in total. Why so many empty rooms? If Jeone's quarters were the usual, each could have housed a family. Then again—no men. Had some recent disaster depopulated the place?

She listened at a few of the drapes, peered into one room to verify that it was empty (and apparently long untenanted), and then crept to the cavern's entrance and looked out. It was full night now, only the faintest patch of glimmer where the sun had risen beyond the upclouds and out of sight. Jeone wondered idly whether it was shining its daylight on her home by now. Not likely, not yet; she'd come down so very far.

Jeone twisted her head to scan the cliff face. Dim light marked other cave mouths, fires or glowmoss. Or maybe not fires; none flickered. Moss then. Where was everyone?

There: that was flame, for certain. Firelight shone from one of the larger caves near the bottom of the village, down below where she'd seen the orchards earlier. It was hard to see through the spreading branches, but as Jeone watched carefully, she thought she saw fluttering movement occlude the light, once, again. Maybe there really *were* bats? All this could be completely innocent, after all. But Jeone had learned to

trust the feelings in her bones that presaged strangeness, and right now they fairly quivered with it.

She eased herself over the edge, bare toes feeling for footholds. As in most villages, these had been deeply carved to make getting around easy, and even supplemented with metal bars in places or flat ledges for resting. Every few fathoms there was a round eyebolt for attaching a child's tether. It was a trivial climb, and in no time Jeone was down among the trees.

She lay full-length on an overhanging limb and peered down, just in time to see something flap past the fire. The wind of its passing was carrion-rancid and she jammed her knuckles against her mouth to stifle a choking noise. Other shapes moved in the cave entrance, and as Jeone's eyes adjusted, she realized that what she'd thought were children were grown women. Which made the flying things—she saw more of them now, gliding in to land—her own size at least, with wingspans twenty feet from tip to tip. “Bats,” she whispered to herself, with a wry grin.

Whatever they were, they seemed to have all arrived; the air was clear. Jeone made herself wait five minutes, counting breaths, before swinging down from the tree limb and shimmying over to a ledge beside the cave mouth. It was one of the largest caves she'd seen earlier, and from inside she heard the low hum of a crowd. They must all be here, all of Shasten

Dhu, and by the stomach-churning stench, some large number of the flying things as well.

Careful to keep herself in shadow, Jeone slipped into the cave.

Torches burned on the walls, infused with something sickly-sweet and pungent that did little to mask the rotting-meat smell of the flying creatures. Birds, not bats, blue-black feathers shading to bright blue crests about the cruel golden eyes and hooked beaks of predators. There were nine of them, even the smallest a head taller than the tallest woman there, crouched with wings folded in a crooning, swaying circle. Through a gap between them, Jeone saw what they surrounded: Dormet, naked, sweat-slicked and gasping, squatting on the stone floor with two other women supporting her. One was the hard-faced guard Amle had argued with earlier, the other a grey-haired, apple-cheeked grandmother who kept up a constant low-voiced, encouraging murmur as Dormet shuddered and moaned.

She's giving birth, Jeone realized. Now? Here? Like this?

Apparently. A contraction rippled across Dormet's distended belly, and the birds' crooning rose expectantly in pitch. One reached out with a wingtip to brush feathers across Dormet's skin. The watching crowd of villagers murmured something in unison. Jeone couldn't see their faces, masked as

they were by dancing flame and shadow, but they didn't sound afraid. Awestruck, maybe, worshipful even.

Another bird touched Dormet, and another, all around the circle. Dormet howled. There was a sudden gush of blood from between her legs, and she sagged against her supporters' arms. Abrupt silence from the villagers and the birds. Dormet shrieked again, and a bloody, black-haired head emerged.

Jeone leaned closer, frowning. *Hair?*

Feathers.

Another push, another scream from Dormet's wide-stretched mouth, and the infant's shoulders came free: human shoulders, ordinary dark-brown skin, below a too-large head patched with wet black feathers across scalp and face. Monstrous fleshy wings followed, naked flaps of skin, one ending in a hooked claw and the other in long frondlike fingers that flexed and reached. No legs. A spill of dangling intestine, blue-grey and mottled with corruption, and the startling white flash of bone, an exposed spine trailing. More blood spurted. A thin slash of mouth opened in the feathered face, giving voice to a gurgling wail of agony. It had no eyes.

A monster, Jeone thought wildly, a dying monster. Half infant, half—fledgling—something. How? Why?

Dormet lay slumped against the midwives' arms, eyes closed. The crooning began again, this time with a note of

terrible sadness, not quite masking the tortured wailing. It was all wrong, all horribly wrong, and almost a relief when one of the birds hopped forward and brought down a claw in a single, surgical stroke across the spindly feathered throat. A last spurt of blood, and stillness fell.

Jeone, shuddering uncontrollable, couldn't take her eyes from the tiny motionless body. Her fingers dug into the cave wall behind her, seeking solidity, reassurance. Somehow the cool familiar stone only made it worse, telling her that this was no nightmare but waking abomination. She stood there, transfixed, as the claws came down again, sectioning the body, joint from bone, with grotesquely tidy precision. Solemnly, the birds each took a red-black chunk of the small corpse, and raised it high as though in benediction.

And began to eat.

Jeone broke and fled, barely making the cavern entrance before she vomited helplessly down the cliff. *Get out of here, get away*, her mind sobbed, as she clung retching to the ledge. *You don't need to know what's going on, you don't want any part of it, just go, Jeone Serrica, just go—*

But behind her a clamor was rising, and some part of her raged and howled at her immobile body, but she was beyond moving, stiff with horror.

Carrion breath and a rush of wind, and rising shrieks at her back. The world spun. Talons plucked her up like an insect and bore her away into the sky.

* * *

Time moved strangely in flight. Jeone hung limply from the great bird's claws, unresisting, half stunned with the overwhelming stench and the horror of what she'd seen. Darkness pitched and swung around her, her eyes sparking false lights to fill the absolute black. Sometimes they seemed to swoop through tunnels or scrape between great canyon walls; sometimes she felt her feet were trailing just above terraces or ledges. Once she cried out involuntarily as a wall seemed to loom straight ahead, but her captor flew unhesitating into it and cold needles prickled her skin, and she realized they were in a cloudbank, and then that the blackness had been gradually replaced with grey. It couldn't be darkness already, Jeone thought. Could they have flown high and far and fast enough to overtake the sun?

No—the faint light was all around them now, brightening rapidly into an opalescent grey-white, directionless and soft. Now Jeone could make out walls and structures, all composed of some pale stone, all glowing with some internal light. Were all clouds like this inside?

The great bird released her and she dropped half her height to the floor, which was smooth and bruisingly hard but strangely not cold. Jeone managed to roll onto her back, meeting the eyes of the bird without flinching. In its chatoyant gaze she saw a fearsome and incisive regard, but not, somehow, any cruelty or malice. Then the moment of connection passed and it was again an unfathomable grotesque, watching her with predatory intensity. It twisted its head to preen its shoulder feathers briefly, and then gathered itself and leapt into the air, gyring rapidly upward toward a circle of blackness far above. The sky, Jeone realized: an opening from this prison, whatever it was.

“Wait,” she croaked, her fear-dried throat cracking the words like eggshells. “Wait, please.” It was gone already.

Alone, Jeone slowly gathered herself. She was bleeding from long shallow gouges on both upper arms where her abductor’s talons had gripped her, but the wounds weren’t severe. She still had her backpack with all her gear, somehow still on her shoulders despite the mad flight. Even her sandals had stayed tied to her belt. *Some good luck after all*, Jeone told herself wryly. The thought buoyed her, rekindling a spark of her usual optimism.

It was a little odd that they *hadn’t* taken her gear, actually, she thought. She could easily have had all kinds of weapons

concealed on her. Were the birds so confident she couldn't escape?

Carefully she stood, testing muscles and limbs and finding them intact. The space she was in was small and blank, a bit less than an armspan wide and about two body-lengths from end to end. It was some unguessable distance high, entirely made of that oddly warm whitish stone. She couldn't make an impression on it with toe-spikes or fingernails. Experimentally she took out her hammer and tried to drive a piton into the wall. The impact bounced the piton out of her hand and made the room ring like a bell. Tiny chips of white flew and drifted to the ground slowly, like feathers. Jeone picked one up and let it drop again; it hung in the air like a leaf in still water, and settled with unnerving slowness. She tucked the mysterious stone chip into her vest and examined the mark she'd made on the wall. It was barely a finger's-width deep, and the tip of the piton was visibly blunted. She *might* be able to climb out, eventually, if her equipment held out, but the chances weren't good. And who knew what was waiting at the top?

Jeone circled her cage, trailing her fingers along the blood-warm wall. It was hard to focus on, between the stone's strange texture and its glow, but she thought there was some sort of interruption partway up, a few fathoms overhead. She

wondered whether it was worth investigating, then laughed at herself; what else did she have to do, here?

She placed herself at the end of her cell and stretched out her arms. She was able to lay her palms flat on the opposite walls and still bend her elbows slightly. This would work. She spread her legs, bracing her bare feet likewise on the walls, and took one spraddle-legged step, then another, Balanced now a foot above the floor, keeping constant pressure outward with all her limbs, she slid one hand upwards, then the other; one foot, then the other. She'd done this kind of chimney-climbing fairly often, though more usually down than up. The birds might not be expecting this sort of escape, she thought. In Jeone's experience, settled townsfolk usually made the routes around their home places as safe and easy as possible, and she guessed there weren't many explorer types in Shasten Dhu.

She could feel her muscles starting to burn with tension, but it was a good feeling: she was in control of her own movements again, she wouldn't fall except by her own weakness.

After only a few minutes, she came to the interruption she'd seen: there was a ledge here, and above it the hole widened, unclimbable. Jeone hooked her elbows over the edge and hauled herself up. Not just a ledge, but a corridor: what she'd taken for an unbroken surface was in fact a crossway,

with tunnels going left and right. She couldn't see where either led.

After some thought, she pulled a thread from her talon-tattered vest, licked it and stuck it to the wall just above her erstwhile cell. Then she chose a direction at random and began to walk. Among the Hisperaan she'd learned to navigate tunnels. You kept one hand on the wall to ensure you didn't double back on your own steps, you marked intersections with whatever you had (a sudden flash of memory assailed her, the taste of dust as she bit her nails bloody to scrawl crosses on a cave wall in her body's ink), and you prayed.

At least this time she had water and a little food. She took a reassuring swallow from her waterskin as she walked. The tunnel twisted beguilingly. Several times she crossed other passages, marking each dutifully. Three times there were other pits in the floor, all empty, and twice there were circles of blackness above her, high and remote. The second time, it didn't look quite so black; was dawn coming already?

She lost track of how long she wandered. The maze had the remote clarity of an uncanny dream, through which she travelled like some unbodied spirit. Somehow the silence and sameness and the grey cloudlike light gradually soothed away the horror of the night, and calmness wrapped itself like a cloak around her.

Then from far away she heard someone sobbing. Jeone quickened her steps at the human sound. More turns and crossing passageways as the noise grew and faded, and then Jeone came out into a shaft similar to the one where she'd first been dropped, though only a fathom or so deep; and there was Amlle, huddled weeping on the floor.

Jeone slid down the shaft as quickly as she dared, dropped to her knees beside the girl and held her wordlessly until she grew still. "Oh, stranger," Amlle mumbled at last. "You should never have come to us."

"You should have warned me," Jeone retorted, but without heat. "And I should have stayed in my room, I suppose. Come, it's water down the cliff now. Where are we, do you know?"

Amlle nodded, sniffing. "Shasten Tharva. Sooner or later we're all brought here. I knew it was probably my turn next, that's why Dormet and I—that's why Llatero let us attend you. Because she might have died in the birthing, and I might—might die here, or vanish, and we—and I wanted to—before the end, I wanted—" Her vague, tearful gesture encompassed adventure, strangeness, far depths and heights. "We can't leave the village, they don't allow it, but you—"

"I know," Jeone said softly. "I know."

"But now they'll keep you, you'll be one of us instead, and they'll make you stay in Shasten Dhu, or here, and I'm sorry,

I'm so sorry, I didn't, I—”

“They may try,” Jeone said, and suddenly she laughed, and jumped to her feet, pulling Amlle up with her. “Hah! We're alive yet, and they're not here just now, are they? There'll be something we can do. Tell me about this place, this Shasten Tharva. Anything you know.”

* * *

It had been, Amlle guessed, perhaps seventy or eighty years since the birds came to the village. Her grandmother, one of the oldest women in Shasten Dhu, had been a little girl when her father and the rest of the men and boys were taken away. Some people said they had all been killed, but some of the women reported seeing men here in Shasten Tharva, from time to time. No-one knew for certain, though, and none were ever brought home. Amlle herself had seen men only twice in her life, travellers passing through the village. “Llatero and Imre tried to make babies with one of them,” Amlle added. “Their mother said it was possible. But it didn't take. Llatero's been unlucky with babies, anyway. None of hers live.”

“None of—” Jeone shuddered, imagining it. To carry dying bird-creatures, over and over— “Amlle, forgive my indelicacy, but how *do* the women of Shasten Dhu make babies?”

Amlle shrugged. “No-one knows. We're all brought here, to Shasten Tharva, sooner or later, and it happens while we sleep.

Sometimes the mothers are gone for a season or more, but it only seems like a few days to them.” She curled her arms protectively around herself. “I haven’t slept yet. I’ve been trying not to. I don’t want a baby. Even if it lives, even if they let us keep it. I just don’t. I want to *leave*.”

“They don’t let you,” Jeone said.

“They always find us if we try. I joined the hunters because we’re the only ones who leave the village at all, but we can’t go more than one day’s climb in any direction or they swoop in and bring us back.” Her hand stole to her shoulder. Jeone saw faint scars: old clawmarks, long healed.

“We’ll find a way,” she promised, with as much assurance as she could put into her voice. “These birds—has anyone tried to fight them? Your hunters—”

“No, never,” Amle said vehemently. “What if we—what if they stopped letting us keep *any* of the babies? If we hurt or— or killed one of them—” She shook her head. “Sometimes people talk about fighting, especially when a birth goes badly, but we’ve all agreed not to. It’s best.” She sounded like she was trying to convince herself, or perhaps repeating arguments that had been more convincing in the past. “It really is best, Jeone.”

That explained why they hadn’t searched her for weapons, and why Amle (Jeone noticed now with some surprise) still had her harpoon strapped to her back. “But if you

killed *all* of them, or drove them off—” Jeone frowned, thinking. “How many are there, do you know?”

“Nine,” Amlle said. “I’ve *seen* nine,” she amended. “There could be more, I guess, but if there are they’ve never come to Shasten Dhu.”

“How do you know?” Jeone asked. “They could be different ones each time.”

Amlle laughed. “Now you sound like my mother. She can’t tell them apart either. She can’t even understand what they say most of the time.”

Jeone blinked. “You can?”

“Oh, of course. Mostly everyone my age can. Teresi and Llon are the only ones who really speak their language; most of our mouths aren’t right. But we all know what they’re saying.”

Jeone digested this, remembering the whistle-talk of the children who’d watched her arrival. Three generations of the birds’ experiments— She’d been thinking that the humans in the village were—well, normal, but of course both Amlle’s generation and her mother’s would have been born of the birds’ strange methods, whatever those were. No outward changes, not like the feathers and half-formed wings of Dormet’s baby, but who knew what kinds of things had been done to them inside? Could they even *have* human babies anymore? Were they human themselves?

“Llon talks like us too,” Amlle continued, oblivious to the drift of Jeone’s thoughts. “Teresi only whistles. It makes her mother sad sometimes, that she can’t talk, but at least she lived and they let Imre keep her. So she’s lucky, if you think about it. Imre is, I mean. Not everyone gets to keep any babies at all.”

And what would the next generation be like, the babies of Amlle and Teresi and their cohort? What were the birds ultimately trying to make them into?

It didn’t matter. If Jeone had her way, it would end here. “Come on,” she said. “We’re going to find them, and convince them to let you alone, whatever it takes.” Seven poison darts, a hammer, and Amlle’s harpoon. Not much to convince with, but there they were: you used what you had. “Do you know where we are? What direction from the village, I mean?”

Amlle nodded. “In the sky.”

“What?”

“Jeone,” Amlle said, stricken, “Shasten Tharva *flies*. Didn’t you know?”

The chip of stone floating like a feather. A *building* that floated, a building in a cloud, a fortress for birds—

Amlle slumped to the ground, hiding her face in her hands. “I thought you had a plan,” she mumbled. “I thought you’d thought of how to escape. We’re never going to get away.”

“Of course we will,” Jeone said, pulling Amlle upright again. She *was* rattled, but dragons take her if she’d show it now. “Trust me. We’ll get out of here, one way or another.”

“What if we fall?” Amlle asked in a small voice. “We could fall into the sky. We could fall *forever*.”

At that, Jeone managed a true smile. “I’ve fallen before,” she said. “Sometimes it’s not the end. Come on. Let’s get moving and see what we can find.”

* * *

And so they walked. Now the openings they passed beneath every so often showed blue sky, and the pearlescent light of the corridors seemed soothing, numbing, an invitation to sleep. Both of them yawned and stumbled as they went, and more than once they forgot to mark an intersection and had to backtrack when they realized.

Light-headed with exhaustion, Jeone didn’t notice when things changed, until suddenly it was all different. Vertigo overtook her for a moment as she realized she was standing on the sky—no, on a clear slab of crystal, flawlessly transparent, that filled the round room they were in like a depthless pool. Above was sky, below was sky, and all around the edges of the room were shadows, figures, dimly glimpsed within the stone as though behind a waterfall. Jeone couldn’t make them out clearly, blink as she might, and then she forgot to try as her

breath stopped in her throat, for between her and them, suddenly, between one heartbeat and the next, were the birds.

There were nine of them, as Amllle had said, all black-blue with vivid blue heads and golden eyes. Jeone could see nothing to distinguish them one from another; all were huge and terrible, like shambling giants in ragged cloaks. Their stench was the same as before, rotting meat and some foul alien odor underlying it, but it was somehow easier to bear in this clean airy place than it had been in the torchlit cave. Jeone took a steadying breath.

“My name is Jeone Serrica, once of Tene Apaioe,” she said, head high. When in doubt, make yourself look bigger. “We’re here. What do you want of us?”

Silence. The circle regarded them impassively.

“Answer me!” Jeone demanded. “I know what you’ve been —what you’ve done in Shasten Dhu. What I want to know is *why*. Tell me!” As she spoke, she was eyeing the room, calculating distances and heights.

“Jeone,” Amllle whispered, “they won’t talk to you.”

“They will,” Jeone said grimly, and with one sudden fluid motion she yanked the harpoon from its loop on Amllle’s back and flung herself across the room at the nearest of the birds.

This seemed to be the last thing it had expected; startled, the bird hopped back a step, half-spreading its wings for

balance, and Jeone ducked under them, the rancid-smelling pinions brushing her face, and hauled herself one-handed up onto the bird's back. Her fingers dug into loose skin at the back of its neck, while with the other hand she held the harpoon steady, its point against the bird's spine. "Nine of you. Do you want to lose one? Talk!"

From across the circle another of the birds moved, very fast. Amlle shrieked and dropped to the floor, arms shielding her head. The bird stooped above her, one claw poised delicately around her skull.

"Is it to be hostages?" a voice said out of the air. Jeone looked around warily but couldn't spot its source. "Shall we make a trade?"

"What for?" Jeone asked, with an indifference she didn't feel. "I met her yesterday. For all I know, she isn't even a person. Dragon's blood, she's probably worth more to you than me, as part of your experiments. Do what you want with her."

"Jeone!" Amlle wailed.

The bodiless voice seemed unperturbed. "Then let us deal otherwise. What is your desire or need?"

"What I *need*—" Jeone pressed slightly harder with the harpoon's head for emphasis; the bird twitched— "is for you to explain why you're doing what you're doing, and, and—to stop," she finished lamely. The absurdity of her demand struck

her all at once. How could she possibly enforce any agreement? Stay here with her hostage forever? Already she was light-headed with fatigue, running on shreds of anger and battle-excitement that were fast evaporating.

But the bird negotiator seemed willing enough to talk. *Or stall?* Jeone wondered, but the thought was fleeting. “Our purpose here is simple. We seek children. Like you we are travelling from another place. We stop here to nest, then move on.”

“Children to *eat?*” Jeone said, aghast.

“Mistakes are eaten. Successes are nurtured and bred. Each generation is designed closer to the ideal, in small increments, until the children are us, and we go on.” A brief pause. “Or until we fail. The experiment may not succeed. Some of us do not think it will. Some of us never believed it would.” Another pause. “But it is likely to.” Jeone realized that though the voice had not changed, more than one of the birds must be using whatever mechanism produced the sound from the air. The words had the feel of a long-argued question.

“How many generations?” Amlle asked from the floor, her voice shaking. “How long until we’re—like you?”

“Perhaps twenty-four generations. Not more than thirty-six. You are a malleable people.”

Jeone tried to imagine it and recoiled. “And all that time prisoners in their village, watching their babies die, or be born strangers—that’s monstrous.”

“You use that word easily,” the voice chided. “Are all things that differ from you so terrible? We are very old, and very wise, and have seen much, much more than you can imagine. We have survived the death of *worlds*, Jeone Serrica. Do not think you can judge *us*.”

“I can,” Jeone insisted. “Cruelty is cruelty.”

“Then act, if you think yourself so wise,” the voice said mockingly. “Name yourself executioner as well as judge, and kill, and die.” Then, with barely a pause, “Come, be not hasty. We will free you to continue your journey, leave you elsewhere on the worldwall so that none of us may threaten each other again.” Again, it was clearly more than one of the birds speaking. There was dissension among them. That was good. That had to be good.

She guessed, though she knew it was a very human guess, that her hostage was the one who suggested going their separate ways. As for the one that taunted her—she couldn’t read anything in their expressions, but she thought it might be the one that stood over Amle. Addressing that one, she said, more calmly than she felt, “I don’t want to kill you. I don’t hate

you, not really. And I've seen more strangeness than you might think. But what you're doing is wrong."

"Your kind breed animals for their meat and wool," the voice said. A new one; Jeone was starting to be able to distinguish them by their manner, though she had no guess which one this might be. "We are as far above humans as you are above turkeys and goats. You cannot judge us. You dare not judge us. We are as gods to you. Look upon the world, Jeone Serrica, look upon it as *we* see it, and understand how small you are."

One wall of the room rippled like mist and grew suddenly transparent, and she was looking out over infinity.

The worldwall spread boundless in all directions, fading into clouds at the limits of her vision. It was a glorious patchwork of green and black and grey and brown, of forests and chasms and every imaginable variety of banded stone, stitched with the silver threads of falling rivers. Details seemed to leap forward as she focused on them: here a vast city hewn in steps from the rock, terraces that must be centuries old all carved with calligraphy three times a person's height; there a herd of lizards forty thousand strong moving across the sheer cliff face in their inexorable migration; there again the wreck of some massive wooden structure tumbling with terrible slowness through the air, bits of it afire and trailing smoke, tiny

figures leaping from the conflagration into the unknown depths

—

In the moment of her distraction, the birds struck. The one she held reared up suddenly, its wings snapping out as it tried to buck her off, and the two nearest leapt in simultaneously from either side. Jeone threw herself flat to the bird's back as talons swiped past her head, and she drove the harpoon down with all her strength, feeling as she did so the terrible inevitability of the moment. The bird convulsed, squalling its agony. She was killing millennia of memory, killing something perhaps unique in the world. The head of the harpoon grated against bone. Jeone tried to pull it loose, but the barbs of the hunting weapon held it fast. The bird twisted its head around, staring at her in pain and disbelief. In its dying golden gaze, Jeone could see the vanishment of ancient wisdom, the burning of libraries, knowledge lost forever.

The other birds' talons swept round again and Jeone dodged, abandoning the harpoon and jumping down to the floor, taking momentary cover under the dying one's wing and letting one of her darts drop into her hand. No guarantee the poison even worked on such as these, but this had always been a long shot, a mere gesture of defiance. They hadn't expected fighting, that was clear; generations of the submission of Shasten Dhu had made them unwary. That was her chance, but

it was a small one, and she still had no real hope she would escape.

If this is my death, Jeone thought, let me make it a good one. Dragons of my childhood, attend me now.

She leapt out of her shelter, and instead of going for the nearest of the birds, as they might have expected, she charged straight across the open centre of the room to fling herself shouting at the one that stooped over Amllle. Its head was nearly in reach, and she flung the dart overhand into its eye, knowing as it left her hand that her aim was true. Time seemed to pause. All the birds were screaming now and she stood poised in the middle of the open space, another dart held ready, daring them to approach her.

“I’ve seen this before!” Jeone shouted, waving her free arm at the vista beyond the walls. “I fell from my home, somewhere up there, farther than even *you* can see. I fell for days. I saw cities flash past me, entire nations, empires human and unhuman. I saw waterfalls a thousand fathoms high, chasms a mile deep, jungles like green fire and skeletons buried in stone. I know exactly how small I am in the great expanse of the world.” She jabbed at the air with the dart. The birds flinched back as one. The one she’d stabbed in the eye was staggering in aimless twitching circles. “And I *still* matter. Everyone does.

Every person is tiny and brief and glorious, and I will not, I will *not* let you disfigure any more lives.”

“We will let you go,” the voice pleaded. It could have been any one of them. Then they were all speaking over each other. “Do not kill us.” “How can you even think of killing us? None of the others have ever thought of such a thing.” “We knew they would turn on us sooner or later! We told you!” “We are the last of our kind. We must not die.”

“Why not?” Jeone demanded. “Why are your lives worth more than theirs? You’ve lived so long and what has any of it been for? You haven’t learned wisdom, or compassion, or—or anything.” She was swaying slightly on her feet now, but her hands were steady. “You’re not gods. You’re just people, and nasty, spiteful ones at that.”

“We will leave this world,” the voice offered. “We will go elsewhere. You will not hear of us again.” “No! We will destroy you, and begin again here.” “And how many more of us will die before the children are complete? No, we must leave now.” “We will leave.” “Here, we give you lives. We do not want them. We do not want this place.”

The walls shimmered again, a nauseating ripple, and the dim shadows Jeone had glimpsed earlier grew solid, became people—became men, naked, lips and fingers blue with cold, who slumped to the ground like broken puppets.

“Take them,” the voice insisted: one speaker only, now, having apparently compelled agreement. “The men of Shasten Dhu, preserved here these decades for our work. They are not harmed, see, they are wholly human. The traits we have given the women will fade and vanish in the next few generations without our continued aid. All will be for them as it was. See, we give you all you ask and more. Only go!”

Jeone nodded slowly, still not relaxing her wariness. “And you’ll never come back?”

“Our—way of travel does not allow it,” said the voice. “In this, too, we are alike, Jeone Serrica.”

The men were beginning to stir now, moving cold-stiffened limbs, touching each other’s faces, exclaiming with surprise. The view of the worldwall dissolved again, and the space now showed a wide white platform unfolding into the sky. “The glider will take you back to your village,” said the voice. “It will listen to young Amle, and go, and return to us.”

Or drop us into the sky, Jeone thought. She had killed two of them, and might well expect betrayal. But somehow she thought they were dealing honestly. Whatever their internecine conflicts, there was clearly at least one faction—possibly even a majority—that wanted nothing more than to be shut of the entire situation. Killing all of them would do that, certainly, but

so would simply letting them go; it wasn't as though the people of Shasten Dhu could pursue Shasten Tharva, after all.

And even if it *was* a trap, what choice did she have? There was no other way back to the worldwall, beyond what was being offered now. And Jeone wanted very much to settle this, before the battle-rush subsided and she fell asleep on her feet.

An act of faith, then. She bent down and touched Amllle's shoulder. "Stand up. Walk." Then, louder, "Men of Shasten Dhu! Come with me, quickly."

Confused but obedient, the men clustered around her. The bird with the harpoon in its neck had dropped full-length on the floor, unmoving, almost certainly dead. *I do not want to see if they eat it*, Jeone decided. She hurriedly ushered her little flock forward, out onto the platform that opened into the sky.

Amllle sat, laying her hands flat on the stone surface. "Go home," she told it tentatively.

The platform, the glider, lifted slowly, separating from the open room. Jeone, looking back as they moved away, saw white towers, a confusion of alien geometries, and then descending clouds hid the strange fortress of Shasten Tharva as they accelerated away.

Amlle was gazing enraptured at her hands. “I can feel how this works,” she said wonderingly. “I almost understand it. Jeone, I think I could take *you* home.”

For a fleeting heartbeat, Jeone was tempted. To see Tene Apaioe again, to walk among the crystal groves and hear the day chorus singing to the dragons, to find out if her father and her sisters still lived—

“No,” she said. “They said the glider would return to them; we may only get one trip. And your village needs its people back.”

“To make babies,” Amlle said. “Jeone, I still don’t want to.”

“Then leave, if you want to,” Jeone said with a shrug. “You’ll be able to, now. You’ve seen what’s out there, all the strangeness and the wonder. Go, see them up close for yourself, and then come home again, and bring stories back. Your people will welcome news, after being isolated so long.” She smiled. “Mind you, I expect things in Shasten Dhu will be fairly strange for awhile, too.”

“You could stay,” one of the men offered, the first words any of them had spoken to her. “I don’t know what our village is like, now, but you’ll have a home there as long as you want.”

Jeone shook her head. “No. It’s a kind thought, but no.”

“Because we aren’t human?” Amlle asked, with just a hint of bitterness.

Jeone, despite herself, laughed aloud. “You’re human, Amle. I’ve seen far stranger folk than you and still known them to be people. Even those—” She waved vaguely at the cloud-shrouded distance into which the floating fortress had disappeared. “They were able to talk to us, treat with us—dragons’ teeth, they were able to mingle their blood with yours, however poorly. Maybe that makes *them* human. I don’t know. But I do know I have to keep travelling. What I seek isn’t in Shasten Dhu. Maybe it isn’t anywhere. But someday I’ll find it, maybe, if I keep going.”

Amle nodded soberly. “Well, then,” she said. “Maybe I’ll see you again someday, somewhere down there.”

“Maybe,” Jeone said, and thought, *If neither of us falls*; but she didn’t say it. She was so very tired, and the clear air made her giddy. She looked at the sky, the glider, the rescued men, and even her own private, impossible quest seemed achievable in that moment.

Fall? she thought. *Dragons’ blood. I’ll fly.*

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THE LAST DINOSAUR RIDER OF BENESSA COUNTY

by Jeremy Sim

Now it just so happens that the day Black Jonas rides into town, there's a bit of a blaze going. So he's bobbing down Main Canal on the back of his plesaur Essie, and he tightens the reins at the smell of smoke and the clangor of the fire brigade streaming up the canal behind him on their overcrowded skiffs. Black Jonas pulls to the side and takes it all in: the bone-white sunshine, the lapping of water at his boots, the faces of a town he hasn't seen in twenty years. He scents a certain something about the air that day, hard and lonely, a feeling like a lifeless reef.

He brings Essie up to one of the old abandoned mooring posts by Benessa Central Station. He's back here for one reason only: to find a way back to the continent. Back to his home. But to do that, he needs to find a man named Doone. And he hasn't seen Doone in a long, long time.

It's a quiet time of day, not counting the distant clatter of fire bells. Black Jonas secures Essie to a ring occupied by a massive, rusted droop-chain and walks down the promenade,

noting the old storefronts as he sees them. Brackysaur bays still line the boardwalk where land meets canal, big ol' rectangular cutouts in the once-white stone, used for loading and unloading back in the days of the dinosaur riders.

He crosses a step bridge, heading for the nearest saloon. It's a new establishment—Black Jonas seems to recall a line of somber warehouses here—but he figures he's got to start somewhere. And some things about a man like Doone never change, twenty years or no.

The saloon's about half-occupied when he enters. Some of the crowd perks up to ogle at the color of his skin, the newness that seems to radiate off him in an old town like this. But they don't know that he's the old one here; it's the town around him that's changed. He takes a seat at the back and orders his beer three-quarters dilute.

“Thank you kindly,” he says quietly when the maid brings it.

She frowns and takes another canvass at him: his brown skin, his eyes, his conspicuously empty holster. “You new in town?” Her tone is not cordial.

“No,” he says. “Not really.”

“Then you been gone a long time. Welcome home.”

“Long time, yes,” mutters Black Jonas, contemplating his beer. “Home, no.”

* * *

There's a way about these things, Black Jonas has learned. You don't just go waltzing in to the biggest saloon in town and start dropping questions. Not if you've just come in to town riding on the back of a living memory. Not if your skin's a certain shade. Then it's best you sit in the corner, sip your watery beer, and observe.

But there's a lot to be seen when you've got an eye for the right things, and Black Jonas takes note as the patterns of civilization come into focus around him. There's a quiet game of canal cribbage being played at the big round table in the far corner. One of the men is clearly winning, his chips stacking up in front of him like an ivory dessert. But it's all happening with a kind of muted efficiency: there's no hollering, no banging on the table, no cheating. Things have sure changed around these parts. And after about half an hour, a suave-looking blue-eyed fellow gets up from the bar, moseys over to the card table, and measures off a portion of the winner's chips, all businesslike. Then play resumes.

What happened here? wonders Black Jonas. But he's seen what he needs to see. So he drains the rest of his beer, sets down his mug, and stands. He makes a beeline for the blue-eyed fellow, pulls up a stool next to him at the bar.

“Well hello,” says the blue-eyed fellow, with exaggerated warmth. “I don’t believe I know you.”

“I’m looking for Sam Doone,” says Black Jonas directly.

“Sam Doone,” says the blue-eyed fellow, pronouncing each syllable. “Can’t say I know the name.”

Black Jonas studies the boy’s face. His eyes say he’s telling the truth. Doone, for all his scheming back then, isn’t in power here anymore. “Apologies,” says Black Jonas, mock-tipping his hat. “Case of mistaken identity.”

A blonde youngster at a nearby table speaks up. “Why, you’re Gentle Jonas, ain’t you?”

Black Jonas feels a spark of surprise. It’s been a while—do people still know him here? And by his old nickname, too.

“Nah,” he says, his throat beer-hoarse. “I ain’t him.”

The youngster wags a finger. “I swear, you look an awful lot like a body named Gentle Jonas. Notorious feller, back in the old days. Real ace with a gun. Skipped town, wanted for sixteen counts of murder. Or so they say.” He says the last part a little nervous-like, as if he’s just realized who he might be talking to.

The blue-eyed fellow cuts back in. “What brings you to Benessa County, stranger?”

“Nothing,” says Black Jonas. “Just passing through.” Which he is.

* * *

Later, Black Jonas tends to Essie. He takes chunks of pemmican from the chow bag and feeds his gal, the sandpaper of her snout sending tingles up his spine. He used to worry about her biting his arm off, the raw power of her jaws ripping through muscle and snapping bone. But that too was a long time ago. Once you get to know a pleosaur, he likes to say, you'll see they never do anything by accident.

“You think we should stay, Ess?”

Essie stares, her neck snakelike, her eyes dark. The front walk of Benessa Central has been recently widened to make room for the new interpelago rails, and the neighborhood's a lot prettier than when Black Jonas was last in town. But the rosy light of sunset makes it all look false, like an oil painting, and the air is tight with smoke. Things change fast on the frontier.

“Yeah, we still need the money if we want that train ticket home,” he says. “But I'll wager Doone's long gone by now.”

Essie worries at one of her saddle-straps.

“Nah, I don't know where we'd go next.” Black Jonas sits over the lip of the mooring dock and nudges Essie's snout away from her straps. “Leave that alone.” He thinks of why he's here, of the old blood on his hands. He feels the tiredness in his bones, the sensation of being at wandering's end and still not

having found a resting place. About the home he hasn't seen for decades, back on the mainland.

“Okay, Ess, you win. This place ain't safe for the either of us, but seeing as we're already here... let's see if we can't track this bastard down.”

Essie stretches for another chunk of pemmican, grinning.

* * *

He gets directions and rides across town, guiding Essie through brown waterways and deserted canals. They pass under the shadow of a hulking warehouse, once used for zinc and sulphur processing. The windows are boarded up, but the air still smells faintly of boiled egg. The corrals, where guanadons and nithymimers were once bred, are empty too.

Essie's flippers make smooth ripples in the dark. Homes and businesses lean over them like silent watchers. Back twenty years ago they were built quick and shoddy, and no one ever took the time to correct it. Their tar smell is lifeless and familiar.

He arrives at the sheriff's office just as the shadows are lengthening and the wind is picking up. He ducks inside to the tinkle of a tiny brass bell.

“I'm looking for a man named Sam Doone,” he says to the sheriff, a round molly who seems to spend a lot of time looking at her fingernails.

The sheriff leans back in her chair, gives Black Jonas that same up-and-down look everyone's been giving him all day. "There's a name I haven't heard in a while. How long did you say you've been gone from Benessa County?"

"Twenty years."

"Well." She sniffs. "Old Doone isn't quite the public figure he was before, but he's still around, alright. What do you want with him?"

Something about the sheriff's question puts Black Jonas on guard. She's giving the same look as that youngster in the saloon, before he asked about Gentle Jonas. "I'm not really at liberty to say."

The sheriff looks up from her nails. She glances out the window at Essie's sinuous form. "You're a pleeboy, aren't you?"

"I was."

"Well, I'm gonna be blunt. For your sake, I hope you ain't thinking of stirring up trouble. Men of your profession don't have the best reputation round here, you understand."

"I understand, ma'am."

She chuckles. "Ain't you polite." She glances at the clock behind her. "Come back tomorrow at eight and I'll bring you to him."

* * *

Black Jonas rents a room at the lodge across the promenade. He has no idea if the sheriff is telling the truth—for all he knows, she's got the wrong Doone, or Doone's dead—but a wet spark of hope fizzles to life inside him anyway.

The lodge's proprietress is a large-waisted widow who serves a stew of beans and seaweed for supper. Black Jonas is the only guest tonight, so she eats with him at the table. "Eat up, honey," she says, slopping more on his plate, and smiles at him like he's her son come back from Sunday school.

She calls herself Miss Carla, and later in the evening they get to talking about the past. She says she opened the lodge on an April whim, many years ago and three months after her husband died. "You're a man, so you don't know that when a woman's husband dies round here, she becomes nothing," says Miss Carla. "You've just gotta find a little hole to live in and hope to stay there for a while."

Black Jonas nods. He knows, without her saying, that her husband died during the time of the dinosaur riders.

And she knows he knows. "Don't worry for it," she says quietly. "Times were hard for everyone."

Black Jonas smiles a little, but the hard ball of guilt stays put in his belly. "So times are better now?"

Miss Carla laughs out loud. "Oh, I wouldn't go that far." She winks and changes the topic. "Say, what's a fellow like you

in town for anyway? If I had a pleesaur of my own, I'd spend every waking minute out there on the ocean. Don't think I'd ever come back."

"Just come back to see an old friend. Sheriff's bringing me to him tomorrow."

"Sheriff, eh?" There's a nervous glint in Miss Carla's eyes, but it's a brief one. It's only later, as Black Jonas takes his hat and excuses himself, that Miss Carla speaks up. "Now it ain't none of my business, but a word of kindness to you. Be careful who you trust in this town."

Black Jonas nods. "Thank you kindly."

That night, Black Jonas cleans his old six-shooter. He digs it out from the bottom of a saddlebag, where it's gone untouched for the better part of a year. The gun is cold against the bag's sun-warm leather, and seeing it again brings a tight, squeezing sensation to Black Jonas's heart.

He flips it onto the bed, then roots around for his cartridge pouch. The gun is in bad shape. Tarnish cups the firing cylinder and the underside of the barrel. But the cylinder still spins, and the grip still fits his hand just so.

He cleans and oils the thing, his thoughts far away. He dreams of finally getting the money from Doone, of buying that ticket. He thinks of getting on that train, seeing the mainland again. Seeing his family. But when he switches off the light,

with the pistol fresh and loaded on the nightstand, his heart feels cold as canalwater.

* * *

“Is it eight already?” says the sheriff when Black Jonas shows up the next morning, cleanly shaven. The clock behind her reads seven fifty-nine. “Well, I’ll be damned.” She jumps to her feet, grabs a ring of keys from a nail on the wall. “Let’s get it over with then.”

She leads Black Jonas out the door, scrunching her face in the sunlight and brisk wind. She dips into a narrow alley, then down another. Black Jonas follows in silence.

They emerge on the far side of the district, next to an imposing building with a sturdy front. The sheriff finagles up a large, bronze key and unlocks the door.

“This is a prison,” says Black Jonas.

“That’s right,” says the sheriff. “Sam Doone’s hearth and home for seven years now.” She scuffs her boots on the doormat and enters.

Black Jonas follows, pushing down the heavy feeling in his chest. She leads him down a corridor and a flight of stairs.

Doone is sleeping when they find him, lying in a lump of dirty blankets on a cot at the far corner of the basement floor. Most of the other cells are empty. The air has an unhealthy, saturated smell to it.

“Morning, Sam,” calls the sheriff, with neighborly cheer.

“Morning,” mumbles the lump of blankets.

“Come over here. You got a guest.”

Sam Doone rubs his eyes and sits up.

The first thing Black Jonas thinks is that Doone doesn't look too bad for a prisoner of seven years. He's still slightly chubby around the wrists, still has something of the old charm in his movements. But he smells of old cork sandals, and his eyes are shallow and seem focused on some invisible thing four feet in front of him.

“Hello,” says Doone. “Do I know you?”

“Doone,” says Black Jonas lightly. “It's me.”

Doone sucks in a breath. “Well,” he says, foundering. “Well.” He reaches out a shaking hand, and Black Jonas can see that Doone's eyes are teary. Doone sticks his arm out through the bars and his fingers find Black Jonas's. They hold each other, their hands a quivering knot, until slowly, awkwardly, the years melt away and their left hands add their warmth to the handshake as well.

* * *

“I can't believe you had the guts to come back,” says Doone, after the sheriff leaves them. (“Thirty minutes, no exceptions,” she said, raising her thick eyebrows for emphasis.)

“Doone,” says Black Jonas. “I gotta say it first. I came back for my payment.”

Doone coughs. He withdraws his hands and folds them against himself, behind the bars. “Well, you took an awful risk coming back for it. Don’t you know who runs this town now? Jimmy DeRoi, that’s who.”

Black Jonas didn’t know that.

Doone whistles. “If Jimmy DeRoi knows you’re back…”

“I’m not *back*, Doone,” says Black Jonas. “I’m here for my money, and then I’m leaving.”

But even as he says it, he realizes the futility of his words. Doone was once top dog in Benessa, a man who tricked and bullied his way to the very top of the day’s tricksters and bullies. But he’s not that man anymore.

“You don’t have the money, do you?” Black Jonas says softly.

“Now,” says Doone, “don’t go jumping to conclusions.”

“Damnit, Doone!” He feels the old anger flaring up. “You hired me to do a job. I done it. I chalked up everyone you asked. I burned my bridges. Now I’ve lain low for twenty years and I haven’t heard a peep or seen a cent out of you. Don’t tell me I done it for nothing.”

Doone gets real quiet.

“Doone!”

Doone spreads his hands, as if it that answers the question. He turns, and slowly sits back down on his filthy cot. “You still remember how it was, back then? Just you and me. We made a great pair, didn’t we?”

“Stop dodging the question, Doone.”

“Oh, come on. They still talk about us, you know that? We were legends. Sam Doone and Gentle Jo—”

Black Jonas slams his hand into the bars, and the screech of metal on stone echoes up and down the hall. For a full thirty seconds, the jail is absolutely silent.

When Doone finally speaks, his tone is adolescent. “Come on, buddy,” he says. “The game ended.”

“What?”

“You know. Scraping gold from the ocean vents. Manganese and sulphur. Scrambling to get a piece of the pie, getting rich and powerful alongside everyone else.”

“It wasn’t a game, Doone.”

“I remember walking out along the harbor one day and seeing pleesaur and ickysaur and what-have-you-saur and their riders, just swimming free in that pristine ocean—I felt this fantastic sense of *possibility*. Of horizons opening up. But it ended. There ain’t nothing left on those vents anymore, and when the mining dried up, you dinosaur riders weren’t needed

no more either.” He looks up at Black Jonas, and again Black Jonas notices the shallow, milky expression in his eyes.

“You make me sick,” says Black Jonas.

Doone just shrugs and gives Black Jonas a kind of watery, encouraging look. He’s silent for a moment, and then, as if he knows he’s pushing his luck, says: “You know, this town’s still got life in it yet. They’re building that new interpelago rail out to Durango, right through here. You seen Central Station yet? Steam trains running on a floating railway, can you believe it?”

Black Jonas shakes his head, eyes on the ground, his fingers still tight around the bars.

In the dim light, a look of understanding finally flits over Doone’s face. “Say,” he says, and for the first time in a long time he sounds truly hesitant. “You— you weren’t planning to buy a ticket on that train, were you? Where? All the way back to the continent?”

Black Jonas nods.

“For good?”

He nods again.

“You still got people back there, then? Family?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

At that moment a realization steals over Black Jonas, like a scratchy wool blanket. It’s all over now, for real. Doone was his last shot, and Doone’s in prison. He hasn’t got the money.

There's nothing more for Black Jonas here, nothing to show for the long days of travel, the nights spent sleeping on Essie's back out there on the open ocean. Without Doone's money, there's no ticket. Without a ticket, there's no going back.

"Freedom and glory," says Doone.

"What?"

"Freedom and glory. That's what the old songs promised us, remember? The golden frontier, the open sea."

"What about them?"

"Even considering how things turned out, the ride was worth something, wasn't it?" He gets comfortable on his cot, then looks up at Black Jonas, through bars, and smiles.

It's the final straw for Black Jonas. He pushes away from the bars. "I gotta go. Enjoy your life, Samuel Doone," he says, turning his back.

"You take care, Gentle Jonas."

When Black Jonas rounds the corner, he almost collides with the sheriff.

"Everything alright?" she asks.

"Fine. Good day, sheriff," says Black Jonas as he ascends the steps to ground level.

But she's got a funny look on her face, and Black Jonas can't help but worry a little.

* * *

“Listen,” says Black Jonas to Miss Carla, over supper. It’s stewed octopus, over a bed of barley. “I thank you kindly for your hospitality, but I’m afraid I’ll be leaving town first thing tomorrow.” He eyes the moon outside, looming two fingers above the horizon.

“Oh?” says Miss Carla.

“And I’ll thank you more if you do me a favor and tell anyone who might ask about me that I’m already gone.”

Miss Carla chews and swallows before answering. “And who might be doing the asking?”

Faces flash through Black Jonas’s mind: the blue-eyed fellow from the saloon. The sheriff. Jimmy DeRoi.

“No one in particular,” he says. “I know it sounds queer. But will you do it for me?”

Miss Carla leans over, smiles knowingly, and gives Black Jonas a friendly push on the shoulder. “You know, pleebos get a bad rap round here, but I can tell you’re one of the good ones. Heart in the right place and everything. So don’t you worry about it.”

There’s an awkward silence as Black Jonas polishes off another bite, then inspects his spoon, front and back. He looks up, finally, and smiles. “I’ll be out of your hair first thing tomorrow,” he says.

“Anyone wants to get rowdy around here, they’ve got to get through me,” Miss Carla says, slapping her hip. “And there’s a lot of me to get through.”

Black Jonas spends the evening troubled. He knows he has to leave tomorrow, and the earlier the better, but he’s got nowhere to go now, no destination, no home. Truth is, Miss Carla’s wrong. He ain’t one of the good ones. Even after washing his face he feels grimy, the same way he felt touching the cold bars of Doone’s prison cell. His pistol still sits on the nightstand, loaded. In a way, the grime’s never left him.

* * *

Black Jonas falls asleep late, but he doesn’t rest for long. He awakens to a banging on the door.

He shakes the sleep from his head, takes six-shooter in hand, and moves to the door to unlatch it.

“Yes?” says Black Jonas, the pistol behind him.

He finds Miss Carla in a nightgown and slippers.

“Oh, honey, you’ve got to get up. The house is on fire.”

Black Jonas’s heart dives. “I see,” he says. He grabs his saddlebag and follows Miss Carla’s swift waddle down the hall. She grabs her own bag from a bedroom as they pass. When they enter the sitting room, Black Jonas feels a wash of heat from above. Smoke is billowing from a second-story landing.

They duck out the front door, into the chill of night. “FIRE!” calls Miss Carla into the darkness, pacing quickly toward a nearby house. She raps on the window. “FIRE! SOUND THE BELLS!”

Black Jonas scans the promenade; his heart stops for a moment when he sees Essie’s empty mooring post. But then he remembers that he gave her free rein for the night; she’ll be lurking somewhere nearby, hunting for food. He takes large steps toward the canal.

“Nobody’s answering,” says Miss Carla, toddling back toward him. “Why is nobody answering?” The night air is cold, and Black Jonas can see that Miss Carla is trembling.

He stops her with a hand on the shoulder. “Miss Carla,” says Black Jonas, soft as he can. “I got to leave. Right now. I do hope you understand.”

“But why—” Miss Carla begins. But she figures it out quick enough. Her eyes flick up at Black Jonas, and for a split second he catches a real sad look on her face; a look of genuine regret. “My,” she mutters, staring at the sky. “My.”

Black Jonas glances around. “Listen to me,” he says, speaking quickly. “You ain’t done anything wrong, you understand? You ain’t involved. I’m going to take Essie and leave now, and when I’m gone, you tell them anything they

want, hear? Tell ‘em I’m headed for Sweetwater County. It’s the truth. You got that?”

Miss Carla nods.

Black Jonas turns and crosses the wide promenade, his steps heavy. The air smells of smoke. The old ball of guilt festers in his belly: he knows it’s best for everyone if he disappears quickly as possible. Maybe someday he’ll come back and make it up to Miss Carla. But he knows it isn’t likely. He’s got too many *somedays* lined up inside him already.

He stops at the water’s edge and brings out Essie’s calling whistle. He lifts the reed to his lips. But before he blows it, someone wolf-whistles behind him.

“Just stop yerself right there, Gentle Jonas.”

* * *

Black Jonas spins, every hair on his neck standing up. The first thing he sees is Miss Carla, her arms pinioned by two sleazy-looking men. The second thing he sees is Jimmy DeRoi, strolling up behind them with his hand on his pistol butt.

“Take one more step toward that water, and I’ll shoot the lady.”

Black Jonas hesitates for an instant. He lifts his palms slowly into the air. *Why her?!* he wants to scream.

“Drop the reed,” says Jimmy.

He does.

Jimmy DeRoi flicks the butt of his cigarette away. He smiles like a cat at dinner. “See, I knew threatening a lady would work on you. You’re a gentleman. Always have been.” He takes leisurely steps to cross the distance between them, then gets his face right up to Black Jonas’s. His voice is low, confidential. “Course, that is why Tom and Lottie trusted you, when all you were was a *SNAKE!*”

Black Jonas flinches from the spittle that accompanies the last word. He sees, over Jimmy’s shoulder, that Miss Carla has gone pure white.

Black Jonas swallows. He speaks calmly, evenly, with his eyes locked on Miss Carla. “I’m sorry, Jimmy. I really am.” He swallows. “I’m sorry for what I did to Tom and Lottie. I don’t got no better excuse. And Lord knows every night for the past twenty years I’ve hated myself for it.” He motions at Miss Carla with his chin. “Let the woman go.”

Jimmy DeRoi laughs. “Sentimental shit like that,” he says, shaking his head. He draws his pistol, plays with the hammer, levels it at Black Jonas. “Not going to work on me, Gentle Jonas. You hear?”

Black Jonas swallows again. Jimmy moves back close, and Black Jonas smells the cigarette-sour on his breath.

Jimmy frees Black Jonas’s pistol from its holster, then backs up a couple steps, holding both guns. “Now a gentleman

like you doesn't want to die yelling and screaming, does he? So I'll give you better than you deserve. One clean shot. A clean fall in the water. And then we're even for Tom and Lottie. But you make one false move, and I'll have you beaten till you beg for death. You hear me?"

Black Jonas shuts his eyes. His heart is pumping in his ears. The night wind is cold against his back, and he knows he should be planning something: an escape route, an attack path, a way to free Miss Carla, something. But all he feels is an indescribable weariness. Even after all these years, he's still hurting people. An innocent woman's home is burning up because of him. Maybe it would be better for everyone if he just went quietly, like Jimmy said.

And would it be so much of a loss, really? He left home so long ago. He had a brother, and a little niece. Suzie. But no, she was too young, she wouldn't remember him.

It might even be nice to die in the ocean, Black Jonas thinks. After all, it was where he wasted his life.

When he opens his eyes again, he's looking down the barrel of Jimmy DeRoi's gun.

"Made your peace?" says Jimmy. "Good." He cocks the hammer.

“NO!” screams Miss Carla, struggling. “You *damn, dirty—*” Her arm wrenches free. Her elbow catches one of the men straight on the chin, and he lets out a pained “uuugh.”

Something happens inside Black Jonas. It’s as if the sight of Miss Carla fighting snaps something back to life in his chest, some prehistoric part that still wants to fight, to struggle, to live.

Jimmy’s eyes flicker sideways, just for an instant. And Black Jonas’s arm whips up, slamming into Jimmy’s elbow like a sledgehammer. He yanks Jimmy’s arm down and hits him square in the face, moving in too close for Jimmy to fire—he squeezes Jimmy’s gun hand with iron fingers, tightening his grip until Jimmy squeals and releases. Then Black Jonas spins and, with his own pistol in his other hand—*BLAM. BLAM.*—the two goons fall, bullets in their foreheads.

Jimmy shrieks and pushes off of Black Jonas. He flings his hands up immediately, backing up as quick as he can. “H-hey,” Jimmy says. “Wait. Wait.”

“Don’t you move,” says Black Jonas. “Stop, Jimmy.” But Jimmy keeps on backpedalling.

And suddenly an icy chill goes through Black Jonas. Jimmy is backing up straight toward the canal. And there’s a shadow behind him.

It happens too quickly for Black Jonas to react. A giant, snakelike head whips out of the canal and chomps down on Jimmy's left thigh. Jimmy screams. In one fluid, powerful movement, Essie yanks him into the water.

"Stop! Stop! Essie!" yells Black Jonas, dropping the guns and scrabbling on the ground for her whistle.

But by the time he finds it, it's too late. The screaming has stopped. The thrashing is over, and a strange quiet fills the air. Black Jonas kneels on the promenade, stunned.

His hands are shaking, and his fist is throbbing where he punched Jimmy. He's murdered again. Twice. And Essie ripped up Jimmy DeRoi.

And she did it to protect him.

* * *

The only sound then is the snap of burning wood. The smell of char and burning fabrics is everywhere, and a wall of heat scalds the back of his neck.

"Pleeboy," says Miss Carla, coming up behind him. "Pleeboy. When they find Jimmy dead like this, they'll kill us."

Black Jonas doesn't know what to say. Essie emerges from the water, and Miss Carla shrieks. But Essie just bobs there, grinning.

Black Jonas goes to Essie, touches the top of her sandpapery head. "You shouldn't've done that," he whispers.

“He was my problem, not yours. I was supposed to take care of it.”

Essie snorts.

“I know, I know.” Black Jonas touches his head to hers, his still-wet tears mixing with her seawater. “I shouldn’t’ve. I shouldn’t’ve thought about leaving you.”

Miss Carla creeps up cautiously. “It didn’t—it didn’t *eat* him, did it?”

“No,” says Black Jonas. “Essie wouldn’t do that. Would you, Essie?”

Essie exhales forcefully.

Black Jonas studies Miss Carla. There’s blood flecks on her face and fear in her eyes. Behind her, sparks shoot into the night sky from the conflagration consuming her home. The surrounding houses observe in silence—nobody has rung the fire bell still.

Black Jonas flattens his palm against Essie’s neck, urges her closer to shore. He grabs her reins.

“Have you ever ridden a pleosaur before?” he says to Miss Carla.

She stares at him. “You’ve *got* to be funning me.”

Black Jonas steps onto Essie’s back and plants himself in the saddle. “If they find us, they’ll kill us. Right?”

“I’m not getting on that thing! It just ate a man!”

“I know,” says Black Jonas quietly. His eyes flick over her shoulder. “But looks like you need a new hole to hide in.”

Miss Carla hesitates only a few seconds. She glances back at her lodge, watches the flames leap and crackle. She clutches her bag, and her mouth forms a determined line. Then, reaching out to Black Jonas for balance, she totters onto Essie’s wide back, swinging her arms. She manages to stay upright by grabbing a saddlehorn on Essie’s rump.

Black Jonas gives the reins a snap, and Essie surges away from shore.

A long ‘v’ trails behind them in the water, highlighted by the orange light of flame. It’s only when they reach the outskirts of town, at Main Canal, that the fire bells clatter to life. Black Jonas and Miss Carla see the pump-skiffs of the fire brigade, clanging away at full volume, race down the waterway ahead of them.

Black Jonas pulls to the side of the canal and watches them pass.

* * *

“Where do you want me to bring you?” says Black Jonas, a while later. They are out on the open sea, Essie chugging along like a rough black island, and Black Jonas hasn’t yet decided what to do. When they find a good town for Miss Carla, he reckons, he’ll stay a while and help her set up a new life.

Somewhere safe. And after that? Maybe he'll move on to the next town. Somewhere far from Benessa, where maybe he can take another small job. Another tiny step toward home.

"Doesn't matter. Wherever." Miss Carla has found a bit of space to stretch out, facing backward. She seems comfortable, watching the waves fan out behind them.

"Don't you got someplace to go?" Black Jonas asks.

"Not really."

"No family?"

Miss Carla laughs. "Lost touch with them years ago, when I moved out to Benessa. Wouldn't know where to find them even if I wanted to. I told you, when a woman's husband dies round here, she becomes nothing."

"Say," says Black Jonas. "I've been meaning to ask you. If you been married, aren't you supposed to be *Mizz* Carla? Ain't *miss* for young girls?"

"Oh, honey," she says. "When you get older, you'll see. The names you choose for yourself are the most important of all."

Black Jonas thinks about it. Essie chugs along for a while in silence.

"So what say we head to the next island?" Black Jonas says. "Essie and me can take you that way. If it strikes your fancy, we'll stay awhile and help you get settled. If not, you're

welcome to keep going with us, maybe take a gander at the next. That sound alright to you, Miss?”

“That sounds just fine, pleeboy.”

And there’s something about the sunlight that morning that glints off the waves like liquid silver. It reminds Black Jonas of precious, beaten metals, dredged from the depths of the ocean. It reminds him of the sheen off his six-shooter, of the old promise of freedom and glory.

He gives one more thought to Benessa County, of the abandoned warehouses, the mooring bays, the corrals. Built for a different age. He is glad that part of his life is over. He knows he will never go back.

He turns to Miss Carla. “You know, you don’t have to keep calling me *pleeboy*,” he says, adjusting the brim of his hat.

“Oh?”

“Starting now, you can just call me Jonas.”

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