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[“In the Shade of the Pixie Tree,” by Rodello Santos](#)

[“Crescendo,” by J.S. Veter](#)

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IN THE SHADE OF THE PIXIE TREE

by Rodello Santos

Sunshine

Don't tarry, the wicker witch had ordered Bekka. I'm out of pixies. Last ones died yesternight.

And so, Bekka bounded down the country path, an empty basket dangling from the crook of her arm. The wicker witch's words had been soft mumbles, as if talking pained her, but Bekka doubted the witch could actually feel pain, and in any case that wasn't a question a good apprentice asked. You did as told, and that was that.

Nevertheless, Bekka planned to enjoy her errand; amongst all the chores given her, pixie-picking was the rare delight. The little pixies were cute as babes, cuter even for their size—tiny as hummingbirds and twice as quick. Of course, Bekka would be gathering the unripe ones still on the trees, not those flitting to and fro with the wind.

Halfway to the orchard, a familiar shout brought her short. Over her shoulder, she found Joakem running down the path, and her heart tripped a beat despite herself. The witch would

disapprove of any distraction, especially Joakem. *Boy casts trouble like a second shadow*, the witch once warned her.

With a single swipe, Bekka brushed a mousy brown lock from her eyes and an itchy bead of sweat from her brow.

Joakem's gangly limbs looked scarecrowish, a likeness bolstered by his frayed and baggy clothes. The hand-me-downs were faded, a contrast to his ever-chipper grin. Bekka's own lips were threatening to smile, but she composed herself before he could see.

In age, he was a year older than her fourteen years; in maturity, several years younger. His hair was mussed, like he'd been attacked by cows in want of something to lick. He finger-combed it in a vain attempt to tame the unruly strands. "Where you off to?"

"Someplace boys aren't allowed." She pitched her tone between taunt and rebuff.

"Why's that?"

"Don't you know the story about the wolf who asked too many questions? The woodcutter chopped off his tail and gagged him with it."

Joakem grinned. "That's a big basket. You're gathering for the witch, aren't you? Herbs and worms and dead stuff?"

Nearly all the village youth were terrified of the wicker witch, despite that she was also the midwife who had delivered

them, who'd made the wicker bassinets and cradles that were their first beds. But if Joakem feared the old woman, he never showed it. Bekka was secretly impressed, even if his courage was born of ignorance. *If he ever saw the witch in her true form, I bet he'd be scared yellow.*

"You shouldn't ask questions about the witch," Bekka said. "She doesn't like that. And she'll know because she can hear anything, even a spider hiccup."

He burst out in laughter that quickly resolved into a lopsided smirk. "Well, you don't have to tell me where you're going. Long as you let me tag along. That's okay, right?"

Bekka exaggerated a sigh. Along the path, the springtime sun bathed everything in rich golden warmth. Birdsong shared the air with the scent of hyacinths.

"Come on," he begged. "Let me tag along."

She didn't tell him no.

* * *

The Storm's Darkest Moment

Rain whips down, the stinging drops driven by wailing gusts. Water streams down Bekka's long hair.

Her mouth feels full of burning briars as she starts the spell, the magic words flaying her tongue.

"Retri mowrana..."

In her arms, Joakem lies dead; his sweet face, once rosy with life, now gray and twisted as ginger root. The weight of him makes her sink in the mud. She knows they will share this grave.

The buzz of angry wings approaches from the trees. The drone rumbles even over the wind and rain.

“*Retri mowrana...*” she says again between sobs, pouring all her will and energy into the words as she continues the casting.

She closes tear-drenched eyes, thinks back to a time when a word, a look, a nod could have made a difference.

She has done what she can, and her limbs spasm as strength flees her dying body. She feels the course of the venom, oozing towards her heart. There is a bone-shaking roar, as if she has been swallowed by a waterfall.

Thunder booms, unending, above her and within.

* * *

Clouds in the distance

Joakem scooped up a pebble, aimed right but lobbed left at the last second. “Miriam says the witch came to your folks on the Eve of Wintersoul, asked if she could train you as her familiar.”

Bekka snorted at the absurdity, then clamped a hand over her mouth at the unladylike noise. Joakem didn’t notice. “I’m

an apprentice, not a familiar. And Miriam *Cow-nose* doesn't have enough sense to fill a baby's belly-button. The witch chose me because I'm smart and talented."

"Miriam has smarts, too."

"She wouldn't know smarts if it laid an egg on her face."

They looked at each other and broke out laughing.

"I think she likes me," he said, out of the blue.

Bekka felt her smile slip. "Just proves what I was saying."

For a long while, they said nothing. The green grass ebbed on both sides of the road, like tides. Clumps of purple wildflowers stirred with the breeze, trembling to share forbidden secrets.

Joakem finally let loose a long stream of chatter. He talked about David, the baker's son, who ate more pastries than his father could sell. He mused about why his cat liked her head scratched back to front but not the other way. ("I think her eyes get stretched if you scratch her wrong".) He warned about gremlins that wore the skins of snakes and hid under piles of leaves ("But don't worry, Bekka. I'll protect you".)

"You talk a lot."

"I know."

"Like all those words are hornets inside you, and you keep beating their hive with a stick."

He gave a tiny laugh. “Maybe I talk ‘cause most folk are so quiet. I hate that. Like there’s holes in the air that need filling.”

“Well, you get me dizzy,” she said. “When people talk too much, I can’t say what I think.”

“Is that why you’re so quiet, because you *are* saying what you think?”

Bekka felt her cheeks redden when she finally caught his insult. He laughed in the face of her glare.

Their path wended through a standing of elms, and the woods soon thickened. Clouds gathered in the distance, dark and fat; the wicker witch had warned her it might rain. Fortunately, the pixie orchard lay just a little farther ahead.

“Are you sure you don’t have chores that need doing?” she asked, her annoyance only partly feigned. “Wouldn’t want your dad to give you a whupping and make your backside shine.”

“Chores will keep,” he said, then mused on why flowers smelled good but tasted terrible.

As they passed the next bend, they came upon a dead tree lying across the path. The bark was painted with repeating white symbols: doors and x’s. Bekka was relieved to see them.

“Do you know what those markings mean?” she asked, testing him.

“I’m not a mooncalf, you know. Those are witch-runes. Means common folk shouldn’t pass, but I’m not afraid. Being with you and all.”

“No, no exceptions. You have to go back. Now.” She dropped her basket at her feet and crossed her arms to show she was going no further until he left. Maybe later she would seek him out and endure his rambling, but now she had work to do.

He frowned. “I guess the witch would be pretty cross if you didn’t follow her rules, huh?”

“Obviously.”

“But I bet she’d be even more cross, maybe give *you* a whupping, if you didn’t finish your chores?”

Before she could react, he snatched the basket from the ground and leapt over the first marker and its symbols of warning.

* * *

The Storm Begins

She tries to stand, but pain bursts in her ankle like wildfire. In her frantic flight, she has tripped over the second marker, its red symbols now ablaze. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* To trip on something she had known was there. She curses the relentless rain, obscuring her vision, turning the footing treacherous.

“Joakem, wake up! You big brainless oaf. I can’t drag you anymore.” She struggles just to drag herself.

When she looks at his face, the blank stare and gray skin, she realizes he is beyond listening. A terrible icy ache pierces her heart. She wipes at her face, blinks to find her hand wet with blood—her blood—though the rain washes it away instantly.

This is my fault. He was just a stupid boy, and I... I should have known better.

There is one last thing she can try, though the gash in her head makes it tough to concentrate, and she can feel the venom, hot and thick, crawling through her blood like bloated worms. Towards her heart.

Calm breaths. Calm breaths. Remember the words.

Her heart is galloping, her voice ragged and raw.

* * *

Clouds approach

“Get back here!” Bekka huffed as she chased him past the first marker, pumping her legs to catch up to his longer strides.

“Whoa!” he shouted, slowing down the instant he entered the pixie orchard. She understood why; the first time the witch had taken her here, she’d been overwhelmed by the beauty as well. The trees loomed, the size of large apple trees, but the leaves were heart-shaped, silver-edged with dark blue centers.

The tree bark pulsed a ghostly white, like moonlight throbbing to an unseen heartbeat.

Joakem approached the nearest pixie tree, reached out with a shaking hand to a pixie growing on a low-hanging branch. Its eyes were shut, but the lashes fluttered sleepily when he rubbed its side with his finger.

“Let them be,” Bekka said and snatched her basket back from him.

“They’re real?”

“Of course, you mooncalf.” She stepped closer to the tree, cupped a nearby pixie to inspect it.

Its wings were a light shade of golden-orange, the violet markings more intricate and beautiful than a butterfly’s. A flash of sunshine caught them just right, and for a moment the wings glinted and glimmered like crystal. She heard Joakem gasp with delight. She couldn’t help but smile, her pride stirring, as though she could take credit for the wonder he felt.

Up close, the little pixie smelled like citrus and spearmint but more subtle than either. Its skin showed two white bands crossing over its shoulders, as if the pixie were wearing overalls. The witch had told her it was one of the ways to identify a ripe pixie. Purple bands, on the other hand, meant the pixie was overripe.

When Bekka asked her what happened if a pixie turned rotten, the witch froze her with a stern look. *“Mostly, they die, but some live and turn wicked. You see one like that, you stay clear. Luckily, it won’t fly beyond the orchard. If it stings you once, you might live. Stings you twice... well, if you heed my runes, you needn’t trouble about that. And if you ignore them, you better have feet like a jackrabbit’s.”*

The pixie in Bekka’s hand stirred once before settling back to sleep. Its beautiful wings dimmed, or rather the sunlight illuminating them did, and Bekka looked to the sky, surprised how fast the approaching stormclouds had moved.

* * *

A steady rain

“We have to keep running!” she shrieks.

“Go ahead! I can catch up.” He is swinging a dead branch, and the pixies hang back a safe distance. “I’ll be right behind you.”

For once, his words make sense; he is the quicker of them. Still, a pang of guilt rises as she sprints ahead, back toward the main path. Her legs burn with exertion.

The rain falls more steadily now, the wind more insistent, keeping the pixies off-balance but not discouraged.

A moment later, she finally, gratefully, hears Joakem behind her, catching up. As they near the second marker, he

gives a sudden yelp. She spins to see a pixie clutching his neck, two more on his shoulder. They stab mercilessly with their stingers—once, twice... thrice—and she can hear the breaking of skin, the puncturing of flesh.

She wants to scream. Instead, she spits in her hands, the slightest of spittle, and repeats her fireworks spell. Sparks sputter in the air like dying embers. Not much, but enough to frighten away the pixies attacking him.

“Hurry!” she yells. He staggers to her, but his eyes are fast turning glassy, his skin pale. She slips her arm around him, starts to drag him, but her desperation is greater than her strength. They haven’t gotten far when a searing, jagged pain pierces the small of her back.

She looks behind her, twisting right then left, one hand grabbing for her attacker while she clings to Joakem. The forest spins. She trips on the second dead tree, its fiery witch-runes the color of fresh blood. Her ankle twists, her head strikes a skull-sized stone. Joakem collapses beside her, his arms too weak to cushion his fall.

Her weight crushes the pixie stinging her, its tiny body squelching, a gummy wetness that spreads sickening warmth upon her back.

* * *

The Skies Darken

“What does the witch do with them?” Joakem asked, standing close enough to make her pulse quicken. “What does she do with the pixies?”

Even if Bekka wasn't forbidden to answer, she doubted he would believe the truth. No one else knew the wicker witch was literally as her name described. Behind the illusion of humanity was a creature of reeds, stalks, cane, and vine; alive only through magic. The pixies that Bekka picked were trained to weave whatever wicker limbs might fray or unravel.

“It's a sacred mystery,” Bekka said. “Not meant to be shared with simple folk.”

“So you don't know, huh?” He sprinted around the tree, winked at her through a gap in the branches. His face was dappled with leaf-shadows, or daubed with sunlight depending how you looked at it. Bekka felt a rush of warmth.

“I'm a witch's apprentice. Of course I know.”

“Oh really?”

Bekka scowled. It was a chore to keep all her secrets secret.

Joakem carried on. “I've never seen you cast anything. Bet you can't even magic a bird to fly.”

“I know lots of spells.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

Bekka ticked them off on her fingers. “I can calm angry dogs, I can make milk curdle—”

“Anyone can do those things,” Joakem said. “You just give them a bone, or leave the milk out a few days. Can you make someone’s nosehair grow, long as a willow branch?”

“Don’t be dumb. And don’t interrupt.” For a moment, the sky darkened, as though reflecting her mood.

“Yeah, but don’t you know any real—?”

“I can make time go backwards!” she spat out.

* * *

Drizzle

“Just say yes and go to the festival with me.”

Bekka turns away from him, just far enough to give him a sidelong glance.

The silence stretches, long enough to make even crickets jittery.

“I don’t know if I should,” Bekka says. The witch certainly wouldn’t approve.

His expression turns wounded, like a puppy nuzzling for affection only to have his nose smacked. Bekka feels a sting of regret.

“Fine,” he says, “if you don’t go with me then I’m just going to sleep in your forbidden orchard until you change your mind.”

“You wouldn’t dare! I’ll drag you out myself.”

“Well, we both know you can’t catch me.” Without warning he sprints off, gazing back, his eyes shooting an invitation for her to pursue.

“You lout!” Bekka places her basket down and runs after him.

During the chase, they veer off the main path. Down the orchard they run—him shouting “Too slow,” and her screaming “You wait and see!” The ghostly white trees fly past, and Bekka can feel her heart thumping like a jackrabbit’s feet. She isn’t sure what she will do when she catches him. Something wicked, she guesses.

They run into a section of the orchard she has never been to before. In the second it takes for them to speed by, she spies a second fallen tree over on the main path, this one smeared with red witch-runes. A second marker, warning of danger. Joakem races past it, absorbed as he is in their sport.

“No!” she tries to scream, but her voice cracks from exertion. If he does hear, it only spurs him faster. He seems oblivious to the change in the trees—the darkening of the bark, the purpling of the leaves. He does not see the dead pixies scattered upon the ground.

It must be the stench that finally stops him in his tracks. Like a mooncalf, he stands there, holding his nose.

She catches up, her breath racing though her legs are still. She places a hand on her chest but can't keep it from heaving.

Pixies hang limply in the branches before them. "These ones are purple," he whispers, with the nervous reverent tone one uses in a graveyard. "And their bands are black as pitch."

The legs of these pixies have fused together, and their toenails too, unnaturally long and braiding into a single, sharp tip. *Stingers*.

"Joakem... we have to go—"

A light rain is falling now, pitter-pattering upon the heart-shaped leaves. The trees seem to quiver, agitated.

Nearby branches stir. Several pixies writhe like hooked worms, and the sound of brittle snaps crackles in the air.

They're detaching themselves. The small hairs on her nape prickle. She grabs his hand and yanks him after her. "Run, you stupid boy!"

Wings buzz as the rotting pixies take flight. A backwards glance shows no less than two dozen, darting like dragonflies after them. They fly in fits and starts, zigzagging as they grow accustomed to their wings.

Joakem is running faster now, slowly outpacing her.

We'll never outrun them, she realizes. Her mouth is dry, but she spits as much as she can into her hands. Rubbing her palms furiously, she turns, shouts a spell that shoots off sparks,

like fireworks, from her fingers. The pixie swarm disperses, some hurt and whirling to the ground. The magic would have bought them a few moments' grace to run, but Joakem is suddenly there, a battle-cry on his lips and a tree branch in hand. He bats three pixies, the impacts accompanied by moist crunches. But more are buzzing towards them.

A terrible premonition comes upon her then.

We're going to die.

* * *

A Sunshower

"You can't make time go backwards." Joakem's smile was as big as the moon, half-shadowed in doubt, half-aglow with wonder.

The truth was Bekka would never utter the spell. The casting was easy, but the cost too severe: a year of one's life for every minute erased.

Not that Joakem needed to know any of that. Bekka sealed her lips with a smile and went back to picking the pixies.

"So are you going to show me?" he asked.

"It's far too complicated, and even if I did, you wouldn't remember anyway." Nor would she herself. You could cast the spell, lose years of life, then go back in time only to repeat the exact mistake you were trying to avoid.

She reached up to collect a pixie, its white bands bright in the sun. When her reach proved too short, Joakem stepped over and helped, his body close enough she could feel the heat of him. Handling the pixie with a gentleness that surprised her, he laid the sleeping sprout in her basket.

“Well,” he said, “maybe you can cast it if I make a mistake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like if I ask you to the Springheart’s Festival, and if you say no and I feel stupid. Maybe you can cast the spell so I can take it back.” His voice hitched like a frog’s.

He was joking, she was sure. But that didn’t keep her heart from a cautious tremor. “I don’t know. It may not be a good idea. What about Miriam Cow-nose? I thought you said she likes you.”

“You don’t have to call her Cow-nose. That’s mean. Just say yes and go to the festival with me.”

“The witch wouldn’t be happy about that.”

“That’s why I’m asking *you*. Besides, the witch probably just wants me for herself.”

Bekka snorts, turns away, just far enough so she can give him a sidelong glance.

The silence stretches, long enough to make even crickets jittery.

“I don’t know if—”

He smiles then, a grin edged in worry and hope, large enough to catch rainbows. She hears her own heartbeat, loud as a waterfall or an endless boom of thunder. The orchard seems to spin, the trees leaning in to listen.

“Okay,” she finally says, soft with hesitation. “I’ll go with you. But you’d better behave.”

The sun shines high above, but the first fat drops of rain fall anyway. *A sunshower*. An omen as mixed as her feelings.

She knows the witch will be scolding her for days. But something within Bekka, some force swifter than her mind, insistent as youth, has moved her. Joakem practically beams, and when he steps closer, Bekka’s breath catches.

Above them, the boughs of silver-blue leaves grant a shade against the sun, a shield against the rain. To her horrified delight, he leans in and kisses her, fearless and fierce, an instant she wishes would last thirty years...safe, sheltered, happy, beneath the pixie tree.

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Rodello Santos was abandoned as a baby in a downtown Manhattan Cineplex. He was raised by kind ushers who fed him overpriced Milk-Duds and weaned him on butter-flavored topping. His humor and stories have found kind, loving homes, including The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Flash Fiction Online, and in Beneath Ceaseless Skies. He is currently racing George R.R. Martin to see who finishes their next novel first. His money is on Mr. Martin.

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CRESCENDO

by J.S. Veter

Yacob's crib-sister was a great one for adventures, so it was she who led them to the Hole. The four children snuck out after lunch when the mommies were settling the wee ones down for their naps and the daddies were cleaning up the kitchen. The clatter of dishes was enough to cover the sound of one squeaky-hinged side door.

Thalie had confessed about the Hole the night before: how she had escaped the watery eye of Daddy Bain and spent the afternoon exploring the dusted ruin of the Stat rather than digging tavaroot out of Rise Common.

It was a miracle she'd not fallen into the Hole, Dellia had said, slapping her hand over her mouth to catch the bad luck. Dellia was a great believer in luck. She had a hundred different ways to keep it close or send it away.

Yacob wasn't sure how he felt about luck, but as Thalie had talked about the Hole he'd crossed his fingers behind his back. The Stat was full of Holes and they were terrible deep and dark. Thalie had planted her hands on her hips and laughed at her

crib-siblings to show how unafraid she was of Holes, or of falling.

“I dropped a stone in,” she’d boasted, arching one almost-invisible brow. “It’s probably still falling.” Thalie had given Min, the youngest of them, a wink. “That Hole goes all the way to the Undertakers.”

“No way.” Eldest of the four, Yacob often found himself firmly planted between Thalie’s nonsense and the others’ wishes. “You just didn’t hear it hit bottom.”

“I listened good, Yacob, but it never hit.”

Min had removed his thumb from his mouth long enough to declare, “Thalie’s ever such a good listener, Yacob.”

“Mommy Lala says,” Dellia had agreed.

“The bottom could just be very far away,” Yacob reasoned. “Remember Daddy Journy’s lesson? The Holes go down to the Beneath, and that’s a very long time ago. Not even Thalie could hear that far.”

“Could, too,” Thalie said, thrusting her thin chest at him.

“And there’s no such thing as Undertakers,” Yacob declared.

Somehow that had turned into a dare, so after lunch the four crib-siblings climbed the musil tree in the back garden and dropped to the passageway behind the sharp-hedge. They listened for signs of alarm—the mummies and the daddies had

rules about sneaking out -- but the only sound from their nest was Daddy Immi's burbling laugh from the kitchen.

It was a curving way the children took from their nest half-way up the City's third hill to the deep-shadowed bowl of the Stat. Anyone who saw a crib of underage children pattering through the streets would ask questions, questions which would get the children sent back to Three-Hill Nest right quick, so Thalie led them through narrow places known to youngsters but conveniently forgotten by the very adults who had once made use of them themselves. It was a goodly long route, too, and by the time the children dipped into the shadows of the sparsely populated low-City the sun was well across the sky.

Then a stone wall loomed, its slumped foundations leaning loosely uphill, revealing a forgotten entry to the forbidden Stat.

One by one the children wriggled through: Thalie first, brave adventurer, then Min, small and lithe, then Dellia, whispering an apology to the Undertakers. Lastly, Yacob, cautious, who had a private moment of terror when he felt stone press down, unforgiving, on his backside.

It was an admonishing hand, that stone, like the stern rebuke of a daddy. Yacob exhaled and pressed forward. The stone relented but took payment in a small smear of scraped skin. Yacob emerged into the Stat, and the Crack, the great

Hole in the heart of the City, gaped at them hollowly from behind its ragged crenellations of fencing.

“Is that where the Undertakers live?” Min asked.

“Over here,” Thalie said, skittering over the heaved floor of the Stat. Quake grass grew gravely green between ancient paving slabs, questing for the sparse sun that crested the bowl of the Stat for only a few short hours each day. Seed heads popped as the children brushed by on soft-moccasined feet. The wavering silver of seed-wings followed their eddied passage.

“What was this place, Yacob?” Min said, voice barely a whisper.

Yacob felt very small in the huge space and Min was smallest of them all. “No one remembers,” he said.

Min hopped from one paving stone to the next. “There must be many Undertakers, if they need a nest this big,” he said.

“Maybe they’re giants,” Dellia said.

“Slowly now,” Thalie said. The children knew the danger of the ever-opening and quickly closed Holes of the City. They had seen safety nets go up, springing from the ground like whiteclusters after rain. Last summer, a Hole had opened right in front of Three-Hill Nest, and the crib-siblings had spent an afternoon watching Fillers pour wagonloads of dirt-brown

forget into a Hole no larger than a loaf of black bread. All through the process, in spite of the web-strong net put in place by the Finders, Mommy Lala had held the youngest children with white-knuckled hands.

That day, once the Hole had been filled Thalie had planted her sharp chin squarely on Yacob's bird-bone shoulder. "Did you hear the voices?" she'd asked. Yacob had pretended not to understand her. Later, he had thought to himself: not voices, no. Not like the mommies and the daddies. Not like the chirruping of carefree children. No.

The voices he had heard were curdled and troubled. Something struggling to be heard, and though all the City dwellers knew of it, no one breathed a word.

The Stat lay deep in the City's memory and the Crack, its crenellated fencing like grinning teeth, had seen more than its share of Fillers. Much of Five-Hill-That-Was-Gone had been poured into its muttering, yet still the Crack whispered. Finally, the people had ceded the Stat and walled it in with the stones of its ancient foundations. Its great gate opened only twice a year, in spring and again in the fall when the Storians came. No City dwellers went to the Stat, not ever, except for Thalie on the day she was meant to dig tavaroot from Rise Common, and today, bringing her crib-siblings on a dare.

“Will the Storians be mad to see us here?” Min asked. He was grubby all over except for his thumb, which was sucked spotless but had left a ring of brown sludge on his lips.

“They won’t be here for months yet,” Yacob said.

“What do they do when they come?” Min asked.

“They look into the Crack,” Yacob said, “and then they leave.” But it was more than that. When the Storians came, the City dwellers clutched warding candles in tight fists, the bright flames guarding against the memory that greenly shadowed the Storians’ garments. And when the Storians left, more Holes opened than at any other time of the year until it seemed the Finders and Fillers would never be enough to bury the past.

“And where do they come from?” Min wanted to know. “Where do they go?”

“Nowhere,” Dellia answered. To the one side of the City was the sea, to the other, the mountains. What lay beyond that could not be imagined.

“Is it true a Sixth-Hill daddy left with them, Yacob? Is it?”

“Shush,” Dellia said, placing her hand across Min’s mouth.

“I’ll be old enough next time they come,” Thalie said loudly. “I’ll meet them at the gate. I’ll ask them where they come from and where they go. I’ll ask them why they visit the Stat.”

“You won’t,” Yacob said, remembering the dry curl of his tongue when he first saw them go by, near enough to touch and yet untouchable. The Storians made the mouth heavy, as if words carried greater meaning than usual when they were present.

“I’ll follow them, then,” Thalie said. “I’ll see what they do and then I’ll follow them all the way to the sea.”

“Thalie!” Dellia said.

“And beyond,” Thalie finished, but Yacob noted how thin her voice was, for Thalie, like all of them, had never given thought to leaving the City. Yacob saw her considering it now. His heart constricted suddenly and he felt cold and hot at once.

“Here,” Thalie whispered, ducking to her knees and scrambling forward. Yacob’s hands flew out to Min on the right and Dellia on the left. “Slowly,” he cautioned, and crouched down as an example. Only when he saw his crib-siblings do the same did he follow Thalie.

The Hole was a gape-mouthed darkness. It had opened at the base of an old cornerstone, the building it had supported long since broken to build the Stat’s protective wall. Yacob suspected the cornerstone was, in fact, straddling the Hole and that the opening was much larger than they could see. Thalie grinned triumphantly.

“The Finders didn’t come!” she crowed. “No one knows about this Hole but us!”

It was a heady feeling. Yacob belly-crawled to Thalie, genitalia constricted in a kind of fear-pleasure he’d never felt before. The Hole was ink-black and hushed, as if it had been waiting.

“Throw a stone down, Thalie!” said Min, who never forgot a dare. He gave a stone the size of his fist to his crib-sister and she took it, wriggling forward until her head was over the Hole. “Well?” she demanded of Yacob. He slithered forward, too, his body pressed against the grey shadowed earth and his face exposed to darkness. “Ready?” she said.

“Ready.” Yacob inhaled the odd salt tang of the Hole. Thalie held her stone-wielding fist high and then, fingers splaying out like the light from a suddenly opened lantern, she let go. The stone disappeared into silence, and the crib-siblings held their breath.

And held it a long time, straining for any sound at all, even a clatter that would say the stone had hit something and then tumbled farther still. Nothing. It was as if it had ceased to exist.

Dellia had been counting. She kept past thirty, on to forty, and when the count reached one hundred Thalie said in a whisper, “Well?”

“How far away is Beneath?” Min asked, as if memory were a distance that could be measured by anything so small as children.

“Shh,” Yacob said, one finger held up like Daddy Immi’s when he wanted their attention.

Thalie turned her head just so, her eyes a dark glint in her face. She heard it, too. Not the stone landing. Not the thud and bump and echo they expected. The sound was a deep rolling and a shush, like thunder pounding the mountains in spring but with a great, ponderous intention.

Thalie’s eyebrows rose with the pleasure of discovery.

“I don’t like it,” Dellia said. She backed away, catching hold of Min’s hand-me-down shirt and tugging him with her.

Yacob listened, eyes on Thalie’s rapt attention. The sound poured upward, taking form, becoming something like words, expressions and sentences clumped together. Yacob heard meaning, heard rounded vowels and plosives bouncing toward them. Thalie dipped her head further, hair falling down on either side of her face, one arm slipped into the Hole as if she could grab the sense of it and pull it into daylight.

“It’s rising!” Min squeaked. Dellia had pulled him well away. He stumbled, shirt tangled in Dellia’s fingers, yearning for Yacob and Thalie.

Min's fear lapped against Yacob, found repeat in the hammering of his heart. "We're not meant to be here," he said, wrapping his fingers around Thalie's upper arm. "We're not meant to know."

"Yacob," Thalie said, squeezing his fingers with her own, "won't you listen to the story?" And as she said it, Yacob's ears were opened and the sounds from the Hole did become words, as if all the daddies and all the mommies in all the City were speaking to him at once. The voices swept into him then, and he was forever and after other than what he had been before.

* * *

The rains came, lashed the City with dark water that froze into bejewelled puddles lasting well past mid-winter. The mommies of Three-Hill Nest dressed the children in boiled wool coats with scarves past their noses and hats low over their eyes. Then the daddies took them to Bonfire, letting them stay up long after moonsfall to watch the wishlamps soar from the summit of Old One Hill.

Yacob held Min's thin hand. "Which lamp have you chosen?" he asked, but Min was searching the crowd for Thalie and was not interested in setting his wishes free for the turn of the year.

"Which lamp is yours?" Dellia asked Yacob. Her face had grown sere and solemn since the Stat. Yacob could see the

adult she would become, as if her child face was shallowing and her woman face rising toward the world she would inhabit.

There was no lamp in the sky big enough for Yacob's wishes, but he told Dellia he'd chosen the red one flying lowly toward them even now. Dellia pointed at a yellow lamp which sailed unerringly for the sea and declared it for herself. Then Dellia reminded Yacob of last year, when Yacob's wishlamp had become entangled in the many spires of Seeming Tower and had sent hot ashes tumbling into the gutters and onto the street.

"We should choose one for Thalie," Dellia said. Thalie, who was absent. Thalie, who was gone from them so often that they hardly knew her scent. Thalie, who always found her way back into the Stat, no matter how often its wall was repaired.

The crib-siblings searched the sky. Around them, City dwellers chose their lamps and said their wishes. The wishlamps moved like somnolences, fluttering against one another, drifting seaward or up to the mountains.

"There," Min said. It took Yacob a moment to see what Min saw. There it was, Thalie's wishlamp, drifting purposefully toward the mountains over the deep hollow of the Stat.

"I wish..." Dellia began, but Yacob shushed her.

"It's Thalie's," he said.

Dellia's own lamp crested the wall, kissed the heavy sea and burst into a shadow of flame. Yacob's landed at the feet of some merchants who laughingly stomped it out before the flames could catch the wooden walls of the Runestall. But Min, Dellia, and Yacob watched Thalie's lantern, Thalie's wishes, skim the roofs of the City and disappear into the west.

Night had almost given way to day when Thalie crept cold-footed into bed. She wriggled against Yacob, bringing with her the dry-stone smell of the Stat and the salted, crusted scent of the Hole. Yacob, drifting near slumber, curled into her, shared with her his warmth and the sting of wood smoke.

Then, when Min's breathing relaxed and Dellia's soft sounds returned, Thalie pressed her lips to the delicate arch of Yacob's ear and spoke. Her voice sparked in him, and it was hard to tell which part of the story came from Thalie and which part of it came from the Hole. It was as if the words from the Hole were reaching out through Thalie and finding Yacob's heart.

* * *

One day, in the back garden of Three-Hill Nest, a new Hole appeared at the base of the musil tree.

Yacob pressed his ear against it. The sound rose to him easily, effortlessly, as though the Beneath had been waiting for him.

...their fear was great and it fuelled their anger; anger can accomplish many great and terrible things.

How old was this tale? How old any of them? And how long had people lived in the City, forgetting, forgotten, having forgotten everything they'd ever known?

When the Lawless reached the edge of Sayaman, City of Fountains, their numbers had swelled to 50 000 warriors. They came over the mountains riding beasts that did not feel the cold. We believed Eternal Sayaman could not fall, and we laughed when they demanded we submit.

Yacob, eyes closed, did not hear the Finders until their hands were upon him, dragging him from the Hole and the musil tree with hooted admonishments. Daddy Immi came and draped his own robe over Yacob's shoulders as a sign of his minority. The Finders subsided, bowed heads showing the proper respect owed a daddy, and Yacob was led inside. There, the mummies boiled milk for him as if he were still in wet-pants. The Finders raised their net and went for the Fillers.

Another day, Yacob visited the library after lessons. He pulled maps from the shelves and studied them, but all they showed was the City, its walls, a dark-grey edging which was the sea and a stone-black smudging which was the mountains. When he asked Daddy Emman for a map which showed more,

Daddy Emman did not understand. When Yacob asked what Sayaman was, Daddy Emman said he did not know the word.

“We’ve forgotten,” Thalie told him. Her black eyes had gone deep with meaning. “We don’t want to remember.”

“What don’t we want to remember?” Yacob said. A late winter storm had shut them inside for the day. Thalie fretted and batted at the windows as if she could not bear the warmth and safety of the nest.

“Something terrible,” Thalie said, her fingers tap-tapping at the glass as if she was sending someone a message.

One night, Thalie did not return from the Stat, nor all the next day, neither. Yacob, Dellia, and Min said that Thalie had gone early to dig tavaroot from the common. Mommy Lala praised Thalie’s effort and sent the crib siblings away with extra sweets to share. Yacob, hot with guilt, dumped his portion down the convenience.

It was a long time before Min and Dellia fell asleep that second night. Yacob lay awake and fretting. When Thalie came in at last her hands were shaking and no amount of coddling could comfort her. She pressed needfully against Yacob until at last Min and Dellia moved to the bottom of the crib. Thalie pulled Yacob to her, held his hands to the bony curve of her hips, and wrapped her legs around him. Yacob moved wonderingly, waiting for her lips to touch his ear, waiting for

her to tell him the end of the story. But all Thalie had for him was silence and a warm wetness he had not known would be there.

* * *

The sun announced the equinox with a banishing of rain clouds and the City responded with a burst of new growth. On the night of the first new moon, word came at last that the Storians were returning. The gate of the Stat was opened, and the scent of the sea crept through the stone ways and alleys.

The daddies of Three-Hill Nest led the elder crib-siblings to the west wall, where they clutched their ward candles in hands not-yet-confident. Thalie the adventurer, so unlike, hung back and Yacob had to urge her to hurry. Her first time seeing the Storians, he soothed, it was not so frightening. Green shadows, they were, who took no notice of almost-grown-ups like them. Thalie accepted his hand and he brought it to his face, inhaling the Thalie-scent which had returned when she stopped visiting the Stat.

His heart filled with her: crib-sister, companion, friend, and lover. He had made plans, Yacob had. His age-coming would arrive when the alva fruit was ripe, Thalie's soon after. Three-Hill Nest had healthy broods; there was a good chance Yacob and Thalie could parent. They would build a new story to replace the one that haunted Thalie's sleep.

Yacob had fooled himself into believing the deep of Thalie's eyes was love.

They lit their ward candles and lined the road between the west wall and the Stat. The Storians were coming, their feet heavy with distance. Yacob remembered a word Thalie's Hole had taught them, a word barely understood, lost in time and history and forgetting. It was a word so close to 'Storian' that Yacob put his lips to Thalie's ear and breathed it like a love token. Thalie startled, flicked an expression at Yacob that was like a discovery, and put her lips to the skin of his neck. And so they were standing when the first of the Storians came around the corner: Thalie's eyes closed tightly as if she were clinging to something. Yacob, heart-full, imagined the two of them in a nest of their own.

Thalie pressed something into his hand and the Storians were gone. Then Thalie pulled away, twisting in the Storians' wake as if reaching forward and back at the same time. And she was gone, her ward-candle dripping wax into Yacob's palm and lifting a curl of smoke from its extinguished wick. Yacob cried out, flinging himself into the trail of the Storians, but Daddy Bain took him around the waist, Daddy Emmer caught him around the neck, and they held him while the Storians took Thalie in a green-shadowed blur.

* * *

When the alva fruit was ripe, Yacob came of age. He took a small nest at the bottom of Three Hill. Daddy Immi visited when the fall equinox came, bringing sweets made especially by Mommy Ahh. Yacob knew they were worried he'd stand ward when the Storians came again and disappear like Thalie and so many others had, but he, Yacob, did not yet have the words the Storians wanted. Instead, he shut the windows and tried to imagine an ending for Thalie's story. At Bonfire, Yacob stood with Dellia and Min. They chose their lamps and made their wishes and Min talked about the new sibling who would soon be joining the crib.

Dellia came of age prior to spring equinox. She came to Yacob and took him for her own and although they tried they could not parent. It happened that way more often than not; there were always more empty nests in the City than full. Dellia fell silent in her ways and Yacob watched for Holes in the street as diligently as if he were a Finder, searching for fragments of memory to explain the scarcity of children, the why of having forgotten.

It was many seasons, however, before a Hole opened and Yacob found it before the Finders. It was right at the door of their nest, as if it were meant for him. Yacob crouched and pressed his ear to the new-cracked stone which had been worn concave by thousands of feet over thousands of years.

The story rose, never fully forgotten no matter how far Beneath it was buried. It bubbled through deep caverns carved by the sea, leeches upward year after year. It rose to the surface, told itself to any who would listen, turned its listeners into storytellers. Like Thalie. Like the Storians themselves, people who were not lost, as Yacob had been taught, but found.

Anchored to the past, reaching for the future.

Yacob closed his eyes, sifting through the voices, listening for the one whose story had been added.

Thalie's.

We promised the future we would remember, but the Storians knew we would forget. We had to. Our shame had lit the sky, sealed the wombs of women and twisted the seed of men. The world was so changed that we bound the horror of it Beneath and whenever a scrap of memory reached up we slapped it down in fear and loathing. But a time is coming, Yacob, a time when the weight of history will burst free, turning all of us into storytellers.

Soon, Yacob. Soon. The City is older than we can imagine, and the Beneath is full to bursting.

Dellia pulled Yacob from the Hole. The Finders were coming with their nets and their fear. Dellia took Yacob inside their nest, closed the door, and wiped the tears from his eyes with feather-light fingers. They listened for the Filler wagon,

the scoop of the brown forgetting, and the scrape of new stone being laid.

“It’s not enough,” Yacob whispered. “The story finds the cracks that run through everything.”

Yacob arranged words of his own to add to the story of the City. In the fall, the Storians would come up from the sea yet again, their rememberings a green weight clinging to their robes. Through the City they would go, unseeing, as if the great stone edifices were meaningless. One by one they would dip their heads over the Crack and listen to the tumbling and lumbering of what had been forgotten. Then, they would add the new stories they had uncovered, filling the last few spaces of the Beneath.

At last, they would carry their stories on and out into the wakening world.

In the City, Holes opened more often and the Finders were too few. Holes lost in corners and unmarked alleys whispered their stories on the wind. Once in a while, the words found ears willing to listen and lips willing to tell.

And in their small nest at the bottom of Three-Hill, Yacob burrowed into Dellia’s warmth, pressed his mouth against the fine arch of her ear, and began to speak.

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COVER ART

“Pillars of the Gods,” by Ward Lindhout



Ward Lindhout is a concept artist currently living and working in Japan. Having studied game design in his home country of Holland, his love for original videogame design drove him to the land of the rising sun. After having worked on titles like *The Evil Within* and *Metal Gear Rising* he is now working at Capcom. He is passionate about designing new worlds and their inhabitants, drawing inspiration from traveling to the many beautiful countries the world has to offer. View more of his work on his website at www.artbyward.com.

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